The paradox of participation: a case study on urban planning in favelas and a plea for autonomy

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Abstract

The participatory planning method called Plano Global Específico (specific global plan, PGE) has been used in Belo Horizonte (Brazil) since 1995 for interventions in spontaneous settlements (favelas). Although the responsible municipal agency describes it very optimistically, inhabitants have manifested significant discontents. This paper focusses on the reasons for this controversial outcome, analysing the PGE method against the background of Brazilian re-democratisation and Belo Horizonte’s public policies concerning favelas. The hypothesis confirmed by this case study is that institutionalised participation does not favour the qualitative leap towards citizen control or autonomy, but is essentially attached to heteronomous planning structures.

Keywords

Favela, Specific Global Plan, Belo Horizonte, Participation, Autonomy, Urban planning

Introduction
‘The Living Village Program has established itself as an international benchmark in urban planning. People who once lived at the margins of society, in poor and subhuman constructions in risk areas, recognise that they were given new life in a setting that provides hope and well-being. The logic of intervention in these areas of the city goes beyond the construction of buildings, streets and recreational space. The projects also emphasise social and cultural demands, such as the need for sociability, apprenticeship and job creation’ (Programa Vila Viva [living village program] described by Urbel [n.d.]).

‘With so many harmful consequences, it is difficult to support the false propaganda of the Municipality obediently reproduced by the mainstream media. Unlike the discourse widely sold, such intervention programs in villages and favelas do not integrate favelas into the city, just make them disappear from the map, along with its inhabitants who are repulsed by the city that one day opened its doors to them’ (Manifesto Vila Morta [Dead Village Manifesto] signed by 22 different social movement organisations in Belo Horizonte, 2008 [URL http://brasil.indymedia.org/media/2008/10//429698.pdf])

Urbel is the municipal agency of Belo Horizonte (Brazil) responsible for the improvement of urban structures in favelas and similar poor settlements. Since 2005, this agency is implementing the Programa Vila Viva (living village program) referred to in the quotes above. Although controversial enough to provoke massive protest (not only from the organisations that signed the Dead Village Manifesto, but also from many other individuals and entities, including the Public Ministry), its interventions result from a participatory planning method, the so-called Plano Global Especifico (PGE) or specific global plan. Urbel (n.d.) describes the PGE method, applied 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? Of course, any social situation entails different opinions and even opposition. But when such manifestations go beyond divergent judgments and describe contradictory facts (e.g. integration in or eviction of the city), and when, in addition, the antithetical actors are a state agency and socially weak groups, it seems worthwhile to analyse what is going on.
Our hypothesis is that the controversial outcome of the PGE method does not simply equal a misuse of participation. Participation is not necessarily a step towards empowering participants and producing collectively accepted results. By autonomy we mean the capacity of individuals and, foremost, collectivities to establish their own consistent ways of action and interaction, insofar as they do not restrain the same possibility for other individuals or collectivities. Being autonomous means being ruled by self-defined norms. In contrast, the idea of participating rather indicates that people are allowed to take part in a certain process of decision making without being able to change its norms.

In the following section we briefly review the idea of participation in urban planning. The third section outlines the institutional and political background of the PGE in Brazilian and Belo Horizonte. In the fourth section the PGE procedures are described. The last section discusses these procedures vis-à-vis the sociopolitical context, considering how its doubtful outcomes are related to the very structure of the institutionalised participatory planning method.

**Participation and autonomy in urban planning**

Participatory approaches, in contrast to top-down approaches, allow people affected by a planning process to take part in it. According to Arnstein’s (1969) already ‘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. 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 six 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 program 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 establishes 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. There has never been an agreement about the essence of genuine participation, or about what lies beneath or beyond this stage of genuineness (the yet-less-than-participatory or already-more-than-participatory). Arnstein herself sees manipulative and therapeutical approaches as ‘dishonest and arrogant’ masks. Pateman (1976) describes them as ‘pseudo-participation’, a category that for her also comprises information, consultation and placation if – as in Arnstein’s definition – there is no influence of the interested party in the decision making. For Richardson and Connelly (2005: 78), consultation should be seen as quite different from participation, while for Pateman both consultation and placation could also fall under the category of partial participation if ‘two or more parties influence each other in making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only’ (Pateman, 1976: 70). On the other hand, Pateman understands full participation as the kind of situation in which ‘there are not two ‘sides’ having unequal decision making powers, but a group of equal individuals who have to make their own decisions’ (Pateman, 1976: 71). For Broome (2005) this would already be beyond participation, since he opposes the idea of being a participant to the idea of having control over major decisions.
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 functions. The idea of participation hardly appears without the existence of at least two asymmetrical terms: an entity responsible for the process and individuals or other entities invited to participate. Those terms can be the city administration and the citizens, the company and its employees, a planning commission and the beneficiaries of the plan, etc. Even if the responsible entity does not use the participation process to legitimise decisions made in advance, it defines its frame, purposes, limits, codes, bureaucracies and technicalities, usually according to a more general protocol. It is in charge of the nómoi, the norms of the process. From the standpoint of a participant, those norms are given by an heteros, the other party, and are thus heteronomous. The important point is that heteronomy has nothing to do with the specific content of a decision, but with the logic or structure in which decisions are made. In this sense, heteronomous planning means processes whose structures are not changed by any particular group of participants.

Let us now suppose that the participants challenge the given norms. The normative entity might interrupt the process and try to find participants more likely to accept it as it 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 auto-nómoi or 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 even claim that building of consensus and communicative/collaborative planning are often means to avoid that leap rather than steps towards autonomy. In this sense, the metaphor of a 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.

‘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’. (Harvey, 2008: 23)

Modern urban planning has no original affinity to collective autonomy. As ‘architectural design on a larger canvas’ (Taylor, 1998: 17) it inherits objectives and procedures from architecture as practiced 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, lacking interdisciplinarity and permeability to empirical data (Souza, 2010). The obliteration of any social, political and economic dimension is one of its central features, but also, as Taylor points out, one of its main incoherences. Actually, 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. All this entirely excludes the possibility of someone other than the expert making decisions.

These domineering procedure of blueprint planning peaks in the aftermath of World War II, and reactions start soon after. Among them 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 plural actors and voices. The problem is how. Advocacy planning (Davidoff, 2004 [1965]) focusses 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’ theory of communicative action, assuming that it is possible to achieve consensus about the ends and means of a plan 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. Since the late-1960s there are architects and planners engaged in the housing debate, who criticise the heteronomous determination of
micro-local space. The most radical one, John F. C. Turner, states that what governments usually see as problems (self-produced settlements) are indeed solutions for the housing question, while the so called ‘solutions’ (huge modern housing complexes) just cause many new problems. Instead, he 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 actually manages to achieve innovative programs for aided self-helped housing, but these programs are later accused of romanticising poverty and opening the way for an actual shrinkage of public investments in poor communities all over the world (Davis, 2006). In fact, he seems to lack awareness of the broader structures that determine the social production of space. Without a consistent critique of these structures, an 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 and scholar, and especially urban social movements play a central role. Countering a long tradition of socio-spatial segregation (on which in fact the whole Brazilian industrialisation is based), they develop the idea of ‘urban reform’, meaning an essential change in the institutions and power relations that dominate the (social) production of space. These movements are among the most expressive social sectors during the Constituent Assembly (1987-1988). They manage to mobilise convoys to the capital Brasília and to submit proposals, particularly the ‘popular amendment for urban reform’, articulating a nationwide popular force. As a consequence, the Constitution enacted in 1988 includes a chapter about urban policy, mentioning the ‘the social function of property’, as well as legal instruments to inhibit distortions such as real estate speculation and urban vacancy.

Nevertheless, the Constitution ends up covering only part of the movements’ demands, and the articles about urban policy are formulated in a way that they cannot be applied without supplementary federal regulation. The corresponding bill is first submitted in 1990, but takes another eleven years to be approved as the Statute of the City (Brazil, Law 10.257/2001). In 1991, trying to enlarge their achievement, the social movements submit to Congress the first bill of popular initiative – with almost one million signatures – proposing a
national fund and a national system of social housing. It takes more than thirteen years to be sanctioned (Brazil, Law 11.124/ 2005).

This shows how doubtful the situation was and still is. 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. Another obstacle are the numerous possibilities to bureaucratise and procrastinate concrete measures. The Statute of the City itself attaches the ‘social function of property’ to municipal legislation, which, in turn, incorporate many of the Statute’s principles only pro forma. Still another obstacle is the decline of federal investment in social policies and the fragmentation of social programs 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 extend, concrete results of a questioning of heteronomy. Nevertheless, they remain blatantly heteronomous and, as such, are protested 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 program’ (Prodecom) in force from 1979 to 1983; and at the municipal-level, ‘the program for regularisation of favelas’ (Profavela) enacted in the mid-1980s. Prodecom organises surveys, deploys public services, and, valuing the self-building practices, creates participatory arrangements, community task-forces and transfers of funds to local residents associations. The problem is that the program ignores demands not voiced by organised social movements (Conti, 2004: 192), and does not advance the legal question (Bedê, 2005). Profavela, on the other hand, tries to overcome this question and to meet the growing popular mobilisation by providing the legal instruments to transform squatters into owners and by placing the favelas on the map (instead of just white spots, they become ‘special sectors’ with specific urban parameters [Belo Horizonte, Law 3.995/1985]).

To implement the Profavela, a decree converts a semi-public mining company, which had some previous experience of removal and resettlement of favelas due to its mining activity, into the ‘urbanisation company of Belo Horizonte’ or Urbel. But the new program lacks Prodecom’s acknowledgment of community self-organisation and of micro-local demands (Bedê, 2005). Communities as such are not empowered, because the Profavela equates the right to housing with the right to private property, disregarding collective forms of ownership. In addition, many ‘beneficiaries’ do not see the real benefit of formalising property while ignoring demands of physical improvement (Magalhães, 2008). Planners also question Profavela’s raw result of estimated five percent 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 10m2 plots, facing 60cm wide streets’ (Cavendish interviewed by Bedê, 2005: 198).
The political scenario of Belo Horizonte changes 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 is the first administration endeavoured in systematically improving housing and urban conditions. Already in 1993, it creates 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 institutionalises this council (Belo Horizonte, Law 6.508/1994) does not follow the proportions pled by social movements; instead of the majority, popular representation holds six of the twenty seats, while the government holds twelve, including the presidency. Anyway, the housing council succeeds in formulating a housing policy that sets popular participation in all stages of any program as a guideline, along with priority treatment for collective demands, limit of family income up to five minimum wages and preferential use of already urbanised areas. The programs themselves are structured in two lines, concerning the production of new dwelling units and the improvement of existing settlements.

The new housing policy establishes different forms of management that imply different forms of participation: public management (*gestão pública*), meaning that planning and execution are carried out by Urbel, while participation is limited to ‘tokenism’; co-management (*co-gestão*), designed for a (later abandoned) program in which self-builders receive material and technical assistance from Urbel; and self-management (*autogestão*), an idea discussed and experienced since the early 1980s, especially in São Paulo. It 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, it 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, 2011). The municipal housing policy provides for it, but, in the end, it only appears in programs 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, Urbel, together with international nongovernmental organisations, starts a program called Alvorada. It restructures Urbel’s previous experiences, questioning the assumption that an essentially technical approach could handle the legal and urban problems of favelas. The need for inhabitants to define future interventions and to take part in their implementation as subjects and agents becomes evident (Conti, 2004: 198). This leads to an ‘integrated’ approach, joining legal, environmental and socioeconomic improvements. Bedê, ahead of Urbel’s planning division at that time, manages to put together a team coordinated by Cavendish, an architect experienced in integrated planning of favelas in Recife and Santo André. The team also includes some of Urbel’s technicians, but it works independently, since one of its major obstacles is precisely the very institutional culture of Urbel (Bedê, 2011). The Alvorada program is able to develop ‘integrated structural plans’ for fourteen favelas and to test their partial execution in four cases, formulating a method that is, so to speak, the proto-PGE. Its transformation into the first version of the PGE in 1995 is due to the demand for a method to be replicated, enabling further urbanising of favelas.

For this, another BH Popular Front’s improvements is important: the annual participatory budget (Orçamento Participativo - OP) in which public works are proposed, negotiated and voted by the citizens in open assemblies. But most demands coming from favelas turn out to be consequences of deeper systemic problems, so that ad hoc interventions
would be but short-term palliations. This leads the mentors of the Alvorada program 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 punctual interventions (Magalhães, 2008). When this plea is eventually accepted, the PGE method is formalised as such, because it becomes subjected to public bidding; its scope widens and certain technocratic features are reinforced. Actually, they had never been entirely overcome even in the Alvorada program. Despite the original focus on people’s engagement, the plans were still strongly based on technical diagnosis and prescription of solutions; so much that the contribution of the nongovernmental organisations consisted mainly of providing high end technology for computerised cartographic restitution. But unlike the Alvorada program, the PGE instates the discontinuity between planning and execution. A community has to request its PGE in the OP process first, and only after going through the whole planning process this community is able to demand funds for each part of the intervention at a time, obeying the established priorities. This makes the process much more rigid and conflicting with the dynamic reality of the favelas.

PGE procedures

The PGE is legally regulated as a condition for interventions in favelas in 2000, directly reflecting the method used by Urbel since 1995. The law provides that it has to include data gathering, diagnosis and proposal (always regarding the legal, the socio-organisational and the physic-environmental situation), as well as a timeline of interventions, a cost estimate and directives for the 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 surroundings. 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 actually 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. As mentioned, the organisation is 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. The group is then chosen right away, or at a second assembly, but anyway its early definition is important to it supports the presence of the team in the community (before adopting this practice Urbel used to have trouble even to carry out surveys).

According to the ‘Standard procedure for contracting and developing specific global plans’ (an internal document used by Urbel with minor changes since 1995), the planning team’s first task is to update Urbel’s cartographic basis by means of a physical survey on site (topography, street network, public spaces, perimeter of buildings and plots),
also including basic information about each household (type of construction and maintenance, number of stores, uses, number of dwellers). In parallel, the team and reference group should begin to mobilise the community.

Then it comes to the data gathering for the diagnosis. Urbel and the planning team, assisted by a statistician or demographer, proceed a sampling survey similar to a population and housing census (housing conditions, family conditions and history, income, profession and education, access to health services), but also comprising data about the inhabitants’ awareness of aid organisations, community associations and leaderships, as well as their general evaluation of their dwelling units and their neighbourhood.

This is followed by three separate steps for gathering data on, respectively, the physical environment, the legal status of the area and the social situation. The first one is mostly a technical field research, starting from the updated cartographic basis and comprising geological features, sanitation and urban aspects (surroundings, settlement structure, access, public transport, previous public enterprises, etc.). The second one is a very time-consuming tracking in registries. The last one, about the social situation, cross-checks data from the national census, the household counting and the sampling survey. In addition, the planning team has to conduct at least thirteen individual interviews (with five community leaders, one representative of the youth, four older inhabitants that know the history of the occupation, three representatives of groups active in the community), asking about the history of the settlement, cultural institutions, nongovernmental organisations, 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.

The final stage, the proposal, are the solutions to the problems diagnosed before or at least directives to handle them. This usually includes geological risk management, sanitation and street network improvement, (opening of larger streets to connect the area with the surroundings and to connect surrounding areas with each other), urban density criteria, new public facilities, removal of houses to open space for all this, definition and location of new apartment blocks, etc. This 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 (parts of) the intervention via OP.

Once the resources are there, construction companies are defined by a public bidding. They are responsible for the executive project design without any popular participation. Urbel, in turn, is responsible for following the company’s work, and for making the community welcome the intervention by means of social work and mediation practices. Usually Urbel sets an office in the building site and also hires a third party to carry out these functions.

In 2005, Urbel managed to get other funds to implement the PGE of Aglomerado da Serra, a huge favela in the south part of the city, surrounded by most exclusive neighbourhoods. At this point, the name Vila Viva was introduced, meaning the program responsible for the actual intervention. In 2008, the Lula administration created the Growth Acceleration Program, allocating a significant amount to social and urban infrastructure, and thus making it easier to get funds also for the PGE implementation, i.e., the Vila Viva. (These financial resources are not accessed directly by the communities. They need to be requested
by the municipality and are not attached to any sort of self-management or community participation.)

In 2001, one year after the regulation of the PGE, the balance was of eleven completed plans waiting for funds to be implemented, 43 plans in progress and seventeen plans defined to be commissioned with the municipal budget of 2002 (Brandenberger, 2002). Ten years later only 54 plans have been completed. There is no systematic statistics, though, regarding the actual interventions. As far as Urbel’s official website informs, the Vila Viva program is being carried out in seven different favelas. The gap between planning and (partial) implementation has been of at least five years.

**A step or an obstacle**

This quantitatively rather modest results of the PGE method should not serve us 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, i.e., which they perceive as *qualitative* increase in their everyday life and their future prospects. The Dead Village Manifesto quoted above, 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 of which they had probably not been aware 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, since many shortcuts have been closed; ‘from here to there, there was a small staircase – 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, people say ‘I can’t work for myself, I have no space’, ‘now I’m alone with some birds’, ‘where 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 this here are apartments, and there are laws. There, you arrange things with the neighbours as you want’ (Melo, 2009: 158 and 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 to shape those options collectively and to reshape 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 peoples’ needs more accurately. Citizens are not primarily costumers, neither interested in consuming a new space-commodity
each time their experiences and opinions change. Insisting on 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 consists in what Pateman (1976) calls pseudo-participation or, at best, partial participation, in case of the community having at least some influence on the outcome. The question is thus if 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 if 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 of 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’, i.e., 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, which 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.

Planner 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. According to Bedê (2011) and Palhares (2011) the main
problem is the gap between concluding the PGE and obtaining resources for the intervention. They believe that people end up resisting the intervention because ‘the community loses all memory of the process’ (Bedê, 2011). But this means in fact that, at some point in the participatory process, 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 but not identical to it, 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, since 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 license 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 (as if they thought: that let us first update our maps, fill our files, translate things into our codes, then we can see what people have to say). What happens is one-sided information, not an
exchange or a dialogue. Even the reference group functions more as a host (or as a butler), just opening the doors of the community. In addition, there is the incongruity between the urban dynamics and data gathering as a separate stage. Bedê (2011), for instance, complains that it takes too much time and is quite useless, because when the plan is ready the situation has completely changed. Palhares (2011) notes that the ‘rigidity of conventional planning is already a problem in the legal city, let alone in favelas’. Even when the planning team tries to fulfil Urbel’s requests of updating every little change, mapping and diagnosis are always lagging behind the urban reality. Both architects suggest that the data gathering should be less detailed and concentrate on major structural problems, but they do not question the very logic on which data gathering 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 those applied in the formal city (there is some inheritance of the discussion on ‘typicality’), but they are fixed anyway. What does not conform to them is diagnosed as a 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 extend 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 imagine ways to interfere. 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 intended mere manipulation. Therefore it is neither necessary nor desirable that improvements of 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 potentials. 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 foreign 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 the attempt to distort lifeworlds into technical codes. What matters most is that technical knowledge puts itself in 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 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 really 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 earns less for performing a ‘non-genuine’ participation. Urbel’s ‘Standard procedure’ does specify 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’. Their 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, there is more political gain and less risk in a friendly-looking meeting than in hard debates. (Some leaders also have direct access to the mayor and other authorities, being able to short-circuit public discussion.) 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 told 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 an 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 Constituent Assembly, when the popular amendment for urban reform was gradually shrunk, and most of its demands were postponed to further regulations; it happened when the Statute of the City was approved thirteen years later, providing in theory the instruments to democratise the cities, which in practice had to be regulated again; it happened in Belo Horizonte when the popular representation in the housing council was reduced or 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, also would be, almost automatically, democratic and participative. But actually, participation at the national or even
municipal level, which has influenced revision and creation of laws and policies, yet does not mean that the resulting plans and interventions will not be imposed from above and perceived as such by individuals and primary groups. Planning remains essentially heteronomous as far 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.

**References**


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