

Disneyfication Now?

Assessing spatial correlates for heritage preservation in Natal, Brazil

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Abstract

This work is part of a research whose aim is to assess possible strategies of preservation for the historic core of Natal, Brazil. It discusses spatial and functional aspects underlying the formation process of Natal's historic core and its present stage. Space syntax analytical techniques are used to explore relations between global and local integration patterns and to assess their effects over factors associated with the preservation of historic sites such as the use and presence of older buildings in the area, and its current state of conservation. Results to date suggest that a process of displacement, followed by expansion, of the city's global integration core has played an important role in the transformation of the area from a major vital centre into a peripheral subcentre. It is argued that this ongoing process has contributed - in this as well as in other Brazilian towns - to weaken the area's potential as a historic centre and, in the case of Natal, to undermine efforts designed to fulfil the area's official status of 'Especial Preservation Zone' (ZEP). The study also highlights the need to discuss the spatial configuration issue as a standpoint for possible alternatives to preservation interventions based essentially on the scenic revamping of key sites into entertainment outlets that have been short living and inefficient.

The problem

This work discusses spatial and functional aspects underlying the formation process of Natal's historic core and its present stage of preservation. Space syntax analytical techniques are used to explore relations between global and local integration patterns and to assess their effects over factors associated with the preservation of historic sites. Results suggest that a process of displacement, followed by expansion, of the city's global integration core has played an important role in the transformation of the area from a major vital centre into a peripheral subcentre and contributed to weaken its potential as a historic centre.

Recent interventions in Brazilian historic sites (i.e. Pelourinho in Salvador, Bahia; Bairro do Recife, Recife and, in a much smaller scale, Ribeira in Natal) have been targets of criticism based on their excluding and superficial character, as well as on the strongly imagetic appeal of these so-called 'historic fantasy islands' (Magnavita, 1995). Deprived of their former historical and social context and made up into scenarios, much in the way of a theme park, these revamped sites are also far from reassuring as regards the longevity of their physical structures given the ephemeral and seasonal nature - night clubs, restaurants - of their new functions. Discussing the historic or ethic merits of such actions lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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However, it is argued here that alternatives interventions to these costly developments, sometimes referred to as 'disneyfication' processes, could perhaps be developed to more effective and long lasting results if some of the issues addressed here were to be considered.

From a 'not a town at all' to the Greater Natal

Officially founded 'a town' in 1599, as part of a defence scheme to protect colonial possessions in South America, Natal remained little more than a hamlet for over two centuries, in spite of its pompous original designation that has inspired mock remarks such as that of 'Natal being not a town at all'. Slow but continuous growth along the nineteenth century was followed by a series of booms in the twentieth century: in the 40's, when the town sited an important American air base; in the 60's and the 70's, when the urbanisation process in Brazil reached its peak; and in the 80's with the increase of tourism in the Northeast region. As a result the town's population expanded from a little over 16,000 people in 1899 (Casculo, 1980) to an estimated present 800,000, and its borders spread from less than one square kilometre in 1777 (Miranda, 1981:20) to a nearly full occupation of the 167 sq. km that now constitute the municipality on both sides of the Potengi river's estuary and along the coast-

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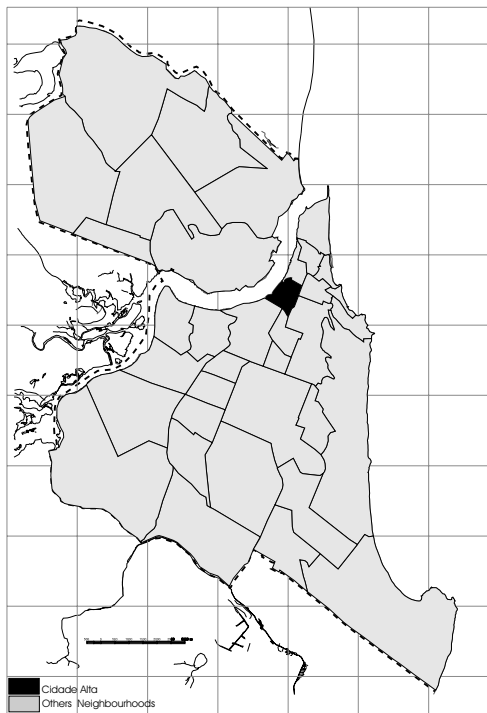


Fig. 1
Neighbourhood divisions in Natal with Cidade Alta in black

line. As Natal heads fast into metropolitan status and tourism becomes a major target for politicians and business people one of the issues recurrently put forward as in urgent need of attention is the preservation and reevaluation of its historic core, officially declared as a 'ZEP' (Especial Preservation Zone) in 1994. Natal's Historic Core, part of today's bairros of Cidade Alta and Ribeira, spreads down northeastwise from the hilltop where the settlement began, along the river and around the harbour (figure 1). Despite its fine historic buildings and the great natural beauty of the site, from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, the area began to lose its former residential and commercial status.

Actions aimed at reevaluating the site have mostly been based on the assumption that specific functions can attract visitors and enhance the role of certain public spaces, especially in the evenings and weekends. These have included the revamping of buildings into cultural and entertainment facilities and some tidying up of facades, streets and squares. However, these 'attractors' have not proved sufficient to generate desirable levels of vitality. Squares and public spaces - animated in workdays but nearly deserted otherwise - continue to function, by and large, as transition routes to shops and offices. Tourists come and go without being aware of an 'older town' in the

vicinity of the routes to the various beach resorts. Former residents have moved to other neighbourhoods, their dwellings progressively occupied by a poorer population. Part of the area's building stock is falling into decay, old houses have become disfigured through coarse conversions or been demolished to give way to parking lots and small shopping malls.

However, the observation of the streets and squares of Cidade Alta in weekdays will show that most of the area continues to be a 'live centre' as defined by Hillier (1999), with a concentration of urban functions. Retail, service, administration, business and religious activities intermix in a form that retains some compact and interaccessible local layout conditions. But what sort of 'liveliness' is that to be found at Cidade Alta and how does it affect the site as a potential 'Especial Preservation Zone' (ZEP).

In order to test the hypothesis that the present state of the historic core is in great part an effect of the growth and transformation of the city's grid structure, space syntax analytical techniques have been used to explore relations between global and local integration patterns and between these and the presence, use and state of conservation of older buildings.

On Some Global Configurational Issues

In earlier research stages space syntax analysis was used to demonstrate the effect of the urban growth on the town's integration core (Trigueiro, 1999). As the grid - squeezed amongst dunes, sea and river - expanded, the former town centre was pushed towards a peripheral situation in configuration terms. The most integrated axes, once located in Cidade Alta, shifted southwards, and a new integration core was structured. This was further reinforced by the occupation of the northwest bank, whose link to the main settlement intercepts important integrating axes.

By comparing the axial map of Natal in the late seventies to that of the 90's (when a sprint of urban growth, nearly doubled its population and area) (figs. 2 and 3), two distinct stages of the local-to-global relationship concerning the study area is revealed. As the integration core shifted southward and eastward, most of Cidade Alta's street grid lay just outside the integration core in the 70's. However, as the urban complex expanded further towards vacant land plots southeast and northwest (across the river) of Cidade Alta, the integration core remained roughly in the same position but expanded in size thus swallowing most of Cidade Alta's street grid in its fringe.

Fig. 2 Axial map of Natal (over plan c. 1978) with Cidade Alta in a circle

Fig. 3 Axial map of Natal (over plan of 1999) with Cidade Alta in a circle



findings so far suggest the 70's to have been the peak of the 'peripheralization' process affecting the historic core configuration and, most likely, a turning point in terms of land value and land use.

In a previous paper (Trigueiro, 1999) it was questioned whether the present state of Cidade Alta epitomises what is left of a once vital town centre in decaying process or the progressive stages of a newly born subcentre? Results so far point towards the second hypothesis.

Given that the area still concentrates a number of features thought to have historic/cultural appeal commonly associated with heritage preservation - old buildings, public squares, natural panoramic scenery, cultural, catering/entertaining facilities - the research directed towards investigating relations between space configuration, space use and the preservation of such assets, namely, the presence of architectural vestiges of successive stages of the town's urban development and their present use.

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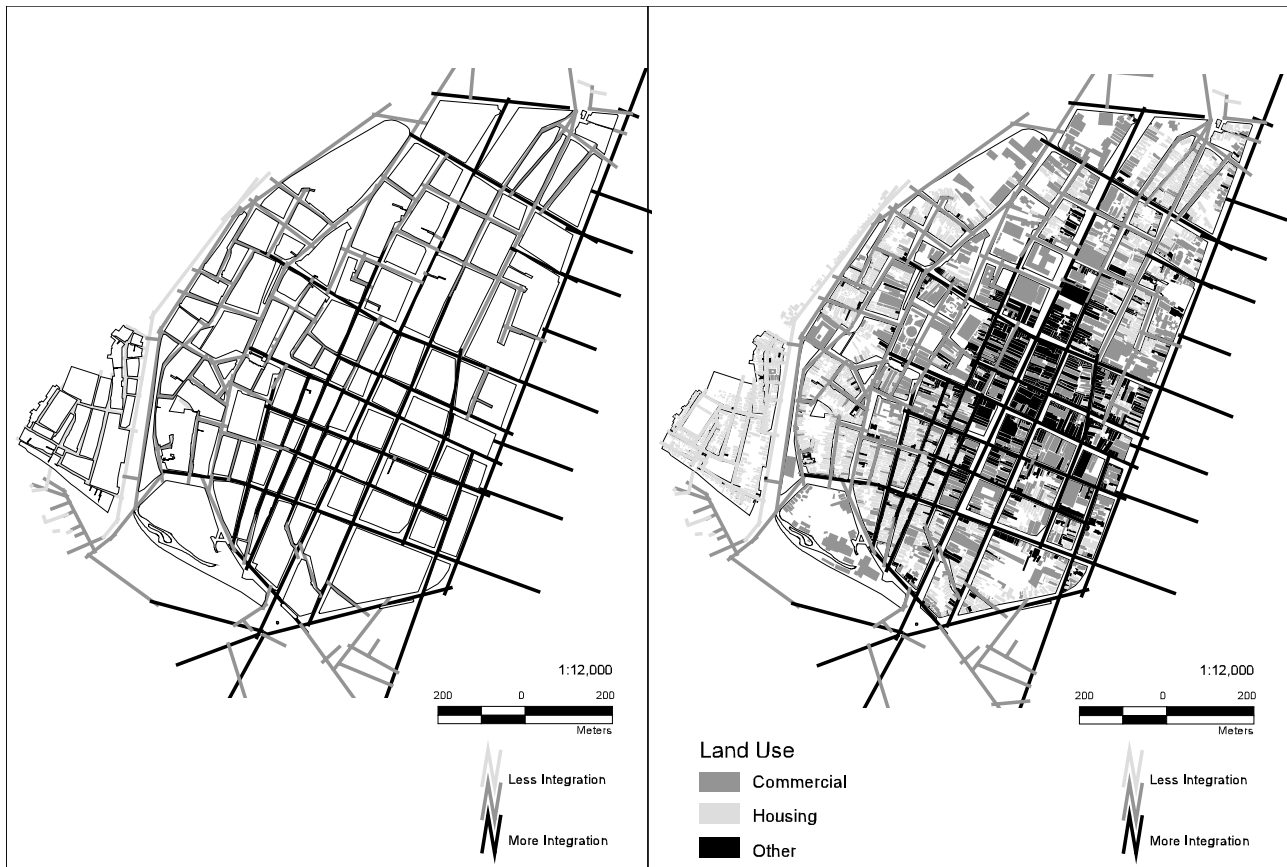


Fig. 4 Axial map of Cidade Alta and surrounding neighbourhood.

Fig. 5 Axial representation and land use in Cidade Alta.

On Global-to-Local-to-Global Effects

A linear representation of the street grid of Cidade Alta embedded in the street grid of surrounding neighbourhoods is shown in figure 4. This map was combined with a detailed recording of each building according to a range of uses identified in the area by means of empirical observation. Figure 5 is a simplified version of such data displaying axes and

buildings used for commercial (black), residential (light grey) and other purposes (medium grey). As demonstrated in other studies highly integrated axis (darker) tend to correlate strongly with the presence of commercial use.

Cidade Alta was the object of a thorough inventory (Albuquerque e Alves, 1989) of all colonial and eclectic residential remains in 1989. A new survey of the area has been carried out in 2000 and the present state of preservation - as regards the 1989 inventory - recorded. A simplified version of this data is shown in figure 6, which displays the above referred linear representation of the area and the surviving pre-modernist buildings identified according to their state of preservation - preserved (light grey), transformed, desfigured, demolished, substituted (dark grey).

The comparative observation of the inventoried ensemble then and now, a mere decade afterwards, reveals an alarming pace of architectural dismantling which tend to coincide primarily with the commercial thoroughfares. It should be pointed out the presence of empty islands in the central portions of the map. This demonstrates the fact that the area had already suffered a profound transformation process in 1989 at the time of the first inventory. The spreading of commercial use over former residential sites - in the fringes of the neighbourhood - seems now to be endangering the already scarce stock of older buildings. Integration values are plotted against the number of remains identified in the area in figures 7a and 7b. Integration correlates positively with the number of lost (or partially lost) cases (0.424 and 0.503 with a discounted outlier) but is negligible as refers that of preserved cases. This suggests that whereas segregation is no guarantee of architectural preservation, high integration may be a hazard to it.

This dismantling of the oldest settlement of Natal brings afloat some disquieting nuances considering that the notion of 'revitalisation' associates with architectural heritage preservation, with scenic 'tidying ups' to meet aesthetic demands, and, especially, with economic sustainability.

It is believed here that the difficulty to define clear strategies, and their underpinning concepts, lie in the difficulty to define the urban object that constitutes these areas in the first place. Most historic centres in Brazil are complex urban fractions whose nature combines diverse - and almost always conflicting - implications of, at least, functional, topological and historical orders. An instance may be the notions behind the expression 'revitalise the city centre', of

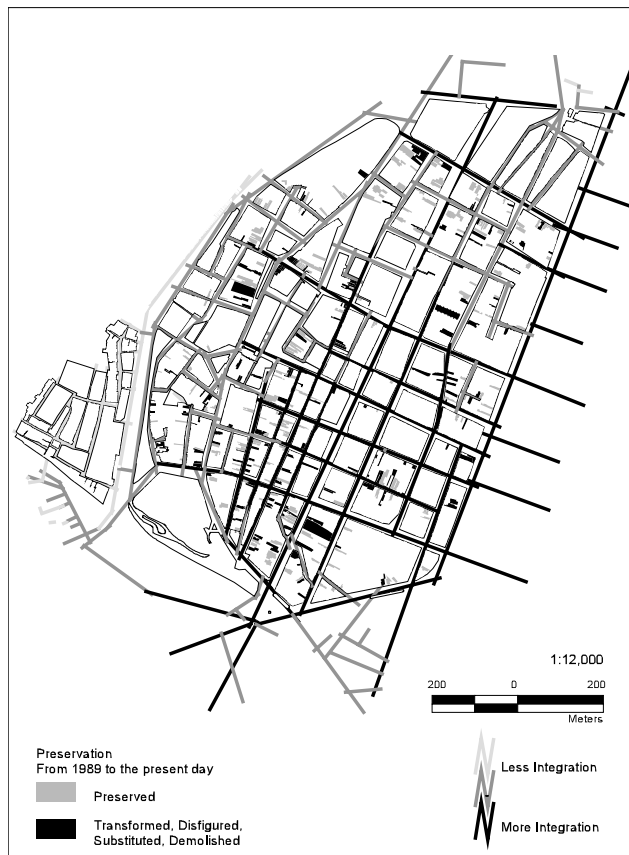
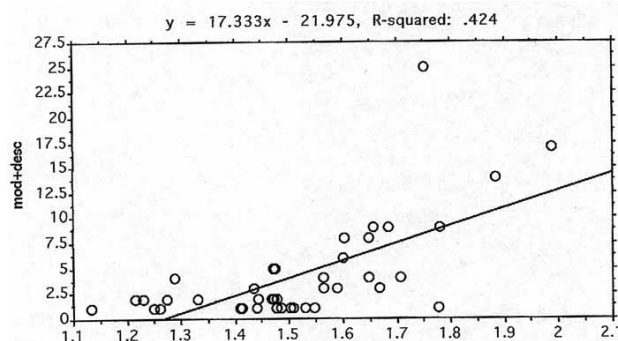


Fig. 6 Axial representation and surviving pre-modernist buildings (formerly housing) as recorded in 1989

Fig. 7a Correlation between integration and the presence of pre-modernist buildings



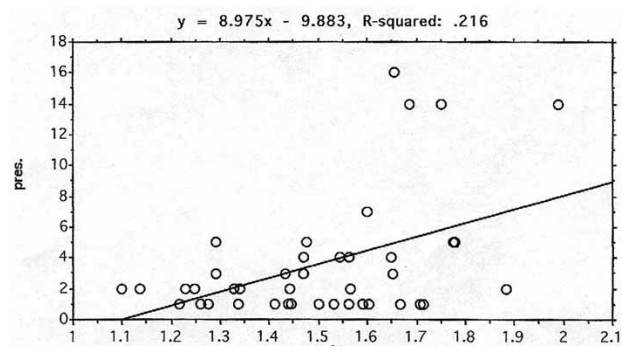
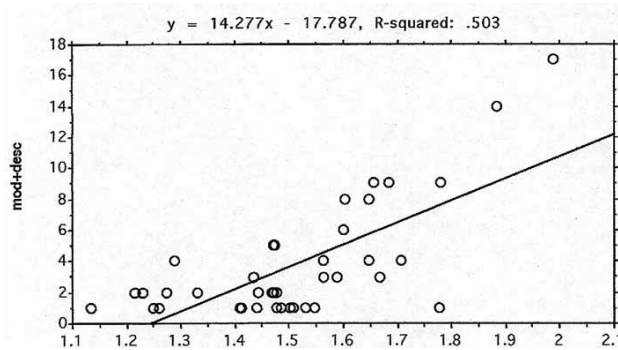


Fig. 7b and 7c
Correlation
between
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the presence of
pre-modernist
buildings

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long questioned in academic cycles but repeatedly used in the discourse of management agents, politicians and the media, despite its inaccuracy regarding both the object and the action.

Furthermore, the presence of high activity levels has proved to be almost incompatible with the maintenance of desirable standards of architectural integrity in most Brazilian towns. Even the swiftest empirical observation will show that many degraded- from an architectural point of view - historic cores present intense vitality thus constituting points of convergence of multiple activities or 'active centres', as referred earlier in this paper.

Although acknowledging that crucial socio-economic issues - such as the still feeble market value of cultural/historical assets in some peripheral capitalist economies - lie beyond the reach of local intervention, it is argued here that important morphological aspects have not, as a rule, been appropriately investigated in current interventions. Given that global space features interfere - as this paper tries to demonstrate - with the nature of local urban fractions, it is just possible that the systematic investigation of the spatial structure, and its global-to-local-to-global relations, be the lost link in most unsuccessful preservation developments.

In this case study, results point out to a close association between changes at global and local level in two moments. Firstly, when the global integration core shifted south and eastwards and the privileged residential and commercial status of Cidade Alta began to fade away. Secondly, when the global integration core expanded, swallowing fractions of Cidade Alta and small-scale tertiary activities spread over former residential sites. Findings to date indicate that both movements have been damaging to the integrity of the historic centre. At first, part of the resident population was replaced by another less capable of coping with the conservation of the buildings physical structures. Next, these were converted into small retail/service facilities alongside chain shops and warehouses (mostly for middle-to-low-income consumers) through makeshift adaptations not to mention demolition for generating parking area.

Those engaged in devising preservation policies, often advocate actions thought capable of fostering multiple economically orientated activities. It could be thought - and actually has been - that a possible strategy for 'revitalising' historic cores would be to increase the area's integration recurrently proved to equate positively with commercial value. Phenomena, as the one reported here discredit such assumptions and expose the fragility of current preservation attitudes in a society for whom historic-cultural value has not as yet consolidated as a commodity. It is here believed that the failure of actions supposedly aimed at conserving city cores is partly indebted to the difficulties of understanding how urban complexes develop at short and long term and partly indebted to the problems of defining the aims to be achieved in a

framework of conflicting interests. Until such difficulties are clarified 'Disneyfication now' seems, regrettably, to carry on being regarded as the only alternative to save whatever is left of Cidade Alta's architectural heritage.

Note

1 In Portuguese: "Da cidade de Natal, nao ha tal". From Frei Agostinho Santa Maria visiting Natal in the eighteenth century (Cascudo, 1980).

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