Decentralized management of public squares in the city of São Paulo, Brazil: Implications for urban green spaces


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Studies about squares contribute to public management and to urban sustainability, once they have an important social and environmental role. This paper aims to clear some aspects of the management of squares in the municipality of São Paulo as well as their role. A qualitative methodology was used in the present study with the main scope of describing, understanding and interpreting the data by means of interviews with public managers. The method of the Discourse of the Collective Subject was used to analyze the data. It was not possible to identify any model of management for the squares in São Paulo, in its 31 administrative regions (subprefectures). From one side, decentralized management of these public spaces is positive because it provides autonomy and agility for the subprefectures to implement their policies. On the other hand, it makes it more difficult, because they depend on the planning and controlling of resources coming from different municipal levels which are not directly connected. Other than this, managers highlight that the squares, in the city of São Paulo, have a main scope of playing a social role. Public managers disagree about the potential environmental role that squares could play and therefore contribute to enhance the urban green spaces of the city. According to the public managers, squares are spaces where there can or cannot be vegetation. Among the challenges for the management of squares there is the lack of an inventory list of squares either registered or not in the municipal records, lack of awareness of the population and very few maintenance teams to answer the demands.

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1. Introduction

Urban green spaces may be defined as public or private spaces, mainly comprising permeable soil and presenting the prevalence of arboreous or shrubby vegetation groups that have ecological, conservational or recreational roles and are open to the public (Myers, 1975; Francis et al., 2012). The presence of this kind of space within an urban scenario, mainly in developing countries, is rarely considered in the management or the elaboration of public policies (Merzhal et al., 2009; Lindholst, 2008). Nevertheless, squares can bring many environmental, economic and social benefits to the urban environment (Choumert, 2010; Lima and Lamano-Ferreira, 2015).

In Brazil, the disorderly process of urbanization of the big cities has not taken into consideration the importance of urban green spaces for its environmental and urban planning (Silva and Vargas, 2010; Jesus et al., 2014), constraining the greens spaces to small spots amidst the urban gray matrix of buildings and avenues. Even though the Brazilian Federal Constitution (1988) emphasizes the society’s duty to protect the environment, within the governmental sector this issue is poor in researches and one can note quite a distance between the external control and the environment (Silva, 2008). This fact shows the importance to relate the studies about public spaces and green spaces to discussions about urban planning (De Angelis et al., 2004; Chen and Jim, 2008; Sander and Zhao, 2015).

Green spaces like squares and parks provide a lot of benefits either to the population as to the urban space, like integration, leisure and recreation (Seeland et al., 2009; Dorigo and Lamano-Ferreira, 2015; Mariani et al., 2016) as well as the reduction of pollution and mitigation of the urban heat island effect (Miller, 1988; Tan et al., 2013; Baloomi et al., 2014). Mullaney et al. (2015). It is also worth noting the benefits of the street trees providing shady
spaces, reducing rain water on the ground, improving the quality of the air and providing a connection with the landscape. Such benefits are essential to the maintenance of ecosystems and to enhance the quality of life in cities (Gidlöw et al., 2012).

Some authors have pointed out the importance of the management of public green spaces (Mullaney et al., 2015) as well as the private ones (Balonei et al., 2014) for the conservation of the biodiversity. For instance, Cornels and Hermy (2004) point out the importance of urban green spaces to the maintenance of the biodiversity and to improving the richness of species and, in this same line of thinking, Beninde et al. (2015) mention the importance of the ecological corridors and the green infrastructure for the conservation of species in anthropic areas.

As to local administration, Araújo et al. (2015) point to the fragility of municipalities when some demands require specific actions which are not always directly related to the office in charge of the issue. Couto and Coelho (2015) show that public managers may present pro-environment standards of actions if they are properly stimulated to do so. Therefore, the scope of the present study was to investigate practices chosen for the management of squares and also the roles green spaces play in the Municipality of São Paulo, SP.

1.1. Management of urban green spaces

Governments tend not to be the only agent responsible for the development and management of green spaces (Azadi et al., 2011). As a mean to have a better management of such public spaces, the municipal government of São Paulo, herein called Prefecture, issued Law 14,223, in 2006,1 which regulates the ordination of the elements that compose the urban landscape in the Municipality of São Paulo and grants a partnership with the society. In the Municipal Decree 52.062 of 2010, that regulates article 50 of the Municipal Law 14,223, the legal figure “Term of Cooperation” can be used by the local administrative region as a tool to create and maintain public spaces located in the municipality. The afore mentioned decree has the scope of signing partnerships with society (individuals or legal entities) to build and maintain public spaces, providing urban, environmental and landscaping improvements. Therefore, the use of Terms of Cooperation reflects how budgets related to the maintenance of public spaces have shrunk, but it can also reflect a new social structure.

According to Oliveira and Mascaro (2007), Urban Projects used to be more concerned with open public spaces than they are today. Mainly due to the real estate speculation, together with the compliance of the governments as they “stopped adopting strategies favorable to the collective interest to improve the city, such as to require public spaces where to build squares throughout the urban spread and accessible to the whole population”.

In the city of São Paulo, it is worth noticing that public spaces are hostages to the real estate market whose scope is to market the land available as much as possible. It is also understandable that the need for transformation and the growing demand for public spaces have made the municipal government, by means of public policies, even in a controlled mode, to use the tools that could provide more attention and bring in more resources for the maintenance of those spaces. Nevertheless the results of such acts are barely noticed in the daily practice.

The responsibility for the public green spaces, in the municipality of São Paulo, is divided between different municipal agencies: Secretary of Sports that manages some Municipal Sport Centers; Secretary of Culture that manages libraries and their surrounding areas, the local Administrative Regional Office, herein called Sub-prefecture, that manages the squares and the Secretary of Green and Environment that is responsible for the management of parks and the remainder of the urban green spaces. It is relevant to acknowledge the management of the squares, in São Paulo, once it is decentralized and have different managers.

1.2. Public squares

Currently, the discussion of the urban green spaces is important, once the urban planning has to accomplish with the needs of a society, which lives in an even more artificial environment, and has to avoid the decline of the quality of life in cities. Therefore, other than being quantified, urban green spaces must be qualified as such. The difficulty to qualify them resides in the evaluation of the benefits they may bring, being either environmental, aesthetic, social or financial values (Caporusso and Mattias, 2008; Yli-Pelkonen and Kohl, 2005).

Many studies have considered the vegetation as an important indicator of the urban environmental quality (Mello Filho, 1985; Flores-Xolocotzi, 2012; Van Leeuwen et al., 2010; González-García and Sal, 2008; Marzilliano et al., 2013), in these studies “green spaces” is used to refer to several kinds of urban spaces that provide the interaction of human activities with the environment (Harder et al., 2006) and can render ecosystemic services (Chiesura, 2004; Benini and Martin, 2011; Lamano-Ferreira et al., 2016; Laforteza and Chen, 2016).

According to McColl (2002), squares are shared public spaces that are available for everybody to use and their main purpose is leisure. Whereas, for Harder et al. (2006), “squares are meeting points whose main purpose is to stimulate a communitarian life, they are green spaces generally measuring between 100 m² and 10 ha”. Lima Neto et al. (2007) points out that if they are deprived of vegetation and are impermeable, squares cannot be considered as green spaces.

Even though data about green spaces from the Water and Electric Energy Department show that there are some squares, in the State of São Paulo, where there are no trees, no low vegetation, no playground or even no public toilet, Gomes and Soares (2003) say that it is fundamental to guaranty the conservation of the green in the various public spaces to ensure a minimum quality of life to the population, specially due to the poor offer of leisure, in most of the Brazilian cities, as well as the lack of access to this kind of space for a large part of the population.

The dialogue about urban green spaces is growing together with the need to build places that bring environmental quality to the cities and this issue is being incorporated into the discourse of the several players that are part of the society (Carrus et al., 2013). Therefore, the role of such spaces, which are shaped according to the transformation that the city has underwent, is to represent the society, and it impacts the life style of the population (Laredo and Somekh, 2014).

Information about this issue is not widely available, either in the scientific literature and in the public offices making it more difficult to elaborate an accurate concept and, other than that, this kind of discussion has a low impact in the academic environment and is almost restrained to the political scenario. Taking into consideration that public squares are part of the urban green spaces system in the Municipality, and they are ruled by the Statute of the City (Law 10.257/01), which establishes the general directions for

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1 Decree 52.062, of December 30, 2016. Grants a new regulation to Article 50 14.223, of December 26, 2006, which rules the establishment of terms of cooperation with the private initiative, aiming to improve and maintain the urban spaces, the environment and the landscape, as well as to conserve municipal spaces, as per stated in article 24 of Law Lei 14.517, of October 16, 2007; adds 3rd to article 2nd of the Decree 40.384 of April 3, 2001that disposes about the donation of goods and services and the establishment of partnerships with the private initiative; revokes Decree 50.077, of October 6, 2008.
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