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Recover our River, Transform our Neighborhood: Resilient Grassroots Urban Planning in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

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Abstract: In response to environmental injustice, what are the strategies used by peripheral neighborhoods to propose and implement resilient grassroots urban planning? A case study in Belo Horizonte, Brazil presents what can be learnt from bottom up initiatives that react to everyday life adversities caused by environmental degradation. Ribeiro de Abreu is a low income peripheral neighborhood in Belo Horizonte, located on the banks of the Onça River, which is highly polluted and degraded. Since the last decades, a strong local social movement has been advocating for the overall improvement of the area, having the cleaning of the river and the implementation of a park on its banks as a catalyst for upgrading. Resilience has been achieved through a two-folded strategy: on the one hand, by establishing strong relations with different sectors of the municipality, instead of relying on conventional structures of institutionalized participation; on the other hand, by mobilizing local resources and implementing self-built interventions in public spaces. In addition, a holistic understanding of environmental issues has led to an expansion of collective action beyond the limits of the neighborhood and the claiming for better distribution of public resources.

Keywords: grassroots urbanism; environmental justice; community resilience

Cities are the places where transformation of nature by human intervention become more evident. Such interventions, however, manifest in uneven ways, according to political intentions, availability of resources and urban planning guidelines, resulting in landscapes with different levels of environmental quality and exposure to risks. In most Brazilian cities, the difference between peripheral low-income areas and central cores is extreme, partially due to unjust distribution of resources and public

investments. Therefore, a great number of low-income residents of peripheries are constantly exposed to environmental hazards, not only for living in risk areas, but also from a lack of proper urban infrastructure and an inadequate treatment of natural resources, such as water courses.

As a response to such environmental and spatial injustices, urban social movements propose new imaginaries for the city they want to live. The negligence of local governments in the provision of infrastructure and services, added to the constant exposure to adversities, may trigger local residents to propose innovative and more resilient solutions for their own neighborhoods, as an alternative to outdated and functionalist urban planning, which still guide many Brazilian municipalities.

According to Brazilian geographer Marcelo Lopes de Souza, civil society should not be limited to criticizing the state, merely positioning itself as a victim of top-down urban planning. Instead, urban social movements may put the state under pressure, proposing and even implementing solutions. The state is not neutral, as it suffers pressure from multiple interests and acts based on the balancing of power disputes. Private interests often exercise greater influence on planning decisions, which means that urban social movements play an important role in guiding government resolutions towards alternatives more desirable by local communities, establishing what Souza calls grassroots urban planning.

Examples of these types of collective action can be found in Belo Horizonte, which forms the third biggest metropolitan region in Brazil. The city was purposely built to be the capital of Minas Gerais state in the late 19th century, at a site that was chosen for its natural beauty and abundance of water courses. Over the 20th century, the city has turned its back to its rivers: in the densely urbanized central areas, most water courses were covered or canalized to give space to highways and avenues. Meanwhile, in low income peripheries, the rivers were left in their natural course, but used as disposal of sewage and garbage. This was the case of Ribeiro de Abreu, a peripheral neighborhood located next to the banks of the Onça River, which forms one of the main water basins in the city.

Figure 1. (a) The Onça River in the Ribeiro de Abreu Neighborhood



(b) Source: Movimento Deixa o Onça Beber Água Limpa

(1)

Since the first houses were built in the 1940s, the area has developed as a low income neighborhood with poor provision of infrastructure services, where residents have been subject to a series of environmental hazards. The Onça River, prominent in the landscape of the neighborhood, is highly polluted due to the lack of sewage interception and waste dumping. Furthermore, many families have been living in high-risk areas prone to constant flooding.

Just like for most of peripheral areas in Belo Horizonte, the presence of the state in Ribeiro de Abreu has been sporadic. When heavy rains caused the river to flood, affected families would be hosted in the local school and receive urgent help. During election season, politicians would show up to canvas for votes, often promising improvements in the area. At the same time, central and high income areas of the city have benefited from a more constant attention given by the municipality, which resulted in better infrastructure and environmental quality. Thus, the adverse situations in Ribeiro de Abreu have been a consequence not only of natural hazards such as flooding, but also of the unjust distribution of public resources.

In response to these everyday life adversities, since the 1980s, a group of local community members began to mobilize and demand from the municipal government improvements and upgrades to the neighborhood. A community based organization was founded and given the name of Community Council United for Ribeiro de Abreu (COMUPRA), which aims at promoting the socio-environmental and economical regeneration of the area. Moved by an utopian vision of a better neighborhood, community leaders and activists believe they have to invent new tactics and actions to accomplish their goals, beyond conventional spaces of participation. “Without knowing it is impossible, we go and do it”, says their main slogan.

The first initiative of the community council was the implementation of a vegetable garden in a local school, which gathered the attention of other residents. After some years of fighting for basic improvements such as better accessibility, schools and health centres, the integration of ecological and urban causes became more present in their discourse. They turned the attention to the Onça river and realized it was critical to the health and wellbeing of the neighborhood. It was necessary to move beyond the immediatist approach of the municipality after flooding and fight for clean water and better environmental conditions. Local activists claim that a river that is not visible, also hides the problems caused by it. Therefore, they refused the conventional solution of canalization given to other water courses in the city, as they saw a great potential in the fact that the river was still in its natural bed.

The lack of specific socio-environmental policies for the improvement of the neighborhood as envisioned by local residents and activists fostered the community council to demand direct negotiation with the government. Over time, community leaders managed to build a relationship of trust with different sectors of the municipality, such as environment, urban planning, housing, water and sanitation, and convinced them to participate in the monthly meetings held in the neighborhood. In that sense, instead of the conventional approach of citizen participation, in which the municipality comes sporadically to inform or collect opinions from local residents, a channel of intense partnership has been established. From the perspective of the community council, there is a concerted attempt to avoid cooptation and increase demands from the municipality: “We want to make use of the government, and not allow that they make use of us”, says one of the involved activists. At the same time, the municipality has understood that these meetings are an important channel of communication with the local community.

The monthly contact with municipal employees enhanced the sense of citizenship of the involved residents, as it made clearer the role of the government and the channels through which their demands can be attended. The meetings of the community council also promoted the integration of different departments of the municipality, which usually struggle to coordinate amongst themselves, as inter sectorial issues are usually brought to the table. Such articulation guarantees, to some extent, that each department assumes their responsibility towards the neighborhood, instead of giving excuses or stepping away. As a result, in some way the Ribeiro de Abreu community council has been able to affect the way the public sector operates, since some practices that originated from this partnership have also been replicated in other territories.

Although the community council fights for a series of issues, the mobilization around the river gained strength and became a catalyst for the overall improvement of the area. The need to extend the collective action beyond the limits of Ribeiro de Abreu originated another social movement, called *Deixe o Onça Beber Água Limpa* (Let the Onça Drink Clean Water), which started articulating with other affected territories and stakeholders, for a systemic approach on the whole water basin. In partnership with the community council, this social movement presented to the municipality the idea of building a park on the banks of the Onça River, followed by the interception of sewage systems and removal of waste from the water and its surroundings. The urban planning department engaged in the idea proposed by the community and developed a project for the park, through a participatory process based on several workshops with residents and activists.

Despite the good intentions from municipal employees and the constant pressure placed on the municipality by social movements, the bureaucracy of the public sector makes the implementation of the park and other local improvements a slow process. So far, some families that used to live in risk areas next to the river have been relocated, but there is no prediction of when the park will be accomplished. Therefore, a group of residents and activists started organizing a series of self-built initiatives to carry out parts of the park themselves. “We want to live in a better place, but we don’t want to wait for the time of politics, so we go and do it”, says one community leader.

After articulating donations of materials from different partners and mobilizing people to help in the construction, the group organizes events that last for one weekend, in which an empty plot is transformed into public space. Therefore, the areas left from the relocation of families have been occupied with playgrounds, sitting areas and urban gardening, avoiding new houses to be constructed in the risk areas and creating places for the community to gather. As the desires of the neighborhood materialize in the space and local residents realize their capacity of spatial transformation, a sense of collective self-esteem is being created. This has been giving more credibility to the community council and encouraging more residents to join the activities and political mobilizations. In addition, a strong sense of ownership arises in relation to the future park, as it is being already implemented by the community.

Figure 2. (a) Self-built interventions in leftover areas of the neighborhood



(b) Source: Movimento Deixa o Onça Beber Água Limpa

(2)

Although these self-led initiatives have brought spatial and social improvements, some major issues still depend on the cooperation of the public sector, such as the cleaning of the river. Hence, the strong political capital of the community council and the social movement, added with the articulation with other actors in different regions of the city has been important for pressuring different governmental institutions. One relevant accomplishment has been the promising by the water and sanitation company that the river will be completely clean by 2025.

Despite all the positive achievements presented here, community leaders, activists, local residents and governmental employees still face a series of limitations. First, people in the neighborhood have different interests and level of involvement, which can lead to some internal conflicts and asymmetrical power relations, challenging the idea of a community as a homogeneous and balanced entity. Second, as the community council is gaining more visibility and responsibilities, it faces the need to improve its internal organization, which is now based on a horizontal and non-hierarchical approach. And last, despite the political capital to pressure and negotiate with different governmental departments, community leaders still come across constant obstacles due to the high level of bureaucracy of the public sector.

There is a lot to be learnt from the tactics and initiatives in the Ribeiro de Abreu neighborhood, since they indicate possibilities of a resilient grassroots urban planning. By experiencing everyday life next to a river, local residents have been able to think of new imaginaries for the city and propose solutions which are more sustainable than the conventional practices of the municipality. The community not only adapts to life's everyday adversities, but also presents innovative ways of

articulating political, material and environmental resources. As a consequence, both spatial and social transformations have been achieved, by upgrading degraded areas and changing the way residents see their neighborhood.

This case study shows that resilience is enhanced when community organizations act beyond the limits of a single neighborhood: structural problems, such as the revitalization of a river, requires the engagement of a series of actors and territories. In addition, the case of Ribeiro de Abreu show that adaptability and concrete transformations become more effective when self-led initiatives are combined with state-community partnerships.

This example also indicates that it is crucial to tackle environmental and spatial injustices, by claiming for better distribution of public resources and a stronger presence of the state in urban peripheries. In that sense, urban social movements like the one at Ribeiro de Abreu have the potential to push for a transformative agenda within municipalities, by engaging deeply with local politics and proposing innovative ways in which the public sector interacts with local residents. A community, in that sense, can be not only subject to urban planning elaborated by the government, but also proactively come up with ideas for the kind of city it wants, and even implement them.

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Conflict of Interest

"The authors declare no conflict of interest"

No references for the short papers but hyperlinks within the text

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