

FINE TUNING SOUTH AMERICAN CITIES

By Deyan Sudjic

Shifting the Urban Age focus to development trends in South America, Deyan Sudjic outlines the contours of urban form that are shaping the economic and political narratives of life in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Bogotá and Lima.

Urban Latin America is one thing. Urban South America is quite another. The former is dominated by Mexico City, by far the largest city of the two entities with Miami as its other putative, though offshore, capital. Perhaps that's why South America is a construct that appeals to Brazil's boosters. Geographical fine-tuning allows São Paulo's Metropolitan Region with 19 million people to make an unblushing claim to be the unchallenged leader, if not of Latin America, then at least of South America, of which it is indisputably the largest city.

Even if São Paulo, for all its economic dynamism, sometimes suspects that it lags behind Mexico City – not just in size, but in its cultural and political clout – it is certainly way ahead of Rio de Janeiro. When Juscelino Kubitchek, Oscar Niemeyer's greatest patron, transferred his government to establish a new kind of country with Brasília at its geographical heart, it was a huge political gesture. One unintended consequence was that it tilted the balance between the country's two largest cities even further towards São Paulo. Rio is now a place in which once languid embassies are hemmed in by angry favelas.

But that sense of confidence and self assertion, marked by the building of Brasília, is a reflection of the rather different status that South American cities have when compared with some of the other regions visited by Urban Age. By comparison with Shanghai, with its strongly centralist government, cities in South America display a much more sophisticated level of 'social entrepreneurship' and civic engagement. There, active pressure groups, religious, ethnic and political groups – in the wealthy districts as well as the highly organised favelas – are not beholden to central government. South

America also has the benefit of civic initiatives that can pay off. Brazil has the example of Curitiba and beyond that, the work done by reforming mayors in Bogotá, a Metropolitan Area that with eight million people is far more relevant in terms of scale.

In the last ten years, Bogotá has built more than 50 new schools, a tangible investment in the quality of life of some of the city's poorest inhabitants. It has done a lot, not just to reduce truancy rates, but also to create a sense of inclusion. The city has initiated a vigorous programme to build new libraries, and an impressive public transport system based on special rapid transit bus lanes, which has succeeded in persuading commuters to leave their cars at home. Bogotá has tackled crime through its visible commitment to social justice, bringing its murder rate down from frightening levels, and raising literacy in its overwhelmingly young population. Bogotá shows its neighbours what can be done, given will, organisation, and rational priorities.

In the network of South American cities, São Paulo certainly eclipses Buenos Aires, which, despite its nineteenth-century classical architecture and its European airs has still to regain the equilibrium of its time in the sun in the 1940s. Argentina's farmers are still angry enough with their government's economic policies to ignite the protest fires that left Buenos Aires trapped in a cloud of choking smoke last winter.

Yet Brazil's huge size, and population in excess of 180 million, gives it a different urban pattern to that of its South American neighbours Argentina, Peru, and Colombia, who each have one overwhelmingly dominant city. One in every three Argentineans and Peruvians live in their capital cities compared to only one in every nine

Brazilians who live in São Paulo. Lima's dominance in Peru has virtually destroyed the national system of cities, a trend that was not even halted by the dismantling of Lima's public transport system in the early 1990s following the government's espousal of the most aggressive neo-liberal reforms in South America. Given the city's unique physical setting, constrained by mountains and the sea, and the absence of growth controls, Lima could develop into a 300 km long linear megacity that encroaches on adjacent low-value desert land; an unsustainable scenario in an environment where water supply and transport accessibility are already at their limits.

São Paulo and Mexico City are very different models of what a city can be. Mexico City's roots go back far into the Pre-Colombian past. São Paulo was a tiny colonial outpost until the beginning of the last century. São Paulo is now the largest city in one of the world's most important new economies, representing the B in that uncomfortably named entity, BRIC, of which the other members are India, China and Russia.

Brazil has the tenth largest market in the world, and an art biennale that has global clout. São Paulo's GDP is in excess of US\$ 10,000 per head, and it has 30,000 millionaires. It has an economy that has powered past that of Mexico, to become bracketed by booming India and Russia. A very large part of Brazil's economic strength can be ascribed to the extraordinary growth of São Paulo. It has exploded in size from just 240,000 people in the early years of the last century. Despite a recent slowdown in its economic prowess, it has been a job-creating machine, absorbing successive waves of migrants: from Europe and Japan, as well as from Brazil's poor North-East. By many measures, it is an unqualified success.

And yet, it is a country and a city that cannot control crime. A year ago Brazil found itself unable to trust the safety of its skies and found itself paralysed by air traffic restrictions. The clichés about São Paulo come thick and fast. It has more private helicopters registered to its citizens than any other city in the world. Its prison system is in a permanent state of insurgency. Its tribes of

street children are brutalised both by crime and the police. It is also the city whose reforming Mayor reclaimed the public realm by banning outdoor advertising, leaving the ghostly traces of billboards stripped of their posters and the charred surfaces revealed by neon signs that have been dismantled. And it is a centre for media that has created the telenovella, spreading a very particular kind of Brazilian culture to audiences around the world.

São Paulo is the classic second city, built on an industrial explosion from almost nothing. And it is that industrial base that makes the Brazilian economy different. It has moved far beyond the natural-resource based boom-and-bust cycles of its neighbours. São Paulo could have been a Manchester, a Shanghai, or a Chicago. But where Rio lost the will to work after it ceded its capital-city status to Brasília, São Paulo is a second city that became a first city. Its infrastructure may be in a ramshackle state. Its crime really is an issue. But like Johannesburg, São Paulo has the vitality and drive that keeps it moving. São Paulo is an authentic metropolis with the racial diversity to prove it with a Japanese and an Arab quarter as well as a Balkan district.

In urban and architectural terms, Brazil is still overshadowed by the remarkable generation that began by creating Rio's great Corbusian monument: the Ministry of Education. It may have lost the remarkable landmark building skills of Oscar Niemeyer. The remarkable architectural talent of Lino Bo Bardi, who arrived from Italy in São Paulo after World

War II has not yet been overtaken by her successors. But in the shape of the Campana brothers São Paulo has developed its visibility as a centre for creative design.

In urban terms the question that faces it is how to address the inequalities, and the fractured nature of its public services. If it does that it could yet find itself becoming a Tokyo, where prosperity and organisation overcame an equally random pattern of dizzyingly rapid growth.

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