

## **About the M'Boi Urban Research Station**

The M'Boi Urban Research Station is a platform of information, relationships and organizational links that support and bring together researchers working with urban issues and especially questions of urban vulnerability. By focusing on a very specific territorial area, made up by the densely packed and largely self built districts of Jardim Ângela, Jardim São Luis, Capão Redondo and surrounding areas in the extreme south-west of São Paulo with a total population of over a million inhabitants, the Research Station has as its mission to increase synergies in relation to pressing urban themes both in the exchange of qualitative and quantitative information between researchers and in the potential impact of the results of research for local development.

The Station is the result of a research program on urban vulnerability that began in 2013 with support from the São Paulo School of Business Administration's internal research fund (FGV - EAESP). In conversation with research teams from other São Paulo Universities who were working on similar issues (the Pontifical Catholic University PUC-SP and the Federal University of the ABC region), we began to make links with social forums, service organizations and local authority units in the region. We were always well received as there was a general feeling that the region was given low priority by the public authorities, but also frequently reminded that the great majority of university based studies that had taken place there over the years, had never been discussed locally nor had their results led to actions for the region.

As an Inter-University collective, we took the position that if our studies are being carried out in the same place in order to better understand the complexities of urban life, it is our ethical responsibility to try and be as useful as possible to those involved in local action initiatives. This approach, which combines elements of field stations with aspects of action research and outreach activities, has been well described as "research in action".

In 2016, the Urban Research Station was recognized by the Getulio Vargas Foundation's Applied Research Fund as making an important contribution to

bringing the University closer to everyday urban affairs and as a result we received a quota of small grants to support undergraduate and graduate students working in our research teams, a number of which are from the region itself. The Station hosts researchers from other universities, both from Brazil and Abroad and is currently finalizing an open access web site which holds all the information that we have collected on the region, other studies carried out – especially the less visible dissertations and monographs – as well as applied research reports by organizations working in the region, local authorities and service providers and all our own preliminary working documents ([www.fgv.br/ceapg/mboi](http://www.fgv.br/ceapg/mboi)). The site also carries information about all the research in progress.

As part of the School's Center for Public Administration and Government, the research station has also begun to broaden its outreach through *pro bono* courses for professionals and activists in the region with an emphasis on urban social issues and the management of local based organizations. As participants of a number of Forums, Research Station staff is always ready to find information and identify useful contacts to deepen discussion and action in urban affairs.

Current studies being undertaken, mainly through a patchwork of small grants and volunteer efforts, include the analysis of micro-vulnerabilities; inter-service coordination and territorial connectivity; youth and cultural movements; people living in areas in risk of flooding and land slippage; socio-economic development and culture; business micro finance; urban agriculture; urban mobility and gender. More long-term programmatic support that will enable the Station to strengthen its outreach portfolio of support for community based activities and provide seed money for new start up research programs is now a priority.

The word M'Boi is the Guarani term for a snake and the Guarani – who still have reservations in the less populous parts of greater south São Paulo and the coastal mountains – usually describe places by their physical features. In this case a little river that winds sinuously down into the Guarapiranga reservoir and became the end point for one of the main roads in the region (Estrada de M'Boi Mirim). But it

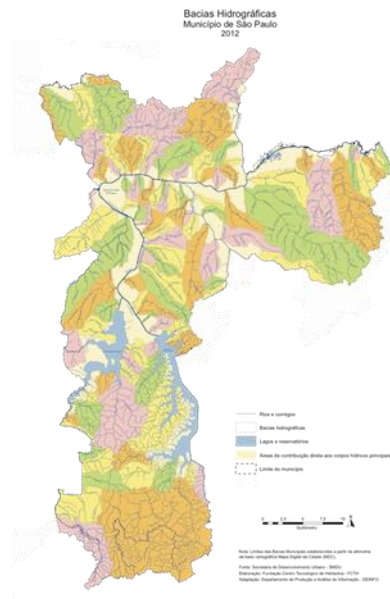
can also be found in the names of two adjoining municipalities in another version Embu.

### **A brief introduction to the territory**

São Paulo and the São Paulo metropolitan region is located in a broad water basin some 800 meters (2,500 feet) above sea level and surrounded by mountain ranges. Even though it is only 35 miles (55km) from the port of Santos on the coast, its many streams and lakes push water inland to form the Parana River, which will pass Paraguay and Uruguay before reaching the sea at Buenos Aires, Argentina. Unlike most of the big cities of the world that can be found near the outlets of their rivers or at least considerable downstream (Cairo, Rome, Paris, London, New York to cite but a few), São Paulo is not just upstream, but sits on top of its catchment area.

Despite the photographs which suggest that São Paulo is a flat maze of high rise buildings, it is in fact a city full of hills and valleys, from which and through which emerge and flow numerous small streams and rivers; nowadays running through concrete channels under major roads, many of which constructed in former river valleys. Figure 1 shows the many different hydrographic sub basins that are within the municipality of itself.

Figure 1: Hydrographic sub basins in the municipality  
Of São Paulo



With a somewhat chaotic urban history in which major infrastructure investment was often left for a later date, preservation of watercourses and housing demands normally moved in opposite directions. This is well summed up by the two major and extremely polluted rivers that zigzag their way through the municipality at the same time as its population suffers the effects of a drinking water shortage. District by district, these contradictions bring dangers of flash flooding (high density occupancy without proper drainage) as well as land slippage (due to precarious construction along the sides of river valleys).

The south zone of São Paulo can be divided into three areas: the first is what those in the more wealthier central regions call the south zone (*zona sul*) which starts at the Paulista Avenue and goes out past the Ibirapueira Park and the well urbanized houses and flats toward the national airport at Congonhas. The second starts more or less at the airport and covers what used to be part of the municipality of Santo Amaro, founded some 400 years ago and annexed to São Paulo in 1935. It crosses the Pinheiros River and continues on either side of the Guarapiranga reservoir. As it crosses the river (over two different bridges) it materializes expressions that are often heard when discussing the differences in distribution and quality of public services and the way the police act: this side of

the bridge; the other side of the bridge. This is where the third south begins, which covers the rest of the former municipality of Santo Amaro.

For the planners in the city hall, this is part of the periphery (*periferia*) of São Paulo; an expression that is used to talk about the outer fringe of the city and its limits with adjoining municipalities. But it is also an expression that positions people as being working class – which in Brazil is synonymous with having low incomes – with substandard housing, not very good education and often being seen as problematic.

If the visitor to São Paulo were to talk to most people in the first of the three southern areas about the third, the impression would be that yes there are people out there, but that is the periphery of the town. Even the portal of the Municipal Government will say on the page introducing the sub-prefectures: “few people know, but São Paulo has 31 small ‘municipalities’ distributed throughout the city” (the commas around municipalities are from the original text).

Jardim Ângela and Jardim São Luís form one of these small “municipalities”: they are the two districts that make up the sub prefecture of M’Boi Mirim with a population of over 600,000 and some 25 kilometers away from city hall in downtown São Paulo. The sub prefecture is a fairly recent institutional development designed to replace the previous regional administrations basically charged with road cleaning and minor repairs.

Together the two districts border one side of the Guarapiranga Reservoir. They went through a housing explosion from the 1960’s onwards fueled by (a) restrictive legislation on agriculture in the catchment area, which led to small farmers selling out and moving away, and (b) the industrial boom in São Paulo which brought may thousands in search of work to a city without any planning for the necessary housing. As a result, people bought formal or semi formal small plots of land roughly carved out of the former agricultural smallholdings or in the impossibility of payment, occupied public land alongside rivers or on

hillsides. When people tell their histories they describe very similar processes. 'We first dug a well to get down to the water, then we built a room and then bit by bit we carried on; that is, when we had the money, the time and as the family expanded'. The "we" may be family members, but will usually also include artisans and building workers from the communities themselves. Sometimes this may be paid work, but often includes a mutual all-in exchange of time and help between neighbors and friends. As one architect put it, "we have to be honest and admit that "self building" doesn't mean bad building, it just means that it wasn't designed by an architect or supervised by an engineer".

The landscape of Jardim Ângela and its co-district Jardim Luís is highly undulated and today it is marked by nearly twelve kilometers by five kilometers of continuous high-density housing that seems to occupy all available possibilities – and impossibilities – of location. Houses will go up from floor to floor with very narrow stairways; others will stretch upwards and downwards along the sides of hills and the roads that curve around the contour lines are cross cut by stairways that rise vertically, dodging their way around houses that have advanced outwards where possible. Despite the heavy subtropical rainfall in summer months, there are no sloping roofs. The tops are flat and unfinished and are very key parts of the property: either for holding social gatherings or for, when necessary, building more rooms: (social) space is indeed a (social) product.

Figure 2 shows some of the variety present, including the very fragile one room houses stretched out over streams that are vulnerable to flooding.

Figure 2: Self -help housing in Jardim Ângela  
São Paulo





Self-building did not only apply to housing but also to most everything else. These were areas of the outskirts of São Paulo that were largely ignored by



the municipal governments in the 1960s and 1970s and those present had to fend for themselves. Many of them were religious people – Brazil has a large catholic population – and were used to the church playing an important role in the community. They built their own places for worship that in turn strengthened the communities and were key elements in the São Paulo Catholic Church's option for liberation theology. With municipal government absent, social mobilization, through the ecclesiastical base communities and also the trade unions was the route to providing basic services and pressuring for place based public investment: water, electricity, sewage, schools, health, transport amongst others were many of the themes that people recall.

Little by little the state and its organizations began arriving but the communities in their different ways had already been active and alongside mobilizing also went the provision of community services. A recent document (2013) published by the Municipal Secretary for Social Assistance and Development (SMADS) analyzing the different regions of São Paulo states that in the region of M'Boi Mirim, some 36% of the population can be classified as being in high and very high vulnerability, which rises to 50% in Jardim Ângela. The description continues with an appraisal of social services:

"In relation to the network of social services, the area of the sub prefecture has 79 different service units capable of attending together 16,610 clients and is the most well equipped of the southern zone 1. Of these units the Municipality directly runs three (2 CRAS and 1 CREAS). Amongst the services that are contracted, the major part is focused on children and adolescents....."

The three service units, of which only two are active, that are run directly by the municipality are the coordinating units for social welfare (known as reference centers in the terminology of the National Social Service system - SUAS). A simple calculation shows that the remainder – seventy-six – are run by other organizations in the region; that were there long before the effective arrival of the local state and the new social welfare system.

Despite the many positive aspects of community mobilization, this remains an area that is faced with very complicated social, material and institutional issues. The two districts and their near neighbor (Capão Redondo) were classified during the 1990s as being the most dangerous places on the planet. Even today police violence and the violent death of young people is still at a frightening level. There are over fifty areas that have identified as being in serious risk of land slippage and flooding and probably many others still to be identified. Most of the formal and semi-formal plots that were sold back in the 1960s and 1970s do not have officially registered land title deeds and, whilst there are a number of public services there is very little inter-agency coordination and often the different agencies use different map coordinates.