Revista Contexto Geográfico

ISSN: 2595-7236

Artigo | *Translation*

Contribution to the Study of City Centres: The Example of the City of Salvador

Contribuição ao estudo dos centros de cidades: o exemplo da cidade do Salvador

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In 1944, A. Chatelain stated that “urban Geography offers a field of research that is still very little explored” (CHATELAIN (Abel), De la Cité à la banlieue, “Les Études Rhodaniennes”, vol. XXI, n.º 3 et 4). Although numerous studies and methodological advances since that year have considerably illuminated this aspect of geographical science, we believe that the study of city centres can greatly enrich it, given the complexity of the problems it raises.

I – CITY CENTRES

A first question would be to clarify the meaning of the terms, establishing what should be regarded as the centre of a city. This is not a matter of rigorously delimiting the perimeter of study; indeed, such a task would be impossible because of regional variations, which are difficult to fit into a rigid scheme.

In reality, there is no single type of urban centre; it varies from one civilization to another, both in formal terms and in terms of content. Some city centres are formed

https://doi.org/10.28998/contegeo.11i.11.22079

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Submetido em: 10/10/2026
Aceito em: 30/10/2026
Publicado: 18/11/2026

by old buildings and others by recent constructions; some consist of skyscrapers and others of single-storey houses. In some, commercial activities still occupy the ground floors of buildings while residences occupy the upper storeys, whereas elsewhere the “city” type appears: blocks entirely devoid of night-time life that, during the day, experience uninterrupted activity. Such features result from the greater or lesser complexity of the urban phenomenon and from the greater or lesser weight of history, but they nevertheless constitute nuances that are made even more conspicuous in the landscape by the cultural and historical aspects of urban formation.

What should be regarded as the city centre. — Urban centres may nevertheless be recognized as possessing the quality emphasized by Bonnure when he considers them “the part of an urban agglomeration that displays the greatest animation and experiences the most intense activity, in all its forms.” This gives them an individuality in relation to the other elements of the urban organism. Yet what gives city centres a common characteristic is the nature of the activities carried out there, which are responsible for the features of landscape and structure that most strongly ensure that individuality. It would obviously be pointless to seek, in the centre of a provincial town or a modest regional capital, the same material and formal elements found in London, New York, Paris, or São Paulo. But in all these organisms, regardless of their size or importance, the institutions that direct the activities of their respective regions of influence are located. The greater or lesser extent of that region, as well as the greater or lesser complexity of its activities, gives the city centre a variable significance.

Undoubtedly, small inland towns contain elements of differentiation between what they call the “street” and the rest of the locality. The “street” is commerce; it is the city centre. It is less differentiated from the remainder of the urban organism insofar as the activities of its arrière-pays are themselves less differentiated, with the exception of prosperous commercial agriculture under monoculture. This applies to settlements more or less directly linked, through their functions, to the surrounding agricultural milieu.

Above this level are cities that act as regional capitals or as purely commercial metropolises and that, allowing for differences of scale, likewise reflect in their functioning and structure the characteristics and life of their region of influence.

There are also integral metropolises, characterized by occupying the highest level of the urban hierarchy. They host higher-order activities that, on the one hand, place regional capitals and purely commercial metropolises under their dependence

and, on the other, place them in a position simultaneously of independence and equality in relation to other metropolises. This does not exclude the existence of so-called super-metropolises, the world metropolises, which share the direct or indirect command of the political and economic affairs of vast areas of the globe and compete with one another for the conquest of an ever larger space.

Whatever the degree of centrality of the urban organism, however, it is characterized by a concentration of resources and functions that confers upon it a power of organization. These activities have their own place within urban space. That place is the centre.

There is thus a tendency, from a geographical point of view, to regard a city's business centre as its centre. This is generally coupled with an activity centre, contiguous with it or superimposed upon it (R. Dugrand calls it the "zone de chalandage", while A. Chatelain uses the term "Zone d'activité commerciale"). Some cities possess only one activity centre, while others develop several, serving different neighbourhoods that are already organized. The business centre, however, is only one, owing to the solidarity — including geographical solidarity — among the activities and directive functions of urban and regional life located there. The study of the city centre must therefore encompass this business centre and the activity centre contiguous with it.

It is clear that we are not attempting here to define this element of the urban organism, but merely to establish an attempt at conceptualization. Monographic analyses of city centres are not numerous, and anyone who ventures to offer a definition — necessarily broad and comprehensive — of a phenomenon that is not yet sufficiently known and studied runs the risk of committing serious errors.

The place of the study of city centres in urban geography in general. — Another question should be answered at once. Can the centre of a city, however large that city may be, provide a landscape capable, by itself, of justifying a separate geographical study? In fact, the urban centre does not in itself constitute a geographical reality, and one must not exaggerate to that extent. Moreover, since the indivisibility of the geographical landscape is one of the basic postulates of geographical science, the study of the city, whether as a form of activity or as a form of organization, is indisputable proof that we possess a field of action of our own.

The formation and development of the region and of the urban organism are intimately linked, just as the different elements of the latter are linked within the city. Studies in urban geography demonstrate this clearly, especially when they seek to interpret the landscape through the relations between city and region. Likewise, within the city, the different elements that compose it maintain a certain correlation with one another and exert mutual influence.

The centre is one of these elements and, in our view, certainly the most representative. The city's periphery does not evolve uniformly, so that the same urban organism may have suburbs with the most diverse functions and physiognomies, some with no direct relation to others. Neighbourhoods reflect in their landscape and structure the social conditions of their residents; thus, within the same city, neighbourhoods of the most varied types are juxtaposed, each leading a life that is, to a certain extent, distinctive and autonomous. These elements of the urban organism therefore reflect particular aspects, whether of urban life itself or of regional life. The city centre, however, is always a summary, a synthesis of the other elements; and although its subareas represent particular aspects of urban functionality, they maintain such close relations with one another that they ultimately form a truly coherent whole.

The city centre reflects, at the same time, the current forms of life in the region and the city and the past, whether through the historical evolution of city and region or through the site initially chosen for the establishment of the urban organism, which, except in certain cases, continues for a long time to weigh upon the spatial distribution of activities and therefore to influence the centre. For this reason, the isolated study of the urban centre should not appear to distort geography's scientific and methodological commitments, but rather to enrich them, provided that it demonstrates the repercussions that the past and present of the city and its region of influence have upon the central area.

The idea of dynamism, inseparable from the concerns of any geographical study and represented by the present forms of life — that is, by regional and urban functions — appears as an active factor. Passive factors include the site and the old structures (where they exist), which take the form of historical relics but may at times overcome this passivity and play a clearly negative role when, for example, their existence depends on legislation protecting monuments, and so forth.

The centre of a city is therefore the theatre of this struggle among tendencies. Their synthesis is expressed in the creation of a landscape. The components of this landscape reflect an element of choice, represented by architectural styles and urbanization processes, but above all they reflect the needs and conditions proper to each stage of urban evolution. The landscape is thus the result of a combination of elements whose proportions presuppose a certain rhythm of evolution and a certain dynamism; the element of contradiction is represented by the factors of inertia already mentioned.

This is why the centres of large cities possess a certain family resemblance, arising from the concentration to which the directive activities of urban and regional life are subject. At the same time, however, they retain an originality of arrangement which, within urban settings, may be distinguished for the following reasons:

(1) the direction and rhythm of the evolution of the region and the city;

(2) the characteristics of the site;

(3) the current forms of urban organization and life, including, on the one hand, present dynamism (forces of transformation) and, on the other, the forces of inertia represented by the greater or lesser resistance offered by structures inherited from the past.

These are the elements that deserve study within the general framework of urban types if we wish to make an effort to recognize the particular forms of organization of city centres.

We believe that, in every case, such an analysis will also involve three series of questions. First, the type of relations maintained between city and region. The kind of activities performed by the city will necessarily have consequences for the urban centre, and the centre will be all the more representative of the city's zone of influence the less industrial the civilization from which the city has emerged. Having thus established the city's place within its region, the role of its central district must then be studied.

The second line of inquiry concerns the relations between the centre and the other parts of the city. It should examine: (1) whether the urban organism has only one centre, combining the role of business centre with that of activity centre for the entire city, or whether there are several activity centres, and what their importance is. This detail is of considerable interest, because the absence of secondary centres makes the single centre, from the standpoint of landscape, much more representative of urban and regional life. Within this second inquiry, it is also necessary to study what we might call the "pioneer front" of the urban centre, which begins by disorganizing the affected

areas before their definitive conquest. This is one of the foundations for the emergence of zones of degradation, a feature peculiar to many cities and one that should likewise be analysed in a study of the urban centre.

The third series of questions concerns the analysis of the urban centre itself, with the landscape studied genetically and functionally so that its formal aspects may be related to those of content.

The individuality of city centres. As a true synthesis of the various geographical elements of urban and regional life, the personality of city centres can be observed most clearly within the same urban series, in cities generated by the same type of civilization.

This individuality may be well demonstrated by the following three examples, all drawn, moreover, from the same civilization. Dakar, in Senegal; Bamako, in Sudan; and Abidjan, in the Ivory Coast are each the head of an arrière-pays with a colonial economy and share a characteristic of cities of recent Western colonization: a segregation between Europeans and Africans that is clearly visible in the urban landscape. Although this separation does not assume identical forms in all three cities, it is present. It is the common trait of their urban organization. Nevertheless, the speed of incorporation into the modern economy, the types of economy over which they preside, and their urban history, including the urban site, have produced distinctive arrangements in the centre of each.

In Dakar, luxury commerce is concentrated on Avenue Roume and its cross streets. This avenue continues, among others, into Avenue Clemenceau, where poorer commerce is located. The latter avenue is connected with the indigenous neighbourhoods, whereas the former communicates directly with the European districts. This does not mean that there are restrictions on free movement. On the contrary, indigenous people circulate freely and are numerous throughout the urban centre. Multi-storey buildings generally contain residences on the upper floors, especially in the poorer retail centre, dominated by Syrian-Lebanese merchants who install their families there or rent to European employees. This is due to the weakness of the urban tertiary sector, particularly the service class, which does not allow doctors, lawyers, and similar professionals to be numerous.

Nevertheless, the centre concentrates almost all commerce in non-essential goods, since the neighbourhoods have markets, poorly installed in rough wooden

stalls, that provide the population's daily supplies. These market-fairs constitute a kind of commercial centre for those neighbourhoods.

Thus, the activities with sufficient strength to create a setting are administration, banking and related activities, such as export companies. These occupy the largest buildings, situated near the port around Place Proté.

This centre, which is now rising vertically, is a new phenomenon in Dakar, since about ten years ago there was no building of more than two storeys. It represents a violent transformation of the old setting — not even a very old one — under the influence of several causes.

In Bamako, a city of 70,000 inhabitants and the capital of Sudan, which combines a commercial function with an important administrative function, the urban centre consists of single-storey houses or buildings with only one upper floor. There is a certain tendency for luxury commerce to become established at the intersection of two main avenues. Strong Muslim influence is evident in the presence of numerous "souks" along most central streets, a kind of permanent fair or open-air commerce, with merchandise displayed directly in the street in front of commercial establishments.

The absence of tall buildings is also linked to the virtual absence of a tertiary sector. This is almost limited to 3,500 civil servants, naturally excluding those without considerable purchasing power. With no industries, no port, and a commercial role less important than that of Dakar or Abidjan, the landscape of Bamako's urban centre is modest.

The European city is flanked by two groups of African neighbourhoods. From above, they can be clearly distinguished by the different amount of greenery. It is the European city that effectively gives the capital of Sudan the nickname by which it is known: the green city, for broad gardens surround the residences. The African neighbourhoods, by contrast, are compact, with a much smaller percentage of green space. The existence of indigenous neighbourhoods to the east and west of the Western district enhances the value of the intersection where the "magasins" that imitate European shops are located, while popular commerce spreads in every direction.

In Abidjan, capital of the Ivory Coast and the principal port for the export of its commercial products, the centre is beginning to acquire a genuinely monumental appearance, linked to the intense commercial activity developed by the city, the metropolis of the country that contributes the largest share of exports from French West Africa. Some buildings combine commercial use on the ground floors with residences

above, but many are devoted entirely to commercial activities. This commercial centre almost exclusively houses luxury trade. It develops on the so-called “Plateau”, where European residences are also located.

An old military camp forms a kind of “coupure” between the Plateau and Adjamé, an important indigenous neighbourhood, just as the lagoon separates the business and activity centre from Treichville, the largest complex of African neighbourhoods. Treichville grew along with the city itself, developing its commerce, which became genuine local trade serving several neighbourhoods as well as the numerous fairs distributed at strategic points. It may be assumed that the lagoon functioned as a “coupure” between one part of the city and the other, so that the principal centre of the Plateau remained devoted almost exclusively to luxury commerce. The construction of the very modern Houphouët-Boigny bridge and the expansion of the port led to the erection of numerous large buildings along the road to Port-Bouët, buildings used as warehouses and company offices on the lower floors and as residences for Europeans above. In this way, that district ceased to be purely African. At the same time, the recent and rapid formation of an Ivorian bourgeoisie linked to the exploitation of the land (cocoa and coffee), together with the political advancement of indigenous people, has produced a levelling movement in the opposite direction, with numerous African-owned houses in districts regarded as European.

As for the arrangement of the centre, its essential feature is the presence of banking, wholesale, and luxury commerce on the “Plateau”, a tendency that will become more pronounced with the speculation accompanying the construction of new and large buildings. In the African neighbourhoods, by contrast, there is popular commerce as well as markets and fairs. The military camp, in relation to Adjamé, and the lagoon, in relation to Treichville, acted as obstacles preventing the principal centre from losing the characteristics with which it began, beside the old port.

II – A PARTICULAR CASE: THE CENTRE OF THE CITY OF SALVADOR

The case of Salvador is, in general terms, one of the great cities that mark a kind of transition between a rural world, to which they preside and from which they draw their products, and another, industrial world from which they purchase

commodities. We believe that the transition from the working methods used in the study of its centre and the principal results obtained may be of some usefulness.

In search of a method. In studying the centre of the city of Salvador, we preferred to delay the assessment and exploration of particular cases, seeking, ultimately, to place them within a broader whole. We therefore attempted to avoid isolating the value already established, a source of misleading reasoning and dangerous generalizations. By analysing concrete aspects of the life of this city, we aimed to offer a modest contribution to urban geography in general, which is still far from being definitively constituted precisely because it lacks a greater number of regional studies; such studies will be all the more useful insofar as they can be undertaken without a systematic bias and without preconceived ideas.

In the case of Salvador, as in that of so many other cities, Brazilian or otherwise, systematic studies of other aspects of urban and regional life are lacking, although they are essential to understanding the city. This forced us to feel our own way through these parallel facts. We did not have — nor could we aspire to have — the intention of offering a complete analysis of each of them, but only of attaining an overall understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thus, these problems entered the work only as problems, undoubtedly rich in inspiration, but considered only insofar as they proved capable of helping us understand a landscape and a structure, that is, of explaining a particular organization of space.

The task contains numerous difficulties to be overcome, which will also confront other researchers working under conditions similar to ours.

Urban Geography cannot dispense with the collaboration of History in investigating the evolution of the urban phenomenon, nor with Statistics in measuring mass phenomena. Unfortunately, the works of historians, apart from the very honourable exceptions of which we may have made excessive use, are oriented toward the study of details. Even these details are unable to encompass the four centuries of urban evolution of which, except in those cases, they provide only an imprecise and fragmentary idea. The construction of that “retrospective geography”, so useful for discovering the roots of the present, is therefore impossible.

Statistical data, in turn, are not entirely valid before 1940. The 1920 census was markedly defective, and the preceding ones even more so. The counts carried out after 1940 were conducted with commendable rigour, but according to a “standard”

framework for the whole of Brazil, and their tabulation was likewise performed in a more or less uniform manner. Yet Brazil's enormous extent and its great regional differences mean that the results are always troublesome when particular cases are to be studied. This does not justify the exaggerated demand for a census with specific questions for every city, but at least a differentiated system of tabulation for the largest urban organisms would be desirable. The distinction between what is regarded as urban, suburban, and rural is one example. On the other hand, the constant concern to improve research methods produces a certain instability in the questions submitted to the "poll", which often makes valid comparison difficult.

A first task, therefore, both for reconstructing past facts and for interpreting current and recent data, was one of selection, eliminating facts and figures whose combination yielded results inconsistent with the demonstrated evolution of the urban organism. We nevertheless placed greater emphasis on direct personal research, undoubtedly full of difficulties, which allowed us to reach some valid results that served as the basis for our conclusions.

Facts to be studied. Certain facts drew our attention in the centre of the city of Salvador. First, its division into two levels: An Upper City and a Lower City, with contrasting landscapes present in both. New buildings and skyscrapers stand in close proximity to old palaces and deteriorated houses. Also related to the site is an almost absolute functional segregation: Wholesale and banking commerce in the Lower City, retail commerce in the Upper City. There is also a multiplicity of relations between the purely formal aspects and the material aspects of the setting. A poor population is concentrated in the old houses of the centre, with serious attendant problems, while vast tracts of land remain vacant.

All these facts lead us to a series of problems for discussion, which we might perhaps group under three headings: (1) the current functions of the city and the centre and their evolution, which is equivalent to reconstructing the entire urban history and the relations maintained between city and region; (2) the present landscape of the centre and its formation; (3) the manner in which urban functions and activities have adapted to the landscape of the city centre, that is, its structure itself.

Such a division is, in a sense, artificial, since the elements of the whole maintain strong relations with one another, as we shall see below.

Urban functions. A first fact to be observed is the persistence of the same principal function since the city assumed the role of regional capital. In fact, the other functions that arose later are closely dependent upon or related to the port and commercial function. The industrial function is a daughter of commerce. The banking function serves almost exclusively commerce and other speculative activities.

A second fact to add is that Salvador's urban region includes areas devoted to commercial agriculture for export and areas devoted to subsistence agriculture for local consumption.

Salvador is the port and commercial marketplace for these agricultural export products; it is also their banking centre. The coalescence of functions that has developed plays a genuinely conservative role in relation to the regional economy. Banking activity itself does not serve to renew the economic life of the State. It merely strengthens commercial and speculative activities. At the same time, banks channel resources from the region and the city and send them elsewhere.

Subsistence agriculture is practiced with backward techniques. It is incapable of creating important urban centres. It is also incapable of sustaining a growing population. Hence the release of surplus agricultural labour, which moves toward the State capital in the most varied forms. In 1950, only 47% of the population over ten years of age formed part of the city's economically active population.

The poverty of part of Salvador's hinterland and the nature of the economy in the other part, together with the general stimulus received by speculative activities, provide no incentive for the establishment of industries. Thus, the urban population grows without any relation to employment possibilities, while the urban zone of influence contracts. Hence the apparent paradox according to which the City of Salvador grows not because of a dynamism of its own, but because of the absence of such dynamism.

The role of speculation in the three major groups of problems of the City of Salvador — function, landscape, and structure — led us to define the city as "a creation of the speculative economy, the metropolis of an old commercial agricultural economy that still survives today; it retains the functions that gave it a regional role, but although affected by the new forms of life that derive from its participation in the forms of life of the industrial world, its landscape still preserves material aspects of other periods."

Such a profound relation between the facts of the regional economy and urban life constitutes a genuine vicious circle, of which the macrocephaly of the metropolis in relation to the region is one result.

A third fact to observe is that Salvador is a colonial metropolis in a country that is not politically dependent. It therefore receives no contribution of outside capital that might stimulate regional and urban life. Salvador is merely an outlet for capital. This gives even greater prominence to the role of speculation in urban life.

The landscape and structure of the urban centre. All these facts find an inscription on the urban ground, above all in the city centre.

The old role of the port of a prosperous commercial agriculture once favoured the city centre through the construction of fine residential palaces and town houses. These houses, later abandoned by the wealthy population, now shelter a very poor population. Almost all are in ruins.

More recently, the city's port function led to the remodelling of the port and, consequently, to the creation of an artificial site produced by land reclamation. This "artificial site" accommodates the new expansions of the urban centre. In this way, it prevents the renewal of part of the Old City. We say part because regulations protecting historical features also play a negative role.

These factors make the landscape of Salvador's city centre a group of neighbourhoods clearly differentiated from the city's other districts, with the juxtaposition of a modern city of American type and areas of tenements. The importance of the modern city is all the greater because it represents, simultaneously, the concentration of the functions of the region and the city and the concentration of urban functions in the centre.

Indeed, the original site of the City of Salvador, leading to the existence of an Upper City and a Lower City close to the port, produced an increasingly visible segregation of functions. The Lower City contains the business centre. The Upper City houses the activity centre, with retail commerce, administration, and the principal services.

Finally, from the standpoint of the creation and transformation of the landscape, Salvador's urban functions are arranged in a hierarchy. At the top are functions directly or indirectly linked to speculation. This explains the different aspects of the centre. Very close to the port are massive blocks of skyscrapers. Along the arteries serving transport in the Upper City are commercial avenues where skyscrapers stand beside

older houses. Meanwhile, in Baixa dos Sapateiros, where poorer retail commerce is located, there are only about half a dozen modern buildings.

There is not, however, an absolute relation of cause and effect between landscape and function, that is, between the setting and its content. The same landscape may house different functions. The same function may be housed in different landscapes. Landscape and structure do not always correspond. Nevertheless, we may admit the existence of functions capable of creating a setting and functions incapable of creating a landscape. The latter make use of, transform, or degrade the pre-existing landscape.

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