

## OF URBAN INVISIBILITIES AND DIVERSITIES. Reflections on urban heritage

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*Understanding the city in all its complexity means discovering the urban diversities that inhabit it along with their many political, social and cultural expressions. Urban heritage is the sum of a place's architectural heritage, its surroundings and often intangible cultural elements. But which architectural heritage is privileged? And which types of cultural elements are valued? The "other" heritage must be reclaimed – the one that emanates from urban diversities and realities that are often concealed from view.*

**O**ur age is characterised by the existence of a hegemonic monoculture. Western modernity has actively contributed to contracting reality and making other realities invisible along with the bodies that inhabit them. The result is an epistemological, social, political and cultural blindness that has deprived us of discovering the world's inexhaustible diversity.

This blindness is also evident in the debates on urban heritage – defined as the sum of a place's architectural heritage, surroundings and the often intangible cultural elements that give it value and meaning. But which architectural heritage is privileged? And which types of cultural element are valued? These definitions are not trivial: the configuration and management of urban heritage is part of constructing spatial and socioeconomic hierarchies that privilege certain urban territories and certain social groups.

### **From intangible to invisible urban heritage**

Understanding the multiple ways urban heritage is expressed means understanding the city in all its complexity. Beyond the urban form and the built space (monuments, buildings, public space), the city is a palimpsest of itineraries, flows, memories, identities, expressions and practices that are expressed in a range of ways and various languages (political, social, cultural and artistic). The "lived city" has a metabolism of its own that produces an intangible urban heritage. When this is generated by the creative activity of marginalised communities, it is often less "intangible" than "invisible".

This “other” heritage must be reclaimed. It emanates from urban diversities and invisibilities and flourishes in the experiences of lives and bodies that find in the poetics of the common their means of collective expression, self-affirmation and articulation. The urban space has been especially fertile in this regard. By focusing on popular creative expression whose starting point is its everyday relationship with the urban space, we can see the expressions of communities that emerge spontaneously without great knowledge of the subject or sophisticated means of performing their artistic practices. Such manifestations are simply the result of the need to construct a voice of one’s own and create a sense of community.

### **Subaltern urban art and the construction of the “other” heritage**

In cities, practices of this kind have been particularly strongly manifested through urban art. One of the most important in the history of subaltern urban art is hip hop music, whose origins lie in the constant cultural mergers and hybridisations that took place in the United States in the 1970s among an African-American population fighting for its rights. But hip hop burst the banks of its North American context and spread all over the world (from Senegal and Ghana to Germany and Brazil, among many other examples) to become a sociopolitical tool used by those whose voice goes unheard. Hip hop has been a means of criticising the problems of poverty, precariousness, racial discrimination and police violence that affect populations of African descent, as well as other subordinated communities (Latinos, migrants, the working classes).

### **The aesthetics of the peripheries**

The case of Brazil and particularly São Paulo shows how the dominant view of urban heritage could be broadened. After hip hop reached the country in the mid-1980s a number of artists and groups emerged that self-defined as “poor, black and peripheral”. Then, in the 90s “peripheral literature” appeared, which was strongly influenced by hip hop culture and produced by *favelados* and *faveladas* such as Ferréz and Dinha. This overflow of peripheral creativity culminated shortly afterwards in “*saraus*”, urban counterculture spaces with poetry at their heart. Other artistic disciplines were gradually added to music and literature, such as theatre, dance and cinema, to create a choral setting of subaltern urban diversities.

This amalgam of cultural expressions has come to be known as the “aesthetics of the peripheries” which, thanks to institutional support (especially municipal), has managed to preserve (and continue to feed) the rich memory of peripheral cultural production. These expressions, forged in communities in intimate connection with the territory from which they emerge, find their place of natural expression in the streets, in the squares, in the bars and in the neighbourhoods. It is from this appropriation of the public space that new meanings and a polyphonic urban memory are being built from the bottom up.

This appropriation of public space occurs both physically and symbolically. Physically, because the urban space is filled with new expressions, new meanings and creative moments when rap concerts are organised in the squares, *saraus* in bars and breakdancing takes place in the streets. Here, the appropriation is physical because the bodily presence of the creative subject in the public space influences its configuration, its function and its identity. But appropriation is also symbolic because the territories from which the “aesthetics of the peripheries” emerge (their living conditions, their sociabilities) are crucial in shaping rap lyrics, the verses of peripheral literature and the meanings of a breakdance choreography.

## **The performative nature of subaltern cultural practices**

The physical and symbolic appropriation of the city has contributed to subverting the hegemonic urban cartography, affirming the centrality of the peripheries. This counterhegemonic configuration of the urban space and the narrative associated with it constitutes a good example of the city's social production and the performative nature of the practices developed in it. And it is closely related to the construction of urban cultural heritage. The urban (and, by consequence, its heritage) is configured not only through the city's materiality, but through its symbolic production: through the different discourses that cross the city and, in this process, shape it.

The “aesthetics of the peripheries” is just an example of how the urban heritage of “otherness” is constructed, of those historically marginalised subjects who also resignify and socially construct the environment in which they live. Art must find in the world what its appearance does not provide, said the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski. Urban cultural heritage must account for these invisibilities and recognise the wealth that emanates from the wide amalgam of diversities that inhabit our cities.