
Ruination and appropriation in the Brazilian's Historic Center - Repercussions and potentialities in the abandonment of João Pessoa's Central Area

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Abstract

The city of João Pessoa, located in northeastern Brazil, followed, from the mid-twentieth century, the national trend of urban sprawl consolidated by the economic prosperity and by the expansion of transportation and communication systems. As a consequence, the city - the third oldest in the country, founded in 1585 - broke away from its secular boundaries, distinguished before as Cidade Alta and Cidade Baixa (Varadouro), and incorporated new territories. Besides effecting a structural change, it redirected the city towards a new configuration of social, economic and political life.

At the time the urban expansion plans were made, areas such as Rua das Trincheiras - inserted in the city's Historic Center - were in their social and economic boom, being a redoubt for the elite and for important services such as the electric tram. However, the effectuation of both city structure and urban sprawl, along with the emergence of impoverished neighborhoods in its proximity, induced their residents to occupy new areas in peripheral locations.

As these families moved towards these new territories, an intense traffic settled in Rua das Trincheiras, attenuating its urbanity by imposing difficulties on pedestrians and decisively damaging the residential use by the elite. As a result, a process of abandonment was triggered in this venue and its buildings endured an economic devaluation that led to the deterioration of their physical conservation.

Based on the data collected by Eudes Silva in 2012, it's verified that, despite the majority of edifices in the area with well-conserved state (32.80%) and with average conservation (45.30%), the number of ruinous buildings (17.20%) and vacant land/total ruin (4.70%) stands out, especially if compared to other parts of the João Pessoa's Historic Center, such as Varadouro and Cidade Alta. In these areas the average of ruinous edifices is 5.50%, while the total vacant land/total ruin corresponds to only 2% of the real estate.

However, the abandonment and the consequent physical and economic damage which accompanies it originated a dichotomy in the area: while the overall physical conservation is concerning, the integrity of the built heritage and its features is the highest in the Historic Center: while 39% of the edifices are considered to be whole and 22.70% slightly altered, the profoundly altered represents 9.40% of the site, well below the percentage in Varadouro and in Cidade Alta (47% and 26%, respectively).

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The explanation lies on the fact that there was no interest in reoccupying the area with other land uses after the elite's evasion since there were other areas better integrated into the city's street network. This lack of interest also induced an exceptionality in its land use pattern, originating an atypical occupation in opposition to the logics established in Brazilian's Central Areas, where there is an intense presence of commercial and services uses in detriment of others. This is observed in the 2012 data below:

- **Institutional:** Cidade Alta (14%), Varadouro (4%), Trincheiras (14,5%);
- **Commercial/Service:** Cidade Alta (53%), Varadouro (57%), Trincheiras (13%);
- **Residential:** Cidade Alta (18%), Varadouro (17%), Trincheiras (39%);
- **Urban Void:** Cidade Alta (15%), Varadouro (22%), Trincheiras (33,5%).

Furthermore, it's inferred that there is, internally, an intense dynamic in its land use, especially in the last two categories above. In spite of maintaining its predominance until present time, whereas the residential use represented 49% of the buildings in 2006, after six years it decreased to 39%, suffering a 10% loss. On the other hand, the urban voids had an increase of 10.50% in the same period, jumping from 23% to 33.5%. Besides demonstrating the correlation between the increase of urban voids and the decrease of residences, these data uncovers that the process of abandonment and ruination of Rua das Trincheiras is not stagnant, is escalating.

This means that the dereliction will continue to play a catalyst role in the site's appropriation by a population with low income, a phenomenon observed in the area since the 1970s - when the occupation of a natural site with rugged relief and of municipal domain originated the Favela Saturnino de Brito - and is extended to the present time, with the appropriation of abandoned buildings by movements of fight for housing, such as "Terra Livre" and "Moradia, Ação e Luta Comunitária".

The first organized the occupation of the old Hotel Tropicana and its 102 bedrooms by two hundred families of low income and high social vulnerability in April 2013. Although it was issued a preliminary injunction in the repossession suit in May of the same year, this decision was revoked since the building is the subject of another lawsuit judging irregularities in the permute agreement between its owners and the State. The edifice remains occupied despite its precarious conservation and the conflicts with the State Government, that often adopts strategies such as cutting off electricity and water provision to force residents to vacate the building.

The second movement led to the appropriation of an old mansion built in the early 20th century and owned by the Department of Education of the State of Paraíba. The building has its ruination as a direct consequence of a restauration work interrupted in 2000 for financial issues and for failing to conform to the requirements of the Heritage Institute. Those appropriations reveal that, despite the fact that the State and landowners are failing to fulfill their legal responsibilities, such as monitoring their physical integrity and safeguarding their cultural value, therefore relegating João Pessoa's architectural heritage to ruination, there is a potential in this marginalized and stigmatized population to reverse the site's dereliction, rekindling its original land use: housing.

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