



Municipal housing on the outskirts of São Paulo

São Paulo, the largest city in South America, is an arsenal of statistics for the shock-and-awe urbanist. You might read that São Paulo is a megacity of 19 million people, and that it has grown 8,000 per cent since 1900. Does that help us understand the city? Does it reveal some essential characteristic? In a limited sense, yes, but it also reinforces what we already know. Speed has always been this city's *raison d'être*. In *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote of his time there in 1935: "The town is developing so fast that it is impossible to obtain a map of it." In the middle of the 20th century, when the city was the engine of the "Brazilian Miracle", a popular slogan proclaimed "São Paulo must not stop" — it was "the unstoppable city".

Today, despite the staggering statistics, São Paulo is slowing down. The population is not growing anywhere near as fast as it used to, but all of that growth is happening in one zone: the periphery. São Paulo's sprawling fringes reveal a city that is still very much in the making, still somehow raw. It is a place where the sacrifices that people make for access to the city are written into the landscape, into the fabric of their homes. Cities that grow this fast grow in an unconsolidated way, and so while the periphery is full of pathos it is also full of potential.

This is the record of a drive around the periphery of São Paulo. In *London Orbital*, Iain Sinclair spent months walking the M25, the city's ring road, in an attempt to understand and embrace the sprawl. I have no such inclinations, and not just because the distances involved are even more perverse. São Paulo is not a city for walking, it's a city of cars — six million of them. In that spirit, this is emphatically a drive, and as such it is an unapologetically blurred snapshot of a city

taken from a moving vehicle, with occasional stops here and there to stretch our legs. But while I doff my cap to Sinclair, in one respect he had it easier: São Paulo has no M25. There are plans for a ring road, the Rodoanel Mario Covas, a 170km-long four-lane motorway. Indeed, one section of it opened in 2002, but the project stalled. Instead we'll be patching together our own orbital, a spaghetti of roads named Ayrton Senna and Presidente Dutra, Nordestino and Imigrantes — some of these names contain clues as to how this city grew so corpulent.

Our route will take us anti-clockwise around the city, which offers the irresistible conceit that this is a journey backwards in time. In telling the story of social and informal housing in São Paulo, we will start with the conditions that face its most recent arrivals, and work back through other forms of housing that previous decades have offered. As we work backwards through those iterations, a fairly clear picture will emerge of the different strategies the government has taken to house São Paulo's ever-growing population — and I include favelas in that “strategy”. Our trajectory will cut roughly from the present day back to a paragon of modernist social housing, and, even further, to a first world war-era workers village, all the way back to one of the missionary settlements that first purported to bring civilisation — or at least the word of God — to this part of Brazil in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But this is not just a survey of housing, it is a portrait of a city that is best understood by its edge condition.

The official centre of the city is Praça da Sé, the old cathedral square. Like Trafalgar Square in London, it is the point from which all distances to the city are measured, point zero. Yet Sé has none of the potency of a symbolic central square, nor any of the usual bustle. Like nearby Praça da Republica, another once grand plaza, it is symptomatic of the decline of São Paulo's historic centre.

Meanwhile, a few blocks north, the Centro district is now the preserve of pimps and prostitutes, and neighbouring Santa Ifigenia has been renamed Cracolândia: Crack Land — an open market for crack dealers and addicts, and a no-go zone after dark. This triangle has been notoriously resistant to gentrification, but that resistance is buckling. With the municipality's blessing, developers are demolishing entire blocks to realise their vision of Nova Luz, an upper middle-class quarter with a cultural centre designed by Herzog & de Meuron. As ever, speculation and land values take precedence over the current residents. The unlikely occupation of this central zone by the poor is coming to an end, and they will inevitably be decanted to the periphery.

Elsewhere in the centre, tourist guides will draw your attention to Oscar Niemeyer's meandering Edifício Copan, one of the largest residential buildings in the world. And a fine building it is too. But more telling than this landmark is a newer typology, the vertical slums that have blighted the centre in recent years. The São Vito tower was from the same era as the Copan but, far from representing the glamour of Brazilian modernism, it was recoded as a beacon of inner-city destitution. Its 27 storeys were occupied by squatters and its façade was a parchment of graffiti and broken windows until it was demolished in the summer of 2010. There are an estimated 40,000 abandoned buildings in São Paulo, and yet 2 million people live in favelas in the periphery. The municipal housing company Cohab is starting to buy some of these properties to turn them into housing, but so far none of the half-hearted attempts to revitalise the city centre has worked. The city has no real tradition of looking after its heritage. São Paulo has happily let once-vital areas go to seed as long as there is a new financial district being thrust upwards somewhere else. The "centre" has been shifting across the Monopoly board in a

steady south-westerly direction — first to Avenida Paulista, then to Avenida Brigadeiro Faria Lima and, more recently, to Berrini. But the historic centre is in limbo, awaiting its gentrifying shock therapy.

And the periphery? In the case of São Paulo the word periphery is almost a misnomer, as there is more periphery than anything else. There are no clear boundaries or perimeters. The periphery is a condition — it is the condition in which the majority of *paulistanos* live.

This has always been the product of tacit politics and economic exploitation. The first wave of the poor to settle in the periphery was actually not made up of rural migrants but was displaced from the city itself by the São Paulo equivalent of Haussmannisation. In the 1910s, the centre was redesigned with broad boulevards and gardens, which of course meant demolishing the crowded tenement quarters of the inner-city poor, who were forced to the outer edge. Then in the 1940s, the city boundary shifted more dramatically. Rural landowners around São Paulo started subdividing their estates and selling plots cheaply — and illegally — to the poor. They gambled that once communities started to accumulate, the government would be compelled to provide basic services and transport routes. Faced with a housing crisis that it was failing to address, the government — the first of the military dictatorships — turned a blind eye to this unregulated expansion. And of course the gamble paid off, because when those services arrived, the value of what remained of the landowners' estates increased dramatically. There is a history, then, of the peripheral poor being used as pawns in a game of property speculation.

In subsequent decades there was less of the economic exploitation but the same degree of political blinkering. The expansion of the periphery took on a different scale in the 1970s

with a wave of migration from the north-east leading to an explosion of favelas. Again it was a case of laissez-faire politics, with another military dictatorship deciding that the periphery was not in the municipality's jurisdiction, but that the outlaw favelas would be tolerated so long as they looked after their own interests (which meant that the government didn't have to).

The São Paulo of popular imagination is conjured by photographs of a dense field of skyscrapers and tales of its helicopter-borne elite on the one hand, and by a creeping fringe of favelas on the other. But it would be overly simplistic to see the city's composition in terms of a wealthy core surrounded by a ring of poverty. While new migrants tend to concentrate around the periphery, they are not alone. It is a place of extreme social contrasts. São Paulo followed a familiar course in the 1980s and 90s, with wealthy citizens fleeing the inner city for the suburban isolation of new gated communities. Alphaville — the sprawling enclave of manor houses and swimming pools on the city's north-west edge — is the most notorious of these. We shall drive past it later, but such places are not the focus of this journey. Not only is there little to distinguish Alphaville from the suburbs of Phoenix, there is scant inspiration to be found in the capacity of the rich to look after themselves. By contrast, the tenacity of the poor in carving out a life in this brutal city is a constant source of amazement.



Pixação en route to São Mateus

# 1. JOURNEY TO THE EDGE

December 8, 6am. It is dark when we set out. We roll past high walls and unscalable gates, past kiosks containing night watchmen, past fenced-in dogs, past all the security apparatus of paranoid wealth. This is Sumaré, a pleasant central neighbourhood somehow sheltered from the rest of the city by its canopy of tropical trees and its incredibly circuitous roads that break from the surrounding grid pattern. Mainly I associate this spaghetti street plan with getting lost, which has happened often. At night, as part of the private local security system, a man on a moped drives around making macaw-like calls to signal to his colleagues in the kiosks that all is well. The first time we encountered that sound we found it threatening — we thought it might be a stalker signalling to a different kind of colleague — but eventually we came to find it comforting.

In Lévi-Strauss's day, Sumaré was a western suburb of middle-class housing. In other words, only 4km from the Praça da Sé, it was then the edge of the city. Following São Paulo's current perimeter will require a much greater radius. On today's journey we'll be circling the city at an average distance of 18-20km from Sé. That means hugging a circumference of about 120km. But there will be circuitous diversions, wrong turns and traffic jams. There will be unexpected sights and unplanned stops. It is still dark, and we will not be back until well after it is dark again.

I'm driving with the photographer Thelma Vilas Boas and her husband, the architect Roberto Somlo, in Roberto's Volkswagen

Santana Quantum (that collision of religion and theoretical physics is oddly appropriate to this unknowable city). Our first port of call is the São Mateus district, 20km to the east. Leaving behind sleepy Sumaré, we wind our way towards the Presidente Dutra highway, as if we were heading to Guarulhos airport. At this hour, just before rush hour has fully kicked in, we still have speed on our side. We pass the Shopping D mall, a giant shed with a tiled façade, like an inside-out public toilet but with a spiral ramp attached to it like a giant spring. Then another industrial shed, but this time it's a pet shop. Then a prison with watchtowers at each of the four corners. Either I've passed this one several times before or there are numerous prisons on the road to the airport.

Veering south towards São Mateus, we start to pass several tower blocks nearing completion. Some are straightforwardly innocuous — undetailed, white, modernist. Others have a distinctly postmodern quality, cheesily decorated with rounded balconies and bands of colour. Upping the ante is a crop of peach towers with pitched roofs and broken pediments aping Philip Johnson's AT&T building. These ersatz New York skyscrapers are among the new wave of housing supplying the city's rapidly growing middle class.

Lula — who is still president as we drive, and has not yet handed the reigns to his protégé Dilma Rousseff — is fond of saying that there are 28 million Brazilians still to raise out of poverty. And if they're lucky, they might end up in a replica Johnson tower. As we drive along Avenida Aricanduva, there are signs of them cropping up everywhere. These concrete stubs are still pupae, cocooned in security netting — they may not morph into AT&Ts. But this is the shape that the city's building boom is taking: cheap speculative towers. Lacking any structural cores, they rely on stacking sometimes 20 storeys' worth of breezeblock walls on top of each other. And after

five years they look old. It is no wonder that, with the boom, the number of resident complaints against construction companies has reached record levels.

Lula pumped money into housing and launched programmes such as the FNHIS, a national social housing fund, and Minha Casa Minha Vida (My Home My Life). The latter is a government scheme to build a million low-cost homes by 2016. The towers we have just passed are from that scheme. They were draped with giant banners screaming Caixa, the federal savings bank that is lending the poor the money to buy apartments in them. The problem is that there is no quality control and certainly no urban plan. The result is poorly made housing in isolated conditions on the periphery. As a job-creation tool it is stimulating the economy but its critics claim it is not helping to house the poorest.

Hitting a suddenly denser, working-class neighbourhood, it is striking how many of the walls are covered in *pixação*. This is a uniquely Brazilian brand of name tagging. Unlike so much graffiti, which still echoes its New York origins, this is *sui generis*. The distinctive lettering evokes Tolkienesque runes, as though the place is crawling with acrobatic elves. Because the higher or more inaccessible the *pixação*, the more bravado displayed by the *pixador*. It's not uncommon to scale tower blocks, as *pixação* is as much an urban sport, like parkour, as an artistic expression — and it is occasionally fatal. The content of these scrawls is not political so much as the act itself. Walls, as we saw in Sumaré, are Sãos' preferred social barriers, separating not just the rich from the poor but the individual from the very idea of that collective hell out there. And so it is only fitting that the *pixadores* use walls to broadcast their presence — to turn, as the sociologist Teresa Caldeira puts it, a tool for separation into one of communication.



The nascent favela in São Mateus

## 2. SELF-HELP: SÃO MATEUS

We've been following a lorry with "So Jesus Salva" inscribed across the wheel guards: Only Jesus can save you. Cutting through a forest, we soon find ourselves in São Mateus. This is a diverse streetscape that feels only half formed. We slow to a crawl as there's a pack of wild dogs in the road and one of them is determined to mount another whether we like it or not. There are some social-housing blocks, a few roads' worth of self-built housing and a small favela just off the road, next to a stream. As we get out and start pulling out cameras, a man approaches us shouting something. He's saying he wants to make a formal complaint about the conditions there. The government is absent, he says. Before we know it, he's leading us down a muddy path towards his shack.

Inside, the man leaves us in the hands of his wife, a woman in her late 20s perhaps, with young skin but an old face, and a scarf over her hair. She doesn't work but looks after the house and their two kids. And no doubt she is wondering why there are suddenly three strangers standing in her kitchen but is too shy not to go along with the situation. It's not the first time people will accept us into their homes — their openness is in marked contrast to the closedness of so much of the São Paulo fabric.

She explains that they bought the land — or, rather, the space — off their neighbour for 2,000 reais [\$1,000]. That purchase will not have legal standing of course, because it wasn't technically their neighbour's either. Ten days ago, she continues, during a heavy rain,

the stream broke its banks and the floor of their house was submerged in sewage-tainted water. There is no sign of that drama now. The place is spotless, and surprisingly well appointed considering the precariousness of the structure itself, which looks like it could blow away. They have a fridge, a TV and a cheap plastic washing machine. The blender has a crocheted cover on it.

The houses here are all assembled from cardboard, sheets of plastic laminate and corrugated iron. This is just a seedling favela, a fresh settlement by new arrivals. It's an illegal occupation of the land, and a tentative claim to it. These houses will last four or five years, and at that point, if they haven't been moved away, the residents will formalise their claim with bricks and mortar. This cluster has only been here two years. There's no running water and the electricity is siphoned off a nearby pylon. Under foot, sewage pipes poke out directly over the stream. Favelas are most often founded next to rivers or creeks for precisely this reason. Some of the pipes happen to be nestling in wild mint, as if to mitigate the aroma.

Nascent favelas such as this one are rarer than they used to be. With so many large, entrenched favelas across the city, it is much easier to join the edge of an established community than it is to strike out on new territory as these people have done. These settlements tend to grow fastest when there is a building boom in full swing. A migrant from the north-east will come and get a labouring job, then his cousin will come down and move in, before meeting a girl and building an extension for themselves. It's the natural order of things.

While the favela may be the most notorious form of housing that the poor will build for themselves, there are more institutional forms. In fact, we came across this favela by chance. The real reason for visiting São Mateus was to see another settlement down the road. Here, residents were granted permission from the government to build

themselves real houses, following a standardised design handed out by the department of housing. This programme is known as *mutirão*, a Portuguese word taken from the indigenous Guarani term for working together towards a common goal.



The back of a terrace of self-built — or mutirão — houses

The *mutirão* housing programme was launched in 1987 as a cost-effective way of tackling the housing deficit. Local community organisations could claim grants for building materials, and then pool their labour to build the houses themselves. It didn't come with legal tenure of the land but it was a productive way of resourcing community self-organisation. In São Mateus, more than 500 families built their own homes this way. Arranged in neat terraces along straight, orderly streets, these two-storey houses appear to self-consciously shun the disorder of the favela. But they are not without their idiosyncrasies. It soon becomes apparent that the original houses lie somewhere behind newer extensions that thrust the frontage right up to the pavement. In most cases these extensions consist of forecourts for parking with an extra room and balcony above. The owners of these houses may be poor, but in one respect they emulate their wealthier *paulistano* counterparts. Almost every house meets the street with a large, floor-to-ceiling gate. The decorative panache behind each gate varies — some go in for pink paint and faux-marble tiles while others opt for bare brick and concrete — but the gate is universal.

On the street we meet a middle-aged woman, Francesca, locking up her gate. She recalls trying to move here 20 years ago almost as if it were a battle. “It was a struggle. We attended all the meetings and seminars, all of those things, until the day came when we occupied the land. We arrived one night, and the day after we achieved the victory, thanks to God.” It took her and her husband five or six years to build the house and make it habitable. They would come on the weekends, as they worked during the week, and lay bricks. For a long time they had no doors or windows. There was no sewerage, so they dug a latrine

in the garden. The roads weren't asphalted. Besides the permission to build and a small grant for materials, there was no other government support. Gradually, basic services such as water and electricity were provided, but still they have no legal documents for the house. We ask how much the houses here are worth now. Francesca thinks about 25,000 reais [\$12,000]. "But I won't sell my house. I fought for it, and it was such a struggle. I will never sell it."

Introduced in the 1980s, the *mutirão* housing scheme was a short-lived phenomenon. It had only been running a few years when the incoming government of President Collor scrapped it in 1990. While local community housing initiatives still exist, the government-sponsored version arguably never really worked anyway. It was overly bureaucratic, requiring participants to work on the building a certain number of hours a week to qualify, and as we saw with Francesca, it was a huge drain on families — one that did not even result in legal ownership. It was much easier and cheaper, in the end, to have a local mason build you a small house in a favela. Having briefly romanticised the idea of self-building, the government quickly resumed its laissez-faire ways.

The streetscape here in São Mateus is eerily empty. There are no shops, no sign of daytime activity. Just the intense morning light and a silence that leaves us wondering how secure we feel outside of the car. Francesca's street sits in a disjointed, patchwork landscape. This still has the tangible feel of an area that was once countryside before succumbing to a series of randomly sited developments that now exist in an awkward relationship with each other. What is interesting about it is that within a few hundred metres you have three utterly different approaches to the housing problem: the favela, the *mutirão* and social housing blocks. You would expect the social housing to be the best of these options, but that is far from obvious

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