

## **Belém, “Gate of Amazonia” – Port and River as Crossroads**

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The geopolitical importance of Belém, the capital of the Brazilian Federal State of Pará, lies above all in its function as “Gate of Amazonia” (Wagner 1996: 21; Campos 1997: 105). Even today, it is still isolated from the rest of Brazil, due to the immense distances to the nearest cities (São Luis 748 km, Fortaleza 1500 km, Brasília 2036 km) and to the restricted means of transport. Apart from travelling by plane, which is expensive and rather limited, these distances have to be covered by bus (to the Northeast or to Brasília) or by boat (to Amazonia). These journeys take days or even weeks. When going to the Amazonian interior, boats are the only alternative to small planes. In view of this situation, port and river take on an outstanding importance.

Belém, a city with more than a million inhabitants, is situated in the estuary of the river Pará, encompassing 718 km<sup>2</sup>, more than half of which consist of mostly uninhabited islands (Matos 2003: 111). As is the case in most parts of the rain forest, the area in which the city developed is broken up by a number of small rivers, brooks and channels which flood the adjoining quarters at high tide or with heavy rain. Even today, this separates the city into two districts: dry (expensive) living quarters which are relatively secure from water, and so called *baixadas*, slum areas which are regularly flooded.<sup>1</sup> This difference corresponds to a social separation, also evident in the port systems.

On the one hand, there is the international port. Belém gives access to the most extensive river system on earth and thus to the riches of the

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1 Conditions in the *baixadas* will be described more closely, taking the district Guamá as an example.

Amazonian rain forest. These can be exploited, transported via the rivers to the international port of Belém and then exported abroad. As a starting point, this port is above all orientated outwards and thus liable to lose importance with decreasing numbers of goods or the shifting of outside interests.

On the other hand, there are the small river ports. The river and its many, partly informal port facilities are vital for the native population as destinations of transition from the interior to the city and as the only access to markets and means of information and communication.

Rosa Acevedo Marin observes that Belém with its *trapiches*<sup>2</sup> represents the dreams of those who come to the city from the interior. The arriving boats touch the city, but the differing ways of life remain, linking the culture of those arriving to that of those moving around in the port area. Port and *trapiches* help to understand the networks of people living in worlds which touch and at the same time remain different (Marin 2003: 79).

This article investigates the movements around the port area in history as well as recent changes, and the economic, social and cultural consequences for the development of the city and the living conditions of people arriving and settling there. A focus lies on the processes of change and their effects on the local population, using as an example the *Centro Histórico*<sup>3</sup> in its historical development as well as the present situation. The tensions of an environment which is characterised by rural exodus and social inequality are also concentrated in the area of port and river, as interviews with members of a youth gang illustrate.

In the following chapters, the stages in the history of Belém which give different meanings to port and river are described, starting with the foundation of the military base and the development of the first urban area. Increasing international trade led to port extensions, whereas the changed situation at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century necessitated structural as well as administrative reforms. Processes of social change, closely related to the geographical conditions, caused the development of two distinctly different urban areas. This was intensified due to rural exodus and migration to the city. Finally recent developments are discussed in detail.

The article is based on literature mainly published in Brazil, a report on a research project in the *Centro Histórico* (2003), interviews with the members of a youth gang in the district Guamá (2003) and on the authors' personal observations.

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2 *Trapiches* are small wooden landing stages on both sides of the river.

3 Historical centre.



*Fig. 1: Segment of Town Map: In the foreground Cidade Velha, first urban nucleus; Comércio (originally Campina), since the 17<sup>th</sup> century zone of commerce, connecting directly to the international port area. Together with Cidade Velha, it forms the Historical Centre (Centro Histórico) of Belém. Umarizal, Nazaré, Batista Campos: Extension of the zone of commerce. Dry urban area for high income groups and international elite. Reduto: Living quarters of dock workers; Jurunas, Con-dor, Guamá: Low lying, regularly flooded area (baixadas), mainly inhabited by migrants from the interior – area of social conflicts (Marthe Schaar)*

### **From military base to urban settlement**

Belém was founded in 1616 by the Portuguese colonial power as a fort for the protection of the Amazon estuary and the access from the south and north, particularly against the Spaniards and French in the vicinity and also to protect the area against French, English and Dutch pirates (Kohlhepp 1986: 11; Encyclopédia 1996: 106). The natural barrier to the mainland caused by the regularly flooded small river Pirí (Igarapé Pirí de Jussara) added to the favourable defence situation (Lopes/Coelho 2003: 63). Belém became a point of departure for expeditions into the interior and for further foundations such as Fort Óbidos (Wagner 1996: 15).

The port of Belém, also dating back to 1616, started as a simple anchorage ground, 120 km away from the open sea on the bay of Guajará and the river Guamá, giving direct access to the Amazon river system.

The protected situation of the port initially was advantageous, whereas this aspect later lost importance due to the development of navigation of bigger ships (Penteado 1973: 29).

A path was built in 1621 along the river Guamá towards the military base (Rua do Norte, today: Rua Siqueira Mendes). From here the first urban nucleus (*Cidade*, today: *Cidade Velha*<sup>4</sup>) developed as a political, military and religious centre. During the next two decades three parallel roads followed which touched the marshland of the river Pirí in the east. In the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, cross-roads were built which connected the river Guamá with the marshland. A Carmelite convent, founded in 1624, supported colonisation of the interior.

Interest shifted to the bay of Guajará, when a road was constructed in 1627, connecting the port with the convent of St. Antônio and extending the area westwards. This became a trade route and an axle along which a zone of commerce developed (Campina, today: Comércio). Until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the anchorage served as port of the city (Penteado 1973: 48).

*Cidade Velha* and Campina which together formed the *Centro Histórico* of Belém, were separated from the mainland by the small river Pirí. Due to the tides, regular flooding restricted exchange, which mostly took place via a number of wooden anchorages (*trapiches*). Based on a plan submitted by the engineer Gronfels in 1771 and realised by order of the governor of the state of Pará in 1803, the river Pirí was drained and filled up, thus overcoming the separation of *Cidade Velha* and Campina (Penteado 1973: 51f.). The Avenida Almirante Tamandaré is in its place today.

## **International trade and port extension**

The developing population nucleus suffered from isolation. Trade connections with Europe existed exclusively via Lisbon. The situation in the emerging locality was precarious, particularly owing to duty payments on waterways and boats (Penteado 1973: 48ff.).

As early as 1743, however, Belém was regarded as a “big city” with regular trade connections with Lisbon. Goods arriving from Europe were bartered for local products such as gold dust, cloves, vanilla, sugar, coffee and, above all, cocoa. As the hinterland of Belém supplied the goods which were exchanged for European imports, the future of the city was secure. It developed from an exchange station into an important trade

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4 City resp. Old City.

centre and established itself as export and import site. The ships arriving from Europe moored in the bay of Guajará north of the river Pirí, the riverboats directly at its mouth, where the actual city port of Belém was situated for a long time (Penteado 1973: 51).

In the second half of the 19th century, river navigation was intensified in Amazonia. Companies were founded which erected a number of small quays on both sides of the river Guamá and further up on the bay of Guajará which still exist today, promoting trade and passenger traffic of the inland population to Belém (Penteado 1973: 60).

The first steamship belonging to one of these companies left the port in 1853, opening the river route to Manaus which at first operated once a month, from 1854 onwards twice monthly. In 1867 several smaller companies were set up. In 1874 the two main companies merged into the Amazon Steam Navigation Company which then held a kind of monopoly. The port of Belém extended its influence, navigation increased considerably (Penteado 1973: 60).

Different regions of the Amazonian interior provided – and still provide – products for the port and city of Belém. The immediate hinterland, encompassing the city itself as well as the adjacent area of Bragantina, is important both for the import and export of goods. The main products of this region are black pepper, fibre and cement, either for local use or for export to other Brazilian states or abroad. The near hinterland can be reached by regularly operating river boats in up to six days' time. Ships to the far hinterland run once or twice per month and often only at three months' intervals. The main products exported are rubber, Brazilian nuts, diverse seeds as well as wood, fish-glue, hides and furs. Imports into this region are negligible, as the population density is extremely low (Penteado 1973: 135ff.).

From 1860 onwards, exports of rubber (caoutchouc) collected in the Amazonian rain forest increased rapidly. Until 1890, however, there were neither port facilities which could cope with this increase nor an adequate organisation. In the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the federal government took matters in hand. Rubber, which had brought many advantages to Amazonia, helped Belém develop into a port adequate for its economic importance (Penteado 1973: 60).

The extension of the port of Belém began when Amazonia was the most important world-wide rubber producer, with a large modern river fleet at its disposal, dealing with internal transport. Demand increased still more as a consequence of the development of new, diverse rubber manufacturing industries in the industrial centres of Europe and Northern America. As a result, prices reached dizzying heights on the interna-

tional market, and the Amazonian capitals – Belém and Manaus – profited from the capital flow (Pinheiro 1996: 45f.).

Before the construction of the new quay, loading and unloading of goods as well as passenger traffic from and into the interior had taken place via the various *trapiches*, which were mostly only suitable for small motorboats called *gaiolas*<sup>5</sup>. Larger ships for coastal shipping operated via the Trapiche Lloyd which was deeper. There also existed the Trapiche Auxiliar directly in front of the fish market, where small cargo-ships moored. Ships with higher tonnage transporting overseas goods anchored further away in front of Pinheiro village (today: Icoaraci) or in the bay of Guajará. Their goods were reloaded and later discharged at the storage shed near the custom house (Pinheiro 1996: 46f.).

During 1910/12 the rubber cycle started to decline. Although compensation could be realised by exporting oleiferous seeds, the economic importance of Belém decreased visibly (Penteado 1973: 88).

In 1940 the federal government put practically all port institutions under state government and ownership (Pinheiro 1996: 47). From 1967 onwards, the port's status steadily declined which led to a reduction of labour. Part of the docks fell into decay. The main cause of this development was inadequate organisation in the port itself and in the transport of goods from the interior (Penteado 1973: 225ff.).

Based on the assumption that the Amazon as well as Belém would still have central importance, an orientation away from port and river in order to find ways of connecting with the rest of Brazil could be observed for a relatively short period. The proposed railway-line from Rio de Janeiro to Belém has to be seen in this context. It has never been built, but since the beginning of the 1960s, there exists a highway connecting Belém with the federal capital Brasília, which mirrors the same idea (Penteado 1973: 233).

In the course of internationalisation, the port facilities were divided into two areas: One was exclusively orientated towards international trade, the other one towards river traffic and local trade. This clearly demarcated division intensified the social and cultural segmentation of the city, as the native, lower class population was denied access to the international port as well as to any economic advantages connected with international trade. These aspects will be discussed in a later chapter.

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5 Literal translation: cages.

## The port at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, river traffic in Pará was and still is busy, connecting with hundreds of ports of different sizes. The majority of these have only limited capacity and are used for transporting people and goods between settlements along the rivers. Only the ports of Vila do Conde, Miramar, Belém and Santarém as well as privately run terminals are qualified for overseas traffic (Pinheiro 1996: 53).

Belém, although ranging behind Vila do Conde and Miramar, is still very important in the region owing to the diversity and economic value of its freights. After the end of the Brazilian “economic miracle” in the 1980s, Belém had faced a break-up of the port activities caused by lack of state investments. Diversification became necessary, which led to exports of a variety of extraction products and processed products for different industrial and trade sectors (Lopes/Coelho 2003: 64).

Also of advantage were a number of characteristics such as urban infrastructure with easy access to electricity, means of communication, commercial activities and varied means of transport. The equipment of the port of Belém, however, was not satisfactory as most of it was technically outdated and due to natural wear in need of extensive repairs. As a consequence, structural as well as administrative reforms were vital to make the port attractive for modernising investments (Pinheiro 1996: 54f.).

These reforms followed three principles: The first step was the withdrawal of the public authorities from the administration of the port. This aimed at increasing productivity and lowering of costs by means of free competition between private enterprises. The Companhia Docas do Pará<sup>6</sup> contacted 18 private firms who have already taken over the service sector at much lower cost. The Companhia, however, still retains its influence by fixing maximum prices in order to avoid cartel agreements which would result in increased costs. To represent the interests of the employees, the Sindicato dos Operadores Portuários no Estado do Pará<sup>7</sup> was set up and authorised to negotiate between management and port workers (Pinheiro 1996: 56).

Secondly, the crisis between capital and labour had to be overcome. The reason for this crisis dates back to the beginning of the 1930s, when work in the port was physically exacting and the productivity of a worker was not higher than 20 tons per day. Over time, this productivity was increased up to 1000 tons per day due to technical equipment such

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6 Society for the Docks of Pará.

7 Trade Union of Dockworkers in the State of Pará.

as fork-lift trucks, conveyer belts etc. Although through this development much manual labour became obsolete, the number of workers remained constant, resulting in excessive costs which reduced successful competition (Pinheiro 1996: 57).

To solve this problem, the organisation OGMO<sup>8</sup> was set up. It represents both port managers and workers and is responsible for management and control. This is to guarantee the correspondence of labour, expenses and professional efficiency. The OGMO has already considerably reduced the number of port workers, at the same time setting up a fund for persons made redundant, thus stimulating voluntary retirement.

The third step was modernisation through private investments. The legislative passed a law, originally named "Law for the privatisation of ports". After intervention by the trade unions this was altered to "Law for the modernisation of ports". Although the government is determined to implement this law, it is necessary to do this on the basis of careful and thorough analysis of the given situations and to act accordingly (Pinheiro 1996: 60).

## **Processes of social change**

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *Cidade Velha* was the first urban area in Belém to be developed into a central place for public and private life for the Amazonian native population who arrived via the small anchorages. In due course, the concentration of commercial and service industries as well as the possibilities of transport and communication through direct contact with the small river ports had attracted further enterprises. This resulted in a wide choice of formal and informal labour, yet a coexistence of housing and business characterised this area for a long time (Ravena et al. 2003: 52).

Parallel to this, the zone of commerce connected to the international port had been visibly extended in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with warehouses, banks and living quarters for higher income groups, with parks and central places (Praça da República). Beyond that zone, a new district of living accommodation for dock-workers had emerged (Redouto). Further development was brought about by Moroccans, Syrians, Lebanese and Jews who had immigrated into Belém since 1879 (Benchimol 1998; Cruz 1958; Zaidan 2001) and soon organised and dominated trade, mod-

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<sup>8</sup> Orgão Gestor de Mão-de-obra = Institution for the Management and for Manual Workers.

ernising the city according to international standards. This modernisation concentrated on the new zone of commerce in the higher and therefore dry urban areas (Nazaré, Batista Campos and Umarizal), connected by a corridor to the international port, leaving aside the *Cidade Velha* and most of Campina. In extension of this zone, a new cultural centre emerged (Praça da Republica with Teatro da Paz)<sup>9</sup>, which had no direct access to the *Cidade Velha*.



Fig. 2: Teatro da Paz (photo: Rolf Oesselmann)

Meanwhile, the expansion of trade caused families with high or medium incomes to move away from the *Cidade Velha*, above all because of increasing noise and the gradual deterioration of the buildings. Consequently, vacant accommodation was occupied by lower income groups, which led to a devaluation of housing property. The result was an area in the immediate vicinity of the centre which largely consisted of dilapidated buildings which, besides living accommodation, housed bars, cheap hotels, brothels and similar establishments. Even more of the higher income population moved away due to the increasing number of cars and unsatisfactory parking conditions caused by narrow streets and the absence of garages, resulting in a further devaluation of housing property.

9 “Square of the Republic” with “Theatre of Peace”. The theatre was erected during the rubber boom and restored a few years ago. The Praça da Republica is the central square of the city.

However, the centre was still used by higher income groups for work, shopping or services, but as the situation became yet more difficult, they preferred shopping centres and areas specialising in higher quality goods and services. The gradual abandonment of the centre by those consumers precipitated the decay and sub-use of buildings. Demand and supply were restricted to goods and services for low consumption, itinerant and other trade of the informal economy predominated (Ravena et al. 2003: 52).

Parallel to the deterioration of the *Cidade Velha*, the commerce zone connected with the international port (Nazaré, Batista Campos, Umarijal) developed more and more into an area reserved for high income groups and the international elite. This social division was emphasised even more when internal migration from the interior of Amazonia to Belém began on a larger scale in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Internal migration/rural exodus**

Although, from the very beginning, Belém was important for the rural population as a central place, there was no significant migration to that city. However, from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, this changed rapidly. The ruthless exploitation of the resources of the rain forest had worsened the economic situation of the native population. In addition, isolation, poor medical care and hardly any possibilities of education in the vast expanses of Amazonia had created an image of the city as a place where everything seemed possible. The rural exodus applied to migrants from the Amazonian interior and other regions, who mostly arrived by boat via the river ports in the immediate vicinity of the *Cidade Velha* where they had their first urban contacts.

At first, many of them settled there or in Campina, both of which consequently degenerated into areas of low consumption. As the population pressure grew, the *Cidade Velha* became a place of transit to districts further along the periphery (Jurunas, Condor, Guamá). This also resulted in settlements of wooden huts on posts in the *baixadas*, located further away following the riverside.

Based on a research in 2003, Ana Claudia Cardoso compares what she calls “centre”, mainly located in dry areas, and “periphery”, in this case the *baixadas*.<sup>10</sup> She contrasts the respective living conditions on the

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10 The extensive discussion on Centre and Periphery cannot be followed up in the context of this article. In accordance with Ana Claudia Cardoso, these terms will be used here in their geographical and social connotations.

basis of income, accommodation, education facilities, public services and infrastructure. In the “centre” people live on regular incomes, their homes are exclusively used as housing and living space, education facilities are within walking distance. Public services, the supply of electricity and water are satisfactory and roads are asphalted. In contrast to this, people on the “periphery” live on irregular incomes, their houses are used to secure and supplement their earnings.<sup>11</sup> As a rule, schools are at a considerable distance, transport is unsatisfactory and the drop-out rate is high. There are hardly any public services; supplies of water and electricity often break down. As these areas are regularly flooded, there is no drainage (Cardoso 2003: 39).

The district Guamá, directly situated along the river and today the biggest settlement of migrants from the interior, can be taken as an example of living conditions on the “periphery”. The first settlements in the area were hospitals and cemeteries for lepers, that is for groups of the population who were expelled from the actual city. In the course of migration pressure these were gradually closed. According to the census of 2000, the population density in Guamá was the highest in the whole city, numbering 102,000 inhabitants.

At no time was there any political planning for the settlement of this area. Electricity, water, drains and public services for education and medical care were only then installed, in a piece-meal manner, when “the volcano was ready to erupt” (Oesselmann/Ferreira/Garcia 2006). Even today, the supply of education and medical facilities is insufficient.

The average family income lies between one and two “minimum salaries”,<sup>12</sup> and cannot guarantee subsistence. Only half of the “heads of family” can rely on fixed wages (Censo 2000). Mothers and children at an early age have to help with the family income. The proximity of the river is advantageous for drug traffic, as there is no policing of the transport system.

The majority of the immigrants come from the Amazonian interior, where rivers are part of everyday life. In Belém, as a result of social pressure, these people live in wooden huts on posts alongside or even above rivers and canals. They use the water for bathing, washing laundry and often for drinking. The result is a high incidence of illnesses, such as skin-diseases and diarrhoea (Matos 2003: 112).

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11 See in detail Oesselmann/Oesselmann 2006.

12 The “minimum salary” (*salário mínimo*), introduced in 1936, was meant to cover the needs of a family of four persons. Today, with the considerably diminished purchasing power of the “minimum salary”, this claim cannot be upheld.



Fig. 3: *Baixada* (photo: Rolf Oesselmann)

The living conditions in the *baixadas*, as well as the severance of traditional social networks which had been important in the interior, have negative effects particularly on the adolescents who by now have organised themselves in more than 120 youth gangs. Although there is a high potential of violence among them, these adolescents are also, in many ways, victims of the destructive surroundings and life conditions, as a research project carried out in 2003 shows.

Of the twenty members of a youth gang between the ages of 17 and 22 who were interviewed, 75% complained about violence in the family caused, above all, by alcohol, bad housing conditions and stress. They further stated that due to the negative atmosphere in their families they had no chance to concentrate on education. In addition, the schools themselves were just as disastrous as their homes, as they provided no motivation and gave no help. The violence of the social climate not only dominates the families but also life at school and on the streets.

Membership in the youth gang provides the interviewed adolescents with a space where they feel accepted and safe within a larger group. A third of them are still trying to get on through education. But they know quite well that in their situation it will be extremely difficult to finish school at any level. They perceive religion and the street culture Hip-Hop as alternative perspectives for themselves. 25% just want to get away and only 30% believe that they will eventually have an acceptable job (Oesselmann/Ferreira/Garcia 2006).

In spite of these precarious conditions in the settlements along the river and in other regularly flooded areas, there are quite a number of cultural events which have their roots in the inland tradition – such as festivities in honour of saints, carnival groups<sup>13</sup>, theatre and music. Another factor are small religious parishes of Roman Catholic, “traditional Protestant”<sup>14</sup> and Pentecostal Churches which people find in their vicinity. Here immigrants are not only given room for first social contacts but also assistance with problems of all kinds and the possibility of being actively engaged in various networks. This is particularly important as, on first contact, many migrants from the interior experience their new surroundings as unfamiliar and not in accordance with their expectations, in some cases even threatening, and need time to get used to them (Oesselmann 2000: 105f.; 123ff.).

The comparison of life in the “centre” and on the “periphery” demonstrates the differing social conditions in the areas connected to the international port on one hand and to the river on the other.

### **The Cidade Velha today**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, revitalisation of the historical centre was put on the local government’s agenda. A number of strategies for improving the housing situation were put into action, based on the assumption that it would be possible to preserve the area, as a considerable part of the urban population had remained there and had refused intra-urban migration (Ravena et al. 2003: 52). In the end, these efforts more or less failed due to immense costs.

In the course of a research project by Nirvea Ravena and Voyner Ravena Cañete, carried out in 2003, the inhabitants of the *Cidade Velha* were questioned on their living conditions. The findings showed that their present social profile places them in the lower middle class. The family income amounts to between R\$ (reais) 200 and R\$ 3,000 (approximately 80-1,100 €) (Cañete et al. 2003: 28). The authors conclude that on one hand there is no immediate danger of poverty; on the other hand the average income is not sufficient for investing into the domestic infrastructure. This has already led to a slow decay of the historical buildings.

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13 Such as *bloco de fome* (“hunger group” who, in fun, invade houses and eat any food they find) or *Boi Bumba* (figure of huge dancing ox).

14 Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists who often work together on the local level.



Fig. 4: Restored and dilapidated houses in the *Cidade Velha* (photo: Astrid Wonneberger)

There is continuous movement of persons and goods in the area of the river ports. People are not only arriving to stay but going back and forth, bringing local products from the interior, visiting their relatives and friends and taking back articles bought in the district, mainly the Ver-o-Peso<sup>15</sup>. This is seen by the inhabitants of the *Cidade Velha* as advantageous for activities of the informal sector, but also for other trade, as it stimulates business. Connected herewith, however, is the problem of safety. There is a high rate of fighting and assaults, often under the influence of alcohol. Between 50 to 70% of the shopkeepers and other local inhabitants rank safety as “bad” or “very bad” (Ravena et al. 2003b: 32). This is one of the most important reasons why 64% no longer want to stay in the area. Another reason is that the inhabitants feel separated from the rest of the city due to unsatisfactory transport facilities – a number of buses no longer run there – and the lack of cultural events (Cañete et al. 2003: 92).

However, some cultural events still take place in the *Cidade Velha*, above all the *Círio de Nazaré*, the biggest religious procession in Amazonia, where hundreds of thousands of people from the inland meet and celebrate the second Sunday in October.<sup>16</sup> Many arrive days before the

15 Biggest market in the region. The name means literally translated: Watch the weight.

16 An elderly woman told us that, as every year, she had come from the interior by boat, a journey of about ten hours. In the procession she walks for

big event, sleeping with family and friends or in the parks. The inhabitants of Belém prepare special meals<sup>17</sup> which are shared in the neighbourhood. The *Círio* is advertised as a tourist attraction<sup>18</sup>, but as the whole area is literally packed with people singing, praying and following the procession, tourists can only safely watch the proceedings from a distance. The district is sometimes also described as the living quarter of intellectuals and artists. But as it remains the destination of internal migration and is still characterised by social conflicts, it is avoided by upper classes and tourists.

### **Revitalisation of historic sites, Ver-o-Peso and river bank**

Access to the river system as means of communication, transport and survival strategies is still seen as of central cultural value even for the majority of the urban population. In the 1990s, however, it became evident that due to uncontrolled development of industry and trade, the population had practically no access to the river. The banks were completely occupied by port facilities which were mostly no longer used, as the enterprises which had owned them had long since moved away. In the end, the local authorities took up revitalisation of the riverside and gradually developed limited areas into a public promenade.

Even here the social division is evident. Revitalisation efforts for the port areas are initiated by different interests, represented by conflicting political groups. On one hand, the government of the state of Pará, until 2006 chiefly representing the middle and upper classes, aims at international tourism by supporting expensive tourist attractions. On the other hand, the Labour Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores), which governed the city of Belém between 1997 and 2004, tries to improve the Ver-o-Peso

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more than seven hours barefooted on the hot asphalt. She is surrounded by thousands of children dressed in white as angels – these were saved from death during their first years of life. Other people carry wooden models such as houses, books or crutches on their heads as symbols to express their gratitude for help with difficult problems. Not only poor people from the Amazonian interior, but also young, well established ones walk in the procession, clutching the long, thick rope fastened to the carriage of the Madonna (Nossa Senhora de Nazaré).

17 Above all *manioba*, mainly consisting of manioc leaves and meat, which takes a whole week to be prepared properly, and *pato no tucupí*, duck cooked in the traditional manner.

18 See tourist information and various websites in the internet.

as the central market of the native population and the adjacent lower middle class residential area.

There is a lot of reconstruction going on in the market Ver-o-Peso. A number of the old wooden roofed stalls standing very close to each other and forming a kind of dark, rather sinister-looking alleyways have been taken down and replaced by stalls made of bricks and spaced more widely. Tourist attractions and arts and crafts are offered. But the majority of the articles on sale – such as fruits, vegetables and fish, typical dishes from the interior, aromatic herbs and traditional medicine, charms and love potions – is directed at covering the daily local demand and meant for immediate consumption. As the Ver-o-Peso is thus chiefly used in the traditional way by the population, it is only marginally successful as a tourist attraction, particularly as both the market and the adjacent area do not meet the safety standards of tourists and the upper classes.

The fort and the adjoining area are open to tourism as a kind of outdoor museum. But in spite of efforts made by the local authorities, the majority of buildings are becoming increasingly derelict due to lack of funds. Yet many inhabitants are proud to live in this historical centre of Belém. They enjoy showing tourists the few, but very well renovated buildings around the fort and the Ver-o-Peso.

## **Revitalisation of port facilities**

In the course of revitalisation activities in an abandoned area of Belém international port, three extensive old metal storage sheds plus an annex were converted into facilities for culture, recreation and tourism, and as such presented to the public under the name of Estação das Docas<sup>19</sup> in May 2000. This project was given high priority.

For conception and planning, a typology was developed to present the city as a synonym for trade, enterprise and home town.

The image of the Estação das Docas as “home town” is represented by the waterfront, revitalised by using derelict warehouses and port facilities and explicitly including natural elements which point to the existing relation between city and water. Under the heading “window to the river”, the focus lies on the river system as symbolic element of local culture. The government of the state of Pará also aims at presenting the new image of the city as attraction for urban marketing and investments into tourism. The general discourse is reflected in statements of the users

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19 Station of the Docks.

who, on one hand, continually stress characteristics such as splendour, pride, self-respect, modernisation etc. and, on the other, point to possibilities of providing additional employment (Amaral 2003: 24ff.).

With reference to the term “city of trade”, the Estação das Docas clearly defines itself on the basis of the value of the facilities and their concept which is directed at the production of an object of luxury. At the time of competition for the project, costs were estimated at 6.2 million R\$ (approx. 3 million dollars). In the end, after a number of alterations, work was completed at the cost of 24 million R\$, 19 million were contributed by the state and 5 million resulted from private initiatives. The change in the course of construction clearly aimed at extravagance. Initially conceived as “window to the river”, the Estação das Docas gained a different connotation through additional accessories: walls made of special glass, air-conditioning (4 million R\$), escalator and lift (500,000 R\$), revolving stage and terminal for passenger ships (550,000 R\$), etc.

In the estimation of users of the Estação das Docas 51% were of the opinion that the results were well worth the financial efforts, whereas 49% stated that priority should have been given to more urgent matters (Amaral 2003: 26).

The conception “city of enterprise”, the joint operation of public and private means in relation to the Estação das Docas, can be demonstrated by: a) the distribution of the construction costs between state and private initiatives, b) the administration of the Estação das Docas by the organisation Pará 2000. According to Pinheiro (1990: 12), this constitutes a strategy of the government in order to divide the area of the Estação das Docas in accordance with their interests. The reception of this innovation policy (partnership between political institutions and private initiatives) by the users was predominantly positive. Only a relatively small number of interviewees pointed out that the enterprises engaged in the Estação das Docas do not encourage access and use by the general public (Amaral 2003: 27).

The first section contains a theatre with about 400 seats as well as an area of about 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> for exhibitions and small fairs. In the second section various expensive restaurants and small shops are situated and in the third a restaurant owned by a brewery, a number of snack-bars and cafés as well as some shops selling mainly arts and crafts. The annex holds tourist agencies, banks and a terminal for sightseeing-boats. Tours of two to four hours are offered three times a day and more extensive tours on Sundays.

Old cranes painted yellow are integrated into the Estação das Docas, flanking the promenade along the quays. Walking towards the Ver-o-Peso one reaches a small amphitheatre. On Sundays, the general public

can watch performances of theatre or clown groups free of charge. Unfortunately, there are no trees or any other sort of shelter, so that the audiences are either scorched by the sun or soaked when it is raining.

In the meantime it is obvious that the Estação das Docas is practically exclusively reserved to higher income groups and tourists, as most of the population cannot afford the prices charged. The area is conspicuously clean and tidy and watchmen ensure that the users are well-behaved. The recreation possibilities are more or less selective. Yet many people belonging to lower income groups, even some of those living in *baixadas*, demonstrate a certain pride in the achievement and the beauty of the Estação das Docas, although they are generally excluded from using it themselves. Quite a few pointed out that some cultural events are open to the general public and that the Estação das Docas are among the places where they would take strangers to the city when they wanted to show them around.

## Conclusion

The “Gate of Amazonia” as crossroads: The focus is Belém, situated where city and inland meet and overlap. Port and river function as centres of trade, transport, information and communication, taking up the vital interests of the people. The movements around the port area directly or indirectly reflect the processes of development and change and their effects on the city and on the different groups of its population.

Initially the direction of movement was inwards along the river systems towards the rain forest. There followed a long period when interest almost exclusively concentrated on exploiting the riches of the Amazonian interior and exporting them abroad. This was the time when the sea port gained more and more importance as it grew with the increasing demand, particularly during the rubber boom. With the shifting of outside interests, it gradually lost significance. The river traffic was also intensified during the rubber boom. With its decline this also lost some of its importance but increased again when rural exodus started in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The townscape of Belém mirrors the stages in the development of international and river ports and the accompanying economic and social processes: from the first urban area restricted by the river Pirí, to the zone of commerce and residential quarters for higher income groups which had emerged with the intensification of international trade on one hand and the settlement of migrants from the interior in areas which are

regularly flooded along the river Guamá and along several small rivers (*igarapés*) in the city itself on the other.

Revitalising activities in the port and river area aim in two directions. There are some efforts by the local authorities to improve conditions in the historical centre and the adjacent middle class residential area to keep the population from moving away. Another factor is the now possible access to the riverside and its use by the general public. The main interest, however, is the creation of a new image of the city to stimulate tourism and urban marketing. These activities are partly supported by private initiatives, as exemplified by the construction and use of the *Estação das Docas*. Although the lower income groups are mainly excluded from the benefits of such revitalising measurements, many of them take pride in the new achievements.

In spite of these various efforts, the outcome is still a society divided socially and separated geographically in the different districts of the port area.

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