The production of everyday life public space

Lígia Milagres, Silke Kapp, Ana Paula Baltazar

Ligia Milagres is an Architect and Researcher of the group Living in Other Ways (MOM-UFMG), Brazil.

Silke Kapp is an Architect, Doctor and Master in Philosophy, Associate Professor at School of Architecture, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais and Coordinator of the group Living in Other Ways (MOM-UFMG), Brazil.

Ana Paula Baltazar is an Architect, Ph.D. in Architecture and Virtual Environments and Master in Architecture, Associate Professor at School of Architecture, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais and Researcher of the group Living in Other Ways (MOM-UFMG), Brazil.

Abstract

The paper is an excert of the author's Masters thesis about the production of everyday public spaces. Instead of addressing the public spaces in general, in its historical or institutional sense, it seeks to investigate the spaces left when private and closed lands are subtracted. They are sidewalks, streets, central walkways in main roads, small neighborhood parks, residual spaces and other open spaces that can be occupied or even physically transformed by the neighborhood dwellers. However, as urban planning usually prioritizes the circulation of cars, commodities and people, this possibility is limited and rarely explored.

To inform the discussion on people's engagement with the production of such spaces, this paper describes a specific case in Belo Horizonte — one of the largest Brazilian cities. It is the case of an interrupted stretch of street that is abandoned, located in an upper middle class neighbourhood. In order to test the degree of engagement or passiveness of the neighbours, a tactic of distributing leaflets directing people to a blog created to discuss what to do with this public space was adopted. This paper describes the evidences raised by the discussions in the blog concerning people's everyday passivity and the habitual delegation of decisions about public spaces to third parties. Our findings inform a discussion on an alternative urbanism that relies on tools with which people might engage in the production of public spaces.

1. Specialized public space and everyday public space

When it comes to the issue of the journal, designing coexistence, it is necessary to go beyond the discussion that considers only the appropriation of public spaces, moving towards a debate about their collective production. Namely, a critical reflection on the public spaces should not be restricted to those designed by specialists, but directed to areas subject to collective production in the micro-local scale, that is, the dwelling scale and its immediate urban surroundings. To this end, we investigate an urban situation that have conditions for collective design in everyday life. Such coexistence is understood here as the political practice of discussion and transformation of spaces.

Instead of a generically approaching public spaces, using the formal and the institutional sense of the large public facility, matter investigating the use of all that is left when the private lot and the gated community are subtracted of the everyday space: the sidewalks, streets, gardens on median strips of avenues, small neighborhood parks, the remnants of past projects and other free spaces. They can be employed in many ways, more or less spontaneous, more or less organized, for meetings, parties, sports, business or leisure; sporadic or routinely; in projects of few hours or months, considering uses that dispense physical transformation or that, on the contrary, require it.

However, these possibilities of occupation and transformation have been under-exploited in the context of an urban planning that prioritizes circulation of cars, goods and people, and in the context of a land subdivision often done without concerning the quality of public space linking the plots. The results have been squares and equipment designed by specialists but not suitable and not cared by residents, and the disregard for the public areas surrounding the dwelling.

This occupational pattern, which repeats itself also at the self-produced areas of the city, fits perfectly with a well centralized management. Together, the logic of the private lot and the

logic of centralized management interdict the engagement of people in the public everyday space. There are many districts and neighborhoods where residents ignore or neglect completely the possibility of intervening, considering that caring for everything that is not private property should be governance's duty. But, and despite all the prohibitions, there are also places where residents take the initiative and engage in improvements.

This variation in the level of engagement of the population should be considered in the debate on the production of public spaces. Surely the commitment cannot be taken as an assumption, but neither the non-engagement. What is involved here is not only the use, much less a popular adherence or use to a plan or design, but the practice of the right to the city as David Harvey (2008) proposes, in addition to individual freedom of access to urban resources, or in other words, the decision-making exercise and the direct action on the urban space of everyday coexistence.

The behavior of people in relation to non-specialized areas, namely, not designed by experts and having no predefined program uses, are concrete samples of the degree of engagement with the urban area surrounding the dwelling. This engagement is the ability to organize, discuss and transform autonomously and collectively the spaces, being conditioned by each context characteristics, ranging from the minimum degree [spaces are ignored] to the maximum [the surrounding community appropriates space, not only caring but proposing and implementing interventions]. To inform this discussion were observed spaces located in residential areas of Belo Horizonte. The city has features of most major Brazilian cities: their public spaces emphasize the transport lanes at the expense of sidewalks, generating public areas that are nothing more than barren wastelands. Since the goal is to understand what is behind a picture in which the disengagement seems to be the rule, we initially investigate one example of the more common case: that in which the degree of commitment is very low.

2. [Almost] zero engagement

Figura 1: Aerial view of the undeveloped portion of Nicaragua Street [area colored in red]. Source: Google Earth

We find a typical example of the lower degree of engagement in a neighborhood of upper-middle class in southern region of Belo Horizonte. This is an undeveloped stretch of the street Nicaragua, due to an error in the geometric design of the street which led to a gap in relation to the level of adjacent roads that impedes the connection with the overall frame. The area is surrounded by buildings, or rather the stilts that support and level them in relation to nearby streets. Thus, none of the buildings have direct access to the area in question, which contributes significantly to its abandonment by its residents. The city's superintendent of urban cleaning, monthly weeding the place, is the only carrying the space. And it not used except by some passer-by who use it as a shortcut, and according to the testimony of neighbors, by young-ones doing supposing illegal practices. This relative lack of activity creates an intimidating and vulnerable environment, whose ways of living and vitality are not envisioned by the residents. Thus, an area that could settle a positive public space, conducting the construction of the buildings as a cluster[1], is only a negative space, residual of the self-absorbed implantation of neighboring buildings.

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[1] Christopher Alexander argues the provision in cluster [cluster or group] against the conventional layout of dwellings in the grid [mesh Hippodamic]. See "The production of houses" (1985), especially the chapter "The collective design of common land".

Figura 2: Meeting of one side of Nicaragua Street with the undeveloped stretch. Source: Author's Personal Archive

As Nicaragua street is part a of upper-middle class neighborhood, the structural reasons for the apparent disinterest it may seem obvious: who has the ease and pleasures in private space does not care about the quality of public space. However, this still does not explain how the situation is handle by residents on a day-to-day, that is, as they perceive it personally. To confirm or deny the lack of interest and to understand the lack of initiatives of use or appropriation, we resorted to an attempt to mobilization by distributing a flyer in the neighborhood[2] (Figura 3 and 4).
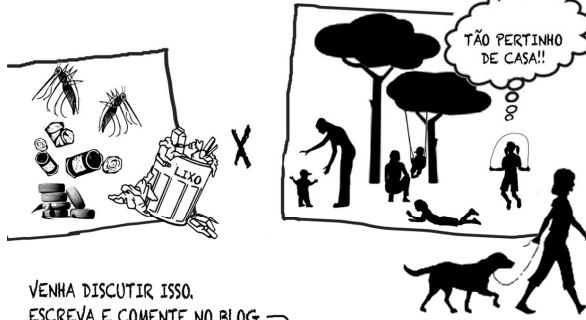
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[2] The MOM group is using flyers as a tactic to mobilize to discussing the production of space, inspired in pamphlets distributed by the Suffragettes at the beginning of the century, in addition to conveying ideas, had an explicit policy goal. *The pamphlets, flyers to discuss the production of space*. Available at: <http://www.mom.arq.ufmg.br/>.

Figura 3: Flyer. Source: Author's Personal Archive

Figura 4: Camouflage pamphlet. Source: Author's Personal Archive

The flyer included a call for participation in a web-blog created for this purpose because, despite the lack of neighbors meet to discuss common problems, they fit the profile of Internet and social networks users. With questions like "Do you use the green piece of street Nicaragua?" and images that refer to the real abandon and some potential uses, the flyer should give visibility to the site and urge the residents to discuss the matter. To do so, care was taken in preparing the content, so the images do not induce this or that proposal.

Forty Thousand flyers were distributed in the buildings near the street Nicaragua. Contrary to the most common distribution practice of pamphleteering on the street without ceremony, it was necessary to mask the flyers in envelopes, so that the gatekeepers of the buildings would not question its merits and send them to the apartments. Even in the few buildings with no doorman, the flyers were enveloped and addressed to each apartment, to increase the chance for residents to give them some attention. Another thousand flyers were posted, without envelopes, in mailboxes of residences and in the counters of the snack bar and bakery in the region.

Figura 5 - Blog for discussion of the Nicaragua Street. Source: Nicaragua Street Blog. Available at: <http://ruanicaragua.blogspot.com/>.

The web-blog received fourteen postings during the eleven days of leafleting. A collaborator called "resident" had been created, with open email and password, so that anyone could post contributions without the need of identification. Thus, the most manifested anonymously. Among the group of anonymous, the prevailing tone was of fear, complaints about taxes and claims for the government, demonstrating that participants see the street Nicaragua as a problem to be solved by an external body. Also frequent was the reference, sometimes extremely biased, to the residents of a nearby slum and the need for policing to keep them away.

[...] We have a vacant lot taken by garbage and drug addicts. I wish the end of the street was transformed into a public square with a police station, because it was opened a shortcut that goes to the [slum] Morro do Papagaio. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/28/2010)

[..] It's a shame that the city prefecture, aware of the problem, takes no action [...] we pay a high property tax and we do not have the services that are states' obligation. I am in favor of a square with a police guardhouse on the site. We pay a lot to live in this area then we can take what is owed. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/29/2010)

[..] This for me is a shame, SHAME. I hope they do something about it, since we pay and expect results. The U.S. charge 6% tax and do everything to society, here we pay more than 60% and they cannot stretch an arm. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/28/2010)

[..] Is not easy to live next to that nest of criminals. I think there should be a park with a decent crossing [...]. Of course, with a PERMANENT military police guardhouse, after all, from this slum next to it... we can't expect much good. I hope our "prayers" to be heard because we pay the taxes! Hugs and congratulations for the blog initiative! (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/25/2010)

Some participants of the blog seemed to assume the existence of a previously defined action, controlled by an institution or company, like in market research or advertising campaigns that advertise the product only after a preparatory phase of suspense. In these cases, participants felt that they should stand for or against, without even knowing the content of the supposed "work".

[...] We would fully support the work that will happen on the street Nicaragua [...] We are please. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/25/2010)

Facing these postings, too focused on claims or passive supporting, we made interference on the blog suggesting the possibility of intervention by the residents:

Can't we think on actions that are within our reach to begin the street improvement? I went there the other day and saw that someone planted seedlings near the buildings' structure ... (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/27/2010)

After that comment, the perspective has changed slightly. Some residents showed more proactive and, curiously, came to be identified.

Well, the typical Brazilian posture of waiting for the government initiative often results in disappointment. Thus, given our context, the pro-community activity could be more fruitful. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/28/2010)

Well, one of the main mechanisms for de-marginalizing a place is its use. I imagine that if there were trees, sidewalks, toys, squares, gymnastic equipments, bars for stretching etc... as the JK square, and with local people frequenting the local more often, a guardhouse would not be necessary. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/25/2010)

I also believe that if the space is used by the neighborhood, it would no longer be bleak and dangerous, without needing guardhouse. Moreover, there are plenty of windows facing the street Nicaragua, it is already a space easy to watch over. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/29/2010)

It would be wonderful to have a green space that surely would only add (value) to our neighborhood. I agree joining this movement. Lets

> mobilize and see if the mayor is really concerned and turned into making our city more enjoyable. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/29/2010)

This last comment indicates, however, that even among participants with a willingness to act, the perspective of intervene directly in the space is not predominant, but the idea of pressuring on external bodies supposedly responsible for it.

> If we could draw a sketch of the re-urbanization of the place or something, we could develop a project to plead resources for developing a executive project for the implementation. How? I think it's quite feasible to get resources from environmental/social compensation of mining ventures, for example. However, it is necessary first of all, creating a legal entity that represents the community and to give legitimacy and credibility to any attempts of prospecting resources.

> I believe the path is to seek the help of some politician who represents the neighborhood, or public entities who take care of parks in the metropolitan area to develop a "green" project to the site. But carefully, not transforming it in a car road or in a place of mess on the weekends. (Nicaragua Street Blog, 7/28/2010)

The blog was used by residents as a mean to deliver positions in a comfortable way, what is clear by the fact that the vast majority of comments are anonymous. During the discussion days in the blog, there has been no concrete action in space or even increased the number of passers-by. That is, the blog was not used as a means to structure activities in space, but opened a channel for discussion and exchange of information that did not existed before. We observed that the residents are not entirely indifferent to the subject, though their concernment is also not sufficiently strong to overcome the habit of delegating decisions about public space to third parties.

The case of street Nicaragua is no exception, but rather indicates with relative clarity how the logics mentioned in the beginning (private estate and centralized management of public space) are embedded by individuals. It is assumed the functionalization of the public area and the consequent subdivision into specialized areas, whether for leisure, either to the monotonous movement of pedestrians and rushed cars. Thus, contact of the residents with their street also tends to be purely functional. As Le Corbusier wanted, the street is only used to circulate. What's on the other side of the fence does not seem interesting enough to arouse actions or even discussions on its use. It is a practice giving support, verbally, to the deployment of a improvement work made by the city management, but the interest hardly extends beyond the fact that it values the particular property.

In neighborhoods, on the scale of everyday life, such functionalization could be subverted by residents, beginning with the appropriation of areas that, for lapses in planning or management, have not yet been tagged. Unlike the production brokered by an outside group, which often leads to empty spaces, the collective production with some local autonomy is more direct and agile and can provide environments organically linked to the residents. Places like the green stretch of street Nicaragua have dimensions and a kind of integration that would facilitate interventions by the public to which it belongs, the inhabitants of the neighborhood.

In fact, the Nicaragua street would need few increments to be frequented on the day-by-day, dispensing complex projects and even the backing of municipal bodies, because there is no geotechnical problems, and lighting and drainage are installed.

Figura 6: Trash scattered on the green area: Source: Author's Personal Archive

Figura 7: almost flat area with few trees planted: Source: Author's Personal Archive

Figura 8: Lighting stilts and one of the buildings that give back to the site. Source: Author's Personal Archive

As already mentioned, we did an insertion on the web-blog to remember that there are actions within the reach of residents who do not require much money or the help of an external body. However, prevailed the understanding that they should appeal to a specialist, make a re-urbanization project and, with the help of some politician, plead the implementation by government. We consulted then, the South Central Regional, the body of the municipality of Belo Horizonte that is responsible for the neighborhood[3]. Its technicians consider that the place needs a large and lingering intervention. They recommend that residents make an agreement with the city hall or align with any politician to get the "great work" prioritized in the municipal budget. In other words, the obstacles to an action of residents in a public space that concerns them directly and daily are doubles. The government takes the heroic position to meet all the demands on any scales – which obviously never actually happens – and citizens, at best, engage in claim this assistance.

The assumption that public space is the responsibility of an external body makes that the security of the site also to be addressed mainly by the way of heteronomy. One of the contributions mentioned above has looked at the possibility of spontaneous surveillance in the neighborhood, since there are many windows facing the street Nicaragua. But most of the participant adhered to the proposed installation of a military police guardhouse, to ensure the segregation of the nearby slum, which was seen as a threat. In this sense, the most widespread opinion seems to coincide with the "Defensible Space Theory" formulated by Oscar

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[3] Information of a technical for Regional Center-South, obtained in a telephone interview conducted by Ligia Milagres.

Newman in the 1970s, an urban design that folds police state, without "ambushes", so that the considered well citizens are safe from actions of offenders[4]. It is believed that an appropriate urban design, with the functionalization of spaces and thorough distribution of activities facilitates the monitoring and control of space by neighbors. It is cultivated a paranoid vision in which passers-by are treated as intruders, potential criminals. In this model, people who walk around town on foot, bisedes daily facing wilderness areas, are subjected to the trial of hostile neighborhoods. An urban design like this is very different from an urban space produced and cared by the surrounding neighbors, which can also be enjoyed by passers-by.

Instead of a "disneyficated" configuration, whose objective is the protection of private property and individual interests, Alexander (1985) proposes that spaces that are mutual to a group of houses would have their layout and conformation determined by households and not by an external agent. Moreover, instead of a specific configuration, he supports the collective production of the arrangement formed by private spaces and urban spaces. It would be pertinent to reflect on what he calls "the collective design of common land" in relation to the consolidated urban environments, without losing sight that this is not the protection of private property or an area belonging a group, but the performance on a certain urban area by the surrounding residents who decide to take care and use it, improvising improvements. In the context in question it is rare to find committed actions in this direction, since most people understand that the space belongs to the government and it is their responsibility.

The lack of habit to negotiate and discuss the everyday urban space makes the bureaucratization of procedures to improve it to be assimilated without questioning. In other words, institutionalization is assimilated into everyday actions and plaster possible contribution of autonomous individuals or small groups. Initially, the flyers fulfilled the role of that residents remember of the public space and think about it, however, it became clear the necessity of a catalyst instrument for collaborative action and a platform to keep them continuously.

3. Opening the toolbox

Ivan Illich defended, already in the 1970s, the need to re-learning how to use and create "tools of conviviality", to facilitate collaboration between individuals and primary groups, without a centralized body to dictate them what do. By tool, Illich meant not only objects but the organizations themselves, whether institutional or not, such as neighborhood associations and schools, for example. Tools for conviviality are those available to be manipulated, handled and used by anyone and are easy to grasp, but intending no exclusivity or monopoly and creating no dependency or structural heteronomy. In a similar though less optimistic sense,

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[4] A Brazilian version even more policing of this theory can be checked in crime prevention through urban design authored by Colonel Bondaruk.

Michel de Certeau (1994) brings the distinction between tactics and strategy of military practice for the social sciences. While the strategy is equivalent to the general plan and assumes a position of power with a certain vision of the whole – albeit distorted or misguided – , the tactic is a procedure that takes advantage of the occasion, local improvisation, contingency, the particular circumstance.

It could be said that the tactic is for the strategy such as daily life is for institutional or, inversely, that institutionalized action tends to demand strategies, while the daily action demand tactics, more immediately related to a specific situation whose peculiarities escape the panoramic view of strategists, subjected to continuous change. Therefore, it is also at the local or micro-local scale, as we prefer to emphasize, that the resumption of "tools of conviviality" could be an alternative to heteronymous production of everyday space: residents of places like Nicaragua street can be organized around a common problem, reinventing the tools they have at hand. This is possible because no large-scale urban function depends on that space, it is not necessary to access or road articulation, neither imports nor exports significant environmental impacts and does not matter to people beyond the neighborhood. There are many similar cases in the city that could be improved by residents without going through processes in which these residents have not control.

Well, if the instruments available are institutionalized and inserted in a bureaucratic chain, it is necessary to imagine other, in line with the micro-local scale, to facilitate access to information and communication, increasing autonomous collaborative practices among the residents.

For now, the possibility of action was not taken seriously in the case of Nicaragua Street, but not only here but also in other contexts, the initial experience of flyers and web-blogs could open to the use of instruments aimed to perform transformations in space. The leaflets could, for example, contain tips for cultivating gardens and orchards, of various techniques for building furniture and equipment, or even information about caring for drainage and paving. The digital medium could act not only as a forum for discussion, but also as a platform for exchange and collection of experiences, counting with the participation of people from other parts of the city. That is, once initially organized around the situation, residents could wield the tools according to their interests.

We do not propose, however, the presence of a mediator, whether institutional or a community leader, constantly interfering or initiating the participatory processes in which people interested vote among a narrow range of proposals. We see the development and diffusion of "tools of conviviality" that act as interfaces capable of stimulating the engagement of people in the collective production of spaces (Baltazar; Kapp, 2010). Regardless of the good will of an ombudsman or community leader, such tools should be able to mediate access to information and means of production of the population directly interested in the social production of spaces subject to collective use.

If the information and means of production, treated as belonging to specialists, are provided and handled by anyone who is interested in transforming certain space, the current situation of helplessness and neglect of the population toward the urban environment could be reversed gradually. The fact is that the residents themselves acting collectively in the immediate surroundings of their homes, themselves designing their spaces of coexistence, could dampen the boundaries between public and private spaces, becoming inhospitable and un-owned spaces in incremented ones, in accordance with collective interests.

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