

Rio de Janeiro's Waterfront: Urbanism and social representation of reality

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Abstract

Post-modernity and economic globalization is inciting the competition among countries, regions and cities, in search of investments, consumers and resources. To pursue a new position in this global market, cities use new urban practices to re-discover and re-invent their identities and traditions, taken as attributes to attract consumers. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, the mythical dimension of the South Zone is inseparable and incorporated to its identity. In evaluating the history of Rio de Janeiro's seaside, the social construction of its imagery and the projects that redesigned its urban signs, we can identify an intermitence of urban interventions, marked by the lack of a continuous management of the waterfront. We verify that, even though tourist marketing appraises the seaside as the main image of the city, it does not receive proportional attention from urban interventions, may be in account of not being understood as a social construction. We conclude that the importance of caring for the seaside must not be understood only as an esthetical question, but also as the valorization of Rio de Janeiro's image, its inhabitants' self-esteem and citizenship itself.

Urbanism and social representation of reality

In the capital of Rio de Janeiro, the mythical dimension of the South Zone seaside is despicably incorporated in its identity. Rio de Janeiro is a plural city in its over-positioning over the passing years, in its way of space arrangement and its portraying possibilities in appearance. But within the diverse images that form the imaginary "carioca" town layout there are a few that just stand – out: the city's relationship with the sea and the image of Rio (and its people) related to beauty being laid back and the beach.

The beach itself can probably be made responsible for the creating of the "carioca" way of life. According to Monica Velloso (1986), Rio de Janeiro was already described to be a "contemplating city, surrounded by mountains, over looking the sea" as early as in the 1920's and the carioca was said to have "a navigational instinct which would make him/herself to crouch over at the end of a dock always in search of new horizons". The mere presence of the beach is seen to have a fundamental influence on the cariocas personal character. According to the historian, from a critical paulistano point of view, *"the summer in Rio de Janeiro was a consequential cause for promiscuity in the streets and squares, the yawn and simply taking it easy"* and the carioca is also characterized as "promiscuous vagrancy on the streets" while on the other hand the paulistano would represent the *"aristocrat sobriety"*.

The mere presence of the sea might not be enough to explain the water-like identity of Rio, being that cultural and social aspects did contribute to the imaginary construction of the carioca urbanization linked to its waterfront. But one cannot ignore the influence of the seaside on the quality of location construction. As Tuan affirms (1980:129), *"the environment cannot be the direct cause of topophilia, but it does supply the sensorial stimulation that, as acting as a seen image, gives form and happiness to our ideas"*. Charles Moore (1994:22) states that in

seaside projects *"both reality and poetry on the continent limits should be evoked"*. As well as this, there are a number of intervention examples in which the presence of water has served as a catalyser through its means of usefulness in symbolic connotations and ludic possibilities as shown in Boston, San Francisco and Baltimore (del Rio, 2001).

Lucrécia Ferrara (2000:88), while collecting images that were used in the press over the first five years of the 1990's, also shows the landscape as a symbolic image of the Rio de Janeiro capital: *"its image continues to be everything an exporting product has: sunlight, sunshine, heat, outdoor health and all under a clear blue sky"*. According to Rio de Janeiro's 1998 Annual Statistics (2000:605), tourists (Brazilian & foreign) as well as residents appoint the *"natural beauties"* as the city's biggest quality. [fig. 1, 2, 3]

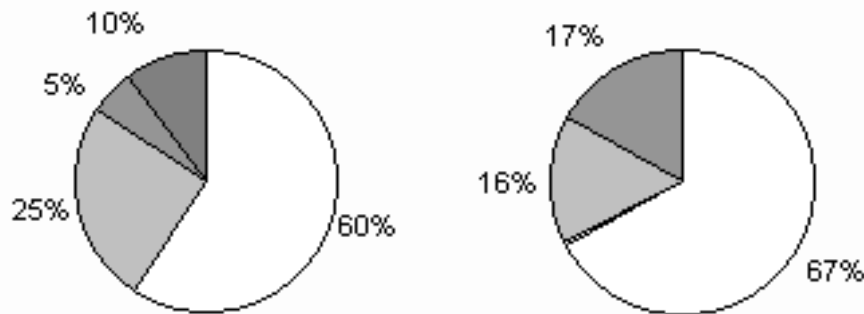


Fig. 1,2,3: The city's external image – the best in Rio according to Brazilian tourists; the best in Rio according to foreign tourists; the best in Rio according to the cariocas. (The city of Rio de Janeiro's Annual Statistic'. Rio de Janeiro: The Perreira Passos Municipal Institute ,2000).

This valuing of the seaside as a tourist attraction can sometimes cloud – out the fact that Rio's "touristic nature" a historical and cultural fact, and not an external one. The organized tourism began to emerge in the city in the 1920's when the first guides, hotels, official organs and tourist agencies came on the scene with the intention of attracting and receiving tourists.

The comparison between a 1930's carte touristique and a 1990's Riotur map show that, as opposed to the present maps, the old map doesn't highlight the South Zone but it highlights the downtown area which is shown at the bottom of the map where from which you "enter" the city by ship. If we consider the maps, not as "replicas of reality, reduced scale copies of a sensitive part of the world, but as representatives of reality, constructed on an account of choice and options as to what should be represented" (Castro, 2000:12), then this comparison does prove that the touristic image was socially constructed.

And so, the urban identity of Rio de Janeiro is a social construction, formed by a continuous agregation of values from an urban form, from cultural expression, from the residents' imagination and from the official construction and city image promoting incentives. Throughout the construction of this imaginary carioca urban, the connection between Rio and its seaside has always been present. In contrast to the construction of shoreline "subjective reality" being linear and continuous, the pathof which conducted its present urban form was marked



Fig.4: Carte touristique de la ville de Rio de Janeiro, la capitale des Etats Unis Bresil, c.1930 .(From the cosmografo to the satellite – maps of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro: Architecture and Urbanism Center of Rio de Janeiro, 2000. p.74)



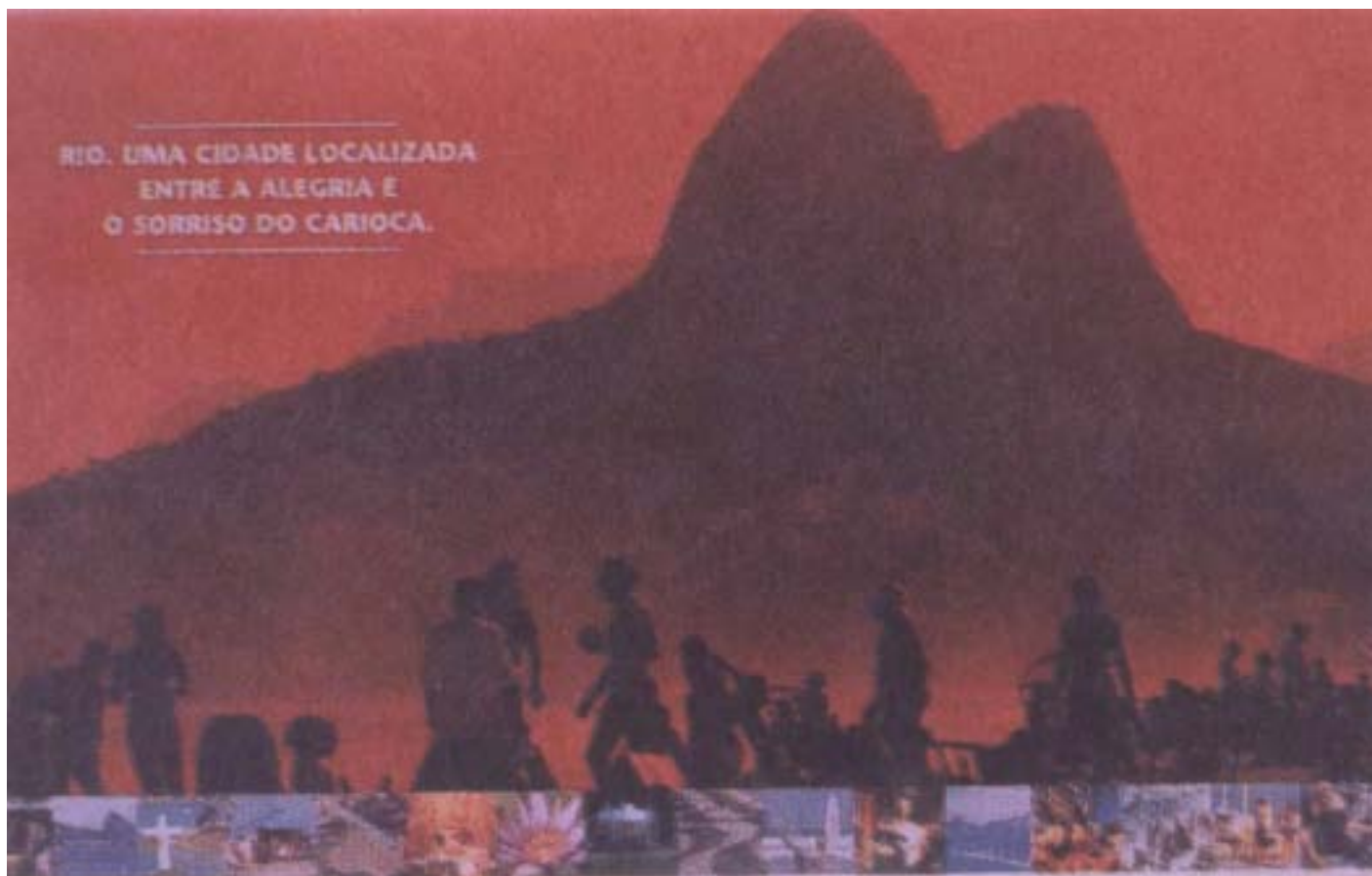
Tourist map,
1999

by the inconstancy of interventions. Continuity was inexistant; a unified management of actions taken was also absent. Actions were normally guided by immediate necessity for the solving of problems related to traffic or urban infra-structure. In between these interventions, the seaside continued to be in the city's imaginative construction, but it received little attention from public administration regarding its urban form.

The new urbanistic practices that were adopted in Rio de Janeiro were reflections of the accelerating economic globalization that turned the cities into world economic actors. These practices assimilated the tendency to rediscover and reinvent the identities and traditions. Through the recognition of the seaside being the city trademark, these projects could have represented an administrative change for those areas, but that just didn't happen. The interventions that occurred were isolated ones: the Rio-Orla Project (1992) for example, which made a significant impact on the seaside's urban structure, was impelled by taking place of a specific event (the UNO conference, ECO-92) and it didn't have great consequences after the event as one would expect for an area that was continuously in use. Instead of isolated projects, Rio de Janeiro's seaside requires a prolonging program.

It is important to point out that this isn't negligence of the seaside's importance from Rio's public administration. On the contrary, the seaside in Rio has always been the most repeatedly used image in official publicity. In spite of "Plano Maravilha" – Rio de Janeiro's Tourism Strategy Plan (1997), to diversify Rio's identity, the natural beauties are still the images that appear on most of the city's promotional posters.

Fig.6: The Carioca Pride Publicity Campaign. (PLANO Maravilha – Rio de Janeiro's Tourist Plan – Progress Report. Rio de Janeiro: Special Tourism Bureau, The Rio de Janeiro Town Hall, 1999. p.37)



It may very well be that this valuing of the natural beauties as the city's main attraction has been one of the motives why little attention has been given to interventions in that area. The understanding of the seaside as something that belongs to nature would automatically take the responsibility away from the public bodies to construct on it. This a situation that is similar to the one described by Berger (1987:122) when presenting the reification concept: *"reification is the apprehension of the human activity products as if they were natural facts, results of the cosmic laws or manifestations of the divine's desire. Rectification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own creation of the human world, and what's more, that the dialogue between man, the producer and his products is lost from sight by awareness."*

But it cannot be denied that the recent acts – eventual urbanity interventions and the social and economical actions that were taken by Rio de Janeiro's Strategy Plan (1995) and Plano Maravilha (1997) – had positive affects of the image of Rio de Janeiro. Since the Strategy Plan implementation there has been an increase in the number of foreign tourists and national as well as international events (markets and conventions) taking place in the city. [fig.7, 8] To benefit from this positive picture, maybe this is the right moment to position the city beyond touristic horizons, and with that also seek other investments.

Public authority itself recognizes in the Strategy Plan the necessity not to limit the city's image to tourism and the natural beauties, valuing other markets such as tourism events and culture. It also seeks to consolidate Rio de Janeiro service nucleus and a centre for big national and international companies, betting on a positive effect on both jobs and city income. But the opening of these new markets doesn't exclude the investments to improve the seaside's image as these investments shouldn't be seen as positive solely for the tourism. The strengthening of Rio de Janeiro's image by use of its seaside is not just

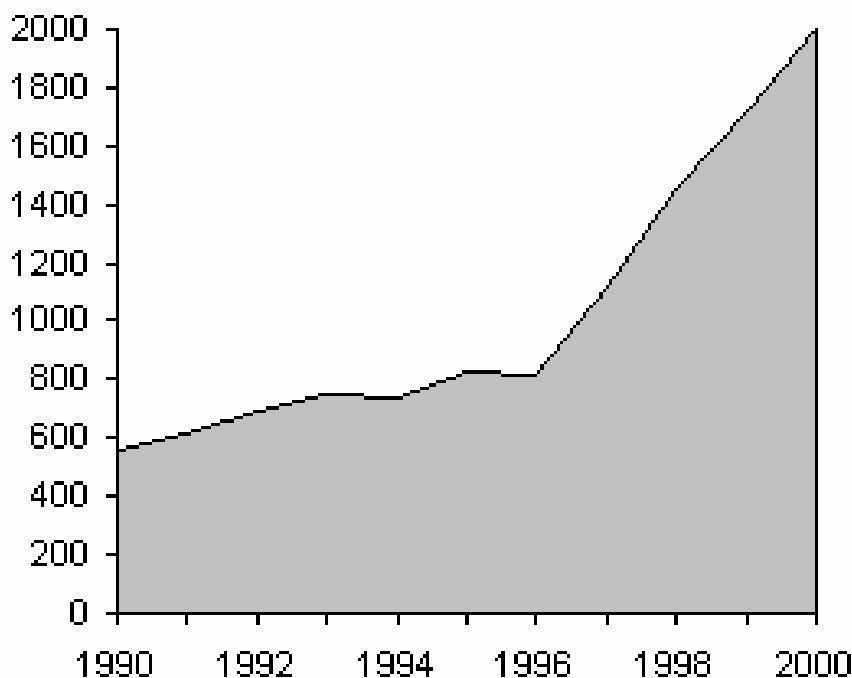
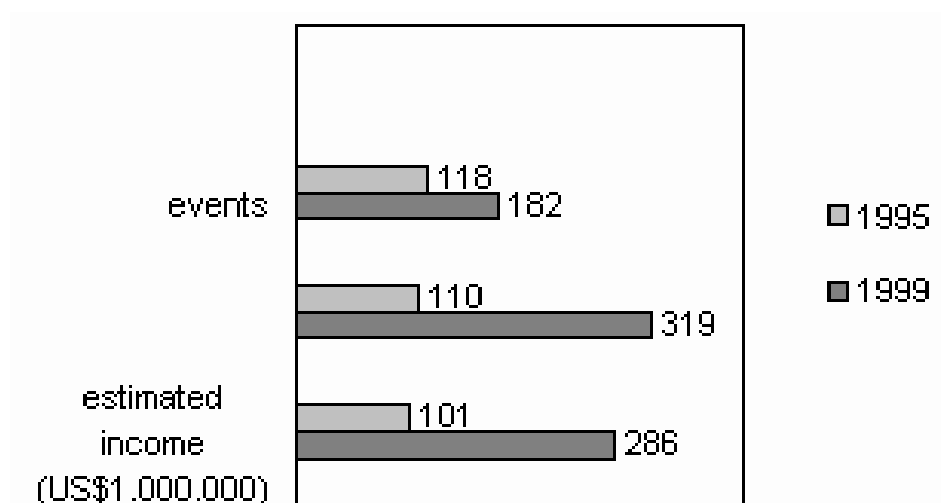


Fig. 7, 8: Foreign Tourists in Rio de Janeiro, 1999/2000; accomplished markets and conventions, 1995/1999. (AVALIATION by Rio de Janeiro Strategy Plan. Rio de Janeiro, 2000.)



to attract visitors: on the "global market" a city with a strong image has more chances attracting new residents and investors. Besides this, the seaside is part of the carioca's life and identity and its valuing has a direct relation to the resident's self – esteem. According to Rio de Janeiro's 1998 Annual Statistic (2000), 54% of the cariocas consider natural beauty to be the city's best characteristic and 55% have going to the beach as their favourite activity.

It is important for the carioca seaside to become a strategic point in the city and not just something used for postcards, so that there can be recognition of the direct relation that exists between the political acts, the urban form and its social representation. The understanding that the seaside's embellishing and treatment isn't just a mere esthetical question, but one value the city's identity as a whole, and it may very well be the kick-start for the public authority to have a change of posture towards its image. The recapturing of citizenship that was proposed by Rio de Janeiro's Strategy Plan could have its beginning by valuing what is the city's biggest and most democratic public space: the beach.

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