Place for All or No Man’s Land? The Experiential Approach in the Quality of Downtown Rio de Janeiro

Date & Time: April 30, 2009, 3:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Location: Deutz Room, IOA Complex, UCSD Campus

This work presents the results of a cognitive study of urban design in the historic center of downtown Rio de Janeiro. It is built around an “experiential” approach, emphasizing cognitive aspects of the human-environment interaction process. It integrates the conscious experience of the observer and dwellers with objective urban design criteria. The research draws from Alcantara’s Ph.D. dissertation, completed in 2008. The work in historic Rio focuses on three case studies within the downtown zone – Praça Quinze, a historic public square, Saara, a popular commercial district, and Lavradio, a dynamic and festive commercial and residential area. These places have been integrated into a design zone called the Cultural Corridor Project, the first major inner-city revitalization effort in Brazil. The “Cultural Corridor” concept has sparked a rehabilitation movement, revitalizing abandoned or rundown central neighborhoods in Rio. It then spread to other cities throughout Brazil. The research is part of a broader work which seeks to deepen our understanding of urban phenomena by embracing the methodological interdependency between the observer and the experienced environment. It also analyzes interconnections between physical (morphological) and spatial attributes of places and the social, cultural and political variables that impact planning and design. In the end, the author argues for a more interdisciplinary understanding of urban revitalization, blending environmental, social and psychological dimensions to understand and design healthier places.

Denise de Alcantara, born and raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is an Architect-Urbanist with Masters and PhD degrees in Architecture (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro). She has been a Visiting Professor at the School of Architecture and Urbanism of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and also at Bennett Institute. She is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies at UCSD. Alcantara has been a practicing architect in Rio for 15 years. Her design portfolio includes over 120 projects—from office buildings, stores, factories, condominium apartments and single family houses to resort hotels, restaurants, a sports complex and a samba stadium. She also worked on the Favela-Bairro redevelopment project in Rio, and has won architectural awards, including an award for the design of the “Economist House” in Rio, and a Fellowship from the Brazilian Ministry of Education. More recently she was co-author of Observing the Quality of Place: Post Occupancy Evaluation Procedures, (in press), and a chapter on the Cultural Corridor for the 2009 book Beyond Brasilia: Contemporary Urbanism in Brazil.

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