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Preserving the (right kind of) city: the urban politics of the middle-classes in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Abstract: Since re-democratisation, Brazil has experienced a slow but continuous process of urban reform, with the introduction of legal and institutional developments that favour participatory democracy in urban policy. Legal innovations such as the City Statute have been celebrated for expanding the “right to the city” to marginalised populations. While most studies examine the struggles of the urban poor, I focus on middle-class citizens, showing how such legal developments have unevenly affected the ways in which different social groups are able to impact the production of urban space. The two cases explored in this study concern residents struggles to preserve their middle-class neighbourhoods against change triggered by projects related to the hosting of the 2014 World Cup in Belo Horizonte/Brazil. The first looks at the Musas Street residents’ fight against the construction of a luxury hotel in their neighbourhood, while the second examines the Pampulha residents’ struggle against the presence of street vendors and football fans in their streets. My findings show that through the articulation of legal discourses, middle-class claims on the need for preserving the environment and the city’s cultural heritage are legitimised by the actions of the local state. The paper thus looks beyond neoliberalism, showing that socio-spatial segregation and inequality should not be regarded solely as the product of state-capital alliances for engendering capital accumulation through spatial restructuring, but also as the result of the uneven capacities of those living in the city to access the state resources and legitimise certain forms of inhabitation of urban space.

Keywords: Class, Inequality, Politics, Governance, Middle-Classes, Urban Law

1. Introduction

It is not news to anyone that, despite the different trajectories of urbanisation experienced within the region, Latin American cities are socially segregated (Sabatini, 2006). The process of “peripheral urbanisation” (Caldeira, 2016) has generated unequal cities, in which areas well-provided with infrastructure co-exist with informal settlements, large peripheries and, more recently, gated communities. In Brazil, the “insurgent citizens” in the autoconstructed peripheries have contested their exclusion claiming the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1968) they have built on their own (Holston, 2008). As a result, since re-
democratisation, the country has experienced the growth of pioneering experiments in participatory democracy (Caldeira and Holston, 2015). The process reached its peak with the approval in 2001 of the City Statute (CS), a federal law that explicitly recognizes the “right to the city” (RTC) as a collective right (Fernandes, 2007). Nonetheless, if the RTC is the “right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart’s desire” (Harvey, 2008, p.23), one might ask whose desire is actually shaping Latin American cities. If re-democratisation, in Brazil has expanded the channels of participation in the making of urban policy, how are different social groups exploring those channels? How are the legal and institutional developments created after the 1988 Constitution employed to legitimise different demands?

In this paper, I will explore the ways in which middle-class residents mobilise the law to justify their claims upon space. Since the approval of the CS, there has been a growing number of contributions analysing the shortcomings of the Brazilian socio-urban reform (Rolinik, 2013; Sánchez and Broudehoux, 2013; Vainer, 2015). I argue that much like the tradition of critical urban studies in the Global South, this prolific scholarship on Brazil has tended to emphasise the struggles of marginalised populations (Fischer et al., 2014; Freitas, 2017) or the profit-seeking urban developments promoted by state-elite coalitions (Gaffney, 2013; Rolnik, 2013). I thus propose to switch the focus to the political practices of middle-class citizens who make use of “invited spaces” (Miraftab, 2004) and mobilise legal frameworks spurred by insurgent movements to shape urban space and produce the “right kind of city” (Centner, 2012).

In order to do so, I explore two case studies of neighbourhood conflicts in the midst of the preparation for the 2014 World Cup in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The attention to middle-class residents in this paper stems largely from the realisation that the role of the middle-classes in shaping urban space in the Global South has remained under-analysed (Ghertner, 2012; Lemanski, 2017). My findings show that through the articulation of legal discourses, middle-class claims on the city’s cultural heritage and the need to preserve the environment are legitimised by the state. The findings further suggest that socio-spatial inequality should not be regarded solely as the product of state-capital alliances for engendering capital accumulation through urban redevelopment, but also as the result of the uneven capacities of those living in the city to access the state resources and legitimise certain forms of inhabitancy of urban space. The paper thus reveals another limitation of the Brazilian urban reform, showing how the institutionalisation of the RTC framework allows its mobilisation by more affluent citizens.
whose political practice may further the very same socio-spatial inequalities that spurred these urban policy innovations.

This work draws on qualitative data regarding two cases in which middle-class citizens are affected by World Cup-related projects. The data was gathered during eight months of fieldwork, conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. I rely mainly on semi-structured interviews conducted with key actors complemented with other types of data. The case studies subject to this study include the Musas Street residents’ fight against the construction of a luxury hotel in their neighbourhood, and the Pampulha residents’ struggle against the large presence of football fans and informal street vendors in their streets.

The rest of this paper is divided into five sections. In the second section, I present a discussion about recent legal and institutional developments in Brazil, while also engaging with current debates in urban studies regarding the role of middle-class citizens in shaping urban space. Section three discusses details about the case selection and the methodology. The fourth section presents the qualitative data analysis with a focus on legal discourses deployed by middle-class residents in their struggle to preserve the environment and the city’s heritage. The final section presents concluding discussions about the cases in the light of theory.

2. The middle-class and the right to the city

2.1. Socio-spatial segregation, insurgency and urban reform in Brazil

According to Sabatini et al. (2001, p.27), “Residential segregation can be defined, in general terms, as the degree of spatial proximity or territorial agglomeration of families belonging to the same social group, whether it is defined in ethnic, age, religious or socioeconomic preferences, among other possibilities”. The phenomenon is an important mechanism through which socioeconomic inequality is reproduced and its occurrence has been identified and analysed in multiple Latin American cities (Katzman and Retamoso, 2005; Rodriguez and Arriagada, 2004; Sabatini, 2006).

Brazil is no exception and much has been written about the country’s unequal socio-spatial pattern, “marked by unregulated capitalist development and inadequate access to housing and land for low-income urban populations” (Friendly and Stiphany, 2019, p.273). Analysing the Brazilian experience, Holston (2008) has focused on the political practices of segregated citizens in the informal autoconstructed peripheries. He argues that the same process that excluded the urban poor from “formal” forms of citizenship has created an “insurgent
citizenship” movement, through which the disenfranchised could claim their rights and their place in the city (Hoston, 2008).

This movement gained momentum during the country’s re-democratisation process when a new window for popular participation was provided, culminating with an intense social mobilisation and debate around the elaboration of the 1988 Constitution (Caldeira and Holston, 2015; Maricato, 1988). Since then, a slow but continuous process of urban reform evolved, with the introduction of legal and institutional changes which turned the country into “a ‘laboratory’ for new local governance and direct democracy strategies” (Friendly and Stiphany, 2019, p.274).

Moreover, after more than ten years of intense debates, a new legal–urban order was established with the approval of the 2001 City Statute (CS) (Fernandes, 2007). This federal law, which was mandated by the constitution’s chapter on urban policy, is considered a groundbreaking development that explicitly recognizes the “right to the city” (RTC) as a collective right (Fernandes, 2011). The statute was organized around three main pillars: “the recognition of security of tenure for low-income squatters, the struggle against real estate speculation and the democratisation of the decision-making process related to urban policies, opening spaces for direct participation” (Rolnik, 2013, p.55).

Nevertheless, this same period also saw the rise of neoliberalism in Brazil. Since the approval of the CS, there is a growing number of contributions analysing how these congruent, but conflicting projects – neoliberalism and democratisation – have influenced the course of urban policy making in contradictory ways (Caldeira and Holston, 2015; Fourchard, 2011; Rolnik, 2013). Such scholarship provides different and complementary explanations to what has been known as the socio-urban reform “impasse” (Maricato, 2011): notwithstanding the most advanced and celebrated urban laws and instruments in the world, Brazilian cities have been continuously characterised by deepening socio-spatial inequalities, persistent insecurity of tenure in informal settlements and mounting environmental contradictions (Arantes, 2013; Klink and Denaldi, 2016).

Many critical scholars (Rolnik, 2013; Sánchez and Broudehoux, 2013; Vainer, 2015) have turned their attention to the mode of neoliberal urban governance characterised by the appropriation of new progressive planning instruments and tools by state-capital alliances interested in promoting “local growth machines” (Molotch, 1976) in the context of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). For Klink and Denaldi (2016, p.404), the “disappointing results of ‘really existing’ Brazilian urban reform” are explained by the shift from a “radical
rights-based project” based on “autonomy and community-driven praxis” to a “professionalized practice of urban reform” centred on the state.

Although not guaranteeing rights, the development of progressive legislation certainly altered the conditions in which both resistance, policy-making and critical thinking has developed since. In the context of preparations for the 2014 World Cup, studies have shown, for instance, how the partial recognition of informal residents’ rights was incorporated as part of the strategies to successfully implement exclusionary urban-development projects (Freitas, 2017; Nogueira, 2017).

Focusing on recent experiences of participatory planning, Caldeira and Holston (2015) have analysed the making of São Paulo’s Master Plan (2002) and Zoning Law (2004). They describe how the participatory process has engendered a competition between citizens divided into class-based groupings with different resources and abilities to affect the results. That, they argue, can lead to the use of the new planning instruments to reproduce existing inequalities. Therefore, even when “participatory democracy” is effective in terms of decision making, it does not necessarily translate into greater social justice. That happens because those inhabiting the “formal” city also engage in this process, claiming their right to affect the way space is shaped. The institutional developments and the new channels for participation emerging as a response to insurgency have not erased society’s stratifications and inequalities, but rather become entwined with those. In this paper, I will add to this debate, focusing on middle-class citizens and their engagement with participatory channels and legal discourses as strategies to shape space, a topic that has started to receive more attention recently.

2.2. The politics of the urban middle-class

The concept of middle-class has been enunciated in multiple ways and there is no consensus regarding what classify a group as middle-class (Lentz, 2015). In this paper, class is defined as a “sociocultural phenomenon growing out of industrial relations of production and the modern state”, that also incorporates “notions such as status and habitus” considering their relevance for class relations (Heiman et al., 2012, p.9). Moreover, class is approached not as a category, but rather as a social process (Thompson, 1978): class distinction is hence achieved through a set of practices in which social actors continually reaffirm their membership to a group by distinguishing themselves from others (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, considering that society and space are co-produced (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005), one must acknowledge the need to incorporate spatial practices into the analysis of such repertoire of boundary-work
(Mercer, 2018). As argued by Heiman et al. (2012, p.26): “Spaces are critical for subject making not simply in terms of marking the physical spatialisation of class” but also because classed subjects are made in those same spaces. A similar argument is made by Zhang (2012, p.214) who states that “socioeconomic differences get spatialised and materialised through the remaking of urban communities.” Class and urban spatial production are thus mutually constitutive processes.

Recently, the “explosion of the world middle-class” (Das, 2009, p.89) has provoked a renaissance of the scholarship on this social group on a global scale (Lentz, 2015, p.14). Nevertheless, whereas in the Global North, a vast scholarship has dealt with the middle-classes and their spatial practices, in the global South, there is a tendency to focus on elites and the poor rather than on those in between (Mercer, 2018). A similar account is given by Lemanski and Tawa Lama-Rewal (2013) who argue for a focus on “urban citizens who are neither ‘elite’ nor ‘poor’”, exploring how the practices of these citizens can help disrupt binary categories that have dominated the discussions regarding participatory urban governance.

Considering the case of Brazil, the political relevance of the middle-classes in key moments of the recent past has been recognised and discussed in a few studies (Caldeira, 2000; O’Dougherty, 1999; Saes, 1985). Despite that, little account of the role of this social group in shaping urban policy has been observed. Writing in the 1980s, Oliveira (1982) has argued that the cities in Brazil were becoming the expression of middle-class aspirations. Industrialisation was then fostering a new class structure, in which the weight of the middle-classes was vigorously growing. Such emerging urban middle-classes became the support of authoritarianism in Brazilian society, while the relationship of the state with the urban was determined by the demands of this social class. Although recognising the importance of the middle-class in shaping urban space, Oliveira’s (1982) work does not explore the channels through which their demands produce material outcomes. His discussion thus resembles recent studies about the new Indian middle-classes who Ghertner (2014, p.177) has criticised for creating “the assumption that the emergence of this new elite in and of itself explains the consolidation of the ‘world class’ city-building project at hand.” In order to identify which forces are shaping cities, he argues, one must reveal the political mechanisms that allow the demands of the middle-class to gain fruition.

This task has been partially taken by Vasconcellos (1997), who investigated the transformation of São Paulo into a middle-class city during the dictatorship. In the context of authoritarianism, the middle-class was selected as the partner to support modernisation. Their
interests “were represented, inside the state, by transportation planners and engineers who promoted the ideology of modernisation” (Vasconcellos, 1997, p.294). He thus concludes that despite the influence of powerful economic and political sectors, the middle-classes were also capable of influencing public policy decisions efficiently. Also looking at São Paulo, Caldeira (2000) has described how, in the 1980s and 1990s, the economic crisis and rising criminality rates were engendering new patterns of socio-spatial segregation beyond the classical centre-periphery dichotomy. São Paulo was becoming “a city of walls, with a population obsessed by security and social discrimination” (ibid, p.232). In her analysis, those walls were both material and discursive. In order to safeguard their social position, the middle and upper-classes were struggling to differentiate themselves from the lower classes. For Caldeira (1996, p.303) the citizens confined in the rising number of fortified enclaves were “abandoning the traditional public sphere of the streets to the poor, the ‘marginal,’ and the homeless.”

In Latin American, recent studies on gentrification have highlighted how the development of real estate projects aimed at middle-income consumers has contributed to the displacement of the urban poor from desirable city areas (Lees et al., 2016). Those discussions highlight the need to further explore how the shaping of cities according to the demands of privileged social groups can impair the ability of the urban poor to belong. Nevertheless, those investigations are mostly concerned with the housing strategies of marginalised citizens or the powerful coalitions behind urban redevelopment.

In this paper, I am interested in looking at the political practices of middle-class citizens who want to be part of the city, analyzing how they organize to claim the right to shape the urban space thus affecting the environment where they live. In Brazil, as we have seen, after democratisation, many legal frameworks and channels for citizenship engagement have been developed. At the same time, neoliberal modes of urban governance have emerged, turning cities into sites of profit-seeking developments that deepen socio-spatial inequalities (Freitas, 2017; Klink and Denaldi, 2016). Despite the existence of a burgeoning literature addressing this paradox, the role played by middle-class citizens – who are neither the promoters of urban development or their dispossessed – remains under-analysed. I thus attempt to breach this gap, by looking at how middle-class views of city-making become influential in multiple ways (Ghertner, 2014), revealing their ability to make use of “invited spaces” (Miraftab, 2004) and articulate legal discourses rooted in the RTC framework.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of distinction, Centner (2012) investigates how contentious middle classes in Global South cities articulate a RTC to create socio-spatial
distinction in the urban realm, which unlike Lefebvre’s progressive aspirations, results in the formation of exclusionary spaces. He has noted that “different groups that invoke middle-class labels attempt to distinguish and mobilise around visions of what they see as the right kind of city, often with very specific discourses of liveability, morality and citizenship” (ibid, p.248). Such “right kind of city” must thus be produced in relation to the public interest, which is best represented by the good citizens who have the moral stance to defend the common good.

Similarly, others have focused on the spatial practices of the middle-classes in Global South contexts, revealing how space and social class are mutually reproduced. Looking at Dar as Salam suburbs, Mercer (2018) explored the process of class ‘boundary work’ in which middle-class residents are shaping the suburban spaces that, in turn, shape their distinctiveness as a social class. For the case of Delhi, Schindler (2016) analysed how associations of the new middle-class seek to regulate the use of urban space by street hawkers. His work reveals how class boundaries are constructed mutually by social groups through inter-class relationships that are not necessarily conflictive.

Building on those contributions I hence seek to add to recent debates regarding the potential of the middle-classes to “act in opposition to or in solidarity with those named as ‘poor’” (Lawson, 2012, p.1). Talking about Indian urbanism, Roy (2012, p.26) holds a pessimistic view:

(...) the making of the ‘world-class’ city has hinged on violent evictions of the urban poor – of squatters, vendors, pavement dwellers. Such forms of erasure and exclusion have been supported by the urban middle classes as a reclaiming of the ‘good city’ and as a protection of the urban commons. This theme of spatial order, championed by the middle-classes, shows how the political activism of the middle classes often eschews class rhetoric and takes up civil society causes.

In this paper, I thus look at middle-class interactions with the urban poor, the elite and the state. While they are not seeking to segregate themselves in gated communities, middle-class residents in this study want to preserve their spaces from change in order to preserve their middle-class lifestyles. The discussion emphasises how social class and space are produced in tandem, interrogating how the struggles of middle-class citizens to produce the “right kind of city” (Centner, 2012) may contribute to deepen socio-spatial inequalities.
3. Methodology

3.1. Selection of case studies

In 2014, Brazil has hosted the FIFA World Cup. Most studies looking at the Brazilian experience have explored how mega-events created opportunities for the promotion of capital accumulation that often lead to the displacement of the urban poor, generally focusing on the case of Rio de Janeiro (Gaffney, 2013; Sánchez and Broudehoux, 2013; Vainer, 2015). I thus propose to switch the lenses towards middle-class groups affected by redevelopment who organise to contest urban change in Belo Horizonte, an ordinary city (Robinson, 2006).

I explore two World Cup-related conflicts that have affected middle-class residents: the Mineirão stadium redevelopment at Pampulha and the attempt to build a luxurious hotel at Santa Lúcia. Figure 1 shows the location of the two areas in the city of Belo Horizonte while also presenting a few images of the selected regions. Moreover, Figure 2 exhibits income data for the two areas, vis-à-vis Belo Horizonte and Brazil. One can notice that, comparatively, those living in these regions belong to higher economic strata.

Please insert Figure 1 and Figure 2

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1. Mega-events are usually described in the literature as “large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events, which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance” (Roche, 2002, p.1).
3.2. Data collection

Data were collected during eight months of field work between 2014 and 2016. I have conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 relevant actors – residents, social activists, state agents, informal workers, among others – involved in the two selected cases. The interviewed residents at Pampulha belong to the local association (Pró-Civitas), whereas those at Santa Lúcia were involved with the “Save the Musas movement”. In order to protect the privacy of participants, all names have been anonymized.

3.3. Note on the difficulty of studying the (Brazilian) middle-class

Following the economic “evidence” of a growing “global middle-class” in developing countries (Kharas, 2010), studies in Brazil have discussed the emergence of the so-called “new middle-class” (Neri, 2008). However, I argue that the people depicted in this paper are not part of the “new middle-class”, but rather the traditional middle-class – formed by liberal professionals, civil servants, university professors, small business owners, company managers, etc – whose emergence is connected with the process of industrialisation (Oliveira, 1982). In order to classify those described in this study as “middle-class”, I have relied on my interactions with the interviewees and the information disclosed during interviews. Nonetheless, I do not intend to argue that the groups I am discussing represent some ideal middle-class type or that their actions can be extrapolated to represent this ambiguous and politically fragmented group. However, I sustain that the spatial practices of the groups discussed are important for the maintenance of their social class status.

4. Preserving middle-class spaces

4.1. Musas Street: preserving the environment

In May of 2011, the local newspapers in Belo Horizonte were announcing the construction of a five-star hotel at Musas street, in the neighbourhood of Santa Lúcia. The headline celebrated optimistically the improvement in the city’s hospitality infrastructure for

2 The “new middle-class” phenomenon has been challenged by Pochmann (2012), who noticed its over reliance on income data.
hosting the 2014 World Cup. Moreover, the article emphasised how the project would require a deal between the entrepreneur and the city hall, allowing the former to buy a piece of the street separating two plots. The 27-storey luxury hotel was planned to be built in an area where the city’s master plan only allowed for constructions up to 9 meters. Despite the violation of construction regulations for the area, the company benefited from the municipal Law 9.952/2010, created to encourage the construction of hotels envisioning the hosting of the World Cup. The legislation made possible the use of an instrument of the CS - the “urban operation” - for the entire city, making construction limits flexible.

The transaction could thus be regarded as “exceptional” (Vainer, 2015), since it required bending norms to promote a profit-seeking state-capital coalition facilitated by the hosting of a mega-event. Nonetheless, despite the efforts of the municipal government to enable its construction, the hotel was never built due to the efforts of a local neighbourhood collective – the “Save the Musas” movement – formed mainly by the middle-class residents of the street. The case thus points towards a more complex landscape in which urban space emerges as the product of ongoing disputes between unevenly empowered actors (Schindler, 2014; Nogueira, 2017).

Matheus, a small businessman with a law degree who had just recently moved to the area, was one of the most active members of the “Save the Musas”. I first met him in September 2015 at his house, located at Musas street. We talked for more than two hours, sitting outside in his barbecue area facing the pool. He was keen to narrate how he had to adapt his house’s project, reducing it in 20 centimetres, to meet the municipal regulations. Matheus, however, claimed to have accepted the condition with no issues, since it was “the requirement of the law.” He further added, “as a legalist I must comply with [the law], right? The citizen has to comply.” He was thus outraged by the violations found in the hotel deal, questioning the city hall’s discretionary interpretation of local planning guidelines.

The residents used several simultaneous tactics to successfully stop the project. Firstly, they challenged the street “sale”, as Antonio – a well-known professor at the Minas Gerais Federal University – narrated to me during an interview in his campus office, which he shares with another colleague. At first the city hall tried to transfer the street to the private company without a public bid. The transaction was then justified by the inexistence of other potential interested buyers. Antonio then questioned this decision by declaring his own interest in buying the land. Although he never actually intended to buy it, he hoped, as in fact happened, that his action would force the cancellation of the transference. Eventually, a public bid was launched
but also questioned by the residents through a lawsuit. Finally, in July of 2012, the deal was sealed in a second public bid, in which the company interested in the hotel was the winner, buying the land for over 1.2 million pounds.

Secondly, the residents challenged the hotel construction, pointing out the illegalities of the project. In this process, the Public Ministry (PM) became an important partner, giving legitimacy to their legal claims. Roberta, the public prosecutor in charge, explained her views on the validity of the municipal law that turned construction parameters flexible.

It [the law] has a serious problem, first because it has authorized urban operations anywhere in the city, right? This is not viable because the City Statute says that when you create an urban operation you must delimit the affected area. (Roberta, Public Prosecutor – 28/10/15)

Moreover, the main argument employed by the residents and the PM was the potential environmental impact of the project. Firstly, Musas street is located within the Serra do Curral “Special Guidelines Area”, with special planning regulations. Secondly, the project was placed within a 3-km radio from an environmental protected area - the Ecological Reserve of Cercadinho. Both arguments were mentioned in three reports issued by the PM opposing the sanctioning of the construction license; first to the mayor, then to the Municipal Environment Council (COMAM) and finally to the Regional State Environmental Policy Council (COPAM). Both councils are “invited spaces” (Miraftab, 2004) created after re-democratisation with the aim to enhance participatory democracy in policy-making.

Moreover, all three reports used the constitutional right to the environment and the local and regional state’s responsibility to protecting it as legal arguments. Additionally, the CS was quoted, emphasising paragraph 4 of the 2nd article, which describes all three levels of government as responsible for “planning the development of cities, the spatial distribution of the population and the economic activities of the municipality, as well as the territory under its influence, as to avoid and correct any urban growth distortions and negative impacts over the environment.” Eventually, despite the PM’s pressure, the entrepreneur received all the necessary licenses in October 2013. Nonetheless, the original legislation required the hotels to be in operation by the end of March 2014, or they would be fined. The entrepreneur then asked for an extension to complete the project that was denied by the City Hall.
In this case, legal-institutional frameworks emerging as a result of the urban poor insurgent struggles for the “right to the city” (Holston, 2008) are deployed by both sides. On the one hand, the urban operation (an instrument of the CS) is enacted to make regulations flexible and stimulate capital accumulation instead of promoting greater social justice (Rolnik, 2013; Vainer, 2015). On the other hand, the residents of Musas street have successfully used both the legislation and the participatory channels to delay the process until the construction became unfeasible. Moreover, environment protection is a fundamental argument that allows their demands to be legally framed as representing the “public interest” (Ghertner, 2013).

Thirdly, an important aspect to this case was the ability of the residents to escalate their struggles, turning an issue that would directly impact only a few into a city-wide issue. For those critical of his government, the case of Musas street was a straightforward example of the mayor’s wrongdoings, involving the privatisation of public spaces, the under-the-table agreements with private developers and the use of planning for promoting urban speculation. Such arguments resonated with the grievances of social activists gathered in a local grassroots movement - the Fora Lacerda\(^3\) - created in 2011, which became a space for “Save the Musas” to become amplified. Moreover, the residents also built alliances with others (such as local politicians, the MP, the Institute of Brazilian Architects) drawing from their personal social networks to promote their movement. Finally, as educated people, they had access to the knowledge necessary to substantiate their claims.

The discussion shows how at least two elements associated with the “middle-class” have played a fundamental role. Firstly, “morality” (Liechty, 2012; O’Dougherty, 1999) emerges as an important feature to validate the residents’ demands. They are not defending their own interests, but the preservation of the environment and, therefore, the public interest (Ghertner, 2013). Secondly, the access to social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) – social networks and education – allows residents to escalate their struggle. As argued by Centner (2008, p.197), urban space is shaped by “groups with differentiated access to forms of capital” that make use of those to make claims thus fashioning “particular kinds of places.” Therefore, one can say that, in this case, access to different forms of capital are relevant to claim space, which is in itself an element of class distinction (Zhang, 2012).

\(^{3}\) In Portuguese, fora means “out” in the imperative. The name of the movement is thus a demand: the protesters wanted Lacerda out of the government.
4.2. Pampulha, preserving the world’s heritage

The Pampulha region was completely redeveloped in the 1940s and the project has been regarded as the first important autonomous work of Oscar Niemeyer, marking the birth of Brazilian modernist architecture (Segre, 2012). The complex built around the Pampulha Lake has become an iconic mark of Belo Horizonte and one of its most important post cards. In 2016 the Pampulha Modern Ensemble has been recognised by UNESCO as a site of world cultural heritage. In the long process that led to this recognition, Pampulha’s neighbourhood association created in 2003 – Pró-Civitas – has played an important role.

In their website, the association describes current efforts to improve their results: “we have been working together with neighbouring associations to try to enforce the City Statute (Federal Law of 2001), which guarantees citizens the right to participate in the elaboration of the rules of the environment in which they live.” The “right to the city” legal framework is thus explicitly utilised to justify their political practice.

Since 2005, Pró-Civitas has been circulating a small newspaper. In an interview in the first edition, the president, Julia, talked about the association’s greatest challenge.

I would like to have involved more people in our work. Surely our results would have been even more substantial. But the association is still very young and we will get there soon. Certainly, this is the natural course of events when you intend to promote the common good for people with few individual needs. (Pró-Civitas Journal – March 2005, p.7)

One can thus note that the association represents people who are not demanding minimum rights, but citizens with access to substantive citizenship, that is, that enjoy political, civil and social rights (Marshall, 2009). It is then a challenge to get the middle-class residents “with few individual needs” involved. The association seeks to affect public policy and to enforce the “rule of law” in order to promote the preservation of the neighbourhood, improving the well-being of citizens.

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5 The publication is available on their website ([http://www.pro-civitas.org.br/jornais/](http://www.pro-civitas.org.br/jornais/)).
In the mid-2000s, they led a successful campaign that stopped a change in the city’s zoning law which would have allowed the construction of high-rising buildings in the area surrounding the Pampulha Lake. The issue was discussed during an interview by the association treasurer, Alessandra, a civil servant who lives in the area since 1982. She lives in a spacious and comfortable two-floor house, just a few blocks from the Mineirão stadium, where she narrated the association’s ongoing concern with the verticalisation issue.

Now the legislation is more rigid, but nothing guarantees that [it won’t change]. In the future, in a short period of time, the pressure might arise from businessmen to make it [the zoning law] flexible again. (Alessandra – 25/08/2015)

The campaign against verticalisation is hence framed as a wider political struggle against the remaking of the city by speculators acting in tandem with the state to promote private interests. Those efforts could thus be interpreted within the “right to the city” framework, as a struggle against the rise of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989) for a more just and inclusive city. However, a closer look at the association’s political practice reveals its ambiguity and the limited capacity of residents to act in solidarity with the urban poor (Lawson, 2012).

According to its president, Julia, Pró-Civitas has been one of the key actors promoting the conservation of the neighbourhood and its heritage. Despite the concerns of “urbanists” with the irreversible environmental impacts that could endanger the Pampulha Lake, she argued that the economic pressures to densify the region have always existed. Julia is particularly fond of the work of Candido Malta, an urbanist from São Paulo, whose work she recommended me after explaining briefly the main points of his theory.6

He thinks that there are two classes of urban predators, the unconscious ones, totally unprepared people, the favelas and such, and the others who are aware, who are doing that to make a profit, with no concern for the city. (Julia – 24/08/2016)

In her interpretation, therefore, the elite and the poor are joined in the same category. The role of the middle-class is hence to fight against the depredatory practices of those trying to make a profit or, alternatively, trying to make a living. Discussing the Brazilian middle-class

6 It is important to emphasise that I do not believe this description is an accurate portray of Candido Malta’s ideas, but rather a personal interpretation, which is the relevant part for the analysis.
in the early 1990s, O’Dougherty (1999, p.153) has identified how these citizens “construct a political identity founded on a moral code versus one depicted as opportunistic and corrupt in Brazilian government and society.” In this case, one can observe the same traces of “moral superiority” that authorises the good citizens to safeguard the city and the public interest from the two groups of “urban predators”. In common, both groups have the disrespect for the laws, which the association struggles to enforce. Since the redevelopment of the Mineirão stadium, promoted in the context of Belo Horizonte’s preparation for the 2014 World Cup, Pró-Civitas has dealt with the second type of “urban predator”, the urban poor who struggle to make a living while disregarding the law.

Before its renovation, Mineirão stadium was surrounded by open space and several street vendors would sell food and beverages to football fans during match days. When the stadium closed in 2010, the workers were displaced and the area became privatised and enclosed. In the absence of the informal market, the football fans got in the habit of remaining in the outside area of the stadium, buying drinks from street vendors and even promoting private barbecues on the streets of the neighbourhood. The situation caused real fury among the residents, who hence began to demand actions from the local council to reduce the impacts of the stadium in their neighbourhood.

In their task to dismantle this burgeoning local informal economy, the residents are in constant contact with Marcia, the director of the Pampulha council’s inspection office. Their claims were justified by a 2003 municipal law (Code of Placements) that explicitly prohibits the activity of street vendors in public spaces. According to Marcia, one of her greatest achievements in 2015 was the praise she received from the association in a letter.

So, it goes like this: “Relevant improvements have been observed in the residential areas leading to a reduction in the number of residents’ complaints. Much more is yet to be achieved, but the work executed thus far makes us optimistic.” (…) I was very happy when I received it because it shows that we are on the right path, that we are not being negligent. (Interview with Marcia, Pampulha Council – 16/12/15)

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7 The modernisation was completed through a public private partnership between the state and the Minas Arena consortium formed by three major construction companies that will be responsible for managing the new Multipurpose Arena until 2037. The total cost was BRL 666.30 million (GBP 200.09 million).
Marcia’s narrative reveals the important role of the residents in the neighbourhood’s governance regime. As argued by Schindler (2016, p.250), “the state is simply one of a number of actors struggling to regulate activity, land-use and service provision.” In this case, middle-class citizens employed the law as a discursive tool to reconstitute the notion of “public interest” in order to shape urban space according to a certain vision of urban order (Roy, 2012; Ghertner, 2013). In the name of heritage preservation, the residents use the “right city” framework and legality to (de)legitimise different uses of urban space aiming to produce the “right kind of city” (Centner, 2012). Both their ability to access the state and use the law are facilitated by their middle-class status (Ghertner, 2014), whereas the reproduction of class distinction is itself engendered by the preservation of middle-class spaces.

5. Concluding discussions: the “good” citizens claiming the “right kind of city”

The critical urban studies literature in Brazil has followed the worldwide trend of this scholarship: it focuses either on the elites, usually colluded with the state, or the struggles of the urban poor (Lemanski, 2017). In this paper, I explored the politics of middle-class citizens in their attempts to make the “right kind of city” (Centner, 2012). Middle-class citizens’ political practices were analysed as part of their strategies to reproduce their social class status (Mercer, 2018; Zhang, 2012). These citizens are not struggling against displacement or for basic needs; they want to be part of local urban governance regimes, affecting the rules of the environment in which they live.

In order to explore middle-class attempts to preserve their place in the city, I have focused on the law and the ways in which residents employ the legal discourse to justify their claims upon space. Since re-democratisation, Brazil has experienced a process of gradual legal and institutional development that has broadened the channels and instruments for participatory democracy in planning and in many governmental areas (Fernandes, 2011). While progressive legislation and instruments, such as the CS, were established through the past struggles of the movement of those excluded from urbanisation in Brazil, their incorporation in the legislation have made them available for more affluent citizens who took advantage of such legislation to advance their own needs. Although not always successful, middle-class citizens in this study had access to resources and were, thus, empowered to participate in the politics of urban space production. That raises questions about the effectiveness of participatory democracy, since the
actual outcome of legal and institutional developments created to enhance social justice hinges upon the balance of power among different social classes.

In both cases analysed, residents of middle-class areas struggle to preserve their neighbourhoods against change. In their discourses, their demands are justified by concerns over the protection of the environment and the city’s heritage. In the case of Musas Street, the state’s attempt to accommodate the needs of an international mega-event is challenged by a few discontent residents. The process through which legality is suspended to make rules flexible in order to promote investments (Vainer, 2015) is interrupted. The case, therefore, points towards a more complex situation in which the capital-state alliance is not able to impose its agenda. Power is more dispersed among the actors involved and middle-class residents actively participate in the local urban governance regime (Schindler, 2016). The law plays a central role as citizens articulate their claims in juridical terms. In their discourses, the project is challenged not because of its potential impact on their lives, but because it is deemed illegal, as it does not comply with planning regulations and it is potentially disastrous for the constitutionally protected environmental heritage. Legal and institutional innovations arising from insurgency aimed to support the poor and the marginalised become instruments for the middle-classes to claim their own right to participate urban space governance.

In the case of Pampulha, the local neighbourhood association plays an active role in promoting the region’s preservation, a site of world heritage. In the aftermath of the 2014 World Cup, the residents mobilise against negative impacts in the region caused by the local stadium renovation. As a result of spatial restructuring, their quite residential streets are turned into a burgeoning informal market, where street vendors sell beer and other beverages to football fans with no legal authorization for sales. In this context, residents organise against informal street vendors, demanding intervention from the local state, which seeks to meet their demands. Middle-class citizens thus use legality, in the name of morality and spatial order, to (de)legitimise uses of urban space according to their own ideas of how the city should be ordered. In their fight to preserve the world’s heritage site, the Pampulha residents also employ legal discourses, evoking the City Statute to justify their right to participate and the Code of Placements to demand the control of the informal economy. However, they are not fighting against exclusion, but rather for the preservation of their neighbourhood as it is by demanding state actions against the illegal activities of the urban poor.

Within critical urban studies, cities are analysed as spaces in constant change to accommodate the needs of capital accumulation. Nonetheless, this process is not uncontested,
as people react against the commodification of urban land, trying to protect their ways of living and belonging to the city against the creative destructive forces of capitalism (Harvey, 2008). Not much, however, is said about how different social class groups are more or less empowered to protect their ways of belonging to the city. The two cases analysed are not about the struggle of the urban poor, excluded and marginalised from the city, but organised citizens “with few individual needs” who also claim their right to “participate in the elaboration of the rules of the environment in which they live”. Such middle-class politics were often described by participants in this study as struggles against state-capital alliances interested in promoting real estate speculation at the expense of citizens’ wellbeing. One could thus potentially locate such efforts in the “right to the city” agenda. Nevertheless, in their argument, the elites are joined in the same category as the urban poor: both ignore the rule of law that the ‘good citizens’ aim to safeguard. The “moral superiority” (O’Dougherty, 1999) of the middle-class allows these citizens to stand in contrast with those groups; they represent the public interest, which legitimise their efforts to regulate urban space.

While the residents of Musas Street are struggling against a luxurious development, the residents at Pampulha are aimed at the urban poor, hence showcasing how middle-class politics can be either progressive or conservative. Common in both cases, however, is the wish to preserve middle-class ways of belonging to the city as the driving force of residents’ political actions. Preserving middle-class spaces, in this regard, also contributes to the reproduction of (re)produce middle-class distinction (Zhang, 2012), revealing the interrelation between the making of middle-class spaces and class boundary-work (Mercer, 2018). Although in these cases residents are not effectively “building” urban space, they struggle to shape it in accordance with their own notions of spatial order (Roy, 2012). Similarly to what Ghertner (2013) has discussed for the case of India, here too we see the use of environmental (and heritage) preservation as arguments that provide legitimacy to potentially exclusionary demands. Therefore, although residents may articulate claims around the “right to the city”, those are translated into “an exclusive right to the city, crafted essentially as the circumscribed property of a certain group” (Centner, 2012, p.248). The preservation of middle-class spaces is thus also about the preservation of a certain middle-class lifestyle, which is constructed in relation to space and urban belonging.

Unlike the middle-classes who have chosen to self-segregate in gated communities (Caldeira, 1996), in this paper, I dealt with middle-class citizens who want to be part of the city. They claim the right to shape the urban space, to affect the environment where they live.
Nevertheless, they also want to fashion places in accordance with their own views, building in the process a much subtler type of wall. These middle-class citizens do not want to leave the polis but rather to engage in the political arena to preserve middle-class spaces. I argue that Brazil’s socio-urban reform has institutionalized the mechanisms of participatory democracy, making those tools available for citizens who are better equipped to make use of such innovations to affect city-making. I thus look beyond neoliberalism as the only process guiding Brazil’s urban future, by revealing how social stratification is entangled with urban policy. I argue that more attention to the role of the middle-classes in local regimes of governance is needed in order to reveal the everyday mundane ways in which socio-spatial inequalities are reproduced and challenged.

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**Figure 1.** Location and overview of case study areas

1.1 Map of Belo Horizonte

1.2 Panpulha region overview

1.3 Musas street overview
Figure 2. Share of the population per income group for 2010: Pampulha and Santa Lúcia versus Belo Horizonte and Brazil

Source: Author’s elaboration with data from IBGE and PBH.

Note: The value of the minimum wage in July 2010 was R$510 (£187).
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