

PROJETO
PROJECT

THREE COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PROJECTS TRÊS PROJETOS CONTRA-HEGEMÔNICOS EDSON MAHFUZ

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Abstract

There is a hegemonic practice in the Southern Brazilian province of Rio Grande do Sul, and certainly in many other parts of Brazil, which disregards the need to create open spaces and buildings which are what some call everyday infrastructure, that is, public facilities that can make daily life more dignified, especially for the low-income population. This practice results from a non-explicit but dominant hegemonic thought in Brazilian politics and administration. Curiously, it does not depend on ideologies, as not even left-wing municipal and state governments dedicated themselves to building such equipment. This text presents three projects that seek to oppose the hegemonic thinking described above. The projects illustrate architectural responses to three situations characterized by neglect: the lack of qualification of open spaces in cities, the almost total absence of equipment that can foster cultural life and social relations, and the indifference to how historical heritage and consolidated urbanism are treated. The methodology involves identifying a problematic urban situation, transforming it into a program for a design studio at the undergraduate and graduate levels, carrying out the architectural design simultaneously with the students, discussing the project in class, and seeking to disseminate it in order to establish a discussion about the problem that gave rise to this response, more than about design itself.

Keywords: Qualification of the Open Space, Everyday Infrastructure, Dialogue with the Surroundings

1 Introduction

This text stems from the premise that the shortage of equipment for public use in the Rio Grande do Sul province is due to thought and practice that could be called hegemonic. Given this panorama, one of the possibilities of resistance and opposition to this state of affairs is to propose concrete actions from the platform I have: teaching at a public university and the practice of architectural design. In Rio Grande do Sul, this hegemonic thought disregards the need to create public spaces¹ and buildings that constitute what some call everyday infrastructure, that is, urban facilities that facilitate and make people's lives more dignified, especially low-income populations. I am referring to equipment such as schools, health centers, libraries, cultural centers, and sports centers, among others, strategically disseminated in cities by public authorities. This lack of action is so pervasive that it is not linked to any political ideology. One might think that it has to do with the right-wing, traditionally indifferent to collective values and public policies. However, the same inertia was present during left-wing governments, both at the federal, state and municipal levels – suffice it to mention the Minha Casa Minha Vida program as an example of a missed opportunity to create dignified environments to live in.

Concerning the cities' public space, there is no permanent qualification policy. When improvements happen, they have to do with preparing the city to host an event, as was the case with the creation of the Orla Prefeito Luiz Paulo Conde and the Olympic Boulevard for the World Cup (2014) and the Olympics (2016) in Rio de Janeiro, but which later had no follow-up. I am aware of the social conquests of the last decades, including in the city of Porto Alegre, but these conquests did not materialize in public facilities such as the ones I am asking for. In recent years, a large public park was built on the shores of the Guaíba Lake, in Porto Alegre, a unique initiative in many decades of inertia. In other countries, there is a continuous effort to qualify existing squares and create new ones because it is understood that public space is the privileged place for meeting and exchanging information, even at a time when digital communication has gained importance. Could this inertia be a part of a strategy to avoid such encounters because they can result in the organization of society claiming its rights? In Portugal and Spain, not to mention the richest countries in Europe, it is common for each neighborhood to have a health center, a public library, a sports center, and a civic center, which contribute to a dignified and culturally rich life, even if one earns little or is unemployed. These are examples worth emulating.

During the decades I have lived in Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, I don't remember seeing anything like this being built in the city's neighborhoods. It does not seem to have occurred to successive mayors that these activities are the basic needs of urban dwellers and that ensuring their existence is part of the mayor's attributions. The market will certainly

¹ By public spaces we mean any not privatized, both open and closed spaces, such as streets, squares and parks, gymnasiums, markets, among others.

not create this kind of equipment, which does not aim at an immediate profit and whose result – the development of citizens – is something diffuse and long-term. In truth, in the Brazilian legislation, there is the figure of the Urban Social Center (CSU), “public centers aimed at development, social inclusion and reduction of violence” (Decree nº 75922 of 01/07/1975 / PE - Federal Executive Branch). However, its implementation is sporadic, irregular, and rarefied. It is curious to note that most of the CSUs were built in the 1970s when the country lay under a dictatorial regime. Another characteristic of this hegemonic attitude is the neglect of historical heritage, both in terms of the individual building and the consolidated surroundings, with their material characteristics and use. The English concept of notable collective value is rarely applied, justifying the preservation of architectural groups based on the perception that the global quality of the whole exceeds the defects of any of the individual structures.

Not happy with this state of affairs and having been a design teacher at a public university for over 30 years, I decided to protest using the weapons at my disposal: the classroom and my work as an architect. In the first case, by proposing as design exercises the equipment which is lacking in the Brazilian cities and, in the second case, by elaborating projects that respond to unresolved problems in my city, which I call counter-projects. In the academic field, I have led design workshops whose theme is a community center and the open space around it, generally located on land supposed to be public squares, but lacking in formal design and landscaping. The work required of the students must give equal attention to buildings as well as open spaces. Every two semesters the site – which generally measures approximately 10,000 m², the equivalent to a typical urban block – is changed and this alters the general equation since different environments require different responses. The community center program includes a library, a multipurpose room, and a café, plus the support spaces for each activity. At postgraduate studios, community service rooms are added to the program.

The objective of the exercise, in addition to the obvious training for the practice of architectural and urban design, is to draw attention to the role of architecture as a social practice through the topics covered in the studio. The safest way to learn to design is indeed by designing, but you can also teach by example. Experience has shown me that students of any level feel safer being guided by someone who has already faced the same design problems as them and, for this reason, I develop all the projects that I propose as a class assignment, in addition to my interest in this type of intervention. In a studio whose methodology encourages the study of precedents as an important step in any project, the teacher's work appears as yet another precedent to be studied. In addition to immediate educational support, these so-called counter-projects are intended to show that it is possible to better resolve those urban and/or constructive situations in a way that benefits the city.

2 Methodology

The methodology concerning the projects presented here begins with the identification of an urban or construction situation perceived as deficient, which then becomes the subject of a design assignment and the motivation for carrying out a counter-project. In the first two cases, they are public spaces lacking formal structure and the equipment and amenities that would facilitate more intense use by residents. In the third case, the expansion of a building with an important cultural value has completely ignored the urban environment in which it was inserted. Once the problem is identified, an attempt is made to understand the place both from a historical point of view and its current use, precedents are studied in search of analogous situations that can serve as a reference, and in all cases, the project is developed guided by the belief that its highest commitment is to the city, that is, the creation of public space and integration with the context. Every proposed building seeks to help define open space rather than just occupying it. When possible and appropriate, new buildings try to amplify favorable local conditions. Projects are developed with a high degree of detail to overcome the schematization of a superficial proposal that addresses only some aspects of the problem. Likewise, the presentation is careful and seeks to present the exterior and interior aspects of the project, when applicable.

3 Counter-hegemonic Project #1: André Forster Square

This first project is a neighborhood square, the André Forster Square, as shown in figure 1, typically resolved in Porto Alegre by creating a sports court and a playground in the middle of existing trees, without a clear landscape design and without including any of the activities described above as everyday infrastructure. A new spatial distribution is proposed to transform that insufficient open space into an ordered whole composed of a representative center – portico, Civic Square, and Community Center – and a strip for physical activities – skateboard, multipurpose court, and playground, next to the building, as seen in figure 2. Shaded green areas for rest and contemplation surround these spaces. The relationship with the

surroundings is carefully planned: the main access is via the avenue and there is a transverse path, tangent to the Community Center, which connects the two side streets. The Civic Square is a place for fairs, local events, protests, and concerts, among others – figure 3. The Community Center offers a place for cultural activities and meetings sheltered from the weather. This is a project that, if implemented, would create a center for the neighborhood, a place where many kinds of activities linked to citizenship could take place, as seen in figure 4.



Fig. 1: André Forster Square, present situation. Source: Google Earth, 2021.



Fig. 2: Community Center and Civic Square Proposal. Source: The author, 2019.



Fig. 3: Aerial view of the square. Source: The author, 2020.



Fig. 4: View of Community Center from Civic Square. Source: The author, 2019.

4 Counter-hegemonic Project #2: Zumbi Dos Palmares Cultural Center

Zumbi dos Palmares Square, in figure 5, is one of the worst examples of neglect with public space that can be found. Located where the historic center of Porto Alegre meets its first expansion, it is an area of almost 11,000 m² completely paved and without any urban furniture or vegetation to soften the impact of the heat (figure 6). In this space, events take place that bring together many people – concerts, rallies, food truck parties – without any infrastructure. The neighborhood to which it belongs – the Cidade Baixa neighborhood – is not lavish in good open spaces either. Actually, there aren't even poor quality open spaces and, although a few meters away there are two green areas, they are residual spaces inside the loops of a viaduct,

very unsuitable to be used as public spaces. Therefore, the site is an opportunity to create a complex of spaces and programs of a public nature.



Fig. 5: Zumbi dos Palmares Square, present situation. Source: The author, 2020.

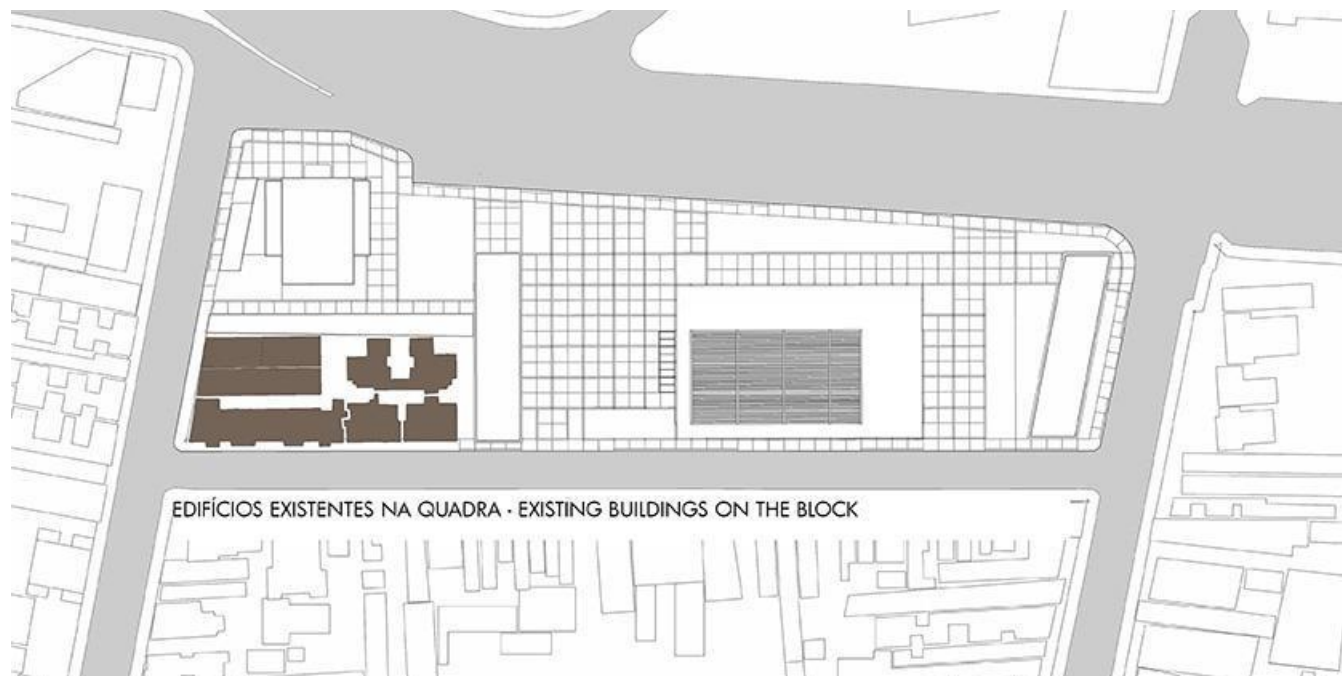


Fig. 6: Existing buildings on site. Source: The author, 2020.

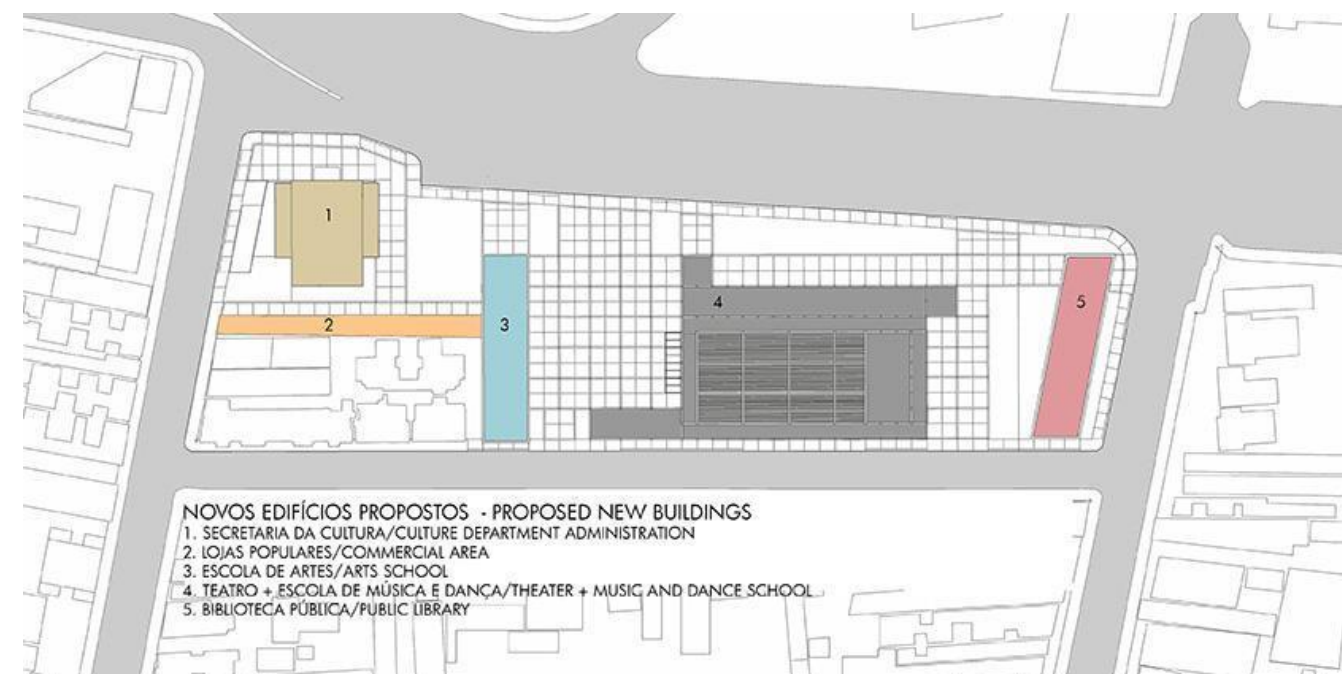


Fig. 7: Distribution of proposed buildings and open spaces. Source: The author, 2020.

Presented in Figure 7, the proposal consists of a cultural center in which the buildings are interspersed with open spaces with the characteristics of a paved square. The Zumbi dos Palmares Cultural Center would consist of the following elements: on the right, in pink, a public library, parallel to José do Patrocínio Street. In the center, in grey, a school of dance and dramaturgy organized around a theater. On the ground floor of this building, there would be a restaurant, café, and shops facing the back street and the small square between this building and the library, which contains a play area for children. To the left of the larger building, there is an art school, in blue, and between them lays the largest and most important open space in the complex. Attached to the school there is a low, long construction in orange, which houses small popular stores and serves to hide the party wall of the existing buildings. Finally, in beige, an administrative tower that concentrates municipal administration offices, today scattered throughout the neighborhood. The project proposal can be seen in figures 8, 9 and 10. This tower is an adaptation of a project by the Spanish architect Helio Piñón. The project would have a positive impact on the neighborhood, introducing teaching, leisure, cultural and administrative institutions, while preserving the possibility of carrying out other outdoor activities in the main square. There is no lack of ideas to qualify cities: what is lacking is the political will to put them into practice.



Fig. 8: General view from the North (historic center). Source: The author, 2020.



Fig. 9: View of the space between the library and the dance/theater school. Source: The author, 2020.



Fig. 10: Square between dance/theater school and art school. Source: The author, 2020.

5 Counter-hegemonic Project #3: University Hospital Addition

Some situations in life seem so wrong that they push us to some kind of reaction, even if innocuous since the wrongdoing cannot be reversed. But the reaction marks a position and, who knows, it may have future positive consequences for similar cases. I am referring to the case of the Porto Alegre General Hospital (HCPA) (figure 11), affiliated with the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). It has been originally designed by architect Jorge Moreira, and its expansion is an architectural and urban scandal due to its vulgarity and for not knowing how to deal with cultural heritage and the urban environment. What is questioned here is not the expansion itself but the way it was carried out. It was a difficult problem from the outset, as the HCPA block is anomalous to its surroundings, with most of its buildings rotated approximately 45 degrees in relation to the streets defining it, except for five buildings on the corner of Protásio Alves with São Manoel streets. This seems to be a consequence of having been designed taking into account roads that finally were not built. This is why the only perceptible relationship with the surroundings is the perpendicularity to Jerônimo de Ornelas Street, much less important than the roads that define the corner of the block where the hospital was located, formed by Ramiro Barcelos Street and Protásio Alves Avenue, the latter being one of the structuring axes of the city's growth towards the East.

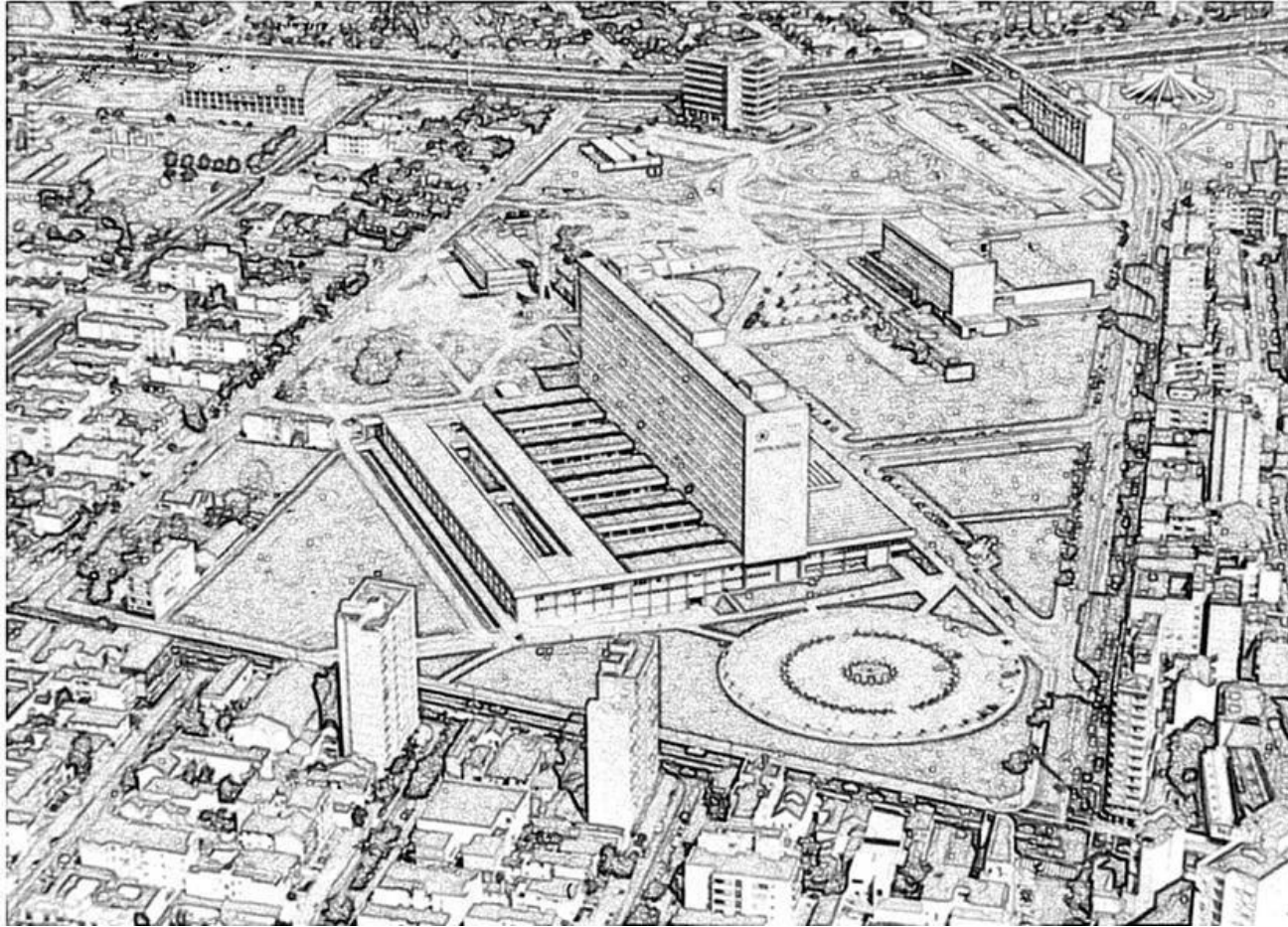


Fig. 11: HCPA, general view before the addition. Source: The author, 2022.



Fig. 12: HCPA, situation prior to the addition. Source: The author, 2022.

The original building (figure 12) was positioned considering the streets, and minimizing the impact it could have on them due to its large size. Whether we like the HCPA building or not, it is part of the city's cultural heritage – protected by the Historical and Cultural Heritage Agency (EPHAC) since 2011. It was very much a part of the residents' memory and deserved much better treatment by those involved in the process. The city of Porto Alegre usually misses out the opportunities to qualify its neighborhoods and, consequently, the lives of its citizens. One could mention the area around the Jockey Club, the Mauá Wharf and the Só Shipyard, to name just a few of such lost opportunities.

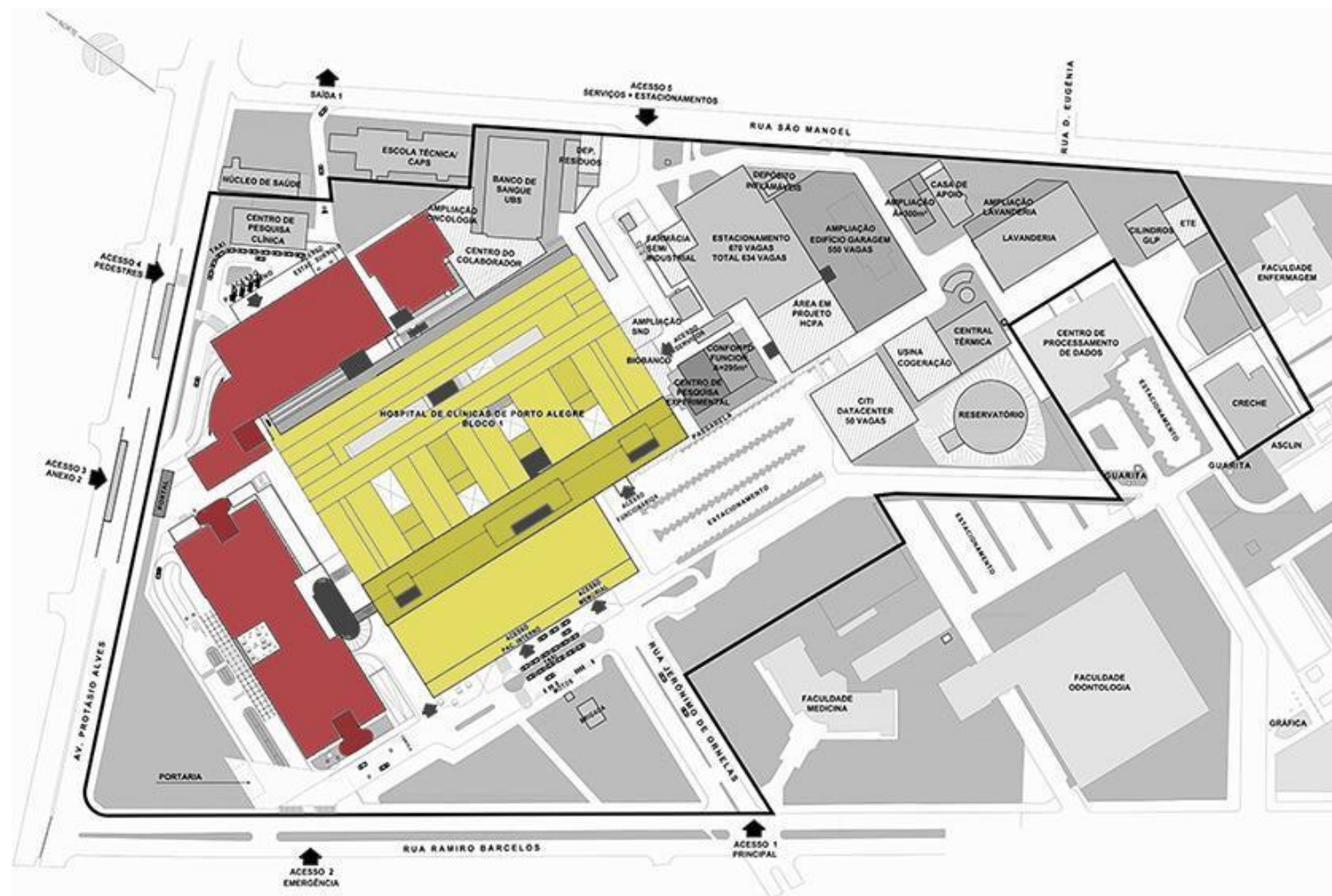


Fig. 13: Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre. Planta de situação, ampliação em vermelho. Fonte: Autor, 2022.

In this case, there was an opportunity to expand the hospital and correct its faulty relationship with the immediate surroundings. However, what was finally built is characterized by vulgar architecture and a total lack of understanding of what is crucial when intervening in a consolidated urban environment. The expansion managed to make matters worse, establishing a chaotic relationship with Protásio Alves Avenue, as its contact with the road takes place through curves and corners, configuring a building volume that in no way favors the daily life of this road, as seen in the expansion plan, figure 13. The view below, in figure 14, shows how formally aggressive the adopted solution is and how it differs from the surroundings, both from a volumetric point of view and from the way the buildings relate to the sidewalks. Furthermore, it completely ignores the commercial use of the ground floors across the avenue, an urban feature that contributes to the vitality of this neighborhood.



Fig. 14: HCPA. Views from Protásio Alves Avenue. Source: Google Maps, 2020.

What I propose derives from a basic premise: architecture's first commitment is to the city. Therefore, the problem of expansion has to be solved at the same time that a positive relationship with the surroundings is established. Another important premise is that when flexible plans are generated – generally by way of orthogonal configurations, well served by circulation and service nodes – with sufficient space to house the program, there is no reason to worry excessively about the layout of the spaces. The counter-project aims to solve the two problems, by reconciling the two directions involved: the alignment of the streets and the rotated angle of the hospital. From a compositional point of view, it can be divided into three parts: an L-shaped bar that follows the directions of Ramiro Barcelos Street (left) and Protásio Alves Avenue (top) and defines the edges of these streets in three dimensions; a central body that follows the orientation of the existing building and that – where it touches the previously mentioned bars – generates a series of patios that light and ventilate the interior space; and the third block, located on the São Manoel Street side, an extension of the spatial logic of the lower body of the hospital, organized around several courtyards, extending as far as the site boundaries, as seen in figures 15 and 16.



Fig. 15: HCPA, counter-project. Ground floor plan, commercial areas in white. Source: The author, 2020.

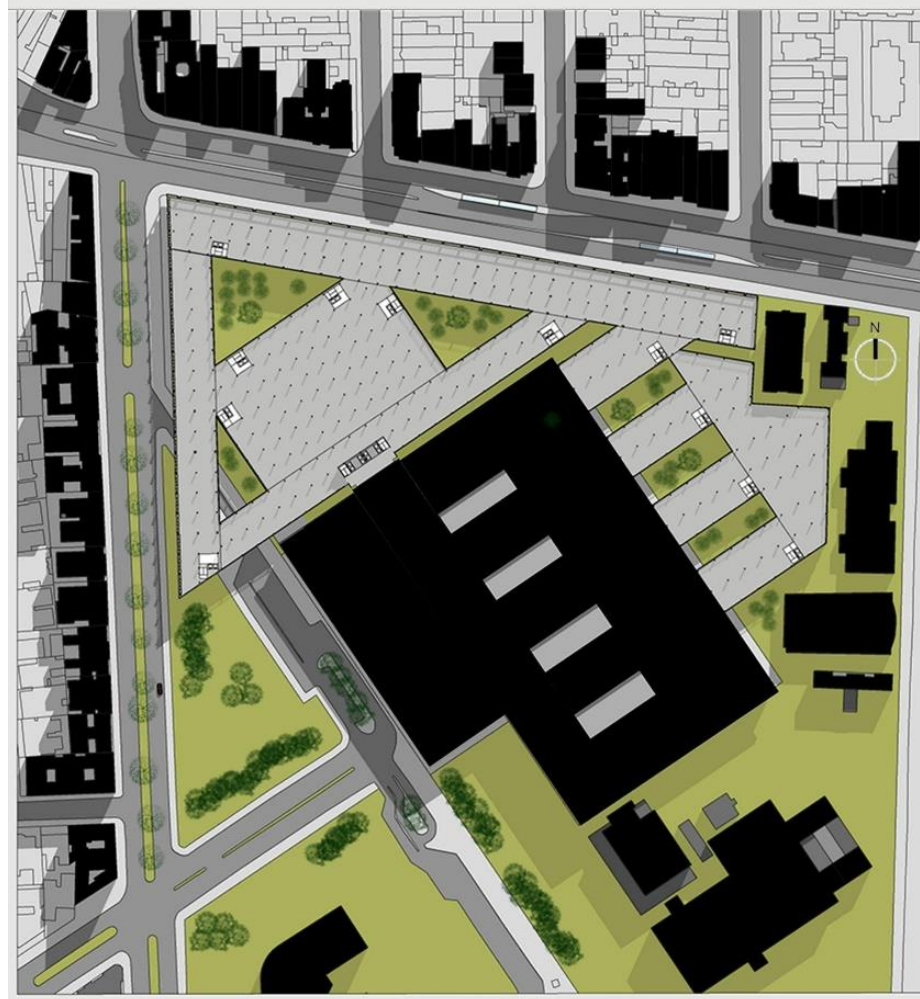


Fig. 16: HCPA, counter-project. Typical floor plan. Source: The author, 2020.

As for the use of the extension, the entire ground plan of the L-shaped bar that follows the streets is dedicated to commercial use, which would certainly bring life to this part of the block, as well as a welcome financial return to the hospital. It should be noted that the store fronts, shown in figures 17, 18 and 19, are recessed, creating a continuous and comfortable portico for circulation and a terrace for bars and restaurants. The entire expansion was kept four stories-high, which meets both the needs of the hospital area and the city's, as the urban space is well defined and the heritage is protected and still visible from various angles. The structural module of the expansion measures 7.5 m, which facilitates underground parking.

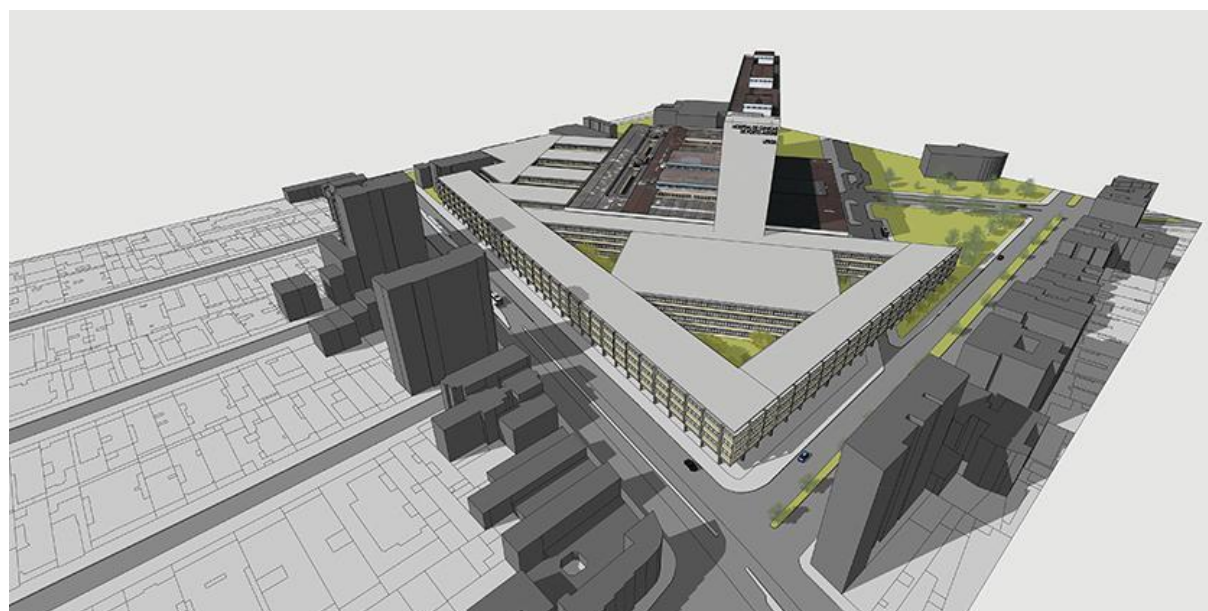


Fig. 17: HCPA, counter-project. Aerial view. Source: The author, 2020.



Fig. 18: HCPA, counter-project. View from the corner of Protásio Alves and Ramiro Barcelos. Source: The author, 2020.

Comparing what is proposed here with the expansion carried out, one can see that the lowest and urbanistically most appropriate solution is also more efficient than the one actually built. The built project totals 84,000 m², spread over 7 and 6 floors, with two underground floors dedicated to parking. The counter-project reaches 71,000 m² above ground, arranged in just 4 floors, with two underground parking floors that add up to another 23,000 m², totaling 94,000 m², which makes it better in every way, not just in the urban sense. This third counter-hegemonic project once again proves something that public works promoters often ignore: in most cases, doing it badly and doing it well costs the same, although doing it well requires more work, as it requires considering more aspects of an urban design problem.



Fig. 19: HCPA, counter-project. View of the Ramiro Barcelos Street facade, showing that the proposed expansion would not hide the historic building. Source: The author, 2020.

6 Final Considerations

Works like those presented here have at least three positive aspects. The first one is that, by studying each problem and gathering material about them, conditions are created to work in the design studio on real themes and, in some cases, the product of joint work can act as a basis for the effective solution of an urban problem by the public authorities. The second positive aspect is that, by developing his own project, the teacher becomes better qualified to guide students, as he knows the difficulties and opportunities intrinsic to the subject. The third positive point, and here comes the direct relationship with the theme of the journal issue is that projects of this nature reveal an attitude of protest and resistance against what is considered a negative hegemonic thought for life in cities. Every well-reasoned criticism has its weight, but when it is presented as a project it overcomes a common type of reaction which claims that it is easier to criticize when one does know the problems in depth.

In the academic environment, the guidelines for authors require references to be included and made explicit in the text. However, almost four decades of teaching and research allow for the development of one's own thinking which, although indebted to the work of countless colleagues, is able to carry out theoretical and design work without being conscious of who influenced each part of it. In these three projects, it is clear that buildings are always at the service of the three-dimensional definition of the open space, that open spaces must have a clear form and avoid any residual condition, and that the immediate surroundings are a factor of great importance in the formal and programmatic definition of any urban project. These characteristics of the projects presented here appeared in my work as a result of the assimilation of ideas from many authors. Therefore, I list below a series of authors whose work was important in my education and whose influence hovers over the presented projects.

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