

NEW URBAN OPPORTUNITIES

By Raul Juste Lores

In a critique of the status quo's preference for privatised urban development and banal urban forms, Raul Juste Lores advocates a fundamental shift to reclaim the architectural richness of existing infrastructure in São Paulo's centre.

Every Friday afternoon, an insane race begins for millions of *Paulistanos*. Who manages to escape São Paulo first? The city's fugitives know they will face miles of congestion, that it will take up to four hours in a car to make a 150 km-long journey, and that the same punishment awaits them on their return the following Sunday. Yet this breathless race is repeated every weekend and on national holidays, accompanied by traffic stopping over 220 km of the city's streets.

São Paulo's biggest challenge is invisible, but it is both the cause and effect of its most renowned problems: security and traffic. This challenge is the feeling of being in an urban prison and the need to escape it. Residents complain about it daily, and even those who love the city say 'São Paulo is hopeless'. But how can such a young city, which only became important in the second half of the twentieth century, now be seen as an incorrigible old hand?

In this era of global competition, in which cities want to impress investors and tourists and recruit talented nomads and resources, São Paulo does not present an image of modernity. Missing are Shanghai's Maglev, Dubai's new skyline and Tokyo's high-speed trains. Old and insufficient infrastructure is everywhere: 62 km of metro lines compared to 200 km in Mexico City; hour-long connections between the airport and city centre that depend on taxis; and rivers, the city's business cards, which are dead and stinking despite decades of investment to clean them.

Trying to assess where São Paulo went wrong or to identify solutions involves confronting questions, which

range from a lack of mobility to architectural ugliness and residents' feelings of insecurity – even in safe areas. São Paulo needs to analyse itself, and correcting its future growth would be a good starting point.

Over the last 20 years, the Berrini and the Nações Unidas Avenues have shown the greatest economic strength in São Paulo. Yet the area's expansion reveals a series of mistakes, especially in the inhuman, arid and unsustainable form the city is adopting – mistakes that were not due to a lack of money as with other cities in the developing world. The roads that surround the area are only suitable for cars, never for public transport, and they send a clear message: use your car because you cannot rely on access via a metro line or bus.

Real estate speculation has transformed what was once a marginal area inhabited by slums into a series of so-called 'intelligent' high-rise buildings that shut out the city. In some cases, it is difficult to find an entrance other than the car park or the garage. Blocks are over-sized, there are no trees or public spaces, and the ground floors lack bars, restaurants and shops. Even during the day his areas seems uninhabited apart from the permanent traffic congestion surrounding it.

Property developers bought the area cheaply and built-up the last square centimetre. Subsequent lobbying on behalf of the corporations that settled there forced the government to bring in electricity and water supplies, as well as public transport and other public services, leaving the bill to be picked up by the public coffers. São Paulo has repeated this property market cycle now several times: first abandoning the centre for Avenida Paulista in

the 1960s, then Paulista for Brigadeiro Faria Lima Avenue in the 1980s and now with this western area since the 1990s. Rehabilitation and modernisation of the city's architectural heritage is alarmingly rare – existing buildings are neglected while new financial districts are created.

São Paulo is, increasingly, an octopus whose tentacles stretch further and further outwards, making it impossible to provide efficient public transport. The tentacles head in all directions: to the West, where the corporate world, gated communities and high-rise buildings proliferate. While the centre has hundreds of empty areas, abandoned buildings and waste land, the poorest people seek housing on the edge of the city, in the North, East and South, polluting areas that should be environmentally preserved, and contaminating the reservoirs that provide the metropolis' drinking water.

In both the expansion of the suburbs and of financial districts, public powers arrive too late, and thus institutionalise the errors made. And despite São Paulo's construction boom and unprecedented economic growth over the last 30 years, resources are not being directed to correct previous mistakes. Both the Mayor and the state government are required to act as educators and regulators for managed growth, and neither should be afraid to curb certain investments, put up barriers or impose conditions.

The unwelcoming character of the Berrini and Marginal Pinheiros areas can be addressed through demands to the property developers themselves. Buildings over fifteen-storeys high should allow for the creation of a square, a garden or a public space that enhances the street-front experience. Avenues need restaurants, bars, shops, pharmacies and bookshops on the ground floors. These functions animate streetlife throughout the day and night, and provide the social surveillance that São Paulo so desperately needs.

Why is it, then, that Avenida Paulista is more secure day and night than other parts of the city? It is because its design embraces the city and mixed-use. There is Trianon Park, public squares, wide pavements, medium-sized blocks and an eclectic occupation. Next to large residential buildings, such as Paulicéia, Saint Honore, the Nações Unidas and Tres Marias, there are banks,

schools, colleges, hospitals, pharmacies and pubs, newspaper stands and cultural centres such as the Theatre of SESI, Itaú Cultural and MASP.

Conjunto Nacional proves that São Paulo once knew how to build intelligent buildings. On its 33 floors, divided into three blocks, there are offices and apartments with separate entrances. The wide pavements outside the building are made of the same material as the floors inside, thus obliterating the boundaries between public and private. The ground floor hosts cinemas, shops, banks, pharmacies and restaurants. This varied use demonstrates how to inject modernity and new life in a 1950s building without damaging it. The result is that the block of the Conjunto Nacional is the liveliest on Avenida Paulista. Continuous streams of people walk the area, weekdays and weekends. In a city that is prisoner to the paranoia about safety, the generous and welcoming architecture of Conjunto Nacional offers coexistence and safety for thousands of people. Criminals, who prefer dark and abandoned places where they can be left alone, are unwelcome there.

Why have the postmodern buildings of the Marginal Pinheiros and Berrini never managed to repeat the success that the Conjunto Nacional, designed in 1953, still has in 2008? If the current real estate market of São Paulo prefers repetitive and simple solutions, it is the responsibility of the public powers to make demands that can 'build the city'. The same permissiveness exists in the planning for shopping malls despite extensive literature about how malls damage the urban landscape. São Paulo now has nearly 80 malls. In five years, the Daslu, Cidade Jardim and Vila Olímpia malls were built next to older ones such as Iguatemi, Morumbi, D&D and Market Place. The result is a chain of seven malls within 10 km². Just as the Mayor can veto building a hundred-storey tall tower because of its impact on the neighbourhood, or can prevent the demolition of a house built in the 1920s, permission for the construction of new shopping malls should require contractors to think about alternatives.

Any intervention that makes a Paulistano not use a car, but instead walk for a few hours on the street in public space, would already have an educational value. Not only because the streets – like the ones in Manhattan, Buenos

Aires, Paris or Rio de Janeiro – would be full of people, but also because if São Paulo’s elite occupied the streets, there would be greater demand for the care of pavements, traffic signs, and urban furniture.

The new malls could remember the trade streets that marked the Paulistano centre, such as the Barão de Itapetininga. The shopping mall typology that has dominated the past 40 years is not sustainable. Beijing has just inaugurated the Sanlitun Village mall which features 19 low buildings, up to four-storeys high, designed by 16 different architects. The result creates diversity among the buildings, vast pavements and safe alleyways. It is, in effect, an open mall. So why continue to allow projects that do not give anything back to the urban landscape?

In Tokyo, where real estate is more expensive and scarcer than in any neighbourhood of São Paulo, municipal regulations required the multifunctional complex of Tokyo Midtown to set aside 40,000 m² of gardens, with an art gallery in the middle, as public space. Roppongi Hills sponsored the design of banks around the enterprise. In Berrini, builders have already demonstrated that they will not care for the city of their own volition. Regulations could force them to look after the design and maintenance of bus stops, benches and squares – investments that would only enhance their property values.

Palácio das Indústrias, Casa das Retortas, Memorial da América Latina, Casa e Parque Modernistas e Parque Trianon, are all well-known names for Paulistanos, but what do they have in common? The first two are large historic public buildings that have been empty for years, waiting for a new use. The others are freely accessible public spaces that are empty during weekends. Meanwhile, São Paulo has built several theatres in recent years in a region beyond the Marginal Pinheiros and Berrini. For most of the public it takes up to an hour and a half by car to get to a concert or a play. The public authorities have failed to create incentives to use empty and centrally located places that already have infrastructure and public transport.

In a city that has only a handful of buildings more than 150 years old, the heritage of the small town that became the largest metropolis in South America should make

preservation and re-investment in the centre a priority. There are dozens of empty or underused twenty-storey buildings. Yet despite the rhetoric about revitalising the historic centre, the last remaining large companies and law offices have left in the last five years.

Residential projects in the centre do not succeed because either humble people without savings are installed in twenty-storey buildings in which the lifts alone generate service charges expected of middle-class housing; or because the ‘brand’ of the centre still has a negative connotation. Buenos Aires with its Puerto Madero, Mexico City with its historical districts of Condesa and Roma, and Bogotá with Macarena prove that even cities poorer than São Paulo can recover derelict neighbourhoods and transform buildings of past decades into local versions of Soho and Chelsea in New York City or the fashionable Marais district in Paris.

São Paulo’s centre has the highest concentration of museums and cultural facilities in the city, the most metro stops and bus stations, several squares, wide pavements and public buildings, and the police is more present there than in other areas. The centre is also strategically located in the middle of the city.

Why, then, has the revitalisation of the centre not worked? The answer is that the boost given by the public authorities was too timid. Large construction companies could have been required to think about alternatives in the empty centre or even retrofit buildings whose historical charm is an added bonus. Photographers, visual artists, stylists, advertising executives, musicians and designers have never needed an explicit and direct invitation from the authorities to occupy these voids. The city quickly expropriates whole buildings to make room for viaducts, tunnels and other works, but it cannot allow new uses for empty buildings in the centre for professionals in the creative industries who are priced out of overvalued properties in Vila Madalena, Vila Olímpia or Jardins.

The Pinacoteca, the Sala São Paulo and the Museu da Língua Portuguesa, all excellent cultural institutions, suffer from a pre-supposed revitalisation of their neighbourhoods. They remain isolated buildings, where users arrive and leave hastily by car, avoiding any intrusion into the areas beyond their walls. Nobody

thought about creating offices, residential use or studios – subsidised or not – which could have provided a halo effect for the surroundings.

One of the recent examples of São Paulo's vitality can be seen at Roosevelt Square. A pile of concrete since the 1960s, when it was constructed to connect express roads and viaducts, Roosevelt Square was the locus of drug trafficking and prostitution until five years ago. Its devalued residential buildings, however, now have new uses on the ground floor: cinemas and bars sit next to alternative theatre groups in search of cheap space. From the dramaturgic talent to urban opportunity, Roosevelt Square now hosts bars and seven theatres that offer plays throughout the day to pay for their expenses.

The courage of the pioneers and the growing movement in the area has driven away criminals. Roosevelt Square has thus turned into a small village in the city centre. But despite years of discussions and promises, a 'pentagon' of concrete prevents it from becoming a real square. A landscape design project would allow the Roosevelt 'movement' to spread to neighbouring streets, building even more theatres, pizzerias, and bars and bringing even more lively youngsters to the area. Several other areas in the centre could host clusters of creative industries, such as the beautiful working class village next to Casa de Dona Yayá in Bexiga, the empty plot beside the Teatro da Oficina, the large pavements with galleries from the 1950s, the beautiful Largo do Arouche, the Avenida Vieira de Carvalho, and the abandoned Vila Itororó.

The success of the Cidade Limpa (Clean City) project, which focused exclusively on removing billboards and outdoor advertisements from the streets of São Paulo, shows how even very small interventions can have a strong impact on Paulistanos' perception of their city. This was not an expensive project, but it managed to counter the belief that 'São Paulo is hopeless'. That the project stopped working reinforces the idea of timidity of São Paulo's public management. The billboards hid an ugly and grey metropolis that is now visible, and the government's failure to improve the urban landscape only adds to Paulistanos' low self-esteem.

Twenty-two years ago, Barcelona changed its landscape with the 'Barcelona, posa'te Guapa' project, which

combined the withdrawal of outdoor advertising with concessions for temporary billboards. When renovating the façade of a historic building, the sponsors were permitted to put their logo on the protective mesh covering the work. With the ban on billboards, street advertising was thus transformed into something more valuable that gave the local authorities enormous bargaining power when it came to making better use of existing resources.

São Paulo has one of the world's largest collections of architectural modernism: from the 1930s to the 1960s the city was what Shanghai is nowadays. Yet despite several works by Oscar Niemeyer, a cultural or tourist map does not utilise this heritage. Recovering the self-image of the city would start with these architectural landmarks. If it wants to be beautiful, São Paulo needs to dust off, polish and illuminate its past glories as any old European city knows. That the façade of Copan is in poor condition, that the Esther building from 1936 has a decrepit front, and that historically important if not architecturally revolutionary buildings like Martinelli or Sampaio Moreira seem semi-derelect, show the challenges ahead for São Paulo.

São Paulo needs to re-embrace architecture, just as it did in the years of accelerated boom and confidence in the future – in the years when its elite created the MASP, the Biennale and the Museum of Modern Art. This could give its young talent the opportunity to build better than the repetitive and awkward custom of today's real estate market. It could ease the entry of talented foreign architects, who would bring new perspectives, new materials and sensibilities to the city. It could also allow the creation of social housing projects by local architects finding new forms rather than the hundreds of identical 'crates' on the periphery. Lastly, the city could create public-private partnerships and international competitions for the construction of major buildings, with prizes awarded by the public for projects that stimulate beauty and create collective spaces that, rather than frighten, attract the Paulistano.

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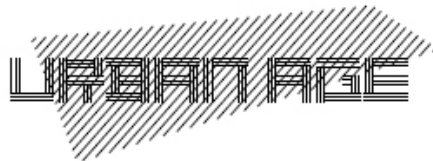
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