



The Paths of the City, the City of Paths: Urban Transformations in São Luis, Maranhão, Brazil

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The original 17th century design of São Luís, Maranhão, Brazil presented regular blocks and lots laid out in a reticulated grid. This pattern created a compact and continuous urban tissue that prevailed until the moment that the process of modernization, in the 1970's made the city sprawl across undeveloped lands, the new neighborhoods diffusely distributed along an extensive road network. Although the Master plan followed the modern urbanism principles it also recognized the value of the historic heritage and proposed its preservation. The city evolved into a city with multiples centers, spatially segregated neighborhoods, private shopping centers, and gated communities. On the other hand, the old compact city is currently a historic city center which is in the Unesco World Heritage list. It is important to say that the city center inherited and preserve the compact original city pattern as well as its multicultural diversity. When this process of modernization and historic heritage preservation began the city center was a very lively place, and it continues to be, even though it has been experiencing some abandonment and decay attributed to the exit of the affluent classes towards the brand new neighborhoods. It is well known that urban life has become the predominant way of living in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, two processes seem to occur simultaneously: on one side the compact city is giving place to a diffuse city in such a way that the disappearance of the city itself seems a strong possibility. On the other side, the city has been experiencing the return of its inhabitants to previously abandoned or degraded places by processes of urban requalification. With that context in mind, some questions arise: How is it possible to conciliate the diffuse city, its rampant privatization of public space and its gated communities, with the conservation of the old historic city center? Moreover, in what manner and in what measure, the production of those new places of living that induced a completely different spatial practice, influenced this process of decay in the city center? In this context, what is the role of the historic city center? Those are the questions addressed in this paper. The theoretical reference was Henri Lefebvre's theory of production of space. The study focused in the modifications that the city center suffers as a consequence of each change in the way of living. The first moment identified was the production of isolated neighborhoods, compounded by individual residences segregated by social classes. The second moment was the production of residential towers introducing the pattern of multifamily residences. The last movement is the production of enclosed neighborhoods and gated communities increasing the social and spatial segregation. This paper introduces the question of whether or not the permanence of the historic city center as a lively residential neighborhood could influence the entire city pattern, thus reviving the compact city.

KEY WORDS: Urban history; urban theory, urban conservation