

Diagnosis in slum upgrading projects: considerations through recent Brazilian experiences

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The word Diagnosis refers us to the field of medicine. By knowing the symptoms, it is possible to identify the disease and determine prognosis and treatment. The use of this term in the field of urbanism implies a certain biologization of the notion of urban analysis, frequently employed by the Chicago School of Sociology (LAMAS, 2007 e VALLADARES, 1998)

Reckoning the slum as a territorial morphology is a recent approach not only in Brazil but also around the world, as the very history of slum interventions demonstrate. During the first slum interventions in Brazil, governments tried to eliminate these territories, treating them as ‘diseases’, rejecting their existence and, therefore, the full comprehension of this phenomenon.

Although nowadays we still witness questionable eliminations of informal housing territories through violent evictions (FERREIRA, 2015), slums are, in most cases, acknowledged as an alternate solution when there is a shortage of accessible housing.

Slum upgrading projects (in Portuguese, Urbanização de Assentamentos Precários – UAP) have been conducted through public programs by progressive city administrations since the 80s and the 90s in Brazil (DENALDI, 2003). Nowadays, there is an unprecedented amount of federal resources allocated to this kind of projects, despite the obstacles faced by the UAP program when trying to achieve more qualified results (MORETTI et al, 2014).

Regarding the UAP, the term diagnosis is usually applied to the moment of gathering necessary information for further interventions. The interest in an exhaustive compilation of the tangible and intangible features of a territory should indicate a special concern for the settlement and its dwellers, as well as for the preservation of

their legitimate interests. However, in spite of this concern, the Brazilian experience shows how distant the UAP projects are from taking vernacular practices into consideration, and how difficult it is to design interventions taking local perspectives into account.

On the other hand, there are cases where diagnoses are understood as tools that help to clarify design decisions, and as important elements for the comprehension of the territory, its dwellers, their actions, uses and representations.

This is how some pioneer architects and others experts in UAP have been discussing and developing their projects in precarious settlements in Brazil. This research focuses on some of these innovative experiences, seeking to draw lessons from them. We will focus on architects who believe in the potential of (and the need for) informal ways of building and occupation, and whose work is based on these models.

We will visit some of their UAP projects that have been built in the last 10 years, interview these professionals and collect information about their working process, with the intention of understanding how militant subjects have been working in these “inhospitable” environments, with public governments and, most of times, limited resources.

It is important to highlight that socio-territorial readings, i.e diagnosis, have usually plenty of difficulties and technical barriers when regarding UAP projects. The lack of preliminary information and the frequently long time frame between making the diagnosis, designing and building constitute true obstacles against the success of UAP projects.

UAP interventions, in all their phases – Diagnosis, Design and Construction – have the potential to alter spatial and social dynamics in urban territories. In order to accomplish real transformation, it is fundamental for the socio-territorial analysis and its correspondent design to respect an integrated approach to the settlements in question. It is imperative for this kind of integration to withdraw from intentional/discursive plans and to embrace action plans, thus finally materializing in the territory.

Bearing in mind that the notion of diagnosis is often related to a problem-solving mindset, the approach to precarious settlements is likely to hover in the realm of what

needs correction. The political agenda on slum upgrading should adopt an alternate mindset, one that sees the potentiality of these settlements. Thus, not only diagnoses but also designs and interventions could aim at more ambitious and beneficial results, which would enhance the positive qualities in these areas, instead of applying palliative treatments for their social-spatial issues.

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