On the crossroads of preservation

Revitalizing São Miguel chapel in a working class district of São Paulo

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Abstract

The seventeenth century São Miguel Chapel, located in a working class district of São Paulo city, had been in disuse for around 10 years. In the second half of the 1970s, the body managing this listed building faced the problem of how to revitalize it given the profile of the surrounding local population. The response to this problem, grounded on an initial ethnographic survey of local cultural production, involved mobilizing a substantial number of popular artists from the city's East Zone and led to the emergence of the Popular Movement of Art. Through an account of this experience and a debate with technical staff from CONDEPHAAT, the article explores some of the issues that situate the preservation of cultural heritage within a field of conflicting interests and ideologies.

Keywords: cultural heritage, revitalization, mobilization, participation, popular movement.

Resumo

A capela seiscentista de São Miguel, localizada em bairro popular da cidade de São Paulo, mantivera-se sem uso por cerca de 10 anos. Na segunda metade dos anos 1970, colocava-se ao órgão gestor desse bem tombado o problema de sua revitalização em face do perfil da população do seu entorno. O equacionamento dessa questão, a partir de levantamento etnográfico sobre a produção cultural local, acarretou a mobilização de um número significativo de artistas populares da Zona Leste e a emergência do Movimento Popular de Arte. Por meio do relato dessa experiência e em debate com técnicos do Condephaat, são explorados alguns temas que inserem a preservação do patrimônio

cultural num campo de conflito de interesses e luta ideológica.

Palavras chave: patrimônio cultural; revitalização; mobilização; participação; movimento popular.

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Here I provide a brief account of a project conducted in São Miguel Paulista in 1977-1978.[1] As will become clear over the course of my lecture, the revitalization of a listed building poses problems in various directions. I defer exploration of these *various directions* to our later discussion: I believe this will be more productive for everyone.

The events originated from a proposal by the São Paulo Prefecture's Department of Historic Heritage, which looked to obtain a socio-cultural profile of the population living in the city's East Zone, combining this survey with the revitalization of buildings of historical interest located in the area. This concern was related to the broader issue of revitalizing monuments in areas occupied by sectors of society that did not necessarily share values that, for the conservation bodies, justified their protection.. As a researcher, it promised to be an excellent opportunity for me to explore the insertion of 'historic heritage' in the cultural dynamics of the working classes, specifically in relation to the planned appropriation of a building of particular significance to the history of São Paulo and even of Brazil.[2]

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1   Lecture followed by a debate held in July 1983 during the seminar *Culture, heritage and preservation*, organized by technical staff from CONDEPHAAT (Historic, Artistic and Tourist Heritage Defence Council) of São Paulo State. The sound recording was transcribed by Mada Penteado, revised by the author and published in Arantes, 1984. The text was revised by the author for the present publication. The conflict between the preservation agencies, the Diocese of São Miguel Paulista and the Popular Movement of Art, which underlay the process described here, was explored in Arantes & Andrade, 1981.

2   São Miguel Church is located in the area of the former village of São Miguel de Ururaí, founded in the mid-1560s, today the district of São Miguel Paulista in the municipality of São Paulo. Dedicated to the Archangel Michael (São Miguel Arcanjo), it was run by Jesuits until 1750. The first chapel, built around 1580, was replaced by the current chapel in 1622, as inscribed on the lintel of the main doorway. The porched building with its single nave, main chapel and beamed ceiling was constructed from adobe and

The proposal set out from a premise that, in my view, was false: namely that the population that lived in the area where this building was located, São Paulo's East Zone, was culturally poor and that their forms of expression were slight or virtually non-existent. One of our first clashes occurred precisely around such conceptions, derived from preconceived notions of what 'art' or 'culture' are or should be.

Given this situation it struck me as fairly unproductive to engage in an abstract discussion of deep-rooted conceptions concerning what 'culture' or 'art' were, and I proposed a kind of adventure, primarily involving an attempt to discover what so-called 'local cultural production' amounted to from the viewpoint of the people concerned – what they would effectively consider to be 'art.' In other words the research proposed to identify *in situ* the material on which the agents of the conservation body would work when developing a revitalization project. Clearly an enterprise like this, which took revitalization to be an intervention and sought to 'excavate' the site where this process would take place – i.e. explore its local cultural production in search of something that was not immediately visible to the administrators – is a long-term project. We decided, therefore, to limit the research field to an area around a single building, choosing the São Miguel Paulista Chapel for this purpose.

A research assistant[3] and I went to live for a period in São Miguel with the aim of mapping the political field of cultural production in the neighbourhood, the context for the planned 'revitalization' process that, in our view, would have to be implemented through a project developed in collaboration with its intended future users – a somewhat daring proposal at a time when Brazil was still living under the military dictatorship.

All excavation work – cultural archaeology, so to speak – necessarily begins with what is visible on the surface. Our starting points were the neighbourhood associations, churches, football clubs, a surprising number of networks of every kind that we discovered there. This was the first surprise. The sheer number of formal institutions found in the district was the first sign that we were going in the right direction. In fact given that most of the

covered with a gable roof. Inside there are pieces made from carved jacarandá wood, officially registered by IPHAN, CONDEPHAAT and COMPRESP. The building was listed at federal level in 1938, state level in 1974 and municipal level in 1991.

3   Tadeu Giglio, then an undergraduate student of Social Sciences at Unicamp. His collaboration has been essential to the accomplishment of this project's goals.

population of São Miguel Paulista, the overwhelming majority of which is working class, only returns home late in the evening and leaves very early, often before dawn, to work outside the district, the number of active associations and entities was very high, just as their purposes were extremely diverse.

However, it was not actually with the formal associations that we wished to work, in part because we had observed that they were already in contact with various theatrical and musical groups in São Paulo city. Clearly life did not stop on the borders of Penha…[4] Many of these groups indeed took advantage of these contacts to promote and develop their own work. Moreover our focus was on the potential users of the space in question, since we deemed it unlikely that residents from other more distant districts or from the middle or upper classes would take any active part in revitalizing a 'dead' space, so to speak, in an outlying place like São Miguel Paulista.[5] Indeed, in contrast to what was being planned,[6] we thought it reasonable to consider future use of the Chapel in conjunction with local residents, particularly those without access to the facilities needed for 'artistic' production.

So we began the research. Firstly we more or less arbitrarily delimited the area in which we would map the activities of interest to us. We observed that the Penha district was a significant limit, along with Itaquera and Itaim. The social and cultural boundaries of this area of the city are partly defined by the clubs people know, the *terreiros* that they frequent. Students who go more or less to the same schools and courses, people who share the same problems like a lack of adequate public transport, the poor state of public roads, the rundown housing, the lack of hospitals. Sharing these impoverished conditions made people feel identified with each other and develop some sense of commonness.

Having delimited the territory through social (rather than administrative) criteria, we deepened our 'excavation.' Setting out from this network of more visible institutions, we looked to unearth the initially invisible meshwork where culture is produced in everyday life. Our goal was to encounter groups with whom we could discuss the Chapel's revitalization. We began by

4   A reference to the district that at the time had the highest concentration of public services and commerce in the East Zone.

5   The distance by car between the middle and upper class districts in São Paulo and the São Miguel Chapel is over 40km across the city centre.

6   The revitalization proposal with the most backing among the preservation agencies was to install a Museum of Popular Sacred Art in the chapel.

conducting several formal interviews with directors of neighbourhood associations, Rotary Clubs, the Lions, and we were told to contact various people in the district renowned as experts of its history. In the process we collected some really very beautiful testimonies that allowed us to chart a series of historical events deemed significant by local residents. We continued until eventually we began to locate the tips of these roots in the dance halls, barber shops, bars, street corners, squares and markets and in the most unexpected places – including an Esperanto School!

However this was only possible after the initial superficial survey and from the moment when we began to live in the neighbourhood. We rented a small room in a kind of slum tenement. Despite our endless explanations, we were almost immediately identified as vendors. People created a history for us, they changed my name, calling me Toninho instead. This process of incorporating newcomers through forms of local sociability was extremely interesting! When you attain this degree of proximity, the social differences among the people with whom you are living become visible and stand out, but at the same time they are culturally elaborated by the group and by ourselves, including even changes of name. I was rebaptized, so to speak: I became Toninho the Bookseller. However much I insisted that I was not, I was a university professor and conducting research, this made little sense to them. They really did not believe me. So I continued to be a 'seller' for a good while until my work as a researcher turned into a reality for them. Unlike other residents, I spent the whole day in the neighbourhood: in other words, I did not leave for work in the morning to return only at night – or go out looking for a job. That made a big difference for them.

The first prolonged contacts took place on Saturday mornings, when local people generally met up. In São Miguel, residential blocks with a number of rooms are very common, one built next to another with a passageway between, a shower and a water tank for collective use. So neighbours meet each other at the tank, when going to take shower or in their doorways... The first positive sign of contact we received was on a Saturday morning when a note pushed under our door invited us to an Esperanto course. It came from a neighbour who attended classes on Saturday mornings. This middle-aged man was one of the first to lead us into these informal neighbourhood networks. The other was a barber who after attending to his last customer, at around nine in the evening, would shut the shop doors and, accompanied by two or three other musicians, would play and sing *chorinho* deep into the night.

So we gradually encountered these small groups and worked with them to try to understand how cultural production unfolded in São Miguel Paulista, seeing things from a different angle; not from the viewpoint of the institutions that had been the most visible when we first arrived. We began to identify another dimension, equally structured, only in a different way. It is more fluid, much more tenuous, precisely because it lacks the physical infrastructure, institutions, personnel and equipment to make it visible. Very often their raison d'être is this very invisibility, which, in the circumstances of São Miguel Paulista under military repression, was almost a condition of survival. Faced with conditions extremely adverse to the exercise of freedom and the use of creative spaces, in sum, adverse to pleasure, this is precisely what happens: expression is diverted to the bars, the backyards, to sporadic and occasional encounters. And in fact this was looked down on by the neighbourhood's more prominent people. After a month and a half or two months had passed, we left São Miguel having already set down roots there and we began to return specifically for encounters, meetings or interviews, or to make our observations on weekends.

This initial network began to expand and we changed the original research area since there were certain places where the relations were more dense, forming clusters of closely interconnected networks of musicians, poets, painters, illustrators, theatre groups, dance groups, circus performer groups, the aforementioned Esperanto group: numerous people who dedicated themselves individually or collectively to some form of artistic expression, not on a professional basis but regularly in their spare time, or in some cases even during work hours. For example, one duo who we knew first met in the factory bathroom. One was humming a tune, the other replied. They greeted each other and soon formed a musical duo that went on to enjoy considerable success in São Miguel. A theatre group, for its part, was formed in a section of Nitroquímica, a factory that also comprises one of the landmarks in the district's history. Two men who worked there came up with the idea of assembling a theatre group, writing a play and performing it. Their theatre group in fact lasted for 13 or 14 years and became highly popular. A couple who performed *caipira* music also ran a theatre group that was active for many years. Their group also kept records of its history, ranging from meeting minutes to financial reports, photos and newspaper cuttings.

It is also interesting to note that almost all these people had a box of keepsakes with souvenirs and objects representative of their memory and that of the group.Once a more friendly, frank and direct relationship had been established, people would bring a shoebox with papers inside. "*Look, perhaps this will be of interest to the research.*" These were unpublished poems, or theatre plays that had never been performed, some handwritten, others typed or photocopied. In this way we gradually made close contact with their histories and experiences. Though it was not our objective, this history started to interest us since we noted that the landmarks that appeared in the reconstruction of these individual and collective trajectories more or less coincided with the history of the district's urbanization. Indeed people very often used the reforms of the square as temporal markers in their individual and group histories. "*Ah, it was in Adhemar's time when they did that...*"; or: "*it was when they constructed that bandstand in the square*"; or: "*it was when they added those flower beds to the square...*" So this intersection of the trajectories of the groups and the history of the district's central square, where the historic Chapel is situated, became something of real interest to us.

Couple in Padre Aleixo Square, with a side view of São Miguel Chapel. Photo by Antonio Saggese, 1977.[7]

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7   All the other photos published in this article were taken by an unidentified photographer and belong to the archive of the São Paulo Prefecture's Department of Historical Heritage (DPH). They are presently published with DPH's permission.

The moment had arrived, then, when, in my view, we had the conditions to ask people explicitly: "What do you think of the Chapel? How do you think it could be suitably used?" The Chapel had been closed for around ten years without any regular activity. For them it was an empty space in a square that over time was being increasingly excluded from the daily life in the district. Excluded by the reforms; excluded by the intensity of the surrounding traffic; and excluded above all because the life of local inhabitants was mostly located outside the neighbourhood, i.e. around the factories and workplaces. In other words, there was a general trend towards confinement of these workers in rented rooms and, to a certain extent, this confinement was reinforced (in terms of the district's history) by the history of the square.

It was when I sat face-to-face with the people with whom I intended to discuss – with them and not with others – what to do with the Chapel that I revealed my objectives more clearly, not without some embarrassment over the fact I had not been able to do this openly from the beginning.

We had got on well before, but from that moment on, when I introduced the issue of what to do with the empty Chapel, our relations gradually became structured differently. We started to meet in a group of five people, who represented five fairly well-known music and theatre groups. Little by little we introduced other participants. After almost a month we began to hold meetings in the Chapel, which were open up to anyone interested. We already had a starting point for discussion. Prior to this, the meetings had taken place at the Esperanto Club, or in the shed used by an amateur theatre group, the Corpo Cênico Parque Paulistano.

At these meetings it was decided that they did not want to elaborate an abstract project for occupying the Chapel. They wanted, in fact, to occupy it effectively and in doing so express and explain their idea of how it could be used. It was possible at the time to negotiate this proposal with the municipal authorities and with the Diocese, which owned the property, and an agreement was reached for us to put together an experimental program. I had already suggested this possibility in my first contacts with the DPH (Historical Heritage Department) because, despite the good intentions of the people coordinating the work at the time, I had no faith at all in made-to-order plans, which materialize as though out of the blue. The groups also thought that way and, rather than develop a project, preferred to undertake a series of activities that demonstrated what they wanted in practice.

They formulated some general principles on how the experimental program should be organized, and this was implanted in more or less two months of production. The programmed activities took place during the course of December 1978. I wish to quickly present some of the principles established by the groups for organizing this activity, which are interesting since they make explicit the ideology that little by little took shape. It should be added that shortly before the start of this final phase of meetings, we had already been using the Chapel at certain times, which is why it had become urgent to begin some kind of activity to ensure access to the space granted.

The decision was taken to draft a document to be distributed during the program, in which these people canvass others who wanted to take part in these events, explaining their intentions and the issue of the Chapel's revitalization. According to them, the revitalization was not a question to be resolved by one, two or fifty people vaguely interested in that matter, but by those taking part in the activities. This was why it was very important for there to be no prior divulgation by the newspapers, radio or television. They believed that it would be extremely artificial to include people from other regions of the city, since although they might bring ideas, they would certainly not follow the process for too long.

They produced the document and before releasing it publically, the inevitable question arose: "*Who signs it?*" At that moment what they themselves would later refer to as a Popular Movement of Art (explicitly not a movement of popular art, which was a more widespread idea at the time) had already taken shape. In other words, over the course of this process a nucleus of debate and activity was effectively formed around the question of access to cultural production facilities in the East Zone of São Paulo, with all the characteristics of a popular movement: groups with similar needs, without affiliation to a specific political party and with diverse experiences, working towards common objectives.

The document contained the following. At the top of the pamphlet is written '*Popular Movement of Art*' and below, where the author's signature usually appears, is written '*Free entry*.' Here I should acknowledge that much of the wording that follows is clearly my own handiwork as an attempt to express the views of the assembly:

"Our objective is to draw the attention of the residents of São Miguel Paulista to the existence of local popular artistic production and to the problems that its producers have been facing. This experimental program is the first activity developed by our movement. As well as offering a sample of what currently exists in this area, we wish to unite people interested in the popular arts and to promote debates on the best ways of stimulating and developing them."

One point was considered fundamental by the group: they did not want the issue of the Chapel to be posed specifically or exclusively. Now as before, they did not want to focus their concern or the movement's raison d'être on the Chapel, access to which was problematic. Their main issue was their own musical and theatrical productions. Here it is worth adding a side note. As can be seen, the processes of reflection and activity were focused much more on cultural production in São Miguel Paulista – and, in this context, the possible uses of the Chapel – than on the Chapel itself. The focus was not the Chapel, but the social movement that had formed around its use.

The document went on:

"As well as exhibitions and presentations by the groups, there will be a meeting at the end of each working day to discuss how our activities are progressing. In this way we intend to assess the interest of the residents of the São Miguel region concerning the use of the Old Church [the term local people used for the Chapel] *for the development of local arts and for exchanges with groups from other localities. If, as well as watching the program, you wish to present a work or take part in the debates, ask for us at the Chapel entrance."*

This movement drew together various individuals and groups linked to theatre, dance, music, poetry, fine arts and so on, forming a collective that, at a given moment, took the following decisions concerning use of the Chapel during this program:

"1. *Use mainly the interior of the Old Church, as well as the side and front porches, the churchyard and Padre Aleixo Square, in accordance with the specific characteristics of each activity.*" Even when thinking about the Chapel, the focus and object of interest was the Chapel in the Square. For them, the Square and Chapel formed a single unit.

"2. *Simultaneously present more than one activity in different locations, so that the public is encouraged to move around the space.*" This is an idea reinforcing the first, that the Chapel was not to be used at one moment and the Square the
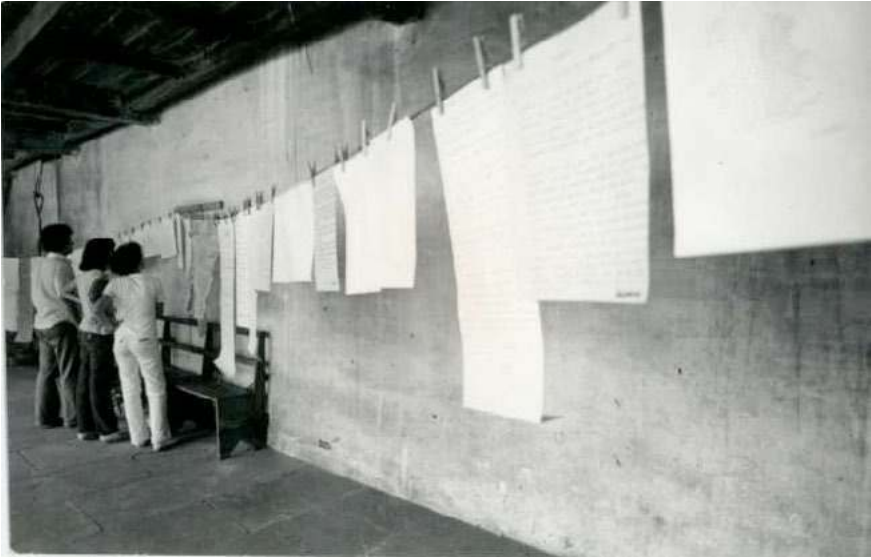
next, but that people should circulate continually between the Chapel and the Square, the porch etc., and that, with this aim in mind, the main door should be left open, meaning that some kind of windbreak should be used. A suggestion was made to hang some kind of fabric in the entrance, which ended up being a very beautiful patchwork quilt. They also placed a small table there with a cardboard sign declaring "'Free entry.' This was actually very important since many people did not dare enter the Chapel, believing they would have to pay a large entrance fee to do so as usually happened.

"*3. Organize permanent shows to avoid reducing the flow of visitors at the weekends and leave the Chapel open every night so that it can be visited after work hours.*" Because, of course, everyone works, arriving home after eight in the evening. So if they left the Chapel open during the day, during the week, it would be left to the children – which was good – or the flies. So it was decided to keep the Chapel open at night.

The Chapel was lit externally by the Regional Administration, which also wired the inside of the building, since electricity was also needed for the spotlights and sound system. In addition, after much insistence, the authority also constructed around 15 benches as the space was completely empty. Once it could be opened at night, a rota system was organized among the participants to ensure the physical integrity of the building. This is very interesting since, as time passed, people began taking control of the building and making it clear that they assumed responsibility for it. The local council staff were responsible for looking after the Chapel during the day, while the key was left at night with members of the Movement who took turns according to the pre-established rota. They ended up sleeping in the Chapel: they did not want to leave. At night, after work – and this is fascinating – people came to see the exhibition and stayed their talking, mainly in the front porch, which began to be used regularly as a meeting point. People met, talked about the program, of course, but also about everything else. And this helped create a climate highly conducive to the revitalization of a space that had been closed for such a long time. There was a horrible smell of insecticide, fleas, leaks, it even rained inside. On the night of a show by a group from Ferreira – set to present a very beautiful *bumba-meu-boi* – it poured down and everyone was soaked. End result: the group was unable to perform because of the rain!

The document continues:

"*4. Concentrate the live shows by groups on holidays and weekends, since on*

these days there is a higher flow of visitors and the artists themselves work during the week." The group presentations were made at the weekends, while during the week there was always an exhibition of drawings, paintings, carvings, leatherwork, and so on, and a form of artistic expression with which I was unfamiliar, which they called *poesia de varal*, 'washing line poetry.' This involves suspending a cord from which people hang texts with their poems, much like a washing line. Funnily enough an officer from the local council was with us the day that the suggestion was made: "*Shall we do some varal poetry?*" He corrected them: "*No, cordel poetry*" ('twine poetry,' referring to a genre of pamphlet-based poetry typical of the Brazilian Northeast). They said: "*No, it actually is varal*," explaining that the sheets were hung on the line like clothing. It was incredible. They put up a clothes line in the church porch, just like in someone's backyard, then another going in another direction, then another, until finally the line stretched across the entire nave, through the side altar and beyond, extending further and further. Every day someone else would arrive and hang up a poem; they changed the poems, left one for a few days and then replaced it with another; they left messages on one another's poems: "*I read your poetry, I liked it,*" "*I thought this was rubbish,*" etc. Some brought drawings. These activities flourished.

"*5. Distribute the activities to increase over time, so as to facilitate production and meet the probable growth in visitors.*" This is another relevant aspect. The group's intention was not to equip the Chapel in such a way that they would become dependent on the facilities, all the paraphernalia needed to produce any kind of work. Their idea was for the Chapel to have water and electricity, and no leaks, so that they could continue their activities with their own equipment. All they requested was the installation of electrical lighting and some benches for people to sit on. No infrastructure was assembled. The loudspeakers came from one group, a microphone was lent by a man who ran a street advertising service. In other words, the equipment used in the program was what the organizers were able to find, borrow and place in the space. The program had to adapt to this independent form of production.

Next came: "*Free public access to the activities with no entrance fees or collections.*" This principle was very significant since residents from the district are extremely reluctant to enter the Chapel, given that, at least during the decade after the church's closure as a religious venue, a number of exhibitions, book launches and other activities took place that were very clearly

elitist by the standards of the Movement's participants. The people visiting the Chapel now had not 'dared' to enter in the past.Some had been afraid: they thought that inside "there were just mosquitos, bats and Indian skeletons" and that entering was extremely dangerous. Others considered that the place had nothing to do with them, they were excluded. Some people would look from afar and would ask things like: "But can you enter?" "How much does it cost?"

"*As far as possible, avoid competition in the program, encouraging contact and collaboration between the different participants, and between them and the wider public.*" This idea of community is common in social movements. For them there was no sense in creating an award for the season's best musician or the best drama group. Instead the idea was to bring together and unite people around common interests, people who shared the same needs and interests.

"*Participants must provide whatever is needed for their presentation, asking for assistance from others where necessary. In the final resort, in order to meet the basic requirements for the program's production, they may ask for assistance from the Regional Administration or the DPH, the public bodies to which the Chapel and Square are directly connected.*" This justified the requests for electricity, benches and exclusive access to the public toilets located underneath the bandstand in the square, which were closed and being used informally.

"*As well as the programmed activities, stimulate new affiliations and ensure the conditions for the participation of new groups and artists, both immediate and more long-term, which includes allowing the additional space and time needed for staging a theatre play, for example.*" Various groups were included over the course of the program. The idea was to bring together groups and collectively develop ideas on the use of the Chapel.

"*As well as neighbourhood groups and artists, stimulate the participation of outside groups who can contribute to the proposal's development.*" A group from Ferreira also became involved. One of the high points of the program was the encounter between the Ferreira group and the groups from São Miguel Paulista. Firstly because of the encounter itself, and secondly because of the Ferreira group's work, which has its origin in the work of Solano Trindade, and is very strongly linked the question of *negritude*, which is immediately relevant to São Miguel Paulista's residents.

"*Hold frequent meetings with the participants at least weekly, freely open to the widely public, to evaluate the progress of the work. Ensure that some members*

are always on hand and hold at least one meeting at the end to discuss the results and publicize the program, in the district and region especially, as a means of assessing the likely public for any long-term program of activities. Use billboards and mobile services for this publicity…" – which was basically what was used: a mobile loudspeaker service – "*…so long as they are free. Do not issue formal invitations or involve media coverage so as not to distort the public and the purpose of the experiment.*"

Following these guidelines, therefore, the Chapel was occupied for around a month, at the end of which it was closed again and the electricity switched off. From January the 1st 1979, the authorities were once again faced with the problem of the "revitalization of the São Miguel Paulista Chapel."

The experiment was highly productive since it showed that, in contrast to the Martins Penna Theatre in a nearby district, for example – which then had a maximum average public of one hundred people per month, despite promoting activities with schools, diploma award ceremonies, and very often attracting highly-rated theatre companies or musicians from the centre – the flow of visitors in São Miguel's case was really astounding, way beyond our expectations. During the second or third week of the program, we decided to leave a visitors' book for people to sign and collected more than 4,000 signatures in two and a half weeks. On one hand, this revealed an enormous demand in the region for activities of this kind. On the other hand, and in contrast to what is usually thought, it showed a large capacity for mobilization among the informal networks in which 'cultural activities' are produced on an everyday basis. It also showed the capacity to organize around common objectives, informed by a political knowhow that did not make access to the Chapel the sole objective.

In fact they continued to be involved in this dispute until 1982. They have insisted on this demand because, in fact, the Chapel is a space with this historical connection, because it has to do with the neighbourhood's identity, because, until the moment when the square was cut off from the neighbourhood's life, it was the central space in the area, because it was a place where things happened and people met, fought, dated, went to mass, and where children played – the local meeting place par excellence.

By chance I was in São Miguel around two months ago and it was startling. They had installed a fun park on the square, on top of the flower beds. There is an enormous carousel in the churchyard. I was left speechless.

I believe that this experiment showed all this potential. In fact, as had been proposed initially, the movement continued outside the church. Following the Chapel's closure – the authorities claimed it was closed for restoration, or some such – they carried on working and meeting in other places.

I do not wish to go on too long, but another aspect worth highlighting is the desacralization of the Chapel. Obviously the Chapel is a place of religious worship and many people were baptized and married there. By definition, it is a space where the sacred is produced. The idea of the Popular Movement of Art was that the program should begin and end with much noise, like almost any rite. It was, so to speak, a ritual of inversion which we lived in the Chapel over the space of a month. The district's samba school, though very low profile, thought that they ought to appear at the front of the church and the drum section in fact marked the start of the activities one Saturday afternoon. They thought that the samba school should enter the Chapel and that the people assembled there would form a procession after the drums. And that is what they did. Clearly it was a scandal from the viewpoint of the Diocese, but not from the viewpoint of the residents, i.e. the actual users.

I find this implicit knowhow embedded in social action extremely interesting. It was precisely a rite, in all its different phases, beginning with the separation between the time of the festival and the time of daily life in which

the Chapel was seen as an empty and haunted space. By being reused for other purposes, the Chapel underwent an interesting process of reform and redefinition without being perforated by a single nail. The walls, communion table and wooden carvings inside the building were respected at all times – demonstrating a much greater respect, in fact, than the public authorities and the Church itself, officially responsible for maintaining the building, had shown it. They reinterpreted all the spaces inside the chapel. The vestry was turned into a dressing room, the main altar into a stage. Utilized in this way, the chapel became a theatre with a meeting room, which was previously the side altar, and a lighting cabin, which was the choir area. What is interesting here is that the spaces of the chapel and the theatre, being structurally alike, allow this process of re-elaboration that begins precisely with the rupture with its religious use.

Excerpts from the debate

Question from the audience: What was the outcome of this proposal to revitalize the Chapel?

Antonio: There were various meetings after the 2nd of January, already held away from the church, in which the experimental program was evaluated. The idea was that the program would be a starting point for us to consider how to use the Chapel. And a proposal was made. At that time the idea was as follows, according to the research report sent to the DPH by myself:

"1. *Given the difficult working conditions of the groups under study, we are in favour of creating the conditions in the Chapel for developing the day-to-day activities of these groups, such as: rehearsals, a laboratory of dramatic arts, and, having resolved this technical aspect, an art studio and photographic laboratory, activities in which a large number of people are already involved.*" Fitted with basic facilities and equipment owned by various groups, the old church could become a workshop for the artistic groups and, simultaneously, a space for presentations and leisure use by residents from the region in general, since they could be offered activities like those included in the experimental program.

"2. *Interferences from the public authorities should be minimized in terms of guiding activities and the latter should be developed as far as possible with the resources of the groups themselves.*" This interference is undesirable because, coming from sectors of society other than the direct producers of these activities and

their public, it will tend to dilute their basic meaning : their structural and symbolic rooting in local social practices.

"*3. Impede the absorption of the entity organizing these activities by the public administration, since this would undoubtedly lead to its stabilization and increase the possibility of it being manipulated for purposes other than the cultural development of the popular sectors, handing over more space to vested interests based on nepotism and political-ideological control, as has occurred in São Miguel Paulista, just as the present research shows.*"

These were, we could say, the directives that the group decided to present to the Prefecture. In fact, at the group's request, my report was discussed before delivery since at this moment it had become a political document. So copies were made and reading and discussion groups were organized over the space of two days. It was discussed chapter by chapter and I forwarded to the Prefecture what had been approved in the meetings. For me it was a striking experience.

Q: Did the proposal not receive any form of continuation within the DPH?

A: No, but these ideas were useful for projects implemented by the group elsewhere. They moved to the front of São Miguel Market, which has a reasonable space on the sidewalk, they performed in other neighbourhoods, at the neighbourhood associations, at unions, at São Miguel Church, at the Morumbi Stadium (when they were invited to take part in a welcome ceremony for the Pope). So they continued to work in line with these conceptions, only in other places.

Q: My question is intended to help clarify the earlier one. You had the proposal and you had a document produced by the local population. Did you send it to some government body for it to be implemented? And what was their reply? Why wasn't it implemented? Did they explain why the Chapel wasn't put into use?

A: I think this is to do with the place occupied by the building in the city's political-administrative space. It's a very difficult Chapel. In fact this was not the first proposal made to revitalize the building. There were others, various proposals and intentions. But it involves a tricky convergence between the municipal administration, the Church, which owns the Chapel, and the residents of a district with whom communication is very difficult, since it involves precisely the exclusion experienced by them and which

is inscribed in the history of the square, as everyone knows and recounts. Dialogue has become practically impossible. This is why I said that we experienced a ritual of inversion during this month spent occupying the central space of the district, a space of wealth and privilege, so to speak. It is a bit like "the slave quarters invading the manor house." From the political viewpoint, it requires a very long process for this to happen and the obstacles are more or less of this kind. I don't think there are good guys and bad guys in the story, but there is an enormous structural difficulty surrounding the São Miguel Paulista Chapel, which arises from the fact that it is, in a way, completely out of place. Were it in an upper class district like Morumbi, for example, there would be far fewer problems in terms of its revitalization. That's what I mean.

Q: I think that you managed to develop a research project with some autonomy from the public authorities, though indirectly linked to the DPH and other bodies. Now that we, or you, are working within a State apparatus, how would you see this type of experience, given that the decision was taken to avoid any interference from the State or from other figures who could encroach on local production, or on the specific production of São Miguel Paulista?

A: In my view, this project is dated. There is no question of reheating and implanting it. However there do exist some conceptions that have lasted and today are found on the side of power. And how is it being done, what is being done now? I think we are trying to face this question concretely in the case of Iporanga,[8] which in some ways is very similar to São Miguel Paulista. There we find, on one hand, a city opposed to preservation, for various reasons, where preservation is taken as a form of constraint, a strait-jacket, a sham. And on the other hand, our conception that it is our duty to preserve the city, insofar as it involves listed buildings. It is listed historical centre, considered of regional and national interest, and we have to respond to this interest. However we intend to highlight the question of preservation, the relation between preservation listing and use: use by the owner and use by the the people who lives in the preserved site. I think that, structurally speaking,

8   I refer to the challenges posed for reconciling the need to shelter the homeless population and the recuperation of a cluster of 69 wattle-and-daub buildings listed by CONDEPHAAT that had recently been severely damaged by rains and the flooding of the Iporanga River. This urban centre was originally a mining hamlet formed in the 17th and 18th centuries.

preservation falls in this gap between listing, protection and use. So you have to work within this tension. It is an intellectually interesting challenge. And politically, can one deal with it?

Q: I wanted to ask a question which is perhaps a bit specific and academic. Did the group's process of reappropriating the Chapel not allow – beyond all those cultural manifestations that form the everyday life of this community – some other connection to be established with the listed building, one that can be traced back to its origin? I think this question is interesting because situations like that of São Miguel are in some ways clearly marked. They must stay in the memory, transforming and acquiring another meaning that, perhaps, is revealed even in the fear that you mentioned some people had of entering the chapel because Indians were buried there... And again I would say that these locations are clearly marked, citing the example of Carapicuíba[9] where there is a very lively artistic manifestation that refers back to its origin in the dance of Santa Cruz.

A: Yes, people spoke a lot about the festivals once held on the Largo da Igreja [the churchyard], the festival of Santa Cruz especially. Some people had taken part in these festivals and recalled them. I focused quite a bit on

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9   An architectural complex formed by the Jesuit village formed at the end of the 17th century to confine an indigenous population. Listed by IPHAN and CONDEPHAAT.

this question because in their view – and I agree – the problem was that the festivals had turned into shows. Like the square, the festivals were gradually isolated, separated from the life of the neighbourhood. Much was said about them, though. And they returned during the course of our activities – obviously reworked over the month – specifically in terms of the distribution of food. Someone always turned up with buns or coffee – this idea of commensality between the participants of ritual celebrations – this became recuperated during the program, though obviously on the scale of the occupation that we were involved in, only very weakly. A *reisado* dance was also brought in. People knew that an old man who works in a crèche had an Alagoan *reisado* group with which he would regularly perform. They went there... and invited the *reisado*. They went to fetch the *reisado*, they went to fetch their traditions, so to speak, such as they were able to reconstitute them. It is worth mentioning that the following year the neighbourhood's samba school chose 'São Miguel de Ururaí' as its storyline, a nativist theme on the origin of São Miguel.

This work, in fact, posed a number of questions and dug up some of the site's origins as well as this question of the earliest foundations of São Miguel Paulista, which was the theme of the samba school, there is the origin of the migrants. We received the proposal to put on five or six theatre plays on the migrants, how they arrived and so on, why the district has so many residents who migrated there relatively recently. So this question of origins was touched on during the occupation of the Chapel.

Q: I wanted to ask about this reutilization of the chapel for purposes other than religious. You said that it was transformed and that there is a structural relation between the stage and the altar, the vestry and the dressing room: the space can be reutilized because there is a common structure that enables this to be done. I think this idea is interesting that a space can have multiple uses and, in the end, it is the community and the use that confer this meaning; confer it, but not in a random way. There is a structural base that allows this or that use to be given. Now, if this use that was given, a more cultural use, the cultural activities of the community itself, in a way, did your proposal not contain a kind of cultural agitprop? Was the population not persuaded to attribute this use? Where did the religious use go, so to speak? Was it not possible to perceive through the research whether there had been a conflict or not? Because there is a conflict, in fact, to

decide what the final use of the building will be. Did the need for some kind of religious use not surface?

A: It surfaced, yes. I think, though, that these activities are not mutually exclusive. Not all non-religious activities harm the sacredness of the temple equally. One serious transgression, however, was the use of the drum in the church. The dances to drums in the church were considered forms of desecration... Apart from this, there was an immense degree of acceptance for the proposed use. It was not a problem because the idea was not to transform the church into a dance hall, but into a workshop – work that would be mostly shown outside the church. The idea was not to centralize everything inside the church. In the report I even transcribed comments from people who came to the church during the program, such as the following: "*To be honest, I would prefer that this location were used for its original purpose, that is, for religion, or for [registering] the past of these districts.*" To return to your question, a very strong proposal would be to form a research centre on the neighbourhood's history – an oral history – on memory of the district. Going back to the comments recorded in the visitors' book: "*...for religion, for the past of these districts, São Miguel, Itaquera, Guaianazes. But it is better it is used for the arts than remaining closed.*" Or again: "*I thought this exhibition was very good and used the chance to get to know the church that, though it may not seem like it, I have wanted to see for the past three years. It was really good indeed, those pictures, photos, and especially the poetry, since they don't just teach us things, they show us a bit about ourselves*"; "*I thought it was cool, interesting*"; "*I liked it a lot because I was able to relax with my friends.*" People became involved because it was a place for meeting, relaxing and chatting.

Q: I can see that the physical space of the church is similar to the space of the theatre. I wanted to know if the project was concerned to make this similarity explicit.

A: No. The space in question is a church, a sacred space, a temple; but on the other hand it has the structural possibility of being explored as a theatre space. This latent possibility to a certain extent shaped its use. The first proposal, which I think is the most obvious one, was the transformation of the church's space, the altar and nave, into a stage and audience area. This was modified over time as the group, from the outset, was concerned not to limit activities to the inner area of the church, but to develop them in the square too. Their objective was the square itself, the church for them is part

of the square. And there was more flexibility. The final proposal was for the church to be minimally equipped to be able to function as a workplace for the groups, which was a shift away from the original idea of occupying the church as a theatre. This is more dynamic.

Q: At any rate, if we return to the origins of the space – and I think this is very interesting – the *terreiro*, which is the most suitable name for the churchyard since it was a Jesuit *terreiro*, also had this role originally. Catechism was much more effective with an open space and the liturgy transformed into a dance with the indigenous peoples, rather than taking place inside the church. Some say that one dance was worth more than three hours of talk from Father Vieira.

A: That's true.

Q: The indigenous dance is performed in front of the church.

A: On this point, to be fair, one of the reforms made in the square that deserves highlighting is precisely the recuperation of the space of the *terreiro*, the churchyard, because it really allows the reconstitution of this original view of the whole. Now it just needs a complementary measure, diverting the traffic.

Q: Another thing occurred to me during this debate, after your talk: a building closed for a long time, but where attention remains concentrated, is never really uninhabited since the imagination ends up populating the place with a series of buried indigenous spirits, with ghosts. This building just became inhabited in another form. And, in some ways, this ends up creating a distance between the community and the building. To some extent it becomes seen as an object from a mythic universe. As the chapel becomes occupied, this provokes a dilution of these meanings created over time. My question is: were these elements evaluated in your work?

A: It amounts to an interference, for sure, an intervention. I agree that an activity like this creates new meanings for the space, changes its representations. People who associated the building with a mystery from the past, which is a value that should be preserved, were able to live in the space, enter it, look from the altar, open the vestry door and peer inside, touch the things there. This changes the relation. Moreover, if you propose a use different from the one originally intended for the building, the distance becomes even greater. But this isn't inevitable, because sometimes a building continues to be used for a purpose similar to the original... I am thinking, for example,

of those English constructions, the colleges, buildings constructed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which are still used today as schools. And that's interesting, because you live among the bats, the ghosts, stories are told about them, people visit the attics; everything is mysterious, but forms part of the history and, in some form, the present reality.

Q: It is integrated...

A: It is integrated with your life. The problem I see in relation to São Miguel is that it amounts to a segregated mystery: a mystery and a prohibition. People are not allowed to live with the mystery. In this sense I read the proposed use as a transgression: people really penetrated a prohibited space. As well as being mystery, it's prohibited.

Q: So some of the meaning attributed to the group's action in relation to the chapel leaks into other prohibitions. It begins to acquire a strong symbolic aspect.

A: Exactly, it disturbs the notion of a mystery associated with the past. Perhaps this is why this huge interest emerged concerning São Miguel's history, which was not only a theme of a samba school storyline, but also provoked a very large interest in forming a research centre on the history of São Miguel, on the history of its immigrant population..

Q: I find these aspects interesting, usually they are not taken into account, this sensation of mystery, these other inhabitants of the building. This I find extremely rich.

A: Yes. The silence, the emptiness, the need to fill everything in. The need to maintain the silence, the emptiness, the mystery, is not taken much into consideration. It is as though everything had to be filled in, unveiled.

Q: I wanted to return a bit to the research, when you talk about those more formal associations, the Lions, Rotary Clubs and so on. What happened in terms of the involvement of these groups? Did they dispute the use of the chapel too? How did the issue of the local leaders and the movement turn out?

A: They were disappointed because they wanted to appear at the big inauguration, which never took place. They exhibited some works and stayed there the whole time. But they did not keep up with the pace of the work, they were left behind.

Q: The movement itself, the process itself to some extent pushed them away...

A: It went in another direction and it became clear that it was difficult to share. In other words, the accent shifted, but they took part anyway, they exhibited works, appeared a number of times.

Q: But in the sense of manipulating this work politically, capitalizing on this movement, were there no problems in relation to these associations?

A: My impression is that the difficulty of continuing the group's work was not due to this factor, no. I think the problem was more the conflict generated between the movement, the bishop and the prefecture (Arantes & Andrade, 1981). But I would like to add the following: there was a positive outcome for the group since these conflicts, which lasted more or less two years, considerably strengthened the group's identity, because, clearly, identity is always contrastive and the *alter* of the group ended up being precisely these institutions, the Church and the Prefecture. These disperse networks, which I cited at the start of my talk, ended up forming a movement, a political entity in the neighbourhood, an entity that for a while occupied the political setting of the neighbourhood and that knew how to maintain its distance from electoral manipulations.

However due to the difficulties of implanting the project in that district, the problems of establishing an effective space (they even rented a house on one occasion), the movement gradually fell apart. But during the process the

group clearly formed a social and political identity. And the group always maintained itself as a 'front' – this is also very interesting – the idea never crystallized that it would absorb all the groups in a single political entity. Perhaps this was due to the fact that its strength came precisely from its constitution as a front that combined facilities made available by various partners.: one found space in a parish hall, another in a neighbourhood theatre, someone else a room in union offices, and so on. This formed a pool of resources enabling a collective proposal to advance. But afterwards the political setting changed too. This was a very specific period, since the military dictatorship and its repressive apparatus were still in force. Much changed after the elections, even during the electoral process, and soon after.[10] It changed a lot. I don't know if the group would have been interested in maintaining this sort of outlook and organization.

Translated by David Rodgers

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10   The Constitutional Amendment that re-introduced direct elections for governors and senators was issued in 1980, inaugurating a pre-electoral period that culminated with the elections of November 15th 1982.