



Research paper

Boca la Caja and informal settlements in Panama

Rodrigo Guardia Dall'Orso^a, Carlos Antonio Gordón Barsallo^b^a University of Panama, Panama^b Universidad Santa María la Antigua (USMA), Panama

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1. History and evolution of Boca la Caja

The history leading up to the occupation of Boca la Caja has been dated to 1932 (Uribe, 1989), originally a settlement of fishermen and their families, made up of modest houses, set along the Bay of Panama, without a regular street pattern. It is currently wedged in between luxury apartment towers built upon the coastline peninsula of Punta Pacífica, and along coastal sectors of the Corregimiento (borough) of San Francisco borough. This neighborhood is the product of a settlement process prior to the land becoming an urban and central part of Panama City, now several of the dwellers have formalized their property ownership, and others continue to arrive. Its environs have become some of the most densely constructed and are among the most valuable locations in the country (CBRE, 2014)¹.

In his book "The fragmented City", Álvaro Uribe (1989) conveys the early story of the neighborhood:

"in 1946, at the end of a 15-year concession by the owners of the Paitilla estate to the National Government for it to build a *malecón* (seaside boulevard) – which was never built-; pressure began in order to evict the dwellers who had occupied that strip

of land since 1932, seizing its ambiguous (public/private) status. The landowners' negotiations with the mayor M. Díaz resulted in an agreement which included the evacuation of the occupied lands, the enabling of national lands on Transisthian road (Peñoncito) to be distributed freely among the intruders, who would be transferred there. That solution did not satisfy all residents, since the community of Peñoncito was 20 km away from the city center, and that, with the quality of transport services at the time, amounted to giving up the city for the country"

The text goes on to narrate that the result was that a new community was founded in public land, and named *Alcalde Díaz*. And the people of Boca la Caja stayed put. Another parcel of public land, near *Paitilla*, was donated in order to provide a place to relocate the Boca la Caja population. The end result was that the empty field, where the boulevard would have been built, was seized by new invaders originating the informal settlement of San Sebastián (Ibid).

Subsequently, in 1949 they received another relocation proposal, first to nearby lands, which would be reassigned to them as a homestead, and in 1950 to a public housing development by a new agency named the Bank of Urbanization and Renovation. Public health reasons were quoted as the argument for displacement. Once again it implied a relocation to 20 km from the city center, on the road to the International Airport at Tocumen, for this reason Uribe's book considers that the proposal was, once again, unsuccessful. The community continued living in their small land plots, which by then averaged 60 sqm, in a neighborhood surrounded and restricted by its neighboring development. (see Fig. 1)

A reference to the community exists in a map by Angel Rubio (1950), included in his seminal book *la ciudad de Panama* locates

E-mail addresses: r@guardiaarquitectura.com (R. Guardia Dall'Orso), carlosg16@gmail.com (C.A. Gordón Barsallo)

URL: <http://panurbis.wordpress.com> (R. Guardia Dall'Orso), <http://metromapas.net> (C.A. Gordón Barsallo)

URLs: <http://panurbis.wordpress.com> (R. Guardia Dall'Orso), <http://metromapas.net> (C.A. Gordón Barsallo)

¹ CBRE Panama market analysis reports are available for download upon request through their website at <http://www.cbre.com.pa>, not on a direct link as they were in earlier consultations during the research for this paper.



Fig. 1. Aerial View of Boca de la Caja and context, Punta Pacifica is to the west, on the left, and the rest of San Francisco borough is north and east. 2014. Source: Photograph by Álvaro Uribe.



Fig. 2. Map source: La Ciudad de Panamá, (Rubio, 1950) showing 'Main reforms to Panama City recommended by Karl Brunner'. (Boca la Caja is shown east of the Paitilla Airport on this map, currently Boca la Caja is west of where the airport used to be, and the informal settlement remaining on the east is called San Sebastián, this map suggests that the two settlements may have been considered as one in the 1940 s.)

'Boca de la Caja' (as it was known at the time) between the older consolidated neighborhoods and new developments in San Francisco. In another of Rubio's maps, the Matasnillo River serves as a divide between the original nucleus, to the west and the 'extraradio' or periphery on the east. Boca de la Caja, lies just to the east, see Fig. 2, Titled Main reforms suggested by Brunner, a reference to the Brunner Report of 1941: Main Recommended Reforms for Panama City. The first City plan document for Panama City was

commissioned by the national government in the early 1940's and Austrian architect Karl Brunner, who also worked in Bogotá and Santiago was in charge. The document is known as the Brunner report and includes a diagnostic and recommendations for the city, some of them are physical planning measures such as road construction or enlargement, but, more importantly the creation of urban planning institutions in the country originates from its policies. A later map issued by the National Geographic Institute of

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