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Perceptions of City Space in Brazil

Nova Luz Project and the Urban Politics of Waiting

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Abstract

This article examines the Nova Luz Project in São Paulo through an ethnographic and historical perspective that connects urban redevelopment, class formation, housing disputes and the politics of participation in contemporary Brazil. The article argues that the project cannot be understood merely as a failed urban intervention, but rather as a revealing case of how competing expectations about city centres, citizenship, modernity and public participation collide in unequal urban contexts. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in São Paulo, newspaper coverage, policy documents and anthropological literature on Brazilian cities, the article analyses how the Luz region became simultaneously represented as a site of danger, deterioration and urban potential. Attempts to revitalise the area through culture-led regeneration, private-public partnerships and policing strategies ultimately produced growing distrust among residents, informal workers and housing movements. While the project officially promoted participation, many residents strategically avoided public meetings, understanding participation itself as a mechanism through which authorities could legitimise decisions that had already been taken. Avoidance, delay and refusal therefore became political strategies. The article concludes that Nova Luz was never completed because it became politically costly, and that the project exposes a broader contradiction within São Paulo itself: a city internationally imagined through speed and dynamism, yet deeply marked by suspended planning, strategic waiting and incomplete urban futures.

Prologue

This paper remained dormant for more than a decade because, as a researcher, I was not immune to the conflicts and competing interests unfolding in the city. While studying the Luz region and the Nova Luz project in São Paulo, I witnessed first-hand two dominant and often antagonistic agendas: the provision of social housing and the pressures of real-estate speculation. Residents in vulnerable situations, many living in irregular occupations, accused government policies of undermining social housing, as redevelopment would require their displacement and relocation elsewhere. For government officials, however, the project was framed not as an effort to gentrify the city centre but as a strategy to enable social housing by coupling subsidized units with others sold at commercial prices.

Behind these overt positions, other interests were also at play. The area hosts São Paulo's most vibrant cluster of popular electronics shops, whose economic success depends on the very absence of housing speculation: low land prices enable competitive retail pricing, making the district regionally attractive. Because shoppers seeking electronics prioritise price over comfort, shop owners benefit from maintaining the area's current conditions. Their desire to preserve the status quo lacked the social appeal that housing movements possessed. My ethnographic work revealed unexpected alliances, such as social-housing events quietly financed by local merchants, an uncomfortable finding that placed me at a crossroads. How could I describe these entanglements without undermining the legitimacy of the struggle for affordable, centrally located housing?

Ultimately, I did not have to decide. During my first interview with a shop owner, I was threatened, warned that I was "asking too much," and intimidated. I left São Paulo after the threat and the eventual collapse of the Nova Luz Project once a new mayor took office (de Souza Santos 2020) and did what others before me had done when confronted with incomplete planning processes and equally incomplete research trajectories (Miller 2003). Whether in Chicago or São Paulo, urban planning is as much about backstage negotiations as it is about concrete buildings and master plans. Examining what remains unspoken, the housing units

never built, the plans interrupted, the alliances concealed, requires its own form of postponement.

Such waiting was both personal and political: a necessary pause after a traumatic encounter, but also an avoidance of provoking interests that I could not fully disentangle. This experience ultimately connected me to residents of informal and often illegal dwellings who themselves lived in a perpetual state of anticipation, fearing eviction at any moment. Waiting became one of the defining temporalities of the city centre.

The city of São Paulo is usually represented through movement: traffic, labour, consumption, speed and productivity. Yet the centre reveals another temporality altogether. It is a city of unfinished plans, delayed reforms, suspended projects and strategic interruption. The Nova Luz Project therefore reveals not only a story about urban redevelopment, but also about incompleteness itself, a reality of any city.

Introduction

The city centre of São Paulo has undergone prolonged processes of urban reconfiguration marked by disputes over land use, social order, cultural symbolism and public participation. The Nova Luz Project of the 2010s emerged in this context as one of the most ambitious attempts to redesign the centre through a combination of urban concession, cultural intervention, housing policy and private-public partnerships. The project proposed not merely the physical transformation of the Luz district, but also the symbolic redefinition of who belonged in the city centre and under what conditions.

The Luz region forms a fluid and symbolic border within São Paulo's downtown area. It is symbolic because it condenses some of the city's strongest anxieties surrounding homelessness, drug consumption, insecurity and urban deterioration. It is fluid because the social practices associated with the area are imagined as capable of spreading and contaminating neighbouring spaces (Frugoli & Sklair 2009). The region's popular designation as Cracolândia reinforced its representation as a zone of danger and degradation.

At the same time, however, Luz remained economically vibrant. The area functioned as one of São Paulo's principal clusters of affordable electronics retail and informal trade. Thousands of workers, traders, migrants and low-income residents depended upon the district economically. The contradiction between urban stigma and economic vitality became central to debates surrounding the project.

The Nova Luz Project attempted to solve this contradiction by promoting a new urban model based on private redevelopment, cultural prestige and middle-class attraction. A consortium of companies received the right to redesign significant portions of the district, including powers of expropriation, demolition and reconstruction. Supporters framed the project as a necessary intervention capable of modernising the city centre, increasing security and attracting investment. Critics interpreted it as a process of socially selective urbanism and gentrification (Jose 2010; Frugoli & Sklair 2009).

This article analyses the Nova Luz Project not simply as a technical planning initiative, but as an ethnographic site through which broader Brazilian questions surrounding class, race, citizenship, participation and urban modernity can be examined. More specifically, I argue that the project exposes the limitations of participatory urbanism in contexts of extreme inequality. While official discourse repeatedly emphasised public participation and democratic consultation, many residents strategically refused participation altogether. Attendance at meetings risked legitimising decisions already perceived as predetermined.

Avoidance therefore became political action. Residents resisted not only through visible protest, but through slowing down procedures, refusing meetings and withholding consent. Participation, paradoxically, was won through non-participation.

The article draws upon fieldwork conducted in São Paulo, newspaper archives, official planning documents and anthropological literature on urban Brazil. In particular, I preserve and analyse the role played by newspaper narratives surrounding Nova Luz. Public debate in newspapers such as *Folha de São Paulo* revealed profound tensions

surrounding urban policing, compulsory treatment, social cleansing, property rights and housing insecurity. Newspaper discourse was not simply descriptive. It actively participated in constructing the city centre as either recoverable or irredeemable.

At the theoretical level, the article dialogues with scholarship on urban modernity, citizenship and participation in Brazil (Holston 2008; Caldeira 2000; Canclini 2012). It also contributes to debates surrounding the anthropology of infrastructure, uncertainty and waiting. Rather than treating delay and incompleteness as signs of policy inefficiency alone, I suggest that they reveal deeper political struggles regarding urban life itself.

Urban Transformation and the Historical Making of São Paulo

São Paulo's urban history is inseparable from the expansion of capitalism, industrialisation and migration in Brazil. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coffee wealth transformed the city into a major economic centre. Industrialisation accelerated rapidly after the 1930s, attracting enormous numbers of migrants from Brazil's Northeast and other regions. The city became both the symbol of Brazilian progress and one of the clearest expressions of the inequalities produced by that progress.

Caldeira (2000) identifies three major phases in São Paulo's urban formation: the condensed city, the centrifugal city and the contemporary fragmented metropolis. During the condensed phase, social groups circulated more visibly within shared urban spaces. Distinction existed, but social classes still occupied overlapping areas of the city centre. Coffee wealth, urbanisation and immigration transformed the city's built environment, but centrality still retained symbolic value for different sectors of society.

Industrialisation and labour reform gradually altered this arrangement. Vargas-era labour legislation strengthened the symbolic connection between citizenship and formal labour while simultaneously excluding large segments of the urban poor from social protections (Holston 2008).

The unemployed and informal workers increasingly occupied ambiguous positions within Brazilian citizenship. Holston (2008) argues that Brazilian citizenship developed through differentiated inclusion, whereby rights were formally universal but unevenly experienced in practice.

Migration intensified these tensions. Migrants from poorer regions frequently settled in peripheral areas lacking infrastructure, while wealthier residents increasingly abandoned the city centre in favour of exclusive neighbourhoods and later gated condominiums. The urban periphery became associated with self-construction, precarious infrastructure and long commutes, while the centre gradually accumulated visible poverty and social abandonment.

The 1980s and 1990s intensified these transformations. Economic instability, inflation and urban violence reinforced middle-class desires for security and exclusivity. Central São Paulo gradually lost upper-middle-class residents while abandoned buildings were occupied by low-income families through informal housing arrangements such as *cortiços*. The centre therefore became associated with deterioration and insecurity. Yet such narratives often obscured the social and economic functions still performed by these spaces.

The Luz district condensed these contradictions particularly sharply. Historically associated with transportation, commerce and circulation, the district increasingly became represented through the imagery of *Cracolândia*. This representation was deeply powerful politically because it transformed complex social conditions into visual evidence of urban decline. Drug users, homeless people and deteriorated buildings became symbols through which broader anxieties regarding order, modernity and governance were projected.

At the same time, however, the area remained economically dynamic. Electronics retail, informal labour and affordable commerce attracted large numbers of consumers from different parts of the city and country. The contradiction between economic vitality and symbolic degradation became central to the Nova Luz debate. The area was not abandoned in any simple

sense. Rather, it was occupied by populations and activities considered undesirable by sectors seeking a different vision for the city centre.

Culture, Urbanism and Middle-Class Distinction

Beginning in the 1990s, public authorities increasingly framed culture as the mechanism through which central São Paulo could be revitalised. Historic buildings were restored and transformed into concert halls, museums and cultural institutions. The restoration of the Pinacoteca and the inauguration of Sala São Paulo inside Júlio Prestes Station became emblematic of this strategy.

Culture functioned not merely as entertainment, but as a civilising project. Classical music, fine arts and heritage preservation were expected to attract middle-class residents and consumers back into the city centre. Such interventions reflected broader Brazilian histories linking urban modernity to elite aesthetics and imported models of civilisation.

Owensby (1999) demonstrates how middle-class distinction in Brazil historically depended upon practices of refinement, education and consumption. Middle-class identities were not defined solely through income, but through performances of cultural superiority and social separation. The attraction to concert halls, museums and Europeanised aesthetics therefore formed part of a broader project of social differentiation.

The Nova Luz Project inherited these assumptions. Urban requalification was repeatedly associated with cleanliness, order, aesthetic improvement and cultural sophistication. Spaces associated with informal commerce, homelessness or drug use were represented as obstacles to urban modernity.

This logic was not entirely new. Brazilian urbanism has historically been tied to ambitious projects of national modernity. From Brasília to urban renewal projects in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, planning frequently attempted to materialise visions of society through architecture and urban design (Holston 1989). Such projects often imagined space itself as capable of producing new forms of citizenship and social behaviour.

Yet these interventions repeatedly revealed the limitations of culture-led regeneration. The audiences attending museums and concerts often remained socially disconnected from existing residents of Luz. Cultural revitalisation produced symbolic prestige without necessarily transforming everyday forms of coexistence.

More importantly, culture became deeply entangled with processes of exclusion. The creation of attractive urban spectacles frequently required the displacement of populations considered incompatible with middle-class consumption and international investment. Moreira (2008) describes these projects as urban spectacles in which the city becomes a commodity consumed visually by selective publics.

The discourse surrounding Nova Luz therefore relied heavily upon aesthetics. Newspaper articles, political speeches and official reports repeatedly contrasted images of urban deterioration with visualisations of modern urban order. Master plans, maps and promotional images projected futures in which homelessness, informal commerce and drug use would disappear.

As Olson (1994) argues, modern societies increasingly inhabit worlds represented on paper. Maps, plans and statistics do not merely describe urban life; they organise how problems are imagined and governed. Nova Luz exemplified this process. The district became a territory continuously represented through images of decline and projected futures of renewal.

The Nova Luz Project and the Public Debate Surrounding the Project

The Nova Luz Project's borders expanded from an area of 105,000m² before 2005, to 500,000m² in its current format. The project aimed to create a trade pole, primarily thought for technology companies (Jose, 2010:146). In 2009, a law of urban concession was approved (Projeto de Lei 01-0087/2009) linking public policies and real estate companies.

In such a context, the Nova Luz Project started to define an entirely new urban setting in Luz, in the city centre of Sao Paulo. A consortium of construction companies, including Concremat Engenharia, Cia.City, AECOM Technology Corporation and Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV)¹, is responsible for the project, a model of urban concession that is unique in Brazil. The project grants the consortium the right to demolish, reconstruct and reintegrate edifices, as well as to expropriate buildings when necessary. In exchange, the consortium has to improve the area in accordance with the project agreed on by the City Hall, which demands the planning of sidewalks, green parks, nurseries, libraries and other public benefits for the city and its inhabitants.

The project is highly controversial from a legal perspective. In her discussion about transformations in Sao Paulo's centre, Jose (2010) cites the public defender Anai Arantes Rodrigues' opinion that the consortium disrespects the Constitution when it delegates the right to execute urban interventions to private companies (Jose, 2010:150).

To analyse such changes more closely and to detect the range of opinions surrounding the Nova Luz Project, I collected reports published by the Brazilian newspaper Folha de São Paulo between December 2010 and February 2012. The newspaper archives became one of the most important windows into the disputes surrounding the project because they captured

¹ The Fundação Getúlio Vargas is a research institution and in the Nova Luz it has mainly provided studies of the Project's economic impact.

not only official discourse, but also public anxieties, readers' reactions, political divisions and competing moral understandings of the city centre.

By the end of 2010 the City Hall tried to demolish 30 per cent of all buildings in the Luz area, preserving only those of historical value and adequate occupancy. In the start of 2011, local commercial dealers demonstrated against the Nova Luz Project. On the other hand, residents of the city of Sao Paulo generally supported the Project. The Nova Luz is estimated to take 15 years to be completed. Residents, traders and popular movements worry about being expelled from the area during the process of urban renovation, real estate speculation and expropriation.

In the beginning of 2012 the police expelled crack users from the area. The police addressed 364 people, and two drug dealers were imprisoned. While some intellectuals and health experts use the newspaper to explain the inefficiency of the police action, claiming that it destroyed years of trust relationship between the drug abusers and health agents, readers express their indignation with articles which, according to them, are "ideologically oriented and written by authors who are against imprisonment or enforced treatment for crack users because they are against the general well being of the city". Different NGOs criticize the politics of "hygienization" in the city centre and demonstrate for human rights in addressing drug users. Meanwhile, new sites for drug consume start in Santa Cecilia and Liberdade neighbourhoods.

The DataFolha² [2] survey (20/01/2012) revealed that 90 per cent of the population of Sao Paulo is in favour of mandated treatment for crack consumers. However, on the anniversary of Sao Paulo, 24th January 2012, a demonstration brought together more than one thousand people against the actions of the government of Sao Paulo. A separate DataFolha [3] study published in the Folha de Sao Paulo Newspaper (27/01/2012) revealed that 82 per cent of the inhabitants of Sao Paulo support the police action in Crackland.

²DataFolha is a Brazilian research institute (<http://datafolha.folha.uol.com.br/>)

On 28th January 2012, the Court provisionally stopped the Nova Luz Project because no public audience presenting the project to the population was executed. According to the Court of Sao Paulo, the State's actions were marked by economic and financial development, social exclusion and forced migration.

On 4th February 2012, the newspaper claimed that the most visible result of the police operation in Crackland was the spread of crack use to neighbouring areas, reinforcing the political nature of the actions. On the 9th February 2012, articles contest that the mayor's speech about the police's interventions suggests that the actions were impartial; for the Newspaper, to promote transparency, the Nova Luz needed to address the dignity of the human person as a fundamental value of the Republic and to understand property as having a value beyond economic use.

The newspaper archives therefore revealed far more than public opinion alone. They exposed how Nova Luz became a battleground for competing ideas regarding citizenship, public order, policing, housing and democracy itself. To understand the social reception of the Nova Luz Project, I conducted extensive reading of newspaper coverage, especially from *Folha de São Paulo* between 2010 and 2012. The newspapers became key arenas through which disputes over policing, housing, participation and urban order were publicly negotiated.

The coverage revealed profound divisions within São Paulo society. By the end of 2010, the City Hall proposed demolishing approximately thirty per cent of the buildings in the Luz region, preserving only structures considered historically valuable or adequately occupied. During 2011, local commercial traders protested against the project while many middle-class residents elsewhere in the city expressed support.

The projected duration of Nova Luz, estimated at fifteen years, intensified anxieties surrounding displacement. Residents, informal workers and housing movements feared expropriation and rising real-estate costs. Traders worried about the destruction of existing commercial networks. Meanwhile, supporters argued that only radical intervention could reverse the decline of the city centre.

The beginning of 2012 marked a turning point. Police operations expelled crack users from sections of the district and sealed some buildings with concrete barriers. Individuals displaced from these operations migrated into neighbouring districts such as Santa Cecília and Liberdade. Newspaper narratives oscillated between celebrating restored order and criticising humanitarian violence.

The newspapers became deeply polarised. Intellectuals, public-health specialists and NGOs criticised the operations as forms of social cleansing that destroyed trust built between health workers and vulnerable populations. Newspaper readers, however, frequently accused critics of ideological bias and argued that strong policing was necessary to restore urban order.

One of the most revealing aspects of the newspaper archives was the emotional intensity surrounding the issue. The city centre was discussed not simply as an urban area but as a symbol of São Paulo itself. Commentators repeatedly described feelings of shame regarding the visibility of poverty and drug consumption in a global city aspiring toward international prestige.

DataFolha surveys published in January 2012 revealed overwhelming support for compulsory treatment for crack users and for police intervention in Cracolândia. Yet public demonstrations against the operations also brought thousands of people into the streets. Newspaper editorials therefore exposed a city deeply divided over the meaning of public order, citizenship and human rights.

Another major controversy involved participation itself. In January 2012, the courts temporarily suspended aspects of the Nova Luz Project because no adequate public hearing had been conducted. Judicial criticism emphasised that the process prioritised economic development while producing forced migration and social exclusion.

Subsequent newspaper articles increasingly questioned the transparency of the project and the broader relationship between urban renewal and

human dignity. Journalists highlighted contradictions between the official language of revitalisation and the lived realities of those displaced.

Importantly, the newspapers did not merely report the project: they actively shaped its political meaning. Newspaper editorials, readers' letters and opinion columns became spaces through which middle-class anxieties about urban disorder were expressed and normalised. The language of revitalisation repeatedly depended upon representing existing residents as obstacles to urban recovery.

The media therefore helped produce Nova Luz as both a promise and a threat: a promise of urban modernity for some, and a threat of displacement for others.

POLITICS OF HOUSING

Policies to restore the image and use of the Luz area have left current users with the perception of being marginalised by the Project. For them, being in the city is a constant threat. This sparks critical analysis regarding urban policy making in general. How do policies merge with philosophies, such as "the right to the city"³? How are different ideas of belonging, imagining and experiencing the city assembled within the framework of urban public policies? Is displacement overshadowed and "anonymised" by ideas of urban requalification and city embellishment?

The Nova Luz Project reveals a prevailing housing trend in Brazil, as there is a deficit of habitation and a large number of abandoned or unoccupied buildings. The lens of insecurity provides an optimal means through which to examine this housing phenomenon.

³ By Right to the city I mean the idea of right to urban life, explored by Lefebvre (1996:158).

The IBGE census from 2000 showed a picture of 6 million domiciles that are unoccupied and accompanied by an urban housing deficit of 7,934,719 (Monteiro, 2009:36). What the 2010s central areas of Sao Paulo showed was a hint of this situation. Segments of the poor have moved to the centre, occupying, often irregularly, abandoned or unused buildings, which are abundant in the capital. In Sao Paulo, 420,000 buildings are empty or abandoned. More than 1,160,000 people live in one of the 2,018 slums, and over 170,000 families live in one of the 700 *cortiços* (Venturi et al., 2006). Luz therefore hints at the sensitive legal implications linked to the right of habitation.

The Constitution of Brazil guarantees housing as a fundamental right. The same law observes the conception of private property as long as it attends to the social use of habitation. Properties unoccupied for more than three years (and not up to date with taxes), thus not fulfilling the social use, can be expropriated by the State. Criteria of public or social interest also justifies expropriation, as long as indenisation is offered to the owners.

In the area under investigation, there are families occupying buildings accountable for expropriation by the State. These families, positioned in law under the guardianship of habitation right, have been expelled because of their illegal use of another's property. But whose property?

In the specific case of Luz, the answer for these questions is more complicated. The government of Sao Paulo, as previously explained, created a legal instrument of subcontracted expropriation in 2009. Through this channel, it is possible to delegate to the right to intervene to private initiatives. The argument for the law was efficiency. Housing in Luz, already complicated with disputes by the poor, private owners and the State, have earned another stakeholder, the private consortium.

In the recent past, successful examples of regulation and restoration of edifices occupied by the poor took place. During the years between 2000 and 2004, the Prefecture of Sao Paulo, in partnership with a state bank, restored the building Brigadeiro Tobias, which had been occupied in October 1999 by the Homeless Movement in the Centre (MSTC). Through a Programme of Residential Tenancy (PAR), apartments were sold to families whose monthly income varied from USD 178 to USD 1,068 and who were living predominantly in *cortiços*, slums or illegal housing (Oliveira et al, 2007).

President of Brazil, Lula, defended the use of unoccupied buildings in the centre of big cities for popular housing. During his participation inaugurating a popular housing settlement in Southern Brazil, 2003, he mentioned that in cities such as Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, there are around 4.5 million residences and apartments unoccupied. In those sites, infrastructure is already an important factor. Lula defended that people should be allowed to live in the centre, close to

their working places and have housing options suitable to their income (Monteiro, 2009:123).

In the case of Nova Luz, up to initial stage of the Project, the poor were expected to be responsible for their homes. Excluded from the real estate market due to their low and unstable incomes, families had to find alternative means of shelter, under undersized legal and economic devices.

This situation exposes a cycle of poverty worth studying. The poor, excluded from housing regulations in central Sao Paulo are ordinarily left “homeless”. Kinfolk’s houses, friends’ house, shelter within the place of work and streets fulfil the idea of “being at home” (Theije et al, 2010:78). The lack of address frames lives of those constantly concerned with where to live. Not having an address often implies the lack of job. The instability of the present does not allow for the planning of the future nor does it bring a bare minimum level of security for employers to hire the homeless, address-less, bank account-less and often document-less people. Wonders regarding homelessness may appreciate that homeless people “do nothing” thus have nothing. Inverting the sentence invites us to consider that they have nothing and hence “do nothing”. This exposition allows for questioning a context of uncertainties.

At the same time, those coming into great fortunes also exist; the scarcity of residences (a common pattern in metropolises such as Sao Paulo) means that well- located buildings become more expensive. In Brazil, terrains or buildings are frequently left unkempt for long periods of

time while awaiting real estate speculation. When there are housing shortages while the demand continues to grow, the launch of real estate enterprises takes place. This could explain the case of Sao Paulo's centre, left unkempt for a long period of time when other sectors had the opportunity to progress. The centre offered fewer advantages in comparison to the enterprises being launched in different parts of the city. Unattractive, the centre depreciated. However, the city has reached a peak in terms of its urban sprawl, and investing in the centre may be once again opportune.

In that manner, Sao Paulo may differ from other cities in the world. An exclusive city centre is not always a disputable trait. The aspect of exclusiveness in suburbs and "peripheral" centres, more common in some American cities, can be seen in Sao Paulo. Still, some exclusive addresses in the city are adjacent to the centre. Luz allows for a discussion of uncertainty and reconstruction.

Finally, politically speaking, Luz portrays different perceptions of the government. In a country with a history of corruption, the State is commonly associated with massiveness, inefficiency and paternalism. The takeover of a region of Sao Paulo by a private consortium was endorsed by the great majority of the population. Besides the popular belief of the indisputable efficiency of private sectors, the Nova Luz Project targets the middle class. They often felt abandoned by the most recent governments of Brazil. Complaining about benefits erroneously given to the poor "with their money" (the taxes they pay), the *sociedade paulistana* (high-society

from Sao Paulo) usually discusses how they are in charge of the economy of Brazil, working and paying taxes, while others (mainly *nordestinos*) live by relying on social benefits.

The Failure of Planning and the Exhaustion of Participation

One of the most important dimensions emerging from my analysis of the never completed Nova Luz Project is not only a dispute over urban space, but also as a case about the gradual exhaustion of planning promises themselves. The project initially appeared as part of a broader Brazilian confidence in participatory planning after the City Statute of 2001. In theory, Brazilian cities would increasingly be redesigned through consultation, social inclusion and democratic engagement. Yet Nova Luz exposed how participation itself could become procedural, performative and ultimately distrusted.

The project therefore reveals a wider shift in urban politics. Earlier forms of Brazilian urbanism, particularly modernist planning, were heavily dependent on the authority of technical expertise and state-centred visions of progress. Cities such as Brasília embodied the belief that architecture and planning could reorganise society itself (Holston 1989). Later reactions to modernism criticised precisely this distance between planners and inhabitants. Participation emerged as the corrective mechanism.

Yet participation introduced new contradictions rather than resolving older ones. As Andrade dos Passos (2010) demonstrates in her discussion of Brazilian master plans, participation often became trapped within what she calls a labyrinth of democracy. Public consultation did not necessarily produce consensus or hybrid urban visions. Instead, it frequently exposed unequal capacities for representation, conflict between stakeholders and mistrust regarding institutional intentions.

Nova Luz exemplified this condition. The project officially embraced participation, public hearings and transparency. Yet many residents interpreted these mechanisms as attempts to legitimise a process already

decided in advance. Participation therefore became associated not with empowerment, but with political capture.

This exhaustion of participatory discourse also reflected broader frustrations regarding urban governance in Brazil. In São Paulo, decades of failed interventions in the city centre produced scepticism regarding promises of revitalisation. The language of recovery, modernisation and inclusion became repetitive. Residents repeatedly heard that the centre would finally become safe, vibrant and socially integrated. Yet projects stalled, administrations changed and interventions remained incomplete.

Importantly, the failure of Nova Luz was not simply technical. It was symbolic. The project lost legitimacy because the promises underpinning it became increasingly difficult to sustain. The gap between official discourse and everyday urban experience widened.

What initially appeared as a large-scale urban transformation increasingly became another interrupted urban promise.

The idea of planning failure therefore requires qualification. Nova Luz did not fail because no planning occurred. On the contrary, the project generated enormous quantities of planning material: maps, projections, hearings, urban studies, legal instruments and promotional discourse. What failed was the ability to stabilise political legitimacy around a single future for the area.

This instability is particularly important because São Paulo itself is frequently represented through movement, productivity and acceleration. The city symbolises speed. Yet Nova Luz reveals another temporal structure operating underneath the city's image: delay, incompleteness, hesitation and waiting.

The centre of São Paulo became a space where plans accumulated faster than their implementation. In this sense, waiting itself became infrastructural. Residents waited for compensation, removal or housing. Traders waited for speculation to materialise or collapse. Researchers waited for projects to become intelligible. Even the state waited for legitimacy.

The political significance of refusal emerged precisely here. Residents increasingly recognised that slowing the process could itself become an effective strategy. Avoiding meetings, refusing participation and delaying negotiations prevented the state from consolidating symbolic closure around the project.

Participation therefore produced its own opposite. Rather than generating consensus, it generated strategic absence.

Participation, Boycott and the Politics of Waiting

One of the most revealing aspects of Nova Luz concerned participation. Officially, the project repeatedly invoked democratic consultation and public hearings. Participation became central to the legitimacy of the project. Yet many residents interpreted participation differently. Public meetings were frequently perceived as procedural rituals rather than spaces of meaningful influence. Decisions appeared already taken before consultation occurred. As a result, boycott emerged as a strategy. Residents avoided meetings because attending would legitimise the process and allow authorities to claim democratic endorsement.

This refusal complicates dominant assumptions surrounding participatory urbanism. Participation is often imagined as inherently empowering. Yet in Nova Luz, refusal itself became politically meaningful.

Slowing down the process became a form of resistance. Delays, absences, postponements and procedural interruptions prevented the consolidation of legitimacy.

Importantly, this resistance was not simply non-cooperation, fatigue and avoidance. It was almost always dramatic or publicly visible, through breaking microphones, blocking entrances and other forms of collective resistance. Refusal therefore interrupted the production of consensus. At the same time, waiting structured the experiences of nearly everyone involved. Residents waited for compensation, eviction or housing decisions. Traders waited to discover whether their businesses would survive. Public authorities waited for legal approval.

Waiting therefore emerged not as passive inactivity, but as a defining urban condition.

This temporal dimension is especially important because São Paulo is nationally represented as a city of acceleration. Traffic, finance, labour and consumption all reinforce images of speed and dynamism. Yet the centre reveals another city altogether: a city of unfinished plans, suspended futures and incomplete modernities.

Nova Luz exposes how planning itself may become trapped in uncertainty. Urban projects accumulate technical reports, hearings, maps and images while remaining fundamentally unresolved.

My own fieldwork became implicated in this temporality. Interviews were interrupted. Meetings disappeared. Alliances shifted unexpectedly. The incompleteness of the project became inseparable from the incompleteness of research itself. This experience fundamentally altered my understanding of ethnographic time. Waiting was not simply methodological frustration. It was part of the political reality being studied.

Conclusion

The Nova Luz Project reveals the contradictions of contemporary urban planning in Brazil. The project attempted simultaneously to modernise the city centre, attract investment, improve security and preserve democratic legitimacy. Yet these objectives repeatedly collided.

Urban revitalisation became inseparable from displacement. Cultural prestige became inseparable from exclusion. Participation became inseparable from distrust.

Most importantly, the project was never completed because it became politically costly. The combination of legal disputes, public criticism, policing controversies and social resistance undermined the project's legitimacy. When political administrations changed, the project itself became expendable.

The incompletion of Nova Luz, however, should not be understood merely as failure. The project reveals important truths about contemporary urban politics.

First, it demonstrates that urban planning cannot be reduced to technical expertise or architectural design. Urban interventions involve conflicting expectations regarding citizenship, property, modernity and belonging.

Second, the project reveals the limits of participation as a legitimising discourse. Residents resisted not only through visible mobilisation, but through avoidance itself. By refusing meetings and delaying procedures, they prevented authorities from easily claiming democratic consensus.

Participation, paradoxically, was successful through non-participation.

Third, the project exposes the centrality of waiting in urban life. Waiting for housing, waiting for expropriation, waiting for political decisions and waiting for projects that never arrive all shape everyday experiences in the city centre.

São Paulo therefore appears not only as a city of speed, but also as a city of strategic slowness. Behind the imagery of dynamism lies a deeply fragmented temporal reality marked by postponement, uncertainty and interrupted transformation.

The Nova Luz Project ultimately tells the story of an unfinished city. Not because São Paulo lacks movement, but because urban futures themselves remain contested.

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