

In Fortaleza, Brazil, Old Buildings Tell City's Story

Contributed by Ernest Barteldes
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Founded in the 17th Century by Dutch conquerors, Fortaleza is one of the few cities in Brazil that has preserved many of its historical buildings despite the incredible urban growth it experienced during the early 70s and 80s, a period when many older structures were torn down to give way to residential towers and commercial venues.

One of the most shameless was the demolition of the historic mansion Castelo do Plácido, which was located in a large block on Avenida Santos Dumont. Its senseless destruction is the equivalent to what happened in New York with the original Pennsylvania Station, which is considered one of the greatest crimes committed against the history of The Big Apple.

The palace was built in the early part of the 20th Century by a millionaire named Plácido de Carvalho to serve the whims of his Italian-born wife, Pierina Giovanni. There is no official record of this, and according to the website Fortaleza Ontem e Hoje, it's all pretty much popular legend.

Carvalho lived there until his death. Upon his passing, the widow married architect Emilio Hinko, who designed several other European-inspired buildings in the city (some of which still stand today).

In the 1970s, the beautiful mansion (a copy of a similar structure in Italy) was torn down to make way to a supermarket that ultimately never came to fruition. Decades later, the state government took over the land (which still held several smaller structures from the property) and built the Luiza Tavora Artisan Center, where local artists peddle their merchandise to visiting tourists.

Despite this and other mishaps, there is a lot that can be seen of the city's history through its architecture. By taking a walk around Fortaleza's downtown district, you can visit the Fortaleza de Nossa Senhora de Assunção, built in 1812 on the location of the old Fort Schoonenborch, where the city was originally born.

Just a block behind the fort is the Passeio Público (Public Square), where the city's high and mighty would go for walks on leisurely afternoons. The square, which today is frequented by much less reputable individuals, is also home to one of Brazil's few existing baobabs, a tree of African origin that was made famous by Antoine de St. Exupery on his book *The Little Prince*.

Just across from the square is the Santa Casa de Misericórdia (Rua Barão do Rio Branco, 20 - Centro), a still-active hospital built in 1861, which is dedicated to chronic diseases and to helping the disenfranchised ill in the area.

Walking a few blocks north you will find Praça do Ferreira, the city's center square. That place has a curious history: built in Fortaleza's early days and refurbished several times, the square was redesigned in 1967 in a quest to "modernize" the downtown district. The result later was an embarrassment that was finally torn down in the 90s, when the original 1920s design was restored.

Even further north is the Teatro José de Alencar (Rua Liberato Barroso 525 - Centro). Built in 1910 during the city's gilded age, its Victorian design contrasts with the new commercial district where it is now located. Today, music fans can enjoy regular classical music concerts and plays that tour the country with some of the best-known names in Brazil's entertainment scene.

There is much more to see around Fortaleza's downtown district that does not fit this article - for additional information, you can visit

<http://www.ceara.pro.br/Fortaleza/index.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortaleza,_Brazil

Ernest Barteldes is a freelance writer based on Staten Island, New York. This article appeared originally in The Brazilians. He can be reached at ebarteldes@yahoo.com.