

Spatial resistance and the right to the city in social condensers

Resistência espacial e o direito à cidade nos condensadores sociais

Resistencia espacial y el derecho a la ciudad en los condensadores sociales

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Abstract

In this study, we investigate social condensers as spaces of resistance, reflecting on their capacity to transform the urban environment and social relations. By transcending physical functionality, these spaces become arenas of discourse and contestation, exemplifying the intersection of architecture with social resistance and the right to the city. We explore how these structures, originally conceived in the context of Soviet Constructivist architecture, function as active agents of social transformation. The analysis focuses on the interaction between these condensers and civic life, underlining their influence on the dynamics of public spaces and the promotion of collective citizenship. This perspective broadens the understanding of public space as a territory of common use and collective ownership. This article, therefore, aims to deepen the understanding of social condensers, highlighting their potential in the planning of public spaces that embrace diversity, inclusion, and the right to the city.

Keywords: Social Condensers; Spatial Resistance; Right to the City; Urban Space; Russian Constructivism.

Resumo

Neste estudo, investigamos os condensadores sociais, como espaços de resistência, refletindo sobre sua capacidade de transformar o ambiente urbano e as relações sociais. Ao transcender a funcionalidade física, esses espaços tornam-se arenas de discursividade e contestação, exemplificando a interseção da arquitetura com a resistência social e o direito à cidade. Exploramos como essas estruturas, originalmente concebidas no contexto da arquitetura construtivista soviética, funcionam como agentes ativos de transformação social. A análise centra-se na interação entre estes condensadores e a vida cívica, sublinhando sua influência na dinâmica dos espaços públicos e na promoção da cidadania coletiva. Esta perspectiva amplia a compreensão do espaço público como um território de uso comum e posse coletiva. Este artigo visa, portanto, aprofundar a compreensão dos condensadores sociais, destacando seu potencial no planejamento de espaços públicos que abraçam a diversidade, a inclusão e o direito à cidade.

Palavras-chave: Condensadores Sociais; Resistência Espacial; Direito à Cidade, Espaço Urbano; Construtivismo Russo.

Resumen

En este estudio, investigamos los condensadores sociales como espacios de resistencia, reflexionando sobre su capacidad para transformar el entorno urbano y las relaciones sociales. Al trascender la funcionalidad física, estos espacios se convierten en arenas



de discurso y confrontación, ejemplificando la intersección de la arquitectura con la resistencia social y el derecho a la ciudad. Exploramos cómo estas estructuras, originalmente concebidas en el contexto de la arquitectura constructivista soviética, funcionan como agentes activos de transformación social. El análisis se centra en la interacción entre estos condensadores y la vida cívica, subrayando su influencia en la dinámica de los espacios públicos y la promoción de la ciudadanía colectiva. Esta perspectiva amplía la comprensión del espacio público como un territorio de uso común y propiedad colectiva. Por lo tanto, este artículo tiene como objetivo profundizar la comprensión de los condensadores sociales, destacando su potencial en la planificación de espacios públicos que abracen la diversidad, la inclusión y el derecho a la ciudad.

Palabras clave: Condensadores sociales; Resistencia espacial; Derecho a la ciudad; Espacio urbano; Constructivismo ruso.

INTRODUCTION

In the intricate weave of cities, where certain structures stand as witnesses to social struggles and human aspirations, social condensers rise as monuments of urban resistance. Visionary architects such as Ginzburg and El Lissitzky, through their creations that transcend the merely physical, embody revolutionary idealism and a relentless search for new forms of social organisation. This article delves into the intertwined narratives of these structures, exploring the dialogues between urbanism, politics, and everyday life within the fabric of urban space.

The 'left-wing' artists [...] believe that the construction of the 'classless society' [...] can be either stimulated or hindered by the living framework in which such a society develops. [...] They think they can hasten the emergence of this society through their art, by acting upon the environment (Kopp, 1990, p. 79).

Urban space reveals itself as a dynamic palimpsest, where resistance and social rearticulation resonate beyond immediate reactions. In often overlooked urban interstices, what might be termed urban resistance flourishes, challenging and redefining the relationships of power and space. The social condensers proposed by Russian Constructivism emerge as paradigms of transformation, challenging conventional notions of urbanism and architecture with their bold forms and multifaceted purposes (Khan-Magomedov, 1987, p. 102).

As we delve into the universe of social condensers, we uncover an intriguing symbiosis between architectural form and social dynamics, a vibrant interplay between utopian aspirations and concrete realities (Kopp, 1970). These



spaces transcend the mere function of buildings, assuming the role of living laboratories, where new narratives of coexistence and resistance are tested. Yet, the constructivists' idealistic pursuit encounters practical challenges, weaving a complex panorama of possibilities and contradictions (Kopp, 1970)

For the constructivists, the aim is the radical transformation of old concepts, requiring the architect to take a clear stand [...] The objective [is] to work alongside the proletariat, participating in the tasks of constructing [...] a new way of life (Ginzburg *apud* Kopp, 1990, p. 80).

Urban space, as the stage imprinted with the indelible marks of conflicts and resistance permeating society, forms a complex mosaic of social relations and power structures (Fanon, 1961). Far from being a passive receptacle, it reveals itself as a dynamic entity, the stage of the ceaseless dialectic between power and resistance (Lefebvre, 2008). Spatial resistance distances itself from a mere reaction; it manifests as an active process of rearticulation and creative subversion of space, undermining power structures and opening new possibilities.

In this context, Russian social condensers reveal themselves as fundamental spaces for critical reflection on the transformation of urban space and its relationship with social and cultural dynamics. Conceived as instruments to influence social and cultural relations, they provoke questions about the complex interconnection between space, power, and social identity. This starting point paves the way for a deeper investigation into the role of architecture in shaping urban dynamics (Harvey, 2019).

The contradictions of space do not arise from its rational form, [...] they stem from its practical and social content, and specifically, from its capitalist content. [...] The space of capitalist society presents itself as rational when, in practice, it is commodified, fragmented, sold in parcels. [...] Inevitable conflicts exist between these two aspects, notably between abstract space [...] and immediate space, perceived, lived, fragmented and sold (Lefebvre, 2008, p. 57).

Reflecting on the legacy of Russian social condensers invites us to rethink urban space, transcending the mere understanding of its physical form and recognising it as a dynamic and constantly evolving stage where power relations are configured and redefined. This perspective challenges us to imagine new configurations of space and society, where power is questioned and renegotiated.



The Concept of Social Condensers

Social condensers¹ are a key concept in Soviet architecture, particularly during the constructivist period. Originating from Ginzburg's innovative vision, they represented more than mere housing structures; they embodied a fusion of architecture and social ideology. Social condensers sought to transform both physical space and social relations, aiming to shape a new form of urban and collective life that would align with socialist ideals. The most notable example of this approach is the Narkomfin housing building in Moscow (Villac, 2018).

We can no longer force the occupants of a building [...] to live collectively [...]. We must offer the possibility of a gradual and natural transition to communal use of certain areas [...] For us, it is absolutely necessary to incorporate certain features that may encourage the transition to a socially superior way of life – to encourage but not dictate (Ginzburg *apud* Frampton, 2008, p. 210).

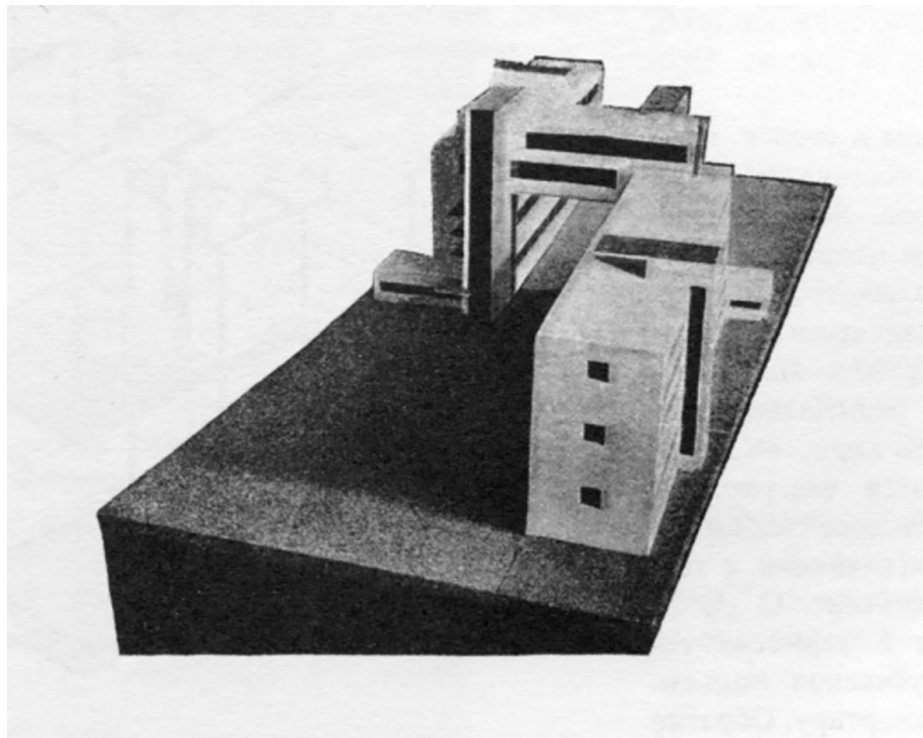


Figure 1 - Model of the "Communal House A1" project (later known as Narkomfin), designed by Ginzburg. Source: Ginzburg, 1927, p. 13.

Social condensers were not merely architectural responses to housing needs but also attempts to reconfigure society according to specific ideological principles.

¹ In this paper, we will adopt the term "social condensers" in its broadest sense. Despite its idealisation within the scope of Soviet constructivism, it is important to emphasise that Ginzburg's proposal resonates beyond its initial ideological roots. Although Soviet in origin, the use of the term here refers to a broader application, which includes diverse adaptations and interpretations in different political and geographical contexts.

These projects represented efforts to reconcile the immediate needs of the population with revolutionary ideals, creating spaces that balanced pragmatism and idealism (Kopp, 1970 *apud* Villac, 2018).

The constructivist approach sought not only to establish a new architectural style but also to directly influence how people lived and interacted within their communities. The spatial organisation of social condensers, with their communal spaces and leisure areas, aimed to stimulate social interaction and foster a social life based on collectivity and equality (Tafari *apud* Villac, 2018).

Ginzburg (1927) redefined the understanding of architecture as mere shelter, in his editorial for the SA² journal, elevating social condensers to a crucial instrument in orchestrating profound social transformations. These structures, according to Ginzburg (1927), transcend their materiality to become laboratories of social innovation, where architecture fuses with urbanity, providing fertile ground for the redefinition of dynamics of coexistence and social interaction.

The role of social condensers extends beyond mere spatial reorganisation, as they instigate a reorganisation of power relations and social interactions, functioning as microcosms of the ongoing struggles for justice and social emancipation. This architectural paradigm, according to Ginzburg (1927), is emblematic in the context of urban resistance, representing both a physical and symbolic manifesto that unites revolutionary idealism with practical action.

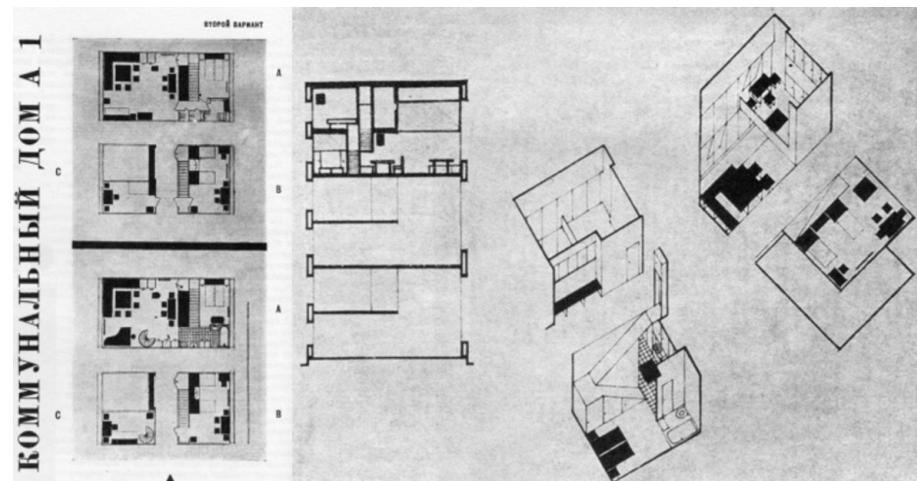


Figure 2 - Photomontage of the "Communal House A1", which combines individual residential units with shared communal areas such as dining rooms, kindergartens, and laundries, reflecting Ginzburg's efforts to create spaces that facilitate interaction and communal living. The residential structure of the project is divided into three segments - A, B, and C - each addressing different housing needs, from minimal accommodation for individuals or small groups to family spaces. The flexible design across two levels symbolises the dynamics of family growth and social change, thus promoting community cohesion and social development. Source: Ginzburg, 1927, p. 130.

2 *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura* ('Modern Architecture') was a journal published by the OSA group (*Obshchestvo Sovremennykh Arkhitektorov* or 'Society of Contemporary Architects') between 1926 and 1930. Edited by key figures of Constructivism, such as Moisei Ginzburg, the Vesnin brothers, and Leonidov, the journal played a central role in Soviet architectural avant-garde, promoting Constructivism and connecting Soviet architects with international ideas.



These spaces reflect the emerging socialist order following the October Revolution of 1917. “Every project of a social condenser must be widely discussed and critiqued by the workers, the future users of these condensers” (SA, 1928). This approach emphasises the importance of considering not only physical needs but also shaping the social and cultural fabric in alignment with socialist principles.

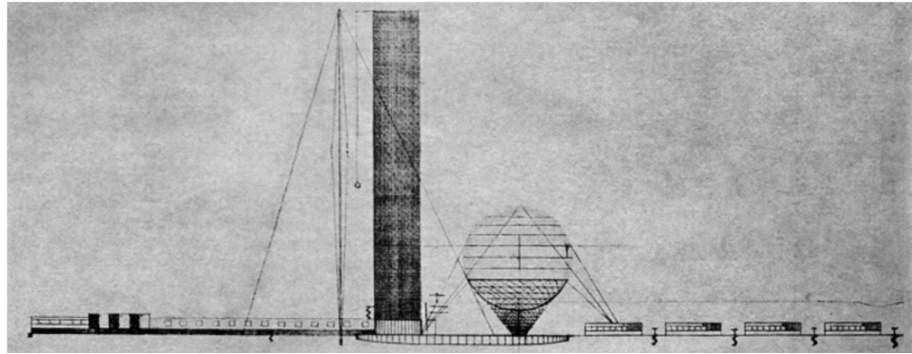


Figure 3 - Lenin Institute by I. Leonidov. The image illustrates the project for the Lenin Institute, a landmark in the Constructivist movement. This project reflects the ideology of social condensers, proposing a multifunctional space that integrates education, culture, and social interaction, symbolising Leonidov's aspiration for an architecture that shapes and reflects social dynamics. The complexity of the design reveals an intention to create a collective environment fostering community interaction and engagement. Source: Ginzburg, 1927, p. 15.

Social condensers, understood as catalysts for social relations of fundamental cultural importance, promote coexistence and the simultaneity of activities, drawing inspiration from the multifunctionality and presence of Soviet communal clubs” (Villac, 2018). “The project of the Palace of Culture [...] allows for the organisation of the entire system of education and cultural policy in the urban sector where it is located” (Kopp, 1974 *apud* Villac, 2018).

Murawski (2017) argues that the social condenser is not merely an architectural concept but a method that encompasses a broad range of elements, including critique, scientific and artistic methodology, ideology, and psychology, becoming central after the October Revolution of 1917. Similarly, Kopp (1970) highlights the transformative function of social condensers, which aimed to reshape the self-centered individual of capitalist society into an informed and engaged member of socialist society, harmonising individual and collective interests. This vision reflects the essence of social condensers as elements of social and urban transformation, establishing a dialogue between the individual and the collective.

Kopp observes that “in each of these [social condenser] projects, there is an attempt to reconcile the immediate needs of the population with revolutionary ideals” (Kopp, 1970). This observation is the key to understand social condensers as dynamic spaces where tensions between pragmatism and idealism are evident.



[...]it was all about equipment whose use had the consequence of socialising activities that were previously individual. This socialisation had the immediate goal of making daily life easier [...] But beyond these short-term objectives, it aimed at the complete transformation of human nature and life in society (Kopp, 1990, p. 98).

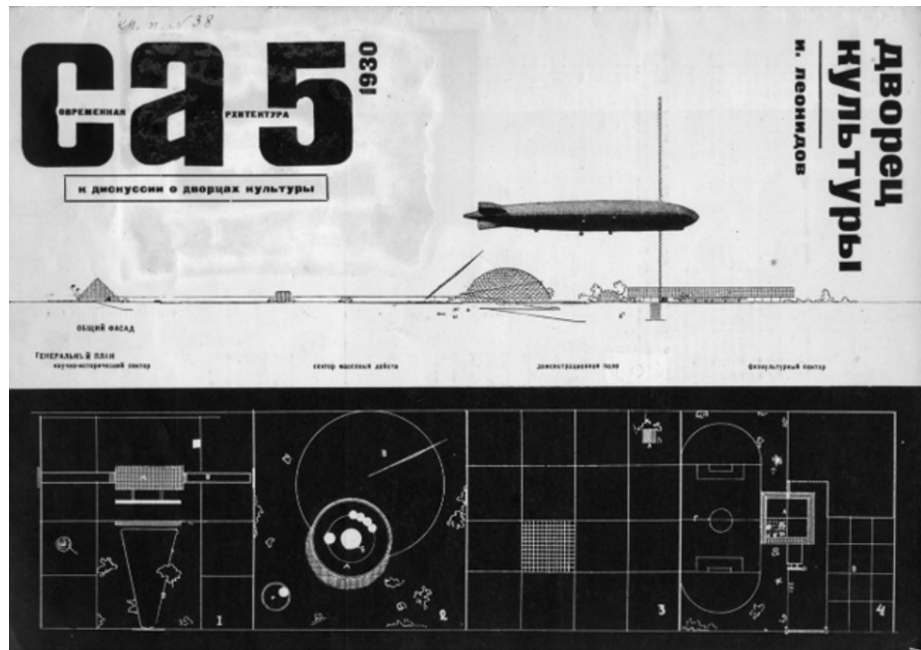


Figure 4 – Cover of the SA magazine featuring the project for the Palace of Culture designed by Leonidov. The page displays the 'General Plan' of the project, which articulates different social and cultural sectors. It includes the 'Scientific-Historical Sector', integrating education and research; the 'Mass Activities Sector', emphasizing community interaction; the 'Field for Public Exhibitions and Events'; and the 'Physical Culture Sector', promoting health and sports activities. These components demonstrate how Leonidov's design encapsulates the idea of a social condenser. Source: SA, 1930, no. 5 p. 3.

The Dialectics of Spatial Resistance

Spatial resistance in social condensers transcends mere reactivity, becoming a creative and transformative force. This resistance can be understood as a form of "counter-hegemony", where subaltern groups appropriate spaces and reinterpret them according to their own interests and needs. This struggle over space extends beyond the physical dimension, permeating symbolic and cultural realms.

Hegemony is a process of political leadership based on the 'active consensus' of the masses, obtained through a combination of 'force' and 'consent'. The ruling class not only imposes its will through coercion, but also seeks to build a cultural consensus that legitimises its domination (Gramsci, 2001, p. 167).



By analysing Russian social condensers through the lens of spatial resistance, we unveil the complex and mutable nature of urban space. These environments, sites of constant friction between utopia and reality, control and contestation, take the form of an ouroboros, feeding off the histories they have witnessed, bearing the marks of the past while harbouring the seeds of social transformation. Understanding the mechanisms of appropriation and reinterpretation of these spaces is crucial for rethinking the role of urban space in constructing more just and democratic societies.

In understanding spatial resistance within Russian social condensers, it is essential to consider the underlying territory – an invisible map of subalternity intertwined with the architectural materiality of the condensers. This map constitutes a profound inscription of social practices and power relations, outlining an alternative geography that contests and subverts state planning. This perspective moves beyond traditional representations of urban space, proposing a more complex and dynamic understanding of built environments (Said, 1978).

Space is more than a mere location; it is a territory of meaning, a field of power, and a stage of conflict. The control of space is a means of exercising power and imposing a worldview. “A primitive tribe, for instance, assigns place, function, and meaning to [...] its immediate environment” (Said, 1978).

Social condensers reveal a dialectic between the projected and the lived, the established and the emergent. As Lefebvre (2006, p. 305) argues, the production of space is a social activity that becomes material reality through a dialectical process. This dialectic, far from being a mere theoretical complication, is crucial for understanding the rich tapestry of practices and relationships that compose the reality of these spaces.

Russian social condensers, in their transformative essence, confront urban challenges and social inequality, going beyond mere survival to redefine the conditions of existence for their communities. Lefebvre emphasises that the “production of space” is a social praxis, capable of transforming existing relations and generating new social organisations (Lefebvre, 2006). Thus, social condensers reimagine the boundaries between public and private, using space as a medium for contestation and social, cultural, and political transformation.

Today, the application of the principles of social condensers faces significant challenges, such as neoliberal urbanisation and the commodification of urban space (Harvey, 2012). However, exploring these concepts offers paths for developing urban practices that promote spatial resistance and the right to the city.



Spatial Resistance in Social Condensers

The resistance embodied within social condensers is not a passive or defensive stance, but rather an active practice of reimagining and reconfiguring space. As Lefebvre puts it, this resistance involves the “production of space”, transforming it from a mere passive container into a dynamic agent within social struggles (Lefebvre, 2006). This transformation elevates space into what Edward Soja calls the “third space”, where contestation and transformation intertwine (Soja, 1996).

Lefebvre articulates that space is not merely occupied but used, transformed, and appropriated (Lefebvre, 2006). Thus, in social condensers, we observe a reconfiguration not only of the physical environment but also of cultural and social space, redefining paradigms of how we live and interact within our urban settings.

In these spaces, power relations are constantly renegotiated and redefined through acts of resistance and transformation. Collective actions, such as organising communal efforts to build housing, hosting popular festivals celebrating local culture, or establishing community gardens that provide fresh food, become forms of counter-hegemony. These practices subvert established power and reclaim space as an “open field of possibilities and transformations” for the construction of a more just and equal society. As Lefebvre asserts, “Space is a social product, and as such, it is also an instrument of power. The production of space is therefore a form of domination” (Lefebvre, 2008).

Santos argues that the production of space is an inherently social act, implicating relations of power, and that social condensers serve as tangible examples of spaces where the daily struggle for counter-hegemony manifests (Santos, 1996). From this perspective, social condensers are territories of contestation and transformation, where the pursuit of a more equitable society unfolds through everyday practices that challenge the logic of dominant power structures.

Social condensers transcend hegemonic power relations and emerge as sites of profound contestation and social reinvention (Harvey, 2019). This resistance becomes an active force in the construction of new horizons, materialising in spatial practices and social relations that challenge the established order (Lefebvre, 2006). The transformation of these spaces demonstrates the unique capacity of social condensers to redefine urban space and its social dynamics, paving the way for more emancipatory and egalitarian futures.

The Right to the City as Conceived Through Social Condensers

Social condensers represent a living expression of the struggle for the right to the city, not merely as a legal or institutional right, but as a manifestation of collective



empowerment and spatial justice. In this sense, the right to the city refers to the physical and symbolic space where all inhabitants, regardless of their background or status, can converge, interact, and reshape their urban environments without exclusion or discrimination. Social condensers provide the setting for this encounter, serving as spaces of dialogue, struggle, and reclamation for the construction and reconfiguration of cities by their inhabitants.

The right to the city cannot — and should not — be reduced to a legalistic or positivist framework. As Gaio notes, “while the law may inscribe social victories, the State (and the law) often serve as legitimators of capitalist accumulation” (Gaio, 2019). This is not to dismiss the importance of legal frameworks in achieving social justice, but to caution against viewing the right to the city solely through the lens of state-sanctioned law, as such laws can be used by ruling elites to marginalise the lived realities, cultures, and needs of urban populations.

For this reason, many governments opportunistically proclaim the right to the city (BORJA; CARRIÓN, 2017, p. 31), contributing to its commodification. As Baldez (2003, p. 84) pointed out, it is an intentional strategy to remove popular movements from the political sphere, immobilising them within a legal framework. In the same vein, Monreal (1988, p. 182) argues that ‘there are numerous cases where the ruling class, in order to placate just social demands from other classes, agrees to pass laws (...), confident that their application will be distorted to suit their interests’ (Gaio, 2019, p. 10-11).

A legal concept of the right to the city, if it is to be meaningful, must be hermeneutically open, ensuring that citizens and social movements are not hindered by legal barriers or the formal constraints of positivist law. Such a concept must encompass the following elements, as Saule Júnior clarifies:

[...] the components of the right to the city that qualify the city as a common good include: a city free from all forms of discrimination; inclusive citizenship with greater political participation; a city that fulfils its social functions; with quality public spaces; gender equality; cultural diversity; inclusive economies, seen as both a settlement system and a shared ecosystem; [...] (Saule Júnior, 2022, p. 58).

Social condensers present an alternative and more genuine approach to the right to the city, one that is rooted not in formal legalism but in a collective sense of belonging and agency. Through these spaces, citizens legitimise one another and participate in shaping common spaces, fostering interactions that transcend the exclusionary dynamics of capitalist urbanism, which prioritises profit over social utility and perpetuates peripheral exclusion.



This project is about forging a new conception of sociability based on humanitarian and solidaristic values and goals, not built on the logic of social exclusion but on the premise that we are all citizens deserving of equal treatment and consideration. More than just a place to live, the city must be conceived as the privileged locus of the political—perhaps the only one—the existential space of humanity as the maker of history; a spatial, temporal, and territorial moment of human demarcation and its developmental possibilities (Leal, 2000, p. 125-126).

Urban inhabitants — no matter who they are or where they come from — must have the power to influence and shape their environment according to their own needs and desires. This power, held by all without any discrimination or exclusion, is what we should call the “right to the city”. It is the right to access public and communal spaces, to actively participate in urban planning, governance, and transformation, free from restriction.

From this perspective — embodied in the microcosm of social condensers — the city becomes a space of encounter, interaction, and cultural creation, re-signifying and revolutionising the alienation born of capitalist urbanisation. The right to the city is not an escape from capitalist agglomeration, but a direct confrontation with the unjust models of urban living. For this reason, citizens must appropriate urban space so that it becomes more than just a cluster of fortified buildings but a vibrant, dynamic environment that reflects and nurtures the communal aspirations of its inhabitants.

Ultimately, it is about rethinking the city for all, ensuring a dignified urban environment for all its inhabitants, whether they be permanent residents, passers-by, visitors, tourists, or those in situations of homelessness, who could inhabit the city with dignity (Saule Júnior, 2021, p. 27).

Social condensers act as living entities, open-air laboratories where resistance to dominant forms of life is enacted, and where collective awareness leads to the re-signification of codified rights. Among these new meanings is the constitutional mandate that property must serve a social function. Despite its enshrinement in various legal instruments within the Brazilian legal system, this obligation has been systematically ignored by public authorities, governments, land, and property owners alike (inc. XXIII, art. 5º; inc. III, art. 170; §2º, art. 182; art. 184; art. 186, Brazilian Constitution of 1988; §1º, art. 1,228, Civil Code of 2002; art. 39, Federal Law nº 10.257/2001; §1º, §2º and caput, art. 2º; art. 12; “a”, art. 18; inc. I, art. 47, all from Federal Law nº 4.504/1964).

The feudal practice of rights, despite theoretical trends to the contrary, reveals a framework that, under the guise of enigma, still presents clear challenges. The praise for ways



of living in urban spaces where fundamental rights such as housing are denied does not withstand even the most cursory examination. But this practice persists, despite everything and everyone. Thus, the parallel between the urbs and the legal universe still demands the emancipation of the senses in an urban space where the ground provides shelter rather than exclusion (Fachin, 1996, p. 109).

To this set of normative prescriptions must be added a new, practical, and revolutionary meaning. In a manner akin to the architectural model of Russian social condensers, property must become a common good, serving the people and their culture. In this way, the expression “social function of property” transcends rhetorical ineffectiveness and assumes concrete dimensions: fostering sociability, collective sentiment, social solidarity, and cooperation among citizens. Socialism becomes manifest through coordinated action, not only in the production of goods and distribution of wealth but also in the shaping of public spaces that constitute cities.

These approaches illustrate how the structure of Russian social condensers can be directly related to the right to the city, fostering a more just, democratic, and participatory urban environment. By integrating these concepts, it becomes possible to create urban spaces that not only meet the practical needs of their inhabitants but also promote values of equality, participation, and social justice.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social condensers symbolise the intersection of architecture, politics, and resistance, emphasising the role of spatial reconfiguration as a catalyst for social change. They serve as a framework for the redefinition of public spaces and the fight for the right to the city, reflecting the dynamic interplay between the needs of inhabitants and the continuous evolution of the urban environment.

The legacy of Russian Constructivism offers a powerful lesson in the potential of architecture to both influence and be influenced by society. These structures demonstrate how spaces can be designed not just to shelter, but also to inspire; not merely to contain, but to liberate.

Social condensers challenge us to rethink public space, not as a static domain, but as a dynamic field for experimentation and innovation—where the boundaries between public and private are fluid, and every urban element can serve as a catalyst for change.

By introducing the discussion of social condensers into contemporary urbanism, it is essential to recognise their relevance not merely as historical



artefacts, but as vivid examples of an ongoing aspiration for harmony between space, society, and culture.

These spaces stand as testament to an unshakable belief in the transformative potential of architecture: to not only construct walls, but to tear down barriers; to weave together a tapestry of community, identity, and hope. This is the enduring legacy of social condensers: an invitation to look beyond the concrete, to perceive the pulsating heart of the city.

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