

# **NIBBLING AWAY THE SPIRIT OF PLACE IN PROTECTED URBAN AREAS**

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**Abstract.** The conservation of protected urban areas (large and small, including cities, towns and historical centres or quarters) is affected by various factors that mitigate the authenticity and integrity of this cultural heritage. Within this universe, small-scale phenomena that, in the majority of cases, occur practically undetected, gradually contribute towards alteration of the appearance and content of the architectural setting of these localities. This work concentrates on analysis of the cumulative effect of minor alterations carried out gradually by the users of these areas, a topic that has been attracting particular attention from the specialists and entities concerned with conservation. Such nibbling modifications are defined as "inch-by-inch deterioration."

At the outset, the article discusses the conception of protected urban areas. It then proceeds to seek understanding of the present conditions of such spaces, through analyses of their transformation, and the conservation measures adopted. Finally, it focuses on a study of the nature, causes and consequences of this creeping alteration, in particular, how they undermine the 'spirit of place' of these areas, as well as how they could be reversed with special reference to Rio de Janeiro city's protected quarters.

## **1. Protected urban areas**

Protected urban areas possess varied denominations and definitions in the specialized conservation literature. The most traditional concept is based on the historical centre, whose perimeter is restricted to the central part of the city, a nucleus that constitutes a starting point for urban evolution spreading along expansion vectors, which have become consolidated over time, forming districts and secondary centres. The first protection and conservation initiatives are concentrated in these places. This tendency used to be justified by the

quantity and quality of buildings with potential for protection. In the beginning, the attention was concentrated on the buildings of notable architectural merit, outstanding in terms of their artistic attributes and atmospheric significance. Subsequently, modest buildings came to be valued because of their importance as part of an architectural setting. Meanwhile, other places in cities were ignored by the organs acting as guardians of the cultural heritage.

As time went by, this distortion was reviewed and gradually corrected. The historical centres were renamed historical sites, a concept that also began to encompass other built-up areas of cities, comprising districts and historical settings (that may include more than one district). The two denominations still coexist in the conservation literature. The common points of these definitions are historical, artistic and affective singularity, homogeneity and integrity that constitute the atmospheres peculiar of these areas, distinguishing them from the rest of the city.

Ramón Gutiérrez's (1989) work, 'Os Centros Históricos da América Latina: Um desafio a Criatividade' [The Historical Centres of Latin America: a Challenge to Creativity] may be considered one of the marks of revised definition of urban areas with potential for protection. Gutiérrez's article was presented in the "Primeiro Seminário brasileiro para a preservação e revitalização de centros históricos" [First Brazilian Seminar About the Preservation and Revitalization of Historical Centres], organized by ICOMOS Brazil, in 1987, in the town of Petrópolis. In this event, the "Carta de Petrópolis" [Petropolis Charter] was drafted, considered by the specialized literature as one of the principal international documents concerning urban area conservation. Comparison of the two texts allows one to reach conclusions regarding the influence of Ramón Gutiérrez in the revision of the concept of historical centre. In the Petropolis Charter, the historical attribute still remains in the designation, "Sítios Históricos Urbanos - SHUs" [Urban Historical Sites - UHSs]. However, the reach of this concept goes beyond the scope of the former definitions stated in protection and conservation texts. The UHSs are understood in this document in terms of their operational value as "**critical areas**" (emboldened in the original document) "rather than in opposition to the city's non-historical places, since the city in its totality is a historical entity."(Cury, 2000, p. 285).

Therefore, from the viewpoints of Ramón Gutiérrez and the Petropolis Charter, the protection must not be restricted to the centres, districts or settings said to be historical, bearing in mind that the entire city, even the recently added built-up areas, including shantytowns, are also historical. However, these "**critical areas**" are distinguished from the other spaces in the city because of their physical, social and economic peculiarities that define the spirit of these places. This collection of geographical forms, as defined by Maurício Abreu (1987, p. 30), are, in reality, urban areas that are produced by the same social, economic and cultural logic of the cities, regions and countries where they are situated. Some of them are protected and others still possess potential for such due to their uniqueness or rarity value as outlined above.

## **2. From urban renewal to conservation**

In the majority of cases, the formation of protected urban areas underwent moments of glory and decline. The loss of prestige of these places is correlated with the obsolescence of the buildings and urban structure. Nutt *et al* (1972), Nathaniel Lichfield (1988), Tiesdell, Oc, Heath (1996) and Peter Larkhan (1996) have studied this theme. They comment that obsolescence is an inevitable process that affects urban areas and their components from the very moment they begin to be used. In general, all the material assets are produced with what is most modern in terms of technology and aesthetic standards. The evolution of the life style of the society and transformations of the social, economic and cultural organization commented above, in some cases, make this legacy out-of-date. This situation can vary over the years, decades or centuries, but it is perceived at the instant a request from the users (individuals, families, companies, public institutions, etc.) is not fully understood. It is as of this point that the obsolescence begins, and it can reach the extreme of total loss of efficiency and utilization.

The concept of obsolescence is controversial. It was and still is used in a distorted manner to viabilize demolitions of buildings and urban renewal schemes for districts considered "decadent" by the public authority and the property market (Sampaio, 2002, pp. 25-26). These places have been mutilated and, in some cases, thoroughly renovated in order to viabilize models of urban development and urban policies. Several of them had the capacity to adapt and perform other functions in these new social and economic frameworks.

However, the justification of "progress" prevailed in the construction of expressways, demolitions of hills, districts, blocks and buildings of which the urban evolution of Rio de Janeiro, for example, is replete with cases. Much has been lost, mainly throughout the 20th century, notably the demolitions of the hills, Morro do Castelo (1920s) and Morro Santo Antônio (1950s), and whole blocks in the construction of the thoroughfares, Av. Rio Branco (1900s), Av. Presidente Vargas (1940s), and Av. República do Paraguai (1950s), just like various international examples listed in the urban investigation literature.

The models of predatory urban development, above all in the post-war period, were severely contested at the beginning of the 1960s. The spokesman for this movement was Jane Jacobs, whose book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (1961, published in Brazil in 2003) became a paradigm of the contestation of unrestrained urban renewal in areas with protection potential. Post-modernism, through revaluation of the architectural and urban contributions of the past, was also fundamental to the survival of these places. These and other initiatives on the part of non-governmental organizations and residents associations, collaborated decisively to create legislation for protection of urban areas, which complemented the protection listing. Tiesdell, Oc and Heath (1996, p. 2) state that the "1961 Monument Act" of Holland was the first, followed by "Loi Malraux" of France, in 1962, the "Civic Amenities Act" in the U.K. in 1967, and so on. In Brazil, this type of listing instrument was implemented as of the 1970s, especially through the initiatives of the city/town halls, which, according to the Brazilian Constitution, possess the prerogative to implement urban policy, create building regulation and urban legislation, besides the power to list, in the same way as the federal and state governments. The pioneering experience occurred in Curitiba (1971), followed by cases in Rio de Janeiro (1979) and Recife (1980).

The majority of areas of interest for protection that have partially or fully resisted urban renewal are, today, protected. In the U.K., according to "The Royal Town Planning Institute" (1994, p. 17), there are around 8,000 conservation areas, and in Rio de Janeiro, around 27, which include around 24,110 listed buildings, mostly from the republican period (1890s - 1940s), according to data from the Secretaria Municipal Especial de Patrimônio Cultural - SEDREPAC [Special Municipal Secretariat for Cultural Property]. Before the

creation of these conservation areas, as of 1937, the federal government, through the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional - IPHAN [National Institute of Cultural Property - the counterpart of the 'English Heritage' or 'Historic Scotland' institutions], listed around 79 "historical centres and urban settings", the majority from the colonial period (15th - 18th century). The state governments initiatives resemble the IPHAN instruments and safeguard criteria.

After the protection measures for areas threatened to a greater or lesser degree by urban renewal on distinct scales, various conservation strategies were put into practice. The conservation literature on urban areas contains an abundance of accounts of initiatives, the majority concentrated on the physical aspects of townscape. Authors, such as Tiesdell, Oc and Heath (1996, pp. 207-211), criticize this strategy, stressing that the conservation of urban areas rests on a tripod composed of physical, economic and social revitalization.

Following this line of reasoning, Rypkema (1992 *Apud* Tiesdell, Oc and Heath 1996, p. 209) states that "people and economic activity, not paint and plumbing fixtures, ultimately add economic value". Tiesdell, Oc and Heath complement Rypkema, affirming that "in the short term, physical revitalization can result in an attractive, well-maintained public realm that projects a positive image and encourages confidence in the location. In the long term economic revitalization is required, as ultimately it is the productive utilization of the private realm that pays for the maintenance of the public realm." From the angle of social revitalization, these authors affirm that the presence of people transforms "spaces" into "places", making them alive, occupied and organic parts of the city.

Protected old urban forms have been adapted to perform new functions appropriate to their architectural characteristics in various cities of Europe, the USA and some in Brazil. Even so, a significant number of buildings are still underutilized or empty (Sampaio, 2002, pp. 22-24). In the Brazilian cases, the persistence of this underutilization in conjunction with scarce financial resources, low purchasing power on the part of the owners or tenants, the marginalization practiced by the property market (which still prefers to invest in the vectors of urban expansion), among other factors, hinder the conservation and sustainability of the few buildings that have been dealt with. However, another phenomenon, hardly studied

in the conservation literature, has been gradually decharacterizing the protected urban areas. It constitutes the occasional isolated renovations that have been occurring systematically in the architectural compositions of the listed buildings.

### **3. Nibbling away “spirit of place” in protected urban areas**

The conservation of protected urban areas is a complex and arduous task. It involves intrinsic and extrinsic factors that are interlinked in a direct and indirect manner. The intrinsic aspects are highlighted in the specialized literature, but they are not always solved satisfactorily in practice. It is known that the loss of urban vitality caused by obsolescence, spontaneous and/or induced, adversely affect conservation and marginalize these areas when defining urban policies and concrete actions on the part of public authorities and the property market. However, factors considered of less importance collaborate in the medium and long term towards impairment of the integrity and authenticity of protected architectural settings. One factor that draws particular attention is the occasional isolated alterations, small-scale renovations performed gradually by the building users on particular architectural elements.

These tiny, localized, concentrated interventions, reminding one of ants at work, are disastrous from the viewpoint of conservation of the values that justify the protection of urban areas, their historical, artistic and affective uniqueness, in particular the typical, recurrent morphological characteristics of places, their architectural compositions, the construction techniques, and the integrity of the townscape, which together with user life styles, that is, their human coexistence and activities, comprise what can be termed “the spirit of the place”. The “nibbling” repertoire is quite varied, including removal of ornaments, balconies, eaves, skylights; replacement of wooden window frames by ones made of aluminium or pvc; coatings (mortar and stonework by tiles), roofing (clay tiles by fibrocement); painting of stone elements (including stone dust), inappropriate chromatic scale; placing of letterings; construction of marquees; installation of air conditioning units, parabolic antennas, wiring; fitting of grills, bars and railings; additions and extensions, etc. These alterations are more conspicuous on the façades (particularly the main ones) and on rooves. However, they also occur on a large scale in the interiors, in the form of compartmentalization, in decorative elements,

finishings, integrated assets, etc., which are often sacrificed in cases of application of the criterion for façade and roof protection, known in the literature as “façadism” (Cf. Richards, 1994 and Sampaio, 2005).

These minor alterations, denominated in this work as "inch-by-inch deterioration", are easily perceived in buildings of notable architectural merit, those that are outstanding in the townscape. However, modest buildings have their value as part of a set diluted along their façades, on their rooves, sometimes in whole blocks and streets. At times, they go unnoticed amid the diversity of forms, textures, colours, effects of light and shade of a set of ornaments, ironwork, window frames, and balconies. This type of action occurs in protected urban areas in general, whether central or peripheral, whether in the process of obsolescence or featuring urban vitality, occupied by users of high, medium and/or low purchasing power, educated or not. It is a world phenomenon that deserves particular attention in the specialized literature and organs concerned with cultural heritage.

Authors like Piero Sanpaolesi (1972) and Bernard Feilden (1996), world authorities on the conservation of buildings, approach these types of decharacterization superficially, placing them in the category, "the action of man", factors that contribute to the deterioration of buildings. However, as Feilden (1996, p. 153) stresses, “very little has been done to prevent this type of situation”. On the other hand, Christopher Brereton (1991, p. 10) draws attention to the detrimental effects of inappropriate alterations to the architectural characteristics. However, prudence is required in correcting these actions in terms of the preservation of the authenticity of the listed buildings. In general, in the British literature, as Robert Pickard indicates (1996, p.40), the physical decharacterizations most observed in protected urban areas are the painting of finishings (mainly stonework) and substitutions of original wooden window frames, rather similar to the "inch-by-inch deterioration" above.

Based on the professional experience of the author of this article in listed building consents in conservation areas of the central part of Rio de Janeiro, on similar reports by technicians acting in organs to protection cultural heritage in general, as well as on research performed about unauthorized works in listed buildings in the Cidade Nova Conservation Area of Rio (Sampaio, 1992), one can list some probable causes of the “inch-by-inch deterioration”. It is attributed to

factors that range from the obsolescence of buildings or parts of them to the absence of initiatives regarding cultural heritage education for building users.

Degradation of the technical and/or morphological performance of certain architectural elements makes users opt for their removal or replacement. The options of building materials available are, in the great majority of cases, incompatible with the aesthetic and physical characteristics of the original construction systems of the listed buildings, notably in terms of finishings and their workability. Even so, these alterations end up being executed, and, in the cases of the broad majority of protected urban areas in Brazil, are made by builders who always seek simple, low-cost solutions, compatible with their qualifications that are, all too often, minimal.

Listed buildings are also adapted constantly to satisfy the justified demands of the current users. Climatization is solved with random installations of air conditioning units in the masonry of the façades, in windows, in the ironwork, etc. Improvement in TV picture quality is obtained by installing large parabolic antennas on the rooves. Security standards are obtained by means of grills or bars across open spaces, and on doors and windows. The search for new space results in additions or extensions that are incorporated into the façades and rooves, altering volumes, roofing, skylights, illumination and ventilation wells.

Small well-oriented alterations developed during the listed building consents in the conservation areas of Rio de Janeiro are a minority. However, it is opportune to highlight the predominance of users who have no knowledge of the relevance of the building, urban and conservation legislation (Sampaio, 1992, p. 60). The listing of buildings by the conservation area instrument in Rio de Janeiro, for example, does not notify the owners, and it is decreed in official gazettes, access to which is restricted. Few are the cases in which the conservation criteria are clearly defined and made available.

The relentless pace of "inch-by-inch deterioration" erodes the townscape and runs counter to one of the main justifications for protection of urban areas: the value of the setting that is fundamental to "the spirit of the place". It gradually undermines the basic concepts of conservation of the protected urban areas, above all the integrity and authenticity of these places. "Inch-by-inch deterioration" also

places these "**critical areas**", according to the definition in the Petropolis Charter, on the same morphological level as the other localities. One or a few ornaments missing, the painting of some stonework bearing historical artistry of inestimable worth, the loss of one original wooden window frame and so on is perhaps only perceived, when these architectural settings are on the verge of irreversible decharacterization.

Insistence on the conservation of these architectural details, in principle, conveys an idea of excessive concern with intricate details and futility when set against the other physical, social and economic problems intrinsic to protected urban areas and the current needs of their users. However, the preservation and maintenance of these elements represent small conquests that will allow continuation of the more daring conservation schemes. On the other hand, it is important to remember that physical revitalization is not capable of maintaining itself for very long without complementary initiatives of a social and economic nature, as previously pointed out by Tiesdell, Oc and Heath.

Despite some irreparable losses, Rio de Janeiro's conservation areas are still recoverable and susceptible to conservation strategies. It is still possible to promote reconstitution and even reproductions and reinterpretations founded on empirical information in the remaining architectural elements without detriment to the integrity and authenticity of the listed buildings. This recuperation will probably take long, perhaps the same amount of time as that of the "inch-by-inch deterioration". Therefore, it is a medium and long-term strategy that needs to start urgently, so that little by little the parts that form the jigsaw of "the spirit of the place" of these protected urban areas become reintegrated. The first step consists of an all-embracing, profound and systematic investigation to complement the empirical diagnosis of the reasons that lead users to engage in "inch-by-inch deterioration." Only on the basis of contextualization of the origins of this phenomenon can suitable conservation strategies be developed for these areas.

The results of the proposed research above must be inserted into normatization programs of criteria for conservation of listed buildings. It is important for the users to have knowledge of the role, no matter how small, of parts of buildings in architectural compositions in their urban area, and also the importance of these elements in the formation of "the spirit of the place", which transforms spaces into places

(paraphrasing Tiesdell, Oc and Heath) and simultaneously contributes to the preservation of the identity of these areas and the memory of cities. It is more efficacious, generates better results, and educates rather than punishes.

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