The Soul of the city: Urban Memory and Heritage

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Abstract

Cities have a soul. A soul made by its essential characteristics, built by its citizens. Since this soul translates the history of its urban spaces, it should not be erased. As an eternal light, it must prevail. As must its memory, which entangles with its history. Urban memory is the city itself, which keeps the marks of its constant processes of transformation and permanence. It’s a mistake to think we can freeze the urban space.

We understand the urban project as an arena which can unite different historic times, preserving the soul of the city and at the same time allowing it to move forward and keep its dynamic character. It is the urban project that can unite past, by the urban heritage, the present in its social totality. It can also unite the different social groups, by their participation in designing the city and its transformations.

The awareness of the cultural heritage, intertwined with the collective construction of urban projects that stress the importance of public spaces where people can get to know what their shared identity is can help preserve the soul of the city.

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Italo Calvino
The invisible cities, 1991

1. The importance of urban memory

Cities have a soul. A soul made by its essential characteristics, built by its citizens. Since this soul translates the history of its urban spaces, it should not be erased. As an eternal light, it must prevail. As must its memory which entangles with its history.

We tend to link memory to past. But it goes far beyond it. Memory is the link between the past and the present. It is also the foundation for the future. Also, memory provides us with references to understand the present and is closely related to a basic human phenomenon: change. Without memory, change will become oblivion and disaggregation, in which any act is a mere mechanical reaction, disregarding past or our own history.

Both the individual and the collective memory are supported by a concrete or material basis. This is why impoverished groups, often times neglected by historic records because of constant changes, might have their own identity erased. The loss of concrete references leads to a loss of identity. Without knowledge of our past, we cannot know who we are in the present. On the other hand, the exclusive care for the past might obliterate the ability to deal with the future, as in a social amnesia. That is to say that the respect for the collective memory should not turn into a cult to the past which eclipses the space for innovation and change.

It’s possible to say that a city identity is an ensemble of many identities, corresponding to each of its individuals and social groups. As inequality is increasing, so is the inequality of identities expressed. It is important, therefore, for preservation to go beyond hegemonic identity, the identity of the “winners” in history. That is why it is so important to keep track of the diversity of the social groups which form the urban landscape.

In this context, what is important to keep as individual and collective memories? What are the elements which represent the essence of our history? In order to answer those questions, let’s see how cities and urban studies evolved. São Paulo will be singled out in order to understand, in a case study, the references that make this urban memory.

The city is a landscape composed of different layers of time. Each layer encapsulates a certain time and witnesses its waves of urbanization and urban growth. Forces of speculation and modernization are entangled with industrialization and immigration ones, coexisting in spaces that have been shaped by changes in technology. What urbanists are, or should be, concerned with is to add new layers to the city without erasing its built heritage.
If the city is composed by materialized layers of time, and if we want to understand the references which compose its memory, we must understand the process of evolution and the ideas undertaken in this process. With that in mind, we will now turn to São Paulo and discuss its urban development process, trying to single out the main historic landmarks. We understand that its history and the citizens are the Soul of the City.

2. The city of the Railway and the Coffee (1875-1900)

The city of São Paulo was founded by Jesuit priests in 1554, but historians consider the year 1875 as its second foundation, a date which marks the beginning of the extraordinary development of the former village, when its population plummeted from 20 thousand to 200 thousand people in only 25 years.

The face of the city was transformed by two main factors. The first was the railway, in 1867, linking the coffee farms from the interior to the port of Santos city; the second was the immigration, mainly from Italians, Portugueses, Japanese and Germans to work in the coffee fields. It was between 1872 and 1875, during the mandate of João Teodoro Xavier as president of the then called province, that the city saw its first improvements in infrastructure and embellishments.

João Teodoro ordered the opening of several streets outside the original perimeter of the historic city, known as the Historic Triangle. These new streets were, mainly, connections between the center and the neighborhoods along the Tamanduateí River. Other works were implemented by the end of the 19th Century, such as the construction of the Chá Viaduct, above the of the Anhangabaú Valley stream, in 1892, which paved the way for the expansion towards the west. In 1895, the then small Luz Train Station was commissioned to be reformed, being inaugurated in 1901.

Circulation was made on foot, horses back and wagons. The first trolley, pulled by donkeys, was launched in 1872. Light came at the turn of the century, when Light & Power Co. launched the first electric tramway, pushing for even more radical transformations.

3. The city of the tram (1900-1930)

The face of São Paulo changed dramatically with the introduction of electric light. The tramway, in particular, helped to establish a dense and compact city, which was reaching its first million inhabitants by 1930.

Urban planning of the time had, as we have seen in the historic introduction, aesthetic and sanitary characteristics. On one hand, urban interventions, public or private, sought to embellish

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1 There were three main churches, one in each corner of the Historic Triangle: São Bento, São Francisco and Carmo
the city, according to European patterns. On the other hand, precarious sanitary conditions called for actions of sanitary nature.

Thus, the main transformations of this period were the infrastructure projects in the central areas. The Anhangabau Valley, for one, was radically transformed with the bridge connecting the two hills and also the construction of the magnificent Municipal Theatre, in 1911.

As the main areas thrived, prices increased and the lower income group of people started to be expelled from the central areas and pushed to the outskirts.

4. The city of the skyscraper and the car (1930-1965)

Between 1930 and 1965, the population grew by five times, reaching 5 million inhabitants. During this period, the compact design of the city was gradually lost, due to the substitution of trams by the transport over wheels, which allowed for an urban expansion towards cheaper lands.

Unlike the previous period, in which European urban model was pursued by the elite, the growing economic presence of the United States, especially after World War II, was symbolized by the urban expansion and verticalization.

The Plano de Avenidas (Plan of Avenues), proposed by Prestes Maia and Ulhoa Cintra in 1930 set the ground for the expansion of automobile and buses, which were supported by the creation of a Municipal Company of Public Transport (CMTC) in 1947. By then, the urban landscape in the central regions had already been shaped by the big skyscrapers, of which Banco do Estado de São Paulo’s building is probably its main example. Verticalization would follow in future decades in regions adjacent to Paulista and Higienópolis.

The Plano de Avenidas was followed by the administrations of mayors Fabio Prado (1934-1937) and Prestes Maia (1938-1945), with new tunnels and bridges which followed the construction of new avenues. The vertical growth and the spread went on. During Mayor Adhemar de Barros’s tenure, verticalization was limited by law, which, for the first time, establishes a ratio of built area/size of the estate. With the new law, the total area of the building could not exceed six times that of the terrain, for offices. In the case of residential buildings, this ratio would be lowered to four.

Also in 1957, the mayor announced that plans for the subway would not be carried on, in consonance with the national model of economic development, based on the emphasis on the automobile industry, implemented in the previous year. The choice for the transport on wheels was in line with the model of city expansion that went on until 1965, based on the verticalization in the center and allotments in the suburbs, served by irregular bus lines.

This was a period in which the city transformed itself significantly, following the pattern of demolition-reconstruction and accommodated 9 million people.

In 1968, Mayor Faria Lima sponsored a plan (PUB) which proposed a radically different urban design, with more than 800 kilometers of streets and orthogonal expressways along with 400 kilometers of subways. The grid was never followed and the subway construction eventually reached 78 km in the year 2017 (less than 20% of the original plan). Another plan, PDDI, approved in 1971, and the new zoning legislation of 1972 have limited the building ratio again, limiting to 10% the number of lots with a coefficient of 4 and the remaining 90% with 2. This limitation contributed to an even further urban expansion, especially in the Southeast portion of the city.

New housing projects were built, with the creation of BNH and COHAB, two entities that fostered credit to builders and buyers, but insufficient to make up for the explosive growth rate of the city between 1960 and 1970. The results of a not very effective housing policy are still felt nowadays. As much as 70% of the population of São Paulo lives in slums, tenement houses or irregular allotments in the periphery. In a detour of its original purposes, BHN, the National Housing Bank, turned to middle class projects instead of social, or popular housing, which favored a real estate boom with new towers.

With Civil Society initiatives, urban memory started to be protected not only by the Government. One interesting example is Viva O Centro, an organization which cares for the identity and preservation of the city center.

5. Towards a democratic city (1988 to date)

From 1988 until today, population has grown from nine to an estimated twelve million inhabitants. For the first time, we see a reduction in the growth rate, which obviously doesn’t mean that challenges have ceased. The Democratic era brought together governments and citizens, in the form of citizen councils and other ways of social participation. In recent years, several councils were implemented in São Paulo, some of them acting on a specific district or region, other focusing on themes issues such as safety, parks, culture, environment etc. In any event, the main issue to be considered in social representation is the idea of identity, especially that of the small scale, the neighborhood or the region.

A new planning legislation passed in the 2015 (Strategic Master Plan) encouraging buildings to increase their connection to the city with shops and some circulation area open to the public on the ground floor.

This new bill seeks also to improve the large scale urban projects under which around 25% of São Paulo city territory lay under by increasing design as opposed to the parametric approach.
when construction permits and limits are set. Although it is an innovative legislation it is disconnected with heritage conservation. Will we lose the soul of our city?

6. Conclusion

This research looks at the urban transformation of São Paulo. What is relevant to the individual and urban memory that is worth preserving? Which are the elements that represent the essence of its history, of its soul?

This is a task which becomes more complex when we consider the significant changes in the city caused by the economic development of the last decades. Progress in this context means change. How to embrace change and at the same time make sure it doesn’t destroy the identity of the city?

Enabling an efficient participation of citizens in codesigning the city together with the city’s government means raising citizens awareness of its shared heritage. In São Paulo, the first and second “Jornada do Patrimônio” (a heritage weekend), in 2015 and 2016, included visits to buildings, the celebration of the immaterial heritage, the experience of the center and of its memory. The DPH, Department of historic heritage has also created a label “São Paulo’s City Cultural Value”, which goes beyond listing, by fostering the sharing of democratically elected cultural goods by the population.

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