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Autoconstruction in Working-Class Brazil

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The ideologues of Brazil's industrialization have long advanced home ownership as a recipe for disciplining the work force. They argue that it brings social stability and moral development to the "dangerous classes." Over the last 50 years, however, millions of workers have become home owners through a radicalizing process called autoconstruction (*autoconstrução*), in which they build their own houses in the urban hinterland under precarious material and legal circumstances. These conditions politicize them, becoming core issues of grassroots organizations and social movements. At the same time, autoconstruction is a domain of symbolic elaboration about the experience of becoming propertied and participating in mass consumer markets, in which both ruling-class and working-class ambitions for developing new social identities intersect. This elaboration occurs in the context of what is for most autoconstructors their greatest lifetime project: the transformation over decades of an initial shack of wood or concrete block into a dream house—a finished, furnished, and decorated masonry home.

This article considers autoconstruction as an arena of such spatial, political, and symbolic mobilizations in Brazil. Its thesis is that the experience of the autoconstructed hinterland engenders political actions about residence and aesthetic judgments about houses through which the working classes develop new kinds of social agencies and subjective capacities that not only subvert historically ascribed incapacities but paradoxically actualize the new hegemonies of modern industrial society. Thus, the impact of autoconstruction is complex: it replaces what are in fact outmoded geographic, political, and personal identities among the working classes with updated industrial versions. To make these points, I first establish the spatial and historical contexts in which autoconstruction became important in Brazil. I then analyze the political significance of autoconstruction, arguing that it generates an expansion of the field of the political to include a new set of issues clustered around the home concerning daily life, the personal, and urban space. Finally, I discuss its aesthetic significance as a public idiom that the working classes construct to express their participation in modern consumer society, in which house transformations provide people with a model of change itself.

I refer to the working classes, and not only to the subset of actual house builders, because above all autoconstruction is about the future, about the possi-

bility of someday having a house of one's own with the security and sense of accomplishment that people believe this entails. It is thus a realm of desire, with marketable fascinations, which deeply involves those who do not yet have a place of their own. This involvement engrosses the working poor, including renters and squatters, not only out of economic necessity, but also out of social and consumer ambition. By aesthetics, I refer to a field of judgments concerning sense discriminations about the world that are more performative than constative, to use Austin's distinction; that is, they do not identify some property in the object independent of the conventions of a particular ~~perceptual~~ culture, but rather create, report on, and confirm our capacities, powers, faculties, and feelings to make such evaluations. In such terms, aesthetic judgments are embodiments of the imaginary representations we construct about our conditions of existence. In no way, therefore, do I use aesthetics to mean something removed from the practical.

Autoconstruction is not, of course, the only arena in Brazil of the changes I discuss. Spirit possession cults and law (the latter especially related to property rights and therefore to autoconstruction) are others. But I suggest that for millions of working-class Brazilians the experience of the autoconstructed house in the urban periphery crystallizes in an especially legible, public, and urgent way their experience of modern society and their images of a better future. This is to argue that autoconstruction engages them in the modern knowledge-world through an essentially new sense of agency, both political and personal. In so doing, they autoconstruct self-images of competence and knowledge that counter and replace those of disrespect and worthlessness that have historically subjugated them to a denigrated sense of their own persons. Nevertheless, the paradox of autoconstruction is that it develops through the reiteration of the kinds of property relations that ground the very social order that exploits them as workers. Although this reproduction changes what is reproduced, I argue that it also expands its scope and power by inscribing it in new places.

Autoconstruction: The Periphery in Space and Society

The term autoconstruction refers to the house-building activity of the poor within a specific set of historical and spatial circumstances, namely, the phenomenal growth of the so-called urban peripheries around Brazil's metropolitan centers over the last five decades. A brief look at the development of the peripheries of São Paulo and Brasília will illustrate the ways in which this type of formation embodies the social stratifications of Brazil's industrial modernity. This social production of space politicizes those exiled to the periphery and becomes a central theme of their aesthetic concerns.

Autoconstruction occasioned the development of the hinterland around São Paulo when it emerged as a supposed solution to the housing crisis of the 1940s. This crisis resulted from a combination of two factors: as the city began to draw a flood of poor migrants to its industries, the basis of its market in new housing changed from rent to ownership.¹ The state encouraged this shift through a variety of market interventions. One was rent control in the form of the Renters Law of

1942, which discouraged investments in new rental units by freezing rents well below inflation for two decades; another was a series of master urban plans to remodel the center of the city and to open the periphery through road construction; and a third was the creation of federally funded banks that were supposed to enable workers to become home owners but that, for various and mostly ignoble reasons, failed to do so. As a result, investors lost interest in cheap rental units in centrally located tenements and row houses—the initial mode of housing for the urban lower classes. Instead, autoconstruction became the focus of several class trajectories. Industrialists ceased calculating rent into salary considerations and began promoting the idea of home ownership for the labor force as a means not only to anchor and discipline workers but also to create a mass consumer market for building and household commodities.² As new kinds of investors in tract real estate and transportation arose to open the periphery for house construction, the working poor were pushed out of the city and into the empty hinterland to build for themselves.

Tethered to city jobs, São Paulo's workers have therefore confronted a dual residential dilemma for half a century: lacking other options, they have to build their own houses; but to find an accessible plot of land for that house, they have to go ever farther out into the periphery. On the fringes of this fringe, where the only infrastructure they find is the dirt road that speculators open to sell the land, they become modern pioneers of city-building. The force of these necessities drives the expansion of the urban periphery at astonishing rates, as millions of workers put up shacks of concrete block or wood and then spend decades transforming them into finished homes. Today, I estimate that over half the residents of the municipality of São Paulo, about 5.5 million people, live in the city's hinterland.

As I have detailed elsewhere (Holston 1989), the development of Brasília's periphery perpetuates the policy of exclusion upon which the city was founded. Government planners intended to build an exclusively bureaucratic capital that would be free from the disorders of other Brazilian cities. Paradoxically, however, their policies required planning instruments that were constitutive of these disorders and that therefore reproduced them. To preserve the government's initial objectives, for example, planners limited residence in the modernist city to those with the requisite status of public functionary (at whatever level, from janitor to minister) or elected official. As a result, even before the capital was inaugurated in 1960, they had to create an impoverished periphery of satellite cities to accommodate those legally excluded from the privileged center. The satellites filled up quickly with construction and service workers, government employees without civil service standing, merchants, and the unemployed, while the center—called the Plano Piloto to distinguish it from the hinterland—remained only partially built and occupied. Thus, the government created a dual social order among Brazilians by a principle of status differentiation that generated, and was starkly symbolized by, a spatial dichotomy between center and periphery.

When the government created an open housing market in the Plano Piloto by selling most of its residences in 1965, the distinctions between the two spatially

in which usurpation initiates settlement and precipitates the legalization of land claims (see Holston 1991). Anticipating this process, squatter organizations often require residents to subdivide and build according to legal regulations so that their seizures appear little different from more legal subdivisions in terms of spatial organization and building materials. On the other hand, those who purchase lots often discover that in one form or another their titles are irregular or illegal. Victims of fraudulent sales, they are accused of squatting and threatened with eviction by those who claim to own the land. With their once property-secured future clouded, they become, like squatters of all sorts, reluctant to expand or remodel their houses until their legal predicament is resolved—which may be impossible or at least take decades—though their desire to renovate is evident in their interest in interior decoration and their accumulation of consumer goods.

Considering these several convergences of identity, it seems more reasonable to use the term autoconstruction to refer to a variety of land occupations and tenure situations that share two attributes: first, that of a particular social production of space in which the need to build a house represents the builder's relations to a set of conditions that we might call peripheral urbanization; and second, that of house building as the figure or measure of an imagined future quite different from those conditions.

Most people who move to the periphery can afford neither to buy a finished house nor to live somewhere else during the construction of their own. Therefore, they typically buy or seize a lot, build a simple wooden or concrete-block house of one or two rooms, and move into it. At that moment begins a long transformation, one of expansion, remodeling, and commodity acquisition, the objective of which is to turn the precarious dwelling into a definitive masonry house. Since neither bank nor government loans are available, it takes a very long time to complete, usually between 10 and 20 years. On weekends, holidays, and after work, the process is carried out at the initiative of each family with the help of relatives, friends, neighborhood groups, and occasionally the services of a building professional. In the two most common varieties of transformation, people either live in a wooden shack in one part of the lot while building the masonry house in another, or they construct a rudimentary house of concrete block, which they transform while living in it (see Figures 1 and 2). In a third type, people buy a government-built pattern house in a peripheral subdivision and remodel it.

These transformations have a fundamental significance in modern Brazil because they are the means through which the periphery itself develops: they generate the evolution of a neighborhood as they accompany the biographic formation of individual families. Thus, the newest and most outlying neighborhoods have the most precarious dwellings and the poorest and youngest families. As these families grow in size and financial security, they transform their houses, which urbanizes the neighborhood, and that in turn displaces the fringe of the periphery to new areas of the hinterland. In the context of this unbalanced ecology, house transformations have a twofold significance to which we now turn: they politicize residents—exposing them to new kinds of political identities and actions, as well as to new forms of domination—and they provide them with a kind of cognitive

distinct status groups changed. Those who previously had no rights to Plano Piloto residence were able to buy in. However, like status, the new criterion of wealth also restricted access to the Plano Piloto, for it meant that lower-echelon and therefore lower-income government employees were ultimately denied the possibility of living there. Those who had been assigned apartments were gradually bought out; those recruited to lower-level positions after 1965 had no choice but to live in the periphery. To accommodate the displaced functionaries, the military regimes that took command in Brasília after 1964 built tens of thousands of subsidized units in the satellite cities, called pattern or popular houses, based on standard designs. This policy contradicted the initial objectives of Brasília's residential organization for it segregated the lower-echelon functionaries in the periphery far from the center where they work and consolidated the Plano Piloto for the upper income and status strata. Thus, although not as exclusively, and along somewhat different lines, the combined effects of the government's housing policy and the real estate market perpetuated Brasília's social and spatial dichotomies after the privatization of public residences.

In both São Paulo and Brasília, therefore, the construction of spatial relations between center and periphery is constitutive of the lived experiences of social stratification. Though not an absolute correlation, distance from the center in both cities is a measure of one's place in a highly stratified order and thus of one's prospects for the future. It is a means by which Brazilians deduce important social facts about each other, such as type of residence, nature of employment, approximate standard of living, and quality of daily life. If we were to plot these factors in terms of distance from the center of São Paulo or the Plano Piloto, each would display the brutal disparities of nearly straight-line correlations. These plots indicate the perversity with which space correlates with life chances in Brazil and thus the logic by which its society is organized in space. Buying land in the periphery to build a house of one's own is therefore paradoxical: it reproduces the periphery, pushing its leading edge farther into the hinterland; but in so doing, it brings the center and its promise of a different future that much closer to the individual house builder.

As the poor have always built their homes, the term autoconstruction arose in Brazil to distinguish those who went to the periphery to become property owners—those who bought, in other words, rather than squatted on house lots. The term also signifies, therefore, the kind of commitment to and imagination about the future that property ownership engenders. These distinctions are significant in relation to the classic squatter settlement, the illegal *favela*, of jumbled shacks and raw sewage, of police assaults and government eradication. However, with respect to highly organized, politically sponsored or church-backed land seizures—such as the Sem Terra (Without Land) Movement—they become less meaningful for several reasons. On the one hand, organized seizure prompts a confrontation with legal authority in which squatters usually succeed in legalizing their claims. In Brasília, São Paulo, and other Brazilian cities, such illegal residence is in fact a reliable way to win legal access to land and housing. Thus, urban peripheries in Brazil generally develop through cycles of seizure and legitimization

map of change itself, calibrated in terms of aesthetic judgments about house architecture and interior decoration.

The Politics of Property and the Politicization of Daily Life

It may not be an exaggeration to say that in contemporary Brazil issues of residence more than those of labor galvanize long-term collective interests among working-class people. There are several reasons for this possibility, some concerning the nature of labor organization and others the strengths of residential affiliations. Union membership is low and work loyalties weak in the face of overwhelming job insecurities, depressed wages, and illegal hiring practices; rapid job turnover among the unskilled erodes ties to unions because they are organized according to sectors of production; and, of course, the workplace is effectively disciplined, and labor conflicts repressed. In contrast, the house is a sphere of relative freedom, a refuge from the uncertainties and brutalities of the world outside—though obviously not from those of the domestic. Most important, however, residential issues rally workers into long-term grass-roots organizations because a large majority of them own their houses and focus not only their greatest consumer spending and material investment on ownership but also their sociability and public image. Home ownership anchors commitments, fosters long-term interests, and legitimates collective actions because it concerns issues that, even when deeply conflictual, have nearly universal sanction as fundaments of Brazilian social order—issues of property rights.

The politics of autoconstruction thus begins with the paramount importance of property ownership in the constitution of Brazilian society. Although its historical significance needs no reiteration here, it is important to note two basic changes in its scope. First, during the latter half of the 20th century, enormous numbers of poor Brazilians have for the first time become property owners. For workers as a class, a home of one's own is still an all-consuming struggle and lifelong ambition; but it is, despite the legal chaos in land tenure, more possible than ever. Second, ruling elites and government institutions have, for the first time as well, supported home ownership as a means to consolidate an urban labor force—though not, significantly, a rural one. Even considering the well-known frauds, deceptions, and perversities of their policies, they have in fact opened the arena of urban land conflict to the masses (see Holston 1991). Moreover, their ideologies of development have consistently valorized home ownership for workers as a foundation of social stability and morality. The point I want to emphasize is that, in addition to the redistribution of urban land, however legally complex, the intersection of these working-class and ruling-class interests in home ownership has had another, important consequence. Because all parties see the experience of home ownership as transforming the whole field of social relations, this intersection expands the field of the political to include a new set of issues clustered around the home, namely, daily life, the personal, and urban residential space. Although this expansion certainly has several other vital sources in the 1970s and 1980s—most significant, the efforts of minority movements (especially

feminism) and the Catholic church (principally its organization of neighborhood ecclesiastical communities)—the consensus on home ownership deeply legitimates this changing notion of the political.³

The politicization of domestic life in the periphery yields complex results: on the one hand, new and subversive political identities; on the other, new forms and technologies of political domination. The poor confront material and legal difficulties in autoconstruction that motivate them to undertake organized political action. The most common difficulties involve the fraudulent sale of house lots, which invalidates their titles, and the lack of basic urban services such as water, sewers, asphalt, schools, and health clinics. Everywhere, residents form into voluntary associations to demand the regularization of their deeds and the delivery of the services to which they are legally entitled as residents. These struggles generate new arenas of political action among the poor around issues of residence—those of housing, family, education, violence, women, and ecology, for instance—issues which, although marginal to the traditional political arena of men, labor, the state, and parties, have been more effective in mobilizing the working classes into grass-roots organizations in recent decades. Moreover, in pressing their residential demands collectively, many associations have achieved an unprecedented understanding of law and government as strategic resources to exploit, traditionally an upper-class perspective. Some have become remarkably skilled at approaching the bureaucratic and legal systems as a contest of tactics governed by circumstance rather than fixed principle, thus learning to engage the master at his own game. In this strategic opportunism, they overturn deferential patron-client relations to law and government and overcome traditional sources of humiliation.

Such residential mobilizations are, therefore, broadly subversive of longstanding power relations in urban Brazil. They galvanize new kinds of political identities because they establish the requisites of collective action and representation among those usually excluded from power. They provide autonomous organization and administrative procedures to regulate collective affairs, determine memberships and boundaries, intellectual resources, and collective ideologies. Although these new identities are strongest among neighborhood and movement leaders, I have no doubt that ordinary residents of the periphery are also transformed politically. Most often, that change develops among these humble and uneducated people as their collective struggles for residential survival generate a first-time awareness of some basic political notions: that they have a right to rights, the need to speak out, the ability to acquire through political practice what they lack in terms of formal education, and the power to change their lives— notions that as a class they have historically lacked. People often describe these transformations in terms of learning how to speak at public meetings of their neighborhood association. As one long-suffering woman from the periphery of São Paulo put it: "In the beginning, everybody was ashamed to speak because there were a lot of people in the room, and each was supposed to say something, and so we felt shy; but little by little we got the knack of loosing the shyness and of speaking about what we know, about what we see, about what we need." Es-

pecially for women, participation in social movements creates an important alternative to the isolation of traditional domestic life, generating a new public sphere of activity which in turn transforms their family lives (see Caldeira 1990). Thus, the politicization of daily life, to which autoconstruction has so significantly contributed, produces a new pattern of political organization in the urban periphery by sparking an unprecedented participatory experience in relatively autonomous representative associations and collective actions.

Having emphasized such change, however, I now raise a number of problems. It is not uncommon to find that, after achieving their objectives, residential organizations demobilize and their hard-won political identities dissolve.⁴ This may occur for many reasons. People may lose interest after victory, as I occasionally found in the cases I studied both in Brasília and in São Paulo. The technical agents that governments send to resolve collective demands tend to preempt the autonomy, authority, and function of the neighborhood organizations. Furthermore, although the struggle for residential rights generates new kinds of political participation, it may also reduce politics to material interests that can be satisfied within the existing system of social relations. It is also the case that in learning to approach the bureaucratic and legal system as a game based more on a logic of strategic confusion than resolution, grass-roots associations accept and perpetuate its perverse premises. For all of these reasons, some sectors of the Left in Brazil (such as factions of the Workers Party) tend to reject as opportunistic and untrustworthy those residential associations organized to obtain services and property rights.

Although they occasionally merit this accusation (as do some factions of the Left), there are good reasons not to overstate either their accomplishments or limitations. First, their objectives are often clearly circumscribed, and we should not ask that they achieve what they do not intend. This is especially meaningful because their victories produce significant benefits. Second, as the needs of the working poor are great, the organizations that develop in autoconstructed neighborhoods tend to be long-term and multi-focused. Specific goals usually take decades to realize, and although particular mobilizations may ebb, others arise among the same people. Moreover, some retire from residential activism to become engaged on other fronts, bringing their residential experiences to union work, party organization, or legal reform, to cite three examples of such redirection that I have followed for a number of years in São Paulo. If we take a view longer than most detractors have of the politicization of residence—since 1930 in São Paulo and 1956 in Brasília—it becomes possible to conclude that the changes in political consciousness that I stressed above are enduring *when* the quest for legal access to residential property and services is posed as a matter of political rights and not merely of government assistance. Where the latter is the case, as I found in Brasília (1989:271), the logic of further demands inhibits political actions to contest power relations upon which assistance is based. However, where people come to conceive of their residential struggles in terms of a right to rights, the politicization of daily life leads from an expanded sense of the field of politics to one of citizenship founded on radically new understandings of self and society.

Neighborhood struggles in the periphery are politically ambiguous, however, not because they may be opportunistic but because they expose the domains of the home and private life, previously realms of working-class experience relatively outside of politics, to the interventions of the state and the culture industries. They generate new possibilities of domination by providing new targets for what we have come to call the technologies of power. It was of course precisely this possibility that ruling elites had in mind in advocating home ownership for workers. Since the foundation of the modern Brazilian state in the 1930s, there has been a vast expansion of its interest and capacity to influence the off-work lives of the working classes. This expansion has come in many forms: government- and industry-sponsored research agencies, such as the Institute for the Rational Organization of Work (IDORT) founded in the 1930s, which studied working-class housing, domestic life, and consumer patterns; urban master plans such as the haussmannian Plan of the Avenues, implemented in 1938, which evicted the center of São Paulo and opened the periphery for mass settlement; legal instruments like the Renters Law, 1942–64, which encouraged the shift to ownership for low-income housing; and financial instruments for building houses such as the Popular Housing Foundation, the Social Welfare Institutes, and the National Housing Bank.

At the center of these initiatives is the attempt to penetrate and structure the domestic affairs of the working classes. They propose ways to link this sphere of local and intimate practices with the large-scale organizations of power and capital—by reaching into the neighborhoods not only through the institutions of bureaucracy, housing codes, taxes, police, education, and the like, but also through a large variety of discourses and images about home life, family, self, body, and consumer habits. Although such linkages have received some theoretical consideration in Brazilian studies of Foucault's genealogies of power, there are as yet few empirical studies. Though I suggest some of their ethnographic aspects in the next section, let us consider here the example of consumer credit, a foundational element of the working-class experience of modernity in Brazil.

As a vital means of sustaining the internal market for Brazilian industrial goods, consumer credit brings together state policy, entrepreneurial interests, and the masses. In comparison with other third world countries, Brazil is remarkable for the degree to which credit is made available to the poor—indeed I would hardly exaggerate in claiming that this availability is one of the reasons for Brazil's extraordinary modern development. At large department stores, poor people find credit for durable consumer goods, such as appliances, and for nondurables, such as clothes. From real estate speculators in the periphery, many of whom are swindlers, they buy land on installment plans. However, I have never heard of anyone purchasing an existing home on credit, except in the relatively rare cases when the government provides financing for low-income housing. Rather, building supply companies set up enormous warehouses in the periphery to advance on credit all the materials that the autoconstructor needs. Although evidence of a reasonably coherent employment history is required in awarding credit in all of these instances, the more important criterion is home ownership, not monthly in-

come. It is not because the store can take a lien against the house that home owners receive credit. Credit managers know that their deeds are mostly worthless. It is rather because the store correlates home ownership with certain moral qualities that make poor autoconstructors excellent risks despite unbelievably high interest rates. Indeed, the credit managers I interviewed all claimed that they were far better risks than middle-class customers for a simple reason: without credit they cannot be modern consumers, which means that they are doomed to a kind of destitution in the city; and with one black mark on their record, they have no credit. Without going into greater detail, the point I want to make is twofold. Organized around the needs of domestic life in the periphery, family indebtedness for almost all varieties of consumer items extends to the lowest ranks of the working classes. This indebtedness is fundamental to modern Brazilian society because it sustains a mass fascination with the aura of modernity embodied in the experience of consumption. In setting credit policies, state, business, and industry representatives generalize this experience by making it individually feasible. While their policies reflect existing patterns of behavior, they also establish correlations of property and morality, need and desire, and work and leisure, as norms for participating in modern consumer society.

There is thus a deeply structuring reciprocity in the politics of residence in the autoconstructed periphery. On the one hand, it involves the state in its obligations to citizens, an empowerment for those who struggle to assert their rights; on the other, it involves these people in a variety of obligations that submit them with long-term consequences to the norms of officially defined behavior.

The Aesthetics of Autoconstruction

Because autoconstructed houses in the periphery are always in the process of becoming something else, always being improved at such great sacrifice of energy and income, they are a staple of conversation: people are constantly making inventories of changes, and these inventories become the measure of many things. Their very incompleteness provides people with a model of change itself and with a mode of thinking about past experiences, present circumstances, and imagined futures. In this way, houses are both concrete embodiments and imaginary representations of people's relations to their conditions of existence. Moreover, they are "good to think" because they channel personal experience into a public idiom, architecture, which enables people to evaluate that experience through a precise vocabulary. This idiom is a visual calculus of appearances—a particular style of facade, certain decorations, the display of appliances, a specific finish or material, and so forth—widely intelligible as symbolic notations about self and society, present and future. These notations arguably constitute the most pervasive, enduring, and textured discourse the working classes elaborate to present their experience of modern Brazilian society.

Anthropologists have long focused on the house as a symbolic representation of the orders of lived experience—though rarely of its disorders. In fact, with respect to order, there is remarkable consensus in the literature about the nature

of this representation. In quite different ethnographic contexts, Bourdieu (1979), Cunningham (1964), Sahlins (1976), Tambiah (1969), and Turner (1955), among others, reach similar conclusions about the way that houses map social categories. For example, they concur, *mutatis mutandis*, that the "architecture of the house thus becomes a central grid to which are linked categories of the human and animal world" (Tambiah 1969:429) and that "the superstructure of the village community is traditionally the infrastructure of domestic construction" (Sahlins 1976:33). In an influential study of the poetic imagination, Bachelard (1964:xxxii-xxxiii) writes that "on whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being" and that "by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms' we learn to 'abide' within ourselves." Thus, domestic architecture structures our intimate thoughts and notions of self. Anthropologists have also emphasized that houses typically symbolize a principle of difference in which an opposition between inside and outside generates a structure of signification capable of being invested with contrasting values, such as private/public, kinship-familial/jural-political, female/male, and home/street.⁵ Most who comment on these symbolic orders and structurations describe them as unconscious in effect and implicit in language and design. They are "elemental signs with hidden meanings," writes Comaroff (1985:54) in her study of the Tswana house, structuring perceptions and actions by "invisibly turning the minds and bodies of those who people them to their inner logic . . . in ways that seldom attain the level of consciousness." In sum, if anthropology generally views the house as a language of being—to invert Heidegger's famous phrase—it has done so in terms of hallowed, tradition-bound design conventions that structure perception unconsciously and embody social relations more by principles of rote than interactive discourse.

Certainly, houses invisibly tune and deeply structure. Yet I want to emphasize the importance of a more superficial dimension of the house, that is, of the house as surface—as public facade, signboard, decorated wrapper, second skin. It is not too great a generalization to say that in modern mass societies of the most varying sorts, this dimension becomes a public medium through which individuals broadcast claims about themselves and comments about the presentations of others. Of course, some modern societies, especially Islamic ones, legally regulate the facades of both public and private buildings; others, like the United States, have strong cultural codes of conformity. But in many countries, such as Brazil, people of all classes view houses as primary opportunities for individuating symbolic practices—indeed, "house talk" is almost required discourse, and those who don't engage lose distinction. Across the social spectrum, people actively participate in the design of their houses, making domestic architecture in Brazil a privileged sign system for a literate public. Especially when house design and decoration are not disciplined by the rarifying standards of professional architects, they become systems of massively legible, highly competitive, and openly innovative communication.

People in poor autoconstructed neighborhoods are especially sensitive to domestic architectural signs, and their houses are especially eloquent, not only be-

cause they build houses, and therefore have considerable technical knowledge about them, but also because they talk about them passionately in terms of a system of aesthetic judgments. To understand these judgments is to grasp the relationship between their exterior concerns as visual discriminations and the sense of self and society they occasion. Such an understanding gives access not only to the construction of a public idiom about working-class life but also to its subjective experience. Although a detailed analysis of these judgments and their aesthetics requires another article, I want to consider one example to suggest how the autoconstructed house is a figure of aesthetic discrimination and how this becomes the ground for the construction of a discriminating self.

When I first met José, Terezinha, and their family, they had been living for almost ten years in a wooden shack at the back of a lot José had purchased in Sobradinho, a satellite city of Brasília (Figure 1). Their living conditions filled them with shame. In their hometown in the state of Minas Gerais, shacks were for animals, not people, and they had never imagined moving to “the capital of the future” to live in one. To make matters worse in the new city, their humble but respected family was not known by name; indeed, in a city of migrants, family names were not important markers of respect. Thus, Terezinha explained, “A house is everything to show that a person has means.” Understandably, building a respectable house was an all-consuming family ambition, finally initiated in 1979. When I saw their dream house a number of years later, its concrete-block shell stood on the front part of the lot, complete but uninhabitable (Figure 2). Knowing the importance of the house to them, I was surprised at their priorities: they had spent their resources decoratively finishing the front facade and entrance before starting the interiors. José quickly made me realize, however, that his new house was much more than a roof over his head: as long as he had the facade of his intentions to display, he could stand living in the shack at the back.

As I investigated autoconstruction, I found repeatedly that house builders in the periphery use their constructions to demonstrate that they are respectable, in spite of their grinding poverty. Above all, they want to distinguish themselves from squatters whom they consider—often in racist terms, though they may except those they know personally—depraved, dishonorable, and dirty. In this sense, the autoconstructed house is a symbolic means of creating differences among the poor. People use it to proclaim membership in a moral community. They achieve this self-promotion through a standard set of architectural and domestic elements. The gestures are simple, though I cannot explore them here in any detail: masonry as opposed to wood; a modern floor plan with formal divisions of space as opposed to the undivided or multipurposed space of shacks; certain pieces of furniture and appliances, such as a wall unit of shelves, a freestanding kitchen cabinet, and a television set; certain kinds of bric-a-brac, especially of porcelain; and shiny, clean, brightly colored surfaces. This set has to be standard to ensure communication; it is, if you will, the *langue* of house talk.

But as this is a minimal set that all houses need to have, it brings no great distinction. To achieve that, autoconstructors strive to personalize the standard equipment by displaying it fashionably, knowledgeably, and creatively. Their



Figure 1

José's present dwelling: a wooden shack at the back of a house lot in Brasília. (Photo by James Holston.)

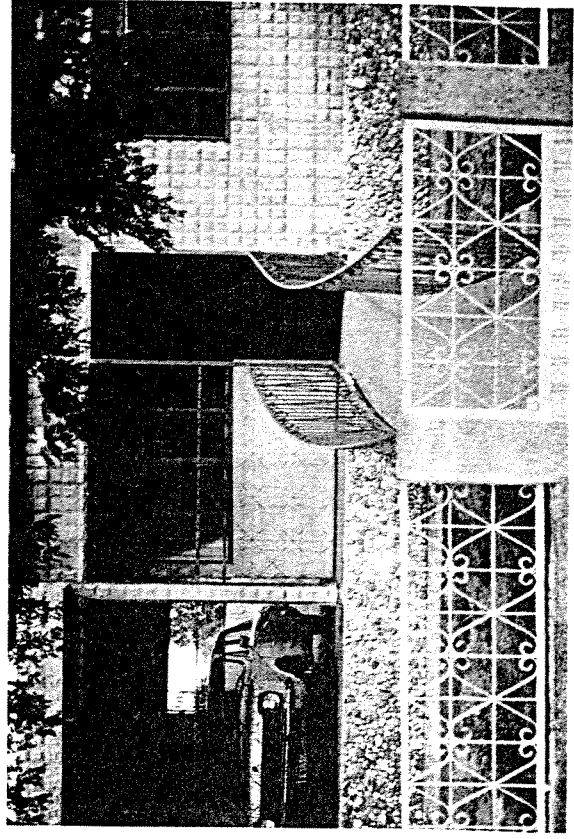


Figure 2

José's future dwelling: a “rustic modern” house under construction at the front of the same lot. (Photo by James Holston.)

aesthetic objective is to achieve what they sometimes call "personality" in their houses. We might conceive of this aesthetic as the *parole* of house talk, the moment of invention that uses the collective elements to make an individual enunciation. Its occasion is especially the front facade on which autoconstructors present—in what is surely a kind of performance—their mastery of style by demonstrating a knowledge of architectural fashion through informed quotation and combination, that is, by showing that they know how to quote valued sources and to combine a limited repertoire to achieve an intended effect. Without analyzing its specific devices at this point, I can let José's description of his future dwelling convey the sense of distinction that people try to achieve in this aesthetic (Figure 2). He describes his construction as "a rustic modern house with a wide cornice for decorative elements, a rusticated stone base, wrought-iron grillwork over mirrored glass, and a ceramic tile facade; in addition, it has a 5 meter bridge going to the front door, which passes over a Japanese garden." What is the aesthetic value of a rustic modern house? I asked. "It has a different look, so as not to copy; it is an innovation—in today's fashion, the rustic look is more sophisticated."

Without doubt, José conceives of his autoconstruction in terms of an architectural code of effects. This is hardly the "choice of the necessary" that Bourdieu (1984:372, 376) claims is the foundation of working-class taste in which "the submission to necessity [born of deprivation] which inclines working-class people to a pragmatic, functionalist 'aesthetic,' refusing the gratuity and futility of formal exercises and of every form of art for art's sake, is also the principle of all the choices of daily existence and of an art of living which rejects specifically aesthetic intentions as aberrations." Not only do I question the adequacy of this conception of aesthetics as art for art's sake, but I also find that nothing could be more foreign to José's concerns than such a rejection. In my view, there is no merit to the tradition in sociological studies, unfortunately rather extensive, of reducing working-class taste to the rack of functional necessity where it has, by definition, no aesthetic distinction.⁶ Consider a final example. What is the determining pragmatic value of his entrance bridge and Japanese garden? Very little, I find, as a few steps would have been more practical and certainly much less expensive. Yet, if the bridge-garden motif cannot be accounted for in functionalist terms, neither can it be explained as a gratuitously formal exercise. Rather, it seems clearly motivated by José's need to innovate, "so as not to copy, to have a different look," as he put it. José achieves aesthetic distinction because he masters an idiom, which leads his public, mostly his neighbors, not only to judge that "his house has personality"—a term they frequently use—but also to become active participants through their judgments in the elaboration of an aesthetic culture that confirms that possibility.

José's statement about innovation reveals, nevertheless, a deep anxiety in the aesthetics of autoconstruction: that of copying. If we consider personality in this system of judgments as referring to the qualities and capacities of a person affirmed in the manner of appropriating styles and commodities, then imitation brings little distinction. To the contrary, personality implies uniqueness. Yet, in

a world of mass produced objects, limited architectural solutions, and scarce resources, how is imitation avoided? The problem became clear to me when I discovered that people usually refuse, to the point of real irritation, to admit that they derive their house designs or decorations from any source other than pure inspiration. Yet, I have seen them exchanging house plans, perusing fashion and home-life magazines, taking field trips to shopping centers and elite neighborhoods, and making careful observations about the upper-class habits and décor presented in TV soap operas. Moreover, they have to use the same construction materials and household goods to make meaningful statements in the sign system of autoconstruction. The problem is that they must, and do, avidly copy.

As I suggested above with the *langue/parole* distinction, their solution is to turn the copy into an original by developing a unique mode of articulating, rather than merely repeating, the standard set of mass produced objects and styles they use. To question their sources is to tarnish their sense of personal distinction in which they have so heavily invested; hence, their quick irritation at my inquiries. This idea of an original copy suggests a different interpretation of working-class taste from the usual litany of derogation it receives as "kitsch, fake, inferior, superficial, vicarious, vulgar, debased, predatory, mechanical, mendacious, manipulated, and falsely imitative of genuine high art."⁷ Rather, it suggests that the kind of kaleidoscopic combinations that characterize the "rustic modern house" are motivated by a strategic conversion of commodities into personalized signs, refashioned to remove them from the context of the mass market by investing them with non-commodity values, namely, the personal competence, knowledge, and originality of their users.

In some aspects of this conversion, the autoconstructor is like the collector Benjamin (1986:155) describes in his study of bourgeois interiors as having the "Sisyphian task of obliterating the commodity-like character of things through his ownership of them." Like collectors, autoconstructors are involved in a reciprocal construction of value between themselves and things. They give value to things but depend on them to define their own sense of distinction. In both cases, the house is the principal site of this signification. For autoconstructors, however, that site is the entire house, not only its architecture but also its ordinary contents—furniture, appliances, knickknacks, kitchenware, and all the other goods that together with their architectural wrapper become charged with personal expression. This expression has, moreover, an intrinsic value that collectors cannot achieve in their personalization of rarified objects: the very fact of a particular autoconstructed house, its existence, is emblematic of the social drama of the periphery itself and of an individual's agency in it—a social value not reducible to the commodity-like character of things to which the collector's connoisseurship ineluctably refers.

The originality of the copy in autoconstruction thus maintains an unresolvable tension between discipline and innovation, and between commodification and personalization. The participation in modern society that it expresses derives from sources well beyond the traditional working-class knowledge-world. They come from the experiences of women as maids in upper-class homes and from

those of working men and women in the city itself. They derive from the electronic and print media, through television soap operas and home-life magazines, for example, which carry regimes of taste to all sectors of society. Such disseminations create asymmetrical transfers of knowledge between classes, and such regimes are means of disciplining even the most intimate features of daily life. Yet, as autoconstructed houses and their housewares are also badges of individual and social achievement among the lower classes, there is a basic tension in the process of acquiring goods of extraordinary social value: people convert commodities into instruments of power and prestige in local projects, and perceive in them the possibilities of satisfying needs, their manufacturers never imagined. The performative displays of autoconstruction thus subvert deep stigmas of real and imagined ignorance that derive from the official exclusion of the poor from the discourses of high culture and from their condemnation by its agents to a low-brow and unaesthetic existence as a result. Of course, the elites do not acknowledge the aesthetic distinctions of autoconstruction. But in pushing against the restrictions of the working-class knowledge-world, these distinctions enact real possibilities of a changed social order because they help create new agencies and subjectivities for it.

Conclusion

All parties involved in autoconstruction imagine home ownership as a means to transform existing conditions—as a means to design the forms of industrial society, to domesticate an urban labor force, to stimulate political participation and stability, or to achieve social respect and personal distinction. As a means to imagined futures, however, these intentions engage existing conditions in complex ways that yield contradictory forms and finalities. Undoubtedly, home ownership is an effective way to discipline the working classes. Yet, it also forces the powerful to make significant concessions to those who become empowered in the struggle for property rights and in the achievements of building a home and becoming accredited consumers. In the politics and in the aesthetics of autoconstruction, the underclasses are constructing images and identities to counter those that subjugate them. Not only are they transforming themselves as citizens but they are also changing the images of disrespect that bind them to a denigrated sense of their own persons. They are replacing these images with new ones of competence and knowledge in the production and consumption of what modern society considers important.

Thus, there is a complex dispersion of power in the experience of autoconstruction, one that both empowers and ensnares because it is about the replication of hegemonic orders and the creation of alternative futures in the very same social processes. This ambiguity demonstrates, on the one hand, that the development of industrial capitalism in Brazil has not turned the underclasses into the passive objects of its history and structured their cultural lives as reflexes of its logic of economic needs. Rather, it suggests that in the process of appropriating the structures, institutions, and images of industrial modernity, the underclasses transform

them into the instruments of new initiatives—into original copies, so to speak. On the other hand, however, there is little in the experience of autoconstruction to suggest that their new status as property owners, and the unprecedented participation in the society of property that this change entails, will eliminate their economic exploitation. Rather, the experience illustrates how their new initiatives also become the ground of new hegemonies.

Notes

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¹According to national census data, renters occupied 68% of the total residences in the municipality of São Paulo in 1940. By 1980, this proportion had dropped to 40%, and the number of owner-occupied residences had increased, during the same period, from 25% to over 51% (see Bonduki 1983:146 and FIBGE 1983:184–186). Among low-income families, home ownership is the norm: in 1987, almost 60% of them lived in their own houses, 30% rented, and 10% lived in homes loaned to them by proprietors who were usually relatives (Metró 1990:30).

²This position was promoted, for example, in numerous articles published in the Bulletin of the Ministry of Labor, Industry and Commerce between 1935 and 1945. In the Latin American critique of theories of dual-pole economic development, autoconstruction became part of a polemic about the reproduction of capital and of labor power. See Oliveira (1972) for the core argument.

³Studies in English about women in minority movements and neighborhood organizations include Caldeira 1990 and Alvarez 1989. For a discussion of the activity of the Catholic church in this respect, see Della Cava 1989.

⁴For examples from Brasília, and references to others, see Holston 1989:260–272.

⁵Elsewhere I (1989:101–144) have analyzed the architectural and semiotic basis of this signification and the importance of house/street relations in Brazilian cities and social life. On the latter see also DaMatta 1985.

⁶In this tradition of analysis we find, for example, such a generally balanced thinker as Tocqueville (1969:465), who claims that the masses of democratic nations “habitually put use before beauty, and they want beauty itself to be useful.” Although such interpretation suggests the importance of revising the theory of needs in consumer capitalism, it is no doubt more surprising in the case of Bourdieu that the symbolic should be given this utilitarian turn.

⁷This list is a sample culled from well-known essays on popular culture by, among others, Clement Greenberg, Leo Lowenthal, and Alexis de Tocqueville, reprinted in Rosenberg and White 1957. To be sure, current cultural theory has advanced beyond such interpre-

tations, but I exaggerate to make the point. In any case, ethnographic research is still lacking.

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