


Stories, memories, and reminiscences: Vila Operária in Maringá-PR

Histórias, memórias e reminiscências: a Vila Operária em Maringá-PR

Relatos, memorias y reminiscências: la Vila Operária en Maringá-PR

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Abstract

This research explores the relationship between memory, identity, and architecture, emphasizing the importance of memory as a unique composition of interpersonal reminiscences, which plays a vital role in the construction of human identity. The city, through its architecture, is presented as the foundation for the development of cultural, historical, and identity expressions, where different architectural styles reflect the traditions, values, and beliefs of a people, influencing their identity and sense of belonging. The article specifically examines the case of the Vila Operária neighborhood in Maringá, Paraná, highlighting its wooden architecture as a reminiscence of a past period in the city, rich with cultural and historical significance. It also analyzes materiality as a means of strengthening collective identity and a possible way of recognizing spaces as sites of memory. The investigation strategy includes documents, physical and oral records, which are essential for interpreting the phenomenon under study.

Keywords: Memory; Architecture and memory; Vila Operária.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa aborda a relação entre memória, identidade e arquitetura, destacando a importância da memória como uma composição singular de reminiscências interpessoais, a qual desempenha uma função essencial na construção da identidade humana. A cidade, através de sua arquitetura, é apresentada como a base para o desenvolvimento das expressões culturais, históricas e identitárias, na qual diferentes tipos arquitetônicos refletem tradições, valores e crenças de um povo, influenciando sua identidade e senso de pertencimento. O artigo examina, em específico, o caso do bairro Vila Operária em Maringá, Paraná, evidenciando sua arquitetura em madeira como uma reminiscência de um período pretérito da cidade, repleto de significados culturais e históricos e analisa a materialidade como uma forma de fortalecimento da identidade coletiva e uma possível maneira de reconhecimento dos espaços como locais de memória. A estratégia de investigação contempla documentos, registros físicos e orais, fundamentais para a interpretação do fenômeno estudado.

Palavras-chave: Memória; Arquitetura e memória; Vila Operária.

Resumen

Esta investigación explora la relación entre la memoria, la identidad y la arquitectura, enfatizando la importancia de la memoria como una composición única de reminiscencias interpersonales, que juega un papel vital en la construcción de la identidad humana. La ciudad, a través de su arquitectura, se presenta como el fundamento para el desarrollo de expresiones culturales, históricas e identitarias, donde los diferentes estilos arquitectónicos reflejan las tradiciones, valores y creencias de un pueblo, influyendo en su identidad y sentido de pertenencia. El artículo examina específicamente el caso del barrio Vila Operária en Maringá, Paraná, destacando su arquitectura de madera como una reminiscencia de un período pasado en la ciudad,



rico en significado cultural e histórico. También analiza la materialidad como un medio para fortalecer la identidad colectiva y una posible forma de reconocer los espacios como sitios de memoria. La estrategia de investigación incluye documentos, registros físicos y orales, los cuales son esenciales para interpretar el fenómeno en estudio.

Palabras clave: Memoria; Arquitectura y memoria; Vila Operária.

INTRODUCTION

Individual narratives are shaped by personal experiences, emotions, and sensations evoked throughout life, which take form through memory. Memory, a unique composition of interpersonal reminiscences, plays a crucial role in the construction of human identity. It is dynamic and alive, carrying the legacies that give meaning and conditions to our existence. We are beings with stories, shaping our identity through a fusion of lived experiences and internal reflections. In this way, we are who we are because we learn and remember.

Architecture, as a material representation of different times, invites us to cultivate memory through the marks it leaves on the city and the relationships it establishes with different social groups throughout history. Understanding the relationship between architecture and society is an important path toward valuing material assets that represent a culture evolving over time. Thus, this analysis proposes a perspective on architecture that transcends its merely physical nature, recognizing its cultural power and its role in history and in the construction of individual and collective identities.

Spaces, and their interaction with material assets, society and its ways of life, play a fundamental role in the evolution and functioning of the community. They can consolidate “sites of memory,” places particularly tied to memories. The ability to connect directly and tangibly to traditions—or to individual and collective values—is an undeniable reality, though it remains a choice rather than a necessity. However, in the face of continuous urban transformations, community members often see their narratives and experiences devalued or dismissed due to the rupture of cultural values from the past, leading to the weakening of social ties, cultural cohesion, and collective unity.

By presenting the Vila Operária neighborhood in Maringá-PR and its reminiscences, materialized in its wooden architecture, this work aims to strengthen the link between memory and the history of both the city and the neighborhood. Thus, the objective of this research, which is still in progress, is to reflect on the importance of physical and oral records in recovering and reinforcing memory.

By promoting different ways to recognize a space as a site of memory, the research addresses concepts of memory and places of memory based on the contributions



of Pierre Nora (2012). Additionally, in seeking to associate cultural memory with this field of knowledge already established by Nora, the reflection of Aleida Assmann (2011) is incorporated, with the goal of linking the identification of Vila Operária's wooden architecture as a memory-supporting element for the region under discussion. John Ruskin (2008) also encourages reflection on permanence, valuing housing in its physical, symbolic, and cultural structure, allowing it to span time, accumulating wisdom and layers of society.

This work was developed through physical records, such as on-site surveys, document reviews, and iconographic records. Eighteen interviews were also conducted with residents of the neighborhood, intervening agents, and historians between 2022 and 2024. These interviews aimed to understand personal stories, spatial and temporal landmarks, everyday practices, and the relationship between the past, present, and future of Vila Operária.

Through the proposed surveys, it is believed that it will be possible to perceive in urban spaces—through the reminiscences of wooden architecture, the discourses, and the observation of daily life—the values that compose a local identity through its set of cultural elements. This approach broadens the perception of wooden architecture as a manifestation that forms spaces of great significance, still recognized in the memories of its users today.

MEMORY, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE HISTORY OF VILA OPERÁRIA

Historical elements provide a description of events and a chronology that supports individual and collective stories, offering references for interpreting spaces, manifestations, and reminiscences in the present. According to Nora (1993), history is the opposite of memory, as he attributes memory with a characteristic of immediacy—alive and active. Memory is a manifestation of a group and is therefore connected to individuals and their territories, unlike history, which tends toward the universality of facts. There is an understanding that the manifestation of memory by a group of individuals is the bringing of subjective elements of the past into the present.

Memory is an interaction between conscious and unconscious processes. Memory should be understood not only as an individual manifestation but also as a collective phenomenon, subject to fluctuations, transformations, and changes when expressed or articulated. As Nora (1993) states:

memory is life, always carried by living groups and, in this sense, it is in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to all uses and manipulations, susceptible to long latencies and sudden revitalizations; it



is an ever-present phenomenon, a link lived in the eternal present (Nora, 1993, p. 9).

In line with Assmann's (2011) proposal to bridge and reduce the distance between historical and memory approaches, the concepts of inhabited (functional) memory and non-inhabited (cumulative) memory are recovered as complementary sources for a historiographic construction that is rich in specificities emerging from social groups. These groups, with strong cultural appeal, maintain memory as a bridge between the past and the future (Assmann, 2011, p. 137). Here, elements not found in the historical description of the neighborhood, such as the wooden buildings in Vila Operária, Maringá, can be revived through the understanding of memory evoked in conversations, images, and life stories collected in documents and interviews.

Vila Operária is one of the neighborhoods in Maringá designed by engineer Jorge de Macedo Vieira in 1947, as part of a broader urban plan for the entire city. It is located between Mauá Avenue, Rocha Pombo Square, Abilon Souza Naves Square, and Avenida Laguna, east of the city's civic center and adjacent to Ingá Park. Its occupation, according to the master plan, represents an area of 70 *alqueires* (a traditional Brazilian land measure equivalent to 24200 meters), divided into 70 blocks of varying sizes. The lots totaled 1,434 plots, with additional spaces designated for industrial development beyond Mauá Avenue.

Today, Vila Operária occupies a considerable portion of the city's central area and has undergone significant changes in its landscape. In the 1950s, when the city's original design was laid out, it was divided into zones designated for specific populations. Vila Operária, as its name suggests, was intended to house workers who were employed in nearby industries such as warehouses, sawmills, and other common services needed during the city's early years of development. The effective occupation of Vila Operária only began after 1947, when the first 309 lots were purchased by buyers registered with the Companhia Melhoramentos Norte do Paraná (CMNP).

In urban spaces, the layers that we can explore today encourage retracing the paths that shaped the past, and one of these layers is, indeed, memory. In this sense, revisiting Ruskin's (2008) concepts, which attribute a significant role to architecture in conveying memory and acting as the "defender of humanity and the individual," opens a path to the various cultural expressions embedded in architecture, particularly evident in southern Brazil. Ruskin imbues the home with symbolism, highlighting its simplicity and the intentions of its use and attachment by its residents. He views the home as carrying a sanctity that spans generations, which must be understood through its symbolic power. By valuing its permanence as a characteristic that soothes humanity, he hopes that by observing a home, one will see the care, attachment, the passage of time, and the different generations that inhabit it. In their absence, we see a landscape of similar, solitary elements, disconnected from the land on which they are built (Ruskin, 2008).



The wooden houses in Vila Operária are described not only by their materiality but also by the stories they hold. The relationships they establish with their residents and neighbors shape the space in a way that reflects and rests in their memories. These wooden structures are connected to the history of the neighborhood, with their buildings and their transformations (in location or material) serving as references to the passage of time. Such is the case of São José Church and Cine Horizonte, important landmarks that, through their films, event promotions, and busy weekend schedules, reflect a sense of belonging and the building of a community, despite the changes they have undergone.

This recognition demonstrates the values and cultural significance these buildings hold in the daily lives of the neighborhood's inhabitants. Architecture, when embedded in a collective context, has the unconscious power to anticipate our thoughts toward it, standing out and maintaining a strong presence in everyday life (ABREU, 2007).

It is through this combination of elements that the memories of stories, which often do not belong to the official chronological history, are identified or evoked. These stories are tied to social groups, personal narratives, and specific territories. As Nora (2012, p. 9) notes, "memory is rooted in the concrete—in space, gesture, image, and object." According to Rossi (2003):

the world we've lived in for a long time is full of places where images are present that have the function of bringing something to mind. [...] In the places of everyday life, countless images invite us to behave, suggest things to us, exhort us to duties, invite us to do things, impose prohibitions on us, request us in various ways (ROSSI, 2003, p. 23).

In this context, daily life is enriched with meaning, as discussed by Meneses (2006), who attributes to the act of inhabiting and working a source of culture that often goes unrecognized because it is not part of the market or economy. This reflects the exclusionary nature of culture, where everyday life and inhabiting are seen as incompatible, as they represent a segment of life that is separated and lacks functions considered "noble." Nevertheless, by observing the repetitive daily actions, it becomes possible to identify the places "where social relations are concretely established, and where social practices give shape and effect to the interests at play" (MENESES, 2006, p. 38).

PLACES OF MEMORY AND THEIR SUBJECTS IN VILA OPERÁRIA

By taking a path that seeks to preserve memories through tangible elements, the focus is drawn to Vila Operária, its daily life, representations, and community. From the design of the neighborhood, with a large square that houses a sports center and marks its spatial and symbolic centrality, to the events that took place



in specific locations such as the church, the cinema, and the soccer field, along with the tranquility of the streets and the relationships between neighbors, all these elements collectively highlight the values and significance of the neighborhood for its residents, as well as for the city of Maringá. In the context of analyzing the city as a broad backdrop for identifying urban issues and planning actions, which often involve the creation of “non-places,” revealing Vila Operária through a closer lens can have a significant impact on the tension between memory and transformation.



Figure 1: Paissandu Avenue and the current view with the Brinco da Vila pitch. Source: Authors, 2024.

Paissandu Avenue, an important thoroughfare crossing Vila Operária from east to west, is essential for understanding the transformation processes the neighborhood has undergone, reflecting the expansion of the city center towards the neighborhood. On one hand, the avenue features building typologies with more than twenty floors, a result of changes in urban legislation encouraged by its proximity to Parque do Ingá and the city center (to the west). This has created a dynamic street, with commercial spaces and services on the ground floors. On the other hand, towards the east, near the Brinco da Vila stadium, the landscape remains largely unchanged, evoking memories of the neighborhood's past—where sports, street gatherings, services, and the connections between space and users brought the area to life (Figure 1).

In this context, memory and its recognition in urban elements, in the meanings of the neighborhood, and in gathering points like Brinco da Vila, enable a discussion of these spaces as places of memory. According to Nora (2012), places of memory are not static or closed in on themselves. Instead, they offer layers that awaken a desire for memory, which works to preserve symbolic and representative elements of a community. These layers are organized around material, symbolic, and functional dimensions and are revealed through a historical analysis that allows for an understanding of “the processes of social production of memories (...) and their role in the construction of historical knowledge and the consolidation



of historical narratives” (GONÇALVES, 2012, p. 34). This same author revisits Nora’s writings:

The place of memory presupposes, to begin with, the juxtaposition of two orders of reality: a tangible and apprehensible reality, sometimes material, sometimes less so, inscribed in space, time, language and tradition, and a purely symbolic reality, the bearer of a history.

(...)

Place of memory, then: any significant unit, of a material or ideal order, which the will of men or the work of time has converted into a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community. (NORA, 1997, apud GONÇALVES, 2012, p. 34)

In the field of cultural heritage in Brazil, the concept of a place of memory has been appropriately linked to the opportunities created by the *Livro de Registro de Lugares* (Registry of Places), established by Decree 3.551/2000. As Arévalo (2005, p. 7) explains, based on the reading of the Decree, it registers:

(...) ‘markets, fairs, shrines, squares and other spaces where collective cultural practices are concentrated and reproduced’, the decree also notes the purpose of this inscription: ‘The inscription in one of the registration books will always have as a reference the historical continuity of the property and its national relevance to the memory, identity and formation of Brazilian society’.

Despite being a relevant approach for the work presented here, the author argues that there is still a need for further understanding of local identities and cultural pluralities, valuing spaces that represent stories built alongside their residents, recognized and remembered through them. Understanding the relationship between these places and both the residents and visitors is key to identifying the broad dimensions of a place of memory, which includes its physical and functional aspects but expands to the construction of a memory acknowledged by social groups. In this way, recognizing its symbolism and power as a trigger for a sense of belonging brings the past into the present and strengthens the relationships identified with the social group it is linked to. As a historical construction, the place of memory serves as a valuable source of knowledge and a tool for building history (ARÉVALO, 2005; ASSMANN, 2011).

Within the Vila Operária, the places where wooden architecture remains are key references to the city’s wooden past, which was visible in the landscape of the 1950s. The records from that era, combined with current photographic surveys, field observations, and interviews with local residents, have demonstrated the



role this wooden backdrop plays in consolidating the history of Vila Operária. The continued existence of these buildings over time symbolizes the durability of things, in contrast to the notion of impermanence often associated with wooden structures. Their persistence, even into the second decade of the 21st century, stands as a testament to their strength. This influence extends to subsequent architectural typologies, which have reproduced the tectonics, positioning on the land, and the ability to house families for decades.

According to the map organized by the authors, the wooden buildings documented in 2014 and 2024 can be highlighted (Figure 2). The second quadrant presents striking characteristics of the neighborhood in both its buildings and the streets that shape it. Unlike the first quadrant, this area maintains the heights of one- or two-story buildings, with more than one house occupying a single lot. It also retains strong neighborly relations and attention to gardens, sidewalks, and the vehicle circulation lanes. The vegetation complements the still-vintage scenery of the neighborhood.

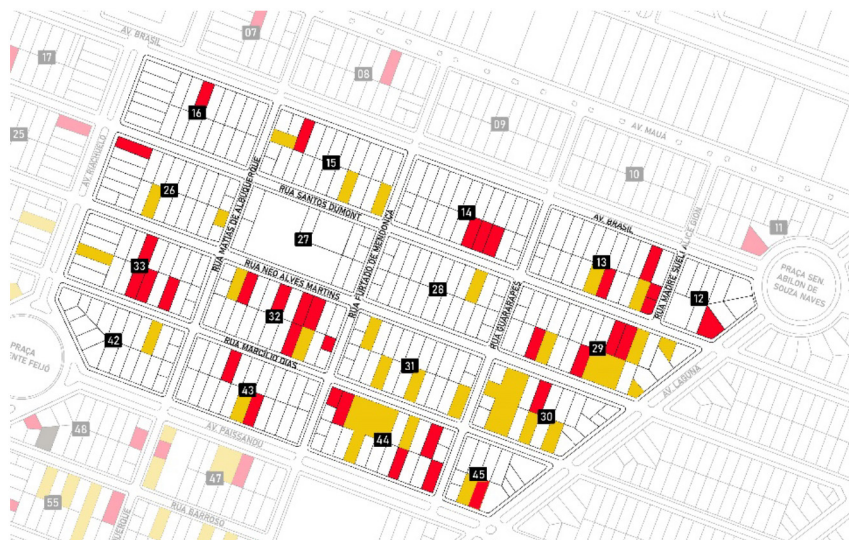


Figure 2: Map highlighting the second quadrant of Vila Operária - in red the demolished buildings and in yellow those remaining in 2024. Source: Authors, 2024.

Néo Alves Martins Street (Figure 3), which extends between Avenida Cidade de Leiria and Avenida Laguna, stands out for housing the rare preserved wooden buildings still found in the neighborhood, particularly between Avenida Laguna and Avenida Riachuelo. This section highlights the buildings that remain on the street to this day.

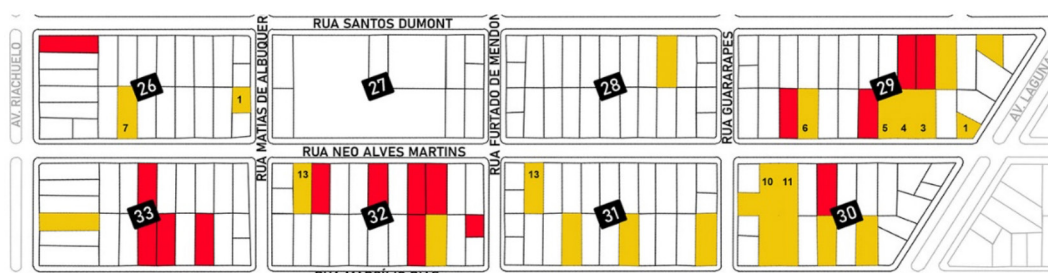


Figure 3: Neo Alves Martins Street, buildings that remain. Source: Authors, on a City Hall map, 2024.



Figure 4: Residences located on Rua Neo Alves Martins: A - Quadra 26, lot 7; B - quadra 32, lot 13; C and D - Quadra 30, lots 10 and 11. Source: Authors, 2022 and 2024.

The remaining buildings (Figure 4) are simple but well-maintained, having belonged to their residents since they were originally constructed. Building C belongs to the current resident's late father, and she continues to live there alone, renting out another space at the back of the lot. House D was also inherited but is in need of care; the current resident does not yet recognize it as a heritage asset or as a reference to his family's history. Over the years, some of these homes have been painted in new colors, but beneath the layers, they still preserve the original peroba-rosa wood that gave them life.

Along Néo Alves Martins Street, the change in building typologies becomes evident as one moves westward, towards Parque do Ingá. The urban landscape gradually shifts, becoming dominated by masonry buildings, with storefronts lining the streets and construction companies acquiring corner lots. In addition to market pressures, these changes reflect the evolving experiences of different generations, leading to a loss of connection and attachment to the land and territory in which they are situated (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Record of Neo Alves Martins Street in the direction of Parque do Ingá. Left photo: near Avenida Laguna and Rua Pombal; right photo: near Rua Henrique Dias. Source: Authors, 2024.

On October 12 and December 16, 2023, during the morning and afternoon, while walking along the street and observing the presence of wooden residences and the activities of residents in both their homes and the street, the powerful connection between architecture, city, and inhabitants became clear. The facades are typically designed with two windows separated by a door, almost like the eyes and smile of a human face, as if they could, in some way, represent the identity of Vila Operária. The houses share a common feature: the verandas (Figure 6). These spaces, furnished and arranged, create areas for people to gather and enjoy leisure, while also serving as an extension of the interior of the house into the yard—an essential connection between the inside and the outside. This symbolizes the intimate connection between the private life of the residents and the collective life of the community.

According to Assmann (2011), recognizing the symbolic within places is what encourages the exercise of memory and can reactivate bonds between generations. Spaces such as the house, the yard, and the garden¹ are significant locations for lived experiences and the building of connections:

In these places, the memory of the individual is extended towards the memory of the family; and here the sphere of the individual's life intersects with that of those who are part of it, but are no longer there (ASSMANN, 2011, p.318).

¹ Correspondence between Goethe and Schiller from 1905, used by Assmann to recognize the strength of the symbolism of places in relation to memory.





Figure 6: House located on the street with typical use of the balcony. Source: Authors, 2023.

Through on-site observations and photographs, it was possible to recognize the role of materiality and the spaces within Vila Operária in preserving both individual and collective memories as well as in maintaining, transmitting, and promoting local history. Additionally, it was observed that these elements not only form part of the urban landscape of a city that was once primarily made of wood but also represent the entire visual and collective identity of Vila Operária. In this sense, the materiality intertwined with the spaces of the Vila serve as identity markers for a social body that can contribute to the recognition and strengthening of these spaces as places of memory.

The interviews conducted, which brought together key stakeholders, Vila residents, and city historians, revealed significant insights. One notable example is an interview with a partner from the Plaenge construction company, who identified three profiles of Vila Operária residents. Among these, the pioneers stand out—those who resist selling their homes due to the emotional value the place holds. The second group consists of their children, the second generation, who are likely to move away soon, and the third group comprises investors, who choose to sell their properties. These profiles unconsciously reflect the tension between what will be preserved and what will change in Vila Operária. According to the interviewee, the history of Vila Operária will be incorporated into new developments primarily through landscape design and plant species, rather than through the preservation of the wooden architectural elements that characterize the neighborhood. This shift moves the materiality of the neighborhood into the realm of reminiscence.

In the interviews with residents, when reflecting on the neighborhood's evolution, they expressed a certain melancholy as they reminisced about the past, recalling the strong sense of community that once existed—everyone knew each other. One poignant statement came from Mr. Antônio: "We have to preserve the Brinco da Vila, that's ours, we have to preserve that!" This remark reveals a deep sense of belonging and affection for the place, along with a plea to ensure that not only the Brinco da Vila but also the entire history and identity of the community are not lost to time and the neighborhood's changes.

DISCUSSIONS

The surveys conducted aim to contribute to a better understanding of the Vila Operária and its daily life. By examining the approved projects at the city hall, particularly the layout of the houses and their relationship with the land, as well as the spaces created in the transition between the street and the house, it becomes evident that there is a sensitivity between the wooden architecture and the neighborhood community. This connection is enriched by symbolic and cultural elements, the preservation of the building and its surroundings, the care taken with the interior of the house, and the maintenance of gardens with shrub vegetation and small trees common to the region, all of which contribute to social recognition and promote the preservation of the residents' collective memory. This brings authenticity and permanence discussed and advocated by Ruskin (2008, p. 56).

The observations of daily life and the photographic records, as well as the survey of buildings at different moments (spaced a decade apart), make it possible to notice changes in the street spaces and the neighborhood as a whole. These records highlight the transformations experienced by the neighborhood, influenced by urban growth. Important examples include the reconfiguration of public spaces, such as the disappearance of the Cinema Horizonte; interactions with private areas, with densification in previously sparsely populated areas; the role of collective spaces; and the different ways the population appropriates and uses them, as exemplified by the changing function of the São José Church square over time.

The few remaining wooden houses in Vila Operária and the public spaces that have withstood the test of time play a vital role as memory preservers. They serve as elements infused with history and as activators of memories shared in local conversations. The architectural types, modes of use, and the relationships established between the city, the neighborhood, and its inhabitants reflect traditions, values, and beliefs that strengthen the connection to Vila Operária.

The presence of key elements in the wooden buildings, such as the veranda and its relationship with the street, due to its close positioning to the sidewalk, creates a unique condition for this space. The street is revealed through the wooden buildings and their residents, often leaning over their fences engaged in informal neighborhood conversations. As one walks along Neo Alves Street, these encounters are common in its western section. However, as one moves toward Parque do Ingá, where skyscrapers have already taken root in the neighborhood, the street loses its personal character, becoming merely a thoroughfare for hurried residents driving to access underground parking.

In this context, the traditional wooden architecture of Vila Operária is studied as a subtle yet significant element, woven throughout the city's history of progress and the unique lived experiences. Wood, as a key architectural feature, has become a



subject of analysis due to its potential to evoke memories of an important period in Maringá's history. Therefore, the act of documenting events through images, documents, and stories shared in interviews is essential for society as a whole, as it materializes fragments of the intangible into the physical realm.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article discusses the relationship between memory and identity and highlights the importance of understanding the power of wooden architecture beyond its aesthetic appeal. These reminiscences play a central role in daily life and are essential for fostering both personal and collective development. Architecture shapes impressions and interpersonal relationships, which are solidified in memory, serving as an extension of the human experience. The wooden buildings in Vila Operária and the public spaces that have endured through history act as guardians of memory by providing a foundation for exercising citizenship.

The concepts of memory and places of memory, also discussed here, are reflected in the presentation of Vila Operária. Observations such as photographic surveys, historical records, resident interviews, and the researchers' experience in the area emphasize the value of a multi-source approach. This method enriches the understanding and recognition of space by including the perspectives of those who use it. The stories become deeply embedded in memory and reminiscences, rather than remaining superficial.

This collection of information serves as a record of both individual and collective memories of Vila Operária. Furthermore, it is essential to value the power of materiality as a foundation for memory, recognizing in the spaces and landmarks the places of memory for the neighborhood and its community. The documentation confirms, each in its own way, the varied perceptions that a single location can hold and its deep connection to everyone.

In Vila Operária, the presence of wooden architecture evokes memories and creates spaces of profound meaning that remain in the minds of its residents to this day. Preserving this architecture, which embodies the community's memories and identity, is a significant challenge in the face of the city's ongoing "progress" and densification driven by capitalist real estate dynamics. It is essential to preserve the stories and memories of this pioneering community in Maringá's development, represented by its board-and-batten architecture, to ensure that individual, collective, and historical values endure over time and are not lost in the march of life.

However, the transformation of Vila Operária is urgent and overwhelming. A shift in the essence of the neighborhood is evident, reflected in the changes in land use, building typologies, traffic flows, and the ways spaces are appropriated. The wooden reminiscences evoke memories of a slower, less consumer-driven time,



more deeply connected to the land—one that is quickly fading into the new urban landscape. Documenting and consolidating memories through the approach presented here has been a means of preserving a portion of the unofficial historiography of the city of Maringá.

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