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URBAN REQUALIFICATION AND POPULAR COMMERCE: CONFLICTS, REGULATION, AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE IN THE CENTER OF MOSSORÓ-RN, BRAZIL

Requalificação urbana e comércio popular: conflitos, regulação e produção do espaço no centro de Mossoró-RN, Brasil

Recalificación urbana y comercio popular: conflictos, regulación y producción del espacio en el centro de Mossoró-RN, Brasil



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the urban redevelopment process of downtown Mossoró, Brazil, focusing on the implementation of the Novo Centro Comercial and the institutionalization of street vending. Drawing on Critical Urban Geography, the study demonstrates how formal and informal commercial practices have historically shaped the city's centrality, revealing territorial disputes, unequal power relations, and divergent spatial rationalities. Based on documentary research, fieldwork, interviews and photographic records, the analysis shows that informal commerce is not a residual phenomenon but a structural component of the urban economy. Recent interventions, driven by the Public Prosecutor's Office and the enforcement of accessibility regulations, indicate that redevelopment operates beyond physical forms, transforming uses, flows and the legitimacy of central urban practices. Findings show mixed outcomes: improvements in pedestrian circulation and spatial order coexist with challenges relating to visibility, operational costs and adaptation to the new commercial facility. The study concludes that Mossoró's urban redevelopment reflects ongoing tensions among the right to work, the right to the city and hegemonic projects of territorial reordering.

Keywords: Urban requalification; Popular commerce; Production of space; Urban centrality; Mossoró.

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RESUMO

O artigo analisa o processo de requalificação urbana do centro de Mossoró-RN, com foco na implantação do novo Centro Comercial e na institucionalização do comércio ambulante. A partir de referenciais da Geografia Urbana Crítica, investiga-se como práticas formais e informais historicamente configuraram a centralidade mossoroense, evidenciando a articulação entre disputas territoriais, racionalidades divergentes e assimetrias de poder. A pesquisa reúne análise documental, trabalho de campo, entrevistas e registros fotográficos, demonstrando que o comércio popular não é resíduo da modernização, mas componente estruturante da dinâmica urbana. As intervenções recentes, impulsionadas pela atuação do Ministério Público e pelo cumprimento de normas de acessibilidade, revelam que a requalificação não opera apenas sobre formas materiais, mas redefine usos, fluxos e legitimidades no espaço central. O estudo mostra que a transferência dos ambulantes para o Novo Centro Comercial produziu efeitos distintos entre comerciantes formais, usuários do centro e trabalhadores realocados, destacando avanços em circulação e organização, mas também tensões relativas à visibilidade, custos operacionais e adaptação ao novo equipamento. Conclui-se que a requalificação urbana em Mossoró expressa a persistente disputa entre direito ao trabalho, direito à cidade e projetos hegemônicos de ordenamento territorial.

Palavras-chave: Requalificação urbana; Comércio popular; Produção do espaço; Centralidade urbana; Mossoró.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza el proceso de requalificación urbana del centro de Mossoró-RN, con foco en la implantación del nuevo Centro Comercial y en la institucionalización del comercio ambulante. A partir de referentes de la Geografía Urbana Crítica, se investiga cómo las prácticas formales e informales han configurado históricamente la centralidad mossoroense, evidenciando la articulación entre disputas territoriales, racionalidades divergentes y asimetrías de poder. La investigación reúne análisis documental, trabajo de campo, entrevistas y registros fotográficos, demostrando que el comercio popular no es un residuo de la modernización, sino un componente estructurante de la dinámica urbana. Las intervenciones recientes, impulsadas por la actuación del Ministerio Público y por el cumplimiento de normas de accesibilidad, revelan que la requalificación no opera solo sobre formas materiales, sino que redefine usos, flujos y legitimidades en el espacio central. El estudio muestra que el traslado de los ambulantes al Nuevo Centro Comercial produjo efectos distintos entre comerciantes formales, usuarios del centro y trabajadores reubicados, destacando avances en circulación y organización, pero también tensiones relativas a la visibilidad, los costos operativos y la adaptación al nuevo equipamiento. Se concluye que la requalificación urbana en Mossoró expresa la persistente disputa entre derecho al trabajo, derecho a la ciudad y proyectos hegemónicos de ordenamiento territorial.

Palabras clave: Recalificación urbana; Comercio popular; Producción del espacio; Centralidad urbana; Mossoró.

1 INTRODUCTION

The street commerce and the informality constitute structuring dimensions of the economic dynamics and the production of space in Brazilian cities. In medium-sized cities like Mossoró (RN), this reality expresses itself historically through the occupation of central areas, where formal and informal commercial practices coexist and compete for centralities,

flows and usage of territory. For decades, street vendors have appropriated the sidewalks, streets and squares of the Mossoró's commercial district, shaping a territory of strong economic vitality, but also marked by intense conflict over the usage of public space.

In the face of the spatial saturation and the obstruction of public footpaths, the downtown of Mossoró became the target of institutional interventions. Following civil inquiries launched by the Public Prosecutor's Office of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, which demanded the fulfillment of accessibility norms (NBR 9050/2004)[1] of the Municipal Building and Land Use Code, the Municipal Government started an urban requalification process that culminated in the removal of street vendors from the public thoroughfares and in the implementation of the new Ademar Dantas de Lira Commercial Center, inaugurated in April 2025.

It's in this context of tensions between the state regulation, the right of public mobility and the informal workers' survival strategies that the central issue of this study emerges guided by the following question: what are the socio-spatial impacts of urban requalification and the transference of street vendors to the Novo Centro Comercial in Mossoró's centrality dynamics?

To answer this question, the present article has the general objective to analyze the urban requalification process of downtown Mossoró (RN), focusing on territorial competition, institutional regulation and the effects of the implementation of the new Commercial Center over formal and informal merchants, as well as passersby.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research aligns itself with the assumptions of Critical Urban Geography, understanding that requalification is not a neutral technical intervention, but a political process that redefines uses, access and the very social production of urban space. The deepening of this debate is grounded by authors who discuss space production, the theory of urban economic circuits and requalification policies.

Finally, to achieve the proposed objetctives and understand the mulitple dimensions of this phenomenon, the research adopted a mixed-methods and descriptive-analytical approach. The detailed research procedures, which include documentary research, mapping, and fieldwork with interviews, are described in the following methodology section.

[1] Although the ABNT NBR 9050 (Acessibility to urban buildings, furniture, spaces and equipments) has the 2020 version, with correction in 2021, as most recent, the usage of the 2004 normative text is justified by being the current parameter at the time of the institution of the civil inquiries by the Public Prosecutor's Office.

1.1 Methodological procedures

To analyze the urban requalification process and the institutionalization of street commerce in downtown Mossoró (RN), this study adopted a mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) descriptive-analytical approach. In compliance with ethical and regulatory guidelines for scientific research involving human subjects, the study was previously submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte, under Opinion No. 7,968,986.

The research procedures were structured and organized into four complementary axes:

The first axis consisted of an extensive literature review grounded in the assumptions of critical urban space analysis. Classic authors who discuss the production of space, the theory of urban economic circuits, and territorial conflicts were drawn upon, such as Lefebvre (2006), Santos & Silveira (2001), Santos (2006), Carlos (1994), Harvey (2013, 2014), and Corrêa (1989), in addition to empirical studies on informality and street commerce in Mossoró, highlighting the contributions of Silva, Araújo, Gomes, and Beserra (2018).

The second axis focused on document analysis. Urban planning legislation (Mossoró's Building and Land Use Code), accessibility standards (ABNT NBR 9050/2004), technical reports, and official records from the Municipal Government were examined. Special emphasis was given to the analysis of Civil Inquiry No. 06.2011.000621-8 and the Civil Public Action (Lawsuit No. 0102794-55.2014.8.20.0106) launched by the Public Prosecutor's Office of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, both of which were fundamental to understanding the spatial litigation.

The third axis corresponded to empirical fieldwork, conducted between November and December 2025. Primary data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews with a total of 33 subjects. The sample was intentionally divided into five representative groups of the different actors producing and using the central space:

- Formal merchants from the vacated strets: 05 (five) respondents installed in the streets where the street vendors got removed;
- Passersby in the downtown area: 12 (twelve) users and pedestrians circulating in the requalified area;
- Merchants from former Bezerra Mendes Street: 05 (five) formal merchants that were already established in the street before the construction of the new equipment;

- Merchants from the Novo Centro Comercial: 10 (ten) informal workers/street vendors that were relocated to boxes of the new complex;
- Government: 1 (one) technical representative of the Mossró City Government (RTPMM), in charge of managing the construction process.

Finally, the fourth axis involved iconographical research, in situ photographic records, and the mapping of morphological transformations in the downtown area. These techniques allowed for the visualization of the materiality of the changes brought about by the requalification process, as well as contrasting the suitability of the new commercial center with pre-existing spatial dynamics. The location map of the Centro Comercial Ademar Dantas de Lira and adjacent commerce was produced using QGIS 3.40.12 software, based on data collected during fieldwork.

Quantitative data extracted from the interviews (approval percentages, operational costs, and safety perception) were tabulated and subjected to simple descriptive statistics. Meanwhile, qualitative data—derived from the narratives of merchants and the local government representative—were analyzed through content analysis and triangulated with the documentary base and theoretical framework, highlighting the divergent rationalities and conflicts inherent in the struggle for the right to the city.

Artificial Intelligence tools, namely ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini (Google), were utilized during the textual editing process for spelling and grammatical correction.

2 URBAN SPACE PRODUCTION, CENTRALITY AND REQUALIFICATION POLICIES

Mossoró's commercial dynamics constitute one of the structuring axes of its spatial production, historically linking regional flows and diverse forms of economic organization. As Couto (2010) observes, the city consolidated its centrality by integrating mercantile circuits from the Potiguar West and the Jaguaribe Valley, a process that intensified with the expansion of the tertiary sector in the 1980s, driven by productive modernization and rural-to-urban population shifts. Beginning in the 2000s, the arrival of shopping malls and retail chains redefined consumption practices and generated new centralities, coexisting with traditional forms of street commerce.

However, as recent studies on the Mossoró territory demonstrate, this commercial vitality is not limited to the formal sector. Informal commerce, street markets, mobile stalls, street vendors, and micro-establishments without employees, has become a structuring component of daily urban life, operating through logics of flexibility, proximity, and adaptation

(Silva et al., 2018; Fundo Brasil, 2022). According to Silva et al. (2018), these practices constitute a historical and social construction rooted in unequal access to the formal labor market, as well as in the daily agency of workers who produce specific sociabilities and uses of the downtown area.

This scenario confirms the Critical Urban Approach perspective that commerce, whether formal or informal, acts as a producer of space. Corrêa (1989) emphasizes that the city must be understood as an expression of multiple rationalities, whose economic practices continually reorganize the territory. For the author, commercial activities reveal distinct modes of use and contestation of urban space, reflecting inequalities among the agents who produce it. They are distributed according to diverse logics, creating centralities, frictions, and complementarities. Thus, commerce does not merely occupy the city: it directly participates in its construction, reflecting the social relations and conflicts that shape the territory (Corrêa, 1989).

From the 2000s onward, the proliferation of establishments without employees, many operating on the threshold between formality and informality, intensified this process, reinforcing the presence of small businesses and spontaneous occupations in high-pedestrian-traffic areas (Couto, 2010). This coexistence between modern commerce and street commerce produced a heterogeneous urban center, marked by conflicts and permanence.

Understanding Mossoró's commerce, therefore, implies recognizing that it does not merely react to socioeconomic transformations, but acts as an active agent in the production of space. Any intervention aimed at the reorganization of street commerce must thus consider this historical, social, and territorial complexity that shapes Mossoró's urban economy.

Based on the foundations of critical geography, it becomes possible to comprehend urban requalification not as a neutral technical intervention, but as an instrument of urban policy that acts selectively upon central areas. By mobilizing discourses of spatial ordering, accessibility, and modernization, such policies redefine centralities, establish new criteria of legitimacy for the uses of space, and produce differentiated effects on the various agents occupying it. Thus, discussing urban requalification implies analyzing it as a constitutive part of the struggles over the production and control of urban space.

Urban requalification has occupied a strategic position in policies aimed at Brazilian downtowns, frequently mobilized as an instrument of modernization and territorial repositioning. As Peixoto (2009) observes, its recurring use in technical discourse tends to

conceal the political character of these interventions, which present themselves as neutral solutions but operate selectively on urban uses, practices, and subjects. The author warns that the proliferation of "re-" prefixes—revitalize, rehabilitate, renew, requalify—produces a rhetoric that masks disputes and legitimizes projects aligned with specific city models.

In the case of Mossoró, requalification policies do not respond to a process of downtown emptying, but rather to a conflicting reorganization of its space, marked by the coexistence of formal commerce, street vendors, and daily practices linked to the lower circuit of the urban economy through informal vending, characterized by low capital intensity, informal commodity circuits, and reliance on family labor. Public interventions directly impact the territoriality of these workers, producing new regulatory boundaries and redefining legitimate uses of the central space (Silva et al., 2018)."

From this perspective, requalification must be understood as part of the social production of space, aligning with the Lefebvrian formulation that conceives urban space not as a mere passive support, but as an element dialectically engendered by social relations and, at the same time, a producer of them (Lefebvre, 2006). By acting upon circulation, accessibility, and patterns of use, interventions reorganize the local urban economy, select practices, and alter the visibility of specific segments, particularly those linked to street commerce.

Thus, far from configuring a mere technical action, the requalification of Bezerra Mendes Street expresses disputes over centrality, value, and urban legitimacy. Its analysis requires acknowledging that the management of downtown articulates the interests of the State, the real estate market, established merchants, and informal workers, producing structural effects on socioterritorial dynamics. In this sense, rather than simple beautification or functional reorganization, requalification reveals different city projects and redefines who has access, permanence, and recognition within the central space.

3 THE NEW COMMERCIAL CENTER OF MOSSORÓ: GENESIS, IMPLEMENTATION AND INITIAL IMPACTS

The analysis of Mossoró's new Ademar Dantas de Lira Commercial Center is situated within the debate of critical geography concerning the social production of space and urban requalification policies affecting central areas. As previously discussed, such policies operate as instruments of territorial reorganization, mobilizing discourses of spatial ordering, accessibility, and modernization, while simultaneously redefining centralities,

uses, and forms of appropriation of urban space. From this perspective, the implementation of this new Commercial Center is understood not merely as a technical response to conflicts over public space usage, but as part of a broader process of institutionalizing popular economic practices, marked by disputes among state agents, formal merchants, informal workers, and downtown users.

The creation of Mossoró's new Commercial Center is the result of a complex historical process in which daily conflicts, disputes over public space usage, and institutional pressures culminated in a large-scale urban intervention. The issue surrounding the occupation of downtown's main thoroughfares is not unique to Mossoró, but rather expresses a contemporary phenomenon characteristic of Brazilian cities: the expansion of informality across central areas, putting pressure on already saturated urban infrastructure and straining the coexistence among formal merchants, informal workers, and passersby. Visual and noise pollution, alongside the obstruction of walkways, recurring elements of this process, became markers of daily city life and revealed, as Santos & Silveira (2001) observe, the existence of a 'used territory' (território usado) imbued with distinct rationalities.

In Mossoró, this scenario intensified at beginning of the 21st century, when urban growth was not accompanied by sufficiently structured commercial ordering policies. Until 2000, Bezerra Mendes Street—located between Meira e Sá Street and Augusto Severo Avenue in downtown Mossoró—hosted an open-air market (feira livre) (Figure 01) that shared space with vehicular traffic, creating a scenario typical of Brazilian popular centralities. The purchase of the National Supply Company (CONAB)[2] building, where Cobal currently operates, by the Municipal Government in the early 2000s prompted the first major reorganization: produce vendors were relocated to the new facility, while others were distributed across areas such as the former Vuco-Vuco Fair, then located at Ulrick Graf Square.

[2] Created in 1990, it emerged from the merger of the Brazilian Food Company (Cobal), the Production Financing Company (CFP), and the Brazilian Storage Company (Cibrazem). Its objective was to integrate food supply, agricultural production incentives, and storage activities, consolidating Conab as the entity responsible for agricultural and supply policies in the country.

Figure 01 – Open-air market at Bezerra Mendes Street



Source: Blog Memória Fotográfica: Uma imagem. Um registro. Uma história.[3]

However, the clearing of the street did not result in the effective ordering of commercial practices downtown (Pereira, 2018). Over the following years, sidewalks and public squares once again established themselves as preferred spaces for setup of stalls, booths, and improvised structures, creating scenarios of spatial saturation.

Independência Square, located in front of the Public Central Market, became the point of highest concentration of street vendors. Coronel Gurgel Street, one of the city's main commercial axes, experienced a similar situation: its sidewalks were progressively occupied by both informal and formal merchants who, competing for product visibility, encroached upon the space designated for pedestrian circulation.

In many stretches, pedestrians were forced to cross the street to continue their route, revealing a severe violation of the right to accessibility. This situation was described by prosecutor Herminio Souza Perez Junior in the civil public action:

> The ilegal and irregular occupation of sidewalks by merchants and street vendors desvirtuates, currently, the usage normally given to the sidewalks. [...] it is verified that the sidewalks are occupated by the street vendors and merchants, while the pedestrians (and people with disability- wheelchair users- are also pedestrians) are sharing street space with cars, risking,

[3] Available at: https://blogdetelescope.blogspot.com/2014/02/rua-bezerra-mendes.html Acessed: December 10, 2025

> obviously, their own life and/ or physical integrity. (Rio Grande do Norte, 2025, p. 16)

The irregular occupation of public sidewalks and the undue appropriation of parking areas reached critical levels of intensity. This condition resulted in an environment hostile to pedestrians, who were compelled to walk on the roadway, sharing space with vehicular traffic, as illustrated in Figure 02. The aforementioned image shows an emblematic site of occupation in downtown Mossoró, occupied for over 50 years. The landmark is located alongside Santa Luzia Cathedral and the Central Market, at the intersection of Francisco Peregrino Street and Martins de Vasconcelos Lane.

Figure 02 – Pedestrians walk sharing space with vehicles



Source: Jornal Defato (Gildo Bento) - 2013

Starting in 2009, this scenario became the subject of institutional scrutiny. A complaint filed by a local citizen with the Public Prosecutor's Office of the State of Rio Grande do Norte triggered the opening of Civil Inquiry No. 06.2011.000621-8, led by the 18th Prosecution Office, which is also responsible for matters regarding the protection of persons with disabilities. The objective was to investigate the irregular occupation of downtown sidewalks by shopkeepers and street vendors, as well as to ensure compliance with Article 132 of the Municipal Building, Land Use, and Maintenance Code:

> Art. 132. The construction of sidewalks shall be mandatory across the entire frontage of properties located on public thoroughfares equipped with curbs, in compliance with current accessibility legislation.
> §1º The minimum width of sidewalks and walkways shall be 2.00 m (two meters).
> §2º All plots, lots, and tracts of land located within the urban perimeter, even if not yet occupied by a building, must have their sidewalks paved, provided the curb has already been placed or approved by the Municipal Government.
> §3º Lots located in environmental protection areas must consult the municipal environmental authority prior to paving their sidewalks and walkways.
> §4º Under the penalties of this code, the upkeep and maintenance of sidewalks shall be the responsibility of the owner of the property they serve (Mossoró, 2010, p. 35).

And the accessibility standards set forth in items 3.11 and 6.10.5 of ABNT NBR 9050/2004:

> 3.11 sidewalk: Part of the street, usually segregated and at a different level, not intended for vehicular traffic, reserved for pedestrian traffic and, when possible, for the installation of urban furniture, signage, vegetation, and other purposes—Brazilian Traffic Code (ABNT, 2004, p. 2).
> 6.10.5 Obstructions in the clear width: Clear widths must be completely unobstructed and free of interference, such as vegetation, urban furniture, above-ground urban infrastructure equipment (utility poles, equipment cabinets, and others), tree rings and planters, driveway drops, as well as any other type of interference or obstacle that reduces the width of the clear path. Any overhead obstacles, such as marquees, banners and identification signs, awnings, illuminated signs, vegetation, and others, must be located at a height greater than 2.10 m (ABNT, 2004, p. 53).

In this sense, the Public Prosecutor's Office acted as an enforcement agent, linking urban legality to the right to mobility. A technical inspection was conducted to determine the required dimensions for ensuring a clear pedestrian path in accordance with technical standards, establishing the minimum dimensions for each of the main occupied streets, as shown in Table 01 below:

Table 01 – Summary of the analyzed clear paths along the streets of downtown Mossoró, RN

No.	Thoroughfare/Reference point	Minimum size
1	Coronel Gurgel Street in front of “A Moderna Magazine” store	2,26m
2	Augusto Severo Avenue in front of “Mania Calçados” store	1,86m
3	Francisco Peregrino Street “Beco das Frutas” (“Fruit Alley”)	1,20m
4	Alberto Maranhão Avenue Banco do Brasil’s sidewalk	1,20m
5	Felipe Camarão Street in front of “Loja do Papai”	1,20m
6	Intersection of Felipe Camarão Street and Coronel Gurgel Street	1,20m
7	Coronel Gurgel Street in front of “Rei dos Colchões” store	1,20m
8	Tiradentes Street in front of “VL Comercial” establishment	1,20m

9	Rui Barbosa Street in front of “WR Industrial” store	1,20m
10	Meira e Sá Street	1,20m
11	Bezerra Mendes Street next to “Park Center”	1,82m
12	Dr. Mário Negócio Street in front of “Fabrício Bijouterias” store	1,20m
13	Frei A. da Conceição Street next to Santa Luzia Church	1,20m
14	Idalino de Oliveira Street next to Mossoró City Council's building	1,20m
15	Vicente Saboia Street in front of “Bradesco”	1,30m
16	Santos Dumont Street in front of “Farmácia do Trabalhador	1,26m

Source: Rio Grande do Norte, 2025

Judicial Case No. 0102794-55.2014.8.20.0106 demonstrates a trajectory marked by controversies, conciliation attempts, and institutional impasses. In 2012, the Municipal Government of Mossoró proposed the construction of a street vendor market (camelódromo) on land belonging to the Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte (UERN), where the ACEU Club formerly operated, an option rendered unfeasible due to the refusal to transfer the property. In 2014, action by the Public Prosecutor's Office resulted in an injunction establishing deadlines for implementing clear pedestrian paths in the downtown area. Faced with an alleged lack of resources to immediately construct a dedicated facility, the municipality opted to issue a public call for the accreditation of private properties as a provisional strategy for relocating street vendors.

Newly built and inaugurated on March 3, 2015, the Shopping Popular (Figure 03) was accredited by the Municipal Government and became an option for relocating vendors, making 250 stalls available for rent. However, monthly rental prices for the spaces, ranging from R$ 500.00 to R$ 700.00, were met with dissatisfaction by the merchants, who resisted the proposal.

After extensive negotiations and several extensions of deadlines, in May 2015, the Municipal Government of Mossoró, in compliance with judicial orders and without having constructed an alternative location for relocation, had to initiate the removal of street vendors from downtown sidewalks, public squares, and streets. This sparked resistance among the merchants, as illustrated in Figure 04, which records the blockade of traffic on Coronel Gurgel Street during a protest against the court order.

Figure 03 – Mossoró's Shopping Popular



Source: Portal Mossoroense[4]

The legal establishment of the Association of Street Vendors of Mossoró (Associação dos Comerciantes Ambulantes de Mossoró – ASCAM) formalized the vendors' participation in the urban reorganization process, granting them the status of interested parties and legitimate interlocutors. However, the absence of an effective and consensual solution from the public administration perpetuated the impasse in public space management.

In 2019, under pressure and intervention from the Public Prosecutor's Office of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, the Municipal Government of Mossoró made a renewed attempt at negotiation aiming at the removal of vendors from central sidewalks. The discussions, however, proved fruitless, triggering resistance from street vendors and an intensification of protests and public demonstrations.

This episode illustrates the role of the State as a key agente in the production of urban space, given that, according to Corrêa (1989), the State acts as one of the primary agents producing space, operating through regulations, policies, and interventions that redefine uses and territorialities. In agreement, Harvey (2013) highlights that the State plays a strategic role in spatial reorganization by enabling urban projects aimed at ordering, circulation, and land valorization, which are often subordinated to the rationalities of capitalist accumulation. Thus, state intervention in Mossoró must be understood as part of

[4] Available at: https://mossoro-portal.blogspot.com/2015/06/shopping-popular-de-mossoro.html Acessed: December 10, 2025

a structural process of regulation and control of central space, in which hegemonic city projects confront historically rooted popular practices.

Figure 04 - Street vendors' protest in downtown Mossoró (2019)



Source: Portal Mossoró Hoje [5]

Note: The banners in the image read: "Prefeita não tire o sustento dos nossos filhos" [Mayor, do not take away our children's livelihood] and "Precisamos trabalhar! Camelô não é ladrão" [We need to work! Street vendors are not thieves].

The scenario changed more definitively only as of 2022, when the Court of Justice of the State of Rio Grande do Norte ruled in favor of the civil public action filed by the Public Prosecutor's Office and mandated the Municipality of Mossoró to adopt concrete measures to clear the sidewalks. The decision accelerated the need for urban planning and prompted the municipal administration to resume studies for the creation of an adequate space for street vendors, as explained by the technical officer of the Municipal Government of Mossoró, hereinafter referred to as RTPMM[6]:

> [...] as soon as we received the court ruling to clear the people who were on the sidewalks and surrounding areas in the downtown area, we knew we couldn't do it abruptly, so we started planning. We brought in the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Judiciary, and we began negotiating a location [...] (RTPMM, 2025).

[5] Available at: https://www.mossorohoje.com.br/noticias/27143-ambulantes-protestam-contra-decisao-de-retirada-do-centro-da-cidade Acessed: December 11, 2025

[6] Interview conducted by the author with subject RTPMM (pseudonym), in Mossoró, on December 4, 2025.

According to the RTPMM, during negotiations with ASCAM, “the only requirement was to not leave the downtown area”. The solution found was the transformation of Bezerra Mendes and Terezinha Costa Streets, from commom-use property[7], special-purpose property[8], destinating them to the implantation of a commercial center designed exclusively to establish the merchants. The choice of location is tied to its urban history: the former “Rua das Flores” (“Flower Street”) was traditionally marked by an intense movement of goods and people, given its proximity to the Central Market and its relevance in the economic life of Mossoró.

To RTPMM, the idea of requalifying Bezerra Mendes Street was justified by its location:

> [...] Next to the market and a public square that we can already revitalize and organize it as a whole. So, that's when the idea came up to set up the whole commercial center on Bezerra Mendes Street, because we would only change a bit of traffic logistics, urban mobility, but we would be able to accommodate everyone. (RTPMM, 2025)

"Construction work for the commercial center, named Ademar Dantas de Lira, including the renovation of Praça da Independência as part of the “Mossoró Realiza[9]”, program, began on January 15, 2024, and was completed on April 22, 2025, representing a total investment of R$ 12,054,083.08. The handover of the facility marked the beginning of the transition process for the street vendors, who were given until May 23, 2025, to complete their relocation.

To establish the complex, vehicular traffic was closed off on Bezerra Mendes and Terezinha Costa Streets, the latter located between the Central Public Market and Praça da Independência. As a result of this road intervention, traffic coming from Meira e Sá Street was prohibited from turning right onto Bezerra Mendes Street, as well as turning left to access Terezinha Costa Street, thereby restricting road connection to Augusto Severo Avenue. Furthermore, to accommodate the number of stalls required for the facility's

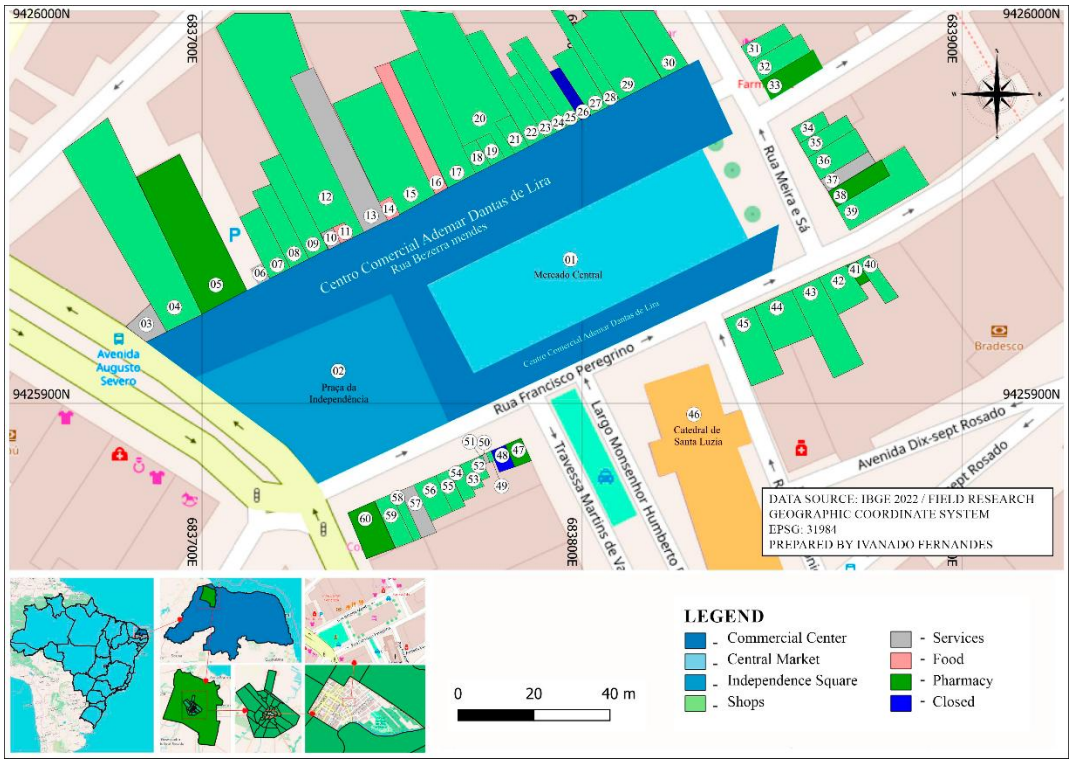
[7] Public properties that belong to the entire population and cannot be appropriated by specific individuals or groups. According to the Brazilian Civil Code (Art. 99, I), properties for public use include: rivers and seas; roads, streets, and public squares; parks and beaches

[8] "Public properties that have a specific public purpose and are allocated to a particular service or establishment. They are used by the public, but in a targeted manner and within specific regulations

[9] Strategic program of goals and investments by the Municipal Government of Mossoró, executed with financial resources from Caixa Econômica Federal

operation, a section of Francisco Peregrino Street, situated adjacent to the Central Market, was incorporated into the project, as illustrated in Figure 05.

Figure 05 – Ademar Dantas de Lira Commercial Center Location Map



Source: IBGE (2022) and field research (2025)

Spanning an area of 2,480 m² (Length: 155 m, Width: 16 m), 315 stalls were constructed across 15 distinct modules, including: women's and men's restrooms featuring accessible toilets for persons with disabilities (PWD); a pantry and technical room; a municipal guard module containing an administrative section, a municipal guard room, tourist information, an accessible restroom, and a pantry; a waste storage module; a bike rack with 16 spaces; 20 taxi spaces; 1 drop-off and pick-up bay for ride-hailing app users; 34 motorcycle parking spaces; 5 delivery rider (motoboy) spaces; 17 motorcycle taxi (moto-táxi) spaces; interlocking concrete block paving; and a metallic roof structure. Additionally, handrails, guardrails, tactile paving, ramps, three accessible restrooms, and accessible parking spaces were installed (see Figure 06).

Figure 06 – Mossoró's Commercial Center



Source: Field research (2025)

The genesis of Mossoró's new Commercial Center thus expresses a complex interplay among social demands, institutional pressures, everyday conflicts over the use of urban space, and structural policy decisions. Its implementation not only complies with a judicial mandate but also reflects a reconfiguration of central area management policies and the dynamics of informal street trade. The initial perceptions of this intervention, concerning both the reorganization of circulation and the redistribution of economic activities, serve as a fundamental analytical key to understanding recent transformations in Mossoró's urban centrality.

Based on field research, interviews were conducted with established merchants along the streets from which vendors were removed, pedestrians in the downtown area, merchants established on Bezerra Mendes Street prior to its requalification, vendors settled in the New Commercial Center, and the technical representative of the Municipal Government of Mossoró responsible for the works, in order to evaluate perceptions of this process.

When established merchants along the cleared streets were asked about the main effects of these interventions on the area, their responses were decisive regarding the "improvement in commercial shopfront visibility" and the "improvement in customer flow". Regarding what public authorities could do to enhance neighborhood conditions, interviewees cited the "improvement of parking availability" and the "regularization of

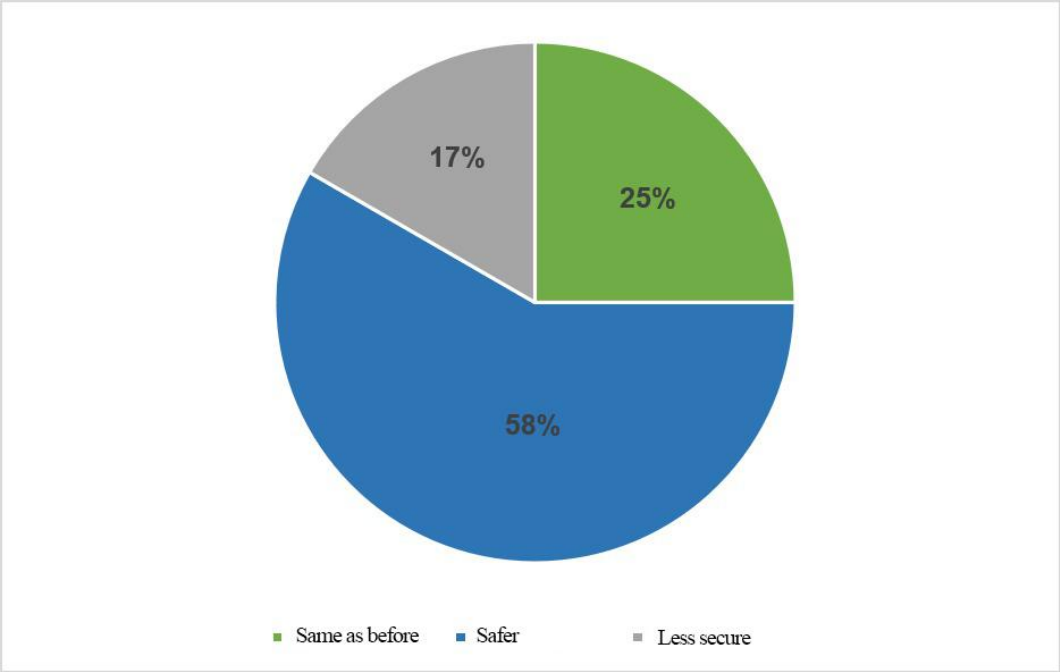
sidewalk", identified as the primary issues to boost customer traffic. When asked to evaluate the relocation process of street vendors from the area's sidewalks, the majority rated it as positive.

These perspectives indicate that vendor relocation transcends the physical dimension of spatial displacement, configuring a process of reconfiguring economic practices and redefining what comes to be recognized as the legitimate use of central space. By prioritizing fluid circulation, storefront visibility, and sidewalk regularization, established merchants reinforce a conception of centrality driven by order and commercial functionality. In this context, state intervention acts as an agent in the hierarchization of urban uses, since, as Corrêa (1989) notes, urban space results from the actions of social agents whose practices produce a fragmented and articulated space fraught with conflicts, wherein certain uses are legitimized to the detriment of others.

Interviews conducted with pedestrians in the downtown area (Centro) revealed consistent and unanimous data. When asked whether pedestrian circulation had improved following the relocation of street vendors and about their perception of greater neighborhood organization, all of the respondents (100%) answered affirmatively.

Among the suggestions offered for enhancing the central area, the shortage of parking spaces emerged once again as the most recurrent concern. Furthermore, it was observed that the perceived improvement in traffic flow and public space organization positively influenced perceptions of safety. A majority of participants identified an improvement in neighborhood security following the interventions, as synthesized in Figure 07.

Figure 07 – Pedestrians' evaluation of the security in the relocated area



Source: Made by the author after field research (2025)

In the interviews conducted with merchants established on Bezerra Mendes Street prior to its requalification, we identified a divided perception. When asked how they evaluate the requalification of Bezerra Mendes Street, 60% (3 out of 5) stated that it was positive, while 40% (2 out of 5) rated it as negative. However, when asked how they evaluate this change regarding their own business, the data inverted. One of the issues cited by this group directly conflicts with a central point raised by the merchants along the streets from which the vendors were removed. While that former group cited an "improvement in commercial shopfront visibility", the reverse applies to the merchants on Bezerra Mendes Street, who complain that they "lost visibility", in addition to pointing out issues with "parking" and even "accessibility". According to one interviewee, due to the construction of the Commercial Center, their establishment, being on higher ground, lost accessibility because "the constructed sidewalks did not comply with accessibility standards".

The topographic discrepancy (elevation difference) can be objectively observed in Figure 08. This illustration presents photographic records evidencing the level difference between the built volume of the Commercial Center and the adjacent commercial units, which belong to the original urban layout. Such observation confirms the physical discontinuity existing between the different phases of land occupation in the study area.

Figure 08 – Sidewalks without acessibiity



Source: Field research (2025)

This situation reveals an inherent contradiction in the requalification process: although backed by a legal discourse that frames accessibility as an urban right, the materiality of the produced space fails to ensure actual conditions of use. The topographic elevation difference compromises spatial continuity and hinders integration between the new urban facility and pre-existing structures, highlighting the fragmentation of the urban fabric. Thus, the requalification ultimately reproduces spatial inequalities, reflecting the tension between formal standardization and the everyday experience of users.

Regarding relationships with other merchants and commercial competition, the interviewees demonstrated good rapport and stated that competition was not an issue, with the majority believing that 'there is room for everyone.' Concerning sales performance following the requalification, in the opinion of the respondents, only 20% (1 out of 5) reported an improvement.

In interviews with merchants operating within the New Commercial Center, we identified a overwhelmingly positive reaction toward the new site. Even among those who responded negatively regarding customer traffic and sales volume, when asked whether they intended to remain, all were decisive in answering 'yes.' When questioned about their reasons, responses ranged from 'in hopes that things will improve' to 'I have nowhere else

to go.' However, one interviewee, identified here as ENTREV01[10], categorically expressed her satisfaction by stating:"

> Some people dream of owning a Ferrari; my dream was simply to have a place to sell and earn my livelihood. This venue fulfilled my dream. Today, I support my family in a decent, clean, well-structured, and safe place, protected from the rain and the sun. I go home with peace of mind knowing that tomorrow I'll come back and my little things will be right here, safe and sound. (Entrev01, 2025).

The evaluation of the vendor relocation process revealed divergent perceptions: 60% (6 out of 10) of respondents reported that the process was well-explained and organized, whereas 40% (4 out of 10) considered it confusing and disorganized. Participation in prior discussions regarding the relocation demonstrated a clear correlation: among the 6 participants who evaluated the process positively, only 1 had not taken part in such discussions.

Financially, 80% (8 out of 10) of participants indicated an increase in operating costs at the new Commercial Center compared to their previous locations (streets and public squares). The breakdown of primary expenses identified electricity bills as the single largest burden for 80% (8 out of 10) of respondents, while 20% (2 out of 10) cited municipal fees as their predominant cost.

When asked about potential improvements for the new facility, 80% (8 out of 10) of interviewees suggested implementing more effective marketing and promotional strategies to attract greater customer traffic. The remaining 20% (2 out of 10) pointed to the need for enhancements in physical infrastructure and drainage systems.

Despite specific reservations, the overall assessment of the new Commercial Center can be considered predominantly positive, as the combined ratings of “good”, “fair”, and “excellent” accounted for 80% (8 out of 10) of responses, with only 20% (2 out of 10) rating it as “poor”.

The analysis of Mossoró's new Commercial Center demonstrates that urban requalification policy, by intervening directly in central space, operates as a mechanism of territorial reorganization marked by disputes and spatial contradictions. As noted by Lefebvre (2006) and Santos (2006), the production of urban space results from the actions of multiple agents and rationalities, traversed by economic and institutional interests as well as the everyday practices of social groups. In the case analyzed, the institutionalization of

[10] Interview conducted by the author with subject ENTREV01 (pseudonym), in Mossoró, on December 2, 2025.

informal street trade reveals both an attempt to order and control spatial uses and a redefinition of the criteria of legitimacy for remaining in the downtown area.

The role of the State as an agent producing space manifests in the enforcement of regulations and normative mechanisms that, although sustained by discourses of legality, accessibility, and modernization, yield uneven effects on merchants, informal workers, and users of central space (Corrêa, 1989; Harvey, 2014). In this way, urban redevelopment does not constitute a neutral or consensual process, but rather an expression of the contradictions of capitalist urbanization, wherein urban centrality is redefined through the selectivity of spatial uses, the standardization of practices, and the retention, or exclusion, of specific social actors.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis of the informal street trade reorganization process in Mossoró demonstrates that local urban dynamics stem from a complex interplay among social agents, institutional pressures, economic rationalities, and everyday practices of spatial use. Far from representing a linear or consensual movement, the establishment of the New Commercial Center is embedded in a trajectory marked by historical conflicts, coercive intervention by the Public Prosecutor's Office, and disputes over the legitimacy of different forms of occupation in the downtown area.

The findings show that informal street trade, frequently associated with the lower circuit of the urban economy represents, not merely an individual survival strategy, but a structural component of Mossoró's economy, capable of generating its own territorialities, sociabilities, and flows. The historical presence of street vendors in central areas shaped established practices of spatial appropriation, constructed amid unequal access to the formal market and a decades-long absence of structured public policies for commercial organization.

The urban requalification policy analyzed in this study thus reveals the materialization of tensions between divergent models of the city: on one hand, the state-legal project aimed at ensuring accessibility, circulation, and sidewalk normalization; on the other hand, traditional modes of territorial use that inject vitality into the downtown area and sustain a significant portion of the urban economy. The intervention on Bezerra Mendes Street makes clear that requalification operates selectively upon practices and subjects, reorganizing centralities and redefining who is permitted to remain in public space.

The interviews conducted throughout the research confirm that the effects of this intervention are perceived unevenly. Established formal merchants located along the streets previously occupied by vendors report improvements in pedestrian traffic, storefront visibility, and perceived security. In contrast, merchants along the former Bezerra Mendes Street indicate loss of visibility, reduced foot traffic, and issues related to accessibility and parking. Meanwhile, the vendors operating within the New Commercial Center express, for the most part, satisfaction with the structural conditions of the new site, while acknowledging challenges regarding customer flow, promotion, and operating costs.

These perceptions reinforce that urban policies yield asymmetric effects and directly impact the local economy, territorial organization, and livelihoods of groups that have historically shaped the daily life of the downtown area. The institutionalization of street trade, although representing progress in terms of accessibility, public space organization, and safety, does not eliminate structural tensions between informal practices and regulatory rationalities.

The findings of this study allow us to affirm that urban requalification in Mossoró cannot be understood merely as a technical endeavor tied to physical spatial planning, but rather as a political process that mobilizes disputes over legitimacy, value, and urban visibility. The city thus emerges as a field of forces, in the terms of Corrêa (1989), where different agents contest not only territory, but competing visions of the future.

Finally, this study contributes to broadening the debate on informality, urban center management, and reorganization policies in Brazilian medium-sized cities. Future research should advance toward a longitudinal analysis of the socioeconomic impacts of the New Commercial Center, the long-term economic sustainability of relocated vendors, and the evaluation of how these interventions influence the vitality of Mossoró's central core over the medium and long term. In a scenario of growing urban complexity, understanding such dynamics is essential for designing public policies that reconcile the right to the city, productive inclusion, and democratic spatial governance.

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