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Urban Studies



Ins and Outs of the Cultural Polis: Informality, Culture and Governance in the Global South

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3 **INS AND OUTS OF THE *CULTURAL POLIS*: INFORMALITY, CULTURE AND**
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6 **GOVERNANCE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**
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10 **Abstract**
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13 This paper provides an epistemological critique of informality by focusing on cultural governance in
14 two cities of the global South, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Dakar, Senegal. Aiming to enrich debates
15 about urban creativity and urban cultural policy, which are still mainly focused on and articulated
16 from the global North, we consider the broad field of 'informality' research as an entry point for
17 such a discussion. Using case studies from African and Latin American contexts, we focus on the
18 interstices of cultural policy and the borderlands of (in)formality, examining how governmental
19 institutions are entangled in informal processes, and how grassroots cultural interventions become
20 part of mainstream cultural circuits. The analysis sheds light on how these creative spaces of
21 cultural production, located in Southern contexts of urban extremes, contribute to the vitality of
22 informal urbanisms and unsettle predominant views that see them merely as sites of infrastructural
23 poverty and social exclusion. The paper suggests that a creative remapping of informality, through
24 an inquiry of the 'ins' and 'outs' of the cultural polis, could improve our translating capacity of
25 academic discourse into institutional/policy-related operations.
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41 **Keywords:** informality, *cultural polis*, governance, urban cultural policy, Rio de Janeiro, Dakar, global
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a revival of studies on urban informality restating the blurred boundary between the formal and the informal, the need to transcend binary thinking and approach informality, conceptually and methodologically, as inextricably co-constituted with the formal realm (McFarlane, 2012:92). These studies, however, have shown a limited, if any, engagement with issues of urban cultural policy, where informality is also present. This article starts from the premise that governmental institutions (whichever their geographies) are entangled in informal processes and that (informal) grassroots cultural interventions have become part of (formal) mainstream cultural circuits. In other words, there are always some *ins* (formality) in the *outs* (informality) and always some *outs* (informality) in the *ins* (formality). It thus argues for the need to pay attention to the *cultural polis*, a term that we have re-adapted from its original meaning as the ancient Greek city-state, and to genuinely reinvest this etymology of the city which, besides the ensemble of urban buildings and spaces, concerns the body of citizens and a citizenship embodied by an informed capacity to engage processes of practical and symbolic re-imaginings of the city.

Moreover, informality in the cultural sector has been predominantly discussed in terms of the cultural and creative labour market, shedding light on the precariousness, exploitation, freelancing, and gender, class and ethnic inequalities that characterise cultural work (McRobbie, 2016; Banks *et al.* 2013; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Yet informality also shapes the ways the state and civil society are inextricably related within the cultural field. Our focus here, therefore, is on the *cultural polis*, as it can progressively pave the way for grounded and informed governance, in a context that comprehends informality as a negotiated process that keeps redefining both governance practices and infrastructure services (Roy 2011; Simone 2004, 2010). Whether urban informality alludes to the whole city, that is, in being made up of kinetic, in motion, temporary, spontaneous, flexible, recycled and reinvented spaces (Mehrotra, 2010) or is defined as a new way of life with place-specific political

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3 economies that spreads beyond the poor or the marginalised (Alsayyad, 2004), it implies a relational
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5 process of cultural, urban and political contestation.
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8 In particular, we seek to examine the usefulness of the term 'informal' in accounting for the nature,
9
10 functioning and dynamics of urban cultural governance, interrogating the relationship between
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12 official policy forms and grassroots practices. In fact, this article highlights how political alternatives
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14 can sprout through informal practices and become innovative sites of formal political
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16 experimentation (Schindler, 2014:792), or cultural policy *de facto*. As informal practice of cultural
17
18 policy-making, such a deployment of the *cultural polis* permits deconstructing the very basis of state
19
20 legitimacy; indeed, both the Rio and Dakar's case studies, as we shall see, provide concrete grounds
21
22 to disrupt the strategic imposition of a moving boundary between formal and informal, which allows
23
24 public authorities to justify future developments and legitimise past ones. To insist, it confronts a
25
26 persisting instrumentalised dichotomy that serves to obstruct the dynamics of urban informality as a
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28 mode of production of the city, especially in a context of incapacitated governments, lacking
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30 personal, technical and fiscal capacity.
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36 The analysis is divided into three main parts. In the first we discuss how the in/formal arrangement
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38 is deeply intertwined in urban cultural production; how it unfolds in the cultural sector (both in
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40 terms of economic and political/ functional and aesthetic/ substance and essence); and what it
41
42 implies in terms of urban governance (i.e. a plea for an open city). The second part offers an analysis
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44 of case studies in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Dakar, Senegal, examining innovative, grassroots
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46 initiatives that have sought to put alternative understandings of urban culture in action, while
47
48 expanding official policy constructs. Finally, we suggest that an engagement with the *ins* and *outs* of
49
50 the *cultural polis* can contribute new insights into informality and culture to urban studies,
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52 transcending the outdated distinction between the formal and the informal.
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3 Overall, the paper argues for the need of local authorities to acknowledge, engage with and support
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5 'in-formal' cultural and creative practices, underpinned by a concern with solidarity and social
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7 change beyond celebrations of commercial entrepreneurialism. By focusing on examples of cultural
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9 urbanism in subaltern locations, we demonstrate the usefulness and limitations of the notion of the
10
11 informal for shedding light on the ordinary practices that also make up cultural governance. In turn,
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13 these challenge narrow-minded notions of cultural policy, demand an engagement with the form of
14
15 the informal and emphasise the value of collaboration as a platform for innovative policy design.
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20 **MAPPING COLLABORATIVE CULTURAL POLICY-MAKING**

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25 Looking into the position of informality in the cultural sector rather than the position of culture in
26
27 the informal sector, this article explores how, once transcended in its reductive binaries, a
28
29 productive relationship between the *ins* and *outs* of policy-making has the potential to enrich
30
31 debates about urban creativity, cultural development and urban cultural policy. In doing so, we take
32
33 seriously spatial juxtaposition as a 'field of agonistic engagement' that is marked by a 'politics of
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35 negotiating the immanent effects of geographical juxtaposition between physical spaces,
36
37 overlapping communities, contrasting cultural practices (Amin, 2004:39). We thus inquire into an
38
39 understanding of a *cultural polis*, aligning Amin's 'politics of propinquity' with Roy's view (2011:233)
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41 of informality as 'a heuristic device that uncovers the ever-shifting urban relationship between the
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43 legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorised and unauthorised'.
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49 We situate a *cultural polis* in contradistinction to the concept of 'creative city', which has originated
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51 in and been strongly promoted from a Northern post-industrial context and has been criticised for
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53 becoming an engine of aggressive neoliberal policies, leading to increasing disparities and
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55 inequalities within cities. As such, we want to suggest a *cultural polis* that is concerned with the soft
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57 resources, the linking value, the glue and the imagination of human bodies; the knowledge and
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3 concern of its citizenry. In a *cultural polis*, different forces and energies come into play to articulate
4 this 'creative city' vision; but rather than focusing onto the *object*, that is, creative industry products
5 and services that can then be used to boost tourism or to re-brand inner-city areas, it emphasises
6 the *subjects* of transformative processes and integrates communities in the conception and
7 production of arts and culture for the wellbeing of citizens. From this perspective, it can be
8 understood as a modal platform, i.e. an ecosystem with high added value that increases, transforms
9 itself and integrates new functionalities, new users or partners quickly and easily.
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12 Thinking of cultural production from peripheral urban spaces, be that in Rio de Janeiro or in Dakar,
13 as unrelated or entirely marginal to mainstream cultural circuits is inadequate since it fails to
14 recognise the myriad connections, exchanges and movements that exist across different parts of the
15 city. The *ins* and *outs* of the *cultural polis* are, then, a reminder of the inherent tensions,
16 contradictions and polemical and combative moving territories of the city; they are also a reminder
17 of the need for collaboration in urban planning, whereby informal participants enter the field of
18 policy-making in a genuinely dialogic and critical manner. Such an approach reaffirms how
19 inextricably related, though still distinct, informality and formality play out in the composition of the
20 city, the latter being a work-in-process always in formation. It also implies a 'spatial literacy' in all its
21 multiple inscriptions (Mbaye, 2016:53-55), and an art and craft of governance (Pratt and Hutton,
22 2013) which does not stem from knowledge produced by expert systems, but is relational and
23 contingent. In this regard, it calls for a 'long-term, systemic rethinking of the processes and
24 structures of governance [...] [with an] embedded, open, networked, relational approach' (O'Connor
25 and Shaw, 2014:167-8).
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29 More importantly, our approach deconstructs the dichotomy between informality and formality,
30 which overemphasises formal discourses and practices and obscures, from its oppositional stance,
31 the legitimacy of informal practices, such as the illustrations of cultural activism provided in the case
32 studies that follow. Moving beyond this reductive binary implies transcending discourses about
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3 'fixing' the city and actually seeking better ways of engaging informed governance mechanisms that
4 stem from what *is* rather than what *should be* – an approach even so more relevant in a context of
5 systematised policy transfers of urban creativity to Southern contexts. Beyond quick fixes to the city,
6 there remains an imperative for a dedicated and renewed commitment toward an effective *agora*,
7 that is, an open public space for civic gathering and assembling, a place for performing citizenship,
8 which can inform both social conversation and political action in regards to processes of urban
9 cultural governance (Canclini, 2016). The concept of *agora* has long informed urban studies concerns
10 through the related notions of public space, sociality, civility and public sphere. Beyond the
11 limitations of previous debates foreseeing the death of public space in light of its commercialisation,
12 privatisation and militarisation (Bodnar, 2015), the *cultural polis* and its *agora* reclaim urban public
13 space beyond neoliberal urbanism through an active process of civic encounter and the making of a
14 public culture.
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31 In this regard, the concepts of 'governance composite' and 'emergency democracy' can be useful to
32 describe 'a process of things in the making' (Simone, 2008:30) where 'interlocutors are not partners,
33 in that their interchanges are not based on some common assumption about what brings them
34 together or an idea that their togetherness is based on advancing some common project. Rather, to
35 be interlocutors is to open up the possibility of some alternative kind of communication that itself
36 may generate new ways of working'. Put differently, the challenge here is for policy-making to
37 remain 'open' to the complex, multiple and contingent relations of urban composition that are
38 constituted by formal and informal practices. At the heart of the *cultural polis* are knowledge
39 exchange and local capacity building, which effectively work towards grounded collaborations,
40 following Miratfab's recent 'recognition of non-professional actors in planning as a field [...] [as well
41 as] the key role citizens and grassroots activists play in shaping their cities and communities' (Ward
42 et al., 2011:861). With informality contributing as a mode of urban production that creates and
43 manages differential spatial value (Roy, 2011), such a perspective is then coherent with Amin's
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3 politics of propinquity which 'must be as much about what is struggled over [...], as it must be about
4 the conduct of local politics, in allowing agonistic engagement [...], and about who or what counts as
5 political, through its recognition of the acts of expression and organisation across local society'
6 (2004:39). However, such a process is not devoid of power relations but requires looking into the
7 political and ideological contexts through which cultural urban development emerges.
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16 The following case studies of specific cultural sites thus highlight how ordinary people, everyday
17 citizens, manage to reclaim urban spaces through both formal and informal practices, and to
18 constructively build within the wastelands of traditional policy-makers and urban planners.
19 However, beyond a crude celebration of 'citizen entrepreneurialism that refuses to wait for the state
20 but instead takes matters [...] in its own management' (McFarlane, 2012b:2802), we are here
21 interested in what can be inferred and learnt from these constructive informal practices as far as an
22 art of urban governance (Pratt and Hutton, 2013) is concerned. Resulting of, responding to and
23 thriving in the interstices of inefficient and inadequate formal performance, the practices of these
24 ordinary citizens manage to make places that are their very own. They thus redefine the borders of
25 cultural policy-making, and effectively ground a rejuvenated *cultural polis* with or without, the
26 presence or absence, even at times hostility of municipal authorities.
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42 **ON URBAN COMPOSITION AND AFFECT IN THE *CULTURAL POLIS***

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46 As Latour reminds us in his 'Compositionist Manifesto', composition 'underlines that things have to
47 be put together (Latin *componere*) while retaining their heterogeneity'; but most importantly, it
48 draws attention away from the irrelevant difference between what is constructed and what is not
49 constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is *well* or *badly* constructed, *well* or *badly*
50 composed' (Latour, 2010: 473). In this regard, transcending the conventional labelling of in/formal
51 allows us to switch the focus of un/decipherable terrains (Roy 2011) towards a critical examination
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3 and questioning of the moral contribution of different practices within the *cultural polis*. In other
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5 words, it emphasises how important it is to explore where constructive practices in cultural policy-
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7 making are taking place, whichever the labelled registered (formal/informal); and encourages
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9 further research to engage into a 'critical contemplation on our current vocational categorisation
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11 and the motives behind it' (Marques et al., 2013:107).
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16 In what Roy (2009) has termed 'civic governmentality', and besides the neoliberal logics of urban
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18 entrepreneurialism, there is still some 'civility' that 'enables important forms of solidarity, sociality,
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20 support and security that cannot be captured by social or economic entrepreneurialism alone'
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22 (McFarlane, 2012b: 2809). Such an understanding resonates with empirical evidence from the
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24 cultural sector, whereby entrepreneurs undertake ethical work. Indeed, restoring the concept of
25
26 'moral economy', Bank (2006: 456) shows how participants in the urban cultural economy 'are self-
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28 consciously engaged in forms of practice that contain ideas about what is 'good' (and therefore
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30 'bad'), exhibit moral ways of acting towards others and negotiate the balance between holding
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32 instrumental or non-instrumental values'.
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38 While still emerging in postcolonial urban studies literature, little interest has been devoted to the
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40 political and social motivations of these participants and workers in the cultural field, where
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42 attention has often been drawn to (nonetheless critical) processes of individuation and exploitation.
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44 In this regard, this article draws attention to such imports from cultural economy scholarship in
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46 articulating crucial dynamics in the field of Southern urban studies: it on the one hand provides
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48 relevant cases of cultural practices that tend to be missing in (non-Western or Southern) urban
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50 studies; and on another, it sheds light onto cultural planning practices situated outside of the
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52 conventional scholarly map of this field. In doing so, this contribution may also illustrate and
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54 demonstrate how 'resistance strategies generated in subaltern urban spaces could be transmitted
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56 from the global South to the global North' (Schindler, 2014:801-2).
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5 *In fine* then, we want to argue that the *cultural polis* provides an actual terrain to explore more
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7 hopeful and generative possibilities in cities where a particular entanglement between politics,
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9 businesses and urban marketing tend to produce policies oriented towards cultural
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11 entrepreneurialism as well as political resistance through alternative cultural and arts forms (Dinardi,
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13 2015). In Southern urban contexts in particular, cultural expressions and artistic production affirm
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15 their dual nature, as essential resources in the livelihoods and lives of urban citizens: they can both
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17 provide an emotional foundation to urban development, and articulate a political efficacy to the
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19 postcolony's (Mbembe, 2001) ideologies and practices. Contrasting the examples of Bela Maré and
20
21 the *MCU*, official recognition from public institutions is crucial to a progressive *cultural polis*,
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23 whether through *ponto de cultura* or municipal cultural programming such as *Tandem Paris-Dakar*.
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25 However, to genuinely enact the *cultural polis* with all its generative possibilities, formal recognition
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27 calls for an effective facilitation and accommodation, actual, continuous and committed support,
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29 that embraces the values, ideologies and perspectives of (in)formal, ordinary cultural policy-makers
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31 *de facto*. As the Bela Maré example will stress, and the experience of the *MCU* shows, this means
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33 democratising access to the means of cultural production – such as the building, money and MoU of
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35 the *MCU* – as well as acknowledging the potential of cultural invention and collective creation led by
36
37 young people for political action and social change. Put differently, the latter implies accepting that
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39 at times local authorities '*don't understand*' and even '*know nothing about*' what happens at the
40
41 grassroots level, and thus need to assuredly endorse and empower citizens' informed/al expertise,
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43 with the aim to learn from, as well as improve communication channels with, civil society
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45 organisations.
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52 **RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL: Galpão Bela Maré**
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3 Rio de Janeiro *favelas* have become a global emblem of urban informality. Despite their specific
4 features and different topography, morphology and history (Varley, 2013), they can be broadly
5 characterised by an inefficient state provision of basic services and infrastructure; informal relations
6 of work and income generation; self-built and highly dense housing in environmentally vulnerable
7 locations; lower-than-average economic and educational indicators; and a plurality of identities and
8 strong social conviviality, with a presence of black, indigenous and migrant populations
9 (Observatório de Favelas, 2009). The city, with its six million people, is a striking example of social
10 polarisation, where wealthy and poor extremes share the same territory in an atypical mishmash of
11 social distance and spatial proximity.
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24 At times these peripheral areas are celebrated in view of their sustainable, flexible and
25 entrepreneurial character, seen 'as spaces open to new possibilities for creativity, urban innovation
26 and social experimentation... where what is 'in process' is in permanent experimentation' (Jáuregui,
27 2011:59). At others, they are stigmatised as spaces of poverty, violence and crime, and defined
28 through their absences, lack, precariousness and dissonant aspects in relation to formal urban
29 patterns (De Souza e Silva, 2014:61).
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40 When Galpão Bela Maré, a contemporary visual arts centre opened its doors towards the end of
41 2011, it sparked controversy. What role should a modern contemporary arts venue play in a *favela*,
42 especially when it is in Maré, that is, Rio's largest and most convoluted area in the North zone?
43 Originated in 1940s, Maré is made up of 16 diverse communities with over 140,000 inhabitants. It
44 still functions under territorial control of rival, armed drug-trafficking gangs and criminal networks.
45 Military police operations are frequent and disruptive for local life, often involving armed
46 confrontations with drug traffickers and random shootings. Maré's civil society has long reported
47 human rights violations and an increasing militarisation of public space, and continues to fight
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3 racism, social stigmas and dominant media portrayals that reduce the diversity and complexity of
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5 local life to drug dealing and crime.
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10 The arts centre opened in a recovered warehouse, two blocks away from Brazil Avenue, one of the
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12 main roads into the city. It was created by a local social organisation, Observatório de Favelas, with a
13
14 transformative aim: to create a space for cultural exchanges between different city parts and re-
15
16 create the *favelas* as public space for social encounters that could contribute to fill a vacuum of
17
18 cultural infrastructure locally. It inaugurated with an arts residency and education programme
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20 (*Travessias*) through collaboration between national and international artists, and also showcased
21
22 the work of Imagens do Povo, a collective group of social photography, research and training. In
23
24 2014, the centre was designated '*ponto de cultura*', an official recognition by the state in support of
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26 community-based cultural activities as part of the points of culture national programme.
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32 Bela Maré, thus, joined the multiplicity of *favela*-based arts initiatives that in producing new
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34 aesthetic languages, forms and experimentations nurture the city's *solo cultural* (cultural soil), from
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36 where new knowledges, action possibilities and cultural practices then sprout (Barbosa and
37
38 Gonçalves Dias, 2013). In the last two decades a surge of periphery-based cultural groups have
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40 opened up the field of culture policy making towards more democratic, plural and diverse forms of
41
42 expression. This 'periphery's culture' movement, guided by a concern with social justice, has become
43
44 a powerful counterpoint to dominant social *apartheid* discourses in the city (Costa and Agustini,
45
46 2014:9). In Maré, the Cultural Guide of Favelas, a collaborative mapping of local cultural practices,
47
48 identified 174 existing initiatives ranging from music, dance and fashion, to theatre, crafts, circus and
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50 photography, including a community museum with permanent exhibitions, arts workshops,
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52 educational seminars and oral history research projects. These practices inscribe Maré with new
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54 inventive meanings in a context marked by social exclusion, violence, and urban fragmentation, and
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3 in so doing, remind us that 'the urban is not ready-made, but always in formation' (McFarlane,
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5 2012:101).
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10 From outside, Bela Maré resembles a large warehouse; its interior aesthetics allude to a modern,
11
12 contemporary art gallery. It has an established team of five paid staff: a coordinator, two education
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14 officers, a porter and a cleaner, and sometimes further collaborators are hired to work on specific
15
16 projects. At the time of writing there is no voluntary, unpaid staff. The centre hosts events in
17
18 partnerships with other educational and arts organisations from outside the *favela*, creating
19
20 unconventional social connections and cultural exchanges. Next door sits Maré's arts centre (CAM)
21
22 which houses an award-winning contemporary dance school (Lia Rodriguez's) as well as a range of
23
24 arts and cultural activities. The centre also hosts Bela Labe, a technology laboratory with three
25
26 permanent and four temporary staff, who conduct research projects on *favelas'* data.
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36 Despite what could be seen as an emerging, *favela*-based, mainstream cultural institution in the
37
38 making, Maré's arts production remains largely invisible beyond its borders. While the focus of
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40 cultural policies in Rio de Janeiro has widened in the last decade towards providing financial support
41
42 beyond its wealthiest areas – South zone and centre –, the latter still concentrate most of the city's
43
44 public infrastructure, investments and services. Popular practices such as *Baile Funk* (funk parties)
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46 have been deemed illegal and are still banned in some *favelas*. Allegedly associated to drug-
47
48 trafficking, violence and excessive eroticisation, *Baile Funk* was expected to meet a number of legal
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50 requirements that became stumbling blocks for organisers. The criminalisation of this cultural form,
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52 through conservative media and political parties, religious groups and police forces, remains one of
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54 the main forms of violence against Rio's poor and black young people (De Souza e Silva, 2014:68).
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3 If we conceive of informality as a form of practice rather than a labour or a territorial categorisation
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5 (McFarlane, 2012), some of Bela Maré's actions can indeed be deemed informal. Some health and
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7 safety regulations are not particularly observed on site and arrangements with local suppliers are at
8
9 times informally made. Post-grant accounting is also an issue for cultural organisations from
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11 peripheral areas which often do not have enough administrative resources in place to comply with
12
13 the state's bureaucratic audit structures. If informality also denotes a complex relationship between
14
15 the state and civil society, we can examine how Bela Maré as a non-profit organisation has
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17 interacted with the state's cultural secretariat:
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22 *They [local authorities] thought we didn't have to be paid because we are a non-profit*
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24 *organisation. They don't understand; they get confused. So they think we only need money*
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26 *for projects... but who is going to maintain this structure? Who is going to pay the*
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28 *receptionist, the internet, the water, the electricity, the sanitation, the pavement? (Jailson de*
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30 *Souza e Silva, Observatório de Favelas founder, interview 2014)*
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34 Doing not-for-profit cultural work was mistakenly seen as doing unpaid volunteering. While public
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36 support had been granted for the initial organisation of the arts centre main exhibition, claims have
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38 been made in relation to ensuing funding cuts based on governmental officers' misconceived views.
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40 The main challenge for organisations such as Observatório de Favelas, then, become for official
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42 cultural policies to find ways of supporting the artistic training of *favela*-based young people, so as to
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44 democratise access to the means of cultural production and acknowledge the potential of cultural
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46 invention and collective creation in the city's periphery.
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51 The case of Bela Maré raises a number of questions about urban informality. Is it a formal cultural
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53 institution located in an informal setting? To what extent is the concept of informality useful to
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55 define its structural, legal, institutional and/or organisational dimensions? Bela Maré, far from being
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3 a disorganised or squatted venue, unsettles a common, taken-for-granted conception of Maré as an
4 informal settlement merely defined by poverty and violence, and produces a new representation
5 that builds on arts and cultural collaboration with other venues, groups and initiatives, engaging
6 with the official cultural-policy domain. It also problematises the meaning of informality as that
7 which is unplanned or spontaneous (Castillo, 2001:105, cited in Varley, 2013:346) or that which
8 involves irregular processes of land use, as the building was actually bought by the Observatório.
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18 Apart from a rich cultural economy, Maré's entrepreneurship is remarkable. A census of economic
19 entrepreneurial activity by the Observatório de Favelas (2011-2013), with the support of local
20 residents' associations, revealed the existence of 3,182 commercial undertakings, that is, one every
21 42 people, mainly in commerce and services, particularly bars, beauty salons and clothing.
22 Informality was not an issue for exclusion in the census, insofar as activities and workspaces were
23 not illicit or criminal, such as those concerning the clandestine reproduction of CDs or clothes
24 brands. Of every four undertakings three were found to be informal and half of them didn't have the
25 intention to formalise the business (Observatório de Favelas, 2014). This informal, dynamic,
26 heterogeneous and productive economic and cultural market disrupts the 'myth of marginality' in
27 the *favela* (Perlman, 2004).
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42 This brief look at Maré provides a glimpse of the limitations of the concept of informality understood
43 as separated from the realm of the formal. To label *favela*-based cultural and arts production as
44 informal in view of the harsh circumstances in which it is developed seems simplistic. In fact, the
45 functioning of Bela Maré is closer to any other formal cultural venue than to an informal,
46 improvised, disorganised or unregulated cultural initiative. Rio *favelas'* long-standing struggle to be
47 recognised as a constitutive part of the city, rather than its informal other, is suggestive of the need
48 for the urban studies community to examine the city as a social whole (Roy, 2013), which, by
49 definition, includes the vibrant cultural production of *favelas*, and to transcend simplistic notions of
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3 informal urbanism, especially in a post-Olympic context that displayed a spectacularisation of
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5 peripheral cultural forms.
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9 **DAKAR, SENEGAL: *Africulturban* and *Maison des Cultures Urbaines (MCU)***
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13 In West Africa in general, and in Senegal in particular, the cultural sector has been growing and
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15 structuring itself essentially through the action of microenterprises and NGOs, which have invested
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17 time, energy and personal capital into the whole chain of cultural production. This is the case of
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19 *Africulturban*¹, a youth centre for urban cultures, which has invested in the depleted municipal
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21 cultural centre of the popular peripheral area of Dakar, Pikine, since 2006, creating a space for
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23 younger generations to access training in cultural action and enjoy cultural production and
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25 consumption of urban cultures. In a context characterised by a generalised discredit towards the
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27 State, in which ‘not only urban African growth is not linked to job creation, but governments have
28
29 been leading a politics of political and economic centralisation that is contrary to any promotion of
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31 democracy or local participation’ (Diouf, 2013:54), these informal cultural planners – or *de facto*
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33 cultural policy-makers, or even better, *cultural polis* makers, perform in synch with the social fabric
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35 in which they are embedded, enacting significant links between cultural production and political as
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37 well as social action.
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43 Highlighting the exceptional dimension of Senegal’s civil society on the continent (Tilouine, 2014),
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45 this snapshot from Dakar’s cultural scene stresses how creative intermediaries emerging from the
46
47 civil society participate in their *cultural polis* by reconnecting their practices and initiatives with the
48
49 macro-spheres of institutional politics in the field. In fact, the experience of *Africulturban* and the
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51 *Maison des Cultures Urbaines (MCU)* is especially relevant for it shows a multi-layered urban society,
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56 ¹*Africulturban* founded by the hip hop artist Matador, member of pioneer group, *Wa BMG 44*, from Dakar’s banlieue,
57 Thiaroye. For more information, see Wikipedia entry created by Mbaye JF:
58 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matador_\(WA_BMG_44\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matador_(WA_BMG_44))
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3 composed of engaged, concerned and informed citizens capable of providing alternative readings of
4 the city, while developing other urban imaginaries and practices through their own culturalscapes.
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7 Incribed in a context generally marked by insufficient support from public institutions, this
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10 experience demonstrates the capacity for ordinary citizens to engage with and inform their *cultural*
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12 *polis*, animated by creative production, citizen consciousness and political activism, while effectively
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14 balancing both instrumental goals (economic potential of cultural production) with moral-political
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16 value of public good / socially useful character (Banks, 2006:464-5).
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25 For ten years, *Africulturban* has been setting up a library as well as the first school of DJing in West
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27 Africa; organising educational initiatives through urban art forms in primary schools (*Hip Hop*
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29 *Educ'action*); training sessions in media and new technologies as well as workshops in cultural
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31 leadership and management (*Youth Urban Media Academy*); and an international hip hop festival
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33 dedicated to urban cultures (Fest2HH) in partnership with Mauritanian counterpart *Assalamaleikum*
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35 *Festival*. Drawing on 'affective affinities'²(Arvidsson et al., 2008:127; Bauwens, 2009) to coordinate
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37 its various initiatives, *Africulturban* has thus engaged in Dakar's *cultural polis* based on principles of
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39 solidarity and common good, investing both into the social and economic values of its cultural
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41 products. Such an approach has also been present in another popular periphery of Dakar,
42
43 Guédiawaye, where the *Guédiawaye Hip Hop Centre (G Hip Hop)* founded by the hip hop artist and
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45 *Y'En A Marre*³ activist, Fou Malade, provides training to the youth in urban cultures professions as
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47 well as civic education. As the Director of *Africulturban* puts it:
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55 ² We are here referring to the process whereby participants aim primarily to accumulate respect and recognition from their
56 community rather than monetary compensation.

57 ³ For a brief presentation and discussion of the civic movement *Y'En A Marre*, see N. Benga, 'Les Murs-Murs Sur Nos Murs.
58 Quête De Citoyenneté Et Culture Urbaine À Dakar (1990-2000)', in Diouf M. and R. Fredericks (eds.), *Les Arts De La*
59 *Citoyenneté Au Sénégal: Espaces Contestés Et Civilités Urbaines* (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 357-77
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3 *My job is very simple: it is to make artistic propositions that people comment, positively*
4 *or negatively, and that each time I make such artistic propositions, it is to give answers*
5 *to political problems (Amadou Fall Ba, Interview 2016)*
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11 These activist engagements (among others) from Dakar's hip hop scene reveal *de facto* cultural
12 policy-makers, civil society energies animated by a dedicated *vision* and resolutely seeking to
13 construct and manage a civic realm, through productive strategies and *actions* implemented in their
14 field of practice for long deserted by conventional policy-makers. These *cultural polis* makers and
15 their initiatives, however, have not gone unnoticed, and in 2013, the highest institutional spheres of
16 cultural policy engaged a political rapprochement towards the issues of urban cultures, with the
17 unprecedented nomination of a technical adviser in charge of urban cultural affairs for the Senegal's
18 Ministry of Culture. Further official recognition occurred two years later, in 2015, when UNESCO
19 Regional Office (BREDA) approached *Festa2HH* organisers to hold a roundtable on copyrights to
20 highlight the role of its Convention 2005 on the 'Promotion and Protection on the Diversity of
21 Cultural Expressions'.
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37 Besides, Dakar's local government also recognised the importance of this field, first by dedicating in
38 2013 its platform of exchange *Tandem Paris-Dakar* in part to urban cultures (a section curated by
39 *Africulturban*' director); and more consequently, at the end of 2014, by officially launching a new
40 training and promotion space for urban cultures in a central area of Dakar, the *Maison des Cultures*
41 *Urbaines* (MCU). The *outs* and their actions that for a time could indeed be deemed informal were
42 thus occupying the forefront of the *cultural polis*, unsettling the borderlands of in/formal cultural
43 policy-making.
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54 Drawing on the experience and competencies of active civic forces from the hip hop scene, the *MCU*
55 stemmed from an extensive process of exchanges and discussions initiated in 2011 and marked by
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3 the engagement of seven of the most dedicated structures involved in Dakar's urban cultures
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5 (*Africulturban*, *G Hip Hop*, *Sankara Studios*⁴, *99 Records*⁵, *Kay Fecc*⁶, *Yakaar*⁷, *Doxamdem Squad*
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7 *Graff*⁸). *MCU's* launch was made official with a meeting of these various organisations'
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9 representatives and the Mayor himself in his office, and the signature of a MoU, which allocated an
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11 80 million FrCFA grant per year for a three-year period for the management and preliminary
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13 activities of the *MCU*. Under Mayor Khalifa Sall, Dakar's government has been claiming an inclusive
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15 and participatory approach which, for the *MCU*, implied having the members of this consortium as
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17 effective stakeholders, owning the creation process and collectively piloting and governing the *MCU*.
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22 For practical purposes, the consortium unanimously chose *Africulturban's* director, as responsible
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24 member in charge of urban cultural affairs for the municipal government, a function attached to the
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26 Mayor's office and mandate. Considering the *MCU's* format and mission, *Africulturban* seems to
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28 have effectively inspired its development, providing crucial benchmarking in terms of its
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30 experiences; however, the inclusive and participatory approach remained instrumental in facilitating
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32 the creation of new tools for urban cultures, such as the unprecedented Cultural Incubator and Fund
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34 for Urban Cultures now hosted at the *MCU*.
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40 *There is money, a physical building and a MoU that say you guys go ahead, you have*
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42 *the expertise, we ourselves do not know nothing about urban cultures; so you're in*
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44 *charge... And that's something that the mayor recognised in complete honesty... And I*
45
46 *would explain to the mayor what it is that needs to be done, simple as that!* (Amadou
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48 Fall Ba, interview 2016)
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52 ⁴Audio-visual studios and music and event production company founded in 2003 by pioneer hip hop artist *Didier Awadi*.

53 ⁵Label of music production and promotion founded by hip hop artist *Simon BisbiClan* in 2006.

54 ⁶International Festival of all Dances co-founded in 2002 by *Gacirah Diagne*, with an explicit focus on urban dances through
55 its projects of *Urbanation* and *Battle of the Year*.

56 ⁷Festival of Urban Music founded by *Safouane Pindra's Optimist Productions* in 2001, with a dedicated Hip Hop Awards
57 ceremony.

58 ⁸International NGO dedicated to the promotion of graffiti, street art, and visual production founded in 2007 by graffiti
59 artist *Docta*, and which organises the *FestiGraff Festival* and the *Graff and Health Festival*.
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5 As Holston reminds us, 'sites of metropolitan innovation often emerge at the very sites of
6 metropolitan degradation'; and in doing so, 'propose a city with a different order of citizenship'
7 (Holston, 2009:245-6). This section highlighted how ordinary urban citizens actively participate in
8 creating an alternative public sphere, through their constructive intervention in the cultural field;
9 and, how such participatory practices have informed new governance mechanisms, with a
10 transformation of the relations between state and citizens and a generation of new policy-making
11 practices.
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22 However, rather than suggesting cultural workers and makers as new urban saints, this insight shows
23 how citizens' social and political values are both important and made evident in the context of urban
24 cultural policy-making. Indeed, through their creative practices (which in the creative economy
25 scholarship are criticised for being individualised and thus demoralised), these *cultural polis* makers
26 demonstrate how (non-economic) moral and ethical values animate and motivate their desire to
27 contribute to the cultural vibrancy of their city (Banks, 2006). These informal cultural policy-makers,
28 citizens usually maintained on the *outskirts* of urban policy, thus highlight how socially useful their
29 cultural work can be, while negotiating a space to develop non-instrumental profit-seeking interests.
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42 Enacting both an informed vision and constructive actions for the cultural field, the
43 *Africulturban/MCU* snapshot draws attention to a variety of motives and initiatives of cultural actors
44 and reveals 'the possibilities for progressive social and political actions contained in cultural work'
45 (Banks, 2006:460). Moreover, this experience illustrates the processes and dynamics involved in a
46 progressive *cultural polis*, characterised by a constant redefinition of the role of informal participants
47 from the civil society and formal policy-makers of cultural public institutions within the cultural field.
48 As Canclini affirms 'this combination of scales of organisation and participation has many
49 consequences, among which [...] the idea of a horizontal culture of public interest and global reach.
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3 [...] But it implies a rethinking of the old theme of the relationship between political parties and
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5 social movements' (Canclini, 2016: 10).
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10 While in African contexts as well as in the wider global South, 'the bulk of city building can be
11
12 attributed to actors outside the state and formal business sector' (Pieterse, 2011:6), this example
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14 reveals a crucial aspect of Senegalese urban identities: the intricate entanglement of living, working
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16 and DIY spaces (Diouf, 2013: 57). *Cultural polis* makers perform within a context that is characterised
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18 by a popular urban economy and informal practices, which at the interstices of formal and informal
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20 territorialities, occupy the majority of the population. However, from their practices, they enact an
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22 informal political culture that claims self-reliance, accountability, and empowerment as well as both
23
24 the involvement and engagement of citizens into democratic processes that are of their concerns.
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26 They thus remind the productive capacity of recognising diversified actors in feeding into a cultural
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28 agenda and policy-making that tackle into the multiplicity of participants: a relational *cultural polis*.
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32 33 **CONCLUSION** 34 35 36

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38 This article has engaged with the question of informal urbanism through the lenses of what we have
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40 called the *cultural polis* in two cities of the global South - Rio de Janeiro and Dakar. Taking up
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42 Mehrotra's (2010: xiii) question of what makes up informal urbanism in a Latin American, and we
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44 add, an African context, we have explored the usefulness and limitations of the notion of the
45
46 informal in understanding the workings of cultural urbanism in subaltern locations. In so doing, we
47
48 have sought to expand the focus of the urban studies literature on informality towards a concern
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50 with cultural policy and planning and the role grassroots culture and the arts can play in
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52 transforming cities and informing policies. Cultural policy studies, in turn, can be enriched by paying
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54 closer attention to the question of urban informality and the ways the formal-informal relationship
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56 shapes cultural governance in contemporary cities. Moving away from a binary dichotomy and
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3 against a presumed hierarchy of order/worth between formal and informal participants, spaces and
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5 practices, the governing processes of the *cultural polis* can, then, be informed by Amin's proposition
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7 of a 'relational politics of propinquity' and its implications for urban governance. Indeed, from this
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9 perspective that embraces agonistic engagements, which could inform a politics of solidarity (Roy,
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11 2013), the *cultural polis* becomes 'an act of making the invisible register of political life visible (e.g.
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13 by decentralising decision-making to civic organisations and communities, by envisioning planning as
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15 discursively negotiated, by bringing into play sentiments, ethics, emotions, aesthetics, ambiguity and
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17 uncertainty into the field of what counts as political)' (Amin, 2004: 40).
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22 We have sought to discuss some of the underground sociabilities (Jovchelovitch and Priego-
23
24 Hernández, 2013) and the hidden, ordinary cultural production and creativity that re-signify and re-
25
26 create urban spaces in Latin America and Africa. Following AlSayyad (2004:25), we have seen that
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28 'informality should not be read as social disorganisation or anarchy'; rather, our case studies
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30 highlight the *form* of that which is allegedly seen as in-formal, showing the intimate and intricate
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32 relationship with the domain of the formal. Moreover, transcending in/formality towards a genuine
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34 realisation of the *cultural polis* recognises that the crucial issue for a sustainable transformation of a
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36 cultural field is to invest into composite governance mechanisms, which tackle into people as
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38 infrastructure (Simone, 2004) as the multiple energies composing the city. Put differently, we cannot
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40 access a satisfactory, even if always partial, account of city-ness in Africa [as well as in Latin America]
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42 without mining this border zone where the subjective and the material collide' (Pieterse, 2011: 18).
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48 Cultural policy, as any public policy, being as much about a vision as implementation strategies, we
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50 can see how policy-makers *de facto* emerge onto urban scenes, in their capacity to develop cultural
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52 programmes, as well as encourage governments to invest in the operationalization of such
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54 initiatives. These multiple energies composing the *cultural polis*, those often *outs* can indeed play a
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56 crucial role in supporting the conventional *ins*, elected officials and public authorities, in clarifying
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3 their role, actions and responsibilities for sustainable urban cultural planning and well-being for
4 urban communities. In these uncertain times marked by institutional corruption, public funding cuts,
5 increasing inequality and distrust of political elites, grassroots creative initiatives re-invent urban
6 imaginaries, produce new modes of engaging cultural audiences and create new languages and
7 knowledge that seek to cross and contest spatial and social divisions. In so doing, they reconfigure
8 and revitalise the governance of the urban cultural field, as shown in the cases of Rio de Janeiro and
9 Dakar. A *cultural polis* then resembles Pieterse's 'relational city' (2008) as far as urban creativity,
10 cultural planning and artistic initiatives are concerned. It reaffirms a regeneration and re-
11 composition of the city through culture and creativity as a complex process with ambivalent
12 implications and a plurality of actors and political practices.
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27 To conclude, artistic and cultural production are revitalising the city as powerful and critical tools
28 capable of documenting the forces at play within urban spaces as well as initiating fundamental
29 debates and innovative interactions. Here, informality as a crucial practice within the *cultural polis*
30 reminds how the latter is, besides its functional dimension, characterised by an affective element: its
31 sense of community, with citizens participating from their respective capabilities and
32 equipotentialities (Bauwens, 2005). We hope that our focus on urban informality will move the
33 discussion on transcending short-sighted telescopic urbanisms that only see parts of the city for the
34 whole (Amin, 2013:477), or are trapped in formal/informal binary thinking; and that it will encourage
35 exploring alternative urban cultural planning approaches by looking at the unpredictable encounters
36 and contestation (Watson, 2009) as well as unusual collaborations that make up the core of
37 '(in)formal urbanism', with its *ins* and its *outs*.
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12
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Figure 1. Galpão Bela Maré. Left: Exterior with Camerata Laranjeiras. Right: Interior during the video-art installation *Microutopias: Inventive practices and imagined futures*, curated collaboratively. Rio de Janeiro, 15th May 2016. Photos by Dinardi, C.

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Fig. 2: Artwork reproduced with the kind permission of SallNgaary