Resident perceptions of urbanisation and elite encroachment in a Jacarepaguá favela

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Abstract

In recent years Jacarepaguá, a sparsely settled, predominantly low-income suburban district in the west of Rio de Janeiro, has experienced a rapid process of urbanisation. Notable transformations include the development of Olympics-related transport and infrastructure projects and a proliferation of new elite condominiums and consumption spaces. This paper looks at how residents of a favela caught up in these processes perceive the changes going on around them. It draws two broad conclusions. First, residents see the intensified market activity inside and around the favela as offering new opportunities for income and employment, but also as potentially destabilising of long-established patterns of community relations and collective action. Second, state intervention has improved the quality of life of residents in important ways, but inspires suspicion among many who see the state as a defender of elite interests and fear that its increased presence will ultimately result in the favela's removal.

Introduction

Unlike their North American counterparts, the suburban areas that expanded rapidly in the cities of Latin America during the post-War era were typically characterised not by middle-class comfort and conformity, but by extreme poverty and widespread informality. Urban scholars saw this process as a spatial expression of the extreme inequalities present in Latin America's social structure, with geographical marginality acting as both a mechanism and a metaphor for the economic and social exclusion of the urban poor (Ford 1996). In recent decades, however, changes to the physical and social characteristics of suburban zones across the region have complicated the picture. The redesign of urban road networks and the 'invention' of the gated condominium as a new housing type (Ribeiro 1995), have permitted elite expansion into peripheral areas previously considered unattractive due to their isolation or the presence of low-income populations (Caldeira 2000). As a result, suburbs have been transformed into zones of social diversity and territorial fragmentation.

The neighbouring districts of Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá in Rio de Janeiro offer an insight into how such processes have unfolded (Santos Maia 1998; Herzog 2008). Although both have undergone dramatic processes of urbanisation since the early 1970s, they have followed very different paths. The Jacarepaguá lowlands to the north (see Maps 1 and 2) were predominantly settled by low-income populations in government housing projects, favelas or poorly served subdivisions.[1] By contrast the coastal strip of Barra was developed through a process of massive government and private investment into a 'global suburb' dominated by high-rise, gated condominiums. A broad separation between the two zones has traditionally been maintained by the natural barrier of a complex system of lakes, rivers and forests at Barra's northern edge. However, in the last decade or so a city-wide property boom, the exhaustion of space for further development in Barra and the decision to locate the 2016 Olympic Park on the boundary between the two areas have driven an expansion of Barra-style development into Jacarepaguá.

These processes have had dramatic impacts for existing low-income residents in Jacarepaguá. One of the places they are being most strongly felt is in the favela Asa Branca, which lies just 1km north of future Olympic Park (see Map 2). In general terms there has been an intensification of both market activity and state presence in and around the favela. Specifically, three key transformations can be identified. First, an increased flow of employment opportunities in the construction and service sectors has heightened demand for housing and given rise to a vibrant rental market. Second, after decades of neglect, the presence of the state has visibly increased, partly relating to the development of the Olympic Park and related transport and infrastructure projects. Finally, previously vacant land to the south and west of Asa Branca has been developed into a large number of affluent gated communities.

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[1] Favelas are officially defined by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estadística as "Collections of at least 51 housing units, most of which lack essential public services, which occupy or have until recently occupied publicly or privately owned land, and are characterised by disordered and dense occupation" (own translation)
http://saladeimprensa.ibge.gov.br/noticias?view=noticia&id=1&busca=1&idnoticia=2051

This paper will look at how Asa Branca's residents view these different processes, the risks and opportunities they perceive and their hopes and expectations for their future in the area. It draws two broad conclusions. First, residents see the intensified market activity inside and around the favela as offering new opportunities for income and employment, but also as potentially destabilising of long-established patterns of community relations and collective action. Second, state intervention has improved the quality of life of residents in important ways, but inspires suspicion among many who see the state as a defender of elite interests and fear that its increased presence will ultimately result in the removal of favela residents.

Favela Asa Branca

Asa Branca is a favela in the *bairro* (neighbourhood) of Jacarepaguá, at the edge of its boundary with the *bairro* of Curicica, both of which lie in the administrative region of Jacarepaguá (see map 3). With a population of 3,295 residents and 1,069 dwellings, Asa Branca is considered a medium-sized favela.[2] It was established through a co-ordinated occupation and division of plots in 1986 and has subsequently grown through verticalisation (most houses now have three or four floors) and the annexation of an unoccupied strip of land bordering the river Pavuninha in 2002 (SABREN). As is typical in many of Rio's newer, more peripheral favelas built on flat land, Asa Branca has an orderly layout, with equally sized plots distributed along streets just wide enough to access by car (See Image 1).

Against most social indicators Asa Branca is typical of Rio's favela population.[3] The area is well covered by water utility services, with 100% of residents receiving running water from the general network and 91% connected to the sewerage network, compared to 96% and 85% respectively for Rio's favelas as a whole. At 83%, literacy among the population aged over 5 is just under the favela average of 84%. In terms of racial composition, 34% of Asa Branca's residents define themselves as white, 16% as black and 50% as mixed, making it almost identical to the Rio favela

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[2] According to the definition used by the Rio de Janeiro *Prefeitura* (or city council) of 500-2,500 dwellings (Burgos 1998, p. 49)

[3] Following data comes from the 2010 Census (IBGE 2010)

average.[4] There are slightly fewer women in Asa Branca than men, which is the reverse of the favela population as a whole.[5] It is important to note the considerable social variation within Asa Branca's population. While two-thirds of households have a typical per capita income of between one half and two minimum salaries,[6] just over one quarter earn less than this, while almost 10% earn more. There is also a spatial expression of this internal diversity. One section of Asa Branca, known as 'the condominium', has larger houses and is seen as wealthier. Meanwhile, the most recently occupied area along the canal has a generally poorer population.

The following discussion is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 residents (F = 15; M = 10) of varied ages and social circumstances, conducted between March and May 2013. Initial interviews were organised through the Asa Branca Residents Association and a local NGO, and further participants identified through snowballing techniques. It is also informed by a large number of informal discussions with community leaders and NGO workers with a good knowledge of the area.

The arrival of the market

Abramo describes three 'logics' that co-ordinate individual and collective action in modern societies, and thus condition access to urban land (Abramo 2003, pp. 1-2). The first is the state, which generates and enforces (or not) the institutional and legal framework through which land is accessed, and also directly intervenes through the production of social housing. The second is the market, which allocates land and property through mechanisms of exchange and capital accumulation. These have been the dominant logics shaping the urbanisation in the rich world. However, in countries like Brazil with extreme social inequalities and financially constrained

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[4] The Brazilian census collects self-defined data on colour or race according to the main categories of 'branca' (white), 'preta' (black) and 'parda' (brown or mixed)

[5] This may be a result of the greater presence of single men living in rented accommodation – see next section.

[6] Brazil's minimum salary is readjusted annually. The level in 2013 is R$678 (approximately $316 USD) http://tmagazine.ey.com/news/ibfd/brazil-new-monthly-minimum-salary-2013/

governments, a third logic – the 'logic of necessity' –has played an important role in urbanisation. The absolute need for shelter and the lack of formal means to acquire it has both provided the motive and shaped the process of land occupation in many places.

As in the case of every favela, the establishment of Asa Branca by settlers who lacked access to housing via the state or the market was driven by the 'logic of necessity'. A resident who participated in the invasion of the canal-side area in 2002 provides an emblematic account:

> Before the invasion we used to rent. My mother had five children. It was just her
> with the five of us. My father had left. So for her to work, look after the children
> and pay the rent the cost was very high. So we came here, built a wooden hut…
> and we stayed.
>
> *Female, 21*

However, since this time the logic of the market has come to play a significant role in determining access to land and the production of space within Asa Branca. Most of the original occupiers and/or their families remain in the area, but as in many other favelas an active property market has arisen, most notably in the form of a large rental sector. A comparison of the 2000 and 2010 censuses reveal that the percentage of rented dwellings increased from 11.1% to 29.1% of the total (IBGE 2000; IBGE 2010).[7]

There is no detailed official data on the rental sector in informal areas that might show changes in rent levels over time or the characteristics of landlords and tenants. However, anecdotal evidence from informants can help to delineate some key features. While an informal rental market has long existed in Asa Branca it seems it has until recently primarily served existing residents of this and neighbouring communities, for example newly married couples with overcrowded family homes who could not afford to purchase a property. This appears subsequently to have transformed into a 'build-to-let' market, in which existing house-owners deliberately

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[7] Interviewee testimonies suggest that it is primarily in the last three years that the number of renters in the area has noticeably risen, suggesting that this figure significantly under-represents the current level.

convert or add additional floors as purpose-built 'kitchenettes'. There are accounts of a few larger-scale landlords who have bought up several properties to let out, allowing them to move out of the favela. The tenants also appear to be coming from further afield, particularly from states in the North East of Brazil. A large proportion of these new renters are drawn by employment opportunities in the construction sector, and commonly appear to find out about renting opportunities through information chains stretching back to their place of origin.[8] The typical cost of a two-room kitchenette is R$300-500 ($140-230 USD) per month, which residents say is considerably higher than levels five years ago.

Interview questions sought to ascertain whether respondents had noticed the increase in renters, whether they felt this was changing the area and if so how. All but one of the interviewees reported having noticed the presence of a large number of new residents in recent years.[9] However, most did not perceive any major problems of integration of new residents. A 17 year-old male renter who had moved to the area from the state of Bahia 5 years previously said he found the first few weeks difficult, being new to the city and not knowing anyone. However, he felt he had quickly become integrated and did not perceive any divisions between long-term and newer residents. Most of the older respondents expressed a similar view.

However, some residents felt the changes had produced conflict, either because some newcomers did not act according to local behavioural norms or because their status as renters meant they did not have an investment in preserving relationships or the quality of the local environment. For example:

> Respondent: "It's changing a lot, with lots of people arriving from outside. They don't have a commitment to the neighbourhood. Not to the place or to the community. Because it's not theirs, how would they know? They don't have roots here, so they don't care. They don't come here to contribute, but just to pass through."

> Interviewer: "(Because) they don't stay for very long?"

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[8] Migrants' knowledge about the area and rental opportunities appears to be disseminated informally via word-of-mouth, although it is possible there are actors playing a more significant co-ordinating role

[9] Of the 25 respondents, nine were renters and five had arrived in the area in the last five years

Respondent: "It's not that they don't stay for long. The worst thing I see is that as they're not from here they don't have any commitment. When they become property owners then they start to change, because then they start to think, now I'm worried, now I have to look after things. But with the majority of renters, they don't have a sense of looking after the [place]."

Female, 43

More typical, however, was a more diffuse sense that the presence of more unfamiliar faces had changed the 'feel' of the area. Residents reported being less likely to leave their doors unlocked than in the past and an increasingly felt that they no longer knew what was going on in the area. This was closely tied to discourses about violence and crime. Asa Branca's residents invariably identify the very low crime rate as a one of the great attractions of the area and a source of local pride. Although recorded violence does not appear to have risen in recent years, many see the changes in the area as a threat to this peace.

Interviewer: Have you noticed the presence of new residents here in recent years?

Respondent: Yes, suddenly I'm seeing lots of people I don't recognise... It's fine, it's just that you don't know who they are so you never know if it might be a criminal or something like that.

Male, 31

In general it seems that residential turnover has not undermined conviviality in Asa Branca, and residents still celebrate the fact that neighbours greet each other and chat in the street, newer residents included. However, there has been a weakening of the correspondence between the space of the neighbourhood and the social networks of residents (Blokland 2003). If some residents are not integrated into local social networks, or it is simply perceived that there are people present who lie outside them, it may undermine the 'collective efficacy' of the community as whole (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997). One resident offered an example for how this may occur:

"You don't know if you have some kind of normal neighbourly disagreement how the guy will react, whether he might be a violent guy."

In the absence of 'closure', or a clear overlapping of local networks, norms may have become both more ambiguous and more difficult to collectively enforce.

The arrival of the state

Sociologists have long attributed the Brazilian state a key role in the process of urbanisation (Abreu 1987). Conflict models present the state as an agent of capital, producing segregation and reproducing inequality through its uneven investments across urban space (most famously Kowarick 1970). Such theories seemed to accurately account for the actions of Brazil's military regime during the 1960s and 70s – a time when favela populations were forcefully removed from high value areas in Rio's city centre and South Zone and re-housed in poorly built and subsequently abandoned peripheral housing projects. Meanwhile huge amounts of public money were invested in opening up Barra da Tijuca to elite development. Following democratisation, however, state expenditure in poor areas increased considerably, most notably through the Favela Bairro programme which carried out on-site upgrading works in a significant proportion of the city's favelas during the 1990s and 2000s. Evidence suggests that during this period state spending still did not come to play an actively *redistributive* role in Brazilian society and was not allocated on an equal basis among low-income areas (Haddad and Nedovic Budic 2006; Bichir 2009; Preteceille and Valladares 2000). However, neither was public money spent solely in the service of elites.

The current urban transformations associated the upcoming Olympic Games have once again raised the question of the role of the state in the urbanisation process (see Comitê Popular da Copa e Olimpíadas 2013). Several favelas have been or are due to be removed to make way for new sporting and transport infrastructure. These decisions have been made with little transparency and few official channels for communities to appeal. The removals are concentrated in Barra/Jacarepaguá, the South Zone and the city centre, which are the main sporting and tourist hubs for the

Games, but also regions experiencing enormous property booms, raising suspicions about government motives. While some evicted populations have been re-housed within the same neighbourhood, others have been sent to public housing on cheaper land in the far northwest of the city, where transport and infrastructure are poor and employment opportunities limited. On the other hand, as emphasised by the Prefeitura, physical upgrading of favelas has continued apace and new infrastructure, transport and policing interventions are, at least in theory, beneficial to the public as a whole.

Although neglected for most of its history, Asa Branca has found itself profoundly affected by this new burst of state activism. In late 2012 public upgrading works were carried out under the Bairro Maravilha programme, bringing paved roads, drainage and street lighting. Given its proximity to the future Olympic Park, Asa Branca lies near the intersection of two new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lines. Unlike nearby Vila Autódromo which lies within the grounds of the Olympic Park, and a few small favelas to the northwest which lie on the projected BRT route, Asa Branca has not been threatened with removal. However, it is likely that some houses along the Avenida Salvador Allende will be removed to make way for the BRT.[10] The resident interviews probed for views about the favela upgrading works, the new transport systems and more general feelings about state intervention.

Interviewees were unanimous in praising the improvements that the recent urban upgrading works had brought to the area. In a practical sense it was widely regarded as having improved quality of life. In discussing the changes, residents portrayed the upgrading as a temporal watershed in which many of the major challenges associated with favela life, such as flooding during spells of heavy rain, had become things of the past:

> It's better. It's better, yes. They paved the roads and everything. God, it's great. Before when it rained and when the river flooded everything got soaked and ruined. Now that won't happen any more.
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> *Female, 21*

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[10] The precise number is not known (Comitê Popular da Copa e Olimpíadas 2013, p. 23)

Respondent: It (the community) has got better, a lot better.

Interviewer: In what ways?

Respondent: The services have improved for the people that live here. They put in sewers, they've brought in lighting, they've paved the streets, they've put in water. So everyone's happy.

Female, 71

In a more symbolic sense the changes seemed to have altered the ways in which many residents see the area and themselves. Following the inauguration of the public works, a pun circulated among residents (only half jokingly) that the area was no longer a favela, but a 'neighbourhood', playing on the name of the programme under which they were implemented, *Bairro Maravilha* (or 'marvellous neighbourhood'). This indicates a desire among some favela residents for the aesthetic trappings of formality, perhaps symbolic of more substantive demands for civic inclusion and social acceptance that have traditionally been denied to them.

Despite these broadly positive perceptions of state intervention, there were also more critical voices among the interviewees. Many residents felt the investment stopped short of what was really required in the neighbourhood. Common complaints were the lack of public or community spaces like a crèche, medical centre or public leisure facilities providing activities for children and young people. None of these were available within the area, nor in the immediately surrounding communities (although private social areas were being provided in the new condominiums). Other residents complained about the quality of the schools and a shortage of job training programmes. For those who perceived a lack of willingness of the state to address these more 'sticky' issues, the upgrading amounted to no more than 'maquiagem' (make up), improving the appearance of the area with tackling its fundamental social challenges.

There were improvements here, but I think there should be a more critical attitude about the community. There needs to be a lot more done here, but it

> goes unnoticed. [There is a problem with] children taking drugs, but no-one sees
> that. I think it's poorly done.

Female, 20

This limited form of state intervention feeds a sense that investments have only been made because of the rising profile of the surrounding region, and not because of the needs of the favela residents themselves:

> The upgrading wasn't to improve the community. If I've been here eight years,
> and it's only now that they want to pave the roads! ... The priority is not an
> interest in our community, it's a general interest, a general development which
> they want the world to see. They aren't doing it for the community. They don't
> invest for the sake of the residents.

Female, 43

Elite encroachment: Inequality, opportunity and fear of removal

Elite development of the area north of the Lagoa de Jacarepaguá is the most dramatic symbol of urbanisation in the region. At the time of writing, in the past twelve months perhaps as many as twenty high-rise, gated condominium blocks have been built in the immediate vicinity of Asa Branca. A short distance to the east work has begun on the Centro Metropolitano da Barra, an area of five square kilometres, which will contain dozens of new housing blocks, a Hilton Hotel and what will become one of the city's largest shopping centres. Residents were asked for their views on these changes, their perceptions of their wealthy new neighbours and about how they believed they would be perceived by them.

Like attitudes towards the favela upgrading, residents were broadly positive about the development of the surrounding area, and particularly about the job opportunities it would bring with it for residents.

> There will be lots of construction so people who work in that area are going to
> have lots of work. For example, with the improvements they did here lots of
> people benefitted from working on them, didn't they. I think that's good.

Female, 42

The majority of interviews were in employment and all but three worked in the Barra-Jacarepaguá region. Many of the female respondents worked in domestic or other service jobs in nearby condominiums and hotels. Further development of the region would mean more job creation and less risk of unemployment. For small informal businesses, wealthy new residents would also mean new markets. One resident who ran a microenterprise barbecuing for social events saw great potential for expansion:

> Take my tiny little business. If I can get just a small proportion of them [the condominium residents] interested in using my business that could be a hundred new clients.

Male, 48

However, the broad enthusiasm for development was tempered by widespread feelings of social distance and segregation. At the time of the interviews many of the new condominiums had not been fully occupied, while the older ones are further away from the entrances into the favela. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy (if perhaps unsurprising) that, apart from those who worked in the condominiums, respondents had had practically no interaction with their residents. In the context of this separation, most believed that they would be perceived negatively by them, as a result of general social discrimination against favelas within Brazilian society:

> People who have money always look at people like us through different eyes, you know. I'm sure they see us in a different way. [That's what it's like]… in Rio, in our society. So we know that they look at us with different eyes.

Male, 38

More specifically, many expected discrimination to revolve around media representations of favelas as violent places. One female, aged 18, said she saw Asa Branca as a 'community' (a term that is often used interchangeably with favela, but which has more positive connotations) rather than a 'favela' because "here they don't have gangs, they don't have drug trafficking". However, she believed that the condominium residents would see it as a "dangerous kind of favela":

> I think they think this is the most dangerous place there is
>
> *Female, 18*

In this way an important component of resident identity and social distinction vis-à-vis other favelas is overwhelmed by a more powerful and widely recognised social distinction between rich and poor, formal and informal.

In a similar way many residents favourably compared their situation with low-income or favela residents in areas with fewer employment opportunities. However, the elite encroachment into the area made many question whether they would be allowed to remain. Around one third of the respondents volunteered the view, unprompted, that they thought the community would be removed. One woman had suspended building a third floor on her home in case of an eviction. No specific reason was given for these fears, and the fact that removal hadn't been threatened and that the area had recently been upgraded did not reassure them. Instead they felt a vague sense that their surroundings were becoming inhospitable and that when the time came the government would not protect them:

> Sincerely, I'm a bit scared. I can't see how the community can continue with so many buildings surrounding it… I'm scared that one day they'll decide to remove the community… and send us to Santa Cruz or Sepetiba… where there's no transport, no healthcare, no education, nothing. That's my concern.
>
> Female, 20

In this conception elite encroachment and state attention are two sides of the same coin, and if low-income populations benefit it is simply because of their proximity to favoured groups. Such benefits are accompanied by a persistent fear that the arithmetic may some day change and the state's defence of elite interests will at that time entail removal of informal settlements, rather than on-site upgrading.

Summary

The transformations currently occurring in and around Asa Branca are impacting profoundly on the lives of residents in two main ways. Firstly, the economic

dynamism of the surrounding region fuels optimism among many about their long-term employment and financial prospects. However, by stimulating the rise of a rental sector in recent years it has also weakened the correspondence between local social networks and the space of the neighbourhood, and thus of the sense of control residents feel over what goes on in their area. This has not undermined quality of life for most residents, but some fear that it may in the future.

Secondly, increased state presence – in the last year in particular – has significantly improved the lives of residents in practical and symbolic ways. However, this sudden interest of the Prefeitura in a previously neglected region is not praised unreservedly. Many believe the changes stop short of what is required to produce transformative social change. A smaller, but still significant number attribute the state's arrival to the elite pattern of development in the surrounding area. For these residents distrust of the state and a belief that it ultimately acts in the interests of the elite prompts a lingering fear that some day, for some indefinable reason, the favela will be removed. They fear this will result in relocation to distant areas where they will lose their locational advantages and the social and cultural characteristics that they value in their neighbourhood.

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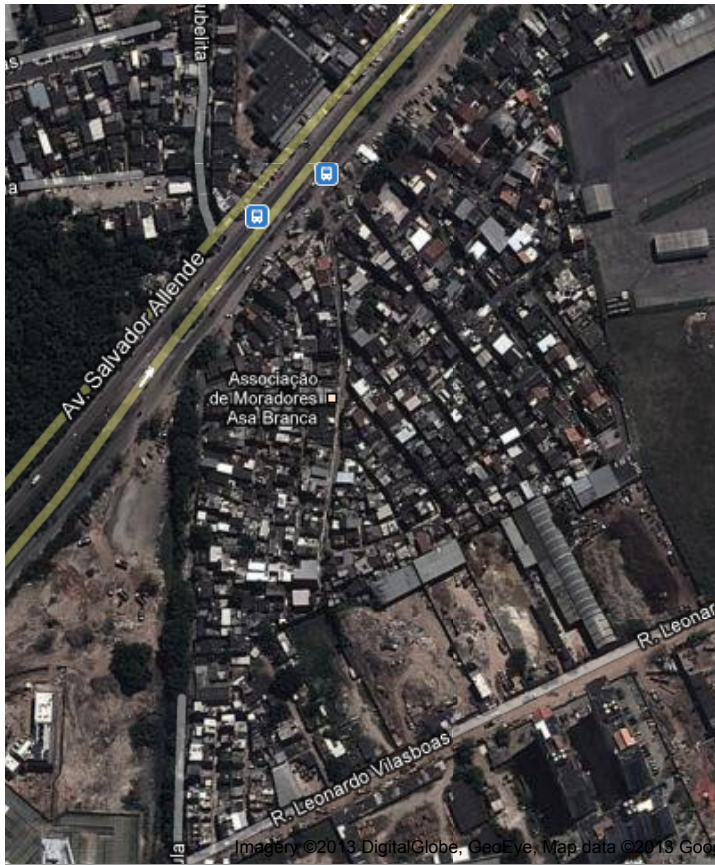
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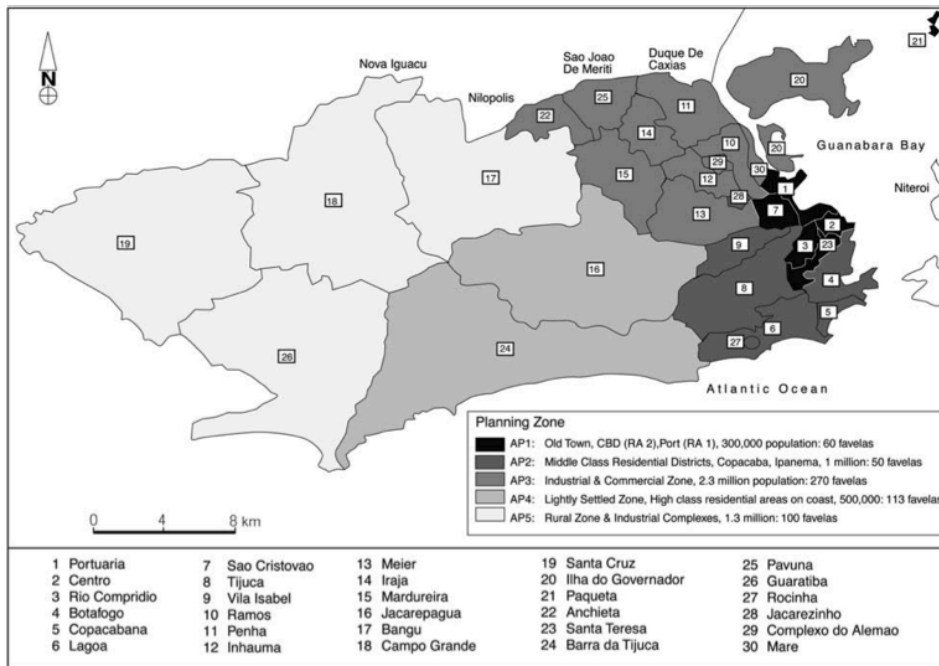
Map 1: Rio de Janeiro's planning zones (Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá occupy the area marked AP4), Source: O'Hare and Barke (2002, p. 227)

Map 2: Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá (arrow marks location of Asa Branca), Source: Instituto Pereira Passos

Image 1: Asa Branca aerial photograph, Source: Google Maps