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This study takes the experience of producing and testing a game in a favela in Belo Horizonte, Brazil in order to discuss participatory planning from the perspective of dissensus. The imaginary of a city mobilised by the game is compared to the structuring interventions carried out in a favela by the state in order to reveal two distinct forms of conceiving and producing space. The first, imposed by technical perspective, takes the formal city as its reference and the second corresponds to the spatial imaginary of a self-produced space of the favela. It is argued that the participatory instances contemplated by the state’s urban planning processes are used as instruments to erase the imaginary contained within the favela’s spatial mode of production, given the impossibility of translating the everyday practices of the favela into the codes of technical planning. The role of the game is to make visible the spatial imaginary of the favela, and so indicate the need to think of participatory tools that enable the agonistic translation between plural imaginaries. This study proposes a reassessment of urban planning instruments within the form of an open-access game, in which differences are seen as contributing to a transformative process.
1. INTRODUCTION

My first experience with games in a socio-spatial context occurred in early 2013 during an extension-research project in which I acted as advisor to a group of architecture students working with the community of Aglomerado Santa Lucia, a favela complex located in the southern centre of the city of Belo Horizonte. The issues raised by this experience with the game gave rise to a series of reflections on games as a participatory and emancipatory tool, which I am currently working on in my PhD research. Among many activities carried out with the Santa Lucia community, we had the opportunity to develop a game to be played with a group of young residents who were attending a municipal social program for youth in underserved areas, named Projovem.

At that time, a vast programme of structuring interventions was being undertaken by the City Council of Belo Horizonte at the Aglomerado Santa Lucia. Despite the program’s high investment in housing, sanitation, roadworks and the construction of parks and public facilities, the process generated a series of conflicts. In addition to the strain on social relations promoted by the imposition of a new spatial order, conflicts emerged especially in relation to the threat of removing residents in order to accommodate the works of the so-called Vila Viva Program.

The idea of developing a game emerged through an invitation to promote a conversation between the architecture students of the extension-research project and the youth group of Projovem program. At that time we knew very little about the way these young residents were dealing with the spatial transformations that were taking place within Santa Lucia through the Vila Viva program. We agreed that this conversation should be an opportunity for the youth group to develop their own perceptions on the subject instead of delegating the role of leading the conversation to the architecture students. Our primary concern was that the presence of the university students could inhibit the participation of the young locals and reduce the possibilities for debate to our external and preconceived vision on the spatial reality of the favela.

Therefore, the idea of the game appeared as a tool to act as a guiding thread for the dialogue, which could enable the Projovem youth group to discuss spatial issues, and encourage critical reflection concerning the changes occurring within the space of the favela. It was hoped that a game could provide an environment in which the young locals might identify themselves as subjects implicated in everyday spatial practice, while at the same time, enabling the construction of a vocabulary that could sustain critical debate on the actions promoted by the Vila Viva Program. For Johan Huizinga (2000), one of the main features of games is that they ‘are not everyday life or real life. Rather, they are an escape from real life into a temporary sphere of activity that has its own orientation’ (Huizinga, 2000:33). By choosing a game as a manner with which to articulate their ideas we aimed to bring real problems on to a platform free from the anxieties of the immediate.

This paper will present the experience of the game to the young people from the favela, followed by a critical review of the participatory process of the urban planning instrument adopted in the Vila Viva Program, the Specific Global Plan (PGE), which set guidelines for the structuring intervention. Both experiences will be contrasted from the perspective of dissensus, as characterised by Jacques Rancière (1996a; 1996b; 2005), in order to describe the formation of a political community based on the discordant encounter of individual perceptions. The purpose of this comparison is to reveal how social relations of domination are reproduced by public policies for producing space.

Within the context of Aglomerado Santa Lucia, undergoing the structuring interventions by the Vila Viva Program, the ‘discordant encounter’ we will reflect upon takes the unitary theory of space by Henri Lefebvre (1991) to identify two distinct forms of producing space. One is oriented by the technical perspective of the urban planning instrument adopted by the Vila Viva Program, and the other is characterised by the spatial practice of favelas, marked by
the collaborative relationships regarding the informal production of space. Although the arguments that support this analysis may have been intuitive at the moment of designing the game, this reflection, inspired by its results, was drawn up at a later date. At this point the game was named the Game of Dissensus.

Taking the experience with the Game of Dissensus this study proposes a re-evaluation of participative instruments for urban planning in the form of an open game, such as that characterised by Vilém Flusser. To explain the open-game model, Flusser argues that ‘games occur in games’ and that ‘every game opens a competence for their meta-game’ (n.d.:3). To Flusser, an open game is one in which the repertoire may be increased and the structure may be modified. In the open game ‘repertoires are increased by processing noise into game elements’ (n.d.:3). The dialectics between game and meta-game connect the multiple instances of a process towards its ultimate objective and beyond the instrumentality of the immediate results. According to Flusser, the game is a metaphor that points to a possibility of transformation in structures that can be translated as political and social structures. However, the Game of Dissensus presented in this study is not about a metaphor but rather a game in its literal sense, understood as a non-discursive experience, which will be played in order to sustain a critical reflection on the need for a political reconfiguration of participatory planning practices.

2. THE GAME OF DISSENSUS

The Game of Dissensus is based on the deconstruction of the modernist reference proposed by the Athens Charter (Le Corbusier, 1933), which separated the functions of the city into housing, leisure, work and circulation zones. The game makes an argument for the erasure of the ordered separation, blurring the limits between the functions and making the use of space more flexible. Although the Game of Dissensus is structured around the framework of the Athens Charter, it is not necessary in order to play it to have previous knowledge of the theoretical framework behind the structure, which is irrelevant to its development. However, it should be clarified that adopting the framework of modern urbanism – in order for it to be deconstructed by the game – emerged as a kind of self-criticism of the extent of our constrained thinking, in which the formal imaginary of a city was the first to emerge during the process of conceiving the game. Having recognised our own limitations, we decided to adopt this as a strategy, a constraining structure to be modified by the game since the players would then be free to propose flexible solutions for the space that they imagined. The idea was precisely to problematise the tensions between the logic of the formal city that permeates the interventions of Vila Viva and the informality of the mode of occupying and producing space in the favela.

THE RULES OF THE GAME

In the game, each of the modernist functions (housing, leisure, work, and circulation) was associated with a colour and represented by a team of players. For each of the colours/ functions, a group of cards was prepared. Each card indicated an everyday action relating to the function represented by the card colour. The game was played out on top of a large piece of white cardboard that fulfilled the role of a board, where players would represent the city in which they would like to live. In turn the players would pick an action card in a different colour from that represented by its group. Through the use of drawings and collages, groups would represent solutions responding to the combination of the action that had been drawn (on the card) and a place corresponding to the function of their group. Within the structure of the game, the actions available on the cards of the other three colours never coincided with an action that usually occurred in places related

1 Informal production is understood as that which occurs outside the legal, normative frameworks that regulate the formal city.
Figure 1 The Game of Dissensus (source: author’s archive, 2013)
to functions represented by its group.

**IMAGINARY ENABLED BY THE GAME OF DISSENSUS**

The proposals drawn up by young players during the game session presented creative solutions to overlapping uses demanded by the cards. Some possible combinations were, for example: a space to play in one of the circulation structures (a street to play football or a basketball hoop at the bus stop); mixed spaces of trade and housing (houses were represented with bars and shops on the front, or houses with signs for manicure/pedicure); a space to study in the park or a space to rest on the sidewalk. Spatial solutions devised by the players presented a much greater level of complexity than those introduced by the Vila Viva Program. They were also much more coherent within the modes of using and producing the space of the favela.

In order to compare the proposals devised in the game with some of the Vila Viva interventions, I use the example of housing and streets. The apartments built to house some of the population decanted from their original homes are of minimum space standards. They offer no flexibility of use and this is totally unlike the way that favela dwellers live, since they often double up the living space with some other activity to increase their income, such as local commerce or services. In addition, the housing model in vertical buildings does not allow for other fairly common practices in favelas, such as cultivating vegetable gardens and keeping animals. Another aspect disregarded by Vila Viva concerns the use of the street as a shared space. Focusing on vehicle access in a number of streets does not respond to the reality of overlapping uses and the commonly observed possibility of negotiation between cars and pedestrians in the streets of a favela.

**3. THE SPECIFIC GLOBAL PLAN (PGE)**

The planning instrument adopted by the Vila Viva Program, previously identified as PGE, is presented as a democratic instrument of planning, intended to oppose the rationalist, hygienist and authoritarian urbanism through a participative/communicative process. However, the contrast between the program’s interventions and the spatial imaginary presented by the young locals in the Game of Dissensus leads to an examination of PGE’s participatory process in order to understand the distance between these two conceptions of space, formulated by groups of the same community but under different processes. After a brief introduction on the general aspects of PGE, its restrictive aspects will be foregrounded in order to identify it as a unilateral consensus-driven instrument of planning.

The PGE’s approach is structured in three areas of action: physical and environmental, juridical and legal and socio-economic. These levels of approach are present at three participative stages: (1) data gathering, (2) diagnostic and (3) proposals, which are analysed in an integrated manner and in which proposals are presented regarding the viability of each field of action (Melo, 2009). After the PGE process has finished, outsourcing companies are selected through public bidding to implement the executive project and execute the works approved in the participatory instances. The construction stage does not involve any community participation. Popular participation therefore only occurs in the three planning stages contemplated by PGE.

In the data-gathering stage, community participation is considered through interviews with residents. In subsequent stages, community meetings are held in order to approve the diagnostics and the proposals. The diagnostics are based on the data-gathering, and the proposals in turn are formulated as an answer to the problems raised in the diagnostics. At the meetings, conflicts and differences that might occur tend to be ignored to serve an agenda for the approval of proposals. However, the conflicts become more acute after concluding the PGE stage. It is only when the implementation
of the proposals starts that the community understands the extent of what has been approved by them in the participatory meetings.

According to Kapp and Baltazar, the origins of the problem are situated within ‘the perspective of the planners in translating the favela into the codes of a formal city’ (2012:12). This approach begins at the stage of mapping and gathering data: ‘[T]he sort of information collected in a PGE follows the needs of planners and public administrators, thus, one-sided information, not an exchange or a dialogue’ (2012:10–11). This manner of accessing and analysing information emphasises the visibility of issues that are perceived as problems only in the light of formal planning. On the other hand, problematic issues from the viewpoint of favela dwellers become invisible to the technicians.

In the subsequent stages, in which the community assembly approves diagnostics and proposals, it is common for dwellers to be seduced by the imaginary of the formal city presented by technicians, since they associate it with a condition of economic privilege. The ways in which diagnostics and proposals are presented in community assemblies ‘reinforce prejudices against the favela, and make it more difficult for the inhabitants to value the qualities of the space they have produced up to that point. It is hard for them to foresee the implications in everyday life of losing such qualities’ (Kapp and Baltazar, 2012:12).

Given their inability to really understand the issues raised at that stage, the community is eventually persuaded to agree with the decisions that are presented as being the only possibilities, thus eliminating any prospect of spatial inventiveness to which the community could contribute.

Furthermore, limiting the participatory process to only these three stages seems to ignore the spatial mode of production of the favela, marked by the autonomy with which the community usually transforms their immediate environment independent of the economic and normative frameworks. In this regard, Kapp and Baltazar point out the contradiction between participation and autonomy: autonomy is the ability of individuals and, foremost, collectivities to establish their own means of action and interaction, as long as they do not restrain others. Being autonomous means being ruled by self-defined norms. In contrast, the idea of participation indicates that people are allowed to take part in decision-making without being able to change its norms (Kapp and Baltazar, 2012).

4. ON THE RATIONALITIES IN DISPUTE WHEN PRODUCING SPACE

According to Lefebvre ‘the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space’ (Lefebvre, 1991:38). In his unitary theory of space, Lefebvre identifies three dialectic instances operating simultaneously within the space, which are the perceived, the conceived and the lived. Translated into spatial terms those are, respectively, spatial practice, representations of space and representational space (Lefebvre, 1991). In the favela’s representational space (the lived), we can see the predominance of the spatial practice (the perceived) to the extent that this space reflects the everyday reality as an intuitive response to the concrete spatial needs of its residents. It reveals a dynamic spatial practice, open to a process of constant transformation through creative negotiation between individual needs and collective space. To Lefebvre, the lived space cannot be translated into verbal signs. In contrast, the representations of space drawn up by the planning process (the conceived) are intellectually elaborated through verbal codes (1991). In the context of urban planning for favela space, we can observe the discordant encounter of these different modes of understanding and producing space. Each one has its own rationality that signifies that they may only be expressed or interpreted by means of specific codes.

The political thought of Jacques Rancière presents a perspective that is able to embrace the coexistence of these different modes of rationality. Rancière identifies an
aesthetic basis in politics, through which he understands politics as a form of experience (Rancière, 2005). For Rancière, it is within politics that the dispute on what can be seen and said in a common world is established. In the current political environment, he identifies a consensual orientation supported by the presumption of equality behind the notion of democracy. Hence Rancière understands the processes that break with this illusion of equality as dissensus. According to Rancière, dissensus emerges as a rupture to the democratic order, a noise on the supposed equality of speech. ‘The one we refuse to consider as belonging to the political community, we first refuse to listen to as a speaking being. We only hear noise in what he says’ (Rancière, 1996b:373). As experience, dissensus is also a constituent process of political subjectivities. For Rancière, scenes of dissensus are the moments of emancipation where it becomes possible to transform a social order presented as immutable through consensus.

Taking as a reference the tangent points in the thoughts of Rancière and Lefebvre, it is argued that the PGE process is inadequate to deal with dissensus, represented here by contrasting rationalities regarding the different modes of producing space. The fact that the PGE can only access one mode of rationality – the communicative one – erases the non-verbal references of the lived space as a subject in the participative planning debate. For Lefebvre, ‘the speculative primacy of the conceived over the lived causes practice to disappear along with life, and thus does very little justice to the “unconscious” level of the lived experience per se’ (Lefebvre, 1991:34).

Communicative rationality as a means to achieve consensus is doubly contradictory to the democratic argument of the participative/communicative planning. Chantal Mouffe suggests that ‘a consensus without exclusion’ is impossible (2007:4). In line with Rancière, she identifies in consensus the responsibility for obscuring and obliterating the multiplicity of identities that constitute antagonistic relations and dissensus. Antagonism is represented in PGE by the diversity of stakeholders in the process – technicians, residents, contractors, politicians, etc. Mouffe believes that the erasure of antagonism through a consensus-driven process is a step towards the consolidation of the hegemonic discourse. In her project for a radical and plural democracy, Mouffe proposes to deal with the antagonism through the form of agonism. Her conceptual framework for agonism ‘simultaneously recognises the inherent social antagonisms and allows its expression in institutional or other forms of organisation’ (Swyngedouw, 2011:5). To Mouffe, the conversion of antagonism into agonism means to cease to consider any contrary position as that of an enemy and as a move towards considering it as an adversary (Mouffe, 2005). The difference is that while antagonism comes from the idea that it is naturally impossible for opposing ideas to co-exist, in agonism co-existence is made possible because in principle it is receptive, although it does not deny political confrontation.

As a non-discursive instance, the game tends to be more open to embedding non-verbal elaborations originated in the practice of lived space. In this regard, the Game of Dissensus is aligned to Mouffe’s agonistic approach since it allows the expression of spatial imagination of favela residents as a strategy of resistance to the dominant consensus on the technical perspective. By lending visibility to this other way of producing space, the game opens up a possible competence for urban planning by challenging it to find other ways of dealing with dissensus.

5. FROM PLAY TO PLANNING: CONTRIBUTIONS OF A NON-DISCURSIVE TOOL

Although the Game of Dissensus was not conceived as an urban planning instrument, it can contribute to the debate on participation as a tool to democratise planning. If the act of playing reveals the distance between the proposals devised by the planning instrument and the spatial imagination of young residents of the favela, it is important to identify which
features in the game enabled this other imaginary to emerge.

I would first like to broaden the reflection on self-criticism regarding the prevalence of the apparent rationality evident at the moment that we were given the task of ‘conceiving’ a game for that context. As well as designing the game, the group of students involved in the university extension project also took part in it as players, alongside the young residents of the favela. What could be observed from this experience was a considerable displacement between the rationality mobilised to conceive the game from that mobilised to play. From the moment the game was conceived we realised the extent to which our thinking (as technicians) was conditioned by the framework (also conceived) of the modernist city. However, during the game session, the influence of the technical training was not recognisable in the proposals made by the students. The imaginary of the formal city that they brought to the game was from the space they live in as residents of the formal city rather than the space conceived at university, as to what a city should be. It is therefore within the displacement provoked by playing that I identify three features that I intend to highlight in the Game of Dissensus. These are: the equal speech condition, the autonomy to interpret the rules, and the denaturalisation of consensus.

The first identifies the possibility of exchange and sharing of ideas in the game environment that we associate with an equality of speech condition – to put it in Rancière’s terms. During the occasion, the ease with which architecture students and the young locals organised themselves into four teams was remarkable. Both sides decided that the teams were to be composed of a mix of players from both groups. Clearly this formation makes it difficult to trace what influence the different backgrounds of each group may have had on the draft proposals. However, I assume that the equality of speech condition was more related to the kind of interaction mobilised through the game than necessarily to the background of the players. The Game of Dissensus does not provide the participants with any previous formulation for their spatial proposals; the challenges posed by the cards enable the desires for the space to be gradually formulated according to the contingency of the situation. Unlike the communicative rationality, which demands a specific skill for the formulation of a speech, the game proposes other paths for elaborating arguments. By the act of drawing, the game allows interaction between the discursive and practical logic in the negotiation between teammates, so that one contributes to enhancing the other. I believe that the interaction between these two logics has also contributed to mitigate the asymmetries that eventually could inhibit the freedom to draw up proposals. Around the board, participants are above all ‘players’; there is no differentiation between ‘technicians’ and ‘community’.

The second feature is the possibility of the autonomy identified in the game as ‘the ability of individuals to establish their own modes of action and interaction’ (Kapp and Baltazar, 2012). Although it may be argued that the Game of Dissensus presents a structure that somehow orients its results, we understand that this does not limit the creativity of the players since it allows a particular interpretation of the rules in order to enable different arrangements. For instance, when a player from the favela was asked to combine circulation and work, she drew a bus in the street that was drawn by another player. She was then confronted by an architecture student, who questioned the redundancy of the theme ‘circulation’ in the combination bus+street. She replied by writing next to her drawing: ‘[T]he bus is the driver’s work’.

The third recalls the initial purpose of the game, which was to articulate the debate on space with the young residents of Santa Lucia. The game has gone beyond its initial purpose since it also fulfills the reifying role of validating the relevance of the spatial imagination of the favela and thus denaturalises the consensus surrounding the conceived imaginary of the formal city. However, it is important to emphasise that
denaturalising a consensus in this case does not mean promoting a consensus in the opposite direction. Instead, the game points towards an agonistic possibility to deal with dissensus. The proposals drawn on the game board were the result of negotiations between the backgrounds of the architecture students and the young locals. During the process it was common to hear comments regarding experiences from both backgrounds, for example: ‘At so-and-so’s house it’s like this’ or ‘Like it is on my street’. When the proposal seemed to be unusual to any player, questions like: ‘Is there really a square like that?’ or ‘But who will want to live there?’ opened up the possibility for discussion of the references, contaminating each other’s imaginary and expanding the repertoire of both groups.

6. CONCLUSION

Although the Game of Dissensus enabled the interaction between groups with different backgrounds, from a critical perspective we must recognise that the conditions in which it was played do not represent a situation of real conflict between stakeholders. On the contrary, from the beginning, the architecture students were aware that the very intention of the game was to give voice to young local people. Despite the many levels of dissensus that can be identified in the wider context of interventions in the favela, the conflictual component is missing within the game. I understand that this difficulty in putting different interests into dialogue is also a recurrent problem in participatory processes. The constructors’ profit or real estate interests are hardly laid on the table – instead they are hidden by a hegemonic consensus of what can be the alternatives in the participatory processes.

In this regard, this article does not intend to state the Game of Dissensus as an alternative participatory tool. Rather, its main contribution is to draw attention to the need to include instances of non-discursive participation in the urban planning process, as a strategy to avoid the exclusionary effects of communication-based processes. Despite its limitations, the Game of Dissensus shows its ability to translate different spatial codes, thereby enabling the coexistence of different spatial imaginary.

In fact, a key feature of the Game of Dissensus is to make clear the distinction between game and reality. The game consists of an extreme simplification of reality into a structure designed to activate a reflexive action. From the perspective of the open game, the structure must be understood as a framework on which a new reality can be created, rather than as a reduction of reality. In the context of urban planning, the open-game reference can be seen as a possibility for expanding the repertoire of practices and spatial imaginary by embedding noise into its structure. Coincidentally to Rancière, Flusser (n.d.) refers to noise as a kind of interference of another order, which serves to expand the repertoire of the game. For Rancière (1996b), noises are voices muffled by an exclusionary political framework where dissensus becomes intelligible to institutional practices. A game open to noise is therefore a structure permeable to dissensus, which means a game able to translate noise into coherent discourse.
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