

# Around – ruins of a city under eternal reconstruction

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**Abstract:** This article aims to investigate the transformations that the city of Rio de Janeiro went through during the urban reform process in preparation for the Olympic Games (2016) and the World Cup (2014), establishing possible relations of closeness and distance with the Pereira Passos Reform, carried out between 1902 and 1906. Intentional destruction that erected new monuments, considerably questionable.

**Keywords:** *Ruin. Gentrification. Expropriation. Deterritorialization.*

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The semantic construction of the urban fabric of a city is always in motion, through an imbricated set of relationships that are established from several axes: economic, political, social, cultural and historical. In the case of Brazil, considering its colonial formation and its inspiration in models coming from other countries that did not necessarily establish geographical, structural and climatic approximations, such processes of redimensioning of the cities and their transits did not occur in an appeased manner. Although it is known that any urban reform carries with it a considerable burden of violence, in our case, a certain ethical and political lack of commitment, concealed by discursive regimes of power that prioritised the maintenance of a landowning structure and in a certain sense, a colonialist one, aggravated some of these moments.

In Rio de Janeiro, which was the capital of the country for 197 years, from 1763 to 1960, due to its privileged location and proximity to the Atlantic Ocean for the export of gold, such changes and mutations were felt most powerfully from the end of the colonial period until the republic. The city presented itself as a melting pot of bodies, habits, cultures and races, without this, of course, implying an absolute democratisation of the public space. Thus, cases of small displacements, changes and restructuring in the very flow of the city were not few. But nothing comparable to the Pereira Passos reform, strongly encouraged by President Rodrigues Alves, which began in 1903 and was inspired by the Paris reform promoted by Georges-Eugène Haussmann between 1853 and 1870.

The Pereira Passos reform aimed to adapt the city to the logic of the metropolis, as well as to produce a certain expansion of its road axes for the insertion of new mobility networks. Obviously there was a desire to expand the city in order to prepare and receive a modernization process already underway that could, in a “generous” manner, accommodate the flow of technological, automobile and urban production in the process of consolidation, as well as produce as an image, the paradoxical imaginary of an urban space that was in absolute harmony with the ideals of material progress and with the complex ideology of civilization.

Although there is still a certain narrative dispute about this reform and about the propositions of the mayor Pereira Passos for the resizing and rediscovery of the city, as for example in André Nunes Azevedo (2016) who, even recognizing the considerable burden of violence invested and used in such reforms, defends the possibility of understanding such desires as something close to a quixotic structuring of public policy that catered to a certain developmentalist utopia of that moment, despite its inevitable

flaws. In any case, it is impossible and inadmissible that we do not consider even today, an undeniable effect of such a process: real estate speculation and the enormous number of evictions. These are elements that, not by chance, are similar in a general way to the Parisian reform and its forced subjective destructuring that turns the experience in the city, until strangeness becomes familiar, into an experiment in disquiet and helplessness.

In this sense, it is possible to ponder that such experience of disorientation and banishment end up provoking, from a collective of individual experiences, a sensation and an imaginary of city in transit that is established by the absence of recognition and by the intermittent discovery of new configurations, eventually violent. “There seems to be a public image of any city that is the superimposition of many individual images. Or perhaps there is a series of public images, each created by a significant number of citizens[...]”<sup>1</sup>

In any case, it is also essential to explain that, even with its charge of power and mutability, the urban experience resulting from Pereira Passos’ reform is extremely different from the reforms that the city of Rio de Janeiro went through in recent years when it hosted the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016. Such difference is not only due to the obvious time difference; but fundamentally by the agents involved in such processes. If before the interest was a certain adequacy to the ideology of modernity, the latest reforms met a specific political game that enhanced a hygienist heritage without long-term urban planning that considered the public space as a dichotomous and considerably separatist experience, fruit of the Brazilian military dictatorship. It was a practice of superficial reform of the city, in order to build an adequate and considerably fragile image of its public space, obviously covering up a structure and a method of operation that continued to widen the difference between the richest and poorest axes, building eventual fictitious spaces of conviviality, justified by capital logic. It is essential not to forget that it was exactly between the 1960s and 1970s that a large part of the favelas started to be removed in order to adapt such public space to a verticalised developmentalist policy that established the economic guidelines that were crucial for the establishment of a neo-liberal policy from the 1980s onwards. While the first half of the twentieth century prioritised cultural and aesthetic remodelling, the second half of the same century saw the beginning of another process of capitalising on public

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1 LYNCH, Kevin. *A imagem da cidade*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1999, p. 51.

experience, supported by a certain urban entrepreneurship that served not only government interests but also the business of large conglomerates and contractors who increasingly established themselves as political agents in the public space.

In the last decade, several construction works have reconfigured the urban fabric, particularly on account of the 2016 Olympic Games. Under the pretext of building a supposed legacy for the city, entire communities were totally or partially expropriated. Among them is Favela do Metrô, also known as Metrô-Mangueira, due to its proximity to metro line 2 and Morro da Mangueira, in the city's North Zone, which once sheltered over 600 families. In 2010, pressured by agents of the municipal administration, about 100 families succumbed to a resettlement agreement, being forced to move to housing developments in the districts of Cosmos and Santa Cruz, in the far west of the city, hours away from their former homes. The residents who resisted the government's first onslaught began to live with ruins and rubble left behind from the first demolitions, which seemed to have been strategically distributed throughout the site. In addition, residents began to suffer from cuts in water and electricity supply, as well as the suspension of the rubbish collection service.

Not by chance, these factors contributed to the establishment of a chaotic urban scenario in the region, by depriving a community of basic services for maintaining its hygiene and, consequently, its health and subjecting it to live with the wreckage of its own history. The governments (federal, state and municipal) seemed to want to dismantle the enunciative system and the ability to question the administrative decisions of its residents, and thus implode their capacity for community articulation.

Lack of information about the projects, lack of definition of routes, implementation of works without any public debate or possibility of presenting alternatives, individualized and negotiated procedures 'case by case', various forms of pressure and threats, lack of removal of rubble from demolished houses, insufficient compensation so that families could access alternative housing - there were several reports of violations of the right to housing in the removals related to the implementation of the Olympic project [...] <sup>2</sup>

Another community that was hard hit by this contradictory urban remodeling project was Vila Autódromo, in Jacarepaguá, west zone of the city. This

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2 Rolnik, Raquel. *Guerra dos lugares*. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2015, p. 364.

old fishermen's village has its history started in the end of the 1960's, mostly formed by builders of the race track in the region, it reached a number of around 3000 residents. And as already pointed out by Raquel Rolnik, even before the operationalization of such expropriations "[...] These residents have inhabited the place for over thirty years and already have the legal right to use the land (right of use concession for housing purposes), but now they are threatened of removal"<sup>3</sup>. Just like Favela do Metrô, the region suffered from an exacerbated real estate speculation, especially for its proximity to what would become the complex of arenas and equipment that hosted much of the Olympic trials of the 2016 Games, in addition to the Olympic Village, which housed the athletes during the event.

It is in this intersection of forces and interests that the work of João Paulo Racy stands as a poetic and political agent for thinking and critically reflecting on the process of gentrification of the city, from a body of work that denounces, without betting on a strict militancy, subjective spaces in deconstruction that are inevitably, reflections of a process of economic-political transformation of the city. Over the last few years, João Paulo Racy has been developing work that discusses in an expanded manner the possible meeting and mismatch between the city and the landscape, excavating, through a plurality of means, the plausible ways of approaching the image, in a poetic wandering between the urban fabric and that which is mirrored as a reflection and atmospheres in transit.

This mismatch fated to failure, fruit of a historical legacy of ruin resulting from the ferocious process of urbanisation, ends up producing a fault and a lack in which the image precipitates itself in a still volatile manner. And it is in this disjunctive poetic gap that the artist operates, as if waiting there, in the hidden underground of things, for the exact moment to shoot again, through a very specific corporeal sensitivity, situations, photographs, videos and objects. And it is in this same considerably serious space-time that we are launched as spectators. It is a generous and critical bet of mutual investment (artist and audience) in the relentless search for some individuation and singularity from the inevitable gentrification of the now of the world.

If photography and video are fundamental languages in his trajectory, it is possible to say that such use has never been ethnographic, as can be detected in some other artists of his same generation. There is, in a very

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3 Ibid: 357

natural way, a semantic turn in the images produced that point, without any anxious affirmation, to a path of amplitude and obsolescence of the framing itself, of the very look that sees nothing; in an epic and minimal exercise of loss of the apparatus before the infinitude of that which tragically escapes him, of all the elements that will never be collected and that end up founding the poetic and semantic real that floods his practice.

On the other hand, it is not a hopeless epic, but a space of pure becoming in which the image distrusts itself, so that it may once again resume its exercise of appearing, disappearing and inevitable longing. The form once foreseen and expected for its phallic power, finds here again, in a whispered way, its nest and its abyss, like a warm womb that silently gestates its next and unusual movements.

Between the years 2011 and 2016 the artist periodically visited some of these regions that were totally or partially demolished, seeking to catalogue these ephemeral landscapes that emerged with the radical transformation that the city suffered. This field research resulted in the work *Improprieties*, which consists of a series of approximately 30 images of facades of some of these expropriated properties, creating an inventory of visual compositions on architectural decompositions to address themes such as gentrification, dispossession and homelessness. Following a rigorous methodology, a

Image 1  
João Paulo Racy.  
*Improprieties Series*,  
2011-2016. Photography, Variable  
dimensions.



typological cataloguing of ephemeral ruins that redrew the topography of the city during the years leading up to the Olympics was produced.

Just as in the process of capturing these images, where a standard distance between the camera and the façades was chosen, large scale printing was also chosen as a strategy with the intention of also distancing the observer. In this way, the understanding of the image as a whole is only possible from a physical distance from those who propose to access it, which provides an installation dimension to the work.

The enlargements were made with high resolution, but in a low quality paper, popularly known as “lambe-lambe” and frequently used to advertise events and services in the streets. This type of advertising, considered irregular, is usually carried out clandestinely. The prints are applied on a plywood chassis, the same material used in the hoardings that surrounded the various works spread throughout the city. The use of these elements aims at the contextual articulation between the plastic of the installation and the visibility of these abandoned spaces, through the precariousness of its materials and its relation with the interventions in these spaces in transition, to then tense the limits between the ethereal of the image and the concreteness of the matter.

Ermínia Maricato, professor and researcher in the area of urbanism, points to several problems present in urban planning in large cities in semi-peripheral countries, such as Brazil. Maricato identifies the import of urbanistic models from the so-called “first world”, applied only in certain parts of the city (as well as in society), as one of the factors that contribute to the fact that large Brazilian cities are marked by an excluding modernisation, reproducing and accentuating inequalities and privileges. For the author, “Brazilian urbanism (understood here as urban planning and regulation) has no commitment to the concrete reality, but to an order that concerns only a part of the city”<sup>4</sup>. As a result, “the urban exclusion represented by the gigantic illegal occupation of urban soil is ignored in the representation of the ‘official city’”<sup>5</sup>. About this excluding urbanistic process, the author further states:

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4 Maricato In: Arantes et al. 2002: 122

5 Ibid: 142





Image 2  
João Paulo Racy. *View of the exhibition Impróprio*, 2019. Dimensions variable. Hélio Oiticica Municipal Art Centre, Rio de Janeiro.

We are referring to a political and economic process which, in the case of Brazil, built one of the most unequal societies in the world, and which had in modernist/functionalist urban planning an important instrument of ideological domination: it contributed to conceal the real and to the formation of a restricted and speculative real estate market. An abundant regulatory apparatus (zoning laws, building codes, visual codes, land parcelling laws, etc.) coexists with the radical flexibility of the illegal city, providing the character of fractured but concealed institutionalisation.<sup>6</sup>

Another important element for understanding the construction of the city, based on exclusionary public policies, is Morro do Castelo, the second seat of the city and the cornerstone for understanding its structural and social configuration. With its privileged view of Guanabara Bay, the main entrance to the city, the hill was an important strategic point in the territorial dispute. The city of São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro was born from the war between the Portuguese and the French. Its construction was permeated by the genocide and extensive catechization of the native peoples and by the intense commercialization of enslaved black people, a colonizing policy that imposed pacification through oppression.

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6 MARICATO, Ermínia. *Metrópole na periferia do capitalismo*. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1996, p. 124.



Just as in the communities expropriated due to the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Morro do Castelo experienced a long period of abandonment by the government. In the early years of the twentieth century, the hill showed clear signs of these decades of neglect; Rio de Janeiro, then the federal capital of the young republic, was undergoing an accelerated process of urban transformation, led by then mayor Francisco Pereira Passos, nicknamed “downsizing”. Under the allegation of beautifying and civilising the federal capital to host major events, such as the 1908 National Exhibition, the mayor, who had been granted dictatorial powers by the federal government, was responsible for major reforms that transformed the city. One of his main works was the construction of Avenida Central, today’s Avenida Rio Branco. The Castle was in the path of the hygienist project of Pereira Passos, who, in order to carry it out, ordered part of the hill to be knocked down. By the end of Pereira Passos’ term, the avenue already had 35 new buildings and another 85 under construction.

Despite many competitors for the title, the great “tormentor” of the Castle was Carlos Sampaio who, besides being mayor of the city between 1920 and 1922, was an engineer and partner in the contractor responsible for the total demolition of the hill. Continuing the strategy of territorial precarization initiated by his predecessors, the mayor-contractor invested in advertisements defending the demolition, claiming that it would bring the necessary modernization and hygienization to the region. The expropriation left thousands of people homeless.

Although the dismantling of the hill took place almost a century ago, the region remains to this day known as the Castelo. However, its new borders have become invisible and changeable. The only living vestige is the Ladeira da Misericórdia, a small narrow and steep street, known as the city’s first public thoroughfare, which has been preserved as a kind of landmark or anti-monument of the demolition. It is on this important point of the city that João Paulo Racy created the work *Under the shadow of the Castle*, an installation that articulates different techniques and materials to dialogue with myths and historical facts about the region.

The first movement of the research was a visit to Ladeira da Misericórdia, the last tangible trace of the memory of a place that resisted for centuries the abandonment to which it was subjected. The ladeira ends in an abrupt cut, a wound scarred by history, hidden between avenues and four generations of buildings which make up the centre we know today. Only its initial stretch was kept standing, preserving the original cobblestones, known as “*pé de moleque*”. This is the first element used to structure the work: a stone taken

from the highest point of the first and last access road to Morro do Castelo. The stone is placed on a map of the region, at the time when it suffered the first structural cut for the construction of Central Avenue, filling the exact space that the hill occupied on the map before it was dismantled.

During the field research, the surroundings of the area currently understood as the Castle were visited periodically. During these visits the artist took with him some printed copies of the current map of the region. During this process, dozens of people on the streets were approached and asked to mark on the map where they supposed the Castle to be, without further explanation. The only common method among all the answers was the use of a red pen for the imaginary marking, which provided a visual contrast with the monochrome print of the copies.

By daily going to the region that was once the most important hill of the city and is now at the same level as the sea, the artist begins to wonder what would have been the fate of those many tonnes of such a symbolic piece of land, disputed for generations. Among the regions that were modified using the castle's land are part of the Urca neighbourhood, the Botanical Gardens, Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon and other low-lying areas around Guanabara Bay, including the land that is home to Santos Dummont Airport.

Interested in the possible relationships between the Castle and these places, these geological unfoldings of the Castle were included in their daily displacement. Connected by a soil disputed for centuries and marked by the blood and sweat of generations of inhabitants, these regions have in common that they are in locations considered "noble", built on land forcibly removed from a place abandoned by the public authorities and transferred to areas with great potential for appreciation - a brutal way of applying the notion of surplus value to a territory. In this case, beyond the geographical location, the very materiality of the land was transformed into a commodity.

Following the clues of this logic of city-currency, soil samples were collected from four regions that have land from Morro do Castelo at their bases: Urca, Jardim Botânico, Lagoa and Aeroporto Santos Dumont. These samples were stored separately in glass containers, identified through labels and added to the work. The action starts from the interest in bringing a portion of the removed land back to the central region of the city and present them in an expository form to discuss possible origins of gentrification in the historical context of the city. The last element incorporated to the installation was one of those responsible for its title - a photograph depicting the silhouette of a castle-shaped building projected onto a stone wall. It is the shadow



Image 3  
João Paulo Racy.  
*Under the shadow of  
the Castle*, 2019. Installation. Hélio Oiticica  
Municipal Art Centre,  
Rio de Janeiro

of the building which houses the Real Gabinete Português de Leitura, a building with shapes similar to those of a castle. The shadowy composition, provided by the incidence of the sun on the side of this historic building, lasted only a few minutes.

The gathering of these elements, produced separately, but sewn together by a historical, social and political thread, made it possible to construct the installation which was presented at the exhibition *Em Torno* - Rio de Janeiro, also held at the Centro Municipal de Artes Hélio Oiticica in Rio de Janeiro. The soil samples, the photograph of the “shadow of the castle”, the stone resting on the map of the early twentieth century and a clipboard with impressions of the current map were distributed on a table, creating a formal and methodical composition. On the wall above the table, maps marked by passers-by were distributed in a grid format, creating a mosaic of possibilities of reinterpretation about the limits and borders of the region known until today as Castelo.



Image 4  
João Paulo Racy. *Under the shadow of the Castle* (detail), 2019. Installation. Hélio Oiticica Municipal Art Centre, Rio de Janeiro

Many of the urbanisation projects presented by different governments throughout the history of the construction of the city had among their main interests the financial speculation of regions until then devalued. Among these operations is the Porto Maravilha project, which consisted of a set of interventions, works and services carried out in the city's port area with the proposal of a so-called revitalisation of the region. Made possible in a context of preparing the city for the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the project involved the transport, urban infrastructure, housing and culture sectors, through public and private resources.

This type of urban project is called strategic planning, a model that has been exported to several cities around the world, as stated by urban planner Carlos B. Vainer, when he states that:

Among the urban planning models competing to occupy the throne left vacant by the collapse of the traditional technocratic - centralized - authoritarian pattern is the so-called strategic planning. The model has been disseminated in Brazil and Latin America by the combined action of different multilateral agencies (Bird, Habitat) and international consultants, mainly Catalan, whose aggressive marketing systematically promotes the success of Barcelona.<sup>7</sup>

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7 VAINER In: Arantes, Otília et. al. *A cidade do pensamento único: desmanchando consensos*.

Fruit of neoliberal policies and inspired by concepts derived from business planning, this model of urbanism encourages competition between cities in the search for investments and technology. Thus, the guiding agent of these cities is profit, acting strategically as companies and making decisions based on the expectations generated by the market. In this context, the State begins to act in accordance with financial interests and depending on the demands of the companies involved, which leads to a depoliticisation of these city-companies and the subordination of public power to market demands.

The so-called revitalisation of these urban spaces alters the dynamics of their composition, bringing with it a migration effect of the population that used to live there by new residents who can afford the higher costs of goods and services that these places now have. This gentrification process not only “expels” the original inhabitants of these places, but also transforms them into homogenised spaces, erasing their traditional characteristics in favour of an aesthetic standardisation. Under the effect of this process, regions in different states or countries have the same appearance, losing many of their cultural references.

This field research has contributed to the construction of an investigation that aims to address points of closeness and distance between the motivations and effects of two different urban reforms suffered by the city of Rio de Janeiro, the dismantling of Morro do Castelo and the Porto Maravilha project, as well as the possibilities of developing a narrative that deals with these events from a poetic and conceptual perspective. In common, both projects were carried out violently and for the benefit of interests other than the well-being of the population living in the spaces where they took place. Thus, it is possible to consider that, historically, the city’s urban planning has been carried out in an unequal way and based on gentrification logics that consolidate and solidify the binomial centre-periphery, treating the urban territory as a commodity and favouring the interests of groups that benefit from real estate speculation.

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