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Community-led Housing as an Alternative to the Advance of Militias in Rio de Janeiro

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of militias' actions in the urban real estate scenario of Rio de Janeiro, highlighting the complex interaction between these groups and the housing market, particularly in popular neighborhoods and projects under the Minha Casa Minha Vida program. Based on the hypothesis that militia domination over space occurs more easily in demobilized territories, alternative housing practices are investigated, characterized by the strengthening of collective land management forms: housing cooperatives, self-governance, and the Community Land Trust. The study's main objective is to present proposals and draw parallels between these organizational forms and the phenomenon of militias, identifying their potential and limitations in confronting armed territorial control.

Index Terms: militias • urban real estate exploitation • community-led housing • Community Land Trust • housing self-governance

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Community-led Housing as an Alternative to the Advance of Militias in Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of militias' actions in the urban real estate scenario of Rio de Janeiro, highlighting the complex interaction between these groups and the housing market, particularly in popular neighborhoods and projects under the Minha Casa Minha Vida program. Based on the hypothesis that militia domination over space occurs more easily in demobilized territories, alternative housing practices are investigated, characterized by the strengthening of collective land management forms: housing cooperatives, self-governance, and the Community Land Trust. The study's main objective is to present proposals and draw parallels between these organizational forms and the phenomenon of militias, identifying their potential and limitations in confronting armed territorial control.

Keywords: *militias, urban real estate exploitation, community-led housing, Community Land Trust, housing self-governance*

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1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, Rio de Janeiro has witnessed the expansion and increasing complexity of armed groups known as militias. This phenomenon gained significant public attention in 2007 and 2008, when, respectively, the kidnapping and torture of journalists in the Batan favela, in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone, came to light, and the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (CPI) on militias was established in the Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro (Alerj). From that moment on, the group's modus operandi was more clearly defined: territorial domination sustained by firearms; coercion of residents and shopkeepers through the collection of fees and compulsory services; social legitimacy associated with order and protection; participation of state agents within their administrative structure; and the occupation of political offices and legislatures (Cano and Iott, 2008). Nevertheless, militias are highly mutable groups, operating in diverse ways, across different contexts, and through broad and complex profit-driven schemes. This makes it necessary to examine their new activities and reconfigurations - among which we highlight, in this article, their production and exploitation of the urban real estate market.

The process of militia expansion connected to the growth of the urban real estate frontier in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro - through fraudulent land titling, the establishment of legal and illegal subdivisions, and other operations replicated by these armed groups - began to be uncovered in the late 2000s through the work of Silva, Fernandes and Braga (2008). However, what initially appeared as a dispersed activity among others has since become a highly profitable enterprise, as demonstrated by more recent studies (Geni and Observatório das Metrópoles, 2021; Petti, 2021; Observatório das Metrópoles, 2022).

Despite the relevance and contributions of these studies in evidencing the territorial dimension and the exploitation of the urban real estate market, most reflections on "alternatives" and "confrontation" remain restricted to the sphere of public security and to state-led mechanisms of control, oversight, and regulation of services - approaches of undeniable importance, though insufficient to fully understand the question (Barbosa Filho, 2025). Going further, this article argues for the need to analyze urban practices and policies that can resist the militia phenomenon, with particular attention to the potential of community-led models of land and housing management.

This work seeks to explore the hypothesis that promoting property and housing models aimed at strengthening collective land management may constitute a way to counter and hinder the militias' advance into the real estate market within low-income territories. Communities that are demobilized, lacking consolidated support networks and effective resident participation in governance, become more vulnerable to militia action and control, which strategically exploit this highly profitable gap.

Beyond individual forms of property and housing, models of land and housing management rooted in collective logics are increasingly gaining ground in public debate. These practices aim to deepen collective governance and community control over territory, challenging the conception of land as a mere commodity (Davis, 2020). In Brazil, particular importance is attached to instruments such as self-management, housing cooperatives, and the Community Land Trust (CLT). This article reflects on how these mechanisms for strengthening community land management intersect with the militia phenomenon, discussing their possibilities, contributions, limitations, and challenges.

The exploratory research presented here points toward an aspect still scarcely examined within academic studies on militias. Even so, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the proposed argument. The most notable among them is the lack of many robust empirical data to substantiate and reinforce the hypothesis. At present, housing cooperative experiences in Rio de Janeiro remain limited, and no operational CLTs exist - only projects under development. Despite these constraints, the analytical exercise is relevant insofar as it suggests new approaches to the problem.

The text is organized into three sections, in addition to this introduction and the concluding remarks. The first reconstructs a historical interpretation of the formation of militia groups up to the present, emphasizing their new modes of operation. It includes a subsection analyzing the practices and performance of these paramilitary organizations in the production of the city, particularly in the construction and control of housing in lowincome areas. The second section situates the debate on community land management models and their potential in Brazil, with emphasis on housing cooperatives and CLTs. The third section explores the potential of alternative management and housing models given the militia issue, as well as some of the challenges they face. In the concluding remarks, we present an overview of the arguments and reflect on possible research developments.

To meet the objectives of this study, two methodologies were employed: first, a bibliographical review, aimed at reconstructing the militias and their evolution in the real estate market, as well as defining the concept of community land management and the housing models that seek to promote it; and second, complementarily, a tracking and monitoring of media coverage on the real estate market, on the control of condominiums within the Minha Casa Minha Vida (MCMV) program, and on the micro-regulations enforced in these developments.

The purpose of this work is not to propose a definitive "solution" to the problem of militia domination over territory, but rather to explore and reflect on new paths and possibilities. The expectation is that investigating the relationship between community land management and forms of armed territorial control can contribute both to exposing militia business practices and to advancing new insights that move toward the construction of the right to the city.

2 The evolution of militias in Rio de Janeiro

It is commonly argued that the emergence of militias is connected to death squads and killer groups that appeared in the 1960s, particularly in the Baixada Fluminense (Alves, 2003; Manso, 2020). In this sense, militias are understood to have originated from the convergence of practices and experiences throughout the second half of the 20th century, among which we can highlight: hitmen groups, police corruption, military repression, involvement with the jogo do bicho, clientelism, direct or indirect participation in politics, and relations with branches of government (Barbosa Filho, 2023). In this regard, the Baixada Fluminense, on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro's metropolitan region, brought together all of these elements.

Precarious urban infrastructure, the absence of regulation, the lack of oversight of security agents, and the limited monitoring of their actions enabled alternative forms of managing urban problems and conflicts to emerge - ones that transformed violence into both a guarantor of order and a lucrative market for the buying and selling of security.

The perception of the region as a "no-man's land," where "the law of the trigger [was] as natural as the law of gravity" (Alves, 2003, p. 41), created a concrete and threatening problem for business owners and residents, namely thefts, robberies, and other forms of "deviant behaviors." In response to this local demand, killer groups began to organize themselves against robberies in the region, often supported by police officers who were backed by the military dictatorship's repressive organs and who became part of their "administrative body": "a militia based on the private use of the judicial apparatus was maintained by the state's public resources" (Alves, 2002, p. 62).

Local acceptance grew out of the belief that the groups were "ordering" the territories through corrective acts— targeting thieves, neighborhood troublemakers, "vagabonds," and all other "deviants", but never against workers and "decent people". Nevertheless, numerous massacres were carried out during this period, several clandestine graves were uncovered, and violence came to be interpreted as a constitutive feature of the Baixada Fluminense, functioning as both a structural and structuring element (Rodrigues, 2017).

At first, only a small number of state officials joined these groups, a situation that changed over the decades. Unlike the current modus operandi of militias, which exercise control over a defined territory, these early groups operated throughout the Baixada Fluminense without fixed boundaries or rival group demarcations. Their activities also included supporting electoral candidates - through executions and/or intimidation - seeking office in both the legislative and executive branches, as well as providing security services for bicheiros and their gambling stalls. It is important to note that these groups' actions were fundamentally grounded in the logic of fear and explicit violence, with minimal mediation. They employed death as the ultimate instrument for resolving conflicts and were "closer to the sertanejo gunmen than to the security dealers found in the city today" (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007, p. 91). In that period, their capillarity was still limited, their practices diffuse, their markets were incipient and fragmented, and their political insertion was indirect.

From the 1980s onwards, with the multiple demands of new urban actors, the weakening of the business-military dictatorship, Leonel Brizola's first-term proposal to confront homicides in favelas and peripheral areas, as well as growing media exposure of killings, massacres, and torture, killer groups began a process of autonomization from the police apparatus. In other words, civil and military police officers increasingly acted as brokers of services for these groups, remaining involved, but less directly, while a competitive security market began to emerge, with several new groups in operation.

In this process, Alves (2002; 2003) highlights a movement of "peripheralization" of death squads - that is, their expansion and entrenchment into other neighborhoods across the municipalities of the Baixada Fluminense. From that point on, they acted as organizations tied to specific territories rather than as "mobile" groups roaming the region. The spatial division of domains and its consequences (electoral fiefdoms, security provision, ties with contraventions, etc.) marked the first substantive changes in groups that had previously acted diffusely. The groups now bound themselves to a given locality and positioned themselves as defenders of residents' interests against thieves and bandits, exploiting narratives of morality, proper conduct, and "good customs."

Entry into institutional politics soon became a path envisioned by many (former) killers, given the advantages of parliamentary immunity from prosecution and the multiple benefits associated with public resources, which could be mobilized to expand their spheres of influence and increase financial gains.

In the Baixada Fluminense, in the early 1990s, members of death squads - under the violence-clientelism nexus - were elected to local legislatures and executive offices (mayors and councilors). Meanwhile, in the Rio das Pedras favela, in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone, an "ideal type" of militia emerged, much more concerned with legitimacy and local acceptance. In other words, the classic forms of intimidation and physical coercion gave way to a softer, less aggressive, and more publicized approach - though coercion did not cease to exist. In Rio das Pedras, militiamen emphasized the absence of drug trafficking (in contrast with other favelas), highlighted their "philanthropic" work with children (mainly through sports and the distribution of toys), and engaged with residents in discussions about local problems and needs. This process sought to build trust among the population and position militiamen in public institutions as "spokespersons of the community." At the same time, the groups' revenues increased significantly, driven by an increasingly diversified portfolio of services, including the sale

of LPG gas cylinders, charging of security fees from local businesses, fraudulent land sales, the formation of alternative transport services oligopolies, and the sale of building materials, among others.

The issue of public security and drug factions dominated political discourse and the front pages of newspapers and magazines on a daily basis, saturated with sensationalism and histrionics, in the quest for a savior figure versus a villain (typically "public enemy number one" designated by the authorities). On the one hand, the "battle" against retail drug trafficking built social legitimacy for militias in the eyes of local residents, who perceived themselves as free from the "degradation" of illicit substances, police operations, and clashes among rival factions. On the other hand, militia representatives increasingly inserted themselves into state apparatus, providing support to these groups, even if from a distance or indirectly (Barbosa Filho, 2021). During this period, the press began adopting the term "militia" instead of "armed groups" or other labels, introducing a new nomenclature for organizations that were being structured in certain areas of the state and presenting them as a "real alternative" to violence and organized crime.

According to Alves (2008), for nearly two decades these groups developed in the shadows, without intervention from public security forces, which allowed them to expand economically, politically, militarily, territorially, and hegemonically, establishing sophisticated partnerships with other militia groups and with spheres of public power. This raised another issue for the author: the entanglement and the indistinguishable aspect between the state and organized crime — or, more specifically, "the extent to which the state itself is involved in crime or even promotes and organizes crime" (ibid., p. 37).

In fact, militias only gained visibility as a public problem in 2007, following the torture of three journalists in the Batan favela, in the Realengo district of Rio de Janeiro's West Zone. This led to the creation of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on Militias in 2008, which produced a detailed description of these groups and their dynamics. Since then, substantial efforts have been made to unveil their modes of operation, their configurations, and their reconfigurations, with particular emphasis on the studies of Hirata et al. (2022), Santos Junior et al. (2022), and Carvalho, Rocha, and Da Motta (2023), in addition to press reports. Even so, in order to conceptualize these groups today, we may turn to the "established" definition of Cano and Iott (2008), which encompasses a set of practices that have persisted over time:

1) The control of a territory and its inhabitants by an irregular armed group;

2) The coercive nature, to some degree, of this control over the territory's inhabitants;

3) The pursuit of individual profit as the primary motivation of the members of these groups;

4) A discourse of legitimacy centered on protecting inhabitants and establishing an order which, like any order, guarantees certain rights and excludes others, while also generating rules and expectations to standardize conduct;

5) The active and recognized participation of state agents as members of these groups. (ibid., p. 59)

Notwithstanding this definition, it is important to stress that militias are highly mutable groups, operating in different ways, across diverse contexts, and with a wide range of service portfolios. This presents both a significant research agenda for the coming years and the challenge of outlining their new activities and reconfigurations, such as: (1) expansion into new areas of the metropolitan region and the state's interior; (2) alliances with drug trafficking, forming what has been referred to as narco-militias; (3) production and exploitation of the real estate and urban services markets; and (4) co-optation of residents' associations.

In line with the purpose of this text, we now turn to explore the production and exploitation of the real estate market, drawing on media reports and other references that contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon.

3 Militia exploitation of the urban real estate market

The unveiling of militia expansion in relation to the growth of the urban real estate frontier in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area - through fraudulent land titling, the establishment of legal and illegal subdivisions, and other operations replicated by these armed groups - began in the late 2000s with the work of Silva, Fernandes, and Braga (2008). Their research highlighted that new processes of criminal territorialization, carried out by these "real estate entrepreneurs," were reshaping the landscape of favelas and peripheral areas, while the violent appropriation of land rent by criminal agents created new opportunities to leverage their activities. However, what was merely one activity among others eventually became a major source of profit.

The report The expansion of militias in Rio de Janeiro: state force, real estate market, and armed groups (2021), co-produced by the Observatório das Metrópoles (Ippur/UFRJ) and the Grupo de Estudos dos Novos Ilegalismos (Geni/UFF), demonstrated that, transitioning between the legal and the illegal, the formal and the informal, and the licit and the illicit, militias obtain a dual advantage - both political and economic. By cross-referencing data from the Map of Armed Groups, produced by Geni and Datalab Fogo Cruzado (Hirata, Couto, 2022), with data from police operations, the report found that between 2007 and 2020, areas dominated by militias witnessed fewer police operations when contrasted with territories under the control of retail drug factions. This constitutes the political advantage: militia-controlled territories are less subject to state repression. Similarly, an investigation conducted over three years by Igor Mello and Lola Ferreira, published by UOL in 2020 under the title The invisible hands of the militia,1 concluded that only 88 police-related shootouts occurred in militia-controlled areas (2.97% of the total), whereas 2,333 shootouts occurred in areas controlled by retail drug factions (78.8% of the total). Unsurprisingly, the perception of "tranquility," tied to the lower number of shootouts, constitutes one of the pillars of "militia morale" and its legitimacy (Araújo Silva, 2017; Hirata et al., 2022).

With regard to economic advantages, the report's authors analyzed the Map of Armed Groups in conjunction with data from the Rio de Janeiro Urban Planning Department (SMU) on licensing and building regularization. They concluded that between 2009 and 2019, areas under militia domination - primarily in the West Zone - displayed the highest rates of licensed and regularized housing units. In other words, by navigating between legality and illegality, militias assemble a strong and complex structure designed to capture financial gains from urban growth.

Militias acquire land - generally well below market value - displace residents from favelas and peripheral neighborhoods, and expand the urban real estate frontier into environmentally protected areas or low-density zones, often with the acquiescence of oversight agencies. They then build apartment blocks, semi-detached houses, small and medium-sized condominiums, and flats. Depending on location and architectural style, these developments may appear as low-income housing or as middle-class projects, but they are typically of poor quality

and frequently lack mandatory legal documents, such as the General Property Registry (RGI). This process also contributes to the marked trend of verticalization in low-income areas.

This form of activity can be classified as "own housing production", meaning the direct construction of housing units — always operating within the porous boundaries of legality and illegality. Media attention intensified after two buildings collapsed in the Muzema neighborhood, in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone, killing more than twenty people. Investigations indicated that the local militia was responsible for the construction (BBC News Brasil, 2019). Following the collapse, other cases came to light and government measures were taken, including the demolition of two militia-built condominiums in Pedra Branca State Park, in Senador Camará (Araújo, G., 2021), as well as the demolition of a militia-constructed building in Rio das Pedras - valued at 2 million Brazilian reais and located on public land (Enfoco, 2021).

Another form of militia involvement in the urban real estate market is the "control of public housing production." In this modality, militias dominate state-built housing projects, particularly those developed under the Minha Casa Minha Vida (MCMV) program or the Casa Verde e

Amarela program, implemented under the federal government of Jair Bolsonaro. A survey by the Observatório das Metrópoles (2022) of online press coverage revealed allegations of territorial control by armed groups in 67 of the 106 MCMV Tier 1 developments - designed for the lowest-income population - 45 of which involved militias and 22 drug trafficking factions, between 2015 and 2022. When grouped by address (since many condominiums are adjacent but registered under different names due to contractual arrangements), 37 MCMV projects were identified in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro. Of these, 19 (52%) had allegations linked to militias, 6 (16%) to drug factions, and only 12 had no reported allegations.

MCMV housing developments under militia control follow the logic of territorial domination. In other words, a project located in a neighborhood already dominated by an armed group tends to also fall under its control, with management and services subordinated to it. Territorial disputes likewise affect condominium control: when armed control of a given area shifts - whether between militia groups or drug factions - the management dynamics of housing projects shift accordingly. Figure 1 illustrates that most MCMV Tier 1 housing units were constructed in militia-dominated territories, which explains their control over the majority of these projects.

The complaints reveal the extent of the control exercised by militia groups in these housing estates. Management and micro-regulations in the housing units are carried out using various strategies, such as the sale of classic militia services (private security, gas, illegal cable TV and internet services, etc.), the role established between the administration of the residences (building managers) and the militias - in some cases, the militia members themselves are the building managers — and, in addition, the use of communal spaces for private benefit, as leisure areas and internal circulation streets become potential spaces for building apartments and stores.

From media reports, which today play a central role in disseminating perceptions, facts, and analyses about urban violence, illegal activities, and public safety, as well as guiding social actors, it is clear that, in addition to internal control of the condominiums (via fees and services), the militiamen regulate who can and cannot stay in the condominiums, given the fees charged. In other words, if service fees are not paid on time, the group expels residents and puts the property up for sale. However, not infrequently, the "justification" for evicting residents for non-payment is not used, and the classic form of intimidation is employed, forcibly emptying the residences through the explicit use of force (GazetaWeb, 2019). The militia groups also "mediate" purchases and sales, charging from 10% to 50% of the sale price of properties in their territories (Benmergui and Gonçalves, 2019, p. 382), exercising full control over all transactions and accounting for houses susceptible to appropriation and new residents to whom they can offer their "services."

It should also be said that the presence of militia groups in MCMV condominiums is not an isolated case, but rather a trend that has been consolidating in the group's range of activities, confirming the complexity of its articulation. In an effort to expand their influence and legalize their actions, reports on CNN Brasil indicate that the militia has even created a residents' association with the aim to seek assistance from the Federal Public Defender's Office (and, when necessary, other competent bodies) to ensure that community residents have access to MCMV housing (Resende, 2020). This effort and transit between the legal and the illegal are neither random nor structured to help residents; on the contrary, they show the sophistication, articulation, and insertion into spaces that are impenetrable to other criminal groups. Therefore, given this bureaucracy, we can see the need for a specialized technical body to manage and promote the entry of militia members into the legal spheres of the public sector.

In other words, the militias act in the interstices of the legal and the illegal, the licit and the illicit, the formal and the informal (Telles, 2010), with institutional support, appropriating government housing complexes or common residences in popular areas. This practice has been consolidating as a form of real estate management of its own, benefiting from the absence of effective territorial control by the original residents. This is the case with the militia's appropriation of MCMV condominiums, which takes place almost without resistance and sometimes ends up filling a "gap" in non-existent management.

Given this scenario, in which urban space involves its own form of territorial management at the borders of the legal and the illegal, it becomes necessary to search for new possibilities of resistance - practices capable of rivaling the appropriation of popular territories by the militia (Barbosa Filho, 2025). Based on the understanding that militia control is more easily imposed on demobilized territories, lacking mature community organization and pre-existing support networks, it is worth considering other forms of land management, characterized by a more prominent role for residents and the presence of technical assistance and partner organizations. The following sections focus on this theme.

Another important element of these experiences is a collective logic that is established (to a greater or lesser degree) and governs all stages of habitat production, including the planning, construction, management and use of the territory. Many make use of collective property models to formalize their land rights (Nahoum, 2011), as well as creating clear definitions of the limits of land use, established in rulings that are built and approved by the residents themselves. Governance of the territory is also usually carried out in a participatory manner, with residents and external partners are encouraged to take part in day-to-day community management.

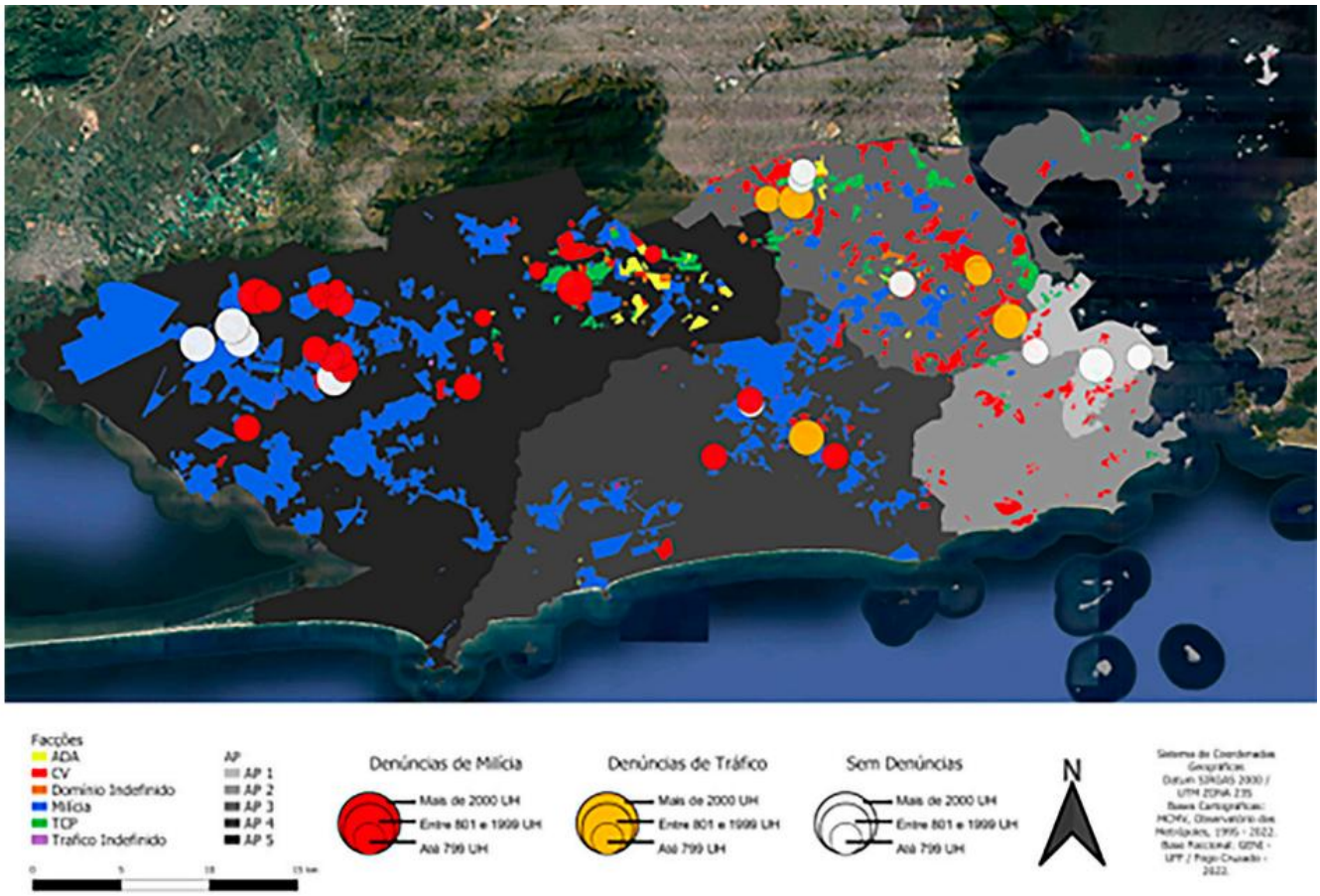

Figure 1. Distribution of MCMV housing developments with allegations of control by territory dominated by factional group — Rio de Janeiro, 2022

Source: Map of Armed Groups — Geni/UFF, Fogo Cruzado (Hirata and Couto, 2022); Reports of control over MCMV Housing complexes — press information gathered by Observatório das Metrópoles — 2015–2022.

4 Community land management and the social production of habitat

What we mean here by community land management refers to a series of housing practices conceived, executed, and managed collectively by grassroots groups. In general, these initiatives seek to break with a logic of housing production and management based on profit, which reinforces the exchange value of housing and its potential as a financial asset, to the detriment of its use value as a fundamental right.

Community-led housing experiences tend to operate outside the state-market duality. This does not mean that they are totally isolated from contact with these two spheres - in several cases we see active dialogue with public authorities and private agencies, especially to obtain funding - but rather that the leading role in the production and management of housing lies with the agents involved in its conception (Ortiz, 2012). When we look at the main actors working with these models, we find social movements, non-profit associations, cooperatives, and autonomous residents organized collectively.

By breaking with a speculative view of urban land, collective housing arrangements have the potential to present alternatives to the commodification and financialization of land. The central objective is not to extract profit from urban land, but to ensure that the territory serves an entire community and that eventual real estate appreciation is not appropriated individually. We see in these initiatives a concern with guaranteeing affordable housing for low-income families who are unable to access housing through formal market mechanisms.

Nevertheless, what is the actual presence of experiences in Brazil? Of community housing management in Brazil? In an analysis of the history of the social production of housing in Brazilian urban planning, Krause and Balbim (2014) identify isolated and localized experiences aimed at housing production through social agents such as residents and technical advisors, with little involvement in public housing policy:

> The scale of the effort and the retrospective of housing production and the city allow us to point out the importance of the social production of housing as a form that has historically been little recognized and incorporated by public policy, but which is extremely widespread in the sense of our real cities and in the desires of our social movements. (Ibid., p. 12)

Experiences of community-led housing have historically been practiced by grassroots groups and social movements in Brazil, albeit with little stimulus of housing policy. They offer new approaches to tackling the problem of housing, taking residents as policy agents and not just beneficiaries. In addition to housing provision - that breaks with the dichotomy between the market and public authorities - these models have been developing alternative forms of space organization and management.

In addition, deepening community control over the territory has the potential to make it more difficult for parallel power groups, such as militias, to force them to take it over. A higher degree of collective organization, the existence of structured support networks and links with partner organizations working on the land are elements that provide greater protection against external threats of co-optation. Mobilized

communities erect additional obstacles to attempts at territorial control by groups with their own interests.

For a better understanding of community land management practices, we will analyze two models in this article: Housing Cooperatives and CLTs.

5 Housing cooperatives

Housing cooperatives exist in different countries around the world and take on very different forms. Some experiences are focused only on the construction of new units, while others also focus on their future management; some operate with a high degree of independence, while others work in partnership with the public authorities or the private sector (in terms of financing or subsidies). In some cases, the property is owned by the cooperative, while in others the units are individualized and distributed among the members. Whatever format it adopts, we can say that the cooperative has at least two key points: the adoption of models of collective ownership and/or governance of the territory and housing production and management that is not guided by market dynamics (Baiges, Ferreri and Vidal, 2020).

The first experiences date back to the end of the 19th century, and today the practice of cooperative housing is widely consolidated around the world. In some countries, housing units built and managed by cooperatives represent a significant portion of the total housing stock. By acting outside the provision of housing via the formal market, or the dependence on the public sector for the construction of units (which is often limited or non-existent), cooperatives have often presented themselves as the only solution for guaranteeing the right to adequate housing for people with low purchasing power.

In Latin America, it is worth highlighting the experience of mutual aid housing cooperatives, which are widespread in Uruguay. Inspired by the Swedish cooperatives of the 1960s and the values of Latin American indigenous movements, this system has a number of fundamental principles, including: (1) self-management in housing construction and management; (2) collective ownership of the land and housing units in the name of the cooperative, in order to prevent gentrification and speculation; (3) mutual aid between cooperative members at all stages of the project; and (4) ongoing technical assistance from a multidisciplinary perspective (Arnold and Quintas, 2020).

Through the efforts of the Uruguayan Federation of Mutual Aid Housing Cooperatives (Fucvam), the mutual aid cooperative model is constantly spreading around the world. Today we find initiatives to replicate the model in Latin America, in countries such as Mexico, Bolivia and Chile, and even in more distant regions such as South Asia and parts of the African continent.

In Brazil, it is worth highlighting the experience of the National Union for Popular Housing (UNMP), leading the cooperative movement based on principles such as housing self-management. Based on mutirão practices and self-construction of housing units, the complexes built with the support of the popular movement carry elements such as the protagonism of residents, community management and a non-speculative approach to urban land (Lopes et al., 2019). Part of these initiatives were financed with funds from Caixa Econômica Federal, under the Minha Casa Minha Vida-Entidades program[2].

In Rio de Janeiro, there are few concrete examples of cooperative housing practices. In part, this can be explained by the low rate of funding for these initiatives and the choice to produce large-scale developments as a housing policy, as evidenced by the MCMV Program. However, it is worth mentioning a few, such as Cooperativa Shangri-lá (Lima, 2023) - the first in Rio de Janeiro - and Grupo Esperança (Bordenave, 2022), both located in Jacarepaguá, in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone. To encourage self-managed housing production, in 2021 the Self-Management Bill was proposed[3], which seeks to raise funds and regulate the practice, claiming its space and relevance in housing policy.

6 Community Land Trust

The Community Land Trust is a model of collective land management characterized by the separation of ownership of land (collective) and ownership of buildings (individual). The main objective is to remove the territory from the real estate market, guaranteeing continuous affordable housing and security of tenure for communities.

The origins of the CLT go back to the movement for civil rights and racial justice in the United States in the 1960s. At first, it was thought of as a mechanism for acquiring agricultural land for the subsistence and economic development of black communities marginalized by the politics of segregation. From the 1980s onward, the model reached North American cities, adapting to this new context and starting to respond to new challenges, especially the provision of affordable housing. It was at this time that the model was consolidated and spread rapidly (Davis, 2010).

Today, we find CLTs in different parts of the world, mostly in countries in the global north. In 2017, the CLT was recognized by the New Urban Agenda as a sustainable and affordable housing option and should be supported by states, which has contributed to its replication elsewhere. Recently, the model has been adopted in countries of the Global South, being used in the context of informal settlements undergoing a process of land regularization, from consolidated cases in Kenya and Puerto Rico and ongoing initiatives in Bolivia, Bangladesh and Brazil.

The wide dissemination of the CLT around the world was only possible thanks to its flexible nature, which allows it to be adapted to different contexts. However, at least five fundamental characteristics are observed in any situation: (1) spontaneous adherence by its members; (2) collectively owned land; (3) individually owned houses and buildings; (4) community management of the territory; and (5) housing affordability (Antão and Ribeiro, 2020).

Regarding the collective ownership of the land, some clarifications need to be made. In every CLT, the land is owned by a non-profit organization, composed and managed by the residents, whose aim is to administer the territory based on the guidelines expressed in the internal bylaws. This organization cannot sell the land or give it as collateral, which in turn is taken off the market, and only the buildings can be negotiated - which reduces the cost of housing (Guimarães, Diacon and Clarke, 2005).

Experiences with the CLT around the world have demonstrated the model's potential to guarantee security of tenure for residents, protecting them both from removal attempts perpetrated by the state and from processes of gentrification and real estate speculation, which threaten the permanence of communities in their spaces. Community control over the territory - combined with collective governance that can count on the support of former technicians, members of the public authorities, etc. - seeks to give residents a greater voice in defining the direction of their development. In this sense, the experience of Puerto Rico stands out, in which eight communities located in an upscale area of the country's capital, San Juan, underwent a process of land regularization and adopted the CLT as a model for managing their territory, an emblematic experience that demonstrated the model's potential for favelas4 (Algoed et al., 2018).

In Brazil, there is still no CLT in operation. The model has been receiving attention from researchers, public managers and members of social movements for its potential to contribute to the provision of

affordable housing and the maintenance of spaces under the effective control of residents. Recently, the CLT was included among the urban policy instruments in Rio de Janeiro's new Master Plan (PLC 44/2021), as well as having been approved in the Master Plan of São João de Meriti (a municipality in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro). There is currently a project underway in Rio de Janeiro5 that is trying to make the implementation of the model feasible, working with some interested communities and seeking to create institutional conditions more favorable for its adoption.

7 Community land management in the face of militia control

Before listing and exploring some of the characteristics of community land and housing management experiences that can hinder militia control over popular territories, it is necessary to point out some of the challenges that the militia imposes on these practices.

Firstly, housing initiatives based on community management - such as Housing Cooperatives and CLTs - depend on the active mobilization of residents in order to be successful. They are the protagonists in the direction of territorial governance and must have the freedom to choose definitions that reflect their wishes. The premise for effective community control over land is a high degree of participation by residents in decisions that affect the organization of space and relations between its inhabitants.

Thus, in territories where residents feel constrained to put forward their interests, or even coerced into defending other demands, community organizing may be at constant risk, affecting the proper functioning of territorial management. As we saw earlier, the militia uses a variety of strategies to co-opt agents involved in territorial organization, from spreading discourses that foster a certain legitimacy for the use of brute force and threats of physical harm. It is to be expected that there may be similar attempts at co-optation in collectively managed spaces based on co-operatives or CLTs, which are not immune to this risk.

Community land management experiences face additional difficulties in militia areas due to the constant risks posed to the full exercise of community organizing, one of the conditions for their functioning. The greater the degree of participation by residents, the more successful community management models are in responding to collective desires and promoting appropriate development. The perception that there are constraints restricting the free expression of residents' may lead to a lower degree of mobilization, bringing new challenges to these experiences.

Another challenge faced by community management concerns the forms of association adopted. In both CLTs and Housing Cooperatives, residents organize themselves by creating legal entities to represent their collective interests. These organizations are structured according to internal statutes approved by the residents and have their own councils and internal management bodies. In the case of CLTs (as well as some housing cooperatives), the organization created becomes the formal owner of the land, responsible for managing it and keeping housing affordable for low-income families.

The militia is well known for its familiarity with more complex organizational arrangements. Many residents' associations, for example, have already had their physical spaces seized and used to support criminal activities (Informe Agora, 2023). Others have been completely co-opted by militia groups and have started to act according to their wishes, interests, including charging for services such as issuing proof of residence and mediating the sale of houses (Araújo, V., 2021). Furthermore, as already mentioned, the militia has even created an association of residents to represent its interests before public bodies, demonstrating its malleability and ability to move between the legal and illegal boundaries.

The appropriation and co-optation of residents' associations by the militias has its reasons in the intermediation of interests in the territory that they have historically constituted, between the population and the government. To dominate the associations, therefore, is to neutralize a possible political rival and bring together an institution that promotes legitimacy.

Thus, community-led housing initiatives may face the challenge of curbing attempts by the militia to appropriate the legal entity, a practice that is already being carried out by these groups. The full functioning of this organization, with residents actually controlling the entity, is an essential factor for the proper functioning of these experiences, and the risk of co-optation brings new obstacles. However, these are not insurmountable and there are ways, in the very structure of the entities, to restrict the risks, as will be discussed below.

Having recognized some serious challenges of community-led initiatives in militia territories, we move on to the focus of the work, which is to reflect on and explore their potential in resisting militia territorial control. The very challenges pointed out suggest some paths and solutions found in the practices adopted by these arrangements.

The focus on strengthening community organizing is the great potential of self-managed housing models to hinder the appropriation of space by the militia. Unlike the MCMV housing policy, where residents are brought to a ready-made development, which they had no part in building, come from different places and have no ties to the new territory, which hinders solidarity, sociability and bonds of unity around improvements, as well as being subjected to management that does not invite them to participate, in community land management models the residents themselves are the agents involved in the production and maintenance of the local neighborhood. The fact that residents play a leading role in all phases of the project, from design and construction to future management, tends to create a much greater sense of collectivity and unity, an environment that encourages collective engagement.

This is the case of the Cooperativa Habitacional e Mista Shangri-lá, for example, located in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro and which today houses 29 families. In this experience, which dates back to the 1990s, the residents built their houses themselves, using a joint effort system in which each family group dedicated hours of work each week, obtaining funding from various organizations and even producing their own building materials (Litsek and Hernandez, 2023). As part of the self-construction process, there was such concern about the engagement of the future residents that the leaders created a Mobilization Committee, which took on the responsibility of fostering the integration of the cooperative members. In addition, the creation of collective spaces was a central point, with the aim of providing residents and neighbors with places to meet and exchange, both for leisure and for assemblies, and a central courtyard, a community center and a chapel were built in the place (Huguenin, 2013). These measures resulted in the formation of a strong sense of community, fostering support networks based on mutual aid and strengthening the group's internal cohesion.

The Shangri-Lá housing cooperative experience demonstrates a model of housing production and management that relies on community control over the land. From the outset, residents demanded that the houses could not be sold and, in the event of a change, the cooperative member would be reimbursed for the hours worked and the house would go to another family in line with the principles of cooperativism. Huguenin points out that the experience has gained legitimacy within the neighborhood, a greater degree of organization that has helped protect residents from external threats, such as militia groups operating in the area: "The group has achieved a certain autonomy in the

neighborhood, facing the parallel power of the militias, being the only one not to pay a monthly fee to this criminal faction" (ibid., p. 27). Over the years, the Shangri-Lá Cooperative has achieved a high degree of social control over the territory, which is evident from the organizational practices adopted, cohesion around common goals and the development of a sense of internal unity.

A community with such characteristics assumes responsibility for the governance of the territory, a governance based on the residents themselves, together with technical advice. Here, there is no gap in territorial management, no space to be filled by other agents. The militia therefore faces obstacles in taking on the role of property manager, charging fees to finance the operation. In addition, a broad network of solidarity between residents is quite visible in these initiatives, as a way of guaranteeing mutual support in cases of intimidation by militia groups.

A second aspect of collective housing initiatives that can help make it more difficult for the militia to dominate is the associative practices they adopt. As seen above, both Housing Cooperatives and CLTs use the creation of legal entities to make their operations viable and in militia territories, these entities will need to protect themselves against co-optation attempts. However, we can find in the very mechanisms adopted by these organizations ways to hinder the threats of external control.

In the CLT, the non-profit organization that owns the land can never sell it, but is restricted to managing it on behalf of the residents. The buildings can be sold, but it is possible to impose some of these restrictions on the sale in order to keep the cost of the housing affordable. One is to impose a resale formula, in order to set a ceiling for transactions; another is to establish a profile of potential buyers, so that the house is purchased by low-income families with ideals in line with those of the community. It is also possible to create a lottery system so that the houses are transferred to a randomly selected family, based on registration. In short, there are a series of restrictions that can be placed on real estate transactions, restrictions that are present in the organization's statutes - registered at a notary's office - and that may hinder the militia's attempts to act as mediators in real estate transactions.

In addition to rules on the management of housing units, guidelines can be stipulated to increase direct control of the organization by residents. Issues that can only be decided by a general meeting with a set quorum, for example, or even channels for residents to carry out projects and develop activities, avoiding as much as possible centralized management that could be co-opted by the militia. The possibilities for structuring such an entity are vast and can take into account a central concern to avoid co-optation by armed groups. In the case of Puerto Rico, for example, in addition to the CLT, an organization called the G-8 was established, made up of community leaders from the eight slums of Caño Martín Peña, which takes on the role of engaging residents and guaranteeing them the power to influence the direction of the CLT's management. In addition, the participation of women, young people and children is encouraged, with young people having the right to vote on certain issues (Algoed et al., 2018).

Finally, another factor that reveals the potential of community land management experiences in the face of militia domination is the participation of technical allies and organizations in land management itself. In any initiative of this nature, technical advice occupies a central place, not only in the construction of the units but also in the future administration and development of new projects. In CLTs, for example, there is a widespread international practice of reserving seats on the organization's management board for technical allies and local organizations, in order to ensure that these agents act continuously in the collective interest and that there is a greater diversity of voices represented. The "classic" management structure of CLTs is referred to as tripartite, in which the management board is made up of 1/3 residents, 1/3 neighbors and 1/3 representatives of the public interest (which includes technical advisors and, at times, public officials) (Davis, 2010). This model aims to guarantee proportional representation of different interests, avoiding co-optation by certain groups.

The presence of agents from outside the community on the management board of CLTs or cooperatives may be a factor that hinders co-optation by the militia. Threats or coercion fall much more heavily on people who actually live in controlled areas. Although not impossible, co-opting external agents who are historical partners of the community shall be at least more difficult and may require greater effort. Additional obstacles may exist if the agent in question is a representative of a larger organization with a high degree of social legitimacy or a person holding a prominent position whose representation is at the very least discouraged.

In this sense, a fundamental task for urban theory and practice is to understand and act in the articulation of the territory, contributing to the construction of local patterns of solidarity within a broader political framework, which implies keeping territorially based movements strongly nourished by processes of formation and reaffirmation of local solidarity, and at the same time keeping these movements integrated into broader projects of social transformation (Harvey, 2007).

In self-managed housing experiences, it is common to see the presence of social movements, civil society entities, university extension projects, public bodies, nongovernmental organizations, among other actors. There is therefore a multiplicity of agents working in the territory, bringing their practices and defending their interests. In addition, the possibility of networking with the territory's mediating institutions (schools, cultural groups, etc.) is a fundamental practice to support community management and the construction of patterns of local solidarity within a broader political sphere, which dialogues with what Harvey (2007) calls particularisms and universalisms, i.e. the relationship of solidarity and strong local articulations integrated into social transformation projects.

A scenario in which the territory is crossed by so many forces and processes brings new obstacles to absolute control by the militia, since it will not find a space "free" of any resistance to impose its will.

8 Concluding remarks

Armed territorial control by the militia is wideranging and involves a series of practices and strategies, from charging residents fees under the pretense of providing security, to billing for essential goods and services such as transport, gas, and internet, to building and selling housing units, among other economic activities, always aiming for profit maximization. For the purposes of this article, the emphasis is placed on the role of militias in urban real estate dynamics, identifying the ways in which these groups appropriate and manage built space, and presenting reflections that can help to illuminate this scenario.

The exploratory study presented here highlights underexplored avenues in the scholarly work on the militia phenomenon: what social practices can help curb the advance of militia territorial control over popular territories, particularly regarding their urban-real estate activities. The chosen object was models of community land management, housing practices that break with the traditional state-market dichotomy and emphasize the strengthening of collective action. These experiences carry the potential to protect territories from attempts at forced co-optation, insofar as they create conditions for management by and for residents and rely on a broad and active support network.

The limits of the proposed argument shall not be ignored though. The first, and most evident, is the lack of sufficient empirical data to substantiate the hypothesis. There are few experiences of housing cooperatives in Rio de Janeiro, and there are still no Community Land Trusts (CLTs) in operation. In the map presented earlier, it is not possible to select territories managed by cooperatives and trace the degree of militia control, given the small scale of existing cases. As the number and scope of community housing management experiences in the city increase - especially in militia-controlled territories - it will become possible to carry out more in-depth analyses of their effectiveness in restricting this territorial control. A second challenge is to reflect on elements of urban service provision that can work in tandem with forms of community management; in other words, to rethink and propose new systems for managing, regulating, and supervising transport, water supply, and other essential services, since it is not enough to secure only the housing dimension.

Despite these limitations, the analytical exercise is necessary, as it points to new approaches to the problem. For decades, data, analyses, and theories have been produced on the social phenomenon of militias, but little attention has been paid to alternatives to this scenario and to ways of countering militia strategies of territorial appropriation. If militia activities are becoming increasingly complex, going beyond their traditional criminal practices, new strategies must be sought to confront this process. The adoption of self-managed housing models to contain the advance of militias in real estate appropriation is an open field - a battle in progress, without definitive conclusions - where new analyses, debates, and dissemination of alternatives are very welcome.

NOTES

(1) The report *As milícias e a exploração de terras na região do Mendanha: estudo de caso*, written by the Research Center of the Rio de Janeiro State Public Ministry (CENPE/MPRJ), is recommended.

(2) MCMV-Entidades was a modality of the Minha Casa Minha Vida program that allocated financing lines to civil society organizations with the capacity to organize and oversee large affordable housing projects. Despite its importance, the program faced several challenges, the biggest being its limited scope: only 0.7% of all contracts signed under MCMV were allocated to community-led projects (Apsan, Comelli and Landesman, 2021).

(3) The Bill n. 4.216/2021 (Self-Management Bill) was drafted and presented to the National Congress by popular housing movements. It establishes guidelines for the practice of social housing production through cooperatives, creating the National Self-Management Housing Program to finance initiatives.

(4) For more information on the Community Land Trust model in Puerto Rico, we recommend Stanchich (2017).

(5) More information at: https://www.termoterritorialcoletivo.org/. Accessed on: 28 Oct 2023.

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