

THE STREETS OF SÃO PAULO

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São Paulo Endless

1.

Metropolitan São Paulo has a population of roughly 20 millions inhabitants on a surface of roughly 8000 sqKm (as a comparison, the Netherlands have a population of roughly 16 millions on a surface of roughly 40,000 sqKm). Still, São Paulo is a *city*, not a country. A *city* made of the same amount of objects accumulated in the space of a *country* such as the Netherlands. A city with as many gas stations as an entire country, as many football fields as an entire country, just one after the other, object next to object, next to object, next to object. São Paulo endless.

2.

São Paulo is a *city*. It ends at a certain point, it has a name, it is precisely present in the memory of its inhabitants. Still São Paulo is a city that undermines pre-established (European) categories about the image and the collective memory of the city. Even if São Paulo is a very defined urban ensemble, the product of a precise interpretation of a very particular landscape, the metropolis does not produce a detailed picture in the memory of its own inhabitants. São Paulo is a city no citizen can claim to know entirely. Contrary to the *generic city*, São Paulo does not lack an ambition towards a precise identity, yet this ambition is defied by the sheer scale of the city. The final result of this particular situation is mixed. The memory of the city is double-sided: geographic clarity coexists with local incertitude. São Paulo is a field covered with a repetition of extremely similar objects: shopping malls, gas stations, logistic centres; all of them almost the same, impossible to recognize, impossible to localize. All of them emerging and vanishing into a blurred picture, recursive and imprecise: endless Petrobras gas stations, infinite Ipiranga. Nobody knows if Petrobras A is 25 Km north-west of the centre, along Bandeirantes, or 15 Km south-east, along Imigrantes, he just knows he already saw it a million times. Nobody in São Paulo really possesses a detailed mental map of the city (the most typical discussion is about which road is better to take in order to go from A to B). The image of the city oscillates among precise (geographical) borders; still it is not fixed, not entirely on focus. Objects are connected in to distracted perception of the drivers, repeating with minimal variations like in an industrial *Art of Fugue*.

3.

São Paulo metropolitan identity is complex because it combines a very precise *geographic* condition with an entirely unclear *local* condition. What is precise at the metropolitan, infrastructural scale becomes blurred at the scale of the single place. Objects do not have a fixed location in the collective memory. They float like rafts swinging in the infrastructural stream.

São Paulo is a landscape *without places*, it repeats hill after hill, creek after creek, and so does the city, turnpike after turnpike, favela after favela. The image of the city is at the same time precise and blurred. São Paulo poses the question of what a city is and of what it means to belong to a city. This happens because of pure scale. São Paulo is so big that citizens cannot have anymore a precise relation to the city they live in. Citizens belong to the *city* of São Paulo, they clearly recognize São Paulo as a city, but there is

no clear opinion on the details of that city. São Paulo is a *city* to which it is possible to belong only in multiple terms, with different degrees of precision.

A *city* as São Paulo forces us to re-define the notion of citizenship. São Paulo is a *city*, a shared landscape that defines a way of living, a collective product, but a collective product with uncertain geography. Parallel to the impossibility for the citizens to know in detail the organization of the city there is the impossibility to know the history of the transformations of the city. No urban history can help the architects operating in São Paulo. No way to get precise knowledge of all the transformations that produced the city, no way to follow the expansion, to recognize legal and illegal. Only the geographic background can help us, and a detailed knowledge of the particular sites. Nothing in between. The city as we traditionally know vanishes into landscape and reappears only into details. Local fragments float in the metropolitan landscape.

4.
São Paulo is a very specific interpretation of a very specific landscape.

The violent beauty of contemporary São Paulo is not so entirely artificial as we might suspect at first glance. The little hills and the small creeks of the *planalto* define a geography that has not disappeared into the city: only valleys became highways and hills became micro-cities (either favelas or rich neighbourhoods or infinite nuances in between the two, does not really matter here). The process developed at incredibly fast pace. Even if founded in 1532, São Paulo still had a population lower than 300,000 in 1900. The city we know nowadays grew in just hundred years. Rivers became highways all of a sudden. In this radical (if not brutal) process of transformation and reinterpretation, the city of São Paulo turned rivers into canals, creeks into highways, hills into settlements and changed the direction of flows of the rivers, producing a city made of islands floating in a whirl of infrastructure. The formalization of the primeval geography produced an abstract reproduction of the original.

Like the seven hills surviving in the massive agglomeration of palaces of imperial Rome, the valley and the hills of the *planalto* survive in the highways, in the clusters of towers and in the favelas of contemporary São Paulo. Like in Rome, the original landscape has been re-defined; re-designed, re-built, creating a new geography that formalizes the original one. If we consider the relative weakness of the original landscape and the potential violence of technology applied to transform it (the industrial technology of the Fordist era, the survival (in a mutated form) of the original landscape is quite surprising. São Paulo is not imperial Rome: machines, dynamite and electric power allowed in São Paulo transformations that were unthinkable with the limited means of enslaved work-force. São Paulo is also not Rio de Janeiro: the primeval landscape of the Tietê and Pinheiros valley was not particularly impressive; on the contrary, the *planalto* here is quite gentle. It could have disappeared quite easily. Seen from this point of view, São Paulo (for all its hydrologic disaster) has been surprisingly subtle in its re-elaboration of the original geography. Confrontation with nature has been ruthless (and sometimes catastrophic) but not disrespectful.

5.
São Paulo is a city for the car. It is the centre of South American car manufacturing. All infrastructures, starting from the (questionable but very precise) strategy envisioned by Francisco Prestes Maia (engineer and later mayor of São Paulo) in the 30s, has been built for the car.

Still São Paulo, with more than 8 millions cars in the metropolitan region, has only around 0,4 cars per person compared to 0,6 in Los Angeles. The majority of São Paulo inhabitants do not own a car. São Paulo is not only a city for the car. Paulistas do *walk* in the city. This situation produces a hybrid urban condition. São Paulo is not precisely L. A. São Paulo is a more complex urban formation: splinters of traditional (pedestrian) city fabric (the formalized public spaces of the centre but also the medieval liveliness of the favelas) survive together with gigantic malls, super-highways and colossal industrial and logistic settlements.

Inside of this multi-layered environment, the divide produced by traffic infrastructure feels even stronger. Pedestrian paths through the city are sometimes very inefficient and unnecessarily complicated or dangerous. The micro-cities have only a relation to the large-scale infrastructure, but they are entirely isolated from one another. Pedestrian connections have been clearly overlooked in the construction of the traffic infrastructure. With an overall extension of metropolitan highways of ca. 370 km, in São Paulo there are only 150 pedestrian bridges (including car + pedestrian bridges) crossing over the roads, that makes a pedestrian connection every 2.5 Km, way too little to produce a city accessible to all its inhabitants.

This evident need of the city (combined with the need for public facilities particularly in the informal areas) provides an opportunity to imagine a new type of pedestrian bridges, combining the possibility to cross the highway with public program and panoramic views.

6.
São Paulo is made of many smaller settlements. It is important to underline that many of these settlements are called “city” (just to list a few: Vila Churruca, Vila Formosa, Vila Galvão, Vila Guilherme, Vila Leopoldina, Vila Maria, Vila Mariana, Vila Prudente, Cidade Ademar, Cidade Líder, Cidade de Tiradentes, Higenópolis, Paraisópolis). São Paulo is a gigantic collection of micro-cities that do not reach the scale that would be sufficient to claim some sort of independence. The micro-cities belong to São Paulo: their citizens are citizens of São Paulo, not of Vila Prudente or Higenópolis. The historical formation of such micro-cities, whether originally favelas or industrial settlements or large-scale real estate speculations does not really matter. The micro-city usually corresponds to the atomic geographic unit, a little hill. The city uses these different micro-cities as experimental fields: some can flourish, and some can languish. In time, the equilibrium among the different micro-cities can change: micro-city A can suddenly blossom while micro-city B barely survives. Anyhow, does not matter the success of the different cases, all the components of São Paulo operate in the same way. The rich micro-cities of Liberdade and Higenópolis have the same scale of the poor Vila Galvão or of the very poor Paraisópolis, the same relation to geography and to infrastructure. The metropolitan grammar of São Paulo is one.

The divide among micro-cities (created by geography and reinforced by infrastructure) is an opportunity to imagine a possible connection, a system of bridges and viaducts creating a public domain in the form of an artificial valley. Tunnels and bridges are already part of the grammar of the (richest part of) the city.

For instance, Anhangabaú (was) is a small creek ending into Tamanduateí. The confluence of the two rivers defined the location of the original Jesuit settlement. Later the valley of Anhangabaú was transformed into a road and then a highway and then covered with a system of bridges and viaducts and finally enclosed in a tunnel. Over time, this process of transformation of the original valley created the amazing public space now connecting Sé and República. Given that the geography of Cabuçu de Cima is the same of Anhangabaú, what worked in the case of Anhangabaú can work also for Cabuçu de Cima. Bridges can be the starting point in the production a new type of public space for metropolitan São Paulo.

7. São Paulo now has the energy, the money and the desire to rework its organization and its image for the future. The municipality is committed to involve the informal settlements in this transformation. So, what to do? Beyond bringing sanitation and regular electricity, what to do for favelas and for São Paulo?

Favelas can improve only as *components of the city*; they can solve their problems only inside of a strategy that considers them crucial for the general improvement of the metropolitan city. Favelas can progress only if seen as opportunities for the city as a totality. As such, favelas are crucial places for the construction of São Paulo and for the construction of a collective memory that could be shared by all its inhabitants, without distinctions of income, race, and gender. Favelas should participate in the definition of the image of the city: there should be reasons to go to Paraisópolis also for people who do not live there. Paraisópolis should belong to the shared image of São Paulo as well as Higienópolis. A project for metropolitan São Paulo has to start from this multiple and unified idea of the city. All the pieces of the city should contribute to its precise *and* blurred identity.

The constitutive coincidence of materiality and abstraction of the city defines a starting point to imagine its future transformations (in the words of Aldo Rossi: *accepting all of the elements that we encounter in a given territory as being homogeneous without supposing that there is a divide separating each element from the next*). This *positive indifference* of the city allows to re-consider the case of São Paulo and to recognize all micro-cities of São Paulo as equal. Favelas need to be treated like the rest of the city. In fact, favelas share the grammar of the rest of the city. Favelas are just poorer and younger, but they are not *inherently exceptional, ontologically alien, and materially other*. Again, what worked in the case of Anhangabaú can work also for Cabuçu de Cima. São Paulo needs to learn, first of all, from São Paulo.

Inside of this strategy, it is possible to imagine interventions operating locally inside of the city fabric and globally on the collective memory.

A first set of interventions can be made of pedestrian bridges crossing highways, connecting neighbourhoods and hosting additional public program. The bridges work both locally and at the metropolitan scale, strongly appearing both in the local context and in the metropolitan network, presenting the different settlements on the wider metropolitan stage. Their strategic locations and their inherent visibility identify the bridges as *objects to be remembered (even if vaguely)*, monuments.

8. The new bridges operate in the city in two manners. At the local scale they relate to the neighbouring urban tissue, adding connections (and eventually program), at the larger scale, they are big elements appearing while driving along the highways. Bridges introduce a new element in the geography of the city, creating a sequence of objects to be perceived in succession. The recurring figures of the bridges frame the experience of the drivers. Bridges operate as large-scale billboards, immediately monumentalizing the public programs associated with them. The bridges are decorated with schemes associated with the colours of the city and of the state of São Paulo.

The bridges follow the style of the collective memory of São Paulo; they are remembered *vaguely*, contributing to the larger image of the city in a subtle, somehow unpredictable way. The bridges merge into the city, without defining a separate identity for the areas they belong to: monuments of the city at large, not of the local neighbourhoods. The bridges (and the sequence of the bridges) immediately belong to São Paulo, without building a separate, conflictual identity for the favelas.

Bridges combine precision at the local scale with a specific sensibility for the overall geography of the city. They precisely react to a context while unconsciously acting on collective memory. The bridges appear and disappear and reappear in the everyday experience and in the memory of the drivers, producing a polyphonic sequence of images, real and unreal, seen and remembered. Bridges frame the endless drive through the roads of São Paulo, all the same, and all different. Where is actually bridge 47, the one with the black and white stripes? And where is bridge 24, the one with the zig-zag pattern and the palm trees on top?

