

# Promotion and Defense of the Right to the City and Adequate Housing: An Experience in Recife, Brazil



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## Project Overview

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**Organization:** CIAPA - Interdisciplinary Community for Action, Research and Learning

**Location:** Recife, Brazil

**Mentors:** Vikram Bhatt, McGill School of Architecture, and Dr. Luis de la Mora, Coordinator of CIAPA, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco

**Fellowship Duration:** May-July, 2014



## About the McBurney Latin America Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations over a period of 2 to 3 months. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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# Promotion and Defense of the Right to the City and Adequate Housing: An Experience in Recife, Brazil

## Fellowship Rationale and Objectives

With a population of 1.5 million, Recife acts as the focal point and the most dynamic core of one of the poorest cities in Brazil. With over 4 million people living in the Metropolitan Region of Recife, the city's diverse settlement patterns have led to neighbourhoods with drastically different economic realities, creating profound social differences between people.<sup>1</sup>

Almost half of the population of Recife lives in deplorable urban conditions, with 48% of people living in *favelas*. These settlements are very numerous, and are scattered throughout the city, including in the central core and within wealthy neighbourhoods. The absence (or malfunction) of social policies result in many socio-economic disparities where the access to adequate housing gets compromised. As a result, access to urban land and housing alternatives for people with low-incomes is negotiated by informal and irregular land occupation. Many of the buildings are of poor quality, and are in areas of extremely poor infrastructure. To address some of these issues, small groups of families have organized themselves to self-manage social production of housing projects, which is a participatory process where people determine the conditions of their own living environment. This process often involves institutional linkages with universities, city hall, financing banks, etc.).<sup>2</sup>



Source: Prefeitura Recife

The CIAPA (*Comunidade Interdisciplinar de Ação, Pesquisa e Aprendizagem*, or Interdisciplinary Community for Action, Research and Learning) works with residents of low-income settlements providing advice on planning and legalization of land ownership. They also offer political and

organizational training for the PREZEIS Plano de Regularização das Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social (Program for the regularization of special zones of social interest), program coordinators and ZEIS (special zones of social interest) area representatives (see detailed map below). PREZEIS is an important urban policy instrument for lower-income residents in Recife.

## Objectives

The initial objectives of this fellowship entailed working in collaboration with the CIAPA team on the following two projects:

1. Providing technical assistance to maintain the quality of the *Dom Helder Câmara* socially produced residential complex, a 200-unit project built between 2007 and 2009. The aim was to improve the conditions of the common spaces and correct home expansions that are deemed unsuitable.

2. Provide advice and consultancy for the PREZEIS program coordinators and ZEIS area representatives, including development and facilitation of workshops to improve their operational capacity and strengthen the program to continue to improve the quality of life of residents in low-income residential areas.



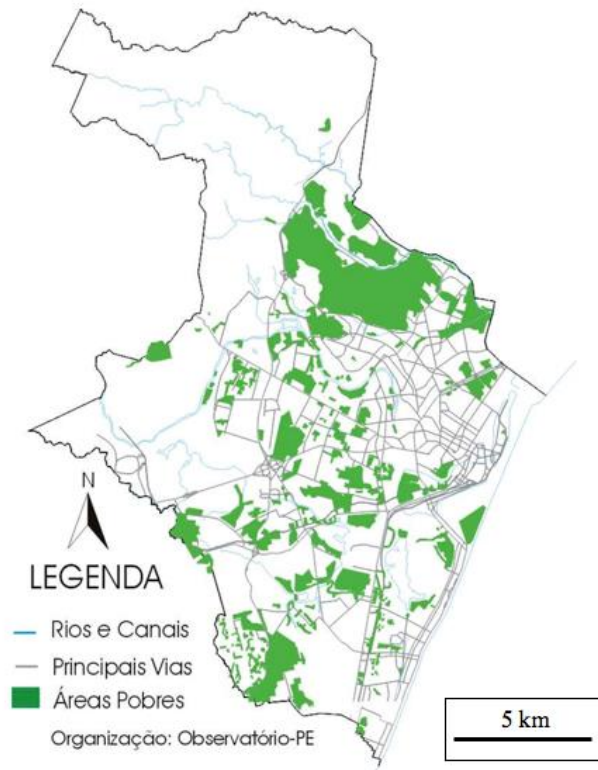
## Background

### 1. PREZEIS

In 1938, a public policy initiative known as the *Social League Against Mocambos (Liga social contra o mocambo)* intended to eradicate all the *slums* of the city of Recife, by removing the poor from the center. The lack of a formal relocation plan led people to occupy the hills and slopes of the city, creating new informal settlements. It wasn't until the late 70's, when military dictatorship was coming to an end, that urban social movements in Recife lobbied for a draft law that would guarantee the permanence of the poor in the central districts or within areas of wealthy neighbourhoods, promoting land ownership legalization programs and infrastructure to improve the living conditions of precarious settlements. In the field of slum upgrading programs, the PREZEIS experience in the city of Recife, has become a benchmark for city management in Brazil, anticipating certain urban instruments that would later represent a new form of relationship between civil society, the State and intervention in the favelas.<sup>3</sup> The PREZEIS law recognizes the right to housing above the right to ownership, where land is meant to be lived in, and not meant to be used as a source of profit and speculation.

## RECIFE - MAP OF ZONES OF SPECIAL SOCIAL INTEREST (ZEIS)

Source: *Observatorio das Metropoles*



PREZEIS presents an important participation channel for civil society. Beyond using urban and legal instruments to facilitate urbanization and land tenure legalization in the zones of special interest (ZEIS), it recognizes the population as an important social segment to be consulted at the different stages through the COMULS (Commission for urbanization and legalization of land tenure) and through the PREZEIS Forum. Having a multi-stakeholder platform where different agendas, motivations and backgrounds interact can be a fruitful approach in the democratization of urban space and the full realization of citizen rights.<sup>4</sup> However, this mechanism can come with its own set of challenges, and the development of a systematic training policy can contribute to strengthen the program.

In recent years, the PREZEIS has been weakened by administrative, technical and political problems that have hindered the program's operation and outcomes in terms of urban improvement and land tenure regularization, as well as affecting the functionality of the democratic management system in place.<sup>5</sup> The limits faced by PREZEIS involve the process of representation and participation of communities, the adaptation of municipal administration representatives to the practices required to co-manage the program, the low operational capacity of the City's administrative structure, the municipal administration's lack of definition of strategies and priorities for intervention in the ZEIS, and insufficient resources allocated to the PREZEIS Fund to meet the demands for urban upgrading in these areas.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Dom Hélder Câmara housing complex

The Dom Hélder Câmara housing complex located in the Iputinga neighbourhood of Recife is the result of a process led by the MLB (*Movimento Luta nos Bairros*), the Ministry of Cities, the Federal Government, which provided the financial capital, and the Federal University of Pernambuco (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, or UFPE), which provided technical assistance. In 2009, 200 houses were built through the process of social production of housing (SPH), conceived by and for the residents, on a vacant lot that had belonged to the Postal Service. These housing units were

sold to residents at the symbolic price of R\$12 000 (approx. \$6000 CAD) to be paid over 20 years. CIAPA, in collaboration with university students, left nine projects for the extension of the housing units unfinished. Residents were advised to contact CIAPA when they wished to expand their house in order to get technical assistance. The dwellers did not follow these recommendations and extended the houses themselves, leaving many of the houses with irregular and problematic layouts, making it more difficult for the municipality to approve their land tenure certificate. When the housing units were concluded and residents moved in, common areas were left undeveloped. It was hoped that the CAIXA Econômica, a Federal Bank institution, would release funds to complete the day care, a playground, a sports field and the community center. The design and implementation of these facilities were to be conducted through a participatory process with the residents.



**Adding additional floors and modifying house typology**

## Activities

In addition to weekly meetings with the CIAPA team, I spent much time visiting PREZEIS sites, attending forums and public hearings around land ownership and property rights, and leading workshops for teachers on the right to the city.

Some external factors such as the *Festas Juninas* holidays, the FIFA World Cup games and two public transportation strikes resulted in an irregular activity and working schedule. Other internal factors such as the inherent bureaucracy attached to programs that needed to be strengthened and the lack of commitment of certain popular and institutional stakeholders caused rescheduling of meetings and delay in the development of certain projects. Considering these factors and the short period in the field, for the case of PREZEIS, there was not enough time to give capacity building workshops. However, a plan for these workshops was elaborated, including a diagnostic of the current condition of PREZEIS, with recommendations to strengthen the program. For the upgrading of the Dom Helder Câmara housing complex, things were stagnated for some time as we waited for funds from the CAIXA Federal Bank to be released. However, we decided to go forward with the consultation meetings with the local residents to analyze how the housing complex was functioning, what was missing, and how the common spaces could be improved. Ten families were consulted during my fellowship, and the process is still ongoing. During the consultation process, one of the mothers expressed concern about certain teenagers starting to get involved in the drug trafficking business, mainly because many of them don't have any activities after school. This problem gave way to a proposal to develop a plan of activities and workshops for youth in the residential complex, to be given by university



students as part of the strategy to improve the physical and social quality of life of Dom Helder Câmara.

The workshops on “The Right to the City and Housing” were not part of my original objectives, but ended up becoming an important part of my activities. Since my supervisor also coordinates an e-learning Human Rights masters program for 180 high school and elementary school teachers who are part of the public school system throughout various municipalities, he asked me to help him co-teach the module on the right to the city and housing. The masters program is given online over the course of 10 months, with one physical meeting per month. A total of three, half-day workshops were given, two of which were in smaller towns, two and three hours away from Recife. These workshops were important since public school teachers in more distant cities from the capital do not get many opportunities to participate in discussions of this nature.

The workshops had the objective of co-constructing with the teachers a conceptual and instrumental base to strengthen social mobilization for a more just city and a better quality of life. My tasks consisted of preparing the content and co-facilitating the discussions, which touched upon the realities of social and urban exclusion, the role of the state and market forces in the access to housing, organized ways to fight for the right to remain in the city and live with the assurance of not being expelled, as well as assuring access to adequate living conditions.



Right to the city and housing workshop, UFPE

## Challenges and Successes

One of the things that worked well during my fellowship, was the fact that the CIAPA group operates within the University context. Through this link, I had the opportunity to interact with other local students from various disciplines (sociology, geography, environment, architecture and urban planning) from the UFPE as well as a few foreign students with the same interests, to work towards common goals. At the same time, the CIAPA acts as a neutral link between local organizations and municipal government, which allowed me to have contact with diverse stakeholders and affected groups without necessarily 'taking sides' and being able to analyze the issues from different perspectives.

What was at times frustrating was the local political climate, which caused projects to stagnate, and the lack of (or strategic) informality of certain City officials and certain representatives of the PREZEIS coordination when scheduling meetings or committing to certain agreements.

The dysfunctional nature of the PREZEIS forum, in some cases, meant that Prof. de la Mora, as representative of CIAPA and the University, had to step in to take the lead on participatory decision-making processes, which at times questioned the idea of empowering local leaders and putting them at the forefront of the process. My attendance at many meetings made me realize that ZEIS representatives had different levels of education, occupations, and life experiences, so we could not just develop a straightforward capacity building workshop to improve the PREZEIS program management where there were so many disparities in skills and learning rhythms. In addition, after attending the PREZEIS Forum meetings, it was evident that there was some corruption between program coordinators; where at times decisions were made beforehand, making the participatory process questionable.

### What did I learn? A Personal Reflection

Throughout the whole internship, my supervisor Prof. De la Mora, kept stating the importance of the community being the 'protagonists' in the action and decision-making processes of the dwellers, inspired from the teachings of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. CIAPA's role is to be there to provide technical assistance if it is needed, but not to impose or to lead the process. I gained a better understanding of the Social Production of Habitat process, the concept of 'livability' (*habitabilidade*), the differences between housing as a political instrument, as an instrument of the capitalist city and as an instrument of well-being. Prof. De la Mora also passed on how knowledge diversity (scientific, technical and popular) are needed to improve the quality of the debate and action processes.

I learned to be patient with processes, and to always think of an alternate strategy or things to be done 'in the meantime' while awaiting a decision or authorization. Nothing is set: Even if there are laws created to ensure housing rights, they always need a social base in order to be implemented, monitored and defended. Flexibility, creativity and constant adaptation were particularly useful skills during the fellowship. Working in different favelas of Recife and interacting with their residents as well as residents of middle-class neighbourhoods made me realize how much social stigma there is towards favelas and favela dwellers. The perception from outside is that they are places where the worst social problems concentrate, where poverty, crime, violence, drug trafficking and prostitution are the norm. In many cases, favelas are diverse environments composed of working-class families, who have integrated these communities as a response to the lack of planning and adequate housing opportunities, who



View of inner streets, Dom Hélder Câmara

May 12- July 20, 2014



probably have more in common with other middle-class families than what people tend to think. I could also understand the important role that universities could and must play in having an impact and creating a better link between research practices and the social needs of disenfranchised communities.

## **Community Implications and Further work**

### **What was your contribution to the delivery of health and/or social services for poor or marginalized groups?**

By strengthening programs such as PREZEIS, we intended to contribute to the maintenance of a program that would guarantee the right for low-income families to remain in a neighbourhood without the fear of being displaced due to market pressures. In addition, improving participative spaces can ensure better communication between residents of ZEIS areas and municipal authorities, which enables residents to better manage social services and infrastructure improvement projects.

Having common facilities like a day care, a playground, a sports field and a community center will be an important addition to the improvement of the quality of life of the Dom Hélder Câmara housing complex. Interviews and consultation with residents will lead to a better understanding of their needs and including them in the process is an integral part of developing a sense of ownership and belonging. Organizing a set of activities and workshops with kids and youth can also contribute to learn new skills, and occupying their time in a more effective and productive manner as a preventive strategy, that can also serve to improve their living environment.

People from the ZEIS areas and the Dom Helder Câmara complex appreciated getting technical support from CIAPA. Many of them communicated that they felt like they were not alone in their struggles and transformation processes and therefore they could gain more confidence in their actions.

For the workshops on “The Right to the City and Housing,” we had contact with many municipal schoolteachers of many ages. Both program coordinators and school teachers got to experience a set of dynamic workshops and hopefully took away a set of tools on reading urban problems, challenges and possible solutions to ensure the right to adequate housing and how to pass this on to their students. Through these workshops, we contributed to ensuring that teachers can transfer a more just vision of the city to their students, so that they receive the tools to feel empowered in order to take forward the changes they feel that are needed in their communities.

### **What would the next steps be to translate your findings into policy action (if not already happening)?**

An aspect to consider would be the institutionalization of the social production of housing process. So far, the Dom Helder Câmara housing complex, despite its success in the quality of housing and in empowering its residents, has been the only housing project in Recife realized on the basis of

SPH. Projects involving the social production of housing usually take longer than market-based or social housing projects, and require the effort and articulation of many more actors, therefore it is a much more complex strategy of housing provision, but it results in added benefits. The challenge would be to convince municipal authorities of the benefits that these types of projects can bring for communities, and to lobby for funds to conduct more of these experiences.

### Advice for Future Fellows

This fellowship expanded my vision of the complexity of managing housing programs and housing policy in Brazil and Latin America in general. Although I am unsure if I would like to pursue a career solely in international development, with the languages I speak and the cultural sensitivity I have acquired, I would definitely be interested in becoming a consultant to work towards improving housing conditions and urban upgrading projects in Latin America.

In my urban planning courses at McGill we often discuss what the role of the planner should be and its level of involvement in shaping urban policy and decision-making processes. This fellowship reinforced my conviction that urban projects should be discussed with the community they will be affecting and that they should advocate for plans and projects that improve the quality of life of communities at large, and that do not compromise the wellbeing of certain groups in favour of others.

Being able to have direct contact with people, visiting the different favelas and other areas of the city, participating in local decision-making meetings and having a first-hand vision of the living conditions and challenges faced by local residents, gave me a better understanding of how urban policy gets operationalized.

Future fellows should get a solid overall understanding of the context of the place they'll be traveling to, and while on the field try to read the newspapers every now and then to really get a feel of the local challenges and how the media treats them. Don't be afraid to ask questions of your supervisor or your co-workers if tasks or situations are not clear, and be sensitive to how you formulate questions to marginal populations to not seem intrusive.

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<sup>1</sup> de Almeida Souza, M. Â. (2013). ZEIS E PREZEIS DO RECIFE: Concepção Avançada e Dificuldades na Concretização dos Objetivos.

<sup>2</sup> Information provided by Dr. Luis de la Mora through email correspondence.

<sup>3</sup> de Moraes, D. A. (2005). Por uma Política de Habitação de Interesse Social para o Recife Apontamentos sobre o Prezeis.

<sup>4</sup> PREZEIS Manual para lideranças (2010).

<sup>5</sup> de Almeida Souza, M. Â. (2013). ZEIS E PREZEIS DO RECIFE: Concepção Avançada e Dificuldades na Concretização dos Objetivos.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.