Sao Paulo, the city of dreams, the city of smell, the city of what

Wolfgang Theis, Universität für künstlerische und industrielle Gestaltung Linz
wolfgang.theis@ufg.ac.at

0. Abstract

Sao Paulo, also known as the New York of Latin America, is a conglomerate of concrete, asphalt, traffic, people, spiced with a little bit of green in between. But Sao Paulo is more than that, it can't be reduced down to socio-demographic or statistical facts. It is the cultural centre of Brazil, home of the leading universities of Brazil, the economic hub of South America. The metropolitan region gives shelter to over 20 million inhabitants. This essay is a try to give a view on Sao Paulo through the eyes of an European.

1. Raped nature or raped humans? What is a city?

What is a city? According to the characterisation of Max Weber, a city is a city, when it contains a fortress, a market place, a court house, and has a collective character as well as as political self autonomy (cf. Weber, 1999). This is a very categorised typology of a medieval city, because nowadays a fortress would be nonfunctional, and not every city has a fortress (anymore). Is such a city not a city anymore, even if it has a number of inhabitants that exceeds several millions? Such a city is definitely considered a city. The problem of what is defined as a city, remains unsolved. The Chinese government defines a city as an urban settlement with more than 200 000 non-agricultural inhabitants (PRC, 2009, Hudong, 2009, ChinaCCM, 2009), while in Brazil there is no differenciation between a town and a city. As long as it is a seat of a municipality, it is considered as a city, even if it is an extremely small semi-rural settlement somewhere in the wilderness with just a few houses standing around a community well. But the question from the phenomenological side

still remains: what is a city? Vilem Flusser answers that question the following way: „Cities are raped nature and that's why they can be inhabitated. They are overcome nature and I live in them as a winner. That's the origin of the cities of Brazil" (Flusser I, 1994). He takes that view from a point of colonisation, as most of today's cities in Brazil origin from various colonial settlements, such as Sao Paulo, which developed out of a school run by Jesuits to today's mega city. Colonial settlements usually had to fight against nature, which always tried to get back what the human beings took from it. In Europe, the inhabitants can be more tolerant towards nature already, because „wolves, midgets and unclean water rarely enter the streets, windows or pipes of European cities" (Flusser I, 1994). Coming to think about that statement, that cities are raped nature then the question arises: where would humans have to live, if it's not in cities? In caves nature would rape the humans and it is definitely a huge progress in the history of the human race that they have been able to gather together, giving themselves rules and regulations (also known as ,laws') for living together and found settlements to be able to defend themselves against straying hordes of nomads in search of gold, slaves and glory as well as against the threats of nature, like beasts, floods or other events. Therefore nature had to be raped, in the sense of Flusser, and the battle between mind and nature (cf. Flusser I, 1994) is an ever ongoing.

This battle has influenced the characteristics of a city and the way of thinking of its inhabitants. As this battle has been fought in most of Europe many centuries earlier than in Brazil, Europeans seem to have a different attitude towards nature now. They allow parts of it to reenter their settlements (Flusser I, 1994), while Brazilians always seem to try to keep nature out of their cities and urban settlements, especially in Sao Paulo, where small green spots are caged in by fences and the parks are places of sport and recreation. Nobody ever said, that a park should not be a site for recreation, but in Sao Paulo these recreational spots are used up to such an extend, that this makes someone wonder if these locations are ever going to be able to recover from recreation. The rivers in Sao Paulo are either heavily polluted, not to say poisoned, or they are hidden, that it is nearly or completely impossible to see them. Where is the River Anhangabau? It has transformed itself from a river of water into a river of cars and busses. Where is the famous Ipiranga, which gave name to a

whole neighbourhood and on which banks Brazil declared its independence from Portugal? It has been channeled and if a non-knowing person is not told that this channel that divides the street is the famous Ipiranga, it would not be recognized as such, but then on the other side, the waters of rivers from remote places are stored in bowls at the perron in the Ipiranga Museum. Paulistas seem to have a very ambivalent relation with nature and its resources. Nature is raped.

2. The city of dreams

What is the character of a city? Why does a city attract so many people? How come that inhabitants of megacities remain there, despite all the difficulties that come along with living there? These are some essential questions that also characterize Sao Paulo. Sao Paulo, with its nearly 20 million inhabitants (including the surrounding cities of the so called ABC zone) can't be really called a small place. With a size that covers 2209km² as a city or 8051km² (EMPLASA, 2009) as the metropolian area, the city region is nearly as big as the Austrian federal state of Vorarlberg (2601km²) and the metropolitan region is bigger than the state of Salzburg (7154km²) (Statistik Austria, 2009). The countries of Lebanon or Jamaica are a little bit larger than the metropolitan area of Sao Paulo, just to give an idea to someone who is not familiar with Austrian geography.

In a place of such dimensions, an economic and cultural life developes and this attracts people from all over the country, even from all over the world. Once a city has grown over a certain amount of inhabitants and covered space, the narrowing strings and boundries of small town mentalities start to dissolve and the „quantity of life transforms into quality and character" (cf. Simmel, 1903). A city forms a character and becomes a place with features that are typical for it and can't be found anywhere else. This trait can also be what is called diversity. Sao Paulo is such a place, it holds everything someone can wish for, theatres, cinemas, an opera house, a world wide known cultural event – the biennal, concert halls and much more. The culinary scene of offers everything, you can eat nearly everything the world cuisine offers in Sao Paulo without having to leave the city, you can have fallafel in the

morning, leberkäse with sauerkraut for lunch and enjoy sushi in the evening, that is if you like fish. On the next day, you go out and have an English breakfast with bacon, scrambled eggs, ham, cheese and bread in the morning, eat fejoada for lunch (yes, it is possible to eat Brazilian food in Sao Paulo) and get some burger in the evening. The one who eats in Sao Paulo never gets bored of its food, as there is always something new to discover. That is, if the one who wants to enjoy it has enough money to buy that food. One of Brazil's wealth distribution problems is not that there would not be enough food available to feed everybody, it is the problem of not having enough money to be able to afford this food. A city of dreams can also become a city of shattered dreams, that does not let its inhabitants leave anymore, an all incorporating moloch, a fatal attraction. How can someone want to leave an object that is attractive and scary at the same time? It is like sitting in a dream, where between the images of a tune that can be heared a balloon passes by, showing the way to go and then vanishes into nowhere. The followers of the dream follow that balloon and end up in a city, which can make their dreams come true as it offers the possibilities for that, but you also have to pay a price, sometimes quite a high price. Fear is one of the prices you pay. On every street corner potential muggers can be found, at night cars pass red lights in order to avoid to be stopped and robbed, gang wars go on in the poorer areas of the city, the historic places in the centre are occupied by homeless of every age group at night, the police acts at their own will and not according to the laws most of the time, the value of a human life is low, because there are so many people in this place anyway, so what difference does one person more or less make? High costs of living is another price you pay for living in the city of dreams. Because of the attractivity of the city for various reasons, the number of inhabitants has risen over the years. The factors for the influx of people include: economic troubles in other parts of the country, environmental problems such as a years lasting drought in the already arid parts of Brazil, family reasons and so on. The construction of affordable housing complexes could not keep pace with the constant intake of new inhabitants and a constant shortage of residental space let the price of apartments rise into unaffordable heights. New high rise buildings offering luxury apartments stand on nearly every street corner in the middle and upper class quarters of the city, the Paulista intellectuals move Westwards, leaving the Eastern zones to the poorer working and

lower middle classes. That development reminds of a 18th century London, where the rich lived in the West End and had their fumes blown by the wind towards the East End, the area of the working class, home of Jack the Ripper. Despite of the lower housing prices in the centre, hardly anyone wants to live there anymore, because, as previously mentioned, fear is also a price you pay, especially in the centre at nighttime.

So what is it, that makes Sao Paulo a city of dreams? It is definitely not the great traffic concept, as busses are small, overcrowded, get stuck in bus lanes that have been taken over by cars during rush hour, the traffic signs seem to have gone missing in a rush of call on duty in other places, cars are directed massively though narrow streets and the street lighting at night is just a helpless try to create shadows on the walls. Underground stations seem to be erected in residental areas arbitrarily, without giving any proper bus connection to the surrounding areas (with a few exceptions in the bus terminals like Tiete or Barra Funda). It is definitely not the low crime rate, eventhough the rate of homicides has dropped tremendously, but the rate of crimes like drug abuse, theft, robbery or burglary is still high enough. It is definitely not the wonderful maintainance of historic buildings in areas like Bela Vista or Caninde by their private owners, which gives the impression that houses, which are 80 years old or even older, are intentionally run down for becoming an object of speculation rather than being well maintained and kept in shape as a memorial of the past for future generations. The question if the maintainance of those houses is affordable is excluded here. So what is it really, that makes Sao Paulo a city of dreams? After having gone through of what it is not, only one answer to that question is possible: it is the spirit of its people, the entrepreneurial spirit of the Paulistas. The one who has experienced this spirit will find it fasctinating and will be infected by it. There is no chance to escape from it, the entrepreneurial spirit creeps inside one's blood and will remain there. The quest for success, economic wealth and adventure is virulent. It was the people of Sao Paulo who helped Brazil to expand its borders in the times of the Bandeirantes expeditions, it was the dilligence of the people of Sao Paulo that attracted foreign companies to build their factories and South American headquarters in Sao Paulo and not in the by then capital Rio de Janeiro after World War II and it is the eagerness for success of the people of Sao

Paulo that makes it Brazil's economic and cultural centre and a place where dreams can come true, a city of dreams.

3. The city of smell

Cities live, cities produce, cities go through various phases of life, which come in cycles. Cities perish into dust and diesel and start to rise again at another occasion, like a phoenix rises from its own ashes (cf. Flusser II, 1994). Sao Paulo rises and perishes, rises and perishes and rises again. A lot of these cycles happen parallel to the mayor who governs the city at the specific time. The human is not used to see cultural phenomena coming in cycles (cf. Flusser II, 1994), but when investigating into this phenomenon of rise and downfall, it is obvious that there is a connection to the political side as well.

Every couple of years the inhabitants of the city are called to duty to give their votes to one of the candidates for mayorship and their cortege of representatives for city councelours. Is it just the view of an European outsider or is it a common phenomenon throughout Brazil, that especially people with Arab or Japanese heritage in their family go into politics? The Sao Paulo mayors Maluf and Kassab and numerous city councelours' photos printed on colourful advertisements of every size during election campaigns indicate that, but the neutral observer might be mislead by the presence of intensified campaigning in central and richer areas of Sao Paulo. In poorer quarters of the city, the campaigns don't seem to be as intensive, eventhough a huge amount of potential voters lives there. So why are the campaigns less intensive there than they are in the richer areas? Maybe it is the apathy, that is exercised so careful by many voters. In the spirit of agony and helplessness towards the everpresent corruption in politics and economy, the mass of voters just give their vote because they are obliged to give it to someone. Politics is supposed to be a procedure, in which groups make decisions. In Sao Paulo it seems to be more of a field of following individual interests, „someone goes into politics to acquire wealth" (Flusser III, 1994). Here the Mathew Effect (cf. Merton, 1968) seems to be omnipresent as well. As it is written in the Gospel of St. Matthew „Unto everyone

that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away that which he hath" (Bibleserver, 2009) it is not really surprising that people from a highly educated and rather wealthy or even aristocratic background go into politics in Sao Paulo. Power and money attract power and money.

During every election campaign, each candidate promises to do something about the pollution of the city. Sao Paulo stinks. It has its unique smell, a mixture of diesel combustion, industry fumes, open fire exhausts, restaurant smell, human waste and excrementes. An approximate number of 5 million cars exist in the city, producing traffic jams reaching a length of 293 kilometers around holidays (just as a comparison, the distance between the central places of Salzburg and Vienna is 295 kilometers and stretches through four out of nine federal states of Austria) and it seems to be a miracle, that trees with green leaves can can still be seen in the city. The sophisticated European, who approaches Sao Paulo coming from Rio de Janeiro by aircraft, happens to ask „what is that?" when the aeroplane stings through the grey and brown haze that lies over the city and he sees the spread out Sao Paulo sea of houses underneath for the first time (cf. Flusser II, 1994). It is some kind of natural reaction to the unexpected phenomenon named Sao Paulo, a sea of concrete, steel, glass, asphalt and other materials that can be acquired by construction companies. Thousands of cars keep the city alive, day and night. Wherever someone goes and no matter the time of the day or night, the traffic will be there already. So what was first? The city or the traffic? Without the traffic no settlement would have been founded and humans would still migrate aimless across the continents, causing more traffic again. So this question can be answered easily: traffic came first, only then settlements and cities followed.

4. The city of what

Living in a city means, being woken up at 5 o'clock in the morning by the trash lorry, having to know the bus or underground timetables by heart in order to get somewhere on time, paying a high price for all the amenities that a city can offer.

Being aware of a city means that someone has got to close the eyes at the right time, or to open them at the right one. It's not always easy to follow the unwritten laws that a city has, especially for new arrivals. Each city has a specific rhythm of life and so does Sao Paulo. The cultural diversity of this city is often seen as its biggest plus, ethical minorities – and everyone seems to be a part of one – are able to live their own characteristic way of life (cf. Medosch I, 1997, Medosch II, 1999). This can be seen as a darwinistic process as well as a, from a less pessimistic point of view, laboratory in order to perform a production of a new kind of human (cf. Flusser IV, 1994). This shall not be seen in a eugenic way, this shall be seen more in a way that without the stern regulations and codes on the old continent, in the new world it is possible to generate a society, which is more free and has less courtly behaviour codes (cf. Flusser V, 2007). This laboratory can generate autocatalytic processes (Medosch II, 1999), which might not be possible in Europe. The terms of „nationality" and „citizenship" have different connotations in Europe than they seem to have in Brazil. In Europe the perception of „nationality" is always combined with the term of „ethnicity". So someone can change the citizenship to the one of the host country after having fulfilled specific legal terms of residency in a country, but that person will always be associated with another nationality, in some countries even generations afterwards still. While in Brazil the terms of „nationality" and „citizenship" seem to have the same connotation and only the regional origin determines the differenciation. Japanese, Arab, Chinese, Jewish, Italian, Portuguese and many more immigrants in Sao Paulo show a clear picture of that.

The city of Sao Paulo does not follow any structural law at all. A plan for city development doesn't seem to exist, the only law that the city follows is the law of constant change. Buildings are constructed only to be torn down a few years later. They don't seem to be well maintained and it appears that Paulistas don't consider conservation and proper maintainance of buildings necessary, because it is possible to tear them down and build new ones on the same site. The acre of land for the construction does not run away and probably raises in value after a building is torn down in order to build a new one. If urban city planning exists for Sao Paulo, then it well hidden. The city appears to be more „a biotechnological, self-organizing organism than a structure planned by humans" (Medosch II, 1999).

Sao Paulo is the city of what, because it can't be put in any kind of urban category. Is it a city of no-return, is it a lost city, is it a city of dreams, is it a city of smell? What is it? It is impossible to describe a phenomenon like Sao Paulo. A city like that has to be experienced, the pulse of life that goes through this city and the vibrations that it sends out. Sao Paulo is an undefinable entity.

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