

It Is All Done: An Experience of Teaching Urban Design in a Squatter Settlement in Recife- Brazil

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Abstract

This paper presents the experience of teaching students of Architecture to negotiate urban design concepts in order to intervene in a poor neighbourhood.

The Favela of Santa Terezinha ¹, a former squatter settlement is at the present days located beside a prosperous Shopping Centre and surrounded by the middle class neighbourhoods. Its main asset is the location, alongside an important avenue that links the North area of the metropolitan region to the city centre and South neighbourhoods.

The students aiming to develop an urban design proposal were faced with a cultural problem: if considering the neighbourhood as a squatter settlement, it was very much improved, and as they said: it was all done. But considering its insertion with the surroundings and the city, the area is stigmatised and the dwellers did not profit from the middle class interface. If, it is all done, express the idea that the future of places like that are already defined, and guaranteed by law. In order to survive do they have to remain as they are?

The position taken by the group, lead to the discussion of cultural, social and spatial values experienced in the city and how they are embedded in the built environment.

The students were guided to recognised different actors and agencies and their interests in the area. Groups were formed to "assume roles" in order to clarify social, economic and ideological logic of each agent and their real possibility to negotiate.

An workshop with international consultants were held, were a joint urban design proposal emerged. The paper discuss the results, as well as the main difficulties in understand urban design as a negotiating tool of social, cultural, spatial and economic issues. A multidimensional conceptual model or urban negotiation was proposed as a paradigm to design.

Key words: urban negotiation, sustainable planning concepts, poor settlement, Brazil

It Is All Done: An Experience of Teaching Urban Design in a Squatter Settlement in Recife - Brazil

The context:

This paper presents the experience of teaching students of Architecture to negotiate urban design concepts in order to intervene in a poor neighbourhood.

The teaching experience was carried out on the Department of Architecture and Urbanism at Federal University of Pernambuco- Brazil, together with the University of Westminster. It placed as basic beginning, the verification that economical pressures produced by enterprises of wide scale invariably end up expelling communities of low income that are located in its outskirts. These communities' inhabitants usually work in small essential services of the urban economy. The retreat for outlying areas increases time of displacement for the work and it exercises direct pressure on the public transportation system. Time of trip and increase of costs act on the middle-atmosphere through the increase of the use of energy and pollution of the air.

What was sought is an alternative for which communities of low income and small businesses could be integrated through the development of partnerships with commercial enterprises of wide scale for the maintainable communities' creation. The main objectives were the ones of to reduce conflict areas and to point out common instances for a community's of interest development.

As part of a knowledge transfer strategy 4th year undergraduate students of architecture participated in the research. Using the principles above their aim was to develop an urban design proposal for the neighbourhood of Santa Terezinha, an old ZEIS ¹ located in the core area of the city.

From the beginning, however, they were faced with a cultural problem: if considering the neighbourhood as a squatter settlement, it was very much improved, and as they said: *it was all done*. But considering its privileged location in the city, the area is stigmatised and the dwellers did not profit as they should. A central question arose: If it is all done expresses the idea that the future of places like that are defined, and guaranteed by law. In order to survive do they have to remain as they are?

The initial perception that it was all done, thus, lead to the discussion of cultural, social and spatial values experienced in the city and how they are embedded in the built environment. In order to do that the students were guided to collect basic data to recognised different actors and agencies and their interests in the area. Groups were formed to "assume roles" in order to clarify social, economic and ideological logic of each agent and their real possibility to negotiate.

The area

Recife is the centre of a sprawling metropolitan area, the skyline dominated by areas of high rise buildings, with large areas of informal development and more traditional low rise around the central area. In terms of informal settlements, the city has proportionately the largest amount of its population living in favelas of all Brazil's largest cities. No shortage of core area sites.

The settlement

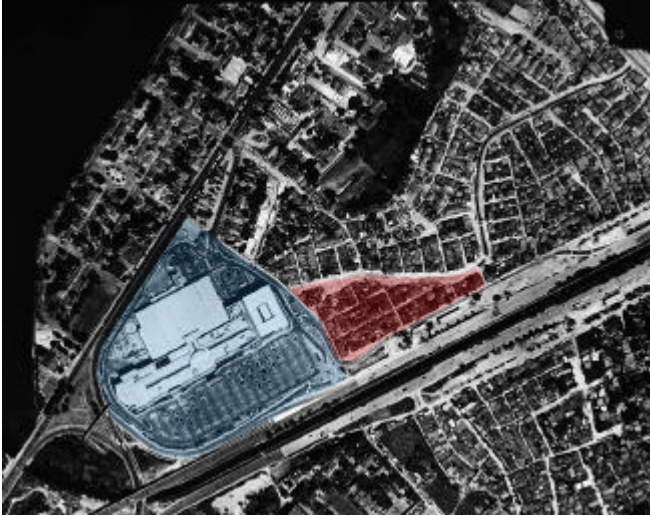


Illustration 1. Aerial view, shopping centre Tacaruna (blue) and the settlement of Sta. Terezinha (red)
Illustrations 2 and 3 details of the settlement of Sta. Terezinha

The Favela of Santa Terezinha ¹, a former squatter settlement is at the present days located beside a prosperous Shopping Centre and surrounded by middle class neighbourhoods. Its main asset is the location, alongside an important avenue that links the North area of the metropolitan region to the city centre and South neighbourhoods.

Due to a long history of struggles with local and state government against eviction the area was considered Special Zone of Social Interest (ZEIS) and went through an urbanisation process carried out by COHAB/PE (the former housing agency of the state government). Today the settlement is consolidated, and the implementation of Shopping Centre Tacaruna in the neighbourhood, in 1997, increased the potential for spatial development in the area. In spite of its strategic location and potential for economic development there are no specific actions, programmes or planning guidelines proposed for the area which may guarantee the local population the profit from having built in this now privileged area of the city.

The Municipal Law of PREZEIS, approved in 1987, defines the process of legalisation of land of those settlements as a form of guaranteeing the urbanisation and improvement of the housing conditions. The PREZEIS search the inclusion of popular areas in the process of city planning. One of the major principles of the Law is the guarantee of the existing characteristics of the community, giving priority for the consolidation of the occupations instead of relocation or eviction.

The Law of PREZEIS has both urban and juridical instruments to make possible the urbanisation and land regularisation of the ZEIS. Mechanisms were introduced to prevent real estate speculation. The law restricts the possibilities for merging the plots, in the attempt of impeding the construction of buildings of great load in those areas.

The PREZEIS is widely acknowledged as an important tool to protect and strengthen the population of poor neighbourhoods in the city, but after 10 years of its implementation there some criticism since it did not result in real empowerment of the population and better quality of living. Instead some areas felt harassed to a considered restrictive legislation.

The area after a first "urbanisation" presents the current plots with an area of 45m² (5 X 9 m) on average. They are organised in non orthogonal blocks following the first

spontaneous occupation. The pattern of narrow streets establishes a radical contrast with the regular urban pattern of the surrounding middle class settlements. Such differentiation beyond the initial problem of making it difficult for cars to access the area reinforces an image of fragmentation and detachment associated with disease and crime. This image contributes to make communication difficult between the slum and the city.

The predominant use is still the residential, followed by mixed (residential/commercial or residential / services), mainly in those houses gone back to the main avenue and that are neighbouring to the access of the Shopping. The trade and the service are constituted by small markets, restaurants, bars, snack bars, sales of Popsicle and chocolates, clothes, manicurists, electronic amusements (video game), hairdresser, etc. Only two constructions serve exclusively as restaurant / bar and there is a construction that possesses the industrial use (joinery). They were also some social institutions and a Social Centre.

The houses

The houses follow the pattern of COHAB (housing agency), they are mostly made out of bricks (today there are just 47 in precarious material condition either with mud or cardboard walls). All of them have internal sanitary cabinet and basic urban services: they have water supply, electricity and they are linked to a condominium sewer system. The typology is characterised, in general, for earthy houses and of masonry, just some "pulled " they are made of wood or cardboard.

Dwellers may have the ownership of the housesⁱ but not of the land which belongs to state government. Such dichotomy in ownership creates a sense of not belonging to the area. When residents are questioned if they pay rent they answer NO but at the same time say that "the houses are owned by COHAB." According to the questionnaires applied in the area, the average time of occupation of the house built by COHAB is 10 years. This signals for some kind of internal housing market as long as they can not be sold without the permission of the government.

The people

According to a research accomplished by COHAB in September of 1995 the community of Santa Terezinha has is higher percentage of adults ageing between 19 and 40 years, characterising an economically active population.

It is expressive the percentage of illiterates 19%. most of the people have no completed basic education. Among the interviewees, none possessed University degree.

The indexes demonstrate a pitiful situation of poverty, where the great majority is paid less than one minimum wage per month. Among the great number of unemployed the time to return to work averages 2 years.

The community of Santa Terezinha do not have today a strong popular organisation and participation, what makes more difficult the struggle for the implementation of improvements. 70% of the interviewees do not participate in any form of community association. The Neighbourhood Association, however, is still the main centre for participation. There is a high index of violence, mostly related to the drug traffic.

The idea that of the dwellers inadequacy to the city life because of their rural origins, proved to be false. Most of them live more than three decades in the area, and the new generation is well acquainted to the urban life and services. In fact, the aspire the urban

qualities of the surrounding neighbourhoods, and try to reproduce aesthetic and symbolic values of the nearby houses.

The students task

The students aiming to develop an urban design proposal were faced with a cultural problem: if considering the neighbourhood as a squatter settlement, it was very much improved, and as they said: it was all done. But considering its insertion with the surroundings and the city, the area is stigmatised and the dwellers did not profit from the middle class interface. If, it is all done, express the idea that the future of places like that are already defined, and guaranteed by law. In order to survive do they have to remain as they are?

The position taken by the group, lead to the discussion of cultural, social and spatial values experienced in the city and how they are embedded in the built environment.

The students were guided to recognised different actors and agencies and their interests in the area. Groups were formed to "assume roles" in order to clarify social, economic and ideological logic of each agent and their real possibility to negotiate.

They developed a questionnaire applied to the favela residents and a interviews with the identified agents or players in the negotiation study.

An workshop with international consultants were held, were a joint urban design proposal emerged.

The students team representing the interests of different agents, presented their aims and goals in the area, as well as, their terms and limits for collaboration. After several rounds of discussion, they elaborated jointly a proposal, where each detail were negotiated exhaustively.

The Players and interests

The Shopping Centre

Located in the boundary between Recife and Olinda, the mall attracts consumers from several middle-class neighbourhoods and neighbouring municipalities. In just three years It has rapidly become a trading and services pole generating direct and indirect employment.

There are several possibilities for developing partnership with the shopping as long as they are already searching for alternatives of expansion. They need for instance, to increase parking space what, (as was shown in the feasibility study) could be achieved through a negotiation to build a multistore garage in the community land.

Real Estate Agents and Developers

The fast development of the shopping, the consolidation of the main avenue (Av. Agamenon Magalhães) as the main axial route crossing the metropolitan area from north to south, has increased substantially the land values for development of housing and office buildings.

The State Government

State Government agencies have being involved with the construction of popular houses and housing programmes since the 1950s, when it assumed the responsibility of providing housing for the caring communities.

The main objectives of the governmental agencies are:

1. Implementing housing policies for the population excluded from the formal market.

2. Giving priority for the improvement of the quality of life and the promotion of citizenship among poor families through integrated actions encompassing:

The plot: implementation of urbanised plots.

The house: financing of construction materials.

The basic services: providing basic Infrastructures and social equipment.

The condition of being formal: legalisation of the ownership of the land.

3. Looking for mechanisms of reducing building costs.

The Local Government

The City local government is responsible for the provision of some services for the population which may be included in the categories of infrastructure, education and health. It is also responsible for the elaboration of urban policies promoting the development and the improvement of the quality of life of the population. Hence, the city government may enter as a partner of the private sector, contributing to legitimise the process and guaranteeing the effectiveness of the actions to make sure the city as a whole profits from and controls the initiatives.

Social Agents

The research identified some support groups and NGO's working in the community. Their main objective is to provide basic services to ameliorate the life of the people. Among them an Italian Group seeking to rescue adolescents from delinquency, several others religious entities and a Neighbourhood Association. There are also health agents which provide basic health care and promote educational and preventive campaigns.

The Planners

A team of students were asked to play the role of planners, advising technically the proposals. They were encouraged to use their expertise and knowledge to intervene aiming to produce better solutions and to register the experienced design negotiation and planning process.

The Workshop - Designing Negotiation



Illustrations 2,3,4 - Proposals

Students initial proposals tended to simplify the complexity of the situation and to replicate normative planning representing "abstract interests". The focus on the favela lead to solutions which segregate it more from its surroundings and diminish the potential of their location. The syndrome of "its all done", lead to timid proposals.

It was necessary to clarify the complexity of designing new futures and new images, but at the same time grounded to the potential of present situation. In this way a conceptual representation of the negotiation was devised.

The above figure, represents the conceptual framework of urban negotiation. It represents a negotiation framework where interests have different contours and change their meanings in presence of other interests (leading to conflict or solutions). At the base of structure, there are common interests regarding the city as a whole, broad concepts like: sustainability, spatial integration, social and economic development.

This dimensional model represents a process where any solution requires a combined action, all the interests should be regarded, including the weak ones. The dominance of any player should be challenged, and the dialogue, should be based on the idea of partnership.

The most creative part of the experience, was the conflict negotiation during the workshop.

The different players presented their ideas over a map, stating their goals and proposing different kinds of collaboration.

It was interesting to see how fiercely the groups defended their proposals. There were critical moments of fights and accusations against "spurious arguments". The most fruitful stage however, was the during the joint proposal, when the students put aside their roles to identify better solution. The students associated to shopping centre pinpoint to the ones associated to the community:

" they think small, they don't have idea of our profit, we were able to pay far more to land than the asked price, we could go much further in employment generation projects. The social equipment that you are asking are poor, you could devise better and more comprehensive services."

The community demonstrated also that they could trade even more land than required, since part of the dwellers would be quite comfortable located in three store buildings. The also stated that their survival depended on better integration with "middle class" neighbours as clients.

The planners were accused of selling their services either to the real state agents, as to the shopping managers. They had a good role mediating interests with the state and local government.

Estate agents and developers presented a low profile during the negotiation but at the end managed to guarantee the best located plots. They proposed the insertion of high rise buildings such as a hotel and commercial centres.

Feasibility studies of these proposals showed that they could match the average levels of profitability for urban development taking place in other areas of the city even though they offered middle class standard homes for the local poor residents. A major difference from previous housing interventions, however, appeared in the proposals of creating sustainable economic structures creating jobs and supporting the development of small business associated with the major commercial enterprises.

Sustainable urbanisation, negotiation, poor neighbourhoods

What has the experiment shown us?

This experiment has revealed interesting facets of the process of production and management of spaces in a Latin American context:

At the level of city consciousness it has shown that beside old structures of segregation produced by institutionalised planning standards and official urban policies the question of the production and of meaning for the land has achieved paramount importance. In this sense, the maintenance of stereotyped images of marginality, disease and crime still play a significant role in the process of segregating and preserving unacceptable levels of poverty and housing conditions.

At management level it has shown that planners, governmental agencies and officials seem not to be aware of the full possibilities a system of partnership may offer for urban development and poverty alleviation.

At educational level it has shown that students of architecture and urbanism under the present school curriculum do not perceive the complexity of the urban environment and are most likely to reproduce bureaucratic planning formulas and reproduce models of segregation.

At the level of the social movements it has shown that there is a profound fear of change among NGO activist and community leaders. Overcautious they prefer to hold to outdated institutional frameworks which have already been neutralised by developers and contribute mostly to deny the possibility of poor settlements from profiting from the increasing of the value of the land they occupy.

It is urgent the creation of new channels of communication between the city and the settlements to improve permeability. It seems that the main objective must be facilitating the process of creation of new meanings instead of searching for solutions. The idea is that these channels can produce new meanings, supporting the appearance of new spaces of negotiation, leading to institutional arrangements enabling models of urban development in which profit is no longer an exclusive prerogative of wealthy developers.

What is still unclear

In the course of the 90's, the issue of partnerships among the private sector, the state and the social movements to solve urbanisation problems entered the planning debate. A few experiences took place in the areas surrounding the main Shopping Centres in the city: Recife and Guararapes to the south and Plaza shopping to the west. Despite the intervention of NGO's and government, very little was done to change the life conditions of the settlers. Make up interventions occurred in the access roads to the commercial areas, and low profile community activities were supported. These practices were repeated to the north, in the area called *Ponte do Maduro*, with the implementation of Tacaruna Shopping.

This is a very interesting moment in the city's history. Most of the major settlements have won their struggle for recognition and radicalism that drove their struggle is wearing thin. Whether the communities are ready for the partnership approach with the private sector is an open question. Also, once rights of tenure are granted, it is likely to be difficult to get the community to act as one in negotiations with the private sector. Tenure is leasehold of varying length (up to 50 years) so, theoretically, the freehold resides with the municipality and would be its bargaining counter with the developers. Finally there is the question of how the city as a whole can participate in the profit generated by these partnerships organised to develop specific areas as long as most of these areas belong to the municipal government.

¹ Dwellers have to pay a monthly instalment which will grant them the ownership.