São Paulo:
Urban Process and Globalization

LUIZ RECAMÁN
Universidade Paulista

The Brazilian social processes have, at least in the last two centuries, affirmed and denied the social processes throughout the world. Local circumstances allowed for the ideas, which later capitalism created in continental Europe, to be formalized in our super-late industrial development. Our late arrival in this capitalistic production process has its obvious disadvantages, but some small advantages. One of which is the fact that the connection between social ideas – liberalism, for example – and social relations could be more flexible, and this connection not be taken as seriously as in the centers where they had been generated. To be brief, our modernization in the last century occurred not despite the backwardness in our social relations, but at their expense.

Upon building, reforming and planning our cities according to the teachings of the most advanced European thought from the first half of the recently concluded last century, we realize a tragedy. Not because we did not know how to do it correctly, but because in the act of constructing, we put in gear the destructive forces of rationality present in the origin of each sketch, statement or beautiful utopia from architectonic modernity. This, without the counterpart of the conflict of social forces that has attenuated these processes in other countries. To provoke a bit, I attempt to extend this thought (which announces and denounces the social stalemates of capitalism in the "metropolis" through what is experienced in its "colonies") to urban issues in the panorama of globalization, this post-utopian and post-ideological universalization, which quickly presented its accomplishments.

The urban transformations that accompany socioeconomic alterations of capitalism in its global phase can be attributed to two factors which especially impacted "old" economic and territorial order: a network of "global" cities as decision centers of the large transnational corporations, and the new information technologies that make geographical and spatial conditions relative. Of course, we cannot speak of one without the other. The post-Ford "soft" production of goods, which disaggregates the traditional factory in the global search of low costs and environmental facilities, is only possible thanks to the transmission of online data. This has altered, it would seem, the physical base over which industrial capitalism developed: the geopolitical hierarchy between the metropolis and the Nation State, and the factory, concentrator of work and merchandise. At the same time in which spatial concentration is renounced, contemporary capitalism accelerates the concentration of capital, as it never has before, which today is reproduced without first necessarily becoming merchandise. The dematerialized capital, monetary values or services, is transformed in an incessant flow of information, constantly in acceleration. The "global city" is where these flows intersect with one another most intensely, where the network is densest. The new international hierarchy between cities is based on the intensity of the knot in the fabric that composes the virtual network enveloping the world. More than consummated fact, we should maintain these theories as one version, which have, however, caused concrete alterations in various "merchandise cities", put up for sale in the generalization of the market, which now passes through all the spheres of our life.[1]

The alterations in urban landscapes have raised new theories, which indicate that we are facing "post-urban" phenomena. Concepts such as territory, place, etc., are substituted for "deterritorialization", non-place, etc. Modifications, which are quite evident in the territorialized cities – palimpsests of places and secular meanings – have also been the target of interest in some large cities on the periphery of the system, because there, due to the violence of the transformation process, they can be better contrasted, and therefore defined. Few cases should be as surprising as that of São Paulo, which, more than a radical and deformed example, I believe better clarifies the impasses and the sense of the ultra-modernization.

In approximately one hundred years, the population grew 270 times, 27,000%, reaching 10,000,000 inhabitants. The urbanized area grew 400 times, reaching 1,509 km². These data refer

to the city of São Paulo. The number of inhabitants, the urbanized area, the economic and social indicators: the growth in the metropolitan region of São Paulo can be seen, during the last century, as an "explosion." With unreachable boundaries – due to regulation or urban infrastructure, until recently the city faced a centrifugal movement of land occupation. The "peripherization" of poverty – the absolute majority – and of wealth know no physical, political-administrative, or legal limits. Today, to territorially define the urban phenomenon of São Paulo, and its urbanized continuum, you can reach radiuses of 100 km from its center, crossing over various municipalities. And this corresponds to its area of direct influence, in other words, basic urban functions: sleeping, working, and circulating of the poor and the wealthy.

This tentacular image should not be a still one since what characterizes it is the movement. The movement within the territory is not the result of the spontaneous or programmed occupation, but is a *process*, its own *raison d'être*. Therefore, it does not achieve equilibrium, not even with the brutal deceleration of the city's growth. From the historic average of more than 5% annual population growth until the 1970's, today the city grows less than 0.5% per year.[2] Recently combined to this explosive movement is an implosive movement, whether it is an attempt to recuperate degraded urban areas to increase their value, or internal movements by the population and investments, or de-industrialization.

Since there is a stock of large empty spaces within the urban area used for investment, the production of new spaces can continue intensely, without continued expansion of the borders. This movement leaves the remains in constant deterioration, until the areas become degraded and the cycle begins again. In 1976, the empty urban lots reached 43% of the total space, the majority of which were private properties, in other words, stock of value. Meanwhile, *favelas* experienced a rate of growth, which increased in recent years at a pace much greater than the municipal population growth. Between 1994 and 1998, the number of families living in *favelas* grew by 47% in the city of São Paulo. Without significant growth in the city's population, the 1990's therefore experienced an immense migration of its inhabitants within its territorial boundaries. In 1993, 39% of the *favela* residents declared that they gave up paying rent to own a shack. Additional data also helps characterize this "implosion." The Map of Social Exclusion shows a curious inversion: an emptying of the consolidated and legal areas of the city toward the outskirts.[3]

The city's dynamic continues to respond to these changes in a self-consuming process of construction and destruction. We will now try to make sense of this movement. What are the forces that put this voracious process in gear, which have, on both the empty land and the constructed areas, only a base over which they are realized incessantly? In understanding this perhaps we can comprehend the morphology of the land occupation, the components of landscape, in other words, the spatiality and its urban forms. As we have seen, these categories are not the determinants in the constitution of the city as social and spatial facts. It is for this reason that they appear to be so inadequate to us when we think and project in this peculiar urban agglomerate.

Two vectors compose the force that moves the territorial occupation in the city of São Paulo: economic gain and segregation. And the link between the two accelerates both, which gives the case of São Paulo a dynamic that may be unique in the international panorama. The difference between São Paulo and other large cities, is the purity and intensity of these vectors. Normally counterbalanced with other components, these vectors can be found in this specific case unobstructed and mutually nourishing each other. This applied unidirectional potential produces great efficiency for the gross logic that generated it (post-colonial capitalistic accumulation). And, in crossing over the last century, this surprises those who believe that the chaos, in the urban form of São Paulo, is an impediment toward its economic growth.

The city was always an intersection of paths, from the first settlement of the Jesuits to the strategic conquest of the plateau, having crossed over the steep coastal mountain range. An obligatory stop for those who circulated throughout the unknown territory, São Paulo was a modest trading post for three and a half centuries. With the shift in coffee production in the middle of the nineteenth century from Rio de Janeiro to the Paraíba Valley and further inland São Paulo state, São Paulo city was transformed into a meeting point for the railroads that drained coffee down the mountain range toward the Port of Santos, and from there to the world. At this moment the matrix which would guide all of the following decades was born. The middle of the nineteenth century marked the transition between the colonial slave economy and the initiation of the country into the liberal order of markets. The new oligarchic coffee elite conciliated what seemed to be impossible for an enlightened spirit: the colonial roots of slave work and the modernity of economic liberalism. We can even say that modern Brazil is formed in this apparent paradox, in its economic structures as well as in its ideological representations. The second half of that century was to see the appearance of capital from coffee production, with the stately houses belonging to wealthy producers, the railroads, and sophisticated commerce. But this growth marked the need to rearrange the distribution of territory, which until then had been under the control of the master class, since the slaves could not own property. The restrictions within the slave trade – which culminated with the late end to slavery in 1888 – created new actors, which destroyed the previous proprietary relationships: the free slaves and the European immigrants who came to work in coffee farming. In 1893, foreigners represented 55% of the city's population. Even before the end of slavery, a new law created a new territorial pact, which pushed away the poor non-

slaves (free blacks and immigrant workers) from access to property. If before owning property was connected to occupying it and the land's productivity, beginning in 1850 with the Land Law, land became a good bought and sold through public register. Merchandized and valued, land did not change hands, and became a new way to immobilize capital.

The counterpart to this operation of this expulsion and segregation was simultaneously put into action. With the new urban land statute (which created merchandise to be valued) the elite residences began to define a standard. It was different from the colonial houses built to the front border limit of the lot, which characterized the main streets in the center of the city. New developments appeared in accordance with legislation, which foresaw the demarcation of large lots, distancing construction from the lot limits, and building freestanding houses. The streets of these new developments were lined with trees and benefited from newly available forms of infrastructure, supplied by the public authority. In this manner, the legal standard for land occupation was designed, as well as the reference for the whole city, even if the majority of the population remained outside such standard. But the land structure also required a direction that would concentrate real estate investments so that improvements would be mutually beneficial, a sort of hyper-regulated zone making non-residential use or collective housing impossible. Such occupation strategy guaranteed high and permanent returns for its investors. With the end of slavery, assets were now secure in real estate, and to invest in land was the best way to guarantee that the capital that came from high coffee profits would continually increase in value.

The spatial transformations in the last quarter of the 19th century acquired a very precise sense. Sanitation condemned the slum tenement houses, and promoted a freestanding single family house as the model for housing. It was not just a question of preventing epidemics, which were frequent, but to impose a new moral conduct to eradicate the promiscuous customs of the blacks, who were accustomed to collective cohabitation in the slave quarters, and therefore inapt to modern life in the cities. These theories, and others similarly based on the inadequacy of the blacks for free work, justified the investment by the federal government in accelerating immigration to substitute slave labor. Inadequate for free work, inadequate for modern life, pushed away from land ownership, the millions of free blacks in this period had no place in Brazilian social order. Their way of living, collectively and in the center of the city, was increasingly closed in on. Their forms of subsistence, as small street vendors, were prohibited. For them and for the future workers, the periphery was reserved for occupation, without regulation; it was tolerated, but subject to eviction should the investors become interested. And this area also was a target for speculation, with developments at times much more profitable than building lots for the elite. As they were not projected in accordance with legislation, the narrow streets and dense city blocks permitted super-profitability for the "extra-legal" investors.

The street, free and unimpeded for circulation, a freestanding house with a front yard in tree lined residential developments, and the city center for business and commerce, were characteristics of the new city idealized by European standards. These characteristics translated the changes in the public sphere, the privatization of personal relations to inside the house, with its enlarged social areas, and the use of the street for increasingly faster circulation of people and vehicles. What is peculiar is that this urban order was put side by side with the majority of the urban space, which had been occupied in a disorderly way. The land does not belong to poor people, but they may occupy it without rules (guaranteeing its availability for future profitable occupation). It is a curious situation in which the law is converted into an exception and infractions into rules (¾ of the city). Condescending with this illegality created a relationship of political guardianship, which characterizes Brazilian politics until today. We continue to be understanding masters with the rule-breaking slave, which intercepts the modern work contract and transforms it into a familiar-personal relationship commanded by the strict father, at an industrial scale.

The polarity between the norm and the extra-legal maintains economic gain and segregation as the matrix for land occupation. The value of land is such not because of its physical characteristics or proximity to the center of the city, but due to its position in the value equation. Lots that are in the more valued areas permit huge profits to the elite's investments. Devalued lots in the suburban areas – the extra-legal areas – permit even higher profits. Maintaining both of these sides of the equation increased the profits of the investor. This polarity is what determines spatiality; it utilizes the territory not only as a physical base, but as a means for production of urban merchandise.

The Avenues Plan of 1930 foresaw the construction of wide concentric avenues and radial arteries. It also did not define a limit to the city. This plan, overlapping the consecrated vectors of valuation, accelerated, at the speed of the automobile, investments as well as the original social cleavage of the city. In 1914, the São Paulo's population density was 110 inhabitants per hectare; in 1930 the density reduced to 47 inhabitants per hectare. From that point on the image of the city would be one of dense corridors in pursuit of the valued areas, intermixed with low-density neighborhoods and empty urban lots. This is the model in existence until today, despite the fact that we are speaking of avenues that are 30 kilometers from the center of the city, and whose average speed of circulation is similar to that of the horses in the colonial village.

In this distant urban desert, one of the largest urban operations of late is taking place, without the existence of any prior project attempting to organize this speculative explosion. Dozens of

new buildings, sophisticated and equipped with high security, burst on to the scene each year in old residential neighborhoods without any urban infrastructure or services. While this speculation bubble lasts, groups of small, lower-middle class houses will be bought up all at once to make way for new super-valued developments in these areas. Immense *favelas*, which were tolerated on empty urban spaces near the Marginal Pinheiros Avenue, were quickly evacuated in order to construct an avenue, which widened the area of real estate interest. The public authority is "towed" along behind the speculation, making these enterprises viable with the construction of avenues, channeling of rivers, and, especially, in removing *favelas* in the areas of interest. The resulting urban space is desolating. Reaching the administrative land limit of the urban area, this frontier leaves behind remains in deterioration, which today is the primary characteristic of the city. Recently, the public authority and some bankers began a movement to attempt to reverse the deterioration occurring in the center of the city. Projects such as culture centers, museums, and restoration of historic buildings attempt to attract the interest of investors in the area. Without dealing with the problem of social housing in the center of the city (we relive the sanitation policies from the last century) and the armies of the homeless who concentrate there, these initiatives are able to only beautify some areas. They become sophisticated islands for the use by the elite, amid the disorder of precarious occupation by the poor population. The survival of these spaces is guaranteed by a security plan which, in connection with parking facilities, permits safe access to those who cross the city in their cars to appreciate their own history.

The mechanism for land occupation in São Paulo described above did not need to change in facing the situation of social deterioration that the country experienced – in fact many countries experienced. The increase in population and violence requires only that protection of the exclusive areas, in the past guaranteed by the public authority and by the law, now be more efficiently protected. The construction of the walls and electrical fences only updates the segregation, responding with operational efficiency to the exponentially growing rates of crime and poverty.

São Paulo helps us to better understand the secular mechanisms of bourgeois city construction because they operate more directly there, without restrictions that could oppose this logic and delay the more drastic changes to the territory, nowadays seen all over. Nevertheless, the mechanisms, specific to the constitution of capitalism on the colonial fringe, should not be isolated, nor seen as a disfigurement of super-late industrial modernization. We can define them as a free movement over the territory of the forces of production, whose resulting space does not only passively formalize this process, but constitutes these mechanisms as active means for production and capitalistic accumulation. Upon producing land as merchandise and reproducing the conditions for its production, all of its

determinations are materialized, in this case, without the inertia of more consolidated cities and societies. In São Paulo, space or urban landscape that could restrict or oppose the aggressiveness of the land speculation was never established. The abstract character of the real estate transactions determined the non-organicity of the form of territorial occupation, from its origin. Beyond abstract it was paradoxical, since the colonial village transformed itself into a city following the logic of the liberal oligarchy that controlled it (the apparently uncomfortable marriage of the liberal and the slave master). *Laissez-faire* extended to the territory contrasts even with the other large cities in Brazil, which, for various reasons including economic apathy, still maintain a symbiosis between colonial space and the interventions of the State forcing modernization.

Disaggregation in urban form, however, is confused with the initial moments of capitalism still within its commercial phase. Beginning with the economic transformations at the end of the middle age, European territory was linked by orbital points, interconnected by routes of intense commerce, which connected centers of financial, judicial, linguistic, artistic and political regulation. The previous territorial juxtaposition was made hierarchical in "Europe of Capitals". This geopolitical reordering expanded the borders of the old world toward the orient, culminating with the conquest of America. This orbital system renounced the old territorial demarcations that separated the city and country dominions, which had been partially related universes until then. The new gravitation, which the territorial capital imposed, permitted a breaking away from the old organization of space, or from the spatiality of the medieval social relations – barriers, gates, walls, etc. – making a growing and continuous flow of merchandise possible in its mercantile circulation (regional, peninsular, continental and between "worlds"). It was a new form of space control as an indispensable factor for the "de-spatialization" of social relations, the territorial equivalent to the abstraction of the productive relations in operation.[5]

The global city today is not a new condition of the contemporary city, but an acceleration, at the speed of the computer chip, of the fragmentary tendencies from the occidental city of the last centuries. The large cities are being transformed, beginning with the radical possibilities of the World Wide Web. And in this regard, São Paulo also presents a radical alternative, since what we have seen recently is the profusion of advertising images – many related to the Internet and virtual euphoria – which spread themselves throughout the city covering buildings, parks, *favelas* and museums. It is not only a new international advertising architecture, which you see everywhere, but a virtual city for consumption. The city destroys itself and reconstructs itself for the fifth time in a century. In crossing the city by car on high-speed roadways, we can follow, in cinematographic sequences, lit up announcements that evolve in frames by second, in an aesthetic *avant-garde* operation turned upside down. This distracted look toward the

horizon, intercepted by advertising signs, prevents our accidentally looking down and noticing the rather material and precarious paraphernalia which support these signs. Carelessly bolted onto the roofs and the broken and littered sidewalks, these billboards sometimes serve to provide shade to new urban players to whom the materiality of public space is directed: the street population. The restricted access to this virtual city does not need legislation or security to be exclusive: the filter that achieves the largest social division of modern history comes from its own technological nature. While some doubted that São Paulo could become one of the global cities of the southern hemisphere because of its precarious urban situation – totally contradicting the prescription of the new prophets of globalization – what you experienced in the city was accelerated technological modernization, providing the southwest axis with special phone lines, fiber-optics, cellular phones, etc. While the theorists prescribed the restoration of the historic city center, public transport, social housing and improvement in crime rates and violence, the real city knew quite well where to invest. After all, its urban process is composed by flows, de-territorialization, fragmentation, segregation and valuation, since the beginning.

Urban thought and the real processes of building cities have approached and distanced themselves for the last two centuries. Discipline itself is born as a perplexity facing an urban agglomeration that does not permit planning: it is born with the end of form and the city unit. The distance between thought and city, between what is and what should be, is the interregnum of utopia and ideology. The modern *tour de force* sought to make the two coincide and the result revealed the original commitments to machine rationality. Today we are re-editing procedures from the past, without the certainty of

rationality or belief in the myths. Urban strategies are sold to cities like re-engineering is sold to companies. As history shows us how difficult it is to alter urban and social realities, we are giving ourselves instruments to intervene in its simulacrum. Contemporary urbanism abandons the critic and utopia, and associates itself with new methods of post-industrial management: beautify city centers, choose culture as a differential, stimulate diversity and competition. Without space for ideology, it incorporates the discourse and the objectives – somewhat softened – of the world economy and the multilateral organisms, using the ideological safe conduct from the critical experiences of the last decades ("difference" versus homogeneity, "place" versus the plan, and history versus *tabula-rasa*). The sense of São Paulo's urban transformations can object as much to the idea of a new development cycle of the city as well as to the discourse of new urbanism, which does for the dominating classes what they themselves could do alone.

NOTES

[1] I refer to large contemporary urban projects, strategies which attempt to attract capital, which become more or less frequent starting from the success of Barcelona. See the recent work of Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells. For a critical point of view see: Arantes et alli, *A Cidade do Pensamento Unico: Desmanchando Consensos* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000).

[2] Data from PMSP *www.prodam.gov.br*

[3] Sposati, Aldaiza (coord), *Mapa da Exclusão Social* (São Paulo: PUC, 2000).

[4] Data for the following discussion were originally taken from: Rolnik, Raquel, *A Cidade e a Lei: Legislação, Política Urbana e Territórios na cidade de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Studio Nobel, 1997).

[5] Recaman, Luiz. "Unidade e Fragmento: a Dissolução da Forma Arquitetônica na Cidade Burguesa", *Leopoldianum 70* (1999): 13-23.