

Housing, work, and migration: a squatted building under threat of eviction

Moradia, trabalho e migração:
uma ocupação sob ameaça de remoção

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to demonstrate, using a squatted building located in the Brás neighborhood and organized by Brazilian and Latin American migrants, the way in which commuting, housing, and work are associated and interwoven. The article shows the constitution and organization of the squatted building, displays the protection network that was formed around the urban space, and explains the way in which a lawsuit that requires the eviction of families addresses the issue of work in the squatted building. Based on the dynamics of this urban space, we demonstrate that the form of work constituted in the squatted building fosters another market: the informal housing market.

Keywords: migrants, squatted building, eviction, housing, work.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é demonstrar, a partir de uma ocupação localizada no Brás, organizada por migrantes latino-americanos e brasileiros, a forma de associação e entrelaçamento entre deslocamento, moradia e trabalho. Demonstra-se o modo de constituição da ocupação e de organização do local, indicando a rede de proteção que se estabeleceu em torno do espaço urbano e como uma ação judicial, que requer a remoção das famílias, aborda o tema do trabalho no local. A partir da dinâmica desse espaço urbano, demonstra-se que o trabalho constituído na ocupação fomenta um outro mercado, o mercado tido como informal de moradia.

Palavras-chave: migrantes; ocupação; remoção; moradia; trabalho.



Introduction

On 21 de Abril Street,¹ located in Brás, a neighborhood in downtown São Paulo, a squat building² has been organized over the years by Brazilians, Bolivians, Paraguayans, Venezuelans and Colombians. There reside 57 families, mostly made of migrants,³ who turned the area into a place to live and work.

Brás is recognized as a neighborhood of national and international migrants in the city of São Paulo. The region developed as a working-class neighborhood and as a destination for countless migrant workers throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Over the years, the neighborhood has been transformed, becoming recognized by its popular commerce and consolidating itself as a gravitational trade center for Brazilian and Latin American *sacoleiros* (popular traveling retailers).

The neighborhood came to be as a migration center, whether as a permanent, commuting⁴ or business destination. Nowadays, the region is part of transnational networks of migration and popular trade, while remaining a place of residence for countless migrants.

Popular commerce in the region, which encompasses the Brás, Bom Retiro, 25 de Março Street and Santa Ifigênia Street axis, is a hallmark of downtown São Paulo; since the 20th century, popular trade has been concentrated in this region and there is where the first industries linked to textile production have emerged (Freire, 2008). The Brás region was the city's first industrial center, undergoing major transformations during the 1980s; a place of industrial concentration that was restructured, causing the clothing industry in the region to give way to factory stores, small clothing stores

organized by migrants in their backyards or even inside their homes (Freire, 2015).

Brás, along with Bom Retiro, continues to be one of the main centers for the production and distribution of clothing items. The Brás and Bom Retiro axis expanded over time to the East and North Zones of the city, regions where countless small sewing ateliers and clothing establishments were set; these are small outsourcing clothing workshops, constituting a network of subcontracts which supplies the clothing trade (Freire 2015; 2008).

The expansion of these small workshops spiked during the 1990s due to the productive restructuring that the clothing industry went through. This change mainly impacts the management of labor and productive organization, not relating to technological innovation of great impact (Freire, 2008). Thus, from that decade onwards, outsourcing to small workshops through subcontract networks gained momentum:

[...] the clothing industry underwent a restructuring process in which companies reduced the size of their plants and focused on the processes of creating, modeling, cutting fabrics and marketing the final products. The formally constituted companies began to subcontract the service of sewing workshops outside the factories to perform the most labor-intensive part of production. Outsourcing was a labor management strategy to deal with a diverse, small-scale production constantly changing according to variations in fashion trends. The insertion of Bolivian immigrants in this sector of São Paulo's industry seems to have occurred precisely through these sewing workshops and, due to expansion, this service becomes outsourced. (Ibid., p. 93)

The strategy of subcontracting through the outsourcing of sewing de-characterizes the work relationship, avoiding accountability for the conditions in which this activity is performed and for the frequent exploitation that these forms of labor management produce. In this structure, the person responsible for contracting the service or responsible for the final sale of the product is no longer accountable (ibid.).

The Brás and Bom Retiro axis, where most of the companies producing clothes in São Paulo are concentrated, is also a place of great concentration of migrants, either street trading, living in the region, or working in small clothing workshops. These are networks and forms of life in the city which intertwine work, housing and migration.

The labor market seen as informal is linked to the dynamics present in urban spaces and to the transnational flow of goods and people (Peralva and Telles, 2015). This labor market connects housing, migration, informal residential rental networks, and forms of exploitation, but it also connects sociabilities, ways of life and resistance in the city of São Paulo.

Squat 21 de Abril illustrates this path. In the midst of the threat of eviction, the families, despite the internal and external conflicts permeating the dynamics of this urban space, built their own form of organization and have resisted the threat of eviction for more than two years.

These forms of life and dynamics in the city are established on the fluid and uncertain borders between formal and informal, licit and illicit. These are markets flourishing on such frontiers and coming to be as an increasingly frequent strategy to the reproduction of capital.

If informality, until the 1980s, was considered an inherent characteristic of the Global South, it is today an inherent characteristic of contemporary capitalism (ibid.). The State, the law and its agents are part of these borders themselves, corroborating their indistinctness and the reproduction of capital that occurs in these spaces.

The intertwined paths of housing, work and migration are part of the circuits inscribed in the city by the “undesirables” (Agier, 2008), who are subject to informality, often appearing as the only alternative for certain populations to find work, housing, commuting, survival and ways of life in the city of São Paulo (Santos, 2022).

Migrants are scale and city producers; they are subjects who have identification and agency in local urban struggles and transformations. They are subjects who take up different identities and forms of integration, not only the “migrant” identity and the integration into circuits considered properly migratory. By pointing out the relationship between city and migration, it is possible to highlight multiple paths taken by migrants in everyday life, multiple connections, crossing migratory or ethnic circuits, which evidence broader sociability (Çaglar and Schiller, 2011; Santos, 2022).

When analyzing the individualized paths of migrants, it is possible to observe that the category of “migrant” obscures the identification and agency of these subjects in urban transformations and struggles. Thus, the category “migrant” is insufficient to refer to urban subjects who live, fight and perform in the city. This category is insufficient to reveal the extent of their complexity, the different ways of living, working and organizing, failing to

show all the power contained in the lives, paths and arrangements that these subjects produce (Santos, 2022; Santos, 2020).

From the actions of the State, from processes of dispossession, organization and resistance built by Brazilians and migrants, as occurred in Squat 21 de Abril, collective sociabilities emerge, constituting an action of a broader urban and social collective, which cannot be limited either to the “migrant” category or, for example, to the “unhoused” category. The expedients used by the State and the violence suffered, as well as the processes of resistance, articulate different subjects and produce the shared repertoires of a broad social collective (Santos, 2020).

Urban informality, whether at work, at home, in documentation or paths taken to the city of São Paulo, is not constituted as a specific sector, but is characterized as a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces, functioning as a mode of government in which the State, its agents and the actions taken by them, considered formal or inserted in the framework of legality, corroborate its reproduction (Roy, 2005). Urban informality is reproduced through state action, its agents, and its administrative or judicial procedures for removing housing or street vendors from the region (Santos, 2022).

Therefore, as the concept of informality is brought up, no specific sector is determined, no determinate form, status or working condition is being characterized, since the widespread idea of “informal sector” inscribes informality in the genealogy of dualisms, which ceases to be understood as a conceptual tool and starts

to be used as a category for describing the real (Rabossi, 2019). Urban informality is a set of transactions that connect different spaces and economies moving between formal/informal and legal/illegal. Thus, informality is not the object of State regulation, but a product of the State itself, based on its ability to constitute and reconstitute categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy (Roy, 2005; Telles 2010).

At Squat 21 de Abril, families work and live in a place under the constant perspective of eviction, since, for more than two years now, it has been the subject of a lawsuit⁵ that seeks to remove the residents and interdict the building in view of risks related to property conditions and the possibility of a fire.

Thus, given the context presented and the monitoring of this occupation, this discussion seeks to analyze its form of organization, how it emerged and started, how the work is organized, the protection network that has been formed in defense of families and for their permanence; how the lawsuit addresses the activity carried out in the property; and how legal actions reproduce informality, often working as an instrument of routine urban planning and intervention.

The article is divided in three parts, in addition to the introduction and final considerations. The first part presents how the squat building came to be and the arrangements made by landlords who charge migrants high rents (in an informal way) to live and work in precarious conditions.

The form of exploitation set up is not directly linked to organization and exploitation of the workforce, but, through the informal

renting which concedes work and living space, collects high values from a property that was previously abandoned.

The second part of the article presents the B.'s⁶ trajectory. She is a resident who is recognized by most families as the leader of the squat building. B. is from Bolivia and arrived in Brazil to work in sewing workshops, going through several workshops until arriving at Squat 21 de Abril. Finally, the third part presents the lawsuit and the threat suffered by the residents, analyzing the way the labor activity developed in the property is presented by the action and the speeches used by State agents to characterize it.

The squat building and its formation

As one leaves Brás station at Agente Cícero square, close to Largo da Concórdia, the number of street vendors, stalls, canvasses on the ground, products, people, and information on the streets is stunning. Even before exiting the train station, some young people holding clothing catalogs may approach you in an attempt to take you to the store where they work.

There one finds countless stalls offering food, peppers, and dried shrimp, as well as canvasses displaying clothes, accessories, electronics, and toys, scattered on the sidewalk, leaving a narrow corridor for pedestrians to transit. Given the numbers of workers arriving to or leaving work and people who seek to buy products at popular prices, the passage left to transit becomes tight.

Street commerce overlaps with stores and galleries established in the buildings of the region. The place takes the shape of a bazaar, there are numerous shopping alternatives, the options are vast and, for those who are not used to such dynamics, it is easy to get lost.

Tourists, immigrants, refugees, subway employees, children, adults, young people, Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians are all part of a harmonious chaos, sharing this space for buying and selling that presents itself in the appearance of a bazaar (Peraldi, 2001).

Such space is a commercial square in which transnational networks of goods and people are triggered, transforming the region of Brás into a gravitational center that activates networks and transnational flows of goods and people (*ibid.*; Tarrus and Peraldi, 1995; Peralva and Telles, 2015). A bazaar economy is formed on the spot:

This is not just a commercial and craftsmanship center where the cycle of goods is peacefully finished. The bazaar is, first and foremost, the place where the worlds of exchange, the different “stages” of the economic machine, intersect. The efficiency of the bazaar does not only rely on the fact that it spatially organizes exchange relations. It is also in the contiguity, perhaps promiscuity, with which it organizes the commercial worlds. Much more than a commercial center, the bazaar is a place of balance between a logic of economic rationalization of exchange that tends to the fluidity and division of mercantile orders, and a logic which is, at first sight, economically aberrant, of tangling and overlapping of products, sequences, rhythms, social orders [...] (Peraldi, 2001, p. 17)

The apparent chaos makes us believe that the whole world has suddenly found itself in the same place, in that particular urban space. Along Rangel Pestana Avenue, amidst the crowd, through the narrow passageway and in the middle of the avenue among countless passing cars, diverse people from different origins, countries, regions, and languages intersperse in a vast corridor of goods.

As we walk, moving away from the Brás station, the number of stalls and commercial establishments decreases, only the large businesses and stores remain on the landscape.

When entering Hipódromo Street, towards 21 de Abril Street, that landscape and the bustle of a commercial square give way to calm streets with little movement. Shops give way to small bars, many filled with migrants chatting in their own language. The stores give way to old townhouses used for housing, many of which resemble tenements. People spread out on the streets give way to locals sitting in their doorways talking about their day.

As you walk down Hipódromo Street, countless abandoned buildings and warehouses appear, some of them occupied by people looking for housing and others still functioning as warehouses or parking lots for trucks.

When arriving at 21 de Abril Street, the landscape is the same: a few tenements, a few bars, people sitting and chatting outside their doors, and large warehouses that have now been transformed into residences and workplaces.

Squat 21 de Abril is one of these constructions. The entrance is a large metal gate, giving access to a vast warehouse; next to it, there is a small door, which gives access

to the staircase of a four-story building, built above this warehouse, which is located on the ground floor. This is the real estate where Squat 21 de Abril is.

As one enters the shed, numerous wooden constructions – a true example of self-construction – delimit the homes of each of the residents. Among the wooden houses, several carts used for commerce are scattered, cars are parked and there are mannequins which are used as sewing models distributed all over the place. These are wooden houses and sewing studios, a whole village built inside a vast warehouse.

Each house has a different size, and the vast warehouse is extended by mezzanines at specific points, where more living and working units are built. It is estimated that more than 40 families live in this warehouse, including Brazilians, Venezuelans, Bolivians, Paraguayans and Colombians.

Upon entering one of these small workshop-houses, the area is barely sufficient for a sewing machine, a bed, a refrigerator and a stove (when they are there), their belongings being scattered, piled up or organized in the corners of the construction. In some cases, the place where the resident lives only accommodates his mattress. Some manage to get a room to sleep and another room, next door, to be their workshop. These are small constructions of different sizes that overlap the functions of housing, sewing workshop, carpentry shop, and parking for residents' cars staying in the warehouse.

When entering through the door located on the street next to the metal gate, we go up the building's staircase and the division between living and working spaces is,

apparently, more organized. Delimitations are made using office partitions; all bathrooms are shared in the property, those of the building as those of the warehouse. However, on some floors, collective kitchens were built, different from the individual ones inside the tiny units that were built in the warehouse.

On the first floor, upon entering through an office partition door, we find a large sewing workshop. There are several machines scattered on small tables, wires falling from the ceiling and various pieces of equipment connected to the same socket. There are some

workers who, without ever taking their eyes off the machine, sew non-stop at an astonishing pace, as if there was no one walking around the place. The “soundtrack” of such space is the constant noise of sewing machines, with short pauses, as each worker repositions their needle and carries on working.

Between one machine and the other, there is a narrow corridor to move up and down, in which fabrics are spread out on all sides. On the day of this visit, it was cold, it was winter, people were sewing large blankets, as it is possible to see in the following image:

Figura 1 – Workshop on the first floor



Source: author's collection, 2022.

In the building, there are sewing workshops interspersed with housing on the first, third and fourth floors; the second floor is used solely for residence. There are at least 17 families spread across the floors, all from Bolivia.

The dynamics within the property are not unrelated to those found throughout the streets and shops of the region, these are families that live and work around this gravitational center and its booming clothing trade. The work, what is sewn and the demands are closely linked with the times, with what is in fashion, with clientele's demand and with orders arriving to the inhabitants of the squat building through retailers.

Residents are hired by retailers to sew what will then be sold by them; these families do not work directly with the clientele that buys the products. The dynamics of this urban space seem to constitute the "backstage" of the commercial dynamics found in the streets of Brás. The blankets were being sewn responding to a demand that presented itself during the winter and was brought by retailers and stores of the region.

The formation of this building began in 2014. Initially abandoned and without any destination, the first residents began to rent the property to live and work through verbal agreement with the owner, considered informal; the rent was calculated according to the amount of space taken, ranging from R\$900.00 to R\$1,500.00.

B. reports that she started living in the property at the invitation of a friend who owed her a debt. This former resident used to rent the first three floors of the property from the owner; for the first floor only, the agreed

amount was R\$1,500.00. Afterwards, he began to sublease the spaces, dividing the place as it is today.

The value of this sublease also varied according to the amount of space taken, ranging from R\$500.00 to R\$900.00. To settle the debt, this friend charged B. R\$500.00 per month for a living and working environment. According to B., this is a low rent for the region, because, before moving to this property, she paid R\$1,000.00 for less space in a pension (Santos, 2022).

Upon discovering that this resident was subletting rooms, the owner began to threaten him and evicted him from the property. Initially, he threatened all residents as he believed they were just employees. However, when he noticed that they actually paid rent, he allowed them to stay and began to collect their rents directly. If the owner had previously charged, from the former resident, amounts determined by floor, he now started to charge individualized amounts by family, increasing his collection with these informal rents charged (ibid.).

This former resident was evicted in 2019, structuring a dynamic of rent collection and threats to families; a typical structure of tenements in downtown São Paulo, which are organized by the charge of high rents per square meter, considering the small housing units of the families, performed by an intermediary who collects the amounts and, in case of default, evicts them by threatening. (Kohara, 1999).

Thus, in the property, the amounts were paid in cash, without provision of any receipt or payment information, being collected by a Brazilian resident, called by them the

“responsible”. There were two “managers” in the property, one to manage the warehouse and the other to manage the floors of the building, always Brazilians and residents of the property. Values were collected every 30th day of the month on the floors and every 10th day of the month in the warehouse, with the main function of the “responsible” being to inspect the place, pass on information about what was happening to the owner and, when necessary, threaten and evict residents (Santos, 2022).

The conditions of the property make works and renovations recurrent, however, complaints and requests were not welcome. The owner claimed that the residents themselves should be responsible for the works and renovations and, if they didn't want to be, they could leave, as there were many families in need of housing. Depending on the complaints made, the owner threatened to increase the amount charged; the rent increase was made suddenly, and then either the payment was made, or there was eviction from the property (*ibid.*).

The main function of the “responsibles” was precisely to evict those who did not want to make the payments; eviction was carried out through threats; acquaintances were called to intimidate and, if necessary, forcibly remove the resident.

The exploitation and the organization of labor that take place in the city of São Paulo are not solely and exclusively linked to the direct exploitation of the workforce. Outsourced subcontracting networks, which occur in the clothing market of the region, facilitate the disrespect of the labor rights of these migrants who come to Brazil. However, it is not just the organization of this market that circumscribes

the conditions of labor exploitation. The ways of living found by this population and their close connection with work, almost inseparable, present another facet of the violence suffered by migrants.

In addition to the direct exploitation which is related to work activities, these individuals are subjected to threats from landlords and their representatives, sudden and expressive increases in rent value, and lawsuits that intend to remove them, forcing them to constantly change their place of residence and work.

Constant threats of eviction make them increase their workload to cover the rent charged or to structure a new house.

Housing and work in the clothing market of the expanded axis of Brás and Bom Retiro are inseparable; the forms of exploitation that happen in the housing of migrants are linked to their work conditions.

In 2020, given the conditions of the property, the City of São Paulo filed a lawsuit against the owner and the residents, requesting the vacancy of the site and the requalification of the property due to the maintenance of the building in inadequate safety conditions. The dangers indicated for the building overlap with the job performed by the squatters; added to the precarious conditions of electricity connection, for example, the work activity itself is a reason for eviction due to risk to the families.

At the end of 2020, there was a court decision for the eviction of the families, and the forced eviction was scheduled to take place in March 2021. Facing imminent eviction, the families began to organize themselves and stopped paying rent to the landlord. The current

organization of residents was configured at this moment; as they started to organize themselves internally in an autonomous way, the property became a squat building.

From this threat of eviction, a support network arised: traditional social movements fighting for housing began to support residents; the Reference and Assistance Center for Immigrants (Crai), a City Hall service, organized site visits; NGOs that support migrants in the city of São Paulo began to help them; and defense in court proceedings is now carried out by the Gaspar Garcia Center for Human Rights⁷ (CGGDH).

Through the actions of both the residents' organization and the network that came to be and through the legal defense prepared by the CGGDH, in the midst of the eviction operation organized by the City Hall and the Military Police, the Court of Justice of São Paulo (TJSP), due to an appeal in the lawsuit, suspended the eviction due to the covid-19 pandemic, understanding that the eviction of these families during the pandemic would pose a greater risk to the lives of the residents than their permanence. At the moment when the police were advancing towards the people to forcibly open the property and remove them from there, the decision of the TJSP was made available, and the operation was canceled.

Through the support given to the residents and their organization, a new dynamic is structured: rent payments are no longer made, the "responsible" becomes just another resident, periodic meetings are organized and the squatters start to live and work having the constant perspective of eviction. The new organization is not carried out without quick conflicts. Under the constant

threat of eviction, families start to fight among themselves, people and families who have small spaces seek to increase their housing, money is collected, charged and organized by all to carry out property improvements. Due to these fights, residents of the building stopped talking to residents of the warehouse; however, amid fights, advances and mishaps, the eviction of the families remains suspended, and the squatters could keep their residence and their work (ibid.).

Paths taken: life, housing and work

Housing, work and migration intersect and often become inseparable; these are paths taken by countless migrants who arrive in Brazil to work in sewing, through contact with acquaintances and family members who are already in the country, through labor agents from their country of origin or through the paths of life. In this path, work is usually linked to housing, and its exploitation involves the form in which residence is organized. Inhabitants are either migrants placed there by the workshops employing them, or people who, in search for "independence",⁸ pay informal rents to property owners in the region to start their own workshop.

The clothing workshops and backyard ateliers organized are often linked to ways of living. These are workshops that provide housing to workers, through agreements that are often uncertain, or people who buy their machines and start to work at home on their own or with the help of family and friends. The

paths of housing and work taken by migrants are numerous and the possibilities are diverse: migrants who join social movements and live in squat buildings, paying formal or informal rents, residents of tenements, reception centers, residence of friends or family, among countless possibilities (ibid.).

However, one of the forms of housing that many migrants find is linked to work. B.'s journey in Brazil demonstrates the path taken by many migrants in the city of São Paulo; it is a migration mechanism that links travel, work and housing (Freire, 2008)

B. is 30 years old, she is from Bolivia, from the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, and she arrived in Brazil 11 years ago. She decided to come to the country after a family quarrel. In her hometown, she worked as a street vendor and, after an accident, she was unable to carry weight and, therefore, to carry out the activity. After falling out with her family, B. left home and found an agency in her hometown offering work in the city of São Paulo; despite the fact that she was not looking for a job, she ended up accepting the proposal, according to herself, in a moment of anger (ibid.).

The agency proposed that she worked as an assistant in a workshop located in the Casa Verde region, North Zone of São Paulo. As an assistant, she would fold and pack pieces to deliver to suppliers. The proposed salary was two hundred dollars a month, room and meals included, working hours going from eight in the morning to five in the afternoon.

According to B., there are numerous agencies in her city that offer jobs all over the world, not just in Brazil. These are labor recruiters, agencies offering these jobs in

Bolivia, often using false advertisement, which facilitate travel and provide job in sewing workshops and ateliers, as Freire demonstrates (2008, pp. 91-92):

Such agencies have a fundamental anchoring point in the city of São Paulo which is developed around the clothing industry. We can say that these are particular forms of circulation that relate to specific forms of production, a mobility that is triggered by the demand for this type of subcontracted work, characteristic of this sector of São Paulo industry.

Upon her arrival, the story told by the agents quickly proved to be false. She worked the first three months without receiving a salary and decided, based on contacts made in Brazil, to move to Praia Grande and work for another workshop. She lived in this city for 6 years, but over time, its demand for work decreased until the workshop had to close. B. still hopes to return to Praia Grande (Santos, 2022).

With no demand for work, she returned to São Paulo, again to the Casa Verde region, but to a new workshop, a place that also provided housing. Unsatisfied, she moved to Brás on Coimbra Street.

After numerous attempts to find suitable and satisfying employment conditions, she decided to start her own workshop, acquiring a sewing machine. She moved to a pension on Gomes Cardin Street, also in Brás. Thus, she started to pay rent and work in her place of residence; Her home remained her workplace, but she paid her own rent and organized her own activity.

In 2017, B. moved to 21 de Abril Street, to another pension, paying R\$1,000.00 in rent. She stayed there until she received her friend's offer to live in the building that nowadays is Squat 21 de Abril. So, hoping to buy more machines, due to her sister's arrival to work with her, and considering the rent of R\$500.00, she decided to move again (ibid.). After her friend was evicted from the building, she starts paying rent directly to the landlord until the eviction threat comes.

Her trajectory illustrates a common path of migration to the city of São Paulo in which work and housing are inseparable; working conditions and the exploitation of labor are linked to living conditions.

B. started sewing more or less 5 years ago; she used to work as an assistant or as a "responsible"⁹ of the workshop, not using the sewing machines. B.'s suppliers and contacts for clothing production were found along her path, through direct contact at the workshops where she worked. Either the workshops forward part of the production to her, so as to deliver the products within the requested period, transferring part of the values; or the order arrives directly from the region's retailers, who work at the "dawn market".¹⁰

Suppliers provide the cut pieces, and her job is to sew them together; the pieces are diverse: t-shirts, pants, sweatshirts, jackets, blazers, and the amount charged ranges between R\$1.80 and R\$2.00 per piece sewn. Contacts request a number of pieces and set a certain deadline. Given the demand she has, she accepts it or not, depending on her ability to produce the pieces within the requested period.

Orders arrive more or less every 15 days. At the moment, she can sew up to 70 pieces a day. According to B., this production is low, however, she would not be able to produce more, as she needs to take care of her one-year-old daughter (ibid.).

This organization of work often configures itself as or is associated with slave work.¹¹ The Bolivian population involved in the activity carries such stigma and is uncomfortable with the association. At Squat 21 de Abril, the situation is not different; City Hall bodies, when inspecting the site, pointed out such possibility, as stated in the lawsuit:

Residents claimed that the houses, which had not yet been visited until that date, were also used for work, and that inside them were machines and instruments for sewing and making clothes. At that time, it was not clear whether or not there was a situation of labor exploitation that could be configured as slave work. Residents denied this type of activity in their speeches, but the elements brought by their narratives can be associated with an exploratory reality. (São Paulo, Interlocutory Appeal No. 2041018-35.2021.8.26.0000, p. 159)

Squatters, when questioned about the way they work, are uncomfortable with this association. Some people who do not live in the squat building work in its workshops, through undisclosed agreements, but deny the association commonly made with slave work. They do not deny that the situation in which they live and work is precarious and that exploitation exists, but they claim that they are free to make their own choices.

However, workers carry this stigma in the city of São Paulo. The discourses shaping the work and the ways of living of this population always go through questions of such nature, as indicated by Freire (2008, p 103):

The issue of extreme cases of exploitation and situations analogous to slave labor is certainly an important issue regarding the immigration of Bolivians, but the exclusive emphasis on this point does not allow for the understanding of the strength of this migratory flow. It is a configuration of relationships that, at its limit, can end up in extreme situations of workforce exploitation, as it effectively occurs in this circuit. However, it is not possible to deem the curtailment of freedom a characteristic of the forms of insertion of this group of migrants in the city. Nor would we understand the high turnover that exists between workshops or the constant comings and goings from Bolivia if we dwell solely on this point. The subject of slavery has come to appear to the Bolivian community in São Paulo as a stigma with all the discriminatory consequences this entails. It's an image they try to shake off.

In these workshops, even those constituted on their own, working conditions are precarious and the pressure and demand for production are exhausting, payments are made per piece sewn at low values and defaults are frequent. Also, the outsourced subcontracting structure, in which suppliers order from workshops and workshops pass the order on to migrants who structure their own production, makes accountability for working conditions difficult. When some accountability occurs, it almost always falls to

the migrants themselves, leaving suppliers and large companies from the clothing industry untouched (*ibid.*).

It is not simply the way in which the work activity is organized that raises such stigma, the ways of living to which it is linked are also fundamental to working conditions. The provision of housing by the workshops, on the one hand, facilitates the reception and arrival of these migrants due to the difficulties in accessing housing in the country, but, on the other hand, it expands the forms of exploitation of these migrants (*ibid.*).

As occurred in Squat 21 de Abril, the exploitation and fear that raised in public bodies, when analyzing working conditions, were actually linked to the relationship that migrants had with the property owner and the "responsibles" mediating this relationship through threats. The exploration and condition of the activity carried out were also directly linked to the way of living, high rent for space, sudden increases in rent value, precariousness of the installations under the responsibility of the owner, and threats received.

The fear of the configuration of slave work is linked to this form of constitution of housing, which is historic and common in the city of São Paulo. This organization that came to be in Squat 21 de Abril is typical of tenements scattered throughout São Paulo, that is, the high rent values that make the square meter per person in tenements in the central area more expensive than the square meter per person in more valued regions (Kohara, 1999); payments, raises and charges are made through threats; and the relationship between residents and

owner, which is mediated by intermediaries, responsible for organizing and evicting families. An organization with neither payment registration nor mediation by the Judiciary.

The characteristics that caught the attention of City Hall bodies and were evident in the lawsuit, which has the property as its object, are less related to working conditions than to living conditions.

The exploitation of this type of labor has several layers; it is linked to the way in which the clothing industry is structured in the city of São Paulo, the lack of payment to migrants often practiced by certain workshops, the way in which these subjects' trips are organized through the mediation of labor recruiters, but which is also linked to the difficulty of accessing housing and to the living conditions encountered by migrants in the city.

Threat of eviction: work and housing at risk

The lawsuit has the ability to make the dynamics of this urban space visible; it is from the encounter with power that the "lives of infamous men" become visible (Foucault, 2003). The lawsuit has the ability to bring the daily life, work and way of living of these subjects to the surface; departing from it, the Civil Defense,¹² the City Hall (its bodies and equipment), court officials, experts, and the support network (NGOs and social movements) begin to orbit this urban space, previously without any visibility (Santos, 2022 and Foucault, 2003).

The life and dynamics of this territory only become visible, leaving traces and being documented, upon the filing of the lawsuit;

the lives of these subjects start to be marked by the discourses imposed in the process and by the institutions and organizations that come to orbit the squat building (Santos, 2022 and Foucault, 2003).

Suddenly, in 2020, after more than 7 years of existence, the daily life, the housing and the work of these people are brought to the surface, and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their way of living and working begins to be discussed. Judicial practices mark the lives of these individuals, who live under the constant perspective of eviction; these practices inscribe these lives in the terrain between the law and its application (Foucault, 1999 and 2003 and Santos, 2022).

From the threat of eviction, a support network emerges to try to guarantee the permanence of the families or to present suitable alternatives for housing assistance. The lawsuit and the support network that orbit around the squat building connect several partners and squat buildings throughout São Paulo; social movements that have other squat buildings in the city provide support, as well as civil society organizations that work with housing or migration and that accompany other squat buildings, thus, a new form of organization is imposed to the squat building and a broader urban collective is formed.

The lawsuit constantly reconfigures the categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy of such space. At a certain point, a decision is made for the eviction, which should be carried out in March 2021, however, when time comes for the decision to be enforced, the temporary permanence of the squatters is guaranteed. The lawsuit configures a field of disputes that affects daily life and illegalities reproduced in that place. The microconjuncture of the space

changes, for example; the informal rental market and the way the property is organized are affected. Under the threat of eviction, rents are no longer paid and the administration of the building is no longer carried out by the “responsibles” (Foucault, 2014; Santos, 2022; Telles, 2010).

The construction that was considered, by court decision, as not consistent with building laws and putting the lives of residents and workers at risk, with the suspension of eviction and the new decision, has its existence legitimated. The lawsuit itself, in the space between the law and its application, constantly redefines the boundaries of legislation (Santos, 2022).

Within these uncertain borders, circumscribed by the lawsuit, a field of dispute is constituted in the urban space, making what is understood as formal more flexible, altering the margins of tolerance of circumventions of legality and formality carried out by those involved in the lawsuit and who operate in the property (judicial agents, bailiffs, city hall agents, residents, landlords). A play is constituted within these indeterminate frontiers of formal and informal, a strategic use of legislation is carried out in this field of dispute that is constituted between the permanence and the extinction of that urban space; this is how the lawsuit operates socially (Santos, 2022; Teles, 2010).

Legislation and law are not constituted as given things, they are strategies of a war in action, they are not constituted to prevent certain behaviors, but rather to differentiate the forms of outline of the very legislation, departing from practices, actions and behaviors that unfold, determining the limits of tolerance,

giving ground, applying pressure, excluding and making certain practices useful (Foucault, 2014, p. 267; Deleuze, 1988).

Thus, when operating socially, the lawsuit ends up:

[...] imposing temporalities, making squat buildings visible, creating zones of ambiguity and composing the operative modes of urban informality, connecting different economies and spaces. From the threat of eviction, an entire institutionality begins to orbit the squat building, dynamics are produced and conflicts emerge on the threshold between permanence and extinction. (Santos, 2022, p. 24)

The process has the ability to constitute and reconstitute the categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy, functioning as an instrument of urban intervention and composing circuits of urban informality.

In the lawsuit, the primary point is linked to the land issue, the main theme is related to the risk constituted by the characteristics of the property and the fact that the migrants live in a place that does not comply with building legislation. The space, the dynamics, the form of organization, the owner's exploration of the property and the work performed appear, apparently, as backdrop; what matters to the judges is whether or not there is danger in the building, since the very motivation for suspending the eviction was the risk of removing families in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic.

Although work emerges in the files, as in a report produced by City Hall services indicating possible slave work or as a circumstance that aggravates the risk to residents, it is not a central theme and goes almost unnoticed,

as if such conditions and circumstances were not relevant to the decision. However, as the discussion advanced, it was made evident that the irrelevance is only apparent, since the lawsuit does not only affect case records, having repercussions in social reality.

At the property, more than the structural conditions of the building, the work is the very condition of supposed danger. It is pointed out, by the report produced by judicial experts, that the wiring and the amount of energy that the machines demand, the form of organization of the studio with little distance between the tables, and the amount of cloth and scattered scraps are configured as the main driver of risk to which families are submitted. In other words, the work is the very risk.

In addition to working conditions, housing conditions, room partitions and houses made of wood increase the potential possibility of fire.

The precariousness of work and housing to which these migrants are subject is the motivation to remove them, as if the simple interdiction of the building and the eviction of the squatters were enough to improve the conditions of the families and prevent them from establishing residence in other risky locations. The housing conditions and the association of work with slave conditions become arguments for eviction; become an argument to delegitimize and criminalize such uses of space and the subjects of living in that property. Thus, eviction without offering any alternative to the families becomes the solution to the supposed problem.

Therefore, even though labor activity is not the central theme of this discussion, the intertwining of housing and work, throughout this migrant path, is the reason for eviction. The daily life of Squat 21 de Abril emerges and

becomes visible due to the lawsuit, discussing the legitimacy of that urban space and its uses. It is not just the housing to be deemed irregular and informal, work also becomes an object of this discourse, starting to be treated as informal and irregular as well.

The decisions and the coming and going of the process legitimize or not certain ways of living and working; eviction, in this context, comes to be understood as a solution for the extinction of the dynamics of that space. Eviction is a way of extinguishing in that location a certain form of work understood as unwanted, without the need to look into the subject, analyze the actual conditions of the activity or call legitimate authorities to carry out this evaluation. By extinguishing the squat, supposedly, the issue of work considered irregular in that location is resolved and ceases to exist (*ibid.*).

Thus, the lawsuit reproduces urban informality by opting exclusively for eviction; the law and the actions of the State compose the informal circuits, the acts and interventions understood as formal and legal produce their opposite, overlapping formal and informal (Telles, 2010). The lawsuit, by circumscribing lawfulness, (re)produces its reverse, and the solution found (eviction without alternatives) causes residents to find residence and work in places that are structured in conditions similar to or worse than those found in the property they lived in.

The law and judicial practices determine the (il)legitimacy of certain occupations and uses of this space, such as its use to live and work, delimiting which spaces are formal or not in the city and which uses are allowed or not. Thus, law reproduces urban informality as a mode of urbanization (Roy, 2005; Santos, 2022).

Final considerations

In the migratory circuit traveled by most of the residents of Squat 21 de Abril, housing, work and migration are intertwined. Labor agents in their countries of origin, families that have already established themselves in São Paulo, or acquaintances who find their livelihood in the clothing industry form the circuit linking these axes. Exploitation at work is directly linked to housing conditions or to the way in which migrants arrive in Brazil.

These are workshops that provide a residence, workers who welcome their families, informal rents and tenements that are used to live and work based on abusive charges mediated by violence and threats.

The dynamics found at Squat 21 de abril are linked to the structure of the clothing industry that was constituted in the expanded axis of Brás and Bom Retiro. At the squat building, sewing workshops were organized as part of the outsourced subcontracting network promoted by the clothing industry. These are migrants who live in the same place where they work and, from contacts made with local retailers or workshops where they previously worked, they receive orders for products to be produced.

The squat building is intertwined with the thriving textile production and with the commercial dynamics of the neighborhood; the way of living and working constituted by the families of Squat 21 de Abril are articulated and fostered by this gravitational center.

The way in which the clothing industry is structured in the city of São Paulo influences migratory circuits and makes the Brás and Bom Retiro axis a region where many migrants live.

Buildings, pensions and warehouses in the region become housing and are used, at the same time, as sewing workshops.

The owners (or alleged owners) of these properties rent these places without any formal contract or agreement, attributing rent values which are high considering the size of the units and the conditions of the building, increasing the values suddenly (almost always in an abusive way), being the site administered by an intermediary which is responsible for evicting defaulters and organizing the space (almost always through threat and violence). This way of living that took place at Squat 21 de abril constitutes a form of labor exploitation. The exploitation of labor is not only linked to the working conditions encountered by migrants in São Paulo, since displacement, housing and work constitute a single circuit, as indicated by the trajectory of B.

The migrant population, in this circuit, constitutes its life in permanent displacement; after arriving to São Paulo, they move from one workshop to another, as well as from one dwelling to another, either because of the difficulty of paying the rents charged, or because of the forced evictions determined by court decisions (Rolnik, 2015). This circuit of social vulnerability causes these subjects to build their homes informally, paying high rents. In the Brás region, informal rent, accessed by this population, is rarely below R\$1,000.00, being this amount charged for the smallest spaces, like a bedroom, and for properties that are usually in precarious conditions or even abandoned (Santos, 2022).

Only after the filing of the lawsuit did Squat 21 de Abril become visible, causing a new form of organization to emerge. Families stopped paying rents, started to relate to each

other, which may have resulted in fights, but also caused the development of strategies of resistance. The space is then constituted as a field of disputes in which the State, the law and its agents take part.

With the formation of a support network and a broader urban collective, the imminent eviction is suspended and the place starts to organize itself under the constant perspective of eviction.

State law and actions build urban informality, circumscribing this space between the law and its application. The categories of formal and informal, legitimate and illegitimate are constantly assessed, made flexible and altered, affecting the dynamics of the property at the same time that these dynamics affect the consequences of the lawsuit (*ibid.*).

These are circuits traveled and resistance strategies (often survival strategies) which are not limited to work, housing or migration. These are subjects and ways of life that are not limited to categories such as “unhoused”

and “migrant”; there are multiple forms of integration and possible paths, and the path taken by Squat 21 de Abril is just one of them (Santos, 2020; Çağlar and Schiller, 2018). Such a circuit articulating travel, housing and work became common from the 1990s onwards, with the restructuring of the textile industry in the city of São Paulo.

The charging of rents to live and work in precarious conditions, associating exploitation of work based on housing conditions, organizes and encourages the informal rental market in the region. The commercialization of housing units and their availability for rent through obscure agreements mediated by violence configures a profitable market, fed, structured and financed by the activity performed by the residents of Squat 21 de Abril. The housing market considered informal is also encouraged by this form of work; the exploitation of labor and the resources that are produced and reverted to the owners (or supposed owners) configure one of the forms of labor exploitation developed by these migrants.

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Notes

- (1) The number of the property was not made available to preserve the resident families. The property will be identified, in this article, as “Squat 21 de Abril”, a name used by the residents and workers of the building. This squat building was monitored during the master's research carried out at the Federal University of ABC, postgraduate program in Territorial Planning and Management.
- (2) This place is identified as a squat building, as it is threatened with eviction. By identifying it in this way, the right to housing and the laws that revolve around the theme of the right to the city are valued, opposing the derogatory and stigmatizing discourses mobilized in the lawsuit, such as invasion, irregular or illegal housing. Furthermore, due to the threat of eviction and the organization of families, the residents themselves began to identify the place as a squat building.
- (3) Migration is the term adopted, instead of immigration, and migrant, instead of immigrant, as this highlights the multiple forms of mobility, the different temporalities and motivations that mark migrations, not circumscribing such movements according to categorizations used by Nation States (Çaglar and Schiller, 2011).
- (4) These are different mobilities produced by migrants, not simply mobilities of origin and destination, or linked to the work performed; they are commuting, temporary, punctual; passage circuits and countless other possible forms of mobility (Adelkhah and Bayart, 2007).
- (5) Law suit of eviction and order to do demolition or regularization of the building. Number of the law suit 1032834-79.2020.8.26.0053.
- (6) To preserve her, only the letter of her name is used to avoid identification.
- (7) Human rights organization in partnership with the Public Defender's Office of the State of São Paulo, which provides free legal advice in cases of land conflicts involving populations in situations of social and economic vulnerability.
- (8) Term used by B. to justify her departure from the previous workshops where she worked and her attempt to build her own atelier.
- (9) Term used by her to refer to her role as head of the workshop, in a coordinating position, responsible.
- (10) In Brás, a neighborhood of São Paulo, a popular night market was organized in which traders from all regions of Brazil and Latin America buy large quantities of products to resell in their stores
- (11) In Brazil, the term used to refer to contemporary forms of enslaved work is "labor analogous to slavery", describing work that does not comply with labor legislation and that has characteristics of slave labor.
- (12) Community-based program to protect the citizens of a state from human-made and natural disasters. It uses the principles of emergency operations: prevention, mitigation, preparation, response, or emergency evacuation and recovery.

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