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Music and humor in the urban space

The street blocks in Rio de Janeiro carnival

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Abstract. *The use of the urban space as a scenery for popular manifestations reaches back to the origins of Rio de Janeiro's Carnival. The so-called "blocks" are groups of people who go out in greeting, to the sound of amplified music and percussion instruments. In the past decades, this type of expression multiplied exponentially, and, nowadays, hundreds of blocks occupy the city streets in the carnival period. The aim of this paper is to investigate the way the "street blocks" act on the urban ambiance and as modifiers of the perception for its inhabitants.*

Keywords: *popular festivities, perception, urban ambiance*

Introduction

The study of the urban ambiance articulates the physical (buildings, street furniture) and natural dimension (vegetation, water, topography) of the space with the appropriation practices, due the sensorial perception of the users. The ambiance is a situated phenomenon which integrates attributes objectives (physical parameters and environmental indicators) and subjectives (sociocultural, affectives and aesthetics): "a space-time experienced in sensitive terms" (Thibaud, 2010).

The use of public space as the setting for popular parties is a tradition of the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. The so-called "blocks", the most popular kind of manifestation, multiplied exponentially in the past decades¹.

How these multisensorial events, which disrupt the "ordinary" ambiance of the streets, influence the perception of public space? Which behaviors are adopted by the public during the passage of the blocks? The memory of these experiences changes the look of the inhabitants over these spaces? In order to investigate the ways of appropriation of public space during these festivities, we adopted the methodology of direct observation of behavior and interviews with the revelers.

Street carnival in Rio de Janeiro

At the beginning of last century, in the streets of Rio, emerged a way of Carnival celebration that persists until today. The blocks "followed the rhythm of percussion instruments, singing their own songs and carrying a flag, commanded by a master with his whistle" (Pimentel, 2002). After a period of apogee in the years 1950-60, the blocks were gradually being overshadowed by the Samba Schools parade, which presents bigger touristic and mediatic appeal.

1. In the carnival season of 2012, the blocks assembled about 5 millions revelers.
<http://www.rioguiaoficial.com.br/carnaval/blocosderua/noticias>

In the 1980s, inspired by the political moment², a new generation of blocks appeared, with the proposal of rescuing the original characteristics of Rio de Janeiro's street Carnival: irreverence, spontaneity and open to popular participation.

Parade dynamics, popular involvement

The blocks move through the traffic ways, while the audience stays in the sidewalks, across the curb. In this type of event, there is a constant interaction and interchange of "active" (the ones who sing and dance) and "passive" (those who watch) attitudes. The displacement strategies are adapted to the parade dynamics. People who are more familiar with the venue usually take alternative ways, by means of adjacent streets, in order to resume their positions within the block (near to friends, or closer to the drums) or aiming to escape the narrower and more overcrowded passages.

In order to achieve a more comprehensive view, some revelers use trees, street furniture and walls as support to elevate the point of view. Given the synchronous nature of these events, is very common that the local residents invite friends to watch the parade, using windows, balconies and terraces as a theater balcony.

Most of the blocks use humor and criticism as theme for their parades. Social and political facts and characters are depicted in a satirical manner in the T-shirts and samba lyrics. The public is very receptive to this type of approach and participates in an active and creative way. Some costumes are surprising due to their plastic solutions and to the improvisation capacity demonstrated by the revelers.



Figure 1. "Simpatia é Quase Amor" battery. Figure 2. Wooden legs in "Escravos da Mauá" (photos by Raul Silvestre)

All human senses, but especially vision and hearing, are stimulated by the urban ambiance generated in the temporal and spatial context of such events.

The sound as reference

The rhythm dictated by the "Battery"³ (fig. 1) is the reference to the revelers to integrate themselves, in a harmonic form, to the collective singing and dancing ritual. The sound of the percussion instruments and that of the singers' voices propagates across the urban space, leading the procession throughout its course.

However, it is important to understand that the physical space is not "neutral", or a mere frame to the activities it embraces. *"The propagation space – narrow, straight or tortuous streets, wide avenues, buildings height, types of materials, vegetation, some furniture... – is an essential dimension in the perception modulation."* (Torgue, 2005).

2. After two decades, Brazil was reconquered the right to direct vote and to freedom of speech.

3. Set of percussion instruments that mark cadence and support the components' singing and dancing. The harmony between the instruments and the rhythmic variations are guided by a "master".

The sound is also an important attraction element: the propagation of the percussion instruments (mainly the bass tones) through the empty spaces between buildings indicates the block's position. It is common that people passing by neighbor streets leave their way to watch the block passing, or even to integrate the dancing. Many times, places visually unattractive can reserve good surprises. The Bloco de Segunda usually finishes its parades with a drums presentation, still, in the docks of a big popular market. The geometry of the space, encrusted between walls, reveals an amazing acoustic quality.

Visual Identity

The exploration of sensitive attributes (color, light, brightness) is part of the plastic language of Carnival costumes and allegories. All blocks have their visual identity associated to their colors, flag and T-shirt. Some of them also incorporate circus and theatrical elements (clowns, acrobats, giant puppets, etc.) to their parades, always related, somehow, to the history of their founders or of the neighborhood where they have been created and are used to parade. The opening of Escravos da Mauá block's parade, in the port zone of Rio de Janeiro, is formed by a group of people in wooden legs (Fig. 2), wearing costumes traditional to the carioca Carnival (columbine, sailor, gypsy, pirate, devil, odalisque, etc.). This is an element with high visual impact, given by interference in the customary scale relation.

Behavior and space usage

The choice for more or less evident costumes, as well as the attitude as "active" or "passive" participant in the collective singing and dancing, reflects the greater or smaller disposition to subvert the daily life codes of conduct. Many people have mentioned the occupation of traffic ways as an especially pleasant activity, seen as "*revenge against the vehicles dictatorship*". The exceptionality nature of the party, "*today is Carnival*", has been frequently evoked too.

The popular characteristic of the event, open to all age groups and social classes, also implies a reduction of the distance – physical, social and cultural – among people. The analysis has revealed, in general terms, friendly behaviors in the repositioning dynamics to go along with the parade. Although some people show certain irritation, most reactions have been forthcoming, followed by a smile, a word or simply a body movement clearing the passage. The youngsters take advantage of these situations as approach strategy. The tank car wash was the solution found by Bloco do Barbas (fig. 3) to soften the revelers' heat (fig. 3). This element, which is incorporated by many other blocks today, was the feature more capable of unchaining unused behaviors, not very commonly observed in adults...

(Re) discovering the city

By subverting the day to day practices, such events exercise others forms of relationship with the urban space (sight / hearing / touch) and other kinds of evaluation based on elementary physical features: form, scale, color, sonority, aesthetics (fig. 4). "*When the routine is momentarily disrupted by a spectacle, the habits change, revealing a different space, opening the dwellers' eyes (and ears) to this place*" (Aventin, 2005).

Many people among the interviewees have reported surprises reserved by places they thought they knew quite well. For others, the blocks offer the opportunity to become acquainted to unknown sites, due to the fact that such locations are out of their "daily route" (home-work-fun). The affectionate relationship existing between the more traditional blocks and the districts where they parade is expressed in references – in the T-shirts and samba lyrics – to the places' nature, history or life style. The valuation of the urban space qualities, through the street Carnival, was also responsible for the rediscovery of areas of the city that, in spite of their historical and cultural importance, were in a degradation process.



Figure 3. Tank car in “Bloco do Barbas”. Figure 4. Ipanema Beach view
(Photos by R. Silvestre)

In the Carnival season of 2012, “the scenario was repeated in several blocks around the city: a huge train (...) opened the parade, followed by a front commission containing people who were not visibly part of the block, and by a group of people in wooden legs, everyone dressed with the same logo signing this opening ensemble. (...) Monochromatic Carnival! (...). Signed and sponsored⁴”. Supported by the intense disclosure in the social media, the campaign caused the blocks to overcrowd, invaded by people more interested in twitting than in singing and dancing. This kind of aggressive marketing threatens the street Carnival permanence as popular cultural manifestation.

The maintenance of the aesthetic and cultural characteristics, as well as of the affective ties with the districts of origin, is fundamental to the continuity of each block’s identity, and highlights the cultural and spatial diversity of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

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