

MOVING BEYOND HOMELESSNESS. HOW DESIGN CAN BE AN INSTRUMENT FOR CHANGE

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ABSTRACT:

“It is incredible. Everyday I collect a whole dumpster and I ask myself: Where does this huge amount of trash come from? It is endless and it makes me sad to see good food discarded among the trash”. *Carlinhos*

The collector describes his routine in São Paulo, the largest city in Brazil. He portrays the trash dumpster as a niche of income and survival strategy. He is sure that a growing number of very poor people will compete to gather the scraps discarded by the rich. It is a desperate cycle that is becoming even worse with the great number of cell phones, electronic gadgets and all kinds of e-waste that are not properly recycled, thus bringing toxins and contamination to the landfills.

This paper seeks to analyze the phenomenon of environmental and social disaster and its connection with design in the urban areas of Brazil. I will begin discussing the growth of the informal sector which provides means of survival to the urban

poor, thus creating possibilities of resistance against the violence of economic exclusion.

The collectors have engaged in the development of an environmental protection economy as they clean the city of São Paulo and other cities in Brazil. I will examine the role of the collectors as agents of the reversion of discarded materials as well as castoffs and their return to the productive cycle and creative transformation, exploring the potential of this activity from a design perspective.

Despite their heroic efforts, the collectors are not properly recognized by society as a whole, and directly or indirectly they work for someone else and companies often profit from their work. Design could collaborate from different perspectives to change their image so they may be seen as a relevant asset.

Finally it seems contradictory that the weakest shoulders carry such an extraordinary environmental burden. Even in the academic realm, much remains to be learnt from the collectors and it is urgent to re-think the ethical dimension of design research and teaching involving minority communities. How are we to deal with these issues?

Keywords –discarded materials, urban poverty, São Paulo – Brazil

1. INTRODUCTION: LIFE STYLE, SOCIAL CONFLICT AND HOMELESSNESS IN BRAZIL

Because of the prevalence of certain life styles, we are running a frightful risk. This is something that Tomas Maldonado, the pioneer in the culture and theory of design, wrote about, in his book *La Speranza Progettuale*. He had long ago warned us of the serious degradation of our environment and the crisis of the technological age.

According to Maldonado:

“We can notice that the distance between the wellbeing of the few and the indigence of the majority is always bigger in our human world”.

Maldonado’s statement provides a framework for exploring lifestyle as a terrain of political and social conflict and a weapon of consciousness.

These political implications are highly relevant in a country such as Brazil, due to its sharp contrasts, social conflicts, and economic inequalities. Brazil is the fifth-largest country in the world in both population and geographic size; it is the world’s fourteenth-largest economy; if the present growth rate is maintained it will be among the top five economies by 2050 (with China, US, India and Japan); it is highly urbanized (currently 82% live in cities); it is home to the world’s largest tropical forests and the largest freshwater reservoirs; and it has the greatest diversity of mammals and birds in the world. Some exotic images of a tropical Brazil dominate the world’s imagination.

Together, our natural resources have contributed to establish the image and mystery of an environmental paradise. Beside these idyllic and stereotypical images, Brazil has another face.

Brazil’s internal differences are enormous. It is a country of extremes. Surprises and paradoxes abound.

Brazil is a highly urbanized country and 82% of the population live in cities. The city of São Paulo is a good example of the hyper-urbanized dimension of Brazil. The São Paulo economy is larger than Argentina’s; the São Paulo economy in Latin America is smaller only than the national economy of Mexico, and São Paulo is among the five largest metropolitan areas in the world (18.3 million). It is a multi-

cultural metropolis; its growing process has been characterized by many contradictions and intense social conflicts.

Counterbalancing the rapid growth process, a huge variety of problems afflict the city: pollution, flooding, huge traffic jams, crime, violence, unemployment, housing shortage, and severe social-spatial exclusion processes. And this is to name just a few of them.

What is the contribution of design to the context of conflicts and urban problems, in a city such as São Paulo?

Until very recently, the most impoverished residents of the São Paulo metropolitan area lived in shantytowns, called *favelas*, or in state and city social housing projects for the poor. Today, however, a significant number of the impoverished are unable to afford even a *favela* or *barraco* or other kinds of social housing for the poor. They are now living on the streets. Informal habitats are spread over large metropolitan areas of São Paulo, with concentration of the homeless in and around downtown. Homelessness adds a new variable to the urban environmental crisis, and although homelessness have been associated with “third” world cities, now these features of “third” world cities began to manifest themselves in the major cities across the world.

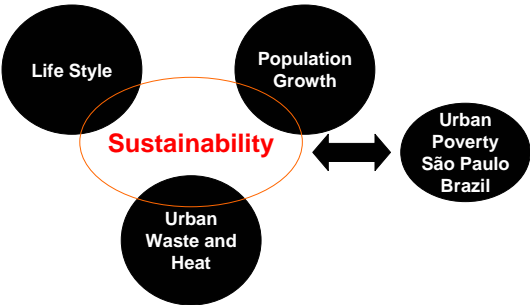


Figure 1 – Sustainability and Poverty, São Paulo, Brazil.

How did the urban environment of Sao Paulo become a vital niche to sustain the daily lives of the homeless? In certain neighborhoods, various elements come together: density of pedestrians, people wanting to make financial contributions, cheap or free food, institutions and services to support the homeless, as well as abundant availability of recyclable material.

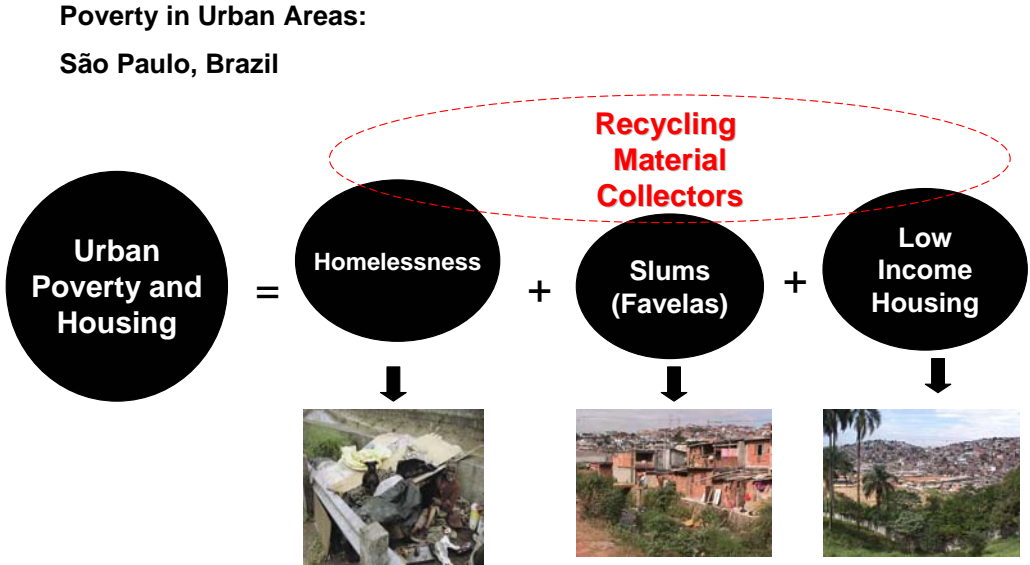


Figure 2 – Urban Poverty, Housing and Recycling Material Collectors

The passion for what is ephemeral gave rise to a new type of advertising and marketing, in which one does not sell and buy merchandise but their symbol, i.e., one sells and buys images which, being ephemeral, must fast be replaced. In this way, the paradigm of consumption has become ephemeral and disposable. The degraded objects, a great amount of castoffs lay on the city streets, as garbage of the technological culture. The new devours the old and expels it and the streets are transformed in a true receptacle of discarded products.

The ceaseless search for material survival strategies enabled the homeless and collectors to exhume these dead products and materials, assigning other meanings to them, establishing new relations and, above all, building a new materiality based

on them, allowing us to ask ourselves about the uses and reuses of the products and materials, their consistency and effectiveness.

When salvaging these products, based on own criteria of adaptation, selectivity, creativity and improvisation, the homeless person reveals his search for autonomy, his personal preferences and idiosyncrasies, in a context where alternative choices are reduced. These wandering objects attract the attention of the homeless persons, who by processes similar to those of archaeology begins to scavenge the city in a sort of collecting, "urban excavation", searching for objects, clothes, cans, food, or other items that he can use directly or sell on the streets. Excluded from the labour market, they see themselves forced to practice a mixture of unsalaried excavation strategies, on the streets and sidewalks of the large metropolises. These vary from homeless to homeless, even reaching the point of a personalized repertory of material excavation. These activities, implemented in the shadows of the regular labour market and considered the most reliable means of excavation on the streets, were classified by Snow and Anderson as shadow work, adapting a concept of Ivan Illich.

These practices are creating a new paradigm so that we can understand the more perverse dimensions of globalized society: the nodal relationship between discarding industrialized products, materials and discarding human beings. These practices present many aspects and involve intense work, constituted by a large number of tasks that have to be carried out with any resources or means available. All these tasks are performed based on the strength of their body, on physical movement through the city, on the long walks and pilgrimages, on the skill of their manual work. Many of these practices involve high risks to the health of the collector or the homeless.

The excavation of trash, of discarded material is the base of the collector's culture and identity. The excavation is performed in the trash containers deposited on the sidewalks, it is a lengthy, laborious, painful task, and is performed daily. Generally

one thinks of trash as something that has already been worn out, used, or a product whose value is already gone. The collector of recyclables forces us acknowledge that much of what we throw away is still valuable.

Although this is only a brief outline, these are a few of the fundamental elements that constitute the context of living from leftovers. In addition there are changes in the world of labour, job insecurity and the growth of informality, a sector which includes the homeless and the collectors of recyclables.

2. MOVING BEYOND HOMELESSNESS: THE COLLECTORS' COOPERATIVE

The increasing joblessness and homelessness in Brazil in the last 20 years has lead to the development of a new strategy of income generation. To overcome poverty people have engaged in recycling activities, as their major means of subsistence. Mainly they collect discarded mass-produced objects and all kinds of recyclable materials. The materials they find are sorted and reintegrated into the productive cycle. Although they play an important role in urban waste management, they receive no health, housing, social security or education benefits. They are considered dirty people, and even delinquents, rather than productive members of our society.

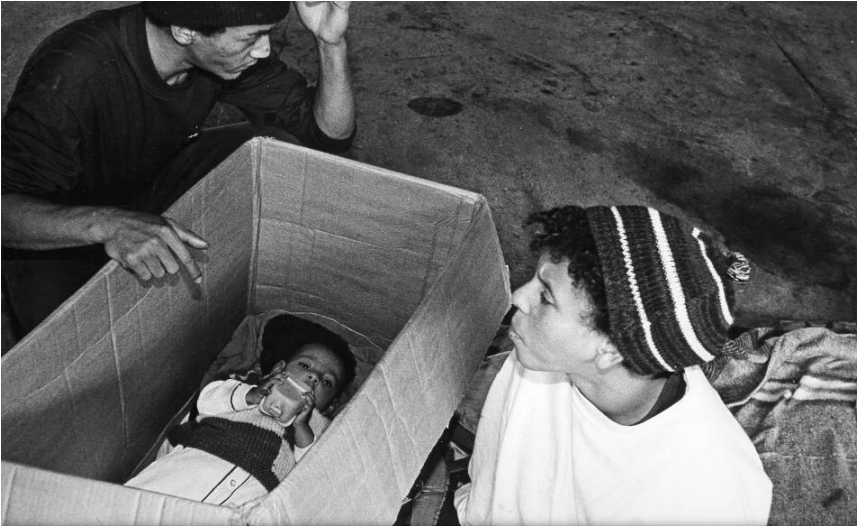


Figure 3 – Cardboard crib, São Paulo Street Children, a characteristic sight in many cities around the world. Photo by Douglas Mansur.



Figure 4 – Recyclable material collector pulling his wagon in São Paulo. Photo by Douglas Mansur.

Collectors live and work in risky conditions and barely survive, but their drive for social economic independence resulted in self-organizing and collective action.

Below we have a brief chronology of the collectors' activities:

End of the 70s – collecting began for the purpose of gathering materials to sell and make money to hold a religious festival – the homeless people' s Mission . This festival launches the foundations of a culture of cooperation.

The 80s and 90s = COOPAMARE and ASMARE, collectors' cooperatives and associations, were created

1992 – The National Forum of Studies on the Homeless was created – to create alternative forms of work and income generation

2001 – National Congress of Collectors of Recyclable Materials

The National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials was established (Movimento Nacional de Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis- MNCR) = training leaders, training agents, advocating needs and social inclusion policies for collectors.

2005 – Asmare inaugurates Plastics Factory – managed by the collectors

Historically, two relevant examples of recycling cooperatives in Brazil should be considered: COOPAMARE [Cooperativa dos Catadores Autônomos de Papel, Aparas e Materiais Reaproveitáveis], and ASMARE [Associação dos Catadores de Papel, Papelão e Material Reaproveitável/Association of Paper, Carton, and Recyclable Material Pickers].

COOPAMARE is located in Sao Paulo city, under the Paulo VI overpass, in the western part of the city, at the intersection of Galeno de Almeida and João Moura street. The use of the land under the overpass was a city government concession, but under precarious use conditions of use. It is the oldest and most successful recycling cooperative. From eight paper collectors with one cart in 1982, Coopamare now has over 150 members and associates. Gradually the collectors

have improved the land situation and now they have power, running water, and restrooms.



Figure 5 – COOPAMARE, under the Paulo VI viaduct, São Paulo. Photo by Milena Kirkelis Bingre.

In 1990 when an eviction process banned collectors from the streets of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais state, Geralda Marçal, a woman collector founded the collectors cooperative ASMARE. In 2005 collectors from 8 associations and 1 cooperative from the Metropolitan Area of Belo Horizonte created the Cata-Unidos, the first recycled plastic processing industry, directed and owned by the collectors. It is a pioneering experience that conveys the high level of organization of the recyclable collectors. In this experience, the role of the collector goes beyond the collection and selection of the material, and they are also responsible for adding value to the material they have collected to sell to Brazilian companies.



Figure 6 – The symbol of – the National Movement of Recyclable Materials Pickers

The successful experiences of the collectors spread across the country leading to the emergence of a new social movement – the National Movement of Recyclable Materials Collectors [Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis/MNCMR] for the purpose of empowering the collectors as the legitimate agent in the activity of collecting and recycling solid residues.

The main challenges faced by the collectors include:

- Fluctuation of the market of recyclables materials
- This activity lacks stability
- Collaboration with the City Administration always depends on the political will of the Administration
- The collectors' activities are threatened by the implementation of retaliatory policies, and there is always a possibility that the areas occupied by the collectors will be repossessed judicially.

The main contributions of the collectors include:

Diminished costs of operating sanitary landfills and conventional garbage collection;

Diminished costs of energy and raw materials, by making use of the solid wastes;

Expansion of material recycling activities

Income generation of 300 to 400 reais/month

3. DESIGN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE COLLECTOR'S ACTIVITIES

Design practices could make a relevant contribution to the advancement of the collectors' activities, and providing visibility to their condition and improving their image. Different scenarios could be considered, ranging from communication systems, to graphic design to the development of the recycled materials manufacturing industry, as well the creative re-use of recovery materials recovery, repair.

As a professor, concerned with the formation of a more critical body of architects and designers, I have conducted an educational experience on design for sustainability and social responsibility, from 2003 to 2006. The emphasis of the course was for students to examine the different roles played by designers and design in resolving or exacerbating social, political and economic issues in the collectors' cooperative. The main goal of the course was stimulating new forms of design taking into consideration the discarded product and its re-use within the urban environment and acknowledging the great value of collectors cooperatives as the main agents in the management of solid waste.

A variety of topics were covered throughout the course, including design of urban artifacts, historical overview of design for society, aspects of theory of need, new trends in the production of product and graphic design. Besides the traditional ways of producing knowledge, it is important to stress a major aspect, which was the direct contact between the students and the collectors, and at different levels, the contact between the students and the neighborhood and the municipality. Contact

with the collectors at the cooperative was a very rich and productive experience and the students quickly understood and evaluated the complexity of the problem. The students presented their work in class and at the cooperative. From the point of view of the collectors, this course gave them the opportunity to convey their extensive knowledge on practical aspects of discarded materials, their knowledge on the selection process and the collection process. During the meetings with the students, the collectors provided them with important information, such as the durability of cardboard and its resistance to the weather; where in the city they can salvage certain types of material; the noise of the broken bottles and glass scraps, how they hamper the collector's working process, at the cooperative.

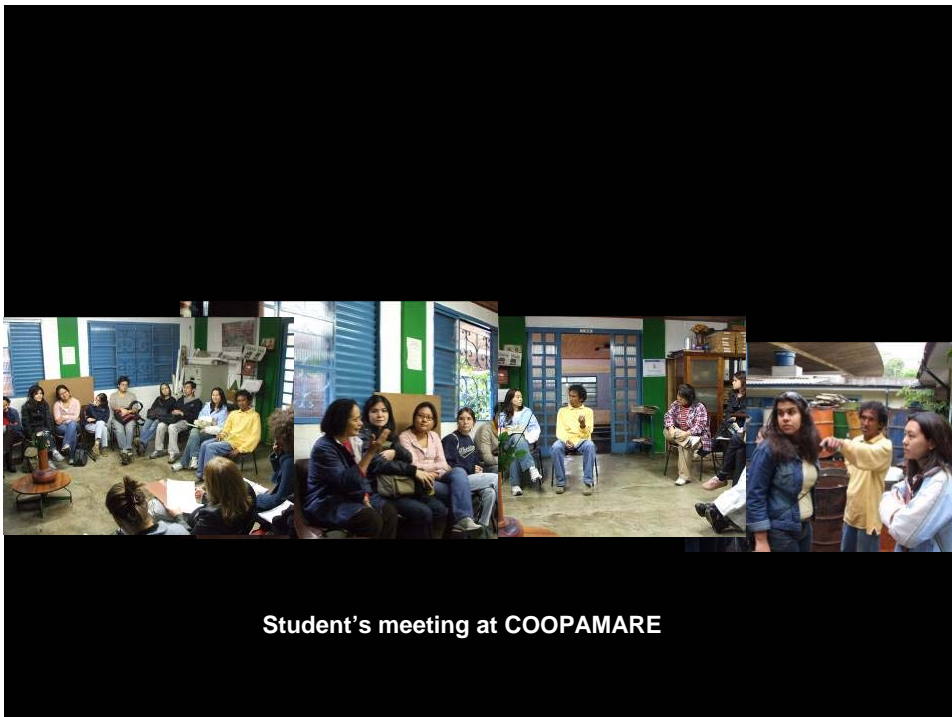


Figure 7 – Student's meeting at COOPAMARE, October, 2006. Photo by Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos



Figure 8 – Student’s final presentation. Photo by Tomas Vega.



Figure 9 – Final project by student Hugo Miguel Aguiar dos Santos, 2006. Photo by Tomas Vega.



BOARD BY

**Joyce Paula M. Delatorre and
Marisa Bueno e Souza**

Figure 10 – Final project “Warning Board” by students Joyce Delatorre and Marisa Souza. Photo by . Photo by Tomas Vega.



Figure 11 – Final Project “Coopamare’s folder”, by students Charlotte Boonekamp, Fernão Morato, Larissa Ribeiro, Valéria Contessa. . Photo by Tomas Vega.



Figure 12 – Collectors Manuel and Antonio commenting the folder. . Photo by Tomas Vega.

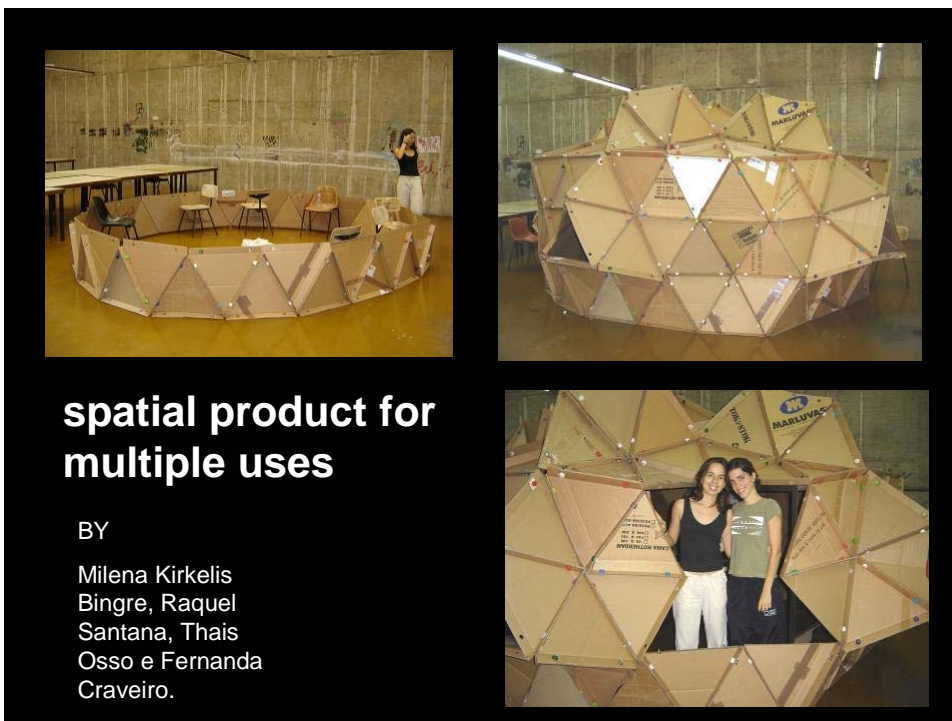


Figure 13 – Final project “Cardboard Modular Structure”by students Milena Kirkelis Bingre, Raquel Santana, Thais Osso e Fernanda Craveiro. . Photo by Tomas Vega.

4. METHODOLOGY

There are two methodological aspects to be highlighted in this study. The pedagogical experience performed with students from the School of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo, together with the Collectors' Cooperative – COOPAMARE, is based on the results of a broad survey performed concerning the subsistence and adaptation strategies of the homeless in the cities of São Paulo, Los Angeles and Tokyo. This survey attempted to understand the character of life on the streets in these three cities, as well as the survival repertoires and strategies of the homeless in those metropolises. A significant proportion of this survival repertoire of the homeless involves collecting activities. Collecting consists of a spontaneously created economy which uses the waste discarded in Brazilian cities, self-employment and self-generation of income. It is a solidary economy based on equality, democracy, self-management. .

Thus, relationships were identified between urban poverty and environment, the production of solid wastes, homeless, collectors and design.

In this context, it is important to define a proper body of design knowledge, as well as the corresponding pedagogical strategies, which will allow students to cross class boundaries in order to achieve the development and evaluation of socially responsible products, as well as a re-conceptualization of design practice and education.

The emphasis of the course was for students to examine what roles designers and design plays in resolving or exacerbating social, political or economic issues?

This course enabled the confrontation and comparison of the students' and collectors' knowledge, and how both collectors' and students' actions were transformed in the process, which required rethinking the process of knowing. Light was shed on this by Paulo Freire's methodology and concepts of critical education.

According to Paulo Freire:

*“Knowing, whatever its level, is not the act by which a Subject transformed into an object docilely and passively accepts the contents others give or impose on him or her. Knowledge, on the contrary, necessitates the curious presence of subjects confronted with the world. It requires their transforming action into reality. It demands a constant searching. It implies invention and re-invention. In the learning process the only person who really learns is s/he who appropriates what is learned, who apprehends and thereby re-invents that learning; s/he who is able to apply the appropriate learning to concrete existential situations. On the other hand, the person who is filled by another with “contents” whose meaning s/he is not aware of, which contradict his or her way of being in the world, cannot learn because s/he is not challenged”.*¹

We have worked with Freire’s idea that in today’s global society education cannot be indifferent to the reproduction of dominant ideologies. He argues against “progressive liberalism” and its passive acceptance of an unequal world, where unemployment, hunger and homelessness coexist with opulence. Students have demonstrated that the creative practice of design can be employed to improve social justice, and can also promote, difference and tolerance and create spaces for audiences to share their values during times of conflict.

In this course we began with the challenging situation of designing out of the mainstream agenda of design, as well as far away from the marketization of design education paradigms². We have renewed a commitment to a critical design

¹ FREIRE, Paulo. Extension or communication. In. Education for critical consciousness. New York, Continuum, p.100-101.

² An important analysis of marketization of design education and neoliberalism in New Zealand is a work in progress conducted by Amanda Bill. At The University of Auckland.

education process that is essential and crucial to the contemporary situation, and that was able to present an alternative design practice.

Once again, Freire's concept of thinking critically has enlightened us, because, according to him conscientization [*conscientização*] is not considered as an end in itself, but is always joined by a meaningful praxis, which means that critical pedagogy concretely links theory and practice.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATION

In his books "Six Proposals for the Next Millennium", Italo Calvino, the writer, says that:

"catastrophes (...) are not the consequence or effect of a single motive (..) but they are like a vortex in the conscience of the world."

I believe that I am not exaggerating when I say that, faced with the catastrophe of unemployment and deprivation in their lives, the collectors of recyclables created an alternative that is this central point of mutation in world awareness. In these difficult times, with increasing destruction caused by climate change, and greater environmental destruction in general, and the hyper-consumption accelerated by globalisation, collectors are building a solidary, human alternative. The cooperatives of recyclable materials collectors are a significant model of resource conservation and environmentally responsible employment creation by means of solidarity.

Now, as the world moves toward a "Planet of Slums", according to Mike Davis what must be acknowledged is that the imminent resources crises urge us to change direction, otherwise will be no future to human history.

Within this problematical context, design knowledge production can not be understood as a form of knowledge transmission, but as a form of cultural politics,

that can happen anywhere, both inside and outside the academy, not just in classroom or studios, but everywhere or at any other place where people can congregate to share knowledge and share learning, on the basis of a problem-solving approach in order to creatively improve the quality of life of the populations in need. Hence, in Brazil, questions regarding design education cannot be removed from issues such as homelessness, poverty, cardboard collectors, environmental decay.

Finally, it is important to stress that the pedagogical experience with minority communities, with oppressed or less powerful groups has many ethical implications. Students and teachers need to be humble, they have to understand that the relationship with destitute people has to be based on equitable exchange and mutual respect. From this perspective, the designer has to acquire sociological, anthropological and even philosophical knowledge and skills. At the very least, students were interested in reaching beyond the creation of new aesthetic formulas, they were intent on building a just and equitable society. The result of the pedagogical experience produced a remarkable range of products. All of us got the sense that in design, each line we draw carries more weight. Together with the collectors we gained a new clarity, a sense of common purpose. Edward Said associated this moment of awareness in his well known question:

“What is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?”

I am deeply grateful to my students who helped me to move between theory and practice, between idea and form. I am very thankful to the dedicated people of COOPAMARE and the whole collectors community who have welcomed me and my students, for more than 5 years in their working spaces and who have provided invaluable information, knowledge and friendship.

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