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Abstract

This essay aims to examine metropolitan cities of Latin America with two aspects of the literature in anthropology, history, and sociology in mind. First, the essay addresses an imbalanced focus on cities on the North Americas by sketching the significance of migration, creation, and urban development in four major metropolises of South America. Second, in place of a framework of urban imaginaries, which has dominated the sociology of Latin American cities in recent years, I argue for a more precise notion of metropolitan imaginaries that better frames the creativity of particular cities and their level of integration into international and regional networks. With this more precise notion, I distinguish southern cities as highly connected places, which attract migrants and bring economic and cultural traffic to their shores, ports, plazas, and streets. They are lively centers of Atlantic modernity with connections that generate greater magnitude for creativity and as such bear international significance as places of architecture and urban design. In their informal settlements, impulses of organic creation further distinguish southern metropolises from their North American counterparts. The quality of international and regional connections distinguish these cities from other urban centers in Latin America, a point underestimated in the literature on urban imaginaries. In this essay, I examine nineteenth and twentieth century Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro. Each is distinguished from most cities by the magnitude of migration, the diversity of their populations, and the connections they have to global and regional developments. Crucially, each one stands out for the quality and impact of their metropolis making, particularly in creative architecture and urban design.

Key words: urban imaginaries, migration, Latin America, urban sociology, Cornelius Castoriadis, creation

Introduction

Interdisciplinary theories of urban life in Western modernity often associate cities with movements of people, goods, and cultures within larger economic and cultural networks. When it comes to urbanization in new world societies, many historians and comparative and historical sociologists seem to accept the axiom that migration is exceptionally central to the constitution of modern life (Almeida, 2011; Belich, 2009; Games, 2008; Nugent, 1992). To varying degrees, the premier cities of the modern Americas joined a larger maritime Atlantic world connecting Western Africa to the Atlantic seaboard states and Latin countries of Europe. They
helped create the trans-Atlantic economy, whilst simultaneously being products of connection to overarching Atlantic modernities, a connection which was both creative and destructive in its effects. Mass immigration and economic and cultural traffic were currents of modernity further stoking that expansion over time, making some American cities places with significant interregional and international connections. Those cities were the major metropolises of the new world and their position over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries warrants their treatment as sites of social historical creation — to invoke Cornelius Castoriadis (Castoriadis, 1987) — and, as such, metropolitan imaginaries, condensing connectedness, creativity and diversity in particular city locations.

Migration exemplifies this connectedness of Atlantic modernities. Transnational migration was one of the currents that boosted urban modernity in the Americas by integrating cultures and languages across three continents (Games 2008). As Moya observes, intercontinental migration brought “the extremes: of global forces and local conditions, of the world and the village” as influences on society making in Latin America (Moya 1998: 40). The process is more complex than images of a singular movement would suggest. In the era of one way mass movements, migrants often moved in three steps from interior regions to ocean voyages, and then either settlement, or a further internal migration (Belich 2009; Moya 2007; Nugent 1992).

Up until the mid-nineteenth century, most migrations were involuntary and most migrants were indentured servants or slaves. Their paths intersected in plantations, mines, and farms. The wealth they extracted, harvested, and produced enriched cities as well as the lands colonized in earlier inland expansion. From the 1870s onwards, mass voluntary migration predominated, converting internal movements in the European continent into large-scale one-way transfers of Atlantic proportions. Over time, such movements then turned into secondary migration to frontiers, plains, border regions, deserts, and inland cities. This dynamic produced a spectrum
of fateful migratory experiences, which defined societies in the Americas in patterns quite
different from African and European societies (Eisenstadt 2002; Wagner, 2015).

In other work, I theorize the dynamics of metropolitan imaginaries more extensively and
explore the institution of these dynamics in North American metropolitan imaginaries (Smith,
2018). In examining Latin America, I set two different aims. First, I address the imbalanced
focus in the English-language literature on cities of North America by sketching the
significance of mass migration and economic and cultural connection for four cities in South
America. I go on to argue that the intensity of connections gives culture, architecture, and urban
design a conspicuous creativity. Second, where key sociologies of southern cities have
theorized them as urban imaginaries (García Canclini, 1997; Scorer, 2016; Silva Téllez, 2003),
I argue that Latin America’s major cities are creations of metropolitan imaginaries. I
distinguish the latter by the quality of international and regional connections that they generate,
a quality derived from the mass of cultural and economic flows they are integrated into. As
lively centers with greater connection to international and regional networks, metropolises
produce greater magnitude for creativity and organic creation. They are internationally
significant as places of architectural practice. The literature on urban imaginaries
underestimates this important dimension of metropolitan centers. I go the other way in this
essay in my examination of nineteenth and twentieth century Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Sao
Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro. I do so by emphasizing how the strength of connectivity that they
enjoyed and the creativity they bring forth differentiate these centers.

In the Latin American literature, we find a complex paradox in debates about city making
(García Canclini, 1997; Silva Téllez, 2003). On one hand, scholars in the fields of demography,
architecture, and urban design treat cities as imaginary creations in the sense that their
inhabitants seek to bring order to urbanization. On the other hand, an overall image of
uncontrollable dynamism shines through in the literature. Cities are ever-changing ecologies,
combining multiple dynamics, agents, practices, and institutions beyond any purposeful ordering process. As ecologies, cities are irrepressible formations that no singular will or plan can subdue. The imaginary complex perpetually unsettles the modern meaning of cities, constantly reconfiguring patterns of city formation and delimiting how policy and planning processes can shape urban reproduction and transformation. Cities variously form on this paradox of attempted rational ordering and complex ecology. How that occurs in specific contexts is one of the central questions motivating theoretical and empirical research into urban imaginaries. With higher connectivity to international and regional networks, the question applies to metropolitan cities even more.

Against this backdrop of discussion on Latin American urban imaginaries, I wish to utilize a specific concept of imaginary. Following Castoriadis, I differentiate metropolitan imaginaries from urban imaginaries in order to focus on the tension of instituted and instituting imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987). Castoriadis’ ontology suggests that societies have a contingent and highly dynamic character — a characterization certainly well suited to the ecological complex of metropolitan cities. However, one addition is essential to mention — his emphasis on the social historical institution of society, which rests on a tension of continuity and discontinuity in history. In Castoriadis’ own words, the social historical institution “structures, institutes, materializes. In short, it is the union and the tension of instituting society and of instituted society, of history made and of history in the making.” (Castoriadis, 1987: 108). Societies are wholes, made and transformed in processes of creation. They are imaginary ecological complexes in which people interact as creative agents in an environment engulfed in the anonymous collective creation of society. I suggest that this is a different way of understanding the paradox. Georg Simmel’s sociological theorization of the metropolis also captures this paradox of the individual and the anonymous collective, albeit within an interactionist paradigm (Simmel, 1976). For Simmel, the metropolitan experience entails a routine in which
the individual encounters familiar places, known people, and an anonymous physical mass of the large city itself, which is replete with strangers. Simmel pointed to the manner in which inhabitants with an established habitus enact daily routines to negotiate a metropolis so familiar and so strange both at once.

Viewed in light of Castoriadis’ theory of the imaginary institution of society, the paradox of cities highlighted in debates on Latin America’s urban imaginaries appears to indicate two ways in which large metropolitan cities are exceptional. First, they are places of flow. People move into metropolises, and then encounter their metropolitan world daily. City dwellers also encounter new arrivals there. Many of those are migrants, both rural and immigrant newcomers. Intercultural encounters are possible in these conditions, although continuous estrangement and mutual hostility frequently arise in the place of intercultural consociation. Second, metropolitan centers are centers of invention. The traffic in ideas flowing through them stimulates creativity. Being this kind of environment, metropolises attract designers: architects, planners, and engineers. They institute an intense interactive environment of creativity, which, in turn, invites creative agents. Yet, there is unplanned ingenuity evident in the self-sufficient neighborhood formation and community organization that occurs in the informal zones of the metropolises, often irrespective of the acute social conditions they are widely known for. The favelas of Latin America set major southern cities apart from comparable new world metropolises in the United States and Canada. In summary, metropolitan cities stand out from other cities because of the intensity of encounters and interaction that they host and the creative environments they foster. Both rest on a tension of an instituted and instituting imaginary.

In this essay, I compare the Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Sao Paolo, and Rio in order to argue that Atlantic patterns of mass migration and large-scale city making distinguish these four as cities with their own metropolitan imaginaries. Limitations of space constrain me from exploring other viable cases, such as Montevideo, Havana, Santiago, Belo Horizonte, and
Lima. The four I have selected relate to transnational currents of people, trade, doctrines, sciences, arts, and methods in ways that give them dynamism. The makers of modern new world metropolises acted and conflicted in those currents. Metropolitan imaginaries instituted conditions in which creative milieu could invent modes of urban design and new styles of architecture. This, along with migration, propelled the imaginary institution of southern metropolitan lights.

**Southern lights—migration**

Before examining each metropolis, I have a brief corrective to the prevalent focus on the US in studies of new world migration. Moya’s thesis that a flourishing phase of trans-Atlantic immigration straddled the turn of the century from 1870 to 1914 emphasizes high levels of immigration to Latin America’s major metropolises (Moya, 1998; Moya, 2006: 416-434; Moya, 2007; see also Pizarro, 2001). While only fifteen percent of the population lived in towns and cities in 1900 (Moya, 2007: 184-190), those major cities were centerpieces of Latin American modernity due to their connections with global capitalism, politics, and cultural transformations. The flow of immigration from Europe slowed in the 1930s. After World War 2, movement between Latin American countries became the prominent migratory pattern maintaining the character of many as “host” societies (Pizarro, 2001). Higher wages, economic growth, and proximity to the expanding peripheries of capitals, along with the loss of employment opportunities in agriculture and the acceleration of projects of resource extraction, drew people to metropolitan centers, making Latin America a highly urbanized world region by the end of the twentieth century. By this time, the region’s megacities were absorbing large numbers of new rural internal migrants (Pizarro, 2001). Movement from one country in the region to another also accelerated. As receiving countries — both at the start and at the end of the twentieth centuries — Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina seem to feature the most vibrant
metropolitan imaginaries, in other words, the most vital places of creation and creativity. We start with Buenos Aires, then turn to Mexico City, and finally Sao Paulo, and Rio.

**Buenos Aires**

*...gobernar es poblar* (Juan Bautista Alberdi, cited in Nugent (1992: 112)

That patterns of immigration to Argentina did not fulfil Alberdi’s vision of exhaustive Europeanization of the population is a testament to the complex forces at work in the chains of connection integrating states, markets, and cultures in Atlantic modernity. In the mass movement of migrants out of Europe, more than twenty percent set out for the River Plate region (Moya, 1998: 47). Buenos Aires’ population doubled in the 1880s, repeating the feat in the 1890s (Moya, 1998; Rock & Rock, 1987: 153). By 1914, it was, arguably, the foremost capital in the Western hemisphere. As free arable land began to run out, migrants found themselves unable to make a livelihood outside of the cities. Migrants experienced a process of proletarianization in this phase (Nugent, 1992: 118-119), which was also one of industrialization in the city. Buenos Aires was a fast emerging metropolis of newcomers.

As Argentina’s proportion of foreign-born accelerated to overtake even the US, reaching fifty eight percent (Nugent, 1992: 112), Buenos Aires became a place for “strangers in the city” (Sarlo, 2000: 113-115). In population, immigration made its ecology multi-ethnic. Italians, Spaniards, Poles, Germans, Russians, Lebanese, Turks, French, Syrians, Scots, the Welsh, and the English came in numbers (Nugent, 1992: 114). Immigrant communities initiated their own organizations to provide welfare and social activities. Moya’s study of Spanish community associations and friendly societies, highlights how Spaniards forged a distinct cultural identity (Moya, 1998). Argentine Jews also sustained a relatively stable
metropolitan identity during this period (Liwerant, 2009). Migration to the Latin new world promised Britons, in particular, a better life and reward for the virtues of wealth-producing labor. This was one aspect of a tight connection between the two countries produced by informal British imperialism. The English may have done well, but for many others in the metropolis, conditions were harsh. Sex slavery and abuses of workers’ rights entrenched some in a miserable existence (Rock & Rock, 1987: 176). Furthermore, for the middle-class rising out of the established popular classes, there was a loss of recognition of the stable class hierarchy of an earlier era. Creative communities in the city were displacing an ascriptive social order at a high tempo. In that respective, it was not only New York that generated *anomie* in the new world. Buenos Aires also encapsulated the hustle of Atlantic modernity.

As an Atlantic country, republican Argentina was quite open to the flux of global trade. The state actively framed a legal and political environment conducive to economic connection. From a littoral position of exposure to international forces, Buenos Aires-based merchants were able to bring pressure to bear on public authorities when it came to trade matters. In response, governments brought predictability to Argentina’s position in international markets through contractarian law (Adelman, 1999). Infrastructure complemented the metropolis’ internationality. Port, rail, and tram building, along with communications, sewerage, and electrification, enhanced the city’s claim to modernity (Rock & Rock, 1987: 144-147). Rail emanated from the capital, aiding the conquest of the Pampas and Patagonia and accelerating internal processes of state formation. The nexus between agriculture and industry patterned a network of rail connections from the capital to the country’s outer reaches. Buenos Aires would not have been the energetic metropolis of national and international renown without its international, cross-American, and provincial networks.

At the hub, of a national network, Buenos Aires’ elites could press their claim to leadership of the Argentinian state. Coexisting with the self-enriching elite in Buenos Aires,
British capital and British traders provided competition for resources, but also a complementary dynamism. With British investment on the rise, the city modernized rapidly. By the end of the nineteenth century, local elites had elements of cosmopolitanism (Sarlo, 2000). They crafted a porteño metropolitan culture. At the same time, porteños were subject to a cultural normalization of exchange associated with capitalist market cultures (Salvatore, 2001). Being accustomed to the cultural imports of flows of philosophy, art, literature and theatre, they were equally open to trade and investment.

There were international influences in city making also. French metropolitan design was visible in the Haussmann-like makeover of the center (Arbide, 1995; Needell, 1995). Geometric boulevards, plazas lined with monumental buildings, and spacious promenades augmented the aesthetic effects of a landscape city (Beriman, 2015). Yet, the capital’s atmosphere diverged in important ways. Along the boulevards, statues and monuments smuggled in Baroque expressions of power. Tall buildings complemented monumental streets. Moreover, the shape of the core had been an artefact of multiple architectural innovations that produced a distinctive look for Buenos Aires. Building exteriors became a primary feature of this distinctive period architecture. The capital’s architectonics displayed American influences also. American finance moved in. Industrial investments from American manufacturers designed plants in the US style. Working class zones grew rapidly in the 1920s. Remarkably, the barrios and shanty towns continued to expand in the Depression years, spurred by further investment in protected manufacturing and textile sectors (Rock & Rock, 1987: 232-234). This was expansion beyond the city’s plans.

Certain architectural influences prevailed in the model of Buenos Aires. Architectural modernism was not a matter of individual genius. Rather, collaboration was the master key to creativity, particularly in architectural firms (Arbide, 1995). As with other Latin American metropolises, local schools of architectural imagination and inspiration coalesced. The
municipal council and a new School of Architecture at the city’s university became the focus of an Argentine urbanism. Buenos Aires’ Council introduced an Urban Planning and Building Aesthetic Commission and a Building Code in the 1920s, which framed the aesthetics of new neighborhoods. At the School of Architecture, scholars fostered a vernacular modernism (Guillen, 2004: 18-21). Argentine architects journeying overseas learned from other schools of design and brought the lessons home. They applied those techniques along with local styles in the central commercial and public buildings in the metropolis. Modernist banks, office buildings, and department stores thus found a place at the heart of Buenos Aires as built expressions of Atlantic modernity.

Up until the emergence of Peronism, these were two local influences shaping Buenos Aires. Peronism introduced an architectural strategy of re-fashioning public space to alter the structural settings of the new populist imaginary (Domingues, 2016; Scorer, 2016: 135-43). The regime used the Plaza de Mayo as a symbol of access to the centers of decision making for its organized political base (Podalsky, 2004: 35-39). Public places became sites of conflict and spectacle. Nonetheless, through its careful selection of major projects, the regime did much to enhance the cult of Juan and Evita Peron in public spaces (Del Rosario Betti, 2006). Peronism promoted an austere neoclassical aesthetics that substantialized power. At the same time, the new buildings emphasized democratic access for the masses, aiming “to dignify the lower class” (Del Rosario Betti, 2006: 233). Juxtaposed to this physical mass of power was the existing social Californian architecture of middle-class homes, which were picturesque expressions of the domestic sphere. The two competing tendencies ensured that the city continued to bear a culture of ambivalence.

Architecturally and culturally, much changed after Peron (Podalsky, 2004). Following Podalsky, we can identify a general trend of modernism continued that through to the 1980s in the constructions of key architectural local firms. From suburban and mass housing to
multinational skyscrapers, aspects of functionalist form inserted themselves in the capital’s redevelopment. New companies specializing in sourcing materials and technology from overseas completed major projects during this rationalist phase of construction. In particular, the city’s visage re-formed around Miesian towers, which were symbols of new commerce and finance (Podalsky, 2004: 12-15, 176-178). Buenos Aires’ skyscrapers were implants in a varied cityscape. Surrounding them was a con-urban re-figuration of diverse residential zones beyond the center (Podalsky, 2004: 178-181). Outside of the center, the metropolis stood (and still stands) fragmented (Scorer, 2016). It became divided between high security and well serviced zones of wealthy porteños and self-sustaining and self-servicing working class barrios and shanty-towns (villas miseria) coexisting alongside them. The latter have been, by necessity, creative, adding hybridity to the city’s social geography. In Buenos Aires, an imaginary of order and chaos informs images of the dual metropolis and structures the interaction between its two sides.

Such changes to the urban landscape pre-figured the consumer metropolis of the 1990s (Podalsky, 2004: 229-235). Buenos Aires’ central buildings were still modernist glass structures, which exhibited transparency by admitting light. However, contemporary architecture has crowded around the center, leaving porteños of the late twentieth century to visualize the city through an optic of late modernism. By the 1990s, Buenos Aires had become even more diverse. Latin American migration to Argentina increased in the last part of the century, adding further layers and divisions to existing porteño identity. As the structure had changed, its popular profile shifted. Spatially, the main axis still pointed to the greater Atlantic world. Along with its people, this axial orientation still symbolizes Argentina’s connection with global developments.

Mexico City
Over three centuries, Spanish colonialism left Mexico culturally mixed. In the new republic, the paradox of the metropolitan imaginary would feature in Mexico City as a tendency to absorb migrants and cultures *en masse*. This tendency was instituted in tension with efforts to make metropolitan places that reflect the historical and cultural plurality of the city. Mexico City from the republican era onwards was a city of in-flows and immersion in national, regional, and international networks. In immigration, Mexico City enjoyed a minor wave of European arrivals towards the end of the nineteenth century. Porfirio Diaz encouraged the trend of European immigration, as did the regimes of the southern cone at this time. The strongest current was Hispanic. Revival of dormant migration chains in the 1890s rekindled Spanish flows (Moya, 1998: 81-84). After World War 1, internal migration replaced the Spanish in-flow. At the metropolitan level, Mexico City’s population doubled in the first decade of the twentieth century (Reader, 2004: 186). Doubling again between 1940 and 1950, and then further tripling before 1970 (Oles, 2013: 313), the national capital experienced escalating growth in its population and its geographical imprint. Across the course of the century, the city’s boundaries expanded from the historic core and the Federal District to the greater Metropolitan Area. Increasingly, newcomers settled in peripheral neighborhoods. By century’s end, Mexico City was one of the most populous metropolises on the planet, having added three million extra inhabitants in the 1990s (Reader, 2004: 171). Of the eighteen million who called it home by that time, half were migrants. Much of populace is drawn by the promise of flight from poverty. They come from rural and mountainous areas of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Hidalgo Tlaxala, and Guerrero. With large numbers of migrants coming to a metropolis ill equipped to absorb them, Mexico City ended the century with a large informal sector, which is decidedly diverse in its composition, sub-cultures, and creative potential (Davis, 1994: 279-280; García Canclini, 1997).
In examining the metropolis’ shape, I touch on two aspects of its overall pattern, which reflect the paradox of metropolitan city making — historicity and modernism. The metropolitan fusion echoes what I characterize as intercivilizational engagement (Author, 2017). This was also characteristic of the pre-Conquest interaction of indigenous civilizations. As a place with indigenous meaning, Mexico’s formation was, from the outset, cast by the historical experiences of the Conquest and its lasting consequences.¹ In the Colombian era, the coexistence and conflict of two civilizations and two civilizational imaginaries, indio and Spanish, resonated deeply in the cultural memory of Mexico and its capital. The colonial confrontation of two civilizations sets a pattern of integration evident in the metropolis’ structure. Mexico City has been one of the diverse zones of the Spanish Americas both in its range of spoken languages and, in the postwar period, its physical commemoration of First Nations culture in museums, archaeological sites, sculptures, and public art (Bonfil Batalla, 1987: 73-96). Mexico’s profound past is memorialized through different media. The capital’s “intangible patrimony” composed of written histories, images, myths, pictures, photographs, recordings, and film memorialise at the intersection of tangible and intangible memory (García Canclini 1997: 92-4, 101). The intangible memory is as much a product of the “informal” metropolis as it is the organized and serviced city. To intangible memory, the informal sector brings popular and democratized meaning re-signifying the original semantics of public intersections and squares. To a great degree, metropolitan cultural memory is negotiable at the cusp of past and present, tangible and intangible, and formal and informal. Historicity infused both the complex ecology of the capital and the agency mobilized with the purpose of creatively shaping it.

As a second point, I want to suggest that Mexico City’s heritage includes a substantial modernist component. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mexico City retained in its architecture and urban form a visible material patrimony. It had developed this during so-
called Porfiriato period (1876 to the revolution) in which Diaz Porfirio presided over a national strategy of modernization. Borrowing directly from European currents of urban design, Diaz invited wealthy European and North American families to assist in the construction of a number of important buildings in Mexico City. The national government remodeled the city inscribing a modern culture in its built structures, metropolitan shape, and public spaces. A Francophone reconstruction of the central core in the 1880s engraved a positivist vision of modernity and progress in the urban fabric. With other influences also informing its development, Mexico City’s public spaces and heroic monuments exclaimed a cosmopolitan civic culture (Oles, 2013: 198-223; Trillo, 1996). Seen as part of a civilizing process, the reconstruction trained the streets and public spaces of the city, taming discontented inhabitants with open boulevards and figurative statues of historic heroes stylized for local tastes, and plazas (Trillo, 1996). The growing metropolis looked diverse at the start of the century. The Porfiriato regime must have felt confident in its civilizing achievements, as it took every opportunity to promote its multi-civilizational heritage and its urban culture internationally, including at numerous world fairs. The monumentality of the pre-revolutionary era left an optimistic progressivist landscape in the core of Mexico City as a further historical layer to its emergence as a metropolis in the twentieth century.

Structurally, the city lost some of its neoclassical luster during the first decade of revolution. Yet, it revived from there. Architecture’s growth as a profession from the late 1920s onwards reflected a long dialogue with Mexico’s past, as well as the international influences flowing through the country’s arts and sciences. Many of the latter came under the label of modernism. The metropolis experienced a period of modernist efflorescence between 1920 and 1940. Like many of Mexico’s cities, the capital grew after the Revolution on the back of state investment in services and early industry (Davis, 1994: 103-104). Funding dedicated to public buildings and parks created an environment best suited to a nascent
middle class. In architecture, a wider urban avant-garde of cultural critique brought rich
influences from within Mexico — particularly pre-Colombian revivalism — and from outside
of it (Carranza, 2010: 1-13; Mutlow, 2005). The monumentality of the Porfiriato era
continued in the innovations architects created (Carranza, 2010: 169-201). Yet, there were
breakthroughs also to new forms of urban design echoing the influences of numerous artists
(Carranza, 2010).

Indigenism, neocolonialism, art deco, neoclassicism, functionalism, and Cubism were
modernist influences on architectural training and practice. Functionalism, in particular, was
a coherent paradigm of design that enjoyed a period of influence in architecture from the
1920s to the 1960s. Many practitioners experimenting with functionalist designs were
seasoned travelers and thus ideal students of the International Styles, amongst others. Often,
they married Beaux-arts elements with functional utility. Creatively using cement,
functionalist architects designed with apertures to light and a sensitivity to color, local
heritage, and the surrounding landscape; in other words, their practice adapted elements of
location, culture, and history (Burian 1997; Carranza, 2010: 126-127; Mutlow 2005: 10-15).
Moreover, the arts inspired in functionalist designers the vivid use of color, reflecting an
infusion of indigenous, colonial, and republican legacies. Here, receptivity to other paradigms
was the practice in the creation of the physical environment.

By the last decade of the century, the metropolis had an emerging skyscraper
panorama around the south of the urban core. This only deepened the city’s notorious
congestion problems. Nevertheless, the upwards extension of the built environment highlights
another aspect of Mexico City. For much of the century, we do not find a concentration of
wealth, prestige, and income in a vertiginous Downtown center, as we typically find in many
Latin American cities (Davis, 1994: 296-297), but this was clearly starting to change. The flat
topography of spatially dispersed subdivisions was starting to shift as a more usual skyline
sprang up in the metropolis’ south. Notwithstanding this point of exception, Mexico City has a family resemblance to Sao Paolo, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro in many respects. The influx of people, ideas, doctrines, cultural influences, and economic goods suggests an overarching pattern shared by the other metropolitan cities. An unmistakable feature of is its mass absorption of migrants, from the regions, but also from other countries. Migration fueled a metropolitan ecology — a cultural figuration to which the agents of design endeavored to respond. Likewise, the metropolitan imaginary of the two cities we look at in the section below features migration and other inflows as a compelling component.

**Brazil’s metropolises**

Brazil’s Lusitanian heritage diverges from the rest of Iberian America. The Portuguese court sought refuge in Rio de Janeiro in the early nineteenth century. This was a formative precedent for republican city-making. Rio became more of a living focal point for Brazilian identity. From this time, this continental state forged an unusual path to nationhood, one conditioned by the ruling elites’ declaration of a constitutional monarchy, formally separate from Portugal in 1822. It is self-evident that the Court’s relocation mattered for Rio. However, Sao Paolo’s position as a counterpoint for the republican opposition is less obvious. By the time Brazil declared a republic in 1889, traditionalism had set its modernity and its principal city in a conservative cast. Demographically, Brazil was multiracial due to slavery, which was more intense throughout the territory and lasted longer than other countries in the Western Hemisphere. In the second half of the nineteenth century, nearly two million slaves underwent the ordeal of crossing the southern Atlantic Ocean in a “second slavery”, which particularly effected Brazil (Tomich, 1991). Slavery shaped both Sao Paulo and Rio in the nineteenth century and beyond. In this context, race dominated social relations in modern Brazil, not only in the era of slavery, but from its abolition onwards as well. It
features in the social hierarchy, cuts across the socio-economic divisions of cities, and characterizes the cultural landscape of the nation. The consequences of slavery were central also to the origins and trajectories of both Sao Paulo and Rio.

Atlantic modernity generated multiple chains of immigration for Brazil. Alongside the African presence, it is notable that large numbers also came from Europe. The main arrivals until the 1870s were Germans and Italians (Nugent, 1992: 122-125). The immigration nexus connected Sao Paulo state in particular with international developments. With slavery ending in the 1880s, the volume of immigrants accelerated and the range of sending countries diversified to include Spain, Japan, Austria, and Russia on top of traditional sources. Three million came in the four decades between 1880 and 1920. Assistance for passage was available, but some newcomers sponsored themselves. Initially, many of the latter ended up as sharecroppers. Migrants coming in later waves found that the path to landownership was resolutely blocked and so increasingly settled in cities. New migrants would head for the port of Rio de Janeiro and the center of Sao Paulo in greater numbers to become metropolitan Brazilians. In the wake of the republic’s separation from the monarchy, both metropolises began to assume the appearance of cosmopolitanism. English and French could be heard from the lips of the wealthy and students (Owensby, 1999: 19). The newcomers hearing those voices and languages would soon know that they were joining cities increasingly connected with foreign trade and imbued with market cultures (Owensby, 1999: 18-26), just as Buenos Aires was at this time. In social relations, commerce and wage labor became the norm. Metropolitan elites acting as benefactors to social networks did not lose the power of patronage; they merely adapted habits and practices of clientelism to processes of marketization.

Immigration was vital for Brazil. While the numbers in metropolitan centers are not as spectacular as they were for Argentina, the impact was still profound. Rio’s population
quadrupled over five decades. However, Sao Paulo’s populace increased nearly fifteen-fold, enhancing its status as the thriving metropolis of the southern plantation district (Moya, 2007: 188). The national inflow peaked in 1891, ensuring that the high water mark of foreign influence was registered in the 1900 census. Immigration reached its height earlier than other American countries and its closure came later with the government legislated restrictions in 1927. However, a wider view of migration can be taken in this respect. Internal linkages also mattered throughout this period. Rural migrants came to Rio and Sao Paolo, attracted by the possibility of better economic fortunes and, consequently, boosting the rates of urbanization. Industry was disproportionately centered on the regions surrounding Sao Paolo and Rio. Sao Paulo in particular benefitted from migration exceeding half a million inhabitants by 1920 as bi-product of an unpredictable phase of industrialization (Owensby, 1999: 27-28 Topik, 1985: 217-219). Sao Paulo emerged as the nation’s premier economic site. By 1950, Sao Paulo had three million people, while Rio trailed it with two and a half million (Owensby, 1999: 48). Like much of the sub-continent, Brazil also experienced a vein of emigration from the 1970s, much of it stimulated by political developments in Europe and in the rest of Latin America. The number of emigrants leaving for Portugal spiked after the 1974 revolution. As a countervailing trend, flows from other Latin American countries increased. Reaching ten million by century’s end, Sao Paulo had become one of Latin America’s metropolitan giants. Along with Rio, Sao Paulo stands out amongst cities in Brazil. This is not only a matter of demography and mass; it is the power, centrality, and creativity of the two cities that distinguishes them.

There is much to be learnt from the tension of design and dynamism in Brazil’s metropolises. At the century’s opening decade, city leaders in Rio produced visions of development that would order the urban space while extending connection to provincial cities and areas by transport and communication lines (da Silva, 2002b). Provincial connections
supplemented its mainly British shipping links. Joining those cities inspired by French reconstruction of the original centers, Rio witnessed a Hausmannian takeover of the colonial heritage at the end of the nineteenth century. Brazil’s elite committed to a “civilizing mission” in line with its adoption of positivism (Carvalho de, 1992; Needell, 1995). On one hand, this meant that boulevards, clubs, shops, theatres, cafes, parks, and cars conjured up a theatre of diversion for downtown elites. The growing sensibilities of distinction and cultivation of the white-collar middle class divided city workers from manual laborers (Owensby, 1999: 58-71). On the other hand, the modernization program provoked conflict in Rio itself. The municipal government vigorously prosecuted a sanitation campaign, which, in turn, pushed the poor away from downtown areas further into zones of improvisation, thereby producing the first *favela*. In the process of constructing an orderly core, Rio’s elites relocated to Beaux-arts *hotels* more removed from the traditional center (Needell, 1995: 533-537). A long and uneven process of partitioning Rio had begun in which *favelas* and formal housing would be inexorably conjoined, but never mixed.6 The *favelas* are a landmark of creative dynamism and self-help stimulating impulses to collective self-organization and improvisation. For the formal city, reform was the agenda and it enjoyed intermittent but vital support from city and state governments. This contrast marked Rio apart for a short time, until informal settlements began to spring up elsewhere.

Sao Paulo started from a lower base yet expanded more spectacularly. Rail and tramlines marked the institution of the city as a powerful regional centre (da Silva, 2002a: 92-98). With such swift growth, the city acquired a singular aesthetic quality, which went unchallenged until the 1920s. Designed according to positivist principles of rational civic order, Sao Paulo imagined and constructed shapely modern-looking avenues that wound in and around major public spaces. Central Paris was not the only inspiration. Engineers and architects had a keen appreciation of innovations in North American and British cities. By the
late 1920s, Sao Paulo was an exemplar of the City Beautiful Movement, giving it aspects of
comparison with many other metropolitan cities. Modernism would impact on this trajectory
also, just as it did for the other cases discussed in the current essay.

The popularity of modernism sets Brazil apart from other Latin American cities. Out
of modernism emerged a basis for the synthesis of different architectural currents in the
twentieth century (Lara, 2010). Known widely as “tropical modernism”, an original Brazilian
language of design flourished from the 1920s to the 1960s on the back of vibrant adaptation
(Andreoli, 2004; Le Blanc, 2012). During this period, Brazilian urban design could depend
on an assured reputation as Latin America’s foremost country for architectural practice.7
Indeed, the postwar regime regarded tropical modernism as the means to globalize Brazil’s
national identity (Winterbottom, 2016: 8-9). For a time, this strategy succeeded well enough.
At its peak, the international prestige of Brazilian designers seemed to be flying high.
Consolidation of the academic discipline in university curricula at the outset of Vargas’ rule
in 1930 certainly helped lay down the pre-conditions of this phase (Guillen, 2004: 26). So too
did the fact that Rio maintained a particularly robust school of architecture, whose work
thrived in the environment of support from the regime for architectural modernization in Rio.
Sao Paulo was not left behind at all in the development of an architectural profession: it was
indeed the metropolitan incubator for much that is distinctive about Brazilian vernacular style
(Winterbottom, 2016: 83). Creative agency in Sao Paolo, however, emerged independently of
the populist regime in the architectural and fine arts.

Of course, in terms of modernism, the Federal capital of Brasilia is the most
extraordinary exemplar of the CIAM School of practice led by Le Corbusier. Although
Brasilia is not considered here at length, a few remarks are obligatory. It is no exaggeration to
say that Le Corbusier’s influence in Brazil was stronger than anywhere else in Latin America
at this time (Andreoli, 2004; da Silva, 2002b:101-104; Guillen, 2004). Arguably, the
The influence of CIAM has been overstated for other countries. However, it is undeniable that the International style—which Therborn classes as “developmentalist modernism” (Therborn, 1999: 30)—was famously encoded into the design of Brazil’s Federal capital. In Brasilia, leading architects Lucio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, and Burle Marx brought Le Corbusier’s principles to the foundation of a whole city. Embarking on this project was a declaration of willful intent and nationalist optimism (Lara, 2010: 30-31). The capital’s design epitomizes the utopian ideal of the civilized city, a reformist vision that found ample succor in European modernism. While architects only got the chance to apply this vision wholly to one city, the doctrine from which this hope sprang informed national trends in tropical modernism that emphasized Brazilian touches in Sao Paolo and Rio.

Modernist architecture went on to harness industrial materials to construct apartment towers and offices on a large-scale elsewhere in the country. Brazil’s celebrated generation of architects — Sergio Bernandes, Jorge Moreira, Joao Artigas, Ernau Vasconcellos, Rino Levi, and the Milan brothers — aimed at masterly fusions of engineering and aesthetics, producing along the way structures that diverged from purist functionalism (Le Blanc, 2012). However, since the 1960s, Brazilian architecture has continued to labor fruitfully, but without admirers either internationally or indeed within Brazil itself (Andreoli, 2004). Original designs continued to appear. Architects made use of artistic accessories, landscapes, ceramic tiles, and colors in educational, commercial, cooperative, and residential buildings in the major cities. In this phase, there was less call for new stock of public infrastructure, or indeed for innovation in larger commercial or cooperative projects. Dynamism is instead found in medium sized structures and housing. Furthermore, the groundswell of collaboration with artists from the 1970s ensured combinations of imaginative design would feature in the built environment and would be an ongoing source of ingenuity. Connections to Japanese, German, and Austrian architects and schools of design opened up channels for exchange as
well as opportunities for international practitioners to bring their faculties and techniques to Brazil. In addition to adopting new foreign influences, metropolitan practitioners have diversified their materials. Like the Mexicans, they continue to build with concrete in major projects. However, the most innovative designs increasingly incorporated rustic and ecological motifs into their medium and small-scale structures. Contemporary architects have taken these and other new infusions that demarcate divergences from modernism into exploratory fields of practice.

The 1990s capped the century with breakaway constructivist currents showing a sharper departure from tropical modernism. Under the conditions of a consolidated democracy, architectural and urban design began to experiment a great deal again. Rio and Sao Paulo’s architectural firms began to show a willingness to engage emergent young designers as a new practicing generation. With Rio, this means a cityscape blend of period styles. One cultural historian writes of Rio’s “decadence” that in entering the metropolis “I do not feel like I have moved back in time, but rather that I have stepped into a different time, and sense of time, altogether” (Winterbottom, 2016: 5, italics in original). Rio imparts Brazil’s different sense of temporality. In Rio, the new sits alongside colonial heritage structures and neoclassical, art nouveau, deco, and eclectic styles. In this environment, new buildings age without ever being old. Some of the art deco property built after Rio’s announcement of modernization in the 1920s survives as contested heritage in a mixed landscape. The cityscape of period architecture attesting to unfulfilled visions of the future is an architectonic articulation of strategies of combination experimented with over time. In contrast, Sao Paulo materializes as frightfully new. Its skyscraper skyline is, by any measure, particularly conspicuous. As well as occupying a vast spatial footprint, this rapid-growth metropolis is a veritable vertical sprawl. Yet, room remains for creative divergence from the massed skyscrapers of the city. As much as anywhere else in Brazil, Paulist architecture
reflects modernism’s influence (Andreoli, 2004). In its major structures, brutalism applied
with technical subtlety was a major post-functionalist genre. Although sourcing national
materials with greater regularity, architects still made only a partial turn to the local climate.

Sao Paulo has acquired a reputation as Latin America’s most expensive city, even as
it began to diversify itself economically. The historic nucleus has experienced a degree of
evacuation, leaving a stock of vacant residences (Lima & Pallamin, 2010). At the same time,
development of informal neighborhoods and peri-urban business districts were distinctive
features of the last two decades of the century, which deepened the segmented character of
the city and its appearance “as a mosaic of misplaced pieces” (Lima & Pallamin, 2010: 39).
Informal settlements sprang up in Brasilia at this time, dotting the perimeter with patterns of
popular appropriation of space. However, the consequences were not the same as they were
for interconnected and densely populated Sao Paolo. In Sao Paolo, by way of contrast with
Brasilia, the developmental logic brought about regionalization beyond the boundaries of the
city and its informal peripheries. In addition to this, the developmental logic increased
conflict, a phenomenon further animated by the rise of neo-localist politics. The polarity of
the city was both source and environment for social movements concerned with housing and
workers’ rights. Arguably, it is only in this atmosphere that a vehicle like the Workers Party
and Lula, as its prominent leader, could arise in the manner that both did. Sao Paulo
encapsulated the sharp conflicts that arise in a massified metropolitan environment in which
skyscrapers and favela communities confront one another.

Conclusion
The cities I examine in this essay are instantiations of the metropolitan imaginary. Each is a
condensation of mass movement and logics of creation and destruction. In this complex
ecology of movement, interaction, and engagement, we find agents and agencies endeavoring
to order metropolitan spaces with the sciences and arts of architecture, urban design, and engineering. Massive one-way migration set new world metropolises apart from their old world counter-parts. In the last two centuries, the four metropolises attracted many newcomers. Major port cities became metropolises, but so did other in-land cities, as we see with Mexico City. What distinguished their metropolitan imaginaries was the lure of people, economic goods and flows, and creative practitioners *en masse* and the production of ecologies of creativity. The amassing of cities sets major metropolitan centers apart; they become cities of the metropolitan mind, as Simmel argues (Simmel, 1976). Some were premier cities at particular junctures (such as the “global cities” of the 1990s). The creation of the mass metropolis was thereby the making of meaning-infused spaces in which the intensity of experience of the anonymous collective becomes a shared metropolitan habitus. Southern metropolises condensed the effects of economic flows, multiple migratory movements, and the circulation of ideas and practices, particularly in architecture and urban design, which were both rationalistic and artistic at the same time. Yet, there is also a “dark underbelly” of new world mass urbanism resulting from the dislocating and destructive effects of modernity. Southern metropolises are beset with critical environmental problems, shortages of accessible quality housing, a deep divide between formal and informal zones, crime, fear, insecurity, and deadlocks in transport. They are the effects of an instituted and instituting metropolitan imaginary, to paraphrase Castoriadis. Metropolitan Americans have made southern cities through imagination and agency by creating in the tensions of these impulses and structures, of institution and design, and of migration and belonging. Southern cities confront the challenge of a new kind of metropolis with this heritage. How they do so is a topic for further research.
References


Anthropological perspectives shine a particular light on how Mexico’s culture is layered with the sediments of the past (Bonfil Batalla 1987).

I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

Thus, southern Brazil benefited more generally from labor migration following famine and strikes in Europe (Therborn, 1999: 12).

Some 6.2 percent of the population were born elsewhere at this time.

Under the populist regime of General Vargas, which followed, intake became even more constricted. Yet, Sao Paulo’s ethnic communities ensured that the city’s cosmopolitan appearance grew.

Lara (2010) argues that the widespread resonance of modernism is the main reason why favela housing is so popular in Brazil. The designs mimic the form and building techniques of modernist middle-class housing.

Modernist arts also flourished concurrently with the design arts, later informing the development of architecture more directly.