



Heritage, memory, and power in the contemporary city: disputes, coloniality, and urban transformations in Rio de Janeiro

Patrimônio, memória e poder na cidade contemporânea: disputas, colonialidade e transformações urbanas no Rio de Janeiro

Patrimonio, memoria y poder en la ciudad contemporánea: disputas, colonialidad y transformaciones urbanas en Río de Janeiro

Diego Marques dos Santos Ramos¹

¹ Centro Universitário UNILASALLE-RJ, Rua Gastão Gonçalves, 79 – Santa Rosa, Niterói (RJ),
ORCID: 0009-0003-1229-3170, prof.diego.ramos@soulasalle.com.br

Abstract

This article analyzes cultural heritage as a political, social, and spatial process linked to disputes over memory and the production of the contemporary city, focusing on Rio de Janeiro. Based on an interdisciplinary literature review and critical analysis of emblematic urban cases, the study discusses how patrimonialization processes reproduce selective structures associated with the coloniality of power and the legitimization of hegemonic narratives. Grounded in heritage studies, urban theory, and decolonial thought, the article problematizes the tensions between preservation, urban transformation, and spatial justice, highlighting mechanisms of invisibilization affecting Black, peripheral, and popular territories, while advocating for critical, inclusive, and socially integrated heritage approaches.

Keywords: cultural heritage; urban transformations; symbolic power

Resumo

O presente artigo analisa o patrimônio cultural como processo político, social e espacial articulado às disputas de memória e produção da cidade contemporânea, com foco no Rio de Janeiro. A partir de revisão bibliográfica interdisciplinar e análise crítica de casos urbanos emblemáticos, discute-se como os processos de patrimonialização reproduzem estruturas seletivas vinculadas à colonialidade do poder e à legitimação de narrativas hegemônicas. Fundamentado em autores do patrimônio, urbanismo e pensamento decolonial, o estudo problematiza as tensões entre preservação, transformação urbana e justiça espacial, evidenciando mecanismos de invisibilização de territórios negros, periféricos e populares e defendendo abordagens patrimoniais inclusivas e críticas.

Palavras-chave: patrimônio cultural; transformações urbanas; poder simbólico

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza el patrimonio cultural como un proceso político, social y espacial articulado a las disputas por la memoria y la producción de la ciudad contemporánea, con énfasis en Río de Janeiro. A partir de una revisión bibliográfica interdisciplinaria y del análisis crítico de casos urbanos emblemáticos, el estudio discute cómo los procesos de patrimonialización reproducen estructuras selectivas vinculadas a la colonialidad del poder y a la legitimación de narrativas hegemónicas. Fundamentado en estudios patrimoniales, teoría urbana y pensamiento decolonial, el artículo problematiza las tensiones entre preservación, transformación urbana y justicia espacial, evidenciando mecanismos de invisibilización de territorios negros, periféricos y populares, y defendiendo enfoques patrimoniales críticos, inclusivos e integrados socialmente.

Palabras clave: patrimonio cultural; transformaciones urbanas; poder simbólico

Volume

14

Issue

3

*Corresponding author

prof.diego.ramos@soulasalle.com.br

Submitted 16 Apr 2026

Accepted 14 May 2026

Published 07 Aug 2026

Citation

RAMOS, D. M. S. *Heritage, memory, and power in the contemporary city: disputes, coloniality, and urban transformations in Rio de Janeiro*. *Coleção Estudos Cariocas*, v. 14, n. 1, 2026.
DOI: 10.71256/19847203.14.3.225.2026

The article was originally submitted in PORTUGUESE.

Translations into other languages were reviewed and validated by the authors and the editorial team. Nevertheless, for the most accurate representation of the subject matter, readers are encouraged to consult the article in its original language.



1 Introduction

Cultural heritage, in the contemporary context, can no longer be understood merely as a neutral set of inherited assets destined for the uncritical preservation of the past. On the contrary, it is a field deeply traversed by political disputes, power relations, symbolic conflicts, and mechanisms of social legitimation that determine what should be remembered, monumentalized, and preserved, as well as what can be silenced, marginalized, or erased from collective memory. In this sense, heritage ceases to be configured exclusively as material inheritance and comes to be understood as a historical, social, and epistemological construction continuously reinterpreted by societies.

As Choay (2011) argues, heritage does not constitute a natural or spontaneous phenomenon, but rather a historical invention linked to the ways in which modern societies have come to relate to time, memory, and the idea of permanence. The institutionalization of heritage emerges, therefore, associated with the need to select certain historical traces considered representative of a collective narrative. Such a perspective shifts heritage from a merely conservationist understanding toward a critical approach, capable of recognizing the political and cultural interests that permeate heritage-making processes.

The relationship between heritage and memory proves central to this debate. For Nora (1993), the so-called “sites of memory” emerge precisely when living memory weakens, making necessary its materialization in monuments, buildings, archives, and urban landmarks. However, this materialization does not occur neutrally. All institutionalized memory presupposes selective operations that organize which historical experiences will be recognized as legitimate and which will remain invisible. Heritage, in this context, acts simultaneously as a support for memory and as a mechanism of symbolic production of the past.

This selective dimension of heritage becomes even more evident when articulated with the contributions of Latin American decolonial thought. Drawing on Quijano (2005), we understand that the colonality of power is not restricted to the formal colonial period but continues to structure contemporary forms of social, cultural, economic, and epistemological organization. The racial and cultural hierarchies established during colonization continue to operate in the production of knowledge, urban spatialities, and historical narratives considered legitimate.

In this sense, colonality acts not only upon bodies and territories but also upon memory regimes. Cultural heritage then becomes part of devices that legitimize certain versions of urban history, often linked to political, economic, and cultural elites, while other experiences remain marginalized. The heritage process, therefore, not only preserves memories: it also produces forgettings.

In the Latin American context — and particularly expressively in the city of Rio de Janeiro — heritage processes have historically privileged colonial, imperial, and republican references associated with state power structures and urban elites. In contrast, Black, Indigenous, peripheral, and popular territories have often been rendered invisible by official preservation policies. This heritage selectivity shows that urban space does not only constitute the physical support of social relations but also a territory of symbolic dispute.

The city of Rio de Janeiro presents itself as an emblematic case of these tensions. Marked by deep socio-spatial inequalities, by a history directly linked to Atlantic slavery, and by intense processes of urban transformation, the city forcefully expresses the disputes among memory, heritage, and power. While certain urban spaces were monumentalized as symbols of the city’s official history, others have remained historically marginalized, despite their fundamental relevance to Rio de Janeiro’s cultural formation.

Territories such as Praça XV de Novembro (November 15th Square), linked to the colonial and administrative structures of state power, have consolidated themselves as central references of the city’s institutional memory. On the other hand, spaces

such as Pequena África (Little Africa) and Cais do Valongo (Valongo Wharf) — deeply related to Black presence, the African diaspora, and experiences of cultural resistance — received late heritage recognition, revealing the historical limits of Brazilian preservation policies.

This dynamic shows that heritage cannot be dissociated from the forms of production of urban space. According to Lefebvre (2006), space is continuously produced by social, economic, and political relations, constituting itself simultaneously as a product and a producer of urban dynamics. Heritage, inserted in this process, actively participates in the construction of urban identities, spatial hierarchies, and forms of social belonging.

Harvey (2005) deepens this reflection by demonstrating that control over urban space constitutes one of the most important forms of exercising social power. Heritage processes, in this context, can operate both as instruments of cultural valorization and as mechanisms of territorial and symbolic exclusion. Heritage preservation thus ceases to be configured merely as a technical conservation practice and becomes part of broader struggles for the right to the city.

From these perspectives, this article seeks to analyze built cultural heritage as a relational, political, and spatial process articulated with contemporary urban dynamics, taking the city of Rio de Janeiro as its central object. The study investigates how heritage processes have historically contributed to consolidating certain urban narratives while marginalizing other social and cultural experiences.

Methodologically, the work is structured around an interdisciplinary bibliographic review, articulating authors from the fields of heritage, urbanism, memory, and decolonial thought, combined with a critical analysis of emblematic urban cases in the city of Rio de Janeiro, especially the processes related to November 15th Square, Little Africa, and Valongo Wharf.

Finally, it is argued that heritage must be understood not only as material inheritance but as a field of epistemological, political, and urban dispute. To preserve implies selecting, interpreting, and attributing meanings to the past, and it is necessary to recognize that such choices have direct impacts on the forms of belonging, recognition, and production of the contemporary city..

2 Heritage, Memory, and Coloniality

The modern concept of heritage consolidates itself in the European context from the nineteenth century onward, especially amid the political, social, and cultural transformations unleashed by the French Revolution and the formation of modern nation-states. In this scenario, the preservation of monuments and historic buildings acquires centrality as an instrument for constructing collective identities and legitimizing national narratives. As Choay (2011) highlights, heritage emerges associated with the need to mediate between past and present, functioning as a mechanism of symbolic stabilization in the face of the ruptures produced by modernity.

However, understanding heritage merely as an expression of historical continuity proves insufficient in light of contemporary complexities. Heritage constitutes, above all, a social construction continuously produced by power relations, institutional interests, and symbolic disputes. The selection of what should be preserved does not occur spontaneously or universally but rather based on historical and cultural criteria deeply traversed by political and epistemological hierarchies.

In this sense, the decolonial perspective offers an important critical contribution to understanding Latin American patrimonial processes. As Quijano (2005) argues, the coloniality of power is structured as a lasting pattern of domination that articulates race, labor, knowledge, and culture, remaining operative even after the end of formal colonialism. The contemporary forms of production of urban memory and cultural heritage remain profoundly linked to this colonial matrix of power.

Coloniality also operates upon regimes of memory. Certain urban spatialities become worthy of monumentalization and institutional recognition, while other historical experiences remain marginalized or rendered invisible. Heritage, therefore, not only preserves the past but also organizes hierarchies of memory.

In the Brazilian case, patrimonialization processes were historically conducted based on aesthetic and cultural references associated with colonial and republican elites. The institutionalization of heritage in the twentieth century privileged monuments linked to political, religious, and economic power structures, reinforcing an official narrative centered on European heritage and architectural monumentality.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, this logic manifests itself in a particularly expressive manner. The historic center consolidated itself as the privileged space of preservation policies, concentrating administrative buildings, churches, palaces, and urban landmarks associated with Brazil's colonial and imperial history. In contrast, Black and popular territories fundamental to the cultural constitution of the city remained for decades on the margins of institutional recognition.

The region of Little Africa exemplifies this process. Historically linked to the Black presence, Afro-Brazilian cultural manifestations, African-based religiosity, and the consolidation of Rio's urban samba, the area remained for a long period invisible to traditional heritage policies. Its relevance to the social and cultural formation of the city contrasts directly with the belated recognition of its historical importance.

The case of Valongo Wharf makes this dynamic even more evident. The main port of entry for enslaved Africans in the Americas, the space remained buried — physically and symbolically — for decades. Its recognition as a World Heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reveals simultaneously its historical importance and the difficulty of heritage policies in dealing with traumatic memories linked to slavery.

This patrimonial selectivity shows that the city constitutes not only a material territory but also a narrative construction. As Mbembe (2018) argues, contemporary regimes of power also operate through the administration of social visibilities and invisibilities. Certain bodies, territories, and historical experiences are constantly displaced into zones of symbolic marginality.

Thus, the analysis of heritage demands an understanding not only of what has been preserved but also of what has been erased, neglected, or silenced. Rio's urban heritage thus reveals itself as a field of dispute in which memory, coloniality, and spatial production are continuously articulated in the construction of contemporary urban narratives.

2.1 Heritage and Urban Structural Racism

The understanding of cultural heritage in Rio de Janeiro becomes even more complex when articulated with the dynamics of structural racism that historically shape the production of Brazilian urban space. Heritage acts not only as an instrument of cultural preservation but also as a mechanism of symbolic legitimation of certain historical narratives and urban spatialities. In this sense, patrimonial processes are deeply linked to the racial structures that organized Brazilian social formation.

As Almeida (2019) argues, structural racism cannot be understood merely as a set of individual discriminatory practices but as an organizing logic of institutions, social relations, and the forms of production of urban life. Racial inequalities do not appear as occasional distortions of Brazilian society but as constitutive elements of its own historical formation.

In the heritage field, this structure manifests itself through the unequal selection of memories considered legitimate. Certain architectures, monuments, and urban landscapes were historically recognized as representative of national identity, while other territories and cultural experiences remained invisible. Heritage, therefore,

actively participates in the construction of the city's urban and symbolic hierarchies.

Bourdieu's (1989) perspective allows for deepening this discussion by understanding symbolic power as the capacity for social legitimation of certain representations of the world. In the heritage field, symbolic power manifests itself in the naturalization of certain urban memories as universal, concealing the historical mechanisms of exclusion that structured their institutional consolidation.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, this dynamic becomes particularly evident when we observe the processes of urban modernization that took place between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The reforms implemented by Pereira Passos sought to align the Brazilian capital with European models of urbanity, promoting urban interventions deeply linked to the hygienist and civilizing ideas of the time.

The opening of Central Avenue — now Rio Branco Avenue — implied the demolition of extensive popular areas of the urban center, causing the displacement of thousands of poor and Black inhabitants. The process of "beautification" of the city was directly associated with the attempt to erase the urban spatialities linked to the Black population and the popular classes.

In this context, urban heritage consolidated itself simultaneously as an instrument of monumentalization of elites and of invisibilization of other social experiences. Urban and heritage policies began to act jointly in the production of a formally modern city, but one profoundly marked by racial and territorial exclusion.

The region of Pequena África (Little Africa) forcefully evidences this contradiction. Despite its fundamental importance to the constitution of Afro-Brazilian urban culture — especially in the development of samba, African-based religions, and forms of Black sociability in Rio — the territory remained historically marginalized by official preservation policies.

As Gonzalez (2020) argues, Black cultural production in Brazil was continuously subjected to mechanisms of subalternization and invisibilization. The modern Brazilian city was structured based on a racialized logic that displaced certain bodies and territorialities into zones of urban and symbolic marginality.

This dynamic can also be observed in the late recognition of Cais do Valongo (Valongo Wharf). The main port of entry for enslaved Africans in the Americas, the space remained buried for decades under the successive urban reforms of the city. Its archaeological rediscovery and subsequent international recognition reveal not only its historical importance but also the institutional difficulty in dealing with the traumatic memories of slavery.

Mbembe (2018) contributes to this reflection by demonstrating that contemporary forms of power also operate through the administration of lives considered disposable or invisible. Necropolitics also manifests itself in the production of urban memories, determining which stories will be monumentalized and which will remain subjected to structural forgetting.

Fanon (1968), in turn, enables an understanding of how colonial processes produce impacts that are not only material but also subjective. The historical invisibilization of certain social groups directly interferes in the construction of forms of urban belonging and recognition. The absence of heritage references linked to Black populations compromises the very possibility of recognition of these subjects in the city.

Rio's urban heritage thus reveals itself to be profoundly traversed by the racial inequalities that historically structured Brazilian society. The unequal distribution of heritage recognition shows that cultural preservation constitutes not merely a technical or administrative question but a political dispute directly related to the production of collective memory and the forms of representation of the city.

Thus, the construction of more inclusive heritage policies demands not only an

expansion of the repertoire of recognized assets but also a critical revision of the very criteria that historically guided preservation processes. Incorporating decolonial perspectives implies recognizing that heritage does not represent a universal memory but a field continuously traversed by epistemological, racial, and spatial conflicts.

3 Heritage as the Production of Memory

In recent decades, the heritage field has undergone a significant process of conceptual expansion. Heritage ceased to be understood exclusively as a set of exceptional material assets destined for historical contemplation and came to be interpreted as a dynamic social process, articulated with the symbolic, affective, political, and cultural dimensions of contemporary urban life.

This conceptual transformation shifts heritage from a logic based exclusively on architectural monumentality to a broader understanding capable of recognizing cultural practices, urban experiences, territorialities, and forms of social belonging. Heritage thus ceases to constitute merely a material inheritance and comes to configure itself as a mechanism for the production of collective memory.

As Nora (1993) argues, “sites of memory” emerge precisely in contexts where living memory finds itself threatened. Heritage acts, in this sense, as an attempt at symbolic stabilization of the past in the face of the accelerated transformations of modernity. Monuments, buildings, squares, and urban territories become material supports for social memory.

However, memory does not constitute a spontaneous or homogeneous phenomenon. According to Halbwachs (2003), all memory is socially constructed from collective frameworks that organize what should be remembered. Collective memory depends on the social structures that sustain it and on the institutional mechanisms that legitimize certain narratives to the detriment of others.

Heritage actively participates in this process. By selecting certain buildings, landscapes, and urban spatialities as representative of collective history, heritage policies contribute to organizing the city's regimes of memory. To preserve also means to attribute historical legitimacy.

Pollak (1989) deepens this discussion by addressing the existence of so-called “subterranean memories,” that is, historical experiences silenced by official discourses. Certain memories remain marginalized not due to an absence of historical relevance but because of the power structures that regulate the mechanisms of institutional recognition.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, this dynamic manifests itself in a particularly intense manner. Rio's urban memory is not organized as a homogeneous narrative but as a fragmented field of symbolic disputes. Official heritage has historically privileged colonial and republican references linked to state power structures, while other territorialities remain invisible.

November 15th Square constitutes an emblematic example of this process. A space historically associated with colonial and imperial administrative structures, the region consolidated itself as an important symbol of Brazilian institutional memory. Its historic buildings, churches, and monuments came to officially represent certain narratives about national history.

On the other hand, territories such as Little Africa evidence the persistence of urban memories historically marginalized. Despite its centrality to Rio's cultural formation, the region remained for decades subjected to processes of heritage invisibilization. Black urban memory was frequently displaced to secondary zones of the city's official narratives.

This dispute over urban memory reveals that heritage constitutes not merely a mechanism for preserving the past but an active instrument for the production of the contemporary city. Heritage recognition directly interferes in forms of belonging,

territorial valorization, and the construction of urban identities.

As Ricoeur (2007) argues, all memory simultaneously implies processes of remembering and forgetting. Preserving certain narratives also means relegating other experiences to historical silence. Heritage, therefore, not only materializes memories: it organizes hierarchies of urban visibility.

Beyond the collective dimension, memory also manifests itself in the daily experience of subjects with urban space. Heritage is lived bodily through social practices, urban movements, affective experiences, and forms of territorial appropriation.

Lefebvre (2006) contributes to this understanding by demonstrating that urban space constitutes a social product continuously produced by human relations. Heritage integrates this process as an active element of urban experience. Heritage preservation acts not only upon isolated buildings but upon the very modes of production of urban life.

In this sense, the absence of recognition of certain heritages directly impacts forms of social belonging. Fanon (1968) demonstrates that colonial processes produce profound effects on the subjectivity of subalternized subjects. The heritage invisibilization of Black and peripheral experiences equally interferes in the construction of urban identities and in the possibilities of recognition of subjects in the city.

Heritage reveals itself, therefore, as a field of dispute among memory, identity, and power. Its preservation cannot be limited to the material conservation of historic buildings but must involve the recognition of the plurality of urban experiences that constitute the contemporary city.

More than conserving objects of the past, to preserve implies disputing narratives about the present and about the possible futures of the city. Cultural heritage is thus configured as an active instrument of mediation among temporalities, territorialities, and forms of urban existence.

4 The Process of Preserving and the Mechanism of the “Elite”

Heritage preservation is usually presented institutionally as a universal practice of protecting collective memory and transmitting cultural values between generations. However, a critical analysis of the historical processes of heritage institutionalization reveals that preserving has never constituted a neutral or disinterested action. On the contrary, cultural preservation has always been linked to the power structures responsible for defining which objects, architectures, spatialities, and historical experiences would be recognized as worthy of permanence.

In this sense, to preserve means not only to conserve urban materialities but also to produce historical legitimacy. Heritage does not preexist preservation policies; it is continuously produced by them. The act of listing, cataloguing, restoring, or monumentalizing certain assets simultaneously implies establishing criteria of cultural value and organizing hierarchies of memory.

In Brazil, the institutionalization of heritage policies was consolidated from 1937 onward with the creation of the Serviço do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (SPHAN), later transformed into the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN). Inspired by European models of monumental preservation, the agency structured the first national heritage protection policies based on criteria associated with artistic exceptionality, architectural monumentality, and the construction of a unified national identity.

However, the criteria that guided the initial consolidation of Brazilian heritage were deeply linked to the cultural references of the intellectual and political elites of the period. The valorization of colonial baroque, monumental churches, administrative buildings, and architectures associated with the Luso-Brazilian heritage contributed to consolidating a particular narrative about the national historical formation.

As Choay (2011) argues, modern heritage processes often operate through the construction of an idea of historical continuity capable of stabilizing collective identities. Yet, this stabilization depends on selective operations that organize which memories will be institutionally recognized. Heritage is thus transformed into an instrument of symbolic legitimation.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, this dynamic manifests itself in a particularly intense form. The historic center consolidated itself as the main territory of preservation policies, concentrating buildings linked to the colonial, imperial, and republican structures of state power. Churches, palaces, monumental squares, and administrative architectural complexes came to officially represent the urban memory of the Brazilian capital.

November 15th Square evidences this logic. A space historically related to colonial and imperial power structures, the region became a symbol of Brazilian institutional memory. Its heritage monumentalization reinforced a particular historical narrative centered on the construction of the national State, the Portuguese colonial heritage, and the administrative structures of power.

However, while certain urban spatialities were recognized as representative of national identity, other historical experiences remained systematically invisibilized. Black, peripheral, and popular territories rarely formed part of traditional heritage policies.

This selectivity cannot be understood merely as a technical or administrative limitation. As Quijano (2005) argues, the coloniality of power also organizes the forms of production of knowledge and cultural legitimacy. Heritage preservation criteria remained historically linked to Eurocentric references of aesthetic value, monumentality, and historical authenticity.

In this context, Brazilian heritage preservation consolidated itself as a mechanism of symbolic reproduction of the social and racial hierarchies of society itself. Institutionally recognized heritage came to represent above all the memory of urban elites and state power structures.

The belated recognition of territories such as Pequena África (Little Africa) and Cais do Valongo (Valongo Wharf) evidences the limits of these traditional heritage policies. Despite their fundamental importance to the social and cultural formation of the city, these spaces remained for decades on the margins of official preservation processes.

Furthermore, the very instruments of preservation reveal important contradictions. Listing (tombamento), the principal legal mechanism for heritage protection in Brazil, frequently operates based on a logic of heritage crystallization. Certain assets come to be treated as static objects, disconnected from social transformations and contemporary urban dynamics.

This perspective tends to reduce heritage to the material dimension of architectural conservation, hindering the recognition of more dynamic, popular, and territorialized cultural experiences. Intangible heritage, daily practices, forms of urban sociability, and Black territorialities frequently escape traditional preservation criteria.

At the international level, bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) play a central role in defining global patrimonialization criteria. Although international conventions have contributed to broadening the recognition of cultural diversity, their criteria remain often associated with ideas of exceptionality, authenticity, and monumentality.

As various authors in the decolonial field point out, the universalization of these criteria tends to reproduce European models of cultural preservation. Certain architectures and urban spatialities become more easily recognized as world heritage, while other cultural experiences remain subjected to processes of institutional marginalization.

In the Brazilian case, the incorporation of these international guidelines often reinforced the centrality of a heritage logic based on the monumentalization of the past. However, contemporary cities demand more complex and dynamic approaches to preservation.

The city of Rio de Janeiro intensely evidences this tension. Recent processes of real estate valorization, gentrification, and urban restructuring have begun to produce new heritage disputes. Historically popular areas became objects of economic and tourist interest, simultaneously provoking cultural recognition and social displacements.

In this context, to preserve cannot mean only to conserve architectural forms. It becomes necessary to understand heritage as a living social practice, articulated with the daily experiences of subjects and with contemporary urban dynamics. Preservation must involve not only buildings but also territorialities, collective memories, forms of belonging, and cultural practices.

Thus, the heritage process reveals itself as a field of continuous dispute among memory, power, and spatial production. The true contemporary challenge lies not merely in expanding the repertoire of protected assets but in critically transforming the very epistemological foundations that historically structured preservation policies.

5 Urban Evolution in Tension with Heritage: Between Preservation, Transformation, and Resignification of Urban Signs

The contemporary city constitutes a space marked by permanent transformations. The urban fabric does not organize itself as a static reality but as a continuous process of spatial, economic, political, and symbolic reorganization. According to Lefebvre (2006), urban space must be understood as a social product continuously produced by human relations, being traversed by conflicts, disputes, and contradictory interests.

In this context, cultural heritage is inserted into a permanent tension between permanence and transformation. Heritage preservation cannot be analyzed in isolation from contemporary urban dynamics, since urbanization processes themselves continuously redefine the meanings attributed to historical spatialities.

Urban modernity historically consolidated itself based on a logic of the acceleration of time and constant reorganization of the city. Since the nineteenth century, industrialization, demographic growth, and capitalist expansion began to produce intense spatial transformations, frequently associated with the replacement of the old by the new.

Harvey (2005) demonstrates that capitalist urbanization is deeply linked to the dynamics of economic valorization of space. The city becomes a strategic territory for the circulation of capital, subjecting neighborhoods, architectures, and territorialities to the logics of urban accumulation. In this scenario, heritage often comes to occupy an ambiguous position: sometimes valued as a cultural and tourist asset, sometimes perceived as an obstacle to contemporary real estate dynamics.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, this tension manifests itself historically at different moments of urban reorganization. The reforms of Pereira Passos at the beginning of the twentieth century constitute an emblematic example of this process. Inspired by European Haussmannian models, the interventions sought to construct a modern and civilized image for the Brazilian capital.

The opening of Central Avenue implied the destruction of extensive popular areas of the city center, simultaneously promoting urban monumentalization and social expulsion. The modernization process was directly articulated with the attempt at racial hygienization and economic reorganization of urban space.

However, the tensions between preservation and transformation are not restricted to

historical processes of modernization. In recent decades, Rio de Janeiro has undergone new cycles of urban restructuring associated with real estate valorization, global tourism, and preparation for international mega-events.

Recent urban revitalization projects, especially in the port region, evidence the complexity of these disputes. The heritage recognition of Valongo Wharf occurred simultaneously with the processes of economic revalorization of Rio's port area. Heritage thus comes to integrate not only memory policies but also contemporary strategies of urban value production.

This dynamic reveals an important contemporary contradiction: heritage can function simultaneously as an instrument of historical recognition and as a mechanism of economic valorization of urban space. Patrimonialization frequently transforms certain territories into cultural and tourist assets, producing direct impacts on local populations.

In this context, the risk of heritage gentrification emerges. Urban revitalization processes associated with cultural recognition can contribute to the displacement of populations historically linked to the preserved territories. Heritage thus becomes a central element of contemporary disputes over the right to the city.

As Smith (2006) argues, heritage constitutes not only cultural inheritance but also social and economic practice. Contemporary heritage processes are directly articulated with urban policies, tourist dynamics, and the forms of production of capitalist space.

However, understanding heritage only as an object of material conservation proves insufficient in the face of contemporary urban dynamics. Heritage needs to continually produce meanings in order to remain socially relevant. Preservation cannot mean the absolute crystallization of urban space.

The contemporary city demands constant processes of heritage resignification. Historic buildings, squares, territories, and urban ensembles need to be continuously reinterpreted by contemporary social practices. Heritage remains alive precisely because its meanings are not fixed.

This perspective makes it possible to overcome the false opposition between preserving and transforming. Heritage's permanence also depends on its capacity to adapt to new forms of urban experience. To preserve does not imply freezing the city in time but enabling different temporalities to coexist critically in urban space.

As Ricoeur (2007) argues, the relationship with the past never occurs in a static manner. All memory is continually reinterpreted based on the needs and disputes of the present. Heritage integrates this process as a temporal mediation between permanence and transformation.

In the case of Rio de Janeiro, this need for resignification becomes particularly evident. Certain historically invisibilized urban territories have recently begun to claim heritage recognition and symbolic visibility. Little Africa, for example, ceased to represent merely a marginalized territory of the city and progressively consolidated itself as an important reference of Afro-Brazilian urban memory.

This movement reveals that heritage does not constitute a fixed category but a dynamic field of narrative disputes. New urban subjects continuously begin to claim recognition, memory, and spatial belonging. At the same time, the contemporary city faces intense processes of material erasure of urban memory. Demolitions, real estate speculation, institutional abandonment, and public neglect contribute to the destruction of important heritage references.

The fire at the Museu Nacional in 2018 constitutes an emblematic episode of this structural fragility of Brazilian heritage policies. More than an architectural or museological loss, the fire represented a profound rupture in the mechanisms of preservation of Brazilian scientific, historical, and cultural memory.

The tragedy shows that heritage is threatened not only by urban transformations but

also by the absence of consistent structural preservation policies. Institutional negligence also reveals hierarchies of value attributed to different forms of memory. In this scenario, it becomes fundamental to understand heritage as an integral part of contemporary urban dynamics themselves. Preservation must articulate conservation, transformation, and social participation.

The contemporary city demands heritage policies capable of recognizing the plurality of urban experiences, incorporating peripheral territorialities, popular cultural practices, and historically marginalized forms of memory. Heritage thus ceases to represent merely architectural monumentality and comes to constitute an instrument of social, political, and spatial mediation.

More than protecting isolated objects, to preserve implies constructing more democratic relations among memory, city, and society. Heritage reveals itself, therefore, as a strategic field for thinking critically about the contemporary forms of production of urban space.

6 Urban Morphology, Heritage, and Disputes over Visibility in the Contemporary City

The analysis of urban heritage in Rio de Janeiro also demands a morphological reading of the city. Heritage does not manifest itself only as an isolated object of preservation but as an integral element of the urban structure, directly interfering in spatial organization, territorial hierarchies, and forms of everyday experience of space.

Urban morphology makes it possible to understand how certain urban fabrics consolidate symbolic centralities while other territories remain subjected to processes of spatial marginalization. According to the contributions of the Italian school of urban morphology — especially Muratori and Caniggia — the city must be understood as a historical organism in continuous transformation, in which permanences and ruptures coexist simultaneously.

In this sense, heritage constitutes not merely a vestige of the past but an active part of urban evolution. Certain architectures, squares, and territorial structures continue to organize flows, sociabilities, and symbolic references even in the face of contemporary transformations.

In Rio de Janeiro, the monumentality of the historic center has historically contributed to consolidating spatial hierarchies associated with the administrative and economic structures of state power. The concentration of institutional buildings, churches, and monumental urban landmarks in the central region produced a strong symbolic centrality linked to the city's official narrative.

However, other urban territorialities developed their own forms of spatial production and identity construction, often disconnected from the institutional mechanisms of heritage recognition. Hills, suburbs, port territories, and peripheral areas constituted important cultural spatialities of the city, although frequently subjected to institutional invisibilization.

Little Africa represents a significant example of this morphological and symbolic dynamic. More than a geographically delimited territory, the region constitutes a cultural spatiality produced by Black urban experiences, practices of resistance, and forms of Afro-Brazilian sociability. The region's heritage is not limited to preserved architectural structures but involves cultural practices, urban routes, affective territorialities, and collective memories.

This perspective makes it possible to understand that contemporary urban heritage cannot be restricted to the preservation of isolated architectural objects. The city constitutes a complex relational fabric in which landscape, memory, social uses, and spatial practices are continuously articulated. Hillier (1996), in discussing the mechanisms of urban spatial configuration, demonstrates that morphological structures directly influence modes of circulation, appropriation, and social

interaction in the city. Heritage participates in these processes by producing urban permanences capable of organizing perceptions, movements, and forms of spatial recognition.

However, contemporary urbanization dynamics frequently come into conflict with these permanences. Processes of verticalization, real estate speculation, and territorial restructuring profoundly alter historic urban fabrics, producing ruptures in the relations among memory, landscape, and urban experience.

The advance of neoliberal logics of city production has intensified these transformations. According to Harvey (2005), contemporary urbanization became a central mechanism for absorbing surplus capital, subjecting urban spaces to the dynamics of economic valorization. Heritage thus comes to integrate strategies of territorial marketing, cultural tourism, and real estate value production.

In this scenario, certain heritage-designated areas become simultaneously spaces of historical recognition and of economic dispute. The symbolic valorization of heritage frequently produces financial valorization of the urban territory, triggering processes of spatial elitization and population displacement. The port region of Rio de Janeiro clearly evidences this contradiction. The urban revitalization of the port zone simultaneously articulated: heritage recognition; tourist valorization; real estate restructuring; production of new urban centralities.

However, such processes also produced tensions related to the permanence of populations historically linked to the territory. Heritage thus becomes a field of dispute among memory, market, and the right to the city.

As Smith (2006) argues, contemporary heritage must be understood less as a set of static objects and more as a continually negotiated cultural practice. Heritage meaning resides not only in the preserved assets but in the social and political relations produced around them. This perspective shifts heritage from an exclusively monumental logic to a relational and territorial approach. To preserve implies understanding the bonds among architecture, landscape, memory, and urban experience.

At the same time, it becomes necessary to recognize that the very absence of heritage also produces morphological and symbolic effects. Urban voids, demolitions, and spatial erasures organize the forms of perception of the city, producing ruptures in the collective mechanisms of urban recognition. Heritage reveals itself, therefore, as a structuring element of contemporary spatial experience. Its preservation — or destruction — directly interferes in the ways in which subjects perceive, inhabit, and signify the city.

In this context, the construction of more democratic heritage policies demands approaches capable of integrating: urban morphology; collective memory; territoriality; spatial justice; social participation. Heritage ceases to represent merely historical inheritance and comes to constitute a strategic instrument for thinking critically about the contemporary models of urban production themselves.

6.1 Heritage, the Right to the City, and Spatial Justice

Contemporary heritage disputes are directly articulated with discussions on the right to the city and spatial justice. The recognition — or non-recognition — of certain urban territorialities directly interferes in the possibilities of belonging, representation, and participation of subjects in urban life.

According to Lefebvre (2001), the right to the city is not limited to physical access to urban spaces but involves the possibility of active participation in the production and transformation of the city. Heritage integrates this debate by organizing forms of symbolic recognition and spatial legitimacy.

In this sense, heritage policies can operate both as mechanisms for the democratization of urban memory and as instruments for reinforcing existing inequalities. The definition of what deserves to be preserved directly influences the

regimes of visibility of the city. Historically marginalized territories frequently face a dual process of exclusion: material exclusion from urban policies; symbolic exclusion from official heritage narratives.

The absence of heritage recognition directly interferes in the forms of collective belonging and in the possibilities of social representation of these urban groups. The discussion on spatial justice therefore becomes central to understanding contemporary heritage policies. As Soja (2010) argues, spatial inequalities do not constitute mere reflections of social inequalities but active elements of their reproduction. Urban heritage participates in these dynamics by contributing to the valorization of certain territories while others remain subjected to institutional neglect.

In the case of Rio de Janeiro, the unequal distribution of urban and heritage investments evidences these spatial asymmetries. While certain central areas receive intense cultural and tourist valorization, many peripheral territories remain devoid of structural policies of preservation and recognition.

However, social movements, cultural collectives, and community organizations have recently begun to claim new forms of heritage recognition. The emergence of policies focused on Black memory, peripheral heritage, and popular territorialities evidences important shifts in the Brazilian heritage field. These demands reveal that heritage constitutes not merely a technical or institutional question but a political arena of dispute over memory, representation, and the right to the city.

Thus, thinking critically about contemporary heritage implies recognizing that cultural preservation is inseparably articulated with urban struggles for spatial justice, social recognition, and the democratization of the forms of production of the city.

7 Conclusion

The analysis developed throughout this article allows us to understand that cultural heritage can no longer be reduced to the condition of a simple set of inherited assets destined for the material conservation of the past. Heritage reveals itself as a process deeply traversed by political disputes, power relations, mechanisms of symbolic legitimation, and urban conflicts that structure the contemporary forms of production of collective memory.

In the context of the city of Rio de Janeiro, such disputes become particularly evident. The city's historical formation, marked by the Atlantic slave trade, socio-spatial inequalities, and successive processes of urban modernization, produced a profoundly selective heritage. Certain architectures, territorialities, and urban narratives were monumentalized and incorporated into official preservation policies, while other historical experiences remained subjected to continuous processes of invisibilization.

The analysis of November 15th Square, Little Africa, and Valongo Wharf shows that Rio's urban heritage does not constitute a neutral representation of collective memory but rather the result of historical operations of selection and legitimation. The belated recognition of Black territories fundamental to the cultural constitution of the city reveals the epistemological and political limits of traditional heritage practices.

The decolonial perspective proved fundamental to understanding these dynamics. The colonality of power, as discussed by Quijano (2005), continues to structure the contemporary forms of production of knowledge, memory, and urban hierarchies. Cultural heritage directly participates in these processes by organizing regimes of visibility and spatial recognition.

In this sense, heritage preservation cannot be understood merely as a technical practice of architectural conservation. To preserve implies selecting narratives, organizing memories, and producing urban belongings. Heritage acts simultaneously as an instrument of cultural recognition and as a potential

mechanism of symbolic exclusion.

The articulation among heritage, structural racism, and the production of space proved equally central to understanding Rio's urban dynamics. Heritage policies historically privileged spatialities associated with political and economic elites, while Black, peripheral, and popular territories remained frequently marginalized.

However, the article also demonstrated that heritage constitutes a dynamic field of dispute and resignification. Recent transformations in cultural policies and in contemporary urban demands evidence the emergence of new disputes over memory, recognition, and the right to the city.

The broadening of discussions on intangible heritage, Black territorialities, the memory of slavery, and spatial justice indicates important epistemological shifts in the heritage field. New urban subjects have begun to claim historical visibility and institutional recognition, putting pressure on traditional preservation structures.

Yet, the contemporary challenges remain significant. The intensification of the dynamics of real estate valorization, urban gentrification, and cultural commodification produces new forms of heritage instrumentalization. Patrimonialization can operate simultaneously as a mechanism of historical recognition and as an economic strategy of urban value production.

Thus, it becomes fundamental to construct heritage approaches capable of articulating preservation, urban transformation, and social justice. Heritage needs to be understood as a living social practice, integrated into the daily experiences of subjects and the contemporary dynamics of the city.

More than conserving isolated objects, to preserve implies recognizing the plurality of memories, territorialities, and urban experiences that constitute the contemporary city. The true heritage challenge of the present time does not lie in freezing the past but in constructing more democratic, inclusive, and critical forms of relation among memory, city, and society.

Thus, cultural heritage reveals itself not only as a historical inheritance but as an active instrument for the production of contemporary urban space. Thinking critically about heritage means, therefore, disputing the very meanings of the city, of collective memory, and of possible urban futures.

References

- AGOSTINHO, Santo. **Confissões**. Tradução de Frederico Ozanam Pessoa de Barros. São Paulo: Edameris, 1964.
- ALMEIDA, Silvio. **Racismo estrutural**. São Paulo: Pólen, 2019.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. **O poder simbólico**. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 1989.
- CHOAY, Françoise. **A alegoria do patrimônio**. São Paulo: UNESP, 2006.
- CHOAY, Françoise. **O patrimônio em questão: antologia para um combate**. Belo Horizonte: Fino Traço, 2011.
- FANON, Frantz. **Os condenados da terra**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1968.
- GONZALEZ, Lélia. **Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano**. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2020.
- HALBWACHS, Maurice. **A memória coletiva**. São Paulo: Centauro, 2003.
- HARVEY, David. **A produção capitalista do espaço**. São Paulo: Annablume, 2005.
- LEFEBVRE, Henri. **A produção do espaço**. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2006.
- MBEMBE, Achille. **Crítica da razão negra**. São Paulo: N-1 Edições, 2018.
- NORA, Pierre. Entre memória e história: a problemática dos lugares. **Projeto História**, São Paulo, n. 10, p. 7–28, 1993.

POLLAK, Michael. Memória, esquecimento e silêncio. **Estudos Históricos**, Rio de Janeiro, v. 2, n. 3, p. 3–15, 1989.

QUIJANO, Aníbal. Colonialidade do poder, eurocentrismo e América Latina. In: LANDER, Edgardo (org.). **A colonialidade do saber: eurocentrismo e ciências sociais**. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2005.

RICOEUR, Paul. **A memória, a história, o esquecimento**. Campinas: UNICAMP, 2007.

SMITH, Laurajane. **Uses of heritage**. London: Routledge, 2006.

About the Author

Diego Ramos is an Architect and Urban Planner and Set Designer. Professor at the Centro Universitário UNILASALLE-RJ (Courses recognized with the MAXIMUM grade, five, from the MEC, in Architecture and Urbanism and Advertising and Propaganda). PhD in Architecture and Urbanism from PPGAU (Postgraduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism) - EAU/UFF with a CNPq scholarship, with studies focused on the city as a living stage of socio-cultural manifestations, based on its material and immaterial heritage, symbols, powers, and evoked memories. Master's in Urbanism from PROURB (Postgraduate Program in Urbanism) - FAU/UFRJ with a "Aluno Nota Dez" scholarship from FAPERJ. Graduated in Architecture and Urbanism from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and having completed two semesters of academic exchange at the Universidad de Chile, in Santiago. Acquiring specialist knowledge in Seisms (Earthquakes), awarded at the CHC 2010 Competition of the International Architecture Biennial in Santiago, Chile with the project: "ESPACIO T" (Urban Planning of the City in cases of Catastrophes). Having been Architect - Project Manager at TV Globo/Metroll. Micro-entrepreneur, Director and theatrical actor graduated from SATED - RJ, also works as: set designer, costume designer, producer, and Theater teacher at CIA JUKAH DE TEATRO and at Academia DEVANT Espaço de Dança. Set designer for various theatrical productions and private events. Founder and Micro-entrepreneur of Cia JUKAH de Teatro, awarded for its relevance in the cultural scene of the City of Niterói by the City Council with the Nicette Bruno Diploma.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization; methodology; software; validation; formal analysis; investigation; resources; data curation; writing—original draft preparation; writing—review and editing; visualization; supervision; project administration; funding acquisition, [D.M.S.R.].

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this article to my grandfather, who taught me to look at the city with affection, lightness, and attention. In the many comings and goings by bus, in the walks and simple conversations through the streets, I learned that the city is made of memories, encounters, and permanences. With him, urban space became alive, memory gained power, and love found ways to remain in time.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About *Coleção Estudos Cariocas*

Coleção Estudos Cariocas (ISSN 1984-7203) is a publication dedicated to studies and research on the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro, affiliated with the Pereira Passos Institute (IPP) of the Rio de Janeiro City Hall.

Its objective is to disseminate technical and scientific production on topics related to

the city of Rio de Janeiro, as well as its metropolitan connections and its role in regional, national, and international contexts. The collection is open to all researchers (whether municipal employees or not) and covers a wide range of fields — provided they partially or fully address the spatial scope of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Articles must also align with the Institute's objectives, which are:

1. to promote and coordinate public intervention in the city's urban space;
2. to provide and integrate the activities of the city's geographic, cartographic, monographic, and statistical information systems;
3. to support the establishment of basic guidelines for the city's socioeconomic development.

Special emphasis will be given to the articulation of the articles with the city's economic development proposal. Thus, it is expected that the multidisciplinary articles submitted to the journal will address the urban development needs of Rio de Janeiro.