

Competition for urban requalification of São Paulo Municipal Market area: an academic experience report

Concurso de requalificação urbana do entorno do Mercado Municipal Paulistano: relato de uma experiência acadêmica

Concurso de recalificación urbana de las cercanías del Mercado Municipal Paulistano: relato de una experiencia académica

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Abstract

The article reports on the academic experience of coordinating the Urban Requalification Competition for the Surroundings of the São Paulo Municipal Market, held in 2023 by IAB-SP with the support of Escola da Cidade and FAU-USP. Grounded in a theoretical reflection on the definition of the public interest, it describes the



organizational process, including the articulation among private, public, and academic actors, the formulation of the terms of reference, and the outcomes achieved. It highlights the competition's methodological innovation in reversing the usual logic of urban management by anticipating the project as the trigger for any subsequent action. Despite the absence of award-winning proposals, the experience is validated as a practice at the intermediate scale of urban planning-between master plans and building projects-and reaffirms the importance of academic engagement in legitimizing processes of territorial transformation.

Keywords: Design competition; Urban design; Urban management; Mercado Municipal Paulistano; São Paulo.

Resumo

O artigo relata a experiência acadêmica na coordenação do Concurso de Requalificação Urbana do Entorno do Mercado Municipal Paulistano, realizado em 2023 pelo IAB-SP, com apoio da Escola da Cidade e da FAU-USP. A partir de uma reflexão teórica sobre a definição do interesse público, descreve seu processo de organização, com a articulação entre agentes privados, públicos e acadêmicos, a formulação do termo de referência e os resultados alcançados. Destaca sua inovação metodológica ao inverter a lógica da gestão urbana e antecipar o projeto como disparador de qualquer ação. Apesar da ausência de projetos premiados, a experiência é válida como prática na escala intermediária do planejamento urbano – entre planos diretores e projetos edílios – e reafirma a importância da atuação acadêmica na legitimação de processos de transformação territorial.

Palavras-chave: Concurso de projeto; Projeto urbano; Gestão urbana; Mercado Municipal Paulistano; São Paulo.

Resumen

El artículo relata la experiencia académica en la coordinación del Concurso de Recalificación Urbana del Entorno del Mercado Municipal Paulistano, realizado en 2023 por el IAB-SP con el apoyo de la Escola da Cidade y de la FAU-USP. A partir de una reflexión teórica sobre la definición del interés público, describe su proceso de organización, con la articulación entre agentes privados, públicos y académicos, la formulación de los términos de referencia y los resultados alcanzados. Destaca la innovación metodológica del concurso al invertir la lógica de la gestión urbana y anticipar el proyecto como detonante de cualquier acción. A pesar de la ausencia de proyectos premiados, la experiencia se valida como una práctica en la escala intermedia de la planificación urbana -entre planes directores y proyectos edílios- y reafirma la importancia de la actuación académica en la legitimación de procesos de transformación territorial.

Palabras clave: Concurso de proyectos; Diseño urbano; Gestión urbana; Mercado Municipal Paulistano; São Paulo.



INTRODUCTION

This article describes and analyzes the Urban Requalification Competition for the Surroundings of the São Paulo Municipal Market, organized by the Institute of Architects of Brazil – São Paulo Chapter and by *Escola da Cidade*, with academic coordination by this author, representing FAU-USP, during 2023. It is an experience report structured in four sections: an introduction, describing the parameters that guided the action and its theoretical framework; methodology, describing the stages of building the competition; results, discussing the experience; and final remarks.

Despite an outcome with limited repercussion (the jury chose not to grant awards, issuing only mentions), the organizational effort – including political articulations and the development of detailed terms of reference¹ – justifies the report as an academic contribution to the discussion of this type of action.

The continuous overlap of regulations and their driving interests, together with the pendular flows of public and private investment, makes understanding – and, more dramatically, acting on – urban transformation a very delicate task. Areas with historic occupation amplify the complexity, with more time for layers and factors to accumulate, as rich as they are difficult for the urban equation. This is the context of the discussion around the surroundings of the Municipal Market: a fringe of the inaugural occupation of São Paulo's historic hill, a primitive port that became the hub of commercial movement and stamped the area's vocation, even as it underwent radical transformations over the decades.

The commercial vocation coexists with a condition imposed by the strategic location: the area is a confluence of the city's main public-transport branches. There were multiple massive public investments in road infrastructure that, on the one hand, consolidated the links between fronts of urban expansion and, on the other, dismantled the park that had kept legible the city's first frontier along the Tamanduateí River.

As elsewhere in this city, explicit inequality operates as a driver of urban form, embedded in the gears that shape decisions of transformation. Secondary uses tied to commercial activity (storage, transshipment, informal retail) occupy much of the space, imprinting an atmosphere of precariousness. Yet the vigor of economic activity keeps buildings in use, preventing the advance of a popular housing market, which – together with a historic lack of public action in housing provision – sketches a perpetual crisis of residential vacancy.

Brazil's long history of promiscuity between capital and public agents is a near-obligatory burden – a shadow that hangs over any action, public or private, that results in urban transformation (Rolnik, 2015). In whose interest is this competition?

¹ It is recommended to read the Competition's Terms of Reference, which advances the reading of this complexity and seeks to present it in an orderly manner for participants, available at <https://concursoentornomercadaosp.org.br>. Accessed on 11/22/2023.



Defining the public interest is the starting point for action. It is not a neutral stance but, rather, a political position. More than an abstract consensus, it emerges from processes of collective negotiation and deliberation, in which dominant forces (Flyvbjerg, 1998) are met by counterweights of social justice, territorial equity, and the right to the city. In an urban-transformation operation, guaranteeing the public interest means orienting state decisions – and the ensuing private investments – toward a shared horizon that ensures diversity of uses, democratic access, social vitality, and preservation of the urban commons (Sennett, 2018).

METHODOLOGY: FORMATTING A COMPETITION FOR URBAN PROPOSALS

The competition was born from the approach of groups representing the area's commercial interests, clustered in two institutions: APECC (São Paulo Association of Entrepreneurs of the Shopping Circuit) and Ibrachina (Brazil-China Sociocultural Institute). Months earlier, the same group had attempted to promote change through a project that was very poorly received by heritage agencies – laden with “Chinese” references and with urban interventions weakly anchored in established dynamics.

The project's failure shed light on the aforementioned complexity that must be considered by any urban action and justified the construction of a more coherent alternative path, now advised by professionals in the field. It became clear that there was an opportunity to bring together representatives of capital – effective promoters of urban transformation – and the actors capable of steering a sound process².

This is where Escola da Cidade and FAU-USP come in. The suggestion to hold a competition – the most democratic mode of project selection – seemed obvious from the outset, as did IAB's participation. Yet proposing a competition for an urban project with broad territorial scope raises an important question about the overlap of a private agent's interests (as the competition's promoter) in a realm that is, by definition, a public responsibility. The municipality's involvement in the process was therefore delicate and essential, providing the necessary sanction.

The competition arose from a private entity's interest in offering a contribution to the city through a project to requalify an area in which it operates. It is the City's role to mediate the process and present criteria that might ultimately justify it. What is described is an innovative action that offers an alternative path for private investment by inverting the usual sequence of decision-making. In this case, the first step is the urban project which – defined by collective criteria – indicates opportunities for investment.

2 In the minutes of its 703rd Ordinary Meeting, CONPRESA addresses the reasons for not approving the project presented as Urban Revitalization of the Municipal Market, Catavento Museum and Cereal District – “Chinatown São Paulo.” Councilor Marianna Al Assal's remarks summarize the position: there are “two issues clearly laid out in DPH's technical report. One concerns the lack of detailing of the project and its dialogue with other municipal bodies [...] The other concerns the symbolic issues surrounding the memory of this place, since, in general, [...] we discuss memory as a problem for private investment, and in this case there is [...] the promotion of a particular memory.” (CONPRESA, 2019)



It is this inversion that justifies the participation of educational and research institutions and of the IAB. An independent choice, through a competition, of a project (the jury³ was appointed entirely by Escola da Cidade, FAU-USP, and IAB) ensures that the channeling of private investment is oriented to the common good, in a non-usual mode of urban governance.

Competitions in Brazil, at the stages of preparation and launch, are often associated with the idea of failure – with a nebulous and remote notion that the discussions they raise will ever be realized. Not without reason: in the vast majority of cases, competitions end as boards archived on the shelves of well-intentioned promoters.

The challenge is doubled when the expected result is not even a building project, but a plan with targeted indications of actions that may, eventually, lead to works being commissioned. Still, what is the point of coordinating the efforts of organizers and participating teams for a contribution so diffuse? The answer lies in the founding premise of the process: to design the entire path – from the selection of the winning proposals to their conversion into executive projects (the decisive step toward any eventual transformation) – in line with current urban-management logics and in agreement with the expectations of municipal authorities.

It is important to reaffirm the central importance of the City Hall's participation in the process, centered in the Municipal Secretariat of Urbanism and Licensing (SMUL)⁴, responsible for two actions: convening various sectoral offices of city government to contribute to building the guidelines for transforming the area and placing the process on the tracks of current urban-management regulation, indicating the routes for continuity of the chosen project.

The approach to City Hall took place through the thematically most appropriate liaison: SMUL, represented by its deputy secretary, the architect José Armênio de Brito Cruz. SMUL convened a meeting with representatives of 17 municipal secretariats, at which specific interests and priorities were presented and discussed, then gathered into a document of guidelines integrated into the competition brief, following the signing of a cooperation agreement. SMUL also guided the steps for constructing the private contribution in accordance with existing instruments.

The early discussion of the possibility of holding a competition immediately dispelled justified suspicions about the validity and legality of private action; a competition unequivocally opens the discussion beyond the promoter's control and validates the action in advance as a democratic rite.

Finally, the role of academia in the process must be understood. The approach between Escola da Cidade and FAU-USP is a natural movement given the constant

3 Jury members: Fernando de Mello Franco, Olivia Buscariolli, Paula Santoro, Tainá de Paula, and Vinicius Andrade.

4 With due emphasis on the role of its deputy secretary, architect José Armênio de Brito Cruz, and architects Pedro Martin Fernandes and Rafael Castelo da Cruz.



exchange among their professionals and students and aimed to broaden the reach of research and extension activities⁵. The activities proposed as preparation for what would become the selection of projects were formatted in an overlap zone between these two university missions; on the one hand, a careful research effort was necessary to define the bases for intervention; on the other, the approach to social groups and the joint construction of knowledge qualify the extension-oriented character of part of the work.

The first contribution lies precisely in the process's theoretical formulation: how to convert private willingness into a positive urban-transformation action that serves the collective interest. The second is the no less important construction of an urban reading of the area, offered to competitors as the Terms of Reference. Unlike competitions aimed at designing a single building, the working bases had to go far beyond a list of needs and constraints. A minimum understanding is essential of the social and economic dynamics at play; of territorial conditions (environmental and human); of mobility strategies; of the incidence of legislation; and of the histories of all these processes. Again we resort to the term complexity to describe the task, as the following sections of this article should make explicit.

The academic teams' participation unfolded on three fronts: the development of research on the area's urban aspects and the interested synthesis of its results, so as to format a Terms of Reference; an extension activity focused on ethnographic recognition of the field reality, organized as a workshop for undergraduate students; and the organization of a lecture series presenting an overview of practical production itself – academic and research-oriented to its measure – concerning the area.

The first front was the construction of the competition's Terms of Reference, under the responsibility of the Contemporary Territorial Agencies Platform⁶ team, linked to Escola da Cidade's Scientific Council. The document presents, describes, and justifies the proposals for two perimeters of action, suggesting that reflection and action be undertaken at two related scales with complementary demands and expectations.

5 The competition team was structured as follows: (a) academic coordination: Beatriz Vanzolini Moretti (Escola da Cidade) and Felipe de Souza Noto (FAU-USP); (b) executive coordination: Ciro Felice Pirondi (Escola da Cidade) and Fernando Tohme (APECC); (c) competition coordination: Ilan Szklo (IAB-SP).

6 Coordination: Pedro M. R. Sales and Pedro Vada. Researchers: Amanda Silber Bleich and Carolina Heldt D'Almeida.



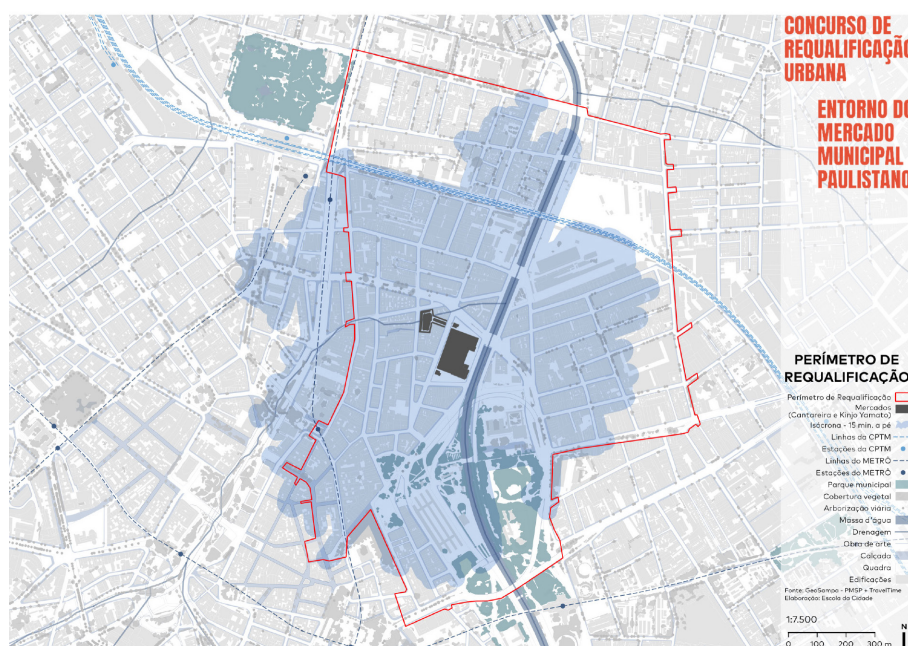


Figure 1: Terms of Reference map for the competition (Sales; Vada, 2023).

It proposed the development of a Urban Requalification Plan, which requires comprehensive urban-ordering strategies, and an Urban Intervention Project, where physical transformations would be concentrated in the short term. The document synthesizes a broad reading of the territory into a set of twenty maps indicating the key issues to be addressed by the projects. And, in conclusion, it presents five theoretical statements as vectors for urban-transformation processes to be considered by participants. It is in this synthesis that the academic contribution becomes most evident, because it underpins the indication of paths that should guide proposals, based on a rigorous reading free of any commitment to the private interests that mobilized the competition's promotion. The diagnostic reading offered by the document directs the call for proposals to organize potential transformation scenarios based on observing three thematic layers: the road system, the system of green/open areas, and programmatic adequacy. With these, expectations of results – as specified in the brief – are anticipated.

The road-system layer recommends indicating streets to be created, removed, and upgraded, including sidewalks, cycle lanes, crossings, footbridges, etc.; indicating the type of appropriation and the resolution of conflicts (vehicles, pedestrians, other flows, and obstacles); proposing surface drainage systems and other urban infrastructures that affect the design of the road system.

The system of open or green areas layer recommends designing public green areas, indicating planned uses and the necessary infrastructures, permeable and paved areas; a general plan for tree planting; a general plan for distributing urban furniture with preliminary description and detailing.

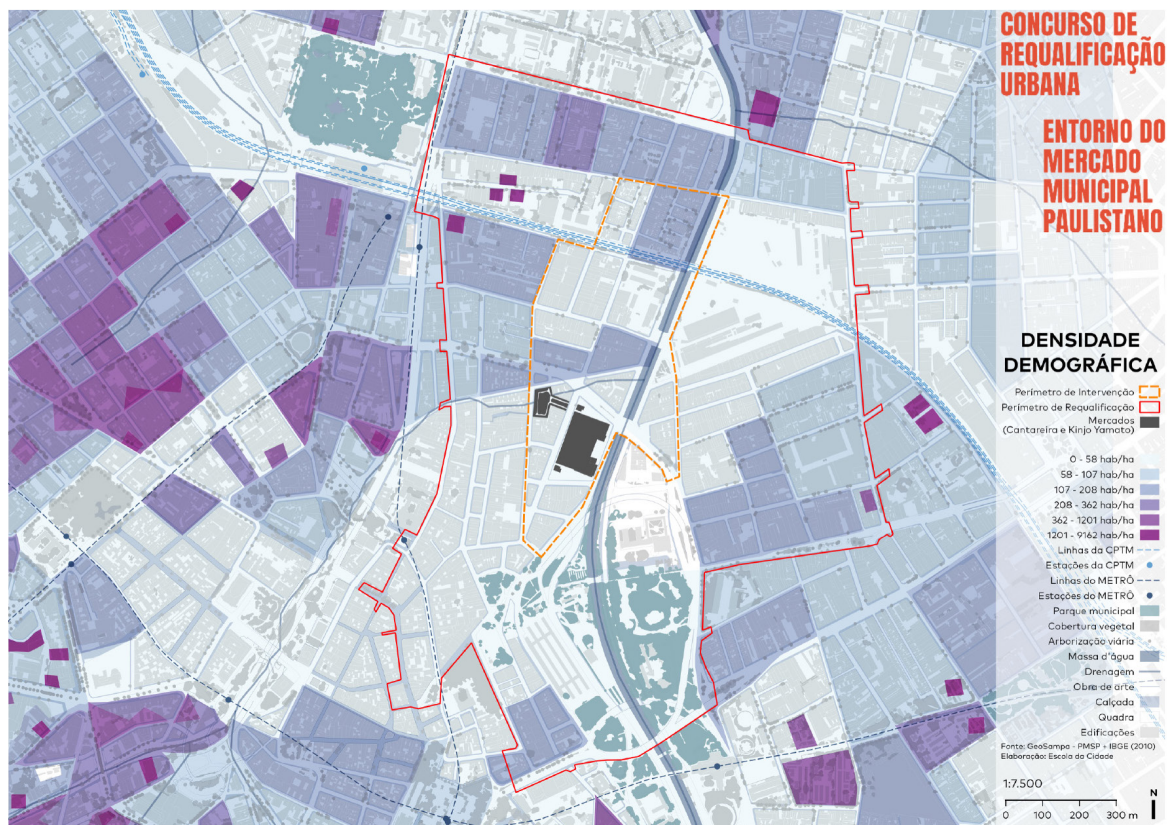


Figure 2: Terms of Reference map for the competition (Sales; Vada, 2023).

Finally, the programmatic adequacy layer requests the indication of uses and possible interventions in underused public areas; in private properties that fail to fulfill their social function and have been notified by the City under PEUC (Compulsory Subdivision, Building, and Use); and in listed public properties.

Understanding the complexity and the stated goal of achieving proposals that address it comprehensively leads the Terms of Reference to describe five guiding statements for urban transformation, or, in its terms, “guidelines for vectors of urban requalification”. Each is an effort to synthesize sectorized, mutually interwoven problems and potentials that function as a common horizon for proposals. They are:

1. [Functional Diversity]. Suggests programmatic and building hypotheses aimed at proposing alternatives to the area's overspecialization, opening space and seeking to respond to flows of cultural, touristic, and food-service interest.
2. [Accessibility]. Suggests general, schematic propositions regarding circulation in the area with the goal of improving efficiency, safety, and comfort, both in terms of macro-accessibility (interfaces of urban connection roads and penetration into the work perimeter) and micro-accessibility (conditions for pedestrian/cyclist connections between destinations, service points, and modal integration points).

3. [Connectivity]. Foresees the interconnection of architectural and urban landmarks through the requalification of routes/itineraries, capable of establishing a network of facilities and green and open areas.

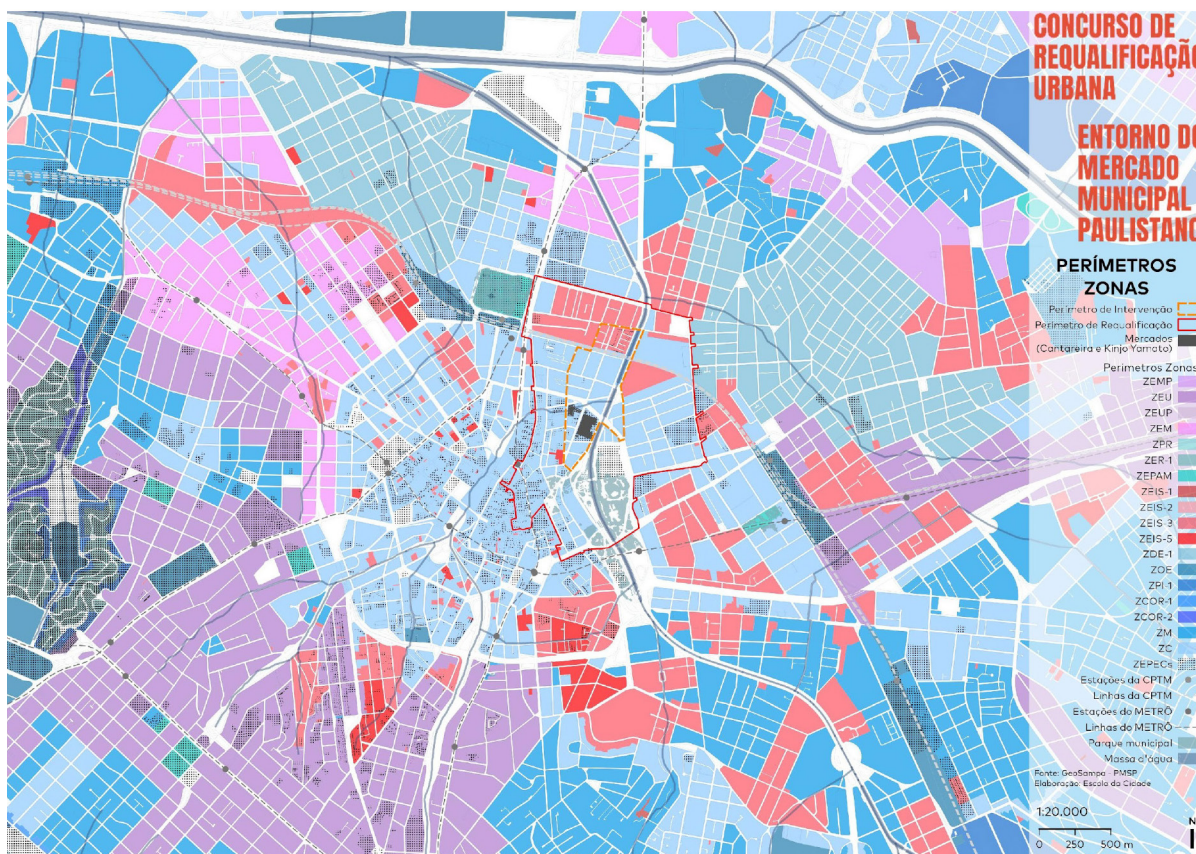


Figure 3: Terms of Reference map for the competition (Sales; Vada, 2023).

4. [Open, green, and vacant areas]. Reaffirms, through the lens of environmental issues – drainage and climate – the central role that the green-area system holds for overcoming and mitigating the critical situation in the region, including better use of large enclosures in structuring space.

5. [Economic feasibility]. Suggests containing implementation and maintenance costs of components and processes, without compromising their quality and functionality.

(Sales; Vada, 2023, pp. 35–38)

The second work front of the academic coordination team set out a stage complementary to the Terms of Reference by proposing a university extension activity conducted by a group of students, guided by ethnographic techniques for approaching urban issues. Coordinated by a professor (architect and urbanist)

from Escola da Cidade and by a researcher (anthropologist) from USP's Urban Anthropology Center⁷, the student team carried out a series of site visits to recognize dynamics and human interactions in the area, addressing a dimension not present in traditional urban-diagnosis processes. The process, named Workshop: Surroundings of the São Paulo Municipal Market, produced a report with extensive graphic documentation, integrated into the competition brief and, above all, incorporated into the diagnostic synthesis prepared by the Terms of Reference team.

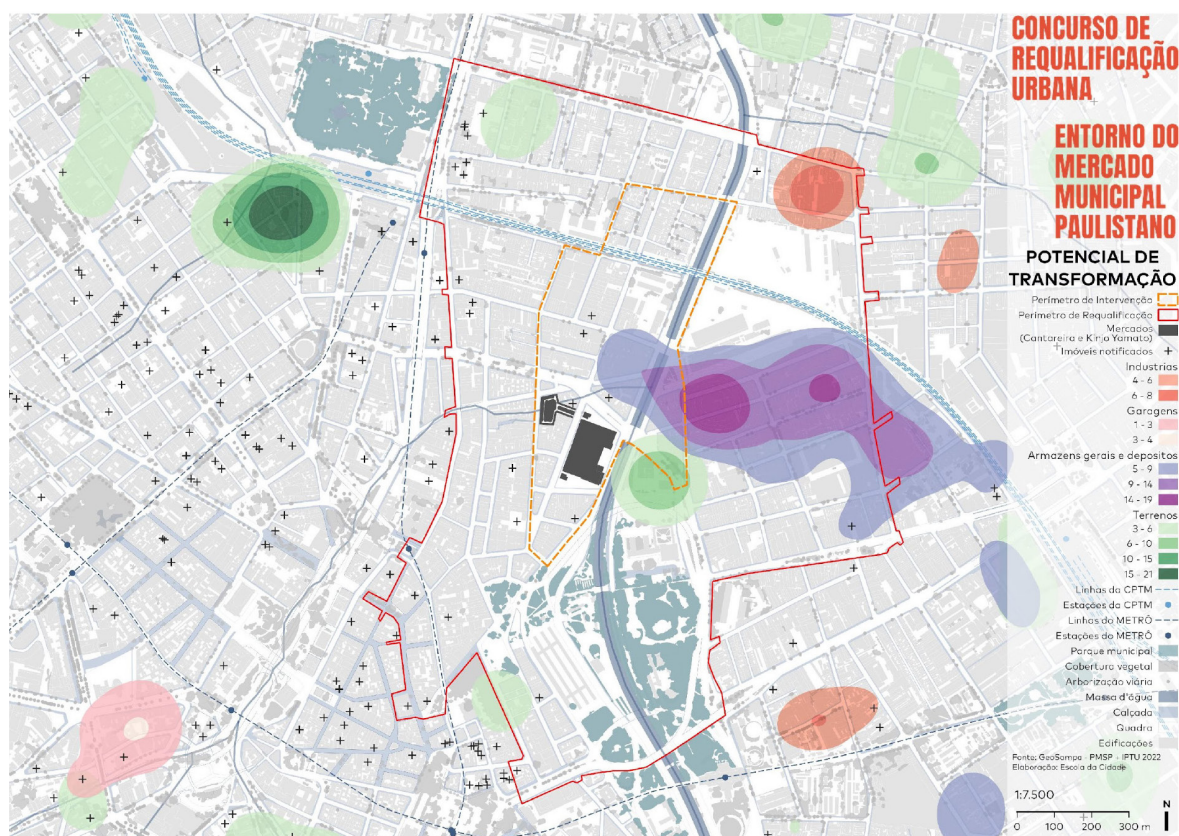
Field incursions were conducted, generating raw material that was analyzed and organized so as to offer an essay on scenarios, actors, and rules established in the specific territory (Magnani, 2002).

The third work front was a series of videos and lectures that build a universe of testimonies complementary to the competition brief. Architects or cultural agents who had carried out projects for the area – or who had complementary knowledge – were invited. The strategy was to replicate the virtue of academic practice and offer participants something like a prior literature review, a panorama of reflections and actions developed for the area. It seemed important to list and communicate these actions transparently, giving voice to those involved in the area's transformation⁸.

7 Coordination: Luís Felipe Abbud (Escola da Cidade) and Yuri Bassichetto Tambucci (NAU-USP), Adeli Palacios Román (Assistant Professor — Escola da Cidade).

8 The workshop report, videos, and lecture recordings are available on the competition website, <https://concursoentornomercadaosp.org.br>. Accessed on 11/22/2023.





urban space, which led the jury – with experience in research, management, and practice in the city – to its decision.

This competition bets on the need to confront urban issues at multiple scales, in some measure overcoming a model of urban management guided exclusively by the association of master plans and zoning laws.

Despite advances brought by the City Statute, the current scenario still does not include in the planning process an effective stage of formal proposition; it has not opened space for a collective and public reflection on the city's design. This results from regulations restricted to the two poles of the urban-project chain: macro-decisions, incorporated as development guidelines in master plans, and the regulation of use and occupation – therefore the individual form – of the parcel.

The challenge lies precisely in modeling these connections; that is, proposing a strategy capable of linking broad guidelines to building definitions through a shared “horizon of meaning.” This term, borrowed from Bernardo Secchi (2006), is apt because it describes the role assigned to the winning team: to offer a plan and a project, with all the limits and virtues of their scope, capable of orienting the area's transformation (Secchi, 2006).



Figure 5: Images of the highlighted entries (Plural Lab). Source: Urban Requalification Competition for the Surroundings of the São Paulo Municipal Market – <https://concursoentornomercadaosp.org.br>. Accessed: 22/11/2023.





Figure 6: Images of the highlighted entries (Marê Arquitetura). Source: Urban Requalification Competition for the Surroundings of the São Paulo Municipal Market – <https://concursoentornomercadaosp.org.br>. Accessed: 22/11/2023.

Defining two working scales (plan and project) reinforces the argument, as it creates the rare opportunity for proposals to move across scales – from specialized, targeted definitions to the description of broad transformation guidelines. It must be noted that the plan described by the competition occupies a scale band much closer than that proposed by the generality of the master plan, perhaps closer to what neighborhood plans should be.

The objective is, therefore, to offer this field of action to architects and urbanists who can, in this way, establish a material and formal horizon for local urban development.

In other words, the competition serves to mediate private action in a field not reached by public management, offering itself as a public instrument – in this case, even though promoted by a private entity – for making urban decisions public (Sobreira, 2009). Open participation to any architecture office and the selection of a specialized jury transfer responsibility to a broader core than those guided by narrow private interest and even than the decisions of municipal technical offices.

As a stage subsequent to the competition, it was foreseen that the winning team would be hired to develop a Preliminary Study, to be submitted to public-validation rites (public hearings), already agreed with SMUL, as well as to the scrutiny of City Hall itself. From that point, the process can be developed by private initiative in more ordinary interaction with the City, through the regulated and already tested legal instruments for partnerships of this nature. It is important to stress – even as a response to legitimate prior concerns about the participation of institutions such as IAB, FAU-USP, and Escola da Cidade in an action that would result in

real-estate business – that private action will be backed by a decision legitimized by a public rite, a competition that defines in advance the collective interests to be achieved. Certainly many subterfuges and some steering may accompany project development; but to face them, the public authorities already has tested tools, with a set of regulations and control strategies. What seems unprecedented is launching the path with an impartial and legitimate project.

In São Paulo, the usual rite of public-private partnerships begins with the presentation of a MIP (Private Initiative Proposal), a regulatory instrument for presenting a proposal to create exceptions within the framework of urban parameters, with changes and possible concessions of interest to the proponent, as long as they are justified by a broad public interest.

It seems evident that defining urban parameters – and to the same extent directing resources that impact territorial transformation – is a public responsibility (D'Almeida, 2019). But it is also well established – or nearly so – that large-impact real-estate investment is, and will continue to be, a private financial responsibility, with which the State is not in a position to compete.

MIPs and PIUs (Perimeters of Urban Intervention), their territorial outgrowth, compose the liberal package of urban policy after the City Statute. They establish a realistic understanding of how cities function, attempting a mediated approximation among the various actors. Again, it is worth stating that this competition is a contribution precisely to this process of mediation, since it serves as the basis for presenting a MIP and, eventually, the formulation of a PIU.

FINAL REMARKS

The absence of awardees is a setback that should be noted. Without a winning team, the promoters need to reframe the strategy for proposing the MIP, which would have relied on the competition as its basis.

Few works were submitted: of almost 50 registered teams, only 13 delivered proposals. The Jury decided not to grant awards, and only to highlight submissions with significant contributions:

Analyzing the set of submissions, the Jury recognizes that it holds a valuable repertoire of strategies and interventions – present across the different proposals – whose relevance seems greater than that of any one proposal taken in isolation. From this reading, and considering that none of the proposals fully met the guidelines presented in the brief and in the competition's terms of reference, the Jury decided not to award proposals and to highlight two projects that stood out for their structuring strategies. (Andrade, Boscaroli, Franco, Paula, and Santoro, 2023).



Some hypotheses were raised for what occurred: scheduling overlap and possible inconsistencies in the brief. My reading, however, is simpler: urban design is not part of most architecture offices' daily practice, which makes approaching the topic more costly; to this I add a distorted Marxist interpretation that attributes to private interest the aura of predatory action, amplified by the ill-fated Chinatown experience.

The university's involvement from the project's outset should support the next steps of the work, which does not end with the absence of a winning team. A new academic extension activity is being structured to bring the highlighted proposals into dialogue with the competition's multiple interests, thereby continuing the plans originally laid out which are, ultimately, a contribution to the city.

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