

**TITLE**

Life is the art of meeting, despite all the mishaps along the way: *The Vizinhança Project* experience

**ABSTRACT**

This paper describes the experience of the Vizinhança Project (2012 - to present), an ongoing artistic practice initiated in 2012 in different neighbourhoods of Porto Alegre, Brazil. Based on the dissertations of the authors [1] - [2], within the fields of design and visual arts respectively, an attempt is made to delve deeper into understanding the actions staged as meetings that trigger participative processes of dialogical nature.

**KEYWORDS**

art, design, participation, dialog, encounter, city

## Life is the art of meeting, despite all the mishaps along the way \*: The Vizinhança Project experience

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### 1. The city as a place of (missed) meetings

The accelerated growth of Brazilian cities, mainly between the 1940s and 1960s, was motivated by a process of industrialization characterized by massive population shifts from the countryside to the city. Within a local context, a lack of efficient urban planning limited the offer of dignified living conditions for people migrating from rural areas. This resulted in precarious housing arrangements that have since become a staple of Brazilian cities.

Fragmented and segregated, the majority of capital cities in Brazil today are described by Aguilera (2004) as physically conflictive, on the outskirts, dense, uncomfortable, featureless, with habitability and solidarity – so necessary to a city – in constant question, the result of an inept democratic system, and a spatially lopsided production model in urbanistic terms, one that is environmentally unsustainable and socially unjust.

To Sennet (2006:2), “today’s ways of building cities – segregating functions, homogenising population, pre-empting through zoning and regulation of the meaning of place – fail to provide communities the time and space needed for growth”. To further aggravate the situation,

a series of factors associated to scale and mobility favour situations related to expediency and consumption, in detriment of spaces for coexistence and exchange. This diminishes the urban experience and, according to Brandão (2009), leads to a gradual loss of a sense of dimension and the public space in which we exist.

The presence and constant development of major roadways with intense traffic flow encourages car travel, privileging the experience of privacy that, according to Hissa and Nogueira (2013):

seems to exist as a hegemonic compounding element in a subjective experience: to deprive yourself of the other, of the risk of otherness; of politics, as a possibility of dissent; live the fear of heterogeneity, the quest for constant pleasure and for safety, in a society of imperative consumption; deprive the other of moving through this society; steeling the social dynamic. It is thus that specific meanings, expected meanings, are associated to subjectification and production of an identity detached from life. (Hissa, Nogueira, 2013: 69).

Of further note, within the scope of Brazilian cities, is the prolific construction of commercial buildings, especially in recent decades. Like “islands of order” (Bauman, 2000) shopping centres package urban experiences in spaces that are physically limited, controlled, safe and artificial. Thus, they can be construed as situations of isolation that affect a person’s capacity to inhabit the world:

to make cities a family place and suited to improving our bodies and souls and the forms of use and habits of our time. Instead of a place of freedom, cities have become a place of pleasures and consumption. (Brandão, 2009: n/p).

These statements attest to the failure of a city model applicable to any context and the urgency to construct other forms of approaching inhabited space in a closer way, considering the reality and desires of the population and, as such, more participatory and open.

Along this line, Italian researcher and designer Ezio Manzini (2018), by means of the collaborative cities concept, proposed the possibility of approaching the city through projects, based on participatory and collaborative processes, designed and implemented by actors from different areas on specific scales. According to the author, in these processes, citizens are no longer mere spectators. To the contrary, they actively participate and take on roles as co-producers and co-designers of the city, helping to create relational values such as trust, empathy and care, so necessary in nourishing the life of a community.

This method, proposed by Manzini, is in line with the thinking of architect and city planner Vera Pallamin (2000) whose reflections are based on the relationship between art and the public domain. In her opinion:

urban art is art created in the city and with the city and can be thought of as a social practice that, through culture and history, weaves a symbolic web that gives meaning to the way we produce and occupy public spaces and, at the same time, we are produced through them. (Pallamin, 2000: 24).

According to Pallamin (2000), projects executed within the public sphere allow for the apprehension of relations and unique ways of appropriating urban space, with their aesthetic proposals reflecting their approach to the social meanings that surround them, their means of cultural and political expression.

It is within this sense that the Vizinhança Project, involving participatory art in the character of dialog, established itself as a means to think and act collectively in the city, using interaction with other fields as a means to leverage situations for meeting and coexisting in public spaces and, consequentiality, other ways of experiencing where we live.

## **2. *The Vizinhança Project (2012 - to present) in practice***

The urban transformation to which many Latin American cities are subjected, especially as from the second half of the 20th century, has provoked a gradual deterioration of public spaces, resulting in the consequent loss of their initial purposes, namely, as meeting points. This statement motivated a process of reconquering these spaces within the city by means of participatory art. The Vizinhança Project proposed the collective activation of idle or unused public and private spaces, establishing them as relational devices that encourage new experiences in the daily routine of a community.

In practice, the project occurs every time a collaborator accesses the Vizinhança website and calls a meeting with other alternating members, to implement a new action in a specific neighbourhood. This request then initiates the process for developing an action, which usually takes around a month. The first job is to obtain authorization for temporary occupation of the suggested space. Once the permit is obtained, the following steps are taken:

a) Initial contact with neighbourhood residents: contact with local residents is usually initiated by the participant that mobilized the action through the website. As a resident of the neighbourhood, this person will leverage the relationship between the Vizinhança Project group and local leaders, coordinators of community centres and the

neighbours most active in the community, facilitating the process of participation and engagement among citizens;

b) Promotion of the first visit to the location: prior to the date scheduled for visiting the location (step c), a walk through the neighbourhood is organized with participants of the Vizinhança Project group who, upon meeting people in the street, hand out printed pamphlets explaining how the action works and inviting neighbours to participate. Another portion of the pamphlets is distributed through people's mailboxes in the neighbourhood. However, the majority of participants arrange their first visit to the location online: the project page on Facebook or the website;

c) Visiting the location: the meeting is attended by neighbours (in response to the notice via pamphlets handed out and conversations from the previous step), along with assistants from other actions and new collaborators that accepted the online invitation or those reached through the project mailing list. This meeting generates a moment for dialog and exchange in which the characteristics and potential of the space are analysed in group. It is also at this time that each person expresses their desires and concerns with regards to issues involving the local context;

d) Acceptance of proposals: following the first visit, the project is further promoted on social networks and a call for proposals is initiated to outline the actions to be staged within the space. Based on these activity proposals, the collaborators – artists, neighbourhood residents and others associated to the group or not – start developing the action. The type of activity to be staged during the period varies: exhibitions, performances, workshops, collective meals, rounds of conversation, talks, film exhibitions and a variety of games. All activities registered on the website are accepted and become part of the program. There are no conditioning factors for staging activities, other than those possibly imposed by the actual location (lay of the land or special architectural features). It is all about “employing the experiences and competencies of each person for the common good” (Dean, 2016: 9), characterizing what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ano) would call “the ecology of knowledge”. For each new action, each proponent takes on a role they feel fit to perform. Considered temporary members of the group, the authors-collaborators may be artists, professionals from several areas or neighbourhood residents. There is no selection of proposals, hierarchy of spaces or activities, but rather the desire to bolster “equality of intelligence” (Rancière, 2011), in building a project that appreciates all types of knowledge. The value of each activity proposed does not lie in its novelty, or the magnitude or depth in relation to the issue, but in the possibilities generated for interaction and dialog;

e) Adaptation of activities and the program: the program is arranged based on the proposals submitted by participants via the project website. At this point, the Vizinhança Project proponents, understood



**Figura 1**  
Organization and cleaning of the location conducted by collaborators.



**Figura 2**  
Decoration and adaptation of the structure conducted by the collaborators. Source: project archives



**Figura 3**  
Distribution of invitation throughout the neighbourhood: delivered in mailboxes.



**Figura 4**  
Staging the second action by the *Vizinhança Project*, featuring the storytelling activity.



**Figura 5**  
Staging the third *Vizinhança Project* action, a collective meal.



**Figura 6**  
Staging the third *Vizinhança Project* action, intervention on the walls.

as those people who propagated the idea of the project at the first action, take on the responsibility of organizing the activities within the program according to the times and spaces requested by the collaborator. In principle, everyone who wishes to share knowledge, whatever it may be, is welcomed. The program features all of the activities to be staged each day with their times and locations. The duration of a *Vizinhança Project* action may range anything from two to thirty days, depending on the availability of the suggested area of use and the participation of people involved through the proposal of activities;

f) Distribution of invitations in the neighbourhood: four days prior to the event, several participants return to the neighbourhood to handout the action program and invite local residents to take part in both the activities to be staged on specific days and to help organize and ready the actual location. The action is also promoted online. Usually, the collaborator that proposes the art also illustrates the program. Each of the actions is named, usually using a word suggested during the process and with which the participants identify;

g) Organization and set up: this activity takes place a few days prior to the start of the action, varying anything from two days to a week, depending on the conditions of the location. This point of the project involves cleaning, removing waste, preparation and adaptation of the space and decoration, undertaken by a group of volunteers that visit the location;

h) Staging the action: the action is staged on the days previously scheduled and promoted, in line with the program of activities defined by the group and collaborators. Everyone is welcome to participate in all of the activities, with no prior registration required. There is no access restriction or any form of payment either;

i) Disassembly: once the use grant period for the space comes to an end, it is returned in the same condition as originally found. For this purpose, another group effort is organized among available collaborators;

j) Sharing on social networks: collaborators are invited to share registrations of the project through a collaborative album on the project's Facebook page.

The process described in the stages above shows that the development of each of the actions depends on the active participation of the community involved, both the proponents of the activity and those who take part. As such, participation is the foremost element of processes actually carried to completion. This method reflects in several aspects of the project directly related to sharing their work among artists and participants, the creation of other means of access to culture as well as the possibility of creating emotional bonds among people and places.



**Figura 7**  
Staging the eighth *Vizinhança Project* action, participants and collaborators.

To present, eleven actions have been staged based on collective exchange and learning, striving to approximate different territories of this multicultural city, which is at once welcoming and also segregated and hostile. Aspects revealed with each new action and which drive us in the sense of conceiving other ways to make a city.

### 3. Participatory art: meetings and dialog in public space

The origin of the relation of practices that involve art and the city are reminiscent of the modernist vanguard, like Futurism, Dadaism, Situationist International, the actions of the group Fluxus, conceptual art and performance and action practices. The discussion gained strength as, from the turn of the millennium, a growing number of artists began expressing their poetics in a social context, creating what Bishop (2006) referred to as the “social turn of the arts”. Note that this participation, as an artistic practice, involves terminology that reinvents the relationships between art and life from several perspectives, such: a new genre in public art (Lacy, 1995), contextual art (Ardenne, 2006), relational art (Bourriaud, 2008), dialogical art (Kester, 1998, 2004 and 2011), aesthetics of emergency (Laddaga, 2006), community-based art (Kwon, 1997), socially-engaged art (Helguera,

2011; Thompson, 2012), collaborative art (Kester, 2004) and activism (del Río; Collados; 2013).

Among these different forms of methodological and conceptual approximation to a social context, the practice of the Vizinhança Project resonates chiefly in the dialogical art proposed by Grant Kester (2017) and, simultaneously, draws nearer to the field of design based on the concept of collaborative encounters proposed by Ezio Manzini (2015).

Kester (2017) posits that, in participatory processes, conversation is the most essential part, a catalyst and generator of work. The author develops the concept of dialogical aesthetics based on the contributions of two philosophers: Russian Mikhail Bakhtin, to whom “an artwork can be seen as a type of conversation: a meeting point of different meanings, interpretations and points of view” (Bakhtin, 1990 apud Kester, 2017: 3) and German Jürgen Habermas “especially in an attempt to build a model of subjectivity based on communicative interaction” (Kester, 2017: 5).

If we consider that this interaction occurs through the meeting of two or more people in an encounter situation, it is possible to draw comparisons between the thoughts of Kester (2017) and those of Manzini (2015), when the Italian researcher postulated on collaborative encounters as being a time and a place where subjects create a common value. According to the author, these encounters are characterized by four specific aspects: a) active involvement - this is related to the time, energy, attention and knowledge invested in an encounter; b) collaborative involvement - this refers to the process of working together in favour of something in common; c) relational intensity - this deals with delivery intensity, when one is more or less dedicated to something, deeply or superficially involved, and open or not to others, for the capacities that involve affecting and being affected; d) social tie strength - a strong tie would be related to cohesive groups, that are more closed and where exchanges with other groups are less common. The weak tie, however, would be present in more open groups, which are more susceptible to interferences and exchanges with others, the fact that excessive involvement is not called for facilitates the entry of new participants.

With the Vizinhança Project, active involvement can be identified in both those who propose and organize the activities and those who show up at the location to participate, dedicating their time and attention. Collaborative involvement is perceived during the process of conceiving the action and then implementing it, when all the collaborators work together to make the project possible. Regarding relational intensity, actions seem to provoke both maximum interactions, with expressive engagement and trust, and minimum

interactions, restricted and more ephemeral and superficial. And lastly, despite the intensity of social ties initiating on the weaker side of the scale (thereby allowing for greater openness and exchange among participants), over time it becomes increasingly stronger, able to lead to bonds of friendship.

Throughout all the stages of the Vizinhança Project actions, meetings are held to place strangers and acquaintances in a state of relational proximity: through unexpected encounters in the street while distributing the pamphlets or during the action. Activities involving myriad formats – a workshop, an artistic presentation (theatre, dance, performances), rounds of conversation, collective meals –, regardless of the knowledge or actions shared, they become potential propagators able to generate environments that encourage exchanges among collaborators and participants. And it is by opening up to others that dialog arises. This constant exchange, that is, the dialogs that are built over time, open the path to new and potential relationships: relationships of friendship and affection among people; collaborative and co-creative relationships; relationships of belonging in relation to the space of the action; and the relationship of belonging in relation to the city.

## **Conclusion**

Reflections during the course of this text permitted an understanding of the Vizinhança Project actions as a way to inhabit the modern city through experiences based on sharing knowledge. And this sharing is like a relational mechanism that stimulates new experiences, bringing people closer, encouraging the salvation of neighbourly relationships and the creation of bonds and affection.

The Vizinhança Project can be understood as a practice that contributes to the collaborative construction of the city, as it calls on participants to take on roles as co-producers and co-designers of the spaces they inhabit in their daily routines. In this sense, the evident interest in supporting and encouraging small and medium reach initiatives means that the Vizinhança Project actions are quite the opposite of large flashy events and usually end up diluting and fading into the background of the daily routine of the communities where they are staged. Thus, these actions function as small affective-wandering laboratories, which mobilize different geographical and cultural territories in Porto Alegre, driven by a common desire shared by all collaborators and participants: to make the city a place of new meetings and sharing.

\* translated lyrics from the song *Samba da benção* (1968) by Vinicius de Moraes and Baden Powell.

### Notes

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[2] BRAGA, Márcia. “Poetics of proximity: Participatory art of a dialogical nature in building opportunities for meetings in public spaces.” Dissertation, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2018.

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