



The (re) signification of Aracaju's (SE) central squares: sociability, territoriality and tangencies

Mário Jorge Silva Santos

PhD Professor, UFS, Brazil Urban-regional, policy and education studies research group (GRUPE/UFS) mariojorge33@gmail.com

Ana Rocha dos Santos

PhD Professor, PPGEO/UFS, Brazil Urban-regional, policy and education studies research group (GRUPE/UFS) ana.rochausfs@gmail.com





SUMMMARY

The present essay aims to analyze the sociospatial production of Fausto Cardoso and Olímpio Campos public squares, which are located at Aracaju (SE) historical center and are attached to the characteristics of urban production in this city. It concerns a case study structured by the historical-dialectic method and considers the history and alterations in the production and use of these spaces by the city dwellers, as well as their identity, sociability, territoriality and tangentiality. This analysis is based on the theoretical presupposition that the studied spaces are produced through capitalist society logics, which means that it has a processual dynamic of multiple functionalities. Thus, one can affirm that Aracaju's central squares are spaces of resistance and identity for social groups that encounter their possibilities of survival at them, even in a context at which most inhabitants regard these places as spaces of passage and often avoided.

KEYWORDS: Public squares. City. Identity.

1- INTRODUCTION

"Geographical space is an indissociable and solidary system of objects and actions mediated by norms" (Santos, 2004, p.137). This affirmation is significative for this study understandings because socially-produced norms, hegemonic or not, conduct actions carried out by individuals as a result of capitalist society dynamics in the production of geographical space.

Geographical objects are more than the instruments used by individuals in their actions, they are produced or reproduced by society through determined intentions and functions. However, they can assume other functions, be re-functionalized or modified through processes associated to a given socioeconomic structure.

Nowadays, there is also a deep debate into the sense of place. According to Tuan (1980, p.42), "space is more abstract than place, what begins as undifferentiated space transforms into place as we get to know it and give it meaning and value". Place is "created by humans and for human purposes, there is a narrow relation between experience and time as sense of place is rarely acquired by the simple act of passing through it" (TUAN, 1983, p.28).

Place is the space of the particular and is associated to historical, cultural and identitary elements that reveal its specificities. "It is in place that the contradictions of globalization are materialized, in accordance with its particularities and possibilities" (CAVALCANTI, 1998, p.52). Place appears as a spatial fragment where it is possible to apprehend how the modern world is produced in the contradictory articulation between the worldly that is announced and the historical specificity of the particular. "Thus, place is presented as a point of articulation between the global in constitution and the local as concrete specificity – as a moment" (CARLOS, 1997, p. 303).

City is fundamentally a spatial concept (Carlos, 1997). It is a particular geographical configuration founded on co-presence, that is, it is where the concentration of a given society happens, which maximizes the density and diversity of social interactions and stablishes different levels of urbanity. "This enables the city to be a privileged place where the exercise of

citizenship can be enhanced because it is the means of existence for most people" (SANTOS, 1994, p.104).

The city is a product and work of various agents that are daily modified for diverse reasons. "It is in this urban space that social struggles are developed, since the city is – before anything – the object of social struggles" (RIBEIRO, 1997, p.103).

City refers to a unique place, although it increasingly contains a global component constituted by values, ways of life and culture that concern an urban society in constitution. The urban life of modern cities has complex relations of sociability that are carried out in its diverse public spaces.

In this context, public squares arise as places in the city where this sociability gains its own dynamic, "because its center contains the public and private spheres that confer meanings and imprint singularisms in the relations between local society and territory, which generates uses that are specific to each city's context" (LIMA, 2011, p.2).

Throughout urban history, public squares had significations that demanded appropriations and sociability specific to each context, making them the stage of urban life since "the networks of sociability turned squares into the possible stage of urban life – intercut by gazes, uses and varied forms of appropriation in different times and spaces" (CORADINI, 1995, p.21).

Contemporarily, squares are presented as places of urban esthetics at which its main characteristics are the politic uses of public space through recreation, leisure, social conviviality, or contemplation.

Thus, its composition is attached to a diversity of uses and power relations that are configured and give meaning to citizen contexts. These power relations come from different spheres (public and private) that reproduce various conflicts in places of sociability.

In face of these observations, the objective of this essay is to discuss the uses of public squares through the conceptual focus of place. Its scope is considered in an approach towards the (re)signification of these spaces in regards to the discussion of its character as sociality spaces situated in Aracaju, at Sergipe state. It is understood that there is a multiplicity of identities that are reinvented and renovated, be it in the configuration of new and old territories or in their transformation into avoided places.

In order to do so, methodological proceedings were conducted in accordance to the dialectical analysis of the question, comprehending that there is a historical production of social relations. Social reality is studied in its totality, at which one cannot understand an element, an aspect or dimension without losing its connection with the whole. This is based on the ideal of an explicative contradiction of capitalist society in its uneven and combined development.

The article is structured on a discussion that considers the historical and social conditions of Aracaju. It employs the contexts of studied public squares and their dynamics to analyze this process through the identified territorial relations and the spatial forms constituted





by society over time in such way that determines new functionalities, territorialities and identities in these spaces.

2- ARACAJU'S CENTRAL SQUARES IN THE SPATIO-TEMPORAL CONTEXT: FROM A PLACE OF SOCIABILITY TO A TANGENTIAL PLACE

As in many Brazilian cities, Aracaju (SE) suffered a significative impact of late 20th century development centered on an economic dynamic that caused a significative populational growth, specially in the 1980's, when it passed the 300 thousand inhabitants mark, reaching 600 thousand inhabitants in 2010 (IBGE, 2010).

One of the most expressive changes of this process was the structuration of its urban mesh of spaces with great commercial and leisure capacity, "elements that since its 1855 foundation were found only in the city commercial and historical center" (LIMA, 2007, p.5).

Aracaju's (SE) center is a result of governmental action that configures its urban face through Sebastião Pirro's design, who projected the city in 1855 based on a quadrate of perpendicular streets. This initial configuration was based on the understanding of the capital as an administrative city, with no consideration to is residential components. Nevertheless, the first residences were located in this initial quadrate, particularly those of public workers that were forced to move into this space due to the transference of the state capital (São Cristóvão/SE) to Aracaju.

Aracaju's central squares, analyzed in this essay, are those located in its historical and commercial center. These are taken by the city's history in a context that is amalgamated with urban development phases and defined by the initial configuration of the capital implantation and by the later attempt to amplify its initial urban quadrate, interiorizing the city.

The squares that are part of this study are: Fausto Cardoso Square, former Palatial Square, projected into the initial 1855 city plan; and Olímpio Campos Square, founded in 1862 due to the former Mother Church of Nossa Senhora da Conceição construction, now Aracaju's (SE) Metropolitan Cathedral.

Since its constructions, both churches (figure 1) always reaffirmed the residential and administrative character of Aracaju's center. They have been spaces of sociability and leisure for the population during many decades.





Figure 01: Overview of Fasto Cardoso and Olímpio Campos squares in Aracaju's (SE) city center.



Source: Prefeitura Municipal de Aracaju (SE), 2016.

This functionality was transformed after 1930, a "period defined by the spontaneous growth of the city" (LOUREIRO, 1983, p.32), which decomposed Aracaju's central area as a place of commerce through the presence and construction of tertiary geographical objects. The neighborhood was consolidated as a commercial center with an effective sprawl of shops, popular street and public markets, which reduced its former residential function.

Diverse interventions in these squares, be it on its physical structures or in the authorization of service activities, and public actions consolidated and delimitated the urban functionality of these places. Its interconnections with the city served as references that delimitated the city and contraposed its growth in the duality of being both a commercial and residential center.

For many years, this dualism seemed to indicate these spaces as convergent city places, not only due to the location of diverse public buildings and proximity to shops, offices and schools, but also because of its configuration as spaces of social and politic resistance. This dynamic transformed these spaces in a result of a succession of events that, at the same time, expressed the movement of capitalist society – in its human subjugation and spatial segregation that expresses social differentiation.

Aracaju's central squares are reformulated alongside their values and uses. Places that were of upper-class conviviality and sociability are (re)configured to become spaces of identity for a poorer part of the population that is segregated by its economic system.





Consolidation of this center as a place of commerce in the 1950's forced a parcel of the population that resided in this space to be transferred to other parts of the city. This happened in accordance to the contraposition of this commercial function to the urban bourgeoise way of life, which begins to have other manners and concepts of comfort and leisure.

Particularly since the 1960's, the center's duality puts a contraposing dynamic in evidence. At one side there is a commercial/administrative space, and in the other, there is the new (old) residential space, but with other kinds of inhabitants, which were not the sugar barons, farmers, industry proprietors and high-class public workers. Now, urban salaried workers and migrants appropriated the center as work-place, a place of opportunity and proximity to their jobs and the urban convergence point.

In this context, Fausto Cardoso and Olímpio Campos squares are transformed in their production as city references. Both squares lose their bourgeoise sociability identity on account of their public character that subordinates its social references to those of a worker-class that begins to inhabit the neighborhood.

Allied to this, the decadence of physical elements reaffirms the abandonment of these places, both in the aspects of maintenance, preservation and revitalization and of its uses by public policy. These components open up possibilities for a territorial approach of public space, because their diverse degrees of domination and appropriation engender a framework of multiple power relations (RAFFESTIN, 1993). Territorial usage demands specific appropriations in the context of public squares, which can be classified as formal and informal appropriations (MENDONÇA, 2007). In this case, the definition of public space conceived by Gomes (2001, p.96) is pertinent:

By one side, we can affirm that public space is a space defined by a juridical egalitarian and democratic statute and, by the other side, that where one practices a certain attitude and social behavior that identifies it as a public democratic life (GOMES, 2001, p.96).

In this sense, we agree with ARENDT (2005, p.76) position that: "the private domain is established by individuality, family and private propriety, whereas the public domain comprehends the questions associated with sociability and common practices".

This new configuration that began on the 1960's configures the private residency in the center as a place for poor workers unprovided of priority public policy that guarantees the minimum maintenance of accessible equipment of leisure and sociability.

This process of city center impoverishment was revealed in many ways and was studied less in critical than in functional manners by researchers. They often reaffirmed the question without indicating the contradictions hereby expressed. Lima (2007, p.6), i.e., affirmed that:

The process of city center 'impoverishment' in Aracaju was particularly revealing in its public market. The presence of marginalized social





actors, such as prostitutes, 'trombadinha' and 'cheira-colas' boys, beggars, amongst others, joined with rampant growth of informal commerce – mainly in close streets and locales – transformed it in an indistinct complex and superdense steed market. This had a decisive influence in the sociospatial reordering of the Municipal Market. (LIMA, 2007, p.6).

The social actors presented by the author are not distant from the subjects that are present nowadays as actional agents of quotidian reference at Fausto Cardoso and Olímpio Campos squares, configurating the landscape and giving characteristics of spatial control to the place.

This apparent control occurs in accordance with actions affirmed by the establishment of strategies that employ fear as a tool for controlling the structural uses of space. This is joined with the absence of public regulation that contradictorily legitimizes the relation of a legitimate identity connecting places to the social subjects that appropriates these spaces, creating a counterpoint to the previously collective usage.

Analyzing the quotidian of the studied squares and observing the permanence of people and square usage as spaces of leisure and relaxation, we constate that Olímpio Campos Square, which was highly frequented for social conviviality, religious use, recreation and cultural leisure, has its present functionality restricted to the commerce of artisanal products (figure 2) and food during mornings and afternoons. Artisanal products stalls use the main path of the square and hinders access to its center portion, be it from the lateral or frontal entrance in relation to the Metropolitan Cathedral.



Figure 02: Overview of artisanal product stalls at the central walk of Olímpio Campos Square.

Source: The authors, 2016.





Destruction of leisure equipment and a sensation of insecurity signalizes the public domain, encompassing questions relating to sociability and common practices (ARENDT, 2005). The square is territorially appropriated by beggars, particularly in the laterals and front of the Metropolitan Cathedral; it is also occupied by hippies that sell artisanal products, drug users and narcotic trade.

It is also important to indicate the existence of three bars (figure 3), an art gallery, one experimental restaurant and two newsstands that are located in the square perimeter with their front facing the surrounding streets. These elements promoted a relative cultural and artistic function in this space during a long time. However, with the recent closure and interruption of service activities by bars and restaurants, their physical structures lost recurrent effective activities. This isolated the internal landscape of the square, which does not have movement or leisure activities, thus lessening the flux of people and their permanence in this place.



Figure 03: Overview of bars situated inside Olímpio Campos Square - Aracaju (SE).

Source: The authors, 2016.

Fausto Cardoso square, reformed in 2010, is surrounded by municipal, state and federal public buildings, which propitiates a greater circulation of people in the area, who have to pass trough the square's space. Until the 1980's, Fausto Cardoso square was intensely frequented, there was leisure equipment, such as cinemas, ice cream and candy shops in its surroundings.

In this square there are no bars, as is Olímpio Campos square case. There are only three newsstands distributed in its perimeter. Some trees were cut in the last reform and gave place





to an open central walk with palm trees that conduct into the monument for Fausto Cardoso, Sergipe's historical figure, who lends the name for its toponymy.

There are two interior buildings: the Olímpio Campos Palace Museum, old Governmental Palace, and the Legislative School, former State Legislative Assembly, both functioning and in good state of conservation. Its physical structure and localization collaborated to turn it into a space of concentration and convergence for political and social acts. Beyond this, its conviviality and leisure equipment are also well conserved because were replaced in the 2010 reform. According to the historian Barreto (2006, p.28):

Few places in Aracaju have so much symbology and so much to do with the city life as Fausto Cardoso square, followed by the square where the Cathedral is located at: different in their denomination and uses. From the square, the city sprawled to every side, in the banks of Sergipe river, water-mirror of country waters, with a sugar smell that *saveiros* brought to the warehouses and sugar mills before it would sweeten aliments in diverse parts of Brazil and the world (BARRETO, 2006, p.28).

The symbology indicated by the author refers to the concept of symbol connected to the social construction of the city. Nevertheless, this romantic symbology attributed to the square is, before anything, a construction by a social class that dominated the place constitution identity – the identity that was forged by the former center dwellers before its decadency as a residential neighborhood. It is important to indicate that even in the actual urban configuration at which, according to Vilar (2000, p.156) "have already presented other functional centralities", Aracaju's historical center remains a convergency space. Although it has been (re)configured through time when stores and enterprises began to decentralize towards other neighborhoods, it continues to be the capitalist space of greater economic dynamic, even if the social segment it attends nowadays is of a social class of lesser acquisitive power.

This change of consumer profile in Aracaju center was also decurrent of the foundation of its first Shopping Center, established in the city in the 1980s.

In contraposition to a place of sociability, central squares became more than a place of passage, because much of the social attractive that orbited these public axes was transferred from the center to other neighborhoods of the city.

In this context, it is also interesting to think on the aspect of square formulation as a public space attached to social leisure or, even, to the contradictory characteristics given by the capital to these urban spaces. In the case of Fausto Cardoso and Olímpio Campos squares, they are configurated as the example of the geographer Santos (2005, p.67) in his analysis of the city center.

Aracaju city center is presented as a contradictory space. This contradiction denotes a confrontation between two uses imposed by capital to Center's





places. Within the rhythms of the night, that eliminates the flux strength, the imposition of sub-works and unemployment creates the conditions that enable prostitutes of both sexes and transvestites to imprint their rhythms in it. The invasion of prostitution into Aracaju's center's night creates a network of power relations in this area that results into the formation of territories constructed and delimitated by these subjects (SANTOS, 2005, p.67).

Central squares also operate into this dynamic and are reproduced as places taken by social subjects involved into the prostitution process that occurs in Aracaju city center. Nowadays, this happens beyond the nightly period indicated by the researcher, extending during the day. This succinctly creates a new place identity that is contraposed between the diurnal functional use, as a commercial/administrative space, and this new functionality connected to prostitution.

This occurrence aids in the comprehension of results indicated by interviews conducted with frequenters and dwellers during this research. When questioned about which of the two central squares they usually frequented as a form of conviviality and leisure, only 12% affirmed its frequentation, amongst this total, 75% indicated they frequent Olímpio Campos square mainly due to religious masses in the Metropolitan Church.

When inquired on their reasons to not frequent Fausto Cardoso square, which was described as a well conserved space (figure 4), 56% of the interviewed indicated that they do not go there because they do not like its frequenters. When questioned on the identification of the social types of the place, the most common answer was the following typification: *malandros*, kids, prostitutes and thieves.





Figure 04: Overview of Fausto Cardoso Square: Reformed, conserved and with few frequenters.



Source: The authors, 2015.

This group of people indicated by the interviewees is a profusion that is undone through an attentive gaze. What happens in the squares is a cyclic process of territorialities that are daily done and undone. Jacobs (2001) describes this as a complex succession of uses and users. Souza (1995, p.82) ideas collaborate in this understanding when it affirms that "territories are constructed in the most diverse temporal scales and they can have permanent, periodic or cyclic existences".

Although the social production determines this space (re)configuration as a loss of its characteristics as a place of sociability for the city dwellers, Fausto Cardoso square continues to be a space of convergencies as it is still highly determined as a place of politic and social concentration and manifestation (figure 5).







Source: The authors, 2013.

In turn, Olímpio Campos square is undoubtedly denser in its cyclical territorialities because there is a diversity of social groups that occupy it through the day. This is expressed by a constant presence of various subjects that concentrate in this space, such as students, hippies, beggars, rockers and drug users.

This structuring reality indicates that both in the point of view of interviewed dwellers and in the observation of people that frequent the place or use the equipment and services of the center, it was possible to constate a behavior that we adjectivize here as a tangentiality of the studied squares.

The concept of spatial tangentiality was approached by Costa and Sá (2007) in their analysis of public square dynamics in Campina Grande (PB) as a way to evidence public and private urban spaces that used to be full of vitality, of fixes and fluxes of people, and that "became marginalized places of non-permanence, avoided by the majority of the population due to the presence of undesired groups". According to Costa and Sá (2007):

A quasi-institutionalization of violence and fear transforms streets, squares and parks of our city into spaces that only have a safe utilization during certain hours of the day, since most of the time some of these spaces are tangential, where permanence is embarrassing or exposes possible frequenters to some kind of risk. As places distinctly respond to certain phenomena, we perceive that the answer of some





Campina Grande's inhabitants was to close off themselves from these spaces. This, in turn, results in public spaces of even greater insecurity because they are empty or occupied by delinquency. (COSTA and SÁ, 2007, p.112).

Based in this conceptual analysis, this study notices that people avoid to cross or remain in the center of these squares, preferring to contour its immediacies even when the fastest route would be crossing it in order to reach another point localized in its surroundings.

This behavior was observed in various days and interviews with fifty people found in the surroundings pointed that 80% of the interviewees indicate the previously identified subjects as the main reason to avoid crossing or stopping in these squares. In general, this form of tangentiality was indicated as a form of precaution against robberies or harassment by beggars, sellers and other forms of relations existent in these places.

At night, this reality is even concreter. The squares studied here are inserted in the "territories of prostitution" studied by Santos (2005, p.70) and its control is more structuring. The few frequenters of this period are restricted to the subjects that use the prostitution services and a high frequency of drug users could be observed. This, consequentially, indicates a drug trade dynamic at its surroundings.

The nightly period has a stronger tangentiality. These squares become places to be avoided by residents of the center as well as most of the population. They became tangential places in contraposition to other times of urban history of the city when they were spaces of sociability, diversion and leisure.

We can indicate that Olímpio Campos square has a less expressive nightly configuration for two reasons: the Metropolitan Cathedral presence, which still holds masses in the initial period of the night (19:00 o'clock), and the presence of a gay encounter point in its left lateral, Green Space Nightclub, which is open in Fridays and Saturdays and concentrates a certain amount of people at this side of the square in these two nights of the week. This punctual reality dos not eliminate its character as an avoidable space because its exterior and interior are mostly deserted and, even during these days of punctual frequency, its tangentiality is still expressive.

3- FINAL THOUGHTS

The process of Aracaju's central squares spatial (re)configuration is a consequence of deep modifications that occurred throughout the years by society and the city as a space of rights. The structured separation of social classes that reflects in the order of urban space occupation and division can respond to questions pointed in this study, after all leisure, festivity, sociability and diversion equipment are sold in the form of merchandise.

Places of collective sociability in residential spaces are offered as a privilege of a determined social class: the one that can pay for green areas, squares, parks and leisure





equipment, such as those present in gated communities. This reality is a result of the fear of violence sprawled in society as a consequence of a profound crisis originated from a perverse situation of income concentration that does not create opportunities of access to goods, services and income to the majority of the population.

Thus, these elements create a situation of social isolation with people behind bars, with walls and electric fences functioning as social limits and frontiers. Spósito (2013, p. 140) analyses this question and affirms that:

Implantation of these enterprises is one of the vectors for complete redefinition of the center-periphery pair because the systems of circulation and accessibility control – be it on what concerns private or public spaces – recompose the spatial tessiture in order to sustain the recompositing of social tessiture. (SPOSITO, 2013, p.140).

In this context of urban spatial production, Aracaju central squares loses its social character of conviviality as they are places convergence for the entire city due to their urban centrality. It becomes a free space just as it is occupied by marginalized groups of this same society.

In this sense, it is important to understand Carlos' (2011, p.137) ideas when analyzing that:

At the contemporary city, the public/private space contradiction reveals the extension of privation through the juridic form of private property of riches and is translated into the social hierarchy that defines access to city places. It indicates the differentiations between individuals in a class. At the same time, it reveals the explosion of the city center as a symbolic place constitutive of identities (CARLOS, 2011, p.137).

The studied central squares become places of resistance, of fixed and cyclical territorial relations that are relations of power. The tangentiality of these places is expressed by this territoriality that is (re)configurated as identity spaces for certain groups, but simultaneously creates the distancing of other parts of society that see them as places to be avoided. These squares are produced in clear relation to the contradictions of the system that structures society and imposes the co-presence as a negation of the other in these places. These squares are avoided in order to avoid "unequal" people, these considered as "outside society's standards".

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