

DESIGN ACTIVISM IN NEW SCENARIOS FOR EMERGING CITIES: TWO PROJECTS IN BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

The current model of urban development in Brazilian cities presents many social challenges since people are losing public spaces to interact with each other and the natural biodiversity. This paper presents an exploratory analysis of design practices developed by two urban communities in São Paulo and Recife. These projects created temporary urban places, performative artefacts and interactive situations. This research aims at understanding how design activism generates opportunities for rivers as public spaces in Brazilian cities. Field data was collected through participant observations and qualitative interviews made to those who created and participated in these experiences. This paper shows design activism as a situated process and how its disruptive effects in the people's perception generate sustainable everyday-life practices.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of design activism is understood within the scope of design research from many perspectives, aiming to understand the diversity of activist practices in design. Design activism can be identified in relation to the concept of activism associated with social movements, when it involves methods that fit into a specific problem, a disruptive routine in order to bring up changes on behalf of an excluded group (Thorpe,

2012). In another approach, aimed at the sustainability agenda, design activism involves projects whose solutions and processes give voice to new possibilities for social, institutional, environmental and/or economic changes (Fuad-Luke, 2009). Design activism facing the common good in urban areas is understood as community practices that strive for the democratization of space (Thorpe, 2012), or as practices that interfere in the different capitals that exist in a specific socio-economic context (natural, human, social, financial, manufactured) (Fuad-Luke, 2009). Urban design activism is related to the interference of material objects in the field of people's perception (Markussen, 2013). This last approach will be used later in this study.

Civic movements in the United States have recently emerged around the notion of tactic urbanism by developing projects design in a short period of time at low costs aiming to interfere temporarily in urban public spaces. These experiences suggest other ways of managing the city guided by the idea of "do it yourself". For instance, the practice known as "Parklet" spread out across cities around the world. The proposal became as a creative way to transform car parking spaces in temporary recreational areas, stimulating discussions regarding the reduction of carbon emissions in the cities, improving public spaces for the pedestrians. This project was based on a creative idea of temporary occupation of small urban spaces by engaging ordinary citizens in initiatives (with public and private partnerships) that can generate sustainable places (Ocubillo, 2012).

According to a recent United Nations (UN) report, 80% of Latin America's population lives in cities, and it is expected that the rate of urbanization in most countries will reach 90% by 2020 (UN-Habitat, 2012). This disordered growth brings about great challenges for the management of cities and their sustainability. In the context of emerging cities in developing countries, private spaces become dominant over public spaces following an urban model where nature is almost totally neglected. In this context, this study asks how design

activism strategies in public spaces give rise to design processes that can integrate the natural and artificial environment surrounding the emerging cities in a more holistic way for the construction of new scenarios.

From this perspective, this paper introduces an exploratory study on design activism within the context of Brazil. This article presents an analysis of two small-scale projects related specifically to the gap between the citizens and the biodiversity of the urban rivers. The aim of this paper is to understand the peculiarities of these practices, as well as their effects in everyday life and to visualize opportunities for rivers as public spaces in Brazilian cities.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected during two weeks in October of 2014 in a fieldwork developed in two of the largest cities of Brazil: Recife with 1.6 million inhabitants and São Paulo with 11.9 million inhabitants (IBGE, 2014). With different sizes, the two cities are two major economic and multicultural centres, with a fast population growth associated with intense domestic and international migration processes. They have different activist social movements that influence other cities in Brazil. In recent years, there were several social initiatives aimed at claiming rights through collective practices in their neighbourhoods, such as urban gardens, recovery of public squares, fair trade, collaborative artistic events etc.

The two selected projects presented in this study are influenced by these initiatives focused on the environmental issues of urban rivers. In Brazil, rivers are used as the main source of energy generation, actively mobilizing the development of its economy. However, in this urban context, the social and environmental potential of these rivers has been ignored since they have been being used as sewage channels and roads. Thus, the two projects were promoted at a small-scale, involving social movements and networks of creative communities by developing partnerships with public and private institutions.

The field data was obtained from the ethnographic participant observation, qualitative interviews conducted face-to-face with the creators of the projects and through online questionnaires made to 10 participants in each projects. To analyze the effects of these actions, local newspapers were also used as a source of information. The visual material (videos and photos) were produced in the fieldwork and provided by the archives of the projects.

CASE STUDIES

The first project, called "*Praias do Capibaribe*", has been taking place since 2010 and consists of performative temporary occupations on the margins of the large urban river that flows across the city of Recife. The interventions happen once a month and bring together around 15 people. During the meetings, there are projections of videos on environmental issues,

collective meals, as well as musical performances, workshops and recreational activities (Fig. 1). In 2014, the project had two important moments that involved the organization of two intensive workshops in order to produce a possible scenario that would facilitate futures changes. For the development of this stage, Julien, one of the creators of the project, realized that "it was important to think about more radical strategies such as collective intensive practices with the aim of producing some artefacts". As a result of the first stage, it was possible for the participants to jump in the river through a giant plastic bubble (Fig. 2). The object was purchased through collaborative funding, and promoted the symbolic transfer of an object of consumption to a purchase an activist value through a community-building activity. In the second stage, a floating pool (Fig. 3 and 4) was built collectively during another workshop. All the resources were purchased thanks to informal partnerships and volunteer work.



Figure 1: Musical performance in a temporary intervention in a margin of the Capibaribe River. Photograph by *Praias do Capibaribe*.



Figure 2: Participants could have the feeling of entering the river through the performance in a plastic bubble. Photograph by *Praias do Capibaribe*.



Figure 3: Floating living area collectively built on temporary intervention. Photograph by *Praias do Capibaribe*.



Figure 4: Floating pool on the urban river. Photograph by *Praias do Capibaribe*.

The second project has been developed since 2010 in the city of São Paulo. The project “*Rios e Ruas*” promotes collective immersions that involve walking and cycling around the town along the city’s buried rivers. Each expedition brings together around 25 people (Fig. 5 and 6). According to Luiz de Campos, one of the creators of the initiative, people have technical knowledge on this environmental issue, but they see it as something separate from their own lives. According to him “there is a tendency for people to think that since the problem was generated by someone else and that it has to be solved by others, so the first change is to make people feel they are part of the problem.” In collaboration with another collective, the project created an online collaborative map where the users can identify the rivers through different living archives (Fig. 8). This tool results from the continuous mapping of the rivers of São Paulo through historical and technical information, but mainly through collective urban immersions, when the information is confronted with the physical and social structure of the current city. The project also includes interactive workshops in schools and NGOs (Fig. 9).



Figure 5: Walking group following a buried river in São Paulo city, project “*Rios e Ruas*”. Photograph by Janaina Barbosa, 2014.



Figure 6: Walking group following a buried river in São Paulo city, *Rios e Ruas* project. Photograph by Janaina Barbosa, 2014.



Figure 7: Drawing the rivers area of the São Paulo city, almost 100% polluted and buried, *Rios e Ruas* project. Photograph by Janaina Barbosa, 2014.

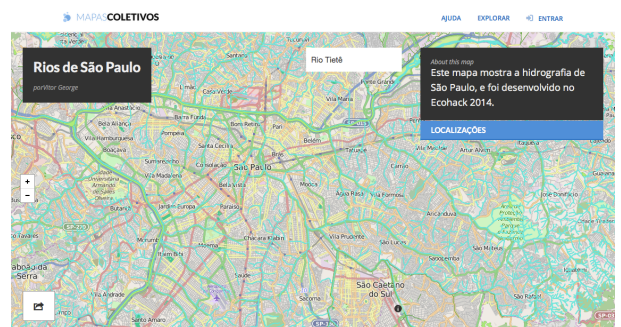


Figure 8: The *Rios e Ruas* project has mapped São Paulo’s 3,000km of buried rivers and streams. Image at mapascoletivos.com.br, 2014.



Figure 9: Rivers map of São Paulo in puzzle. Artefact used in workshops in schools. Photograph by *Rios e Ruas*, 2013.

DISCUSSION

These practices intend to promote social cohesion and the empowerment of the urban community with regard to environmental issues, in order to promote behavioural changes, both at the individual level (encouraging walking and cycling around the city, household savings of energy and water, recycling, etc.) and at the collective level (participation in community actions that put pressure in the municipality to set goals for the rational use of these resources). The target audience is composed of people who are attracted by the proposals presenting different profiles. These projects work as living street laboratories using strategic artistic methods as tools in the creation of temporary spaces, performative artefacts or social interaction situations.

The case studies revealed two aspects: design activism as a situated process and its disruptive effect in everyday life.

SITUATED PROCESS

In the historical context of Latin America the activist actions are closely related to organized groups focused on claiming civil rights. We can say the same for design activism projects. In both projects is clear the claim for the sustainable use of urban rivers by the involved designers. Also, in the interviews, we identified a relationship between the projects and the social collectives as urban permaculture groups, community associations and different groups of artists and activists (The Guardian, March 11, 2015). This aspect is defined in the participation of a network of people willing to play an active role in the management of the city. These groups organize themselves mainly by online social tools and develop collective “transition practices” opening space for social innovation towards a possible future city (Manzini, 2008).

The structural situation of these cities broadens the real possibilities of using the rivers as public spaces. So, in the Brazilian context these activist practices are still considered utopian, isolated, small, and, in some cases, even subversive. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify them as design practices because they use methods other

than protest, in which a group of people struggle with the institutional power to claim a cause. In fact, through experience and visualization, it portrays a better city scenario. The two projects were created without any institutional support, emerging from the personal motivation of small number of designers. However, they deal with institutional power in order to create a debate on sustainable practices that interfere, in any way, with the political agendas of the cities.

The processes behind these projects are very resilient and able to adjust to different circumstances, to the physical and human resources and to various motivations and partnerships (Certeau, 1994). Despite being coordinated by a small number of designers, these creative processes have an organic nature that constantly allows collaborations and time settings.

Thus, it seems that to better understand the processes and effects of design activism practices it is necessary to consider specific socio-economic contexts. In Brazil, the activist nature of these interventions is an innate feature that is not presented as a form of direct confrontation to the established order, but as an indirect clash based on irreverence, playful and creative spontaneity, opening up possibilities to solve the problems.

DISRUPTIVE EFFECTS

In order to analyze the effects of these two experiences, this study will be based on the conceptual analysis made by Markussen (2013) of the aesthetic dimension of the design activism. The author related the effects caused by these practices to the notion of "disruptive aesthetics", which means breaking paradigms of social order, opening space for negotiation processes towards new forms to inhabit the urban spaces. The aesthetic of design activism is related to a "poietic" activity, which breaks the barrier between form and content, presenting itself actively in a reinvention of meanings (Carlsson, 2012).

The case studies invited the citizens to take part in the creation of the city and work with experiences of everyday life like walking, playing and recycling. In Recife, the aesthetic act of entering in the river is shared by a small group in order to experience a possible city, even if only temporarily. Walking also becomes an aesthetic act in São Paulo, where it imposes many barriers between people and the natural environment that still survives in its territory. Both experiences generated temporary experiences in the city differently, opening up possibilities to see the city as a space that can be transformed by changing individual habits both in the domestic and the professional life. For instance, the questionnaires revealed that an architect realized that her professional skills can contribute to a more sustainable city through small projects or a student realized that it is better to use his bike than his car. For a few moments they could experience a closer relationship with the river and its nature, but also with the cultural imaginary that surrounds it. The artificial,

organic and cultural dimensions become one through the aesthetic experience.

The floating living space, the performative swimming giant bubble or the collective walk on a “invisible” river, probably do not bring any structural changes to the real use of these urban rivers. However, these temporary interventions may have large impacts on the way how each person that participated in the action sees the city. Their effectiveness is clearer at the individual level, when people feel part of the environmental problem, as was observed in the interviews. Thus, the challenge becomes that of expanding environmental activism into social activism in order to make it tangible and relevant to people. So, these experiences have a micro-political nature, where subjectivity plays an important role in the construction of other human enhancement systems (Gattari, 2000).

CONCLUSION

Design activism processes in urban spaces are closely related to the social, economic and cultural context of the Brazilian landscape. The whole creative process is flexible and suits the present circumstances. The understanding of the aesthetic dimension facilitated the qualitative measurement of the intangible effects achieved by the design experiences, as the perceptive impact on the interviewed people of the environmental problems, urban common good and the empowerment of citizens in everyday life.

These two case studies allowed realizing that it is possible to reach even if only small percentage of the Brazilian population, namely workers with higher education and university students. However, in the context of emerging cities, design activism tools can also create new scenarios by multiplying the effects of these practices towards more resilient experiences on a local scale, involving a larger diversity of citizens. However, these projects face the risk of being exposed to the economy that uses such initiatives for private benefits through “green washing” strategies in their invisible market interests.

A future comparative study of these practices with others design activism processes located in others contexts will be a way to better understand the specificities of these practices. It was observed that the design research field lacks field studies to develop new tools towards a more tangible implementation of these processes.

Finally, this ongoing reflection contributes to the field of design research as a broad understanding of the political dimension of design that deals with people’s satisfaction and desires in collective processes, mainly dealing with the non-material aspects of human existence.

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