

DEALING WITH THE HISTORIC CORES OF “SWOLLEN CITIES”: NOTES FROM THE BRAZILIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

At a world wide level the historic cores of the cities face different realities.

Countries in development have to deal with a problem that could be called “swollen cities”. There, population increases at intense growth rates and the economy develops within very fast changes. The effort to adapt society to this reality can cause losses that are beyond repair. The values that were constructed and incorporated through generations are transformed or even suppressed. These changes occur at a velocity that makes difficult any reflection about what is happening to the constructed substract. And this heritage is exactly one of the fundamental aspects of the city’s identity: it is its historic core together with its gradual expansion that formed the origins of the today’s neighborhoods.

Over the centuries, the cities grew within a harmonious relation between “quality” and “quantity”. In the modern city this fundamental proportion suffered a rupture. And that can be seen as one of the basis of the urban problems in the western world (ARGAN, p.74).

The development of cities is related to its capacity to take advantage of special conditions. These could be geographical, environmental, historical or cultural aspects. The adequate management of these conditions qualifies these cities as “successful”. But, the contradiction is, that this capacity to maintain these dynamic through time can now be the reason to the loss of the qualities that gave its characteristics. The objective of this paper is to identify fundamental aspects of the cities’ identity in order to deal with this overwhelming reality.

Important aspects related to the identity of growing cities

The identification of the fundamental aspects of the cities’ identity could be used as a “leading thread” in the effort to

restore some of the “lost qualities” within the uncontrolled “growing quantities”.

- Setting:** geographic situation and ecosystems

Cities developed because of its geographical localization: as strategic places regarding defenses, commercial exchanges or governmental centrality. Therefore the urban structures were located on hills, nearby waterfronts, or as an element of connecting trade routes. Some places were chosen for its beauty, others for functional reasons. (*see photo 1*)

The city’s dynamic changed. The original reasons for setting lost their importance, and even are felt as an obstacle of the cities’ development. Hills are occupied in an uncontrolled way; important ecosystems such as swamps and dunes are eliminated; waters are transformed in land. The relation of the city with its surroundings suffers radical ruptures.

There are great losses. For instance, the relation of the city with its waterfronts: there are densely occupied spaces, made private; others are used for urban infrastructures such as traffic systems: auto routes, parking. Sometimes there is given priority for huge economical enterprises, or other spaces, previously located far away, became integrated in urban tissue such as commercial harbors. There are also unsolved urban problems such as sewer effluents thrown directly in pluvial canalization... The citizen loses the connection with the natural environment, traditionally perceived as relaxing for human beings.

- Function:** adapting buildings to nowadays necessities

The constructed substract of the cities reflects the reason that leads to its existence. Traditional uses that became obsolete had to be adapted through times, often with excellent results. The residential use was present and this was a guarantee for a balanced use of the space. (*see photo 2*)

Now, the historical centers are suffering inadequate interventions. Uses are getting specialized and exclusive, tending to commercial uses such as shops and offices.

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Consequently the use of the space is restricted to commercial hours. There are no residences nor leisure or cultural functions that would make these places vivid at night times. As a result, during the day the public spaces are “invaded” with traffic and parking. During the night the space becomes insecure. So, in both situations, there is little space for the pedestrian population – the traditional user of the city cores...

● **Architecture:** urban scale and architectural qualities

Nowadays the cities live with various scales. Although changing functions, the historic substract maintained a volumetric harmony through the past centuries. Recently this proportion was radically transformed with results that are difficult to accomplish. The problems of scale are often accompanied with the lack of quality of the new constructed buildings. (*see photos 3 and 4*)

● **Population:** historical settlement process within today's reality

The traditional settlement guarantees the continuity of memory and accumulated experience. This, often unconscious knowledge, can be an important instrument to achieve results that contribute to a harmonious development regarding the future. Otherwise, the increasing number of permanent residents and tourists has to be seen carefully, because it can represent either opportunity or threat to overwhelm the city's historic and cultural heritage.

Each newcomer brings his own history, which includes skill, knowledge and talents. This very special potential, present in a great number of growing cities, can reinforce the historical trend of the settlement process. Combined with the natural resources and cultural heritage, this resource can be seen as a unique mean of the continuous construction of the place's identity.

“Sustainable urban development”: a proposal to link “city's memory” to “place”

Memory is related to time and inserts itself in the historical process, and is fundamental for the development and the continuity of human existence. CHAUÍ (1996, pg 130) considers that the capacity of memory together with imagination gives the possibility to advance in knowledge in order to achieve experience and wisdom.¹

¹ The concepts of the necessity of memory related to preservation were studied in a chapter of my master thesis (ADAMS, 2002, pgs15 to 23)

Through times, each cycle materializes its necessity.

Nowadays, the popular jargon says that “time is money”. There is little space for aesthetics or quality. As specialists, dealing with memory should be our contribution to maintain these values present. The challenge is to transform potentials that till now are the “virtual sources of a place” into instruments of “quality of life” and “balanced development”. These potentials till now have been ignored. They have to be brought to the citizens' awareness and consciousness.

To achieve a “sustainable urban development”, the fundamental action should deal with identifying “meaning and significance”. In this regard, some premises are fundamental within the major objective, this is linking the city's memory to the place:

- Natural environment has to be valued as one of the basic items of humanity;
- Intangible values are the essence of a place and its hidden potentials, so they have to be identified;
- The historical substract reflects the objective of the city's existence. So, whatever primary reasons supported the choice of the city's setting and its urban and architectonic elements, they should be clearly identified, brought to the citizens awareness and valued;
- The quality of the surroundings is vital for physical and mental health of the population;
- Economic profit is welcome, but the individual interest can't prevail over social benefit.

Strategies for an integrated urban conservation process

All over the world, there were made efforts toward the preservation process. Initially historic subjects were preserved in an isolated form as individual monumental buildings. Then, special urban tissues were seen as important to preserve. Gradually the vernacular aspects were integrated, and the urban elements as a whole system were considered worthwhile to conserve.

This process has been conducted by specialists - where ICOMOS has a leading role - and in general has been supported by governments, through its technical structures. In time, the participation of the communities gained importance and became reference in some places. But that isn't yet a reality in a larger sense.

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At a legal level, the existence of preservation laws does not guarantee the maintenance of cultural heritage. There is a need for a major support from other levels of society. In Brazil, the Federal Constitution considers as Brazilian cultural heritage the tangible and intangible products, taken individually or in ensembles, that are reference to the identity, the actions and the memory of the different groups that form the Brazilian society. The text mentions specifically cultural, historical, environmental, artistic, archeological, paleontological, ecological and scientific values.²

But, until now, there are lots of losses. And in some places, population fights for the maintenance of its heritage. And, although there are preservation laws and there is consensus about the necessity of preserving heritage, there is still a long distance to obtain a wide materialization of the preservation ideals as they are stated in our international charters.

Therefore, besides the traditional measures that had been taken during the last decades, there is a need for a turning point in the way of how to deal with the preservation of our heritage. In order to organize these reflections, I used the case of FLORIANÓPOLIS. This capital city of the State of Santa Catarina is set on the Island of Santa Catarina, situated at the southern coast of Brazil, linked to the continent through bridges. For Brazilian standards it is a middle size city with a huge growth-tax, due to high middle-class immigrants. As it is a place of great beauty, it has a great tourist appeal and in the summer, the fluctuating population represents the double of its normal population.³ Its historic importance is related to the geographic strategic position – nearby the southern line of the Tordesilhas Treaty, which divided the “known” world between Portugal and Spain. In the XVIII century, that fact led to the construction of a defense system composed of almost 10 fortresses, that was accompanied by a settlement program of immigrants from the Portuguese Azorean Islands.

The preservation process in Florianópolis was made possible because of the forward-thinking municipal preservation law (1974). This legislation represents one of

the first initiatives of protection at a local level in Brazil. This law made it possible to protect the cultural and natural heritage through individual acts undertaken by the mayor. The law was complemented in the 1980s by a second urban preservation law, whose components allowed for the preserved structures and monuments to be seen not in isolation, but as a whole part of the overall urban context, in accordance with the international principles of conservation. The efforts towards an interaction among the different structures – on social, political and economical levels – advanced the process of guaranteeing the maintenance of the preserved heritage.

However, there were deficiencies during the process which make it difficult to get the best results in the dynamics of urban conservation. To bridge these gaps there could be a special focus on certain strategies in order to obtain an integrated urban conservation process:

- **The population has to be involved.** Till now the leading role has been given to specialists, and, in a greater sense, the population relies on the effort made by the technicians that work in the public administration. Population has to assume the responsibility for defining the values that should be preserved. This is a process that has to be constructed in order that it occurs in a continuous form, and not only when there are very severe punctual problems. (*see photo 5*)
- **Meaning and significance have to be brought to awareness.** Reflections on the subject have to be brought to public. Their accuracy has to be checked, and the city has to decide to adopt them. The continuity of a proposal based on meaning and memory has to be done by those whom it concerns. It has to be constructed together by all actors of the process. (*see photo 6*).
- **Urban laws and development plans have to be integrated to preservation concepts and induce balanced harmonic solutions.**

The economic sectors, which pursue their individual benefits, have a pushing force. The result is an immense pressure over politicians in special over the legislative – the council of the city. This can result the change of urban laws, such as master plans, through punctual alterations, that can cause disasters for the city planning, and for urban preservation in special. The best way to face this situation, besides the specialists evaluation, is an effort on communal involvement linked with the rescue of “significance and meaning” of the place.

² Extracted from article 216 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution. (BRASIL, 1988)

³ Florianópolis has approximately 400.000 inhabitants (IPUF), with a grow rate of almost 3.7% a year (IBGE - 1991/2000). The fluctuating population reaches 550.000 persons. The Island of Santa Catarina is 426.6 km² in size and is situated approximately 500 meters away from the mainland (IPUF).

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● **The public administration should continue to function as support to preservation.**

There are matters which depend on public action, such as the supervision and the induction of the policies that are to be executed. Laws are insufficient to guarantee the realization of the objectives of the urban planning. There has to be instruments that stimulate preservation, either through evaluating specific monuments or places, or the installation of functions that would contribute to conservation in a larger sense. Some of these measures could be:

1. **In regard to function:** Mixed use, especially in historic surroundings, guaranteeing its dynamic; (see photo 7)

2. **Evaluation of the historic substrate through its “refunction”.** For instance, a fortress, former element of the defense system, now is a leisure place; (see photo 8)

3. **Installing economic benefits:** Through Tax reduction or similar instruments.

But at last, not at least, there has to be an effective control upon what is happening on the municipal territory.

Final Remark

So, the “problems” of our cities could be transformed into opportunities: the potential variables that are the hidden clues that support the dynamics of the place. The rescue of its’ meaning and significance can contribute for the understanding among the inhabitants. Memory needs to maintain itself materialized, and the places that incorporate this dimension, in greater or smaller rank can be seen as “sacred spaces”. Their existence can’t be risked or damaged because of their power of attraction or their quality of continuity.

As life functions in cycles, and the different levels interact, we could conclude with the contribution of the great myth researcher Campbell⁴,

*When in accordance with nature,
nature returns you with its blessing.*

Every sacred place is where the eternity shines through time.

Abstract

The economic dynamic on a world wide level, transformed the timing of the city-cycles, especially in developing countries. The velocity of these changes can

cause consequences that are beyond repair. The problems of the historic cores of the cities can be focused in the following aspects:

- Setting: geographic situation and ecosystems
- Architecture: problems of scale and quality of the constructed substract
- Function: inadequate substitution of traditional uses that became obsolete.
- Population: historical settlement process within the increasing number of permanent residents and/or tourists has to be seen carefully, because it can represent either opportunity or threat to overwhelm the city’s historic and cultural heritage

The instruments traditionally used in the 1980s and 1990s - “urban planning and conservation” and “interaction among social, political and economical structures” - are fundamental, but insufficient to attend the demand. It is priority to incorporate new variables into the efforts to preserve the city’s past while overseeing its future growth. To achieve a “sustainable urban development”, the fundamental action should deal with identifying “meaning and significance”: linking the city’s memory to the place. At the same time, there has to be constructed strategies for an integrated urban conservation process. So, the “problems” of our cities could be transformed in opportunities: the potential variables that are the hidden clues that support the dynamics of the place.

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⁴ Adapted from Campbell, The hero’s journey: Joseph Campbell on his life and work. (2003, pg 40).

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Fig.1 The city's setting has to be valued.

View of the bridges that connect the Island of Santa Catarina, Brazil, to the mainland.



Fig.3 View of the Historic Center of Santo Antônio, Island of Santa Catarina, which maintains the occupation model used by the Portuguese Immigrants that came from the Azorean Island.



Fig.2 Former residences are now been used as offices.

Image of a building in the Historic Center of Florianópolis.



Fig.4 Florianópolis, Historic Center.

Radical changes occurred in the former volumetric harmony of the historic substract

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Fig.5 The population has to realize what should be preserved



Fig.6 Meaning and awareness:
View of the Santana Fort (XVIII century) together with the iron bridge Hercílio Luz (1927).
The fortresses remind of the strategic importance regarding the defensive function of the Island. The existence of the bridge, linking the Island to the Continent, guaranteed the maintenance of Florianópolis function of capital of the Province of Santa Catarina.



Fig.7 Adequate function has to be stimulated by the public administration. View of the Historical Center of Florianópolis.



Fig.8“Refuncionalizing.” through dynamic uses.
View of the Fortress São José da Ponta Grossa, nowadays used for leisure purposes.