



SAFE SPACES IN SÃO PAULO

By Paula Miraglia

A detailed study by Paula Miraglia traces the complex relationships between crime, spatial segregation and quality of life in the centre and the periphery.

Violence and therefore safety – as themes and elements of social configuration – play a major role in the construction and characterisation of Brazil's major urban centres. Since the 1980s, marked increases in urban crime alongside the emergence of democratic openness and urbanisation have transformed Brazil's cities. The proliferation of robberies, thefts, kidnappings and violent deaths has promoted criminality and a consolidation of fear and insecurity as commonplace characteristics of urban life. Murder rates in the country's capitals have grown significantly, especially among adolescents between 15 and 24 years old. While the average rates for the entire population remained stable between 1980 and 2002, ranging from 21.3 to 21.7 for every 100,000 inhabitants, those among young people skyrocketed from 30 to 54.5. In São Paulo, violence today conjures two opposing trends: while in the 1980s and 1990s a systematic increase in murder rates scared the city (in 1999 the rate was 43.2), both the state and the Metropolitan Region benefited from a significant reduction over the last six years, so that by 2005 the murder rate had already dropped to 22.

São Paulo, with a rate now lower than the national average and that of Recife, Vitoria or Rio de Janeiro, presents itself as a genuine exception. For although violence remains a constituent part of the city's configuration, especially with regards to its recent history, the city has nonetheless established new patterns of sociability that allow for a renewed understanding of the city and its public and private spaces. This understanding and subsequent use patterns influence the city's spatial and architectural configuration as well as the opposition between centre and periphery. At the same

time, the reduction of murders entails a reflection on the strategies involved in the process of confronting a violent sociability and also signifies broader trends related to concepts of violence and safety.

Despite the constant reduction in murder rates, neither academics nor policy makers have been able to form a consensus about its causes. The reduction has been attributed to an extensive and varied set of factors: state interventions such as the improvement of management policies (for example the creation of INFOCRIM, an electronic database that facilitates communication between the city's various police districts to produce an overall mapping of crime statistics) and increased investigative police activity; the work of non-governmental organisations and community engagement in the most violent areas; policies such as the 'dry law' in some municipalities; reduced availability of firearms; demographic changes in the state and other parts of the country over recent years; and even the rise of Evangelism in the suburbs.

The justifications alternate depending on who constructs the explanatory narrative, with each proposed cause subject to ongoing research and controversy regarding its relevance and effectiveness. Even so, besides the multiple causes of violence, an important battle in the political and institutional arena is taking place over the factors creating the supposed increase in safety and the different ways of confronting it. Which is the best strategy: prevention or suppression? Must safety be a subject that is primarily the responsibility of the police, or does it deserve the attention of other areas of public policies such as urbanism, health or education? If we add safety and violence to the top metropolitan problems –

contrary to transport, flooding and pollution, the city's other major challenges – solutions are typically not addressed through urban interventions. In the face of violence and insecurity, typically resources emanate from the criminal justice system, the police force, or other repression apparatuses. This equation shows a failure: originally, safety is a problem *of* the city, but not for *the* city. The metropolis assumes a secondary role in formulating policies for the prevention and confrontation of violence, as it is unable to actively participate in changes that promote safe spaces for living and social interaction.

However, an analysis of São Paulo shows how a district, as a place of transformation as well as physical and social interaction, plays a key role in these processes. Mapping the types of safe spaces in different neighbourhoods can reveal the unequal distribution of violence in the city. The concentration of murders, along with other violent crimes against life, in the suburbs demonstrates how São Paulo practises an uneven risks economy. Territorial analysis also allows a deeper understanding of how the city deals with the issue of safety: which are the strategies of each district or region? What are the consequences of each option or arrangement? What is their potential for universal application? And finally, what is the impact on the city's sociability and the life of its inhabitants?

Mapping the heterogeneity of social expressions in an apparently homogenous area in socio-demographical terms allows the differentiation of forms which define the 'periphery'. Research developed by the Centre for Metropolitan Studies (CEM) of four areas in São Paulo – Jardim Paulista in the centre, Cidade Tiradentes in the East, Jardim Ângela in the South and Vila Nova Cachoeirinha/Brasilândia in the North – has revealed various conditions of poverty within the same area. To distinguish between them, the studies considered social group characteristics, combining variables associated with income, education, unemployment, access to urban infrastructure and race or ethnicity. From these isolated indicators, it was possible to make a detailed description of the distribution of such social groups and their living conditions.

As the distribution of violence and safety influences patterns of sociability, and affects each district differently, the answers revealed phenomena that also take into account the particular characteristics of each area. Thus combining social and demographic characteristics such as income, skin colour and education with symbolic and material resources such as public services, community engagement levels, informal arrangements or the very history of the neighbourhood, each community creates its 'repertory of safety' to be assessed against certain violence scenarios. Crime distribution in São Paulo is a good starting point to examine this diversity. If, on the one hand, the association between poverty and crime is discarded, the coincidence of lower income, higher concentration of slums, greater presence of black and brown people, low education levels and the concentration of murders on the other hand cannot be ignored. Other than emphasising the unequal distribution of violence, such a scenario offers a macro-analysis which – alongside other elements – helps to trace a portrait of the periphery and ultimately forms a major contribution to understanding the relationship that is established between the periphery and its residents and the centre. Certainly the occupation and distribution of groups in the city also results from state interventions (or the lack of them), therefore these social indicators are essential to limit periphery areas. But the relational character of the centre/periphery opposition, and its attendant spatial understanding, implies a certain perspective that must also recognise the diverse political and cultural context of what peripheral signifies.

The victimisation of neighbourhoods alone is not enough. Firstly, because not all districts with high rates of vulnerability in São Paulo have high murder rates. Secondly, even in those districts where we find a combination of vulnerability and violence there is a wide range of strategies. We are much more interested in exploring the differences that such scenarios may produce and in identifying cycles in which violence and safety are at the same time producers and products of a particular type of social interaction. Selecting two opposing poles in the Metropolitan Region provides information that can help build a repertory of safety in the city. Doing so reflects on how these strategies

combine the categories of 'space' and 'sociability' and how this interaction and diversity are building the city.

Located just three kilometres from the centre of the city, the neighbourhood of Jardim Paulista (Jardins) corresponds to the city's urban development pattern and constitutes a wealthy neighbourhood in the city's South-East area. Jardins is considered very safe, with a mix of residential and commercial spaces that bring together a wide range of shops characterising the city's luxury retail market. The clientele combines local residents with visitors who enjoy the leisure activities and shopping offered by the district. Recent changes increased the area's safety, although they were intended to improve something that already existed, such as the widening of pavements or enhanced lighting. These interventions were not substantive; on the contrary, the objectives promoted consolidation and stability associated with a sense of peace and safety. An idea of completeness is added to this perception. From the perspective of the residents, the fact that shopping, leisure and social activities can all be carried out with relative proximity is experienced as something positive. 'I don't need to leave the neighbourhood', is often heard. Strategies to protect shops and residential buildings include mixing private security guards or signs indicating that the space is being watched with more hidden features such as surveillance cameras. Even large shop windows generate selective action, and together these interventions both appeal to, and inhibit, passers-by.

One of the most recurring elements when talking about fear or the feeling of insecurity is – not incidentally – based on the presence of someone else, usually a non-resident or a worker from the region. But these 'others' are not random: street sales people, beggars and the homeless populate the category of those that are 'displaced' and are all blamed by local residents as potential threats to peace and safety in the neighbourhood. The CAPE (Centre for Permanent Assistance) of the Secretary of Social Assistance offers a service that is advertised on the residents' association website, which receives 'complaints' about homeless people that are near or in front of their homes, and they 'intervene'. In this quick description, the various attempts to homogenise the area reduce diversity using

strategies of avoidance of non-equals, and promote urban interventions that ensure a single standard of sociability.

On the other side of the metropolis, more than 31 kilometres from the centre, the Cidade Tiradentes district and housing complex – the largest in Latin America – occupies a peripheral location in the city's far East. The area, previously a farm called Santa Etelvina, was acquired by Cohab, the metropolitan housing authority, at the end of the 1970s, to be incorporated into the urban network as low-value lots. Built from the 1980s onwards, the large scale of this housing complex eventually produced a uniformity to the landscape which became a defining feature of Cidade Tiradentes. For two decades the neighbourhood had a reputation as one of the worst places to live in São Paulo. The main problems highlighted by residents were the long distance from the centre, violence, limited public investment in basic urban infrastructure and almost no shops. Added to this was the fact that, until recently, the region lived under territorial dispute between criminal organisations, further evidence of its high murder rate. In recent years, however, a series of profound transformations such as the construction of the Tiradentes Bus Terminal have transformed the area. The terminal has significantly improved access to other regions of the city, thus reducing the distance and sense of isolation, while ensuring greater movement of residents to other sectors of the neighbourhood.

Over time the structure of the housing complex has changed. The first- and second-generation buildings were subjected to interventions proposed by the residents. The construction of walls, sentry boxes (though permanently disabled) and the addition of security bars accompanied attempts to enhance the buildings aesthetically. These interventions went beyond the mere improvement of safety standards and defined a process of 'consolidation' of the property that incorporated new standards and references. As a result, more recent buildings were constructed with active sentry boxes and electronic gates already in place.

At the same time the neighbourhood became dominated by a single criminal faction: the First Command of the Capital (PCC). Its exclusivity marked the end of territorial disputes in the area, causing a reduction of

murders in the immediate vicinity. With the arrival of the police and expansion of the district police squad, crime today occupies an area called 'Fundão' with a clear territorial demarcation of the activities showing that they have therefore lost a central position in the life of the neighbourhood. The arrival of shops and more diversified public and private services in the area have completed its transformation. Major chain-stores and supermarkets now serve the residents and are seen as important achievements by neighbourhood residents. In this sequence of progressive acquisitions, a bank is one of the last elements still missing.

Thus, even if the area is not totally homogenous, with some pockets benefiting more than others from such changes, the image of a violent neighbourhood is changing into that of one with potential for economic and social development. This process was able to transform the residents' sense of belonging and has changed perceptions among residents about how to access their city.

The presence of public power, exemplified by the increase of police action and by the bus terminal, as well as the multiplication of services offered were responsible for the diversification of the landscape and its social fabric, which nowadays is more pluralistic and varied. Therefore, it can be argued that Cidade Tiradentes has made use of a social diversification strategy. The heterogeneity of the neighbourhood has become a factor of resilience. The permanence of the PCC indicates that it is not impossible to live with violence or crime; the continued proliferation of slums emphasises that the region is still extremely socially and economically vulnerable. But these changes show that the district was able to lift itself beyond a position of victimisation.

Despite the ethnographic wealth of both examples, we are not interested in caricatures to illustrate the differences between rich and poor neighbourhoods. Instead, the issues and problems that actually are in permanent dialogue with the wider structures of urban interaction that merit attention. Many of the elements mentioned in both cases have been repeated, with appropriate contextual adaptations, and offer themselves as genuine choices for the city and its residents. Together with other tools of segregation, they form a fragmented

city in which the channels of communication between centre and periphery are constantly weakened. Using a so-called 'repertoire of safety' may become a permanent mechanism to promote the actualisation of inequalities.

Taking the difference between homogeneity and heterogeneity in Cidade Tiradentes as an example, the void resulting from the lack of public and private services, together with an endlessly repeated anonymous architectural pattern, created residents' resignation about the region's vulnerability. Therefore the strengthening and enhancement of the complexity of the social fabric are associated with changes that, in this case, produce movement and circulation: elements that can provide physical, symbolic and social interaction between groups from within the district and from the rest of the city.

In the case of Jardins, however, the transformation takes the form of permanence and repetition. The maintenance of certain urbanisation patterns ultimately perpetuates the homogeneity of the area, either in terms of space, or with regards to visitors' profile and characteristics. It has established itself as a well-maintained progressive area. Jardins reinforces a sense of community that is generated by an organic enclosure of the neighbourhood. There is nothing new about using separation strategies inspired by protection: the high walls of closed apartment blocks, the gates and the guards make it easy to identify this set of mechanisms. But when it comes to open spaces, involving streets and pavements, segregation tools go beyond physical aspects. From this perspective, imitating the fluidity and the ample capacity of the circulation of violence, safety appears to be a continuum, that, like violence, is supported by urbanisation resources that are merged with segregated sociability strategies. This projects the distinct separation of a determined area without building intentional explicit physical limits.

The comparison between these two strategies to reduce crime and violence raises questions about the effectiveness of solutions. Although a reduction of murders is evident throughout the city, the question persists whether the peripheries will some day be less violent than the centre. The applied strategies are not able, or do not contemplate a reversal of the patterns of victimisation. Even if reduced, most violent deaths are concentrated in the periphery. The continuing

victimisation and levels of violence, as well as the strategies of segregation, are obstacles in the subversion of the relation between centre and periphery which occur today.

Spaces are able to determine patterns of sociability, but coexistence and interaction are also powerful elements in the configuration of community. If we assume that safety and its distribution shape the city, the opposition between 'strategies of protection' and 'safety development' seems to summarise the available options and translate the implications of each model. The first, more reactive strategy, mobilises an individual dimension of avoidance, while the second, propositional, emphasises the

collective dimension of interaction between individuals and groups. The contrast suggests the limits of partial solutions to the problem. This is evident not only in the tension between the models of safe spaces in a safe city, but also through the way they announce a struggle for the city itself. In other words, the creation of safe spaces is not complemented by the perception of a safe city. Such models are exclusionary, and show that either the entire city is safe or no one is.

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