

THE PATHS OF THE CITY, THE CITY OF PATHS: URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS IN SÃO LUIS, MARANHÃO, BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

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 multifamiliar 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.

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that urban life has become the predominant way of living in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, two processes appear 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, the rampant privatization of public space, as Paquot (2006) says, 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?

The twentieth century seems to have been divided exactly between those two processes says Secchi (2010): concentration and dispersion, continuity and discontinuity. The first, the compact city, which can be at the same time a magic place that gathers differences and a place that can grow at a very high proportion. This uncontrollable growth brings pollution, traffic congestion, criminality and urban violence in such a way that the city can lose the very quality that made it attractive and desirable as a place to live.

The fear of multitudes, of immense conurbations, has been one of urbanism's most significant mottos in the 20th century says Secchi (2006). From hygienist's proposals to 20th utopias, such as the garden cities, and the modernist's des-urbanism to name just a few, urbanism has been seeking to make cities work by separating functions, in order to avoid an undesirable mix of uses, promoting in this process a well-known socio-spatial segregation (Secchi,2006).

On the other extreme, the discontinuity of the city over the territory appears also as a menace. The disperse city seems to defy the very concept of city. As Secchi (2006) points out, the idea of concentration, although inspiring fear, has organized urbanism's thoughts on the city and the urban society in such a way that it appears to be not only the city's univocal characteristic but the inexorable and predictable future for all cities. Is it possible that such belief concealed for a long time the transformations that the city experienced? Or, is it possible to say that the exacerbation of the fear of concentration led to dispersion? On the other hand, would the concern for that disappearance lead to concentration and continuity again, and is the coming back to the old cities centers a sign of that attitude?

Are urbanization and concentration on one side, and dispersion, sprawling, the dissolution of the city on the other? Or are these simply new ways of living? Or new city forms? Or, in the very moment that urbanization seems to prevail over other ways of living as Choay (1994) remarked, we are watching the death of the city and the reign of the urban?

The questions about continuity and discontinuity, compactness and sprawling are some of the aspects that oriented this study. This was done precisely because those two logics, the logic of making the compact city and the logic of building the horizontal and disperse city, are not only present but also both connected and disconnect in contemporary São Luis. The historic city center has proudly assumed its condition of World Heritage City. At the same time, the disperse city is evolving into a very segregated urban space, developing new residential enclaves, enclosed communities, which are isolated and firmly secured by walls and electric fences.

On one side, it maintained its original 17th century design of regular blocks in a reticulated grid. This pattern that created a compact and continuous urban tissue is now divided into two parcels, the historic center and a continuous expansion. This logic prevailed until the process of modernization, in the 1970's, made the city sprawl across undeveloped lands, creating large areas dedicated to the production of housing, and the industrial areas and ports. Since then, the logic of the production of the urban space has been oriented and dominated by the new paths created, a brand new network of modern high speed ways, the new neighborhoods diffusely distributed along this extensive road network.

This was a period of modernization, driven by the industrialization that was supposed to rescue the city, and consequently the state of Maranhão from the bankruptcy it had been suffering since the first decades of the century. This failure had a strong impact in a city that had enjoyed a glorious and rich past when it was still a Portuguese colony.

In fact, São Luis had had a strong relationship with Europe because it was easier to go from there to Lisbon, due to its natural proximity. This relationship ended for several reasons at the end of the 19th century. First, the economy which was based in agriculture, collapsed. Then, the solution proposed by the state to face this adversity - to transform the state's economy from agricultural to industrial failed. The southern cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, which were better equipped in money and work forces, became the industrial and economic center. Secondly, the port itself, located in the Praia Grande, in the city center, the foundation core, was not able to continue functioning due to the accumulation of sand and other materials in the river. São Luis was literally isolated. This path of the city, the maritime path, was then abandoned.

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Time to introduce the theme chosen to conduct this study: the paths. They will appear in this paper either in the physical or abstract sense. In the physical sense, the paths are the ones used by people to move around the city in their everyday activities. They are very different in form and allow different ways of apprehending the city, and different spatial practices as Lefebvre defines it, whether they are in the compact or in the dispersed city. In fact, the changes in transportation and forms of displacement are frequently associated with urban transformations. Nonetheless, there are paths intended to give the city access to the world, that is to say, to make it capable of being part of the networks that make urban life possible and desirable. Finally, there are the paths that urbanism could choose to make the city a better place to live. These are the meanings of paths that will be used.

Resuming the debate, when the maritime path was abandoned, the city went into a profound economic crisis. São Luís became one of the northeast's poorest cities. That was the situation during the 1960's. However, at that time, the dictatorial federal government decided to promote development and modernization policies. The goal was to transform, as fast as possible, the Brazilian society into a modern industrialized society. São Luís was considered strategically located, as it had been in the colonial times for almost the same reasons: proximity to the industrialized countries, and to important raw materials, which at that time were the iron from the Carajás Mine in the neighboring state of Pará.

Once more the path was the maritime path, a new port, with a higher capacity was to be built: the Port of Itaqui. That was a project from the last decades of the 19th century, but was held off by political reasons and the southern economic dominance until then. In this context, the prospect of resuming the economic trail of trading, exportation as the primary activity was something to be celebrated. The development plan had the construction of this Port as a focal point.

Nevertheless, the port's location was far from the urban center. The second priority had to be the construction of the connection between them, the project dating from the 1950's. Until then, the city's transportation network was structured along two major routes: the Caminho Grande, the Long Path, and the railroad. The Caminho Grande was a very extensive road that linked the urban center, the foundational core, near the sea, to the interior of the Island of Maranhão, this path was used to connect it to the rest of the state as well as to the country itself.

In its first portion, beginning near the foundational core, there was the Grande (Long) Street: the place for commerce and residence until the 1970's. It is still a commercial center, although today the residential use has decreased significantly. The second half, in the first wave of modernization was transformed into a large avenue, a modern boulevard that became home to eclectic mansions for the elite. It was quickly equipped with cable cars connecting the new suburbs to the city center, so that the city had an old colonial core, very well preserved, and a modern urban expansion which was interlaced with the old morphology and maintained the pattern of urban continuity. The urbanization occurred along the Long Path, in the portion of land between the two rivers.

The other route, the railroad, also connected the city with the country, and ran parallel to the Long Path, arriving at the city core. The new port, which was located far from the city center, in the other side of the Bacanga River, needed both a way to cross the river and access to the railroad.



Figure 1 The city between the rivers Figure 2 The historic city center

That was the city at the second half of the 1960's, when an enormous economic growth oriented by the industrialization was expected. The construction of the port and of a new road network began. New paths were created to fulfill the needs for modern living: new high speed roads, and bridges over both the rivers compounded the new paths, all of them connected in the extensive road network that quickly would integrated the new conquered areas with the old ones. As in many other cities, particularly in the American continent, the city replaced the railroad, and the cable cars with the new motorized vehicles. A new railroad was built specially for the new port, but it did not reach the city center anymore.



Figure 3 The road network Figure 4 The bridge over the Anil River

Yet, the modernization of the city was an old dream, never fully realized because of the economic situation. Among the projects to modernize the city there was one that reunites the expansion of the road network and the conquest of unoccupied lands, that is to say, the lands between the Anil River and the sea, and the lands between the Bacanga River and the São Marcos Bay. This option would give this urbanization a specific characteristic; to be unlimited (Mesquita, 1958). This image gives the actual dimension of the proposal: in front of such an amount of free land the expansion could be endless. Thus, the construction of the endless city also began. This proposal was the basis for the new Master Plan elaborated in 1974 accordingly to the main federal guidelines for the desired urban development that would bring together the new industrial and modern society. As main objectives: to define the parameters and guidelines for environmental protection; to determine a land use regulation; to elaborate a transportation and traffic policy; and last but not least, to valorize the historic urban heritage.

The question of how to conciliate the existent city with the process of modernization was addressed with the proposal of the valorization of the historic heritage, preserving the colonial urban environment. The historic city was born. From that moment forward the colonial city, which was the city in where people live, will be the administrative and institutional center, and the civic center. The old buildings that were once used either for commercial and financial activities, or to shelter the homes of the elite, and that were left abandoned because of the economic failure, would all be transformed in governmental facilities, whether it was to be federal, state or municipal government. Or they would be turned into museums, cultural centers, or theaters.

Furthermore, besides this first change of uses, the main objective was to develop the "tourisme of art," said Viana de Lima (1972) who was a Portuguese architect that came in a Unesco's mission to São Luis aiming to analyze the economic context and the role that the historic city could play in the process of economic and urban

development. That was, in fact, Unesco's second mission in São Luis. In fact, in 1966, when the process of Brazilian modernization was initiated by the dictatorial federal government, the French architect Michel Parent, also from Unesco, was the consultant for the federal government. His mission was to conciliate the modernization process with the reminiscent colonial cities all around the country. At that time the proposal was the same: tourism as the tool to integrate the historic cities in Brazilian modern industrialized society. Michel Parent's mission report: « Protection et mise en valeur du patrimoine culturel brésilien dans le cadre du développement touristique et économique »- (Brazilian Heritage preservation and valorization in the context of touristic and economic development), as already stated in the title, points out exactly that the historic city was part of the process of economic and urban development, and that it plays an important role.

In addition to that use, the particular characteristics of the commerce in a small town such as São Luis, determined the definition of the historic city as the central business district, which completely suited the functionalist rationality of a city's segmentation in homogeneous areas, which was the very goal of a zoning process.

It seems that two paths for the city were determined: to preserve the existent city, now turned in a historic city to be used for touristic purposes; and to create a new modern way of living outside the boundaries of the existent city. Are they really different paths? Or did the latter incorporate the former?

The new modern city was materialized by the construction of a large amount of new housing subdivisions, compounded by single family detached residential dwelling, mostly financed by the National Housing Bank -BNH, scattered along the extensive road network, in such a way that the endless city was also the sprawled city. Each one planned for a different segment of the population: the land at the other side of the Anil River, on the north of the island, near the sea, designed for the most affluent segments. The other side of the Bacanga River received the low-income segments. The lands in the middle portion near the existent city were designated for the middle classes. (Ribeiro, 1999; Burnett, 2002)

A large part of the investment was employed in the construction of an infrastructure sometimes ten times larger than it was necessary for the subdivision itself, in order to prepare the surroundings for future urbanization. Some areas were designed to be institutional and commercial areas, although most of them were never constructed. Thus, considering the extension of the road network and the extension of urbanized land along it, even though there were enormous amount of land left between the new residential areas, the city could be assumed to be a great metropolis (Mesquita, 1958). Or at least the image of one.

In fact, the resultant city was an assemblage of fragmented and intricate labyrinths, as each residential area was isolated from each other if not in distance, at least because they were designed in such a way that they did not communicate directly. The traffic was organized around it, through the large and high-speed roads, defining the brand new and modern paths for the brand new city.



Figure 5 São Luis, 1997. The fragmented urbanization Source: Burnett, 2002, adapted by the author.

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The compact city gave place to the disperse city. In doing so, it changed the way of living, since dispersion is a new mode of production of space and it is also a new way of living, as Secchi (2010) pointed. In Lefebvre (1998) terms, this changing will generate a new spatial practice. The social diversity existing in the old city was dissolved in homogeneous areas, and the use of cars tended to prevail over the others modes of displacement.

Conversely, the historic city resented the building of a new one. First, the new way of living attracted the dwellers, especially the high income segment. As the city began to experience the consequences of the economic development, even though it was less than it was foreseen, the rich colonial houses were sold to big national chains of department stores that were attracted to the city. The smaller houses had the same destiny as their tenants had to leave in order to let their owners, which were the same that owned the bigger houses, to profit from changing the residential use to the commercial one.

In addition to that, the enthusiasm in making the new city put the historic city, even the project to transform it into a touristic attraction, on hold. It was only five years after the Master Plan, in 1979 that the state government created the Program of Revitalization and Preservation of the Historic Center of São Luis concentrated in rehabilitating exactly the Praia Grande, the foundational core, that because it was for a long time the richest area suffered the most with the economic bankruptcy. The historic city gave place to the historic city center.

The path of the historic city was then divided: the rehabilitated historic city center has been included in the Unesco's World Heritage List, in 1997. The old urban center, although submitted at the same heritage preservation rules, as it was abandoned by the elite, is falling apart.

Since the creation of the historic city, it seems that every action taken in it was followed by an action in the modern city. For instance, if the Program of Revitalization and Preservation of the Historic City Center received a major investment in 1984, in that same year the construction of a new city center for the elite in the modern city begun. First, a shopping center was built in an affluent residential area that made the sophisticated stores leave the city center, followed by businesses and services such as medical clinics, attorney's offices, and others, including private schools. Some years later, in 1992 the municipal government, through a new Master Plan, consolidated this path by changing some land use regulations, to promote a higher density. The height of the buildings changed from six to fifteen floors, and, more important, the residential towers, the high-rise apartment buildings also grew in size and sophistication, which also happened to the leisure area in of them. Certainly, living in apartments was not a novelty but from that moment forward it captured the elite's attention and desire. Living in those residential towers became the new and coveted way of living: a new path to follow.



Figures 6 and 7 The residential towers Source: Meireles Junior, 2008

The elite, that up to that time had preferred to live in big and comfortable houses in the finest and noblest neighborhoods, embraced the new way of living, from the height of the residential towers, behind the walls, protect by the electric fences. Certainly, this new path increased the social and spatial segregation process, and strongly hit the old city center, increasing the evasion of its dwellers.



Figures 8 The roads in the new affluent residential areas

The historic center, however, continued to receive investments, as well as the popular appreciation and admiration. The program succeeded in rehabilitating a precious urban historic heritage that turned immediately into an amazing cultural, and leisure area for São Luis and an international destiny for cultural tourism. Its entire population proudly celebrates the title of World Heritage City.



Figure 9 The new centralities center



Figure 10 The new city from the city center

The city changed. The housing subdivisions turned into lively neighborhoods, even attracting to them the functional diversity that was supposed to be avoided, transforming the larger ones in either auto sufficient neighborhoods or new centralities for the city. These centralities demand the capacity of communicating with the immediate vicinity, which generates compactness once again. Even the creation of a new city center for the elite by increasing its density seems to work in that direction.



Figure 11 The new roads

Nonetheless, the pattern of increasing density and, in some extent, bringing back the pattern of continuity inside the more affluent residential areas, did not sustain itself for a long time. That is the case of the new elite's city center, which was declared saturated, meaning that the lands available will not give the same quality of privacy expected. The option was again to go searching for new unoccupied lands along the sea border. That was one of the paths followed by the real estate market.

Another path was the production of the enclosed communities, the residential enclaves that are now constituting a new way of living, attracting not only the dwellers left in the old city center but also the people from the neighborhoods originated from the old housing subdivisions. Of course, those residential enclaves differ in size, luxury, location and even if it is a single family unit or a high-rise building condominium. Their leisure area vary from the basic playground to a larger amount of "attractions" such as swimming pool, fitness academy, sauna, and specific spaces to play many different sports, such as soccer, basketball, volleyball, skate, and others. Sometimes they include a movie theater, a space for teenagers, a party room, a reception room and everything the imagination can conceive, the main marketing technique for those residential condominiums being the amount of attractions each can offer.

The result is an even more fragmented space, with even more intricate labyrinths since those enclaves are fulfilling the gaps. The vacant urban lots are left by the disperse urbanization by turning them into dead ends, separated and isolated, not by the large and high-speed roads, but with solid barriers - fortified walls, electric fences, all of that strongly controlled by security cameras and armed guards. In

addition to that, a large part of the population was left out of this process, being obligated to live in ambiguous and precarious conditions, the inevitable other side of an urbanization that is guided and controlled by the market.

It was Lefebvre (1998) that pointed that the space is a product to be consumed. However, it is not a simple product. It is a social product, meaning that it incorporates social actions of actual subjects both individual and collective. It is also not a work of one moment, but a process in which interact three moments: the spatial practice, the representations of space and the representational space. Spatial practice is related with the realm of the perceived, it embraces the association between everyday life, daily routine and urban reality. Representations of space are related to the realm of the conceived. It is the conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, among others. Finally, representational space is the space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols.

This conceptual triad perceived-conceived-lived certainly deserves a much more profound and accurate discussion. Nevertheless, thinking of it shows that to understand the urban transformations São Luis suffered it is necessary to consider the representations of space that oriented the plans and interventions in the city as well as the spatial practice developed in it, and its interactions.

Considering those aspects, it is possible to understand that in São Luis the representations of the space succeeded in creating a modern city with a historic city center that fulfills the role of civic and cultural center, as well as the function of a valued object in the industry of cultural tourism. On the other side, a close observation of the spatial practice, the way the inhabitants apprehended the historic city center as their place, especially if it is considered the other parcel of the city center, allows one to conclude that if the affluent segments abandoned it, many dwellers, which are not home invaders or the lower-income segments, as the representations of space consider them to be, stayed in the place and enjoy staying. Besides, the place is the commercial place par excellence for the majority of the city. The transformation it suffers is that it is not the elite's center anymore; it is everybody's center, the whole city center.

In addition to that, it is important to observe that the housing subdivisions of the BNH were transformed into auto sufficient neighborhoods and new centralities in a process that necessarily meant to reintroduce the diversity of uses, the approximation of residential and working areas to the once conceived residential only areas.

This approach leads to think about how the representations of space themselves are created. Certainly they belong to the scientific realm, generated by scientific methods, coordinate by scientific people. The question is whether or not this scientific realm can (and how it does) interpret and translate what is lived and what is perceived into the conceived space. In this sense, urbanism tends to think that what is conceived does represent the best way of living, the materialization of people's needs and desires. It still must be asked: for whom? Because, if it is well recognized that in the modern society, everything can be sold, everything can be bought, the space as a product will be sold and bought and thus submitted to the market and the capital influences. In such a condition it does not escape the influence of the articulation of the different sectors of capital in determining the land use. And it does not escape a less perceived influence: the hegemony of a class. Or the ability that the classes in power have to dominate every sector of life including the space.

Thus, the representations of space created under the influence of that hegemony will conceive a space directly satisfying the needs and desires of the dominant segments of society. Or not. Because, Lefebvre admits, the hegemony do not avoid the critical knowledge, the science and the practice of science that are committed not with the hegemony of the capital but with the ampler interests of the majority of the inhabitants and with the construction of an equitable and democratic urban space.

Those are the paths that are open now in front of the urbanism in São Luis: To accept and condone the privatization of public space and enclosure of residential areas in maximum security condominiums; Or to embrace the production of public spaces, of social-spatial diversity as shown by the spatial practice in the historic center, in the city center, and in the popular neighborhoods.

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