

Use and appropriation as the everyday design of public spaces in the Bexiga neighbourhood (São Paulo)

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Abstract - Bexiga is a historic and popular neighbourhood in São Paulo, situated between the 'old' city centre and the well-known banking district of Avenida Paulista. The public spaces in Bexiga thrive, despite disinvestment and lack of formal urban design initiatives. While some authors attest an ongoing dereliction of duty by the city administration towards this traditional neighbourhood, others celebrate the relative preservation of Bexiga's architectural and cultural heritage. It is between neglect and resistance as social spaces that Bexiga's public spaces are shaped. This chapter explores the collective nature of everyday use and its role not only as creator of the neighbourhood's public spaces but also as designer of these spaces, albeit in latent form, through processes of use and appropriation. This rather informal character is addressed from the perspective of historical-critical research on the collective construction and evolution of Bexiga's public spaces. Such informality provides juxtapositions of past and present, as well as of change and continuity. Led by an empirical field research, this chapter analyses the construction of public space through use and appropriation. Findings reveal that the informal character of public space implies a more fluid spatiality and relies significantly on its temporality and its collective character. The dynamics of everyday design is the result of a range of organised and impromptu actions, in such a way that an organised event can endure unexpected uses in the surrounding areas, embodying a fluid public space. There is an underlying logic in the location of these spaces, close to housing and cultural hubs. It is the persistent everyday repetition of ephemeral acts of use and appropriation that creates and designs vibrant living public spaces in the neighbourhood. This creation plays an important role in the cultural preservation of Bexiga, acting as a reinforcement of its collective origins and character.

Keywords - Everyday use, everyday design, co-creation, Bexiga, São Paulo

INTRODUCTION

The widespread, yet local, urban dynamics of investment and disinvestment in central areas changes not only actors but also the identity of public open spaces. Processes of urban redevelopment and change have an impact on once consolidated public spaces as often oppose the generation of profit to social development and sustainability. The spatial fix (Harvey, 2013) of urbanization and capital have an impact on the social construction of urban spaces, subordinating the collective construction of public spaces to the exchange value of land. As proposed by Smith (1996), systemic disinvestment in central areas is part of a bigger process, in which the devaluation of certain areas opens the way to profit through a subsequent cycle of investments in a process of urban valuation. Either investment and valuation or disinvestment and devaluation can have a significant impact on the everyday construction of public spaces, as it affects the presence of social actors. Despite being decisive, these dynamics are often overlooked and, as consequence, compromise a fuller contextual understanding of many factors that might curb or encourage the collective construction of public spaces.

Amidst the not always welcoming scenario to public life in conditions of urban abandonment, insurgency experiences take advantage of public space devaluation to reclaim such areas through collective organization, resulting in the (re) appropriation of once degraded public spaces, like "a Batata precisa de você" [Batata – a square – needs you] and other movements in São Paulo. Grassroots initiatives have the power to challenge established relations between urbanization, capitalism and social dynamics. Public spaces emerge as a pivot in this process, as they enable the materialization of collective construction and defy the given logic of public investment allocation. Areas not prioritised by public investment can be taken over by collective action.

The central area of the city of São Paulo has been affected by disinvestment in a similar process as described by Smith (1996) in cities across Europe and USA. In this Brazilian case, disinvestment started in the 1950s, by a shift of investments towards other more affluent areas like Avenida Paulista (Frúgoli, 2000). This investment shift leaves areas equipped with infrastructure behind and, in São Paulo, devaluation allowed the settlement of underprivileged strata of the population in its central area. The concentration of employment and infrastructure combined with the relative lack of interest of affluent groups shaped a diverse and complex city centre. The combination of relative neglect and thriving public spaces characterizes the Bexiga neighbourhood, between the 'old' city centre and the well-known Avenida Paulista. Between these two poles and their urban dynamics (Fig. 1), Bexiga has always been an in-between space, taking advantage of its central location but never in the spotlight of investment or development. This aspect has shaped the current configuration of the neighbourhood and has contributed to understanding the factors that might

encourage or curb the collective construction of its vivid public spaces. While some authors attest an ongoing dereliction of duty by the city administration towards this traditional neighbourhood, others celebrate the relative preservation of Bexiga's architectural and cultural heritage. Between physical neglect and thriving public life and collective culture, we approach Bexiga's public spaces going from this larger contextual frame to reach the smaller scale of the everyday construction and design of public spaces. The morphological contrast between the surrounding neighbourhoods follows a different daily process of public life construction that responds to everyday needs, and challenges the established urban dynamics as it takes advantage of the given adversities.

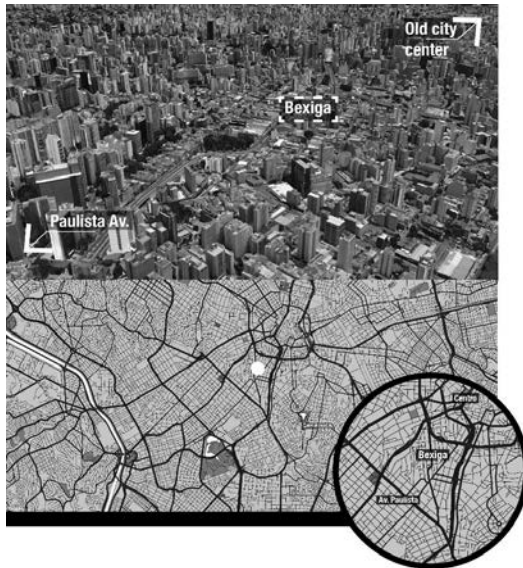


Fig. 1. The location of the Bexiga neighbourhood and its urban configuration.
Source: elaborated by the authors using Google Earth satellite image.

THE DIMENSIONS OF EVERYDAY USE OF PUBLIC SPACE

Many are the possible theoretical relations between everyday use and public spaces. In order to report them and structure the analysis to fit our purposes, we start with everyday use as conceptualized by Certeau (2008). This implies pushing the boundaries of this term beyond its usual temporal meaning, opening it to all possibilities covered by cultural fabrication. Certeau recognises the manipulation of what is given in a certain situation as bricolage, as everyday production of meaning. By valuing the active role of the consumer in manipulating what is given, people are emancipated from consumers to producers. This shift towards an active role is made through processes of use and appropriation, as the user manipulates the subject in its own way and will, often against pre-established rules which would supposedly dictate this process. According to the author, there is a hidden secondary production

on processes of use and appropriation. These practices have an underlying logic, this art of making and manipulating is guided by a hidden logic manifested in public culture. Through such lens, the everyday creation of public space can hinder discipline and order, and, instead, expresses the result of this collective logic of creation. In order to investigate such creation process, we rely on another concept from Certeau: tactics. As opposed to strategies, tactics is based on time, on the opportunity to make the best of the situation in order to get something out of it. It plays with events to generate results. Tactics are decisions, ways to better deal with the situation. Another dimension of everyday use is repetition. On a different but also suitable approach, according to Highmore (2002), Lefebvre understands everyday life as recurrence, commodity and oppression, yet also recognising everyday as the holder of a potential to promote changes in the existing exploitative relations.

In this way, we hereby construct a theoretical framework for the analysis based on everyday use as proposed by Certeau and Lefebvre. Although certain aspects are contradictory, the combination of the political dimensions of Lefebvre's everyday life with the emancipatory content of everyday creativity and production provided by Certeau, allows the investigation and interpretation of Bexiga's public space in a broader scale while also providing the basis for a small scale analysis of the practices and appropriation that shape these public spaces. While Certeau provides us with a closer look at the practices and the underlying spatial logic, Lefebvre's view contributes to a realistic look into the often exploitative sphere of the reproduction/exploitation that guides urban dynamics and might lead to insurgent appropriations of the public space.

METHODS

The exploration of everyday use and its collective nature as the creator and designer of the public open spaces of the Bexiga neighbourhood through processes of use and appropriation is articulated by qualitative and ethnographic strategies. Following the theoretical framework regarding everyday use as a concept through the lens of Certeau and Lefebvre, the analysis starts by a historical-critical review of Bexiga's public spaces, their collective construction and evolution as social spaces. This involves understanding the ways the neighbourhood's cultural identity and population constructed these spaces through history, in order to enable a more grounded contextual analysis of the current co-creation of the spaces. In this part of the analysis, we focus on informality as the connector that juxtaposes past and present use and appropriation forms. The current construction of the public space through use and appropriation is analysed using empirical field research. In an ethnographical approach, we conducted passive observation of some of Bexiga's public spaces during organised and non-organised events, occasion used for casual talks with users and inhabitants. The analysis is based on data collected during weekdays, weekends, and holidays.

SOURCES OF INFORMALITY

The unusual urban configuration of the Bexiga neighbourhood is a product of its history, which by extension results from the context of its urban consolidation and expansion. Considering the physical space and social fabric that together creates and consolidates public spaces through time, we explore a constant characteristic of the neighbourhood related to its public life: Informality, which has been a constant due to immigrants and the diverse nature of their backgrounds. Before the formal division of land into urban plots, this area, back in the nineteenth century in the outskirts of the city centre, sheltered the quilombos, gatherings of freed and escaped slaves. These informal settlements served as hiding places around the Saracura river, used for everyday chores back then. It is not a coincidence that this area was later the birthplace of São Paulo's samba music, and that until today it has remained a place of resistance of the black community. The samba school Vai-Vai was founded here in 1930 and throughout the year still attracts a great number of people to the streets during its rehearsals for the carnival parade. With the rapid urban growth processes that hit São Paulo at the end of the nineteenth century, the area was incorporated in the formal urban fabric of the city. The booming real estate market found no problem selling properties to newly arrived Italian immigrants, who are responsible for the Italian-inspired architecture typical of the neighbourhood. Together, Italian immigrants and the black community found their ways and constructed a neighbourhood in rather informal manners, against city regulations that value social order and are directed to the more affluent neighbourhoods. Between Italian shops and samba, social diversity fostered a persistent and vivid public life that has lingered until today.

One of the main sources of informality are the *cortiços*, rundown collective tenements inhabited by the poor people often in unhealthy conditions. The *cortiços* in the central area are related to the lack of more affordable formal modalities of housing in the context of rapid population growth in the nineteenth century. Since then, urban legislation aims to curb the proliferation of such *cortiços* due to unhealthy conditions, but the municipality fails to meet the demand for affordable housing in central areas, closer to job opportunities and basic infrastructures. Despite all the insecurities resulting from the informal relations between landlords and tenants in the *cortiços*, for many families they are still the only temporary solution. The social diversity that fosters the processes of creation of public space in the neighbourhood has been supported to this day by the residents of the *cortiços*. First, *cortiços* sheltered part of the black community when Italian immigrants and their descendants became the landlords, renting the basements for collective lodging. Starting in the 1960s, when the devaluation processes hit the neighbourhood, pushing the more affluent Italian immigrants to wealthier neighbourhoods, the conditions of the *cortiços*, now ran by other people than the Italian immigrants,

deteriorated. Around the 1970s, Bexiga was the most densely populated neighbourhood of São Paulo (Scarlatto, 1995). This can be explained by the proliferation of *cortiços* (Fig 1). The verticalization process in the city centre swept through Bexiga towards Avenida Paulista, sparing some of the small-scale Italian houses from demolition. However, many of these houses had to make room for widening the streets in their transformation into avenues, which added to Bexiga's abandonment and devaluation.

As portrayed by Marzola (1979), progress seems to have forgotten the neighbourhood. Despite the relative abandonment, the collective organisation is a key factor that contributes to the thriving of Bexiga's public spaces. There are several organised groups and non-governmental organizations that work towards the collective construction of a more inclusive neighbourhood, like the Association Novolhar, active for more than 20 years. A collective action also planted the seed for the long process of formal recognition and protection of the architectural value of the built environment. Bexiga is the neighbourhood with the highest number of buildings classified by the Historical Heritage Office, which draws attention to its touristic potential. Social life is part of Bexiga's collective identity, present in oral stories and in publications about the neighbourhood's history. Being places for listening to live samba music and for religious Catholic and African festivities, the public spaces have an important historical dimension, with overlapping past and present uses. The persistence of an everyday informality somehow links the past processes of construction of the neighbourhood with the current everyday creation of its public spaces.

DESIGN BY USE AND APPROPRIATION

The co-creation of public space in the Bexiga neighbourhood based on use and appropriation is composed by a range of tactics that seeks to provoke changes in the given situation and in the shape of the environment to make the best of the situation. Informality is the feature that contributes to the overflow of the past historical creation of public spaces, through the *cortiços* and the cultural hubs that articulate organized events, such as religious street festivities, and impromptu spatial everyday practices. Based on the theoretical framework of everyday use, we aim to relate and spatialize these pulverized practices to a certain hidden logic of co-creation processes in the analysed public spaces.

The events organised by the community, in general, cause more intense use around a core area, but give rise to spontaneous uses in its surrounding areas, resulting in a sort of fluid public space around a centrality (Fig. 2). In the case of the most traditional festivity, the Festa da Nossa Senhora da Achirópita, the centrality is more linear since it takes place in the streets (13 de Maio, São Vicente, and Luiz Barreto Streets), attracting around 250,000 visitors per year. This big event takes place yearly on every weekend of a particular month, usually August. There are tents selling

typical Italian and regional food and live music. This event temporarily changes the neighbourhood's everyday routine as it mixes local inhabitants with visitors, brought together to celebrate the collective yet profitable culture of Bexiga. The surrounding streets to the centre of the festivity attract a lot of people heading to it. Many of them decide to remain in these secondary streets and sit on the sidewalks to create the desired atmosphere among acquaintances and enjoy the best of both worlds: avoid the crowded, loud space in the core, but still take pleasure in the street life and chatting with friends.

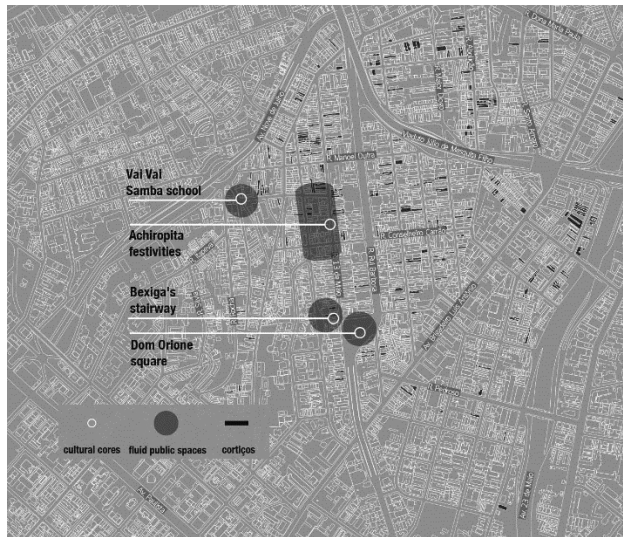


Fig. 2: Map locating cultural cores and the fluid public spaces around them the cortiço's locations.

On a smaller scale, the Escadaria do Jazz is another organised event. It takes place on Saturdays at the Steps of Bexiga, an important public stairway connecting the upper and lower parts of the neighbourhood, the historically richer and poorer quarters. As perhaps the best known area in Bexiga, the stairway attracts many tourists and, as a symbolic and cultural place, many organised events take place here, like the annual washing of the steps promoted by the African religions in memory of the abolition of slavery. As a more frequent event, the Escadaria do Jazz gathers a smaller number of visitors to listen to live music, eat and drink. As with the Festa da Nossa Senhora da Achiropita, there is a core area with more intense use and secondary areas adjacent to it. In both events, people use the given structures to create informal sitting or standing areas (Fig. 3). The high concentration of people in the former event forces visitors to stand around and lean on the walls and facades, while in the latter, visitors seem to stand or sit anywhere, according to their excitement to the music or choice to engage in conversation. There are no formal sitting places like benches; this seems to create an open invitation to a free appropriation of the environment according to needs, i.e. sitting on the lawn around the

stairway, on the steps, or on the surface between the lawn and steps. Temporality is an important factor of these tactics, as the momentum plays a key role in the decision of where to sit. For instance, during the first minutes or hours of the Escadaria do Jazz event, the momentary small number of visitors might be intimidating, and people choose to lean on the walls and watch from a distance until more people arrive. When more visitors gather, people move from the periphery to the centre. During our observations, the first people to arrive tend to choose the steps to sit, but after someone jumps the lawn protection to sit on the grass, a lot of people follow, filling it instead of the steps. In this case, someone's small breach seems to encourage other people to do the same. This again highlights appropriation as a tactic that responds to the momentary possibilities and gives shape to this creation process.



Fig. 3: Some acts of use and appropriation in the neighbourhood.

The different possibilities of use and appropriation of the stairway contrast with the static benches and pathways in the adjacent Dom Orione Square. During the events, and even on a daily basis, the square has not been as frequently used by the population as it could be, as observed in the fieldwork. Most users tend to ignore the ill-located benches and sit on the kerb that separates the green spaces from the pathways and prevents people from stepping on the plants. The square is linked through view relationships from the stairway to the busy 13 de Maio Street. Even when formal sitting space is provided, people create their own space according to their will, maybe due to the static and restricted position of benches. While the organised events foster and actually lead to acts of use and appropriation, and as a result, to the creation of public spaces, the morphology of the built environment seems to play this role for the non-organised, more spontaneous and momentary creation of public spaces on a daily basis. The features of the traditional buildings, with flats on the first floor and a small shop or workshop on the ground floor with large doors and direct contact with the street, stimulates public life. People gather around these shops, which offer direct contact between in and out, private and public, contributing to a busy, thriving street life. During the fieldwork, in most cases

there were more people sitting on the sidewalks and leaning on the building facades than just passing by.

Sitting or standing also plays a decisive role in the everyday creation of public spaces, being largely responsible for public life. Beside the shops on the ground floor, the *cortiços* also impose the use of public space due to the reduced number of private spaces available to its inhabitants, which results in the overflow of otherwise private time activities into the public spaces. This evident overflow of informality, even of pitiable origins, stimulates public life and the establishment of collective relations between neighbours and small business owners. Many inhabitants spend some time on the sidewalk, getting in and out of the houses. These relations are evident in the small talks taking place in front of *cortiços* and shops, as well as in the passageways between such places.

This everyday co-creation of public spaces starting from people's needs ends up nourishing public life and promoting contact with other people. The dimension that overflows the public spaces is based on the collective identity of the neighbourhood, and it is frequently portrayed in samba music and in oral narratives. Clotheslines hanging in the facades was a frequent element in old photographs of Bexiga and they are still present nowadays. The culture of "will do", the appropriation of space to overcome adversities and fulfil needs is evident in our analysis of the uses and appropriation of public spaces. Overcoming everyday individual adversities is also related to a similar but more collective and organised process of use and appropriation which involves claiming the neighbourhood's underused structures and spaces. Exploring the situation inherent to everyday life in the neighbourhood not only highlights the wasted, misused morphologies and spaces, but also brings to the fore potential creativity and opportunities. The claim process surpasses the hostile character of the residual spaces under viaducts and organises an active fight for more quality public spaces. Symbolically, these wasted spaces represent an affront to the lack of space in the *cortiços*, or at least contrasts to them. To name a few (Fig. 4), the underparts of the Júlio de Mesquita Filho viaduct recently received the renovation improvements of Arena Bela Vista, a soccer field that hosts a social project which targets poor children teaching them to play soccer. The collective initiative emerged in the local community and was funded by the city council. Another part of the same viaduct hosts a *Sacolão*, a place for selling vegetables and fruits at reasonable prices. Another *Sacolão* is located under the Armando Puglisi viaduct, near Bexiga's stairway. Despite not being essentially public spaces, these spaces are sustained by and encourage social life in the neighbouring streets.

The everyday co-creation of public space can act as igniter of the claim of other public spaces, as is the case of the movement in favour of a park in Bexiga, in one the last few big empty plots in central São Paulo. The movement defines itself as a "cosmopolitical movement which fights for the creation of the Parque das Terras do Bexiga". Despite an existing draft law that foresees the establishment of the park,

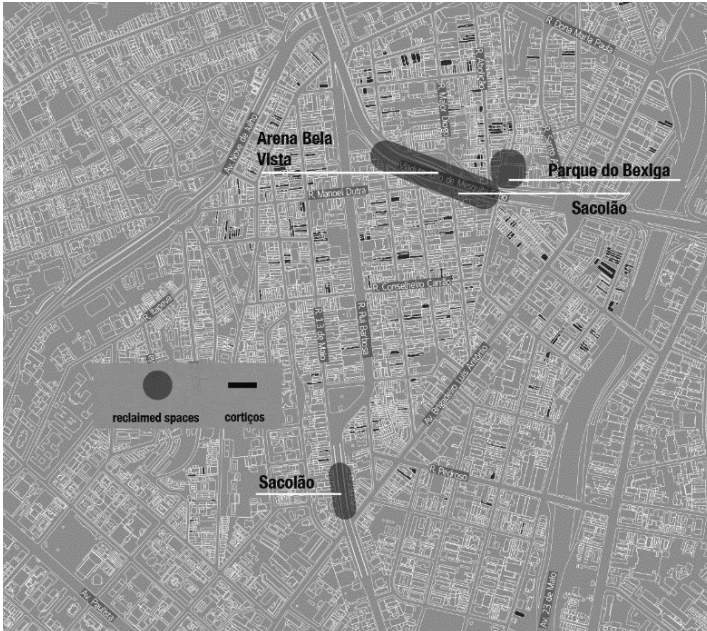


Fig. 4: Claimed hostile and underused spaces towards collective use.



Fig. 5: Public display of support for the establishment of the public park in Bexiga.

the plot owner plans to build instead high-rise commercial and hotel towers, tearing apart the traditional human scale of building in this area. There have been organised protests to protect the area, transforming it into a collective, green space. The findings of our research suggest that the creative and engaging potential of the public sphere provided by the existing flexible public spaces also fosters the claiming of other public spaces, like the 'Bexiga Park' movement. Social mobilisation and collective action challenge the social dynamics that favour capital and private profit. The exercised everyday public life and the well-used albeit scarce public spaces in Bexiga are public evidences of the needs regarding public and green spaces. Mobilisation reinforces collective identity by encouraging people to engage in such common causes (Fig. 5).

CONCLUSION

The spatiality of Bexiga's public spaces and everyday temporality presents itself to the eye first as a rather curious entanglement between its population and the materiality of its territory. Further analysis reveals that the co-creation of Bexiga's public spaces transits between the ephemerality of everyday social acts of use and appropriation and its cumulative, insistent and repetitive urban qualities materialised in its public spaces. The apparent fragility of everyday scenes that shapes these spaces is replaced by a range of overlapping everyday uses. Our approach to the dynamics of everyday design suggested public space as the product of a range of organised and spontaneous actions, in such a way that an organised event can experience non-organised uses in the surrounding areas, materializing a fluid public space. Such fluid space might encourage more practices of use and appropriation in order to fulfil the momentary users' needs. The tactics that create and shape Bexiga's public spaces seem to be the result of a range of acts of use and appropriation to manipulate the given space to make, firstly, public life feasible and, secondly, feasible according to the users' will. This rather emancipatory view, based on the theoretical framework provided by Certeau (2008), guided the exploration of the vivacity of the public spaces among the often hard urban reality of Bexiga.

The cortiços, those rundown collective tenements inhabited by poor people in unhealthy conditions, remain and contribute to the social diversity that enhances the co-creation process of the public spaces, becoming vivid places despite the hard conditions of inequality and disinvestment. There is an underlying logic indicated in the location of these spaces, close to housing and cultural hubs. It is the persistent everyday repetition of ephemeral acts of use and appropriation that creates and designs vivid public spaces in the neighbourhood. Such co-creation plays an important role in the cultural preservation of Bexiga, reinforcing its collective origins and identity. Finally, we suggest that the process of urban abandonment and misuse resulting from the urban dynamics of investment and disinvestment, despite its well explored negative social and urban effects, can ignite processes of resistance and collective

action for community demands. They are examples of unusual processes of use and appropriation that challenge the established urban dynamics; they not only have a local impact, but also, in a bigger symbolic sense, are acts of insurgency and collective transformation. This makes co-creation of public spaces possible in the first place. In this way, the everyday use and its collective design of public spaces acquire a bigger, rebellious dimension that feeds the hope of advancing towards urban change and may pave the way for the citizens' right to the city.

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