

Empty Lots: Collective action of experimental urban occupation

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Abstract

This project was a collective action organized by artists and architects during the year of 2005 that transformed private lots into temporary public spaces. It was done in a Brazilian city (2 ½ million inhabitants). This city possesses 70.000 vacant lots corresponding to 10% of all urban properties. The urban process, built in the logic of the financial markets, stimulates spectacularization and encourages fear and segregation. This collective action proposes another direction: to generate a network of potential spaces all over the city that can be incorporated by the neighborhoods due to their proximity. The possibilities of free occupation problematize the contemporary social life, playing on notions of property, environment, uselessness, communities, ethics and aesthetic. The diverse processes of interventions were done after the negotiation with the proprietors, who borrowed the lots, and the works created relations with the local population, provoking their involvement.

This project was implanted as a collective action of artists and architects, in order to temporarily transform private property lots into public spaces. Each group of artists walked across the city searching for empty lots and then negotiated with their respective proprietors the temporary loan of the lots (which constituted the most difficult part of the whole process). After that, they carried out actions in the lots establishing relationships with the places and with the local population. The idea is to maintain the private property temporarily as a public one, while the proprietor doesn't give use for this space. At this section I'll be referring to the constitution of private space in Brazil, the existence of empty lots in Belo Horizonte, and several programs to occupy them, acting as a resistance force against the society of control.

The land private property didn't exist in colonial Brazil. Since the XVI century, several systems were adopted for land concession to the Portuguese elite, in order to have them explored. With the abolition of slavery by the end of the XIX century, the number of people who didn't possess land increased enormously. There is a lack of access to land by the low class population in Brazil, as a consequence of property concentration in the hand of a few, of the real state speculation by that privileged group of proprietors, and of the absence of the needed agrarian and urban reforms. This minority rate of land concentration is among the highest in the world. So, since the beginning of the XX century, that landless population has informally occupied residual urban spaces as hills, strips of land, shores, breaches, through land invasions, spontaneously constituting a kind of spatiality to dwell and to work in. In Brazil those people as a whole correspond to 40% of the total population.

Belo Horizonte, the city where that project was carried out, was founded in 1897, at the southeast of Brazil. It has presently 2.400.000 inhabitants, 700.000 private properties, of which 10% (70.000) are empty lots. In face of this large number of empty lots I proposed a procedure that allowed their temporary use as an area to be adapted by the neighborhood. The existent ones are mostly punctual vestiges of the geographic initial layer; some are diversified green areas, or demolished or abandoned buildings. In the dense and vertical area of the downtown, the empty lots became profitable business as parking lots. Others, in peripheral areas, are used by the neighbors to plant corn, beans, manioc and

vegetables. Empty lots, therefore, are potential places for urban breathing. If they are summed up, they can constitute a large quantity of free, open and green gardens. They form areas of different characteristics, almost always between walls. They have qualities as shadowing, vegetation, less exposition to vehicular noise, proximity to neighbors, accessibility, and infiltration in the urban tissue. If the 10% of empty lots becomes incorporated by the population in their daily lives, near their houses, the city becomes redesigned by the growing of temporary open and public spaces, and by the creation of systems of neighborhood cooperation.

The areas officially recognized as public places are parks, squares and streets. In contemporary cities the parks are big recreation areas, constituting distant points, to where dwellers of different neighborhoods dislocate in the weekends. The squares are almost in all boroughs, serving the purposes of local and daily use; however, almost become islands for traffic circulation. The streets have been used in the past as an extension of houses and commerce buildings, but they are becoming more and more inhospitable, aseptic: an endless sequence of walls and electric fences. Therefore, the empty lots have an evocative potential on the perception, because it exposes the absence of use, of activity, and, at the same time, the sensation of freedom and expectative. By the use of empty lots another dynamics is established, other behaviors appear and new local programs can be developed. They can be transformed into gardens, meeting spaces, experimentation of the nature in the micro urban scale. There we can raise milk cattle, stretch wet clothes, put plastic pools, make wedding, familiar parties and picnics, they can be used as living-rooms, places for collective TV- watching and to listen crickets. The gardens can be of vegetables, flower beds, or little savage gardens. They can constitute spaces for products exchange, places for rest or reading, for star observation, or activities as games, hair dressers shop, small musical concerts, etc.

Those possible programs are far from speculation, since the local population can construct them, be ephemeral and be constitutive of new ecologies and systems. I believe it is a way of resistance to the society of control. Today there are many spaces like shopping malls, Disney lands and resorts, fully watched, where the functions and desires are previously defined and controlled, more and more presenting a false neo-liberal sustainability discourses. They correspond to the privatization, elitization, spreading of fear and restriction of the collective ways of urban life.

In the present project, the first experiment (2005) was carried out at four private lots, and the second (2006) on six private lots (which became a TV documentary). The lots have been temporarily changed into public spaces. I describe some of them.

Action 1 – 100M² – A 500m² lot, with ruins of an abandoned edification, in the central region of the city. The project consisted in a plantation action of 100m² of grass (*photo 1, 2, 3*). The local people became involved in many different ways, whether collaborating with the planting, serving us water and snacks, settling earth, creating communitarian projects for planting flowers and vegetables, organizing barbecues and swimming pool day. The planting of the grass was the element that catalyzed the whole process of involvement of local people, who later began the process of occupation of the remaining 400m². This project was successful during 3 months. After that the owner of the lot decided to close it. I understand that the fear and the imaginary of loosing the property was the reason. But after that I found some other vegetable plantations experiences around the city that work out successfully, having good relationship between neighbors and the lot proprietor. (*photo 4*)

Action 2 - PERIMETER – The action took place during 12 hours of a day. The lot consisted in an area of about 2000m², without wall or precise limits to set the property apart from its surroundings. That feature made allowed spontaneous appropriations by the neighborhood dwellers, who used the lot as a passage and access way to a slum. The constant passages through the terrain established several informal ways. The action performed by the group dialogued with the main use attributed to the lot: passage way. The action consisted of following the people who passed through the lot in a day during 12 uninterrupted hours, “drawing” their trajectories on the ground with a moisture of water and whitewash applied directly to the soil. The marking had its beginning and its end settled by the limits of the lot. The action sought to reveal, as in a process of negative, the contour of the private property. We meant to propose a situation of estrangement, a possible questioning that could draw the attention

of the passerby to his relationship with his surroundings, and to reflect on the notions of use and property. (*photo 5*)

Action 3 – THE BUILDING BLOCKS MY SIGHT – An experiment of star watching during one night. The place has several empty lots and residential buildings. So it was installed lunettes, astronomic binoculars and this way affording an experience that usually takes place in non-urban zones. (*photo 6*)

Action 4 – TOPOGRAPHIES – Using the topography of the lot, with about 40% of declivity, there have been created undulations with the earth proper for people to lie down, read and watch the panoramic view. Groups of neighbors felt comfortable to remain in that “garden” constituted of yellow mattress. (*photos 7/8*)

Action 5 – SPA – hairdresser, relax massage, manicure. Below two big ancient trees, according with the hairdresser that had its coiffure in front of the lot, we created a SPA, profiting the relaxing condition of this lot, located in downtown. (*photo 9*)

Action 6 – COMMUNITARIAN LUNCH – We invited many people that lived in the neighborhoods to make the food, bring the chairs and their eating utensils. We put a 22 m length table on an empty lot. It was a great meeting point. This had a very strong effect at people’s imaginary, because after that they decided to use the lot for other communitarian parties. (*photos 10/11*)

Action 7 – FILM EXHIBITION – We did a film exhibition at an empty lot with some demolition ruins. (*photos 12/13*)

Many of these actions were ephemeral, even if the original idea of the project was to create a permanent situation. But I believe that it became a kind of parameter for the people that live near these empty spaces and in the city. It is a way of multiplication of the idea and to divulgate the possibilities of different programs. The yielding historic differences of right to land property in Brazil, elicited private property associated to the public welfares, urban density, improper official public spaces, the uncontrolled privatization of public spaces, all are juxtapositions that model the contemporary cities. The dichotomy public-private seems to be weak in front of the contemporary urban complexity. By proposing the use of private lots as spaces for collective experience, we change public-private into a new juxtaposition of experience and space.

(Action1-Louise Ganz/ Breno da Silva; Action 2-Fabíola Tasca/ Ines Linke/ Rodrigo Borges; Action 3-Carolina Junqueira/ Laís Myrrha/ Melissa Mendes; Actions 4/5/6/7-Ines Linke / Louise Ganz)



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9



Photo 10



Photo 11



Photo 12



Photo 13