

Co-created Street Furniture as a Catalyst for Urban Culture and Public Life

Laura Sobral

Public spaces in many Latin American cities, faced with low investments by the state in urban quality of life, are generally either deserted or occupied by informal street vendors or private infrastructure.

The Government often alleges that the establishment of public space structures requires a high level of maintenance efforts and therefore costs. Aside from the natural wear and tear of these structures, the up front cost, often accounted for through depreciation, proves to be of highest cost. This fact raises some questions. Is there a sense of belonging felt by the visitors to the space? Are the things implanted in public spaces what the people who frequent those spaces want them to be? How are the users involved with designing, fabricating, or installing the urban furniture in that space? Are the maintenance and the caring for the spaces discussed and shared with the community that uses the space?

Undoubtedly, the presence of urban furniture is an aspect of particular relevance to the public vitality of city spaces. If we consider urban life to be the software of a city, urban furniture is the hardware of public spaces, encouraging the permanence of citizens so they can interact with each other.

Today, a city's outside spaces are often encountered and treated as simply a place of transit. Used solely as a space to pass through during the daily commute, these spaces are viewed as a path and not as a destination. For public spaces to become places of permanence and a destination, the presence of adequate and high quality urban furniture is essential. With its public spaces occupied, a city comes to life; it becomes safer, the local economy thrives and the city ultimately reinforces urban culture.

My activism in favor of fully occupying public spaces in São Paulo, Brazil – the largest city in the southern hemisphere and one of the more populous cities in the world – focuses on understanding which conditions favour permanence in and the activation of urban spaces. I propose that urban spaces be created collectively.

A meaningful example of this collective creation is happening at [Largo da Batata](#), a square that is over 300,000 SqFt, located in the city core of São Paulo. After a 10-year renovation, Largo da Batata reopened to the public in 2013 as an immense desert, void of vegetation and urban furniture apart from light posts. The square is an urban transportation node, with over

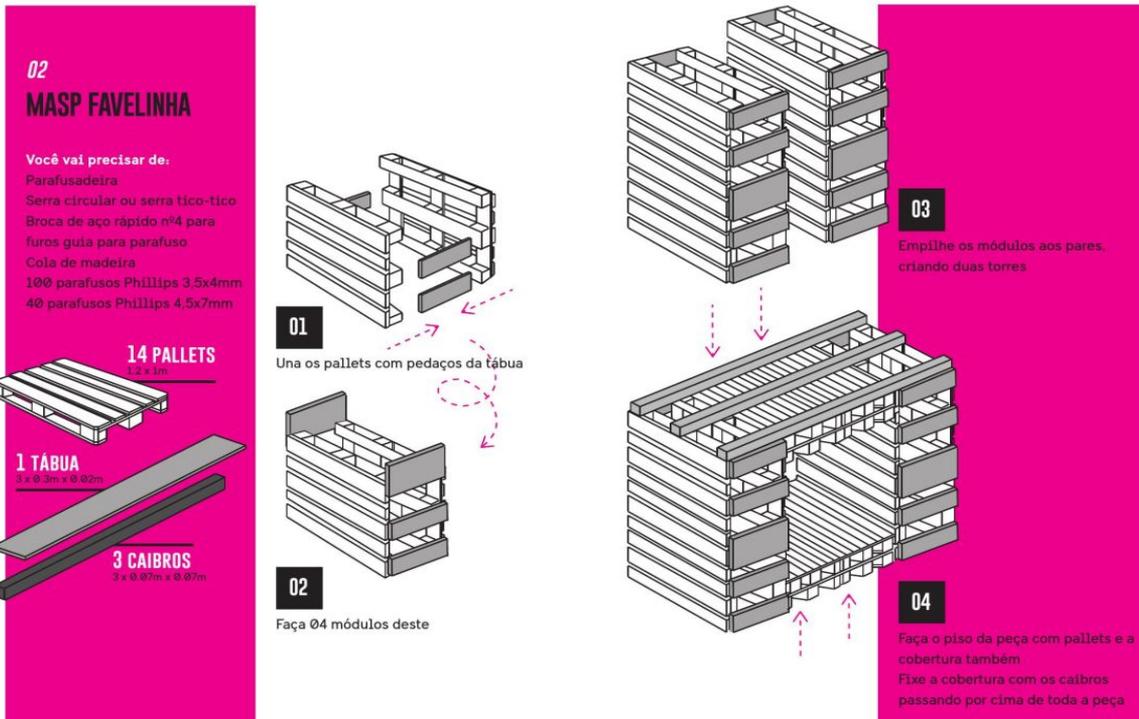
20,000 people passing through every day to reach buses, a subway station or bike lanes. The challenge was to transform the space into a destination.

In a small group consisting mostly of nearby residents, their friends and acquaintances, and urban activists, we decided to occupy the space every Friday after 6pm to encourage passers-by to imagine what the space could be.

We decided to use urban furniture to accomplish the change. In the first weeks we placed beach furniture into the space - chairs, mats, umbrellas cushions – and soon it became clear that our presence could be established. At the same time we could, with the collective construction of urban furniture, solve (even if temporarily) the square's inability to support activities. Our idea was that these objects would provide concrete questions that would stimulate users, by interacting with the objects, encouraging them to imagine their own desires for the space might be. On the following Fridays, we turned the square into an open air carpentry workshop, building together with anyone who was inspired to take part in the construction. Painting was also done collectively, and the first benches lasted for months even though they were constructed from recycled pallets.

When we walked through the square, the homeless who helped with the painting would tell us they were “the keepers of the benches”. The day following completion, the furniture started to be used by passers-by, immediately changing the way the space was being used. After our initial constructions, many other generations of furniture, made from pallets, were built in and remained in the square. By observing how the square's occupants were using the furniture, we adapted the furniture to better suit the needs we found. These needs included ease of cleaning, improved ergonomics, and creating furniture that could be easily carried by two people for easy relocation.

The most technically advanced designs that best suited our local needs were documented in [DIWO manuals](#). These open source manuals were made available for free to the public online on the project's website: largodabatata.com.br



How-to manual for building the piece titled MASP FAVELINHA, available at largodabatata.com.br

Almost three years after we first started our weekly visits to Largo da Batata, its social and cultural dynamics have been deeply changed. The space has become a local reference for a self-managed, open air cultural center, where grassroots suggestions are welcome and have a space for experimentation. There are now more than 12,000 people on the square's facebook page. Our group interviewed users to collect data about the use and impact of the urban furniture. The result showed that the structures built were made and used both by homeless people and by executives that work nearby.

The co-created furniture was essential for the development of a local sense of community and served as a catalyst for other collective activities. This project fueled the process leading to the Government installing permanent furniture.

Some outputs of the collectively built urban furniture in Largo da Batata

- Co-creation and maintenance by the users, activating the process of creating a community linked to the square.
- Development of a sense of belonging.
- Support for independent cultural activities on the square.
- Identification of the square as a laboratory for civil society bottom-up experiments
- Opening a channel of dialogue with the municipality about public space shared management and participation, bypassing many of the typical bureaucratic and slow moving processes.
- Creation of the Instituto A Cidade Precisa de Você (The City Needs You) and it's makerspace, development of the BATATALAB project.
- Creation of use cases that informed the urban furniture developed by the Municipality that is in the process of installation.
- Mobilization of São Paulo's citizens and the local media to pressure the Municipality to invest in improving the square.

"The issue of temporary use transcends itself. It is the antithesis of the monetary urban development of cities. To put it hyperbolically: the urban production of financial markets is exclusively based on the organization of money flows that are completely uncoupled from issues concerning the use of urban space. Conversely, temporary use is urban development without financial means that is solely based on the use of urban space. It can be understood as a particularly striking example, the prototype of a new urban practice conceptualized in more universal terms.

Focussing on São Paulo's public spaces we can detect various dilemmas in the development of these spaces.

informal structures vs. official communication

Initiatives and neighbourhood groups are often selforganized without hierarchies and formal organization patterns. For the municipality and planning authority this kind of non-formalized organisation seems to be a difficult counterpart, especially in terms of communication. In the worst case, the administration will refuse to communicate with the group, if there is no responsible representative.

construction vs. responsibility

The construction of street furniture is mostly done in hands-on workshops by initiatives in a participatory process with the neighbours. There is no official construction company which gives a guarantee on the construction and its safeness. The implementation and use of the furniture is more or less in a legal limbo.

political change vs. development of movement

There is still no legal right or planning instrument to make public spaces usable through additional functions or furniture. So this kind of development of public spaces depends strongly on the „good will“ of the present city government or municipality.

Melanie Humann, Urban Catalyst Studio

São Paulo, 2016

The success of this group in Largo da Batata gave rise in 2015 to a collective of people determined to expand this method of activating public spaces and to research other shared management methods of common urban space.

With this intent an association was founded, an NGO called [Instituto A Cidade Precisa de Você](#) (The City Needs You Institute).

The intent of the actions in Largo da Batata was not to change only that specific territory, but to propose another culture of use in the public spaces of the city; a use that would be more democratic and fair. The people who initiated the NGO did so for numerous reasons. To replicate learnings from Largo da Batata, increasing impact by implementing projects in others parts of the city and the country. To establish a formal representation in city councils was also a goal, increasing the impact of the group's actions and proposals and bringing the issues to broader decision-making spheres. The creation of an NGO that promotes the shared-management concept born from a the local public space initiative was encouraged by the uncertainty of the local political situation. While grassroots initiatives flourish, led by citizens and innovators, city makers who design and produce public spaces on a daily basis taking account of re-use and social innovation, efforts are hampered by the unstable global and local political contexts. We cannot take for granted the continuity of any progress or advancements we have made, whether those advancements are informal agreements or even new public policies. Due to this uncertainty, the formalization of an NGO seems helpful for the success of civil society advocacy.

The co-creation of communal urban furniture and the research in shared management are the main branches focuses of the Institute. We are dedicated to researching and prototyping urban furniture, enabling a public creative process. This incorporates the first communitarian desires to its final production, analyzing both the process and its end-use, for further collective ideation of what is best for the place and its users. Furthermore, we test possible ways to make the caring for this furniture also communal, to ensure its continuity to the applicable extent for both the people and location. We have built furniture in several different cities in Brazil and in mainly in public spaces in São Paulo.

How could our experience of temporary urban furniture in Largo da Batata become more permanent? From our research, we know what is urgently needed: comfort, shade, and playfulness. In 2015 an open call, called BATATALAB, was made for two structures. One with the theme of shade, the other with the theme of playfulness. These two ideas were to be chosen collectively by a group composed of users, experts, government representatives and activists. The ideas were developed by the idea's creators together with this group. For the comfort theme, the decision was made to develop urban furniture with the group that was already involved in the construction of the temporary structures.



Collective building process of the comfort structure on site - day / Image: Rachel Schein



Collective building process of the comfort structure on site - night / Image: Rachel Schein



Comfort urban furniture / Image: Jeorge Simas



Shade urban furniture / Image: Rogerio Canella



Playful urban furniture / Image: Roberto Canella

The [BATATALAB](#) urban furniture was collectively made (the project developing the three structures was collective, as well as a portion of its construction) and privately sponsored, with the intent to donate the furniture to the Municipality. When the structures were finally ready, the Municipality stated that they would not have the capacity to provide maintenance. This created a question if the Municipality can't maintain the furniture on its own, maybe it could with civil society collaboration. Since installation one year ago, we have been in dialog with the Municipality to develop a suitable model of shared management. Meanwhile we are collaborating informally between A Cidade Precisa de Você, a private sponsor, the square's user community, activists and the Government to maintain the structures.

The world is witnessing the growth of citizens engaging in public space creation practices. This is driven by current limitations to publicly funded projects. A process of transformation and innovation in approaches to the design, production and management of public space is ongoing. However, groups that operate using open-source tactics should not necessarily be interpreted as expressions of 'anti-statism'. They should instead be interpreted as methods beneficial and useful to public authorities. Public space is contested, the city inhabitants have different needs and ideas how it should be used, including the maintenance responsibility and the democratization of its use. The Government therefore has an important role

mediating these expectations towards a fair alternative, rather than imposing their own solution based on technical subsidies. Once the public space is appropriated by the population, becoming an urban common, it is time to implement a governance model. Models of shared management of public spaces and their elements are therefore a central theme of the NGO research.

We conduct research on street furniture as a potential tool for dialogue and participation. The importance of community-developed urban furniture and its multiple possibilities of evolution push us to think about how this narrative can be explored. Linking prototypes to public policies is one of the challenges that the Institute faces. Creating and developing possible models of shared management from a bottom up processes is our focus.

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