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**FADING TRACES OF SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN THE OLD TOWN
CENTRES OF SERIDÓ, BRAZIL**

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Fading traces of socio-environmental change in the old town centres of Seridó, Brazil

Abstract

This paper presents a morphological study of four hinterland towns in Seridó, part of the vast semi-arid region in north-eastern Brazil generally designated as *sertão*. It aims to stress the importance of safeguarding the remaining ensemble of 19th and early 20th century buildings, by arguing that they function not only as landmarks of the towns' transformation processes, but also as living evidences of changing socio-environmental relationships.

Findings stem from a study of territorial occupation and architectural transformation, which is part of a developing dissertation, and from data that comprise an inventory of twenty-two older town centres whose objective was: to record the remaining architectural vestiges that demarcate those towns' successive urban stages; to raise awareness about their rapidly disappearing architectural heritage by displaying the inventory in the web; and to form a database to support studies about the built environment in Seridó.

Most of those towns originated as cattle farm settlements in the 1700s, became supporting commercial nuclei for cattle and cotton wool trades in the late 1800s and centres for tertiary activity from the mid 20th century, following the economic collapse of those trades. Albeit affiliated to the country's then predominating stylistic tendencies, the simple physical structures of older buildings appear remarkably well-adapted to specific social needs and to the region's tough nature. These evolved into larger, more solid houses that presented increasingly climatic adequacy until the last quarter of the 19th century, thus demonstrating a steady growth in resources availability and folk builder's competence to respond to specific socio-environmental requirements. Although the houses produced after that time resemble more and more those of the coastal settlements, some morphological aspects of the traditional buildings lingered on until the 1970s, when a combination of factors – among which urban functional change assumes key role – has been acting to erase those traces from the built ensemble.

Key-words: architectural heritage, urban form, building form, built environmental transformation, socio-environmental change

1. First settlements in “Seridó”.

In order to meet the aims proposed by this article, a brief account of the territorial formation of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, and particularly that of of Seridó, will be initially presented with an emphasis to some environmental, economical, social and political influences which are essential for understanding the dynamics behind the settlement of urban nuclei in that region. The essay will then focus on the morphological nature of the four oldest urban nuclei within Seridó (Acari, Jardim do Seridó and Serra Negra), utilizing data contained in the “*Inventário de uma herança ameaçada: um estudo de centros históricos do Seridó*”, produced by the research group on morphology and uses of architecture –MUsA/UFRN¹. That data base comprises an extensive inventory, developed between 1996 and 2000, which recorded buildings dating from the 18th to mid 20th centuries, in which some of the original physical attributes, in varying states of conservation and preservation, still survived. The above mentioned data base constitutes, therefore, a landscape of the architectural heritage existing in Seridó in the twilight of the 20th century.

In the 16th and 17th centuries the sugar cane economy, due to its excellent profitability and high level of specialisation, was a highly productive system, then in fast expansion on the coastal area of the Brazilian northeast. Due to the conflicts caused by the penetration of cattle heads into sugar cane fields, cattle raising on the coastal area of the Brazilian northeast was

¹ MUsA/UFRN - Base de Pesquisa em Morfologia e Usos da Arquitetura (Morphology and Uses of Architecture Research Group)

made illegal by the Portuguese government. In view of the incompatibility of such activity with the sugar cane plantations on the coastal area, and the requirements for providing the sugar cane zone with animals for traction power as well as beef, the cattle had to be displaced to the hinterland areas. According to Andrade (1995), the cattle raising economy was fundamental for the occupation of the Portuguese America hinterland, where in a period of only one century large farms were settled and practically the whole north-eastern “sertão” had been occupied. At first an ancillary activity to the sugar cane economy, the cattle expansion was boosted by the development of the former.

During periods of stagnation in the sugar industry, the excess population moved to the “sertão” region (Andrade,1986). The semi-arid climate and the “caatinga” vegetation favoured the development of the cattle raising activity by reducing illnesses, providing abundant forage in the rainy season and offering sufficient water in river courses existing in the region.

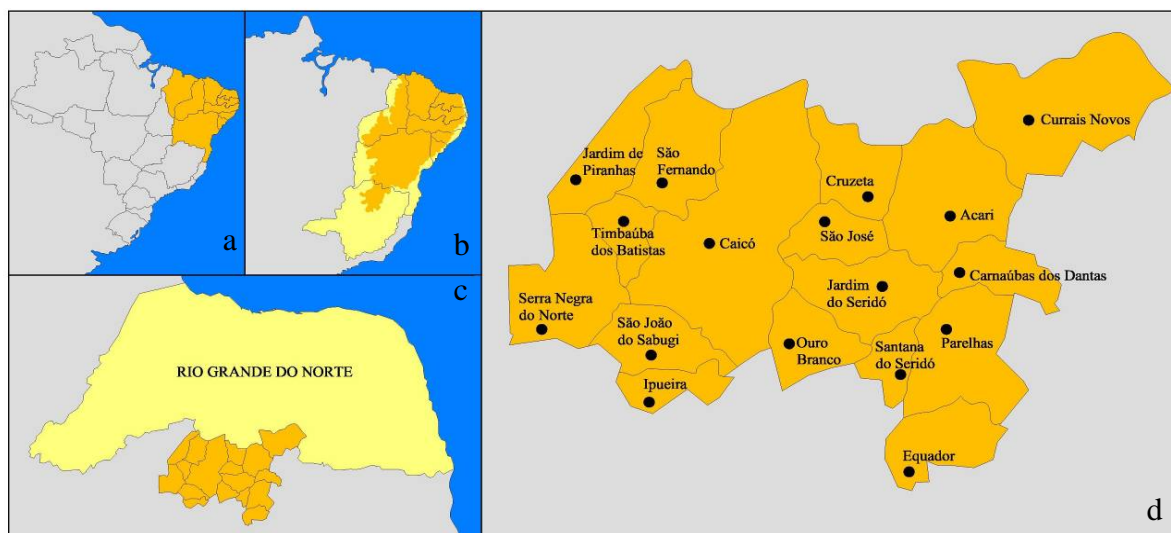


Figure 1 – Brazil with the North-East Region in orange (a); states (yellow) that include the semi-arid area (b); the state of Rio Grande do Norte with Seridó in orange (c); towns in Seridó (d).
Credit: Nathalia Diniz

The hinterland of the present State of Rio Grande do Norte was first populated in the 17th century under the above described circumstances. According to Cascudo (1955), with the multiplication of cattle confining corrals and the demise of the indigenous population, many prospective settlers from Pernambuco and Bahia claimed land properties in the “sertão”, but few of those actually settled in the region at first. Little by little, some years later, pioneers from Pernambuco returned to the region, now bringing their families. At that time they obtained permission from the Catholic church to erect chapels. In the second half of the 17th century the sertão of Rio Grande do Norte was dotted with cattle corrals, occupying then the spaces that had belonged to the Indians. Maps by the Dutch cartographer Georg Marcgraff, at the service of the Dutch West Indies Company in Brazil, dated from the 40s in the 17th century, show the presence of numerous corrals in the north-eastern, including those in Rio Grande do Norte.

Many a farm yard where cowboys managed the cattle are now the central square of towns located in the “sertão” according to Cascudo (1995). Until the mid 19th century Rio Grande do Norte was the main supplier of traction and beef cattle to the then provinces of Paraíba and Pernambuco.

The first land concession in Rio Grande do Norte was awarded on 9 January 1600 and only in 1676 was a concession granted within the Seridó territory, pertaining to the Acauã area, now in the municipality of Acari.

According to Medeiros Filho, (1981), only after 1720 were the first families regularly and permanently installed in Seridó. Certainly, before that date, the harsh environmental conditions only permitted the settlement of men unaccompanied by their families – lone

cowboys, criminals escaped from the law, tame Indians and enslaved negroes. From then on the cattle raising activity in Seridó developed in the following way: young calves bought in the province of Piauí were brought to Seridó where they were raised and after turning into fully grown fat animals, were resold to Paraíba and Pernambuco (Medeiros Filho, 1983). The same author remarks that the type of cattle there raised was very resistant to long walks.

Cascudo (1984) points out that the trails that criss-crossed the vastness and aridity of the “sertão” determined the appearance of selling outposts, or fast markets for the acquisition of light supplies, and of resting facilities for granting cowboys some comfort in their repose periods along the route. Buildings, mainly houses that accommodated inhabitants as well as whatever service that was to be offered, besides the odd chapel, became means to shorten the distance among farms. Such settlements developed into villages, which were later upgraded to municipal seats.

However, cattle was not the only important thing in the life of the “sertanejos”, (the inhabitants of the sertão) Their religious life, restricted to domestic devotions, such as the family prayers in the evening, and the “novenas” (a sequence of nine prayer practices along nine successive evenings) recited on the holy dates required better accommodation under the roofs of catholic temples as well as the authority of catholic priests. The demand for rites celebrated at more appropriate sites grew parallel to the population growth. According to Medeiros Filho (1983, pp. 95):

“Rural land owners moved by religious zeal endeavoured to build chapels in their farms, and for this purpose they donated half a league of land which would become an asset of these temples. This was a necessary condition for the acceptance of their intentions”

Following this custom three chapels were erected in Seridó as follows: in *Arraial do Queiquó* (now Caicó) in 1700; in the *Serra Negra* farm (now the town of Serra Negra do Norte), in 1735; and in the locality of *Acauã* (now Acará), in 1735.

During the 18th century only one Parish was created in Seridó: The *Freguesia Gloriosa de Sant’Ana* (Glorious Parish of Saint Ann), separated from the *Freguesia de Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso do Piacó*, (Parish of Our Lady of the Good Success of Piacó, now the town of Pombal, in the State of Paraíba). From the year of its creation, 1748, until 1788 the limits of the Parish of the Glorious Sant’Ana remained the same.

Due to its crescent development, from a demographical, political and economical viewpoint, four more parishes were established along the 19th Century in Seridó: Acará (1835); Jardim do Seridó (1856); Serra Negra do Norte (1858) and Currais Novos (1884), all of them independent of the Parish of the Glorious Sant’Ann from which they were detached. Four villages were also created, by being separated from the *Vila Nova do Príncipe* (the New Village of the Prince, a temporary designation of the present town of Caicó, in honou of the then Royal Heir), which are now the towns of: Acará (1835), Jardim do Seridó (1859), Serra Negra do Norte (1874) and Currais Novos (1890).

In Seridó as happens in most towns in the north-eastern “sertão”, agriculture developed as an ancillary activity in relation to cattle raising, not reaching a higher importance for commercial exchanges. Only during the great drought in 1845, with the demise of almost all livestock, agricultural activities acquired some visibility. Due to economic crises brought about by the American Independence War (1766-1783) and the American Civil War (1860), cotton growing in that country suffered great losses and England, the main purchaser of the American production, had to look for other suppliers for its textile industry. In that context, Rio Grande do Norte had the chance to appear as an important producer of cotton raw matter (specially a variety of a highly praised long fibre, designated as “mocó”), and, as a result, to occupy a prominent place within the state economy, competing with sugar, around the 1880s, and surpassing it in 1905. From that period until the 1970s, cotton became the main source of employment and income in the State and in Seridó. Extensive cattle raising brought families to the “sertão”, but it was the growing of cotton, which, according to Augusto (1980),

engrossed and strengthened the settlement of inhabitants, so that at the end of the 20th century, according to the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE* (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) the Seridó area of Rio Grande do Norte comprised 18 municipalities, as listed below: Caicó, Ipueira, Jardim de Piranha, São Fernando, São João do Sabugí, Serra Negra do Norte, Timbaúba dos Batistas, Acari, Carnaúba dos Dantas, Cruzeta, Currais Novos, Equador, Jardim do Seridó, Ouro Branco, Parelhas, Santana do Seridó and São Jose do Seridó.

2. Fading traces of a two-century old urban formation

Although buildings dated from successive time periods are being increasingly regarded as chapters of a trajectory for acting as landmarks that narrate a town's formation and transformation process much in the way of a novel plot (figure 2), and despite the fact that architectural heritage figures in the current government discourse about the benefits of cultural tourism as a means of bestowing identity to a town, the actual state of the built environment in Seridó is dispiriting and inspires great concern.

The socio-economic transformations that followed the collapse of the local beef and cotton production, both unable to compete with that of other origins, coupled with the strong urbanisation impetus that swept the country from the mid-20th Century up to the 1970s concurred to change most towns of Seridó, which had always held the role of supporting nuclei for a rural-based production into centres of tertiary activities (Morais, 1999). In the absence of legal measures or actions capable of safeguarding the built environment, and in the face of the cultural change that affected the towns' residents partly due to the population mobility that accompanied that process, the urban expansion and its functional transformation exerted a powerful damaging pressure on the architectural heritage, particularly on the older buildings located in the original town core.



Figure 2 – Examples of Seridó architectural heritage. Clockwise: *Igreja do Rosário* in Acari, first chapel in the settlement (the crowded atrium indicates a festivity or a market day); same building currently deprived of its side extensions; two examples of buildings erected to accommodate a *Casa de Câmara e Cadeia* (Acari and Caicó); house with attic in Serra Negra do Norte.

Source: Collection of the Parish of *Nossa Senhora do Rosário* in Acari; and MUSA/UFRN

Empirical observations of various towns in Seridó, showed that buildings retaining their original forms, which had survived from the 19th and early 20th Century well into the 1970s, were being severely mutilated or simply vanishing at a quick pace. This acknowledgement motivated an inventory of pre-modernist and early modernist architecture, which was developed along the last years of the 20th Century (Trigueiro et al, 1995-2000). The records regarding each building's estimated time of construction, and its current state of preservation

of original formal attributes revealed devastating losses over a period of a mere two decades, as compared to other Brazilian towns of equivalent age and bulk. Even considering the fact that the built environment is but an artefact in continuous process of use, re-use and, therefore, modification to accommodate the needs of different people in successive epochs, the panorama found for the architectural heritage of Seridó was, and carries on being, disquieting.

The buildings in figure 3a present formal characteristics which are inherited from colonial times although they have most certainly been erected after Independence, in 1822. In Seridó those are houses built along the 19th century, particularly in its last quarter but also in the first decades of the 20th century, up to approximately 1920, thus demonstrating the extraordinary resistance in the region, of a formal type that had already been altered in most Brazilian towns, however acquiring the status of vernacular architecture in the region, probably due to having demonstrated an excellent adequacy to the local environmental and tectonic conditions.





Figure 3: traditional houses in Seridó: Caicó, Acari, Jardim do Seridó and Serra Negra do Norte (a); a few items that equipped traditional houses in Seridó (b).

According to Santa Rosa (1974), referring to vernacular buildings in Acari, which may well represent cases throughout Seridó, traditional houses were built with clay bricks, with two side gables covered with colonial roof tiles, generally comprising a front room, windowless bedrooms, dining room nested to a kitchen and service complex, with larders, washing-up area, often open to the backyard, and outbuildings to accommodate servants, storage and a latrine. The furniture was usually very simple, comprising a few chairs, one or two large tables, the odd side table and sitting stools, the water clay vessels (figure 3b). Bedrooms were often furnished solely with arks and trunks, sleeping facilities comprising hammocks that could be hanged just about anywhere in the house, bedrooms reserved for the women and couples, with single men and boys usually distributed around the day spaces. Beds were rare and often the privilege of the marital couple, who would also keep hammocks by the side of the double bed, for daily repose. Kitchens were furnished with a large masonry stove accommodating a log fire and oven (fig.3b), masonry counters and a large table for the preparation of food and built-in wooden shelves. Washing-up was done in basins in a service open terrace adjoining the kitchen, where a large round masonry oven was sometimes also located (fig.3b). Larders were furnished with built-in wooden shelves and trellised platforms for food storage hanging from the roof structure (fig.3b).

Those houses belonged to prosperous farmers and were not utilised as normal dwellings, but used on weekends, open market days and special occasions like family weddings and during religious festivities. Because the day to day life occurred mainly in the farms which produced all necessary supplies for the support of the farmers and their families, these second homes represented a discrete demonstration of economical vitality. Since the urban nuclei within Seridó were quite homogeneous and strongly resembled most others to be found in the north-eastern semi-arid hinterland, it can be inferred by the above description, that life in the villages and towns located in the “sertão” was quite stable if somewhat monotonous.

Similarly to most Brazilian earlier towns those nuclei were ensembles consisting of a church and churchyard, which predominated over the built scenery of residential buildings in their surroundings. Those buildings have an important role in the urban form and context of the Seridó towns as they demarcate the original nuclei and the starting point for the expansion of such towns; a second church and a *Casa de Câmara e Cadeia* (site of the local government, court of justice and gaol) signalled the development towards a higher rank in urban status. Buildings once built to accommodate a *Casa de Câmara e Cadeia* are found in three of the four cases examined here.

The good economical phase experienced in Seridó in the last decades of the 19th century and in the starting years of the 20th century enabled the expansion of the urban nuclei

in the region. In that period the eclectic style largely disseminated, both on the new buildings and on the old ones, which were often then updated to the eclectic style.

As self expressed by its own designation, a greater formal variety is found in the built scenery at the time, ranging from built shells that are similar to those of colonial houses, except for a more abundant presence of ornaments, to the much more complex volumetrical compositions of multiple articulated solids that point towards the proto-rationalist language of art-deco, complete with geometrical decorative motifs, bare surfaces and armoured cement marquees.

In a first stage – end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries – an eclectic formal repertoire initially inspired in the classical architectural styles predominates in newly build edifices and over earlier façades, in the shape of decorative cornices and mouldings, that framed doors and windows, and covered the eaves of old roofs, and of triangular pediments that disguised the steep lines of colonial side gables. The second quarter of the 20th century brought multi-volumed, highly-ornamented buildings with motifs inspired in varying styles and origins – Medieval, Renaissance, Alpine, Victorian, Iberian colonial). This diversity of built shells accommodated new modes of spatial interface among inhabitants and between these and outsiders, which pointed out to changing ways of domestic life in most Brazilian towns. They coincided with a first wave of urbanisation in the country and with a decisive phase in the development of Seridó towns into commercial centres, and with the emergence of a richer street life, which was met by investments in urban infra-structure, notably those aimed at creating “beautiful sceneries”. New detached buildings that broke away with the traditional models of built shells appeared, surrounded by gardens, low walls and elaborated iron railings so that they could be manifested to this newly-acquired urban look of modernity.

In the 1950s and 1960s morphological attributes affiliated to the international and, especially Brazilian modernism found its way to the towns of the remote sertão. Amalgamated with formal elements of colonial and eclectic architecture, from elementary geometric ornamentation vaguely inspired in art-deco motives to the odd case in which various aspects of the volumetric articulation, façade composition, and technical innovations were assembled, the new formal repertoire began to reshape the built scenery. Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 represent the old cores of the towns that exemplify this study, displaying examples of colonial, eclectic and modernist architecture still existing at the end of the 20th Century.

In the course of the inventory older buildings were still predominantly used as residences. However, it became evident that buildings originally used as residences were radically altered to accommodate commercial activities – retail and service facilities – and that adaptations were not only inappropriate in terms of adequacy to the new uses (thermal and lighting comfort, area, space structure, parking, etc), but always disfiguring in terms of their original characteristics, utterly defacing the built ensemble, and therefore erasing historical traces of the towns’ urban formation.

However, such aggression against the original features of those buildings are not perpetrated only by shop owners, as illustrated by the case of Caicó, represented in figures 8a/b, which shows that although commercial uses tend to coincide more strongly with disfigured cases, residences also suffer from such deleterious actions.

Elsewhere, changes, brought about by the urban expansion and intervention processes, in the space configuration of the street grid in old town centres of Seridó have been accessed (Trigueiro, Teixeira et al; 2005) by means of space syntax analysis. It was seen that in most towns a highly accessible cluster of streets more or less centrally located within the expanded grid, now covers nearly all the urban area that had existed before the 1970s, and because this cluster tends to attract most movement flows it also attracts uses that benefit from these flows, such as retail as well as various kinds of informal activities (i.e. street vendors). These, on the other hand, repel traditional dwellers, who move out of the area, which will then attract lower income residents as well as the newly arrived, who seldom hold a feeling of identity or belonging concerning the history of the place. Thus a combination of ingredients is reached to efface all traces of environment heritage.



Caicó - RN
Approx. scale - 1/1000

- colonial
- eclectic
- modernist
- unrecorded



Figure 4 - Map of Caicó's old core displaying buildings that still presented more or less well-preserved vestiges of colonial, eclectic and modernist architecture in the last years of the 20th Century.

Source: MUsA database over map of CAERN (reworked by the authors)

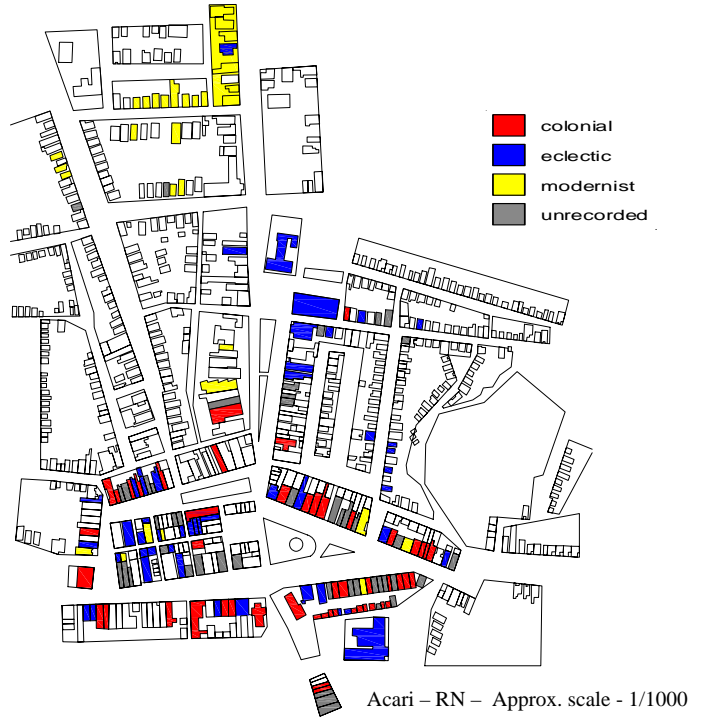


Figure 5 - Map of Acari's old core displaying buildings that still presented more or less well-preserved vestiges of colonial, eclectic and modernist architecture in the last years of the 20th Century.
Source: MUa database over map of CAERN (reworked by the authors)



Jardim do Seridó - RN
Approx. scale - 1/1000



- colonial
- eclectic
- modernist
- unrecorded

Figure 6 - Map of Jardim do Seridó's old core displaying buildings that still presented more or less well-preserved vestiges of colonial, eclectic and modernist architecture in the last years of the 20th Century.
Source: MUa database over map of CAERN (reworked by the authors)



Serra Negra do Norte - RN
Approx. scale - 1/1000



Figure 7 - Map of Serra Negra do Norte's old core displaying buildings that still presented more or less well-preserved vestiges of colonial, eclectic and modernist architecture in the last years of the 20th Century. Source: MUsA database over map of CAERN (reworked by the authors)

3. A fading scenery

As has been seen, in the wake of the dismantling of the farming and livestock raising economy and the transformation of those earlier towns into centres of tertiary activities, the residential use is replaced by commercial/services use, in buildings located within the original occupation sites that become devaluated as residential areas, whereas new neighbourhoods attract investors and urban investments.

In the old centres, besides the common understanding that it is absolutely necessary to add certain standardised physical elements favoured by the fashion of the moment in order to alter the use of a building, particularly from residential to commercial, residents also feel they must update the look of their houses to meet the day trends, as an effort to increase the value to their property, which may incur in a mere surface modification (the application of ceramic tiles on the façade), up to a radical stylistic revamping or a complete conversion in order to meet requirements of contemporary life, such as a car shelter (figure 9). This, added to the presumption that living in flats instead of houses makes property less vulnerable to crime, complete the full picture for a total substitution of all vestiges of architectural heritage in early towns of Seridó.

To make matters worse, in spite of the increasing discussions regarding heritage conservation both in the media and within professional-academic circles, in most Brazilian towns age and architectural integrity do not translate into real estate value, as so happens in developed countries. Within this context and in the absence of a national policy to educate society about architectural form and about the importance of preserving some of the integrity of each successive phase of the historical development of the built environment, commercial opportunity and novelty is all that stands.

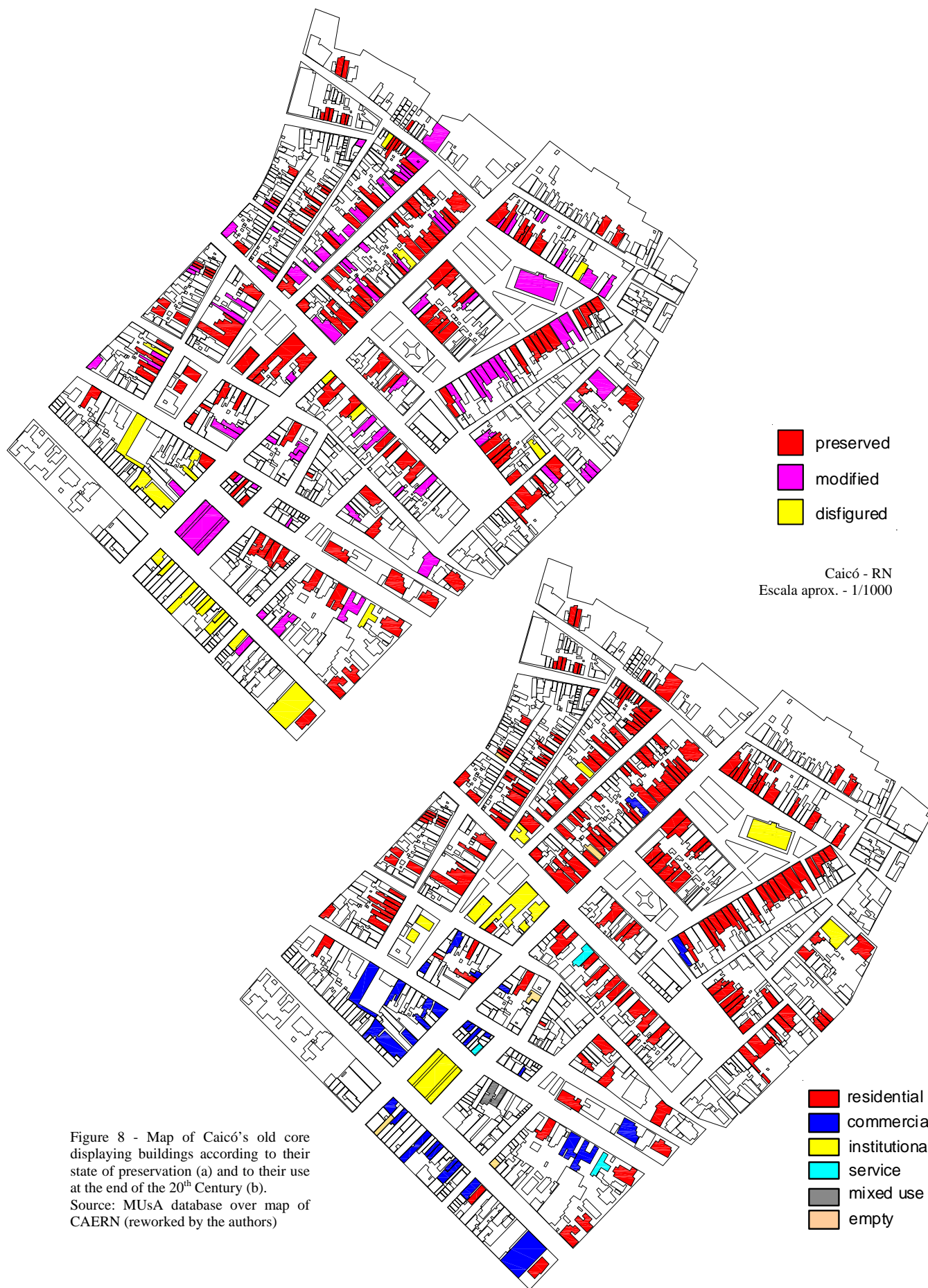


Figure 8 - Map of Caicó's old core displaying buildings according to their state of preservation (a) and to their use at the end of the 20th Century (b).
 Source: MUsA database over map of CAERN (reworked by the authors)



Figure 9. Old buildings of Caicó, whose original formal characteristics have been transformed in the last ten to eleven years. Source: MUa database (1996) and coursework (2007) by architectural students attending the course in Projeto e Planejamento Urbano e Regional – PPUR/UFRN.

The pace of destruction can be further demonstrated by a recent coursework assessment of Caicó’s old buildings, which have survived since the 1996-97 inventory. Figure 10 shows that 44 buildings then recorded, 13 have either changed from “preserved” or “modified” to “modified” or disfigured. Regrettably, the assessment of the other parts of the town core does not show a brighter picture.

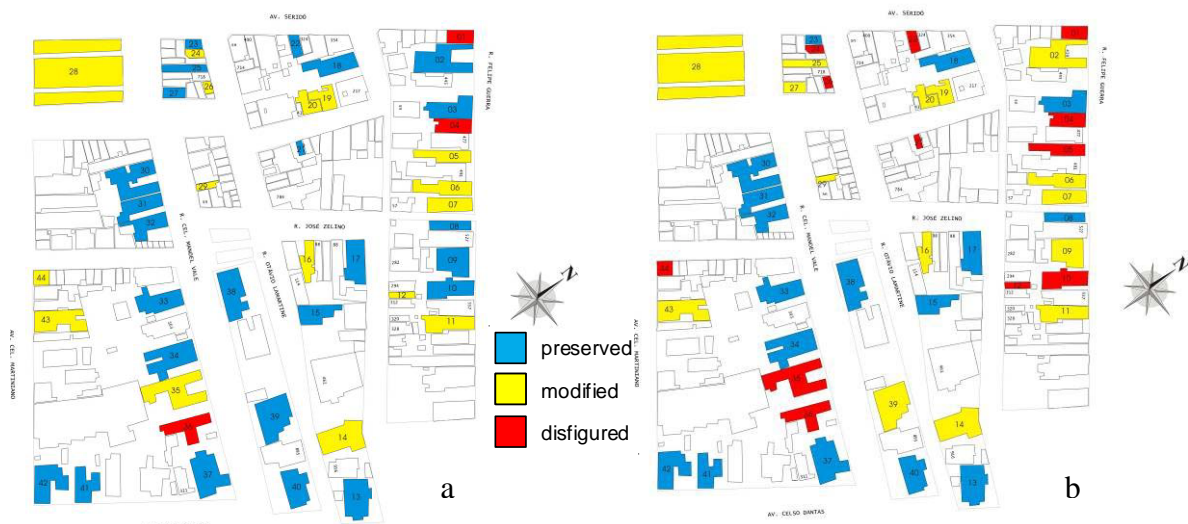


Figure 10. Map of a part of Caicó’s old centre displaying buildings according to the state of preservation of original formal attributes in 1996 (a) and 2007 (b).

Source: Coursework for Projeto e Planejamento Urbano e Regional – PPUR, March 2007

The process described here, which is common to most older Brazilian towns, seems all the more perverse in Seridó since this area is generally identified as a disseminating focus of material and immaterial cultural assets, and concentrates most remaining traces of centuries of territorial occupation and social practices materialised on urban spaces and buildings, which are considered an essential part of the cultural roots of Rio Grande do Norte, one of the poorest states in terms of heritage preservation, among the ones that experienced urban occupation in the early days of the colony.

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