



CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE REQUALIFICATION PLAN FOR THE CENTRAL REGION OF RIO DE JANEIRO CITY

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the social aspects arising from the stimulus to the increase of residential enterprises and building incentives for residential use of underutilized buildings in the central region of the city of Rio de Janeiro, through the urban revitalization plan called Reviver Centro. The method used for this analysis was a literature review on the subject, as well as an analysis of legal requirements and the Revitalization Plan of the Center of Rio de Janeiro itself, established by Complementary Law n° 229/2021. The results obtained indicate that there is a possibility that the Reviver Centro Plan may not be successful in all proposed lines of action, mainly because it does not clearly present the sources of revenue for the realization of a large part of the proposed projects. Moreover, even if the plan is successful in terms of revitalizing the central region of the city, there is still a risk of gentrification in the neighborhood, generating negative consequences for the local population.

Keywords: *Urban Requalification, Reviver Centro, Affordable Housing.*

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar os aspectos sociais advindos do estímulo ao aumento de empreendimentos residenciais e dos incentivos edilícios para no uso residencial de prédios subutilizados da região central da cidade do Rio de Janeiro, por meio do plano de requalificação urbana chamado Reviver Centro. O método utilizado para esta análise foi a revisão bibliográfica sobre o assunto, além de análise dos requisitos legais e do próprio Plano de Requalificação do Centro do Rio de Janeiro, instituído pela Lei Complementar n° 229/2021. Os resultados obtidos indicam que há possibilidade de que o Plano Reviver Centro não seja bem sucedido em todas as linhas de atuação propostas, principalmente por não apresentar a relação de fontes de receita para materialização de grande parte dos projetos propostos. Ademais, ainda que o plano seja bem sucedido em termos de revitalização da região central da cidade, existe ainda um risco de haver a gentrificação do bairro, gerando consequências negativas para a população local.

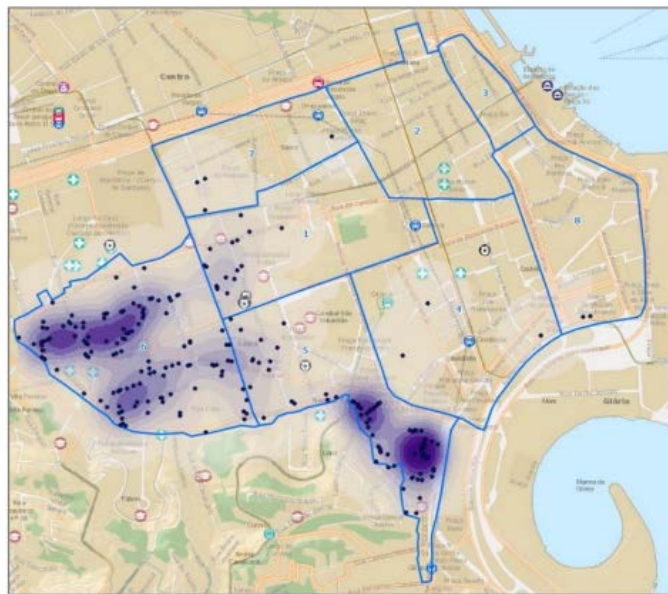
Palavras-chave: Requalificação Urbana, Reviver Centro, Habitação de Interesse Social.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Downtown area context

The Centro is a neighborhood located in downtown area of the city of Rio de Janeiro, contained within the II Administrative Region. Rio de Janeiro is the capital of the state of the same name, located in the southeastern region of Brazil. The central area includes other neighborhoods such as Saúde, Gamboa, Santo Cristo, Caju, and Lapa. This area is mainly composed of commercial and tourist buildings, but also has some residential properties on a smaller scale, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Residential occupation in the downtown area of Rio de Janeiro city.



Source: PCRJ (2021)

This region has the highest concentration of financial and office buildings in the city, boasting a mix of historic buildings and modern skyscrapers. The geographic area includes the regions of Santa Rita, Candelária, Central do Brasil, Praça Onze, Santana, Senado, Cruz Vermelha, Tiradentes, Bairro de Fátima, Castelo, Cinelândia, Carioca, Livramento, Praça XV, Saara, and Uruguaiana; as well as the Cobras, Fiscal and Villegaignon islands, and the Santos Dumont Airport.

The region is a large flat area with some elevations. Its original coastline no longer exists due to several gradual landfills, mainly for the remodeling of the Port of Rio de Janeiro. The center of Rio de Janeiro is intersected by Presidente Vargas Avenue, Rio Branco Avenue (formerly Central Avenue), and Rodrigues Alves Avenue. The most recent urban interventions in the region occurred on the last cited avenue, with the demolition completion of the Perimetral Viaduct, in 2014. This marked the beginning of the Porto Maravilha Project, which, like the Reviver Centro Program, aims to revitalize a vital area of the city.

1.2 Downtown Rio de Janeiro occupation

Concerning the occupation of downtown Rio de Janeiro, the region has the oldest urban city tissue, being an area delimited by the historical region and other neighborhoods that were urbanized in the first half of the 19th century, thus being an area of the city with great appreciation for cultural and historical heritage (TÂNGARI et al., 2011). Despite this great value complemented by its well-integrated infrastructure and range of services, the neighborhood has been experiencing a process of emptying commercial properties since 2017.

This location has a large number of listed buildings and presents many proposals for urban requalification, which, according to Carlos (2021), has been favoring architectural preservation, also aiming to prevent the complete renewal of these areas.

This more intense requalification process began in the Port Zone (I Administrative Region), still characterized by low verticalization, but due to recent changes in building legislation and other initiatives provided for in the Porto Maravilha Program, instituted by Complementary Law N°. 102/2009, is undergoing a process of transformation and renewal. Among these initiatives is precisely the encouragement of verticalization and residential use of the region, through the coordination of the Urban Development Company of the Rio de Janeiro Port Region (CDURP).

2 URBAN REQUALIFICATION

2.1 Reviver Centro

Unlike the Port Zone, the Reviver Centro program field already has intense and verticalized occupation of your city blocks and low incidence of open spaces. The City Hall encourages the updating of existing buildings for residential use through retrofitting, as established by the Simplified Code of Works and Buildings of the Rio de Janeiro City (2019), which provides for greater use of the interior area while respecting the preservation of the facade, aiming at reintroducing these buildings into the real estate market.

The project purpose is recovering the Rio de Janeiro downtown area through various fronts, such as urban, economic, social, and cultural. Thus, with fiscal and building incentives, the objective is to attract new residents by using existing underutilized constructions and vacant land. The municipality expects to attract these new residents with the already established robust transport infrastructure for all regions of the city and with the existing options for leisure and culture.

One of the incentives created is the "Interconnected Operation", which consists of an incentive for the construction of mixed or residential buildings or the conversion of existing buildings in the II R.A. area, so that when the operation is carried out in the central area, the owner receives the right to use urban "bonus" by paying a counterpart in Planning Areas

(AP) 2 and 3, which are consolidated regions of the city and encompass the neighborhoods of the North and South Zones (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2021).

The plan also aims to recover, expand, and create new green areas, making the city center more pleasant and inviting, including the creation of a "Low Emission District," which aims for greenhouse gas (GHG) neutrality by 2050, as predicted by the text of the law. Figure 2 illustrates the location of the program in the global context.

Figure 2 - Scope and location of the program: Southeast region of Brazil (A); State of Rio de Janeiro (B); Reviver Centro program neighborhoods - Centro, Gamboa, Lapa, Santo Cristo, and Saúde, located in the central region of Rio de Janeiro city, the capital of the state (C).



Source: The authors

The Plan for the Redevelopment of Rio de Janeiro's Center is developed based on the publication of Municipal Decree No. 48,348 on January 1, 2021, which established the Working Group for the Redevelopment of Rio de Janeiro's Center. The Plan establishes intersectoral actions aimed at improving the region through the conservation, recovery, and organization of public spaces. According to the City Hall (2021), these are fundamental actions for the successful attraction of new residents, which is the central objective of the Plan.

It is worth noting that urban rehabilitation carries the potential for the appreciation of the built environment, contributing to the redevelopment of abandoned or degraded areas. With the use of appropriate techniques and materials, taking into account local building culture and suitability to the existing urban fabric, urban redevelopment can rebalance the built environment (QUALHARINI, 2017).

2.1.1 Urban mobility

The incentive for the revitalization of the city center has the dense transportation network of the region as one of its pillars, as highlighted by the former Municipal Secretary of Urban Planning, Washington Fajardo. According to the Secretary, Rio's downtown is like a "5-minute City". Leaving a subway, train, or VLT (light rail vehicle) station, residents are five minutes away on foot from cultural attractions, shops, and restaurants, which is a significant advantage compared to other neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro (GARCIA, 2021).

It is worth noting that the central region of the city has different collective modes of transportation in operation: subway, train, VLT, buses, and ferries. Although, with such an offering, the city center is considered an ideal location for denser housing, there are necessary actions in the context of the road system so that the area can accommodate this relatively new use.

The Reviver Centro Plan, formalized through Complementary Law No. 229/2021, provides measures in this regard, such as reducing the encouragement of automobile use, prioritizing the space for active mobility and walkability over motorized mobility. There is also a provision for improvements in horizontal and vertical graphic signage, refurbishment of road lane coatings, development of a cycling infrastructure project, including cargo bicycles and envisioning the implementation of bike routes (reactivation of the Ciclo Rotas Centro project) and public bicycle parking.

Some technical points, such as issues related to public transportation demand studies and network design, walkability, sidewalk coatings aimed at real accessibility, and even incentives for the establishment of commerce and services aimed at housing, were left open in the plan, and it is understood that Reviver Centro establishes guidelines that must be better specified in specific instruments for its effective implementation.

2.1.2 Housing

Regarding housing as the focus of the project, especially with the promotion of social interests, a more promising direction is presented when compared to the results in underutilized spaces of the Porto Maravilha project, for example. Goals with increments of inhabitants and the valorization of the area are quite interesting and promise gains for the economy. However, the project still presents some blind spots regarding the possible impact on various current residents, with a good portion of them in a condition of socioeconomic vulnerability.

Even with the promotion of social interest housing, the project can still serve as a trigger for the gentrification phenomenon due to doubts and uncertainties about the execution of the Plan in this area. In this sense, "Social Rent" sounds like an initiative by the public authorities to transfer a responsibility that could be assumed with the production of new housing

for popular classes, not leaving such a noble mission solely to the possible reconversions carried out by developers and their private interests.

The reconversion of these existing buildings, through retrofitting, can be essential for their valorization and the expansion of the use of their space, meeting the demands of new housing in the region, but on the other hand, existing buildings run the risk of devaluing as the quantity of buildings in the surrounding area increases with a greater supply of services.

2.1.3 Social Assistance

The Centro neighborhood is marked by a significant homeless population. According to the Rio de Janeiro Homeless Population Census data of 2022, almost 28% (or 2,220 people) of the total of 7,865 homeless individuals are in the AP1 - Centro and surrounding areas, the region with the highest concentration of this population (PCRJ, 2023). In order to mitigate this problem, the Municipality has two Reference Centers for Social Assistance (CRAS): Professora Ismênia de Lima Martins and Dodô da Portela.

The Reviver Centro project presents two housing program axes: the Continued Housing Service and the Temporary Housing Service. Both seek to solve the problems of the homeless population in the neighborhood, including individuals who live on the streets or workers who cannot afford to return to their homes, which are far from the Centro area and who have no other alternative but to spend the night in the central region.

The "Social Rental Program", of a continuous nature, aims to produce and offer rental properties with partial subsidies, attracting the target audience as a way to activate the residential character of the Centro. Among the beneficiaries envisaged for this program are civil servants, retirees and pensioners, students of technical and university courses, with priority for quota holders, workers from families eligible for Federal Government housing programs, among others.

The "Assisted Housing Program", of a temporary nature, seeks to offer monitored support for the reinsertion of families or individuals into the labor market, aimed at low-income families, including single-person households, according to the criteria of the Social Assistance Policy and housing care policies, with priority given to families belonging to the following segments: people aged sixty-five or over; homeless individuals; people with disabilities; families and individuals in situations of vulnerability or social and personal risk; and residents of areas at risk, insalubrious, and of environmental preservation.

For the axes of the program previously presented, the formation of a "Real Estate Park" is sought, considering private or public properties, in habitable conditions and located in the area of coverage defined in the Law to meet the demands for social rental and assisted housing (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2021).

3 OTHER REQUALIFICATION CASES

The Rio de Janeiro city redevelopment plan is not the only initiative of its kind on a national and international scale. Botelho¹ (2005, cited in SANTOS, 2014) recalls that other urban redevelopment projects have already taken place in major Brazilian cities, such as Salvador (BA), Recife (PE), São Paulo (SP), Vitória (ES), Fortaleza (CE), and São Luís (MA).

Years before the revitalization processes that are being implemented in Brazil, many countries experienced the recovery of abandoned areas, especially those of historical importance, with internationally known examples being Barcelona (ES), Medellín (CO), and the Soho district in London (UK), whose strategies were linked to innovation, knowledge, and creativity in the territory (TEIXEIRA et al., 2016).

The São Paulo redevelopment program had, in broad terms, the same objective as the Rio de Janeiro Reviver Centro: revitalization based on the preservation of historical and cultural architectural heritage with alteration of the total or partial function of these buildings, which become residential or mixed-use (ALVES, 2016). The Requalifica Centro program, a revitalization project of the capital of São Paulo that continues to have further developments today, emerged in the 1990s from concerns about the emptying of the central region and the displacement of private companies to new centralities that emerged not only in São Paulo but also in several other Brazilian metropolises.

The Viva o Centro Association (AVC), founded in São Paulo in 1991 by the then-president of BankBoston, Henrique Meireles, was born from the articulation between the State and the private initiative with the objective of gathering proposals from experts to requalify the Historic Center of the city (composed of the Sé and República districts), which initially suffered from a crisis of emptying of companies and factories (ALMEIDA, 2004). At the same time, new centralities were consolidating, such as Avenida Paulista, Avenida Brigadeiro Faria Lima, and finally, Avenida Engenheiro Luiz Carlos Berrini, better known as Marginal Pinheiros.

Thus, similarities with Reviver Centro can be observed, and according to Alves (2016), through an institutional mechanism called "Urban Operations," urban exceptionalities were allowed legally with the justification of revitalizing areas considered degraded. In this sense, through urban flexibility and streamlining in the approval and legalization of projects, both programs encourage the requalification of areas through tax incentives, building incentives, and mixed-use of properties, focusing on attracting new residents and investors to areas that were previously degraded. Another common and important point is the incentive for the retrofit of existing buildings, reducing costs, deadlines, and waste

¹ BOTELHO, T. R. Revitalização de centros urbanos no Brasil: uma análise comparativa das experiências de Vitória, Fortaleza e São Luís. Revista Eure. Santiago do Chile, v. XXXI, n. 93, 2005.

generation and thus increasing the efficiency of interventions in the built environment.

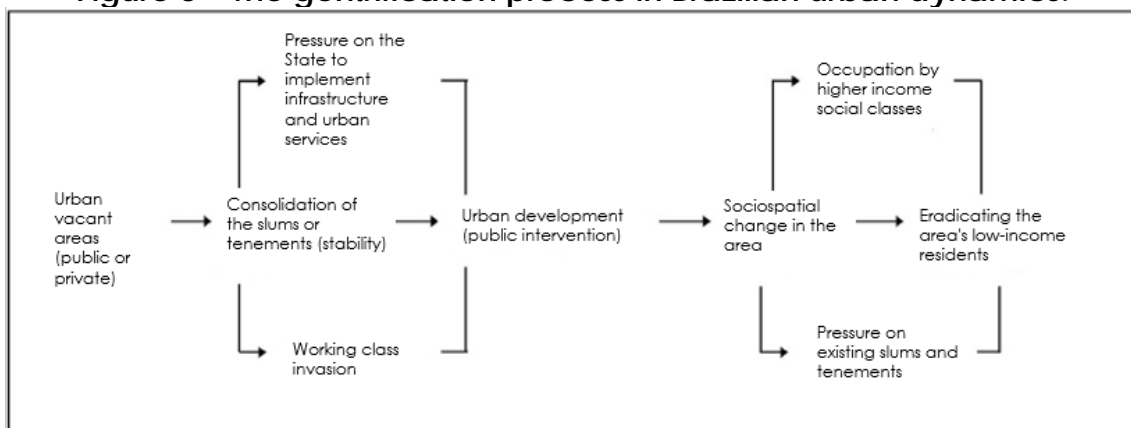
4 DISCUSSION

Alves (2016) recounts that in the case of Requalifica Centro in São Paulo, there was, as a consequence of the revitalization actions, a change in the profile of the residents and passersby of the affected area, expelling those who had been there longer, since they no longer had the financial means to remain in the area. This involuntary movement was caused by the socio-spatial actions resulting from this urban transformation process. This phenomenon is called gentrification, when, through government, private or joint actions, such as in the case of São Paulo, a neighborhood or district loses its existing local characteristics, ultimately displacing the original population from the area.

As was the case in São Paulo, there is a risk that gentrification could also be a problem in the region covered by Reviver Centro, even though the Plan released by the City Government includes measures that should theoretically mitigate this effect. This is the case of "Social Renting," which will allocate a percentage of the new housing built in the region to low-income populations and will have a rent value controlled by the municipal administration.

According to Furtado (2014), an analysis must be developed focusing on the context where the possibility of gentrification may occur. That is, in addition to local geographic and economic studies, it is necessary to take into account the dynamics of production processes and land use for housing. In this context, the need for housing (housing deficit) and demands for population service provision regarding the implementation of infrastructure and access to basic services must be highlighted. Thus, the difficulty of expansion to new areas and the cost of implementing public services may lead to the possibility of rescuing consolidated areas as an alternative to this housing problem. Figure 3 exemplifies this cycle, present in many of Brazil's large cities.

Figure 3 – The gentrification process in Brazilian urban dynamics.



Source: Adapted from Furtado (2014)

Bidou-Zachariasen (2006) points out that gentrification is not a precise process and has several faces. Another important point is that it is not an irreversible or unavoidable process. It is possible to have economic and social participation in urban revitalization processes to ensure that the focus on social housing and the democratic use of the city is not lost.

Lastly, it is imperative to contemplate the connection between governmental urban policies focused on the overall city planning. A crucial aspect entails fostering incentives for targeted urban development, considering preexisting infrastructure, as exemplified in downtown Rio. Simultaneously, there should be a discouragement of urban sprawl in peripheral regions characterized by insufficient infrastructure (BLAIS, 2012).

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite being commendable from an economic and urbanistic point of view, the requalification initiative, as it has happened with other projects in Brazil and around the world, brings a socially questionable side effect: gentrification. The movement of neighborhood appreciation before all revitalization actions is a double-edged sword, benefiting large real estate companies, investors, and the most privileged layers of the population, while expelling those groups considered socially "undesirable."

It is worth noting that the establishment of the Reviver Centro Program also counted on the participation of the population in the area's surveys, as can be seen on the Program's website, which shows an approach to society. Additionally, Rio Decree No. 51,134/2022 has already been published, establishing guidelines for the "Housing Program" in the central region, representing another positive aspect in the multifactorial analysis of urban requalification.

The initiatives of "Social Renting" and "Assisted Housing" (which prioritize low-income families and socially vulnerable people) provided for in the Reviver Centro Plan aim to mitigate this effect, being commendable, but care must be taken so that the effect is not precisely the opposite, generating a kind of neo-apartheid in new residential complexes.

Furthermore, the conservation and restoration projects of historical monuments and their lighting, paving, fences, fountains, posts, gardens, and all kinds of public goods allow, in addition to beautifying and valuing a visibly degraded heritage, to rescue the Carioca historical identity that has been lost over time. Such projects do not depend on the repopulation of the neighborhood but require significant investments and specialized labor.

The origin of the necessary funds for the implementation of some of the mentioned projects remains vague: will they come from the Public Power, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), private initiatives, or resources generated by the Reviver Plan itself, such as the Interconnected

Operation revenue, for example? Additionally, deadlines were not set for the implementation of many projects along the Law.

Finally, regarding building benefits, renewed and modern buildings with preserved historical and cultural facades and features are expected, which is a positive point, but it is necessary to balance with the crisis in the formal job market. Due to the new remote work guidelines, there is also a challenge in trying to repopulate the region since, although there is a reasonable number of commercial and corporate buildings emptied in the center, there are also new opportunities in the surrounding area. In this sense, it is essential that the planned incentives drive the retrofitting of the building park since the possibility of failure in the conversions is directly linked to the high risk of failure in the attempt to densify the region, which could result in the failure of the Reviver Centro Plan.

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