



# Discovering the para-formal city: controversies and mediations in public space.

## Débora Souto Allemand, Eduardo Rocha and Rafaela Barros de Pinho

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**Débora Souto Allemand** is architect and urban planner, and member of "*Cidade+Contemporaneidade*" research group. She researches relations among Contemporary Dance and Urban Space.

**Eduardo Rocha** is architect and urban planner. PhD in Architecture. Professor and Researcher at Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning College, at *Universidade Federal de Pelotas* (UFPel). He researches city and contemporaneity.

**Rafaela Barros de Pinho** is architect and urban planner. She researches city and contemporaneity.

### Abstract

This work aims to map para-formality in the downtown area of Latin American cities as Bagé, Salvador, Montevideo, Santiago de Chile, Santo Angelo, La Plata, Pelotas, Brasília, São Paulo and Jaguarão from urban cartography, making use of infographics and dissemination in real time via website. Activities considered to be para-formal are those that lie on the boundary between the formal – taken as formed, ready-made – and informal, as in "forming", "under construction." These are commercial, cultural, housing-related activities, among others, found in the public space of the city, which are not part of its first configuration, but nowadays become part of its everyday life. The subjects here called para-formal are actors of the city who take ownership of space and organize themselves without any intervention of the State. Their actions often generate controversies, disputes, different opinions and discussions, since they directly interfere in the dynamics of urban life and reconfigure the space of cities. Such assemblages construct, with other urban subjects, the city itself - *Do It Yourself*.

**Keywords:** para-formal, urban cartography, public space, urban design.

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## What is "para-formal"?

Light, dark, gray, like in a film noir, the town presents itself in various ways before our eyes. The town boasts several identities. At the same time the visitor is shown seductively invites to explore and discover he may also be presented with a terrifying aspect, a gate to the universe of the unknown. Its corners lead to both challenges and surprises, especially when what is in question is this that we here call para-formality.



Fig. 1 - Location map of the cities where data collection about "para-formal" occurred. Source: <http://www.guiageo-americas.com/mapas/americanasul-politico.htm>. Editing: Rafaela Pinho Barros, 2013.

This article is part of a research project that, between 2011 and 2012, aimed to experiment with para-formalities in central territories of some Latin American cities - Bagé, Salvador, Montevideo, Santiago de Chile, Santo Angelo, La Plata, Pelotas, Brasília, São Paulo and Jaguarão (figure 1) -, and has mapped them out from urban cartography, making use of infographics and dissemination in real time via website. The research turned to the unregulated spaces, "anarchist" areas, where people produce activities that tend to subvert traditional guidelines of the formal economy, urbanism and human relationships. That can lead to important changes, both theoretical and practical, in thinking and planning the city.

The contemporary city is a place of border, of rupture, a city of trade, a place in which proliferate abandoned, uncultivated areas and, at the same time, there are new cultures and subcultures always arriving, such as the activities called para-formal, which are daily manifestations of the city.

The public space in contemporary cities is not defined and limited by urban plans. On many occasions, there are city dwellers who decide which space will have a public character and which one will not; which space will fulfill a certain function or another. Through this process appear para-formal activities, such as "nobody zones", areas that start to fulfill different functions from the ones they were initially supposed to fulfill.

Thus, the research approached the central areas of cities, which in addition to being prime spaces of diversity are also places of densification of para-formal activities. We find, in these spaces, the "other urban", the one who escapes, resist, and survive in the everyday life of another urbanity, through tactics of resistance and appropriation of urban space, anonymously or not, but certainly dissimulated. This "other urban" is made explicit in the homeless, the street vendor, the peddler, the garbage collector, the prostitute, the artists, among others (Picture 2)



Fig. 2 – Para-formalities. Source: Débora Allemand, 2013.

Para-formal, a term created by the Argentine group GPA (2010), concerns a concept of borders, which unlike the opposition between formal and informal, is seeking experience gap or interstice between categories, called here as well as "para-formal" urban scenes. It differs, therefore, from areas of knowledge such as Urban Development and Economy, which precisely categorize their objects and studies in formal and informal city and/or economy. The para-formal model of investigation appropriates alternative categories to explore the "middle field", the interstitial areas of the ordinary city. Para-formal in this sense is something artificial and temporary, something that concerns the form, but that at the same time does not configure itself as such. It is a place of intersection between the formal, in the sense of formed, and informal in the sense of "in formation", between the predictable and the unpredictable. The para-formal thus blurs the traditional concepts of formal, as something supported by legislation, and informal, as unprotected by laws, settling on what inhabits the gap between them.

In this research, para-formal activities are those that lie on the boundary between the formal, taken as trained, ready, constituted, and informal in the sense of "in-training", "under construction". These are commercial, cultural, housing-related activities, among others, found in the public space of the city, which are not part of its first configuration, but nowadays become part of its everyday life. These are urban scenes, which can be individualized by photographic images and annotations. The para-formal in the routine of the city generates controversies, disputes,

debates and diverse opinions. It presupposes city-body and body-city relationships that are sometimes veiled and docile, others revealed and disobedient.

### **How can we capture the para-formal in the cities?**

Throughout this work we sought as goals (1) to understand and systematize para-formalities found in city centers, with the intention of giving visibility to the contemporary urban phenomena, (2) to analyze the relationship of the formal city with its para-formalities, and (3) to establish variables that enable a clear way to illustrate clearly the space and time as a basic sense of orientation, always through reading elements of plans and cartography, ie, images, and urban wanderings as a way to uncover the city within the city.

We delimited from these goals the following methodological procedures: (1) research concerning the cities studied, (2) collection of images in portions of the central areas of cities, (3) identification, analysis and classification of para-formal equipment found, (4) urban interventions from existing para-formal equipment; and (5) organization of data regarding the collection of images and analysis of activities.

According to the items below:

A. **Research regarding the studied cities.** At this stage there was a research related to each city in which the workshop, presented in the next section, took place referring to the number of inhabitants, the urban morphology, the historic city and territory – the downtown or central area. We also researched the theory of image and communication. All these data were summarized in a research report.

B. **Collecting wandering exploratory images in portions of central city areas.** This was a collection of images from workshops, configured as collective experiments, administered to different groups, formed by residents and non-residents of the cities. The images and wanderings were always made in the centers of cities, always having a point of start and arrival, but never given a pre-determined path to follow.

C. **Identification, analysis and classification of the para-formal devices found.** This stage sought to identify, in each photograph made during the wandering paths, para-formal equipment present in each registered scene, whether it would be stalls, baskets, boxes, banks, among others (Picture 3). After being identified, based on activities performed with the group of participants after the wanderings, the devices were analyzed and classified according to their type, size, mobility and facilities. Relations of bodies with the equipment, and the recognition of urban / environmental influences that could modify or allow activities such as the weather, the season, walkways, canopies and others were also made.



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| IDENTIFICAÇÃO      | NOME(S): Cristiane Nunes e Tássia Vasconcelos<br>IDADE(S): 22/24 anos<br>MAIL(S): cristiane_sn@hotmail.com   | PROCEDÊNCIA: <input type="checkbox"/> TURISTA<br><input type="checkbox"/> NATIVO<br>INSTITUIÇÃO/PROFISSÃO: estudantes de Arquitetura e Urbanismo - UFFel   |
|                    | TEMPO/CLIMA: <input type="checkbox"/> SOL <input type="checkbox"/> CHUVA <input type="checkbox"/> NUBLADO<br><input type="checkbox"/> VENTO <input type="checkbox"/> QUENTE <input type="checkbox"/> AMENO <input type="checkbox"/> FRIO | DATA: 18/10/12<br>TURNO: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MANHÃ <input type="checkbox"/> TARDE <input type="checkbox"/> NOITE   |
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Fig. 3 – Table analysis of the "para-formal" scenes. Source: Eduardo Rocha, 2013.

D. **Organization of data on the collections of images.** With the purpose of organizing the obtained material, we compiled a research report, which, in addition to discussing the group's view on the para-formality, met the images obtained from all Latin American cities surveyed. For this, we delimited a data sequence for each one of the cities. First, we presented the urban layout, and wandering paths (Picture 4), and then we chose from ten to fifteen para-formal scenes we considered outstanding both for its originality and/or repetition.

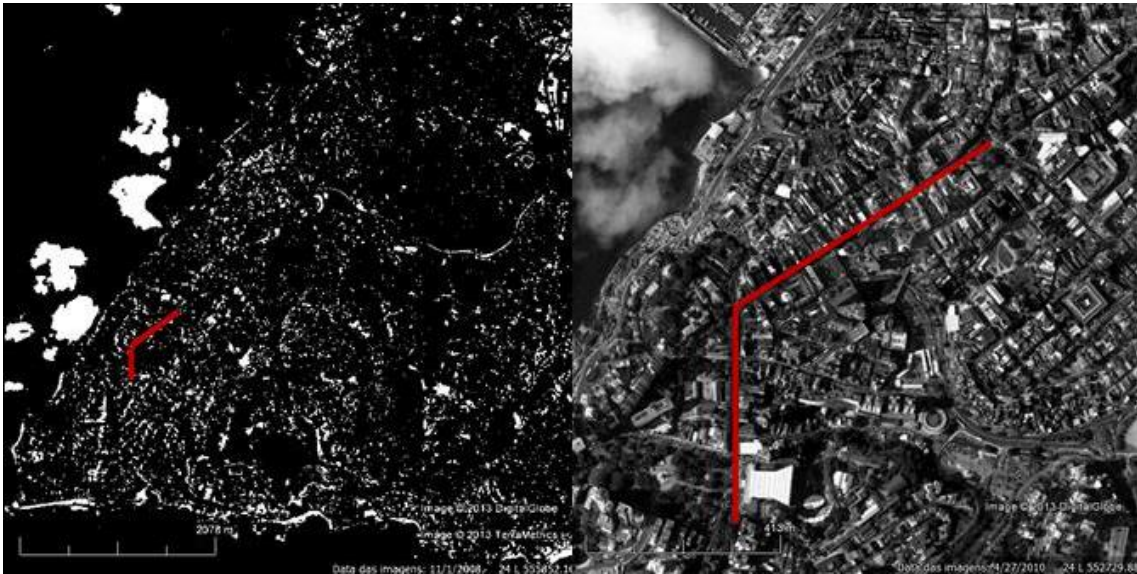


Fig. 4 – Maps showing the demarcation of the main wandering paths in the city of Salvador. Source: Eduardo Rocha, 2013.

E. **Analysis of the collected material.** We did some crossing of information from the cities surveyed, highlighting the types of activities and equipment more or less used, relating them to the urban space (Picture 5). We also investigated the nature of the para-formal bodies, seeking to understand the differences from one place to another. However, the main analyzes focused public space where para-formal activities took place, relating them to the practice of urbanism and urban planning.

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Fig. 5 – Trailers in the city of Jaguarão. Source: Rafaela Pinho, 2013.

Para-formalities fight for space with new constructions. Newsstands get mixed with street vendors, posters announcing promotions in stores mingle with ads on buses. When one sees too much, very little is noticeable. Amidst all these images, and their synchronous accumulation, the man sees and surprises himself in his own abandonment.

Everything small disappears. But if we lose all that is small, we also lose our orientation, we become victims of what is great, impenetrable, super-powerful. One must fight for all that is small and still exists. The small things give the great ones a point of view (WENDERS 1994, p. 187).

Systematizations drawn from material collected lead to some peculiarities, among which are:

- **Trailers.** The trailers are the para-formal category of greater evidence in the cities of Jaguarão, Bagé, Pelotas, San Angelo and Montevideo (Picture 6). They are found in various locations around the city, from the central square to medians, streets with less traffic, along with other para-formal clusters. Contrary to the municipal laws, that state these trailers should be mobile, they are actually fixed in locations, presenting themselves as traditional commercial spots, either because they are fixed or concreted into the ground, or because they have some structure around them.

Most of these para-formal equipment is used to sell snacks and food in general. As a few exceptions, they are also used for the sale of clothing, toys and other miscellaneous goods. Although such devices are irregular, occupying parking space, or even disrupting the flow of people on the sidewalks – most of the time occupied by tables and chairs - few inhabitants of the city of Jaguarão, for example, would opt for a city without trailers.

The survey results pointed positively to the use of trailers on public space, showing that people like to have such equipment in their towns, for the most different reasons. Either because it is a common practice, or because they generate commotion and thus greater safety at night, or even because they enjoy the food on offer – a variety of snacks – or because they attract people to a particular location, among others. We highlight the terrible aesthetic and sanitary quality of some of these trailers, which have a negative impact to the image of the city.

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Fig.6 – Trailers in the city of Montevideo. Source: Débora Allemand, 2013.

• **Invented para-cycles.** What we subsequently call "invented para-cycles" are found in large numbers in the cities of Jaguarão (Picture 7), Pelotas and Santiago. Any object as a grid, post, among others, can serve as support to park bicycles in the city center.

During the wanderings it could be observed, indiscriminately, the huge amount of this para-formal use of both public and private space. This phenomenon is observed not only in the cities studied, but in most cities that enable the use of the bicycle for transportation, and, in a contradictory way, such use not encouraged by the public power or by private initiatives. The city itself seems to suggest, therefore, the need for para-cycles.

But if the city has no space for cyclists, why is the bike still the means of locomotion of many? Why it still resists, re-exists in the city? According to Thais Portela (2009), resistances are a way that the so called minorities find to go against development models dictated by a supposed majority. The most significant example is the use of the automobile as the primary means of urban transport, which occupies most of the space of routes and minimizes the space for people. Understanding cities as places to be used and lived by people, the bike could be an interesting way to try them and at the same time be an efficient means of transportation, and one that also contributes to the reduction of energy consumption.

Here we would like to highlight:

- Cycling in the city can be a good way to feel it, discover it, noting the gaps, margins, activities that end up going unnoticed when we walk by car or bus, as we enter the "capsule" that transports us from one place to another, one that does not allow us to observe the way.

- Cycling is a means of expression of society and "screams" for space and visibility. Neither more nor less than the other modes, it should be considered in city planning and road expansion or reorganization projects.



Fig. 7 – Para-cycles invented in the city of Jaguarão. Source: Débora Allemand, 2013.

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• **"Para-formal" in formal:** A very recurrent class in the cities of Jaguarão, São Paulo (Picture 8), Bage and Sant'Angelo is what we call "para-formal in formal". These are "para-formal" activities that occur attached to formal activities (shops, restaurants, etc.) The formal advances indiscriminately on public space, accommodating up on sidewalks, facades and even in parking spaces and bearing housings. An extension of the displays. It is cultural in some cities that products offered by the shops be at display in the street to draw the consumer's attention.

Many commercial buildings are of historical interest and are residential typology (eclectic-historicist), making the existence and opening of conventional displays difficult, so the merchant chooses to display the goods out of his private space, therefore creating what we call "para-formal "in formal.



Fig. 8 – "Para-formal" in formal, city of São Paulo. Source: Débora Allemand, 2013.

• **Isolated wandering vendors or street traders:** While walking through the city streets, an activity that attracts attention is the isolated mobile vendors (Picture 9), the ones who try to sell their product without "fixed business location" - perhaps a fixed territory -; but since they have no particular location on the city map, every day or hour they can move, seeking shade or potential new clients. All in a single nomadic movement.

There also can be found a vast array of wandering "para-formalities", those who walk all the time, moving around the city: sellers of various products, advertisers, sound advertising, promoters of products and establishments, etc.



Fig. 9 – Isolated mobile and wandering vendors in the city of Salvador. Source: Eduardo Rocha, 2013.



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• **Large "para-formal" sets:** These sets are usually known as "Camelôs" (Picture 10). They have a cluster of "para-formal" activities consisting of stalls selling from clothing to electronics, through food and everything imaginable. It consists of trailers, stalls and some street vendors. Most activities or equipment are fixed in the public space. Its implementation follows no set pattern or regularization, although covertly spaces are defined and demarcated. Walk around these sets is like walking in a maze.



Fig. 10 – Grande conjunto "para-formal" na cidade de Jaguarão. Fonte: Eduardo Rocha, 2013.

- **Homeless:** Homeless are in the scenes found in most of the cities studied (Picture 11); disadvantaged people that, for lack of choice, live on the pavements, usually in open places, though covered with canopies. Maybe because this scene is present every day in the street it ends up becoming part of the urban scenery which we are accustomed to live in.

Such residents are mostly beggars, or live on the streets begging, something that affects the welfare of the population that does not feel comfortable with this situation. Unfortunately it is true in many of Latin American cities.



Fig. 11 – Homeless person in the city of Montevideo. Source: Eduardo Rocha, 2013.

• **Sound:** When walking through town centers there is a category that is distinguished by sound, such category is composed of singer-songwriters, who are dedicated to present their songs in public space (Picture 12). In addition to "deliver" their music, live or on record, in exchange for money, the musicians also seek to sell their custom products such as CDs and DVDs.

The sound is a category that deserves a particular study, it can be harmonious or present itself as noise pollution in the city space. It consists of the entire mix that the public space supports on his vocal cords, so it is natural to go out of tune sometimes.

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Fig.12 – Street musicians in the city of Pelotas. Source: Rafaela Pinho, 2013.

## Cartographies of the “para-formal” in latin american cities

During the research process we deemed necessary a space cut in the cities choosing their town centers as the target of the study. “Center” thought of as the place of meeting, complexity and density of “para-formal” scenarios, usually characterized by wide boardwalks large flow of pedestrians. This spatial selection renamed the project: “Para-formal in the City Centre”. The conclusions are drawn, therefore, from three fronts: public space, the equipment and the body:

- **“Para-formal” public space:** We find para-formalities in the following areas: sidewalks, awnings, street corners, dropouts, voids, among others. Couplings to urban facilities (bank, post, bins, etc.) which may serve as a reference for the places of “para-formalities”.

Many seek the shade in places where the weather is hot or the sun to warm up on cold days. The movement of the sun and the shadows delimits the area usable by “para-formal” agents in the public space. We found many trailers (big and stationary equipment) from the square up to the central avenues flowerbeds, streets with less traffic along with other “para-formal” clusters.

They also coexist in the category “para-formal in formal”, where activities “para-formal” occur attached to formal activities (shops, restaurants, hardware, etc.). The formal moves indiscriminately on public space, accommodating up on sidewalks, facades and even in parking spaces and bearing housings. A sort of extension of the displays.

We then concluded that the use of sidewalks can “pollute the visual” of the streets, however, in many cities, this habit is accepted by the population that will even “interact” with the products, seeing and touching the goods without entering the facility.

Another highlight is that some of these establishments, in front of their premises, provide public services and facilities to the residents of the city, such as benches to rest, bins, para-cycles, natural shadow, etc. It is possible to observe that this invasion of public space, when indiscriminate, can obstruct public tours making them obstacles for pedestrians. One could also note, on the spaces occupied by large equipment such as trailers, that these need to be studied in order to determine where they should be allocated in the public space: it is the role of the architect and urbanist plan the “para-formal” spaces.

Another type of “para-formality” that requires study and planning is the big “para-formal” sets, that determine and affect, sometimes, large areas of the city, more

than just the territory physically occupied by it. These areas should be targeted for detailed studies because such areas / territories may end up taking a proportion of coverage and unwanted deregulation for a well-functioning city (there are cases where this deregulation ended up taking charge of a neighborhood or even a whole city).

- **"Para-formal" equipment:** The equipment was divided into three categories concerning: the size, mobility and facilities. We found many small and mobile "para-formal" and many other large and fixed (like the trailers, which have, in most cases, hydraulic and electrical systems).

The city of Salvador, for example, had many small mobile devices such as carts selling juices. On the other hand, in Bage and Jaguarão, there was a lot of trailers, which probably started off as portable but today, most often, are fixed at the sites they chose to stay, either because they are fixed or concreted into the ground, or even because it may possess some structure around it. Most residents of Bage and Jaguarão concluded that they like the trailers, because they bring security at night and are a cheap food option, being a part of everyday life. The ones that dislike the trailers claim that they hinder the site's architecture - "they are ugly".

It was concluded that large and fixed equipment have no good solutions "architecturally". They are mostly adapted and often leased at strategic points for the image perception of the city, many of them occupying "large" public areas. Furthermore, many of the trailers caught on the wanderings were in precarious conservation and hygiene.

Now the wandering and mobile scenes/activities enliven the public space of the city, making every moment we come across filled with new sensations, sounds and different landscapes. The street vendors and wanderers bring creative solutions to the city center, inventing new uses for it and, in order to do so, make use of survival and living strategies. They are able to create a network of dependency to their uses and activities - "it is impossible to live without them."

- **"Para-formal" body:** The "para-formal" body is usually present in the activities we observed and often it is the very "para-formality" itself. They may be sitting, standing or walking. Solitary or in groups.

The "paraformal-body" is one who tries to sell their product without "fixed business location", without a particular location on the city map, moving every day or hour, seeking for shade or potential new clients, with apparatuses always nearby, whether they be public or carried with themselves.

It was also observed that the bodies that accompanied the medium sized and mobile equipment generally were sitting or standing next to the equipment. That is not the case for the trailers, as an example, in which the bodies were inside the equipment itself, being able to move with relative ease.

## Final considerations

It was noted, too, that the "para-formal" scenes do not get to be obstacles, but, on the other hand, points of reference - interesting things (GEHL 2013) - and come to serve as a rest stop to pedestrians (body support).

From the analysis and crossings of maps, it was possible to get some results, such as:

- 1) The "para-formal" is loaded with custom and cultural local identity/difference;



- 2) The "para-formal" teaches us new solutions to the contemporary city, as well as animate, teach, live and experience the city;
- 3) The existing urban design (legal) accommodates itself up to the "para-formal" scenes and vice versa;
- 4) At the same time, the "para-formal" in several scenes also pollutes, disrupts and attacks the city and the citizen and;
- 5) The "para-formal" denounces a lack of urban facilities and;
- 6) The subjects of the "para-formal" are true actors of the city, making themselves the space of the *polis*, a space of politics, of fighting for the rights that exceed the ones established by the agencies that control the city.

Based on the studies, analyzes, workshops and interventions we may state, at the end of the survey, that coexists a "para-formal" city, a parallel city to the formal city. We found a space of indiscernibility, a blurred area where we can abandon or find anything that we had lost right there. The city sometimes limits, sometimes releases the bodies and ideas, the kind of movement experienced in the body of the user is changed as the city is modified. The "para-formal" performs assemblages between the different users of the city, and its daily life architects its own city - *Do It Yourself* - interfering directly in the dynamics of urban life and bringing new ways of thinking about the city.

Is by walking in the gaps, margins and obscure paths of the urban spectacle that we see another city arise: intense, alive. The "Other Urban" is the one that escapes, resists, and survives in the everyday lives of such other urbanity, through tactics of resistance and appropriation of urban space, anonymously (or not) and dissimulated, radical. This "Other Urban" is explained through the figures of homeless people, street vendors, collectors, prostitutes, artists, among others. Those are the ones the majority chooses to keep in invisibility, opacity, turning them in "targets" to regulation or, in the words of Paola Jacques (2012), "aseptic" projects and urban interventions. Therefore, we understand the importance of urban wanderings as a way of building the city, opening up space for discussions and thoughts about the place of mankind.

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