

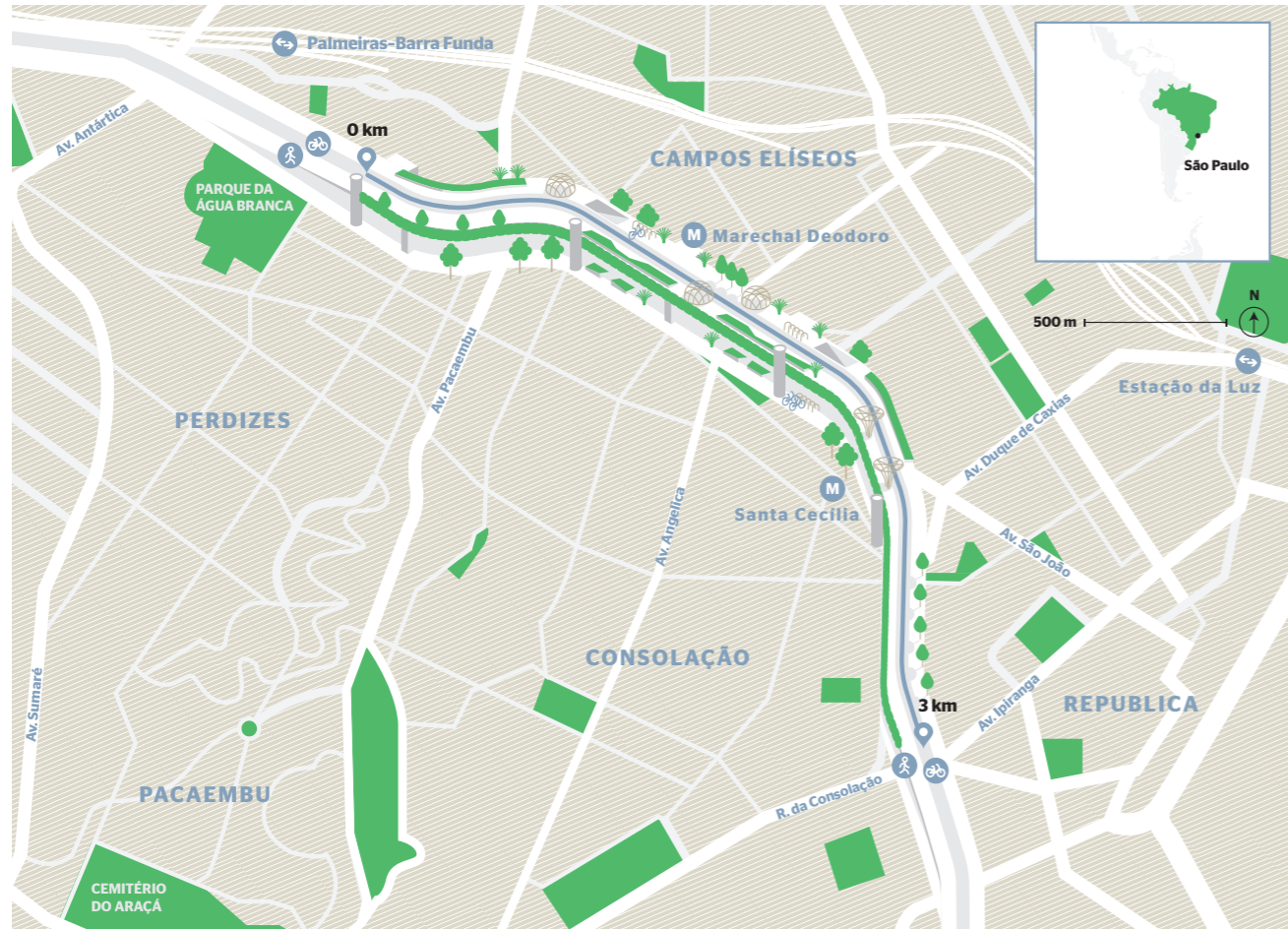
GREENING THE 'BIG WORM'



A central highway in Brazil's largest city is about to get a green makeover. But are the plans all they're cracked up to be and who, really, will benefit? **by Lottie Watters**

Residents in São Paulo make use of the Minhocão's open spaces while it is closed to traffic

LOTTIE WATTERS



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The Minhocão stretches for 3.5km through central São Paulo

It's a lazy Sunday afternoon and the sun is shining down, providing city-dwellers and passers-by with a welcome 30°C heat. The sounds of dogs barking, skateboards rolling and clattering to the ground, runners panting, their footsteps padding, and even the jazz tunes of rehearsing saxophone players fill the open air.

But something is off. This is no ordinary public space – no park nor high street. This is the 3.5km-long express highway that runs through the centre of Latin America's largest city, São Paulo. This is Brazil's 'Minhocão'.

'It's our urban beach,' says Giovanni Nassralla, a local citizen who moved to São Paulo five years ago. As if to underline her point, nearby lies a topless sunbather, spread across the central reservation dividing the four lanes of non-existent traffic.

The Minhocão – which literally translates as 'big worm' – has increasingly been closed to traffic since its construction four decades ago. Today, it closes every weekday evening from 8pm–7am and all weekend. It was built during Brazil's dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s when the car industry here began to boom.

Rumour even has it that the then-mayor of the city, Paulo Maluf, ordered its construction so he could get

from his home straight to City Hall every morning without stopping for traffic lights, explains Victor Benevides, another citizen and Minhocão regular who sits on a blanket in the shadow of a towering high-rise with his dog. 'Though no one knows if that's true,' he adds.

As impressive as the actual highway may have been, the 'worm' was condemned by many city planners as a mammoth failure because of its subsequent societal consequences. Following construction, house prices plummeted and much of the once trendy and buzzing neighbourhood that bustled beneath became a bleak and desolate corridor. Now, the land below the Minhocão is home to throngs of homeless people, while above the structure passes just a few feet away from residents' windows, creating terrible noise and air pollution for those living nearby (and beneath).

But despite the negative environmental, economic and social consequences, the highway has come to have alternative and unintended outcomes for the local population. Some people view it as something magnificent. 'It's like you can sail through the high-rise buildings... it really gives you a beautiful sensation once you're in it,' says Nassralla.

When the road is closed to traffic during the evenings and weekends, it suddenly transforms into an open and public space, one that has become an integral part of the local community. Street vendors sell coconuts and other delights; community events, parties and exhibitions spontaneously emerge; dance groups and musicians come to practice their arts; fitness enthusiasts

use it to exercise; and overall people migrate to the tarmac to laze about at this alternative local hangout.

'I use it for sports, to run, but also for picnics,' said Nassralla. 'I threw a party there, a going away party for my friend. We took a few sound boxes and had a DJ... We have picnics and everybody brings baskets of food. It's kind of like a beach.'

For decades, there have been ongoing discussions about what to do with the Minhocão because of its disruptive impact on local residents. For a long time, discussions centred around tearing it down completely, explains Eliana Barbosa, an architect who used to reside in central São Paulo and conducted research on the Minhocão in 2010. 'Back then, the municipality and the planners and the architects did not really conceive of Minhocão as anything other than a mistake that had to be demolished,' she says.

But this is a mistake that may be about to undergo a dramatic course correction. In February of this year, São Paulo's local governing bodies announced that plans had been officially passed to permanently close the Minhocão to traffic and instead transform it into a public park and green space.

URBAN GREENING

Felipe Monzolini is director of Associação Parque Minhocão (the Minhocão Park Association), an organisation founded in 2013 by a group of architects, professors, activists and artists. 'The Minhocão Park Association helps in the efforts [towards the government's park plan] because it has made the city realise that people no longer depend on cars as much as they did in the past. It's a city for people. The government's decision to turn the Minhocão into a

URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE
São Paulo

park comes from the principle that people already use it as a park,' Monzolini told *Geographical*.

'They [the association] had a hugely important role, especially in raising awareness of the park. They actually put the idea that it could be a park into the minds of the people,' said Nassralla. 'They're always going to the City Hall open assemblies to talk about these things and they're always very active,' she says.

Green spaces can bring a wide range of benefits to local populations – improved air quality, dramatically improved physical and mental health (people use them to exercise and they are proven to reduce anxiety), and they act as carbon sinks, explains Kenneth Gould, co-author of *Green Gentrification: Urban Sustainability and the Struggle for Environmental Justice*.

However, while urban greening does have numerous environmental and health benefits, it can equally cause negative impacts if it is not carefully monitored and implemented, he warns: 'Urban greening has this patina of being a universalising good, even though we know that it can make cities less sustainable by making them more unequal.'

One well-known example is New York City's High Line – a disused railway track that, similar to the plans for the Minhocão, was converted into an elevated public green space. Though hailed by many for its innovative and green use of the vacant industrial space, it has also been heavily criticised by others for gentrifying the area and pushing out local residents who could no longer afford to live there, says Gould.

Such 'green gentrification' is often the case with a new green amenity. Real estate values go up; the amenity is sold as a tourist attraction; restaurateurs and businesses get very excited about it; and it brings a whole new population to the area, Gould explains. '[But] then the population that's already living there is going to be framed as a hazard to the amenity. That is: tourists and wealthy new residents don't want to see homeless people.'

In Barcelona, on the other hand, the creation of the city's elevated park, Jardins de la Rambla de Sants, was very much linked to the residents' needs – rather



'The government's decision to turn the Minhocão into a park comes from the principle that people already use it as a park'

When closed to traffic, the Sao Paulo residents turn the highway into a local community gathering spot



The Jardins de la Rambla de Sants in Barcelona has been open to the public since 2016

PEDESTRIANISED ELEVATED WALKWAYS

Minhocão (São Paulo)	3.5km
High Line (New York)	2.3km
Rambla de Sants (Barcelona)	0.76km



New York's High Line is built on former elevated train tracks

than tourism – and is now used and enjoyed by the local population, according to Isabelle Anguelovski, a research professor at the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies.

The facilities in Barcelona are very different from that of the High Line – there are exercise machines, children's playgrounds and water fountains dispersed along the route. Additionally, its creation was not widely advertised or did not garner much coverage in magazines or media outlets (unlike the High Line), meaning it hasn't become such a tourist attraction. 'The municipality of Barcelona really values green space as a right for everyone, not as a marketing tool for the city,' says Anguelovski.

On the other hand, Barcelona's 'superblocks' attracted a lot of international attention and investment and have consequently spurred gentrification in their respective neighbourhoods far more than the Jardins de la Rambla de Sants did. The superblocks are part of a master plan to largely pedestrianise and reduce car traffic in the city, leading to greener streets, new cafés



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and restaurants, and changes in the demographics and prices in those areas, explains Anguelovski. 'Research on the superblocks found that the removal of traffic pacifies neighbourhoods and therefore contributes to gentrification in its own way.' The fear for many is that closure of the Minhocão to cars could therefore contribute to gentrification in this way, too.

TRAFFIC FLOWS

Traffic is another significant issue that residents raised concerns about. The Minhocão is still a completely functioning and integral road during the week and is queued with cars during rush hour. Considering its size, São Paulo has poor public transportation links – the underground metro system comprises less than 100km of rail lines. In comparison, London has 402km for a similar surface area (1.5km²), but a population two-thirds of the size (eight million to São Paulo's 12.2 million).

In June, a case was even filed to suspend the park plans because of the lack of planning around traffic. 'The abrupt deactivation of a major road would have a major urban impact, as well as the risk of irreversibility, if the municipal park was created in place of the elevated highway,' said judge Salles Rossi who ruled to suspend the plans.

Further concerns by citizens come from the government's track record of not maintaining public infrastructure. There's a history in São Paulo of parks and other projects being constructed under much heralded government initiatives but later forgotten and abandoned. 'Any infrastructure in a city needs maintenance and São Paulo is a city in which maintenance of public equipment and public infrastructure is very deficient,' says Barbosa. 'We even had a viaduct that simply broke in half. It's shameful how the municipality treats the issue of maintenance.'

Formalising the Minhocão as a park could also mean the space becomes over-regulated, its current benefits and uses being lost to the public. 'My biggest concern with the new project is if the plans do not include its current uses, or that it has several rules and is exclusionary,' says Monzolini. 'The New York

High Line that people keep comparing it to has 28 prohibitions and the principle of the Minhocão is that it has no rules because it is a road. So, it's curious and democratic to have such a space.'

Deepening these concerns, Barbosa explains that São Paulo has a right-wing mandate that began with Mayor Doria, 'with a very, very aggressive agenda of privatising public spaces.' If the Minhocão becomes over-regulated, it might become a space where only those who can pay very high fees for events will be able to use it, she fears.

Though lots of Minhocão users are in favour of greening it, many expressed their concerns about who the plans are really for. 'It is key that city planning and government policy is implemented if they are to ensure its greening benefits the right people,' explains Gould. 'You really need public policy that ensures the people who are already there can stay there. Some form of public housing, social housing, rent controls, affordable housing development – all of that has to be built-in before you put in the green space because once that goes in, the market's just going to do its thing.'

With the park plans currently on hold, it has not been reported who the investors will be and who might fund the project. What lies ahead very much depends on that and whether government policy will play a part in shaping the outcomes. The complexities of the Minhocão still being a functional road, along with Brazilian politics, makes this situation more complex and unpredictable than previous cases of elevated parks. Nevertheless, 'you need public policy to intervene because markets left to themselves distribute goods to the rich, and hazards to the poor. And that's just natural,' says Gould. ●