

Left in limbo: unanswered questions and unquestioned answers, thinking through Complexo da Maré

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Abstract

The present text examines the assignment of the worldwide open student competition at Complexo da Maré in Rio de Janeiro as part of the upcoming 'World Congress of Architects'. It raises the ground by questioning the assignment on what it produces and what it could have produced. Every assignment within educational environments may have several agendas. Design studios necessarily request possible design answers to a particular problem concerning a particular place, in some cases developing conceptual approaches that may generalize into models of thought. The ideas competition is meant to provoke design responses that contribute to the academic discourse – not only on favelas and related areas – but in this case also on megacities as a terrain of habitation and politics. To generate fresh answers one wishes for firm questions on an institutional level. Changing perceptions might result in shifting priorities. What do we wish for?

Keywords

Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro, Favela, Slum Area, Squatter Settlement, Precarious Community, Informal Neighborhood, UIA2021RIO, Urban Transformation, Design.

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The assignment of the worldwide open ideas competition at Complexo da Maré in Rio de Janeiro as part of the upcoming 'World Congress of Architects UIA2021RIO' has been without doubt a great opportunity and challenge. The introduction to the brief invites students of architecture and urban studies to generate fresh input for an urban design that may preserve the historical identity of the cluster favela Maré, yet at the same time, aims at reversing the ongoing process of political split and spatial segregation. The general approach of the competition organization is vaguely in accord with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, not necessarily arriving at independent issues, yet emphasizing on the much-discussed paradigm of social integration, equality of opportunity and inclusive prosperity, boldly directing the attention toward the common notions of difference and diversity as desirable properties that may inspire connection with the surrounding communities and bind the favelas to the formally planned and built city proper.

What kind of position would one expect from the involved heavy-weight institutions and co-organizers International Union of Architects and Institute of Architects of Brazil, supported by UN Habitat? In one way or another I would imagine that an assignment launched by a group of such extraordinary caliber must express its unconditional solidarity with the favela communities and culminate in an open call for substantial change, that is a radical departure from enduring political and planning practices of parochialism and hypocrisy. That's what architects can do and what design should do.

After at least twenty-five years of producing much paper work on the subject of inclusive societies and cities with minor impact on ground, why not taking a radical position for a long overdue twentieth century problem? The organization of a student competition of such order can allow herself to involve in the rights discourse, to question the prevalent default settings of the formal/informal binary, to question the presumed power and privileges, the "elite's ingrained and unacknowledged sense of superiority and entitlement (Perlman 2016)," and by all means avoid being complicit to authoritarian voices or politics of – at its best – ignorance and neglect.

We need to be aware that is not enough to withdraw on the general terms of “inclusivity, safety, resilience and sustainability”. Even the most conservative or authoritarian institutions and governments, with or without the active involvement and partnership of UN Habitat or other aid organizations and programs, would give their projects a whiff of United Nations SDG11, to receive the institutional nods of agreement, thereby eventually securing the untroubled flow of supportive subsidies or entire project funding by multilateral development banks, financial institutions, investment funds, and donor agencies and organizations.

Why not acknowledging the problematic in-house made design-decisions, which persist as a result of an outdated ideological orientation, based on continued economic growth and development, enacted and effected by a ruling elite in close liaisons with banks, industry, and finance, and among others, willfully or knowingly operated by a tenacious squad of planners, technocrats, inspectors, enumerators, managers and their associated institutions?

Why not insisting in urbanistic responses that are outspoken on the socio-political deficiencies, economic disparities, and systemic root causes – strongly rejecting any form of naïve surface treatment, restorative beautification, and other low-level improvements – unless major principles and outcomes of the capitalist economic system that keeps failing most of its citizens every day and on multiple levels are severely under question.

We should know better. It is not enough to request Maré’s integration into the city. Even worse, it is patronizing and objectively wrong to assume that the ‘other’ wants to be ‘integrated’ by all means. One-directionality as condition? Normalizing the other? We should know better. The automated reflex to call for integration exposes lack of insight and distinct empathy for the psycho-biological ramifications of living over generations on the edge of society, day in and day out swallowing the consequences of being stigmatized and outlawed, while at the same time trying to enjoy the everyday routines and habits of a family and community life. Living isn’t concerned with lifestyle, but with the way we want to live as a community, the appointments that we make with each other. Any relationship starts from mutual respect. The residents of Complexo da Maré and possibly any other favela with a history of many decades are worthy of a comprehensive

historical investigation, a critical reappraisal of the rich culture and past living, and thereby rightly demanding present-day acceptance as citizens on eyelevel.

Competitions embedded into educational environments are not meant to solve the grand problems, that's hardly possible. Instead they are tendered to build genuine commitment, raise questions, promote awareness, stimulate intellectual agility, and generate keen interest in the mechanics of transformation as design issue. Any investigation into the brief has to start from questioning the brief itself, and questioning the subject at hand. How did we come here? What are the design-origins of favelas? What are the underlying reasons for the existence of so-called informal settlements? Is it possible to imagine a world outside the world? Why do we accept and eventually support the artificial division into formal and informal, into legal rules versus popular practice? How to understand and relate the place-bound condition that is called 'favela' without generalizing it into terms of 'slum area, squatter settlement, precarious communities, or informal neighborhood' (Revelo-Imery 2014)? What is the oppressive dimension that manifests itself in the persistent presence and alarming repetition of derogatory and defamatory stereotypes, often applied on millions of favela residents, eventually embraced and enunciated evenly by the upper class, the so-called elite, policy-makers and policies, planners and designers, popular opinion and opinion leaders? What is it that design can do?

As curators of the Istanbul Biennial 'Are We Human?', Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley released the provocative statement that "there is no longer an outside to the world of design; design has become the world (Colomina, Wigley 2016)." The powerful observation goes beyond the actual object and includes the understanding that our conceived, contracted and engineered environments, ecosystems and societies are not neutral, but complete urbanization (Lefebvre 2003), which at the level of ideology is a totalizing project of planetary reach (Golubchikov 2016). If design is everything and everything is design, we find ourselves doubting the assumed moral, legal, and political autonomy of our human existence in relationship with the expanding world of material and non-material formation, expanding on the notions of the two architectural historians and theorists: "To talk about design is to talk about the state of our species (Colomina, Wigley 2016)."

Trying to absorb the many unanswered questions and unquestioned answers, the young-age design students engage into an unbound collection of available information, facts and figures, beyond doubt, here and there confused with opinions and beliefs, filtering and processing the subsequent data as the work progresses.

Middle class living environments tend to avoid overlay with informal realities. Though informal settlements in our metro-home are mainly safe with criminal records far below the favela counterpart, the two worlds are exclusive to each other. How to open doors? How to get involved with the other half's life? The topic is sensitive with biases, accusations, and actual and constructive evictions in range. State-organized vandalism replaces reasonable urban interventions. Heavy-duty excavators, equipped with high-reach demolition arms and concrete crushers are mistaken as adequate equipment for neighborhood upgrading of all kind and scale. Particularly during these days.

How to show that the artificial divide between 'formal versus informal' is a product of political and legal decision-making, a 'design-decision' that can be challenged any time? How to convince that the vast informal economy is not "an aberration, a deviation from the norm that can be corrected (El Sharnoubi 2019)," yet is as essential as the bankable economy, evenly contributing to the productivity and profitability of the system; though for major parts off-grid and off-record. How to link and sync Rio's realities with those back home?

In fact, Janice Perlman's grounded observations on precariousness and marginality as laid-out in "Rethinking Precarious Neighborhoods: Concepts and Consequences of Marginality" were of tremendous help to feed the discussion. With many years of experience in research and practice, Perlman defends "informal settlements as essential spaces of insurgency and innovation that nurture non-conformism (Perlman 2016)." She considers any attempt to formalize the informal as a major mistake that may result in losses at many levels: "Loss of labor and productivity, loss of consumer power, loss of cultural production and creativity, and not least, loss of social and intellectual capital." (Perlman 2016), with ourselves being reluctant on terming 'humans as capital', which parallels the pejorative management language of an economic libertarian elite.

Perlman takes us back into the late 1960s and early 1970s, when studies on favelas were hardly an issue, even though forced eviction and displacement of favela dwellers in new housing communities in remote areas at the city's periphery were the order of the day. Passing the period of fifty years in review, Perlman emphasizes on the two major shifts in urban policies, "from removal to upgrading, and then from upgrading to removal," not without emphasizing the altered motivation that underlines the initiating role of market forces and state interventions during recent time (Perlman 2016).

The detailed time-line helps to understand the consequences of the changing policies. Particularly "the shift from removal and resettlement to incremental on-site upgrading" sparks the interest of the current student generation, to work contextually with the people in place. And the current backward move, the return to the rules and regulations of the bulldozer is most probably frustrating people anywhere in the world. Perlman states that it is not sufficient to promote 'The Right to Housing and The Right to the City', but consequently she wishes to add 'The Right to Dignity' to counter "the lack of respect for the dignity and personhood of the many favela residents (Perlman 2016)."

Janice Perlman hits a nerve and her statement echoes the uncanny mode of current urban transformations back home. Feeling absorbed by her concluding statement, the students felt eager to learn from the work of Catalytic Communities, Rio on Watch, Favela Community Land Trust Support, and the Sustainable Favela Network. No less, the presence of the on-site community organizations and non-governmental organizations that reflect Maré's socio-political and cultural life are evenly impressive and heartwarming. The ones we could find include: Centro de Estudos e Ações Solidárias da Maré, Observatório de Favelas, Instituto Data Favela and Data Popular, Museu da Maré, Arts Center Galpão Bela Maré, Maria e João Aleixo Institute, Parque Estadual Library, Centro de Artes Redes da Maré, Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Dança and her Escola Livre de Danças da Maré as part of the Residency Resistance Project.

And as if the witnessing of the cultural life at Maré wouldn't be enough, Maré-favela's self-surveyed demographic statistics reveal (apparently the national census doesn't care) that six out of thousand residents at Complexo da Maré have a university degree, which sums up to a surprising 840 people out of currently 140.000 residents. In first place six permille doesn't sound convincingly great, yet a group of 840 residents

compares exactly to the size of our entire architectural faculty. That's more than a base, it might be a force to build upon.

Being in tune with Janice Perlman's conclusions, the economist Gary Dymski adds another exclamation mark by offering "Ten Ways to See a Favela", raising another set of vital questions about 'the normative and the other' in societies: "What do members of society owe one another? What does membership in society mean? And are all residents in a society, full members of that society (Dymski 2011)?"

And this is exactly where the project starts. As simple as that, while studying conditions abroad, somewhere in the back of their minds, the students engage with comparable situations at home. The new knowledge increases the sensitivity to the general problems, and reduces the mental distance to the motionless concrete and brick realities that assemble the unloved iconic image of (not only) the other half of the city, rightly shifting the discourse from an urban form to conditions that produce and reproduce an urbanity we live in every day.

And then there is Rafael Soares Gonçalves, whose notion of 'favelas at the margins of cities, and at the margins of history' triggers full attention. Soares Gonçalves reminds us to not look at favelas as problems to disappear: "Thinking of these spaces as a problem to be solved ends up distorting our understanding of this reality and influences the public policies targeting them (Soares Gonçalves 2016)." In the introductory statement of his paper, he calls on Ananya Roy's support in paraphrasing from her article "Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism", "trying to understand and transform the ways in which the cities of the global South are studied and represented in urban research, and to some extent in popular discourse (Roy 2011)," (Roy 2011, Soares Gonçalves 2016):

"There is a need to put aside apocalyptic and dystopian discourses on such spaces and understand that they are places where people live, coexist and engage in political practices. Yet, these spaces remain invisible and sidelined by urban theory. How, indeed, can one write the history of something that should not exist and which is condemned to

disappear? How can one think about the past of an object that is considered bereft of a future?”

Being a historian and urbanist, Soares Gonçalves seems to support the idea of ‘history from below’, actually listening to the narratives of the past and present every day, ‘memories of things said and done’ as a first attempt to address “all kinds of evidence beyond the grand historical narrative, including the peoples’ consciousness, culture, and value systems (Coogan 2005).” Soares Gonçalves suggests that: “Writing the history of the places, unearthing the memories of residents, and understanding their daily life are essential to formulating new public policies for such neighborhoods (Soares Gonçalves 2016).” And a bit later he sharply continues:

“Yet, historical thinking on the everyday experiences of favela inhabitants is still in its infancy. What do we know about the negotiating strategies, the types of self-help construction, the struggles to access public services, and the different associative structures since their creation, which for some of them dates back more than a century? Have the diverse legal forms and local regulatory practices permeated one another? The importance of historical thinking on the residents’ daily experiences and the legal aspects stems from the fact, as José de Souza Martins points out, that everyday life makes no sense if it is disconnected from the historical process that reproduces it.”

Writing a history of the favela’s everyday includes addressing conditions of insecurity and vulnerability, instability and impermanence. If there is no official land and building register, how then to prove ownership and continuous presence within an area over a period of time? Histories establish calibration points and intervals. Gonçalves knows that people “hold on to documents, chiefly for political reason”, a receipt on the residential address from a hospital or local clinic, a letter of intention to purchase, an actual sales contract with reliable witnesses, receipts of repair or particular purchases to improve the building’s water and electricity system, a family photo in front of the property, literally anything that helps to prove what he calls ‘residential stability’. Gonçalves continues to explain: “This practice is often used as a counterpoint to a situation of illegal residence, and may be useful when negotiating with public authorities, or when the threat of displacement or rehousing looms on the horizon.” All these practices are utmost familiar, as they describe a practice that seems common in many places around the world

including our metro-home. Favela dwellers need to be inventive: “If informal neighborhoods have become what they are, it is due to the existence of a historical process that criminalizes these localities and their residents (Soares Gonçalves 2016).”

In fact, histories are a tool to better understand the passive coping mechanisms, but also responsible decision-making and now and then inventiveness, something that Gary Dymiski would identify as “solving problems by creativity, using alternative solutions, working with what one has, rather than what a rulebook specifies is necessary (Dymiski 2011),” yet Gonçalves main interest “seeks to explore how urban informality and urban planning intertwine (Soares Gonçalves 2016).” He points out that planners and politicians may have a distorted perception when dividing urbanity according to an imagined formal/informal binary. Instead he proposes to understand informality as a form of urban planning, as a correlative, not just a reactive system, yet a system of interdependence with the formal planning paradigms (Soares Gonçalves 2016):

“Through its theories and standards, urban planning defines the template for the city and society, but on the other hand it also defines what is non-compliant with its project. As a result, the notion and concept of informal neighborhoods, with their diverse local designations, are necessarily constructed through dialogue, accompanied by a reflection on urban theories and normative constructs of the city. The major innovation here is the birth of urban planning and its efforts to plan, set standards and, above all, classify urban space. What explains the appearance of informal neighborhoods such as Rio de Janeiro’s favelas is not the emergence of new modes of urban production, but rather the efforts to relegate extant modes of production to irregularity.”

Taking the previous remarks into consideration, the urban design studio rejects the managerial perspective of the urban planner and instead engages with the crooked and imperfect, most commonly paying attention to concepts of safety and resistance based on cooperation and solidarity rather than control.

The double strategy of the urban design course involves a group of students in the specific issues of the favela-cluster Maré, yet not without embracing the contextualities next door, addressing comparative issues with respect to the actual circumstances and

conditions back home. *Cairenes* meet *Cariocas*, but most essential and implicit to the setup, *Cairenes* meet *Cairenes*. Students may understand that there is no such thing as neutral space, no world outside the world, neither there nor here. The exercise is eye opening and meaningful. It helps to articulate the subject, again, not necessarily resolving the grand issue, yet listening actively, hearing the people sing, depicting the political subjectivities, highlighting the similarities and differences between the one and other places, weighing and proposing, slowly groping the way ahead toward a personal trajectory, designing collaborative environments, spaces of transformation, eventually avoiding the neo-colonial subtext of development and the neo-liberal preoccupation with growth.

Changing perceptions might result in shifting priorities. What do we wish for? Due to their engagement, students start to recognize and address the blind spots in the actual and mental maps of the metropolitan realities. Places outside the experience. Places of accumulated risk. Raw information. Unaddressed areas, deliberately left blank on maps. Urban design doesn't address single objects, but a "world in becoming," change and motion, "subjects under construction (Braidotti 2019)". The studio unfolds around the imagination of how to alter the 'garden of reality'. Here and there. It appreciates designs that considers and re-considers the factual ground realities, designs that sensitively enhance the current living environments, and at the same time, are bold enough to contribute to the academic discourse – not only on favelas and related areas – but in this case also on the megacities as a terrain of habitation and politics (Roy 2011). Is there anything else we can wish for?

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