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about garAges

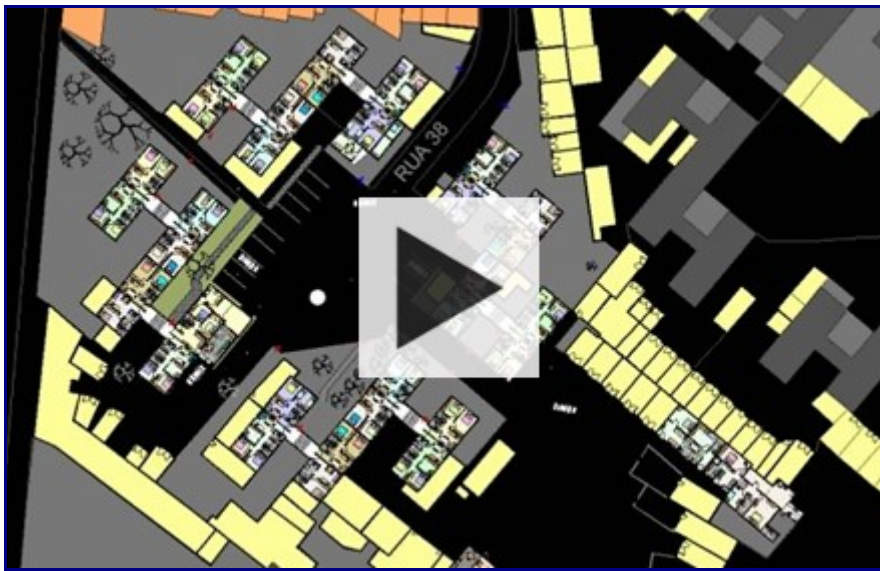
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about garAges is a documentary about the spatiality of the urban periphery. The film explores how people appropriate this space and how these individual actions will come to informally compose another space, unpredictable and radically distinct from the originally built one. The technique used in the movie shows, in an articulated way, the en route camera and plan images, thus composing a description of the systemic dimension of the city. The city is understood as a spatial system, a giant net of articulated courses where even the most subtle modifications tend to affect people's lives in a radical way.

The film deals with the process of dereliction of a large housing complex, large enough to constitute itself as a city district. The film shows how this dereliction process, taken as something negative in common sense, converts itself, in that place, in opportunity and driving force of a spectacular spatial, social and economical transformation occurred over the course of two decades. The scenario is the Rubem Berta housing complex, situated in the northern zone of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

about garAges is a socio-spatial report. It shows people, the housing complex residents, their paths, their moments and their perspectives, and presents this social theme in a way viscerally tied to the handling of space by these residents. Following such line, about garages is a tribute to the capacity of self-organization of the people and their spaces. The Rubem Berta housing complex, as the place is known, would originally result, if its construction had been carried to term as it was planned, in the typical mass produced housing complex, with everything and everyone in precisely defined positioning: houses here, commercial spaces there, circulation spaces, leisure spaces, everything straightened according to the Athens Charter, central document in the primer of modernist urbanism.

Rubem Berta, however, would never come to concretize this ideal. The bankruptcy of the contractor left the buildings unfinished and abandoned by a few years, to the point of them ending up being invaded. The invasion was an organized movement, involving people from different origins, rural and urban. From a troubled early life, the Rubem Berta complex went being colonized, developed itself and converted itself in an exemplary situation of the contemporary urban counterculture.

Although the place has been planned in order to accommodate a predetermined formation, there happened, since the origin, spatial situations that came to propitiate spontaneous accomplishment of the most varied individual actions in space, jointly producing a continuous spatial transformation in that place, in its appearance, and, above all, in its spatial logic. On the other hand, its public space, in its origin, is precariously defined. The apartment blocks were distributed in a peculiar manner, with groupings of edifications disposed around large, roughly circular spaces, big yards that repeated throughout the area. From this spatial configuration would result that the interfaces between the different edification groupings came to become residual spaces that were, meter by meter, being occupied in a situation at first glance without law and without order.

In that context, the edifications originally predicted as garages emerge as mother cells in the spatial metamorphosis shown in the documentary. These spaces were initially occupied by residents who negotiated their own apartments and saw there a new world of possibilities of spatial handling and life improvement, especially if compared to the possibilities of modification of the original apartments.

In this process, the garages went becoming houses, markets, businesses, places of worship and everything else that would be wanted. The improvising also expanded in the ground apartments too, to which were added garages that were converted in kitchens, balconies, etc. Over time, these increasings become faster and, as is worth noting, start to establish a new spatial order, distinct from that initial order noticeably geometric, so perceptible in plan. This new order simply follows from two factors coming from urban practice: the demands of expansion of the individual space combined with the need, often antagonistic, of preserving, or extending, or limiting, or eliminating accesses. The result is amazing. This new order, predominantly topological, went being gradually approved by the population, becoming today part of the collective unconscious mind: the spatial logic of the labyrinth.

The apparent explicitness of the original plan, where a background without defined shape is devastated by a precise pattern of geometric shapes, is replaced by a complex

configuration where the picture becomes more and more undefined and the background takes on a clear definition in the continuity of the paths spontaneously generated from the sheer necessity of accessibility to the different parts of the complex. The unrestricted accessibility of the original spatial distribution was replaced by a spatial pattern where a maze-style mesh begins to be glimpsed. The pressure of common sense goes step by step taking over and deforming what remains of a conceptual order that is unviable on practice. The place moves quickly and consistently to become a genuine part of the urban culture of our time, with all the problems, contradictions, and why not, the qualities inherent to this condition.

about garAges is a report of this process. A spatial report given through the actions of the resident, a statement of solidarity, ambition, quarrels, perseverance and joy. The testimony of the residents and the visualization of space related issues happen in parallel. The film, beyond its natural function of entertainment, has the ambition – one can say cultural – of showing to the general public an unusual scenario full of social and economical life existing in the city of Porto Alegre, right under our noses, emerged through the spontaneous action of the population from an area ideally planned. Naturally, a red alert to our planners.