

# THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

## SPONTANEOUS VOIDS Unsolicited Urbanism and Secondary Economies

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## Design & Build Brazil



## SPONTANEOUS VOIDS Unsolicited Urbanism and Secondary Economies

### Operational Context

This project is the result of a 24-hour collaboration between CAMPO and OKRA architects. Both offices were invited to develop a project for the Lapa district in Rio de Janeiro as part of a workshop organized by the Netherlands Institute of Architecture (NAi) and Columbia University's Studio-X. The scope of the workshop dealt with a peculiar strategy for design activism called 'unsolicited architecture', which we further developed as 'unsolicited urbanism'.

The term 'unsolicited architecture' was coined by Ole Bouman in his homonymous article written for Volume magazine in 2008. In summary, the idea behind this term is that architects should have more pro-active standings toward the contexts where they operate. However, the scope of this term does not incorporate any kind of uncommissioned projects. Bouman's concept dwells on the idea that 'unsolicited architecture' (or urbanism in this specific example)

takes place whenever a disaster occurs and need immediate assistance, or when a veiled potential is uncovered. What would be the case if a situation arises where these two approaches apply? How does one operate in a scenario where the transition from a traditional lifestyle is rapidly forced to abide to a free market-driven logic needs to be mediated? The 'spontaneous voids' project engages on this kind of mediation.

### City Branding or Lapa = Las Vegas (?)

In recent years, the Lapa district – known for its bohemian and rather dodgy lifestyle – has been undergoing a fast (and forced) revitalization process, which is not being planned accordingly. Powerful market forces are keen to turn Lapa into its "poster child" by incorporating its informal and rather uncontrolled nature to a sort of 'marketing' logic. Just like the creation of a brand.

Holding an extremely informal character, Lapa became the symbol for a kind of nighttime lifestyle that is profoundly 'carioca' and also somehow chaotic (carioca = term that designates everything that





is originally from Rio). The image of the 'carioca' bohemian (the so-called 'malandro') arises as metonymy of Lapa's social and cultural contexts. The district's urban setting with a rich, but rather decrepit, eclectic architecture is the physical background for an extremely strong and relevant symbolism for the city.

The "carioca's lifestyle" is defined by a very strong beach culture during the day, while at night it is represented by the bohemian ambience found in Lapa. Considering the possibilities of mercantilization of this bohemian and informal lifestyle and the economic revitalization of the neighborhood, there was a quick response of different economic agents

on taking advantage of this opportunity. Today, bars, restaurants and nightclubs convert this lifestyle into something artificial, slowly eliminating one of the best features of the area: its ability for adaptation and its informal performance.

### A Different Kind of Gentrification

In this context, as witnesses of the everyday life in the neighborhood, it is not easy to accept the integral transformation of a characteristic lifestyle, which generated its identity, into an underdone and artificial fac-símile. As part of a broader process of regeneration of the area, we understand that Lapa will experience an intense period of gentrification, in which we take part marginally. On the 24 hours



during the development of this project, we asked ourselves how could be possible to empower the local culture while establishing ways for its survival.

How to facilitate spontaneous meetings? Which are the places able to support the parallel economies in Lapa? Where could the neighborhood offer a space of non-restrict use? How to allow the area to have a full 24h cycle, instead of having only night hour peaks of use? All those questions brought together a group of immediate urban actions, which we call spontaneous voids.

### Secondary Economies

A major part of Lapa's local economy is based

**LAPA'S EMPTY STREETS IN DAYTIME**



on diverse cycles of informal street commerce (performed by the so-called 'camelôs', or street vendors). The bohemian vigor of Lapa's streets depend on the commercial and leisure provided by streets vendors selling liquor, food, and local merchandise additionally to those being sold in regular bars, restaurants and shops. This immaterial infrastructure allows street life to be continuously boosted, especially in the evenings. Performing in synchronism to regular commerce, but still retaining a certain level of para-legality, street vendors compose a kind of secondary economy, extremely dynamic and adaptable.

Because of the swarm nature of this commerce, it requires a rather complex logistical preparation for both food preparation and storage. The preparation of these logistics takes place locally in Lapa in daytime, when street vendors spend the whole day in organizing themselves for intensive public engagement as soon as the sun goes down.

**Upper Floors and Urban Life Cycles**

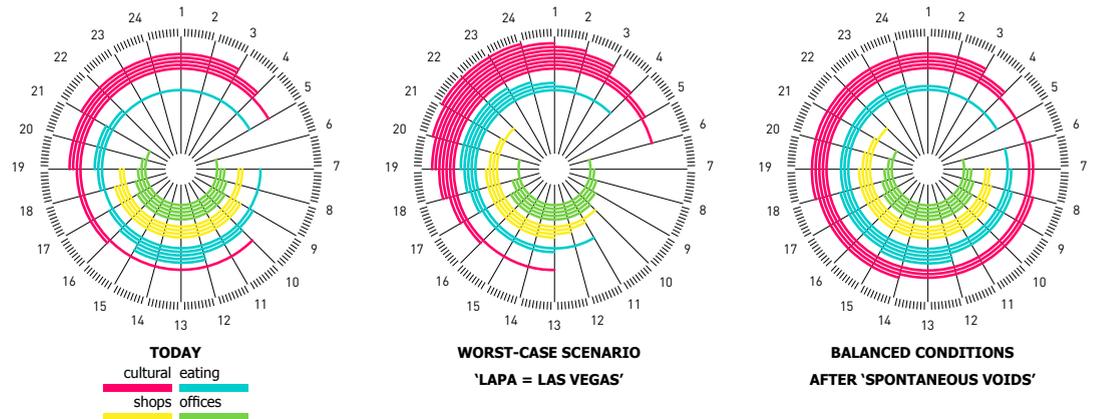
Beside Lapa's the bohemian qualities, it is one of the best preserved historical neighborhoods in central

Rio. Its rich – yet derelict – heritage of late 18th-century eclectic architecture is the physical scenario for the Lapa brand, that tries to link itself to an image construct of what a traditional carioca nightlife would be like.

Most of Lapa's eclectic architecture is made up of 3 to 4-story houses of apartment buildings that were not designed to have commercial units in their first floors. Contradictorily, those are the most sought over buildings for the establishment of chain bars and restaurants, possibly due their will to build a fake image of tradition.

This kind of occupation resulted in another big problem for the neighborhood, empty upper floors. Original access to the upper floors of Lapa's historical buildings was made via narrow staircases that reached the ground floor through the buildings first floors. The new occupation of these buildings by bars and restaurants on their first and second floors (at the latest) block access to their remaining upper floors, which remain empty or just partially occupied by storage.

**URBAN ACTIVITIES - 24-HOUR CYCLE IN LAPA**



This situation causes disruptions in the patterns of urban life cycles in Lapa. Because most of the restaurants are not open in daytime, there is a huge gap of urban usage in Lapa that is only filled in evenings. Throughout most of the day, Lapa is subject to a paradoxical process of urban emptiness. It is full of commercial infrastructure that contributes partially to the intensification of life in the neighborhood. What is the use of a busy nightlife if local populations are unable to profit from the economical developments that it is bringing?

### The Voids of Lapa

Throughout the analysis of the neighborhood, we realized that there are innumerable empty sites, being the result of the natural degradation of historical buildings, as well as of incomplete urban transformations. However, those voids do not necessarily represent gaps in the cycle of activities of the area, but serve as a safe port for important formal and informal activities. They are parking lots that also shelter small factories for the construction of street vending carts; gas stations that also functions as sports courts; among many other non catalogued examples.

Our main strategy was the maintenance of those spaces effectively as urban voids with unrestricted access. Their current activities would not, in a first moment, give place to new functions, yet they would be reinforced and optimized through temporary structures. As an example, we chose one of those voids to present different sceneries of this new occupation, with a generic hypothesis of intervention.

### Cultural Reserves

One of our intentions voids was to establish the voids as reserves of the authentic culture that coined Lapa's identity while providing local population with the tools to engage on resisting the inevitable market

forces hovering the neighborhood. We embraced the analogy of a nature reserve in literal terms when applying to the 'spontaneous voids' concept. The main idea behind it was to create a clearly defined territory that could be freely used and managed by their current occupants and users.

This strategy aims at retarding the evil effects of the intensification of Lapa's occupation by chain bars and restaurants by empowering a part of society that would have no voice in this process otherwise. This would allow the gradual adaptation of Lapa's secondary economies to the completely new circumstances brought by the artificial environment being set up.

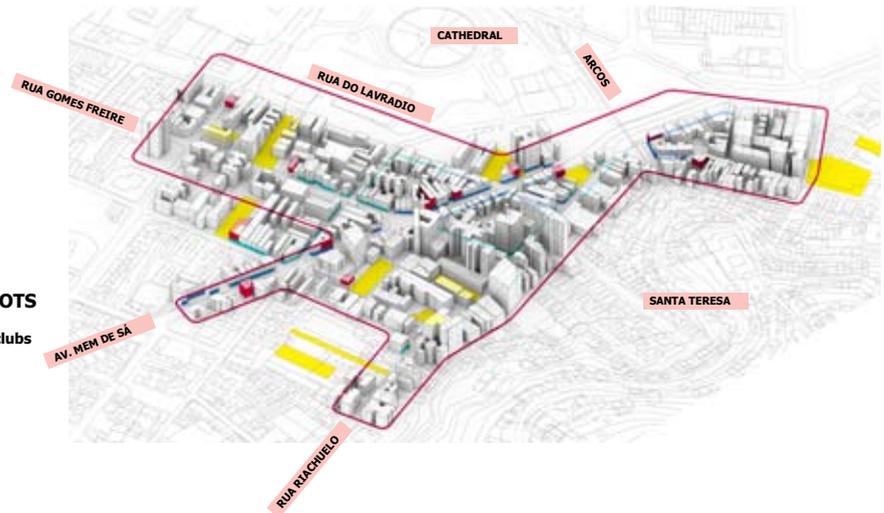
The reserves would be able to operate with the implementation of light steel structures that could be set up to house (and amplify) current local activities while creating new urban surfaces and access to other levels. We were able to identify – even in an extremely short period of time – that the current secondary economies taking place in

LAPA'S SECONDARY ECONOMIES



### STREET-LEVEL URBAN ACTIVITIES & VACANT LOTS

- restaurants / bars / clubs
- local commerce
- empty upper floors
- empty / vacant lots





EXPERIMENTAL SITE TODAY



EXPERIMENTAL SITE POST-OCCUPATION

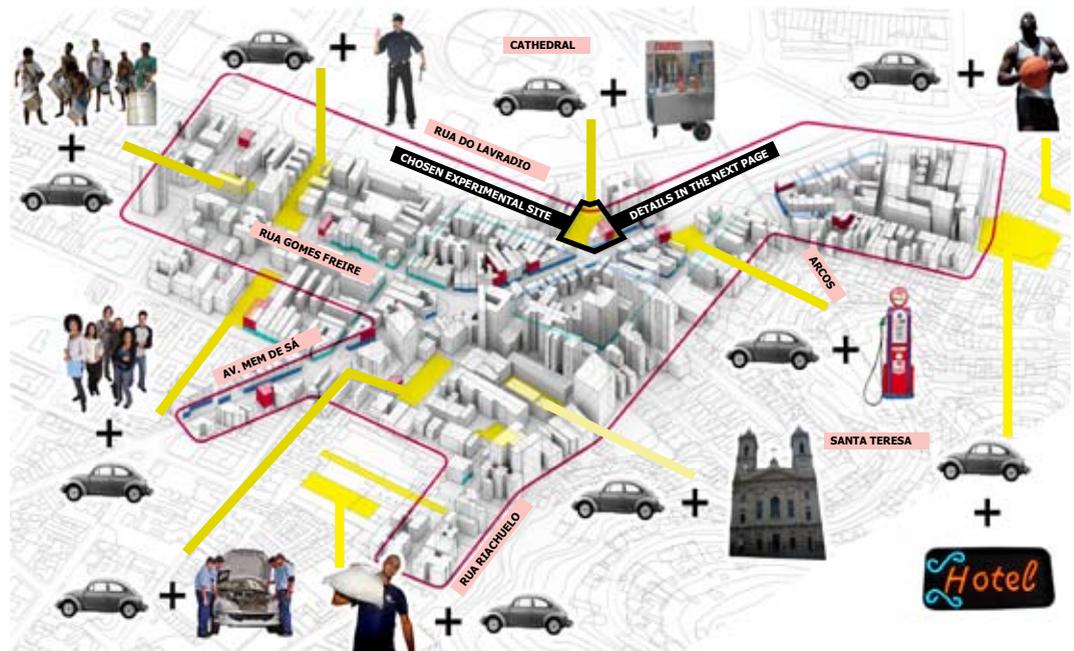
the voids compose a sort of neighborhood network that is able to widely activate Lapa's street life even in times of the day traditionally devoid of activities (e.g. daytime). The potent incorporation of the reserves in Lapa's everyday life would protect the neighborhood against immediate threats while laying the foundations for public-oriented interventions in the future.

### Prototypical Future Scenarios

The empty site chosen is situated in the corner of Lavradio Street and Mem de Sá Avenue, where there is a parking lot and a small workshop and repairshop for carts used to sell popcorn, sweet corn and churros. The prototype to be installed on this empty site is composed by a large metallic structure, placed in the edge of the plot, toughing the blind façades of

### SPONTANEOUS VOIDS EXISTING 'JOINT-VENTURES'

- restaurants / bars / clubs
- local commerce
- empty upper floors
- empty / vacant lots





EXPERIMENTAL SITE TODAY

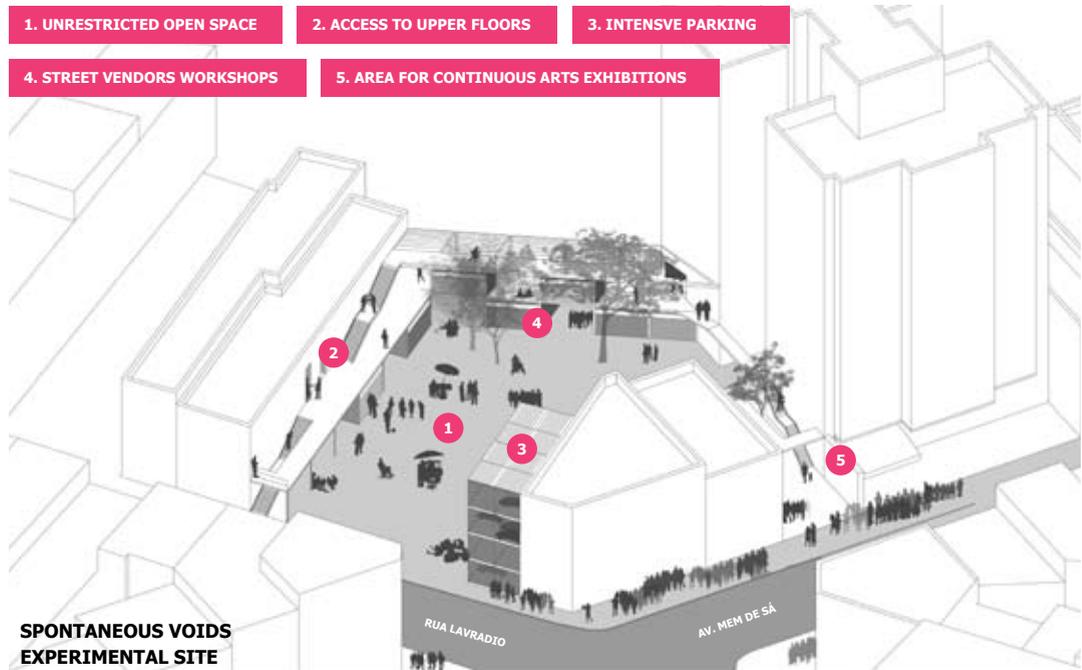


EXPERIMENTAL SITE POST-OCCUPATION

the neighboring buildings. This structure will shelter new workshops for the cart builders, and new places for selling the products, as well as provide access to the upper levels of the neighboring sites, currently empty and inaccessible due to the uses established on their ground floors.

The parking lot will be replaced by a system of vertical parking, extending the number of parking spaces, and releasing the ground level. Surrounding the site, this new structure, composed by elevated walkways, workshops and parking spaces, seeks to activate its empty center, as a space of essentially free use. Empty sites like this one will develop activities that will be transformed throughout the day, balancing the use of Lapa in different hours of the day and night. In the morning and afternoon, activities like small workshops and the access to the upper levels of neighboring historic buildings will guarantee liveliness during day hours, while at night the empty sites will become a great space for performances and casual meetings, free from the control and standardization offered by the bars and restaurants currently installed in the area.

- 1. UNRESTRICTED OPEN SPACE
- 2. ACCESS TO UPPER FLOORS
- 3. INTENSIVE PARKING
- 4. STREET VENDORS WORKSHOPS
- 5. AREA FOR CONTINUOUS ARTS EXHIBITIONS



SPONTANEOUS VOIDS  
EXPERIMENTAL SITE