

The homeless and the struggle to exist

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Abstract

Here Welita Caetano, an organizer with the Front for Struggle for Housing (FLM) in São Paulo, Brazil, writes about her own experiences as a homeless person, as a leader of the housing movement, as a popular educator, and as a municipal housing counselor. As she explains, occupations for housing justice are small revolutions and means of building relationships and community.

Keywords

Homeless workers, squatting, right to the city, community, Brazil

What I write in this article comes from my experiences as a homeless person, a leader of the housing movement in the city of São Paulo, a popular educator, and municipal housing counselor.

I live in a metropolis taken by economic interests, and life seems to have little value and importance. Workers toil every day in crowded subways and buses or in miles of endless transit. They spend about four hours of their lives in transportation. I see informal workers running around so as not to lose their goods to the police, who are always ruthless with the street vendors. Others destroy themselves throughout the day working for apps: they are drivers, bikers; they deliver goods, transport people, and in the end, their wages are not enough to maintain their most basic needs.

Surviving in this metropolis is a great challenge for the workers; it was so for my family when we arrived here in 1996. We landed at the bus station in the city of São Paulo after 17 hours of travel. We were some of the millions of migrants who came in search of a dream and a decent job to support their family. My father, a Black peasant who lived the difficulties

of making a living from what he produces, saw in the city an opportunity to guarantee us a better quality of life.

We left behind our simple way of life in the countryside. It was a surprise for all of us to see a city that seemed to have no end; the constant and deafening noise of the cars; its colors of various gray tones; we seemed invisible to those who walked the streets in haste. Soon my father managed to rent us a little room. We didn't have any furniture to decorate that space, just some rugs where we slept. For a child who grew up free in the country, living like this, I felt like a bird in a cage!

Like many migrants who arrive here, my father sought support for our family in informal work, selling foods and beverages on the city streets, or subjecting himself to jobs with very little income that was insufficient to pay rent and feed ourselves.

When we could no longer pay rent, we ended up in a state-run shelter for people without homes or in the situation of homelessness. For about five months, we stayed in a large hall divided into two bedrooms with hundreds of bunkbeds. One side was for women, the other for men. Nothing there made me feel welcome or in the safety of a home. We could only enter this space at eight pm for dinner and then for sleeping. At five o'clock in the morning we had to leave, regardless of whether it was raining, whether it was cold or not, and whether we had a place to go to or not. I have never experienced such a feeling since then. It is suffocating not having anywhere to go back to and rest one's body. We would stay on the streets, sometimes sitting in the squares, or in churches watching the endless services. I was afraid people would realize that we had no place to return to. And my greatest desire was to have a home for me and my family. I wanted to eat my mother's food again, watch a cartoon lying on the sofa. Wake up a little late on the cold, rainy mornings.

One day, walking aimlessly through the city, we found an occupation organized by the housing movement. It was a building that had been abandoned in the center of the city 45 years ago. My parents sought help and we were immediately welcomed. I learned there that we, the poor, have two options: either we fight, or we die! They bury us and crush us in various ways, both physically and in the slow process of exploitation and social humiliation. The collective struggle can make us strong to resist and continue to exist. In the process of struggle, we continue to forge ourselves as historical subjects.

In cities, as they are organized, it is a human necessity to have a decent place to live. For it is from these spaces that the fundamental rights inherent to human beings are built and achieved, such as: education, health, work, and more. This also includes happiness as a right of the soul. We know that it is the duty of the State to create effective public policies in the area of social housing and to make sure that human rights are not violated. Those who need dignified housing cannot wait for tomorrow or be offered a place in a shelter as an alternative. I say this from experience: shelters are not a place for a family to spend a single day. But due to lack of political will, it is mostly the State that offers shelters to those in imminent danger of becoming homeless. Due to the State's inertia amidst the housing needs of unsheltered families, housing movements organize themselves to fight for the right to inhabit the city.

If, on the one hand, the State is neither efficient nor humane when dealing with the problem of the right to the city; on the other hand, it acts quickly when it is to defend the economic interests of the real estate sector. The State is the agent that promotes and executes forced removals of entire communities. State and real estate capital go hand in hand, they are restless! Their domains and influences are rooted in the hegemonic discourse disseminated by the traditional media that criminalizes social movements in the struggle for housing. When hate speech is not as effective, they resort to the police force to repress the popular struggle.

The territories with the best infrastructures are taken everywhere for the construction of sumptuous buildings. But, of course, the poor cannot stay around, they get in the way of business, they are pushed to the slopes and peripheries as if everything were strategically planned for the expansion of territories to be explored in the future. The low-income working class is pushed away from their workplaces. They live in places without the slightest infrastructure, building houses on the mountain slopes, over streams and sewers. Those who live in the center and expanded center are allocated in the so-called tenements, old houses with several rooms, which charge rent at abusive prices.

It is not possible to hide misery and exclusion under the carpet. We are about 12.2 million people who inhabit the city. Of these, 3.3 million people live irregularly, that is: in the slums, in the occupations, in the tenements and in the streets. To give you an idea, there are about 24,000 people here who live in conditions of homelessness—one of the largest homeless populations in the world. São Paulo still is, however, one of the world's richest cities with a GDP of 699,288 billion Brazilian reais.

While millions do not have homes, the website of the City Hall of São Paulo maintains a section on housing and urbanism where it is possible to access the list of addresses of properties that have been notified for not fulfilling the property's social function. Here in Brazil, you can have property, but it needs to have a social function. If it does not fulfill this condition, the State has the duty to expropriate (acquire the property) and give it a social function. There are about 1,216 buildings and plots of land that are empty or underutilized in the downtown and expanded center areas, and another 1,270 properties that still have to be notified. But these figures refer only to the most central areas of the city. Housing movements report that the city is hollow with thousands of vacant lots and properties in the most valued areas. These are areas where it would be possible to build or remodel with popular participation, thus generating jobs and housing for the homeless. With progressive governments, the city advances slowly. We demarcate areas of social interest where one can only build or retrofit for social housing. Some buildings and areas have been expropriated and destined for reform that was demanded by the housing movements. At this moment, the Struggle Coalition (“Frente de Luta”) is remodeling two buildings in the central areas of the city where around 400 families will live in dignity. This is the outcome of twelve years of struggle. However, when power is seized by conservatives, the attack on the popular organizations intensifies.

The housing movements have been small stones in the shoes of real estate agents. We denounce their scandalous partnerships with the State and their violation of human rights.

We are on housing councils, which are deliberative but practically taken over by market interests. Yet, as much as is possible, we help build public policies for the city. The activists are not only the homeless; there is a network of lawyers, psychologists, architects, engineers, university professors, universities, NGOs that work together with the movement in the fight for the right to the city and in the creation of housing projects. But the main tool in the struggle for housing that the workers have is occupying real estate all over the city. There are about 55 buildings occupied in the downtown and expanded downtown areas, in addition to many areas on the outskirts of the city. An occupation is a territory conquered by low-income workers. It is a real construction site, where we transform the spaces with our own hands. In this process, we also transform and rebuild ourselves as politically active subjects. These spaces are the homes of the homeless, but they are also a denunciation of real estate speculation with the complicity of the State.

There are several housing movements in São Paulo. The Housing Struggle Front (FLM) is one of the main groups operating in the city. It gathers around 12 movements, all coordinated by Black women. In total, the Front coordinates 48 occupations, mainly in the city center, which brings together about 10,000 organized families.

The struggle for decent housing became my job. I don't know if I chose this or if it was just that my life circumstances allowed me to have deep empathy for the homeless. Every time I receive calls, messages, and people knocking on the door in a state of need in search of shelter, I return to my childhood and relive this experience that never left my mind. I see myself in every story I hear.

I remember the day I met a woman who today is my friend and companion in the struggle, a Black woman with three children, who, at the end of a meeting, asked to speak to me in private. I was in a hurry, but I saw in the eyes of those children my own gaze 25 years ago, when I arrived to an occupation with my family. I stopped to listen to her. Anguished, she asked me to help her, and before I could answer, she started telling me her story. She had arrived eight months ago in São Paulo as a native from the State of Bahia. She told me that she decided to leave her home because her husband worked so hard, but they had no food in her house. So, they decided to gather what little they had to travel to São Paulo. They spent ten months saving money to buy five bus tickets. It was three days of travel. When she arrived here, she was sheltered by her mother who had been in town for some months. It was a single room to receive seven people. Soon her husband got a precarious job, earning a little less than one thousand two hundred Brazilian reais. They then rented another small room for nine hundred reais. What was left from her husband's salary was destined for food. It was three hundred reais to keep five people for a whole month. She told me in tears that she hadn't bought fruit for her children for a long time, because purchases were only for the bare minimum, for survival. To replace fruit, she bought artificial juices of various flavors and put several bottles in the refrigerator. In her words, those bottles were the only thing that colored her refrigerator, and when her kids asked for fruit, she would send them to drink the juice of a particular flavor. She never took her children to the market, because she was too afraid that they would want something that every child likes to eat. She told me that the

biggest pain was waking up in the morning and not having a loaf of bread to offer her children.

A year and a half ago, her family came to live in an occupation. We got a job for her and school for her children. Every time I visit their place, she makes a point of preparing a beautiful table with cakes, coffee and fruits to offer us. She speaks with joy that now she wakes up happy. She told me smiling that if one of her sons asks for coffee, she says, “Have coffee, my son!” If he says, “Mom, I want a cake, a loaf of bread,” she is pleased to say, “There it is, my son!” Today, she is one of the leaders and coordinators of the occupation where she lives. Recently, she told me that, just as she was helped in her moment of despair, she will also help those who looked after her.

I don't tell this story to romanticize poverty. I share it to broaden our consciousness about the violent ways in which we live: lives are being destroyed every day because of unbridled gain, our lack of empathy, and due to the invisibility of the causes of the poor. This issue needs to come into play more strongly in the universities, in communication platforms, in the circuits of the middle class, and in government plans. To create opportunities for us to talk about our struggle and resistance! To establish spaces for debate like the conference on Urban Activism held in 2019 by Harvard University in Boston. These places are where we can exchange experiences, strengthen ourselves with so much resistance around the world, build knowledge and promote engagement in the struggle for the right to the city. For it is not only for the homeless poor; it is a struggle for human existence.

In my opinion, in the occupations inhabit the most exploited people within the capitalist system. They are mostly women, Black and single mothers. They build from their needs a laboratory of social transformation, where it is possible, even with many external attacks, for the right to live in the city. The homeless have much to contribute to the construction of a city with respect to differences, because they build alternative and more humane ways of living the city. Life created in an occupation is the model of the city that the homeless hope to build. It is more democratic, in the sense that everyone participates, everyone decides, and everyone takes action with equality and transparency and in relationship with one another. Occupations are small revolutions that we can build every day in ourselves and with others.

Those who do not fight are dead!

About the author

Welita Caetano is a labor scientist trained in Management and Law, and is the leader of the Frente de Luta por Moradia (FLM) in São Paulo, Brazil, for which she coordinates seven different squatted buildings in the central city. Welita works to disseminate the need for urban reform and the right to the city. Of the more than 400,000 empty buildings in São Paulo, almost 20,000 are in the central city, although the area has lost 20 percent of its population in the last ten years. The squatting of empty buildings in the central city is seen by the FLM as the best way to make visible the need to house homeless families in empty property. Some leaders of the FLM have been recently arrested or threatened with arrest, in the effort of the local authorities to criminalize the struggle for housing.