

## INTERVIEW: LIVING LAJE

José Eduardo Ferreira Santos is a psychologist with a doctorate in public health, he is also a curator. Through a research on the situations that led to the Violence and murder of teenagers in the *favelas* of Salvador's periphery Subúrbio Ferroviário<sup>1</sup>, Eduardo was dragged to a missing narrative—the story of beauty on the slum had never been told. He became a collector of works by the artists of Subúrbio, and of its beauty in general. After developing an informal museum at his house, in 2014 he, along with his wife Vilma Santos, started Acervo da Laje— a cultural center containing the first assemble of the *Subúrbio* as an aesthetic experience.

*Laje*<sup>3</sup>, to which the *acervo* makes reference in its name, is a common space in the domesticity of a favela, referring to the top slab of a house; a space that operates as a balcony for celebrations, but that bears in it the potential of becoming a new house, if the family needs expansion. My conversation with Eduardo aimed at understanding concept of *laje*, “a spatial heritage of the favela”, in the works of the Acervo as well as in the broader context of the favela.

### Why using the name *laje*?

It has to do with the story of the space. Informal housing in the peripheries of Salvador started in the form of *palafitas* (wooden houses on stilts over the sea), then it developed into *taipa* (wooden structures covered with earth stucco); concrete and bricks became ubiquitous in the nineties, because of the rise in the price of terrains—it allowed to grow a family vertically. My parents had a house and we started to “grow” it; I decided to live on the second floor.

We would have barbecues on the *laje*. When I became a professor, I started to meet with friends, other professors, to arrange discussions in that space—many beautiful things happen in the *laje*. It is the space of sociability that the favela doesn't have (as a public space).

As we started to collect the work of favela artists, we began to use the *laje* as a place for exhibiting such things; people didn't believe in the existence of those artists. One day, a magazine was interviewing me, and they asked what was

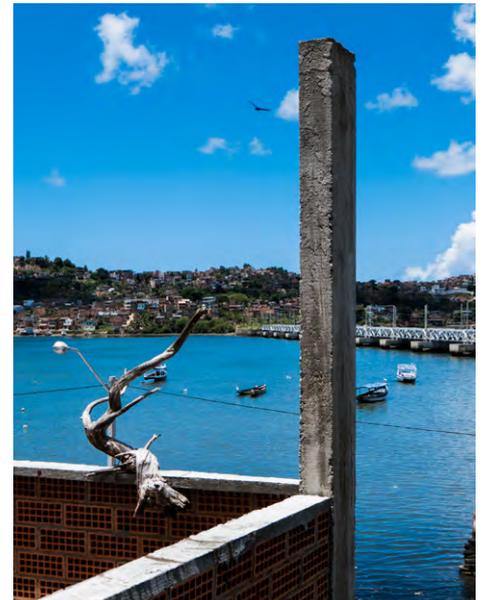
1. the neighborhood's name would translate as “railway suburbs”

2. *Acervo* could be translated as both an archive and a collection, for it implies both an aesthetic and an object of research.

3. The word *laje* translates literally as (concrete) slab. The Brazilian connotations of the word, explained in this interview, make it untranslatable—it was kept as original.

Happening there—so I said it becoming a sort of acervo of the laje.

When they asked us to take part in Bahia's Biennial of Art as an exhibition space, and we ended up receiving over three thousand visitors, it got to a point of no-return. Now we have a new space: House 2, and it also has a laje—but it was conceived as a cultural center. The name is related to that—as the cultural spaces of the city are located on its center, the laje presents a heritage, and a possibility for the sociability on the periphery.



Acervo da Laje: House 2  
photo by Federico Calabrese  
2018

I love the fact that House 2 mimics the image of its self-built neighbors, even though it's an architect's design. The self-standing columns at the top of the laje were one of the things that drove me to this conversation, what do they mean for you?

They play with the imagination of people; everyone thinks about what could be built there—a new slab, a roof... I think a construction should always help to understand imaginative processes: ours and of those who pass. The perception of the laje as an "incomplete" plays with a certain fiction of the city—a city is not only construction, but what we make in relation to it. That's the provocation of the columns: at any moment something could happen— as an acervo (collection) we are never finished either.

Our house was "planned"; it was designed by Federico and Carolina—people

are scared when they see it. We (the city of Salvador) have two modes of construction: the formality of the city center, but also people that are building from their life-knowledge—we are displaying our knowledge in the way we build our houses. So we wanted the house to have this dialogue with the community, but also to cause a sense of wonder, as a space that was built to receive many people (in comparison with the small spaces allowed by the short spans of self-built architecture).



“Bola Rebola”  
Anitta, J. Balvin, Tropikillaz  
(stillframes)

I sense in the laje a certain utopia of the unbuilt—the idea that there’s value in being a “work in progress.” I see it in the way many pop-culture appropriations of the favela use the space, as well as in the way they interact with elements of its construction—plastic-covers that protect a laje from rain, steel-frames for concrete reinforcement, water tanks...—, the video clips of Anitta, for example. Do you think there’s a kind of material culture, developed from the fact that we inhabit houses always in potential construction—a construction fetish?

In a sense yes—the columns of the acervo embrace construction as a symbol—but we must be careful. There is always a tendency to colonize the favela—and we don’t want to be colonized, by no one! What happens is that the colonialist perception sometimes embeds meanings in a elaboration that is not his own. The entertainment appropriates popular things and thinks it is representing the people, but it’s only making a commercial use of life. So when we see someone using a water tank as a pool (a scene in one of Anitta’s videoclips) we realize it’s a sacrilege—no one would bathe in water that is used for eating and drinking. Life becomes scenery.

There's also a very carioca (from Rio de Janeiro) sense in this use of the favela as a kind of safari for tourism and commercial culture—I see it working differently in Subúrbio.



Acervo da Laje: House 2  
photo by Federico Calabrese  
2018

The Acervo project for house 2 operates with memory, what was the process of it?

The city is always “remaking” itself. The street where we live now is a landfill, made with construction rubble coming from Beira Mar<sup>4</sup> avenue in Ribeira—it was a submerge city brought up— pieces of tiles that kept showing up on the shores and streets. Federico and Carolina asked us to keep a collection of it in order to decorate de facades; they were inspired in Lina bo Bardi, who had done it in the sixties—she was the one who convinced Jorge Amado and Udo Knoff, among others, to reuse the bricks, tiles, and small stones thrown in sea of Bahia.

To start collecting meant looking at the ground, and looking at the ground meant rediscovering the city. We were thinking it were simply tiles and ceramic, but then we realized there were porcelain from diverse nationalities—German, English, Portuguese—, ivory, bottles from the XVIII century...We became aware that, in order to understand the city, one had to look at the ground.

In the Acervo, those fragments became valuable—it's the city reediting itself.

We also went to the studios of artists; mainly Eckemberger and Prentice, where they started to donate us the pieces that broke in the process of firing and were not apt for selling—for us it was priceless, since there were unique pieces, that revealed the process of the artists. Thus the house reveals the memory of a city that always had a connection with the craft of ceramics and tiles.

In a broader way, the reuse of materials in our construction reveals a city that

4. Seaside

wasn't exhaustively studied, and it wasn't exhaustively urbanized as well— that's why Salvador is always a city in reconstruction. Realizing that makes people look at it in an affectuous manner—neighbors and friends started dropping tiles at our door— they perceived that, in the so called trash, there was something meaningful to local memory.

But, the way I see it, this reuse of memory was already happening, we often see self-built houses that "cannibalize" other buildings. In 2014, you (Eduardo and Wilma) started "Ocupa Lajes"— a series of exhibitions, presentations and workshops occupying the lajes of Subúrbio. What was it like to arrange an exhibition on a private space? How did they deal with memory?

It surprised me that every laje had a space devoted to memory: an old chair of the family, a painting, pieces of iron, domestic utensils—the prejudice we had about the laje as a place for accumulating stuff was entirely wrong. The laje is a space of selection of what was once used but that cannot be discarded, and therefore is kept in a sort of limbo—an unconscious— in the exhibitions we frequently resignified those items; for the second edition, it became a curatorial axis. The memory of the Acervo and the memory of the family (who owned the house) were developed into "crossroads."

We could not arrive at a laje without a respect for those memories. To be conscious that we were inaugurating a new way of seeing the laje (as a public rather than a private space) meant respecting hugely the aesthetic elaboration those families had already developed—a previously existing curatorship. It was about bringing up something which was already there.

The laje, as a place of sociability is composed not only by aspects of the present, but with aspects of the previously lived—it develops an orientation of the future from those.

**As a space of collective domesticity, what is the difference for you between the laje, the living-room and the gourmet-balcony<sup>5</sup>?**

What impresses me in the laje is this sort of panoptic vision. We meet a different view of Salvador in each laje we go—and it is an non-mediated experience. It doesn't present the aesthetic treatment of the gourmet in this sense, and it is not

5. *Varanda-gourmet*, a popular space in current mid-income residential developments—a sociability derived from the current popularity of culinary television series.

a living-room because it lacks the sense of commodity (comfort). The living-room is like a plane, it controls your emotions—when the light turns on you're awoken, if the light turns down you will sleep, a sound blinks and you feel hungry—the laje, in contrast, always presents a challenge: to see and to know you are being seen, as well as the monumentality of it. It provokes a kind of vertigo.

Also, to get to the laje you have to pass through the intimacy of the house; constructive patterns, sometimes extremely sloped stairs, that can also challenge you.

**I'm curious you mentioned the panoptic. How does seeing and being seen change people?**

I had an idea until the 2000's, maybe until 2010. From then to now Brazil changed. Brazil became extremely polarized (both politically and religiously). When I finished my doctorate, in 2008, sociability was more explicit, there was a dialogue among neighbors. Now I see the idea of persecution stronger in people—lajes that used to be observable from all sides are building side-walls, things are getting reserved.

There was a rise in violence as well, so there are more fences in the houses, the current moment of Brazil is breaking the sociability of some spaces. The recognition of the panoramic view as a heritage—a value of the house— might end. People now hate themselves for anything, they fight for anything—I'm not sure how this will develop in terms of architecture.

As for Foucault, there is an strategic use of the laje, mainly by drug-traffic. I saw it a lot in São Bartolomeu, where, from the lajes, one could control everyone who was entering in the neighborhood—there's a power that comes from seeing.

**Finally, what do you do with the laje at your home now?**

For me it works as a space for breathing, its where I remake myself; the laje is a paramount space for those who have it. We (Eduardo and Wilma) think the house as an of extension of us, so it molds to our elaborations—each corner starts to develop a specific song<sup>6</sup>: the living-room for having people, the kitchen, the office where I think, and the laje, which I see as a space for breathing.

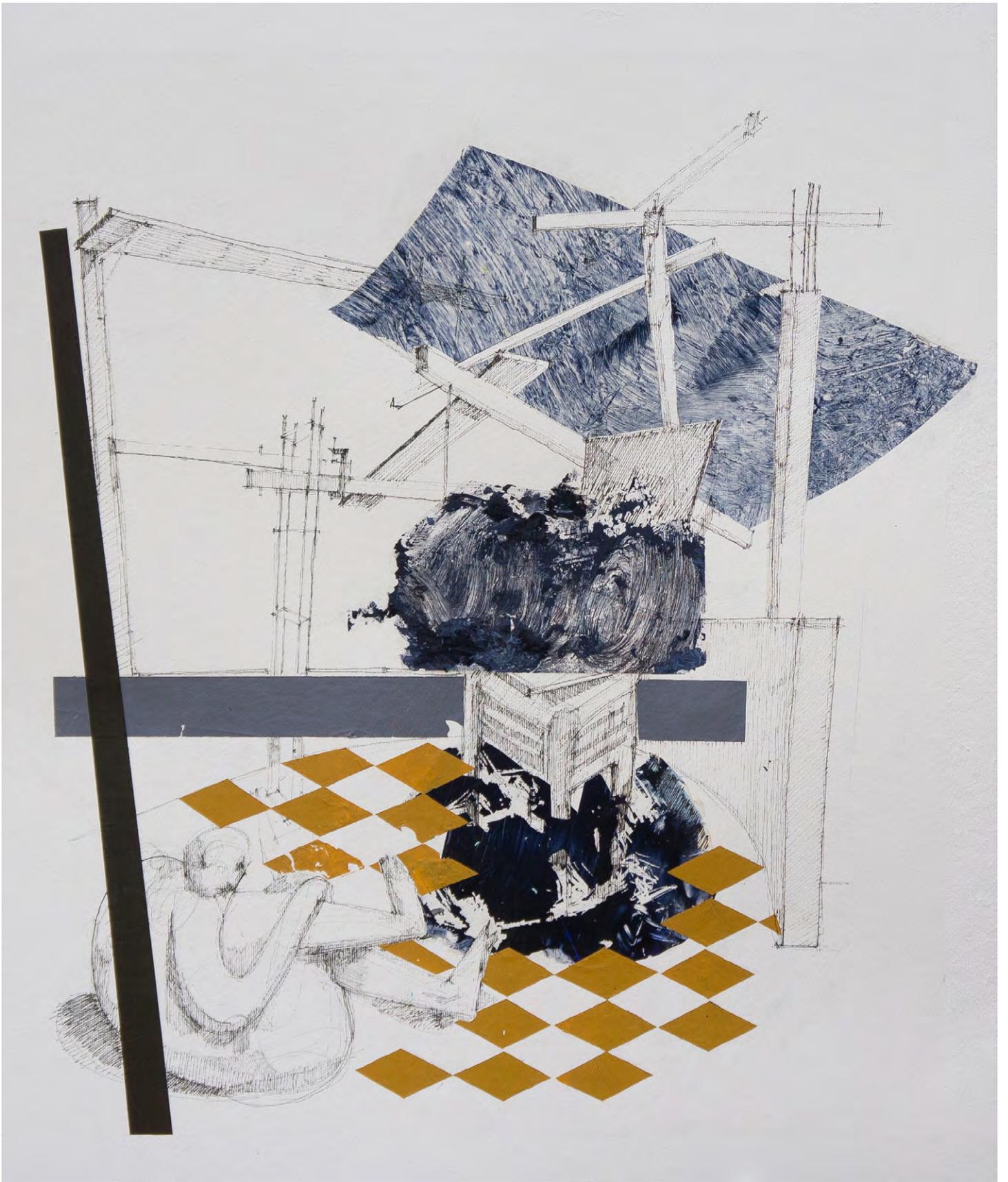
It also brings me a sense of gratitude: for being able to have built it, being able

6. Both "singing" and "corner" are expressed with the same word in Portuguese (cada canto o seu canto).

to have a house; it's a space that gives strength, security, and points it towards the future—if we have kids they will build on the laje. In Brazil we have such an uncertain perspective of the future... It is one of few spaces which still holds this "pregnancy."



Acervo da Laje: House 2  
photo by Federico Calabrese  
2018



"Laje" (II)  
Pedro Alban  
2019



"Laje" (III)  
Pedro Alban  
2019



"Laje" (IV)  
Pedro Alban  
2019



"Laje" (M)  
Pedro Alban  
2019

