Neighbourhood Development
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Strategic Planning and Community-Based Planning as Tools for Urban Development
The Struggle of the Vila Autódromo Community, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Ricardo G. Paris, Aurelia Guasch Antúnez, Rodrigo C. Bertame, Maria Fernanda Romero

The city of Rio de Janeiro, like many other South American cities, presents a growing tendency of strategic plans with entrepreneurial and goal-oriented approaches as part of its urban and governance agendas. Mega-events have served as a relevant driver for urban planning, with promises of bringing investments for infrastructural projects and incentives for tourism; at the same time, poor neighbourhoods often find themselves excluded from any plan and vision for the future of the city. This paper focuses on understanding one of the most emblematic urban struggles in Rio de Janeiro: forced evictions for the construction of the 2016 Olympic Games structures, and the resistance of the Vila Autódromo community through social organisation and a community-based plan. Hence, the paper will discuss two approaches to planning: one is the city's strategic plan that was elaborated with a market-oriented perspective to prepare the city to receive international events like the World Cup 2014 and the Olympic Games 2016. On the other hand, the Vila Autódromo community-based plan, which was a response to the emerging conflict situation, was made to resist evictions and propose alternatives for local development. Strategic plans and community-based plans are tools for urban development established to face the current economic restructuring in developing countries. At the same time, they represent different visions and power relations within the city. As planners, we need to understand the role of these approaches to contribute to a democratic and just urban development against social exclusion and urban segregation.

Strategische und gemeindebasierte Planung als Werkzeuge der Stadtentwicklung – Der Kampf der Vila Autódromo in Rio de Janeiro (Brasilien)


The history of the main Latin American cities is built on layers of struggles about land possession and market forces, amidst authoritarian or populist governments and poor-neighbourhood dwellers. In Rio de Janeiro, from the massive displacements of the 1960s to the world-famous Programa Favela-Bairro, stakeholders have used different strategies to remain in their original places or evict the poor urban dwellers. More recently, the new phenomenon of mega-events has led to the rise of new approaches to struggle for land and housing tenure.

This paper focuses on understanding the current and most emblematic urban struggle in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: forced evictions for the construction of the 2016 Olympic Games Infrastructure and the resistance of the Vila Autódromo community. It presents numerous stakeholders – from municipal authorities to international real estate corporations, local dwellers, and local politicians – and the conflict of interests among them. Also, the different strategies used by local residents and activists to resist evictions and fight for urbanisation and spatial integration for the community are looked at. In this context, we observe institutional collaboration, civil society activism, and planning as a tool of resistance, but also state violence, the city as a space of competition for attracting investment, commoditisation of public assets, as well as corruption and the disrespect of official agreements (Brooks 2016).

Groups supporting evictions and the ones fighting to stay use different strategies to pursue their causes. In this regard, social media, internet, traditional media, and local actions such as social mobilisation and cultural activities were strongly used as tools in the struggle. Through 3D images showing future sports facilities – where the community is currently placed – or national personalities sharing videos questioning the Mayor’s action, not only a legal and institutional struggle took place, but also a dispute concerning the overall concept of urbanity and the right to the city. In this sense, planners need to respond to conflict situations, intervening forces to support the autonomy of the local population (Vainer et al. 2013).

The paper contrasts two planning approaches related to the decision-making processes on urban transformations for the most-recent mega-events, e.g., the World Cup and the Olympic Games. These are the strategic plan (SP) developed by the local government and backed by a public-private consortium, and the community-based plan (CBP)
elaborated by the affected community. Both approaches are analysed through the perspective of the iconic example of Vila Autódromo, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. On the one hand, Vila Autódromo was targeted by the overall strategy of the SP of reducing informal settlements and attracting investments. On the other hand, the dwellers elaborated a CBP to resist evictions and create a local alternative for urban development. The CBP was used as a primary instrument to disseminate a counter-position to the local population and to deal with the public authorities. It was elaborated by the community association, with the support of planners from the university and local media. The Vila Autódromo community has an emblematic role, since it has been resisting forced evictions for decades. Since the 1990s, various arguments emerged to argue for displacement: among others, environmental harm, preventing transportation network improvements, aesthetic effects in the landscape. At present, the arrangements made by the municipal government and international investors – namely, the International Olympic Committee, its sponsors, and real-estate corporations – and expressed in the SP are in direct conflict with the local community’s needs and desires.

Background

In Brazilian legislation, since the democratic constitution of 1988, urban development policy is made at the municipal level. The regulation of urban policies, the “city’s statute” (Estatuto da Cidade), states that every property must serve “social functions” in the city (função social da propriedade) and ensure the social welfare of the inhabitants. This urban act also stipulates “citizen participation and democratic process” as mandatory in every urban project (Estatuto da Cidade 2001).

At the same time, the current state of global capitalism seeks to transform every material or immaterial good or service into an exploitable asset, opening the market to absorb capital surpluses and spatially expand its domains (Harvey 2003). Therefore, to maximise economic growth, many underdeveloped countries soften their land regulations. In many instances, the responsibility to attract investments is left to the municipal level, thus shifting the risk to the public sector and supporting a much more flexible and geographically detached form of capital accumulation (Harvey 1989). Besides low local taxation and affordable local labour, many cities of the Global South offer their territory as an asset to be exploited. Local resources are understood as a potential for profitable public-private partnerships; urban-renewal projects, open spaces, essential public services, infrastructure, security and environmental issues, and culture and heritage spots are often managed by foreign enterprises (Mendes 2014).

Facing this scenario, Rio de Janeiro has also been deeply involved in a competitive race with other cities in the last decades. Since 2007, when the city was the host of the Pan-American Games, a flow of investments through mega-events (or using them as a justification) has transformed the urban fabric and affected the social relations in the city severely. Pressures from the local government, the finance and construction industries, as well as from international organisations (International Olympic Committee, FIFA) on poor communities have led to several urban conflicts.

Vila Autódromo, for more than thirty years, grew as a typical small poor community – favela – in Rio de Janeiro. Its simple self-made residences with poor access to infrastructure the home to approximately 700 families. During the 1980s, a small fisherman community officially formed the Associação dos Moradores e Pescadores da Vila Autódromo – AMPAVA (Association of Dwellers and Fishermen). After the establishment of the association in 1987, the community underwent a partial regularisation process
and some services and environmental licenses for the fisherman were provided, although other essential services like water and sanitation remained rare. Afterwards, in 2005, the city declared the area as an AEIS (Area de Especial Interesse Social), or "area of special social interest," a legal status that facilitates the implementation of social housing programmes through flexible urban regulations with the goal of integrating vulnerable communities into the city. This legal planning instrument includes procedures for solving land-tenure issues as well as formal access to public services.

Parallel to the attempts for the favela's formalisation, in 1993 Villa Autódromo became a target of eviction for the reason of its "aesthetic and environmental impact" (Menides 2014). Later, in 2007, during the city's preparation for the Pan-American Games, intense pressure from real-estate companies for development projects affected the community. Moreover, in 2009, when the city was chosen to host the Olympic Games in 2016, the threat of eviction rose again. After numerous mobilisations, the city's mayor Eduardo Paes said that the evictions were a requirement of the International Olympic Committee, but the city's authorities were considering negotiating alternatives (AMPVIA 2012). In those years, a legal battle to prove the legality of the occupation was fought between public defenders and the municipal attorney.

According to national law, the urban legislation of all major cities in the country, including the zoning plan and urban development strategies, shall be guided by a decennial municipal master plan (plano director municipal). The city of Rio de Janeiro approved its latest version in 2011. In the city's master plan, it is said that the priority is to provide infrastructure and services to poor informal neighbourhoods, aiming at their integration into the formal city, except in areas under risk or environmental protection. The area where Villa Autódromo is located is considered a zone of "urban expansion under control" (macrozona de ocupação controlada); this means that urban expansion shall only be authorised if the necessary infrastructure is in place. However, since the end of the 1990s, urban development has been regulated less by the approved legislation than by more flexible models, resulting in the adoption of the goal-oriented model of SP as the leading urban strategy. Nevertheless, the current legal instrument of urban development of the city is the latest approved master plan and its macro-zoning regulation, while the SP endorses public or private investments in the city for specific purposes (such as for urban renewal, education, health, and transportation, among others).

When the public authorities affirmed that the urbanisation of the Vila Autódromo was impossible, they neglected the principles and tools of the master plan (such as AEIS zoning, which was supposed to facilitate the integration of the area). In this scenario, the dwellers association, in partnership with research institutes from two different public universities, elaborated their CBP as another tool to support further negotiations.

Strategic plan (SP)

In general, the concept of the SP is a response to the comprehensive-rational plan, where the government has control over the implementation of investments to conduct territorial development. SPs do not officially replace master plans; indeed, some cities have pointed to the "importance of synergy and synchronisation" between statutory spatial development plans and strategic plans (Steinberg, 2002). However, the adoption of an SP is most commonly associated with the integration of investment strategies and urban market to facilitate public-private partnerships (Vainer, 2000).

This logic was highly used in many main cities of Latin America in the last two decades: Rosario (Argentina), La Paz (Bolivia) and Bogota (Colombia) are some examples; however, with very different outputs and processes (Steinberg, 2002). In the case of the city of Rio de Janeiro, the municipality has elaborated and implemented two SPs embedded in the mega-events context: the first one for the period 2009-2012, and the last one, for 2013-2016. These plans are built upon a social consensus achieved through an aggressive marketing strategy for rebuilding the city image, with ideas of beautification and revitalisation (Cortes de Lima 2012), to persuade stakeholders to the concept of an idealistic and affluent future. As the city has become an asset to be sold, major projects must be implemented to attract investments, and whatever

3 The public defender (defensoria publica) is a public institution that offers assistance and legal services to people or groups that cannot afford to pay. The institution is empowered by the constitutional principle of universal access to legal assistance. It also has an important role in acting in the public sector for human, social, and individual rights advocacy.

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Figure 2: "Not everyone has a price tag" – "It's so difficult to want to live in our neighbourhood Vila Autódromo." – "We are not fools! We know who is part of the struggle and who is in it for the money!" – Grafiti against the demolitions and new high-rise buildings in the background. Source: Fernando Frazao, Agência Brasil 2015
constrains the thriving of future projects needs to be removed.

Contemporary urban projects and the city's preparation to receive major international events are usually funded by strategic partnerships established by the municipalities (Silva, 2012). Therefore, cities are competing for these partnerships, and once they are engaged in one, the given city is unlikely to revoke the commitments made. The reasons are several, but in our case we can highlight the common perception of competitiveness and productivity of the city "management" supported by influential local elites, i.e., the media and political power. Together with the idea of "entrepreneurial city" and a strong notion of "city patriotism", which seeks to develop a non-political and charismatic programme that is focused on results and build a consensus of "common benefit" (Vainer 2000). Thus, the democratic process is hindered by a set of conceptions, and the space for alternative viewpoints and public information is severely curtailed. In addition, the logic behind these kinds of processes makes it almost impossible to ensure any broader democratic process since the strategic sectors and stakeholders settle the terms before turning to inform the public.

Although the city of Rio de Janeiro had a legally binding master plan in 2011, in which all local urban policies are linked to a formal participatory process, the implementation still depends on political will. On the other hand, the increasing influence of private interests in the development of urban policies has led the public power to adopt prescription of the "Catalan model of planning" since 1993 (Vainer et al. 2013). Unlike the master plan – which is based on zoning, social function of the city, and elaborated through a long political process – the SP is directed by guidelines and goals, and conceived by a selected group of personalities and businesspersons. In addition, the SP is not a binding planning tool, but a set of programmes that justifies the public investment in a goal-oriented format; nonetheless, it is an official and public document. The Rio de Janeiro SP was created to stimulate an "integrated and competitive future" for the city, promote Rio de Janeiro as the "best place in the southern hemisphere to work, live and visit", and to "act in the short term and think in the long term" (PMNU 2012). In short, the SP is a tool to integrate several actions that are happening in the city without proper democratic consultation.

In our context, the SP's long-term visions are used to justify every action, even if these may violate citizen rights. For example, the SP has a goal to reduce areas occupied by favelas by five percent. It also links the decrease of green areas in the city to the expansion of informal settlements. All those figures start to reintroduce a concept of urban development through socio-spatial disintegration, which understands favelas as barriers for development since an urban asset loses its attractiveness if it is located next to poor communities. Novel in this scenario is the use of an intensive "propaganda" fostered by mega-events and the attempt to generate a sense of pride in the population to gain support for the authorities' actions.

Community-based plan (CBP)

To confront the constant pressure for evictions, which became stronger after 2009 because of the Pan-American Games, the local community, with the support of professionals and students from two public universities, elaborated an alternative development plan. The basic concept was to overcome the idea of mere public consultation and empower the local community to develop and implement a consistent plan (AMVBA 2012). Therefore, activities were designed to bring together residents and a team of students, professors, and researchers to diagnose the area and to identify strategies to maintain the houses in the Vila Autódromo. Secondly, the community elaborated alternatives with socially accepted technical solutions to each problem that they identified. Finally, public assemblies, meetings with experts, and discussions among dwellers defined the priorities and the programmes to be implemented. The priorities were

- i) housing; sanitation, infrastructure and environment;
- ii) public services and;
- iii) culture and community development.
As a result of a technical urban and environmental assessment, the CBP acknowledged the necessity to resettle 80 of the 700 households since they were located in a flood-risk zone. However, the community agreed to relocate these households within the Vila Autódromo, allowing for the continuity of social networks as well as promoting a balanced interaction with the natural environment.

The Vila Autódromo’s CBP received international recognition. It won the first prize of the Deutsche Bank Urban Age Award Rio 2013, getting US$80,000 for the Vila Autódromo Association to strengthen the fight against the planned evictions led by the municipality. Several strategies were used by the dwellers and social organisations to stop the eviction processes. Social media, popular mobilisation, and direct actions of resistance were ways to expose the issues that were happening and the impacts that the mega-event would mean for the local population.

Although community-based planning is not a new approach for urban development, in the context of the city of Rio de Janeiro this was a pioneering process. The city’s master plan (plano diretor) guarantees the active participation of the population in public hearings, moreover, popular plans can be presented to the executive power, which can also approve the plan, turning it into a law. Also, the “city statute” (Estatuto da Cidade), a federal law approved in 2001, includes the participatory process in urban planning. Therefore, public participation through associations and hearings is not new in the Brazilian context of urban development; however, the Autódromo’s independent bottom-up democratic approach and its continuous use as a tool for political struggle in the case of Vila Autódromo was something unique. Vainer et al. defined this process as “conflictual planning” (planejamento contitulante), as the plan was updated as new actions were taking place. In this regard, the first principle of the plan states that:

“The community-based plan of Vila Autódromo is a result and expression of the struggle of the Vila Autódromo’s residents. The residents are the ones who will decide about the objectives, programmes, projects, alternatives and priorities.”

It is possible to observe the empowerment of the community since, as citizens, they want to be actively involved in the decision-making process of their future.

In addition, it can be seen that the local community, while preparing the plan, had in mind the importance of the process with which they were dealing, for the plan intends to support other communities that could experience similar problems. This is expressed in its 10th principle:

“The Plan is part of the fight of all communities of the city, the state and the country against the violation of the right of having a house; it also stands for the respect of human rights in projects for the World Cup 2014 and the Olympic Games 2016 (AMPVA 2012).”

The CBP was one of the most important tools of organisation and resistance used by the Vila Autódromo community. One of its strengths is the fact that the plan was produced and reshaped in a continuous and very dynamic process (Vainer et al. 2013). From 2011 to 2016, for every step taken by the city, the community association and the planners involved reorganised the plan in order to adjust to new parameters (AMPVA, 2016) and to maintain most of the population, integrating it within the changes that would happen in the surroundings.

In 2016, the violence became stronger; several families had been evicted and the residents who wanted to stay were facing hardships such as cuts in the water supply and leftover debris from demolitions on the streets. Therefore, a strong alliance with other organisations, a few politicians, and activists was built as part of the strategy. At the same time, international attention was drawn by organisations such as Amnesty International. As a consequence, Vila Autódromo made international headlines in news outlets such as Al Jazeera, NY Times, and BBC.

Alternative media and social networks played a particular role in the process, showing multiple sides of the story. Clearly engaged in the ideology of urban marketing, the national mainstream media hardly gave any attention to this kind of process. However, the violent actions in the city triggered significant social mobilisation and raised criticism of many local and international actors against the Olympic Games. Therefore, there was no way to suppress the topic, even though it was obvious that the media provided biased information. A social media network was created by independent activists with the intention of sharing information easily via blogs, video broadcasts, twitter, and other alternative media.

Vain endeavour? – Evictions in the run-up to the Olympic Games

While this paper is being written (August 2016), the process was still on-going. The last incident occurred a few days before the start of the Olympic Games (August 5th), when the city presented a plan and started to construct a
Conclusions

What are then the results of the CBP of Vila Autódromo? There is no easy answer to this question.

This case study shows not only the various interests at stake within urban renewal projects, but also the weakness of national legislations and political processes to take into consideration community-based plans and citizen’s needs and initiatives for urban development. However, on the other hand, there are some interesting features worth highlighting.

Firstly, this process led to the empowerment of the community and raised their awareness about their claims and rights. In this regard, although almost the entire population of the Vila Autódromo was evicted, the people involved in the popular planning process have become more conscious about their rights. It is likely that they will continue to fight for their rights and a democratic city, in Vila Autódromo and/or elsewhere.

Secondly, the visibility and international attention of this case and other communities in the same situation were strategically used to support their struggles. The international recognition of the CBP through prizes for its alternative approach to urbanisation had an important role in promoting support and creating public awareness.

In addition, the process brought centrality to the role of citizens in decision-making processes that concern their lives. Institutions and people can have a fruitful relation if the role of the latter is respected, especially by ensuring that they own the final decisions. Dwellers associations, residents, and researchers can be part of the development of the city as a whole, and informational networks can be created to generate the basis for new kinds of relations among stakeholders. Also, the activist networks that were involved present a positive side of globalisation, where information and solidarity can reach their objectives faster. Finally, as presented by Vainer et al., the new dimension of this process is that the conflict determines the pace of the planning process; in other words, the emergence of the (conflict) situation conditions the planning responses.

Democratically led CBPs can provide a sustainable approach to urban development at the local level, as they promote a balance between action and control over public space, and they help organising social relations with the territory. Fair and open relations among institutions, public power, and civil society can generate different uses of urban space, and promote conflict resolution, and resistance. As Vainer et al. point out, the process of "conflict planning" understands conflict as capable of forming autonomous actors for a counter-hegemonic project. When facing the various conflicts, counter-hegemonic movements may find gaps to destabilise the neoliberal hegemony and to pursue alternative models of urban and/or neighbourhood development.

Strategic plans, in turn, correspond to more dynamic flows of capital and labour in cities. If these focus on the short-term results and attraction of international capital, as in the case presented, we can identify harmful
effects on the local territory and governance. On the other hand, the Vila Autódromo’s community-based plan was a reaction to an inefficient regulatory enforcement of urban and rights. Its experience shows the myriad of elements that are at stake in urban development and pro-poor advocacy, but mainly the importance of the community as the protagonist of the process. Downscaling the planning process, a close relationship among planners and civil society, and active political response during the process are some of the elements that made the Vila Autódromo’s CBP so remarkable. In this regard, strategic and community-based plans can be tools for urban development, both being established to face the current globalised economy in developing countries. Both serve specific functions and reach defined targets to support development models and ideologies. As planners, we need to understand which forces are behind each of these approaches and be coherent with the processes of construction of a democratic and just society.

References


