

Conserving the spirit of Burle Marx gardens in Recife, Brazil

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Abstract

This paper has as its main aim to present Burle Marx gardens inventory as an instrument to conserve the spirit of the Recife urban landscape in Northeast Brazil. In Burle Marx's garden conception (as one of the most famous landscape designer all over the world), vegetation is the main element of an architectural composition which takes into account the cultural aspect. He showed this principle in the first public gardens designed from 1935 to 1958 in Recife. The gardens were drawing on ecological, artistic and educational principles and were referred to as 'living monuments' according to the Charter of Florence (1981). Until 2002 there was lack of conservation in most of these gardens. They were threatened to lose Burle Marx conception for new interventions with any artistic, historical and cultural values. The practice of conserving historic gardens began to be discussed in Recife in 2002 when consideration was given to the restoration of two of the gardens: Euclides da Cunha and Faria Neves. The restoration was based on the proceedings of the Charter of Florence exploring pleasure and meditation in order to preserve the spirit of Burle Marx garden. The first part of the inventory deals with six gardens and it will be continued to a group of the eighteen Burle Marx public gardens in Recife.

Key words: Burle Marx garden, spiritual value, conservation

## 1. Introduction

Gardens constitute an integrated part of the landscape history of Recife. The Park of Friburgo (*Parque de Friburgo*) built in the 17th Century by Count Moritz von Nassau (*Conde Maurício de Nassau*), of a Renaissance design and which surrounded the Palace, defined a relationship of complicity with the physical characteristics of the site. In other words, it cultivated the natural elements: boulevards of coconut trees and other kinds of vegetation which spring from the waters of the rivers, and embrace the majestic architecture of the palace. Designing boulevards, beds of ornamental plants, fruit trees, vegetables and medicinal herbs gave shape to a vast open space of 6.4ha integrated with the Master Plan for the *Mauritsstad*: the name then given to Recife.

The park stood out on account of the spacing of the coconuts trees along the boulevards and internal paths and also by its strategic siting on the Antônio de Vaz Island (*Ilha Antônio de Vaz*) alongside the landscape of waters and the mainland. In the locale of the *Parque de Friburgo*, the Square called the *Praça da República*, built around 1875, and the garden called the Campo das Princesas can still be seen today. In addition, a set of gardens was built dating from the 19th Century, which constitute a first moment of creating spaces for public use in the middle of edifications which can be regarded as a

composition of built and open spaces in which the relation of natural resources – vegetation and water is taken into the balance.

In 1935, the artist Roberto Burle Marx arrived in Recife when he was invited by the then Governor, Carlos de Lima Cavalcanti, to manage the Parks and Gardens Sector of the Directorship of Architecture and Construction of the Government of the State of Pernambuco (*Setor de Parques e Jardins da Diretoria de Arquitetura e Construção do Governo do Estado de Pernambuco*). Burle Marx conducted renovation works on the existing squares, some of which comprise partial projects and others complete projects. He conceived the first gardens of his career. Within his interventions, the squares are gardens and one of them is the *jardim das cactáceas* (Cacti garden) also called *Praça Euclides da Cunha*. During the 1950s, when Burle Marx was living in Rio de Janeiro, he was invited to set out new gardens in Recife, including the *Praça de Dois Irmãos*, today officially called the *Praça Faria Neves*. In these two gardens, Burle Marx confirms his respect for the physical features of the local landscape, by making use of the regional flora and giving a high value to water.

However, these two gardens projected by Burle Marx were abandoned due to lack of conservation and thus lost their original features. They were restored between 2003 and 2006 and took as a guideline the Florence Charter, drawn up in 1981 by the International Council on Monuments and Sites – ICOMOS and the International Committee for Historic Gardens – ICOMOS/IFLA.

The data presented above underpin the aim of this article which is to discuss coincident and diverging aspects, which have been identified from the study and use of the content of the Florence Charter as guidelines for the process of restoring the Burle Marx gardens to conserve the spirit of the place. These aspects arose out of this analysis and are connected not only to the presuppositions of the artist's conception, but also to the specificities of the culture and urban characteristics of the locale.

## 2. The conservation of historic gardens

Garden is a universal term that acquires concepts over time and within diverse cultures as a part of the set of recreational or open spaces and it includes both public and private spaces. Thus, as it constitutes a universal term, understanding it extrapolates territories with the aim of reaching its origins, its philosophical content. The essence of a garden seems to mean a gesture in the landscape as if it were something inherent to man living with society as an answer to his impulses. Within this understanding, human expression moves closer to art and poetry and reaches the content of landscaping, in other words, the art of creating gardens.

The urban explosion of the Brazilian metropolises in the 1970s that led to the expansion of the road system and building density unbalances the ratio of open space to built space and this implies the reduction of vegetation in backyards and squares despite the attempt to create urban parks in some cities. Furthermore, in the 1980s, due to alterations in the environment some worries arise concerning conservation and urban sustainability which are registered in the Venice Charter of 1964 and given high importance in the Florence Charter of 1981.

The Charter was drawn up with a view to protecting gardens which were recognized as assets of cultural heritage. It defines in its 1<sup>st</sup> article that “a historic garden is an architectural and horticultural composition of interest to the public from the historical or artistic point of view”. It gives value to vegetation as the principal element of the landscape composition of a historic garden that characterizes it as a living monument, and thus is an architectural production which unites nature and culture. As a heritage category, a garden is considered a monument either because of its historic values or artistic values that demonstrate its cultural meaning. The historic garden assumes the cosmic acceptance of paradise within the etymological meaning of the word and on the other hand it is a vegetal architecture, which has to be safeguarded as a testimony of a culture and age. According to the Florence Charter, this demands it and its surroundings are conserved. The lay-out, street furniture and running or dormant waters stand out in the composition of architecture.

In Brazil, the experience of conserving historic gardens through restoration actions has been developed in a pioneering manner in the city of Rio de Janeiro focusing on the gardens constructed in the 19th Century. In Recife, this was initiated in 2001 by the restoration of two gardens conceived by the landscape artist Roberto Burle Marx – the *Praça Euclides da Cunha* (1935) and the *Praça Faria Neves* (1958). In Rio de Janeiro this practice focuses on the Botanical Gardens – a garden with a scientific function and huge size and the *Passeio Público*, the first public garden in Brazil which was projected in 1789. On the other hand, it was in Recife where the restorations of the gardens of Burle Marx first took place and were understood as historic gardens along the lines suggested by the Florence Charter.

Indeed, the restoration of the first garden *Praça Euclides da Cunha*, led the decision to prepare an inventory in order to protect historical gardens of Burle Marx as cultural heritage. This work provided the opportunity to establish a working partnership between the University and the City Council of Recife in order to restore these two gardens, as the scientific community wished to find out more about the first gardens of this famous landscape artist.

### 3. The garden of Burle Marx

The gardens conceived by Burle Marx in Recife are the product of his artistic education, which includes knowledge about history, botany, painting, sculpture, music and architecture, and of his impressions of the urban landscape that he finds in Recife. Little by little, as he familiarizes himself with the landscape of Recife, he expresses his thoughts: “*As time went by, I started imagining how the natural beauty could be organized. I would like something that had rhythm, color, surprises and aesthetic emotion. This is what a garden is; it has to leave the person lighter. And in all of this the plant is the main actor. Each one represents a play, whether dramas, comedies or tragic-comedies, depending on the mood and talent that it introduces*” (Lemos e Schwarzstein, 1996, p. 7). This is a garden which introduces a different way of seeing the landscape, a modern garden founded on cultural reasons for change and national identity for “*sowing the Brazilian soul*” as he mentions in an interview for the *Gazette Diário da Tarde* (14/03/1935). The modern garden is born in an atmosphere of cultural movement in which Brazilian plants become referential elements of regional characterization and they suggest themes for landscape composition.

Declarations of local intellectuals such as the one made by the engineer and poet Joaquim Cardozo emphasize the creative ability and the respect that Burle Marx used to give to the local culture in his works “*Mr. Burle Marx will end up giving to the gardens of Recife an incomparable and singular character such as they certainly have never had previously*” (*Diário da Tarde*, 14/06/1937). Burle Marx ennobles the features of the local landscape acknowledged, and utilized at that time in his gardens, together with philosophical foundations which can justify the reason for their existence as a response to human needs. Hence, Cardozo further reaffirms “*the landscape of Pernambuco has offered Burle Marx precious elements which have been to some extent neglected by his predecessors. Now, hopefully taking full advantage of those values has been noticed and the artist has known how to use them favourably*” (*Diário da Tarde*, 14/03/1935).

The *Praça Euclides da Cunha* and *Praça Faria Neves* are gardens that ennoble the flora of the Northeast region or rather, that pay homage to two ecosystems: the *Caatinga* (the scrub land of the interior) and the *Mata Atlântica* (the so-called Atlantic Forest region). The *Praça Euclides da Cunha* (Illustration 1), projected in 1935, had the vegetation of the *Caatinga*, characteristic of the *Sertão* – the drought-stricken lands of the Northeast of Brazil, as its principal and original motif. It includes trees and a central bed of Cacti which are plants that the landscape artist got to know in the greenhouses of the Botanical Gardens of Dahlen in Germany and also by reading the book *Os Sertões*, by the writer Euclides da Cunha published in 1902.

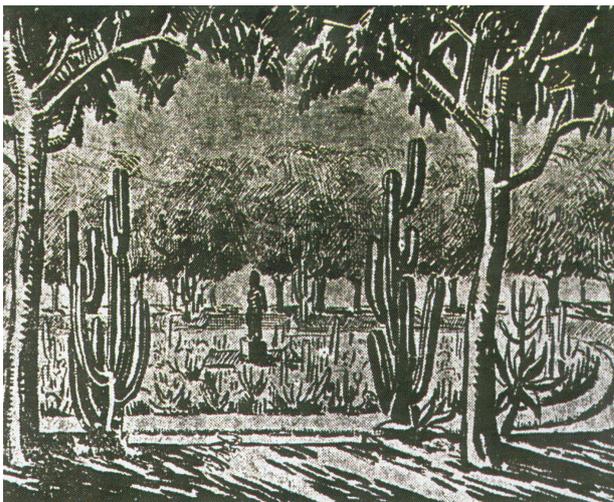


Illustration 1: Design of Praça Euclides da Cunha, 1935 by Burle Marx. Source: *Diário da Tarde*, 14/03/1935.

This constituted the first essentially Brazilian public garden that had the evident intention of representing one of the most singular dominions of our flora and therefore it was a response to what the Modern Movement longed for. In his statement to the *Diário da Tarde* on 14th May, 1935, Burle Marx affirms his intention “*to give a garden to Pernambuco in which one may find hygiene and art allied to the fellows of education and culture which is the same as saying that Pernambuco today will have, as far as gardens are concerned, something solid and definitive to present to posterity that comprises an expression of art, culture and good sense*”.

Burle Marx creates a garden of Cacti and Bromelias in the centre of this square and by doing so the flora as an object of his admiration becomes known. Beside the cacti, he

proposes a sculpture of a man in a loincloth. From the central bed two curling grass-beds and paths of beaten soil sprawl up to the limit of the sidewalk of the square. It is surrounded by tall trees from the Caatinga ecosystem i.e. they follow the elliptical shape of the site. Along those paths people would walk while admiring the central bed as a showcase collection of Cacti. At one of the ends, the rows of trees met and formed a small thicket around a historic building.

Differently, the *Praça de Dois Irmãos*, inaugurated on 14th December 1958 was characterized by Atlantic Rainforest vegetation, very present in its vicinity. A concrete piece of playground equipment with steps, disks and a sand box next to a linear bench defined the main space. Surrounding this equipment, various trees were planted which provided shade and guaranteed tranquil use of the space. During the 1960s, the square was renamed the *Praça Faria Neves* to pay homage to the researcher José Pedro Faria Neves. It is integrated with the *Parque de Dois Irmãos*, the former *Horto Florestal* (forest nursery) which together with the village for state public servants, old houses and edifications form a beauty spot.

As time went on, various trees grew in the central bed of the *Praça Euclides da Cunha*, thus making the *Jardim das Cactáceas* (the Cacti garden) that had been idealized in 1935 lose its characteristics (Illustration 2). The restoration begun in 2003 led to the felling of 25 trees from the central bed, mostly fruit trees. At the same time 48 trees of the *Caatinga* ecosystem were planted in the surrounding space in accordance with the original project which was interpreted from the designs of the landscape artist. The restored square was inaugurated in 2004 (Illustration 3).



Illustration 2: *Praça Euclides da Cunha* before the restoration, 1993. Source: *Laboratório da Paisagem*



Illustration 3: *Praça Euclides da Cunha* after the restoration, 2007. Source: *Laboratório da Paisagem/UFPE*

The *Praça Farias Neves*, during the 1990s became a large car park for users of the *Parque de Dois Irmãos*. It had a bus terminus and was used as the stage for popular festivities that used to degrade the landscape year after year (Illustration 4). The residents of the village for whom the square was made did not enjoy the benefit of using the space anymore. The restoration of the *Praça Faria Neves* was carried out in 2006 (Illustration 5) and the valuable personal records of residents of long-standing allowed partial reconstitution of the original Burle Marx project as it was found neither in the official archives of the City Council of Recife nor in the Roberto Burle Marx office in Rio de Janeiro. That office since the beginning has collaborated with the collection of data.



Illustration 4: *Praça Faria Neves* before the restoration, 2001. Source: *Laboratório da Paisagem/UFPE*



Illustration 5: *Praça Faria Neves* after the restoration, 2006. Source: *Laboratório da Paisagem/UFPE*

#### 4. The restoration of the gardens of Burle Marx in the light of the Florence Charter to support the inventory proposal

The basic document that was adopted as a theoretical and methodological reference was the Florence Charter besides the speeches of the landscape artist which had been published in local newspapers, designs and old photographs which belonged either to residents living near the squares or were taken from public archives.

The similarity between the understanding of a garden according to Burle Marx and the definition of a historic garden in the Florence Charter, i.e. the consideration that is given to the vegetation as the main element and therefore to the garden as a living monument, guided the restoration project for both squares. The carrying out of the restoration project of a garden conceived by Burle Marx was enlarged to cover the surroundings, thus characterizing it as a landscape unit and therefore with its own identity. That was the intention of Burle Marx when he projected gardens for different locales or neighborhoods of the city of Recife.

The use of the Florence Charter in drawing up the restoration project gave very high value to the use of a simple square. It became a multidisciplinary and educative element just as Burle Marx had conceived it. On analyzing it some time after conducting the two interventions in urban historic gardens, it became possible to discuss from the start aspects that did not seem to oppose the urban needs as the end objective was to restore the garden without too many worries about the surrounding area and the city.

In the Florence Charter the garden is dealt with according to four main aspects: its definition (Art. 1 to Art. 9), its conservation (Art. 10 to Art. 17), its use (Art. 18 to Art. 22) and its legal protection (Art. 23 to Art. 25). The aspects mentioned were analyzed by taking into consideration the restoration of the gardens in question as follows.

However when it gives emphasis to the contemplative and meditative condition of the historic garden (Art. 5) as an *“idealized image of the world, a paradise in the etymological sense of the term, but yet bears witness to a culture, a style, an age, and not seldom to the originality of a creative artist”*, the text of the Charter seems to break away from urban reality. In this case it creates a separate world, one that is imaginary

and perfect and which has nothing to do with being linked to the reality of a city with serious urban problems related, for example, to more vehicle traffic, the lack of housing and health services but which still considers a garden as testifying to a culture which marks local singularities.

Art. 9 mentions the inventory of historic gardens as essential for knowing them profoundly and analysing their authenticity. This will depend “*on the design and scale of its various parts as on its decorative features and on the choice of plant or inorganic materials*”. In restoration projects, the study of the square as a unit composed of natural and built elements has been pursued.

Regarding the item on conservation, Art. 14 points out the guarantee of an adequate environment and adds that “*any alteration to the physical environment which endangers the ecological equilibrium must be prohibited*”. It is not explicit if the physical environment encompasses the surrounding landscape which almost always, in metropolises, undergoes serious transformations due to urban needs. One of them that occurs in the two squares is the intense circulation of cars which can badly affect the condition of the landscape unit and also the ecological balance aimed at, on the urban scale. The *Praça Euclides da Cunha* has the function of a roundabout in the road system and the *Praça Faria Neves* had a bus stop which has been removed as a result of the restoration project.

The Florence Charter (Art. 15) recommends that any restoration work of a historic garden shall only be undertaken after a thorough study that includes an ample collection of records relating to the garden in question and to similar gardens with a view to ensuring the scientific character of the intervention. Taking that principle as a guideline, the two restoration projects were based on a documental research related to the 1930s when Burle Marx drew up, including minor alterations and complete projects, around 18 projects for the public gardens of Recife. In addition, documentation from the 1950s was used. Articles and nankeen designs of the landscape artist were identified and interpreted as well as plants, photography, newspapers reports and governmental documentation.

Thus, the description brought to life again from residents’ memories and their photographic collections did help in the choice and siting of vegetation for the *Praça Faria Neves* as happened with a screen of *abricós de macaco* trees and beds of *cana-da-índia* reed used in the *Praça de Casa Forte* in 1935 – his first garden projected in Recife. The photos helped also to recompose the design of the areas covered with beaten soil and grass. On the other hand the aerial photos where the similarity between the sinuous design and the bench of the *Praça Faria Neves* and the elements of the *Praça Salgado Filho* – located in front of the airport of Recife, and built in the same period, could be identified and thus guided how the restoration project was drawn up.

The Florence Charter states in its Art. 16 that the restoration intervention must respect the evolution of the historic garden and that no period should be given precedence over any other. The reconstruction of damaged or worn out parts should be based on unimpeachable documents and material vestiges.

By observing such recommendations, the restoration project for the *Praça Euclides da Cunha* recovered the layout of paths and lawns and the choices of tree and cacti species.

Turning to the restoration of the *Praça Faria Neves*, the playground has been recovered based on residents' photos, material vestiges remaining from 1958 and photos of playground equipment of the *Praça Bernadelli* projected at the same period in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Concerns related to whether one period is given precedence over any other have made the two projects observe what has stayed permanent and what has been altered over time and to seek to make Burle Marx's design compatible with some current needs and has therefore consolidated some uses.

In the *Praça Euclides da Cunha* what were maintained in the garden were a sinuous bench similar to Burle Marx's project language but later enlarged, and a sculpture symbolizing the man of the drought-stricken lands, the *Sertão*, which was conceived by the sculptor Abelardo da Hora in the 1950s. A path that crosses the *Cactus Garden*, although not foreseen by Burle Marx in 1935, was also kept in the garden as it makes it possible to cross the square which is located in a very busy area of the city.

In the *Praça Faria Neves*, the remaining rails from tramcars, which circulated from 1917 in the *Dois Irmãos* open space before the garden was set up, were kept in the square. When this means of transport disappeared from the streets of Recife, the rails were land filled at Burle Marx's suggestion but emerged due to the continuous process of soil erosion. Currently they recall a transport system that was very representative of the history of Recife. On the other hand the restoration project of the *Praça Faria Neves* comprised the implementation of tables for board games, which, although not part of Burle Marx's project, met requests from some specific users.

The Charter (Art. 23) mentions that " *the preservation of such gardens must be provided for within the framework of land-use plans and such provision must be duly mentioned in documents relating to regional and local planning*". This aspect is still far from being carried out in many Brazilian urban gardens which, with few exceptions, do not constitute an administrative priority even though this awareness is fundamental.

## 5. Conclusions

The restoration process of the *Praça Euclides da Cunha* and *Praça Faria Neves* reveals, on the one hand, the application of principles formulated in the Florence Charter as to the painstaking investigation of the garden in question and similar gardens in order to guarantee the scientific character of the intervention. And only by so doing was this made possible. It also demonstrates concern about respecting the evolution of the historic garden without given precedence to one period over any other.

The recovery of degraded built elements or of vegetation was based on material vestiges and unimpeachable documentation among historic sources such as statements and designs produced by Burle Marx, newspaper reports, official documents and photography besides interviews with residents and workers of the areas surrounding the square and also with the technicians of the City Council. At the same time, in both cases, the restoration project assimilated new components in relation to the demand of current uses such as design alterations, equipment for table games and elements to prevent cars entering the square.

On the other hand, the urban reality of Recife which is characterized by intense car traffic, pollution, the weaknesses of the infrastructure network, building density in the

surroundings of the squares, the poverty of most of the population and vandalism creates a scenario contrasting with the notion of a paradisiacal garden delineated by the Florence Charter. Hence there is a visible distance between the conservation of a historic garden and the conditions of the surrounding landscape as far as the physical and social aspects in urban reality are concerned. This serves well as an example of the scenario found in Brazilian metropolises.

Taking into consideration that a historic garden is a place of tranquility, in the terms of the Florence Charter, and that its use is a conservation instrument, it is necessary, after it is restored, to safeguard it from eventualities that can cause it damage such as festival events. Therefore, both the restoration of the *Praça Euclides da Cunha*, by preventing the entry of cars and street-traders during the all-night festivities in its surroundings, and also the restoration of the *Praça Farias Neves*, by stopping the holding of the Festival for Children Festivity and its use as a permanent car park, recover the historic garden as a place of tranquility. At the same time, conservation is seen to be a first step in the growing process of heritage education in the city of Recife.

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