Learning from ‘favelas’: the poetics of users’ autonomous production of space and the non-ethics of architectural interventions

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Abstract

This paper starts by introducing the spontaneous, dynamic and autonomous process of production of the space of Brazilian ‘favelas’ (illegal settlements where the usually economically excluded from the cities accommodate themselves). It first draws a distinction between ‘favela’ and its usual English translation—shantytown or slum—, emphasising the informal and autonomous process of its production as opposed to the heteronomous process of production of the formal space of cities. Then, it discusses the usual institutional interventions by Government, Academy and NGOs, designed by architects and urbanists, which completely ignore the dynamic and autonomous logic of the space of favelas. It then compares the non-planned design process of ‘favelas’ with the planning tradition of formal architecture. The article finally concludes with a provocative proposal for architects to learn from ‘favelas’ instead of imposing their traditional processes and products on them, which is illustrated by the ‘interface of spatiality’ designed by the research group MOM (Morar de Outras Maneiras) – which in English is LOW (Living in Other Ways), and its application at the Aglomerado da Serra, the biggest shantytown in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

1. The informal and autonomous logic of ‘favelas’

The present paper intends to be a critical theorisation of architectural production in Brazilian ‘favelas’ in opposition to formal architectural practice. It is based on exploratory case studies of self-produced enterprises in ‘favelas’ which are also often self-built. Usually these self-production processes focus primarily on the very decision making process, which simultaneously happens with the processes of acquiring knowledge, articulating power and building indeed, instead of the traditional focus on conventional results and technical features due to formal architectural practices. In other words, the studies were meant to discern the productive forces and the productive relations in both circumstances, and to highlight their problems. We came to the conclusion that, although architects could help on discussing many issues, and eventually resolve some of them, they have in fact to learn from ‘favelas’ rather than vice-versa.

‘Favela’ is an illegal urban settlement, generally translated as ‘slum’ or ‘shantytown’. However, the meaning of ‘favela’ in Brazil slightly differs from the actual meaning of slum and shantytown. Slum means an area of the city or even a house which is in a very bad condition and also very poor. Shantytown refers to an area in or near a town where very poor people live in small and roughly built huts made from thin sheets of wood, plastic, etc. The ‘favela’ phenomenon can sometimes meet the meaning of slum or shantytown but it is in fact characterised neither by bad condition nor by roughly built and almost temporary accommodation. The main feature of a ‘favela’ is the fact that it is a piece of land which is illegally appropriated due to a specific reason. This illegal appropriation is in most cases consequence of poverty, but its main cause refers to an attempt to include the excluded. Nowadays it is a very complex social, cultural and political phenomenon, but considering the history of Brazil, which is very recent, it is easy to identify the roots of such phenomenon. Some of the big Brazilian cities, such as Belo Horizonte, are just over 100 years old. When this city was ‘founded’ (it was a designed city) it offered place for an elite to live in accompanied by their workers. As the city grew, there was a need for more workers along with the many informal activities which started taking place. This growth was not planned, and since the model of the city was very rigid — there is even a contour avenue supposed to fix its spatial limit — it was
not prepared to accommodate the ones who were not programmed to be there. It is a model of exclusion imposed by spatial design. Nevertheless, many workers from nearby towns and villas were needed or even attracted to better chances there. At first they would travel daily but then they would look for accommodation in the city for the weekdays, and probably a permanent accommodation in the near future. As the city was not flexible enough to cope with this demand, there was no way to accommodate all the new people arriving. ‘Favelas’ are born in response to this rigid and exclusive city model, in order to accommodate those workers and those looking for work in the new growing city.

‘Favela’ is then an answer of a modern spatial attempt of inclusion, focusing on difference and the dynamic possibility of growth in order to accommodate the ones that are excluded from the planned city. Although the reason of existence of ‘favela’ is related to the need to ‘solve’ a spatial problem, its developments are strongly committed to the problem-worrying strategy. Two points should be noted: first the purpose of this settlement, and second, the form of this settlement. With regards to its purpose, it is an attempt of inclusion. As such, the purpose of a ‘favela’ is not free from the system of dominance; on the contrary, it is created in order to enlarge the space of inclusiveness of the city. With regards to its formal manifestation, it ends up as an unprecedented artificial settlement inside the modern tradition. It is a dynamic space; it is alive, spontaneous, constantly growing, constantly in transformation. It is formally non-representational although it is created in order to achieve the patterns of living in the city. Its formality is a consequence of a non-planned, non-rational settlement, giving place to a more sensible manifestation, even if not intended, since it lacks predictions. The difference of the lack of prediction in ‘favelas’ and the lack of prediction in the city is that in the first it results from a dynamic and inclusive space while in the second it is a consequence of an exclusive plan ending up as an static and exclusive space.

The richness of the ‘favela’, as an example of open process, space of difference and dynamic space, can still be clearly seen, although it is not guaranteed to last in a near future. We are not proposing we all should move to ‘favelas’ or to start living without any planning. Our analysis of the ‘favela’ intends to indicate the formal possibilities of dynamic and not entirely predictable spaces, which indeed accommodate differences.

2. The corporate and heteronomous logic of production of formal spaces in contrast to the production of ‘favelas’: the case of Aglomerado da Serra

In spite of the above mentioned qualities of ‘favelas’, one should acknowledge that they are also spaces of conflict, related either to their city insertion or their internal structure. Regarding its social and political place in the city as a whole, it should be noted that there are many attempts to legalise and to control it. In this transformation, we believe that ‘favelas’ are loosing their best features while establishing their own systems of dominance based on the same patriarchal model of the city, even if in opposition to it. They are moving towards rigidity and stagnancy, and instead of becoming spaces of desire they are becoming spaces of fear.

According to Jailson de Souza e Silva, external interventions in ‘favelas’ usually follow one of two rules (being both based on prejudices). Or they are based on the conservative logic, which takes the ‘favela’ dweller as a potential marginal (out-of-law), or they are based on the progressive logic, which takes the ‘favela’ dweller as a good-savage victimized by the circumstances. In both cases, the ‘favela’ is isolated from the city, from which it is part, and the institutional intervention (either Government, Academy or NGO) completely ignores the community’s logic of survival, its dynamics and peculiarities. The dominant logic of power imposed by the formal and legal authority is always from the top-down, impregnated with at
least one of the prejudices mentioned above, creating a clear boundary between the legal and the illegal settlements. The problem with this dominant logic of intervention is that there is no boundary, even less a clear boundary, between the city and the ‘favela’. Even if we can clearly see the differences in their cores, mainly because of the self-organised logic of occupation of ‘favelas’, we cannot leave aside that the people living in ‘favelas’ are also economic active (working and consuming) in the legal city. There is no boundary, except the ones imposed by physical interventions.

These top-down interventions are not only bad as they ignore the dynamic logic of ‘favelas’, but mainly because they reproduce, in the space of ‘favelas’, the same corporate logic of production of spaces that happens in the formal city. This corporate logic, as Wanzel has warned in 1969, is a consequence of an economic process in which it was ‘becoming uneconomic for the building industry to meet the specific needs of “users” for new products’.3 In response to that users became corporate clients in order to pull their demand for innovation. Wanzel says that ‘only a large corporation is able to apply normalization widely enough to take advantage of new inventions’. If, on the one hand this process seems natural and good, as users are joining forces and being heard, on the other hand, this means the end of diversity, triggering a process of progressive alienation of users. According to Wanzel ‘the danger of the entente between the design professions, the construction industry, and the Government, is not simply that their “techniques” will inexorably alienate a “user” from his physical environment due to their inability to discriminate finely enough to provide for his specific needs. But also, and more significantly, that their indiscriminate use will alienate the user from his social and political institutions’.

Most buildings in the formal city are designed under this corporate logic, in which the client is not the user, but someone (an individual or a group) or something (a corporation) who or which will sell or rent the space after its completion. The main problems of this logic of production of spaces are the normalisation of demand and the neglecting of users, leading to their manipulation instead of looking for their true satisfaction. Wanzel says that ‘the overwhelming insensitivity of bureaucratic, professional, and corporate “technology” transforms “users” into non-persons, not only alienated from their environment, but totally rejected by their institutions’. This is the ultimate result of top-down, corporate and objective design.

The self-production of spaces in ‘favelas’ has managed to escape the corporate logic described above. However, for a number of reasons — some of them related to actual safety problems in those settlements and other merely related to low political strategies of realising interventions (of any kind) to get votes — the Government is increasing the amount of interventions in ‘favelas’. These initiatives completely ignore the dynamic of the spaces of ‘favelas’ and their self-production processes. They are indiscriminately done from top-down, following the same corporate logic of the legal city. If this is a problem in the formal city, it takes another dimension in ‘favelas’ as besides leading to alienation of users, the spaces designed (and built) are minimum in cost and consequently in size, with no flexibility at all. This leads to a recurrent process since, by becoming alienated, users lose any chance of political articulation and then they receive Governmental interventions with no criticism.

An illustrative example of such corporate logic of intervention is happening nowadays in one of the biggest ‘favelas’ in Belo Horizonte — Aglomerado da Serra. We bring this example here to discuss the usual self-production process in contrast to the corporate intervention. The usual process of production of space, either the one of the dwelling unit or the public space, is based on self-production and daily negotiation. As one of the results of a research survey about dwelling units we confirmed the hypothesis that most dwellers not only have their houses constantly being built but also that they keep expanding their houses according to their needs.4 And that it is the reason they are constantly negotiating the public space with their neighbours. An example of such a process is the case of Dona Berenice. She moved to Aglomerado da Serra in 1974 with her husband (Senhor José) and their three children (Fernando,
Janilson and Lucilene). According to Dona Berenice, in that time there was no pavement, no water supply and no electric light, and most houses were made of a sort of cheap plywood or plastic canvas. Their house were solid, made of bricks, though very tiny with only two rooms (one for sleeping, where the couple and their three children used to sleep, and the kitchen). They managed to accommodate different functions in these rooms in different times. She says, for example, that the bedroom was also used to work during the day and the kitchen as a meeting place when their friends went over to listen to country music. This embryo-house is inserted at the bottom of a hill, carved into it. Most internal walls follow the natural terrain after carving. After a few years living there they decided to build another room, the bathroom, with the circulation leading to it. So, they carved even more the terrain and opened a window into the public alley (beco) that leads to the upper houses. Some years later they negotiated with the neighbours (next door and upstairs) and bought more space. This time they built an external wall closing the alley, a stepladder leading to the second floor and attached another room from their neighbour’s space.
This is just one example of the everyday production of spaces in ‘favelas’. The use and construction of spaces simultaneously happen, without legal constrains (they neither submit their buildings to legal approval nor they follow any rules regarding the relation of their buildings to the public space and to the neighbours). The lack of obedience to any building regulation enables a constant negotiation of space and guarantees the possibility of expanding the houses. Unfortunately, the interventions proposed by the Government, with lots of technical assistance, completely neglect this logic of negotiation and expansion, and we can only expect bad consequences coming in the future (either regarding users satisfaction with their dwelling units or concerning problems related to community articulation due to the lack of spatial negotiation).

A recent example of such interventions is happening at the Aglomerado da Serra with the implementing of the so-called Specific Global Plan. Among the varies interventions proposed, the main focus is turned to three interrelated projects: first, the implementation of the access roads; second the recovering of the water springs and streams; and third, the relocation of the dwellers that needed to be removed from risky areas and the stream banks as also the ones removed in order to implement the access roads. For that project the City Government has a department responsible for raising data and elaborating (supposedly together with the local community) the Specific Global Plan. Apart from many problems with this Specific Global Plan (which is an instrument of pseudo-participation rather than of actual community involvement), the main issue that needs critical addressing is the means by which the interventions are actually happening. The Government has hired a ‘consortium’ of two leading contractors who became responsible for the executive planning (based on the previous Specific Global Plan) as also for its realisation. The community participation in such a process is none, and the consortium’s main focus is on its own profit, as it works as a corporation and not as a social entity. In this way, the consortium intends to do everything as fast as it can, and to do so they are hiring projects with very tight deadlines, which makes it very hard to innovate. A clear example is that of the apartment buildings designed to accommodate all families removed from risky areas, stream banks and the places where they are building the access roads. The buildings are all the same, with four floors each (to avoid the lift), their positioning completely neglects climatic issues (sun and wind), and to make it worst, they have no flexibility at all, offering only a very tiny apartment for each family.

The main problem with these buildings is not the fact they all look alike and seem randomly located all over the place, but that they are not suitable for the community. The images speak more of the contrast between these inadequate apartment buildings and the traditional spaces of ‘favelas’ than any possible discourse. Of course we are not saying that the poor conditions of ‘favelas’ is a positive feature, but surely the way people negotiate their spaces and place their houses respecting each other’s spaces is a
lesson to be learnt. For instance, in Aglomerado da Serra almost everyone has a great view from their houses and this self-organisation of the space is not based on any pre-established building regulation, but is a result of constant negotiation. The apartment buildings recently proposed (and being built) completely ignore self-organisation and impose themselves as a finished solution to organise and alienate people.

An overview of a favela in Belo Horizonte

These two examples raise an important question regarding the role of architects. If on the one side they are not present in the spontaneous production of ‘favelas’, on the other side they are imposing the formal and corporate logic when they are called in by institutional interventions. Perhaps we should review this participation. Instead of reproducing in ‘favelas’ the architectural production based on authorship, architects should respect the self-organised processes of negotiation, work together with the communities to improve their knowledge regarding building components and processes, and create instruments to enable people to experiment spaces before actually building. In other words they can learn from ‘favelas’ and improve their practices instead of imposing their practices on ‘favelas’.

3. The productive forces and relations at play in the production of spaces: drawing from autonomous art

Architects love to discuss the relation of their activity to art. Sometimes it is considered unethical and completely denied, sometimes it is exalted as the autonomy of form, but in most cases the discussions really miss the point. The peculiar character of art does not primarily lie on the creation of ‘facts’ but in production processes that are the conjunction of advanced productive forces and unusual productive relations, which — at least to some extent — let those forces determine themselves, instead of being determined from the outside. Art is, first of all, free work. In formal architecture this conjunction is obstructed by the preconceived ‘plan’ or ‘design’. The plan defines the results of the building process without really taking part in it, whereas the plan is also a prerequisite to the use of advanced technical means. At the same time, the very actors in the building process are deprived of the knowledge and power that would leave them to decide on their doing. Therefore, nothing allows us to directly compare usual formal architecture to art. On the other hand, productive forces and relations are key aspects for the analysis of self-production in general, and of the architecture of ‘favelas’ in particular, because, although not actually free, such production is closer to free or emancipated work than any other. Let us first see what a non-planned process could mean.

The critical philosopher Theodor Adorno understands art as the refuge of mimetic behaviour, and at the same time as an active part of western rationality, the embodiment of means to dominate nature.
According to Adorno, the dialectics of mimesis and rationality leads to experimental procedures, in the categorical sense of the term. It does not mean just the use of chaotic events or accidents to create surprising effects, but experiments where the artistical subject does things without knowing what they are, or ‘practice methods which results he can’t envisage’. Adorno even compares the artist to a dowser, following the way where the object ‘pulls the hand’. To do this, the artist mobilises every technique available. The artist’s procedure is opposed to instrumental achievement of a predefined purpose, because it applies technique to serve a singular event, instead of using it to simply impose certain forms and contents upon material. This includes an irreducible component of spontaneity, combined to a not less irreducible effort of construction, which, exactly for this reason ‘demands solutions that do not present themselves immediately and with precision to the representing eye or ear’. Any external and a priori definition would be totally strange to this kind of procedure. ‘With bandaged eyes the aesthetic rationality must launch itself in the formation process (Gestaltung), instead of directing it from the outside.’

It is impossible to induce or program such a process, or even to organise it in the manner of the industrial production. Nevertheless, it has certain objective conditions: first of all, the absence of domination in the relations of production. This implies, among other things, the disposal of the producer over her/his means of production. Otherwise the artistic process will be just another routine. Such autonomy is quite difficult to achieve in a social context in which everything leads to unfree work or at least to commitments to publishers, galleries, exhibitions, critics, subventions, prizes, etc. But even in this context the painter or writer, who works directly on pictorial or linguistic material, is still able to acquire her/his own brushes and papers. In architecture this does not happen. Not because architects seldom have resources to build what they want, but because, since they have left the building site in the Renaissance and undertook the exclusive function of designing, they have also ceased to get effectively involved with materials and spaces. They do not build and they do not know how to build. Such involvement is left to workers who are hardly allowed to decide anything. The division between intellectual and manual work was established early in architectural production.

For the architect, this has meant a growing distance from the real object. Apparently advanced technical resources of modern and contemporary architecture, such as structural systems or digital designing aids, are abstract instruments, much more efficient for control than for real inquiry into spatial and material possibilities. At the same time, the relation between the artistical subject and the object was transferred — in the psychoanalytic sense of ‘transference’ — to the drawing tools. That is where the fetish of tracing, sketching, and drawing gestures comes from, as if there existed a substance of spatial reality between the hand and the pencil, between the imagination and the 3D software. In fact there are only pseudo-objects, representations which never really withstand the designer’s intentions. The resistance experienced by designers comes from the outside: they are market rules, schedules or economic goals. All this has nothing to do with an aesthetic rationality that launches itself ‘with bandaged eyes’ in a process; it is just rationality — without adjectives — that directs objects from outside.

For the builders, who actually do the material work and who for a long time have dominated building techniques, the division of labour in architectural production has meant interrupting experimentation and reflective practice. Their work was gradually ‘idiotized’ (as André Gorz describes it). And even when a builder retains some knowledge about traditional techniques, he does not have access to the advanced means that could be mobilised for the consecutive production of a space. As Sérgio Ferro has diagnosed, the usual formal architectural production — planed, designed, legitimitated by public and professional institutions, and which makes part of the real estate market — is what Marx has called a ‘manufacture’: it depends on skilled manual workers but puts them under a totalizing command, atrophying craftsmanship and making impossible any independent production.
The only well known modern architect critical about planning and designing was Adolf Loos. His most celebrated and most misunderstood argument, against ornamentation, addresses exactly our issue. Loos didn’t oppose all ornament, but the practice, then usual among Vienna Secession architects, of inventing ornaments on paper with no connection to real materials, spaces and means for making them. In his caricature-like way, Loos describes how building was dominated by design:

And the master builder received a tutor. The master only knew how to build houses in the style of his own time. But the man who knew how to build in any passed style, the rootless one, he turned out to be dominant: the architect. [...] The master could not spend much time on books. The architect took everything out of them. [...] He learned how to draw, and since he didn’t learn anything else, he drew well. The master couldn’t do this. [...] The architect caused the art of building to degenerate into a graphic art. [...] It is terrible when an architectural drawing, which in its presentation has to be recognised as a work of graphic art — and there are actually graphic artists among architects —, is built in stone, iron and glass. The sign of the built object is the boring two-dimensional composition. [...] The pencil, not the tools, creates form. The different kinds of relief and ornaments on a building show if the architect used pencil number 1 or number 5. [...] And the masons sweat to carve and scrape all this graphical nonsense.11

Although the target of Loos critic is the architecture of the second half of the 19th century, his argument also fits well to criticise the architecture of the Italian Renaissance, which imposed on the construction logic a vocabulary recreated from ruins and writings, as also to Brazilian modern architecture, which has overwhelmed the building-site with abstract calculations and forms supposed to be pure, giving birth to absurdities such as the inverted dome of the National Congress in Brasilia. Loos approaches those contradictions from the perspective of someone familiar with building sites (his father was a mason), and he perceives that new architecture is about sedimenting more and more human work, producing more and more surplus value. But Loos does not discuss its relations of production directly.

The very process that underlies the conditions criticised by Loos is the transformation of simple cooperation into manufacture. Simple cooperation means collaboration of ‘a group of workers who are almost at the same level, have very widespread skills and very few hierarchy’.12 Manufacture, on the other hand, demands a centralised structure directed by an ‘emancipated’ architect. For extraordinary, monumental architecture, this transformation has happened in the late middle age, as shown by the different emblems of the architect in the iconography of the time. The big square and compasses in his hands turned gradually smaller, construction geometry turned gradually into drawing geometry. ‘The first one serves building that dictates forms; the other one serves forms to which building has to adapt. One starts by doing and ends on the result; the other anticipates the result and compels doing’.13 Yet such domination of building by plan or design did not affect ordinary architecture until the 19th century, when mass-production of working and dwelling spaces had started. Until this time, everyday spaces were still mostly self-produced, and defined by builders and users together in the building process. The main concern of Loos' criticism is this new situation, where design determines not just extraordinary monuments but also everyday spaces. And this criticism is still valid and relevant.

Today, the formal architectural mass-production in Brazil can be described as a highly profitable manufacture with three main features: i) it offers a great number of jobs and terrible working conditions; ii) it uses design to command workers and to sell its products; and iii) it imposes its own spatial rules upon the users. The production of spaces in ‘favelas’ differs from this pattern in many ways. It should not be seen in a romantic perspective, as if it were still really free. In fact, this space is created out of necessity and not by choice; it involves value exchange and a peculiar market, and almost all its materials, techniques and patterns do no more than imitate the formal practises. Nevertheless, there is a kind of
autonomy of individuals and groups in ‘favelas’ that does not exist in the formal city. Such autonomy, which is nothing more than a consequence of a marginal position in the economic system, means that the division between intellectual work and material work does not prevail there. People who conceive spaces are the same ones who build them and, in general, also the ones who use them. Intellectual work of conception and manual work of execution are not separated. The production is not directed from the outside.

Against the expectations we had before field research, this production is not even directed immediately by financial restrictions. Certainly, people buy what they can, and this is not much. But once they have acquired their means for building (a piece of land and the conventional or improvised construction materials), the financial equations seem to lose importance. Of the people we talked to, none of them keeps register of their expenses or thinks about ‘rationalising’ construction. When there is any plan or design, it is only a vague indication that will be configured concretely throughout the building process. Self-builders and self-producers do not seem to hesitate undoing what was done or reconfiguring the intended object. In other words, they do not hesitate to experiment.

The architecture that results from this process is sometimes very similar to the ‘normal’ one. But there are also cases which demonstrate that the coercion of the usual productive relations was broken through.

The images below show the house of Francisco, which is self-produced and self-constructed.

There is nothing in Francisco’s house that does not come from conventional building techniques and materials, but nothing remains unchanged. He applies concrete blocks, bricks, cement, natural stones, iron, tiles, and a lot of reused elements. At the same time, however, he created completely
unconventional spaces and forms. While the whole is very carefully related to the spatial environment, every single part seems to have been subjected to a singular elaboration, quite impossible to achieve in predefined design.

4. Learning from ‘favelas’ and providing means for increasing their autonomy

Franciscos' house demonstrates an autonomy on building site which does not occur in formal production. But, in spite of this autonomy, it cannot be taken as an autonomous art-architecture, because it lacks an essential aspect, indicated by the concept of ‘advanced productive forces’. Francisco and other self-producers do not have access to advanced knowledge and instruments which would allow them to really open up new possibilities. What they mobilise are the relatively poor resources of a production done under very difficult technical and financial conditions. On the other hand, if they had access to more advanced means, they would probably not act according to the same artistic logic, with its openness and its creation of singular events and singular use values, because all the advanced architectural means we have today were forged by and for heteronomous production.

This is exactly the point where we think a new way of acting in formal architectural practice should start. Autonomy in the design or production of space means that people involved in designing and building need to have access to knowledge of design and building processes and components in order to discern and enact. But at the same time it means that those processes have to be open enough to increase autonomy instead of limiting it or even turning it impossible. Nowadays, if one wants to apply knowledge about, for instance, slight structures or solar energy in building, s/he has to count on a crew of specialists, who will make the decisions. The building process itself will then be planned in detail, loosing every spontaneous element. What happens in ‘favelas’ nowadays is a step towards autonomy, though very limited by the poor access to knowledge of design and building processes and components. This quasi-autonomy is in fact obliterated by the dominant heteronomous tradition that directs the availability of both processes and components. To change this picture is not an easy task. If on the one side the self-building tradition of these needing people is an allied, on the other side the heteronomous, corporative and imposing ways of the author-based finished designs and the limited and bureaucratic building industry are great problems to overcome.

In order to enable actual autonomy for designing and building there is a need to tackle two main problems: design and building. Even if our approach points towards designing, building and using as simultaneous activities, we believe that people need to be able to experiment with spatiality before actually crystallising it in a building structure (which happens most times as most components do not enable any flexibility at all). The design we are discussing here is not related to traditional drawings of any kind (be them sketches or technical drawings). Design here is more related to a means for people to experiment different spatial possibilities in context, so they can evaluate, for example, where to place the openings as also the size of the rooms. This proposed design strategy would only be used when it were really useful for builders and dwellers. That is, this is expendable when users are prepared to try spaces as they build.

The aim of our research group MOM/LOW (Morar de Outras Maneiras / Living in Other Ways) is to devise means to help bridging design, building and use towards autonomy. So we are working on two interface designs. First, an interface of spatiality, a kit of parts to be assembled very easily by one or more people so they can discuss and have a feeling about the physical space they are about to build before actually building. Second, an interactive digital interface for building knowledge of processes and components, which is open to everyone and every company to place their expertise regarding traditional or alternative
processes or components available in the market, so anyone can access and play with these in order to be informed and choose which process and component to use. This digital interface offers a three-dimensional environment with technical feedback for experimenting connections amongst the different components, so users can play with them in this environment and also get technical information linked to them in the interface database; users can also discuss with other users and eventually even with the makers in a forum. This digital interface is currently being programmed.

Regarding the interface of spatiality, we already have a first version of it, which is a set of plastic pipes — with 60cm, 120cm and 180cm — spatial joints made of laminated wood, clothes of different fabric, size and colours, ropes and pins to stabilise the structure. It is very easy to assemble so people can experiment different spatial arrangements without constrains. Apart from serving as a design instrument, this interface has enabled us to verify the different ways people deal with space. We made the same experiment with a group of first year architecture students and with a group of teenagers in Aglomerado da Serra. The exercise given was to assemble the kit in order to create an object-space to make shadow and accommodate all participants. There was no rules or external impositions. Even though, the architecture students started by making an inventory of all pieces and discussing possible solutions for the given problem with the maximum use of the resources available. In the case of the teenagers of the Aglomerado da Serra, they merely acted, instead of counting the pieces or discussing, they created new forms as new circumstances emerged and as they increased their knowledge (by means of practice) of the modular possibilities of the kit.

The space produced by the architecture students

The space produced in Aglomerado da Serra

This experiment highlights two different ways of dealing with space, which are related to two ways of producing spaces. The architecture students have reproduced the very formal production, which is always heteronomous. Even if they are themselves the makers, they try to determine, plan, and envisage the results prior to actually building and using, in an attempt to guarantee the correspondence of certain predetermined goals to the final (and finished) result. In other words, the students were trying to represent an idea of an event in a finished built form. Nevertheless, this correspondence never happened. On the other hand, the teenagers of Aglomerado da Serra reproduced an undetermined process, which is not structured according to the usual relations of production in building-sites. That is, the process they reproduce is closer to the autonomous production of the arts than to the heteronomous production of formal spaces. The space they created does not represent an event as they never tried to envisage such an event, but it was very useful (and used) after completion.

Looking at the results of this experiment, we can conclude that the process of production based on action enables more flexibility and autonomy than the process based on discourse and its representation. If on
the one hand the ‘favelas’ are produced in this action-based logic, on the other, the formal architecture is produced within a corporate and heteronomous logic. We are not ignoring the fact that the results of this quasi-autonomous process of production of spaces in ‘favelas’ are very precarious, as are also the conditions in which this production happens. However, instead of dismissing it as a malaise that needs extermination we are proposing two strategies (with no intention of proposing solutions): first is to learn from it and transform the heteronomous practices of production of formal spaces; and second is to devise alternative techniques for this autonomous production to achieve better results.

We would like to conclude with the impossibility of reconciling poetics and ethics in architecture without taking into account the informal logic of production of spaces. This logic, as shown above, is not only valid for low-income communities. It indicates more than that: it questions the top-down decisions, the excluding planning models, the disregard with changes in time, and, mainly, the authorship of architectural works. In this view, we hope, architects would design interfaces rather than finished spaces and dwellers would have more autonomy in the production of their spaces.

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4 Carvalho, Juliane Miranda, A arquitetura informal das ‘favelas’ e sua contribuição para as práticas formais de projeto, Monography of Post-Graduation in Architecture of Interiors, PUC-Minas, 2006.

5 According to Carole Pateman there are three types of participation: pseudo, full and partial. Pseudo-participation is the most common in architecture: users are called to participate in the design process only to legitimate the imposed proposals of architects. Pateman says that ‘pseudo-participation ... covers techniques used to persuade employees to accept decisions that have already been made’. See Pateman, Carole, Participation and democratic theory, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.


7 Ibid, p.46.

8 Ibid, p.175.

9 Ibid, p.43, see also p.287.

10 Ibid, p.175.

