PUBLIC SPACE AND CHILDREN

Who Cares and Who Takes Care of?

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Introduction

In this chapter, we investigate the role of children in the production and significance of public space in Brazilian cities. Public spaces are places where people should share experiences of solidarity and learn about the world and, because of these learning processes, are particularly important for children. However, this feature remains unacknowledged in Brazilian cities, which are shaped by social inequalities, high rates of urban violence, the frightening presence of cars on public roads, and the generally poor quality of urban spaces. In this context, individual concerns appear to be more important than community issues, resulting in an absence of interest in the state of public spaces, and particularly in designing public spaces that cater to the needs of children. We argue that children *should* be an essential part of public space and we speculate in this chapter about who cares for children in the design of public spaces and who takes care of these spaces.

In this context, we critically examine one established form of scientific knowledge, outlining an approach to other forms of knowledge, beyond established scientific ones, and their relationships with the city. As a product of modernity, the positivist approach of scientific knowledge resulted in technical advances, but also the possibility of unequal power and social inequity, due to the erasure of other ways of narrating the world (Sousa Santos 2004). Different knowledge produced by different people and cultures involved in social emancipation practices have often remained unacknowledged. The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ibid.) calls this kind of invisible knowledge ‘emancipatory common sense.’

As Sousa Santos (ibid.: 789) underlines, both the positivist approach of scientific knowledge and other forms of knowledge are incomplete. This incompleteness may be perceived in urban public spaces. In such spaces, where such things are (or should be) visualized, one can recognize potential dialogues and conflicts arising from the plurality of multicultural knowledge, far beyond official regulation and scientific knowledge. In Brazilian urban society, a very high proportion of the economy is informal, and city administrations have little control over the use of spaces. In planning and regulation, it is important to treat the public space not only as a physical and material space—something geometric—but also as a socio-political

dimension. The way we (do not) plan, design, use, and care for public space may include or exclude individuals or social groups. On the one hand, in Brazilian cities, it seems that no one cares for the streets or takes care of them. However, on the other hand, we can identify the emancipatory possibilities produced in these public spaces, which maintain the meanings of recognition and of belonging to such places (Barros e Silva and Matos e Silva 2018).

We also present a practical experience, intended to produce other social narratives connecting children and public spaces, making visible alternative ways of seeing and acting in the world. To this end, we use “the work of translation,” an unconventional sociological tool developed by Sousa Santos (2004: 801, own translation), to facilitate the appropriation of public spaces by the Brazilian child within his or her different social realities.

Urban Childhood: First Approaches

The Portuguese word *infância* [childhood] comes from the Latin word *infantia*, which “etymologically means the one who cannot speak” (Dias and Ferreira 2015: 119, own translation). In Brazil, the ‘Child and Adolescent Statute’ (a federal law promulgated in 1990) states that ‘child’ means all individuals up to 12 years old. However, it should be noted that childhood here is a plural and complex period, interspersed with multiple discourses, including different traits, according to specific social, historical, cultural, and urban contexts. Childhood must be understood, therefore, as a social construct understood as a different structural category in different societies (Jenks 1982). According to Marina Dias and Bruna Ferreira (2015), childhood as a concept did not exist until the end of the Middle Ages. It could therefore be said that childhood is an invention of modernity as a result of emancipatory processes.

The *United Nations Children’s Fund State of the World’s Children Report* notes that childhood experience around the world is becoming increasingly urban and that this shift is irreversible: Nowadays over 50% of the world’s population—including over one billion children—live in medium and large cities (UNICEF 2012).

According to official population estimates, in 2020 Brazil’s population is about 210,727,174, of whom 51,215,974 are children and teenagers up to 14 years old, in other words 24% of the entire population. Socioeconomic indicators demonstrate inequalities: In 2019 about 13 million people in Brazil (6.5%) were living in extreme poverty (that is, living on less than US\$1.9 per day), while 52 million people were living in poverty (on less than US\$5.5 per day), about 25.3% of the country’s population (Nery 2019). A report from the Abrinq Foundation presents some significant information about the living conditions of children and teenagers in Brazil: 40.2% of children and teenagers under the age of 14 live in poverty; 17.5% of all teenage girls became mothers before the age of 19; 18.4% of homicides committed in 2016 were of children and teenagers under the age of 19; and 66% of children under the age of three do not have access to either a public or private kindergarten (Varella 2018). In summary, the report demonstrates the severe vulnerability of the majority of children in Brazil.

It is true that childhood experiences in Brazilian cities vary. Many children enjoy the advantages of urban life, such as access to education, medical, and recreational services. On the other hand, the number of children denied rights to essential resources and basic humanitarian services, such as clean water and healthcare, is very high—even when living close to such services. However, many of these children may also be homeless and coerced into activities that involve risk and exploitation or face the constant threat of expulsion from their homes, even when living in the most unacceptable conditions—unsafe and overcrowded housing,

and seriously vulnerable to disease and disaster. In the sociology of childhood in Brazil, the term ‘non-child’ has been used to describe children for whom none of the social conditions required for a life of dignity can be identified. Although children are recognized in law, their contemporary prerogatives and the rights broadly associated with childhood have not been empirically identified. Children are often excluded, hidden, and absent, with so-called ‘street children’ constituting a paradigmatic example (Marchi 2007).

Interestingly, over the years, the rise in the number of children living in cities has created a paradox—how to make childhood and public spaces connect, given the spread of fear, high rates of criminality, and increasingly hostile design and use of the street in Brazil. One could say that the street is not a place for play or to establish a relationship of care and support for children’s health and social development. As a result, on the one hand, children from families with medium or high economic backgrounds are walled up in gated communities that provide the illusion of freedom and autonomy. On the other hand, children from low-income situations experience more outdoor playtime, even if there are no good quality public spaces in their neighborhoods.

In general, thinking about the relationship between children and the public space in the contemporary Brazilian city presupposes a consideration of other issues, such as the frightening presence of cars on public roads and the poor quality of urban furniture. Indeed, in these conditions, children’s freedom of movement is reduced and the possibility of developing particular ways of perceiving the city is impeded (Dias and Ferreira 2015).

In contrast, in ancient Greece, for example, children learned by walking routes in public space. The *paidagogos*¹ was in charge of accompanying children from home to school and back and knowledge was generated, and experiences were shared along these routes. Public space was not only understood as a place for constructing thought in action, but also as a space for shaping democracy by constituting the *agora*. Christine Loth and Thomas Coelen (2016) explain that pedagogy during this period existed exclusively in public space—albeit strictly for boys only—and that it originally means the methodology of accompanying children through the public space of the city. In this sense, public space was seen as a fundamental element for a child’s development and learning—one that people cared about.

We are nowadays dealing with public spaces that have lost their importance as places of encounter, experiences, and learning. The detachment of children from meaningful street spaces reduces their large-scale perception of open space, hinders the construction of a sense of citizenship and neighborhood, and impairs the development of mental, geographical, and affective maps.

Interaction with public space can inspire children to care for places, and thus become critical and participatory social agents who question the world around them, expanding their creative capacity and environmental sensitivity. This also means learning about conflict and differences, which may emerge when different perspectives come together. Children are likewise encouraged to solve problematic situations and propose new challenges, thereby fostering their capacity for organization and planning. Children need to be educated for life, for citizenship. They therefore need to use and appropriate public spaces, for example by playing freely with other children. As Claudia Oliveira (2004: 22, own translation) notes: “If they cannot use the public space, how will they become citizens? How can you respect this space if you do not get to know it?” However, some research has demonstrated that children’s freedom to walk and play outdoors, and to explore the environment with their peers, has become increasingly restricted in Brazilian cities, despite the need to find ways to stimulate their autonomy (Ramalhoso 2017).

Urban public space is not only understood in its aesthetic, functional, or environmental state, but also in its political dimension, since it may be appropriated and shared by different social groups and can accommodate divergence and disagreements (Matos e Silva 2014). It is a place of struggle and negotiation. Further, fear, neglect, or lack of access to public space can lead to physical confinement and promote a sedentary lifestyle. Little by little, particularly, but not solely, children and families from the privileged economic classes, who normally avoid public spaces, relinquish the political dimension of the urban public space as a place of interaction and free play, a place to learn other perceptions, and deal with disagreements. Since Brazilian society is pervaded by different types of inequalities, especially socioeconomic ones, conflicts in contemporary Brazilian cities have become life-threatening. Cities have suffered from the proliferation of private spaces—for example, in the form of shopping malls and gated residential communities—that deliberately seek to display some of the characteristics of collective (but not public) spaces of coexistence, but which are merely intended for coexistence between equals.

There is nothing new in this. Historically, public space in Brazilian cities has always attracted contempt and indifference. As opposed to the household, or the domestic space, people on the street are viewed with reservations, even with disrespect (DaMatta 1997).

Public space is understood here as

something that goes beyond the *street*; as a set of practices that are structured in a certain place [...] as a social space, a public space does not exist *a priori* only as a *street* but is structured by the presence of *actions* that give it meaning.

(Leite 2010: 84, original emphasis, own translation)

Thus, in order to constitute public space, it must be traversed, both physically and symbolically, by practices and actions.

However, as we have said, fear is the hallmark of public space in contemporary Brazilian cities. The current high homicide and crime rates² in Brazil lead people not only to move away from the streets, but also to disqualify all kinds of spaces from public use and access. Although it is not possible to generalize, in certain situations, even the act of walking on the street or using public transport, for example, can be highly stigmatizing. This reinforces the historically constructed state of indifference, contempt, and therefore carelessness related to Brazilian urban public space.

The ways a child appropriates public space in the city may indicate potential, such as creativity and capacity to improve the use of public infrastructure, and contribute to the diversification of the street itself, since the more heterogeneously a street is inhabited, the safer it will become (Jacobs 2000). This is why this relationship (between children and public space) has assumed such importance, since it re-signifies the child's place in the city and allows it to become a place of recognition, affection, identity, and autonomy.

Connecting Public Space and the Child Through Care: The 'My Lime Tree Sidewalk' Project

All scientific knowledge is socially constructed. However, according to Sousa Santos (2004: 789), there are non-conventional practices and experiences in the world that often become invisible. Since these are "considered alternatives to hegemonic experiences, their credibility

can be discussed and argued and their relations with hegemonic experiences can be the object of political dispute" (ibid., own translation). Sousa Santos (ibid.: 801, own translation) therefore developed the concept of "the work of translation." In this sense, translation enables reciprocal intelligibility between available and possible experiences of the world. This applies to knowledge, actions, and practices.

The work of translation represents an alternative way of interpreting the experiences of social emancipation, as well as their agents, understanding that all everyday cultures are incomplete and can enrich and be enriched by dialogue and confrontations with other everyday cultures and other perspectives. This creates the necessary conditions for the concrete social emancipation of social groups. The work of translation is a sociological tool that aims to make emancipatory experiences visible.

The production of scientific knowledge must aim to promote social emancipation, a principle of democracy. Emancipation in this sense refers to participation in the social process of democratically constructing new spaces and new forms of individual and collective citizenship. Emancipation is a path to a new state of knowledge, and to solidarity, which is a forever-unfinished process.

From this point of view, it makes no sense to understand public space through a general theory, which presupposes the obliteration of the complexity of public spaces. The work of translation is an alternative to a hegemonic general theory, providing reciprocal understanding between experiences of the world. Through translation, the participatory practitioner's knowledge goes hand-in-hand with expert knowledge. It is therefore manifest among social practices and agents, since all social practices comprise knowledge. In other words, the work of translation involves knowledge applied to practices and materialities and aims to stimulate a desire for the collective creation of knowledge and practices that provide alternatives to neoliberal globalization. The goal is to inspire the establishment of contact zones and to share experiences.

If we understand that technical and scientific knowledge is as incomplete as all other forms of knowledge, it is essential to appreciate the importance of alternative ways of thinking about public space through experiences. As long as possible dialogue and conflicts are recognized, new forms of science may eventually figure in hybrid forms of emancipatory knowledge, taking into account the plurality and richness of multicultural experiences in the world. From this perspective, Sousa Santos (1997) states that this entire movement triggers emancipatory actions in society, which often become invisible in the daily life of the city.

These experiences, invested in emancipation and knowledge, "involve a rupture from conservative and mythicizing commonsense, to then become a new and emancipatory commonsense" (Koga 2002: 47, own translation). The following is a reflection from Sousa Santos (2004: 778, own translation):

Social experience around the world is much wider and more varied than the things that Western scientific or philosophical social tradition know or consider important. This social wealth is being wasted and it is this waste that feeds ideas that proclaim that there is no alternative, that history has come to an end and so on.

Sousa Santos (ibid.) discusses the importance of not wasting these experiences. It is therefore necessary to break from the dominant knowledge model of technical and scientific rationality, guided by indolent, arrogant reason, and replace it with a "cosmopolitan rationality,"

which prevents social experience from being wasted and recognizes its potential. This is a fundamental condition for recovering wasted emancipatory actions and thinking about dichotomies beyond arrangements of power. Other relationships and connections, which have been overshadowed and made ‘invisible’ by the dominant dichotomies, can therefore be revealed.

Below we present a social experience developed and led by academic actors whose intention was to create the conditions for possible social emancipations that translate reciprocal learning (between the university and citizens, and vice-versa) and the desire to connect transformative practices. This project attempted to facilitate dialogue between academic staff and citizens (adults and their children) within a specific neighborhood. The researchers visualized potential conflicts in order to support the creation of a new form of science. Sousa Santos’ concept of translation helped us to read and interpret the spatial practices of this activity. The project also illustrated aspects of spatial practice that contribute to academic (hegemonic) knowledge.

At this point, we should mention the principle of ‘extension activities’ at Brazilian universities within which this project is situated: As well as teaching and research, extension activities are a fundamental part of the university approach in Brazil, particularly in order to build connections between society and the university, and to incorporate civic feedback into research and teaching. This principle also enables universities to fulfill their social mission (Fórum de Pró-Reitores de Extensão das Universidades Públicas Brasileiras 2007). University teachers and students carry out activities with the community, making the knowledge acquired through teaching and research within the university available to the urban public. This activity produces new knowledge to be developed and coordinated.

In 2019, the extension project *My Lime Tree Sidewalk—Affective Relations Between Children and the Neighborhood* was conducted in the city of Aracaju, Brazil, by the Departments of Theater, and Architecture and Urbanism at the Federal University of Sergipe.³ The project sought to strengthen affective relationships between children and public space, specifically focusing on the neighborhood around Graccho Cardoso Square, located in the traditional São José district, near the downtown area (see Figure 13.1 and 13.2).

Aracaju is located in the northeast region of Brazil and has a population of 657,013 (IBGE 2019). Like other medium and large cities in the country, it is marked by strong socio-economic inequalities, evident in residential areas with very different urban configurations and architectural typologies: from vertical buildings and single-family houses in middle- and high-income neighborhoods—mostly in gated communities, surrounded by walls with guardhouses, security staff, and equipment such as cameras—to precarious urban structures consisting of smaller houses and apartments in poor neighborhoods. In all of these urban situations, even in low-income neighborhoods, the relationship with the street is often problematic. Care and maintenance are undertaken to a greater extent in private spaces, relegating the public space to another world, outside, beyond physical and visual barriers.

In this context, we observe that constant and frequent practices for the use and appropriation of the public space by children usually occur in low-income neighborhoods, despite the poor quality of spaces and constructions. The São José district, where the project was undertaken, has 5,587 inhabitants, is quite near the downtown area, but is not exclusively commercial. It is an old bourgeois neighborhood, not much sought after by young families with children. Although the public spaces in São José are of good quality, the children living in São José rarely go out into the streets or squares to play or meet friends.

FIGURE 13.1 Advertising the project in Graccho Cardoso Square, Aracaju. Source: César Matos e Silva, 2019.

FIGURE 13.2. Graccho Cardoso Square, Aracaju. Source: César Matos e Silva, 2019.

Project activities took place in 2019, over five months, with a multidisciplinary team of university professors and students from architecture and the performing arts and were divided into three stages. These stages were constituted as a sequence of relational intensification between the nearest neighborhood and the district, as follows: rooting, ‘radiating,’ and wandering. In the first stage, activities were specifically focused on Graccho Cardoso Square and were aimed at promoting dialogue by inviting the local neighborhood, enabling coexistence, and stimulating interest in caring for the public space. The first stage activities were: 1) publicizing the project to the local population using handouts and brief interactions with passersby; 2) raising the awareness of dog owners, who use the square to walk their dogs, to collect their

animals' feces through the motto: "The poop is yours, but the square belongs to everybody"⁴; and 3) construction of minimal play equipment in the square (non-existent at the time) by installing two swings on the branches of trees in the square. The swings were permanently installed for use by children and adults.

In the second stage (radiating), play activities were performed with the group of children formed over the previous stage, promoting games, costume production, and a percussion workshop (see Figures 13.3 and 13.4). In this phase, radiating walks were organized with the children, i.e., walks to nearby public spaces, as well as to neighborhood bakeries and ice cream shops, using the Graccho Cardoso Square as a starting point. From these small collective walkabouts, the researchers attempted to enable cartographic recognition of the neighborhood and contribute to a geo-affective perception of the open space surrounding the children's homes, i.e., providing them with the option of finding ways to have fun, socialize, and learn in the city not mediated by the unique perspective of the automobile.

The plan for the last stage (wandering) was to wander, that is, to walk around with no pre-determined direction, using play and performance to visually demarcate this small collective way of inhabiting the neighborhood. The children and the team made costumes and

FIGURE 13.3 Activities with children in Graccho Cardoso Square, Aracaju. Source: Cesar Matos e Silva, 2019.

FIGURE 13.4 Activities with children in Graccho Cardoso Square, Aracaju. Source: Cesar Matos e Silva, 2019.

props for this meandering, using their experience in the previous project stages as inspiration. The idea was to observe the dynamics, interests, pauses, and negotiations about where to go between the agents themselves (the children and adults), their spontaneous interactions with the built environment, and the perceptions, care, and feelings of belonging triggered by the experience.

Finally, the project aimed to position the children as the main interlocutors and agents, in other words, to take them out of the usual invisibility of traditional social participation processes, translating their performance, their ways of looking, and their interest in the public space. Indirectly, the researchers sought to intensify connections in this traditional neighborhood and expand perspectives of the notion of urbanity, which has historically been exclusively designed from an adult-centered point of view.

Final Considerations

Scientific research dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of the relationship between children and the public space is growing. It is necessary to position children as the main interlocutors and agents, that is, to remove them from the traditional processes of invisibility in social participation and advance the reconstruction of childhood in society as a task for a new paradigm, as multidisciplinary work, enabling a transformation of professional practices consistent with the new vision of children and childhood.

It is understood, therefore, that experiences and practices that focus on issues of collective interest in urban life contribute to the political formation of citizens involved both directly and indirectly in such social mobilizations. Ultimately, the goal is to focus on those who experience social mobilizations as spectators, as opposed to those who take an active part in such experiences. As stated by Clara Luiza Miranda (2013: 14, own translation) and demonstrated throughout this chapter, the experimental appropriation of the public space by children constitutes a form of “tactical, not spontaneous, occupations.”

Through the *My Lime Tree Sidewalk* project, we are not suggesting that children themselves should take care of public space or a neighborhood. They are children, and this responsibility rather falls to the government, to society, and to the parents. However, as part of urban education, the activities were intended to make the children aware of the adults' 'uncare' for the city, since they could see and experience for themselves the poor quality of the space and the conflicts within it. As an emancipatory practice, this is also true for adults, who also need to become aware of all the uncare for the city and build critical knowledge about how our urban environment should be constituted for children.

Thus, emancipatory practices and actions take account of the fact that theory and practice are inseparable and that there is no theory without practice. As Paulo Freire (1977: 41, own translation) suggests: "Practice takes on a new significance by being illuminated by a theory which the acting individual lucidly appropriates." The *My Lime Tree Sidewalk* project is the practical result of a work of translation, enabling perspectives about the notion of urbanity and citizenship to expand, since it promoted other ways of reading and seeing the world through playful activities in public space. These project activities aimed to develop the care and socio-affective skills of the neighborhood children. Like other similar experiences, this is a way of taking care of public space and, fundamentally, of fostering new roles for public space caregivers: children, adolescents, and adults. By stimulating the children's understanding as interlocutors and agents of social participation, and strengthening their multiple relationships with the neighborhood square, the extension activity supported the children's involvement in and approach to public space.

Notes

- 1 Slaves were assigned to the education of children from seven years old and accompanied them in activities outside the house. The word gave rise to the term 'pedagogue,' which refers to the person responsible for the official school education of children, adolescents, and adults.
- 2 The current homicide rate in Brazil is 29.5 per 100,000 inhabitants (2020). We can compare this with rates in Germany (1.1), Austria (0.6), the United Kingdom (1.2), and in Latin America, Argentina (5.9), and Colombia (25.5) (see World Population Review 2020).
- 3 The project was led by Maicyra Leão (Department of Performing Arts), Robertha Barros (Postgraduate Program in Development and Environment (PRODEMA), Department of Architecture and Urbanism), and César Matos e Silva (Department of Architecture and Urbanism) at the Federal University of Sergipe, Brazil.
- 4 Notice boards were produced and put up in the square, containing phrases and testimonials from the neighborhood children about their impressions of the dog poop, and an open class about zoonosis and diseases that can be transmitted by animal feces was held under an almond tree by a professor and specialist from the university.

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