

Fragments of a fading heritage: assessing effects of change in urban function over building conservation in the north-eastern hinterland of Brazil

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Abstract

The proposed short paper assesses the effect that functional changes in hinterland towns have exerted over their built heritage. The study focuses on Caicó and Acari - the oldest towns of Seridó, a sub-region of the sertão in Northeastern Brazil, which originated as riverside supporting posts to cattle raising in the 1700s, "... became commercial centres, mostly related to the cotton wool trade, especially during the last decade of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, and nuclei of tertiary activities since the 1960s, following the collapse of the local beef and cotton production, both unable to compete with that of other origins. The fierce urbanisation impetus that swept the country throughout the 1950s up to the 1970s also had a bearing on the development of the tertiary sector in both towns and on the slowing down and eventual suppression of the cotton industry."

Evidences of the trajectory described above are imprinted on the built environment through variations on the urban layout and in the building types that pose as landmarks of successive stages. However, empirical observations of these and other towns in Seridó, indicated that such signs, which had survived well into the 1970s, with occasional losses, seemed to be vanishing at a quick pace. This acknowledgement motivated an inventory of pre-modernist and early modernist buildings developed along the 1990s (Trigueiro, 1995-2000)¹ whose results showed a devastating effect taking place over a period of two decades upon a century-long heritage. In order to assess the extent to which building types that represented a stage of development were affected by the next stage, diachronic space syntax axial representations of Caicó and Acari were drawn over the present street grid of the town centre, and the recorded building remains were represented and colour coded according to their stylistic affiliations - colonial, eclectic and modernist - that inform about time of construction - c. 19th to early 20th century, 1920s to 1940s, and 1950s to 1970s, respectively.

Findings show that most integrated lines, at each period, coincides roughly with the presence of building remains of an equivalent epoch, thus illustrating the well-known effect of movement potential over land-use and the consequent expansion and/or shifting of active centres. However, whereas in previous stages gradual expansions over the countryside caused the active centres in each town to shift a step away from the river, while allowing for a reasonable conservation of older ensembles, the more recent transformation towards a centre of tertiary activities that accompanied the multiplication of fringe settlements on both sides of the rivers, caused the active centre to sprawl over virtually whatever existed before the mid-twentieth century. They also illustrate in vivid colours, the sad outcome of a process of urban transformation left to the design of market forces in the absence of a legislation capable of conciliating new urban roles and scales with environmental

¹ The inventory results are being gradually displayed in the web: www.seol.com.br/bdc

conservation.