Retrying autonomy: a perspective of development beyond participation

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Abstract

This paper discusses a new approach to autonomous community development, drawing from two main facts: before centralized planning, people used to be able to produce their own everyday spaces; technical support for such autonomy was on the agenda in the sixties and seventies, but was later given up for the idea of participation, which is often centralized planning with manufactured consent. Highlighting these kind of heteronomous processes and pseudo-participation we discuss the instruments used by Urbel (responsible for the urbanization of favelas in Belo Horizonte, Brazil). Finally we argue for an alternative approach based on self-production by means of which people raise data, discuss what to do, get funds and build in a truly autonomous way. This means changing the role of planners from designers of finished proposals to designers of instruments to which people can resort to decide what to do in their own spaces.

Keywords: autonomy, participation, centralized planning, everyday spaces, favela

1. Introduction

Urbel is the name of the public department of the city of Belo Horizonte (Brazil) responsible for the improvement of the urban structure in favelas and other spontaneous settlements of poor communities. Since 1995 Urbel applies a participatory planning method whose critical analysis, together with the discussion of an alternative, is one of the present tasks of our research group [to be identified after blind review] and the focus of this essay. Our aim is to show how participation has turned into an instrument for placating socially weak groups, instead of increasing their autonomy and their political power in the
city. By autonomy we mean the capacity of a person, a primary group or a community to establish their own norms of action and interaction, insofar as they do not restrain the same possibility for other persons, groups or communities. As it has been used in our context to date, the idea of participating (being part of) is essentially opposed to the idea of autonomy (being ruled by self-defined norms). In theory participation may be well intended, but in practice it rather indicates that people are allowed to take part in a certain process of decision making without being able to shift its essential codes, bureaucracies and technicalities. The authority is then a bit more widespread, but the authoritative institutions persist anyway. In a critical perspective of autonomy, those very institutions have do be put in question.

This is especially true for the institution of centralized planning of everyday spaces, because it is directly related to the persistent heteronomy in the production of such spaces even in participatory processes. We mean by centralized planning any situation in which a small group decide for a whole community or population how space should be designed, built, managed, and ultimately appropriated. Not that everything determined by the plan will indeed happen, but it creates a context in which events differing from such determination are interpreted in a negative manner as mistakes, conflicts or transgressions. While the term centralized stresses the fact that a few decide for the many, the term heteronomous stresses the idea that principles guiding such decisions are imposed by some ‘other’ (heteros), foreign to the community (as when expert technicians use abstract, general knowledge for interventions on concrete, singular spaces). Historically and logically heteronomy is preceded by centralized planning, but once there, it persists like a bad habit, even in a process of a certain democratization (as when the use of abstract knowledge to intervene in concrete spaces is taken for granted).

In the next part of the following discussion we try to put the need for centralized and heteronomous planning into a historical perspective. In the third part we
briefly remember the alternative to such planning debated in the 60s and 70s, and how they
turned from the idea of supporting autonomy to the idea of participation. Then, in the fourth
part, the procedures of Urbel are analyzed. The final part argues for an approach beyond
participation, focusing on autonomous development.

2. Relativizing heteronomy

The need for centralized and heteronomous planning and design is not given
by human nature but historically developed, serving specific interests. Its systematic
application on everyday spaces, such as dwellings, local streets and markets, leisure spaces,
and even agricultural land is hardly older than hundred years. Although there was some urban
planning since the Antiquity, usually related to totalitarian regimes, schemes like the
Hippodamian plan (a grid layout) or the Roman forum did not define details of the urban
fabric. On the other hand, indigenous peoples, as well as those of premodern cities, produce
their own living spaces without central planning. Each member of a community guided by a
common tradition is partly responsible for the general result, which has coherence but no
unified geometrical image. Its legibility is that of lived space not of conceived space (see
Lefebvre, 1991).

Even when the modern figure of the architect detached from the building site
came about, in the Renaissance, ordinary spaces were not directly affected, neither were the
abilities of the general population to produce them. Architects served a very specific purpose,
described by Garry Stevens (1998) as the representation of power. The lack of registered
information about planning authority, financing and administration of ‘ordinary’ spaces in the
Renaissance cities indicates that architects did not worry much about such questions. Alberti
for instance distinguishes carefully between the general population and ‘a few individuals’
renowned for their wisdom, skill, experience, or prosperity, and therefore argues that ‘some
buildings are appropriate for society as a whole, others for the foremost citizens, and yet others for the common people’ (Alberti, 1988: 93-94). But when it comes to the discussion of this last category, he just states that buildings for common people ‘should follow the example of the rich and emulate their magnificence, as far as their resources allow, though this imitation must be dampened, so that financial considerations are not sacrificed to pleasure’ (Alberti, 1988: 152). We can infer that ordinary spaces were not part of the architect’s practice, and that people still produced them in an autonomous way, even if extraordinary spaces (including dwellings for the rich) were carefully designed.

The production of everyday spaces in industrialized countries was gradually turned into an object of planning and design only after the Revolutions of 1848. A rather neutral explanation of this historical change would be that urban planning was a technical necessity imposed by demographic explosion and made manifest by the revolutionary events. The industrial city of the nineteenth century did not have the material and spatial conditions for the settlements and building methods people were used to, and the dynamic of such new cities was too strong and its growth too fast to allow an organic or bottom-up creation of new responses. Another neutral explanation regards seeing heteronomous planning of everyday spaces as cultural development. The division of labor, a feature of any complex society, implies that some specialized groups decide for everybody about certain issues. Finally, a less neutral explanation is the idea that central planning of everyday spaces is part of the capitalist production of space. Such production is more than the fabrication of the surroundings or the scenery for a certain economic system. As Lefebvre (1991) shows, the way people act and interact, the possibilities of resistance or rebellion, as well as marginalization are mostly defined by how space is physically and socially constituted. Nineteenth century capitalism managed to shape space according to its own premises by planning it. Planned space is
therefore not a byproduct of capitalist economy, but one of its main instruments to control alternative modes of production and to survive crisis, i.e. to reproduce itself.

Architects entered planning of everyday spaces only after 1900. The first architect to systematically design an industrial city was Tony Garnier, who began this attempt in 1901 and finally published his ‘Cité Industrielle’ in 1918. Residential structures got central to architects’ discussions only in the 20s, with the first two CIAMs. The shift from extraordinary projects to a new task seems to be related to the increasing number of architects rather than to a change in the essentials of the profession. In the United States, for instance, there were 600 architects in 1850, against 16,000 in 1910 (Stevens, 1998: 169). We may ask if the very increase is not due to social demand, but it should be considered that expanded access to higher education had in itself a placatory function. This may explain why, despite the novelty of the task, architects preserved methods and principles used for the design of extraordinary works since the Renaissance, even after the CIAMs and the abolition of historical styles: authorship, the ideal of each piece of architecture or urban design as a perfect whole, users as contemplators or as characters of predefined events. They created spaces destined for common people but those people were not supposed to change them, let alone to produce them in their own manner. Quite the opposite, they were supposed to ‘learn’ how to live a modern life, with its hygienic premises, rational management of time and energy, mono-functional rooms, and suppressed public sphere. Le Corbusier’s propaganda in the 20s (the term public relations was coined only in later years by Freud’s nephew Eduard Bernays) is explicitly about such ‘pedagogical’ goal. This authoritative approach reached its peak in the aftermath of World War II, followed by public policies, as well as by private developers.

What has happened to everyday space since 1848 may be compared to what is happening to food since the 70s: the general public is convinced of its ignorance about the matter and led to trust the experts (architects and planners in the first case, nutritionists in the
second), cultural knowledge is devaluated by a supposedly scientific one, and who cannot or do not want to rely on specialists is said underdeveloped (about the social phenomenon of ‘nutritionism’ see Pollan, 2008). The production of everyday spaces, just like the production of food, used to be an everyday activity unseparate from use or consumption.

A very illustrative example of these two opposite modes of production of space happened in the Amazon area in the 90s, on the occasion of the building of a hospital in a native community. It was reported to us by the architect Leda Leonel, who worked on site. The well meaning white professionals designed a plan in the conventional architectural manner, ‘respecting’ the exterior circular shape usually reached by the natives, but neither its social dynamics of construction, nor its nonhierarchical interior space. Since the building site employed the same natives, they simultaneously produced their own living space nearby (maloca). It was possible therefore to observe the two processes going on side by side and showing their substantial differences. In the hospital, building and use were clearly separate, and the construction evolved by categories: first all the foundations, second the whole supporting structure, third the roof, and so on. The natives’ living space, in contrast, grew part by part on a daily basis as it was simultaneously used: first the space for a few families, second more space for more families, until the circle was completed (if needed, they would have began a new one). On the building site of the hospital, final shape, materials, functions of different rooms were all previously defined by the architectural design, leading the natives to perform mere alienated work. On the contrary, the production of the natives’ space was part of their daily life going together with cooking, sleeping, talking, child caring and the like. Even if usually repeated, the final shape of a maloca is not an instrument of control, but a cultural tradition that fits communal living with no hierarchy. At the same time, each member of the community has knowledge and access to materials to produce space in an autonomous way. There are cooperation and division of labor, but not to the point of alienation.
3. From autonomy to participation

The discrepancy between the everyday-autonomous and the specialized-heteronomous production of ordinary spaces was subject of architectural and urban debates in the 60s and 70s. If, on the one hand, the urgent production of housing in the aftermath of World War II had offered good time and place for most architectural and urban practices to over-plan and over-design ordinary spaces, on the other hand, the results of such overwhelming projects were crucial to stimulate critical discussions and proposals in the 60s. The critique focused on huge housing complexes and their consequences for the inhabitants, but also raised other issues concerning the design-building-use separation, perfectly suitable for the commodification of ordinary space, and the modern building methods which reinforced division of labor and extraction of surplus value (Bicca, 1984; Ferro, 2006). Unfortunately these issues were never all contemplated at once in the debate, and it run out of steam when attempting to embrace more complex social and political urban matters. As far as we know, there was neither a holistic approach to autonomy in the production of the urban environment, nor a radical critique of the established political economy of such production. Debates came to emphasize (and romanticize) individual freedom in the production and appropriation of the private home, rather than criticize and transform planning, design and building procedures as a whole. This ended up in two new premises which at first sight seem to contradict each other but are indeed complementary: a neoliberal cut of public subsidies for ordinary spaces (as social housing) and the practice of participation with an essentially paternalistic approach. They are complementary because including the excluded in an established system also represents a way of incorporating and controlling them (see Kothari, 2000: 142), as well as a strategy of delay. The example of public policy in Belo Horizonte, discussed in the third part, will show how this works.
Nevertheless, let us first develop a bit more on the context and the people involved in the critique of heteronomous production in the 60s and 70s, because in certain way they reached questions and proposals that must not be forgotten in a new attempt towards autonomy. According to Royston Landau (2003) most of the architects heading this movement grew up during the War and were involved in academic debates in the end of the 50s. These include John F. C. Turner, Lucien Kroll, Ralph Erskine, Christopher Alexander, Walter Segal, Nicolaas John Habraken, Yona Friedman, the Archigram group, and Cedric Price. In 1969, Paul Barker together with Reyner Banham, Peter Hall and Cedric Price wrote ‘Non-plan: an experiment in freedom’, starting with a question that summarizes the tone of the whole debate: ‘Why not have the courage, where practical, to let people shape their own environment?’ (Barker, 2000: 8). Indeed the essay came out after a dispute between the Dorset County Council and the Dorset Society of Architects about a booklet issued by the former to ‘guide’ buildings in rural areas. The society of architects complained that such a booklet stimulated commonplace architecture, done without specialized knowledge, but noteworthy it was not concerned with the absurdity of trying to regulate, plan and control what was in principle free from constraints. Architects engaged in the debate of autonomy thus confronted two different parties: the paternalistic State and the tradition of an authoritarian professional praxis.

One of the most radical critics of such heteronomous determination, especially concerning housing, was the British architect Turner. Working in Lima (Peru) since 1957 and having visited many other big cities in developing countries, Turner states that what governments usually see as problems (self-produced settlements) were indeed solutions for the question of housing in mass societies, while the so called ‘solutions’ (huge modern housing complexes) just caused many new social and spatial problems. He advocates ‘autonomy in building environment’ meaning: self-government in local affairs, freedom for
families and small groups to build what they want, economy and simplicity of tools whenever possible, and, finally, the idea that the built environment should be planned but not designed (Turner, 1976: 155). The difference he makes between planning and designing is that of limit-setting and action-prescribing (we will come back to this point later). Turner managed to achieve innovative programs for aided self-helped housing, but more than the initiatives of any other of the architects referred below these programs were later accused of romanticizing poverty and opening the way for an actual shrinkage of public investments in poor communities all over the world (see Davis, 2006).

The critique of mass production deprived of individual features was at the centre of the works of Kroll, Erskine and Alexander. Their approach was directed towards user participation in the design and construction as a means to personalize buildings, as in the case of Kroll’s La Méme (the students’ facilities at the University of Louvain), Erskine’s Byker Wall and Alexander’s housing projects in Nagoya and Mexicalli. The problem is that this approach results in finished products: even if considering the immediate wishes of their participants, it fails to take into account that inhabitants, requirements and tastes can change over time. Nevertheless, the diversity resulting from such initiatives makes spaces more suitable for different users than the conventional mass products.

Habraken’s approach to mass housing, instead of enabling individual participation, proposes two stages of building: support and infill. Support refers to the predetermined parts of a building and includes everything supposed to be collectively decided; infill refers to the changeable parts, supposed to be individually decided (Habraken, 1972). Despite the greater flexibility enabled by this system compared to the already mentioned personalized participatory designs, it still leads to a traditional finished product because once done the infill is not trivial to change. The advantage of such a system is to guarantee mass production without a mass product. This idea, however, has reached broad
developments worldwide, starting with Habraken’s own SAR (Stichting Architectural Research) in the 60s, culminating with the Open Building movement, which is becoming widespread nowadays, though more as a technology for flexible markets and uses than as a possibility of autonomy for people involved in building and using the resulting spaces.

A completely different attempt to oppose heteronomous mass production is that of Friedman’s Flatwriter, a machine that should enable users to design their own flats without the mediation of a (human) designer. The machine was programmed with technical knowledge and the users had simultaneous feedback about the impact of each design decisions. However, mediation of designers was anyway implicit in the machine’s limitations and possibilities. The very fact that the user was given the place of the planner and was supposed to produce a finished solution to be built in the most traditional manner and only afterwards used contradicts true autonomy.

Segal’s approach differs from the others, since it focuses on building, acknowledging the difficulty of individuals and small groups to build their own homes using traditional materials and processes. He proposed a methodology using timber-frame and other materials found at any do-it-yourself shop, which could be easily self-built by any group. The problem is that even if first intended as a continuous open process, it soon became just a rational method for self-building, perhaps because of the constraints of building regulations. Although we believe that a change in building technologies and processes would be crucial for real autonomy, such autonomy nevertheless is not bound up with self-building.

Architects such as Friedman, the Archigram group and Price have also contributed to the debate with a range of proposals of mutable spaces depending on users’ participation to be completed temporarily. Friedman proposed mobile architecture to serve the unpredictable by means of a structure covering city centers in which people could arrange their dwellings without having to buy a plot and build a permanent house. This idea would
enable change and spontaneous—unplanned—growth of cities. With similar intentions
towards spontaneous growth and mobility Archigram proposed Plug-in City and Walking
City, utopias that perhaps might do more to initiate a real discussion of autonomy than well-behaved participatory processes. Cedric Price, for his part, is perhaps the architect who
criticized the idea of participation more radically. For him it was becoming a means to impose
dull opinions from randomly selected individuals onto the collective, as in radio programs
with live audience participation. He was very keen on designing value-free structures for
people to add value themselves to the spaces, as for instance in the proposed Generator and
the Fun Palace and in the built Kentish Town Inter-Action Centre.

All the above initiatives, and many others that appear in recent books such as
Peter Blundell Jones, Jeremy Till and Doina Petrescu’s Architecture and Participation (2005)
though pointing towards opening architecture to people’s experience, are still based on what
might be called ‘participation towards finished products’. Even in the case of Price, design
and building are still traditionally done, and autonomy is only possible in the appropriation of
the spaces, which are not finished in principle. In all cases, the traditional architectural
practice, separating design, building and use still prevails over the possibility of an open
design process.

We might not neglect that autonomy was in the architectural agenda and that
some practices were thinking of instruments to enable it, but as mentioned before, there was a
lack of awareness of the broader structures which determine the social production of space.
Even an apparent radical approach such as non-plan is easily associated with the New Right
discourse, as demonstrated by Ben Frank (2000). As Friedrich Hayek and other advocates of
the New Right, non-planners identify freedom with free-market capitalism. To oppose the
paternalistic Welfare State they recur to ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ (Frank, 2000: 35). Their
superficial critique led to propose the replacement of professional planners and control of the
State by the rules of corporations and the control of their private interests. Architects seem too much involved within the planning tradition of the field to have a truly critical and radical position. In other words their proposals did not escape the recurrent problem imposed by the fact that they and their clients are submitted to power relations without being fully aware of these. As Stevens (1998: 87) demonstrates, if they were, architecture would probably not fulfill the role of ‘justifying the domination of the dominant’.

The main point we would like to stress regarding the non-radical course of the debates and practices mentioned above is that more than awareness of concrete problems of design, building and use, it is needed a critique of the political context that guides the definition of problems and the establishment of solutions. Good intention without a strong social and political engagement is not enough to free the professionals working with space from their submission to power relations. Any depoliticized attempt, no matter how much well meaning it is, will ultimately lead at most to participation by means of mediation. Such practices, when repeated in different contexts, end up as mere heteronomous processes with pseudo-participation of communities.

4. Uncritical participation

Highlighting the contrast between autonomy and participation, we propose to discuss the methodology used by Urbel in Belo Horizonte. This methodology, created in 1995, is called Specific Global Plan or PGE (from Plano Global Específico). The contradictory linkage of the global and the specific was originally meant to indicate a holistic, interdisciplinary approach with specific solutions for each area of intervention. Before explaining the PGE, however, it will be useful to explain the broader context in which it appeared.
As mentioned before, abstract knowledge applied to concrete spaces constitutes heteronomy in itself. In Brazil, this tension gets worse by the fact that planners and designers are trained in an academic tradition quite distant from the social and spatial reality they are supposed to work on. Erminia Maricato (2000) describes the situation as ‘ideas out of place and place out of ideas’, focusing on the split between the formal parts of Brazilian cities and its illegal, spontaneously grown parts, such as favelas. While the bourgeois tradition of planning is to some extent feasible in the formal city, it has nothing to do with the informal one, being thus ‘out of place’. On the other hand, favelas and other illegal areas are ‘out of (the planner’s) ideas’ because there is practically no formal knowledge of characteristics and dynamics, and most plans until the 90s did not even consider their existence. Until very recently any procedure in Brazilian laws, bureaucracy and public administration was exclusively devised for the formal city, deepening social and spatial segregation.

Nevertheless, segregation also serves the formal city and its management: people living in favelas work and consume as everybody else, favelas function as a political cause whenever convenient, and they are licenses for relativizing urban laws wherever needed. Without them, there would have been no cheap labor power, no industrialization, no mass consumption. Favelas and other illegal occupations of urban land have thus been tolerated since the beginning of Brazilian’s industrialization, although accompanied by repeatedly reinforced prohibitions. Just when invasions harm the real estate market or the building industry laws are applied strictly. This relativization of laws, justified by the ‘chaotic’ reality of the city and promoted by private interests, goes hand in hand with a tradition of nicely written but never implemented plans. According to Maricato (2000), the plans often sound ridiculous vis-à-vis the concrete problems, but nevertheless they are not naive; their function is to hide real antagonisms with rhetoric of good intentions.
The development of participatory processes in public policies in Belo Horizonte since the 90s should be analyzed against this background, and in the context of a relative democratization of the country after the end of military dictatorship in 1985. The Federal Constitution of 1988 includes general principles for a more equalitarian society, specially concerning urban contradictions: Municipalities are declared part of the Federation, with autonomy to create their own organic law. This autonomy is reinforced in 2001 by the so called City Statute (Federal Law 10257/01), with emphasis on social functions of urban property and participatory processes.

Meanwhile, in the first administration of the Labor Party under Mayor Patrus Ananias (1993-1996), Belo Horizonte saw the implementation of a Municipal Housing System (Sistema Municipal de Habitação). It is composed of a housing fund and a housing council with representatives of the organized social movement and of various public and private sectors. The executive institutions of the system are the housing department (Secretaria Municipal de Habitação), in charge of new developments, and the already mentioned Urbel, responsible for improvements of favelas. The same Labor Party administration also introduced a participatory budget better known by the acronym OP (Orçamento Participativo), allocating a (small) amount of the municipal revenue to construction works proposed and chosen by the public.

All this seems very promising, and indeed there was a belief among the social movement that with time the OP would grow into a model of shared city government. All citizens would have actual power of decision instead of merely electing a Mayor or, in a more 'participatory' way, voting for one or another predefined proposal. In the first OP assemblies people presented their most diverse demands, ranging from the refurbishment of a traditional theatre in the city centre to basic urban infrastructure for sanitation and transport in favelas. The positive aspect of this was that the theatre refurbishment, once publicly confronted with
much more urgent needs, was clearly recognized as a minor claim even by its former
supporters. Without the OP process, powerful lobby of some privileged group would probably
have succeeded in getting the funds for the theatre. The OP thus came as an important
instrument to define priorities by means of public negotiation.

On the other hand, these first experiences of large scale participatory process
also had fragile aspects. Most demands coming from favelas and similar areas were
consequences of deeper systemic problems, so that interventions would be but short-term
palliations. It seems worthless, for instance, to pave an alley at the bottom of a hill without
properly treating its top and caring about its whole sanitation structure.

The PGE methodology was formulated by Urbel as a response to such
inconsistencies. It is a procedure to systematize planning directions for each favela or, as the
urban legislation defines them, for each ‘zone of special social interest’. The PGE is supposed
to embrace physical-environmental, legal and social questions, and to be developed in a
participatory process of data gathering, diagnosis, and proposition of directives. It was legally
formalized in 1996, being now a prior condition for any further work in favelas. Its goal is to
substitute punctual interventions for the so called ‘structural interventions’.

From this point on, the OP evolved in a quite different manner concerning
favelas. Its function as a channel for spontaneous engagement out of self-organized
communities has been obstructed, since any demand has to be consistent with the respective
PGE. Paradoxically, not even the money for the development of this plan is automatically
provided by the Municipality, but has to be requested in the very OP process. Put another
way: to have an urgent need met by public investments, a community first applies for the
PGE, furthermore goes through a complex and (as we will see) heteronomous process of
gathering data, diagnosing problems and defining the whole ‘structural intervention’, and then
finally the community applies for each part of its execution separately, because the
expenditure of the OP is relatively low. It has been estimated that it would take at best 13 years to have even a small ‘structural intervention’ entirely done this way, not to mention the new demands that necessarily arise in the meantime.

The development of a PGE is done by private offices whose professionals are architects, urban planners, engineers, social workers or psychologists, and sometimes also geographers, lawyers and experts in statistics or data processing. The office in charge of each PGE is selected by Urbel in a public auction, not by the respective community. Before beginning to work, the PGE team is presented to the community by Urbel officials in a public assembly out of which a ‘reference group’ is formed, mainly composed by community leaders. This group has the important function of supporting the presence of the team in field (before adopting this practice Urbel had trouble to carry out surveys and interventions). Furthermore the reference group represents all the other residents in participatory decisions. There are other assemblies, but they seldom change things previously defined by the professional team and discussed with the reference group.

The work itself is then organized in various steps, whose fancy denominations and detailed requirements we will not try to translate here. The first basic part is the updating of maps, including topographic survey and counting of households. There is no participation at this point, since the professionals do their field research just by observing and eventually measuring physical characteristics of the place. The next step consists of gathering data about three different aspects: urban environment and infrastructure, social organization, and juridical situation. It may be surprising that the juridical aspect of the favela is given as much attention as the other two, but indeed the crucial purpose is to regulate property, turning the favela into a part of the formal city as far as law is concerned. This means that residents eventually have to pay taxes on their properties, so that many of them oppose regulation. Regarding the data collection of the urban structure, it is still mostly a technical field research
based on direct observation and measurement, in which people are involved only to give very basic information and to open their houses to the technicians. The approach to the social aspect is the only one in which the developing team of the PGE comes to talk to people, to hear their opinions and demands.

Before explaining how this works, it is important to stress that the sequence of events predicted by Urbel in the PGE puts the technical and bureaucratic needs for a systematized database before any demand or singular feature of the community. (Let’s first update our maps, fill our files, satisfy our rules, and then we can see what people have to say.) The very term community, which we are also using since we lack a better one, expresses the abstract idea of a solidary neighborhood. But in fact each area embraced by a single PGE is composed of many different groups, with different structures, interests, conflicts and modes of negotiation. Any actual participatory approach would first worry about those specificities, and about how participation could work in each singular social context.

The gathering of social data in the PGE, besides coming after technical information, has to follow a predefined procedure (although it is difficult to say to what extend this is actually done). According to a stratified sampling, at least 13 people are selected for interviews and asked about the history of the settlement, its politically organized movements, engagement in former OP processes, cultural institutions, formal or informal leadership, channels of participation, internal groups and relations of power, the role of NGOs, and finally there is also one point about needs and demands. In other words, the interview aims primarily to discover how to deal with the community’s political forces, in order to accomplish the intervention, while the demands presented by the residents are less important. After the interviews, their results are crossed with data from other institutional sources (such as the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics - IBGE) and with data
obtained in the other parts of the research. The data gathering closes with partial diagnoses about each of the above mentioned aspects and a final ‘integrated diagnosis’.

What follows is the last step of the PGE method, in which the team proposes general directives for the development of the area (environmental sanitation, urban density, social equipments, etc.), some major construction works, and a range of priorities used later to enqueue the requests for the OP. The proposals are discussed with the reference group and later shown to the community (actually to those people who have time and interest to attend the assemblies). The general population has little chance to contribute with ideas or solutions. People may resist some proposals, especially those implying removal of houses, for instance, to give place to a new street or the like, but this leads only to slight modifications (the design of the new street is changed so to bother people who do not have time or interest to attend the assemblies). At the same time, there are community members (usually leaders) which have direct access to the Mayor, the president of Urbel or other powerful figures, and thus are able to influence the decisions of the PGE through this channel without any public discussion.

It is often said that a problem clearly stated is halfway to solution. In critical terms this also means that the concepts and categories used to understand a situation obstruct a huge part of its possibilities. ‘Clarity’ is often not more than rigidity, removal of the unfamiliar, absence of new ideas. To describe and analyze a favela, the PGE method operates with a closed index of concepts originated in the intellectual tradition of urban planning for the formal city, not in the particular context it should refer to. The concepts may seem clear (to us), but it is likely that they miss many important characteristics and potentials. The same is true for the proposals, determined to a great extent by the map updating and the data gathering within the restraints of this closed index.

The main fault of PGE, though, is not the simple fact that it became a placating instrument much less concerned with real participation than with the identification of
leaderships and groups of influence, in order to successfully implement a standard solution. Its main fault is that it was born as an unreflected response to immediate problems raised by the very first implementation of interventions chosen in the OP. That is, instead of questioning the whole condition before seeking a solution, the PGE method goes with the flow of problem-solving in the same established order it was supposed to defeat. It seems to neglect, or at least decide not to take into account, the OP's promising future of shared management of city government, as first intended and welcomed by social movements. The current developments guided by PGEs indicate the most traditional structural interventions, with no actual participation of the communities but the consent of their leaderships. Its cost-benefits outcome is excellent only for politicians and contractors.

5. Towards retrying autonomy

The intention of our research group is to try a truly autonomous approach to planning. This means opposing autonomy to participation, and stepping back from proposing any directive towards the design of structural interventions based on problem-solving. Our intention is to increase communities’ access to knowledge and material, always potentializing their own traditions of mobilization and negotiation.

Instead of stimulating competition and reinforcement of leaderships within communities, which usually end up with very authoritative proposals for structural interventions, we propose a critical approach that includes the whole community in a process of self-mobilization, self-organization and self-management. Instead of mediators, our role is to design and provide interfaces for such autonomous process. Providing access to information and means for negotiation is a first step to overcome usual macroplanning that creates a permanent dependence of the community on the State or another sponsoring
institution. We are discussing the basis for such an alternative and will try it out soon in a favela in Belo Horizonte. This concluding topic outlines our approach in contrast to the PGE.

If we want to improve a machine, cure a disease or mitigate climate change there is a need to translate the object into certain categories intelligible for us; they help us to understand what is happening and to imagine ways to interfere. This is because machines, viruses or the ozonosphere have no ability to act at their own choice or to define how to govern themselves. In short, they are not capable of autonomy. The same logic does not apply to people, unless we intend mere manipulation. Therefore it is neither necessary nor desirable that the improvement of areas like favelas departs from its translation into pre-established concepts familiar to experts and professionals. We should instead be aware of the obvious but often forgotten fact that the residents of a favela 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. The strict consciousness of this basic principle leads to conclude that translation should go the other way around. Instead of translating the resident’s situation into technical categories and suppose that (we) professionals will ‘solve the problems’, it would be much more consistent to translate technical knowledge into a common language or into useable tools, turning it available for communities so that they can more easily create responses to their demands.

It is noteworthy that in most academic and political debates ‘participatory planning’ or ‘participatory development’ has meant a shift in the categories used to analyze and intervene in communities rather than a dismissal of the very practice of categorization. In the toolbox of planners a ‘functional’ set (geology, sanitation, zoning, density, sun, air, transportation, etc.) was expanded to a more ‘social’ one (culture, neighborhoods, personal relations, leadership, informal economy, etc.). That residents are asked about these topics and that they are somewhat taken into account is enough to label a project participatory. In this
sense, when Urbel declares that some process has to be participatory it means in practice that the social set of categories will be used. In contrast, the approach towards autonomy we are seeking is not about a wider scope of information to foresee the community’s future more efficiently. Autonomy implies that only the inhabitants themselves may do this if they want.

As already indicated, we draw from Turner’s distinction between design and plan, the former being a means to prescribe and control actions, and the latter an instrument for setting limits, which, paradoxically, opens a range of possibilities for action. The directives resulting from any traditional plan, such as the PGE for instance, not only follow the logic of prescription and control of action, but depart from the unquestioned mistake of taking a current condition for granted and improving it. People directly affected usually have no say, and when they have, it is in a participatory process constrained by a mediator. The professionals that deal with space are trained to solve-problems, at least pointing directives, not to speculate or problematize conditions having no solution in mind. This makes them unable or unsuitable to cope with the role of mediation without directing it towards problem-solving and finished results.

You might say that without mediation people would merely repeat the same problem-solving practice without technical support, which would lead to even worse finished results. However, a range of experiments we have done proves that depending on the sort of stimulus people have to start negotiation, they actually engage in a process of problematization raising a range of issues never contemplated in a leader-group relationship [reference after blind review]. Such stimulus are usually related to not having a leader-group relation (no mediation) and having an instrument to facilitate people’s engagement (interface).

The main feature of such interfaces is to awaken possibilities to radically change the traditional authoritative design process. So instead of designing finished products or directives towards them, architects and urban planners might use their knowledge to create
interfaces that increase communities’ access to knowledge and material enabling their autonomy in the process of production of space.

We are developing our alternative for autonomous process of production of space in favelas strongly based on interfaces. It is important not that we gather precise geometric and statistic data of the area, but that the community has an instrument (an interface) to help them to dynamically gather and analyze data simultaneously with negotiating, fund-raising, building some physical interventions and using them. Such proposal, though, is not possible in traditional macroplanning, with its separate stages; a micro scale planning alternative is needed.

In a micro scale planning approach different groups of the community could, for example, discuss and implement different systems for water supply and collection: one area might be more appropriate to accommodate a reservoir and a small treatment station, as another might have a spring to supply water but no place to treat grey water. Each group might create its own alternative or negotiate a shared one. However, there is no actual need for a formal topdown intervention of sanitation as is usual in macroplanning.

In practice retyring autonomy might focus on a few basic interfaces:

- Interfaces for dynamic data-gathering (already mentioned).

- Interfaces for availability of information. These might be courses, aiming to broaden people’s horizon rather than imposing specific knowledge. For instance, courses on different (self)building techniques are welcome, but not to promote the use of a specific material. They might also be digital interactive interfaces, for example one to make a repertoire of solutions of mezzo structures available by means of an open database using a sort of wiki structure. We have already developed a similar open database of building components and processes to stimulate the autonomous production of dwellings [reference after blind review].
- **Interfaces to enable negotiation.** These are intended as a means to break with the leader-group relationship usually already established in favelas. They might be digital interactive multiuser interfaces to enable each user to individually elaborate his or her thoughts and share them in action, not only by means of discourse. These interfaces might also include 3D environments for experimenting the proposals.

- **Interfaces to enable physical experimentation of spatial hypothesis.** These might be a set of structuring and fencing pieces with different ways of connection to be assembled by people and experienced before actual construction of a permanent intervention. We have already developed a very successful ‘interface of spatiality’ for trying out small spaces.

- **Fund-raising interfaces.** These are mechanisms to group and make available information regarding public and private funds, as also to enable collective organization of proposals for application. In no way this means that the State is free from its responsibility of providing necessary money for the interventions. In the opposite direction of the resulting New Right approach of ‘non-plan’ and Turner’s experiments, the critique of the paternalism of the State serves to abandon imposed interventions and work autonomously towards the original aim of the OP.

It is usual to evaluate the success of public investments in communities by two main criteria. The first is explicit and consists in measurable benefits: number of new housing units, streets, equipments, etc. The second, rather implicit, is the appearance of the area. The more it resembles the formal city the better, and in the best case there are also some extraordinary building to be shown in the media for the next political campaign. The outcome of an approach retrying autonomy cannot be evaluated in those terms. It would be easy to destroy it by just pointing out, for instance, the loss of economies of scale. Also its external political gains will probably be lesser than in conventional planning. However, its contribution to overcome social and urban divide is likely to be more expressive.
References

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