

## **PARALLEL CITIES**

### **Film as architectural tool**

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### **Abstract**

*Parallel Cities is the title of a research project in which film is a central instrument to identify and analyse architectural problems. Film and video are traditionally considered tools for representation and are usually used in the realm of architecture in ways similar to presentation models, perspective renderings and architectural photography. There are however other tools that might be even more important within the architectural process, those which drive reflection about space and architectural problem solving: sketches, conceptual models, photography documenting process. All of these tools are crucial to the architects' design process. One of the fundamental purposes of this research project is to promote the use of film and video as design tools. Other research fields, such as anthropology, use film and video as a research instrument. In anthropology, ethnographic film is a research tool which had a far reaching impact in contemporary documentary cinema. In architecture, film was used as a research instrument in William Whyte's "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces" (1980), which has served as the main source for the development of our project. We propose to observe the social interaction that occurs in recently modified public spaces – such as Largo do Intendente in Lisbon – bringing forth new patterns of occupation, as well other architectural problems that are still open. Thus, video becomes an instrument that allows the architectural project to be continually questioned and redesigned, and it extends the span of the architectural project into its built and occupied existence.*

**Keywords:** Urban Design, Film, Documentary, Occupancy

### **1. Architecture and Film: conventions**

When we pair architecture and film we immediately think about a series of films that have been presented in many film thematic retrospectives on this subject. Films such as *Metropolis* (1927), that shows the futurist urban ideal, as well as many other films of the German Expressionism movement; or as *The Fountainhead* (1949) that portrays the icon of

the individualist architect; or as *Mon Oncle* (1958) and *Play Time* (1967) that represent the contrast between the rigid orthodox modernism and the nostalgia for the vernacular that emerged by mid-twentieth century; or as *North by Northwest* (1959) that also plays with the distinction between corporate modernist architecture and the chaos of natural settings; as *Le Mépris* (1962) that uses architecture and landscape to define the atmosphere of the story; as *Blade Runner* (1982) that presents the dystopian vision of future cities; or as *Inception* (2010) that presents the architect of the future using telepathic systems of 3D modelling.

These movies are part of architecture's social imaginary (Alsayyad, 2006) and are constantly screened worldwide throughout departments of architecture, classes, student group's weekly screenings and institutions such as *Cinemateca Portuguesa* (Rodrigues, 1999) or the British Film Institute.<sup>1</sup> Gradually these films became acknowledged as references within academic production (Penz & Thomas, 1997; Lamster, 2000; Pallasmaa, 2001).

These films are also instruments of representation of the architectural object. They create an efficient iconic image of a building or urban setting, while associating it to the mythical image devised through film. An interesting example of this phenomenon is the appearance of Peter and Alison Smithson's Economist Building (1959) in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow Up* (1966), where a group of mimes begins its disruptive stroll around the city of London on the Economist plaza. The building, that was polemic at the time, had its corporate status blurred by a radical image.

Even within the field of documentary, notable buildings and famous architect's biographies more often than not, represent architecture. Documentary filmmakers Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine present their work as an alternative view to the idealization of architecture, presenting buildings with their everyday occupancy. Nevertheless the buildings depicted are precisely the most iconic – OMA's House in Bordeaux, or Herzog and de Meuron's Hosanna winery – to explore the contrast of the prosaic situation on an exceptional building (Bêka & Lemoine, 2013).

Film is thus conventionally observed to be an instrument to represent the architectural object, just like presentation models, drawings, collages and photography before actual occupancy occurs.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2009 the British Film Institute presented a series of films to celebrate the Royal Institute of British Architect's 175th anniversary (Andrew, 2009).

## 2. Architecture and Film: as an architectural tool

There are however other instruments that are very important to the process of architectural design. Those, which promote architectural thinking and problem solving: study models, sketches, drawing and photography as a registration of the character of a place. These are fundamental instruments, which complement themselves within the process of designing any architectural project. Thus, one of the fundamental premises of this research project is to promote film and video as design tools.

Film and video are used as research tools in other scientific fields. In anthropology, the ethnographic documentary is a valued instrument in academia. And there is a clear intersection between contemporary documental film and ethnography.<sup>2</sup>

If the city was always a common subject in film, nowadays we see a rise on the production of documentaries on urban environments. Many documental films provide sound study material in architecture schools and some research centres use film and video research tool.<sup>3</sup>

The urbanist William H. Whyte (1917-1999) already used film as an instrument that allowed pursuing urban research through exhaustive observation. His work *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1979)<sup>4</sup> presents a fundamental experiment on the analysis of the urban realm and the assessment of urban design projects. This kind of research presents architectural practice as a process, rather than a finite design. Whyte's team looks at the diverse social interactions occurring within public space and this becomes clear through film. Taking the design of an urban square, one can see the design decisions being tested and also many unexpected actions that open the way to other occupations (Whyte, 1979).

Our research project, *Parallel Cities / Cidades Paralelas*, aims to promote intersections between the fields of architecture, urbanism, documental cinema and anthropology. Thus we aim to retrieve film and video as research instruments in architecture. Observation through video recording allows the detection of specific problems that have to be solved or local

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<sup>2</sup> Such as the work produced at the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University: <http://sel.fas.harvard.edu>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the film screenings organized by the Urban Planning Department of Urban Studies & Planning do MIT, the online media publication *Urban Planning Film Review* and the Program in Urban Studies de Princeton University.

<sup>4</sup> This project is published in film and in print (Whyte 1979, 1980)

advantages that might be incorporated on the project. Therefore we encourage that the architects' role to be expanded throughout time and the occupation and use of the space.

### **3. Case Study: Largo do Intendente**

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the symbiosis between the growth of the creative classes and the manifold urban areas that lost their previous identity – either industrial areas or popular housing – promoted the occupation of derelict urban areas by cultural services such as art galleries and artist studios. This phenomenon and its apparent success, in cities like New York or London, was adopted by urban planning who tried to replicate the instrumental role of the creative classes in urban regeneration.

The urban renovation project carried out at Largo do Intendente, in Lisbon, has been following the gentrification through its occupation by the creative classes, motivating more affluent, formally educated people, from a younger generation to occupy the problematic neighbourhood. Nowadays, even when the most enthusiastic proponents of this method start to question its validity, it is necessary to evaluate, analyse and eventually change the course of these urban projects.

In this context, the observational documentary can be very valuable to the city. If generic strategies can be misleading, extensive local observation allows to identify specific problems or to bring neighbourhood assets into play. We chose to study Largo do Intendente because it is possible to follow the transformation that takes place through political decision – and its formal evidence: the architectural and urban project. These decisions affect multiple actions on the life of recent, as well as established, inhabitants.

During the last decades, the image of this area of Lisbon merged with an atmosphere of dereliction, with drug traffic, street prostitution and the presence of illegal immigrants. The feeling of 'warzone' within its community often appeared in daily newspapers (Mendes 2002). Occasionally, usually associated to election campaigns, the visibility of Largo do Intendente attests to its problematic state as well as local politicians intentions to redeem its condition.

If we look at the media and political discourse, about Largo do Intendente, produced in the last decade, we see a digression about the factors that are assumed to cause that situation.

This causal dissociation allows us to analyse past strategies and predict prospective ones. In the beginning of the present century the triad – drugs, prostitution and illegal immigrants – were part of the same problem, urgent to eradicate. Ten years later, the need to counteract Intendente's social stigma emerges through a strategy of 'image makeover' of Largo and neighbouring areas. This strategy dissociates social issues and the urban realm.

Thus, in 2003, Pedro Santana Lopes, then mayor of the city, affirmed that the strategy to be used at Largo do Intendente will be mainly to solve the problems of its inhabitants, of its public space and its buildings (Intendente ganha vida nova, 2003). Nevertheless, this change does not happen. There are isolated interventions that never tackle the problematic triad.

In 2010, the following mayor, Antonio Costa, invests personally in the area temporarily moving his offices to a building at Largo do Intendente. His own contribution is, according to his own words, to 'give confidence' to potential future investors (Boaventura, 2011).

In two years the image of Largo do Intendente and surrounding area is profoundly changed: creating a main public square and establishing new public space at Rua do Benfornoso, new commercial and cultural institutions, and the city hall invests in the production cultural events – such as concerts and festivals. According to the mayor this is the "phase to introduce Largo [do Intendente] and Mouraria." This establishes it is important to renovate and change, but it is equally important to reveal and advertise the new "clean" image of the neighbourhood. In the same interview, the mayor declares that the promotion of the "new" Largo do Intendente aims to "attract Portuguese citizens, foreign tourists and investors" (Público & Lusa, 2012).

In short, there is a change in political discourse that leads Largo do Intendente to become a central place in the city, away from its previous isolated character. This change occurs in the space, image and the social fabric of the area, and catalyses the confrontation between different aspirations and urban life. These differences are discernible in the occupation of public space – its tensions, hybrids, disruptions and continuities are the subjects that turn this into an interesting case study.

#### 4. Workshop Parallel Cities: Observational documentary

Within the context of this research project about life in the city and the occupation of public space, we organised the workshop Parallel Cities in February 2013, within the Architecture Week annual event organised by the Department of Architecture (ECATI) of Lusófona University in Lisbon.<sup>5</sup> During ten days, Largo do Intendente was the lab and object of study of a group of twenty-one students<sup>6</sup> supervised by five teachers.<sup>7</sup>

The main goal of the workshop was to produce a short documentary film that displayed the analysis of this space regarding its recent renewal, the actions of its inhabitants and the social life of this place. This studio also aimed to start a video and sound archive that is important for the long term analysis of this area.

We organised a daylong seminar to introduce other relevant projects to the participants. The collective Left Hand Rotation presented the documentary *Luz* (2012), about the polemics regarding the urban renovation process of Bairro da Luz in São Paulo, Brazil. Marta Silva presented the project Largo Residências, an art residency centre situated at Largo do Intendente, she also talked about the social dynamics of the neighbourhood. The artist and anthropologist Hélène Veiga Gomes presented her research project *Intendente(s)* (2001) while being an artist in residence at Largo Residências. And finally, a team from Atelier Joana Vasconcelos presented the work *Kit Garden* (2012) that was installed at Largo do Intendente.

The students were organised in teams, and each would produce a segment of the documentary, after having tutorials on how to use the video cameras, sound recorders and editing software. During three days each team observed and video recorded what happened in the space. Afterwards, they analysed the footage and produced a first version of the film that was edited and re-worked in the following days.

With this workshop the teams were able to look at the city identify its social dynamics and to make connections between designed, produced and lived space. It presented the team to a work methodology based in involvement and physical presence. It also allows them to analyse the field with the distance and filter of the filmed sequences. Thus it creates a

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<sup>5</sup> This follows the previous Architecture and Cinema workshop of 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Abba Baldé, Boris van Es, Catarina Farmhouse, Cátia Almeida, Carlos Fernandes, Cláudia Mendes, Diogo Afonso, Diogo Ferreira, Gonçalo Bento, Ivan Parashev, Ludmila Cosnean, Marco Cunha, Paulo Rosas, Ricardo Veloso, Sofia Cambeiro, Teresa Conceição and Tânia Barracho.

<sup>7</sup> Catarina Patrício, Eliana Sousa Santos, Luís Santiago Baptista, Patrícia Santos Pedrosa and Paulo Figueiredo.

dialectic between presence and distance that will hopefully generate further insights about the city.

## **5. Parallel Cities Workshop as research process**

The work produced in this workshop is a work in progress, in the sense that a methodology that ideally requires longer timeframes is used during a very short period. Thus the presented film must be looked at as part of an experimental process, which will be developed in the near future. When participating in this workshop we take note of several methodological setbacks.

### **5.1 How to film**

The eminent presence of cameras, people, and sound operators disturbs the day-to-day routine of the area. It may even modify the behaviour of its users. (Goffman 1963, 1973) In this case, this problem was pronounced since several teams of students and teachers occupied the space, sometimes simultaneously.

While being observed and filmed, some inhabitants of the area are easily lured to participate, sometimes excessively, trying to speak for a collective. On the other hand, there are other users who try to avoid any contact with the teams on site.

The research team should try to diminish the evidence of its presence, dissimulating the filming equipment and becoming 'invisible' through continuous occupation, thus allowing the observation closer to the normality (Moore, 1973; Olson & Peytchev, 2007). Also, any information regarding the research objectives should be concealed, since users who adapt their behaviour in anticipation can change the social dynamics of the space.

In socially fragile environments, such as this one, it might be important to work with intermediaries – people or institutions that are central to the communities. There are also problems regarding this strategy, since the community might associate the research teams to those institutions who introduced them, and adapt their responses accordingly (Dohrenwend, Colombotos & Dohrenwend, 1969).

It is important to have in mind that the research is based on the observation of a limited number of people that are part of a large number of communities. A research project like this will not exhaust a complex case study as Largo do Intendente.

## 5.2 What to film

The teams should observe the movements, hesitations and breaks of walking people – either alone or in groups. They should take note of public space appropriation, such as storefronts, restaurants and public features (Sommer & Sommer, 1991). And they should relate this appropriation to the individual and collective memory about the place. Teams should also note the elements of the designed space – configuration, materials, trees and greenery, street furniture and public art. A long term observation would allow noting variations on daily and weekly cycles and more precise information about the community.

## 6. Final Notes

Given the nature of the project and the scarcity and subjectivity of the collected information – video and interviews – is still early to present any objective conclusion. However the aim of this workshop was to present the potential of this kind of research to the participants – to think about the expectations and results of urban design projects. And more importantly, it also allowed us to briefly test the methodology to be used in a long term research project.

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## Research Project

### **Silent Rupture. Intersections between architecture and film. Portugal, 1960-1974**

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