

Preface

This book emerges from concerns that have accompanied me since I was a young student of architecture and urbanism in Brazil in the beginning of the 2000's. My hometown, Rio de Janeiro, is known both for its natural beauties as well as for its huge social-spatial inequalities. Like most of the big cities in Latin America, Rio's urban landscape is marked by rich neighborhoods surrounded by poor areas, most of them self-built by their own residents. Self-built spaces of poverty, usually referred to as informal settlements – or favelas –, despite being predominant in the urban fabric are often disregarded in planning and architecture training. The disconnection between the reality that I saw and the one that I was taught in the university was always striking to me and it led to a series of approximations with the context of these self-built spaces.

The first deep encounter that I had was during my Bachelor thesis, where I decided to develop a design proposal for one favela that would arise from the issues reported to me by its inhabitants. After several visits and an immersive and completely inductive interaction with a group of residents, it was clear to me that their main concern was the location of the public health clinic that was placed, according to their words, in the only leisure space of the community.

To provide a context on how this piece of information was crucial to the further reflections that led me to the point that I am today, it is important to explain a bit about the context of this favela. The favela is named Vila Canoas, and it is a very small one located in a rich neighborhood in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Just across the street there are "million dollars" mansions located in gated communities. This small and overcrowded favela is located along a river and a short walk through its narrow streets shows us a diversity of technical issues that surely affect negatively the quality of life of the residents: little (or no) sunlight exposure and adequate ventilation in the houses, structural risks, homes at risk of flooding due to being located over the river, mobility issues

caused by non-standard stairs, narrow streets, and ramps that do not follow any technical standards. In 2002 Vila Canoas received an upgrading project in the context of the Bairrinho/Favela-Bairro program¹, where among other spatial transformations a public health clinic was built on what was technically described as an empty plot, but that was perceived by the local inhabitants as their only leisure space. Besides the implementation of the health care facility, the project also built two small squares with adequate urban furniture, in a good location and following all technical requirements to be considered a successful project.

Despite that, in all of my visits to Vila Canoas I never saw one person using those squares. On the contrary, the area where their leisure space used to be and where now the health clinic was located was always full of life, with people using the remaining open spaces besides the building in diverse ways. There was an informal market established there, people would hang out on the stairs that gave access to the clinic building, children would play besides it, and I even saw someone fixing their oven in this space. When I asked the residents I spoke to what was the main problem they faced in Vila Canoas, they all pointed out to the construction of the health clinic: "it destroyed our only leisure space". The narrative of the residents was not well received by the state architect that worked in the place. According to this person the residents were wrong about their demands and the major problem of the favela was the houses above the river.

Without disregarding the obvious technical issues that the favela faced and that are definitely in need to be addressed, this experience provoked me to see the distance between those who are thinking and designing the spaces and those who are using and in many cases building those spaces. For me it became clear that the training that we received as well as the tools and methods we had were not sufficient or adequate to act on those contexts.

Later on, as I followed my path both as practitioner and as an academic, I would be confronted with those issues in other contexts that made me realize that this phenomena – although more visible in self-built environments – was also present in very formalized areas of the so-called Global North. Following this first intuitive and somehow naïve experience, I started to dive into the topics of participation, collaborative design, co-production of spaces in the attempt to experiment and develop different formats of interaction between

¹ Favela Bairro was a favela upgrading program developed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from the 1990's to the early 2000's

technicians and civil society in its diverse forms that could aim for more inclusive spaces.

Coming back to my first project in a favela, in the end I decided to take on the narrative of the inhabitants and proposed a different design for the area where the health care facility was located to accommodate the diverse uses that were already happening there. I mention this, because now I have the clarity to understand that this was also a political decision. And later on, when I became more engaged with favelas' organizations and afterwards with social movements both in Brazil and in Europe, I would realize that engaging civil society can also – or should also – assume a political role.

With this book I aim to provide insights and also describe experienced methods for collaboration between different actors in the fields of urban and architectural planning and design with local communities and civil society organizations. But the lens through which I intend to explore these cases is the political dimension of the struggle and the potential for transformation that is intrinsic in these practices. Therefore, this book is not a merely compilation of methods for co-producing urban spaces, but rather it can be understood as a call for critical reflection in our fields of studies and in others.

Although it is written from the perspective of an architect and urbanist, the past years of working with communities have showed me that it is crucial that we move out from our disciplines and engage in horizontal exchange within and outside our technical and academic bubbles.

Beyond disciplines directly related to design and planning like architects, urban planners and designers, the approach proposed in the book could be useful for urban sociologists, anthropologists, engineers, among others. The base of the methods proposed are spatial, but they have been developed and experimented in an interdisciplinary setting. Beyond scholars and practitioners, the content of the book could also be useful for institutions and organizations working on the field with local communities.

