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Micro-resilience and justice:

co-producing narratives of change

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Abstract

Significant lessons can be drawn from grassroots experiences of self-organising to challenge the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities in cities. This paper examines the strategies of low-income dwellers living in squatted buildings in São Paulo, and asks how resilience narratives can help understand the agency of these micro strategies across multiple scales. The city centre of São Paulo is a key site for housing movements to challenge spatial injustice in Brazil. In a context where housing for low-income groups is in short supply and is characterized by highly skewed social and spatial distribution, squatted buildings have emerged since the 1990s as laboratories for alternative ways of producing the city. The paper draws from an action-research project investigating such occupations in São Paulo. Firstly, it explores the practices of individual and groups inhabiting a building known as Ocupação Marconi, focusing on its social production as a device for co-producing local resilience from the micro-scale. Secondly, it reflects on which forms of knowledge production might allow for putting such practices into focus, interrogating participatory action research as a means to facilitate resilience at scale.

Introduction

“Stop calling me RESILIENT. Because every time you say, ‘Oh, they’re resilient,’ that means you can do something else to me. I am not resilient” (#notresilient).

Resilience thinking has drawn attention to the risks facing coupled social-ecological systems, with relevant consequence to a number of fields. Social-ecological resilience has been framed as the capacity of a system to deal with uncertainty and, crucially, transform in the face of strains and stresses. This capacity involves flexibility, diversity, and adaptability, and is defined on the basis of a range of principles including the understanding that all socio-ecological systems are complex adaptive systems, and that persistent change – rather than stability – is the key characteristic of ecological and social realities alike. Moreover it highlights how change occurs through myriad interactions across diverse spatial and temporal scales.

Resilience is also, however, an elastic notion and indeed a “contested narrative” (Scott Powell, Kløcker Larsen, & van Bommel, 2014). Whereas environmental sciences have highlighted its progressive potential, a range of debates around the broader usage of the term – particularly in social sciences – has focused on the political content of the concept. Here, I am particularly interested in exploring the consequences of thinking through notions of ‘local’ or ‘community resilience’ (‘resilience from below’) in relation to marginalised urban groups, their perspectives, and their priorities.

Within this context, critics have emphasised that resilience thinking eludes notions of power and politics, and that resilience narratives often seem to evade the possibility that extant (social, economic, political and ecological) circumstances generating uncertainty might be subjected to a wider structural critique. As a consequence it has been observed that narratives surrounding community resilience risk developing within largely dysfunctional social framings, characterised by the unequal distribution of power and resources (MacKinnon, 2012; Jonathan, 2013; Cretney, 2014). As highlighted by Michelsen, “such framings avoid the fundamental democratic questions about what social, economic and political rights and lives citizens experience, aspire towards, and demand.” In short, as Adger states, “resilience theory in itself does not deal with the normative dimension, so – by implication – it needs to be used in conjunction with other concepts that do” (Leach, 2008, p. 9).

Secondly, it has been discussed that in mainstream usage resilience tends to be conservative, focusing on the maintenance of structures and on the ability to 'bounce back' from shocks. Leach (2008) and Shaw (2012) on the other hand highlight that social-ecological resilience rather entails a dynamic process of 'bouncing forward' – a necessity to transform and innovate to overcome stress. This in turn raises a fundamental question about the end point of such transformations: which concerns about the future are foregrounded, and whose future aspirations are pursued in this process? In other words: resilience for whom, and for what ends? In a reflection on the emerging consequence of resilience thinking in the realm of urban planning, Davoudi discusses that "the same problematic has always been evident in sustainability and planning, in urban regeneration and in many other places within the field where processes of de-politicisation and normalisation produce perverse policy constructs. The definition of an end point is clearly a political question" (Davoudi, 2012, p.332).

Resilience as a radical agenda?

In dialogue with these reflections, this paper examines the practices of urban dwellers and organised housing movements in São Paulo, Brazil, as a means to explore how community resilience may be associated with ideas of rights, power and agency, and to the mechanisms underpinning the construction of citizenship. As well it reflects on which forms of knowledge production might allow for putting such practices into focus, interrogating participatory action research as a means to foster community resilience at scale. The aim is to contribute towards a transformative definition of community resilience, within a framework whereby a will to social justice is central, and resilience is geared towards supporting the needs and aspirations of marginalised groups. The paper questions how the "resilient practices" (Petrescu 2012: 65) of urban dwellers that have been excluded from the circle of citizenship can potentially challenge the uneven distribution of urban resources and opportunities in cities, and shape and frame radically alternative urban imaginaries.

This reflection connects to a wider body of theoretical and empirical work examining the urban dimensions of justice, democracy, citizenship, and community struggles. Specifically, it relates to ideas of spatial justice (Soja, 2010), the just city (Feinstein, 2010), and the right to the city

(Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008 and 2012). Key to these notions is the recognition that urban struggles for social inclusion and citizenship are both struggles *in* space – embedded in the physical fabric of the city – and struggles *for* space – striving toward a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities (Purcell, 2002). The notion of the ‘right to the city’ is especially meaningful in this context, because it has been used by social movements as a unifying frame that connects localised urban claims and actions across the globe¹. The right to the city highlights the urban environment as a producer of social relations of power, and emphasizes the right of urban dwellers to play an active role in the production of the city they desire and value.

In his commentary to Lefebvre’s work on this subject, Mark Purcell (2002) underlines two main aspects of this right: the right to appropriation, and the right to participation. The right to participation points to inhabitation, rather than formal citizenship, as the basis for membership in society – including both the entitlements and obligations attached to membership. As the production of the city is the condition determining belonging, it is those who live in the city who can legitimately claim urban space, regardless of their formal status. The right to appropriation implies “the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space” (Purcell, 2002, p.103). This right is pursued not only through the occupation of already-existing space, but also through the production of urban space so that it meets the needs and aspirations of inhabitants. In this two-fold understanding, the right to the city provides a relevant re-orientation to the definition of both urbanisation and justice, because it links questions of democracy and rights to spatial production – highlighting power and agency as inherently embedded in the micro-politics and everyday practices of urban transformation (De Certeau, 1984). Furthermore, it connects these principles to the use value, rather than market value, of urban space. This highlights the necessity to restructure the power relations that underpin spatial production, in order to achieve more just cities (Purcell 2002).

Discussing the right to the city in relation to resilience puts into focus both the everyday bottom-up attempts to deepen resilience and the transformative social end of the process. From this perspective, community resilience can be broadly defined as a “de-centred, de-commodified and de-carbonised alternative” (Brown, 2011, p.14) to dominant urban regimes, which takes

form through the spatial practices enacted by urban dwellers in order to contrast urban development patterns producing inequality and uncertainty. Importantly, this definition requires acknowledgment of the diverse vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of different urban actors. In resilience literature, vulnerability encompasses “exposure to perturbations or external stresses, sensitivity to perturbation, and the capacity to adapt” (Adger, 2006). A social vulnerability framework recognises that climate as well as political and economic disruptions impact different urban groups in different ways, depending on their living conditions and on larger forces affecting their ability to respond to crises. These forces are shaped by the uneven geographies of development – with the urban poor being inherently more exposed to risk than others (Allen, Boano, & Johnson, 2010). The second term in focus, adaptive capacity, addresses the capacity of a social-ecological system to cope with contingencies – “to be able to maintain or even improve its condition in the face of changes in its environment(s)” (Adger, 2006). This links to the agency of everyday practices of inhabitation and appropriation, and importantly, to the processes that enable and disable bottom-up mechanisms to cope with uncertainty. These processes take place through the negotiation of relationships across groups, institutions, places, and scales.

Rethinking resilience through a right to the city perspective implies a definition of ‘community resilience’ that acknowledges that differential vulnerability is socially constructed – while also recognising the agency of marginalised individuals and groups in response to the uncertainties they experience. This highlights the centrality of people’s self-organised tactics to cope with disruptions, as well as the need to support these tactics by challenging “the underlying structural issues of power and inequality that might be contributing to the presence of disruptions” (Cretney, 2014, p.22). As a radical critique to the status quo of urban inequality and marginalisation, ‘community resilience’ links in this understanding to a form of politics “that changes the very framework that determines how things work” (Žižek, 1999, p.199).

In exploring the spatial practices of social movements in São Paulo, the paper aims to interrogate how these might inform this definition of resilience, as a collective capacity to resist disruptions both by coping with stresses, and by pursuing alternative ways of making urban space. This reflection is complemented by a discussion on how and under which conditions

participatory, action-oriented research is able to support this process. The point of departure is that the concept of resilience bears in itself the potential to make more evident collective forms of inclusive citizenship and city-making that are based on micro-scale activism and the radicalization of everyday life, and are geared towards more just urban relations at multiple scale levels (MacKinnen, 2012).

São Paulo: Ocupação Marconi / Oficina Marconi

(Figure 1)

The initiative that informs the discussion took place in August 2014 and focused on an informally occupied building known as Ocupação Marconi in the area of Praça da República, located at the heart of São Paulo's central district. The centre of São Paulo comprises dozens of formerly vacant buildings that have been informally re-inhabited by organised housing movements. Although numbers fluctuate as the strategies of social movements change and forced evictions occur more frequently, it has been calculated that at the moment there are approximately 35 occupied buildings in the city centre (mostly high-rise)², which illustrate the many struggles that have shaped inner-city São Paulo over the past two decades.

The context of São Paulo Centro

The access to and control over spaces in the city centre of São Paulo is highly contested. Since the 1980s, as the local government encouraged the formation of new economic centres in non-central locations of the city, property prices in the central districts decreased. However, even if depreciating, properties still retained relatively high economic value based upon the assumption of future regeneration. As a combined result of speculation practices and legal bottlenecks, 290,000 housing units were reported empty in 2010, 38,000 of which in the region of São Paulo Centro (Earle, 2012; Kohara, 2013). Meanwhile, these new economic centres started generating increased property values in other areas across the city, contributing to urban displacement and to the peripheralisation of the urban poor. In the same period in São Paulo, about 130,000 households were deemed homeless and 890,000 households were reported living in inadequate conditions (Secreteria Municipal de Habitação, 2010; Tatagiba et al., 2012).

Under these conditions, organised housing movements emerged in the mid 1990s as a key urban actor linking urban development dynamics in central São Paulo to wider claims for the right to dignified housing and to the city. Today, organised occupations in São Paulo Centro continue to highlight the existing disjunction between Brazil's progressive housing policies and the living conditions of the most vulnerable layers of its population, while at the same time exposing tensions and inequities regarding the future of the area. On the one hand, inner city regeneration proposals by the Municipality of São Paulo, such as the large-scale New Luz project, have proposed market-led urban development strategies targeting middle- and high-income groups. This has recently resulted in the increased number of forced evictions of occupied buildings, and in the increased expulsion of lower-income dwellers from the inner city (Trindade, 2014). On the other hand, housing movements have used occupations as a way of producing shelter for the urban poor, and as a platform for highlighting the city's dramatic housing shortage and the need for truly affordable housing opportunities in accessible and well-serviced areas (Tatagiba et al., 2012; Trindade, 2014). Furthermore, occupations illustrate the possibility to develop innovative housing solutions that are based on rental mechanisms and collective self-build and self-management processes, and that contribute to urban regeneration by reactivating the social function of property³ as defined by the Brazilian Constitution (De Carli, Frediani, Barbosa, Comarù, & Moretti, 2015).

According to Trindade (2014), 105 acts of occupation were undertaken in São Paulo city centre in the period 1997-2012. Although the occupation of vacant land and buildings was not a new phenomenon in São Paulo, before the mid 1990s this had predominantly taken place in the city's peripheries. Over the years, inner city buildings have been at the centre of intense contestations between housing social movements, private owners, and different local governments and public sector bodies (Kohara, 2013; Earle, 2012). Tatagiba, Paterniani, and Trindade (2012) together with Kohara (2013) agree that the action of social movements in the highly visible central districts of the city has effectively contributed to shading light on the urgent need for social housing in central areas of the city, bringing this issue to the agendas of both local and state governments.

The social landscape of informally occupied buildings is multifaceted. Occupations themselves are carefully designed acts of civil disobedience that take into account the physical and legal conditions of the building, in order to identify optimal moments and sites for action. Once a vacant structure has been occupied, collectives are formed to agree on the building's own rules, and on the principles to be followed in its management. Social movements initiating these actions are numerous, diverse, and fluid. Most of them are grouped under either one of two umbrella organisations, called the UMM⁴ and FMP⁵. Within these federations, individual social movements are more flexible constellations, each organising their own affiliates in response to specific positions, norms, and governance structures. Furthermore, occupations are not isolated actions, but are supported by extended networks of civil society groups, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions providing legal, technical, and social support for housing movements in their struggle to activate unused properties and re-appropriate the city centre.

Participatory Action Research

Ocupação Marconi was established in 2012 through the occupation of one of these buildings, Edifício São Manoel in Rua Marconi. Erected in the 1930s as an office block, the building had been emptying out since the 1980s, and in 2012, the only spaces in use were the commercial units at the ground floor. Since September 2012, Edifício São Manoel has been used by a housing movement called Movimento da Moradia Para Todos (MMPT). Today, the building is commonly identified as Ocupação Marconi, and is home to approximately 130 households, including a high percentage of national and international migrants.

Focusing on Ocupação Marconi, the initiative described in this paper emerged from the collaboration between a multi-disciplinary group of scholars based in Brazil and the UK. The project was designed in dialogue with Benedito Roberto Barbosa, an activist in the São Paulo Union of Housing Movements (UMM) and a lawyer at Centre for Human Rights Gaspar Garcia, and with Welita Caetano, a housing activist then affiliated to MMPT, and one of the leaders of this occupation. The research was linked to a postgraduate module titled Insurgent Urbanisation at the Universidade Federal do ABC (UFABC). This experimental module was taught

collaboratively by the author together with colleagues from both UFABC and University College London⁶. It included a six-weeks live component led by the UK team⁷, involving students in a hands-on investigation of occupied buildings in São Paulo Centro through mapping and other participatory methods.

The strategic aim of the initiative was to contribute to UFABC lecturers' on-going engagement with inner city social movements by creating an open platform that would involve researchers, students, activists, and community leaders in a collaborative research process. This was designed to generate a situated and plural account of the building in the context of São Paulo housing struggles, and it was intended as a pilot experience for further action-learning and action-research initiatives to be undertaken in partnership with UMM⁸. Driven by an interest in occupations' potential to prefigure alternative scenarios for São Paulo Centro, we came across the experience of Ocupação Marconi – where residents appeared to have initiated not only novel forms of spatial production, but also innovative narratives about the role these could play in transforming São Paulo's unequal urban landscape. The six-weeks hands-on component of the module focused on analysing and recounting this experience, and took the name of Oficina Marconi⁹.

Participatory action research (PAR) was adopted in this context as a collaborative form of research that recognises the existence of a 'plurality of knowledges' in a variety of institutions and locations. Participatory action researchers assume that "those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements" (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007, p.9). Crucially, our interest lay in the practice of PAR as a way to not only recognise the 'plurality of knowledges' available, but also to put these into action in order to articulate the ways in which informal inhabitation practices contribute to creating alternative urban futures for São Paulo Centro. Like research co-production, PAR is based on the perspective that research is a collective rather than an individual exercise; and whereas debates around co-production highlights the shared initiation, development, and implementation of research projects, PAR emphasizes how research activities might engage in dialogue with existing forms of knowledge production. Furthermore PAR is understood here as a means to

produce 'actionable urban theory' (Allen, Lampis, & Swelling, 2016) – i.e. to produce concepts and frameworks that have consequences on the practices of urban change. Such forms of theory, Allen, Lampis and Swelling argue, do not necessarily reside in grand accounts of urban reality, but rather in the articulation of narratives “that attempt to capture and nurture more relational and materially grounded pathways to transformative change” (2016). Along these lines, PAR can be defined as the practice of collaboratively identifying and cultivating innovative practices at the micro scale, in order to strengthen transformative processes that are already underway. Key to this process is the identification of cues in the present “which provide alternative paths out of the current crisis” (Cleaver 1993): “some of these will disappear, others will survive, but the challenge remains to find them, encourage people to articulate, expand, and connect them: to link and network various micro-politics of resistance” (Chatterton, Fuller, & Routledge, 2007, p.221).

The PAR methodology adopted by Oficina Marconi connected to a wider research platform using participatory mapping as a way to advance more inclusive representations of the city¹⁰. Mapping was seen as a means to understand residents' dwelling practice, to provide arguments about the role of occupations in regenerating the area, and to enable dialogue with the institutions that govern regeneration processes in São Paulo. Within the occupation, students worked in groups, each addressing a different scale of the building's production. The first group, *moradia* (dwelling), focused on individual households, on the practices enacted by residents to transform and appropriate their own home environment, and on the values they attached to their place of living. The second observed the *predio* (building), exploring the arrangement of the building's physical spaces and its linkages to the collaborative processes that underpin the governance of the occupation. The third explored the *cidade* (city) and examined the physical as well as social and political connections between Ocupação Marconi and other occupations in São Paulo Centro. Each of the groups conducted 10-12 semi-structured interviews and utilised a specific method to investigate the theme and scale assigned to them. The *moradia* group engaged residents in participatory photography exercises; the *predio* group used photographs and diagrams to document the building's collective spaces; the *cidade* group conducted a detailed stakeholders analysis.

Parallel to the work being carried out by the students, the visiting research team developed a second process of investigation, which primarily involved in-depth interviews with the leaders of the occupation, participant observation, and a number of semi-structured interviews with residents¹¹. The first were aimed at understanding the current status of the occupation within the wider context of São Paulo housing struggles. The latter aimed to examine the ways in which people described their relations to the building, which values and perceptions they associated to the experience of the occupation, and how this social and physical space intersected with their personal histories and their perceptions of belonging in São Paulo¹². This process was carried in collaboration with São Paulo-based artist Gabriel Boieras who developed photographic portraits of the interviewees and their homes (Figure 2 and 3). The six weeks investigation was concluded by a half day 'breakfast in the street' where students presented their work to residents, and collected feedback on the narratives they had generated for each scale (Figure 4).

Based on the findings from this initiative, the following sections examine the ways in which Ocupação Marconi and the initiative Oficina Marconi may inform new understandings of 'community resilience' oriented towards social justice. The discussion explores the social production of the building as a device that shapes new narratives among residents and new political spaces in São Paulo, and on the role of the research process as a means to support the production of situated accounts of this device, and reconfigure the internal and external understanding of this contested area of the city.

Making Ocupação Marconi: The building as a narrative space

In examining the spatial practices of social movements, the paper aims to highlight how these might inform a transformative definition of resilience, as a practice that resists disruptions by producing new imaginations of what is possible and by enacting radically different ways of making urban space. There are at least two aspects to this argument: the first is primarily reactive and focuses on the capacity of micro-scale practices to cope with conditions of fragility and uncertainty. The second is transformative and emphasises the ability to instigate systemic change, and to affect the structural issues that produced instability in the first place. The case of

vacant buildings occupations in São Paulo illustrates that the collective practices of social movements enhance the coping capacity of highly vulnerable urban dwellers, by facilitating forms of solidarity and auto-organisation. At the same time, this case provokes a reflection on the extent to which occupations can draw transformative links between residents' micro-resilient practices, and the structural factors generating inequality. Here, I will focus in particular on how these links might be shaped through the production of new narratives and representations of the city.

Fragility and auto-organisation

In the period 2012-2015, Ocupação Marconi has produced many instances of auto-organisation through residents' self-building, self-management, and self-organisation practices. As in similar cases across São Paulo, the occupation hosts a diverse group of residents, including an elevated number of migrants from Bolivia, Peru, and Haiti, as well from Brazil's poorer Northeast and Amazon regions. Most dwellers share a history of extremely precarious living conditions and personal circumstances, including several instances of irregular employment, fragile family conditions, chronic illness, alcoholism, and drug abuse. As a means of coordinating such a diverse and complex group of residents, collective life in the occupation is organised through a floor-based structure, where each floor is carefully administered as a semi-independent unit and managed by a designated floor representative. This allows for the efficient running of the communal toilets and of other self-started services such as garbage collection and cleaning. At each floor, dedicated signboards mediate the communication among residents and with the floor representative – drawing attention to important events such as housing demonstrations and group meetings, as well as cleaning rotas and maintenance fee payment deadlines (Figure 5). This floor-based system is networked through weekly assemblies attended by all residents, and is supervised and coordinated by a building representative appointed by the MMPT. This representative is in turn the interface between the building's residents and the leadership of the social movement. The relations between MMPT and other housing

movements in São Paulo are also governed through a similar structure of nested forms of representation.

This hierarchical governance structure includes forms of centralised control, as well as instances of collective decision-making. Crucially, this system is instrumental to the development of collective practices that, in addition to providing for the building's maintenance, contribute to generating forms of mutuality and solidarity among the occupation's vulnerable residents (De Carli & Frediani, 2014). The experience of cohabiting spaces and facilities, sharing norms and regulations, and – to an extent – making decisions together about the building's functioning, creates opportunities for addressing personal vulnerabilities at a collective scale, and enhancing resident's capacity to deal with everyday challenges. This function of the building as a collective coping device is particularly important in light of the exposure to risk and the conditions of material scarcity experienced by most residents in the occupation. During the interviews that we conducted in 2014, several residents highlighted for instance that the building's self-governance supported the emergence of alternative economic networks and livelihoods opportunities centred in the building itself. Two stories exemplify this point.

The first concerns a woman named Maria¹³. When Maria entered the occupation, she was homeless and unemployed, and was caring for her daughter by herself after her husband had been arrested. In a moment of severe difficulties, the occupation was able to provide her with a vital support structure. As it happens in different social movements, MMPT pays a salary for those who perform a key role for the functioning of their affiliated occupations, such as the building coordinators. In Ocupação Marconi, these roles include the coordinator of the communal kitchen located at the second floor of the building, which was initiated by the building's leadership in the early days of the occupation (Figure 6). This can be used by residents upon the payment of a small fee, but is also meant to provide food for collective purposes. Maria took on the role of kitchen coordinator in 2012, and at the moment of our interview this was her main source of livelihood. During her working hours, she could take her daughter to the building's self-organised nursery – started by the building's coordinators as a way of supporting single parents living in Ocupação Marconi (Figure 7). Beyond the essential

sustenance provided to Maria, the kitchen also played a wider part in the occupation's social and economic life – demonstrating the importance of the building's location and its self-managed collective spaces in nurturing alternative economic flows. At the time of our interviews, the kitchen's functioning was largely based on relations between residents of Ocupação Marconi and local street market vendors, who would give away their unsold produce at the end of each day. This contribution was key in allowing the kitchen to provide free meals to the nursery's children, as well as to prepare lunch boxes that would then be sold to informal workers living in other occupations in the area – creating a self-sustaining micro-economy.

A second instance of the role played by the building as a coping device is provided by Emmanuel, a young man of Haitian origins living in the occupation with his partner and child. Driven to the occupation by the desire to find a place in the city, like many others Emmanuel did not become involved with MMPT on the grounds of his political views, but rather on the basis of his concrete needs and aspirations for the future. During the interview, he explained that living in the occupation had allowed him to have a place to stay in the city, as well as to create new livelihoods opportunities and provide for his child. He highlighted that the position of the occupation at the heart of São Paulo's central district – in proximity of formal and informal livelihood opportunities – had been a key factor influencing his decision to live there rather than in one of São Paulo's peripheral settlements, notwithstanding the high density and the material difficulties that characterised the building. This choice was supported by the presence of collective facilities, including the communal kitchen and the nursery. Importantly, Emmanuel also underlined that the access to job opportunities on the informal market was often made possible by the social and spatial organisation of the occupation. Both the general signboard at the ground floor and floor-specific signboards distributed throughout the building's common spaces are often used by residents to post job adverts and highlight opportunities. Like Maria, Emmanuel discussed that the sharing of spaces and facilities was therefore an important device to overcome his personal difficulties.

Narrative disruptions

The social and material production of the building is a mechanism to experiment and render tangible the claims of housing movements, beyond the scale of individual buildings. While providing for the material needs of residents, occupations simultaneously prefigure a radically alternative urban future, and strive to open up new spaces of participation and dialogue with civic actors and local authorities, in order to advocate for urban reform and policy change at scale. A key factor in this process is whether social movements are accepted as legitimate actors in the struggle for dignified housing. This is based on the acknowledgment of their role as representatives of broader networks and interests, as well as on their inclusion in formal decision-making arenas, such as the Conselho da Cidade (City Council).

During the research, the leadership of Ocupação Marconi often stressed the importance of public recognition in order to open up a productive dialogue with the Municipality. One of the strategic aims of the occupations as highlighted by Marconi's leadership concerned the attempt to change the public's attitude towards occupations, and fight against the stigmatisation and criminalisation of housing movements and individual residents in São Paulo. In a polarised social and political context such as today's urban Brazil, over the past two decades the media has often portrayed occupations as criminal acts, abuses of private property, and places of extreme illegality. Throughout the interviews that we carried out, the residents of the building and particularly the occupations' leaders were always explicit in addressing the stigmatisation of social movements as a way of delegitimising the claims of the urban poor, and a fundamental limitation to their capacity to affirm their own housing rights. At the same time, it is also evident that the diffused stigma cast upon occupations hinders the possibility to understand the complexity of power dynamics happening within the occupations themselves – including situations of marginalisation and exploitation experienced by residents, and the conditions of subordination and destitution that many face whilst living in São Paulo's vacant buildings.

Against this background, in the period 2012-2015 the residents of Ocupação Marconi devised a range of ways to creatively disrupt and reverse such stigma. Among the most notable mechanisms was the construction of an image of social innovation for the building. A key example was provided by an article published in mainstream media, terming Ocupação Marconi

as a *laboratório social* (social laboratory). The article described Edifício Manoel as a “self-sustaining building”: “The social laboratory, as this 1939 building in Rua Marconi ... has been called, has hot showers, Wi-Fi, nursery, a lounge, a library, a communal kitchen, a 24-hour concierge and strict rules of coexistence”. Crucially, this narrative of positive material transformation, and social innovation and experimentation, was tactically used by the movement in the judicial process aiming the reintegrate property to the building’s private owner. At the same time it was part of a wider exploratory process that aims to test occupations as a means to advance alternative forms of production of urban space, based on participation and collective self-management.

A second example of the narrative practices enacted by occupations to engage in dialogue with the city is the diffuse use of the buildings’ facades as large-scale urban signboards – highlighting the role of the occupation to the rest of the city. In Ocupação Marconi, a building-wide banner stated: “Enquanto você não acorda, a gente luta para você”: “Whilst you don’t wake up, we are fighting for you” (Figure 8). This banner, like others across São Paulo Centro, reminds the city’s users and passers-by of the housing struggle of residents, and highlights that occupations is not only to provide shelter in the short-term, but also and most importantly to advocate for housing solutions for the urban poor.

Such narrative processes and devices play an important role in increasing residents’ sense of recognition and belonging. At the same time, they are key instruments of mediation – tools intended to open up further mechanisms of engagement with the city government and judicial structures. In the period 1997-2012, informal occupations allowed for the creation of 3,500 social housing units in the city centre of São Paulo, obtained through the re-labelling of occupied buildings as Housing of Social Interest (Tatagiba et al., 2012). Two of such buildings were included in the national social housing programme Minha Casa Minha Vida. Although these can be understood as small advances in the context of São Paulo’s housing shortage, at the same time such transitions from informality to formal housing solutions highlight the potential of occupations to introduce policy innovations and have an important impact on current modes of urban housing production. The de-criminalisation of social movements is an important pre-condition to such process.

The innovative role of occupations in re-shaping inner city São Paulo plays out in multiple fields and is not devoid of contradictions. We have highlighted elsewhere (De Carli & Frediani, 2014) that there are important limitations to the extent to which occupations manage to sustain alternative ways of using, producing, and governing urban spaces – as well as to their capacity to transform the social, political, and economic context within which they are situated. However, when put in tensions with resilience thinking, these experiences also highlight the urgent need to deepen our understanding of dwellers' agency and adaptive capacity under conditions of extreme inequality. Similarly, they highlight the need for new ways of supporting these capacities, particularly through the production of alternative narratives about these experiences. As much as the practices themselves, the forms of knowledge production utilised to discuss occupations are also crucial and will form the focus of the next section.

Situating Oficina Marconi: Co-producing narratives of change

The research activities undertaken by both researchers and students involved in Oficina Marconi aimed to contribute to strengthening the narrative dimension described above by creating a shared account of the building and of its role within the context of housing struggles in São Paulo. The following section explores this research process in order to examine some of the ways in which open and collaborative research may interact in a meaningful manner with grassroots micro-practices of resistance, to help expand their impacts towards more just practices of urban design, planning and policy-making. In particular this section will focus on one aspect of this process, which is the understanding of Participatory Action Research as a means to co-produce socially and spatially situated *narratives of change*.

What unfolded in Ocupação Marconi in 2013-2015 – and what we contributed towards by initiating Oficina Marconi – was a distributed ecology of research¹⁴, where different voices, agendas, and timelines of engagement had been combining for over two years towards the construction of a narrative of social change grounded in the physical and social space of the occupation. This ecology of research was nurtured by the weekly organisation of 'political awareness workshops' (*reuniões de conscientização política*). These were planned by MMPT with the objective to instigate a process of exchange and mutual learning among residents, and

to expand residents' capacity to engage with urban policies on housing and with the wider institutional and political context of São Paulo. Several actors and circumstances further contributed to this process. In 2013 an organised group of research and postgraduate students from the Faculty of Architecture of the University of São Paulo, named Coletivo Chão, established their studio at the last floor of the occupation, and conducted a building survey, which resulted in a detailed dossier that was handed over to residents. On the same year, the occupation was involved in a judicial procedure sparked by a request of eviction by the building's owners. As a way of contesting this request, the building's coordinators facilitated a process of self-investigation that was based on residents-led enumerations and photo-surveys. The investigation documented the social profile of residents and the building's state post-occupation. These materials, together with the dossier by Coletivo Chão, were used in public hearings to demonstrate that Edifício São Manoel had been abandoned by the owners since 2009, and that current occupants were returning it to its social function. The judges involved in the process recognised the claim of MMPT and rejected the request to evict the residents: "Also based on the aggravating circumstances that the property is intended to housing elderly and children, the procedure concludes with a request for success of the appeal" (Acórdão, 2013: 3). It was against this background that Oficina Marconi took place in July-August 2014. The aim of the initiative was to support UFABC's engagement with social movements in São Paulo, by creating a horizontal learning platform that would generate a shared account of the occupation – while also contributing to broaden the discursive field about social housing in São Paulo central district. This platform was shaped by the research activities undertaken by the group, and was enabled (or hindered) by the ways in which these connected to existing forms of knowledge production in Ocupação Marconi. To begin develop this argument, I will next focus attention on two aspects of how Oficina Marconi – as a university-led initiative – linked to this ecology.

Distributed knowledge

Firstly, the initiative had a strong focus on questioning the relationships and power imbalances that often underpin academic knowledge production – between localities and cultures (UK / Brazil) and between sectors (academia / civil society). This process was made possible in the

first place by a slow dialogue between the different academic teams involved in the initiative, regarding our approaches to the city as well as the principles underpinning our collaboration. This dialogue allowed for instance to reject the traditional insider / outsider binary – “with the EuroAmerican professional intellectual poised and positioned as ‘the one who diagnoses’” (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010, p.114). Throughout Oficina Marconi the work conducted by the ‘visiting team’ – as well as by students – was explicitly situated within the wider agenda of UFABC’s on-going engagement with housing movements in São Paulo, as part of their commitment to activist scholarship (Comaru & Moretti, 2013). This shared understanding of the project as a time-limited contribution to a wider process of collaboration and action provided focus and ethical grounding to all research activities.

The two teams also made an explicit effort to negotiate the theoretical and intellectual basis that would inform the research. The emphasis during the process was on the contribution that site-specific, spatially embedded narratives could make to broader urban theory and policy-making, with a focus on both the processes of urban regeneration, and the construction of substantive citizenship (Holston and Appadurai, 1999). Although based on shared ethical and political grounds, the ‘making sense’ of the occupation required us to design connections between diverging theoretical backgrounds, linking cultures and disciplinary domains. Rather than suppressing distances, we explored the different theory cultures at play in this collaboration – and eventually generated a hybrid framework for examining the dynamics of housing struggles in São Paulo (De Carli et al., 2015).

Simultaneously, Oficina Marconi was devised in a way that would challenge the contours of the academy and of the classroom, and create opportunities for knowledge exchange and mutual learning between academia, social movements, and dwellers. This happened through the mediation of the building’s leadership, who opened up the space of the occupation, introduced us to floor coordinators and residents, and allowed students to circulate in the building and to attend assemblies and other moments of collective deliberation. These opportunities were enabled by the use of contested urban spaces as sites of research and teaching: for instance the building’s common rooms, or the streets where housing demonstrations took place. Throughout the six weeks of engagement, the location of research and teaching sessions

alternated between the University and Ocupação Marconi itself – drawing together contributions from academic staff and São Paulo housing activists, as well as social movement leaders and residents, both outside and inside the classroom. This spatiality and the face-to-face links between those involved jointly contributed to partially dislocating researcher-researched relationships, and facilitated some unusual forms of knowledge co-creation and mutual learning – for instance, where residents were invited to join us in the classroom and provide feedback to students on their on-going work. In this process, throughout taught sessions and research fieldwork, the experience of all actors (insiders and outsiders, students and residents) was recognized as a partial yet relevant contribution to the research. Residents contributed to reviewing students' work, and participated to seminars to discuss social housing strategies in São Paulo. Throughout these exchanges, narratives of Ocupação Marconi and of São Paulo Centro were articulated in ways that avoided jargon and redundant theoretical abstractions. Emphasis was placed on the effectiveness of our accounts of the occupation's daily reality, which was absorbed by us and by the students as a guiding principle to try to develop shared narratives and shared representations.

Linking knowledge and action

This careful crafting of the relationships among academic partners, with students, and with representatives of MMPT and the residents of Ocupação Marconi, enabled a temporary space where knowledge creation and learning could happen collaboratively and in several directions. This was an important pre-condition to the emergence of narratives and representations attempting to capture the very concrete 'pathways to change' that were being experimented in the occupation. However the questions then remained, as to how these narratives and representations – and the process of shaping them – could be put into action and have effect beyond the limits of our initiative.

Advocates of PAR often highlight the role of social learning in advancing transformative change. Following Freire (1968, 1996), the emphasis is placed on self-transformation, "as [research] participants learn how their individual experiences of oppression and exploitation are shared by others, and about factors shaping those experiences" (Cameron, 2007, p.207). This points to

the importance of designing a research process that is open, and that encourages those involved to appropriate it, to bring their own concerns, to transform it. Contributing to critical reflection past and beyond the timeframe of our initiative was one of our key preoccupations during Oficina Marconi, and one that we addressed in ways that are necessarily partial.

A key relationship in this sense was the one with the building's residents. This initiative's ambition and capacity to open opportunities for critical awareness among residents was indeed limited – based on the awareness that a complex pedagogical process could not take place in the short time of our fieldwork. At the same time, however, there was a constant effort to open up the process of research to questions and discussion. In particular the final event of the initiative was used as a means to bridge the distance between researchers, students, and inhabitants – creating an informal opportunity to share the work that students had been conducting, explain their methods, and show the mappings, videos, and texts that resulted from their work. This was a key moment in opening up the research process and allowing for reflection (Figure 9).

A stronger focus of our engagement was on supporting those civil society groups that had been driving residents' mobilisations: the building's coordinators and the leaders of MMPT, UMM, and other social movements. As mentioned earlier, this initiative largely evolved in dialogue with Benedito Barbosa (UMM) and other members of São Paulo's housing movements, by exchanging ideas and exploring options as to the meaning of this initiative, the directions it should take, the non-profit agencies and support networks that should be involved in it, and the public forums it could be taken to. Grounded in the work and networks of UFABC, rather than formalising partnerships and projects, Oficina Marconi strived to form meaningful relations that would support the work of housing movements – relations that still inform joint plans of research and action in São Paulo and beyond.

Finally our efforts to nurture occupations' capacity to affect change at scale meant engaging with planning and policy making institutions during and beyond the research process. During the module and in the following year, it was agreed with UFABC and social movements that the Department for the Control of the Social Function of Property should be involved as a partner in the research process, and that further activities should develop hand-in-hand with NGOs

supporting housing movements – such as the Centre for Human Rights Gaspar Garcia. Through a number of meetings held in different moments in time with these same actors, we shared approaches and findings, agreed future goals, and secured commitment towards the investigation – allowing for joint research initiatives including both the local government and social movements representatives¹⁵. Opening-up participation to this research to include the same institutions responsible for the production of the urban conditions that social movements are contesting, is indeed a complex effort and an important lesson for future participatory action research initiatives. In this sense, the enduring contribution of different actors to the follow up meetings (social movements, communities, NGOs, public agencies, and researchers) is perhaps the most important outcome of Oficina Marconi.

Concluding remarks

Ocupação Marconi solicits fundamental political questions about the form and future of cities, as well as to what a commitment to ‘community resilience’ might mean in the contexts of highly skewed distribution of power and resources – and the ways in which academic scholarship might engage with this process. The definition that emerges here is in line with Cretney’s terming of resilience as the “strength of communities” (Cretney, 2014), and the capacity of “alternatively organised communities” to restructure “the very framework that determines how things work” (Žižek, 1999, p.199). Within such definition, the experience of São Paulo’s social movements organising around housing and citizenship suggests a number of themes for further reflection on the relations between community resilience and social justice, and on the role of PAR in supporting community resilience.

A first theme concerns the need to relate localised, community-based processes to the larger scale dynamics of uneven geographical and urban development. This involves questioning what constitute a disturbance to ‘community resilience’, at which scale disturbances are mapped, and by whom. Urban development patterns in São Paulo highlight that the social processes that shape and hinder community resilience are largely located at the scale of urban, regional, national, and transnational power relations (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013). If such large scale social-spatial processes impacting on communities are not addressed, the notion of

'community resilience' risks reproducing a sense of 'responsibility without power' – whereby marginalised urban dwellers are expected to generate mechanisms of self-reliance to cope with unjust dynamics they cannot affect. These disturbances can be identified through collaborative forms of research that foster horizontal learning, evaluation, and critical reflection. It can be argued that in this context there is an important role to be played by participatory action researchers, in making visible the cross-scalar causes and impacts of differential vulnerability, and in doing so collaboratively with those who most acutely experience inequality. This can help strengthen grassroots critical learning and self-reflection processes as they emerge.

This leads to a second theme of reflection, which concerns the need to ground community resilience in a cross-scalar network of relations that spans across different sectors of society. Learning from the case of São Paulo, it can be argued that the resilience of vulnerable communities is largely enabled / disabled by complex interactions between politics and everyday practices. These interactions are shaped through the negotiation of cross-scalar relationships across groups, institutions, and places. In order to transform the life uncertainties affecting individuals and groups, 'community resilience' needs to be similarly understood and fostered through a cross-scalar politics of relations that mobilises links of reciprocity and solidarity across different areas of society, in order to challenge the disempowering local, national and supranational processes. São Paulo occupations clearly demonstrate one way for communities to engage with scale – linking personal and local aspirations to citywide imaginaries, urban claims, social movements, and external actors. The relations that residents of Ocupação Marconi built with both the media and academia, and the links that Oficina Marconi developed with sectors of the local government, are an effective example of the form that these cross-scalar politics may take. Participatory, action-oriented research operating within this field can contribute to exposing and highlighting the adaptive capacities of urban dwellers, and the agency of their everyday practices. Furthermore it can act as a mediator of relations – building links to and interfaces with wider networks that can influence policy- and decision-making.

A third a final theme of reflection, among others possible, consists in the need to organise around persistent change, rather than aiming for stability. This relates to the principle that persistent change characterizes ecological and social systems alike, and to the understanding

that small changes can produce large-scale transformations in the long term. Ocupação Marconi in particular demonstrates that in order for incremental change to affect deep structural imbalances, this needs to produce shifts in the conception of what is possible, and to prefigure alternative forms of city making. This idea links to the notion that dweller's "capacity to aspire" is a key resource required to contest and alter the conditions producing their marginalization (Appadurai, 2004), as much as is their capacity to engage with complex decision-making processes and policy frameworks. In the case analysed here, these were cultivated through 'citizenship workshops' and other pedagogical initiatives carried out by social movements within occupations and across São Paulo. Academic research working in solidarity with these practices and building links between local actions and large-scale urban imaginations can support the emergence of new narratives of the city, representations of the future, and forms of practical intervention.

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Captions

Figure 1 – Ocupação Marconi, inner courtyard. Photo by G. Boieras

Figure 2 – Living spaces within the building. Photo by G. Boieras

Figure 3 – Living spaces within the building. Photo by G. Boieras

Figure 4 – The final event of the research / teaching initiative in Rua Marconi. Photo by G. Boieras

Figure 5 – Signboards in the building's stairways. Photo by the Author

Figure 6 – The communal kitchen. Photo by G. Boieras

Figure 7 – The nursery. Photo G. by Boieras

Figure 8 – The banner on the building's façade. Photo by A. A. Frediani

Figure 9 – Reflective exercise on the last day of Oficina Marconi: "A dream of a dignified and hardworking life, Marconi is the possibility to have one's own permanent home." Photo by Author

Notes

¹ An example of this is provided by the Global Platform for the Right to the City: a large scale initiative by organizations from Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe including "NGOs, networks and forums, academic institutions, public sector, social movements, foundations and international organizations". The objective is to advocate for policies and actions aimed at developing "fair, democratic, sustainable and inclusive cities" by the United Nations and national and local governments (www.righttothecityplatform.org.br, accessed 17 June 2016).

² Numbers vary depending on sources. In 2013, the newspaper *Estadão* claimed that the city centre of São Paulo included 47 informally occupied buildings (<http://goo.gl/nPvn7C>, accessed 15 January 2016). At the time of our field research, it was commonly agreed that the number ranged between 30 and 40.

³ The Social Function of Property is a central theme of the City Statute (Law 10.257), a federal law aiming to provide land access and equity in large urban cities. The Social Function of Property stresses the priority of use value over exchange value, and of collective interest over individual ownership rights.

⁴ União dos Movimentos de Moradia, i.e. Union of Housing Movements

⁵ Frente da Luta por Moradia, i.e. Front for Housing Struggles

⁶ Francisco de Assis Comaru and Ricardo de Sousa Moretti of the Centro de Engenharia, Modelagem e Ciências Sociais Aplicadas, UFABC (Santo André, São Paulo), and Alexandre Apsan Frediani of The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL (London).

⁷ Here and throughout this paper, to term 'visiting team' refers to Alexandre Apsan Frediani and the author.

⁸ Further information about the broader partnership and initiative are available at <https://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/insurgent-regeneration>.

⁹ Marconi Workshop.

¹⁰ The Heuristics of Mapping Urban Environmental Change, based at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL.

¹² Other methods used included: a half-day transect walk across the building together with one of the floor's coordinators, to explore the building's collective spaces, infrastructure, and rules and norms by observing, asking, listening and producing a transect diagram of the space; the observation of one of the building's weekly evening assemblies; the observation of a housing demonstration, together with representatives from Ocupação Marconi; a focus group discussion at UFABC based on the research outputs produced by the students (videos, diagrams), with invited representatives from Ocupação Marconi.

¹³ The names of residents have been altered to protect their privacy.

¹⁴ The term 'ecology of research' is borrowed from Doina Petrescu.

¹⁵ On the year following Oficina Marconi (2015), the team organised a half-day focus-group discussion at the offices of the Municipality of São Paulo, involving representatives from the Municipality's Department for the Social Function of Land, UFABC (lecturers, masters, and PhD students), NGOs (Centro Gaspar Garcia de Direitos Humanos and Escritorio Modelo – PUC), social movements (UMM and MMPT). This provided an opportunity to present back some of the findings from the experience, and to establish a platform to conduct future research on alternative pathways to urban regeneration in the city.