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## Playing to the Streets in the "City of Walls:" Intersections of Art, Resistance and Urban Change - Part One

By Raphael Soifer

OCTOBER 2007

### Intersection 1: Avenida Ipiranga & Avenida São João



*Alguma coisa acontece no meu coração  
Que só quando cruzo a Ipiranga e a Avenida São João  
É que quando eu cheguei por aqui, eu nada entendi...*

*Quando eu te encarei frente a frente, não vi o meu rosto  
Chamei de mau gosto o que vi de mau gosto, mau gosto  
É que Narciso acha feio o que não é espelho...*

*E foste um difícil começo, afasto o que não conheço  
E quem vem de outro sonho feliz da cidade  
Aprende de pressa a chamar-te de realidade  
Porque és o avesso do avesso do avesso do avesso.*

Something happens in my heart  
That's only when I cross Ipiranga and Avenida São João  
It's that, when I arrived here, I understood nothing...

When I faced you, front to front, I didn't see my face  
I called "bad taste" what I saw as bad taste, bad taste  
It's that Narcissus finds ugly anything that isn't a mirror...

And you were a difficult beginning. I put behind what I don't know.  
And whoever comes from another happy dream of a city  
Learns quickly to call you reality  
Because you are the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse.

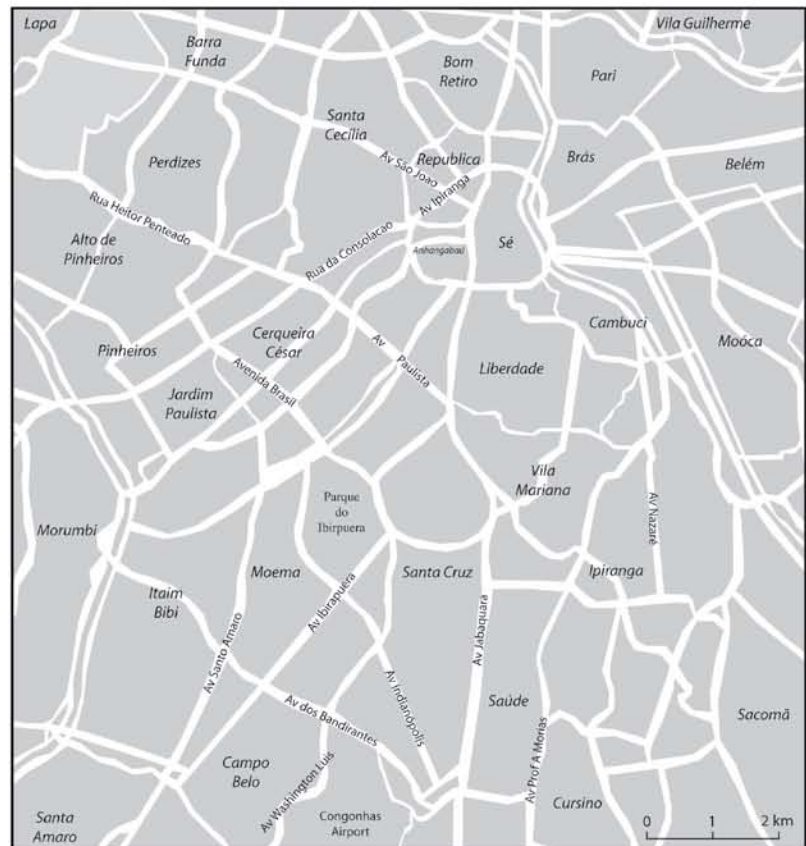
—from "Sampa," by Caetano Veloso

There is nothing immediately arresting about the intersection of Avenidas

Ipiranga and São João. The two major thoroughfares cross each other toward the center of São Paulo's downtown and receive much of the area's traffic, but their rows of colorless buildings and general low-level pandemonium render them barely distinguishable from the nearby streets. Although Veloso's "Sampa" (a nickname for São Paulo) captures beautifully the confusion and contradictions of the city, I suspect that his choice of intersection was guided more by the search for an adequate rhyme with *coração* (heart) than by any specific association. Nevertheless, the song has come to serve as São Paulo's unofficial anthem and in turn, Ipiranga and São João have become iconic symbols of city life.

Veloso — a native of the northeastern state of Bahia and perhaps Brazil's most renowned songwriter — lived in São Paulo relatively briefly during the 1960s, when he was one of the focal points of the counter-culture, anti-dictatorship *tropicalia* arts movement. Yet it makes perfect sense that an outsider, especially a *baiano*, should have written the city's defining song. Migrants from the country's northeast — an overwhelming presence in São Paulo for the better part of the past century — have provided much of the cheap labor that built the city. Although Veloso arrived with a formal invitation as part of a convoy of young, talented, soon-to-be-legendary *baiano* musicians — including Tom Zé, Gilberto Gil (currently Brazil's minister of culture), and Maria Bethânia (Veloso's sister) — the majority of northeasterners come fleeing drought and poverty, in search of any work that will enable them to survive. Lula, the current president, made the trek from the rural interior of Pernambuco state with his impoverished family when he was seven.

Though northeasterners have migrated for longer and in greater numbers than any other group, many of São Paulo's immigrants came farther and left an equally lasting impression. The city experienced a population boom in the nineteenth century, as the coffee industry in São Paulo state began to dominate the Brazilian economy. In 1888, Brazil's abolition of slavery coincided with the city's increased push toward industrialization. In response, local and national leaders sought to expand the labor force while keeping Brazilians of African descent away from upwardly mobile professions. They recruited waves of immigrants, especially from Italy and Japan, to transform



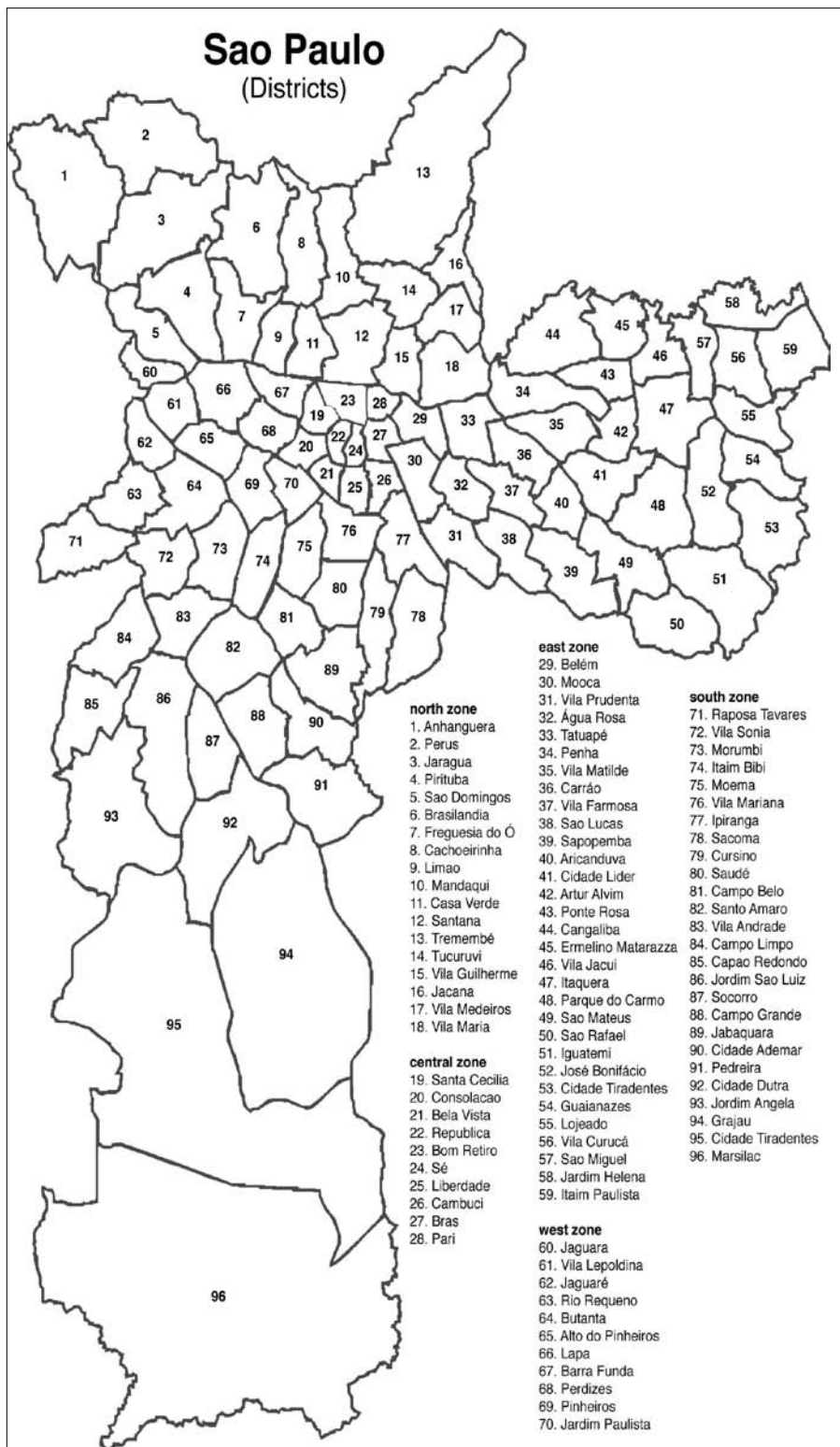
São Paulo and the surrounding area into the country's largest metropolis, and the center of Brazilian industry and commerce. São Paulo's migrant communities have largely assimilated to Brazilian culture, but the city's size and diversity contribute to the conception of São Paulo as Brazil's "international city."

Coming to São Paulo from almost anywhere else is a jarring experience. Popular conceptions of the city include a "concrete jungle" (usually in English) or a "sea of concrete" (usually in Portuguese). Both terms

suggest a confusing vastness, a lack of orientation, and from ground level at the intersection of Ipiranga and São João, the city corresponds to both descriptions. A mass of graying buildings stretches in three directions, interrupted briefly by a sloping plaza due east, with more buildings popping up just behind it. São Paulo's high-rises radiate out from the city center before fading away into a mass of the periphery's mostly self-constructed red brick houses. These patterns of "rich" and "poor" buildings continue in seemingly endless, though increasingly unpredictable, configurations, broken only by the occasional industrial lot, which today is likely to be abandoned.

São Paulo is comprised of five main zones — East, West, North, South, and the city center — and while each zone has some socioeconomic diversity, extreme segregation between classes has long been the norm. *Paulistanos* know the West Zone, nearest to the downtown, for its concentration of high-rises, fancy cars, and private security forces. No one who asks where I live is surprised to find an American in the classically West Zone neighborhood of Pinheiros, which one friend called a "gringo repository." From much of Pinheiros and the West Zone in general, the periphery is more rumor than reality. Except for my taxi ride on the day I arrived into Guarulhos Airport — located just outside the northeastern edge of the city — I passed my first month in São Paulo without seeing the wooden shacks and brick buildings with corrugated tin or plastic roofs that typify *favelas* throughout Brazil.

São Paulo's expansive blankness complicates finding meaning in any given intersection, or preserving the history of the city's zones, neighborhoods, and street corners. The distinctive landmarks that represent Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo's chief rival, are almost entirely absent here. Newsstands sell panoramic postcards of rows of buildings in the downtown enclave of Anhangabaú, or of rows of taller buildings on the West Zone's chic Avenida Paulista, or of the semi-green refuge of Ibirapuera Park (whose name means "place where there used to be trees" in the indigenous Tupi language), from which rows of buildings in the



nearby upper-class neighborhoods are readily visible. Tourists looking for a sexier keepsake find that most kiosks also keep a selection of Rio de Janeiro postcards — with natural wonders like Sugar Loaf Mountain and the curved beach at Copacabana — in stock. The absence of spectacular sights and clear *destaques* (standouts) in the city's architecture seems to fit in with a lack of a visible, concrete memory.

Without singular or iconic images, São Paulo is defined by other traits — such as the weather and the social climate — which are in stark contrast to traditional images of Brazil. The city is known as the *terra da garoa* (land of drizzle), and the weather tends to go out of its way to disappoint. The country's largest city has also long been derided as the “tomb of samba,” because it's where this most famously Brazilian of musical genres supposedly goes to die. Finally, São Paulo is renowned for its breakneck pace and unceasing work ethic. As Tom Zé — by far the most prominent *baiano* import to have planted roots here — sings in his *São São Paulo*:

*Em Brasília, é veraneio  
No Rio, é banho do mar  
O país inteira é de férias  
E aqui é só trabalhar*

Brasília's passing the summer  
Rio's going for a swim  
The entire country is on vacation  
And here, it's just work.

Over the last century, politicians and urban planners have constantly reinvented São Paulo, and architects continue to alter its landscape at a breakneck pace. Visible reminders of the city's history fade away quickly. The constitutional revolt of 1932, which pitted the interests of the city's elite against those of the populist dictator (and later folk hero) Getúlio Vargas, the assassinations and street violence that accompanied the most brutal years of the military dictatorship, and even the recent air disaster at Congonhas airport, all disappear in a frenetic rush toward improvement and modernization. São Paulo suffers not so much from a will to forget its past as from an unshakeable impulse to construct its future. In a place where so many visual memories are lost in the constant reconfigurations of public space, the arts take on an especially vital role in telling the stories of the city. Street-based performance, a focus of my research in São Paulo, assumes the daunting task of opening the city's public spaces, of making *praças* and thoroughfares sites for public interaction, rather than simple passageways between one closed destination and another.

São Paulo is haunted by a pervasive fear of crime, spurred on by grisly, quick-breathed accounts of murders

and the occasional high-profile kidnapping in newspapers and television journals. The city's public spaces and street life have diminished drastically over the past several decades, according to Teresa Caldeira, a Brazilian anthropologist now based in California in the 1970s. Today, few spaces remain where significantly different kinds of people interact.

In her landmark book “City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo,” Caldeira describes a city characterized by “privatization, enclosures, policing of boundaries, and distancing devices,” and writes that “the new urban environment that enforces and values inequality and separation is an undemocratic, non-modern public space.”<sup>1</sup> Fear of crime leaves much of the city empty at night, and as Caldeira notes, the city's elite have all but abandoned public life — often including the use of public streets and public transportation — in favor of heavily guarded malls, gated condominiums, and cars with bulletproof windows.

For such a segregated city, however, São Paulo's dividing lines are quite complex. Caldeira writes that contemporary São Paulo “cannot be mapped out by the simple opposition of center-rich versus periphery-poor. It is no longer a city providing conditions for inattention to class differences, but rather a city of walls, with a population obsessed by security and social discrimination.”<sup>2</sup> *Paulistanos* from all social classes frequently worry about *favelas* encroaching on their neighborhoods. Often, residents cite current conditions in Rio de Janeiro as conclusive evidence. (Rio often serves as São Paulo's fallback example of all things irreversibly decadent). In Rio, where the proximity of wealthy neighborhoods and peripheral settlements has long been the norm, the word *favela* has become something of a term of pride. In São Paulo, however, it is usually pejorative. Residents of the periphery might identify a neighboring complex as a *favela*, but relatively few people will cop to living in one.

In spite of public fears of encroaching *favelas*, however, the city's center and West Zone continue to intrude steadily on the periphery. In addition to living life as though under siege, the middle and upper classes have gone on the offensive. The sort of changes that long since overtook wealthier neighborhoods, such as the enclosure of space and the heightened use of private security, have already begun to take over the downtown and sizeable chunks of the periphery. Today, shopping malls pop up on formerly public land, and legally sanctioned high-rises displace the city's most vulnerable residents, who often live in shacks made of scrap wood, without deeds to their properties. (A wooden shack — as opposed to a brick one — is considered the most telling sign of poverty short of homelessness in São Paulo. Residents see wooden shacks as the clearest evidence of a given community being a

1 Caldeira, Teresa P.R. *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2000. p. 4  
2 *ibid*, p. 231-232



*favela*. Most wooden shacks are sided with any available material, which tends to include at least one large political campaign placard for any of the countless candidates who have pledged to improve living conditions for the working poor).

Having come of age in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1990s, I often feel as though gentrification has been pursuing me wherever I go. More likely, I've been pursuing it. I've spent most of my post-college life in the States subletting and couch-surfing in neighborhoods like the Mission in San Francisco and West Harlem in New York City. I tend to arrive with just enough time to feel nostalgic for a past I can only reconstruct through its dying gasps, and to leave shortly before the rent gets prohibitively expensive for the friends who have let out their beds or ceded their couches to me. Gentrification in São Paulo does not strike me as much more extreme than in New York City (where the police murders of Amadou Diallou and Sean Bell serve as the best-publicized examples of gentrification's inherent violence), or San Francisco, or even Cambridge. In São Paulo, however, the violence of "revitalization" is barely hidden, and my unfamiliarity with the city makes it, in many ways, an ideal location to discover and better understand the social, political, and aesthetic realities of modern cities that I've long grumbled about but rarely examined closely.

Gentrification in São Paulo begins from a very different starting point than in the American cities where I've lived. Spaces like the Brooklyn waterfront — formerly a key site of public interaction, and now the target of privatization — don't exist in the same way here. Caldeira recalls that downtown sites like the Praça da Sé — home of the city's "zero mark,"<sup>3</sup> indicating where the Portuguese built their first settlements — were once social hubs for middle-class residents, who would dress to promenade. Since the 1950s and 60s, however, the rich and middle classes have steadily moved away from São Paulo's downtown. Today, Praça da Sé, like most of the area, is thronged with vendors, street musicians, and commuters, virtually all of whom live far from the city center. The Praça, once the site of varied social interactions, is still a vital gathering space. Today, however, it is, in Caldeira's words, "fundamentally a space for poor residents, in its daily use as well as in its symbolism."<sup>4</sup>

Avenida Paulista, a central thoroughfare in the West Zone, was once home to the extravagant mansions of 19<sup>th</sup> century coffee barons. The avenue still serves as a kind of public promenade, but these days, it's a mixture of business and plea-

sure. Suitably for São Paulo, business has clearly come out ahead, and the mansions have long since given way to oversized, gleaming office buildings. Most major financial businesses moved south from Praça da Sé and its surroundings in the 1960s, when elevated crime rates and further drives toward social segregation changed the public perception of the downtown into that of a danger zone.

Street culture on Avenida Paulista continues. During the day, pushcart vendors selling corn and yakisoba are on most street corners, and on warm nights, bars spill out across the sidewalk. Any political movement of note will eventually march down the street (as I discussed in my first newsletter). Paulista is something like a middle- and upper-class Praça da Sé. An important difference, however, is that Paulista stretches across three kilometers of the city, effectively dispersing crowds, while the Praça da Sé's central plot and narrow side streets tend to draw people together.

While the spirit of the West Zone encroaches ever more on the periphery, the city center is also being streamlined, redesigned, and re-imagined. A recent "Clean City" law — which features public announcements reminding *paulistanos* that "a clean city is a civilized city" — has instituted heavy fines for pollution. This includes the aesthetic pollution of billboards and oversized shop signs. At the same time, publicly financed "revitalization" projects are transforming formerly poor and working-class neighborhoods into refurbished pleasure zones for the city's elite. "Revitalization" alters neighborhoods so that they are unaffordable for former residents, but also unrecognizable as places where these residents might once have lived. Out with the *botequins*



*Gambling, shining shoes, listening to preachers, and passing through Praça da Sé.*

3 *ibid*, p. 320

4 *ibid*, p. 320

(ubiquitous corner joints that are combination bars and greasy spoons); in with the expensively guarded shopping malls and restaurants with valet parking.

## Intersection 2: Avenida Prestes Maia & Avenida Washington Luis

In the city center, City Hall plays the gentrification game according to its vision of the laws of the street. In the revitalization of Praça da Sé, for example, advocates for the city's homeless population report constant police harassment during the day. At night, municipal water trucks make constant rounds, drenching anyone with the audacity to sleep in one of the city's few remaining public spaces.

On June 15, 2007, riot police cleared out the building at Avenida Prestes Maia number 911, which had been occupied for more than five years by 468 families associated with the MSTC (Movimento de Trabalhadores Sem-Teto do Centro - The Downtown Homeless [literally, "Roofless"] Worker's Movement). A former textile factory abandoned for well over a decade, the building is co-owned by a city council member who owes over 5 million *reais* (about US\$2.85 million) in property taxes. Nevertheless, after years of legal battles, a judge approved a final eviction notice this June, after which police quickly evicted the last stragglers and sealed all visible entrances with cement.

BijaRI, an arts collective and design firm based in the bohemian-chic West Zone neighborhood of Vila Ma-



*The empty building at Avenida Prestes Maia number 911*

dalena, has dedicated most of its considerable body of non-commercial work to fighting, recording, and highlighting the injustices of São Paulo's gentrification. This group of eight middle-class men was closely connected to the Prestes Maia movement. Their "Gentrification Poster," conceived for the occupation, was a simply formatted sign that summarized the "revitalization" process:

*Gentrification: a process of restoration and/or improvement of deteriorated urban property carried out by the middle or emerging class, generally resulting in the removal of the low-income population*

The poster, plastered in and outside of the building, became an aesthetic signature of the *Prestes Maia* occupa-



*A former Prestes Maia resident waits in the street in front of the building after being evicted in a police raid. Photo courtesy of Rodrigo Araújo and BijaRI.*



tion. During the frequent police raids of the building, the poster appeared regularly in the news footage, as police hacked away at the building's walls with crowbars.

### Intersection 3:

**Avenida Faria Lima & Cardeal Arcoverde (Largo da Batata)  
Avenida Faria Lima & Avenida Angelina (Shopping Iguatemi)**

Most of BijaRI's São Paulo-specific projects — which include extensive documentation of police interactions with the city's homeless — focus on displacement and violence. BijaRI's work is far from standard propaganda, however, veering instead toward surreal, Situationist-style antics. In 2002's "Anti-Pop: The Chicken," BijaRI released a hen in two public spaces, illustrating, according to the group's website "the social tensions present in a giant metropolis like São Paulo."<sup>5</sup> The first site was Largo da Batata, a working-class shopping district at the southern end of Pinheiros. The second, Shopping Center Iguatemi, is a fashionable, up-market mall less than one kilometer away.

In Largo da Batata, shoppers and vendors barely



(Above) Largo da Batata (Below) Iguatemi



(Above) Riot cops work toward the "removal of the low-income population" at Prestes Maia 911. (Below) The chicken, more or less at home in Largo da Batata. Photos courtesy of Rodrigo Araújo and BijaRI.



noticed as the chicken wandered amid newsstands selling soap opera guides and cheap caps. When it flapped into the street, a teenage boy chased it back to the corner, where a man deftly picked it up by its feet. At Iguatemi, on the other hand, shoppers who caught sight of the bird froze and clutched each other, eventually wandering nervously away as the chicken pecked at the ground in front of Tiffany & Co. Soon, mall security agents arrived in a truck with flashing lights, and ordered BijaRI members to remove the chicken. Five years later, the reaction in Iguatemi would likely be the same. Largo da Batata, however, is nearing the end of a major transformation that has erased much of its recent past. The area is on the verge of sharing all the touchstones of upper-middle class life with the rest of the neighborhood. In Largo da Batata today, the chicken would likely be arrested.

BijaRI's shenanigans haven't halted gentrification in its tracks, although their involvement (and that of other artists) with the Prestes Maia building played a major role in drawing media attention to the occupation, and in postponing the ultimate seizure of the

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bijari.com.br>



building. But in a revitalization process where decisions affecting a given community tend to go entirely over residents' heads, BijaRI's work serves as a reminder of the complexities of gentrification, and as a living, breathing, kicking and screaming testament to who and what gets displaced by the city's ubiquitous cranes and scaffolding.

Rodrigo Araújo, a founding member of BijaRI, told me that after the resolution of the Prestes Maia standoff, BijaRI and other arts groups closely involved with the occupation and the MSTC have found themselves more contemplative than active. Currently, he said, the group is stepping back from the creative process to consider how the energy generated around a single building can be harnessed to a variety of disparate locations throughout the city. Yet street performance in São Paulo continues unabated, and even without the media blitz and immediately high stakes of the Prestes Maia occupation, it continues to touch on many of the same issues.

#### Intersection 4: Praça Roosevelt & Rua Consolação

A crucial aspect of telling the stories of a city is reinforcing the urban myths and inside jokes that residents already know. This sort of ritual retelling accounted for much of late July's *O Pior de São Paulo* (The Worst of São Paulo), a combination guided tour and performance by the local troupe Os Parlapatões (whose name roughly translates to "The Buffoons"). The show took the form of a bus trip to the most embarrassing sites in the city, complete with stock characters — of whom the cachaça-swilling, samba-belting, overly made-up bus attendant Rachel was by far the crowd favorite — bad tour bus



*Mall security approaches the renegade chicken at Iguatemi Shopping. Photo courtesy of Rodrigo Araújo and BijaRI.*

coffee (made with seltzer and served lukewarm), and field-trip-style sing-alongs.

Not surprisingly for Brazil's "international city," the concept behind *O Pior de São Paulo* came from Europe, where the Italian-American performer Leo Bassi created a *Worst of Madrid* for his adopted city. The original, according to the *Folha de São Paulo*, was a heavily politicized affair, featuring a protest of the Iraq war and the attempted toppling of a statue of Generalissimo Franco, in order to do to his image "what the Americans did with Saddam."<sup>6</sup> The Parlapatões' version, somewhat disappointingly, didn't come close to Bassi's edginess. Politics were there, but relegated to clever but predictable jokes about government corruption and the excesses of the rich.

The importation of ideas — along with clothes, home electronics, pop music, and television programs, just to name a few — is something of a mania in São Paulo, even more than in the rest of Brazil. The craze transcends class lines. While the city's elite women shop for European haute couture at the upper-crust Daslu department store, teenage boys in the periphery prize their New York Yankees caps, both counterfeit and authentic. (My protests, as a Red Sox fan, that they don't understand what the cap represents are met only with bemused stares). Worse, there is a constant sense, especially in city's art circles, that foreigners and foreign places have a kind of magic that eludes São Paulo. Ricardo Freire, a columnist for the weekend guide of the middle- and upper-class *Estado de São Paulo*



*Praça Roosevelt: concrete bunker as city-scape*

6 Lores, Raul Juste. "Parlapatões fazem tour em "símbolos" de SP." Reproduced from the *Folha de São Paulo* at the Municipal Secretary of Culture Website: <http://www6.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/secretarias/cultura/imprensa/0406>.



newspaper, summed it up when he compared a foreign cinematic collage to a local version. “*Paris Je T’aime* is a silly, fun little film in which Paris acts more as scenery than as a character,” he wrote, “while *Bem-Vindo a São Paulo* (Welcome to São Paulo) is a depressing, silly little film in which São Paulo acts less as a character and more as an inducement to suicide.”<sup>7</sup>

Throughout *O Pior de São Paulo*, the gags continually reference the city’s surprisingly bitter rivalry with Rio de Janeiro. It’s literally a running joke; while we’re still in line, a confused-looking marathoner sprints by, and then comes back, asking for directions to Rio, which is hosting the 2007 Pan-America Games. He reappears throughout the show, coughing from the smog, still looking for the highway that will take him to the city where all the tourists want to go.

São Paulo’s rivalry with Rio de Janeiro goes back at least to Sampa’s emergence as a major city. Even after the country’s capital moved from Rio to Brasília in 1960 — by which time São Paulo had established itself as the country’s “heartbeat” — the image of Rio as a warm, laid-back tropical haven has continued to captivate Brazilian and foreign imaginations, and to piss off *paulistanos*. My *carioca* friends (native of Rio) tend to dismiss São Paulo as a great place to make money or establish a career, but as a terrible place to live. My *paulistano* friends, on the other hand, seem to get fits whenever I mention missing Rio, or when I hit a *carioca*-sounding consonant particularly hard. It seems impossible to combine two *paulistanos*, a bottle of beer, and a gringo with a slightly *carioca*-influenced accent before the insults start flying. When I point out that *cariocas* seem not to regard São Paulo with anything approaching the passion *paulistanos* feel for Rio, a local friend (who’s never visited Rio) shoots back: “Of course not! We sustain them so they can sing and laze around all day!”

After a ten-minute drive in the mid-afternoon smog, our first stop on the *Pior de São Paulo* tour is at one of the city’s many viaducts, which bring heavy traffic level with the third- and fourth-story windows of whoever’s unfortunate enough to live in nearby apartment buildings. A real estate agent greets us and walks us through the chalk-outlined floor plan of the forthcoming “Pig Snake Living Condo,” to be built directly on the viaduct. It’s a bit crowded, he admits, but he promises that living there will cut our commute times because we’ll be able to just jump out into traffic.

Even beyond the “Pig Snake Living Condo,” English is inescapable in São Paulo. At first, I thought I was just finding myself in conversations with people who couldn’t resist the opportunity to practice, but I soon realized that it

wasn’t just me. Eavesdropping everywhere, from trendy bars in the West Zone to bus rides through the periphery, the English phrases keep coming up. “My friend,” and “thank you” are almost universal, but English responses to statements in Portuguese can get quite long and technically advanced. The elite newspapers — especially the *Folha de São Paulo* — will occasionally define a concept with an English phrase, like “bullying.”

Sometimes the English word is snappier, but in almost all cases, the listener understands it as more sophisticated. The Iguatemi Shopping mall, where BijaRI released their now-infamous chicken, does not offer “*Estacionamento com manobrista*” for the shiny cars with bulletproof windows that carry its customers to the curb, but it has ample space reserved for “*Valet Parking*.” Dropping a phrase into a con-



Shouting the praises of the “Pig Snake Living Condo.”  
Photo courtesy of Giselle Monte.

versation, in many circles, proves one’s level of education and worldliness. An advertisement for language courses in the city’s subway system gets right to the point, advising “Your English is like your salary: it could always be better.” Conversely, among those who don’t really speak English, inserting small phrases at key moments mocks the aspirations of the would-be sophisticates.

*O Pior* brings us deep into the heart of sophisticated São Paulo with a walking jaunt up Oscar Freire, a street filled with boutiques and pricey restaurants in the West Zone neighborhood of Jardins. Here, guides introduce the crowd to a variety of stock characters grinning at us from behind metal gratings: the aging society wife face-lifted beyond recognition; her womanizing husband; and their playboy son. Tour guides allow us to wave, but remind us sternly, “Don’t feed the rich!”

Leaving Jardins, we head up Rua Augusta, the epi-

7 Freire, Ricardo. “Burka.” In *Estado do São Paulo*, Guia da Semana. 5-12 October, 2007. p. 130. My translation.

center of *tropicalia*, psychedelic rock, and experimental art in the 1960s, which is now devoted mostly to strip clubs and cheesy bars to the northwest of Paulista, and overpriced restaurants and pretentious boutiques to the southeast. At a stoplight, a dwarf actor in a balaclava jumps on to the bus, shouting that we're all being held hostage by the notorious PCC (Primeiro Comando de Capital — First Command of the Capital) criminal gang. The gang was formed in the state's prisons after the 1992 massacre at Caradiru Correction Center in which riot cops killed 111 prisoners (unofficial counts place the death toll at closer to 250). Since then, the PCC has virtually taken over prisons throughout São Paulo state, and led a chaotic wave of violence in the city in May 2006, targeting primarily the military police. On the bus, however, we've been forewarned. As the actor runs up the aisles, shouting "PCC! PCC!" we hold up our hands, following our guides' instructions from the beginning of the tour, and call out, "I'm not police! I'm not police!"

Our assailant leaves before the light changes, and one of the guides leads us in a sing-along of "Trem Das Onze," (11 O'clock Train). Written by Adoniran Barbosa, the most prominent samba composer from the "tomb of samba," the song won a television contest in 2000 to name the city's most representative tune (Veloso's "Sampa" came in a close second). Predictably, while *carioca samba* tends to reflect Rio's carefree spirit and celebrate life's excesses, "Trem Das Onze" epitomizes the rush and worry of São Paulo. The song's story is told in the voice of a lover hurriedly leaving a romantic encounter to catch the last train to the poor, North Zone neighborhood of Jaçanã.

*Se eu perder esse trem  
Que sai agora às onze horas  
Só amanhã de manhã*

If I miss this train  
That leaves now, at 11 o'clock  
I'll only get back tomorrow morning

For anyone without a car in São Paulo, the song — written in 1964 — still resonates. The city's public transportation system often seems like a perverse mechanism of social control. The basic structure of a limited subway and reasonably extensive bus service linked to a light rail system that reaches most cities in the São Paulo metropolitan area makes perfect sense. The problem sets in between 11:30 and midnight, when almost everything suddenly stops. Together with the exorbitant cost of taxi rides, São Paulo's public transportation plays a major role in separating the city by class. Members of the middle class



"Don't feed the rich!" Photo courtesy of Giselle Monte.

either drive or are driven; while the upper echelon of São Paulo's elite commutes by helicopter to avoid kidnapping attempts and the atrocious traffic. For the majority of the city's population, however, with no car or significant cash reserves, spending a night out far from home becomes a logistical impossibility.

The divisions between rich and poor expand constantly in São Paulo. While it's easy to laugh at the excesses of caricatured socialites on Oscar Freire, I leave *O Pior de São Paulo* feeling implicated in the divisions. When the bus returns to Praça Roosevelt, site of the Parlapatões troupe's theatre, the tour guides lead us to the middle of the Praça, where they've laid out a baby swimming pool filled with plastic bags, soggy magazines, and other debris. One guide explains that, since they couldn't bring us to the polluted Rio Tietê in the city's North Zone, they've decided to bring the river to us. Furthermore, they're going to make a Tietê pizza, since in São Paulo, *tudo acaba em pizza* — literally "everything ends in pizza," an expression meaning roughly that everything will work itself out the way it always has. One of the actors strips to his briefs and stands in the pool, while the others pelt him with eggs, flour, and tomato sauce. Looking around the praça, I notice a small group of homeless men sitting by a makeshift fire about 10 meters away. While we and the actors swim in excess food, the streets remained full of *paulistanos* who frequently can't get enough to eat.

Parlapatões is one of six troupes with its own theatre at Praça Roosevelt, formerly a major drug trafficking and prostitution point until the theatre companies began to arrive in the early 1990s. The trafficking had surged due not only to the relatively empty streets, but also because of the elevated concrete polyhedron built over the Praça in



1971. This construction is just about as ugly as it sounds, but it's oddly suited to the city, not only for its awkward concrete blockishness, but for the weirdly captivating view of condominiums from the top. Obscured from public view, however, the quadrangle continues to harbor the last of the drug trafficking on Praça Roosevelt, even though the space has a strong police presence. With at least the tacit support of Parlapatões and other troupes, who rely on municipal grants for their livelihood, City Hall is locked in a low-pitch battle with a residents' group that wants their Praça preserved as it is. In the midst of the conflict, meanwhile, are the local homeless. They will likely have to find new digs when and if the praça is reconfigured, but barring a major offensive from the city and the police, they should return shortly afterward, because *tudo acaba em pizza*.

If the film *Bem-Vindo a São Paulo* serves as an "inducement to suicide," *O Pior de São Paulo* is a celebration of ev-

erything maddening. Shortly after we leave the bus, a tour guide apologizes for the sunny weather and relatively empty streets of the Sunday afternoon performance. He promises that, next time, they'll give a tour at rush hour on a cold, rainy Friday. In *O Pior de São Paulo*, however, the idea of the city is never fully connected to the images of its streets. The piece relies more on the ideas of a given location — such as the notion of snobbishness on Oscar Freire — while leaving the rest of the story to the actors. Though the performance uses São Paulo's streets and neighborhoods as scenery, they are a secondary concern. In my next newsletter, I'll examine three attention-grabbing performances in the city center and West Zone that have engaged the people and streets of São Paulo, in distinct voices and with divergent conclusions. Each, dealing with the city as a character, asks it important questions and reveal aspects of its personality that diverge clearly from what many have come to accept as inevitable. □



*Alex, who lives on Praça Roosevelt, displays his tag, Preto (Black). Alex, the only homeless person I spoke to who agreed to be photographed, very politely explained that his community at Praça Roosevelt didn't want "to have pictures taken where they sleep." As I left with my camera tucked away, a white sedan from the Diário de São Paulo newspaper pulled up, carrying two photographers.*

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# INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## Current Fellows

**Kay Dilday • FRANCE/MOROCCO • October 2005 - December 2007**

Kay is studying the relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France and in North Africa. A former editor for *The New York Times* Op-Ed page, Kay holds a master's degree in comparative international politics and theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a bachelor's degree in English literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*.

**Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009**

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

**Derek Mitchell • INDIA • September 2007 - 2009**

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

**Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008**

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

**Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009**

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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