

# SUSTAINABILITY AND THE CITY

by Prof. Bruno Roberto Padovano  
with the collaboration of Claudia Jarjoura

Brazilian architect Claudia Jarjoura left São Paulo 18 years ago but her heart still lies in South America's largest city. It has long been her dream for the city of São Paulo to be redeveloped back to the days of its former glory. She approached renowned Brazilian architect and urbanist Bruno Roberto Padovano to explain how the city of São Paulo, particularly its beautiful and vibrant, but degraded and chaotic historical downtown area, is going about its transformation into a more sustainable and pleasant city to live in.



Aerial view of São Paulo, South America's largest city

With a total population of some 20 million inhabitants, São Paulo's metropolitan region houses simultaneously two megacities, the São Paulo municipality and all its other 38 conurbated cities, both of which have more than 10 million inhabitants. This fact can only be explained by the economic magnet represented by São Paulo's industry during the first 60 years of the last century and its transformation, from the 1960s onwards, into a global city.

Recent changes in São Paulo's economic base, such as the process of de-industrialization and the rapid expansion of the tertiary sector, have characterized a new urban scenario for its present and future, with a gradual moving away from the central areas and the rise of a

new, multi-centered urban structure.

While smaller municipalities surrounding São Paulo are still enjoying population and economic growth, the population of São Paulo itself has remained practically static, and is actually decreasing in its more central suburbs - the old downtown areas and its immediate periphery.

For São Paulo this is actually good news, as it is finally allowing the government to deal with long-standing problems such as housing deficit, lack of mass transportation, traffic congestion and air, soil and water pollution. By around 2050, when São Paulo celebrates its 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the city may well have regained some of its past urban grandeur, only this time on a new scale.

The main problem facing São Paulo today is the lack of financial resources needed to invest in new

urban infrastructure, social housing and related facilities. The newly-elected mayor of São Paulo, Fernando Haddad, is trying to obtain, with the federal government of his fellow PT (Workers' Party) member, president Dilma Rousseff, a longer-term schedule for debt repayments, which may allow his administration to carry out some of the most necessary improvements, especially with regards to the extremely critical housing deficit for low-income families, calculated at over 1.5 million units, a considerable part of which in *favelas* (slums), often located in areas of risk for their inhabitants.

One of Haddad's most important projects is the urban redevelopment of the Nova Luz area, a socially degraded, yet still economically vital part of São Paulo's downtown. It opens up a new chapter of urban

planning and design not only in São Paulo but in Brazil as a whole.

Some important public buildings are already being constructed in Nova Luz, such as the Complexo Cultural Luz Teatro da Dança, a cultural complex designed by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, and a new home for the state education centre Centro Paula Souza, designed by Pedro Taddei e Francisco Spadoni. The Companhia Paulista de Trens Metropolitanos (São Paulo Metropolitan Train Company) has also received a new visual communication project designed by João Carlos Cauduro, and the municipal administration has recently approved a masterplan for subways and trains in the area adjacent to the Luz Station.

The Nova Luz Project is the first of its kind in São Paulo focused on the urban requalification of a

historical district which is currently inhabited by low-income population living in *cortiços* (houses or apartments in which each room is rented to a different family), but displays vital commercial activity.

## The Nova Luz Project opens up a new chapter of urban planning in São Paulo

The declaration of the area as an urban concession means that all existing properties within its boundaries can be acquired by private developers or public agencies for demolition and new development, according to a masterplan implemented by US design firm AECOM as part of a consortium of four organizations.

## Bottlenecks

Despite its numerous public hearings and the adoption of a web-based information system to allow the monitoring of all stages of its implementation process, the project has been fiercely criticized for not being representative of the local community by local business people whose commercial activities have been damaged by the demolition works. It has also been accused by local planners of generating a gentrification process, with the relocation of current residents and the control of drug-dealing activities in the so-called "Cracolândia" (an area overrun by crack users and dealers).

The urban model used for the design of Nova Luz is actually quite traditional, with mixed uses and buildings aligned with their neighboring streets, adhering to the current occupational



format and creating few open spaces, without the adoption of a more oxygenated form of spatial organization, i.e. with more green spaces, which are lacking in São Paulo's congested downtown area, where the land coverage is extremely dense.

This has been justified by the designers as a way of maintaining the existing pattern of buildings in the

area, but may well prove to be one of its weaknesses in attracting developers. Most office buildings in the metropolitan area adopt setbacks and green spaces between them to allow for better views when looking out from the offices and avoid structural problems when high rise structures are built one next to the other. Generally speaking, developers have preferred

urban locations close to higher income residential suburbs, avoiding urban blight and proximity to slums and low-income communities, not to mention drug-dealing centres.

Also, the idea of mixing social housing, office and commercial developments might please those with progressive ideas with regards to more socially-diversified communities in downtown

areas, but may not be attractive to future middle-class occupants of those essentially market-oriented residential developments that are seen in the city.

It is likely that a more well-defined environment for modern business structures and new middle class housing in the area would have created a more sympathetic way of associating different urban functions. The Nova

Luz Project also remains an uncertainty due to the political shift from the centre-right government of Gilberto Kassab to the centre-left one of Fernando Haddad, who has suspended the concession, although recognizing merits in the project. It will be interesting to watch the developments of this urban project as it goes through two different municipal administrations. **B**



São Paulo's social inequality from an architectural point of view



Complexo Cultural Luz Teatro da Dança, by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron

## Side by side

How to reconcile market interests and social benefits is a fine balance for which no ideal solution has yet been found, due to the social contrasts that exist in São Paulo. Simply mixing different social classes together may not be the best way to resolve this complex economic and cultural dichotomy.

In fact, São Paulo's major urban changes are occurring due to the expansion of the mass transit system, with a strong allocation of resources by the state government to subway and metropolitan railway improvements, and to the new monorail system, which have been accompanied by a mobility shift from private

automobiles to public transportation in the last decade, after a continuous expansion of the former.

This may well prove to be the best way to distribute social housing, especially for families living in areas of risk and those relocated due to urban improvements. This seems highly justifiable from an urban design perspective, thus improving the access by working classes to jobs in the whole metropolitan region and reducing the use of private transportation and the circulation of buses.

A burgeoning change in mobility patterns is represented by the increased circulation of bicycles, a growing trend in São Paulo, with more

than 200 thousand cyclists riding to and from work every day. It is still a small proportion of the 40 million trips carried out daily in the metropolitan region, but if the government were to adopt a major plan for the circulation of bicycles in separate lanes, this number would grow steadily in the next years, also reducing the use of cars and their emissions.

Another important action that has been undertaken in São Paulo is the creation of a network of linear parks alongside streams, rivers and lakes: a change of paradigm with regards to green areas and the implementation of leisure facilities for all social classes. Some tangible progress has

been made in São Paulo over the last decades, with the reintroduction of trees along its main avenues and in some of its central suburbs, which are making the city greener.

Besides regenerative actions in specific locations, there is the need of a more integrated form of planning and design of the city's public, semi-public and private spaces, with the different metropolitan systems working together to generate a more sustainable future for São Paulo, which seems to be the only way to resolve the current drawbacks for those who live and work in South America's largest and most complex megacity.

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