

## **Theatre City: On Design in the Interplay of Social and Material Space (Teatro Oficina, Bixiga, São Paulo)**

Jeroen Stevens

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Résumé de l'article

La cartographie culturelle reflète un tournant spatial dans le champ des études urbaines et disciplines associées qui sont à tout le moins toutes concernées par les interactions entre les espaces sociaux et les espaces matériels. Cet article tente d'apporter une contribution à ce débat interdisciplinaire en explorant les applications de la cartographie culturelle dans le cadre des projets d'urbanisme participatif, voire d'urbanisme plus socialement inclusif. Certaines formes de cartographie culturelle peuvent permettre de répondre à certaines contraintes émanant des méthodologies ethnographiques en sciences sociales et ce, en comblant les lacunes découlant de la rencontre des espaces sociaux et matériels. Les résultats de cet article découlent de trois années de collaboration entre le Research Group on Urbanism and Architecture de l'Université de Leuven et le Teatro Oficina, situé dans un espace contesté du quartier Bixiga, au coeur de São Paulo. Ce quartier en question a été au coeur de plusieurs luttes urbaines (Lute Urbaine) entre groupes sociaux culturels et promoteurs immobiliers. L'immeuble du théâtre et ses environs se présentent tant que pars-pro-toto pour le paradigme de la ville théâtrale, offrant des points des perspectives sur la dialectique de l'action culturelle vis-à-vis la transformation matérielle de la ville.

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# Theatre City: On Design in the Interplay of Social and Material Space (Teatro Oficina, Bixiga, São Paulo)

Jeroen Stevens  
*University of Leuven, Belgium*

*Abstract:* Cultural mapping reflects a spatial turn broadly taken in related areas of urban studies, all of which, in different ways, care about the interaction between social and material space. This article will contribute to this emerging interdisciplinary field by exploring applications of cultural mapping as tools for more inclusive forms of urbanism. The main argument holds that particular forms of cultural mapping can help bridge certain constraints of ethnographic methodologies of social sciences, on one hand, and spatial analysis and design methodologies, on the other hand, as they can operate in the same interstices of social and material space. This article is the result of a three-year and ongoing collaboration between the Research Group on Urbanism and Architecture of the University of Leuven and theatre company Teatro Oficina, located on a highly contested urban site in São Paulo's central neighbourhood of Bixiga, which for thirty years has been part and parcel of a *Lute Urbaine* ('urban battle') between the cultural group and a major real estate development firm. Both the theatre building and the surrounding terrain present themselves as *pars-pro-toto* for a theatrical city paradigm, offering insights on the dialectic vicissitudes of socio-cultural actions vis-à-vis the material transformation of the city.

*Keywords:* urban activism, participatory urban design, modernism, urban stage, theatre culture

*Résumé :* La cartographie culturelle reflète un tournant spatial dans le champ des études urbaines et disciplines associées qui sont à tout le moins toutes concernées par les interactions entre les espaces sociaux et les espaces matériels. Cet article tente d'apporter une contribution à ce débat interdisciplinaire en explorant les applications de la cartographie culturelle dans le cadre des projets d'urbanisme participatif, voire d'urbanisme plus socialement inclusif. Certaines formes de cartographie culturelle peuvent permettre de répondre à certaines contraintes émanant des méthodologies ethnographiques en sciences sociales et ce, en comblant les lacunes découlant de la rencontre des espaces sociaux et matériels. Les résultats de cet article découlent de trois années de collaboration entre le Research Group on Urbanism and Architecture de l'Université de Leuven et le Teatro Oficina, situé dans un espace contesté du quartier Bixiga, au cœur de São Paulo. Ce quartier en question a été au cœur de plusieurs luttes urbaines (*Lute Urbaine*) entre groupes sociaux culturels et promoteurs immobiliers. L'immeuble du théâtre et ses environs se présentent en tant que *pars-pro-toto* pour le paradigme de la ville théâtrale, offrant des points de perspectives sur la dialectique de l'action culturelle vis-à-vis la transformation matérielle de la ville.

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Jeroen Stevens is an architect and urbanist, currently working as doctoral researcher at the OSA Research Group on Urbanism and Architecture at the University of Leuven, Belgium. His research focuses on the agency of cultural and social movements in urban development. E-mail: [jeroen.stevens@kuleuven.be](mailto:jeroen.stevens@kuleuven.be).

*Mots clé* : l'activisme urbain, dessin urbain participative, modernism, scène urbaine, culture théâtrale

### **An emerging interdisciplinary paradigm**

Cultural mapping reflects two recent shifts in the interdisciplinary field of urban studies. On one hand, it emerges from the so-called 'spatial turn' taken in (especially anthropological) social sciences, but also in art, cultural studies, geography, and sociology, explicitly underpinning the importance of 'space' in dealing with social and cultural phenomena (Walf & Arias 2008). Space, here, is mostly rendered as a rather neutral *receptor* of cultural practices, or as a background for social activities, while seldom acknowledging the agency of physical constellations or the way they facilitate or disturb particular social and cultural uses (Heynen 2013). Instead, "the focus is most often on social mechanisms and cultural processes that play out in space and that leave their marks on spatial configurations" (Heynen 2013, p. 344). Ethnography tends to study space to understand the way it is inscribed with social and cultural praxis, while only exceptionally dealing with the impact, cultural determination, and resourcefulness of particular spatial traits such as topography, street morphologies, building typologies, and so forth (Loeckx et al. 2004; Sennet 2006).

On the other hand, cultural mapping echoes a certain 'social turn' in the discourses and practices of so-called 'spatial professionals' in architecture, urbanism, and planning. Since Jacobs (1961) proclaimed the end of the 'great American cities', a worldwide counter-movement has criticized modernist urban interventions for being disconnected from the local, the social, and the cultural. This widespread critique on modernist projects tends to blame spatial design for lacking social and cultural attachment with the inherent polysemic complexity and ambivalence of local contexts. Space, here, is often rendered as an instrument to "impose certain desired behaviours on subjects" (Heynen 2013, p. 346), carried out primarily to instigate social and cultural change (with Foucault's analysis of Bentham's panopticon prison as the key reference to illustrate the deterministic power embedded in the physical organization of the built environment). The large body of scholarly work that discusses the implementation and impact of new planned cities such as Brasilia is typical of this rhetoric, as it heavily criticizes the city's detachment from local culture and everyday life (Holston 1989). This line of discourse has encouraged multiple scholars to urge architecture and urbanism to engage in ethnography to attune planned interventions to local culture (De Meulder & Heynen 2006; Low et al. 2005; Zukin 2010). Holston (1998) suggested that perhaps one of the most crucial questions for urbanism to consider is "how to include the ethnographic present in planning" (Holston 1998, p. 46). To reengage the social in urbanism after what he called "the debacles of modernism's utopian attempts" (Holston 1998, p. 55) requires, for him and many others, an expansion of the idea of urbanism, complementing its design methods with urban ethnography by tracing, observing, decoding, and rearticulating social and cultural peculiarities.

The idea of curing inappropriate design, commonly qualified as 'from above', with social and cultural imagination based on an ethnographic conception of the social, commonly qualified as coming 'from below', became widespread in worldwide debates about non-gentrifying urban renewal and neighbourhood upgrading. Although ground-breaking designers such as Alison & Smithson, Rudofsky, and Turner have been inspiring generations of designers to feed their

architectural and urban projects with thorough ethnographic fieldwork studies, the opposition between concerns with material space and social space seems to persist. More recently, the ethnographic ‘cleansing’ of urbanism has tended to make way for temporary small-scale interventions as emergent liberators to shed the yoke of the capital-driven, burgeoning, ‘destructive nature of architecture’. Depicted as genuine forms of urbanism, recent publications vividly describe an emerging interest in ‘micro urbanism’ (Rosa 2011), ‘tactical urbanism’ (Lydon et al. 2015; Lydon & Garcia 2015), ‘acupunctural urbanism’ (Oswaldet et al. 2013), and ‘other ways of doing architecture’ (Awan et al. 2011), together with various other labels that pinpoint the variety of ‘small-action-big-impact’ practices that are assumed to radically change cities. Without denying or minimalizing their impact on urban life, most of their structural capacity to reform the city appears restricted to pop-up attractions in the more obedient cases, or to political pressuring in the case of more disobedient manifestations. One might ask if temporary uses could not inform spatial development to a greater extent, with ‘structural temporarity’ forming the basis for the design and implementation of more long-term and larger-scale urban projects.

### **Staging central São Paulo**

Increasingly, central São Paulo is depicted as the site and subject of a diverse range of cultural practices that appropriate urban open space in unexpected ways. Both vacant buildings and open urban spaces are intensively claimed and resignified through interventions of multiple social and cultural groups. As with the aforementioned ‘new urbanisms’, Caldeira (2012) designates these practices as radically changing the urban environment by breaking through the segregation patterns that characterize São Paulo, initiating claims for more inclusive urban development.

Without doubt, such cultural practices played a key role in the historical production of public spaces in Brazil, which were shaped by social and artistic movements and marginalized populations through the staging of the repressed Afro-Brazilian rituals of *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*, gatherings of slaves, and black festivals such as carnival and capoeira (Curtis 2000; Ortiz 2000). These kind of practices continue to significantly impact urban space today, and in some cases urban development. A recent upheaval of scholarship addresses various cultural practices that claim and transform in one way or another urban open space in the central area of São Paulo. Iddings, McCafferty & da Silva (2011) and Caldeira (2012) note how graffiti and *pixações* (a particular style of tagging in São Paulo), as well as skateboarding and *parkours* (hazardous climbing of tall buildings), illustrate the refusal of the urban poor to remain fixed in the impoverished peripheries. Instead, they mark their presence in public space, asserting their right to the public realm on the ‘central stage’ of the city. In this regard, Caldeira (2003) identified also funk and hip-hop as place-making practices of urban youth in segregated areas. More recently, Joaquinho (2014) noted how since January 2014 urban residents from the peripheral outskirts of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro gather in downtown shopping malls and turn them into palaces of funk and rap dance (known as *rolezinhos*), targeting malls as collective spaces to claim equal rights to leisure, shopping, luxury, and recreation. Most telling, without doubt, are the social housing movements that since 1997 have initiated occupations of various abandoned buildings in the centre, transforming former offices, cinemas, hotels, and apartment buildings into temporary housing for the lowest income classes (Earle 2012; Lima & Pallamin 2010).

In parallel, an upheaval of so-called ‘new movements’, mainly initiated by young middle-class collectives, present an explicit spatial urban agenda. The *Parque Augusta* movement is concerned with a central green area at risk of being redeveloped into banal real estate. *Baixo Centro* strives for more space for street art with, by now legendary, urban art festivals. Various movements focus on the *Elevado Presidente Costa e Silva*, or *Minhocão*, as the city’s largest viaduct is popularly referred to. Built during the military regime, the ‘Earth Worm’ passes through the central city, cutting through the building fabric of various neighbourhoods. These movements discuss its imaginary transformation into São Paulo’s very own ‘High Line’ (*Movimento Parque Minhocão*) or direct demolition (*Movimento São Paulo sem Minhocão*). Today, the large concrete surface of the viaduct is closed to traffic on Sundays and is occupied and used for walking, sports, leisure, and street art (see, e.g., Barbosa 2012).

It goes without saying that such intensive cultural manifestations and spatial appropriations have always had a significant impact on the transformation of cities. Harvey (2013) illustrated how such claims on urban space worldwide evoke claims on the right to coproduce the city in a fundamental and radical way. For Marcuse (2009) they comprise a struggle over “who should have the benefit of the city and what kind of city it should be” (p. 192). In São Paulo, claims on the city became particularly prominent in June 2013, when the city’s central avenues turned into the stage of massive demonstrations, initially triggered by a *20 centavos* price rise of bus tickets, but eventually turned into a kaleidoscopic uprising due to a multitude of social and cultural discontents (Harvey et al. 2013). Be that as it may, the relation between such cultural and social actions, on one hand, and spatial development, on the other hand, remains elusive. In most cases, cultural claims on urban space are seemingly restricted to political pressurizing rather than real spatial transformation. Most cultural occupations appropriate urban space for a limited period of time, after which it frequently returns to the domain of hegemonic forces, without necessarily changing the physical urban environment at all, or in rather punctual and anecdotic ways (Low 2003).

The distinction between *using* space and *modifying* space seems particularly equivocal. Here, the theatrical metaphor that renders space as a *stage* provides a helpful vantage point to start unravelling the dialectic relation between the material and the social. Here, urban space becomes the stage on which social and cultural claims unfold, mutually informing, limiting, and provoking one another. In this light, “the impact of social forces on architectural and urban patterns is recognised (because the stage is seen as the result of social forces) while at the same time spatial patterns are seen as modifying and structuring social phenomena” (Heynen 2013, p. 349). Regarding space as a stage, and the city as a theatre, both the agency of physical space and social space are acknowledged. Recognizing the impact of spatial parameters on the production and reproduction of social and cultural reality avoids being deterministic in the way the built environment is able to condition use, appropriation, or disruption. The theatrical city offers in this way a valuable paradigm to reconceptualize urbanism as a practice that operates at the interface of the social and the material culture of the city. Cultural mapping might be one of its major tools, as it allows for catalyzing socio-culture knowledge into spatial design. The following case study presents an attempt at cultural mapping, uncovering and ‘spatializing’ the specific cultural and social knowledge of locally embedded cultural actors. First, it will unravel the particular interplay of social and cultural practices and the way they have played out in space at Teatro Oficina. Second, it

aims to test more long-term urban transformation scenarios on the basis of temporary occupations of urban space.

### **Teatro Oficina**

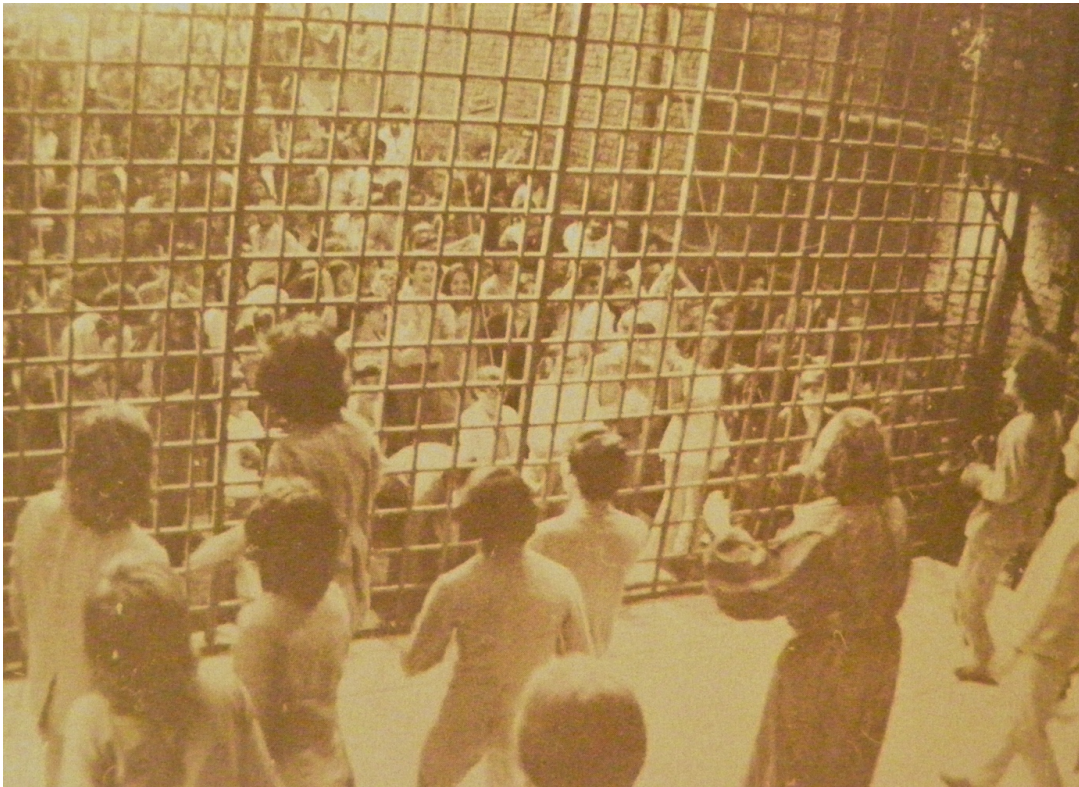
The history of Teatro Oficina is exemplary in the way it closely intertwines with the transformation of the neighbourhood of Bixiga, illustrating a complex dialogue in which the company, their remarkable theatre building, and the neighbourhood mutually reshaped each other, and continue to do so. The neighbourhood of Bixiga summarizes various challenges of São Paulo's central area. Located between the (colonial) historical city centre and the city's major economic Avandia Paulista, the neighbourhood demonstrates a complex historical juxtaposition of indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial layers of urbanization related to African, Italian, and *Nordeste* waves of migration (Schneck 2010). Today, the district is on a fragile trajectory. Although (or because) the district is listed as heritage, it is characterized by massive destruction due to real-estate speculation, high and increasing vacancy rates, a concentration of poverty, and discourses of criminality, socio-cultural conflicts, and precarious living conditions. On the other hand, the district seemingly maintains its basic qualities as a centre of popular culture and street life, with its urban space as the continuous focal point of spontaneous cultural appropriations from a variety of social and cultural initiatives.

Attracted by the particular hybrid character of the neighbourhood, the modernist and avant-garde Teatro Oficina settled in Bixiga in the 1950s. In the midst of an emerging early-modernist scene, from its very start the company conceived theatrical performance as a laboratory to investigate and perform issues of society and modernity. The founder, José Celso Martinez Correa (commonly known as Zé Celso), would become one of the most important modernist and avant-garde theatre directors of Brazil. Since the theatre occupied its building in Bixiga, it has been in a constant process of reconfiguration and adaptation, in close cooperation between the company and remarkable modernist architects and urbanists, incorporating an explicit concern with the spatial articulation of theatrical productions, continuously seeking to inform theatre with architecture and vice versa.

In 1953, the Brazilian architect and urbanist Joaquim Guedes – *enfant terrible* among the leading Brazilian architects such as Niemeyer and da Costa – designed together with the company a *sandwich theatre* in which the borders between actors and audience were blurred. Stage, coulisses, tribunes, and technical spaces were no longer separated spaces, and actors and technicians shared the same visibility. The social experiments of the group provoked the military that seized power in 1964. In 1966, paramilitary groups burnt down the building. For the reconstruction, Zé Celso collaborated with Flávio Imperio and Rodrigo Lefèvre, two proponents of the *Arquitetura Nova* movement, continuing the quest for a radically honest theatre by means of 'poor' brutalist architecture, reducing the building to the bare essentials (Machado 2010; Wisnik 2012). The renewed theatre symbolized a bunker for cultural resistance against the military regime (Schwartz 1992). Oficina was also at the frontline of popular cultural resistance against increasing censorship, with equally provoking performances and architectural articulations as its main arms (Bo Bardi et al. 1999). As the company's building went through an iterative process of design, destruction, and redevelopment, the theatrical metaphor that deals with space as a stage becomes double. First of all,

its continuous mutation and interaction with cultural and social actions underlines the theatrical interplay between social space and material space. Secondly, as a fundamentally *urban* theatre, theatrical performance and urbanity start to overlap: as the theatre explicitly aims to ‘act back’ upon the city, the city increasingly becomes its stage, while the theatre converts itself into a micro-model of the city outside.

From the 1960s onwards, the Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi designed the scenography for the most contested productions of Oficina. While the repression of the regime increasingly trivialized individual and artistic freedom, the theatre reopened and took part in the formation of the larger artistic *Tropicalismo* movement together with Bahian composers Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. In this way, Oficina made its turn to political engagement explicit, as tropicalism extended the anthropophagic and artistic themes expressed by Oswald de Andrade in the 1920s by ‘absorbing’, ‘digesting’, and ‘regurgitating’ the many different cultural layers that entered Brazil in colonial times and during later waves of immigration. Together with diverse aspects of pop art, it drew explicit attention to the disjunctive modernisation of “a Brazil in which there were planes in the air and barefoot children on the ground” (Oliven 2000, p. 65). Teatro Oficina sought to mobilize the public by shocking provocation. By turning technical support into performance, and back-stage proceedings into play, the design was a radical call for liberation as well as a machine for liberation, through which the audience was confronted with its own complicity with omnipresent forces of repression (Melo 2010). Throughout the 1960s, Oficina’s productions were constantly at the centre of scandal and debate (Dunn 1993).



**Figure 1.** Teatro Oficina staging *Life of Galileo* in 1968. Source: Author’s personal archive

As a consequence of the company's political commitment and radical aesthetics, paramilitary groups attacked the building again in the 1970s (David 1992). While the regime was radicalizing, both the theatrical work and architectural language of Oficina further radicalized with it. In the play *Life of Galileo*, the actors were behind bars, and the chorus locked up in a cage, unable to face the public, a direct allegory of military repression and violence. Meanwhile, the military regime sought to rapidly modernize the country with vast infrastructural works. The major East-West highway connection – known as the *Minhocão* – was brutally imposed on the fabric of the neighbourhood of Bixiga, passing right in front of Oficina, and designated by Wisnik (2012) as the most ideological landmark of the military regime. The theatre building was largely demolished. When Zé Celso returned in 1979 after five years of exile, the company developed, together with Edson Elito and Lina Bo Bardi, the idea of running a *street theatre* through the building, as a *Carnaval-Sambódromo*. This would allow the urbanity of the street to invade the building and interconnect the public space of the city with the theatre stage, intertwining urbanity and performance. In line with artistic productions of Helio Oiticica and the *Arquitetura Nova* movement, the project resembled a quest to democratize architecture, applying design as an instrument to liberate the oppressed and poor.

While the building was under reconstruction, the major Brazilian real estate firm of Silvio Santos initiated the demolition of the surrounding buildings in the block, making way for a large shopping mall. The theatre building withstood the demolition works due to its heritage listing. Ever since, Oficina has blocked the generic development of the surrounding site. In this way, it has maintained this territory as one of the last remaining open spaces in the dense and deprived neighbourhood of Bixiga. Step by step, the Oficina group started to invade and occupy the terrain that had been cleared, imagining it as a public agora. In parallel, the focus of the company shifted more and more from rebellion to social engagement, involving street children in rehearsals and plays. The company unfolded as a pedagogic force, albeit with an exceptional and controversial libertine philosophy. In 2002, the company set-up its own social movement, *Movimento Bixigão*, organizing both readings of theatre plays for disadvantaged children from the neighbourhood as well as circus workshops, street festivals, and educational projects. By involving the urban poor of Bixiga, Oficina utilized theatrical projects as a point of departure for addressing related social issues.

In 2004, after blocking three shopping mall proposals, the company developed its own architectural proposal for the site, together with the Brazilian architecture office JBMC. Suggesting the full appropriation of the existing theatre's surroundings, the project architecturally consolidated a program that Oficina had been developing during the previous decade. It would consist of an 'anthropophagic university', a factory of creativity, based on the writings of Oswald de Andrade; a 'stadium theatre', both a large theatrical stage and a public agora for Bixiga; and an *Oficina da Floresta*, a productive green park based on Caetano Veloso's famous song, *Sampa*, which in its turn was based on Lina Bo Bardi's stage design for Oficina's 1968 play, *Na Selva da Cidade*. Although the project by JBMC lacked spatial quality with a design disconnected from the context in the neighbourhood, it was an important step in the way Teatro Oficina engaged in architectural articulations through theatrical concepts and programs. In 2010, the group further consolidated its claims on the vacant surrounding site. As a *Sambaqui*, a carnival procession, the play went through



the neighbourhood to gather the public, and to plant the first trees, plants, and grasses on the largely flattened terrain. The theatre was turned into a mobilizer of public participation in spatial transformation. Today, Bixiga and Teatro Oficina continue to be at the centre of contestation in São Paulo and beyond. The vacant site became a symbolic contested territory, embodying a thirty-year struggle between activist local cultural organizations striving for a qualitative public realm and a capitalist speculative real estate market rebuilding the city into a landscape of closed condominiums, largely supported by neoliberal governmental programs.



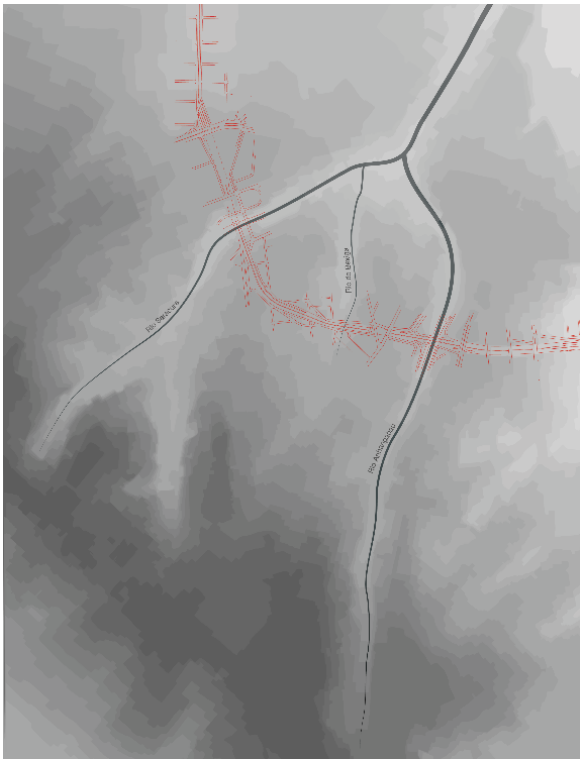
**Figure 2.** Urban vacancy surrounding Teatro Oficina (Bixiga, São Paulo). Photograph by Jeroen Stevens

### Urban design as cultural mapping?

In collaboration with Teatro Oficina, a design research was initiated with the University of Leuven. As a tool for negotiation, design research could be understood here as “an exploration of the spatial possibilities and limitations of the site, ‘mapping’ the spatial sensibilities, interests, agendas, and skills of various urban stakeholders, exploring the spatial convergences that could suggest new forms of collaboration and open up new trajectories of development” (Loeckx 2009, p. 25). Specifically addressing the interstices of social and material space, the design exploration was an attempt to connect social and cultural processes with the physical traits of the place. It embraced the historical layering of the palimpsestic urban territory and the spatial ‘resourcefulness’ embedded in the topography, water structure, urban morphology, building typologies, and collateral damage of large-scale infrastructures, while at the same time taking the cultural and artistic appropriation of vacant and residual spaces as starting points to connect to the local social and cultural complexity.

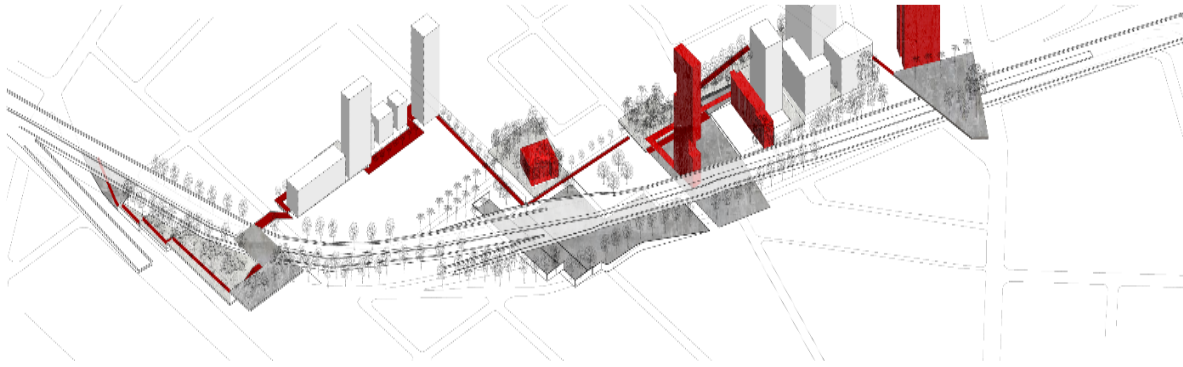
The search for opportunities in the spatial context started from the distinctive topography, the covered rivers that border the neighbourhood, and the Minhocão, which cuts through this landscape, decontextualizing the grid morphology and breaking up various building blocks. The mapping generated a landscape of fragmented and undefined open spaces, a necklace of residual *terrains*

*vagues* (Solà-Morales 1996). This condition of vacancy entails a powerful spatial quality due to the absence of an architectural program. As these residual spaces are still waiting to be exploited by programmatic potential, programs outside of the formal order of the city can take place, recalling Koolhaas' often cited maxim: "where there is nothing, everything is possible, where there is architecture, nothing else is possible" (Boyer 2008). The abundance of peripheral spaces without a clearly defined program seemed to provoke experimental occupations, as their secondary character encouraged experimenting with different potential uses and significances (Remy & Voyé 1981). Somehow, the very physical characteristics of the leftover folds and cracks concentrated around the edges where infrastructure and topography intersect provoked particular social and cultural practices.



**Figure 3.** Mapping spatial traits. Drawing by Jonas Knapen (Stevens & Knapen 2013)

After intensive fieldwork conducted together with Teatro Oficina, a first design scheme was proposed to take the necklace of residual spaces as an open invitation to define a new series of public platforms that could act as a framework for future development. In this context, the contested terrain at Teatro Oficina functions as a key space within the structure that meanders under, above, and around the viaduct. This way, the contested plot was encapsulated in a larger urban scale project. Rather than acting as final plan or proposal, the designed scenario aimed to act as a blueprint and frame for development, highlighting priorities, steering towards a shared vision among different stakeholders, and offering a canvas for spontaneous use and appropriation as well as a preliminary long-term vision.



**Figure 4.** Urban design scheme. Drawing by Jonas Knapen (Stevens & Knapen 2013)

During the tenth Architecture Biennial of São Paulo in 2013, a design team was set up with researchers from the University of Leuven (Belgium), the architecture office Vazio Arquitetura (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), the Latin American architecture collective Supersudaca, and the theatre company Teatro Oficina to further elaborate this design scenario. With regard to the paradigm that renders space as a stage, the basic concept of São Paulo's tenth Architecture Biennial, 'City: Ways of Making, Ways of Using', was remarkable in the way it aimed to raise awareness regarding the multiple ways in which the city is constructed, designed, produced, used, inhabited, and appropriated. Curated by Guilherme Wisnik, Ana Luiza Nobre, and Ligia Nobre, it focussed on the complex dynamics that build, destroy, and rebuild the city day by day. The Biennial therefore radically changed its format. Instead of confining itself to the usual set-up in a single building in Ibirapuera Park, the exhibitions and projects were spread throughout the city, intermingling with everyday urban life and incorporating the urban tissue into its own spatial structure, designating the whole city as its stage.

The nucleus, 'Modes of Collaboration', aimed to reflect on the city through a network of actions in which collectives of architects, planners, artists, institutions, movements, and local communities collaborated to respond to urgent urban problems. The nucleus started from the premise that conventional planning methods are suffering a worldwide breakdown, suggesting that activities of collectively producing architecture with local communities and a variety of stakeholders can point to a new emerging scenario for planning and design. Hence, it sought to emphasize the way in which collaborative ways to build, think, and use the city could develop new tools and methods to approach urban issues, thereby supporting experiments and unusual strategies of research, discussion, and actions and exploring new forms of collaboration between 'spatial professionals' (architects, urban designers, planners) and socio-cultural groups. In this way, it transcended the widespread plea for designers to engage in ethnographic endeavours, as it encouraged engagement with the social complexity of local actors as active participants in the design process. In a proliferating debate on participation and community engagement, it acknowledged that designers might rather try to design *with* people instead of handing-off design and spatial production entirely to grassroots initiatives that seldom transcend the scale of temporary interventions.



Bardi's street theatre finally crossed the viaduct, merging the two parts of Bixiga that were brutally disconnected.

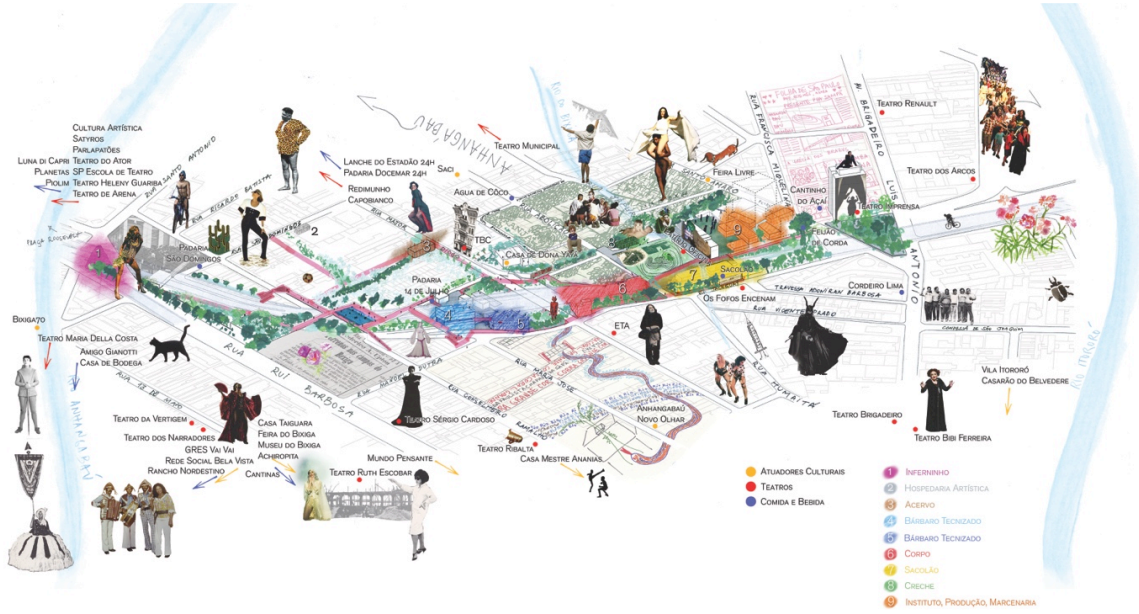


Figure 6. Anhangabáú da Feliz Cidade. Drawing by Terreyro Coreografico, 2015



Figure 7. Agora Agóra! (Agora now!). Photograph by author, 2015

## Conclusion

Time will tell if the actors involved manage to turn the gradual appropriation and transformation of the site into a real urban project. Nevertheless, the group's history and current actions represent a particular culturally driven form of urbanism altering the place significantly through an unusual collaboration with 'spatial professionals'. It illustrates that cultural mapping that seeks to inform design can engage in close collaboration with local cultures instead of merely illuminating cultural characteristics. Perhaps these kinds of collaborative efforts could become the agenda of an ethnographically engaged urbanism that transcends the constraints of both the spatially engaged ethnographic social sciences, on one hand, and the socially oriented design methodologies, on the other.

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