

Urban inscriptions: A discipline in the horizon of citizenship

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Abstract

We take into consideration the role of São Paulo city hall's public policies to reflect on the importance of integrating urban inscriptions in Higher Education disciplines in Brazil. According to the historical summary presented, the pendulum swing of rejection and acceptance by the mayors of São Paulo generates avoidable costs and the exclusion of an institutional approach regarding urban inscriptions practices. In order to have efficient public policies, we observed that the academic inclusion of themes specifically linked to urban inscriptions might result in support of professions that directly interact with the practices (Architecture, Urbanism, Arts, etc.); it can also increase the diffusion of knowledge in Basic Education, and highlight the need to institutionally integrating the urban inscriptions into the dynamics of cities and the citizenship formation.

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1. Public power in São Paulo and the urban inscriptions

The controversies between the city hall and the taggers in São Paulo replicate conflicts that have marked the history of the urban inscriptions. We use the expression “urban inscriptions” to define in an unbiased manner these urban artistic practices such as painting, installation, performance, etc., without highlighting any practice specifically – as it already happens in our traditional dichotomy graffiti vs. *pixação* (Correa, 2016).

If we consider Correa's proposal (2016) about the recent origin of urban inscriptions - the cases of May 1968 in Paris and the 1970s in New York - we will see that there have always been conflicts between the government and some urban inscription practices, sometimes with the citizens' applauses, sometimes with their boos. In Paris, RATP and SNCF¹ (local public transport authorities) along with the city government created a file system to catalogue images, names and places in order to relate the inscriptions to their authors and, consequently, prosecute those who were responsible for them, by punishing them with heavy fines

and arrests. In New York, Mayor John Lindsay (1966-1973) spared no effort to erase graffiti from subways. Counting on the media collaboration, his anti-graffiti policy, which consisted of fines, arrests, advertising campaigns and increased security in garages and subway stations, spent 10 million dollars along 1972. Despite of it, the city hall did not reach even 50% reduction in graffiti on the subway (Castleman, 2012). Nevertheless, these emblematic cases of the public power struggle against urban inscriptions with low efficiency considering the value-for-money of the investments, did not set an example for our mayors in São Paulo (Ribeiro, 2005).

At the end of the military dictatorship, the Tupinãodá group (Beside Colors, 2016) began its urban interventions in the city of São Paulo, with the inescapable repression of the regime on their backs. Jânio Quadros' tenure (1986-1988), which was already set in a political “democratic” phase in Brazil, followed the same example by criminalizing inscriptions, sweeping them away with truculence. Besides, it is worth remembering his famous quote regarding the pioneering graffiti by Juneca and Bilão (Estadão, 2017): “Let's see if you tag the jail. They will be prosecuted with the utmost diligence”.

1 - Respectively, *Régie autonome des transports parisiens* e *Société nationale des chemins de fer français*.

Only within Luiza Erundina's tenure (1989-1992), the urban inscriptions began to have a different treatment. During this period, the so-called graffiti, enjoying its status as urban art, was opposed to *pixação* and chosen as its antidote. Furthermore, graffiti workshops were created to take *pixadores* out of crime and turn them into graffiti artists, as well as works and places of urban inscriptions were recognized and valued, having as a good example the "hole" of the Paulista Avenue (Complexo Viário José Roberto Fanganiello Melhem).

The duality between Jânio/Erundina returns in the 21st century: new politicians, old politics. Mayor Gilberto Kassab (2006-2012) with the "Clean City" law resumed the clash with urban artists, documented in the film "Gray City" (2013), while Mayor Fernando Haddad (2013-2016) included urban inscriptions in the city public policies, by valuing, mainly, the urban art genre (Beside Colors, 2016) - already established in the art market - without overlooking other practices integration such as graffiti and *grapixo* (Correa, 2016). In the sequence, Mayor João Doria (2017-2018) took office, whose administration was more aligned with the policies of Jânio and Kassab, generating great controversy due to the dissonance in the treatment of urban inscriptions concerning the previous administration.

For instance, Haddad's government implemented a project to open the walls of 23 de Maio Avenue, in São Paulo, for urban inscriptions, which turned more than 3 kilometers of the avenue into an open-air museum, stimulating tourism in the city. In the following administration, Doria deleted the inscriptions on 23 de Maio Avenue, replacing them with vertical gardens on the account of a sustainability agenda. Also, it is noteworthy that, in exchange for the inscriptions deletion on 23 de Maio Avenue, the government of Doria and Bruno Covas (2018-2020), vice mayor who took office after Doria left to ran for the position of governor of the State of São Paulo in 2018-2019, proposed the creation of a "graffitidrome", a space for urban inscriptions for the exclusive and authorized practice in the city - providing more debates about the transgressive nature of urban inscriptions, and their relationship with the city hall (Editorial Diário Zona Norte, 2017). The characteristic public policy dispute over urban inscriptions in São Paulo won another case in which, each term, a significant part of the city's resources was destined to strengthen the practice or to remove it.

The overview of the urban inscriptions approach by public institutions shows a simplistic division - either the sublime or the grotesque - of a complex artistic-social movement. What started with doodles on wagons and political phrases on the university walls has developed into the tags, which are very close to our *pixação*, graffiti, with its diversified use of colors and letters, the urban art, with its variety of technical support and improvement, and 3D graffiti, *grapixo*, at last, in a multiplicity of semiotic practices (Fontanille, 2008) that survived a hostile context, innovated and established themselves over the decades.

The famous train graffiti and cool spots in New York were fought and considered a crime back in their days (Style Wars, 1984). Its absorption by the art market contributed to the recognition and social valorization, taking graffiti to museums and art galleries. This example seems to be repeating in Brazil because despite being marginalized and structured in a very different way from New York graffiti, a field linked to urban art is establishing here. *Pixos* made on canvas reshape the urban inscriptions iconography, and if history repeats itself, the grotesque becomes sublime, again.

Thus, it is necessary to reflect on urban inscriptions beyond personal taste, whether by "good citizens" or by badly or well-intentioned politicians. Favoring the inclusion of this practice in academic formation through disciplines, for instance, can be the beginning of a process to expand knowledge about the issues that imply urban inscriptions and the formation of an agenda in the public debate.

2. Educate to avoid repetition

By briefly analyzing the history of São Paulo city hall management on urban inscriptions and identifying in this pendulum swing an issue more linked to Party strategies (once being against or in favor makes representatives more conservative or more progressive to their voters), than a view of institutional policies (transversal to the mandates); we sought to reflect on the role that education can play in deepening knowledge and the formation of public opinion regarding urban inscriptions.

Consequently, the urban inscriptions inclusion as a discipline in Higher Education, for example, could contribute to the beginning of a greater insertion of this practice in

the agenda of our society. Due to its complexity, urban inscriptions could integrate the curriculum in the areas of Architecture and Urbanism, Visual Arts, Art History, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Sciences, Language Sciences, among others, expanding their presence beyond research groups or of individual researches, especially in Graduate Programs, to be an essential topic in the academic education of several professionals.

As a result of this curricular integration, new perspectives would be obtained, especially in works that directly “face” urban inscriptions in their making, such as Architecture, Urbanism, Civil Engineering, Interior and Exterior Design, and the Arts. Thus, the awareness about the urban inscription existence by these professionals could generate new forms of dialogue with the practice, perhaps, with less social conflicts. Furthermore, the discipline institutionalization in Higher Education implies an unfolding in Basic Education through teaching degrees, for example.

Therefore, themes of public space use brought by urban inscriptions would enter into citizen formation as well as the approach of inscriptions as an object of study would provide a consolidation of more democratic debate about practices that are present in the cities. Furthermore, it would be more unlikely that political opinions would impact, with public resources, this artistic-social dynamic of Brazilian cities.

3. Final Remarks

Hence, it is necessary to understand that these value judgments around urban inscriptions are volatile because they are “dated”; it suffices to look at the historical transformation of this movement. Also, it is necessary to establish public policies with the support of those who have relationships with this urban practice. One of the ways to guarantee the “place in the sun” would be to create an institutional space, via academic disciplines, in the formation of varied careers - because one must have an interdisciplinary perspective, so he or she does not reduce the phenomenon excessively. Nonetheless, this process of disciplinary insertion and its repercussion in the labor market, in Education, in the formation of public opinion, namely, in the agenda of society, is something slow and optimistic. As it has been shown, it would not be the first challenge that urban inscriptions have faced. The practice has adapted to countless social adversities and has remained steady throughout its history,

expanding its place in culture. Perhaps, this time, the space to be occupied is in the curriculum and not on the walls: the transgression becomes less physical and more symbolic.

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