

Sao Paulo, A Graphic Biography / by Felipe Correa

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With just over 12 million inhabitants, Sao Paulo is the largest city in South America. Its metropolitan region, with almost 22 million inhabitants, ranks as the fifth most populous in the world and is the economic, financial, and cultural centre of Brazil. Despite being founded over 450 years ago, Sao Paulo, as we know it, has been largely built since World War II. The combination of rapid and uncontrolled expansion with decades of a largely utilitarian approach to urban development, in one of the countries with the highest levels of income inequality in the world, has generated many complex social and environmental challenges. It is no secret that Sao Paulo deserves careful and critical analysis of its complex spatial structure, and the author, Felipe Correa, makes a bold contribution to this and offers some insightful ideas for the sustainable redevelopment of Sao Paulo's large swathes of post-industrial land. The author's approach in this book is similar to that presented in his earlier book about Mexico City co-written with Carlos G. Alfaro, *Mexico City: Between Geometry and Geography* (2014), in that gives an overview of the city's fast-paced growth through archival material, photography, analytical drawings, and text, and has an interdisciplinary approach.

The book is bilingual, with all text appearing in both English and Portuguese on each page. It is organized around five sections (or topical units as the author calls them). Section A, *Sao Paulo: Models of Urban Growth* takes up just over half of the volume. It is organized in eight topics and includes a collection of writings by professionals and theorists from fields as varied as landscape architecture, ecology, governance, and public health. This section is particularly important as it gives the reader a comprehensive overview of the processes that have shaped Sao Paulo's growth over time, and introduces ideas and projects tackling the challenges resulting from the city's utilitarian and disjointed approach towards water management, transport and urban planning. The first sub-section, *City of Ridges and Valleys*, focuses on topography and hydrology. It presents a visual analysis of Sao Paulo's rapid expansion, highlighting some of the problems created by the channelling of rivers and the occupation of flood plains. The second, *City of Citadels*, focuses on Sao Paulo's variegated urban grid, introducing design strategies to better connect the city's districts. The third, *City of Points*, examines the process of verticalization and calls for more attention to how contemporary tall buildings are meeting the ground. The fourth,

Cities of Spreads and Densities, examines how the city's mobility infrastructure developed over time and argues that it should be transformed from an autonomous system to one that better integrates the city's urban and natural environments. The fifth, *Cities of Voids*, examines the types and distribution of open spaces in the city. The sixth, *City of Collective Living*, concentrates on the most progressive market and affordable multifamily residential projects. The seventh, *City of Warehouses*, analyses Sao Paulo's industrial development spatially, particularly along the railway lines and the city's main river, Tietê. It calls attention to opportunities for regeneration and the need to preserve some of the city's industrial legacy. Finally, *City of Layered Economies* analyses the development of the city's many growth areas across time.

Section A not only offers a major contribution to understanding Sao Paulo's urban and environmental challenges but also builds a strong design argument for more articulated solutions encompassing different spatial scales and areas (transport planning, urban planning through the mixing of uses, and urban design). One aspect that I would like to have seen covered in this section or even in other parts of the book relates to informal settlements and favelas. Given that they house roughly 30% of Sao Paulo's inhabitants and many are located around Sao Paulo's main water reservoirs, they should not be disregarded. Unfortunately, they were only briefly mentioned in the context of water management, mobility infrastructure and public health, particularly in the essays by Renato Anelli and Marcia C. Castro.

Sections B, C and D—*Collective Living in South America*, *Mobility Infrastructure: Driver of the Urban Project*, and *Urban Plans and Visions: A Genealogy of Sao Paulo*—bring together an impressive range case studies from Sao Paulo and from a variety of cities around the world, providing new design ideas and solutions. Section B showcases ten multifamiliar buildings that have pushed the boundaries of residential design in South America between the 1930s and the 1980s and provides an overview of other ten significant projects in some South American cities. The case studies chosen—such as the Reurbanización El Silencio—one of the first affordable housing projects in South America—designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva in 1941, and Edifício Altolar, designed by Walter James Alcock in 1965, both in Caracas—form a rich compilation of good examples of South American residential architecture. The reader will find axonometric views, sections and plans of all developments and details about some of them.

Section C investigates how well-designed mobility infrastructure solutions can contribute to urban life by enabling new urban forms and uses over time and by structuring and connecting urban interventions. This section showcases examples from places as varied as Algiers and Hong Kong, meant to be used as points of reference for the upgrading of Sao Paulo's transport networks. Section D provides an inventory of thirteen significant built and unbuilt projects that have gradually constructed the city's urbanist discourse. This is an important section as it gives the

reader a good understanding of architects' imaginaries and some of the most important design visions for the city.

The final section of the book, *An Evolutionary Plan: Connecting the City to the River*, proposes a collection of projects for the area of the Arco Tietê, a post-industrial inner-city region of 40km² located between the Tietê River and the city's main rail lines. The author argues that to successfully transform the area, policymakers and practitioners need to focus on re-scaling its heavyweight mobility infrastructure, rethink the relationship between the city and the river and its floodplain, give new identities and uses to former industrial areas while protecting some exemplar buildings of this era.

Overall, the book's focus on interscalarity allows for a remarkably comprehensive analysis of Sao Paulo's geometric and organizational complexity and this alone makes it an important resource to both professionals and students of architecture, urban design or urban planning, who are interested in Sao Paulo. All the images and maps are of extremely high quality, although in a few instances, aesthetics seems to have been prioritized over readability. Nonetheless, what makes this book valuable is that it not only carefully situates some of Sao Paulo's most complex problems, but also articulates ambitious, but undoubtedly doable, design proposals which, if materialized, would significantly improve the quality of life of those living in Sao Paulo.

References:

Correa, F., Garciavelez Alfaro, C., 2014. Mexico City: between geography and geometry. Applied Research + Design, San Francisco, California.