Design by means of citizen activism: three cases illustrated by the action of Coletivo Maré, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Abstract: In this paper, we will (1) provide a context to a Brazilian practice in codesign; (2) introduce the Complexo da Maré and the work of Coletivo Maré; to showcase three situations involving collaborative design practice, using participant observation (Ingold, 2012). (3) Later, we will discuss acts of improvisation by revisiting concepts such as ‘tactics’ (de Certeau, 1988), ‘collaborative learning’ and ‘ways of cooperating and making together’ (Sennett, 2009, 2013). Our final considerations discuss forms of spatial qualification based on the human perception and experience of space that are unveiled by collective action.

Keywords: Codesign, Improvisation, Rio de Janeiro, Favela, Complexo da Maré

1. Introducing the object of research, the employed method and selected theoretical references

This article is based on an exercise developed within an ongoing master research that focuses (1) on the correspondence between designers and citizen activists, based on (2) codesign practices and participatory design methods, with the goal to forge urban space transformations. In this context, we are working in collaboration with a community-driven initiative called Coletivo Maré – organised by three local residents in partnership with a local NGO –, which acts since 2010, within the Complexo da Maré – a complex of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (see: Jacques, 2002). Within this framework, this paper results from the descriptive analysis of the local cooperative work, critically revisited through a suggested theoretical scope. Several field trips of three days have been

\footnote{1 For this research we are exploring methods of design anthropology, codesign and participatory design based in the tradition of that research focus developed and consolidated since the early 1980s by scholars at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, and currently debated with scholars from the University of Aberdeen, the Center for Codesign Research and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts.}
carried out using participant observation (Ingold, 2013, p.5-9). Given that, we will showcase three situations in which, through the work of Coletivo Maré, ‘improvisation and creativity’ (Ingold & Hallam, 2007) transformed and brought resilience to spaces at Complexo da Maré.

These forms of citizen activisms can be seen in context at Coletivo Maré where they face social concerns and tackle them through collective action (Thorpe, 2011). Such urban phenomenon has been studied by Rosa (2015). Classified as “community-based initiatives”, these are initiatives that “indicate the ability of citizens to present solutions to challenges posed by everyday life, and use creativity to transform and multiply existing resources” (Ibid., p.160).

The designers’ gaze - provoked throughout these observations and direct contact and interaction on the ground - builds up on a notion of the expansion of the design field: one that is shaped not only by the work of designers, but also by the work and experience of inhabitants of the city.² Ingold and Gatt (2013, p.141) introduce a notion of design understood as an open-ended concept. This perspective opens opportunities to include non-designers into the design process, allowing us to broaden the understanding of the design practice to a wider framework capable of creating correspondence between designers and users (Ibid., p.142), one notion that is key to the exercise presented here.

2. Preliminary notes

Before we move to showcase the initiatives, it is important to state that this work carries the background and point of views of the researches, based on personal experiences during fieldwork trips. The method and materials used consists of participant observation (Ingold, 2013, p.5-9) accompanied by photographic documentation on side of non-structured interviews with local people that currently work at Coletivo Maré. We opted for narratives to describe the situations we experienced. According to Jacques (2015, p.81) “narratives of urban experiences are also related to otherness issues and the exercise of narration itself is associated to a spatial practice, to movement, to field trips or, even, to the action of traversing one city”.³

It is important to clarify that organisers of Coletivo Maré are in accordance with our research and we have agreed to use their real names. This research is part of a longer process of contact that started in 2013. One should also state that the intention of this research and of the proposed discussion focuses on the opportunity to learn one from each other and bring insights to expand the design field to a more inclusive agenda.⁴

3. Contextualization

3.1 Ideas on Collaborative Design developed in Brazil since the second half of the twentieth century.

However we will not review a longer period in the history of Brazilian design, here, it seems valuable to highlight the work of a few designers that responded to modernism with a call for Brazilian

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² This becomes increasingly valuable in environments such as this one, where large parts of the city have been self-built, and thus where the city space results from collaborative acts.
³ Original quote: “A questão da narração da experiência urbana também está diretamente relacionada com a questão da alteridade e o próprio exercício de narração também está associado uma prática espacial, ao movimento, à viagem ou, ainda, à ação de percorrer uma cidade”.
⁴ The work carried out by Coletivo Maré has increasingly searched for connections with the work of designers with the goal to respond to local issues.
architects to review and actualize a theory of their own.\textsuperscript{5} Those references remain valuable to our days as references in design research focused on topics related to codesign. Anthropologist and designer Anastassakis introduces the work of Aloísio Magalhães (1927-1982) and Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992) as references to that attitude in design practices. The first was a Brazilian designer who worked inside the dictatorial government taking popular culture as a reference development and cultural policies. The second was an Italian architect eradicated in Brazil that focused on the importance of traditional culture and identity.\textsuperscript{6} Art critic Lisette Lagnado (et al., 2011) also calls for a discussion focused in the traditions and culture of Brazil, question the importing of models from other schools.\textsuperscript{7}

The positions of those designers situate knowledge from the user to inform the processes and products of design, something noted as well by designer Johan Redström (2012, p.83): “we still struggle with articulation of relations between design and use that differ significantly from an understanding that \textit{first designers design, then users use}”. This notion questions what comes after a design project, especially in urban settlements where unpredictability is a rule.

Facing this condition this article argues that design in Brazil could work beyond industrial production and market interests, targeting social and urban matters (Magalhães, 1998). Furthermore, designers could learn from real experiences in the city where spontaneous interventions occur by means of citizen activism. This could open new pathways for designers, and promote more dialogical exchanges (Freire, 1996) where both groups have autonomy to participate and interact according to a dialectics of otherness.

3.2 A brief context of Complexo da Maré and Coletivo Maré

The Complexo da Maré constitutes the largest assembly of favelas in Rio de Janeiro’s metropolis (Jacques, 2002), composed by seventeen communities - already established as neighbourhoods since 1994.\textsuperscript{8} Its history bears protests and resistance by its dwellers for decades. Since the 1940’s, residents struggled to occupy and stabilize the area due to aggressive repressions made by the government and the imposition of forced eviction policies, especially during the dictatorial period in Brazil.

\textsuperscript{5} See Bo Bardi’s theory of an "Immediate-Life-Architecture". Bo Bardi, Lina, Contribuição Propedêutica ao Ensino da Teoria da Arquitetura. São Paulo, 1957.
\textsuperscript{6} See: Anastassakis, 2014.
\textsuperscript{7} However this has been previously argued by several scholars (Sergio Ferro, Flávio de Carvalho, Flávio Império, among others), Josep Montaner indicates a trend in those local contextual practices worldwide in the post II World War period. Lagnado suggests to look into the works of Le Corbusier, Lina Bo Bardi and Escuela Abierta de Valparaiso. See: Lagnado et al. (2011); and Montaner, J. M., 1999.
\textsuperscript{8} For more information see: Guia de Ruas da Maré, 2014.
The complex spreads between two highways and is crossed by a third (see Figure 2) lying next to Guanabara Bay and below the international airport. The area concentrates an enormous diversity of constructions, streets and alleys featured by a plain geography besides Guanabara Bay. As an inspiration for its large amount of mangroves and ports the name ‘Maré’ (‘tide’ in English) was adopted.⁹

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⁹ Brazilian architect Paola B. Jacques depicts that urban landscape of the Maré: “The constructors of favelas have their own logic and personal spatial culture, completely different from the logic of conventional architecture found in the formal city. It is about another kind of process, other way of constructing their own housing, regrouping them, and so, occupying and appropriating the urban space.” (Jacques, 2002, p.49)
Activism and community leadership were born and strengthened between 1950’s and 1960’s through local associations. During the 1990’s the modus operandi of social leadership changed by the birth of Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) and institutions that, by means of education, sport, art and culture, provided qualified services for the communities. Today, many of these play a political and social role, within and outside of the settlement. Here it is important to highlight two NGOs that were crucial for the birth of Coletivo Maré: Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré and Observatório de Favelas.10

The Coletivo Maré started in 2010 through the involvement of three young activists - Geisa Lino, Alberto Aleixo and Douglas Lopes – also inhabitants of Complexo da Maré, partners and employees of Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré NGO. The group develop activities in different spaces (see figure 4 below).

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10 Both institutions were created by two local activists, Eliana Sousa Silva and Jailson Sousa Silva. For more information about both NGOs follow: Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré - http://redesdamare.org.br/; Observatório de Favelas - http://observatoriodefavelas.org.br/
The group provide support to children and youngsters, due to the lack of family structure and criminal influence in the area. Over time, Lino tells us, the collective learned that short events create more interest and do not demotivate participants after a while. The experience with long-term activities usually led to disengagement. Those facts provide a background to the situations we will showcase in this article.

5. Showcasing the three situations

We have selected three situations where Coletivo Maré developed projects that could be defined as design initiatives despite the fact that they would not categorize them as such. Our observations led us to a structure those acts in relationship to design processes. These acts are elucidated by Ingold (2012, p.19-35) while describing the work of a watchmaker, thus inferring that “[those acts have] to do with foresight, with the ability to form a plan or representation in mind in advance of its material realization”.

5.1 Situation 1: Cycle car equipped with LED, sound system and projector

During three days at Lona Cultural da Maré (see figure 3), Geisa and Douglas invited a group of cycle activists to teach kids how to fix bicycles, followed by a partnership with a fab lab group called Olabi
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*Makerspace*. Together they envisioned a multimedia vehicle that would claim for people’s attention while traversing Maré. The main goal was to draw residents’ attention to another space, *Parque União Square*, where they would project videos about gender issues.

Day one consisted of generating ideas for the concept that led them to an old cargo bicycle they had and from that object they created a roofing support using welding tools. On second day they watched a movie about cycling activists and when the cycle car’s structure was ready they painted it in black and left it drying during the night.

![Figure 4: Cycle car process. Credit: Douglas Lopes.](image_url)

On third day they invited a local electrician (third photo from figure 4) to help them install the lights and portable battery system. The equipped cycle car got out of the tent area and started playing music alongside with other bikes from local participants. Brazilian funk music started playing out loud calling out for residents to take part on it. The cycle car moved for about twenty minutes passing through busy streets and alleys, to arrive at *Parque União Square* where it would join another local event.

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Geisa and Douglas opted organising a closing session on the last day in collaboration with another collective: “we like to work together with other groups that want to make things, especially involving cultural production”. In this act, they placed the cycle car facing the wall of a skate track and turned on the projector that showed images of local interviews on the empowerment of local female funk singers.

The experience forged by this workshop generated another insight for debating. According to Geisa, bicycling is a really important issue for them because “it allows them to cross crossing borders and break barriers inside the favela” which have always been a matter of concern for them because of drug mafia conflicts. For such reason they started a project called “Maré sem fronteiras” - translation Maré without borders - aiming to discuss and create new possibilities to solve this problem. Thus, while the design process was important in this occasion, the outcomes created an opportunity for an in-depth understanding of ideas that could potentially discuss rooted physical and cultural barriers.

5.2 Situation 2: The making of urban gardens in a residual space adjacent to a local warehouse

The second situation was a three-day event aiming to construct a vertical urban garden in a residual space adjacent to Centro de Artes da Maré. The Centre is a local warehouse where several activities are organised by the collective or by the NGO.

Events like this are usually organized at Lona Cultural da Maré, but as it was undergoing repairs they selected the warehouse to host it, from Thursday until Saturday. Sarah Hannah (figure 7), a bicycle

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11 Quote from Geisa Lino at Complexo da Maré, 10th june 2016.
12 Quote from Geisa Lino at Complexo da Maré, 10th june 2016.
activist, was invited to assemble a brand new bike, using parts from older bikes. A collective called *Muda Maré* - formed by biology students from Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) - stepped in to help them construct the vertical gardens.

![Figure 6: Bike fixing; boys learning how to build a bike with Sarah. Credit: Douglas Lopes.](image)

During the first day one part of the group worked on the bike while others helped dismantling wooden pallets that would serve as a frame for the vertical gardens. The work involved getting acquainted with carpentry and improvising as a means to overcome the challenges posed by that process. However simple that design might seem to be, its process of construction unveiled important insights for that collaborative work (figure 7 and 8).

On second day, issues related to the lack of knowledge about the employed techniques emerged: *Muda Maré* suggested making a hole in the ground to plant a tree while other participants were making marks in the wall to attach the wooden pallets. We noticed that participants feared making mistakes as they were unaware of the techniques; at the same time fighting to make things work under guidance of invited experts.
Figure 7: Vertical garden process. Credit: Douglas Lopes.
On third day we all started filling the wooden pallets with garden sand. In that process, the biology students chose which seeds were used and instructed participants about how to make bomb seeds, which are small, humid, sand balls filled with seeds.

The chosen seeds were mainly of linseed, pumpkin and sunflower. The first one is for regulating intestines; the second one against body inflammations; the third one against headaches. By stressing their medicinal use, one could introduce its meaning and use to everyday life, while reconnecting youngsters to the culture of their grandparents. The playful aspect of the bomb seeds would, over time, attract the interest of a larger audience, which would later be capable of passing on the whole process to others. The connection between the playful acts triggered by this activity unveils aspects of design that are critical in that environment. As Gabriela puts it “we learn things by doing. If we don’t do it, we won’t learn it”.  

The last activity included cycling from Centro de Artes da Maré towards Parque Ecológico da Maré. After twenty minutes cycling we got to the park, which lies in a higher altitude, where one is able to observe almost the whole complex. There, the bomb seeds were spread in the park so that the seeds would grow in the future. A symbolic act for something built collectively as they had started two decades earlier.

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13 Quote from Gabriela Lino at Complexo da Maré, 15th September 2016.
5.3 Situation 3: The organization of a cultural event underneath the Yellow Line viaduct

The third event consisted of a one day cultural production developed by the collective where they aimed to transform a derelict underused area under the Yellow Line viaduct into a place for encounter and skateboarding classes. The area, now called Pontilhão Cultural, used to be occupied by mafia drug dealers and used as deposit for civil construction leftovers.

According to Geisa, the whole idea of occupying the area came up after a few times she has passed next to it and noticed that a collective of skateboarders, named Skate Maré, used the area to teach children skating. At that time, Alberto (another organiser of Coletivo Maré) was running Lona Cultural da Maré with her and together they envisioned a cultural production that could transform the place through a partnership with the skaters.
For the event day, all participants met in area bringing materials such as paint, brooms, traffic cones and others that would be used to make the space ready for the concert. While elderly were adjusting equipment and electrical facilities such as lightning, stereos and power generators, youngsters finished cleaning and preparing spaces for the skaters, spectators and invited band.
The set allowed the event to be hosted on a public space - constructed by a collective act, thus democratising access to music and culture. In addition, a presentation of Skate Maré brought together a sense for making and using the space with the pride of learning that sports activity. The first graffiti panel - later added by several others - was painted on the skateboarding track and provided the space with a sense of being taken care. The event resulted in the demonstration of a possible use of that area as an open space designed (or programmed) to serve as an area for encountering, practicing of skateboarding, and enjoying a local public space.

![Figure 13: Pontilhão Cultural during the event. Source: retrieved from Coletivo Mare’s facebook page - https://www.facebook.com/ColetivoMare/](image)

### 6. Discussion of scenarios through revisited concepts

As we portrayed, all the three events were carried out with the goal of bringing cultural, educational and playful experiences for locals. The showcased situations, however simple in their methods, describe opportunities not only for apprenticeship but also to visualise how design may serve in such contexts through activities such as conceptualizing, planning, brainstorming, testing and making things together.

Our experiences of observation were revisited by theoretical concepts excavated in the research. The three concepts can be found in two afore mentioned works: Michel De Certeau’s (1988) ‘tactics’, Sennett’s (2009, 2013) ‘collaborative learning’ and ‘ways of cooperating and making together’. To explain that perspective we have put together some observed aspects in their theoretical background in order to sustain the encounter between practical and theoretical work.

In addition, we tried to perceive affinities between Ingold and Hallam’s (2007) different notions of improvisation and the concepts above in order to visualise how improvisation could be framed into other perspectives. A conceptual framework (figure 14) matches analogous concepts in order to suggest an interpretation of the improvisations observed within these practical contexts.
### FRAMEWORK OF ANALOGOUS CONCEPTS

| IMPROVISATION IS GENERATIVE | COLLABORATIVE LEARNING |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| “It gives rise to the phenomenal forms of culture experienced by those who live them or in accord with them” | “The use of imperfect or incomplete tools draws on the imagination in developing the skills to repair and to improvise (...). Learning by demonstration puts the burden on the apprentice; it further assumes that direct imitation can occur.” |

| IMPROVISATION IS RELACIONAL | WAYS OF COOPERATING |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| “It is continually attuned and responsive to the performance of others” | “An exchange in which participants benefit from the encounter (...) because mutual support is built into the genes of all social animals; they cooperate to accomplish what they can’t do alone.” |

| IMPROVISATION IS TEMPORAL | URBAN TACTICS |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| “It cannot be collapsed into an instant, or even a series of instants, but embodies a certain duration” | “Constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’ (...) achieved in the propitious moments when they are able to combine heterogeneous elements.” |

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The concept of ‘tactics’ (1988) found on Michel De Certeau’s ‘The practice of everyday life’ defines ways of action that occur without planning, spontaneously, which are not calculated and escape from institutional agendas and that “constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’”, running out of the predicted track.

In the context of Coletivo Maré, ‘tactics’ are ubiquitous. The way one handles objects, tools and spaces, giving other uses to them, not in the way they were produced for, qualify their acts as tactics. In the example of the cycle car experiment - produced by industries for delivering products and not as a multimedia vehicle - the tactics could also be seen as the way they manipulate time and space as an opportunity, transforming the use and programs expected for such a support, or device (the bicycle). The same applies to the occupation of Pontilhão Cultural and transformation of a derelict space into a place for encounter and leisure.

In ‘Craftsman’, Richard Sennett defines our second concept - ‘collaborative learning and making’ - as way skills are passed from hand to hand. More focused on craftwork skills, the author (2009) states that handmade works reunitie manual and intellectual skills. According to Sennett’s (2013, p.10) “imagination begins by exploring language that attempts to direct and guide bodily skill. This language works best when it shows imaginatively how to do something”. In addition, the ability to learn through demonstration and observation expresses that apprenticeship could be passed from one person to another.

Inside the Coletivo’s work it is possible to see that youngsters develop their skills from observing and listening others that detain knowledge. We perceived that in different occasions, kids wanted to participate but did not know how to use tools; such as the time they constructed vertical gardens. Collaborative learning, in this situation, occurred by the act of older ones inviting and letting them learn while doing, like bomb seeds making. In the beginning they were not interested but after everyone engaged the activity they wanted to participate collaboratively.
The third and last concept ‘ways of cooperating and making together’, found in Sennett’s ‘Together’, explores processes of cooperation in different contexts, including the community. The author discusses the notion of cooperation among several aspects, from which we’d like to highlight four, combined in two pairs: dialectics and dialogics; sympathy and empathy. For Sennett (ibid., p.18-22) dialectics means finding a common ground; dialogics conduct conversations by listening and observing others, promoting dialogues of understanding. Sympathy can be understood as identification between persons, while empathy means listening others and observing in their terms.

Both pairs could be found within the collective context simply by overlooking the situations they purpose. During the third situation, dialectics happened when the collective agreed to create an event together with Skate Maré, by promoting activities that involved skateboarding and at the same time had a cultural aim - finding a common ground. Dialogic appeared in all of the three situations, especially related to the kids and youngsters. Dialogue is a tool they use to drag their attention and open space for working with their anxieties, fears, and desires also to bond and motivate them to participate.

Sympathy appears when they identify themselves with cultural production as a path to direct their activities. According to Geisa they try to bring cultural events to the favela and show that they are an example of cultural life in Rio de Janeiro. Empathy on the other hand could be observed in moments such as the gender debate at Parque União square, right after the cycle car transmitted movies with that approach. When the group discuss vulnerable subjects they aim to see through others eyes, in that case local women that still face violence against their gender.

These elements merge into cooperation acts. According to Sennett (2013) there are three main aspects for the understanding of communities: morality, local convictions and ways of cooperation. That could explain the mission of each community understanding cooperative acts as a vocation for communities, opposing the logic of individualism, usually seen in capitalist driven societies.

7. Final discussions

Collective action carries great potentialities: not only to stimulate participation and provoke other community lifestyles, but as well to generate resilience through real transformations while qualifying collective spaces (Rosa, 2015). The observed situations pose relevance to the analysis of vivid space (Lefebvre, 1984) through all influential actors’ lenses, all of which that play a different role in every new articulated situation.

However humble they might seem, these actions allows us to understand, in a more detailed form, how improvisation and creativity bring participants together to dedicate their efforts in experiences capable of transforming social life on the ground. Moreover, through the designers' lens, we perceive knowledge and skills lacking in the design field that prove to be important in order to apprehend human action engaged with local demands and desires.

Another point to be mentioned is the adaptability found in already developed tools to contrasted contexts such as Coletivo Maré’s. After these experiences we seek for design practices that might impact the construction of politics through the other lenses, rather than imposing imported representations of space from other contexts. Indian sociologist Gayatri C. Spivak (2010, p.74) suggests, “radical practice should attend to this double session of representations rather than reintroduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire”. It is not about developing merely social design processes, but rather, about social design processes engaged with real concerns that resist the status quo agenda.
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