

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Neither dead nor alive: Participatory slum governance as a zombie program

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Abstract

This article focuses on PREZEIS, an internationally acclaimed participatory slum governance program in Recife, Brazil. PREZEIS was implemented in 1987 and emerged out of a strong popular movement that resisted forced evictions of squatter settlements under the military regime (1964–1985). To date, however, its main objectives—upgrading slums and regularizing land rights—have not been achieved, and its executive powers have been dismantled over the years. We argue that this institutionalization of a popular movement gave birth to a “zombie program” that lives off the past and refuses to die. We advance the zombie metaphor through the Lacanian notion of “fetishistic disavowal,” of *knowing* PREZEIS is “dead” but still *believing* it can be revived through ritualistic, fetishistic activities. We argue that the challenge is to accept its death, opening up the possibility for something truly new to arise. In the conclusion, we also explore how this factors into broader debates on urban post-politics.

KEYWORDS

Brazil, fetishistic disavowal, post-politics, PREZEIS, Recife, slum upgrading, zombies

INTRODUCTION

PREZEIS (Plano de Regularização das Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social; Plan for Regularizing Special Zones of Social Interest) is a 35-year-old participatory slum governance program in the city of Recife, Brazil. It is one of the oldest participatory slum governance programs in Brazil and claims to represent more than half of Recife's 1.7 million inhabitants living in low-income neighborhoods that often began as informal land occupations. In the early 1980s, as the result of a strong popular movement that resisted forced evictions during the military regime (1964–1985), these land occupations were labeled ZEIS (Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social; Special Zones of Social Interest). Co-managed by elected ZEIS representatives, PREZEIS aimed to provide tenure security to the urban poor, with the promise of regularizing landholdings in ZEIS.

Our analysis of PREZEIS's trajectory shows two sides. On the one hand, PREZEIS is a highly innovative and progressive program

(Carrière, 2021; de Souza, 2001) that, since its implementation in 1987, has brought together various actors to deliberate on pro-poor policies in Recife. Due to PREZEIS, the low-income neighborhoods known as ZEIS can still be found in prime locations, close to the city center and the beaches, resisting the influence of project developers and real estate investors (Souza and Bitoun, 2015). This is reflected in recent literature that characterizes PREZEIS in terms of “urban innovation,” “inclusive development,” “social justice,” and “participatory democracy” (Carrière, 2021; Uwayezu and de Vries, 2022).

On the other hand, there have been few concrete results in terms of PREZEIS's main objectives of slum upgrading and regularization of land titles, as the program has been financially drained and structurally dismantled (de Moraes, 2019; Gallart, 2019). Its office—containing three desks and one computer—is located at URB, Recife's Urbanization Department, a prominent department of the City Hall. We show how, in practice, PREZEIS has become a stage for electoral negotiations, ritualistic yet ineffective activity, punctuated

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by highly emotional events that commemorate the glorious past of the popular movement. Even those who note that PREZEIS persists without achieving its original goals revel in the memories of its past achievements.

To understand its enduring discursive and imaginary presence in the urban landscape of Recife, we approach PREZEIS as a “zombie program” that lives off the past and refuses to die. As a heuristic device, the zombie metaphor allows us to raise uncomfortable questions like, What if PREZEIS is neither “alive” nor “dead,” neither a “success” nor a “failure,” but just “undead”?¹ And if that is the case, what are the forces that keep it going—as a policy instrument and as a manifestation of popular struggle—and lingering in the liminal space between the dead and the living?

Advancing the zombie metaphor, we also draw on Slavoj Žižek's (2011, 70) Lacanian theorization of “fetishistic disavowal,” signaled when “rational” knowledge is counteracted by a call to “irrational” belief, as in “we know very well that... , but still we believe... and act accordingly.” Bringing together fetishistic disavowal and the zombie metaphor helps us understand PREZEIS as an “undead” program—of *knowing* that it is dead and yet *believing* it is still alive, participating in ritualistic, fetishistic activities that revive it in imaginary ways. Although our informants in PREZEIS did not explicitly refer to the program in terms of a fetish or zombie, they frequently used the language of death and (the need for) resurrection.

This article is based on Sven da Silva's 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Recife: two months in 2014 (mid-May–mid-July), three months in 2017 (January–March), and eight months in 2018 (April–November). He conducted participant observation in the PREZEIS office, at the monthly meetings, and during many other activities. He also carried out interviews, analyzed the program's 31st-anniversary celebration, and drew on archival research to reconstruct the program's history. He joined community visits with the coordinators, public hearings about finances, and meetings with political candidates and studied two elections of PREZEIS coordinators (in 2017 and 2021) and several elections of the local consultation bodies. Martijn Koster conducted 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Recife between 2003 and 2022, on electoral politics, participatory planning, and urban development, including the role of PREZEIS. Pieter de Vries has regularly conducted research in Recife for shorter periods since 2002, on participatory planning, including PREZEIS. Together, we visited numerous PREZEIS meetings and interviewed municipal administrators and politicians about participatory planning and slum upgrading, both within and outside of PREZEIS.²

In the following sections, we first outline how a range of literature uses the zombie as a metaphor and discuss the implications of approaching PREZEIS as a zombie program. Second, we clarify the multiple meanings of PREZEIS: as a legal system, a movement, a political arena, and a stage for building personal reputations. Third, we apply the zombie metaphor to PREZEIS and analyze how the program emerged, evolved, and impacted the city's spatial and sociopolitical landscape. Fourth, we analyze PREZEIS's nostalgic 31st anniversary, in 2018, at the City Council, where speakers emphasized its “dead” and “living” aspects while disavowing its complete

death. In the conclusion, we reflect on what a zombie program does by exploring how zombification and fetishistic disavowal factor in recent broader debates on urban post-politics.

ZOMBIES AND FETISHISTIC DISAVOWAL

Is there any hope for progressive politics that benefit those who live on the periphery of Brazilian cities? This was the question behind a presentation on PREZEIS that Sven da Silva gave at a conference in 2019. Sven discussed the multiple dimensions of PREZEIS and described how, even though weekly meetings have been held for 35 years, the program has achieved very little of its main goals of upgrading slums and regularizing land rights. Sven concluded by suggesting that Brazil's move to the right—Jair Bolsonaro's presidency had started in 2019—could revive PREZEIS with the popular energy of the past. This speculative conclusion imagined a revolutionary phoenix rising from the ashes of PREZEIS as a cure for its degradation. Instead of acknowledging that, as a program, PREZEIS stays “alive” while having deactivated the energy of the popular movement (de Vries, 2018), it was easier to fantasize, in a fetishistic way, about its possible reanimation.

Then someone in the audience asked: “Are you not too optimistic about something that is already dead?” Quite shocked, Sven could not agree that his fieldwork could be compared to conducting an autopsy on a dead body. He had just returned from fieldwork, in which he had gone from meeting to meeting, and in which he had experienced PREZEIS as very vivid. He answered: “PREZEIS is certainly not dead. At best it can be described as a zombie.”

In hindsight, this unconscious outburst was highly fortunate, as it provided an appropriate metaphor for putting into words an inconvenient truth about the persistent ineffectiveness of such programs. This outburst was an example of what Lacanian theorists call “knowledge in the real,” how the unconscious brings forth a “knowledge that does not know itself” (Žižek, 2008). This moment reveals how Sven, like many others, already knew PREZEIS was “a dead program walking.” Yet, in willful self-delusion, Sven and the other authors of this article still invested in the fiction that a tribute to PREZEIS could bring it back to life.

Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1938), in the context of US colonial presence in Haiti, described how zombies are spoken of as “the living dead,” wandering the earth, without souls, as cheap laborers. In Haitian lore, a zombie is a body reanimated from the grave to work for a practitioner of supernatural Vodou, a *bocor* (master). Someone trades the soul of a loved one to a *bocor* for their own benefit in life. The *bocor* sucks the soul out of the loved one's body, who, after dying and resurrecting, works endlessly for the *bocor* without thinking, without consciousness. In popular culture, the zombie is assigned more monstrous elements, such as the possibility of a collective attack on living persons, infecting them and making them zombies too.

In this article, we are less interested in the colonial and racialized dimensions (Hurston, 1938; Lauro, 2015; Luckhurst, 2015) than in

the zombie's undead nature. As an undead being, the zombie "slowly drags itself around in a catatonic mode but persisting forever" (Žižek, 2012, 341). Exposing an irrational drive, they "are dead but they don't yet know it, living on as automata... a perfect emblem of decline coupled with denial" (Luckhurst, 2015, 2).

Based on aspects of the zombie emphasized in the literature, we loosely discern two, at times overlapping, ways of thinking about zombies. The first one emphasizes the life-draining threat of infection that a zombie and its master pose for an institution or society at large (Lakeman and Molloy, 2018). This view primarily regards the zombie as a destructive and mindless monster, controlled by another force, similar to the classic anthropological description. The zombie in this view needs to be killed or cured and certainly avoided to prevent further harm.

However, PREZEIS is not a destructive monster haunting the city. It is not a pervasive "zombie project" in the sense that it sucks financial resources (Anthony et al., 2015). On the contrary, PREZEIS has virtually no budget and no organizational structure. We do not characterize the people running it as contagious zombies controlled by a master, in the warning sense of "before you know it you are also mindlessly shuffling to the beat of the *bocor* drum." If anything, we argue, PREZEIS persists not because of a well-defined *bocor* but because participants and observers hold onto the fetish of a viable program, as Sven did during the 2019 presentation mentioned above.

We are interested in the "in-between" quality of the zombie as an undead entity, alive and dead at the same time, lingering between past and present. With a little imagination, we can see here a connection with Antonio Gramsci who says that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass" ([1930] 1996, 33). This brings us to the second "mode" identified in the literature, where the zombie figure is used to think about the persistence of an "in-between" status of projects, ideas, situations, and actors.³

We draw on the literature on "zombie projects" in infrastructure studies where "the figure of the zombie invites analysis of infrastructure projects over multiple iterations and across temporal frames" (Carse and Kneas, 2019, 22). Ashley Carse and David Kneas, in their "typology of heuristics for analyzing the unbuilt and unfinished" (2019, 9), draw on William Rankin, who defines "zombie projects" as projects that continue to exist "even when disconnected from their original goals" (2017, 353). They persist because they are given "new purposes by different groups" (Rankin, 2017, 357) who "resurface" legal documents and "reanimate" the past to make a supposedly "new" project happen (Sizak, 2021).

We add that the persistence of the zombie—the energy with which it is infused on the beat of the drums—is often the result of fetishistic disavowal. This is best grasped in the tale of the emperor's new clothes: I know that the emperor is naked, but since everybody believes that he is wearing beautiful clothes, I participate in the ritualistic admiration. Here, the fetish is the idea that the emperor is dressed beautifully. The question is why everyone—except an innocent child—is complicit in the public secret that the emperor is naked.

What is striking is the state of denial in which participants and observers are involved. While it is an open secret that nothing is being done or should be done, PREZEIS continues as an undead program. Echoing Luckhurst's definition of the zombie, PREZEIS persists through the denial of its death by the actors in the institutional apparatus: the coordinators and delegates (and researchers) who try to repair it and continue to laud its progressive nature. This is why the notion of fetishism, as the attribution of inherent values or powers to the idea of an object (Pietz, 1985), fits PREZEIS.

This means that the challenge is not so much finding a cure (infusing it with new energy or returning to the original structures) but rather accepting its death while remaining loyal to its principles. Linking back to Gramsci ([1930] 1996, 33), the unwillingness to accept the death of "the old" could impede the emergence of "the new" while disavowing the popular movement's struggle against corporate interest, a topic we return to in the conclusion.⁴

We argue that, by investing in the imaginary of the undead, we can understand how projects are kept alive, even against common sense that they no longer serve any productive function. In doing so, we advance the zombie metaphor to include a "zombie program": everybody knows it is dead, yet it has to be brought to a close before something new can be implemented. This is relevant because it helps us understand projects and programs, in our case PREZEIS, beyond the dichotomous notions of success/failure or alive/dead.

The meaning of success or failure in development projects and programs has been a subject of lively debate in development studies. Authors like David Mosse (2004) and James Ferguson (1994) point at the incongruities between form and content in such projects, for instance between their official objectives on the one hand and their political and (de)politicizing impact on the other. Mosse (2004) posits an irreducible gap between policymaking, as a process with its own rules and objectives, and the actual effects of policy interventions. He argues that we should look at how policymakers and development practitioners ascribe specific notions of success and failure to projects rather than reading off results in terms of a general logic. In his words, "success and failure are policy-oriented judgments that obscure project effects" and hence risk obscuring "how things actually happen" (662).

If indeed such an irreducible gap exists, then it is possible that seemingly innovative and promising projects are in practice animated by an "irrational" or even "nonsensical" drive that thrives and expands by virtue of not achieving the program's manifest objectives. One way to approach this drive is to push Mosse's argument further and draw on the figure of the zombie, who is kept undead by the fantasy that we can keep doing things as always, without acknowledging that such a disavowal harms the lives of those the development programs claim to help.

WHAT DOES PREZEIS STAND FOR?

PREZEIS is a system of laws to legalize informal settlements and provide them with infrastructure.⁵ The aims of PREZEIS are to (a) "adapt

property to its social function,” (b) “prioritize the right to housing over the right to property,” (c) “prevent real estate speculation in ZEIS,” (d) “avoid indirect evictions of ZEIS residents,” (e) “encourage community participation in processes of urban development and regularization of land titles within ZEIS,” and (f) “preserve, whenever possible, existing buildings.” To guard these principles, maximum lot sizes are limited to 250 square meters, and merging lots is prohibited. In addition, each family is allowed a maximum of two lots, one for housing and one for income generation.

As one of the aims states, PREZEIS also stands for deliberation and participatory planning. To implement and safeguard its regulations, an organizational structure was set up. In every ZEIS, residents elect representatives for their Commission for Urbanization and Legalization of land titling (COMUL), which functions as a site for the deliberation between ZEIS representatives, NGOs, and Recife's Urbanization Department (URB). COMULs make development plans that are executed by the municipality. In 1988, the PREZEIS Forum was created as a second deliberative instance on a city level (CENDHEC, 2005). The Forum hosts monthly meetings between all ZEIS representatives, planners and technicians from URB, other government officials and councilors, and representatives from NGOs, social movements, and the federal university.

However, the Forum provides a stage for ZEIS representatives to develop themselves politically, as well as for politicians to expand their power base within ZEIS areas. The Forum has thus become an electoral arena, where representatives opportunistically offer their services to populist politicians in ways that do not necessarily benefit ZEIS areas (da Silva and de Vries, 2022). PREZEIS turned into a stage for politicians to demonstrate their care for the urban poor. They only need to open the City Hall doors for rituals like the PREZEIS anniversary, with abundant media attention, to suggest that they do a lot for the poor in Recife. These political interests go hand-in-hand with corporate interests. While ZEIS areas are protected against land speculation, many are in prime locations that hold great promises for project developers, who constantly try to get a foot in the door. For them, changes to ZEIS boundaries or regulations may generate enormous possibilities and profits, especially considering that Recife's real estate prices are among the highest in Brazil.

PREZEIS is also a reminder of the strong popular movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Today, civil society organizations still consider PREZEIS as part of a larger movement that also comprises the Landless and Homeless Workers' Movements, the unions, feminists, and antiracists. A poster in the PREZEIS office expresses this activist dimension by saying “the city is ours, it is not for sale.” Likewise, PREZEIS's slogan is “in defense of dignified housing.” However, at the time of the 31st anniversary in 2018, there were only two representatives who continued to advocate the interests of the popular movement, criticizing the stealthy appropriation of ZEIS land by corporate actors.

Thus we see how PREZEIS is “alive” as an electoral market but “dead” in its intended legal and institutional goals of slum upgrading and titling. PREZEIS is vulnerable to electoral and corporate interests and falls short in showing solidarity with ongoing land

occupations by the poor. To better understand the persistence of PREZEIS, we paraphrase Žižek's (2011, 70) Lacanian formulation of fetishistic disavowal: “I know that the soul of the program is dead—institutionalization and personal interests drained the energy of the popular movement—but still I believe that the program can be revived.” This form of “fetishistic disavowal” is ideological, we argue, in that it perversely undermines efforts to construct forms of popular sovereignty while paying lip service to past popular movements.

HISTORY OF PREZEIS

The following trajectory shows how PREZEIS has always had an “in-between” status. The program was never “finished,” always struggling for existence, recognition, and impact, lingering between operating as planned and being dysfunctional or obsolete. While in the 1990s its organization was slowly set up (see Figure 1), in the early 2000s parts of the program were removed due to administrative reforms and competition with other government programs.

The birth of an undead program

In 1983, as a compromise between the popular movement and the military regime, Recife City Hall introduced a new zoning law that recognized 27 Special Zones of Social Interest (ZEIS). “Special urban norms” were to be established in the ZEIS—such as prioritizing shelter over ownership rights—to initiate processes of regularization, upgrading, and integration into the urban structure.⁶ In 1987, PREZEIS was established as a new organizational structure to ensure the definition and protection of these “special urban norms.”

PREZEIS's existence was not directly visible to ZEIS residents. In the early stage, two related issues arose: a lack of resources and involvement of electoral politics. Regarding the resources, the 1987 law established that a special fund would be created to execute ZEIS development plans. However, it did not define where the funding would come from or who would be responsible for managing it. A new mayor could thus easily paralyze PREZEIS by stopping its funding.

Initially, grassroots representatives had undefined mandates and were appointed by a social movement organization operating in the respective ZEIS community. These representatives received a transport and lunch fee, which became popularly known as the *jetom*. Apart from these fees, their work was unpaid, which made them vulnerable to bribes from city councilors and their political parties who wished to form an electoral base within ZEIS and corporate forces who wished to alter ZEIS parameters for construction projects. As ZEIS representatives started earning extra income by campaigning for politicians (da Silva and de Vries, 2021), ZEIS residents demanded local elections for the position of ZEIS representative, complaining about a lack of transparency and accusing their representatives of benefiting personally from the *jetom* and bribes (Araujo and Costa, 1995).

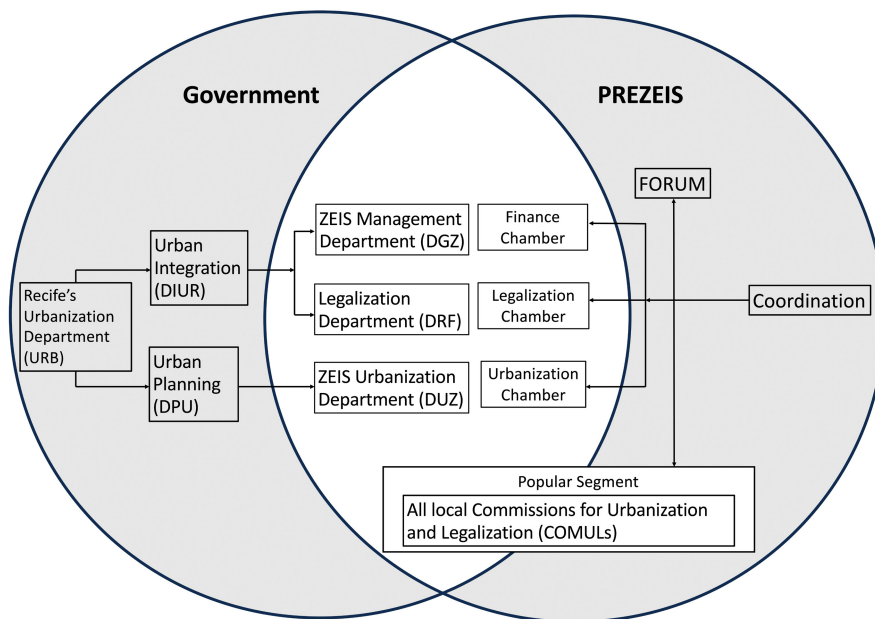


FIGURE 1 Organization structure of PREZEIS. Source: Slightly adapted and translated version of Luna Lyra, [<http://pet.arquitetura.ufc.br/2011/06/por-luna-lyra-resenha-do-texto-o-plano.html?m=1>]

To prevent the popular enthusiasm from fading (further), and PREZEIS from being paralyzed by a lack of funding, the municipality, in close cooperation with the popular movement, created the PREZEIS Forum (CENDHEC, 2005). The PREZEIS Forum comprises all ZEIS representatives and representatives of the municipality and advisory NGOs. The ZEIS representatives meet separately as the popular segment, one week before the Forum meeting, to set the agenda. The popular segment and Forum meetings take place in the URB auditorium, in the city center. The Forum quickly gained recognition and was integrated into the administrative structure of the city. Although it is largely due to the Forum that PREZEIS still exists, it also shifted the power balance from the grassroots-level COMULs toward the city-level Forum. This rendered the Forum vulnerable to political influences, so much so that it turned into an arena for electoral politics (da Silva and de Vries, 2022).

In the 1990s, PREZEIS became more institutionalized, making its operations more cumbersome (see Figure 1). The increased number of acronyms, referring to departments, councils, and chambers at different levels, demonstrates the complexity of its functioning. In this period, PREZEIS's organizational structure was extended by the creation of three thematic chambers: one for urbanization, one for legalization, and one for budgeting. Within URB, simultaneously, a new structure was set up to provide basic services to ZEIS areas. The Urban Integration Directorate was created to work with COMULs on ZEIS development plans. In 1993, the Municipal Fund of PREZEIS was finally put in place for the development and execution of ZEIS urbanization and legalization plans, and the payment of the *jetom*.⁷ The Fund would largely consist of municipal funding and be controlled by URB. However, no sanctions were defined to force the municipal administration to actually invest in it.

To monitor and manage all these tasks, a new bureaucratic layer was introduced: the Coordination. It consists of three representatives, who are elected by the Popular Segment, and one government official. One of the Coordination's main tasks, besides chairing the Forum meetings, is to oversee the elections for ZEIS representatives in COMULs. At the end of the 1990s, manuals were issued that described the internal regulations for COMUL and FORUM meetings (FASE, CENDHEC and URB, 1997). These regulations, which have been amended frequently, include, for example, the duration of mandates, the start and end time of Forum meetings, voting procedures, and provisions regarding the *jetom*. These regulations further shifted the center of bureaucratic attention from the grassroots to the city-level operation of the PREZEIS Forum (Marinho, 1998).

Losing and gaining life

PREZEIS entered a new phase when the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores; PT) assumed power in Recife in 2001. Contrary to expectations, this was the start of the fragmentation and debilitation of the urban popular movement. After the Left and the popular movement succeeded in building up PREZEIS, the PT weakened its executive power while promoting neoliberal growth policies (Nuijten et al., 2012). In fact, under PT rule, only one ZEIS has been fully "upgraded," and none have received official land titles through the program (de Moraes, 2019). Bypassing PREZEIS, slum upgrading projects became part of a citywide beautification aimed at improving sanitation and transportation. They were funded and implemented by the World Bank and the Federal Growth Acceleration Program (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento) (Koster and Nuijten, 2012).

The PT soon prioritized its flagship program, Participatory Budgeting (Orçamento Participativo; OP), and subordinated PREZEIS to it (Gallart, 2019).⁸ As a result, PREZEIS increasingly depended on PT politicians. Activists who had played important roles in PREZEIS now received employment in the PT administration, thereby weakening the Popular Segment of PREZEIS. In addition, several NGOs with an official advisory role in PREZEIS started to work with the OP instead. More importantly, in various interviews that we carried out since 2014, we were told that corporations started building in ZEIS areas after bribing ZEIS representatives to hide information and silently agree with illegal projects. In other cases, ZEIS representatives formally agreed to reduce ZEIS parameters for these projects in exchange for personal benefits or relatively small upgrading projects in the area.

As one PREZEIS coordinator put in in 2018:

[In the past] everybody got along the government tape. Today, the good lawyers no longer support us at PREZEIS. They work for the government or large companies. The judiciary is unaware of legislation regarding ZEIS when it benefits the poor. However, when it favors real estate speculation or large companies, it acts quickly.

In 2018, another coordinator, who had co-founded the PT in Recife, became very disappointed in the party and said: “The PT does not value PREZEIS and has drawn much power to it, which has weakened the popular movement.” A civil servant with a long history of working for PREZEIS put it more bluntly: “The PT fucked (*fudeu*) PREZEIS!”

An administrative reform in 2005 left PREZEIS without a sufficient budget or technical support (de Moraes, 2019; Gallart, 2019). At Recife's Urbanization Department, the Urban Integration Directorate was closed. This means that ZEIS development plans were not being further developed and executed, which impeded the original PREZEIS objectives. In the absence of projects, COMUL meetings have become a tick-box exercise. Without projects and finance, the meetings of the technical chambers have also lost their purpose. As one of the coordinators commented: “We don't have access to information, we don't have the structure to work, and the burden is increasingly placed on the coordinators.” PREZEIS thus lost much strength in countering top-down urban planning, leading to criticisms that it is putting low-income neighborhoods at risk of giving way to commercial interests in real estate and land (Souza and Bitoun, 2015, 34).

Paradoxically, the program received international recognition at the same moment that it was becoming less effective on the ground. It was being promoted “as one of Brazil's first and most important attempts at creating a citywide framework for urban upgrading” (Imparato and Ruster, 2003, 87). The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank also lauded PREZEIS as an exemplary pioneering framework for slum upgrading (Magalhães, 2016). In 2000, UNHABITAT included PREZEIS on its list of “best practices” in economic development, housing, and urban governance (Donovan, 2007).

To this day, several (international) scholars are enthusiastic about PREZEIS and its innovative and progressive policies (Carrière, 2021; de Melo Rocha et al., 2022; Uwayezu and de Vries, 2022). The experience of ZEIS residents is different. One of them told us in 2018: “Unfortunately, PREZEIS is a utopian mechanism; a fairy tale for the outside world. In reality we elect representatives who cannot change the situation. We are simply placing lambs into the lion's den.”

Using participatory budgeting as an example, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (2015) show how programs have been packaged as successes and replicated elsewhere to inductively demonstrate that best practices can be gleaned from local experiences. The major point they make is that this type of policy is predicated on the occlusion of the politics of the city, in particular, the struggle of the popular movements against corporate interests. This is precisely what happened with PREZEIS under the PT administrations. PREZEIS was promoted globally as an innovative example of participatory slum upgrading even as it became more “undead,” driven by bureaucratic rituals and clientelist practices (da Silva and de Vries, 2021).

Neither dead nor alive

In the 2012 municipal elections, the PT lost to the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB). In 2013, the new mayor jokingly presented himself as “the godfather of PREZEIS,” referring to the fact that PREZEIS had been implemented under PSB rule. Once again, ZEIS representatives and PREZEIS coordinators had high hopes for a revival of PREZEIS. However, rather than reenergizing the program, the PSB introduced its own participatory program, coopting the coordinators, who moved into working for the PSB. The municipality's “lack of [continuous] commitment” to PREZEIS has been criticized as it “has greatly diminished the scope and credibility of PREZEIS and the ability of NGOs to overcome the influence of local political brokers” (Montambeault, 2016, 140). PREZEIS, as we see it, turned into an object of electoral politics (da Silva and de Vries, 2022).

If the original idea of PREZEIS was that it would unite all low-income communities in their struggle against eviction and speculation, today ZEIS representatives are primarily concerned with showing that they are working for their community and bringing minor improvements so they will be reelected. Most of these improvements are funded by councilors who, in collaboration with private developers, offer ZEIS residents small infrastructural projects (e.g., a road improvement or the expansion of street lighting) in return for electoral support. So, especially when elections approach, councilors and opposition politicians attend the Forum meetings to increase their visibility and build an electoral base.

During our fieldwork in 2017 and 2018, many PREZEIS meetings were primarily about organizing Carnival and other festivities, and their financial settlement. Much time was spent gossiping and discussing electoral politics and more mundane topics such as “Why haven't I received the *jetom* yet?” or “Please use WhatsApp only for PREZEIS-related messages.” Rather than focusing on upgrading and regularization of land titles, the heated debates were about

alleged fraud during ZEIS elections or conflicts between elected ZEIS representatives and government officials, planners, or NGO representatives.

Occasionally, an activist delegate—member of the popular movement—would give an in-depth presentation about the challenges that ZEIS residents face or advocate action. However, little is actually done, because, as everybody knows, most representatives, including the PREZEIS coordinators, are connected to PSB politicians (de Vries, 2018). Representatives attend the meetings to exchange information and to demonstrate that they are active at the city level, which increases their worth as campaigners in electoral times.

The following exchange between Edvaldo and Maria Betânia during a 2018 FORUM meeting aptly expresses the current situation of PREZEIS. Edvaldo is one of the PREZEIS coordinators and has been active in the program since the 1990s. Maria Betânia is a ZEIS representative. With a fixed job in the healthcare sector, she is one of the few popular leaders who does not depend on campaigning for politicians to make a living.

During the meeting, Edvaldo expressed his concern about what will happen to PREZEIS if the Popular Segment “does not wake up.” He suggested working with the university on a campaign to promote PREZEIS through online videos but also encouraged using ZEIS representative election campaigns to spread information about what it means to live in a ZEIS and what PREZEIS does. He was critical of representatives who get elected by what he described as buying votes with beers. He raised his voice and said, “People do not even know about PREZEIS!” and followed with the rhetorical question “What is PREZEIS?” From the back of the room, Maria Betânia shouted, “Dead!” Edvaldo’s quick response, “It is not dead. We continue it here,” was followed by applause. Maria Betânia replied, “We should change the name to ZEIP, Special Zone of Political Interests,” and then, somewhat annoyed, left the room to smoke a cigarette. Edvaldo did not necessarily contradict Maria Betânia’s claim that the energy of the popular movement has been impeded. Indeed, the ideals of the popular movement are anchored in law, and every official meeting is in fact a proclamation of the existence of PREZEIS. Their exchange exposes the paradox of PREZEIS being simultaneously dead and alive.

We witnessed a similar performance when, that same year, a city councilor approached the coordinators with a request to host the PREZEIS anniversary to celebrate its victories. The members of the Popular Segment cynically stated that “the meeting will be very short because there are no victories at all.” Their reply echoes “the fetish of participation” (Leal, 2003): the endless and repetitive rituals that aim to keep a program alive although it is dead. Thus, we ask: Why celebrate a program that, by looking at its achievements, does not function anymore? What is the role of these nostalgic performances that rehearse the memories of a popular movement that has been disanimated by electoral interests and bureaucracy? To address these questions, we describe how the fetish of PREZEIS disavows the open secret that its function has shifted to being an arena in which brokers vie for the support of political patrons, killing the disruptive energy of the popular movement while simultaneously keeping it alive by paying homage to its memories.

31ST-ANNIVERSARY OF PREZEIS: THE FETISHISTIC DISAVOWAL OF ITS DEATH

When Sven arrived at the City Hall, the room was already filled with people greeting each other and taking pictures for their social media accounts. Apparently, the PREZEIS coordinators and bureaucrats who organized the celebration were aware of the allegations that PREZEIS is dead, as several banners taped on the walls sought to contradict this reading with slogans like “PREZEIS exists and merits respect,” “PREZEIS: fruit of the people’s struggle,” and “PREZEIS: an instrument for urban transformation.” Other banners called for a resuscitation of the program: “To urbanize and legalize we need to restructure” and “Defend and strengthen PREZEIS!” Sven recognized the banners from a previous public hearing.

Sven first greeted Degenildo, the chairperson of the PREZEIS Coordination. Thereafter he jokingly asked Edvaldo, who was also present, “Will this be another one of those one-hour speeches about the history of PREZEIS by a university professor?” Edvaldo laughed and promised that this would not be the case. Then a bell rang and everyone went to their seats.

Two councilors had organized this homage (*reunião solene*) to the 31st anniversary of PREZEIS. Antônio took the role of chairman, while Miguel gave the principal speech.⁹ Antônio opened the meeting and invited the other speakers to the table, after which the national anthem was sung.

Reminiscing about the energy of the popular movement

Antônio invited Miguel to the lectern, who immediately tried to liven up the atmosphere saying, “This is a party, let’s be in a party mood!” He was quick to refer to the “living history” of the popular movement, saying: “I want to greet Antônio who comes from the popular movement. He is a committed leader and councilor.” Although the duo identified themselves as activists of the popular movement, over the years of our research, we had never seen them in Forum meetings or any other of the program’s settings before.

Miguel then took a couple of minutes to individually address many of the people in the room with a friendly comment. After mentioning that today is “a historic day” and that it is a “great satisfaction to recognize people who undoubtedly make the history of Recife,” he began a lengthy speech about PREZEIS’s history, summarizing it as “a permanent struggle for the transformation of Recife’s urban and social structures.” He highlighted the importance of PREZEIS as “Brazil’s greatest urban reform tool which allows us to consolidate poor communities in the city’s central spaces.” In support of this he mentioned the well-known official statistics: “There are 74 ZEIS areas housing at least 200 [low-income] communities, corresponding to 53 percent of the population.” He praised the PREZEIS Forum as “heroic and historical because it has met every month for 31 years.” For him, the spirit of struggle never disappeared, as he

called PREZEIS “the most organized and expressive movement of popular resistance in the entire national territory.”

His speech focused on the early history of PREZEIS and did not contain any reference to the changes that had taken place since the early 2000s. In effect, his speech referred to the popular movement as a movement of the past, calling for recognition and solidarity with the poor’s ongoing struggle for the right to live in the city. He called on everyone to “roll up their sleeves” to transform all of Recife’s informal settlements into ZEIS areas.

He recalled that “there are over 160 communities that do not have a ZEIS status.” The “revolutionary” transformation of a settlement into a ZEIS is crucial, he said, to “avoid the panic of eviction once and for all.” Although the transformation of all informal settlements in the city into ZEIS was an original goal of PREZEIS, we have found that its current lack of legitimacy and funds makes this goal a joke for most ZEIS representatives. As many of them told us, the struggle for more ZEIS areas is at odds with the fact that there is not enough budget for attaining its basic goals of urban upgrading and land titling. Miguel ended his speech as follows:

Greetings to all who have dedicated and continue to dedicate their lives to the popular movement of Recife. Recife is grateful for the sweat and dreams of all of you. You all are synonymous with strength and perseverance. Together we will continue to write the history of the popular movement. Long live PREZEIS!

Antônio thanked Miguel for his “beautiful presentation” and greeted the PREZEIS coordinators. From the whispers in the room, the audience thought that he did not know their names. He also greeted several others, calling them “great warriors of our movement.” He invited the councilor to stand up again to hand coordinator Degenildo a big certificate in honor of the 31st anniversary. Journalists rushed forward to take pictures.

Antônio then invited the director of URB to the floor, who also took his time to individually congratulate and greet many attendees. His short speech focused largely on “the richness, greatness, and eloquence” of PREZEIS as consolidation and maintenance of the “rights of the poor.” He admitted that he attended only one Forum meeting and praised PREZEIS as a space of struggle against the “attack on the poor Brazilians and the conquest of rights that is taking place.” He ended his speech, almost sighing, as if it was an obligation, by saying: “Long live PREZEIS. Long live the PREZEIS Forum. Long live the struggle of the people. And let us be more and more united in this fight. Congratulations to you all!”

The coordinators' revelation

After brief applause, the chairman invited Degenildo to speak on behalf of PREZEIS: “And now, the moment we have all been anxiously waiting for. With much *carinho* [kindness, affection] I want to

invite Mr. Trajano to speak on behalf of PREZEIS.” Degenildo started thanking and greeting the same people as the previous two speakers. He joked about the councilor’s long speech about PREZEIS’s history: “It looks like the councilor has been studying in the library for a week.”

In contrast to the previous speakers, Degenildo also emphasized the “dead” side of PREZEIS, in line with the views of ZEIS representatives such as Maria Betânia who argue that there is no sense in rehearsing memories of the popular movement when most representatives only attend meetings for the *jetom* and to discuss electoral politics. Degenildo knows the history of PREZEIS well, yet he also depends on the municipal government for his employment. So he carefully composed his critique.

For example, he greeted the URB director, saying that this director pays “as much attention as possible to PREZEIS” but “has limitations in what he can mean for us” and that “not everything has been resolved.” He defended the current municipal government, saying that it “has been trying to ease the problems of PREZEIS but has not found solutions to all the problems caused by the previous [PT] administration.” He carefully chose this wording so as not to publicly offend anyone.

Then Degenildo analyzed the current situation of PREZEIS. Instead of focusing on the “living history” of the Forum, as the previous speakers did, he started by emphasizing the “living” aspect of PREZEIS in terms of its contrast with the “dead” Participatory Budgeting program (OP), which the PSB had discontinued after its victory over the PT in the municipal elections. Degenildo explained that PREZEIS is legitimized by the number of votes ZEIS representatives get in COMUL elections:

Last year we had 15 ZEIS elections and this year we have 24 elections. In these two years, none of the elected representatives was elected with less than 100 votes. It sounds like a joke, but in OP one could call himself a representative with only 10 votes.

This statement was applauded enthusiastically by ZEIS representatives who were not in favor of OP. While the event was about the achievements of the popular movement, at this moment it became clear what PREZEIS is now all about. For a moment, Degenildo revealed PREZEIS’s “public secret,” exposing the naked emperor: if you can garner more than 100 votes, you display electoral muscle. This mechanism goes against the principles of the popular movements of remaining autonomous from the state and corporate interests in their struggle for popular sovereignty.

Degenildo then criticized the dire situation PREZEIS was in. He stated that the COMULs were “running precariously” and that the three technical chambers (urbanization, legalization, and finance) “do not function as they did in the past.” He demanded more resources, especially for relatively minor issues such as the transportation of coordinators and promotional material. He continued with some careful criticism of the current administration:

Without resources, we cannot do anything. Today we do not have a car for the coordination to work. We do not have PREZEIS material. No calendar, shirts, or pamphlets. We have various events but do not have any material to promote PREZEIS—not even a T-shirt to wear. In contrast, the municipal government just invested R\$100 million for their own publicity.

Contrasting the “dead” aspects of PREZEIS, he ended his speech by expressing his firm hope to continue and bolster PREZEIS:

We need respect! We will not stop here. We will make ourselves heard and fight well this time! We have PREZEIS in our blood and will continue the struggle. We will have another 30 years to come and we will be here celebrating in the City Hall.

The last person to speak was Jô, the government advisor within the PREZEIS Coordination. As she put it, PREZEIS had “captivated” her, and she had “clung” to it “with so much passion.” Jô was active in the unions and sees the workers’ struggle reflected in PREZEIS. In contrast to the other speakers, who talked about elections, movements, lack of funding, and new government regulations, Jô spoke about the crux of what PREZEIS dealt with in the past, the land occupations:

The origin of PREZEIS’s struggles does not lie just in the 1940s and 1950s when people migrated to the city and started occupying pieces of land. It lies at the conquest of Brazil by the Portuguese. This was the start of the people’s struggle to reclaim their land.

She ended her speech by saying: “We need to unite more and more! Get organized! To tell the mayor that PREZEIS exists! That it exists and deserves respect!”

Her speech received a very long applause and many signs of acclaim as it pointed at the possibility of a popular awakening. She admitted that the soul of the program is “dead,” but declared she is not ready to let it go. People stood up and shouted, “Now we have really been represented!” The chairman thanked her. Then he closed the meeting, and everyone started taking pictures again for their social media accounts.

Reflecting on the anniversary

After the celebration, Sven met Aderbal, an ex-coordinator of PREZEIS and an ex-representative of a ZEIS in the city center, and his friend Nado, a political entrepreneur with good contacts among politicians and corporate actors, for lunch in a restaurant. Both campaigned for the PSB and have been accused by activists of selling ZEIS land to political and business actors (da Silva and de Vries, 2021).

Reflecting on the anniversary, Sven told them he was impressed by Jô’s passionate speech. Nado replied agitatedly: “She lives in old times! The popular movement? It died! We have to accept that!” Referring to his own experience as a political campaigner, Nado explained that “people do not get out of their houses to protest for free, you need to offer them money.” Aderbal continued: “The people who keep talking about the past are living well, they have jobs in the university, in NGOs, in the government. They make money off the backs of the people’s misery.” Nado concluded, “You cannot make a living from good intentions and beautiful ideals.”

So, despite being present and applauding, Aderbal and Nado had a very different perspective of PREZEIS than the speakers at the City Hall. They openly support the neoliberal shift initiated by the PT and continued by the PSB. A point not to be lost is that while PREZEIS is “undead,” the popular movement does exist, outside of PREZEIS, at the margin of the electoral system. While the anniversary commemoration was strongly imbued with the fantasy that PREZEIS remains part of the popular movement and thus can be revived, political entrepreneurs such as Aderbal and Nado are driven by the clientelist profit principle that underlies the functioning of the bureaucracy and corporate forces. This is the public secret underlying PREZEIS: we know that it has become an electoral market in the service of corporate interests, and yet we keep investing in the idea that it is part of the popular movement and that it can be revived as a vehicle for popular sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

This article approached PREZEIS from the perspective of the “unbuilt and unfinished” (Carse and Kneas, 2019), as an “unfinished” zombie program that eludes its own death. It is striking how the program persists despite achieving virtually none of its original goals. Neither the land regularization processes nor the local infrastructural development plans have been executed. These purposes remain intact on paper, while in practice the program functions to propel electoral and bureaucratic interests. The program, in other words, is “undead”: it has ceased to function, but it is kept alive through nostalgic performative rituals, fixated on the past while denying the current urban antagonisms. Performances such as the anniversary celebration—but also the repetitive (academic) presentations of PREZEIS as a “best practice” to be revived and replicated—are symptomatic of what Lacanians call fetishistic disavowal. These are forms of disavowal buttressed by the fetish—the idea that PREZEIS can improve the lives of the urban poor—that engenders all sorts of activities to infuse the program with external energies, while grassroots energies wither.

All these activities take place in the knowledge that they make no difference to the actual (neoliberal) situation. In fact, activists and researchers *know* that PREZEIS has turned into an arena of electoral politics and that institutionalization has killed the energy of the popular movement, first by aggravating its bureaucracy and later by cutting its funds. Yet they simultaneously participate and revel in

the memories of PREZEIS's past achievements, *believing* that this can revive the spirit of the 1970s.

The zombie metaphor, in this way, helped us to understand PREZEIS beyond notions of success/failure or alive/dead, which we consider unhelpful dichotomies for understanding development projects' "reality," which is a socially constructed belief (Mosse, 2004). Whereas the development literature points at irreducible gaps between form and content (Ferguson, 1994; Mosse, 2004), we combine the zombie metaphor with the Lacanian theorization of fetishistic disavowal to push this argument further and demonstrate how the "reality" of projects is a matter of fetishistic activity. Indeed, the life of a project is the result of the fetishistic rituals through which special powers are infused into the idea of a project while disavowing that it is a dead or lifeless object. Fetishistic disavowal, we argue, is ideological in its denial of urban antagonism as attested by the increasing levels of poverty and homelessness due to land speculation spurring ongoing land occupations in the city, processes that occur at the margins of programs such as PREZEIS.

Zooming out, we wish to end by exploring how the zombie metaphor and the notion of fetishistic disavowal factor in recent debates on urban post-politics. Our findings resonate with theoretical work on the evacuation of "the political" in (Leftist) neoliberal regimes underwritten by populist slogans promising to unite the people around shared values that transcend—and indeed occlude—the antagonism between Left and Right. Erik Swyngedouw (2018) calls this "post-politicization": a "situation in which the political—understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement—is increasingly colonized by politics—understood as techno-managerial governance." Following Jacques Rancière (1999), Swyngedouw distinguishes between *policies* (the governance of the people), *politics* as the "art of the possible" driven by the competition for access to state power, and *the political* as the reordering of the dominant regime of time and spaces (the distribution of the sensible) by an invisible, uncounted category. The political, he argues, is inaugurated when this category, those who do not belong to the dominant regime, irrupts into the scene and asserts its egalitarian right to participate in the ruling of the polity (Swyngedouw, 2011).

In a recent article Emanuela Guano sheds light on post-political labor displayed in senseless artistic spectacles, providing a "simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness," hence covering up the sufferings of those affected by the neglect of the state (2023, 12). Quoting Susan Buck-Morss (1992, 19), Guano describes such spectacles as "phantasmagorias whose role it is to bombard the eyes 'with fragmentary impressions', so that they may 'see too much—and register nothing'" (2023, 12). This resonates, again, with the fetishistic investment in the "undead" corpse of PREZEIS: the bombastic rehearsal of rituals—singing the national anthem, handing over a certificate, emotional evocations of the heyday of the popular movement—all aimed at occluding the fact that the program never got off the ground.

Zombification, as we described it, is thus another way to point to the domestication and cooptation of the *political*, as it assigns places

to categories through senseless procedures—the repetition of the same—reminding everybody that nothing can be done outside of the dominant regime of time and spaces. The zombification of PREZEIS is one of many techniques of post-politicization: the occlusion of the political struggles of the "uncounted" (the landless who engaged in massive land occupations) and the domestication of the political into a form of neoliberal techno-management (Nuijten et al., 2012). Going back to Hurston's (1938) image of the zombie as a cheap laborer, the zombification of PREZEIS makes us painfully aware how a political event was deprived of its energy and converted into a lifeless program.

The inability to acknowledge that PREZEIS is "dead" inhibits any attempt to build up a popular movement against neoliberal urbanization. The challenge is to see the emperor naked: to see the fetish as it is—a set of "nonsensical" rituals. This entails distinguishing between PREZEIS as a program (*policies* and *politics*) and *the political* in which the popular movement challenged the dominant order when it engaged in massive land occupations in the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, we conclude that a possible "cure" for zombie programs such as PREZEIS lies not lie in attempts to reanimate and resurrect them but in accepting their death. This opens the possibility—linking back to Gramsci—for the rise of something truly new.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In this article, our main focus is on the zombie's undead nature and not so much on its racialized dimensions (Hurston, 1938; Lauro, 2015; Luckhurst, 2015).

² The three authors contributed equally to the writing of this article.

³ This includes analytical concepts, as sociologist Ulrich Beck points at with his notion of "zombie categories"—concepts that govern our thinking but are "not capable of grasping the new situation" (2005, 63). He refers to the tendency to hold on to an outdated notion of nation-states as isolated containers, despite living in an increasingly interconnected world. His central argument is that this precludes creative thinking. Although PREZEIS is not a "zombie category" in Beck's sense, his notion urges us to question how holding on to "the old" impedes the emergence of "the new."

⁴ We could extend this line of thinking into Freud's distinction between symbolic and physical death, but that would take us beyond the scope of this article.

- ⁵ Law no. 14.947, Cria o Plano de Regularização das Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social (PREZEIS), 1987.
- ⁶ Many informal settlements fell outside of the 27 areas, which means that their housing rights were (and still are) not legally protected.
- ⁷ The Portal da transparência, an online municipal database, contains information about the PREZEIS Fund. It shows that there has been no investment in urbanization and legalization plans since 2016, and that the few funds available are for promotional materials and the payment of fees to ZEIS representatives.
- ⁸ The question may arise as to why the PT did not cancel PREZEIS. We see two main reasons for this. First, because PREZEIS was anchored in the law, which makes it difficult to cancel. Second, because canceling PREZEIS would generate negative publicity for the PT.
- ⁹ The names of the councillors are pseudonyms.

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