

DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE VERSUS PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND PARTICIPATION IN URBAN CONSERVATION

SOME CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN DISCOURSE AND ACTUAL PRACTICE IN BRAZIL

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Abstract

This text discusses some issues regarded as essential for an integrated urban conservation theme, both from a theoretical viewpoint based on literature selected as reference for discussions and from practical viewpoints derived from recent experiences in Brazil, particularly in the Northeast. The advantages and limitations pertinent to the utilization of perception methods and environmental behavior, as well as users' participation in the making of decisions concerning interventions in urban territories considered for conservation/restoration are here analyzed. The viewpoints from technicians, intellectuals and specialized professionals are placed in opposition to those from the general public whose needs the above professionals supposedly meet and address in studies and propositions. With basis on the utilized references some contradictions between discourse and actual practice are here identified in order to demonstrate that: 1) The analyzed cases show a prevalence of the technical view over the user's perception. 2) The causes of the existing difficulties are not inherent to the analyses and diagnostic methods themselves, but to the essentially political aims to which they serve as basis. The experience (although rather incipient) pertinent to the built heritage in the State of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, well illustrates the problems here focused.

Public perception, participation, urban conservation

1. Introduction

From the 60's to this date new approaches concerning the built environment have arisen, particularly those aiming to incorporate the perception, the environmental behavior as well the participation of urban dwellers in the planning, design and management processes pertinent to their cities. In most cases the opinions and viewpoints from the regular, non-technical population involved in those processes have been valued and taken into account. Various studies have utilized these methods within the space related sciences (architecture, urbanism, geography and environmental psychology), emphasizing their advantages rather than their disadvantages. The results of such studies have justified and legitimated, at least for the sake of argument, innumerable actions regarding the urban space (housing, transport systems, education,

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etc). On the other hand, their utilization and effectiveness concerning an integrated conservation of the historic environment is less discussed.

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the advantages and limitations pertinent to the utilization of perception methods and environmental behavior, as well as users' participation in the making of decisions concerning interventions in urban territories considered for conservation/restoration. These situations usually trigger divergences/oppositions between the viewpoints from technicians, intellectuals and specialized professionals and those from the general public whose needs the above professionals supposedly meet and address in studies and propositions. This matter will be discussed in the light of the main question proposed for session (D) in this Seminar – “Will new interfaces bridging disciplinary knowledge of professionals and non-disciplinary perception of the public bring better decisions or yet more divergence”?, anchored both on theoretical viewpoints based on literature selected as reference for discussions and on practical viewpoints derived from recent experiences in Brazil, particularly in the Northeast. With basis on the utilized references some contradictions between discourse and actual practice are here identified in order to demonstrate that: 1) The analyzed cases show a prevalence of the technical (disciplinary) view over the user's (non-disciplinary) perception. 2) The causes of the existing difficulties are not inherent to the analyses and diagnostic methods themselves, but to the essentially political aims to which they serve as basis.

2. Public Perception Behavior and Participation in planning and designing processes – problem or solution?

The attribution of importance to users opinions and to the formal qualities of the built environment became popular in the 60's within a context of criticism regarding modern architecture and urbanism (or regarding part of its production, usually known as “international style), allegedly considered as “inhuman”, “monotonous” and aesthetically poor. On the wake of this criticism, two movements came to effect: one aiming to revalue the users (individuals or groups), their cultural identities and their relations with places (genius loci); and another one aiming to reassess the importance of aesthetic qualities (formal/visual) in architecture and in the city (in contrast with the prevalence of functionalism then in effect).

Environmental perception studies consider that the urban landscape is comprised of formal/visual elements which define aesthetic qualities possible (in higher or lower degrees) to be perceived and decoded by observers through mental images or serial views (Lynch, 1970; Cullen, 1974). The identification of these landmarks, nodes, strength lines and other visual morphological references, is thence considered as an important element for intervention projects, as well as for the conservation of the natural and built heritage. In Cullen's case the analyses are essentially visual and from the observer/researcher viewpoint, whilst for Lynch the mental images of the users are the main reference.

This morphological/aesthetic dimension is linked to a second one, symbolic/affective , considering that landscape contains values and symbols built from the experiences and

feelings of viewers (Tuan, 1981). In addition, the environment contains a historical-cultural dimension which is the result of human actions over the time and constitutes its memory (alight/alive or faded/dormant) at the present time.

Thus, all these dimensions must be taken into consideration when intervening on the environment. However, as Lynch himself admits:

“The city is not only a perceived object (...), it is also the object of many builders (...)The moving elements in a city, particularly people and their activities are as important as the physical and stationary parts” (1970, p. 1-2).

Therefore, people’s actions and behavior, their different forms of appropriation/non-appropriation of places, their structures and meanings, must also be considered for a better understanding of social-spatial relations. The appearance of notions such as “personal and group space” “existential space”, as well as the behavior of people in relation to the environment have become a reference for planning and design (Sommer, 1973; Lang, 1987). In addition, the assessment of the elements comprising the city landscape, made by the various urban agents (and not only their view/perception), particularly the values attributed by them to each of these elements, must be considered as important tools for its conservation/permanence or modification/redesign (Velooso & Elali, 2002). This matter will be further discussed in the next section.

Finally, in the wake of the important political and cultural movements occurred in the 60’s, the necessity for greater public participation in planning and management decision processes becomes largely disseminated. Derived from that idea were various participation modes, such as participative planning, co-management, and self-management. Another line of thought devised a more direct participation from the communities in decisions pertinent to urban and architectural designs (Sanoff, 1992; 1999). Much has been produced /discussed concerning this matter; some experiments have been successful, others only partially successful; some cases revealed a large gap between discourse and practice. After having been well established, the right to these participative processes is now considered to be undergoing a crisis. This brief synthesis is not suitable for deep discussions on this matter but only in what concerns conservation of historic sites (the specific aim of this discussion).

However, the reading of existing assessments, as well as our own academic experience in the development of researches, supervision of papers/thesis (some of them utilizing the methods of perception/environmental behavior, other ones analyzing the relations between the uses and the morphology in the built environment), allow us to offer the following remarks: 1- In general, those forms of approaching the matter, particularly the ones that value public/user perception have meant considerable advances for the *understanding* of the social/spatial relations (analyses and diagnostic), permitting the generation of general guidelines for intervention planning and design; 2- On the other hand, the translation of the wishes/necessities of the general public into technical and political solutions actually implemented in the projects, either in the private or the public sectors, are not so evident. In many cases, what prevails is the view/perception of the technicians who are in charge of designing the projects (not necessarily the same researchers/consultants who performed the diagnostic – what in

itself constitutes a considerable technical-theoretical dispute), or, as more often happens, the economical and political feasibility/”perception” for the implementation of actions, in all cases based on specific disciplinary competences. 3 – Thus, public perception serves as a reference; and many times as a legitimating basis for the projects (discourse level); and if it does not constitute a problem, it does not present a solution either (practical level). These arguments shall be developed from the analyses and interventions for conservation and restoration on the Brazilian heritage, which has some particularities. They will attempt to clarify the contradictions between discourse and some practices in effect. What is clear is that public perception (non- specialist general public) is only a part, one of the perception levels in the process; and added (as opposed) to that are the different perceptions of researchers/scholars, technicians/designers and political and economical agents there involved. On each of these perception levels, the translation of the other levels, no matter how accurate it is intended to be, it is by definition impregnated with the view/interpretation of the agent who bases them on his/her own disciplinary competences. That is, the only way to rigorously consider the wishes and necessities of the involved populations, would only be feasible if they could participate as active members in all phases of the process, that is, if the roles of all different agents could coincide.

3. Public Perception in Urban Conservation Processes – in the light of the Brazilian experience

In the scope of historic heritage, according to De Gracia (1999), the great question in the 20th century was how to conciliate the modernization process – and its necessarily modifying actions – with the conservation of old town centers. The restoration of historic cities destroyed during World War II and the devastating actions of a pragmatic result urbanism have brought the question of conservation and restoration of decayed historic sites and buildings to a new light in the 60’s. Brandi’s restoration theory (1963) – whose Portuguese translation has been recently published in Brazil – is one of the milestones that have influenced restoration practices, both for art works and for architectural works (Jokilehto,1999). Starting with a fertile discussion in various countries, a series of charters, and heritage documents were written (Declaration of Paris, 1962; The Venice Charter, 1964; The Declaration of Amsterdam,1975; The Washington Charter,1987), defining the guidelines to be followed in this matter. The object of conservation has grown from the previous notion of monument and real historic centers to any part of the city with a historic meaning (historization of all built environment) at the same time as the social cultural questions (maintenance of the resident population, the meaning of heritage to the communities), and environmental questions (conservation of the natural environment and the impact on the existing basic services structure) start to be considered as essential for a sustainable development.

Meanwhile, the notion of integrated conservation comes to light (Amsterdam Declaration, 1975). This defines principles that enhance the value of public perception and participation in the processes of restoration of historic areas . “Architectural heritage is comprised by *all buildings and urban developments* containing *historic and cultural interest*” (...) “heritage is a cultural asset, and therefore, its maintenance must be

everyone's responsibility" (...) "the recovery of decayed urban areas must be performed without substantial modifications in the social composition of their dwellers."; (...) "the conservation of the built environment must be part of the education programs, especially for youngsters". Meeting these questions would create then, a suitable field for the utilization of research methods and techniques that take into account the perception, the behavior and the participation of users in the processes of city planning, design and management. However, so far few researches are oriented in this direction as few are the evaluations regarding existing experiences with this specific format (i.e., how do the general public perception and participation in the integrated urban conservation process occur; what are the advantages and limitations of its utilization interfaces regarding this approach and its relation with the disciplinary/technical-specialized view). Yet, comments should be made concerning a few points considered as essential for this matter, with basis on our academic experience as a Design 05 lecturer in the Architecture Course at UFRN (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande Norte) which includes studies on interventions on sites and buildings, in addition to the knowledge acquired with the heritage study and research group, which in the last two years has conducted, among others, a research titled "Methodology for Interventions on the Built Heritage – an analyses based on heritage experiences in the State of Rio Grande do Norte". That research discusses suitable methods and techniques to serve as basis for more effective interventions in this area (that is where those questions related to public perception, environmental behavior and participation emerge), also analyzing, as a basis for references, experiences in Brazil and in the world. The study case concerning the State of Rio Grande do Norte heritage, developed at the cities of Natal, São José de Mipibú and Ceará-Mirim, although still incipient illustrates the questions here discussed.

. Environmental Perception – is perception a condition to conservation?

The importance of the various studies on environmental perception developed across the world since Lynch published his famous book based on the concepts of legibility, imageability, structure and identity cannot be denied. Environmental perception was enriched with the above mentioned works by Cullen and Tuan, the latter relating perception with the experience of individuals in places (personal/emotional links). The discussion here, as previously mentioned, refer to their application in connection with urban conservation. The general assumption is that only what is perceived as relevant for the memory of a certain place is conserved, that is, perception is not enough, it is also necessary to recognize some type of value (historical, artistic, cultural, personal/emotional) in the perceived object/space (Veloso & Elali, 2002). This recognition, however, does not occur only at the level of the general/non specialized public; but also at the level of agents engaged in the production and management of urban territories (based either on experience or on specific disciplinary competences).

By way of essentially visual/imagistic resources (such as the elaboration of mental maps) the perception studies have the advantage of providing the identification of strength lines and reference landmarks within a certain landscape. In the case of historic sites, they enable selection for conservation purposes not only among

recognized monuments, but also, among artistically/architecturally less relevant buildings and, less expressive convivial spaces (squares, courts, small urban fractions), considered essential for the user population. These references to the user population; moreover if linked to urban evolution morphological/typological analysis and behavioral analysis, may doubtlessly confer greater legitimization and authenticity to actions directed to urban restoration and conservation. Indeed, they can provide the back-up for interventions that consider them as legitimate bases. But does this actually occur, or do these identifications remain only at the level of studies and diagnostics? Other questions regarding researches must be placed: the population being considered will really be the one to use the recovered place? Or is the potential user universe located out of this place?

In the case of decayed historic centers, practically deprived of permanent dwellers, and to which negative images are (or were) strongly connected (such as the Ribeira harbor area in Natal, or even in the case of Bairro do Recife), the perception studies present some limitations. The strong “negative image” and the low value attributed to the location are the main hindrances to be considered. In such cases the surveys must also involve people who are not regular users of the location, from outside the area. Questions such as: “why don’t you regularly visit the town center?” or “what actions would be necessary in order to encourage you to regularly visit/live in it?” might be much more useful. In the case of Natal, for example, a general survey regarding the images of the city (Elali, 1999) demonstrated that only the natural environmental heritage is perceived and valued by the local and visiting population: the Morro do Careca (figure 01), the beaches of Ponta Negra, Praia do Meio and Praia dos Artistas, the dunes of Genipabu, (located near Natal but out of the city borders) and even the cliffs of Pipa, (located 70 km away) were the items identified as landmarks in the synthesis-images of the city. Therefore, the prevailing attributes are the ones connected to the natural landscape (that is, the coast line), while the historic built heritage is located at a rather lower position in a scale of cited elements, including the Reis Magos fortress (figure 02), one of the cities post-card images and one of the few monuments listed by the National Historic Heritage Institute (IPHAN) in town. In another survey performed by Architecture School students (Design 05) in the Ribeira area, the surveyed individuals (most of them living in other areas of the city), showed great difficulty in identifying two of the most important and already listed monuments (Alberto Maranhão Theater - figure 03 - and the old jailhouse, now converted into a Tourism Center). The perception studies confirmed the little importance attributed to historic built heritage and the prevalence given to the attributes of the natural landscape, which is a source of important economical gains originating from the tourism industry.



Figure 01: Morro do Careca, Natal



Figure 02: Reis Magos fortress



Figure 03: Alberto Maranhão Theater

(Fonte: CD-ROM Natal 400 anos)

Perhaps that is the reason for the little interest demonstrated by municipal and state governments concerning the implementation of concrete actions for the recovery of the historic centers in Natal and the neighboring cities of São José and Ceará-Mirim, where a considerable historic heritage still exists, in spite of its state of neglect. As, according to the local belief, historic heritage does not generate wealth nor electoral votes, only a few pin-point interventions have been performed, mainly dedicated to the recovery and conservation of some relevant monuments (especially military and religious architecture) where the technical criteria for restoration prevailed (not without the occurrence of, in some cases, rather heated theoretical-methodological debates) No integrated urban conservation action was planned; only in the case of Ribeira in Natal, a project titled Ribeira Operation was prepared, which in spite of the initial euphoria never really came out of the drawing board. Only the façades of a few buildings were recovered and painted at Rua Chile, in an attempt to revive the court to where the

street converges- a space appropriate for open air cultural and artistic events.- backed up by tax deductions favoring the private sector, such as bars and restaurants (an attempted local version of the Bom Jesus project in Recife, where the first phase of the Bairro do Recife revival project was initiated). We all know how fragile these pin-points actions are. Now, the discussion is tentatively being re-initiated through some isolated actions, not exempt from controversy. From the private sector side there a project for enlargement and improvement of the existing port, intended to facilitate the out flow of the agricultural production, what may enable the economical revival of the area while previous studies have demonstrated that the uses connected with that type of activity (in general, bulk trade and services) are not compatible with the conservation of the built heritage (Trigueiro & Medeiros, 2003). On the other hand surveys probing the area users have revealed conflicting interests by specific social groups; representatives of the commerce, industry and services linked to the port activities (fishing industry, warehouses, machinery maintenance services, etc), as well as the low income communities which utilize the Potengi river as a source of income (mainly fishing and informal transport) wish to remain in the area. On the opposite side there is the desire of insertion into the area, as the conquest of a territory, by a small and select, however rather noisy group of local artists and intellectuals who dream ,with a restored Ribeira, permeated by recognizably more conservative artistic, cultural and institutional activities. Port or heritage, that is the dilemma.

As an illustration of the difficulties regarding isolated initiatives, there is the case of a group of local artists who used an old building to found a cultural space (Casa da Ribeira), recently closed (as happened to many bars and restaurants that had to close down due to the present economical crisis and the absence of sufficient customers). Fortunately, this space has recently been reopened after intense mobilization in the city and its adoption by some private entrepreneurs.

This illustrative example demonstrates that the perception regarding the importance of heritage conservation evidently is not the same and scientific studies in this field are important for the understanding of these conflicts. However, in the absence of a consensus, of a political will that seeks to conciliate the need for economical growth with integrated urban conservation, what has prevailed so far are the most immediate political and economical interests. The fact that the population does not recognize the value of the historic center added to a strong negative image, generates a considerable resistance to the idea of visiting it or living there. Without larger actions, which necessarily include political *negotiation* of the conflicting interests and for the implementation of feasible, integrated, high impact actions, it will be very difficult to revert this negative image. On the other hand, pin-point programs either on the leisure and culture sector or on the dwelling sector, in our understanding, will have very dim chances of achieving success.

Conclusions

In synthesis, the general public perception is not an obstacle for better decision making in integrated conservation actions and divergent visions will always exist regardless of participation of stakeholders in the process (sometimes even more dramatically). Studies

in this field (perception and environmental behavior) are important but not sufficient if not adequately linked to other environmental studies, as well as, to socio-cultural, economical and especially political insights. Following Audrerie (2003), postulation most such studies turn meaningless without a thorough action plan to underpin their aims and render them feasible. Beyond the opposition between academic and non-academic competence, other questions emerge. What is knowledge about heritage for ?; who wants to preserve what ?; what if stakeholders are indifferent or even opposed to conservation actions in view of concrete self interests ?; Could academic competence bring significant change to the present situation by fostering new images of historic cities ? It might do so, but this new image, re-created by scholars, is no guarantee of change in the direction originally envisaged, even if the users' desires are taken into account. They may even produce drawback effects. Vox populi is not always vox Dei.

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