

Undoing the City of Dichotomies

Rethinking Social Futures in the Urban Expansion Zone of Rio de Janeiro

The twentieth-century capitalist city, “the metropolis,” is based on fragmentation—the city building itself into a space of extremes. On one end lie the “ruined urban zones” with their systems of unchangeable and unconvertible public space.¹ Today, what can be defined and seen as ruined urban zones are sections of the metropolis afflicted with poverty, ecologically depleted regions, the remains of ancient structures, and contaminated industrial zones such as harbors and docks and their environs. Gleaming against the backdrop of these ruined zones are the “peak zones” that are produced without considering innovative social and architectural developments, and are characterized by a deadening spatial emptiness. The fragmentation of zones in Rio de Janeiro is becoming increasingly visible, with the peak zones and the ruined zones becoming more obvious, and the borders between them intensifying.

This urban fragmentation often results in social tensions based on economic, cultural, and ethnical polarizations; it has triggered the formation of gated communities and their polarized islands within the space of the city. Exclusive zones and privatized enclaves have deepened the cleavage between the peak and ruined regions of the city. As a consequence, these dichotomies have led to fragmented areas: today, Rio de Janeiro is composed of many cities within a city.² This becomes particularly obvious if we take a look at Rio’s urban expansion zone in the southwest, where the new residential area for the middle and upper classes along the coastline, Barra de Tijuca, is developing in contrast to the popular neighborhoods of Jacarepaguá, where the workers and the lower-middle class are located.

Cidade de Deus, the Popular City

The popular city of Cidade de Deus has formed as an antithesis to unilateral fragmentation in the city—a mass housing settlement for displaced favelados that sits between these dichotomous worlds.³ Planned in the legacy of the “Alliance for Progress” social housing,⁴ Cidade de Deus has evolved over time into a synecdoche of the people’s city, although it was created in the spirit of segregating the lower-income groups. At the time this neighborhood was conceived, it lay on the outskirts of the city with very little or no public infrastructure. In time, as the city expanded horizontally, Cidade de Deus became centrally located. The settlement had been based on strict real-estate models of land



Cidade de Deus: An inanimate model transformed by its inhabitants into a working model of diversity and street life.

distribution and mass production without any regard to the cultural and climatic needs of the people, while in its context it transformed into a regional urban centrality. Gradually, the people appropriated these inanimate models to make them suit their needs and habits.

The history and development of Cidade de Deus illustrates how popular neighborhoods can come into being. The lessons from its development can be used to create more democratic and socially active neighborhoods against the grain of the real-estate developments that now dominate the fragmented city.

Barra da Tijuca, Model Scenario for Social Division

Barra de Tijuca, as described above, has emerged as a peak zone of the city. This area has emerged as an allegory of how the American way of life has come to transform the traditional urban culture of Brazil. Gated condominiums and seafront developments, commercial strips and big shopping malls are all characterized by high walls and highways, and were built in the image of Los Angeles and Miami. Barra da Tijuca emerged from the real estate developments that also sparked the valorization of Jacarepaguá. The land was dedicated to housing construction starting in the 1960s, followed by the urbanization of the coastline after the saturation of Copacabana and Ipanema by the 1970s and '80s. The region of Barra da Tijuca, an area full of swamps and undergrowth sandbanks disconnected from the surrounding area due to high mountain ranges of up to 1,200 meters, remained unoccupied until the middle of the twentieth century. In the 1970s Barra da Tijuca was opened up as a new front for urban expansion with the construction of a double-lane highway and several residential towers, which triggered large-scale urbanization accompanied by a population growth of 160 percent. In the period between 1970 and 1980 this increased to 627 percent, accounting for the 21.8 percent population growth of the entire metropolitan area. Another push occurred during the 1990s when the Yellow Line (Linha Amarela) expressway was constructed, allowing for a better connection with the North Zone

of Rio and linking Barra da Tijuca with Galeão International Airport.

The real estate market development was driven by a territorial strategy based on the regularization of land use and subdivisions in 1976. The urbanization of Barra da Tijuca continued according to new urban models that followed the patterns of globalized urban production. The construction of residential towers pushed the free market economy, promoting a new way of living in the city that combines privacy and security alongside the concentration of services—a product tailored to the profile and social status of future residents. Social and spatial separation formed the basis for specialization and differentiation, which assured profitable returns for the developers and corporations. The *condomínios* that dominate the urban landscape deliberately focus on individualization. Neoliberal values are manifested in the form of security and individual comfort rather than urbanity and open public spaces.



The entrance to a gated condominium in Barra da Tijuca.

The resulting social divide of such a model of growth is not only threatening the quality of urbanity it produces but also shatters the sociocultural development of its denizens. The parable of segregation is enhanced in the

cosmetic treatments adorning the streetscapes and the fancy shopping malls that cater to the upper-middle-class residents of the area. The opposing models of social mixture in Jacarepaguá, on one hand, and the strict segregation in Barra da Tijuca, on the other, provide important lessons today in the search for a solution that would be able to bridge the urban divide. The development of the central interstice of the city could be used to introduce a new social paradigm promoting social mixture and a new type of urbanity.

Considering the fact that Barra da Tijuca continuously represents the urban expansion zone where real estate seeks profits, we should question how social housing and sustainable architecture can be included within the new areas of urban development.

A short historical overview of Colônia Juliano Moreira, an area located between the two opposing models of Barra da Tijuca and Jacarépagua, will draw up the potential of a new urban development that could bridge the social divide.

Colônia Juliano Moreira, a Popular Neighborhood Developing Centrality

The site of the former psychiatric colony Colônia Juliano Moreira, which is located on the southwestern edge of Jacarepaguá, finds its origins in the agricultural occupation of the Atlantic forest as the colonization of the city of Rio de Janeiro began. The area was populated by sugar and maize flour mills in the seventeenth century and was known as Engenho Novo, from the name of Rio's oldest sugar and maize flour mills. By then the land of Jacarepaguá was dominated by big sugarcane plantations and was inhabited by mill and plantation workers until the region came to be known in the eighteenth century as Onze Engenhos (Eleven Sugar Mills). In the early nineteenth century, however, sugarcane planting and processing was abandoned, and coffee emerged as the leading economic activity in the area.

A major transformation happened in the beginning of the twentieth century, when the sugar cycle started to decline and the farm

was expropriated by the federal government to transfer mentally unsound patients from Ilha do Governador (Governor's Island). The first patients to come from the Ilha do Governador colonies arrived at the asylum at the end of 1923. The West Zone, isolated from the urban center of Rio by a lush forest and green spaces, was thought to be an ideal location for the establishment of a psychiatric institution and the rehabilitation of its patients. After 1935, workers' houses started to spring up on the enormous grounds, which was by then renamed Colônia Juliano Moreira.

By the 1980s, communities started to grow around the traditional workers' houses in the area and the first favelas in the area started to emerge. With recent advances in psychiatric treatment and a drastically reduced hospitalization rate for psychiatric patients, the psychiatric grounds were demobilized to allow for urban expansion in the West Zone of the city.

Today, Colônia Juliano Moreira consists of about eleven communities with around thirty thousand residents along with the derelict buildings of the psychiatric institution and a historic center from the time of the colonial occupation. This forgotten piece of land has become a precious piece of property for the city, and by virtue of its central location in the horizontally expanding city, the land has the potential of becoming the new urban center of Rio. The proximity of this space in Jacarepaguá to the Barra Olympic zone and the new service corridors that will connect it to other areas in the city also opens up many doors for the development and eventual occupation of the area. The opportunity for development can be used for solving the difficult social situation in Rio and also for bringing about sustainable development in the region.

The Mega Event as New Frontier for Urban Expansion

Rio de Janeiro is set to host the World Cup and the Olympics in 2014 and 2016, respectively. The bid documents submitted by the city reflect an elaborate narrative about an

urgent need for urban transformation. The mega events and the funding pouring in as a result provide an opportunity to speed up the transformation of Rio de Janeiro into an even greater global city. The Olympic Park where the majority of investments for the Olympics concentrate has been situated in Barra da Tijuca, on a roughly triangular peninsula of around one hundred hectares on the northern coast of the Jacarepaguá Lagoon. It is identified as a key neighborhood for maximum new development in order to "stimulate" the city's expansion. Major expressways (TransCarioca, Oeste, and Olímpica) have been proposed along with bus rapid transit corridors and the subway to connect the Barra Olympic zone to the other Olympic zones and the international airport. Transolímpica is planned as a twenty-six-kilometer-long transport corridor comprising a motor highway and parallel subway lines with stops servicing the areas on the way. The corridor would provide a direct connection from Barra da Tijuca to the airport and North Zone of the city. The new line would consequently connect nine neighborhoods in the area. The development would also usher in an array of public transport in and out of the city, consisting of a SuperVia train, subway, and conventional buses. The line would pass through Jacarepaguá, and new subway stops would be constructed in the area.

The highway will pass through the area of Jacarepaguá that abuts the site. This project could represent the connection of other sectors, especially the middle-class neighborhoods and Barra da Tijuca. The neighborhood of Barra da Tijuca will benefit the most, with the construction of the new venues, transportation networks, and shopping, residential, and entertainment centers, in addition to the rehabilitation of parks and rivers. The development of this transport corridor offers an idea of how the area will grow. The additions of infrastructure are bringing Barra de Tijuca back to the attention of real estate development. "For the people of Rio, the Games will transform their city with new infrastructure, new environmental, physical and social initiatives and new benefits and opportunities for all with long-term city objectives, optimizing the urban and social legacy opportunities."⁵ Whether the promises these mega-events have

made will really lead to inclusive and equitable social growth remains to be seen. Under the pressure of development, the demolition of homes and clearance of favelas with the excuse of preparing for the major sporting events has become typical, although it is against Brazilian law. The bright new future has no room for these unplanned, spontaneous developments that are an integral component of Rio's urban landscape.

Using the area of Colônia Juliano Moreira for social housing for the economically disadvantaged would also disprove the theory that the less privileged sections of the society belong to the outskirts. In addition, this sensitive area where the Atlantic forest meets the urban landscape needs to be conserved, and development needs to consider the conservation of its ecology. The principles of a scenario of urban transformation should consider a compact city and provide equality on social and physical levels. The fundamental objective of the situation should be to develop Rio de Janeiro within its genuine social and physical setting and repair ruptures and cleavages related to prosperity and poverty, decreasing the stark dichotomy. In this regard, after the completion of the transformation project, the region should be able to integrate itself into the city. This necessitates a public conception of fairness, productivity, and sharing, as well as a strong perceptual redefinition of space in the city as a total entity.

A Prelude to Alternative Futures

How exactly should public authorities realize the potential of the sites of urban expansion in Jacarepaguá, and what kind of frameworks should they come up with to bridge the city with the surrounding nature? Could these developments be used to create a better urban life, to bring about social integration parallel to the creation of capital through real estate development?

When trying to foresee the new trends linked to processes like mass housing programs and their physical impacts, the urban realm becomes a central issue and many questions arise. What this means for the city is not very

clear, nor are its effects on urban production and creation of territory.

With the ambitious social-upgrading and mass-housing program “Minha Casa, Minha Vida” (MCMV) by the Brazilian Federation, which aims to rapidly produce mammoth amounts of housing, it remains to be seen how the representative aspirations of people linked to a “new lifestyle” will be treated. Will the resultant market expansion be tackled with the same established logic, and will this new market be overrun by developers, or could this become an inflection point in social thinking?

In the first place, the matter of the proximity of nature and its sustenance and preservation gains momentum, given that the zones of urban expansion lie inside nature reserves. In the framework of the MCMV program and the logic of mass production, the production of territory represents the depletion of nature. A careful design that incorporates nature into the built environment and its sustainable management and distribution could define successful models in this area.

Second, urban quality becomes a strong parameter. Issues such as the distribution of functions and spaces, the spatial attributes of infrastructure, and the constellations of private and public domains must be raised. The MCMV model could be used to interweave and enliven the quality of existing public spaces in the area. The open spaces could be reactivated by incorporating popular activities and engaging public and private enterprises to sponsor and maintain them.

Ultimately, the urban economy underlying the urban structures sustains the middle class. Instead of letting the market take over the lower middle class, the challenge is to find ways to empower this class to create a city that strengthens its values and ensures it a better future.

With the eyes of the world focused on the location of the Olympic Games, there should be conscious efforts to develop this area in an alternative, sustainable way. The position of the site in between the popular city (Cidade de Deus) and the capitalist city (Barra da Tijuca) and the proximity to the Olympic venue is crucial, giving the possibility to create a new node in the city that is perfectly inserted in its surroundings, containing the

entire infrastructure and services that a neighborhood needs. The ongoing developments would offer a perfect occasion to rethink the dichotomies of the city—formal and informal settlements, gated condominiums and favelas, construction companies and auto-construction, city and nature. Urban planning should see these elements not as opposites but as complementary models, interconnected parts of a puzzle able to create a substructure and a layout based on inclusion and diversity. Between the ruined urban zones and the peak zones, between urban and natural landscapes, an alternative model might be developed—a mediating zone that creates the popular city in a sustainable and integrated way, a new urban model where urbanity merges with nature.

— Nitin Bathla

1. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans. and eds. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

2. Oswald Mathias Ungers, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff, and Arthur Ovaska, *The City in the City – Berlin: A Green Archipelago* (Zurich: Lars Müller Verlag, 2012)

3. Marc Angélli, Rainer Hehl, Something Fantastic, eds., *Cidade de Deus – City of God* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2012).

4. Alliance for Progress was a decade-long program for social cooperation between the United States and Latin America, started under the Kennedy administration in 1960. Refer to my article “Progress or Déjà Vu.”

5. “Candidature File for Rio de Janeiro to host the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games,” cited in Angélli et al., *Cidade de Deus*.