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# The City Museum of São Paulo

A New Design for City Museums in the Era of the Megacity

*Maria Ignez Mantovani Franco*

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## Abstract

The City Museum of São Paulo as subject of study and museological challenge tries explicitly to 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, articulated upon the collection of contemporary items to be pursued by methods of social mobilization, maintaining a dialogue with the proper logic of a globalised world, but canonically erected over the founding precepts of sociomuseology.

Focusing on territory 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 endeavors to understand the dynamics, as well as the problems that characterise human life in those vast and complex territories.

**Keywords:** City Museum, Sociomuseology, Territory Museum, Contemporary Collection, São Paulo

## Resumo

O Museu da Cidade de São Paulo, como objeto de estudo e de problematização museológica, busca explicitar uma metodologia interdisciplinar – já posta em teste em 2003 e 2004 – que enuncia a concepção de um novo modelo de museu de cidade, que tem como objeto de análise a grande metrópole São Paulo, que se articula sobre as premissas de coleta contemporânea de acervo, empreendida por meio de métodos de mobilização social, em interlocução com as lógicas próprias do mundo globalizado, porém canonicamente erigida sobre os preceitos fundadores da Sociomuseologia.

Com foco no cenário dos museus de território, este modelo busca fomentar um caminho novo e alternativo, que observa e interage em relação a uma realidade inerente à contemporaneidade, às megacidades latino-americanas, na medida em que busca problematizar e compreender as dinâmicas próprias da vida humana nestes imensos e complexos territórios.

**Palavras-chave:** Museu de Cidade, Sociomuseologia, Museu de Território, Coleta Contemporânea, São Paulo



**Antonio Saggese photographic essay with images taken during the “Expedição São Paulo 450 Anos”, and edited by the photographer.**

# The City Museum of São Paulo

A New Design for City Museums in the Era of the Megacity

*Maria Ignez Mantovani Franco*

The City is a tomography of the present, pointing to the future and looking back to the past.

Today, city growth averages one million people every week. In 1950 there were 86 cities with more than one million inhabitants, today they are some 400 across the world. However the most significant effect of the urban process is, without doubt, the explosion of megacities. It took one century for the urban population – around 3.4 billion – to surpass the world's rural population, but United Nations projections indicate that by 2025 the urban population will reach 61 per cent of the total.



Figure 1. Social and environmental diversity: a slum lives cheek by jowl with a high standard building at Morumbi quarter, in São Paulo. Photo: Tuca Vieira.

In the case of São Paulo, creating a new city museum requires, at the outset, that one should consider some 1,500 square kilometres, corresponding to the administrative area, as the geographic area of study. That is, the area of the Municipality, politically divided into 96 districts where 11 million people live. However, approximately 20 million people live in the wider metropolitan area. During the last decades, studies confirmed by satellite images have indicated that two conurbation<sup>1</sup> axes are clearly distinguished and expanding: one extends towards Rio de Janeiro, 400 kilometres from São Paulo, and another is in the direction of Campinas, 100 kilometers away. Travelling along either axis one cannot help concluding that it is difficult to talk about São Paulo as a subject for a museum and, at the same time, ignore Greater São Paulo with its vast conurbation which is continually expanding and changing.

This theoretical model – a territorial museum – is nourished by the clear and evident notion that the city is something which undergoes mutations, a permanently pulsating being. The City Museum of São Paulo has as its artefact that very metropolis, and it requires dynamic structures capable of undertaking real time mutations, in order to cope with the oscillations of social life in the big city.

The gigantic urban area which comprises the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo and the Metropolitan Region of Campinas is the first macrometropolis of the southern hemisphere, inhabited by 22 million people, approximately 12 per cent of the Brazilian population. Its factories form the richest industrial complex in Brazil. They are responsible for 65.3 per cent of the gross product of the State of São Paulo or 21.1 per cent of the Brazilian GNP (gross national product).

Though there is no one universal definition of an urban area, it is safe to assume that the Brazilian macrometropolis<sup>2</sup> is surpassed only by a few urban agglomerations, such as Tokyo-Yokohama, Shanghai or Mexico City. This suggests that the emerging countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America will, in the next decades, be the biggest generators of megacities.

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1 Conurbation – a large urban area formed by cities, towns and villages that developed side by side until they merged into one urban area. (Houaiss, 2001, 826).

2 In his studies to define urban planning for the northwestern part of the United States, Scot Patrick Geddes, at the beginning of the twentieth century, defined the concept of macrometropolis as a widespread urban area, multipolarised by metropolises made up of vast conurbations. The apocalyptic term “necropolis” was also used during that period, assuming that megalopolises were doomed. From: Zanchetta, D. A primeira Macrometrópole do Hemisfério Sul. In: Revista Megacidades – Grandes Reportagens. São Paulo: O Estado de São Paulo, August, 2008: 64.



Although this analysis tries to focus on the municipality of São Paulo as the museum artefact, 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 city natives and the inhabitants of the wider urban region. 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 architects and urbanists, but it is also a fertile soil for other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, education and museology. All the different professional standpoints converge in the study of the way of life and organisation of the populations in the megacity.

In the outer edge of the megalopolis, one can identify new social arrangements that articulate and make possible a collectively organised life that goes beyond city government initiatives. Considering the concept of multiple centralities around the core of the megalopolis itself, we see that those outer populations gravitate around other urban landmarks, new social references, new expanded centres, other forms of circulation, communication and social interaction. The word “periphery” is ambiguous since one can always ask: peripheral in relationship to what?

When we look at the global urban scenario it seems correct to state that the need to create museums about the city has never before presented itself with such intensity, especially so in the megalopolises of emerging countries. We need to consider the sheer scale of these cities 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 museums of cities, within this theoretical model, consider public interest as their priority and that they take actions that give priority to democratic access and enjoyment of the population, involving knowledge about the city where they live and work.

The City Museum of São Paulo project recommended, through exploratory interactions with young people, the adoption of the idea that São Paulo is an “Educating City”. Thus, it should consider itself as an active institution able to translate the feelings and ambitions of its population into a concrete programme for the museum.

Cities are the natural ground for multiculturalism, territories where diversities co-exist, where differences are confronted. Furthermore in Latin America and especially in Brazil, where São Paulo is doubtless its greatest expression, large cities have received multiple migratory fluxes through both immigration and emigration for most of the twentieth century. The consequences are that cities like Rio de Janeiro, Bogotá, Mexico City, Medellín, and so many others, are hybrid spaces, contradictory and multicultural.

Therefore in a large Brazilian city there is a pattern whereby newcomers rapidly find their most closely related ethnic group to which they can attach themselves, a first exercise in getting involved, in belonging; from this first welcome gesture, the newcomer will feel 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 socialise and absorb each other's traditions and contradictions.

Considering the global scenario of intolerance between people, the multiculturalism that characterises Latin American metropolises may be one of their most powerful distinguishing features and strengths. It is possible that Latin American cities have the potential to develop new hybrid models, revealing an aptitude to adapt, possibly in a more ingenious form, to new global challenges.

In 2003, as part of the 450th anniversary of São Paulo's foundation, the Culture Secretary of the city proposed the creation of a City Museum of São Paulo that would value former initiatives in recording city history, but would also aim at broadening more traditional views in acknowledgement of the territorial complexity of São Paulo. The model of a city museum developed during that period is the subject of an in depth investigation and analysis in my doctorate thesis in Museology, which was presented to the "Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias", in Lisbon. In my thesis, first conceived in 2003, the process of making sense of the urban space as a museum artefact took into account the following:

- a) the underlying philosophy of the museum should be established from questions, problems and concerns addressed to the museum by city people and should not follow a dynamic from top down, as is frequently the case;
- b) the present should become the main component of the museum's philosophy and actions;





Figure 2. Boxes used for the transportation of horticultural products in the São Paulo General Warehousing and Centres Company (CEAGESP). Photo: Nair Benedicto/N Imagens.

- c) the museum should accept the challenge of real time interaction with different populations, looking for references representative of the present time and aiming at a collective construction of the future city;
- d) the exact point when the city was founded would be no longer chosen and revered as the central starting point for the museum – on the contrary, other points of reference and other starting points would be considered through a wider notion of where city boundaries lie;
- e) other forces in different areas of the wider city would be considered as legitimate and equally symbolic and important;
- f) interaction would proceed with an increasing number of citizens, becoming part of networks that constitute the new logic of living – why not say surviving – in the large urban centers like São Paulo;
- g) other means of communication should be explored, using modern technology, but shaping them to the intentions of each museum programme;
- h) a new more humane form of discourse should be 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 “Expedição São Paulo: 450 anos” (“São Paulo Journey: 450 years”).

The idea was to obtain a contemporary tomography of the city of São Paulo. An urban journey was undertaken with an interdisciplinary character and two different routes were followed during one week. If we could attach unique values to the “Expedição São Paulo: 450 anos”, they would be the method and the intentionality of the programme. It surely was not a picturesque or naïve trip, nor was it a group of academic people looking to confirm their theses. There was detailed planning and we could count on community leaders linked to the municipal government, 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 programme totalled 700. The co-ordination group analysed the suggestions and decided on two final routes: North-South and East-West. Two groups of travellers, of a multidisciplinary nature, were made up of anthropologists, architects, educators, psychoanalysts, archeologists, artists, photographers, filmmakers, museologists, sociologists, geographers, environmentalists, historians, planners and organisers. The travellers were assisted by a group of young students, mostly with a graduate degree in history, with specialization in museology or following the master degree in anthropology. They were responsible for approaching people to be interviewed, for distributing at the various places to be visited printed material concerning the City Museum and the journey itself. They were also responsible for obtaining authorisations 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 only and no collection had been foreseen. However, growing enthusiasm led many of the travellers to start on the direct collection of items and it became necessary to arrange for a daily reception of those items in predetermined points in the city. Items thus collected have been deposited at the Iconography and Museums Division of the Municipal Secretariat of Culture of São Paulo.

The dynamics of the “Expedição” included travelling along each route during the day and evening meetings in order to evaluate what had been accomplished and to plan what should be done along the next stretch. Every night each of the groups received a visit from a social actor specifically chosen. While

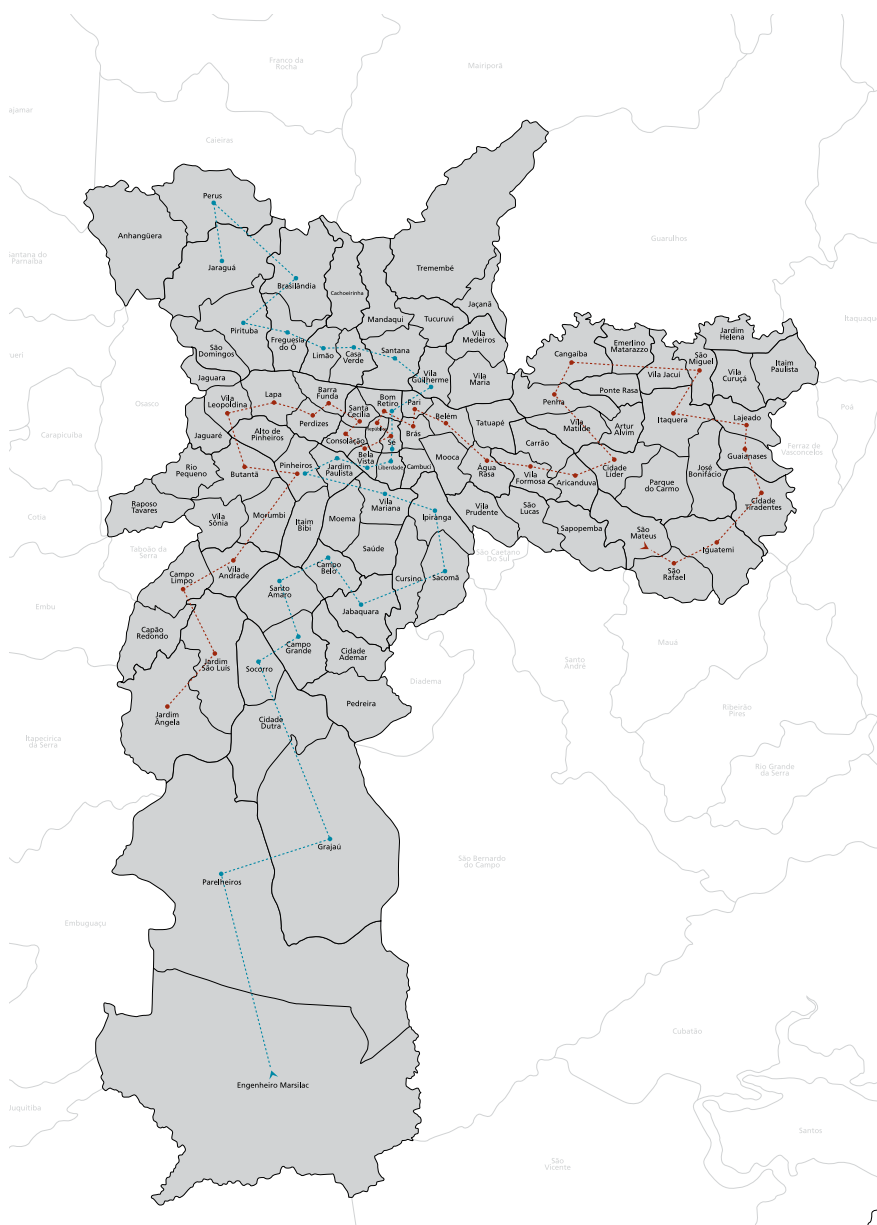


Figure 3. Great São Paulo – The two routes of the “Expedição São Paulo 450 Anos”: North-South and East-West”.

one group heard the intense account of a homeless girl, the other received a deaf and blind woman; both tried to explain how to orient yourself in São Paulo faced with your own limitations. The two groups went by different visiting points: slums, rap and hip hop groups, neighbourhood football clubs, samba clubs, different religious gathering places, telecentres, co-operatives, 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 created by the impact of a large meteorite at Vargem Grande – at the southern extreme edge of the city – some 400,000 years ago.

The two groups went through the tunnels of the Metro, streets and bowels of the historic centre of the city, narrow passages of slums, internal alleys of low income housing projects, and even cemeteries and maximum security prison cells. Those dynamics allowed them 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”)<sup>3</sup> covering some of the houses: the most important social meeting place in the destitute areas visited.

The journey was not a comfortable promenade: violence and insecurity accompanied the travellers on both routes, though both violence and insecurity are part of everyday life in the city. The precarious conditions in which people have to live and lack of suitable public services result in a permanent deprivation. Social and environmental imbalances do not provide for a serene landscape; on the contrary, they create a scenario of conflict, and it became evident that these were territories devastated by insecurity. Contrary to those sensations that were both latent and present, the “Expedição São Paulo” was, without question, an opportunity to demolish so 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 would be to reveal to the public – more than the needs, conflicts and inconsistencies – the hard day to day life of the people of São Paulo; the fraternal

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3 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 socialising, leisure and community activities.

generosity between equals; the social networks that assure life and survival in the city; the counterpoint between apparent chaos and the unbelievable capacity for organisation developed by the associations we visited; the environmental issues and the alternative solutions that prevent a complete disintegration of the system.

Discretely a few journalists from “O Estado de São Paulo” – one of the most important large circulation newspapers in Brazil – joined the “Expedição São Paulo”. The day São Paulo commemorated its 450th anniversary, the newspaper published a supplementary section devoted to this interdisciplinary experience, reaching 300,000 readers all over the country.

The last day of the “Expedição São Paulo” was taken by a final evaluation. Both groups met in a city centre hotel and recalled their routes, faces they met, oral statements that were recorded, photographs yet to be developed and items collected. 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 / imaginarium.<sup>4</sup>

These orienting concepts formed the structural basis for the editorial organisation of all the other products connected to the “Expedição” such as: a book, an exhibition at the Olido Cultural Centre (seat of the Municipal Secretariat of Culture), a video documentary, and the creation of a database in multimedia format that consolidated all the documentation related to contemporary items collected during the journey, in view of the effective creation of the City Museum of São Paulo in 2004.

After a change of government in 2005, the project for the new City Museum was discontinued, with only a group of some small historic houses remaining in the scenario; they met neither the contemporary demands of a city museum, nor the scale of a megalopolis like São Paulo. Some of the questions related to the setting up and running of the City Museum are still awaiting answers. First of all, one should revisit the sequence of studies and negotiations undertaken during the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, aiming at the realisation of the project. This would allow us to produce some fundamental questions:

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4 Imaginarium refers to things, real and fantasy, that recurrently occupy our minds. It may include a football team, a film star, folklore items etc.

a) What threat to those who take decisions at a political or institutional level, is represented by creating a museum that is based on the collection of contemporary items? Why is it that collecting items produced today by society is seen, in museological terms, as more threatening than the traditional collection of cultural items that legitimate and sanctify the historical path of an object?

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

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 value or its intrinsic value? Those values which were adhered to in the past had been great reference points across the centuries, do they apply today to our trans territorial, globalized world? If our society struggles against its own aging, by reverting to the past, why don't we feel an identity with the present?

d) Could it be that a city museum that articulates itself upon contemporary collections is a threatening museological model by means of a simple inversion of the symbolic weight of the objects, or maybe this discourse provides an inversion of more encompassing social senses?

e) Assuming that the selection of an object presupposes a logic of discarding it, are we afraid of the power of museological 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



Figure 4. COOPERCLOSE (Recycling and Selective Collection Cooperative) classification table. Photo: José Guilherme Cantor Magnani.

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 today than it was in the past?

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



i) Why are initiatives focused on making us aware of our common humanity across different cultures supported and implemented without hesitation in different countries? Why are museums of contemporary history 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 place it in a museum?

j) Why should we revere the myth of the founding fathers of the city? That wider area standing outside the city centre, outside the city walls as it were, is it a desirable and commendable object of study? Why is it that fear surfaces whenever we pierce the symbolic surrounding walls and face those vast peripheral areas where most city people actually live? Could it be that a medieval atavism prevents us from going outside the centre, fooling those 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, odours 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 paths 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 the 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? In this new model, would there be many people entitled to choose? Would the History to be told reference people so far unknown? 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 recognise themselves. What about us? Would we remain with no connection, therefore voiceless?

The City Museum of São Paulo as subject of study and museological challenge tries explicitly to 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 globalised world, but canonically erected over the founding precepts of socio-museology. 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 endeavors to understand the dynamics, as well as the problems that characterise human life in those vast and complex territories.

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