

Museum of the City of São Paulo: A new paradigm of City Museums in the Era of Megalopolises¹

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The City is a tomography of the present, indicating to the future, strata of past times.

Nowadays city growth averages one million people every week; while back in 1950 there were eighty six cities with more than one million inhabitants, today they are four hundred all over the world. However the most significant effect of the urban process is, doubtless, the explosion of megacities. It took one century for the urban population – around three point four billion inhabitants – to surpass the number of people in the country, but United Nations projections indicate that by 2025, urban population will reach 61% of the total.

Creating a new *city museum* in São Paulo requires that, in a first analysis, one should consider as geographic area of study some fifteen hundred square kilometres corresponding to the patrimonial intervention area. That is the area of the Municipality, politically divided into ninety six districts where eleven million people live, while approximately twenty million people live in the metropolitan area (Figure 1).

During the last decades studies confirmed by satellite images have indicated that two conurbation² axes are clearly characterized and expanding: one extends in the direction of

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² Conurbation – Large urban area formed by cities and villages that *appeared and developed side by side until they touched each other.* (Houaiss, 2001, p. 826).

Rio de Janeiro, four hundred kilometres away from São Paulo, and another is directed to Campinas, one hundred kilometres from São Paulo.

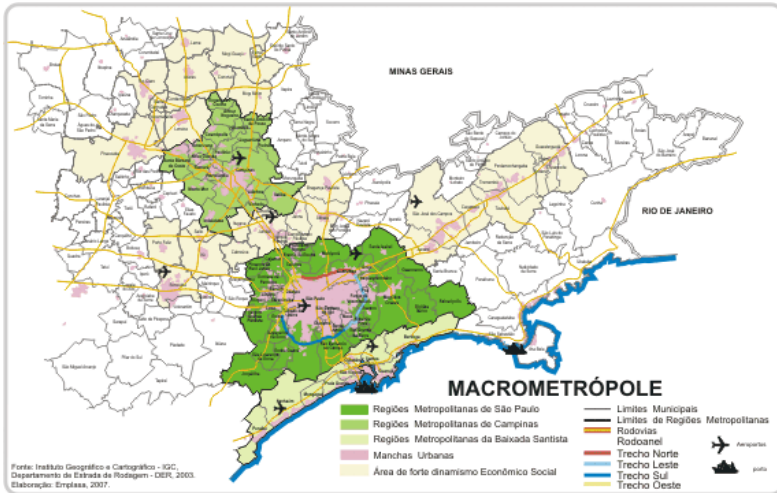


Figure 1: São Paulo as a museal object in the megacities expanded plan. (Source: Emplasa - Empresa Paulista de Planejamento Metropolitano SA - Secretaria de Estado de Economia e Planejamento. Available at: <http://www.emplasa.sp.gov.br/portalemplasa/index.asp>.)

Travelling along either axis one cannot help concluding that it is difficult to talk about São Paulo as a subject for musealization and, at the same time, ignore the Greater São Paulo with its already inevitable progressive conurbation processes.

This theoretical model – territory museum – is nourished by the clear and evident notion that the city is something undergoing mutations, a permanently pulsating being. The City Museum of São Paulo, supposed to have as its musealization object that very metropolis, requires dynamical structures capable of undertaking real time mutations, in order to cope with trends and oscillations of social life in the big city.

This gigantic urban spot characterizes the first macrometropolis of the southern hemisphere, inhabited by twenty two million people, approximately 12% of the Brazilian

population. Its factories form the richest industrial complex in Brazil. They are responsible for 65.3% of the gross product of the State of São Paulo or 21,1% of the Brazilian GNP (gross national product).

With respect to the global scenario, one can say that the Brazilian macrometropolis³ is surpassed only by the macroregions of Tokyo-Kobe in Japan, Shanghai in China and Mexico City in Mexico. This ranking reinforces the idea that the group of emerging countries will be, in the next decades, the biggest generator of megalopolises.

Although this analysis tries to focus on the municipality of São Paulo as the museal object of its reflection, one cannot deny or ignore the fact that a huge crowd moves daily along the axes that, as tentacles, connect São Paulo to its peripheral regions. Migratory fluxes have intensified along both directions in such a way that today there is social contact in São Paulo between São Paulo born people and inhabitants of the macrometropolis.

The economic wealth of the State of São Paulo when considered in the general Brazilian context raises serious concerns related to this macroaxis. Besides its natural potentialities it becomes the target of important political and economical dispute.

Modern urban planning requires multifaceted knowledge involving analysis by competent architects-urbanists, but it is also fertile soil for other spheres of social science: anthropology, sociology, psychology, education and social museology.

All the different professional views converge to the study of the way-of-life and organization of the populations in

³ In his studies to define urban planning for the northwestern part of the United States, the Scotsman Patrick Geddes, in the beginning of the twentieth century, defined the concept of macrometropolis as a widespread urban area, multipolarized by conurbated metropolises. The apocalyptic term "necropolis" was also used during that period, assuming that megalopolises were doomed. From: Zanchetta, D. (2008, agosto). A primeira Macrometrópole do Hemisfério Sul. In: *Revista Megacidades – Grandes Reportagens*. São Paulo: O Estado de São Paulo. p. 64

the megacity. In the outer edge of the megalopolis one can identify new social arrangements that articulate and make possible a collectively organized life that goes beyond government initiatives. Considering the concept of multiple centralities imposed by the megalopolis itself, we see that those populations gravitate around other urban milestones, new social references, new expanded centralities, other forms of circulation, communication and social interaction. The word periphery presents itself with significant ambiguity since one can always ask: peripheral in relationship to what?

Looking at the global scenario just presented it seems correct to state that the need to create City Museums has never before presented itself with such intensity, mainly in the megalopolises of emerging countries. It is necessary to consider the scale, the extension of the territory and adopt a more diversified format, multicentered, able to articulate social forces in a more encompassing way.

Possibly we can make evident the fact that City Museums, within this theoretical model, consider public interest as its priority and that it takes actions that give priority to democratic access and enjoyment of the population involving knowledge about the city where they live and perform.

The City Museum of São Paulo, through exploratory dynamics with young members of the population, adopts the idea that São Paulo is an Educating City. Thus, it considers itself as an active institution able to translate into an interpretative scale the yearnings of its population.

Cities are the natural ground for multiculturalism, territories where diversities coexist, where differences are confronted.

Furthermore in South America and especially in Brazil, where São Paulo is doubtless its greatest expression, large cities received multiple migratory fluxes as well as immigrants, during most of the twentieth century, characterizing them as a hybrid space, contradictory and multicultural.

Therefore it might be considered that in a large Brazilian city all newcomers could rapidly find their most closely related ethnic group, offering them a first adhesion, a first exercise in complicity and belonging; from this first welcome gesture the newcomer will feel as part of the group, but not confined to a ghetto; members of different groups do not tend to exclude each other; on the contrary they establish multicultural relationships, they socialize and absorb each other's traditions and contradictions.

Considering the global scenario of intolerance between people, transitive multiculturalism that characterizes Latin American metropolises may be their most emblematic reference link, their most powerful exchange mechanism. It is possible that Latin American cities have the potential to develop new hybridation models, revealing some aptitude to adapt themselves, possibly in a more ingenious form, to new global challenges.

In 2003, as part of the commemoration of four hundred and fifty years of São Paulo foundation, the Culture Secretary of the city of São Paulo proposed the creation of a City Museum of São Paulo that, at the same time, would value former patrimonial initiatives but that should aim at broadening traditional views in acknowledgement of the territorial complexity of São Paulo. The model of a city museum developed during that period was the object of in depth investigation and analysis in my doctorate thesis in Museology presented to the "Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias" in November 2009.

In the experiment conceived in 2003 the process of musealization of the urban space has taken into account that:

- museal discourse should be established from questions, problems and argumentation addressed to the museum by the population and not following a dynamic going the opposite way;
- present time and contemporary collection should become the main protagonist of patrimonial actions;
- the museum accepts the challenge of real time interaction with different populations, looking for

references representative of present times and aiming at a collective construction of a perspective of the future;

- the exact point of foundation is no longer chosen and revered as the first or socially accepted centrality; expanded centralities will be considered through the enlarged concept of territoriality;
- other forces in different regions of a territory shall be considered as legitimate and equally symbolic and referential to the populations;
- interaction will proceed with an increasing number of citizens, becoming part of associative and interpretive networks that constitute the new logic of living – why not say surviving – in the large urban centres;
- it is accepted that other communication scales should be explored, using the intrinsic logic of contemporaneous processes, but shaping them to the patrimonial intentions of each program;
- a new anthropophagic discourse is adopted that admits and digests different types of knowledge, logic and discourses, favouring a multidisciplinary architecture.

Among the various experiments carried through in association with the development of the City Museum of São Paulo, one of them became widely known: the "São Paulo Expedition four hundred and fifty years"

The idea was to obtain a contemporary tomography of the city of São Paulo. An urban expedition was undertaken with an interdisciplinary characteristic and two different routes were followed during one week. If we could attach special and unusual values to the "Expedition São Paulo four hundred and fifty years" they would be the *method* and the *intentionality* of the program. It surely was not a picturesque or naïve trip, nor a group of academic people in search of confirmation for their theses. There was a detailed planning and we could count on managers and operators of public policies of the Municipality who indicated points to be considered in the definition of the routes to be followed by the travellers. Suggestions on the

points of interest to be included in the program totalled seven hundred. The coordination group analyzed the suggestions and decided on two final routes: *North-South* and *East-West*. Two groups of travellers, of multidisciplinary nature, were composed of anthropologists, architects, educators, psychoanalysts, archaeologists, artists, photographers, filmmakers, museologists, sociologists, geographers, ambientalists, historians, planners and organizers. Travellers were assisted by a group of young students, mostly with a graduate degree in History, Museology and Anthropology. They were responsible for approaching people to be interviewed, for distributing at the visiting points printed material concerning the City Museum and the Expedition itself. They were also responsible for obtaining authorizations for image use. Their most important task, however, was to take notes on forms specially conceived for that purpose, concerning items identified as being of interest for the future museum. Initially the idea was to make a record of items only and no collection had been foreseen. However growing enthusiasm led many of the travellers to start direct collection of items and it became necessary to arrange for a daily reception of those items in predetermined points of the city. Items collected that way have been deposited at the Iconography and Museums Division of the Municipal Secretariat of Culture of São Paulo.

The dynamics of the Expedition included travelling along each route during the day and evening sessions devoted to evaluate what had been accomplished and planning by the travellers of what should be done along the following stretch (Figure 2). Every night each of the groups received a visit from a *social actor* specifically chosen; while one group heard the intense account of a homeless girl, the other received a deaf-blind woman; both tried to explain how to orient yourself in São Paulo facing your own limitations. The two groups went by different visiting points: slums, rap and hip hop groups, neighbourhood soccer clubs, samba clubs, different religious gathering places, telecenters, cooperatives, indigenous villages, social assistance, health, education and cultural

centres. The city was seen from an elevated heliport at Avenida Paulista as well as from the bottom of an urban crater resulting from the impact of a large meteorite at Vargem Grande – southern extreme point – some four hundred thousand years ago.



Figure 2. The dynamic of the Expedition: travelling along the routes during the day, and evening planning sessions. (Source: São Paulo Expedition database, 2004).



Figure 3: São Paulo 450 Years Expedition traveller's group after the final evaluation. Source: São Paulo Expedition database, 2004

The two groups went through tunnels of the Metro, streets and bowels of the historic center of the city, narrow passages of slums, internal alleys of Dwelling Centers, and even cemetery blocks and maximum security prison cells. Those dynamics allowed to observe how the city subverts the use of its spaces: a football club that shelters a school, the samba club that takes care of milk distribution, a religious space where the rapper learns how to read a musical score, schools where families find adequate space for their leisure, local clubs where the elders find a suitable space for meeting their equals, the street that stages cultural events and last but not least the concrete slab (the "laje"⁴) covering some of the

⁴ Houses built in the "favelas" or in peripheral urban areas may have a concrete slab as their top floor or roof; it is normally used as a space for socializing, leisure and community activities.

houses: that is the most important social meeting place in destitute areas visited.

The Expedition was not a comfortable promenade: violence and insecurity accompanied the travellers on both routes and were part of the narrations of the dwellers. Human deficiencies and lack of suitable public services mark the precarious living condition of those populations and produce a permanent discomfort for them. Social and environmental unbalances do not provide a serene landscape; on the contrary, they show a conflict scenario, and a territory devastated by insecurity became evident.

On the opposite direction to those sensations that were latent and present, the Expedition was, doubtless, an opportunity to demolish many stereotypes about São Paulo. Discovery was much more intense than apprehension and everyone had the strong feeling that the mission of the City Museum will be to reveal to the public – more than the needs and inconsistencies – the laborious day by day of the São Paulo inhabitants, both in their formal and informal jobs; the fraternal generosity between equals, the social networks that assure life and survival in the city; the counterpoint between apparent chaos and the unbelievable capacity of organization developed by the associations we visited; the environmental issues and the alternate solutions that prevent a final congestion.

Discretely a few journalists from "O Estado de São Paulo" – one of the most important large circulation newspapers in Brazil – joined the Expedition. The day São Paulo commemorated four hundred and fifty years of its foundation, the newspaper published a supplementary section devoted to the interdisciplinary experience, reaching three hundred thousand readers all over the country.

The last day of the Expedition was taken by a final evaluation. Both groups met in a downtown hotel and recalled their routes, faces they met, oral statements that were recorded, photographs yet to be developed and collected items. It was a final effort towards an interdisciplinary synthesis, towards the definition of a logic that might give

sense to the next phases. It was an intense working day and finally as a result of systematic observations the three founding bases were selected: territory/ sociability/ imaginarium⁵ (Figure 3).

These orienting concepts formed the structural basis for the editorial organization of all the other products connected to the Expedition such as: a book, the exhibition, a video documentary and the creation of a data base in multimedia format that consolidated all the documentation related to contemporary items collected during the Expedition, in view of the effective creation of the City Museum of São Paulo in 2004 (Figure 4).

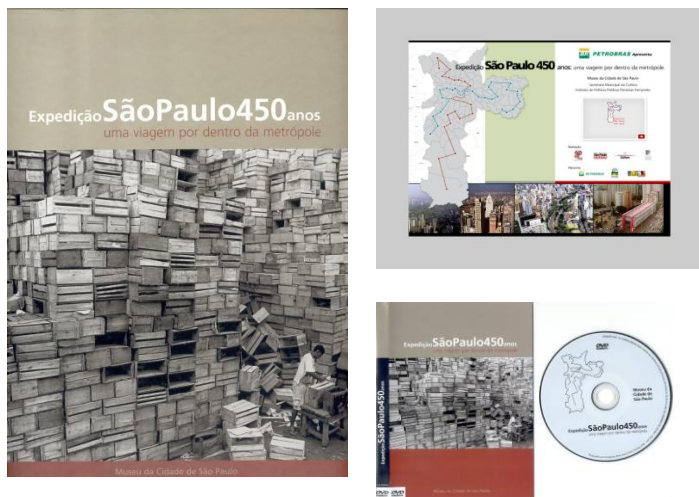


Figure 4: Products connected to the Expedition (database in multimedia format, video documentary and book).

After the election of a new Mayor of São Paulo in 2005, the project of the new City Museum of São Paulo, already detailed and having its implantation initiated was

⁵ Imaginarium refers to things, real and fantasy, that are recurrent in the minds of a social group.

interrupted following a governmental decision that maintained the *status quo*; the City Museum of São Paulo went back to its traditional condition. From that moment on, the City Museum of São Paulo has been cited by some of the existing memory institutions of the city, but São Paulo was going back to the parish logic of a post-colonial city, neglecting the conscience of the complexity and gigantic condition that characterizes the city as one of the global megalopolises.

Some of the questions related to the creation and implantation of the City Museum of São Paulo are still waiting for answers. First of all, one should revisit the sequence of studies and negotiations undertaken along the twentieth and twenty first centuries, aiming at the accomplishment of the project. This activity would allow us to produce some fundamental questions:

a) What threat to decision taking people at the political/institutional level, is represented by the project endeavouring to create a museum that is based on the collection of contemporary items? Why is it that items produced contemporarily by our societies have a musealization process that is much more threatening than the traditional collection of cultural items that legitimate and sanctify the historical path of an object?

b) The model of a *historical museum* that reveres the past would be safer, therefore? Ancient objects would ask less questions than their contemporary counterparts? The extraction of objects pertaining to every day activities, in real time, would it introduce irreparable voids in our society? Or should we just allow objects, that irrevocably would fall into oblivion, to be discarded by passing time and then, as a consequence, we would naturally preserve those with a "vocation" to become musealized?

c) Or should our selection be based on other values and criteria? Could it be the aesthetic value of the object, its social representativeness, its age, the profile of its owner, its monetary intrinsic value? Those values which in the past had been great references during centuries, do they apply today, to our transterritorial, globalized world? If our society struggles

against its own aging, by multiplying logics of reconstruction and likelihood, why don't we feel referenced to the present?

d) Could it be that a city museum that articulates itself upon contemporary collection is a threatening museologic model by a simple inversion of the symbolic weight of the objects, or such discourse provides an inversion of other social senses far more encompassing?

e) Assuming that the selection of an object presupposes a logic of discarding it, are we afraid of the power of museologic manipulation of our own lives, of our path, of our memory, that a choice of a contemporary object could determine? Are we more afraid of making a selection or of discarding? Are we less happy by living with what is retained or by abandoning what is discarded?

f) How does the museum fit into this contemporary equation? What history is it intended to legitimate? What do we want to recall, what are we allowed to forget? This new museum, shall it be a territory for new senses, new expectations? If traditional museums had the power to revere and nominate what should not be forgotten, why can't we consider that the city museum has the power of reflecting, of modifying, of restating, of heightening the present, and thus redesign, in real time, our own future? Would there be time to wait for the natural aging of objects? Wouldn't that process be much more contaminated nowadays than it was in the past?

g) Why does our society applaud, consume and musealize contemporary art, building "cathedral museums" to keep it, all over the world? Could it be that art speaks about life without presenting so many threats as objects do?

h) Why an increasing number of science and technology museums is created, making evident to the public the great themes that concern our planet survival? Wouldn't human extinction be a greater fear than that imposed by the collection of contemporary objects?

i) Why initiatives focused on the conscientization about the importance of solidary coexistence between different cultures are supported and implemented without hesitation in different countries? Why *museums of contemporary history*

are so few in Brazil and why are they considered to be threatening? What in our life today is unbearable to the point that we don't want to remember it, to select it, to elect it and musealize?

j) Why should we revere the myth of the founding father of the city? The locus, the enlarged area standing off from the center, is it a desirable and commendable concept? Why is it that fear comes up to the surface whenever we pierce the symbolic surrounding walls and face the increased size of the territory, beyond our ties, to peripheral areas? Could it be that a medieval atavism prevents us to go outside the center, fooling the walls and delving into the complex surrounding urban mesh, nobody's land, as people refer to it?

k) Would it be possible to substitute an imitation for the object? Why not use available technology to express unforgettable feelings, gestures, tastes, odors and images? Would the fascination of motion be more stimulating than the object at rest? Does the object rest, talk or ask questions? Should we give up original items and assume a definitive adoption of virtual interaction? Following the tracks of collaborative networks, would it be possible to create virtual collections and even virtual museums, rejecting the imperative logic of generating and maintaining patrimonial institutions? Why should we maintain original when we already have frozen their images for the future? Are we not even able to modify, edit and recreate them? In the age of human clones, when the logic of ancestral relationships and heredity is openly defied, why not think of the obsolescence of the original object? Why not clone the object, reproduce it and discard it?

l) Could it be that the most important concern is related to who chooses the object instead of what is chosen? Would there be many people entitled to choosing in this new model? Would History be told with references to people unknown in the social scenario? Would silent crowds start to be given a voice? As it speaks would that crowd use a syntax that we would not follow or understand? If that is a different syntax many will recognize themselves. What about us? Would we remain with no connection, therefore voiceless?

The City Museum of São Paulo as subject of study and museological problematization tries to explicitly present a multidisciplinary methodology – already tested in 2003 and 2004 – that enunciates the conception of a new model of *city museum*, whose objective is the analysis of the great metropolis – São Paulo – maintaining a dialogue with the proper logic of a globalized world, but canonically erected over the founding precepts of Sociomuseology (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Social and environmental diversity: a slum lives cheek by jowl to a high standard building at Morumbi quarter. (Source: Urban Age. http://www.urban-age.net/03_conferences/conf_saoPaulo.html.)

Focusing on city museums, that model tries to stimulate an alternative new path, that observes and interacts with the reality that is inherent to contemporaneity, to Latin American megacities, as it endeavours to problematize and understand the dynamics that characterize human life in those vast and complex territories.

About the author:

Maria Ines Mantovani is Founder and Director of Expomus, a leading museum services company based in Sao Paulo dedicated to social, scientific, technological and environmental projects in Brazil and internationally. She holds a PhD degree in Sociomuseology from the Lusófona University in Lisbon.