

# Urban Design and The Future of Public Space in the Brazilian City

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*Invited to participate in a research workshop organized by the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas - Austin, the author responded to its provocative title "The End of Public Space in the Latin American City?" with this discussion paper. The workshop was an interdisciplinary exploration of the controversies around the erosion of public space in Latin American Cities, and of the paradox between democratization processes and the expansion of physical divides and spatial segregation.*

This discussion paper addresses the preliminary results of a research project on contemporary urban design in Brazil that investigates its evolution from its peak with the new capital Brasilia to its decline after the modernist era, and concentrates on its resurgence in the last two decades. Several case-studies inform a critical assessment of urban design as recently practiced in Brazil, its role in the shaping of the public realm, and in social and economic development. The research is meant to contribute to a better understanding of Brazilian urban design from an international perspective, and to foster a discussion on the applicability of its lessons in the US and other contexts.

Our findings indicate that public space in the Brazilian city is not about to end, but it is undergoing transformations that point toward opposite directions. One direction heads to a stronger seclusion of all social groups into their protected "home" spaces, while the other heads to the betterment of quality of public spaces at large, from neighborhood plazas to downtown revitalization. How contradictory or how complementary these directions are will not only depend on community participation and public involvement in local affairs, but also on the spatial dependence of cultural, political, and religious manifestations that are still deeply rooted in the Brazilian society.

## I. INITIAL DISCUSSION

Our concept of public space bears three complementary and interconnected characteristics: it must have a spatiality (a physical, concrete, and palpable existence), it must be

appropriated by citizens (in their daily lives and/or for special events), and its ownership must be controlled by the public (government or shared land). If urban design deals with the physical and socio-cultural quality of the public realm and the making of places for people to enjoy and use (Carmona et al 2003), then it is also about making public spaces.

In Brazilian urban design, the struggle to overcome the modernist paradigm, its subversion of traditional urbanism, and the hegemonic image of Brasilia, started in the mid eighties soon after the overthrow of the military and the return to full democracy. The chapter on urban policy in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution and its regulation by the "City Statute" in 2001 "confirmed and widened the fundamental legal-political role of municipalities in... directives for urban planning and in conducting the process for urban development and management" (Fernandes 2001).

This fact not only ensures an old constitutional prerogative that sets the social role of urban land beyond its economic value, but it also expands the principles set during the United Nation's 1992 Earth Summit and other UN campaigns for more socially inclusive development. Also, with the return of democracy and the resurgence of parties with stronger social concerns, local governments revised planning programs and included new participatory and socially oriented programs, such as legalization of land tenure and participatory municipal budgeting. Evidently, these new political and social frameworks reflect in the way urban design is understood, as well as in the way it is practiced.

The practice of contemporary urbanism and urban design in Brazil have yet to be more systematically studied and their advances remain largely ignored by international researchers. Of course, this is not the case of Brazilian modern architecture which has been studied in some detail

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and is reported in a number of recent international titles such as Fraser (2000), Deckker (2001), and Cavalcanti (2003). Although these are all mostly historically oriented and stop their accounts by 1960, they clearly show the role of architecture in the country's cultural development.

After the publication of the much praised analysis of Brasilia and its subversion of traditional urbanism by Holston (1989) only a handful of international publications have addressed Brazilian urbanism at large. The modernist legacy of Brazilian cities was reported by del Rio & Gallo (2000), the prospects in *favela* upgrading was discussed by Fernandez (2000), Caldeira (2000) commented the relationship between modernist planning and social segregation. More recently, Brakarz et al (2002) and Machado (2003) published on the *Favela-Bairro*, the neighborhood upgrading project in Rio de Janeiro. And of course, the most published advances in Brazilian urban planning are the successful efforts by the city of Curitiba particularly in transportation and environmental planning (Margolis 1992; Hawken et al 1999).

Interestingly, the lack of a systematic and integrated inquiry on the practice of contemporary urban design in Brazil also affects Brazilian academia as no such effort is available in Portuguese. After the efforts of the three national conferences on urban design at the University of Brasilia in the late eighties, most available studies are either historical accounts - such as the national inquiry coordinated by Leme (1999) on the history of Brazilian urbanism until 1965 - or are limited to a specific projects - such as reported at ANPUR meetings (the Brazilian association of research in urban planning).

## II. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Although our research clearly indicates that modernism continues to impact Brazilian cities for the better (by bringing in the functionality and urbanization much needed in developing areas) or for the worse (by facilitating spatial and social segregation), there are several ground-breaking and successful examples in urban design that teach important lessons and point to new directions, such as in historical preservation, revitalization, and in upgrading the quality of public space.

Our studies and the fifteen case studies included in our investigation indicate four general trends in Brazilian

contemporary urban design.<sup>1</sup> These trends are: a) urban design at the city scale, b) urban design for revitalization, c) urban design for social inclusion, and d) urban design for social exclusion.

Important projects and successful examples can be found all over the country, such as in Rio de Janeiro, Belem, Salvador, Porto Alegre, and Sao Paulo. Even Palmas - new capital of the recently created state of Tocantins inaugurated in 1990 - may be called a success in regional development and in serving its current 150,000 population albeit its modernist design concepts. In Salvador, a recent massive state project has succeeded in revitalizing the old deteriorating historic core, boosting local economy and attracting tourism, but it has also spurred gentrification and new social contradictions. In Sao Paulo brown and grey fields are now regarded as opportunities for new territorial transformations, and while shopping centers and private developments cause profound impacts to their surroundings they also respond to them and experiment interesting mutations. In Porto Alegre, the DC Navegantes shopping district demonstrates the success of a privately-led revitalization of a brownfield, and in Belem the somewhat uncoordinated projects by state and city governments start to revitalize the historic riverfront. In Rio de Janeiro, the three most important and successful efforts in contemporary urban design will be briefly discussed later in this paper.

On the other hand, the investigation also reveals some of the limitations of urban design as currently practiced. In the case of Curitiba, for instance, while the city boasts its many successes in public transportation and sustainable social design, it now faces the limitations inherent in the city's own marketing, in the planning models that have been adopted, as well as in the lack of metropolitan planning. Urban design practice is permeated by some of the contradictions inherent in a free-market and global economy, and as such, suffers retraction of the public realm.

## III. THE END OF PUBLIC SPACE? SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN BRAZILIAN CONTEMPORARY URBAN DESIGN

Urban design may be regarded as an instrument for social exclusion that limits accessibility and social encounters, while preventing the unexpected. For the new post-modern environment, seclusion and total control are qualities, and urbanity - as we historically learned it - does not exist. Social exclusion and spatial control are seen everywhere in major cities.

1: Case-studies being developed in several Brazilian cities by different collaborating researchers.

Modernist urban design is easily appropriated by developers and by the “private realm”, which sometime generate strong physical and social segregation. This is the case in Barra da Tijuca, a district of Rio de Janeiro with 120 km<sup>2</sup> and 200,000 population designed in the late sixties by Brasilia’s Lucio Costa, creator of Brasilia. The Corbusian model of “towers in the green” was applied in full, and meant to integrate development with the natural landscape, allowing for the free flow of space, air, views, and movement. However, strict zoning and design regulations created a disjointed environment of areas dedicated to singles uses (apartment towers of up to thirty stories, single-family houses, retail and shopping centers, services, and industries), large distances separate buildings, cars and highways dominate, and public areas are no-man’s land. The rigid separation of land-uses and of typologies provide a rationale for a culture of seclusion as a response to the fear syndrome of the middle-class: communities, shopping centers, and business parks are walled and fenced, and their access is controlled. Modernist space, originally conceived as communal, is becoming increasingly segregated.

The large majority of new residential developments in all Brazilian cities follow the “gated community” model, partly as a result of a society that is understandable scared for its own personal security, but also as an expression of a socio-cultural gap that is increased by the market and by social expectations. Even dead-end streets of the city grid are being gated by residents, who first build their own fences around their buildings. Within walled and gated communities, the common imagery is often a pastiche of traditional and alien architectural styles - symbols that are quickly adopted by the middle class for status connotation. This urban design and its architectural imagery, and their set of social and cultural metaphors are interpreted and appropriated by other social groups, popularizing a totally new urbanity. Gates and walls have become symbols of security but also of social belonging, and big land developers – such as Alphaville from Sao Paulo - now sell “new urbanism” as a new way of life.

#### IV. URBAN DESIGN FOR REVITALIZATION

By the mid 1980’s the majority of the large cities in Brazil had realized they should direct planning and design efforts for the redevelopment of the downtown areas. Deteriorating, underutilized and outdated buildings, vacancies, “planning blights”, antiquated zoning and regulations, and over ambitious road projects were some of the problems to be



*The first gated communities in Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro, built in the early 70’s follows a modernist design with apartment towers, single-family houses, a club, a private school, and a small shopping center next to the gate. (Photo by V. del Rio)*



*A recent 800 acres residential development near Belo Horizonte where all single-family communities are gated and surrounded by 10 feet walls. (Photo by F. Lara)*



*A common view in Rio de Janeiro: a fence protect the entrance to an apartment building above a restaurant. (Photo by V. del Rio)*



Janeiro was started in 1993: *Rio Cidade*, a citywide program for the redesign and regeneration of commercial cores and strips in several neighborhoods. Some brief comments on both these programs will follow.

### V.1. Upgrading of Squatter Settlements in Rio<sup>3</sup>

The Favela Bairro program was conceived in 1995 by the city government to integrate squatter settlements into the surrounding neighborhoods. It recognizes the social and capital investments that the squatters did over the years by providing the communities with physical upgrading of public spaces and complementary social projects. However, the most important benefit of Favela Bairro is the distribution of land titles, providing the “favelado” with security and rights to city comforts.

The program represents investments of US\$ 600 million and benefits a population of 500,000 in 120 favelas – what corresponds to 60% of the city’s entire squatter population – and has been successful in community development and in integrating these “informal” settlements into the formal city. Favela Bairro has innovated in several fields and is considered a model-program for neighborhood upgrading by the InterAmerican Development Bank (Brakarz et al 2002) that provides significant financial support - up to a US\$ 4,000 per family.

The Favela Bairro methodology – hiring design teams for each favela project through public competitions – allowed for a special attention to the quality of design and the specificities of each settlement. Design teams had to cope with the enormous complexity of the socio-cultural and spatial reality of the different favelas, what also means coping with different local politics, power struggles, and participatory processes.

The quality of the urban space is provided for by new roads and pedestrian pathways, access to infrastructure networks and city services, playgrounds, and recreational areas. Occasionally Favela-Bairro builds community facilities such as day-care centers, and new housing units – generally to replace those who had to be evicted from risk zones. Social programs complement neighborhood upgrading and integration to the city, mostly through community

development, educational and income generation projects, such as the organization of local work cooperatives.

By investing in the public realm, this innovative urban design process is successful in improving significantly the quality of life of communities. His limited scope is probable the major reason for success, as the program does not try to tackle with large scale housing and other fundamental social problems that affect the urban poor. On the other hand, evidence demonstrate that the improvements tend to attract new dwellers and impact housing prices and rents, thus generating gentrification and a more speculative housing market that is difficult to control.



*A community center at Favela do Fuba and the urbanized waterfront at Ladeira dos Funcionarios, both projects of Favela Bairro. (photos courtesy of J. M. Jauregui and Arqui 5)*



3: Case-study investigated by Cristiane Duarte and Fernanda Magalhaes, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.

faced. Not surprisingly, much of these areas had important historic and cultural patrimony to be respected for legal, symbolic, and political reasons. And unlike North-American cities, most of these areas are still being heavily utilized by a large amount of the population; particularly users of public transportation due to the central location of transit nodes.

In the last twenty years several revitalization projects have been implemented in Brazilian major cities, most with a cultural and recreational bias, and some include efforts to revitalize waterfronts. Examples may be found in Salvador (the first Brazilian capital and birthplace of Afro-Brazilian culture), Sao Paulo, Recife, Porto Alegre, Belem, and Rio.

In Salvador, the Pelourinho – the historic core - was deteriorating, had a bad reputation, high marginality and prostitution, and most of its buildings were vacant or in very bad state of conservation, many had turned into slums. Because of its cultural, historic, and architectural importance, after many attempts along more than three decades, the state government finally implemented a program destined to recuperate it as a tourist destination. Not without controversies and a touch of post-modern scenography, the project evicted original residents, encouraged new tourist-oriented retail and services in restored buildings, created new cultural events, and has renovated the area that now feels more “secure” and attracts hordes of tourists.

On the other hand, in Porto Alegre, an old industrial district is being totally revitalized by the private sector with little support from the government. A couple of blocks had its original industrial buildings renovated into an outlet shopping center, where shoppers can meander along alleys and sidewalks, and enjoy pocket plazas and cultural events. Although architecturally this is not a great project, it is an urban design success. The original area has already been expanded, has a theater and good restaurants, and is now a popular destination during weekends.

Probably the most important and successful effort for urban revitalization among Brazilian cities is the Cultural Corridor project in downtown Rio de Janeiro, which will be commented next. It became a model for preservation and revitalization, and inspired many other projects and programs in various cities, and remains a huge success.

#### **IV.1. Projeto Corredor Cultural - Rio de Janeiro<sup>2</sup>**

Projeto Corredor Cultural was the first large scale urban

design program in Brazil to combine historic preservation to cultural and economic revitalization in the inner-city - the historic core of Rio de Janeiro in the Central Business District. The project started in the early eighties by city planners and community groups who reacted to the fate of some of the most traditional buildings downtown. Retailers and the local business community cooperated fully after realizing that preservation could help them fight gentrification and displacement from larger economic groups, and as a means to revitalize and attract new clients.

The project soon gathered enough political momentum and was approved by the mayor and the city council in 1982. In January 1984 the area was declared a special district with special design guidelines and development requirements. Buildings were classified for preservation (those to be maintained and refurbished), renovation (new buildings in vacant plots), and reconstruction (important buildings to be rebuilt). Building envelopes, design guidelines, a color scheme, signage control, and construction requirements were defined, and a system of technical assistance for property owners, developers, and architects was established. Property tax abatements and other city based incentives were made available, and the city started complementary projects such as street beautification, pedestrian precincts, and new public lighting. Other initiatives help disseminate the project such as cultural events, tourist guides, walking tours, educational books, posters, postcards, etc.

To help revitalizing downtown as a cultural destination, private and quasi-private initiatives were attracted to the area to renovate several historic buildings into cultural centers. Some of these include the Casa Franca-Brasil (art show-place maintained by the French government), Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil (a big cultural center maintained by Brazilian's largest bank, holding two theaters, art galleries, two cafes, a library, and research facilities), Centro Cultural dos Correios (cultural center and exhibition spaces maintained by the post office), and others. Many new retail stores reopened; new cafes and restaurants were started, and the downtown now offers many activities during the happy-hours and the weekends. Due to the success of the project, its original boundaries were expanded several times to include more buildings and areas in the fringe of the downtown. As the last zoning restrictions prohibiting new housing in the

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*2: Case-study Investigated by Vicente del Rio (Cal Poly) and Denise Alcantara (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro).*

CBD were removed in the late 90's, the area is starting to receive the first residential projects in decades, in new and recycled buildings.

The Projeto Corredor Cultural is an extremely well succeeded planning and urban design program from all points of views. From almost 3,000 buildings included in the project 800 had been totally restored by September 2002 and almost 2,000 had been object of partial betterments (such as painting and new signage) according to the project's special requirements.

Other cities use it as a role model, and many replicated it's methodology. From the social point of view, the project proved to be sensitive to the community groups and involved them in the decision making process. From the economic point of view, it managed to maintain the dynamics and

diversity of small-scale commercial activities, supporting them against larger scale uses and enhancing the quality of their space. From the ideological point of view, it represented a big step from the technocratic approach of preceding plans by concentrating on the social value of the building stock as well as on the spaces and activities. Finally, from the cultural point of view, the project proved to be fundamental in recuperating the symbolic and cultural role of the city's past, along with rejuvenating its public spaces.

## V. URBAN DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Urban design has an important role to play in the re-democratization of Brazil in guaranteeing the social function of the public realm. This question became crucial with the realization that the quality of public spaces and services were major issues not only for citizenship but also for ameliorating the gap between rich and poor, and to compete for a better image nationally and abroad. In most major cities, city planning and urban projects try to recuperate the city – or at least parts of it – as a pluralist environment, while seeking to extend public services and cultural and social amenities to larger groups.

Efforts for social inclusion are particularly present in projects for the renovation of streetscapes and public open spaces, and in the upgrading of *favelas* -squatter settlements- and neighborhoods. It is no novelty that Brazil faces a huge housing demand that is not only a result of the nation's lack of resources and structural economic problems, but also of years of neglect or of pursuing the wrong housing paradigm. National housing policies and institutions like the National Housing Bank – extinguished in the 1980's – contributed to a biased approach, and squatter settlements (*favelas*), illegal subdivisions, and slum housing grew at astonishing rates. In Rio de Janeiro, 25% of the 6 million population live in almost 700 *favelas*.

After Brazil's full return to democracy in the mid 1980's and facing the lack of resources from the central government, some states and major cities started housing projects on their own. Smaller scale housing initiatives, assisted self-help, and settlement upgrading, became more common in dealing with squatter settlements and illegal subdivisions. The most innovative and successful of such programs is the *Favela Bairro* in Rio de Janeiro, started in 1995.

Also, in the lines of urban design for social inclusion another ground-breaking effort to recuperate city spaces in Rio de



*Revitalization of the Cultural Corridor in Rio de Janeiro through historic preservation, design guidelines for new construction, and renovation of public space.  
(photos by V. del Rio and Corredor Cultural)*



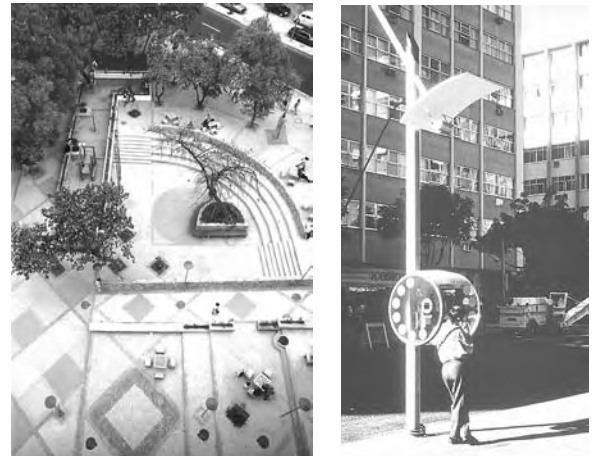


## V.2. Enhancing the Pedestrian Experience <sup>4</sup>

With the country's steady return to democracy and free elections Rio experienced the start of a slow economic and cultural renaissance in the late eighties. In 1993 a new city's Strategic Plan was launched to restore its position in an increasingly competitive global market, to recuperate its once famous world image, and to redirect policy actions to satisfy local communities more directly. The plan identified the necessary programs to attract new investments and tourism, and the projects to restore quality in the public realm. Part of these efforts concentrated on Rio Cidade, a large-scale unique urban design program to remodel public spaces at key commercial areas throughout the city, making them more livable for residents and visitors alike, and fostering shopping and a safe and active street life. The program was relatively successful and some of its projects did manage to enhance local pride, the use of public spaces, and injected larger revenues for local retailers.

Rio Cidade was a significant change in how the public sector regards its role as the promoter of a livable and attractive city: the strategic plan moved city officials away from planning which was purely geared to zoning and transportation policies. Urban design was assumed as a major contributor to the reconstruction of the image and the quality of life, place identity and sense of community, particularly through more pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, and public spaces that could act as catalysts for social and economic revitalization. Spanning from 1993 to 2000 the program was divided in two stages that included 41 different project areas, and design teams were hired through open public competitions. The fifteen projects built in the first stage represented a public investment of approximately US\$200 million. Project areas span from tourist neighborhoods such as Copacabana, Ipanema, and Leblon, to downtown and working-class neighborhoods such as Meier, Bonsucesso, and Campo Grande.

The program was effective in supporting public life in several of the target areas. Although results vary in each case, all projects had significant local impacts and contributed to revitalizing the public realm through a more pedestrian friendly environment. Critics point out the lack of method to choose the project areas, the excessive attention on embellishment, the differentiated budgets between areas, and the lack of design coherence between



*Projects of the Rio Cidade making better public spaces in Meier, Leblon, and Ipanema. (archive photos in IPLAN Rio, and by V. del Rio)*



4: Case-study investigated by Vicente del Rio, Cal Poly.



*Scenes of heavily used public spaces: Ipanema beach, beachfront lanes closed to vehicular traffic, and a street celebration during Carnaval.*



projects sometimes along the same traffic corridor. On the other hand, a valid collection of different design solutions was attained, public areas received several betterments that increased pedestrian comfort and security, the public perception of some of the areas changed radically, and the program contributed to rebuild the city's image.

Under a different name and with a different administrative scope, Rio Cidade was continued by the following city administration. Importantly, the program has changed community perceptions and expectations, and its philosophy was incorporated into the daily concerns of the different city departments. Urban design is now seen as an important public policy, and several such projects are renovating public spaces in the city, such as in the efforts to revitalize the port area, and to prepare the city for the Pan-American Games and as a candidate for the soccer's World Cup.

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

While most of the contradictions of a global and free-economy are certainly present in Brazilian cities - that succumb to street violence, social segregation, and to the retreat of the middle-class to gated environments - the research reveals that a number of government-sponsored projects are producing urban areas and city centers that are more livable, attractive, and responsive to communities.

While private space becomes more entrenched and sometimes expands over the public realm, public space in Brazil seems to be alive and well. While socio-cultural patterns and traditions demand public spaces for their expression - such as carnival and several religious celebrations, soccer, etc, most Brazilians still rely on the public realm for social encounters and recreation. The square, the sidewalk, the parks, and the beaches will always be fundamentally places of plurality, what evidently is particularly important for lower and middle income groups. In Sao Paulo, people still flock to Viaduto do Cha, Anhangabau, Largo de Sao Bento, and Ibirapuera Park on Saturdays, and on Sundays residents of the downtown walk and play in the Minhocao elevated expressway which is closed to traffic. In Rio, the most successful intervention in public spaces was simply the closing of traffic lanes along waterfronts, and in some commercial strips of suburban neighborhoods, what allows people to "appropriate" the street, jog, stroll, and socialize freely.

Urban design in Brazil seems to have overcome the limitations of the modernist paradigm, and has expanded to a number of



different approaches that are responsive to community needs and integrates interdisciplinary teachings toward real place making. This differs from the previous modernist “portrait” of what a city should be like; one that relied on total control and centralized design. “Post-modernity” in Brazil has carved an urban design that follows no models but seeks “visions” of urban quality. In the quest for these visions, urban design as public policy seems to be fundamental for a truly pluralistic and culture specific usage of the public realm, and for social and economic development.

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