

BRAZIL - The Emptying of Brazilian metropolises (Mario Osava, Tierramérica)

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Brazilian metropolises like Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo are seeing their population density — and their quality of life — decline.

RIO DE JANEIRO - [Tierramérica](#) - It is difficult to believe that Brazilian mega-cities like Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, with millions of inhabitants and traffic-clogged streets, are seeing their population densities decrease, which aggravates the cities' problems and makes solutions even more difficult to find.

But this is what urban planners are saying, concerned about reversing a centrifugal population trend that multiplies imbalances, contamination, violence and unregulated settlement in Brazil's major urban areas.

The southeastern coastal city of Rio de Janeiro is a serious case of population density loss since 1960, threatening urban sustainability due to the deterioration of services and quality of life, according to Sergio Magalhaes, an architect who has played an important role in the city government and is known for promoting a program in the 1990s to bring infrastructure to the "favelas", the precariously settled slums throughout the city.

In the 75-year period ended in 1955, the then-capital of Brazil expanded its urban area six-fold, but its population had multiplied by 10, reaching three million. Since the 1960s, however, the area of the city grew to three times its size, but the population did not even double.

The "emptying" of Rio, which now is home to six million people, is due to a series of factors, beginning with the expansion of vehicles and a 1942 law that promoted the home ownership, whereas rental housing had previously predominated, Magalhaes explained to Tierramérica.

Without credit to build on urbanized and expensive land, the population began to distance itself from the city center. Families, increasingly smaller but occupying the same size and type of residence, and the doctrine of the extended city also contributed to reducing demographic density.

The expansion towards the west, far from the beautiful Guanabara Bay around which the city and the metropolitan area had been structured, drove up the costs of infrastructure and public services (paved roads, transportation, water and sewage, electricity and telephone networks) just when Rio was losing its role of Brazil's economic engine to Sao Paulo, and its status of national capital to the founding of Brasilia in 1960.

Under these conditions it became impossible to maintain the supply of urban services and equipment for everyone, says the architect and urban planner.

Sao Paulo, 420 km west of Rio, had greater population density in the 1930s, when it had a well-defined and structured city center, with the population concentrated around it.

In the two following decades, there was a dispersal process as a result of the transition from transportation via trains and trolleys to buses and cars, Renato Cymbalista, an urban planner with the non-governmental Polis Institute, told Tierramérica.

The possibility of traveling "to any distant place" in a vehicle with its four tires made moving to the periphery viable, as families and developers sought cheaper land to build homes. That "option for the

paved city model" and the impoverishment of the population are the two leading factors behind urban dispersion, according to the expert.

In 2002, the city of Sao Paulo covered 873 square km, 57 percent of which (500 square km), were populated between 1930 and 1962, according to figures from the metropolitan planning agency.

The poorer population, who didn't have the means to compete for urbanized and more expensive lots, had to build their houses in distant neighborhoods, "more densely populated, with more violence and fewer schools," summarizes Cymbalista.

The result is an "unbalanced" city of 10.8 million people, with greatest concentration where there are fewer jobs, schools, hospitals and health centers, which increases social inequalities and the need for long distance transportation, he said.

The resulting traffic congestion and air pollution are aggravated by the predominance of single cars.

The solution, in Cymbalista's opinion, is to apply the City Statute and promote mass transit, by underground train or buses on bus-only streets. The city legislation, approved in 2001, promotes planning with citizen participation and the recovery of urban density through measures that tax unused lands, prevents expansion without infrastructure and facilitates construction on vacant lots in the city center.

In Rio de Janeiro, the shift of the upper middle class towards Barra de Tijuca, a beach neighborhood to the west, worries Magalhaes. In addition to drawing people away from the city, it is contributing to the decline of the city's historic center and its symbols, threatening Rio's urban identity with the aim of creating a new city center.

Barra de Tijuca has been built up over the past three decades, following the urban doctrine of modernism and rejecting older city models, favoring instead the tall and separate buildings that preserve a more open and green landscape. It is no accident that the original plan came from Lúcio Costa (1902-1998), the urban planner who designed Brasilia.

"The myth to be destroyed" is that this new neighborhood "represents the future of the city," says Magalhaes, because it is a "perverse" approach that favors a small group that attracts the bulk of public and private investment, to the detriment of the city's northern districts, where most of the poor population lives.

Rio is a threatened metropolis because it lost its role as Brazil's economic leader and its status as the national capital. To save itself, it has to recover quality of life and it must "democratize itself", expanding infrastructure and the availability of housing loans, he adds.

Three measures, according to Magalhaes, are essential: convert the extensive railroads that cross the most populated areas into underground trains, urbanize the favelas, and clean up the polluted Guanabara Bay.

Recuperating water quality in the bay, and therefore also its beaches, would rebuild the prestige of the city center and nearby neighborhoods. In this way, says the expert, Guanabara and rail transit would once again serve as the glue holding the city together — and to the benefit of everyone.

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