


Possible allegories: design of parade cars in the lower divisions of the São Paulo carnival

Alegorias possíveis: projeto de carros alegóricos nas divisões inferiores do carnaval de São Paulo

Posibles alegorías: diseño de carros alegórico en las divisiones inferiores del carnaval de São Paulo

*Gleuson Pinheiro Silva, mestre em Arquitetura e Urbanismo pela Universidade de São Paulo (USP).
E-mail: gleuson@usp.br  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8159-9240>*

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Abstract

In this article we present allegorical car projects for the São Paulo carnival samba school parade, between the years 2010 and 2024. The objective is to reflect on the development of this type of work amid the contingencies of resources and of infrastructure in the lower divisions of the São Paulo car-nival. The sources used are sketches, drawings and photographic records relating to the conception, elaboration and execution of the allegories. We seek, from design activity, to demonstrate ways of facing challenges and present responses that are common to design activities in the field of arts, design and architecture.

Keywords: allegorical car; carnival; physical model; project.



Resumo

Neste artigo apresentamos projetos de carros alegóricos para o desfile das escolas de samba do carnaval de São Paulo, entre os anos de 2010 e 2024. O objetivo é fazer uma reflexão sobre o desenvolvimento desse tipo de trabalho em meio às contingências de recursos e de infraestrutura das divisões inferiores do carnaval paulistano. As fontes utilizadas são os croquis, desenhos e registros fotográficos referentes à concepção, elaboração e execução das alegorias. Buscamos, a partir da atividade projetual, demonstrar formas de enfrentar desafios e apresentar respostas que são comuns ao campo das artes, do design e da arquitetura.

Palavras-chave: Carros alegóricos; Carnaval; Maquetes; Projeto

Resumen

En este artículo presentamos proyectos de carros alegóricos para el desfile de escuelas de samba del carnaval de São Paulo, entre los años 2010 y 2024. El objetivo es reflexionar sobre el desarrollo de este tipo de trabajo en medio de las contingencias de recursos y de infraestructura en las divisiones inferiores del Carnaval de São Paulo. Las fuentes utilizadas son bocetos, dibujos y registros fotográficos relacionados con la concepción, elaboración y ejecución de las alegorías. Buscamos, desde la actividad de diseño, demostrar formas de enfrentar desafíos y presentar respuestas comunes a las actividades de diseño en el campo de las artes, el diseño y la arquitectura.

Palabras clave: Carros alegóricos; Carnaval; Modelos; Proyecto.

INTRODUCTION

In this text, we discuss the experience of designing allegorical cars for samba schools in the lower divisions of the São Paulo carnival, based on my work as a carnival designer¹. Some projects were chosen between 2010 and 2024. Our objective is to analyze the aforementioned production from the perspective of project development and in the context of the significant transformations, both structural and emerging, of the São Paulo carnival over the period of a decade. The São Paulo samba school parade, originally a black revelry, has become a mass spectacle that assumes grandiose numbers and dimensions. Since its officialization in 1964, the festival has been significantly transformed in its structure and format, attracting the interest and participation of the most varied social segments, reflecting conflicts and processes common to society as a whole (Bello, 2008).

With the growing number of spectators, temporary grandstands were built in the places where the parades took place, which placed spectators in increasingly

¹ Carnival designer (in Portuguese, 'carnavalesco'), is the professional responsible for creating the visual elements of the parade, namely, the floats, props and costumes.



distant positions from the processions (Azevedo, 2010). The beginning of television broadcasts in the mid-1980s intensified the process of growth or verticalization of the parades and even contributed to the creation of a specialized space for the event, the Anhembi Sambadrome (Baronetti, 2015). In addition, the growth of the carnival samba schools led to an increase in the creation of new groups in the city, a movement that accompanied the demographic growth and the considerable expansion of urbanization, which reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s (Pinheiro, 2020).

When it was officially established, the samba school competition was organized into three divisions. Currently, it has seven groups, the first three of which parade at the Sambadrome and the others perform the so-called “neighborhood carnival” on catwalks set up on the city’s avenues. During the period covered here, the parades were held in the neighborhoods of Vila Esperança, at the Interlagos Racetrack and at the Sambadrome.

In this hierarchy, only the first division, called *Grupo Especial*, has its parades televised and, consequently, benefits from broadcasting rights, in addition to being able to attract sponsors who invest in the production of the parades. Historian Bruno Baronetti (2015) discusses the entities that have managed the samba school carnival since its officialization and the split that occurred in the 1980s due to the division of the funds from television broadcasting rights. The second division, or *Grupo de Acesso I*, has sporadically managed to negotiate television broadcasts and thus, occasionally, enjoys this money. As for the other divisions, they generally only count on municipal subsidies for the construction of their parades.

As mentioned, the first three groups, *Grupo Especial*, *Grupo de Acesso I* and *Grupo de Acesso II*, parade in the Sambadrome. This space was built to prioritize the verticalization process of the parades and thus has determined the dimensions of the visual elements, mainly of the allegorical cars, related to its architecture. In addition, the three groups that parade in the Sambadrome have very different investment conditions, with the *Grupo Especial* considerably distant from *Grupo de Acesso I* and *Grupo de Acesso II*. When we look at the groups that perform on the streets, this difference becomes even more significant.

Regarding the infrastructure for making the parade floats, the schools in the *Grupo Especial* (First Division of the Carnival Competition) have had access to the *Fábrica do Samba* since 2016, located in the Barra Funda neighborhood, a few kilometers from the Sambadrome². This space has warehouses equipped with the infrastructure to make the floats and accessories. More recently, in 2019, the space belonging to the city hall in the North Zone of the city was made official, which was already used informally by some groups, such as the space designated for the warehouses of the schools in the *Grupo de Acesso I* and *Grupo de Acesso II*. The schools in the other divisions do not have a space of this type and many of

2 The *Fábrica do Samba* (Samba Factory) was partially opened in 2016, serving half of the *Grupo Especial* associations. The work was only completed in 2022.



them do not even have a space to house the work, assembling their floats in public spaces in their respective neighborhoods.

However, the visual characterization of the festivities is established vertically, from top to bottom. Thus, the grandeur of the parades held in the context of the *Grupo Especial* becomes the paradigm for all other groups. In this sense, regardless of the investment capacity of the association, and even the infrastructure for building the pieces, the aim is always to execute elements with the largest possible dimension. It is important to mention that the samba school competition has specific regulations for each group, in which the mandatory minimum and maximum quantities of elements are determined, such as the allegorical cars, for example.

Although the work developed over the aforementioned period refers to the sets of visual pieces for the parades, we will focus here on the allegorical cars projects. Within this time frame, we chose four works, two of which were created for parades that constitute the Neighborhood Carnival and the other two for parades in the Sambadrome. The sources used are the elements of design and development of the project, in the form of sketches, two-dimensional and three-dimensional representations, photographs of models and construction of the floats. Methodologically, we sought to point out the resources used to achieve visual impact and large dimensions in the context of the scarcity of resources and infrastructure, especially in the Neighborhood Carnival groups.

Allegories and reality

Allegorical cars are stage elements built on the chassis of a vehicle, usually a large one. A flat base is made of steel structure, on which a new stage design is built each year. Broadly speaking, there are two types of stage design: a) conventional, when steel prisms are built, sometimes closed with wood, on which decoration and/or sculptures are applied; b) hollow, when the shapes and elements are not closed with wood or fabrics and, often, the structures are part of the decoration.

Since the 2000s, professionals from the Parintins Folklore Festival, in the state of Amazonas, have been increasingly involved in the design and production of floats for the São Paulo Carnival. The main technological contributions of this group include the mixed sculptural work of a steel structure with a Styrofoam enclosure, and the creation of models, also in Styrofoam. Traditionally, Styrofoam sculptures were made from solid blocks, but Styrofoam is a very expensive material. Mixed sculptures have become the predominant type due to cost reduction.

The design of floats is usually composed of two-dimensional technical drawings and perspectives that simulate the desired volume. Currently, two-dimensional drawing and three-dimensional modeling programs are used. Some professionals use physical models. This is the type of representation we prefer because it allows us to investigate both the structure and the finishing and also simulate



the visualization of the float from the points of view of the judges or spectators. Thus, the model is an investigation tool, the materialization of an idea still in development, according to the understanding of architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha:

The model, very simple, is doing something you want to see. The right diameter, the right height, the human scale. You can be this character, kneel on the floor to see inside the model, it's very beautiful! Close the window, wait until night, take the Zinho lamp off the light table and bring it close to the model, see the effects of the light... you see the size of things, their proportion, you see the transparencies (Rocha, 2007, p.55-59).

The initial sketches are always elevations, since the main issue involved in the design of floats is volumetry. Thus, floor plans or top views usually appear later. In addition, the height of transportation or circulation of the floats to the parade site is considered, limited to four meters, in order to ensure that it passes under the electrical wiring and viaducts and bridges of the city. The height of four meters, generally indicated in the drawings, constitutes a transition dimension, determining elements that can be fixed to the chassis and those that must be mobile or fit together.

For the 2010 carnival, the Unidos de São Miguel Samba School was in the fifth division of the São Paulo carnival and the theme chosen was carnival music. The opening float made reference to the song *Mamãe Eu Quero* (Mommy, I want), bringing elements of the children's universe mentioned in the lyrics of the song. This first proposal consisted of four sculptures of babies that rotated around a central axis. The size of the sculptures would have the function of delegating the verticality of the set. To increase the size of the float, a device was used to create a structure that fit into the main chassis, being pushed by it; in carnival jargon this piece is called an '*avancê*' (advanced, complement). At first, a baby bottle surrounded by pacifiers was represented on the *avancê*. Later, it was decided to bring the larger baby bottle to the axis of rotation of the baby sculptures. Also, in this development of the idea, the pacifiers would be the finishing elements of the sides of the base of the float.

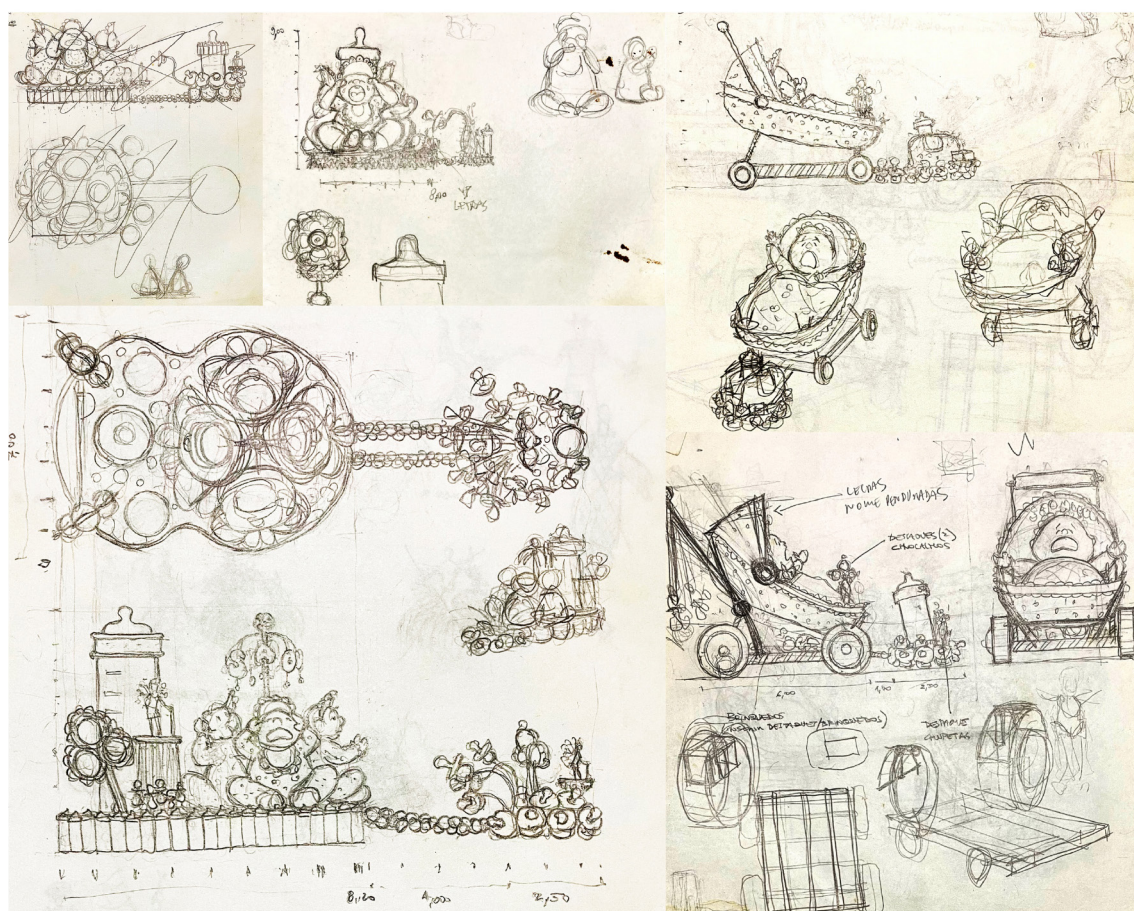


Figura 1: Sketch of the design of the opening float for the 2010 carnival, elevation and top view.
Technique: graphite on sulfite paper. Source: personal collection.

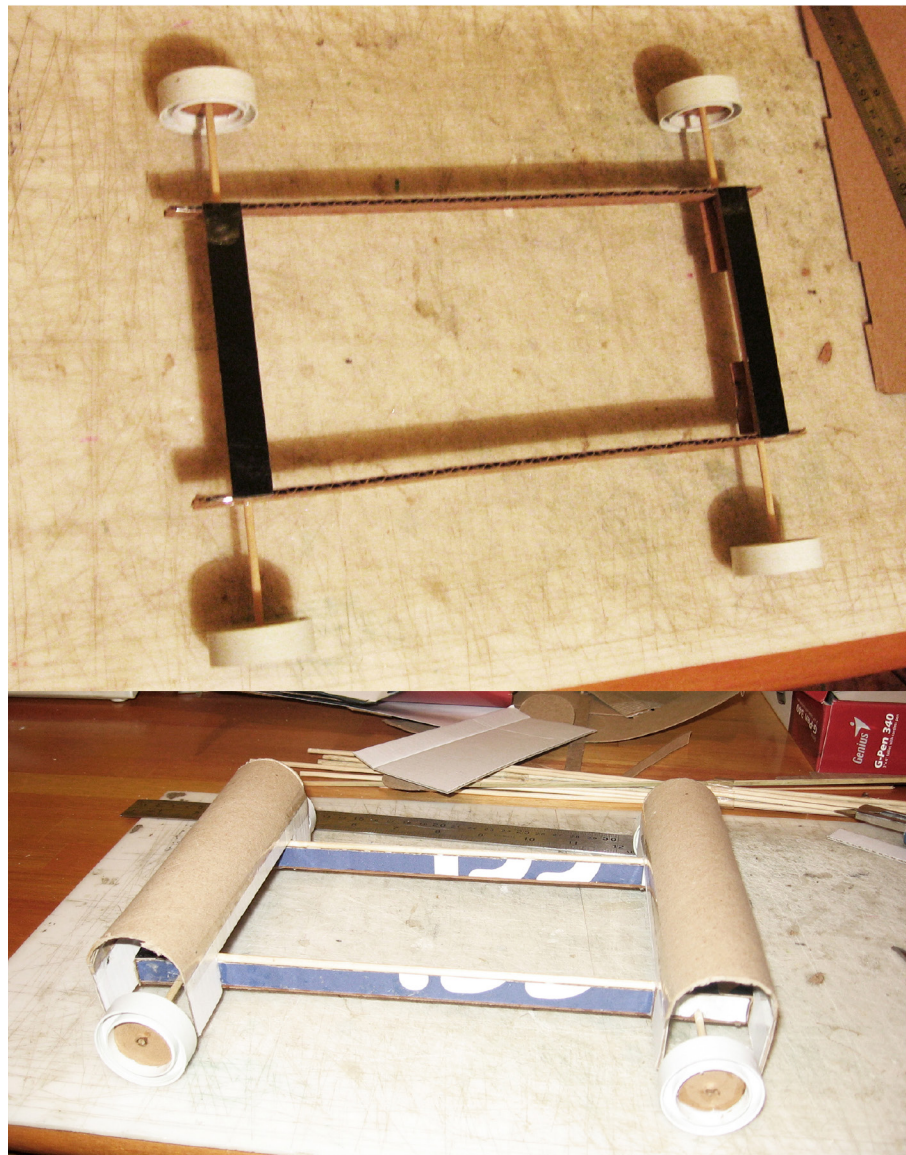
The size of the baby sculptures seemed difficult to achieve, since it would require a more robust structure. It was therefore decided to reduce the size of the baby sculptures, which would be four meters high, so that they could be transported fixed on the chassis. It is important to emphasize that the aim was to avoid making very large sculptures that would need to be transported by truck or trailer, resulting in transportation costs. The winch to transport the chassis was already expensive, so it was important that the larger pieces of the floats travelled on the base, even if disassembled, tilted or overturned.

This proposal was consolidated in a sketch, including the indication of the sign with the name of the association (one of the mandatory features that schools must display on their opening float). They also sought to investigate less conventional shapes for the float, avoiding rectangular prisms and trying to give a curved contour to the base of the chassis, as can be seen in the top view. However, we still had a float that did not have a truly innovative shape. It was then that the idea of creating a float that would deconstruct the idea of a table (chassis) on which the sculptures are arranged began to be raised.

The proposal then changed significantly and the base of the allegory became the base of a baby carriage, on a larger scale (drawings on the right, Figure 1). This idea brought with it the innovation of having a chassis with an exposed structure, devoid of wood or other closures, that is, an open chassis. Although the basket and baby set was large, it could be transported “lying down”, within the limit of four meters in height, in a similar way to folding baby carriages.

After the sketch study, 1:25 scale models were made to test the volume and decide on the combination of colors and materials to be used. Furthermore, the metalworker who would build the structure would use the project as a representation. Thus, the structural system of the model simulated the structure that would be built. To approximate the behavior of the steel tubes, galvanized wire and PVC rods or wooden sticks were used – when it was not necessary to make curves. The areas that would receive wood cladding or have a closed finish in the model were made with cardboard or cardstock. No study models were made; However, the creation of the final model itself constituted a research process. For this project, it was essential to simulate, as faithfully as possible, the chassis with its main beams and even the tires.





*Figure 2: 1:25 scale model, representation of the chassis frame with tires and closing parts.
Source: personal collection.*

A decoration was designed to overlap the structures of the tires and their respective axles (Figure 2), since the steering and rolling devices could not be decorated. The initial idea was that the tires of the float would be visible and would appear as the wheels of a baby carriage. However, this would result in a float with very small dimensions, in accordance with the proportion of the wheels. Therefore, it was decided to make decorative wheels, larger in size and that would hide the tires, as we can see in the following image.



Figure 3: 1:25 scale model, representation of the structure and finished model. Source: personal collection.

When developing the model, a platform was added to each side of the float to hold the compositions, whose costumes would represent rattles. The entire closure of the stroller basket was made of fabric, which resulted in a lightweight piece. The height of the push bar for the baby stroller was the element responsible for giving the set verticality, since a float with an open base tended to appear smaller than conventional floats. The size of the float is not an objective criterion for judging. However, impact is commonly associated with grandeur and size, in a subjective manner.



During this carnival, the Unidos de São Miguel samba school did not have a warehouse to build its floats. Therefore, the structures were built on a vacant lot in the neighborhood and the decorations were produced to be applied only on the eve of the performance. This situation limited the scale of the work so that it could be assembled in three days, which was the time which the floats remained in preparation at the parade site. In 2010, the parades of the then Group III (fifth division) were held in the Vila Esperança neighborhood, on Avenida Alvinópolis.

In Vila Esperança, the floats are assembled under the Vila Matilde Viaduct in the days leading up to the parade. An important factor limiting the size of the floats in the parades that take place in Vila Esperança, in addition to issues regarding financial resources in the fifth division and space for work, is the subway walkway, whose span allows floats to be no more than 7.40 meters high. All the decoration material was made in advance to be applied to the structure. This type of work organization, in which the decoration pieces are not developed directly on the structure, requires strict control of the size of both the decoration and the structure, so that there are no missing areas to be decorated or finishing flaws.

In 2010, Unidos de São Miguel was promoted to the fourth division of the carnival for 2011. That year, the parades in this division were held at the Interlagos Race Track, in the city's South Zone. For Unidos de São Miguel, which still had no warehouse, court or any space for rehearsals or construction of the visual elements for the parades, parading in such a distant location was a major challenge. As we have already mentioned, the strategy adopted by the school was to make the decorative pieces for the floats to be applied the day before the parade, at the performance location. Often, to support this work, it was necessary to quickly produce props or pieces in the homes that served as workshops in São Miguel and take them to the concentration camp on an emergency basis. However, constant trips between Interlagos and São Miguel Paulista was not feasible.

For the 2011 carnival, the chosen theme was the act of singing, with the plot entitled "Those who sing, scare away their ills". Two allegories were conceived and the one we are discussing here referred to the chants of the fans of a football team in the stands. Below are some sketches of the conception of the first ideas.

The initial idea for the float was to reproduce the stands of a soccer stadium and the field. Since the stands, in the context of the plot, needed to be occupied by fans, the possibility of including human elements such as fans was considered. However, this would place a very large load on the available chassis and could represent a problem for the parade, since the school did not have the resources to reinforce the structure. The structures of floats are almost always made of steel tubes, which are very expensive. Thus, when they need to support large loads, they end up becoming very expensive. Scenographic elements use tubes of smaller gauges and thinner walls, which are much more affordable.



The representation of the football field was defined using a fabric the width of the allegory, structured by people who would position themselves in openings where it would be possible to put their heads – like a shirt collar – thus forming the carpet. For the stands, instead of using people, they thought of making two-dimensional dolls (plates), which would be fixed to a rotating mechanism and would allow the staged “fans” to be changed. Although this effect of changing the fans required a special structure, since they were lightweight pieces, the cost was much lower than if people had been used. The chassis had a five-meter square platform and with the artifice of the football field, seven meters long, the allegory had its size multiplied.

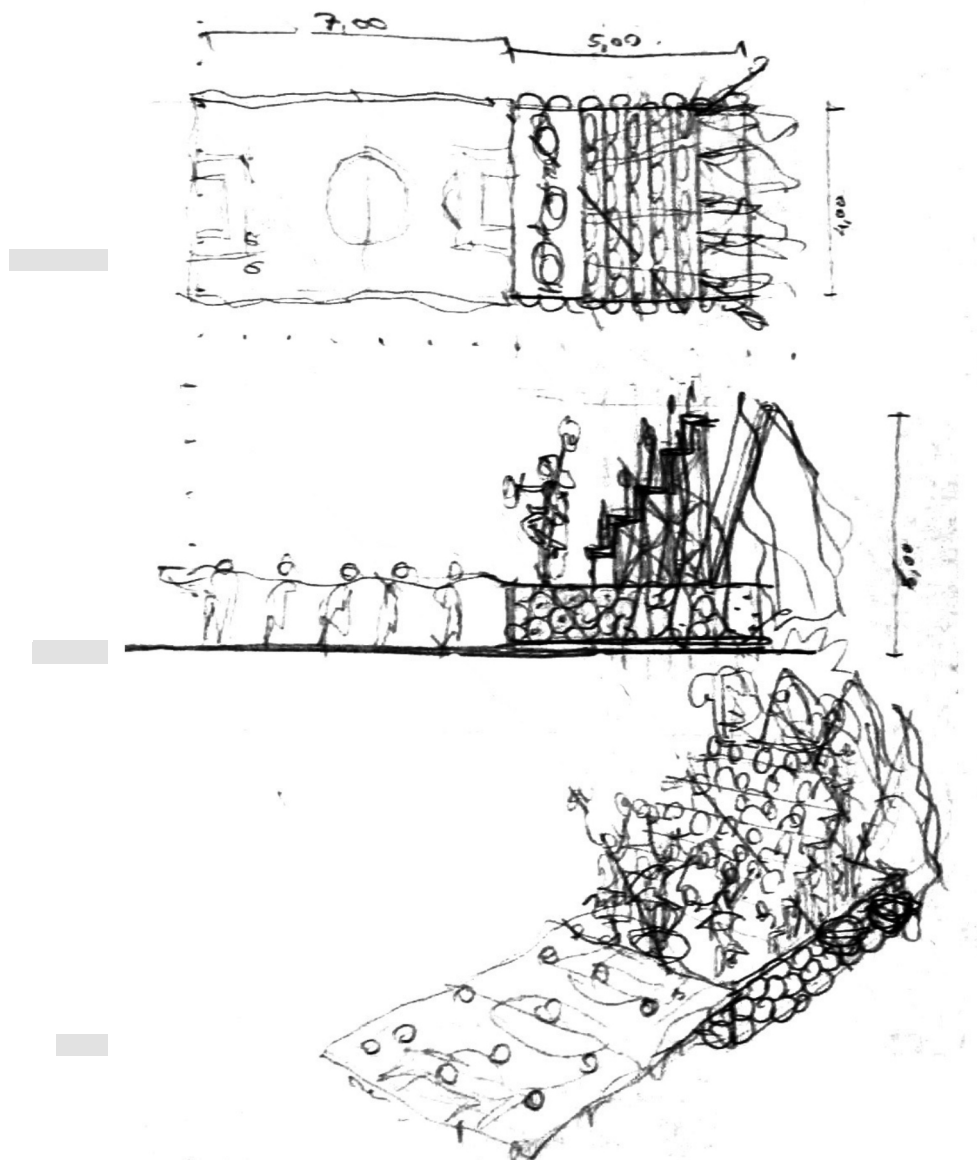


Figure 4: Study sketch of the second allegory for the 2011 carnival, top view, elevation and perspective. Technique: Graphite on sulfite paper. Source: Personal collection.

The metalworker who was going to build the structure of the floats worked for another Samba School in another neighborhood that had a warehouse. Thus, Unidos de São Miguel managed to reach an agreement to share the warehouse of this association and the structures were built far away. It is common for associations in the lower divisions to share specialized professionals. Because it was further away from the neighborhood, one of the metalworker's requests was the technical drawing with the dimensions of the floats.

From the sketch to the consolidation in the technical drawings, there were some changes: in front of the stands, there were sculptures representing cheerleaders. It was then decided to use people to represent them and to place a trophy in the center. Also, at the back, three platforms were included for highlights³. The sculpture representing the trophy would not use a metal structure and the drawing only indicated the platform on which it would be fitted.

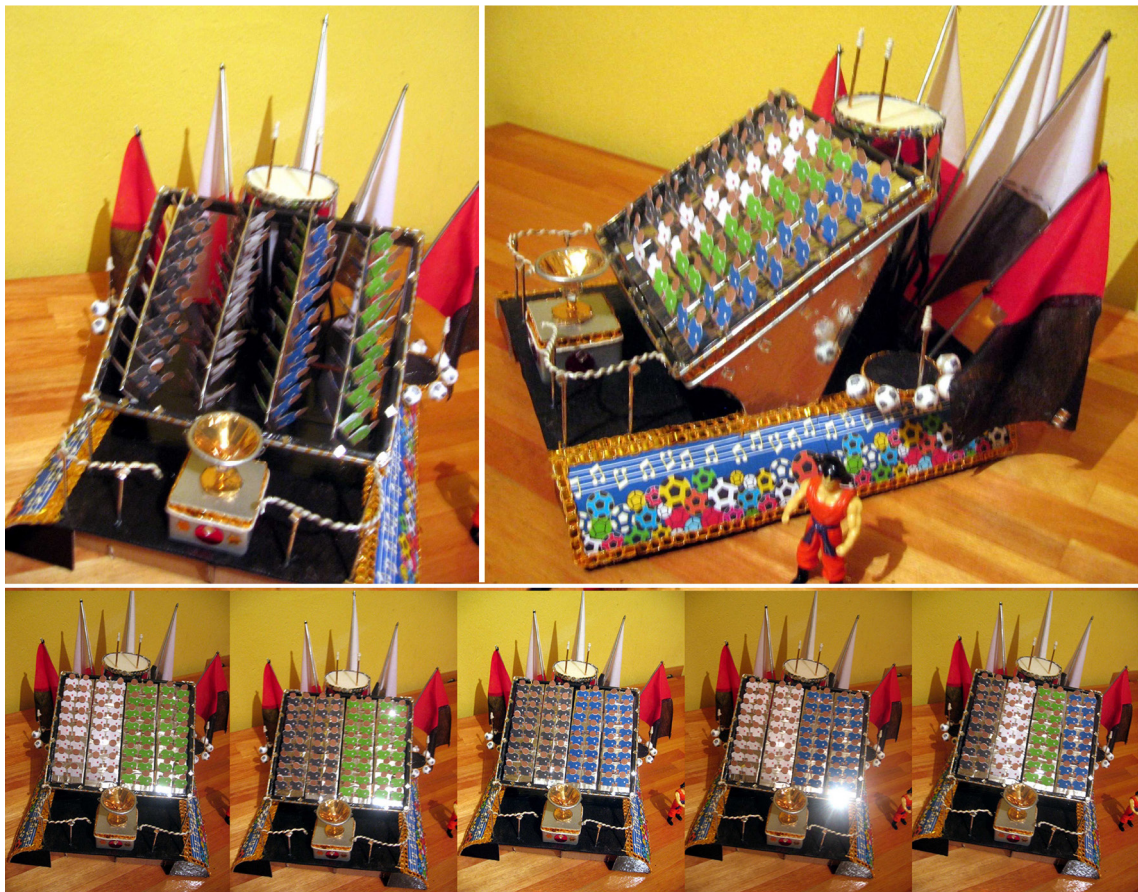


Figure 5: Model allegory 2, 2011, scale 1:25. Source: Personal collection.

Because of the elaboration of the technical drawings, that year the models were used more for studying and defining the decoration. The model was made without the representation of the carpet that would be the football field. As a resource

³ Highlights are people who wear luxurious and large costumes representing important points of the plot or the float in which they are inserted..



to increase the width of the float, it was proposed that the sides of the base be curved. The flags on the back were also a device to make the float appear larger. As we can see in the images of the model, the turning mechanism allowed the use of four different colors for the fans and thus the arrangement could be made, obtaining two colors or even four colors simultaneously in the stands. The mechanism for changing the fans worked through four frames in which pairs of dolls with the same shirt color were lined up on each side. In the following image, we have a record of the float in the parade. In the following image, it is possible to see that the carpet that represented the football field had its width reduced during the execution, compromising the idea of widening the base of the float.



Figure 6: Image of the allegory in the parade at the Interlagos Racetrack. Source: Personal collection.

Now we will move on to two works that were better suited for execution, in the third division of the carnival, in a school that had a sheltered space for the construction of floats and accessories. The Camisa 12 Samba School had moved up to the third division, and in the 2018 carnival its theme was Saint George, the patron saint of Sport Clube Corinthians Paulista, and the association comes from an organized fan group of the club.

As the group had moved from the neighborhood carnival to the parade at the Sambadrome, it was deemed necessary to increase the size of the floats in order to cause greater impact. The theme of the second float was the representations of Saint George in Umbanda, in the form of the seven phalanges. The sculptures would

be placed on hollow prisms in which were represented elements characteristic of the Orixás to which each of them was related. The support of the first phalange projected beyond the base of the float, increasing its length from 13 to 16 meters.



Figure 7: Sketch of the design of the second allegory of the 2018 carnival. Technique: Graphite on sulphite paper. Source: Personal collection.

In this project, a different methodology was tested, replacing the physical model with a digital model. The modeling was carried out in a three-dimensional drawing program and the generation of two-dimensional drawings, with dimensions, as well as rendered perspectives, aiming to simulate the texture of the materials. The figures of the phalanges were drawn by hand, digitized and colored in an illustration program.

In relation to the initial sketches, the sails that formed the rear of the allegory were removed during the development of the model. Also, between the prisms in which the phalanxes were inserted, platforms were allocated for the highlights, in the shape of atabaque drums. These platforms reached the maximum height for transportation and the upper part of the prisms, which reached seven meters, were to be fitted.

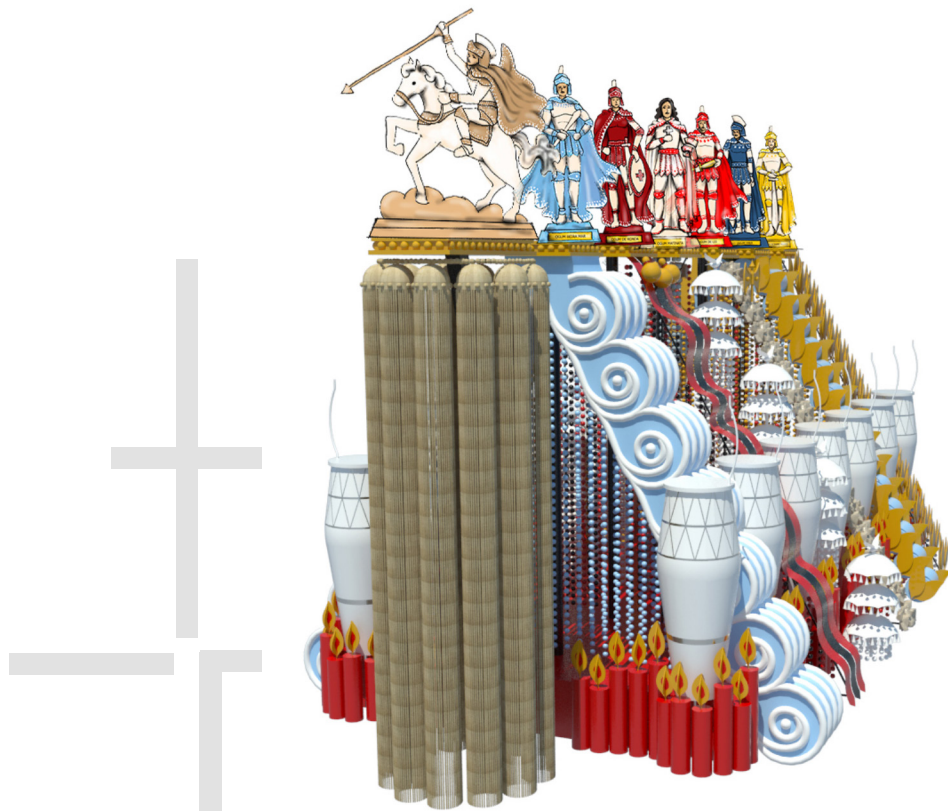


Figure 8: Rendering of the second allegory, carnival 2018. Technique: Digital model and illustration. Source: personal collection.

Execution drawings were developed for each of the sculptures, with dimensions and reference images, according to the representations of the entities in popular culture. In the higher divisions of the carnival there are more financial resources and, consequently, more professionals are involved and a greater variety of techniques are used. These sculptures were made of Styrofoam, hence the demand for specific drawings. The project pieces are multiplied and subdivided, since specific drawings are produced for the metalworkers and Styrofoam sculptors.

During the execution process, some of the planned decorative elements were lost, the most significant being the candles that would be around the base of the allegory. Furthermore, the failure to test the decoration on a physical model compromised the result, especially the decoration of the prisms with the characteristics of the *Orixás*. Painting to simulate textures on some of them did not produce a satisfactory representation and result.

Another example of work in the same carnival division is the project developed for the same association for the 2024 carnival, whose plot was the story of Chico Rei. Again, the idea was to achieve an impactful volume, but avoiding the use of closed prisms.

The opening float represented the kidnapping of Chico Rei in the Kingdom of Congo and the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean on the slave ship. The idea, from the beginning, was to make an openwork allegory, made up of strips of fabric and plastic, to represent sea water. The set was divided into three parts, with the first smaller float representing the Kingdom of Congo, the second part, the kidnapping and the main chassis, the ocean with the slave ship. The sculptures, in the middle of the storm, were the *Inquices*, entities from *Bantu* mythology who, in the plot, tried to prevent the kidnapping of Chico Rei.

In the proposal consolidation sketch, we have the dimensions of the set. The main chassis was 11 meters long and the set of floats reached about 28 meters. The drawings show the modulation considering the transport height, limited to four meters. Thus, all the elements above this limit would have to fit together. The ship was expected to move back and forth, in a half turn to simulate navigation in the middle of a storm.



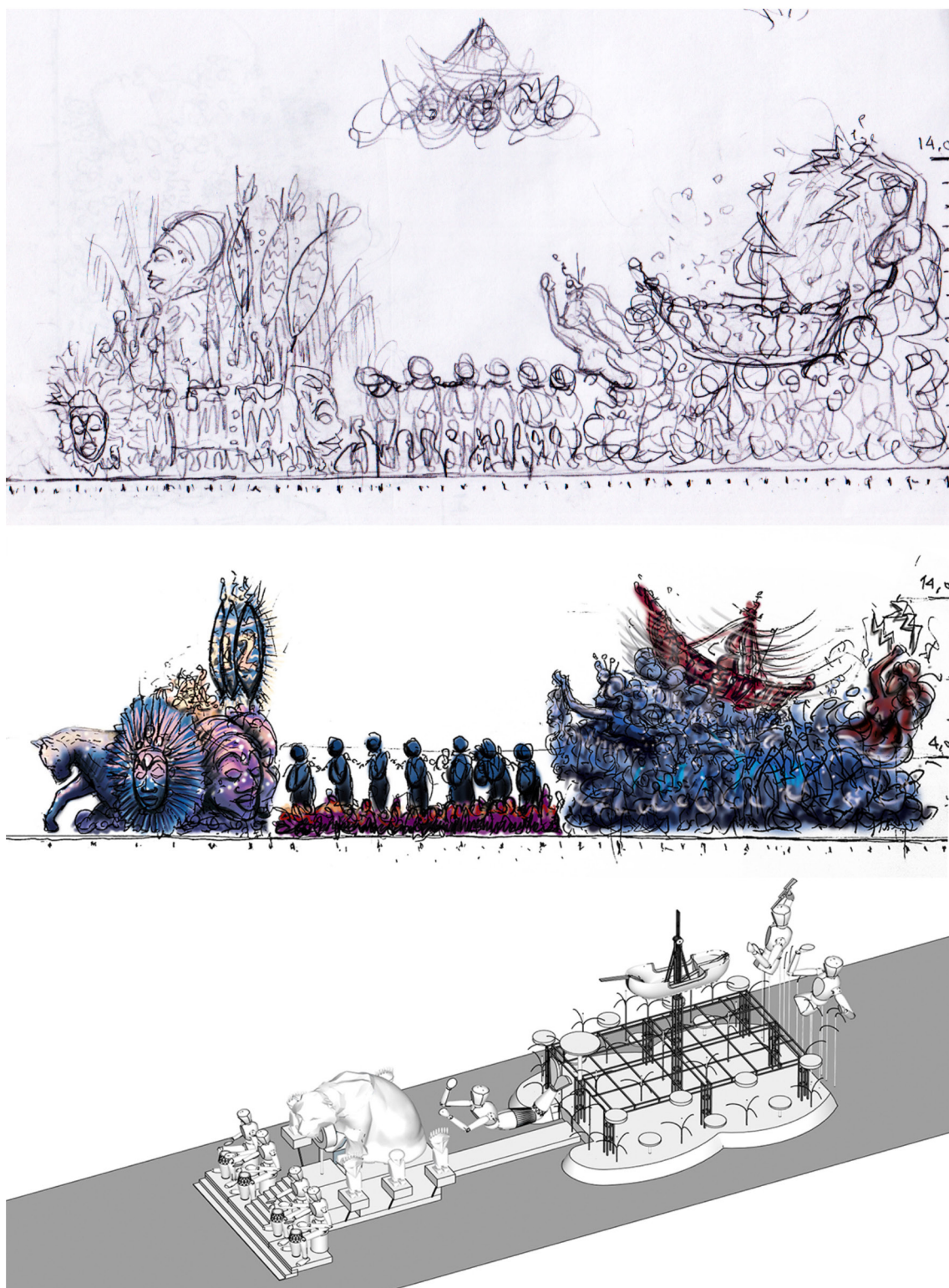


Figure 9: Initial sketch, presenting the idea and electronic model for studying the structure, opening float, carnival 2024. Technique: hand drawing and digital coloring; 3D modeling program. Source: personal collection.



After the initial sketch studies, an electronic model was created to confirm the dimensions of the structure. It was decided to use the existing structure of the float, four meters high, used in the previous carnival. This is a very common procedure, even in first division groups: the design of the float using the metal structure used previously. This is because, as we have already mentioned, steel, widely used in structures, is quite expensive.

In relation to the initial sketch, the second tripod, which represented the kidnapping, came to represent the sea, with the sculpture of *Mikaya*, the entity of the seas and oceans. The representation of the kidnapping was transferred to the staircase of the first allegorical element, being a staging performed by members of the school. The three-dimensional model also shows the posts with three rods that made up the decoration of the upper part of the allegory, a solution that aimed to use as little steel as possible. The volume of the upper part would be achieved with curtains made of strips of fabric and plastic.





Figure 10: Physical model of the opening float and allegory at the Sambadrome gathering, Carnival 2024. Source: personal collection.



The physical model (Figure 10) reproduces the base of the reused float. This procedure was important to ensure that the position of the rods, compatible with the existing structure, would result in the desired effect. The tones to be used were also defined. The structure was used to attach strip curtains that closed off the float, but did not form walls. Thus, as the movement progressed, it was possible to understand the depth of the scene created. Furthermore, the movement of the ship on the top of a metal tower was tested on the model.

The rods on the upper part of the allegory were two meters high: two meters and four meters. Despite their size, they were relatively light pieces that could be handled by two people. In turn, the strip finishing allowed for movement in the decoration, creating greater interest than on a static wall surface.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The development of the projects presented in this article allows us to reflect on some solutions in an environment of scarcity of resources or infrastructure, presenting responses for an event that, although originally a popular festival, has progressively taken on the character of a grand spectacle, in an increasingly expensive competition. In this context, the associations, even in the lower divisions of the carnival, find themselves forced to present an impressive visual appearance.

Within the tradition of allegory projects, the choice of open-topped floats is the result of contingencies in the lower divisions of the carnival, but also expresses an artistic choice for this scenographic characteristic, where it is possible to take advantage of depth and the play of light and shadow. This procedure is related, in the field of architecture, to the opposition between closed volumes and solidity, as opposed to transparencies, cutouts and weaves.

Furthermore, the project development method emphasizes the importance of creating physical models as a means of investigation and defining solutions. Models allow the design of the structure and possible movements, with greater precision regarding the dimensioning of the materials to be used, as well as their performance. They also allow the results of the use or combination of colors and textures to be verified in advance, as well as the visualization of the float from the point of view of spectators and judges, in a dynamic manner. In turn, we identified limitations when only electronic models were developed, mainly because they did not allow the physical simulation of the materials and their respective structural and texture behaviors. Furthermore, models, as a communication tool between the various workers in the warehouse, are more efficient, as they are more accessible, dispensing with the need for prior knowledge of reading technical drawings.

Finally, the methodology for developing carnival float projects has many connections with the field of design and architecture, especially with regard to the language used for representation and the tools for designing and developing the project.



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