

The new lands of the cities

In Belém – In 2010, professors and students of the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) helped the inhabitants of Murutucum Island, near the Brazilian city of Belém, to once again produce bags, backpacks and shoes waterproofed with latex rubber, which had not been done for more than a century. UFPA professors and researchers are now looking beyond these activities, this time for the purpose of mapping, understanding and helping to manage the cities of a state with an area nearly three times the size of France.

“We want to help cities solve their problems and prepare their action plans,” says Fábio Carlos da Silva, Associate Director of the Center for Advanced Amazonian Studies (NAEA) and Executive Secretary of the Amazon Public Policy Incubator (IPPA), which brings together universities, government agencies, nongovernmental organizations and companies in nine Amazonian states. One of the activities planned for this year are public administration courses for mayors and city council members.

“We knew almost nothing about the interior of the state of Pará,” noted Ana Claudia Duarte Cardoso, an architect and researcher at UFPA and the Vale Technology Institute (ITV). In 2004, shortly after completing her PhD in England and returning to Brazil, she joined a group of researchers who visited 14 cities in the state to assist in preparing the master plan, which would be required as of 2006 for cities with 20,000 inhabitants. “We saw that the problem was deeper,” she remarked. “Many cities were unable to create master plans because they had no information on their territory or assessments of their needs and potentialities, nor any cartography.”

In July 2012, Cardoso returned to the Marabá region, now as one of the coordinators of Urbis Amazônia, a research project implemented in 2011 and funded by ITV Belém and the Vale Foundation for R\$2.3 million. It seeks to better understand the process of how urban areas in the Amazon form and evolve. Architects, urban planners, economists and geographers from the states of Pará, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are attempting to identify stress points and contribute to public policy formulation in three regions of Pará (*see map*).

“We are developing a cartography of urban areas of the Amazon,” says Antonio Miguel Monteiro, a researcher at the National Institute for Space Research (INPE) and coordinator of Urbis. “It’s not a traditional cartography, because it reflects the social, spatial and cultural relationships between places, not just their locations.” For the first expedition, from June 4 to 15, 2012, ten researchers visited 58 communities bordering the city of Santarém along the Tapajós River. There are some small communities, with 50 to 100 families, but “they work together like a city, complementing functions and services,” says Monteiro. A health clinic may be located in one community and a school in another, and all the families use them. “We want to highlight these centers, the ways in which they are organized and how they relate to other areas, so that they will be considered in regional planning.”

On another expedition, from July 19 to August 5, 2012, nine researchers visited the cities of southeast Pará (Urbis-1) and interviewed residents, business owners, town clerks and directors of non-governmental organizations. They saw urban centers that were not on the maps and unexpected phenomena, such as cities that were born large and spreading, with thousands of residents drawn by jobs created by mining companies or agribusiness. Many cities

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Fire in the distance: bikers crossing the PA-239 highway, covered by smoke from fires on grasslands in the São Félix do Xingu region in August 2010

are dependent on rural activity, reversing the usual hierarchy.

They are beginning to see what needs to be done. For example, at two condominiums of the Minha Casa Minha Vida [My House My Life] federal government program, with a total of 2,500 homes under construction on the outskirts of Marabá, they found no regular bus lines. Bus service helps to prevent new neighborhoods from becoming isolated. “The work is haphazard, with no thought given to accessing resources that would enable consistent and coherent planning,” says Cardoso.

Affordable condominiums in similar situations are also being built in Parauapebas and Canaã dos Carajás. “Half of the urban area of Parauapebas is made up of lots because new arrivals, instead of just buying the land, buy four or five lots, because the price of land is low,” she notes. “The end result is cities full of empty spaces.” Urbanization, in turn, radically transforms the natural landscape: “Hilltops and riverbanks, which should be preserved, are bald in all the cities we visited.”

Mixed areas

Roberto Monte-Mor, a Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) and Urbis researcher was very distressed by the expedition. “We saw a process of total destruction, paved roads, and a lot of people making money from land sales and motorbikes.” In Tucumã, motorcycles and scooters account for 80% of the vehicles on the road, and 50% in Parauapebas and Marabá.

“What we’re seeing in Pará,” said Monte-Mor at a UFPA seminar in late October, “is an urbanized area that is both country and city, and neither of the two, but an amalgam of the two.” Monte-Mor, a 65-year-old architect and urban planner who has been traveling the Amazon for 40 years, has worked with economists for 30 years and with geographers for 15, originated the concept of extensive urbanization in 2004. The Urbis team adopted it to analyze the urban areas of the Amazon. “City limits have expanded and rural areas have undergone a process of urbanization. People who live in rural areas also want to live in the city, with electricity, satellite TV and a sense of citizenship. The city threw its tentacles over the countryside,” he observed.

These phenomena are not unique to the Amazon. Since 1960, road construction and the expansion of electricity networks, telephone service and sanitation have taken the comforts of the city to rural residents throughout Brazil. Monte-Mor has found similar phenomena in indigenous villages in northern Minas Gerais, whose residents have electricity and paved streets in front of their brick houses.

From an economic standpoint, the cities of the first region we visited are doing well, that is, growing and generating wealth. Mainly because of the mining and agricultural sectors, the share of gross income of the Urbis-1 cities in the Pará economy rose from 8.6% in 1996 to 20% by the end of the next decade. In Canaã dos Carajás, one of the largest iron ore exploration projects in the world, with an estimated investment of \$20 billion, led to the construction of roads, pushed up the price of land and attracted new residents: the population of the city could rise from 20,000 to 100,000 in 10 years. However, the construction of houses does not always keep pace with the arrival of migrants. “Since 2002 the urban perimeter of Canaã dos Carajás has moved more than six times,” as recorded in one of the Urbis reports, “with the creation of pockets of poverty in 19 informal settlements established in public

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Chapéu Hill, in Parauapebas, occupied by makeshift settlements

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areas.”

It is hard to find natives of Pará in these cities of Pará, because most of the residents came from other regions of the country. In Parauapebas, recognized as a city in 1985, 56% of the residents are migrants or children of migrants. In Canaã dos Carajás — an even newer city, recognized in 1994 — 54% of the residents came from other states. Canaã has one of the highest annual rates of population growth in Brazil, 18.11%; the national average is 1.55%.

Cattle and beaches

In São Félix do Xingu the bovine herd has grown impressively — from 9,000 in 1994, to 682,000 in 1999, one million in 2001, and two million (declared) in 2010, which means an average of 22 cattle per resident. “In 1980,” says Monte-Mor, “São Felix was a village lost in an old-fashioned world, with less than 2,000 inhabitants, and suddenly it was transformed into a city of almost 50,000 people, with huge stores for chemical products, advertisements for rodeos and Greenpeace protest signs. São Félix and Xinguara have cattle on both sides of the river; everything has been cleared; there are no groves of chestnut trees. It is sad to see farmers and rubber workers displaced. It is sad to hear residents discussing which is worse, mining or ranching. The deforestation has been brutal. Before long the Amazon will cease to exist.”

Many people go to enjoy the river beaches or fishing in the rivers of São Félix do Xingu and Marabá. Monte-Mor, who visited the region in 1984 and 2001, was astonished to see hundreds of stands selling fish on the sand and dozens of jet-skis cutting through the Xingu River, “I had never seen tourism as popular as this. The devil is the music. Huge speakers and terrible music.”

“We face the challenge of combining the many Amazons, exploring elements that can be integrated and emphasizing internal differences,” says Monte-Mor. Fábio Silva sees the risk of once again relying on large economic enterprises as a way to promote the economy of the North: “Large projects serve the country and the world, but in the long run did not bring the improvements anticipated for the region.”

