

**COVID-19 and Tactical Urbanism:
new possibilities for using public space
in times of pandemic**

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ABSTRACT

This work sought to reflect on urgent adjustments in public space in times of crisis from tactical urban interventions. For this, it elucidates protective measures related to the control of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular under the aspects of urban mobility and civil engagement, using for this the case study of the implementation of temporary cycle lanes in the municipality of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The methodology of this research was based on official publications made available electronically by the Municipality of Belo Horizonte and by the Company responsible for the transport and transit sector of Belo Horizonte (BHTRANS). In addition, this work was supported by publications available electronically from the Association of Urban Cyclists of Belo Horizonte (BH in Cycle) from 2012 to 2021. Based on the correlation between the material collected and the theoretical basis available on topics of interest to this research, the study aimed to discuss temporary and small-scale operations of the Tactical Urbanism type, implemented from the partnership between public authorities and civil society to ensure a safer urban mobility in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic during the year 2020 to date. The work highlights that the inclusion of Tactical Urbanism as a formal tool in urban planning can foster new local possibilities and immediate action strategies in the face of crises such as COVID-19, in addition to fostering citizen participation in decision-making processes about the city and its importance, guaranteeing basic rights such as moving safely.

KEY WORDS: Tactical Urbanism. Urban mobility. Civil engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the midst of a pandemic scenario, leaving the private territory of our houses onto the street means going beyond the street limits to launch into the collective space, which has now become a space of risk. However, the need to keep urban life active and ensure safe urban displacement in our cities required urgent changes in urban design and the sudden rearrangement of daily life to control COVID-19.

Suddenly, the limits of use and appropriation of public space changed. The dissemination of the new coronavirus has brought to light society's dissatisfactions and pertinent demands in the face of the State's lack of providing basic rights such as coming and going, and highlighted the emergence of a counter-response by citizens, demanding the implementation of power protection initiatives public in the context of urban mobility. As it was possible, civil society itself began to move to make adjustments in the city and adaptations to its routine, in order to ensure safer mobility. In fact, the determination of physical distance as a measure capable of reducing transmission due to the ease of contagion of the new coronavirus interfered with displacements, work and study regimes,

With no time for medium and long-term urban solutions and no availability of financial resources for complex interventions, space was opened up for Tactical Urbanism, punctual and low-cost experiences, more agile solutions to be implemented and which are generally related to the construction of the bottom up citizen empowerment¹ to overcome moments of need and generate temporary palliative solutions for urgent problems such as urban mobility.

It was proposed, then, a reflection on the contribution of the use of Tactical Urbanism in public space in order to face urgent urban situations, such as the one that occurred during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 and which continues in Brazil until the time of publication of this article. To illustrate the use of tactical initiatives applied to mobility during the pandemic period and also to present a case of successful citizen engagement in making the city, the case of the implementation of the temporary bicycle network in Belo Horizonte was presented, its reflection for the city and the protective measures taken during the pandemic.

¹ Johnson (2003) defines as "bottom-up systems" organizations in which the order starts from collective interactions that are systematized in a decentralized way.

2 OBJECTIVE

Investigate the potential of Tactical Urbanism as a means of responding to crisis situations, especially in the aspects of urban mobility and civil engagement, taking as a case study the implementation of cycle lanes² in Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais, Brazil, during the new coronavirus pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021.

3 METHODOLOGY / METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The methodology of this work had a descriptive character with an emphasis on urban analysis, and the methods used aimed, mainly, to reflect on urgent adaptations in the public urban space in times of pandemic, especially in the aspects of urban mobility and civil engagement, using for this is the case study of the implementation of temporary cycle lanes in the city of Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais. For this, the research was based on official publications made available electronically by the Municipality of Belo Horizonte and by the Company responsible for the Transport sector of Belo Horizon (BHTRANS). In addition, this work was supported by publications available electronically from BH em Ciclo (Association of Urban Cyclists of Belo Horizonte) during the period from 2012 to 2021. Based on the correlation between the material collected and the theoretical basis available on topics of interest to this research, the study intended to discuss temporary and small-scale operations of the Tactical Urbanism type, implemented through a partnership between public authorities and civil society to ensure safer urban mobility in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The work highlights the agenda of active citizen participation in decision-making processes about the city and its importance in guaranteeing basic rights such as moving around the city safely.

4 RESULTS

According to Erminia Maricato (2020), we were before the pandemic at a time of crisis in global capitalism. For the author, from the 1970s onwards, capitalism entered a process of dismantling the social state and public policies (MARICATO, 2002) and what is being experienced now, during the pandemic, is the deepening of the effects of this globalization, which will make us travel a path of social, economic and political crisis for some time. (CARLOS, 2020; MARICATO, 2020). This crisis is closely related to cities and to the maintenance of a neoliberal market logic that brought with it the defense of a minimum state, privatization policies and the deregulation of markets, and which also opened paths for the repeal of protective laws that had been hard won in the past (COMPARATO, 2013).

The contemporaneity and the instability that surrounds it brought us face to face with the challenges encountered since the beginning of Brazilian industrialization (GONZALES ET AL.,

²According to ANNEX I of the concepts and definitions of the Brazilian Traffic Code (2020): “cycle lane” corresponds to a part of the carriageway intended for the exclusive circulation of cycles that is delimited by specific signs; on the other hand, the “cycleway” would be a lane dedicated to the circulation of cycles that is physically separated from common traffic.

2013). This past process allowed the population to appropriate the urban way of life over time, but it did not guarantee decent basic rights to live in cities. This raised and still raises challenges that have not been overcome before and that evoke a response to social inequality, environmental conflicts, the spatialization of urban functions, the demands of mobility.

The current situation places us in a position responsible for designing the city of the present, not the city of the future, but the city of crowds, which also needs to be a more democratic city (GONZALES ET AL., 2013). And, who knows, on the bright side, the pandemic may also lead us to new forms of globalization and geopolitics, creating an opportunity to redirect actions towards a more sustainable and inclusive urbanism (BESEN, 2020).

The post-pandemic world cannot be the same and, despite all the questions we have been asking ourselves at this uncertain time, there is a certainty of the need for a fairer, more humane and more democratic development project for cities.

Currently, urban planning is applied that focuses on designing large-scale interventions, supported by the principle that the process should be controlled from the top down, that is, the decisions taken by authorities that control the process and decide what and how will urban actions be implemented. Thus, cities are built from urban spaces without memories, without exchange, without union, without proximity, that is, without relationships, individualistic and inadequate for users. Unpredictable spaces regarding their occupation and transformation, as the individual's needs and their relationship with the 'place' are not considered in the idealization process (FLORÊNCIO DE MACÊDO; MORAES DE ALMEIDA, 2020, p.2).

Given the dissatisfactions and imbalances that this way of making the city has brought about over time, it can be said that the pandemic ended up inciting conflicts and practices in a scenario that already existed. The challenge now is to rethink the city in the most democratic way possible and as a network of territories that organize and communicate in different ways, which need to be thought of in a decentralized way and each with its own specificities. These territories are also influenced by each other and, therefore, they need to be connected and integrated in their conflict resolution actions in order to move forward together.

to saints (2020), the triple domination of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, which has characterized the Eurocentric world since the 16th century, provided, over time, new forms of repression of popular resistance and blocked the path to its liberation from what is generated in social and political struggles against this domination. However, the author puts forth a spark of hope when he says that, in parallel, new forms of resistance, oppositional creativity and imaginary liberation are born to overcome old paradigms. Brenner (2016) states that, in addition to these old paradigms, the idea of the city, its complex form and whose economic and social dynamics are directed towards unsustainability, requires more agile responses to everyday problems in the face of the urgency of facing the urban crisis.

Claiming urban public space can be a promising way to create new models and to weaken the barriers imposed by capitalist yearnings. And, despite the city's macro-scale appearing to be in contrast, in relation to the micro-scale and punctual scope of tactical urban interventions, actions of this type can become tools for creating spaces for talking about the daily life of localities and for reinventing more democratic cities and territories. In this sense, Adriana Sansão Fontes elucidates that:

[...] small tactical actions can enhance existing situations, intensify the everyday urban experience, gradually reclaim and reconquer places and give identity to degraded

spaces, contributing to permanent long-term transformations. (SOURCES, 2018, p.103).

The term Tactical Urbanism has been widely disseminated since the beginning of the 21st century. However, it is still a relatively young term, with its ancestry being attributed to urban planner Mike Lydon and his team that make up the studio Street Plans Collaborative. In 2011 these urban planners launched a publication designating US actions as tactics: Tactical Urbanism: Short-term Action, Long-term Change (PFEIFER, 2013). Generally speaking, Tactical Urbanism can be seen as a temporary way of intervening in the space that intends to act on a scale closer to human, in the local sphere and with a low investment cost. However, the term does not have a single definition, it is still under construction and it must be taken into account that it is not a unified movement that can be characterized in its entirety. There are several interpretations, various types and ways of doing things, which encompass a very wide range of proposals (BRENNER, 2016). According to the creators of the term:

Tactical Urbanism is an approach to building and activating neighborhoods using short-term, low-cost, small-scale policies and interventions. It can be used by a variety of actors, including governments, businesses and non-profit organizations, citizen groups and individuals. It makes use of open and iterative development processes, efficient use of resources and the creative potential unleashed by social interaction (LYDON; GARCIA, 2015, p.2, our translation).

This reframing invites a new dialogue on local resilience and helps cities and citizens together explore a more subtle and agile approach to creating spatialities, so that it is possible not only to imagine a long-term transformation, but also to adjust to it. as process conditions change (LYDON; GARCIA, 2015, p.3, our translation).

Given the above and reflecting on the situation of crisis aggravated by the pandemic that urges answers to urban problems, it is argued that Tactical Urbanism and the common elements that underlie it, can mean deep urban and cultural transformations for places. It is believed that this tool has the potential to bring to light urgent attempts to regain the right to the city and urban places as political and plural spaces. In this context and according to David Harvey (2012, p.74), this right to the city means “the right to change ourselves by changing the city”, stating that this right is essentially collective, since this transformation of individuals “inevitably depends on the exercise of a collective power to shape the urbanization process (2012, p.74)”. In conditions where the malaise of individualist neoliberal ethics is predominant, it becomes almost impossible to nurture ideals of urban identity, citizenship and belonging. In this way, the public context becomes a reflection of the capitalist logic applied to the urban, that is, it creates disconnected spaces that do not present urban and social life permeated by exchanges between the community, meetings and collectivity (HARVEY, 2014).

The current pandemic context and the urgency to keep active activities essential to the maintenance of urban life, put us every day in an impasse that is not new, but that needs reflection: it is no longer possible to think of urbanism as a construction finished (GONZALES ET AL., 2013). Today's urban form is constantly changing and is soon surpassed by future demands, which therefore require new everyday expressions of the city.

The production of the urban space of the present, everyday and that is constantly changing, includes a conscious individual who wants to appropriate the city in order to adapt and respond to the continuous changes in their habits. Regarding this awareness, in Belo

Horizonte, Minas Gerais, the demand for a safer and more sustainable public space to move around came from cyclists a few years ago and currently combines ideas of temporary tactical infrastructure with the emergence of protective measures to moving around the city in the face of the COVID-19 crisis.

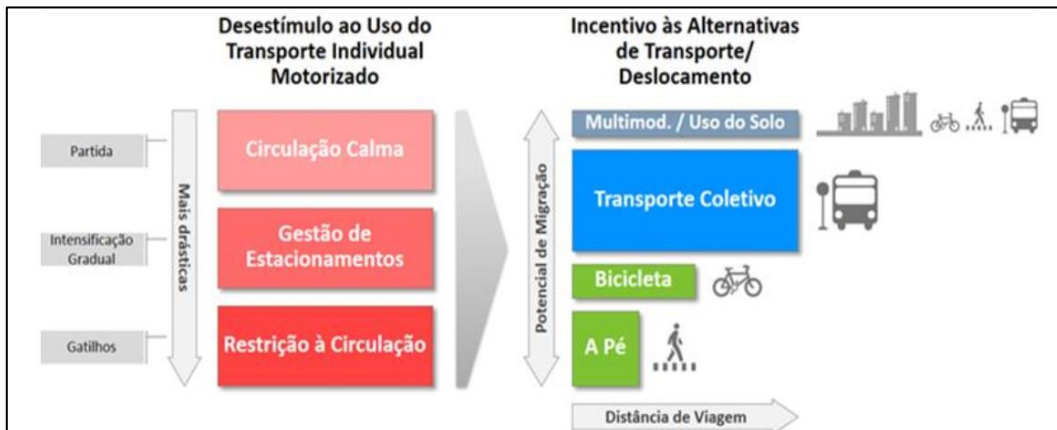
Since 2006, the capital of Minas Gerais has had a specific program for bicycles implemented by the city, the Bicycle Transport Incentive Program (Pedala BH), which was revised and incorporated into the Belo Horizonte Urban Mobility Master Plan – PlanMob-BH (CITYHALL). DE BELO HORIZONTE, 2020a, p.26). However, the implementation of the first spaces for mobility by bicycle only began, in fact, in 2010, without consulting civil society. The consequences of this process of cycling projects imposed by the government mainly involved not meeting the needs of users and caused cyclists to mobilize and exert great pressure on the streets, social networks and media for more blunt solutions to their daily problems (BH EM CYCLE, 2017). In 2012, a well-articulated group of cyclist citizens took shape, which began to organize itself, demanding improvements in mobility by bicycle in the capital. It was at this time that the Belo Horizonte Urban Cyclists Association (BH em Ciclo) emerged, a non-profit association that defends the cyclist's right to travel through the streets of the capital like any other transport user (BH EM CICLO, 2020) .

With the passage of time and given the importance of better communicating the interests of cycling improvements to the public authorities, the group of civilians associated with “BH in Cycle”, demanded that they could participate in the construction and design process of spaces for bicycles, which in this case, it involved direct users of the cycling infrastructure. The success of this engagement was the response of the government to resolve the situation of unsuccessful projects and the dissatisfaction of the population of cyclists by setting up a work group within the “Pedala BH” program, the “GT Pedala BH”, open and without leaders, and created with the objective of being a space for dialogue between cyclists interested in promoting the use of bicycles and the municipal public administration (PREFEITURA DE BELO HORIZONTE, 2018).

Currently, and in view of the new challenges imposed by the pandemic on urban mobility, cyclists in Belo Horizonte realized that their demands for improvement in bicycle mobility would be an opportunity to ensure safety when traveling and also to affirm their role as active agents in urban decisions. Thus, the persevering engagement of civil society that travels by bicycle in the capital and whose individuals had already consolidated a permanent and periodic dialogue with the government and with the Transport and Transit Company of Belo Horizonte (BHTRANS), put even more pressure on the administration public, directing it to bet on quick actions and practices of Tactical Urbanism to implement temporary cycle lanes and facilitate urban displacements during the pandemic.

Another important point that contributed to the feasibility of the city's temporary cycling structure is that strategies to discourage the use of transport were instituted in the Belo Horizonte Urban Mobility Master Plan (PlanMob-BH 2030), in its most recent review dated in 2017 motorized individual (figure 1), proposing "the use of measures that act in the conditions of displacement in a gradual manner (the simplest considered as 'starting' and the most drastic evaluated through the 'triggers') [...]" (CITY OFFICE OF BELO HORIZONTE, 2017, p.28).

Figure 1 – Definition of the Travel Demand Management Strategy

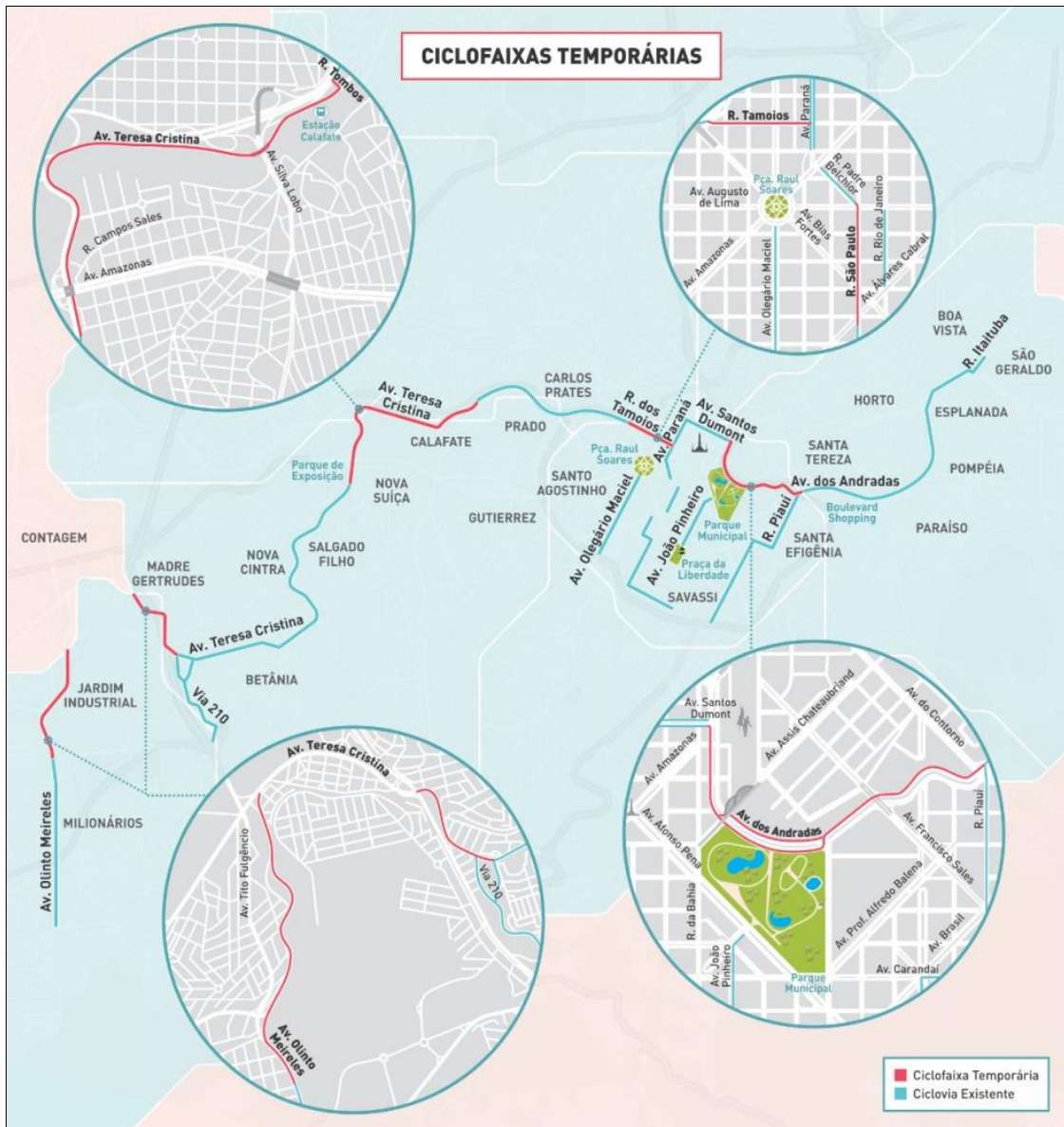


Source: BELO HORIZONTE CITY HALL, 2017.

In this context, with the support of the public mobility policy in force, combined with the risk of exposure to contagion in the option of mass public transport, the positioning of an engaged civil society and the urgency brought by the crisis of COVID-19, the Municipality of Belo Horizonte, through BHTRANS, quickly mobilized to indicate safe mobility solutions during the pandemic period and the bicycle proved to be an excellent alternative for safe, sustainable and individual travel.

In conjunction with the city's cyclists, the municipal government carried out inspections that identified the best route to receive, at first, the temporary cycling infrastructure. In the first phase of the temporary project, inaugurated on July 13, 2020, a set of cycle lanes was installed that connected the East and West regions of the city, approximately 30 km long, offering a safer and more sustainable option to come and go in Belo Horizonte. In addition to the proposal being already implemented and in full operation, it must be said that it took advantage of stretches of preexisting cycle paths and proposed new cycle lanes, which link the Barreiro region to Avenida dos Andradas, in the São Geraldo district. The project evolved even more and also included cycle lanes on the Teresa Cristina Avenue section, located in the municipality of Contagem (figure 2). The tactical strategies that were added to these cycle lanes are related to the use of signs with paintings, cones and beacons which delimit the area destined for bicycle traffic. The city hall was also concerned with signaling with temporary signs and banners instructions for drivers and motorcyclists to respect the space destined for bicycle users (PREFEITURA DE BELO HORIZONTE, 2020b). According to the municipal government, after the inauguration of the project and its monitoring, it was possible to see great use of the temporary infrastructure, a factor that also favored the implementation of improvements in fragile security points. In September 2020,

Figure 2 - Location and details of temporary cycle lanes



Source: BELO HORIZONTE CITY HALL, 2020b.

5 CONCLUSION

The pandemic caused by the new coronavirus, together with the adoption of a neoliberal city model and the deepening of an urban social crisis of great proportions in Brazil, have been precarious to public life in several aspects, imposing differentiated access to places in the city and elucidating even more the unequal and anti-democratic structure of society and urbanity in which we live. In view of the new threat to health and the speed of contagion by the new coronavirus, the main recommendation established was to isolate oneself. This has been the main front to fight the pandemic and one which has pushed us in a direction opposite to proximity and the collective sphere. In this context,

Tactical Urbanism appears in this scenario as an emergency way to adapt the public space to the new needs of physical isolation. Given the complexity of making changes in urban infrastructure, tactical actions have tried to alleviate the effects of the pandemic in everyday

life, even if sometimes only in a palliative way. It is clear that the citizen engagement and collective discourse defended by this way of intervening in the city are positive, but, in practice, it is also necessary that there is good will on the part of the government, the legal support of public policies and an efficient interaction between civil society and professionals involved in the planning and management of municipal bodies, in order to ensure collective processes for the transformation of urban space. Together,

The insertion of Tactical Urbanism as a formal tool in urban planning can foster new local possibilities and immediate action strategies in the face of crises such as COVID-19, streamlining generally bureaucratic processes and making them possible even with budget deficiencies generally relevant to public coffers municipal authorities. Still, this tool can boost the participation of the population in the construction of the city, based on a truly participatory process that guides the production of urban space aimed at users.

In this sense, the urban tactical cycling solution adopted in Belo Horizonte combined a moment that urged responses to the problems of displacement and the citizen demand for improvements in mobility conditions to the dialogue with the public authorities and the proposition of solutions that, in addition to already formally foreseen in urban legislation, they are possible, low-cost and quick-to-implement solutions for the moment of crisis.

Both for the construction and for the feasibility of urban solutions, the partnership between the different actors in Belo Horizonte was essential to make the project and the process feasible. Even, who knows, they may also be contributing to greater adherence to this active and sustainable form of transportation that is the bicycle, in a post-pandemic scenario and to greater urban and participatory awareness of civil society in solving the daily problems of their places. Anyway, it is necessary that more people become aware of their right to the city, so that this cultural change has greater reach, so that more people feel part of the public urban sphere, willing to build places with which it is possible to identify, heterogeneous, plural, collective and therefore democratic.

6 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel - Brazil (CAPES) for the Masters scholarship from Tiffany Nicoli Faria Latalisa França (process n° 88887.489488/2020 -00).

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