

## **The fragmentary social-spatial logic and the production of social housing under the Brazilian program “Minha Casa Minha Vida”**

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**Abstract:** Brazilian cities have experienced transformations characterized by polycentrism, the proliferation of gated communities for high and medium-income groups, indoor shopping spaces, and a novel approach to the production of working-class space. This latter aspect, being subsidized by the State and implemented in collaboration with private real estate entities, reflects both spatial transformations and the everyday practices of urban residents. These changes significantly impact daily life, underscoring aspects of socio-spatial fragmentation. This article analyses such fragmentation in relation to the production of social housing, focusing specifically on two urban contexts in Brazil: the medium-sized city of Presidente Prudente and the metropolis of São Paulo. The research has a qualitative nature, primarily involved conducting and analysing interviews with residents of vertical gated communities from the Brazilian federal government’s housing program “Minha Casa Minha Vida”. The results indicate socio-spatial redefinitions in both urban contexts, which include changes in inhabitants’ mobility, the privatization of leisure spaces, limited integration between gated communities and their immediate surroundings, physical segregation enforced by walls and security measures, and the homogenization of the landscape.

**Keywords:** Fragmentary social-spatial logic, social housing, Brazilian cities.

## Introduction

The Brazilian urbanization process, intensified from the 1950s and combined with the country's structural social inequalities, led to the development of cities under a dual centre-periphery logic: the centre was qualified by a concentration of better urban infrastructures, diverse commerce and services, and neighbourhoods with higher urban and landscape standards, predominantly inhabited by the middle and upper classes. Conversely, the periphery, distanced from the centre, was characterized by inadequate infrastructure, limited public services, and the spread of irregular subdivisions, predominantly housing the working-class under precarious urban living conditions.

In recent times, Brazilian cities have undergone transformational shifts signalling the rise of a post-Fordist logic (Sposito; Sposito, 2020), exemplified by developments such as polycentrism, the proliferation of gated communities for high- and medium-income groups, the indoor and segmented shopping spaces (Salgueiro, 2001), and a new way of producing the working-class space (Nagib; Nakayama, 2023). In addition to the materialization of dormitory neighbourhoods on urban peripheries, the proliferation of vertical gated communities for the working-class and the complexification of ways of inhabiting and experiencing peripheral urban space began to reproduce constructive, infrastructure and security measures formerly exclusive to middle and upper classes.

This logic of social housing production, subsidized by the State and executed in partnership with private real estate developers, reflects ongoing socio-spatial fragmentation. This fragmentation perpetuates contradictions and challenges in achieving the social right to housing, still reliant on homeownership and housing financialization (Rolnik, 2015). This situation reinforces discontinuities in the (fragmented) urban fabric and ruptures in urban living experiences.

The repercussions of these disruptions on daily life, along with the phenomenon of polycentrism, emphasize aspects of socio-spatial fragmentation, perceived here as a process delineating significant segmentations in the territorial continuity of cities and restructuring socio-spatial practices around segregated housing, shopping, and leisure spaces (Sposito; Sposito, 2020).

This article specifically explores the interplay between fragmentary socio-spatial logic and social housing production in Brazil, based on research in two

distinct urban contexts: Presidente Prudente, a medium-sized city in the Southeast Region of the country, and São Paulo, the largest urban agglomeration in South America. Our aim is to deepen the understanding of the current *modus operandi* in the production of social housing in Brazil, recognizing that the traditional dual centre-periphery logic (Caldeira, 2000), which previously guided urban space production in Latin America, is insufficient to explain current socio-spatial dynamics (Nagib, 2023).

In this qualitative research, our methodology was primarily grounded in the analysis of interviews<sup>1</sup> (n=14) conducted with residents of working-class vertical gated communities. These residential spaces, resulting from the Brazilian federal government's housing program "Minha Casa Minha Vida" (PMCMV), were scrutinized to understand the relationship between the emergent working-class housing market and the redefinition of a spectrum of daily practices and material and symbolic representations. The study revealed significant insights in several areas: the mobility patterns of inhabitants, the privatization of leisure spaces, limited integration between the condominiums and their surrounding environments, physical segregation reinforced by walls, and the resulting homogenization of the landscape in urban peripheries.

The structure of this article is separated in two main sections, following this introductory part and concluding remarks. The first section offers a theoretical contextualization of social housing in Brazil, connecting it to socio-spatial fragmentation. The second section delves into the representations of working-class urban space within the context of fragmentary socio-spatial logic. This is achieved through an analysis grounded in the narratives of city dwellers, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

## **1. On social housing and socio-spatial fragmentation**

Disruptions in the urban fabric are intricately linked to a process of space production that exacerbates socio-spatial inequalities and differentiates habitats, as well as shopping and leisure spaces in cities. This phenomenon includes, for instance, spaces secured by surveillance systems, such as shopping centres and

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gated communities. These spaces not only redefine everyday life structures (Sposito; Góes, 2013) but are also replicated in peripheral areas for both affluent and lower-income classes (Nagib; Nakayama, 2023).

In Brazil, social housing policy began in the mid-1960s. Despite experiencing programmatic shifts and discontinuities in its development trajectories (Nakayama, 2021), the policy predominantly focuses on financing and constructing new dwellings (Bonduki, 2019). Over the years, efforts to address the growing qualitative and quantitative housing deficit have manifested in the creation of extensive housing complexes, typically situated far from city centres and near urban perimeters.

In the context of pronounced social inequalities, the housing demand intertwined with the need to fulfil other urban rights – such as sanitation, environmental concerns, education, and healthcare. Collectively, these issues reflect the precarious nature of burgeoning urbanization in Brazil. Housing policies predominantly favoured the standardization and architectural uniformity of residences on large plots, often overlooking solutions aimed at the comprehensive reurbanization of precarious settlements.

At the beginning of 2009, PMCMV<sup>2</sup> was launched, bolstering economic development and expanding the construction sector during the second term (2007-2010) of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers' Party). With resource management carried out by the Ministry of Cities, PMCMV was designed to combat the housing deficit in Brazil, offering subsidies and reduced interest rates in order to make the acquisition of housing more accessible to the working-class, both in urban and rural areas. To date, PMCMV has delivered more than 6 million homes across the country, with the two largest Brazilian public banks (Banco do Brasil and Caixa Econômica Federal) serving as its main financial agents and companies in the construction industry acting as proponents or executors of the housing units (Ministry of Cities, 2023).

PMCMV serves families with a monthly income of up to 8 thousand Brazilian reais (R\$)<sup>3</sup> in urban areas and an annual income of up to R\$96 thousand in rural areas. In turn, families fall into 3 different income brackets: bracket 1 comprising up to R\$2,640 per month in urban areas and up to R\$31,680 per year

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<sup>2</sup> Established by Law n. 11.977/2009

<sup>3</sup> In March 2024, US\$1 corresponded to approximately R\$4.98 and €1 corresponded to R\$5.44.

in rural areas; bracket 2 from R\$2,640.01 to R\$4,400 per month in urban areas and from R\$31,608.01 to R\$52,800 per year in rural areas; and bracket 3 from R\$4,400.01 to R\$8,000 per month in urban areas and from R\$52,800.01 to R\$96,000.00 per year in rural areas (Ministry of Cities, 2023).

PMCMV's service lines, finally, are subdivided between: a) subsidized housing production, exclusive to bracket 1, whose suppliers can be I. local public entities (states and municipalities) or civil engineering contractors via Residential Lease Fund (Fundo de Arrendamento Residencial – FAR), II. private non-profit entities via the Social Development Fund (Fundo de Desenvolvimento Social – FDS), III. for family farmers via resources from the General Union Budget; and b) acquisition via housing financing for individuals using resources from the Length-of-Service Guarantee Fund (Fundo de Garantia do Tempo de Serviço – FGTS) by Caixa Econômica Federal bank (EBC, 2023).

However, PMCMV achieved limited quantitative impact in providing housing access to the lowest income groups, which were the program's intended beneficiaries (Balbim, Krause; Lima Neto, 2013). The institutional and political strategies shaping PMCMV also influenced urban space configuration. A preference for constructing new units, driven by real estate market interests, led to widespread standardization of units and housing complexes in peripheral areas. Despite some progress, such as PMCMV-Entidades modality, which utilized funds from the FDS to provide subsidized financing to families organized through private non-profit entities, PMCMV largely perpetuated the standards of previous policies.

The implementation of PMCMV has notably intensified the production of housing in vertical gated communities, facilitated through public-private partnerships between government and private construction companies. This development has propelled segmentation dynamics and exacerbated the process of socio-spatial fragmentation. PMCMV's contribution to the mass production of such condominiums, coupled with their spatial boundaries, has led to the isolation and segregation of social groups. This, in turn, has deepened socio-spatial differentiation and transformed daily urban practices of work, leisure, consumption, mobility, and housing.

This disruptive process, intrinsic to the manner in which social housing is implemented and consolidated, highlights the issue of socio-spatial

fragmentation. Despite the increase in vertical gated communities, this expansion has not democratized high-quality housing standards for a broader segment of society nor resulted in uniform urban lifestyle conditions. Instead, differentiation tends to become more pronounced within this process of production of urban space, still rooted in social inequalities and the material and symbolic barriers among city dwellers. The proliferation of high walls, for instance, gradually alters the landscape, creating an environment where thoroughfares and public spaces are less welcoming, and the inhabitants' engagement within their condominiums diminishes collective interest in the city (Nagib; Nakayama, 2023).

Social distinctions are thus reinforced, both through elements of the landscape (like high walls, electric fences, concertinas, etc.) and in the daily lives of city dwellers. This situation reveals the social fractures and hierarchies inherent in a certain logic of urban space production (Castells, 2020; Navez-Bouchanine, 2002), as well as the material and symbolic representations stemming from the physical barriers that dominate the landscape and induces lower interactions among city dwellers and other urban spaces, including public ones (Nagib; Nakayama, 2023; Prévôt-Schapira, 2001).

State actions, therefore, align with this fragmentary socio-spatial logic. On one hand, they dictate the forms of policy implementation and the types of articulation among various actors; on the other, they inadvertently foster the proliferation of habitats enclosed and controlled by security systems. Although PMCMV has expanded housing availability, it has not necessarily ensured comprehensive rights to quality urban living conditions. The program has, in effect, contributed to the reproduction of working-class vertical gated communities and demonstrated housing policy's adaptability to real estate market interests, aligning with the commodification of space and the trend towards proliferating enclosed neighbourhoods and segregated residential areas.

In light of the foregoing, the subsequent section of this article synthesizes the qualitative analysis based on the narratives of city dwellers. It aims to delineate aspects linking the process of socio-spatial fragmentation with the production of social housing in Brazil.

## **2. Representations of working-class space under fragmentary socio-spatial logic**

Building upon the theoretical framework previously established, this section presents an analysis derived from interviews conducted in the medium-sized city of Presidente Prudente and the metropolis of São Paulo, more specifically in the Pimentas district of Guarulhos, in the São Paulo conurbation. The narratives chosen for this study representatively reflect the interplay between socio-spatial fragmentation and urban dynamics associated with the implementation of vertical gated communities in social housing habitats, as a result of PMCMV.

From the analysis of these narratives, five key aspects emerged: I. the prevalence of walls (physical barriers) in social housing; II. the influence of a specific housing pattern – gated communities – in defining housing typologies; III. the geographical positioning of these projects relative to city centres and their placement within the urban fabric; IV. the homogenization of the landscape; V. the dynamics between common space within condominiums and the public space.

Interviews with city dwellers in different urban contexts revealed a correlation between the gated community model and the perception of “safe space”. Similar to medium and high-income habitats, residents of working-class condominiums also associated the presence of high walls with a mitigation of urban violence. However, this link between enclosed spaces and “security” also uncovered contradictions. In Presidente Prudente, most interviewees did not perceive the city as unsafe. Conversely, in the metropolis of São Paulo, many residents questioned the effectiveness of gated communities in ensuring greater security, challenging the necessity of constructing condominiums and large walls for protection.

This widespread replication of gated and security-controlled habitats for income classes benefiting from PMCMV underscores the real estate market's influence on social housing policies under State management. This approach replicates the privatization of space as a solution for working-class habitats, marketing these areas as “safe” and “exclusive” while emphasizing high-density living. Such mass reproduction reiterates the processes of spatial segmentation, driven by hierarchical income ranges and characterized by segregation.

The social housing projects examined in this study were predominantly located in peripheral urban areas, both in the medium-sized city and the metropolis. The significant distance between these housing complexes and city centres is often emphasized by residents. Their daily commutes depend on either personal vehicles or public transportation – mainly buses – the efficiency of which, particularly in peripheral areas, is frequently questioned, thus challenging the assurance of urban mobility.

When inquired about their choice of residence, residents linked their decision primarily to the financing conditions offered by housing programs. However, they also highlighted the proximity of the vertical gated communities to newly emerged subcentres in peripheral city areas. These subcentres are characterized by the presence of shopping centres, medium and large retail chains, including fast-food outlets, appliance stores, pharmacies, supermarkets, bank branches, and also local neighbourhood businesses (Nagib, 2023).

The uniformity of social housing units further amplifies the morphological differentiation in spaces, leading to a homogenization of the landscape in peripheral areas. High walls demarcating these housing complexes distinctly separate public and private spaces, resulting in narrow sidewalks shaped by the walls' contours, thereby diminishing the pedestrian experience in these locales (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



**Fig. 1.** Housing complexes in the medium-sized city of Presidente Prudente. Photo credit: Gustavo Nagib (December 2022).



**Fig. 2.** Housing complexes in the Pimentas district of Guarulhos, within the metropolis of São Paulo. Photo credit: Gustavo Nagib (September 2023).

Residents' narratives revealed a limited use of common spaces within the housing complexes, despite perceiving these leisure areas as exclusive and private. Conversely, public leisure spaces adjacent to these gated habitats, where available, were also underutilized, attributed to various factors such as lack of habit or time, and poor maintenance of these areas. This suggests that the implementation of extensive walled spaces, controlled by security systems, inadvertently discourages integration with external public spaces, which are often monotonous and lack human-scale urban amenities.

It was also observed that the public leisure spaces frequently mentioned by residents are typically located far from their homes, necessitating motorized transportation for access. The design of these working-class vertical gated communities emblematically represents and reinforces the segmentation of social groups, elucidating socio-spatial fragmentation and raising concerns about equitable access to urban rights and amenities.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have explored the interplay between the fragmentary socio-spatial logic and the production of social housing in Brazil, examining two distinct urban contexts: a medium-sized city and a metropolis. This ongoing research suggests that current housing policies in Brazil tend to reinforce this fragmentary socio-spatial logic, as evidenced by the predominant models and

typologies prevalent in social housing production. The widespread emergence of vertical gated communities for the working-class closely aligns with the development of new subcentres in peripheral areas. This trend not only reflects a spatial restructuring but also suggests a constriction in the daily lives of urban residents, who increasingly confine themselves to specific segments of the urban fabric, further segmenting and differentiating the urban landscape.

Interviews with inhabitants of these working-class vertical gated communities imply that the material and symbolic significances of walls and other physical barriers in new residential developments exacerbate the fragmentation of the urban fabric. They also impact the interactions between city dwellers and various urban spaces, encouraging residents to remain within closer territorial bounds of their homes.

Concerning spaces adjacent to these gated residential areas, including public spaces, the physical boundaries created by walls and fences contribute to the desolation of surrounding streets, inadvertently fostering a sense of insecurity among pedestrians. Paradoxically, the limited use and appropriation of intramural common spaces contrast with residents' perceptions of security, often upheld by camera surveillance systems and guarded entrances.

Lastly, landscape homogenization emerges as a defining and structuring element of the social housing production process. This phenomenon indicates a replication of architectural and urban models that are similar in form and content. However, these models contradictorily highlight the segmentation and the socio-spatial differentiation inherent in the urban fabric.

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