

## THE VOICES OF THE TENEMENT OPERATORS

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### Abstract

*Tenements have been a housing option for the poor in downtown São Paulo since the 1870s. Studies on tenements in São Paulo have been conducted for more than a century, although the major subject missing from the literature has been the tenement intermediaries or operators, the articulating agent of the entire scheme. The text is based on six interviews conducted with tenement landlords and intermediaries in the central region of São Paulo. Through discourse analysis 6 analytical categories have been listed: 1) The beginning of the activity: in which the insertion of the operator into the ecosystem of the tenements is narrated, and sometimes the transformation of properties into tenements; 2) Selection and contracts: how residents move in and the rental documents and agreements; 3) Caretaking: the maintenance of each tenement, habitability; 4) Coexistence: the daily relationship between tenants and landlords and intermediaries; 5) Rates and earnings: costs and income obtained; 6) Future and life projects: how the operators visualize their future in relation to the tenement(s), expansion, sale and even leaving the business. Rather than the tenement operator being described generically, with negative attributes, common figures emerge, who are mostly poorly capitalized and who strive to obtain a slight social upward mobility or to interrupt processes of deterioration.*

### Keywords

*Tenements; Central Areas; Rent; Housing; Operators; Landlords and Intermediaries.*

## AS VOZES DOS OPERADORES DE CORTIÇOS

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### Resumo

*Os cortiços são uma opção de moradia dos pobres no centro de São Paulo desde a década de 1870. Estudos sobre cortiços na cidade já são feitos há mais de um século, mas o grande sujeito ausente da literatura são os intermediários ou operadores de cortiços, o agente articulador de todo o esquema. O texto é construído a partir de sete entrevistas realizadas com operadores proprietários e intermediários de cortiços da região central da capital paulista. Pela análise do discurso, elencamos seis categorias analíticas: 1) Início da atividade: inserção do operador no ecossistema dos cortiços e, por vezes, transformação de imóveis em cortiços; 2) Seleção e contratos: entrada de moradores, documentos de locação e acordos; 3) Zeladoria: manutenção de cada cortiço e habitabilidade; 4) Convivência: relação cotidiana dos inquilinos com os proprietários e intermediários; 5) Valores e ganhos: custos e receitas; 6) Futuro e projetos de vida: visualização do operador sobre o futuro relacionado ao(s) cortiço(s), expansão, venda e até saída do negócio. No lugar do operador de cortiço descrito de forma genérica com atributos negativos, emergem figuras comuns, em sua maioria, pouco capitalizadas e que se esforçam para obter uma pequena ascensão social ou interromper processos de decadência.*

### Palavras-chave

*Cortiços; Áreas Centrais; Aluguel; Moradia; Operadores; Proprietários e Intermediários.*

# THE VOICES OF THE TENEMENT OPERATORS<sup>1</sup>

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Introduction: The major absence

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, around 596,000 people, or 5% of the population of the city of São Paulo, lived in so-called tenements or rooming houses (SEADE; CDHU, 2002). Tenements provide collective rented accommodation, generally with substandard physical conditions for housing and high rent prices. They constitute one of the few opportunities for the low-income population to access the city's installed infrastructure, such as public transport, hospital network, schools and leisure areas. Tenements exist throughout the entire city, but have been historically more recurrent in the more low-income central neighborhoods, such as Bela Vista, Bom Retiro, Liberdade and Santa Ifigênia. Although the term tenement is widely used in the scientific literature, and is also used in this article, almost everyone involved in the tenement ecosystem prefers to call such places either rooming houses or boarding houses. The exception to this is the organized movement that fights for housing brought together under the name *União de Lutas dos Cortiços* (ULC) [Union for the Struggle of Tenements], which politicizes the term tenement as a way of denouncing the precariousness of a situation that should be faced by the State (NEUHOLD, 2016).

The tenements of São Paulo have been the subject of investigation for over a century, the inaugural study being the well-known survey of tenements in the

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1. The authors are grateful for the support of the Wealth Inequality Initiative for being able to carry out this research

district of Santa Ifigênia, in 1893 (CORDEIRO, 2010; RIBEIRO, 2015; BORIN, 2016). Albuquerque Lui and Cymbalista (2020) divided the studies on tenements in São Paulo into three main explanatory strands: a) Tenement as a *complaint* – focusing on a description of the precariousness, in the absence or insufficiency of public policies; b) Tenement as *potential* – a form of housing that guarantees the presence of the very poorest in central areas, demanding recognition and requalification; c) Tenement as *reality* – territoriality with specific ways of life, which deserve to be narrated and qualified so as to do justice to the lives and struggle of its residents.

In relation to the social agents, the focus of the literature has been on the residents (LAGENEST, 1962; SIMÕES JUNIOR, 1991; COMARU; ABIKO, 1998; MASSARA, 1999; PICCINI; KOHARA, 1999; PINTO, 2003; CYMBALISTA; MOREIRA, 2006; GRACE COSTA et al., 2011; KOHARA, 2009; 2012; SOUZA, 2011; 2018; GARCIA, 2013; KOWARICK, 2013; PARIS, 2013; SIMONE, 2014; PRADO, 2015; DE MIRANDA, 2017; DIAS, 2019), on the action – or lack thereof – of the public authorities (VERAS, 1987; SCHOR, 1997; VERAS, 1994; COMARU; ABIKO, 1998; PICCINI; KOHARA, 1999; SCHOR, 2000; LABHAB, 2004; PICCINI, 2004; DE SAMPAIO, 2007; VIEIRA; KOHARA, 2009; 2012; KARA JOSÉ, 2013; LOPEZ, 2010; GATTI, 2011; LÓPEZ SILVA, 2011; MARTINS, 2011; CDHU SGPAC, 2012; DOMENICIS, 2012; BIANCHINI; SCHICCHI, 2013; LUCCHESI, 2015; PASTERNAK, 2015; BORIN, 2016; SANTO AMORE, 2016) and more infrequently on the landlords (TASCHNER; MAUTNER, 1982; PICCINI; KOHARA, 1999; KOHARA, 2012; DOMINGUES, 2017). Despite its specificities and different commitments, one element has permeated the entire literature: the lack of information on the role played by the tenement operator, the one who makes spaces available for tenants, whether it is a landlord or an intermediary.

The sparse available knowledge on the operators presents consequences for interpreting this type of housing, since what explains the emergence of a tenement is the existence of a potential operator (a landlord or intermediary). The mere offer of a property on the market does not lead to the formation of a tenement, fundamentally, many properties do not become tenements. Likewise, the existence of potential tenants in itself is insufficient for this business, because if there is no offer of rooms to meet this demand, a tenement will not form.

The operator matches the demand for housing with the availability of rooms. This is the social subject who identifies the property with the potential to be transformed into a tenement, making the necessary adaptations to it; defines housing prices and conditions, in almost all cases with verbal agreements; parameterizes sanctions in case of non-compliance with agreements; establishes the regimes for the use of shared spaces; mediates disputes; makes emergency repairs when physical conditions render the occupation unfeasible; pays consumption bills

and apportions their costs. It is he or she who sustains the business and strategic concept for exploiting the property. It is a position that brings a lot of work and also power over the resident community. Far from being peaceful, it is exercised in the midst of tension and conflict.

In historical sources this figure is very fleeting. The tenement operator appears when exercising the role of landlord, in administrative documents, requesting the approval of plans, alterations and expansions in his/her properties, tax exemption or demanding public investments. This is the case of Carlos Gilardi, the landlord of a series of properties in Santa Ifigênia, which the family maintained for decades, at the end of the nineteenth century, or of the Neves family, landlords of a series of tenements in Glicério for around a century (BORIN, 2020), or Francisco Barros in the various requests to authorize buildings in Vila Barros, the largest tenement in the city, in Bela Vista (DOMINGUES, 2017). Studies such as those by Cordeiro (2010), Ribeiro (2015) and Borin (2016) have investigated the relationship between tenement landlords and public authorities, seen from the “other side of the counter”, i.e., the State, focusing on public intervention strategies in search of attributing greater salubrity to the territory. In these sources, the tenement landlord has tended to behave like a typical rentier urban landlord, seeking to obtain the highest possible return on his real estate investments and to escape fines and sanctions. His role in the micropolitics of the tenement, as a landlord, is not revealed by the administrative documentation.

We have also come across some reports from tenement dwellers who have mentioned the operators. We only know the first name of Graziela, who, in the 1920s, was the probable landlady and manager of the largest tenement on the hill of Pari, on Rua das Olarias, who, “in addition to simply renting out the rooms, also administrated them and oversaw the behavior, thereby playing the veritable role of the police. She lived in the center of the plot of land in a huge mansion” (LUCCI apud LEMOS, 1985, p. 43). During the same period, also in Pari, the Ferruccio Marchetti tenement was of a better standard. The houses had a bedroom, living room and kitchen, but the bath and latrine were shared by the thirty houses. Residents had their own wooden toilet seats, which they took with them when going to the bathroom. In the Marchetti tenement, there was also community life, with a collective masonry oven, used at festivities (LUCCI apud LEMOS, 1985, p. 95). Between precariousness and community sociability, it is only the residents who speak in these historical sources, not the operators.

While the historical sources enable some individuation of the tenement operators, the secondary sources invested much more in the construction of the operator as a collective category – a part of the injustice-producing machine that is the tenement.

The first characteristic that appears in the studies is *exploitation*: “The intermediaries establish a relationship of superiority in relation to the subtenants, which is not always fair and egalitarian”<sup>2</sup> (PICCINI; KOHARA, 1999, p. 5) in addition to other authors in a similar vein, such as: ARAÚJO; PEREIRA, 2008; KOWARICK, 2013; MICHELETTI *et al.*, 2009; SOUZA, 2011; “Residents are exploited by sublessors or intermediaries, having to pay high rent prices in relation to the small square meterage and the terrible unsanitary conditions” (SOUZA, 2011, p. 1); “Those who exploit also extract gains on water and electricity rates” (KOHARA, 2009, p. 63).

The second characteristic is the function of *control*. “When there is any kind of scandal, disreputable misconduct on the part of a woman [...] or some racket often made by a drunk or a bully, it is the one ‘in charge’ of the tenement who takes the necessary measures: in general, swift expulsion” (LAGENEST, 1962, p. 15).

The third attribute is *aggressivity*: “They are aggressive, they’re afraid that they’ll close the tenement, because then he would lose his job” (KOWARICK, 2013, p. 57); “The residents, in addition to suffering from the precariousness of housing, also suffer from the violence imposed by the landlords or intermediaries” (KOHARA; PICCINI, 1999, p. 2); “The intermediary was named ‘the owner of the key’, and she was the only stable resident of the place – a woman with a difficult temperament who presented herself as the landlady and leader of the tenement” (MICHELETTI *et al.*, 2009, p. 2).

The fourth attribute is its *elusive* aspect: “These are individuals or legal entities that are difficult to identify and, in certain cases, do not even appear in the reports of residents” (SANTO AMORE *et al.*, 2016, p. 22); “These exploiters, aware of their illicit activity, generally identify themselves by nicknames or something generic. It is common not to give receipts to residents when they pay their rent, and if they do, they sign it illegibly or with an incomplete name” (KOHARA, 2009, p. 63).

The studies that provide interviews and testimonies from the residents themselves reiterate and illustrate abuse, authoritarianism, oppression, surveillance, threats, appropriation of goods and gender harassment:

[...] Any kind of noise, the little that we make, he cuts off the electricity and there we are for a couple of days or so in total penury [...] If someone runs into debt, they go into the room and take a radio and television [...] They always come when the men are not here, and they’re always making threats. (SIMÕES JÚNIOR, 1991, p. 29-31)  
The landlord said he won’t renovate it, he gives no assistance to anyone. He just waits for payday to arrive, he wants to get his money

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2. This and all non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the authors

[...] and the person in charge of the house doesn't install a shower, and doesn't want to either, she wants to install it just for herself, and that's how it goes [...] sometimes the landlady of the tenement doesn't allow us any freedom. If a friend comes in and we want to have a little party, she then starts playing up, she wants to charge for water and electricity separately just because sometimes friends come here. (ARAÚJO; PEREIRA, 2008, p. 10)

Hence, in the literature, the condemnation of operators, whether landlords or intermediaries, prevails. The intellectual position from which operators are analyzed has changed little since the aforementioned inaugural study on tenements in São Paulo, the survey on Santa Ifigênia, in 1893: "Strict measures must be taken to contain the greedy exploitation of those who build without conscience and those who let and sublet buildings paying no attention to the laws of morality and the lives of their tenants" (São Paulo, 1893, apud KOWARICK; ANT, 1994, p. 77).

Little emphasis is given to qualifying and detailing the management activities carried out by the operators, as exceptionally demonstrated by Kowarick (2009, p. 57): "They perform collection services, have the function of maintaining order, choose the tenants, for whom they are liable to the landlord of the property". Lagenest (1962, p. 15) goes into more detail:

This personage, the one "in charge", is the centerpiece of the tenement. Hired by the landlord of the house, it is he who receives the monthly rent, who decides whether to accept or refuse a potential tenant, who determines the rent price, who maintains order and plays the role of police whenever necessary. He may exploit his tenants as well as help them. He habitually exploits them mercilessly, saying that "it's orders from the boss".

The social arrangement of tenements provides abundant empirical material to support these analyses and reporting the overexploitation of tenements will always be necessary. On the other hand, we argue herein that it is possible to problematize this central figure in the relationships of the tenement in greater depth: Who is it? Where does he/she come from? How did they take up this position? How can he/she legitimize themselves before tenants and landlords? How do they handle the challenges of such complex day-to-day management? What do they wish for their children? The fact is that, in more than a century of studies on tenements in São Paulo, it is almost impossible to find first-person testimonies from these characters.

This text operates within this gap. It results from qualitative interviews, in narrative form, with seven operators from tenement houses in the central neighborhoods of São Paulo, plus visits to the properties they manage, between



December 2020 and August 2021. It provides centrality to the tenement operator as a subject – as far as we know, for the first time – and seeks to understand the world where these agents exist, their dilemmas, challenges, even dreams and pride.

Building trust with tenement operators was a key element in enabling the systematization of the interviews herein described. At no time was the objective to distrust the veracity of the information or to make moral judgments on the actions of the operators. Consistent with the adopted methodology, this article presents, in a direct form, the discourse of the operators, their perspective and their worldview. Complementing these testimonies through the eyes of the tenement dwellers could offer a more complex, nuanced picture of life in the tenements, but this goes beyond the objectives of this text.

### Revealing the operators

The initial expectation was that we would experience difficulties in obtaining access to tenement operators, given the prevalence of descriptions in the literature that characterize them as being aloof. However, this was not what we encountered: focused and respectful approaches resulted in relatively easy access to the operators. Contacts were made through “snowballing”: two of them were from the circle of acquaintances of one of the authors; the third was a friend of the first interviewee; the fourth had been visited by the field survey of the Compartilha project of the FICA fund, associated with this research; the fifth was known to a former tenement dweller and recommended the name to the authors; and the last was linked to research for a partner NGO, in Bela Vista. In addition to gaining access to the operators, we also obtained an open door to the tenements. The seven interviews were carried out between December 2020 and July 2021. Below, we list the participants of the study:

1. Júlio<sup>3</sup>, 71 years old, of Japanese descent, from a poor background, with seven siblings, born in Itapira – in the countryside of the state of São Paulo. He came to the capital with no fixed income in the 1970s. He finished his studies after elementary school. Father of three children, widower, landlord of two tenements in Barra Funda, central São Paulo, which he acquired in the 1980s. He began letting in the 1990s, and lives in a house opposite one of the two tenements.
2. Haroldo, 62 years old, born in Japan. He came to Brazil at the age of two, to a Japanese agricultural colony in the region of Ribeirão Preto. From a

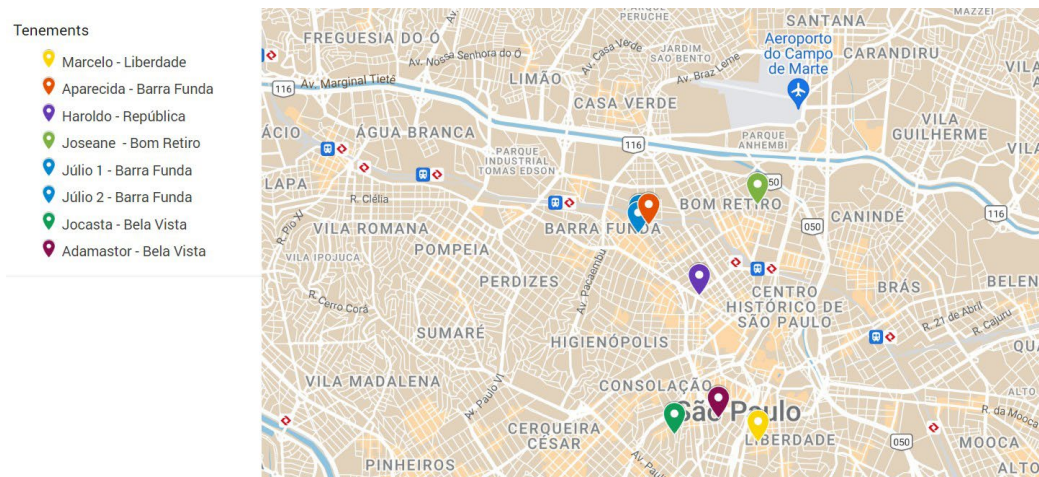
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3. Fictitious names.



poor background, with five siblings, he arrived in the capital with no fixed income in the 1980s. He finished his studies after high school. Married, landlord of a tenement in Republica, a central region of São Paulo, which he acquired in 2005.

3. Aparecida, 49 years old, a native of Araci, interior of Bahia, 219 km from Salvador. From a poor background, with 15 siblings, she came to the capital with her husband with little money in the 1990s. Mother of four, married, studied until high school. An intermediary, tenant, and operator of a tenement in Barra Funda, central region of São Paulo, since 2020. She was a tenant for ten years at Júlio's tenement; later, she went on to other places, before she began renting her tenement.
4. Joseane, 50 years old, from the interior of the state of Paraíba. From a poor background, she came to the capital with her husband with little money in the 1990s. Mother of one child, separated, studied until high school. Intermediary and operator of a tenement in Bom Retiro, central region of São Paulo, since 2016.
5. Marcelo, 55 years old, from the interior of the state of Paraíba. From a poor background, he came to São Paulo alone, aged 19, in 1987. Married, father of two, studied up to the 5th grade of elementary school (currently 6th grade). Tenant and operator of three tenement houses in Liberdade, a central region of São Paulo, since 2011.
6. Jocasta, 45 years old, from Sabinópolis, Minas Gerais. From a poor background, she came to São Paulo with her mother when she was three years old. Separated, mother of three, studied up to high school. Tenant and operator of a tenement in Bela Vista, central region of São Paulo, since 2019.
7. Adamastor, 60 years old, born in the city of São Paulo. From a middle-class background, married, with one son. Studied up to higher education. Landlord of a tenement since 2009, in Bela Vista, and owns a construction company and other properties in upscale neighborhoods of the capital. Resident of the upper-middle class neighborhood of Higienópolis. He is not strictly a tenement operator, since there is an intermediary, however the interview demonstrated that the relationship is not one of simply outsourcing functions, but one of very closely monitoring the operation, thereby enabling a better understanding of the ecosystem and demonstrating that there is much complexity behind the apparently resolved categories of "landlord" and "operator".



Map 1. Locations of the tenements for each operator

Source: Own elaboration, 2021.

The interviews have enabled us to construct an original view of what the literature has already consolidated with regard to tenements. The testimonies have been grouped into six categories: 1) The beginning of the activity: where the insertion of the operator in the ecosystem of the tenements is narrated, and sometimes the transformation of the properties into tenements; 2) Selection and contracts: how residents move in and the rental documents and agreements; 3) Caretaking: the maintenance of each tenement, habitability; 4) Coexistence: the daily relationship between tenants and landlords and intermediaries; 5) Rates and earnings: costs and income obtained; 6) Future and life projects: how the operators visualize their future related to the tenement(s), expansion, sale and even leaving the business.

#### The beginning of the activity

With some variables, the literature has explained the emergence of tenements through an increase in economic dynamics, the growth of the city and the precarious and low-income population.

The tenement emerges and expands as the result of a new relationship of exploitation, in which the worker needs to acquire, with the salary he earns, the means of living to survive [...] insofar as the economy bases its process of surplus extraction on the impoverishment of workers and at the same time needs to maintain the working class family unit in order to exploit it and guarantee its continuity, the tenement [...] appears as the most viable form for nascent capitalism to reproduce the working class, at a low cost. (KOWARICK; ANT, 1994, p. 74)

Although it explains the phenomenon in broad terms, this narrative also has its limits: the tenement, as an inanimate being, has no ability to invent itself, someone needs to promote it. The growth of the city and of the low-income population, without the capacity to enter the formal housing market, may result in different forms of precarious housing, and if tenements appear, it is because there are individuals with the agency capacity to do so. In other words, it makes sense to address which agents operate in a tenement that “emerges”, “expands”, “appears”.

Júlio (landlord) saved money working in a laundry that he opened with his brothers and made a profit from the purchase and resale of two houses in the North Zone of São Paulo, one in Cachoeirinha and the other in the Limão neighborhood, both in the North Zone. After these negotiations, he bought two properties in Barra Funda in the late 1980s, and turned them into tenements in the early 1990s, an undertaking he saw as being less risky than opening a store:

When I had the laundry, I learned from the Portuguese [...] The Portuguese would go in, the old bedroom was big, and so they used to put in a partition here and there, and they'd make one bedroom, and then another bedroom. Assuming that he paid [for the rent] 2 or 3 thousand Reais [...] it meant it was possible to take in 6 thousand Reais, with a gain of 3 thousand reais. Except that he'd spend it, he put in a wooden partition and worked at the top of the house. He'd then take on another house and make another rooming house, and earn another 3 thousand Reais, and that's how it went on. I started to realize this, in the 1970s [...] through the Portuguese who had rooming houses, I realized that I had this wisdom, because I was afraid to open a store. What to do? At least rent is secure money. If I make a *kitnet*<sup>4</sup> today, a worker doesn't pay R\$1,300, R\$1,400 [...] renting a small room with a bathroom is for him to sleep, make a cup of coffee, food on the weekend, it's easier and cheaper. And what am I going to do at the Vitorino house? [Vitorino Carmilo Street] I'm going to create a rooming house. [...] That was when Collor confiscated<sup>5</sup> everybody's money. I had the complex, but I was broke. I didn't even have the money to go to the market [...].

I still had no idea what I was doing. So I made two large bedrooms downstairs. I thought, I'm going to do it differently, I'll close this here and make both bigger and smaller bedrooms, that I can let out cheaper. Over on the other wall I'll make a *kitnet* and down at the bottom I'll make another single room. I called in a bricklayer and then I started to get a taste for things. (Júlio, testimony on December 18, 2020)

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4. One room with its own small kitchen area and bathroom. A single room occupancy.

5. Here Júlio refers to the confiscated savings accounts by the Collor de Mello government, in March, 1990. Source: <https://www.infomoney.com.br/mercados/plano-collor-o-confisco-da-poupanca-que-derubou-a-bolsa-em-mais-de-40-em-dois-dias>.

Haroldo (landlord) worked as a waiter in high-class restaurants, and lost almost everything after suffering from tuberculosis. With a sum of money from a car consortium he had taken out, he acquired a property from an indebted mortgage borrower through the Caixa Econômica Federal<sup>6</sup> for an amount below the market price, taking on the debts of the property:

It was the only option I had to make a rooming house. Because it was all I had, I had nothing else. I was sick, unemployed and all I had was the consortium. I started to renovate it. At the time, just on this, I spent 12 thousand Reais [...] I divided up the living room, the bedrooms, I divided it in two because it was too big, I built another bathroom, it was an old house. (Haroldo, testimony on January 28, 2021)

Aparecida (an intermediary or lessor who sublets) lived in tenements. With no equity capital, she found herself in the position of an intermediary, not paying anymore rent and saving money to buy the property. She reports the beginning of the activity as an opportunity:

This rooming house came up, and my daughter said: – Let's try, and if it works, we'll get out of paying rent. So, I don't pay rent, I take care of the rooming house and make a little money. I saved some money, my daughter and I, and we found this rooming house. I rented it with my nephew, who had been widowed with two small children, and so to help him out, I called him in. He knew the landlord of this house, who is from Bahia as well [...] It was a total mess, the floor was made of cement, and whoever had taken care of it was a friend of the landlord and had stayed here for about 10 years. Had never paid any rent and had just destroyed it all. Before we moved in, the landlord took away 18 dumpsters of rubble. Everything was just so ugly. We had to fix the roof, line the ceilings, and do the flooring, new doors, which the landlord gave, and we went in with the labor. My husband is a bricklayer. We bought new toilets for the bathrooms, which were pretty ugly. (Aparecida, testimony on February 9, 2021)

Joseane (intermediary) reported that she came to the house as a resident in 2005, and began her role of representing the tenement landlords in 2016:

I first came here as a resident, when there was someone else in charge. She left and I stayed. Most of the residents here are Bolivian and Paraguayan, and I was the only Brazilian at the time, and the landlords thought it was better to leave it with me, easier to understand, many

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6. Caixa Econômica Federal, also referred to as “Caixa”, is a state-owned Brazilian financial services company headquartered in Brasília, Brazil.

of them don't even speak Portuguese [...] A lot has changed, more responsibility. Before going to the landlord, everything comes through me. (Joseane, testimony on February 2, 2021)

Marcelo (a lessor who sublets) lived for many years in tenements and met his wife in in one of them. After years of working as a doorman in buildings, he saw the opportunity to have his own business and, with that, obtain the maoney to pay for better housing. He rents three houses in Liberdade, and sublets the rooms:

Because I used to live in a rooming house and already knew what it was like, the landlord there [of the rooming house in Santa Cecilia where he lived and where he met his wife] called me in to do some painting and after I left the apartment I got the taste for it, and then I thought: – I'm going to rent a house and the rooming house will pay for my rent. And it worked. I didn't have any kind of training to find a job, and [didn't want] to go back to being a doorman in a building again. I got the taste for it. (Marcelo, testimony on April 5, 2021)

Jocasta (a lessor who sublets) lived for many years in tenements, and when the tenants left, she took over the property, letting out some of the rooms to supplement her income.

There was someone who used to rent here. I moved into this house, [...] and I lived in the first bedroom. A couple rented it to me who used to live in the room my son lives in today. It was a rooming house. And they said they were leaving [...] So, the landlord told me to take everything, so I took everything. (Jocasta, testimony on July 6, 2021)

Adamastor (landlord) acquired four properties on the same piece of land to create a tenement, aiming to diversify its investments. Unlike the others, this business was planned:

This is a type of collective letting, an extension of the activity. Because it's always very expensive, an apartment costs x amount, a house like this for you to make several bedrooms is very expensive. [...] I bought it to expand the entrepreneurship, to increase the amount of letting. I saw it as something that I could live on after my retirement. Investing in real estate, having an income, a business. (Adamastor, testimony on August 2, 2021)

With no experience in administrating the day-to-day life of a tenement, Adamastor hired a person who was a resident of one of the old houses on the land to be his representative (intermediary):

I have a company, I provide assistance, if it needs maintenance, I send an employee there to fix it, and Madalena (the intermediary), she lives there, she helps to collect the rent. She lives in a nice house there. I give her a discount. In practical terms, she receives the rents, provides assistance there, in fact as if she were a caretaker, we form a partnership. (Adamastor, testimony on August 2, 2021)

With these interviews and the excerpts highlighted here, we are able to define four categories of operators: 1) Direct landlord (Júlio and Haroldo) – owns the property, assumes its responsibilities with onus and bonuses and works directly with the residents; 2) Indirect landlord (Adamastor) – owns the property as an investment, assumes its responsibilities with onus and bonus and works with residents via a representative (intermediary), but remains very close to the day-to-day management; 3) Intermediary (Joseane) – acts as a kind of caretaker, does not pay rent and makes partnerships with the landlords; 4) Sublessor (Marcelo, Aparecida and Jocasta) – rents the property and then sublets it directly to the tenants, has a contractual relationship with the landlord and pays the rent, regardless of subletting it.

We also identified four different movements that create the social role of the operator. The first is the pragmatic response to a crisis situation, in which the person finds him/herself without income, but with a property to exploit. This is the case of Júlio, who began investing in real estate, but with his savings being confiscated at the time of the Collor government, saw investment in tenements as an alternative source of income, as did Haroldo, who after losing his job bought a property from a indebted mortgage borrower from the Caixa Econômica Federal.

The second movement, that of Marcelo, Aparecida and Jocasta, is the structuring of a subletting business, taking advantage of the fact that the value of renting rooms per square meter is higher than renting entire properties. This position requires capital in order to rent and adapt the properties and for legitimacy to sign a lease. Marcelo reported a preference for self-employed work, rather than the arduous work as a doorman in buildings. Jocasta had no plans to have a tenement, but with the departure of the sub-tenant, the opportunity arose. In all three cases, the previous experience of living in tenements as a tenant was decisive, constituting a repertoire that allowed them to assume the role of manager.

The third movement, that of Joseane, is an opportunity perceived in the transition from being a tenant to an intermediary or resident representative as a stand-in for the landlords. This is the most precarious status, it does not require movable or immovable capital, but a position of trust in relation to the landlord.



We observe that these three movements are similar to the study on tenements carried out in the early 1980s, in which, in the suburban tenements, the operator and the tenant belong to the same social class, whereby the operator is the one who manages to obtain a property with a lot of sacrifice. (TASCHNER; MAUTNER, 1982).

The fourth movement, that of Adamastor, understands the tenement as a possibility to diversify his business, as a long-term investment, another category of real estate within its investment portfolio, while having to hire an intermediary in order to handle the day to day.

Adamastor is an exception in the group due to his more privileged social origins. The other interviewees, in previous moments of their lives, had lived in tenements, including the current landlords Júlio and Haroldo. They also have a poor, migrant background. They consider the activity of letting rooms as a profitable, low-risk business, within a horizon of reduced economic possibilities, requiring little (or no) capital and low-skilled professional training. In place of the narratives of exploration, there is necessity, a sense of real estate opportunity and the significant work required to structure a complex business like a tenement.

While Adamastor is more in line with the existing literature, his operation is not of the “the worse the better” type. He seeks a return on the capital invested, but there is much work involved in monitoring the operation and he says he needs to offer a better quality product than the competitors so as not to lose his tenants.

### Caretaking

The literature has repeatedly indicated the poor housing and health conditions of tenements (ANDALRAFT; BARRELLA, 2018; GRACE COSTA *et al.*, 2011; KOHARA, 2009; 2012; KOWARICK, 2013; LABHAB FAUUSP, 2004; LUCCHESI, 2015; MICHELETTI *et al.*, 2009; PARIS, 2013; PICCINI, 2004; SANTO AMORE *et al.*, 2016; SIMONE, 2014; SCHOR; BORIN, 1997; SOUZA, 2011; VERAS, 1994). As a result, it has tended to disregard two elements: a) the enormous internal diversity of conditions in tenement rooms. Even in the same property there is great diversity. Different conditions are reflected in different rental rates in a highly dynamic market where frequent moves are the norm. Tenements in better condition may charge higher rents, have fewer vacancies and lower turnover rates; b) the significant work in the management of the properties by the operators. Tenements, as spaces that are used so intensively, require a huge effort to maintain them. The wear and tear needs to be addressed; if this is not done, there is a risk of residents leaving, with the consequent loss of income.

Júlio and Haroldo, property landlords, claim that they take scrupulous care of each room and the collective environments, seeking to provide good living



conditions and thereby add value to the properties. They personally carry out corrective maintenance and contract services for larger interventions.

Adamastor (landlord) adapted the properties in order to create his tenement and is expanding it with an upper floor. He has undertaken renovations and improvements to valorize the property and keep it in good condition. He also owns a contracting firm, which ultimately provides services for improvements and expansion.

Aparecida, despite being a lessor, has managed to renovate most of the property she operates. The adaptations required little capital, since the landlord provided the material and the service (laying the floor, renovating the bathrooms, changing the roof, placing the handrail on the stairs, changing the doors of the rooms, for example) was carried out by Joseane's husband, who is a bricklayer.

The lessor Marcelo rents three historic townhouses, which are well looked after. With the rental income, he undertakes electrical, plumbing and building maintenance, thereby ensuring adequate living conditions. He details how he controls electricity costs with sensors in the corridors and a timer in the showers: "Light, we put sensors in the corridors, and in the shower, there is a 15-minute timer. So there's 15 minutes of hot water and if you want, you can have 15 minutes of cold water. The hot water only comes back again after 15 minutes."

The lessor Jocasta is giving up the property due to the unsanitary conditions of the rooms, because of leaking and the appearance of mold, and a lack of understanding with the landlord:

He refuses to come to an agreement on home improvements, he doesn't want to deduct it from the rent. There was a moment when he just didn't want to know anymore, and neither did I. [...] I paid R\$ 1,650.00, before it was R\$1,850.00. He put it down because of the pandemic. I asked to stay on for R\$ 1,100.00 for me to fix everything, but he doesn't want to. So I'm leaving. (Jocasta, testimony on July 6, 2021)

The tenement administrated by the intermediary Joseane has the worst living conditions, with flooding,<sup>7</sup> hazardous wiring, leaks in the rooms, and structural problems on the roofs. She has informed the landlords about the problems, who then only carry out the most urgent maintenance, and put off any structural interventions. With regard to the leaks in the rooms, she reported that: "Sometimes it does the trick, but sometimes it's just palliative with a tarpaulin". With regard to

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7. On the day of the interview with the intermediary and the visit to the tenement, it rained a lot and we experienced what the residents have to go through with the flooding inside the tenement, whereby the common yard and the outside street all get flooded.

the electrical part: “I’ve already talked to the landlord about rewiring, but nothing has been done. Because the wiring cannot support a full house, you have to go there to turn the circuit breaker off and then on again”. With regard to the flooding:

Everything is very old here, old wiring, lots of cracks, bathrooms in a deplorable condition. Down there, when there’s heavy rain, it floods, with water up to the knees. In February 2020, when it rained a lot, the downstairs rooms all got flooded. It went up to about a meter. Many people moved out because they lost their furniture [...] I wouldn’t live in the lower part of the rooming house because of the rains. (Joseane, testimony on February 2, 2021)

In contrast to the image of abandonment and precariousness, the narrative of the operators causes concern with the improvement of the building and the caretaking, seeking – in a traditional rentier mentality – to increase the amounts charged, reduce the turnover and vacancies. Such concern does not always result in effective improvements; when the landlord is the operator, he is better able to decide how much and how to reinvest (Júlio, Haroldo and Adamastor). When the operator is a lessor, the investment needs to return in the short term. The cost of caretaking work and renovations is included in the calculation of rental payments and receipts (Marcelo and Aparecida). The intermediary needs to convince the landlords to make the investments (Joseane). The lack of understanding on giving a rent rebate in return for carrying out the infrastructure improvements causes the lessor to give up the property (Jocasta).

The small sample brings a gradation: the best conditions and the most appropriate caretaking occur when the operation is undertaken by the landlords, since there is a concern with structural investments, with the valorization of the property – the investments revert to short and long-term gains. Tenements operated by lessors have intermediate conditions. The tenement operated by the intermediary Joseane has the very worst conditions, reflecting a short-term and possibly speculative mentality of the landlords, who may be letting the property while they wait for a buyer to demolish it. No-one is aware of the Moura law<sup>8</sup> and the possibility of obtaining special socially adjusted tariffs for water and electricity.

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8. The Moura Law, No. 10,928, of January 8, 1991, which, among other points, defines a tenement as a unit used for multifamily collective housing, presenting, either in whole or in part, the following characteristics: consisting of one or more buildings built on an urban lot; subdivided into several rented, sub-let or assigned rooms for any reason; several functions performed in the same room; access and common use of unbuilt spaces and sanitary facilities; circulation and infrastructure, in general, precarious; and overcrowding. Available at: <http://legislacao.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/leis/lei-10928-de-08-de-janeiro-de-1991>. Viewed on: August 28, 2022.

## Coexistence

The literature reports relationships of suspicion, control and gossip that take place among tenants, associated with the situations of forced coexistence in precarious spaces, with spaces and equipment that are forcibly shared. Pinto (2003) reported the re-signification of the principle of reciprocity among tenement dwellers – of something quotidian and banal, it becomes a bargaining chip used for survival. Kowarick (2013, p. 1) presented an account of Cris, who lives in a tenement in Pari, who described the difficulty of coexistence: “It’s too small here for four to live, there’s no privacy; if it were bigger, we could live here. [...] but at night, privacy is hard. On the weekends, there are some who drink, and we have to get up to tell them to stop the noise. When they play loud music at night, then I have to speak”. Simone (2014, p. 209) narrated the inexistence of affective bonds between the Bolivian residents of a tenement in Brás, where there is a limited coexistence due to the needs of the environment.

The interviews with the tenement operators bring a very different perspective. All of them stated that they have an excellent relationship with the residents, and that their attitude towards the tenants makes all the difference. Rules that may be seen as tools for the control and deprivation of freedom are framed by operators as “rules for good coexistence”, such as: setting 10pm as the time for everyone to be in their rooms; requesting people not to walk around in common areas after this time; prohibiting visits and bringing people in to sleep together; avoiding loud noises, especially after 10 pm. Júlio reported a certain sponsorship relationship with the residents: “Everyone likes me a lot, there are many friendships, [...] I even loaned money to a tenant there. I lent R\$ 50, R\$ 100, and afterward he returned it to me with the rent, but this doesn’t happen easily”. He also speaks about how to preserve harmony inside the houses: “When there’s a problem, I throw them out. If I let a troublemaker stay then he’ll spoil it for the others, take away the peace of the others, it’s no use”.

Haroldo places himself in the role of counselor:

Posture, right, man? You have to have posture and position yourself. They are family, we talk, they open up, dialogue, you have to see how people are doing, you have to guide people. I am proud to have helped many people. I used to be a devil in the shape of a person, I used to curse a lot, today I don’t anymore. All through dialogue, conversation, not swearing at others. (Harold, testimony on January 28, 2021)

Aparecida also reports that she tries to help the residents, but makes an interesting inversion of positions in relation to the usual image of the intermediary

as the exploiter: “I help people, but many just don’t give a dam, I just get screwed. My daughter says I am a soft touch, but it’s okay, everyone respects me, play when it’s time to play, and fight when I need to”. Joseane describes her role as someone who imposes limits: “It’s easy, they are quiet. There’s no problem, we get along well. For some, when they cross the line, we have to draw attention”.

Marcelo informed that he never had to expel anyone and that there are no fights between the residents: “They’re good people who live in the houses and there’s almost never a problem”.

The narrative appears regarding concern about having well-kept houses and providing dignified places for the residents:

[...] keep the houses organized and people feel good about living here, because it’s not about saying that you have a rooming house and that you can put people there just anyhow, that it’s just about wanting their money and not doing the upkeep, not doing things right in the houses. Everyone has to have the dignity of living well, even if it’s a small room in a boarding house, it has to have quality. (Marcelo, testimony on April 5, 2021)

Jocasta commented that she got along well with everyone, except for one resident who took drugs and created problems, until the day he was invited to leave the tenement: “Then he started to get abusive. I made him food and he had no money, and I let him eat freely. He didn’t have any money for food, but he looked crazy”.

Adamastor mentioned that he has a good relationship with the tenants, that he has never had to evict anyone and that he has a close relationship with everyone, especially the intermediary. On specific occasions, he concedes a few extra days for paying rent, interest-free. This statement shows that the landlord does not always fully delegate the management of the property to the intermediary, which is one way of reducing the intermediary’s power and making him/her replaceable.

Júlio, Haroldo and Joseane mention the long stay of residents in their tenements as proof of the good coexistence. At least one statement from a former resident confirms this type of sponsorship relationship with Júlio:

I used to live at [Júlio’s] boarding house, his wife helped me a lot, both of them. They’re like parents to me [...] We lived at the Japanese boarding house for about 10 years, I know their family and they know ours, a long time ago, the children grew up together. (Aparecida, testimony February 9, 2021)

The seven interviewees described their relations as companionship, in some cases friendship between operators and tenants, despite their different roles, in

an interesting contrast to the existing literature, in which reports of exploitation, excessive authority and violence prevail. Jocasta's narrative, who used to be a tenant of Júlio, living in the tenement for many years and raising her children there, proves that he had a good relationship with the residents. It is not a question of discovering the "truth" of the relationships between operators and residents, but of pointing out the complexity of these relationships. The tenement operators interviewed had also been tenants, with the exception of Adamastor.

### Selection and Contracts

The tenement market is competitive and highly dynamic, and follows the same logic as other rental submarkets: properties in better condition achieve higher rent prices and have lower vacancy rates. A high turnover signifies that rooms are always available, and operators need to communicate that availability. Actively seeking tenants rewards operators because it gives them the possibility to make a better selection of tenants.

Aparecida, Joseane and Adamastor place "rooms to let" signs, together with the telephone number, in front of the tenement and await contact. When interested parties make contact, they hold an interview, ask about the person's profession and, if approved, demand the payment of a deposit in advance. Once selected, residents may have access to the house. Haroldo makes the selection via Facebook:

I put it on the marketplace, on the room rental app and on Facebook, whereas long ago I used to put paper out on the lamppost, many years ago. Now, more or less selected people appear, they're not street people. Because if you put it on the lamppost, what do you get? Druggies, junkies. There's a lot of signs on the streets, and I've already been to these other rooming houses from the lampposts. [...] They're horrible, they look like a prison, there is no laundry room, there is no air to breathe. (Harold, testimony on January 28, 2021)

During the visit, Haroldo conducts the interview. He asks about income, and checks whether the tenant takes drugs. If approved, he requires the first month paid in advance. Júlio does not put a sign on the door. Being able to move into the tenements that he manages is only possible through recommendations by the residents themselves:

In the past, I used to put people in at random, it's hard when you don't know them, and you bring in a stranger. We've had fights, there's been someone who was a thief. We live and learn, but today I don't need this anymore. I don't put up a sign, I go by recommendation, the guys say: "There's a friend of mine who's in a messy boarding

house and here it's organized". And I say, but is this guy really good? "He's a good worker, he's from my hometown, you can rest assured". When they come recommended, I don't even need to say anything else, because they all talk among themselves, they already know the system: "the Japanese guy is nice, he doesn't like noise, you can party from 2 to 4 in the afternoon on the roof, no problem, he even joins in, but don't make any noise. I'm not saying mine is the best, but there are a lot of messy pensions, full of potheads. The guys even say: "go to the Japanese, it's quiet there". (Júlio, testimony on December 18, 2020)

Like Júlio, Marcelo and Jocasta also do not put up signs and only let rooms through recommendations from either current or former residents: "I don't put up a sign, it's all word of mouth, you only come in by being recommended. We don't put up signs here. Recommendation is more of a guarantee, there's no problem" (Marcelo, testimony on April 5, 2021). We perceived that they seek to construct more homogeneous groups of residents, which facilitates the management of spaces and reduces tensions. Marcelo prefers to only let to women, with two of the three exclusive houses:

And so the first one just for women began, the first two are still only for women. They're much less work. They're more understanding than men. Men, you know how it is, they start dating, then they want to bring back a girlfriend, then someone says: "You said we couldn't, now he's bringing his girlfriend back". Women are better. (Marcelo, testimony on April 5, 2021)

The tenement administrated by Joseane, in Bom Retiro, is mostly made up of foreigners: "Currently, it depends, there are more than 10 children, and 28 adults, usually couples, but there are friends, relatives too, mostly Bolivians and Paraguayans. Brazilians, there's me, Mariene, plus two gentlemen. [...] Some have a workshop and sew in their rooms". In the tenement rented by Aparecida in Barra Funda, most are informal workers or from the social base of the service sector: "There's an electrician, a bricklayer, a caretaker, two hairdressers, a driver, one who works on *jogo do bicho*<sup>9</sup>, one is unemployed, but she does odd jobs and then there's my niece's husband who works delivering pizzas and by making carts". Haroldo does not accept children or couples, but accepts gay men:

There's a lot of homosexuality here, because of Arouche. There's also been a male escort, but I don't allow them to bring people back here. Have your clients, okay, but go to a hotel. It's important to pay my rent. I don't allow drugs, visits, sex in the rooms, you have to respect

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9. An informal, illegal, although extremely popular gambling game.

the environment. There were once two high-class call girls, but that's not a problem, from here on out. [...] There's one guy who's lived here for eight years, and he's the only old man here. [...] Some have separated, but live alone, some have children who live outside. [...] One is a doctor's driver, works in São Bernardo, and then works with Uber, others work with I-food deliveries by bicycle, another works in a restaurant, another is a salesperson. (Harold, testimony on January 28, 2021)

In the tenements operated by Marcelo, many of them are students from the universities in the neighborhood and work in offices. There is only one person per room: "Most people come from outside São Paulo, for example they come from the interior of the state, they don't go to hotels. When they come here to rent, their parents come with them to see it". In Júlio's tenements, the residents are migrants:

All my tenants are from the Northeast. They work all day and at night, they want to rest. Bar opens at what time? At 5 am, so they wake up at 10 to 5. They have a house out in the village, but it's too far away, and if they go there, they have to wake up at dawn. One of them would have to wake up at 3:30 am to be here at 5:00 am, if he took the bus after that, he'd be late. One lives alone, another lives with a couple, another works in a Japanese restaurant, another works as a doorman at a building, one couple works at the bar, their brother also works there. Those who came from the village arrive here exhausted, because they had to take buses, trains and subways, they spend a lot on fares. Not here, they go on foot and they're there in 5 minutes, not even 5 minutes. They come back, rest here, go to work and come back, eat there, there is a fridge and stove. They rest a lot. (Júlio, testimony on December 18, 2020)

Adamastor prefers residents with no children, where some are retired, liberal professionals, bakery workers and self-employed.

We don't choose, but we give priority to couples without children. In the past, we had a problem with couples leaving their children there [...] and leaving them alone, and that's a problem. For those older than 4, we accept with children, but we usually give preference to couples. (Adamastor, testimony on August 2, 2021)

In the selection processes, therefore, we see a gradation, which is related to the great care taken with the properties and the situation of the property. Landlord-operated tenements have fewer public processes and select residents by referral, while those that are more precarious and operated by intermediaries



tend to advertise the availability of rooms on the façade of the building. There is a search for specialization and homogenization of the residents, the more selective the landlord, the greater success he has in this homogenization.

The literature is unanimous in mentioning informality as a rule in the renting relationships of tenements, resulting in arbitrary price increases, untimely and violent evictions, threats and all kinds of deprivation of tenants' rights. The lack of contracts also has consequences for tenement operators, so it is interesting to understand their side of the relationship. Júlio, Haroldo, Marcelo, Aparecida, Adamastor and Jocasta do not enter into formal lease agreements, but ask for a copy of the residents' ID and CPF<sup>10</sup>. Even Jocasta has no formal lease agreement with the landlord. Joseane – the tenement intermediary in the most precarious situation – reported that recently the landlords began to make lease agreements with the new residents.

#### Rates and earnings

The rates charged for rooms in tenements is the most studied and documented aspect in the literature regarding the work of the operator. Studies have indicated the high levels of profitability of landlords and intermediaries throughout the decades. For the case of São Paulo, research by Kohara (1999; 2009) highlighted this point:

All field research and literature on tenements are unanimous in describing the precariousness of housing and the high income obtained by those who exploit it. [...] Tenement exploiters use many tricks to obtain the maximum yield per tenement, such as coercing residents and adding value. [...] Despite the existence of laws that limit the precariousness in the tenements, due to the lack of inspection by the responsible departments, the exploiters obtain high incomes keeping the tenements in terrible conditions of habitability [...] the misery of the tenement dwellers has always served as a possibility of enrichment for many landlords or intermediaries of these rented properties. (KOHARA, 2009, p. 52-64)

In his research, Kohara (1999; 2009) demonstrated that the tenement rooms had an average area of 11.9 square meters, and were rented for R\$ 19<sup>11</sup>, i.e., R\$ 13.17 per square meter, which is much higher than prices charged for renting single-family homes in the same neighborhood, which averaged R\$ 7.40 per square meter. The value per square meter was also higher in tenements than in upper-middle-class neighborhoods. Araújo and Pereira (2008, p. 10) discussed the abusive profits

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10. A registration document for citizens with the Brazilian tax authorities.

11. At the time of writing the exchange rate for the Brazilian Real was R\$ 5,18 to US\$ 1.

of intermediaries, as an extremely profitable function, with many of them achieving a profit of approximately 500% of the amount invested. They take advantage of the lack of formalization when they rent, since there is hardly ever a regular rental contract. Maricato (1996, p. 22) reports abuses by operators in the apportionment of water and electricity bills. Piccini (2004, p. 82) indicates that profit is easy, but does not generate enrichment:

For both the landlord and the intermediary it is not a big profit by which someone may become rich. It is an easy profit, given the illegality of the operation, outside the legal norms [...]. The landlord is unknown, and the residents pay the rent directly to a real estate agency or to a sub-lessor [...]. The sub-lessor overcharges the tenant, whether or not the landlord is aware of it, seeking a profit margin, but without worrying about the precarious physical and social situation of the residents. (PICCINI, 2004, p. 82).

In the seven interviews, we asked about how the rent prices and fees were composed. Rent prices vary depending on the size of the rooms and the availability of a private bathroom. In the tenement managed by Joseane in Bom Retiro, rental rates range from R\$ 215 (smaller rooms, with no bathroom), to R\$ 450 (rooms with private bathroom), to R\$ 600 (larger rooms with bathroom). In the tenement managed by Aparecida in Barra Funda, prices are higher, from R\$ 650 to R\$ 800, with a private bathroom. In Haroldo's tenement, in República, the price of rooms varies from between R\$ 550 and R\$ 750, none of which have a private bathroom. Marcelo lets rooms in Liberdade, with no private bathroom, for R\$ 1,000. In the Jocasta's tenement, the rooms vary between R\$ 400 and R\$ 700, none of which include a private bathroom. In the tenements of Barra Funda, owned by Júlio, the smaller rooms cost R\$ 600 and the larger ones, R\$ 700. Couples pay R\$ 100 more. There also has what is commonly called a kitnet, which is rented out for R\$ 1,300, and has its own kitchen and private bathroom. In the second tenement managed by Júlio, the smaller rooms cost R\$ 700 and the kitnets, R\$ 1,200. Adamastor lets the smaller rooms for R\$ 800 and the larger ones for R\$ 1,000, all of which have an internal bathroom.

Júlio, Haroldo, Marcelo, Aparecida, Jocasta and Adamastor provide Wi-Fi for their residents, which is included in the price of the rent. Harold has put furniture in every room, with beds and wardrobes; in the common areas, there is a TV, washing machine, stove, appliances and a sofa. Marcelo lets rooms with a bed, wardrobe, refrigerator and desk. The kitchen has a stove and a microwave, and the laundry room has a washing machine. In the other tenements, rooms are rented with no furniture and there are no collective appliances in the common areas.

Aparecida and Joseane charge an additional R\$ 70 for water and electricity per person, based on an average monthly apportionment; Haroldo, Marcelo and Jocasta include water and electricity in a single price included in the rent. Júlio only includes these expenses in the price of the rent in the tenement where he actually lives; in his other tenement, he shares the water and electricity bills according to the number of residents. All seven respondents provide water and electricity bills to residents.

The interviews also make it possible to identify whether this activity provides an opportunity for enrichment. The only one who lives exclusively on the income from the tenements is Júlio, although he works full-time in the management. He is not simply a rentier. Even so, he lives in one of the tenements that he administrates. Haroldo lives off the rental income and also offers meals and laundry services to the residents for an additional charge, in a traditional boarding house relationship. Aparecida, in addition to managing the tenement, is a caregiver for an elderly woman, she works as a daily and sells acarajé (traditional food from the state of Bahia), an activity she undertakes at night on the weekends outside the tenement. Joseane takes care of the tenement and works as an estate agent. Marcelo complements the rental income with the sales from a *bombonière* (a small, sweet and snack stall) located on the ground floor of his house, which he runs with his wife. Jocasta is the manager at a thrift store and is also a caregiver for the elderly. The rent from the tenement helps to pay the rent on the house.

Marcelo gave information on what he considers to be a limit to the operation: “I’m thinking about keeping the houses just as they are, I won’t rent out, and [he operates three houses], because then I would have to pay someone to take care of them, there would be nothing left” (testimony on April 5, 2021). Adamastor actually earns a significant income from the activity (around 10 minimum wages), but he also owns other companies and other properties.

We have calculated the gross income obtained from running the tenements, without deducting the costs of the preventive and corrective maintenance. Júlio earns an average monthly income of around 10 minimum salaries<sup>12</sup>, by letting 8 rooms and 6 kitnets in two properties. Haroldo has a monthly income of between 3 and 4 minimum salaries, letting 6 rooms in República. In both cases, there are two overlapping incomes, that of the property and that of the management work.

Aparecida, with her tenement in Barra Funda, earns an average monthly income of around 5 minimum salaries, letting 12 rooms, 5 of which include a private bathroom. Marcelo, with three tenements in Liberdade, totaling 15 rooms,

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12. The national minimum salary in 2021 was R\$ 1,100. Source: [http://www.guiatrabalhista.com.br/guia/salario\\_minimo.htm](http://www.guiatrabalhista.com.br/guia/salario_minimo.htm).

has a monthly income of around 3 to 4 minimum salaries. Jocasta with a 2 bedroom tenement has a monthly income of around 0.9 to 1 minimum salary. Adamastor has a tenement with 15 rooms, and after deducting the rent discount for the intermediary, has a monthly income of around 10 minimum salaries.

The income calculation of Joseane, who operates a tenement in Bom Retiro with 26 rooms, 15 of which have a private bathroom and 11 with a shared bathroom, is different from that of the other interviewees: “I don’t pay rent every month, and when I rent out a room only for the first month, I earn around 30% of the initial rent”. Her earnings, therefore, vary according to the number of rooms that are let and to the turnover of residents. However, considering the non-payment of rent and the turnover, her income is between 0 and 2 minimum salaries. The tenement landlord, on the other hand, receives between 10 and 12 minimum salaries, without the burden of any of the daily work.

In our small sample, we have not mechanically arrived at the image of the greedy slumlord or operator who becomes rich at the expense of his tenants. The scenario is more complex. This more customary figure appears in the case of the tenement operated by Josiane. Among the operators, even the landlords who earn the most income (Júlio and Haroldo), there are no signs of wealth. Joseane, as a representative of the landlords and a resident, is unable to improve her living conditions and receives a low income from her work. The need to supplement income with other activities – also unprofitable – is another sign that the exploitation of these tenements is not so highly rewarding. In the testimony of the operators, we find what can be described as an economic ecosystem that is poorly capitalized most of the time, with little capacity to produce wealth and savings, and is work intensive. There is a need to permanently reinvest in the properties, which, due to the excessive use, are constantly rundown.

The one exception is Adamastor’s operation, who already had a high income before acquiring the tenement. He has maintained this activity and presents other investments.

#### Future and life projects

The operation of tenements is, on the one hand, a job that requires no specialized training or technical qualification, and enables professionals with little formal education to enter the job market. On the other hand, it requires hands-on experience and good problem-solving skills. The work is intensive and conflictive, from which no prestige is extracted. In the small sample of this text, it does not appear to be highly profitable. One of the factors to be investigated is the life projects of the operators, for both themselves and their children. It is possible that operators accept hard work in the present, with a view to achieving a better

future, viewing the intergenerational trajectory of families – except Adamastor, who has invested in real estate and other companies, and who decided to invest in the acquisition of a tenement to diversify his business.

At the time of the interview, Haroldo was selling his tenement in order to leave São Paulo and live in Santa Catarina:

I'm 62 years old, I've been working since I was 15, you get tired. I want to sell everything and go there, to Santa Catarina. My wife is already there. [...] We want to go to Blumenau, to leave the beach, but there in Santa Catarina, buy a plot of land, build two houses down below and put them up for rent and then we live upstairs on the income. Sell here, sell there in Itapema [a house the family owns] and do a quick construction project. (Harold, testimony on January 28, 2021)

Joseane is tired of being an intermediary and has already thought about leaving the job, but has not yet managed to do so, oscillating between negative statements – “Sometimes I get stressed, it makes me want to leave and go away” – and positive feelings – “I like the rooming house. Left to me, I'd fix everything, but it's not mine. I like the neighborhood, everything is close, the subway is close. That's why I haven't moved away. To have to catch transport everyday”.

Aparecida, despite managing the tenement and having two other jobs, does not think about giving up work, since she wants to save money to buy the property:

I think that after I finish renovating everything properly, [it's still being renovated] I think about saving a little money so I can buy it. Because the landlord has already told me if he decides to sell, I'm first in line. I said: – Only if you sell it in installments. He said: – We'll do anything. [...] If I manage to fix it here, because I won't stop working, because I can't sit still. Me working, my husband working, my daughters working, we'll get by. I think we can save some money to buy this house. My plan is to buy this house, I don't know how [...] To keep the rooming house, it's a good place, everything close by, at one time it was very bad, now it's full of buildings, fancy bars, with strangers, not the locals anymore. (Aparecida, testimony on February 9, 2021)

Marcelo would like to buy a property and stop being a tenant, but he has no prospects: “I want to have my own house, but I don't have the income for that, neither in the center nor in the neighborhood, everything is so expensive”. Júlio would like to provide a differentiated service to increase profitability, but he is discouraged by his age:

Things have changed so much these days. I was going to make a different kind of rooming house. But I don't know if I'll have any more time for that. What would I do? I'd put a room with 2 single beds, 1 fridge and rent it out to students. I'd charge R\$ 800 per head for the kitnet. I'd earn R\$ 1,600, R\$ 1,700 for a room. What would be done differently? I'd wash their clothes, bedding, because I'd have a laundry room, I know how to wash and iron. I was thinking about it, but I decided not to do it because washing clothes takes work, I'm too old. (Júlio, testimony on December 18, 2020)

Jocasta, because an agreement could not be reached with regard to making improvements to the property, is returning it to the landlord and she is finishing with the tenement. She is planning to live in an occupation in the same neighborhood and intends, in the future, to change her focus and have a hostel with a different kind of service: "I want to make a hostel for more mature people, like, a woman comes and gets breakfast in her room, uses a computer. Have my thrift store at the hostel".

Júlio intends to leave the two tenement houses as an inheritance to his three children and has a more strategic investment perspective:

I'll never sell up. I'll leave it to my children. But not for them to sit on their laurels, it's been a long path, but there are still things to be done, here you feel more at ease. Suppose you get 10,000 here, that'll leave so much for the house, this is saved for you, add it up and buy another one, make a deal, whatever you want. I've always told my son, you can buy, but never sell, because this here will always give you an income. Invest in what you earn, everyone has to know how to get on. Today, to earn money, you have to buy a preconstruction property, you have to make sacrifices, but when it's ready, it's worth R\$ 100,000 more, three years from now. Money attracts money. (Júlio, testimony on December 18, 2020)

Adamastor, the investor, intends to leave the tenement to his wife and son and, if possible, acquire more tenements and scale up:

Buy more houses and land, to make more rooms. [...] if there's money and something worthwhile, invest as well. There's a lot of big people buying and pulverizing the region with standardized bedrooms, with 40, 50 rooms, and they charge less, because they earn on a large scale, so it's difficult to compete. [...] The business will go to him and my wife, who is younger. It's an activity I chose because it's an easier activity to manage. Having a rooming house that earns you rent is easier to manage than a company, which is something technical. The rooming house is something simple to manage. That was my thought, it's easy to get other people to manage it. No major problems. (Adamastor, testimony on August 2, 2021)

We have realized from the reports that the real estate market is recognized as a source of constructing an inheritance, albeit limited. Intermediaries want to become landlords, but see challenges and difficulties in saving money. The landlords see the properties as security for both themselves and their children, or from the perspective of selling for retirement (Haroldo) or for succession (Júlio and Adamastor), but none of them has built any great wealth. Adamastor, always the exceptional case, initially entered the market with a great investment capacity.

## Conclusion

Poverty and urban precariousness may take on different forms, such as favelas, self-built peripheries, occupations, among others. Tenements represent one of these alternatives, but may only occur in the presence of an operator. The operator – as landlord, intermediary or tenant-subtenant – is not only the agent who receives the rents from the tenement, but also the person who assumes the work and risks of the operation. Thus, this strategic function deserves to be studied. Despite this, the scarcity of information on operators is astonishing, in more than a century of studies on tenements in São Paulo.

Instead of empirical studies that personify operators, the literature has preferred to describe it as a category, almost always being addressed with negative attributes, linked, for example, to spoliation, speculation, threats, abuse of power, and a certain elusive nature. In the present article, there has been a different movement: to understand the worlds in which the operators exist and the worlds that they have created. Without collating the testimonies with the viewpoints of the residents on the same topics, or with a more in-depth ethnography in the tenements, there is no way to verify the veracity of the testimonies. Even so, it is possible to glimpse the narratives of the operators as a set of strategies, wagers, desires, dreams and pride. We do not have the objective – nor the interest – of contradicting the previous literature, but the small sample studied herein has revealed that it is possible to construct these subjects in a more complex manner than has thus far been observed.

In the interviews with Júlio, Haroldo, Marcelo, Aparecida, Joseane and Jocasta, we encountered operators performing a laborious activity, from which little prestige and little income are extracted, which does not enable enrichment – at most, a limited well-being or a manner to interrupt a process of social decay. These are people who need to perform multiple economic activities in order to survive, with little capital. The interview with Adamastor, on the other hand, reveals something different, a more professional investor with capitalist rationality, with other economic options, who has built a business out of letting small bedrooms,



better suited to the figure of rentier, and which is well described by the geopolitics of the city in that the landlord lives in an upscale neighborhood and operates housing in a poor district. Even so, he is an entrepreneur who gets his hands dirty and manages his business with daily attention. In the testimonies, we observed different rationalities of “the worse the better”: operators looking for more stable, reliable tenants, the willingness to upgrade their properties.

The testimonies have provided an opportunity to observe specific territories and relationships, a fringe economy, little capitalized, very informal and marginal, with fluid and overlapping roles, such as those studied by Cymbalista (2020). At the same time, they reveal common subjects who need to make the best of the limited opportunities that life has offered them, in order to cope with the many challenges that this very reality imposes upon them. After this empirical incursion and the subjectification of operators, it is difficult to return to the category of tenement operators, viewing them simply as the perverse pole of the exploiter-victim binomial.

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