AMONG WAYS OF LIVING

Looking at diversity from cultural actions and digital media

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Abstract. This paper presents reflections stemmed from a research that seeks to cast a gaze toward the diversity of ways of living in communities, starting from the interaction in communicational processes structured by digital means. This paper introduces findings on the possibilities of similarities between people of different groups in a community in hybrid instances, starting from cultural activities. Further explorations about the potential and qualifications of the use of digital media for this purpose will also be presented. The trials that comprise the object of reflection in this article took place and were only achievable for being part of a larger public policy project, funded by an important Brazilian research funding agency. The project has been in development since March 2010 by the research group of a recognized leading university and involves post-doctoral, doctoral and master researchers. Additionally, the project has partnership with various third sector institutions such as NGOs and collectives, as well as music bands and European universities.

Keywords. Diversity; ways of living; digital media; communities; communication.

1. Introduction

In this paper we present considerations derived from experiences within a research developed during three years and that was aimed at learning and verifying the diversity of ways of living in communities belonging to different social and urban realities using for this digital media, starting from communicational processes, in the ambit of cultural actions occurred within a large public policies project.

Encouraged by previous successful experiences in this research area, the group Nomads.usp, Center for Interactive Living Studies, acknowledged the important need to search for methodological procedures and practices in qualitative research which would comprise more embracing aspects and that would enable to bring the
researcher closer to the studied reality. In addition to this, the verification and use of digital media potentialities for such procedures, starting from a low-tech structure of easy reproducibility, as it has already been the premise adopted in researches conducted at Nomads.usp for over ten years.

The project in question is called “Hybrid Territories communities, cultural actions and digital media” and it belongs today to public policies funding line at FAPESP¹, and it has been in development since March 2010 by Nomads.usp², at University of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Master, PhD and post-doc researches are involved turning discussions the result of a large process developed by many researchers working and reflecting together. Furthermore, the project is structured by partnerships with the tertiary sector such as collectives, NGOs, partnership with music bands and artists with local public bodies linked to cultural production and promotion as well as Brazilian and European universities.

In Brazilian socio-cultural reality and context, the funding and the development of this line of projects represents a considerable advancement in terms of expanding and bringing to surface innovative practices with a less centralized decision power and with other attitudes in regards to the promotion of public social well-being.

Cultural actions developed by the project and presented in this paper will be made available – as a step-by-step – to public institutions, collectives and regular people at communities looking at implementing similar practices, liable to be adapted and re-used.

2. Ways of Life, Diversity and Communities: Some Theoretical Explorations

The interest for understanding and perceiving different ways of life is identified as a way for architects and researchers, also from other knowledge areas, to cast a closer glance on realities outside the academic circle, in order to perceive and think about the importance of this approximation in a more empirical way.

The notion of community, in the context of this research, is close, among others, to that of Stuart Hall (2003, p. 66) who defends that, for the most part, these heterogeneous groups of people, originating from different cultural contexts, bring also together different origins and cultural heritage and configure a rich and plural whole, influences present as references to “communitarian self-definitions”, that although they are present, remain in a constant revision, merging and relativization process and not as a static and unchangeable understanding, a social formation that is constituted starting from the difference, by a “variety of articulations, ideas and social practices” (Hall, 2003, p. 52).

The notion of ways of life as practices present in the everyday life of individuals belonging to a specific community is related to its point of views, according to Raymond Williams (1961, p. 55; quoted in Hall, 1980, p. 59).
“Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change”.

3. Communicational Processes and the Role of Digital Media in Respect to the Goals and Practices Accomplished

The idea that ways of life are a reflex of the way people understand themselves and share this understanding with each other, is imbricated in the communicational processes that make this exchange possible. For this work, they are not constituted as an investigative concern per se, but rather in what this process, when conducted by starting from different supports (messages, digital graffiti, music, etc.).

The exchange processes involved in the communication of groups of people involves other possibilities such as:

“[…] access into what was opaque, knowledge where there was previously ignorance, bringing close what had been remote – all these capabilities of pervasive computing transform our ideas about space.” (Cuff, 2003, p.45).

Castells has extensively developed, throughout his work, reflections of different orders on the power of different forms of sociability and communicational networks, changes in the way we communicate and pointed to a new structure in force that is controlled by the flux and intensity of information in transit (Castells, 1999). In his work Communication Power (Castells, 2009, p. 10), the author defines this power as “the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s)”. He also argues that he understands this question as not exactly a prerogative of a specific group of people but rather as a form of relationship among individuals. It is through the possibility of new forms of communication in communities geographically distant that people of a specific group are able to share points of view and knowledge, in virtual instances. The communicational processes observed are constituted as a medium to the agency of points of view and the articulation of their differences.

4. Communities and the Actions Accomplished

4.1. TIRANDENTES CITY AND CDHU

The activities presented in this work have been carried out in two different realities and localities (Figure 1). One in a district in the outskirts in the east region of São Paulo, the district of Tiradentes City, the largest complex of public housing estates in Latin America, located approximately 40 km from downtown São Paulo;
the other locality is in the outskirts of the city of São Carlos, – which is located approximately 230 km from São Paulo – in the district of Vila Isabel, the public housing estate Waldomiro Lobbe Sobrinho – known as CDHU – with an estimated population of 4,000 inhabitants (São Carlos total population is approximately 220,000 inhabitants).

If on one hand the Tiradentes City in São Paulo presents a formal population of 200,000 inhabitants, with an estimated 70,000 “informal” population; on the other hand, the São Carlos area presents a population of 900 inhabitants. Both areas consist of groups of vertical housing estates or tower blocks with unities of a same project built by the Public Authority.

After previous experiences based on qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and after some initial contacts with residents of housing estates involved in the research, we came to the understanding that the Hybrid Territories project demanded and offered the possibility of experimentation of not so usual methods that are more efficient for the understanding of the diversity of ways of life in the communities in question but also attentive to pre-existing practices that are already accepted by those communities.

4.2. STREET RADIO

4.2.1. Process and realization of Street Radio

The Street Radio, as its creators the actors at the Instituto Pombas Urbanas (Urban Pigeons Institute) call it, consists in an ornamented mobile tricycle equipped with a
sound system connected to a car battery and incorporated to its structure. Its visual appeal is aimed at drawing the attention of passers-by to the intended message. It was used for years by the actors of Instituto Pombas Urbanas as a communication channel for events promoted by this cultural center. For the purposes of our research we use this device as a way to dialogue and to listen to local residents, to perceive different postures and to report on the reality of the place and on how it is living in it, facilitated by an informal atmosphere created by the presence of the Street Radio, by disguised actors and researchers and by the sound equipment (Figure 2).

The Street Radio was conducted in the Tiradentes City streets and it was equipped by the sound system. Interviews were conducted with the Radio itself and the researchers surrounding it were also conducting informal conversations with people around the event and who many times provided quite deep reports on everyday life issues. Researchers posed questions on how it was living in Cidade Tiradentes and about their point of view on how it would be to live in a housing estate with identical housing units but in São Carlos, in this case at the CDHU. The reverse was made later at the CDHU (Figure 3).

Despite the existence of a central question we were also interested in the emergence of other issues and aspects of everyday life. The record was made by video footage with the aim of propitiate a second reflection moment by community residents together with researchers.

Street Radio was able to generate an informal atmosphere in the surroundings of the path traversed by it. The Radio created an ambience appropriate for interaction among children, youth, adults and elderly people in the streets and squares through which it passed.

Whilst in movement it was perceived in the Street Radio structure the formation of interaction spheres of performers and researchers with community residents: interviews by radio, informal conversations and records for future discussions.

Interviews with loudspeakers contemplated briefer answers but that did not appear to intimidate, on the contrary, it was as a dialogue with the community.
itself was established. Generally speaking, aspects of everyday life in the community were approached such as the issue of drug addiction both by teenagers and children, the transformation experienced by the housing estate in the last ten years, the living in community as a way of sharing experiences, the construction of cooperation ties between residents, celebrations and events occurred, the coexistence of different everyday practices, violence, the presence of narcotics dealing, the presence of the Instituto Pombas Urbanas as a cultural agent and social transformer as well as idealizations regarding life in another housing estate but in a smaller city.

At the same time, informal conversations surrounding Street Radio originated from issues announced on loudspeakers but entered other spheres of depth and resulted in quite personal reports, for instance, from mothers who suffered from having sons involved in dealing or using narcotics. Or also reports on how important it was to live in a community where everybody know and help each other and the wish that future generations could continue living there. These reports have been recorded also in a field diary by researchers who described in details conversations and experiences in field.

4.2. CDHU CULTURA FEST

Another cultural action to be approached is called CDHU Cultura Fest and it took place at the CDHU in the city of São Carlos. The event realization was also understood as a methodological procedure to understand ways of life and the coexistence of differences, able to bring us another gaze on the same community. As a large event that sought to reunite different groups within the community, there have been diverse activities available and among these we will deal with
these: digital graffiti; screening of comments during the event; street dance and music band playing remotely.

4.2.1. Screening of comments

For the screening of comments researchers circulated during the event with note-books, talking to residents and inviting them to give their opinions through a comment that would remain stored in the Hybrid Territories project website (Figure 4).

We could perceive the reclaim of a promotion of moments that could propiti ate the contact with different forms of culture; the issues of drugs and violence were also present. As in the Street Radio, we could perceive, in informal conversations, the reverberation of what was being screened. These conversations also showed where, in the opinion of many of the people concerned, cultural practices and events were located as well of showing how they saw that possibility of coexistence of groups that don’t usually talked to each other within the community.

![Figure 4. Screening of comments at CDHU Cultura Fest (Nomads.usp, 2012).](image)

4.2.2. Digital Graffiti at the CDHU Cultura Fest

This procedure was conducted through open source software, in this case laser tag, and low cost, in this case touch tag, which were also previously tested by graffiti artists resident at the CDHU.

For Laser tag we used a notebook with software developed by the Research Lab installed and linked to a projector, a long-reach laser and a recording camera linked to a notebook, capturing the laser movements. For the Touch tag we used a tablet with the installed software connected to a projector (Figure 5).

During the event both structures were made available for public use so that it could be used as a form of expression and language not necessarily verbal.
The procedure attracted mainly children and youth who marked with drawings things from their everyday life such as tags and words that mentioned musical styles or slang while children elaborated drawings stemming from the imaginary of housing or nature.

4.2.3. Street Dance and bands playing remotely

This consisted of a presentation of a street dance group and two bands playing simultaneously, one located in the city downtown, in a studio, and the other in the event location. The bands could experience the musical production remotely by using skype software (Figure 6).

Both presentations brought in their musical themes issues related to life in the outskirts in general. In this moment a large public was attracted, an interesting moment of intense reunion of people from different postures, age and groups within the community: from conservative ladies to youth, adults and children.
This form of expression through dance and music may have caused a possible recognition with the population and may have drawn its attention. The fact that two musical bands played remotely, of course, brought numerous interesting questions to the research. However, we have not perceived clearly that this factor caused a strong attraction on CDHU residents.

5. Final Considerations

At the end of the presented experiences it is possible to perceive the experience of a potential still in development of the tested mechanisms. Even if it was possible to learn about the existence and about some aspects of different ways of life in the researched communities, a very large material, and recorded in the research group database, it was possible to come to conclusions that orient some forms of gazing, that verify the use of digital media in specific practices and that point to possible future explorations.

The experiences were configured by moments in which planning was successfully accomplished and other in which it needed revisions and this fact turned out to be positive for the research as it allowed us to understand that in this area of investigation there are no formulas and that we need to be attentive in relation to the demands that arise in field, from the public, directing the research steps in a positive way.

It was interesting to note the residents’ different receptivity in relation to semi-structured interviews and Radio Street interviews. There was a considerable change in the residents’ predisposition to express themselves in relation to everyday life in the housing estate and this reflected deeply in the quantity and in the quality of the information gathered. In other words, we are under the impression that, through a more fun approach the population felt more motivated to talk and...
to express an opinion on how it is to live in this estate and it was not only impelled to answer questions posed by interviewers.

Again, a less traditional approach regarding the information gathering has proved to be less intimidating for the population and this resulted in more willingness and motivation on behalf of the population to express itself in a natural and spontaneous way.

We sought to present procedures that could assist in understanding this diversity within a community, incorporating to the process the use of digital media as interaction-promoting agents, exploring its potentialities so that they can also provide a revision of the uses given to urban space, possibilities of requalification by the social interaction of a community that appropriates this space by cultural expression. Such process is understood as a system liable to additions and other appropriations as well as being applicable, given its transdisciplinary character, to other areas of knowledge. We also acknowledge the possibility of guiding architects and researchers to merge and relativize points of view on communities, on urban realities and on the use of procedures to understand them and incorporate them to academic and professional practices.

Procedures developed by the research have also adjusted themselves as a form of empowering these communities and the people that live in it as they consist in simple and accessible technological structures that can be appropriated and adapted to new uses leading to the emergence of new sociabilities and new practices.

Endnotes

1. The Project of public policies “Hybrid Territories: digital media, communities ans cultural actions” is funded by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo - FAPESP.
2. http://www.nomads.usp.br

References