

Pacts, dissonances, and protests: reflections based on the central area of Recife*

Pactuações, dissonâncias e protestações: reflexões a partir da área central do Recife

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss how interventions in central areas of Brazilian cities have become a matter of consensus, that is, a certain level of agreement among social actors regarding the resulting spatial changes. Agreement is essential for them to make pacts and, simultaneously, it causes dissonances, many of which lead to protests. To fulfill the objective, the article (1) investigates the key concepts of consensus and dissent, from which the notions of pact, dissonance, and protest - related to groups of individuals who rebel - are developed, and (2) analyzes the case of the central area of Recife in light of these concepts and notions. The conclusion is that the pacts concerning spatial transformations in this area and its surroundings - and probably in other Brazilian city centers - have subdued the dissonances that occurred there and continue to occur.

Keywords: pacts; dissonances; protests; central area of Recife.

Resumo

O presente artigo tem como objetivo discutir como intervenções em áreas centrais das cidades brasileiras têm sido objeto de consensos, ou seja, de uma certa densidade de adesão dos atores sociais quanto às pretéritas modificações espaciais; densidade imprescindível à pactuação entre eles e, simultaneamente, causadora de dissonâncias, muitas delas provocadoras de protestações. Para tanto, (1) investigaram-se os conceitos-chave de consenso e dissenso, a partir dos quais se desenvolvem as noções de pactuação, dissonância e protestação, referentes a grupos de indivíduos que se rebelam; e (2) analisou-se o caso da área central recifense à luz desses conceitos e noções. Isso permitiu concluir que os pactos estabelecidos a propósito das transformações espaciais nessa centralidade e seu entorno - e provavelmente em outros centros de cidades brasileiras - têm subjugado as dissonâncias que ali ocorreram e continuam a ocorrer.

Palavras-chave: pactuações; dissonâncias; protestações; área central do Recife.



Introduction

The ideas presented in this text are the result of a reflective process developed within the framework of a networked research project on how the real estate market functions in Brazilian historic city centers. These ideas were further developed into a paper entitled *Central do Recife: dissonâncias e protestações* [Central Area of Recife: Dissonances and Protests], which was presented at the Third National Seminar of the aforementioned research network, held in the city of Recife in Northeastern Brazil, in September 2023. On that occasion, the following questions were brought into the debate: Is the revitalization process of the Historic Center of Recife and the spatial changes taking place in its immediate surroundings being shaped by (visible and invisible) disputes? Which dissonances are generating protests in the historic center? Would it not be necessary to take these into account when conceiving a more socio-spatially inclusive central area?

Addressing these questions has led to reflections on the formation processes of consensus within this territory, particularly regarding the ongoing spatial changes that have taken place over the past 20 years. These *consensuses* have been made explicit at the “negotiation tables” through accords or pacts between public and private actors. However, as previously noted, this territorial fragment also reveals dissonances, i.e., spatialities that diverge from and resist these transformations, many of which have sparked *protests*.

In light of the above, this text aims to examine, from a dialectical perspective, how interventions in the aforementioned center and its immediate surroundings have become the object of *consensus*, i.e., of a certain

degree of alignment among public and private actors regarding past spatial modifications. This alignment is indispensable in establishing an *agreement* between these actors and, simultaneously has given rise to *dissonances*, many of which have prompted acts of *protest*.

To achieve this objective, the methodological approach undertaken unfolds in three stages. First, it explores the key concepts of *consensus* and *dissent*, from which the central notions of this text are developed: *agreements*, *dissonances*, and *protest*. The second stage presents the current socioeconomic dynamics of the historical center of Recife, aiming to bring the reader closer to the empirical reality under analysis. The third stage, (a) identifies the actors involved in fostering *consensus*, along with the ways in which they employ the media to generate accords or pacts; and (b) analyzes the *dissonances*, i.e., the factors or elements that are “out of tune”, or “misaligned” with the aforementioned spatial changes that have become the object of *consensus*. In other words, the analysis identifies dissonant spatialities (*dissonances*) and discordant movements (*protests*).

Concepts and notions: consensus, agreement, dissonance and protests

Revisiting Brazilian historic centers and their surroundings – with the aim of uncovering the principles, forms, factors, and processes involved in the construction of human space – does not yield ready-made, definitive answers. On the contrary, such investigations continuously give rise to other, complex

questions. In the case of this text, the challenge lies in the effort to reveal three key notions — *agreement*, *dissonance*, and *protest* — and to explore their interconnections.

To pursue this objective, a dialectical perspective has been adopted. Hegel was the first to formulate dialectical logic in which contradiction serves as the key explanatory category for movement and transformation in all that exists. He argued that opposing poles are not mutually exclusive, but instead, are integral parts of the same movement. Marx (2011), while acknowledging Hegel's contribution, retained the core of Hegelian dialectics, interpreting it from a historical and social standpoint. In the case under analysis, action and reaction are viewed as components of the same movement — a characteristic feature of modern society. Accordingly, *agreements* and *protests* — mediated by spatial dissonances — are neither linear, nor mutually exclusive; but rather, they feed into one another.

Clarifying the notion of *agreement* requires engaging with the concept of *consensus*. Derived from the Latin — the term *consensus*, meaning something jointly agreed upon, is formed from the prefix *con* (together with) and *sensus* (feeling or sense). However, in the context of social consensus, it does not imply unanimous approval. It is a central theme in sociological thought, concerned with identifying the factors that sustain the cohesion (unity, stability) and persistence (or continuity) of social relations over time, and even across generations.

Max Weber (1864-1920) referred to the notion of *convention*, understood as a form of “custom”, which ensures order. The validity of *convention* — considered here as stemming from a form of *consensus* — is preserved insofar

as, within a given social group, any deviant behavior is likely to encounter disapproval. Meanwhile, when order is upheld by law, coercive mechanisms become necessary, often enforced by individuals appointed to ensure compliance. For Weber, *convention* may in fact prove more effective. Ultimately, in a vast number of interpersonal relationships, individuals rely on a freely established order, rather than one guaranteed by formal authority.

Abramo demonstrated just how effective *convention* can be in the case of the real estate market, to the extent that it underpins and drives a new economic and social division of space (DESE),¹ a term particularly significant for Lipietz (1974), as will be further discussed below. Abramo acknowledges the existence of a

spatial coordination of decisions to produce built spatialities by real estate capital and their social validation, which would not necessarily depend on state action (Abramo, 1991). This form of coordination, which we refer to as “urban convention”, would be a response by the agents producing urban built spatiality to an urban environment in constant transformation. Uncertainty regarding the future DESE [economic and social division of space] would be one of the defining features of the Fordist urban regime, insofar as the capital responsible for producing such spatiality must negate past spatial configurations in order to impose the urban markup. Thus, the agents who must make decisions concerning built spatiality, whether as producers or consumers of that spatiality, do so within a horizon of “urban uncertainty” regarding the future DESE, since it will be the aggregated result of a set of decentralized individual decisions. Therefore, real estate capitalists, individually, will speculate on the production intentions of other capitalists (where and for whom they will produce built spatiality) and, based on

those speculations, will construct an idea of the future (virtual) DESE. (Abramo, 1995, p. 532)²

At its core, this idea represents a *consensus* with regard to the future DESE, which inherently demands an *imagistic perspective*. Although Abramo acknowledges that the formation of a *convention* does not necessarily depend on the State, it must be recognized that it is at times validated by the State through urban planning regulations, and at other times through public-private partnerships. It therefore constitutes a form of social validation with the State's undeniable acquiescence.

It should also be noted that, in the field of economics, John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), in his seminal work *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, engaged with this concept when analyzing how the financial market functions. He stated that interest rates are not determined by production, but rather by the prevailing belief that "the existing state of affairs will continue indefinitely, except in so far as we have specific reasons to expect a change" (1967, p. 149).³ He emphasized that without an accord – i.e., an *agreement* – the current state of affairs will persist (a *convention of continuity*), and the coordination of the financial market collapses. The same occurs in the real estate market, which relies on adherence to the idea of a future DESE — a consensus anchored in a forthcoming *imagistic perspective*.

A major development in sociological thought was marked by Jürgen Habermas. In his magisterial work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1987), he distinguishes between two types of interaction among social actors, depending on the use of language. Reference is made to *communicative action* when language

is employed as a source of social integration and socialization, with *communicative rationality* prevailing. It is through this form of action that those involved confirm and renew their identities and their sense of belonging to social groups.

Communicative action [according to Habermas] compels individuals to move beyond the egocentrism of a calculation oriented solely toward their own success. From the functional perspective of understanding, communicative action serves the tradition and renewal of culture; from the perspective of socialization, it contributes to the formation of individual personalities; and from the coordination perspective of action, it fosters social integration and the creation of solidarity. (Lima and Rivera, p. 334)

Moreover, *communicative action* – or action oriented toward communication – serves as a catalyst for emancipatory practices aimed at overcoming domination and enabling individuals to engage in critical reflection. While this does not eliminate conflict, it seeks to resolve it through argumentation. Thus, the emancipatory content of the modern project would be recovered. As will be discussed further, this *communicative action* is closely tied to the dissonances that persist within the modernization project for the central area of Recife.

When language is employed primarily to convey information in pursuit of a specific goal, it is what Habermas refers to as a case of *strategic action*. In this mode, *instrumental reason* prevails. Within such a framework, *publicity* – a central theme in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* – is conceived as a tool used by the bourgeoisie, composed of "cultivated"

individuals, to construct a genuine public sphere, i.e., a political space. Within this space, efforts are made to mediate between society and the State, through the formation of public opinion that persistently seeks to influence the dynamics of domination. However, through a complex process of interpenetration between public and private domains, it is possible to observe that publicity becomes susceptible to manipulation by interest groups. As a result, the public sphere, while ostensibly political, often functions through privately motivated arguments.

In the case of real estate production, the role of publicity is not adequately addressed in the process of forming the *urban convention*, as though it were solely derived from the conduct of capitalist agents. This article argues that the manipulation of publicity is a non-negligible factor in shaping the idea of the future DESE. Ultimately, public and private arguments, anchored in public opinion, must assert themselves as *consensuses* in order to underpin *agreement* processes, i.e., to align with the establishment of accords and partnerships. These processes unfold at “negotiation tables,” where “noise” is strategically introduced to help achieve objectives outlined by social groups - namely, capitalist agents – concerning what is purported to constitute a general-interest need. This is precisely what has been taking place in the central area of Recife: *agreements* between public and private actors are being formalized to implement the modernization project in that area. The future is already there – it may and should be visualized and attained. On the notion of “noise,” Abramo et al. (2022, p. 23) comments, using the example of smart cities.

The idea of the creative city is a kind of noise that can generate a dynamic of contamination, and shape the urban

belief: the urban convention holds that the solution for future cities lies in the creative city, and therefore we must make investments and land-use decisions accordingly [...].

Both types of interaction – *communicative action* and *strategic action* – may therefore coexist within the same territory, as is often the case in the central areas of Brazilian cities, each retaining its own specificities. Indeed, they are the outcomes of the same socio-economic, cultural, and political system. It is precisely the tension between these two forms of action that reveals the groups that hold power over the territory, for whom spatial *dissonances* either matter very little or are perceived as needing to be eliminated. It is important to emphasize that even when the actors involved reach a consensus at the “negotiation tables!, this does not imply that such consensus is total or unanimous. In line with the political philosopher Norberto Bobbio (1909-2004),

Total consensus is somewhat unlikely even within small social units, and virtually inconceivable in complex societies. As such, the notion of consensus must be understood in relative terms. Instead of framing discussions around the absence of consensus, it is more accurate to speak of degrees of consensus within a given society. (Bobbio, 2007, p. 240)

In contrast to *consensus*, there is *dissent* – a category which, according to Bobbio, is the most general expression of disagreement and a negative attitude toward the political system or its more specific aspects. Thus, civil disobedience and the various forms of opposition and protest are typical manifestations of *dissent*, which, in the case under analysis, are potentialized by *dissonances*.

Adopting the notion of *dissonances* seeks to underscore the extent to which strategic actions, marked by the interpenetration of public and private domains, lead to spatial transformations that clash with other existing spatialities. This, in turn, has sparked *communicative actions* designed to empower social actors, encouraging critical reflection on the right to inhabit the same territory, to right to access housing, the right to the city, the right to work, and so forth.

Dissonance and consonance are two terms that have been borrowed from the repertoire of musical philosophy. Consonance occurs when two notes played together produce a sense of harmony. Dissonance however, is the opposite, when there is a clash between notes (frequencies), causing a sense of conflict or discord. In essence, therefore, it refers to a combination of sounds that are either minimally harmonious or completely at odds with one another. However,

If we transcend the musicological register and enter into the aesthetic, and particularly the aesthetic-musical domain, we encounter what could be characterized as a *constellation of consonance and dissonance* that is no less complex or even problematic. Olivier Baron (2008) recently sought to synthesize this as follows: on one hand, *dissonance* has historically been designated as a sort of degeneration of consonance or as something that demands its dissolution into consonance. This causes dissonance to be viewed as an irrational element, or at least less rational than consonance, and, as such, something uncivilized, untamed, recalcitrant, and even demonic. Aesthetically, it is almost synonymous with the category of the ugly. (Pucciarelli, 2018)

Therefore, at its core, *dissonance* signifies the absence of harmony, a quality attributed to that which, by comparison, does not fit in with

other things. It clashes with the elements around it to such an extent that it is perceived by many as ugly. Crucially, *dissonance* is understood here as a degeneration of *consonance*. If it is deemed ugly, it must be concealed, not displayed. It represents, therefore, one of the two faces of the Roman god Janus (the two-faced deity), in this case, the “vicious” face, which contrasts with the “virtuous” – *consonance*. When it cannot be concealed, it must be naturalized. Thus, its presence becomes unnoticed. As the popular saying goes: “there is none so blind as those who do not see”. To this person, it matters little.

From this context emerges the key notion of *protests*, closely tied to the perceptible *dissonances* within the urban structure of Brazilian city centers. This notion manifests through the screaming voices of protest, advocating demands that diverge from *established consensuses*. More specifically, these manifestations represent responses to the *dissonances* identifiable in the urban fabric, where the discordant (noisy) elements are the consequences of the very *dissonances*. *Protests* may take various forms, including acts of civil disobedience, the occupation of vacant buildings or derelict areas for housing or work purposes, actions whose intent contradicts the *consensuses* and, for that very reason, in many cases, are subject to criticism.

By thus breaking with a possible theoretical linearity, where *consensuses* generate *dissonances*, which in turn generate noises, these concepts and notions may instead be understood as part of a self-reinforcing cycle. “Noise” is not merely the result of *dissonances*; it also contributes to the formation of *consensuses* in an interdependent manner. It reflects, therefore, a dialectic of action and reaction, each giving rise to the

other. In contexts marked by urban uncertainty, a need arises to produce “noises” that generate a dynamic of propagation aimed at establishing an urban *convention* to guide public interventions and attract private investments in specific areas. This is particularly evident in areas that have experienced abandonment. For these, there is no alternative but interventions and investments, such as those that will be analyzed below in relation to the central area of Recife. These examples will be examined in greater detail, as it is first necessary to bring the reader closer to the empirical object through the analytical framework outlined above.

Approaching the empirical reality: the Historic Centre of Recife

Like the historic centers of other Brazilian cities, the Historic Centre of Recife (CHR) is far from homogeneous. It encompasses a mosaic of distinct areas and realities. Different agents with varying interests operate within this space, shaping and reshaping its pre-existing spatiality in multiple ways. What lends uniqueness to this center, as with any other, is the culture that permeates both its material and immaterial dimensions. The latter refers to the diverse ways in which each different part of the center is experienced and interpreted.

Initially, it is important to note that there is no formal institutional delimitation for the CHR. For the purposes of this study,

it is understood to comprise a set of Strict Preservation Sectors (SPR) within the Protection Zones of Cultural Heritage (ZEPH), located in the neighborhoods of Santo Antônio, São José, and Boa Vista (ZEPHs 8, 10, and 14), as well as the southern portion of the Bairro do Recife, listed by the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (Iphan), and therefore subject to strict preservation regulations. The ZEPHs are subdivided into SPRs and Environmental Preservation Sectors (SPA). While the SPRs are governed by strict guidelines that tightly regulate alterations to the built environment, the SPAs function as buffer zones surrounding the areas under strict preservation. Properties located within these zones may be demolished and rebuilt, provided such interventions do not interfere with the visual integrity of the strictly protected areas. This signifies that the municipality does not recognize their structures as cultural heritage.

The Bairro do Recife, designated as ZEPH-9, presents specific legal characteristics regarding urban planning parameters. In addition to the protected area delineated by IPHAN, it encompasses the Renewal Sector (SR), the Urban Consolidation Sector (SCU), and a Controlled Intervention Sector (SIC).⁴ Another important aspect to highlight is the presence of a Zone of Social Interest (ZEIS), corresponding to the Pilar Community, a residential enclave within the Bairro do Recife (Figure 1).

However, within the context of a set of SPRs, the CHR displays a range of specificities in terms of the way it functions, its morphology, and the applicable legislation, primarily related

Figure 1 – Demarcation of the Historic Center of Recife



Source: Master Plan for the Municipality of Recife, 2021. Google Earth, 2021.
 Elaboration: Gemfi/UFPE (2024).

to its rehabilitation. This observation led Lacerda and Abramo (2020) to identify, in their analysis of the real estate market within this center, the existence of six distinct submarkets (Figure 2), which, although interrelated, exhibited their own unique dynamics.

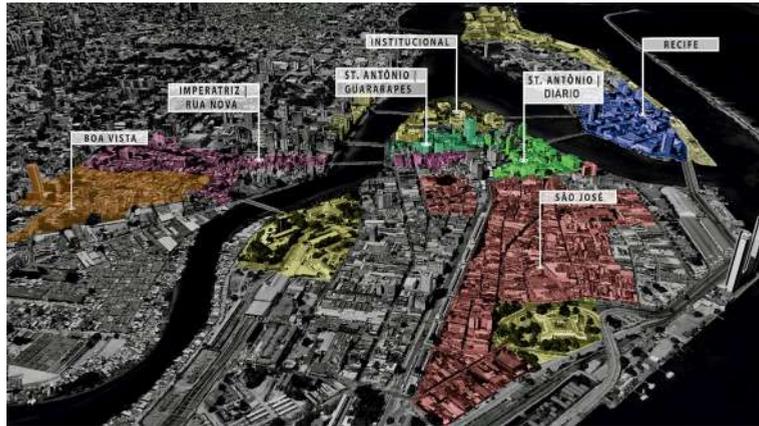
The analysis made it possible to mark out the submarkets of *Bairro do Recife*, *Santo Antônio–Guararapes*, *Santo Antônio–Diário*, *São José*, *Imperatriz–Rua Nova*, and *Boa Vista–Santa Cruz*, all situated within the four neighborhoods identified here as components of the CHR.

In the Bairro do Recife, a corresponding submarket has emerged, primarily focused on information and communication technology (ICT) and the creative economy (CE) – notably through the Porto Digital Project – as well as leisure activities. Fernandes and Lacerda (2023) highlight that, since 2000, the Bairro do Recife has undergone a revitalization process primarily

under the coordination of Porto Digital. Initially, the project aimed to attract ICT companies to the area through infrastructure improvements and rehabilitation, coupled with a significant incentive involving a 60% reduction in the Municipal Services Tax (ISS), as established by Law n. 17.244/2006. Later, in 2015, the coverage area of Porto Digital was expanded to encompass a quadrilateral in the Santo Amaro neighborhood, the entirety of Santo Antônio, and part of São José, along with activities related to the CE.

The centrality of the Santo Antônio neighborhood was a key factor in attracting higher education institutions during the first half of the 2000s. It became even more appealing not only due to its inclusion within the coverage area of Porto Digital but also because the 60% reduction in the Municipal Services Tax (ISS) was extended to education-related activities

Figure 2 - CHR according to real estate submarkets



Source: Gemfi/UFPE, 2020. Elaboration by Antônio Lacerda and Andresa Santana.

(Fernandes and Lacerda, 2023). In this context, Lacerda and Abramo (2020) identified two *real estate submarkets* within the neighborhood: *Santo Antônio–Guararapes* and *Santo Antônio–Diário*. The former had been driven by private educational activities, especially higher education, bolstered by federal incentives (Prouni and Fies financial programs), particularly throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, which established it as an educational hub. This hub however, lost momentum due to the Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with the expansion of distance learning. In contrast, the latter, the *Santo Antônio–Diário submarket*, remains predominantly commercial but stands out as a strategic area for the territorial expansion of ICT and CE activities, currently concentrated in the Bairro do Recife.

In the São José neighborhood, Lacerda and Abramo (2021) identified a submarket of the same name, characterized by popular retail and wholesale trade, with a strong presence of street commerce. In the Boa Vista neighborhood, where residential use remains significant, the *Boa Vista–Santa Cruz* submarket was delineated, with residential use still predominant despite growing pressure from the expanding commercial sector. The *Imperatriz–Rua Nova submarket* connects the Boa Vista and Santo Antônio neighborhoods through a commercial corridor that was once one of Recife’s most important, but which is currently experiencing a process of decline.

More recent dynamics regarding the CHR also deserve attention. In 2021, the Recentro Program was established (Municipal Law n.

118.869/2021), with the goal of promoting the recovery, renewal, repair, or maintenance of properties located within the CHR. This law provides for a temporary exemption of 50% of the Urban Property and Land Tax (IPTU) for construction and interventions in commercial properties, and a 100% exemption for residential properties – possibly inspired by the 1997 Revitalization Plan for the Bairro do Recife. Additionally, the law establishes a 60% reduction in the Service Tax (ISS) for service activities related to engineering, architecture, geology, urban planning, civil construction, maintenance, cleaning, environment, sanitation, and related fields. These incentives apply, initially, to ZEPHs 9 and 10 (covering the neighborhoods of Recife, Santo Antônio, and part of São José), with no fixed time limit.

The same law extends these incentives, for a period of ten years from the issuance of the operating license (*alvará de funcionamento*), acceptance or occupancy permit (*habite-se*), to lodging activities located in the aforementioned zones, as well as to cultural, leisure, related, complementary, and allied activities. This implies that information and communication technology (ICT), creative economy (CE), and higher education activities continue to benefit from the privileges established by the 2006 law and its amendments: a 60 % reduction in the ISS, with no fixed time limit and irrespective of any property rehabilitation.

It should also be noted that the predominantly popular commercial activities in the São José neighborhood are not included among the economic activities eligible for the ISS reduction. In the context of territorial disputes inherent to market driven areas, this unequal treatment underscores the public

authority's priorities and reveals its role in regulating the supply and demand of real estate heritage assets in the Historic Center of Recife. Moreover, by not acting impartially, the State has fostered unfair competition among the various existing uses, thereby distancing itself from its function of promoting social integration.

Lastly, one of the defining features of the CHR is the real estate dynamism in the immediate vicinity of the strict preservation areas, especially along the waterfronts. In the early 2010s, the Porto Novo Project (Phase 1) was launched on sections of the maritime shoreline in the Bairro do Recife, aiming to rehabilitate old warehouses to accommodate bars, restaurants, museums, a maritime terminal, and other venues. Subsequently, this service and tourism development vector extended to the São José neighborhood – also along its waterfront – under the *Porto Novo Project (Phase 2)*, resulting in the establishment of the Novotel Recife Marinas (240 rooms), Marina Recife, and the Recife Expo Center Convention Center.

The entirety of the Porto Recife Project (Phases 1 and 2) has been implemented on federal land managed by Porto Recife S.A., an agency of the Pernambuco State Government. Access to these sites was secured through 25 year leases beginning with the contracts signed in the 2000s and early 2010s. It is therefore in the government's interest that these developments generate sufficient financial returns to meet, among other obligations, the costs of the concession. Thus, the State – as a rentier real estate actor – serves as a partner and one of the principal agents in the rehabilitation process of the CHR.

In addition to the projects already mentioned, the following real estate products have emerged: the Moinho Recife Project (corporate and residential spaces totaling 251 housing units) and the Hilton Hotel (132 rooms) in the Bairro do Recife; and in the São José neighborhood, the Recife Novo Project (1,042 dwellings), as a continuation of the Duarte Coelho and Maurício de Nassau Pier residential developments (810 units) – known as the “Twin Towers” – inaugurated in 2009 (Figure 3).

In addition, the renovation of the São José Market stands as a key project aimed at transforming the site into a tourist attraction. This has involved a reconfiguration of the market’s internal layout and removal of the informal vendors from its surrounding areas. The goal is to reposition the market as a tourist destination, aligning it with the broader set of tourism-oriented developments that comprise Phase 2 of the Porto Novo Recife

Project, concentrated along the waterfront of the neighborhood. By contrast, the Boa Vista neighborhood – only included within the scope of the Recentro Law in December 2023 – continues to suffer from a lack of public policies aimed at stimulating urban rehabilitation, as well as a notable absence of private-sector interest in its historically significant area.

Thus, the CHR and its surrounding areas have emerged as sites of interest for a range of actors from society, highlighting a complex interplay between state-led rehabilitation efforts, such as tax incentives and infrastructure development or improvement, the interests of specific economic sectors, and the functional dynamics already present in the area. Within this context, certain real estate submarkets have exhibited greater economic dynamism, as reflected in the activation of their real estate stock, with the Bairro do Recife standing as a prime example.

Figure 3 – Developments in the Historic Center of Recife and immediate surroundings



Source: Google Earth Pro, 2021. Elaboration: Gemfi/UFPE (2024).

Given this scenario, a number of critical questions emerge: How were the agreements that led to the prioritization of certain areas within the central district – often at the expense of others – constructed? What are the broader repercussions of these processes on the urban dynamics of the area? What dissonances have become apparent as a result? Within this framework, what are the social implications that must be taken into account and discussed?

Revealing *consensus*, *dissonances* and *protests*

In this section, the conflicts stemming from the implementation of the CHR modernization project are analyzed through the lens of two types of interaction introduced by Habermas, both of which pertain to the use of language: *communicative action* and *strategic action*. As previously discussed, the first, *communicative action*, deals specifically with the formation of consensus instrumentalized through publicity. Its objective is the manipulation of public opinion in response to the socio-spatial repercussions resulting from this type of action. The second concerns actions aimed at confronting *strategic action*, grounded in the *dissonances* that persist within the central Recife modernization project, fueling *protests*.

Strategic action: forming consensus

This study underscores the central role of publicity as a key instrument in the formation of consensus, particularly in mediating the

relationship between public and private domains. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the analysis focuses on how the consensus is constructed within the context of the CHR modernization project. The following sections draw on empirical data collected from various studies and media sources, with the aim of identifying the actors who have participated – or continue to participate – at the “negotiation tables” where *agreements* on the modernization project are reached.

To this end, two developments in the region were selected for closer analysis. The first refers to the Moinho Recife Project – a planned complex comprising hotel facilities, business and corporate spaces, commercial and gastronomic establishments, and a multifunctional space – developed within the Controlled Intervention Sector (SIC) of the Bairro do Recife, in proximity to the Pilar Special Zone of Social Interest (ZEIS). Both developments benefit from fiscal exemptions made possible through the Recentro Program. The second concerns the tourist complex associated with the Porto Novo Recife Project (Phase 2), composed of the Novotel Recife Marinas, Marina Recife, and Convention Centre, as well as the Moinho Recife project. This complex – located on the edge of the historic area of the São José neighborhood, where strict cultural heritage preservation regulations do not apply, relies on the cultural characteristics of the area to establish itself as a tourist attraction hub.

In broad terms, the research conducted has shown that the revitalization program in the CHR is frequently presented as a successful example of public-private partnerships. A news

article published by *Foco Pernambuco* in 2021 (Dias, 2021) illustrates this narrative by reporting on a visit by the mayor of Recife, João Campos, to the construction site of the Moinho Recife project. In the article, the mayor emphasizes the importance of such collaborations/partnerships for urban development and job creation (Figure 4). Similarly, a report published by *FalaPE* (2023) regarding the construction of the Novotel Recife highlights the creation of 2,600 direct and indirect jobs, while underscoring the partnership between the municipal government and the private sector that made the project possible.

Additionally, there are media reports focusing on the role of other State actors, such as congress members and the Pernambuco State Government itself. One example is a piece published by *CBN Recife* (2023). In this report, a statement by Congressman Luciano Bivar is particularly noteworthy: he thanks

the current governor of the state, Raquel Lyra, for “facilitating and providing every possible condition for the development of such projects and ventures, and for all those investing in Pernambuco” (Figure 5).

It is important to note that the formation of consensus is strategically orchestrated, particularly in the current context where social media plays an increasingly prominent role in publicizing initiatives. In this scenario, social media profiles linked to municipal and state administrations have become key instruments for shaping consensus regarding the CHR. Through these channels, governmental bodies promote projects highlighting the economic and cultural benefits of the renovations.

Posts on platforms such as *Instagram* and *Facebook* frequently showcase “before and after” images of the interventions, emphasizing both modernization and heritage preservation,

Figure 4 – Forming consensus: Moinho Recife



Source: FocoPE (Dias, 2021).

Figure 5 – Forming consensus: Novotel, Marina Recife and the Convention Center



Source: CBN Recife (2023).

and often generating thousands of positive interactions. Ultimately, municipal and state actors play a leading role in these interventions by acting as regulators of urban land use and providers of incentives – ranging from infrastructure funding and improvements to tax reductions and exemptions.

Thus, communication through these platforms contributes to shaping public opinion by promoting a positive view of urban interventions and fostering a favorable *consensus*. This effort seeks to downplay *dissonance* and to cultivate a new *urban convention*: a envisioned Special Zone of Social Interest (ZEIS), portrayed as a future space capable of generating financial returns for the capital that anticipates its potential and invests accordingly. Hence, the manipulation of publicity emerges as a powerful instrument. In effect, private interests, under the guise of public opinion, begin to assert themselves as *consensuses*, thereby legitimizing processes of *agreements*.

However, this narrative is actively contested by social movements and local residents who, through protests and other forms of resistance, expose the problematic consequences of these policies – a theme explored in the following section

Communicative action (protests): responding to the dissonances

The urban fabric, which constitutes the complex web of cities, inscribes within its space the *dissonances* that permeate social relations.

These *dissonances* become evident through visual, social, and functional elements that not only structure the urban experience, but also expose the underlying dynamics of power, conflict, and/or marginalization. As Santos (2006, p. 69) noted, “In taking on life, always renewed by societal movement, forms – turned content-forms – can participate in a dialectic with society itself and as such make up part of the evolution of space”. This movement plays a fundamental role in transforming geographic space, which thus becomes more than just a physical landscape; it is a material expression of the needs, values, and activities of the society that inhabits it. From this point onward, we explore how *dissonances* become perceptible in the central area of Recife, which range from *visual discontinuities* to physical and symbolic barriers, and demonstrate how these elements contribute to the marginalization of certain population groups.

One of the most striking manifestations of *dissonance* in urban space emerges through *visual discontinuities*. These violent “ruptures” on the landscape – produced by architectural structures or urban elements that are out of place within their surroundings and disrupt the visual coherence of the area – reveal *dissonances* stemming from disjointed planning decisions. In historic areas such as the CHR, such discontinuities may be understood as architectural interventions that disregard the historical, social, or cultural context, or even as the result of neglecting the preservation of architectural heritage. Moreover, visual discontinuities may function as both physical and symbolic barriers that perpetuate the

marginalization of certain social groups. This sociospatial fragmentation highlights the presence of historically marginalized communities within the CHR, underscoring profound disparities in the provision of basic services and infrastructure.

A paradigmatic example that illustrates the aforementioned *dissonances* is the Moinho Recife project. In this case, the architectural design clearly fails to establish any meaningful dialogue with the adjacent ZEIS Pilar. On the contrary, it in fact reinforces separation by erecting a “boundary” between the development and the community by means of a blind wall (a *façade* devoid of openings) that extends over eight stories high (approximately 24 meters). This structure creates a stark physical and visual barrier, imposing a rupture in the urban fabric and contributing to spatial

fragmentation and disjunction within the lived space (Figure 6). This exemplifies the vicious face of the god Janus, as previously discussed – one that is either concealed or deliberately neutralized. This spatial discontinuity is further mirrored in the asymmetrical distribution of resources and urban infrastructure, which serves to reinforce enduring cycles of poverty and social marginalization. Consequently, the cohesion of this space is compromised, i.e., the socio-spatial integration between distinct parts of the same territory. In this context, the architectural form described above thus becomes an active agent in the dialectic between society and the evolution of space, reflecting and reproducing the deep economic, social, political, and cultural stratifications that define the urban landscape.

Figure 6 – Rua do Moinho (2023) in the Bairro do Recife



Source: Gemfi/UFPE (2023).

Figure 7 – Protests: voices of the residents in the Pilar community



Source: Folha de Pernambuco (2024).

As previously mentioned, *dissonances* are direct causes of *protests*. In the case at hand, they reflect the mobilization of social actors in defense of their right to occupy the same territory, the right to housing, the right to the city, the right to work, among others.

The visual discontinuity described above symbolically imposes silence upon these actors, in an attempt to stifle their voices. However, at times, their voices break through. Far removed from tax incentives and celebrated partnerships between the state and private enterprises, the residents of ZEIS Pilar are compelled to continue through *protest*, not only claiming their recognized rights, but also to demand: (1) the completion of the housing complex, whose construction was halted due to archaeological

findings; (2) the repair of units already delivered by the government, which have presented structural issues; and (3) progress in the legal titling processes of granting secure tenure through the true right of use of the housing units (Figure 7).

Although the spatial discontinuity has not been addressed by the State through actions aimed at fostering integration or dialogue between these markedly distinct spaces, the voices of the Pilar residents have proven powerful enough to prompt the resumption of construction works this year, after a ten-year hiatus (2024).

Land use conflicts also reflect spatial *dissonances*. Such tensions are often manifested through territorial disputes, where

Figure 8 – Protests around the São José Market



Source: Jornal do Commercio (Moraes, 2020).

diverse interests collide. The lack of integrated planning and effective land use regulation in the CHR has resulted in disordered and unequal urban development. The establishment of a tourist hub in the São José neighborhood, near the popular street market area commonly known as *Vuco-vuco*, has triggered tensions in the central area of Recife, particularly regarding the right to work for hundreds of street vendors, a commercial activity deeply rooted within this space.

The renovation of the São José Market and its surroundings began with the removal of a longstanding herb and produce market, which had operated for decades near the site. The relocation of these vendors took place in 2019, when they were moved to physically distant areas (such as the Cais de Santa Rita) or to poorly integrated spaces, even if physically close to the São José Market (such as annexes

of the market itself). This situation has revealed a dispute over space, now being repurposed for its tourism potential in alignment with the Nove Porto Recife project (Phase 2), currently under development along the waterfront. Tensions have resurfaced, with forceful voices expressing the concerns of those excluded from the processes through which consensus was constructed (Figure 8).

The identification of spatial *dissonances* requires an ongoing, persistent effort. It exposes the enduring nature of these patterns of spatial production despite the numerous accords established by the actors shaping urban space. In other words, as long as the State continues to prioritize economic interests over its social obligations, these dynamics, marked by tension and inequality, will persist in multiple, and often perverse, forms. Thus, critical and continuous monitoring of spatial

dissonances becomes indispensable, not only to understand their manifestations but also to anticipate and/or mitigate their future impacts, with the overarching goal of advancing social justice within the urban space.

Conclusions

As stated in the introduction, this text forms part of a broader reflective inquiry into the formation of *consensus* concerning the spatial transformations taking place in Brazilian historical centers. This investigation has made it evident that total *consensus* is not only improbable, but, as Bobbio reminds us, fundamentally unthinkable. Nevertheless, the pursuit of *consensus* takes place around the “negotiation tables” in an effort to avoid or minimize *dissonances* and, by extension, to preempt or diminish the likelihood of *protests*.

The ongoing revitalization of the Historical Centre of Recife and the spatial transformations taking place in its immediate surroundings, most notably along the waterfront, are being shaped through both visible and invisible conflicts. These tensions stem from interventions led by economic sectors, particularly those investing in information and communication technologies, the cultural and creative economy, real estate, tourism, and leisure, all operating in close partnership with governmental bodies at the federal, state, and municipal levels. Hence the need for processes of *consensus*-building among the actors involved. Indeed, they are actively redefining the economic and social division of space (DESE), a restructuring that has produced *dissonances*, i.e., spatialities that diverge from or resist these transformations,

leading to spatial discontinuities or even violent “ruptures” on the landscape. Such consensus is reliant upon *strategic actions*, whose aim is to mediate the relationship between the State and society through shaping public opinion and thereby socially validating the new DESE. It is around the “negotiation tables,” held behind closed doors, that accords and pacts are forged between investors and local governments. What emerges is a process of interpenetration between public and private domains, marked by the manipulation of publicity by interest groups.

What is unfolding is that these *dissonances* have given rise to *protest*. This constitutes a form of *communicative action* – expressed through reflective practices aimed at emancipation in the face of social and spatial domination exerted by public and private sectors. Such is the case of the Pilar Community – a Special Zone of Social Interest (ZEIS) – located adjacent to the Moinho Recife development. Although the visual discontinuity symbolically imposes silence upon the residents of this community, their voices continue to resonate through the streets. A similar dynamic is observed in relation to the Porto Novo Recife project (Phase 2), which is unfolding along the margins of the São José Market, generating tensions and, with them, protests grounded in the *dissonances* between these two spaces.

The methodological path followed in this study has made it possible to conclude that the *agreements* established in relation to the spatial transformations of the historical center of Recife and its surroundings – and likely in many other areas of major Brazilian cities – have either ignored or subordinated the *dissonances* that have occurred, and continue to occur, in these spaces. Moreover, private interests, disseminated through the media,

have asserted themselves as the producers of *consensus*, whose central narratives frame specific needs as if they were expressions of the general interest.

In summary, this article has highlighted the dialectical dynamism between actions and reactions that so aptly characterize modern society. It has also shown that the State, by

exercising its interventionist power (through urban regulations, tax incentives, infrastructure improvements, and informational tools), while failing to heed the various “noises” arising from diverse socio-spatial realities, has aligned itself with particular territories and economic sectors, thereby deferring its most essential role: that of fostering processes of social integration.

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(1) All acronyms used throughout this article refer to the Brazilian Portuguese terms.

(2) This and all other non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the authors.

- (3) N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of KEYNES, J. M., *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. Global Grey. (2022, p. 79) Available at: <https://www.globalgreybooks.com/general-theory-of-employment-interest-and-money-ebook.html>.
- (4) The Controlled Intervention Sector (SIC) is intended to stimulate activities while maintaining the urban layout, the built environment, and preserving the port landscape. The Urban Renewal Sector (URSU) allows for the renewal of the urban fabric. The Urban Consolidation Sector (SCU) aims to maintain the existing pattern of land use, optimize parking areas, and ensure access to the riverfront by promoting spaces for leisure and social interaction.

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