THE BRIDGE, THE MARKET, A CENTRALITY FOREVER LOST AND SOME HOPE: studying alternatives for re-qualifying an old town centre

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Abstract
This paper presents current stages of a long-term study, which aims to discuss strategies for re-qualifying the old town centre of Natal, Brazil. As it is often the case in cities worldwide and in Brazil (Amorim, 1995, Nogueira, 2005, Rigatti, 2005); from the post-war period onwards, Natal’s former active centre at the global scale, gradually lost this quality as the urban grid expanded from a compact to a sparse settlement (Medeiros, Holanda, Trigueiro, 2003), and the area developed towards a specialised down-market sub-centre. In the 1990s and early 2000s, syntax analysis was used to examine the role played by spatial factors in the transformation of Natal’s active centre, and to assess the effect that planned interventions in and around the old town centre, including the construction of a second bridge over the Potengi river, might exert over the conservation of its architectural heritage (Trigueiro, 1999, Trigueiro, Medeiros, 2003). Results indicated that if the dislocation of the integration core, which in Natal coincides with the major active centre, away from the old centre contributed towards its emptiness, its later re-insertion within the margins of the active centre was a factor of architectural disfigurement. This and other possible consequenc es of those interventions put forth at the time are now taking place. On the other hand, discussion forums concerning the “historic destiny” of the old centre have intensified and various proposals are now being studied. We seek to contribute towards this discussion by investigating these proposals and pointing out the processes they might trigger.

The Problem
This paper presents current stages of a long-term study, which aims to discuss strategies for re-qualifying the old town centre of Natal, Brazil. It seeks: (1) to demonstrate that development tendencies identified in earlier research phases are being confirmed; (2) to outline the present scene in the context of the morphological nature of Brazilian old town centres; and (3) to discuss possible scenarios for enhancing the area’s prospects of becoming a cultural centre in the light of current tendencies of interventions on old town centres. As is often the case in cities worldwide and in Brazil (Amorim, 1995, Nogueira, 2005, Rigatti, 2005) from the post-war period onwards, Natal’s former active centre at the global urban scale gradually lost
this quality as the street grid expanded from a compact to a sparse settlement (Medeiros, Holanda, Trigueiro, 2003), and that area developed towards a specialised down-market sub-centre. In Brazil this trend is particularly strong in situations of rapid urban growth, such as has occurred in the majority of the state capitals in the country. The former centralities have progressively become less significant for the urban systems as a whole and new centres have emerged as part of a multinuclear complex. That displacement of centralities usually leads to deleterious consequences for the stock of older buildings.

In previous phases of this study, syntax analysis was used to examine the role played by spatial factors in the transformation of Natal’s active centre, and to assess the effect that planned interventions in and around the old town centre (including the construction of a second bridge over the Potengi river) might exert over the conservation of its architectural heritage (Trigueiro, 1999, Trigueiro, Medeiros, 2003).

Results indicated that the displacement of the active centre – from the old centre onto other areas – coincides with a progressive depletion of uses and activities that may be conducive to higher commercial value, or even to a complete emptying of certain areas, thus submitted to abandon and oblivion. In such situations, the built stock is then gradually neglected, dilapidated or abandoned. However, once the integration core (that coincides with the active centre in the case of Natal) gradually expanded to the point of swallowing parts of the old town centre into its margins the architectural ensemble began so suffer mutilations or demolitions to accommodate uses thought to suit the new kind of sub-centre that was then emerging. This and other possible consequences of the studied interventions put forth at the time (to be described later on) are now taking place in a moment when there seems to be, for the first time in Natal, a concurrence of efforts from diverse categories of stakeholders – although by no means a synchronised one – towards addressing urban issues affecting the old town centre, or else a part of it, the present neighbourhood of Ribeira.

Forums to debate the “historic destiny of good old Ribeira” have intensified and various proposals are now being considered. We seek to contribute towards this discussion, as part of a multi-disciplinary research group, by investigating morphological effects of proposed and ongoing interventions in order to discuss some processes they might trigger. Space syntax techniques combined with a database supported by a geographic information system are used to articulate information about form and use of buildings and open spaces in the old town centre of Natal as well as to simulate physical interventions currently planned or in progress. This database is part of an inter-disciplinary body of information, which is being used as a resource to explore possible scenarios in order to help in the decision making process of outlining a rehabilitation plan for Ribeira.

**A Centrality Forever Lost**

A configurational analysis of Natal reveals aspects that are common to other Brazilian old city centres. Founded in 1599 as a military outpost within the defence strategy for the Portuguese colony being implemented in South America, Natal showed no signs of development for nearly three centuries. The 20th century brought significant changes: trade growth, arrival of immigrants, the dawn of aviation and specially World War II with the subsequent installation of military bases, leading to the afflux of a new population contingent to the town. New settlements (Cidade Nova, Alecrim and Rocos) were added to the original neighbourhoods of Cidade Alta (the foundation site) and Ribeira (the harbour zone), thus defining expansion axes
towards North, South and East. In the subsequent decades the city grew from 103,000 inhabitants in 1955 to approximately 800,000 in 2005, considering the municipality boundaries. Nowadays 1.1 million people are estimated to live in the metropolitan area.

Present day Natal occupies both banks of the Potengi River, with the east and south sectors, spreading from the former Cidade Nova – the current neighbourhoods of Petropolis and (part of) Tirol – to Ponta Negra beach and the bordering city of Parnamirim.

In the 1990s, the configuration impact of the then proposed construction of the now nearly finished second bridge was investigated through syntax analysis (Trigueiro, 1999). Results indicated: (1) that neither the old town core nor the neighbourhoods North of the river would experience a considerable change; (2) that the duplication of the old bridge would be more effective to integrate the two areas; and (3) that the new bridge would bring an important increase in the relative integration of the main coastal route, which could impact strongly in environmentally fragile sites and in social housing neighbourhoods located along that route that would become more vulnerable to the pressures of the market once the area gains accessibility and movement (Figures 1 and 2).

The current scene reinforces the arguments put forth at the time. The bridge is still under construction (Figure 3), but the market, anticipating its effects, has acted to radically transform low rise residential blocks into towers of luxury flats and the pressure to alter the legislation that controls height and density of occupation in the surrounding areas has been enormous. In addition to that, it is now becoming consensual that the new bridge shall bring meagre, if any
improvement in terms of the daily pendular movement of workers to and from the southern part of town where most jobs are concentrated. This view is gradually gaining space amongst not only scholars and town planners, but also politicians – who now advocate the duplication of the old bridge – and the general population, especially those who use the bridge on a daily basis. A statement by one of the authors of the present essay informing that the new bridge would not bring the alleged relief to the old bridge rush hour congestion, published years ago in the local media, has been used in court as evidence for the public prosecution against former authorities accused of having granted permission for the construction of the new bridge, without the necessary appraisal of its feasibility and consequences. Indeed, a first version of the famous bridge in advanced stages of construction was abandoned two years ago due to alleged structural flaws.

The present axial modelling of the old centre embedded in an area of around 4 km displays a considerable rise in average integration. In this configuration parts of Ribeira are placed in the fringes of or within the global integration core (Figure 8). This representation takes into
account newly planned interventions mostly designed to improve connectivity in and around the old town centre by creating less tortuous links to the new bridge that are expected to help re-distribute vehicle flow, which, as we had predicted in 1999, would be strongly channelled along the coast, thus thickening movement in the tourism circuit. What can be expected from this? Will Ribeira benefit from the potential animation that tends to accompany the rise in average integration values? Or will remaining buildings be torn in pieces to accommodate uses that might take advantage of the natural movement (Hillier, 1996) phenomenon?.

**Old, New, Configurational: What Centrality?**

In synthesis, previous axial modelling of Natal at successive time periods revealed that the grid expansion along the 20th century contributed to peripheralize the two neighbourhoods that make up the old town centre – Cidade Alta and Ribeira – but that later, the adjacency of Cidade Alta to the global integration core had lethal consequences in terms of heritage conservation, whereas a certain topological and geometric distance to that core seems to have prevented the destruction of older buildings in Ribeira, although at the cost of a general urban decay and land devaluation more severe than that affecting Cidade Alta.

A naïve but space syntax literate planner might – by being familiar with the notion of natural movement – advocate strategies to increase integration as a catalyser of vitality and economic growth. However, although it seems by now well demonstrated that more integration attracts commercial and service related uses (Hillier, 1996, Desyllas, 1997, Van Nes, 2005, Nejad, 2005, Nogueira, 2005), in the specific case of Natal, such strategy, if successful, would most probably lead to the destruction of the remaining architectural heritage, in the absence of efficient legal protection, and in view of the disregard for antiquity as an added value. This somehow Manichaean view masquerades, however, a set of nuances concerning old centralities: despite the transference of the active centres whose configuration coincides with the integration core, to other locations, the old town centres hardly lose their gregariousness potential altogether. What occurs, in fact, is the gradual substitution of the building stock by types that are associated with poorer social segments and the area redefinition into a sub-centre or a peripheral commercial sector.

That substitution that goes together with the loss of certain ambiances is not always, of course, the sole effect of the active centre displacement caused by the urban expansion. Social, political or economic factors interact with, and catalyse the process by encouraging the relocation of residents and activities away from the old centre. The need to create new centralities as signs of economic vigour in tune with the idea of contemporary high status is one of those (Marques, 1995, Zanchetti et al., 1995, Villaça, 1998). In the face of this conjunction we feel obliged to ask: how do centralities, old and new, fit into the larger urban complex? To what extent old centres are in fact marginal areas or can be said to be in decadence? What scenarios may be outlined for these fragile places in the perspective of rapid urban growth?

A configurational study of 44 Brazilian towns (Medeiros, 2006) has demonstrated that for nearly all cases the average integration of the old centre is higher than that for the whole urban system (Figure 4). Such findings reinforce the idea that old centralities, albeit losing status as the main urban centre, conserve a privileged accessibility even if positioned in the periphery of a metropolitan-scale active centre as is the case of Natal. This has been quite clearly exposed in a survey involving 380 respondents that aimed to identify prospective
residents for Natal’s old centre (Monteiro, Trigueiro, Roazzi, 2003). When asked (through open questionnaires) to state possible reasons for wanting or considering the possibility of living there the most frequent answer was: “because it is central”.

The fairly weak accessibility of the old centre as found in cities where larger-scale active centres have been relocated – i.e. João Pessoa, Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, São Luís – is by no means the rule. In various old town centres accessibility levels are compatible with those of the integration core. This is the case, for instance, of Manaus, Teresina, Pelotas, Porto Alegre, Uberlândia, São Paulo, Aracaju and Florianópolis. However, even in these towns it is clear that the old centre is no longer the locus of the major active centre in the larger urban scale. The townscape in these areas acquires the unrefined, neglected visual aspect associated with mass consumption as opposed to the posh (if kitsch) look of shopping malls and hypermarkets that abut the main arteri es of contemporary centralities. This fact, of course, reinforces the argument that not all processes of urban decay stems from configurational change, but, at the same time, indicates that they tend to result less from local than from global-to-local causes.

An Oasis in the Labyrinth

This notion emerged from the assumption that old centres, when compared to the urban system in which it is embedded, and to its integration core, would present more positive configurational indicators. It was believed that old centres, especially in larger settlements, could retain certain configurational features which had been lost by the city complex, due to the fragmented model of urban growth along the 20th century, which, in Brazilian cities, often take the shape of a patchwork, with divergent arrangements and orientations clustered together to form the urban unit.
Studies have shown that:

(1) the average integration and connectivity values of old centres (Natal included) are higher than those of the system as a whole; the old urban centralities continue to play a significant role as active centres, however in a secondary or peripheral position (Figure 5).

(2) three situations were identified in a sample of 44 cities (Medeiros, 2006): the old centre coincides with the integration core (remaining as the main urban centrality); the old centre is in a marginal position in relation to the integration core (as in Natal, after the displacement of the urban centrality and its change into a sub centre, which benefit from the accessibility potential of the integration core, although in a peripheral way) and; the old centre and the integration core no longer coincide (thus indicating a situation where decay is accentuated).

(3) Synergy and intelligibility values (Figure 6) are higher than those in the system and the integration core (Natal included), thus indicating a better relation between global and local aspects – a positive attribute in terms of permeability as well as of spatial apprehension.

Such results show that, firstly, the idea of decay of old centralities is relative; secondly, that old centres are privileged places, where form-space attributes promote a better spatial apprehension, with a fine
tuned local-global relation that induces a better performance concerning circulation, orientation and localisation through the urban space. Therefore, the oasis in a labyrinth.

**An Oasis in the Dunes?**

Those results outlines a configurational description of the metropolitan expansion of Natal, which produced a collage of new settlements (mostly residential neighbourhoods and housing estates) that took the form of discontinued grids (Figure 7), poorly linked to one another and to the existing urban tissue, which was often dilacerated by the widened and extended thoroughfares, redesigned to serve as (sometimes the only) connection axis to the new urban areas.

![Discontinued grids in Natal](image)

Former space-use relationships resulting from long processes of organic and small-scale planning development were disrupted. This worldwide transformation tendency, often referred to as "Urban Renewal" and a key target of criticism concerning the Modern Movement urbanism, was particularly intense in Natal during the 1970s and 1980s at a time when in most of the developed world planning efforts were being directed to the regeneration of old town centres. Commonly referred to as the period of "Urban Preservation" (Vargas & Castilho, 2006), this urbanistic paradigm that succeeded the Urban Renewal period is characterised by criteria and aims that only recently started to be part of the official government discourse in most Brazilian municipalities.

Some of those make up the definition of Natal's old centre as a special zone of historic preservation (ZEPH) in the city's Master Plan. Despite the much wider scope of planning interventions that were expected to underpin the new acquired status, actual actions were limited to punctual restoration works in a few historic buildings and to a superficial treatment of a row of façades in one of the oldest lanes, in the expectancy of fashioning the place into an entertainment venue, which, save some short lived seasonal episodes, never quite took off, thus exposing a (not in the least unusual) failed attempt to combine town planning and heritage preservation instruments for stimulating sustainable development.

Instruments to promote urban development and heritage conservation have, according to Ribas and Bezerra (2005), shown difficulties in dealing with the specificities of sustainability in urban management partly due to their distinct conceptual basis. Whereas urbanism instruments are mainly designed to organise economic and social
relations within the private space, instruments for managing historic and cultural heritage are concerned with the preservation of collective assets.

Despite the abundant criticism targeted at the so-called “Urban Preservation” model, most authors concede that some improvement has been achieved in terms of architectural and environmental protection. Objective definition and decision taking strategies are being refined and awareness has widened concerning the privatising of public spaces, the reliance on retail and service activities as regeneration schemes, the re-creation of cultural sceneries, the debate about what is being meant by “historical value” (Vargas and Castilho, 2006).

In previous articles we have repeatedly stated that architectural integrity never quite ascended to the stage of a commodity in Brazil or at least in regions outside the cultural tourism circuit such as Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and Bahia.

However, on the screens of open television channels in Natal, the municipal administration is, at present, inviting the population to take part in the effort to “rescue” the “historic ethos” of Ribeira. Part of this effort involves a project (Ribeira, 2005) for which researchers from the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte were commissioned to develop a multi-disciplinary plan for regenerating the area, which is part of a national programme for the Rehabilitation of Urban Central Areas whose main objective is:

“(…) to promote the use and democratic occupation of urban central areas in Metropolitan Regions, allowing for the permanence of the resident population and attracting new residents by means of integrated actions capable of fostering and sustaining functional and social diversity, cultural identity and economic vitality” (authors’ translation).

These guidelines signal a step forward regarding the period of “Urban Preservation” towards the so-called period of “Urban Re-invention”, when priority is given to the economic basis, which is expected to catalyse the urban transformation, in tune with the notion of sustainable development (Vargas and Castilho, 2006). This notion has predominated amongst scholars engaged in heritage protection at least since the 1990s. It led to the substitution of the term “preservation” for “conservation”, or else “integrated conservation”, which was deemed more adequate to incorporate the idea of a collective patrimony as part (and sometimes physical support) of an economic basis expected to be created or re-created, as the case may be, thus becoming a commodity capable of attracting private investments.

In Natal, the economy is substantially pulled by the services sector, and especially now by the tourist and real estate boom (mostly reliant on foreign capital), initiated in the 1980s. Consequently, environmental and infrastructure quality have been a focus in the local political discourse, In 2006, Natal was six in the ranking of Brazilian cities to receive foreign tourists (see www.infraero.gov.br), only behind big cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Porto Alegre and Fortaleza. At the end of 2005, 40% of all new development in the local real estate market were directly sold abroad.

In a special Sunday Times edition about buying abroad it is said that: “The enthusiasm of Britons for holidaying in more far-flung places – the Far-East and the Americas – has also opened many eyes to the joys of owing their own home […]. Thailand is increasingly popular and developers are moving in to capitalise on the British interest. We’re also seeing lots of interest for Natal in northern Brazil”.

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The touristic appeal of Natal has always been based on the landscape and scenic character of its beaches and dunes. The idea of cultural tourism is secondary, has been restricted to an intellectual elite, and only lately has become part of an alleged political interest as an alternative to the sun-sea-sand-sex appeal. Recent federal lines of funding for supporting regeneration processes in central areas might have triggered this interest, which hopefully will contribute to save Natal’s meagre remaining cultural heritage, as compared to that of nearby capital cities such as Sao Luis, Recife and Salvador.

**Some Hope**

Despite the various fruitless episodes of attempted actions aimed at Ribeira – some of which clearly vying with one another –, the present outlook points towards a new impetus, this time going beyond the commissioning of a pinpoint redevelopment or a discussion forum in which nobody seems to know what the promoters’ intentions are, or if they exist at all, starting from the melange of re-terms (i.e. regeneration, revitalisation, rehabilitation, re-qualification, re-valuation etc) used in these occasions.

About the proliferation of such terms, Vasconcellos & Mello (2006) alert to the fact that “RE” is a strategy that contemplates (or pretends to contemplate) the inclusion of time in the analysis of space, without offering meaningful definitions and methodological tools to achieve that. Modistic opportunism takes advantage of this impreciseness to promote urban marketing. Are we then experiencing a step forward in a path to achieve a syntheses between the divergent conceptual basis of “urbanism instruments” and “heritage management”, as defined by Ribas and Bezerra (2005) by being able to “organise economic and social relations within the private space” and at the same time contribute for “the preservation of collective assets” or are we heading towards a re-creation of a mock historic centre?

In open forums and as part of a multi-disciplinary team currently engaged in producing a report on the area’s potentialities for becoming a cultural centre, we have repeatedly argued about the global effects that the expansion of Natal has exerted over local patterns of movement and use and therefore, of urban vitality. Despite the reluctance with which space syntax analysis is viewed in some governmental and academic spheres after years of research presentations and confirmed predicted outcomes, some of those arguments seem to be slowly sifting through, at least in theory. Space configuration together with other formal attributes of buildings and open spaces are being seriously discussed alongside information concerning socio-cultural and economic aspects of the population as well as transport and infra-structure conditions. Effects resulting from the interplay of these various factors are expected to become more transparent by being articulated in a comprehensive database supported by GIS tools that is being used as a resource for decision taking processes, which includes data concerning accessibility, visibility, safety-related physical attributes and land use.

Although under populated and wanting in many aspects the investigation to date has shown that Ribeira retain a shadow of its former mixed land use, some clusters of housing – if and badly distributed, and a handful of attractors for fostering cultural tourism, such as two theatres and a few bars and restaurants. More importantly, as has been demonstrated here, the old town centre of Ribeira retains combined spatial properties that are recurrently pointed out as important to foster urban vitality. Other than that Perdikogianni and Penn (2005) have found that the failure to develop during the period of great transformation in the 19th century is at the
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root of the current scale and diversity of the very successful neighborhood Clerkenwell, adjacent to the City of London.

The considerable integration gain that the new interventions are likely to bring may benefit streets (i.e. Pe. Miguelinho, upper right) that have managed to retain some land use diversity (theatre, retail, services) by, for instance, increase pedestrian movement to retail, entertainment and catering facilities (Figure 8); it may also encourage more visitors by enhancing the role of those roads (i.e. Tavares de Lira, bottom to top right) that function as an entry to the area. These and other outcomes may happen to the benefit of the architectural heritage ensemble or at its expense, be it by mutilation, revamping or substitution. Who shall choose what?

In a previous study we asked whereas “disneyfication” was the only alternative to overcome the obsolescence of Natal’s old centre (Trigueiro et. al, 2001). Later developments point out towards a route that seems to fork in two directions: one is paved by much political palaver, hesitant financing interest, intense marketing and danger of becoming yet another mock history theme park; the other signals towards actual possibilities of sustainable change anchored by well-informed and inclusive discussions about what is to be kept, what is to be discharged, what is to be invited, and how. The hope lies there.

References


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i. Depthmap 50919B developed by Alasdair Turner, UCL.

ii. The GIS tool that supports the database is the Spring 4.2, developed by the INPE.