

Urban activism and cultural heritage

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Abstract

Is it possible to think of another role for cultural heritage in cities that is not necessarily linked to their reconversion in spaces of cultural entertainment, towards recovering the value of central areas and gentrification? Is it possible to have an urban activism that transforms cultural heritage in a source of reflection and counterpoint to processes of urbanization as a business? This article aims to answer these initial questions from the exposition and discussion of an experience that is being developed in the city of São Paulo and has the objective to gather arguments and produce narratives in defence of the permanence of poorer social groups in city centers, using cultural heritage against gentrification. Such experience fits a kind of urban activism that has educational actions in the field of cultural heritage as an essential tactic. In this sense, it affirms the need to democratize heritages and also memorialization processes which have produced, over time, an invisibility of certain social groups, among which are workers and poor inhabitants of city centers.

Keywords: Right to the memory. Gentrification. Participatory inventory.

Introduction

In Brazil, the institutional experience of cultural heritage protection in different governmental spheres (be it federal, state or municipal), with strong european influence, particularly french, has delegated us a homogeneous and cohesive point of view over the social subjects and the memories represented there, which ended up creating absences, invisibilities and hiding popular and working classes, little or not at all represented in this universe.

Reinforcing this situation of social inequality in heritage, the State, through actions of conservation and restoration, has been investing resources in the transformation of these cultural properties into products for visual consumption within a combined strategy of using heritage as a means of promoting spatial value, which results, in return, in the expulsion of inhabitants and poor workers from central areas. Heritage turns, therefore, into a villain and source of social exclusion.

It has been used, contemporarily, as strategic element in urban policies aimed at the promotion of the, so called, return to the city center, as analyzed by Riviere d'Arc (2012). This return has the mark of a classist conquest of the city center, as noted by Smith (2006), since the horizon that takes place is one of displacement of inhabitants of popular classes out of the city center.

Decades of abandonment of the central areas by the social segments with higher income, be it the form of housing or of economic activities, has resulted in reoccupation by poorer social groups, due to the need of proximity to the job, even if it is informal work in street commerce. The lower rents, in a scenery of devaluing real estate or the actions of housing social movements that occupied empty properties, as happened in São Paulo, contributed to the popular reoccupation of the city center. The result is that, after a few decades of declining inhabiting population of downtown

neighborhoods, currently it can be verified that they are growing and also a significant change in socioeconomic profile, with a predominance of strata of lower income.

However, by concentrating infrastructure and urban services, currently, these centers have become objects of dispute, consisting in a new frontier for the operation of real estate markets seeking to attract there groups of economically solvent inhabitants. As a strategy that involves articulations between political and economic groups, a discourse is built about the degradation of the city center, used to legitimize intervention plans that spearhead the spatial revaluing and expulsion of poorer groups.

The creation of parks, projects said to be of re-qualification of public spaces, intervention in roads and recovery and restoration of historic heritage are part of a formula created to revert the negative representation of the center as a degraded, dangerous and violent place. The defense of heritage recovered and reintegrated to the daily life of central areas turns, therefore, into a powerful justifying alibi of this excluding urbanism.

In this context, it is possible to think of another role for cultural heritage that is not to contribute to the expulsion of poor inhabitants from downtown? The present article aims to discuss this question, presenting and debating an educational experience that is being developed in this path

that takes heritage as a source of reflection and mobilization for the permanence and right to the city center for poorer social groups; it questions and problematizes, in this sense, the use and abuse of heritage as source of legitimacy for the process of gentrification.

It is a form of activism that has as essential tactic the education aimed at putting in evidence other possible heritages, closer to daily life and work of popular classes. This action is being developed by means of a participatory inventory of cultural references that adopts the method formulated by the Institute of National Historic and Artistic Heritage (Iphan). It starts with the understanding that the participatory inventory is an educational tool that seeks to democratize heritage and memorialization processes, aligning with a humanist and freeing pedagogy, as proposed by Paulo Freire (2011). An education that is capable of forming subjects for the unveiling of the world, so that they may, then, transform their own reality. As opposed to teaching about a heritage chosen by the State in an authoritarian, selective and excluding way, participatory inventories build a path in the opposite direction, enabling social groups to recognize, select and write their own history.

This experience is being built in a section of the area historically consisting of the city center of São Paulo, in a territory that was cut, in the 1970's, by the construction of a highway, popularly called Minhocão (Big Worm), named Elevado Presidente

João Goulart. The construction of this highway, at the same time that it contributed to the real estate devaluation and the leaving of richer social segments, also favored the formation of a more popular profile for the contiguous areas with respect to the economic activity as well as their inhabitants.

Besides the popularization of this territory over these four decades, a set of urban cultural practices was built on the daily existence of the inhabitants and workers of this space of the city. They are ways of making, living, being and diverse cultural manifestations in intimate relation with the central places of São Paulo. Examples are the *roda de samba* that happens behind the church and starts after the mass, or the artistic and political interventions that use the structure of the highway as physical support. They are lores and forms of expression of the fight for housing that have constituted an organization and mobilization for the permanence downtown and for the right to the city. In this inventory were identified more than forty cultural references among celebrations, forms of expression, lores, places, buildings and objects that are related to social groups that re-occupied the center in its moment of real estate devaluation.

The method of the inventory of cultural references stimulates and encourages the participation and involvement of social groups, so that the process of identification is given from the understanding and point of view of those that are the interpreters of heritage. The goal of the inventory was to

assess and map the cultural references of social groups that are most vulnerable to the process of gentrification, subverting the look over cultural heritage as that which is most consecrated, to think of other possible heritages from the collective memories that are built in the daily life and work of popular classes.

Educational action as urban activism

The participatory inventory *Minhocão contra Gentrificação* is an initiative that came about, in 2016, in a meeting between Repep (Heritage Education Network of São Paulo) and the Movimento Baixo Centro. Repep is a collective of professionals that seeks to rethink educational concepts and practices in the areas of culture, social memory and heritage. The Movimento Baixo Centro acts in the central area of the city of São Paulo and its objective is the creative occupation of public spaces aiming to stress public policies in this region, defending the right of the citizens to occupy streets and public squares for different forms of expression of the urban humanization, as referred to by Carrapatoso (2012).

The initial intention of the inventory was to bring awareness to other narratives about the public space and the buildings in the city center, ones closer to the memory and life experience of inhabitants and old denizens. What justifies the inventory in the territory cut in half by the *Minhocão* is the possibility of gentrification that is associated with propositions and projects of its trans-

formation in a public park, or its demolition. Even if these propositions are not fully realized, the advertising of these projects and propositions is already influencing the social dynamics, stimulating real estate value in the region that may lead to the expulsion of the poorer and most vulnerable.

Keeping in mind the size of the territory and the actions to implement, at a certain moment, as a tactic for its execution, public callings were made for volunteers to form group and aid in the identification of cultural references. More than 50 people got involved with the participatory inventory as researchers and citizens concerned with the territory in which they live. Among them, professors and college and post-graduate students of different areas such as architects, historians, geographers, anthropologists, and also public servants and heritage professionals. Since the work is volunteered, during this time, the team varied a lot in number of professionals involved but was able to keep a constant core to organize and manage the activities and their follow ups.

The inventory of Minhocão is being realized with a method of educational action developed by the Iphan and is based on the notion of cultural reference. Through this notion, it is possible to think about heritage in a widened form, distancing from the traditional and conservative view that identifies only the old and monumental and that which is the expression of official history of great deeds and heroes. The cultural reference is rooted in the

daily life and memory of social groups and guides an experience that is collective. It may be a practice, a lore, a craft, but also the place in which those happen. It may be a physical object or a building, independent of the existence of architectural or artistic value. The content of a cultural reference is given by the quality of the relation established, over time, among the social group.

References are constructions and natural landscapes. They are also arts, crafts, forms of expressions and ways of making. They are festivals and places to which memory and social life give a different meaning: they are considered the most beautiful, they are the most remembered and beloved. They are facts, activities, objects that mobilize closest people, that reconnect those who are far, so the feeling of participation, belonging to a group, having a place, is revived. To sum up, references are objects, practices and places appropriated by culture in the construction of the meanings of identity, they are what is popularly called the root of a culture (IPHAN, 2000, p.29, free translation by the authors).

As part of the method, the inventory seeks not only to identify and qualify the cultural references, but also to explicitly state their different specificities, which is made by their classification in the following categories: celebrations; forms of expression; lore; places; objects; and buildings. It is an exercise in understanding and interpretation of the proper senses and meanings of each reference.

Celebrations are about festivals and parties, but also about work rituals and devotion, are moments apart from the usual social life. Forms of expression are understood as all the means by which the social groups communicate their experience, in different forms of language: oral, bodily, graphic, auditory, artistic. Lores are about the knowledges, techniques or crafts, are ways of making with respect to the material production or to the practice of some social activity, a service. The category of places aims to comprise spaces that are appropriate for the execution of practices and manifestation, constituting the material base for the realization of culture of those spaces of important symbolic meaning attributed by the social group. The place may be a corner, a waterfall or a public square; it is independent of the existence of any building, since the meaning was constructed from its location, i.e., as a spatial point. But the reference may be linked to a certain building that has symbolic value independent of its architectural or aesthetic-artistic quality; in this case, the category is of buildings. Lastly, the category of objects is about work instruments or religious devotion apparatus, utensils linked to daily life, to forms of leisure and play, understood as part of the memory of the social group.

With the theme defined considering the knowledge of the complexity of the territory cut by the *Minhocão*, it was questioned about what would be the social groups approached in the participatory inventory. With the multiplicity of possibili-

ties, a choice was made pondering which would be the subjects most vulnerable to the process of gentrification, allowing the circumscription of five social groups that are interpreters of the cultural references. It is noted that, in this process, it was not the objects and/or cultural manifestations that were essential, but the relation of the subjects that attribute value to them, from the interpretation of how they were socially constructed.

The protagonism observed in the participatory inventory results in the collective production of knowledge formulated by various agents in the identification and selection of that which is most meaningful and part of social life. In this sense, it is about a dialogic activity, constantly building meanings and experiences. The participatory inventory is set as a heritage pedagogy that problematizes a territory and seeks to identify a living and complex heritage related to the local conditions and needs. Therefore, the heritage education brought about by the inventory is that connected to critical reasoning about heritage, that affirms and is in accordance with the continuous transformation of their values, related directly to the groups and social subjects. In this way, it is also about exercising citizenship, a formative action that may also be understood as a political tool, a strategy for social mobilization.

One of the first social subjects approached was the group called LGBT+, that has a historic relation of centrality in the *Largo do Arouche* square.

On the first contacts, it was verified that this group is made up of local inhabitants but also of habitual denizens that have a strong cultural identification with the region, many of which living in the outskirts of the city. The group is also composed of sex workers (male and female prostitutes and club dancers), workers of complementary activities to sex commerce (in clubs, bars, saunas, sex-shops, show houses and motels) and the tourists that do not fit in the habitual use but that have the region as a traditional point of visitation. The approach was made through interviews and talks with denizens, agents of collective movements and government agencies, in the participation of events and debates and through educational workshops of interaction with the diverse public, such as: Coletivo Arouchianos, Secretaria de Direitos Humanos e Cidadania, Ataque! Queer e Frente pela Diversidade e Melhoria da Região do Largo do Arouche.

Another social group to which the cultural references were researched is formed by inhabitants and poor workers of the city center. In this group are included workers with formal contracts, but also workers of informal commerce and peddlers, both with low income (waiters, mechanics, doormen, etc.). The research tools for this group were talks that happened while the places of work and socialization were being known. The same strategy of approach was used with the third social group, the immigrants and refugees, many from african countries, but also haitians, bolivians, paraguay-

ans, syrians, among others. although they are also part of the group of poor workers and inhabitants of the city center, since many of them work in informal commerce and live in pensions, the migratory issue, however, presents itself as a differentiating factor, because their situation of vulnerability is greater considering the prejudice and discrimination by their origin, color and social condition.

This scenery of complex social problems was a constant challenge of the inventory, with respect to the identification of the social subjects that live the reality of the territory of Minhocão. In this sense, another social group that composes the inventory is about the homeless and people living in the streets, those in condition of most critical social vulnerability. They are seen by society with negative representations as linked to crime and, in general, are the first targets of urban “beautifying” policies. Work was made towards the recognition that homelessness is a urban social phenomenon of dramatic and inhumane proportions, and the approach to this group was made through social movements, NGOs, and pastoral agents that have already established a long relation with these people, through actions of social assistance and solidarity. Talking about heritage with this social group that has a set of more urgent needs may seem superfluous, but, as the work on the participatory inventory has the perspective of fighting against gentrification, the intention is precisely to enlighten questions that are being hidden in the territory.

On the other hand, there is the fifth social group that presents some ambiguities: they are culture workers. The presence of artists and the production of an active cultural field has been, historically, an enabler of added value of urban areas that become attractive targets to real estate market. This potential is recognised, but also the possibility that art can resignify spaces as a form of critical conscience. This group then gathers people linked to diverse artistic languages (scenic and visual arts, music, performance, graffiti, etc.) that are also attracted to this region by the low rents; in general they are connected to the activity of cultural production outside of the market, and still tended to act in a central area.

Other possibles heritages

In all, 44 cultural references were identified and inventoried, among which are 4 celebrations, 13 forms of expression, 6 lores, 11 places, 9 buildings and 1 object. Some of them dialogue with more than one social group, presenting and recognising conflicts in meanings. Following, some references are presented that exemplify the universe of the work and the possibilities of thinking of another possible relation with cultural heritage, within the context of central areas of large cities. Given that it is not possible to state and qualify all of the references identified, 8 of them were selected to highlight. They are: occupation of empty buildings; fight for housing; graffiti; *folhinha* (graffiti paper sheets); street theater; ways

of making window theater; black feminist activism; *Largo do Arouche*.

As an integral part of the ways of making and living, the Occupation of Empty Buildings was identified as a cultural reference in the category of Forms of Expression. It is a practice that is born of the collective and organized experience of workers of the central area of the city, that expresses and communicates the need to fulfil a fundamental right to housing and the social function of the property, both devices established in the Constitution. This social practice manifests its cultural dimension in involving ideas, values, and senses that are transmitted by the group as heritage, as part of its collective memory. This form of expression is highlighted by the persistence in time, as it is the product of the first mobilizations for better housing conditions in the central area, in the year 1984, made by the people living in tenements. There are, therefore, more than three decades of experiences consolidated and affirming the political culture, revolutionary character and right to the city as a right to the permanence of poorer workers in the city center. Political culture is understood as the set of cultural practices that are produced in articulation with social struggles, which seek to transform the reality in the sense of overcoming forms of social injustice and political fights for hegemony, as presented by Chauí (2006).

Likewise, the knowledge acquired by the social movements in this experience of acting in the city

center was identified as a cultural reference in the category of Lores. It is the specific lore of Fight for Housing. It is associated to a set of knowledges that were built from the practices, routines and experiences of organization and mobilization that conform a repertoire of collective action, according to Tabagiba, Paterniani and Trindade (2012). They are lores produced through sharing and are reproduced in the social group by transmission of collective memory and involve the formation of critical conscience of a series of social injustices. But they are also knowledges of practices of fight, forms of planning and organizing, the execution and negotiation, the resolution of conflicts and also the ordering of routine in the occupied space.

In the category Form of Expression, Graffiti is also highlighted as an urban expression in São Paulo that has unique characteristics in its writing, presenting itself as marking and dispute of territory that has the city center as symbolic space of great visibility. The graphical relations on the walls are also a reflex of how people organize socially. Demystifying the graffiti as an act of vandalism, it is understood as a cultural reference a language of closed system that only those that practice it know its meanings, provokes those who do not understand it and also put the name (of the person or group) in a place of prominence in the city that routinely excludes them. As part of the universe of graffiti, there are also the folhinhas that are records of this script in sheets of notebooks, schedules or kept loose, collected and even sold. The small

sheets were identified as a cultural reference in the category Object, since they are artifacts produced and traded in meetings between the graffitiists and are valued individually or in sets by the age of each record, and also by being made by more experienced and/or famous graffitiists. At the same time, they are support of memory of graffiti and reflex of social relations of the graffitiist.

Another reference recognised in the inventory of Minhocão in the category Forms of Expression is the Street Theater, characterised by occurring without or with very little infrastructure, in which the unpredictable is part of the spectacle. It is an expression that has as main characteristics the democratization of the access to culture and the interruption of the daily routine of citizens, inserting itself and bringing presentations to the public space that, sometimes, dialogues with political themes, provoking the public. Similar to the theatrical experience on the street are the Ways of Making Window Theater, another cultural reference, this time in the category of Lores. It is a set of knowledges associated to the production of theatrical presentations, executed with techniques developed especially for the relation window, stage and highway public. It was created and developed by the Grupo Esparrama, that initiated a series of plays from a window of the apartment of its members in front of the Minhocão. From the first experiences, the group was able to adapt the techniques of street theater dealing with the structure and distance

to the public and the Minhocão, building a new experience in scenic arts.

Still in the category of Lores, it is due to highlight as a cultural reference the Black Feminist Activism. It consists of a set of knowledges produced in daily experience and routine fight anti racist, against racial, sexual and gender discrimination and combating violence against women, and also the mobilization of efforts of black empowerment. The oldest experience comes from an organization of a group of black women gathering in the Institute of the Black Woman, the Geledés, that is headquartered very close to the Minhocão. Geledés was founded in 1988 by women that act in the feminist and anti racist fights. However, their experience that conformed this group is prior to that, from the resistance in the period of military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. The lores are diffused to universes ever wider by the use of social networks and the virtual environment, the Portal Geledés becoming an important reference of information and critical reflection on the subjects of racial discrimination and feminist movement. Such lores are related to the actions in the areas of human rights and racial equality, which contemplates juridical counseling to victims of social discrimination, promotes actions of conscientization and political organization, researches about health systems, citizen rights and educational actions. Besides Geledés, another important reference of anti racism activism in the territory of the Minhocão is the Aparelha Luzia, a cultural space

that is simultaneously a place of resistance, debate and dialogues about black empowerment, as well as a meeting place, a place for courses, parties and soirees. The space is responsible for the diffusion of the artistic production and politics of the black communities in São Paulo and, according to its idealizer and founder, Erica Malunguinho, being located in Barra Funda is a symbolic act as a kind of reinstatement of ownership, since the black traditions that are connected to the origin of the neighborhood were erased from the history of the city.

Lastly, another example of cultural reference that must be highlighted is the Largo do Arouche, in the category Places, because this location constitutes historically as centrality for LGBT+ groups. The Arouche, since the 1950s, is a meeting point for homossexuals, and this has been emphasized in the following decades with the opening of leisure equipments such as bars, restaurants, cinemas, dance clubs, saunas and others. By the end of 1970s, the Largo do Arouche was already the appropriate territory for the affirmation of sexual diversity, understood as the epicenter of the movement “sair do armário” (come out of the closet). Initially, frequented by middle classes, with special mention to artists, college students and intellectuals, over the years, this territory has diversified socially, today being markedly a central spot for poor youth of the outskirts of the city that cannot admit their sexuality in their home neighborhoods. The Largo do Arouche is current-

ly set as the main locus of sociability, gathering and the possibility of affective relations in a context of affirmation of sexual and social diversity.

Closing remarks: the subversion of heritage towards the right to the memory

Despite being stated in the Constitution of Brazil, the right to memory is far from officially recognized and accomplished. The Federal Constitution of 1988, in the article 216, conceptualized cultural heritage in a wide meaning, unconditionally tying it to the values attributed by the different social groups, recognizing that heritage supports the action, identity and memories of these groups. Therefore, heritage creates the basis for the formulation of a social right to the memory. Similarly, the Federal Constitution established that the preservation should be shared between the State and society, which necessarily implies that the public institutions, that are responsible for heritage, must create forms of social participation and listen to demands in identifying and protecting cultural heritage.

If the values emanate from social groups, such as said by Meneses (2012; 2017), why do the processes of identification continue to be made in discretionary form, without listening those who live heritage daily. It is essential, in current times, to problematize the ways in which these procedures of selection and election are given, which are far from learning the senses and meanings

that social groups attribute to cultural properties, since no dialogue whatsoever is established with those that are subject the heritage. The existential relation of social fruition of these groups have with heritage must be understood and it will only be possible when the procedures of identification, selection and election are open to dialogue with these subjects, valuing and integrating empirical knowledge, wishes and expectations of social groups.

The Participatory Inventory of Cultural References is a path to that. Through it one may operate the transformation of the look, in the sense of overcoming the objects most consecrate of official memory, to put in the center of the actions the universe of daily life and social experience. The inventory tool allows the reflection about routine things, removing them from their daily invisibility and resignifying them. This process occurs when these things are stated as places of life, like celebrations, work rituals and forms of being, living, and ways of making.

The inventory may promote a subversion of the hegemonic forms of thinking about cultural heritage. These hegemonic forms have imposed, since very early, an idea of collective heritage that does not represent the totality of the social groups, especially the popular strata, the subordinate groups. However, this heritage was and is imposed as if it belongs to everyone, as if it is consensus. In truth, it is support of a memory ex-

terior to the groups, but that is internalized by the popular classes as if it were their own memory. The process of internalization is by means of statist discourse that affirms its legitimacy as the only entity capable of stating what is heritage, through institutional recognition.

In this situation, using a method created in the field of cultural heritage, the inventory, as educational activism, aims to state and announce other possible heritages, considering the experience and living, the practices and memories of popular groups in the city center. In this way, heritage turns into a discourse defending the permanence of inhabitants and poor workers in the center and of the right to the city, against the urbanism that promotes socio-spatial segregation and deepens inequalities and social injustices.

The inventory of Minhocão tries to show that, after more than 40 years of presence of the highway in this central portion of the city, it is no longer possible to conceive it as a urbanistic failure. Such discourse that sees the Minhocão as a scar is the same that defends healing measures aimed at real estate valuing, at beautification and the replacement of classes from this space. The Minhocão became, over the decades, a place of a multi diversified social activity, out of the market, erratic and that has in this highway its central axis, since it is that which has generated different uses and forms of social appropriation accompanied by the cultural production that is equally complex and diverse.

The inventory of Minhocão allows the problematization of the consensus of a urbanistic failure and a “scar to make up”, proposing a subversion of the look over it, recognizing that, in these 40 years, the highway was resignified, becoming “[...] locus of intense cultural activity, of appropriation and social use and urban life in its complexity.” (NITO; SCIFONI, 2017, p. 49).

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