URBAN HERITAGE REPRESENTATIONS IN HYPERDOCUMENTS

THE MONROE PALACE IN RIO DE JANEIRO

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Abstract

The need for various approaches of conservation and restoration drives our attention to the different kinds of urban heritage. These differences can be understood in terms of different degrees of heritage values such as oldness, historical documentation, intentional remembrance and integrity.

We can also consider that buildings are signaled as heritage as much as for the narratives in which they are involved as for their physical presence and qualities. Their physical presence acts as a departure point for citizens to share histories and stories.

A hyperdocument, defined here as an electronic network narrative, is one of the informational devices available to bring such stories to the public. From our experience in the Laboratory of Urban Analysis and Digital Representation (LAURD-PROURB/FAU-UFRJ) developing hyperdocuments on urban heritage, we set up the basis for our case study: the Monroe Palace.

The Monroe Palace, former house of the Brazilian Senate in Rio de Janeiro, originally represented Brazil in Saint Louis, USA, during the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. It was controversially demolished in 1976; and its reconstruction – or at least of some sort of memorial – has been taken into consideration recently. We use its presence – and absence – in Downtown Rio as a departure point to understand a few aspects of the urbanization of Rio in the 20th century.

We discuss what would there to be regained in terms of the communication of its heritage values with this reconstruction and what could be achieved with a narrative presented in a "media" other than the building itself.

Keywords: urban heritage, digital heritage, world fairs

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1. Heritage values

The task of heritage preservation led to the acknowledgment of the various different natures of heritage, in a refining process that encompasses more and more subtleties. Each heritage object, be it physical or immaterial, demands specific preservation actions, and yet there is a need to establish more general policies and categorizations.

In 1903, Aloïs Riegl published his treatise on monuments, stating that a monument cannot exclusively belong to a category such as “artistic” or “historical”, all of them belonging simultaneously to both [Riegl, 1984]. What does differentiate them, however, is the degree of art and history associated to them. From that mix of values should preservation policies be designed, respecting the peculiarities of each monument. Indeed, he reallocates those values under two major categories: values of remembrance and contemporariness. Values of remembrance are oldness, historical value and intentional remembrance; contemporariness values stand for usage and artistic value, itself split into newness and relative artistic values. He notes that not only each monument has different degrees of each value, making them worth preserving for different reasons, but that those values vary over time, because they are at least in part socially attributed.

We consider that this system of describing a monument in terms of a set of values is an efficient way to deal with the multiple possibilities that an urban object has to be inscribed in a collective memory, while still allowing comparisons between different objects. As Riegl also notes, a monument may become less important when we possess other monuments that tell us the same things in a more complete and rich way.

These comparisons, it is always worth remembering, are no stranger to the preservation of urban heritage. As a matter of fact, Argan (1993) notes that preservation and demolition are two sides of the same coin, since the definition of an area to be preserved can be read as a statement that everything else is prone to be changed. He also describes the role of the urbanist as the management of the urban values, historical and artistic objects among them.

The system of values described by Riegl is first divided, as we said, in values of remembrance and of contemporariness. The first value of remembrance is oldness. The simple fact that an urban object yields marks of the passage of time is enough to render it as important to the eye of the beholder – and thus the attraction that ruins exert over us. It is the simplest depiction of oblivion. Of course, the line between a romantic ruin and a neglected wasteland is thick, and some integrity of the object must be conserved for the sake of recognition, avoiding pure abandon. Historical value is the interpretation of the object as a documentation of history, to be studied thoroughly by specialists. Therefore, its conservation obeys more or less the same directives of other historic documents, with minimum changes to the object, as it is an inscription of a bygone time. Intentional remembrance is the original sense of monuments, that is, an urban object designed to represent a specific act (or destiny, or feeling) to future generations. That does not prevent a monument designed to represent one thing from later...
representing something else. Anyway, as Argan stated [1993:226], if we preserve a classical monument, we do so because it is a demand of our culture, and doing so we attribute them a meaning altogether different from their original ones.

Values of contemporariness, on the other hand, speak of the integration of the monument with the life of the city. The value of use is self-evident, but this simplicity might lead to overlooking its importance. Indeed, the very fact of participating in the daily life of a city may either prevent a building’s degradation as it may avoid considering it for demolition. The artistic value, itself divided in two other categories, is far more subjective. Taking the value of newness, for instance, that stands for the quality of integrity that a work of art must have, a completeness not always easy to tell when it comes to “living” works such as the case of urban objects. The relative artistic value is explicitly subjective, it is the social judgment made from time to time in order to decide what is pleasant or not to the city. Although every work of art is judged differently according to different societies over time, changes in this judgment are far more crucial when it comes to redecorating a cityscape.

1.1. Monuments, Historical Monuments and Heritage

According to Françoise Choay [2001], the urban heritage concept we adopt nowadays is the descendant of the monument and historical monument concepts developed mainly over the 19th century. The concept of the monument, as we stated above, is the reminder of an act or deed – and ultimately the ephemeralness of mankind. Its purpose is not to inform, but to deal with emotions.

The modern city of the nineteenth century with its quick transformations in traditional urban tissues developed over the centuries, plus the formation of National States with their need of symbols, especially ones rooted to tradition, gave birth to the concept of historical monument. Huyssen (2000:60) calls that architecture a funerary space memorial of heroic death and failure, such monumentality serving to assure the presence of the dead whose sacrifice is indispensable to a new culture. They can be seen as the remains of a bygone society, almost archeological in value.

Choay (2001:307) claims that the expansion of monument protection policies has been transformed during the 20th century in the “ecumenic religion of built heritage”, a context that Audrerie (1997) names “tout patrimoine”. This means that not only public buildings of national importance were to be preserved, but also that “common” urban fabric and less important uses were taken into consideration. Time is no longer fundamental: Brasília entered the Brazilian list of preservation almost as soon as it was built. But less monumental buildings (or not monumental at all) were to be preserved, namely buildings from the Industrial Revolution and post-industrial, as well as pre-industrial urban fabric. Hence the present day difficulty of determining also what is not heritage, what should give place to something else and to the regular dynamic of a city.
1.2 Authenticity

Another issue involving heritage is authenticity. John Urry quotes McCannel to describe the search for authenticity by tourists as a modern version of the quest for the sacred [1999]. According to Urry, it is not a coincidence that historical research on tourism refers to pilgrimage as a precursor of tourist activity. Therefore, the search for authenticity is in fact a guarantee that the emotions the visitor feels are true. For the same reasons people wouldn’t like to learn that a saint to whom they devoted their faith was a fake, or a madman, they dislike the idea of a fake reconstruction of a building passing as the actual monument. This does not mean every reconstruction is to be avoided: like the caves in Lascaux, people can actually enjoy an enacted experience if they know this condition beforehand. As Van Der Berghe suggests (apud Getz, 2001:247), the creation or recreation of authenticity may lead to a secondary authenticity of its own that can be helpful to revive and reinvigorate traditions that would otherwise vanish under the forces of modernity.

1.3 Urban Heritage Narratives

The objects that constitute urban heritage are used as narrative supports, be it to tell the tale of market or academic history (Gonçalves, 1996). Therefore, the set of these objects is the basis for a narrative that helps understand and relate to the city and the nation. They embody certain concepts that are vital to the establishment of a nation or even the image of a city. They work as visual metaphors for complex abstract concepts such as Nation, State, or City – or even the idea of a pleasant city to live. As it can be expected, alterations on the set tend to produce different narratives.

The idea is not completely new. Kostof (1999:279-335) notes that the skylines and panoramas were early planned in the history of cities, since it is “the familiar, fon icon of the city-form, a vision to cherish and come home to; it is also their urban advertisement to the world, the front they present to visitors, and a disseminative shorthand for a broader audience still.” (1999:283) Therefore, panoramic views of cities can be found in paintings from 14th and 15th centuries. In some cases these city views would even lay apart the rules of perspective to enhance some important buildings. Another form of representation, common in the 18th century, was the capriccio, a painting genre where several imaginary and real buildings were depicted in a fantastic landscape. This has probably originated the modern souvenirs where many urban icons are shown together, constituting a some sort of summary of the city.

2. Hyperdocuments and Urban Narratives

This study focuses on hyperdocuments as one of the several ways to represent heritage, searching for its characteristics that are appropriate for the urban heritage representation. There are different meanings for the word ‘hyperdocument’, and they can be arranged in a scale from the more conceptual to technologically strict approach.
On a more abstract level, Lévy [1999] defines hyperdocuments or networked messages as a specialization of one of the dimensions of communication, namely the informational device, that is, the way to arrange information. Other informational devices include linear narrative, the most traditional type way of telling a story; virtual worlds or spatial narratives, the spatial arrangement of information to deliver a message; and information flow, made upon database filters.

A more strict definition from the same author assumes networked messages are conveyed in digital media. The qualitative leap of this approach is the displacement of the linking operation from the subject navigator, who does it manually, to the navigated object, which does it automatically; also, the destination point is displayed within the same space where the origin was. As a result, following the links is much faster, and can be more easily done by the reader.

Yet Lévy [1999] brings another refinement of the definition, describing hyperdocuments as digital interactive multimodal documents, that is, they take into account user’s intervention to reorient the flow of information in real time and involve many of the user’s senses in their interpretation.

Laurini [2001] is even more specific, defining “hyperdocument” as

... a modern version of non-linearly organised materials. That is, they are electronic documents with direct access to information of diverse form by means of window presentation and mouse clicking on important words or other displayed information. [2001:124]

We shall work with this restricted version most of the time. However, this does not mean we do not take into account the differences between linear narrative and fragmented narrative.

Digital hyperdocuments have some important features for the representation of urban heritage. They work with non-linear narrative, allowing the development of parallel structures. Also, they are composed of fragments linked through highlighted remissions. Besides, they usually have some index of some sort, readily accessible from most parts of the document – some sort of meta-remission that helps understand the structure of the message –, or at least the presence of other forms of meta-remission such as navigation buttons.

If the representation of isolated architectural objects does profit a lot from digital languages, these advantages are not fully carried from the architectural to the urban scale. One of the reasons is the still lasting difficulty for ordinary PCs to manipulate models of some complexity in real-time, as in the case of urban tissues with some level of detail. The physical size of monitors poses another problem, as urban plans tend to be much larger, and even the zoom feature can be disorienting when the whole figure is not simultaneously available. That lends to the search of alternatives to virtual worlds for depicting urban scale narratives.
Since 1995, the Laboratory of Urban Analysis and Digital Representation of the Post-Graduation Program of UFRJ (LAURD-PROURB/ UFRJ), coordinated by professors Roberto Segre e José Ripper Kós, works with hyperdocuments, both in CD-ROM and HTML, that aims to make evident the symbolic structures of Latin American cities. Our first attempts focused on Rio de Janeiro and Havana, as part of a research called “Evolução dos Sistemas Simbólicos da Cidade Latino-Americana” (Evolution of the symbolic systems of the Latin American City), sponsored by CNPq (National Council on Scientific and Technological Research) and oriented by professors Roberto Segre, José Ripper Kós, Lilian Fessler Vaz and Eduardo Vasconcellos. Both “Rio Colonial” and “Havana Colonial” CD-ROMs, as their titles state, deal with the Colonial period of each city. Professor Roberto Segre also conducted a similar project in Buenos Aires. Other aspects of these works were earlier examined by Kós et al [1999].

Figure 1 – Snapshots from Havana Colonial CD-ROM and Rio Colonial CD-ROM.

From these and other works of the Laboratory (many of them, or at least their descriptions, can be found from the website http://www.fau.ufrj.br/prourb/laurd/), it was possible to establish a few narrative types in hyperdocuments on this subject, which depict the structure of these fragmented narratives.

The first is augmented linear narrative, that is, a linear narrative with minor interaction of the user, usually in the form of action triggered by a hotword in the main text or a hotspot in the screen – resembling animated footnotes, but allowing the flow of information to be controlled by the user.

Another narrative type is the tree structure, with a linked table of contents of sections and subsections that convey the structure of the text side by side with the text itself. A consequence of writing in this fragmented form is that text pieces have to be relatively small, and the reading order should not be restricted to the table of contents order. It is an electronic version of the traditional TOC, but this constant presence on the screen and the atomization of the text is a good stimulus rearranging the order of the reading.

A narrative type later developed in our work is the array of categories, where from the selection from two or three sets results a page. Here, the emphasis is on the possibility of comparison among pages and categories. The major drawback, of course, is that
categories should be carefully chosen in order to produce the complete array (and interesting results) when crossing sets.

Finally, there is the possibility to use rules of combination to produce freer links between pages. The more recent research on this tries to control those links in a separate file from the page itself, allowing better control over the relationship between pages – and ultimately allowing users to customize this relationship and exchange their own personal linking views with others.

3. The Monroe Palace

The Monroe Palace was originally built to represent Brazil in the Saint Louis Purchase Centennial International Exhibition, in 1904. It has attracted the attention of visitors, the jury of the Exposition – being awarded the Great Prize of Architecture for foreign pavilions --, and the American press – newspapers like “The Censor” called it “the pearl in the diadem of foreign buildings”. However, its commission in 1903 to Engineer Colonel Souza Aguiar included the need to rebuild the pavilion in the newly open Avenida Central, in Downtown Rio. So, in 1906, it was rebuilt in Rio, in its previously designed place in one of the more important squares in Rio, along with many other prominent buildings not yet finished, the Municipal Theatre, the National Library and the National Museum of Art.

![Figure 2 - The Monroe Palace in Saint Louis (left) and in Rio de Janeiro.](image)

During the 3rd Pan American Conference in 1906, the Saint Louis Pavilion was renamed after the former American President. From 1907 to 1914, we can say it was used as the Capital ballroom. In 1914, the Chamber of Deputies moved to there, until 1922, when the building was requested as part of the 1922 Independence Centennial International Exposition. When the Exposition was over, the building was refurbished to house the Senate. From 1937 to 1946, with the Senate closure by the Vargas dictatorship, it housed the Department of Political and Social Order. In 1960, when Rio was no longer Capital City of Brazil, with the construction of Brasília, the building was used to minor public functions, with a residual representation of the Senate in Rio and some departments of the Armed Forces.
The building was demolished in 1976, under great discussion in newspapers, with alleged reasons varying from simple aesthetics to the passage of the subway lines.

3.1. The Demolition

According to Argan [1993], though, a building with a neutral value is not as subject to demolition as a building with a negative value. We believe there lies the main reason for the demolition of the building, which makes it a strong statement on the influence of attributed meaning for preservation.

Aguiar [1976] tells that pragmatic reasons were given for demolishing the building: the subway and the traffic. To shorten these topics, the company responsible for the subway redesigned that part, reinforced the structure around the Palace, and made a curve soon called the “most expensive curve in the project”. All that to avoid damaging the building. Traffic liberation was also considered; but the pattern of streets surrounding the building was not altered until five years ago, when an underground parking lot was built under the square.

The “simple aesthetics” mentioned indeed is far from simple. To consider the building ugly 70 years after it was awarded a prize in the Exhibition is a clear sign that it was not simply anachronic or outdated but that its style was somehow offensive. Indeed, the building belonged to Brazilian Eclecticism, a style more associated with the founding Republic of 1889. This Republic had in Rio its Capital City, and there was a symbolic reason for erasing one of its symbols in order to reinforce the new capital and the renewed Republic.

Editions of the newspaper “O Globo” were prone to diminish both the artistic as well as the historical value of the building. It was said that the building was a copy of the Saint Louis Pavilion, not the Pavilion itself reconstructed, and therefore it lacked historicity.

Another reason even architects corroborated for the demolition is that the style of the building did not add anything to the values of modern art. It must be said that Brazilian Modernist Architect Lucio Costa has great influence over the National Institute for Heritage Preservation since its foundation in the thirties, and that Brazilian Modernism,
in order to establish itself, had to confront the dominant Eclectic style (Puppi, 1998). So the demolition of the building can also be seen as a way to make a statement about the prominence of Modern Architecture over the previous style.

3.2. Heritage Values of Monroe Palace

Let us examine the Monroe Palace under the system of values described in the first part, in order to further understand the reasons for its demolition, to develop an approach of the hyperdocument to depict it, and why it should be or not reconstructed.

The value of oldness of the building was not to be despised, but accounts from the time of demolition lead us to believe that it was in such a state that told more about decay and abandon than longevity and the passage of time. Rebuilding it wouldn't bring this value back, except as for every other new building: day by day. On the other hand, a hyperdocument based on representations of the period (and most of it should be done that way, since the building is not there anymore for new documents to be produced in loco) can report the value of oldness by the representations themselves, as it is with any old photography we look at, because we already know the effects of time on that media. Original text documents can also be showed along with their transcriptions to achieve a similar effect.

Oldness is also related to authenticity. A reconstruction couldn’t be presented as the actual building, even if the original structure is used, because there would be more gaps to be filled by hypothesis than by certainty. It is already difficult to gather information to produce an electronic model of the interior of the building, let alone the actual construction. Even the well documented Barcelona Pavilion of Mies van der Rohe is presented as a careful reconstruction, not the actual building. As we stated before, the audience does not want to have their emotions manipulated without warning. The Monroe Palace rebuilt would be authentic enough if presented in that way. For the electronic hyperdocument, authenticity comes in the form of the authorship and references of the document itself. That is the guarantee the audience has that the work is or not to be trusted.

Which leads us to historicity. After all, people have great confidence on science and its methodology. The acts of history that took place in the building, especially when housing the Chamber or the Senate, however, seem to be better documented in the records of these institutions than it would ever be in a hypothetic reconstruction. This would serve better to provide the ambience of the square and the knowledge available on Eclectic buildings construction methods and materials. Which building would be reconstructed, though? The original design of 1904, or the refurbished version of 1926? The first is more beautiful, but the second is the one that corresponds to the Senate period, the one of greatest importance. Electronic modeling should contemplate both, allowing comparisons and manipulation. It should (the whole hyperdocument in fact) serve also to inform the public about those possibilities and their consequences in the event of a reconstruction. One of the core objectives of the hyperdocument, besides
making more information available on this building and its connection with the city, is to link this information internally, joining different approaches and sources. In the case of the Monroe Palace, it means to tell about the Eclecticism and other representative buildings of the style; about its author and other works; about how Avenida Central (now Avenida Rio Branco) and the plaza, also known as Cinelândia, developed over time; and about its demolition, as a way to inform people about the importance of meaning for preservation.

Intentional remembrance is related to the constitution of the building as a symbol for something. The original meaning related to the emergent Republic, what was corroborated by the presence of the Senate and the Chamber, on different occasions. More than that, the building figured in postcards, stamps and banknotes. We believe, on the other hand, that the hyperdocument should convey predominantly the message of the building demolished for its negative meaning.

The value of use of the reconstruction is yet unknown even to those who wanted the Monroe Palace to be rebuilt. A historical approach on that seems more adequate to retrieve the importance of the building in several periods. For the hyperdocument, at least, it is enough.

The style of the building has now been fully acknowledged as important and even appreciated. And the building as a work of art is indeed something that can only be fully experienced with the reconstruction. Electronic modeling and reconstitutions, however, can provide adequate previews of the result, and additionally bring simulations of urban configurations no longer available, for the sake of experience and comparison.

Figure 4 – Simulation of the Monroe Palace as seen from Aterro do Flamengo

3.3. Transposing Values in Hyperdocument Form

The option for a hyperdocument in this case is to privilege the multiple insertions of this particular building, namely its presence in one of the most important urban projects that took place in Downtown Rio; the connections with republican institutions; the aesthetics of Eclecticism; and its demolition as a result of its negative meaning.
The design takes into account the fragmented nature of the discourse and the need to present information as original as possible. Therefore the choice to use a shuffled images as main menu. Further subdivisions are to be showed in the left division of the screen, with the fragments - texts, animations, and pictures, that is, the very pages of the hyperdocument - shown on the right.

Our main concern was transposing the thesis to hyperdocument, in order to establish a few standards and guidelines to text. We relied heavily on CSS recommendations of the W3 Organization to ensure stability of the design over next generation browsers, a clean HTML code and integrity of design over changes in layout.

Figure 5 - Main menu of the hyperdocument.

Having planned each of the greater (the main themes) and lesser topics (the actual fragment to be seen), we decided to give further thought to the ways of binding them, in order to achieve more interesting possibilities of navigation from the point of view of links. We then focused our efforts on providing a map where the user will be able to rearrange the connections between lesser topics of different themes. This is not without a reason, for we believe that rearranging information to achieve new and unexpected meanings is one of the strengths of hyperdocuments, especially when it comes to reassigning meaning to a building.

Conclusions

This work is intended to constitute a methodology for works on heritage in hyperdocuments focusing on the intended values to communicate. It is not intended to avoid reconstructions or restorations, but instead to help reflect why and when do them, and how they can achieve their objectives.

The focus on the demolition of the building has a double role. It should serve as guidance to similar cases - who wants to demolish and why - as well as elaborate the very issue of demolition and disappearance as vital elements of the urban culture, as much as preservation itself.
Rearrangement could ultimately lead to an understanding of the objects of urban heritage as elements of a narrative to be constantly rewritten and their meanings reassigned, and that the power to do that lies with the citizen.

The Monroe Palace, even if it no longer exists, has not ceased to inhabit the urban and national tales. Therefore, it is important to have new narratives linked to it. When the use for this particular myth is gone, all related stories will begin to vanish, but there is still room to question if its utility is indeed outdated.

Finally, for further information and discussion on the subject, please refer to the website http://www.fau.ufrj.br/prourb/dissertacoes/rparaizo/index.html in order to view the original Master thesis and the Monroe Palace website.

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