

Public spaces and the coronavirus pandemic: the Halfeld Park (Parque Halfeld), located in the city of Juiz de Fora/Minas Gerais

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ABSTRACT

The theme of this article is immobility, in essence. When substantially all of humanity is forced to either reduce its usual flows or systematize them into "essential" and "non-essential," the Municipality of Juiz de Fora started to observe one of its most traditional public spaces becoming a source of infection and consequently a symbol of necessary containment. Under those circumstances, this study aimed to analyze the mobility restrictions in favor of public health plus the efforts of the local government through a bibliographic review about the specific set of the Halfeld Park (Parque Halfeld). Primary sources highlight the emerging need to guarantee the best conditions for public spaces in the current context (the "new normal") in any city. In effect, this work contributes to the discussion about rethinking cities, as well as providing data that prove faulty urban planning and management when dealing with this crisis: palliative actions are not enough.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic. Public Space. Halfeld Park in Juiz de Fora/MG.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the intimate relationship between urban environments and health. Specific discussions about diseases caused by the way of life in cities over the last decades are in the spotlight although the debates about cities have been strongly active since the critical analysis of urban production based on modernist dogmas. Overall, the general unhealthiness in urban environments is due to excessive population growth, which jeopardizes the quality of urbanization in contemporary cities (DAVIS, 2006). The health consequences come for all, but are stronger to the most vulnerable groups. This whole context points out to the need of better space planning, especially when it comes to mobility and places of conviviality in cities.

Yes, many cities are already worrying about improving mobility conditions and enhancing public spaces. However, this process was abruptly interrupted by the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 (the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2). Health protocols became a priority, that is, immediate hygiene and social isolation or distancing. Suddenly, public spaces were no longer a "remedy" for urban lifestyle diseases, but places to be fiercely avoided. Ultimately, a new question arises: how should public spaces be treated during the pandemic considering their importance for public life?

In order to collaborate with this specific debate, the present article seeks to understand how the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic have been impacting socio-spatial relations and the urban management. Given that, specific objectives of this study are: (a) to expand the discussion on the pandemic crisis by analyzing an important public space, the Halfeld Park, located in a medium-sized city, Juiz de Fora/MG, and; (b) to recover the historiography of said park in order to identify its functions and importance to the city.

This work's methodology includes a bibliographic review, historical research, and documentary research. The great purpose was to identify contemporary theories that have fueled the discussion about public spaces in today's cities. Additionally, primary sources of data provided informations and laws regarding the pandemic crisis in the city of Juiz de Fora. These sources are a compilation of the news published in the most relevant newspapers of the city plus the local ordinances passed between March 17, 2020, and October 14, 2020. The data allowed the examination of the treatment given to Halfeld Park during this specific time set of the pandemic.

Altogether, this research wishes to contribute to the discussion regarding how cities responded to the pandemic crisis. It also aims to grant data that may be useful for urban planning and urban management during this health crisis. Furthermore, this work is an analysis of a public space and it can be easily reiterated regarding the contexts of other cities, consequently supporting the comprehension of the relationship between urban public spaces and the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 THE CITIES AND THE PANDEMIC: SOME NOTES ABOUT THE URBAN DEBATE

When debating about the contemporary city, urban public spaces come to the spotlight. They have various forms and scales. According to Carmona (2018), said diversity means the recognition of the diverse urban lifestyles and of the variety of demands by urban populations. The diversified public spaces also imply having something to offer for everyone. In this same perspective, Gehl and Svarre (2018) talk about the need to develop contemporary tools to establish cohesion between the variety of lifestyles and the public spaces. These authors also state that urban planners have begun to prioritize the interaction between daily life and public spaces, as well as considering the social and psychological dimensions of life in the city. Therefore, the rates of "lifestyle diseases" are being modified.

Gehl and Svarre (2018) affirm that urban planners have been looking for solutions regarding public spaces and the diseases related to the lifestyle in the contemporary city, like stress, diabetes, and heart disease. However, this is all very recent as it only arises in the middle of the 20th century. Urban planners have been facing the challenge of reconfiguring public spaces to respond to infectious diseases that plagued cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Gehl and Svarre, 2018, p. 45-49). At that time, improving living conditions in the cities was imperative in order to face the illnesses. The architects and urban planners then proposed houses with proper ventilation and lighting. They also revised the design of the overcrowded, tight, and unhealthy cities by suggesting wide avenues, afforestation, and urban parks.

At first, it seems that the world is reliving this dark and uncertain period with the current pandemic caused by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2, responsible for COVID-19. Uncertainties emerge. While there are no exact answers for anything right now, the most appropriate is following the guidelines established by health authorities: hand hygiene, wearing masks, and social distancing. In this context, architects and urban planners are called out to contribute in facing this crisis. Actions include creating environmental conditions for those who need to maintain social isolation through quarantine and rethinking public spaces in order to offer safe outdoor environments in a post-pandemic world. It is necessary to think not only of the large free areas of the metropolises, but of all the scales and natures of public spaces in the cities.

2 JUIZ DE FORA AND THE HALFELD PARK (PARQUE HALFELD)

Juiz de Fora, a city located in the state of Minas Gerais, has its origin in the old Vila de Santo Antônio do Paraibuna, which was elevated to the category of city in 1853 and changed its name in 1865. The city is categorized as medium-sized and the estimated population is 573,285 as for 2020 (IBGE, 2017). Juiz de Fora is also labeled as the Capital of Zona da Mata Mineira

(Regional Capital B). It establishes a network of influence with the towns of Além Paraíba/MG, Sapucaia/RJ, Ubá/MG, and Muriaé/MG (IBGE, 2020). The municipality has an important industrial park, diversified commerce, public and private educational institutions, reference hospitals in various specialties, laboratories, and a wide variety of professionals and services. Juiz de Fora has several options of free public areas: Halfeld Park (Parque Halfeld), Lajinha Municipal Natural Park (Parque Natural Municipal da Lajinha), Morro do Imperador, Mariano Procópio Park (Parque Mariano Procópio), the recreation area of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora Campus (área de lazer do Campus da Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora), the Arts and Sports Center (Praça CEU), Antônio Carlos Public Square (Praça Antônio Carlos), Bom Pastor Public Square (Praça Bom Pastor), Baleia Public Square (Praça da Baleia), Agassis Public Square (Praça Agassis) and São Mateus Public Square (Praça São Mateus).

The Halfeld Park, even before the construction works that made it an actual park, was already a very important public space for the city of Juiz de Fora. Rangel Júnior (2006) quotes Oliveira in his chronicle book and states that the area of the Halfeld Park was a place for great events and meetings in the city, such as circus performances and itinerant amusement parks. This public space had its first construction work at the end of the 19th century and the landscape was designed by the architect Miguel Antônio Lallemont. However, the work had received many criticisms. The change of location for installing circuses and amusement parks and the low quality of the building materials did not match the initial contract. Given this widespread dissatisfaction, the Municipal Square (Largo Municipal) underwent a renovation following the English garden model under the responsibility of the construction company Pantaleone Arcuri and Spinelli, hired by Colonel Francisco Mariano Halfeld. This action was recognized in 1901, when the municipality then allowed the new name for the park: Colonel Francisco Mariano Halfeld Park (Parque Coronel Francisco Mariano Halfeld) (RANGEL JÚNIOR, 2006, p.23).

At this point, urban practices of beautification and spatial planning were viable solutions to the cities. The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century were marked by health crises, like the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. According to Benchimol (1988, p.178), the health crisis in Brasília (the federal capital) at that time expressed the situation of the poor living conditions of the population. Within the scope of urban reforms that tried to plan and beautify the urban space, gardens and squares were great options: green places capable of contributing to the improvement of aeration conditions in cities. In this context, it is important to acknowledge the approval of local ordinances in attention to the health conditions in cities, such as the Decree of the State of Minas Gerais No. 2.733 of January 11, 1910. This local ordinance made it mandatory to present projects of urban improvement in hygiene and health conditions to the State Hygiene Directorate. As stated by Magalhães (2015, p. 129), gardens then assumed a “social function in the spatial planning and beautification of public spaces,” and therefore the population started to take them as references for walks and recreation. Henceforth, it is clear that the beautification project of the cities was not restricted to the metropolises as one can see by the landscape remodeling of Halfeld Park, in Juiz de Fora, a medium-sized town, at the end of the 19th century.

The Halfeld Park is the first public space in the city and one of the most important places in public and everyday urban life of Juiz de Fora. Its relevance is explained by the use and appropriation of the park itself by the population, as well as the fact that it is located around

great public institutions such as the City Hall, inaugurated in 1878; the old Municipal Palace, built in 1918; and the former Benjamin Colucci Forum, from 1973 (COLCHETE FILHO; PEDROSO; BRAIDA, 2014). In fact, the surroundings of the Halfeld Park are full of relevant places to the city of Juiz de Fora: the São Sebastião Church, from 1878; the Temple of the Methodist Church of Brazil, opened in 1927; the Clube Juiz de Fora Building, from 1918, and its later remodeling in 1955 (architectural project by Francisco Bologna and artistic panel in Portuguese tiles); the 1930 Ciampi Building, known as the city's "skyscraper" for a long time; and the Santa Helena Building, from 1937, a meeting spot for society at the time, since it had lots of coffee venues: Café Astória, Casa do Café, and Café Santa Helena (GENOVEZ, 1998; RANGEL JÚNIOR, 2006).

Therefore, this public space, which has a large green area, a children's playground, an open space for events, and multiple street furniture, provides people recreation activities, entertainment, circulation, and occasional trade (craft fairs). The Halfeld Park indeed represents the close idea of Borja's public space (2006): a multicultural place for the exchange of knowledge and experience as a result of the collective appropriation. These urban experiences were abruptly suspended in March 2020, though. A local ordinance demanded Halfeld Park to close in the name of public health since social distancing is a guideline recommended to fight the Coronavirus pandemic.

3 THE HALFELD PARK AND THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic imposed the emerging need to fight the spread of the Coronavirus. Health authorities advised on the importance of avoiding agglomerations in order to reduce the chances of contagion. Decree No. 13.893 of March 16, 2020, ordered citywide park closures as a response to the novel coronavirus (PREFEITURA DE JUIZ DE FORA, 2020). Despite the fact this ordinance suspended the operation of municipal parks indefinitely, the Halfeld Park has not suffered significant changes. People were still frequently going there. Ultimately, one could not expect the immediate closure of the Halfeld Park since it is a public space without any type of fences, a result of the 1923 renovation when railings were completely removed (RANGEL JÚNIOR, 2006). To actually close down the Halfeld Park, the City Hall installed an aluminum railing on the morning of March 21, 2020, (ZANELLA, 2020).

Despite the enclosure of the area and the prohibition of any type of event, an organic fair, which used to occur in Halfeld Park every Thursday, still happened on March 26, but outside the railing. This event was also suspended after an inspection by the Department of Environment and Urban Planning in compliance with the aforementioned decree that deliberated on preventive measures to face the COVID-19 crisis (PREFEITURA, 2020).

At the beginning of August, there was a face mask in the bust sculpture of Henrique Halfeld, a monument of the Halfeld Park. This art project was already going on in other cities, such as São Paulo. By placing protection masks in several monuments, there is a demonstration of the desire to give a new outlook to public spaces in the context of the pandemic (CNN, 2020). In Juiz de Fora, this action is also associated with the reopening of commerce and the increase in pedestrian circulation on the streets. It was a warning to the need of keeping up with the precautions, such as wearing a protection mask (MORADORES, 2020).

At the end of September, the Halfeld Park underwent some interventions for its reopening. The Municipal Paving and Urbanization Company cleaned the park, tidied the plants and flowerbeds, reexamined the electrical installations and repaired the lighting, and installed safety nets to the street furniture in order to support social distancing. On October 8, all railings were removed and the park was officially reopened to the public (DELGADO, 2020).

Figure 1: Isolated street furniture in Halfeld Park



Source: The authors (2020)

Primary sources of the main local newspapers in Juiz de Fora during the pandemic point to the following findings: (a) compliance with local ordinance on protective measures against the Coronavirus were not immediate. Complementary actions were necessary; (b) park users, in general, despite regretting its closure, agree with the need for emergency measures to combat social agglomerations; (c) local traders were apprehensive with the effect of the protection measures on their businesses, such as the owner of the park's newspaper stand and the fairground farmers; and, (d) the railing removal and the permission to use the park, even if only for circulation or individual sports activities, made users to quickly return to this public space. While analyzing local ordinances passed between March 17, 2020, and October 14 of that same year, this study notices that there was no specific measure on the adequacy and/or improvement of public spaces, such as squares and parks. In fact, the absence of actions aimed at adapting such spaces in the city demonstrates that there are no projects for the morphological reconfiguration and/or production of new street furniture elements that prioritize a safe use of free areas.

Table 1: Most relevant local ordinances passed between March 17, 2020 and October 14, 2020

Local ordinance	Text	Date of publication in the Official Gazette
DECREE No. 13.893 - March 16, 2020	Rules preventive measures to deal with the public health emergency of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and provides other measures. Features citywide public park closure for indefinite time.	03/17/2020
DECREE No. 13.920 - April 7, 2020	Declares a state of emergency in the municipality of Juiz de Fora due to the COVID-19 pandemic	04/07/2020
DECREE No. 13.929 - April 17, 2020	Amends Decree No 13.893 of March 16, 2020, and rules other protective measures to deal with the public health emergency of COVID-19. Features the creation of the Coronavirus Prevention and Confrontation Committee	04/17/2020
DECREE No. 14.068 - August 28, 2020	Amends Decree No. 13.975 of June 12, 2020, which "rules preventive measures to deal with the public health emergency of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) and provides other measures." Features the reinstatement of practicing sports and recreation activities while following the health protocols.	08/29/2020
DECREE No. 14.118 - September 29, 2020	Rewrites article 1 of Decree No. 14.030 of July 28, 2020, which establishes temporary measures for Municipal Councils that have councilmen/women ending their terms during the pandemic of the new Coronavirus (COVID-19). Features the authorization of automatic extension, until December 31, 2020, of Municipal Councils terms that would end during the state of emergency period.	09/30/2020

Source: prepared by the authors while set up on the publications of the Official Electronic Journal of the Municipality of Juiz de Fora. Available at: https://www.pjf.mg.gov.br/e_atos/e_atos.php. Accessed on: October 15, 2020

Given these findings, the future asks: how to safely use public spaces after this pandemic? To what extent will public spaces continue to be the main stage of urban life? Thus, there is an urgent need to observe and analyze the changes caused by the pandemic in the use and perceptions of public spaces. And yes, it is possible to provide suggestions for a safer and healthier city planning and designing with regard to public health.

In a recent study, Honey-Roses et al. (2020) draw attention to the impacts of the pandemic on urban life. The first of them is the urban project. It will be crucial to rethink the influence of the design of public spaces in order to make them care for global health. To accomplish that, planning professionals and public health professionals would have to team up to build healthier cities during and after the pandemic. The second aspect refers to the impacts on the use of public spaces and new public behavior trends. According to the researchers, the pandemic can limit the ability to develop new relationships. Altogether, for the authors, the issue of the public space being a permanent place for social interaction or not still depends on field research. At last, the essayists state the social inequality and the exclusion of vulnerable groups may be get worse due to COVID-19 accelerating the process of privatizing public spaces. The privatization of public spaces will promote a restriction of users. Finally, even though there

is no way to predict the difficulties that we will have to face in managing cities due to the coronavirus crisis, it is fair to assume that public spaces and collective life have definitely entered the global discussion.

CONCLUSION

By observing the debate about the contemporary city, it was possible to perceive a great prevalence on the discussions about urban public spaces. The scenario of the current pandemic demands that urban planners rethink cities and prioritize sanitary protocols while considering the importance of public space as a place of urban encounters and exchanges.

With this in mind, it is certainly complex to analyze the conditions of one of the most important public spaces in the city of Juiz de Fora, the Halfeld Park. When examining the local ordinances passed during the pandemic, there was no mention of interventions to reconfigure the morphology of the area nor the street furniture of the Halfeld Park or any other public space in the city. So far, little has been debated about the emergency of designing healthy and safer public spaces. The governmental measures implemented until now only worry about temporary actions to face the crisis.

The analysis of the aforementioned primary sources points out the urgent need to guarantee safe conditions for public spaces in the historical context disclosed as “the new normal” in any kind of city. The health crisis of the novel coronavirus affects the economy (multiple businesses closing down), the public security (control of social agglomerations), and the public health (overcrowded hospitals). But, above all, the pandemic has put urban public spaces in a quite new condition. Even though we have more questions than answers at the moment, it is certain that streets, public squares, and city parks need a new outlook. These spaces have a historical importance on representing the public sphere and are also a form of evidence on how we live and care for each other.

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