

Omar O’Grady and the urban environment transformation of Natal during the 1920’s

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The city of Natal, capital of Rio Grande do Norte, faces during the 1920’s a massive changing process on its urban form, much of this thanks to the reorganization of its administration structures. These material transformations are based on the change of municipal government. In the year of 1924, the engineer Omar O’Grady, graduated in the Illinois Institute of Technology (USA) is elected as town’s new mayor and starts a period of urban improvements not seen yet during the first two decades of the 20th century. The improvement emphasis will take place over the pavement and opening of streets and public squares.

Therefore, our study starts from the following research question – in which way O’Grady’s management contributed to the system of streets and roads development from 1924 to 1930, period in which he was ahead the City Hall? This paper, thus, intends to comprehend the administration strategies and the actions undertaken during this period of investment in urban infrastructure. The study is based on historical sources, especially, the official messages from the City Hall and reports from the main newspapers in circulation during the 1920’s.

One of the first main contributions of O’Grady’s was the reformulation of the administration basis in Natal. In January, 1925, he divides the City Hall in three distinctive departments – Treasure, Public Works and Protocol, through the Resolution number 241. In the same year, he also changes the tax collection responsibility from the State Government to the City Hall, through Decree number 262, raising, this way, the municipality’s revenues. The year of 1925 is also when new urban rules are established, aiming the definition of urban aesthetics’ new patterns. Among those new rules, the law predicted building heights control in Natal’s main streets, as well as the

regularization of real estate taxes in the urban zone. Besides this, the investment in the streets systems is the great mark of his management.

In the subsequent years, O'Grady starts to reform public gardens and to pave many streets, avenues and public squares such as Ulysses Caldas Square in Cidade Alta neighborhood, facilitating, this way, the traffic of automobiles to the new planned zone of Natal, Cidade Nova. The avenues which receive the new pavement first are two of the most important ones – Tavares de Lyra, in the commercial zone of Ribeira and responsible for the connection with the harbor of Natal, and Avenue Rio Branco, Cidade Alta's main street. After this, is built part of the road that connected the Alecrim's fair – the most important of the capital – to Macaíba, a town very important in Rio Grande do Norte's urban network.

Still during 1925, are initiated the works on the opening of a new avenue in the city, which is, perhaps, the most iconic work of O'Grady's, the Atlantic Avenue. This avenue was designed to lay by the ocean, passing by Areia Preta, the most elegant beach of Natal at this time. Its total extension was 800m and the tramways, as soon as it was finished, started to circulate along it. The construction of this new axis allowed the city to grow in a new direction, which was aligned with the increasing circulation of automobiles in Natal – although very restricted to the richer. Many other actions of this order will take place during the rest of the decade what will contribute, significantly, to the changing of the urban environment in Natal.

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