ON INSTRUMENTS FOR DIRECT ACTION IN THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

LÍGIA MILAGRES

Ligia Milagres majored in architecture at UFMG (2008), received her Master's from the Graduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism at UFMG (2011) and is pursuing a PhD at the same institution. Her research focuses on groups of dwellers' self-organization and decision-making in the production of urban space. Her topics of interest are: planning and management on a microlocal scale, collective initiatives, and autonomous organization.

Abstract

This paper discusses the possibility of direct action of self-organized groups of urban dwellers in the decision-making on the production of microlocal space[1]. To this end, it draws from Marcelo Lopes de Souza's (2006 and 2012) problematization of the constraints to the relation between urban social movements and the state and of the potential proactive role of civil society in the planning and management of space together with the state, despite the state, and against the state. This paper, then, develops an argument in favor of social movements political actions against the state. For that it presents the case of a group of favela dwellers in Belo Horizonte and draw from a critical anarchist approach on the structure of the state. In

[1] This discussion has been developed in the context of the author's doctoral research (2012-2016), in course at the Graduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism at Federal University of Minas Gerais, under the supervision of Professor Ana Paula Baltazar dos Santos. This paper has also drawn from the final project of the subject Architecture as an Interface, taught by the same professor, and in light of her valuable notes, guidance, and criticism.

conclusion, based on the notion of interface (Ana Paula Baltazar, 2007, 2012, 2013; Ana Paula Baltazar & Silke Kapp, 2006, 2009), this paper identifies features that might contribute to the formulation of alternatives to the instruments employed by the state, fostering the dwellers' self-organization and autonomy.

Keywords: production of urban space; groups of dwellers; direct action; self-organization.

Social movements, groups of city dwellers, and the critique of the State

The 9th number of V!RUS, dedicated to the theme "the city and the other," is propitious to discuss the protagonist role of the collectivity of urban dwellers in the production of space in the city. The term "production of space" is based on Henri Lefebvre's (1973, 1974) dialectic discussion. He considers that the production of space is central to the reproduction of capitalism and heteronomous political structures. These structures are maintained and reproduced by the production of space and, simultaneously, can be transformed by changing its production. In this context, the critique of the heteronomy of the state apparatus–qua an anarchist critique which will be presented below–offers important elements to the discussion of this transformation process, questioning the hierarchy present in decision-making procedures.

The centrality of the state in planning and urban management is criticized by Marcelo Lopes de Souza, who argues for the protagonist role of social movements in these processes, i.e., as agents with the ability to propose and implement socio-spatial alternatives, not merely as partners of the state. Souza presents three types of social movements' political action: *together with the state, despite the state, and against the state*.[2] This paper specifically discusses the case of a group of *favela* dwellers in Belo Horizonte, which place themselves against the state.

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[2] The author develops this discussion in the paper *Together with the state, despite the state, against the state—social movements as 'critical urban planning agents'* (2006) and, more recently, discusses this topic further in the paper *Ação direta e luta institucional: complementaridade ou antítese?* (Part 1 and Part 2, 2012).

Souza claims that urban social movements compromise their autonomy when they work in partnership with the state. For him, this risk is due to the tendency to fit their experiences into the molds of state procedures. That is, even when they are formulated and conducted by leftist governments, institutionalized participation processes can be a trap that negates the potential of social movements' practices. The author calls this process "structural co-optation", a threat to "any social movement that accepts to join institutionalized channels of participation" (Souza, 2006, p. 334).

As regards social activism, Souza draws our attention to the specificities of social movements, whose main characteristic is the dialectical consideration of specific local issues and global structural ones:

> "[...] social *movement* is a special kind of social activism: namely, one which is particularly ambitious and critical. [...] different from a 'parochial' local activism which operates more or less as a mere pressure group in order to preserve certain privileges or obtain some gains in the general framework of the economic and political status quo, and without criticizing status quo as such, social *movements* act as 'militant particularisms' which are at the same time imbedded in place-specific experiences and committed to more general, 'universal' ethical values and broader political goals [...]" (SOUZA, 2006, p.340)

Still in this context, according to Souza, *neighborhood activism* and *favela activism* are no longer relevant and no longer play the important role they did in the 1960s and 1970s, pressuring the local state:

> neighbourhood associations are usually nothing else than clientelistic, serving as bastions of 'territorial corporatism' for middle-class residents or as structures for political bargaining (exchange of votes for petty favours) on the part of the poor – or even (and increasingly) as instruments in the hands of favela-based drug traffickers. (SOUZA, 2006, p. 331)

In view of these nuances, this paper focuses on the political actions of groups of dwellers that share the same urban area, motivated by community issues concerning everyday space on a microlocal[3] scale. The goal is to highlight this particular type of social arrangement and how it has come about in some urban areas. As an example, the case of a group of dwellers of Vila das Antenas located in Morro das Pedras (Belo Horizonte) is presented in short and discussed from the author's perspective. This group

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[3] I use the term "microlocal" according to Souza's notion of scale (or level). The microlocal scale "corresponds to territorial divisions [...] that refer to spaces that can be experienced intensely and directly in everyday life" (Souza, 2010, p.107).

does not fit in the traditional neighborhood association mold and is going through a more comprehensive process of critical development, beyond immediate issues, which deserves to be discussed.

The group was formed in 2009, independent of the existing residents'association and other formal groups, initially aimed at resisting an intervention process imposed by the city administration. The intervention consisted of building a road across their neighborhood connecting two major avenues, which involved the removal of part of its dwellers. At that time, the group of dwellers contacted two research groups at UFMG's School of Architecture and Urbanism, who shared the same criticism of how government interventions are proposed and implemented in the neighbourhoods in *favelas*. Both groups, MOM (Living in Other Ways) and LAGEAR (Graphic Laboratory for Architectural Experimentation), in which research projects the author participates, have followed and supported the self-organization process of this group of dwellers since then.[4] This contact contributed to group discussions on the relation between immediate issues experienced by dwellers (intervention proposals and removals) and structural issues behind them (the doings of the state and the real estate industry regarding the production of urban space). From these discussions, it became clear that the historical consciousness of the socio-spatial construction of Vila das Antenas by its dwellers was conducive to a more comprehensive and consistent organization.

Despite the resistance that initially motivated the group, dozens of houses were removed and, after a bureaucratic process that lasted three years, the road was built in 2011. Since then, the group (whose permanent core oscillates between 8-10 dwellers) has sought ways to improve their political organization and efficacy, proposing interventions, events, and regular activities, in addition to opposing other heteronomous processes. The most recent process is an agreement between the Municipality of Belo Horizonte and CEMIG (the energy company of Minas Gerais State), which threatens to remove part of Vila das Antenas dwellers who have lived under a transmission line for decades.

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[4] It is important to remark that both research groups investigate critical alternatives to the technicians and researchers' work as mediators by developing instruments that foster dwellers' discussion, self-organization and autonomy.

The group remains active and, despite its difficulties in achieving a higher level of organization, seeks to promote historical consciousness among the community dwellers, by discussing their condition as a social group and its future prospects. The goal of this process is to strengthen the resistance to unfavorable city administration proposals and to imagine alternatives to their socio-spatial production.

Some aspects of the actions of this group of dwellers are especially important to this discussion. Unlike other community groups whose formation and activities are motivated by processes run by the state or other external mediators, the group from Vila das Antenas has been motivated by resistance to and criticism of government actions. Instead of adopting a demanding attitude towards the state, the group seeks a proactive outlook on their own problems, ever alert to the risks of cooptation. Although their actions are not completely consistent, i.e., pointing in the same direction (against the state), a critique of the state has been consolidated at the same time as they occur. For instance, a conflict with the city administration–which did not allow the use of CRAS building (the neighborhood's social assistance reference center) for a community event sponsored by the group–helped its members to realize that in order to be able to manage their activities autonomously they have to have their own space instead of using buildings constructed in their community and managed by the city. The group has been systematically using with increasing frequency an outdoors space surrounded by houses, which is temporarily equipped by them according to its desired use (e.g., cinema, auditorium or library).

One of the main difficulties encountered by the group is to bring together other dwellers in deliberations and activities, engaging those who are still acquiesce to government interventions. This lack of social articulation often weakens the group in situations of confrontation and the resulting gap in relation to other dwellers can be wide enough for the group to be perceived as responsible for proposing improvements in the neighborhood. That is, instead of group actions being seen as feasible collective practices with direct benefits to their everyday lives, some dwellers tend to reproduce, on a smaller scale, their customary relation with the state.

Participatory instruments and representative democracy

Participatory instruments have been implemented in the planning and management of urban space, especially from the 1990s onward (Participatory Budgeting, Participatory Planning, Councils, among others), as part of routine procedure in some Brazilian municipalities. More recently, in 2011, the government of Belo Horizonte adopted a city division into 40 territories–called "shared management" territories–so as to purportedly increase possibilities for dialogue between the city administration and urban dwellers (Nabuco, Ferreira, & Almeida, 2011).

Although the stated goal of the aforementioned instruments is to increase popular participation, they do not enable groups of dwellers to act as decision-makers on the microlocal level—especially if these groups are made up of dwellers who lack economic and political power. Even when they acknowledge some participation or the inclusion of some demands as well as the monitoring by representatives of dwellers, these channels end up leading to procedures and routines conducted strictly by the state apparatus. Another aspect that characterizes these channels of participation and indicates their limits is the fact that, in general, they use structures of representative democracy, not direct democracy. Bearing this situation in mind, the division of the city into "shared management" territories mentioned earlier ends up reinforcing administrative procedures rather than enabling processes conducted by organized groups from these territories.

Participation instruments employed in planning and urban management processes do not reformulate the production of space beyond the capitalist production and political organization based on representative democracy. Regarding this issue, Souza warns that:

a consistent participatory experience, exactly because it is consistent, deserves to be treated with suspicion and caution (even when it is positively valued, tactically): after all, even more than a weak experience, it can deceive and disarm further by suggesting tacitly, based on the results that it can produce, that representative "democracy" is less problematic than it actually is (Souza, 2012b, p.3).

Thus, urban dwellers (whether living in neighborhoods or *favelas*–with the exception of groups with economic and political privileges) are kept away from decision-making processes and the possibility of problematizing aspects of the production of everyday space.

Possibilities against the State

Souza (2006, 2012) argues for a critical complementarity between what he calls *direct action* (self-governing civil society) and *institutional struggle* (critical and tactical cooperation of social movements with non-conservative parties that assume government power). That is, it is not a matter of disregarding the state, but of knowing when and how to act during its conjunctural breaches, while maintaining a critical stance with respect to its heteronomous structure (Souza, 2012). The state-critical perspective advocated by Souza involves especially the critique of the heteronomous structure of the state apparatus. Despite displaying conjunctural changes in orientation, the essence of the structure of the state "lies in maintaining heteronomous order (structural asymmetry of power, structural division between leaders and the led), which is its main expression and essential mainstay" (Souza, 2012a, p. 2).

The criticism advocated by the author is vital to the present discussion and its intention to explore instruments for direct action as part of a transformation process arising from the production of space. Souza is one of the few critics of urban planning dedicated to the radical critique of the state apparatus. Marxist thought, which forms the basis of much of the criticism in this direction, does not radically deny the set of state institutions in the process of social transformation. On the other hand, anarchists, who advocate that the structure of the state be dismantled as this transformation process occurs, are either viewed superficially or without radical critique (Baltazar dos Santos, 2009), often being assimilated by neoliberals that argue for the replacement of the state with corporations. This is not to strengthen the dichotomy between the state and civil society, or to ignore the state, but to criticize it and imagine ways to transform the existing political organization.

The anarchist critique of the state is often interpreted as if it advocated the destruction of the political structure in favor of a complete lack of social organization. Nevertheless, this critique presupposes the dismantling of the state apparatus in a process of social and political reorganization. The anarchist denial of this apparatus does not imply desarray, but it is a necessary step to make room for another form of social organization radically different from representative democracy. It is a political structure based on self-management and direct democracy, in which people can actually propose and decide on aspects of their organization.

To Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), one of the theorists of classical anarchism, the state implies the abstraction of the public and common interest, thus sacrificing the population's actual interests. Bakunin's argument against the state is also based on the anarchist premise of international solidarity, which implies the negation of patriotism and institutions supporting the state at various levels (Bakunin, 1950). Colin Ward (1924-2010), contemporary anarchist author, devoted much of his work to critically analyzing social policies of the state in the British context. For him, the policies promoted by the welfare state in Britain in the twentieth century inhibited the practice of mutual support that existed between workers in the nineteenth century. These mutual support practices could have developed further and, in place of the welfare state, there would be today what he calls a welfare society. Obstruction of voluntarism and localism, as Ward argues, refers to trusting the state apparatus as a structure that can solve social problems (Ward, 2000).

> The nineteenth century working classes, living far below the tax threshold, taxed themselves in pennies every week for the upkeep of their innumerable friendly societies. The twentieth century employed workers, as well as its alleged National Insurance contributions, pays a large slice of its outcome for the support of the state [...] We took the wrong road to welfare. (WARD, 2000: 12)

Both theorists, in different times and contexts, present relevant ideas to the present discussion. Both identify the state apparatus as hindering the proactivity of civil society regarding concrete issues of common interest.

Therefore, if state participatory instruments do not meet autonomous political practice in the production of everyday space, we need to discuss alternatives that contribute to the self-organization of groups such as the

one in Vila das Antenas. Thus they could collectively discuss their problems and possibilities, defining the course of the socio-spatial production. This is no easy task, considering that the logic of representation is sometimes incorporated even by powerful social movements, that an abstract "government" is recognized as responsible for proposing improvements in the urban space or even that dwellers find it difficult to discuss common issues with their own neighbors.

Instruments (interfaces) for direct action

What would be the features of instruments oriented towards the process of "overcoming heteronomy,"–as pointed out by Souza (2006)– in the production of space, considering the direct action of groups of dwellers on a microlocal scale?

Ana Paula Baltazar dos Santos (2007, 2012, & 2013) and Silke Kapp (2006, 2009) argue in favor of instruments consistent with people's autonomy in the production of space based on the concept of *interface*. It is a type of instrument that dispenses with mediators (such as architects and other experts in the production of space) and enables a continued production of space by dwellers, allowing them to problematize their decisions and actions at the same time as they use and transform spaces. Another important feature is that the interface operates as a "connection and/or separation instrument that depends on users' interactions" (BALTAZAR, 2012) and does not determine the relationships between agents. That is, it does not imply, beforehand, the domination of one group over another.[5]

Below, the aforementioned authors address the production of interfaces as elements facilitating social commitment qua a critical alternative to technicians' work as mediators:

> "Instead of stimulating competition and reinforcement of leaderships within communities, which usually end up with very authoritative proposals for structural interventions, we propose a critical approach that includes the whole community in a process of self-mobilization, self-organization and self-management. Insted of mediatores our role is to design and provide interfaces for such autonomous process. Providing access to information and means for

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[5] Class notes, Architecture as interface, taught by professor Ana Paula Baltazar dos Santos at the Graduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism at UFMG in the first semester of 2011.

> negotiation is a first step to overcome usual macroplanning that creates a permanent dependence of the community on the state or another sponsoring institution." (KAPP e BALTAZAR, 2009 p. 21).

The two elements indicated by the authors as departure points—*access to information* and *means of negotiation*—served as the basis for the creation of an interface in the city of Congonhas (MG): Ituita (2012).[6] The purpose of presenting this case is not to restrict discussion to this specific arrangement, but to explain how these elements can be organized in practice. The interface Ituita was designed to promote discussion and engagement among dwellers regarding spatial production of the city. It comprises three interactive LED panels (located at Congonhas' downtown square) connected to a website. At this website, Congonhas residents answer questions on the city, neighborhood, and street scale by choosing the colors green (positive), yellow (indifferent), and red (negative); they can also take part in an online discussion forum. Their answers are graphically shown on the panels, evidencing information and standpoints that had not been hitherto perceived systematically and publicly. The interface—which still is under testing—may enable continual public diagnosis, thereby contributing to a continual collective discussion about issues and potential aspects of everyday space by inhabitants.

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[6] The interface was co-developed by LAGEAR and Opera Architecture Studio. For more information, see: Stralen, M.; Baltazar, A.P.; Melgaço, L.; Arruda, G. Congonhas Media Cascade - Ituita: A permanent urban interactive interface for citizenship. In: *eCAADe 2012: The 30th International Conference on Education and research in Computer Aided Architectural Design in Europe*, 2012, Prague, 2012.
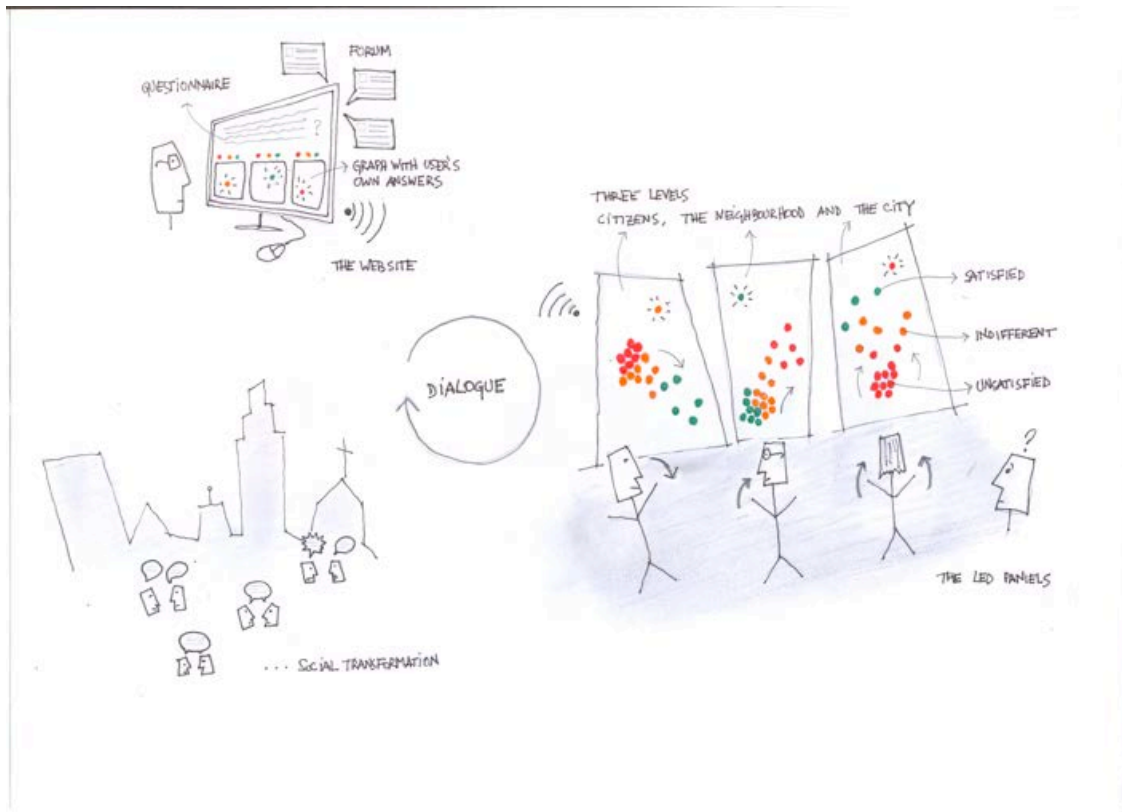
Figure 1. Graphic representation of interface interaction levels. Source: LAGEAR Archives (UFMG), 2012.

Such instruments, which enable access to information and means of negotiation, can support groups like Vila das Antenas in raising and problematizing socio-spatial issues, improving their conditions for direct action in conceiving and implementing proposals. Broadly speaking, developing the idea of interface can lead in the way pointed by anarchist critique, providing city dwellers with means for experiencing direct democracy on the microlocal scale and enabling discussion and collective decision-making in the production of everyday space.

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