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House-ing Urban Kin

Family Configurations, Household Economies and
Inequality in Brazil's Public Housing

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Abstract

In Brazil's post-neoliberal government, social policies became the bedrock for a new political economy predicated on poverty alleviation via market inclusion. This article draws from long-term ethnographical research conducted among beneficiaries of *Minha Casa Minha Vida*—Brazil's largest housing policy. I am interested in the myriad ways policy designs and its contentious operation symbiotically reshape sociability and kin among first-time homeowners. I take a closer look at how ideas and configurations of the family travel across intimate and public domains—from communitarian politics to household economies—and are anxiously negotiated, becoming the indexer of experiential moral systems of care. Transitioning across multi-scalar instances of everyday sociality, I interrogate how such economies conflate with the infrastructures and pervasive imaginaries of the house in the local machineries of the policy.

Index terms

Keywords : Family; Household; Social Housing; Morality; Communitarian Politics; Brazil.

Full text

Introduction

1   Gazing through the window crevice of her new apartment, Anelise[1] takes a deep breath and sighs. In September 2014, she moved to *Residencial Bento Gonçalves,* the latest of a series of condominium projects built in the southernmost city of Porto Alegre under Brazil's largest public housing system. Designed in 2009, the program—called *Minha Casa, Minha Vida*—set in motion billions of dollars in the ensuing years and issued large-scale mortgage subsidies to nearly 4 million families earning up to three minimum wages (some US$ 650 in 2009). Sprawling the boundaries of urban governance and mass consumption, the program was also part of a wide range of social policies intended to tackle poverty through social and economic development in a country vastly known for its endemic social inequality and structural housing shortage.

2   Anelise is thirty-four-years-old and lives with her husband and an eight-year-old daughter. In our first conversation after she moved in, she spoke of past housing experiences in the hilltops, shifting familial relations, and the process to become a deserving public housing beneficiary. Her narrative was punctuated with stories of success, such as when she was handed the keys of her apartment by the mayor, but also with moments of uncertainty and anxiety. After years of activism for their first homeownership, Anelise and her sister took different pathways. Anelise's inclusion in the program happened alongside the exclusion of her sister. "In my life, I feel my family fractured. They will not come to visit me. Sometimes I feel I stole my sister's opportunity for a better future."

3   In Brazil's postneoliberal government, *Minha Casa Minha Vida* became the landmark of a new political economy predicated on poverty alleviation via market inclusion. Relying on a diffuse political machinery that reached hundreds of cities across the country, the program empowered local leaders, state officials, and planners to decide upon the number of units and the allocation of this much-desired housing benefit. Under the guise of state accountability and transparency, direct channels between the government and housing movements were crafted, encouraging potential beneficiaries to partake in bottom-up grassroots politics.

4   For five years, Anelise and her sister diligently attended to meetings, demonstrations, and social events organized by Codespa—one such housing associations that has its roots in Porto Alegre's popular democratic participation in politics, made famous by the city's Participatory Budget. Various social organizations came together in Codespa, which became the city's main forum for debating and running public housing projects. Codespa's leaders are involved in party politics and operate as bottom-up brokers of people's relationships to the state, which proclaims itself popular, interventionist and way beyond neoliberalism.

5   Coming from a relatively large house in an informal settlement in Porto Alegre along with her brother and parents, Anelise's family met only part of the criteria to become a *Minha Casa Minha Vida* recipient. Meanwhile, her sister—an unemployed single mother suffering from hearing loss—resided in a shack without access to public transportation, sewage, water, and electricity. Anelise's sister was technically a better fit for the social housing benefit; yet, contingencies associated with the local implementation of the policy hampered her chances for a house, precipitating new familial arrangements and everyday practices of sociability.

6   In this article I am interested in the myriad ways policy designs and its contentious operation symbiotically reshape sociability and kin among first-time homeowners. I take a closer look at how ideas and configurations of the family travel across intimate and public domains—from communitarian politics to household economies—and are anxiously negotiated, becoming the indexer of experiential moral systems of care. Transitioning across multi-scalar instances of everyday sociality, I ask how such economies conflate with the infrastructures and pervasive imaginaries of the house in the local architectures of the policy. I interrogate the urban house as a lived category through which low-income beneficiaries conceptualize their new lives as they move from peri-urban informal settlements to middle-class environments, and as a vantage point to apprehend issues of citizenship, social inclusion, and economic development.

7   'Kin' and 'house' have consistently framed the understanding of urban dynamics in Brazil. Beyond the widespread notion of the patriarchal family inaugurated in the work of Gilberto Freyre (Freyre, 1978) and decoded as a metaphor of the country's social inequalities (Da Matta, 1997), scholars have distinguished between middle-class and working-class familial arrangements (Schuch, 2005; Fonseca, 2007), conceptualizing the house as a key infrastructure for working-class ideals of the extended family (Heredia, 1979; Palmeira, 2009).

8   Emic notions of family as refracted through the lines of race and class have led to alternative frameworks juxtaposing house and family, such family configurations (Marcelin, 1999) and circuits of children exchange (Fonseca 2000) that extend well beyond the architectures and physical purview of the house. Though much work has been done to show how, among poor Brazilians, the house is contained by diverse familial arrangements (Sarti 1996), the issues of how—concretely—such dimensions intersect in practices of poverty governance and everyday political subjectivity—particularly through intervention programs such as housing policies—have received far less attention.

9   In this article, I draw on this body of literature to suggest that social housing programs coalesced with familial restructuring to reshape the urban architecture of Brazilian peripheries. I problematize three family images associated with the design and implementation of housing projects: the bureaucratic family, envisaged by policymakers as conflating with a model household and enacted through networks of state and market representatives; the "big" family, a political construct performed through the communitarian assemblages of the policy; and the working-class nuclear family, an emerging structure of belonging that surfaces as people like Anelise learned how to navigate the contentious terrains of inclusion and exclusion from the policy. Throughout, I document the political economy that crystallizes at the juncture of housing designs, community politics, and political subject-making.

The "bureaucratic family" : Modeling working-class households

10   Although *Minha Casa Minha Vida* projects abide by an overarching architectural plot determined at the national level by *Caixa Econômica Federal*—the public bank upholding endorsements, financing construction, and

issuing mortgages—they are made available to beneficiaries through the local arms of the state. In Porto Alegre, this is the responsibility of the Municipal Housing Department, which was invented in the late 1960s, during the country's military dictatorship, alongside early efforts to resettle thousands of families to a newly created neighborhood, called Restinga, some 20km from the center of the city. Restinga's overall infrastructure remains precarious, but it is still considered a hub for housing resettlements, hosting five *Minha Casa Minha Vida* private condominiums, due to a wide array of inexpensive land and labor force which considerably reduces the cost of each unit.

Map 1: Porto Alegre, Restinga and Partenon

Source: Google Maps.

11
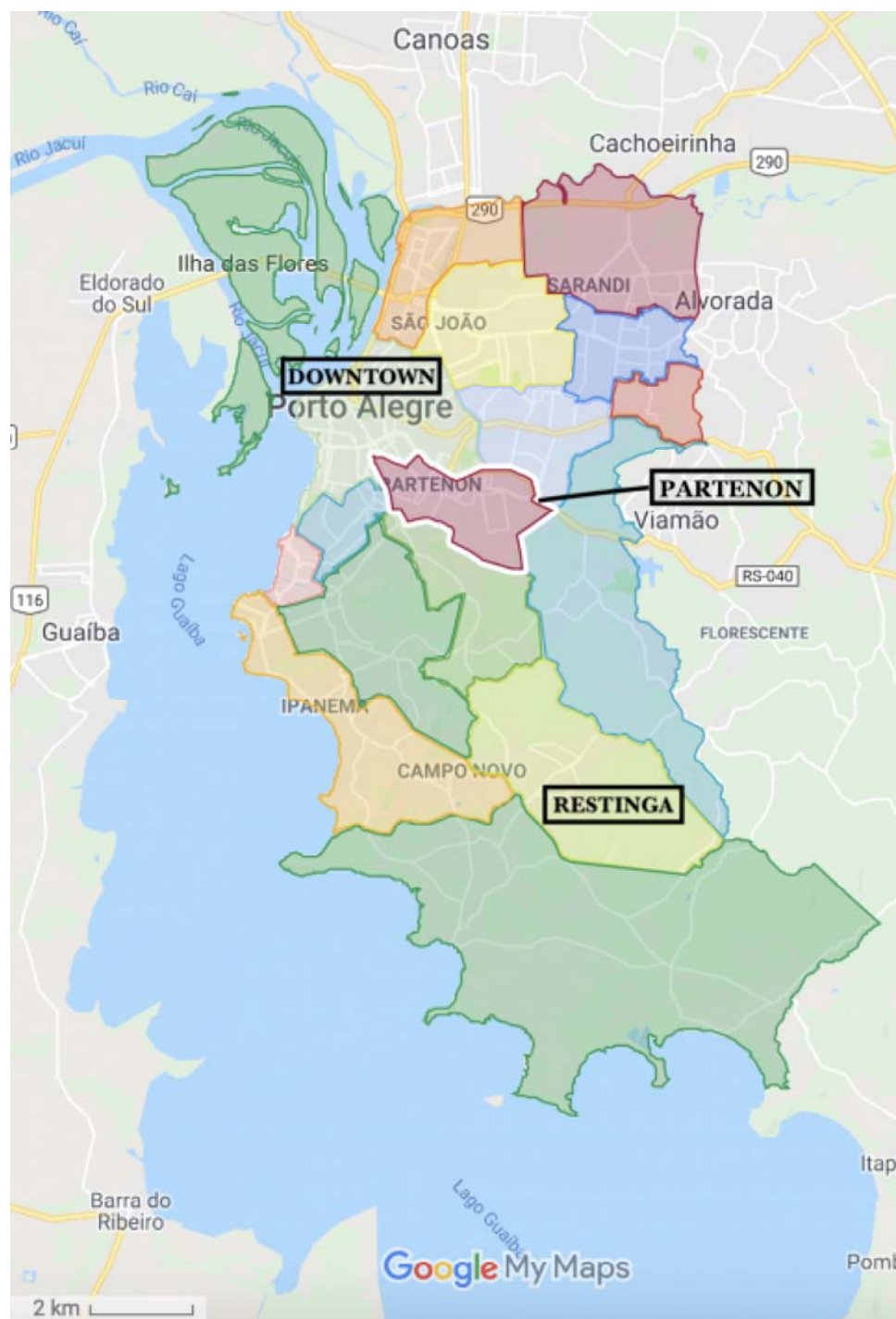
Anelise and many others placed themselves in a more central region of the city, called Partenon. Partenon is bisected by a mountain ridge into two distinct social zones: a modernized and urbanized middle-class residential area by the asphalt hosting *Residencial Bento Gonçalves*, and an informally occupied zone with unfinished shacks and para-legal infrastructure of water and electricity along the slope of these hills. Partenon's shantytowns—also called *vilas*—developed largely outside of the city administration's radar, basically in line with the history of most of the country's favelas, where first generation illegal occupants thrive and, after leaving, rent out their places to newcomers, eliciting an informal housing market (Valladares, 1978; Caldeira, 2000; Cavalcanti, 2007; Motta, 2014). Thus, throughout much of Brazil's urban history, hilltops and asphalt became powerful spatial indexers of the social and economic differences that separated the lives of the urban poor and of their middle-class counterparts.

Image 1: Partenon seen from the hills

Source: author.

Image 2: Residencial Bento Gonçalves, Porto Alegre

Source: Author.

12   In Porto Alegre, the Municipal Housing Department developed an intricate set of interventions to monitor the strange trajectory of visibility and effacement through which the poor's presence was informally tolerated in the fringes of the city. During its 50 years of existence, the department undertook over 47,000 housing efforts, including provisional houses, emergency houses, social rent and assisted compensation. With various degrees of efficacy, these measures were based on discretionary decision-making while intending to grant access to housing as a social, constitutional right. By doing so, they enshrined the concept of a "low-income family," defined as a family whose total income remains below the total of three minimum wages and who therefore cannot bear, fully or partially, the costs of housing.

13   Idealized notions of the family allowed for the calculation of housing shortage, which was estimated to be around 35,000 units in Porto Alegre by 2009. Deficit indices are projected based on squattings and informal land occupations, but also entail what the Department calls "housing inadequacy." These comprise makeshift or rustic residences, subleased dorms, excessive population density and cohabiting families. By assuming there is an expected adjustment between a domestic unit and a family, the planning of housing policies and its architectural models recreate the house as the site of an idealized figure of the nuclear family.

14   Cleber[2] is the chief deputy of the Municipal Housing Department of Porto Alegre. He marshals the eligibility and enforcement of criteria for *Minha Casa Minha Vida* projects in the city. Since 2009, he attended to dozens of families per day: homeless, undocumented, squatted, low-income people who had all applied for housing but did not know what to expect or how long to wait. "Only after the government received too many registrations they realized they had to constrain the criteria," he revealed. *Minha Casa Minha Vida* came to target primarily families of single mothers, elderly, and disabled with a domestic income of up to three minimum wages. In Porto Alegre, priority was also given to existing demands formalized through the city's Participatory Budget—which gave Marilia, a long-standing grassroots activist, a considerable advantage over first-time and politically unarticulated potential beneficiaries.

15

According to Cleber, the Municipal Housing Department took advantage of the policy's innovative legislation to perform broader operations of gentrification and removal of underprivileged populations from core parts of the city's urban fabric. These procedures were deemed necessary to recover degraded areas surrounding soccer stadiums—as Porto Alegre was among the cities to host the 2014 Soccer World Cup—and for the construction of large-scale urban infrastructure, such as viaducts. "Those people around the Beira Rio stadium; they had to be removed. Can we throw them into a *Minha Casa Minha Vida* project in Restinga? Yes, we can. And so we did," the official pieced together.

16   In his recollections, technocratic criteria conflated with moral procedures in the assemblage of a story of action and success. For instance, many of the programs that dislodged entire communities required negotiation with, and persuasion of, local leaders about the viability of alternative—and temporary—dwelling solutions outside the centers of the city. Partnerships with social workers proved to be quintessential to this purpose. The politics behind these provisional interventions carried flairs of "human social rights" and were defined by Cleber (quoting the Department's internal bylaws) as "the rightful access by all to a quality life standard that includes public equipment, transportation, sewage, cleaning, and decent housing, all of which guarantee a democratic city for all."

17   In practice, such measures enshrined the house as a moral and social space through which ideas of dignity and the nuclear family blended together. According to the Department's statistics, Porto Alegre's pronounced housing deficits were caused by improvised domiciles (3%), informally subleased dorms (4%), squattings (32%) and, fundamentally, cohabiting families (61%), which stood at the center of the Department's intervention agenda. Assessed against the backdrop of a nuclear family, these statistics informed how professionals like Cleber approached slums and their inhabitants.

18   In fact, ideas of the nuclear family were pivotal to Cleber's performance as a housing agent. "Many people seek me to get the keys for a new home. But I have to tell them: you were only pre-selected. Now we have to analyze your situation." Thus, the first step in the screening process was a careful examination of the domestic total income. "When people tell me what they make," he continued, "they think it will be advantageous to inform the earnings of only one family member. As soon as you pay them a visit and check their situation, you discover ex-husbands, daughters-in-law, and other members, all living under the same roof."

19   In his experience, families had to be "disentangled" from the cohabiting household and refashioned into smaller, nuclear units composed by father, mother and kids below working age. Applications needed to be reissued according to this principle in order to be granted consideration by the federal bank in charge of processing data on beneficiaries. Consequently, families were instructed to keep their registration updated with the municipality, communicating changes in household composition, salary, and jobs—in an endless bureaucratic spiral. By transforming people into database entries, low-level bureaucrats like Cleber gained a sense of the rapidly changing familial and financial configurations, while producing fine-grained data suitable for comparison and biopolitical government.

20   In his work, Cleber bridged normative notions of the nuclear family with the multiplicity of familial arrangements he found in ordinary interactions with housing beneficiaries. For the deputy, such discrepancies did not result from

lack of opportunities or resources, but from an alleged "culture of poverty" (Lewis 1959). Neighbor disputes, he suggested, were the central source of grievances. In his account, the dearth of a "cultural adjustment to the sort of life a condominium requires" stood at the core of the problems. "These people are not used to paying bills or to living in harmony. Sometimes you can't stand the bad smell coming from the units! They have all sorts of animals, like guinea pigs, rabbits, dogs, cats, living all together with five, six people under the same roof." Cleber visited an apartment with seventeen dwellers in Restinga. At some point, his story goes, the big family split apart and squatted the apartment in front, voided by previous owners.

21   CleberCleberUnable to keep up with the expenses, with too many people squashed in the same space, many returned to the informal areas where they originated, leaving behind depredated units or "selling the keys" informally—processes that left apartments in the hands of traffickers. Only in rare circumstances housing projects fulfilled their social purpose; too often, they were taken up by illegal brokers, networks of corruption and favoritism, or by people who, though technically eligible for the program, would prove incapable of bearing the costs or the familial restructuring necessary to succeed. In short, Cleber reported that people were too much like Anelise's sister. "People with no future plans. The little money they make by selling the property, they spend right away. Eventually, they will return for another social project. But guess what? The *system* knows them already. They can't reapply. They only get one shot."

22   In Cleber's morally codified bureaucratic language, people received a unique opportunity to prove their desire to progress and to strive for a better life. The case was illustrated by successful families he encountered in his forays: people—equally needy and vulnerable—that moved from the streets to an apartment and yet had everything tidy, clean, good smelling. "The kitchen is where it is supposed to be; so is the living room and the bedroom." Transferring responsibilities to the henceforth first-time homeowners, the policy—however fraught in its design or ill-implemented—was meant to produce well-educated, enfranchised citizens, grouped in orderly, nuclear families.

23   The powerful grammar of a model family thus became a key figure of governance and affect in everyday exchanges between street-level bureaucrats and deserving citizens. To crystallize as a model, it was contrasted against families headed by single mothers who purportedly failed to take care of the home. Active household planning, unique opportunity, and inner will to move upward all became indexers of the policy's success. In all other cases, Cleber would resignedly say "nothing can be done."

24   To actualize such a model family through housing programs, policymakers and state bureaucrats collaboratively relied on communitarian politics. Beset by community leaders, politicians, social workers, urban planners and representatives of public banks, communitarian politics shaped the contours of urban territories and implementation programs by enacting a particular form of citizen activism I refer to as the "big family."

The Big Family

The Family Political

25   "Here we are all part of a big family," a tiny black lady in her sixties prophesied in the microphone. Across the podium from where she spoke, an intrepid throng of hundreds of future homeowners did not blink. Fully absorbed by her restless voice, the crowd grew accustomed to hearing from community leaders, local government officials, and market representatives. Convening in church saloons and samba school headquarters in the peripheral neighborhood of Partenon since 2009, shortly after *Minha Casa Minha Vida* was launched, Codespa created a meaningful and long-lasting articulation to state- and market institutions.

26   Marilia's fiery voice and relentless dislocations across political and communitarian boundaries made her a renowned figure in Porto Alegre's participatory forums, way before she assembled Codespa. Persuading hundreds of families to pursue their homeownership dream through political activism, Marilia forayed impoverished neighborhoods in search for the needy, all the while running for a place in the city council. "We have the constitutional right to housing," she prophetically announced before the mayor during the inauguration of *Residencial Bento Gonçalves*. "This successful partnership with the government will help us built a model community!," she announced to the 160 families that had been carefully handpicked as they showcased moral evidence of their deservedness and disposition to thrive.

27   In this section, I show how the infrastructures of grassroots participation enabled collaborative policymaking designs (Mosse, 2004) that involved agents in various institutions and scales of power. I argue that citizen activism hinged on producing a communitarian body perceived as the "big family." While in Brazil's public imaginary the realm of the family is usually confined to the house and thus to private affairs (Da Matta, 1986), Marilia's public enactment of an homogenized collective family provided a political language that reflected some of the categories the state used to frame policies for the urban poor all the while legitimizing moral criteria to adjudicate housing benefits.

28   Codespa's activities are thus another key node in the process of restructuring familial ties. By providing an extensive network of care and support for selected families, the association controlled how information reached beneficiaries as they developed new forms of sociability. Information could take the form of lectures on key topics of conviviality and self-improvement, such as how to separate trash, how to manage household finances, how to become a micro-entrepreneur, and how to adequately behave in a condominium. Together, they reinforced Cleber's ideal of the nuclear family as a mirror of the household.

29   In what follows I look at Marilia's own public trajectory as a community leader, highlighting turning points that foreground the management of her public image as a respected family mother. I argue that her constitution as a role model mobilizes a particular set of figures that gravitate around the manipulation of kin relationships. Such figures project the idea of an extended family that looms from her personal circle and expands to envelop the community. Ultimately, the manipulation of kin relations illuminates how intimate and public domains congeal in the production of moral economies, and how such moral economies entail future expectations of the ideal working-class household among those deemed deserving housing beneficiaries.

30   "My life is an open book of rectitude," Marilia claimed before the microphone. To justify contentious decisions, she strategically referred to glimpses of her own familial past in public speeches. "I've been nothing but a

caring mother of three beautiful sons, but if it comes down to me giving up my apartment, I will gladly do so," she bellowed before the director of the Municipal Housing Department and a crowded audience of hundreds. "That being said, if I were to sacrifice mine, how do I decide whom to give the apartment? To whom am I to forward it, Vera?"—she looked another local leader in the eyes. "To your son who had issues with his application? To the grandma who never missed one meeting but could not be accepted this time? Please tell me, help me decide!" Already in tears, she continued: "You think it is easy? I lose sleep overnight thinking of you! My grandmother used to say: worse than the noise of the bad is the silence of the good."

Image 3: Marilia conducting Codespa meetings

Source: Author.

31   Marilia's personal involvement allowed her to speak freely and to make demands from Codespa families. She developed into a respected leader, branching out activities, creating leading positions for her entourage, and honing her affective capital as a caring role-mother to all Codespa members. Reflecting this process, she would take up a secondary role as administrative director of a local child care, a key controlling institution in Brazil's peripheries through which public money is channeled into the localities. "Being a community leader comes with power but also with a lot of responsibilities," she bragged. "I have to be clean-fingered and not surrender to the temptation of bribery." Managing large sums of cash, entrusting locals as professionals, and outsourcing services to the market, Marilia grew closer to her target audience of parents and their extended households. Notorious and celebrated for her

accruing generosity, her name and acumen became a topic of everyday conversation. She was simply everywhere.

32   In practice, the pursuit of the "big family" ideal privileged households that were perceived as easier to be restructured into nuclear kernels. While individual families already known by existing members of the board were admitted without much contestation, unknown families had their household thoroughly scrutinized. The grounds for such an investigation—performed by a handful of Marilia's entourage—was to determine whether families had the ideal balance between size, generation, gender composition, and income (or lack thereof). Evaluations were thus discretionary estimates of vulnerability that took into consideration existing familial structures and the probabilities of their transformation, decomposition and reorganization to fit the architectural limits of apartments—standardized, two-bedroom, 39-square-meter units. As a result of Codespa's screening, large households with co-habiting families gave way to smaller kernels of young couples with kids, as well as elderly; only exceptionally did households include members of the extended family, such as sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, *padrinhos* and *afilhados.*

33   As time progressed, Marilia appointed family members for leading roles—both within the association and the child care. Her sons were featured on the microphone during critical moments of meetings, showcasing their wives and kids, and starting to master, themselves, the art of giving public, family-based speeches. Passionate and boisterous, they came to stand for the association's exemplary morality behind the adjudication of housing benefits. People learned about their new jobs as low-level government functionaries—a courtesy of Marilia's personal network—and about their roles as exemplary fathers. In the process, the matriarchal leader was once again promoted as a caring mother that steered her offspring away from corruption, theft and trafficking.

34   Celebrated as a role model in both intimate and public domains, Marilia and her nuclear family soon became the indexers of a larger sense of familial belonging that encompassed all deserving members of the local housing association—a process that would congeal in the public celebration of her 2014 birthday, months before the inauguration of the housing project.

Celebrating the "Big Family"

35   The celebration of Marilia's birthday was a dramatization of her polyvalent power and a testimony of her audacious circulation across governmental, financial, and educational domains. A handful of Codespa's board members and associates had been invited, alongside state officials, bureaucrats, bank representatives, and myself—chosen due to my connections to the university.

36   Marilia's gated residence—a two-story self-constructed home situated in one of the neighborhood's shanty hilltops—was adorned with colorful lights that extended all the way to the sidewalk. Makeshift billboards with laudatory messages and graffitied "welcome" notes had been installed by her sons. "Make yourself at home," she smiled upon my arrival. Wearing a dark red gala gown, jewelry, and shiny high hills, Marilia received her guests one by one, grabbing them by the hands and rehearsing *pagode* dancing moves. A pervasive barbecue smoke gave way to a food court and a sound infrastructure playing Brazilian *funk.*

37

Talking to Codespa's board members, I learned about the constructor's last attempt to offer money in exchange for upgrading the association's headquarters. Marilia's brother, whom the offer was made to, replied saying the association could not accept monetary contributions, but "donations" from good-heartedly people, "ready to help," were in high demand. The representative of the company—who was sitting behind us—found a better solution: he would ship a full load of materials directly to Codespa's headquarters.

38   A few minutes later, I observed a conversation that took place between Marilia and one of her right-hand guys; they were considering her prospects to move to a different political party. She was still a member of the Workers' Party (PT) but the local director of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB)—himself eating snacks in another corner of the patio—had made her an irrefutable offer. With another round of elections approaching, her interlocutor fathomed, Marilia had to bargain her partisan-political support with caution to garner more visibility for herself and the community whose votes she was, after all, pledging.

39   Marilia looked in my direction. She noticed I had overheard the conversation and amended: "Most parties like to use poor communities as a "maneuver mass" [*massa de manobra*] to get things done their way. I don't stand by that! Here we are trying to make decisions collectively, as a big family."

40   Marilia had just finished her elevator pitch when a sound-equipped van [*carro de som*] parked before the gate. Bright lights shined through the open trunk, illuminating the façade, while powerful speakers played birthday songs. Everybody moved to see what was happening, forming an offhand circle around the car. A deep voice ricocheted from the speaker, asking: "Where is Marilia?"

41   When she emerged from amidst her guests, already in tears, a series of homage stories were carefully dramatized by her (also crying) entourage and sons. Describing their experiences with Marilia, each person enshrined her qualities both as mother and community leader.

42   Marilia then gave a speech to the audience of prying neighbors and bystanders in cars and buses. Following protocol greetings, she thanked political authorities, her extended family, and, surprisingly again, my own presence: "It is never too much to show love for our family. All of you here tonight, you *are* my family! You are my basis, my unconditional friends, old and new. Moisés, from the university, acknowledges our unity and our collective spirit and that's why his presence today is so important to us."

43   Sausages and floured steak started to circulate as traffic flow was reestablished. The well-skilled griller turned out to be a functionary of the Municipal Housing Department. "I know her very well," he told me. One of Marilia's sons had recently been admitted and was now working with him in a departmental sector in charge of performing forceful removals from squatted land and evictions of social housing defaulters. He threw more alcohol into the grill, drowned out his cigarette, and lowered his voice: "Here it is the Housing Department that elects political candidates. Housing has always been these people's priority and the government knows it. Which is why they use it as a bargaining chip."

44   I wanted to know more about his disturbing juxtapositions of politics and rights—not to mention his own propinquity to—and personal business with—Marilia. As I looked around, I saw similar traces everywhere: not too far away, a representative of the Municipal Sewerage Department was having a

beer with the leader; another clic close-by was talking about how "friends" from the Municipal Department of Urban Planning—where Marilia's other son was employed—would attend the next meeting to "show support" [*dar uma força*] and strengthen the leader's public image. It was all too intimate. Yet before I could articulate the following sentence the griller turned his back to me, drunk some more *cachaça*, and moved on to his next joke.

"Big-Women"

45   In a much-quoted article, Marshall Sahlins (Sahlins, 1963) contrasted Polynesian-type hierarchical societies of chiefs and sub-chiefs with a relatively less documented, Melanesian-type, system of segmented lineage locally held together by faction-leaders he coined "Big Men." In the absence of institutionalized political positions, such chiefdoms agonistically competed over prestige and influence. Leadership was not a social ascription but rather the creation of "followership" (290), attained through acts "which elevate the person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men" (289). Rather than obedience, loyalty was achieved through the public dramatization of special skills commanded by the leader, which led him to amass a "fund of power."

46   More interestingly, Sahlins' analysis of Big-Men is grounded on vernacular notions of kinship. "Any ambitious man who can gather a following can launch a societal career," he maintained. While a Big-Man network typically "capitalizes in the first instance on kinship dues and by finessing the relation of reciprocity appropriate among close kinsmen (291)," "the rising leader goes out of his way to incorporate within his family 'strays' of various sorts" (291). Ultimately, Sahlins argues that the accrued social prestige gives Big-Men control over the local excess product, siphoning resources and managing consumption to satisfy short-term personal goals, but above all long-term societal interests. In the figure of the "Big-Men," the economy becomes a means to politics insofar as production hinges on the leader's quest for prestige (Clastres 2010: 189–208).

47   These insights on the "domestic mode of production" gain surprising actuality when we consider the mechanics of Brazil's social housing policy at play in Porto Alegre's urban configuration. Relying on a highly segmented system of organized communities of beneficiaries, the implementation of large-scale intervention programs was held together by the workings of faction-leaders such as Marilia. These "Big-Women"—to paraphrase Sahlins—were tangled in ongoing quests for prestige through local networks of mutual help and obligation. In order to secure the legitimacy needed to act in the name of potential beneficiaries and constituencies, they had to take up activities explicitly geared at honing their "followership."

48   In this process of "kin-making," familial relations played a key role in keeping the political structure afloat and workable; spiraling from the leader's inner circle, family boundaries were actively negotiated and performed in everyday exchanges between municipal authorities, local leaders, and beneficiaries. Mediating the selective adjudication of housing, Codespa's fragmentary organizing principle of the big family provided a structure in which order, hierarchy, and political prestige flourished from the "exemplary center" (Geertz 1980) of Marilia's entourage and rewarded her for her painstaking leading efforts.

49   Operating at the juncture of personal and communal interests, of economic and political resources, Marilia rose from her societal career as a "Big-Women." In the process, she faced the predicament of whether and how to congeal Codespa into a perennial structure of governance—and hers into an institutionalized political figure. Yet Codespa's quest for the "big family" soon gave way to private senses of belonging and familial replanning as members inhabited new architectural designs and devised new political subjectivities.

50   In the next section, I return to the story of Anelise and her sister. I explore how her engagement with this political and communitarian structure of participation simultaneously precluded her social ties to family and opened up new venues for her own familial restructuring. Submerged in exclusionary bureaucratic routines to become eligible for the public benefit, Anelise's sister was left behind in the run for a scarce home. Unable to fit within the enforced concept of the nuclear family, the dismissal of Anelise's sister refashioned her own sense of thriving for a place in the aftermath of her move to the condominium.

Restructured Household Economies

Family Debris

51   Anelise recalls the day when members of the housing association visited her family, weeks before municipal elections took place in 2012. By that time, Codespa's leaders were invested in assessing people's needs to become beneficiaries. As the commission passed by, Anelise overheard comments on how beautiful her house was. She decided to approach them.

52   "I want you to see my house from the inside," she asked.

53   After entering through a narrow pathway, Anelise followed up:

54   "This is *my* part of the house; my mom owns the second floor and I split the first floor with my brother's family." She then presented the rooms: "This is the living room, a makeshift kitchen and a small bedroom I share with my husband and our daughter." According to Anelise, Codespa's members were impressed by her pro-activism and relieved they did not incur the gross mistake of excluding her from the program. She wrapped up: "Was I not home at the time to defend myself, my fate would have been very different. I only regret that I didn't have a car to drive them to my sister's house and to show them her living conditions were even worse."

Image 4: Partenon's shantytowns
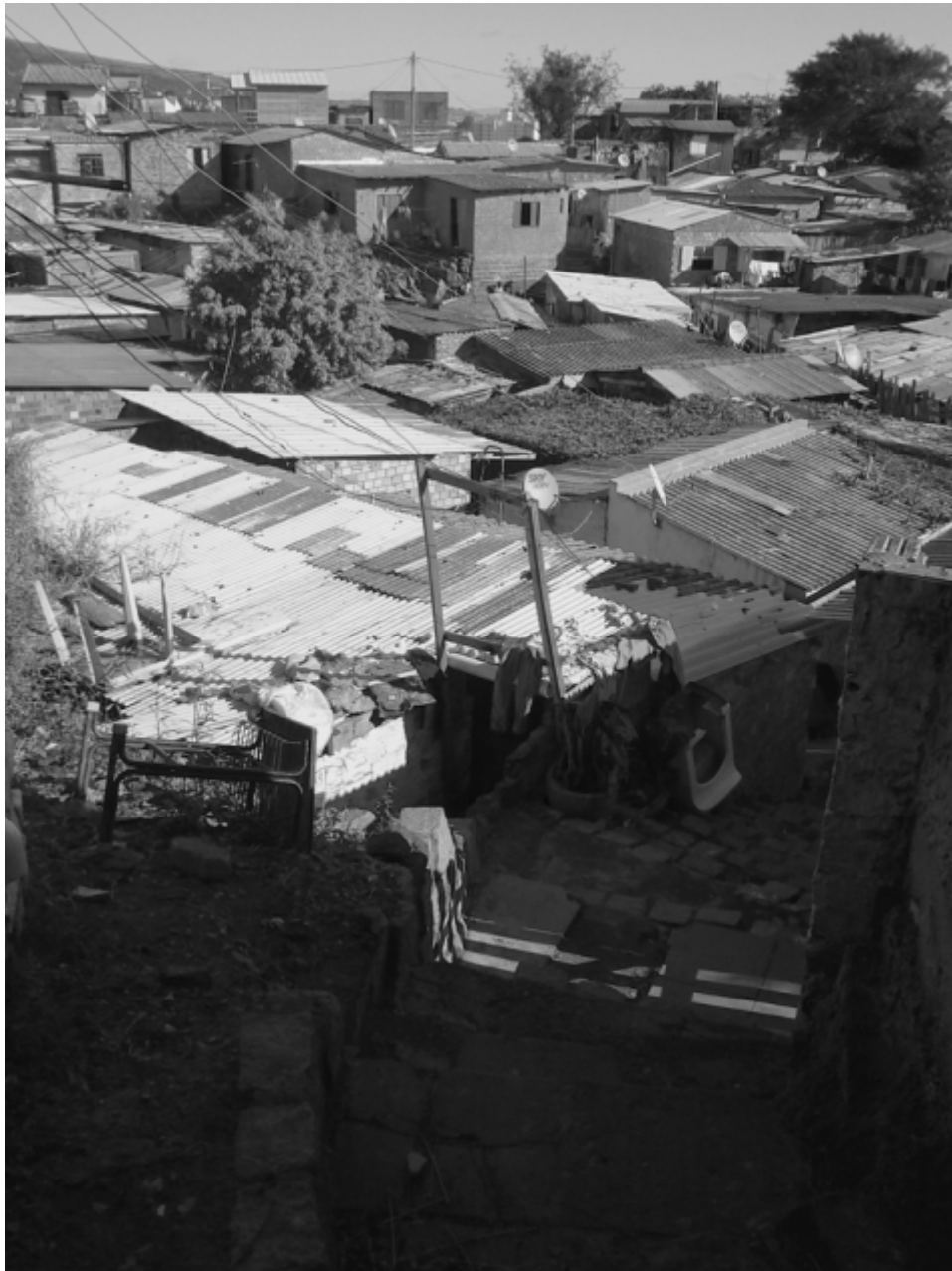
Source: Author.

55   Anelise's past housing condition resonates with Louis Marcelin's concept of "configurations of houses," where the social, economic, and symbolic attributes of house-ing come together. His study of African-Brazilian kinship arrangements proves useful to understand just how kinship and the physical properties of the house coalesced in Anelise's experience of domesticity, prior to her move to *Residencial Bento Gonçalves*. Writing against prevailing structural approaches—which see the house as a material embodiment of symbolic difference (Lévi-Strauss, 1991; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995)—the anthropologist maintains that "the house only exists as part of a network of households; thought and lived in interrelations with other houses that partake in its production—in the symbolic and concrete sense." By foregrounding how the house becomes a lived patchwork of social and material forms in flux, this perspective attends to Bachelard's call of the house as a topography of the self and the intimate (Bachelard, 1958) while considering the political and economic contingencies under which place-making takes place and novel familial arrangements consolidate (Motta, 2014).

56   Over the course of more than five years, Anelise and her sister diligently attended all Codespa's meetings. They continuously supported each other with hope and faith in their first homeownership. Yet, after painstaking efforts, only Anelise was able to move on. For state representatives, the exclusion of her sister was justified by documentation errors; local leaders alleged that, being unemployed and single mother, her familial situation did not inspire confidence and she would therefore be unable to bear the expenses of the resettlement. Beyond partially subsidized installments, beneficiaries have to bear condominium fees, household bills, and furniture expenses—triggering a routine of payments intended to discipline people as consumers of the house.

57   Unable to produce evidence of her adverse living conditions, Anelise's sister set forth to prosecute the state and the housing association against favoritism and vote buying. Her utopia—to denounce dismissive and condescending practices by resorting to an equally fraught and provisional legal system—was in fact Anelise's life quandary in the new apartment. Anelise was tied in daily networks of gossip and became the target of rapid-traveling stories among neighbors. She felt daunted: "I cannot see my family's freedom to come and visit me here. They understand it is something we struggled for together; it is joy and sorrow at once.."

58   Meanwhile, Anelise was summoned to depose in her sister's case. "The public attorney already made it clear she will not get a new apartment. I told the commissioner: I can't say that what happened was vote buying. I can only speak for myself. Nobody told me, 'if you don't vote for me you won't receive your apartment.' But we had an understanding that voting would be beneficial to us." In the end, Anelise saw Marilia's political campaign as a legitimate counterpart for her painstaking efforts to bring the policy's outcomes to the community. "I know many people who live here are her family. But I cannot judge for I don't know how I would proceed were I in her shoes," she reasoned.

59   Stuck in a context of widespread poverty—where everybody was a fit for the policy and there were not enough housing units—criticism against Marilia's proceedings was inconsequential as her political brokerages far outweighed the potential damage caused by favoritism or nepotism. Key in this mediation, ideals of the model family were performed to legitimize Marilia's controversial decision-making while also enshrining nuclear families capable of bearing the costs of an enclaved lifestyle by the asphalt.

60   When I asked Marilia about the breakdown in the case of Anelise's sister, the leader described it as yet another situation beset by problems in documentation, miss-communication, and lack of personal effort. "She simply doesn't have a family to back her up," I was told eventually. All in all, the reasons deployed to explain the exclusion of Anelise's sister reveal emerging paths of inequality crystallizing within Brazil's recent social policies. Encompassed by notions of the "low-income nuclear family," only the deserving among the poor were given a chance to thrive in this political economy of the house.

New Domestic Arrangements

61   Anelise did not give up the dream of her first homeownership. Even after her sister's exclusion from the program, she continued to make plans for her apartment. Here, I *have* to be happy," she reckoned in our conversations. Shortly after moving in, Anelise re-painted the walls with vibrant colors and

filled the space with brand new furniture. "Nowadays I see politics differently. I am the beneficiary of a housing program, I have already been the beneficiary of *Bolsa Família*, I am the beneficiary of a public university racial quotas system. This made me look at the government in a new way."

Image 5: Anelise and her family

Source: Author.

62   As Anelise carried on with her narrative, I realized the extent to which her moral grammar reflected—and overlapped with—Codespa's own language of worthiness, edified during the years of wait for the condominium and in various interactions with state and market representatives. Through her exchanges with other deserving beneficiaries, Anelise actualized a sense of active aspiration (Schielke 2012; Fischer 2014)—a kind of the ideal of life at which she directed her present-day efforts. While deeply rooted in Codespa's political community, this active disposition to thrive was concretely experienced through the transformed architecture of the built environment and its material objects. It was also the built environment that enabled the transition from an ideal of the collective "big family" towards familial future projects.

63   In Anelise's—and many other people's—reasoning, state-distributed benefits should not be an end in itself; rather, they were meant to operate as a springboard through which inner aspirations met (otherwise improbable) chances for a better life. Again, familial arrangements heavily preconditioned each person's prospects of success. For Anelise, policies should operate at the dialectical juncture of "giving a man a fish" (Ferguson, 2015) and knowing how to seize it. In practice, this meant that not everybody was equally as well prepared to take advantage of the opportunities made available by governmental intervention. People like her sister, for example, would need further support before being able to commit to a house mortgage, however heavily subsidized. Others would first need to be persuaded about the life improvements that come with paying for a home, a role in which Codespa's leaders excelled.

64   According to Anelise, amidst the rapidly changing financial and material conditions of the poor, the key was to detect each own's tempo and will to

thrive. Once again, her example provided a good point of departure. When Anelise lost her job, her household was maintained exclusively with her husband's minimum-wage. The supplemental money received from *Bolsa Familia* proved decisive to keep the couple's finances afloat. "It was the cash for kitchen gas, groceries, clothes for our daughter to go to school, sneakers for me to go look for a job." The point was, Anelise fathomed, cash transfers allowed her family to set aside *time* to think of long-term projects, while adjourning difficult decisions. By covering immediate expenses and stabilizing her household economy, *Bolsa Familia* opened up new spaces for autonomy and for the future to materialize. "Then you realize, you don't have to leave your kid with *any*body because you no longer have to run after *any* kind of job to bring home the bacon."

65   This transient household structure allowed Anelise to attend college after years without studying. Coming from a weak elementary and secondary public-school background, she had to first undertake preparatory courses to apply for the highly competitive entrance exam at Brazil's prestigious public universities. To keep up with the costs, Anelise sold homemade cookies and candy among her colleagues.

66   Once passed the admission exam, her modest domestic income qualified her for a social bursary on top of standard free tuition, enough to cover expenses with office materials, books, and bus tickets from and to the university campus. "I grew up knowing that college was only for the rich. Whenever I passed by the campus, I thought, 'this will never be for me. Perhaps I can work for the firm that cleans their floors.' It was not my reality." However ambitious, Anelise's acumen seemed improbable without the familial structure built over years of social benefits. "Without some minimum ground, even the quotas will be out of reach for most," she sentenced.

67   With Anelise attending college, new challenges unraveled. She felt unprepared to tackle exams and to keep up with the learning pace. More importantly, Anelise did not have the domestic infrastructure that was taken for granted by her colleagues, namely a private home office equipped with computer and internet. New digital technologies, including online learning platforms and e-mail lists, were a novelty and hampered her performance during the first year. While participating in Codespa's meetings and preparing to move, Anelise encountered a predominantly white and upper-middle-class university environment and confronted issues of race and social difference.

68   She depicted the sociability with her colleagues as guided by individual projects of distinction. "Where am I to go next summer; London? Paris?," she described some of the conversations. For a long time, she did not know how to connect. Feeling out of context, she could only ask herself: "Am I going to get there one day?" Through social policies, she crafted a space for her own longings and becomings—a place neither associated with distinction nor with inferiority. Rather, she saw class positionalities as dynamic vectors influenced solely by one's inner sense of development and ability to seize the opportunity whenever it presented itself.

69   Gravitating around the quest for a better life, her refashioned sociability would find ways to linger through the coming generations: after much effort, Anelise managed to get her daughter a scholarship for a private school. "I want her to get a good education. I want her to be smart and to speak up in this world." Anelise's ultimate endeavor was to abridge the social distance separating the poor from the "privileged" who learn—since early age—to ask: "what do you want to be when you grow up?"

70   In many ways, Anelise's improbable life trajectory in face of entrenched poverty could be considered exceptional as it does not necessarily reflect that of the average housing beneficiary. Yet by centering on her painstaking efforts we gain a sense of how exceptionalism is fabricated through everyday exchanges between beneficiaries, political authorities and community leaders, all invested in reshaping familial arrangements and household economies. By foregrounding Anelise's housing configurations vis-à-vis broader constellations of agents, institutions, and future expectations, I documented the house at once as a lived structure, a collection of relations, and a node in larger political and economic systems.

Conclusion

71   In this article I sought to move beyond normative frameworks that reduce the house to a material representation of kinship arrangements. Instead, I have shown the extent to which family relations are actively performed and renegotiated in three empirical scales of Brazil's most notorious public housing program. First, I discussed the political economy behind the implementation of housing projects in Porto Alegre, documenting how local officials overlap spatial and architectural properties with idealized notions of the nuclear family. In their rendition, social housing should encourage readjustments between the house—its sheer physicality—and the affective properties instantiated by it.

72   Secondly, I approached family as a political construct blending private and public expectations in the assemblage of a housing association. Relying on the principle of an encompassing model family that spawned from the leaders' intimate circle to embrace every community member, grassroots participation was morally refracted through local networks of belonging. I showed how benefits selectively found their way to deserving beneficiaries based on their capacity to display familial virtues aligned with the collective performance of a "big family:" a "followership" emanating from the community leader and creeping into the imagination of future household economies.

73   Finally, I drew on Anelise's paradigmatic case to examine the unfolding moral constellations of care that came into being in the aftermath of a case of exclusion from the program. Through activism, resilience, and familial restructuring, moral distinctions between deserving- and undeserving poor crystallized, qualifying "those entitled to certain resources under certain conditions, that is, those deserving of external help" (Villarreal 2004: 180). The house and its affective architecture became key figures for the replanning of her life; material nodes articulating citizenship, consumption, domestic finances, and a new political subjectivity that reflected her communitarian travails.

74   By simultaneously becoming a nuclear family and occupying one residential unit, Anelise actualized broader moral concepts of domesticity as enforced by bureaucrats like Cleber. Here, cash allocations—directly transferred to the poor via *Bolsa Familia*, or through educational fellowships and housing concessions—become the diacritical signals of how the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2013) is to be assessed and controlled. Anelise perceived and evaluated her own circulation across various social programs through the lens of household finances (Zelizer 2005): how much money is spent, how well it is spent, what future expectations (Beckert 2016) are concocted, and what other chances in life it helps unleash.

75   Congealed in the materiality of the apartment, family, household and architecture merged in the production of new political and economic subjectivities. Far from being exclusively symbolic, family relations project onto the very materiality of the city, leaking from the physical constraints of the house into world-making, and providing the grounds for subjective transformation. Through its key location amidst Porto Alegre's urban infrastructure, *Residencial Bento Gonçalves* continues to pose new challenges and opportunities. While enabling better urban mobility, use of public services, and integration with other social classes, it is also the source of anxiety and overtaking hope. As evidenced in Anelise's case, people feel more acutely that they have to fit into established social models when dislocating to urban spaces marked by sharp social, racial, and economic differences. Here, too, familial arrangements become key indexers of people's plasticity to outgrow kinship practices considered improper to life in a condominium—such as co-habitation—while projecting future expectations of wellbeing that center on newly developed household economies (DeLuca, 2017).

76   Family configurations provide a powerful analytical vantage into the highly dynamic processes of kin negotiation among Brazil's urban poor (Fonseca, 2000, 2007; Schuch, 2005). Extending its heuristic value to grasp the effects of intervention programs, I have argued that processes of "house-ing" illuminate the collaborative scales that make up housing programs and the ways in which they pervade people's experience of the house. The empirical evidence here discussed—from normative perspectives of nuclear domesticity, to the political construct of the big family, to vernacular forms of place-making—illustrates how notions of the family and the house are coupled and decoupled as they travel across nodes of political and economic governance, shaping domestic assemblages that both reflect and transcend the ideal of the nuclear family.

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List of illustrations

	Title	Map 1: Porto Alegre, Restinga and Partenon
	Credits	Source: Google Maps.
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/articulo/docannexe/image/4400/img-1.png
	File	image/png, 527k
	Title	Image 1: Partenon seen from the hills
	Credits	Source: author.
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/articulo/docannexe/image/4400/img-2.png
	File	image/png, 152k
	Title	Image 2: Residencial Bento Gonçalves, Porto Alegre
	Credits	Source: Author.
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