

(working title) Architectural and urban interventions as a platform for (re)inventing cities' identities – a somewhat conflicting scenario?

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Introduction – culture and the logic of contemporary urban regeneration strategies

Culture has been the major element in urban regeneration strategies that not only contribute to transform (physically and symbolic) hinterlands, but also promote some sort of reinvention of cities' identities and, consequently, increase mass tourism phenomenon. Since the 1800s, the provision of cultural districts with opera houses, libraries, museums, theatres and public squares has been part of 'modernising' political agendas in several cities around the globe. However, it was in the 1990s that a heavy reliance on the spectacularity of these developments and architectures created a new 'formula' for regenerating cities. The reasons for implementing such formulaic solution are many, but one is particularly compelling: more than transforming the identity of places, these developments and architectures intend to reinvent former derelict (and often historical) areas as fashionable districts, privileging the provision of cultural activities for a large, diversified public.

Urban regeneration schemes like Manchester's The Quays, or Bilbao's Abandoibarra, London's Southbank or even Rio de Janeiro's Porto Maravilha were commissioned and designed to 'heal' hinterlands and/or amend previous inefficient urban planning strategies – particularly considering the consequences of the industrial economic decline and the CIAM modernist inheritance and its functionalist/zoning spatial segregation. Arguably, the redesign of cities' redundant areas is considered crucial because it fosters economic growth and encourages socio-cultural transformation (which could be a positive thing), but also because it creates a more 'cosmopolitan' (image of the) city, where reconfigured spaces and activities are planned and

proposed to attract the ‘right sort’ of people and flow of capital (i.e. gentrification) – something that has intensified urban competition and entrepreneurialism as well as endorsed cities as places for consumption (Harvey, [1989], 1997, p 93; Augé in Ockman & Frausto, 2007, p 91).

However, in order to justify the commission of flagship architectural venues (mostly art museums) in cities’ derelict areas, most of these planned (and largely imposed) urban regeneration strategies have proposed a vast range of so-called cultural activities and services, notably targeting on the tourism/experience industry and its related activities – e.g. specialised shops, package travel deals, mass tourist attractions and routes, etc.... Simultaneously, cosmopolitan architectural aesthetics, uses and functions contribute to promote these recently renovated areas as ‘pop’ tourist destinations, where ‘iconic’ buildings become ‘symbols’ of urban regeneration/gentrification processes. (Rocha e Silva, 2011, pp 1-82)

This logic, however, seems to have changed recently: since the mid-2000s, whereas political agendas elsewhere are more aware of the relevance of the somewhat spontaneous and/or non-official cultural manifestations that are particular to a place, the sole reliance on new spectacular architectures and/or major urban developments in some obscure city as a means to promote economic growth has minimised. It seems that these attributes – even considering all the gentrification and touristification processes, and the increase in the real estate and land value – are not enough to sustain such regenerative policies anymore: some other factor has to emerge in order to keep the (speculative) wheel swirling.

In this sense, the proliferation of cultural politics and urban strategies that attempt to combine contrasting forces like the local and the global, the vernacular and the official artistic/architectural repertoire, the pop and the highbrow, the contemporary and the traditional etc... has become more evident. More than simply bringing together contrasting forces, these strategies have focused principally on how to create a more symbiotic, a more balanced relationship between consolidated and emerging cultural forms, artefacts and products – which eventually would be more widely accepted and absorbed by the public (be it of ‘locals’ or not).

Therefore, it is important to mention the sort of ‘back to the basics’ approach to design, where the incorporation of local cultural values, the development of partnerships with communities and the creation of multi- and transdisciplinary teams are encouraged – hopefully to create objects, environments and places that are more meaningful to people. These symbiotic strategies could be described as anthropological in its essence: instead of simply imposing new solutions, aesthetics and lifestyles that are alien to people, these heterogeneous working teams enthusiastically engage with the local communities in order to understand their real needs and to find other views, perceptions and possibilities (Reis, 2012).

(interventionist) contemporary urban design strategies in Rio de Janeiro – a platform for an idealised image of the city?

Interventionist processes does not come without some serious consequences – particularly if considered how former cultural patterns are either subdued or enhanced to promote cities’ new identities. As it is known, Rio de Janeiro is undergoing a rather long, profound and controversial (physical and symbolic) urban transformation to host a series of mega-events – notably the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. Major infrastructural works were planned, as well as the redevelopment of former derelict and/or disused sites to accommodate specific demands – which is the norm, given the (large) scale of these events and the (huge) expectations concerned. The difference, perhaps, is how to balance (pre-conceived) demands and the (real) expectations of the citizens – which is not quite the same thing.

Whilst the implementation of a series of newly designed buildings and urban developments is under way (museums, a completely renovated docklands and port area, a new financial and office district in the city centre, amongst others), there has been a clear intention to incorporate more traditional forms of cultural manifestations and representations – even if not always pertinent and appropriate. Our intention here is to present and discuss how the current politics and design strategies are attempting to balance these conflicting demands and project new realities – i.e. to transform Rio de Janeiro into a ‘cosmopolitan city’ yet preserving its somewhat distinctive cultural heritage, lifestyle and festive atmosphere.

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