

Empty Lots: Collective Action of Experimental Urban Occupation

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The Empty Lots project was a collective action organized by artists and architects to transform private lots into temporary public spaces. The project took place throughout the year 2005 in Belo Horizonte, a Brazilian city with some 2.5 million inhabitants and 70,000 vacant lots (which is equivalent to about 10% of all its properties). Based upon the mechanisms of the financial market, the urban fabric as we know it stimulates speculation and encourages fear and segregation. This collective project, on the other hand, proposes thinking into another direction – and certainly the possibility of occupying land for free presented a problem: notions of property, environment, community, ethics, and aesthetics were all called into question.

Empty Lots generated a network of public spaces that were easily incorporated into the neighborhoods. Each group of artists walked across the city in search of empty lots and then negotiated a temporary loan from their respective proprietors (which constituted the most difficult part of the whole process). The actions helped forge relations with the local population and the places, indeed, directly provoking their involvement. The idea was to create a temporary public space on unused private property.

The notion of land as private property didn't exist in colonial Brazil. Since the 16th century, several systems had been adopted for land concession to the Portuguese elite, as a means of encouraging exploration. With the abolition of slavery by the end of the 19th century, the number of landless people increased enormously. The lower classes have always lacked access to owning land in Brazil due to the absence of the agrarian and urban reforms; consequently, property has been concentrated in the hands of a few, that is, in the hands of real state speculators or the privileged class of proprietors. This minority group holds the majority of the land: the ratio presents one of the more shocking statistics in the world. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the landless population has resorted to informally occupying residual urban spaces such as the hills, strips of land, shores, beaches – through land *invasions*, they have spontaneously created a particular kind of spatiality in which to live and work. On the whole, these people make up some 40% of the total population of Brazil.

Located in the southeast of the country, Belo Horizonte was founded in 1897. It was in the empty privately-owned lots that we proposed a procedure that would allow them to be temporarily used by the local population. Some of the lots are diversified green areas or the sites of demolished or abandoned buildings. In the dense area of downtown, it became a profitable business to convert the empty lots into parking lots. In the city outskirts, these lots were being used by the neighbors to plant corn, beans, manioc, and other vegetables. Empty lots, therefore, became potential sites for urban breathing. All in all, they constitute a large quantity of free, open, green gardens. Each area has its own special characteristics, but they are almost always between walls. By incorporating these empty lots into the daily lives of the population living in proximity, the city is inevitably redesigned.

The areas officially recognized as public places are the parks, squares, and streets. In contemporary cities, the parks are big recreation areas; they constitute the distant destination to where dwellers of different neighborhoods relocate on the weekend. The squares are located in almost all of the boroughs and are frequented by the locals daily; however, they have come to resemble traffic islands. In the past, the streets were used as an extension of the home and of commerce; but they are becoming more and more inhospitable, even aseptic: the street has become an endless sequence of walls and electric fences. Therefore empty lots have an evocative potential. They can change the perception of the neighborhood by exposing the absence of use, the absence of activity, and, at the same time, providing a sensation of freedom. Another dynamic is established: behaviors change and new programs can emerge. When these empty lots are transformed into gardens and meeting spaces, an experiment with nature takes place on the micro-urban scale. Emptiness becomes the site of ad-hoc invention: the empty lots become places for raising milk cattle or for parties and picnics, for weddings, or even as collective living rooms, places for watching TV and listening to crickets.

Likewise, the gardens might be a wild bed of flowers or a tamed row of vegetables. They can constitute spaces for trading products, for rest or reading, for observing the stars, or a place for games, a makeshift hairdresser's shop, small concerts, etc.

This instant programming is the opposite of the real-estate speculation that has caused these lots to be empty in the first place. Actively appropriating these spaces, the local population invents new types of ecologies and systems for the contemporary city. It is a form of resistance to the society of control. Today there are many public spaces which are under complete surveillance – like shopping malls, Disneyland, and resort hideaways, to name but a few – where functions and desires are defined and controlled: they present an increasingly false neo-liberal sense of a sustainable discourse. Entrenched in a politics of elitism and privatization, these spaces ignite fear and, moreover, actively restrict the collective ways of urban life.