

As a recipient of the Thinker Summer Research grant from the center of Latin American studies, as well as the recipient of the Global Metropolitan Studies Pre-dissertation Field work grant, I went to the periphery of Rio de Janeiro Metropolitan Region, in Brazil. My focus during this trip was São João de Meriti, a neighboring city, home of 458,673 inhabitants, and the densest city in Latin America¹. As other peripheries, it embodies a relation of dependence, insufficiency and incompleteness in relation to the central city, Rio de Janeiro. This narrative, constantly repeated, is based on an assessment of lacks², which often overlook the opportunities on the ground. At the same time, this rhetoric endorses large-scale urban transformations that don't reflect the major population needs, causing problems such as fragmentation, abandonment, displacement, and so on. In this field research I proposed to observe the spaces created by the intersection between water, electricity, and transportation infrastructure³ and the process of peripheral urbanization.

Different from other cities in the world, peripheries in Brazil were built in a process called peripheral urbanization⁴, which consists in a specific process of city making typical from the South. It generates new modes of politics, operates with a specific temporality and agency, and engages in transversal logics. It is characterized by *autoconstruction*, a method in which the residents "build their houses and cities step-by-step according to the resources they are able to put together at each moment". In this context, the occupation comes prior to the implementation of infrastructure. Sometimes, as in the case of São João de Meriti, the transportation lines, especially railroads, were implemented almost at the same time as the land parceling and housing construction. This type of occupation occurred as the population needed, and very often without a formal plan. Therefore features like public spaces were not thought in advance. My hypothesis lies on the fact that when infrastructure was implemented after the land was occupied, it generated leftover spaces that become places for communal use in this highly constructed area. Very frequently they are not recognized as official public spaces, consequently they embody often unruly social, cultural and economic relations. As such, these public spaces become marginal of city life⁵ and invisible to the predominant considerations of the global urban change. As Simone⁶ reminds us, the periphery "is potentially a generative space - a source of innovation and adaptation", by analyzing these spatial formations in São João de Meriti, this pilot research aims to illuminate this powerful generative role. This could validate ways of city-making characteristic from the South, empower communities, and foster a more equitable and sustainable urban growth.

As part of this preliminary investigation I spent three weeks in the field aiming to: (1) become familiarized with the area, (2) choose the space that I would like to further analyze, (3) make contact with local organizations and community, as well as (4) collect meaningful data. I made contact with the Municipality of São João de Meriti and with the Metropolitan Agency of Rio some months before this trip. This was important as they granted me access to city reports, future plans, and maps, prior to my arrival. Having access to this material guided my choice

¹According to IBGE data its population density (number of inhabitants divided by the area in square kilometers) is one of the highest in the continent, about 13,024, 56 (inhabitants / km²). Therefore, São João de Meriti is popularly known as the *Formigueiro das Américas* (Anthill of Americas).

²AbdouMalik Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads*, (London, Routledge, 2010), 1-333.

³The selection of those types of infrastructures is due to the fact that transportation, electricity, and water have been key claims to urban citizenship and urbanization in Latin America. Teresa Caldeira notes that beyond infrastructure, land tenure claims were also at the forefront of social movements demands in Brazil.

⁴Teresa Caldeira, *Peripheral Urbanization: Autoconstruction, Transversal Logics, and Politics in Cities of the Global South*, (Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 2016), 3–20.

⁵Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads*, 16-17.

⁶Ibid., 41.

toward three locations within the city that could fulfill the needs of this research. My first visit to the city was together with the Municipality personnel, which allowed me to meet some community organizations, such as, the *Movimento Pró-Saneamento* (MPS) that fights for sanitation in the metropolitan area since the 80s. In addition, having their companion was key in terms of security since the area has high violence rates. Moreover, this first contact with the field made me narrow down to only one location of the three previously selected, the *Feirinha da Pavuna*, which is a street fair, located in the division between the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São João de Meriti. Along its 200 meters of extension and more than 100 sellers, one can find from fresh produces to electronics, and a great variety of people. This place was key to my research due to several particularities ranging from its location to its importance in the peripheral social, cultural and economic context.

In 1910 the *Rio Douro* train branch was launched with two lines: *Belford Roxo*, that still exists; and another, which was deactivated in 1970 and transformed into an elevated subway line (the Line 2). Pavuna⁷ is the last station of this line and underneath it, the leftover space, is where the *Feirinha* happens every day since mid 70s. It gathers people from the whole metropolitan area since it is the point of transfer between the Rio de Janeiro's subway and the Baixada's⁸ train. Although the street fair exists for more than 40 years, it became famous to the general public through a famous samba singer, Jovelina Pérola Negra, who wrote the song "Feirinha da Pavuna," in 1985, since then, it is a space/event that has a metropolitan reach and cultural importance. In addition, this street fair represents an important economic activity for the area where it is placed. The peripheries commonly suffer from deprived resource, jobs, access to material infrastructure, and services provided by governments. Hence the inhabitants must engage in an open-ended arrangement which Simone⁹ calls "politics of anticipation" to endure. In this context, *Feirinha* emerged from the necessity of the inhabitants for produces and social-economic activities that weren't available for them.

São João de Meriti and Pavuna, have experienced some public and private investments and urban improvements along the years that *Feirinha* existed. Among them, a past renovation program called "Rio Cidade"¹⁰, and future interventions such as the "Operação Urbana Consorciada Pavuna – São João de Meriti"¹¹. Nevertheless none of them considered this space or the concerns of its informal sellers or *camelôs*, how they are popularly known¹². Therefore, the *Feirinha* and its users faced a great vulnerability and stigmatization along those years. Only in 2014, after a great pressure from sellers and of the local inhabitants, the fair was institutionalized as Cultural Heritage of Rio de Janeiro. This effort was important for the formal recognition of this space. As one of the sellers mentioned "this area is known as a dormitory district, it is stigmatized. (...) The inhabitants should be aware that São João de Meriti has important cultures and ways of life that can reverberate around other parts of Rio".

⁷ Pavuna is a neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro which is on the border between the city of Rio and the metropolitan area.

⁸ "Baixada" or "Baixada Fluminense" is how all the cities located in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro are called.

⁹ Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads*, 1-333

¹⁰ "Rio Cidade Program" was one of the projects included in Rio de Janeiro's Strategic Plan, under the campaign "the urbanism is back to the city". It followed the urban entrepreneurship of the 90s in cities such as Barcelona. The program upgraded fifteen areas on its first phase (Rio Cidade I) and other fifteen on its second phase (Rio Cidade II). Pavuna was refurbished with this program in 1995 however the *Feirinha* wasn't part of the renovation plan.

¹¹ Technical cooperation between the State of Rio de Janeiro, the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro, and the Municipality of São João de Meriti aiming at the promotion of studies and joint actions for sustainable urban development, in the areas of mobility, environment, housing and social and economic development around Pavuna subway and São João de Meriti train stations.

¹² *Camelôs*, have fought for their work rights since the 80s when an economic depression in Rio de Janeiro made the informal work a way of survival of many inhabitants.

It is also important to mention the characteristics of the surroundings of the Feirinha. When I arrived in Sao Joao de Meriti I was expecting to encounter a majority of single-family homes as the census of 2010 indicated (more than 80%). However the scenario was slightly different, as my observations and conversations with inhabitants and municipal authorities indicate. Walking in different neighborhoods of the city I saw a considerable number of apartment buildings with no more than five floors, as well as countless cohabitations within single family's plots. Moreover, the built environment was less *autoconstructed*, as few decades ago¹³, and more "autodeveloped" -- meaning that they were not built along the years by their owners, but by outside developers. Their origins and characteristics are diverse and difficult to map out since usually they do not operate within the formal real estate market. These changes in the way peripheries are being built have effects not only in the build environment but also in the public spaces and their publics. For instance, home ownership is decreasing in São João de Meriti in the past 20 years, which might affect the way inhabitants interact with the community or advocate for changes in their neighborhoods. An example of the consequence of this shift in public space is the frequency of informal sellers replacement in Feirinha da Pavuna. In the past the *camelôs* use to be the same for years. When they retired, family members inherited their selling points. In contrast, nowadays sellers don't have a commitment to stay for a long time. This change in land tenure clearly poses some issues related to the dwellers attachment and commitment to the space, as well as the characteristic of their demands. This shift is something that interests me to further investigate.

In this fieldwork I was able to make important connections that granted me with information that I wasn't able to find in current and past literature. The municipality of São João de Meriti, the Metropolitan Chamber of Rio de Janeiro, the Integration Secretary of Rio de Janeiro and Baixada Fluminense, and the *Movimento Pró-Saneamento* shared with me their perception on the different aspects of social-economic and cultural dynamics in São João de Meriti. Thanks to this trip to Brazil I have a better understanding of what cases have the highest potential to be studied, and have access to the data relevant to my research. All this would not be possible without the Tinker Field Research Grant provided by the Center for Latin American Studies.

¹³ See Teresa Caldeira, *Peripheral Urbanization: Autoconstruction, Transversal Logics, and Politics in Cities of the Global South*, (Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 2016; James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Erminia Maricato, "The Future of Global Peripheral Cities," *Latin American Perspectives* 44, no. 2 (March 2017).