Alfândega Square: The Place of Plurality

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Abstract. The present article is based upon a master’s degree Dissertation entitled “Alfândega Square: a place of places”. Subject to the current work is the Alfândega square, located in the historic portion of downtown Porto Alegre, the capital of the Federal State Rio Grande do Sul. The square is composed by distinct parts: Lugar de Memória (the place of memories), Lugar de Entorno (the place of ambience), Lugar de Pluralidade (the place of plurality) and Lugar de Evento (the place of events). With these different places highlighting the various dimensions of public places in metropolises, using the Alfândega square as the study subject raises some relevant questions about how much a public space can change throughout its existence. It can be affirmed that in this mosaic of social representations, vicinal territories and symbols comprise an important locus for the analysis of the urban space, since it presents itself for social forms' multiple spaces of material survival and social coexistence. For this reason, the study of the Alfândega square is also an investigation about contemporary urban phenomena and their multiple and emerging social practices that are modified by the influence of external factors in the city. This article has its emphasis on the place of plurality, remembering the profile of regular visitors in the past and comparing it with present-day users. The non-participating observation methodology was used to analyse regular visitors of this public space. Visits to the square where carried out in different periods of time during the two years of study. As a result of these visits, a series of territorial maps were created, depicting the territories of the regular to the square.

1. Place of Plurality

Place of plurality is related to the diversity of people or things in the same space, as well as various [1] types of manifestation of different cultures and traditions. According to Castello, “It is the place of leisure, pleasure, blending, contrast, the ‘others’, the differences [...]”. The author brings, in his book the same case study here analyzed (figure 1): “Within this focus, the interface between (once again) [1] Alfândega square and Rua da Praia makes up a very clear copy of what is to be a place of plurality”.

[1]
2. Social Aggregates

In the context of Alfândega square, the best term to refer to the current regulators of this public space is social aggregate. Pérsio Santos de Oliveira [2] describes this denomination as “the meeting of people with weak group feeling and loosely agglomerated. Even so, they can maintain a minimum of communication and social relations amongst themselves”.

The term “aggregate” was adopted by Luciano Pedroso, in his dissertation, titled The Daily Space of the Aggregates of Alfândega Square in Porto Alegre/RS, to qualify the local users. In his research, the author interviewed, through questionnaires, the users (or the aggregates) of the square, reaching conclusions regarding affective and identity, as well as spatial links. The results of the interviews were tabled, pointing the links of the users with the square. The first two links (affective and identity) indicate immaterial and intangible aspects, seeking feelings of affection and identity with the site, while the spatial link appears in material form, pointing the occupation and fixation in the square.

Pedroso’s interviews will be used in the present article to compare the analysis of the groups that used the square before the requalification made by the Monumenta project and the observations carried by the author in the years 2017 and 2018.

In order to facilitate the analysis, and the approach regarding users, the main aggregates were grouped into three categories: workers, players, regulators and residents. Table 1 summarizes categories of aggregates.

| Table 1. Four categories of aggregates |
|---------------------------------------|
| **Workers** | **Players** | **Residents** |
| Shoeshiners | Checker | Permanent |
| Outpatient | Domino | Transient |
| Craftsmen | Deck | |
| Prostitutes | | |

Source: Elaborated by the author, 2018
Figure 2 depicts the square plan showing the preferred location of the social aggregates. In the areas close to the museum (MARGS, Memorial of Rio Grande Sul and Santander Cultural), there is a decrease in the territoriality of users, having greater presence of homeless people. It is also noted that workers, mostly, choose to use the streets that cross the square: *Rua dos Andradas, Rua Cassiano Nascimento* and *Rua Capitão Montanha*.

![Figure 2. Territoriality of aggregates. Source: Author's collection, 2018.](image)

2.1. Workers

This category includes four social aggregates: shoeshiners, craftsmen, ambulants and prostitutes. In common they have their working environment: the square. This group takes ownership of the place to get their livelihood. David Harvey [3], in his book *Space of Hopes*, names a space of natural survival as the place that humans use in the search for a “vital salary”. That is, individuals, through social practices aimed at subsistence, take ownership of space plots. These plots are called micro-territories.

Serpa relates the micro-territories with the public space:

“The micro-territorialities that manifest themselves in the public space of the contemporary city show the existence of plastic and movable territories, which express segregationist practices of spatial control, from a dialectic between cultural contents and Economic. Segregation reveals itself in distinct ways, and here we aim to emphasize the symbolic content related to the explication of differences, transformed into practices of distinction of groups, classes and class fractions, in the processes of appropriation of the space That occur today in cities” [4]

Alfândega square is set up in several micro-territories occupied by its aggregates, with a strong presence of informal work practices, with the objective of guaranteeing individual sustenance.

The shoe shiners are a remarkable and constant presence in the square. They are located at three points along the square: near the *Caixa Economica* building, on *Rua Capitão Montanha*, corner with
Rua da Praia, and at the two ends of Rua Cassiano Nascimento, between Rua da Praia and Rua Sete de Setembro.

The shoeshiners chose the square as a place to exercise its craft in the middle of the last century, because it was a space with intense flow of male regulators. It was also a place of political debates, often frequented by intellectuals and journalists. The presence of the Grand Hotel, the cinemas and cafes in the vicinity, favoured the coming of the regulators at Alfândega square.

Nowadays they occupy the square from Monday to Friday, from 8:00 a.m., approximately, until around 18:30. On Saturdays, they start their journey at the same time, ending around 14:00. This group uses stationary chairs that remain in the square, favouring the permanence in certain points and allowing greater territoriality in this public space.

Figure 3. Territoriality of the shoeshiner. Source: Author’s own collection, 2018.
Figure 4. Shoeshiners in the 80’s. Source: Photographer Flávio Wild

Figure 5. Shoeshiners in the year 2018. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.

With the change of users in the square, the clientele of the shoeshiners has also changed. Most of the current clients consist of workers from the nearby buildings, mainly officials of the Legislative Assembly and the judiciary workers. According to an interview conducted by Luciano Fernandes
Pedroso in his dissertation, the shoeshiners have relationships of belonging and different perceptions of the site.

“I work here ten years and I have no friendships (...). It's hard. I don't like the chair, and I don't own it. I just do my job, receive my payment and that's it. At the end of the day I just live with the customers”.

“T’ve been here for twenty-two years, I’ve seen everything here (...) The square for me, it's my livelihood, my food, it's light, energy, it's life. I need her and I think she needs me. I like everybody here. I'll give it to everyone”.

Given these reports, it is noted that the shoeshiner 1, even after working for a decade on the site, has no attachment to the square and sees it only as a workplace to ensure his livelihood. In the opposite way, shoeshiner 2 shows feelings of affection towards the place in which he works. The two statements lead to the concepts of Topophobia, or fear prejudice of a given place, and Topophilia, or like, unconditional love for a given place. Topophobia appears clearly in the speech of shoeshiner 1 and Topophilia in the speech of shoeshiner 2. Both terms were created by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in two of his books *Topophilia: A study of the perception, attitude and values of the environment* [6] and *Landscapes of Fear* [7].

**Table 2. Social Aggregates: Affective and spatial bonds - shoeshiners.**

| Social Aggregate | Links              |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Shoeshiners      | Affective and Identity | Space |
|                  | Partly             | Strong |

In the visits made in the years 2017 and 2018, it was noted that the shoeshiners were still constantly in the square and had a fixed clientele. Even after the Monumenta project, finalized in 2012, they remained in the same places. During the book Fair, an annual event that takes place in the square, they continue their work, not moving. Their bond with the square still is very strong. The territoriality of these aggregates is the most striking amongst the groups studied.

**Figure 6. Craftsman. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.**
The square houses sellers of industrialized and handcrafted products, many of them members of the Craftsman Association of the Handicraft Fair of Alfândega Square (ARTEFAN). It also has the presence of artists, magicians, clowns and musicians (traditionalists, instrumental, gospel, rock, pop Rock and MPB) and evangelizers.

Sellers settle at fixed points (tents) and mobile (ambulants). Most of the ambulants are located at Rua da Praia. The tents are fixed at Rua Cassiano Nascimento.

In this workers category, it is worth mentioning the informality of the work exercised by this group. The informal sector of the economy has been growing considerably in the face of the crisis facing Brazil. Both sellers, streetwalkers, street vendors, artists, shoeshiners and prostitutes have forms of work that converge on social practices established in this space with the aim of obtaining financial resources for material survival.

### Table 3. Social Aggregates: affective and spatial bonds – craftsmen, street performers, vendors

| Social Aggregate     | Affective and Identity | Space |
|----------------------|------------------------|-------|
| **Craftsmen**        | Weak                   | Strong|
| **Street performers**| Weak                   | Weak  |
| **Vendors**          | Strong                 | Strong|

Figure 7. Territoriality of workers. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.
Through the map of territoriality (figure 07), it is noted that the craftsmen with the fixed stalls are located along the block of Rua Cassiano Nascimento, between Rua da Praia and Rua Sete de Setembro. The sellers in general, including ambulants (even other unfavored craftspeople by the permanent stalls), remain at Rua da Praia, without a pre-established point, demarcated daily through the products that are on display. There are also sellers located at the intersection between Rua Sete de Setembro and Rua Cassiano Nascimento Street, mostly Haitian salesmen (they are also located along Rua da Praia). Singers (participants of the religion Jehovah’s Witnesses) are located at Rua da Praia, close to the Caixa building and at Rua Sete de Setembro.

The practice of prostitution in the square has peculiarities: it occurs in the daylight, with a specific profile of women who flee from common sense, in a place of wide circulation of the historic area of Porto Alegre. Women are integrated into the dynamics of the environment in such a way that a distracted passerby may not even perceive their presence.

The prostitutes of Alfândega square chose the place for the autonomy of schedules and reduced violence. During the day, the square shows itself safer, only tacit conflicts occur between the different types of prostitution. These women showed a high construction of territoriality in the space, evidenced by the speech of the interviewed: “We're here to do a show, no point in hiding. If we hide, they won't see us. And there is no money for our livelihood [...]”. Prostitute 1 [8].

In the context of female prostitution in public areas, it is noted the presence of an intense symbolic character, that is, “a tacit, unwritten, but legible convention by all users through the codes of language and behavior” [9]. In the case of Alfândega square, in the years preceding the Monumenta project, according to Pedroso, the women who lived in the activity had as basic prerogative to present themselves in the role of prostitute, that is, their activity was not hidden in any way because prostitutes need this publicity when referring to prostitution in public places. They needed to be seen, noticed by probable clients.

| Social Aggregate | Links | Affective and Identity | Space |
|------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|
| Prostitutes      |       | Strong                 | Strong |

Source: PEDROSO

In the visits made to the square in 2017 and 2018, a large decrease in the number of prostitutes was noted. Although they are still present in this public space, their territoriality is no longer demarcated as reported in the studies of Beckert and Kohlrusack [10]. It takes a watchful eye to observe the encounters. They use discreet clothing and have fixed customers, who already approach them with previous knowledge of the work offered by the women who are circling the square.
During the observations made in 2017 and 2018, it was noted that the few sex workers who remain in the square occupy the spaces close to the monument of General Osório, located in the middle of the square. They are usually seated on the benches near the monument or walking discreetly close to it. In the course of the visits to the square, it was possible to see at most three professionals at the same time, and in some days, none.

2.2. Players
The Alfândega square, besides work, represents a place of leisure. Many players attend the space to play checkers, domino and cards, establishing a bond relationship. These games practiced in the square represent the intangible heritage that exists on the site. Pedroso classified as strong the affective and spatial bonds of the players of the square.

| Social aggregates | Links          |
|-------------------|---------------|
| Players           | Affective and Identity: Strong | Space: Strong |

Source: PEDROSO
The checkers group is in the square since the year 1983. The best players of checkers of Rio Grande do Sul meet at Alfândega square.

**Figure 9.** Checkers players. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.

The checkers group is in the square since the year 1983. The best players of checkers of Rio Grande do Sul meet at Alfândega square.

**Figure 10.** Domino players. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.
The group of dominoes players is heterogeneous, similarly to the checkers. Composed of male players, mostly retired, but from different social spheres. Some, already retired, travel daily, coming from other cities in the metropolitan region, to meet in the square, where they play and take turns with friends. The square became the place where they feel important and welcomed.

The group of card players is also heterogeneous. It is composed almost exclusively by men, as well as the other groups of players. These users have been in the square for a few years. Individuals from various social and professional classes, including unemployed, participate. A differential aspect of this social aggregate is that, in addition to the pleasure of conversation, their games involves betting and winning the amount of the table is the goal of the game.

![Figure 11. A game of cards. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.](image)

![Figure 12. Player’s territoriality. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.](image)
During the observations of 2017 and 2018, among the three groups of players present in the square (checkers, domino and cards), it was noted that the checkers players have a greater link of spatiality and territoriality, regardless of the season, and, in the course of the Book Fair, they keep close to the corner between Rua da Praia and Rua Cassiano Nascimento. In 2018, with the installation of bars, in the previously unoccupied building, the players of domino and cards lost part of their privacy and territoriality, but until now remains on Rua Capitão Montanha, moving on days of strong sunshine to Rua Cassiano Nascimento.

2.3. Homeless residents
The homeless are present in the square, marking a fragility and a social problem of Porto Alegre. The work elaborated by Reiher [11] in 2015 showed the presence of underaged residents on the city streets. Currently (2017/2018) the presence of this profile of dwellers was not registered. The map below (figure 13) shows the presence of street dwellers in different sectors of the square and, as the flow of pedestrians decreases, the presence increases, since most of these residents do not use the square to ask for money or to sell some material. The larger use is to sleep in the benches and to meet with other street dwellers.

In an interview with Reiher [11], the residents reported having a specific dynamic: every night, until approximately 22:00, they remain in the square. Past these hours, until daylight, they roam the city. Street dwellers have stressed that they cannot sleep in the square overnight for safety measure, as their lives may be at risk.

During the visits to the square, in the year 2018, three years after the interviews made by Reiher [11], it was noted the same dynamic. Figure 14, bellow, shows a homeless sleeping in one of the

![Figure 13. Territoriality of street dwellers. Source: Author's collection, 2018.](image-url)
square benches, since he probably stayed awake at night. The street dwellers of the *Alfândega* square who use the benches to rest usually do not approach the other users to ask for money or food.

There is also a permanent group of homeless residents formed by those who have been in the street situation for some years. They are already known to the other users and workers of the square and the surrounding area. Their daily life mixes to the day to day activities of the others, who take the place as their stage of presentation, work, rest, leisure and reflection.

![Figure 14](image14.png)

*Figure 14.* Street dweller, winter 2017. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.

Transient homeless move around the square, searching for objects, cans, or cardboards to resell or recycle. They walk in groups and carry grocery carts, used to store the collected materials (figure 15). They are not at a fixed point: Throughout the day, they are transiting through the square.

![Figure 15](image15.png)

*Figure 15.* Transitory street dwellers. Source: Author’s collection, 2018.

The social category *residents* of the square, among all the categories existing in this public space, is, in a certain way, at least for the vast majority, invisible in the eyes of society. In this same condition of invisibility is the category of workers. Both portray not only the social inequality existing in the Gaucho capital, but also the forms of survival and sustenance that these people found.

### 3. Conclusions

Currently, there is a cultural change, in which pluralism gains strength. The *Alfândega* square, with its diversity, portrays this heterogeneity through its aggregates, which often make the square its shelter, like the beggars, or even the ambulants, the shoeshiners, the artists and the prostitutes, who make the place their office.
The square has, in its *genius loci*, the heterogeneity, which can be seen throughout the article developed here for this understanding. It is a copy of a place of diversity and an authentic construction, which changes in accordance with the change of economy, society and architecture.

This public space can be considered an absolute space, a living/perceived space of representations and everyday spatial practices. This living space is not conceived, it is a space of representation.

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