

## **The danger of community engagement as an exclusion tool: four case studies in four different scales in Brasilia, Brazil**

Gabriela DE SOUZA TENORIO, Universidade de Brasilia, Brasil

### **1. Introduction**

Community engagement in the urban planning process, despite being essential, must always be put into perspective. This is because most citizens have difficulty in thinking in a systemic, comprehensive way while seeking to help their cities carry out planning. In any intervention scale, it is difficult to achieve a kind of public participation that will be inclusive, unless there can be a form of education that can anticipate what will be the implications for the city as a whole, of the local wishes of individuals and groups. Education introduces a collective spirit to the realm of decisions, clarifies the role and nature of the public domain, showing its value to the city and society. Although democratic representation is structured from the relationship of the citizen with a spatial basis, it is necessary to emphasize that places do not belong to its residents, but to the city. The paper illustrates how citizen involvement may show intolerance and segregation desires with four case studies that took place in the capital of Brazil recently and discusses attitudes desirable to obtain a conscious and responsible community engagement.

### **2. Brasília and community engagement**

Brasilia is one of the most sprawling cities in the world, and its population density increases further away from the center. The Central Business District/CBD, where most of the formal jobs are, is situated in the heart of the Pilot Plan, the area where the original design of the city - created by architect Lucio Costa - is materialized, and which has been regarded as World Heritage Site, thirty years later. In 2010, the estimated population was 2,570,160, but less than 10% lives in the Pilot Plan. The rest lives farther away, either in neighborhoods with suburban characteristics, dormitory-neighborhoods or gated communities.

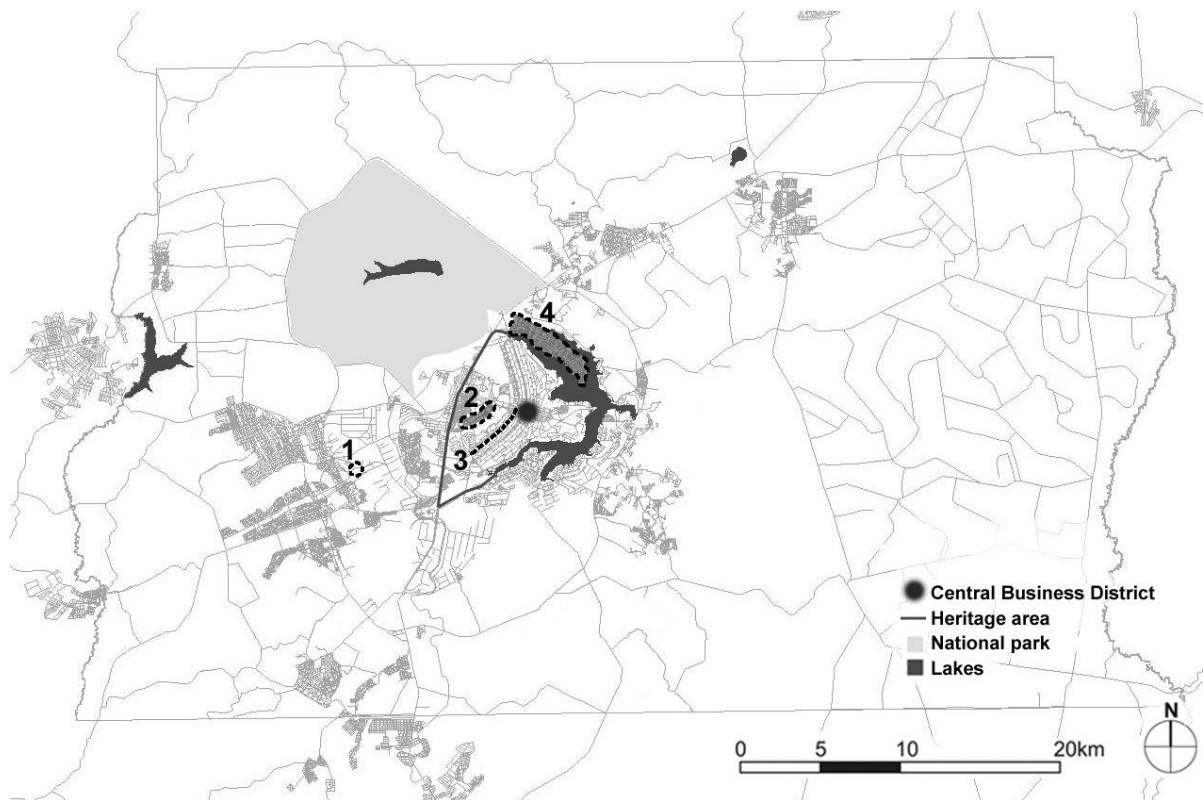
The city's original modernist design brings unfavorable features for its inhabitants' socialization. These have been aggravated by the kind of political decisions made throughout its history, such as those that currently determine its metropolitan structure. With rare exceptions, social classes are separated territorially in 'niches' of homogeneous communities that are not used to share their interests with others. Besides, there are very few public spaces that are suited to bringing them together and allowing them to overcome their differences. Unfortunately, new endeavors coming to CBD, as *Setor Noroeste* (Northwest Sector, discussed in Tenorio & Germano, 2010), perpetuate this exclusionary posture, since they are designed to shelter only a portion of the population, offering only one - expensive - type of housing.

As a result, especially within the heritage area and other upscale adjacent neighborhoods, people use to live, as Freitas, 2010, stated, in a "state of excessive welfare". "The residents of the Pilot Plan and other noble areas have lost the tolerance and flexibility one must have to confront a metropolis like any other in the world".

Not surprisingly, the affected community generally rejects the changes needed to meet the challenges that the city growth imposes, whenever it means to bring into "their" space people

other than those who they are accustomed to live with. As an aggravating factor comes the view of many residents who believe that any action will violate the protection laws regarding Brasília as World Heritage Site, and will make it loses its designation by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/UNESCO. Thus, things must remain as they are, even though this means that the city will become increasingly non inclusive.

Four situations in different scales - from local to metropolitan – that occurred recently show how community engagement can reflect exclusion actions. *Figure 1* shows Brasília, understood here as the whole Federal District/FD, and highlights the locations studied.



*Figure 1: Distrito Federal: axial map. The nuclei outside the polygon belong to another State but depend on Brasília. Numbered, the location of the case studies: 1. Jandaia Square in Aguas Claras; 2. Setor Sudoeste; 3. South W3 Avenue; 4. Lago Norte*

### **3. Four case studies in four different scales**

#### **3.1 Jandaia Square, block 205, Aguas Claras - local scale**

In 2008, Jandaia Square was built on a plot surrounded by the buildings of block 205 in Aguas Claras, a middle-class district of DF. According to the newspaper *Correio Braziliense*, the residents gathered together and requested authorization from the local administration to carry out a design, and the company responsible for constructing most of the local buildings, built it without any burden on the authorities. Thus, on the initiative and community engagement, a public space was born, with lawns, palm trees, pavements, benches, a fountain and an amphitheatre.

In a dense borough with very poor public realm like Aguas Claras, any attempt to offer a public place has great chances of working at a local level and even being extended across the borders of the immediate neighborhood and attracting residents from other places. This is what in fact happened. The Jandaia Square proved to be a success. This was because it started to be used by a reasonable number of people who were to some extent quite varied (with a good proportion of women and children) and included both people from the nearby

buildings and from other locations, who carried out various activities there. However, among these, there were some activities that caused trouble to the residents and, as a result, they began to think that the establishment of the square had been a mistake.

Less than two years later, the local administration destroyed the fountain and buried the amphitheatre at the request of the residents themselves. (Calcagno, 2009) They made the square less attractive, damaging it, since this was the solution put forward by the majority (Figure 2)



*Figure 2: Brasilia, Brasil. Aguas Claras. Jandaia Square as it was originally constructed (on the left) and its current state (on the right). Source: Google Earth.*

Although the space has been created on the initiative of the community, it does not belong to it: it belongs to the city. That is why the local administration behavior is so questionable: it was only concerned with the anxieties of the neighboring residents and overlooked the wider context. Besides, when it comes to a place used by human beings (any place, whether public or not), it is no surprise that problematic activities can also occur. This is not to suggest that the maintenance of the square should be discouraged so that it can be kept in the original condition in which it was found, but rather useful information for how to deal with it.

It would be appropriate if the local administration, when was first made aware of the request of the residents, had carried out a full investigation of the place. Public money was used on destroying the fountain and burying the ampitheatre (and this is not any less serious because they had been built with private funds), when it could have been spent (at a much lower cost) in studying the square itself: what activities took place, their frequency, which was involved, exact places and circumstances. On the basis of this information, they could have circumvented the problem by drawing up a list of possible courses of action that could be put into effect while they were monitoring the results. Together with this, they could have sought to make the community fully aware of the benefits of public life and the need for tolerance, while taking the necessary steps to suggest and support events that could strengthen the relationship of the community with that particular space. Ans, of course, if necessary, they could involve the local police.

Clearly it is disturbing that some people who frequent the square intimidate others, as well as the fact that some of the activities witnessed by the residents of block 205 are reprehensible, but is it the case that there are just “offending people” doing “things wrong”? Are there not also “decent people” doing “things right”? Of course there are. And if they were compared, what would be the proportion of those who were “right” or “wrong”? To find this out, it would be necessary to observe, study and get to know the square so that an intervention could be made in a constructive way. Thus, the children would not have to see the destruction of the amphitheatre where they used to play during the morning simply because undesirable activities took place there on Friday and Saturday nights. Admittedly, it would be hard work but it would be worthwhile: a public space is an invaluable asset.

It may be that the residents' expectations have been that the square would fill only their requirements, and that would be intended only to support the uses they have imagined. After all, the square is the outcome of their own design and initiative, and spaces created based on this dynamic tend to reflect the community with which they are situated. So, it is natural that the residents look after them as if they were theirs, and is common the belief that, if any misuse was made of the place, it was probably caused by someone from outside. Thus, when the square began to "cause problems" (or rather, it was so successful that it led to being a mistake), it was no accident that these were attributed to "undesirable visitors", even though there was no evidence to show that it was not local residents who were responsible for the loud music, heavy drinking, drug-taking or acts of obscenity.

### **3.2 The Public School, Setor Sudoeste - neighborhood scale**

The Setor Sudoeste (Southwest Sector) is a borough near to the Pilot Plan that was created in the late 80's. Despite having mixed-use buildings and a major shopping street, the neighborhood is mainly divided into "noble" Sudoeste, where more than 90% of the residents belong to the upper-middle and upper classes, and "economic" Sudoeste, where this number falls to a little less than 80%. As can be observed, people in the borough show little variation of income levels, which makes it a homogenous community.

A few years ago, two episodes demonstrated the frame of mind of some residents of the "noble" part of the neighborhood. In the first, they adopted a stance against the construction of sports courts "to avoid the gathering of yokels" (Alves, 2009). The label of yokel ('*peao*' in Portuguese) has pejorative connotations since it is used to describe farm labourers, people in general who have little education. The fact that it was attached to the potential users of public sports grounds makes it clear that this would not be applicable to the and, thus, would not be an activity they would wish to carry out. This situation resembles, on a similar scale, what was discussed previously.

In the second episode, the residents lined up against the construction of a public school, even though it had been embodied in the original project of the *superquadras* (superblocks) of Brasilia: a spatial pattern followed by the "noble" Sudoeste. According to the Report on the Pilot Plan (document with the city's design principles) "within these *superquadras*, the residential buildings can be arranged in the most varied way and in compliance with two general principles: a maximum uniform building high, perhaps six floors and *pilotis*, and separation of road and pedestrian traffic, especially by allowing access to primary schools and the facilities that exist within each block" (Costa, 1991). Lucio Costa had a utopian ideal of equity, citizen dignity and efficiency of public services, in his proposal for Brasilia.

The members of the Regional Administration were in a state of perplexity when a group of people claim that the public school was not necessary because all their children studied in private schools and this would only be "for the children of domestic servants" (Alves, 2009). It should be made clear that Brazilian society is profoundly unequal, and there is a huge number of people with little education and few qualifications. Thus, domestic servants are readily available to the middle class. This means that a building with 48 apartments is very likely able to offer work to 48 domestic employees either on a monthly or daily basis.

Apart from the depressing fact that the residents' request confirms the prevailing skepticism about the value of public education in Brazil, this attitude reflects a view that, at the very least, is mean-spirited about our society. They ignore the fact that these workers would be able to leave their children close to their place of work (which is at a distance of at least 20km from their houses). And what would be the problem if the children of these domestic servants – or rather children in general who are at a different socio-economic and cultural level than the residents' children – attended a school close to the residential area? A bad

influence? Degeneration? The prejudiced and non inclusive view lingers on. Even today, Setor Sudoeste does not have a public school.

### **3.3 Change of use in W3 South Avenue - city scale**

W3 Avenue is one of the city's main public transport routes and runs along the entire Pilot Plan. According to the original conception of the city, it was intended to be a bordering service highway, which would allow the supply of wholesale goods. This would be located on the east side, while on the west side there would be gardens and orchards.

The original plan was never implemented. Even before the inauguration of the city, where there would be gardens and orchards, single-family row houses were built to serve the first skilled workers who came to the city with their families (Figure 3).



*Figure 3: W3 South Avenue in 1969. Businesses, services and dwellings on the East side ("500" blocks on the left) and residences on the West side ("700" blocks, on the right). Source: Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal.*

As a result of the delay in establishing the central sectors of the city, which were intended to offer commercial and entertainment sectors, the southern stretch of the W3 began to become the real cultural and commercial heart of the city until the 1970s. According to Holanda et al, 2003, this was the 'golden era', and from then onwards, the avenue entered a period of decadence and deterioration. Among the various reasons for this decline, such as the consolidation of activities in the city center, is the avenue profile. The fact that it only has commerce and services on one side, and residential dwellings on the other, makes it ineffective in becoming a real "pole of attraction", as it had before. However, since some years ago a trend can be observed in which the residential dwellings adjoining - or close to - the avenue began to offer a wide range of services such as beauty parlours, lawyer's offices, esoteric consultancies and guest houses. These were a symptom of the need to take advantage of the infrastructure facilities and attractive sites in Brasília.

The residents complain about these changes, especially the guest houses, which, for them, are apparently places that host the worst of the human species: "They take in criminals, drug dealers and prostitutes", one resident declared (MADER, 2011). According to Holanda, 2012, it is necessary "to distinguish between *urban codes* and *posture codes*. The first regulates building shape and land use, the latter regulates behaviour - desirable practices of urbanity that allows good coexistence. If there are noise, prostitution, drug traffic etc., anywhere in the city, in the adjoining houses of W3 avenue or in the internal houses of the "700" blocks, it is up to the government to repress them. They are not urban problems, but police ones."

Putting aside what statements like the resident's (and they are not unusual) reveal about prejudice, misinformation and generalization, some thought should be given to the real nature of the citizens who actually come to visit the city. It should be taken into account that

the "official" places for accommodation in the Pilot Plan are the expensive ones that exist in the south and north hotel sectors. Although they are not far away from public transport stops, they are not well connected to them. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that accommodation on the W3 can be very convenient and practical for tourists who are less well-off and not in a position to pay for taxis or rent cars.

At the end of 2009, the Federal District Government/FDG issued an official order for drawing up PPCUB (Plan for the Preservation of the Urban System of Brasilia), the purpose of which was to create a master plan for the heritage area aiming to recommend ways for development and for solving problems without spoiling the essential character of the city as originally conceived. After carrying out some studies, the appointed team came up with the suggestion that there should be a change in the land use of the houses in the west limit of W3 avenue, but there was a negative reaction. "We are not going to put up with traders here" stated the community mayor of block 705.

It is clear the residents' partial and exclusionary attitude. As puts Holanda, 2012: "The existence of services in residential area buildings is not necessarily a problem, in Brasilia or in any other city. Moreover, the current discussion is fraught with 'make believe'. For example, make believe there are no offices operating in homes within blocks '700'. Nobody argues against that - and nobody should. They do not bother anyone. But the residents argue against the *popular* services ranging close to the avenue, exactly for this reason: because they are *popular* and do not correspond to the highest income levels prevailing inside the '700' residential blocks".

At the end, PPCUB has retreated and left the '700' land use the way it has always been - single family houses. A lost opportunity. A change like this would be the first step in legalize irregular activities and revitalize the avenue, by making use of its full potential for business and services. The whole city would benefit.

### **3.4 Lago Norte's second bridge - metropolitan scale**

Lago Norte (North Lake) is a borough with suburban features that is situated on a peninsula. Its main residential model consists of single family houses on plots of 1,200 sq. m (the value of a sq m of land is currently around USD 690) which makes its residents the holders of the second highest average monthly domestic income of Brasilia. There is an extremely low supply of trading activities, services or employment, thus the borough depends on the Pilot Plan. Its population is highly motorized and reliant on private cars, and it is common to find a proportion of one car per resident able to drive.

In this area, the only connection to the city center – Bragueto bridge – is becoming increasingly inadequate since it experiences serious congestion at peak hours, day by day. Some redesigning of its access has been carried out, but there has always been an idea of building a second bridge. The supporters of this scheme argue for better links with the city, so that alternative routes can be established to improve traffic in different ways and reduce the time people spend moving around. However, the residents have never welcomed the idea.

For several years the subject lay dormant and seemed to be insoluble, until it was officially again brought up in 2008 by the FDG. It introduced the Estrada Parque Universidade de Brasilia (EPUB) scheme - which consisted of two bridges and a highway. As well as providing more alternatives for the population Lago Norte itself, it would be a choice for the residents of districts located further away, such as Sobradinho, Planaltina, Varjao and Paranoa. In addition, the residents of the gated communities in the north section of the city could go to Asa Norte without necessarily having to cross the existing bridge (Figure 4).

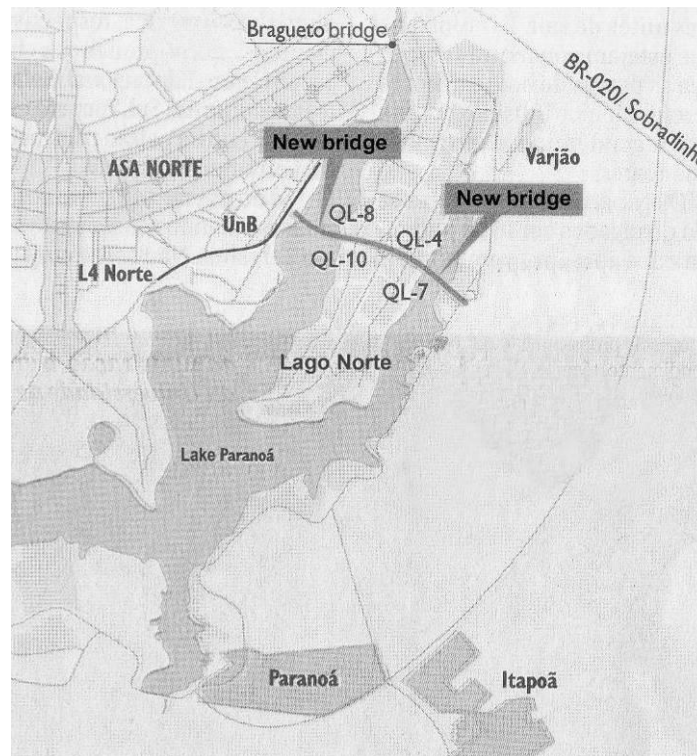


Figure 4: Brasília, Brasil. New bridges for Lago Norte. Fonte: Rodrigues, 2008.

There was less resistance: when the residents were faced with the problems of congestion at their only outlet, they were more willing to accept the idea of being connected to Asa Norte. However, they are reluctant to agree to the connection with Paranoa. One common charge is that this will spoil the character of the place by turning it into a place of through traffic.

The administrator of the borough at that time stated that he was against adding the section of the bridge that would forge a link with Paranoa. "The exit is really necessary for the [Pilot] Plan. However, there is still no need to carry it out on the other side" (Rodrigues, 2008). So... the connection to the Pilot Plan is necessary for the population of Lago Norte, which in 2010 consisted of 41,627 people, but is it not needed for those 453,047 inhabitants (a population more than 10 times higher) living in the north portion of the Federal District?

No fundo, não há como negar que há, sim, outra razão para a recusa. A opinião de um morador a deixa transparecer: "Moro no lago norte há 26 anos e gostaria de ver esta ponte feita, pois só temos uma saída. Mas fazer a perna que liga ao Paranoá não tem razão de ser, pois já tem a saída para o Varjão. Mas não é por segurança, porque se o cara quiser vir até o Lago Norte, vem até remando" (Rodrigues, 2008). Claro está que esse "cara" a que se refere o morador é um ladrão. A população do Lago Norte, isolada em sua península, funciona como um grande condomínio fechado, um grande grupo homogêneo, que tem tão mais receio de outros grupos quanto mais diferentes de si eles forem. Então ladrões só podem vir das bandas do Paranoá? Não há ladrões na Asa Norte ou no próprio Lago Norte? O posicionamento preconceituoso e excludente vem adiando uma solução que proporcionaria um melhor ir e vir para uma parte grande da metrópole.

It cannot be denied that there is, indeed, another reason for the rejection. The opinion of one resident makes this clear: "I have been living at Lago Norte for 26 years and I would like to see this bridge built because we only have one outlet. But to add the 'leg' that links to Paranoa does not make sense because we already have an outlet to Varjao. But it's not for safety reasons because if a guy wants to come to Lago Norte, he can come here by rowing a boat" (Rodrigues, 2008). It is clear that this "guy" is a thief. The people of Lago Norte are isolated on their peninsula and operate like a large gated community, a big homogeneous

group which is very afraid of other groups that are different from themselves. So thieves can only come from Paranoa? Are there no thieves in Asa Norte or Lago Norte? The prejudice is given precedence over a solution that can allow a better means of going to and from a large part of the metropolis.

#### 4. Conclusion

Brazilian law states that urban policy should aim at the full development of the social functions of the city through the democratic management, which popular participation is an integral part (Brazil, 2001). Gomes, 2012, remembering the birth of democracy, states that the reforms of Cleisthenes, in Ancient Greece, essentially replaced "political representation based on tribes, by a space-based representation, established by a territorial division". The democratic governance is so grounded in the concept that the citizen is bound to a spatial component and, therefore, in their engagement, has responsibilities to the territory it occupies and represents, as well as has needs and desires related to it.

Planners need the vision and experience of this community member. According to the Project for Public Spaces/PPS, an American organization that deals with public spaces on the basis of public participation, this community member "is anybody who plays a role in the participation of a specific place": resident, owner of business, worker, member of institutions, official representative, member of some group etc. In short, anyone that has ties to the area is useful and indispensable to the planning process, in any of its levels, regardless of their involvement.

The relation between citizen and place or, in a broader way, between society and space, is explained, for instance, by the Space Syntax Theory. According to its authors, Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson: "We read space and anticipate a lifestyle". The theory states that there is a social logic of space, as well as there is a spatial logic of societies. Its main axiom is: "spatial organisation is a function of the form of social solidarity" (Hillier & Hanson, 2003), social solidarity being the way people meet in public spaces: in a random way, in diverse groups; or in a programmed way, in homogeneous groups. The authors explain that most societies show, in all levels, both types of solidarity.

Configurational attributes of places (also called spatial patterns by the theory) are in harmony with social expectations that are based on people's cultural standards, of which Holanda, 2002 draws "two millennial socio spatial paradigms": the paradigm of formality and the paradigm of urbanity. The first one is aligned to the social structure that Durkheim called "mechanical solidarity" (terms found in the book *The division of labour in society*, 1893), for which the city is organized through hierarchy, dispersion, specialization and segregation; its parts having well-defined and controlled borders. The latter is aligned to the Durkheim's "organic solidarity" that historically emerged with the social division of labour and complementarity of activities and roles. Implies low hierarchy among its parts, which must be complementary, interdependent and integrated.

Holanda, by studying ancient cultures and their social structures, states that, historically, more democratic societies have their cities designed according to the paradigm of urbanity (2002, p. 130). The reverse is also true: less democratic societies, which feature large social inequalities, have cities designed according to the paradigm of formality.

This finding makes it desirable to search for the establishment, in addressing urban problems, of solutions that undergo spatial patterns more conducive to the shelter of a democratic society. They would be those that minimize distances, smooth borders, integrate parts, extend possibilities of use, favor diversity etc. This requires an ever-expanding vision that often exceeds the limits of the neighborhood and considers the urban system as a



whole. However, people will not always be prepared to - or interested in - take into account the broader impacts of their local choices. And the more homogeneous the community involved, the more it tends to resist changing.

Here is where education plays a main role in community engagement process. Interviews, discussion groups and meetings are the most widely used activities to allow people closely involved in the situation in question, to express their feelings and become involved in the process of creation, by stating their needs and desires. But these occasions for gathering input for the preparation of normative instruments relative to the city or endorsing proposals, cannot take place without a dynamic that allows information to be transmitted. Nor is it possible only to have the residents or homogeneous groups as representatives. The residents surrounding the Jandaia Square were listened to, but what about those who came from other places to make use of it? The residents of Setor Sudoeste were listened to, but was this the case with the domestic employees? The residents of the "700" blocks were listened to, but was any attention paid to those that use the area, though living in other districts or the users – "respectable" and law-abiding people – of the guest houses? The residents of Lago Norte were listened to, but how far does this apply to those who live further away from the Brageto bridge?

The case studies show how attitudes of homogeneous groups in the process of community engagement can be extremely exclusive. The voice of the people is not necessarily the voice of God, in contrast to what is stated in this proverb. The support and involvement of citizens in urban issues should act in a way that improves the city and makes it more inclusive and fair. Planners and urban designers must be aware to this.

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