

New urban activism in São Paulo: a city for (which) people?

Daniel Ávila Caldeira

dac@usp.br

In the past few years, several self-organized collectives have been playfully and critically occupying public spaces in the central districts of the city of São Paulo, Brazil. Varying in mode and scope of action, the activities promoted by these groups integrate a wider movement aimed at “taking over” public space, which has drawn attention of both the media and the city administration.

Regardless of their heterogeneity — for instance, among the many fields of action pursued are street parties, art interventions and “tactical urbanism” — there seem to be significant aspects in common among these collectives. Using public space not merely as physical support but as working material, they are formed in large part by educated youths with an upper middle-class upbringing who share liberal political values and a will to act independent of, or in spite of, the official administrative channels.

The places chosen for action also share some features: spaces perceived as run-down and abandoned by the State, in and around the historical city center in areas shunned by the middle- and upper-classes. These include places such as ill-kept public squares, a disused tunnel, an elevated expressway closed to traffic on weekends, squatted buildings, and public plazas newly redesigned as part of urban renewal projects.

Despite the “do-it-yourself” philosophy behind these news forms of activism, the values they convey resonate with the current (2013-2016) city administration’s approach to urban planning and cultural policies. Paradoxically, not only city officials have acted to facilitate and even help funding the promotion of otherwise independently organized actions and events, but also a set of public policies aimed at reclaiming the streets “from the cars” and “for the people” partakes of aesthetic values and *modi operandi* with activist collectives. Another paradoxical facet of this “new urban activism”, frequently brought up in public debates by activists themselves, is that, while among their main, often explicit, intentions is to promote the democratic occupation of public space and to embrace in their activities the wide cultural and social diversity that makes up the city, ultimately symbolic barriers seem to rise between them and other urbanites with different life styles.

Based on ethnographic work made for an ongoing PhD research, in this paper I explore some of the aforementioned paradoxes. Having as a backdrop the bustling scene formed by the various activist collectives and the frequent public discussions in which they actively participate, I have been following more closely the activities of a limited number of groups that have managed to be in the limelight and influence the urban policy agenda. One of the key points explored in the research is the ambiguous zone occupied by concepts such as urban decay, urban regeneration and gentrification, mobilized differentially by urban planners as well as by activists to inform and legitimize different, often conflicting, types of intervention in the public space. Lastly, I argue that, although the many novel instances of activism do present a positive potency and frequently bring about an end result that is widely enjoyable (such as pop-up street furniture), more often than not the very planning of the activities and the links between the collectives and the city administration may bear aspects that are exclusionary to the participation of the broader community living and circling around the center of this diverse and extremely unequal metropolis.

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