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# Architecture Inside Out

Urban transformations through the  
perception of demolition engineers

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## Resumo

O presente artigo é uma incursão etnográfica no universo das técnicas e rituais praticados por empresas de demolição de construções arquitetônicas. Tida muito frequentemente como meramente brutal ou mesmo escandalosa, a tarefa de destruir é aqui explorada em sua complexidade material e simbólica. Assim como o ato de construir supõe uma forma de compreender e qualificar o espaço segundo um conjunto de normas sociais, o ato de demolir é, ele também, pautado por crenças e cosmologias que muito variam de um contexto para o outro. Ver-se-á que o destruidor de paredes e sua marreta bem podem desvelar histórias e patrimônios, escondidos entre um tijolo e outro, que o preservacionista mais habitual nem imaginaria.

**Palavras-chave:** memória urbana; demolição; patrimônio; antropologia da arquitetura

## Abstract

The present article is an ethnographic journey into the universe of techniques and rituals undertaken by companies geared to the demolition of architectural constructions. Viewed by many, more often than not, as merely brutal and even outrageous, the task of destroying is herein discussed in its material and symbolic complexity. Just as the act of building assumes a way of understanding and qualifying space in accordance with a set of social norms, the act of demolishing is, in and of itself, ruled by beliefs and cosmologies that vary a great deal from one context to the other. It will be suggested that the destroyer of walls and his sledgehammer may just as well unveil “history” and “heritage”, hidden in the midst of bricks, that even the most seasoned preservationist would not have even dreamt possible.

**Keywords:** urban memory, demolition; heritage; anthropology of architecture

# Architecture Inside Out

Urban transformations through the  
perception of demolition engineers

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Building has never been a simple task, let alone demolishing. At the end of the day, perhaps, these movements are not as diametrically opposed as they might seem. The history behind the buildings that pepper small and large cities alike tends to be – rather precociously – brought to an end once they are demolished. I believe that it is quite possible as well as profitable to understand demolition as an uninterrupted continuous process. Once the materials, authors, scenarios, features, and uses of an architectural edifice have vanished – if they actually ever do – something will eventually stand the test of time, inasmuch as their myriad traces are solid indeed.

When a researcher is dedicated to the historic architectonic study of a given building, he or she will possibly focus on original plans and projects, circumstances under which the works took place, authors and dwellers, facade reforms and alterations, interiors, uses, or even aspects of its iconographic and symbolic representations. However, the means by which a building is pulled down do not seem to raise much interest. This process is generally summarized in a date: “demolished in 1976,” for instance. Occasionally, if more attention is given to the fact, the demolition of a building might raise questions – frequently accusatory – that give way to melancholic<sup>1</sup> feelings.

We envy European cities without realizing that in the short period of time since the establishment of Brazil and its cities, we have always demolished instead of trying to preserve what is important for our identity. It is worth noting that the same phenomenon is true for individuals: one’s upbringing depends on one’s origins, background, education and rules. If these factors

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<sup>1</sup> I here expressly refer to Sigmund Freud’s definition of the term as elaborated in: “*Mourning and Melancholia*”, 1917.

are inexistent, if part of one's memories (anamneses) were destroyed or not, we lose part of ourselves. (BARDA, 2009, p.24).<sup>2</sup>

This quotation presents several assumptions that are key to major contemporary understanding of "identity" and "heritage." I believe these perceptions are worth elaborating on, even briefly.

To begin with, there is the idea that we – Brazilians – somehow "envy" European urban preservation policies. But one should perhaps be more suspicious of European cities. A continent that has been the battlefield for so many wars and revolutions, not to mention great fires and earthquakes, might not be the best representative of preservationist concerns. European urban land, and countryside, was and still is – as displayed by a wide range of authors who have focused on these cities' history of architecture and urbanism<sup>3</sup> – constantly altered, destroyed and rebuilt. Who has demolished more? Who has demolished less? But these might not be the best questions to raise. It seems much more interesting to concentrate on the relations between "material destruction" and "identity." From this point on, it will be possible to unravel the paths – we were erroneously made to follow – that led us to believe that Brazilian urban policies are, or have been, basically destructive and not concerned with "memory."

The second assumption in Marisa Barda's quotation makes reference to the consequences of destroying or demolishing something. If so, she says, this demolished form somehow disappears and therefore, cannot be present. Nonetheless, couldn't a demolished building be present in our imagery? Or, more concretely, could it not be present through images collected in public or private city archives? Or, even more concretely, in the building's *material traits* (columns, beams, ornaments or all types of fragments) transferred and incorporated to other buildings<sup>4</sup>?

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2 The quote can be found in the introduction of Marisa Barda's book on the importance of recording and preserving "vectors of formation" for the survival of a city and culture (*Espaço Vernacular na Cidade Contemporânea*, 2009).

3 Just to mention a few: Michel Ragon (1986), Benevolo (2003), and Argan (1998).

4 Concerning the appreciation for fragments, Giorgio Agamben gives endless examples where substituted terms are simultaneously denied and recalled by the substitutions. I believe the best example for this study is that provided by Palladian Villas: "Gilpin, who pushed pre-Romantic taste for the unfinished to the point of proposing the partial destruction of Palladian Villas so as to transform them into artificial ruins, had become aware that what he called the "laconism of genius" consisted precisely in "giving a part for the whole" (...). thought, as did Novalis, that every finite work was necessarily subject to a limit that only the fragment could transcend" (AGAMBEN, 2007).

Let us take a first example: in 1976, a building known as the Monroe Palace, located in Cinelândia Square, opposite the Municipal Theatre, was demolished in Rio de Janeiro. In the photomontage below we see that the lion statues that stood as part of the Palace's entrance at Rio Branco Avenue were removed. Today, these statues embellish one of the gates of the Ricardo Brennand Institute, fifteen kilometres from the centre of Recife in Northern Brazil.

The third assumption in Barda's quotation is that there is a tight connection between "identity" and the urge for it to be "preserved." Moreover, "preservation" is understood as if constantly subject to the threat of "oblivion." The apparent inherent syllogism is as follows: (1) If a man forgets, he loses part of his identity; (2) Identity presupposes memory; (3) Memory is, then, the opposite of oblivion. (I will return to this syllogism in further detail later in the paper. It is worth noting that I will try to present a disagreement with it, especially with reference to the conclusion (3) of terms 1 and 2.)

Finally, there is also an analogy drawn between "cities" and "individuals" in the same quotation. In both cases, their identity would strongly rely on their material features (architecture and urbanistic characteristics for a city; physical traits for a person). Nonetheless, can we really state that a city's identity would be "lost" if any (or many) of its architectural and urban characteristics are not preserved? Who is it that defines the "important" features that must be preserved?<sup>5</sup> Will Rio de Janeiro cease to be the same city due to urban transformations that took and are taking place? Isn't the city's alleged "identity," precisely linked to these constant mutations<sup>6</sup>?

Although I believe Barda's perceptions deserve further examination, I would like to go back to the analogy drawn between cities and people. This methodological resource provides the necessary elements to research a given

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5 In that sense, I believe the best reference is the book *A retórica da perda: os discursos do patrimônio cultural no Brasil*, by José Reginaldo Gonçalves. His study analyses the pragmatic and political reasons used by those intellectuals who define – through rhetorical inventions that have deep consequences in terms of social practices and feelings of belonging – the making and implementation of official cultural heritage policies.

6 "In any case, it is obvious that identity is a relative construction, based on a selective valuation of similarities and differences. At Ise, it is irrelevant that the materials have been renewed— and thus to Western eyes are "not the same"— so long as they are of the same type and put together under the ancient ritual and technical regime. By such criteria, what we call Tinturn Abbey could not pass under that name, the age and "authenticity" of the stones notwithstanding. It would not be Tinturn Abbey, because it is a ruin" (SAHLINS, 2002:10).

Coming from Missouri, in the United States, where it had been the Brazilian pavilion at the 1904 Saint Louis World's Fair, the Palace is then rebuilt in Rio de Janeiro. 1906...

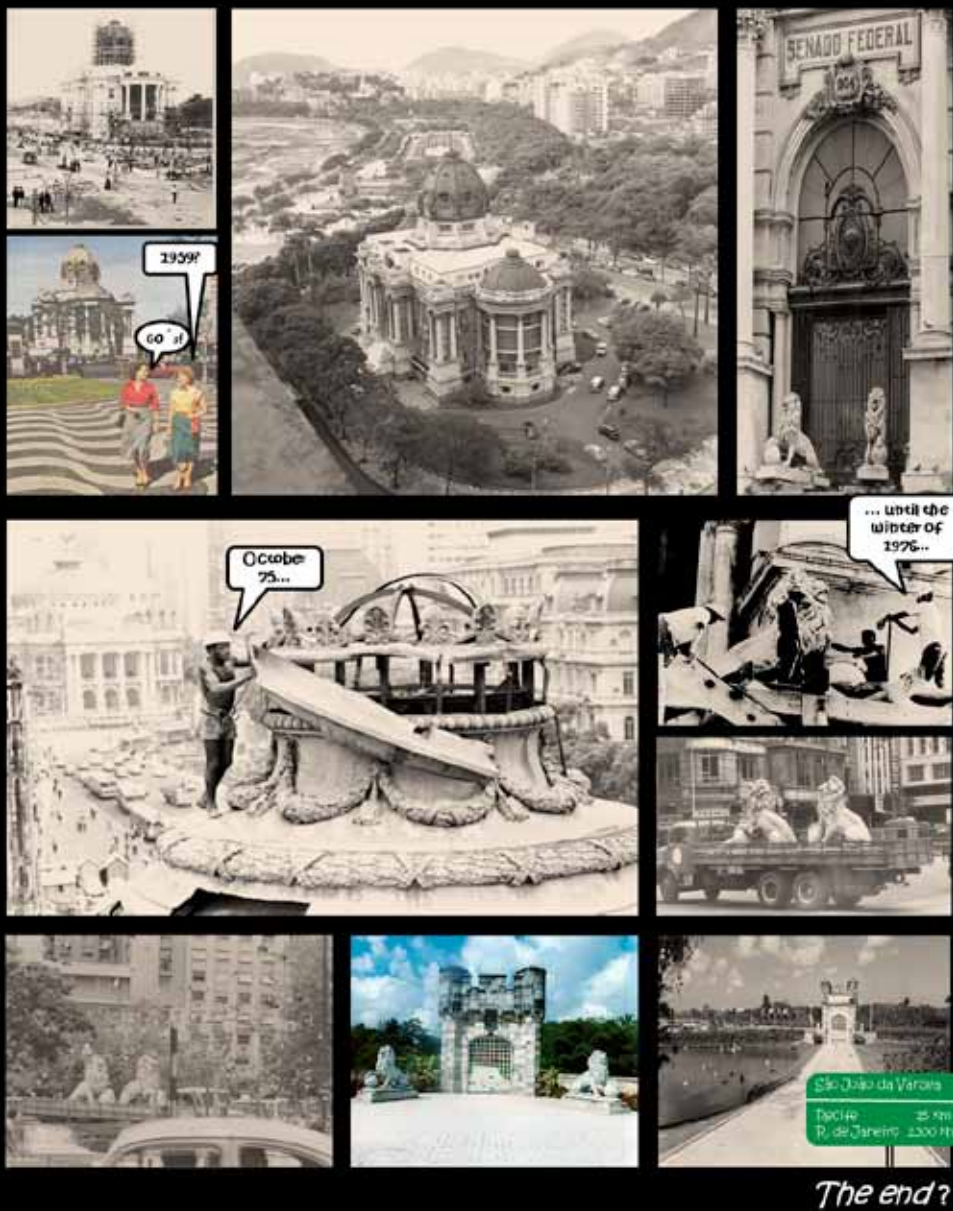


Figure 1 – The Monroe Lions and their displacements<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Deborah Bronz for the stimulating conversation and graphic help in this photomontage, and Clara Gerchman for her effort in acquiring digital copies of these images from the O Globo Newspaper Files.

building from a wider perspective and to guide our notions about buildings beyond the idea of a *container* (for economic, ritual, ceremonial, cultural, daily activities) and beyond the idea of a mere *shelter* from the elements.<sup>7</sup>

To relate a built form to a human being and to perceive it as a *living entity*,<sup>8</sup> gives us the opportunity to question it in the face of its biography,<sup>9</sup> autobiography, displacements, intimacies, shame, mutilations and transplants, ancestors and predecessors, heritage and wills, birth and – why not – funeral ceremonies. Much in the same way as we are sometimes led to believe that people, in varied and diverse forms, outlive physical death, a building too can outlive its demolition.

(...) when the great architect lay on his deathbed in a tiny hotel room, the story goes that someone rushed in and exclaimed: "Mr. Sullivan, your Troesch Building is being torn down." Sullivan raised himself up and retorted, "If you live long enough, you'll see all your buildings destroyed. After all, it's only the idea that counts." (BYLES, 2005).

As "memory" became a principal concern in so called modern societies, to demolish, or even deforest, became highly suspicious, regulated, red tape activities, requiring a series of official permits and subject to great pressure by civil society. Nevertheless, more than a "greater awareness by civil society about the importance of preservation for identity," I believe that the current situation of "heritage inflation"<sup>10</sup> is a consequence of a shift in the way we perceive, not only preservation, but "time" itself.<sup>11</sup>

7 Reference papers on this topic are: *Architecture Without Architects* (RUDOVSKY, 1964) and *The Mutual Interaction of People and Their Built Environment: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (RAPOPORT, 1973).

8 Susanne Preston Blier (*The anatomy of architecture: ontology and metaphor in Batammaliba architectural expression*), Roxana Waterson (*The Living House: an anthropology of architecture in South-East Asia*) and the paper by Sylvia Caiuby Novaes (*As casas na organização social do espaço bororo*) were particularly interesting readings, with relevant thoughts on the topic at hand. The three publications share enlightening chapters or excerpts on the topic of building destruction according to local cosmologies, and helped me place questions to my collaborators and think about some matters in a comparative approach.

9 Appadurai (1988) and Kopytoff (1986) suggest the notion of thinking about a "career of things," a "biography of things" or the "social life of things."

10 Term used by HEINICH (2009). In French: *inflation patrimoniale*.

11 According to authors like Nathalie Heinich (2009) and Dominique Poulot (2006) there has been a shift in heritage classification policies and practices since the 80s. Hence, from a logic based exclusively upon the uniqueness of certain buildings, decision makers responsible for discourse selection and production began to attribute value to the *typical* nature of certain practices and related objects. François Hartog (2003), Reinhart Koselleck (2006) and Andreas Huyssen (2000) also identify in the 1980s the appearance



Le futur n'est plus un horizon lumineux vers lequel on marche, mais une ligne d'ombre que nous avons mise en mouvement vers nous, tandis que nous semblons piétiner l'aire du présent et ruminer un passé qui ne passe pas. (HARTOG, 2003, p.205)

It is very likely that this shift is the actual reason why sledgehammers, hammers, blowtorches, drills, backhoes and even dynamite are usually seen with a great deal of distrust, to say the least. In the eyes of those who would rather see them far from their belongings, these tools entail the risk of being used – wisely and skillfully – by alleged “ignorants” who know nothing about “history,” “culture” or “nature.” Only, do they really not?

For authors like Tim Ingold, we must in fact go a step further and pursue to deeper consequences the city-people analogy. According to this British anthropologist, it is not precisely, or not simply, an analogy. Architectural form and the animal body (human beings included) are indeed homologous. Referring to the concept of *dwelling* in Martin Heidegger, Ingold states that one can only “be” because one “dwells.”

[In the hegemonic view,] to dwell, in this sense, means merely “to occupy a house, a dwelling place.” The building is a *container* for life activities, or more strictly for certain life activities, since there are other kinds of activity that go on outside houses, or in the open air. Yet, Heidegger asks, “do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that *dwelling* occurs in them?” (1971: 146). (...) Heidegger tackles the issue through an exercise in etymology. The current German word for the verb “to build”, *bauen*, comes from the Old English and High German *buan*, meaning “to dwell.” Though this original meaning has been lost, it is preserved in such compounds as the English “neighbour,” meaning one who dwells nearby. Moreover, this sense of dwelling was not limited to one sphere of activity among many – to domestic life, say, as opposed to work or travel. Rather it encompassed the whole manner in which one lives one’s life on earth; thus “I dwell, you dwell” is identical to “I am, you are.” (...) “We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is because we are dwellers... To build is in itself already to dwell... *Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build*” (Heidegger 1971: 148, 146, 160, original emphases). (INGOLD, 2000, pp. 185-186)

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of memory as the key concern in so-called modern societies, launching a new posture in the perception of time. In other words, a new *regime of historicity* where unlike previous decades, the past is the target for collections and “*presentifications*”.



## A building moving outside in<sup>12</sup>

However paradoxical it may seem, I was there, on the morning of the implosion, due to a certain *morbid curiosity*. My previous research had been concerned with networks of *Old Rio* photograph collectors<sup>13</sup> and I believe that it was by being confronted with images of demolished buildings in the city (“criminally demolished,” they said), that I became interested in their enemies. According to the logic of these networks’, the collection of photographic images of demolished buildings allows for the maintenance of affective and mnemonic ties with a city that has disappeared or been murdered.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout that study, I increasingly incorporated iconologic and iconographic techniques of interpretation, which those collectors used for the photographs and which they ended up teaching me. Nevertheless, while they searched their collections for the “victims” of demolitions, I became evermore surprised with the photographs’ equal exposure of the, so called, “criminals.” On signs pegged onto construction fencing, on a company’s logo stamped on a construction helmet and in all those small, almost imperceptible, details accumulated in similar photographs, the authors of these “crimes” prove themselves present. Yet again, who are those unknown companies and who are these unknown people being accused, even if indirectly, of causing harm to the city’s identity?

It is unlikely – one must suppose – that the decision to demolish an

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12 I would very sincerely like to thank the collaboration and availability of the demolition team with whom I have conducted this research. In order not to expose them to greater publicity, I have decided not to put their names in this paper.

13 I had the opportunity to meet, interview and dedicate myself to these collectors’ practices during the research for my Masters’ dissertation, called: *Memórias de uma cidade paralela: O Rio Antigo nas montagens de uma confraria* (*Memories of a parallel city: Old Rio in the assemblages of a fellowship*). Supervised by Dr. José Reginaldo Gonçalves, in this work I reflected on some aspects of representations of urban life and identity construction in Rio de Janeiro, through the perspective of a specific network of photograph collectors. I proposed an incursion into the ways in which these collectors gather, exchange and redistribute visual documents, with the aim of raising questions about their judgments about urban transformations that occurred in the city’s scenery.

14 As has been pointed out by Walter Benjamin: “It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty. But as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value. To have pinpointed this new stage constitutes the incomparable significance of Atget, who, around 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them as if they were crime scenes” (BENJAMIN, 2009, p. 26).

architectonic construction would lie in the hands of a demolition company. In this sense, speaking of crimes, the individual who carries out the murder (the assassin) is not always the one who decides whether it should, or not, be carried out (the contractor). But does this mean that the assassin(s) has (have) no responsibility for the decision to carry out the crime? Here is a counterexample.

*(Government Agency 1's Offices, October 2010. Extract from an interview given by public employee 1 (P. E. 1). P.e.1 is an engineer who worked on the demolition of the former offices of the Brazilian Historical and Geographic Institute – IHGB).*

**P. E. 1** – The building was on Augusto Severo Road, on the corner with Teixeira de Freitas. Near the public sidewalk. At the time, the city government widened Teixeira de Freitas's to make it a two-way street. The building stood on the corner.

**A. G.** – Who requested the demolition? How long ago was it?

**P. E. 1** – At the time I was over forty years old. The construction secretary was Emílio Iguain. He asked us to demolish the building. I don't remember the date, but it was in the 1970s.

**A. G.** – How did you demolish the building?

**P. E. 1** – It was a manual demolition. I was actually very impressed with the building's entire entrance. It was comprised of fine detailed stone. That part was entirely removed, stone by stone. And it was stored at the Parks Department. But I do not know what they did with it all.

**A. G.** – Whose idea was it to preserve that facade?

**P. E. 1** - That was my own decision. We – my team and I – thought the facade was very beautiful. So we removed it all, right to the bottom, without breaking it. There were some thirty men working there. In the past there was a mortar that held the stones and the self-sustaining arches together. It comes away more easily really. We didn't need a hole-digger, or pickaxe. Those methods only started after the 1970s. The mayor was Marcos Tamoio and he couldn't care less about the building. So, we sent it to the Parks Department because it was like a monument. We thought that the government might reuse that façade somewhere else. It was a shame to destroy it, really!



Figure 3 - IHGB building at the beginning of the 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

One could rebut and say that those who carry out demolitions could, in the end, be closer to the representations that we might have of “gravediggers,” rather than “criminals.”<sup>16</sup> I don’t believe it matters too much. Whether carried out by contractors, assassins, surgeons or gravediggers, the demolition of a building is a process that takes place uninterruptedly. From its construction to the removal of the last debris, passing through the paper decrees ordering a demolition, these steps form a complex network of imbricated decisions. Each of them could have altered very much the final result.

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My provocation is as follows: what if we changed the focus of the spotlight? If we move into the shadows the group of people that are normally lit-up when urban interventions are at stake, what could be added to the debate by those who directly deal with demolition? In other words, if we

<sup>15</sup> Source: <http://www.rioquepassou.com.br>, unidentified author.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, when asked about the analogy they prefer, most demolition experts interviewed would rather see themselves as “urban surgeons.”

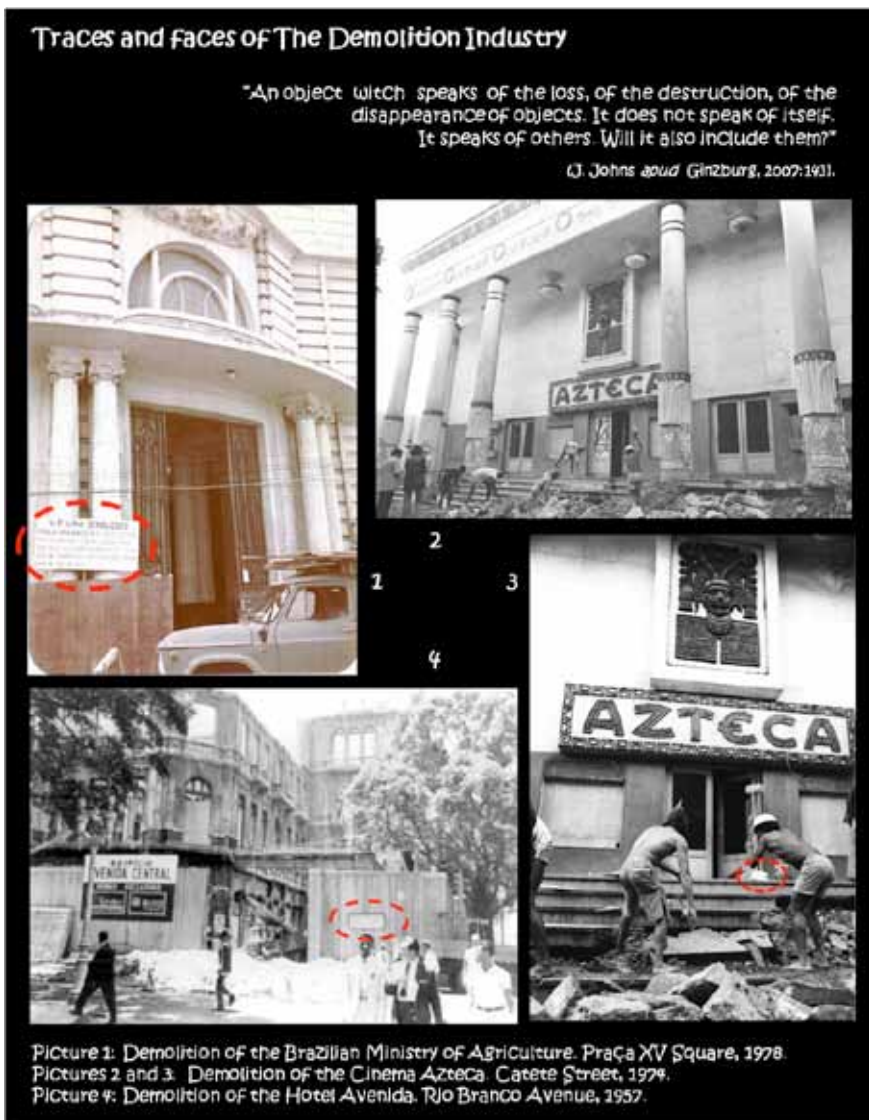


Figure 2 – Traces and faces of the demolition industry

provisionally decrease the volume of official statements, discourses and practices conducted by those who have the authority to say what is or is not heritage (and by those who would know how to preserve it, restore it, conserve it, interpret it, as well as by those who by collecting, lament certain demolitions), we will be able to hear the voices contained in the long and complex work of demolition. Let us listen to them.

While I began to collect material for this new research – while also being attentive of the buildings that were being demolished, during my travels

through the city – I was surprised by a television news report. From the heights of a helicopter, *TV Globo*’s broadcast cameras awaited the implosion of a penitentiary complex. Instants later, several blocks began to collapse. In sequence, the images appeared in slow motion and I noted the name of the company responsible for the work. It was stamped on a white screen that covered each of the blocks. A week later, I was at the offices of *Company 1*.

At the company’s reception hall, an enormous photograph covered one of the lateral walls from end to end. A twenty-three floor building, the *Palace II*, had been captured at the precise moment of detonation, just prior to its complete collapse. It was a very different type of architectonic image to those I had become accustomed. Neither in black and white, nor static. As I waited to be taken into Engineer 1’s office, I thought: “I am faced with the image of a moving building!”.



Figure 4 – Implosion of the Palace II building<sup>17</sup>. Photo: Ivo Gonzales

17 Source: O Globo Newspaper Online.

(Offices of *demolition company 1*, first contact. Excerpt of an interview given by *Engineer 1*)

**A. G.** – I watched the implosion of the *Frei Caneca* prison on television and I would like to know more about the type of work that you do. How is a building imploded?

**E. 1** – Look, we still have one block, which we're going to implode next week. If you would like to see the implosion close-up, I can authorise it. It's due to start at midday, but you can't arrive after eight in the morning.

**A. G.** – And do you think that I can follow the preparation process for the implosion with your team, that is, arrive there before the day of the implosion to see how things are carried out?

**E. 1** – You're not going to open a demolition company are you? So, yes, of course you can. You'll speak to *Supervisor 1*. But you'll have to use a helmet, boots, gloves and ocular and auditory protection whenever you are in the building. If it's for your study, you can take notes, photos and speak to the team. My son is there almost every day, *Engineer 2*. There are also some English documentary makers filming there. But at some point you will, all, have to leave. It can be dangerous. We deal with explosives, do you understand?

We spoke at length about demolitions carried out by that company, about some technical procedures that the engineer tried to explain and about the risks faced by someone in that profession. We watched an institutional security film and a computer generated simulation compared with a real implosion. We also spoke about the company's history and about *Engineer 1*'s professional dreams:

**E. 1** – Sometimes, while returning home, we go past those cylindrical towers in Barra. *Engineer 2* and I imagine and talk about how we would implode them. It's not a question of liking the building or not. It's more of an exercise. It would give our company great visibility, if we were to implode those towers. We've even done the calculations for the building where we live. My son is just like me, when we look at certain buildings, our heads turn quickly to imagining detonation plans.

That first introductory conversation had a real impact on me. These engineers seemed to experiment with the city and its architectonic constructions in a very different way to the collectors. If the latter saw constant absences in



contemporary constructions (the absence of a demolished building), the former saw there a spectacular destruction. Or, at least, the potential for such.

When I left the office through the same reception area, I looked again at the *Palace II* photograph and formulated my initial definition in another way. It was not just a “moving building,” but a building moving from the outside in as if it was a character in a play. It then seemed to me that an implosion plan had something of a well-rehearsed screenplay. As the main character, there was a building with a clear role: to represent – before a present and television audience – a scene that would prove the precision of the calculations and methods acquired over many years by one director and his troupe.

This mildly theatrical impression of an engineering operation became even stronger when, a week later, I entered a prison for the first time. This was also the first time I was inside a building surrounded by fencing and “restricted” by the state Civil Defence Department for “demolition works.” I felt as if on the backstage of a show that would be seen by many, despite its few seconds of duration.

### **Architecting an implosion plan<sup>18</sup>**

Around 11 am, on Saturday June 3, 2010, the conducting circuit of detonators was ready. The plan would lead to the implosion of the Frei Caneca Prison Complex, located in Estácio de Sá, a neighborhood in the central region of Rio de Janeiro. Entangled into the construction, a confusing cluster of multicoloured wires was carefully set up. The only thing still missing was the selection of a high ranked person to trigger the detonator. After months of preparations, the moment – in which the last unit of the country’s oldest prison would be reduced to a pile of debris – drew nearer. After noon, the cleaning process of that piece of land would begin for it to receive a new housing complex.

A few days before the arrival of the demolition team and their weapons of destruction (backhoes, jackhammers, drillings rigs, sledgehammers and blow torches), which would open up giant holes in the walls, a few dozen

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<sup>18</sup> According to Jeff Byles: “In her flair for marketing, Freddie – a proud member of the Public Relations Society of America – is often credited with having popularized the word *implosion* to describe explosive demolitions. (...) The term is a misnomer, since implosion denotes something that bursts inward, like a vacuum-filled vessel being crushed from the force of external pressure. In the case of buildings, our old friend gravity does the job, not external pressure” (BYLES, 2005, p. 85).



prisoners still occupied their cells, plotting, among other things, escape plans.<sup>19</sup> According to prison guards, inspections conducted in April revealed the severe destructive action of the inmates, who had dug tunnels, opened up holes and sawn off beams.

The scene is a curious one: a demolition that had begun with the inmates (illegally and from the inside, in secret stratagems) would now end, in a spectacular form, with the explosive calculations (equally occult) of workers (engineers, supervisors, hammer drill operators and laborers) concerned with this particular stage of an urban intervention.



Figure 5 – The building's ground floor and a ladder. Photo: Alberto Goyena.

<sup>19</sup> According to the president of Rio's Court of Justice, in an interview with the O Globo newspaper, "in April, prison guards discovered an escape plan from Hélio Gomes, and two tunnels were found." In the same article, the civil servant's description was: "the construction is in a terrible state. Part of the concrete that should hold the locks on the inside of the walls doesn't even exist anymore. Pieces of the cells have been sawn off. Loose wires are used by the inmates to heat water, like an improvised microwave. The walls are full of leaks, some of them so old that they have created holes, leaved the pipes exposed" (Presídio Helio Gomes na Frei Caneca será desativado em um mês, Globo.com, 8/6/2009).

(Demolition company 1, offices, two months prior to the implosion of the mental health ward of the prison complex. Excerpt from an interview given by Engineer 1)

**A.G.** – Would it be possible for me to have a look at the company's files regarding the implosion of the prison? I'd like to see the documents which show the detonation plans...

**E. 1** – No, we don't keep anything. Once the building is imploded, we also destroy the study material for that building.

**A.G.** - Really? Why?

**E.1** - Have you ever seen a cook handing out cake recipes? Why would I make a file with all the calculations and plans for everyone to see? When I started working with dynamite, there were only ten engineers in Brazil that worked with rock blasting. Today, there's about five hundred... So many courses and lectures were given that nowadays there's an absurd amount of competition in the field of rock blasting. It served as a lesson for me. But to dynamite a rock, so that one can build a tunnel, for example, is not the same as imploding a building. You must have other skills, it's very different...

**A.G.** - So what you're saying is that, in Brazil, there aren't any engineering schools or specialization courses in the field of building demolition? How did you learn?

**E. 1** - No, there aren't. We sometimes give a few lectures showing how it was done, how it works, how it doesn't work. But never a recipe... Look, a lot of it is learned by *feeling*, really. It's in a kind of dialogue with the building that the plan works itself out. In years of experience with this company, a lot of knowledge was accumulated. Each implosion is unique. Each building is different and demands specific calculations, made especially for it. But, of course, some things can be used for one and another. Now and then we make partnerships with foreign companies, and it's there, in the action of the daily preparations that we exchange methods. If you want, we have some photographic records, but we don't keep anything beyond that.

I was able to visit, the already deactivated, Hélio Gomes prison a few times. On the first visit, I identified myself to the guards at gate 505, on Frei Caneca Street, and was soon led by one of the demolition company workers to the second floor of the building, through a two-story staircase that was in ruins and had no lateral protection. Carefully climbing one step at a time and skipping

the ones that had only the stair hardware, I found one of the engineers responsible for the operation, standing in a floor full of debris. He was *Engineer 1's* son, who had authorised my entrance in this fenced and restricted area. On that same floor, there were also four or five workers with helmets around a column. They were drilling into it at various points. They carefully handled coloured wires and a kind of white paste which, I would later find out, were the detonation wires and gases that would be mixed with a gelatinous nitro-glycerine compound and explosives: dynamite. I had the impression they were setting up “traps” in a mine field and I paid extra attention as I walked.



Figure 6 – The ethnography's battlefield. Photo: Alberto Goyena.

Still on the same floor, and not far from these men, another group of people, men and women who were apparently foreigners, walked around with powerful recording cameras, microphones, reflectors, diffusers, backpacks and clipboards. Probably influenced by the presence of all that cinema paraphernalia and by the requests for “silence!,” my first impressions of the surroundings gave me the feeling of being in the middle of a movie set built for a war film.

Scenes that reveal images of destruction after a bombardment could very well be shot in this set, where there were holes of all sizes in the walls, wreckage everywhere and pigeons flying and cooing freely inside the building, with no one to chase them away.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Although I will not treat the topic in this paper, it must be said that the presence of a wide range of

A moment later, I found out that these foreigners were actually a physicist and his crew of documentary filmmakers from an English broadcasting station. They were there to capture images that could be used as analogies in an astronomy show regarding the cosmological explanations for stellar evolution, with their collisions, explosions and compressions... I quickly found out also that the “traps” which were being set up by those workers had as their only “prey” the building itself. Far from having any explosive traps on the floor to stop any unwanted passerby, they were being placed directly into the “backbone” that sustained the “body” of that motionless building.

Still on the second floor, apart from the debris that also completely covered it, one could see a giant collage of pictures, framed by a trail of partitions that no longer existed. Up close, one could distinguish a series of erotic, and even pornographic photographs mixed with newspaper cut-outs with all sorts of articles, automobile and perfume ads, photos of *escolas de samba* (samba schools) and sports teams, as well as football score tables.



Figure 7 – Interior decoration. Photo: Alberto Goyena.

animals in a building to be demolished is an important issue for animal protection associations and for the demolition contractors themselves. Indeed, animals are also very much linked to their urban habitats.

According to the engineer who accompanied me during the visit through the interior of the building - answering my questions and pointing out technical demolition procedures - in order to implode a construction, one must initially identify the structures to which its weight converges.

**Engineer 2** - The rest, such as the divisions and walls, has to be destroyed by hand so that, once the columns are detonated, the weight of the building doesn't support itself in a unbalanced and dangerous manner on these more fragile structures, producing unwanted motions. That is why there isn't anything except the structural columns on the first and ground floors. On the remaining floors this isn't necessary, the force of the collision takes care of the destruction... Unless there's concrete or some other kind of resistant material or structure. The elevator shaft, for example, is always a delicate case to deal with. It absorbs the impact and can cause motions that weren't planned. That's why we drill all these holes, so that we can be sure... Since our time is short, we can't open all the walls, of course. That would be a different job... That's why you need a certain *feeling* that comes with experience from other implosions. There are times when we have to guess... Since we don't always have access to the construction plans, or we can't trust them completely, it becomes a matter of knowing which columns are structural, what could be inside the walls and how these materials will react to the explosives.

On the Friday prior to the implosion, I spent the morning observing the preparations for the following day. I walked through the ground floor, as well as the three other floors and the concrete slab where there was a huge water tank. In a *crescendo* that went from the free and ripped spaces up to the almost intact third floor, with nearly all of its divisions, it felt more and more as if the inmates had left only moments ago, forgetting some of their belongings behind. Among the graffiti, drawings and marks of all kinds, there were also bed sheets, ripped t-shirts, laundry tubs and numbered concrete bunk beds, bathrooms, mattresses and blankets, clothes, notebooks, plastic cups and a lot of pornography.<sup>21</sup>

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21 According to a note published in the newspaper O Dia Online on Feb. 12, 2009, the complex was granted by the state government, in the period before its implosion and after its deactivation, to serve as a set for feature films and soap operas. "The scenario is considered ideal for those who need realistic prison scenes. "We searched everywhere in Brazil, but the conditions in jails are precarious, the atmosphere is tense, it's hard to film inside a prison," says Sergio Rezende, whose film tells the story of the attacks by





Figure 8 – Dynamite placement. Photo: Alberto Goyena

My first impressions of this warlike scenario were then abruptly replaced by the disturbing and frightening thoughts on prison life. On a bed, an inmate's geography textbook with notes and exercises. In the cell in front, three playing cards grouped in a corner, two facing upwards and one downwards. On another corner, papers and lists of names. All of those material traces, the smell of the cells and the sight of improvised electrical wiring and curtains provided fertile material for the visitor's imagination. As highlighted in the comments I heard from the documentary filmmakers, as well as from the company workers, it was impossible not to be affected or even "contaminated" by the lives and sociability that had, not long ago, occupied that scenario. As one of the team members pointed out, the preparations for an implosion do have something of an "indiciary" or archeological procedure.<sup>22</sup>

**Foreman 1** - This isn't the first time I've worked in a prison demolition. I was also at Carandiru, in São Paulo. The cells always strike us, they make you think about the lives of the inmates and the conditions of these prisons are frightening. (...) Almost every one of us lives in Sao Paulo, but we travel all over the

the criminal faction PCC, that froze São Paulo in 2006."

22 I refer here to the observations about the "indiciary paradigm" made by Carlo Ginzburg in his article entitled: *Sinais: raízes de um paradigma indiciário*. GINZBURG, C. 2007, p. 143-179.

country to make implosions. Sometimes we spend four, five months inside a building. It actually becomes our workplace, our office. And we work in all kind of places: sometimes a warehouse, a factory, stadium, bridge. (...) Since we have to open, drill, rip open the walls to discover how they were built, we also end up finding many hidden things. One of us found a hand phone and money hidden inside a wall and covered up in tooth paste. Things like old newspapers, coins from past centuries or wooden figurines are also very common. It depends how old the building was. There is a huge amount of stories that can be found among bricks... not to mention... well... corpses. You know, many things from the past end up stuck in the walls.

My last visit to Hélio Gomes prison took place hours before it was no longer there. At least in one of its possible forms and presences. Once the construction was entangled in connected blue and orange wires (technically referred in Portuguese as “cordel” and “brinel”), the latter inserted in dynamite sticks, carefully placed into orifices drilled into the building’s support columns, and once the detonation sequence was defined, all that was left was to connect one end of this tangle by means of a long red wire containing a gaseous chemical composite (launcher wire), to a pistol (fuse).

A company worker moves away from the building and walks slowly as he unwinds that last piece of red wire from his coil towards a point in an imaginary two hundred meter radius (maximum security zone<sup>23</sup>) that surrounds the building. He is closely followed by a second worker, who carefully adjusts the wire on the floor, moving it away from any object that might obstruct the flow of combustion gases.

Once there, the second worker cuts the wire, separating it from the rest of the coil and hands the end to Engineer 2. From his waist, *Engineer 2* draws the pistol to which the end will be stapled. He is closely observed by *Supervisor* and *Engineer 1*. Around them there are reporters, cameras, Civil Defense agents, Fire Department officers and the top officials of the state Housing Company. One could also see the English documentary filmmakers and the rest of the demolition company staff, a few guests invited to the ceremony and myself, an anthropologist who, until then, had never seen an event such as this happening “live.”

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23 Following the norms by Rio de Janeiro State and municipal civil defense agencies – which determined that occupants of the real estate located inside the so called “maximum security area” must leave the area two hours before the implosion – there could be no one inside the radius.





Figure 9 – Long red wire being unwind. Photo: Alberto Goyena

Scattered throughout the area, including inside the drain pipes and even inside the building, there are microphones, photo cameras, film cameras and seismometers, all pointing towards the wrapped building.<sup>24</sup>

As soon as the first sound signal is given, a certain tension seems to establish itself among those present. There can no longer be anyone inside the “maximum security radius.” Emphatically reprimanded, one of the documentary filmmakers who still hesitated for the best angle for a take returns to the “safe point” with his handheld camera, apparently frustrated. In the air, two or three helicopters circulate the area and on the top of a nearby hill, dozens of spectators await to watch a spectacle that, based on previous experience, will last less than ten seconds. For one of the workers, whom I talked to while we waited for the final moment, this wasn’t an exciting novelty in any way.

**A. G.** – What is the name of your job? How does it appear in your contract?  
Demolition man?

**Hammerman 1** – No, it’s mar-te-le-teiro (hammerman)... It’s someone who knows how to use a drilling rig and hammer drill. The one who makes the right

<sup>24</sup> This is in fact an enormous white screen that serves to contain projectiles.

holes in the right places, so that the dynamite can be placed there afterwards. That's how it works here, there are labourers, hammermen, supervisors, the administration people and the engineers.

**A. G.** – It won't be long now ... are you apprehensive? What time is it?

**H. 1** – Time to pray!... *I'm not too worried.* It's not me who's in trouble if something goes wrong! But actually, this is the part of the job I least enjoy. I would actually like to leave after everything's ready, before the explosion. I don't even look. It always frightens me. It's tense. Once there was a building no one wanted to demolish. So this engineer accepted the challenge. When it was time to implode it, he got very nervous, sweating even. And when the detonation came and the building fell, he cried a lot. Out of fear, emotion, relief, all at once...

Similar to a theater play, the third of three sound signals is finally given. Weeks of preparation come to an end. The building would now thoroughly “perform” the “role” it was given. The honor of pressing the trigger is then granted to a state representative, the president-director for the state Housing Company, precisely the one in charge of the housing construction that will occupy the area once the prison wreckage is removed. The count-down begins.



Figure 10 – The Building's last instants. Photo: Alberto Goyena

Two or three minutes after noon, a light snap could be heard and the detonation seems to have failed. The engineer abruptly takes the pistol from the hands of the honoured guest, swiftly handles the weapon and, with the appropriate skill, presses the trigger once again. This time, one hears a monumental rumble and the four-story building can be seen moving as if from the *outside in*.



Figure 11 – Farewell weapon. Photo: Alberto Goyena

**Engineer 2** – Yeah... I think he was nervous or scared and couldn't press the trigger until the end, it happens a lot.

In a conversation that I had much later with *Supervisor 1*, during the works for the implosion of another building in Rio de Janeiro, he confided to me that the “real” fuse isn't always in the hands of the guest.

**Supervisor 1** – Sometimes we hand a button or a pistol with a wire attached to it to someone important from the government, but it's all fake. I stare at the person, the countdown starts, he pulls the trigger and immediately looks at the building... That is when I do it for real!

When it was past noon, the imaginary line of the safety radius was already undone. In the building behind the prison, separated by a tall and sturdy wall, occupants that had invaded an old head office for the extinct *Manchete*

*Communications Network* now returned to their homes, authorised by the Civil Defence Department. From behind the wall, I remember hearing screams of fright concerning the cloud of dust that had entered the rooms. Spread out on the floor and covered by that huge white screen, the last block of the Frei Caneca Prison now awaited the removal of its last debris. It would be the demolition company itself that would return, days later, to crush those remains so that they could be reused in the construction of the new housing project.

**Hammerman 2** – The crusher produces small stones, which is important material in civil construction. Nothing is really lost. It is either reused or disposed of, but it does not disappear!

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, at *Praça XV* Square, some two or three kilometers from Estácio and also in the central part of the city, merchants and bystanders buy, sell and trade antiques in one of the fairs for such objects in the city, as is common on Saturdays from 7am to 3pm. At the stands, some dedicate themselves to trade in specific images, commonly known as “Old Rio Photographs.” As for the passers-by, a group or “fellowship” of collectors searches for moments of the city that reveal customs, people, streets, squares, monuments and, above all, buildings, which, as a general rule, have “disappeared.”

They collect objects that make present an absence, images that refer to something that resembles the thing sought after, although it is not the thing itself. In other words, and according to the iconological treatment given to these images, their collected objects speak of loss, destruction and of the disappearance of other objects.

The goal behind the initiative to collect is, as they affirm, , to document the “urban transformations that took place in the city of Rio de Janeiro.” They collect, study, comment, juxtapose, digitalize and then exhibit these images in digital forms. In this case, however, the value of the collected object is not actually in the photography itself, for this is seen merely as the support that provides, by comparison, the detection of a mutation in the urban tissue.

As soon as it was made a ruin, the Frei Caneca Prison Complex became a coveted and highly valued image among merchants and collectors.

## Conclusions

A couple of months prior to the implosion of the Frei Caneca Prison, the company whose work I have been following since July 2010, participated in two other public bids. They won the first one, where a university hospital was at stake.<sup>25</sup>

The second bid though, they lost. This was the *Fonte Nova Football Stadium* in the city of Salvador. Once the implosion was accomplished, I met *Engineer 1* in his office to discuss the issue.

(Offices of *demolition company 1*, one week after the implosion of the Fonte Nova Stadium. Excerpt of an interview given by *Engineer 1*)

**A. G.** – What did you think about their implosion?

**E. 1** – Well, honestly, you saw the video, it was quite ugly.

**A. G.** – Ugly!? That's not the kind of adjective I would have expected from you! What do you mean, ugly?

**E. 1** – *Company 2* is quite afraid ... They were very scared that something would go wrong. They stuffed too much explosives and they imploded the bleachers with no design whatsoever. They even left a whole gallery up to demolish manually later just because it was close to another building. That is fear and lack of respect for the stadium.

**A. G.** – Lack of respect? How come? How would you have done it?

**E. 1** – Well, I had imagined a much more respectful implosion. The stadium had a long history of very famous football games! Besides, there were hundreds of supporters, dressed up with their local team shirts, gathering around the stadium the day it was imploded. They had lots of memories about the place... It would have been much better to do a spiral implosion. It would have given the impression that the stadium ascended, that it raised. In their implosion, as you have seen, the stadium just fell apart. Our project would have started from one point of the ring, sort of burning it slowly until it disappeared into a dust cloud.

These words give us the opportunity to bring back the analogy between buildings and people. The aesthetic care for this implosion proves the point about demolition not being a simple task. Indeed it is not, neither from a technical point of view nor from a ritualistic one.<sup>26</sup> There are very strict codes when

<sup>25</sup> In fact, many of the perceptions here expressed about the Frei Caneca Prison were raised during a much longer field work carried out in the Hospital Universitário Clementino Fraga Filho, from October to December 2010.

<sup>26</sup> According to Stanley Tambiah: "Ritual is culturally constructed system of symbolic communication.

demolition is at stake. In the same way that we might be very aware of the ways in which someone is buried, it is also with a significant deal of care that a farewell ritual, according to cultural variants, is conducted for a building.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the relation they establish with their “prey,” demolition experts somewhat defy these buildings to survive the “traps” they lay.<sup>28</sup> To look deep into the ways these men refer to their work tools and the buildings they demolish, is to perceive that an *animalization* of those objects will be frequently employed in their discourses. In a hunting scene, as we well know, some prey do escape, the same goes for demolition.<sup>29</sup>

Far from supporting demolition indistinctively and being concerned with the risk of falling into an excess of relativism, my aim here was never to deny the relevance of heritage policies and practices. My intention was only to demonstrate, through ethnographic research, that the acts of preserving and demolishing might not be as opposed as they may seem. When observed in detail, demolition processes can reveal themselves as strongly impregnated with a surprising capacity to unearth biographical data about a certain building. If we were to preserve these walls from being torn apart, we would also have prevented ourselves from the risks of being faced with some of the building’s hidden stories.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, demolition has

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It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative, wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the sense of indexical values – I derive this concept from Pierce – being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance (TAMBIAH, 1985, p. 128).

27 I had the opportunity of meeting a demolition engineer from India when I attended the 2011 World Demolition Summit. Mr. *Engineer from India* told me that, according to Hinduism, the cosmic functions of creation, maintenance and destruction are personified by the forms of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the maintainer or preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer or transformer). Before starting a demolition enterprise in India, this modern engineer would conduct, together with his team, a ritual dedicated to a four armed high deity, Shiva.

28 I here expressly refer to Alfred Gell’s article: “Vogel’s net: traps as artworks and artworks as traps” (1996).

29 Just after the implosion of the Frei Caneca Prison, *Supervisor 1* rushed to look at the debris. He noticed that the water tank I previously mentioned had not been destroyed. “We did all the calculations right” – he said – I guess it was just not its time...”

30 As José Reginaldo Gonçalves affirms, not all societies gather goods in order to accumulate or retain. In many societies, processes of gathering or collecting are aimed at redistribution and even destructive purposes, as in the case of the Melanesian *Kula* and the Northeast American *Potlatch*. (GONÇALVES, 2007, p.109).

something of an archaeological approach.

It is also important to perceive that a collecting initiative of the sort I have described is not possible without the contribution of demolition companies. The aura of an old photograph of a city relies partly upon the fact that the characters represented are no longer there. Collectors of images of old Rio are therefore very strongly linked, even if by denial or accusation discourses, to their supposed rivals.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, demolition somehow promotes an enterprise of fragment gathering.

Moreover, one could conclude that in the same way that preservation and destruction are closely linked, the same goes for oblivion and remembrance. The mistake in the syllogism expressed earlier has to do with the definition of memory. Memory is by no means opposite to oblivion, but the result of an uncontrolled mechanism of remembering and forgetting. In this sense, demolition is highly present and should be carefully analysed when dealing with urban memories. To forget demolition processes is to fall into the enchantment inherent in narrow ways of understanding it.

Last but not least, there is no space for architecture without demolition. Building and destroying are therefore both involved in the continual transformations of a city. Even when a site should be “clean” of previous building, there will be destruction of what we tend to call “nature.” That is why, finally, to understand architecture in more complex ways, it might be useful to turn things inside out.

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31 According to Dario Gamboni, “Destruction does not suffice – any more than does preservation – to guarantee permanence. But it can contribute to it, and this is enough to challenge the equation between destruction and oblivion and to justify a theoretical distinction between memory and material survival” (GAMBONI, 2005, p.168).



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