# Cities: To Whom, by Whom?

## The Minhocão Elevated Highway Case Study in São Paulo/ Brazil

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Cities are a reflection of capital. People claiming the "commons" is, in a way, an attitude towards a shift in this capitalist discourse. But it can also be understood as a reflection of it. In a neoliberal society, the fundamental question we should ask ourselves is not how to claim the commons, but truly what the commons are, and what it means to claim public spaces. This is a recurrent discussion that I am interested in exploring also through the perspective of certain individual and particular behaviors within urban spaces. The "ephemeral" (transient/ temporary actions) and the informal can be seen as a transitional tool, and analyzing it can help us interpret some of the issues related to alternative uses of spaces. In order to illustrate this discussion, I pretend to resort on some case studies that are currently/ recently happening, analyzing its development and consequences. For this paper, my focus should concern one example within São Paulo (Brazil): The Minhocão soon-to-be deactivated elevated highway.

According to Henri Lefebvre, the ephemeral is one important characteristic to generate multiplicity and active urban spaces (Lefebvre, 1970). I understand the ephemeral as something that can play an important role when it comes to "claiming spaces." In this matter, I'm particularly interested in design and art activism and their direct relation to political and social issues used to empower the population, generating awareness and engagement. As mentioned, although these actions represent an alternative to the dominant power of capital within the city space, it can also be a reflection of a determinate social group as well as towards individual interests. Despite the fact that they are not directly related to privatization, the consequences that can reverberate from certain actions can be in themselves very contradictory.

From another perspective, looking at the ephemeral within its informal approaches (such as informal occupation, informal businesses, etc.), the question we should ask is what is the value of actually claiming a space, and if we shouldn't consider a more democratic and "organic"[1] approach to this matter actually being made through free occupation of the land? But this also comes with a contradiction of its own, once the "informal" already is a form of claiming spaces, even if not official, and we can also directly correlate its ideal of spatial use to power. Considering land as a commodity, the difficulty is to separate the uses of any spaces without understanding them as a repercussion of the power of capital.

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[1] "Organic" here is posed as something in contrast to tabula rasa city planning. It questions the idea of planning, once it relates to it as an imposed perspective over land occupation and the use of spaces by people.

Laura Belik



**Image 1:** Minhocão highway during weekend. January 2016
*Source: Laura Belik*

## Introduction: Overview

The São Paulo of the 20th century was a city built for cars. Its urban landscape was a repercussion of the power of capital and governing influences, mostly pushed by the auto-industry. The Avenue Plan ruled how the city would grow, and consequently, how its population would live. By the turn of the century, this reality started to change: the palimpsest of an era prevails, but its uses have shifted. Today, cities and urban spaces come to life through their use and everyday practices. The population that was once limited by the forms imposed on them have started dictating their needs over the land.

To illustrate my point of view, I will give an overview of São Paulo's Urban History and road formations, and more specifically, I will examine one case-study of the Minhocão Elevated Highway and the discussions this piece of infrastructure brings regarding its uses as a road as well as a public space for leisure.

The Minhocão is targeted as a site around which debates over democracy, rights and the urban public space are ongoing. Built in the 1970's in São Paulo's city center, this concrete expressway cuts through the city's dense landscape, producing an incarnation of the modernist view of progress: individual auto mobility offered through ground infrastructure. While still used by about eighty-nine thousand commuters daily (in private vehicles or public transportation) during rush hour, the Minhocão is unpopular amongst

neighbors that suffer from its noise, pollution and lack of privacy. The structure is also seen as the main catalyst for the degradation of the area that it traverses and for the drastic drop in the real estate value of surrounding properties. It is relevant to return to this now because of the recent announcement of the permanent deactivation of the Minhocão over the course of the next fifteen years, as part of São Paulo's new Strategic Plan[2].

This research uses the example of the Minhocão Elevated Highway and the current debates and interventions in this public space to raise the idea of a new perspective on Urban Commons as a practice directly in conversation with counter politics and the social production of spaces. The collective action promoting debates over possible future outcomes for this structure indicate the empowerment of the users through participation. The highway, thus, here represents a shift in people's understanding of their city's spaces, considering the multiple voices and viewpoints around this particular element of infrastructure that now is also seen as a symbol to attendant claims of use-rights.

From a different perspective, these new practices and the understanding of the Minhocão as a Common can also

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[2]  Por que o Minhocão pode ser fechado e não precisa de alternativa rodoviária, Diário da Mobilidade, Last accessed April 21, 2017. https://diariodamobilidade.wordpress.com/2015/06/03/por-que-o-minhocao-pode-ser-fechado-e-nao-precisa-de-alternativa-rodoviaria/

be seen as very contradictory. While the basic concept of Commoning is to be portrayed as mechanism of mutual support and negotiation to shared resources, thus a way to improve and empower the collective, it can also be portrayed as a neoliberal tool of control over the land. Debates over the commons in relation to spatial development add this multifaceted reality. For instance, if we consider an Urban Common something that is neither public nor private (Blackmar, 2006), the idea of claiming it adds value to it, therefore, is a "service for privatization" (Federici 2010), and not anymore a "common".

# 1  Historical Overview

## 1.1  São Paulo's sprawling

São Paulo's growth is directly connected to its industrial history. The first significant and successful industrialization period happened in the early 1900's, attracting waves of (mostly) European immigrants. The initial great investment in the industrial sector came from an Italian immigrant in the beginning of the 20th century: Francisco Matarazzo started with a mill in São Paulo to produce wheat flour, and in just a few years managed to raise the largest industrial complex in Latin America[3].

From there, the city started to grow at a fast pace. Brazil's massive industrial investment from the 1950's onwards specifically affected the Paulista capital as the main location of the automobile industry, which constituted the core economic activity for the city during that period. This industry also guided the way the city would be planned, according to the logic of the vehicles that would cross it.

São Paulo's automobile industrial complex was the main pole of attraction for workers from other states, and this flow of people represented Brazil's major internal migratory wave in the 1950's. The subsequent decades represented the fastest the city grew. In the 1960's and 1970's the city experienced an increase of 55% in its population.[4] "As expected, industrial growth was associated with intense urbanization" (Caldeira 2001).

With this rapid population growth came the need for new spatial models and organization methods of urban space. The São Paulo government continued to privatize transportation and with that, roads contributed to an uncontrolled urban sprawl reflecting extensively on land speculation, causing a drastic expansion of the urbanized area (Barbosa 2012). These interventions in the city influenced

a series of other road works implemented between 1960 and 1970, among them the Minhocão elevated expressway (Rolnik 2011).

The physical expansion of the city was unfolded through a fragmented process that would emphasize private interests in land speculation. Land and resources were not just spaces shared by the community, but resources for developing businesses (Camargo 1976). As Maria Ruth Amaral de Sampaio argues, São Paulo's uneven growth is a result of the public bus-line routes formation and their relationship to land speculation (Sampaio 1994). As the population grew, (especially the ratio of blue-collar workers) so did the city in order to support this new housing demand. But the newcomers would only live where there was easy access to the city's facilities and their work place. The demand for land was attached to the demand of accessibility. Since the same people who owned the bus lines were the ones who established the bus routes, they would buy the land according to the new routes they were establishing, therefore making their land as well as the demand for their own transportation system more valuable. This ultimately led to an uneven territorial expansion and sectorization of the city, as well as, of course, uneven wealth distribution. This growth pattern not only changed its residential and commercial landscapes, but also affected the creation of open public spaces for the population.

After the 1970's the industrial sector started to slowly move out of São Paulo city, replacing their plants in the city to other areas in Greater São Paulo. São Paulo city then became a city of services, an informational complex. Nevertheless, the palimpsest of its industrial period prevails in the urban spaces.

## 1.2  São Paulo's public spaces

São Paulo's city center was conceptualized at first with a colonial mentality, and was highly influenced by the power of the church and the state. As in many other Portuguese colonies, São Paulo's radial streets converged in largos (enlargements) or plazas, which housed the church and administrative buildings (Caldeira 2010).

With the city's fast paced sprawl during the industrial growth, investments in parks or open free areas were not as common. Although the city center was built according to a colonial plan, the extended city had not followed the same (or any) ordering logic. The difficulty of access to parks and open recreational areas led to the formation and emphasis on other kinds of public spaces through the city. Some of them are private public spaces like sports clubs, shopping malls and private condominiums. But there are also commercial areas and public transportation nodes where there is a constant high influx of people, that started to be re-interpreted and re-designed accordingly, envisioned as public spaces as well. These

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[3]  Abrindo os trilhos para a locomotiva, Prefeitura de São Paulo, Last accessed April 21, 2017. http://www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/portal/a_cidade/historia/index.php?p=4827

[4]  Population growth in major capitals (per decade). Skyscraper city. Last accessed April 21, 2017. http://www.skyscrapercity.com/show-thread.php?t=638799

open areas gained enlargements of their sidewalks and pedestrian areas, being used no longer exclusively as a passageway, but also as an area of leisure. This represented an interesting combination between transitional spaces and spaces of permanence (Calliari 2014).

From these discussions, we can understand why a growing organization of people reclaiming more public spaces of usage are focusing their demands exactly on this particular object: the high-speed, large-scale avenues and streets. In a city like São Paulo, the claim for public space is the claim for the uses of the streets. And due to its scale, this action demands a broader civic organization. Popularly driven initiatives towards rethinking public spaces and the uses of São Paulo city are not a particularity of the Minhocão structure per se. We can identify a series of events that have been confirming this idea of reclaiming the streets in the past few years. Through the recognition of popular demand, the city embraced punctual events that are now testing the ground for possible radical change in the way the population use their spaces. Some of them are the Virada Cultural,[5] a 24h cultural festival that started in 2005, making the entire city center closed for vehicles, and more recently (2015), the program Rua Aberta[6] (open street) that has been closing some of the city's main arterial roads such as Avenida Paulista on Sundays, making a pedestrian-only space open for sports and leisure activities.

## 1.3 The Minhocão

The Minhocão was a controversial structure even before its idealization. Conceptualized and commissioned in the 1960's during the Brazilian military dictatorship period (1964-1985), the road opened in January 24th, 1970 by the former mayor Paulo Maluf (1969-1971). The Minhocão stretches for 3.4 km (2.2 miles) with extension roads connecting the city center to the western part of the town, from Praça Roosevelt (city center) until the Largo Padre Péricles, in the Perdizes neighborhood. The road sits 5 meters (16 feet) above ground, and its distance from the surrounding buildings varies between 0.5 meters to 4.6 meters (1.6 to 15 feet). The Minhocão was the "largest structure of reinforced concrete of Latin America"(author's translation)[7] by the time it was built. It used 300,000 bags of cement, 60,000 cubic meters (15850323 US Liquid gallon) of concrete and 2000 tons of steel cables (Comolatti 2014).

Although originally located in a middle-class neighborhood, the Minhocão's arrival negatively changed its population's social status drastically. Nevertheless, the neighborhoods around the structure are still wealthy or commercially important. Even though the Minhocão area was an "unwanted" space, it continued to be used as it was an unavoidable passageway. The potential of the region around the highway maintained a certain interest of the real estate market in the area (Comolatti 2014).

The negative reaction to the structure started before the Minhocão was even implemented. From the beginning the media constantly criticized Maluf's engineering attempts. The Minhocão's role as an expressway was threatened and ridiculed after having a massive traffic jam on the day of its inauguration. Another major issue was related to the massive investment in the elevated highway, taking the focus away from the (then) growing subway system. Maluf would then refute those criticisms, arguing that the subway could not change the growing volume of automobile use and their impact on the city center. As for the Minhocão's repercussion on its surrounding area, in less than a year almost all the apartments and commercial venues on the first floor of the buildings right near the structure were emptied out, as O Estado de São Paulo newspaper described:

> «Selling this property: The selling signage does not make any sense anymore. Almost all the buildings are empty, abandoned. Who would like to live here?»[8]

The remaining inhabitants would represent the resistance. Suffering from noise, pollution and safety issues on a daily basis, they were the first ones who clamored for improvements in the area, and who received, as a result from their demands, the hours of closure during the nighttime and the entire day on Sundays, which later expanded to Saturdays as well.

Gradually, the Minhocão gained adherents that started to use the space in a variety of ways. First, the neighbors themselves began to use the structure for sport activities and recreation, and eventually other people started to pay more attention to the potential the area had. A notable increase of users since the 2000's was the starting point for some neighborhood associations and activist groups to be more organized and get involved with the Minhocão space, introducing social and artistic interventions, and contributing for the structure to be used more actively by the general public.

These interventions represented a great development towards a new perspective on the uses that the Minhocão

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[5] Virada Cultural. Prefeitura de São Paulo, Last accessed April 21, 2017. http://viradacultural.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/2015/

[6] Prefeitura promove audiencias publicas para abertura de ruas aos domingos. Prefeitura de São Paulo, Last accessed April 21, 2017. http://www.capital.sp.gov.br/portal/noticia/6021

[7] "[…]Será a maior obra em concreto armado de toda América Latina", famous phrase by mayor Paulo when announcing the Minhocão's construction, in 1969. Last accessed April 21, 2017. Video of the announcement at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j44cTNnDHps

[8] Author's translation. Headlines from major newspaper about the elevated highway region in the 1970's . Elevado: O triste futuro da Avenida. Acervo Estadão. Last accessed April 21, 2017.. http://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/19701201-29342-nac-23-999-23-not/busca/Minhocãoo

**Image 2:** View from the elevated highway during weekday. January 2016
*Source: Laura Belik*

structure could have- not only as a highway and infrastructural piece, but, ultimately bringing to light discussions on the idea of portraying a public space as an urban common, socially produced by the aims and needs of the collective. But a closer look at these interventions and the actions on the Minhocão space since the 2000's reveals that those active participants claiming the space today are a different group of actors than the ones who initially organized and intervened to protest about the structure.

## 2  Present situation

Because of the high cost of the structure's demolition, estimated in R$ 80 million (around US$30 million), different mayors throughout the years leaned towards different ideas and outcomes for the structure's future, but none were actually implemented.[9] Today this discussion is still open ended, but with Mayor Fernando Haddad's (2013-2016) announcement

of the Minhocão's deactivation, there is a greater expectation of coming to a consensus. Nevertheless, the users themselves have increasingly shown discontentment and voiced their opinions regarding what they believe should be the best use of the space. Popular demand has grown, but continues to show polarized points of view and lack of consensus.

Amongst other actors, there are two major groups that are actively discussing the Minhocão's future today: the ones clamoring to transform the structure into a linear park, called "Associação Amigos do Parque Minhocão" (Friends of the Minhocão Park Association)[10] and the ones that want the elevated highway to be demolished, called "Movimento Desmonte Minhocão" (Dissemble the Minhocão Movement)[11]. It is important to mention that despite the fact that those two groups have been presented as having the main opposing ideas about what to do with the Minhocão, there are several of other minor (or less organized) groups that believe in other alternatives besides those two, and that are rarely mentioned by the media or social networks. On top of that, when paying closer attention to each one of the two main groups, we also need to recall that they too are composed of a multiplicity of voices that don't necessarily think exactly alike.

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[9]  It is important to mention Mayor Jose Serra (2005-2006) launched a contest for ideas for the Minhocão launched in 2006. The contest "Prestes Maia de Urbanismo" intended to get the attention of architects and engineers to create proposals for the space. The City Hall's intention from the beginning was not to put the ideas in practice, but just to foment the discussion around the structure. By that time, the mayor was actually in favor of the demolition of the Elevated highway. More information can be found at Prefeitura de SP lanca concurso do Minhocão. Last accessed April 21, 2017. http://brasil.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,prefeitura-de-sp-lanca-concurso-do-minhocao,20060202p24880

[10]  Minhocão Association official website. Last accessed April 21, 2017. http://minhocao.org
[11]  Movimento Desmonte Minhocão website. Last accessed April 21, 2017.  http://www.minhocao.net.br/?p=1562

**Image 3:** Minhocão elevated highway entrance from Consolação Avenue. January 2016
*Source: Laura Belik*

The group advocating for a Park, "Friends of the Minhocão Park Association", are more media savvy and politically influential. They are also constantly promoting events, press releases and activities related to the structure. They affirm that the "Park already exists when it comes to its uses",[12] and they count on the support of many leading actors that work or live in the Minhocão's surroundings and/or correlate with the cause. This group started with engineer Athos Comolatti, back in the 1980's, inspired by a design proposal created by Architect Pitanga do Amparo for the Minhocão during the Jânio Quadros administration as Mayor of São Paulo (1986-1988). Even though the project never got to be constructed, Comolatti believed there was a space for change, and gathered together some close friends and personal connections to advocate for the space. The High Line case in New York City was also a great influence for the group.[13] Today the association has grown exponentially, and is composed mainly of intellectuals, artists, architects and activists that use the space of the highway, but not necessarily live or work by the structure.

The "Dissemble the Minhocão Movement", the group that is fighting for Minhocão to be taken down, are a loose coalition, not as large or active, but are constantly present raising their voice in opposition to the linear park. They are mainly composed of residents who live directly by the structure, and that were, in some capacity, already involved with neighborhood associations or administrative causes of this particular region of São Paulo. They complain about problems related to noise, pollution and lack of security caused by the presence of the elevated highway. The group officially started their activities in September, 2014[14], when they showed up for the first time as an oppositional voice to the "Friends of the Minhocão Park Association" during a public hearing about the Minhocão.[15]

Despite this dichotomy of opinions when it comes to the future outcomes of the structure, it is important to highlight the civic initiatives towards the possibility of change, and its interpretation as a potential example of an urban common, giving power to the city's inhabitants in shaping urban space (Lefebvre 1968). This emancipatory discourse exemplifies both how our cities have been a reflection of the measure of civility and sustainability of their society, as well as the recognition and common understanding of the modern city as disruptive and open for change (Lees

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[12] Minhocão Association. Last accessed April 21, 2017. http://minhocao.org

[13] Information from author's interview with Athos Comolatti on December 8th, 2015.

[14] MDM Completa um ano de atividade em defesa da comunidade. Movimento Desmonte o Minhocão- MDM, last accessed May 12th, 2017. http://www.minhocao.net.br/?p=1567

[15] Ala do contra surpreende grupo que defende parquet Minhocão. Folha de São Paulo, last accessed May 12th, 2017. http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2014/09/1513648-ala-do-contra-surpreende-grupo-que-defende-parque-no-minhocao.shtml

2004). Nevertheless, as David Harvey reminds us, the difficulty of this emancipation is that it can only be made by reconciling both utopias of form and social processes (Harvey 2000), thus the problems of coming to a consensus. Not only that, but this potentially democratic action often brings up deeper social considerations regarding class struggles and power dynamics.

# 3 Minhocão: A commodified common

The Minhocão and the discussion around it does not represent an isolated case, neither formally nor ideologically. The concerns this object raises can be seen in many other situations around the globe. Locally, the Minhocão is a reflection on how São Paulo's spaces were built as commodities from the beginning. The city's economic growth has been led by the power of industry, which neglected any ideals of publicness and always supported private interests.

In a context where the power of the capital prevails, who gets to be represented, and how? When considering land as a commodity, there is a difficulty in separating the uses of any spaces without understanding them as a repercussion and representation of the logics of the market. The ideal of the common, thus, is disrupted by the consideration of the effects of real estate market.

São Paulo's sprawl in the 1950's onwards was a result of its exponential economic growth and industrial investments. The physical expansion of the city was a fragmented process that emphasized private interests in land speculation. The Minhocão structure is a result of this historical context. Its construction was justified because of the need of an expressway as a facilitator to the traffic of vehicles in the city. Although the structure is ultimately a road, thus, a piece of infrastructure that represents the common needs and interests of the city and the public/users, it also had a value of its own, and reflected the commodified city and the power of capital behind it. The roads under the Minhocão, and the highway itself belong to the city and (as roads) are administrated by the Companhia de Engenharia de Trafego (Department of transit).[16] As an urban structure, they are classified as a Via Estrutural (Structural Road) by the zoning laws from the Regional Planning legislation of São Paulo.[17]

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[16] CET- Companhia de Engenharia de Trafego. Last accessed April 21, 2017: http://www.cetsp.com.br

[17] Secretaria Municipal do Desenvolvimento Urbano. - Zoneamento da cidade de São Paulo. Prefeitura de São Paulo. Last accessed April 21, 2017: http://www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/desenvolvimento_urbano/legislacao/planos_regionais/index.php?p=1902

Mayor Paulo Maluf, when building the road, justified it as an indispensable construction for São Paulo - a piece of infrastructure that would facilitate the traffic flow of vehicles in a city where the car fleet was growing exponentially. Nevertheless, different people held different visions for the uses of that space. Cities are a reflection of the constant negotiations between different social groups that inhabit their spaces. In this sense, they reflect directly on power dynamics, and therefore, are designed accordingly, satisfying and echoing such political and economic values, and not necessarily representing truly democratic outcomes from these dynamics. As David Harvey states, for neoliberal cities, the urban is essentially a result of a capitalist mode of production. The morality intrinsic in its construction is a political statement (Harvey 1978). Thus, the discussion over the commons, or idealized public spaces and their truly democratic aspects are ultimately conditioned by the dynamics of power in that determined society. The Common, then, becomes compromised by the real estate market around it.

# 4 Public spaces vs. commons

To rethink the Minhocão elevated highway from its use as an infrastructural piece and as a public space does not automatically mean reclaiming it as a common. Considering Elizabeth Blackmar's definition of the urban common as something that is neither public nor private (Blackmar 2006); public spaces are not necessarily urban commons, and they can be privatized and continue to be considered a public area for use. Harvey explains that, saying that public spaces are not public property, but an amenity provided by the State (Harvey 2013). Historically the Minhocão elevated highway was a state-constructed outcome of private interests, and even today the many actors who organize around the ethos of civil engagement cannot promise democratic outcomes - this is wherein lies the problem.

The Minhocão space already demonstrates its market value from the moment it was claimed. Even if the players involved introduce a democratic discourse about the outcomes and improvements in the area, the idea of claiming the commons represent one of the biggest contradictions within contemporary neoliberal cities. According to Harvey, by creating urban commons one ends up creating good desirable spaces- unconsciously adding value to that land and resulting in a commodity or one more possibility for real-estate speculation (Harvey 2013). Therefore, by claiming the Minhocão, one is automatically commodifying it.

It is important to differentiate these terms in the Minhocão case so we understand from the beginning that the area will always be a reflection on the market influences in the first place, and that the current discussions around it refer to the instance of its uses. But one should

keep in mind that in a commodified space, the power of influence also dominates the agency of the space. Influential groups, more than just mere users, end up having a stronger voice in the future outcomes of the structure (and the city in general), as we can see happening today. Our challenge is to try to maintain its "publicness" aspect when it comes to a democratic way for using the space despite its status (Low 2006).

These discussions engage directly with ideals between the differentiation of public and private spaces. People tend to create this differentiation referring to aspects of accessibility, control and behavior, but beyond that I argue that the contrast is ultimately a reflection of the modern capitalist society (in São Paulo's case, the neoliberal society), and the spaces don't need to be privatized per se, but can be a reflection of private interests. In the Minhocão's public space discussions, the publicness of the space is much more related to the free access to the structure than to its role in decision making, but, nevertheless, it ends up reflecting those aspects as well. By being a public and contested space, - a common- the Minhocão automatically engages with ideals of urban democracy, but this does not necessarily mean its outcomes are those of a democratic space.

As mentioned before, the people who are claiming the Minhocão as a public space today, especially the ones advocating for a linear park, reveal a broader spectrum of participants than just the direct neighbors who live adjacent to the structure. Although activist groups and engaged militants may coexist within the spatial borders of the elevated highway, they unveil an influential role with the authorities that previous groups did not have before. Nevertheless, their contributions will work towards an improvement of the area, and by that, this will ultimately add value to it. The subsequent results and consequences are predictable: a rise of property value (this has already begun) and gentrification.

In conclusion, those who ultimately were aiming for a more just and democratic city, thus a city for its population, a city with commons as public spaces,- end up working for a specific publicness that will not affect the totality, but rather, once again be exclusionary. The democratic aspect of those actions should not just lie on the fact that the attempt to transform this space was a civil initiative. Margaret Crawford reminds us of the argument Nancy Fraser first exposed that our society is characterized by its multiplicity, and with that, it generates new political arenas of democratic action (Crawford 1995; Fraser 1990). But we must pay attention to the fact that this same multiplicity can also generate exclusion. The Minhocão ideally could be a common, a space to be used and shared by the community. Nevertheless, the concept of "community" is itself already exclusionary, and it must be taken into consideration.

# 5 Public spaces and urban democracy

The Publicness of public spaces is characterized by how open they are when it comes to engaging with the plurality of people that inhabits them. Nancy Fraser's concept of the public sphere relies on its multiplicity. To understand the complexity of our society we should understand that there is no homogeneity when it comes to its population, and that our public spaces should not be created only for the bourgeoisie, but to emphasize that multiple spheres of our societies have always existed (Fraser 1990). Thus, public spaces should be understood as, ideally, an arena of discursive relations. This conceptualizes Public Spaces as a space for multiplicity[18]. But in order to do that, public spaces should constantly be changing and being reinterpreted by their users.[19] The challenge raised goes beyond the uses of the spaces, but into a question of democracy, and the need for a reformulation of the existing idea regarding economic and social participation in our cities.

As it was built during a dictatorial context, the Minhocão project did not have any consciousness in being a representation of its society, let alone to represent its multiplicity. Nevertheless, the city was always a diverse space. Even today private interests continue to dictate how the cities spaces are being built or used, only reinforcing and perpetuating the idea of the power dynamics behind them.

Despite varying definitions of public spaces, the Minhocão space acts as a contested object in the city, representing the dispute of the society towards the urban form. Regardless of who has a stronger say or more influential voice, the elevated highway opens the space for this conversation, encompassing its multiple players, thus being democratic in this sense. As mentioned by Margaret Crawford, public spaces are the key mediators of democracy, and need to be constantly redefined by their practice through experience. The public sphere is not unity of equality, but a collection of counter-publics (Crawford 1995). In this sense, to come to a democratic consensus, we have to take into consideration the multiple and its diversity, and by doing that we are starting to create a more inclusive environment. The Minhocão space, by opening the series of discussions over its possible futures engaging with multiple

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[18]  Is there a way to understand the totality of society's multiplicity? Russel Jacoby also poses this questions when talking about multi-culturalism, and how not everybody's ideal society will be the same (Jacoby 1999).

[19]  David Harvey also discusses the constant change of spaces in "A Brief History of Neoliberalism" (2005), when arguing about Utopic societies and spaces, he explains that that society advances through contradictions and confrontations. The idea of achieving the perfect state, therefore, is impossible. Utopia could only be achieved in a static situation, but society is constantly changing. Utopia should then be seen as a process. We have to get away from a static idea of a society, meaning, getting rid of a specific geometry. The ideal city is not fixed in space, is malleable.

publics, is already making a stand for these new democratic possibilities. Nevertheless, as Crawford reminds us, the same multiplicity that generated a "new arena for democratic action" also can be the basis for tensions between different groups of people (the multiple counter-publics). Still, its recognition can also be considered the germ towards urban democracy (Crawford 1995). This is clearly exemplified by the current discussions in our case study.

As the current debate over the Minhocão's future shows, once we identify two distinguished groups of users aiming for opposite outcomes for the same space, we identify different publics and a battle over who has more power in the decision-making process. That is, in addition to other possible minor oppositional groups that were not even taken into account. How can a space represent the societies multiple voices in a way that satisfies the majority of its population? Even though the Minhocão opens up this arena for democratic debate, it also reveals a mixed group of users with conflicting opinions.

Therefore, once the power of influence prevails, what would be the advantage of presenting the multiple voices that compose our complex and heterogeneous societies? I argue that it is precisely by highlighting this multiplicity that we are creating a new vision of what democracy can be, and how it can encompass a bigger audience regardless of who has the final say. Presenting the multiple is already a move towards change. The role of the Minhocão in this case, is to be the public site for contestation. And it is important to acknowledge these contestations going beyond the physicality of the highway.

## 6 Top down, bottom up, top down

I now return to some initial concerns: If the land is a commodity, its use will always be a repercussion of the power of the capital, a reflection of the power of influence.

The gradual change of people's mindset over the use of the Minhocão as a public space instead of a high-speed road is the result of a collective ideal being incarnated and it also represents a lively city that is always reinventing itself. But to officially change the space's purpose reveals an influential shift. In this case, once created in favor of the auto industry and to inspire a certain modern image of São Paulo, today the highway use must attend to a new ordering logic: the claims and needs of its users. This shift, from a top-down tabula-rasa approach to the city's design, to a bottom up perspective over the usage of the city's already imposed form (Manzini 2014), seems utopian and democratic. On further interrogation, that evaluation also appears to be not very convincing.

The question one should consider is the nature of bottom-up strategies, and how much they are truly popularly

driven. Are there any approaches to the urban environment or to our communities that are free from the aims of power? Miguel Robles-Duran considers this question as guiding the "new activism" process that will always result in a banalization of larger political struggles (Robles-Duran 2014). In light of this, I revisit some of the initial questions posed in this paper: Who are the agents claiming the Minhocão space, and who do they truly represent? In order to answer this, I put myself in an ambivalent position: Influential "outsiders" or struggling residents, the debates, tensions, arguments among these groups and the ideas that underpin them ultimately give us an understanding of democratic and participatory actions. This is because they represent civil engagement in order to claim for the city's space, an engagement that is not done on equal terms. Nevertheless, they are democratic.

## 7 Conclusion

*«What is the city but its people?»*

This paper used a case-study of the Minhocão and the debates over the possible futures for this infrastructure to engage in a larger conversation around public spaces, urban democracy and our society. The goal was to present a story about urban transformation and the reflections around it; to understand new perspectives on the highway and the interventions in this particular public space as an urban common. Through the analysis of the Minhocão, I considered a range of many different layers and aspects that compose the discussions and debates around the uses of our city spaces and how the built environment can both reflect on our society's dynamics, but can also represent an apparatus for change.

Considering the city's multiple voices as an important tool towards democracy, I came to understand the need for recognition of the plurality of users in the democratization of our spaces, but also the considerations one should make about who actually gets to be heard or represented. In this sense, there is a need for the recognition that the urban spaces are not only a reflection of our society, but by understanding the society's multiplicity we can also see it as an arena for multiple exclusions.

In this sense, the paradox we face today is that, even though we can celebrate the urban spaces as an apparatus for democratic action, having the Minhocão as an example of a spatial aperture for these multiple conversations when understood as an urban common, this public space also can be recognized as a reflection on the power of influence and private interests around it. Nevertheless, by recognizing the plurality of voices and giving them space to expose themselves we find an inclusionary opportunity in itself, admitting new democratic possibilities.

The Minhocão represents this dichotomy between being a public site for contestation, an arena for potential dialogue encompassing the multiple voices as visions of a society, an urban infrastructure that is now seen as a space for an open conversation and debate as a democratic space, and yet, also another example of how this democracy can be limited.

This research, thus, presents the Minhocão case study as an instrument of awareness over the democratic aspects around the social production of our public spaces as urban commons. Not only have I raised the idea of the need for public spaces to be used as democratic arenas of contestation engaging with the multiplicity of their users, but to engage with the questioning of democracy in itself and the need to structure this democratic process properly so that our city spaces are not just one more outcome of neoliberal urban planning.

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