

***\_sense of place  
within transience***

*[reconfiguring permanence  
in states of precarity]*

*São Paulo, Brazil*

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Research Plan / November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023

**global housing / repair & consolidate**  
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MSc 3/4 / Graduation Studio / 2022–2023



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## *introduction*

Looking back to primordial times, the basic tools to sustain and prolong human life were and still are food, water, air, and shelter. As people evolved, so did their relationship with their environment. Human needs are something far from static and as is their quest for growth. Through this progressive development, Frederick Kiesler states the human environment becomes three-fold: the natural, the human, and the technological”(Kiesler 1939). “...While life comes only from life, it is also dependent on its technological environment. By changing the physical environment, life may be quickened and increased, retarded or destroyed” (Kiesler 1939). As a result of this interrelationship, Kiesler argues functional design or the idea that form follows function is lacking. Instead, “since the building designer deals with forces, not objects, design is therefore, in my definition, not the circumscription of a solid but a deliberate polarization of natural forces towards a specific human purpose” (Kiesler 1939). In other words, Kiesler suggests humans have innately developed a skill to influence their life in a desired direction. It is through this correlated desire in which people consciously create a demand, resulting in a new inherent development towards new possibilities, forms, and functions within an already existing framework.

Within this development, emerges the city.

“Ancient settlements that arose as ritual centers promised the permanence and order of the cosmos to fragile human beings...Since the time of Aristotle, ‘city’ to philosophers and poets stood for the perfect community. The citizen inhabited the city; serfs and villeins (villains) lived in the countryside. The city of man, where the bishop had his seat, was an image of the City of God...” (Tuan 1974, 150).

The city became a symbol of opportunity and prosperity; a space for citizens to flourish, its bounds embodying a chance for betterment. However, in the case of Sao Paulo, Brazil – and many cities of the Global South– those same bounds demarcate also what it means to be a rightful citizen of the city; and for the urban poor, this often represents itself in inimical form.

## *problem statement +* *research question*

Sao Paulo, Brazil, a megacity home to 22.4 million inhabitants as of 2022 has “one of the most inequitable distributions of wealth in the world” (Caldeira 1996, 303). In the various districts, the inequality either shouts or whispers its presence. An open city, where the street-scape is the backdrop for social convergence, segregates itself in Sao Paulo as a space of clear definition of the haves and have-nots. Within the urban condition “...the physical distances separating rich and poor have decreased at the same time that the mechanism to keep them apart have become more obvious and more complex” (Caldeira 1996, 304). As Brazil’s economic and political conditions exponentially shifted so did the reshaping of the built landscape – with that, the right to the city for the urban poor became intangible.

“Since the 1940s, the working classes had been building their own houses in the periphery of the city in a process called ‘autoconstruction.’ In this process they bought cheap lots in distant areas of the city without any infrastructure and services, and frequently involving some illegality, and spent decades building their dream houses and improving their neighborhoods. In this way, they both constructed their homes and expanded the city” (Caldeira 1996, 305).

Through this process even the poorest of citizens could gain access to the city. However, due to economic restructuring, new generations are even more at a disadvantage to precarious living conditions.

On the opposite spectrum, for the well-off, the current city skyline is arrayed with inward turned urban enclaves; congruently polarizing amenities once connected to the public street (i.e., parks, residential complexes, schools). These vertical communities retain all that is necessary within a private and autonomous space and can be positioned almost anywhere, independent of their context. In many cases, they are placed at the periphery directly neighboring auto-constructed settlements. As Caldeira coins it, "...Sao Paulo is today a city of walls" as the disparity between classes became something quite defined and accepted with the fear of crime fueling changes to all forms of public exchange (Caldeira 1996, 307). Within this, emerges a dynamic, one of codependence. The poor rely on the city for financial prosperity; the wealthy rely on the labor of the poor.

As the government begins to address housing for the city's most marginalized through large-scale residential blocks – as a means to domesticate the transient realities of Sao Paulo's contemporary urban condition – the notions of social segregation are still wide and apparent. As the favela is stigmatized with housing a certain social class, so is the governmental housing, and so is the urban enclave. Each environment has become categorical; of separate and unequal atmospheres devoid of connection. However, is there a way for these atmospheres to communicate? In his book, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, Richard Sennett refers to three types of repair: restoration, remediation, and reconfiguration. In the case of Grajau – a peripheral district of Sao Paulo constituting for a majority of the city's urban poor – Sennett's ideas of repair can be disseminated within its changing context. Restoration, looking to accept the exiting approaches to marginalized housing. The second, remediation, looking to build upon existing solutions, interchanging and exchanging certain elements for an improved whole. Lastly, reconfiguration giving space for new typologies with the use of existing forms. This brings into question:

1. *How could a kit-of-parts approach marry the efficiency of a top-down approach & the resilience of a bottom-up approach to enable place-making in self-built settlements of Grajau?*
  - a. *How can participatory process be a part of the planning process for social housing?*
  - b. *What spatial structures help create/enable the development of social cohesion in self-built settlements?*
  - c. *How can a catalogue of dwelling types adapt and meet community needs over time?*

## *theoretical framework*

According to Najafi and Kamal B.M. Shariff, the "main goal of urban design is creating a sense of place... (paying) attention to the quality of places and built environments" (Najafi, Kamal B.M. Shariff 2011, 1054). The role of design is in so many ways an instrument to answer human needs and expectations as Kiesler also suggested. Najafi and Kamal B.M. Shariff go to define 'place', as expressing "a strong affective bond between a person and a particular setting. In other words, place is mixed with human values and principles. As a result, place is a particular space which is covered with meaning and values by the users" (Najafi, Kamal B.M. Shariff 2011, 1054). In the context of Sao Paulo, the contemporary urban condition is ephemeral – in constant flux as, "today, the pattern among poor people is to keep moving once they become urbanized. Remitting money home, modern migrants...treat the places in which they alight as five-or ten-year work sites rather than destinations in which they integrate for good" (Sennett 2019, 100).

How do we address spatial value and place specificity when the urban fabric is exponentially changing? To deeper comprehend a meaningful value system of place, Edward Relph sets a framework: by the identity of a place, he "refers to its 'persistent sameness and unity which allows that [place]



to be differentiated from others...Relph describes this persistent identity in terms of three components: (1) the place's physical setting; (2) its activities, situations, and events; and (3) the individual and group meanings created through people's experiences and intentions in regard to that place" (Seamon, Sowers 2008). However, to Relph, these three components were not enough to capture the full essence of people's relationship with place. He elaborates, "...one needs a language whereby we can identify particular place experiences in terms of the intensity of meaning and intention that a person and place hold for each other" (Seamon, Sowers 2008). He defines this concept as insideness or the degree of attachment, involvement, and concern an inhabitant or group of inhabitants have for a said place. He contends that within our contemporary a genuine sense of place is gradually overshadowed by a less genuine attitude towards the built landscape. In *The Human Condition* (1954), Hannah Arendt touches on human thoughtlessness, an outstanding characteristic, she observes, of our time. Much as Kiesler drew on people's inherent skill to direct his or her life in a desired direction, Arendt stipulates this act results in a series of events, without serious understanding and consideration for their future implications. Rahul Mehrotra goes further to apply this to the Global South when referring to Ravi Sundaram "'pirate' modernity of the poor who slip under the laws of the city to simply survive, without any conscious attempt at constructing a counter-culture" (Mehrotra 2017, 133). Honing into Grajau, this unconscious direction by the masses manifested itself into informal settlements; ultimately expanding the bounds of the city of Sao Paulo.

Within Relph's framework, sense of place can be expanded to be directed towards diverse facets within a given society; looking at an inhabitants individual position and circumstance. These unique points of view being in the form of their gender, physical and intellectual abilities, the nuance of one's cultural and social backgrounds, economic endowments, and political and religious affiliations. In essence, sense of place has differing levels of intimacy with inhabitants. These levels contribute to people's social engagement with place based on the strength of emotional connection to said place. While this affective value varies from place, it correlates to people's expenditure of quality time, quality of social

interaction, and as a result a creation of identity through these aspects. A sense of place can find meaning in its positive perceptual and psychological influence.

To marginalized groups residing within Grajau, the idea of sense of place holds yet another set of challenges. While auto-constructed dwellings do not fit into the government standard of suitable housing due to their precarity, their rich sense of place supersedes that of the alternative sterile government-funded tower block. This brings to the fore, what is the appropriate balance? To Mehrotra, "...urban design today is in a place between an intuitive exploration between the formal city represented by architecture and the instant city premised on temporality" (Mehrotra 2017, 135). Building on this, Charles Correa suggests the policy of 'Equity Plots' stating, "plot sizes ranging from 50 sqm to 100 sqm would be viable both for the poorest sections of society...as well as the affluent" (Correa 2010, 203). He suggest eight essential principles towards housing in the Global South: incrementality, open-to-sky space, equity, disaggregation, pluralism, malleability, participation, and income generation. With these elements, planners are able "to provide the advantages of high density, yet separate enough to allow for individual identity and growth options...allowing for an organic mix of income groups and communities" (Correa 2010, 203). Thus, finding an equilibrium between the permanency of built form and the ephemeral urban conditions in Grajau is essential towards contemporary place-making within its bounds – specifically, in regards to marginalized housing.

## *methodological positioning*

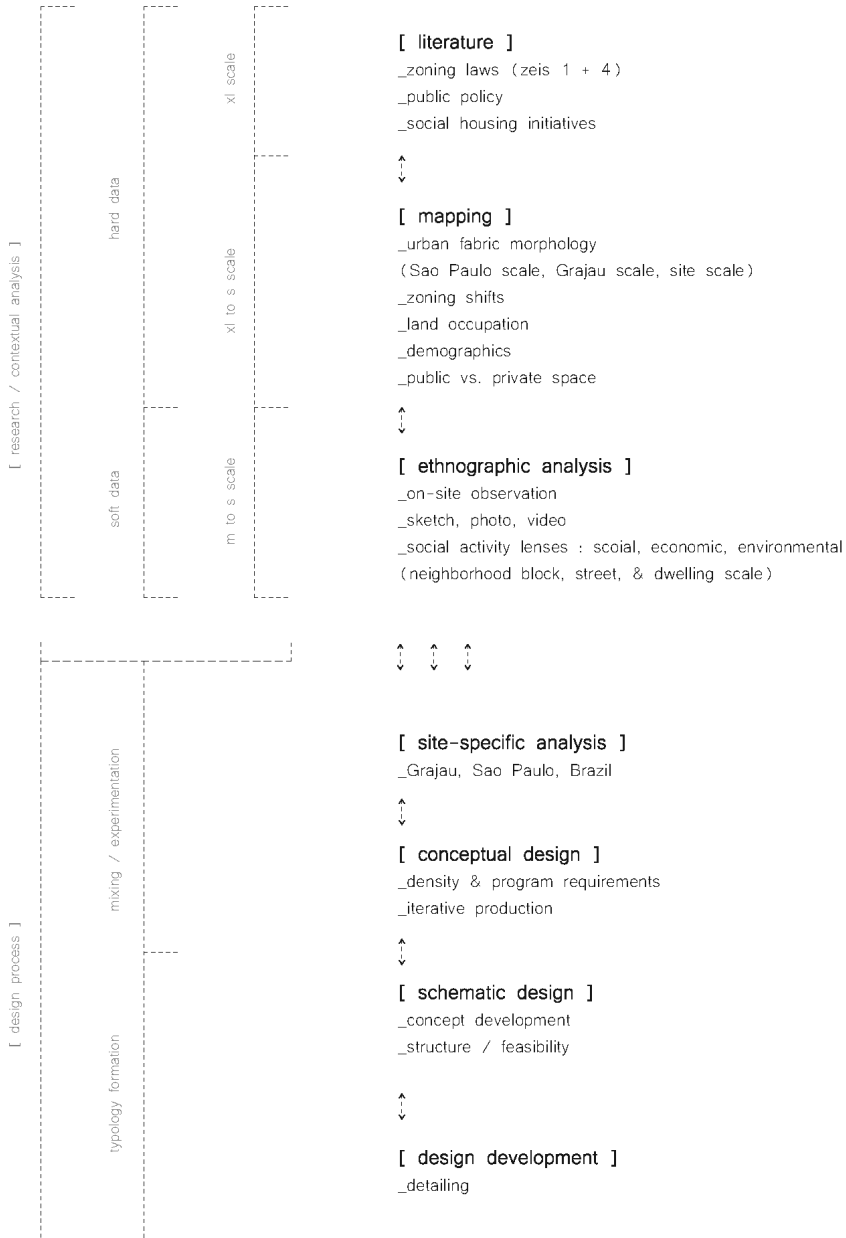
The methodological approaches towards the research will be three-fold through: (1) **literature** (2) **mapping** (3) **ethnographic analysis**. The variety of approaches are necessary to grasp the range of atmospheres comprising Grajau, Sao Paulo, Brazil.

In order to realize the current urban condition of Grajau, knowledge of Sao Paulo and its past are necessary to provide perspective on the development of its urban periphery and multi-faceted social, political, and environmental conditions. Literature regarding Sao Paulo's zoning laws, public policy, and social housing initiatives are necessary to understand the existing framework of governmental procedure towards social housing. Secondly, the method of mapping would reveal the ephemeral urban landscape of Grajau. To understand the transience specific to the context, it is important to analyze its development through time; with a multi-scalar approach. From analysis of the larger metropolitan area, to the neighborhood 'block', and ultimately down to the street scale, it would be crucial to understand how the urban fabric transitioned into its current condition. This method would visualize shifts in zoning, land occupation, morphology of building typologies, demographic, the environment, as well as changes in public and private space. Thirdly, after on-site

fieldwork in Grajau – consisting of sketching, photography, and video – are collected, an ethnographic drawing analysis would be developed. This method would show the everyday life of the inhabitants through various lenses, those being: social, economic, and environmental. Through this process, a more nuanced reflection of social behavior can be gathered regarding the districts constituency. This collection of soft data (qualitative qualities) can then inform community make-up and social priorities, delineating a series of place-based activities vital for community exchange.

The culmination of methods would inform the design of all neighborhood constituents, from individual dwellings to adjacent neighboring clusters, to the community scale, ultimately creating an ecosystem of inclusivity, shared resources, and adaptability for the wide range of users. Building and assembly practices would be tailored around available skill sets, as users would function as the primary construction agents. The goal would be to create a network of dwellings that propagate inclusive ways of living and reflect the users' rich cultural identity. This culmination of soft and hard data, would provide a contextual springboard for implementation of marginalized housing design interventions balancing between themes of permanence, ephemerality, and sense of place.

# ***\_research structure***



## *research reflection*

Richard Sennett quotes Robert Venturi, "...'richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning.' That is the ethics of an open city" (Sennett 2019, 301). The current urban fabric of Sao Paulo, Brazil, has turned inward. The segregation between various economic and social groups is clearly defined – each confined to their own atmosphere. In contrast, an open city, a place of convergence, of exchange, of complexity "via creating synchronicities, less determinate thanks to incomplete form, more socially interactive due to its porous edges, punctuated by will: the tie between form and function loosens for all these reasons, and the city becomes free to evolve. It opens up" (Sennett 2019, 289). The direction of this research is to expand on the current urban fabric of Sao Paulo in the formation of more resilient and meaningful atmospheres within the city. Moving beyond conventional governmental quotas of the housing crisis, and instead looking for a softer, more malleable approach towards high density housing – a humanistic approach – one which a community can identify with. The city of today, "...is not only the city of the poor, or the regular models of the formal and informal...but a kinetic space, a space where these models collapse into singular entities and where meanings are ever shifting and blurred" (Mehrotra 2017, 133). As architects and urbanists, it is essential to adapt design approaches to reconfigure, adapt, and reformulate to the permanent state of flux.

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