

The Project of Arquitetura Nova: Practice and Form

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Rethinking the role of the architect and design across scales and scopes is an urgent imperative in the face of the tremendous social, political and environmental challenges of the next decades. Yet, the endeavour of dismantling and rebuilding the means and the ends of what is essentially a very conservative form of production is daunting. A crucial step in pursuing this ambition is the search for exemplary practices that dare to challenge the dominant forces and lines of development and, therefore, are usually erased from the prevailing narratives.

At the core of this research is the idea that building is both a mode of production—a process that requires a specific organisation of labour—and at the same time its outcome—a material form that defines a specific use and organisation of life through presence. Hence, building, as both process and form, contributes decisively to the production of subjectivity. However, while building can be understood as the mere implementation of existing forms of production, architecture is instead the materialisation of a project that aims at constructing subjects' other or more precisely at bridging the gap between existing and imagined subjects, between dominant and alternative forms of production and life.

From this premise, three fundamental questions emerge: how should the process that materialises the project unfold; who should be the subject that imagines new forms of production and life; and what form should architecture take. The work of the Brazilian collective Arquitetura Nova offers coherent answers to these questions, grounded in a radical critique of the specific historical conditions, and elaborated through the experimentation with a different form of architectural practice.

Process

1. The critique of the role of the architect was elaborated on by the group in a number of controversial articles during the 1960s and early 1970s. Sérgio Ferro further elaborated and systematised the theoretical approach in the book *O canteiro e o desenho*. For Ferro, building is not an industry but a manufacture, a labour intensive activity with little mechanisation that maximises the extraction of surplus from labour. It is precisely by virtue of its quantity, diffusion and backwardness that the building activity plays a crucial role in the global capitalist organisation, extracting from labour the capital to be invested in more advanced sectors of the economy. Sérgio Ferro, *O canteiro e o desenho* (São Paulo: Projeto, 1979).

2. See Sérgio Ferro, "Brasília, Lucio Costa e Oscar Niemeyer" in *Arquitetura e Trabalho Livre*. Sérgio Ferro, ed. Pedro Fiori Arantes (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2006), 305-320.

3. "Economic miracle" commonly refers to a period during the military dictatorship, between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, which saw a rapid acceleration of development driven by State investments, in which construction played a crucial role. For a critical reading of this paradigm, see Paul Singer, *O Milagre Brasileiro: Causas e Consequências* (São Paulo: Estudos Cebrap, 1972) and Francisco de Oliveira, *Crítica à Razão Dualista. O Ornitorrinco* (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2003), originally published in 1972.

4. Sérgio Ferro first used the term "Arquitetura Nova" in a 1967 text referring to the new generation of "rational architects" in Brazil and just twenty years later to identify his collaboration with Flávio Império and Rodrigo Lefèvre. Sérgio Ferro, "Arquitetura Nova," *Teoria e Prática*, n. 1 (1967): 3-15; Sérgio Ferro, "FAU, travessa da Maria Antonia" in *Maria Antonia: uma rua na contramão*, Maria Cecília Loschiavo dos Santos, ed. (São Paulo: Nobel, 1988), 272-273; Ana Paula Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova: Flávio Império, Rodrigo Lefèvre e Sérgio Ferro* (São Paulo: Romano Guerra Editora - EDUSP, 2003), 13.

The starting point of Arquitetura Nova's project is the consideration that, within capitalist relations of production, the architect's "art" is about mediating the conflict between capital and labour, thus enforcing the separation of the builder from his/her own knowledge. Through the *desenho*—both design and drawing—the architect reduces the act of building to a mere execution of orders and at the same time enforces a strict division of labour, ensuring that construction remains the largest and most effective source of capital accumulation and labour exploitation.¹ Ultimately, design weakens the workers' collective relationships with the aim of assuring efficiency and control of the production process.

From this perspective, the example of Brasília exposes with stark clarity the consequences of the architect's line, of turning ink and paper into steel and concrete. Building a city from scratch in a remote area, with very limited technological means, meant using an enormous amount of labour and forcing thousands of workers to live amassed in precarious self-built shelters. At the same time, Oscar Niemeyer's design for the key buildings of the "Plano Piloto" pursued a metaphysical aesthetic, as if the constructions would have landed effortlessly from another world. Furthermore, the light white surfaces not only concealed the dramatic condition of the construction site under a thin layer of white plaster, but actively multiplied labour. Following the line of the drawing beyond any structural logic, the architect required the concrete to absorb exceptional tensions, exponentially increasing the amount of steel and the labour required and consequently the surplus value extracted from the workers through the construction process.² Ultimately, Brasília—beyond the rhetoric of an heroic enterprise in the construction of a modern nation—has to be understood as an unprecedented project of capital accumulation that launched the so-called economic miracle of the following decade.³

In 1960, the year of Brasília's inauguration, Flávio Império, Rodrigo Lefèvre and Sérgio Ferro were still students at the Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo of the Universidade de São Paulo (FAUUSP), and the idea of Arquitetura Nova was still taking shape.⁴ However, in those years they had the chance to design and carry out a few buildings in the new capital and, more importantly, to experience first-hand the "horror of Brasília's construction sites".⁵ The shocking working conditions they witnessed urged them to radically rethink the role of the architect against the myth of development.⁶

Arquitetura Nova was not an office but rather a multitude of experiments in painting, scenography, pedagogy, building techniques and political theory, a permanent exercise in free and collective labour as a means of radical political change. Indeed, the adjective *Nova* had nothing to do with the search for novelty and originality that pervades contemporary architecture. *Nova* identified an *ethos*, an attitude towards work and life for which architectural practice was understood as a technique of critical thinking and political action.⁷

Against the false hope of development and the deception of a free, open and democratic aesthetic promised by national Modernism, the group proposed



ARCHED PORTICO. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE, FREDERICO BROTERO HOUSE, SÃO PAULO 1971.

the rationalisation of popular construction techniques as a means to liberate workers from alienation and exploitation. Arquitetura Nova pursued a "poetic of economy," an architecture of reduced means where scarcity is not accepted as limitation nor aestheticised as a moral value, but rather assumed as the rationale that informs the structure, the production and the aesthetic of the work.⁸ From this perspective, the role of the architect becomes one of organising the collective labour of building, of designing new relations of production that minimise labour intensity and reclaim the value of the workers' knowledge: from *desenho* for the construction site to *desenho* of the construction site.⁹

After some attempts with prefabrication, which failed due to the lack of adequate technology, Arquitetura Nova experimented with the vault in the design of houses and schools. The form of the vault provided structural efficiency and simplicity of construction given that its geometry, based on the catenary curve, allows the structure to work almost exclusively in compression, therefore

5. "I closely followed the horror of Brasília's construction sites. Out of an ethical obligation, I was forced to review the airy certainties of the profession—and so I continue today." Sérgio Ferro, "Arquitetura e luta de classes: uma entrevista com Sérgio Ferro," interview by Lelita Oliveira Benoit, *Crítica Marxista* 15 (2002): 1-5. Translation by the author.

6. As the economist Celso Furtado thoroughly demonstrated, underdevelopment is not a temporary stage of an evolutionary process, but rather a structural condition in the global dynamic of capitalism that allows the centre to perpetuate its domination on the periphery both at a global and local scale. According to Furtado, in technologically and financially dependent economies based on the export of natural resources, like Brazil, industrialisation has a "structural tendency to exclude the mass of the population from the benefits of accumulation and technical progress." Paradoxically, development increases the gap between a wealthy minority that consumes imported high-standard commodities and the vast majority relying on low-tech goods produced for subsistence. See Celso Furtado, *Desenvolvimento e subdesenvolvimento*. (Rio de Janeiro, Fundo de Cultura, 1961); *O mito do desenvolvimento econômico* (Rio de Janeiro, Paz e terra, 1974).

7. The adjective "Nova" was borrowed from the "Cinema Novo," a cinematographic movement led by directors such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Ruy Guerra and Glauber Rocha, which questioned the very idea of development by assuming the scarcity of resources as an opportunity to challenge the dominant aesthetic and mode of production. See Ismail Xavier, *Sertão mar: Glauber Rocha e a estética da fome* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983).

SUBTRACTIONS.
RODRIGO LEFÈVRE AND
NESTOR GOULART REIS FILHO,
PERY CAMPOS HOUSE,
SÃO PAULO, 1970.

8. The definition of "poetic of economy" is published in an article by Sérgio Ferro and Rodrigo Lefèvre in 1963: "It's from the useful, constructive and didactic minimum need that we take [...] the basis of a new aesthetic which we could call 'poetic of economy', of the absolutely indispensable, of the elimination of all that is superfluous, of the 'economy' of means for the formulation of a new language entirely established in the base of our historical reality." Sérgio Ferro and Rodrigo Lefèvre, "Proposta inicial para um debate: possibilidade de atuação" in *Arquitetura e Trabalho Livre*, 33-36. Translation by the author.

9. See Arantes, *Arquitetura Nova*, 119.



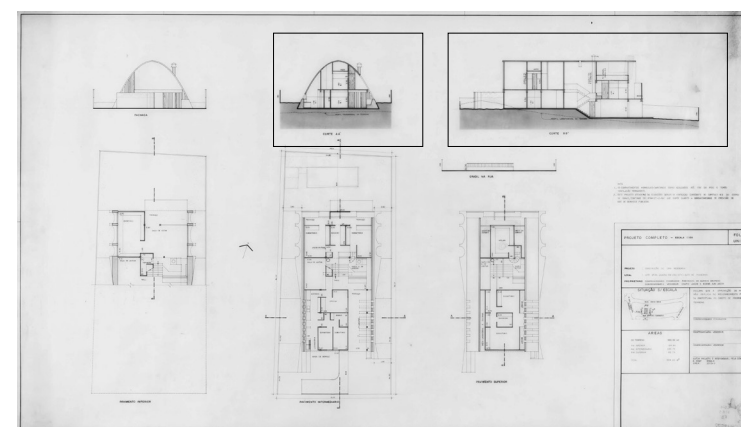
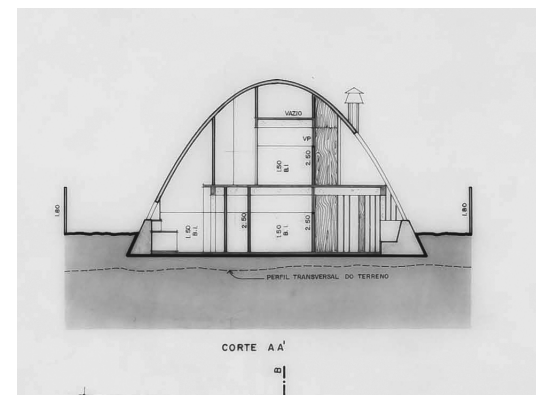
minimising the need of steel and concrete, and drastically reducing the amount of labour and cost of materials. The structure was initially constructed with standard straight hollow bricks and prefabricated beams. Disposed longitudinally on wooden moulds to form the curved surface, the array of beams was then finished with a layer of lightly reinforced concrete. In the latest projects Rodrigo Lefèvre further refined the construction technique by turning the original catenary into a second-degree parabolic curve and using transversal curved beams, a system that made construction easier and more efficient.¹⁰

Building activities were articulated in separate phases and parts, so that the design recognised the autonomy of each team of workers—masons, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, etc.—encouraging their thinking and making according to each technical capability. Following an “aesthetic of separation,”¹¹ every phase and component of the construction process was left exposed in the building, allowing the marks of labour on matter to become a sign of the workers presence.¹² Rather than representing the power imposed on the workers through the drawing, the building turned into a didactic device that exposes the potential of cooperation and collective will. Thus, the construction site was reimagined, from a space of oppression and exploitation to an arena of political experience, a stage where differences and conflicts between workers are negotiated through the self-determination of production rather than repressed through the hierarchies of labour division.¹³ Assuming the building process as the preeminent stage of the conflict between capital and labour, Arquitetura Nova shifted the core of architectural labour from design to production. The construction site, often seen as an obstacle between the perfection of the idea and its realisation, was embraced as the *locus* where the working class could build its emancipation. Architecture should not only stop enforcing the alienation and exploitation of labour through drawing but must also refuse to provide for the working class according to the paternalistic logic of developmentalism imposed by the State. On the contrary, building itself became the horizon where the workers could come together and realise William Morris’ motto: “art is man’s expression of joy in labour.”¹⁴

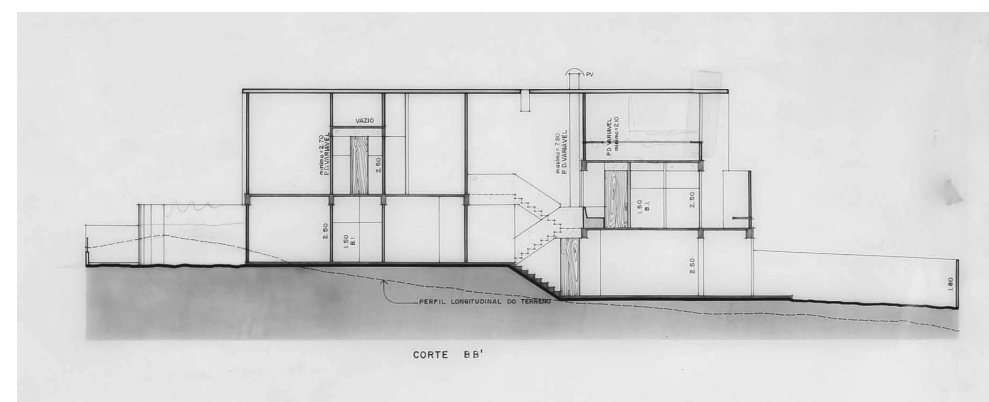
Subject

If the rethinking of building as a process found in the construction site a clear paradigm of a possible revolution, the question of the subject driving such an ambitious project remained more ambiguous.

Arquitetura Nova imagined a practice of architecture rooted in the existing relations of production, directly engaging with oppressed subjects, and their demands, through collective action. Such a radical approach was developed within the hopeful spirit of the early 1960s, when the basic reforms proposed by President João Goulart and the rise of popular organisations, such as the Ligas Camponesas and the Comunidades Eclesiais de Base, promised a profound transformation of the Brazilian social and political landscape: before the military coup of



“DESENHO”.
RODRIGO LEFÈVRE,
FREDERICO BROTERO HOUSE,
SÃO PAULO 1971.



10. Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova*, 74.

11. Sérgio Ferro articulates the notion of the “aesthetic of separation” in his book *O canteiro e o desenho* republished in Sérgio Ferro, “O canteiro e o desenho” in *Arquitetura e Trabalho Livre*, 105–202.

12. Sérgio Ferro, *A casa popular* (São Paulo: GFAU, 1972); Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova*, 100.

13. To describe this form of productive cooperation Sérgio Ferro used the metaphor of the jazz orchestra, where the free improvisation of performers is allowed and encouraged within a common theme. Sérgio Ferro, “Flávio arquiteto” in *Flávio Império em cena* (São Paulo: SESC, 1997), 100.

14. William Morris, “Art under plutocracy” in *The collected work of William Morris* (1883; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 164–191. Significantly, William Morris’ sentence will later appear in paintings by Sérgio Ferro, who will discuss the legacy of the British architect in various texts.



FORM IN THE LANDSCAPE.
SÉRGIO FERRO, BERNARDO
ISSLER HOUSE, COTIA, 1961.



CONSTRUCTION SITE. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE AND NESTOR GOULART REIS FILHO,
PERY CAMPOS HOUSE, SÃO PAULO, 1970.

15. Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda and Marcos Augusto Gonçalves, *Cultura e participação nos anos 60* (São Paulo, Brasil: Brasiliense, 1982); Arantes, *Arquitetura Nova*, 49.

1964 revolution seemed possible, if not imminent.¹⁵ More importantly, the 1960s also marked the acceleration of the dramatic rural exodus that turned Brazilian cities into largely self-built megalopolis in only a few decades: millions of people migrated from the country's impoverished interior to the margins of major urban areas where they were forced to sell their labour power and build their own shelter. While industrial capitalism professed the rhetoric of development as a remedy to this permanent crisis—a solution embraced by both the Brazilian State and the Brazilian Communist Party¹⁶—, *Arquitetura Nova* claimed the possibility and the need to organise a cooperative practice exceeding capitalist modes of production.

Mass migration and self-construction provided a labour reserve and a mechanism for reducing workers' salaries,¹⁷ while also constituting the material condition and basis of production for a large part of the Brazilian people. Therefore, the subject of a truly popular architectural and political project was to be found less in the organised industrial proletariat than in the rural migrant now turned into a worker, builder, and dweller of the Brazilian city. On the construction site, the encounter of the rural and the urban, of the migrant with the technician and of popular with erudite culture, could give rise to an emancipatory synthesis based on the available means of production rather than on the false promise of a future development.¹⁸



TOTEM-TOILET. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE,
DINO ZAMMATARO HOUSE, SÃO PAULO 1970.



MONUMENTAL FORM. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE,
DINO ZAMMATARO HOUSE, SÃO PAULO 1970.

16. The official line of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) maintained that the path to revolution required the development of the industrial means of production and therefore supported the project of developmentalism led by the national bourgeoisie. This was one of the most relevant points of friction between *Arquitetura Nova* and their master João Batista Vilanova Artigas, who was a prominent member of the PCB. Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova*, 26–27. Arantes, *Arquitetura Nova*, 39–48.

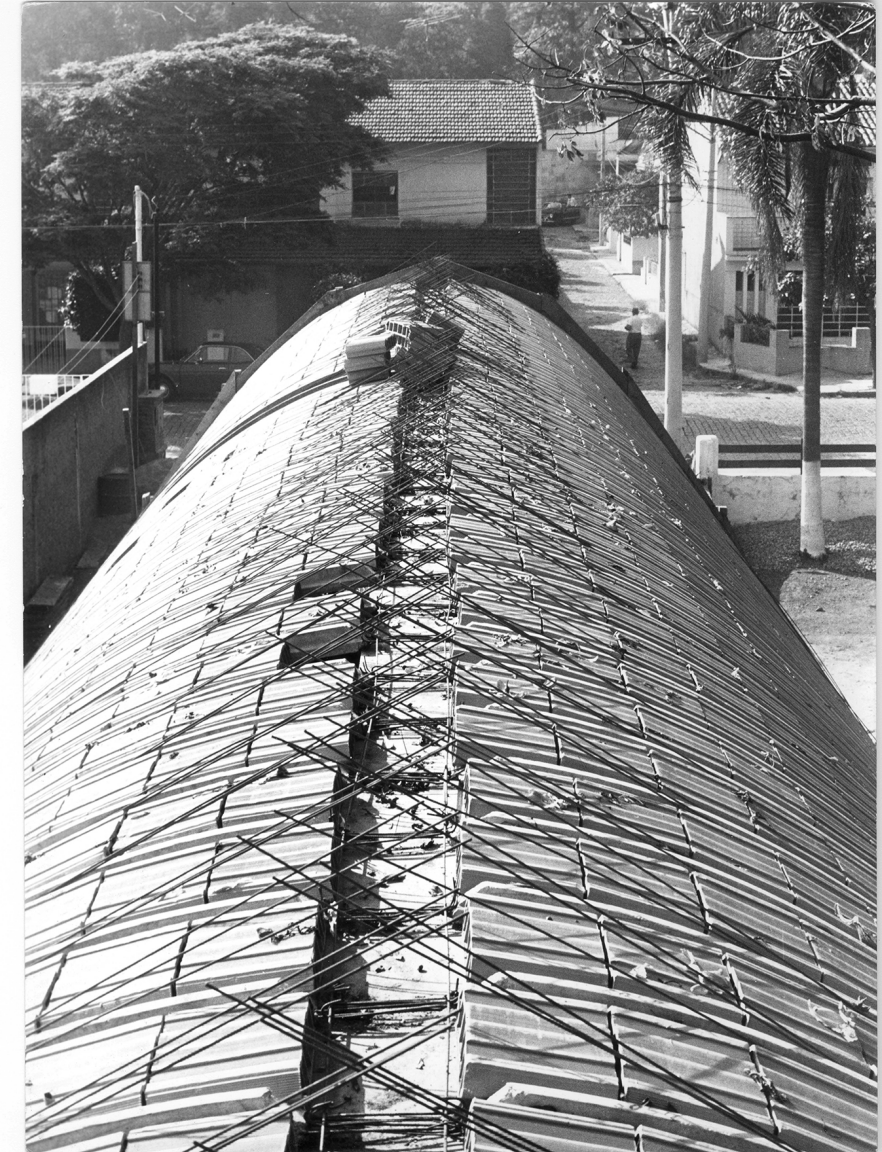
17. Allowing the migrants to build their own illegal houses meant keeping workers in a precarious condition, sparing investments in the provision of housing and discounting the value of rent from the salary. The seminal book on the issue remains *The Housing Question* by Frederick Engels, written in 1872. Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question*, C.P. Dutt, ed. (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1942). The argument is also explored in Rodrigo Lefèvre's master thesis. Rodrigo Brotero Lefèvre, "Projeto de um acampamento de obra: uma utopia" (Master diss., FAU USP, 1981), 20–31. For the relationship between state, capital and social housing in Brazil, see Nabil Bonduki, *Origens da habitação social no Brasil* (São Paulo, Estação Liberdade, 1998).

18. In his master's thesis, Rodrigo Lefèvre discusses in depth the potential of the encounter between the migrant and the technician—*técnico de nível superior*—forming a new subjectivity. The thesis is a systematisation of the experiments carried out in the previous decade, synthesised in the project of a "school-construction site," where an architectural and political paradigm based on cooperation could be built. See Lefèvre, "Projeto de um acampamento de obra." The term "school-construction site" will be used later by Erminia Maricato in an article dedicated to Lefèvre. Erminia Maricato, "Sobre Rodrigo Lefèvre," *Projeto*, n. 100 (1987): 111–113.

The work of Flávio Império for the 1960 play *Morte e Vida Severina* is the first powerful manifestation of this emancipatory potential. Based on a poem by João Cabral de Mello Neto, the piece celebrated rural popular culture following the journey of a peasant walking from the inland to the big city. The abstraction of the costumes, made with poor and basic materials such as jute fabric and cardboard, contrasted with the realism of the migrants arriving in the station of São Paulo, brought on the scene by projecting photographs—a device borrowed by Berthold Brecht. As Sérgio Ferro recalls, “simple materials [...] transfigured through the lucid invention were definitely more suitable to our time than the falsification of metropolitan models.”¹⁹ Producing sets and costumes offered a more direct path to action than architecture and, to a certain extent, the backstage represented a simplified version of the construction site the group was envisioning: a collectively organised space, where teams with different craftsmanship worked together to create the various elements of the scenographic project.

However, if in theory *Arquitetura Nova* clearly defined the subject of their architectural and political project, in practice a self-managed construction site where workers could freely build their home was less a reality than a metaphor of a possible free and democratic Brazil.²⁰ As Sérgio Ferro recalled years later, empowering the workers’ creative freedom was a dream relentlessly chased and almost realised in many experiments.²¹ Yet, after the Army’s seizure of power in 1964, such an ambition became impossible as the dictatorship made large-scale development, urban growth and violent repression the cornerstones of the Brazilian State.

The legacy of *Arquitetura Nova* has been studied and further developed by scholars and practitioners largely from the point of view of their radical and rigorous analysis of the material relations of production. These analyses place the building process at the centre of the construction of subjectivity. Yet, from this angle, *Arquitetura Nova*’s position easily slips into a utopian horizon, where the power of the construction site rests on the idea that the technician and the migrant would design, build, and inhabit together. This perspective flattens the relationship between architecture and the construction of subjectivity into a single plane where designing, building, and dwelling ultimately coincide. As Roberto Schwarz has noticed, addressing the issue of housing through the practice of self-construction runs the risk of translating the conflict between labour and capital into the distance between the housing movement and the contemporary means of production.²² Rodrigo Lefèvre himself had poignantly remarked that “only there, at the time of transition, where some of the political and economic relations will be modified, can I accept to participate in a large-scale self-construction process.”²³ However, if *Arquitetura Nova*’s theory gives the building process the role of shaping the subject, on the contrary, in their built work, it is the architectural form that is the primary means to construct a new subjectivity, to bridge the gap between existing and imagined forms of production and life.



MINIMUM STEEL. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE AND NESTOR GOULART REIS FILHO, PERY CAMPOS HOUSE, SÃO PAULO, 1970.

19. Ferro, “Flávio arquiteto,” 98–101. Translation by the author.

20. Arantes, *Arquitetura Nova*, 84–85.

21. Ferro, “Flávio arquiteto,” 100.

22. Roberto Schwarz, “Posfácio,” in Arantes, *Arquitetura Nova*, 231.

23. Lefèvre, “Projeto de um acampamento de obra,” 31. Translation by the author. See also the interview with Rodrigo Lefèvre by Renato de Andrade Maia, in Ana Paula Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova* (Master diss., EESC-USP, 1999), 111, available online on *Vitruvius*, last modified January 2000, <https://www.vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/entrevista/01.001/3352?page=4>.



POPULAR CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE AND NESTOR GOULART REIS FILHO, PERY CAMPOS HOUSE, SÃO PAULO, 1970.

Form

Between 1961 and 1977, Flávio Império, Rodrigo Lefèvre and Sérgio Ferro produced a wide range of over 60 architectural projects including houses, schools, multi-storey buildings, competitions, and renovations.²⁴ Within this body of work, the experimentations on the single-family house, and in particular the elaboration of the archetype of the vault-house, undoubtedly constitute the most consistent manifestation of their *ethos*. The clients for these residential projects were friends and relatives, a group of bourgeois intellectuals keen on experimenting with a different way of living in their own house.²⁵ Yet, working with the single-family house meant going to the political-economic root of the production of space, as the home is the *locus* of institutionalisation and naturalisation of property, and the family is the productive core of a capitalist society. The interior is the place of reproduction and comfort associated with women, which provides relief from the busy and dirty production space of the city, associated with men. Such opposition enforced gender hierarchies and the myth of ownership of both the house and the goods needed to make the interior a personal and protective space as opposed to the repetitive character of the urban.²⁶ This aspect is particularly emphasised in the suburban single-family house of the Americas, where the house as the negative of the city acquires the territorial dimension of the plot. Furthermore, in Brazil, the home is the place where extreme inequality rooted in racial and class segregation—a legacy of slavery from which the country never really freed itself—is managed through the ambivalence of personal relationships between master and domestic workers.²⁷

Facing these contradictions, Arquitetura Nova used the archetype of the cover as a means to seize the gap between the existing and the imagined subject and turn it into the substance of the project. As such, Arquitetura Nova's ruthless critique of the architect's role goes beyond both the recognition of the construction site as the battleground for the liberation of the working class and the call for collective self-construction actions, to propose a critical horizon for architectural practice.

Arquitetura Nova's *ethos* takes the form of a simple gesture of powerful aesthetic intensity that manifests the theoretical and technical issues posed by the group's political position: a single large vault defines the space of the house; two glass and wood walls on the short sides regulate the threshold between interior and exterior; the floor is manipulated to accommodate the topography and define different spatial qualities through fixed furniture; a number of secondary elements are overlaid on the vault and articulate the organisation of the space. These four basic operations constitute the archetype that Arquitetura Nova produced and refined through a dozen variations, from the Casa Bernardo Issler in 1961 to the Casa Paulo Vampré in 1977.²⁸

The "aesthetics of separation" is coherently deployed in the exposed electrical and plumbing installations and in the intentional separation of the vault from the elements that organise its living space, such as the mezzanines, the "wet rooms," the window and skylight openings, and the fixed furniture.

24. A complete list of works is in Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova*, 133–135.

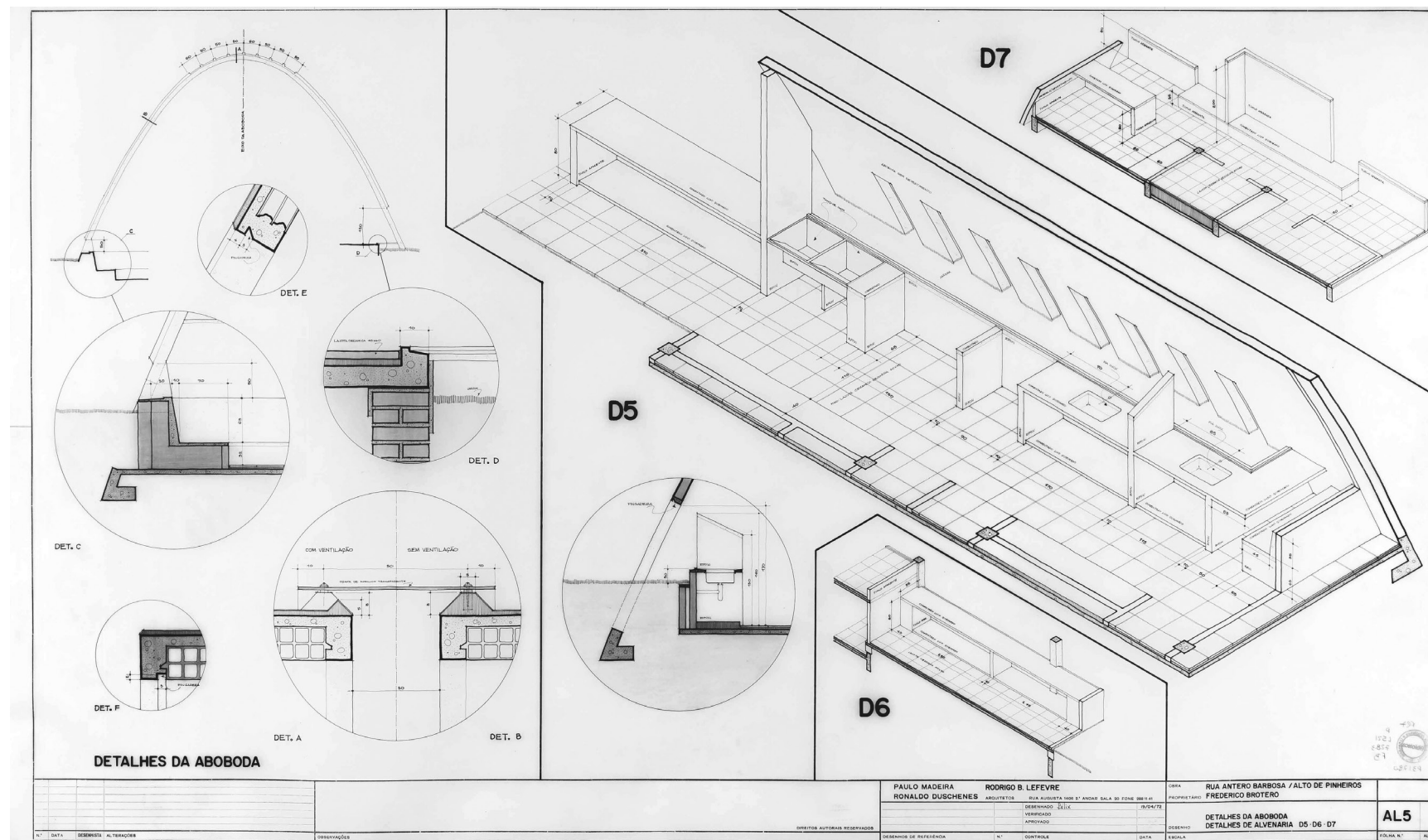
25. It is worth mentioning that Arquitetura Nova built a series of public schools between 1966–1967 and designed an unbuilt proposal for social housing in 1968, each using the system of the vault. However, these projects are exceptional episodes within the trajectory of their work. Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova*, 70.

26. For a concise history and thorough critique of the notion of the domestic, see Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shehêrazade Giudici, "Familiar Horror: Toward a Critique of Domestic Space," *Log* 38 (2016): 105–129.

27. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, "O homem cordial" in *Raízes do Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia das letras, 1995): 139–152.

28. Single-family houses constitute the most conspicuous and relevant part of Arquitetura Nova's architectural production. Among the eighteen houses they designed between 1960 and 1977, twelve adopted the vault form. There is no unanimous consensus among the scholars as to what should be included in the group's production: after Sérgio Ferro was exiled to France in 1971, Rodrigo Lefèvre continued to experiment with the vault-house while working on large-scale projects for Hidroservice and Flávio Império dedicated himself to art and set design. However, the houses of the 1970s are clearly a development of a common trajectory.

VAULT DETAILS.
RODRIGO LEFÈVRE,
FREDERICO BROTERO
HOUSE, SÃO PAULO 1971.



29. According to Walter Benjamin, in montage, "the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted. [...] The interruption of action, on account of which Brecht described his theatre as 'epic', constantly counteracts the illusion on the part of the audience. [...] Epic theatre, therefore, does not reproduce situations; rather, it discovers them." Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" in *Selected Writing*, vol. 2, part 2, 1931-1934, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 778.

30. On the emergence of the interior as ideology, see Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity* (London: Routledge, 2007).

While the geometry of the cover allows for the use of the most common and familiar materials of the Brazilian city, their unusual arrangement and the overlaying of autonomous elements against the absolute clarity of the vault produce an effect of estrangement reminiscent of the montage technique devised by Berthold Brecht in his "epic theatre."²⁹ In the same way, Arquitetura Nova's "epic details" counter the naturalisation of hierarchies and relations of production, i.e., the core of the bourgeois ideological project of the interior.³⁰ By disrupting the conventional understanding of domesticity, the vault allows a new form of life to be invented through inhabitation.

The mezzanine floors accommodating the rest areas, for example, are bare concrete structures built inside the house, suggesting a penetration of the very

generic fabric of the city into the intimacy of the interior. Suspended at the very centre of the vault they at once materialise and dissolve the idea of privacy through the continuity of the three-dimensional space. The openings in the vault defamiliarise the notion of windows by perforating the surface with concrete boxes or slices of fibre-cement pipes, or by subtraction, generating unusual arched porticoes that reveal the structure's pace. The "wet rooms" are autonomous concrete and brick structures containing kitchens, toilets, or the maid's rooms: topped with water tanks and decorated with the geometrical arrangement of exposed coloured pipes, these volumes stand like iconic and enigmatic totems. If the presence of domestic workers in the Brazilian house could not be eradicated, at least it was not half-hidden or hidden in the backyard, but placed



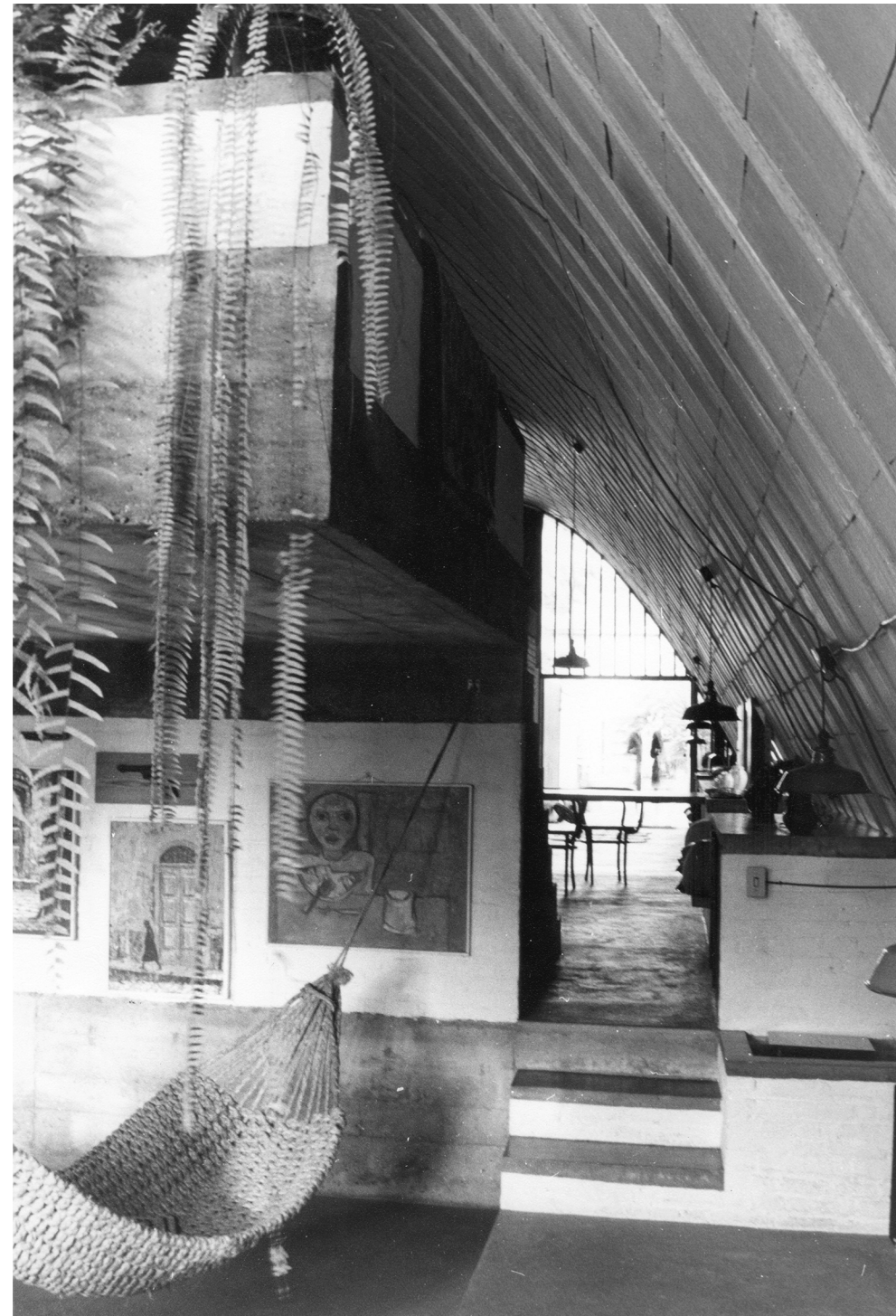
"EPIC" DETAILS. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE, DINO ZAMMATARO HOUSE, SÃO PAULO 1970.

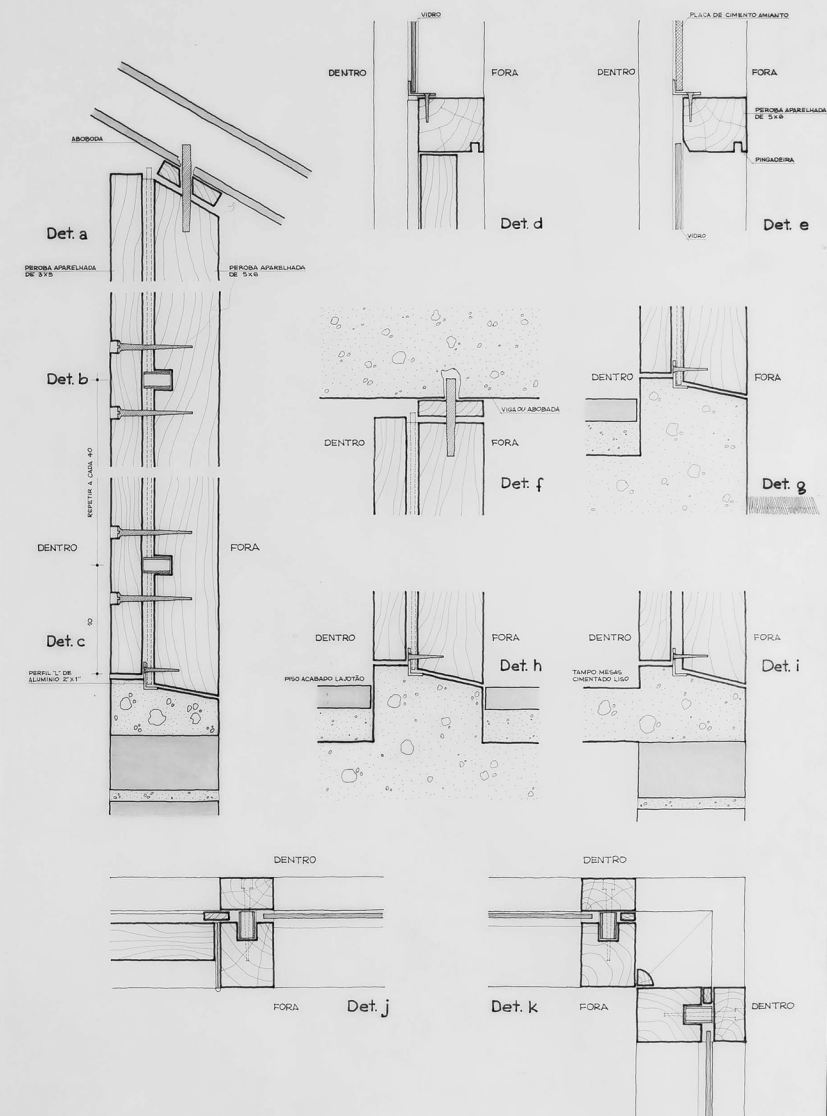
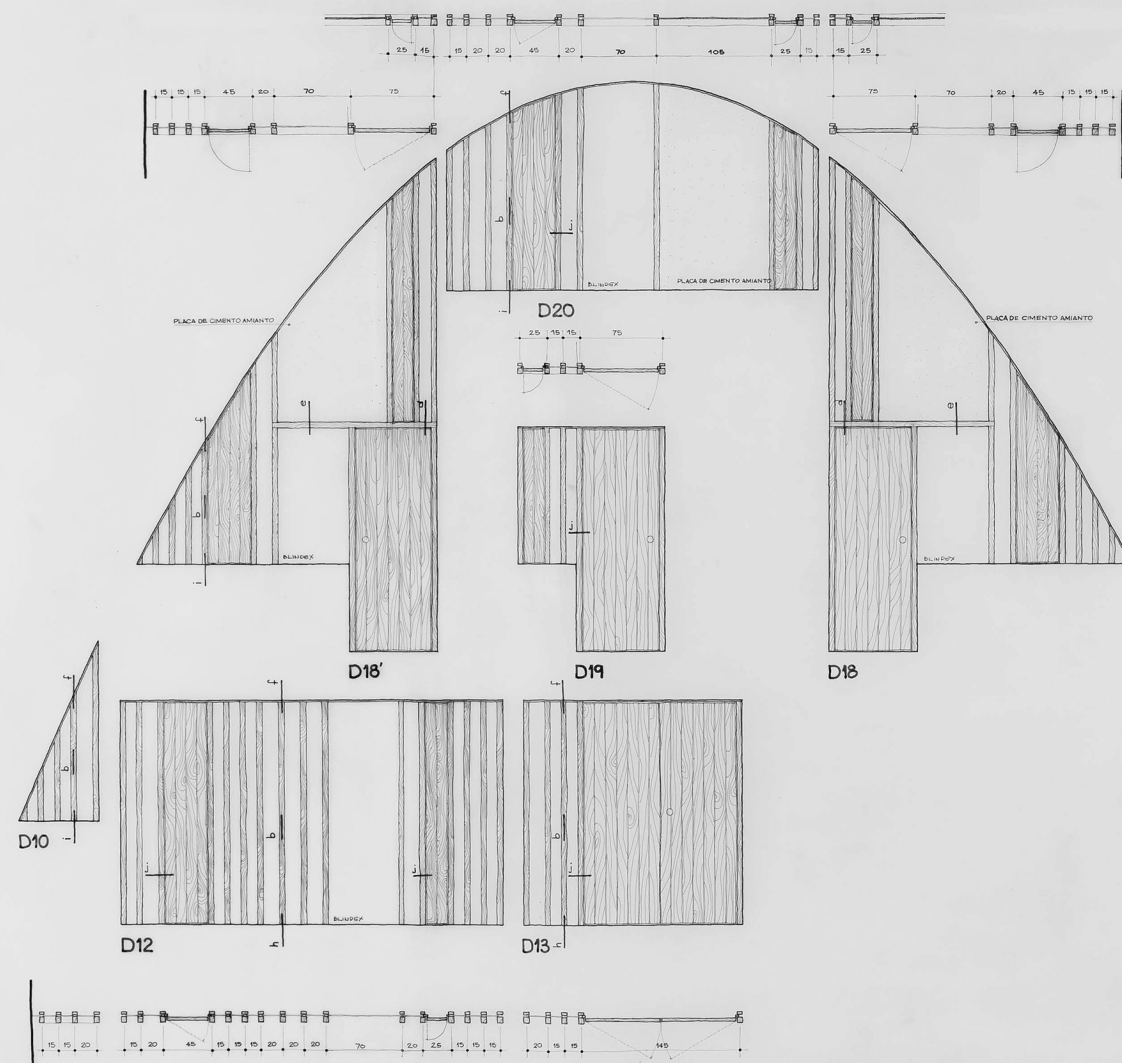
in plain sight at the entrance of the house, in a volume that could be eventually demolished when "abolition" was finally achieved.³¹ The fixed concrete furniture conceals the problematic moment when the cover touches the ground and reduces the inhabitable height,³² and at the same time they are permanent objects removed from the endless cycle of commodification and open to appropriation through use. Finally, every element, seen as produced, analogously represents the entire manufacturing cycle, and thus counters the ideological separation between the domestic interior and the city as space of production. Even enclosed within the individual plot and bound to private property, the archetype of the cover strives to expose the conflict between capital and labour and to produce a political awareness beyond the collective moment of the construction site. In this respect, the gap between the imagined and the real subjects inhabiting the house is not understood as a limit or a contradiction, but rather as an opportunity to imagine another way of dwelling and, therefore, new relations of production against and within capital: the vault-house is striking insofar as its form is able to question the bourgeois canon of domesticity and put forward an alternative paradigm of living.

31. Ana Paula Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova*, 89.

32. Ana Paula Koury, *Grupo Arquitetura Nova*, 85.

Although never explicitly claimed by the group, the refusal of a domesticity based on property and privacy finds a crucial precedent in the indigenous *oca*, the collective-domestic space of many Brazilian native peoples. The parallel goes far





31/01/78 *Salix* ALTERADO LARGURA DAS PONTALIDADES VENTILADAS

NT DATA DESENHISTA ALTERAÇÕES OBSERVAÇÕES

DIREITOS AUTORAIS RESERVADOS

PAULO MADEIRA
RONALDO DUSCHENES

RODRIGO B. LEFEVRE

ARQUITETOS RUA AUGUSTA 1405 3º ANDAR SALA 20 FONE 298 11 41

DESENHADO (1/20)

VERIFICADO

APROVADO

DESENHOS DE REFERÊNCIA

NT

CONTROLE

DATA

OBRA RUA ANTERO BARBOSA / ALTO DE PINHEIRO
PROPRIETÁRIO FREDERICO BROTERO

DETALHES DE MADEIRA

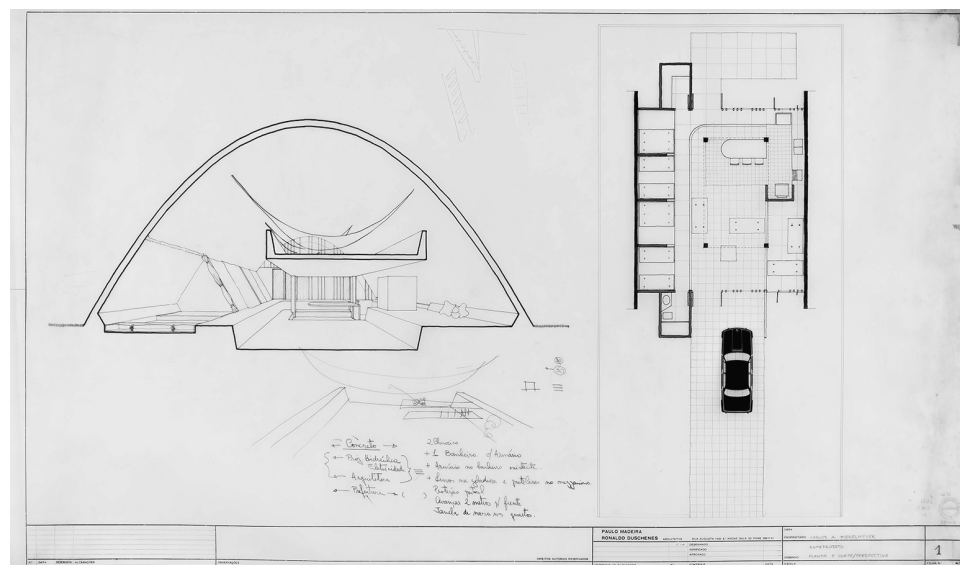
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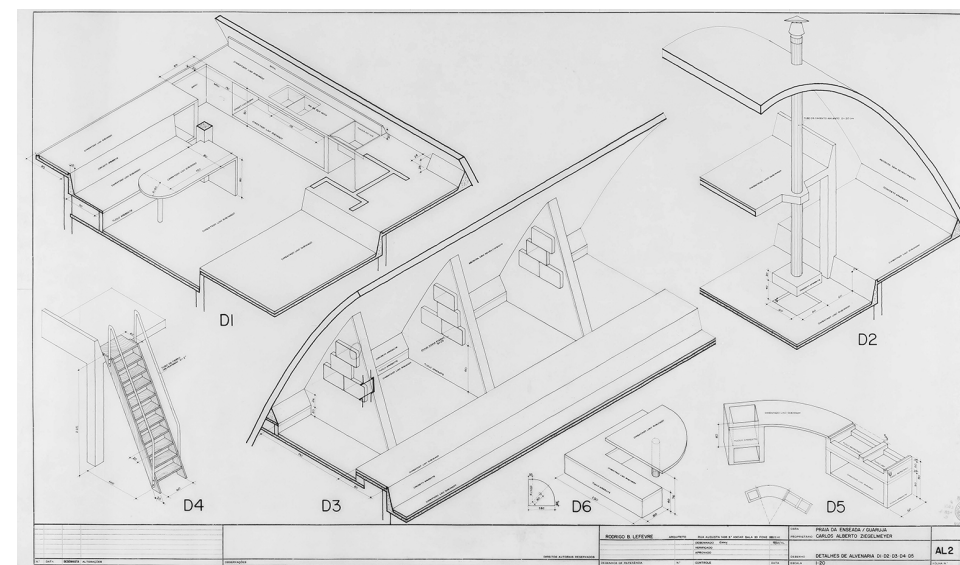
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FORM OF LIFE. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE, RONALDO DUSCHENES AND GENY Y. UEHARA,
CARLOS ZIEGELMEYER HOUSE, GUARAJÁ, 1972.



FIXED FURNITURE. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE, RONALDO DUSCHENES AND GENY Y. UEHARA,
CARLOS ZIEGELMEYER HOUSE, GUARAJÁ, 1972.

beyond a superficial formal resemblance or the fetishism of a national cultural identity, hinting instead at the idea that the formulation of an alternative form of life is inextricably linked to the valorisation of the native culture. Not only is the *oca* a vaulted space, but it is also built and lived in collectively as a space of the clan rather than as a stronghold of the nuclear family. In this respect, the words of Sérgio Ferro describing the unbuilt project of the Casa Império-Hamburger seem to claim an idea of domesticity analogous to the indigenous one: “the gentle curve protecting first the construction site and then the family Império-Hamburger with its maternal, uterine connotation. Inside, total freedom, to escape the rigidity of the bourgeois house. On the mezzanine, completely open to the community of numerous children, bed, wardrobes, benches, and tables compose a festive *promenade architecturale*. Below, the *promenade* continues, fluid with few closed spaces.”³³ Going beyond the opposition—still internal to the bourgeois tradition—between the subdivision of the apartment and the fluidity of the modernist open space, the metaphor of the uterus claims a much deeper sense of belonging to the land beyond the social construct of the family. Furthermore, the *detournement* of the Corbusian *promenade architecturale* into a carnival of furniture suggests an idea of living based more on the communal use of space and objects than on privacy and property—a conception very close to that of native peoples. The shape of the vault itself, blending the vertical and horizontal planes into a continuous surface, challenges the conventional Cartesian dimension of space, constituted at once by separation and repetition *ad infinitum*. On the contrary, the space is fluid but constantly framed by the curvature of the ceiling-wall surface that, even when subdivided, always offers a way for the subject

to analogously reconstruct the whole from a singular part. As such, the shape of the cover produces an understanding of space that is not of a mathematical kind, but rather, as the indigenous one, symbolic and cosmological.

The power of the vault-house lies in its savage monumentality, in the autonomy of its form, chosen not in relationship to function or context but in spite of them. Lightly resting on the ground, the cover solves the problem of shelter and thus liberates the interior from functional concerns. As such, the archetype is radically anti-typological: a means of dwelling without an end.³⁴ The vault-house seems to anticipate the unfolding of post-Fordist production in the imagination of a self-managed construction site that opposes autonomy, cooperation, and creativity to the hierarchical organisation of the factory.³⁵ Furthermore, it stages a living condition that blurs the boundaries between work and leisure, public and private, productive and reproductive labour. Rather than liberating the worker, the dissolution of the modern boundaries of human activities implies an increasingly pervasive control and exploitation of the very potential of human labour, of our common capability of thinking and relating:³⁶ the utopia of the plan overcome by the endless reproduction of urbanisation. However, the archetype of the vault-house uses the ability of form to expose architecture as a common anthropological condition in opposition to the ideology of isolated individuals and unique architectures. The vault-house stands as a paradigmatic form that produces a tension between the subject, the house, and the city, and thus challenges prescribed norms and behaviours while opening to collective use and appropriation of space.

33. According to Sérgio Ferro, the Império-Hamburger house, designed by Flávio Império for his sister in 1965, has been the most complete and original contribution of the group, a “legisign,” a term borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce. Sérgio Ferro, “Flávio arquiteto,” 100. Translation by the author.

34. Here I refer to the political autonomy of the gesture as theorised in Giorgio Agamben, *Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996).

35. The issue is briefly touched upon in Pedro Fiori Arantes, *Arquitetura Nova*, 120–130.

36. This is the central thesis of Paolo Virno’s reflection on language based on the notion of “general intellect” proposed in Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993). See also Paolo Virno, *Convenzione e materialismo. L’unicità senz’aura* (Roma: Derive e Approd)



WAITING FOR THE CONCRETE. RODRIGO LEFÈVRE AND NESTOR GOULART REIS FILHO,
PERY CAMPOS HOUSE, SÃO PAULO, 1970.