Design Methods in the Emergent City

Assemblage, Acts, Performance

Samson, Kristine

Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Samson, K. (2013). *Design Methods in the Emergent City: Assemblage, Acts, Performance.* Paper presented at
Nordic Design Research Conference 2013, Malmö, Sweden. http://nordes.org/nordes2013/

DESIGNING THE EMERGENT CITY: ASSMEBLAGE, ACTS, PERFORMANCE

EXPLORATIVE PAPER

KRISTINE SAMSON,

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

PERFORMANCE DESIGN AND VISUAL CULTURE

COMMUNICATION- BUSINESS AND INFORMATIONS TECHNOLOGIES

ROSKILDE UNIVERSITIY, DENMARK

KSAMSON@RUC.DK

ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to define urban design in relation to the specific challenges of emerging cities.

The emergent city is a three month field research project conducted in the winter 2012-13 in Sao Paulo, Rio and Santiago. Through a case study of Mudo Coletivos temporary structure, *Bolha Imobiliaria,* and the making of it, I wish to outline a design approach for urban design in cities lacking public spaces.

Urban design is understood in a broad sense, not as architectural design but also as spatial design and artistic interventions in public space.

Through the paper I will address how the designer can co-create and reassemble existing urban spaces through his/ her situated acts. The approach suggests a situated design methodology but is based on a theoretical understanding. It is my belief that the designer, by looking into the emergent properties of urban spaces, instead of its physical and cartographical outlines, can see her work as a processual intervention in the city rather than durable object design.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

The paper proceeds through a theoretical outline of 3 core notions: Assemblage, Acts, Performance. After introducing the notion, I illustrate how they are enacted through a design processes that took place in Sao Paulo in 2012.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

Through the three notions I seek to develop a theoretical framework for the understanding and making of urban design. I work with the assumption that urban designers can profit from a philosophical and ontological understanding of urban space as emergent. Here I do not consider design as something durable; rather I consider design as co-producing act working with existing resources and qualities in the city. Recent urban studies have emphasized urban assemblages (Farias 2011, Farias & Bender 2010). Supporting the notion of assemblage, I specifically draw on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage put forth in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

"I will call an assemblage every constellation of singularities, traits deducted from the flow - selected, organized, stratified - in such a way as to converge (consistency) artificially and naturally; an assemblage in this sense, is a veritable invention"...

By that they state how each assemblage must be understood as a singularity, with its own singular attributes, qualities, challenges. The assemblage is useful in analyzing and determining specific situations in urban space.

First, to understanding design as a component in the emergent city, we have to understand existing urban assemblages and their constitutional parts.

Deleuze and Guattari write:

"An assemblage is necessary for the relation between two strata to come about." (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:70). Thus assemblages exist of (re)established relations combining heterogeneous – or not yet assembled – components of space. Through the case study I seek to exemplify how the designers recollect and reassemble urban space.

Second, every urban design is an *act*. Act can establish new relations in the existing urban assemblages as it cuts through urban assemblage in specific, even original ways. In my case study, I will illustrate how design

become an act, intervening in the existing socio-material assemblages in the city.

Third, designing as an act thus have the potential to *perform* new relation relations in the socio-material assemblages. Thus the acts of the designer can be understood in terms of how she by her acts establishes new assemblages by reassembling existing materiality, meanings and qualities. Performance is here understood as the political side of the design act. It implies whether design leads to transformation, whether it enables change the life in the city, whether it reorganizes urban matter in a better way or more human way.

METHODS

As the case study seek to exemplify how the designers recollect and reassemble urban space by means of situated acts in the city and its socio-material assemblages, my own act as a researcher must similarly be situated. My own methods are situated, meaning that ethnographic participant observation has been combined with informal interviews and visual methodologies where I seek to capture emergent situations. . I argue, that a situated in urban space as a researcher is necessary to understand the emergent qualities that takes place in urban space. The place for the structure was not decided before hand. Neither did I as a researcher made decisions on whether to use the case for my research. In both cases, a situated methodology shows that meaning, use and sense often emerge out of the situation: meaning and sense cannot be planned in advance as rationalistic decisions. Rather, urban space is situational and emergent as so many components come together. Thus, to work methodological and empirical with emergent spaces in the city, you must allow yourself to take chance and go into situations when they occur.

CASE STUDY – BOLHA IMOBILIARIA

MUDA_Coletivo and Misterio Basuramas *Bolha Imobiliaria* was set up at the highway Minhocao in Sao Paulo the 16th of December.

It was produced and recollected by found material under another highway in collaboration with the waste collectives, Coletivo Glicério.

The design consists of an inflammable structure that was set up at Minhocao, Sunday the 16th of December 2012 but also the process of making it. From the conception of the idea, the Bolha Imobiliaria was meant to be a collective design intervention. Muda_Coletivo is a young Sao Paulo-based collective. Due to cultural politics in Brazil, most young artists and designers work in loosely organized networks as each project is dependent on network organization and collaboration with the right stakeholders. Thus the identity and people behind Muda Coletivo change according to each project. In this case, Muda Coletivo was part of the urban movement, Preliminares. Their spatial design consisted of an intervention on the highway Minhocao – a highway cutting through Sao Paulo City Centre. For the

young architect and activist, Marcella Arruda, who initiated the process, it was important to question urban gentrification processes and to pose a protest against the market driven exploitation of the city – in other words to claim urban space back by means of a spatial intervention. Thus the intervention was both to be a kind of protest campaign against market driven urban development, and a temporary design illustrating the possibility of other kinds of human-scale spaces in the city. With this background, the idea of the Bolha Imobiliaria was conceived: an inflammable structure made out of reused plastic bags. As most architects in Sao Paulo are developing architecture and design on market driven premises, it was obvious for Muda to break with existing architectural practices. Thus the design had to be developed out of people's own desire and engagement, and with the existing urban condition as a point of departure. With no funding, the intervention was restrained. These constraints initiated the collaboration with Misterio Basurma – a design office working with reuse of urban waste. Though Basurama had the expertise of working with reused material, they did not have access to recycled material. So a third collaborator was introduced: Basurama knew of the recycle collective Coletivo Glicério, in the neighborhood Liberdade. Under a vast network of interconnected highways, a former homeless, Joao Batista had started to collect and re-use urban waste. Due to his organizational talents, JB had succeeded to establish a recycling station where people in the Liberdade neighborhood could exchange objects and materials. To get access to the materials for the design, Muda and Basurama got involved with Coletivo Glicério and its founder, JB. Despite having no professional training as designer, JB had a specialized knowledge of the different sorts of plastic and their potentials for reuse. Thus Muda and Basurama decided to construct the structure in Joao Batista's recycling station under the highway. During the week of construction, people from the Preliminares movement were invited to participate in the design process. However, only a few dared to go as the place was difficult to access and was considered unsafe territory among the middle class, young creatives associated with Preliminares. This meant that Muda and Basurama had to rely on the workforce connected to Coletivo Glicério: homeless and poor people in the Liberdade neighborhood who depended on the gift economy and the exchange of goods in JB's collective. Thus, by collaborating with the people in the Coletivo Glicério, it became obvious for Muda that they were not only designing temporary architecture – they were also designing a political commentary on gentrification and the use of public space. The every day practice of exchanging labor and found materials was a way for the people in the Liberdade neighborhood to survive. Participation in these informal processes for Muda and Basurama became a political act where the design process was both design of a design object but more interesting: a way of doing design directed otherwise.

By the way they assembled the design from the city they drew attention to how the homeless and the poor are generally neglected when market driven interests govern urban planning and design. Likewise they pointed to how urban waste accumulates in megacities due to consumption of the rich.

Thus in several perspectives, Muda's construction of *Bolha Imobiliaria* was a design act (re)assembling in the city. It assembled exsiting socio-material space 1) *in the way it* was constructed through a collective process integrating local people, 2) in the way it took place as a site specific intervention in a neglected space assembled material and urban waste, and 3) in the sense that the process questioned discursive issues of urban development, meaning that the design process became entangled with the complex social and political issues at stake in Sao Paulo and its lack of planning.

In that regard, the process reassembles the city socially, mentally, methodologically and aesthetically). For instance, the locals enabled the designers to see aesthetical and functional value in otherwise neglected material. In that sense the production of the temporary structure established temporary spaces of collaboration in a city normally governed by economical growth and capital interests. Thus, the process indicates that spatial designs are not strictly about the design of a design object, rather spatial design can be understood as *acts establishing relations between people in the process of making it*.

For instance, the few middle class people who came to Coletivo Glicérios space under the highway were inevitably confronted with another urban reality than their own.

Design here become an act engaging people and materialities in and through the urban spaces it design for: by choosing the recycling station Coletivo Glicerio underneath a highway in Sao Paulo's slum, the designers chose to reuse resources from existing urban spaces. By reusing urban waste for the structure, they transformed the existing urban assemblage in a specific and original way. And they involved different social groups and people along the way. That makes it into an example of co-creation emerging out of specific urban situations: even though the making of the Bolha Imobiliária was initially a collaboration between Misterio Basurama and Muda_Coletivo, out of necessity it became an assembled act not merely involving Coletivo Glicério and the people in Liberdade but also the found materials at hand.

Thus the design practice of Muda_Coletivo can be understood as a *design act* assembling resources from the complex socio-material layout of the city.

1. urban assemblages in downtown Sao Paulo: The socio-material assemblage of downtown Sao Paulo consists of a mixture high-rise buildings from the modernist area in the sixties and old abandoned and decaying houses. Furthermore, downtown is the home for many drug addicts living in the streets and gathering in the area Crackolandia near the old railway station. While the middleclass has moved outside of the city centre and now hides in high-rise condominiums with surveillance cameras, the drug addicts and homeless hang out in the streets. Sao Paulo's urban space are thus highly segregated. Thus, compared to many other cities, there is no sense of public space in Sao Paulo.

2. Assemblage: Existing urban assemblage on Minhocao. Built by the military regime in the 60'ies as an elevated highway, it cuts right though the center of Sao Paulo. On Sundays however, the place is closed for car traffic. It transforms the road into an amazing public space with strong urban qualities.

3. Assemblage Construction of the Bolha Imobiliaria took place by reassembling the existing materiality of the city. The city fabric and the waste form the urban consumers is reused in the temporary structure. In that sense, the design reshape urban materiality. The processes constructed a social temporary space of non-commercial collaboration in a city governed by economical growth and interests.

4. Assemblage and act: Design process as an act of reassembling the city: By choosing the reuse station and boxing academy Coletivo Glicerio under another highway in Sao Paulos slum, the designers choose to act with, within and by use of existing urban assemblages.


5. Design as social and cultural act. By collectively assembling social and cultural resources, the making of the Bolha Imobiliaria was a collective act involving Joao Batista and Coletivo Glicerio and the homeless people of Liberdade neighbourhood.

6. The temporary design acts in existing urban assemblages. Bolha Imobiliaria rises at Minhocao as an alternative and temporary bubble commenting on gentrification processes in downtown Sao Paulo.

7. Design acts in public with the help from the public: Bolha Imobiliaria rises on Minhocao: It proposes alternative spaces for alternative uses and aesthetical sensations in a city of brutal functionality and growth.
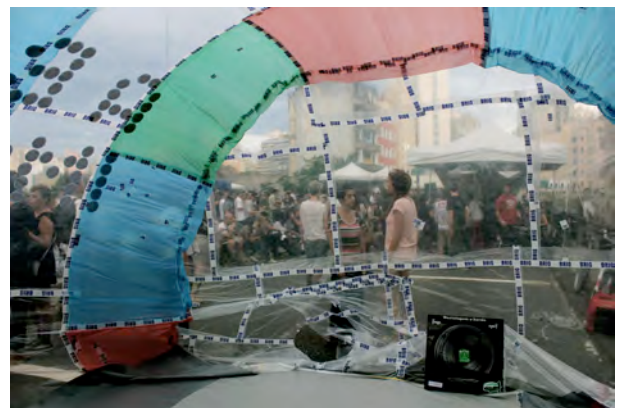
8. Performance Initially, the temporary space is empty of people. As the designer, Marcella Arruda points out (interview), since there is no tradition for public space and coming together in public in Sao Paulo, nobody dares to enter the structure. In that sense, the Bolha performs as an aesthetic and alternative space breaking with the socio-cultural habits in the city.

9. Aesthetic performance: The temporary space transforms Minhocao into a temporary space of enjoyment and bodily sensation of the city.
Even though the design did not change the physical space of Sao Paulo, it mentally changed the social practices and the conception of Sao Paulo for the visiting guests. In that sense, Bolha Imobilaria has impact as
communication of other values in the city. It shows that it
is possible to use public space differently at the same time breaking with the image of down town Sao Paulo as a dangerous and inhabitable space (see illustration 1).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In a city as Sao Paulo where public space is rare, we can ask what spatialities emerge out of a temporary design like the Bolha Imobiliaria. Even though the design was only temporary and was taken down Sunday night before the highway Minhocao opened for traffic next morning, I find the initiative interesting in terms of how it changes the *sense* of public space. Whereas the intervention does not change the physical layout of the city, it surely changes the mental. Just the fact that it happened and it happened in a place like Minhocao, a brutal piece of infrastructure, illustrate the impact of temporary design. But it also illustrate that urban design is dependent of the urban environment and surroundings. Being set up at, let us say, Sønder Boulevard in Copenhagen, this design may not have the same performance.

To sum of we have to reconsider what impact temporary designs as acts have for a city. In the mentioned case, temporary designs perform specific socio-spatial politics in relation to the city of Sao Paulo and its existing urban spaces, its lack of planning and its brutal economical development. As mentioned above, I use the term performance broadly understood to describe the political side of aesthetics, but also the unforeseen and emergent qualities emerging out of design acts and urban interventions.

As put by McAuley in *Space in Performance* "Being an event rather than an object, performance is radically unstable in the meanings it generates and in the activities it engages".

Thus, regarded as a performance act, Bolha Imobiliaria creates an emergent and unstable public space in the city of Sao Paulo. Unstable in the sense, that people are unsecure of the meaning and use of the structure. In a city where public space are minimized or non-existent, where most people go by car and only the homeless use the public spaces, the designed bobble create an emergent space yet without fixed qualities. The performance of the structure must therefor be seen in relation to the existing urban assemblage: as a design act participating in the mental change of the city.

References

Deleuze & Guattari (1987): *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizofrenia. Trans.* Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press.

Farías, Ignacio & Bender, Thomas, 2010: *Urban Assemblages. How Actor Network Changes Urban Studies.* Questioning Cities Series. London and New York: Routledge.

McAuley, Gay: 2010 *Space in Performance*: Making Meaning in the Theatre (Theater: Theory/Text/Performance)