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Ambiances in “Black Urban Areas”, Salvador City, Bahia, Brazil

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Abstract. *This work is part of a doctoral research in development, whose central theme is black populations and black urban areas in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. The great diversity of forms of urban occupations in terms of social, economic, spatial, cultural, and historic aspects is observed in these urban areas. This research sheds new light on the problem, and fosters an understanding about urban areas in Brazil on cultural and historical specificities of black populations. Since the beginning of the last century, the foundation for the formation of some neighborhoods in the city was of African religions houses (Terreiros de Candomblé). The proposal presents a study considering that the African Heritage, the economic history and the natural resources shaped urban environments.*

Keywords: *ambiances, black urban areas, african cultural heritage*

Proposal background

Salvador (Bahia, Brazil) is the oldest city in Brazil, founded in 1549. Since it was a port city, it was the center of important commerce in the import of African enslaved population and the export of products during the time period of criminal enslavement in Brazil.

Brazil was one of the last countries to abolish slavery, since it had imported African laborers until the mid-19th century. Because of these historical aspects, the city of Salvador has gathered the majority of black population, and nowadays approximately 79 % of its inhabitants are from African descent, according to the official Brazilian Census (IBGE, 2010).

The urban population of Salvador is of approximately three million inhabitants which is divided in general terms in three types of neighborhoods. The majority of the population lives in neighborhoods produced by popular knowledge, which we denominate self-constructed neighborhoods, characterized by popular urbanization which is developed by low income populations with very little or no municipal or state intervention, and the technical formal knowledge of architecture and urbanism. These are majority black neighborhoods. Another type of neighborhood is that one that follows urbanistic delineated by technicians, architects and urbanists and these areas are constituted by a majority white population. And there are intermediate neighborhoods that blend self-constructions with structures of urban planning and municipal or state intervention.

The diverse forms of culture of African base, denominated black cultures constitute the cultural universe of the city. Salvador is an important national and international reference of black culture in Brazil. Thousands of tourists travel to this city annually, people who are interested in the multiplicity of urban ambiances created by black cultures. It is a city marked by a grand historical and cultural material heritage of African basis, where we can find a strong influence of *Bantu* culture followed by *Nago-Yoruba*, among others.

Our study is carried in a majority black neighborhood called *Engenho Velho da Federação*. The neighborhood is culturally known by the existence of many *Terreiros de Candomblé*, which are liturgical communities based in African religions. The historical data mark the presence of these religious communities in place before the formation of the district as a formal unit. The most well-known and historic recognized *Terreiros* are: *Casa Branca* (1856), *Bogum* (± 1835), *Cobre* (1906) and *Tanuri Junçara* (1955). Our proposal is grounded on the interest of evincing that the evolution of the neighborhood and that its ambiances create a characteristic urban form originated from a genesis pertaining to *Terreiros de Candomblé* or under their influence.

We use an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating concepts of cultural studies, history, sociological and geographic for urbanistic interpretation. The study is directed towards areas in the city that emerge through a creative autonomy, specifically of black social groups, in the collective construction of inhabited spaces, guided by behaviors and conducts originated from the culture of African and afro-descendant basis. We understand these populations as constitutive of an *urban* grounded on their historical and cultural specificities, permeated by African philosophies and traditions with characteristic references of collective social life, in a scale that allows us to identify them as a space that is lived and felt, as a place of action and experience. Figure 1 show the location of the neighborhood under study, which is located close to the Traditional Center of the city of Salvador. Figure 2 presents the current general aspect of this self-constructed neighborhood.



Figure 1. Location of the neighborhood Engenho Velho da Federação in the city of Salvador. Source: Base Map - LOUOS/1984 PMS - Version 1.3 (development of the authors)



Figure 2. Partial View of the Neighborhood of *Engenho Velho da Federação*, Salvador. Source: Personal Archive

Conceptual References

We consider urban ambiances as a result of the sensitive relationship between space, the geographical nature of physical space and its population. This concept is part of the material and immaterial aspects resulting both from history and culture. It takes into account urbanistic and semiological considerations. Semiology is a science of signs and symbols, and objects as systems of signs, images, rituals, gestures, clothing and equipment and buildings. The semiological structure comprises ordered and interrelated elements, which are complementary between meaning and significance (Silva, 1985). In our work we use the Afrodescendant methodology, which studies the populations of African descent from the standpoint of multidisciplinary sciences and complex systems, based on African philosophy and geography. It is grounded on a multi-varied analysis taking into consideration aspects of culture, politics, economic as well as societal, as interrelated in dynamic ways (Cunha Junior, 2011). In this article, in the study of urban ambiances, Semiology and Afro-descendance are part of analytical systems that interfere in a subjective and sensitive way in the morphological and typological evaluation of the urban space. In both evaluations, the perceptions and uses of space are important for the comprehension of the relationship of the population with the space in terms of the social identity of the population. Cultural identities may be thought of as one of the facets of the influence of urban ambiances, and inversely, the latter may also result from the uses assigned by identities in urban spaces.

Given the dynamic condition of the social history of Africans and their descendants in Brazilian society, involving the historical periods of slavery system and racist capitalism, we have specific conditions such as social, economic and spatial exclusion which have culminated in the formation of self-constructed neighborhoods, particularly by Black populations. That population brought an African cultural heritage base which was adapted to Brazilian conditions.

Hence, in these *black urban areas* that are marked by references of African basis, as we evince in our research the *Terreiros de Candomblé* as diffusers of these values (Sodré, 1988), the cultural civilizing values are predominantly African. *Terreiros de Candomblé* are religious spaces marked by a complex typology, consisting of tangible and intangible African heritages with broad physical areas, containing ceremonial buildings, houses of deities, residences and some have green areas.

Sodré, in his elaborations about *Terreiros de Candomblé*, signals to a spatial relationship and its organic features, bringing the notion of social form as forms taken up by life as social forms. This social form of *Terreiros de Candomblé* privileges the difference and the plurality of functional relationships of coexistence and allowed in the universe of the African enslaved in Brazil the sensible comprehension, beyond pure intellectualism: the myth, the symbol, imagining a life style in his particular atmosphere, his multiplicity within a unit of his relationship with space. Sodré attributes to the imagination a new relationship with the real: through the imagination of black groups of communities of *Terreiros de Candomblé*, this is featured as a black-Brazilian social form par excellence, as an origin place of force and social strength for the black social group that experiments citizenship under unequal conditions. In this social and cultural context, emerges a new African social relation “adjusted” to new possibilities of “survival” and “coexistence” within the urban space, built by a black social form that is provided by *Terreiros de Candomblé*.

For the study of the neighborhood Engenho Velho da Federação, we used as references concepts coming from the African culture, disseminated by *Terreiros de Candomblé* in which we evince the *energy/vital force, ancestry, community and socialization* as part of a *black culture*, and the concepts built in the research, *black urban area* and ambiances found in this neighborhood (Altuna, 1985).

We have established our understanding of black culture(s) from a “*relationship with the real*” (Sodré, 1988, p. 10), in which everyone and everything emanating from a common

energy source and due to that fact are interdependent. Human beings and other nature beings are the result of mutual relations in which their lives interfere with each other.

In this relationship with the real, we are in a specific field of black populations in the Brazilian historical conditions in its ways of life, in its experiences, interactions and survivals. Hence, all of this is integrating and integrated in black cultures, creating its particular knowledges by specific groups: religiosities and its unfolding in the community through the territories and the symbiotic integration with nature, social relations, clothing, food and culinary, medicines and pharmacology, labor, arts, musicality, movement, body, etc. We comprehend this complex system of forms that conform dynamic cultural heritage sites related to the temporal and spatial dimensions, as operational means of relating to the *real*, with the existence, with the real world which is visible and invisible, influencing the relationships between the individual and the collective, the relationships with space, the relationships with the body and the relationships with people, objects, places and nature, therefore being sources of perceptions, and sensorial perceptions.

Under a strong community sense, in which the collective precedes the individual, the interaction is fundamental in its dynamic conception of life: the community is primordial, solidarity, communion and interaction. The interaction involves everything: human beings, living and dead, plants, animals, minerals, natural phenomena, since they encapsulate life and energy (Sodré, 1988; Altuna, 1985).

Within the African thinking everything comes from *energy/life force*. The material or imaterial existence is a form of energy to be processed by society. The energies have diverse qualities and states. But they are always realizing dynamics, the world, life, beings from nature which are essentially dynamic and fundamentally systemic. Systemic in the sense of multiple interactions; some influence others, the separation between us and the others, we and nature. Hence, we need to consider the meaning of *ancestrality* as the guide of the comprehension of society and its constant transformations. Ancestrality implies in a dynamic vision of human collectives in relationship to localities and the historical times in these localities (Cunha Junior, 2011).

With such conceptual references, distinct from Western thinking, we may provide an analysis of the *community* and its forms of *socialization* as creators of particular *ambiances* in *black urban areas*, from the perspective of the African culture that is disseminated by the *Terreiros de Candomblé*. The community, community life, is defined by a particular scale in which the social relationships are not anonymous. They are demarcated by socialization factors in which the daily social interaction is marked by festivities, gatherings, playing with the children, the meeting points, the relationship of proximity with the street, the articulation with the neighborhood, circles of conversation with the neighbors. The relationship with the neighborhood due the proximity develops more solidarity ties, almost familial ones, and it is fundamental as a means of life (Ramos, 2007).

These environment in majority black neighborhood generate peculiar *ambiances* which are not only perceived and felt by those who own the cultural references of African basis, diffused by the *Terreiros de Candomblé*, apprehended and accumulated by the daily experiences of the residents. Hence, the scope of the ambiances goes through perceptions of sensible dimension inscribed in the spatiality, but they may not be described: they are simply felt. The sensible apprehension, referring back to Sodré (1988), operates beyond the pure intellectualism, assimilating the myth, the symbol and the imaginary of a life style, with its particular atmosphere, its multiplicity in a unity and its relationship with space. The ambiances are differentials that guide us in the comprehension of the parts of the neighborhood, not only by the tracing of the trails or by the characteristics of the constructions.

In the realm of urban public space and its ambiances, we have the offerings (*oferendas*) that are realized in street crossroads, in external spaces of the *Terreiro* and other strategic points (natural resources). They are considered gifts to the Orisha Saint. Also, these ambiances

should be present at strategic points close to natural resources, such as headwaters, or trees that are important to religions of African trees such as *dende* or jackfruit trees.

The collective imaginary is also fueled by several references, with various sensory perceptions, refusals or fears of Candomblé symbols that mark the audible, visual and imaginative spaces in relationship to the legends and stories relating to religious communities, their members and the entities worshiped in these *Terreiros de Candomblé* in urban areas. *Terreiros de Candomblé* are in many ways producing a territoriality outside their walls which translate into urban ambiances.

Terreiros de Candomblé: African genesis of the Black Urban Areas

We have already referred to *Terreiros de Candomblé* as diffusers of African values. In its insertions and influence in urban spaces in its surrounding areas, we verify its interferences in the structuration and consolidation of the neighborhood. Its black social form unfolds itself in the forms of urban life, in the production and appropriation of the urban space that we empirically register here, incorporating the African cultural heritage, historical factors, economic and spatial, shaping urban environments.

Hence, we understand the *black urban areas* as a territory built from these knowledges assimilated by the residents-founders of the neighborhood who successfully built solidarity strategies of socio-spatial relationships, being actively participative and interactive, emptying anonymity and passivity.

The symbolic, originated in the mythic-religious territory of *Terreiros de Candomblé*, and its organization in the spatial arrangement reproduces itself in the playful activities, the exchanges, the value of use of the territorialized form. The trees, the houses, the herbs, the animals, the human beings compose a totality, not dissociated or dichotomized in humane/natural, sensitive/intelligible, etc. (Sodré, 1988).

The practical urban experience related to the daily lives of the people in the neighborhood, with its movements, sounds, smells and stimuli resulting from the interaction of actions and reactions between people and the urban space, are perceptible through the tridimensional and sensorial dimensions of the social appropriation and the urban form established in *black urban areas*, such as a drumming, a *capoeira* movement, a smell of incense or *arruda*. The *black urban area*, from the references of the *Terreiros de Candomblé*, is a form of spatial organization that is distinct from the planned forms or the urbanistic practices that prescribe the smoothed out spaces, homogenized spaces, aseptic spaces and the logic that orients the relationships of production, incorporating them, nevertheless.

In that sense, we have an understanding of the *black urban area* as a social construction of a space that is generated through the self-construction of houses, opening of streets, preservation of sacred trees, among others, generating an urban space that is loaded with symbolic material and immaterial elements of the *Terreiros de Candomblé* in the lives of these neighborhoods. The *black urban area* is the result of environments of offers, of nesting site religious of *Candomblé* practice, of spaces and sacralized paths, of helps of neighbours in the construction of the house, of sacred 'landscaping', among other manifestations.

Conclusion

We consider the *black urban areas* as a rich experience of production of urban spaces through a creative autonomy, generating ambiances conformed with black cultures in its "relationship with the real", socially recognizable and interactive, albeit the social and urban precariousness imposed upon these neighborhoods composed of black populations.

In the *black urban areas* were generated, from the spatial and cultural model of *Terreiros de Candomblé*, peculiar models of space production and socio-urban appropriation that is

capable of favoring full urban realization through the common lived experiences, enabled by the daily experiences produced collectively, enriching the quality of urban life.

Engenho Velho da Federação is an example of these neighborhoods under study since it presents many examples of these particular aspects of ambiances. The stories collected in the research interviews show the existence of an urban memory linked to ambiances produced by the existence of *Terreiros de Candomblé* in the neighborhood. The current examples are linked to the ambiance of urban weekend sounds, religious art installations (recorded and photographed by us), smells and sensorial body experiences present on in corners and collective spaces created by the residents themselves.

In conclusion, we may assert that these ambiances are cultural, and their meaning are inside a given culture. Moreover, ambiances are part of cultural aspects of society, in which they have their own genesis and transmission system. *Candomblé* is a culture and the *Terreiro de Candomblé* is physical parts that act as a genesis and transmission system of African descendant people, creating ambiance at Engenho Velho da Federação. The *Terreiro de Candomblé* is an integral part of local history, producing a different perception and representation in this part of the black city, Salvador.

The analysis of this particular urban point the disconnection between the discourse of the generalist planning, regulator and disciplining of productive relations and the “making” provided by a praxis of the residents of this *black urban area*. Having as examples the *black urban areas* and its particular ambiances, in light of black historical and cultural specificities, we may tread by alternative paths in order to think the city.

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