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The Revanchist Logic of Mega-events: Community displacement in Rio de Janeiro's West End

Gabriel Silvestre ¹

Nelma Gusmao de Oliveira ²

¹ Bartlett School of Planning, Faculty of the Built Environment, UCL, Wates House, 22 Gordon St, WC1H 0QB, London, UK; E-mail: gabriel.silvestre.11@ucl.ac.uk.

² Instituto de Pesquisa e Planejamento Urbano e Regional (IPPUR), Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Cidade Universitária, Ilha do Fundão, 21941-901, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil; E-mail: nelmaoliveira@hotmail.com.

Abstract

As the curtains are drawn in London's East End, Brazil and Rio de Janeiro will be under international spotlight over the next four years. This paper focuses on the process of Olympic city-making in the West End of Rio de Janeiro, where the planning and construction of facilities and transport network have adversely affected low-income settlements. The planning of the Olympic Park have become the latest episode in a series of attempts to drive out one of the longest established poor settlements in the borough of Barra da Tijuca. Attention is given to the changing discourse justifying the relocation and the context in which residents have resisted eviction. In another case study, the paper considers the construction of Bus Rapid Transit corridors aimed to improve the difficult access to the area. In this instance, some communities were not able to avoid eviction, being relocated to the western edges of the city or financially compensated. Analysis of the eviction process is drawn from material collected by visiting the affected communities. The paper concludes reflecting on the inexorability of Olympic city-making and the entitlement to the emerging geographies.

Keywords: Olympic Games; Rio 2016; Social Impacts, Community Displacement

Brazil emerged as an important contender for the hosting of mega-events over the past decade, ultimately securing the rights to organise both the 2014 football World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. The city of Rio de Janeiro has been central in this strategy, due to play a prominent role in the former event and to take the lead from London after 2012. International press coverage have been keen to explore geopolitical readings in this scenario as a coming out to party for Brazil as an influential economic force, but on a local scale the hosting of mega-events have also been pursued as a strategy for disciplining the urban space and to open up new areas for capital accumulation.

Rio de Janeiro's mega-event strategy has its genealogy with the rise of new conservative political figures that have dominated local politics since 1993. The introduction of entrepreneurial instruments such as the city's first Strategic Plan, marked a departure from previous welfarist approaches, with new policies such as flagship urban projects identified for its contribution for economic development. Having the experience of cities elsewhere as cases of reference, mega-event hosting was championed as a way to enable and articulate extensive urban projects. After putting forward two failed attempts to host the 2004 and 2012 Olympics, attention was turned to a regional event. The hosting of the Pan-American Games

in 2007 set new standards in the delivery of facilities and supported infrastructure in the history of this event, a deliberate decision to boost the credibility of the city to organise large sports events to the eyes of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The risky venture, which reached a final budget nine times that of initial estimates, proved successful and in its third attempt, the Olympic bid was finally awarded.

The bid book presented to the IOC, promised to make 'full use of the city magnificent landscape' with the mega-event expected to 'accelerate the city's broader long-term aspirations, enhancing its social and physical fabric' (Rio 2016, p.19). However, for all the excitement that marked the days after the IOC announcement with grandiose claims about the future of the city, lack of information, coercion and insecurity about the future have all been part of the daily routine of many residents of poor communities affected by the works associated with the event. In this article we document and discuss the experience of displaced and resisting communities in the city's West End where a great part of the planned urban projects are taking place. We then proceed to a preliminary conclusion on the nature of Olympic City-making in Rio de Janeiro.

Changing Geographies in Rio's West End

The transformation of Rio de Janeiro in an Olympic city is envisioned by clustering facilities in four zones around the city, each according to a themed policy objective, while improving the transport network between them. Under the heading *expansion/connectivity*, the area of Barra da Tijuca is presented as the 'naturally expanding area of Rio, the chosen location for the majority of families and first home owners' (Rio 2016 2009, p.39). It will house some of the main venues and facilities for the event, including the Olympic Park, the Olympic Village and the International Broadcasting Centre (IBC). These projects and the supported transport plans are aimed to accelerate current processes to strengthen the area economic, residential and leisure profile. In the following sections we discuss how the construction of the Olympic Park and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridors have produced social impacts adversely affecting some of the area's low-income communities.

Vila Autódromo

The borough of Barra da Tijuca has some of the fastest rates of growth in the city, increasing its residential population by 26% in the second half of the 1990s (Prefeitura do Rio 2004). Its attractive coastline coupled with the rising land and rent prices in the city South End have encouraged higher-income groups to move into the area, which was previously characterised by fishing villages, social housing estates and weekend homes. The rapid transformation experienced since the 1970s have brought high-rise buildings, gated communities, shopping malls and the city's largest convention centre. Construction workers from the northern suburbs also established themselves in the area due to long and expensive commuting, in many cases settling at existing low-income communities. The settlement of Vila Autódromo is very illustrative of the dynamic processes of this period. Originally a fishing village on the shores of Jacarepaguá lagoon, it expanded with the arrival of new dwellers that came to work in the construction of the Rio Centro convention centre and the adjacent motor racecourse in 1977, reaching 350 families in 2011. As the surrounding area transformed in the following decades, the settlement become more visible to those driving along the increasingly busy thoroughfares marking its north and west boundaries, as well as to those moving to nearby residential buildings. Since the early 1990s Vila Autódromo found itself increasingly at odds with the city authority to remain on the site.

The first attempt of eviction took place in 1993 by the local area authority which was reported to claim that the settlement caused 'aesthetic and environmental damage' (Defensoria Pública do Estado do Rio de Janeiro 2010). The process temporarily halted when, after appeals by the community, the government of the state of Rio de Janeiro interfered and granted a 40-year lease renewable to a further 99-year period. The clash between two levels of government was produced due the fact that the area in which Vila Autódromo was

established was owned by the state of Rio, bought two decades before to develop the racecourse. Despite land entitlement, the provision of public services and urbanisation has been limited over the following years.

In 1998 land ownership was transferred to the city government, raising expectations among residents regarding their future. The award in 2003 for the hosting rights of the Pan-American Games, and plans to build competing venues in the racecourse, inaugurated a new chapter of conflict between residents and authorities. Initial plans proposed to lease the area to a public private-private partnership (PPP) but due the lack of interest from investors, the public sector assumed the delivery of the project (O Globo 2011a). Once again there were attempts to evict the entire community who was able to mobilise demonstrations and support from social movements to legally challenge the municipality plans. The same did not happen to the settlements of Arroio Pavuna and Canal do Cortado in which 113 families were evicted to give way to access roads to the athlete's accommodation, now a gated-community complex (Benedicto 2008).

Insert figure 1 here

Insert figure 2 here

The hosting of the 2016 Olympics and plans to further develop the racecourse area into an Olympic Park have mounted a new and heightened challenge, with the municipality raising a series of continuous reasons to support the eviction. The settlement was already digitally 'brushed out' of the CGI presentation given to IOC delegates on the day of the award, and only days later, residents learned via the press about city plans to evict 3500 families from various settlements, including Vila Autódromo, to enable event-related works (Folha de São Paulo 2009). In this case, eviction was deemed necessary for road works and the construction of the IBC. Early in 2010, it was also included in a list of communities to be relocated for being at risk of natural hazards (O Globo 2010). Since then the resident's association have pressed for more details on the development plans and to be able to participate in its elaboration, and was able to arrange meetings with the city mayor and the housing secretary. The city authorities were adamant in defending the relocation to a new settlement, bringing up new reasons such as the security perimeter layout. However, months later the winning proposal for the design of the Olympic Park organised through an international competition, acknowledged the permanence of the settlement and no need to build in the area (IAB 2011).

As previously planned in the Pan-American Games, it is expected that the development of the Olympic Park will be carried out through a PPP responsible to build the structure and maintenance costs for a period of 15 years. The novel aspect is that after the event a total of 1.2 billion square metres, or 75% of the total area, will be transferred to the private partner to commercially explore for residential, hospitality and businesses ventures (O Globo 2010b). For the residents of Vila Autódromo the disclosure of the terms confirm their claims of social eviction, one justified as removing poor communities in order to increase land values. Assisted by expertise from members of other social movements, a report was produced to technically counter the various claims of event planning, environmental and safety concerns and was forwarded to the IOC (Defensoria Pública do Estado do Rio de Janeiro 2010). As of December 2011 a multidisciplinary academic team from two local universities were assisting the resident's association in the elaboration of an urban plan to be proposed to the city authority.¹ The objective is to highlight the possibility of bottom-up alternative plans that can be developed with that of the Olympic Park.

Community displacement along Avenida das Américas

The increasing urban expansion over the last decades in Rio de Janeiro's West End has been slowly accompanied by improvements in the public transport and road networks. Up to 1997, main access was provided via busy coastline roads and tunnels until a 25 km express

way was built connecting the northern area to the city centre via an intra-urban toll access. The hosting of the 2016 Games is enabling a series of extensive transport-related interventions building new routes between Barra da Tijuca and different parts of the city. Apart from the expansion of the underground system to the region, three corridors of BRTs have been announced, connecting the area to the international airport; the Olympic cluster of Deodoro; the city centre and other boroughs further west, totalling more than 125km of express bus lanes. Works started soon in 2010 and several communities have been displaced as a result. In the month of May 2011 one of the authors took part in a human rights committee that visited city-wide settlements affected by works related to the mega-events to be held in the next four years. In this visit individual and collective testimonials were registered and visual material (photographic and video) were produced. The case described next refer only to those settlements located along the Avenue das Américas in the Barra da Tijuca region, and are discussed in greater details in the final report produced by the visiting mission.²

Several settlements were affected by the works of the Transoeste corridor, including the communities of Restinga, Vila Recreio II and Vila Harmonia. Altogether, more than 500 families were displaced as a result of eviction, accepting either a financial compensation or being resettled at social housing projects distant in 40km. A similar pattern of events were experienced by these communities. Initially, city officials visited the settlements to communicate the eviction due to works related to the BRT corridor. During the visit houses and local businesses were marked with painted signs and officials instructed residents to accept financial compensation or relocation to a housing project, otherwise they risked being left empty-handed. Residents then denounced their situation and appealed to the Public Defender Office.³ Meanwhile demolition works started to be carried out, in one instance, as registered at Restinga, carried between 8pm and 2am (Dhesca 2011).

The process was legally halted for a brief period, with the houses of those that did not accept the offer left surrounded by rubble and litter. Further visits of public officials escorted by the police only added more pressure for residents to negotiate. Those who accepted one of the offers had their houses demolished before being relocated or receiving compensation, having to live with friends and relatives or rendered homeless. Financial compensation took only the built structure into account which was insufficient to acquire a similar property in the area. At the time of the mission visit few individuals still remained in the settlements as a result of pending legal processes. Those who were relocated were reported to be in financial hardship due to increased commuting expenses, with some returning to the area to live with relatives not evicted or moving to other settlements. To many that moved to the housing project, the fact that they would now have to pay mortgage came by surprise and was beyond the financial means of some.

Insert figure 3 here
Insert figure 4 here

The visiting mission noted several issues of human rights infringement on the part of the city authority. The final report presented a series of recommendations:

- (1) The creation of an institutional space to prevent and mediate conflicts within the municipality structure;
- (2) Immediate release of all urban projects incurring in relocation and eviction;
- (3) The organisation of public meetings with involved communities to discuss urban intervention projects;
- (4) Reform legal procedures to compensate displaced individuals taking land values into account;
- (5) Halt all evictions in progress until they are negotiated and alternative plans discussed with the communities;

- (6) Demolish houses only after the resettlement of the entire community is completed, or in cases when it is necessary, immediately remove all the rubble;
- (7) Taking into account the number of people at risk due to works related to the organisation of the mega-events, the following measures are necessary: i) elaboration of a housing plan by the city authority that identify the financial resources and necessary measures to guarantee the right to housing of those affected, ii) guarantee the alternative of being resettled in an area near the original site, iii) increase the offer of social housing in established central areas;
- (8) Whenever relocations are necessary to be carried out by the public sector, to observe procedures recommended by UN resolutions of which Brazil have recognised.

(Dhesca 2011, p.38-39, translated from Portuguese by the authors)

Conclusion

Since winning the rights to host the 2016 Olympic Games, large working sites have sprout up in the landscape of Rio de Janeiro, signalling the emergence of new geographies facilitated by the event. The borough of Barra da Tijuca is undergoing an intensive process to accelerate urban expansion and public service provision with the development of the transport network and the construction of the Olympic facilities. However, as these projects unfold they reveal a perverse rationale of entitlement to the emerging Olympic city.

The rhetoric of 'honouring commitments assumed with the IOC', have been used by the city authority to strengthen a process of disciplining the urban space which have seriously affected the lives of low-income communities found in the way of urban projects. The cases of the communities of Restinga, Vila Harmonia and Vila Recreio II reviewed here show how top down decisions have produced at their best, the relocation of people to distant social housing projects through a stressful and painful process of rapid urban clearing, imposing new financial and geographical difficulties. At their worst, the procedures adopted by city officials have enhanced the hardship of vulnerable members of the society, disregarding the production of insalubrious environments around those that remained on their sites, and the induced situation of homelessness of those awaiting compensation or relocation.

The case of resistance of the community of Vila Autódromo next to the site designated to the Olympic Park also cast some light on the expectations of those directly involved with the production of Olympic space. Despite differing from other settlements by achieving legal landmarks of land occupation and service provision, the community have been met with a persistent desire over the years to drive them out of the site, as the surrounding area became more valuable. What was once a distant settlement in the western edges of the city became an undesirable presence.

As the spotlight turns to Rio de Janeiro in the coming years, officials and investors will be pleased by the international visibility that mega-events will confer to their plans. Just as visible will become the spatial injustices of the city. If the urgency of honouring deadlines and the national image confer a legitimacy to blitzkrieg planning, perhaps is only through resistance and counter-planning that resident's associations and social movements can bring to the surface discussions for a more participatory Olympic city-making.

Notes

1. The team is composed by members of the Institute of Urban and Regional Planning Research of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (IPPUR/UFRJ) and the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the Federal University Fluminense (FAU/UFF).

2. Available at <http://www.dhescbrasil.org.br/> (full report in Portuguese only) and <http://www.youtube.com/user/PriscilaWITNESS> (videos in Portuguese with English subtitles).

3. The Public Defender Office is a public agency attached to the state government structure to provide free legal assistance to those who cannot meet the costs of legal services.

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