Culture as Urbanism, or the Territorial Dimension of Culture

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Abstract
This article develops the idea of a "territorial dimension of culture" (proposed by Raquel Rolnik) in the context of contemporary grassroots urbanism in São Paulo, in particular in the peripheries of the city. The central argument of the article is the value of culture as an integral element in urbanism, and not as a separate area that is occasionally brought to bear on it. The article examines the use of culture in the construction of public spaces in the periphery—spaces defined not by their formal aspects, but for sustaining a diverse and inclusive public sphere. Culture is understood as urbanism both because it helps in critically understanding urbanization processes, and also because it aids in intervening in these processes concretely. The article also suggests a broadening of the epistemological assumptions of urbanism, so as to include practices and bodies of knowledge by diverse communities and groups, which are not necessarily recognized by official educational and professional institutions. Such a broadened vision has the potential to generate a more democratic, participatory and efficient urbanism, and a more just and humane city.
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In a short but provocative blog post written on the occasion of the announcement of the Law for the Support of the Periphery of São Paulo (Lei de Fomento à Periferia de São Paulo), urbanist Raquel Rolnik proposes that we consider the "territorial dimension of culture" as an important variable in city planning and urban design (2016). Rolnik seems to suggest something different from our more common understanding of overlaps between territory and culture. She points not simply at the places where territory and culture intersect, but most crucially at the dimension where they merge together. I take Rolnik's evocative coinage—the "territorial dimension of culture"—as my departure point and central argument in this text. I will discuss the term both as a conceptual proposition, as well as an empirical finding from my research on grassroots urbanism in São Paulo.

Putting culture and territory together might not sound new at first. Many territory-based disciplines and professions have looked at culture as an important element in the production and understanding of the built environment: from architectural patrimony programs that consider cultural practices and intangible heritage as integral to historic preservation and conservation; to urban designs that include culture as an important function of cities; to architects who take culture into account when designing or transforming buildings and places. Conversely, many disciplines in the cultural field also look to territory: literature, film, art history, cultural studies, and visual studies all have considered space as a factor in artistic and cultural production, not only as setting but also as theme, trope, muse, metaphor, and context (this phenomenon has been called "the spatial turn" in many non-space-based disciplines; see NIEUWENHUIS E CROUCH, 2017; WARF E ARIAS, 2009, among others).

The instances above consider how culture influences space, or how space influences culture.

But the territorial dimension of culture is different. It is not an interface where culture and territory meet, as separate and distinct entities, and "talk" to each other. Rather, it is a dimension (which may be temporal, spatial, conceptual, or all of those) where culture acquires spatial properties and vice-versa. Culture ceases to be seen as an external factor that comes into play in urbanism, and becomes an integral force that is formative of urban space. Or, perhaps more appropriately, culture and territory become mutually constitutive and, therefore, inseparable. This discussion may sound quite abstract (and rightly so, as its theoretical implications are important), but my argument stems from empirical findings.

I posit that culture has a territorial dimension based on my current, ongoing research project on grassroots urbanism in São Paulo in the last two decades. What is more, I suggest that recognizing the territorial dimension of culture—the fact that cultural acts are forces that shape the use, form, and meaning of the built environment—also has political and epistemological repercussions, as it forces us to acknowledge the contributions of groups and individuals who are traditionally excluded from most professional and academic definitions of urbanism. These groups and individuals act outside of established disciplinary frameworks, and bring methods and concerns that are seemingly extraneous to the skill set and techniques of city planning and urban design, including but not limited to culture, race, gender, sexual identity, art, literature, and performance. I hope to demonstrate that these methods and concerns, in fact, are essential if we want to conceive the production of urban space in a more democratic and equitable manner.

Recognizing that these are important elements in the planning, production, transformation, and use of urban space also means broadening the range of "authorized" voices that can be at the table of policy-making and city-building. This point is based on Marilena Chauí's exploration of the notion of a "competent discourse" as a tool of socio-political exclusion and domination, where class interests and political ideologies combine with scientific positivism to circumscribe a small set of "competent" voices, and to exclude others from having a say in political, economic, cultural, and technological decisions (1981). Chauí's argument can help us explore the potential contributions of grassroots urbanists not only to the city, but also to the field of urbanism as a whole.

The activists who engage in the territorial dimension of culture are usually not professionals of urban planning and design: most of them did not attend architecture and urbanism schools, did not receive professional credentials, and do not work for official public or private urbanism offices. The epistemological implication of my argument is that the practices, ideas, value systems, methods, and goals of these activists constitute a variegated corpus of knowledge that should be engaged se-

riously, and non-hierarchically, by the "competent discourses" of urban planning and design. Culture is one among their many potential contributions to a more just and inclusive form of city governance.

Sure, there are many civil servants, officials, and private consultants who work in areas such as cultural programming, education, and events. But their activities—while worthy and crucial to social and urban inclusion—still reinforce, for the most part, the separation of territory and culture that I alluded to above. In contrast, the way urban activists merge culture and territory, the way they use culture as a force for change in urban space, is less encumbered by established professional boundaries and jurisdictions. The activists use, and produce, culture as an integral element of urban planning and design, and not as an appended discipline or related department.

To be clear, I did not set out with the assumption that culture is territorial, and that my study of urban space and urban policy would necessarily look at culture. My project began by trying to cast a wide net over the contemporary proliferation of grassroots urbanism in São Paulo. It was through my research, as I broadened my scope to include the whole city, as I visited sites and interviewed activists, that I encountered cultural action as a form of urbanism. The course of my research widened my assumptions about my subject of study, prompting me to reframe both my methods and my initial hypothesis.

I had been interested in the informal occupation of public space as a force of urban transformation since the early 2000s, when those manifestations were more sporadic, and associated with the more familiar idea of street demonstrations (SANDLER, 2007). After bubbling for over a decade, and increasingly taking the form of something more permanent than street marches, a variety of urban activisms coalesced into a distinct trend in the early 2010s. In 2013, the June Journeys catalyzed a rising tide of grassroots urban actions, while also spurring debates and reflections on the topic in social and news media, academic venues, presentations, and publications (FRIENDLY, 2017; SCHERER-WARREN, 2014; ESCOLA DE ATIVISMO, 2015; BURATTO, 2016; HOLSTON, 2014; CALDEIRA, 2015; among others).

As a scholar who had been paying attention to these initiatives for a while, I was struck by the 2013 debates for two reasons: first, the general excitement on the part of scholars and activists, and the sense that something novel in both quality and quantity was happening in the city. Two, the recurrent criticisms voiced by some of these scholars, who believed that the proliferation of urban activisms was problematic because it was concentrated in the center of São Paulo, in areas already flush with socio-economic resources, cultural capital, and urban infrastructure. These critics were concerned that the new urban activisms not only ignored the serious problems of low-income, peripheral neighborhoods, but also that they were

complicit in processes of gentrification and social discrimination while adopting a "feel-good" discourse on public space for all. Guilherme Wisnik, a scholar and curator who supported many of these initiatives and as such was in the crossfire of these debates, describes the discussions as "an acute situation" that "arose when movements … were accused of elitism" for representing "an intellectualized middle class that is only (or primarily) concerned with the central areas of the city" (2015).

I had witnessed some of these debates in heated social media discussions. Later, the debates and criticisms were recounted to me in personal interviews and informal conversations with scholars and activists. I took all sides of the debate seriously; without dismissing either the criticisms or the criticized, I wondered whether this somewhat dichotomous impasse accounted for the full story. In other words: was it the case that contemporary grassroots urbanism ignored peripheries and low-income neighborhoods? Or was there perhaps grassroots urbanism taking place in peripheries and low-income areas, and some of us simply did not know about it, or did not count it as urban activism? Although in the past the size of São Paulo had discouraged me from whole-city research projects, now I believed that the only way to answer these questions and test the accuracy of the criticisms was to look at the city in its entirety, not only to do justice to the variety of activist initiatives, but also to map out larger trends as well as absences and gaps.

The city as a whole

In his work on self-managed, self-built social-interest housing (mutirões) in São Paulo, Caio Santo Amore insightfully proposes to approach the topic through the double viewpoint of a telescope and a magnifying glass, combining the focus on specific case studies (micro-scale) with the broader context of the city and of urban policy in general (macro-scale) (2004). His work makes a compelling case for the double-scale approach not only as a way to provide a full, balanced account, but also as a critical consideration of the political challenges of housing movements, who derive their force from their local and small scale, but which need funding and support from broader, large-scale public policies and institutions. Santo Amore's insights apply to grassroots urbanism (unsurprisingly, considering that both social-housing movements and urban activism coincide in their bottom-up approach and their concern for social justice).

The telescopic scale of the whole city is necessary for understanding where urban activism happens, where it doesn't, and whether it changes according to its socio-economic and territorial context. The telescopic scale is also necessary to place urban activism in the context of public and private policies and institutions—whether those are seen as friends, foes, or both. Indeed, one of the findings of my field research is that the "grassroots" and the "informal" coexist, interact,

and intermingle with the "top-down" and the "official" (whether in the public or private sectors) in a variety of ways, and the idea of a completely independent grassroots urbanism operating outside of any established frameworks is at best a romantic idealization that does not match the reality of most initiatives.

At the same time, the magnifying glass on case studies is necessary not only to evince the variety, particularities, and irreplaceable uniqueness of each initiative, but also to understand the nuances and paradoxes of urban activism. Zooming onto case studies not only illuminates their inevitable contradictions, but also demonstrates that in most cases the contradictions are not deal-breakers. Learning about the lived realities, decision-making dilemmas, and existential challenges of activists allows us to understand their contradictions from an experiential viewpoint as opposed to a normative one. The shortcomings, compromises, and even negative outcomes of some grassroots initiatives are not to be swept under the rug, but neither do they invalidate the many achievements of those initiatives.

The telescope-magnifying glass approach has had its challenges. Looking at the city as a whole has meant mediating between the scale of large and mostly quantitative data, and the step-by-step process of finding case studies manually and individually, so as to cover precisely those areas of the city that are often left out of mainstream media and publications. Carrying out this research as an expat scholar who visits the city annually for short-term field work means that I have let go of any claims to a "representative sample," since any such claims would assume that one knows the full size of the research universe. But the very nature of grassroots urbanism—dynamic, local, small, often time-based, and sometimes ephemeral—combined with the physical challenges of a city of 12 million inhabitants, makes it extremely difficult to measure and estimate the total number of initiatives at any given point, and over time.

Still, after two years of focused fieldwork, a digital map in progress with over 300 initiatives, and twenty interviews (with more planned), I believe it is possible to make assertions about grassroots urbanism in São Paulo with a degree of certainty. The first assertion, which will not come as a surprise to the many scholars and activists who have been working on peripheral and low-income areas of the city for many years (MAZIVIERO AND ALMEIDA, 2017; TURRA NETO, 2013; AFFONSO, 2010; SUZUKI AND BERDOULAY, 2016; ADERALDO, 2017; MESQUITA, 2008; BORTOLOZZO, 2014; CAFFÉ AND HIKIJI, 2009–2013; TRINDADE, 2012, among many others), is that contemporary grassroots urbanism is by no means limited to the wealthy central neighborhoods of São Paulo. Many, and by some counts most, of the initiatives are spread in the peripheries of the city, especially but not exclusively in southern and eastern zones. Other initiatives take place in cen-

tral but low-income areas, and still others happen in privileged sites, but with a disruptive and "guerilla" character. I use the term "guerilla" to allude to Jeff Hou's work on insurgent public space and guerilla urbanism, which he distinguishes from the more general concepts of handmade, DIY, or tactical urbanism. For Hou, insurgent and guerilla urbanism are intrinsically critical of the status quo and committed to transformative and inclusive social action, as opposed to DIY or tactical actions (2010).

The second assertion, which follows from the first, is that contemporary grassroots urbanism is not reducible to one type of initiative. Considering only the creative festivals, installations, and design-build projects that have garnered the most media attention (such as Parque Augusta, A Batata Precisa de Você, and Festival Baixo Centro, among others) means ignoring a vast range of actions, movements, and achievements that have taken place elsewhere. The critiques of urban activism that deem it elitist reduce all urban activism to a small sample, a sample that happens to be located in wealthy central areas and carried out by the so-called "intellectualized middle class." The critique is therefore tautological, working as it does with a biased sample that confirms its assumptions. While individual critiques of activist initiatives can make a compelling case for their complicity with exclusionary processes, it does not follow that urban activism as a concept is always already compromised.

What is more, and this takes me to my third assertion, the effect of urban activism (or grassroots urbanism) in the city is more than the sum of its parts. Taken together, the constellation of initiatives—imperfect, varied, and contradictory as they may be—adds up to a larger force that has transformed specific urban spaces, influenced broader urban policies and programs, and changed social expectations about what the city can be. I found evidence of these effects in my interviews with activists and urbanists, in the direct observation of sites and activities, and in the study of recent urban politics. Discarding a whole swath of initiatives because they are "hipster" or "bougie" means ignoring their power to endear mainstream media, the general public, and funding agencies to the idea of grassroots urbanism in the first place. Alternatively, reducing all of urban activism to these initiatives means neglecting the immense number and variety of projects in low-income neighborhoods in the periphery and sometimes in the center of the city.

Finally, considering the city as a whole has led me to broaden not just my geographical scope and methodological approaches, but also my disciplinary premises. Looking beyond urban activisms at the center also meant finding actions and projects that do not fit the traditional descriptors of "urban," "architectural," or "design." When I began to look for urban activism around the city, I used a working definition that considered any action or project that was both grounded in ur-

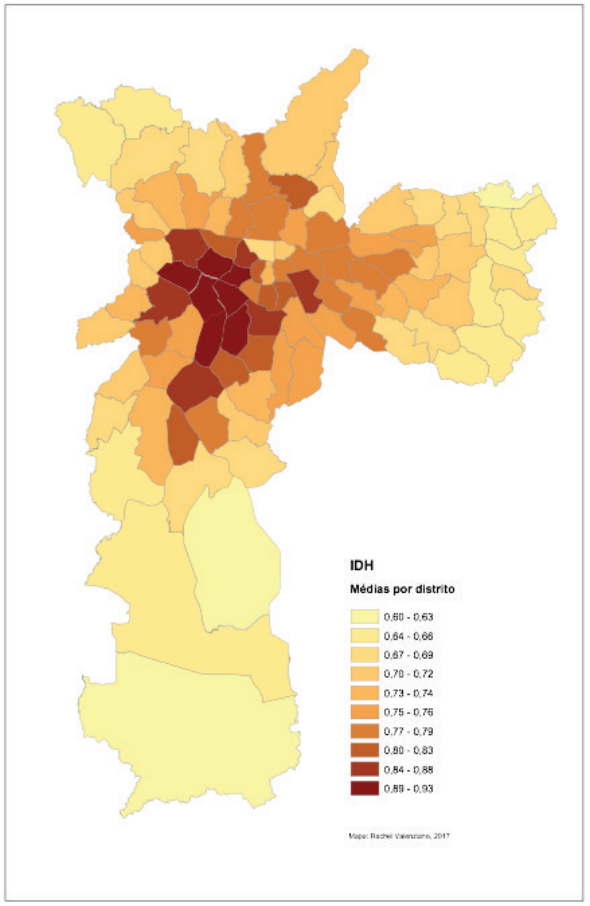

Figure 1: Human Development Index in São Paulo, average by district. Map created by my research assistant, Rachel Valenziano, using data from the City of São Paulo. Copyright: Rachel Valenziano and Daniela Sandler, 2017

ban space (meaning either a specific locale, or a specific urban issue) and that attempted to act upon and transform said space (which implies that these projects were not merely reactive or expressive, but that they were proactive). I had expected to encounter the usual suspects: handmade public equipment, community gardens, maybe a movement for the protection of a natural resource. I did found some of these, but they were vastly outnumbered by another kind of activism, one that relied on cultural actions: community music studios, movie screenings, open-air poetry slams, centers and groups focused on minority rights, alternative media outlets, fashion and graffiti projects. They fit the bill of my "urban activism" definition: they are deeply connected to urban sites and urban questions, and they hope and endeavor to effect change upon those sites and questions. Although I was not expecting it, they presented me with the full force of the territorial dimension of culture.

Invisible Periphery

The Association Invisible Periphery (Associação Periferia Invisível) is emblematic of this cultural-urban activism. The association began in 2009 as a convergence of residents and artists in the Vila Sílvia neighborhood, in the northeast outskirts of São Paulo, near the border with the city of Guarulhos and nestled amidst the eastern districts of Itaim Paulista, Itaquera, and Vila Guilherme (SOARES, 2016; PERIFERIA INVISÍVEL, 2016). These areas, like most of São Paulo's peripheries, have some of the lowest Human Development Index levels of the city—a calculation that takes into account several indicators such as mortality, life expectancy, income, and literacy, among others (Figure 1).

The association defines itself as an organization devoted to art and culture; it does not explicitly make a claim to being an agent of urbanism. However, in its activities and mission, it performs the role of urban agent, creating public spaces for formal and informal gatherings, community-oriented art and educational programs, discussions and debates on urban issues, and connections between the far-flung eastern and southern peripheries of the city. Its name is the first inkling of a deep consciousness of both local and systemic issues in São Paulo. The name acknowledges the invisibility of the periphery—the absence of the periphery from mainstream media (other than alarmist news about drug-related crimes), from social imaginaries (again, other than alarmist stereotypes), and from public and private investment priorities. In two words, the name points to the local, situated predicament of peripheral neighborhoods, and to the broader context for this predicament, which is its subordinate relationship to the city as a whole and to its wealthier center in particular.

For what is now almost a decade, the association has carried out a consistent series of art, cultural, and social activities in its current headquarters as

well as nearby venues and open sites. Although many of these activities, such as workshops, film screenings, and debates, happen in closed spaces, they are all public and open to the local community. Many of these activities also engage participants in active reflection on and discussion of the socio-economic and political challenges of the periphery (SOARES, 2016).

The association cultivates its cultural and art vocation as a way to fill a void—the scarcity of cultural venues and programming in the eastern zone of the city. The association fills this void with a collectively minded, idealistic mission of providing a public good for the neighborhood (as opposed to a profit-driven rationale of finding an underexplored "market niche"). Every activity is grounded by the conceptual and critical commitment of the association's members, who have a deep-seated consciousness of the peripheries of São Paulo in all of their complexities: as sites of spatial and infrastructural challenges; as part of a larger system of uneven development; and as sources of a lively cultural production and socio-urban critique dating back at least to the 1980s.

Gustavo Soares, a member of the association whom I interviewed in August 2016, began our conversation with an engaging exposition on the history of literary movements in the southern peripheries of São Paulo since the 1980s. He addressed the connections between this literary production and hip-hop culture, and their role in the formation of a critical consciousness in residents of peripheral neighborhoods—starting with the southern districts and eventually spanning eastern and northern areas. While his eloquent presentation owed much to his academic background (he was enrolled in a master's program in communications, and had devoted time and energy to the study of the recent cultural history of the peripheries), it also revealed his sense of belonging in a socio-cultural world that delimited a generation and connected distant areas of the city to each other based on common experiences. This sense of belonging was palpable in other activists I interviewed in the eastern and southern peripheries, even when these activists were less academically oriented than Soares (MARINO, 2016; CARRIL, 2006; TENNINA, 2017; HOLSTON, 2008; MOASSAB, 2011; KOWARICK AND FRÚGOLI, 2016; VAZ, 2015, among others).

The periphery is therefore an imagined locus of identity and social connection, a locus defined as much by its common values and practices (a taste for punk and protest, literary salons, rap music, graffiti) as it is by its grievances. Such an imagined locus transcends the geographical encumbrances of the city—the vast distances between neighborhoods, the lack of efficient public transportation, the miles of congested traffic and unsafe streets separating these areas. This transcendence, and this sense of connection, is distilled by city-wide events such as Aesthetics of the Peripheries (Estéticas das Periferias), a festi-

val that gathers art, music, performance, and cultural groups from the various outskirts of the city.

At the same time that Soares presented me with this well-considered reflection on the historical arc of the peripheries, and the role of literature and culture in offering opportunities for critical thinking and socio-economic emancipation, he also expounded on the practical challenges of his organization. They relied on public funding through competitive grant applications and other programs. Most of the members had other full-time jobs, and devoted time and energy to the association as volunteers on top of their other occupations. The headquarters had been donated by a relative of one of the members, and they were refurbishing it on their own gradually (when I visited, two members were busy working on the street-front space). I naively asked about crowdfunding, and Soares patiently stated that their communities did not have disposable income to donate even if they wanted. So the association also searched for ways to make itself sustainable in the long run without depending on public grants, which are of limited duration and depend on fickle political tides.

Soares explained that they were focusing on the music studio, a lovingly built space at the back of the building, small but impeccably appointed with recording equipment and sound insulation. He told me that the studio served two purposes: it could be rented to local artists at a much lower cost than commercial studios, and it also served to record the work of a series of selected artists that the association had chosen to produce and promote. These artists all came from peripheral neighborhoods, and their music had an independent streak. The association promotes these musicians by producing audio recordings, music videos, and live concerts. The idea is that investing in these musicians could be a source of revenue as well as a way of fostering and disseminating the cultural production of São Paulo's peripheries. The revenue, in turn, could help keep the association running and maintain its public activities.

The entanglement of idealism and pragmatism represented a survival tactic more concerned with making things happen than with ideological purity. There was no conflict between a community-oriented discourse and a music-business enterprise—not only because one helped support the other, but also—as Soares pointed out—because the "enterprise" is far removed from the profit-driven commercialism of the popular music market. The music-production endeavor is a stab at an alternative economy, intersecting with mainstream economy just enough to make it viable (and legal).

The territorial dimension of culture

One may still ask: aren't all of these activities just good old cultural programming? On the face of it, they might seem so. But what I argue here is

that they are also, at the same time, urbanism. At this point a working definition of urbanism is in order—a provisional definition based on established professional and academic assumptions. There are many such definitions; I will use Charles Waldheim's succinct explanation of urbanism as a term that "refers reflexively to both the empirical description and study of the conditions and characteristics of urbanization, as well as to the disciplinary and professional capacity for intervention within those conditions" (2016, p. 2).

Waldheim's definition is helpful in indicating that urbanism is both the knowledge and analysis of urban conditions (study) as well as action upon and transformation of these conditions (practice). Waldheim still grounds the definition in "disciplinary and professional capacity," thus aligning himself with the mainstream connotation of the term as belonging to a class of officially sanctioned experts (Chauí's "competent discourse"). Waldheim also adds design as an element that differentiates urbanism from, say, the socio-spatial, political, and economic processes of urbanization. The focus on design is noteworthy because it, too, reinforces mainstream assumptions about what constitutes urbanism and its toolkit: drawings, plans, maps, a drafting board, a computer, digital maps, cartography, in addition to spreadsheets, charts, tables, and statistical calculations.

But urbanization comprises not only physical or quantifiable aspects. It also includes the human relationships that form these developments, and which are affected by them; social actions, values, and imaginaries; cultural representations, assumptions, and meanings that inform the way people occupy and navigate cities. This is nothing new in urban theory and planning practice—such a socio-culturally animated view of urbanism is present in a range of historical, theoretical, and practical work, from Henri Lefebvre's account of the social production of space in the 1970s (1974), to critiques of technocratic and neoliberal planning (JACOBS, 1961; BRENNER, 2017; JAYNE E WARD, 2017), to contemporary government structures that contemplate art, culture, education, leisure, and sports as essential planning elements. The Tenth Architecture Biennial of São Paulo (2013), curated by Guilherme Wisnik, Ana Luiza Nobre, and Ligia Nobre, synthesized this approach in its vision of the city as defined both by using and making (WISNIK, 2016; ANELLI, 2013). We can now test the Periferia Invisível against this working definition of urbanism as the study of and intervention in socially produced urban environments.

The activities of the Periferia Invisível encompass concerted actions, reflections, and plans to understand urban conditions and to improve them. Their debates, workshops, art and performance programming, and overall mission focus on the association's urban context: both its immediate surroundings (the Vila Sílvia neighborhood), and its larger regional location (the eastern zone of

the city). Their activities also connect these specific locales to the more general context of the city's peripheries, which may be distant from each other in space, but which share common socio-economic, political, historical, and spatial features. In doing so, Periferia Invisível connects the concrete (its neighborhood) to the conceptual (the periphery), as São Paulo's peripheries are not simply geographical areas, but also the socio-economic product of complex urban processes. Just as the North American "suburb" is a critical category to understand patterns of urbanization in the United States, so is the "periphery" in São Paulo and other Brazilian cities. Their formation speaks to the precarious way in which industrialization, demographic growth, and urban migration took place in the second half of the twentieth century in Brazil. The Periferia Invisível, in its very name, prompts us to reflect about this condition and about broad structural challenges in the city, while also at the same time returning us to the lived experiences of periphery residents.

The Periferia Invisível works actively to connect groups and individuals engaging similar issues in the city's peripheries, through events and virtual dialogues. Even the music production venture contributes to this connectivity. For example, singer-songwriter Camila Brasil, who has collaborated with Periferia Invisível, is from M'Boi Mirim, a neighborhood in the southern peripheral zone. Soares described to me how Brasil traversed the city for hours using public transportation (notoriously insufficient and congested in São Paulo) to get to the recording studio. By circulating in the city, Brasil carried the cultural project of the music studio back and forth, linking faraway regions through her body, her eyes, and her creative production. She is one among many other artists, writers, cultural agents, and interested citizens from near and far who have participated in Periferia Invisível's activities. By fostering these multilateral connections among the city's peripheral neighborhoods and residents, the Periferia Invisível supports a network that reaches more people and more places than any single isolated initiative.

This connectivity also creates a system—of conversation, collaboration, and joint action. The system goes beyond each scattered project; it implies (and creates) lines of communication, processes for coordinating actions, and mechanisms for sharing resources. According to urban historian Leonardo Benevolo, it is precisely the emergence of a systemic approach connecting a variety of disparate, specialized agencies and fields that generated what he calls "modern town planning" in the nineteenth century (1963). For Benevolo, town planning was always about the connection and coordination of a web of agencies and fields of knowledge, some of which—at the time—appeared to have little to do with planning (for instance, medicine and germ theory).

But the systemic nature of grassroots urbanism in the periphery is also distinct from modern town

planning, which presupposed a centralized governance structure. The peripheries of São Paulo, instead, are connected in multiple directions, and with no clear "command center." The Periferia Invisível is but one among hundreds of projects, initiatives, groups, centers, and associations, of varying sizes and characteristics—cultural centers, groups devoted to gender and racial inclusion, literary salons, permaculture projects, graffiti workshops, skateboarding schools, among many others. This does not mean that every project has the same scope or impact; some are quite small or ephemeral, and others gain notoriety in the whole city. Sometimes they join forces, and sometimes they act in dispersed and piecemeal ways. Taken together, they form a system, but a very different one from the systems of official urban planning; rather, they offer an alternative that is by nature informal, dynamic, and in some ways fragile—but systemic nonetheless.

Finally, the Periferia Invisível also transforms urban space in tangible ways. Its events—workshops, classes, debates, film screenings, music performances—are meeting points for local residents and people from other neighborhoods. Some of these events happen in open squares, while others happen in enclosed community spaces such as the Periferia Invisível headquarters. Whether the spaces are open or enclosed makes little difference, as these events welcome a diverse public; they are inclusive and accessible. They activate and support a public sphere—a realm of dialogue, encounter, conversation, physical and cultural proximity, and even conflict, as proximity does not assume harmony and agreement at all times.

Here I parallel an argument Rosalyn Deutsche has made about public art. She argues that the location of an artwork in an open plaza or street does not automatically mean it will engage a public (or publics) in any meaningful way (1996, p. 59). James Young makes a similar point when he notes that monuments, without social engagement and reflection, are mere stones in a landscape (1993, p. 2). Both Deutsche and Young go on to suggest that monuments and artworks become meaningful when groups and individuals engage them: when people pay attention, reflect, debate, are moved or enraged, produce conversations, generate memories, take actions, or simply open up to new ideas because of their contact with these works.

The argument can be extended to space. If open streets and plazas are empty and unused (for whatever reason), they do not constitute full-fledged public spaces. They may be publicly accessible, but they do not support a public sphere. Conversely, enclosed spaces (whether owned by the government, a non-profit, or private institutions or individuals) can be sites of public encounters, debates, and actions; they can foster reflections, new cultural meanings, the joining of forces, or the clash of divergent opinions.

The Periferia Invisível provides room for diverse individuals and groups to come together, and generates a dynamic public sphere—one that is ongoing, always renewed by each event, blog post, or discussion. The Periferia Invisível fulfills a need for public gathering spaces in a neighborhood that lacks cultural and leisure offerings, parks, squares, public equipment, and even basic sidewalk maintenance. But it does not fulfill this need according to mainstream professional and disciplinary conventions of planning and design. Rather, its work is small in scale, and, to the untrained eye, barely perceptible—as they know all too well, "invisible." But one only has to look beyond expectations of monumental, permanent, and polished spaces to notice their presence. It starts with the striking façade of the association's headquarters, where a roll-up metal gate is covered by expressive graffiti. One then may look across the street and notice that there is graffiti on a wall on the opposite sidewalk—poems and images that echo and respond to the multicolor metal gate, in a kind of conversation that marks this area as a visual fulcrum and helps the association spill over onto the street.

If an architect, landscape architect, or urban designer created a perfectly conceived and built plaza, with state-of-the-art equipment and landscaping, and nobody came, would that not be considered a failure—even if the physical design were considered a success? In an ideal city one may wish to conjoin both: high-quality design and lively social uses. But in the real, and imperfect, city of São Paulo, the lively social uses are no small feat. The city's peripheries have been historically associated with a dearth of urban life. Self-built "dormitory neighborhoods," they lack basic infrastructure; do not offer enough jobs, schools, hospitals, entertainment, commerce; and are plagued by high mortality rates, racially motivated police violence, and crime. Even though their residents commute to central, wealthier neighborhood daily for jobs, health care, commerce, and public and private services, the peripheries are geographically and symbolically segregated from the rest of the city.

But now, when one looks at their cultural flourishing—in associations and initiatives such as São Mateus em Movimento, Sarau do Binho, Pretas Peri, Permaperifa, Sarau Cooperifa, Agência Solano Trindade, Casa Ecoativa, Bloco do Beco, Cine Favela, among hundreds of others—one also sees the peripheries as sites where art, culture, and social life thrive; where people have places to hang out, meet each other, learn, dance, party, express their identities safely, out on the streets or in the capillary network of houses and meeting rooms that, one by one, light up the area.

These cultural initiatives have not solved all of the urban problems of the peripheries (which cannot be solved without structural changes in the socio-economic and political organization of the city and the country). And admittedly, they involve a relatively small number of people, which

should not be surprising in the context of a city of 12 million (and a metro area of 21 million). But urban activists have carved out effective, lively public spaces. These spaces have an impact that goes beyond the number of square meters they contain, by improving the quality of life of local residents, inspiring similar initiatives, and building a positive image of the peripheries as sites of relevant cultural production, inclusive sociability, and a confident identity.

Culture has not only helped these projects understand and critique their urban conditions, but it has also helped them transform and improve those conditions. We can understand culture as urbanism, returning to Waldheim's definition. Sure, culture does not account for all possible activities within urbanism—but neither can urbanism be reduced to any of its other more accepted components, such as traffic management, street design, landscaping, infrastructure, demography, public health, zoning, etc. These are seen as essential to urbanism, city planning, and urban design—and not as parallel and separate departments that occasionally interface with each other. Culture, too, carries a transformative potential if considered as integral to urbanism from the start.

But the lessons from São Paulo's urban activisms cannot be boiled down to inviting more experts to the planning table—this time, experts in culture. What makes these activisms so effective is their embedment in their communities, something that can only be achieved from the ground up. In addition, communities also hold their own set of values, worldviews, and habits; unique ways of understanding the world; and entire bodies of knowledge (empirical, conceptual, ethical) that are not necessarily recognized by official professional and educational institutions. Broadening our mainstream notions of what is acceptable knowledge does not mean doing away with mainstream scientific, technocratic, and organizational principles. Neither does it mean absorbing every new alternative approach into a hodgepodge. What it means is a new epistemology that incorporates multiple voices with an equal seat at the table, through dialogues, cooperation, and negotiation—a process that does not have an endpoint, and which must make room for conflict and error. But for that, we must rethink what we mean by "disciplinary and professional capacity" in the theory and practice of urbanism.

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