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To cite this article: José Adriano Pereira *et al* 2025 *IOP Conf. Ser.: Earth Environ. Sci.* **1536** 012027

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Reuse of Vacant Buildings and Urban Regeneration Strategies: A Comparative Study between Porto Alegre, São Paulo and Recife

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Abstract: The presence of unoccupied buildings in Brazilian urban centers, coupled with the scarcity of affordable housing, drives the reuse of these buildings as a strategy for urban regeneration. This practice aims to mitigate the physical and social degradation of historic centers, promote the preservation of architectural heritage and increase access to decent and sustainable housing. This study carries out a comparative analysis between Porto Alegre, São Paulo and Recife, focusing on public-private partnerships (PPPs) aimed at the housing conversion of vacant properties. The research is structured along three axes: (I) legislation and public policies, examining urban planning instruments and incentives; (II) investor profiles, highlighting financing and management models; and (III) architectural typologies, assessing the potential and limitations of existing structures. A qualitative approach was adopted, with a document review and comparative analysis of policies and architectural typologies. Preliminary results indicate that cities with greater regulatory flexibility and more robust fiscal incentives have a greater capacity to attract investment. São Paulo stands out for its PPPs in the historic center; Porto Alegre, for its active heritage legislation; Recife, for its challenges in infrastructure and heritage protection. By integrating normative, technical and economic dimensions, this research contributes to the debate on sustainable urban regeneration strategies, with a focus on social inclusion and valuing historic centers.

1. introduction

The increasing emptying of buildings in the central areas of Brazilian cities reflects an exclusionary and fragmented model of urbanization, which has favoured peripheral expansion, real estate speculation and socio-spatial segregation, to the detriment of the qualified occupation of urban centers (MARICATO, 2011; ROLNIK, 2015). This process resulted in the abandonment of historically important properties, the degradation of the urban fabric and a worsening housing deficit, especially for low-income groups.

At the same time, the appreciation of the social function of the city and property has spurred debates on need to reoccupy urban centers with integrative, sustainable and inclusive proposals.

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In this scenario, the reuse of vacant buildings has emerged as a fundamental strategy not only for the physical revitalization of degraded areas, but also as an instrument for promoting affordable housing, the preservation of historical heritage and sustainable urban requalification (FARIAS, 2017; MOURÃO, 2020). Buildings respond architecturally to the demands of a social and economic context that no longer exists, and their material structures are dependent on updating processes. Laws, on the other hand, do not incorporate this need to adapt buildings to contemporary demands.

Mourão, in "Integrated urban regeneration, protection of cultural heritage and environmental efficiency as divergent objectives in urban policies in Portugal (2000 - 2020)" reports that "The social dimension, from the perspective of integrated urban regeneration, was naturally held hostage by this undervaluation of cultural heritage in the face of the overvaluation of economic and environmental opportunities." Note that the discussion between heritage, economy and environmental issues has always been in search of a sustainable equation (MOURÃO, 2019, p.91).

The increase in the number of abandoned buildings represents an urban paradox: at the same time as it highlights the underutilization of built territory, it reveals the ineffectiveness of public housing and heritage preservation policies. Thus, the reuse of these buildings, through public-private partnerships (PPPs), represents not only an opportunity for architectural regeneration, but also for social reintegration, with the potential to strengthen sustainable housing and urban mobility policies. By looking at the experiences of the three selected Brazilian capitals, the research identifies facilitating factors, legal and technical obstacles, and successful institutional models that can support other similar initiatives in the country. In addition, it aims to contribute to the formulation of political and urban planning guidelines that promote a fairer, more efficient and culturally sensitive occupation of urban centers.

The adaptive reuse of vacant buildings has been the subject of growing interest in the fields of architecture, urbanism and urban planning, as a critical response to the challenges of building obsolescence, the housing shortage and the degradation of historic centers. The specialized literature shows that successful urban revitalization initiatives require an articulated intersectoral action between the state, the market and civil society, which makes it possible to combine legal instruments, financing mechanisms and effective social participation (HARVEY, 2012; SEIXAS, 2016).

A brief reflection on the role of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in the reuse of vacant buildings reveals a structural ambivalence regarding the promotion of urban equity. On one hand, PPPs can serve as effective instruments to mobilize resources and accelerate urban regeneration projects, particularly in contexts where public sector budgets are constrained. On the other hand, when not guided by clear social interest directives and public oversight, such partnerships tend to privilege market logic, reinforcing gentrification and social exclusion in central urban areas (HARVEY, 2012; SEIXAS, 2016). In the absence of robust social counterparts, housing projects may prioritize profitability over the social function of property, thereby undermining principles of spatial justice. Consequently, the integration of PPPs in urban rehabilitation processes requires collaborative governance models that guarantee citizen participation and explicitly target housing inclusion goals.

David Harvey (2012), when discussing the right to the city, proposes a critical reading of neoliberal urban dynamics, warning of the risks of the commodification of urban space and gentrification as a consequence of misguided urban projects. For him, urban transformation needs to be politically mediated, guaranteeing equitable access to the infrastructure, territory and

symbolic goods of cities. In this sense, the reuse of abandoned buildings can represent an alternative to peripheral growth, as long as it is associated with inclusive public policies.

In line with this critical view, João Seixas (2016) proposes the concept of "collaborative urbanism", which recognizes the complexity of contemporary urban territory and the need for integrated approaches involving planning, politics and citizens. For him, sustainable urban regeneration is only possible when there is convergence between territorial governance practices, adaptive regulation and institutional innovation.

Nuno Portas (2011), in exploring the concept of "living in transformation", highlights the importance of housing solutions that respond to changes in the ways of living, working and moving around in contemporary cities. The author advocates architectural and regulatory flexibility as premises for interventions in existing buildings, especially in historic centers. Thus, the conversion of unoccupied buildings must take into account not only their previous function, but also their ability to adapt to new housing and urban demands.

In the Brazilian context, Ermínia Maricato and Nabil Bonduki (2014) discuss housing policies in Brazil, focusing on social housing and public housing production. Bonduki, in particular, points out that the reuse of buildings can be an effective alternative to the large-scale construction model, particularly in central areas with infrastructure. He argues that, in order to achieve this, it is essential to integrate the instruments of the City Statute, such as the social function of property, master plans and urban induction instruments, with heritage policies and accessible financing mechanisms.

Iana Bernardino (2018) highlights the scarcity of lines of financing for housing, especially low-income housing, between 1986, when the National Housing Bank ceased to operate, and the mid-2000s, a period in which there was no nationwide housing policy in Brazil. According to Bernardino, it can be concluded that "the mobilization of a large volume of resources for housing finance can leave its mark on different parts of the city, where new buildings can juxtapose or replace older buildings and alter occupation patterns and socio-spatial dynamics" (BERNARDINO, 2018, p.133).

In J. Stevens (2019) "Occupy, resist, build, inhabit! A genealogy of urban occupation movements in the center of São Paulo, in particular, since the 1970s, organized housing movements began to occupy the city center. Different occupations by the MSTC (Movimento dos Sem-Teto do Centro) and the FLM (Aliança de Luta por Moradia), the União dos Movimentos de Moradia (UMM), the Unificação das Lutas dos Cortiços (ULC) were also integrated with the Movimento dos Sem Terra (MST), the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto da Região Central (MTSTRC). The 1988 Constitution endorsed the principles of democratic urban management, providing legal and political instruments to expand direct participation. This led to the approval of the City Statute in 2001.

In São Paulo, although some regulations have been progressively incorporating specific parameters for this practice, such as the São Paulo Municipal Building and Construction Code, Municipal Law No. 16,642/2017, there are still gaps in the legal framework on the subject (TERRA; MORETTI, 2019). More recently, Municipal Decree No. 61.311/2022, which regulated the Requalifica Centro Program (Municipal Law No. 17.576/2021), which aims to stimulate the retrofitting of old buildings in the center of the capital, highlighted the relevance of advancing the debate on this topic. The Fourth District, located in the northern central area of Porto Alegre, is characterized by a strong industrial and logistical past. During the first half of the 20th century, the region was home to warehouses, factories, workshops and sheds linked to railroad activity and port expansion. The predominant typology in this area is industrial buildings in exposed

masonry, with high ceilings, large internal spans and metal structures, characteristics that give them high potential for conversion to contemporary uses such as cultural centers, creative spaces and collective housing. Currently, the Fourth District has been the subject of public and private initiatives aimed at its urban rehabilitation, based on creative economy and innovation models. Recife has been facing the emptying of its historic center since the 1940s. The study *Moradia no Centro* (Habitat Brasil, 2018) shows, for example, that there are 112 properties with more than 5 floors in some state of abandonment in just one of the districts of the historic center (Bairro de Santo Antônio).

From the 1970s onwards, there were several debates about Historical and Cultural Heritage and the Preservation of City Landscapes in the wake of international Heritage Documents, Pacts and Charters. (MENEZES; 2015), points to a change in urban policy attitudes in the city: if before there was an interventionist intention in the center, from 1970 onwards the intention became one of conservation. The author points out that the conservationist approach alone was not enough to halt the process of emptying the center, nor to attract vitality to the area.

This emptying of the central areas is therefore part of a process of urban growth that pushes the most vulnerable population towards the outskirts, while the middle and upper class population begins to occupy new areas of real estate expansion (JUCA; 2024)

The Recife Municipal Master Plan establishes that for ZEPHs (Special Zones for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage), construction parameters must comply with the preservation of the existing heritage and the cultural landscape of what is defined as the Historic Center of Recife. However, the zoning of historic neighborhoods as ZEPHs is often a point of contention between public authorities and real estate investors: on the one hand, there are fiscal incentive policies aimed at attracting new uses and investments to historic buildings; on the other hand, there is a lack of interest from the real estate market and a preference for new real estate developments. This perception is observed daily in the city, where new residential towers are constantly being built, while buildings in Recife's historic area have been subjected to decharacterization and abandonment (MENEZES, 2015).

According to the studies by Menezes (2015) and *Moradia no Centro* (Habitat Brasil, 2018) the inclusion of housing in the center of Recife is a crucial part of the city's economy and vitality. There is a large contingent of workers from the city center who live on the outskirts and who could benefit from the creation of housing units closer to their homes (JUCA; 2024).

Therefore, this study is based on the understanding that the reuse of vacant buildings for housing purposes requires an approach that combines technical and architectural knowledge with the social, economic and political dimensions of the city. The intertwining of legislation, architectural typologies and investor participation is essential to guarantee viable, sustainable and socially just projects. Analyzing the experiences in Porto Alegre, São Paulo and Recife will allow us to see how these variables behave in different Brazilian urban contexts and what lessons can be learned for their replicability.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a multifactorial methodological approach, which allows us to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of reusing vacant buildings in urban centers, considering its political, economic and spatial consequences. This structure makes it possible to analyze everything from the local regulatory framework to the architectural materiality of the buildings, linking (legislation and public policies), (investor profiles) and (architectural typologies).

The comparative analysis was structured on the basis of an analytical matrix that relates the three investigative pillars of urban regulations, economic incentives and architectural typologies to the data collected in the three cities. Specific urban legislation was examined, the available financing mechanisms were systematized and the physical-constructive characteristics of vacant buildings were analyzed.

Political factor: This involves a critical analysis of the urban and housing legislation in force in the cities studied, such as Master Plans, Land Use and Occupation Laws, and incentive programs for housing or urban rehabilitation. This dimension seeks to understand how the legal framework enables or limits the practices of converting buildings for housing purposes, especially in protected historic areas. **Economic factor:** Explores the financial and institutional arrangements involved in reuse processes, with emphasis on Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), investment funds, tax incentives and civil society participation. The aim is to understand the role of the different actors and their motivations, highlighting financing models, risks and benefits associated with conversion projects. **Spatial and architectural factors:** This refers to the assessment of the construction typologies of vacant buildings, their technical and heritage adaptability to the new housing functions. Structural compatibility is analyzed, as well as the limits of intervention in listed buildings or buildings of cultural interest.

This methodological structure makes it possible not only to map existing initiatives, but also to understand the mechanisms of articulation between public policies, investments and architectural conditions, producing an analytical basis for future proposals in the field of urban regeneration with a housing focus.

The research seeks to understand the factors that determine the viability of reusing unoccupied buildings for housing purposes, especially in central urban contexts marked by constructive obsolescence, housing shortages and heritage challenges. To this end, the objectives were organized around three interdependent axes: normative, institutional and technical-architectural, which underpin the study's methodological structure. They

1. To analyze the influence of urban legislation on the reuse of vacant buildings. Urban legislation represents one of the main regulatory vectors that determine the success or failure of building conversion projects. The research seeks to identify how the legal and regulatory frameworks in force in the cities of Porto Alegre, São Paulo and Recife impact on the technical and financial viability of reusing abandoned buildings. Instruments such as: 1.1 Master plans and their guidelines for occupation in central areas; 1.2 Specific heritage preservation and zoning rules; 1.3 Incentive mechanisms such as onerous grants, transfers of building potential and tax exemptions will be analyzed. This analysis will make it possible to understand whether the legal frameworks act as inhibitors or catalysts for urban transformation, highlighting the need for more flexible and adaptive regulations.

2. Identify the main players involved in the process (public and private). Urban revitalization with a focus on housing requires complex institutional links. The study will therefore seek to map the different players involved in implementing these initiatives in the three cities analyzed. Among the main players to be identified are: 2.1 Municipal and state authorities, such as urban planning, housing, culture and urban development departments; 2.2 The private sector, including developers, construction companies, investment funds and owners of vacant properties; 2.3 Civil society organizations, such as housing movements, urban NGOs and heritage councils; academia and experts. The analysis will make it possible to understand the interests, conflicts and synergies between the actors and how public-private partnerships (PPPs) have operated in the housing reuse of urban real estate, especially in central areas.

3. To assess the typological adaptability of buildings to new housing functions. The third objective focuses on the technical-architectural dimension of adaptive reuse, seeking to assess how the physical and functional characteristics of unoccupied buildings influence their conversion to housing. Aspects such as: 3.1 Internal configuration and modularity of spaces; 3.2 Potential for reconfiguration of uses (from commercial to residential, for example); 3.3 Technical limitations imposed by preservation or conservation standards will be analyzed. The research will therefore investigate which typologies are more prone to residential conversion and how innovative architectural solutions can make it possible to redevelop buildings even in the face of structural or heritage restrictions.

3. Discussion and Results

Figure 1 shows that the architecture of the central areas of São Paulo, Porto Alegre and Recife share a set of architectural characteristics that reflect urban patterns common to large Brazilian cities in the 20th century. Despite local specificities, there is a convergent structural and aesthetic basis to the buildings constructed in the context of the modernization, verticalization and institutionalization of the capitals.

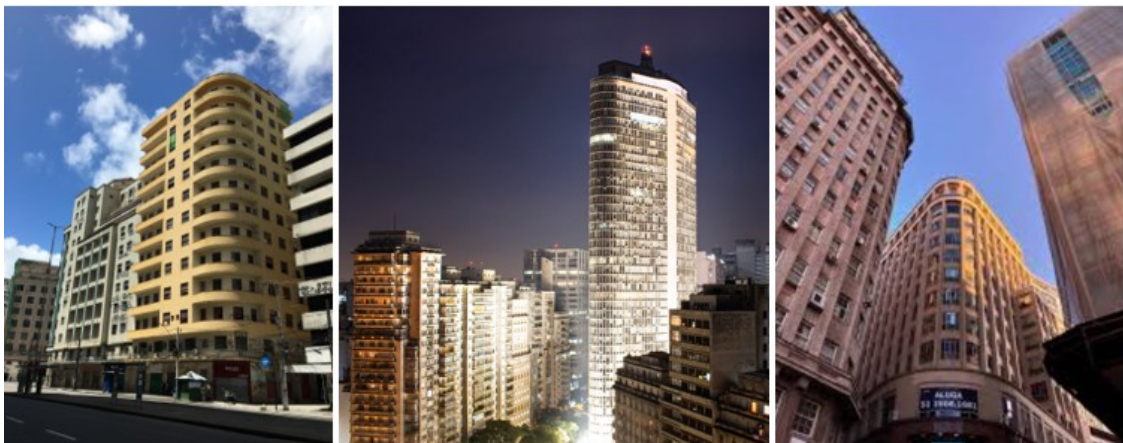


Figure 1. From left to right (i) Buildings, Bairro S. Antônio in Recife. Source: Author; (ii), Círculo Italiano Building in São Paulo Photo: Renatto de Sousa, (iii) Porto Alegre, Photo: Bruno Palaoro. Sequence from left to right.

Among the main points of similarity is the presence of eclectic and art deco buildings, built between the 1920s and 1940s, marked by symmetrical façades, the use of geometric ornamentation and brickwork or reinforced concrete structures. These buildings, commonly used for residential, commercial and administrative purposes, form an important symbolic and functional ensemble in the central areas of the three cities. In addition, the three centers have mixed and multifunctional typologies, where residential use coexists with commercial, cultural and service activities. Selective verticalization, which began in the 1950s and intensified in the following decades, gave rise to medium- and high-density buildings with similar structural and technical characteristics, which today make up an underused building stock, but with high potential for housing conversion. These similarities show a common background: the adoption of modernizing urban and architectural models, associated with the centralization of economic and political activities, which resulted in structured urban complexes consistent with the paradigms of the time. Although each city has its own historical and stylistic landmarks, the architecture of

the central areas reveals a convergent typological matrix, which is fundamental for thinking about integrated strategies for urban rehabilitation and reuse.

Understanding that cities have historic sites of different sizes, with urban fabrics made up of different typologies, we chose to focus on verticalized buildings to allow comparisons between the case studies. São Paulo: The initiative of concessions and public-private partnerships, such as the "Requalifica Centro" Program and the ZEIS (Zones Special of Social Interest), show progress in converting properties into social housing. "Renova SP Centro" and the use of onerous grants as a fundraising instrument. Porto Alegre: Municipal laws, such as the Environmental Urban Development Master Plan (PDDUA), promote rehabilitation with tax incentives. Projects such as Viva o Centro demonstrate the link with private investors. The Master Plan allows reuse through tax incentives and decentralized property regulation. Recife: Faces obstacles related to rigid regulations and urban infrastructure. The Recife 500 Plan and the Recentro Project propose guidelines, but they have yet to be implemented.

Table 1. Political scale - legislation shows that São Paulo has more flexible urban regulations and more robust incentive instruments for the reuse of vacant buildings, reflecting an active rehabilitation policy for the center. Porto Alegre has made progress in the sector, but still lacks a broad integration of housing and heritage policies. Recife has significant regulatory rigidity, coupled with strong heritage protection, but no effective urban policies to stimulate housing conversion, revealing a gap between preservation and revitalization.

Criteria	São Paulo	Porto Alegre	Recife
Master Plan	Revised in 2014; focus on reoccupation of the center and housing densification	Master Plan with guidelines for rehabilitation in the Fourth District and Historic Center	2021 Master Plan with little specific emphasis on the rehabilitation of historic buildings.
Urban planning legislation	Zoning law allows mixed use; Consortium Urban Operations offer incentives	Specific rules for preservation and specific incentives in industrial areas	Restrictive land use laws in listed areas; lack of urban exception mechanisms (currently under review)
Housing incentive instruments	Downtown Housing PPP; incentives via Retrofit and exemption from onerous grant in central areas	Centro+ program and incentives in urban revitalization areas	Recentro project still being structured; lack of housing plan linked to preservation
Regulatory feasibility for conversion	High: flexible regulation and up-to-date mechanisms	Medium: sectoral incentives, but without broad articulation	Low: property rigidity and lack of specific incentives for housing conversion

Table 2. Economic – Economic Perspectives / Investors shows that São Paulo leads the way due to the diversity of financial models and the strong involvement of the private sector in housing PPPs. Porto Alegre, although showing promising initiatives, still operates with moderate investor participation and restricted incentives. In contrast, Recife is almost exclusively dependent on public investment, with a lack of economic arrangements that make the rehabilitation of vacant buildings attractive to the private sector, which compromises its capacity for urban dynamization.

Criteria	São Paulo	Porto Alegre	Recife
Participation of private investors	High: developers, real estate investment funds, social entities	Medium: local investors, startups, and partnerships with universities and NGOs	Low: predominance of state funding and isolated initiatives
Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)	Advanced: notable example is the Central Housing PPP	Emerging: focus on projects in the Fourth District with cultural and creative funds	Incipient: no PPPs specifically aimed at social housing or building reuse
Financing models	Diversified: CEPACs, subsidies, retrofitting with tax exemptions	Municipal tax incentives in designated areas	Predominance of public funding; lack of clarity regarding investor appeal
Tax or credit incentives	Available: progressive property tax (IPTU), exemption from building rights fees, credit lines	Present but limited in scope and impact	Scarce; no integrated urban fiscal policy for housing rehabilitation currently in place

In common, the three cases show that the viability of reuse is directly related to the existence of integrated policies and intersectoral engagement. The comparative analysis between Porto Alegre, São Paulo and Recife follows the three structuring axes of the study: legislation, economic perspectives/investors and architectural typologies. Below is a summary table of the main findings for each city.

(Table 1). São Paulo presents a robust legal framework, with specific requalification laws (such as the Requalifica Centro program) and urban incentives, which support reuse initiatives. Porto Alegre stands out for its legislation focused on preservation and municipal tax incentives. Recife, on the other hand, is constrained by rigid and poorly implemented regulations, particularly in historically protected areas (ZEPH – Special Zones for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage).

(Table 2). The capacity to attract investors is closely linked to the clarity and flexibility of urban legislation. São Paulo, with consolidated mechanisms such as PPPs and tax incentives (progressive property tax, CEPACs), offers the most favorable investment ecosystem. Porto Alegre, although with a lower volume of private investment, advances through partnerships with local actors. Recife, in contrast, relies primarily on public funding, which limits the scale and continuity of rehabilitation actions.

(Table 3). Architecturally, the three cities share buildings with potential for adaptive reuse, particularly due to the presence of modernist typologies and open-plan structures (as observed

in São Paulo and Porto Alegre). Recife, despite its significant architectural heritage, faces technical limitations imposed by strict preservation criteria and deficiencies in urban infrastructure.

Table 3. Spatial and architectural scale - architectural typologies shows that São Paulo, with its multifunctional architecture, has high technical adaptability for new housing functions. Porto Alegre, with its robust industrial heritage, also has considerable potential, but requires specific adaptations. Recife, on the other hand, despite having a significant and valuable historical heritage, faces greater structural and technical challenges in reusing its colonial and eclectic buildings, which require more careful and costly interventions.

Criteria	São Paulo	Porto Alegre	Recife (Santo Antônio)
Predominant building typology	Modernist and multifunctional (offices, services and vertical residences)	Industrial, institutional and commercial, with robust structures	Colonial, eclectic, art deco; townhouses and mansions and multifunctional modernists
Construction system	Reinforced concrete, open floor plans, easily adaptable structures	Mixed structure (masonry + concrete); limitations in older buildings	Load-bearing masonry, fragile and rigid structures in relation to adaptation and Reinforced concrete, free-standing plans
Adaptability for housing	High: good sectorization, ventilation and the possibility of dividing units	Medium: requires reconfiguration of spaces; feasible for collective housing	Medium to low: need for structural reinforcement and careful property solutions
Heritage preservation	Medium: some listed areas; greater flexibility outside protection perimeters	Medium-high: state and municipal listings; clear guidelines in some districts	High: large part of the area under IPHAN and FUNDARPE protection; strong intervention control

4. Final considerations.

The reuse of unoccupied buildings in central urban areas is not just a one-off response to the housing shortage and the degradation of the urban fabric, but is also a powerful sustainability strategy, capable of combining housing, social inclusion, historical heritage and economic dynamism. The results of this research show that the effectiveness of this strategy depends directly on the existence of a flexible regulatory framework, clear incentive mechanisms and efficient coordination between the public and private sectors. When comparing the contexts of Porto Alegre, São Paulo and Recife, it is clear that the most significant advances occur where there is a convergence between well-structured public policies, consolidated public-private partnership (PPP) models and a regulatory environment that favors the conversion of obsolete buildings. São

Paulo, for example, stands out for its robust initiatives to encourage housing reuse through concessions, tax incentives and instruments such as the Consortium Urban Operation. Porto Alegre, meanwhile, has developed municipal legislation aimed at rehabilitating its built heritage with promising results. Recife, despite its historical wealth and architectural potential, still faces structural and regulatory obstacles that hinder the dynamization of these processes. Finally, this research contributes to the debate on more inclusive and resilient cities, signaling paths towards an urbanism that values memory, promotes the right to the city and responds to contemporary urgencies with sustainable, scalable and socially just solutions.

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