



# LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS  
MODOS DE HABITAR

**ABADA EDITORES**

# LA CASA

## ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD  
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## **La relación entre habitante y vegetación en las casas de Maceió en el siglo XIX**

### *The Relationship Between Inhabitants and Vegetation in the Houses of Maceió in the 19th*

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#### **Resumen**

Desde el período colonial brasileño, especialmente en las ciudades ubicadas en la región nordeste, se construyó una relación cultural de desvalorización de la vegetación nativa, mantenida a la margen del caserío construido. Los fondos de los patios abrigaban la escasa vegetación urbana, especies exóticas destinadas a los huertos y pomares. Solo a partir de mediados del siglo XIX e inicio del siglo XX, bajo influencia del ideario higienista y embellecedor, ocurrieron diversas transformaciones en las viviendas de las ciudades brasileñas que permitieron la inserción de la vegetación en las retracciones laterales y frontales de los lotes. A partir del análisis de la legislación local, de la iconografía y de la lectura de cronistas locales se buscó demostrar de qué manera esa alteración en la configuración espacial de las residencias y en los modos de habitar ocasionó una mudanza en el *status* de la vegetación en la ciudad de Maceió-AL, de los desvalorizados patios a los valorizados jardines residenciales.

**Palabras clave:** patios, jardines residenciales, vegetación, Maceió, Brasil

**Bloque temático:** Arquitecturas de la casa: el espacio doméstico a través de la historia

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#### **Abstract**

*Following the colonial period in Brazil and particularly in the towns and cities located in the North-East region, a cultural relationship was established which failed to recognize the value of the native vegetation that remained alongside the rows of houses that have been built. Sparse urban vegetation could be found in the backyards including exotic species that were designed for gardens and orchards. It was only in the mid 19th Century and beginning of the 20th Century that, under the influence of hygienic and aesthetic principles, radical changes began to place in the dwellings of Brazilian towns and cities which allowed vegetation to be included along the boundary walls at the front and side of the allotments. This study seeks to demonstrate through an analysis of local legislation, iconography and the writings of local chroniclers, in what ways this alteration in the spatial configuration of the dwellings and new styles of living, brought about a change in the status of the vegetation in the city of Maceió-AL, from being a feature of undervalued backyards to forming a part of highly prized residential gardens.*

**Keywords:** backyards, residential gardens, vegetation, Maceió, Brazil

**Topics:** Architectures of the house: domestic space throughout history

## Introduction

Maceió, which is located in the State of Alagoas –a region in the North-East of Brazil– dates back to the 18th Century, and its origins were related, among other things, to the extraction of wood for exports of timber and the sugar industry among other goods that went through the port of Jaraguá, which was situated in the vicinity of the small settlement of Maceió. This region was devoted to the cultivation of land for subsistence farming and the exploitation of wood.

It was a characteristic feature of this period that nature which dominated the landscape, was also feared by man as being an unknown and dangerous domain and was thus pushed into the background in iconographic designs or even not represented at all. For this reason, until the first half of the 19th Century, in most of the iconographic designs, the settlements of Maceió were practically devoid of vegetation. The little vegetation that is represented shows that Maceió is an area of land used for cultivation.<sup>1</sup>

The native undergrowth was at the end of the garden far away from the buildings and its overriding purpose was to be exploited by man. The site where the settlement had been built had to be cleared of any kind of vegetation. Cavalcanti explains that the squares that had been laid bare and weeded were also known as yards and reflected how the city was viewed by the people where vegetation was regarded as existing at the opposite end of civilization and this explains why vegetation was kept at a distance from the city.<sup>2</sup> This also took place in British towns and cities according to an analysis conducted by Thomas.<sup>3</sup> This might be the reason why the woodlands and vestiges of the Atlantic Forest that can be found in Maceió, are generally not represented in the iconographic designs and the urban centers were practically denuded of vegetation.

It was only in 1839, when the status of Maceió was raised to the category of a capital city, that vegetation gradually began to be deliberately included within residential allotments and this signaled the beginning of a slow change in attitude to the relationship between society and vegetation which was reflected in their lifestyle. An intrinsic part of this change was the enactment of Municipal/City Codes of Practice throughout the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century, which led to a gradual introduction of vegetation into the city.

## 1. The Municipal/City Codes of practices and the alterations to the residential dwellings of Maceió during the 19th Century

In the colonial period of Brazil, under the influence of the Portuguese tradition, urban dwellings were usually built in narrow and long rows, alongside the public highways. Reis Filho states that they were simple, terraced houses with gable roofs, and often possessed a combined orchard and vegetable garden in the backyard for private use where ornamental plants were blended

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<sup>1</sup> Tharcila Maria Soares Leão, “Urbanizar a vegetação: o ideário dos agentes construtores de Maceió-Al no século XIX” (PhD thesis, Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Veronica Robalinho Cavalcanti, “O imaginário local e o ideário higienista: os (des)caminhos da construção da paisagem maceioense” (Anais do V ENEPEA, Recife, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Keith Thomas, *O homem e o mundo natural: mudanças de atitude em relação às plantas e aos animais (1500 – 1800)* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1983).

with fruit growing trees and vegetables for the subsistence farming of the urban population.<sup>4</sup> In line with the “civilizing” mission of that epoch, the native vegetation which was not cultivated by the people had to be kept at the edge of the homestead. A few new architectural typologies had already emerged in the first half of the 19th Century, especially in the main towns and cities along the coastline. These were influenced by the opening up of Brazilian ports in 1808, and by the ideas of the French Artistic Mission.<sup>5</sup> This allowed new ideas and technical equipment which led to changes in the appearance of the buildings in the larger towns and cities through the inclusion of friezes, glass panes fitted in the transoms of the doors and windows, the use of wrought iron, bowls and crockery imported from Portugal.

Although on a different scale, in Maceió, the building style of the dwellings followed a similar pattern. There were detached houses with features of the colonial period in Brazil, without any adjoining walls at the front or on the sides. Their walls were generally built in the style of the “taipa”<sup>6</sup> with a gable roof which was sometimes covered in straw which drained some of the rain water on to the streets and the rest on the open spaces at the back of the allotments –the so-called back gardens. Cavalcanti explains that they were houses with a simple arrangement of rooms inside comprising front rooms and a passage that led to the bedrooms, called alcoves, which lacked any windows.<sup>7</sup> The dining-room and the kitchen (each marked in orange in the ground plan), were situated at the end and gave access to the back garden (marked in green). In some cases, the kitchen was separated from the main building at the end of the backyard so as to be at a distance from activities that could attract insects and unpleasant smells.

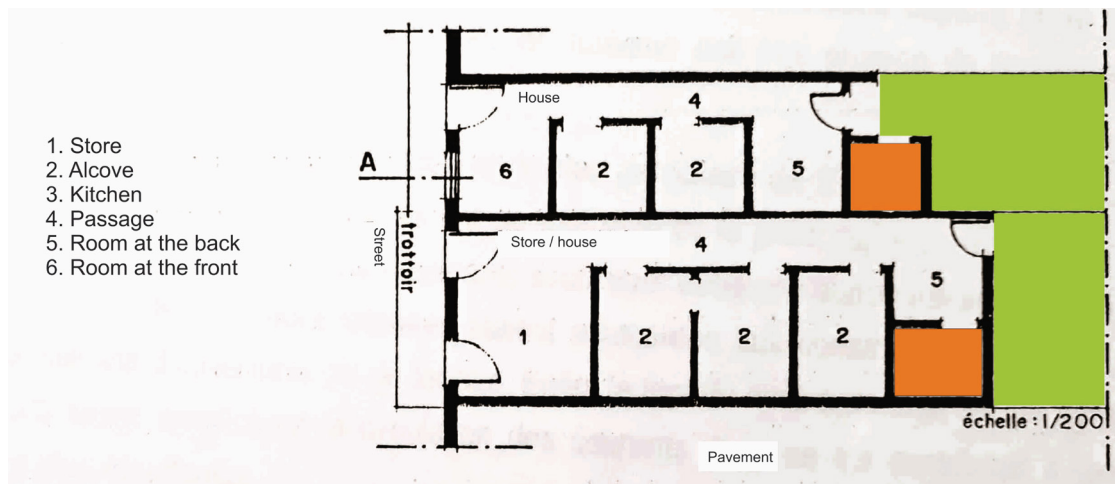


Figure 1: Ground plan of the floor of a detached building with a backgarden in Maceió  
Source: Cavalcanti, “La production...”, 198

<sup>4</sup> Nestor Goulart Reis Filho, *Quadro da arquitetura no Brasil* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> The French Artistic Mission consisted of a group of artists led by Joaquim Lebreton who came to Brazil in 1816 with the aim of setting up an Academy of Sciences, Arts and Workshops in the new Portuguese Kingdom of America, the purpose of which was to usher in “civility” to the court of D. João VI.

<sup>6</sup> Taipa is building technique that uses moistened mud and wattle to fill the spaces in the walls between the vertical and horizontal wooden frames.

<sup>7</sup> Veronica Robalinho Cavalcanti, “La production de l’espace à Maceió (1800-1930)” (PhD thesis, Université de Paris I, 1998), 197.

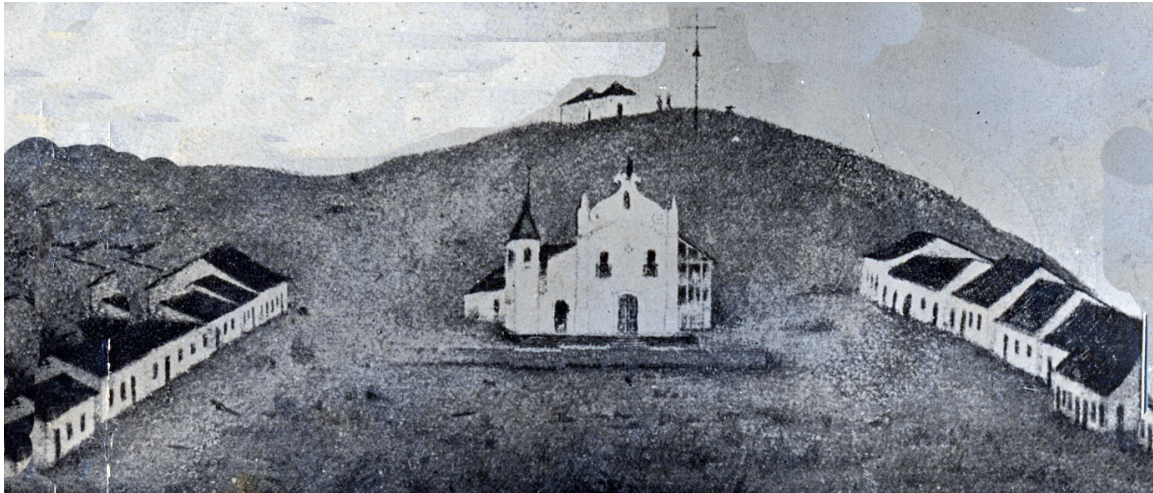


Figure 2: Engraving of bungalows in Maceió from the 19th Century  
Source: Craveiro Costa, *Maceió* (Maceió: Sergasa, 1939), 9

In the case of some buildings in the North-East like Maceió, these back gardens could serve many purposes such as to allow subsistence farming through the plantation of gardens and orchards, rearing livestock such as birds and pigs and by including wells which could supply the houses with water. As they were close beside the kitchen, the back gardens also acted as an extension for activities linked to the preparation of food, as well as being a place that could provide people with a place of recreation and enjoyment.

As the 19th Century progressed, another habitation typology was established although it kept the same relationship between constructed space and free space within the allotment – the so-called multistoreyed houses. As an example of this kind of dwelling which was characteristic of the dominant groups, one can cite the multi-storeyed house of José Antonio de Mendonça, known as the Baron of Jaraguá, which was built in the first half of the 19th Century. Multi-storeyed houses were buildings with two or more floors, alcoves, and bedrooms without ventilation; they had a kitchen at the end (marked in orange) and back garden (marked in green), which also served the purpose of allowing subsistence farming and sheltering the owner's vehicle.

It is clear that since the beginning of the settlement of Maceió, most of the dwellings were built in long narrow rows which made it impossible to have grove plantations at the front or sides. This configuration became standardized following the enactment of the Municipal/City Code by the Municipal Chamber in 1845, (which could result in a fine or demolition of the building if it was infringed) where recommendations were made for the frontal alignment of the buildings with the aim of embellishing the city.

In light of this, the planting of vegetation for any purpose, could only be carried out in the back gardens. However, since there were no bathrooms in the houses or multi-storeyed buildings, the residents had to carry out their physiological needs in the backyards. Thus, despite playing a role in providing a means of subsistence farming, the back gardens were regarded as places of little value since they were where the drains passed, and the latrines were located, as well as serving as rubbish dumps.



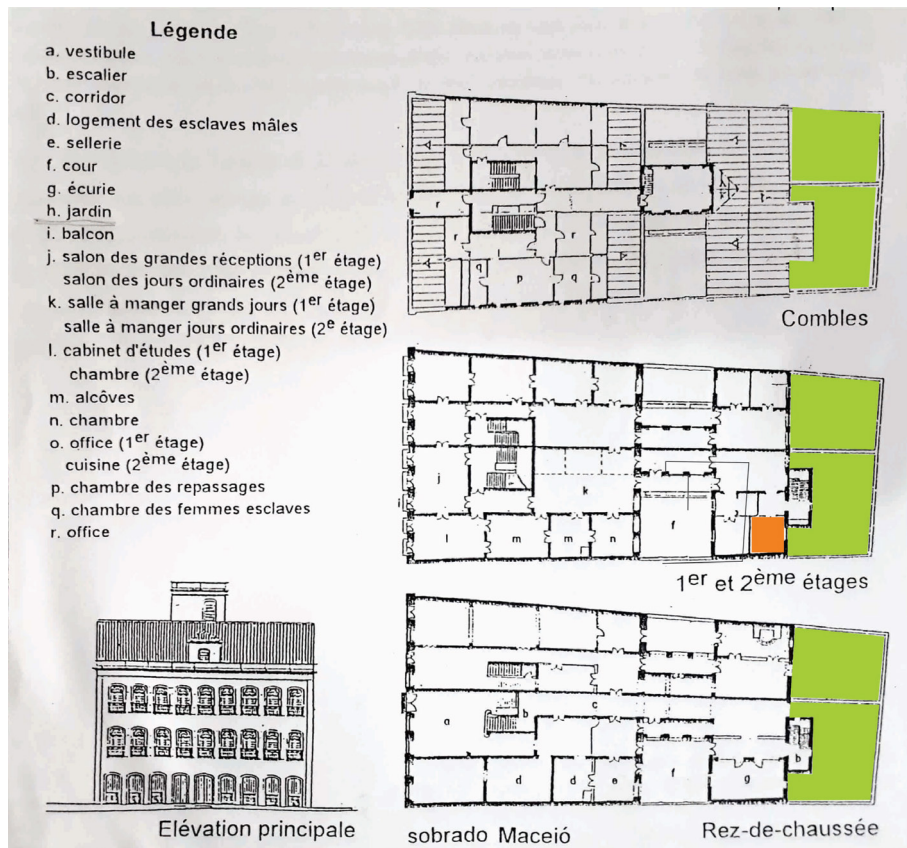


Figure 3: Upper and lower floors of the multi-storeyed house of the Baron of Jaraguáem Maceió  
Source: Cavalcanti, "La production...", 261



Figure 4: Photograph of the multistoreyed house of the Baron of Jaraguá in Maceió  
Source: Digital collection of the Museum of Image and Sound, Alagoas (MISA)

An analysis of the Municipal/City Codes show that there were guidelines for the maintenance and cleanliness of the back gardens. The first of these was Resolution nº 386, Article 11, of 8th August 1861, which stipulated that «os moradores das casas desta cidade serão obrigados a conservar limpos de esterquilínios e immundicias seus quintaes, e bem conservadas e cobertas as latrinas e privadas que nelles houver».<sup>8</sup>

With a view to embellishing the city, the Municipal Code of 1845, stated that the owners of property who had land alongside the main streets of the city, had to «amurar a frente em forma de edificio»,<sup>9</sup> by creating a false façade. As well as this, they had to build walls to enclose the back gardens so as to prevent the dumping of rubbish in the local areas and thus to keep these undervalued spaces well out of sight. Until the last decades of the 19th Century, the planting of vegetation in the surroundings of the houses was restricted to the back gardens which underlined the fact that the landscape features were regarded as having a low status.

The reforms made by the Municipal/City Code which was enacted by the Municipal Chamber in 1878, in the interests of hygiene, began to allow houses to be built that were no longer aligned with the street. This was because the allotments could now be divided by iron railings, while maintaining the alignment of the façades and this allowed some of the rooms to be ventilated and gardens to be planted in the fronts of the houses. As a result of this change, another building typology was incorporated and in this way, other spaces within the allotments began to be filled with vegetation and to serve other purposes.



Figure 5: Photographs of residential dwellings with boundary walls  
Source: Digital collection from the Public Archives of Alagoas (APA)

<sup>8</sup> [Translation by the authors: The residents of the houses of this city must keep their backyards free from garbage and filth and look after them properly. They must also ensure that the latrines and privies are covered]. Resolution nº 386 of 8th August 1861. *Compilação das leis provinciais das Alagoas de 1835 a 1872*. Tomo IV (Maceió: Typographia Commercial de A. J. da Costa, 1872).

<sup>9</sup> [Translation by the authors: Seal off the front of the building with a wall]. "Código de Posturas da Câmara de Maceió, 1845", in *Compilação das leis...*, 150.



Subsequently, the new Municipal/City Code of 1911, which was designed to make ventilation possible by addressing questions of hygiene, stated that «todos os compartimentos de um prédio, qualquer que seja o seu destino, terão aberturas directas para a rua, pateo, área ou quintal».<sup>10</sup> This change freed the buildings from all the restrictions imposed by the allotments and allowed the gardens to be included in the surroundings of the entire residential dwelling.

In addition, it should be noted that the recommended use of iron railings at the front of the properties made the gardens more visible and this suggested there was a change in the *status* of vegetation and the life-style of the residents. The backgardens ceased to be undervalued and places that had to be sealed off and kept out of sight and instead became gardens situated alongside and in front of the houses where the iron railings allowed them to be open to public view.



Figure 6: Photograph of a dwelling with a surrounding garden in the district of Bebedouro, Maceió-AL  
Source: Alagoas Institute of History and Geography (IHGAL)

These changes more often took place in the larger-sized properties which belonged to the wealthiest social classes, such as the mansion houses, chalets and bungalows which were usually located in more secluded districts such as Bebedouro and Farol. The gardens of these new residential dwellings often consisted of sophisticated and decorative designs and possessed a wide range of aesthetic features, such as shady bowers, sculptures, fountains and seats. This served to add both an aesthetic and financial value to the building and denoted the beginning of a trend where the presence of gardens symbolized the social *status* of their wealthy owners.

<sup>10</sup> [Translation by the authors: Every room in a building, whatever its purpose, must have a direct opening to the street, patio area or the back garden]. *Código de Posturas Municipais de Maceió* (Maceió: Publicação Oficial, 1911), 39.

## 2. Life-styles and vegetation in the comments of the local chroniclers

This alteration in the *status* of vegetation within the residential properties reflected a considerable cultural change of attitude that had gradually evolved for several centuries. The chronicles and poetry of local classical authors reveal several aspects of these changes when the authors describe in detail –albeit in a romantic form– the ways the local residents lived in the first decades of the 20th Century. This was shown in the way they assigned different roles to vegetation, (and to the backyards and gardens in the houses of Maceió), which are not noticeable in the City Codes or other official standards of that epoch.

Thus, it was decided to supplement the analysis of local legislation and illustrate these changes by examining two literary works by chroniclers from Alagoas, writing at different times in the 20th Century: the novel *Angústia* [Anguish], written by Graciliano Ramos in 1936; and the poems in the collection *A resposta* [The Answer], written by Ledo Ivo<sup>11</sup> and published in 1983.

### 2.1. The backgarden of Graciliano Ramos

Written in the first half of the 20th Century, the novel *Angústia* describes the drama and suffering of the public official Luís Alves, who comes from a poor family and lives in the most remote district of the city. In the story he sees his relationship with his fiancée end following her involvement with Julião Tavares, the son of a successful businessman who makes her pregnant and abandons her.

In the book, the backgarden of Luís Alves'house was one of the main stages for the romance he had with his neighbor Marina. In the course of the novel, the author describes some features of the gardens in both the houses of Luís Alves and his neighbors and provides information about their spatial configuration and the way these spaces are used in the first half of the 20th Century.

The gardens described in the novel are separated from the neighboring properties by barbed wire. These mark out the boundaries and reflect a desire to keep a distance although the neighbors share and are merged in their surroundings because their view is not obstructed and they are able to see what goes on in each other's lives.

The bathroom, shed and rubbish dump are all located in the back garden, as well as the dunghill and stagnant water which give off an unpleasant smell. The garden was described as an extension of the kitchen and a place where there was a flour press machine and somewhere for washing bottles and breeding chicken. It was also a place for subsistence farming carried out by growing beans, maize and lettuces and where mango trees provided shade, paw-paw trees supplied fruit and rose bushes perfumed the air. Luís Alves described it as follows:

O meu horizonte ali era o quintal da casa à direita: as roseiras, o monte de lixo, o mamoeiro. Tudo feio, pobre, sujo. Até as roseiras eram mesquinhas: algumas rosas apenas, miúdas. Monturos próximos, águas estagnadas, mandavam para cá emanações desagradáveis. Mas havia silêncio, havia sombra.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lêdo Ivo (1924-2012) was a poet from Alagoas who won many awards and also a member of the Brazilian Academy of Arts. He published dozens of novels and other books in which he portrayed the habits of the people of Alagoas in a satirical way, as well as the streets, buildings and customs of Maceió during the 1930s.

<sup>12</sup> [Translation by the authors: My horizon was restricted to the back garden on the right: the rose bushes, rubbish dump and paw-paw trees. Everything was poor and filthy. Even the rose bushes looked withered and only had tiny buds, There were dunghills close by and stagnant water from which emanated a vile stench. But there was silence and there was shade]. Graciliano Ramos, *Angústia* (São Paulo: Record, 1990), 39.

In summary, *Angústia* is a novel which shows that the backgarden was a place of contradictions: it was dirty but was a source of food supply food; it was ugly but filled with roses which provided the backcloth for the first encounter between Luís da Silva and Marina. This was the configuration of the houses that could be found in Maceió in the 19th Century and remained until the 20th Century, especially among the inhabitants with less purchasing power.

### 2.1. The residential garden by Lêdo Ivo

In the prose with the title *A resposta* [The Answer], written by Lêdo Ivo, a few decades after *Angústia* had been published, the author illustrates a different kind of habitation that belongs to the wealthiest classes of Maceió, and reveals a different kind of relationship between the resident and vegetation within the urban dwellings. It entailed a new life-style in a new district – Farol, and illustrated the changes in social customs after the proclamation of the Republic which represented a complete break with colonial traditions with regard to the construction of houses. In addition, the poetry shows us that there was a significant change in the role of vegetation in the residential dwellings.

Lêdo Ivo describes the gardens of the house of the businessman Seraphim Costa, in the district of Farol:

Os muros brancos, que cercavam o quarteirão, semi-escondiam a casa, também branca, além do jardim que aparecia entre as grades, e em cujos canteiros florejavam espessuras e certas musguntas flores amarelas, e um imenso besouro zoava [...] O palacete branco vulgava riqueza, luxo, secreto esplendor. Além das portas fechadas, das presumíveis estatuetas de mármore, do aroma das dalias, do fino palor dos azulejos, das mudas venezianas, havia decerto um universo de opulência, que a nossa fantasia de meninos pobres mal podia imaginar [...] em seu palacete, na exuberância do jardim equatorial, no chão assombrado de árvores enlanguescidas pelo mormaço, havia algo que era a fusão improfundável dos mais faustosos elementos nativos com uma substância remota e avoengueira, como que a reprodução de antiga planta deixada do outro lado do mar e tacitamente reconstruída pela poupança e ambição do imigrante afortunado. Por isso, meu pai dizia aqui, querendo assim significar tudo o que era o império de Serafim Costa: as grades do jardim, os sinuosos canteiros colmeados de folhas e flores, os calangros e insetos, a água espatifada de uma fonte, os familiares que não apareciam às janelas, talvez para não confundir a visão de todos os que, como eu, o imaginavam reinando solitário em sua mansão, sem quinhoar ostensivamente com ninguém o resultado, de sua vida vitoriosa, feita de zelo e siso.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [Translation by the authors: The white walls which surrounded the neighborhood, partly concealed the house which was also white, as well as the garden which could be glimpsed between the iron railings. This contained clustered flower-beds and yellow flowers and a huge beehive [...] The white palatial building displayed wealth, luxury and a certain splendour. As well as the fact that it had closed doors, statues presumably made of marble, an aroma of dahlias, a fine shade of ceramic tiles and Venetian blinds, there was the feeling of a world of opulence which could hardly be imagined in the fantasy world of any poor youngster [...] There was something in this palatial setting, in the exuberance of the tropical garden and the shade of the trees, languishing in the heat that was an impenetrable merging of the most Faustian common, native elements with remote substances from overseas, like the reproduction of an old plant left on the seashore and silently saved and reconstructed by the wishes of a fortunate immigrant. For this reason, as my father said here, thus wanting to signify everything that constituted the "Serafim Costa" mansion house: the iron railings of the garden, the twisting flower-beds with leaves and flowers sheltering bees, and insects, the splashing water of a fountain and the family members that did not appear at the windows (perhaps not to spoil everyone's view) – like me – they imagined someone reigning alone in their mansion, without sharing their results with anybody in their glorious life which was made up of zeal and maturity]. Lêdo Ivo, "A resposta" [The Answer], in *Releituras* (website), consulted on June 18, 2018, [http://www.releituras.com/ledoivo\\_resposta.asp](http://www.releituras.com/ledoivo_resposta.asp).

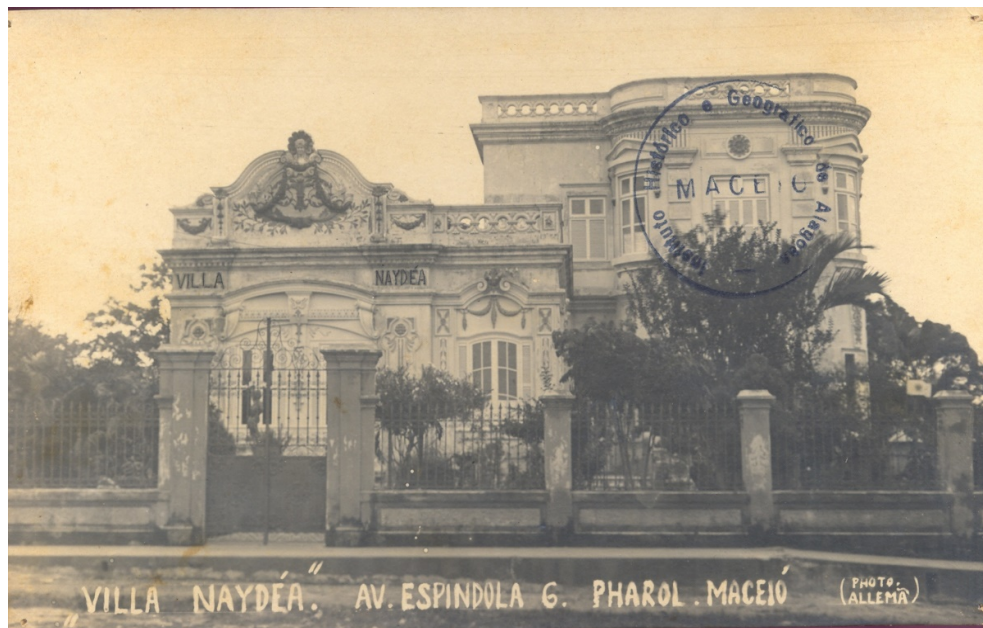


Figure 7: Photograph of the Seraphim Costa mansion house with its gardens, in the district of Farol, in Maceió  
Source: Alagoas Institute of History and Geography (IHGAL)

According to the author, the palatial garden and its garden involved a merging of native elements with the reproduction of features imported from overseas and brought to Seraphim. In this garden with its tropical climate, there were objects with a European influence such as the dainty flowers and the decorative features, which seemed to exist in harmony with the local fauna.

The description of Lêdo Ivo provides testimony that these mansions and their gardens were a living feature in the imaginary world of that time and confirm that in the 20th Century in Brazil, vegetation and its various forms had established a new aesthetic role and added value to the buildings by showing the degree of wealth and luxurious lifestyle of their owners.

### 3. Final considerations

By taking vegetation as the connecting thread in our analysis, we adopted the Municipal City Codes of the Council Chamber of Maceió, which were enacted during the 19th Century and beginning of the 20th Century, as our main research sources. These were supplemented by a selection of texts by classical writers from Alagoas and photographs.

We found that the cultural relationship established from the time of the colonial period that involved an undervaluing of the vegetation in Maceió, can be inferred from the regulatory requirements that only allowed vegetation to be planted in the neglected places within the urban allotments –the backgardens. Thus, it served the utilitarian purpose of subsistence farming and some species began to form a part of the daily lives of the residents, while sharing space with drainage, rubbish and stagnant water and thus underlying the role played by the backgarden as a place that lacked a landscape that could be valued.

Following the changes that took place in the 20th Century, as well as those of the City Codes and customs of the residents, vegetation has begun to play a new role with the urban properties. The inclusion of boundary walls at the sides and front of the houses, has allowed

gardens to be included. Thus, the vegetation has acquired different values – a utilitarian value as a form of subsistence farming in the backgardens and what is now an aesthetic value which plays a role in the residential dwellings in a way that has never been the case before.

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