

# MEMORY and RESISTANCE

## The Museu da Maré in Rio de Janeiro



Social Museology, Museum, Representation, Neighbourhood,  
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Recently the Museu da Maré showed an exhibition about LGBT activist and local politician Marielle Franco, who was killed in 2018.

Franco grew up in the favela the museum is located.

All photos – Manuela Conti.

At the end of the nineteenth century Patrick Geddes acquires the *Short Observatory* in Edinburgh, and starts its transformation in the *Outlook Tower*. The building will be restructured by the Scottish biologist, town planner and educator in order to become a pedagogic device to understand the city and support interactive planning processes. From the observatory scoping the city with a 360 degree view from a 25 mt. height, the visitors of the tower could descend through a collection of didactic objects, maps, models, samples, providing an explanation of the urban dimension related to geology, zoology, botanics, statistics, economy, history and sociology. Finally, the multidisciplinary experience of the tower led to the street level, to walk into the streets of what, at that time, was a critical transforming area of the city: the degraded Old Town of Edinburgh. In the following years, Geddes would be an essential actor and activator of the process of regeneration of this territory, restoring housing, founding a cooperative of inhabitants to rebuild the Ramsey Garden district, a people's university and a self-managed student hostel, and involving inhabitants and children in creating gardens and playgrounds. The *Outlook Tower* will constitute the organisational and creative fulcrum of this process. As Patrick Geddes remains an essential reference in the history of participatory planning, so his *Outlook Tower* stands as a quintessential prototype of a typology of interactive structures dedicated to catalyse urban regeneration from below and within.<sup>1</sup>

More than hundred years later, Geddes' progressive approach is reverberated in the experiences of social museology, a movement challenging the conservative concept of museums as institutions dedicated to preserving crystallised values, often representing dominant power relations and colonial perspectives, and proposing instead an idea of museum as a collective project enhancing local capacities to reclaim and craft emancipatory identities. In this article, we introduce the experience of the network of *Museums of Memory and Resistance* in Rio de Janeiro, presenting in particular the case of the *Museo da Maré*. Our encounter with such bottom-up cultural space derives from the recent involvement in the EU Marie Curie rise project *CoCreation*, which provided the opportunity to spend a few months researching in Rio de Janeiro with the aim of developing and testing co-creation methodologies in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Our starting assumption has been that it wouldn't be possible to develop any meaningful participative process without settling in appropriate spatial arrangements able to support an inclusive, horizontal and fair process of exchange with local inhabitants. The key starting point of any supportive co-production practice should be identifying opportune *contact zones* representing local demands and struggling identities (Asking & Pain 2011). Looking for places where to start a collaboration with local society, we discovered the role of social museology in producing cultural spaces able to foster social inclusion and defy the stigmatisation of deprived territories. In Latin America, an approach to museology close to social movements and emancipatory cultures started to be applied from the 1970s and was formalised in a seminal round table in Santiago de Chile in 1972. The resolutions taken in Santiago, and in the later Declaration of Quebec of 1984, evolved into the major framework of social museology with the creation of the *International Movement for a New Museology* (MINOM). The concept of integral museums proposed here understands the museum explicitly as action rather than a conservatory of heritage, and a place of community organising and struggle. This approach inspired an entire new generation of bottom-up museal spaces to be settled in critical spaces of dispossession with the aim of reclaiming an »alternative, critical, democratic, inclusive, polyphonic and insurgent museological practice, affirming themselves as decolonial experiences«<sup>2</sup>. In Brasil the concept was largely adopted thanks to the impulse of sociologist Mario Chagas, but greatly benefited from the institutional support given by Gilberto Gil becoming Minister of Culture in the early 2000s under the premiership of Lula.

<sup>1</sup>  
Paba (2013). »Dall'outlook Tower alla casa della città«. In *La Nuova Città* 1/2013, pp. 4-7. Our interpretation of Geddes' *Outlook Tower* owes the inspiration to Giancarlo Paba, who sadly went missing this year. The authors want to dedicate this article to his loving memory.

<sup>2</sup>  
International Movement for a new Museology MINOM-ICOM, *Position paper on the proposal for a new Museum definition* [http://www.minom-icom.net/files/minom\\_position\\_paper\\_on\\_the\\_proposal\\_museum\\_definition.pdf](http://www.minom-icom.net/files/minom_position_paper_on_the_proposal_museum_definition.pdf) accessed on 20/08/2020.

»The museum is the type of intervention in favelas that can prove the legitimacy of favela communities while also fighting the criminalization and discrimination they suffer.«  
Mario Chagas

The first Museum of the Favela is the *Museu da Limpeza Urbana* (Urban Clean-up Museum) settled in Caju, a neighbourhood in the north of Rio de Janeiro, in 1996. Since then more museums have been created in places like Horto, Maré, Rocinha, Manguinhos, Cerro-Corá, Cantagalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho, etc. These projects have adopted different focuses and denominations, ranging from eco-museums and natural reserves, to museums dedicated to local history, struggles and everyday practices. In such cases like the *Sankofa Museum* in Rocinha they may not even have a permanent seat, developing a wandering activity of exhibitions and events in public space. Horto instead preserves its memories directly within the private houses of local inhabitants, and one needs to set appointments to visit these private spaces. More recently the *Museu das Remoções* (Museum of the Evictions) has been founded to record the processes of displacement in the Vila Autodromo Favela.

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Starting from diverse triggering factors and forms, they converge on reclaiming emancipatory purposes rooted in daily life issues. This blossoming of communitarian spaces defines itself as a movement, and takes inspiration and situated practices from urban movements struggling for rights. They come with a clear political stance, that is that of challenging power relations and over-determinations that confine the favela in an ontological dimension of illegality and marginality. They challenge the historiography and the consolidated perception of the Favela as a place of damnation and struggle against spatial stigma through situated counter-narratives and the cultural activation of citizens. Using the words of Chagas »A museology that is not fit for life, it is good for nothing (...) the idea of these practices of museology, is to serve life, not just organic life (...) but social life. So the practice of social museology is the practice of commitment to life. That's why I could call it *biophilic museology* ...«<sup>3</sup>. In 2013 these diverse experiences constituted themselves as a network, the *Rede de Museologia Social do Rio de Janeiro*.

**Museu da Maré**

One of the groundbreaking experiences is the *Museu da Maré*. Maré, in the northern periphery of Rio de Janeiro, is a complex of several favelas with more than 140.000 inhabitants stacked on 10 sq. km: one of the biggest, most disadvantaged and stigmatised territories in Brasil. Maré was born from a reclaimed shore, from which it derives its name, which literally means tide. The first settlements in the area happen around the beginning of the twentieth century, during the administration of mayor Pereira Passos whose plans to transform Rio in a »tropical Paris« started by evicting the poor population from central locations. During the 1940s and 1950s the construction of the main Rio highway, the *Avenida Brasil* and the industrial developments of the neighbouring territories produce a consistent immigration from the surrounding regions, and push the indigenous population to settle in the swamp of the Guanabara Bay. This led to the typical construction of palafittes (stilt houses) in the area to inhabit grounds subject to floods. These precarious dwellings were soon subject to stigma and identified as a symbol of poverty at a national level. Under the military dictatorship of João Baptista Figueiredo in the 1960s the *Projeto Rio* was developed to remove the inhabitants from the stilt houses and fill up the swamp area. Further expulsions from the south of Rio in the 1950s and 1960s under Governor Carlos Lacerda meant the removal of entire favela communities and many residents moved to Maré. *Nova Holanda*, for example, is a favela that started out as a temporary construction project built to house residents evicted from favelas such as *Praia do Pinto*, *Favela do Esqueleto*, *Morro da Formiga* and *Morro do Querosene*. As a matter of fact, the temporary camp became permanent and through integrations and new spontaneous constructions it underwent a process of »re-

<sup>3</sup>  
Video interview collected in August 2019 by Manuela Conti, Giovanni Fiamminghi, Sergio Segoloni. Accessible online at <https://vimeo.com/303149624> accessed on 20/08/2020.



favelisation». In 1994 Maré was recognised as an official neighbourhood of Rio. Since then the complex is taken over by drug dealers, its territory divided between different gangs and is affected by hard militarisation and occupation by police and paramilitary corps. In 2016 with the incoming World Championship and Olympics the favela was hidden in key points from the sight of curious visitors crossing the city to attend the sport events. Opaque acoustic panels were installed around the area, and a special paramilitary police instituted for the control of the territory against narcotraffic, increasing its material and perceived segregation.

In such a contested territory, the *Museu da Maré* is created in 2006 with the aim to provide a space dedicated to the collective heritage of the favela. At the beginning the project of creating a museum in the favela was received skeptically, even criticised by museologists as a form of ghettoisation for its will to remain within a territory considered irredeemable, but the support of Gilberto Gil allowed to receive a grant from the Ministry of Culture through a program called *Culture Points*. This was the opportunity for implementing the physical structure, that nevertheless has been realised and managed mostly through work on a voluntary basis by its promoters. A bottom-up initiative of heritage making, born out of the desire to preserve memory and identity in a context of poverty and social exclusion, the project was developed by the *CEASM (Maré Center of Study and Solidarity Action)* through forums with residents and community leaders. The focus of this NGO is on education and the formation of technical and political competences in the Favela, with a Gramscian accent on developing strategies for cultural hegemony. The origins of the project are in 1998 when the *Rede Memória da Maré* was created, which later originated the *Arquivo Dona Orosina*, the original collection of objects and documents constituting the core of the project. The collection was assembled as a result of a sharing process, with the inhabitants providing objects, images and memories to constitute a living archive of practices and memories of the neighbourhood. In 2004, after an exhibition at the *Museu da Republica*, the inhabitants of the favela who had supplied the exposed items expressed the wish to see them exhibited permanently in Maré. By the initiative of *CEASM* a few months later the Museo was settled in Maré in an old factory of maritime transports, *Cia Libra de Navegação*, with a surface of about 800 m<sup>2</sup>. The building was leased for 10 years. In 2014, at the expiration of the contract the museum was threatened to be evicted by the owner of the building, which engendered a largely participated campaign to resist, ultimately winning state protection as a recognised cultural institution of the city. Finally in 2020 the organisation has been able to acquire the property, thanks to some international donors' contribution, guaranteeing its presence in the neighbourhood.



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The structure is positioned right at the entrance of one of the most disadvantaged, violent and criminalised areas of Rio, presenting itself as an interlocutor between the city and the favela: it is a meeting point, an attempt to mend a relationship torn by years of violence. Acting as an interface between the legal and consolidated city and its informal and precarious counterpart, it develops a proud emancipatory action reclaiming the positive identity of those who are confined in such a space of dispossession. The *Museo da Maré* struggles against the stigmatisation of the territory. It proposes a self-generated, conscious and complex narrative of the local community which does not fear to define themselves as *favelados*, a term elsewhere intended as derogatory. In the words of one of its founders »Museu da Maré before being a Museum was a political strategy (...) we were worried that the students we were able to send to the university got a vision of Maré imposed by outside or by the Brazilian mainstream media (...) in the imaginary built by the media we are *naturally* violent, *naturally* traffickers, *naturally* prostitutes«<sup>4</sup>. Emblematically, among the graffiti decorating the façade, the Lefebrian claim to the *droit à la ville* is consciously remastered in *derecho a la favela*, subversively reclaiming the right to a decent and legitimate identity from within the dispossessed territories of the favela. The point its creators want to make through the Museo is that you do not need to move out of the favela to reclaim your right to a better life, to better opportunities and social justice, you can do it from here, claiming your right to stay, study and work honestly.

In the course of time a great effort has been made in cataloging all gathered materials, of which only a small part are displayed. The permanent exhibition has been organised by the curators of *CEASM* according to the principles of social museology and with a substantial contribution of the local community. The museum installation subverts the traditional *western* linear methods of storytelling by conceiving time as a cyclical entity. Inspired by Jaques Le Goff's *Le Calendriers* the exhibition is organised around twelve different temporalities rather than usual spatial categories. »If life is measured by years, days, and hours, on watches and calendars, in this museum it is measured in phases, where nothing is complete and everything changing« says the introductory panel. Twelve like the months in a year and the hours in a clock, these dis-

<sup>4</sup>  
Interview with Lourenço Cézar, director of the *Museu da Maré*. Realised in Rio De Janeiro by Manuela Conti and Sergio Segoloni in July 2018.



tinct non-linear temporalities define critical themes and related cycles of life in the Favela. The first founding cycle, the *time of water*, refers to the tidal movement which influenced the territorial morphogenesis and determined the first architectural forms of settlement. The *time of home* is dedicated to dwelling. Here we find an entire stilt house, reconstructed by the scenographer of the project who actually used to live in one of such constructions. We then have the time of migration, the time of resistance, the time of work, of celebration, of faith, and the final section, the time of future. The overall declared intent is that of »creating a new time«, so to say, to lay out the ground for positive change. Recently a temporary exhibition entitled to the *time of Marielle*, was dedicated to the LGBT activist and local politician killed in 2018. Raised in Maré, a former collaborator of *CEASM*, Marielle is a great inspiration for the local youth as someone that coming from a favela and recognising herself as a proud *favelada* has been able to study, access a political career and struggle for human rights. *CEASM* and the Museu have an important role in supporting the youths from the favela in studying and getting to university. During the years the *CEASM* supported some 1.600 students to be admitted at university, an impressive number that still remains insufficient in the context of the biggest favela in Brasil whose percentage of educated people are among the lowest in Rio.

Aside from the specific museal function, the *Museu da Maré* is essentially a social center, organising events, social and political activities. Recently also a space for children, a library and playroom, was created. The center supplies courses and recreational activities like hip hop lessons, street dance, theatre, music, capoeira. It is used by local citizens and organisations, but hosts international political events as well, connecting global struggles and organisations. It is a place for organising political activity, advocacy, and coordination among the spaces of resistance in Rio. It is an important node in the local network of museums of resistance, able to combine the attention to empowering local communities and to open the favela to connections with national and international issues. *The Museu de Maré* is an extraordinary example of how cultural heritage can be used as a fertile ground for building a future of change for the better, aiming at the transformation and improvement of a living territory rather than the mere conservation of a given, crystallised identity.

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