

Occupation Cultural Centers & Cultural Agents in São Paulo

- A limited perspective from 2011 until present -

Depending on the original layout of the building, Occupation Cultural Centers are comprised of a large, open-format room on the ground, first or top floors, and may have adjacent libraries, screening rooms and art production studios (where paint brushes and other materials are visible). Some occupations are in old hotels, which support this configuration, but not always. The adjacent rooms will often double for church assemblies, hair salons and other small businesses, or childcare. In fact, the video room at Occupation São João--where I have the most experience--is often used for childcare and educational purposes, just as the bigger room is used for Capoeira lessons and other forms of exercise, flea markets and general meetings of the community. There is no universal 'look' for these cultural centers, but one does pick up similarities after visiting a few. Too, they are 'networked' with other cultural centers. Shortly after visiting the cultural center at Occupation São João for the first time in 2012, I was invited to a poetry night at Occupation Mauá near the train station at Praça da Luz that was open to the public. Other occupations, such as Hotel Cambridge, Prestes Maia and Marconi have cultural centers onsite and it is common that their *sarau*, exhibitions, film and literature nights attract *moradores* from throughout the São Paulo's housing movements.

In early 2015, I listened in on a discussion between University of Leuven students planning the *Insurgent Cartography* workshop¹ at Hotel Cambridge Occupation and Raquel Rolnik, FAU-USP professor and former UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing in which she observed the pronounced role of *cultural agents* as a newer development in the housing and public space movements of São Paulo. The ensuing *Insurgent Cartography* workshop indeed sought to integrate inhabitants of Hotel Cambridge Occupation, an instructional design 'studio', and an 'open call' group of participants through a creative form of mapping research that resulted in an exhibition installed in the occupation's cultural center, a communal space including a library and cyber cafe adjacent to its bakery on the second floor. Hotel Cambridge also features an entire playground (or lobby, depending on how you look at it) made of tires by the Spanish artist, Basurama who also turned the Viaduto de Cha into an enormous, oversized swing-set some years back.

In our talk, I proposed a distinction between international and local artists, as well as one between those local artists observing an occupation or movement context for research purposes and those living within it by dint of economic necessity. Professor Rolnik offered some more examples she witnessed during the Parque Augusta campaign that relate the 'cultural agent' observation to urban gardening initiatives, greenspace networks, and anti-gentrification actors, as well as within labor-based cooperatives such as COOPAMARE, a collective of cardboard

¹ <https://insurgentsculturesinclusiveurbanisms.com>

pickers and recycling families situated under a viaduct in the neighborhood of Pinheiros. In 2016, Ms. Rolnik would participate in a speaker series at the *Hotel Cambridge Residency* intervention by artists Icaro Lira, Juliana Caffe et al; Escola da Cidade professor and HABITACIDADE working group member, Carla Caffe would spearhead a gardening design charrette and installation also at Cambridge; and Lanchonete.org would produce a project by two local artists conducting a six-week series of workshops on photography, social media and self-empowerment with COOPAMARE through its Zona da Mata garden programme² at the neighboring Goethe Institute in the same year.

Terreyro Coreográfico³, an artistic collective emerging from their actions during the 2013 Architecture Biennial, focuses on access to space and waterways through a cultural programme under and around a viaduct in the neighborhood of Bixiga facing Teatro Oficina. Terreyro Coreográfico is then implicated in a decades-long struggle over public space led by Oficina's artistic director extraordinaire, Ze Celso. By being open to the public, the São João Cultural Center is eligible for public monies to run a variety of programs such as classes, *sarau* and its monthly Café Imaginário, while also accommodating the uses and perspectives of people living there for activities such as church and political meetings, LGBT and other identity groups, and English language lessons.

In her 2007 essay on *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*⁴, Chantal Mouffe asserts that:

Public spaces are always striated and hegemonically structured. A given hegemony results from a specific articulation of a diversity of spaces and this means that the hegemonic struggle also consist in the attempt to create a different form of articulation among public spaces.

The *Hotel Cambridge Residency* intervention also includes dialogue-based projects with members of both .Aurora⁵ and O grupo inteiro⁶, artist collectives based nearby in the city center, as well as Dulcinea Catadores⁷, an artistic offshoot named after a beloved member of COOPAMARE. Another project, Lanchonete.org is an artist-led cultural platform focused on the right to the contemporary city. It gets its name from the ubiquitous lunch counters—convivial, fluorescent-lit, open-walled, laborious, points of commerce—that populate almost every street corner. For the Goethe Institute project, Episodes of the South, Lanchonete.org member, Raphael Daibert wrote about a group of homeless refugees and immigrants based at Hotel Cambridge Occupation called GRIST (Grupo de Refugiados e Imigrantes Sem-Teto) in his article, *Enclaves of*

² <http://www.zdm2016.lanchonete.org>

³ https://www.facebook.com/pg/terreyrocoreografico/events/?ref=page_internal

⁴ <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>

⁵ <http://www.pontoaurora.com>

⁶ <http://www.ogrupointeiro.net>

⁷ <http://www.dulcineiacatadora.com.br>

*Struggle*⁸. While not all GRIST members live at Hotel Cambridge, Carmen Silva, leader of Movimento Sem-Teto do Centro (MSTC), part of Frente de Luta por Moradia (FLM) has offered the occupations' cultural center for group meetings. And Brazilian filmmaker, Eliane Caffe has popularized the group; its leader, Congolese refugee Pitchou Luambo; and the solidarity between housing and immigrant self-determination groups in the Center of São Paulo with her acclaimed new film *Era o Hotel Cambridge*⁹. And through a recent visit to Hotel Cambridge arranged by Lanchonete.org, a Princeton student group was able to visit a nearby building that had been occupied the night before by a new community and its supporters from surrounding occupations, something not often observed by the public.

São João Cultural Center: A deeper look

The Occupation São João is a constituent member of the citywide housing movement, Frente de Luta por Moradia (FLM) to which Hotel Cambridge is also affiliated. Antonia Nascimento, its leader has been in the movement for 25 years. It is comprised of approximately 60 families and 170 residents overall. Most come from the same part of the east periphery, São Mateus (including some extended families), even if the community includes newer arrivals from other parts of the city and country as well as a family from Colombia. The community led the process to landmark their building, the historic Hotel Columbia Palace, and is generally known for being politically active given its small size.

One example of an international artists working with the housing movement is a 2011 collaboration between Occupation São João and New York artists, SWOON and Paula Segal when they were in São Paulo for the *De dentro para fora, De fora para dentro* exhibition by MASP. SWOON engaged the São João community in her Ersilia Encampment¹⁰ underneath the museum, and Paula got to know the occupation where SWOON later provided the murals that now accentuate its renovated, first floor cultural center. And, during the 2013 São Paulo Architecture Biennial, Lanchonete.org and the Centro Cultural São João produced a project together in their courtyard with artist, Thiago Gonçalves called 'Acarajé + Gravura'. Using food and entertainment, the one-day event was merely a gesture to invite the public to visit the occupation, something that is rare outside of architecture, urban planning, artist and activist circles.

In September of 2014, Jakub Szczęsny (Poland) was the first Lanchonete.org artist resident to live in the Ocupação São João. After two weeks of daily contact with the families and the collective tasks of the occupation, he staged a flag-making workshop, produced by Lanchonete.org that focused on the histories of families living in the occupation. The flags were eventually made (mostly by the

⁸ <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2016/02/25/enclaves-struggle>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkIJADMDYGw&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁰ <http://caledoniacurry.com/ersilia.php>

youth during a Sunday sewing session) and eventually hung on the outside of the old Hotel Columbia Palace as a “coat of arms” installation. In September 2015, Jakub returned to work with at the occupation with a gardening organization, Cidades Sem Fome¹¹ based in the east periphery near São Mateus (where many of the occupiers came from before occupying the Hotel Columbia Palace in 2011) on a project¹² to build a garden at the occupation and to offer a four-day workshop on gardening for the members of the housing movement more broadly and the general public in so doing. The garden workshop and resulting ‘guide’¹³ were supported by Casa das Caldeiras and the Goethe Institute, and it was the first time that a foreign government’s cultural organization had supported any programming within the occupation.

In 2015 Pepe Dayaw (Philippines) was the second international artist to stay at Occupation São João through its cultural center’s collaboration with Lanchonete.org, and in 2016, Edgar Calel (Guatemala) was the third. On all three occasions, the artists collaborated with Nazaré Brasil who manages the occupation’s cultural center and their activities were incorporated into its monthly, thematic cultural evening, Café Imaginário¹⁴. And, during a March 2015 joint workshop, *concreto amado: habitar e conviver no centro de são paulo* between Escola da Cidade (São Paulo) and KTH Architecture School (Stockholm), hosted in the São João Cultural Center, occupation leader, Antonia Nascimento explained why the Cultural Center on their first floor is so important:

- It helps occupiers to get used to the Center, which may be quite different than where they have moved from;
- It helps to re-politicize families on the cause of the social (housing) movement of which they are a part, and it serves as a;
- Transitional space between the movement and broader public (city).

Lanchonete.org members recently presented the concept behind the flag-making workshop at São João during a Cities as Community Spaces¹⁵, a conference in Valletta, Malta in November 2016. In their presentation, *Developing identities to improve collectivity*¹⁶ they offer that:

Given the way the Brazilian mass media criminalises the city’s many occupations, the act of raising the flags from the front of the Ocupação São João has its own symbolic importance. It goes beyond the exhibition of an art work, demonstrating to passersby that the space is occupied by people and families, all with their own singular complexities.

¹¹ <https://cidadessemfome.org/en/>

¹² <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2015/10/15/immersed-context-jakub-szczesny>

¹³ http://pontoaurora.com/download/HORTAS_LIVRES_A4.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/Ocupação-São-João-MSTRU-490900594319238/>

¹⁵ <http://conference.valletta2018.org/speakers/lorena-vicini-raphael-daibert>

¹⁶ http://lanchonete.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/developingidentities_presentation.pdf

This de facto criminalization dealt by the media is a common experience shared by other disaffected communities such as refugees and immigrants, and thus a source of the solidarity we see between Hotel Cambridge and GRIST. Attached is a statement from the May 2015 Grupo de Refugiados e Imigrantes Sem-Teto open forum at Hotel Cambridge entitled, *Morar no Refúgio*.

Conclusion

In all the aforementioned examples there is a blur between ‘activist’ topics (e.g. gardening, water, permaculture, public space, housing and immigrant rights) and collective forms that are historically present amidst the struggles of both social and artistic movements alike. And while the art market and its institutions have a healthy appetite for both the physical and process byproducts of urban relational aesthetics, there are normally multiple intentions and influences embedded in any such projects. Mouffe (2007) stresses that she does “not see the relation between art and politics in terms of two separately constituted fields,” while relegating the artistic intervention to a microcosm of the broader social context it either affirms or resists:

From the point of view of the theory of hegemony, artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order or in its challenging and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension. The political, for its part, concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations, what Claude Lefort calls ‘the *mise en scène*’, ‘the *mise en forme*’ of human coexistence and this is where lies its aesthetic dimension.

In a 2004 interview with *Multitudes*, André Gorz proactively suggests that a widening of the field of art is needed “by intervening directly in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization of capitalism,” and offers that “a front of total resistance to this power is made possible” by the production of subjectivity to capital and that:

It necessarily overflows the terrain of production of knowledge towards new practices of living, consuming and collective appropriation of common spaces and everyday culture.

If what Gorz is alluding to is the connective intuition, empathy and resulting solidarity of those fluctuating masses somewhere on the underside of capitalism, then David Harvey (2005) explains the conditions under which this solidarity turns to resistance in A Brief History of Neoliberalism:

It is precisely in such a context of diminished personal resources derived from the job market that the neoliberal determination to transfer all responsibility for well-being back to the individual has doubly deleterious effects. As the state withdraws from welfare provision and diminishes its role in arenas such as health care, public education, and social services, which were once so fundamental to embedded liberalism, it leaves larger and larger segments of the population exposed to impoverishment. ...Behind these major shifts in social policy lie

important structural changes in the nature of governance. Given the neoliberal suspicion of democracy, a way has to be found to integrate state decision-making into the dynamics of capital accumulation [in order to form, restore, sustain] the networks of class power.

In *Times of Interregnum*, Zygmunt Bauman (2012, Ethics & Global Politics), asserts that "Finding an exit from the state of interregnum and chronic as well as unredeemable uncertainty would require the restoration of the commensurability of power and politics." And, whereas I am personally skeptical that art can easily transcend the neoliberal set-up, my aspirations for Lanchonete.org are that it be situated in an urban context in which solidarity and trust may be attained despite power differentials ... and that something meaningful be shared in the process.

Nazaré Brasil, who manages the São João Cultural Center along with Mildó Ferreira, once told me that collaboration with international artists and cultural producers lends credibility to their approach and use of cultural strategy to 'build a bridge' between people who came to the center when it still had abandoned buildings seeking convenience and those who now 'come down from Paulista' and often hold negative impressions of occupiers, ethnic enclaves, informal groups and low rent payers. By explaining their strategy she helped Lanchonete.org find its 'footing' in São Paulo's urban issue landscape, and through repeat partnership, co-curating artist residencies and public programmes, we have slowly developed a mutually beneficial relationship between our projects.

Seemingly as excited as I was after seeing last year's Tadeusz Kantor exhibit at Sesc Consolação, Mildó Ferreira, co-manager of the São João Cultural Center asked a leading question: Why not a housing movement biennial that used its different cultural centers? Good question, Mildó! In fact, Sesc would need to be incorporated into a story on class-specific accessibility to arts and culture in São Paulo, and vice versa access to artists in the city's *baixa renda* and social movements.

The complexity and overlapping nature of these cultural spaces and agents in the center of São Paulo--meeting on the 'bridge' that Nazaré evokes in her strategy--is paralleled by one's inability to capture all the relevant actors and influences in one text. If I should try, I must include art historical and site-specific references such as Nelson Brissac Peixoto's *arte/cidade*¹⁷, Coletivo Comboio at Occupation Prestes Maia, BaixoCentro, OcupaçãoCidade¹⁸, the artist Mundano, and Julia Masagão's 2008 thesis research, *Entre*, living at the 'Treme Treme' community on Rua Paim. I would include the film screenings atop Hotel Cambridge Occupation and Arnaldo de Melo developing a temporary cultural space on the top floor of Marconi Occupation in 2011-2012 during his doctoral research at

¹⁷ <http://www.artecidade.org.br>

¹⁸ <http://popupcity.net/brazilian-situationism/>

FAU-USP, as well as Leandro Viana's portrait series with the families of Occupation São João¹⁹, later exhibited in its cultural center.

I would suggest that the look of the more recent--three times used--cultural space Observatório²⁰--and the vertical gardening initiative called Movimento 90° by the same people²¹--could be said to be in a learning 'dialogue' with the older Coletivo Coletor, and may be in a useful feedback loop with the predecessor, rooftop and gardening projects (mentioned above) but with an enhanced public policy and real estate-power access and some allegiance to the formal art market ... all of which require a concerted effort if they are to be focussed to benefit the class-based struggles sharing the same city center. I would work all the way up to the new mayor's *Cidade Limpa* campaign, which has inspired a citywide surge of Pichação 'writing'; micro modes of commodifying São Paulo's homegrown visual language of dissent²² become evident (Pichação writing can presently be seen in PIVÔ's ground floor gallery); and the emergence of at least one new font, pixelated to imitate Pichação, named Dória by artist and Lanchonete.org member, Arnaldo do Melo (see attached/inserted).

Lanchonete.org's next artist will come to consider Pichação and related forms of street art and publicity, and the new public policies that affect them.

—Todd Lanier Lester (for Lanchonete.org), February 2017

¹⁹ <http://www.leandroviana.com/ocupacao/>

²⁰ <http://observatorioarte.org>

²¹ <http://movimento90.com>

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jan/06/pixacao-the-story-behind-sao-paulos-angry-alternative-to-graffiti>