

Sometimes dubbed Brazil's Venice, Recife is situated on a series of islands, articulated by waterways, on the country's northeast coast. The nation's ninth largest city, it has a historical core, but also shares many urban challenges common to other Brazilian metropolises: a beachfront blighted by speculative development a semi-derelict port area and extensive zones of poor neighbourhoods. Architects and academics **Circe Monteiro and Luiz Carvalho** from the multidisciplinary research group INCITI (Research and Innovation for Cities) at the Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife, describe here why, despite a history of inconsistent development, this could now be Recife's moment to transform itself as the urban agenda comes to the fore.

RECIFE

The Popular Struggle

for a Better City

Recife, Brazil's ninth largest city with a metropolitan area population exceeding 3.8 million, currently faces an unprecedented opportunity to shape its future as a green and sustainable metropolis. This is not just 21st-century planning jargon. A conjunction of particular circumstances has challenged the way the city has been planned, has countered prevailing economic and property interests and established the basis for a new approach to urban design.

Located on Brazil's northeast coast, Recife is characterised by many of the same urban phenomena that one finds in other large coastal cities: a burgeoning beachfront of hotels and speculative residential towers of negligible architectural quality, a port area of abandoned warehouses and an endless periphery of low-income neighbourhoods and favelas with minimal transport, poor-quality health and education facilities, and non-existent urban amenities.

What differentiates Recife from Brazil's other coastal cities is its geographical setting on a series of islands defined by a network of waterways. It is no coincidence that the term 'Brazilian Venice' is often used to promote the city. In addition, unusually progressive planning in the 1980s preserved several blocks of 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century buildings in the districts of the historical core, including the lively São José market of 1875. In the 1990s, the island of Bairro do Recife – the oldest part of the historical centre now marketed as 'Recife Antigo' (Old Recife) – established itself as the heart of the city for public festivities and witnessed a further transformation due to the arrival of new uses such as a technology hub.

Throughout its history, Recife has been shaped by conflicting forces. Four of these competing influences – the city's struggle to conquer nature, the impact of new developments, the struggle for representation by various social movements, and the search for a new quality of life and sustainable development proposed by the Capibaribe Park plan – highlight key aspects of the city's past development, its current situation and a possible future.

CITY VERSUS NATURE

The first long-lasting (and ongoing) conflict is between the city and nature, notably the fight to control water. Recife's identification with the waters of the Capibaribe River, the main watercourse that traverses it, is one of the city's most striking features. The city's initial urban nucleus was built on an isthmus between the Atlantic Ocean and the Capibaribe River basin. When the Dutch occupied the territory in the 17th century they built their city on flooded land where there was already a small village next to the port. 'By the reefs' gives Recife its name. Even after the expulsion of the Dutch in 1654, this settlement became the region's main economic centre, and then its provincial capital, and remained one of Brazil's three largest cities until the mid-19th century.

Explosive population growth during the 20th century and the substitution of river by vehicular transport diminished the role of the Capibaribe as a structural element of urban space. Market demand for a modern lifestyle in high-rise buildings created a disconnect with the river and nature in most of the city's central districts, with the exception of the beachfront.

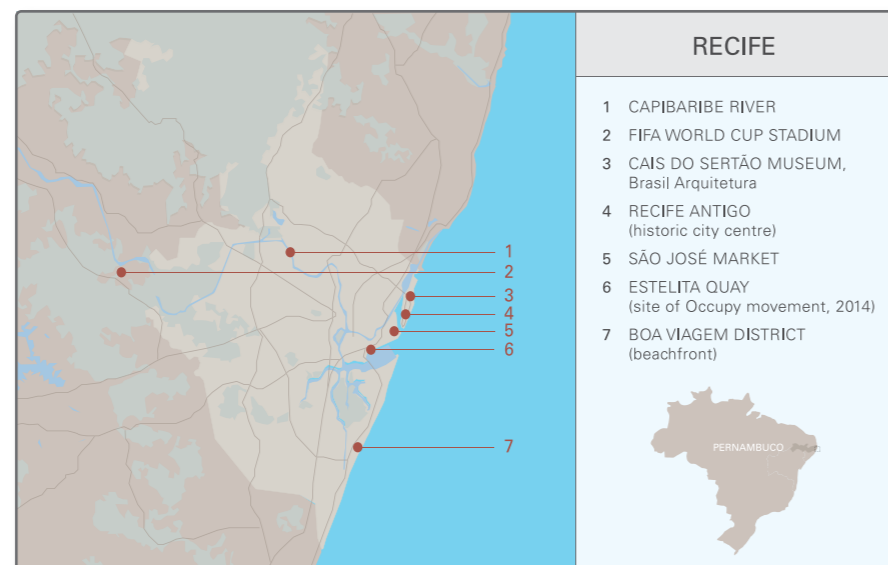
Recife thus entered the 21st century with an urban structure that barely acknowledges the river. Market demand favoured new neighbourhoods along the beachfront, with high-rise buildings substituting the existing low-density typologies. Recife's historical centre (a group of four out of its 94 districts) is the only place where some traces of its connection to water can still be found.

Along with the new growth, the already precarious mobility was exacerbated by President Lula's policy to help consumers from lower-income groups by reducing car tax. As a result, passenger cars and motorcycles congest roads throughout the city, reflecting the country's rising rate of car ownership, which increased by an average of 7 per cent a year from 1992 to 2009.¹

In the last decade, a series of plans for improved public transport were initiated, largely driven by Recife's role as the 2014 FIFA World Cup host city. Today, however, the effect of

Recife: key map
Locating major
landmarks and
projects

Recife's historic city centre is set on an island. An ambitious proposed reclamation and upgrading of the Capibaribe River would provide a much-needed green lung through many city neighbourhoods. Note the location of the 2014 FIFA World Cup stadium, 23 kilometres (14 miles) northwest of the city centre.



Capibaribe River, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil, 2014

Marco Zero Square, Recife Antigo (Old Recife), Pernambuco, Brazil, 2015

On the left bank lie a wealthy neighbourhood and the Santana Park, while the right bank is occupied by poor communities – two different worlds divided by the river with few connecting bridges.

below: The historical city centre with its renovated warehouses is enlivened by weekend fairs and musical performances that attract residents, visitors and, increasingly, cyclists.



these plans is scarcely noticeable due to lack of connection of the proposed systems with the existing network, and the fact that most of the works have been only partially implemented.

HISTORICAL VERSUS MODERN

Recife is fortunate because a series of programmes coordinated by industry, national and local government and academia initiated at the end of the last decade have contributed to the regeneration of part of the city's historical centre at Bairro do Recife. Focused on local economic development, the initiative provided incentives to attract technology-based information and communication businesses to the area. Porto Digital, the flagship of these interventions, currently accommodates 250 companies with 7,100 people working in 50,000 square metres (540,000 square feet) of refurbished 19th-century buildings.

Parallel to this, Recife City Council and the Pernambuco state government also introduced initiatives to support culture and leisure in the city centre, including previously dispersed carnival festivities, and the refurbishment of riverside warehouses that now include a major museum dedicated to the history and culture of northeast Brazil's semi-arid Sertão region. Temporary cycle lanes, a street market and closure to cars on Sundays have all contributed to the district's transformation. The city centre has been occupied in new ways by teaching institutions, young residents, offices, bars, restaurants and museums, reinforcing its role as a meeting place and point of convergence for different social groups. This vitality attracted new users (primarily the middle classes) and stimulated new habits such as family weekend cycling, strolls along the promenade, or just meeting friends at city-centre bars. Although they do not reach the entire city, these small yet important changes are a first step towards bridging spatial and social segregation.

THE STRUGGLE OF THE CITY, FOR THE CITY, BY THE CITY

With the exception of Recife Antigo, the city's skyline of Baroque church towers, its magnificent river views and exuberant vegetation have been gradually destroyed due to several decades without long-term planning. Regulations are continually written and modified to meet the objectives of developers. The speed of transformation is such that these losses are only recognised by city authorities when it is too late. Until recently, these repeated demolitions took place without any community reaction.

In response to Recife's startling growth at the end of the last century, and the problems of verticalisation and limited mobility, neighbourhood residents' associations have played an increasingly important role in pressing for new city legislation. An important example is the implementation of a regulation that is still in use limiting the building height to six floors in areas close to the river, and a maximum of 20 floors across the rest of the urban fabric in 12 of the city's districts. These are predominantly middle-class groups fighting to protect their own interests and tend to be dismissed by local authorities as bourgeois movements without popular legitimacy, however they exert strong influence in the political sphere and local press.

Another vector of discontent with the business-as-usual property market was a group of activists who created the Direitos Urbanos (Urban Rights) discussion forum in 2012, along with a blog that aired citizens' views against development projects that were detrimental to the city's landscape or involved the demolition of historical buildings.² This was a first in Recife.

In June 2013, a wave of popular demonstrations erupted across Brazil during the FIFA Confederations Cup with an urgent agenda of demands (from better public transport,

Urban mangrove,
Boa Viagem,
Recife,
Pernambuco,
Brazil, 2014

opposite: This conservation area in the middle of the city connects two important water systems: the Capibaribe River basin and the sea.

Occupy protestors,
Cais José Estelita,
Recife,
Pernambuco,
Brazil,
7 May 2015

below: 'The City is Ours, Occupy It.' The struggle against the construction of a high-rise scheme on the Estelita quay was sparked by social media and grew into a forceful voice campaigning for urban rights.

Recife's 'urban rights' movement emerged, questioning the city's current development model. It reached its peak during the World Cup

education and hospitals to rights for minority groups, but principally against the public works proposed for the 2014 World Cup). Although Recife already had a specific governmental programme in place to respond to FIFA's requirements regarding its infrastructure, it was clear to the general public that the World Cup would be an exercise in exclusion, and that the promised improvements would not be implemented in time.

A proposal for a mixed-use project adjacent to Recife's new stadium almost 20 kilometres (12 miles) west of the city was abandoned. The bus rapid transit (BRT) system was only partially completed and does not even reach the World Cup stadium – a white elephant that was built despite the fact that the city already had large stadiums, which are currently facing maintenance problems.

Within this context, Recife's 'urban rights' movement emerged, questioning the city's current development model. It reached its peak during the World Cup, precipitated by opposition to a proposed waterfront development of 40-storey residential towers at Cais José Estelita. The project is planned to occupy a prime city-centre site that previously served as a railway yard connected to the port. The development of gated tower blocks ignores its urban context and would turn the waterfront into an exclusive destination for residents only. This approach is all too common in Brazil, and the result is a city of enclaves. Although the project has been reformulated to address some of the issues that concern the urban rights movements, if implemented it would undermine the relation between city and waterfront. In the current economic scenario it is still not clear whether the project will be realised.

Although Recife's Occupy Estelita (Ocupe Estelita) movement was sparked by a local development issue, it relates to broader struggles for participation and democracy





The large number of cyclists using these dedicated routes at weekends represents a subtle but significant change in the habits and everyday life of Recife's middle class.

elsewhere in Brazil and globally. The use of online social networks enabled a new awareness and broader debate of local urban problems, as well as accountability in the face of crisis and threats from the developer and city government. Occupy Estelita typifies what David Harvey (who lectured at the site and is one of the most ardent supporters of this movement) terms 'virtual agora': debating the city. According to Harvey: 'The right to the city is ... far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts' desire.³

On the night of 21 May, right before the World Cup in June 2014, when Recife hosted four matches and the city was host to more than 40,000 tourists, Occupy Estelita came to a head when the developer sent bulldozers to demolish the waterfront warehouses. The immediate posting of photos on social networks enabled a crowd to gather on the site within minutes, and it was then occupied around the clock for 28 days, with speeches by university professors and young activists alternating with impromptu nightly concerts.

A common purpose crystallised among a diverse group of protesters.

The great shared lesson of Occupy Estelita was that Recife's future can no longer be the result of a top-down development process alone. Citizens want to play a part in shaping the city's future, and they will fight for a better quality of life for all. This is no longer just a virtual movement, and its presence cannot be ignored.

CAPIBARIBE PARK AND THE REINVENTION OF RECIFE

When the current mayor, Geraldo Julio, began his term in office in 2013 he committed to a different vision for Recife's future by engaging the transdisciplinary research group INCITI (Research and Innovation for Cities) at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE) to study options for the urban and environmental recovery of the Capibaribe River. A confluence of particular circumstances and its synergy with other ongoing projects made the Capibaribe Park project a timely proposal. A public river transport

INCITI/UFPE (Research and Innovation for Cities/Universidade Federal de Pernambuco), Capibaribe Park, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil, 2014

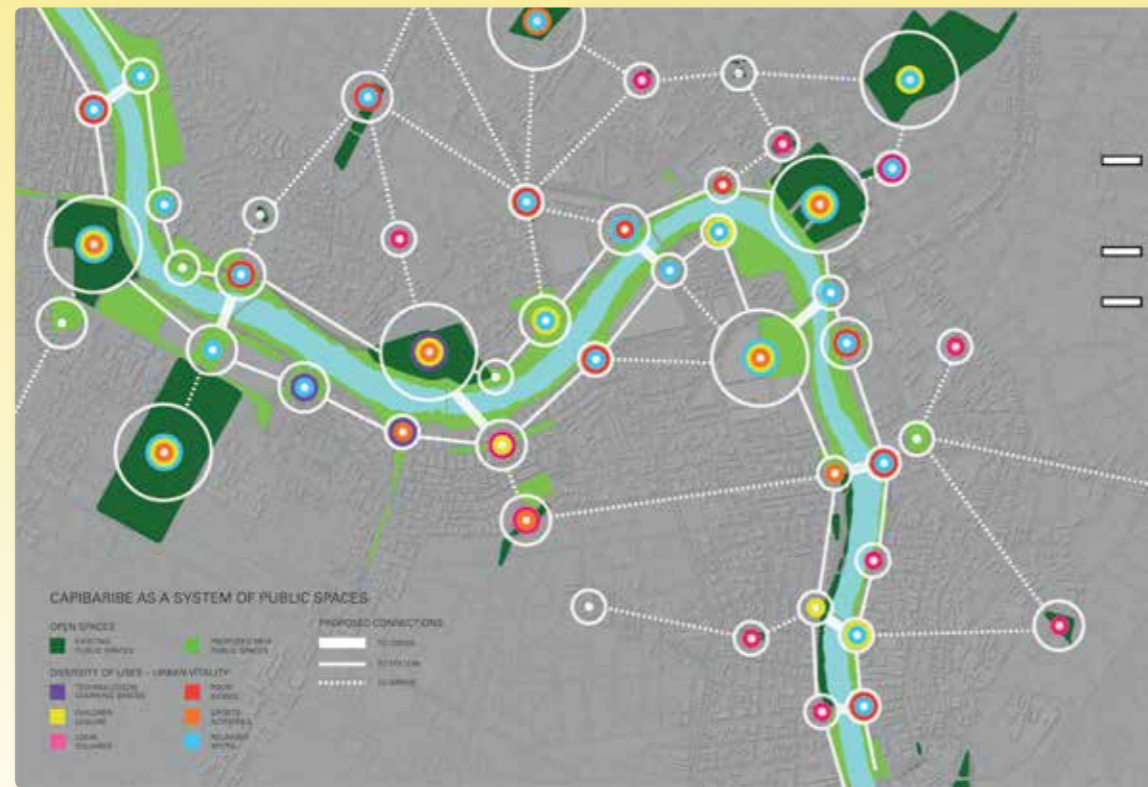
Green infrastructure at Antonio Maria Square. Landscaped riverside promenades are proposed to link the planned river transport terminals with bicycle lanes and bus stops at nearby avenues.

network with five stations on the riverbanks was already under construction, coordinated by the state government. A public/private partnership recently took over responsibility for Recife's sanitation and will treat 90 per cent of the city's sewage. Together with the completion of a large study of the city's urban drainage being implemented by the local government, this should dramatically reduce river pollution.

Another intangible phenomenon to support the proposal of a park is the recent explosion of interest in cycling, supported by the creation of almost 30 kilometres (19 miles) of disconnected cycle paths in Recife since 2003. The large number of cyclists using these dedicated routes at weekends represents a subtle but significant change in the habits and everyday life of Recife's middle class, who are not only looking for public leisure areas in the city, but are also keen to participate in shaping its future.

The Capibaribe Park project is based on a simple plan that is phased to expand over time. Some strategic areas are already being implemented, such as the Baobá Square and at the margins of the Graças neighbourhood. The project

Network of open spaces
along the river margins
from Santana Park to the
Derby neighbourhood.
As part of the proposed
Capibaribe Park project,
cycle and pedestrian paths
along the river would link
fragmented green and
open spaces and squares
in an integrated network.



proposes paths 'to follow' the river, pedestrian bridges 'to cross' it (often connecting districts with radically different socioeconomic profiles), green streets 'to link' to nearby squares, and parks to infiltrate the city with places 'to embrace' nature and the river. The objective is to provide permanent public areas and to create a vibrant public realm that enhances the river and the city. Recife is an intriguing case when it comes to public places. In a city where public space accounts for less than 0.5 per cent of the city's area, why are existing parks so underused? Beyond creating new public spaces, the agenda of Capibaribe Park is to reconnect existing areas and to foster a sense of ownership of the public domain among Recife's citizens. Through strategic actions, the park would provide a backbone that articulates spaces for people that are socially, ecologically and spatially embedded in local areas.

The positive impacts of an integrated system of parks along the Capibaribe would be manifold. It would reduce the average temperature in the 42 districts the project would directly impact, increase public access to open space, and provide a new means of transport in the city. Equally important, it could help change the mentality and behaviour of Recife's residents, encouraging them to take possession of the city, feel it, experience it and build it.

The proposed next steps for the Capibaribe Park project include a series of international competitions for urban design, public furniture and art installations. To garner support, a marketing campaign is needed to raise awareness about the importance of the public realm among a wide range of inhabitants and stakeholders. The spatial transformations proposed do not necessarily rely exclusively on the public sector. Broad involvement is crucial to secure funding and to overcome the fear of discontinuity due to the political changes that always accompany structural urban infrastructure projects of this scale.

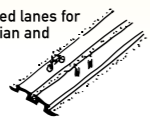
The debate sparked by the Occupy Estelita movement has paved the way for change by setting an urban agenda for Recife. Now is the ideal moment to translate expectations into strategies, to demonstrate that the Capibaribe Park has the potential to ignite the transformation of the city and to reduce segregation by creating shared public spaces for its citizens regardless of social or economic barriers. ▢

TO FOLLOW

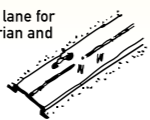
A network of 45 kilometres (30 miles) of cycle lanes and pedestrian sidewalks would link natural and urban spaces, providing windows, decks and piers along the riverside.



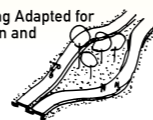
Separated lanes for Pedestrian and Cyclist



Shared lane for Pedestrian and Cyclist

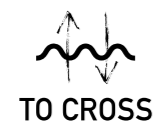


Preexisting Adapted for Pedestrian and Cyclist



TO CROSS

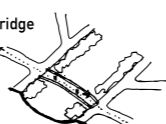
Twelve new pedestrian and bicycle bridges are proposed to link the two banks of the river, making urban services and equipment accessible for populations that currently are spatially and socially segregated.



Boat Crossing



Pedestrian Bridge and Cyclist

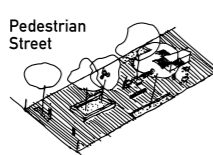


TO LINK

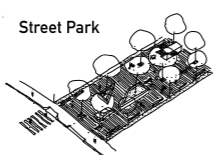
A network of 53 kilometres (33 miles) of pedestrianised streets would increase urban vitality and encourage new uses.



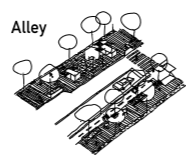
Pedestrian Street



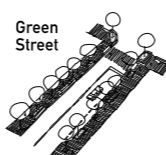
Street Park



Alley



Green Street



TO EMBRACE

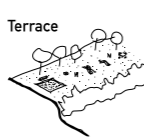
The park will provide a diversity of open places to meet, rest, play and enjoy natural landscapes.



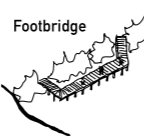
Window



Terrace



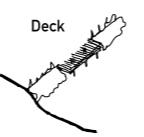
Footbridge



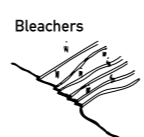
Floating Deck



Deck



Bleachers



above: Proposed stands will link a major existing park in the upscale neighbourhood of Jaqueira directly to the river.

left: Riverside promenades would be planted with native trees and climbers to provide shade and reduce the urban heat island effect.

Notes

1. Rafael Pereira and Tim Schwanen, 'Tempo de deslocamento casa-trabalho no Brasil (1992-2009): diferenças entre regiões metropolitanas, níveis de renda e sexo', discussion paper, Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA) (Rio de Janeiro), 2013: http://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/bitstream/11058/958/1/TD_1813.pdf
2. <https://direitosurbanos.wordpress.com/>.
3. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, Verso (London), 2014, p 4.