

**SYMPOSIUM**

**Commentaries on “The Active Role of Geography: A Manifesto”**

**Organised by Lucas Melgaço and Tim Clarke<sup>1</sup>**

**From Totality to Place and Vice-Versa:  
Brazilian Experiences**

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Any proposal for analysis and interpretation that wishes to inspire or guide an intervention directed at the whole of society cannot dispense, then, with a vision of this whole.

Milton Santos et al. 2000

**Introduction**

The Miltonian theoretical construction constitutes a vigorous basis for interpretations and propositions regarding the contemporary world. The critical dimension of the work of Milton Santos, his understanding of the active role of space and of the totality of place, not only constitute the foundation of critical geography but can also contribute much more to “practical-purposive disciplines”, such as regional and urban planning, architecture, landscaping, and urbanism.

The passage, however, of the theoretical discourse of critical geography into purposeful practice does not depend only on analytical rigour and good intentions. Difficulties in the dialogue with different social agents present no easy task, but it is not

impossible. It is to leave the domain of science and ideals isolated from the practical-purposive disciplines, and to act in the field of politics; here, again, the Miltonian theory of space reveals itself as an important foundation.

Santos made the relevance of the political as a foundational element of spatial production clear in his classes and his works (Santos 1987, 1996, 2000). It allows us to avoid falling into determinisms of one kind or another when we understand space as a social instance of the dialectical movement of society, with the same status as other social instances—culture-ideology, economy, and politics (Santos 1978, 1985).

In the third part of *The Active Role of Geography: A Manifesto*, Santos and colleagues (2000) alert us to the necessity of considering the movement of society as a whole if our intention is to perform analysis and interpretation in order to guide actions directed towards the whole of society. According to the *Manifesto*, partial interventions attend to particular interests or lead to results that are ephemeral, if not unworkable. It is not difficult to find examples of government actions that suffer from the weakness of sectoral analyses and that produce effects that are very limited, if not contrary to the intended outcome.

This article briefly discusses two contemporary Brazilian practical-purposive experiences that illustrate the distinction between a sectoral approach with an economistic bias and an approach that seeks to read “space as totality” and a “force of place”, to use the Miltonian expressions (Santos 1996, 2005): [i] the “My House, My Life Programme” (*Programa Minha Casa, Minha Vida*), Brazil’s principal housing policy, which has been in force since 2009, but which represents some serious misconceptions, some recurring in Brazilian history since the period of the military dictatorship (1964-1985); and [ii] the concept of “public enjoyment” proposed in new municipal master plans, perhaps as a contribution to the enrichment of Brazilian public life.

### **Experience 1: The “My House, My Life Programme”**

The “My House, My Life Programme” (MHMLP) launched by the Brazilian federal government in 2009 contracted 3.4 million housing units over five years and had

shipped 1.6 million units by April 2014. Quantitatively, the MHMLP is already the largest housing programme in Brazilian history, but it is not free from criticism.

Its origin may explain its greatest fragility. The MHMLP was conceived largely as an anti-cyclical measure after the global crisis of the established markets from 2008 onward. The programme has injected billions of dollars into the Brazilian economy, avoiding major depressive impacts. The MHMLP strengthened the real estate sector, whose main businesses ended up being capitalized, in 2006, with the opening of capital in the stock market. Capitalized, the major national corporations needed to grow their market, and therefore put pressure on the federal government to expand solvent demand.

So the MHMLP was created with extensive federal funds, with the most significant productive agents of the private sector, the large real estate developers. The programme was divided into three income groups, with higher subsidies for low income populations (those earning up to approximately US\$780.00 monthly), thus “guaranteeing” the possibility of acquiring housing for segments of the population who were on the margins of the formal real estate market.

The official line was that there was a drastic reduction of the housing deficit, estimated at 7 million units. The largest result was the strengthening of the large national companies involved in real estate capital. The programme also benefited real estate speculators. Most of the larger-scale enterprises are given in distant tracts of areas of consolidated urbanization, increasing the value of existing plots between enterprises of the MHMLP and occupied areas of the cities.

To live in areas that are so remote is no easy task for Brazilians living on low incomes, as transport and urban services and equipment are, in general, of poor quality. In this sense the MHMLP aggravates situations of socio-spatial segregation in the large and medium cities of the country.

Furthermore, by privileging the quantitative aspects and the liquidity of enterprises, the MHMLP has given little attention to date (2014) to questions relating to the urbanity of new housing projects. The privatization and isolation of enterprises aggravates socio-spatial fragmentation, privileging the private sphere, at the expense of the qualification of potential spaces for the public sphere. The programme aims not so

much to extend their citizenship as to transform poor populations into a new consumer class.

### **Experience 2: Public Enjoyment and Master Plans**

The Metropolitan Region of São Paulo (MRSP) was created by the federal government in 1973, and presently encompasses 39 municipalities. The MRSP comprises a population of approximately 20 million inhabitants, produces about 15% of Brazil's gross domestic product, and contains around 47,000 industries. The continuous urban area is made up of more than 2,200 km<sup>2</sup> and is partially surrounded by a horticultural belt, supplying the MRSP and, to a large extent, the 12 million inhabitants of the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, the second most populous in the country.

In the centre of the MRSP is the state capital, São Paulo, with more than 11 million inhabitants in 2014. São Paulo is the economic-financial centre of the country. The city is a most dramatic portrait of socio-spatial inequality: heavily protected luxury condominiums contrast with houses in an endless process of self-construction; art museums and offices of the largest companies are in close proximity to thousands of homeless people.

Between 1972 and 2012, São Paulo's urban planning was generally characterized by a functionalist approach, with little attention paid to the improvement of the spaces dedicated to public life. The rule of a minimum distance between buildings and the boundaries of lots set the living spaces and public spaces apart. In 2013, work began on revising the Strategic Master Plan (SMP) of the Municipality. Among other measures, it sought to condense areas best served by high-capacity public transport, as well as to enhance public life of the streets on such axes, stimulating mixed-use and "active façades" (commercial and service activities facing the streets).

In discussions at public hearings for the revision of the SMP, the Landscape Framework Lab (Lab QUAPÁ—Quadro do Paisagismo no Brasil) of the University of São Paulo's Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, supported by visual analysis of satellite imagery of all the urban blocks of the city, demonstrated the necessity of

expanding open spaces for public use, above all along the axes of density desired by the municipality.

Given the high price of land in the areas served by mass transit, it was proposed that the right to greater use of land should be tied to the allocation of a percentage of the land for “free space of public enjoyment”, without involving the donation of such areas to the municipality. This way, the entrepreneur does not lose the right to include the “free spaces of public enjoyment” as “land area” for the purposes of calculations of urban parameters (land use coefficient, occupancy rate, and land permeability index), but is obliged to maintain free public access to such spaces.

Lab QUAPÁ’s proposal was well received by local authorities. The concept of “public enjoyment” was approved in the new SMP; however, to no one’s surprise, Lab QUAPÁ’s initial proposal had its metrical requirements reduced and had its application restricted to lots of more than 5,000 m<sup>2</sup> present in the axes of density provided for in the new SMP.

A similar proposal was presented by Dr. João Meyer, researcher for Lab QUAPÁ, in 2014, for the new Master Plan of the Municipality of Santos. In Santos, private spaces of public enjoyment were named “open areas of public use”, applicable to enterprises in lots of more than 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>. The question of the qualification of spaces of public enjoyment should also have been assessed in 2015 in the revision of the urban planning legislation of the Municipality of Campinas.

It is worth noting that Santos and Campinas make up the seats of the São Paulo Metropolitan Regions: the Metropolitan Region of Baixada Santista–MRBS–and the Metropolitan Region of Campinas–MRC, with about 1.7 and 3 million inhabitants respectively. These cities have economic dynamics of national stature. The MRBS has the largest port in the country and is a major centre of industrial petrochemical and steel production; the MRC contains the largest cargo handling airport in the country and also constitutes a centre of excellence in research and development, particularly in the areas of information technology and telecommunications.

It is hoped that the creation of urban planning norms that promote the creation of qualified open spaces for public enjoyment can contribute gradually to the (re)valuation

of public life in the Brazilian cities; whether or not this is the case will be observed in the future.

### **Conclusion**

The two experiences described above make it clear that the question of scale does not qualify a proposal as either global or sectional. Although it is of national importance and offers significant quantitative results, the MHMLP offers little or no contribution to the sphere of public life; instead, it leads the poorest populations away and reinforces socio-spatial segregation.

The goal of Lab QUAPÁ's proposals for the creation of private spaces of public enjoyment is to contribute to the qualification of the spaces of public life (from the everyday to political demonstrations), understanding that the improvement of such spaces makes possible the greater public use of space, expanding the public sphere in general (Queiroga 2012). Life in spaces of public appropriation, whether they be public or private property, allows contact with difference, recognition between people of different social groups, making it possible, perhaps, to value the notion of *res publica*, so fragile in a country of elitist and patrimonial social structure.

Clearly, simple public conviviality does not annul social contradictions and conflicts, but undoubtedly situations of dissent, when made public, make debate possible and qualify the public political sphere, thus constituting an urban living experience much richer than one that is restricted to the controlled and programmed spaces of the private sphere. This is not spatial determinism, but the understanding of the totality and of the force of place in socio-spatial processes (Santos 2005), opening up the emancipatory possibilities that are not directed at this or that interest of a particular social group.

Although the proposal of Lab QUAPÁ still predicts restricted localization, its purpose is not of a sectional nature; on the contrary, it seeks to encourage the creation of spaces of public appropriation that may perhaps contribute to the space of the citizen and not to the "pluperfect consumer", as Milton Santos (1987) warns. This is neither an easy nor a small accomplishment for a large country in the midst of transformation.

## Endnote

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This essay, together with nine companion pieces, are available online at <https://antipodefoundation.org/supplementary-material/the-active-role-of-geography/> (last accessed 8 December 2016). A translation of Milton Santos et al.'s "The Active Role of Geography: A Manifesto" by Lucas and Tim, together with an introduction by Lucas, are available in *Antipode* 49(5).

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**ANTIPODE**

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