



The Many Lives of Luz

*Fighting for the Future of a
São Paulo Neighborhood*

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There's no denying that the 123 acres in São Paulo that the city has dubbed "Nova Luz"— better known to locals as the neighborhoods of Santa Ifigênia and Luz — have seen better days. Indeed, the whole center of Brazil's largest city hollowed out over the 1970s and '80s as major government offices and business headquarters decamped to more modern quarters across town. Yet downtown's charms remain, from a stained-glass public market to a towering Gothic cathedral to vintage early 20th century architecture. It all frames a bohemian mix of punk bars, used-book stores and edgy nightclubs that give São Paulo the air of downtown New York in the 1970s.

In the busy commercial stretches of Santa Ifigênia, motorcycle parts, audio gear and computer repair are the name of the game. They thrive by clustering, an old-school strategy anathema to the retail mix imperative of São Paulo's tony shopping malls. The local business association numbers the neighborhood's small businesses at 15,000, responsible for 50,000 direct jobs and potentially hundreds of thousands more through wholesale business that originates with goods sold here. A smattering of students and artists brush shoulders with a much larger, much poorer population that squeezes into tenements or a handful of squatter settlements in abandoned hotels and office buildings. With its affordable rents and central location, the neighborhood has also become a welcoming spot for new immigrants to the city, a kind of Little Latin America, home to Bolivians, Ecuadorians and especially Peruvians.

It is here that city leaders are battling over one of the world's largest urban redevelopment projects, financed by the biggest public-private partnership in the country's history and requiring large-scale expropriation that would result in the relocation of hundreds of families. The **Projeto Nova Luz** (or the "New Light Project," a reference to the Luz neighborhood and a nearby train station) is a heated controversy about the center of Sampa, as São Paulo is affectionately known. With its downtown bouncing back to life after decades of disinvestment, these 45 blocks of prime real estate are ripe for serious changes with potentially life-altering consequences for the people — a mix of the city's poor and working class, native and foreign-born — who call this corner of the Brazilian megalopolis home.

To outsiders, the diverse, busy neighborhood has only one name: *Cracolândia*, or "Crackland." As Brazil cruelly relives America's urban catastrophe of the 1980s, there are mini-cracklands in scattered dark and forgotten corners across São Paulo. But the most visible, central and polemical crackland bloomed right in the heart of the Luz, near a deactivated intercity bus terminal, for the better part of a decade. When the building was demolished in 2010, the hundreds of zombified users, known locally as *noias* (an abbreviation for "paranoids"), blossomed and thronged nearby streets nightly.



The 50-odd square blocks that comprise the Nova Luz Project have been a redevelopment polemic at the heart of São Paulo, Brazil for nearly a decade, with the most recent proposal calling for half of the footprint of the neighborhood to be flattened.

After several years of hysterical reporting that gained international attention, the São Paulo police launched a heavy-handed operation in January 2012 to forcibly remove addicts, demolish drug dens and arrest dealers. The **public handwringing that followed** highlighted the lack of treatment options and public officials' unwillingness to confront the root of the problem, although opinion polls indicated 85 percent of residents supported the measures. This despite 68 percent of Paulistanos believing, according to the poll, that even what essentially amounted to a police occupation wouldn't halt the local drug trade.

Many thought that the police operation was the harbinger of construction cranes. With a surplus of affordable real estate, two commuter rail terminuses and two multi-line subway stations — including the brand new Line 4 with swift service to key financial districts — the neighborhood is a real estate developer's dream. Rocky past aside, what's now being called Nova Luz has long attracted the interest of São Paulo elite, who view its not-yet-packed-to-capacity streets as a final frontier in the city's march toward global capital status. Plans drawn up by a consortium of four organizations, led by the multinational engineering and project management company AECOM, envision the area as the city's newest arts district.

Thrust into the center of a multibillion-dollar real estate deal, the current residents of this long-neglected downtown neighborhood have become unwitting guinea pigs in a test case with implications for the future of urban redevelopment in São Paulo, as well as for grassroots citizen activism in a nascent democracy. The end game for Nova Luz has ramifications for all of Brazil, as the legality of the land expropriations at the heart of the project could set a new precedent to be replicated across the country.

LOVE AND CROWDING IN SP

São Paulo has always been a city of superlatives. It is the largest city in South America, with more than 11 million inhabitants, at the center of the largest metropolitan area, pushing 20 million. An expanded vision of the metro area would reach 75 kilometers (45 miles) south, through the swath of Atlantic rainforest on the coastal mountain system of Serra do Mar, to the city's largest port, Santos, and northwest to the university and high-tech hub of Campinas, roping in more than 29 million people. As part of an emerging megalopolis that stretches east to Brazil's second-largest city, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo is the anchor of a corridor that encompasses 45 million people, making it nearly as large as the Northeast Megalopolis of the United States (the 50 million-person stretch from Boston to Washington that inspired French geographer Jean Gottmann to popularize the demographic term in 1957).

With so many people concentrated in a city that was a Jesuit backwater of 65,000 in 1890, it is no surprise that São Paulo has become the backbone of the Brazilian economy. As the alphabetical front-runner of the much-ballyhooed BRICS — that's the economic grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — Brazil's international profile has risen astronomically in the last 20 years. São Paulo can claim a lion's share of the credit, as it generates nearly 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product, about the same as New York City's contribution to the U.S. GDP. If you step back and look at the entire state of São Paulo, of which the city is the capital, this share of the GDP balloons to nearly a third. Indeed, the automotive, aerospace, pharmaceutical, financial, manufacturing and agribusiness interests (think Brazilian coffee) concentrated here power the national economy.

But São Paulo is such a powerhouse seemingly in spite of itself. Like many megacities in the developing world, it's crippled by traffic. Two-hour commutes are typical on standing-room only buses without air conditioning, even in the heat of a tropical summer (the Tropic of Capricorn runs through the northern part of the city). In ill-served neighborhoods in the farthest reaches of the São Paulo, periodic

complaints about poor bus service occasionally boil over, with frustrated passengers setting a bus or two on fire. The subway, a measly 50 miles spread among 60 stations, pales in comparison to New York's, which has 16 times as much track and eight times as many stations. Insanely overcrowded trains plague commuters at rush hour, and a crush of passengers strains the system even at the least likely hours of the day. As incomes across the country rise and some of São Paulo's poorest find themselves able to afford the subway for the first time, the stress on the otherwise clean, efficient system shows even more.

"It's immoral, unconstitutional, and illegal," rails Garcia, the computer parts salesman and merchants association president. "It's tailor-made for developers to take away from residents."

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Instead of going underground, the rich fly above it all. São Paulo is home to **the world's largest private helicopter fleet**, ferrying CEOs from gated condo rooftops to skyscrapers with multinational headquarters. They are fleeing not only the nightmarish traffic — though by creating their own aerial bottlenecks, they allowed a bicycle to **win an annual commuting contest** — but also the nightmare of a kidnapping. High-profile elites are targets for hefty ransoms, while the average Joe driving a nice car runs the risk of an “express kidnapping,” where assailants force a quick withdrawal from the victim's ATM account. Bizarrely enough, a recent wave of such attacks revealed that the majority of perpetrators were **solidly middle to upper class**. No wonder that up-from-the-streets rapper Criolo has struck a chord with his recent, plaintive tune, “**Não existe amor em SP**” (“Love doesn't exist in SP”).

COMPETING VISIONS

Meanwhile, if the true measure of a city's soul is its core, then São Paulo is poised for another superlative. AECOM renderings for Nova Luz show sleek glass buildings home to some 12,000 new residents. Broad, tree-lined avenues host soaring office buildings occupied by high-tech businesses and ground-level cafes. And at the site of the former bus terminal site better known as the Crackland ground zero? An immense, Modernist cultural center, the future home of the São Paulo Dance Company.

The proposed facility will join the nearby ranks of the city's most esteemed cultural institutions, major landmarks that sit just outside the boundaries of Nova Luz yet feel a world apart: The extravagant Sala São Paulo, home to the symphony orchestra; the Museum of the Portuguese Language, inside the elegant belle époque Luz Train Station; the Parisian-style Luz Garden; the Museum of the Resistance (an homage to those who fought against the military dictatorship); and the stately Pinacoteca, which houses the country's finest modern art exhibits.

The gleaming high rises and glass façades of AECOM's designs bear little resemblance to today's Nova Luz, a mixture of admittedly ugly mid-rise, monochromatic apartment blocks with some older pre-war rowhouses in varying states of upkeep. Despite assurances to respect historic buildings, the plan — which calls for demolishing half the footprint of the neighborhood to make way for new construction — will create a jarringly sharp contrast between old and new. The flashy, light-up entertainment plazas are reminiscent of a recent Montreal effort, the Quartier des Spectacles, criticized for promoting large-scale festivals **without supporting the local cultural scene**. New public squares centered on a central boulevard are intended to mimic Barcelona's *La Rambla* pedestrian mall. While mixed-use buildings are the norm, whether the current working-class residents and retail businesses will find a foothold in newer digs is in question.

On display in the Nova Luz visitor's center, a solitary, spruced-up rowhouse surrounded by a vacant lot, AECOM's plan has the look and feel of cosmopolitan-anywhere urban design: Attractive, tree-lined boulevards populated by cutout people and flanked by contemporary architecture. As São Paulo architect and urban planner Felipe Francisco de Souza, author of the first book-length work on the project, describes the renderings: "Some people are holding smartphones, couples walk arm-in-arm, a few kids play ball, a woman is holding a shopping bag, white men in suits walk down clean sidewalks."

"On the side of one of the buildings," de Souza continues, "a soccer player in a Brazil national jersey appears to be celebrating a goal, and behind him, in large font, is written 'goal' in English."



Low-income families like the residents of the Mauá Street Occupation fight for their right to live downtown because of access to schools, health clinics, and public transportation that is much harder to come by in distant neighborhoods on the edge of the city or more precarious *favela* settlements.

The linguistic misstep only underscores the impassioned feelings of Antonio Santana, a 28-year-old photographer who grew up in the neighborhood. “Who is this project for?” he asks, “Because it sure isn’t for the people who live here.”

Santana owns a 300-square-foot studio apartment that he purchased for \$20,000 BRL (\$10,000 USD) six years ago, but which has a current market value of \$115,000 BRL (\$57,500 USD). He is the president of the Santa Ifigênia Residents Association, which he organized as soon as he saw the map and realized his apartment building was on the chopping block. Harried and a bit over his head as he learns about land use law on the fly, Santana sees conspiracies everywhere.

“There are dirty dealings on every side of this thing,” he warns, explaining that in all of São Paulo there are only 80 licensed appraisers, which the eventual concessionaire could buy off so that owners get less than market value, bottoming out at the “venal value,” what property taxes are based on. In Santana’s case, that’s a mere \$16,000 BRL (\$8,000 USD).

Business owners are equally anxious. Paulo Garcia has worked in the computer parts trade for 30 years as owner of Info Bell, and currently serves as president of the Santa Ifigênia Merchants Association. While the latest figure Garcia has heard is \$1,300 BRL (\$650 USD) per square meter in compensation to business owners, he believes his own business is worth 10 times that. Meanwhile, City Hall isn't approving any new construction permits because Projeto Nova Luz calls for so many demolitions.

The end result? “The neighborhood is frozen,” Garcia laments. “While the publicity has brought lots of business owners to the fight, it's also contributing to neglect because people are afraid to invest in their businesses.”

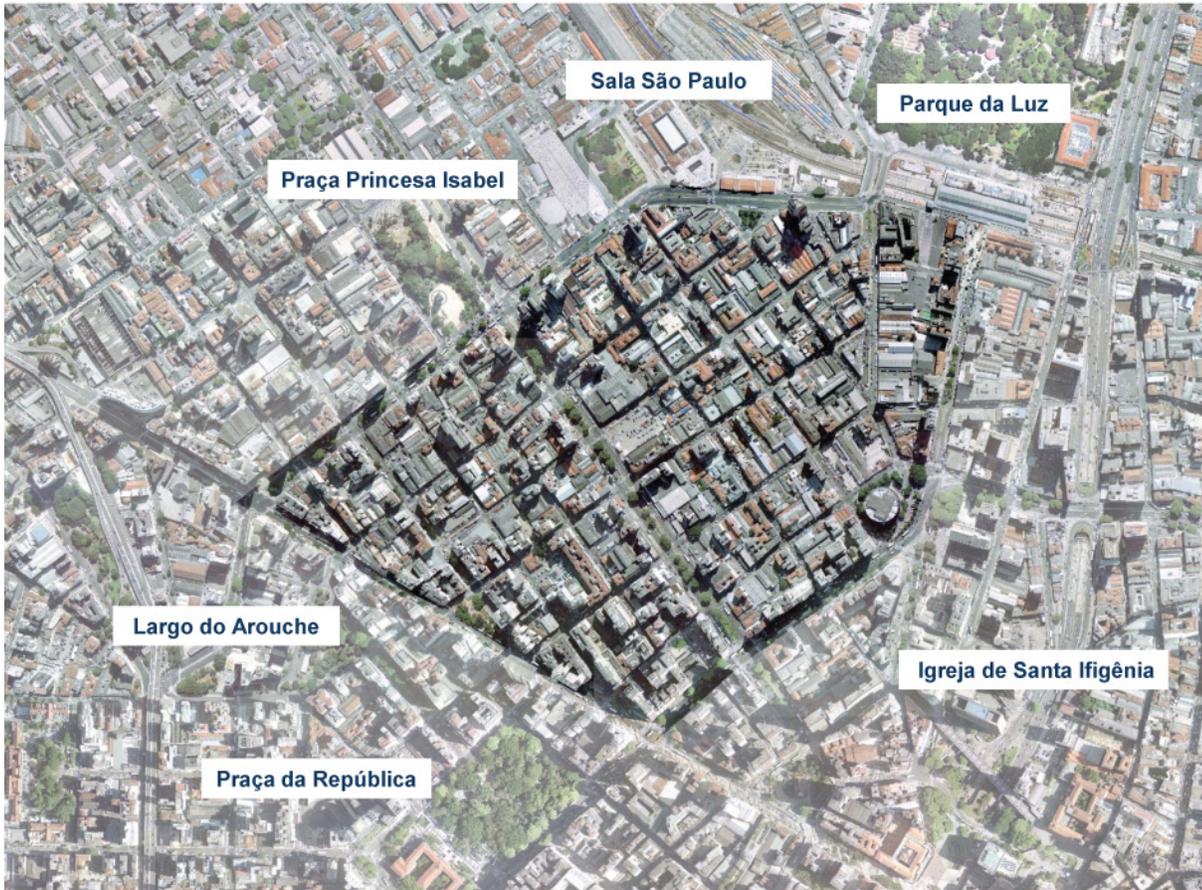
DOCTORING DOWNTOWN: LEGAL INSTRUMENTS FOR URBAN RENEWAL

The pretext for the reshaping of Nova Luz is a convoluted legal drama relying on two key legislative concepts batted back and forth from opposite ends of São Paulo's political spectrum: Special Social Interest Zones (ZEIS in Portuguese) and Urban Redevelopment Concession.

ZEIS are geographically delineated areas that the city government highlights as having specific affordable housing needs. They come in several flavors, from informal *favela* settlements in need of physical upgrading, to undeveloped peripheral areas, to run-down neighborhoods that have good bones. Downtown falls into the latter category, known as a ZEIS 3. About one-third of the Nova Luz perimeter is subject to ZEIS regulations, which allow for increased height and density in exchange for specific percentages of affordable and public housing in areas with existing urban services (streets, sidewalks, transit connections, etc.).

The ZEIS predates Projeto Nova Luz by a number of years, emerging under the mayoral administration of Marta Suplicy, who governed as a member of the leftist Workers Party between 2001 and 2004. The ZEIS is one among 41 legal tools for urban development that ended up in a citywide master plan created by the Suplicy administration. Also included in the final document was the notion of “urban redevelopment concession,” where private firms would bid for the right to conduct infrastructure improvements in exchange for capturing some of the value they create. It was a loosely defined concept that fit with the emerging notion in Brazil of pursuing public-private partnerships.

Though the redevelopment of Luz was certainly a notion that Suplicy and others were excited about, the mayor never spoke about creating a concession for the



Prime for the Taking

Luz is a central slice of downtown São Paulo. Hit hard by the city's crack epidemic, the neighborhood is gradually stabilizing, thanks to an influx of immigrants and small businesses. Now a megaproject could transform its future.

Source: Projeto Nova Luz

neighborhood, or for any other. The potentially controversial idea flew right under the radar as citizens dissected more immediate issues such as an ongoing housing crisis, crippling traffic, inadequate public transit, lackluster schools and nonexistent hospitals.

Suplicy lost the 2004 election to José Serra of the conservative Social Democracy Party. The loss of power was a setback for the Workers Party agenda and its signature policies, including the ZEIS affordable housing initiative. The redevelopment of Luz was “shoved in a drawer,” says Patricia Rodrigues Samora, a post-doctoral researcher at the University of São Paulo’s Laboratory of Housing and Human Settlements.

Kazuo Nakano, an architect and urbanist at the Instituto Pólis, a São Paulo-based urban affairs think tank, compares the proposed urban development concession in Luz to the eminent domain taking argued in the 2005 watershed Supreme Court case, Kelo v. New London.

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As it turned out, the reinvention of Luz was an idea too compelling to stay on the back burner for long, and Projeto Nova Luz was born in 2005. The first, stalled effort involved a master plan from Brazilian star architect and urban planner Jaime Lerner, of Curitiba fame. Lerner envisioned a Parisian-style neighborhood of low-rise buildings and one of Latin America’s largest pedestrian malls. The ZEIS, however, stuck out like a thorn, mandating housing for the poor and conflicting with Lerner’s chic vision of urban elegance. But the master plan was law, and the ZEIS status wasn’t going anywhere. Meanwhile, speculation about the future led to immediate price hikes for previously undesirable properties in the Nova Luz perimeter, making the project less financially attractive to developers. With little ado, the plan was dead in the water.

But the demise of Lerner’s plan opened the gates for a rethinking of the project. Soon enough, the real estate community, led by allies of Serra and his successor Gilberto Kassab, who served as mayor from 2006 to 2010, decided that eminent domain was the only way to accomplish the goal of urban renewal. And with a

certain redevelopment concession approved by Serra's predecessor, the city could ostensibly get a project off the ground. Under the concession's provisions, the city could set the general guidelines for the neighborhood — in particular which parcels can be demolished — and then transfer development rights to a private consortium empowered by the right to seize properties and build anew. The private consortium would pay for infrastructure improvements with the understanding that it would also pocket the proceeds of the outlays. The model is similar to Rahm Emanuel's **new and as yet unproven infrastructure bank in Chicago**, though with more in private real estate development than in public amenities at stake.

Put forth to the São Paulo city council in 2009, a series of bills establishing the procedure passed easily. Francisco de Souza reports in his book that 29 city council members had received donations — some as much as \$270,000 BRL (\$135,000 USD) — during the 2008 campaign from the Brazilian Real Estate Association, a professional organization not restricted by campaign finance laws as is its close partner, SECOVI. A judicial investigation subsequently implicated 13 of the elected officials for receiving improper campaign donations beyond the legal limit.

The deal has enraged those home and business owners who stand to be forced out of the neighborhood they have helped create “It's immoral, unconstitutional and illegal,” rails Garcia, the computer parts salesman and merchants association president. “It's tailor-made for developers to take away from residents.”

Garcia fears that if the law sticks in Santa Ifigênia, it will be replicated in cities all over Brazil.

Indeed, downtown disinvestment is not unique to São Paulo, and large cities from the Amazon to the Argentine border are contemplating strategies to redevelop their urban cores. Rio de Janeiro is already underway, where the Porto Maravilha public-private partnership is remaking the downtown waterfront. The validity of urban redevelopment concessions could be a game changer for eager coalitions of developers, construction firms and politicians. Carlos Loureiro, a former public defender for the State of São Paulo, argues that the law “represents an absurd threat to urban policy in Brazil.”

“It would completely humiliate the struggle for urban reforms by institutionalizing the privatization of urban planning and development,” Loureiro says. The political consequences, he says, would be “terrible” for those who aren't positioned to profit from government-supported private development.

Others agree that the privatizing twist to Brazil's otherwise progressive land use laws would set a dangerous precedent. Kazuo Nakano, an architect and urbanist at

the Instituto Pólis, a São Paulo-based urban affairs think tank, compares the proposed urban development concession in Luz to the eminent domain taking argued in the 2005 watershed Supreme Court case, *Kelo v. New London*. In that case, homeowner Susette Kelo disputed the Connecticut town's designation of her property as blighted to pave the way for a corporate pharmaceutical complex, arguing that economic development is not a public good. She lost the case and her house was demolished, but the project fell through and her former home is now an empty lot.

“What is the public benefit of the Nova Luz urban redevelopment concession? There isn't one,” Nakano says. “It's debatable that ‘urban renewal’ is a public benefit because nothing guarantees that what takes place will benefit society. It could just promote higher real estate values.”

The debate is a familiar one to anyone paying attention to development politics in the U.S. In the last few years, eminent domain has played a major role in several high-profile projects. Declaring **parts of downtown Brooklyn blighted** was essential to securing the Atlantic Yards project, whose lynchpin Barclays Center opened last September even if promised residential high-rises remain illusory. Compulsory purchase, the British equivalent of eminent domain, was key for building the 2012 London Olympics infrastructure. There, just as in Brooklyn and in Luz, existing business owners **disputed the blanket characterization** of their neighborhood.

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NO TO NOVA LUZ: NEIGHBORHOOD VOICES

Born in neighboring Campinas, Vitor Coelho Nisida graduated in 2011 from the School of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo (FAUUSP) and is now a researcher at the school's City Lab, focusing on public space and the right to the city. Searching for an undergraduate thesis topic, he was struck by the impassioned polemic surrounding Projeto Nova Luz. As he dug into the issue, he realized it was personal.

“I confess,” he wrote in an e-mail interview, “that I realized only after I started my research, and much to my surprise, that I was living in an apartment inside the Nova Luz boundaries.”

With a uniquely on-the-ground perspective, Nisida set about inventorying the available vacant lots — mostly surface parking — and low-rise buildings that could have extra floors added not just within the Nova Luz boundaries, but in central downtown as a whole. His final calculations, presented in the thesis “Another Luz,” would equitably increase the region's density without requiring wholesale evictions or demolitions of entire city blocks.

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“No one is against improvements,” Bardosa explains. “We just want them without evictions.”
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But the city plans otherwise. A consortium led by AECOM earned the contract and proceeded to make recommendations, working closely with the city, for which buildings would stay and which would go. According to Luis Ramos, coordinator for the project in the city’s Urban Development Secretariat, any building larger than 21,500 square feet or with more than 20 housing units,

in addition to any building already under historic preservation rules, would stay.

Nakano believes the government is transferring development rights to a private entity that it doesn’t even have. And all, potentially, for naught. “Any company,” Nakano explains, “will be nervous because of the headaches, the legal costs, the bad PR of pursuing so many seizures. Not to mention concerns about whether or not the infrastructure will come through.”

Claudio Bernardes, president of SECOVI, the real estate trade group, demurred about whether developers would bite were the bid to be made public. “The idea is obviously interesting, the opportunity to revitalize and change the entire face of downtown,” he explained in a telephone interview. “Whether or not the market is interested would depend on the conditions of the bid. If they provide for reasonable profit margins, it would interest us. The architectural vision is intriguing, but there has been a lack of information about financial terms and commitments.”

Meanwhile, public officials overseeing the project maintain that public benefit is there, as well as the market appetite.

“A lot is said about this project but very little is understood,” Ramos says. In an interview, the project coordinator argues that new housing created by the development will attract new residents to contribute tax revenue, making the initial public investment well worth it. The construction, he says, will “bring in the likes of public employees and students.”

The numbers promulgated by the Nova Luz Consortium, as the AECOM-led group is known, make up a one-sided impact report. While the purported benefits include 12,000 new residents, 19,400 new jobs and 5,000 new housing units, nowhere is it clearly stated how many displaced residents, jobs and housing units are projected not to return.



Nova Luz, the Vision

A consortium of organizations led by the international engineering company AECOM has created a controversial plan to bring 12,000 new residents to the neighborhood known as Luz.

Source: Projeto Nova Luz

The present population of the Nova Luz perimeter is about 12,000, raising the obvious question: Will Nova Luz as it is currently configured simply replace one population with another? Ramos says the answer is a definitive no. “There will always be somewhere for them to go when evicted,” he says. For its part, AECOM has remained silent on the issue. The company’s São Paulo-based project manager canceled a scheduled interview and did not answer questions sent via email.

Patricia Samora, from the University of São Paulo, wrinkles her nose at my question

of who will live in the new Luz. “The government is always talking about bringing in the middle class,” Samora says. “Those with cars who can send their kids to private school and patronize shopping malls.”

“In other words,” the academic adds, “PSDB voters” — PSDB being former Mayor Serra’s Social Democracy Party.

In theory, the presence of the affordable housing requirement in the ZEIS provision means that, at the very least, not every square inch of redeveloped land can become the kind of high-rise gated condominium conjured by AECOM’s renderings. But whether the law will result in its desired outcome is something no one can say for sure. The law, as it stands, lacks the teeth to force developers to build affordable housing along the same timetable as market rate housing.

This means the area illustrated as a large public and affordable housing complex in AECOM’s renderings could remain untouched, while luxury high-rises sprout up around it. And if the developer waits years or even decades to build, there are no penalties. Even worse, if the developer never builds the affordable housing there is little recourse.

But even if developers do move forward with the affordable units in a timely manner, the rubric defining affordability is broad enough to be rendered nearly useless. A plan dated April 2012 declares that 40 percent of the total constructed area will be public housing, for households making zero to three times the minimum wage. Another 40 percent will be workforce housing (four to six times the minimum wage) while the remaining 20 percent is up to the concessionaire.

“That could be anything from a nursery school to a luxury office building,” Samora explains. It’s not hard to extrapolate that, without any phasing requirements, public housing is sure to be low on the priorities totem pole. The other problem is that the qualification criteria are pegged to the minimum wage, which has risen dramatically in the last decade. As such, housing targeted at households earning up to six times the minimum wage, which 10 years ago meant menial laborers, are now the emerging middle class. Under the law, developers can build for this middle-class segment of the market while still fulfilling their mandate to provide housing for the city’s needy.

“This ZEIS,” Nakano argues, “will not meet the needs of poor families earning from zero to three times the minimum wage, which make up 90 percent of the demand for housing in the area.”

The truly poor who live in Nova Luz are among the most vulnerable. Take the 237 families who live in a six-floor abandoned hotel that faces the stately Luz Train Station, on the edge of Luz’s official boundary. These squatters are among São Paulo’s



Nova Luz is home to a diverse mix of working-class families, immigrants, students and artists, all of whom have found a home in affordable apartment buildings.

poorest — street vendors, waste pickers, itinerant maids — and are represented by a group calling itself the Mauá Street Occupation.

On a gray midday in subtropical late spring, with the pirated electricity on the fritz, I sit in the courtyard with Benedito “Dito” Roberto Bardosa, chief counsel for the São Paulo Housing Movement, and Nelson da Cruz Souza, downtown coordinator for the movement and general coordinator of the Occupation. The building has surely seen better days, but colorful graffiti murals in the courtyard, kiosks selling snacks on stairwell landings, and a constant stream of kids begging for “Uncle” Nelson’s attention attest to the sense of community that pervades the five-year-old squat.

When the pioneers arrived it was a mess, but “we made it look inhabitable,” da Cruz Souza says with a chuckle, recounting how they went from hauling out trash to wrangling electricity, water and sewage connections. Each floor has a coordinator and the group holds general assemblies — a kind of “internal democracy,” as he puts it, “to

avoid anarchy, total chaos.”

Turning to the subject of Nova Luz, da Cruz Souza is firm: “The project isn’t about social inclusion, it’s about social exclusion. Mauá will be demolished and turned into an entertainment district.”

The new investments, he says, will price out the current residents who are earning minimum wage or slightly more. So those who leave, he says, will end up on the outskirts of the city. “They’ll lose everything they’ve worked for to have a decent quality of life.”

Like the Santa Ifigênia residents and merchants, however, Mauá’s spokespersons recognize that the neighborhood is far from perfect. “No one is against improvements,” Bardosa explains. “We just want them without evictions.”

YOU CAN FIGHT CITY HALL

In between serving bowls of hearty *sopa criolla*, a creamy chicken soup, Edwin Sarmiento marvels at how much life has improved on the block where last year he opened a Peruvian restaurant, Sabor Peruano.

“We used to have three or four *noias* passed out on our doorstep every day when we opened,” the Peruvian immigrant says. The addicts no longer seek respite on his block, he says, crediting increased police presence. When asked about Nova Luz, Sarmiento has a vague sense of the changes afoot, but he says he hasn’t had any direct contact with city government. Although he rents the restaurant space like most immigrant business owners, he isn’t worried about eviction, even though no provisions exist to compensate evicted renters. Having spent nine years in Brazil and now legalized thanks to a federal amnesty program, Sarmiento is here to stay — in São Paulo, at least. Whether the taste of Peru will continue to waft along *Rua Guianases* is still unresolved.

In October of last year, Fernando Haddad of the Workers Party defeated Serra, who ran for his old office now that his successor, Kassab, faced a term limit, in the city’s mayoral election. The pendulum has swung back to the left before the urban redevelopment concession went out for bid, much to residents’ delight and the real estate community’s chagrin. Nova Luz’s visionaries are subsequently leaving office with nothing to show for it.

Brazil is only 25 years out of a military dictatorship, and many citizens are still in the process of discovering their rights. Despite some divisions within the anti-Nova Luz coalition — Santana, for one, is no longer on speaking terms with the president

of the Luz Residents Association — a makeshift coalition of resident groups, small business owners, academics, artists and activists has managed to leverage the legal system to stall Nova Luz. In a war of attrition fought through the public defender’s office and a series of public hearings, the Serra and Kassab administrations were in a race against time that they ultimately lost.

Haddad’s exact plans are unclear as of his taking office on January 1. But in August of last year, during the campaign, he promised to “end the nightmare” for business owners and solicit a “new design” for Nova Luz, [according to the *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper](#). Nabil Bonduki, an urban planner who worked in the Marta administration and a Haddad ally, was elected to the city council during the recent election. He is intimately familiar with the São Paulo master plan, ZEIS 3 and Nova Luz, and has promised to revisit the plan.

“Revising the Nova Luz plan is a priority of the new government, along with the master plan,” Bonduki says. “We will talk to civil society and local stakeholders, everyone will participate in the debate. There will be a complete overhaul.” These words should come as a relief not just to the residents who felt shut out of closed-door dealings between developers and politicians, but for Paulistanos of all stripes. “Mixed income,” Bonduki affirms, “will not just be the plan for Nova Luz but for the whole city. We want to guarantee diversity.”

Brazilians like to refer to drawn-out stories as *novelas*, or the soap operas so popular during primetime, and the downtown drama of Nova Luz certainly qualifies. For the Peruvian immigrants, janitors and maids living in squatted buildings, and motorcycle parts dealers, computer repairmen, drug addicts and ordinary Paulistanos that call this struggling but vibrant corner of the Brazilian megacity home, everyone is hoping 2013 will bring the final episode. >



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Tuca Vieira is a photographer based in São Paulo. He enjoys shooting architecture and the urban environment. See more of his work on his website, www.tucavieira.com.

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