

Exploring alternatives for the redevelopment of peri-central neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro: an urban design teaching perspective

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Strategic planning has been a means for cities to enhance their ability to attract investment, transforming them into territories that are now essentially understood as real estate profits generators. Acting as a main partner in such a process, the concept of urban regeneration then converges with the rehabilitation of historic centers, an agenda dictated by the postmodern critique and recently reinforced by the concept of 'sustainable city'. The first struggle is culturally driven and emerged as a reaction against the large-scale application of functionalist urban planning precepts incubated in the European context of postwar reconstruction. The second initiative, more concerned with environmental issues, seeks to reorient a whole lifestyle associated with a kind of urban 'product' that had been simultaneously stimulated by the consumer goods industry, especially in North America: the suburban single-family detached house. In both cases, we are talking about a process that resulted in the abandonment of urban centers by the economic elite. In Europe, the return to the city center was initially driven by historical heritage concerns combined with aggressive policies to improve energy performance of old buildings but has since been slowed down by the 'sales success' of these picturesque neighborhoods where the high cost per square meter is driven by the investments strategies of the international financial system (especially in major global cities). This tendency has represented a constant challenge for local governments forcing them to create and make use of legislation specifically conceived to ensure a minimum of social mix. In North America, the propaganda in favor of the city-center has mainly focused on attracting young singles and couples

without children – the famous yuppies – selling them a lifestyle linked to the concepts of 'smart-city', 'creative city', 'intelligent clusters' etc.

Faced with this reality that has widespread all over the world, academic experts evolving in the context of emerging economies such as Brazil seem divided. Some of them support the initiatives oriented towards the enhancement of the city center, claiming, in line with postmodern criticism and sustainability principles, for an ideal compact city restricted to its more central and historically infrastructured areas. Others, despite sharing certain values against modernity and defending the redevelopment of central areas, are bothered with its perverse effects such as gentrification and social segregation. To avoid such negative consequences, they claim for housing rights for the excluded population and more ambitious quotas of social housing in the gentrified neighborhoods. Given the difficulty of imposing such restrictions on over-valued areas, city administrations in the developing world adopt here and there some symbolic rules and/or resort to urban mobility as a way to 'democratize' access to the center and promote the idea of equipping the rest of the city with mass transit means which is consistent with the 'sustainable city' paradigm, which has in turn become an increasingly attractive branding strategy for global capital markets.

In urban contexts with lower levels of social inequality as in countries where the concepts mentioned above were originally created, the system's sustainability is precisely based on these last two forms of action: social quotas for real estate projects in high-valued central areas and efficient public transportation network ensuring relatively quick and comfortable access to the metropolitan downtown where most of the jobs and services are located.

Generally speaking, and within a certain social and economic context, a city model that has progressively transformed the old European centers in a sort of 'theme park' becomes then possible. According to Muñoz (2005), these traditional city centers end up by suffering a process of 'urbanization'. Grounded in the importation and reproduction of a cityscape designed to foster consumption, these centers surrender to the dominant logics of the 'sugar-free gum', the 'meat with no fat' or the 'cigarette without nicotine' and other smoothness invented to 'soften' and 'secure' reality making it more palatable to the 'average international taste'. In this world ruled by the logics of consumption, "the typological elements like streets and squares that historically characterized the compact

city are being transformed according to a very similar intervention model" into "shopping and leisure centers that are exported to the real city."¹ Theories such as 'Cities for People' put forward by the Danish architect Jan Gehl are then utilized as an alibi by the market and appropriated by politicians because they are convergent (at least partially) with the intention of standardization of the urban space, something that does not fail to refer to the quality labels applied to companies and to any product or process that is likely to become a safe target for financial investments.

In Rio de Janeiro, projects for public spaces, which are part of the Porto Maravilha Urban Operation, follow the same logic. There is no desire to differentiate from the images that populate the reports on urban operations in central areas throughout the world. In fact, as Nadia Someck (2012) reminds us by citing Peter Roberts and Hugh Sybes (2006), they serve as a theatrical stage for a typical tactical feature of urban regeneration in which a well-known designer is invited to create something outstanding and therefore ensure good visibility in the strategic mediatic arena.

The paper claims therefore for the urgency to define alternative urban redevelopment strategies for the already urbanized and infrastructured areas that do not compromise their specific landscape, ambience, local heritage and people's ways of life. To achieve such a goal, we have been constructing an urban design teaching methodology intended to help architecture students to understand ongoing processes as a way to underpin their urban design proposals. The teaching strategy has privileged neighborhoods that are located in the immediate periphery of the city center and were gradually transformed into a belt of poverty around the historic core. The pedagogical proposal is composed by a series of exercises conceived to address different and complementary purposes. The sequence includes video making, role games simulating experts' views and stakeholders' conflicting logics and interests, actual exchanges with local communities and communication skills.

The pedagogical proposal intends to depart from traditional formalistic approaches to urban design by assuming planning strategies and their inherent

¹ MUÑOZ, 2005, p. 83.

interdisciplinary complexity and strong connection to real world issues as a fundamental ingredient of the design process. The experience that has been constantly improved for the last ten years shows through its awarded and published student work that these same neighborhoods that went through a serious process of stagnation and urban obsolescence can now be considered as an open field of possibilities for the construction of a more socially just and sustainable city rather than a mere and abstract playground for the global finance investment system and real estate market conservative recipes.

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