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Cities of Plastic and Cardboard and the Space of Resistance

At the beginning of the Third Millennium the spatial and urban concentration of poverty, deprivation and human suffering has taken on astonishing proportions.

The current development model contributes to social exclusion; it produces unemployment, indebtedness, and does not ensure living conditions. Gentrification, neglect and helplessness displace thousands of excluded, bringing them to the large cities. Furthermore, this parcel of the population undergoes a stigmatization and discrimination process, leading to increasing marginalization.

This paper discusses the impact of unemployment and socio-spatial exclusion in the central areas of Sao Paulo, Brazil, where the cultures of unemployment, practices and alternative strategies performed by the unemployed, homeless, collectors of recyclable materials and street vendors are expressed, with a view to resisting the crisis, generating income and protecting life.

They have built **cities of plastic and cardboard** across the formal city, in order to keep alive. What are the attitudes of society towards these new practices? Frequently these homeless populations are seen as parasites, and the society's responses include a variety of adverse, virulent, stigmatizing reactions. One of the most prominent reactions is what the Americans usually call the NIMBY syndrome (NIMBY-Not In My Back Yard), which applies not only to the arrangements spontaneously constructed by the homeless, but also to all types of institutions providing services to these populations. The mentioned reaction applies too to the great mass of informal workers and recyclable collectors [catadores], that act in public space, occupying it according to a very specific logic.

This syndrome describes one dimension of resistance that is the organized resistance of communities to the use of public spaces, which consists in one of the most sinister effects of neo-liberalism: the end of public space and the transformation of the citizen into the customer.

In Brazil this process is even more perverse, because it has the marks of an authoritarian, colonial, slave-holding society. As says Marilena Chauí "Brazilian society is marked by the predominance of private space over the public space, and having as its center the family hierarchy, it is strongly hierarchical in all its aspects. In this society, social and inter-subjective relations are always performed as a relationship between a superior who give the orders and an inferior who obeys. The differences and asymmetries are always transformed into inequalities that reinforce the order-obedience relationship. The other is never acknowledged as a subject, nor as a subject of rights, he is never acknowledged as subjectivity nor as alterity. The relations between those whom they consider their equals are as of a "family relationship", i.e., complicity; and among those that are seen as unequal, relationship takes on the form of a favor, of clientele, of guardianship or cooptation, and, when there is a very marked inequality, it takes on the form of oppression".

The unceasing search for material strategies of survival brings to the homeless a possibility of exhuming dead products attributing to them other definitions and constructing a new materiality on their part. The typical recycler was a homeless person that, through the rescue of discarded material, has been able to overcome his/her condition of severe poverty. Recyclers have been doing their work in an informal and marginalized manner for decades, but some of them have created recyclers cooperatives in order to generate a dynamic of collection, selection and commercial activities, thus generating some income.

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Looking at the survivalist strategy of homeless recyclers it is possible to recognize a culture of resistance that impacts the large metropolis. I use the term resistance to refer to homeless recycler everyday practices.

Resistance in this context is the political struggle in defense of dignity, of humanity, of survival. The practices of such resistance by the homeless involve some form of collective or individual action, a tremendous sense of creativity and design that transforms nothing into human survival.

Bell Hooks has been writing on the resistance space in her book *Yearning : Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* wrote about resistance in the essays "Homeplace: a Site of Resistance" and "Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness", Hooks recomposes our lived spaces as potentially places of resistance against all kinds of oppression. She refers to the marginal space as a place of resistance: "Understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. If we only view the margin as sign marking the despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for as lost. (...) So I want to note that I am not trying to romantically re-inscribe the notion of space of marginality where the oppressed live apart from their oppressors as "pure". I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance. And since we are well able to name the nature of that repression we know better the margin as site of deprivation."

Resistance had become a significant theme in Michel Foucault's work. Writing on the nature of power in society and its pervasive mechanisms, Foucault   stressed the productiveness of power, because it is not only a negative force, where there is power there is resistance. According to him: "(…) resistance is a part of this strategic relationship of which power consists. (…) If there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience. You have to use power relations to refer to the situation when you are not doing what you want. So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. (…) To say no is the minimum form of resistance. But of course, at times that is very important. You have to say no as a decisive form of resistance".

São Paulo still has blood spots in its sidewalks due to the brutal series of attacks on sleeping street people, that left seven dead and eight more seriously wounded. Despite police and governmental promises to seek justice in this case, the crime is still unsolved. Activists and homeless community and leadership are resisting against all kinds of city cleansing practices.

The critical interpretation of architectural resistance is an uplifting initiative to re-think the space and the place of the homeless and excluded populations within the contemporary city. Critical intelligence is an inseparable partner of hope. It is important to publicize the result of this camp to a wide audience in schools of architecture, design and urbanism, because it is important to re-think the approach to social issues in architecture. and take once again Michel Foucault to illuminate our understanding of this matter. He says: " (…) [Architecture] can and does positive effects when the liberating intentions of the architect coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom".

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