

Urban Commons and democracy

CITIES: to whom, by whom?

What is the city but the people?

-William Shakespeare, 1608, Coriolanus

OVERVIEW

Cities and urban spaces are a result of their use, and to claim their space can mean a claim for democracy but can also be understood as a claim for power. This paper presents the Minhocão Elevated Highway as a case-study in an attempt to illustrate this contradiction. Built in the 1970's in São Paulo's city center, this concrete expressway crosses the city's dense landscape, producing an incarnation of the modernist view of progress: individual transportation. Unpopular amongst neighbors that now suffer from its noise, pollution and lack of privacy, the structure is also seen as the main culprit of degradation of the area and for the drastic drop in the real estate value of surrounding properties.

As a result of this dissatisfaction, just a few years after its completion in 1976, the structure started to close for traffic during the night and on Sundays, out of concern for residents in the surrounding buildings. This temporary reprieve represented not only a

gain for the locals, but also a step towards the recognition of the consequences that the construction of this piece of infrastructure had on citizens.

Although discussions about the elevated highway has always been present in *Paulistas*¹ lives, it is relevant to return to this now because of the recent announcement of the permanent deactivation of the Minhocão over the course of the next fifteen years. This decision was passed by Mayor Fernando Haddad in late 2014 as part of São Paulo's new Strategic Plan².

The announcement regarding Minhocão's future was a direct result of growing popular demands for the highway space. Regardless of the outcomes expected for the structure, which today generates a heated debate over its demolition or transformation into a linear park, the celebrated victory of the popular demand and the initiative of a civil approach to a public matter are to be highlighted. Another important aspect to be analyzed is the shift in people's mindset, as an element of infrastructure now comes to be understood as a *common*, thus, possible to be claimed³.

The goal of this paper is to offer a more critical perspective on this situation, focusing specifically on the possibilities of democratic aspects in this action. Among other concerns, who were and are the major agents of this operation? Who do they represent?

¹ Residents of São Paulo city.

² *Plano Diretor Estratégico da Cidade de São Paulo*. in: http://www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/desenvolvimento_urbano/legislacao/plano_diretor/index.php

³ This in itself is already a very contradictory attitude. If we consider an Urban Common something that is neither public or private (BLACKMAR, 2006), the idea of claiming it adds value to it, therefore, is a "service for privatization" (FEDERICI, 2011), and not anymore a "common".

This research uses the Minhocão Elevated Highway case study to interrogate the uses of public space as a possible mechanism towards urban democracy.

INTRODUCING THE OBJECT: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

Brazilian urban planning was highly influenced by North American concepts of modernism. Planning and architecture were just one of the many reflections of larger economical and political contexts that Latin America was facing since the beginning of the century: Two World Wars, the Iron Curtain, periods of military dictatorships and authoritarian governments, influx of foreign investments, etc.

São Paulo was always a significant site in this historical context. The 1950's were an important moment for Brazil's economy, when the State started to encourage massive investments in industry, and its market for multinational corporations. This specifically affected the *Paulista* capital, being the main location where the auto-industry was established, which composed the core economic activity for the city during that period. This also guided the way the city would be planned, according to the logic of the vehicles that would cross it.

Because of this scenario, São Paulo got the attention of investors from the U.S. quickly. One example of this is the 1950's Program of Public Improvements coordinated by

Robert Moses, whose contract was negotiated by Nelson Rockefeller⁴. During that time, Moses' team looked at former road plans for São Paulo as defined in the Prestes Maia's Plan (1930s)⁵ and proposed an updated system of infrastructure, introducing the "urban Highways" along *Pinheiros* and *Tiete* rivers. His idea was to better accommodate traffic volume in the existing avenues, creating expressways that would be independent from the urban fabric that they were crossing.

Because of rapidly expanding industry, São Paulo faced a phase of great economical and geographical growth between the 1960's and 1970's, and experienced an increase of 55% in its population⁶. With this came the need for new organizational methods for the urban spaces. Private transportation continued to be prioritized and with that, roads contributed to an uncontrolled urban sprawl as a reflection on land speculation, causing a drastic expansion of the urbanized area⁷. These interventions in the city influenced a series of other set of road works implemented from 1960 to the 1970s, among them the Minhocão elevated expressway.⁸

⁴ Siwi, Marcio. *Urban Renewal North and South: The Case of São Paulo and New York During and After WWII*. PhD Candidate. New York University-Research report.

⁵ According to the Enciclopedia Itaú Cultural, (in: <http://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/en/pessoa4511/prestes-maia>) the Avenue Plan designed by Prestes Maia for São Paulo was "a network of new, wide avenues and overpasses around the landmark hill and the new central area around República Square, intended as a traffic solution as well as an aesthetic intervention. This network would collect the flux from the "radial arteries" before it reached the center, thus avoiding traffic jams. The main radial arteries included existing avenues and others to be constructed, and connected to one another through the perimeter of irradiation and two additional peripheral circuits: an inner circuit (crossing Paulista Avenue) and an outer circuit (source of the future "marginal" avenues bordering the rivers Tietê and Pinheiros), concentric in relation to the first."

⁶ Population growth in major capitals (per decade):
<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=638799>

⁷ Barbosa, Eliana Rosa de Queiroz. "Minhocão Multiples Interpretations" In:
<http://www.vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/arquitextos/13.147/4455/en>

⁸ Rolnik, Raquel and Klintowitz, Danielle. "(Im)Mobility in the city of São Paulo". In:
http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0103-40142011000100007&script=sci_arttext&lng=en

Conceptualized and commissioned in the 1960's, during the Brazilian military dictatorship period (1964-1985), and completed in January 24th, 1970 by the former mayor Paulo Maluf (1969-1971), this controversial infrastructural work has 3.4 km (2.2 miles) of extension roads connecting the city center to the western part of the town⁹. The construction lies 5 meters (16 feet) above ground, and its proximity to the surrounding buildings varies between 0.5 meters to 4.6 meters (1.6 to 15 feet). As a consequence of the construction of the highway, the area around it rapidly deteriorated. Subsequent pollution and the lack of natural light, as well as unattractive walking spaces underneath the high-speed road changed the use of the area drastically. Suddenly the space attracted the homeless, smugglers, drug dealers and prostitutes, contributing to the decisions of former middle-class dwellers of the area to leave.

Nevertheless, the neighborhoods around the structure were still wealthy or commercially important, even though the Minhocão area was an “unwanted” space, because of its location it continued to be used, as it was an unavoidable passageway.

Since its announcement, the highway was already a controversial topic of discussion amongst São Paulo's population, and for the time of its existence many different proposals were made to minimize its impact. The media constantly criticized Maluf's engineering attempts. The Minhocão's role as an expressway was threatened and ridiculed after having a massive traffic jam on the day of its inauguration. Another major issue was related to the massive investment in the elevated highway, taking the focus away from the (then) growing subway system. Maluf would then refute those

⁹ More information and pictures of the Minhocao implementation: <http://acervo.estadao.com.br/>

contestations, arguing that the subway could not avoid the growing volume of individual transportation in the first place; it also did not reflect the ongoing problematic of a rampant growth of the car fleet and their impact in the city center. As for the Minhocão's repercussion on its surrounding area, in less than a year almost all the apartments and commercial venues on the first floor of the buildings right near the structure were emptied out¹⁰.

The remaining inhabitants would represent the resistance. Suffering from noise, pollution and safety issues on a daily basis, they were the first ones who clamored for improvements in the area, and who received, as a result from their demands, the hours of closure during the nighttime and the entire day on Sundays, which later expanded to Saturdays as well.

Gradually, the Minhocão gained adherents that started to use the space in a variety of ways. First the neighbors themselves began to use the structure for sport activities and recreation, and eventually other people started to pay more attention to the potential the area had. A notable increase of users since the 2000's was the starting point for some Neighborhood associations and activists groups to be more organized and get involved with the Minhocão space, introducing social and artistic interventions, and contributing for the structure to be used more actively by the general public.

These interventions represented a great development towards a new perspective over the uses that the Minhocão structure could have, - not only as a highway and infrastructural

¹⁰ “Elevado: O triste futuro da Avenida”. December 1st, 1970. in: Acervo Estadão.
<http://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/19701201-29342-nac-23-999-23-not/busca/Minhocão>

piece, but, ultimately as a urban common¹¹, a space for public access and a more diverse usage by the population. But a closer look at these interventions and the actions on the Minhocão space since the 2000's reveals that those active participants claiming the space today are a different group of actors than the ones who initially organized and intervened to protest about the structure.

Amongst other actors, there are two major groups that are actively discussing the Minhocão's future today. The ones claiming to transform the structure into a linear park, called "*Associação Amigos do Parque Minhocão*" (Friends of the Minhocão Park Association)¹² and the ones that want the elevated highway to be demolished, called "*Movimento Desmonte Minhocão*" (Dissemble the Minhocão Movement)¹³. The ones advocating for a Park are more media active and politically influential. They are also constantly promoting events, press releases and activities related to the structure. They affirm that the "Park already exists when it comes to its uses", and they count on the support of many leading actors that work or live in the Minhocão's surroundings and/or correlate with the cause. The ones fighting for the structure to be taken down are a loose coalition, not as large or active, but are constantly present raising their voice in opposition to the linear park. They are mainly composed of residents who live directly by the structure.

¹¹ Considering Elisabeth Blackmar (2006) explanation of the "commons" as properties that are neither public nor private, that implies open access and shared participation, thus being a space for the community.

¹² *Minhocão* Association. <http://minhocao.org>

¹³ *Movimento Desmonte Minhocão*. Minhocao.net.br. <http://www.minhocao.net.br/?p=1562>

As mentioned before, the Minhocão is strategically located in between wealthy residential neighborhoods and the downtown commercial area, and thus it serves as a transition space. This was one of the main reasons why this area has slowly been reclaiming appropriate attention: due to its prime location within the city and the convenience of its surrounding facilities, people are gradually realizing the importance of the Minhocão space, in spite of its current problems regarding safety and levels of degradation.

It is precisely this current moment that people have started to revisit the Minhocão and its importance for the city and the society, creating new perspectives on the structure's uses and potentialities that I would like to focus, especially regarding the agents involved in those actions and the direct and indirect consequences of their actions.

THEORETICALLY SPEAKING

MINHOCÃO: A COMMODIFIED COMMON

The Minhocão and the discussion around it does not represent an isolated case, neither formally nor ideologically. The concerns this object raises can be seen in many other situations around the globe. Locally, the Minhocão is a reflection on how São Paulo's spaces were built as commodities from the beginning. The city's economic growth was led by the power of industry, which neglected any ideals of publicness and always supported private interests.

In a context where the power of the capital prevails, does everyone get to be represented?

When considering land as a commodity, the difficulty is to separate the uses of any spaces without understanding them as a repercussion and representation of the logics of the market.

São Paulo's sprawl in the 1950's onwards was a result of its exponential economical growth and industrial investments. The physical expansion of the city was a fragmented process that emphasized private interests in land speculation. Both industrial growth and the city's geographical expansion were based on the influence that entrepreneurs had in the public administration. Land and resources were not just commons shared by the community, but resources for the developing businesses.

The Minhocão structure is a result of this historical context. Its construction was justified because of the need of an expressway as a facilitator to the traffic of vehicles in the city. Although the structure is ultimately a road, thus, a piece of infrastructure that represents the common needs of its community, it also had a value of its own, and reflected on the commodified city and the power of capital behind it.

Cities should be a true reflection of the society and culture they embody. But the reality is that they reflect directly on power dynamics, and therefore, are designed accordingly, satisfying and echoing such political and economic values. As David Harvey¹⁴ states, for neoliberal cities, the urban is essentially a result of a capitalist mode of production. The morality intrinsic in its constructions is a political statement. Thus, the discussion over

¹⁴ Harvey, David, *The urban process under capitalism: a framework for analysis*, (International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 1978)

the commons, or idealized public spaces and their truly democratic aspects are ultimately conditioned by the dynamics of power in that determined society.

PUBLIC SPACES Vs. COMMONS

To rethink the Minhocão elevated highway from its use as an infrastructural piece into a public space does not automatically mean reclaiming it as a common. The urban common, according to Elizabeth Blackmar, is something that is neither public nor private¹⁵; whereas public spaces are not necessarily urban commons either, and they can be privatized and still continue to be considered a public area for use. According to Harvey¹⁶, public spaces are not public property, but an amenity provided by the State. Historically, the Minhocão elevated highway was a state-constructed outcome of private interests, and even today, the many actors who organize around the ethos of civil engagement, cannot promise democratic outcomes. — This is wherein lays the problem.

Even if the players involved introduce a democratic discourse about the outcomes and improvements in the area, the idea of claiming the commons represent one of the biggest contradictions within contemporary neoliberal cities. Silvia Federici argues that since the 1990's the World Bank and the UN have already appropriated the commons in service of privatization, but under the guise of its preservation and protection¹⁷. According to Harvey, by creating urban commons one ends up creating good desirable spaces —

¹⁵ Blackmar, Elizabeth. *Appropriating "the Commons": The Tragedy of Property Rights Discourse*. (The Politics of Public Space, Routledge, 2006)

¹⁶ Harvey, David. *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. (Verso. Chapter 3: The creation of the urban commons. 2013)

¹⁷ Federici, Silvia. *Feminism and the politics of the commons*. The Commoner, 2011. Available at: <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=113>.

unconsciously adding value to that land and resulting in a commodity or one more possibility for real-estate speculation¹⁸.

Therefore, by claiming a space, one is already assuming a value intrinsic in it. Thus, by claiming space as the commons, one is actually claiming a public space. The dimension and the extent of its “publicness” are highly differentiated from instance to instance. (As Setha Low and Neil Smith state¹⁹)

Returning to the Minhocão... A closer look at those people who are claiming this public space today, especially the ones advocating for a linear park, reveals a broader spectrum of participants than just the direct neighbors to the structure. Although those activist groups and engaged militants may coexist within the spatial borders of the elevated highway, they unveil an influential role with the authorities that previous groups did not have before. Nevertheless, their contributions will work towards an improvement of the area, and by that, this will ultimately add value to it. The subsequent results and consequences are predictable: a rise of property value (this has already begun) and gentrification.

But one question remains: Those who ultimately were claiming for a more just and democratic city, thus a city for its citizens, a city with public spaces, — do they not end up claiming for a specific publicness that will not affect the totality, but rather, once again be exclusionary? The democratic aspect of those actions should not just lie on the

¹⁸ Harvey, David, *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. (Verso. 2013) P. 67-88.

¹⁹ Low, Setha and Smith, Neil. *The Politics of Public Space*. (Routledge, 2006), P.3

fact that the attempt to transform this space was a civil initiative. As Margaret Crawford²⁰ reminds us, our society is characterized by its multiplicity, and with that, it generates new political arenas of democratic action. But we must pay attention to the fact that this same multiplicity can also generate exclusion. The Minhocão ideally could be a common, a space to be used and shared by the community, although the concept of “community” is itself already an exclusionary factor to be taken into consideration.

TOP DOWN, BOTTOM UP, TOP DOWN

I now return to some initial concerns: If the land is a commodity, its use will always be a repercussion of the power of the capital, the power of influence.

The gradual change of people’s mindset over the use of the Minhocão as a public space instead of a high-speed road is the result of a collective ideal and it also represents a lively city that is always reinventing itself. But to officially change the space’s purpose reveals an influential shift. In this case, once created in favor of the auto industry and to inspire a certain modern image of São Paulo, today the highway use intends to attend to a new ordering logic: the claims and needs of the citizenry. This shift, from a top-down tabula-rasa approach to the city’s design, to a bottom up perspective over the usage of the city already imposed form²¹, seems utopian and democratic. On further interrogation, it also appears not very convincing.

²⁰ Crawford, Margaret, *Contesting the public realm: struggles over public space in Los Angeles*, (Writing urbanismo, Routledge, 1995), p. 271-280.

²¹ Manzini, Ezio. *Making Things Happen: Social Innovation and Design*. (Design Issues, Volume 30, Number 1 Winter, 2014)

The question one should consider is the nature of bottom-up strategies, and how much they are truly popularly driven. Are there any approaches to the urban environment or to our communities that are free from the aims of power? Miguel Robles-Duran considers this question as guiding the “new activism” process that will always result in a banalization of larger political struggles²². In light of this, I revisit some of the initial questions posed in this paper: Who are the agents claiming the Minhocão space, and who do they truly represent? In order to answer this, I put myself in an ambivalent position: Influential “outsiders” or struggling residents, both groups ultimately give us an understanding on democratic and participatory actions. This is mainly because they represent civil engagement in order to claim for the city’s space. However, this engagement is not done in equal terms. Nevertheless, democratic they are.

²² Robles-Duran, Miguel. *The Rise of the ‘Instant Activist’ and the way it is transforming the practice of architecture, urbanism, and how the cities are built*. (South as a State of Mind, Issue No. 5. 2014.)

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