

MEMORY AND CENTRALITY IN RESENDE

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of the Main Center in a medium-sized city undergoing urban restructuring at the interface between space and time and its different locational logics and dynamics. Our approach includes mapping the spatiality of the economic activities of Resende's downtown and Campos Elíseos, especially bank branches and public administration buildings. The research materials were photographic records and their respective historical interpretations, reported memories given through interviews, and publications by memorialists, historians, and official sources, among others. The aim was to reconstitute the "present of the past", following a chronological path from the time of the peak and decline of coffee production, at the beginning and mid-nineteenth century, respectively, to the formation of the Main Center of Campos Elíseos in the mid-twentieth century. The discussion has three parts: the formation of the Historical Center of Resende; the Center crossing the river, which debates the formation of the Main Center in Campos Elíseos, and finally, a reflection on the spatial struggle of urban centrality in a medium-sized city.

Keywords: Centrality, Memory, Intermediary Cities, Central Area.

Resumo / Resumen

MEMÓRIA E CENTRALIDADE EM RESENDE

O objetivo principal deste artigo é o de debater a função do Centro Principal em uma cidade média em reestruturação urbana na interface entre espaço e tempo e suas diferentes lógicas e dinâmicas de localização. Como procedimentos operacionais predominantes, têm-se o mapeamento das atividades econômicas, simbólicas e de administração pública de Campos Elíseos e do Centro Principal, em especial as agências bancárias. Como materiais, foram utilizados os registros fotográficos e suas respectivas interpretações na história, relatos de memórias por meio de entrevistas e publicações de memorialistas, historiadores, fontes oficiais etc. e, portanto, a reconstituição do chamado "presente de então", em um percurso cronológico, desde o período do auge e declínio da cafeicultura – início e meados do Século XIX, respectivamente – até a formação do Centro Principal de Campos Elíseos – Meados do Século XX. Deste modo, o debate se desenvolve sob três partes: a formação do Centro Histórico de Resende; o Centro atravessou o rio, em que há o debate da formação do Centro Principal em Campos Elíseos; e por final, uma reflexão acerca da peleja espacial da centralidade urbana em uma cidade média.

Palavras-chave: Centralidade, Memória, Cidades Médias, Área Central.

MEMORIA Y CENTRALIDAD EN RESENDE

El objetivo principal de este artículo es discutir el papel del Centro Principal en una ciudad media en la reestructuración urbana en la interfaz entre el espacio y el tiempo y sus diferentes lógicas y dinámicas de ubicación. Los procedimientos operativos predominantes son el mapeo de las actividades económicas, simbólicas y de administración pública en Campos Elíseos y el Centro Principal, especialmente las sucursales bancarias. Como materiales, se utilizaron registros fotográficos y sus respectivas interpretaciones en la historia, informes de recuerdos a través de entrevistas y publicaciones de memorialistas, historiadores, fuentes oficiales, etc. y, por lo tanto, la reconstrucción del llamado "presente entonces", en un camino cronológico, desde el período de pico y declive del cultivo del café (principios y mediados del siglo XIX, respectivamente) hasta la formación del Centro Principal de Campos Elíseos – Medios del siglo XX. De esta forma, el debate se desarrolla en tres partes: la formación del Centro Histórico de Resende; el Centro cruzó el río, donde hay un debate sobre la formación del Centro Principal en Campos Elíseos; y finalmente, una reflexión sobre la lucha espacial de la centralidad urbana en una ciudad media.

Palabras-clave: Centralidad, Memoria, Ciudades Medias, Área Central.

INTRODUCTION

Henri Lefebvre (1999 [1970]) accurately stated that “there is no city, nor urban reality, that does not have a center”, as the center is the part of the city with qualities of attraction that preserves cohesion, even when relatively fragmented. It is the locus of the management of the territorial division of urban labor and has significant correlations between different uses and socioeconomic strata, although cases of gentrification or urban restructuring may be identified, as discussed by Smith (1996) and Soja (1993). When writing about the memory of cities, Le Goff (1990 [1988]) and Abreu (1998) say that the center reveals the constant production and reproduction of the urban, constituting the materiality and immateriality of memory and history.

Urban restructuring, as considered by Soja (1993) and developed by many authors, such as Scott (1984), involves profound changes in the city’s structure and how urban spaces are produced. In general, they result from alterations in the economic base and social and economic agents, or through the introduction of urban equipment or infrastructure that have a significant impact on the area. Thus, this study uses an interpretation of urban restructuring that refers to the urban in general, at local or regional scales.

Historian Jacques Le Goff considered the parameters for reflecting on the past to understand the resources that give access to information and how they should be used to understand a context’s meaning at a given time and its historical conjuncture. He then makes the transition to the construction of memory throughout history, valuing the collective memory and its social wealth.

On the other hand, Geographer Mauricio de Almeida Abreu discusses the need to distinguish individual memory from collective memory and their respective correlations with social class issues. To this end, he points to the city as a place of memory, to which we wish to attribute the specificity of the city center since memories of neighborhoods and other fragments are associated with their roles in the territorial division of urban labor, specific social classes, income, function, and ethnicity. Although often avoided, the center is where differences are found and where it is more difficult to avoid seeing the myriad variations in the urban setting. Low, Taplin, and Scheld’s (2005) ethnographic research in New York City parks highlights how city squares located in central areas have different uses. For the authors, the more central the park, the greater the ethnic and social diversity of the visitors.

Mauricio Abreu states that

[...] countless collective memories coexist in a city at any time. In perpetuating themselves in permanent records, these urban memories do not lose their specific character and their attachment to the group or class that produced them. (1998, p. 86)

Therefore, there is an intense dynamic of correspondence between different times, with overlaps and accumulations.

Since the cities of Antiquity, the center has been vitally important due to its role as a place of management and concentration of economic activities. The long literature on the history of cities directly and unquestionably reveals the importance of city centers as the locus of strategic activities, which is why in terms of absolute and relative position they are normally located in privileged urban areas. Their unique infrastructure makes them an area of convergence and dispersion of people, businesses, goods, services, transport, capital, and ideas.

The restructuring of the capitalist city in the mid-twentieth century relativized the center’s functions with the emergence of the polycentric city, as widely debated in works by Cohen (1972), Barton (1978), Erikson (1983), Hartshorn and Muller (1989), Berry and Kim (1993), Pfister, Freestone, and Murphy (2000), Clark (2002), Reis (2009), and Silva (2006, 2017a and 2017b). The territorial division of labor increases in complexity from other areas where central functions are also performed. However, the literature has always highlighted the continuation of the city center’s importance, as it has never lost its prominence. Instead, space-time variations have emerged, and the vast bibliography contains several research cases that indicate the alternation between some obsolescence and the resumption of the interests of big capital (SMITH, 1996). Therefore, the debate about the polycentric city, already well established in international literature, refers to the change in the paradigm of city

production, which takes on a spatial form that expresses centralities at different levels and dimensions, in different areas of the city.

Since the research developed in the 1930s at the School of Urban Ecology in Chicago, investigations into the structuring of cities have mainly emphasized the study of city centers and the different expressions of urban centrality. The terms Central Area, Main Center, Traditional Center, and Historic Center were adopted to designate this vital area for the city structure. Among the many authors who have dedicated themselves to the study of urban centrality, are the Brazilian scholars Ribeiro Filho (2004), Sposito (1991), Corrêa (1997), Reis (2009), and Maia, Silva, and Withacker (2017). The latter traced a methodological-temporal path that assists the present study. They present a reflection of centrality starting from a historical study of the centralization process, examining the different dynamics of decentralization and the formation of secondary nuclei, culminating in the trend towards the nucleation of shopping malls in Brazilian cities.

The area that plays the role of the Main Center does not always coincide with the city's place of origin or where the first Center was formed, although they often overlap, as it is a strategic location for economic and management activities that go beyond the changes imposed by new historical moments (technologies, urban structure, city size, among others).

Although these studies predominate in metropolitan urban areas, the same issues are also identified in medium-sized cities, which occupy intermediate positions in the urban system, with dimensions, scales, roles, positions, and agents that end up developing some processes differently. Therefore, medium-sized cities also express these new contradictions of capitalist society, in such a way that, as regional centers, they are an important part of the conformation of urban networks and territories.

This is precisely the case in the city of Resende (RJ), where there was an important change in the location of the Main Center's function, which migrated from the right bank to the left bank of the Paraíba do Sul River, establishing a new area in the Campos Elíseos subdivision. The original Center retained its buildings, but a significant part of its functions migrated to the new area. Consequently, the memory of the Center (ABREU, 1998) was kept alive through its buildings and forms.

This article discusses the role of the Main Center in a medium-sized city undergoing restructuring at the interface between space and time and its different locational logic. To this end, the analysis with address the spatiality of the commercial and service activities in the city center of Resende, especially bank branches and public administration. The principal methodology uses photographic records and their respective historical interpretations, memories related in interviews, and publications by memorialists, historians, official sources, and others. Accordingly, the "present of the past" is reconstructed following a chronological path from the period of the peak and decline of coffee production at the start and middle of the nineteenth century, respectively, until the formation of the Main Center of Campos Elíseos in the mid-twentieth century. There are three parts to the discussion: the formation of the Resende's Historical Center, the creation of the Main Center in Campos Elíseos when the Center crossed the river, and finally, a reflection on urban centrality's spatial struggle in a medium-sized city.

THE FORMATION OF THE HISTORICAL CENTER OF RESENDE

The middle Paraíba do Sul Valley, where the city of Resende (RJ) is located, is part of the Paraíba River Valley and lies between the Serra do Mar and Serra da Mantiqueira. The predominant relief is a "Sea of Hills", covering the area drained by the river, from the Guararema elbow to where it is joined by its first important tributaries, the Piabanha-Preto and the Paraíba-Preto. At this point, the plateau starts to decline, and the rapids begin. More specifically, the city is located in the lower reaches, in the Resende sedimentary basin, which has an analogous disposition to that of Taubaté (FUNDAÇÃO INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, 1977).

Resende is transected by the old Central Railway of Brazil that was built to transport the coffee production to the Port of Rio de Janeiro. The Dom Pedro II Railway Branch reached Resende in 1873,

replacing the transportation to the ports of Angra dos Reis and Corte, previously carried out by pack mules and barges.

The Bandeirante Tenente Coronel Simão da Cunha Gago from São Paulo was the first to incorporate the land where the Vila de Rezende and later the municipality were established. In the historical documents, the name is spelled “Rezende”, with a “z”, which is no longer used in official or historiographical documents.

The old Vila de Rezende was created on September 29, 1801, by order of D. José de Castro, Conde de Rezende - Viceroy and Captain-General of the sea and land of the State of Brazil. The village included the districts of Barra Mansa and São Luiz Ferrer, which have both been subdivided and emancipated. Rezende’s limits went from Morro da Fortaleza, on the border with São Paulo, to Serra do Itatiaia to the north on the border with Minas Gerais. It included the Barra do Pirai and Ribeirão das Lages, bordering on Angra dos Reis (A GRANJA, 1931). From 1848, Vila de Rezende was elevated to the category of city and it currently has a territorial extension of 1,113.50 km² (IBGE, 2010), which is still quite large, despite several processes of territorial emancipation throughout its history.

The city, which currently has 126,084 inhabitants (IBGE, 2010) was built on the banks of the Paraíba do Sul River, more precisely, on its right margin, giving rise to the First District of the Municipality of Resende, known as the Centro. Establishments providing commerce, services, and housing for the rural and bureaucratic elites were concentrated in this area. The Centro’s architecture is composed of remnants of Minas Gerais Baroque and neoclassical buildings; the style is eclectic, with decorative elements, including shutters instead of guillotines and the emergence of pediments, hiding the roof (ACADEMIA RESENDENSE DE HISTÓRIA, 2001).

The economic transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the rise and fall of local coffee production in the nineteenth century, altered the city’s development. Coffee cultivation was based on slave labor, which was hit by policies to ban, and later abolish human trafficking. Combined with soil exhaustion, this led to a rapid decline in local production, with many coffee farmers migrating to the Ribeirão Preto Region (SP) in the west of São Paulo. Soares (2014) presents a history of the introduction and circulation of coffee in Resende:

In 1802, Resende was already a coffee exporter, and, from then on, the region would undergo a major change. The beginning of the reign of coffee gradually changed the entire economy of the region. If before the arrival of coffee, the few inhabitants of the hamlet and the surroundings of “Campo Alegre” planted and benefited from sugarcane, took care of indigo plantations, raised some cattle (selling meat to Minas and Rio), from the nineteenth century onwards everything would be subject to the innovation of coffee. Former cattle farms, sugar and cachaça mills, indigo plantations, started to plant [coffee]. Other plantations such as corn, beans, rice, and cassava started to supply the coffee farms and the urban centers’ nuclei as part of a support and subsistence system. However, coffee was already imposing its almost absolute power as a commercial export crop.

(SOARES, 2014, p. S / n)

In 1840, at the height of production, landowners established residences in the Centro of Resende, building townhouses and mansions, based on the wealth generated by the coffee economy. According to A GRANJA (1931), the first mansion constructed was owned by D. Benedita Gonçalves Martins (1809-1891), known as the Coffee Queen (figure 1). She is a famous character in the city’s history, as she owned more than 10 properties, which produced around 580 tons of coffee per year (State Institute of Cultural Heritage, 2009).

The construction of the first Mother Church at the beginning of the nineteenth century was financed by donations from big coffee farmers and built using slave labor. It was one of the important milestones in the formation of the center of Resende and certainly influenced the location pattern of landowners’ homes, which began to dominate the production of urban space. This church was almost destroyed by a serious fire that only left the facade standing and was rebuilt by the same agents and workforce of enslaved people, in 1954. The building has been preserved in the same form until the present (figure 2).



Figure 1 - Mansion built on the corner of Igreja Matriz with Rua XV de Novembro - Resende (RJ),
Figure 2 - Mother Church of Resende (RJ)

The agglutinating power of the construction of churches is notable, as it evidences the Center's symbolic power and its centrality for religious issues. It is also a way to demonstrate the distinction of the elites, who financed the works and guaranteed their hegemony in space.

Close to the Mother Church are two other churches, which are especially important to the Resende Center's history, namely the Senhor dos Passos and Rosário churches (Figures 3 and 4)



Figure 3 - Senhor dos Passos Church - 2018, Figure 4 - Rosário Church

Both churches were less important in urban life, although they are close to the Mother Church they are located on the hill and so access was more difficult. The Senhor dos Passos Church was intended for people of a lower social standing, and the Rosário Church was built for the slaves. The latter was idealized and funded by Manoel Gonçalves Martins, a Portuguese Commander, also known as Manoel of the Stamp, because although he had the title of Commander, he was illiterate and carried a gold stamp with his name, which he used to sign documents. He was the father of D. Benedita, mentioned above, according to information from Mr. Nourival Rosa, in a 2009 interview. The construction of a Rosario Church for enslaved black people had already occurred in the city of Rio de Janeiro and demonstrates the need for internal social distinction in the central areas of Portuguese cities and their close link with the Catholic Church.

Religious life is a very important aspect in cities of Portuguese descent and is one of the elements that connects the center and memory, since the buildings' symbolism, especially the largest and most imposing urban ones and the importance attributed to the liturgical issue, confers an almost sacralized air to the center, above all, around the central churches.

The fact that the city was constructed by an enslaved labor force means that it does not involve the same mechanisms imposed by the capitalist wage-labor society and the residential segregation also follows different parameters. There was compulsory segregation of slaves, who lived in places chosen by their masters, in rural and urban properties. Their masters also dictated the spaces they frequented, such as churches - in this case, the Rosário. It should be noted that the local historiography viewed these matters as social actions carried out by the masters. Despite being slave owners, Commander Manoel Gonçalves Martins and D. Benedita were considered social benefactors. On the other hand, to be fair, there is a statement on the city hall website informing that "Nowadays in Resende, there are 63

properties listed by the Municipal Historical Heritage [department], the vast majority were built with slave labor, which proves the importance of blacks for the history of Resende” (Resende City Hall).

The townhouses and mansions located and listed by Resende’s historical heritage indicate that the center resulted from large-scale real estate investment, built by slaves, which reflects and reinforces the memory of the nineteenth-century elite’s power.

In an interview with Mr. Nourival Rosa in December 2009, at the Casa de Cultura, an important nineteenth-century building that hosted the Paço Municipal, he commented that the wealthy families were located in the vicinity of the Mother Church. After the decline of coffee, many of them moved to the “Oeste Paulista”. Due to inheritance transitions and the diminished interest in the city the properties were sold or even abandoned. Several publications and reports refer to the “Oeste Paulista”, when in fact they mean the Ribeiro Preto Region (SP), which is not located in the western region of São Paulo. Rosa says that many proprietors moved to Rio de Janeiro and other regions of the country, and as a result, most of the properties ended up as public, municipal, state, or federal property. They were used as public buildings, such as the headquarters of the Federal Tax office, judicial structures, and museums, among others (Map 1), or even abandoned.



Map 1 - Resende Center: location of buildings built in the 19th century - 2018. Key: Bus Station / Oliveira Botelho Sqare / Centenario Square / Low-income Commerce / Carmelodromo / Public Buildings / Commercial Buildings / Residential Buildings / Church

Therefore, an Urban Center was produced based on regionally created agrarian wealth and slave labor, which resulted in the construction of important buildings with great value to the municipal historical heritage. In the following section, the debate considers the migration of the centrality and the formation of the Campos Elíseos Main Center.

THE CENTER CROSSED THE RIVER

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, was a period of significant economic and urban obsolescence, leading to Resende’s relative decline in regional importance. The city lost roles to the neighboring municipalities of Barra Mansa and, subsequently, Volta Redonda, which is a focus of rivalry, incorporated by residents in their daily practices. However, trade and service activities that demanded a greater spatial reach were concentrated in neighboring municipalities, diminishing Resende’s position in the regional urban network.

As already discussed, this economic obsolescence was felt in the Center, its importance was gradually weakened and several events contributed to the migration of centrality to Campos Elíseos, in the middle of the twentieth century, such as:

a) The transfer of the Military School of Resende in 1944 to Resende on the left bank of the Paraíba do Sul River. In 1951 its name was changed to the Academia Militar das Agulhas Negras (AMAN). This academy is considered the largest for cadet training in Latin America and attracted a large number of military officers, teachers, service providers, and students, generating a great demand for urban services and the sale of various items, mostly located on the left river bank, just outside the Center.

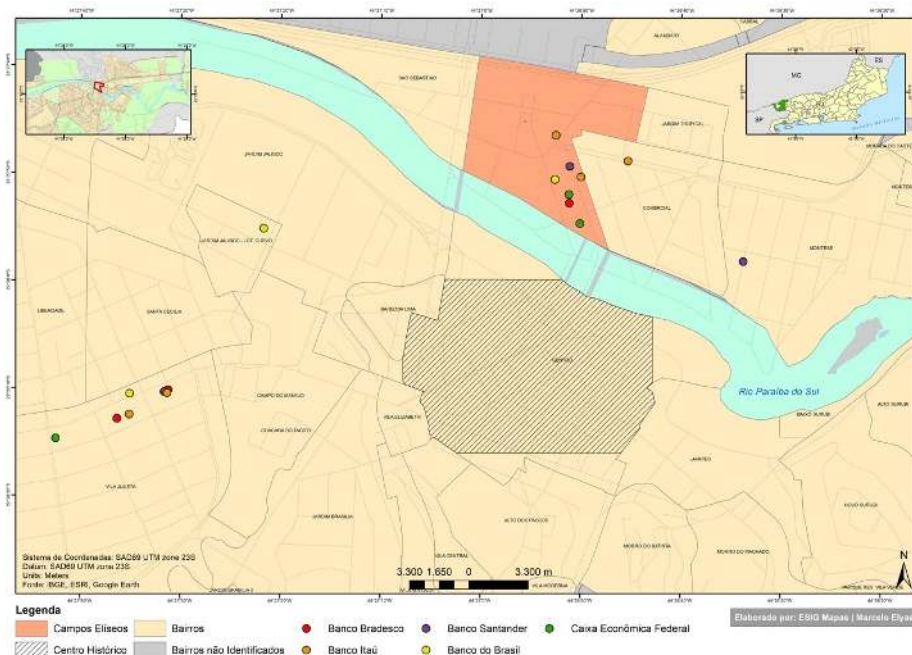
b) The inauguration of the BR 116 - Federal Highway (Via Dutra), in 1951. Its route is along the left bank of the Paraíba do Sul River and it stimulated demand for various services from people in transit. As the main form of entry into the city, it was decisive in attracting services to the left bank.

c) The availability of urban land in the Campos Elíseos subdivision, very close to AMAN, permitted the gradual construction of Resende's new center, with the migration of the urban centrality.

Thus, the Paraíba do Sul River, which had previously been extremely important in the transportation of coffee, became a barrier that isolated the city center and preserved its architecture, an uncommon occurrence in Brazilian cities, even though bridges already existed. The oldest one still standing, the Ponte Nilo Peçanha, also called Ponte Velha, was built in Belgium and transported to the Port of Rio de Janeiro and later Resende, in 1905. Subsequently, other bridges were built. In this sense, obsolescence was the reason for the preservation of the heritage of the former Resende Center.

The Campos Elíseos area of the city already existed at the beginning of the twentieth century and gradually gained importance due to the unfolding of the three events above. The street that begins at Ponte Velha, Rua Albino de Almeida, was the greatest expression of centrality. From the second half of the twentieth century, this street started to concentrate the city's main stores and bank branches, its apex being the construction of the Resende Promenade, the supreme and practically unique symbol of urban centrality until new triggers affected the urban restructuring with the construction of two shopping malls, Resende Shopping and the Mix Patio, which significantly changed the urban structure and the location pattern of economic activities (SILVA, 2017).

The location of the bank branches reveals how the Campos Elíseos area, on the left bank of the Paraíba do Sul River, started to concentrate the economic activities in the city of Resende (Map 2).



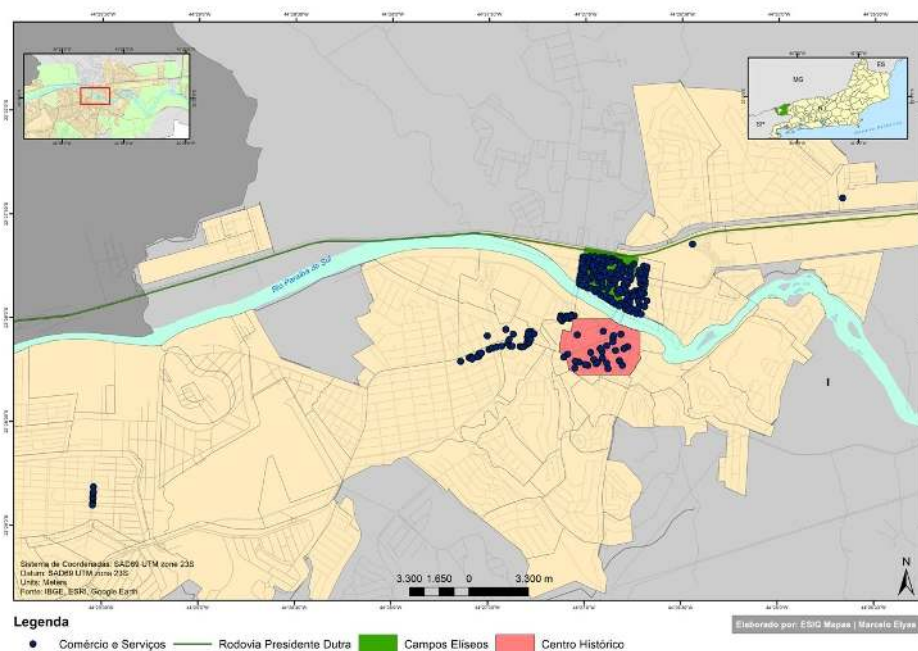
Map 2 - The location of bank branches in Resende (RJ) - 2018. Source: Field research, 2018.

The concentration in Campos Eliseos is evident. All the main banks are present, including those branches differentiated for higher-income segments, such as Banco do Brasil's Estilo and Prime, from Bradesco. Some branches can be found in the recent urban expansion axis of Manejo, towards the gated communities of large high-income houses and to the west serving the most populous and lower-income neighborhoods, such as Cidade Alegria (BASTOS, 2017). There is no branch in the Centro de Resende, demonstrating that the centrality has migrated.

In research on urban centrality, banks have notably occupied areas of maximum centrality, as they are institutions that have central demands and the resources to pay for them, regardless of the size of the city. Also, most companies and offices need proximity to banks for their day-to-day operations, generating links that establish the points of convergence and dispersion of people, businesses, and others. In turn, a set of complementary activities ends up settling in these areas, expressing their centrality.

As a study aiming to carry out a historical reconstruction until the present, one difficulty has been obtaining research sources. Consequently, no files or documents were found to prove the history of banks' locations in Resende, however, oral reports make it quite clear that banks had been located in the Historic Center of Resende before the production and dense occupation of Campos Eliseos. Therefore, we opted to develop the debate about the migration of the function of the Main Center. Previous research, already published by Melara and Silva (2018), shows demonstrates the flows, convergence, and dispersion to Campos Eliseos, which took on the function of the Main Center.

In this sense, the location of commercial and service activities in Resende has its greatest concentration in the Campos Eliseos neighborhood, as can be seen in the general survey on the location of commercial and service activities, carried out by fieldwork on the street, by students from the Research Group on Urban Restructuring and Centrality GRUCE / UFRJ, from 2008 to 2018, which gives a broader view of the locational pattern in the city of Resende. An annotation methodology was used in loco, by concentration, which only recorded and computed a concentration above three establishments (map 3).



Map 3 - Resende (RJ) - The location of trade and services activities (2008-2018). Source: Field research, 2008-2018.

However, concerning complementary and more low-income activities, there were important changes in the location of urban equipment, such as the Bus Terminal, which was formerly located on the right side of the Paraíba do Sul River, very close to the city center. In 1996 it was transferred to a

new building, located on kilometer 305 of the Presidente Dutra Highway, using the new standards of interurban accessibility. This new facility is managed by a large national road service network - GRAAL, reinforcing the locational interest and, therefore, its geographical position. The Patio Mix Resende shopping mall was built a few meters away, in 2011; its corporate website explicitly discloses this location pattern:

PátioMix Resende is located at the main interchange of the municipality and on the side of the Presidente Dutra Highway - the main highway axis in the country, connecting the states of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and with an estimated flow of more than 100,000 vehicles/day. A UNIQUE and PRIVILEGED location, which guarantees high visibility and easy access for the flow of vehicles and people circulating in the area of influence of the project and the Highway's floating public. (PATIO MIX RESENDE, sd), (<https://www.facebook.com/ShoppingPatioMixResende>), (Accessed on May 15, 2019).

The former Bus Terminal building was in an extremely poor condition and ended up being used by the Resende's low-income commerce occupied by small traders (figure 5). The Mercado Popular de Resende (figure 6) was built close by, it was also composed of simple buildings without any sophisticated finishing. In the literature, this area of popular access is called the Center's Peripheral Zone, according to Corrêa (1997 and 1991), Strohaecker (1988 and 1989), and Rabha (1984).



Figure 5 - The internal part of the Old Bus Terminal of Resende - 2018. Figure 6 - Popular Market - 2018

On the other hand, due to municipal government actions there is an appreciation of the architectural heritage, with several buildings being used for public purposes, such as the Resende City Hall and the Old Municipal Market, which has become an exhibition space (figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7 - Resende City Council, 2018. Figure 8 - Resende Municipal Market, facade - 2018

These buildings, together with several other public ones, are in good condition, with recent restorations, indicating a concern with the issue of heritage in this area, which no longer plays the role of an urban center, but preserves the urban memory. An interesting episode was the incident when residents protested against construction by the Public Ministry that used pile drivers next to a “Palacete”, as recorded in the G1 portal’s report, of March 15, 2015 (<http://g1.globo.com/rj/sul-do-rio-costa-verde/noticia/2015/03/moradores-reclamam-de-obra-que-compromete-palacete-em-resende-rj.html>). This adobe building was noteworthy because it was built in the early nineteenth century and, according to the news report and the work of the historian Nourival Rosa, in 1868, it hosted Princess Isabel when she visited the city.

CONCLUSION

As centrality is an attribute of the central place, it is absolutely fluid and can vary in space and time - seasonally or over a long period, however, it always has a dynamic that expresses and reinforces the demands of the society that produces it, seeking the attributes of the moment or as Mauricio de Almeida Abreu called it, the “present of the past”. Historical Geography, brilliantly debated by this researcher, focuses on the debates about the geography of the past, but this not seen and understood as the past, but as the present of the past. In other words, the historical moment is perceived within the context and the logic that produced it, with all the inherent contradictions and possible alterations that allowed the most concrete and profound changes. Therefore, it is also a geography of centrality, which can migrate for long-lasting periods, seeking the new urban center, the new focus, or the new convergence. However, for a certain time, the newness may be temporary, due to particular circumstances.

The centrality and the urban center thus represent a dialectical pair with deep space-time variations, the latter is the materiality of the process and fluidity of the former. Consequently, the centrality attracts the focus and convergence of economic agents’ interests and attention to a given location, which are capable of making profound changes in the area’s form and substance. When there is interest in the central area, it undergoes strong urban interventions to meet new logics that may even lead to its mischaracterization, within a dialectical process of destruction followed by new production. The alteration or creation of roads, the demolition of city blocks, high-rise buildings, and major changes in economic and social agents, are some examples that have already been experienced and witnessed in the history of cities.

However, there are cases where the centrality migrates and a new center is produced, taking with it the attention and focus of the economic and social agents, which except for the action of time or other agents with lower purchasing power, allows maintenance of the architecture, monuments, squares, and streets. The concern with the historical heritage is a relatively recent phenomenon, especially in Brazil, so that the economically prosperous cities evidence a strong lack of characterization of their forms, especially in terms of their buildings and street layouts.

In the case of Resende, where the Historic Center is rich in memory and history, the visible form and content were preserved because of its decline when it ceased to be the economic hub. The new Main Center, Campos Elíseos, started to attract the attention and focus of economic agents in the twentieth century, following a period of prosperity in the center of Resende in the first half of the nineteenth century, with monumental buildings that demonstrated the wealth that accumulated in the agrarian-regional economy and the aspirations to display it in the urban environment.

In this sense, there is a mobile spatial-temporal relationship between Center and Centrality in the production of the city of Resende. The Historic Center still preserves the memory and some public administration services and Campos Elíseos took on the function of Main Center, with the concentration of the largest flow of passers-by and a greater concentration of commerce and services, especially banks, registry offices, and others.

The city center is also where wealth is celebrated and demonstrated to maintain and reinforce social distinction and the reproduction of capital. History shows us that lasting architecture is the one that represents the elites of the present of the past, who used the best engineering and materials existing at the time. What is considered to be the beauty and richness of the urban historical heritage is, in truth,

the expression of the entrepreneurial elites of the present of the past. In the case of Resende, they were slavers involved in all the historically proven violence and abuses, which do not appear in their buildings but are widely known and present in memory.

In this sense, the choice of the site and the building of the city center and its connections with other areas of the city and with other cities is the realization of the economic agents with the greatest hegemony of the present of the past. On the other hand, it ends up generating convergence and dispersion within the urban ensemble, attracting different social strata. In nineteenth-century Resende, although the drivers and production in the center belonged to the ruralist slave elites and the commanders of the urban bureaucracy, the area was frequented by and necessary to a large portion of the urban population as a whole, including slaves, who had a church built for their exclusive use.

Urban restructuring and the production of the polycentric city change this logic; however, its foundations are still valid for an understanding of city dynamics and to maintain the importance of urban centers. In the late 1990s, Professor Manoel Seabra, whilst carrying out fieldwork in São Paulo city, said that “to know the city, first visit the center”, an extremely important fact for Urban Geography studies.

Thus, centrality expresses the city’s social, economic, and political content, its essence and its convergence in time and space, demonstrating that the city has a dynamic production, which leads to changes in the logic of centrality. This article demonstrates that in the city of Resende (RJ), the center even had to overcome the physical barrier posed by the Paraíba do Sul River. It was observed that there is an important issue regarding the articulation between the site and the geographical situation in the composition and production of urban space. Therefore, the Center is steeped in memory and history, but it can also be replaced or undergo significant alterations to its composition as a result of conjunctural changes.

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