

Modern Cemeteries and resurrecting narratives: revitalization and ruins in the Brás district, in the city of São Paulo.

When the East-West line of the Subway passes by the Brás station, in a long elevated stretch, the passenger's gaze at the cityscape beneath is one of interrogation. What could those hundreds of numbered, green rectangles painted on the ground be? I believe that this question has not only crossed the mind of the researcher-commuter like me, but also of all commuters at the view outside the window. Unlike them, we set out to look for the answer(s) to the question, whose beginning we would find in the oral history of the district.

The Brás, a huge deindustrialised area of the city of São Paulo, is a district characterized by material remains and ruins from the beginning of its industrial modernity, which took place from the late 19th century to the mid-twentieth century, scattered around in old factories, empty warehouses and abandoned railways. A massive multicultural working class population was present throughout all its history. Once the home of immigrant factory workers, nowadays the neighbourhood has part of its population composed by those who make a living on informal work as street vendors and gleaners, and those living in precarious housing in tenement houses, small slums or the streets.

In 1976 the demolitions began, making place for the building of the subway line that crosses the district. In connection with this project, the City of São Paulo, under the administration of Olavo Setúbal, in partnership with the federal government, implemented a huge project of urban renewal alongside the line - called the Brás-Bresser CURA (Urban Communities of Accelerated Recuperation) -, whose aim was "to correct the scars brought about by the construction"¹.

An important part of the district history was then erased. This history was expressed in the architectonic and urban design – removed with the destruction of a 260 thousand square meter area – and in the strong remaining ties of nationality and neighbourhood, broken with the removal of 5 thousand people. The destruction was further deepened with the delay and incomplete execution of the project: ten years after the beginning of the subway construction, middle-class apartment buildings were

¹ Quoting Mayor Olavo Setúbal. *O Estado de São Paulo*, Oct. 11, 1978. Bayeux, apud Vérias (1991).

finished, which meant that the whole area was a construction site for a whole decade. However, social facilities such as schools, crèches, churches, and shops never came out of the paper. The unfinished project created an enormous urban emptiness between the new buildings and the subway line, which the City, to no avail, has tried to “fill up” for a quarter of a century.

Our paper intends to analyse the role of narrativity in the process of rebuilding the memory of this urban emptiness and discuss it in the context of a modern Latin American peripheral megalopolis, São Paulo, at the turn of the twenty-first century. Its temporality is marked by porosity (Benjamin, 1987, 1991), shown up not only in the founding interpenetration between construction and destruction of the urban materiality, but also by simultaneous ruining or decadence of constructions which are never finished, nor would ever be.

If we assume that the urban space is constituted by many temporal strata articulated by a memory which is not only architectural, but also made of gestures and words (Cauquelin, 1982), oral history presents itself as a tool for understanding this articulation in this porous and unstable urban context. Thus, from 1998 to 2002, we carried out several interviews, both thematic and of life histories, with individuals and groups who had a relation with that space².

In this reconstruction, despite the different and discontinuous historical experiences, there was among these groups a common image related to that urban emptiness: that of the “cemetery”. In order to understand the transmission of this common image, we analyse the symbolic thread that acts as mediator between the narratives and the material traces of each intervention in that emptiness, and cross narratives, resorting to the notion of anamorphosis (Cauquelin: 1982), the work of time on places operated by language, which articulates the disparate, on one hand, historical experiences, and on the other, the original common image, updating it, by means of resignification. The anamorphosis mediates the representations and appropriations of that space by each group, mixing mythical and historical references, which attribute a meaning to that “urban emptiness” and its destroyed history.

² We categorized them into old inhabitants, those who had had their houses disappropriated for the construction of the subway (group 1), and those who were not affected by the demolition (group 2), the street vendors and the residents of the new apartment buildings. See (Pereira, 2002).

The Future in Suspension: urban planning

In 2002, the Brazilian NGO Arte/Cidades, upon reflecting on the erasure of the urban history in the global cities, intervenes in that space through the work of artist Carlos Vergara called “The Future in Suspension”. The ground of that urban emptiness is painted red, but for some question marks, left in the raw cement texture. According to its curator, Nelson Peixoto (2002), the proposal reflects the “failure” of those urban projects designed to complement, for instance, viaducts and subways. In these areas, “left to their own fate”, a reflection of the “urban and social disaster”, “the future is in suspension” (idem). Unlike the urban planner, “the artist doesn’t anticipate”(idem).

This artistic installation, in a first interpretation, is proposed as a criticism against and a negation to the temporality of the urban planner, based on the projection of an ideal future. In doing so, the work of art finds a way to express that question posed by the subway passengers, though perhaps not related to the future, but one that considers the present and the past of the place. It is time itself which is in suspension. To apprehend it, language glides from plastic arts to articulate itself to the mute and anonymous reflection of the subway users, reflection which, in turn, comes out of anonymity to gain an identity in the oral narrative on the past of the district.

The Time of Tradition: the Clock

Mr. José D’Angelo, aged 63, a former resident whose house was disappropriated, evokes the memory of an old clock placed at the top of a demolished building at the end of his street. His narrative tells the history of the building and the clock, a reproduction of London’s “Big Ben”, which served as a landmark for the neighbourhood. The building, erected circa the end of the nineteenth century, was an English commercial warehouse, called “Casa dos Ingleses”, then successively replaced by a similar establishment, “Wilson Son’s”, a private transportation company, “Jabaquara”, the city’s public transportation company, “CMTC”, and, eventually, to another private transportation company, “Viação Cometa”. When he tells the history with the photo of the clock in his hands, he expresses his grief about the demolition: “at the time, that was a big waste for mankind because it could have been a permanent history”. A moment later he concludes:

“The elder people called it “Casa dos Ingleses”, (...) that would be my father, my grandfather (...). But us, my generation, with the coming of “Jabaquara”, CMTC, we then called it ‘The Cometa Clock’, in my time. But then again, if you take the other generations, they called it by yet another name (...)”.

The memory of the clock is also shared in the interviews by other residents of the old neighbourhood, who evoked the moments of everyday life and the celebrations of New Years’ Eve.

For more than half a century this building and its clock expressed a link between a private temporality and a collective temporality (the neighbourhood), and across generations (the family), broken with the demolition.

The clock is the representation of a homogeneous and empty time (the chronological time), but also represents its appropriation by another temporality characterized by private and collective rituals. It is the image of Kronos, the devouring time, but also of Kairos, time apprehended and immobilised by individual memory as well as collective memory (Cauquelin, 1982; Matos, 1995). Therefore, the clock and the building represent the image of that group in time and space: they are the mark of the presence of the past in the present and, at the same time, of a present which changes without breaking up with the past. And that is reflected in the correspondence between the nomination of the space and the family cycles of birth and death. These replacements evoke the continuity inside the transformation, and the stability inside the changes, configuring a time of tradition.

The Time of Rupture: World War II

Miss Pascoalina Cerullo, 84 years old, from the first group, recalls that in 1948 she and her husband were afraid to buy their former house. The owner had gone to the war and they had to wait for his return in order to complete the deal. The soldier never returned. And thus they bought it and began their life there.

In another context, Ms. Maria Carta, 79 years old, from the second group, remembers the demolition preceding the beginning of the construction of the subway in 1976. In the neighbourhood there was mourning and crying “that not even sheets could dry”. And she associates this event to two others that take her narrative further back into

the past. She remembers the year of 1945, the year of her wedding but also the moment of the soldiers' return, with the end of World War II: "It was just like when the soldiers came back from war in 1945 (...) We cried just from seeing them coming. They were alive, one with one leg, another without... without one arm, another injured, another...". Then she completes the narrative talking about the sadness of seeing people who had lost the homes where they had raised their families and built their lives.

In their recollections, two temporalities intertwine: the personal history (the buying of the house and the marriage) and the collective history (the departure and return of the soldiers from the war and the demolition of the houses). The collective history is not only a dimension of the personal history, but also an image recovered by the memory. The former past (the war) is appropriated to give a meaning and a magnitude to the recent past (the demolition). Two different temporalities, the history of the urbanism and the war history, are linked by the recollecting in order to apprehend the meaning and the dimension of that "urban emptiness": the collective mourning and trauma. It's the time of rupture. The image of the body condenses a metaphor of the district in the image of the "stones of the city", as the mutilation of a part of the territory, and as metaphor of the subjectivity, in the mutilation of the individual, severed from the ties of neighbourhood, family and place.

The Time Disciplined: the "Camelódromo"

Towards the end of 1997, the city hall, in association with the commercial and financial capital, represented by the "Associação Viva o Centro", turns its attention to the architectonic and urban patrimony of the historical centre of the city, and begins to implement revitalization and preservation projects in the area – which includes Paulista Avenue and the Sé and República squares. To this end, city authorities carry out several operations designed to expel the street vendors who occupied the streets of the region, as well as the adjacent perimeter, such as the Largo da Concórdia, in the Brás district.

During these operations, called "Projeto Dignidade" (Dignity Project) the urban emptiness is taken back by the local administration which seeks to "fill it up" by transferring the street vendors to the area. The emptiness now has a new function, which is to segregate and confine the informal commerce away from the streets, in a place now

called “camelódromo”³. On the ground, the rectangles painted in green with a number corresponding to the space of each stall.

The discipline that prescribes a single place for each and every individual transforms the anonymous multitude of street vendors of Largo da Concórdia and the surrounding area into an organized multiplicity (Foucault, 1988). The records of this multitude are inscribed in the demarcation of the disciplined urban space (idem, 1988, 131) by means of the official numeration defined by the local authority, giving the “camelódromo” a rationalized configuration.

The transference failed due to the street vendors’ resistance, who considered that space a deserted region. Because it was in an isolated area where very few people circulated when compared to the main streets of the district, the image of death is explicitly evoked in the speeches of the street vendors. The nomination of that space among the street vendors ranges from “dead (commercial) point” to “cemetery”.

Even the subway company, still in the 90’s, could not react with indifference to that “urban emptiness” and installed many benches under the station, trying to transform it into a public square. Later on these benches were removed by the company because they had been improvised as beds by the homeless, both children and adults, sheltered in social institutions near the station. Not even the police station of the abandoned “camelódromo” is left unscathed, and was also occupied. Thus, the project of the public square fails.⁴

The Time of Legend: the Square of the Tombs

Mrs. Mirtes, 40 years old, who has been living for 11 years in the apartment buildings constructed in the urban renewal (Cohab)⁵, describes the emptiness: “It’s full of tombs, I mean we say they’re ‘tombs’. Because you can see, look, the little squares like that, then it is the Square of the Tombs, that one filled with little squares, where they were going to set up stalls. But the street vendors united and didn’t come here (...). Then it was abandoned again”.

³ Derived from the word “camelô”, a popular name for street vendors.

⁴ This work stems from a broader research (Pereira, 2002), for which we had not interviewed the local homeless, but just those from a neighbouring area.

⁵ Companhia Metropolitana de Habitação de São Paulo.

The resistance of the street vendors to the demarcations produced on the former emptiness (the feeble flux of people) a new emptiness: the image of the official demarcations is resignified and language operates a change in the meaning: the “camelódromo” is perceived as a cemetery by the residents of the Cohabs.

A tomb, according to Aurélio’s Dictionary of the Portuguese Language, is a “funereal monument erected in memory of someone at the place where he/she is buried”. Death, monument, memories, traces: the marks of the demolition of whole blocks (the emptiness), of the spatial segregation and disciplining (the “camelodromo”) enforced by the State, and the resistance of the street vendors (Square of the Tombs) transform that space in a place of death, but of recollection too. But whose recollections of what?

According to Mrs Mirtes, it is not rare for people to ask her if there actually existed or had existed a cemetery in the area. The language revives an urban recollection, unknown and anonymous, whose traces resist there as legend, and unknowingly, makes reference to the principal image – the cemetery – and to several mutations of meanings that orbit around the nomination of the Square of Tombs.

Final Considerations

We can mark two crucial moments of the urban history of São Paulo associated to that urban emptiness. In the 70’s, urban planning was a tool of the military regime’s political project to modernize the public administration and intervene in a “rational” and authoritarian way in the cities’ configuration (Véras, 1991: 526). That was the final moment of a cycle of conservative and expansive modernization, based on urban expansion, social integration and on the idea of a project (Gorelik, 1999).

This cycle had barely started and it had to give place to a post-expansive modernization, accelerated in the 90’s, based on the market economy under the auspices of the neoliberal ideology (idem). The abandoned or ruined architecture and urbanism reminiscent of that first cycle are fought for by the impoverished popular classes –who squat in them and improvise by living in the streets and working in informality– and the State, the elites and middle-classes, who seek to take them back through revitalization processes, combining preservation of historical patrimony and social and spatial segregation, in a disseminated process of gentrification (Arantes, 2000; Harvey, 2000).

In this emptiness, formed by the destruction/construction of the city's history and by the unfinished decay of its buildings, the ruins of a peripheral urban modernity emerge. Gorelik singularised them in the Latin American context: "the urban modernity was a path to reach modernization, not its consequence; modernity was imposed as part of a deliberate policy leading towards modernization and in this policy the city was the privileged object" (1999: 56). The temporality of modernity is set out by its ruins in the most dramatic way, marked by the ephemeral and by death⁶ (Benjamin, 1987).

The meanings around the image of death are the expression of a modern temporality materialized on the urban emptiness: the cemetery. In the figure of this modern cemetery, the anamorphic process reveals the images and their historical meanings articulated by the oral memory, which are, respectively: from the question marks, the presupposed temporality in the urban planning of an ideal and empty future; from the clock, the ephemeral in the breaking of the transmission of the families', the neighbourhood's and the urban past; from the war, the breaking of the individual roots and the grief; from the "camelódromo", the emptying and the segregation of the public space; from the tombs, the anonymous memory of death.

Through this symbolic mediation these modern ruined temporalities are lived and represented in the inhabitants' experience. If the material ruins are signs of these historical strata, the oral narrative not only recovers the fragmented images of the past, but also updates the images by articulating them in the remembrance process, which thus confers a meaning to what, at least from the perspective of the unaware onlooker, seemed to be a vast emptiness filled with question marks.

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⁶ J. M. Gagnebin, while commenting on the analysis of the character of modernity in the work of Baudelaire by W. Benjamin, remembers that "Haussman materially realizes the approaching of the old and the modern through the manifestation of the senility of the present: the ruins of today correspond to the ruins of the past, death doesn't only inhabit the palaces of yesterday, but it has also appropriated the buildings we are constructing. It is this convergence of the past and the present in the form of its common future, death, that characterizes the temporal conscience of modernity" (1997: 150).

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