INTerventions in Historic areas, Mobility and urban Conservation: The Case study of Bairro do Recife District

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Abstract

Urban conservation has been presented as an alternative way to analyze the interfaces between different fields of knowledge that impinge on the process of urban sustainable development. Nowadays, collective identity and memory are essential values that must be present in any urban planning task. In particular, transportation projects represent one of the most interfering interventions on the urban space and, this is especially the case in historic areas. The objective of this paper is to analyze the gap between plans and projects on transportation, which have been conceived in order to improve mobility in central urban areas, and urban conservation. The case study is the current Bairro do Recife District which, since the 1980’s, has been the object of studies, projects and urban interventions which target re-habilitating the area. First, the paper emphasizes the positive and negative impacts on the mobility of people and vehicles, ranked from several projects that reflected directly on the traffic system of the Bairro do Recife. Second, it analyses the role of the Bairro do Recife Technical Agency that has remained as a consultancy body, without the necessary autonomy to assure governability and governance in the area. Third, it is seen that, very often, financial mechanisms are not fully utilized because of the lack of liaison between the different public management bodies. Throughout the analysis, the paper therefore considers the physical integrity, the authenticity of the architectural character and the level of integration between the main objects that comprise the built landscape.

Key words: urban conservation, interventions, mobility, Bairro do Recife

1. Historical Background

The original peninsula of Recife, the oldest area in the town, started out in the 16th century as a fishing village and a harbor, the function of which was to promote agricultural production in Pernambuco, which lies in Northeastern Brazil. Because of the increase in sugar-cane production, in the 17th century, the harbor of Recife became the largest in the Americas.

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The occupation of the peninsula followed the model of Portuguese towns. It stretched along a narrow belt, parallel to the coast, with some roads penetrating the continent.

Over the centuries, several projects were conceived to improve the harbor area, but that objective was only reached at the beginning of the 20th century, as the result of a project based on hygienist concepts. First, the urban reform of Recife transformed the peninsula into an island and changed the local urban design, in order to facilitate the flows of goods coming from the hinterland to the harbor area. Starting in that period, the restrictions on accessing the island became more evident and are reflected in the local circulation.

The new urban design, influenced by the Haussmann style, created several main avenues that configured a radial-concentric network. The transformations in the urban tissue, as a consequence of the works to improve the harbor area, set a new pattern of occupation and a new aesthetic order.

In the second half of the 20th century, industrial growth, the integration of regional economies and the increase in the population was decisive in transforming Recife into a regional metropolis, leading to activities moving out of the center and, consequently, a functional definition of the new economic spaces.

In the 1960’s, the urban structure of the harbor area was thoroughly transformed, due to a reform that included the construction of new quay-side warehousing, a group of oil-related product containers and the sugar terminal. The area around the Chapel of Pilar was expropriated in order to set up facilities related to harbor activities. However, the change was not fully brought about and many plots remained empty. Then, unemployed people and, even harbor staff employees looking for housing near their place of work invaded the empty plots and founded the Community of Pilar. Since then, the very low standard of living of the inhabitants and the indifference of public authorities have put at risk both the physical integrity and the authenticity of the architectural characteristics of the Chapel of Pilar which is a national monument. The building is surrounded by the squatters’ make-shift homes, is in practice almost inaccessible, and therefore deprived of visitors or active use.

The 1960’s re-building program impacted on Av. Alfredo Lisboa, as it annexed part of the road for use as a loading/unloading area for trucks and another part for the railway.
The riverfront of Cais do Apolo, which underwent land-fill in the 1970’s, at first was set aside for creating car parking. Progressively, it has been occupied by municipal, local state and federal government bodies but their presence has brought little benefit to the local neighborhood economy.

The attempt to transform the Bairro of Recife into a business centre did not work, due to the process of various activities moving out of the immediate area. New lines of urban transport routes were determined by the transformations in the grid, such as the construction of Av. Agamenon Magalhães, towards the end of the 1970’s. These changes have been reflected in the radial-concentric network. They began in the central area, contributed to speeding up the flow of traffic and boosted the tendency for activities to move out.

The Bairro do Recife became a prime area for commercial activities. The consequence of sites becoming derelict and under-valued was that many buildings were erected on and near accessible and extensive spaces for use as departmental stores. One result was that vehicles used for loading and unloading began to park in public spaces.

During this period, residential use of the Bairro collapsed so that by 1991, only 566 people were identified as residents, and most of these were concentrated in the Community of Pilar.

In the 1980’s, urban planners and managers tried to correct the negative image of the Bairro. In 1986, the Plan for the re-habilitation of the Bairro do Recife was drawn up, based on studies that took into account the local social context. Also, they verified that the urban infra-structure needed to be improved from different viewpoints.

2. The existing conditions of accessibility and mobility and the plans for urban improvements

The grid in the Bairro mainly comprises the following roads: Av.Rio Branco, Av. Marquês de Olinda, Av.Alfredo Lisboa, Av. Cais do Apolo, Av. Cais da Alfândega and Rua Observatório. The only access into the Bairro is over the 12 de Setembro, Buarque de Macedo and Limoeiro bridges, while the outward flow is over the 12 de Setembro, Maurício de Nassau and Limoeiro bridges.

Until the end of the 1970’s, few bus routes, serving the historic downtown area, passed through the Bairro do Recife. Due to that characteristic of the public transportation system, people who worked in the area had to walk across the bridges in order to catch buses in the neighboring districts of Santo Antônio and São José.

Parking along the roads became more and more difficult. The Riverfront of Cais da Alfândega, considered as a possible alternative, was not suitable for this kind of use, because there was no public lighting, or policing, or regular street cleaning. A representative density of the traffic of vehicles loading and unloading was identified in the neighborhood of the Forte do Brum, and in Brum Street and São Jorge Street, serving the department stores, the Harbor and Recife Mill.

In 1975, unemployed people and harbor staff employees began taking over derelict buildings and forming the area that became known as Rat Squatters Area, today called the Community of Pilar. Public spaces and sidewalks were invaded and make-shift houses erected, without any kind of infra-structure. São Jorge, Bernardo Vieira de Melo, Edgar Werneck, Ocidente, Brum Streets and the Travessa de São Jorge all remained unpaved.
A program named “Urban Improvements” was drawn up by the municipality for maintaining and restoring open spaces in the Bairro, establishing urban control, improving public transportation, traffic and specific projects. After analyzing the situation of the Bairro, the program defined the following objectives for improving urban mobility:

- Maximum utilization of the existing functional and physical structure (physical rehabilitation);
- Integration Harbor/Town.

Between them, emphasis was given to the re-habilitation of the open space of Bom Jesus Street, in such a way as to stimulate the diversification of services and opportunities, and to bring about the re-urbanization in front of Cais da Alfândega.

That phase was characterized by the creation of the Bairro do Recife Technical Agency whose main task has been to implement the Plan and coordinate the local projects. Nevertheless, without the necessary financial and political autonomy to ensure projects in the area are carried out in full, the Bairro do Recife Technical Agency remained a mere consultative body and, in 2005, its activities were ended.

Such fragility, therefore, became, aggravated because of the non-continuity of policies between successive administrations. In 1989, for example, the change in Mayor led to a slow-down in the execution of public works. Only projects which had been started were followed through, even though there were resources for implementing some others.

In 1991, after the Revitalization Plan for the Bairro do Recife was drawn up, the process was resumed, the objectives of which were to preserve the cultural and historic heritage, to revive the local economy, to increase tourism and to define a management model, based on sustainable development. Despite some successful aspects of the Revitalization Plan, the economic emphasis was to the detriment of the social insertion of the local population and has contributed to altering the common understanding of the concept of open public spaces.

The Revitalization Plan proposed zoning that considered the particularities of each sector. Three sectors were identified in order to regulate the use and occupation of urban land: the Sector of Controlled Intervention, the Sector of Urban Renewal and the Urban Consolidation Sector.

In these sectors, several Poles of Interest were set up in order to make the revitalizing actions more efficient. The new actions were only available due to partnerships for investment between public bodies and private companies.
The five poles of interest are as follows: Fluvial (riverside), Alfândega (the former Customs area), Bom Jesus, Pilar and Arrecifes (the mole).

The Bom Jesus and Alfândega Poles are situated in the oldest sites of the original Bairro do Recife, in the Sector of Controlled Intervention. In those poles, several projects and actions were selected to accelerate the process of economic revival.

In the Bom Jesus Pole, along Barão Rodrigues Mendes Street, some vestiges of the 17th century Porta da Terra Rampart were discovered. The area was designated as being for pedestrians only. In addition, improvements in drainage, public lighting and the maintenance of trees and shrubs were recommended.

Implementation of the Bom Jesus Pole Project was carried out in 1997. It has prompted other programs and projects to be drawn up. The most significant programs are: PRODETEUR (Program for the Development of Tourism) and the Monumenta/BID.

3. The local logic of traffic

The Bairro do Recife grid consists of 43 streets, with distinctive features, ranging from narrow ones, or those paved with cobble-stone, to broad, asphalt avenues. In Image 2, the roads of Bairro do Recife are represented according to the conventions of the National Traffic Code.

The Buarque de Macedo and Maurício de Nassau Bridges are like extensions of the urban design of the Bairro do Recife, linking the main avenues to Santo Antônio District, to the west, while the Limoeiro and 12 de Setembro Bridges give through traffic routes to the north and south, respectively.

Av. Alfredo Lisboa, classed as an arterial road, has a rapid flow of vehicles and links the northern and southern ends of Recife. In a unique sense, it corresponds to the eastern boundary of the Bairro do Recife, and extends from 12 de Setembro Bridge to Limoeiro.
Bridge. Therefore, it functions as a Crossing Axis, by receiving the traffic flows coming from the southern end, and leading on to the Harbor area or the northern end.

The sequence comprising Av. Martin Luther King, better known as Cais do Apolo, and by Alfândega Street, recently adjusted for traffic, configures the Internal Linking Axis of the Bairro do Recife. Despite Av. Martin Luther King being a two-lane road, the flow coming from the north to the south is more intense. The Internal Linking Axis also links Limoeiro Bridge to 12 de Setembro Bridge and forms a binary with Av. Alfredo Lisboa.

Alfândega Street is a wide road, paved with cobble-stones, with sidewalks and parking spaces. Its adjustment for traffic was aimed at absorbing part of the traffic coming from Madre de Deus Street, the urbanization of which is of long standing and consolidated, but the width of this street is less than that of Alfândega Street.

The Marquês de Olinda and Rio Branco Avenues are radial, and start out from Marco Zero Square. They have an important function in the traffic system because they offer the way into and out of the Bairro, via the Buarque de Macedo and Maurício de Nassau Bridges, respectively. Both avenues, which have 3-lanes paved in asphalt, form together a binary so that they determine the east-west connection, and vice-versa, between the Bairro do Recife and the rest of the Historic Centre.

On the other roads, the traffic is either passing through or serving commerce and local services. Most of the roads are narrow, with very old cobble-stone, and a relatively regular urban design.

In most of the roads of the Bairro do Recife, parking places are distributed along the sidewalks and regulated by the blue zone system. In local roads, this system permits a maximum of 5 hours’ parking, as in the following streets: Rua do Bom Jesus, Rua Domingos José Martins, Rua da Guia, Rua do Apolo, etc. On the most important roads, either due to the physical configuration, or to the ranking of the traffic system of the Bairro, or to the intense through flows of vehicles, the maximum parking time allowed is 2 hours, such as on Rio Branco and Marquês de Olinda Avenues.

4. Programs and projects for the Bairro do Recife

The main existing programs and projects for the Bairro do Recife correspond to most of the urban re-habilitation works for public spaces, with the emphasis on PRODETUR and Monumenta/BID.

PRODETUR I and II aim to promote and consolidate municipal tourism activities, by improving both the physical aspects and institutional development. Thus, some restoration and draining works were announced such as the restoration of the Cruz do Patrão (a standing cross from the slavery period) and the access to its surroundings, the Pilar Chapel and an archaeological dig at São Jorge Fortress. Unfortunately, until now none of those projects has been undertaken, because of the lack of liaison between political spheres and the non political continuity from one administration to another.

The urban qualification of the Community of Pilar is expected to be an important intervention in the Bairro because of the social insertion of residents. Improving its public spaces should be achieved by unblocking access to the Pilar Chapel Courtyard. Between the blocks, the remaining spaces should be designated for public parking areas, with a view to the future demand created by the new projects. But, here again, this project has not yet started. Particularly, in this situation, it is not in the interest of private real state promoters to invest in the area and, on the other hand, the local government is not able to achieve this by itself.
The aims of Monumenta/BID are to restore and preserve the historic and cultural heritage in a sustainable way. The Alfândega/Madre de Deus Pole is a component of Monumenta/BID and its proposals are:

Integrating areas of distinct historical eras that are important to the development of the Bairro do Recife and the Historic Centre;

Encouraging the expansion of private investments, and

Promoting the implementation of important activities in the area.

The first phase was the restoration of the building that has housed the Oratory Monastery and the old Custom-House, since the 18th century. In that building, which is protected by the Institute for the National Historic and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN), a new use has been introduced, the Paço Alfândega (shopping) Mall.

In its essentials, the building’s main morphological features were preserved but the introduction of an aerial walk-way to bridge the gap between the multi-storey car park and the Paço Alfândega Mall itself, has resulted in strong interference on the architectural ensemble.

The main issue is to establish the limits which must be respected while new interventions are added to built environments, as integrity is an important requisite to ensure the authenticity of historic sites. Despite the need created by the large number of new parking places, the implementation of the aerial walk-way was the subject of fierce debate, involving IPHAN, the Town Hall Administration, the academic community and several civil institutions.

The project named Porto Digital is supported by the Government of the State of Pernambuco and aims to attract Information Technology enterprises and corporations to the Bairro. Initially, the Porto Digital was made responsible for restoring some 20 old buildings, and this reflected positively as several sections of streets and sidewalks were also restored, thus contributing to improving mobility.

While the infrastructure for technological activities and improvements to public lighting were being put in place, some vestiges of the defence ramparts, dating from the 17th century occupation of the Bairro do Recife by the Dutch, were discovered. However, the degradation of some sections of the sidewalks, as a consequence of the digs, has led to the destruction of part of the traditional use of Portuguese paving stones. If, on the one hand, those works bring some quality to the area, by improving the public lighting, on the other
hand it contributes to reducing the local mobility, by causing discomfort to pedestrians, and attacks on the integrity and authenticity of architectural elements.

Within certain limits, the strategy for the Porto Digital allows the new enterprises and corporations to choose the location of their premises. The most frequent and decisive factors for locating new groups in the Bairro do Recife are related to the offer and cost of real estate and some external factors. For business owners, good parking facilities make a favorable impression.

Some enterprises, based in the area, provide products or services related to traffic which they market all over Brazil. One of them is responsible for creating remote centralized and integrated management systems for traffic light networks. Such systems share the infrastructure of equipment and the means of transmission and communication and produce information for panels, besides calculating the volumetric averages and statistics of flows, which are transmitted in real time to a central control unit. But, unfortunately they have not been engaged on a project for improving local urban mobility.

The aim of the Urban Archaeology project is to foster tourist activities in the Bairro, by displaying for the public important historical vestiges such as the old Dutch ramparts. But, until the dig is over, the archaeological works inhibit visits to Barão Rodrigues Mendes Street, as fencing has been partially destroyed and serves as shelter for squatters. This demonstrates the lack of liaison between the institutions involved and begs for actions to be synchronized in order to avoid negative consequences for urban mobility.

The project called Living in the Town Centre aims to improve housing conditions in the Central Area of Recife, by bringing together investment funding from the public and private sectors. In order to bring this about, it is hoped that by encouraging the use of housing for residential purposes in the Bairro do Recife, and supporting this with encouraging the return or set up of complementary services and commerce, a community can be established that can attain local sustainable development. This is premised on diversifying the range of services and opportunities offered in the district, which could be also interpreted as an action to increase local mobility.

**5. Final considerations**

From the time it was first settled, the Bairro do Recife has performed a primordial role in the formation of the urban space of the Historic Centre, and has served the preponderant function of supporting harbor activities. Starting with the urban revitalization at the beginning of the 20th century, the radial-concentric urban design, which plays out from Marco Zero Square, gave a different shape to the built landscape, and dictated the movement of traffic movement under the then newly implemented model for the grid.
The construction of Av. Alfredo Lisboa, which links the flows coming from the south and leading north, can be seen to have been an attempt to neutralize the radial-concentric model. Nevertheless, the movements observed along this avenue are typical of through traffic, as they do nothing to promote integration between the functions and activities undertaken in the Bairro. Therefore, the challenge consists of integrating the external flows to the internal logic of circulation in the Bairro, by creating a circular public transportation system, which should support productive activities, services and commerce, thus avoiding excessive congestion in public spaces.

The stress exerted by private car owners over the logic, as they see it, of urban planning leads to alternatives that can put at risk both the physical integrity of the built environment and the authenticity of its main morphological features. The challenge is then about restoring buildings, by putting them into their current economic context, and about respecting the values of each of the natural, cultural and built environments, both separately and together.

One of the main objectives urban planning seeks to achieve, and which ought to include transportation planning, is to improve the mobility of people. This is to be seen as a way to expand the range of opportunities and access to goods, services, jobs, culture and entertainment.

Urban development depends on a large set of economic, social, political and cultural factors, as well on concrete policies adopted by the Government, the private sector, the citizens in general, and organized society. That being so, the actions and projects, undertaken by different social agents, who are responsible for transforming collective practices, will only be effective in ensuring sustainable development if they are conceived as part of a management urban conservation plan. In such a plan, natural, cultural and built values must be shared and accepted as priorities, and this must be achieved by means of negotiating proposals that involve a wide range of citizens and, which must be followed up and evaluated by working groups that are fully representative of local society at large.

References


