OSCILLATING MODERNISM

Between Openness and Compartmentalization in Post-War São Paulo Apartments

Marta Silveira Peixoto

ABSTRACT: In the second half of the 20th century, significant modern residential buildings were built in several Brazilian cities. However, regarding the middle-class examples, the layout of most of these apartments was very similar to the 19th-century bourgeois houses. Furthermore, despite using a reinforced concrete structure—always hidden—there was no greater spatial or visual integration. This collection of buildings, neglected by the real estate market in the 1980s, was rediscovered in the early 2000s by new buyers. The former owners gave way to people who admired the qualities of modern architecture, even though they knew they would probably face several difficulties arising from significant renovation. The most common adaptations made in the second occupation included modifying layouts and modernizing facilities and finishes. Besides, the internal spaces became more fluid and integrated than the original version, encouraging conviviality. The number of internal partitions decreased, as did the decorative elements and furniture. More recently, it was possible to recognize a third episode in this history. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when entire families were locked in their homes in a forced and unprecedented coexistence, there was a need for yet another adaptation process. This time, the actions aimed to recover private environments that better support life in confinement, where different non-domestic activities started to happen inside the homes. A process of 'demodernization' seems to have taken place, rehearsing a return to pre-modern layouts of compartmentalized spaces. Through the observation and analysis of the changes in three study cases in the city of São Paulo, this work aims to reflect more broadly on the transformations in the way of living in modern apartments. In addition to bibliographical research and analysis of the projects' graphic material, this research included reports from residents and access to their personal files.

KEYWORDS: Modernist interiors, modern Brazilian architecture, modern residential buildings, renovation in modernist apartments.

do.co.mo.mo_ JOURNAL 73

INTRODUCTION: According to Comas (Comas and Adrià, 2003), the detached house was an essential typology in 20th-century architectural production and a key research area for modern architects. In the first half of the century, financing often came from the architects themselves or an elite clientele, financial or intellectual. In Brazil, modern architecture gained visibility in residential projects only after World War II. Social and economic changes reshaped consumption patterns, particularly among the middle and upper-middle classes. For these groups, it was a time of shifting habits and modernization. Wealthier individuals acquired goods once considered luxuries, like appliances and automobiles, partly fueled by economic policies favoring the domestic market. As a result, modernity and new consumption habits became accessible and quickly integrated into the daily lives of the middle class, fundamentally changing how they lived and interacted with their homes.

The so-called urban-industrial society was then consolidated, supported by a developmental policy deepening throughout the 1950s. It brought a new lifestyle spread through magazines, cinema, and television, as noted by Comas and Peixoto (2019). Regarding construction, industry and agriculture's benefits encouraged the real estate market's expansion as an investment. As Somekh (1997) observed, national laws freezing rents and discouraging investment in popular housing led to greater financial commitment to properties for the wealthiest. The

01 Pedregulho housing neighborhood, Affonso Eduardo Reidy, 1947. © Ruth Verde Zein Archive.

02 Louveira building, Vilanova Artigas and Carlos Cascaldi, 1946. © Biacsantoro, CC BY-SA 4.0.

03 Copan building, Oscar Niemeyer, 1966. © Pablo Trincado, CC BY-SA 2.0.

increase in land prices, while pushing the lower classes to the periphery, stimulated taller constructions. The urban landscape saw notable verticalization, and the construction of many multifamily residential buildings took place, mainly in the large capitals.

Modern architecture extended to residential buildings, popular housing complexes built with state funds like in São Paulo (Sanvitto, 2014) or the Pedregulho housing neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, and bourgeois buildings from the late 1940s to the 1960s. In São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, this production included examples of excellent quality designed by prestigious architects such as Affonso Reidy [FIGURE 01], Franz Heep, Lucio Costa, Rino Levi, Vilanova Artigas [FIGURE 02], and Oscar Niemeyer [FIGURE 03]. Many buildings replaced old mansions, exploring an image linked to the luxurious comfort of progress and technological advancement.

On the other hand, there was resistance to assimilating modern architecture into residential works. Serapião (2014) explained that, despite the Avant-garde exterior,

the buildings' individual units resembled the 19th-century bourgeois house, albeit smaller. The interior layout reflected a hierarchical, uneven structure. Typically, the program included separate living and dining rooms, three or four bedrooms, one or two bathrooms, a kitchen, pantry, laundry room, and servants' quarters (bedroom and bathroom), organized into three sectors: social area, bedroom wing, and service rooms. The building had two independent accesses, one for residents and another for servants or service providers, each with specific vertical circulation. The potential of reinforced concrete structures, allowing fluid spaces, was underutilized. Spatial integration between rooms or sectors was rare, except between the living and dining rooms. Otherwise, apartments followed a traditional layout, far from the innovative ideas proposed in the early decades of the 20th century—whether individual, as in Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's variations of the Citrohan type, or collective, such as the immeubles-villas, for example.[1]

FIRST MOVEMENT – 2000s

According to Lores (2017), the real estate market neglected these buildings in the 1980s and 1990s. However, they were rediscovered by a new clientele at the beginning of the 21st century (Peixoto, 2019). Though not part of the economic elite, this group, often architects or related professionals, recognized the potential of these fifty-year-old apartments despite the challenges of aging. More than the original quality of the construction, they valued the light and views provided by the large openings, the height of the ceilings, and the generous square footage, which outshone more recent constructions. They also understood that the reinforced concrete structure allowed for the necessary changes to meet contemporary operational and programmatic demands.

The most common renovations consisted of the elimination of servants' rooms, the integration of kitchens and social areas, the renovation of bathrooms (often accompanied by the creation of en-suite bathrooms), the installation of air conditioning systems, and the modernization of facilities and finishes. Most of the new residents were smaller families without maids and traditional homemakers. As a result, some of these units have been converted into two- and one-bedroom apartments or even large studios. Service doors became little used, almost restricted to the arrival of purchases, eliminating the original hierarchical system and the logic of enclosed and monofunctional spaces [FIGURE 04].

This phenomenon, occurring in several Brazilian cities financed by private individuals, involves renovation works on apartments in modern buildings of recognized quality,

04 Louveira building, Vilanova Artigas and Carlos Cascaldi, 1946. Floor plan of an original apartment (top); floor plan of a renovation by AR Arquitetos, 2008 (bottom). © Marta Peixoto Archive 2024.

some cataloged by heritage agencies, like the Lausanne building. Driven by clients who value the qualities of the original works and are committed to preserving their authenticity, these second occupation projects align with the ideas of the buildings' authors—as seen in Zein's Ph.D. dissertation (Zein, 2005). The qualities appreciated are well-ventilated and well-lit spaces that "avoid disorder, confusion, dark corners, and intimate spaces," as Benton said (2006, p. 13). Although restricted to the apartments, there is no doubt that the qualification of one of its parts represents an injection of economic and intellectual resources into maintaining the entire building.

SECOND MOVEMENT – 2020s

In 2020, another transformation took place. This time, the cause was not a real estate quirk or some cultural issue but a global health emergency. Life changed radically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People started working from home, schools were closed, and housekeeping and home repairs were canceled. Suddenly entire families were isolated in their homes, with strict restrictions on social coexistence. After a first moment of paralysis, several daily activities began to be carried out remotely: children's classes, parents' work meetings, and physical exercises. No difference existed between where a person lived, worked, studied, played, or rested. Everything started to happen inside the home, which led to a focus on the interior space.

During the lockdown, many of these apartments performed well in terms of habitability issues. Modern projects are always concerned with lighting and insolation; freeing the building from the lot's physical boundaries and allowing for wide openings to the outside. Regarding the distribution scheme, the original servants' entrances, which used to be next to the laundry —practically eliminated in the 2000s due to their discriminatory nature—, became a good solution for sanitizing purchases and people arriving. The ample square footage and low density also relieved the close-to-house-arrest situation. However, as for privacy, some of the solutions promoted by the renovations of the 2000s worked unsatisfactorily in this new condition. When forcibly transformed into multifunctional spaces, the open and integrated rooms lacked walls and doors that would allow different residents to carry out diverse activities simultaneously while maintaining some degree of privacy.

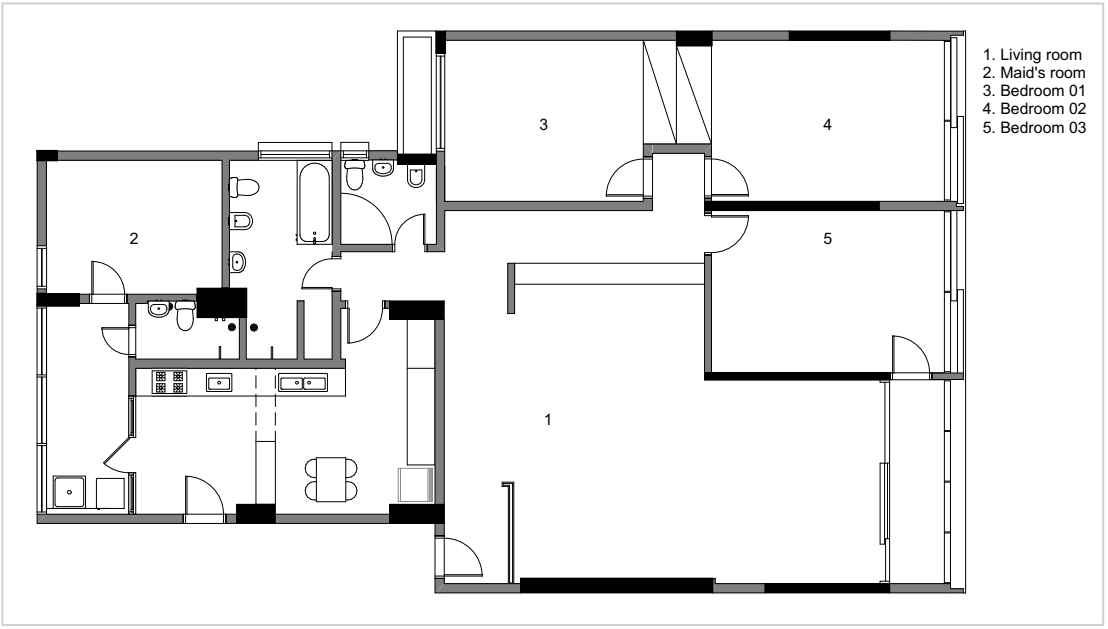
THE CASE STUDIES

This article examines how different residents adapted their homes to the challenges imposed by the pandemic through three case studies, all located in the city of São Paulo. In all cases, the owners are architects. The first two cases are similar and are part of the broader renovation phenomenon discussed earlier in the text. Both involve large apartments in the Lausanne building, located in the upscale neighborhood of Higienópolis. The third case in the neighborhood of Pinheiros is an adaptive reuse of an office building and does not fit within the same trend observed in the previous two cases. However, it is important because it reveals other significant aspects, expanding the scope of the discussion and introducing new considerations on how the pandemic may have influenced spatial dynamics and lifestyle choices in ways not seen in the other examples.

THE LAUSANNE APARTMENTS

The Lausanne building was designed by Franz Hepp in 1953 and was listed as architectural heritage by the city (CONPRESP) and state (CONDEPHAAT) agencies in 1991. It consists of four 180m² apartments per floor, with two units connected to each vertical circulation core. The building is fifteen stories tall, with thirteen typical floors and two distinct ones [FIGURE 05]. The first case was visited on-site, and the resident provided a report of the events, along with the apartment's floor plans. There is less data regarding the second case—only a brief report and a photograph from the Instagram profile *Habitar a Quarentena*.[2] The floor plan shown was drawn based on this information.

05 Lausanne building, Franz Heep, 1953. © both left: Giovanna Renzetti Archive, 2024; both right: Marta Peixoto Archive 2020.



06 Floor plan of an original apartment in the Lausanne building (1953) with three bedrooms. A door separates the social space from the kitchen and service areas. © Marta Peixoto Archive, 2020

07 Floor plan of first case after renovation in 2008 for a couple without children. © Silvio Oksman Archive, 2019.

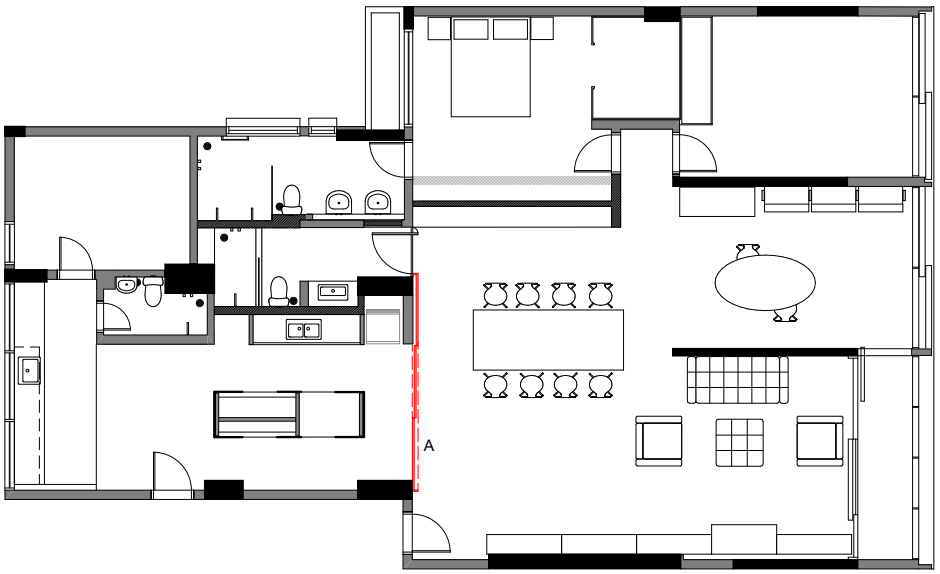
Both apartments are on the typical floors. Each had a large living room visually connected to the street through a balcony. The bedroom wing had three bedrooms and two bathrooms. The kitchen was enclosed, adjacent to the laundry, maid's bedroom, and bathroom. There were two entrances: one for residents and guests, leading to the living room, and another for domestic servants and household services, leading to the kitchen [FIGURE 06].

In the first case, the couple had no children or plans to expand their family. They renovated their apartment in 2008 by converting one bedroom into the wife's office, connected to the living room, and turning the largest bedroom into a master bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. They removed the wall between the kitchen and living room, and the former laundry became a balcony, giving access to a service bathroom and an enclosed laundry, replacing the maid's room [FIGURE 07].

However, an unexpected pregnancy changed their plans and programmatic profile. Three years and a second child later, they installed a sliding door between the kitchen and living room, as the kitchen became heavily used by a maid. They also reconfigured one room for their two daughters to share, accommodating both sleeping and study spaces [FIGURE 08, FIGURE 09].

This new arrangement was necessary in response to natural changes in life, and it went well until 2019. Nevertheless, since the pandemic, the father began to work from home, as the mother did, just as their daughters began to take classes remotely. This time, the solution was an improvisation. The mother remained in her original office but had to share the workspace with the girls. The father held meetings and taught on the balcony—weather permitting—and the eldest daughter used the kitchen to attend her classes, where the door could be closed for more silence.

There was one purposeful difference in the second example compared to the first. The residents already had two children, and the renovation was designed—by the owners' architects—for this existing family of four. They kept the original number of three bedrooms. As a result,



08 Floor plan. © Silvio Oksman Archive, 2019.

09 Photo showing the sliding door added in 2011. © Marta Peixoto Archive, 2020.

the social area is significantly smaller in this case. The leading transformation was to connect the laundry room, kitchen, living room, and balcony [FIGURE 10]. These spaces became contiguous, a generous social area from the front to the back of the building. Reporting to *Habitar a quarentena*, the father said how they adapted to the pandemic.

Made easier by the fact that the couple were also partners in their professional lives, the dining room became a shared office for the couple. Since each of the children already had a bedroom, it was enough to provide them with the appropriate equipment to begin attending school—and almost everything else—from their rooms.

10 Floor plan of second case: Another renovated apartment at Lausanne building. © Marta Peixoto Archive, 2024.

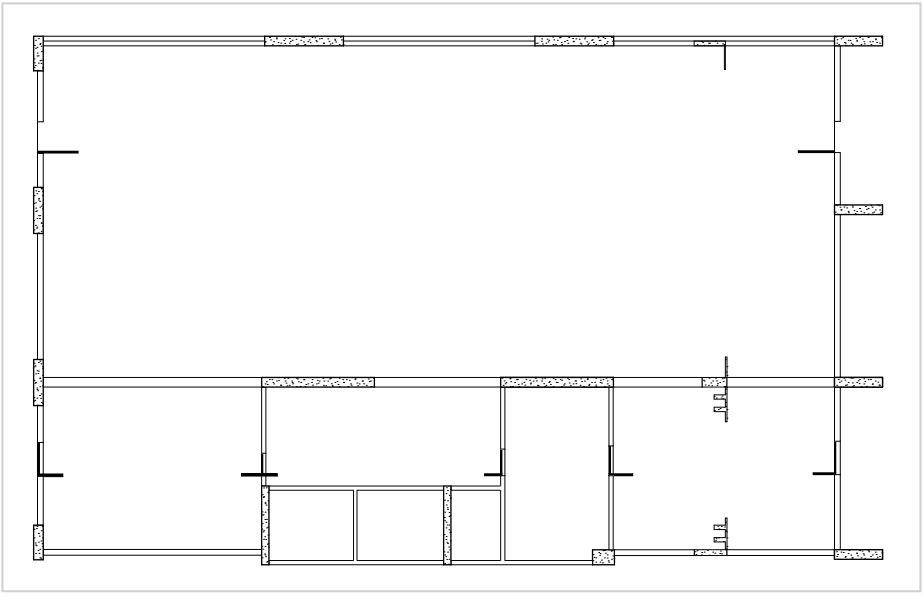
11 Second case: Living room during pandemic. © @habitaraquarentena, 2022.

Meals were now served at the kitchen counter, and the family created a small exercise nook in the living room [FIGURE 11]. The balcony became even more critical, the only space to connect to the exterior. As in the previous case, the service door gained value as an entry point for shopping and for the few exits to the outside, where shoes and coats were stored.

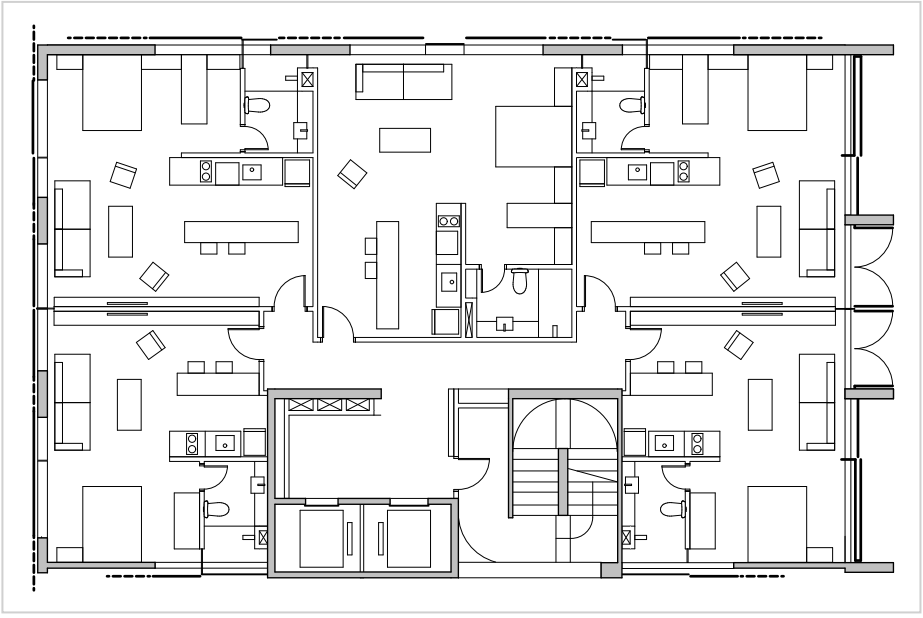
A CASE APART – EXPANDING THE SCOPE

This third case is different and an adaptive reuse of an office building. Located in the Pinheiros neighborhood, another upscale area of the city known for its numerous bars, restaurants, and various businesses, it stands out for its accessibility. The resident, an architect, decided to move into a smaller apartment following a divorce. His firm had recently converted a forty-year-old office building into small residential units. While the original 1980s construction was not architecturally significant, it was part of a notable group of buildings descending from mid-20th-century high-quality designs. These structures, with independent concrete frameworks, are prime candidates for profitable conversions due to the growing demand for micro-apartments [FIGURE 12, FIGURE 13].

These small units easily fit into the compact dimensions of commercial buildings. Contrary to expectations, however, the cost per square meter is high. These projects



12 Third case: Original structural drawing of the typical floor. © Marta Peixoto Archive, 2024.



13 Third case: Adaptive reuse of a commercial building (1980) for residential micro-apartments (2017). © Angelo Bucci Archive, 2019.

14 Third case: Original and renovated façade. © left: Angelo Bucci Archive, 2019; right: Pedro Mascaro Archive, 2019.

capitalize on the trend toward minimalism and low consumption, drawing from international references in cities like Tokyo and New York. They are marketed as the ideal living solution for metropolitan residents seeking proximity to work and cultural attractions.

In this case, the façades of the building were modified to adapt to the new requirements resulting from the change in program and character [FIGURE 14]. The 40 square meters studios were small and functional, ideal for a single person. Furthermore, the building was close to the architect's office. As he spent most of the day outside, the place functioned more like a hotel suite than a residence. During the pandemic, the situation changed drastically, and he was forced to work at home without much space, without daily walks to work or meals with colleagues, restricted to a single, multifunctional space. According to him, it was as if he had begun to live in the office, as an ironic case of 'reconversion.'

MODERN INTERIORS IN TIMES OF CRISES

After the renovation, the Lausanne building's apartments became more aligned with the principles of modern architecture than in their initial configurations. They transformed into more fluid, integrated forms with fewer partitions, the disappearance of decorative elements, and the replacement or removal of many coverings. Their interiors were stripped down, with fewer objects and furniture, liberating the glass façades and enhancing the visual connection with the outside. Similarly, the third example—a standard office building converted into a collection of 'urban cabanons'—saw its units rely on the city as a complement to their function, much like their French iconic predecessors, which required neighboring buildings and landscapes to facilitate proper living.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed a confinement that profoundly changed domestic life. In these three situations experienced by Brazilian upper-middle-class architects, the forced coexistence of living and working in integrated spaces caused discomfort. The need for privacy, isolation, and individual spaces became paramount, highlighting the limitations of open-plan layouts and multifunctional spaces. The ample square footage of the two larger apartments made things more manageable inside. On the other hand, these families began to live in spaces that abruptly served many functions besides residential. In the third case, the viability of living in a small place hinged on a connection with the city, which was practically impossible at that time.

The forced adaptations in these spaces seem to suggest that modern design, especially open-plan layouts, faced difficulties during this crisis. The pre-modern scheme—in which each function occupied a distinct and preferably enclosed room—might have offered greater potential for adaptation to that situation. 'Demodernization' was particularly evident in the Lausanne apartments. Although their interiors once valued open, connected spaces, the pandemic led to a reconsideration of these configurations. The three original bedrooms, along with the living room separated from the kitchen and laundry area, would have provided the much-needed privacy to balance work and leisure. The small apartment, once seen as a smart solution for urban living, turned into confinement. The streamlined design that once made it a practical and efficient place became an obstacle in the face of the imposed multifunctionality, which created the need for more space—even for a single person.

MODERN INTERIORS AND PRESERVATION

One of the main issues when discussing adaptation, renovation, and reuse of modernist interiors is the preservation of architectural heritage. While these interventions address specific conditions and offer alternatives, they also raise concerns about what is being lost or altered in the process. Modernist interiors, especially those from mid-century buildings, are integral to the architectural legacy of the structure as a whole, but they are often overlooked in preservation policies, which tend to focus more on the external appearance.

A particular challenge arises when renovations take place inside private apartments, hidden from public view

and, importantly, from heritage agencies. In the first two cases, the renovations might indeed preserve and even enhance the apartment's functionality while respecting its architectural value, but this happens without any oversight from preservation bodies. On one hand, this independence allows for quicker, cost-effective interventions that do not rely on the complex bureaucracy of public funding. In many cases, the sum of these individual renovations could help conserve the overall building without the need for large-scale public investments.

However, this process also carries risks. Without the involvement of heritage agencies, decisions about what to preserve or alter fall entirely on the shoulders of private owners and the professionals they hire. The quality and sensitivity of these renovations can vary significantly, depending on the expertise shown by the designers. While some residents may opt for careful, historically informed renovations, others might prioritize personal preferences or trends, leading to modifications that compromise the original design ethos. For better or worse, the 'hidden' nature of these renovations means that a key aspect of architectural heritage—interior design—is left unprotected, even though it forms an essential part of the building's identity.

In Brazil, there is no consensus among architects and those involved in architectural heritage preservation on how to approach the renovation of over fifty-year-old modern apartments, particularly regarding their interiors. Some believe it should be prohibited to alter original plans, components, and materials or make any minimal modifications to these apartments. This limitation can be dangerous, even if backed by good intentions to preserve the author's original idea. Today, very few people would buy an apartment over fifty years old, even if it was spacious, bright, adaptable, and located in a prime area since it would not have a single en-suite bathroom, and the resident would be forced to keep a maid's room, as well as being prohibited from upgrades such as air conditioning. Not recognizing the adaptations necessary for contemporary life makes the satisfactory use of these apartments unfeasible.

CONCLUSION

In Brazil, modern architecture took more than five decades to be widely accepted in residential programs and by the average client. Shortly after gaining greater acceptance at the beginning of the 21st century, a change in the way of living imposed by the pandemic made previously content residents yearn for masonry walls—or something with a similar role in visual and acoustic insulation—and the closed doors of pre-modern residences. The pandemic exposed the limits of some modernist beliefs. Despite these challenges, modern domestic interior spaces possess inherent qualities, including an open and bright atmosphere, innovative spatial solutions characterized by forms that convey a sense of order, and abundant connections to the outdoors. Furthermore, their transformative capacity, made possible by reinforced concrete structures, remains essential.

Though the examples presented here are a small sample, they represent trends that were widespread in Brazil in the first decades of the 21st century, prevalent both in the real estate market and in architectural commissions. The first trend is the renovation or adaptive reuse of modernist buildings. These projects cater to a bourgeois and up-to-date clientele. The most common example is the relatively large apartment in upscale or traditional neighborhoods, structured in reinforced concrete. Significant demolition of walls creates larger rooms, integrating social and service areas and connecting as many spaces as possible. The second trend is the micro-apartment in central metropolitan areas, small not as a cost-saving measure but as an alternative for residents who want to enjoy the conveniences of the city. These residents pay more per square meter but save time walking to work, restaurants, or theaters. Although all three cases date from the last twenty years, they incorporate ideas from the early 20th century, aligning contemporary design with the principles of modern architecture. In all the examples presented, there is adaptation, renovation, and reuse of existing buildings.

Even though the WHO continues to describe COVID-19 as a pandemic, the emergency phase has ended, and we still do not have a clear picture of its consequences regarding home interiors. However, in Brazil, where there is a significant collection of high-quality modern buildings, it is crucial that these experiences are not forgotten. Renovating a single apartment can trigger a positive ripple effect. The cumulative impact of multiple renovations within the same building can create an 'immunity' against the ravages of time and the harsh realities of real estate speculation. To do so, it will be necessary to provide owners, architects, authorities and construction companies with more knowledge about the particular values and design elements to plan and document interventions to better ensure a longterm integrity of the buildings as a whole. Each owner's investment in enhancing their property not only attracts like-minded neighbors but also fosters a shared goal of increasing asset value. This process allows for entire buildings to undergo renovation without significant collective investment or fanfare. This approach reflects not only a response to the past, considering architectural heritage and our culture, but also a viable and sustainable solution to the multifaceted problems of contemporary Brazilian cities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since 2019, the author of this article has held a CNPq (Brazilian Council for Scientific and Technological Development) productivity grant as a researcher. A thank you also goes to Angelo Bucci, Camila Thiesen, and Silvio Oksman, who gave me access to their files and shared these stories with me.

REFERENCES

BENTON, T. (2006). *The Modernist Home*. V&A Publications, London.

COMAS, C. E, & Adrià M. (2003). *La casa latinoamericana moderna* [*The modern Latin American home*]. GG/Mexico, Mexico.

COMAS, C. E., & Peixoto M. (2019). *Sonhos americanos. Casa Canoas, Oscar Niemeyer, Rio de Janeiro/Casa Cueva, Juan O'Gorman, Ciudad de México* [*American dreams: Casa Canoas, Oscar Niemeyer, Rio de Janeiro/Casa Cueva, Juan O'Gorman, Mexico City*]. Vitruvius.https://vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/arquitextos/20.231/7506

HAQ [@habitaraquarentena]. (2021, September 18). *Como todos, tivemos nosso cotiano abruptamente transformado, o que nos fez ver, experimentar e refletir sobre vários aspectos. Moramos num* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://instagram.com/habitaraquarentena?igshid=MTJtd3h6NjRlbjJzaQ==

LORES, R. J. (2017). *São Paulo nas alturas. A revolução modernista da arquitetura e do mercado imobiliário nos anos 1950 e 1960 [São Paulo in the heights: The modernist revolution in architecture and the real estate market in the 1950s and 1960s*].Três Estrelas, São Paulo.

PEIXOTO, M. (2019). Ahora lo moderno és vintage [*Now the modern is vintage*]. *Summa+*, *170*, 102-107.

PEIXOTO, M. (2021, March 27). Changing to the past [Video file]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ep3rYmMa_eE

SANVITTO, M. L. (2014). Social housing in the 60s in São Paulo. *Docomomo Journal, 51*, 54–59.

SERAPIÃO, F. (2014). Moderno nas Alturas [*Modern in the heights*]. *Monolito #19. Higienópolis*, 14-26.

SOMEKH, N. (1997). *A cidade vertical e o urbanismo modernizador* [*The vertical city and modernizing urbanism*]. Studio Nobel/Edusp Fapesp, São Paulo.

ZEIN, R. V. (2005). *A Arquitetura da Escola Paulista Brutalista: 1953–1973* [*The architecture of the Paulista Brutalist School: 1953–1973*]. Doctoral dissertation, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul]. Lume UFRGS. https://lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/5452

Marta Silveira Peixoto *is architect, secretary of the Interior Design Committee of Docomomo International, Coordinator of Docomomo Brazil (2024-2025). Full professor at the Department of Architecture and PROPAR (Doctorate Program of Architecture), UFRGS, the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, where she teaches Design and History of Architecture. Author of books, chapters, and articles on architecture, her research field is the Modern Interior and Modern Heritage.*

ENDNOTES

1 These conclusions are related to years of research on the subject. The photos are part of personal collections and could not appear here. However, some of them can be seen in Marta Peixoto's presentation *Changing to the past* (Peixoto, 2021).

2 @habitaraquarentena (which can be translated as *Living in quarantine*) is an Instagram profile launched by the Brazilian architect Camila Thiesen that brings together photos and reports about the relationship between residents and their homes during the pandemic.