

Power Imbalances in Favela-Upgrading Practices in São Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract

Favelas in São Paulo, Brazil have been undergoing major transformations since the 1980s with the rise of upgrading programs. These programs are widely seen as ways of alleviating urban vulnerability. However, the fact that they change the political structure of favelas, causing power imbalances, goes often untold. This article discusses the outcomes of upgrading efforts in Favela do Sapé, placing a special emphasis on the social actors involved in the upgrading. Characters such as favela dwellers, governments, and parallel powers are assessed through a power planning lens. The present analysis also focuses on the social actors' relational possibilities that are aimed at changing the power scenarios of favelas.

Keywords: Favelas, Favela-Upgrading, Power Planning, Social Actors

1. Introducing the Dynamics of Favela do Sapé

On a dry and sunny afternoon Favela do Sapé, in Western São Paulo, suddenly became a ghost town. The frequent rush of children who used to play by the creek shores, as well as routine commuters who would walk down the narrow alleys to the closest bus stop, abruptly ceased. Even during upgrading works, the residents of this favela would not give up on their routine. But on that day, something different was happening.

By that time, I was an intern at the São Paulo City Housing Department (SEHAB) and my constant visits to Sapé had taught me how daily life would usually take place in the community. In the described afternoon, one architect from SEHAB and I were conducting inspection visits to residences which had been affected by cracks and other consequences of the ongoing work of tractors and trucks. When walking alongside the creek's shore, we noticed that everyone instantly vanished from sight.

As we curiously stared at each other, the explanation soon made its way through the opposite shore. A group of heavily armed policemen came out of nowhere and marched up the main street of Sapé. Fearing a shooting, we quickly left the waterfront area and looked for shelter in the City Hall's upgrading headquarters—which happened to be a makeshift structure originally designed to be the core of the construction site. A few moments afterward, we received news that the police raid was aimed at arresting a suspect for stealing a car in the surroundings of Favela do Sapé.

Favelas are defined by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, in its Portuguese acronym) as agglomerations of at least 51 residences, set in an irregular

grid, which lack basic services such as water, electricity, sewage, and garbage pickup. Also, favelas are set on a piece of land that residents do not own (IBGE 2011). UN Habitat uses the term “slum” to define a type of housing that (1) lacks basic services, (2) is substandard or presents illegal or inadequate building structures, (3) is highly dense or overcrowded, (4) offers unhealthy living conditions or is placed at a hazardous location, (5) presents tenure insecurity and (6) is amid poverty and social exclusion (UN Habitat 2003, 14). In this paper, the term “favela” will be employed instead of “slum” for it is here understood that each country has its particularities when it comes to precarious and vulnerable housing. And, since a Brazilian case will be assessed in this article, it is fair to label it with its proper local name.

The police raid narrated above is not exclusive to Favela do Sapé. In São Paulo and in other Brazilian cities, residents of favelas often witness police incursions, which are usually aimed at tackling organized crime that operates in and outside these settlements’ boundaries. In the specific case of Sapé, it cannot be said that police presence necessarily relates to upgrading works. Nor should it be claimed that what I witnessed on that day in 2015 started to happen more frequently after this favela had its works completed.

Nevertheless, this episode sheds light on a common phenomenon that takes place in favelas across São Paulo and Brazil as a whole: The dispute over territorial control between different social actors and groups. On that specific day, I could identify the police as one of those groups. But news daily delivered by the city’s media outlets, as well as studies carried out by scholars and authorities, also convey the existence of other groups. Maybe because of the impact of the means deployed by criminal organizations—namely, violence and fear—organized crime is the most evident social actor. But other groups may also be involved in the contest for spatial control in vulnerable settlements in São Paulo, especially in areas undergoing upgrading. These groups include the city’s government—which is not always tied to the police—residents, upgrading designers, urban planners, social workers, etc.

This work is written based on the idea that upgrading interventions are an attempt to change the political structure of favelas, but result in power imbalances. The point is that before the beginning of the works favelas are usually a territory commanded by the parallel power, which manages to establish a relatively pacific avenue of interaction with these settlements’ dwellers. However, the municipal government may seek to regain control over favelas through upgrading, which implies the physical and institutional rearrangement of those communities.

When it comes to the parallel power, there are many ways of labeling it. Gabriel Feltran (2011), for instance, calls it the “criminal world.” Janice Perlman (2010) usually uses the term “drug gangs.” In short, the parallel power is understood in this paper as the organizations commanded by criminals who are usually involved in drug-dealing. These organizations—such as *Primeiro Comando da Capital*, or First Command of the Capital—oftentimes act as institutions that are parallel to the government and that

establish their own order in their territories, usually through violence and fear. Due to reasons such as government neglect, one of these territories in Brazil is the favela.

The state-sponsored process of reclaiming favelas is assisted by planning, architectural, and engineering firms. These three groups usually represent technical expertise, around which power might also gravitate in vulnerable settlements. Planners, architects, and engineers hold design as their tool to perform changes to the built environment. Favela residents are also a key group involved in the quest for power, as they are the direct target of social policies, police incursions, and actions carried out by the parallel power.

A natural perturbation is always felt when favelas undergo upgrading works. After all, during these works outsiders such as architects, planners, engineers, and social workers hired by the local government flock into these communities. Also, upgrading plans are a major cause for chaos since they entail one view of how these communities should be shaped in the future, regardless of some of the implications this new conformation can have on local actors.

The concept of power imbalance originates from Bent Flyvbjerg's work, which in general terms is based on the power planning concept. To be more precise, Flyvbjerg addresses this framework as "phronetic planning." For the purposes of this article, the same approach has been relabeled *power planning*.

Flyvbjerg (2002) studies the influence of power relations within planning practices. He claims that, based on their interests, the most powerful social actors control the way planning-related data will be interpreted and how planning practices will be prioritized and carried out in their cities or communities. He analyzes the implementation of a car-traffic reduction project in the city of Aalborg, Denmark. This planning project partially relied on the assessment of surveys of local shoppers' transportation modes. Flyvbjerg asserts, "The interpretation [of survey results], which has the stronger power base, becomes Aalborg's truth, understood as the actually realized physical, economic, ecological, and social reality" (360).

Similarly, the interpretation of the needs for favela-upgrading works in Sapé, as well as the project priorities ascribed to this upgrading and the way they were conducted were legitimized by the most powerful group of social actors in this context. The São Paulo City local government, as well as planning professionals—architects, urban designers, engineers, and social workers—had the biggest say on how the Sapé upgrading was carried out. And this community's residents, who had less power, were to some extent maneuvered (as shall be explained in item 5). The parallel power was naturally left out of the decision process.

Bent Flyvbjerg probably did not conceive of his methods with favelas in mind, but if some theoretical constraints are rightfully accounted, his framing can be replicated and applied to the power dynamics that emanate from favela-upgrading projects. Therefore, this paper will turn an eye toward Brazilian communities, especially through—but not limited to—Flyvberg's perspective.

This work follows a predominantly qualitative approach, which is founded on the analysis of Favela do Sapé as a case study. The primarily-collected material for this analysis includes a total of six semi-structured interviews carried out with local dwellers, public officials from the São Paulo City Housing Department, and from a company hired by SEHAB to oversee upgrading works. One of the six semi-structured interviews was also conducted with a member of the design team of Sapé's upgrading. All these talks took place throughout 2016 in Favela do Sapé and other areas, such as the Housing Department headquarters. The names of interviewees are intentionally omitted for confidentiality.

Primary sources also comprise pictures taken in situ during visits that occurred between 2014 and 2016, as well as satellite images adapted for this article. Secondary sources correspond to news articles taken from newspaper archives and from hard news websites. Academic literature, especially on urban violence, spatial segregation, and power dynamics, was also vital to the making of this paper.

It should be mentioned that although this article heavily relies on interviews, one major constraint regards their conduction. Power dynamics are a naturally delicate matter as they relate to subduing and subjugating processes wherein at least one social group is undermined. In Favela do Sapé's context, the most influential element in local power relationships is physical and psychological violence. For this reason, asking local residents and other actors about specificities of the settlement's power dynamics proved to be a difficult endeavor. This became a taboo issue that had to be overcome with a careful elaboration of less sensitive questions, as well as through the consultation of other sources such as academic literature.

This paper is structured into this introductory section, five other parts, and a conclusion. The next section will cover a brief literature review of favelas, urban peripheries, and elements that often relate to these places such as the vast influence of the parallel power, landownership issues, and the autoconstruction practices witnessed there.

The following section will explain in detail the upgrading project of Favela do Sapé, including envisioned and actual interventions. The fourth section of this work will go further in the description of Sapé's upgrading. In this part, a contextualization of upgrading policies and practices will be given through the lens of the dispute for territorial control between the local government and its allies on one side and the parallel power on the other. The fifth section will cover a very specific and unique practice that rises from upgrading programs in São Paulo: the Management Council. It will be argued that in Sapé this council was an important participatory planning tool. But, on the other hand, it can be seen as a mechanism for the government to maneuver favela dwellers into siding with the City Hall in the local quest for power.

The last section preceding the conclusion will focus on the *power planning* theory and other ideas that explain Sapé's upgrading. The final link between all interviews, field observations, and consulted literature will be made in this section. By including these sections and organizing them in this way, this paper will ultimately shed light

onto the idea that planning is heavily conditioned by the outcomes of power struggles between various social actors.

2. Favelas and the *Periferia*: Where Ownership Issues, Violence, and Organized Crime Meet

Favelas have historically been disputed territories in Brazil between state forces and criminal organizations, as well as between different drug gangs. In some cases, paramilitary forces, or militias, also take part in claiming favela land. As Janice Perlman (2010) puts it, “Favelas are appealing locations for drug gangs,¹ with their narrow, winding alleys, abundant hiding places, and unemployed youth” (165). The sale of substances such as cocaine from favela territories to high-income consumers is the mechanism that mostly sustains the parallel power. And the reaction from state forces eventually comes as a means of repression toward two distinct groups: criminals and favela residents (Leeds 1996, 50). The former may be the primary target of the police; however, the latter group usually ends up affected by repressive state action as well.² When it comes to favela dwellers, Elizabeth Leeds points out that “squatter populations, in particular, are caught between the illegal violence of drug dealers and the official violence of security forces” (ibid.).

Favelas are settlements that bear different geographical locations across Brazilian cities. Whilst in Rio de Janeiro many of them are scattered through high-income neighborhoods, in what resembles socially vulnerable and physically precarious enclaves, in São Paulo most favelas emerge on the city’s fringes, usually labeled as *periferia*, or periphery. As Mautner (1999) explains, the geographical periphery of São Paulo does not fully overlap with the periphery defined by urban sociology. She adopts the sociological understanding—which this paper also does—and defines the *periferia* as a place where the poor live, as well as a socially segregated area with low real estate values.³ Additionally, the periphery of São Paulo, and many other Brazilian cities as well, comprises areas that are distant from transportation infrastructure and most employment opportunities. These areas also lack social, leisure, and public facilities.

1 It should be noted that this paper does not claim that favelas are susceptible to trafficking because of one sole feature, such as physical irregularity. The point made by Perlman and supported in this article is that a combination of issues (namely, lack of state presence in police patrolling and in the provision of infrastructure, basic services and facilities, as well as a lack of economic opportunity and of representativeness) coupled with the narrow alleys, dead ends, and physical and visual obstacles that exist in favelas create a convenient stage for opportunistic criminal groups to establish themselves in these settlements.

2 Cases of favela dwellers who are shot during confrontations between policemen and criminals are frequent. Other ways through which those dwellers can be affected by repression (such as in selective police searches) are more nuanced.

3 Mautner also defines the periphery as a transforming place, which is gobbled up by the formal city and which thus expands its borders centrifugally (Mautner 1999, 254).

The *periferia* is thus marred by social exclusion in most cases. Ermínia Maricato (2010) describes the Brazilian peripheral city as an outcome of “peripheral capitalism,” which implies that low-income populations from cities in developing countries may settle in areas excluded from the formal land market, as well as from existing urban regulations (8). It is important to make a crucial distinction here. Although most favelas in São Paulo are on the city’s periphery, due to a few technical and abstract elements, they cannot be seen as synonyms.

As Holston (2008) explains, favelas usually emerge from squats in areas that can either be central or peripheral. The *periferia* is, on the other hand, mostly built on the ideas of land and home ownership, which materialize in *loteamentos* (subdivisions). Naturally, there are squatter areas in the periphery as well, but the dwellers of the urban fringes originally settled in these areas after paying for their land and for the construction of their residences. The author argues,

Even if the former [settlers who pay for land and for their home’s construction] were swindled in their purchase and could not prove full legal ownership as a result, the majority could claim to have transformed themselves in the process of settling the peripheries from renters, squatters and mere posseiros [squating landholders] of land into landowners. (185)

In fact, although *periferia* residents usually stick to the idea of ownership, in many cases, land occupation in the peripheries originates illegally. Holston explains that “[the] very illegality of house lots in the peripheries makes land accessible to those who cannot afford the higher sale or rental prices of legal residences” (206–207).

It should be noted that even if they illegally occupy land, the poor working classes that inhabit São Paulo’s peripheries do not necessarily resort to property seizure. As stated in one quotation above, they might pay for their land’s occupation and development, but still end up in a form of “illegal or irregular residence” after being defrauded (*ibid.*, 208).

And what about the abstract driver of the comparison between favelas and peripheries? Due to the fact that favela dwellers usually seize property, as opposed to purchasing it, favelas are usually seen by peripheral residents as places of “physical” and, consequently, “moral” disorder (*ibid.*, 173). There is, thus, a conceptual separation between squatting (favelas) and ownership (subdivisions in the *periferia*) sustained by the inhabitants of the latter.

Holston also describes the historical bifurcation of the trajectory of the urban poor in São Paulo during the 1940s: Governmental measures and other influential forces prompted the urban working poor to leave their dwellings in the city center.⁴ As he puts it, “They could either try to remain in the more central areas, moving into the new favelas . . . or hanging onto rooms in *cortiços* [tenements] . . . or they could move to the distant hinterlands” (165). The hinterlands are the areas where the *periferia* would

4 Among governmental measures and other factors was the 1942 approval of the Renter’s Law, which froze rents in Brazil and thus made renting unfeasible from the landlord’s perspective. Coupled with that, were the numerous demolitions of rental units due to urban renewal efforts in central São Paulo. Lastly, the

later be constructed. For the reasons stated in the preceding paragraphs, favelas and the periphery are seen as mostly different alternatives.

One of the ultimate construction mechanisms in the periphery of São Paulo is what Caldeira (2016) calls “autoconstruction.” As she explains, autoconstruction—known as well as “self-building”—is a process by which *periferia* dwellers incrementally build their own houses, usually with their own labor (5). Ermínia Maricato (2010) adds that this process is also related to fragile land ownership, usually based on clandestine occupations of urban plots (9).

Ananya Roy (2005) explains that informal settlements within cities are a convenient mode of urbanization for governments in the developing world. She points out that the state reserves to itself the power of legitimizing and delegitimizing informality. The state also has the means to curtail or foster informal urban settlements. For Roy, it is a matter of “political struggle” (150).

Feltran (2010) explains that the aforementioned *periferia* dwellers that built their houses through self-help in the Greater São Paulo area were, in the 1970s and 1980s, usually associated with the image of “*trabalhadores*,” or workers. These workers overcame adverse conditions, such as low education attainment and income, by forging political movements. Many movements were related to national and regional unions or had local implications—including community organizations that fought for social goods (such as asphalt, piped water, housing provision, etc.) and for the actual achievement of universal rights (592).

Feltran argues that, after the 1980s, the “criminal world” gained room to compete for legitimacy with traditional peripheral elements such as labor and political representativeness. From this point onward, crime began to influence local residents and their institutions (592). This was witnessed in the favelas that were located in São Paulo’s *periferia*. Similarly, favelas in central areas also went through similar processes of crime-control escalation.

After this brief explanation of the social and historical processes that encompassed the periphery of São Paulo and many of this city’s favelas, it becomes possible to understand the constitution of what would later result in power struggles and imbalances between the parallel power, dwellers, and the government in this case. Now, the physical shaping of this case study shall be assessed.

3. The Upgrading Plan for Favela do Sapé

Territorial interventions are crucial ways of interfering with power relationships. Favela-upgrading efforts could be seen in this sense as a means to change the way space is built, as well as who occupies it. Having said that, it should be noted that this article does not have the ambition to assert that the power struggles which were

gradual replacement of streetcars for buses made settlements in the periphery a feasible alternative to living downtown (Holston 2008, 162–163).

witnessed in Sapé necessarily happened in other upgraded favelas. This work aims to assess the particularities of the selected case study. Thus, hopefully this work can make room for similar studies in the future.

In order to understand the upgrading plan of Sapé, it is important to trace back the process of settlement in this favela. It is located in Rio Pequeno District, an area that was formerly considered peripheral but has currently been incorporated by the formal city in many ways.

The first settlers moved into Sapé in the 1970s. A testimony from a long-time local dweller conveys the neglect from the city government in relation to the constitution of a physically precarious housing network on the local creek's waterfront:

Sapé had the river, the river that used to flow and that still flows today. But it was a very shallow river, very shallow. When I arrived here, there were no shacks in front of the river. There were shacks, but very few. Then, [the years] went by and [Sapé] went on growing, growing, growing. The waterfront started to expand. The waterfront started to expand and there was a point in which there was nowhere to build anything.

The conditions that followed those years of increasing occupation in Sapé led to housing insalubrity mainly due to flooding and landslide risks. It became evident that some kind of physical intervention was necessary, as another testimony narrates: "My house was on the waterfront. I lived [there for] 26 years. I experienced floods. I experienced floods that my stove, the water would cover it. I experienced floods [so] that I lost everything."

Upgrading came, then, as the answer. This type of intervention should be understood as a way of consolidating residential areas in favelas, with few demolitions. In upgrading projects, favela dwellers usually remain in their homes and have infrastructural facilities such as sewage systems and new road space implemented in their communities. New housing units are built only to rehouse displaced families within the favela boundaries. The primary aim is to improve the targeted areas rather than to rehouse all dwellers.

The devised project for Sapé aimed, among other objectives, at clearing the local creek's floodplain, which meant demolishing 527 residences alongside the watercourse. Another important criterion for demolition was the physical precariousness of some dwellings. The City Hall estimated that, before the upgrading, 9% of homes (about 210 units) were made of wood, which is considered more insalubrious a material than brickwork, which is more commonly adopted in São Paulo's favelas. Additionally, the project envisaged clearing 98 residences to make room for new road space. Lastly, 354 homes would be demolished to open space for the resettled units. The foreseen displacements accounted for 1,082 residences in total (Formicki 2016, 81-82).

The upgrading process ended up clearing 1,496 houses and replaced them with 462 housing units⁵ between 2012 and 2017. This means that more than 1,000 families are still displaced.⁶ It shows that while on the one hand upgrading interventions can solve the physical precariousness of many families, on the other, such interventions can also engender troublesome consequences. In other words, upgrading favelas could result in exclusion and displacements. In this sense, Sapé's case illustrates what well-intended policies can lead to.

Naturally, exclusion was not the original intent of the São Paulo City Housing Department and upgrading designers. Although the number of planned displacements in Favela do Sapé reached a high proportion—the total amount of families that originally lived in the community was 2,362—there was an original prediction that more housing units would be built not only in Sapé itself but also on two separate plots of land near the favela (*ibid.*, 82). Problems with construction funding and land ownership ended up being a definitive hindrance to more replacements (80).

It is important to state that, according to Zuquim (2012), although complete favela clearings can still be seen in São Paulo, recent city administrations have been implementing upgrading programs in favelas with a certain regularity since the 1980s (6). Thus, Sapé is a result of the recent shift in the city's housing policy.

4. Favela-Upgrading as a way of Intervening in Space and the Status Quo

Sapé's upgrading project designer: I think that design, architecture, and urbanism are always a transformative action of space. We always transform. When we transform we demand that users revisit their ways of behaving. Organized crime, as well as formal social institutions, are based on permanence. That means that it is easier to administer the public good or it is easier to administer the control of space by trafficking with the constancy of places. If that place starts being constantly changed, you have to revisit the rules, you have to revisit the strategies, your points of view, your strong and weak points in the territory's domain. So, I think that the works in Sapé, which lasted four years, were a big disturbance for drug dealing, for the dealers, for the domain scheme that Sapé's space had.

As mentioned before in this paper, territorial interventions strongly interfere with power relationships. Studies and hypotheses that range from the *defensible space* theory to so-called authoritarian modernism have been devised—and critiqued—in order to

5 This was Sapé's situation by September 2017 when the upgrading works were already over. The upgrading works in Sapé were carried out between 2012, when the first displacements took place, and 2017, the year when the last housing units were delivered.

6 In such cases, the São Paulo City Housing Department (SEHAB, in its Portuguese acronym) pays a monthly allowance to displaced families until they are rehoused in public residential units. The problem that usually arises is that families receive a low allowance of 400 reais (equivalent to about 120 dollars), which only enables them to seek precarious housing.

frame how planning and architecture's takes on the built environment may influence people's behaviors.

For instance, Oscar Newman's defensible space theory attempts to explain how architectural and urban design might affect the way U.S. low-income condominium dwellers see themselves responsible for public, semi-public, semi-private, and private areas. Among other points, Newman (1996) argues that if a designer conceives of more private areas in a housing project, its dwellers may feel more inclined to take care of their own spaces, watch out for them, and, thus, help prevent "crime and instability" issues there (28).

It is important to counter-argue that the defensible space theory may not consider a series of social and economic factors that can explain the incidence of crime in housing projects. In other words, Newman might have overlooked issues such as the social vulnerability of many dwellers, as well as the low governmental funding for the maintenance of spaces in public housing condos.

Other authors have also formulated theories and critiques of the way modernism-based architecture, urban design, and planning have been shaping cities. Holston (1989), for instance, argues that the modernist ideas that guided the design of Brasília were nourished by the "utopian" premise that "the design and organization of Brasília were meant to transform Brazilian society" (21). James Scott (1998) uses the expression "high-modernist authoritarianism" to talk about how, in his view, Le Corbusier would see urbanism and the role of the planner (111).

When it comes to favela upgrading, planning and design may affect the way different social actors embrace the transforming built environment. The interview excerpt in the beginning of this section illustrates this point. In this case, the works themselves implied an at least temporary change in the routine and order of Sapé. And, as shall be explained in the following paragraphs, technical experts who were hired and supported by the São Paulo City local government attempted to implement a new, definitive spatial order that could affect this community's parallel power in the long run.

In the previous quotation, historical neglect from the city's authorities toward Sapé's settlement was evidenced in the words of a local dweller. The social constitution of favelas, spatially embodied by squatters and precariously-built and insalubrious residences, was layered upon an active inaction from the government. The decades-long omission by authorities created the conditions for other actors—namely, settlers—to take over territorial control.⁷

Following the population that migrated to Favela do Sapé, another set of actors stepped into the area to claim its territory. One of these actors is the parallel power,

7 This state omission cannot, however, be simply interpreted as a state absence. As Caldeira (2016) points out, "peripheral urbanization does not mean an absence of the state or planning, but rather a process in which citizens and governments interact in complex ways" (7). The author says that local governments in the Global South usually allow for squatting in urban peripheries and, years later, intervene by improving these areas and providing squatter settlers with land regularization and, in a few cases, social housing.

which should be here understood as a group of actors that have some control over areas such as favelas similarly to governments but not officially. In São Paulo, the parallel power is embodied by a major drug-dealing organization called “PCC,” *Primeiro Comando da Capital*, or First Command of the Capital. It gained prominence in São Paulo and penetrated this and various other communities city- and state-wide. Biderman et al. (2014) explain,

[Ethnographic] evidence suggests that PCC dominated the wholesale drug distribution of illegal drugs into the city of São Paulo during the second half of the 2000s. From this vantage position, it established exclusive deals with local retail distributors located at favelas, who later became PCC operatives. (4)

A look onto newspaper and news website archives shows that PCC has been active in Sapé and has been using its space as a stage for actions such as executions. In a report from February 2017, *O Estado de S. Paulo* news outlet informs audiences of the trial of one of the top commanders of PCC. He was being prosecuted for ordering two killings, which occurred in Sapé in 2004 (Hisayasu and Carvalho 2017).

The entry of a third group of actors, the government—in this case represented by the police—was registered in Sapé after the parallel power took control of the settlement. Police incursions, as the one previously narrated, took place on some occasions. A 2017 report from *Agora* newspaper narrates the conduction of a police force “mega-operation” against drug trafficking in all parts of São Paulo City, especially including five favelas among which is Sapé (Fontes 2017).

Aside from raids, the upgrading policy comes as another type of effort to regain spatial domain on the government’s end. Naturally, this is not the sole intention of these interventions. It should be mentioned that the reason stated by the São Paulo City Housing Department for the clearance of the creek’s shores, for instance, was the existence in this area of precarious houses, which were subject to floods (Formicki 2016, 56). In fact, as already mentioned, many residences—some of which consisted of extremely precarious materials such as wood—were in the flood-risk area. However, the fact that some clearances created a more encompassing visibility in Sapé and thereby enabled the circulation of eventual police raids should not be disregarded.

Sapé, like most Brazilian favelas, was abundant in narrow alleys, dead ends, and tiny circulation spaces. As a result of the creek’s floodplain clearing, a vast open space was created. This space enabled a better view of the favela’s central area and also made circulation easier.

Figures 1 and 2 depict spatial differences in Sapé before and after the upgrading works. The first image is from 2005, when the settlement had more housing density and shacks covered up the stream course. It is difficult, if not impossible, to identify any street or alley. Figure 2 shows the physical situation of Favela do Sapé in 2017. By this time, the upgrading interventions were over and many residences had been cleared

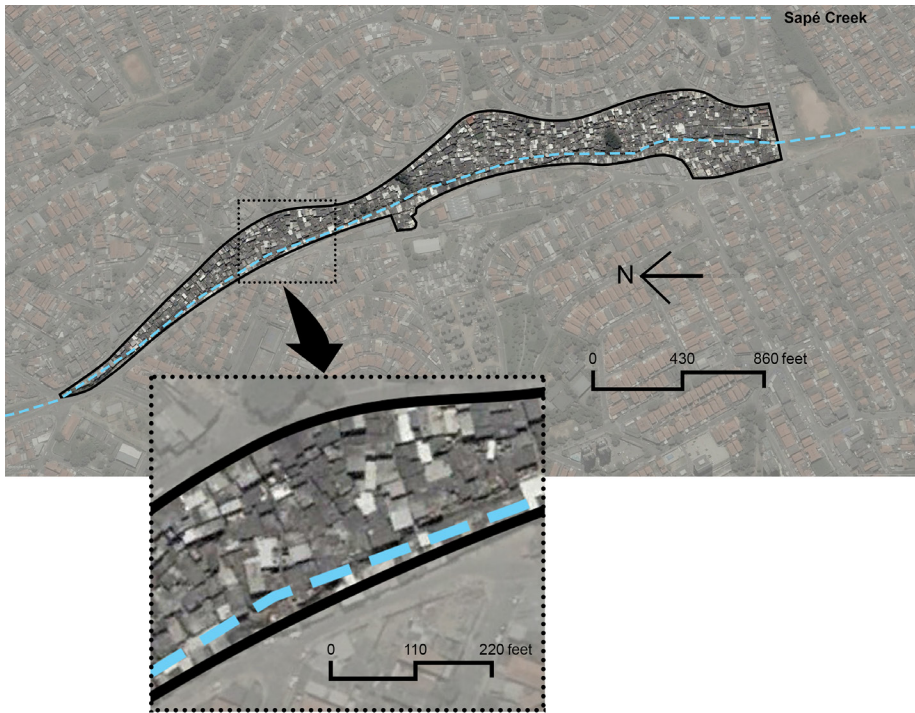


Figure 1 Favela do Sapé, 2005 (Image from Google Earth and adapted by the author)

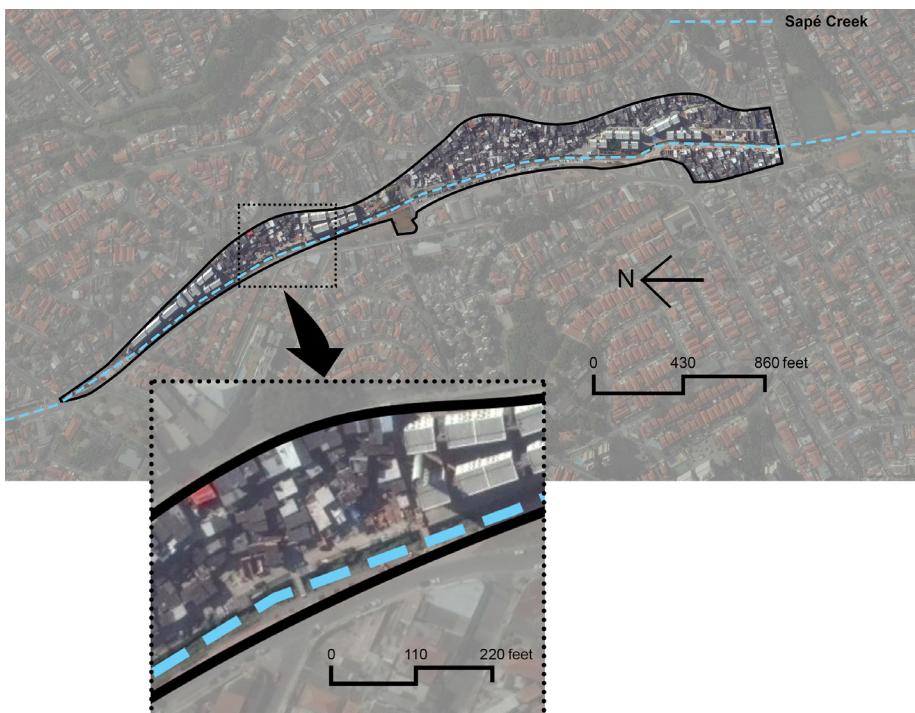


Figure 2 Favela do Sapé, 2017 (Image from Google Earth and adapted by the author)

alongside the waterfront. It is possible to see one street built on both sides of the channelled creek.

Figure 3 zooms into one of the former images. One can see an intermediate stage between 2005 and 2017 during which the works were still underway. The future street and a newly-established visual horizon that overlooks the upstream portion of the favela are already visible.



Figure 3 Clearance of the stream's margins in Favela do Sapé during the upgrading works. The stream runs between the green guardrails. *(Photo by the author)*

According to Samper (2012), upgrading could be a means to reduce violence in informal urban settlements (59). Moreover, the author asserts that governments interfere with the urban environment to increase real and perceived levels of security (62). Samper sees “a trend in Latin America towards multi practice (urban upgrading) design as tools for the state agencies to re-conquer spaces where the right of the state to control the means of repression . . . is in frontal contestation” (64-65). In this sense, governments are directly disputing spatial control with the parallel powers via upgrading practices.

This logic is corroborated by Sapé's upgrading designer. As she states in an interview carried out by this article's author, altering the "constancy of places" implies revisiting strategies of territorial occupation, especially on the local parallel power's end.

It should also be mentioned that local governments across Brazil usually do not justify upgrading interventions on violence control grounds. Authorities do not claim that these improvement plans are important because they curb the control the parallel power has over favelas. This fact is implicit. However, different administrations tend to broadly announce and advertise actions *exclusively* dedicated to fighting off drug dealing influences on these communities. This happened in the late 2000s when the UPPs (Pacification Police Units) were implemented in the City of Rio de Janeiro by the Rio de Janeiro state government, and in 2018 when the Brazilian military was allowed to intervene in the city to carry out armed raids against local criminal gangs.

At the crucial moment of upgrading, another group of social actors comes into play. This group represents the possessors of technical knowledge, which may relate to the fields of urban planning, architecture, urban design, civil engineering, social policy, etc. Members of this party were trained and educated with the purpose of implementing physical and social changes. In Sapé's case, these changes should affect not only its dwellers, but also inhabitants of the surroundings, as said one member of the upgrading design team states,

[Sapé's upgrading] resulted in an urban gain, resulted in a gain for that place, for beyond the favela, which I think is a duty of public money. All that is public money. So, it is not possible that all that will be destined for those who live in Sapé. This is another rationale that I believe has always been important to us. Which is to say that it should generate something good for the city. Regardless of the favela. Because, otherwise, we will be privatizing the use of public money.

In the quest for power in Sapé, technical professionals usually side with the government and deploy their knowledge in corroboration with favela-upgrading practices. One member of the upgrading design team mentioned in an interview with the author that during the upgrading process, the team always partnered with the city government and dialogued with public officials.

5. *Conselho Gestor*: A Governmental Approach

Another city mechanism that perpetuates efforts to exercise more power during upgrading works is the *Conselho Gestor*, or Management Council. This is a type of local council which is made up of dwellers and landowners of an area to be upgraded, as well as public officials and NGOs that work inside or with the area. This council is informative and also deliberates on the outcomes of the proposed upgrading program (Formicki 2016, 27).

The Management Council is set up by City Hall officials and comprises regular meetings that take place not in the City Hall premises, but in the area that is about to be

upgraded. During these meetings, information on project deadlines is presented. Also, the project itself is presented along with maps, plans, and drawings. Citizens are then consulted about architectural details to be implemented. This council is an attempt to approach favela dwellers as authorities. By establishing a means of dialogue with favela dwellers and by granting them some decision-making power over their future, this approach can be seen as a way of mollifying eventual demands and complaints about the lack of room for community participation. The constitution of participatory planning mechanisms such as the Management Council also underscores a previous level of organization and engagement with favela dwellers—and, broadly speaking, peripheral urbanites. As Caldeira (2016) argues, these citizens from the Global South come together in networks that secure jobs, local support, and rights such as tenure regularization (10). The author explains that “the quality of the urban environment has significantly improved and residents of the peripheries have been able to remain in the neighborhoods they built, in large measure due to their constant organizing” (15).

The Council initiative has generated positive effects, which can be noticed in quotations from both São Paulo authorities and from Sapé locals. In an interview with the author, an official from the Housing Department asserted that the “Management Council was also a great learning opportunity. Establishing the Management Council [in Sapé], discussing with them, understanding the dynamics of the population. That was a great learning opportunity.” A community dweller also had a good impression of the approach: “The best thing that existed was inventing this council thing. To help the community.”

The way Sapé dwellers view management councils is not, however, unanimously positive. As one local dweller and member of the council puts,

Because under this mayor here, this administration here, he gives a lot of opportunity to the councils. The councilmen have free pass inside the Housing [Department]. Councils there have free will. There the councilmen can call and arrange a meeting. You can see that, when it is in somebody’s schedule, it is set up. They have it there. But there is a problem. They schedule, we talk, but they don’t keep [to their promises].

Two elements can be witnessed in this testimony. First, there is an institutional arrangement within São Paulo City’s governance structure that allows management councils to have great outreach. Councilmen are not ignored nor put on hold. However, a second element stands out: According to this Sapé councilwoman, agreements are not fulfilled on the authorities’ end.

One question should then be posed: what is the point of the Management Council? As the two elements previously brought up indicate, the point of this institutional arrangement is basically twofold: giving favela dwellers a sense of power and influence over the upgrading outcome of their settlement and, more importantly, by this means getting them to side with and support city officials in the bigger quest to alter the power balance in the community to favor the local government. Naturally, there

is not only a sense of granted power to dwellers; there is an actual concession from designers and public authorities. Nevertheless, this concession is somewhat limited, for the economic resources and the technical expertise belong to those government representatives and designers.

To end this section, two observations are made. Firstly, the exposed conclusions relate to one specific favela in São Paulo. Further studies might confirm if these conclusions can or cannot be replicated across other settlements, given that there are similar criminal structures that operate throughout not only the city but the entire state. Additionally, although the upgrading programs that were implemented had design specificities, they followed similar major rationales, such as the criteria for the selection of intervention areas.⁸ The way of conducting the upgrading plans—which includes the adoption of management councils—was also adopted similarly in many favelas. Thus, in a sense, Sapé may illustrate the conjuncture of many other favelas in São Paulo City and State.

The second observation is about the time frame of the described upgrading policies. They refer to three consecutive administrations, which ruled São Paulo between 2004 and 2016. The current government has slowed the pace of upgrading works across the municipality and may change key components of the city's housing policy.

6. Interpreting Sapé's Upgrading through the Power Planning Approach

As this article approaches its end, a few more questions remain to be answered. They relate to the quest for power in favela-upgrading practices: How does the upgrading project of Favela do Sapé engender power imbalances? What is a power imbalance?

Let us start with the definition of power. Based on his *power planning* research, Bent Flyvbjerg (2002) asserts that “power defines physical, economic, social, and environmental reality itself” (361). In Sapé's upgrading case, power emanates from all social actors and realities. The government has economic might—for it finances the works—as well as repressive police power. Caldeira (2016) argues that “while residents are the main agents of the production of space, the state is present in numerous ways: it regulates, legislates, writes plans, provides infrastructure, polices, and upgrades spaces” (7). The government also indirectly guides designers and other technicians, such as the Housing Department architects and planners. Teresa Caldeira explains,

In the process [of developing peripheral land], state planners and agencies acted routinely after the fact in a way that benefitted private developers, improved neighborhoods, and consolidated the rights of residents. We can recognize the same logic in programs of land regularization and slum upgrading. (8)

⁸ In a few words, one of the main elements that drove the selection of certain favelas over other areas is the location of settlements along hydrographic basins, as well as the physical precariousness and social vulnerability of some settlements.

Sapé's residents have popular power, which is conveyed through the election of their Management Council representatives and, more broadly, of city legislators. However, these residents have little if any economic and technical might. Lastly, the parallel power, through violence and fear, attempts to interfere with the favela's power relationships.

A power imbalance may occur if one group of social actors is subdued and ends up underrepresented. As stated previously in this article, upgrading works are an overall attempt by governments to alter the amount of influence the parallel power holds. But the effects of upgrading practices happen distortedly, as the most affected group—the one that is actually mostly weakened in terms of power—is favela dwellers. Although physical interventions may disturb the routine of criminal organizations, residents end up facing the biggest power asymmetry.

For instance, in the case of São Paulo's Management Council, the City Hall empowers this council as a pretext to the perpetration of changes that appeal mostly to the government. The council is not as autonomous as it seems, for it inconspicuously incentivizes Sapé's dwellers to feel included in the upgrading process and thus to support it. In this case, it is the political power emerging from the government that defines the institution of the Management Council as an informative and deliberative mechanism; not the informative and deliberative attributes of the council itself. Analogously, Flyvbjerg argues that power may define the application of knowledge instead of letting knowledge reign for its own significance.

It is important to state that the parallel power in São Paulo is structured through a strong network that outsizes city and state boundaries. The primary organization behind the criminal world is the aforementioned PCC, which earns money from trafficking in countless places and from other economic activities, too. Thus, the physical upgrading of PCC's territories may not disturb this illegal group too much. On the other hand, favela residents end up in between a power dispute in which local authorities, with the support of technicians, try to expand its domain.

In this expansion attempt, the São Paulo government has changed its intervention tactics throughout time. Historically, the city administration shifted from clearing favelas to upgrading them, as explained by one resident of Sapé: "Then, since I arrived here, I always listened to this upgrading plan. [But] they didn't say 'upgrading.' They used to say 'favela clearance.'" This change in the government's discourse and actions showed that maybe authorities realized that favelas could not be fully reclaimed by clearance. Following this rationale, a smooth and incremental intervention could prove more successful.

Research, such as Flyvbjerg's, points to the sometimes overlooked relationship between power and rationality within planning practices. Rationality could be viewed as the technique- and expertise-based side of planning. According to the author, this side is oftentimes interpreted and manipulated by the group of social actors that controls the planning mechanism. Thus, what matters the most is not the "correct, ratio-

nal or true” interpretation, but actually “which party can put the greatest power behind its interpretation” (Flyvbjerg 2002, 36).

In the upgrading of Sapé, what prevailed was the interpretation of the city government, which shaped the rational approach of designers and technicians. And there were strong reasons for the local authorities to lead their take on rationality: the social vulnerability and physical precariousness of the settlement’s dwellers and, last but not least, the intention to weaken the influence of the parallel power over local residents.

The outcomes of this interpretation are as follows:

- a) The physical transformation of Favela do Sapé, which, among other things, created new horizon lines and facilitated circulation in the settlement;
- b) An increase in the presence of the local government; and,
- c) The forging of an allegiance with local residents through the Management Council.

The transformation of Sapé’s spaces resulted in a change in the way these spaces were appropriated by local residents and by the parallel power. Although this transformation is permanent, it may not lastingly affect the power dynamics in this favela if the government does not permanently operate there.

This leads us to the second outcome. During the upgrading works, government officials were constantly seen in Sapé. By “government officials” I mean architects, planners, social workers, and engineers. The police eventually made incursions, as described in this paper’s introduction.

Nevertheless, after the end of the works most of these officials were relocated to other areas or went back to their offices. There is no São Paulo City urban policy that effectively brings a government presence to favelas on a permanent basis. Although the upgrading brought important public infrastructure and services, such as sewage collection, many other elements are still missing. Public facilities such as daycares and libraries, which denote the amicable and necessary presence of the state, were not implemented. It is important to say that police patrolling is also important—not only in favelas, but the entire city—but should not be the sole means of state action.

The last outcome was also established through a temporary logic. The Management Council brought many Sapé residents closer to government authorities and, therefore, empowered the City Hall and, to some extent, local dwellers. However, after the completion of the works the Management Council of Sapé, although not dissolved,⁹ became considerably less active.¹⁰ This shows that, once again, the upgrading efforts carried out in Favela do Sapé led to an ephemeral increase in government presence. Therefore, although significant, the government-sponsored change in the power

9 The Council still formally exists because its period of validity has not yet expired. Also, as there were a few condominiums which were still left to be built, and a new bidding process for their construction might approach, this structure has not been dismantled.

10 One source from the Housing Department explained that, in practical terms, only one council person has still been working on behalf of the Management Council.

dynamics caused by and witnessed during Favela do Sapé's upgrading did not fully accomplish the desire of the City Hall's authorities.

7. Concluding Remarks

Caldeira (2016) argues that "peripheries are, undoubtedly, about inequality" (9). Based on the power planning framework, I argue that this inequality is mirrored by power imbalances in favelas across São Paulo.

Government authorities, criminal organizations, planners, designers, and residents are unequally involved in the quest for control over favelas. The recent upgrading attempts in São Paulo convey the way this quest is currently shaped. It is a powerful mechanism in a sense that it aims at securing the incorporation of favelas into the jurisdiction of the state. After all, upgrading means disturbing the presence of the dominant parallel power. It also implies an attempt to establish legal participatory institutions, such as the Management Council, that can bring favela dwellers into the urban realm and also persuade them to side with the local government.

If residents tend to be highly and disproportionately affected by state interventions, criminal gangs may not be equally hit. This does not necessarily mean that favela-upgrading practices are deceitful or harmful. Upgrading should not be viewed through a good-or-bad lens. It should be seen as a mechanism of incorporation of marginalized urban dwellers by the state, which results in power struggles and imbalances. Its effects could be positive or negative depending on which social actor is regarded and, especially, each actor's strength.

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