



Crowdfunding property in downtown São Paulo: The case of FICA fund

Renato Cymbalista

Fabiana Endo

Roberto Fontes

Rodrigo Millan

FICA

Renato Cymbalista is a professor at the School of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo (FAU-USP). He is an associate and one of the directors of FICA. He sits on the board of Casa do Povo, Frente Alimenta, and Instituto Pólis. **Fabiana Endo** is FICA's institutional coordinator. She has a BSc in Civil Engineering from the Polytechnic School of the University of São Paulo (EP-USP), with a dual formation on Architecture and Urbanism.

Roberto Fontes de Souza is FICA's project manager. He has a BSc in Architecture in Urbanism from the Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP) and holds an MA in Housing Studies from FAU-USP. **Rodrigo Millan** is a FICA associate and one of its founding members. He has a BSc in Sociology from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and holds a PhD in Architecture and Urbanism from the FAU-USP.

Currently, he is a post-doctoral researcher at the School of History of Universidad Diego Portales, Chile. **Contact:**
rcymbalista@usp.br
fabiana@fundofica.org
roberto@fundofica.org
rodrigo.millan1@mail.udp.cl

Abstract

Brazilian housing policies have been historically based on private property. There is no national policy or fund for renting, and with few exceptions like the program for affordable housing in the city of São Paulo, local policies do not address this issue either.

In 2015, a group came together in São Paulo to think about non-speculative property in Brazil. Some points they converged on included: the will to go beyond the outcry over segregation and gentrification; the awareness that regular private property traded on the market cannot meet social demands nor lead to a just city; the idea of offering solutions to the State, instead of simply demanding solutions from public authorities; a desire to reframe the relations between theory and practice in urban studies.

Since then, the response has been experimental and incremental, the product being the creation of FICA, a fund run by a non-profit – the Community Property Association. Since 2017 it has managed a flat in downtown São Paulo, donated by early supporters, renting it at non-speculative prices. In 2021, FICA fully crowdfunded the purchase of a second flat, and is also experimenting with social investments for shared housing. Currently, FICA controls four properties under different tenure regimes.

This article describes FICA's short and intense history as a unique organization in Brazil, and hacks the country's regime of property regulation to promote socially progressive and non-speculative models of real estate.

Keywords

Rental housing, community housing, community land, tenement houses, São Paulo, Brazil.

Introduction

Much has changed in the central city neighborhoods of São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, over the last few decades. Starting in the 1960s, elite businesses and professionals began migrating away from the inner city toward wealthier neighborhoods to the south and west of downtown, and were followed by headquarters of companies and even government offices (Villaça, 2001; Fix, 2007). Some of these neighborhoods had never ceased to have poor inhabitants (Feldman, 2004), but the reconfiguration of rental prices drove more low-income families into many center city neighborhoods. This process, as Kara (2010) suggests, is often swept under the carpet of the predominant ideas of downtown 'degradation' and 'emptiness'.

As Solares et al. suggest (2019), the idea of 'revitalizing' center city neighborhoods in large Brazilian cities has prevailed in the real estate market. This notion often dismisses the day-to-day lives of the social groups who inhabit and make heavy use of its public and private spaces. It is common for such places to be referred to as 'abandoned' or 'degraded', a narrative developed out of an interest among market agents, segments of the public sector and traditional media. Their main focus has been on promoting the idea of redeveloping downtown, São Paulo's attractions thrust forward through new residential buildings and commercial projects aimed at the middle and upper classes of the city (Vannuchi, 2019). The confluence of these forces has made it difficult for lower-income families to stay in São Paulo's downtown neighborhoods, whose rents have skyrocketed in recent years.

In the 1990s, social housing movements started squatting in vacant buildings as a form of direct action to press for housing policies in center city neighborhoods. Such occupations were soon supported by NGOs and intellectuals. In the twenty-first century old problems persisted, such as the abusive informal rental market, housing insecurity and evictions. New issues also appeared: after decades of divestment, real estate companies rekindled their interest in building in the older parts of the city. The confluence of a stronger economy, lower interest rates, easier credit and a renewed interest among different social groups for dense inner-city living gave rise to a growing fear of gentrification that started to take root in some neighborhoods.

Even employed families who enjoyed stable incomes started to experience market exclusion from downtown due to growing rental prices. It is no coincidence that many of these families had no other option but to live in tenements, pensions or even squatter occupations to stay in the downtown neighborhoods. Even so, this often came at the cost of an enormous proportion of their monthly incomes. They faced overcrowded conditions, insecurity, usury by landlords, and the risk of evictions, among other threats. But now the fear is reaching new levels: if speculation and real estate investment continue, soon there will be no place to go in the inner city.

Urban housing policies in Brazil have historically been based on individual home ownership. Unlike other countries in the region such as Uruguay or recently Bolivia, collective property programs have been largely absent in Brazilian housing policies. Few initiatives have been developed around rental housing policies. One exception is the

affordable housing created by the City of São Paulo in 2002 to broaden access to housing to segments of the low-income population either unable or not wanting to participate in home purchase programs (D'Ottaviano, 2014). On the one hand, the program offers minimal coverage considering the scope of this housing policy in a city the size of São Paulo: six housing complexes have been developed in almost twenty years, offering housing to only 903 households. But as Gatti (2019) states, despite its small scale, the program had a significant impact on the budgets of the beneficiary families, who pay 10% of their incomes for living in centrally-located neighborhoods. Unlike most of the social housing built in the periphery or outskirts of the city in the recent decades, the projects of this rental housing program are located in central and peri-central areas. The overall expansion of this initiative has been challenging, since city officials haven't considered it as a priority. Nor have they contemplated how cooperatives, associations or other types of civic organizations could fit into the model by collaborating with the day-to-day administration of the housing complexes for such things as changing lightbulbs, fixing elevators and collecting rents and fees from tenants. The rent delinquency rate is quite high, as are expenses for common area upkeep, affecting both building maintenance and everyday life within these communities.

Since the turn of the century, progressive activists and professionals have followed three main paths of action for democratizing the inner city: 1) researching and reporting inequalities, evictions and gentrification; 2) participating in the design of public policies for housing in downtown areas via the handful of opportunities to do so; 3) finding various ways to support social housing movements squatting in vacant buildings as a way to put pressure on policy makers. The three fronts are important and have had an impact, but they keep civil society playing a minor role compared to either the government or social movements. As part of Brazilian civil society, FICA has persisted in carving out non-profit property that is neither state-owned nor caught up by market forces.

This article outlines the group's beginnings and its organization as the association known as FICA; its pilot experience in a flat in downtown São Paulo; its first experiences as a social landlord, the diversification of its lines of action, and its current challenges. Despite its small scale, FICA represents a qualitative innovation in a process that invents a self-conscious social landlordship in Brazil.

The text is structured as follows: the origins of the association; the history of the first property; the challenges of landlordship; strategies for crowdfunding a second property; strategies for upscaling; relationships with the city's social housing movements; and a conclusion integrating this history of practice with theory.

Creating an association

A group formed in São Paulo in 2015 to think about non-speculative property in Brazil. Some of their common concerns included: the desire to take steps beyond simple outrage and the drawing of attention to the processes of segregation and gentrification; the awareness that the regular private real estate market continued to be unable to meet the needs of society and produce a just city; the idea of offering solutions to the State instead of simply

demanding solutions from public officials; a desire to reframe theory/practice in urban studies.

The group—made up of white professional middle-class people—began to hold meetings to debate these ideas. They knew they wanted to access property, and would need money to do so. They started holding fundraisers, basically dinners where they collected voluntary cash contributions. Although small amounts, the donations received through these meetings provided evidence that they were onto something larger than ideas and intentions, that a real process was underway. The meetings were also fundamental for building a group of collaborators representing a diversity of professions like architects, sociologists, artists, economists, lawyers and historians.

Their activism was coupled with legal formalization. The money collected could not be held privately, as there was no desire to acquire property heroically in name of some individuals' visionary project. This called for a legal organization of the group's activities. Two lawyers allied with the group drafted a proposal for creating an association, a simple and more flexible type of organization good for ramping up the group's operations. Later, if needed, the association could convert into a foundation—a more stable legal format, but also harder to run.

Since the association did not start out with significant resources or a major donor, it was designed as a lean operation, in line with the regulatory framework established that year for non-profit organizations. Thus, the association has a small-scale executive team (president, vice-president, chief financial officer and two directors) appointed by a general assembly that meets on an ordinary basis once a year. Members of the executive team have three-year terms.

The articles of organization were finalized in September 2015. The official founding meeting was held on 5 October that same year, kicking off the first term of the executive team. By mid-2016, the association obtained official authorization to operate. The official name of the institution, Association for Community Property, was technical and the group needed a more concise fictitious or trade name to be known by. The name eventually adopted was suggested during a meeting with an advertiser, who proposed the acronym FICA for “Fundo Imobiliário Comunitário para Aluguel,” which translates as “Community Real Estate Fund for Rent.” FICA also means “to stay” in Portuguese, a powerful anti-gentrification message.

Apartment #1

The public crowdfunding campaign started in late 2016. It began small and grew over time. By May 2021, the association had about 130 people making regular monthly donations. Some larger donations also came in—the largest from a couple of supporters who offered to buy a property and lend it to FICA for the next eight years to serve as a place to test out some hypotheses. At the end of the eight-year period, the donors would evaluate the project

Figure 1

Both the renovation and the furniture for the apartment were carried out collectively, drawing on both volunteers and professionals. **Photo: Tico Tico Institute.**



and might then make a definitive donation. The 47-square-meter apartment was purchased on the market in July 2017. Unoccupied for 10 years, it was in bad shape and required renovation. Design for the renovation and furniture was done collectively with voluntary professional work. The renovation itself relied partly on unpaid supervision work and donated materials, and was carried out incrementally over a relatively long period of time, from mid 2018 to mid 2019.

The first apartment brought great visibility to the project: potential supporters could visit the site and see first-hand that it was more than an abstract idea. The space was also used to hold meetings and host the press. A working group was put together among the associates to carry out a collective project for the renovation. From October to December 2017, FICA's Apartment was exhibited as part of the São Paulo Architecture Biennial. The most important part of the exhibition was the apartment itself, supported by panels on the walls explaining the project. In December 2017, FICA was invited to a public debate on affordable housing. Sharing the roundtable with a city council member, the then secretary for municipal housing and a businessman, FICA realized it was starting to be taken seriously both nationally and internationally.

Under normal market conditions, a property like FICA's Apartment #1 would be rented for around R\$ 1,300 (USD 260) including rent and utilities. Although the apartment's market value was not FICA's parameter, it was needed to calculate its 'cost price', a non-speculative rate. Since this was an unprecedented approach to rent, the amount to charge was discussed in a series of meetings, and later in a general assembly with association members. In addition to utilities, the rent included the following components: a wear-and-tear fee for the apartment to deal with any damages and repairs; an amount to help fund the Association; a contribution to the fund, enabling the purchase of new apartments; property insurance. The monthly total came to R\$ 630 monthly.¹ A family earning two minimum-wage salaries would spend less

¹ Due to inflation and increased utility costs, by July 2021 costs were R\$ 800, still less than half market prices in the same building.



Figure 2

FICA's first flat performing. In October 2017, shortly after purchasing Apartment # 1, FICA exhibited the project at the 11th Sao Paulo Architecture Biennial. The main object of the exhibition was the apartment itself, providing real dimension to the project. Panels included information about FICA's legal status, the state of fundraising, and a video on urban inequalities in São Paulo. In July 2019 we completed a thorough renovation and the first family moved in.

than 30% of their income on housing expenses, a parameter considered adequate at the international level.² Although the rental price FICA settled on is the cheapest in downtown, it is still out of reach for the poorest.

Decisions about other selection criteria were also taken collectively. The first tenant should be a woman, of any gender identity or sexual orientation. There should be a child in the household. The adults should work downtown. FICA called on professionals from trusted institutions to help to shortlist the possible candidates.³ With the help of a psychologist and a social worker, six candidates were selected and interviewed in May 2019. Candidates were ranked in order of priority, and the first on the list was called.

The selected family is made up of two heterosexual parents and three young children who had never lived at a stable address before. In June 2019, they signed the lease. FICA's intention is to renew the rent as long as the relationship is mutually beneficial, since the FICA apartment is not seen as an 'incubation' home, but as a permanent and alternative solution to private property.

² The price was calculated in early 2019. By 2021, due to inflation and increased utility costs, it had gone up to R\$ 750, still about 30% of the income from two minimum-wage-salaries.

³ Some of the eight allied institutions included social housing movements, NGOs for technical assistance for homeless people, and charities that work in downtown.

Learning to be an ethical landlord

Having tenants in the apartment has doubled the challenges for the group. Work now needed to be kept up on multiple fronts of communication, fundraising, transparency, and now, a relationship with tenants. FICA became an exceptional landlord in a city and country without subsidies for such activity, much less a legal or institutional framework for housing associations or social landlords. This exceptionality meant the need for reflection and daily innovation. Every decision had to be strategic and thoroughly discussed.

Even small issues required big discussions. One of them was about the so-called *fianzor* (warrantor). There are no guarantors in informal rental relationships, resulting in higher perceptions of risk, arbitrary and unregulated price increases, instant evictions upon default and the need to pay in advance. After thorough discussion, FICA decided to take the risk of not requiring a guarantor. Another issue was tenant privacy. As the first of its kind, FICA is often asked for interviews or feels the need to give information about the tenants to members or donors, yet does not want to subject tenants to unnecessary exposure.

FICA also realized that it needed to promote evaluations of its impact to make a statement, and the first apartment was a perfect scenario for developing this skill. Undertaken collectively, the impact evaluation is an important tool for three reasons. The first is that the interviews' outcome becomes a validation tool for the processes implemented. For instance, one of the most anticipated impacts of Apartment #1 was that it would provide children a safer place to grow up. It is known that 90% of the human brain develops by age 5 (Iwasaki et al., 1997; Reiss et al., 1996), so a family with children was a must in the tenant selection criteria. The second reason, connected to the first, was the desire to show FICA's supporters the long-term positive impact of their donations, thereby preventing any discouragement over the long time span between donating and helping the target group. The last, but in no way the least, is the importance of including the family in the participatory process. Once they become a FICA tenant, they agree with the routine of periodic interviews and they are fully aware that part of the rent they pay goes toward acquiring new apartments.

Since they moved in, in July of 2019, FICA has conducted two qualitative interviews with the family to measure the apartment's impact on aspects of their life such as health, their children's education, access to leisure and culture, income and work. The first took place one month after moving in, the second a year and a half later. The latter was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, first reported in Brazil in March of 2020.

This impact was immediate and impressive. The youngest child, who has a respiratory condition, immediately became better after moving in and experienced no further health issues related to housing conditions. On their first day of classes after the move, one of the daughters (five) had already set up a pajama party in the new home. With the improvement of the children's health, their mother had more time, could organize her routine and freelance as a cleaner and nail polisher several days a week. The extended family found it a good place for their Sunday gatherings. For the parents, the biggest change in their life related to the safety provided by the apartment, now free from the experience of people trespassing that

they endured in their former home. They have not missed a single rent payment, even during the pandemic.

The impact of the new home is undeniable, but monitoring processes represent continuous work currently based on statements and perception. The next challenge is to make it more objective. As FICA's work serves more tenant families, more data and metrics can be generated and compared.

One step towards higher tenant engagement is the development of a self-management tool, called 'The Tenant Handbook'. This handbook will cover good practices to keep the building well maintained, and integrate with a digital app to support participatory inspections. In theory, the app will enable tenants to be more responsible and proactive in the periodic inspections. They can also become more engaged and empowered in the collective building, which we hope will lead to a reduced need for repairs. Projects like these are always built within FICA by many hands. The participatory inspection app is being developed for implementation in FICA's second apartment, bought in the first quarter of 2021. The group behind it is made up of students from an UX school in Germany, led by one of FICA's directors.

A Crowdfunded Second Property

While the setup processes for the first apartment were being decided—such as tenant selection criteria, rent costs and renovation—crowdfunding for the next apartment was already underway. During that time, FICA hosted many debates, workshops, and international seminars to engage more partners and volunteers. They held many meetings in the apartment itself, bringing would-be sponsors there to see the project for themselves. The supporter base started to grow, and crowdfunding became more effective as we won more trust and legitimacy. FICA has committed to transparency, making financial statements available once a month, posting on social media about the progress of its activities, sending a monthly newsletter and publishing detailed annual reports.

Important milestones in gaining visibility included contributions to the 11th São Paulo Architecture Biennial (2017) and the Chicago Architecture Biennial (2019). These events led to articles in the press, interviews and social media. A bilingual book on our history (Antunes and Cymbalista, 2019) was published, which helped to establish international partnerships with other projects offering property alternatives in their cities. The number of supporters has steadily risen, as well as institutional partners, who offer their knowledge in different areas. The recurring donations are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Three years of public crowdfunding raised enough funds for the purchase of another property in early 2020, the so-called Apartment #2. The outbreak of the pandemic made the search for this property more difficult and delayed the purchase for several months. Serendipitously, however, the delay had a silver lining. Crowdfunding continued, allowing FICA to buy a larger apartment than previously planned. In December 2020, FICA found

the apartment: a 66 square-meter unit in the Liberdade neighborhood. Paperwork took quite a long time, but by April 2021 the property officially belonged to FICA.

A new collective design process was set up to develop the apartment’s renovation plan and renovation itself began in July 2021. Tenants will be selected through interviews conducted by a social worker in mid-October 2021.

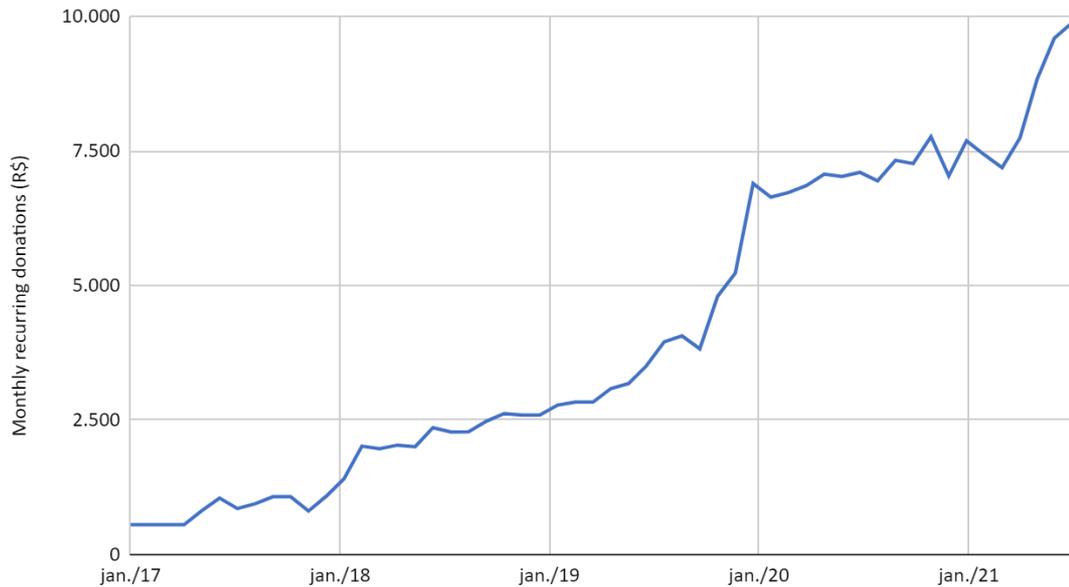


Figure 3

Monthly recurring donations in Brazilian R\$, Jan 2017 - Jan 2021.

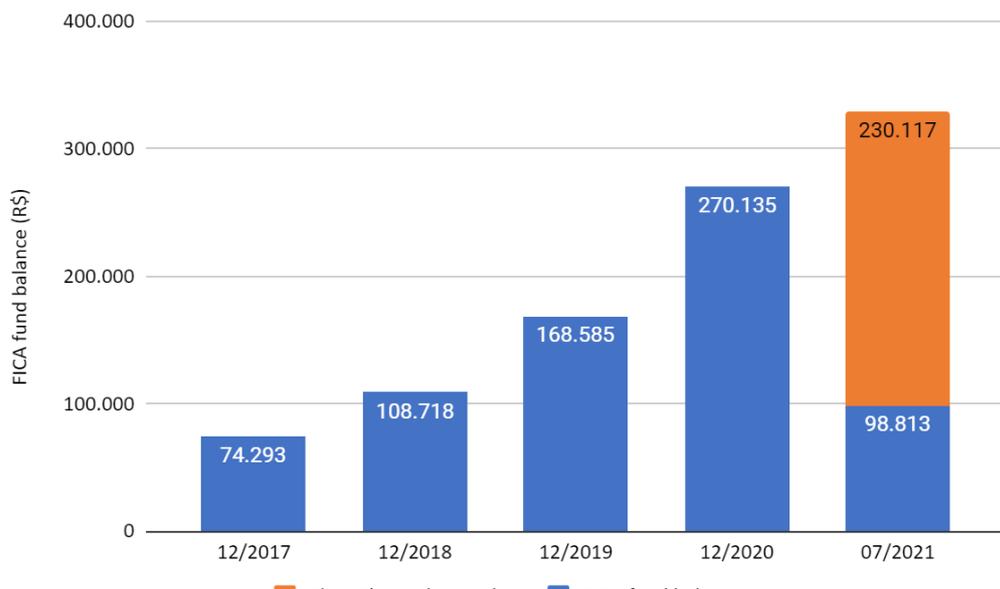


Figure 4

Annual progress of the balance in the FICA fund for purchasing apartments. In 2021 the second apartment was bought for R\$ 230,117.66



Figure 5

Left: Interior view and floor plan of Apartment #2. FICA, 2021.
 Right: Floor plan of Apartment #2, total area of 66sqm. FICA, 2021.

Upscaling and diversifying

Since the creation of the association, there has been a love-hate relationship with time. On the one hand, FICA's founders always knew it would be a long-term project, so slow and incremental processes were not necessarily seen as a handicap. In fact, it was the only option in the early years, since the work started from scratch, with no big sponsors nor public subsidies, and relied exclusively on volunteer labor from the directors and supporters. On the other hand, some allies and supporters had a strong sense of urgency. They encouraged debates on upscaling and accelerating, on accessing not only donations but also social impact investments.

Redesigning a donation-based model to an investment model has not been an easy task. It is challenging even for FICA's original formula, based on removing inventory from the market through non-refundable donations. The thesis to be tested is whether FICA can connect the two extremes of São Paulo's social inequality: those with wealth and those without who live in poor housing conditions and therefore within FICA's realm of action.

In downtown São Paulo it is common for people to share a dwelling with other families in so-called *cortiços*, or tenement houses. Such living quarters in the downtown neighborhoods of Brazilian cities are quite often unsanitary and overcrowded. A family typically occupies a room and shares facilities such as toilets, bathrooms and spaces for laundry. Despite the poor conditions of such spaces, they are very expensive: the price per square meter is more expensive than real estate in prime locations in the city. This price reflects how few rental options exist for poor people who need to live downtown. Renting out rooms in a *cortiço* individually makes these buildings extremely profitable real estate investments, giving the

owner or middleman about a 2% return on the property value each *month* (Kohara, 1999), which means more than 20% a year.

FICA's idea has been to find investors who can lend money at low interest rates. The funds raised will enable FICA to buy real estate currently used as *cortiços*, or to create FICA's own shared houses (this type of housing is legal in São Paulo as long as it meets certain minimum standards). As a result, FICA can provide much better housing, protect tenants with legal contracts and decent management, while also paying the investments back. Once the debt is paid off, rents can be significantly reduced. Despite lower returns, we hope to attract mission-driven investors by the potential control they can have over their investments, making ethical banking feasible and supporting the production of dignified worlds. The work to make this possible is being funded from 2020 to 2023 by a grant FICA won from a Swiss foundation to support the design of such a system of social investment in tenement houses.

The new program presents new challenges. The first is branding: it is important to communicate that FICA is not embarking on a model contributing to financialization. In fact, it is quite the opposite. FICA offers good-minded people an opportunity to invest in an ethical fund that sits outside the banking system. It aims to integrate fair housing in the inner city into the movement of ethical banks, solidarity lending and other similar initiatives. Therefore, FICA treats urban real estate not as a pure expression of a monolithic financialized capitalism, but as an open-ended economy, following in the footsteps of Gibson Graham (2006) and their inspiring paradigm of 'diverse economies'. In Brazil, the work also aligns with the perspective of Singer (2002) among others, grouped under the umbrella concept of a 'solidarity economy'.

Another challenge is finding investors. The returns yielded by shared housing are low compared to regular investments, so it is necessary to attract people who value the social impact in addition to having disposable assets for investing.

A third challenge is developing models for building maintenance, social support, and conflict mediation. FICA is not implementing projects like many other co-housing projects in which people share spaces on a voluntary basis. Instead, FICA focuses on vulnerable and (sometimes) traumatized people who have had to share living quarters their entire lives out of need, sometimes for generations. For them, sharing doesn't necessarily mean collectivism, cooperation or idealism, but quite often recalls humiliation, lack of privacy and tense relationships. It is important to listen and understand their needs, so that the program can provide a healthy amount of shared space, rules everyone consents to, and well-maintained facilities.

The first house to be purchased under this system was acquired in July 2021 with money partially donated and partially lent by investors. The house was on the market and, as luck would have it, belonged to a relative of one of FICA's members, which made negotiations easier. Investors will receive an annual profit of 4%. Three families will share the house. Tenants will be appointed by an allied institution, a Bolivian women's cooperative tied to the

Figure 6

This yellow two-story home was purchased in July 2021. It will be shared by three immigrant families who work in the garment district of Bom Retiro.

The ‘compartilha’ [share] project creates dignified alternatives for people living in the city's cortiços or tenement houses.



garment industry in the same neighborhood. Besides managing the investments, FICA will design cooperative tools to set house rules and implement participatory building management. Still an ongoing process, there will be important lessons learned within a few years.

Relationships with social movements

During the last few decades, social housing movements have become one of the greatest innovations within Brazilian urban policies and struggles. Organized to pressure the government at different levels for proper housing policies, these movements participated in enacting progressive legislation such as the Constitution (1988) and the City Statute (2001). They often occupy buildings in direct actions to express outrage over vacant buildings and the lack and/or slowness of housing policies. They form the core of a powerful progressive alliance generally described as the ‘urban reform movement’, a coalition that permanently uncovers the exclusionary dimensions of Brazilian urbanization processes.

Brazilian urban social housing movements also have their own limitations. One relates to property. In analytical terms, they denounce the perverse effects of private urban property, but when their struggles achieve a housing solution they typically lean toward private ownership. They have not commonly looked at alternative land models such as collective property, limited-equity cooperatives or community land trusts. The choice for private property is both understandable and respectable in a non-welfare country like Brazil—where, for example, a home can become an intergenerational asset—but in the long term, several hard-won homes have been sold to become inventory on the real estate market once again. In 2002, a survey conducted by the São Paulo Housing Secretary about the main housing programs (PROVER) showed that 40% of families served by the programs would eventually

sell their homes. The same survey found that approximately 17% of the 18,145 housing units built in 41 housing complexes had irregular occupation (Lucca, 2008: 152-153), which means the residents were no longer the program's original beneficiaries.

Brazilian academics, and NGOs who work with the housing sector, have pointed out this contradiction, yet being outspoken on this point is thorny as it can potentially undermine the collective struggle for housing rights. It also highlights a type of privileged speech, as many want others to struggle for collective property while they can buy or inherit property themselves.

Rather than *demanding* collective property become part of the grassroots movement's agenda, FICA has chosen to *offer* it. Let us take Joana's history as an example⁴. Born in Recife, she migrated to São Paulo at the age of nine with her mother and three siblings. They lived in different *cortiços*, or multi-family tenement houses. When her mother lost her job, they had to move to an *ocupação* (squatted building). They did not like their life there, but the time in the *ocupação* was very important as this was when they first came into contact with the human rights NGO *Centro Gaspar Garcia de Direitos Humanos*. Some years later, Joana, now with her own husband and three kids, again found themselves in a desperate situation. Facing eviction from their building, Joana turned to the NGO for help once again. This time, FICA was in touch with the same NGO asking advice on potential tenants for its first apartment. The NGO shortlisted six families from that same building, all of whom were interviewed by FICA. Joana's family fit the criteria best.

A second example is Julia Gutierrez's journey. The Gutierrez family moved to Brazil to escape Argentina's economic crisis after Carlos—Julia's husband—had been guaranteed a job at a communication company. A few months after his arrival, Carlos was fired in a mass layoff, making him unemployed shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country. The family moved into a tenement house in the Penha neighborhood, where they rented a room for the parents to share with their two children. The youngest, Mário, had just been born. The family soon faced the difficulties of tenement life in São Paulo. Julia came into conflict with the landlords because of several incidents of abuse and injustice. It is quite usual for violence to be the next step in such conflicts emerging within *cortiços*: the physical and eviction threats become real.

Shortly thereafter, in May 2021, they got in touch with the *Despejo Zero!* (Zero Eviction!), a social movement organized during the pandemic to prevent illegal evictions in the city. FICA was contacted by the leaders of the Congolese League, an organization of Congolese immigrants and refugees based in downtown São Paulo. They presented the extreme situation the Gutierrez family found themselves in after receiving an ultimatum to leave their room within a week or face violent expulsion. At the time, FICA was negotiating the purchase of its first shared-house rental property. Given the urgency of the situation, FICA welcomed the family into their first room temporarily as a space to stabilize after a very difficult and traumatic period. The result was tremendous: the members of the family saw an

⁴ Real names have been changed to maintain confidentiality of the families.

almost immediate improvement in their health problems, such as diabetes, respiratory diseases, dermatitis and stress.

Carlos managed to get hired by a company. The children overcame severe anxiety. The elder one won a scholarship from a school in the neighborhood. In October 2021, the family was still living in the property, and Julia took a leading role in improving and minor refurbishing of the house. The Gutierrez family was awaiting the arrival of more tenants, who will occupy the vacant rooms. These new tenants will come recommended by the *Unificação das Lutas de Cortiços e Moradia* (Unification of Tenement and Housing Struggles movement), an important movement in the struggle for rehousing people living in the city's tenements. As in the case of the Gutierrez family, different social and housing movements recognize FICA as a partner both in extreme and exceptional situations, as well as in long-term initiatives.

Joana's and the Gutierrez's journeys give us at least two lessons. First, they show the complexity of the Right to the City paradigm. In Brazil, homeless people organized in social movements are part of complex and multilayered alliances: they mobilize allied forces (and are mobilized by them) on a daily basis. In its uniqueness, FICA fits well into this field. The second lesson is that, grassroots movements are a social and political force, but they are also made up of people. Victory in obtaining housing is not guaranteed and can take years of struggle. In the meantime, people have to live somewhere. Being homeless in the Global South means being exposed to violence, scarcity and abuse. Less support from the State means people can't afford to be unemployed—they need to work hard even while struggling. The FICA model can offer safe housing during these gaps. Even if, it can still only be done on a very small scale, the impact is immeasurable as it is about protecting those we can reach.

Final remarks

The hands-on and incremental approach adopted by FICA is one of our greatest assets. The process of acquiring property through crowdfunding is still ongoing, and the results are good. FICA started in 2021 with one tenant family, but expects to finish the year with eight families living in our multi-family homes.

These years have also been a journey in theory and history. The project started as a response to gentrification and to the lack of supportive public policies. Eventually it became understood that FICA is part of a long history of civil society playing a role in housing provision, recalling utopian socialists of the nineteenth century, the cooperative housing movement and Ebenezer Howard's garden cities, among other examples.

Six years into our journey, FICA has also found its theoretical partners. The way we plan our projects dialogue with the idea of the *just city*, developed by Susan Fainstein (2010). This means that our action takes place within the framework of capitalism as it currently exists, searching for incremental systemic change as a consequence of continued pressure for justice. FICA sees itself as a (small but very unique) part of a complex body, the 'right to the city crowd', in São Paulo and Brazil. FICA believes, following Singer (2002), that it can

actively create clusters of *solidarity economies* within capitalism. Furthermore, it agrees with the feminist duo J. K. Gibson Graham's (2006) paradigm of diverse economies: FICA does not take capitalism for granted as a monolithic monster, but rather identifies and imagines horizons of non-capitalist economic relations, removing small bits of property from speculative real estate markets.

FICA, a small initiative to build a property fund promoted by civil society for social rent, allows us to look at this issue from a non-traditional point of view. As a small-scale experiment that needs to build its own solutions without many references, FICA has been an interesting laboratory for thinking about the minutiae of the functioning of social lease regimes. How can it best operate within national regulatory frameworks, combining existing instruments? What is the value of a fair rental? What kind of contract should be signed? How should it deal with defaults? How should responsibility be shared for housing maintenance? What criteria should be used for selecting residents? What are the responsibilities and potential of extra-governmental agents, and what are their limits of action?

FICA is developing knowledge to answer these questions. This is knowledge available to society, which advances a debate beyond complaints, demands and immobility. In the midst of an extremely difficult time for progressive planning in Brazil, FICA represents a realm of hope. On a very micro scale, FICA is carving out redistribution and a certain suspension of the rules of the real estate speculation game, and it feels good.

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