

# The Image of the Waterfront in Rio de Janeiro

## Urbanism and Social Representation of Reality

*Nara Iwata & Vicente del Rio*

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Globalization incites nations, regions, and cities to compete for investments, consumers, and resources. In aspiring for a new position in the global market, cities utilize new urban practices that lead to the rediscovery and many times to the invention of identities and traditions that became fundamental attributes to attract consumers. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, also follows this path, and since the turn of the twentieth century, the mythical dimension of the bayfront first and then of the beachfront have been inseparably incorporated to the city's identity and international image.

Developmental patterns along the waterfront and the imagery associated with the beaches in Rio de Janeiro reveal that the social construction of reality is marked by a continuous redesign of urban symbols. Although tourism and marketing have always praised the waterfront and the beaches as fundamental to Rio's image, there was never a continuous and comprehensive public planning and management process to overlook these areas. Sectoral and embellishment projects happen from time to time, but they result either from political gestures or are remedies for a pressing functional problem. The discontinuity in the history of urban interventions along the waterfront is a clear expression of the lack of deserved attention from the city planning apparatus.

This article discusses how the evolution of the city's image has had a strong relationship with the beaches and the natural landscape and how, by continuously perceiving them as a natural asset, the city managers have failed to understand their role in the construction of the beachfront as a social reality. The city planning process in Rio de Janeiro should recognize the waterfront and particularly all development along the beaches as important resources in an everlasting, continuous process toward the social construction of reality. Policies, plans, projects, and regulations should not only consider city images as commodities but as inseparable from the city's daily public and social life.

### ► 1. Postmodernity and Contemporary Urban Practices

There is no consensual definition of postmodernity in contemporary cultural theory. The debate—especially alive in the late seventies and early eighties—divides

### Abstract

Postmodernity and economic globalization incite countries, regions, and cities to compete for investments, consumers, and resources. In aspiring for a new position in this global market, cities utilize new urban practices that lead them to rediscover and reinvent identities and traditions. In Rio de Janeiro, the mythical dimension of the South Zone is inseparably incorporated to its identity. In evaluating the history of the imagery linked to the beaches and the projects for the waterfront, one may observe a social construction of a reality that is marked by a continuous redesigning of symbols but also by a discontinuity in the history of urban interventions. Although tourism and marketing continually praise the waterfront as a fundamental factor in the image of the city, a continuous public management process never really existed. The city managers must understand the beaches, the waterfront, and development along the shoreline as important resources in a continuous process of social construction of a reality that should not only address their images as commodities but should treat them as inseparable from the city's daily public and social lives.

**Keywords:** *waterfront development; social representation; city image; city marketing*

**Nara Iwata**, architect, M.Sc. in architecture, is a researcher in the Graduate Program in Architecture, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.

**Vicente del Rio**, architect, M.A. in urban design, Ph.D. in architecture and urbanism, is an associate professor in the City and Regional Planning Department, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

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theoreticians between those who consider modernity as an unfinished project and those who believe that our times represent a rupture with it and that this is necessary for cultural development. However, some aspects of contemporary society are consensual, such as the decline of the nation-states, the globalization of economy, the crisis of institutions, and the collapse of hierarchies and of metanarratives (universal truths). One can add to these aspects the shortening of the temporal dimension, the multiplication of images and their “commodification,” and the urgency in informational and consumption patterns that lead us to a “compression of space-time” (Harvey 1998).

In completing this perspective, Jameson (1994) considers postmodernism as the moment when reflectivity submerges in an abundance of images. In admitting that everything in our lives can be considered culture, we promote the estheticization of daily life, and culture itself becomes an object of consumption. This phenomena is intimately related to the collapse of meanings, the elimination of the barriers between real and imagery, and to the multiplicity of readings of the same object. To Baudrillard (1992), we live the era of the simulacrum and of a continuous resemantization of things. Even Lyotard (1996), who considers modernism as an unfinished project, lists a series of terms to gloss the aesthetics of today’s culture such as “spectacularization,” “mediatization,” and “simulation,” all of which point toward the prevalence of the image over the object itself.

Accordingly, identity has become an essential asset for cities given that the globalization of the economy and of culture foster an increasingly obstinate competition between countries, regions, and cities to attract investment (Kotler, Haider, and Rein 1993; Erickson and Roberts 1997). These goals relate directly not only to the real natural and historical attributes of a place but to the ways it is perceived and to the capacities inherent in the images that it is able to generate. Thus, the new strategies for urban development aim at the (re)construction of urban identities by concentrating on the differential areas of the city, and making use of the existing natural, cultural, and historical attributes that are contained in the realities and in the imagination of the population (del Rio 1997).

Within this context, globalization generates a tension between the global and the local that stimulates a movement toward the valuing of place specificities and the recovery of urban identity. The image of a place is strengthening as a counterpoint to globalizing images. As noted a long time ago by Lynch (1960), we do not perceive the city as a whole but parts of it with which we identify or with which we establish a link through our lives. It is this fragmented cognition that allows for the emergence of landmarks, edges, districts, and so on—

elements that gain prominence both physically and emotionally in the city environment, thus forming its identity.

To Santos (1994), the image of a place is a fundamental issue because it is only through place and the everyday life that we are able to adjust perception to interpretation and thus form our world vision. A place may be understood as an environment perceived through localized experience, including not only the landscape itself but what is imagined, the stories, the feelings, and the concepts (Walter 1988) or as “intense foci of happenings, concentrations of dynamism, crossroads, moments of energy, and scenarios of ephemeral effects” (Montaner 1997, 45).

The postmodern paradigm increasingly incorporates an interest for place making and for urban identity. The functionalism, universalism, and purism that characterized modernism were gradually replaced by pluralism and contextualism in contemporary city planning and urban design, particularly in “new urbanism.” Born from the imperatives of rethinking suburban growth and the American urban model, this postmodern “school of thought” was inspired by European contextualism and is best expressed through the teachings, realizations, and marketing efforts of a group of professionals organized as the Congress of New Urbanism. Following the steps of modernists and the seminal Charter of Athens of 1933, new urbanists published a Charter of the New Urbanism in 1996 that quickly became what is perhaps the most utilized reference book in contemporary urbanism. According to the new trend, urban development must respect historical patterns and precedents because they support “continuity and evolution of urban society” (Leccese and McCormick 1999).

However, as noted by some observers, new urbanism represents a revival that equals the historicism of the 1970s and 1980s and reflects the conservatism of the North American middle class (Ellin 1996; Lara 2001). Indeed, in aspiring to recuperate the symbolic richness of traditional urban forms, parts of the city are being transformed into symbolic spaces inductive of identities that are being put at stake by globalization and the growing specialization of the so-called world cities as cultural, technological, or tourist poles.

On the other hand, the postmodern condition and globalization have also generated transformations in the political organization of society with emergence of participatory democracies as an option for representative democracies (Doberstein 1996/2000, 104). With the debacle of what Vainer (2000, 75) calls “traditional technocratic-centralized-authoritarian precept,” new city planning models have been introduced, among them “strategic planning.” This model incorporates the competitive facet of the “neoliberal” economy and does not divert from the theories of new urbanism in that it

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“maintains its focus on the alleged cultural dimension of the so-called historicist striving of the prevailing paradigm” succeeding the wreck of modernism (Arantes 2000, 13).

Born out of the tactical thinking of the military, strategic planning was adopted by business management in the early sixties as a response to economic globalization. The international flux of capital and the de-territorialization of production demanded from the actors playing this new economy the capacity to define and implement competitive strategies with a global vision. From the eighties, city planning started to adopt the same model in the United States and in Europe, a transposition that was only possible because—according to the advocates of strategic planning—“cities are submitted to the same conditions and challenges as businesses” (Vainer 2000, 76).

In modernism, the city had already looked for inspiration in the private enterprise, and the urban prototype resulted from the appropriation of ideas from Taylorism: rationality, functionality, regularity, and standardization. Now, however, the transposed values are productivity, competitiveness, and above all, subordination to the logic of the global market. In subordinating to the market, the city and its images become a product to be sold, commodities that have to be molded according to the expectations of consumers. As noted by Relph (1976), “places live in a constant state of tension between what they are, what they have to be, and what global power and capital make them to be.” So the real challenge for strategic city planning is to administer tensions between the global and the local spheres and to build a city that may respond to the imagery of both consumers and residents. Symptomatic of postmodernity and the leading competitive economic striving of contemporary urbanism is that those once called citizens—back when the striving force was *citizenship*—are now referred to as *stakeholders*.

## ► 2. Urban Imagery and City Marketing

If we live a “true moment of the society of images” as noted by Jameson (1994, 120), we must recognize the power and the complexity of a city’s imagery as well as its contribution to identity, to legibility, and to the construction of social realities. The urban imagery acts as a constant reference to cognition and consequently to the formation of images and concepts, through an interactive process in which city and inhabitants mold one another.

This dialectics may be understood by taking Merleau-Ponty’s “visible-invisible” analytical pair: everything invisible tends to become visible while another invisible element is forming and so on (Borde 1998). Similarly, the *real* city is the materialization of an imaginary condition that in turn is

transformed by the city, and subsequently transforms it, in a continuous, never-ending process. Confirming this interdependency, Berger and Luckmann (1987, 87) noted that “the relationship between man—the producer—and the social world—man’s product—is and will always be a dialectic relationship. Within this context and if the city may be considered a product of society, man and city act reciprocally one on the other—the ‘product’ reacting on the ‘producer.’ ”

When considering this same interactive process, Lynch (1960) notes that the city image results from a bilateral process between the observer and his or her environment. Images are not only abstractions from an “objective” reality, but they result from intentional interpretations. There are as many images of a place as there are people since place identity lays in the experience, in the eye, in the mind, and in the intention of the observer as much as lays in its physical appearance (Relph 1976).

Thus, the construction of a city’s identity is a cognitive process consisting of a continuous balancing between ideas—a person’s motivations, values, and expectations—and direct experience. For Piaget (1969), this process reflects a state of equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation: assimilation as the incorporation of the object by the individual while accommodation is the individual’s readjustment as a response to the transformations caused by such incorporation. Piaget understands that knowledge does not begin in the recognition of the self or of the object but in the recognition of the relationships between them. So urban identity and city image cannot be understood simply in terms of physical aspects or as a product of behavior but as an indissoluble combination of the two.

If urban imagery incorporates individual experiences, then social representation is not only a reproduction of reality, but it remodels reality. The “imaginary city” is not a faithful reproduction of the “real city,” but its interpretation as the “symmetry between objective and subjective realities is not total” (Berger and Luckmann 1987, 179). Each individual has his or her own experience of the city and his or her own personal interpretation.

Nevertheless, the individual experiences of the members of a society may be grouped together into a common identity that encompasses a certain degree of consensus relative to the physical and other verifiable components of places, the so-called “public identity” or “collective image.” Lynch (1960, 7) defined this concept as the “consensual image that one may expect from the interaction of one single physical reality, a common culture, and a basic physiological nature.”

Contrasting to “public identity” as the sum of individual experiences, some authors conceive “mass identity” as deriving from the work of “opinion makers” who present people with

prefabricated, easy-to-consume images through marketing and mass media (Relph 1976; Featherstone 1995). According to Harvey (1998), this represents a more artificial identity based not only on symbols and signifiers but on an assemblage of signs arbitrarily fabricated and barely acceptable. He observed that while the dialectic relationship between experience, perception, and imagination is central to the construction of identity, it is also open to mediatization and manipulation.

Consequently, city managers see marketing as increasingly fundamental as a means to promote the city, a promotion that, however, reduces the urban environment to a commodity not only to make it respond to a commercial competition but to emphasize its aesthetic appreciation. By selling a mediated identity, a fictitious world is created, and the real world is transfigured to seduce and fascinate the consumers. To be readily consumed, the image that is produced by city marketing has to get close to a stereotype, it is simplified, and represents only one view of the object.

As culture has always followed the economy in postmodernity, we deal with the culture of consumption and the consumption of culture, a context where “opinion makers” and “cultural producers” take fundamental roles. In a very special way, new urbanism is also a product of specialists of symbolic production, these experts that “produce cultural orientations for the social practices” (Featherstone 1995, 84). More often than not, “invented traditions” promote a place not through its history and its identity but through *simulacrum*s that are distant from reality. Thus, the mediated city is characterized by signs that do not point to different levels of reality but to a set of fabricated myths, and by doing so, they risk losing meaning and contents. A new conflict must now be administered: the detachment between objective reality and subjective reality.

### ► 3. The Waterfront in Rio de Janeiro— Objective and Subjective Realities

The importance of the construction of this social imagery may be observed through the study of the evolution of urban development along the waterfront in Rio de Janeiro, whose development was first largely dependent on the sea’s



**Figure 1.** *The entrance to Guanabara Bay and relationship of the historic city with the waterfront.*  
Source: “Pesca da baleia na Baía de Guanabara” by Leandro Joaquim, oil on canvas, c. 1795, in Museu Histórico Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.

economic and strategic importance. As a Portuguese colony in the early years, the city depended on the port and on the fortifications that protected the bay against invaders such as the French and the Dutch armadas (Figure 1). In the nineteenth century, baths in sea water started to be utilized in Brazil as a therapeutic technique against all sorts of illnesses, and by the turn of the twentieth century, a new type of development along the shore started to respond to the city’s potential as a health and bathing resort. Interestingly, at the time, bathers had almost no freedom as doctors prescribed the beach, the spot, the time, the duration, and even how many immersions they should take. The hedonistic intent was initially concealed by the therapeutic project, and the objective of the bath was not to get exposed to the sun but to sea salt. Until the end of the nineteenth century, one was supposed to cover from head to feet and to avoid the times of the day when the sun was stronger to preserve the pale skin typical of the elites who did not have to work outdoors.

While rapid sociocultural transformations and a new sanitary conscience marked the beginning of the twentieth century a new perspective was introduced on health and hygiene, and modern man acquired a new and very different look that deliberately linked him to work. From preventive medicine, sea bathing turned into a healthy practice for the development of beauty (Corbin 1989). This was the start of Rio’s vocation as a sea resort, a vocation that was taken to the max as the beaches became the city’s main foci for recreation and leisure, its

principal public space in the city, and a “natural” extension of the bourgeois residences (Sevcenko 1998).

However, by the end of the nineteenth century, Rio was also famous for its terrible unhealthy urban conditions that fomented fatal diseases so that ships often refused to lay anchor in its port, and international investors started to turn toward Rio’s competitor, Buenos Aires. At the same time, the proclamation of Brazil as a republic generated the need for a national project and new symbols for the restoration of its international image. It is important to note that since then all water bodies—sea, rivers, lakes, and so on—in Brazil have been considered a matter of public interest, so that their margins and the access to them are protected and dictated by public easements controlled by national and state institutions. Waterfronts have thus long been considered as part of the public domain, and their use by private parties happens only under special governmental concessions.

Between 1902 and 1906, an intense program for urban renewal was set in place in Rio de Janeiro by Mayor Pereira Passos with full support and funding from President Rodrigues Alves. The city would then experience impressive and vast public works programs, embellishment projects, and public health programs including mass vaccinations of entire city districts—which in many cases meant the use of force against resisting communities who were unaware of its consequences in health.

Pereira Passos’s extensive program of urban reforms included the transformation of Rio into a stylish city of the “*belle époque*,” as French values were seen as synonyms with modernity. New “Haussman-like” avenues were traced over old morphologies downtown, neoclassical architecture was “en vogue,” and infillings utilizing the land from raised hills in the downtown changed substantially the profile of the city. New areas were created for urban growth toward the inlands and for the expansion of the port, its facilities and warehouses. Along the shorelines of the bay to the south, new squares, boulevards, and “*passeios*”—the Avenida Beira Mar—were built over reclaimed areas leading the way for the elites and, of course, for the expansion of the land market and for a primitive form of “globalization”—railways, electric, gas, and land development were mostly the result of British investments (Figure 2).



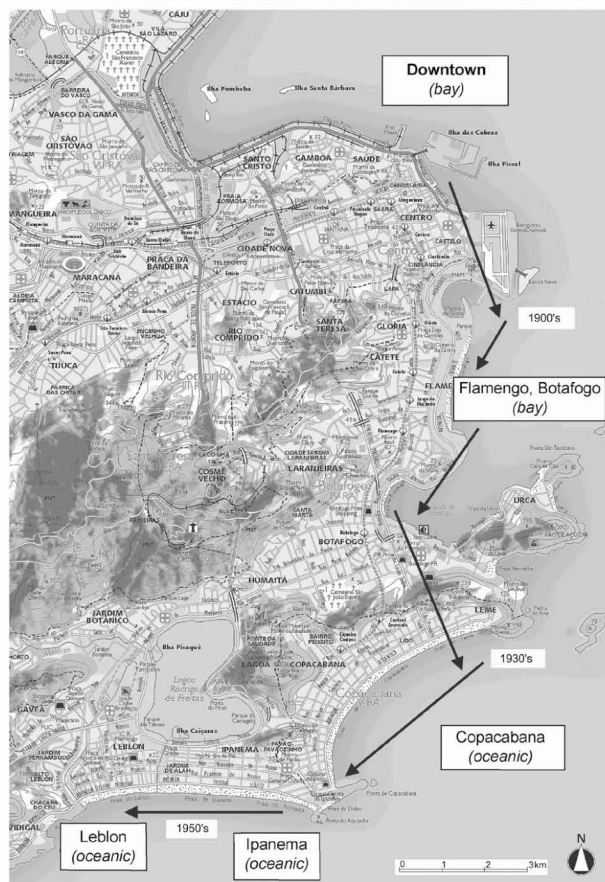
**Figure 2.** Avenida Beira Mar at the bayfront, one of the efforts toward a new city image and to direct urban growth in 1906.

Source: Photo by Marc Ferrez, collection G. Ferrez. Instituto Moreira Salles, Rio de Janeiro.

With modernity, residential location in the city became a symbol of social status and lifestyle, and the city’s “best districts” were successively driven more and more toward the southern shores (Figure 3). The migration of the first elites to the new districts helped them to keep a safe distance from Rio’s impoverished historic core, where their old and once distinctive residences were transformed into tenements and slums. Along the bay and to the south of the historic core, the districts of Flamengo and then Botafogo were appropriated by the elites, whose beautiful urban houses were located first along the waterfront and then along the major arteries and the tram lines. The sign for these developmental patterns toward the south had been given in the late 1800s with the proclamation of the republic and the location of the new presidential palace in Flamengo. Eventually, as we will see, the changing social logic of urban development dictated the rich to move to newly developed areas further away to the south and their houses to be replaced by apartment buildings for the middle class.

In the 1920s, a new understanding of the importance of air and sun led to a the modernist paradigm in architecture and urbanism, and the beach and outdoor life began to be





**Figure 3.** The expansion of the city along the waterfront toward the south and the oceanic beaches.



**Figure 4.** A typical image of the carioca lifestyle in Ipanema, strongly linked to the natural landscape and the beachfront.

Source: Photo by V del Rio.

associated with a new standard of beauty that incorporated images that until then were supposedly popular. The sun-tanned dark skin of the beach bum and the values inherent in “living next to the beach” composed a new social representation of the dominant class, in an image that was to be intensely pursued by all who wanted to be recognized as a *carioca* (those who are born in Rio) and to participate in the bourgeois culture (Figure 4). During this period of rapid urbanization, intense land redevelopment was encouraged by both local and state governments through new zoning and building codes, and city beautification projects such as the widening and paving of new streets and boulevards along the bayshore toward the south and the seashore.

Following this movement toward the south and the sea, Copacabana was the first district along the southern beaches to be developed. First a refuge for the elites and an alternative to the crowded, deteriorating conditions of the downtown and adjacent neighborhoods, the district was soon to be adopted as one of the strongest and most enduring of Brazilian images (Figure 5). As new tunnels and tram lines transported development to the south shores in the thirties, Copacabana was marked by rapid urbanization and intense land development and was to become the most popular residential district in Rio de Janeiro and eventually one of its busiest commercial cores.

As automobiles became the new icons of modernity, they increasingly subordinated economics and politics after World War II in Brazil and consequently urban renewal and public works in Rio. In the early fifties, the coastal line along the bay south of downtown was to be redesigned yet again when new landfills beyond Avenida Beira Mar made way for the construction of the Flamengo Parkway linking the central business district (CBD) to Copacabana. Pushed away from the bayfront by the new expressway and by the increasingly polluted conditions of its waters, the elites were once again encouraged to move to the south and the newly developed lands of Copacabana. The bayfront kept its symbolic value only as a *visual* resource, while Copacabana’s beachfront became a resource that was at once visual and in use by the new residents and beachgoers.

Paradoxically, the Copacabana of Carmen Miranda and Walt Disney’s *Going Down South* was incapable of maintaining its position in the old social hierarchy of the city as the lower middle class started to migrate into the high-density apartment buildings that were starting to pop

up everywhere in the district as a consequence of the strength of its own image and the intensification of real estate development. These newcomers from the lower-middle-class neighborhoods moved to Copacabana in search of their bourgeois utopian dreams (Velho 1989). The district was quickly transformed into a popular destination through the construction of countless apartment buildings of little architectural quality but with the largest number of residential units that could possibly be squeezed into a confined space. Many had retail establishments on the ground floor and floors destined to offices—especially along the busiest streets and bus corridors—and very few offered sufficient on-site parking.

Development in Copacabana was so intense that in the late sixties it was ranked among the world's densest residential areas (Prefeitura da Cidade 1992, 111), demanding heavy investments in infrastructure and in increasingly sophisticated solutions for vehicle circulation and public transportation (Figure 6). Moreover, urban conditions in Copacabana affected the whole city not only because of the demonstration effects but also because topographical conditions turned the district into a necessary passageway to the still newer residential districts further to the south and to their developmental opportunities, such as Ipanema and Leblon (see Figure 3).

Consequently, Copacabana's waterfront was to be transformed once again as the city responded to its crowded and deteriorating conditions while pointing developmental patterns toward recently urbanized areas along the south shore. By the late 1960s, the city opted for a gigantic waterfront project consisting of hydro-mechanical infillings that more than tripled the sand area dedicated to bathers, making possible the construction of a major sewage-disposal solution and a double-carriageway boulevard to facilitate vehicular movement from the CBD and the Flamengo Parkway. Calling upon world famous landscape architect Burle Marx to design the new streetscape, the city tried to adapt Copacabana's popular image to more fully respond to the demands of both bathers and developers. The district's waterfront and beach turned definitely away from serving as an almost exclusive symbol appropriated by the elites into an extremely popular and mostly public resource (Figure 7).

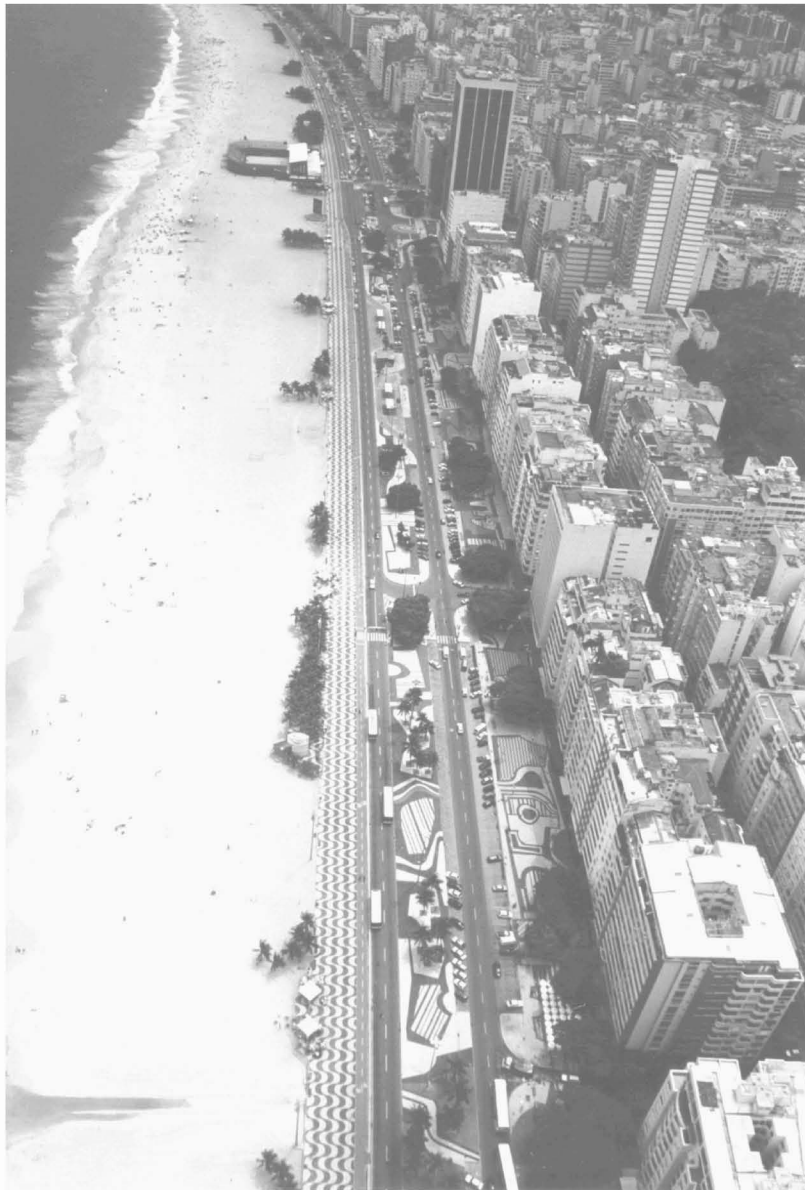
By then, the demystification of Copacabana was on its way to be reflected in the arts, in music, and in literature. The tones of exaltation and optimism in the images that once belonged there were



**Figure 5.** *Copacabana in the fifties and the relationship of city life to the beachfront.*



**Figure 6.** *The dense development along the beach in Copacabana in the seventies.*  
Source: Photo by V. del Rio.



**Figure 7.** Copacabana beachfront transformed after the construction of a new sewage system, a new boulevard with landscaping by Burle Marx, and the expansion of the sand area.  
Source: Photo by Silvio Macedo. Used with permission.

abandoned for those that acknowledged its terrible urban conditions, picturing the district as a malaise, “miniature of all metropolises and the refuge of all criminals” (Cardoso et al. 1986, 69). With its decadence and loss of prestige, the elites followed the shoreline southbound and populated Ipanema, a new neighborhood that—in its own turn—was to become the birthplace for yet another wave of social fashions and for a new way of life that was to influence the whole country.

In the late sixties, Ipanema exploded as the “in” place of *bossa nova*, bikinis, and cool intellectual youngsters riding scooters and wearing dark sunglasses (Castro 1999). There, sitting in a sidewalk bar, Tom Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes composed one of Rio’s most enduring badges as a pledge of love to a passing beauty: the “Girl from Ipanema.” The lyrics associated the girl’s beauties to some of the neighborhood’s aspects and to the sensuality of the sea. This image became popular worldwide and stayed with Ipanema as one of the strongest symbols in the city’s repertoire. *Bossa nova* helped to project Brazil to the world, and Ipanema’s bohemian way of life became a model for many Brazilians. The new Ipanema-influenced carioca was cordial, urbane, and easygoing, well informed and sophisticated much like a Baudelaire’s *neo-flâneur* that combines “informal behavior with intellectual sophistication” (Lessa 2000, 389).

The image that marked Rio as a tropical paradise during the forties and fifties started fading away in the late 1960s when the country was already under a military regime (1964 to 1985). The complete transfer of the federal government to Brasília—the new capital inaugurated in 1960—the escalating economic crises and high inflation rates, and the increase in drug traffic and street violence, were the main factors that led economic investments and political forces to abandon Rio and move the commercial and financial power axis to São Paulo, a much more industrialized city in tune with world capitalism.

In terms of urban design, nothing worthy of note happened in Rio’s waterfront during the seventies and eighties. By the early nineties, the worsening of socioeconomic conditions and the decrease in life quality had generated conflicting realities and considerable violence, and the imagery of the city’s natural beauty was substituted in local and international newspapers. Once nicknamed, “The Marvelous City,” Rio de Janeiro was now described as a tormented, fragmented, excludent, and violent city: a picture coinciding with a



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critical situation of urban disinvestment and disorder. Within that context, the return to full democracy was slow but steady, and a multiparty system with direct elections down to the municipal level was totally restored by the early nineties.

By then, city officials in Rio started to wake up to the new times, and two isolated urban projects were implemented along the beachfront from Copacabana to Leblon. Although projects Rio-Orla (1990) and Rio-Mar (1992) have been considered by many as mere city beautification, they should be understood within a larger context of a new set of urban ideological concepts not far from what is now labeled “new urbanism.” Aimed at restoring public spaces, retrieving local traditions, and fostering a vision of the city as architecture, these projects reach beyond aesthetics and correspond to the valuing of local identities in face of a globalizing world (Prefeitura da Cidade 1990, 1998).

This is particularly true in the case of Rio-Orla, a project exclusively geared to prepare the city for the Earth Summit conference in 1992. Both these projects promoted much needed betterments along the beach such as newly designed streetscape that included platforms for seating and food kiosks, tree planting, parking, and a dedicated bike lane. However, as they resulted from isolated decisions moved by very specific political objectives, they did not represent any change in the historical trend that marks the lack of attention on part of the public planning system with the continuous potential of the beachfront imagery and its symbolism.

The first direct elections for city mayor marked a new era in Rio de Janeiro from the early 1990s. In 1995, the city government adopted a new strategic plan that was to lead urban development into the neoliberal global economic paradigm. Following the Barcelona model, the plan called for public-private partnerships and for more agile public actions toward the transformation of the city: “there is a political desire to transform the city, which recognizes the compromise between the exercise of citizenship and the need for competitiveness . . . there is a clear perception of opportunities” (Prefeitura da Cidade 1996b, 9). Seven strategies are put forward by the plan to direct actions ranging from integration; participation; competitiveness; and welcoming to the consolidation of the city as a regional, national, and international development pole.

In the strategic plan, urban design and demonstration projects were to act progressively as catalysts for private investment and for the creation of a new social and cultural imagery of Rio both in Brazil and abroad. New urbanistic ideals and urban design solutions were to rescue the quality of the public realm, and to foster the notion of place and the sense of pride of *cariocas* (Lopes 1998). In the words of architect Luis Paulo

Conde, former secretary for urbanism (1993 to 1996), mayor (1997 to 2000), and a pivotal player in this new era, city planning and urban design were to be used to recuperate “the notion of local, the design aspects, and the culture of the city” (Prefeitura da Cidade 1996a, 13).

The strategic plan pushed the city into a rejuvenated political and economic posture enabling it to plunge more deeply into the global market. Several programs and projects were to be considered strategic for city development, such as the revitalization of the downtown and the old port area. However, the plan’s mission for the reconstruction of the city image should have started from the perspective of revaluing the waterfront imagery—the oldest and best-known set of symbols regarding Rio de Janeiro. Among the several actions for urban development contained in the Strategic Plan, the only one that contemplates the beachfront suggests the continuity of the beautification actions of Projeto Rio-Mar.

#### ► 4. Construction of the Imagery of the Beachfront

In the superposition of historical times, in its spatial organization, and in the possible portraits of its appearance, one can say that Rio de Janeiro is a plural city. However, among the diversity of images that compose the *carioca*’s urban imagery, perhaps the strongest are the city’s relationship with the sea and scenes of aesthetic beauty, of informal behavior, and of bathers. The beach is Rio’s true monument. As the popular composer/singer Caetano Veloso noted, “we Brazilians have incorporated the city’s landscape so deeply within ourselves that (Claude) Levi-Strauss’s negative judgement during his visit (that the Guanabara Bay resembled a mouth with missing teeth) offends us” (quoted in Borde 1998).

The beach may be considered as the major single factor for the emergence of a “*carioca*” lifestyle. According to historian Velloso (1986), in 1920, Rio de Janeiro was already described as a “a contemplative city, surrounded by mountains, and looking at the sea” and the *carioca* as having a “navigation instinct that makes him stand nostalgically on the pier, looking for new horizons.” The presence of the beaches is noted as a fundamental influence in the formation of a *carioca*’s personality<sup>1</sup> (Figure 8). According to the same author, from the critical perspective of a *paulista* living in the twenties, the “summer time in Rio de Janeiro causes promiscuity in the squares and streets, yawning, and negligence” and “promiscuous street vagrancy” mark the *carioca* while the *paulista* represents “aristocratic sobriety.”



**Figure 8.** Major assets in the formation of a carioca personality: nature, beach, leisure, and socializing. Source: Photo by V. del Rio.

The simple presence of the sea may not be enough to explain the resort-like image of Rio de Janeiro, as other strong social and cultural issues contributed for the construction of urban imagery linked to the beaches. However, one cannot ignore the strong influence of the waterfront in the construction of the *quality* of these images and places.

As noted by Tuan (1974, 129), “The environment may not be the direct cause of *topophilia* but it provides the sensory *stimulae* that, as a perceived image, give shape to our ideals and happiness.” One of the first “postmoderns,” internationally acclaimed architect Charles Moore (1994, 22), declared that at the beachfront, projects should evoke “both the reality and the poetry of the continent’s edge.” Several urban projects could be cited where the presence of the water—with its symbolic connotations and recreational possibilities—served as a major catalyst for economic and social redevelopment such as in Boston, San Francisco, and Baltimore. “Water is a defining force that models the assets of every place it touches” (Urban Waterfront Center 2001).

The same occurs in Rio de Janeiro, as its identity is so intimately linked to the sea that although the mission of the 1999 tourist strategic plan was to promote Rio as a “multiple city,” the large majority of images used in the marketing efforts utilized strong symbols such as the beach and aerial photos of the beachfront (Prefeitura da Cidade 1999). When studying the most recurrent images of Rio depicted in the press from 1990 to 1995, Ferrara (2000, 88) also proved the strong presence of an emblematic landscape: “its image continues to be adequate

as an export product: light, sun, hot tropical climate, health from an outdoors life under a blue sky.”

Prizing the beachfront as a tourist attraction may at times cover up for the fact that the “tourist nature” of Rio is truly a historical and cultural product, not an eternal asset. Organized tourism was only started in Rio in the twenties when the first guides were published and the first governmental bureaus and private travel agencies started to attract and to receive tourists. Just by comparing a *carte touristique* of the thirties to a contemporary map of Rio, such as those by Rio-Tur (the municipal agency for tourism development), one notes that the prominence of the image moved from the downtown to the South Zone and its beaches. In the older map, downtown appears at the bottom, and it is from where one “enters” the city by ship. Considering that a map is not

a *reproduction* of reality—copies in a reduced scale of the sensed world—but a *representation* of reality that result “from options and decisions about what to represent” (Castro 2000, 12) this comparison helps one to understand the tourist image of Rio as a social construction. Despite all the efforts in reconstructing the identity of the city, it continues to be regarded as a “tropical beach paradise.”

## ► 5. Concluding Remarks

The several “histories” of the construction of the imagery of Rio de Janeiro and the urban interventions in its waterfront are interdependent and prove the relationship between political practices and city form and its social representation. However, while the history of the construction of the “imaginary city” is linear, the trajectory of the urban practices that molded the “real city” is intermittent. Rio de Janeiro’s identity has been constructed by a continuous aggregation of values that are present not only in the residents’ imagery but also in the governmental initiatives to reconstruct and to disseminate its image. The construction of Rio de Janeiro’s image accumulated values along a linear trajectory: the exotic city of the empire at the end on the nineteenth century assimilated the cosmopolitanism and modernity of Avenida Beira Mar in the beginning of the twentieth century, the glamour and pluralism of Copacabana in the fifties, and the cultural and informality of Ipanema in the sixties.

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On the other hand, the route that led to the present urban forms along the bay and beachfronts is marked by the inconsistency and discontinuity of governmental interventions. Except for a brief period at the beginning of the twentieth century when all urban projects and city beautification efforts were directed toward the construction of a new international image that coincided with French *belle-epoque* symbolism, all public actions along the waterfront were guided by immediate needs: widening of streets, reforming *paseos* and sidewalks, public bathrooms, observation platforms for life guards, streetscaping, food kiosks, solutions for vehicular traffic, and new public infrastructure.

In between these interventions, although the beachfront continued to be strongly manifested in the construction of Rio's imaginary, it received no special attention from the public planning sector. By failing to recognize the beach as a social construction, a long succession of city managers never assumed its administration as a process integrated to and interdependent with the rest of the city. Lately, the contemporary urban practices in Rio are but a reflection of an accelerating process that transforms all cities into actors in a globalized economy, pushing them toward the rediscovery and reinvention of identities and local traditions.

The city's managers have first to recognize the waterfront and the beaches as the strongest of Rio's symbolic landmarks, so that a significant change is generated in the way waterfront development and public actions are managed. Although isolated projects along the beachfront for specific events—such as the 1992 Earth Summit Conference—have caused sectoral and localized physical transformations, over the years there has not been the continuity one would expect from a public vision for an area that represents the most important expression of Rio's public realm and collective image. More than ever, instead of the neoliberalism agenda of isolated and uncoordinated public projects, the *carioca* beachfront demands a continuous and integrated set of policies and urban design programs.

It is important to observe that the city's managers never negated the importance of the beachfront for the city. On the contrary, images of the beaches are increasingly and repeatedly utilized in marketing efforts and in advertising. However, it is precisely because *natural* beauty is overemphasized and valued as the strongest attraction in the city that little attention is given to public interventions and development control along the waterfront. It is as if the understanding of the beachfront as a natural asset exempts the public sector from any responsibility in its construction as social reality, a situation that is similar to that described by Berger and Luckmann (1987, 122) when they develop the concept of reification as “the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else

than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world, and further, that the dialectic between man, the producer, and his products is lost to consciousness.”

Rio de Janeiro's beachfront must stop from being seen solely as a “nature construct” subject of tourist brochures and postcards to be understood as a strategic area for city development where there is a direct relationship between political practices and the resulting urban forms and their social representation. If globalization indeed presses for a constant production and commodification of images, city managers should take control over the construction of the waterfront as social representation. And if globalization generates a constant tension between global and local, the strategic use of this tension may help build the image of the beachfront as a cultural manifestation that will be competitive in the global market.

Evidently, the opening of new markets for Rio should not exclude public investments in the image of its waterfronts and beachfronts, which will have positive effects not only for tourism. The need for strengthening Rio's image from the standpoint of its coastal line is very clear not only from the perspective of attracting visitors: in this competitive “global market,” the cities with the strongest positive images also prevail in attracting investors and a more educated labor force.<sup>2</sup> In recognizing that the care and beautification of the beachfront are not simply marketing and aesthetic issues but a valorization of the city's own identity as a whole, the public sector will make a huge step in recognizing its own responsibilities in the construction of the city's image and in the social representation of Rio de Janeiro.

One has to admit, nevertheless, that recent public actions—urban projects and social and economic programs set in motion by the strategic and tourist plans—had positive impacts in the image of Rio de Janeiro. The 1996 Strategic Plan addresses the need for not limiting the image of the city to traditional tourism and to the beauties of the natural landscape and for prizing other markets such as cultural and event tourism. The city's actions of the five following years generated a significant increase in the incoming tourist flow from abroad and in the quantity of national and international events (conventions, fairs, festivals, etc.) (Prefeitura da Cidade 2000b).

This positive momentum could be utilized to reposition the city beyond the postmodern economic horizons of servicing tourism, generating bigger tax revenues, and attracting new investments by having these coordinated with a wider concern towards the quality of life of the *cariocas* themselves through the waterfront. In Rio, the waterfront is a major participant in the way of life of the *carioca*, it is deeply absorbed by their own self-identity, and its valorization has a direct impact in the self-

esteem of the city's population. According to a recent study, 54 percent of *cariocas* consider that the beauty of the natural landscape is Rio's best asset, and 55 percent consider going to the beach their favorite pastime (Prefeitura da Cidade 2000a).

Development control and urban design quality along the waterline together with quality control of the beaches will be means to invest not only in the construction of the city's international image but also to respond to legitimate social and cultural expectations and traditions of *cariocas*. Thus, a comprehensive, continuous, and institutionalized care for the waterfronts will serve to conquer new international markets and will ensure the beaches as the most traditional and pluralistic public space in Rio de Janeiro.

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## ► Notes

1. *Paulistas* are those born in São Paulo, Brazil's major city. The rivalry between the two cities started when São Paulo turned into the industrial and financial center, while Rio kept its role as the nation's capital and cultural center. The popular images show the *paulista* as a hard worker and a formal suit in the private sector and the *carioca* as an easygoing beach bum who works short hours in a public agency.

2. In this respect, Curitiba may be cited as the only example in Brazil where the strength of its international image and its economic success are direct results of a perfect orchestration of local politics, urban planning, and city marketing (del Rio 1992; Garcia 1996).

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