Occupied city: Hotel Cambridge and central São Paulo between urban decay and resurrection

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Section 1

Socially engaged practices of housing and contested environments

*Participatory practices and negotiation policies/sharing and relation with place*
1 Occupied city

Hotel Cambridge and central São Paulo between urban decay and resurrection

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Introduction

On 23 November 2012, about 200 sem-teto (‘roofless’ or ‘homeless’) families occupied the abandoned Hotel Cambridge, 216, Avenida Nove de Julho, central São Paulo, Brazil (Figure 1.1). The organised group of squatters was part of MSTC (Movimento Sem Teto do Centro, or ‘Homeless Movement of the Centre’), which was a group affiliated with the larger FLM (Frente de Luta por Moradia, the ‘Frontline of the Struggle for Housing’). In 2012, FLM occupied about 15 buildings in the central region of São Paulo, a number which has grown to 19 since. Together with 11 occupied terrains in the city’s periphery, these squatted sites house about 10,000 low-income residents. By the time this anthology is published, these numbers will be outdated again. The city of occupations is remarkably volatile and elusive, a kinetic infusion that percolates the material culture of the city. Today, the former Hotel Cambridge is one of the movement’s strongholds in the centre, accommodating 170 low-income families in what used to be a mirror palace of insouciance and extravagance.

The occupied hotel is exemplary, but not exceptional in the city. Central São Paulo has become a provisional product of myriad occupations. Over the last few decades, due to a decrease in population, the city centre has slipped
into decay and dilapidation with high vacancy rates. Simultaneously, urban movements such as MSTC and FLM have increasingly (re)occupied the abandoned building carcasses. Semi-derelict constructions have been converted into peculiar transitional low-income dwellings. Other ways of living together have germinated from the fissures and ruptures of the centre’s eroding spatial organisation, which in itself created a unique cityness emanating from the re-appropriated wasteland of unbridled urbanisation. The resulting ‘occupied city’ is simultaneously imagined and pieced together on the corpse and decrepit debris of the old one.

This chapter will discuss the transformation of the Hotel Cambridge as a prototypical instance of the centre’s erratic oscillations between degeneration and regeneration. As a ‘centre in the centre’, the building’s transformation will be devised as a *pars pro toto* for the concurrent metamorphosis of downtown São Paulo. The focus lies on the mutual transformation of the building and its built environment vis-à-vis occupation practices that seek to carve out spaces for collective dwelling for some of the city’s most vulnerable population, by reclaiming the idle architecture of vacated hotels, offices, factories and commercial buildings. The chapter sets off by presenting the entangled idiographies of Hotel Cambridge and the central area of São Paulo. First, the ambitious inauguration and glorious heydays of the hotel will illustrate the centre’s alleged revival. Secondly, their looming deterioration will be examined. The third section will focus on the popularisation that simultaneously
occupied the centre and the vacated hotel. Subsequently, the rise of central occupation movements and their tactical repertoire for reappropriating vacant structures will be explored. Finally, an architectural analysis of the present-day occupation will illustrate some aspects of the contradictory proto-urbanity that is propagated by the centre’s collection of occupations.

Centre of prosperity

In the early twentieth century, São Paulo mutated from a modest town into a global metropolis. While the city rapidly expanded, its former colonial centre utterly transformed. The iconic inauguration of Latin America’s very first skyscraper in 1929 – the Martinelli building – was a harbinger of the centre’s surge of reconstruction.¹ Two decades later, the colonial settlement is almost entirely replaced by vertical constructions. Some of them are remarkable architectural masterpieces, yet most present banal replicas of the same model that turns minimal land properties into maximum profits. Still and all, a new centre is supplanting the old one, a ‘modern’ high-rise metropolis fudged together on the wreckage of the old, and Hotel Cambridge is one of the paragons of the metamorphosis.

Before its outworn remains were squatted, for almost 30 years Hotel Cambridge was one of the most exclusive and fashionable hotels in town. The building was erected in 1951 by the Paulistano businessman Alexandre Issa Maluf, after the design by the Hungarian-Brazilian architect Francisco Beck and inaugurated two years later. The luxurious edifice flanks the brand-new Avenida Nove de Julho, one of the recently implemented ‘grand avenues’ Prestes Maia had foreseen in his influential Plano de Avenidas (1930), the city’s first comprehensive masterplan dedicated to salvage the congested centre from further ‘slumification’.² Backed by a steadily growing economy, the plan brought the centre back onto the radar of investors such as Maluf. The latter’s sparkling new hotel covered a built area of 8,600 square metres, with 94 apartments and 26 suites, spread over 16 floors, including a generous lobby, a spacious bar, a restaurant and a beauty salon. Managed by a group of Spanish entrepreneurs, it soon made its name as one of most chic venues in downtown São Paulo.

The building façade was static and symmetric, with a sequence of square windows looking over the Anhangabau Valley, the crucible of São Paulo’s initial settlement. A monumental portal facing the avenue gave access to a double-height ceiling lobby. Massive concrete columns
framed a patchwork of carpets, leather sofas and small wood-crafted tables that today would be designated as genuinely ‘vintage’. Marble walls were cautiously decorated with dark woodwork and plentiful modern chandeliers draped the interior in soft yellow light. Two central elevators – the mechanic innovation that sparked high-rise construction from the 1920s onwards – encircled by a fairly majestic marble staircase, led up to two rooftop terraces, offering stunning views over the city. The hotel was primarily celebrated for its elegant bar, accessible from the back door, and embellished with three large murals by the influential Italian-Brazilian artist Danilo Di Prete. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, the cafe turned into a beloved rendezvous for bossa-nova and jazz fanatics. International celebrities such as Nat King Cole, Ivon Curi and Dick Farney, as well as famed sport teams, frequented the place and embued it with a mythical imaginary.

If anything, the architecture of the hotel yearned to resemble the centre’s ostensible renaissance as the aspirational metropolitan epicentre of Latin America’s progress, encapsulated in an architectural vocabulary of extravagance. Against the backdrop of São Paulo’s fierce industrialisation and ostensible leap into modernity, the city emerged as the continent’s economic powerhouse. While Brazil’s modernist movement was devoted to materialising the radically new ‘modern’ capital of Brasília, Hotel Cambridge and its analogues constituted an architectural pseudo-modernist spin-off, carried out by joint investors and architects jumping on the bandwagon of development and modernisation, albeit without much of the social reform agenda proposed by modernists of the period. These are the characteristics of modernisation rather than of modernism.

Centre of decline

Despite significant investments in the centre’s renewal, for better and for worse, incentives for recuperation never enforced a complete make-over. Hotel Cambridge, and other opulent investments (as much as they bear testimony to the centre’s purported resurrection), equally mirrored the centre’s stagnant incapacity to live up to over-ambitious renovation projects. By the end of the 1970s, the global financial crises had caused unemployment and poverty among many denizens that had been drawn to the city during the decades of prosperous development. The convergence of dwindling wages with escalating rent and property prices largely impeded ‘formal’ dwelling opportunities for the city's
low-income population, and pushed them together with new arrivals to large informal settlements that aggregated on the periphery of the metropolis.⁴

As the city’s periphery urbanised, its old centre paradoxically peripheralised. Although urbanistic interventions in part sought to prevent it from complete collapse, they contributed to its gradual disintegration. Up to the mid-twentieth century, most urban interventions were devoted to the concentration of tertiary activities, and to ‘sanitising’ overcrowded slums, which also had the effect of wiping out numerous neighbourhoods inhabited by workers.⁵ The aforementioned Plano de Avenidas further engendered destructive reconversion works that wedged the centre between concentric ring roads, transversely intersected by a major north–south expressway taking over the former valley of the Anhangabau River. Meanwhile, renewed building codes encouraged almost unbridled verticalisation of the centre’s built tissue.⁶ A series of highways and viaducts were amassed in the vicinity of the centre, geared towards improving the macro-accessibility of the metropolis’ south-west area. On the rebound, the old centre increasingly surfaced as an isolated island amidst giant traffic junctions, traversed by overdimensioned infrastructures that eradicated vast sections of its built tissue and viciously disrupted the urbanity of popular neighbourhoods. The 1972 zoning plan unwittingly added insult to the injury by rigidly designating the centre as a merely commercial enterprise.⁷ Large areas were pedestrianised as well, to square off over-congested traffic. While major road constructions mutilated the centre’s morphology, the historic Praça da Sé was designated as the leading junction for the new metro network, encircled by the new principal bus terminals. Slowly but surely, the centre became an outstretched walkable transfer hub, a vital site for commerce, trade, exchange and passage, not of residence or inhabitation. It became overcrowded during the day but deserted during the night.

The recurrent tinkering with the centre eventually propagated a vast exodus of inhabitants. Chief banks and corporations migrated from the ‘old’ to ‘new’ prestigious centres around the Avenida Faria Lima (1968) and the enlarged Avenida Paulista (1974), south-west of the city.⁸ Most of the high-rise buildings that were hastily cobbled together during the ‘verticalisation decades’ proved insufficient for the demands of contemporary offices, lacking car accessibility, parking facilities, air-conditioning or technological requirements in general. Also numerous cultural and recreational institutions abandoned their decrepit downtown infrastructures, while multiple public departments left the outmoded centre for more illustrious locations.⁹ Although the metropolitan
population increased by 42 per cent during the last two decades of the twentieth century, Sé – the centre’s oldest district – lost approximately 40 per cent of its inhabitants. While new developments precipitately mushroomed around the city, the discredited historic core successively imploded (Figure 1.2).

The withdrawal of businesses, cultures and residences left a stockpile of obsolete building carcasses behind. In Sé, 3,055 dwellings were found abandoned in the census of 2000, accounting for a vacancy rate of 26.77 per cent. As a whole, the centre counted about 40,000 registered vacant dwellings that did not require structural refurbishment works. This accounted for almost 20 per cent of the centre’s building fabric that was obsolete, although fit for inhabitancy. Actual vacancy rates remained uncharted, as the census did not include the assortment of deserted hotel buildings, office towers, governmental institutions, commercial buildings, factories and industrial warehouses, nor residential constructions with structural deficiencies. In other words, at least one-third of the centre’s architecture was probably abandoned, leaving derelict architectural relics, which were gradually falling apart because their functionality had been temporarily suspended. Altogether, the Fundação Pinheiros estimated that almost 600,000 buildings were inhabitable but vacant in the metropolitan region of São Paulo. In the same yearly report, the institution calculated the metropolitan region’s housing deficit at 582,129. São Paulo counted and still counts more dwellings without people than people without a dwelling. Ironically, while one-third

![Figure 1.2](image.jpg) Central São Paulo’s hodgepodge of morphologies, typologies and infrastructures.
of the city’s architecture was left in obsolescence, another third of the urban population was living in unacceptable dwelling conditions.

Hotel Cambridge symbolised the centre’s gradual erosion. While the urban elite fled the discredited historical area, cars increasingly dominated the building’s surroundings. Given the escalating traffic congestion on the Avenida Nove de Julho, its splendour waned, and much of the building tissue along the avenue was left obsolescent. As the population withdrew, criminality rose. Unsurprisingly, the hotel’s highbrow clientele was lured away by alternative hangouts. What had been the ‘centre’ was no longer an aristocratic ‘place to be’. The hotel managed to stand firm for a long time, despite fierce financial issues and erupting disputes between the owners and the managers. In the early 1990s, the building was drastically renovated, a last resort to reclaim lost glamour. Afterwards, the hotel’s bar showed up in popular media, reminiscent of its ‘charm of the 1950s’, and celebrated for maintaining the ‘nostalgic’ atmosphere of long gone days. It was by now managed by a young migrant from Pernambuco, one of the many who moved from the poorer Nordeste Region of Brazil to São Paulo on the promise of more desirable work and dwelling opportunities. Many of these new arrivals filled the vacated building stock in the centre, as they became the dominant population of the centre’s cortiços (substandard tenement rooms). The owner passed away in 1998 and the building was left to his two sons. It became a popular backdrop for photographic shoots, theatre plays and film scenes that sought to recapture the character of the 1950s. The building was already a simulacrum of what it allegedly used to be. It continued to function up to 2002, when it finally closed its doors (Figure 1.3).

Centre of popularisation

As middle-class residents and activities evaded the centre, many of their renounced spaces were recycled by poorer residents and secondary enterprises. Posh establishments made room for popular lanchonetes (snackbars), exclusive galleries became mundane bazaars, renowned cinemas turned into peepshows, well-known hotels into motels for promiscuity. In addition, the concentration of commuters attracted informal street vendors and small businesses. Many of the ramshackle building remnants of more glorious building decades turned into cortiços, and the homeless increasingly inhabited residual spaces beside and below infrastructures. Many left-behind vacant properties are squatted. Ironically,
Latin America’s once so vigorously proclaimed ‘pioneer’ skyscraper, the Edificio Martinelli, in the 1970s turned into the city’s first vertical slum, a monumental cortiço of 27 floors. The surging proliferation of so-called ‘subaltern’ claims on the architectural remains of what the elite had forsaken, in turn, only accelerated the departure of middle-class occupations. The centre turned more and more into a central periphery, a secondary centre, in the shadow of other development fronts, and in that sense easily harboured what Remy and Voyé designated as a ‘weak legitimacy’, fostering other ways of being by virtue of remaining somehow off the radar and out of sight.

The centre also remained ‘central’ in many ways, in part because its diachronically accumulated symbolic value could hardly be reproduced elsewhere. Paradoxically, the same districts that suffered the highest population decrease simultaneously collected most urban services and jobs, now more tailored towards low-income workers. For those that depended on public transport, it was still the best-equipped area of the city, congregating low-skilled jobs, public social and educational institutions, and affordable cultural amenities. Although it was less and less inhabited, daytime urbanity was thriving.

Figure 1.3 ‘Hotel Cambridge threatened, a landmark of the city’.
In the meantime, Hotel Cambridge entered a popular afterlife as underground night club. ‘Trash 80s’ DJ sessions took over from jazz and bossa nova, while Nat King Cole made room for DJ Tonyy and the hits of Abba and Rádio Taxi. The new party spot was a hit, and the former hotel’s large communal spaces were jam packed from Thursday to Sunday. The extravagant concrete structure that once sought to evoke elitist prestige was subverted, from jazz to pop, from elegance to ‘trash’, from elitist to popular, and – arguably – from exclusiveness to inclusiveness. The upper 14 floors remained vacant, and slipped into gradual decay.

**Centre of recrudescence**

On the night between 8 and 9 March 1997, about 1,000 members of the ULC (Unificação de Lutas dos Cortiços, ‘Unification of Cortiço Struggles’), undertook what became known as the first organised building occupation in São Paulo, simultaneously occupying four abandoned buildings in the centre. The ULC emerged at the end of the 1980s, together with various other movements, and supported by the Housing Pastoral of the Catholic Church and human rights associations, to fight for better living conditions in the centre’s cortiço-packed regions. The occupants’ accomplishment to stand firm and successfully negotiate with the property owners proved to be an impetus for insurgence, and sem-teto groups were invigorated for the years to come. They transposed the occupation strategies of the well-organised MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, the ‘Landless Movement’) to the inner city and turned their mass-organised claim for rights to the city into a struggle over rights to the centre of the city, incorporating all the pragmatic and ideological aspects ‘centrality’ entails.

By 1999, building occupations were pervasively entrenched in the centre’s architectural landscape, in their material presence openly criticising the lamentable quantity and quality of social housing, exacerbated by the abundance of vacant buildings in the centre of the city. After a fatal accident in one of the occupations the same year, many movement leaders withdrew from long-term occupations, advancing instead political negotiations, every now and then supported by short symbolic occupations. Some did keep durable occupations as a vocation and established the MSTC, in 2004 joining forces with other radical movements under the umbrella of FLM. Over the years, FLM became the largest housing movement active in the centre, and one of the most outspoken advocates of ocupar para morar (occupy to live): occupation
not solely as a political performance, but to inhabit. This set them apart from Brazil’s largest union of housing movements, the UMM (União de Movimentos de Moradia, ‘Union of Housing Movements’). A principal FLM slogan is Ocupar, Resistir, Construir, Morar! (Occupy, Resist, Construct, Dwell!), openly shifting the focal point of the Landless Movement’s mantra Ocupar, Resistir, Produzir, from ‘production’ to ‘construction’ and ‘dwelling’. Over the years, FLM became highly professionalised in organised squatting, involving a thorough screening of abandoned properties – collaborating with notaries, lawyers and journalist collectives – as well as in self-managed ‘reform’ techniques, turning obsolete building cascos (shells, stripped-down structures) into genuine transit-housing complexes. This way, they refused to unequivocally choose a side in movement debates over ‘reformism’ versus ‘revolutionism’, as they purposively combined political participation with direct action. They ‘demonstrated’ not only politically, but also pragmatically, by pre-fabricating provisional responses for the issues they denounced. Their occupations practiced what they preached, demanding political action without waiting for it to come, but instead prefiguring it piece-meal. Notwithstanding their affiliation with the Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores (communist labour party), their approach to housing was remarkably anarchistic, advocating the kind of solutions that ‘would be made if we were living in the kind of society we envisage [putting forward] anarchist answers that can be tried out here and now’.22

The impact of occupations on the centre’s gradual reform has been significant. Sanches illustrates how occupation movements managed to put the centre back on the ‘urban agenda’, and forced the federal, regional and municipal governments to improve living conditions in the centre.23 In 2002, Hotel Cambridge was shortlisted for reconversion through the municipal ‘Morar no centro’ (‘Living in the centre’) programme, but, as so often, the project got stuck in red tape. While Madre de Deus, the first successful central social housing project initiated by an occupation movement, was under subsidised self-construction, social movements began an initial register of vacant buildings eligible for reconversion. The list was picked up by a dedicated task force (Grupo Técnico de Analyse de Imóveis, GTAI) of the city’s Housing Secretary (Secretaria Municipal de Habitação, SEHAB). Between 2001 and 2004, they charted 317 abandoned properties in the centre.24 In 2009, COHAB (Companhia Metropolitana de Habitação, the ‘Metropolitan Housing Company’) appointed FUPAM (Fundação para Pesquisa Ambiente, ‘Foundation for Environmental Research’), at the University of São Paulo (FAU-USP) to update the
old list and identify vacant structures suitable for housing. In total, a detailed report compiled information on 221 buildings, of which 53 were found directly suitable for expropriation, renovation and social habitation. Hotel Cambridge was one of the 53 selected buildings, and in September 2010 it was indicated for the Renova Centro (‘renovate the centre’) programme, which promised to expropriate and reform all 53 buildings. Eventually the last underground party in the hotel’s basement took place in June 2011. Together with seven other FUPAM-listed hotels, Hotel Cambridge was bought by the municipality under wide media coverage, applauded by social groupings, and condemned by many middle-class residents, who regarded social housing in the centre as yet another ‘out of place’ disgrace that the area had to endure. The building was now part of an ambitious project to partially renew the centre with and for low-income social groups.

Nonetheless, Hotel Cambridge remained vacant due to bureaucratic complications. A year and a half after the expropriation, on 23 November 2012, the building’s gate was forced open by a group of *sem-tetos* from MSTC-FLM in intense turmoil, occupying it to take the municipality at its word, and pressurise the building’s reconversion (Figure 1.4). For months, families had been preparing for the break-in in one of the movement’s basegroups. Their weekly meetings resonated Freire’s controversial ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, advocating a labourer-liberation stemming from conjoined critical reflection, stimulated through dialogical popular education, as the necessary impetus for radical praxis, the ‘humanising’ resurrection of the poor. In the basegroups, families were introduced to the ideological currents and strategic tactics that MSTC and FLM have developed over the years. This is also the place where occupations are meticulously prepared and carefully orchestrated. Mostly, buildings are simultaneously occupied as a set, to gain visibility and encumber police. Different groups gather in secluded localities and are synchronically mobilised to different target buildings. Often, this implies the coordination of a few thousand occupants, in part transported with a series of buses from peripheral locations. There seems to be a sense of urbanistic thinking latently underpinning the whole operation, a deliberate contemplation on where, when and how to act on the city, which remains at the same time largely impromptu, ‘on the spot’, experimental and hence prototypical at any time.

The occupation moment bears resemblance to Victor Turner’s *rite de passage*, a liminal moment of breaking with the established
order of the personal and the urban status quo through an iconoclastic act of creative destruction, smashing, shivering and dismantling the material obstructions that separate the publicness of the street from the interior’s reserved private sphere. It is nominated a *dia da festa* (a party day), as a semantic affirmation of the occupation’s ritual nature, an event-like festivity to hanker for. For many participants, it is a transgressive and cathartic experience of self-liberation. At the same time, the slumber of the building is disrupted, entering a liminal upheaval, betwixt and between established spatial orders. The occupied city is a joint transition for the building and its occupants. When the Cambridge Hotel was occupied, the military police intervened promptly and forcefully, entrusted to redress the disturbed order. Avenida Nove de Julho was blocked, and the group of *sem-tetos* driven off with teargas and batons. The occupants set up a *linha da frente* (‘front line’) of mainly elderly people, women and children to discourage violence. For a number of days, policemen blocked the entrance, and participants later recalled how they hoisted food through windows at the back of the building, while the military were trying to starve them out. Despite the deplorable conditions inside some 200 families stood firm. The group locked itself down, welding the iron entrance gate from the inside. The movement’s flag was draped out, an almost militaristic seizing of power over a newly acquired territory, inducting the former sanctuary of richness into a bastion of popular resistance.
Centre of proto-urbanity

On the first night of the occupation, a rudimentary campsite was constructed in the ruins of the 1950s landmark. Dedicated task forces initiated specific commissions: defend the entrances, set up collective cooking and eating facilities, provide water, repair electrical and hydraulic infrastructures, initiate cleaning works or furnish provisional sleeping places. Decay had left its traces, and during the first weeks, no fewer than 25 trucks of refuse, piled up over years of neglect, were taken out of the building. Construction and management took the form of *mutirão*, a notion derived from communal help systems in rural territories that eventually came to depict mainly collective building-related practices. Families settled rapidly, and as the military cordon left the place, a convoy of mattresses, ovens, refrigerators and furniture entered the building to increase the costs and hence impede eviction. Most furniture resulted from *shopping rua* (‘street shopping’), was collected in the streets or was scavenged from dumpsites. The proto-project is by definition a recycling project, concurrently reclaiming a group of residual buildings, orphaned household goods and an allegedly ‘lost’ and largely abandoned population (Figure 1.5).

Solnit eloquently illustrated how extraordinary communities emerge from the precarious displacement caused by large disasters, as germs of a ‘paradise’ under construction that effloresce from ruined

![Image of the scene with debris and people working.](image)

**Figure 1.5**  *Mutirão*, and the piecemeal architectural reclaim of the derelict hotel.
architectures. Differently but likewise, a peculiar emergent sense of *communitas* was forged by the precarious working and living together in the newly occupied building. Community, here, indeed emanated from a shared state of crisis, part and parcel of a strategy for survival, or at least improvement. In fact, the peculiar collectivity that emerges in the occupations is inextricably bound up with its (in part deficient) architecture. It is exactly the building’s demand for adaptation and patching-up to make it fit new purposes that compels collective action and decision-making. Precisely this incremental architectural proto-project inheres other ways of living together, albeit stemming more from an ‘imperative’ to build than from Turner and Fichter’s ideological ‘freedom’ to build, ‘confusing freedom to act with the necessity to survive’. Rather, it is the defective architectural performance and the necessity of material repair and reprogramming as well as the implicit obligation to reconsider spatial uses that compels some kind of community to become established. Hence, *mutirão* dictates the everyday, encompassing some kind of architectural and societal laboratory, even if that results from exigency much more than from premediated utopianism.

Between 2012 and 2016, *Ocupação Cambridge* developed into one of the movement’s most cherished bulwarks in the city, proudly displayed to potential members and envied by other movements. Although the occupations are broadly criminalised by conventional media, Cambridge slowly made its name as an ‘ocupação chic’, one to be proud of, where the label ‘sem-teto’ was carried in a kind of allegoric ‘black pride’ celebration of subaltern culture, and as material proof of what the ‘urban outcast’ autonomously can accomplish. For the movement it remained a provisional solution, an instrumental device for personal improvement and political pressure, but not a final destination in itself. For many inhabitants, however, things stood differently, as the majority was less concerned with the movement’s political agenda, and more with improving their living conditions. It is an ambiguous condition, wherein the movement strives to accelerate inclusion into the conventional housing mechanisms of the city as is, while simultaneously striving for a peculiar kind of ‘exclusion’, claiming increasingly rights to build another city – indeed, ‘for the defense and strengthening of difference and autonomy’. Similar ambiguity plays out in the movement’s legal tactics, legitimising transgressive squatting actions by the unconditional constitutional right to decent housing, and the ‘social function of property’ (since 2001 the ‘City Statute’ has legally obligated properties to be ‘proper’ – that is, serving a social purpose). For FLM, *sem-tetos* are legitimised and even impelled to violate the right to private property in order
to rectify the unlawful homelessness to which they had been subjected, and the affluence of ‘improper’ properties. The occupied city simultaneously breaks and enforces the law, stemming from the demands of an everyday political agenda.

With the means at hand, the architecture of the building has been adjusted to comply with the occupants’ ever-changing aspirations. The entrance was reinforced, branded in the movement’s red-and-white house style and tagged with movement logos. The graphical language is defensive, often aggressive. The large ground-floor windows are deliberately covered up with brickwork. The reception desk is reused as a gatekeeper’s portal; no one gets in or out without signing the respective list. The occupied city is firmly defensive, exclusive in its own way. Ironically, architectural filters that used to reconcile the hotel’s strict exclusive nature with a mimicry of openness and accessibility are now recycled to regulate the movement’s ambivalent border control. The lobby has been turned into a large meeting space (Figure 1.6). Walls are blackboard-painted, and daily announce upcoming actions and meetings as well as miscellaneous communication. Others carry movement slogans: *Quem não luta, ta morto!* (‘Who is not fighting, is dead!’) the most popular one, reminiscent of Freire’s pedagogy again, underscoring the poor’s duty to fight for a humanised living. Also, *Ocupação, uma canteira de obra* (‘The occupation, a construction site’): the occupation as a

![Figure 1.6 Weekly occupation ‘assembleia’, meeting of inhabitants and co-ordination.](image-url)
continuous project-in-the-making, a bricolage of bits and pieces that has to ‘make do’ with ‘whatever is at hand’, by reallocating ‘a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours’.35

Former collective hotel spaces now mediate the occupation’s unpredictable nature. The bar is appropriated as a polyvalent space, functioning, amongst others, as a film set, a capoeira hall, a cinema space, a meeting room, a concert hall and party club. From 2015 onwards, the space has recurrently staged a second-hand market and a genuine cultural sem-teto festival. A snack bar and hair salon are daily open to the street. The large restaurant space above is organised as a library, a meeting room and a small office space. The elevators’ engines were stolen during the years of abandonment, making the staircase the backbone for internal vertical circulation, as well as the confluence of daily chitchat and gossip, the urban forum where one enters the communal debate willy-nilly. The former beauty salon is used as a sewing workshop, where inhabitants make a living from cloth-decoration. Each of the upper floors has its own sub-coordinator, and collective corridors and spaces are maintained daily according to a rotating mutirão list. Most floors have shared bathrooms, with variable degrees of cleanliness.

The occupation’s individual apartments differ strongly, depending on the priorities and aspirations of the residents. Some invest heavily in the temporary dwelling, renew floors and ceilings, repair windows, decorate walls and organise elegant interiors. Others preserve the aesthetics of a campsite, a temporary shelter, awaiting new opportunities to continue dynamic dwelling trajectories. The temporary nature of the settlement implies that investments remain an ambiguous matter, as although many are eager to devote themselves to ‘domesticating’ the acquired space, it is a certainty that it will be a volatile home, an interim residence that after an unknown time will have to be returned to more conventional cycles of urban reproduction. Temporality and permanence also differ greatly among occupations. Many only last for a few days, while Ocupação Maua has been inhabited by FLM members since 2007. Despite negotiations, evictions often end up in violent confrontations with the military’s special choque (shock) forces, involving teargas bombs, rubber bullets and multiple arrests. It remains a contentious city. The proto-urbanism is an ‘ephemeral’ urbanism, not as a recurrent yearly ‘festival city’ such as the one recently praised by Mehrotra and Vera,36 but as a rhizomatic urban constellation that perpetually mutates, shifts, adapts, disappearing from one place only to pop up again somewhere else, at the same time transiently intangible (as every parcel in itself is temporary by nature) and structurally present (as the system endures).
In fact, squatting practices are de facto bound up with practices of urbanism, whether as the most archetypical but ‘hidden’ history of housing, as a broadly applied strategy to impede urbicide renewal schemes, or as an instrument to demand more cautious urban renewal. Ocupação Cambridge and other occupations carried out by FLM seem to combine traits of the European autonomous and squatter movement that proliferated in the downtown areas of for instance Amsterdam, Barcelona and London with Latin America’s long-standing legacy in mass social mobilisation and organised land occupations, without simply replicating any of either. Downtown occupations in Latin American cities remain hardly documented, with the recently evaded Torre David in Caracas as the most illustrious exception. With hindsight, this absence from discourse reaffirms the prototypical nature of FLM’s occupied city, experimenting with an idiosyncratic practice within the intricate genealogy of urban movements.

Although for many participants the final objective is to gain access to opportunities encapsulated in the central architecture of the city, at the same time a distinctive kind of ‘cityness’ emerges within the occupied set of buildings. Hotel Cambridge is one instance out of an ever-shifting constellation of occupations where another kind of living together, based on mutirão, is perpetually tested out. Inclusion is intermittently manufactured in a dialectic play of reallocating and resignifying obsolete architecture with minor amendments. The distinctive urbanity that germinates inside is highly fragile and ambivalent, as it continuously has to adapt to shifting circumstances. It is an urbanity that is time and again in a phase of experimentation, never to actually establish or consolidate. It is a kind of proto-urbanism, a preliminary, provisional laboratory prefiguring possible urbanisms yet to come, empirically put to the test on site, as a sequential demonstration of imaginable and feasible cities. It is prototypical because it remains concurrently volatile and contingent, as well as exemplary and emblematic, a project for the city ceaselessly under construction, but at the same time meaningful and significantly impactful.