Hybrid Territories Project: Cultural Actions and Digital Media

Marcelo Tramontano[1], Denise Mônaco dos Santos[2]
Nomads.usp, Institute of Architecture and Urbanism, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil.
http://www.nomads.usp.br
[1]tramont@sc.usp.br, [2]demonaco@sc.usp.br

Abstract. *This paper presents the Hybrid Territory Project, a cultural public policies research project carried ou by Nomads.usp, the Center for Studies of Interactive Living, of the University of São Paulo, Brazil. The central theme of the project is to understand how public cultural policies can make use of digital media in an effort to connect people and groups living in social realities apart from each other. The project seeks to bring physical and virtual instances together by means of cultural actions in urban areas. Moreover, it aims to design coexistence from joint work carried out by diverse actors, including architects, who have a voice in defining the project goals, actions, and methods. It is expected that the project will provide strategies for public policies to lay down conditions favoring the coexistence of differences in cities as enriching and desirable.*
Keywords. *Public policies; digital media; communities; cultural actions.*

CONTEXT

The problems faced by those who are called to intervene in urban areas – e.g., urban planners, politicians, architects, designers, artists, animators and scholars from many fields – seem to be undergoing significant changes. The main problem they are expected to deal with is no longer about designing and producing physical spaces that will eventually constitute places of living, in various scales, for populations whose profile they believe to know in depth. On the contrary, these agents need to understand that the very essence of society is being altered through various phenomena, such as migration, access to information, enhancement of local cultures, respect for and encouragement of minorities, among others. As the city is composed of these people, designing the urban area means envisaging favorable conditions for differences to coexist, with dignity and significance.

This perception is even clearer in the field of architecture, urban planning, and urbanism, i.e., in studies that value ad hoc interventions in collective and public spaces. That is to say that these studies see the potential of local actions associated with everyday life and marked times, as opposed to large-scale, rigid, predetermined interventions or projects. To this end, these approaches borrow from different disciplines; in other words, they hold within themselves a transdisciplinary character. (Ericson and Mazé, 2011; Borasi and Zardini, 2008; Brower, Mulder, Martz, 2002).

[…] *an Open City is a place where different social groups co-exist, cultural diversity is present, differences in scale are visible, and urban innovation and probably economic development are taking place. When all these factors come together, it can have a positive effect.* […] *Open City is not a city; it is a condition of a*

part of the city. […] *The Open City condition consists of innumerable contradictions, which makes it difficult to define exactly which spatial qualities have to be created before you can speak of an Open City* (Christiaanse, 2010).

The central theme of the Hybrid Territories Project is to understand how public cultural policies can make use of digital media in an effort to connect people and groups living in social realities apart from each other. The project explores concepts such as tolerance, cultural diversity, and collective construction of hybrid spatialities. To be precise, the Hybrid Territories Project seeks to bring physical and virtual instances together by means of cultural actions in urban areas. Moreover, it aims to design coexistence from joint work carried out by diverse actors, including architects, who have a voice in defining the project goals, actions, and methods. It is expected that the project will provide strategies for public policies to lay down conditions favoring the coexistence of differences in cities as enriching and desirable.

These two notions, i.e., coexistence and tolerance, seem to point to ways of thinking about the constitution of hybrid spatialities as coexistence design. In particular, they indicate possible intervention strategies and actions and opens new perspectives for investigation. Despite prioritizing extreme situations, these concepts are treated and applied to multidimensional conflict situations. These situations bring forth the desire to embrace differences in terms of relationships among groups and communities and to build, by spelling them out, a rich encounter and transformation process. Pinto notes that "[…] *we must radically rid ourselves of a naïve kind of euphoria about the proliferation of differences. It seems that a good path to follow is to make them plain, seek their emergency conditions and potential instead of just celebrating them.*" (Pinto, 2001, pp.51).

The construction of a research agenda is in progress. It reaffirms the importance of interweaving digital technologies at the level of local communities or, yet, the relevance of intermingling people, places, and technology. This research agenda also affirms the relevance of addressing digital technology issues from a social standpoint, i.e., that of development and social transformation for local communities. (Foth, 2009; Beamish, 2001; Carroll, 2005; Day and Schuler, 2004; Gaved and Anderson, 2006; Gurstein, 2004; Warschauer, 2006).

THE PROJECT

The Hybrid Territories Project is structured around eight experimental cultural activities based on the use of digital media and information and communication technologies so as to foster new possibilities for communication among people. These activities also explore people's hostility toward rarely consensual cultural expressions, e.g., graffiti and indie rock music, and other unusual cultural expressions, e.g., the use of wearable and sonic computer interfaces in public places. They also seek to expand the application of well-known processes, such as digital fabrication in the service of building physical, hybrid spaces and places for sociability among communities collectively. All actions imply remote and local interaction among researchers, communities, public partners, academics, and third sector agents.

The aforementioned cultural actions gather around four thematic axes: (1) Body, (2) Space, (3) Sound, and (4) Image. Each axis focuses on a main theme but makes use of resources pertaining to the other axes as well. Thus, in spite of prioritizing the production and display of images as a cultural expression, actions having images as their central theme may also involve sound resources, be somehow related to the body or have a connection with space. Each action comprises two phases – named Workshops and Events – that put forward specific activities at distinct levels of community involvement, and, consequently, different methodological approaches. While Workshops are instances of production/work involving a small group of participants, Events are instances of public display of and discussion about what was previously produced, i.e., Events count on the participation of a larger number of people. Digital media are used in all actions in several ways, from simple use of livestreaming dis-

cussions over the Internet to remote rapid prototyping, remote musical jam sessions, and film projections on public space façades. Digital media are also employed to collect public reactions and allow them to express themselves during these events.

Every action has its own goals, employed resources, results obtained so far, and roles played by its participants: communities and public and private partners. These actions are much more complex than they are presented here. The Hybrid Territories Project is being conducted by Nomads.usp (Center for Studies on Interactive Living) belonging to the Institute of Architecture and Urbanism at University of São Paulo, Brazil, since March 2011. Funded by FAPESP (São Paulo State Research Funding Agency), the project is scheduled to end in February 2013. Some of the actions listed below were conceived to involve several Brazilian states, thereby bringing together very diverse regional and socio-cultural realities. Other actions are focused on São Carlos, the project host city, with the participation of dwellers of a local housing complex and the city's population.

Body_01 action: wearable interface

The Body_01 action was carried out with the help of a mobile artistic intervention, called Captas, which consists of three yellow capes coupled to computer systems worn by actors/performers that walk the city streets and other urban spaces. This action was conducted in partnership with the media artists Fábio de Oliveira Nunes and Soraya Braz, who conceived the action, and a group of young actors sponsored by the São Carlos Arts and Culture Bureau, a major public partner of the project. This intervention took place in downtown São Carlos.

According to its creators, the action goal is to criticize the use of cell phones in public spaces, and further demonstrate that information and communication technologies may be blurring the boundaries between public and private spaces. This intervention aims to lead people to perceive the oft-unnoticed ways that their private life spheres come to inhabit public spaces and, in some cases, their intimacies are bared to the public.

The Captas wearable interface consists of a yellow cape, made of perforated plastic material coupled to an electronic system. This system is composed of sensors that pick up electromagnetic waves emitted by cell phones within a given distance. A microcontroller processes the captured data – which are stored in a MP3 player – and broadcasts the sound of pre-recorded cell phone conversations back to the environment through small speakers.

This intervention aimed at questioning the nature of the relationship between this interface with the physical space. It enabled participants to think that a hybrid space setting could be constructed with the help of users of the space themselves or even based on their behavior in this space, their repertoire, and not only from a certain materiality of the physical space itself. It also enabled participants to reflect on which interface properties would be sufficient to dictate the qualities of hybrid spatialities and the role played by urban subjects in the creation of hybrid spatialities.

Besides the aforementioned issues, the first action developed in the project also aimed at testing and analyzing different procedures and methodologies. It included the feasibility of partnerships at different levels, the scope of their responsibilities in an action of this nature, and tools for collection, logging, and systematization of intervention data in public spaces. The results of this action informed the next actions carried out in the project.

Body_02 action: housing complexes

The Body_02 action was conceived for two locations, São Carlos and Cidade Tiradentes, a district of the city of São Paulo. These two places comprise suburban low-income state-built housing, i.e., identical housing units. The theme guiding the workshops and events during this action centered on similarities and differences in aspects of everyday life of residents of these housing complexes. The purpose of this action was to promote the emergence of a comparative outlook on living in housing complexes in different urban realities, foster the construction of new outlooks about living in hous-

ing complexes, and use digital media to stimulate its residents' representation. This action involved several instances, including synchronous remote communication over the Internet between residents of these complexes, fanzine and radio workshops, and street performances. A video was produced as a synthesis of different workshops conducted in Cidade Tiradentes and São Carlos so as to show perceptions of these two communities about life in such housing developments.

The video was first shown at the housing complex in São Carlos, as part of a larger cultural event, where residents were provided with different means to express themselves, e.g., two digital graffiti interfaces, using graphic language, and a feedback interface, which makes use of written verbal language, all projected on façades of common spaces at the housing complex. It should be remarked that the focal point of this event was to enable residents to expound their views on issues of everyday life in that space, their anxieties and criticisms, as well as help them to take ownership of a specific communal space in the housing complex, namely, the sports courts area. During the course of this action, it was noticed that this space was important to residents in spite of the fact that it had been neglected due to its occupation by drug users. During this event, which was anchored in rapping and street dance and provided facilities for the practice of skateboarding, soccer, and bomb graffiti, all the housing complex residents were invited to occupy this space. With specific and well-timed actions in this space, the Hybrid Territories Project seeks to stimulate the appropriation of this space from the perspective of communal use, widely negotiated among residents in a collaborative and propositional way.

Sound_01 action: intercultural dialogues

The Intercultural Dialogues action was the result of the partnership of Nomads.usp and the São Carlos Arts and Culture Bureau with the musical improvisation and research group Aquarpa, from Federal University of São Carlos, the German rock band Par-

ashurama, and Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Germany. The main goal of this intervention was to promote the construction of mutual positive outlooks by bringing sounds and realities of Lünenburg and São Carlos together and fostering non-verbal dialogues between sounds produced by Aquarpa and Parashurama. The purpose of this action was to conduct a remote dialogue between the two cities via livestreaming video and audio, thereby creating hybrid spatialities from the intersection of this instance of remote synchronous communication to physical locations at these two cities. The event associated with this intervention took place simultaneously at the Lünenburg and São Carlos railway stations.

Some aspects of this action are noteworthy. In practice, this type of synchronous connection was shown to be an effective way of integrating sonically two faraway places through co-presence, creating hybridism in public spaces, and promoting collective use by condensing communication spheres through sound/musical components. However, the quality of synchronicity needed to establish communication through non-verbal language is high. In technological terms, it is related, on the one hand, to the quality of the Internet connection and computer systems and equipment used for transmission and, on the other hand, to the availability of specific equipment, such as mixer, sound cards, speakers, microphones, among others. That is to say that these actions call for a team of people with specific training in different disciplines. In addition, actions relying exclusively on Internet connections and synchronous communication seem more prone to unpredictability, which points to the complexity of technological devices involved in actions of this nature and the specificities of working with actions focused exclusively on sound-musical language.

As regards the dialogue to be established and the content in question, irrespective of technology needs, there is the need of improving communication and interaction among individuals who are different by respecting their differences and bringing them together. In this case, the groups involved in

the conversation were already skilled with respect to the language used and acquainted with the sound-musical universes in question. However, some difficulties became apparent as to breaking with very distinct views on sound and music production. In this case, i.e., when there is a whole universe of repertoires, there should be willingness and openness to converse, to interact with diversity, with those who, despite speaking the same language, have different opinions, behaviors, and attitudes. This foreseen and actually perceived difficulty suggests that these interventions should encourage communication between participants more effectively and systematically.

Action sound_02: rock bands

The purpose of the Rock Bands action is manifold: to promote the construction of a favorable outlook on the universe of rock music on the part of lay individuals; to increase the artistic opportunities for musicians using digital media; and to encourage comparative thinking about life in Germany and Brazil in light of social, economic, and cultural aspects and about diverse regional realities in Brazil as represented by the cities of São Paulo, São Carlos, Rio Branco, and Belo Horizonte, situated in three different Brazilian states, where the intervention is to take place. Other important goals of this action are to check the feasibility of partnerships between public cultural agencies and independent cultural production networks and to encourage the participation of local communities as actors in the event.

This action sessions will be distributed along four weeks, during which the German band Parashurama will conduct immersion sessions with different cultural groups belonging to Circuito Fora do Eixo (Out-of-the-Axis Circuit), a huge nationwide network of cultural collectives, and will hold jam sessions via the Internet and concerts with local and faraway bands, thereby creating a web of musical interactions among bands from these four Brazilian cities. Two interactive computer interfaces are being developed so as to encourage active public participation during the events of this action. Roughly

speaking, the first interface, similar to children's memory games, seeks to address issues related to everyday life in Hamburg, Parashurama's place of origin, and in the aforementioned four Brazilian cities, in an effort to promote reflection on current lifestyles in these distinct places. The second interface, called 'Timeline', has the graphical format of a trail game, and contains, at its 'homes', information about the production process of this cultural action, built mainly through partnerships and mutual exchange of interests, which differs from pay practices common to such events. This timeline, constructed as the action is developed with inputs from all bands and cultural agents in question, aims to make this cultural production process transparent to the public.

Action image_01: photos

This action seeks to elicit – among certain groups of inhabitants of the cities of São Carlos, Uberaba and Rio Branco, geographically distant from one another – new outlooks on some public spaces commonly found in most Brazilian medium-sized cities, regardless of the fact that they are situated in different regions of the country. Three groups of public school students from these three cities have been invited to produce images of significant urban spaces in their respective cities and to discuss, remotely, about these spaces via Facebook. Later, the photographs produced by these groups are to be projected in streets and public squares at an event that will take place simultaneously in the three cities. They will also be displayed on banners in these places for one month. At this event, students and audiences from the three abovementioned cities will meet online in public, and this communication will be screened on walls or façades bin these streets and squares.

The participating communities are considered here as cultural agents and content producers and thus will have the opportunity to express themselves through text messages using notebooks or tablets, which will also be displayed. Finally, a third screening will display the students' testimonials.

Action image_02: videos

During this action, two groups of fifteen college students each – inhabitants of two cities, São Carlos and Rio Branco, representing two diverse regions in Brazil: Southeast and North, respectively – will learn how to shoot and edit videos under the technical supervision of film directors. The resulting videos – documentaries lasting from 5 to 10 minutes – will be shown to the public of both places followed by discussions with the video makers.

The Image_02 action aims to promote and analyze video creation as a tool for expression and reflection on cultures and lifestyles of diverse places, thereby enriching discussions about the lifestyles and everyday lives of the communities in question.

It is believed that Acre residents, inhabitants of this lowly populated region, who have the Amazon forest and the indigenous people's universe as major cultural attributes, will speak about their perceptions about everyday life in a city in São Paulo State, supposedly one of the most affluent regions in Brazil, and vice-versa, so that stereotypical world views may be discussed and relativized. The themes of the documentaries to be made by college students from Rio Branco will be constructed from the perspective of São Carlos students and the other way around.

Different workshops on script and storyboard production, shooting and use of equipment, and editing will be interspersed with several instances of remote discussion and communication among participants. The videos made in both cities will be shown at an event held simultaneously in public squares of these cities. All videos will be shown simultaneously in both cities, and their communities will have the opportunity to express their opinions, at planned intervals, via digital interfaces created especially for this event.

Action space_01: graffiti

This action aims to construct a positive outlook on the universe of graffiti art, to expand the opportunities of graffiti artists with the use of digital media, to stimulate reflection on universal, regional, and local graffiti, to promote reflection on transience and permanence of urban interventions, and to encourage exploration of nonverbal distance communication. The Graffiti action involved synchronous remote communication and tangible interfaces, and was conducted with groups of two cities, São Carlos and Belo Horizonte. This action partners consisted of the research group LAGEAR from Federal University of Minas Gerais, the São Carlos Arts and Culture Bureau, the cultural collective network Circuito Fora do Eixo, and graffiti artists from São Carlos and Belo Horizonte.

Two interfaces were used in this action: LaserTag, developed by the Graffiti Research Lab and TouchTag, an app created by DustyPixels for devices with Android operating system. Different stations were set up on the day of the event in both cities for local use of the public and invited graffiti artists. Graffiti created by means of TouchTag installed on tablets were projected locally and remotely in both cities on walls and building façades, so that one city could follow what had been accomplished in the other city, while mobile tablets with the same program were passed around for public use. The implementation of LaserTag enabled communication and interaction, through digital graffiti production, between invited graffiti artists and communities from both cities. These actors were allowed to 'talk' and share information by means of livestream devices and projection. The event was broadcast live from both cities through specific Twitcam channels.

Implementing this event in São Carlos and Belo Horizonte demanded the work of a large team of researchers and partners and the ability to work with different systems and equipment. This action was successful in many ways, especially with respect to the goals of the Hybrid Territories Project, namely, favoring and promoting positive outlooks on graffiti art production using digital media in a given context. From this experience, the establishment of hybrid spatialities by way of different interfaces is now understood as a process that requires: (a) provision of a number of interdependent computer programs, hardware devices, and other peripherals (cameras, projectors, cables, connectors, adapters,

and so forth), (b) conduction of systematic planning and organization by a team of trained and skilled professionals, especially with regard to the systems employed, and (c) essential and systematic testing of interfaces in the places where they will be implemented, because only from this procedure can adverse situations be predicted.

In partnership with Circuito Fora do Eixo and the collective Aparelho Coletivo, the action was concluded at an event named Grito Rock (Rock Shout), which gathered a large audience, at an urban park in São Carlos. During this event the aforementioned digital graffiti tools were made available in addition to an interface to collect and project participants' comments. Together, these tools promoted public participation and interaction during the event. This experience was highly successful and marked the project advancement with regard to the proposed uses of digital interfaces to encourage the community – in the role of cultural agents – to transform actions of this nature.

Space_02 action: digital fabrication

The action called Digital Fabrication aims at favoring the process of community acknowledgement, conversation, and collaboration based on the discussion about urban and collective spaces. It aims at designing, constructing, and establishing a small pavilion intended for housing future cultural actions developed by the community. In this action, the design of spaces is understood as a series of five events comprising a far-reaching cultural action capable of promoting collaboration and peaceful living among residents of a housing complex in São Carlos. There will be employed strategies and procedures derived from parametric design and digital fabrication involving housing complex dwellers and students from the Architecture and Urbanism Institute at University of São Paulo.

In the first of five events, there will be displayed – via projection of images of several complex-geometry pavilions – formal and constructive alternatives made possible by the use of parametric design and digital fabrication. The goal is to gather the whole community around the materialization of a venue dedicated to culture, to be built next to the sports courts. At the second event, the community will be invited to experiment with altering the shape parameters of some pavilions. At the end of the event, a proposal will be chosen to be built.

At the third event, a laser cutting machine will make, before the community, pieces of small models of the chosen pavilion, which will be assembled by participants. It is expected that in this way they will be able to envisage the actual cutting of pieces and final assembly of the pavilion. The small-scale models produced will be given to participants so that a large number of residents may have a model at home, stimulating discussions after the event. At the fourth event, parts of the pavilion will be cut out by a CNC machine. The housing complex residents will be invited to accompany the cutting of parts by comparing them to the laser-cut model pieces they have. Finally, the pavilion will be assembled collectively during the last event, which will conclude with a party.

FINAL REMARKS

The several research questions guiding the Hybrid Territories Project center on the feasibility of using digital media embedded in cultural activities as vectors of social change. This interweaving assumes a qualitative character, this non-neutral condition, which should also be assumed by all dimensions of hybrid urban spaces. The opportunity to use computer systems, apps, and interfaces for social purposes makes more sense when these implementations are associated with specific contexts of countries with characteristics similar to those of Brazil, where social inequalities still call for extreme solutions. In other countries, where studies – particularly on the development of computer interfaces and digital media – and practical experiments in this field are well established, this kind of social contribution, that is, this prerogative with regard to the wellbeing of underprivileged communities, is just another aspect to be considered, among many others.

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