URBAN PLANNING IN RIO DE JANEIRO: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE URBAN DESIGN PRACTICE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract

This paper is an outcome of a research entitled “The Role of Urban Design in Strategic Planning: The Case of Rio de Janeiro”, which was carried out at the Architectural Association Graduate School, in London.

This paper presents a historical review of the urban development of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The study gives an overview of the city’s urban planning through time, pointing out some connections between the different urban factors involved in the urbanization process. By focusing on the project scale, it intends to show the roles that urban design have played during the different periods of the urban planning in Rio de Janeiro. The general argument of the paper is that since the turn of the twentieth century, the city has played an important role as a laboratory implementing and adapting established international urban concepts to the local reality. Although such a position has been lost during the 1970s and 1980s, this study shows that the tide began to turn in the 1990s and the revival of urban design has emerged as one of the main features of the current urban policy in Rio de Janeiro.

Key words: Rio de Janeiro, urban planning, urban renew, XX Century

The Great Urban Reforms in Rio: First Half of the Twentieth Century

Under the administration of the engineer Francisco Pereira Passos, Mayor of Rio de Janeiro from 1902 to 1906, the city initiated the era of great urban renewal. The core of the city went through a period of intensive construction work, which destroyed the last vestiges of its colonial urban design.

The redesign of Central Rio aimed, above all, to provide the city with an urban space that could express its increasing importance on the international scene. This new desirable image of Rio was not in agreement with the colonial appearance of its central area, where the headquarters of political buildings were mixed with poor slum houses. In order to elevate the new Rio de Janeiro to the same level of other important international cities, a radical urban transformation took place.

With the political motivation for rebuilding dirty cramped alleys formed by precarious airless dwellings in order to eliminate epidemic diseases, Central Rio was modelled on monumental splendour perceived as characteristic of the great European capital cities. A powerful urban reconstruction process took place inspired by the Paris of the Second Empire and grand avenues ending in impressive urban squares surrounded by public buildings were all built to embellish the city.
During the same period, some large scale urban interventions funded by the Federal Government, also took place in Rio. Although relatively few in number, they caused much more urban impact than the Pereira Passos projects, due to their vast scale. The most impressive one, taking into consideration the morphological transformation of the city’s urban fabric, was the opening of the Central Avenue (Avenida Central).

Based on the Parisian boulevards designed by Haussman, thousands of colonial buildings were demolished in order to open out the Central Avenue. This avenue, today renamed Rio Branco Avenue (Avenida Rio Branco), must have once been Latin America’s most impressive urban highway. Bordering the avenue of no more than three storeys high and with a promenade that ran right down the centre, this avenue became the heart of the nightlife of the city. Nowadays, even though it is still one of the most important streets of Rio, the once graceful avenue with its glamorous restaurants, theatres and cafés, has been swamped by inexpressive office buildings and traffic pollution.

Where the Central Avenue crosses the Seafront Avenue, which was also built at this time, there is the Marechal Floriano Square (Praça Marechal Floriano) and the area known today as Cinelândia, named after long-gone cinemas built in the 1930s. Designed to be the cultural core of the city, this section of Rio Branco Avenue is the only part of the scheme that remains impressive. It is surrounded by interesting public buildings such as the National Library (Biblioteca Nacional), the Municipal Theatre (Teatro Municipal), at the northern end of the square and the Fine Arts National Gallery (Museu Nacional).
de Belas Artes), on the opposite side of the road. This urban area is probably the best example of the “Belle Epoque” style in Rio.

The Pereira Passos Administration brought about significant improvements, in terms of infrastructure and appearance to the central area of the city. On the other hand, through the opening and widening of streets and avenues a great number of poor colonial houses, where the low-income communities used to live, were demolished. Nearly three thousand such dwellings were razed to the ground during his administration (FINEP, 1985). As this urban renewal programme had built very few alternative social housing schemes, most of those people, although needing to remain close to their places of work, could not afford to live in the area any longer.

The solution found by the people was the beginning of one of the greatest contemporary urban problems of Rio de Janeiro. The widespread tenement demolition led the evicted population to build their own houses in the vacant surrounding areas. The homeless quickly occupied the previously deserted main hills located in the city centre in a very precarious way, giving rise to the first shantytowns which are known in Rio as favelas.

The Pereira Passos Reform represented the first example of massive urban intervention sponsored by the public sector in Brazil. Up to that time, the role of the State concerning urban development was restricted to controlling private sector initiatives. This new way of planning the city established by the Passos Reform totally changed the urban development pattern throughout the twentieth century. Apart from the period of time between 1914 and 1918, when a policy for restraining public expense was implemented in the whole country due to the First World War, the following elected Mayors tried to maintain the same aggressive style of planning (Reis, 1977).

The Carlos Sampaio Administration TP3PT for instance, had as its main goal the preparation of Rio de Janeiro for the coming celebration of the first Centenary of Brazil’s Independence. A great number of national and international tourists were expected to take part in the Festival, which would be highlighted by an International Exhibition. As the site for this event had not been decided when Sampaio was nominated, he saw it as an opportunity to provide continuity to the redesigning of Central Rio that had been started by Pereira Passos (Reis, 1977 and Abreu, 1997).

Eager to provide the perfect site for the International Exhibition, he carried out the demolishing of the historical Castle Hill (Morro do Castelo) and removed one of the city’s earliest and poorest neighbourhoods called Misericordia, which was located on the base of that hill (Abreu, 1997). Those areas, although still occupied by low-income people, had become one of the most expensive parts of the city after the inauguration of the Central Avenue.

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3 Carlos Sampaio was the Mayor of Rio de Janeiro from 1920 to 1922 and he contributed a great deal in transforming Central Rio. Even though he did not implement as many urban works as Pereira Passos.
With the demolition of the Castle Hill and the Misericordia District, two more working class communities, which had hardly survived the Pereira Passos Reform, were expelled and a large empty site became available, exactly in the heart of Central Rio. This site with a nearby landfill area, which resulted from the removal of the hill, not only resolved the problem concerning the location of the International Exhibition, but also provided an excellent opportunity for new urban developments.

Another Mayor, who played an important role in the urban planning development of Rio de Janeiro, was Antônio Prado Junior. During his Administration, in the late 1920s, a French urban planning team headed by Alfred Agache, who was a member of the English originated Gardens-City Movement, was commissioned to design a plan for the city. The Agache Plan had the general intention to beautify Rio, especially the central area and its southern districts, and to organise the city according to specific activities. Central Rio, for instance, would be functionally divided into six distinct sectors: Business Centre (Centro de Negócios), Administrative Centre (Centro Administrativo), Monumental Centre (Centro Monumental), Financial Centre (Centro Bancário), Embassy District (Bairro das Embaixadas) and Calabouco Gardens (Jardins do Calabouço) (Reis, 1977).

As far as residential areas were concerned, Agache had physically formalised the latent socio-economic stratification present in the city. The new and still dispersed southern districts located on the seacoast, such as Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon, were designed similar to European Garden Cities, aiming to attract the affluent class of Rio. For the early districts of the city, such as Catete, Botafogo, Flamengo, Laranjeiras, Vila Isabel and Tijuca, the plan had suggested a less radical design, following the already consolidated urban fabric, to house middle-class communities. For the poor people, the plan had intended to prepare the suburban areas of the city by building social housing schemes, improving basic infrastructure and providing a good public transportation system.

The Agache Plan was over ambitious and the Municipal Administration had neither time nor financial resources to implement it completely. Even so, this plan has been considered a turning point in the urban planning process of Rio de Janeiro. For the first time the Municipality seemed to admit that it was losing control over Rio’s urban growth and was prepared to commission an international planning team to design an overall plan for the whole city.

Nevertheless, some urban interventions proposed by the Agache Plan, such as the opening of the Presidente Getulio Vargas Avenue (Avenida Presidente Vargas), were carried out in the following decades. The plan had suggested the construction of a huge avenue that would work as a sort of urban expansion axis perpendicular to the Central Avenue. In order to do that, it was necessary to demolish every block located between the
General Câmara and São Pedro streets, from the well-known Eleventh Square (Praça Onze) to the charming Candelaria Church (Igreja da Candelária). The square itself and more than five hundred buildings were destroyed due to this urban reform (Reis, 1977).

Many authors have considered this intervention one of the greatest mistakes of urban planning in Rio. Besides the demolition of a significant historical area of the city, the project aggravated the deterioration process by splitting the surrounding urban fabric. Apart from a small sector near the crossroad with Central Avenue, the urban development expected for the side of this avenue never happened and the monumental buildings planned remained on the drawing boards.

Fig. 06 / Fig. 07: The opening of the Av. Presidente Vargas splitting the urban fabric

In 1929, while the Agache Plan was still being conceived, Le Corbusier was visiting Rio and took the opportunity to make sketches of some urban ideas for the city. His proposals showed some essential differences in terms of city images, and two conflicting urban design models based on divergent theoretical movements appeared. While Agache’s master plan seemed to be more concerned about the empty spaces defined by the buildings rather than the buildings themselves, Corbusier’s controversial suggestions emphasised the architectural object.

Fig. 08: One of the Corbusier’s urban proposals for Rio: a massive and tortuous residential building topped by a sort of highway roof.

Although Corbusier’s proposal was never built, its design principles guided most of the urban and architectural projects implemented in Rio, from the 1930s to the 1960s. Modern Architecture was established and became a sort of consensus among designers.

Rio was transformed into a huge construction site with both private and public developments emerging all over the city. Growth was so fast that planning was left behind. The city’s population increased from nearly 1.8 million inhabitants in 1940 to 2.4 million in 1950 and reached 3.3 million in 1960, while the Greater Rio, constituted by the metropolitan areas of the city, expanded from 2.2 million people to 4.9 million during the same period (IBGE, 1966).

By that time, the city had started to show the first signs of an uncontrolled urban dynamic growth. While central areas of the city were facing physical deterioration due to the ongoing spontaneous removal of the population, the suburban districts were going
through an unrestrained urban expansion. Reasonably well provided areas, in terms of infrastructure, were being abandoned by people while other parts of the city, which lacked basic services, were being occupied by them.

The Impact of the National Automotive Industry on Urban Design Policies in Rio

At the beginning of the 1960s, another extensive urban change took place in all metropolitan cities of the country. The national automotive industry was born and streets of most cities became crowded with cars. The geographical location of the city, squeezed between the mountain slopes and the sea, escalated the problems and Rio found itself particularly exposed, with traffic becoming chaotic. This fact affected Rio’s citizens by forcing them not only to deal with huge and frequent traffic jams, but also to share the sidewalks of the city with cars that used them as parking places.

The fast growth in car traffic led the city to an unprecedented open conflict between the new type of transportation and the town fabric. Parts of the city that had emerged mostly for the priority of pedestrians had to be adapted to massive car traffic. In order to refit these areas for new car demands, urban planning policies in Rio had their main focus changed and gradually traffic engineers took over the lead of urban design teams. Tunnels, overpasses, bridges and both ground level and elevated highways became the principal components of urban design.

In the late fifties a Greek urban planning company named Doxiadis and Associates was commissioned to design a new plan for the city. Similar to the Agache Plan in the 1920s, the Doxiadis Plan was heavily based upon interventions on consolidated urban infrastructure. However, the current focus was the accessibility and mobility provided to the car and the plan proposed a new high-speed traffic circulation network for the city. The Doxiadis Plan left, as its main legacy, a wide range of highways coded by colour lines such as Red Road (Linha Vermelha) and Yellow Road (Linha Amarela) that were eventually built in the 1990s.

Public urban interventions in Rio became almost totally reduced to road constructions during the 1960s and the 1970s. An endless list of urban works could be made showing improvements in car transportation that were carried out during those times. Many important tunnels, such as Rebouças and Santa Bárbara were dug in order to connect areas of the city that used to be separated by mountains. Some elevated highways, such as Paulo de Frontin and the Perimentral were also built to complement the already saturated ground level avenues. Not to mention the impressive 14 kilometre bridge named the Costa e Silva Bridge.

Although most urban interventions at that time had the exclusive purpose of improving car traffic, some of them tried to take into account the pedestrian as well. Two landfill areas could be mentioned as good examples of urban projects where attempts to achieve a fair balance between the pedestrian and the automobile were made, even though the main objective in both cases was to relieve traffic congestion. They were the Flamengo Park PT (Aterro do Flamengo), built from 1961 to 1965 and designed by the urban architect Affonso Eduardo Reidy and the landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, and the

4 This bridge, popularly known as the Rio-Niteroi Bridge, links the two largest cities of the region by crossing the Guanabara Bay.

5 Repeating the same strategy applied in the 1920’s, another historic hill named Morro de Santo Antônio was demolished in order to carry out the landfill Aterro do Flamengo.
Copacabana Beach Sidewalks (Calçadão de Copacabana), which was built from 1969 to 1972 and also designed by Burle Marx.

Nevertheless, the widespread shift of urban design policy in Rio towards prioritisation of car traffic and parking had gradually taken streets and squares from the pedestrian. The result was that walking around and spending time in public spaces became unpleasant and a steady impoverishment of city life took place. The obvious correlation between public space and social life is very well illustrated in the case of Rio. The city once internationally known for its social life, promoted by a broad spectrum of outdoor activities, had dramatically changed.

The deterioration of public spaces in Rio led to the development of private clubs, shopping malls and condominiums confined in enclosures. The hostility pedestrians experienced in public spaces encouraged them to bypass these areas on the journey from home to work. The established role of public spaces as the most important meeting places in Rio began to change and people started to use the growing number of private locations for socialising.

This architectural privatisation of the physical public sphere, which has increasingly happened all over the world, has been even worse in cities like Rio, where a considerable number of inhabitants live an extremely difficult life below the poverty line. The enormous economic gap between the rich and the poor existing in large developing cities has transformed the public realm into unsafe urban spaces of high social tension.

Under these conditions, the possibility of having a safe indoor “public” life heavily patrolled and regulated by security guards became a very attractive proposition to middle-class citizens. The expansion of this “architectural urbanism” in Rio, progressively confining the city inside its walls, demonstrates its increasing public desirability. For some citizens, who take the inevitable consequences of such an attitude to the extreme, the city has become a proliferation of isolated indoor “urban spaces” connected by wide highways.
The transference of the country’s capital to the newly built Brasilia in 1960 could be also considered an important factor in exacerbating Rio’s environmental deterioration. By losing the status as the Capital of Brazil, the city also lost a great deal of its economic and political power. The focus of the urban policy on overpasses and highways established in the 1960s and 1970s, besides aiming to better the car traffic flow in the city, it seems to have been a desperate attempt to maintain the status of Rio. After all, Brasilia with freeways and viaducts everywhere suggesting modernity and power was designed to replace Rio as the head of the country (Holston, 1993).

In 1969 this new pattern of life was instigated in Lucio Costa’s master plan for the Baixada de Jacarepagua. For the first time, a whole district of Rio de Janeiro was designed following the road-oriented modernist principles in a way, it was the last urban attempt to show that Rio, as well as Brasilia, had also achieved absolute modernity. Nothing appeared to be more appropriate, at that time, than having a large part of the city designed by the same urban architect following the same urban paradigm. The idea was to plan a new district that, by overcoming the chaos of the traditional city, would provide a perfect urban environment for modern living (Costa, 1969).

Aiming to avoid the problems of the old urban areas of the city, the plan represented a complete breakdown of the traditional urban pattern in terms of zoning use and division of land. It was basically constituted by urban nuclei with residential towers connected by narrow streets and small squares surrounded by shops. Huge green areas without any precise proposed activities separated these nuclei from one another. As the minimum distance between the nuclei was 1 kilometre, a massive freeway system was designed to link them.

Although the intention of the plan was to provide a comfortable and socially integrated urban space whereby car traffic could coexist peacefully alongside other uses of the city (Costa, 1969), the outcome was tragic. Boundary walls have surrounded the urban areas and “public” spaces, except for the beach, have become walled in private condominiums and shopping malls. Ironically, this district of Rio, which was designed aiming to bring social integration back into public domain, became the most segregated urban space in the city.

Regulatory Master Plans: The Case of Urban Structural Projects

During the 1970s and 1980s, the city of Rio de Janeiro was ruled by massive rational plans, which were full of institutional analyses supported by a huge amount of quantitative data with questionable pragmatic applicability. The plans were largely regulatory, focusing on what should be avoided rather than presenting clear urban proposals. They were very ambitious in scale and based upon long-term anticipatory actions, which very often made them ineffective at dealing with current needs.

The Basic Urban Development Plan (Plano Urbanístico Básico-PUB) implemented in 1977, although it can be included in the above description, must be mentioned as an important attempt at providing tangible outcomes (Del Rio, Santos and Fontes, 1986). By creating the Urban Structural Projects (Projetos de Estruturação Urbana-PEUs), this plan provided a crucial tool for resolving the lack of objectivity in planning at that time and paved the way for the development of concrete urban actions.

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6 Up to this time the new districts developed in the twentieth century, such as Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon, were an interesting mix between traditional and modern urbaniy.
The original concept of PEU was to give particular attention to homogenised urban sections by implementing special urban projects, which would prevail over the zoning regulation of the whole area. Through designing street and square patterns, defining uses and activities and having as a final outcome a mass plan, the PEUs brought back to the planning scale the possibility of developing urban design projects. However, this wide and integrated approach was never achieved and it became, in practical terms, a building regulation review project (Del Rio, 1990).

During that time, a building boom was creating deep transformations of the townscape and several important symbols of the city were being threatened by such uncontrolled urban development. This environmental problem paved the way for citizens' resistance, which grew based on a strong sense of identity. Local people started to organise themselves in order to fight for preservation and better living conditions in their residential districts (Santos, 1988). In that context, the PEU project was promptly seen as an opportunity to establish special urban regulations to cope with citizens' demands (IBAM, 1994).

Many PEU projects were carried out all over the city during that time and most of them due to claims raised by what came to be known as the social movements, especially concerned with historic and ecological preservation (Del Rio, Santos and Fontes, 1986). Until that time, traditional planning in Rio had very often neglected built and natural environments. By engaging local people, the PEU projects played an important role in bringing environmental issues onto urban policy agendas. Subsequently, community participation, which was one of the most significant features of many urban projects, has become an indispensable practice adopted in urban planning in Rio.

The urban conservationist movement, for instance, had its first proposal accepted by the Urca Urban Structural Project (PEU-Urca). Designed and implemented in 1978, by the Municipal Planning Department, this PEU was the first one to be conceived and arose in response to demands from the local population to protect the district against speculative construction processes that were taking place at that time (Del Rio, 1990).

The small and wealthy district of Urca is located in a very special part of the city, where the Guanabara Bay meets the Atlantic Ocean, and it already had some environmentally protected areas, even before the project was implemented. However, those environmental regulations had, as their main goal, to preserve the Sugar Loaf Mountain, which is located in the district and is one of the most important landmarks of Rio. Thus, it was entirely restricted to the mountain itself and surroundings. By establishing the limits for the height of new buildings and keeping the density under severe control in the whole district, the PEU-Urca succeeded in preserving the neighbourhood’s identity.

Numerous other important PEU projects were implemented in different districts of the city, like the PEUs Botafogo (1983) and Santa Teresa (1985). Nevertheless, the most prominent conservationist urban project was undoubtedly the Cultural Corridor Project (Projeto Corredor Cultural). Based upon the work carried out by urban architect Augusto Ivan in 1979, this project became a broad preservation programme for central Rio. For the first time, a historic preservation project was concerned with protecting the urban environment as a whole, rather than focusing on the architectural value of an individual building (Carvalho, 1983) The recognition that the environmental quality of a particular urban space is not exclusively due to the quality of its buildings was a paradigmatic changing of urban planning in Rio.

7 Until that time, national and local preservation policies were based on a narrow-minded view that only important buildings, with conceived architectural merits, should be preserved.
Initially implemented in one of the most traditional streets of the city, named Carioca Street (Rua da Carioca), the Cultural Corridor Project has been extended throughout central Rio (Pinheiro, 1985). After many decades of continual deterioration, the inner city has been entirely transformed through a broad concept of revitalisation, which included economic, physical, social and, above all, cultural recovery of the area (Carvalho, 1983).

The project, which has become a model of urban preservation in Brazil, recovered the symbolic meaning of this part of Rio, by giving back its cultural role that was built up over the centuries. A notable part of the city centre has, nowadays, an atmosphere that invites people to spend time there and it would not be an overstatement to say that central Rio has been one of the most attractive options for passing leisure time in the city for the last decade.

During the 1980s, however, urban planning in Rio must be understood in the context of the economic recession and political re-democratisation, which the country was going through by that time. If, on one hand, very few public and private developments occurred in that decade, due the stagnation of the Brazilian economy, on the other hand, the return of political freedom, after twenty years under a dictatorial regime, emphasised the importance of the social movements in the construction of the city.

The Brazilian civil society slowly started to be reorganised and free elections were held for state governors and members of the congress. The desperate attempt made by democratically elected governments in responding to the proliferation of social demands from different organised groups formed the basis of urban planning in all the large cities of the country (Santos, 1988). Nevertheless, as it was mentioned above, this period of transition towards democracy took place during a severe economic recession and scarcity of resources marked the urban developments in the 1980s.

Contemporary Urban Planning in Rio: Redeeming Urban Design

The deterioration of Rio de Janeiro escalated into the 1990s due to impoverishment of its population, dilapidation of public services and, above all, the disorderly use of both public and private urban spaces. As a result of many years of urban policy neglecting the quality of the city’s public realm, not only in its social dimension but also in its physical spatiality, Rio started the decade with the highest street crime rates of its history. The city’s image changed from once nationally and internationally known as the “wonderful city” (Cidade Maravilhosa), and became a city associated with urban violence and insecurity.

In terms of planning ideology, a substantial change took place with a growing disbelief in the effectiveness of large-scale ambitious plans. Those plans, which had been implemented in the city since the 1970s, were heavily criticised for their lack of practical results. Apart from the Urban Structural Project (PEU) already mentioned, very few projects were effectively implemented as by-products of those plans. The revitalisation of the urban project and the consequent revival of design as the main tool for city planning, have gradually been consolidated through Rio’s official urban policies.

The 1992 Summit Conference on Sustainable Development of the Earth - Eco 92, a global environment forum promoted by the United Nations and held in Rio, was the turning point towards a new urban approach for the city. Taking advantage of the international repercussions surrounding the event, the local government focused its efforts in rescuing

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8 Three of these social movements played a distinguished role in restructuring urban planning in Rio, which were the neighbourhood-association, heritage-preservation and ecological-environmental movements.
Rio’s public spaces. Some very simple and inexpensive urban programmes, which have produced significant social gains for the city, were implemented.

One of the most interesting was to close some streets, avenues and even freeways from the motorised traffic during Sundays and Bank Holidays. By transforming roads into temporary pedestrian meeting places, this urban programme has created alternative public spaces all over the city.

It included the coastal avenues of wealthy districts, such as Leblon, Ipanema and Copacabana, and the less privileged areas, where the need for public spaces was widely recognised. Not to mention the immense Flamengo Landfill (Aterro do Flamengo), which has attracted crowds from diverse surrounding districts for walking, running, biking, skating, or simply socialising. These new car-free public spaces have been used for recreational activities, in which the opportunity to see, meet and interact with other people has become a significant attraction.

![Fig. 11: The Aterro do Flamengo closed to cars during Sundays and Bank Holidays](image)

More permanent urban interventions for the improvement of the city’s public spaces were also developed, such as the Rio Coast Line Project (Projeto Rio Orla). Implemented between 1992 and 1993, this project aimed to reinforce the vocational role of Rio’s beaches as social integrators. Leblon, Ipanema and Copacabana, which are the three most well known beaches of the city, had their landscape transformed. Through the redesign of the sidewalks, clearly prioritising pedestrian activities over car traffic and parking, the scheme provided new standardised kiosks and bicycle paths linking the beaches.

With a special lighting system designed to optimally illuminate the roads, sidewalks and beaches, the project encouraged the practice of a variety of nightly recreational activities. The development of Rio Coast Line made activities, such as fishing, swimming, jogging and many other sport practices which, previously for security reasons, had only taken place on the beaches during the day, very popular evening activities.

Nevertheless, even though the Rio Coast Line Project has succeeded in promoting social life by improving public spaces, it was a controversial initiative that gave rise to an extensive public debate. Besides technical criticism regarding specific design features, the project was heavily criticised for being restricted to a very small and already privileged part of the city. Whilst accepting the criticism in relation to the elitist nature of the scheme, the City Hall developed the Rio City Programme (Projeto Rio Cidade).

Created in 1993 and based on a number of theoretical points raised by Janes Jacobs, Gordon Cullen, Kevin Lynch and others, who had already stressed in the 1960s the social importance of streets for the development of citizenship, the Rio Cidade Programme was
a plan for the reconstruction of the public spaces. It basically proposed the redesign of Rio’s main roads and their surrounding squares in order to regulate their usage and improve urban standards. Although its physical target was limited to streets and squares, the ultimate goal was to restore, through the improvement of those public spaces, the depleted social life of the city (IplanRio, 1996).

According to Luiz Paulo Conde⁹, the programme was conceived with a commitment to making it feasible, bearing in mind the failure of the over ambitious plans from the mid 1960s to late 1970s. As was said above, the urban plans developed in Rio during that time were usually based upon abstractions without an accurate sense of social, economic or political feasibility and therefore of little practical use. Instead, this urban programme intended to establish an official compromise in order to avoid idealistic and unattainable objectives, by setting up well-balanced goals between desirable and achievable scenarios (IplanRio, 1996).

![Fig. 12: The Rio Cidade Ipanema, designed by the architect Paulo Casé, was one of the most polemic urban projects generated by Rio Cidade Programme](image)

The Rio Cidade Programme has been the greatest urban intervention in Rio de Janeiro, since the massive landfills and tunnels engineered in the 1960s. The difference was that instead of focussing attention on cars, the design projects generated by the programme have privileged pedestrians. Putting to one side the ambitious goal of building the ideal city, the programme has opted for upgrading the existing one by reorganising the public spaces. By doing that, it has improved functional and aesthetical qualities of those urban spaces, contributing to reduce the social pressure in some of the most complex areas of the city.

**Final Considerations: the Reconciliation of an old Marriage between Rio de Janeiro and Urbanism**

Far from being conclusive, this paper aimed only to give an overview of the planning process in Rio during the twentieth century, pointing out some connections between the different urban factors involved. As observed, the city of Rio de Janeiro has had its urban development based around several plans, programmes and projects. Even though many of the ideas proposed by them have not been implemented, they all were relevant for the development of the city.

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⁹ Luiz Paulo Conde is a well known Brazilian architect who was the head of the Municipal Urbanism Department when the Rio Cidade Programme was implemented.
Ever since the turn of the twentieth century, when urban planning became a professional discipline in Brazil, the city of Rio de Janeiro has played a crucial role as a laboratory, implementing and adapting established international urban concepts to the local reality. Right up until the end of the 1960s, urban issues had been subjects of ample public debate with the average citizen showing interest and awareness on city planning, probably more than any other city in the country.

However, during the 1970s and 1980s Rio lived through a period of uncertainty concerning urban policy, leading the city into an urban crisis whose consequences are manifested through the deterioration of its urban spaces. Several successive administrations neglected the city’s public life, not only in its social aspect but also in its physical and spatial dimension. The usually keen and critical attitude of the city’s population towards urban issues, acquired through decades of practice, have dramatically diminished, taking with them a great deal of information about planning.

Throughout this period, the Municipality gradually lost control over the city’s planning process and a growing urban disorder began to take hold. As has been shown in this paper, the city of Rio de Janeiro entered the 1990s immersed in a decadent, social, economic and physical context. Rio’s image as one of the most interesting cities in the world was jeopardised by the remarkable level of urban violence, making people afraid of walking along its streets.

During those two decades urban policies in Rio were based upon static and generic urban plans, which were partially implemented through over-ambitious public works quite often left unfinished. Another characteristic of those plans was that they were clearly dominated by disciplines, such as Sociology and Economy among others, which, although relevant, considered only partial views of the city. Urbanism as an autonomous discipline that emphasises design, city image and urban culture, in which a range of distinct fields is considered, simply disappeared. Urban projects, once the foundation of planning in Rio, became sub-products of the whole planning process and urban design, which used to be its main tool, was transformed into a complementary, perhaps neglected, activity.

The general loss of faith in physical planning, not only in Rio but all over the world, led social scientists to become the protagonists of urban planning. Although social science has indeed provided interesting and efficient methods for diagnosing urban problems, it does not seem to offer suitable tools for solving them. The design-based approach, on the other hand, over the centuries has developed problem-solving skills which make it much more capable of generating solutions. The decline of urban design in the planning process was particularly depressing in the case of Rio de Janeiro, whose physical development had been based largely on a series of successful urban projects.

However, this study showed that the tide began to turn at the beginning of the 1990s. The return to the public debate of issues concerning urban aspects brought a long period of Rio’s citizen apathy to an end. Public space and public life were reintroduced into Rio’s urban policy and the public image was rescued through the redesigning of several streets and squares, all over the city. A renewed urban policy based upon design projects was established and a great number of public spaces have been renovated over the last ten years. The revival of urban design, as the main tool for the renovation of public spaces, has emerged as one of the principal features of the current urban policy in Rio de Janeiro.

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