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## The portrait of a place

### *The lived and desired environment in the speech of the residents*

Patricia MENDES, Maria do Carmo BRANT DE CARVALHO

**Abstract.** *The São Paulo State Department of Social Housing (SEHAB) decided to develop a new experience: to search in the residents' speech a precondition to think the urban projects for the area of Cabuçu de Cima (Jaçanã/Tremembé, North Zone) of São Paulo City. This proposal was also based on the demand of 5<sup>th</sup> International Biennale of Architecture in Rotterdam / 2012 – Making City for São Paulo Municipality where the guidelines was to think the city with the voice of the residents. Because of that we conceived eight workshops which the main theme was “lived and desired urban ambiance”. We used dynamics groups to reveal the skills and “savoir faire” of the participants as also to strengthen the communicative expression and fluency of them. We faced a high challenge in this proposal: to recover and build up an exchange space between popular and the technical/scientific knowledge regarding the city. The idea was to reveal not only the Cabuçu de Cima residents complaints but also their propositions for their environment.*

**Keywords:** *participation, fluency communication, lived and desired ambiance*

### Introduction

The São Paulo State Department of Social Housing (SEHAB) decided to develop a new experience: to search in the residents' speech a precondition to think the urban projects. The area of Cabuçu de Cima (Jaçanã/Tremembé, North Zone) of São Paulo City is one of the test site of this experience. This proposal was also based on the demand of 5th International Bienalle of Architecture in Rotterdam / 2012 – Making City for São Paulo Municipality where the guidelines was to think the city with the voice of the residents.

In this preliminary consultation with residents it was chosen to hold workshops to capture in their perceptions, how they see, live and want the urban space in which they inhabit. At the same time, these residents were committed to translate what they expected of an urban housing project in the territory where they inhabit by creating references for technical details of the projects.

This scenario is constantly producing urban tension and conflict and must reverse the logic of traditional urban housing projects to operate on the outskirts of São Paulo.

So this proposal presented itself as a great challenge: to recover and strengthen an exchange space between popular and the technical / scientific knowledge regarding the city. The idea was to reveal not only the complaints but also the propositions for their environment.

This paper is about the methodology used to dialogue with the residents at Cabuçu de Cima. We conceived eight workshops which the main theme was “lived and desired urban ambiance”. We used dynamics groups to reveal the skills and “savoir-faire” of the participants as also to strengthen the communicative expression and fluency of them.

## Scenario of the place: the micro basin of the river Cabuçu de Cima

The selected area of this proposal lies in the micro basin of the river Cabuçu de Cima, it is located in the north region at the sub prefecture of Jaçanã Tremembé in the municipality of São Paulo.



Figures 1 & 2. Cabuçu River and the configuration of the Urban Area (Fabio Knoll, 2011)

It is an outskirts area, near by the Cantareira Sierra<sup>1</sup>, where the neighborhoods started to be developed in 1975 by the poor workers in irregular settlements and illegal occupations in public areas. Some occupations were at the hills and others at the valley in the river's bank. As a consequence, this area was developed with a lack of green and leisure areas and poor infrastructure. In 1985 some of these settlements were regularized by the public administration and some Public Housing for the low-income population was built in this area but it was not enough to change the existing scenario of vulnerability.

Today the inhabitants in this area still live with all sorts of vulnerabilities: poor housing conditions, lack of social and environmental comfort, isolation from the absorption labor's poles and a poor access of public services. This urban area was built illegally in its majority, triggering self-built homes in small lots, with no green areas and recreational facilities, poor urban infrastructure (such as water and sewer net badly scaled, narrow streets and sidewalks, among others). You can't distinguish the irregular area from the regular one. We can say it that neighborhood was built by them, but not decided by them.

## The methodology and its tools

We start from the hypothesis that if we develop the communication's fluency of the residents, recognize and enrich their knowledge about the territory we could create a rich space for exchange of knowledge between experts and residents.

The content of these workshops was developed based on the meaning /re-signification of knowledge, values, behaviors experienced and modified by the participants on their micro territory. This means that we began from existing concepts to develop new ones in the workshops collectively, such as the classification of a risk area in the territory (in the hills, in the bank's rivers, under the transmission electric area, etc.).

The pedagogical approach focused on strengthening of the expression and the communicative fluency about "lived and desired urban ambiance" by them.

The project HEM – Les Hauts- Champs developed by Bazar Urbain (2007) inspired us to think about the methodology and tools at the workshops and how to design them.

We invited twenty five local leaders (residents and representatives of local micro organizations) to participate in the workshops once a week at a public office nearby. We started to work at the workshops with "the lived and desired urban ambiance" as the main theme,

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1. One of the most bigger urban forest of the planet.

which relied on research about the environment, observation about the dynamics of the territory, lived experience, experimentations as well as contributions of knowledge and informations. We used several pedagogical tools to allow them a reinterpretation of the territory such as: a street map, photographic documentation, the neighborhood scale model, ludic activities of construction/ deconstruction/reconstruction, etc.

### *Map of the affections*

It was presented a street map of the territory in a larger size (2 x 1 m), with level curves of the area and the location of some public department (school, hospital, etc.) that could help them to read and identify the street and places. The map of the affections (everything that affects them positively and negatively) was used as a daily diary, where they signalized the discussions about the issues of territory in the workshops.

This tool had mobilized the participants to recognize their territory, study its scale, visualize their demands, their mobility in the territory, densification in the risk areas, lack of green areas, among other things. At the end the map of the affections help them to see all the issues of the territory and propose actions.



Figures 3 & 4. Map of the affections built by the participants (P. Mendes, 2011)

### *Commented walking and a photographic registry*

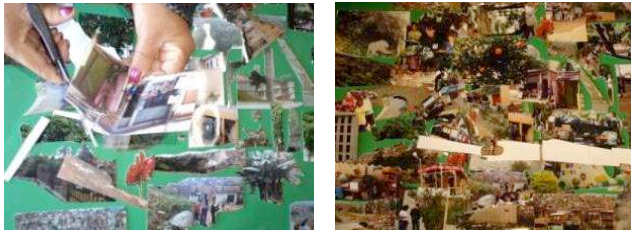
A walking through the territory was another tool used to mobilize residents to review their neighborhood and its problems. It was inspired at Thibaud (2001) methodology called *parcours commentés*. We provided them cameras to take pictures of the situations that affect them both positively and negatively (a house, the garbage, the river, an inhabitant of a tree, etc.). They chose the paths that should be taken in this activity. They showed us how they move and circulate around the territory, their perceptions about the lived environment. Each group in this pathway was also stimulated by one coach seeking for their answers about the living environment.



Figures 5 & 6. The registration of the residents in the walking (P. Mendes, 2011)

### *Portrait of the place*

This portrait was made by the participants during the workshops where they discussed and made several speeches about what could be a possible neighborhood, putting their aspirations and proposals. This was a tool used as ludic activity with the photographs taken by them on the commented walking. In a green card, they started to cut out the photos and disposed them. According to the reflexive dynamic about the desired neighborhood, they removed one and put another one. This activity was a deconstruction of the lived environment to a construction of a desired one. These changes made at the green card during the workshops were all photographed and transformed in a stop motion( an animation photography movie) with a period of 2:23 minutes.



Figures 7 & 8. Cutting, placing the photos above the green card (Biba Rigo, 2011)

### *Scale model of neighborhood*

The scale model of the area was another tool that we used in the workshops with them to analyze the topography of the place, the shortcuts and risk areas. We began to work their perception about these areas, how they experienced the issues (the areas that usually flood during the rainy season and the empty lots that serve illegal waste disposal for example) and what they think about the technical proposal offered by the city hall.



Figures 9 & 10. Residents discussing the issues of the territory (P. Mendes, 2011)

### *Cartography of the place*

The Cartography of the place was another ludic activity that we used to work with them about the territory. The tapestry was the story in points of the place. How they see the territory and what they would desire for there. They put affective references and public spaces they would rather there. The desire to transform the riverbank into a linear park with cycle path was one of the suggestions.



Figure 11. The tapestry made by them with the Linear Park by the river  
(P. Mendes, 2011)

## Achievements

Despite the possession of information about this area and knowledge on the municipal plan of urbanization proposal for Cabuçu de Cima, we did not know the local population nor the dynamics of the territory.

According to Santos (2002) each individual has a specific way of perceive and evaluate a certain area resulting from his everyday experiences. Augoyard (1979) points us that inhabitant qualify in a living way a certain space in a singular time. In other words, each place has a history, built by the inhabitants, so it is unique. Thibaud says (2004: 357) “We do not perceive the ambience, we perceive according to the ambience”. That means the ambience guided our perception about the place we are in. The apprehension of the ambience is made by the subjectivity at the singular but is also oxygenated by the collective. So we can say that the meanings given by the ambience are changeable, because it is driven by a subjectivity that is also shifting. It depends on our repertoire and affective senses of the lived moment.

How is the territory perceived by the different social group that lives in Cabuçu de Cima? How do we involve them to discuss the territory? How do we create a space of exchange knowledges? These were the issues that guided us in the beginning of our workshops.

From this standpoint, we understood that to look for effective actions in a certain urban space requires us to recognize it, not only as a physical space, but as also a dynamic space of social interactions. It means to identify how the locals qualify, shape, appropriate and perceive their territory. It means to know and reflect about it, how the social issues (precarious infrastructure and public services, risk areas) are seized and perceived by the residents. It means to look for the residents needs in their territory.

In other words, we understood that if we want to know their territory and their demands, the dynamics of the workshops should be dictated by the residents. The pedagogical process should also be thought from the demands raised by them, because we wanted them to feel the main protagonists in this process. This role also could not be made by protectorship, but with horizontal exchanges between experienced knowledge from the residents and expertise from the urban planners to write collective urban plan.

The population owns a lived knowledge due to accumulated learnings in their trajectories of urban life. They know how to use this knowledge to diagnose and propose. This knowledge is essential in shaping the urban development and housing projects, so we need to create a participation space.

However, this action does not always happen due to the presumption of technical knowledge that the urban professionals owns – disqualifying the lived knowledge that the residents have. This also happens because they don’t know how to invite and seek adherence of the population in these projects. The residents are competent to produce an urban social diagnosis when there is a space to exchange lived and expertise knowledge.

When the population experiences a participation in a horizontal process (democratic) with technicians and managers of public policy, they are able to contribute significantly to the propositions of the policy. They also remain mobilized and actively participate in the production process.

Finally these workshops revealed us a lot of things such as:

1. Information about the dynamics of the lived environment in this micro territory that we, social and urban planners did not know about it. The strong sense of belonging of the place for the residents; the shortcuts and steps used by them to walk in the neighborhood; the habit of sitting on the sidewalks on the weekends; the concern of residents with the preservation of the Serra da Cantareira; among others. Those are important informations for the urban planners to use for the development of the urban plan for this area.
2. The access of information about the aspirations of residents and proposals raised in the workshops.
3. The knowledge acquired by the participants about the lectures of the maps and the risk areas, allowed them to discuss the proposals of urban planning with the urban planners.
4. The workshops gave the residents necessary inputs to a qualified debate over the collective needs at the territory as a whole.
5. Joint and Empowerment of the local social network.
6. An interesting process of social negotiation about the issues of the territory.

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## Authors

- Patricia B.M.T. Mendes, Social Worker, Public Health PHD, Researcher associated at Memory Center of University of Campinas UNICAMP), Researcher at the Research Group of Public Health and Environment at Public Health of São Paulo University (FSP/USP) and Vice-President of PARTICIPARE Instituto de Meio Ambiente e Cidadania, São Paulo  
E-mail : patricia.brant@gmail.com
- Maria do Carmo Brant de Carvalho, Social Work PHD at Catholic University of São Paulo, Pos-Doctor in Political Sciences at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Retired professor of Social Work and of Pos-graduation of Catholic University of São Paulo. Researcher at IEE/PUCSP, São Paulo, Brasil  
E-mail : mcbrant@uol.com.br