

Urban planning in the context of social conflicts: autonomous initiatives in contemporary Brazil

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The development of alternative projects, utilizing technical language and instruments, has been a resource used by urban social movements in its struggle for the city at least since the 1960's. Through counter proposals, organized groups contest real estate projects and urban interventions that threat poor families of displacement. In the Brazil of the 21st century, social conflicts triggered by urban interventions related to mega sports events, are giving rise to autonomous organizations. From outside of the government, and questioning it's practices, they elaborate alternative proposals.

This paper intends to discuss surveyed cases of autonomous planning practices in the context of social conflicts, in contemporary Brazil, in dialogue with the academic literature on progressive, radical, insurgent and alternative planning experiences in central countries (or the *Global North*)

Community planning arises as a strategy to face real estate and official urban renewal projects, which threatened poor communities of displacement, in context of the civil rights movement in the United States (ANGOTTI, 2008). Also from North America, and as result of community planning experiences, radical planning emerges in association with social transformation claims (FRIEDMANN, 1987). Recently, in the 1990's and 2000's, reflections on insurgent and progressive planning bring to the present such discussions (SANDERCOCK, 1998; MIRAFTAB, 2009; BEARD, 2003). Since the 1970's in Brazil, technical advisory offices have supported urban social movements in the development of social housing projects, to face economic and political powers in their struggle for the right to the city (BONDUKI, 2011; USINA, 2008). Brazil's cities are marked by extreme inequality in the distribution of urban goods and services. The claim of the right to the city must refer not only to authoritarian processes of urban renewal (as emblematic cases in cities of the Global North, for

example), but also to demand profound changes in the social production of the urban space.

The differences in the course of the autonomous planning experiences in Brazil are not only due to its specific historical processes of urban development. The interpretation of the process in which such experiences happen must also consider different political constructions. Notions such as “radical” and “social transformation” have different meanings when compared to insurgent planning experiences narrated from the Global North. In Brazil, radical planning, for example, would be related to a discourse of rupture in relations of power and the distribution of social goods, rarely found in alternative processes of management and planning.

In the neoliberal city of the 21st century, regulated in accordance to standards of corporate governance and focused on the attraction of (especially foreign) investments, there is no place for the poor and the urban conflicts are intensified. Social movements and community organizations seek for strategies and means to resist and challenge such imposed city project. Popular and alternative projects and plans for the urban space emerge as possible instruments to defend their right to housing and to the city; to claim for their right to decide about the future of the urban space, against corporate forces allied to political power.

Can these practices be comprehended as "counter-hegemonic", "progressive" or even just as "successful", considering the extremely hostile environment in which they happen? We can point out cases of insurgent community organizations that resist and even change the course of specific urban processes, with results also in the social appropriation of the events. But can the paths to the necessary rupture in relations of power and the distribution of social goods in urban space be seen?

After brief considerations of the Brazilian specificities in face to the academic literature from the Global North on community, radical and insurgent planning, the paper will present analyzes of contemporary cases in Brazil of insurgent, alternative, or autonomous planning experiences, in general associated with urban social conflicts triggered by large urban projects that threaten communities of low income population. This paper will analyze cases in major Brazilian cities: *Vila Autódromo* and *Horto* in Rio de Janeiro; *Vila da Paz* in São Paulo; *Dandara* in Belo Horizonte; *Saramandaia* in

Salvador; and *Comunidades dos Trilhos* in Fortaleza. The following dimensions will be highlighted: who are the “subjects” of the planning processes; how they relate to the technical knowledge; what are their main political strategies; how they interpellate the State; and what are the possible or persecuted results.

The social conflict, as noted, opens space for social creation. Oppressed population arm themselves with an urban plan to confront corporate groups supported by political power. The urban plan is presented as legitimate means of power, recognized by institutions in the scientific or technical field, such as universities and advisory offices presented in the cases. The urban plan is also a resource to strengthen the popular mobilization, oriented to build a collectively produced vision of the city, founded in the defense of social rights.

The plans, though, are directed to the State. They press for negotiation, in extreme unequal conditions of power. The feasibility of alternative projects depends on government investment, and require, in many cases, radical changes: in political alliances with economic agents who historically benefit from public investments; in taxes and urban standards. They frequently question Brazilian *patrimonialistic* tradition, solidly encrusted within the government institutions. In this context, radicalism is imposed as condition. The realization of the autonomous planning and the achievement of social gains depend on the discontinuity, or even rupture of the governance situation. Furthermore, planning decisions made in context of social conflict can be guided by short-term issues that do not necessarily remain and are consolidated over time. This way, both victories as defeats can be ephemeral.

In fact, the conditions for radical (as opposed to the a pragmatic) approach and for social transformation are, in Brazil, very different from those addressed in the Global North literature. This requires not only a critique of the immediate transposition of these categories to Brazil, as well as the production of categories, types and concepts adequate to fit as interpretative keys to the Brazilian reality.

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