Urban Claims and the Right to the City

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Published by University College London

Walker, Julian, et al.
Urban Claims and the Right to the City: Grassroots Perspectives from Salvador da Bahia and London.

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Gurreira Maria Occupation

Maria Lucianne Lobato Ferreira (Lôra), is the Leader of the Strength and Struggle Warrior Maria Occupation, and state coordinator of MSTB – the Homeless Movement of Bahia.

The Gurreira Maria Occupation is an occupation on a privately owned plot of land in the northern peripheries of Salvador, close to the airport and the boundary with the neighbouring city of Lauro de Freitas. The land had been left vacant for six years due to property speculation when in November 2016 it was occupied with the support of the Homeless Movement of Bahia (MSTB). The plot has now been subdivided and is occupied by 80 self-built homes. Most of the occupiers came from
Bosque das Bromélias, a nearby social-housing project from the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* state housing programme. They chose to move to the occupation because of problems they faced in Bosque das Bromélias, including poor accessibility, overcrowding, the high cost of bills and rent, and a lack of livelihood opportunities and social infrastructure. They are currently engaged in a legal battle with the private landowner, who is attempting to evict them from the site.

The MSTB movement, which is supporting the occupation, was founded in 2003 to organize women and men to get housing and other social rights required for a dignified life. It has since organized 34 occupations in Bahia, including 17 in Salvador, using the slogan ‘Organize, Occupy, Resist!’ MSTB emphasizes the concept of ‘living with dignity’ and aims to address the housing shortages experienced by many residents. At the same time, a large number of houses and land sites remain empty in the city despite the fact that Brazil’s City Statute of 2001 made a public commitment to the social function of land and housing.

Right to the City: ‘We need more than we have, and just having it in the area is not enough.’ Diego and Eduardo in the library.

**Right to the City**

I don’t feel I have a right to the city. I came from an occupation called Quilombo Ninha Warrior,¹ and when I went to Bosque das Bromélias
public housing, where 2,400 families live, I thought I was going there just to live, but we had to fight for everything. We had to fight for school buses, for public transportation, for a footbridge (which we only got after one person died in a traffic accident). Those things were planned for in the housing project but we still don’t have a health clinic, for instance. So we’ve been facing the fact that the project wasn’t implemented, and we face this series of problems. Thus, we had to reframe and fight for everything. So, which rights to the city are not offered to the people, including myself? Later, I faced a bigger problem, which was the need for housing: the majority of people used to pay rent in Bosque das Bromélias, the housing-estate project that we, low-income people, had won the right to live in. But that suddenly became a trade-off. The movement has this dilemma, to tackle the housing problem by refusing to pay rent – even if that means we have to live in shacks. It doesn’t matter if people are living in shacks under a canvas shelter, the most important thing is that they have support – this is the movement’s solution. Because if we don’t occupy, if we just have meetings, if we just talk with the government, it does not put any pressure on them. What rights would those families have if it wasn’t for this movement, the MSTB? We don’t have sewerage. We have a gato, which we’ve made, shared and paid for. We have water because we’ve paid for it. So I, as a representative of the community, don’t feel we’ve got the right to the city. They’ve put me in a housing estate that is on the other side of the city. I used to have everything before, and here I had to build everything again. Now we have 11 buses, which bring the kids back and forth to São Cristóvão. Those buses constantly have problems, and it’s the city hall that pays for it. And if we were depending on the city hall’s will, those kids would be going to São Cristóvão on foot. But we as a movement didn’t allow that. So I don’t know what ‘right to the city’ this is. It has to be discussed, there must be dialogue, because people from movements, from MSTB and others, are homeless. They do not have this right to the city. Everything is there, on paper and well-written, but it’s just a magazine cover because it doesn’t exist. The right to the city would be to have a health clinic next to my house, a beautiful school for my daughter to study at, public transportation which isn’t as precarious as the system we have. I believe that this would meet a little of our needs. Other things we could pass over, but when it comes to education and health then things get hard. We were able to build a day-care nursery but we still don’t have staff there. Those who work there are volunteers. Everybody is a volunteer, there is no contract. That’s why the struggle can’t stop.
Community

I believe in the community that we dream about, the Community of Well-Being, in which people are organized to live well. Even if there are differences, when the time comes to fight, everyone would hold each other, would kiss each other. We try to show our community its potential – that we should cultivate a garden with vegetables, build a headquarters, a school, and even look for people to work in this school and pay them. But this still is something to aim for. None of this has been achieved yet because our occupation is still a baby. We are about to complete six months and we are threatened by a repossession lawsuit. This is what holds us back, because we have a carpenter here, a construction worker, we have everything. If it were a case of building for ourselves, everybody would build the streets. Sometimes it gets a little messy because someone goes over the boundary line of their own family plot. But then we go there and replace the fence because everyone has a plot of 13 x 10 metres. Here in the squat we still lack the land permission to make our community. In Bosque das Bromélias the facilities are missing, we are working on that. We only have the day-care nursery, the footbridge, the public transportation and the school buses. And the school buses serve the kids here. In
terms of community life, it’s a bit complicated because there are leaders who call themselves leaders but don’t actually do anything. In terms of struggle it’s like this: once you own your house, the struggle stops. So you have to squeeze their minds, otherwise people become neutralized and don’t move forward. I think that, when people say ‘community’, the movement comes up. Because, if it wasn’t for the movement, there wouldn’t be these communities.

Movement: ‘In our movement there is not only one mind who is in charge of everything, everybody is in charge.’ It was through the MSTB movement that Lôra was able to get her apartment.

Movement

I think movement is a key word for this interview. We make decisions collectively, so I think this is key. It’s this movement that people believe in, people go after something and we do what is feasible, and what is unfeasible, to make things happen. When the landowner comes to us with a repossession suit, we don’t stand with our arms crossed – we mobilize everything and we get on with what is needed. We, as a movement, look for the negotiation table, the Public Defender, the Public Prosecutor’s Office. We look for the landowner, to tell him that the Housing Secretariat has to intervene. And those who have given us this support, the political-training courses, were the partners that support the movement. So, if it wasn’t for this movement I wouldn’t know what
I’m saying. For example, within this movement there is a local and a state board. The state board is the one that goes to the negotiation table, the table of conflict and of every kind of problem that arises. The local board is formed by the leaders of their communities, and, with time, we see who has the potential to become part of the state board. I’ve participated in occupations and I’ve became part of the local board because of the things that I had done. Then there was a political-training course before I was invited to become a member of the state board. I’ve learnt how to behave at a table with the state government. In the beginning we were even afraid of going to City Hall, but nowadays it’s so much easier. It’s through the movement that we’ve gained political consciousness, which we bring to the occupation, with the political-training courses. If we hadn’t had the movement to instruct us at this point, I guarantee that when the police first arrived with the repossession suit we would have lost our minds and we wouldn’t have known what to do. And if we didn’t have this instruction [in how to protect the occupation], this community wouldn’t exist. I’ve been arrested once. I was under age, I didn’t know what I was doing, I didn’t know what I was fighting for. And nowadays I know what my cause is and what I want. We need to build capacity because when you decide things collectively you don’t break your head alone. So I’ve learnt to always put the collective in the forefront so they decide what they want for their lives. And if we go along this path, nobody gets lost.

Notes

1 Quilombos are areas occupied by groups that define themselves as remnants of quilombo communities, which were places of resistance established by fugitive slaves.
2 Gato means an informal infrastructural installation.
3 Of the site that the movement is occupying.
4 The MSTB.
5 To ‘break your head’ is a Brazilian expression that means to dedicate yourself to solve a problem.