

THE CONSERVATION OF HISTORICAL GARDENS IN A MULTIDISCIPLINARY CONTEXT

THE “CACTÁRIO DA MADALENA”, RECIFE, BRAZIL

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Abstract

Historical gardens are considered cultural assets that characterize cultural landscapes in which the exercise of human imagination and skills on nature throughout time can be detected. This concept places vegetation as the main element in architectural composition for cultural significance. In Recife, Brazil, potential historical gardens can be found. These are the first gardens by Burle Marx, a famous Brazilian landscape designer. The gardens draw on ecological, artistic and educational principles and are referred to as ‘living monuments’ according to the Charter of Florence (1981). The *Cactário da Madalena* (cactus garden in Madalena), later called Euclides da Cunha square and laid out in 1935, is the first original Brazilian public garden with Brazilian plants from the *sertão* region in Northeast Brazil: the *cactos* vegetation. The lack of maintenance and management has changed garden landscape design over the last seven decades. The decision to aim for restoration has represented a challenge to Recife managers. It has become a multidisciplinary approach interrelating facets of history, botany, landscape architecture, education, geography, and literature. This paper seeks to show the conservation of historical gardens in a multidisciplinary context as a shared task while discussing the restoration of this Burle Marx garden, which involves the community. It also tries to introduce an awareness-raising process among residents and tourists with respect to the historical, artistic, economic, educational and ecologically significant values of the garden as cultural heritage. It functions as an instrument of communication between the history of the city and the population. The conservation of the garden will be monitored by conservation indicators referring to the surroundings and in particular to the garden.

Key Words: *Historical garden, conservation, multidisciplinary*

1. Introduction

Historical gardens are considered cultural assets that characterize cultural landscapes in which the exercise of human imagination and skills on nature throughout time can be detected. They are of considerable importance when cultural landscapes and above all heritage landscapes are concerned. Vegetation is the principal element in their architectural conception and together with materials, furniture and lay-out need to be maintained due to their cultural wealth. This brings together aesthetic, historical, scientific and social aspects from the past as materialized by history, from present time by incorporating their use and from the future as the testimony of a society.

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Historical gardens integrate various fields of knowledge since there are widely varying interpretations arising from the same object. Thus, facets of diverse disciplinary areas such as history, geography, architecture, botany, economy and sociology are brought together so that historical gardens are also symbolic landscapes legitimized by the community use. This characterizes a multidisciplinary context.

The interest in the study of historical gardens in the city of Recife, Brazil, started with the investigation of the 9 gardens projected between 1934 and 1937 by the internationally well-known landscape designer, Roberto Burle Marx. Before that, *in the 17th century, the presence of the Dutch Governor Johann Moritz van Nassau initiated a vital period for the formation of local culture reclaiming land and building bridges, forts, palaces, an observatory and the famous park of the Friburg Palace.*

Burle Marx's gardens in Recife are the first of his career. In this group, the *Cactário da Madalena*, currently *Praça Euclides da Cunha* (Euclides da Cunha Square), is a cactus species garden which is undergoing the concluding phase of restoration in accordance with the principles of the Charter of Florence of 1981. This garden was laid out in the *Madalena* neighbourhood in 1935 as a thematic garden to display the *caatinga* vegetation characteristic of the *sertão* - the semiarid lands subjected to drought of the Brazilian Northeast Region. Burle Marx exhibits the specifically Brazilian native plants of a region of splendid beauty inhabited by poor yet resilient communities in an urban public garden of the coastal region. Its educative and ecological function lasted for 45 years.

The city of Recife grew out of tidal pools on a group of small islands formed from deposits brought by rivers and maritime currents and by reclaiming land from mangroves at different times in its history. The surface of the city is made up of hills, plains, water courses and mangroves, beaches and special zones of environmental protection. According to statistics from the City Council of Recife a total of 400 shanty towns existed in 2000. The low levels of education attained by the population allied to fragile governance, low productivity and the discontinuity of programmes and resources have led to a series of problems in the sphere of environmental degradation. This is seen in bad landscape conservation in neighbourhoods and the lack of open spaces for recreation and environmental balance. These are reflected in the deterioration of the gardens of Burle Marx, parks, forest reserves and water courses, historical monuments and housing which are important landmarks in the history of the city. The efforts of recent administrations to work in partnership with the private sector aiming at conserving the cultural heritage of the city are still very timid and planners lack a broader perception of these new forms of urban management.

Following advice from the Federal University of Recife, the City Council decided, in 2001, to carry out restoration of this garden and by so doing to pay homage to Burle Marx, with the aim of making the Brazilian roots of landscape design stronger and encouraging tourism both from within Brazil and other countries. However, the decision to restore the original lay-out of Burle Marx, as a pioneer experience, resulted in removing some trees from an area which was originally taken up by cacti. This occurrence caused some sectors of the population – until then mere spectators – to express concern and to react negatively to this change. This has represented a major leap in the learning cycle of conservation management on the part of the professional team responsible for the project. As a result, the need to bolster the process was noted and has led to mobilizing the diverse social agents such as the academic community from several disciplines, public sector departments and agencies, trade unions and professional associations, the private sector

and population at a large in order to make the restoration legitimate and to guarantee the garden is conserved as a historical one. This has been an attempt to create a pioneer experience in heritage education in a metropolitan city.

This paper aims to show the importance of a historical garden in an urban area as a pedagogic element in raising the awareness of the population by making the history of the garden known and by valuing the originality of its creator and the functions of the garden: aesthetically, ecologically and socially as a multidisciplinary subject. The work therefore seeks to guarantee the future of conservation management and to legitimize its use.

The cultural meaning of this garden will be based on fields of study which consider not only the history of its creation including the principles of artistic and architectural conception but also its economic and social sustainability. This may stimulate comprehensive studies to be carried out by diverse professionals and the permanent participation of population thus guaranteeing maintenance as an educative process in management. This participation should start in primary schools and serve as an example for the restoration of other gardens by Burle Marx in Recife as well as other historical monuments, mainly those under public ownership. The restoration of the square started in August 2003 and is currently going through its concluding phase. It will continue to be managed as the conservation indicators will be monitored.

2. Historical gardens and conservation

In the Charter of Florence, 1981, vegetation is deemed to be the main element in the landscape composition of the historical garden. This characterizes it as a living monument and thus it constitutes an architectural and cultural production to the extent that it unites nature and culture. According to Riegl, the quality of being a 'monument' means to draw attention to, remember and aim to relive a past steeped in time (Choay, 2001:26). Choay complements this by stating (2001:18) that "a monument is anything that was erected by a community of individuals to recall or make other generations recall happenings, sacrifices, rites or beliefs". Moreover Riegl says while the "monument is a creation which has been deliberated on, thought through *a priori*",... "the historical monument is not, from the principle desired, and created as such; it is constituted *a posteriori*, through the converging points of view of the historian and the art lover who pick it out from the mass of existing buildings, amongst which monuments represent only a small part" (Choay, 2001: 25). In this way, it is time which leads the quality of being a live monument to the historical garden.

By considering that the historical garden is an architectural composition in which the main element is vegetation – a vegetal architecture – to be safeguarded as hearing witness to a culture, this Charter demands its conservation (and its surroundings) is guaranteed through restoration or reconstitution and by drawing up an inventory to manage it and regulate its use (Cabrera, 1999).

According to what is stated in the Charter of Burra of 1982, conservation is understood the aim of preserving the characteristics of a cultural asset, that is, a building, a site, a garden or other constructed work which possesses cultural significance. In each case, content is included, that is, the reasons for its existence including its use over time and the surroundings to which it belongs (Cury, 2000 : 247). The practice of conservation covers different types of intervention amongst which is restoration. According to the Charter of

Burra, this is “the establishment of the substance of an asset in a state which was previously known” (Cury, 2000: 248). The restoration plan must include the garden as a document: “a complete and heterogeneous text which is presented as a draft”. This is why the plan for restoration must not aim at re-writing the original, but a unitary set of documents which transmits accumulated information, thus leading to an appropriate reading (Cabrera, 1999).

This is how the historical garden has become a cultural asset which forms a memory, a live archive and guarantees the material and vegetal permanence. Conserving it will lead to the future, or it will be projected, and not just the forms which evoke the image of what it once was, with the aim of giving new life to the material which is mutilated and imperfect but also to the history and culture of local people (Garcia, 2002: 55).

Carrying out the conservation of a historical garden is made real by applying the conservation indicators in such a way that a process of permanent monitoring is put into practice. The indicator is an instrument the function of which is to supply information on the nature and tendencies in the evolution of the features of a given phenomenon. The collection of data must be accompanied by periodic reviews of the indicators which respond effectively to conservation. In various other countries, historical gardens have their protection and conservation guaranteed. In Brazil, it is only now that this question is being discussed. This is why it is necessary to encourage initiatives which advance in this direction.

3. The multidisciplinary approach to public gardens

Roberto Burle Marx, the landscape designer with a world-wide reputation, came to Recife in 1934 when he was 25 and stayed until 1937. He undertook new projects and reforms in seven public spaces. To him the creation of a garden means a gesture towards the landscape as if this were something inherent in how people live in society and respond to its impulses. It is by this approach that the human expression draws close to art and poetry and reveals the core content of garden landscaping, in other words: ‘the art of making gardens’ (Dourado, 1991: 63).

The modern garden was born with Burle Marx’s look at the Brazilian landscape. His talent extended to painting and sculpture. From his artistic studies in Europe from 1928 to 1930, he brought influences from English, French and German landscape designers and painters and added these to the aspirations of the Modern Movement in Brazil. At that point in time, it was proposed that the artistic construction should be of a national character, thus breaking away from foreign influences and democratizing art for all classes.

The *Cactário da Madalena* today called Euclides da Cunha Square, designed by Burle Marx in 1935 and carried out in Recife, was the first essentially Brazilian public garden which evidently aimed at representing one of the most singular domains of our flora. When conceiving it, Burle Marx proposed innovatory guidelines for the modern Brazilian garden the essence of which is the evocation of the environment and that which affects the vegetation of the *caatinga* (scrub land) in all its diversity and the context in which the people of the *sertão* live. He first came across this vegetation when he saw examples in the hothouses of the Botanical Gardens in Dahlen, Germany and later in the book of Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertões*: the journalistic true account of the repeated attempts by the Brazilian government to squash a rebellion in the *sertão* and which immortalised the

landscape of the *caatingas* as well as the drama and resistance of the people of the *sertão*. Burle Marx paid homage to the writer by naming the square after him (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 – Burle Marx’s drawing of the *Cactário da Madalena*, 1935 (Marx, 1987).

Burle Marx’s conception of the modern garden began to take firm shape based on concepts of: hygiene, education and art as he makes clear in his article on the ‘Gardens of Brazil’ published in the Bulletin of Engineering of March 1935. With regard to hygiene, the garden represented a concentration of species which would lead to making the climate less harsh and removing some urban pollution. The educative aim of the garden would be as a means of instruction and transmitting knowledge by means of every one of its elements amongst which the vegetation itself looms up as the main one. In the end, when considered as a work of art, the garden would consist of a modern representative artistic expression as a cultural manifestation.

His concept of the ‘modern’ was not limited to closed spaces, closed in on all four sides by walls and trellises but was broadened by being guided by ‘a thought process giving order to nature”, that is, pointing towards the open spaces of the great natural landscapes behind which lay the aim of striving to create a love for nature in the city dweller.

Through giving a high value to nature by placing a garden of *Cactaceae* and *Bromeliaceae* in the centre of the square, a classic principle of convergence is laid down even though it is a rigid one. It takes the focus for the object of his admiration within the principles of symmetry and gives pride of place to the wealth of the flora. The aim is to make the community acquainted with it and this includes emphasizing how varied it is (Photo 1).

As his composition associates plants with species from the *sertão* he intended to pay homage to the writer, Euclides da Cunha, who in 1902 had penned an interpretation of the culture of the *sertão* in the light of all its hard and bitter reality and by so doing he depicted it in unequivocally realistic terms. The use of the flora from the *sertão*, large and medium sized trees and cacti in a public garden gives added value to the urban landscape and demonstrates how to use education, culture and ecology to convey meaning.



Photo 1 – Cactus vegetation of the square in the 1930s (Dourado, 2000).

Planning the restoration of Euclides da Cunha square was founded on general guidelines given in the 1981 Charter of Florence. It looked forward to its future recognition as a historical garden and as a cultural heritage site. It is implicit in this that the conservation of the space is inserted into the landscape of its surroundings and that its character as a living monument is safeguarded. The Charter makes clear that restoration should not favour one age to the detriment of another unless the state of degradation leads to it having to be reconstituted from vestigial remains and shielded by researching documentation which proves the authenticity of the garden. This should be registered in an Inventory of Historical Gardens.

As the drawing for the original project have not been found either in the archives of the Burle Marx Office in Rio de Janeiro or the Town Hall in Recife, research on the restoration of the landscape project began with an analysis of his garden drawings, old photographs, interviews and texts written by him at that time. Visits to the square were made to survey and evaluate the vegetation, to make observations on the transformation of the landscape of the surroundings and the use made of the square at different times of day.

4. The garden: restoration and community participation

The restoration of the *Cactário da Madalena, Praça Euclides da Cunha*, was based on adequate existing data about this asset concerning its lay-out as previously conceived and therefore it made the restoration of its cultural significance possible. This experiment - that started in February, 2001 -, unleashed a new process for the planning and management of public spaces in the city of Recife. The restoration design was based on evidence such as Burle Marx's drawings and lectures between 1935-37, old photographs and iconography, and interviews with people knowledgeable about the subject. Some visits were undertaken to the square to identify the *caatinga* vegetation and comparing this with the survey carried out by the City Council. Also this stage provided a process by which the City Council professional team involved with the project gained a maturer understanding of and belief in this practice of restoration/conservation: keeping to the original ideas of the famous landscape designer Burle Marx.

Despite the arguments on the removal of trees to make room for the cacti having taken place early on representatives from educational institutions, trades union, professional associations and environmental pressure groups, the community in general was not included. The inclusion of the community in general in this process would imply preparing a special program of heritage education to be provided by City Council which would involve different levels of education as well as the media. Furthermore, the

restoration of this garden also established a process of awareness-raising for both the institution and local residents. It happened that the City Council was still not very convinced of the need to make such efforts besides which they reverted to the excuse there was a shortage of available civil servants. This led to fresh argument in local newspapers that in turn created a kind of communication channel between departments of the City Council, The Federal University and other institutions involved.

A total of 20 news items was exchanged between the community and local government between July 2003 and May 2004. Although the main aspect of the restoration project, which was to re-introduce cacti vegetation included in Burle Marx's conception of the garden, had been explained in a newspaper article by the team responsible, many people had not seen this and there emerged user opinions against this way of thinking. These opinions were related only to an isolated subject which was the removal of vegetation without considering the whole idea of the garden. This argument was restricted to a single point which was the felling of 23 trees which growing up for the lack of maintenance (Photo 2), instead of expanding the conception of a thematic garden on *caatinga* vegetation. And there was a screen of trees limiting the square according Burle Marx's idea which was to have been completed with the planting of 48 trees, and therefore the planting of a greater number of trees than those which were to have been removed (Fig. 1). It seemed that the main point was the loss of vegetation which had become a practice in the city under pressure from the high density of building. One of the consequences of this was the elimination of gardens and yards. Furthermore, the population had forgotten the maintenance level of the square had been low for more than twelve years and the parking of vehicles on the grass and paths of the square had become a practice.



Photo 2 – Euclides da Cunha Square: trees instead of cactus, 1993 (CECI, 1993).

Also people were influenced by the image of cacti vegetation as being associated with drought, hunger and poverty, held to be characteristics of the *sertão* region. So, when the removal of the trees started, the arguments became serious and associated Municipality decision-making with environmental crime as well as showing a lack in preserving the city's memory. This assertion although it came from an article by a well-known intellectual showed a lack of knowledge about the city's history. At this point, the City Council recognized its educational role from the point of view of the city having an educative role. It replied through the newspaper by presenting historical, ecological and artistic arguments concerning Burle Marx's garden conception including his having

specified the cacti to be planted. The City Council praised the high quality of the team responsible for the restoration project showing that they were aware of the decision to conserve the garden as a monument. The controversy reached federal government authorities. Their analysis took into account historical and artistic arguments in respect of the city's history and the environmental reasons for the felling of several trees most of which were diseased, and their being replaced with *caatinga* vegetation from the original design. Such reflections showed that the arguments deepened the subject of open spaces as history, art and ecology, which attains multidisciplinary and new cultural values (Photo 3).



Photo 3 – The *Cactário da Madalena* restored, 2004 (CECI, 2004).

This fact can be analysed both positively and negatively. Positively because population demanded a more democratic debate involving different social classes and the future users of the square. This made the team responsible for the project reflect on the methodology used and consequently to perform better. Negatively as the population felt left out initially which may cause them to increase or decrease their involvement in the management process.

For the team responsible for the project which since the beginning was concerned about the reaction of the population, the accusation of aggression towards the environment because of the removal of the trees was an important spur to caring even more for the urban landscape. However it revealed a position of resistance to change and also a lack of information about the history of Recife and a lapse in the preservation of memory. Nevertheless, this manifestation has provoked a debate on the history and social, ecological and educational function of a public space. This has led to new positions being adopted such as the one of a neighbouring school that promptly showed interest in being a partner in the management of the space.

The Euclides da Cunha Square is becoming a symbolic landmark in the city. In November 2004, it was selected to represent Brazilian architecture, along with some architectural buildings, in an exhibition mounted in three Colombian and European cities. This shows recognition of its cultural value by the profession of architecture. And, by observation, the high level of urban landscape maintenance in its vicinity provides evidence that the practice of conservation and use are considered legitimate by the population.

The conservation of this garden invests in time, memory and knowledge and unites the past, present and future. In other words, the memory of a time which had a certain way of thinking and landscape, the permanence of structural elements which resisted time –

some trees, vestiges of the lay-out and its relation to new elements such as materials and furniture – and the active use of this cultural object in the education of new generations.

This is a plural and therefore a multidisciplinary piece of work as it brings together a team of professionals from different fields of study to rebuild or to make perceptible an abandoned artefact which will be legitimized by its users. For the City Council, the experience represented a learning process in which the responsibilities for investing in the conservation of a cultural asset are to be shared with its citizens. In addition, this decision incorporates new behaviour regarding aesthetic and ecological principles which were very much to the fore during the 17th century as demonstrated by the interventions of the Dutch Prince Moritz van Nassau and later in the 20th century by Burle Marx.

The recognition of a garden as an artistic piece of work opens up a new moment for the population of Recife and its cultural landscape as it means above all strengthening the relationship between art and nature and hence taking forward an educative process for respecting and valuing public spaces as well as promoting heritage education.

5. Indicators of garden and surrounding conservation

The Charter of Florence demands the conservation of historical gardens and their surroundings be guaranteed by drawing up an inventory to manage and regulate their maintenance and use. The inventory begins with the garden itself and its immediate surroundings.

The chosen indicators for the study of the region where the *Cactário da Madalena* is located are instruments for getting to know the local reality at the level of neighbourhoods in the diverse dimensions of a multidisciplinary context such as: the economic dimension – income, economic activities, collection of taxes -; social development -; poor localities, income distribution, unemployment rate, proportion of indigents, infant mortality -; housing – number of dwellings, poor housing, level of connexion of dwellings to public utilities, value of land and built area, housing density and investments -; environmental management – housing in areas of risk, monument and historical sites, length of rivers and canals, green areas, areas of expansion, water-borne diseases, rates of population growth -; governance – collection of taxes, public investments in infra-structure works and the participation of the population in urban management. Such data are fundamental for the comprehension of the garden's surroundings as a landscape unit that will express its character which is understood as the combination of physical, social, economic, environmental and psychological variables.

As to the micro vision in which the historical garden is the object, the indicators become more specific. Apart from which, it is vital that communities acknowledge its value as a living monument, guarding and defending it whenever something threatens its existence. For this a permanent and effective monitoring and control system is necessary to evaluate the status of the historical garden in the light of conservation indicators the functions of which are to point out aspects that will assure that it will be used appropriately. The specific indicators cover:

Infrastructure – adequacy and conservation of furniture; proper functioning of the drainage system, lightning, water supply; internal and external sign-posting, information plaques; cleaning the borders and area of square;

Environmental management – health state of vegetation; accessibility to the borders and the area of the square by pedestrians and automobiles; car parking; safeguarding of historical buildings and monuments within the square and which borders it; permanence of the architectural configuration on the boundaries of the square; controlling environmental imbalance; implementation of the Inventory of Historical Gardens; liaison with other gardens and public spaces nearby.

Governance - mounting of events permitted within the square as a part of educational and cultural programmes; compatible uses; participation and organization of the community in actions of preservation; protection and sponsoring associations by the committed community to cultural heritage; use of protection legislation and restrictions as to use;

Economy – inclusion in the tourist route through Recife; reducing maintenance costs.

6. Conclusions

The first step for the conservation of historical gardens in the city of Recife has been taken with the restoration of the *Cactário da Madalena*. This means a gearing towards the promotion of the restoration of a group of its gardens so that these artefacts may be incorporated as a cultural heritage in the daily life of the city's inhabitants. It makes clear that a new conservation practice in a city with a high level of poverty and a low level of education should be expected a conflict situation that should be faced up to under the perspective of investigating and restoring Brazilian roots and so construct knowledge. To achieve this, the participation of the population and non-specialists is acknowledged. Although at first this was characterised as a reaction against what had been put forward they later became partners when they played a watchdog role on work-in-progress, thus adding another function to the multidisciplinary team. The restoration process of the *Cactário da Madalena* has been an innovative experience in heritage education and in the learning process for urban conservation not only for the City Council but also for the professional team and local residents. They range from ordinary people to those with different levels of education. The restoration of the garden brought back some aspects of the 1935-37 urban landscape and kept others from today in order to build a cultural landscape. That the restoration of the garden materialized arose from activities of the professional team, City Council decision-makers and the population at large. Special heritage awareness education began in 2001 and will be maintained by applying indicators for garden conservation. Conservation means the awakening of knowledge about how the process of the potentialities of a garden of irrefutable qualities can be consolidated through use and certainly will be admired by visitors much to the satisfaction of those residents in Recife.

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