

WHATEVER STAYS, FLOWS OR TALKS: IDENTITARY PLACES WITHIN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT¹

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Introduction

Cities are filled with visual and symbolic references, mostly related to the way each individual faces aspects of transiting and living within today's urban environment. Individual or group contexts interfere in the perception of these references as people inhabit and occupy spaces following inherent aspects of their cultural habits, social relationships and even ways of moving from one place to another – which may influence city traffic planning. Somewhere within this context we will find, in lesser or greater scale, imaging representations of places, signals, textures and other forms of the city language, fragments of a broader visual context which cannot be perceived as a whole. Those are leftovers of a daily visual experience, perhaps associated with residues generated by other experiences. Under this aspect, residues are memories.

These social-spatial practices will be considered as the main significance attribute of the city spaces in the context of this paper. Here we will take in consideration the viewpoint of those who transit to, move around or live within the city, which we will freely name “circulating elements”. We do this so we can group within a common designation pedestrians, drivers, tourists, inhabitants and other people with other possible denominations. Also, within the given context, the space of practices we will be referring to is – and solely is – the public urban space.

From this starting point and using the documental and bibliographic research as the methodology for this work, our main objective is the discussion of the relationship within the space and the construction of the identity. We do this by looking throughout the urban environment and the relationship among the circulating elements and the context. These will form what we will call identitary places, meaningful portions of the social space (LEFEBVRE, 2001; DUARTE, 2002), understood from social and historical

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relationships (AUGÉ, 2005), singular and subjective processes of coding and decoding (HALL, 2003), composed by fixed and flowing elements (SANTOS, 2006; 2008) and speeches. The latter being a complement to the model proposed by Milton Santos, once we consider a semantic system associated with his conception of systems of objects and systems of actions.

From identity to place

One way we connect with others is through some kind of geographic reference. We present ourselves as South Americans, Europeans, Asians, Africans. We are also identified by our professions: Professors, Physicians, Architects, Masons or Drivers. These identity contexts are multiple and one complement the other: there are Californian Doctors, Australian Architects and European Drivers. Each accent, local slang, technical terms and dressing codes represent, at least in an initial analysis, codes and signs samples lending some meaning and a feeling of pertaining to a given cultural context. This context allows individuals some level of identity among its pairs. The territorial aspect (spatial or geographical) can be understood as one of the most perceivable identity elements mostly due to its physical and symbolical characteristics. This is true as we can see a territorial identity given to every citizen at birth, in the form of an official document. The birth certificate has nothing to do with the birth place of one's parents, personal history, individual preferences, tastes and other characteristics. The birth certificate imprints our original territory. Nationality: Brazilian.

An imprint like this, eventhough it is engraved in the documents identifying us as citizens, is not something that can be derived from our genome. Still, maybe because this is one of the first identities given to us, along with our names (and sometimes a preferred soccer team and a star sign), seems to be "part of our essential nature", as put by Stuart Hall (2005, p. 47) when questioning national cultures as sources for cultural identities:

(...) national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation. We only know "English" because of the way "Englishness" has come, what it is to be represented, as a set of meanings, by English national culture. It follows that a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings - *a system of cultural representation*. People are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of the nation as represented in its national culture (HALL, 2005, p. 48, highlight by the author).

Participating in the idea of a Nation means to aggregate in an integral context a series of cultural differences. They form what we may call national culture, as pointed by Hall (2005). This does not mean, however, we are dealing solely with a plural aggregation of differences and characteristics that form sorts of a national identity fabric. The so called national culture can be understood as the demand of a legitimate identity, "introduced by

the society dominant institutions aiming to expand and rationalize its domination over social actors”, to use the words of Manuel Castells (2001, p. 23).

Hall (2005) questions this general pertaining to a “great national family” or to a unifying national identity that would nullify and subordinate the cultural differences and idiosyncrasies. To the author, the globalization contemporary context denies and displaces the closed identities of a national culture, causing a “pluralizing effect over the identities, thus producing a variety of possibilities and new possibilities of identification and changing identities into more positional, political, plural and diverse ones; less fixed, unified or trans-historical” (HALL, 2005, p. 87). In the global context, contemporary societies are characterized by social differences and antagonisms producing diverse identities or “subject positions”, as put by Hall (2005), who reaches the conclusion that “the fully unified, complete, safe and coherent identity is a fantasy” (HALL, 2005, p. 13). So we have open and multiple identities, continuously formed and transformed by history and culture.

What was once something institutionalized such as the cultural identity, became something open and reflexive, an “individual quest, susceptible of infinite refinement” (LIPOVETSKY, 2004, p. 95). It is important to highlight those multiple identities, “subject positions” (HALL, 2005) or “individual quests” (LIPOVETSKY, 2004) do not relate to -- at least not completely – the roles individuals play within the society, such as father, brother, teacher or soccer player. As per Castells (2001, p. 22), “identities organize meanings while roles organize functions”, so we assume meaning as “the symbolic identity, by a social actor, of the reason for the action he performs” (CASTELLS, 2001, p. 22). To Castells (2001), even though an identity may be originated by a dominant institution, such as the State, it will only takes its identification condition as the actors internally accept it. In other words, this will happen when the individuals assume the condition imposed by the given identity. Fábio Duarte (2002) exposes the relationship between identity and territory using an example based on the English Literature, illustrating Castells’ reasoning on this identity internalization:

When Romeo Montecchio is identified as the killer of Juliet Capuletto’s cousin, in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, he is sentenced to expulsion from Verona. The exile hurts him not only due to the distance from Juliet but also because he has lost his citizenship, his identity. If not in Verona, where to go? Verona is his territory – not because he, Romeo, is the determinant of Verona’s organization, but because he has accepted the city and is accepted by the city (DUARTE, 2002, p. 79–80, highlight by the author).

The exile described in this example does not deal only with the loss of territorial reference. It also deals with the loss of identity reference. However, the fact of accept and being accepted as part of an identity context is directly related to the pertainment of a physical, geographical placement – Verona. The story by Shakespeare takes place in the XVI century, in a context quite different from what we experience nowadays. Today, to a young boy as Romeo, the exile feeling will make itself more present in the lost of connection with his social networks, rather than his territorial reference. The today’s Romeo tries to

accept and be accepted in a fluid context of identity, through his connections, towards what he considers relevant and important. As per Lipovetsky (2004, p.95), “this has to do with the recognition by what we are in our community and historical difference, by what differs us from other groups”.

To Garcia Canclini (2001), in an interconnected, fluid world, the identity sedimentation organized in stable sets such as ethnic groups, nations and classes becomes restructured “by the means of inter-ethnic, trans-classes and transnational sets” (GARCIA CANCLINI, 2001, p. XXIII). The author highlights the frontiers between countries and big metropolis such contexts conditioning the common contradictions to the processes he calls hybridization: “the rigid frontiers established by the modern States became permeable. Few cultures may now be described as stable unities with precise borders, based on the occupation of a delimited territory” (GARCIA CANCLINI, 2001, p. XXIX). Counterpointing the idea of a legitimate national identity (CASTELLS, 2001), hybridization constitutes a process of identity building by the means of social practices that “arises from the individual and collective creativity. Not only in the Arts but also in the daily life and in the technologic development” (GARCIA CANCLINI, 2001, p. XXII). In this context, the concept of identity must be understood beyond a flat, static meaning, but as something that changes and moves.

Hall (2005) still adds “the identity rises not only from the full identity that already exists within us, as individuals, but from *a lack of* completeness that is filled from our *exterior*, by the means we imagine we are seen by *others*” (HALL, 2005, p. 39, highlighted by the author). As the author points out:

This process produces the postmodern subject, have been formed as not having a fixed identity, essential or permanent. The identity becomes a “mobile celebration” formed and transformed continuously in relation to ways in which we are represented or interpreted in cultural systems that surround us (Hall, 1987). It is defined historically, not biologically. The subject assumes different identities in different moments, these identities are not unified around a coherent “I” (HALL, 2005, p. 12).

Reyes (2010) contributes to this concept of identity as a process, stating:

[...] the central point resides in the fact the “identity” does not configure something, it is configured once it is open and always in process. So, the identity must be understood as a verb, not as a subject, becoming an “identification process” and not anymore as an “identity” (REYES, 2010, p. 91).

So, in the context surrounding this paper, as we handle the concept of identity we consider, within it, the understanding it is always in movement and it is always open. We assume identity as a process although we will not always name it as “identification process” along this text. We do understand its fluidity beyond its characterization as a

verb, as noted by Reyes (2010), and also its multiple, hybrid character, as stated by Garcia Canclini (2001). The identity, once conceptually understood in the way we present it, secretes processes of identification and also feeds them, generating new processes and movements in the global, contemporary context.

To Lipovetsky (2004) it is in this same context (globalization) that the chaos, uncertainty and the excesses – of what the author calls hypermodernity – bring the need for unity and meaning. Paradoxically to the globalization, which seems to impose some sort of homogeneity, there is a parallel process of cultural fragmentation generating, as a reaction, a feeling of community identity, a search for safety and unit.

Castells (2001) points local communities, collectively built and also preserved by a collective memory, as specific sources of identities. “These identities, however, consist in defensive reactions against the conditions imposed by the global disorder and by the transformations which cannot be controlled and happen in an accelerated rhythm” (CASTELLS, 2001, p. 84). Lucy Niemeyer (2010) states this identity construction, being personal, cultural or national, happens while having the conflict between change and permanence as the background. In other words, the conflicts between global and regional, imposition and resistance.

While on one side the globalization, which is characterized as acting as a pulverizing and fragmenting centrifugal force, leads to the weakening of collective identity links and the strengthening of uniformization, on the other side the hybridism and regional integration occur due to integrating, centripetal forces. So, the presence of opposing forces remain and intensifies – one leading to the uniformization while other leading to differentiation. Each culture deals with this correlation of forces in its own way, thus creating solutions, yet temporary, to this deadlock (NIEMEYER, 2010, p. 78).

This setting presents some consequences for the national and regional identities, open the path for new understandings surrounding the processes of identification mostly related to spatial aspects. Garcia Canclini (2001), Castells (2001), Lipovetsky (2004) and Hall (2005) reach similar conclusions about national identities in the global contemporary context. In general the authors consider the rising of hybrid, multiple, local and/or resistance bound new identities facing national identities previously institutionalized and now in a disintegration process, “as a result of the growth of cultural homogenization and the ‘global post-modern’” (HALL, 2005, p. 69, highlight by the author). The context is specially interesting once it places the process of identity homogenization, caused mostly by the globalization, on one side and on the other, the reactions contrary to this process. As Lipovetsky (2004, p. 92) points out, “it is known, in many cases, the reactivation of historical memory works in frontal opposition to the principles of liberal modernity”.

Among the national, the global, the local and the hybrid, the contemporaneity does not leave us many points where we can place identity anchors or spread our breadcrumbs. If we have the nationality disintegrated by the global, the territory effectively dissociated from its territorial-geographic configuration and the construction of the

identity through hybrid processes, the space left to us is the one where it is possible to secrete memories, find (or find again) roots and build self and hybrid contexts of identity construction. This space is not geographical nor physical, although social (LEFEBVRE, 1991) and “anthropological”, here introducing a concept by Marc Augé (2005) which we will cover in the next chapter. A space we continuously call place and starting from this same commonplace spins multiple, interconnected identification processes.

Even though contemporaneity changes into fluid our certainties, “the places remain fixed” (HALL, 2005, p. 72) and these places are where we fix our roots. “The ‘place’ is specific, concrete, known, familiar, delimited: the point of specific social practices that molded and formed us and with which our identities are strictly linked to” (HALL, 2005, p. 72). “The place fulfills itself through the word, the allusive exchange of certain passwords, in the familiarity and the complicit intimacy of the speakers” (AUGÉ, 2005, p. 66). In the global contemporary context the place seems to be the space where identity remains.

From place to identity

Before moving forward with the definition of place, it is important to locate and contextualize the space within our understanding of this analysis and guide the reader to what we intend to define as place. The space we refer to in here must be understood as something that secretes signification and assumes the attribution of meaning. It must be understood as something broader than its physical boundaries, which defines the space given to a specific construction or the space needed to move within a route. The space that interests us here is the one produced from social practices or, simply put, the “social space” as defined by Henri Lefebvre (1991):

(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to a rank of a simple object. At the same time there is nothing imagined, unreal or ‘ideal’ about it as compared, for example, with science, representations, ideas or dreams. Itself the outcome of practices, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. [...] Social space implies a great diversity of knowledge (LEFEBVRE, 1991, p. 73).

The social space cannot be characterized as a physical thing to Lefebvre (1991). It is a set of relationships among things, produced through social actions. However, it must not be understood as a product in the same way flour bags or cars are produced. The production of the space, as considered by the author, is a pre-condition and also a result of what he calls social superstructures. So, a nation is a space produced in the same way a domestic environment is also produced.

This social space contains a great variety of objects, natural or artificial, beyond nets and paths allowing the circulation of these objects, material goods and information. It is a sort of social morphology where the space is related to living experiences in the same way the form is related to living organisms, intimately linked to its functions and structure. In the context presented by the author the social space is not an isolated medium, an abstraction or a pure form, simply because it cannot be understood without the objects it contains, which are not only things but also relationships (LEFEBVRE, 1991).

The space comprised here is intrinsically linked to human practices, as put by Milton Santos (2006) when he states the space is “formed by an indissociable, solidary and contradictory set of systems of objects and systems of actions not taken in isolation but as the single frame in which history happens” (SANTOS, 2006, p. 39). This space conceptualized by Santos (2008) can also be understood from what the author calls fixed and flows:

Each kind of fixed is born with its characteristics, technical and organizational. So, to each fixed type there is a corresponding typology of flows. A geographical object, a fixed, is a technical object and also a social object, thanks to the flows (SANTOS, 2008, p. 86).

Thus objects cannot be understood separated from the system of actions in the same way actions are not possible without the objects. “Fixed and flows mutually interact and change” (SANTOS, 2008, p. 86). So the space, to which we are referring to, does not exist without human action.

Michel de Certeau (1998) understands the space is only realized from some sort of interaction among the people living in it or traversing it. To Certeau (1998, p. 201), space is an “intersection of mobile elements”, a result of the “operations that orient, circumstantiate, secularize and make the space work as a polyvalent unit of conflicting programs or contractual vicinities”. Stuart Hall (2003) states a message (or a happening) produces meaning and changes into a social practice through the operationalization of a code. To Hall, this is a process requiring both material instruments (means) and social relationship sets. “If no ‘meaning’ is taken away, there is no ‘consumption’. If the meaning is not articulated as a practice it has no effect” (HALL, 2003, p. 388, highlight by the author). In the same way, to Certeau, space acquires meaning when it is practiced. In the context of cities this meaning is defined by an articulation among forces, having in one side a “literal meaning”, a “clear text” and in the other the deviations, manipulations and improvises practiced by the society. Certeau names this forces “arts of doing” (or “ways of doing”), actions of re-appropriation of the urban environment throughout social practices applied into the space:

These space practices take us into another specific form of “operations” (“ways of doing”), into “another spatiality” (a poetic, “anthropological” and mythical space experience) end into an *opaque* and *blind* mobility of the inhabited city. A *transhumant* or metaphorical city thus insinuates into the clear text of the visible, planned city (CERTEAU, 1998, p. 172, highlights by the author).

From Certeau's (1998) thoughts – space of social practices –, Santos (2008) – the space as a system of objects and system of actions – and Lefebvre (1991) – social and produced space –, we have tried and developed a concept of space which is related not only to human interactions while constituting and signifying a public space, but also related to the process of people identifying with the urban environment, shared with other circulating elements. Considering the relationships between the circulating, the space and the identity as a process, we can bring together to the discussion the concept of Marc Augé's (2005) “anthropological place”:

These places have at least three common characteristics. They intend to be (and intend us to be) identitary, relational and historical. The blueprint of a house, the rules of living, the streets of a village, the shrines, public parks, the territory boundaries correspond, each one, to a set of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts which their contents being, simultaneously, spatial and social (AUGÉ, 2005, p. 47).

“We have included the notion of possibilities of paths happening within the anthropological place, along with the speeches that take place in it and the language that characterizes it.” (AUGÉ, 2005, p. 70). The anthropological place is a construction, a production such as Lefebvre (1991) social space. This social space is impregnated by the meaning and also the practices of the circulating elements that give meaning to it:

We will reserve the term “anthropological place” for this concrete and symbolic construction of space, which could not of itself allow for the vicissitudes and contradictions of social life, but which serves as a reference for all those it assigns to a position, however humble and modest. Moreover, it is because all anthropology is anthropology of other people's anthropology that place – anthropological place – is a principle of meaning for the people who live in it, and also a principle of intelligibility for the person who observes it (AUGÉ, 2005, p. 46).

The concept proposed here supposes the usage of the term “place” representing the signified space inserted into what Augé means as “anthropological place” and also within the theoretic set proposed by Fábio Duarte (2002, p. 65), to whom the place “is constructed by the process of spatial elements signification, organization and hierarchization through the cultural substrate”. To Duarte (2002, p. 65–71) the space is a social and cultural position, a “portion of the signified space”, rather than a space configuration. To this space are attributed “signs and values reflecting the culture of a person or a group”. In the same meaning Silva (2003) seems to summarize in one sentence the feeling we are looking for when using the term place as the kernel of the identitary relationship between the circulating elements and the public urban space: “the places are revealed as the shelter for affective or aesthetic communities sharing the same living intensity, beyond values and feelings allowing the common identification and pertainment” (SILVA, 2003, s.p.).

Lucrécia Ferrara (2002) also contributes accounting for the choice of the place as the kernel of our analysis. To the author the place is intimately related with the production of meaning, at the other end of the spectrum of the concept of space, which under her viewpoint becomes abstract:

Considering the opposition between space and place is only concrete when we realize the former is an abstraction, confronting the ability of producing meanings, actions and behaviours by the latter and considering, on one side, the distinctions between communication and information and, on the other side, the differentiation among iconic, indicial and symbolic signs when realizing meanings (...) (FERRARA, 2002, p. 22).

Rogério Proença Leite (2004, p. 284) complements this concept as he proposes the place “as a given physical and/or symbolical demarcation in the space, which is qualified by its usage and to which are attributed differentiated meanings, orienting social actions and being reflectively delimited by them”. The territoriality of this place, itself, becomes subjective considering the practices giving meaning to it. From these theoretical constructions we can say, using Duarte’s (2002, p. 75) words, “the construction of places is rich once it has nothing to do with rocks but instead, with its choices, its organization, its means and among the ethereal blending of them”.

Cities are places and, at the same time, they also contain places, *interrelated* and *intercrossed*. Even though they can be characterized by its geographical constitution or its boundaries, the cities interest us in their subjective and in the fluidity transforming territorial references in the contemporary context. This is why, here, we prefer to deal with urban environments formed and signified from and through their places,

[...] defining the place as a portion of space, without boundaries or precise spatial dimensions, with mirroring signifying elements -- in other words, meanings in which the users (individuals or groups) find themselves and identify others. The construction of places is the signifying operation that happens when the fixed and flowing are apprehended, recognized and sorted. It is the unstable, fertile action responsible for the conscience of being in the space (DUARTE, 2002, p. 76)

The spaces concerned to this paper are essentially the ones within the urban environment. Thus, we search an understanding of the city as a process of constant signification in itself, from its diverse social contexts: an idea of city composed by multiple processes or identification, built from its places and the practices by its circulating elements.

Identitary places in the urban environment

When we think on the concept of identity for a city, it is clear to understand the idea of an imposed project in the way Le Corbusier (2000) and other modern urban

thinkers thought, is somewhat incompatible with the way the contemporary world allows the multiple interpretation of the concept of identity itself, as we have previously noted. Le Corbusier (2000) believed in the geometry of urban planning as the only solution for the cities, considering straight lines as the “human path” and curved lines as the “mules path”. At this point it is interesting to notice Certeau (1998) uses the term “deviation” as a sample of his practices of space which is, in a certain way, a synonym to “curve”. Practicing the space, so to speak, is acting upon the space circumstantially geometrized by the urbanism and weave the “mules path”, in other words, articulating the “arts of doing”. Here the city becomes essentially an overlapping of social, spatial, cultural and historical practices. We come to realize, despite its complexity, it is understandable when we observe the restoration of an old building where we remove layers and layers of paintings until we find an indication of its original colors. The urban archeology reveals practices. The urbanism as postulated by Le Corbusier ignores this.

In the Brazilian urban environments we find an identity essentially represented by an “interleaving, hybridation, miscegenation ideology” as put by Niemeyer (2010, p. 83), agreeing with Garcia Canclini (2001) when presenting hybridation as a form of combinations when generating new structures, objects and practices. Taking this multiple, hybrid and subjective context as a base, it is necessary to think on the urban environments identity question, taking the identity as something open and always in process, understood as a verb and not as a substantive, as put by Reyes (2010).

From this point, the place becomes the kernel of the search for the understanding of the aspects related to this process, once it is “the most unstable among the spatial portions” (DUARTE, 2002, p. 99), experienced by each person and constantly resignified. This also configures the space as the portion of space that is the richest in the production of meanings, actions and behaviours (FERRARA, 2002). “The place, as built from a identitary signification of a portion of space, implies in a qualitative multiplicity that, in an hypothetical extreme, takes us into a diversity that is equal to the number of cultural communities” (DUARTE, 2002, p. 161). Although it is not possible to measure this multiplicity it is possible to notice it while circulating through the cities, not only observing it throughout maps and other representations.

Taking these two concepts (place and identification process) we present a theoretical-methodological proposal in order to understand the subjectivity of the urban environment signification process by their circulating elements: the constructions of what we call *identitary places*, a concept to what we will give some characteristics in order to guide your understanding:

- identitary places are also “relational and historical” (AUGÉ, 2005) once here are included both the social relations and the history as the integral parts of the identification process which they relate to;
- we deposit our references within the identitary places and they serve us as our own identification within the space (DUARTE, 2002), although they do not configure a physical-geographical position and yet, they do configura a cultural position;

- the space practices (CERTEAU, 1998) are the instruments building identity places, over the fluidity and multiplicity of the social spaces (LEFEBVRE, 1991);
- the identity places signification is understood throughout coding and decoding processes which differ and present different understandings depending on the means and associated social relationships (HALL, 2003).

Kevin Lynch (1982), in what he calls “image of the city”, presents a classic concept involving the relationship between people and public spaces within an urban environment. To the author, the public image of any given city is the overlapping of many individuals images, “or maybe there is a series of public images created by a significant number of citizens” (p. 57). However, more important than his definition of public image is his concept of each individual “self image”, which is closer to the proposal we search for identity places:

Each individual has a self and unique image which is, to some extent, rarely or never publicized and yet is close to the public image and, given different settings, becomes more or less determinant and more or less accepted. (LYNCH, 1982, p. 57)

Lynch (1982) categorized the elements of this “image of the city” in physical forms which he called ways (channels throughout the observator moves), boundaries (frontiers, interruptions, lines along regions relate to each other), neighborhoods (urban regions with bidimensional extensions) and landmarks (buildings, boards, stores, mountains). Lynch (1982) tried and presented image of the cities representative elements in, still, a physical and geographical sense. In order to understand the image of places and find the multiplicity of signification production in identity places, the understanding of places as a system, by Milton Santos (2006; 2008), seems more coherent and also associated with the open concept of identity we use here.

If we take the concept proposed by Santos (2006) as a starting point – which states the space is composed by the relationship between systems of objects and systems of actions – we can say Lynch’s (1982) categories precisely refer to geographical objects. This does not mean they are not related to actions – Milton Santos’ concept supposes the indivisibility between systems of objects and systems of actions –, but Lynch’s classic categories are essentially objects, they are *fixed*, although signified through *flows*. Santos (2008) defines fixed as the elements recognized by sedimenting characteristics while flows “are informations that can circulate, having those fixes as anchors and catalyzers” Santos (2008). A geographic object, such as a crossroad, is a *fixed*, although it is configured as a social object from its *flows*.

On one side, the systems of objects condition the way actions occur and, on the other side, the system of actions leads the creation of new objects or realizes itself over existing objects. This is how the space finds its dynamics and transforms itself (SANTOS, 2006, p. 39).

Systems are the ones operating and giving meaning to the fixed elements and flows through human action as only it “has an end, an objective – once in nature the action is ‘blind, has no future’; and the objects do not act, even though throughout history they are predestined to some sort of actions” (DUARTE, 2002, p. 47). While what is fixed configures physical aspects (material), the flows denote virtuality (*matériel*).

Beyond fixed elements and flows, however, a specific treatment on how these fixed and flows communicate with the circulating elements seems to be missing. This question is also raised by Fábio Duarte (2002) in relation to the writings by Milton Santos. Here, we try to answer the question: “can one ask until which point the equation between the systems of actions and systems of objects is sustainable in the absence of an informational independent system?” (DUARTE, 2002, p. 95). If we have systems of objects, relating to fixed elements, and systems of actions, operating flows, we can also consider a semantic system in order to understand the multiple senses and significations present while reading places. Thus, it is possible to differentiate in the context of the urban environment whatever *stays*, *flows* and *talks*.

From the talks it is possible to assume the coding and decoding of the narratives by the circulating elements. These narratives can be found within the communications media, the architecture or in another flows and fixed representations. As we saw before, to Hall (2003) and Certeau (1998) a message or a happening produces meaning at the moment it is operationalized by a code and transformed, again, in a social practice as the space itself, which only acquires meaning when practiced by the circulating elements. In other words, the transformation of urban elements into readings assumes the practice of a code. A crossroad by itself is part of a landscape, an object. In the moment the needed code is considered for its practice, the street decodes into a narrative – from fixed elements to flows, becoming a place, a signified portion of the space that, once decoded, effectively speaks: “Something happens in my heart as it reaches the Ipiranga and São João Avenue crossroad” (VELOSO, 1978).

In the brief context of the above sentence we have a fixed element (the crossroad as a geographical object), flows (the crossroad where the paths find each other, their names and functions) and also a very real talk represented by the position of the circulating element in relation to this portion of space. More than a construction of the social space (LEFEBVRE, 1991) we have the construction of an identification process (HALL, 2005; REYES, 2010) and we effectively see the rising of an identity place, eternized by Caetano Veloso’s song. What we propose here is the understanding that the space can be understood through the relationship among systems of actions, systems of objects, flows and fixed elements (SANTOS, 2006; 2008). The place where the identity is built demands, however, a semantic system and assumes a consideration around its talks.

In this sense, the city speaks different texts, which are distinctly interpreted accordingly to the context of each circulating element. The metro lines, present in the graphic representation of this urban way of transportation, speaks in lines and colors representing, in an iconic, simple form, its real geographical representation. The understanding of the linearity of the paths, the knowledge of the urban transport structure (stations, connections) and some association with universal icons constitute possible elements that allow

the decoding of the message by the receptor. Individuals not familiarized with this code may have difficulties understanding the messages, which will be interpreted differently from the possible objective of the sender and yet it still configures a reading. "There is no degree zero in language" (HALL, 2003, p. 393), thus although understood in different ways, the transmitted message is the result of some articulation of the language over the real, making the sign a representation more or less closer to the natural. The meaning may differ or may not exist but the talk remains, with other meanings.

This urban narrative is not only visual but it may be synthesized as such. As put by Flusser (2007), we live in a society which increasingly values surfaces (screens, images, videos) over line (the linearity of a book). To Flusser (2007), "the facts are represented by the more complete imagistic thinking and are represented by the conceptual thinking in a clear way" (p. 115). The life in the city is imagistic and non-linear, thus the reading of its talks is also a reading of images.

Our civilization provides us two types of media. Those known as linear fiction (such as books and scientific publications) and others called surface fiction (such as movies, TV images and illustrations). The first type of media can act as an interface between us and the facts in a clear, objective, conscient way, thus conceptual yet relatively restrict in its message. The second type may perform this interface in an ambivalent, subjective, unconscious way, thus imagistic (FLUSSER, 2007, p. 115).

The mediation between the city and its circulating elements is, therefore, imagistic. The city speaks and is read, as put by Flusser (2007), in subjective and unconscious ways. There is no conscious interpretation but an invisible reading as a constant process, happening in a multiple, simultaneous way. If only objects are not enough to build the social space, the actions do not complete the construction of the identity place and the city secretes the impossibility of its reading as a line the talks, on the other hand, build identity processes among flows, fixed elements and circulating components inserted into the imagistic environment of the city.

Final considerations

From space to place, the path we cover is ruled by a process of identification, or the building of an identity. The place represents a point where we connect our identities, or in other words, a reference to the social practices that forms us as individuals and also as part of a collective. In the urban space the cities may represent these places at the same time they can also contain them. The city only exists as an identity place in the way it is signified by those who live in it, independently of its shape and physical limits. The place, conceptually taken here as identity, not geographical but cultural, transcends the limits of the urbanism and acquires a symbolic qualification. The transcendence from fixed elements into flows becomes code, encompassing decoding and interpretation. Within the city, the multiplicity of meanings are written and read everywhere. Multiple

identification processes are built from their places and the practices of its circulating elements.

In this imagistic mediation, the city talks and is read in an invisible, constant reading, in a simultaneous and multiple ways. The circulating element is what makes the place, once it roams through the spaces and also through its significations. The circulating elements articulate the narratives and resignify themselves from them. If the (social) space only exists from the interaction of its objects and actions, the place is where the individual reframes this same elements through its particular codes. Thus, here we consider the place as identity as it is the result of a constant collective reading, built from individual decodings.

This semantic system (talks, readings, codes) does not exist without the objects and actions that form the urban space, and yet configures here what is essential to the understanding of this same space as part of a wide process of identity construction. The street is a construction, considering its physical aspects (it is paved with tarmac, it is wide) or its function/meaning (it leads to a place, serves automotive vehicles). From the relationship the street has with those circulating by it, it also serves the construction of identity contexts (my street, the street of my childhood). We live the city through fixed elements and flows, under the subjectivity of places and the multiplicity of identification processes. However, the identity construction resides in the codes and urban talks.

The understanding of identity places does not happens in a cartographic form, as it is possible to realize the political spaces in a map. The identity places are the result of affective relationships between persons and the cities, which cannot be understood from a linear perspective or any kind of categorization limiting its identity configuration to specific places or contexts. In this sense, each and every place can be identity, being a park, a street, a path, a block an avenue and even an airport.

The reading of identity places assumes the decoding of spaces emerging from this affective geography. This is a complex reading which is not sustained by linearity and so, it is imagistic defined. Among things and informations, image and imaginary, fixed elements and flows, objects and actions, the city is raised in rock and affection, built in the impossibility of its linear reading, although supported by the imagistic construction of its places through identity processes forming what we call narratives. These narratives circulate through public spaces within the urban environment, articulating and being articulated by places and circulating elements. Uses, practices, memories, positions, references, histories and relationships circulate, drawing the identity fabric that is present in the relationship between persons and its places. In order to understand them it is necessary to live them, apprehending how they signify through their speakers, articulating physical and affective positions and references; built and embodied histories and relationships; and finally, formed and deformed uses and practices, understanding how the curve is written over the straight line, thus changing space into place. So, the narratives are presented as spaces of actions upon objects and flows over fixed elements, which articulate image and imaginary in an imagistic-identity construction of places embedded into the urban environment of the cities.

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WHATEVER STAYS, FLOWS OR TALKS: IDENTITARY PLACES WITHIN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the relationship between space and identity construction, taking under consideration the urban environment through social practices that form what will be called here the identitary places: portions of public space defined by their significance and cultural position, formed from singular and subjective coding-decoding processes and understood from social relations, fixed aspects, flows and speeches. From these concepts, is presented in the end a supplementary proposal for the classic Milton Santos model, associated with the construction of a new semantic system, in a complementary way to the objects system and actions system proposed by the author.

Keywords: Public spaces; Urban environment; Identity; Place.

Resumo: Este trabalho tem como objetivo principal discutir a relação entre espaço e construção de identidade, tomando em análise o ambiente urbano através das práticas sociais que formam o que aqui serão chamados de lugares identitários: porções do espaço público definidas por sua significação e posição cultural, formadas a partir de processos singulares e subjetivos de codificação-decodificação e compreendidas a partir de relações sociais, fixos, fluxos e falas. A partir destes conceitos, é apresentada ao final uma proposta suplementar ao modelo de Milton Santos, associada a construção de um sistema semântico complementar aos sistemas de objetos e sistemas de ações conceituados pelo autor.

Palavras-chave: Espaço Público; Ambiente Urbano; Identidade; Lugar.

Resumen: Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar la relación entre el espacio y la construcción de identidad, tomando en consideración el entorno urbano a través de prácticas sociales que constituyen lo que se llama aquí a los lugares identitarios: porciones de espacio público definidas por su significado y su posición cultural, formadas a partir de singulares y subjetivos procesos de codificación-decodificación y entendidas por medio de las relaciones sociales, los fijos, los flujos y los discursos. A partir de estos conceptos se presenta una propuesta suplementaria al modelo de Milton Santos, asociado con la construcción

de un sistema semántico complementario a los sistemas de objetos y sistemas de acciones propuestos por el autor.

Palabras clave: Espacio público; Medio ambiente urbano; La identidad; El lugar.
