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Anatomy of a Durational Project

Lanchonete.org, 2013–2017

Todd Lanier Lester

The term ‘expulsions’ is used by Saskia Sassen (2014) to radicalize our understanding of the ‘rising inequality, poverty, imprisonment, foreclosed homes and other injustices’ associated with increasing disparities. Expulsions take on ‘specific forms in each location of the world, and they have specific contents in diverse domains: economy, society, politics,’ which means they tend to be studied in their specificity, but Sassen warns that this obstructs them being seen as ‘the surface manifestations of deeper trends that today cut across the familiar divisions’ (2014). Such displacements, she argues, ‘share a simple, common element: There are people being (usually permanently) cast out of what had been their lives’ (2014).

For those of us who think about cities and watch for new urban phenomena, the relationship between the economic strength of a city and its ability to conjure mechanisms that dispossess and hide the dispossession of demographics within its overall makeup is not esoteric. Lanchonete.org, the focus of this chapter, uses art—and even the rhetoric of art—in a site-specific art project operating across the Center of São Paulo (Brazil) to encourage people-centric public policymaking processes that include those groups whose realities fall outside of the dominant culture.¹

Lanchonete.org can best be described as a progressive urban platform: a durational and iterative process involving activities that engage people, and therefore having a high degree of unpredictability. The platform is focused on a geographic area that is undergoing fast-paced change (given its

convenience and proximity to all major public transport options and important administrative facilities), characterized by aggressive gentrification maneuvers (henceforth referred to as *capital encroachment* to differentiate them from less aggressive forms of gentrification where policies serve as checks and balances). Also present in the Center of São Paulo, however, are countervailing forces that challenge this status quo of big business leading urban change. These forces include artists, cultural centers, anti-forced-eviction activists, cultural producers, community organizers, occupation dwellers and other citizen groups for whom Lanchonete.org offers both a sounding board and an opportunity to be heard.

Major cities of the world are increasingly characterized by contested (not just limited) space for a variety of reasons that include rural to urban migration, immigration and forced mobility. In this context, institutions, groups and individuals with the greatest social, political and financial power get priority access to 'prime' real estate and frequently disregard existing residents' needs and desires as well as their vulnerability to spikes in the cost of living. Lanchonete.org acts as a reference to this global phenomenon, and it simultaneously proposes solutions. This platform amplifies good ideas already present in the Center of São Paulo, as well as those shared in dialogue with visiting artists and thinkers.

Looking Back

In 2005, I left the international humanitarian field after seven years of working around the world in areas of extreme poverty and conflict. I was disillusioned with a system I observed to hold national interests over systemic improvements. During that same period, I witnessed independent artists, unaffiliated to the big NGOs, doing the most courageous work in the same places yet not receiving acknowledgement, support and the resources needed to avert danger when needed.

In 2005, for example, while in Sudan working for the International Rescue Committee, I met Gadalla Gubara, the father of Sudanese cinema (then in his 90s), and his daughter Sara, also a filmmaker. They invited me to visit their studio, where I learned that the government had issued a decree of eminent domain ² to take the land where Gad's film studio stood in 1998. According to Sara, the day of the decree was the day that Gadalla went blind. The

military used his studio as a dormitory, while his equipment and film reels were haphazardly stacked in corners, stored improperly and some destroyed. I came to know the Gubaras just after they regained the studio through a protracted legal battle, yet the land on which it was situated was still held by the city. It is widely believed that the city's demand of the land and its facilities was an attempt to silence the Gubara family, who was making a range of independent films challenging conditions in Khartoum (such as regular power outages) and the Sudanese state more broadly. Eminent domain—a tactic used all over the world to close spaces of free expression and censor alternative viewpoints expressed through art—was similarly used against a local painter and installation artist, Afifi, whose calligraphy shop was closed by the police after he installed an art piece that decried the poor conditions faced by local artists on a nearby overpass in Khartoum.

My reaction to these incidents and the broader phenomenon was to launch freeDimensional, an organization that provides safe haven to artists and activists in danger through a global network of participating artist residencies (see Joag and Lester, this volume). The freeDimensional approach started a movement within the artist residency sector, asking brick-and-mortar art spaces with hosting ability (apartments, spare rooms, staff capacity) to consider using those vacancies for hosting artists in danger. While Lanchnete.org is rather different than freeDimensional, it is another example of how the artist residency template can be stretched to fit the needs of a specific community.

Over a series of short visits to São Paulo (Brazil) beginning in 2005, I observed that the *lanchnete* (lunch counter) is a place where people from different economic strata share middle ground—if only to take a *cafezinho* and *pao de queijo* standing at the same counter—in an otherwise class-stratified city. Lanchnete.org celebrates the ubiquitous presence and porous, open-front and corner pass-through design of these lunch counters. The project covers the neighborhoods that make up the city center and the issues implicit therein (the state of housing, food and water sovereignty, transportation, political agency and access to municipal resources and to those available through corporate affiliations). Lanchnete.org is a complex and multi-faceted project, and while it is conceived as a platform (and an amplification device for diverse and marginalized voices), in what follows, I describe the two key cogs that generate its momentum: a cultural program (including artists' residencies) and a cooperative business (in the form of a restaurant).

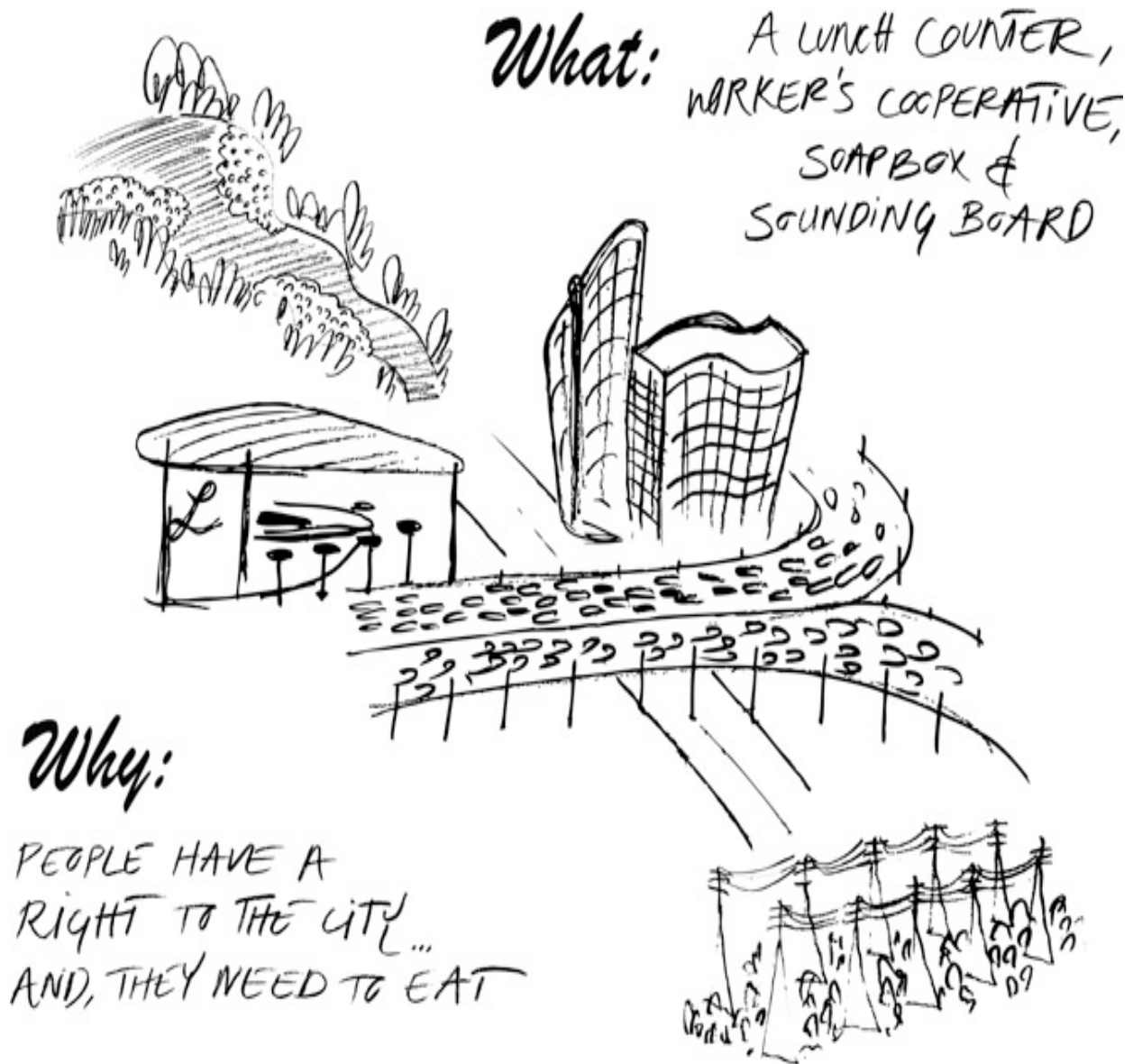
A range of contemporary events and phenomena currently shape the space of urban artistic engagement. The pan-western housing crisis of the last decade is still playing out, and it is joined by other events, such as the conservative turn of some governments (e.g., the Dutch), which simultaneously affect global funding for the arts. The response to recent natural disasters (such as Hurricane Sandy in the U.S.) has evoked a new urban vernacular of ‘resilience’ through which the increasingly instrumentalized culture monies (not unrelated in this sense to development funding) are tasked to solve urban problems in pronounced, utilitarian ways. Raquel Rolnik, UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing and professor in the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo told me that one new development she sees is the role of cultural agents active in urban social movements. Projects are required to ‘quicken their pace’ to receive the capital support of funding bodies, a quickening that may effectively strip away—or pare down—the possibilities for genuine engagement. Nevertheless, this characteristic of the dominant market ideology frequently plays out in the political economy of philanthropy and donor setups, which are common interfaces to both the arts and development. By planning to shapeshift after five years, Lanchonete.org attempts to subvert the aforementioned bind on time in relation to observable impact.

What?

Lanchonete.org is an arts-based approach—imbued with a community organizing ethos and experience—that supports and amplifies citizens working for a just city. Lanchonete.org believes that the characteristics of a just city are attainable, yet enjoying the *right to the city* (Merrifield 2011) is not a static thing and may never be fully arrived at without incremental and new, outside-the-box approaches. Although Lanchonete.org is focused on the Center of São Paulo, in its specificity, it demonstrates a methodology for other cities and other contexts. It attempts to pilot an atypical organizational form, a cluster of associated people and organizations working together—members that don’t all have the same objectives and vocational backgrounds but share some basic values about, and aspirations for, the city.

Lanchonete.org is both restaurant and a cultural program, a business and an association. It is made up of people, just like the city itself.

Why?



Source: TheLanchonete.org design by Adam Bakry

In the microcosm of daily life in the center of São Paulo, there is no one central issue that invites innovation, but rather, the cumulative causality of capital encroachment under the guise of gentrification as *fait accompli*, and

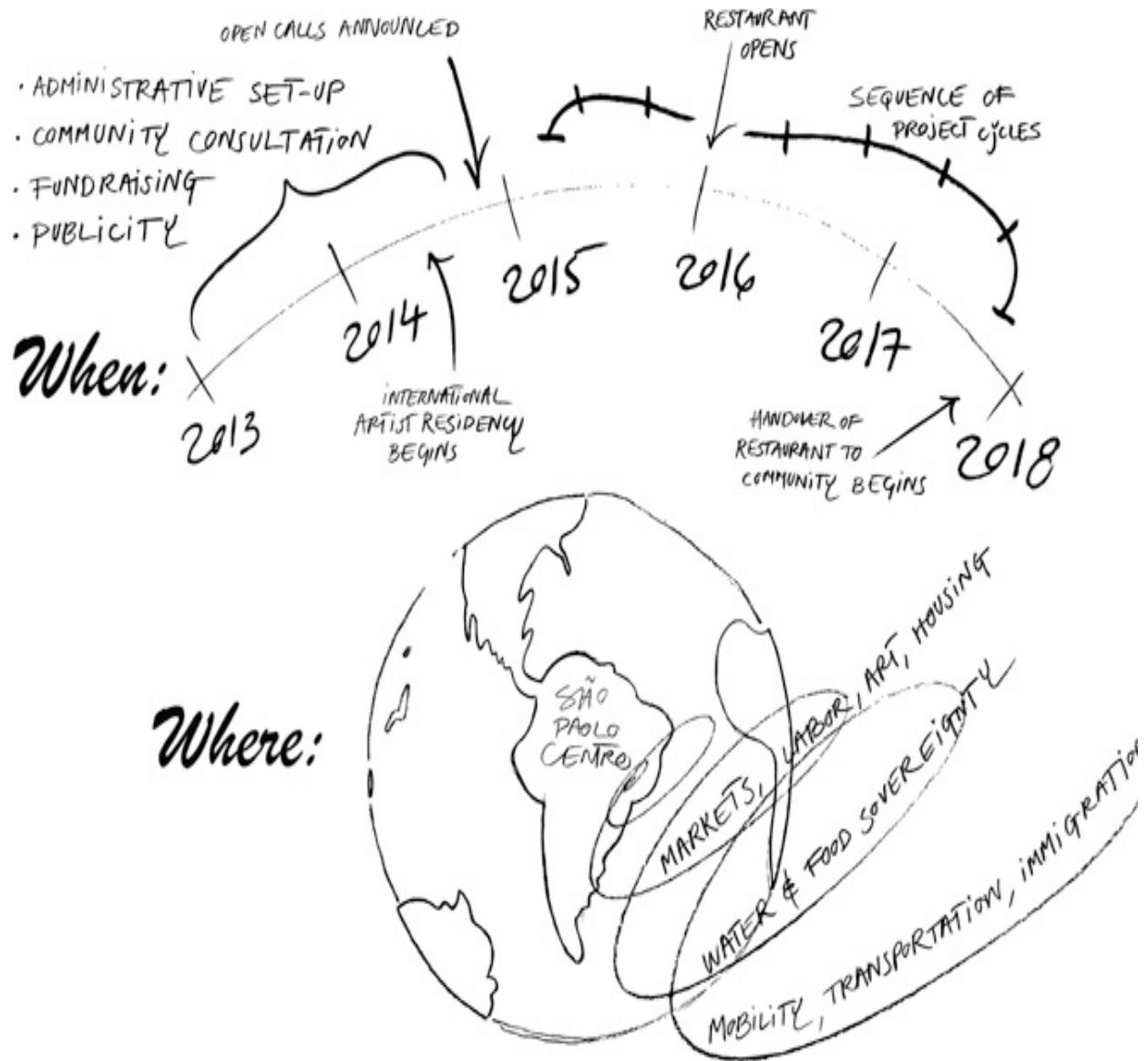
the set of conditions brought about by population growth and social service needs outpacing urban planning capacity. Lanchonete.org aspires to be a prism through which understanding and dialogue on issues, conditions, successes and failures that reflect daily life in the Center of São Paulo can gain momentum and flourish. Moreover, it aspires to be the engine for a citizen-authored feedback loop with the prospect of informing urban policy in the face of a beleaguered public discourse on diminishing public space. It seems that the usage of space in São Paulo is often a negotiation between people and business, with the municipal government often playing catch-up. A specific instance that demonstrates this showdown between people and capital, with the judiciary coming down on the side of business, is the injunction against engineer and community activist Ricardo Fraga Oliveira (founder of the Movement for the Other Side of the Wall) and his campaign at a construction site that required him to delete all references to the real estate development company from his Facebook page ('Court Approves Ban on Development Protestor', 2013).³

When?

Launched formally in 2013, Lanchonete.org will run for five years, from 2013 through 2017. Initial steps have included setting up administrative operations for the business, which will become a community-held asset by the end of the project, conducting research (via appreciative inquiry, public narrative framework and other approaches useful for understanding and building on local consensus), broad awareness raising and building a resource base both locally and internationally. The cultural program that includes residencies for visiting artists started in early 2014. Another central component, a membership body or association, *Associação Espaço Cultural Lanchonete*, has been founded to ensure that the restaurant and its cultural programming continue to reflect community desires and the diverse and evolving realities of people living in the center of São Paulo. The official 'art project' ends in 2018 in order that the cooperative project of this association may flourish, benefiting from art world resources, but unencumbered with limitations that can arise from a monodisciplinary, categorical or wholly grant-funded approach.

Where?

As São Paulo becomes more and more congested, the center, which was formerly perceived as a dangerous and blighted area (by some), has become coveted real estate for its convenience and accessibility to public and private goods. Along with this shift in perception, those desirous of relocating to the center for its convenience are encouraged to see occupiers and low-rent payers as freeloaders, even if they have settled areas and renovated buildings that were formerly thought to be unlivable. ⁴ It appears inevitable that real estate developers who bought buildings during the ‘danger’ period because they were devalued—and the capitalist system they represent—will push out the diverse range of mixed income constituencies that make up the center, for which the well-organized Occupations are bellwethers of change. ⁵



Source: TheAnchorImage.com design by Avner Bakry.

How?

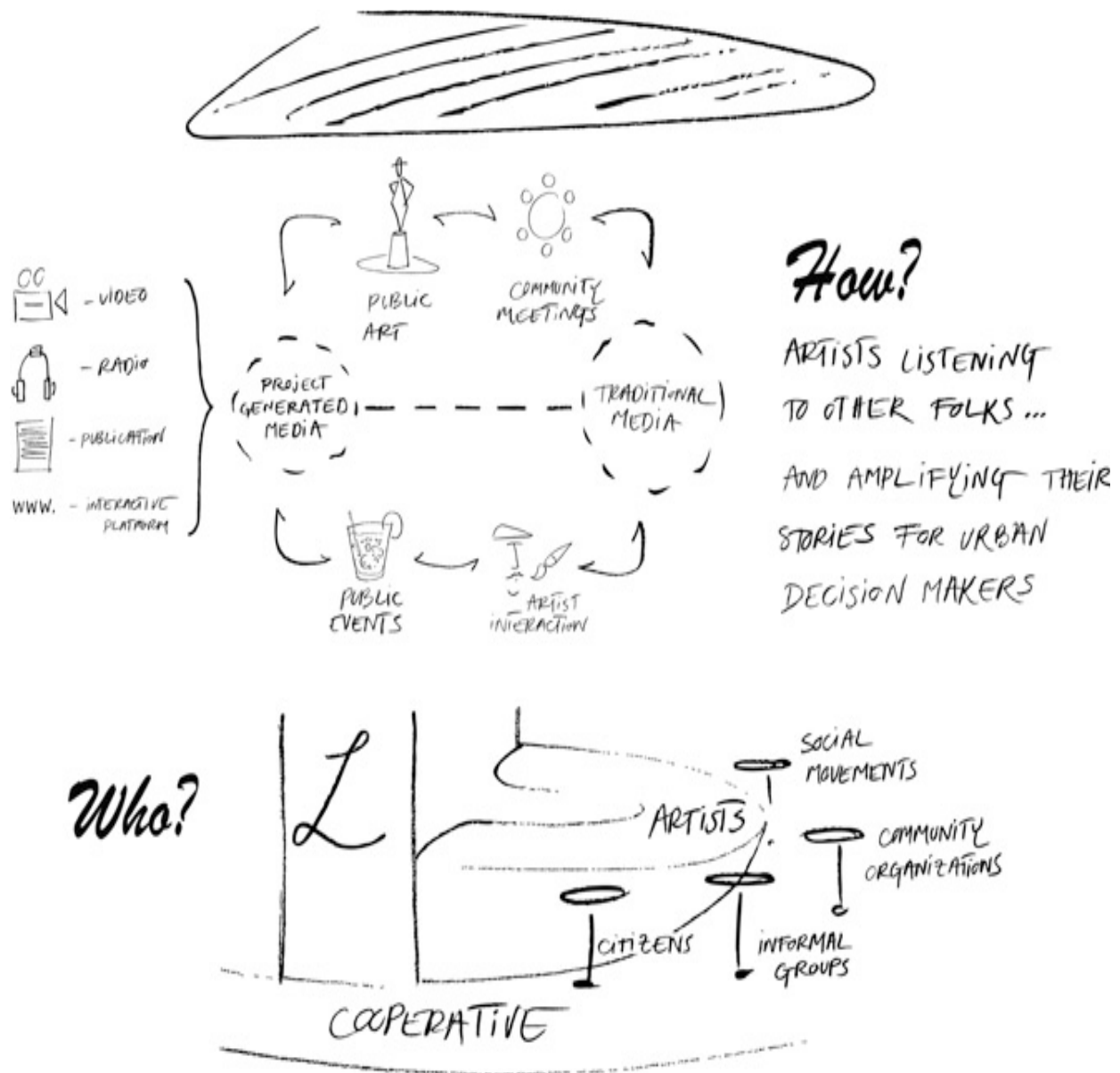
Lanchonete.org is interested in food as an aspect of culture and concerned with the broader, related issues of food justice and food sovereignty in complex urban environments. While producing food making as performance and setting up operations for a popular restaurant places a particular focus on gastronomy, nutrition and hospitality, these topics serve as an entry point for understanding and discussing the cumulative causality of class and labor on

urban, daily life in the surging city. This means that the food (of it) is both actual and somewhat of a trope. While we enjoy food and understand its relation to rights, labor and daily life, we are careful in how we deploy and encourage its discourse. 'Food-speak' is easily subsumed or coopted by the narrative of our 'hungry' market, and 'foodie' culture is deployed as an aspect of gentrification that also prices people out of their own neighborhoods. Furthermore, at the macro-level, global agri-business can be argued to be part of neo-colonial strategies that challenge food security and food sovereignty. Therefore, we are cautious about how we 'make our food' and careful that the process of identifying a location for the restaurant does not mimic the speculative market.

This is achieved by keeping the implementation process inviting and porous in order to accommodate new and changing issues as they emerge. By operating at a slow pace that maintains values of transparency and inclusiveness, Lanchonete.org seeks to amplify the different ways people claim their *right to the city*. The following can be categories as objectives, but we see them more as a code of ethics:

- (1) Enact food justice, equitable food systems and employment standards in a brick-and-mortar space (the restaurant) undergirded by a management and membership structure that reflects the same ethos and aspires for longevity in the community
- (2) Build durable relationships and partnerships to ensure that community desires, decisions, histories and consensuses are understood, as well as to access expert knowledge requisite for an emerging business in the hospitality sector ⁶
- (3) Amplify citizen voices and actions by forging new coalitions with guest artists and local artists, citizens and organizational partners, thereby enhancing solidarity on issues key to quality of life for all.

Who?



Source: TheLanchonete.org design by Adam Bakry.

Lanchonete.org works in consensus with individual citizens as well as community-based organizations and informal groups. The project was launched after extensive consultation with citizens and citizen groups (artists, food workers, occupiers, activists, gardeners and community organizers among them), guest artists, social movements, policymakers, local businesses, community-based organizations and educational partners in São Paulo. It also invites a group of international artists to reside in the Center of São Paulo and thus develop a relationship with its citizens (local artists among them), institutions, issues and patterns. The international artists

work in a cohort with local artists during each project cycle and are thus never on their own to interpret, decipher and ‘know’ the city. The artists constitute a bridge to a broader community dialogue, serving as catalysts that both ‘surface’ new information and insights and contribute to the project’s iterative design simultaneously.

Visiting Artists’ Program

The artist residencies are not studio residencies. Partner spaces (brick-and-mortar art spaces in the Center of São Paulo, ⁷ housing occupations, educational and cultural institutions) can be engaged to hold meetings and produce work throughout the residency period, and even exhibit that work in a weekend festival and exhibition that marks the end of each residency. However, the project seeks artists who are most interested and comfortable with the city as their studio and stage, and local counterparts as their guides to daily life in the center of São Paulo.

Each visiting artist (international or from another Brazilian state) stays approximately three months and joins a cohort with other participants. The first month is spent getting to know the Center of São Paulo, its citizens, institutions, issues and patterns, and meetings are facilitated between the residency artists and local artists, activists and organizers, social, urban-issue and arts organizations. The four guest artists are lodged in and around the center in a way that creates meaningful cultural exchange, such as with partner organization Occupation São João.

The artist residency is a vocationally specific concept of the art world and an accepted format for cultural exchange. Here, we use the acceptability of the format to streamline our fundraising endeavors, while simultaneously experimenting with how activists, researchers, architects and other thinkers who might not identify first and foremost as an ‘artist’ can benefit from the same qualities of mobility and exchange implicit to the format. Jakub Szczyński, for example, is a Polish architect who was our first resident in March 2014 and lived at the Occupation São João.

Business as a Trojan Horse

While the most visible, tangible form of the project is the restaurant, the *Associação Espaço Cultural Lanchonete* is the backbone of the initiative. The association is the legal mechanism by which resources are attracted and held to implement the project, the primary mechanism by which community members (artists and non-artists, organizational leaders, youth and residents of the center) join and participate in the project and ultimately the mechanism by which the infrastructure and other capital assets are transferred to community members at the end of the five-year art project. The business is run as a worker's cooperative, and here the project is informed by inputs from outside the art world, such as the Rochdale Principles, a set of ideals for the operation of cooperatives, and the burgeoning global B-Corp (Benefits Corporation) movement, which is known as *Empresa B* in Brazil. The principle asset of the association is the restaurant. Although the restaurant will be accessible to the general public for regular meals during breakfast and lunch hours, at night the food service will be organized, themed and directed cooperatively by community members who have joined the association and the participating artists. These may range from special events to weekly community dinners.

Partners

Lanchonete.org works in partnership with food, youth and social service organizations, including Cities Without Hunger (Cidade sem Fome), GastroMotiva and the Centro Cultural São João of Occupation São João. Cities Without Hunger is a world-renowned urban gardening initiative operating in the eastern part of São Paulo, where unemployment is at the highest level. Teaching households how to grow produce in urban conditions provides both a healthy diet and income-generating opportunities. Cumulatively, the gardens under Cities Without Hunger management produce at a surplus; therefore, it is possible for a restaurant to buy directly from producers.

GastroMotiva trains at-risk urban youth to cook and become chefs in professional kitchens. It shares a very similar ethos with Cities Without Hunger, to first improve food preparation and dietary habits at the household level that, in turn, leads to employment opportunities and holistic betterment in families, communities, neighborhoods, businesses and the city. We

purchase our produce from Cities Without Hunger and hire our restaurant staff from the ranks of GastroMotiva trainees. Furthermore, the founders of both organizations are part of an advisory council for Lanchonete.org. Both organizations have expressed an interest in having a central location, or food lab, in the center for a variety of practical reasons; therefore, it has made sense to enter discussions with them early on regarding future usage and management of the restaurant facility. While these two organizations primarily serve constituents in the periphery of São Paulo, our partnership with the Occupation São João, a member of the housing movement, Frente de Luta por Moradia (FLM) is more focused on the center of the city, where there is a higher density of both population and the built environment.

In the phenomenon of forced eviction that affects millions of people at lower levels of economic agency, occupations are at the forefront because their legitimacy can be dashed with the claim of illegality. This *de jure* interpretation of the law does not account for the *de facto* reality (and complexity) of daily life in fast-evolving cities such as São Paulo. While land speculation both benefited from and fueled a ‘danger’ narrative in the center, occupiers have renovated whole buildings to livable states whereby they could more easily get to their jobs and enjoy convenience in this sprawling city. Simply put, they used things that were not being used. Through the normalizing effect of daily use, occupiers (and the larger socio-economic demographic that they represent) helped the inner city of São Paulo to be perceived as livable again, even if they are the first to be priced out and even if their methods are no more or less legal than those of the speculators able to pad the pockets of politicians for favorable prices on city-owned buildings and favorable zoning decisions (the same system deploys police forces willing to remove ‘occupiers’ from their homes in the middle of the night as one tactic when that property is ready to be ‘turned’ into something more luxurious). Working with the occupation movement has been useful in understanding issues at play in the Center of São Paulo from a group of people affected acutely and immediately by capital encroachment.

While Occupation São João is a single site and constituent member within the constellation of São Paulo-wide housing movements, of which the FLM is only one, it is a dynamic example for the following reasons: it is women-led, of small size (170 people, 60 families), is relatively homogeneous (most come from the same part of the periphery) and, perhaps most importantly, strategically innovative. Knowing that they are unlikely to ever be seen as legal tenants, they have found ways to ‘inch’ forward in claiming their right

to be there by leading the process of landmarking their building, the historic Columbus Hotel. Additionally, the Occupation has created the Centro Cultural São João, a unique art space that is open to the broader community providing space for language lessons; LGBT, immigrant and other group meetings; church services; sport and Capoeira instruction, among others.

The Prospect of an Alternative Policy Process

A city has many different stories, yet sometimes decision-makers need help hearing them all. The old lunch counters in the center of São Paulo and across the vast city typically have open fronts rather than doors, making them porous and easy to enter or pass through. These ubiquitous pedestrian meeting and service ‘points’ and their longstanding, popular tradition present an alternative to the homogenizing effect of capital encroachment on public space. Lanchonete.org is an art project that eventually takes on a physical form—in the shape of a popular restaurant—as a symbolic reference to the possibility of diverse groups and classes co-existing in the urban space. In this context, there are some big questions that the unfolding project asks of itself and that ricochet among its participants and peers:

- (1) Can diverse neighborhoods persist and survive in close proximity to the epicenters of capital?
- (2) Is it possible for the resources marshaled by a durational, site-specific art project to stay in that community after the ‘art project’ has ended?

Presently, the art world is enduring what I see as a market-driven fascination with social art. What this seems to mean on the ground is that community processes that are led by artists or are regarded *as* art are expected to reveal themselves faster than the life cycle of a community organizing endeavor. Therefore, to be both requires a steadiness that rebuffs capitalist tendencies, which are common in the art world, and not uncommon to other project-based sectors, such as international development.

The durational project is broken into three-month cycles that include a range of activities surrounding the visit of guest artists and their collaboration with local counterparts. At the end of the first three months, there are collaborative workshops designed by community members with

guest and local artists in easily accessible venues throughout the center, such as (but not limited to) the restaurant itself. Open to the public, the workshops constitute a mode and sequence of engagement that leads up to a final series of events, like a weekend festival of dialogue, art exhibition of local and international artists and related programming that will continue for the following month, often overlapping the first month of the next project cycle. To date, we have experimented with the workshop form, and themes have included urban mobility, access to water and urban waterways, home and forced eviction, youth and cultural movement, food systems and food justice, and education, as well as urban planning and citizen engagement broadly. Local curators and writers are engaged to document new insights and information from the overall process including these events, which are widely publicized, free and open to the public.

Documentation of the process, topics and results are archived on an eponymous website and, additionally, shared via a range of accessible formats (publications, media stories, audiovisual outputs, policy papers etc.) at the end of each project cycle. This constitutes a process whereby citizens and local partners ‘see’ their ideas and input interpreted by the participating artists and strategically relayed to the broader public and decision-makers through dynamically produced events as well as formal and informal media channels.

Conclusion

The success of Lanchonete.org will be measured by how effectively connections are supported (in the restaurant and on the project) across socio-economic class levels and areas of interest. It is hoped that people who do not benefit from the art world will derive value and meaning from the project in practical and even immediate ways that respond to their own needs and desires. Occupation São João, for example, has already told us that collaboration with international artists and cultural producers lends credibility to their approach, and the use of cultural strategy can potentially ‘build a bridge’ between people who come to the center to occupy abandoned buildings, seeking a better and more convenient way of life, and those now who ‘come down from Paulista’ and may have negative

impressions of occupiers, ethnic enclaves, informal groups and low-rent payers propagated by mainstream media.

It is hard to argue with urban plans that promise convenience, improved standards of living and beautification of the built environment (both public and private); however, these aspirations are often future-oriented and do not assure that the incremental changes necessary to achieve them will be easy on the population currently living in areas under heavy speculation. Without fail, when government, politicians and urban planners start to consider such projects, commercial interests are drawn like moths to flame, interests that do not normally take humanistic approaches to redevelopment without a system of checks and balances, including specific policies and the accessibility of the policymaking apparatus in situ.

The approach of Lanchonete.org is to make a durable platform that is artist-led, people-centered, inclusive and horizontal. This platform is being made for and with a specific community and relies on a variety of ingredients from the fields of journalism, community organizing, urban planning, architecture, design, politics, gastronomy, the policy sciences, the humanities and art in all its forms. A recent focus, for example, on the impending water crisis in São Paulo included an art gallery show (Kunsthalle São Paulo 2015), an opinion piece in a major news outlet (Hydrotropism: Lessons from Ficus Elastica 2015) and public meetings between artists and a range of other professionals.

There are many examples that share a similar DNA to this approach, such as arte/cidade, an occasional project by local São Paulo philosopher, Nelson Brissac Peixoto; the newer El Departamento de Comida in Puerto Rico; and a range of historic media and cultural initiatives known to have disrupted the status quo of dominant culture in other locations, such as the Fogo Process and participatory video more broadly. ⁸ We believe that this approach works on a variety of levels (individual, institutional, artistic and so on), and that ultimately, coffee and food that is good and cheap, as well as a feedback loop that adequately represents and amplifies the daily lives and concerns of people living in the center, are both achievable.

Notes

- 1 Associação Espaço Cultural Lanchonete is a non-profit entity in Brazil. It has a president and three counselors, all of whom are Brazilian citizens living and working in the cultural sector. Lanchonete.org was originally conceived by Todd Lanier Lester, who works with a dynamic team of cultural producers—Joel Borges, Isabel Gandia, Lorena Vicini and Raphael Daibert—and the broader associations, who have added their ideas and modifications along the way.
- 2 Variouslly called compulsory purchase or acquisition, resumption or expropriation in other parts of the world to indicate the right of the state to take private property for public use.
- 3 See: [http://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/3756/en/brazil:-court-approves-ban-on-development-protector?utm_source=ARTICLE+19+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=315cc6fa38-Free Expression 23 May&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c3bf82663f-315cc6fa38-209348197%20%28accessed%2015%20September%202015%29](http://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/3756/en/brazil:-court-approves-ban-on-development-protector?utm_source=ARTICLE+19+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=315cc6fa38-Free+Expression+23+May&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c3bf82663f-315cc6fa38-209348197%20%28accessed%2015%20September%202015%29).
- 4 I use the term ‘renovated’ here in juxtaposition to the more frequent notion of beautification as ‘projects... undertaken by city councils to refurbish their downtown areas, in order to boost tourism or other commerce.’ *Wikipedia*, s.v. Beautification. Online: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beautification (accessed 15 September 2015).
- 5 Lanchonete.org works closely with Occupation São o Joao and the FLM, which is the movement of São o Paulo’s occupations.
- 6 Cities Without Hunger and GastroMotiva met through the Lanchonete.org project, thus confirming that one role of the project can be to make essential introductions. We feel this is an important role because often when people and organizations are claiming their rights to the city in limited-resource settings, there is an automatic default to working in isolation. We seek to build new alliances through this project.
- 7 Such as those organized through Circuito Centro. Online: www.circuitocentro.org (accessed 15 September 2015).
- 8 arte/cidade. Online: www4.pucsp.br/artecidade/ (accessed 15 September 2015). Challenge for Change The Fogo Process. National Film Board of Canada. Online: coolstudios.com/576/pdf/Challenge%20for%20Change%20-%20The%20Fogo%20Process.pdf (accessed 15 September 2015). El Departamento de la Comida. Online: eldepartamentodelacomida.com (accessed 15 September 2015).

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