

Resistance in Brazilian Streets: Beach in an Inland City

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to present the Praia da Estação (“Beach Station”) movement—an important occupation of public space in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais State, Brazil. A joyful protest, Praia da Estação was created in a decentralized and peaceful manner, in response to the top-down regulation set up by Mayor Márcio Lacerda in 2009, to regulate the use of Praça da Estação (“Square Station”). The idea of creating a beach in an inland city, where people would protest in swimsuits, asserts the peaceful and irreverent character of the demonstrations. Thus, Praia da Estação is considered one of the first in a series of actions in Belo Horizonte dedicated to defending the use of public space and (re)gaining control over it.

Introduction

Like most contemporary cities, Belo Horizonte has become the center of several disputes about the privatization of public space through a diverse range of decisions and regulations, from cultural to housing ones. The various attempts of private companies and the city government to regulate the use of public space through urban design are quite visible here though not new. Such gentrification policies have been known and practiced since the 19th century yet over time they have gotten more and more sophisticated in achieving their main goal: displacing communities in order to profit from the rehabilitation and spectacularization of urban projects.

At the heart of this disturbing process is the desire to control the use of public space, making it more consumable, valuable, and orderly via segregative, conservative, and disciplinary rules and actions. Our project showcases the reactions of the residents of Belo Horizonte against the normative and disciplinary actions put in place with the only objective to make the city more attractive for the rich (Taylor 54). Specifically, we focus on a movement born from these reactions, *Praia da Estação* ("Beach Station").

The City of Belo Horizonte

The City of Belo Horizonte, or "Beautiful Skyline," is located in the State of Minas Gerais in the Brazilian hinterland, about 450 kms (280 miles) from the coast. Unlike most Brazilian cities, Belo Horizonte was designed between 1894-1897 to replace the then capital of Minas Gerais, Ouro Preto. It was the very first planned city in Brazil. Currently, its metropolitan area has 5,156,217 inhabitants, which ranks it as the third largest city in the country (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics).

According to political scientist Francois Montambeault, Belo Horizonte "has historically been considered a quite centralized and exclusionary model of governance, and is often characterized as the traditional bastion of the conservative Brazilian political forces" (175). With regards to public space, the city has been marked by institutional interventions, seeking beautification, harmonization, and cleanliness, without much consideration of the needs of the residents. As a result, public space in Belo Horizonte lacks diversity. Here, urban planning has always been the product of laws and regulations concerning the "proper" use of public space, often dictated by the upper classes, inconsiderate of popular opinion. Such is the case with the law against the placement of outdoor tables and chairs by sidewalk cafes and restaurants, or the law against walking on the grass in some squares.

When the military dictatorship regime in Brazil began to transition to a democratic government in the mid-1980s, the left-wing coalition led by the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, The Workers' Party) changed the relations between the city government and the residents (in particular, the favela and various community associations): it introduced the public policy of *orçamento participativo* (participatory budget), giving residents access to local governance.

Currently present in most Brazilian cities, *orçamento participativo*, became an important city program in Belo Horizonte as well, where it was implemented in 1993 under the PT administration. Some major projects carried out under this program have been the restoration of public squares, urbanization of favelas, and construction of hospitals and schools.

However, the program has eroded in the last decade or so for various reasons: first, some active community members got jobs with the city, which made them less vocal in defending the interests of their former communities; second, the current mayor is not only uninterested in investing in this public and democratic instrument of urban planning but he has, in fact, eliminated it; and third, it served its basic purpose because even though *Orçamento Participativo* allowed the city government to listen to the demands of the population, it did not give the tools and power to that same population to propose its own version of urban planning and build its own spaces.

Yet despite its budget and political constraints, *orçamento participativo* established itself as one of the foundations for direct political dialogue between the residents and the city government, and became adopted as a public policy in 2008, with the election of Mayor Márcio Lacerda by a bi-partisan coalition (PT and PSDB or left and right-wing, respectively). But the result was a rather limited public policy because neither the left nor the right wing was willing to grant urban planning power to the communities, defending its unwillingness by claims that civil participation is redundant and unnecessary in an already bi-partisan, inclusive government. This faulty argument reduced civil participation all over the spectrum.

Immediately, already in 2008, public space became a contested ground, as evident by the following instance: Ms. Marcia Amaral went to sunbathe in the historic Raul Soares Square, wearing only her swimsuit, and got arrested and charged with disturbing public space as she had laid down on the grass, which is forbidden, and resisted police questioning. In addition, Marcia's act instigated a barrage of conservative comments, which, much like the police allegations, demonstrated that in Belo Horizonte using the public square as a place to sunbathe was not OK.

But since the event happened, it became a spectacle, of the kind that Guy Debord writes about, which won the sympathies of the common residents of Belo Horizonte. As Debord explains in his fourth thesis, the spectacle "is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). And this is what occurred at the square, when Marcia wanted to sunbathe and was arrested for it. She broke the rules of occupying public space "properly," which, in the case of Belo Horizonte means, keeping one's uncivilized behavior (i.e., lying on the grass) at bay. Historically, as a place where one can conduct business, walk around, give a speech, stop and reminisce, and just be in the company of strangers, the square belongs to the public. And, as Marcia suggested with her behavior, one should be free to enjoy the sun in the square as well.

From Square to Beach

Enter *Praça da Estação* (Square Station): the square in front of the central railroad and metro station that connects the different parts of Belo Horizonte to each other but also, Belo Horizonte to the rest of the country. Also known as the area where soccer matches are displayed on big screens; where concerts, theatrical performances, and music festivals take place year round. In 2003, *Praça da Estação* had been rehabilitated in order to house the Museum of Arts and Crafts and various cultural events with large crowds. The project, inconsiderate of the popular opinion, had aimed to transform the square from a parking area into a concert arena and a venue for other popular and official gatherings promoted by the City's tourist bureau. High columns with powerful illuminations were to allow the use of the concrete, empty space at night; water fountains contributed to the relaxing experience during the day.

But on December 9, 2009, mayoral decree Number 13,798, approved by the municipal chamber, prohibited any form of popular gatherings in *Praça da Estação* (Belo Horizonte). Once the decree was issued, the public started to voice its discontent, flooding City Hall for public hearings, but also gaining publicity across Brazil via social media. Internet blogs and various digital platforms allowed residents from different segments of society to debate the decree and the gentrification process it was a part of, criticizing the authoritarian, top-down decision. The Mayor kept the decree despite all the controversy that it stirred, causing a series of counter actions, among which *Praia da Estação* (Beach Station), considered one of the first in a series of popular movements whose objective and main goal was to defend and (re)gain the use of public space in Belo Horizonte. Such gathering began in a very democratic and horizontal manner, without a center figure or leadership. Its goal was to protest Márcio Lacerda's decree, demanding openness and democratic actions regarding city planning. Such movement inspired other initiatives with similar characteristics.

Sous les pavés, la plage: (Beneath the Asphalt, There is a Beach)

On January 10th, 2010, a group of artists, musicians, journalists, and actors got together and created "*Vá de Branco*" ("Go Dressed in White")—an event open to everyone—which can be considered the beginning of the *Praia da Estação* (Beach Station) movement. The event consisted of going to the square dressed in white clothes. That first demonstration showed that a leaderless movement, product of a horizontal organization and unrelated to any political party, is a tangible reality. In Portuguese, the words beach (*praia*) and square (*praça*) are spelled and pronounced similarly; in fact, if spoken very fast, they can be easily confused. Though Belo Horizonte is not a coast city, the name "*Praia*" instead of "*Praca*" *da Estação* was created, and with it—the idea of creating a beach in a beachless city, where people would peacefully protest in swimsuits at *Praça da Estação* (Station Square).

Historically, the word “beach” has been related to public space and the city. In May of 1968, students in Paris, France, took over universities and streets and fought the police and the government against the capitalization of culture and life. Their slogan “*Sous les pavés, la plage*” (“Beneath the asphalt, there is a beach”) harkens back to the 1871 Commune of Paris, when citizens drove their Mayor out of the city and survived the attack of the Prussian army for three months by building barricades out of cobblestones, underneath which was beach sand (Harvey 287-302). The same happened in 1968: a beach “arose” when the students built their barricades. Yet in Belo Horizonte, cobblestones were not removed from the road: a beach was created on top of it.

The barricade, as a strategic tool of resistance (to police or enemies), was recovered as a strong political image by students in 1968, and further, as an aesthetic and imaginative potential to subvert and occupy the city. The beach, the sand, and the imaginary water became elements to the 1960s student and artistic movements—especially the Situationists—and their ideas of redesigning urban living (Wark 147-159). The use of swimsuits and water in the asphalt square of Belo Horizonte is a way to discuss history as a living critique of current life conditions.

At the same time, repeating the French event that occurred in another city and time, brings new forms of thinking about conflict where local context does matter. In the photos shown in this article (Fig 1-3), the joy of people occupying the streets and the square in order to affirm a life without restraints is quite obvious. It is clear that this protest is neither a strike—a popular tactic used by workers since the 19th century that consists of the interruption of work and occupation of the factory—nor an occupation, like Occupy Wall Street in New York City in 2011. The difference is due to the fact that in Belo Horizonte, protest is linked to Brazilian Carnival culture. People went to the streets and created beaches joyfully: they sang and were dressed in costumes. Swimsuits and water do not simply help people make a stand in an occupied space; they are tools that help produce certain identities and/or subvert others.

The Water Fountains and Beaches in the Inland City

In Belo Horizonte in 2010, 50 people dressed in swimsuits, with floats and toys, refreshed themselves using the water fountains of the square (Fig. 1), becoming participants in the first *Praia da Estação*.



Fig. 1. *Water Fountains. Beach Station, Belo Horizonte, 2012.* Photo credit: Priscila Musa.

After a while, the local government, who instructed the police to turn off the water fountains and re-establish peace in the square, interrupted this collective beach partying. In order to further discourage people from going to the “beach,” the authorities decided that the fountains would be shut off each Saturday, for maintenance. But since then and despite these efforts, *Praça da Estação* has been transformed into *Praia da Estação*, especially on Saturdays (Migliano 45). From 2010 to the end of 2015, the movement responded to the dry fountains by keeping a water truck (acquired through crowd sourcing) at the site (Fig. 2), which allowed people to continue using the square as a refreshing beach point (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Water Truck. Beach Station, Belo Horizonte, 2012. Photo credit: Priscila Musa.



Fig. 3. Beach Station, Belo Horizonte, 2013. Photo by: Priscila Musa.

Social media was fundamental in getting protesters and other participants together: the activists of *Praça da Estação* made public calls to the general population with the objective to draw attention to the incomprehensible and authoritarian Mayoral decree. But not only that: they returned every week in order to imagine through the occupation of a privatized public space a new kind of city that is open to diversity, inaugurating new ways of occupying public spaces, promoting and inventing beaches, using water as a

magnet for social gatherings. Since the authorities responded with new ways of control, *Praça da Estação* had to try new strategies as well.

Praça da Estação created a successful visibility of what resisting the government control over public space might look like. In June of 2011, only five months after the mayoral decree was introduced, it was revoked. Yet City Council created another form of controlling public space: any event would be permitted at the square as long as it met certain regulation. Or as Deleuze observed in 1992, the disciplinary society created in the 18th and 19th centuries transformed into the controlled society of the 20th and 21st centuries (Deleuze 3-7). Instead of prohibiting an action, as the decree initially tried to do, City Hall created a set of rules that would make spontaneous and popular manifestations difficult due to numerous bureaucratic hoops the organizers would have to jump through, one of them being that individuals and corporations should pay a fee in order to use the square for any event. Such economic constraint aims at profiting off of public space as well as financially dictating and discriminating against any future use of public space by the masses.

As Bourdieu postulates, power is defined by the capacity to distinguish oneself from the other, which is based on choices, one of them being which places one can occupy or not (373-385). Such distinction is produced at Square Station by controlling who can use the space or not, based on fulfilling a set of rules, which are virtually impossible to meet except for the government itself. Hence, what is produced is either highly controlled cultural events or big corporation events by Coca-Cola and AMBEV (among others). Therefore, Square Station it is a public place free for people to use *if* they conform to a set of restraints, in negotiation with those who have financial power.

Concluding Remarks

By the end of 2015, Beach Station threatened to re-create the beach in a wealthy region of Belo Horizonte, Savassi neighborhood, at *Praça da Savassi* (Savassi Square), exporting the model of festive occupation of public space to other regions of the city. The local government was once again fearful of the disturbance of order, especially in a place frequented by upper class citizens. In order to discourage the Savassi manifestation, the authorities “fixed” and reopened the water fountains of Square Station. But this did not stop the relocation of the event. Beach Station stayed at Savassi as well, in an effort to gain more visibility, which they did.

Thanks to Beach Station, Belo Horizonte has become an inspiration for other celebrations promoting the free use of public space, elsewhere in the city (such as “Fica Ficus”) and across the country (such as “Ocupa Estelita” in Recife City, “OcupeOCocó” in Fortaleza, and “Parque Augusta” in São Paulo). At the same time, the city government in Belo Horizonte is creating new forms of controlling the use of the square, inventing new decrees, new forms of permitted use of the space that limits the occupation, confirming that we are indeed living in the time of controlled freedom.

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