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Joana Ribeiro Santos

Master Degree - Sociology

Porto, Portugal

Researcher at Engineering Faculty of University Porto

Contact: joana.ribeiro.santos@hotmail.com

Metamorphoses in the city and the place of collective memory: what challenges?

Abstract

The cities define, every day, focus of different transformations, movements and flows. Analyzing how urban and social changes that emerge, gradually, especially in urban historical areas, imposes the understanding of distinct vertices of components to all the elements not included in the territories of the urban mesh.

We consider the phenomena of urban rehabilitation and regeneration that have gradually become part of the restructuring plans and strategies of several European cities, it is important to understand the set of more subjective impacts that are widely triggered. We speak clearly of the domains associated with social networks and local bonds of proximity, abstract apanages of the human network present in the central urban centers.

The reflection presented in this summary derives from a sociological and qualitative and ethnographic study (2015-2016) about the impacts of urban rehabilitation on local

social recomposition, focusing on Rua das Flores, located in the Historic Center of Porto.

The dynamics associated with the sociabilities and daily lives of local social actors are profoundly adapted, under the urban transformations and the emergence of more diverse and international publics, as well as more dispersed. The fracture of social bonds and affective networks, especially in the street context, hitherto in accordance with the current standards, are anchored in a progressive substitution of practices of support and proximity networks, based on the logic of globalization and internationalization of spaces urban history. The subjectivity of the analytical elements thus requires a reflection on the local social impacts of urban rehabilitation, considering the affective and collective content of the social actors involved in the recomposition processes.

Keywords: *urban rehabilitation; social recomposition; street networks; social bonds; collective memory*.

Introduction

As cities they are composed as a patterns of various and distinct elements, sometimes cadenced, or fragmented. Because it is such a large subject and simultaneously subject to multiplications that deserve careful analysis, the study of cities over time of phenomena, experiences and interactions, calls for a constant updating and understanding, as well as the investigation and intervention of areas such as geography, sociology, anthropology, urban planning, or architecture. Not overlapping the importance of a specific area of study, over any other area mentioned above, consensus tends to reside in the progressive complement of visions – multidisciplinary

- that allows a deeper and eloquent understanding about such a precise and comprehensive theme. In addition, since the city is a place endowed with physical forms, social actors, institutional frame, as well as an infinite and almost inscrutable panoply of experiences, representations, daily life and inherent symbologies, it alerts us to its entire condition as a multifaceted urban laboratory (in)divisible.

Cities and downtown areas. What challenges?

We can see the city as a multipurpose space, where the historical heritage intersects with social movements, urban cultures become involved with the city tradition, emerging a highly symbolic blend between the past and the present, between memories and appropriations that territorialize the future of city in the light of urbanism (Ribeiro Santos, 2016, p.24). The urban areas and city centres also coincide with a set of antagonistic challenges and tensions in permanent emergency and restructuring. On the one hand, they consolidate the effervescence and frenetic effervescence of urban events and trends and, on the other hand, an inevitable fragmentation of certain practices and meanings, as a result of the growing heterogeneity present in a postmodern era.

Processes and mechanisms of *rehabilitation*, *regeneration* or *urban renewal*, make up not only an urban lexicon, but also approximate the capacity to expel or delimit approaches around phenomena and the city itself. The planning and implementation of these interventions has been increasing in cities, particularly in older urban centers, such as downtown and historical urban areas. The ideal of restructuring the old city can thus initiate two fundamental dimensions: the propulsive operations of urban development, under a matrix of a strong political side; and simultaneously the principle of urban rehabilitation sustained by the needs of deficit housing conditions,

adding a social imperative of change (Coing, 1966). Attempts to regenerate the urban structure elucidate, no more or less, the experiences of minimizing impacts when modernizing these spaces and even potentiate the time factor that, although indelible and dominant, its effects may be mitigated through preservation and local asset appreciation.

The web of impacts that underlies urban regeneration interventions is huge and pluriparadigmatic. Although we recognize that the basic principles inherent in urban renewal and regeneration processes are anchored in the improvement of the structural, housing, social, cultural and economic conditions of the city, we can see that they can generate certain collateralities in the territories and in everyday life of these actors. The extensive cosmopolitanization of cities alongside the emergence of new patterns of consumption, as well as the more intense flows of heterogeneous publics, proclaim new connections in local relational and affective structures, especially in the middle and large European urban city centers. In the specific case of the Historic Center of Porto, Portugal, the phenomenon of rehabilitation tended to promote the hybridism present in the city: tourists mixed with the local population, *hostels* with the landscape of the house or the euphoria of some, in contrast to solitude still manifests that others complain in the city (Ribeiro Santos, 2016, p.46). A liquidity bond that has gradually mystified cities in which global and local roles are confronted, there is an intense correlation between spaces and territories, located in urban landscapes (even at tremendous distances!) And a progressive sensation individuals, groups and locations (Bauman, 2000, p.7-8).

This problematic allows us to raise questions about the human relationships that are established at the core of the central urban nuclei, whether in the context of transformation or in a period of a posteriori change and adaptation to new conditions of being and being in the city. If the consolidation of new tendencies and fruition leads, in parallel, to fractured and reactive movements, especially with regard to the permanence of local social networks, to the maintenance of neighbourhood ties - with a deep rootedness and symbology in the older historical zones, neighbourhoods or

islands of the city - and to the sense of community based on the designs of collective memories. In this sense, we can carry out an exercise in reflection and visualization of cities and their geographical and urban features - streets, alleys, squares, avenues, gardens, blocks - as *institutions of memory*[1] whose boundaries do not delimit physically, but identity relations. Since the memories that occupy the city are not homogeneous, it is important to mention the affective bonds and the social and group relations that make up the experiences and activities of cooperation or conflict are assumed as the distinctive features of consolidation. In the context of urban transformations, we try to understand the relational metastasis between actors and local social groups, not relegating their permanent extension to each element present in the urban environment.

Methodology

The conceptualization and narrative of recent phenomena around the problematic of social relations and affective bonds in the context of neighbourhood in the city comes mainly from the analysis and understanding of different literary references, scientific visions and theoretical developments on the theme. Nevertheless, and based on a more theoretical-empirical perspective with exercises of deduction and reflective induction, we start from some of the results presented in a study developed by the author on the impacts of urban rehabilitation on the local social recomposition of an urban artery in the Historic Center of Porto, Portugal, during 2015 and 2016. Although the research encompasses and interrelates other thematic, sometimes convergent, and sometimes divergent - as broad analytical vertices - the dimension associated with local affective and relational ties have occupied an axis of pertinent debate. relevant - in this context of a scientific article - to channel the most constructive recognition. As far as methodological domination is concerned and based on a hypothetical-deductive logic (Bericat, 1998: 81), we anchor a reasoning that allowed the development of a

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[1] Nora, 1984.

process of constant confrontation between previously existing theories and empirical data collected. However, the research was eventually conducted through the premise of induction, since the attempt to discover new orientations, thoughts and paradigms in the course of the research, was also a deeply embedded aspect in the inquiries (Ribeiro Santos, 2016, p.47).

Considering the nature and context of the study, as well as the inherent appanages of its audiences, we favor a methodology based on ethnographic research, allowing the complementarity of techniques of a qualitative substance. Ethnography allows an understanding of the symbologies inherent to daily life, containing a methodological position that is produced and reproduced in the development of the interactions themselves. In analyzing the social impacts of urban rehabilitation and, specifically, the social and affective relations of its publics, the use of ethnography in an urban context has enhanced the description of social realities through a more interactionist look and based on the meanings evident in the experiences, appropriations and in the very role of social actors (Idem, 2016, p. 50). The empirical data collection techniques were mainly based on the exercise of direct observation and participant in a street context, the preparation of a field diary with the records and notes of field work incursions, the collection, selection and analysis of records from the written press and, finally, through the use of semi-direct interviews with local audiences. We emphasize the fascinating and first-born penchant of the direct observation technique, the ability to demystify all angles of perception, the most innate forms of space appropriation, and the flows of the most diverse publics (Ibid., 2016, p.53-54). Thus, the methodological core of research was based on the ability to observe the main effects of urban regeneration as a phenomenon of change and reconversion of local practices, as well as the attention given to the flows of the public present in the housing, commercial and tourist context of the street - the urban core.

Conclusive Clues

The debate about changing transformations and, concretely, the challenges imposed to the preservation of the collective memory and the maintenance of the social and affective ties of the local population, is not exhausted in an investigation nor in the context of communication or scientific production. We emphasize the specific and singular character that each city, each territory or each place, produces in the actors and social groups that permeate these spaces, developing their activities and daily life.

Through the attention given to the literary references on the subject, the research on which this study has dealt has allowed us to arrive at interesting visions and, nevertheless, to new possible and future paths to be taken to deepen the subject. The views and perceptions about the local social recompositions are presented as heterogeneous and diverse, showing points of convergence and divergence between individuals of the same group or in consonance of place and proximity. It is understood that, although the processes of urban regeneration provoke, in a way, feelings of satisfaction and potentiate certain forms of involvement with the urban environment, they are also experienced, in parallel, as a propelling phenomenon of the identity decharacterization of the street (Ribeiro Santos, 2016, p. 113).

Arguments such as the progressive departure and absence of local habitants and traditional traders due to the exponential real estate inflation - the result of the revalorization of rehabilitated housing - and the emergence of increasingly cosmopolitan, dispersed and international flows, constitute concomitant factors for the manifest fracture of local social networks, neighbourhood and proximity systems, anchored until then in the community values and senses and sustained in the human web of the city. The capacity to promote strategic, political and involvement synergies that lead to urban rehabilitation through sustainable urban and social development, in a constant and interrelated way with the historical and relational symbioses of the street, respecting the preservation of the roots of the populations and their permanent involvement with planned and ongoing interventions (Idem, 2016, p. 115).

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