A PERCEPTION OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM, A RAPPROCHEMENT WITH TEACHING AMONG POPULAR CLASSES

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WE USUALLY THINK IT IS EASIER TO OPPOSE A LIFE MOVEMENT THAN TO FOLLOW ONE’S LIFE MOVEMENT

(Pedag. Coord.)
For that purpose, I present a four-year experience (from 1986 to 1990) with a group of children and teenagers who dwell in a shantytown called Morro do Preventório, in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro.

My reflections refer to participation and perception and to the possibility of comprehending the environment construed as language.
The unfoldings resulting from the aftermentioned experience were possible thanks to a characteristic common to most Brazilian children: from a very early age, they watch and participate in the construction of their milieu.

Since they live in the slums and peripheries, they have no other way of housing but self-construction.
The approach between the architect/urbanist and this child is twofold. First, the **drawing**, used as an instrument by the first, is a rather accessible way of expression to the latter, and the **city**, our object of study, is a source of experience and learning to the child.
The Rectory of the **University Federal Fluminense** had already suggested to the various centres to integrate the **Extension** in its projects, aiming to give the population alternative and innovative scientific resources developed by the departments.
The architecture course accepted the challenge of integrating the extension to teaching and research and tried to contextualize the development of the students’ projects (through the discipline of low-income housing) according to the realities of the studied urban scenes.

The developed activities were influenced by the participative movements current.
Unlike the adults, who were more unwilling to draw and had little hope of getting into action, the children showed great skill for spatial learning and its graphical representations.

For someone who had been dealing with participative processes and had seen their strong link with communication and education, working with children brought a new dimension, permitting to exercise this triple relation in a more complete way than with the adults.
With a 3,50 x 2,50 m copy of the base-map of the Morro and after some classroom animations, the children were encouraged to talk about the route to their houses.

We would climb the Morro according to their orientation. When we were by the rocks, conversation would linger and they felt more at ease to talk.

Wagner, who could not read from his notebook, showed me how to build a house very clearly:

the lines of the foundation, the use of level and lead line, iron and stirrups, the mixture of cement, sand and crushed rock, the technique to lay the bricks, roofing tiles and scantlings.

Precise terms and meanings, with which fresh architecture students have little familiarity.
While the reading of primers proved to be something very remote from any attribution of meaning, the reading of the city and its perception, practiced everyday, was something to which they showed great aptitude. Thus, having the city as an interlocutor, our dialogue began.
This phase was essential in order to feel the potential of an effort that could be developed with children and teenagers, considering their freedom of locomotion, their permanently under-construction houses, their active participation in building the houses, their attentive listening to older people and the accumulation of responsibility they have to face from an early age.

From that point on, my working plan foresaw successive steps which implied the familiarization of each child with project dynamics, aiming to encourage expression and the search of a vocabulary and images of their urban experience.

In order to approximate architecture and urbanism to the basic school level, the construed space would be adopted as a reference to the exercise of talking and reading, generating elements to support the teaching of literacy, mathematics, arts and, mainly, in the language area.
The construction of an effort in education cannot be compared to the elaboration of a building schedule. There are intermediate phases that are impossible to ignore and many setbacks that are part of the process.

THERE WOULD NOT BE ANY KIND OF ACTIVITY IF, FIRST, THE RELATIONSHIPS ON A PERSONAL LEVEL AND THE USE OF SPACE HAD NOT BEEN EXPLORED.

The challenge in the creation of a working environment was to find balance and peace in the room. In this initial phase, relating was extremely difficult; children would hold on to me, as if I would not be coming back the next day. There was a lot of stealing and also a lot of verbal and physical aggression, a lot of energy to be worked on.
The Portuguese language teacher elaborated an action plan, an idea of the educational process which implied the relationship between the action of the educator and the life history, interests and themes introduced by the group while the activities were under way.

It was conceived with a broader focus, based on language and trying to establish communication and dialogue through self-identification and self-expression.

Its structure was conceived based on the notion of generative themes, as correlated subthemes, an idea of the educational process which implied the relationship between the action of the educator and the life history, interests and themes introduced by the group while the activities were under way.
We tried to master the new terms and the topological notions, allowing to move on with the external works.

...recognizing the elements in the room; the emergence of figures; the interpretation of forms, the action upon them and its transformation in games.
Photography was an instrument used until the end, a common resource in the architectural work itself.

First, an easy-to-use automatic camera, accessible to each and everyone: from assembling, disassembling and loading the films, everyone handled it and took pictures.

As the pictures were developed, the children noticed factors such as distance, light and shadow.
Differentiated activities were encouraged and in the room one could play, listen to music, stay in groups, alone or study. However, when the activities were initiated, **we collectively defined some rules**: try to persist when facing difficulties, stick to the exercises, try to verbalize any uneasiness, notice the game of living together.

This was the greatest challenge until the conclusion of the work.
Small wooden stages were built simultaneously to the manufacturing of the model, in order to allow each child to become closer to those miniaturized spaces.

For the children, it was the visualization of a product. Children who, otherwise, quickly tear their drawings, hide their notebooks and are ashamed of their handwriting.
To be inside...

From where do we get here?
How does the light get in?
Where does the air circulates?

The children started to tear the newspapers, creating windows, passages and small squares.
1:1 Scale

It was encouraged the structure of planning in terms of thinking, wanting, executing and enjoying.

For the work, it was important for the children to notice that what was discussed in the classroom was effectively happening.
When groups from different shifts met, fighting and confrontation for any reason were common. But, as the "city" was being built in the inner court, the afternoon shift could not impossibilize the work from the morning shift and vice versa, on penalty of the "city" not happening.
At times, they reproduced what they knew about living in the Morro, at other times, they lived a complete fantasy.

The activities were not rapidly exhausted and, since the children had already incorporated the act of building in their daily lives, many times in a pleasant and playful way, this latent fact was simply activated.
Perceptive studies, when dealt with from an early age in the schools, can support the educational process as a whole. They allow the construction of a stage, a composition that translates the image of a group or community and their relationships with space.
The Childrens´Life History and the Mental Maps
Creating situations in which the children were encouraged to talk and to listen to each other

The creation of the maps mobilized them, unlike the copied exercises, mechanically executed by the child and whose result is identical to everyone; **the cognitive maps allow for free expression, the emergence of difference and novelty.**

The use of writing was encourage. When we came back from our outings, we always produced reports using the elements of our conversations in the Morro.

We increasingly talked about Preventório and the work with the maps allowed for an individual and a collective time, one helping the other.
It is not difficult to see that the outside is the great source of leisure, work and learning for them.

You "look" around and you also "see" around

( Pedag. Plan )

...Where do they go by themselves?
Where do they go with someone else?
Where do they like to go?
The Morro is only for shantytown dwellers?
We began talking about laws, codes, taxes. Land has a price…

We talked about the movement of people in the city, about migrations: "I came from the waterfall.", "My brother has moved to cavalão" or "My grandmother has always lived here."
After these excursions to the close-by neighborhoods, our conversations took place at the top of the hills, in Preventório or in a city Park from where one can see Niterói, the whole Guanabara Bay, Rio, the oceanic beaches and its lagoons.

Everything is part of a city that, with its spaces, allows for a comprehensive study, stories, relationships, groups, movements, etc.
The familiarization with a space that is not feared and the ample possibility of movement allowed for fluency in the

We read the city and its organization, the differences between where they lived and other neighborhoods; the readings produced doubts and questions.
In the process, a constant interchange with the children was assured, as we listened to what they knew and challenged them with problems.

There was a lot of movement, comings and goings. Every piece of information offered aimed to make the children realize a problem manifested by the city's image.
In the classroom walls, we created a big mural of the surroundings.

Photos, drawings and information were added, stuffing the studied area, until then just a map contour. What did we learn about the city? What complements the history of Preventório?
Observing, registering and projecting.

One knew that, from those drawings, other works would sprout.

One did not tear or lose what one saw.
The spatial information in the Morro reveal the construction phases, a result of continuous building and adaptations by the residents; one can see a great deal of "ground plans" and "models".
At that point, we already knew many characters of our story:
the immigrant who came to the big city and started to plant on the top of Preventório; if it was previously a forest, it also had Indians; if there were colonizers, they were Frenchmen and Portuguese; if it was once a cemetery, there surely would be corpses...
Many things had been seen and learned and could serve as basis to understand the place and its history, for the children and the community.
“Thinking about the road already taken”

(Pedagogical plan)

The collective production of a book entitled .....
The characters described by the residents "came back to earth" through photographic registers which were altered and dramatized by the children.
The book was, again, an attempt to reduce the distance between the children and writing, a possibility to meaningfully and joyfully use the written register.

Undoubtedly, the literate children would go further, but that did not stop the smaller ones from contributing with their sun, their stars, their collages and their scribblings.
The process of elaborating the book was an exercise which allowed the approach of many important aspects such as:

- A register for the community, recovering and reconstructing (through the elders’ accounts), the occupation phases of the Morro.

- The valorization of the object book as a source of knowledge, understanding it as something to be complemented by other books. Children were encouraged to bring all kinds of books, Brazilian history, science, even comic strips...

- The discovery of the history of Preventório, through the reading of fragments of the city itself.

- A new reference of their relationship to writing. It became easier to deal with the written register, replacing fear and the consequent refusal to deal with it, which took place initially.

- An incentive to understand that the child is also a direct participant of his/her own process of building knowledge and owner of values and references of his/her milieu.
It was an exercise of seeing that the transformation of Preventório is linked to (or is the transformation) of the city itself.
Conclusions:

Repercussions to Architecture and Urbanism

- There certainly is a field of action in the basic school level for professionals who deal with the city and it is configured in two basic aspects.

- The first one refers to enriching the child's life by means of the school. This child has a knowledge of his/her own about the act of building, which regards self-construction.

- The role of the architect/educator is to make this knowledge evident in the school space so the child may sees that what he/she knows is in fact knowledge, that he/she can improve it and can access information that are not available and that will surely enhance their knowledge.
The second aspect refers to the improvement of the school work itself.

The architect's role in the basic school is not to "teach architecture to the child".

Architecture would be present in school because this child deals with architecture in his/her daily life.

In that sense, we can say that architecture is a means and not an end; **it is an instrument that generates knowledge, capable of supporting other disciplines.**
Repercussions to the Group of Children

In the individual as well as in the collective space, the children started to produce knowledge in the school space, understood as the project's room.

While verbalizing their knowledge and difficulties, learning to debate, they learned to relate to knowledge in a more peaceful way, which was clear from the relaxing atmosphere in the room.

As to the environmental issues (child-knowledge relationship), the discussed themes, based on the approach of the Morro do Preventório and its surroundings, were intense, capturing its representations and bringing them to the classroom, transforming them in object of knowledge in the project.

The level of concentration and the ability to elaborate depicted by the children in their productions were significant.
The Child from Popular Classes, Environment and Education

Not much is said about the city, about the constructed environment, which is so close. The city became symbolically negative, not only for its precarious infrastructure but also for the lack of freedom to walk around it, to possess it.

It became distant, seen from car windows on the way to school, shoppings and condos. For these children, the streets are associated with violence.

While I worked with the children from popular classes, that same model was presented. When I mentioned the word environment, they started to talk about "that thing with the ozone layer", the killing of alligators etc. But, for these children, the relationship to the city and the construed environment in which we live is very different.

They experience the outside very intensely. Although it may inspire fear, it is outside that they find leisure, their chances of survival and learning.
Studies related to children who go to their residential buildings playgrounds, refer to the generalized fear among them and their families in relation to the streets and the consequent restriction of the freedom to come and go.

In these studies, the playground children presented rather fragmented and disarticulated drawings of their neighborhood. The cognitive maps obtained in Morro do Preventório and the surrounding neighborhoods, were articulate and, otherwise, filled with references that oriented the children. That has to do with territorial possession, with walking around the city and orienting oneself by its landmarks.

One has to attempt to know the dimension of this appropriation/expropriation of the city.
The working potential that architecture and urbanism have with children and teenagers from the popular classes is immense; it is a great engagement seen by the children with enormous pleasure and propriety.
Hopefully, the courses which train professionals who work with the city will approximate their experimentation and reflections with the basic schools, amplifying the benefits to the environment and its users.