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The (re)conquest of the city: polis and public sphere

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ABSTRACT

We appear to be living in times of “political indifference”, an impression shared by many about the waning of the public sphere. At the same time, we have witnessed movements worldwide to recover the urban space for purposes of political expression, such as the *Indignados* of Plaza del Sol, in Madrid, or *Occupy Wall Street*. However, how can the exercise of politics be taken beyond the realm of occasional demonstrations? Can we see in our cities the true meaning of the *polis*, the locus of everyday politics? This article examines the conditions for projecting the public sphere into the urban space. Through delving into theories of rationalization, a series of hypotheses will be presented regarding the penetration of new forms of rationalization in the production and appropriation of the city, (i) of space as a manifestation of the public sphere, (ii) the weakening of this sphere through the rationalization of space itself, as well as (iii) the deepening of the dichotomies between the “public” and “public space”, the technical sphere and political power, private production and public appropriation. Using representative examples of these trends in the city of Rio de Janeiro, it recognizes in the new spatial configurations, prevailing today, an expression of the negative consequences of the rationalization presently at work in urban microstructures. These observations will lead us to the conclusion that these trends must be reversed through re-conquering the city and restoring an urban public spirit.

Keywords: Polis; Public sphere; Politics of everyday life; Communication; Rationalization.

Introduction

We appear to be living in times of “political indifference”, an impression shared by many about the waning of the public sphere – a forum in which divergent views on economic, social, cultural and political life are expressed (Chauí): an emptying of shared social life, impeding political action (Augusto Novaes), that could culminate in a trivialization of ethics (Leopoldo and Silva) and a weakening of the very notion of community, manifest, somehow, in the form of an absence – the absence of politics in everyday life and ultimately in its highest form: urban life.

On the other hand, we have witnessed movements worldwide which are re-appropriating the urban space as a venue for political expression and exerting pressure on institutional structures – notably, the Indignados of Plaza del Sol, in Madrid, or Occupy Wall Street, which then spread to several capitals, including the electrifying occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, followed by the Egyptian revolution – demonstrations that manifest the potential of the public space. David Harvey speaks opportunely of the “collective power of bodies in public space”, converting it “into a political commons, a place for open discussion and debate”, a recapturing of public space as political space. Mike Davis asks participants of Occupy “to continue to democratize and productively occupy the public space”.¹

However, how do you provide continuity to this exercise beyond occasional manifestations? What about the “politics of everyday life” in the sense of polis – the political dimension of space as a venue for constant communication? Do our urban spaces ensure the possibility of daily expression of the plurality of the social world? Can we view our cities as the locus of politics of everyday life – the political city?

This article seeks to examine the urban condition of public life – or, more specifically, the conditions for projecting the so-called “public sphere” into the urban space. The goal is to understand how a political city can emerge and be exercised: the urban experience as a political experience. We know that the manifestation of the public sphere in everyday life has occurred historically via the urban space. However, constant expression requires spaces that will constantly sustain it.

My analysis will begin with the impression that our cities are increasingly lacking in vibrant public life because, among other reasons, the spaces that are currently being produced appear to have a negative impact on urban public life, leading to the waning of its expression in the space itself. I will then seek the causes of this weakening by delving into theories on the rationalization of society and space. I will present a series of hypotheses regarding the penetration of

1. Harvey (2012a, p. 60; 2012b); Davis (2012, p. 42).

more subtle forms of rationalization in the production and appropriation of the city – which voice and advance trends already recognized in the 19th century by theorists such as Max Weber. I will put forth the idea of the “politics of everyday life” in connection with what Durkheim called anomie, the loss of ethical values which we will see is associated with disinterest in politics, according to the original meaning of the polis. Lastly, based on Lefebvre, I will discuss how the rationalization of urban space, planning practices and the production of space itself have contributed to the waning of the public sphere, witnessed by many – no longer in the form of Cartesian zoning organization, noted by Lefebvre, but of an increasingly rationalized space, now in its microstructure. This analysis will lead us to examine the ability of our cities to provide material conditions for political action, particularly based on its role to generate gatherings and density of communication in day-to-day life.

These hypotheses will ultimately bring us to the conclusion that this process must be reversed – by re-conquering the city and restoring an urban spirit. However, we will see that this restoration does not simply depend on demonstrations involving a “return to the public space”, as Harvey points out, but also on spatial conditions for the constant return and presence of the public in the public space. In other words, the problem goes deeper than the emptying of the public space: both its emptying out as well as its retaking does not occur in a vacuum. They depend on material conditions – urban and architectural – and, therefore, I will present arguments with respect to the relationship between open and built spaces, and public and private spaces.

The long-range vision entails reversing the damage brought about by the processes of rationalization of the urban space as an expression and milieu of what Habermas refers to as “shattered modernity”. We will explore this apparent paradox: on one hand, the current impression of political disinterest and the waning of the communicative dimension of societies and groups which have the ability to thematize their own condition, as found, at least conceptually, in the original meaning of the polis; on the other, the current signs of revival in the public sphere as seen in political demonstrations.

I intend to explore the particular mode of societal rationalization that has resulted in scenarios of autonomous decision-making about urban space on the part of space production actors. I will hypothesize that the growing autonomy of this sphere has been secured in the form of social and economic roles for specialized actors, who have been legitimized and freed a priori from political restraints and broader social and urban responsibilities in their decisions regarding the production of the city. I will argue that this autonomy is structured in accordance with a system of urban regulations that also stem from a process of rationalization. Above all, I intend to describe the modes such as urban space production practices which have achieved this autonomy with respect to the daily practices of other social actors and with respect to responsibilities in the sphere of public decisions in terms of the State’s management of the urban area.

I will argue that the result of this way of thinking is an increasingly greater division between built and open space, and public and private space, in which private space is defined according to production strategies, with a focus on marketing fields. New architectural standards have led to a weakening of relationships: built-open space, the weakening of the use and appropriation of public space and the dominance of private over public in new areas of Brazilian cities and in the replacement of existing fabrics.

I will explore, therefore: (i) space as a manifestation of the public sphere, (ii) the weakening of this sphere with the rationalization of space, (iii) and its new forms, in the deepening of dichotomies between public and public space; technical sphere and political power; technical and theoretical; private production and public appropriation; and new architectural and urban configurations which are currently becoming prevalent and express, in today's urban micro-structure, the downside of social and material rationalization. To this end, I will use: (iv) representative examples of this trend in the city of Rio de Janeiro, such as the new urban frontier to the west and its legislation.

The politics of everyday life and the waning of the public sphere

Politics is something that occurs between individuals, within a common space of public life.²

There are undoubtedly different definitions of "politics", such as the building of momentary consensuses, the conflicts and expressions of the constitutive division of the social dimension and the permanent creation of rights. The vision reigning today, however, separates the politics of everyday life and sets them within their own institutional sphere, where actions concerning the community are deliberated and decided: "a political sphere composed of political events that are distinct from all other spheres and social events". We conceive of "politics as based on the State or state institutions, form of governments, the existence of political parties or the presence or absence of elections".³

Herein lays the difficulty of restoring the idea of politics as an everyday phenomenon of social relations, as venues for constantly airing differences or conflicts – a politics of everyday life in the sense of the polis, of interaction in urban life, in embracing the notion of public. There is a decidedly urban dimension in the exercise of politics, which makes it akin to the idea of the urban sphere as an immersion in otherness realized in the production of linguistic exchange:⁴

2. Hanna Arendt in Novaes (2007, p. 17).

3. Novaes (2007, pp. 22-33).

4. See Netto (2012; in press).

communication. Augusto Novaes refers to politics as an exercise of speech – a vision of democracy as a “regime of speech or the effects of speech”, which Kant defined, in 1784, as “a common mode of deliberation that individuals may use for issues of public concern”.⁵ Dewey would later define public as a forum of speech for cooperatively solving common problems, under democratic conditions.⁶ The definition of “public” as communicative was systematized in 1962, in Habermas’ work on the public sphere as a jurisdiction in which state authority would be publicly monitored through critical discourse: “A discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest”, and where public opinion is formed.⁷

An initial approach for seeking the urban condition of the public sphere can be found in Habermas’ modalities of the public sphere, according to “density of communication, organizational complexity and range”⁸ – two of which have strong potential to be linked to space as a material condition:

- (a) episodic, consisting of spontaneous gatherings in places like bars and the street, as situations which constitute politics of everyday life. Not all communication in these venues involves political issues – but they are political activities insofar as they involve potential self-reflective communication, that is, where actors can also pose the problems of society itself and its organization, structure, institutions, cracks, contradictions, etc. Without the density of spontaneous communication in these places, a prime realm of possibilities would be lost for sharing opinions, postulating views of the world and social organization, presenting opposing opinions, formulating syntheses, exercising momentary consensuses and organizing groups and political events. The culture of bars and pubs are arenas of social life: they materialize the public sphere, manifest in the street itself. Among the endless commentary about each person’s daily life, political issues can also come to the fore from time to time;
- (b) organized presence at public gatherings in planned events, such as public festivals, political party meetings or churches congresses, the theater, rock concerts, etc. The recent and extraordinary global wave of demonstrations is an example of this mode, where the urban space provides the opportunity for expression – more evident forms of cooperation and coordination of activities at the time of public gatherings, visible to other actors and social fields;
- (c) abstract, which breaks with the extension of the urban space in that it is produced by institutionalized networks of top-down transmission of information, in the form of media, involving transmitters and receivers,

5. Kant in Habermas (1984b).

6. Novaes (2007, pp. 22, 33 and 26) and Dewey (1927), respectively.

7. Hauser (1998); Asen (1999); Fraser (1990, p. 57). See Perlatto (2012).

8. Habermas (1997, p. 107).

in digital and telematic communication networks between peers, as potentially symmetric interlocutors, in the role of mutual transmitters of information and perceptions of the world. Even the elusive materiality of these communications is produced and anchored in the city.⁹

The episodic and organized presence modes of the public sphere seem to constitute the historical reason for the city itself. They continue to be present – at least potentially – in the spaces of Brazilian cities. My hypothesis is that the projection of the public sphere in the form of opening up meeting areas, which has already met with resistance in terms of spatialities and contemporary urban and planning regulations, in the form of organizational and urban zoning efforts, continues to suffer from the effects of the rationalization of space, in its production and legislation, and with respect to co-presence itself – reduced to areas in today's cities that are rarefied and controlled in nature. The exploration of this hypothesis will require, however, briefly delving into the impact of rationalization as a vector of modernity on the public sphere. We will see, however, how the potential of the public sphere starts being fractured by the logic at the heart of the current processes of urban rationalization.

Modernity shattered by a logic of the modernization process itself

Observers recognized, even in the nineteenth century, clear signs of a process of societal transformation and modernization – the emergence of modernity marked by “rationalization”. Unlike Marx, Weber’s diagnosis is pessimistic. He interprets rationalization as an increasing differentiation of social action, the opposition between traditional substantive rationalities and a new formal rationality directed toward the organization of activities, knowledge and technical processes – and the emergence of a particular type of action: strategic action, guided in accordance with its end purpose, means and results (zweckrational).¹⁰ It describes a growing methodical involvement, arising from rationalization in bureaucratic administration, business accounting, scientific practice and its mastery of empirical processes. It was echoed in the modern state and economy as central systems of action in societal terms, and in the development of a “methodological conducting of life” with respect to personality.

9. “The more a city grows the more abstract the communication within it becomes. This abstractionism is typical of the city. We could even suppose a relationship between the stages of development of the city, democracy and social communication, when today we would then be (generically) in the age of the great city, flush with democracy and abstract communication – which does not exclude concrete forms, yet does not dispense with the abstract.” Romulo Krafta (in a personal communication). On overcoming the apparent dichotomy between space versus new transpatial communication networks, see “Between urban and digital spaces, or the unfolding of practice” (Netto, 2011). Also see Perlatto (2012).

10. This is a distinction that will lead to instrumental and non-instrumental ideas of reason and rationality in Adorno, which would influence Habermas later on.

There is a progressive weakening of the conducting of life based on values and traditions by a rationality that is free of ethical counterpoints once endogenous to the process for the guiding of action. In Weber's view, actions become increasingly justifiable by their own criteria, exempt from the recognition of their impact on other fields of practice. Durkheim called this process "anomie".¹¹ This is followed by a functional decoupling of the economic and political systems and the progressive exemption of evaluating economic and production systems from an ethical point of view.¹²

We know, however, that what Habermas calls the "unfinished project of modernity" did not have this goal: on the basis of reason it proceeded in the direction of its full realization in the ideas of equality, freedom and fulfillment of the potential of individuals. The collapse of this project in a shattered modernity indicates the path of rationalization of practices and their breakdown into autonomous spheres, driven by their own strategic logic, imposing damage on other spheres. An expression of the ability to operate in a specialized manner ends up fracturing the social world and, ultimately, betrays the principles of the original project of modernity itself, as envisioned by Kant and others in the eighteenth century. During its course, the sphere of rational politics, detached from the economy and State, was weakened by the same forms it initially awakened. Modernity gave way to a derailment (*Entgleisung*), presenting pathologies such as anomie, skepticism, privatism and narcissism, as opposed to values such as responsibility.¹³

How does this process of rationalization of human practices involve space? We will now see how urban space itself provides more than one example of the profound contradiction between the potential of rationality and the negative consequences of rationalization: as Lefebvre noted, space was a fundamental way of expanding it in the social world.

11. See the use of Durkheim's concept applied to an urban policy problem in Trigueiro (2012).

12. Anomie is also accompanied by the aforementioned separation of the social sciences in economics, sociology and political science. This analytical separation of the sciences of human practices results in supporting, intellectually, the notable progressive detachment of the economy from other spheres of action. Economic action is then guided by its own criteria based on principles of maximization of benefits, among others – criteria devoid of ethical implications as far as their impact on the social world and its environment.

13. This is the central thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1985). Habermas, an exponent of the fourth generation of theorists engrossed with the theme, at last takes up an emancipation project that has not been seen since Marx – a "child of Enlightenment thought", as Harvey notes (1992, p. 14). The increasing autonomy of the economy and anomie go hand in hand. See the reaction of economist Paul Krugman on the immorality of decisions on Wall Street. Available at: <<http://nyti.ms/MxiYGA>>.

Modernization and rationalization in the urban space

The great theorists of the late nineteenth century were deeply embroiled in diagnosing the same process which was then clearly emerging: modernity. Georg Simmel was no exception, but he was unique in one sense: he explicitly associated modernity with the life of the metropolis. In Simmel's view, "mental life in the metropolis" involves the disciplining of our sense of space and time, the liberation of the individual at the cost of mutual treatment in objective and instrumental terms, under the influence of economic rationality, the calculation of exchanges and coordination of the division of labor and an intellectual and blasé attitude arising from the complex stimuli of modern life.¹⁴

However, Simmel's interpretation was still not able to reveal the full extent of modernization in the shaping of space, as well as the role of space and urbanization in the building of modernity. Henri Lefebvre is the theorist who, half a century later, would make this discovery. Like Weber, Lefebvre adopts a theory of societal rationalization – but in such a way as to include space as fundamental in its installation in everyday life – a "dominant trend toward fragmentation, separation and disintegration". An abstract space that tends toward homogeneity, the elimination of existing differences, emanating from the reductions of the rationalization mode – even if the reduction is a "legitimate operation".¹⁵ As an example of the confinement in systems within systems (each one of which "aspires to the status of an independent force"), Lefebvre cites the practices of urbanism and architecture, fields pertaining to specialists who operate through reductionist schemes.¹⁶ It would no doubt be possible to reconstruct the history of urban planning as a history of rationalization.

What are the implications of this scale of rationalization of space? Below, we will see formal examples of the transformation of the city according to a handful of principles of instrumental rationality, disconnected from other implications and consequences in relation to other spheres of practice.

The urban consequences of rationalization in contemporary times

We tend to think that the trend toward rationalization through space reached its pinnacle in the form of modern mechanistic urbanism – such as sectorization and the idea of apparent order in Euclidean geometrization – noted by

14. See Simmel (1950) and Harvey (1992).

15. See Lefebvre (1991, pp. 9 and 106, respectively).

16. Lefebvre (1991, pp. 9, 52, 106, 287 and 414).

Jacobs and Lefebvre. The more apparent form of ordering space was partially weakened by urban criticism in the 1960s, but more subtle forms of rationalization appear to continue being strongly manifested in the Brazilian city, in the form of management tactics and more penetrating spatial scales and thus, as I will argue, with severe implications on the social and political potential of the public space:

- a) alienation in relation to the *res publica*;
- b) autonomy of the private in relation to the public;
- c) schism between theory, technical sphere and decision-making with respect to the city;
- d) alienation of production practices in relation to the appropriation of space;
- e) damage to cities stemming from the rationalization of architectural configurations that end up undermining the use of the public space.

Each of these topics certainly deserves a paper on its own – but we'll take a quick look at some of their aspects and impacts on the public sphere.

(a) Alienation in relation to the *res publica*

A sign of anomie in the technical, legal and economic spheres and of the invisibility of their production activities in the urban space – in addition to the removal of the public from urban decisions – is the weakening of the sense of “public” of the urban space as a setting for appropriation. We also have a transformation of values with respect to architecture and cities affected by the demonization of a type of open space for the public. In another apparent paradox: in societies that are making progress in their models of democracy, as well as increasing in scale and complexity, the definition of decision-making fields, in specific spheres and institutions, renders social and political processes invisible, and removes decisions concerning the city from the everyday realm. There is also a depoliticization of these processes.

Examples of this removal from the public sphere are frequent. The subjection of decisions about urban production to relationships between the specialized technical sphere and the political institutional sphere can be seen in our cities. The agendas of actors in decision-making positions are not uncommonly tied to the actors of production of space. Interpretations in relation to the city and ways to build it are imposed, on the basis of legal legitimization or by the central position of these specialized actors.

Inevitably, these interpretations are permeated with private motives. There is an emphasis on private modes of life and an architectural production focused on specific niche audiences via advertising tactics. These tactics include, ac-

according to Bauman¹⁷, playing on fear, as an urban policy; they feed on prejudices against otherness stereotyped as sources of danger or violence; and can intensify the sense of resignation of the public. The building of lifestyles based on these values can, therefore, affect the behavior of individuals and their manner of social interaction and vision of the social realm. An assimilation imprinted in the space and in forms of urban life. The expansion of instrumental rationality transforms the city according to a handful of principles unrelated to their impact on the social realm.

A second dimension of rationalization, pointed out by Lefebvre, among others, can be found in the temporality of our practices. The routinization of everyday life results from the programming of times for activities of different natures, even outside of work. This programming takes the form of a more functional experiencing of space – social life in a merely functionalized public space.

These factors overlap, in the Brazilian context, with the partial invisibility of decisions concerning the production of urban space, coupled with an understanding of the State as an opaque and distant organizational structure, which extends to citizens a vague vision of the *res publica* itself. All these processes jointly appear in the alienation of the public sphere in relation to its own “sense of public”, especially apparent in the lack of attention given to urban space as a form and field of appropriation, as a forum for powers and interests and an arena for social disputes. They are also apparent in the very forms of appropriation as an expression of forms of social interaction, which appear to have shifted away from the public space in most large cities. This shift, in turn, can undermine the political dimension of everyday interactions and the potential for cooperation and self-organization in regard to common causes.

(b) Autonomy of the private in relation to the public realms

Hannah Arendt defines the absence of self-interest as a condition for the exercise of politics in the polis – “an opposition between conduct governed by self-interest and public life”.¹⁸ We are far from this condition. “The first form of disinterest [in politics] is the privatization of life – disinterest in public affairs in favor of the private.”¹⁹

Restrictions on collective autonomy provoke a feeling that it's not feasible to pursue solutions to problems in the social sphere, which, in turn, leads to political indifference or even .

17. See Bauman (2009).

18. Leopoldo and Silva (2007, p. 132).

19. Novaes (2007, p. 15).

hostility toward politics as a place of institutional instances that should articulate the individual and social aspects of existence [...] such that the withdrawal of the individual to the private sphere then appears to be the only way to ensure his autonomy.²⁰

There is an ethical rejection of politics: “the profound contradiction in which we are entangled.”²¹ The separation between ethics and politics creates a distance between the individual and society, a fragmentation that will result in the inability of the individual to recognize himself in his social identity and, thus, act as a political individual.

Space will be elemental in this process. Interaction of a political nature no longer finds, in the urban plan, possibilities for full realization. Urban space primarily becomes a place for the manifestation of private interests. In this space, interaction of a political nature may not find any possibilities for its realization. Even though we live in a society where the resolution of problems no longer corresponds to the polis²², political life depends on the daily acknowledgment of opinions and exposure to actors in their diversity – conditions that will emerge more strongly in conditions of density of gatherings and communication, as provided by the city. A detached view, on the part of the public, places the burden of intervention, in the urban space, on the private economic sphere and its autonomous decisions, free from associations and implications in other spheres. The legitimization of the self-referential interests of actors, both in the production and consumption of this space, affirms the “private” as the greatest attribute, value and quality for the space. In this scenario, the consequence is the naturalization of the dominance of the private.

(c) The schism among theory, technique and decision-making with respect to the city

The waning of the public sphere in its urban projection seems to coincide with the hiding of political decision-making on the production and appropriation of space behind a technical sphere and its institutional organization. However, the difference between these spheres also engenders possibilities of conflict between decisions of a technical nature and the production agencies of the space itself. A State strongly linked to the public sphere will nourish the independence of the technical sphere that it supports within its own institutional structure, in its decisions about the city in the face of the self-centered interests of the actors who produce space. A technical sphere that is weakened politically or technically will have a reduced ability to propose urban policies.

This interplay of tensions between different spheres constitutes a significant part of the daily exercise of urban transformation planning and activities. In

20. Leopoldo and Silva (2007, p. 134).

21. *Idem.*

22. In a discussion with Romulo Krafta.

the Brazilian context, there appear to be two types of weakening in the position of actors in this interplay: a weakening of the technical sphere, due to the preponderance of particular criteria of political groups; and a weakening of the theoretical sphere, due to planning being understood as a practical field, exempt from the abstractions of theory in relation to the difficulties of city management, resulting in scientific knowledge frequently being overlooked. Thus, there is a separation between planning practices and theory, in the form of systematic and empirically consistent knowledge; between management institutions and academia as a specialized subsystem in the production of this knowledge – either stemming from criticism that such knowledge is not very applicable, or criticism regarding the lack of attention placed on the complexities of the city.

The distance between the technical and academic spheres weakens them both; it undermines a sense of usefulness and urgency in research practices and in terms of demand for theories able to address empirical urban problems. It creates a sense of the isolation of theory from the problems encountered in practice, as though applicability were a lesser effort, especially in regards to structural changes. On the other hand, a technical sphere detached from the developments taking place in research tends to be progressively weakened *vis-à-vis* problems presented by cities in transformation. When the technical sphere minimizes the importance of theory, it removes the possibility that empirical evidence found in research can provide support to decisions concerning the production of space. The negation of theory thus leads to a negation of the technical realm, which loses support in the definition of urban agendas and in the dispute with interests of political groups. In the vacuum of this mutual estrangement, the objectivity of the thought processes of private producers takes over and prevails.

(d) Alienation of production activities in relation to the full appropriation of space;

One serious problem resulting from this schism is the absence of systematic knowledge about urbanization standards in production and their consequences on the daily dynamics of the city. The absence of debate, both public and technical, about urban and architectural form and its implications on performance, over and above the energy question of buildings, is not, however, without consequences. In this vacuum, form is determined almost exclusively by adhering to the maximization worksheets of the actors who produce space, with their specific criteria. Areas of the city become the projection of a self-centered logic, dictated by self-referential interests. One of the consequences is the separation of private production from concerns about the public appropriation of urban spaces. The city is taken over by a homogenizing logic that distances itself from the different social groups which are constantly seeking expression in the urban space.

Therefore, the exclusive projection of the codes of the private sphere onto the urban space tends to weaken the urban sphere itself: the possibility of a social world projected in its complexity in the form of cities as an expression of the public sphere.²³

(e) Damages arising from the rationalization of urban and architectural configurations

We come, finally, to the material components that will consolidate these forces of rationalization. I would like to expose, at this stage of my argument, the means by which the urban space is quietly, but intensely, participating in the weakening of the public sphere. The term “exposure” makes sense because these means and urban standards are not the expression of a “society”, insofar as a total entity, but of a specific social niche, technically supported and strategically oriented toward supplying typified spaces, based on values such as the segregation and alienation of the public – which do not respond, therefore, to the values of urban and social diversity.

I’d like to point out that there is clearly a new model of architectural and urban production, which expresses a new form of rationalization of urban space, which is much more penetrating than the rigid zoning of modern urban planning – a type of rationalization that has been shaping the city, especially since the early 1990s, in the form of (1) increasingly controlled interfaces between built and open space, and public and private space, in the definition of architectural types and segregated structures – subjecting entire areas to forms of atomized segregation at the level of urban lots; (2) exclusive activities for certain publics, permitted and even consolidated by urban and architectural regulations. These aspects are materialized in architectural models characterized by barriers and separations from other buildings and the public space, as modes of controlling access. This results, therefore, in breaking down the continuity of facades and the compactness of blocks. They have advantages in terms of habitability²⁴, originally set forth in master plans that were modernistic, precarious and without infrastructure, epitomized by the Athens Charter and Voisin Plan.

The problem does not lie in the division between public and private in the form of demarcations that characterize cities in the Greek polis, but²⁵ in the separa-

23. This reasoning does not imply that the “market is the villain that corrupts the State”. It first indicates that the association between production actors via the market and those that manage the urban space can easily be compromised. The problem lies at the source: a model of representative democracy that enables an alignment between private interests and the institutional activities of political actors, established at the time of financing political campaigns, can easily drive a wedge between these institutional activities and the public interests of those being represented. There is frequent evidence of this in scandals involving governments in varying scales.

24. However, they reproduce anti-urban prejudices that used to associate spatial densities and epidemics in the European city of the nineteenth century, which was industrialized, precarious and lacking in infrastructure, and thus influenced the concepts of ideal cities conjured up at the time, ranging from the garden city to the modernist city. These models proved, however, to be inadequate, also in terms of other aspects of habitability: in usual urban situations, in lots, most of their openings were to the side, a few meters from the side walls of neighboring buildings, detracting from privacy, insulation and lighting.

25. See Arendt (1987).

tion of architecture as private space from the arena of public life par excellence, which is the street. Nor is it a matter of returning to urban public life of the past, but rather upholding the possibility of constant and daily co-presence which is the essence of life in the city. Richard Sennett reminds us that Aristotle defined the city as *synoikismos*, a convergence of people from diverse family backgrounds: “A city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence”²⁶.

I would like to put forth the thesis, which we provided empirical support for in another paper²⁷, that this architectural and urban pattern has been responsible for reducing the appropriation of urban space in areas and cities where it is increasingly applied. It gives rise to what we might call, using Lefebvre’s excellent term: the “negative appropriation of space”.

Let’s take a look at how the building model is responsible for negative appropriation. An isolated architectural model often has side clearances from other buildings, which requires larger lots and imposes greater distances for pedestrians at the ground floor and street level. This model usually also comes with walls and reduced density for openings (windows and doors) – elements that build the interface with the street. Front and side clearances, walls and fences and reduced openings accompany a drop in the number of pedestrians, shops and services at ground level and functional urban diversity – factors that define the forms and intensities of the social appropriation of the space. This pattern is not restricted to gated communities in cities: it also appears in normal urban lots, creating forms of atomized segregation. These empirical observations reveal the inadequacy of the models that have been consolidated in the market. These are not “subjective” impressions, a term often used in an effort to negate such observations.

The projection of the urban public space in a ‘shattered modernity’

What are the functional implications that this architectural pattern generates? The truth is, ground floors with shops and services are now unfortunately associated with the possibility of being accessed by “just anyone”, and the risks that this non-planned otherness brings in its wake – as evidence of an undesirable difference – such as risk of violence, manifestations of poverty or inconsistency with the status that the building and its different publics seek to uphold. What these concepts of architecture and the city often lack is an understanding of the relationships that buildings and their activities maintain between themselves and with the urban space and functioning of the city – a systemic understand-

26. Aristotle in Sennett (2012, p. 14).

27. See “(Buscando) Os efeitos sociais da morfologia arquitetônica” – Netto, Vargas and Saboya (2012).

ing. The elimination of public activities at the ground floor, once widespread, entails a total disconnection of the specific activities of these buildings in relation to the flow of appropriation of the different publics in the street.

A characteristic of this micro-rationalization of space is the independence of the operation of buildings in relation to their surroundings, if its users do not use the street as a space for pedestrian movement, but come from far away in personal vehicles. Therefore, even though they do not constitute specific zones, this building configuration can produce flows that are removed – analytically, functionally – from overall urban flows. This relative independence of the public space can also lead to subtle forms of segregation, established in the form of spaces primarily servicing its target audience.

The production of these buildings in areas where urban renewal or expansion is taking place makes them specialized, not as areas demarcated by mechanistic plans, but as a mere accumulation of buildings of a certain standard. Herein is the tremendous efficacy of this transformation: it does not depend on pre-established norms, but occurs in the form of similarities among individual decisions, with effects on the social appropriation of its spaces and the diversity of activities, which are only recognizable when such types become dominant within a context.

The role of the production of space is the responsibility of specialized actors in this regard, but who – in our context – are unable to connect the act of building with any other aspects besides those corresponding to the maximization of individual interests and the satisfaction of typified actors and lifestyles based on marketing assessments.

The alternative to this criticism would be to ignore the reduction that this logic represents as the sole vector of urban transformation. And to ignore a circularity: a logic circumscribed to one group or social field ends up systemically impacting the possibility of appropriation of other groups, when it is projected on the urban space as a model of urbanization. This model is a typical oversimplification and distortion of the deviations of a rationalization that is disconnected from its broader contexts. Thus, there is a reduction and imposition of a model of space – and even a way of life – on all other forms of life, on the vitality of whole areas of a city and on urban performance itself, which ultimately affects everyone. There is an archetype of this type of production of urban space in an area under expansion in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The case of the “new urban frontier” of Rio de Janeiro

The expansion of the South Zone to the west, in Baixada de Jacarepaguá, starting in the 1960s, in vast areas with few properties, was in large part pre-defined by Lucio Costa's Pilot Plan (1969). This Plan initially established criteria for urbanization: regulation of land use and urban form, limiting buildings to between eight and ten floors; autonomous nuclei interspersing multi-family and single-family residences, with a separation between them; development of the region for all layers of the population; preservation of the region's ecosystem; and creation of a new business center in the area known as Barra da Tijuca, as an alternative to the historic downtown area. The Plan generated conflicts between production actors, crucial for its partial completion; changes made to accommodate adjustments for real estate interests, such as floors and intended uses; and land subdivision.²⁸ The landscape of the area was modified through vertical construction, with multi-family buildings with 25 to 30 floors, especially in its first area of expansion, in Barra.

Exceptions aside, the spatial rationalization of the area generally adheres to modernist functional and typological genotypes – with the addition of some diversity. Barra, since the beginning of its urbanization, has been deliberately associated with a “new style of contemporary life” via urban marketing [Figure 1] – and is certainly understood as such by its consumers. The cores are protected by the distance and apparent autonomy offered by the closed shopping malls. While it would have the functions of the city, distant and accessed by expressways, inhabitant-consumers would be served within the area's cores. The model's acceptance is confirmed by the growth rates: 2,580 inhabitants (1960); 5,779 (1970); 40,726 (1980); 98,229 (1991); 174,353 (2000); 300,823 inhabitants (2010). The growth rate between 2000 and 2010 is an impressive 72.54%.

FIGURE 1

“This is our wall of shame” – an illustration used in advertising to demonize the morphology of Copacabana by establishing a new architectural typology associated with “a new [urban] lifestyle”. Urban marketing was already active in the 1970s and 1980s.

Source: *Jornal do Brasil*



28. Rezende and Leitão (2003).

The expansion continues further west of the environmentally fragile areas of the Baixada²⁹, formalized according to the “Urban Structuring Project (PEU) for the neighborhoods of Vargem Grande, Vargem Pequena, Camorim and some of the neighborhoods of Recreio dos Bandeirantes, Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá” [Figure 2] – Supplementary Law No. 104 of November 27, 2009.

FIGURE 2

the latest frontier: the area of the PEU das Vargens, in yellow.

Source: Montezuma and Oliveira (2010)/NIMA-PUC



The legislation for these areas continues to reflect the urbanization models of the real estate market to the point of prescribing rules that today prevent traditional urban configurations such as continuous typology.³⁰ All of these regulations determine the particular type of “towers” or isolated buildings and, in an irresponsible manner, prevent other typologies, thus reproducing the Barra model and inducing a sparse occupation.

Urban areas such as this have been such fields of engagement for actors who, more than ever, mold space as the reproduction of lifestyles, via market research and models that ensure cost minimization with a maximization of profit at the time of sale.

- (i) The reproduction of the plan based on vertical growth and the multiplication of floors maximizes the use of installed manpower, machinery and technology at the construction site, thereby reducing construction time. These factors reduce construction costs for each floor: that is, the relative cost of each floor that is added decreases, while the sales value of the property increases due to the “view” factor. This explains the preference of real estate production actors for the isolated-type formula. It is also one of the reasons why the fabric of cities has progressively been replaced with this type – a formula in place since the 1990s.

29. Montezuma and Oliveira (2010).

30. The urban regulations for the new expansion frontier define subdivision criteria as a minimum area of 360 m² for lots (as in sector F) and 1,000 m² for large-size lots (sector I), with a minimum frontage of 20 m. The criteria for buildings are generous, with a maximum of 6 to 18 floors; frontal spaces are fixed at a minimum of 5 m. More seriously, clearance space from the boundaries of the lot is required by law. In the PEU (Urban Structuring Project) areas, the indexes that have fragmented the form of Brazilian cities based on an abstraction created to meet certain aspects of habitability, but without paying attention to other performance factors – the land use indexes (IATs) – are low.

- (ii) The replication of the building model reduces the costs of specific architectural designs for specific locations. This factor gives rise to the preference for large lots capable of providing enough space for these types and their space clearances.
- (iii) The combination of these factors in the creation of attractive “packages” for a lifestyle based on concepts of status and protection, reproduced for their target audience.³¹
- (iv) Land subdivisions must be suitable for this type of real estate, with large lots, meaning that these new areas will no longer have the continuous morphologies of the traditional city, unless future urban repair takes place.

More serious still, new Master Plans, throughout Brazil, have been formulated in such a way that the continuous, less vertical and more context-specific type is excluded – an attack on urban morphological and functional diversity, on the appropriation of public, pedestrian and open space, and on good urban performance in general. The irony of the logic of rationalization of individual interests is that it does not necessarily lead to the best overall outcome. Unintended urban consequences, such as decreased performance, can ensue. The final result can show up in the sum of micro-rationalizations that appear to make sense individually, but no longer make sense in the totality of their impacts. Silent negative effects may remain concealed for a long time – but this invisibility does not negate their existence.³² Certain types of architecture make sense to their producers and consumers by offering ways to minimize costs and increase individual benefits, but their cumulative systemic effect, both spatially and temporally, can be disastrous.

It is precisely this dilemma that we face today in our cities. Without encountering much reaction from the academic sphere due to the lack of theoretical and empirical studies, morphologies have been reproduced without a rigorous examination of their urban impact. The social effects of architecture continue to be ignored in teaching, in decisions in the real estate market and in planning practices. It is as though we are myopic with respect to the evident emptying of the streets or the low appropriation of space in areas where this new standard predominates. This situation will have implications in the public sphere, such as decreased density of gatherings and communication in the public space.

31. See Bauman (2009).

32. The decision to use individual vehicle transport easily leads to collective patterns of congestion. A factory dumping its unprocessed byproducts into the river may represent a cost savings for the manufacturer, but the cumulative damage will ultimately affect the whole body, including the manufacturer. Promoting the production of vehicles positively impacts a strategic sector of the economy and can reverberate in others, but further down the line it can negatively affect overall economic activity by contributing to the decline of mobility in the city.

City, *res publica* – for a social and urban ethic

How can the situation involving the waning of the politics of everyday life be reversed? Movements for recovering the public space, as a projection of the diversity of the public sphere, such as Occupy Wall Street, Tahrir Square in Cairo, or Syntagma Square in Athens, serve as reactions to this process of anomie. Such movements seem to indicate a “renewal of the public space as the locus for the exercise of politics, through gatherings and the agglomeration of small or large crowds”³³.

The key question, however, has to do with situations over and beyond protests, in the form of daily actions and more constant projections of the public sphere into the urban space. The constant occupation of the public space, suggested by Mike Davis, cannot be achieved in just any urban condition. The spatial constitution of the public sphere as an arena for discursive relationships in which actors come together to discuss issues of mutual interest, where public opinion and political participation are enacted through speech,³⁴ undoubtedly extends beyond open public space – and includes built space as a locus of the body in action and interaction. The political use of the public space is feasible if there is continual appropriation, and this also depends on built and private space for anchoring the practices and activities of actors – attractors of the flows. The interweaving of the public and private sphere in the urban space cannot be ignored.

Besides this interweaving, a policy on space should take into account the rationalization of urban space and social practices. I propose that the causes of the weakening of the urban modalities of the public sphere (episodes of spontaneous gatherings and organized presence) are related to three vectors of rationalization:

- (a) cognitive and ethical vectors, which operate in the form of knowledge, values and guidelines, which release actors from broader social and urban links and contexts in order to focus on their self-referential way of thinking;
- (b) action vectors resulting from these guidelines, which operate in the form of internal strategic partnerships in specialized fields of operation, likewise self-referential – such as the fields of the producers of urban space – establishing relationships of strategic dependency with other fields, such as the regulatory system for urbanization and appropriation of the city and the political decision-making system, which are severely disconnected from civil society, that has been reduced to the category of typified consumers of space;

33. Name (2012, p. 201).

34. I use concepts of mutual interest found in Hauser (1998) and political participation through speech in Fraser (1990).

- (c) material projection vectors of these activities in the production of the urban space itself, notably in the ways of building and architectural and urban standards. These vectors reproduce, install, establish and reinforce the trends of division produced in the private and institutional spheres, which seem to converge with each other and move away from substantive instances of the values, practices and social and urban contexts of the public sphere.

How can we avoid this free fall in the “division without end” and the logic of separation typical of the strategic rationalization of the urban space, which serves exclusive functionality and the ideal of segregation? It's not a matter of abandoning the gains and potential of rationality, but to resituate forms of urban rationality from the perspective of broader values and direct it into discussion agendas for forming public opinions. The re-conquest of the city is about recovery in relation to a “shattered modernity” that cannot only take place in a circumscribed normative institutional sphere, or in occasional acts of specific actors, even if collective. It requires the strengthening of public opinion and its impact on the planning deliberations of democratic institutions, including the following aspects:

- Discussion about urban responsibility – based on the ethos of the city as a means of social interaction for different fields and social agencies – which begins in recognizing the role of the private sphere in the affirmation of the public sphere;
- Discussion about descriptions that can objectify and actions that can reverse the strategic use of the legal and planning systems in the production of space that relinquish this urban responsibility. I speak of moving from an “ethic of the urban sphere” to daily, informed political action, in dialogue with the technical and scientific spheres, and access to decision-making, which is otherwise rendered invisible.
- The influence of informal public discourse centering on issues of urban interest, formed in autonomous social fields about the deliberative practices of planning institutions. Without this wideness of range, public discourse does not achieve actual political power.³⁵

These aspects are clearly based on an ethic of balance of weight between actors that the city – along with other media, such as transpatial networks – can provide as a structure for communication situations: the possibility of recognizing spatial logics that express certain social niches and the possibility of transforming the public and private space. A broader manifestation of actors in the public sphere (the field of social life in which public opinion is formed) requires a compatible notion of public space and the debate regarding urban production. The core proposal of this text focuses on reversing the trends of

35. On the concept of deliberative politics, see Habermas (1997)

anomie and the reaffirmation of the city as a field of politics in everyday life through restoring the ethic of social interaction in the pure sense of the polis, with the means to overcome the fractures between disconnected practices and between fragments of only functionally dependent subsystems. An ethic that is able to guide: (a) the generation of technical standards in architecture, through using more precise knowledge that is attentive to the impacts of different urban standards, with the commitment of the actors involved in the production and planning of urban space; (b) the role of the regulatory sphere, in order to come up with urban rules and institutionalized planning practices that express these guidelines to the diversity of agencies and demands.

Since Aristotle's book, *Politics*, it's been understood that the urban space promotes social diversity – especially in areas of trade and exchange – something that the functionalized city of the 20th century and the controlled spaces of the Brazilian city of the 21st century have been progressively losing. My brief account of this process ranks as one among others – but it does urge criticism and rejection of this generalized model in the form of a debate that takes into account different visions of the urban sphere and architecture – one that is guided, however, by a sense of responsibility of the private sphere toward the public sphere, and which is able to foster a deliberative institutional policy.

Nor is it necessary to paint an apocalyptic view of the city: there are areas in every city that pulsate with urban life. Urban centers continue to be composed of dense open spaces, such as those historically associated with the meaning and origin of cities as an expression of social interaction, the division of labor, political organization and the collective experience in its most sophisticated and difficult form: democracy. When people are on the street, any kind of effervescence can take place. This would enable us to draw nearer to the idea of the polis, the daily exercise of social life and exchanges with political potential. Other spheres, such as those involving legal requirements and urban rules that guide the production of urban space, are a means to this re-conquest.

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