
INSURGENT URBANISM: ALTERNATIVE MODES OF PRODUCTION AND APPROPRIATION OF URBAN SPACE IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF SAO PAULO

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This paper presents a research on new forms of appropriation of public space through actions that are self-managed and crosscutting to government arrangements, led by decentralized groups, organized so anarchic and horizontal, flexible and situational, which has been called in Brazil as “Urban Collectives”. Because of their critical stance to the status quo and limiting forms of access to urban, these groups propose alternative ways to use, look, plan, discuss, build and inhabit the city, we call: insurgent urbanism. Therefore, this paper seeks to understand the appropriation of public spaces by these groups in the outskirts of Sao Paulo, on the margins of large investments primarily cultural. The aim here is to understand their legitimacy as a social organization, and the public sphere concepts tied to the emergence of these groups in Brazil. In these areas, the key element is the functionality and the potential for organization to fight, argue and claim for public policy for the communities. Thus, this research expects to provide conclusive data not only for the understanding of this experience, but mainly to provide support to the urbanist generates solutions that really meet the demand of the population, respecting cultural differences of each region.

Keywords

insurgency, comprehensive planning, appropriation of public space, urban collectives

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2011 was marked worldwide on account of the popular uprisings, a phenomenon of political, social and technological dimensions that took place in several cities around the globe. In Brazil, in June 2013, thousands of people took to the streets in a multifaceted protest, which began against the increase in city bus fares, but then transmuted into other claims. From the visibility of these public demonstrations, the idea of collective groups have spread geometrically by Brazil, notably guided by intervention works in the urban space, with character of social denunciation. For their critical view to the status quo and limiting forms of access to urban, these forms of association have led their actions guided by the motto of the Maker culture “Do-it-yourself”, defending the citizen role to produce, collaboratively and with creativity, critical attitude and autonomy, the transformation of reality.

This research, still under development, presents an analysis of the recent actions of urban collectives in São Paulo that through alternative proposals to use, look, plan, discuss, build and live, is shedding light on issues of sociability and collective construction of the city. Taking as its starting point the emptying of public space, from the Brazilian historical and political context of the 60s to 80s, the paper aims to provide critical apparatus for creating a narrative that explains the Brazilian urban dynamics since the struggle for urban reform to the production and appropriation of the city from the 2013 demonstrations. We hope to contribute to enlarge the understanding of the contemporary city, revealing the relationship between technology and territory, and its importance to point out positive alternatives to the cities.

FROM THE EMPTYING OF PUBLIC SPACE TO THE RISE OF “URBAN COLLECTIVES” IN BRAZIL

In Brazil, during the 1980s, there was a deepening of socio spatial inequalities, due to the policy of the 70s and the global restructuring process. The modernization of the period known in Brazil as “developmentalism”, in the 50s, ended up being strangled by tightening the external debt and the inflation intensified as never happened before. The rise in international interest rates since 1979, and the problems of external debt management marked a growth never seen in inflation in the country, and continued to grow year by year. This period became known in Brazil as the “lost decade”, characterized by the decline in investment and GDP growth, the increase in the public deficit, the growth of external and domestic debt, and the inflationary rise. It should be emphasized that the country was under military government.

The military dictatorship in Brazil began with the coup of March 31, 1964, resulting in the removal of the President, João Goulart, and taking power Marshal Castelo Branco. This coup established a military dictatorship in the country, justified by the fear of a communist threat. Such governance conditions constituted obstacles to the formation of a national project that cared about the common interests always rejected. They became also and mainly an obstacle to formation of a modernity project, which include the formation of a rule of law and citizenship as support of a democratic project country. Moreover, the political culture of the military regime transformed the meeting in the public space in a threat, transforming this in a subversive act. Thus, the closing and emptying of public space have contributed to the interruption of the democratic construction process in the 1960s and 70s.

In last years of this regime, Brazil had several problems that, added to the strengthening of social demands since the mid-1970s, have culminated in the development of a wide range of grassroots movements. Thus, from 1974, the regime’s legitimacy crisis reflected the struggle for the return of the rule of law and promoted the beginning of the debate on the human rights issue, making the military government impracticable. In 1983, a campaign for direct elections for the presidency has started and, even if the constitutional amendment was defeated in Congress, a president was elected indirectly and a new way of governing the country has started at this point.

Finally, in 1988, the Congress passed a new constitution for Brazil, applicable to the present day and tried to erase the traces of the military dictatorship, establishing democratic principles in the country.

The aggregation of the urban social movements in favor of the struggle for democracy in the 1980s happened, however, at the same time the country was undergoing a worsening of living conditions in large urban areas. The economic recession coupled with the de-industrialization and the expansion of tertiary activities, the impoverishment of the working classes, the removal of part of the middle and upper class out of the center, and the wide dissemination of crime, accentuated inequality in cities like São Paulo. Over the 1970s, the city experienced an intense process of building the slum, and this became the spatial expression of the inequalities in Brazilian society. The growth rate of slum dwellers, for example, between the years 1973 and 1980 in São Paulo is higher than the growth rate of the whole city in this period.

“The significant concentration of poverty in the Brazilian metropolis has as its expression a dual space: on the one hand, the formal city, which focuses public investments and on the other, the absolute counterpoint, the relegated informal city of equivalent benefits and growing exponentially in urban lawlessness that is exacerbating the social and environmental differences. Insecurity and lawlessness are their genetic components and contribute to the formation of urban spaces without attributes of urbanity.”¹

In this context, the emergence of popular movements, especially in the suburbs, had as decisive agenda the fight for improvements in living conditions against the growing process of exclusion of urban benefits. The articulation of residents claiming their right to citizenship has permeated different fronts of struggle, such as regularization of illegal settlements, movements for basic infrastructure, for health equipment, etc. These movements, which are multiplying from the 1970s, were closely related to problems of production, distribution and management of commons means of consumption necessary for everyday life. Citizenship claimed by penalized and outraged by the instabilities of a society still in the constitution of a commonwealth, could actually expand up anchored mainly the constitutional rights of equality and participation. The foundation of the People’s Councils, in the 80s, as a legitimate representative of the population, has embodied the consolidation of an effective space for negotiation as opposed to a confrontational policy.

When the globalizing neoliberalism hit the country in the 1990s, the Brazilian State joined the international recommendation of minimal government, giving more space to the ideology and privatist policies², and declining to invest in infrastructure or in social care policies. The introduction of neoliberalism caused an increase in concentration of the elite income, restoring, on the world stage, the privileges of the groups that had diminished their power and income after the Great Depression and World War II. Locally, given the Brazilian historical-political context, neoliberal input and economic opening have resulted not only changes in the production process, management and organization of labor, but in the built space, further accentuating the socio-cultural contrasts³.

In this period, the number of shopping centers increased significantly, as well as gated communities, private security and traffic control. The establishment of a fragmented city resulted in disqualification and abandonment of public space, deepening segregation and reducing people to a simplified life in homogeneous cores. The mechanisms of control and surveillance, the bars and the walls separating the private property of the street “create private places within the public city”⁴. The street, place of meeting and dialogue between different, is fundamental to building a culture of tolerance. This detachment tends to subtract positive aspects of urban sociability, which are established in the common living in contact with the other in the sphere of public life. For Sennett⁵, the impossibility of meeting with the unknown and the difference, a condition created in intramural microcities, “the person takes the chance to enrich their insights, experience, and learn to most valuable of all human lessons: the ability to call into question the conditions established in his life”⁶.

However, in the late 1990s, there is a resumption of reconstruction and reinterpretation of public spaces in large Brazilian cities, especially in São Paulo, this time from the perspective of diversity and difference as liberating forces against the remnants of authoritarianism and conservatism. There is a redefinition of the struggle for democracy and citizenship through cultural and political initiatives of different orientations and nature, now stripped of previous narrative models, universalist and totalizing, absolute certainties⁷. For Harvey⁸, in postmodernity nothing eternal configures any human activity. In its bases are fragmentation and ephemerality, which constitute the chaos and some unreasonableness dictated by multiple, by nomadism and difference.

It is in this perspective that arise new forms of appropriation of public space by self-managed and crosscutting to government arrangements, led by decentralized groups, organized so anarchic and horizontal, flexible and situational, which has been called in Brazil as “Urban Collectives”. Armed with a conceptually oriented vocabulary to propose more imaginative, sensitive and dynamic ways for urban living, Collectives appropriate themselves from the city, opposing to the territory making process from the projection of fear and violence⁹. Thus, the popular uprisings, the resumption of the streets and the redefinition of public space appear as a search for the right to the city and for a more human city, inclusive, safe, healthy, and with livable streets¹⁰.

THE INSURGENT CITY: STRATEGIES OF TODAY’S URBAN COLLECTIVES

According to Castells¹¹, the technological revolution, focusing on information technology, began to reshape the material basis of society and therefore the urban space. It is through the use and appropriation of Internet tools and other new technologies of information and communication that Collectives articulate and make politic, that is, there is a powerful link between the so-called “cyberspace” and the real world (physical and territorial space) in the forms of action and organizing collective. The network logic defined collaboratively and without evident leaders, it drives the production and actions of these groups.

This form of grouping, although typical of the work of young visual artists, has been conducting interventions in urban space. This urban character, however, differs from the expression traditionally used by hip-hop culture. One can see, then, that the form of collective action is significantly different from those of the last century, mainly due to the postmodern condition as a new version of the experience of space and time, according to Harvey¹². This wave of space-time compression implies an inevitable acceleration of *modi vivendi*, that is, there is a volatile and ephemeral character in production, labor processes, and even the ideas. Volatility is its flow and thus they reject the idea of projects in the long or medium term. There is a certain nomadism within these structures; so the participant can move to another group when the project is done, essentially because a Collective is not configured by its members but by its actions. The ephemerality and fragmentation lead these unions, because they understand immediate action and tactics are required in the context of public intervention. They differ, therefore, from the 60s and 70s actions, when groups were organized in cooperatives or unions, guided strictly by closed and well defined agendas.

“There is not much difference from the point of view of the multitude and all the other movements that are born of the needs of basic or fundamental desires to live and produce. But there is another element that is the uniqueness. When the multitude moves, it is never simply a mass, it is a plural wealth of life questioning elements. Of course, here comes an organizational problem. There is a great unity problem, of movement’s coordination, among many singularities. But this is also the richness, the beauty of the process which we are living.”¹³

The rhizome and nomadic character of Collectives allows an artist/activist belonging to more than one group simultaneously for different projects. This feature, added to its form of independent, enables unusual connections for co-creation, through juxtaposition and collision, which redraw other possible dimensions of existence, highlighting the concern with otherness and other worlds that coexist. In the fragmented and splintered world,

it is possible that all the worlds happen without privilege one over the other¹⁴. Therefore, his open constituent process causes an explosion of singularities, far from the modern conception of a unique way as a form of resistance to the dominant powers, or rather, the modern concept of unity. Distance themselves from the setting of a party or any fixed structure of organization, even if this uninterrupted open relationship of singularities in motion - that make up the multitude to Negri¹⁵, composes strategies to undermine authoritarian proposals using common action opposite to crisis. For Negri¹⁶, narrowing between being social and political power is due to the conditions given by the nature of the contemporary crisis, the transition to political postmodernity, although not resulting in a unit.

Spontaneous interventions or ephemeral architectures, ie, purposeful urban micro-interventions promoted by these groups represent demands and emergencies led by the citizen as an essential agent in the city production dynamic. It is called tactical, guerrilla or insurgent urbanism, which suggests other perspectives to the city and its contemporary everyday problems. Understanding the city as an open platform to constantly be made from the perspective of the public interest has guided this mix of actions, behaviors and atypical meanings to develop a distinct spatiality of those provided by law and by traditional practices. The regulatory framework that provides for the use and occupation of the land - and public space, often end up cluttering the emergence of innovative initiatives for the creation and use of built space. This is because it understands the space from the unique perspective of the modern world, entrenched in strong convictions, and does not include the dialectic caused by actions that realize the space from the multiplicities of possible layers. Often, government practices tied to atavistic bureaucratic processes favor the abandonment cycle and activity restriction of public open spaces, helping to maintain fear and urban violence within the city.

Precisely because of the aspect that challenged the prevailing cultural and spatial model, Collectives approach their actions to the hacker culture, or hacking, understood as the creation of a smart shortcut that results in a new resource for a tool. The term, consolidated in the 60 to set computer experts involved in a type of programming subculture, meets the contemporary activist interventions in the public space of inventive character, and fast alternative to catalyze civic coexistence.

Collectives act to scramble existing codes, producing a movement around them and, from nomadism perspective, they escape from territoriality. In many ways, their tactics are answers to the slow process of city transformation guided by the official structures, because the Collectives work from the real urgency. They operate from a small adaptation of public space, invasive or not, and assuming that the street is the space of all, these groups generally do not ask for authorization or permission of the local government for their interventions. So, these reclamation, redesign, or reprogramming of public space occur on a small scale and seek flexible and reversible solutions, or more adjustable conditions for inevitable change, considering that places are not static.



FIGURE 1 Minhocão Playground by Basurama. In 2013, the collective built a playground in the middle of downtown area that could be enjoyed for free and can be replicated elsewhere. Accessed in January 2016.

Normally, Collectives promote educational profile initiatives by offering courses and services related to artistic production, not only to promote community empowerment, but also as a way to seek sponsorship for the activities realization. An example of this is the Basurama group, acting since 2007 in São Paulo, whose works are developed with discarded materials to articulate urbanism and ecology with educational activities. Another aspect of self-management is that it tends to eliminate the authority traditionally centralizes the selection and decision on the artistic production, represented by the figure of the art curator. The group Baixo Centro, for example, a collaborative, horizontal and independent movement that emerged in 2011 with the proposal to reframe the central region of São Paulo, especially around the Minhocão (a high street that cuts a large portion of the central area, comprising the districts of Santa Cecilia, Vila Buarque, Campos Elíseos, Barra Funda and Luz). The movement was structured around a street festival held by an open network of producers interested in this region and has as its motto “the streets are to dance”. Because of its self-managed character, the Festival opens public calls for people and groups enroll their ideas and what they will need to perform them. Then the group does the “cuidadoria”, i.e. take care of the projects looking for means to support them collaboratively through crowdfunding and/or other independent forms of storage.

All experimentations of urban practice from everyday life perspective invite us to a debate on site resilience, understood as the ability of citizens to deal with problems and overcome obstacles together, considering the importance of history and symbols for the local community, or rather, places storytelling. Still, they help us think about agile and inexpensive approaches to the production of space, which can result in long-term changes or urban policies more comprehensive.

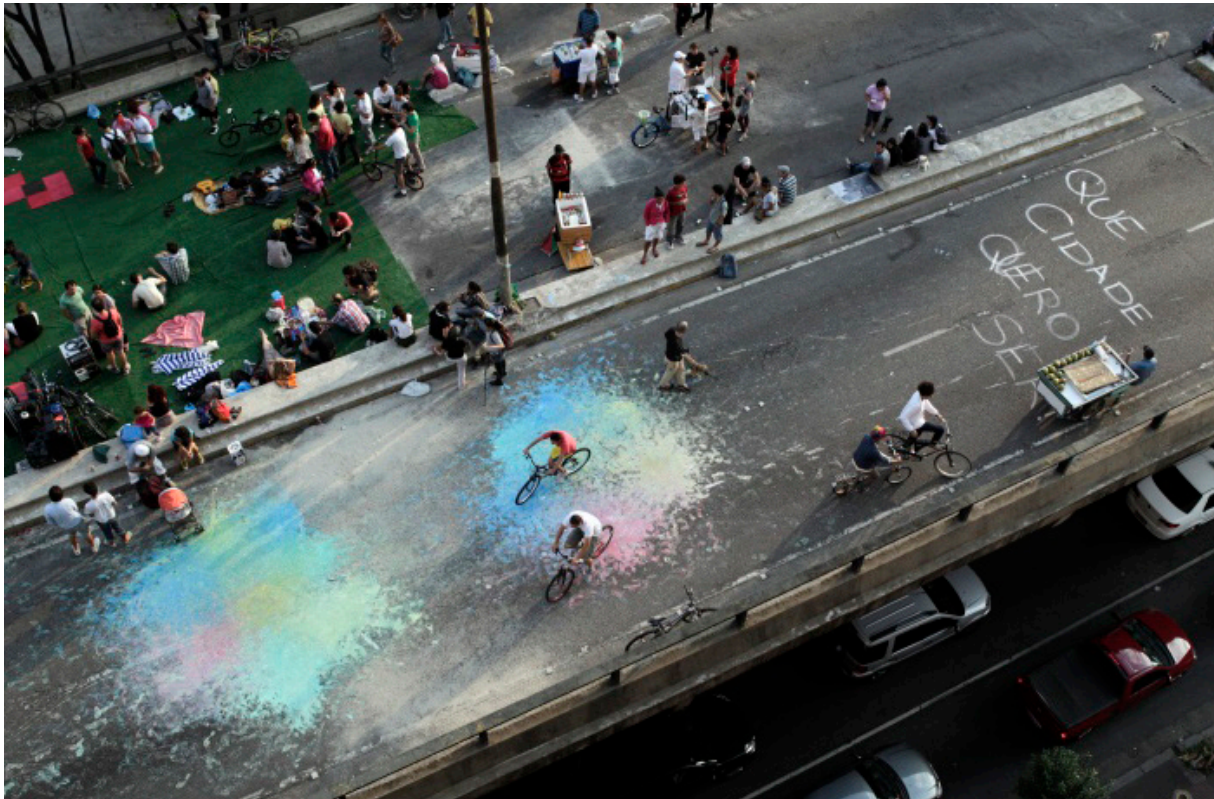


FIGURE 2 Baixo Centro Festival. The photo shows the occupation of the streets for the festival, which promoted several activities in Minhocão by using artistic interventions such as painting the streets and cover them with artificial grass. On the street it is written “what city I want to be”. Accessed in January 2016.

TACTICAL ACTIONS IN SAO PAULO

In São Paulo, the tactical urbanism¹⁷ has been practiced mostly by designers, artists and architects, who also give priority to the visual aspect of the intervention projects. Their actions are more often found in the axis Center-West Zone of São Paulo, place of residence or work of most of these people. However, one can notice the growth of associative and horizontal movements in the more peripheral areas of the city, such as the northern and eastern areas, especially by groups that are on the margins of major investments, especially in the cultural sector. In these areas, the key element is the functionality as well as the potential of the organization to fight, argue and claim for public policies for communities. Importantly, the southern outskirts of the city of São Paulo, around 1995, stood out on the national scene because of activism led by rappers groups dealing with the black condition and crime in the slums in Brazil. Areas such as the Capão Redondo neighborhood were considered centers of diffusion of hip-hop culture and guided the political and cultural reconfiguration the south periphery of São Paulo. Therefore, this portion of the city continues, even today, to share an intense activist movement, making the practical consciousness of local residents. Then, we chose not involve this area both because it is already well mapped and because activism seems consolidated there, focusing the study on the East and North zones of São Paulo.

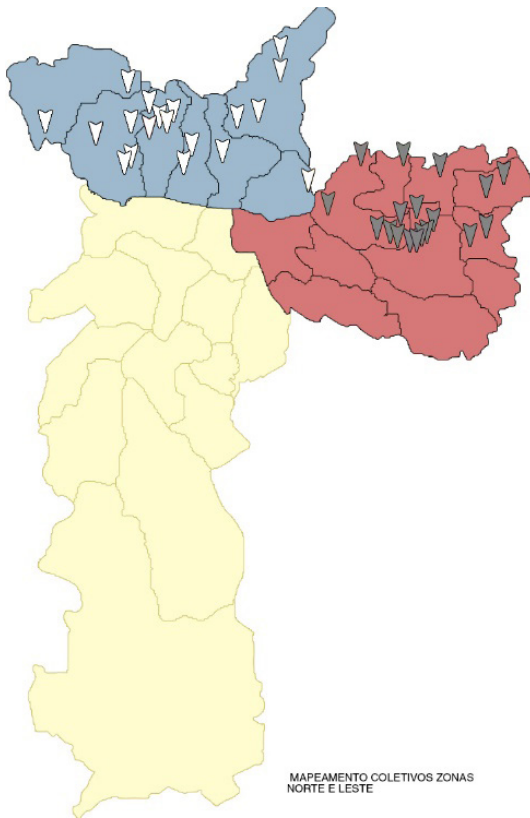


FIGURE 3 East and North zones of São Paulo. This research focuses on the peripheral areas of North and East zones because they are territories “off-axis” of the government investment. This map provides an overview of all groups found.

The research, still under development, addresses the recovery of public space in recent years from groups who organize themselves through digital platforms. The interest in mapping Collectives in the peripheral areas is to understand their conceptual motivations, their actions and tactics, to discover similarities and differences in relation to actions in the most valued axis of the city, Center-West zones, which are traditional territories of the São Paulo alternative culture. Added to this, the understanding and discussion of the dimensions of public, private and common spaces in these regions, as well as the theme of violence and socio-spatial segregation, as important keys to understand the context related to the creation, appropriation and maintenance of the territory on the outskirts of São Paulo. Thus, the research seeks to covers the differences and specificities of each Collective, as a kind of observatory to monitor collaborative actions in territories “off-axis” of the government investment and to understand differences between these actions and those that occur in the most valued axis of the city.

From the theoretical framework, we found a set of elements or components from which the interventions will be analyzed. We have already summarized them in the following aspects: i) Functional, in terms of their ability to articulate civic coexistence; ii) Social, for their effective use by the local community, including here the dimensions of management, use and autonomy; iii) Formal, in terms of physical size of the intervention; and iv) Symbolic, involving the importance of history and places storytelling involved by the actions. These perspectives of understanding point to problems associated, namely: a) understanding the role of technology as a means of articulation and / or as a work process; b) the mode of intervention in the public space, with respect to time and scale; and c) the collective field of action, whether local or itinerant. Finally, we will relate the mapping with the data collected from these filters described above.

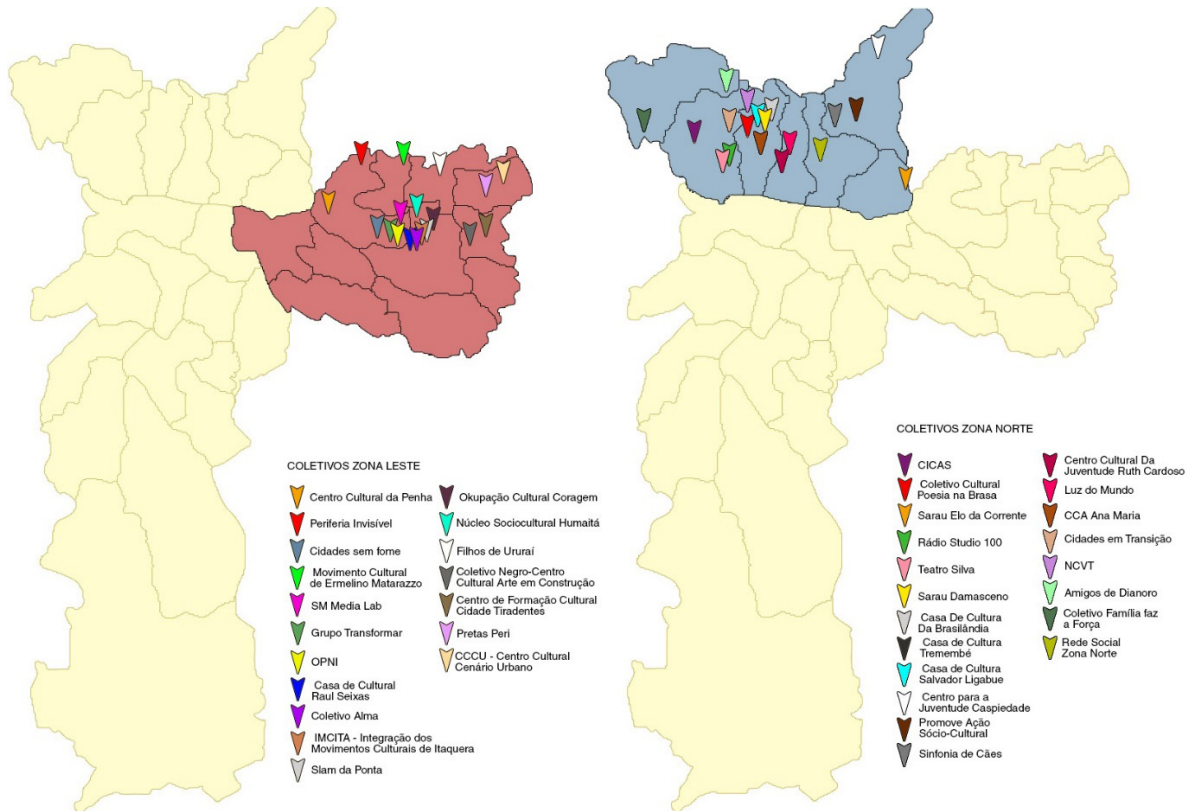


FIGURE 4 Collectives from North and East zones of São Paulo. This map summarize the first data collection. The legend indicates each collective and its specificity.

The first results indicate that the activities of collectives in the North and East Zones cover topics such as environmental education, literature / poetry, vegetarian food / vegan, dance, theater, music and street art. They work with spontaneous or ephemeral interventions based on experimentation, treating the city as a laboratory to reveal the potential of spaces previously discredited. In general, culture acts as the element of politic articulation. An example is the development of the Periphery Development Act - PL 624/2015, formulated by the Cultural Movement of the Peripheries, from dialogs with the community in order to demand greater investment in culture in these regions. According to them, the public subsidy programs to artists on the periphery are not sufficient to meet the existing demand, and the scope of their crowdfunding is lower. To expand the funds invested by the municipality, in 2012 the group drafted a bill to force investments through municipal public policy. The fight is being led by the articulation of various Collectives of the East zone and they organized a survey on what were the most urgent guidelines on the outskirts. In 2015, they obtained some achievements and in 2016 the law should be voted on in the House of councilors.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Collective movement is international and the theme has been gaining strength since the 1990s. The concept of “tactical urbanism” became popular in the US in 2010 when it was used in a debate on the transformation of Times Square in a space only for pedestrians. In 2011, UN-Habitat adopted a resolution on sustainable urban development through access to quality public spaces. Since then, urban initiatives that aim to promote urbanity has been constantly discussed around the world¹⁸. In Brazil, the Institute of Architects (IAB) held since 1993, the Urban Kindness Award, a prize to incentive small attitudes of citizens who work to make everyday life in cities better. The UN-HABITAT Conference 2015 discussed the theme “Public Spaces”, focusing precisely on the issue of Collective´s microactions. The importance of the issue is unquestionable, since the resumption of the streets by people is essential to avoid the collapse of the cities. The conference recommendation is to understand the power of these movements for local development, revealing the potential of spaces until now condemned.

How we pointed out, we do not have a long history of using public spaces, and to be in a common area requires practice and habit. That´s why the recovery of public spaces by the citizens in Brazil, nowadays, represents the main insurgency struggles and demands, especially in a large proportions city and as complex as São Paulo. So, this type of data collection is essential not only for understanding experiences in the peripheral areas of São Paulo, but mainly to provide support to the architect and urban planner´s work in creating solutions that really meet the demand of the population, respecting cultural differences and projects already underway.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor(s)

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Endnotes

- 1 Marta Dora Grostein, *Metrópole e expansão urbana: a persistência de processos “insustentáveis”*. (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2001) vol.15, 02.
- 2 Maria Carolina Maziviero. *Plus d’un siècle de privatisme dans la gestion urbaine de Santos*. In: *Métropoles des Amériques en Mutation*, edited by Luc-Normand Tellier, p. 305-316. Montréal: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2012.
- 3 David Harvey, *Condição pós moderna*. (São Paulo: ed. Loyola, 2003)
- 4 Teresa P. do Rio Caldeira, *Cidade de Muros: Crime, Segregação e Cidadania em São Paulo*. (São Paulo: Editora 34/Edusp, 2000). 04.
- 5 Richard Sennett, *O Declínio do Homem Público: as tiranias da intimidade*. (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999).
- 6 *Ibid.* 360.
- 7 Fredric Jameson, *Pos modernismo a logica cultural do capitalismo tardio*. (São Paulo: ed. Ática, 2004)
- 8 *Op. cit.*
- 9 Jane Jacobs, *Morte e vida de grandes cidades*. (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2000).
- 10 Jan Gehl, *Cidades para pessoas*. (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2013).
- 11 Manuel Castells, *A sociedade em rede*. (São Paulo: ed. Paz e Terra, 1999) vol. 1
- 12 *Op. cit.*
- 13 Antonio Negri. *É a multidão que comanda a história*. In: *Jornal Zero Hora, Caderno Proa*, 2014. Accessed in: March 15, 2016, <http://zh.clicrbs.com.br/rs/noticias/proa/noticia/2014/06/antonio-negri-e-a-multidao-que-comanda-a-historia-4520222.html>
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- 15 Negri, Antonio, and Michael Hardt. *Multidão: Guerra e Democracia na Era do Império*. (Rio de Janeiro: ed.Record, 2005).
- 16 *Ibid.*
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Image sources

Figure 1: Minhocão Playground by Basurama Collective, available in: <http://basurama.org/pt-br/projetos/parque-de-diversoes-minhocao-2/>

Figure 2: Photo by Tiago Queiroz, available in: <http://noticias.r7.com/sao-paulo/noticias/festival-do-baixo-centro-reune-atracoes-no-michocao-20120401.html>

Figure 3: Map produced by the research group.

Figure 4: Map produced by the research group, from the collected data.