

## Spaces Of Citizenship

### Integrated educational spaces as catalysts for levelling up

In 2000 Marta Suplicy of the leftist Workers' Party became the mayor of São Paulo, Brazil. She had run her campaign and committed her government to addressing especially the excluded sectors of disenfranchised areas of the city: the urban poor living mainly in the peripheral districts. Her aim was to translate the values of a social-democratic society, despite the continuing neoliberal trends in the country, through the formation of community integrated spaces by using education as the catalyst. Led by architect and planner Alexandre Delijaicov, Marta Suplicy coordinated a team of architects to develop new educational centres based on the "Park School" themes outlined by educational reformer Anísio Teixeira more than half a century before. The CEUs, or Unified Education Centres (Centros de Educacao Unificados) are public facilities conceived as local centres of urban life, located in the peripheral areas of São Paulo.

These CEUs became the flagship project for urban transformations using multi-functional centres as an impetus to shape public spaces around them. This would be accomplished by improving the connectivity between public buildings and transport, as well as offering spaces for the public to come together. CEUs function as ultra-modern cultural, educational and community focal points; they have multiple facilities pairing the school buildings with other public facilities such as theatres, sports areas, day care centres, libraries, canteens and swimming pools. Arguably the most beneficial of these facilities are the 'tele-centres', which are state-of-the-art facilities where people can use computer technologies to develop digital skills essential to navigate the modern world. In a time where social and economic stratification is not solely confined by geography but is also prevalent in the more ephemeral sphere of the world wide web, digital illiteracy and lack of connectivity can further pronounce these inequalities and widen the gap. The CEUs offer facilities to bridge this realm and thus function as a springboard to broaden opportunities. All this situated in some of the poorest areas of São Paulo, where some communities do not have regular access to even the most basic resources such as running water or electricity.

These Unified Educational Centres are one of the most topical and exciting public policy reforms to combat inequality. Currently, they form a network of 45 units deployed in the poorest and most disenfranchised areas of São Paulo. To keep costs down all CEUs are constructed out of prefabricated elements and standardised forms. Prefabrication has a bad reputation in Brazil as often being of bad quality and thus concerns that this modularisation would not be embraced by the local communities was resolved by creating a system of rules that would ensure specificity and individualisation of the CEUs that would respond to the areas in which they were built in.

The locations of the educational centres are located in under-served communities of high social exclusion, normally in previously regarded informal or illegal areas that are now being regularised and urbanised. The parcels that these schools are built on are usually

protected green spaces where only public buildings can be constructed, meaning that the CEUs are often built in natural settings amongst trees and small rivers. During the week the CEUs function as schools, while the evenings and weekends the spaces are transformed into public spaces.

The CEUs were intended to be vessels by which the underserved could span social and economic divisions. A significant objective for the CEUs as outlined by Delijaicov was for the centres to function as social bridges. Although education in itself is giving people the foundations to interact with society on more even terms, it is only when education actually promotes social interactions between social strata (ie. between different demographics of a city) when it is truly inclusive. The CEUs function as autonomous entities with no overlap with surrounding neighbourhoods. This could be resolved by the strategic placement of CEUs on the borders of contrasting demographics. What this project is currently lacking is how schools interact not only between neighbourhoods but also with other parts of the city. That being said, this has been a highly successful experiment. In 2010, UN Habitat sent independent evaluators & have reported that community satisfaction with the facilities exceeds an astounding 90 per cent. Moreover, levels of digital literacy, further education and employment have increased significantly since the project conception in these areas.

The city of São Paulo has shown that educational projects can flourish if they promote the fight against social inequalities and further contribute to the development of community values of participation, inclusion and autonomy, as well as providing the larger community with facilities to participate. The architectural vision of the CEU project has provided spaces of citizenship, and afforded possibilities to diminish social stratifications through training, education and means of communication. Much of their success is a result of transforming generic elements with the specific fabric they sit in, taking advantage of local characteristics as well as responding to the specific needs of the area. The schools function more as a catalyst for community interaction within a given community and has so far proven successful. The CEUs can thus be perceived as a successful strategy for strengthening community involvement and providing opportunities needed especially in underserved communities through spatial and programmatic measures. The question is whether there is scope to export this model to other cities facing similar challenges.