The Paradox of Participation: A Case Study on Urban Planning in Favelas and a Plea for Autonomy

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The participatory planning method called Plano Global Específico (PGE; Specific Global Plan) has been used in Belo Horizonte, Brazil since 1995 for interventions in favelas (spontaneous settlements). Although the responsible municipal agency describes it optimistically, inhabitants have manifested significant discontent. This article focuses on the reasons for this controversy, analysing the PGE method against the background of Brazilian re-democratisation and Belo Horizonte’s public policies for favelas. The article argues that institutionalised participation does not favour the qualitative leap towards citizen control or autonomy, but is essentially attached to heteronomous planning structures.

Keywords: autonomy, Belo Horizonte, favela, Specific Global Plan, participation, urban planning.

Urbel is the municipal agency of Belo Horizonte, Brazil responsible for the improvement of urban structures in favelas and similar low-income settlements. Since 2005, this agency has implemented the Programa Vila Viva (Living Village Programme). Although controversial enough to incite massive protests, the programme’s interventions involve a participatory planning method: the so-called Plano Global Específico (PGE; Specific Global Plan). Urbel (n.d.) describes the PGE method, used since 1995, as ‘a detailed study of the reality of villages and favelas of Belo Horizonte, with direct participation of the community’.

What went wrong in this participatory process? We hypothesise that the PGE method does not simply equal a misuse of participation, but shows how participation can contradict 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.

In the following section the idea of participation in urban planning is reviewed. The subsequent section outlines the institutional and political background of the PGE in Brazil and Belo Horizonte, while the fourth section describes PGE procedures in details. The concluding section discusses these procedures vis-à-vis the socio-political
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context, considering how outcomes are related to the structure of the institutionalised participatory planning method.

Participation and Autonomy in Urban Planning

According to Arnstein’s already classical (1969) ‘ladder of citizen participation’, the idea of ‘taking part’ can embrace very different things. On the lower rungs are Manipulation and Therapy, which mean the use of participatory discourses as a ‘public relation vehicle by powerholders’, so that people submit to a given process (Arnstein, 1969: 217). The next three rungs, Informing, Consultation and Placation, ‘progress to levels of “tokenism” that allow the have-nots to hear and to have a voice, but still do not allow them any power over the decisions’ (Arnstein, 1969: 217). Shared power begins on rung 6 or Partnership, where ground-rules of a planning process are established through negotiation between powerholders and citizens, and ‘not subject to unilateral changes’ (Arnstein, 1969: 221). Finally, Delegated Power and Citizen Control, the last two rungs, imply a decision-making process ruled by the majority of the citizens or even that ‘residents can govern a programme or an institution, be in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and be able to negotiate the conditions under which “outsiders” may change them’ (Arnstein, 1969: 223).

Arnstein established this typology in the late 1960s motivated by the fact that the idea of participation had been used for almost any political purpose. This seems unchanged to date. Even authors with critical approaches still use different parameters to set the lower or upper limit of participation towards manipulation or autonomy (Pateman, 1976; Broome, 2005; Richardson and Connelly, 2005), but there seems to be no agreement on what constitutes full-participation. We will neither try to define what participation ‘really’ means, nor balance it on the knife-edge of genuineness. Most important are its practical and political roles. Participation always involves at least two competing factions: an entity responsible for the process and individuals or other entities invited to participate. These factions can comprise, for example, public agencies and citizens, companies and their employees, planning commissions and the beneficiaries of a plan. The entity responsible for the process defines its frame, purposes, limits, codes, bureaucracies and technicalities, usually according to a more general protocol. For the participating individuals or entities, the norms of the process are heteronomous. It is important to acknowledge that heteronomy does not relate to the specific content of a decision, but with the logic or structure within which decisions are made. In this sense, heteronomous planning means processes whose structures are not changed by any particular group of participants.

If participants were to challenge given norms, the normative entity could interrupt the process and find participants more likely to accept it as is; however, the entity can also be independent enough and willing to open its norms to discussion. Then, if a reformulation is carried out, the participants may establish a new framework, redistributing responsibilities, changing codes and even developing a new entity. Instead of calling such a process participation qualified as ‘full’ or ‘genuine’, we propose to call it autonomy, because it would have self-given norms. Therefore, autonomous planning means processes whose structures are defined in context and by the people involved.

What we have just described as a logical option for a normative entity that has been challenged – opening norms to discussion and real change – is in practice a small revolution. Participation can be conceived as an intermediate stage from authoritarian to
autonomous planning, but not without a qualitative leap. There is no smooth transition. We argue that consensus building and communicative/collaborative planning are often means to avoid that leap rather than steps towards autonomy. In this sense, the metaphor provided by Arnstein’s ladder is misleading; however, one might ask whether it would be worth defending autonomy anyway. We insist on this because autonomy is much closer to the right to the city than heteronomy, as stated by Harvey (2008: 23):

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanisation. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

Modern urban planning has no original affinity to collective autonomy. The obliteration of any social, political and economic dimension is one of its central features, but also of its main incoherences (Taylor, 1998). As ‘architectural design on a larger canvas’ (Taylor, 1998: 17) modern urban planning inherits objectives and procedures from architecture as practised since the Renaissance. Planners assume that their task is ‘an exercise in the physical planning and design of human settlements’ (Taylor, 1998: 4), showing final spatial configurations just as blueprints of a building. Indeed, blueprint planning as exemplified by Le Corbusier’s modernist urbanism assumes that the physical environment can determine social life, that this determination must follow the planner’s normative concepts, and that it must be implemented by a strongly regulative state. This interpretation excludes the possibility of decision-making by anyone other than the expert.

Among reactions to this type of planning are requests for citizen participation beyond the institutions of representative democracy, starting from the assumption that planning always means competing values and interests, and cannot be carried out just by a public agency (not to mention a single architect), but must include several actors and voices. But how can this be accomplished? Advocacy planning (Davidoff, [1965] 2004) focuses on social inequality and on the idea of each planner acting as an advocate for a different vulnerable group. Communicative and collaborative planning approaches (Forester, 1989; Healey, 1997), on the contrary, are based on Habermas’s theory of communicative action. These approaches assume it is possible to achieve consensus through arguments, if the planners are able to break the usual distortions and to create conditions for communication. But although a discourse ethics would be a substantial part of a more just society, conversely, such a society does not arise only from consensus and persuasion; ‘a certain degree of individual and collective autonomy is a prerequisite of communicative action’ (Souza, 2000: 192).

The debates on participation and autonomy are especially relevant to the spatial scope at which the boundaries between planning and design tend to lose sharpness: the ‘micro-local scope’ of neighbourhoods, where nearby qualities are more important than widely ranging structures, where spaces can be ‘intensely and directly experienced in everyday life’ (Souza, 2010: 106), where people can communicate in person, and direct participation or autonomy is most feasible. Architects and planners who criticise the heteronomous determination of micro-local space have been engaged in the housing debate since the late 1960s. The most radical among them, John F. C. Turner, advocates ‘autonomy in building environment’ (Turner, 1976: 155): self-government in local
affairs, freedom for families and small groups to build what they want, economy and simplicity of tools and, finally, the idea that built environment should be planned but not designed, even at the micro-local level.

Turner’s differentiation between design and planning means the difference between a prescription and a limit. ‘Planning is an essentially legislative, limit-setting function, and must cease to be confused with design, which has to do with laying out lines of action’ (Turner, 1976: 155). This statement means nothing less than reversing the blueprint planning logic: instead of extrapolating design to the order of magnitude of an entire city, the features of planning (as setting limits that open possibilities for action) should be applied to housing.

Turner has been accused of romanticising poverty and complying with shrinkage of public investment in poor communities (Davis, 2006). Lacking a consistent critique of the broader structures that determine the social production of space, Turner’s autonomist approach is easily turned into a New Right discourse, equating autonomy with the ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ of free-market capitalism (Frank, 2000: 35). To clarify the difference, it might be emphasised again that autonomy must be conceived not only as an individual attribute (as for neoliberal thinking), but also as a collective attribute. If individual autonomy is ‘the capacity of particular individuals to make choices in freedom’, collective autonomy is ‘the conscious and explicitly free self-rule of a particular society’ (Souza, 2000: 188).

Changing Institutional Structures

The leap towards autonomy in urban planning in Brazil has not happened yet, although, the premises for conventional, heteronomous urban planning have been seriously questioned during the last three decades. In this process, which is part of the re-democratisation of the country, left-wing parties, scholars, and urban social movements have played a central role. Trying to change power relations in the production of space and countering a long tradition of socio-spatial segregation (on which the whole Brazilian industrialisation is based), they have developed the idea of ‘urban reform’, submitted as a popular amendment during the rewriting of the Constitution (1987–1988). In 1991 social movements also submitted to Congress a grassroots bill proposing a national fund and a national system of social housing. It took more than a decade, but both were relatively successful in the end: the Statute of the City (Brazil, Law 10.257/2001) was approved to supplement the rather scarce constitutional articles about urban policy, and a national housing system was created (Brazil, Law 11.124/2005).

But the successful fight for a more advanced legislation does not yet mean actual change in everyday urban space. One obstacle is that the very movements that constitute a major force at the federal level scatter when it comes to local politics. Other obstacles include the numerous possibilities to bureaucratise and procrastinate concrete measures, the decline of federal investment in social policies, and the fragmentation of social programmes implied in ‘municipalisation’. And, finally, there is a mistaken conceptual identification of popular participation in representative democracy with popular participation in direct democracy (best known as autonomy).

The method of urban planning examined here, the PGE, also faces those obstacles. It opposes authoritarian planning in principle but, as we shall see, retains many of its features. The fact that procedures originate in a new and more democratic constellation does not guarantee that they are, in themselves, new and democratic. Changes in the
(political) framework of planning do not prevent its (technical and social) development from following previous patterns. The interventions in *favelas* based on the PGE method are, to some extent, concrete results of a questioning of heteronomy. Nevertheless, they remain blatantly heteronomous and, as such, are contested by many inhabitants. In the day-to-day practice, heteronomy has persisted like a bad habit.

The history of *favelas* in Belo Horizonte is as troubled as in other Brazilian capitals, with a series of occupations, removals and new occupations. But there are also two early attempts to improve *favelas* that are worth mentioning: at the state-level, the ‘community development programme’ (Prodecom) in place from 1979 to 1983; and at the municipal-level, the ‘programme for regularisation of favelas’ (Profavela) enacted in the mid-1980s. Prodecom organised surveys, deployed public services, and, prizing self-help building practices, creates participatory arrangements, community taskforces and transfers of funds to local residents associations. The problem is that the programme ignored demands not voiced by organised social movements (Conti, 2004: 192), and did not advance the legal question (Bedê, 2005). Profavela, on the other hand, tried to overcome this question and to meet the growing popular mobilisation by providing the legal instruments to transform squatters into owners and by designating favelas as ‘special sectors’ with specific urban parameters (Belo Horizonte, Law 3.995/1985). To implement the Profavela, a decree converted a semi-public mining company, which has some previous experience of removal and resettlement of *favelas* as a result of its mining activity, into the ‘urbanisation company of Belo Horizonte’ or Urbel. But the new programme lacked Prodecom’s acknowledgment of community self-organisation and of micro-local demands (Bedê, 2005). Communities as such have not been empowered, because the Profavela equated the right to housing with the right to private property, disregarding collective forms of ownership. In addition, many ‘beneficiaries’ did not see the real benefit of formalising property while ignoring demands of physical improvement (Magalhães, interview, 2008). Planners also question Profavela’s raw result of estimated 5 per cent of the target population (Conti, 2004: 196), attained on the premise of compliance with the ‘typicality of the local occupation’ (Belo Horizonte, Law 3.995/1985): ‘This was just a way to put into an organised discourse […] the consolidation of an existing space that in many cases should not have been consolidated because its standard was very poor […] there were 10 m² plots, facing 60 cm wide streets’ (Cavendish interviewed by Bedê, 2005: 198).

The political scenario of Belo Horizonte changed in 1993, with the election of the Frente BH Popular (BH popular front), a coalition of four leftist parties headed by Mayor Patrus Ananias and strongly supported by social movements. It was the first administration attempted in systematically improving housing and urban conditions. Already in 1993, it created a ‘municipal housing system’, comprising a housing fund, Urbel as executing agency, and a ‘municipal housing council’ as a participative and deliberative forum. Indeed the law that eventually institutionalised this council (Belo Horizonte, Law 6.508/1994) has not resulted in the proportions that the social movements were looking for; instead of the majority, popular representation holds six of the twenty seats, while the government holds twelve, including the presidency. In any case, the housing council has succeeded in formulating a housing policy that recommends popular participation at all stages of any programme, along with priority treatment for collective demands, limit of family income up to five minimum wages and preferential use of already urbanised areas. The programmes themselves are structured in two tracks: one for the production of new dwelling units and the other for improvement of existing settlements.
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The new housing policy has established different forms of management that imply different forms of participation: *gestão pública* (public management), where planning and execution are carried out by Urbel, while participation is limited to ‘tokenism’; *co-gestão* (co-management), designed for a (later abandoned) programme in which self-builders receive material and technical assistance from Urbel; and *autogestão* (self-management), an idea discussed and experienced since the early 1980s, especially in São Paulo. This means that public resources are transferred to associations of future residents, who manage them, hire technical assistance and contractors, decide on the plans and, in most cases, also work on the building site. On Arnstein’s ladder, this is equivalent to partnership or delegated power, at least in theory. In practice, self-management has always faced resistance in Belo Horizonte’s public administration (Bedê, interview, 2011). The municipal housing policy provides for it, but, in the end, it only appears in programmes for the production of new dwelling units. The city’s Master Plan also includes self-management as a directive, but restricts it to cooperatives supervised by professional technical assistance (Belo Horizonte, Law 7.165/1996). Self-management for the improvement of existing settlements has never been seriously debated in Belo Horizonte.

Alongside the development of the new policy in the 1990s, Urbel, together with international non-governmental organisations, started a programme called Alvorada. It restructured Urbel’s essentially technical approach to handle the legal and urban problems of favelas, and focused on the need for inhabitants to define future interventions and to take part in their implementation as subjects and agents (Conti, 2004: 198). This finally led to a new approach, joining legal, environmental and socioeconomic improvements, and to the development of ‘integrated structural plans’ for fourteen favelas, partially implemented in four cases. The method formulated in this process is, so to speak, the proto-PGE.

Its transformation into the first version of the PGE in 1995 is a result of another BH Popular Front improvement: the annual participatory budget (Orcamento Participativo [OP]) in which public works are proposed, negotiated and voted for by the citizens in open assemblies. But most demands coming from favelas in the first editions of the OP turned out to be consequences of deeper systemic problems, so that ad hoc interventions would just be short-term palliations. This has led the mentors of the Alvorada programme to defend the elaboration of an integrated structural plan as a requisite for demands presented in the OP. At best, the plan would be implemented as a whole; otherwise it would guide timely interventions (Magalhães, interview, 2008). When this plea was eventually accepted, the PGE method was formalised as such, because it became subjected to public bidding.

Formalisation has widened the scope of the PGE method and reinforced certain technocratic features. Actually, they had never been entirely overcome even in the Alvorada programme. Despite the original focus on people’s engagement, the plans were still strongly based on technical diagnosis and prescription of solutions, so much so that the contribution of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) consisted mainly of providing high-end technology for computerised cartographic restitution. But unlike the Alvorada programme, the PGE has introduced discontinuity between planning and execution. A community has to make a request to its PGE as part of the OP process first, and only after going through the whole planning process is the community able to demand funds for each part of the intervention at a time, following the established priorities. This makes the process much more rigid and it conflicts with the dynamic reality of the favelas.
PGE Procedures

The PGE has been legally regulated as a condition for interventions in favelas since 2000, directly reflecting the method used by Urbel since 1995. The law provides that it has to include data gathering, analysis and proposal, a timeline for interventions, cost estimates and directives for further development of the land (Belo Horizonte, Law 8.137/2000: Art. 140).

The possibility of self-management is not mentioned in the law. Its assumption is public management with the types of participation that Arnstein (1969) would call information, consultation and placation. For this, a reference group must be formed. Its members can be representatives of the local residents association, of other community groups and also of organised groups from the surrounding areas. According to the law, the reference group has to follow every step of the development of the PGE, monitoring the allocation of resources, mediating between the community and the public administration, working as a multiplying agent within the community and informing the public administration of any building work or activity in disagreement with the PGE (which really means that group members are supposed to denounce their neighbours). The reference group members ‘will not be entitled to remuneration’ for all this; their reward is that ‘their functions will be considered relevant public service’ (Belo Horizonte, Law 8.137/2000).

A PGE is usually developed by a private organisation of architects, urban planners, engineers, social workers, and sometimes also geographers, lawyers and statisticians, selected by Urbel through public bidding. The community cannot hire or fire the planning team, but is just presented to it by Urbel officials at a first public assembly, which also serves to explain the role of the reference group and to define its members (in very few cases the community asks for more time to discuss this definition).

According to an internal document used by Urbel since 1995, the planning team’s first task is to update Urbel’s cartographic basis by means of a physical survey on site including basic information about each household. In parallel, the team and reference group should begin to mobilise the community. Data gathering for the diagnosis follows. Urbel and the planning team, assisted by a statistician or demographer, proceed with a sampling survey similar to a population and housing census, but also comprising data about the inhabitants’ awareness of aid organisations, community associations and leadership, as well as their general evaluation of their dwelling units and their neighbourhood.

This is detailed in three separate steps for gathering data on the physical environment, the legal status of the area and the social situation. The first is mostly technical field research, starting from the updated cartographic basis and comprising geological features, sanitation and urban aspects. The second involves very time-consuming tracking land registries. The last cross-checks data between the national census, the counting of households and the sampling survey. In addition, the planning team has to conduct at least thirteen individual interviews (with five community leaders, one youth representative, four older inhabitants that know the occupation history of the area, three representatives of groups active in the community), asking about the history of the settlement, cultural institutions, NGOs, internal factions, relations of power, politically organised movements, channels of participation, engagement in former OP processes, and general needs and demands. All these data are supposed to be discussed with the reference group, systematised in ‘partial diagnoses’ about each of the three aforementioned aspects and finally synthesised into an ‘integrated diagnosis’, the second product of the PGE, which has to be approved by a community assembly.
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Its final product, called a ‘proposal’, presents solutions to diagnosed problems or at least directives to handle them. This usually includes geological risk management, sanitation and street network improvement, urban density criteria, new public facilities, removal of houses to create open space for all this, definition and location of new apartment blocks. These solutions and directives, together with a cost estimate and a definition of priorities for future OP-requests, are discussed with the reference group and, again, approved by a community assembly.

After completing the PGE, the community has to engage in obtaining resources for each part of the intervention via OP. If they succeed, construction companies are selected through public bidding. They are responsible for the executive project design without any participation from the community. Urbel, in turn, is responsible for monitoring the company’s work, and for ensuring that the community does not resist the intervention through social work and mediation practices. Usually Urbel sets up an office on the building site and hires a third party to carry out these functions.

In 2001, one year after the regulation of the PGE, there were eleven completed plans waiting for funding, 43 plans in progress and seventeen plans waiting to be commissioned using the 2002 municipal budget (Brandenberger, 2002). Ten years later only 54 plans have been completed. There are no systematic statistics, though, regarding the actual interventions. According to Urbel’s official website, the Vila Viva programme is being implemented in seven different favelas. The gap between planning and (partial) implementation has been of at least five years.

In 2005, Urbel managed to get other funding to implement the PGE of Aglomerado da Serra, a huge favela in the south of the city, surrounded by very exclusive neighbourhoods. At this point, ‘Vila Viva’ was introduced as the name of the programme responsible for the actual intervention. In 2008, the Lula administration created the Growth Acceleration Programme, allocating a significant amount of funding to social and urban infrastructure, and thus making it easier to get funds also for PGE implementation, that is Vila Viva. But these financial resources are requested by the municipality and not attached to any sort of self-management or community participation.

A Step or an Obstacle?

The quantitatively modest results of the PGE method should not serve as an argument against it, because quantity is not our main question. What matters are improvements in urban environment and housing conditions that make sense for the intended beneficiaries, that is, that they perceive as qualitative improvements in their everyday life and future prospects. The Dead Village Manifesto, as well as petitions from the Public Ministry against Urbel indicate that this is not always the case. Recent pieces of qualitative research concerning Vila Viva interventions vis-à-vis everyday practices in favelas (Melo, 2009; Nascimento, 2011) demonstrate the same. A detailed explanation of the conflicts would go too far, but it may be mentioned that the inhabitants complain mostly about losing qualities that they had probably not been aware of before.

To briefly illustrate this, we take some extracts from interviews conducted by Melo (2009) in the Aglomerado da Serra. About the new street network, for instance, inhabitants say that ‘access has improved, but mobility has worsened’, meaning that it has become easier to go through the favela by car, but not to get to places inside the favela on foot, because many shortcuts have been closed; ‘from here to there, there was a small set of steps – it was a bit hard, but one came quickly to the other side’.
Comparing the *favela* to the areas with new apartment blocks, they note that in the former ‘each one has his own sky above’, ‘the neighbours live at my window’, ‘doors always stay open’, ‘I used to have two balconies and a beautiful view of the city’, ‘I had a backyard with dogs, chickens, my medicinal herbs’, ‘I was thinking about building another floor for my daughter’. About the new apartments, inhabitants say ‘I can’t work for myself, I have no space’, ‘now I’m alone with some birds’, ‘where do you peg out your washing?’, ‘we are forced to stay here until I’ve saved some cash’, ‘I can’t wait to move, bills are very high, to me it’s enough’. A boy visiting his cousin in the renewed part of the Aglomerado summarises the difference:

> You can’t run inside the house [...] The Mayor said so. [...] Here you can’t have a party, make noise, turn the sound on at night. In the favela you can do whatever you want. Everyone does, no one complains. And they are the same neighbours, here and there! I think that’s because these here are apartments, and there are laws. There, you arrange things with the neighbours as you want. (Melo, 2009: 158, 166)

Improving everyday life and opportunities is unlikely if people cannot decide for themselves which qualities are important, taking into account the individual as well as the collective dimension. The prerequisite for such a decision is autonomy, meaning not only the freedom of choice between given options, but the possibility of shaping those options collectively and of reshaping them over time. The young boy quoted above calls this ‘arranging things with the neighbours’, in contrast to ‘laws’ and ‘the Mayor’ saying that children must not run inside the apartments. Although this may sound amusing, it captures the idea of external instances defining features of everyday life that affect nobody but ‘the neighbours’. Therefore, the point is not about the experts understanding people’s needs more accurately. Citizens are not primarily customers, nor are they interested in consuming a new space-commodity each time their experiences and opinions change. Emphasising Harvey (2008: 23), the point is our neglected human right ‘to make and remake our cities and ourselves’.

This brings us back to the question about whether, in the context of the PGE, participation is a step towards autonomy or essentially attached to heteronomy. As already mentioned, self-management for the improvement of *favelas* has never been seriously debated in Belo Horizonte. The participation intended in the PGE method gives the community no direct power to make decisions, but at best some influence on the outcome. The question is, thus, whether practices such as information, consultation and placation favour the qualitative leap towards partnership, delegated power and, ultimately, citizen control, or if they hinder it. Put another way, the question is whether participatory practices in a PGE process make individuals and institutions more open and prepared for future shifts in the distribution of power.

One critical point in this respect is that the PGE method follows the conventional planning sequence of data gathering, diagnosis and proposal, which fits in the likewise conventional chain of planning, building and using, as if an urban environment were a finished product and not an ongoing, constantly changing process, performed by people able to act according to their own choices. Although this contradiction between (urban) processes and (planned) products is far from being exclusive to *favelas*, it is certainly fiercer in any context where people are used to rely on their own initiatives. Even interventions intended as ‘structural’ – in contrast to punctual – do not stop the dynamics of production of space in *favelas*; so much so that renewed areas need to be closed and guarded not to become again ‘favelised’, that is, used by the inhabitants.
for purposes not established in the plans. In our view, the only way to overcome this Sisyphean task – Urbel’s technicians call it ‘ice wiping’ – is a plan in Turner’s (1976) sense, as a limit-setting device that opens possibilities for continuous but not predefined actions; a plan able to adjust to contingencies. More than ‘obliging the actors to follow lines for procedures’, it should [set] the limits to what the actors may do on their own initiative and in their own ways (Turner 1976: 105). The endless process of public intervention and entropy can only be countered at the scope of micro-local space with the inhabitant’s engagement. But why would they engage in something that they cannot define and redefine collectively over time? Such openness is hampered by the prescribed successiveness of data gathering, diagnosis, proposal, construction and use.

But precisely this sequence structures the whole participatory arrangement of a PGE and, conversely, this very arrangement reinforces the conventional sequence. To begin with, there is the attachment of the PGE to the OP, as a prerequisite for any demand. Although the discussion on the uselessness of punctual interventions was quite pertinent in principle, it did not lead to a thorough critical review of the planning procedures, nor of the chain planning–building–using. Planners, administrators and even community leaders persisted on the vision of a favela that, little by little, would get closer to the situation idealised in a plan, until being ‘ready’. Nobody seems to have asked the fundamental question of how planning could make sense combined with the formalities of the public administration, a limited budget and a constantly changing urban environment produced by active people. So, instead of the founding basis of the PGE, the problem is placed in the allocation of public resources. At the same time, the well-meaning attachment of the demands to a previous plan obstructs the very OP as a channel for spontaneous engagement out of self-organised communities.

Planners who have experienced the PGE method do realise the consequences but not necessarily the causes of the contradiction between the urban dynamics of favelas and the planning–building–using logic (Magalhães interview, 2008; Bedê interview, 2011; Palhares interview, 2011). They tend to see the main problem in the gap between the PGE and the actual intervention: ‘the community loses all memory of the [participatory] process’ (Bedê interview, 2011). But such a ‘loss of memory’ indicates the inhabitants have been convinced to approve a proposal that they understood as an external enterprise, not as part of their own practices. Even if a plan were developed and implemented on a continuous basis in the short term, those practices would persist after the intervention, unless people were compelled to abandon any peculiarity of their mode of production of space. In this sense, the problem is not the discontinuity, but the sequence itself.

A second critical point, related to the first, is that the categories and concepts used in the planning process are entirely based on the technical perspective, not on the inhabitants’ knowledge and experience. The possibility of this happening in a process intended to be participatory depends on the division of participation in two instances: a reference group, which is supposed to receive training to understand the technical language, and an assembly that should trust the reference group. At first, this arrangement may seem indispensable, because planners are not used to participatory processes and do not know how to handle the situation differently. But the crucial question is that, over time, the very existence of the reference group becomes a licence to go on with the same categories without ever questioning them. In combination with the conventional planning sequence, this makes the process almost inaccessible to ‘ordinary’ community members.

The problem begins at the stage of mapping and data gathering: the 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. In addition, there is
the incongruity between the urban dynamics and data gathering as a separate stage.
Planners complain that it takes too much time and is quite useless, because when the
plan is ready the situation has completely changed. Palhares notes that ‘the rigidity
of conventional planning is already a problem in the legal city, let alone in favelas
(Palhares interview, 2011)’. Even when the planning team tries to fulfill Urbel’s requests
of updating every little change, mapping and diagnosis are always lagging behind the
urban reality. Planners suggest that data gathering should be less detailed but they do
not question the logic on which it relies.

One might object that data gathering is only the first stage of the process, and not
even the most important one. However, the conventional sequence implies that this first
stage leads directly to the second (diagnosis), which in turn leads to the third (proposal)
almost as a logical corollary. Just as planners seek and arrange information according
to technical categories, they measure them by given standards. These standards do not
equate to those applied in the formal city (there is some inheritance of the discussion
on ‘typicality’), but they are fixed anyway. What does not conform is diagnosed as
deficiency, regardless of the residents’ judgment; and what they perceive as problems
tend to be disregarded if it does not contradict technical parameters. The same is true for
the proposal, determined to a great extent by the planners’ previous concepts. Once a
situation is structured by certain categories, the planning process hardly gets rid of them.

It is often said that a problem clearly stated is halfway to solution. In fact, if we
want to improve a machine, cure a disease or mitigate climate change there is this need
to translate the object into categories intelligible for us. They help us to understand
what is happening and to devise ways to intervene. This works because machines,
viruses or the ozonosphere have no ability to define how to govern themselves. They are
not capable of autonomy. The same logic does not apply to people, unless we simply
intend manipulation. Therefore it is neither necessary nor desirable that improvements
to favelas start with their translation into concepts familiar to the experts but not to the
inhabitants. Furthermore, since these concepts come from a tradition of urban planning
for the formal city, they obscure the very context they are supposed to clarify. The
concepts may seem clear (to us), but it is likely that they are often just a rigid removal
of the unfamiliar, an absence of new ideas, missing many important characteristics and
potential. We should instead be aware of the obvious fact that inhabitants have just
the same intellectual and creative capacities as any other human being, and that they
know their situation much better than any external group does. In this sense, a planning
process aimed at increasing collective autonomy would first worry about the specificities
of a place and about what planning could mean in each singular context, instead of
starting with an attempt to distort life into technical codes. What matters most is that
technical knowledge puts itself in the service of what is out there.

However, there is a third critical point beyond the conventional planning sequence,
the technical categories, and the fact that both structure the type of participation used
in the PGE and, conversely, are reinforced and legitimised by this type of participation.
This point is the political development of the individuals, groups and institutions
involved. In the whole PGE process, there is only a very limited interest in achieving
actual communication and bringing conflicts to the surface to discuss them.

This may happen in part for economic reasons. As far as the reference group is
concerned, ‘financial resources to pay leaders reasonable honoraria for their time-
consuming efforts’ (Arnstein, 1969: 221) are not only absent but forbidden by law.
As for the planning team, it neither earns more by fostering extensive discussion, nor
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earns less for carrying out a ‘non-genuine’ participation. Urbel’s ‘standard procedure’ specifies quantity but not quality of the meetings with the reference group and the community assemblies. In practice, it only takes a short report, a list of signatures and some photographs to prove that participation has met the standard.

But a certain (lack of) political culture also contributes to the avoidance of communication and conflict. Rather than debate, the participatory process in the PGE is characterised by what Forester (1989: 153) calls ‘premature consensus-building’. The very term ‘community’ (which we also use as we lack another one that would be as easily understood in this context) expresses the assumption of a common-interest neighbourhood, while in fact each area embraced by a single PGE is composed of different groups, with different structures, interests and modes of negotiation. The planners tend to overlook this diversity, presenting themselves as ‘informed technocrats’ and ‘neutral mediators’. They act ideologically in the following sense:

If planners adopt roles that ignore the political world, they will seriously misrepresent public problems and opportunities. They will distract attention both from relations of power and, more important, from the ways that affected citizens can act to change those relations of power. Ideologies are systematic distortions of communication in precisely this sense of obscuring political possibilities. Ideologies are powerful distortions not because they are unclear. Rather, they are so clear, so transparent, that they effectively misrepresent social and political reality just as they obscure alternatives, cover up responsibility, encourage passivity and fatalism, and justify the perpetuation of needless suffering. (Forester, 1989: 153)

When it comes to the community assembly, which should be a significant political forum, both the planning team and the reference group (not to mention Urbel’s technicians) tend to drive people to approve one PGE product after another, without encouraging them to actually discuss the process or question the products. Every single product is presented to the community in a way that seems so obvious and logical that it is hard to protest. Being conceived primarily on the planners’ perspective of translating the favela into the codes of the formal city, the diagnosis and the proposal 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.

The reference group might try to do this, but as it works for free, its members are mostly community leaders or people who have time to participate, such as pensioners and non-workers. For the leaders, concerned about preserving their influence within the community and outside (some have direct access to the mayor and other authorities), there is more political gain and less risk in a friendly-looking meeting than in hard debates. And for ‘ordinary’ members of the reference group the power relations at stake are dubious or even invisible. To cite just one example, an older man, member of the reference group of the PGE from Morro das Pedras, declared in a public hearing that he does ‘not know what BGE [sic] means’; later, he said that he didn’t understand what all this was about, his ‘only intention was to help the community’ (Nascimento, 2011).

In more general terms, participation depending on a special group, invited to join a privileged channel, tends to demobilise the community as a whole, especially when such a group has just representative functions (Souza, 2010: 205). It would be different if it had decision-making power, and if that power had been delegated by the community: the group would be supported and monitored collectively, working under the premise
that each of its members is a spokesperson for opinions and decisions previously discussed with the other inhabitants. But a group that is only a ‘reference’ tends to dampen other people’s engagement and to promote passivity.

It could be argued that all this is not genuine participation, and therefore not evidence against it. The counter-argument would be that there is no way to prescribe ‘sincere engagement’ or ‘honest participation’ as a public policy. In practice, most of the planners and mediators do not have the skills and the political awareness that it takes to follow Forester’s (1989: 155) advice for better communication. But if they had, the quality of the process would still depend on the good will and character of single individuals, instead of depending on a collectively defined and supported structure.

The avoidance of conflict follows a political dynamic that still recurs in many situations related to social demands in Brazilian democracy: a very participatory initial discussion is more and more constrained when it comes to concrete actions, until it ends up dominated by fairly conventional practices. It happened during the rewriting of the Constitution, when the popular amendment for urban reform was gradually suppressed, and most of its demands were postponed for further regulations; it happened when the Statute of the City was approved thirteen years later, providing, in theory, the instruments to democratise cities, but that in practice had to be regulated again; it happened in Belo Horizonte when the popular representation in the housing council was reduced and when the possibility of self-management in favelas disappeared from the agenda. All this is reinforced by an undue attention to formalities and the belief that changes in legislation mean changes in people’s lives.

On the other hand, the very fact that claims of popular mobilisations are embedded into new laws and policies seems to give the actors involved the certainty that the whole context, and all actions engendered as a result of it, would be democratic and participative. But, actually, participation at the national or even municipal level, which has influenced revision and creation of laws and policies, still does not mean that the resulting plans and interventions will not be imposed from above and perceived as such. Planning remains essentially heteronomous as long as local or micro-local conditions are determined by a priori rules, even if such rules are accepted by the participants. Democracy does not emanate from the top.

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Interviews

