



Urban cultural insurgencies: the fight for the Brazilian city



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Abstract: Based on the study of 24 urban insurgencies, in seven Brazilian metropolises, we discuss their principles, contextualization and results. Following a historical review of Brazilian urban practices and policies highlighting alternate hopes and deep disenchantments, we describe the methodology and present the case study. The conclusions are: there are still no signs of the replication of such experiences in more extensive practices; they suggest a preference for working detached from official governmental structures; they follow global commitments and aspirations in virtual and very informal consortiums but rather act locally and independently; they are most commonly found on the periphery and in abandoned downtown areas; they avoid hierarchical structures, advocate for minority causes, propose affirmative actions and rely on social media for their organization. In general, their impacts are restricted but suggest a pragmatism with feasible emergency solutions. The article's tone, also shaped by the authors' personal experiences, is quite positive and even suggests a possible urban utopia.

Keywords: urban insurgency; Brazilian cities; social urban movements.

ES Insurgencias urbanas culturales: la lucha por la ciudad brasileña

Resumen: A partir de un estudio de 24 insurgencias urbanas en siete metrópolis brasileñas, se analizan sus ideales, contextos e impactos. Tras una revisión histórica que destaca la alternancia de esperanzas y desencantos por parte de la población, los Gobiernos y la academia del país, se presenta la metodología y el estudio de caso. Las conclusiones son: no existen signos de replicabilidad en entornos más amplios, las insurgencias prefieren trabajar de forma independiente de las estructuras gubernamentales formales, siguen agendas internacionales de manera informal enfocándose en temas locales, se ubican a menudo en zonas periféricas o espacios centrales abandonados, abogan por causas minoritarias y proponen acciones afirmativas, y dependen en gran medida de su actividad en las redes sociales. En general, los resultados de las insurgencias son puntuales, pero sugieren un enfoque pragmático con soluciones de emergencia potenciales. El perfil del artículo, también marcado por las experiencias vividas de los autores, es bastante positivo y sugiere incluso una utopía posible.

Palabras clave: insurgencia urbana; ciudades brasileñas; movimientos sociales urbanos.

Summary: 1. Framing the reflection. 2. Brazil: a disenchantment trajectory towards urban insurgencies. 3. Conceptual clarification. 4. Selected Brazilian urban insurgencies. 5. Conclusions. 6. Acknowledgments. 7. Bibliography.

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1. Framing the reflection

It could be argued that the debate about democracy, citizenship, and justice is as longevous as cities themselves. The meaning and range of each of these concepts/ideas may be time and context-sensitive; however, their relevance to mediate our lives in organized societies remain paramount, even if to question their substance and validity.

Democracy, and in more recent centuries, representative democracy, has often been subjected to scrutiny and criticism. Nevertheless, there seem to be additional layers of concern about its “health” in contemporary society. Tormey (2014), discussing the contemporary crisis of the representative democracy, states it has always been in crisis. For this author, what is new and so far, unusual is the consensus in underpinning it.

Some other authors, as pointed out by Blühdorn (2019), talk about a *democratic fatigue syndrome*, as qualitatively distinguishable from the *crises of democracy*, which, as we believe, has been debated for some considerable time. The focus here is on the “striking transformation of democracy in terms of a dialectic process in which the very norm that once gave birth to the democratic project—the modernist idea of the autonomous subject—metamorphoses into its gravedigger, or at least into the driver of its radical reformulation” (Blühdorn, 2019: 389).

Within this context, there have been *insurgent movements* that aim at repositioning politics and the city. Holston (2018) points out that authors such as Hardt and Negri (2009) and Harvey (2012) debate the *right to the city* (after Lefebvre’s interpretation) by considering the city as a commonwealth. According to him, it is possible to see urban or metropolitan rebellions as a real collective product, where residents take their city as commons, suggesting new forms of city-making, city-occupying and rights-claiming. The concept of “urban commons”—with roots in Elinor Ostrom’s work on common-pool resources—is emphasized Harvey as the political occupation of public spaces for collective expression. This focus distinguishes it from urban insurgencies discussed in this article. While insurgencies primarily occur in public buildings or open public spaces, they tend to be more geographically and thematically limited compared to the broader concept of “urban commons”. Further clarification of these distinctions between collective actions is worthwhile.

Preliminary conclusions indicate that, despite different levels of their organization and geographic scope, they show a persistent and paradoxical intention to the dialogue. Also, cynical submission to a political, social, and economic status is another attribute that may characterize them: despite an explicit criticism of it, urban insurgencies hereby discussed constitute a phenomenon that proposes immediate solutions in a very limited geographic scope, despite combining global awareness and international criticism towards capitalist society. They “stay inside”, try to survive, and struggle to offer their members better lives and higher levels of awareness driven by a clear disappointment with large social movements and organizations and by a natural desire for day-to-day survival.

2. Brazil: a disenchantment trajectory towards urban insurgencies

Disappointment has followed the trajectory of social urban movements in Brazil if we consider the persistent duality that tailors the way cities are built, used, and transformed. Brazilian literature studying cities captured the very same disappointment and confirms it not only for the current moment, but since cities and urbanization became a ubiquitous nationwide phenomenon. Previous research conclusively demonstrates a similar scenario for Latin American cities in general. Kruijt and Koonings (2007: 141), in the epilogue of their book on Latin America’s urban duality, reiterate that poverty not only widened the gap between two groups of citizens and produced fractured urban spaces, but rather “became a consolidated problem” and provoked a “distrust of the excluded of the formal economy and society”.

In Brazil, during the 1960’s, Maria Carolina de Jesus (2014: 32), a *favelada* (the Portuguese term someone living in a *favela*, a squatter urban area), and nearly illiterate woman who later became a nationally recognized author, documented a sense of hopelessness and complete abandonment by the state in her diaries:

“I consider São Paulo like this: the governor’s palace is the living room. Town hall is the dining room, the city itself is the garden. The favelas is the dumping sector [...] What can be expected from the future?... Such difficulties eliminate [sic] any affection we can have towards politicians” (free translation).

In the 1970s, under high demographic and migration rates, accelerated metropolization, and peripheralization, Brazil witnessed a growing number of urban dwellers experiencing concrete dispossession. Kowarick (1979) confirms this decade as that of the dispossessed, low-income citizens and rural migrants struggling to live in big cities by squatting. Their strategies included squatting, building their own houses, and—a new development—enduring long commutes.

In the 1980s, Maricato (1982) built upon these ideas while also acknowledging harsher realities. In already industrialized cities, wage stagnation for the working class made securing basic urban needs increasingly difficult. Barbosa (2014), using São Paulo as a case study applicable to other Brazilian metropolises, argues that organized squatting and informal construction emerged as a survival strategy/mechanism from the 1980s onwards. This approach was largely driven by social mobilization, later with national coordination. In the 1990s, authors like Bonduk (1998) and Rolnik (1999) further confirm the limitations imposed on workers and to the dispossessed in accessing the city the way they needed. They also highlighted the persistent duality in how Brazilian cities are built, used, and appropriated. While the 1988 Brazilian Constitution introduced legal and institutional pathways for urban transformation through the concept of the “social function of the urban land”, translating national guidelines into concrete municipal practices proved a long and arduous process. Once again concrete changes were delayed.

In the 2000s, all hopes were thus laid on a new legal framework, paving the way for a new utopia, based on partnerships between government and organized groups: cities were to be transformed by means of master plans, participatory process, municipal city councils, housing councils, city conferences, urban land use laws against market speculation (see the Federal Law Statute of the City, approved in 2001) and public capacity building to understand how the city functions. All these efforts soon revealed the need for subsequent practical experiments. Not for the first time, expectation and frustration were aligned in the way Brazilian cities had always been idealized.

The difficulty of implementing the Master Plans often led to frustration and disappointment among the leaders of the movements that have participated in the strenuous efforts to approve and implement the proposals. There are records of cases where no concrete results whatsoever have been achieved, leading to serious questioning by the movements about the usefulness and effectiveness of the whole process (Carvalho and Roszbach, 2010).

In the 2010s, the federal housing program My House, My Life (the largest governmental funding program for social houses in the Brazilian history) promised to reduce significantly the housing deficit in the national territory. In fact, numbers of this program had the potential to transform a long-standing reality. The end of the Workers Party (a party that was built and elected on the promise of implementing inclusive public policies) era in the federal government and the economic crisis that accompanied it explain the current reduction in the activities of this program. But frustration and criticism have additional explanations: the exclusion of the very poor families from the subsidized mortgage loans, the non-alignment of the program's locational impacts with municipal guidelines for land occupation, and the creation of gentrified areas are now present in post facto reports. Ferrara *et al.* (2019), for example, point out the consensus that there have been explicit gentrification and speculation processes due to government investments in the 2000s.

This short review confirms a historical scenario of urban duality, idealizations, and few concrete changes. It also confirms an endless alternate process of hopes and disillusionments where social movements and participatory processes have steadily gained importance yet with results that may question their own endeavors.

Despite having their origins much earlier, it was in the 1980s that the fight for urban reform and the Brazilian social movements made their appearance much clearer. Friendly (2019), for example, says that "Brazilian urban social movements have played a key role in bringing about change in urban policy since the 1980s and in light of the widespread protests across the country in June 2013". Saule Jr. and Uzzo (2010) confirm the struggle for urban reform to have started in the 1960s "when progressive sectors of Brazilian society demanded structural reforms to the legal regulation and use of public land", but they equally observe their consolidation in the 1970s and 1980s.

The elite-guided logic of technocratic plans of the 1960s and 1970s gave way to a more democratic and participatory management of the city, ideally encompassing the safeguard of the social function of the city, the need, and the right to social justice, and proper conditions for the whole city, including sanctions against speculation procedures disregarding the urban land social function. After all these promised social gains, contemporary urban or social movements seemed to start searching for alternate ways, avoiding general formulae to change neither the society nor the entire city.

To turn another circle, leaving disillusionments behind and foreseeing utopias ahead, the June 2013 Journeys, which occupied the largest Brazilian cities, heralded new practices and new possibilities to transform our cities. That scenario suggested a prolific academic production trying to understand what it brought in terms of new balances and antagonisms between social agents, but mostly in terms of their independence from interactions experimented before. Scherer-Warren (2014) identified five new formats of social movements after 2013: 1. Organized social movements (formally constituted, aiming the continuation of their fights); 2. Marches and demonstrations; 3. Large demonstrations of indignity; 4. Blockages; and 5. Sociocultural actions and manifestos.

This article does not count with a historical retrospective to discuss the impacts of the experience that may exemplify this contemporary cycle. Its intention is to make a conceptual contribution to a phenomenon we are too involved with to be sure it really announces a new cycle, suggesting better results and the ability to break a historical interchange pattern between hope and disillusion. The five formats used by Scherer-Warren do not constitute isolated manifestations of desires, but mostly overlay their characteristics: the insurgencies we studied for this article reproduce parts of each of these formats. Although there are particularities that characterize each one of these insurgencies, a common agreement and mutual respect constitute the fundament of their own individual existence: respect for differences, sympathy for the marginalized, criticism of western economic values, and prioritization of socioenvironmental concerns. Despite how deep these bonds are, they hardly constitute formal partnerships. The case study presented here confirms such aspects.

3. Conceptual clarification

To understand the concept of insurgency used in this article, the first clarification we should consider is the context in which it takes place. Initially, urban insurgency referred only to large popular riots planned to overthrow established governments, their parts, or their undesired decisions. In this case, insurgencies were primarily discussed in military science, as one of the "oldest and most prevalent forms of warfare" (Miller, 2002); seen by strategists as a recurrent phenomenon, increasing worldwide due to population growth, poor urbanization processes, and a conjunction of political and social factors. Taw and Hoffman (1994), for example, see the United States government as a military power with very limited conditions to cope with urban guerrillas or insurgencies in enemy countries; it lacks appropriate resources and the strategic will to combat and get directly involved in such complex warfare.

The other main format of insurgency, despite some very combative discourses, intrinsically or tactically accepts dialogue with the social and political establishment. Their focus on a limited area of the city and specific channels for advocating for their vision may explain the circumscription of their intentions and reveal a pragmatic gesture to change whatever is possible, albeit at a small scale. Following Holston's proposition (2018), insurgent movements —or *colectivos*— means those movements that are capable to articulate alternative proposals based on self-empowered group of citizens, who do not necessarily present their demands to the state. They rather gain legitimacy by acting according to their own resources, their own and segregated articulation.

Both ways to understand urban insurgencies confirm cities as places for emancipatory political and social expression, as protagonists capable to change themselves, their societies, and the course of history. If in the early 1970s, Castells (originally published in 1972) and Harvey (1973) challenged the idea that cities were solely built and transformed by social ecology and population-territory relations, class conflict became the central phenomenon to explain cities. However, in the mid-1980s, Friedmann (1986) presented his “world cities” as a primary result of economic forces, establishing a new international distribution of labour and global management. Sassen (2005) would reinforce such ideas, making popular the term “global cities”, again, based on economic parameters. In contrast, Castells and Borja (2003) announced a new urban protagonistism: citizens who defend collective and community interests through a new form of citizenship. In this article, we adopt the term urban insurgency as a contemporary expression of our cities, demonstrated in pragmatic, localized initiatives, hardly operationally connected with large movements, critical to the current capitalist hegemonic model, and optimistic in transforming circumscriptive realities.

Another factor that makes the concept of urban insurgencies clearer is the context in which they proliferate. Differently from their counterpart, the urban acupuncture —here taken as punctual interventions in compartments characterized by services and infrastructures satisfied—, the urban insurgencies generally occur in spaces of basic needs scarcities and a sense of governmental abandonment. Swyngedouw (2018) detects a clear tension between such emancipatory desires, projects, initiatives, and demonstrations, and a paradoxical context characterized by post-politicization and post-democratization. Paradoxically, all this results in a combination of “non-authorized” agents gaining force, politics being economized, and the economy lacking any political character.

4. Selected Brazilian urban insurgencies

Our discussion is based on 24 experiences that could be named urban insurgencies in the seven largest Brazilian cities. Concurrent with the investigation made in the Brazilian cities we also started the analysis in four Latin American capitals: Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Mexico City, and Santiago (three *colectivos* for every city and not limited to cultural activities). Even though this research is not completed yet, it already suggests a similarity with the Brazilian cases and an indication that the most common characteristic among contemporary common urban insurgencies is their adherence, explicitly or not, to a globalized agenda.

In the present research, the urban insurgencies were selected according to three filters. The first one restricts the initiatives to those considered cultural urban insurgencies. This scope is intended to guarantee a minimum level of homogeneity among them and allow for general conclusions. Even though the selected urban insurgencies prioritize cultural actions, they all —we learned later— have their activities expanded to other fields: educational, political, and civic actions. The second filter is the geographic scope, that of the Brazilian metropolitan regions (mention of the main city sometimes led us to their metropolitan region). The demographic size of these areas suggests strong social and urban dynamics functioning as enriching environments for collective actions and easier connections with national and international agendas. The fact of occurring in large cities also guarantees larger visibilities and the generation of more interests to know and discuss them. This attribute facilitated our survey, either by means of available academic studies or the description of their institutional organization on the internet. Limited to the metropolitan regions of Brasília, Fortaleza, Porto Alegre, Recife, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro, we discussed 24 urban insurgencies: three per city. The metropolitan regions in Brazil constitute formal agglomerations of municipalities playing collaborative roles in an intraurban network but mostly dependent on the core city. Better jobs and higher incomes are found in the core city that, for the interest of our research, offers the expertise and the publicity the urban insurgencies implemented in the periphery needs. The selection of metropolitan regions we selected is a reflexion of the national urbanization process: starting along the coast and going west, after the inauguration of the new capital, Brasília. Along this long strip, the urbanization is now consolidated, demographic rates are lower, urban networks are denser and more complex. The third filter refers to the area the urban insurgencies occur. All selected urban insurgencies use and/or occupy either unused government buildings or unoccupied public open spaces. This scope eliminates initiatives potentially supported by the private sector or individuals and reinforces the desired homogeneity of the selection. The kind of illegal or informal occupation of public buildings we observed in our research combines a paradoxical combination of incertitude (living under threat of eviction) with a dormant attitude of the state in these cases (living under the protection of an intricate judicial framework that values the “right to have a place to live”). Over time, individuals may change due to personal circumstances, such as job opportunities or family dysfunctions. However, our studies suggest a surprising degree of temporal persistence, lasting even across an entire generation. The cases selection started with a survey with preliminary contacts with *colectivos* —as in Spanish meaning the non-profit, community, informal organization responsible for the urban insurgencies— already mentioned by scientific literature or suggested by community leaders and members of our national network. Additional and more consistent information

was also obtained from social media platforms: Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, we proceeded with a survey of selected scientific articles discussing the construction of public policies for the selected cities' last three mayors' terms. It aimed to detect possible relations between the insurgent groups' procedures and intentions and formal public policies presented by their local powers. As expected, this investigative process proved quite singular, differentiating from other research we r on formal urban public policies, which count on organized information and predefined procedures to contact their agents.

In the first moment, the information about the selected cases consisted of those related to their temporal permanence, activities circumscription, main activity, main agents involved, and management format. It provided us a long list of popular initiatives that could be named urban insurgencies, but not always respecting the filters we had adopted.

Gathering the basic data, we needed to complete the tasks of the Moment 1 required a bit more effort than planned. What we had expected to be a simple synthesis of materials made available by secondary sources demanded additional efforts to be confirmed and to validate the cases. In fact, there is a considerable distinction between what is said on social media by the *colectivos*, for example, and what later proved to be correct. We can't say for sure how much of this is due to their innocence, genuine belief, or strategic intent.

In the second moment, the survey was guided by a set of more analytical questions that were answered in written interviews given by agents involved in the *colectivos*' proposition, organization and management. The questions that guided the interviews we acknowledge as pretentious, but they are also designed to spark discussion about something we are still experiencing, and so involved in the ideals and utopias they suggest. These questions are: 1. Do recurrent practices found in Brazilian insurgencies result from the absence of the state as a provider of infrastructure and services? 2. Do they suggest short-lived results? 3. Are there signs that new dialogues may be established between representatives of the urban insurgencies (the *colectivos*) and their local governments? 4. Are there signs of deepening tensions between insurgent groups and formal urban management, or will they be absorbed as formal practices? 5. Do they really suggest new and local conceptual references for urban studies? 6. What are the specific characteristics and geographic, temporal, organizational, and connectivity patterns in the selected Brazilian insurgencies? All these questions were answered by means of secondary sources, visits, and interviews with key agents taking part in the *colectivos*. These questions could not be fully answered. However, the doubts they sometimes aroused have worked as insights for future investigation. Question n. 5, for example, could not be totally clarified in the scope of our research. Our empirical experience suggests that urban insurgencies are now recurrent research topics in the Brazilian urban studies field: dissertations, theses, books and articles seem to highly value a topic only recently introduced in our academic and scientific environment. The same could be said for question n. 4. Again, our empirical experience suggests local government policies in Brazil are somewhat absorbing insurgent practices in their public policies framework. However, much remains to be discussed about how much of them is actually adopted and what the conditions are to make it true and lasting.

The table below presents the 24 Brazilian initiatives implemented by the *colectivos* we selected. As mentioned earlier, while this research focused primarily on these Brazilian cases, it benefited from a parallel, ongoing study with a broader geographical scope, in four Latin American metropolises. It also provided additional insights for our analysis, contributing to the conclusions of this paper. This table is organized to answer the six main questions we defined and the analysis guiding aspects.

Table 1. Brazilian case studies

Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte / MG			
Insurgency	<i>Espaço Comum Luiz Estrela</i>	<i>Kasa Invisível</i>	<i>Casa do Beco</i>
Creation	2013	2013	2003
Category	Arts and Culture.	Culture and Creative economy.	Arts (theatre).
Geographic scope	Downtown trending district.	High-income district in the central area of the city.	The periphery of Belo Horizonte
Agents	Artists and activists.	A pool of <i>colectivos</i> .	A pool of artists.
Funds	Self-funded	Self-funded.	Public calls for cultural projects. Private funding.
Scale	Urban compartment.	Urban compartment.	Urban compartment.
Causes	Right to the city.	Fight against capitalism.	Youth living conditions.
Activities	Shows, political training, circus, language classes, permaculture, theatre, workshops, and community meetings.	Film screenings, debates, workshops, courses, libertarian studies, independent entrepreneurship, library, and Free Shop.	Theatre, film screenings, workshops, capoeira, dance, scenography classes, and cultural exhibitions.
Brasilia / DF and neighbouring municipalities			

Insurgency	<i>Coletivos Radicais Livres S.A.</i>	<i>Casa Frida</i>	<i>R.U.A.S.: Rede Urbana de Assuntos Sociais</i>
Creation	2003	2014	2006
Category	Culture.	Culture.	Culture (Urban Culture).
Geographic scope	The periphery of Brasilia.	The periphery of Brasilia.	The periphery of Brasilia.
Agents	Activists, poets, and young people in the community.	Women poets from the community.	Cultural producers and young people.
Funds	Public calls for cultural projects.	Donations, public calls, small commerce, and crowdfunding.	Public calls and services.
Scale	Urban compartment.	Urban compartment.	Urban compartment and the city.
Causes	Education through culture.	Feminism, gender rights, domestic violence.	Art and culture capacity building for young people.
Activities	Soirees, music attractions, poetry, short movies.	Courses, debates, talks, artistic activities.	Capacity-building workshops for young people in the periphery: films, photography, scenography, social incubation, and musical shows.
Metropolitan Region of Fortaleza / CE			
Insurgency	<i>Carnaúba Cultural</i>	<i>Coletivo Servilost</i>	<i>Nóis de Teatro</i>
Creation	2017	2016	2002
Category	Arts (engaged art)	Arts and Culture.	Art and Culture.
Geographic scope	Downtown.	The periphery of the city.	The periphery of the city.
Agents	<i>Coletivos</i> .	Collective of young artists living in the district of Serviluz.	Theatre group.
Funds	Self-funded.	Self-funded.	Open calls for cultural projects.
Scale	Urban compartment.	Urban compartment.	Urban compartment.
Causes	Alternative living.	Change the cultural reality in the periphery.	Change the cultural reality in the periphery.
Activities	Musical events, workshops, exhibitions, and shelter for young artists from the periphery.	Musical events, workshops, movies, theatre, and dialogues with the community.	Cultural evenings, workshops, community newspaper.
Metropolitan Region of Porto Alegre / RS			
Name	<i>Ocupação Cultural Pandorga</i>	<i>Casa de Cultura Popular – A Violeta</i>	<i>Slam das Minas RS</i>
Creation	2015.	2014.	2016.
Category	Arts and Culture.	Arts and Culture.	Art (counter poetry).
Geographic scope	The periphery of the city.	The central area of the city.	Public spaces.
Agents	<i>Coletivos</i> of artists.	<i>Coletivos</i> of artists.	Girls from the periphery.
Funds	Self-funded.	Self-funded.	Non identified.
Scale	Urban compartment.	Urban compartment.	City (itinerant).
Causes	Right to the city.	Right to proper housing.	Right to the city and women's empowerment.
Activities	Shelter, art, culture, education, capoeira classes, circus, theatre, language classes.	Shelter, film screening, art workshops, debates on the right to the city, musicals, and theatre shows.	Performance poetry.
Metropolitan Region of Recife / PE			
Name	<i>Coletivo Sexto Andar</i>	<i>Coletivo MauMau</i>	<i>Slam das Minas, PE</i>
Creation	2013.	2009	2017
Category	Arts and Culture.	Arts and Culture.	Arts (poetry).
Geographic scope	The central area of the city.	The central area of the city.	Open spaces in the city.

Agents	Artists and <i>colectivos</i> to produce audio-visual products.	<i>Colectivos</i> of artists.	Collective of black women.
Funds	Self-funded.	Self-funded.	Self-funded.
Scale	City.	Urban compartment.	City and region.
Causes	Independent art appreciation.	Independent art appreciation.	Women's rights and fight against racism.
Activities	Workshop for cultural projects, art workshops, debates, film sessions, and pocket shows.	Cultural events, exhibitions, workshops, temporary shelter for artists, open space for arts, and gastronomy.	Poems recitals, and production of short books and magazines.
Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro / RJ			
Name	<i>Norte Comum</i>	<i>Casa Borbulhante</i>	<i>Casa Nem</i>
Creation	2011.	2018.	2016.
Category	Culture.	Arts.	Art and Culture.
Geographic scope	The periphery of the city. Itinerant office.	High- and medium-income districts of western Rio de Janeiro.	Downtown and southern region of the city.
Agents	Cultural producers, artists.	<i>Coletivo Lá Vai Marias</i> and independent artists.	LGBTI+ and Transgender movements.
Funds	Self-funded.	Self-funded.	Self-funded.
Scale	Urban compartments.	Urban compartments	Urban compartments
Causes	Culture off central areas.	Alternative art.	LGBTI+ and Transgender rights.
Activities	Soirees on popular culture in local bars and open spaces, walking tours, and photographic exhibitions to explore peripheric districts.	Artistical interventions circus, dance, poetry, soirees, music, and open fairs for natural products.	Workshops, debates, parties, shows, shelters, open fairs, sewing, photography, yoga, and art classes.
Metropolitan Region of Salvador / BA			
Name	<i>Casa Preta: Espaço Cultural</i>	<i>Centro Cultural Que Ladeira é Essa?</i>	<i>Casa Monsxtras</i>
Creation	2009.	2013.	2016.
Category	Arts and Culture	Arts, culture, and informal education.	Arts (Transformers).
Geographic scope	The <i>central</i> area of the city.	The <i>central</i> area of the city.	Public spaces of the city, The central area of the city.
Agents	Artistic groups.	Activists, artists, musicians.	Artistic groups.
Funds	Self-funded.	Self-funded.	Non identified.
Scale	The central area of the city.	The central area of the city.	The <i>central</i> area of the city.
Causes	Drug addiction and racism.	Low-income young people living downtown to reduce violence, fight gentrification and avoid forced evictions.	Black people movements and LGBT people.
Activities	Theatre shows for young people, performances, contests, workshops, exhibitions, community libraries, training courses, and debates on racial topics.	Brazilian Jiu-jitsu, capoeira, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese classes, Hip hop workshops for women.	Performances.
Metropolitan Region of São Paulo, Brazil			
Name	<i>Luz nas Vieiras</i>	<i>Urban Ideas</i>	<i>Cooperifa</i>
Creation	2012.	2018.	2001.
Category	Arts (urban intervention).	Arts (Tactic Urbanism).	Culture (popular poetry)
Geographic scope	Favela Brasilândia.	Hostile spaces to pedestrians.	The periphery of the city.

Agents	Collective Boa Mistura (Madrid team of artists).	Landscape professional, journalist, and architect.	Organized communities.
Funds	Self-funded.	Self-funded.	Self-funded.
Scale	District.	Entire city.	Regional.
Causes	Art may transform society. Importance of spaces for proper social conviviality.	Creation of new open spaces.	Cooperifa Soirees gather people to make poetry popular.
Activities	Partnership with the community of Favela Brasilândia to graffiti public spaces.	Urban projects prioritizing pedestrian and active mobility.	Open theatres, festivals, and cultural exhibitions.

Source: the authors, 2020.

Obs.: “Arts” refers to artistic activities in general, involving the creation of tangible works like paintings, poems, or urban graffiti. “Culture” encompasses the broader knowledge and practices that shape a society, including its connection to art, as well as concepts like the right to the city and political participation. Self-funded projects primarily rely on contributions from individuals, such as team members or supporters. In some cases, they might seek grants from governmental agencies or private foundations, but this is less common.

The table above suggests nine recurrent characteristics among the selected cases, and potentially a general attribute of urban insurgencies. The determination of these characteristics was informed by the discussions we had with agents involved in the *colectivos*’ organization and on double-checked secondary information. Despite their own efforts to make them continuous, most of the experiences appear to be short-lived. The availability of contacts and information we experienced in our research decreased as the *colectivos* aged, indicating weaker community bonds and organizational cohesiveness. A very small group of these *colectivos* or urban insurgencies confirmed a different performance. *Cooperifa*, in São Paulo, and *Casa Nem*, in Rio de Janeiro, not only demonstrated a temporal sustainability but also a recognition that goes beyond their original communities. According to our review, the years 2000 may be taken as a turning point for the urban insurgencies, following the worldwide events which questioned old established social and political rules. In fact, the selected experiences are still quite young: out of the 33 (considering both the Brazilians and the Latin Americans), only six were created before 2010, with a concentration in the years later than 2015. Temporal sustainability is an asset long defended in formal public policies. In the case of the selected urban insurgencies – somewhat the counterforce of governmental initiatives – there seems not to have intention to make them last. On the contrary, their target and their procedures signalize that ephemeral character does not constitute an important asset for those who are responsible for them.

The second recurrent characteristic of the selected urban insurgencies is that they all suggest we should see their desired impacts from a different approach, differently from those we adopt in public policies, for example. However, analysing their real impacts and their persistence is a difficult exercise with no historical perspective yet. What is new is the fact that the objectives presented by these initiatives are more focused on the processes themselves than on final accomplishments. The adoption of art, culture, and entertainment as the main tool to communicate with their communities and to transform their lives signals the emphasis on the means much more than on the ends.

The third recurrent characteristic is the fact that these insurgencies present fragile institutionalizations, relaxed group bonds, porous boundaries for their campaigns, and mostly informal procedures with the community they work. That is a general and intrinsic characteristic that cannot be questioned or taken as if in other levels of urban management; on the contrary, it is easily justified. Even though formality is not a foundational principle to be respected, informality results from uncertain resources (generally observed), legal constraints (no legal recognition of property rights, such as the case of the *Coletivo Espaço Comum Luiz Estrela* and its fight to use an abandoned listed public building in Belo Horizonte), and constant setbacks imposed by opposing groups (violence and prejudice in the case of the *Coletivo Casa Monsxtras*, in Salvador, for example).

In terms of connection with formal planning or formal urban management, the general scenario is the common absence of dialogue between the insurgencies and public formal policies. This lack of dialogue between insurgencies and public formal policies is the fourth recurrent characteristic we observed in our research. The insurgencies are *allowed* to operate in geographic or institutional gaps, often ignored by authorities. In rare cases of consolidation, they may achieve some degree of acceptance within a broader context. The public poetry sessions in Porto Alegre in southern Brazil and Recife in the northeastern region (two different urban realities) performed by the *Coletivo Slam das Minas* exemplify this government’s indifference and their members’ independence and disregard for political promises or commitments.

In all insurgencies analysed for this paper, we found no indication of solid ongoing negotiations to guarantee governmental support or recognition. It constitutes the fifth characteristic we found. In only one case, this situation may be distinct: São Paulo. By analysing the proposals for the last three mayors in this city, we observed a certain allegiance to assimilate in their public policies the success of some collective practices.

By and large, the geographic scope of the initiatives is limited to a single urban compartment or to itinerant venues. That defines the sixth characteristic we observed. The precise location of activities and offices are typically located in one of the two wettings: 1. abandoned public buildings in central areas of the city, taking advantage of easy access to public transport and of the visibility these areas offer, or 2. the peripheries

of large cities, closely connected with the urban spaces they intend to transform. In the first case, the agenda of the *colectivos* tend to be more connected with that of their peers in the country and abroad; in the second, local pragmatism defines their agenda. In five cases the location occurs in trending areas of the city, counting with the support of medium- and high-income professionals, taking advantage of the vicinity to potential affluent donors or decision-makers, and guaranteeing higher chances of publicity for their causes and needs.

Considering the two groups of insurgences we referred to in this paper, we may say there is no significant distinction between those in Brazilian cities/regions and those in the three other Latin American capitals: location, organization, purposes, informalities, resources, agendas, and connectivity turned out to be quite similar. This may suggest the adoption of similar global values being adopted in different national contexts; similar urban constraints among these cities/regions, demanding similar solutions, and the existence of an informal network of ideas and ideals turning into concrete initiatives, wherever their organizers are. However, this possible shared platform of ideas and ideals does not depend on concrete and operational connections at the international level: out of the 24 Brazilian experiences and the nine Latin-American, only three proved a certain degree of formal international connection, mostly based on fragile personal relations. Again, it may suggest a shared consensus amplified agreement but certainly submitted to a pragmatic interest in working at the very local level. Vaz (2016), the leader of the *Coletivo Cooperifa*, confirms the idea that a general agreement on what he believed and defended existed before he and his friends decided to make it real in their community: the unexpected creation of a poetry club in the periphery of São Paulo, occupying a substandard bar, now celebrating its 20th anniversary, and gathering hundreds of people every week:

We haven't noticed other people, from other places, were thinking the same way. The only thing we missed was a place. We did not know people had such an accumulated strength (interview).

The observed similarities between cases in Brazil and in Latin America constitute the seventh characteristic we confirmed. Yes, there is a clear connection between initiatives that yet geographically distant, follow a broad set of principles. Much remains to be investigated to clarify the existence of such a global agenda or at least a general perspective born in and intrinsic to the global South metropolises. If clarified, we could even make progress on the concept of the global South metropolis, which, despite being commonly used, lacks a better understanding. Furthermore, our research excluded the participation of the *colectivos'* members in political parties or other larger social movements. However, further research is necessary to understand if it is part of a generalized disenchantment towards these organizations or if it is an inherent characteristic of the urban insurgencies. Our research suggests that the *colectivos* explicitly adopt a pragmatic and instant search for solutions, restricted to their ability to make changes, that of their own and limited compartments in their city.

Another common characteristic observed in the cases analysed, despite occurring at different degrees of involvement, is the common presence of research, students, and young professional groups. These external agents play important roles in these initiatives at the point of potentially undermining their core identity of being insurgent, locally focused, and operationally disconnected from other fights. The *Coletivo Casa Nem*, in Rio de Janeiro, exemplifies this idea. Created as a squatting action in an abandoned middle-class district building, later moved to a more gentrified district, Copacabana, and soon had its causes amplified by offering support to LGBT+ people in their needs of education and against police harassment. At these moments, the collaborative help from professionals outside the dweller's group has always been decisive: independent professionals with their expertise, individuals from the municipality – facilitating and clarifying bureaucratic procedures and finding alternatives when the evictions were imminent –, and the Brazilian Bar Association with its formal legal assistance, were decisive for its existence. That is a *people-in-need-outside key actors'* connection commonly observed in the *colectivos* we analysed, confirming a pragmatic dialogue between them and parts of the system they criticize. The statement of its leader Indianara Siqueira (2020) about the nomination of the documentary *Indianara* for the Cannes Award Festival was emblematic. She does not only recognize the pragmatic connections with outside key agents but also confirms two other approaches commonly observed in the other urban insurgencies we analysed: a rich metamorphosis in their agendas and a clear sympathy with global and contemporary causes.

Casa Nem [...] is very revolutionary [...]. We were forced to go to the left. We are anti-capitalists, we value people's freedom, and we believe another world is possible. We do not want employees anymore, we want people to be free, we want them to work less and enjoy life [...]. Casa Nem is a tribe, that is the so-called Utopia made true (interview).

The lower number of *colectivos* in cities with higher degrees of formality might be explained by the presence of those formal structures. This suggests that insurgencies are not solely driven by global agendas (as we may conclude from their ideals and limited formal and consistent international connections). Instead, they seem more influenced by a context of inadequate public services and urban infrastructures. Poverty, but more importantly, disappointment with public policies and even with large social movements, may explain the driving force behind the urban insurgencies we studied. Common expression among these *colectivos* include: "We do it now", "We want it now", and "We are aware of others' needs and fights, but we're changing things our way". These statements might indicate not only disappointment but also strong criticism towards social movements vying for influence in local and national governments were common expressions among men and women involved in the *colectivos* we discussed. These statements may sometimes indicate not only a disappointment but also a strong criticism towards the more "traditional social movements" that dispute for

political influence in local and national governments. This explains why none of the cases we formally studied, or those we encountered more informally, had no formal ties with these movements.

However, despite the lack of formal connection, the collectives demonstrate a clear and unequivocal sympathy with the social movements' agenda, as long as it challenges the social, political, and economic establishment.

The big picture reveals a strong emphasis on pragmatism and urgent transformations. This can't be simply attributed to individualism or ignorance of global or national contemporary issues. In fact, our final recurrent characteristic highlights that their adherence and contribution to broader movements aren't to be found in concrete actions, but rather in their ideological alignment with a range of progressive ideas and a commitment to global concerns.

5. Conclusions

We started this paper with the presupposition that the visible impact of the insurgencies activities is only observed in the microcompartments of the cities and able to transform only a small part of their communities' lives. This assumption remained valid until we reached these conclusions. From the outset of this investigation, we discounted the likelihood of achieving larger, immediately visible, and lasting transformations. The results, though limited to the chosen cities and experiences, now confirm our initial assumption.

Expecting visible, immediate, and durable impacts yet possible at smaller scales should not be a parameter to evaluate the experiences above. Their impacts vary and their final output remains fragile, sometimes visibly inconsistent. However, they constitute a widespread utopia and a paradoxical and informal systemization of ideas and changes globally desired. If compared with the utopias designed by public urban policies—in the case of the selected cities or others in their countries, generally by means of master plans—the urban insurgency utopias may differ in terms of incubation, maturation, time, public involvement, resources, continuity, and results. However, the main contrast between them is found in the specificities of the urban insurgencies: made real by essentially grassroots-driven movements—the *Colectivos*—, their unique capacity to rejuvenate themselves, their ability to make novelties explicit and their metamorphose to respond to new demands or to submit their activities to new opportunities and constraints.

The second important conclusion we may attest to is that the process is undoubtedly much more important than the results. The value lies in the process itself, in the *desire* to transform the city, rather than in achieving immediate and tangible results. This reinvigorates what Lefebvre's (2000) concept of experimental utopias from the 1960s. For Lefebvre, utopias should be tested through concrete experiments, with their implications and consequences, sometimes undesirable, detected on the ground. This practical approach allows us to understand what makes certain places and experiences more successful than others. That is precisely how the *colectivos* choose to act.

Urban insurgencies involve proposing actions collectively, designing near futures, and fostering community bonds. These are qualities rarely seen in top-down urban projects or even traditional participatory methods. This is our third conclusion, based on the discussion we so far have made: pragmatism, immediatism, microcompartment based approaches, and actions circumscribed to precise thematic scopes guide the *colectivos* existence.

Urban insurgencies' motivations emerge unexpectedly and informally, aided by the urban environment of large cities that fosters these informal and non-hierarchical collective actions. Building on Arendt's concept (2018, first edition c. 1950) that political action flourishes where interaction thrives, the cases we studied suggest three additional factors that contribute to the flourishing of urban insurgencies: poverty, disappointment, and a desire to participate in broader political movements. These three factors, perhaps interconnected as a single phenomenon, represent our fourth main conclusion.

The chances of the experiences discussed in our research replicating themselves in extensive practices are still difficult to evaluate. This lack of extended experience makes it difficult to assess whether these initiatives can be sustained, either through continued activity by the original participants or through replication by others in different urban settings. Again, the contact with these experiences suggested that their most valuable result is their communal belief, somewhat spontaneous organization, and operational moment. Gohn (2011), based on the assumption that education cannot be limited to the formal environment of schools, understands social movements as one of the possible sources of innovation and knowledge generation. However, such learning is not an isolated process, but the result of a complex political and social environment. Urban insurgencies, as we understand them in this article, share the same limitations: their ability to influence urban realities goes beyond their inherent characteristics and hinges on external factors.

Our research also found that urban insurgencies have a fragile and circumstantial relationship with governmental structures. This relationship involves conflict, negotiation, strategic infiltration, and occasional opportunistic collaboration, but rarely does it lead to full absorption of these emancipatory movements into formal management practices.

Despite their seemingly isolated nature in space and time, the urban insurgencies demonstrate historical and processual connections with larger movements observed worldwide (see Harvey, 2012, for example). Tormey's (2014) discussion about global manifestations may certainly be considered for the urban insurgencies we discussed in this paper: a diversity of topics to fight for and a rejection of hierarchical relations. According to him, today's activism may be labelled in terms of their resistance to injustice and their refusal to interact vertically, but rather horizontally and based on social networks. In essence, urban insurgencies typically combine self-management practices, alternative housing, and use of public space. They often

function independently of governmental structures, eschew hierarchical set-ups, advocate for the causes of marginalized groups, propose affirmative actions, and rely on social media for their organization. These conclusions seem in alignment with what Holston (2018) identified, in analysing worldwide uprisings in the past two decades: a variety of circumstantial reasons but with a clear intersection of common interests and actions such as occupation of urban space, rejection of representative politics, flirting with alternative forms of democracy, resistance to eviction and gentrification, resistance to police violence, and use of social media.

Kateb (1981: 374) states that “The time may come when the nostalgia for representative democracy will replace the nostalgia for direct democracy”. One could argue that there may be a time when there will be nostalgia for both. A better understanding of urban insurgencies may, within this context, contribute to filling an investigational void, provided they are seen not only as the result of tensions and disappointments but also as potentialities to public policies: they deserve more than a vote of confidence, they deserve an elegy.

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