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Housing Security: Placing Brazil's Social Housing Program in a Violent Context

FRANK I. MÜLLER 

COLLECTION:
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**POLICY
COMMENTARY**



ABSTRACT

Latin America's 'housing crisis' affects 28 million lower-income households. In many Latin American countries, governments have developed housing policies to provide access to basic standard dwelling and to offer a route towards legal tenure at an affordable cost. Yet, they have failed to address violence and crime that beneficiaries are often exposed to. I argue that housing policies must take stronger efforts in accounting for urban security. To sustain that argument, I will trace Brazil's attempts to provide a 'secure future for beneficiaries by providing equal access for all to physical and social infrastructure and basic services, as well as adequate and affordable housing' (UN Habitat 2017: 7). I refer to such policy directive as an incentive for national governments to pursue housing security. I primarily draw from academic literature on housing policies in Latin America, evaluations of Brazil's contemporary housing program, and media outlets, and use parts of my own interviews with public administrators and beneficiaries of the housing program. Designing routes towards housing security, first and foremost by reinforcing the constitutionally granted right to housing along with guaranteeing the social function of property, must be central concerns of Brazil's next federal government.

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According to United Nations Habitat, 1.8 billion people worldwide lack adequate housing. Setting out to safeguard universal access to adequate housing, the United Nations' New Urban Agenda (2017) names affordability, sustainability, and inclusiveness as targets for national urban policies. Revamping Friedrich Engels' impulse to conceive the housing question as a social one, the Agenda relates the material house and the metaphorical 'roof' over one's head, to environmental injustices and the unequal distribution of wealth. Yet, as I argue here, housing policy, and its socio-material project, must also include issues related to urban security. To sustain that argument, I look at Brazil's implementation of the Agenda's directive to provide a 'secure future for beneficiaries by providing equal access for all to physical and social infrastructure and basic services, as well as adequate and affordable housing' (UN Habitat 2017: 7). I refer to such policy directive as an incentive for national governments to pursue *housing security* – a concept that wishes to draw attention to a so far underexamined issue in literature on Brazil's housing policies.

Latin American housing policies are particularly interesting cases for studying housing security. Firstly, the 'housing crisis' affects 28 million lower-income households (Rojas 2019). In many Latin American countries, governments have developed housing policies to provide access to basic standard dwelling and to offer a route towards legal tenure at an affordable cost. Yet, secondly, they have failed to address the ongoing exposure of populations to violence and crime. Crime and violence particularly affect people living at the margins of urban Latin America (Auyero et al. 2015). This situation has worsened since the beginning of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Davis & Hilgers this issue). Residents' exposure to state violence and crime often continues after being rehoused to social housing developments as criminal organizations control many social housing developments in urban Latin America (Araújo 2018; Müller 2021).

This commentary aims at further developing the concept of *housing security*. After briefly outlining social housing policies in Latin America more generally, I will highlight Brazil's federal housing program *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (My House My Life or MCMV by its Portuguese acronym). Taking peripheral social housing developments in Rio de Janeiro as a case study example, I suggest that policies must more actively address security issues. In doing so, I primarily draw from academic literature on housing policies in Latin America, evaluations of Brazil's contemporary housing program, and use media outlets and parts of my own interviews with public administrators and beneficiaries of the housing program in Rio de Janeiro.

PROBLEMATIZING HOUSING IN LATIN AMERICA: SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND POLICY RESPONSES

Housing inequality is a visible phenomenon in Latin American cities. Luxury high-rises in São Paulo or Mexico City featuring huge balconies, pools, and green gardens, with their secured gates and impassable walls separate these elite residential communities from surrounding auto-constructed neighborhoods. Such imagery is an expression of the region's sharp social and economic inequalities which materialize through housing. These inequalities have deepened in most of Latin America's countries since the spread of neoliberal market reforms and real estate financialization in the 80's and 90's (Angotti 2017), as the financialization of housing favors investment and speculative logics splitting societies around the globe (Rolnik 2013). Both the financialization of the housing sector and increasing prices have further locked poorer residents into peripheral spaces, and prolonged the region's history of urban sprawl.

The resulting 'peripheral urbanization' (Caldeira 2017) places those residents center stage as political subjects, having to collectively engage as defendants of their house, home, and neighborhood. Settlements are often 'produced by the people' (Zárte 2017: 30) for whom the commodified formal housing market remains largely inaccessible. National policies, however, have turned towards the neoliberal marketization of housing, fostering home ownership models backed by loans for individual, also low-income households, especially since the influential World Bank report 'Housing: Enabling Markets to work' (World Bank 1993). Such micro-finance schemes often lead to an increased indebtedness of these households (Grubbauer 2020).

In turn, such indebtedness in many cases hinders upward social mobility. Consequently, housing has become a steering wheel in the reproduction of socio-economic and political inequalities.

This steering wheel, broadly speaking, can turn into two directions. Promising solutions, promoting citizen participation, came from the populations that are most affected by the housing deficit (those who cannot afford to buy or rent). Auto-construction, until today (Caldeira 2017), is seen as a viable route and common descriptor for integrational efforts of 'the urban poor' into the fabric of medium to mega-cities. To be sure, 'the urban poor in Latin America' (Fay 2005) are neither a homogeneous political subject, nor have they been led to act outside of structural and institutional arrangements. Since the 1970s, analyses have diversified and improved state policies that foster assisted self-help housing in Latin America (Ward 1978; Klaufus 2010; do Lago 2011; Grubbauer 2020). John Turner's call for supporting individuals and housing collectives to self-build and improvise their houses and neighborhoods has been paradigmatic in this regard (Turner 1976). Attempting to overcome technocratic and state-led top-down solutions to the housing deficits, the call was for state- and NGO-assisted participatory integration, producing new institutional arrangements (Ward 2012).

The second direction the wheel can turn is towards the state-led construction of residential developments on medium and large scales. Mass housing developments, producing housing without socio-spatial integration into the urban surrounding, can be found on the continent since the early 1970s (Budds et al. 2005). Early housing macroprojects were intended to promote affordable housing throughout the region. They faced, however, a set of challenges including the availability of cheap land only on the urban margins (Santoro 2011; Ward 2003; Camargo 2013; de Duren 2018) and decreasing public investment into the housing stock in relation to the GDP (i.e., Fleury 2017). Critical analyses turned towards the policy's limitation to subsidize housing only for citizens in formal employment relations, often leaving out the lowest-income sectors. In addition, state-initiatives to subsidize households were often running behind the fast-increasing prices for land, urban services, and real estate (Murray & Clapham 2015: 355). This combination of state investment, increasing prices for developable land, and the availability of large plots of land ready for building large quantities of housing units, continues to drive private developers to construct in peripheries far away from urban centers. Furthermore, the cost saving material imperative of standardized low-cost housing favors the monofunctional, or in many cases dysfunctional architecture of national mass housing schemes, reducing social housing policies to building simply a place to sleep (i.e. Santo Amore et al. 2015; Vergara et al. 2019).

To address these issues, while avoiding over-generalizations, the next section will zoom into the Brazilian context and Brazil's federal social housing program, My House My Life (MCMV), and then center on the case of Rio de Janeiro.

BRAZIL'S STRATEGY: MINHA CASA MINHA VIDA AND THE RETRACTING STATE

In this section, I will review critical evaluations of Brazil's housing policy. The Brazilian Constitution guarantees a right to housing. The City Statute (Estatuto da Cidade) further reinforces the social function of property (Lopes Martins 2019), balancing an individual's right to property against the obligation to make use of the commodity in favor of the wider society. However, the social function of *housing* has fallen victim to the logic of a 'neoliberal state' (Harvey 2005). A neoliberal state's agenda, in theory, seeks to maintain the monopoly of violence while granting the most freedom to individual and corporate property. As private sectors drive housing policies, real estate developers' and private investors' interests, to further commodify the real estate market (Maricato 2017; Rolnik 2016), have pushed housing developments further away from city centers onto cheaper land (Libertun de Duren 2018). In addition, as I will explore in depth in the next section, it is this dislocation and the materiality/architecture of the developments that, taken together, favor criminal governance structures and, paradoxically, undermine the state's housing agenda.

Brazil's housing program MCMV (My House, My Life) started in 2009 and was closed in 2021 under Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. It is a clear example of a public-private partnership. At its core, it is a federal civil construction and development program forged by the Ministry of Cities

under the 2008 federal Growth Acceleration Program (PAC). State and municipal authorities are formally responsible for overseeing land use regulations, the respect for environmentally protected areas, and the coordination of housing developments with urban masterplans (*planos diretores*). MCMV followed on a series of prior housing programs since the country's democratization in the later 1980s (Valença & Bonates 2010), all of which favored growth-oriented policies through housing. Yet, most of the decision power was turned over to the financing bank, Caixa Econômica Federal (CEF) and private companies, leaving little influence and control over the distribution of housing units and the location of housing developments to local planning authorities (*secretarias*).

MCMV was implemented as a response to the global financial crisis, thus following a call for supporting individual homeownership and mortgages. MCMV is arguably the biggest homeownership, building, and mortgage subsidy program ever instituted. The first phases produced 4.3 million units with construction contracts for another 5.7 million by 2019 (UOL 2019). Primarily directed to assist the lowest income groups, 40% of these units were constructed for households with zero to three minimum monthly incomes (*faixa 1*), 40% for low-income (*faixa 2*), and 20% for low-middle income families (*faixa 3*) (UOL 2019). Later phases however, turned around this ratio. While most of the candidates for the MCMV program belong to the lowest-income-sector, this sector only received 30% of the program's budget during its third phase. Most units were directed at low-income households (*faixa 2*). Constructing mainly for these, and for the low-middle income sector, the program could still meet its targets in terms of constructed units but at a lower cost as higher income groups receive less to no state subsidies. Researchers thus concluded that the program served as a state-authored countercyclical stimulus for the labor- and capital-intensive construction sector (Fernandes & Novy 2010). In the first years, the program created 3.5 million jobs (Lonardoni 2016: 52).

To counter land speculation, the City Statute (Estatuo da Cidade) defined planning tools to guide municipal authorities. As high demand for plots that are large enough to build larger quantities of housing units has led to increased prices, even for land far out of city centers (Ferreira 2012), those planning tools would have mitigated the effects of speculation. Yet, even where a city's master plan has outlined Special Zones of Social Interest (ZEIS) – reserving central, more expensive plots for social housing projects – none of such projects produced housing for the lowest income sector (Pequeno & Freitas 2013). In result, state subsidies have triggered private investment and speculation and the MCMV program has engendered adverse incentives.

Various evaluations highlight negative outcomes related to the peripheral location of the low-cost housing units such as loss in land for agricultural use and environmental degradation in formerly surrounding green areas (Biderman et al. 2018). Furthermore, condominium location, as well as geographical and infrastructural disconnection, leads to rising costs for transportation to commute. In addition, MCMV developments have left many residents disarticulated from urban politics (see also Bonduki 2009; Ferreira 2012; Cardoso & do Lago 2013). Only a minority of MCMV developments are organized via the sub-program 'Entidades'. This foresees to actively include future beneficiaries in the construction process, thereby expecting to foster a stronger social cohesion of the resettled community (Stiphany and Ward 2019). Built in locations that are disconnected from urban services and infrastructure, MCMV projects house populations in areas with less formal labor opportunities in proximate surroundings (Ribeiro & Silveira 2020). As former UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing and urban planner Raquel Rolnik summarizes: 'Our deficit is not so much one of housing units as one of urbanity' (Rolnik 2016).

To be clear, MCMV has given many households without ownership rights access to the formal housing market. Yet, it has also dragged many low- and moderate-income people into greater mortgage debt. In particular those who can hardly afford to pay back, due to low incomes and minimal, if any, labor protection (UOL 2019). Beneficiaries of the lowest income group, the *faixa 1*, who receive the highest state subsidiary, are required to pay 5% of their monthly formal or informal income for up to 30 years after which they receive the title to their house. Without that, they are neither allowed to sell nor to sublet their house. Studies demonstrate that failure to meet this requirement is widespread, being the case for up to 90% of households in some MCMV projects (Acolin et al. 2019). The reasons for such failure are diverse. One of the reasons

behind many households' factual failure to pay back the loan is the presence of organized crime and related violent displacement, as the next section will further detail.

HOUSING AND CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN RIO DE JANEIRO'S PERIPHERY

MCMV may have built millions of houses, but it has neither incentivized social, economic, or political integration of the residents into their new environment, nor has it established means for fostering inner-community ties of the cohabitating populations (Becerril 2017; Stefani 2021). These unfavorable social conditions combined with social housing developments' peripheral location – that is, distance from other services and employment opportunities – offer organized criminal groups a fertile ground to expand their business portfolios towards real estate markets. This way, people rehoused to social housing developments are often exposed to similar exploitative and violent factors as they had experienced in their former neighborhoods. The effects for low-income populations – the primary beneficiaries of state-financed social housing programs – include economic loss, personal insecurity, and limited political participation.

Violence at the urban margins of Latin America takes many forms, from militarization (Müller 2012), via racialized police violence (Alves 2016), to police-criminal collusion with organized crime (Arias 2006; Arias 2017). The urban margins are also under attack from more quotidian and interpersonal expressions of violence (Moser et al. 2006; Auyero et al. 2015), including gendered domestic violence (Gutierrez & Delgado, this issue). Most often, violence is related to the presence of criminal actors and their violent repression by state forces, which (dis)organizes social, political, and economic life at the urban margins (Alves 2016). Local criminal powers extend their territorial influence in social housing developments through fighting, the violent recruitment of new group members, and the forced expulsion of families from their apartments.

Exposure to crime and violence is an expression of social inequity. While a huge share of Rio de Janeiro's residents perceives their city as figuring among the most violent ones in the world, the factual exposure to violence is distributed very unequally (Igarapé 2017). More than half of all homicides in the city occur in only two percent of the urban territory. The Baixada Fluminense (River Lowlands), while not a formally recognized region, comprises of 13 municipalities and is home to close to four million inhabitants. Known as the city's 'suburban periphery' (Abreu 2010), it is often associated with very high homicide rates, which have oscillated between 40.3 to 70.4 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants over the last 20 years (ISP 2021). Alongside drug trafficking factions, militias have taken stronger foothold in this area too. The abundant violence has historical roots and a racialized face as its victims are overrepresented among the poor black population (Forum Grita Baixada 2022; Rodrigues 2017).

Interestingly, however, Hirata et al. (2022) shows that violent police raids occur disproportionately less in militia-controlled social housing condominiums in Rio de Janeiro. The authors suggest that such differentiated policing is due to militias' strong personal links with local politicians and police personnel, institutionalizing criminal governance structures. This observation is backed by social movements (IDMJR 2020), suggesting that, in line with a long-observed liaison between right-leaning politicians and the military police, militias benefit from an illicit, yet institutional, protection (Ramalho 2020).

Criminal governance is a mode of governing people and territory that is embedded within ongoing negotiations and violent contestations of territorial control (Denyer Willis 2015; Lessing 2021; Ferreira & Gonçalves 2022). Police and tax authorities, and in the case of social housing developments also the respective municipal secretaries, are present in quotidian issues. So are other authorities. These are not always opposed to state authorities, that is, the police, tax authorities, or municipal secretaries. Rather, they can be 'cooperative crime-state arrangements based on corruption, alliance against other armed threats, or outright crime-state integration' (Lessing 2021: 855). Such 'collaborations' (Arias 2019) can also lead to situations in which criminal actors benefit from state interventions and investments, as it has often been observed in favelas and, more recently, in social housing developments (ISER 2018).

In Rio, militias (*milícias*) regulate the sale and rental markets of social housing units in MCMV condominiums and the access to urban services (Araújo 2019; Petti 2020; Araújo and Petti in this issue) in addition to driving illicit urbanization on the urban fringes (Müller 2021). *Milícia*, in the specific context of Rio de Janeiro, is a term that is used to distinguish armed groups composed of (former) policemen predominantly. *Milícias* are more closely tied to state security forces, due to the personal biographies of their members, but also their longer history and origin in state-supporting and -supported death squads (Souza Alves 2003). The gated community-like structure of MCMV blocks, with surveilled entrances and clearly legible arrangements of parking lots, houses, and fences facilitates the enforcement of law-and-order practices through which militias expand their influence (Arrigoitia 2017).

As Hirata et al. (2022) demonstrates, in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, militias and drug traffickers are active within and closely around most of the social housing developments. While the data source – filed complaints by residents via a telephone hotline – does not secure 100% reliable data on the organizational structure behind the observed illicit activity and the distinction of militias from other criminal factions, the general fact of criminal organizations' presence (be it militias or factions) in these formally and state-produced spaces is alarming. Media research confirms that extortion and the violent expulsion of residents from MCMV apartments have intensified for years (i.e., Soares 2021; Monken 2018), both by militia groups and drug trafficking factions (Araújo 2019).

Yet it is largely the militias who have developed an alternative real estate market within the boundaries of their territorial influence. This 'market' benefits from violent acts and threats also links to the regulatory characteristics of the MCMV program. Taking a closer look into reported cases in which either drug trafficking gangs or militias control the MCMV reveals insights into the institutional complexities aggravating housing insecurity. Militias take an administrative role inside the condominiums, i.e., ruling who may use the parking lot or the common areas for barbecue or parties (ISER 2018). Furthermore, illicit markets expand towards covering daily necessities, such as electricity, water, and gas (Benmergui & Gonçalves 2019). Descriptions of militia-controlled MCMVs usually involve their violent imposition, forcing residents to accept their rules and offerings or, alternatively, to accept violent expulsion (ISER 2018: 58).

The resettlement trajectory of MCMV beneficiaries aggravates the alternative real estate market's hardships. About half of MCMV residents receive an apartment through resettlement away from risk areas (Mazza et al. 2019), rather than via the program's financialized leg. This often leaves affected populations no choice as to the location of their future apartment. The lottery through which most beneficiaries enter the program, which is run by the program's financial organ, the Caixa Econômica, further contributes to the arbitrary place of relocation. Families originating from different neighborhoods under the control of competing criminal factions are then sometimes housed into the same development, building, or even on the same corridor (Interview with employee at the municipal secretary for infrastructure in Nova Iguaçu, May 2019; ISTOE 2015). Only if they can offer detailed proof of being menaced or treated aggressively by gang members inhabiting their housing block or condominium, can they file for replacement (Interviews with residents in an MCMV project in Nova Iguaçu, April 2019).

For the region of Nova Iguaçu, the interviewed secretary's employee reported a total of five cases with these characteristics at the time (2019). The more frequent case being that residents find a way to informally sublet or sell their apartment, often following from a combination of force or aggression against them by the same group that offers to buy the apartment below market-value. Complicating issues, in case of lowest and lower income groups and their respective financial support scheme, such sale is not only informal but also illegal as beneficiaries do not hold property titles before the loan is fully paid back (usually after 10 to 30 years). As a result, beneficiaries often end up selling to a criminal organization and returning to the place from where they had been resettled or they search for another place from then on without the right to claim an apartment via the MCMV program.

Given the increased expenditures for urban services after resettlement, additional difficulties occur and bring forth offers through illicit markets. A resident of a MCMV condominium in Duque de Caxias reports that they do have a choice whether to use a connection to the formal electricity grid, or to the *gato* – a form of informal electricity provision known from

the *favelas*. While in the *favelas*, a formalized electricity connection is oftentimes a ticket to formalize citizenship rights (Pilo' 2021), in MCMV citizenship is no longer a primarily aspired achievement given the formalized process of property titling a beneficiary enters by moving into an apartment. Yet, economic considerations might still turn residents to the informal electricity service offer, usually run by militias: the *gato* remains much cheaper.

In sum, the continued influence of criminal governance in state-led mass social housing further complicates a secure future for beneficiaries. Indeed, as the Rio case shows, residents of new social housing complexes see themselves exposed to similar exploitative and violent factors as known from their precarious neighborhoods of origin. Here, criminal actors offer urban services and paid protection, as well as an alternative real estate market.

FINAL REMARKS: PLACING SECURITY ON THE AGENDA FOR ADEQUATE HOUSING

In capitalist societies, social housing policies offer governments a way to mitigate the effects of stark inequalities. However, within social housing developments, increased exposure to crime and violence continue to shape the livelihood of poorer populations (Arjona 2021). As states attempt to improve the safety of relocated residents and to mitigate the effects of social inequalities, which are broadly challenged by militias and other criminal groups, social housing policies must be subjected to a more scrutinized critique of their failures to live up to such promises, namely, to offer *housing security*.

Housing security can be defined as a socio-political situation in which the house becomes a place of protection *from*, and also *to engage with* threats and uncertainties (Müller 2020; Segura 2020). As housing developments remain embedded within preexisting (criminal) power structures, struggles for improving housing security are exposed to a combination of challenges. Uncertain tenure and exposure to crime and violence, as well as the peripheral location, undermine such attempts. The peripheral location removes the condominiums from their surroundings. Weak societal cohesion, additionally results from the arbitrariness in rehousing families originating from diverse places. The privatization of services, including the rising costs, call on stage 'alternative', often illicit, providers and finally, the necessity to (re) sell while the program lacks a legal option for this, weaves a structure of opportunities for illicit actors to perform real estate sales activities, producing an alternative real estate market.

The New Urban Agenda has not satisfyingly incentivized national governments to implement housing policies that also foster housing security. Housing is still often reduced to a commodity disconnected from questions about its 'how' and 'where'. In that sense, a Renewed Urban Agenda should treat housing as a 'right' (Turok & Scheba 2019) to (live in) urban security. This way, granting the 'right to housing' can be a vehicle for broader urban inclusion and social citizenship. To secure this right, policy makers need to recognize political power imbalances and criminal alliances at grassroots, neighborhood, and municipal levels; more broadly, speaking with Abigail Friendly, placing housing security within such an agenda would attempt to materialize urbanites' rights to 'physically access, occupy and use urban space' (2020: 307). Yet under what conditions residents in large-scale social housing compounds can form stronger collective political agency, similar to auto-constructed neighborhoods, remains to be studied.

Despite or perhaps due to their deficiencies, social housing programs often *do* offer beneficiaries routes to become 'political agents' (Caldeira 2017: 3), sometimes they even urge them to do so. Housing security encompasses a 'political materiality' (Pilo' & Jaffe 2020), offering opportunities and necessities for the formation of political subjectivities. Demanding the fulfillment of the constitutional right to housing therefor involves demands to improve urban security. Housing security is a pressing issue that, based on one's own (new) place in a housing project allows to collectively interfere in wider urban, and national, politics (Stefani 2021). Such struggles for housing security would be well integrated in a new version of '*autogestão*' (Stiphany & Ward 2019) within a re-budgeted sub-program MCMV-*Entidades* (D'Ottaviano 2021). Placing housing security centrally on such a grassroots urban agenda would further allow beneficiaries to foster collective urban management organized around an 'ethos of social emancipation' (Stiphany & Ward 2019: 313). The roof over one's head, the apartment or house is then a place from where beneficiaries steer attempts to secure their own place in the city. However, a renewed

participatory leg of a social housing policy must foresee measures that circumvent negative exploitative strategies that aim at luring ‘neighbors away from well-served communities they have collectively constructed over decades’ (Friendly & Stiphany 2019: 279).

A new MCMV program, possibly reversing its termination during Bolsonaro’s presidency in 2021, should therefore carefully assess social movements’ as well as scholarly critiques to its shortcomings. Even though the social housing program MCMV was not directly implemented to protect or defend residents against criminal groups it should be held accountable for failing to provide housing security. As a (social) housing policy, it claimed to be not only *growth-oriented*, but directed at shaping the *social urban fabric*, too. Thus, it is responsible for pursuing the well-being, socialization, and productivity of urban citizens. As a social and political project of the Workers’ Party (PT) government, leading Brazil until 2018, the program failed to integrate the poorer population into the city, to improve their social mobility and to decrease their exposure to criminal violence. To avoid the further disillusion of left-leaning parties’ votership, a renewed social housing policy must take social movements and scholarly critiques seriously, based on a rigorous assessment of local criminal governance structures as well as of the collusions of state and non-state actors in producing housing insecurity. Such critiques have emphasized that MCMV projects have in many cases even worsened the living conditions of resettled urban residents (Stefani 2021). As organized criminal groups weaponized housing – expanding illegal markets to social housing developments and turning these into battlegrounds in territorial confrontations – social housing policies’ aims are further challenged. Designing routes towards housing security, first and foremost by reinforcing the constitutionally granted right to housing along with guaranteeing the social function of property, must therefore be central concerns of Brazil’s next federal government.


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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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