

## Brooklyn - Samba, politics and struggle in southern Brazil

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### Abstract

This article presents the results of a case study carried out in the city of Porto Alegre (Brazil). Using cartography tools, the research analyzed the experience of Brooklyn, a space produced by the communal use of Imperatriz Leopoldina viaduct lower span, in the central area of Rio Grande do Sul capital. From a theoretical approach that considers the materiality of structures and the unpredictability of urban environments as opportunities for communication, the study demonstrates the contribution of bottom-up practices in Urban Regeneration (UR) processes, making a relation between local conflicts around these initiatives and their potential to question the rule of urban planning as a device for spatial segregation.

Questo articolo presenta i risultati di un caso studio condotto nella città di Porto Alegre (Brasile). Utilizzando strumenti cartografici, la ricerca ha analizzato l'esperienza di Brooklyn, uno spazio prodotto dall'uso comunitario del viadotto Imperatriz Leopoldina, nella zona centrale della capitale gaucha. A partire da un approccio teorico che considera la materialità delle strutture e l'imprevedibilità degli ambienti urbani come opportunità di comunicazione, lo studio dimostra il contributo delle pratiche bottom-up nei processi di Rigenerazione Urbana (UR), mettendo in relazione i conflitti locali intorno a queste iniziative e il loro potenziale per mettere in discussione la funzione della pianificazione urbana come dispositivo di segregazione spaziale.

**Keywords:** bottom-up practices; urban regeneration; Porto Alegre.

**Parole Chiave:** pratiche bottom-up; rigenerazione urbana; Porto Alegre.

The urban theme is one of the main points of dispute in contemporary society and the connection between the quality of experience in cities and the human future is evident. Allied to the pressure to improve the quality of life in cities, the demand for new modalities of space uses grows. Even before the globalized experience of confinement, necessary to control the circulation of the coronavirus, the daily difficulties caused by restrictions on access to public services and the expansion of physical, economic and disciplinary interdictions that limit mobility and enjoyment of the city multiplied by different social groups, especially the most vulnerable. It is also worth mentioning the irruption of the effects of environmental imbalance that go beyond rural or forest boundaries and emerge as a concrete presence in the life

of cities, with pollution and extreme weather events becoming increasingly frequent and intense in urban areas. To top it off, the humanitarian crises caused by the displacement of political and climate refugees are knocking at the door of cities on all continents and demanding solutions. In general, a series of elements related to the right to access public services such as the conditions restrictions on urban transport, the interdiction of leisure spaces and the bottleneck in the offer of housing, resulting from a specific logic of occupation of the territory, has been a reason for revolt and contestation. This contemporary discomfort has brought the urban agenda to the center of popular demands that emerge in conflicts around the world.

In this context, thinking about the needs of the inhabitants of contemporary cities means thinking about the logic of occupation that segregates populations and restricts human experiences to a typology of planned coexistence. In this way, it is important to denaturalize the rationality that organizes space and understand this regulation as a device that affects bodies and shapes the way of living, coexisting and inhabiting.

To contribute to this effort, this article offers elements to legitimize autonomous occupation movements that, in order to exercise their right to exist, need to make their bodies and their precarious condition visible, stressing urban norms and provoking a change in the uses of public spaces in urban areas. The research, carried out between 2018 and 2019, as part of a doctoral research (Sandri, 2020) has an interdisciplinary approach (communication, sociology and urbanism) on the materiality of the city as a trigger for space production. One road structure provided shelter for three types of occupation: a) philanthropic – PF das Ruas – distribution of food to vulnerable population by 180 volunteers; b) cultural – Samba on Tuesday – music night event that promoted interaction between different social sectors; c) sports – street skaters whose activity included that place in the city's sports circuit.

The three practices changed the toponymy of the viaduct and the use of the underpass, dynamizing links and articulations of solidarity among homeless people, cultural activists, and young people from the periphery. Acting autonomously and without governmental support, the groups revived and recovered a space considered degraded, installing an experience of ephemeral and

fluid appropriation of belonging to the space.

The increase in circulation and the diversity of people brought together by the cultural event displeased the neighbors and generated conflict. Instead of mediation, the municipal authorities chose to use a police force to repress the sale of drinks and make the event unfeasible. The upsurge of political polarization in the 2018 presidential election and the recognition of Brooklyn as a space for anti-fascist demonstrations turned the musicians and the audience into a target, and the event was suspended by the promoters themselves for fear of violence. In the following years, only philanthropic action remained in place without being the target of questioning. The research conclusion related to the acceptability of changes in the public space to the degree of differentiation from the typology of previously fixed uses.

### **The experiences**

*PF das Ruas.* The action began in August 2016 and brought together 160 volunteers who distributed 1,300 meals on Saturdays. The choice of Brooklyn was a consequence of its central location and offer of shelter from the weather. Under these conditions, the activity was maintained even during the covid pandemic. The use of the space was strictly regulated, with demarcated areas for circulation, food preparation, a kids' space and an area for meals for the elderly. The entire structure was assembled and stored in a warehouse rented by the group at the same location. Volunteers worked independently without formalization as a group or non-governmental organization. They carried out campaigns to collect food and money, prepared and cooked food in their own homes. The food was heated on stoves installed in Brooklyn and had a special menu on commemorative dates. The action included the work of two psychologists, distribution of clothes and medicines, as well as offering support and assistance. The government took specific actions with health promotion and disease control campaigns.

*Sports.* Skateboarders were the first to arrive in Brooklyn and the main attraction was the conditions provided by the viaduct, such as protection against rain and heat and the lighting that allowed for night practice, without paying any fees for its use. In an area that occupies one third of the north face of the underpass

of the viaduct, the floor covering is regular and favors the sliding of the wheels, allowing it to be used as a track. Brooklyn was part of a downtown street skate circuit that also had two other downtown rinks.

In a work done during two nights, without institutional support, the skaters prepare the space to be able to perform the maneuvers that characterize the sport. Corrected the unevenness of the floor and installed objects that act as obstacles. With these adaptations, Brooklyn became a reference on the circuit and some street skate personalities were there. Users defined their presence and use of the space as “random”, without prior scheduling or script. In most cases, they were young people from the outskirts of the capital who used break periods or traveled especially to practice sports. The skaters’ movement attracted initiatives such as Slams and Rap battles that linked Brooklyn to a network of independent cultural events. The first musical event resulted from a partnership between the skaters and a bar that operated on site.

*Cultural - Samba on Tuesday.* Brooklyn’s increased visibility attracted commercial establishments and a building was remodeled for residential and commercial rental units. Two bars and a store specializing in vintage LPs, whose owners were also involved in skateboarding, resumed cultural promotion in the place, providing electricity for events. The public grew and massive events took place with a large number of regulars.

In 2018, the use generated complaints from neighbors due to noise and dirt. The conflict gave rise to a complaint at the Public Prosecutor’s Office for “disturbance” of the order. In the midst of this conflict, the group Encruzilhada do Samba transferred its samba circles from another area of the center of the capital to Brooklyn. The event was free, small and intended to sell craft beer to finance a structure that included renting chemical toilets, transporting instruments, cleaning the place after the event and sound equipment (low power amplifier and a microphone).

The song started at 7pm and ended at 10pm, with a setlist composed of private interpretations of classics of the genre. Despite the conflict, Samba de Terça remained and ended up becoming the visible expression of the group that tried to negotiate a way out with the neighbors, the so-called Movement in Defense of Brooklyn. That year was also marked by the

presidential election. During the political campaign, the place was used for demonstrations against the candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro, bringing together sectors such as unionists, the university community and a large cultural event organized by sixteen groups of sambistas in the city.

Two days after Bolsonaro's victory as president of the Republic, the negotiation to legalize the event, underway with the municipal authorities, was interrupted by residents who claimed to have no further interest in setting rules and allowing the activity to continue.

The last samba circle was held on October 30, 2018 and the organizers announced the end of the activity, justifying that there would be no conditions to guarantee the safety of musicians and patrons. They feared an escalation in inspections led by municipal authorities that already had a large contingent of military police mobilized with the justification of repressing the illegal trade in drinks. The group still kept Samba de Terça for some time in two other parks and then in a bar, but did not survive the pandemic.



Fig. 1 Samba on Tuesday (Samba de Terça). Musical group performance under viaduct lower span, 25 October, 2018.

Source: Sinara Sandri.

## Literature review

The analysis of the problem was based on a theoretical framework that focused on the opportunities for communication present in practices that make an unforeseen use of urban spaces. The literature review brought together themes such as communalization in Harvey (2013, 2014), Dardot and Laval (2017), the identification of elements of urban insurgency punctuated by Holston (2013) and Tonucci (2017). With Butler (2019), we also understand that the compulsory coexistence between different people and the sharing of a precarious situation provided by urban life is an opportunity for communication. The central concepts were the production of space and the right to change the city, in addition to the idea that the materiality of the city is a trigger for communication opportunities (Gumbrecht, 2010) and a critique of the organization of the city based on the pressure of capital (Rolnik, 2015).

Within the scope of this review, it is worth highlighting as a first approach the understanding that spatial configurations are the result and expression of disputes of forces. Pierre Bourdieu (2007), in the classic "Effects of Place", understands space as a place for the affirmation and expression of the exercise of power. The inhabited space would function as a spontaneous symbolization of the social space. By expressing hierarchies and social distances in a disguised way, we would have a "naturalization effect", where differences produced historically would seem related to a supposed nature of things. This map of locations and distributions fixes and aims at social oppositions in a form of symbolic distinction, tending to reproduce itself in spirits and language, in the form of categories of perception and appreciation. The incorporation of prolonged and repeated experiences of spatial distances, made by the displacements and movements of bodies, would affirm social distances and, by consolidating a hierarchy, would have the effect of naturalizing the inscription of social realities in the natural world.

Furthermore, spatial planning can help to ensure some degree of control over the continuous urban metamorphosis and, in this way, also communicate power relations and ways of life. For Jeudy (2005), the capacity for assimilation is a constitutive factor of the city, and contingency irruptions are managed and reduced to an aesthetic effect in order to respond to a

«need for mental security» (Jeudy, 2005: 99) and enable the belief in the possibility of constituting an organic unit, capable of representation. In this way, the emergence of something perceived as a spatial disjunction would trigger initiatives to forge alternatives of aesthetic recomposition, where the establishment and organization of urban territories would have the effect of «calming its inhabitants» (Jeudy, 2005:99). For the author, «uncertainty mastered or about to be mastered presents this aesthetic dimension: the city becomes the idealized territory of possible representations of the contingency of the future» (Jeudy, 2005:110).

Finally, the change in the productive system impacts the urban conformation and it would be appropriate to think «what does it mean to be a city where the fixed capital, the brain, was taken from the boss?» (Negri, 2017:234). The industrial working-class city followed the working day model where time followed a 3x8 ratio (eight hours of work, eight hours of transport and daily activities, plus eight hours of sleep). With the modification of work, the demands of production were transferred to the urban environment. Labor is no longer confined to the factory and the structure and organization of work is no longer the responsibility of the boss. Time flexibility and mobility are fundamental, as the physical aspects of the city and the regulation of production flows. A first consequence of this new configuration is the displacement of the work environment to the housing or public areas. The demands of this new format are not met either by the bosses or by the government, being under the responsibility of the “entrepreneur” himself, stressing the physical structure and services of the city.

The question posed for this work was precisely to investigate in more detail what happens in these processes of urban reconfiguration from the experience of transformation of the Imperatriz Leopoldina viaduct in Brooklyn. For this, we mobilize the idea of producing the common of the collective urban experience. Tonucci (2017) sees in authors such as Hardt, Negri and Harvey, the possibility of contemplating the power of the urban environment as a trigger for encounters and relationships of commonality and the city itself as a common resource. For Harvey (2014), the common is not an object, an asset or a process but as «an unstable and malleable social relationship between

a certain self-defined social group and the existing or yet to be created aspects of the social and/or physical environment, considered crucial to their life and livelihood»(Harvey, 2014: 145). At the center of this definition, we have a social practice whose core is the relationship between the social group and an aspect of the environment that goes beyond the logic of mercantile exchange and market valuations. It is appropriate to differentiate public goods from the common, we find a quality that results from a political action of those who want to appropriate the space, with relevance as an example the situations in which the streets themselves become urban commons.

### **Methodology**

The study focused on the activities developed in Brooklyn, taking as the main verification axis the composition, the forms of fruition and control of urban space in a public environment. The first methodological reference is Ferrara (2018) who relates the configuration of urban space to forms of interaction, giving particular importance to forms of improvisation as an indicator of the tension between functional prescriptions and the uses made by populations.

The selection of the corpus looked for cases that show the insufficiency of this standardization and the presence of elements related to practices of institution of the common, that is, “promote spaces of autonomy” or “autonomous geographies” where people want to constitute political, economic and social forms of life, egalitarian, solidary and non-capitalist organization through the combination of resistance and creation (Tavares, 2019: 18). In this specific case, we collected information on the process of space appropriation and on the logic of consumption of urban space.

The work is a case study and the search for evidence was carried out through direct observation and systematic use of interviews as a research procedure, also using cartography practice tools that presuppose different moments of observation. Data production was carried out through in-depth interviews, participation and observation in face-to-face activities and social network.

In an initial period of four months (March to June 2019), data were collected on the dynamics of activities that showed a combination of agents who recognized their role in the production of space and



shared the understanding that the place should be occupied, even without producing a common understanding of what to do.

During the fieldwork, the materiality of the viaduct and the need to recover the construction process of the overpass gained relevance using archival photographic images about the changes and initial impact on the surrounding population.

By opting for the experience of the drift component of the cartographic method, we seek a sensitive interaction with that space of the city with the objective to observe possible processes that went beyond urban planning and built communicabilities. Thus, the objective of the observation was to understand how that architectural structure reactivates narratives and moves perceptions. The situations observed involved multiple actors who played different roles in a dynamic and restless interaction.



Fig. 2 Samba on Tuesday (Samba de Terça) participants, 25 October, 2018.

Source: Sinara Sandri.

## Results

The inclusion of Brooklyn on the city map results from actions that took that space unexpectedly and constituted an environment for the inscription of bodies and rights, changing the perception

of a degraded area of the city, at the same time that questions the limits of a pre-set functionality.

The activities developed around the practice of skateboarding, PF das Ruas and Samba de Terça contributed to the constitution of a socio-spatial experience called Brooklyn. These collective experiences formed more or less temporal territorialities due to their regularity and had direct and indirect reflections on the surroundings, provoking other associated events and, in this way, potentially giving new meaning to the daily life of the city.

In this sense, the first concrete fact found was the alteration of the place's toponymy and its recording in search engines such as Google Maps. The second finding was that although there was a common understanding of the need to intensify and qualify the use of the site, there was no consensus on what should be done, nor initiatives by the local authorities to offer any alternative for the site. This vacuum opened the possibility for autonomous initiatives of customization and use of space. The third observation is that, from the point of view of communication, the three cases studied can be characterized as processes of resonance where all actions are potentiated without necessarily being directly or indirectly related. It was also evident the effectiveness of the materiality of an urban structure as a trigger to create living spaces and trigger communication processes, with the realization of unforeseen and unexpected alliances between social sectors that do not usually share spaces of socialization.

The research also served as a basis to define the framework for the concept of public space of decompression, under development by the author. The idea of decompression areas is applied in corporate architecture projects to encourage coexistence and interaction, break the work routine and offer a diversified environment, relieving the tension caused by very demanding tasks. In public spaces, these areas of decompression imply processes of communalization, characterized by bottom-up practices, with a high degree of interactivity and that make unforeseen use of urban spaces. The typology includes elements of environmental, cultural and memory reactivation recovery.

Finally, the research related the acceptability of changes in the use of public space to the degree of differentiation in relation to the typology of occupation previously established, verifying that the greater the unpredictability, the lower the acceptance,

regardless of the quality of the impact caused on the environment. By denaturalizing the logic that configures the urban space, we find a very precise process of territorialization that fixes functions and also modulates the behavior of the population from the framing of the body itself as an artifact for the exercise of government. In this environment, subjectivities are crystallized from devices that try to forge a homogeneity both in the fixation of the visibility of the landscape, as well as in the control of information flows. The point is that, even with this stabilization effort, there is a considerable demand for the constitution of local spaces, sometimes aroused by the very inscription of material landmarks in space. In a way, it would not be hasty to confirm that, with or without state participation, the population is customizing their spaces based on the needs of their daily lives. The problem is, as demonstrated in this study, when the action of local power not only ignores the importance of these initiatives but also works effectively as obstacles to their development.



Fig. 3 Political demonstration held in Brooklyn during the presidential election campaign, 20 October 2018.

Source: Sinara Sandri.

## Discussion

The analyzed experiences present elements of the “bottom-up” urban regeneration concept as advocated by Squizzato (2019). The author warns that UR is a complex practice that by definition involves a variety of aspects, namely economic, physical, social and environmental ones, but that recent urban studies literature also point out UR also in relation to more informal practices referring to projects that have totally different characteristics from the ones traditionally connected to the concept of UR and which would be known as “from the bottom up”. Some of the characteristics listed by Squizzato to define these strategies can be found in the cases studied: a) deal with physical improvements and also social relations, ownership models, b) use low-budget strategies, c) involve the active participation of the community in the design process, d) involves the presence of urban activists, e) involves the return of benefits to the local community, f) considers the urban “space” as a “place” with a specific meaning for the resident’s identity.

In this way, we have peace of mind in seeing the collective initiatives around Brooklyn as bottom-up experiences and confirming the hypothesis that this type of action can effectively have an urban regeneration effect. The question that seems relevant in this case, is to understand the specificity of the problem posed there that opposed the public power and the neighbors to one of the activities developed in the place.

The underutilization of the lower span of the studied viaduct is not the result of the decay of an urban area. On the contrary, it is the result of a road modernization project that interfered in a residential area and generated an underused space since its origin. The intervention on an already consolidated city did not consider an existing sociability or the need to include non-homogeneous subjects. The same typology of action by the public power was maintained when approaching the independent initiatives of reoccupation of the place decades later. In this case, the responsibility of creating a useless space was not only not corrected, but was reaffirmed by hindering the appropriation of space by the population.

The study was carried out in a specific moment in Brazil, marked by the attack on civil rights, disqualification and lack of recognition of the importance of popular participation. However, in addition to

this conjunctural element, it is important to observe, based on this specific case, the dynamics of the blocks imposed on bottom-up initiatives. So far, with the exception of the residents' success in preventing cultural events from taking place in the place, the space does not seem to have aroused great interest from the public authorities and continues to be used by PF das Ruas and skaters. However, in Brazil, there is a tendency to mobilize land and public patrimony for projects of different natures. In April 2019, the mayor of São Paulo issued a decree<sup>1</sup> regulating the concession of areas that are under viaducts and bridges in the city for the carrying out sports and recreational activities in events that bring together up to 250 people. The measure updates two previous laws that already regulated the occupation of these areas and targets around 62 bridges and viaducts whose area totals 290.000 sqm, of which 175.000 sqm would be under the lower spans, therefore, with coverage. The measure is part of the Municipal Privatization Plan and the resources obtained from the concessions will be allocated to the Municipal Development Fund. In Porto Alegre, there is still no specific measure for lower areas of bridges and viaducts, but the municipal administration has already taken the initiative to release areas of parks and public squares for concession to the private sector<sup>2</sup>. In this way, we are authorized to think that the increase in private interest and the willingness of the government to free up public spaces for the exploitation of economic activities are related to the difficulties imposed for the full use of cities by their population.

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1 <https://leismunicipais.com.br/a/sp/s/sao-paulo/decreto/2019/5872/58727/decreto-n-58727-2019- regulates-permission-of-use-of-under-viaducts-bridges-and-adjacencies-included-in-the-municipal-destatization-plan-under-the-terms-of-law-n-16703-de- 4-de-outubro-de-2017-e-da-lei-n-16-651-de-16-de-may-de-2017>

2 Bill 011/2018 authorizes the municipal executive to grant to the private sector, for up to 35 years, the services of operation, administration, maintenance and use of squares and parks in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul. The proposal was approved by the City Council after a period of processing of only five months.

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