

Two Quarters in Rio de Janeiro

The Carioca Experience

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The literal definition of the word “carioca” is a native or inhabitant of Rio de Janeiro. However the meaning behind it goes far beyond merely place of residence. It describes a good-hearted, friendly, generous and humorous state of spirit in an often chaotic, loose system where punctuality is optional, social relations are essential, delays are inevitable and contradictions are evident.

This is the system I was introduced to for seven months as a City and Regional Planning exchange student in the School of Architecture and Urbanism of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. My “carioca” experience far surpassed any expectations I held before my trip. The exchange not only offered me new academic options, it contributed to my personal growth through immersion in a culturally enriching environment.

Rio de Janeiro is one of the most interesting urban areas to study planning. It is a city where spontaneity reigns and planning frequently occurs to resolve a problem, rather than prevent one. I learned this first-hand when I worked on an urban design study for Madureira, a district constituting an important commercial and cultural pole for the north zone of the city. The project site, bisected by two railroad lines and a major overpass, was unlike any other place I had experienced.

During my first site visit I left with blank paper, overwhelmed by the amount of information to process. Analyzing the site posed completely different design problems such as strengthening linkages between divided neighborhoods, providing better transit options for an area where over



Port area in Rio. (Photo: S. Russel)

500,000 people travel daily, or revitalizing a dense commercial district containing great cultural significance. All of these factors contributed to a fascinating study and design proposal for an extremely complex urban area.

My other coursework was just as interesting, and included creating an exposition on design solutions for urban waste and a comparative study of Californian and Brazilian architecture. I was also fortunate enough to participate in a national convention of architecture in Rio where I attended lectures by well-renowned professionals, including one by the world-famous architect Oscar Niemeyer.

The academic setting of the university was inspiring for me, with frequent guest lectures, dedicated architecture students, and coursework with group projects that allowed me to network with Brazilian students and faculty. I was so intrigued by the planning projects occurring at the university and in the city, I decided to complete research to develop my senior project on a topic in Rio. As a result, through contacts with Brazilian professors and students, I am currently working on an urban design concept for tourism development in the Port area of Rio, coinciding with the recent revitalization plans for this area.



Downtown Rio. (Photo: S. Russel)

Beyond learning from my academic experiences, were the lessons I learned from daily living in Rio de Janeiro. From catching the bus to the friendliness of strangers, the Carioca system is a looser configuration where unexpected events like street fairs or incredibly long lines are normal. The city is full of contrasts, with luxurious high-rise apartment buildings next to the largest slums in South America, also known as favelas. While I was in Rio, it was hard for me to believe a city with such spectacular scenic beauty and gracious residents could be riddled with such extreme urban problems of violence, poverty, environmental degradation, and congestion.

My stay in Rio always seemed to be full of exciting options that left me so enamored with the city. Whether it was viewing the *desfiles*, or samba parades, of the Sambodromo during Carnival from box seats, or visiting Rocinha, the largest favela in South America, I was amazed by the complexity and differences of Brazilian culture and life. Yet at the same time, it was impossible to feel like an outsider with such an overwhelmingly warm and welcoming population. I left Rio truly filled with an incredible appreciation for its *carioca* culture, and even feeling *carioca* at heart.



Project site in Madureira, Rio de Janeiro, and concept sketches by team mate J. Guimaraes.



Contrast between a historical building turned museum and a modernist skyscraper. (Photo: V. del Rio)

