

# Informal Urbanization of Latin America: The Post-Global Proto-Cities

Latin America is considered the most urbanized and unequal region in the world; 80 per cent of its population lives in cities, and more than 111 million people live in squatter settlements; this informal urbanization is marginalized from the history and theoretical discourses. Favelas, barrios populares, and villas miseria represent the proto-urbanization of the future cities.

**DIANA MALDONADO**

Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León

## **“MODERN” CITIES**

All countries that constitute Latin America are developing countries; approximately 124 million of Latin American urban inhabitants live in poverty. This number is manifested in the city-space, through “informal” fabric. The south-continent has always been characterized by the concentration of population in a few cities. However, nowadays the megacities of the subcontinent (Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, among others) concentrate only 14 per cent of the urban population; while more than a half of urban inhabitants live in “secondary metropolis”. In Latin America there are approximately 55 cities with a population that ranges from 1 to 5 million of inhabitants. Hence, one may ask: Is this urban structure “modern”?

According to Marshall Berman, the modern life is a combination of different processes like scientific and technological advances; the industrialized production; urban growth; mass communication systems; the state and its bureaucracy; social movements; and the capitalist market. These processes are called “modernization”; the group of values and ideas that result of modernization are called “modernism”. In the twentieth century, the open-modern visions were substituted for their opposite; the fundamental polarizations have place in this period, and remained until the present time (center vs periphery; formal vs informal). Simultaneously, another kind of modernism was developed (postmodernism?), it was based in the idea of break boundaries between all human activities; although, the lack of criticism was its weakness. As Marx said, in the modern life “everything is pregnant of its contrary” and “all that is solid melts into air”; thus, modernity is an open-ended process.<sup>1</sup>

Cities are the figure of modernity; they represent an allegory of the crisis; although one can build from there “new urban horizons”, since the idea of modernity is based on changing and evolving. The urban modern movements



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were developed in a multiplicity of regional forms which were exported through colonization process, strengthening the modernizing world system. The first crisis of European modernity shaped the principal cities of the time; from this spatial organization it was established the symbiotic relation between urban fabric and industry. In 1960 a new urban crisis, in almost every city in the world, has occurred, pointing the end of the economic “boom” of the industrial countries. The national and regional centers for control of international economy and responsible for the urban order, collapsed. The crisis of capitalism resulted in a crisis of modernity which provoke to the generation of new forms of modernization as a tool to redirect the perspective and create practical and theoretical tools that would give meaning to the new world revealed<sup>2</sup>.

The urban crisis has exposed weaknesses and deficiencies of the theories and urban practices used till this time (Chicago School). From the neo-Marxist School of Urban Political Economy it was created a new urban paradigm (the modern Fordist-Keynesian metropolis) as an analysis tool for the comprehension of the post-modern cities. The efforts became re-rooted in the proposals of Engels and the main concern about the reproduction of poverty and inequality. Urban planning remained as the key piece of spatial re-structuration, despite the fact that it was seen as a tool at the service of the capital and the state. The urban organization described by the Chicago School did not disappear, however, its centralized structure was blurred, and the city-space was fragmented; after that, a process of recentralization (market and state) occurred, the peripheral fabric increased<sup>3</sup>.

Since the latest twentieth century, studies on the subject of urban, point out some global transformations that force us to rethink both the nature of human settlements and the proposals from urban planning professionals. The first transformation is the conversion of territory in urban area; the second transformation is the rapid growth of informal urban development (economy, employment, housing, lifestyle); and the third one is the emergence of cities with more than 10 million dwellers (modern cities).

Figure 1: Informal fabric. Monterrey, Mexico. Photo by Javier Gómez.

The “informal sector” as a concept was born in early 1970; at that time two groups were identified: a public sector and the service providers, which is integrated by small shopkeepers, street vendors, porters, craftsmen, messengers, barbers, and staff service, who take over the streets, sidewalks and alleys of developing countries. At the end of the 1970s, the informal sector was described as “urban poor”, people living in slums or squatter settlements. The first distinction between formal and informal sectors is based on the different types of employment; unprotected urban labor markets are called “informal,” in opposition to the formal sector protected market.<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1)

The megacity is considered the urban form of the global era, it is characterized by traits of hypermodernity, but also by a sharp inequality, the megacity is connected to the outside through global networks and locally disconnected. The post metropolis represents two different cities in one (dual city), it is the urban expression of the differentiation process of the work divided into two dynamic sectors involved in the economy: informal and formal economy, and work based on the informal economy.<sup>5</sup> The coordinate reference system has completely changed; the contemporary society is characterized by the existence of the space of places and the space of flows, the timeless time and the hope of the glacial time, the electronic home, and the virtual reality as an everyday matter. The “modern” power acquires new geographies.

#### **GLOBAL VILLAGE: THE CULTURAL STRUGGLE**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines globalization as

“The action, process, or fact of making global; the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale, widely considered to be at the expense of national identity.”

According to Nezar AlSayyad, the idea of the world as a global village of freedom has been substituted “...by the very real threats posed by globally unbounded and unrestrained “other.” At the beginning of the twenty first century, globalization seems to present different characteristics beyond its original conception. AlSayyad identifies these characteristics as a “post-global” paradigm that replaces the multiculturalism ideal by a dominant culture; the new global engagement is represented by the imperial hegemony and the religious fundamentalism.<sup>6</sup>

For Gordon Mathews, there are two definitions of culture which prevail at the beginning of the current century, but neither definition is enough by itself. From an anthropological perspective, culture is defined as “the way of life of a people”; although, in a world based on flows of people, information, and capital, it is hard to think any “culture” belonging to certain people located in a specific place, completely divergent from another culture of people living in other places. One of the principal reasons of this is because today, culture is shaping by two opposite forces: state and market. Mathews proposes the combination of this traditional idea of culture with a more present-day definition: “culture as the information and identities available from the global cultural supermarket”; even if the choosing is not a free process at all<sup>7</sup>.

Manuel Castells understands culture as “... the set of values and beliefs that inform, guide, and motivate people’s behavior.” On the network society culture, Castells recognizes that since the contemporary society is global, there

is multiplicity of cultures, living together and struggling with historical and geographical aspects from different areas of the world. The challenge is to find ways of communication which solve the distance between each other, "...without them there is no society, just dominant networks and resisting communes." Castells look at the future proposing a hypothesis:

"... Global culture is a culture of communication for the sake of communication. It is an open-ended network of cultural meanings that can not only coexist, but also interact and modify each other on the basis of this exchange... A process of material construction of the culture of the network society is under way...It is the process by which conscious social actors of multiple origins bring their resources and beliefs to others, expecting in return to receive the same, and even more: the sharing of a diverse world, thus ending the ancestral fear of the other."<sup>8</sup>



In the current times, the question of identity seems to be in the center of the discussions. The connection between identity and cultural products (including cities) is clear. However, in a world that is local and global at the same time, with a society based in networks, "moving" in the space of flows more than in the space of places, a critical review of this relation, and the concepts related with it, looks to be necessary. Among the current circumstances, the construction of the identity could be a complex process since it derives from a multiple and contradictory sources. Thus, it seems that identity is always about the recognition of the difference, and from there, to establish the sameness.<sup>9</sup> People could have plural identities even with contradictory positions. The construction of identity uses information from history, geography, collective memory, biology, institutions, individual fantasies, power and religion. Societies process all these materials and rearranged in its meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects implemented in their social structure and their temporal spatial framework.<sup>10</sup> The development of the constituting elements of identity such as language, history, ethnic groups, religion, among others,<sup>11</sup> is related with territories. National identities are the result of this association. (Figure 2) According to Gordon Mathews, "imagined communities" or nations are created

Figure 2: Global built environment and identity. Tokyo, Japan. Photo by Diana Maldonado.

by governments using state institutions and multimedia to shape the thinking of people. With the establishment of a national identity, it is possible to talk about cultural identity; however, it is formed by considering, not only national identity, but also ethnic and cultural market sources.<sup>12</sup>

Talking about open-cities in a “post global” era seems contradictory; however, if we consider the “informal” urbanization or resisting communes as “border spaces”, perhaps it could be possible the re-modernization of the contemporary Latin American metropolis.



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### PROTO-CITIES AS BORDER SPACES

Human societies live in groups. From the beginning, these groups showed a sharp gender division of roles and tasks, the social organization was manifested into city-space. The men-hunters used to work to maintain and defend the territory, the women use to gather food and take care of the needs of everyday life in the temporary home camps; the shelters (tents or huts) were placed following a circle shape, as a settlement. During sedentary era, temporary characteristics of home camps and shelters were changed to another kind of materials and building techniques to allow them to last longer. Recent research has shown that the camps of hunters and gatherers were developing a complex structure: moreover to the base camp, there were also other smaller mobile camps, hunting stations, caves used as a temporary shelters, and workshops to make tools. The sedentary processes were vital to the consolidation of the agrarian society, the villages grew to significantly size; at this point it can be said about proto-urbanization; the urban division of labor, large-scale irrigation, and writing, all of these characteristics of “civilization” are still in its first stage<sup>13</sup>.

To the list of influences related to the origin of the cities (economic opportunities, monarchical institutions and bureaucracy, technology, production of food, religion, large-scale communities, military strategies, solidarity, among others), some researchers add the stimulus of the urban agglomeration (synekism), which occurs in all human settlements; most conservative scholars believe that the result of this agglomeration was the virtual creation of the city and the state, while the critical sector of researchers define synekism as a fundamental force that was presented throughout the sequence of human societal development, outlined in the proto-cities and continuing in the present time. Considering this urban force as the key piece for the comprehension of the urban phenomenon, Edward Soja proposes to change the conventional sequence of the social

Figure 3: Flexible Surfaces. Monterrey, Mexico.  
Photo by Penélope Montes.

organization and place the city before the Agricultural Revolution, causing not only the development agriculture itself, but also the emergence of farming villages, rural life, shepherds and farmers, the writing, class formation, and the state. On these basis, it is possible to continue the human development process: proto-urban ---urban/rural -- urban -- neo proto-urban --- future cities --- ----- ---; hence, the peripheral fabric (border settlements), should be considered the new proto-cities of the twenty-first century.

SimCity (Simulation City) is a computer game released in USA, at the end of the 1980 decade; in the game, the players create virtual cities from their own urban imaginary. The “new cities” are built on virgin lands. Proto-cities (border settlements) represent the “real” simcities. Considering virtuality in the analysis of the border settlements it will allow to imagine “multiple ways of engaging with the real by questioning, breaking, and negotiating realities.”<sup>14</sup>

Future cities will “born” from the peripheral settlements (favelas, barrios populares, and villas miseria). As “borders” they are informal-formal spaces of contradictions and ambiguities; they are contingent zones where the happening allows new ways of bonding. Peripheral settlements are the homeland of the “outsiders”, they use “double-cross” glasses to see the world; here, multiple and shifting are the key cultural elements; the possibility of future is always present, and it is a multi-layer future.

The word “periphery” derives from the Latin peripheria that means “circumference,” or “each of the three regions of air” that surrounded the earth. The Oxford English Dictionary also defines it as “A line that forms the boundary of something... the circumference of a circle or other closed curvilinear figure; a perimeter” and “The external boundary or surface of a space or object; something forming such a boundary; a border, an edge...”

In the city-state, the governmental power expresses itself through the administration based on writing; monumental buildings represent the professionalization of economic, ideological and military domination; moreover, institutional structures grow stronger in order to maintain stability and to ensure cultural continuity; in addition to these changes, the patriarchy, as a social order, is becoming defined, so the built environment and the activities of everyday life that took place inside and outside of the city, they have become more centralized<sup>15</sup>.

For the spatial professionals, reinterpret the idea of border is urgent; the contemporary cities are territories made up of a few centers, surrounded by mutable peripheries. For instance, Latin America is the most urbanized region in the world, concentrating 80 per cent of its population in cities. The territorial organization of cities, states and nations is in a concentric way. As long as the cities were growing, peripheries were appearing; borders are constantly delocalized; in the twenty-first century, the periphery is located at the center of the city as well as on its margins. Regardless the geographical position of the peripheral settlements, their everyday life is based on border culture. In many Latin American cities, the first boundary area was blurred by new urban development (infrastructure, housing, commercial areas, communication bases and channels, financial citadels, governmental buildings, among others); the first peripheries constitute the mobile-borders.

As it is mentioned before, multiple and shifting are the key cultural components of border spaces; thus, hybridity and hyper-hybridity are the condition

for the construction of peripheral identities. Related with people, the word hybrid derives from the Latin “ibrida” that means “... of human parents of different races, half-breed.” It is defined as “anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of different or incongruous elements...a compound formed of elements belonging to different languages.” In the dictionary it is explained that when the prefix “hyper” is used with nouns, it means “going across, transposed” and also “...beyond, overshooting, excess, extravagance.” Thus, hyper-hybridity implies something such as an exaggerated hybridity, or beyond it.

The role of the everyday life is crucial for the comprehension of borders, it develops spatial patterns of historical ideas, social actions, and routine, “People extend themselves –mentally and physically- out into space much as a spider extends its limbs in the form of a web. We become as much as part of these extensions, as they are of us”<sup>16</sup>. “Border” inhabitants choose fleeting and transient elements of spatiality, it means, everyday life activities and flexible-surfaces, to express themselves.

Despite the fact that urban-architectural narratives have been privileging spatial experiences, the obsession for physical materiality (real/real), purity (conventional tradition), and objective functionality (formal planning), although remains; the professional proposals are based on material evidence that can be measured and controlled. Thus, peripheral settlements are residual areas that need to be rescued from chaos, ugliness, and inefficiency. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, this logic doesn’t make any sense. The development of tools that allowed the comprehension of the “modern” proto-cities, it seems necessary in order to participate in the construction of new geo-political institutions.

#### **“MAPPING” THE “NEW” URBAN ORDER**

In “Del rigor de la ciencia”, Jorge Luis Borges<sup>17</sup>, talked about a map with the size of the empire (formal planned city), a map that became useless and was abandoned outside the realm; over its ruins the border inhabitants re-built daily its own maps. The word map came from the Latin forma, and it is defined as the drawing or representation total/partial of the earth surface; the maps show the distribution of physical and geographical aspects. The informal urbanization is border-territory; it constitutes the peripheral fabric of the modern Latin American cities; as the result of the emergency planning, its documentation is uncommon; their maps are satellite photographs.

Since the Age of Discovery, maps have been documented the historical sequence of the things in the space, the resulted information is consider as real/real facts; however with the transformation of the concepts of time and space, the relationship between build environment and producers changed radically. Nowadays the materiality of the urban-architectural phenomenon is no longer enough to express the society that produces it. Contemporary society moves more in the space of flows than in the space of places, and the virtual reality is a part of everyday life. The idea of map needs to be examined. In recent years urban scholars have considered that a better way of understanding the cities and urban experience is through films; from there, the “citizens” build images of the world, that is to say cognitive maps. Songs, videos and literature (history included) also help to build the social image of the metropolis.

Informal settlements have never been part of the formal city maps; its registration has multiple layers that are dynamic, flexible and simultaneous (graphical maps plus cognitive maps plus multimedia plus \_\_\_\_\_). It seems that the best



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way to document them is capturing fragments of everyday life, and then later join them knowing that not only represent real / real facts, but also virtual and imagined realities. Maps, it means the “forms” of physical places and its changing virtual counterpart, are tools that enable the transformation of reality.

On the construction of “new maps”, for instance, if it is talked about the geo-history (a map) of Cairo, in some point it is going to talk about Cleopatra. Cleopatra became queen in 51 BC; she was mistress of Julius Caesar, and later of Mark Antony. After Caesar’s assassination, Mark Antony became his successor, and Cleopatra’s ally and lover; she continued her reign, not as protected monarch, but as independent queen. Contextualizing the character of Cleopatra and the territorial struggles, one would think in women who live and rule “border” settlements in Latin America.

Monterrey is located in the northeast of Mexico; the metropolitan area is constituted by twelve municipalities; it has 5,000,000 inhabitants; within the metropolitan area of Monterrey there are registered 60 “polygons” of poverty. The barrio Independencia is considered the first periphery of the city; in a map of Monterrey dated in 1894, the barrio appears as part of the regular trace of the metropolis, the peripheral neighborhood was planned to shelter stoneworkers from San

Figure 4: Map of location. Tokyo, Japan. Photo by Diana Maldonado.



Luis Potosí. Around 1950, “La Indepe” was expanded southward, the orthogonal trace was lost, and the “border” geography gained presence. In recent years it has been used as a strategic point of transactions between different groups of the organized crime. As the city was growing up it became in a central area.

Doña Martha is the Queen of the barrio Neo-Independencia, she has living in the settlement for more than 30 years. Martha organized the people and distributed the land between families who took the south area of the mountain; during many years they have been tried to be part of the formal city, offering the purchase of the property, even they paid for the drawing of site maps; although, everything has been useless. Nowadays, Doña Martha represents 300 families; because of their informal condition, the procurement of basic services and urban infrastructure, has been a constantly struggling. The achievements are obtained from the local organization, strategic alliances with political parties and leaders, and the negotiation with internal power forces (neighbors, army, and “drug cartels”). The barrio has its own transport and security networks; the security of the settlement is based on communication by cell phones, if a stranger enters the neighborhood, he or she is intercepted, also if there is a presence of a drug cartel, the routes are immediately modify.

Combining measurable information, literature, experiences, films, memory, and “tactics” of habitat, it is possible to see beyond the conventional maps; this strategy does not substitute the real facts, but it allows one changing the way they are seen. The conventional maps (drawings) will represent the maps of location; from there it will be possible to build an infinite number of cognitive maps or approach maps (windows to the territory), when this “new” maps are drawn they are transformed into maps of re-location, thus at this point there are two options: to add more approach maps or to trace a critical pattern to create maps of intervention. The mapping process follows an uninterrupted spiral.

Maps are representations of geographies (realities/hyper-realities); they should be constructed collectively, as a part of the everyday life. Perhaps from the superposition of maps could be possible the creation of “shifting” protocols of communication; it would be a step in the “opening” of the Latin American urban order; considering the informal settlements as the new proto-cities, it shows that all that once was thought as the end of the cities, now it represents their future.

Figure 5: Re-thinking the mapping process.  
Monterrey, Mexico.

**ENDNOTES**

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