

## ***Panem et circenses*<sup>1</sup> at Largo da Carioca, Brazil: the urban diversity focused on people-environment interactions.**

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This paper explores how outdoor performances actively define and create the essential character of open spaces in Brazil, a country known for its overwhelming abundance of outdoor life. We investigate the importance of open spaces within the urban fabric, and consider the ways in which the history and aspirations of the local community become meaningfully woven into these spaces. We chose an open space, or *largo*<sup>3</sup>, in the city of Rio de Janeiro called *Largo da Carioca*, which embodies the relation between collective memory and appropriation. We then consider how the *Largo* has consistently been used as an arena of performance despite the intense urban changes and movement of people over the last 50 years. As a way of grasping the dynamic of the activities of the *Largo da Carioca* we adopted two approaches: historical-evolutive and participant observation. The first concerns the evolution of the urban space of *Largo da Carioca* and the background of outdoor performances as a way of introducing the popular arts of Rio de Janeiro, and as a way of connecting our theoretical analysis to the field research. In the second approach we use tools and methods from ethnographic research such as field annotations, direct interviews and visual resources, like photographs and video-shooting, so as to fulfill and complement our work. We argue that the urban essence of these performances is related to the 'inviting' conditions of this particular urban site and to its (in)formal structures, uses and regular activities. It invites – because of its openness, formal and social largeness and amplitude – a singular melange of uses and appropriations through which the formal and social are amalgamated – for, as one informant said, it is '*an open space of constant comings and goings*' (Igor Ferreira, 13/07/03).

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<sup>1</sup> *Panem et Circenses*: 'loaves and circus'. Words of bitterness uttered by Juvenal (*Satires*, X: 81) to the Romans of the Decadence Kingdom, when they made an uproar for wheat and free spectacles at the forum.

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<sup>3</sup> *Largo* is a denomination of an enlarged space (due to levelings and building demolition) typical in Portugal and 'exported' to Brazil as an old colony of this country. We have at least a hundred *largos* spread in Brazil nowadays.

<i>To be an artist</i>	<i>To be an artist</i>	<i>One must face the plaza</i>
<i>In the city</i>	<i>In the city</i>	<i>Lots of coins and cheers</i>
<i>One must be a clown</i>	<i>One must hide a chair</i>	<i>Embrace his fee</i>
<i>Floating and vanishing</i>	<i>Swallow a sword</i>	<i>Applauses and uproars</i>
<i>One must await</i>	<i>Draw people's attention</i>	<i>No time for fears</i>
<i>For the moment to bow</i>	<i>Show good care</i>	<i>And there it goes the show, with chair, sword, care and another day to glow</i>

Chico Buarque, *The City of Artists*, 1969.

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores how outdoor performances define and create the character of open spaces in Brazil, a country known for its overwhelming abundance of outdoor life. We consider the importance of open spaces throughout the city and examine how the history and aspirations of the local community become intimately intertwined within such spaces. Our focus is one particular open space in Rio de Janeiro called *Largo da Carioca* that embodies the relation between collective memory and appropriation. Accordingly we investigate how this *largo* has been consistently used as an arena of performance despite the intense social, political and demographic changes of the last fifty years.

In order to grasp the dynamics of the *Largo da Carioca*, and connect our theoretical analysis to the field we adopted various approaches and definitions. The first is historical-evolutionary, and concerns the evolution of the urban space of *Largo da Carioca* in relation to the history of outdoor performances and popular arts in Rio de Janeiro. The second uses the familiar methods of participant-observation including field annotations, direct interviews and visual resources including photography and video. Lastly, in order to understand and clarify the meaning of an 'open-space' (which is a term that encompasses multiple meanings in relation to planning and use) we employed the following behavioral definition:

*'A space is open if it allows people to act freely; it has no necessary relation to ownership, size or landscape character (...) it is named "open" as responsive, disengaged, ready to hear or see as in open heart, open eyes, open hand, open mind'* (Lynch 1991:396).

By combining these approaches we hope to explore how the *largo's* formal openness, sociality and amplitude not only *invites* use and appropriation, but actively creates the conditions for the formal and social to become amalgamated. For, as one informant, said *Largo da Carioca* is *'an open space of constant comings and goings'* (Igor Ferreira, 13/07/03).

By observing street theatre, popular dance and collective activity it is possible to see how the relationship between actors (users) and audience (passers-by) is itself facilitated by the openness of the *Largo da Carioca*. Openness extends throughout the

*largo*, affording opportunities for new and diverse forms of sensuous stimuli alongside the intense symbolic forms through which people in post-dictatorship Brazil have been developing a ‘deeper’ social contact. The interactions between audience and artist employ shared language codes that engender a sense of familiarity, easiness and intimacy. Closer observation shows how there are definite ‘circulation zones’ at *Largo da Carioca*: in the core we find people who ‘stay’ and join the performances; on the boundaries we find those who ‘pass by’ thus presenting us with further characteristics of the place. Moreover the *largo* allows persons to pursue their activities with comparatively little social or economic constraint, thus the place becomes an index Of Norberg-Schultz’s (1976: 20) *genius loci*: ‘we have learned that after having known each typical characteristic of a place, it is the *genius loci* – or “the spirit of a place” – the determinant factor that shows up its cultural aspects’.

Urban spaces and *largos* become appropriated, experienced and named through the way their inhabitants act and behave within their confines. The *Largo da Carioca*’s own activities are central to the way inhabitants (and tourists) interpret and understand Rio de Janeiro, thereby turning a single piece of the city into a metonymic reference for the whole. People talk about the place as ‘the symbol of the city’ or ‘the heart of the city’ even though it is not the most important historical landmark within Rio de Janeiro. Our work seeks to extend the connection between outdoor entertainment and one of the most agitated open public spaces in Rio de Janeiro: *Largo da Carioca*. We are particularly interested in the processes of appropriation and the influence performance exerts over people’s experience and appreciation of the city. It is also our intention to understand the *largo*’s usage in terms of place-identity and as an index of the city’s recent history and on-going diversity. People from many different social backgrounds get together just to talk, to read, to relax, to enjoy the view and to (re)establish many kinds of contacts. Open spaces are, in our opinion, the interactive-managing-gears that promote better communication skills, dialogue and debate concerning people’s values and necessities.

The activities at *Largo da Carioca* mostly take place during the period people spend downtown, that is from 8 am to 7 pm. Thus most users of *Largo da Carioca* (street vendors, workers, students and artists) know this place through *daylight*. The quotidian spectacle thrown by actors, audience and scenario has a time to start and to finish, as anything in life and the *Largo da Carioca* loses its dynamism in the evenings and especially weekends. The absence of the people who normally constitute the *largo*’s character entirely changes the atmosphere of the place. As Aristotle once said ‘a city cannot be made of buildings alone; only different people make it’.

The outdoor performances in *Largo da Carioca* bring difference, the unexpected and the surprising into people’s lives, and the ideas and activities encountered there frequently enter into city-talk. Furthermore: ‘the unexpected is a stamp of every outdoor performance and it makes fragile [as well as it enriches] the low control an artist has over the interaction with the audience and over his own performance. Supplied by unsteady bonds, artist and audience are constantly dealing with the accomplishment and the proceeding of the show’. (Carvalho 1999: 11).

## 2. *Panem et circenses: Largo da Carioca* and street theatre or 'food for thought'

*During the day all the open space, the access-ways, the alleys, the store lounges, the galleries, the trees, the walls, the products sold by street vendors, the 'circles', the 'stuff' and each element caught by the eye close and far, as a back-cloth, are alive. The city is a piece-of-art for the wanderer and this one recognizes his place (...) the social activities at Largo da Carioca make an act compared to the movement of the sun. But at night the outlines are made; skyscrapers are leading actors in the skyline, totems of the industrial and economic development of the city. They are lighted as huge candles that conduct the eyes. In the middle of so many giants there it is the Convent, waiting for a new day to be the icon of the environment, as usual. (Ethel Pinheiro, Field Notes – Wednesday 16/04/03 6:20pm).*

The tradition of using public ways and places as stages for cultural expression and theatre has a long history that extends at least as far back as Ancient Greece, Egypt and the Middle East. Mesopotamic cities, for example, celebrated their devotion through plays and performances that emphasised the collective quotidian life and helped maintain people's culture rather than merely being theatrical productions. Iconographic records found in ancient palaces and tombstones show how artists, jugglers, equilibrists and acrobats were performing on streets long before any written records of such activities (Van Buren 1992). In medieval times, public plazas were still used as arenas of expression, and on market days and holidays a great variety of attractions '*ranging from loud discussions to organised spectacles*' would entertain the growing urban population of Europe, making the inhabitants part of '*an atmosphere of freedom, frankness and intimacy. [] The public plaza was the converging point of every non-official settlement and – in a certain way – it had the "extra-territorial" right in the world of the official ideological order, where the last word lies with the people*' (Bakhtin 1993: 20). Medieval plazas therefore offered a second constituted world with a particular aesthetic that parodied the official and ordinary life – stamped by sobriety, authority, fear, restrictions and forbiddances:

*The popular performances at the mediaeval plaza were granted with loud and degrading people's laughters. Miracle products, predictions, malicious praises, insults and outrages: the word took its place through laughter so as to lead people to a secondary world, far from the official and ordinary one (Carvalho 1999: 9).*

Despite the ideological distance between Bakhtin's medieval public plaza and *Largo da Carioca* there are nevertheless many significant coincidences. Every day hundreds of artists and anonymous persons bring to *Largo da Carioca* a huge variety of performances that are seen by large anonymous audiences comprised of men and women with different social origins and life expectations. The *Largo da Carioca* has a long history of gathering people from different social contexts. As far back as the XVII century, when the Convent of Saint Antonio was built by the Franciscan Order, diverse social groups including slaves, masters, street vendors and artists would gather in this formal *and* heterogeneous physical space to take water from the only fountain in the city of Rio de Janeiro and get updated with the last news in town. This practice continued until 1925 when the third and last fountain was pulled down.



Fig. 1: Third Fountain at *Largo da Carioca*; Edward Hildebrand, 1844.

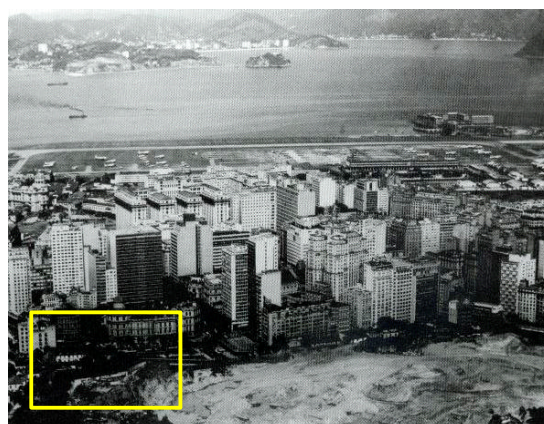


Fig. 2: *Largo da Carioca* after the levelling of Saint Antonio Hill, 1961 (Guanabara Bay at the bottom and remaining *Largo da Carioca* in yellow).



Fig. 3: *Largo da Carioca* (gardens of Burle Marx), 2003. Ethel Pinheiro.

Since then, *Largo da Carioca* has remained a place for gatherings and social life, but until recently its physical space was enclosed by the mountains and hills that defined the geography of this area. This restricted any potential expansion of the area and it was only when Mayor Dulcídio Cardoso pulled down Saint Antonio Hill in 1961 and Burle Marx's subsequent intervention in 1980s that we see the open space of *Largo da Carioca* as it exists today.

Outdoor performances in parks, streets, plazas and *largos* provide an outline of the history of the city. For the *largos* are not only stages for artists but the artists themselves have become part of the history and tradition of these places. The *largos* are essential to the maintenance of Rio's popular culture; the rebirth of street theatre

immediately after the military dictatorship of the 1970s was a time when young idealists reaffirmed the historical influences of their performances. They asserted that their actions were *continuity or a critical surmounting* of previous experiences and traditions, thus locating themselves within a well-defined tradition of outdoor performance. This is an interesting situation, for there was little development of street theatre during the dictatorship when cultural exchange with other countries was limited and groups throughout the 1970s predominantly used Rio's open spaces to work for the cooperation of unions and political parties. Therefore it is important to ask how the fragmented elements of street theatre became reconstructed in Rio de Janeiro and throughout Brazil.

The present day *Largo da Carioca* offers a form of expression and reality that emerged out of the increasing openness of civil structure at the end of the military dictatorship (Garcia 1990: 32). It offers a place for city-talk, social mobilisation and forms of collectivity that work against dogmatic political speeches. Performers and audience alike appropriate a part of the city and engage in creative practices in response to the new democratic political atmosphere that followed the military system of the late 70s, and it is therefore not coincidental that the cultural elite uses and understands the street<sup>4</sup> as the most democratic way of socialising popular arts and performance. Contemporary street theatre in Rio de Janeiro encompasses its own lexicon of typical expressions, coarse speeches, political aporia, constraining jokes, punishment-free talk and shots of social malice; a lexicon that emerged out of the determination of a few artists in the 1980s who used outdoor performances to articulate and create the atmosphere of freedom that dominated society after the military dictatorship. It is common to see new artists actively perpetuate this tradition through the comparison with old famous street artists. Carvalho (1999: 40) considers a veteran artist's profile, the late Alexandre Bahia, who led a modest and visionary course of life, searching in his inspirations for a type of art that would lead him to all kinds of audiences: that is outdoor performance. His experience on 'the stage' of *Largo da Carioca* through the years is mixed with the spatial changes he has seen:

*According to him [Alexandre] the vocation comes from childhood when he used to swallow glass and razor blades at school – without knowing how. Nevertheless it was only when he was 24 that, after many odd jobs, he decided to be a street artist, inspired by the performances of 'Avestruz', an old artist he used to see at Largo da Carioca (...) More than half of his life has been lived at Largo da Carioca and his personal life is mixed with the place. Alexandre was a spectator of the urban changes and grasps a wide variety of information on old and new things. At Largo da Carioca everybody knows him: the passer-by, the street vendor, the bartender and the shoeshiner.*

Alexandre Bahia's observations emphasise how people from many different social and cultural backgrounds gather at *Largo da Carioca*. Together they share a special and ephemeral reality aided by the particularity of the public space that sustains it. A closer examination exposes a constant movement of 'circles'. A *circle* is the popular name given to a group of people set around an actor or a group of performers who

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<sup>4</sup> *Street*, in this case, represents the public space in the city, the extra-limits.

watches the show, as outlined by Carvalho's observation of the activity around artist Alexandre Bahia:<sup>5</sup>

*'Circle' is a native category used to express the disposition of the audience around the central actor, the street artist. The narrative follows the chronological sequence of Alexandre's performances, taking the 'circle' itself as a reference for the analysis. Special attention must be drawn to the subsequential moments of the show: open the 'circle' (invite people to watch the show); hold the 'circle' (keep audience's interest); make an axé (ask for money) and let people leave the 'circle' (Carvalho 1999: 10).*

Circles are powerful symbolic and emblematic elements in this formal space. People categorise each other by the 'circle' they join in, by the acrobatics they have just seen together, or by the collectivity that gathers to watch a 'popular' show and then disperses afterwards. Both the person who passes by *Largo da Carioca*, and the person who stays to watch and enjoy the activities recognise this attribute. Moreover it is a characteristic that is facilitated by the spatial layout and openness.

*Ephemeral and plural, the place is appropriated and elucidated as a second world. The plaza is a moral region (...) As we tried to explain Largo da Carioca is a reference point for different place-identities that emancipate and joke with the dominant official order; these identities are found in the simple occupations, arts and leisure activities which hold a symbolic dimension and not only in the survival strategies (Carvalho 1999: 32).*

The image of the 'circle' is present in the performances of every artist at *Largo da Carioca*. At the very start of the show the artist swings a bottle of water over his head and makes a circular drawing on the floor, so as to call people's attention. When the water evaporates the 'circle' of people takes place. The circle manifests itself in many other different ways. For example the artist walks around an imaginary circle marking a virtual limit of the desired proximity people should take from him. Afterwards, he is able to start the show. Sometimes the artist uses a microphone to call people together: 'C'mon on people, let's make a circle'. Artists such as Alexandre Bahia 'open the circle' with questions such as: 'Little darling, if it is not a big problem, would you come closer? Hey you, student (...) if you were rich you would go to a theatre hall (...) but you are here and I suppose you want to have fun'. These invitations explain the informal characteristic of the performances at this famous open space in Rio de Janeiro known as 'the big stage of the city'. Circles are of such importance that they directly relate to the perception of space. For example when we asked 50 people to draw a plan of *Largo da Carioca*, and 45% drew a huge circle, although the physical limits of *Largo da Carioca* are in fact indeterminate. The formal configuration of *Largo da Carioca* is often mixed with this dynamic and ephemeral image of the

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<sup>5</sup> Searching for more information about this artist we started asking people at *Largo da Carioca* (January 2003) where Alexandre Bahia could be found. To our surprise this search was really easy; everybody knew at least one piece of interesting information about his life and we could see his image was taken as a mythical element in the space. Our second surprise was related to the discovery of his death in the year of 2001, which meant that Luciana Carvalho (1999) was the last person to hear and investigate his stories, speeches and experiences.

‘circles’ appearing and disappearing and thus we can venture that the image of ‘circles’ is the image of outdoor performances.

### 3. *Largo da Carioca* and its activities

*Art not only reflects environment but spectators.* (Oscar Wilde, In Dorian Gray’s Portrait, 1890).

During the ten months we engaged in participant observation at the *Largo da Carioca* (between November 2002 and September 2003), we tried to understand how people link social activity to the *largos* physical structure through cognitive maps and interviews. The most interesting response to our researches was, when we asked people to choose a word that could explain the place. We grouped the answers into *concrete* and *abstract* ones. When talking about the feelings people get from the place we find *movement*, *entertainment* and *work* as betraying the *largos* dynamism and tradition, whilst *culture* and *nostalgia* emerge as basic links that join appropriation, memory and place-identity to the character of the place. This chart was made with the selection of words that appeared in all the fifty interviews.

Concrete elements	<b>Convent of Saint Antonio</b> Outdoor performances Subway station
Abstract elements	<b>Movement</b> Work Entertainment Tradition Culture Nostalgia

These elements are suggestive. And as further ‘food for thought’ we have identified a further variation of the circle to represent the outdoor performances in Brazil: *the circus*. We can observe certain similar processes in terms the *Largo da Carioca*’s street theatre and the techniques of the circus, not least in terms of spatial dynamics and the training of popular actors. It can also be seen in terms of a central focal point that acts as a ‘melting-pot’ city, gathering people from distant regions and lands as well as different parts of the city. Indeed it is the diversity of cultural groups and social backgrounds that is constitutive of the *largo*’s meaning and identity. This is *Largo da Carioca* to the citizens of Rio de Janeiro: an open space, as in ‘open heart’. It is a place that has changed in so many ways during the last three centuries; from the rural aspect that was present when the convent was built to the urban symbolism of the modern day skyscrapers. Despite these changes some of its uses and activities, such as local trade, street performances and theatre have lasted, reflecting people’s effort in maintaining vernacular examples of Brazilian culture in relation to the ‘inviting’ openness of this peculiar place, free from defined physical limits. We end with one of the most significant and fertile links of all, namely the action of taking



water from the fountain (or washing the clothes) in relation to the action of using water to mark out a 'circle' of people that join a quotidian activity: the performances at *Largo da Carioca*. This association itself is only possible because of people's collective memory and sense of appropriation, which led *Largo da Carioca* to survive in spite of all the political and urban changes. As Lucas (one of our informers, 15/07/03) would say '*this is the place of circles*'.

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