

12. Springs Square: nurturing urban waters



Type: bottom-up (grass-roots initiative)

Region: southeast

State: São Paulo

Biome: Atlantic Rainforest, cerrado
(Brazilian savannah)

City of São Paulo

Population: 12 176 866 (estimated 2018)

Area: 1528.5 km²

Elevation: 760 m

Coordinates: 23.557386 S / 46.737778 W

HDI: 0.805 (2010) ¹¹⁵

Context

São Paulo is the capital of the state of São Paulo and the centre of the largest metropolitan area in South America with 21.2 million ¹¹⁶ inhabitants. The city has expanded over the landscape with the eradication of the original ecosystems, burying most of the creeks, with larger rivers straightened and canalised. Nature is restricted to some parks, mainly in the peripheral areas. São Paulo has been called the City of Waters due to the 300 rivers and creeks that were originally in the landscape. Many springs remain active, despite the urbanisation. There is a growing movement of awareness-raising regarding nature in the city, and the relationships between biodiversity, waters and people.

¹¹⁵. <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/sp/sao-paulo/panorama> 8.11.2018.

¹¹⁶. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/biggest-cities-in-south-america.html> 8.11.2018.

Challenges

The Homero Silva square (the legal name of the Springs Square) is situated in the Sumaré neighbourhood of São Paulo. The vicinity is mainly residential. This square of 12 000 m² is the largest green space of the neighbourhood.

It used to be a derelict area where people would throw rubbish. It was unsafe; nobody used to go there. A grass-roots movement called Ocupe&Abrace (occupy and hug) started to take care of the place to recover the springs and biodiversity, aiming to gain direct contact with nature and natural processes and flows.

Actions

The Springs Square is a groundbreaking initiative created by the community to occupy the small, derelict park and restore the springs located there.

- Restoration of eight springs of the Black Water creek (córrego Água Preta) that flows into one of the main rivers that cross the city, the Tietê river.
- Plantation of more than 600 native and fruit/food species in collective events.
- Building of two ponds.
- Introduction of about 100 aquatic species in the ponds to enhance the ecological balance, and to biologically control mosquitoes.
- Promotion of social activities.
- Organisation of 13 festivals that attract people to celebrate nature, rivers and springs. The event has become a tradition that has permeated to other neighbourhoods and is inspiring more people to care for their green areas.
- Celebration of other civic initiatives, such as music festivals and a 'drums circle'.



Figure 64. Built pond to collect the water from the eight springs of the Água Preta creek — social ecological benefits in the heart of the city.

There is an independent project named cerrado infinito (infinite savannah) inside the square that has introduced vegetation from the cerrado (Brazilian savannah), the native dry ecosystem that had disappeared from the urban landscape. Daniel Caballero is an artist who is passionate about this ecosystem. He has been collecting, planting and educating residents about the importance of getting back this ecosystem that has deep roots, thus enhancing the water flows of the springs.

Stakeholder involvement Implementation

- The design and implementation were carried out by the grass-roots movement Ocupe&Abrace.
 - The introduction and monitoring of the aquatic biodiversity and most of the new trees were done by the biologist Sandro Von Matter.
 - Daniel Caballero planted in the square what he has called cerrado infinito. There is signage to explain and educate readers on the species and functions of the ecosystem along the pathways.
- The collective movement started in 2013 and has been very active since then.
- Community engagement and collaboration maintains the square's activities. The festivals are carried out with residents' contributions.
 - Daniel Caballero finances the cerrado infinito.
 - There is no funding from any institution.
 - The city collects rubbish, mows the lawn and maintains the lighting.

Outcomes

- The pond and the fauna have reduced the mosquitoes in the region. It has gained space in the media (newspapers, magazines and TV programmes) to call attention to the importance of NBS in promoting a balanced and healthy environment.
- Schools and universities promote field trips to learn what has been done in the square and learn about science outdoors.
- Residents enjoy the quiet and peaceful green area daily.
- Residents and other grass-roots movements are more cohesive and work together to mobilise people to environmental causes.
- Temperatures and air moisture close to the park are better than in other places.
- Awareness has been raised about civic responsibility for water security and conservation, especially in the city that has faced shortages of water for several dry years.
- The springs have been recognised by the Geographic and Cartographic Institute of the state of São Paulo.
- Water quality has been approved by the state environmental company and is monitored monthly by the project Observando Rios (observing rivers), of the non-governmental organisation SOS Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Forest).

Success factors

- This is a successful bottom-up project that has been a reference that transcends the city's borders due to social media.
- Biodiversity in the area is impressive, due to the collective work and engagement.

Limiting factors and risks

Planning is underway for a 22-story building to be built on the edge of the square, with an underground garage that will affect the water table and its ecological balance. Ocupe&Abrace is fighting against the construction because there are springs in the lot, and is demanding that the city protect and incorporate this plot of land into the square.

Lessons learnt

The grass-roots movement Ocupe&Abrace is a civic initiative that incorporates every collaborator's talent. There is no leadership. The informality of the group is not an obstacle to keeping the work flowing well and productively. The biggest challenge is when it has to be represented in public sessions, or to the public institutions.

There seems to be a small and silent revolution occurring, progressively changing people's minds and reconnecting them to nature.

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Selected references

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- <http://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2017/01/moradores-se-unem-para-combater-pernilongos-na-cidade-de-sao-paulo.html> (in Portuguese)
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- <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/11/river-hunter-sao-paulo-lost-waterways-failing-megacity> (in English)

On the 22-story building:

- <https://www.pracadanascente.minhasampa.org.br/> (in Portuguese), accessed: 8.12.2018.