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A WINDOW ON BRAZILIAN CITIES

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A window on Brazilian Cities. When Changes are Evident to the Eyes. Presentation of the column "A window on Brazilian cities"
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Presentation of the column

On-site

In the year 2000, São Luiz, the capital of Maranhao, was a vast stretch of single-story houses, around a historic centre of European origin with colourful *azulejo*, and random presence of multi-story building along the ocean beaches.

Each year, since 2005, the number of active cranes grew: destroying forests and swamps, the new fences of buildings and towers along with massive shopping centres and new road networks, mark the urban landscape, while the postmodern skyscrapers design the coastline of part of the ocean. Yet in 2000, the wide social gap among the few rich and many poor, as a feature of the Latin American continent, was visible and noticeable. In contrast, for the coming years, it seemed that a middle class were to arise and grow in number, which is willing to spend, moving with car, characterized by globalized lifestyles and consumption patterns, strongly incising into the urban landscapes.

In 2015, the slowly advancing construction, instead, seems to reveal the first signs of slightly decline of consumptions and building productions.

Fifteen years of presence in one of the cities in northeast Brazil made it possible to observe the rapid and essential transformation of its morphology and urban tissue. São Luiz is no exception. This has occurred and is occurring in many cities and territories of the Brazilian Federation.

Moving Beyond Commonplaces

Likewise today, what I encountered fifteen years ago has never been what I had expected and assumed.

In this city of one million inhabitants, commonplaces, recurring themes and prejudices have been and are usual as for the rest of the nation-continent, which is Brazil. A country, «in perpetual fluctuations between maximum ambition and impotence infantilized of a peripheral and anarchic population»¹, where the existing contradictions in urban landscape are not easy to interpret: *favelas* (slums) and rich districts, planned city and informal city, neoliberal global cities and districts of local participations, modern and postmodern architecture, hyper-project and poorly maintained promenades, tropical historic centres of European origin and island secured with highly-equipped dwellings (i “condominios fechados” or gated communities), environmental cutting edge urban mobility and deficiency of sewage system and electricity, nature as far as the eye can see and expanses of single-story housing in the city or high-rise building of the metropolis. In the past it seemed simple to render a comprehensive framework, composed of the poles apart reality among those juxtaposed

¹ B. Barba, *No país do futebol. Brasile 2014: il calcio torna a casa. Un viaggio antropologico*, Effequ, Orbetello, 2014, p. 61.

ones: places of high inequalities, in resources, quality of life and socio-economic conditions.

In more recent years, substantial intermediate phenomena have become connoting and go beyond the commonplaces. «In 2007, for the first time in Brazilian history, the inequality level decreased rather than increasing. According to the data published by Getúlio Vargas Foundation, the majority of Brazilians no longer live in the lowest poverty level, yet moved to the average, which is a turning point. Furthermore, the growing middle class has led to a reduction in the poorest population, but also the richest, highlighting the shrinking gap in inequalities»². Economic growth has encouraged the creation and consolidation of such middle class³, which by 2015 includes up to 40 million of the Brazilians⁴, and their related lifestyles.

Simultaneously, throughout the last decade, there has been a substantial urban expansion, along with a rising demand, construction of new housing and infrastructures. On one hand, such achievements are a response to the urbanization process of rural population (even if distant, yet maintains strong ties with its place of origin as a bi-residency) and, on the other hand, the desire of both rural and urban populations to change their social status and lifestyle. Thus, arise the new primary infrastructural requirements and major road networks, new public housing settlements and districts of towers.

Besides this turbulent development, a truly impressive threshold of a potential crisis in real estate market is approaching in a country, which after years of boom and favourable economic cycle faces a growing decline and recession. Some data tend to confirm this trend. «In the first half of 2015, the industrial production dropped by 6,5%, marking the worst figure during the past five years»⁵. Moreover, based on the International Monetary Funds, the gross domestic production (GDP), being always positive since 2010, suffers 2% loss in 2015. After an 11,6% and 4,8% increase, respectively in years 2010 and 2012, the real estate market seems to change the trend and «the growth speed in many parts of the country is reducing, while others are recording first price falls»⁶. The debate over a possible housing bubble is controversial. In 2013, some of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation's economists (among them Paulo Picchetti) believed that major sport events, hosted or to be hosted, in Brazil and the lack of housing may support the country's further growth, while others (namely Samy Dana) claimed the already existence of a housing bubble in the country.

Accordingly, one observing Brazilian cities and metropolises should deal with, on one hand, the rapid and significant changes of more than a decade and not yet concluded. On the other hand, regarding the history and recent events, these cities show a good observation and reflection, necessarily considering the variety in urban settings and the socio-economic conditions that seem to characterize Brazilian cities of

2 G.L. Gardini, *L'America latina nel XXI secolo*, Carocci, Roma, 2009, p. 21. According to Gardini, reducing inequality is preliminary attributed to the neoliberal policies for economic austerity of the Federal President, the sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, followed by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's social policies, without abandoning the Cardoso's rigor.

3 In a research through statistical data, such as income, the Getúlio Vargas Foundation presents the emergence of the «new Brazilian middle class» (M. Neri, *A Nova Classe Média*, Centro de Políticas Sociais/FGV Editora, Rio de Janeiro, 2008). The achieved success has given rise to criticism, especially sociologists, regarding the lack of indications to other criteria such as employment level or cultural capital (J. Souza, *Os Batalhadores Brasileiros. Nova Classe Média ou Nova Classe Trabalhadora?*, UFMG Editora, Belo Horizonte, 2010; G. GF. X. Sobrinho, “Classe C’ e sua Alardeada Ascensão: Nova? Classe? Média?”, *Indicadores Econômicos FEE*, vol. 38, n. 4, 2011, pp. 67-80). For a critical reflection on the debate see: A.R. Salata, “Quem é Classe Média no Brasil? Um Estudo sobre Identidades de Classe”, *Dados*, vol. 58, no. 1, jan./mar. 2015.

4 R. Da Rin, “Il sogno infranto del Brasile”, *Il Sole-24 Ore*, 9 August 2015, p. 4.

5 Ibidem.

6 E. Rossi, *Brasile la grande transizione. Dal boom economico ai grandi eventi sportivi*, GoWare, Firenze, 2013.



the new millennium. The author believes that it is necessary to give space, illustrate and materialize these on-going changes and diversities, and avoiding opaque or confirmed readings. Observing and recounting the two features of change and variety, can guide one in preventing what in the past were the few risen commonplaces to symbolize a boundless nation. This is the intention and expectation of this column. The necessity to overcome the commonplaces in the case of Brazil and all South American countries is also shared with the world of architecture. In his recent contribution on *Casabella*⁷, Francesco Dal Co invites to no longer consider Latin America as a “unique and unified world”, whose cultural manifestations are associated to a similar origin, if not exactly coinciding. In the catalogue of the exhibition *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980* [www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1499] (MoMa, New York, 29 March 19 - July 2015)⁸, Jorge Francisco Liernur illustrates how the genealogy of such stereotypes can be attributed to the developing and underdeveloped concepts, which led to «replacing the meridians and parallels that instead allows to explain, even from a geographical point of view, the radical cultural difference»⁹, encountered in the entire Continental System.

Telling and Showing

Likewise the architectural debate, which triggers the overcoming of stereotypes towards specifying, articulating and “comprehending” from these cultural and disciplinary contexts, thus, the aim of this column is to draw Europocentric attention to the largely unknown Brazilian cities and territories, as well as their planning instruments, in recent years, the outcome of much experimentations and concrete practice in urban constriction and management.

Narrating these less known contexts and cities – where by 2004, already 82% of the Brazilian population lived – and the transformations that they are undergoing is the scope of “A window on Brazilian Cities”, presenting also the planning instruments, which in itself are unfamiliar and full of contradictions: from *City Statute* (federal law 10.257, 2001) to Federal City Ministry, the division between standards and design in urban planning (Municipal Master Plan), up to the recently approved *Metropolis Statute* (federal law 13.089, 12 January 2015)¹⁰.

The attitude followed by this column is the one of an explorer interested in learning, and maybe live and revive the literature on this city and metropolis, through different entries and contributions such as articles, reviews, translations, interviews, photo-essays, video services.

The ambition is that readers will search for encouraging contributions, both to study and deepen, and they can also feed the comparison with collaborations that may enrich this column.

7 F. Dal Co, “Learning from Latin America?”, *Casabella*, n. 850, 2015, pp. 90-93.

8 B. Bergdoll, C. Comas, J.F. Liernur, P. del Real, eds., *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2015.

9 F. Dal Co, *Op.cit.*, p. 92.

10The *City Statute* is a federal law that regulates the use of urban property and makes mandatory the municipal master plans for cities with over 20,000 inhabitants. The *Metropolis Statute* provides guidelines for planning, management and implementation for public duties of common interest in the metropolitan and urban areas, which are developed by the states [www.observatoriodasmetropoles.net].



São Luiz, Brasil. Calhau, 14.04.2012 © M. Mareggi



São Luiz, Brasil. Rua de Estrela, centro storico / historic center / centro histórico,
10.07.2007 © M. Mareggi



São Luiz, Brasil. Rua João Henrique da Cotovia, centro storico / historic center /
centro histórico, 23.04.2014 © M. Mareggi



São Luiz, Brasil. Rua Grande, centro storico / historic center / centro histórico,
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São Luiz, Brasil. Cohafuma, 11.04.2013 © M. Mareggi



São Luiz, Brasil. Condomínio Parque Athenas, 27.04.2014 © M. Mareggi



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