

Studies of a city in movement

Urbanist who created new disciplines
at FAU-USP dedicates herself to
studying the São Paulo macrometropolis

Márcio Ferrari | PHOTO Léo Ramos Chaves

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Regina Meyer enjoyed teaching at the University of São Paulo's School of Architecture and Urbanism (FAU-USP) so much that when faced with the sudden interruption of reaching retirement age in 2011, she decided to "go in denial." "I was in full flight," she says. "I was still researching and trying to create new disciplines." The enthusiasm of her students was contagious, and vice versa. Today, Regina invests her energy in new research projects and in supervising her graduate students.

Born in Guaxupé, Minas Gerais State, she moved to São Paulo in her early years, and the city became the primary focus of study for her entire career. At 22, she married psychoanalyst Luiz Meyer, and together, they moved to France and then Geneva, Switzerland, to study. Facing an impossible labyrinth of a selection process for the architecture college, she decided to try psychology. "I was accepted in 1968. The psychology course at the

AGE 75

EXPERTISE

Planning and urbanism

QUALIFICATIONS

Degree in Architecture and Urbanism from the University of Brasília (1974); Master's from the University of London (1977); PhD from the University of São Paulo (1991)

INSTITUTION

School of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo

SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATIONS

53 articles, 22 book chapters, 9 technical papers, 41 graduate students supervised



University of Geneva was internationally renowned thanks to the innovative work of Jean Piaget. But I had to cut my studies short at the end of the second year to return to Brazil.” On arriving in Brasília, where her husband had accepted an invitation to create a new Department of Psychiatry at the School of Medicine of the University of Brasília (UnB), she found that local psychology courses adopted a predominantly behaviorist approach, as opposed to Piaget’s theories. Disappointed, she resumed her long-standing interest in architecture, starting a career that would lead her to urbanism and urban planning.

Regina Meyer, a married mother of two (Diogo, a biologist, and Ana Elisa, who works in publishing), granted this interview in her apartment, which is in a central neighborhood of São Paulo. The building was designed by architect Rino Levi in the 1940s and decorated with tiles by landscape architect and plastics artist Roberto Burle Marx.

Your studies on metropolises, particularly São Paulo, have always been characterized by an intense focus on changes to the practical terrain. What are you currently working on?

I am working with colleagues from FAU-USP, pursuing a project that, in my case, fulfills an endeavor that was started during my PhD days, when I studied the São Paulo of the 1950s, and continued with my observation of the changes taking place in the metropolis in the 1990s. In the early years of the 2010s, our research was advancing towards an enlarged urban scale — that of the macrometropolis; a concept that, although not new, has gained more support in the last few decades because of the enormous territorial expansion of many cities and metropolises. In our case, it is the conjugation of the São Paulo metropolises, which are located in a large territory of 53,000 square kilometers and have a population of 30 million inhabitants across 173 municipalities. This immense set of cities gravitating around a group of metropolises creates an area of almost continuous occupation that radiates from São Paulo on various axes. The study underwent many important developments. At the same time, the São Paulo state government produced an ambitious Macrometropolis Action Plan. There

have not yet been any practical results because plans need time to take root, but formal discussion of this powerful territory — home to 73% of the state’s total population, 83% of its Gross Domestic Product [GDP] and almost 30% of the national GDP — has gained ground, even earning a place in public policy. At the moment, the objective is to write articles that focus on the urban dynamics of this macrometropolitan scale. Raising awareness of this post-metropolitan territorial organization contributes to

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Did the functions of each city change with the formation of the macrometropolis?

The formation of the macrometropolis is a historical process. It is an urbanization process that creates distinct urban characteristics during its development. When analyzing urban evolution, as the scale changes, the questions that we need to ask also change. With the São Paulo macrometropolis, recognition of the region’s potential in contemporary terms is very important, and although public policies have always existed, those aimed at strengthening the coordinated functioning of the territory are still new. São Paulo is, and I believe it will continue to be, the nucleus of this macrometropolis because it has the functional characteristics inherent to a powerful center. Just as Paris and London dominate their surrounding areas, regional hegemony is observed in São Paulo because of many factors, such as the organization of capital, to a certain extent the workforce, the research and knowledge based there because of its great universities, the stock exchange, and company headquarters. This does not mean that metropolises the size of Campinas and São José dos Campos, which also host important research centers, will not play important roles in the future. For the time being, São Paulo is where the public and private decision-making institutions are located, even though the workforce and productive innovation are distributed among the other metropolises.

What were the milestones of your career that led you to your current studies?

After my PhD, throughout the 1990s, I wanted to embark on a study of the urban transformations that we were experiencing in São Paulo. To do so, I needed to add other areas of knowledge. With my colleague, Marta Dora Grostein, economist Ciro Biderman, who had recently completed his PhD in urban economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT] and was teaching at the Getulio Vargas Foundation [FGV], and many undergraduate and graduate students, I formed a working group that united FAU-USP and the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning

[CEBRAP]. The results of six years of work were published in a book, *São Paulo Metrópole* [São Paulo Metropolis], in 2004 [published by IMESP/EDUSP]. The main objective of the research was to identify and analyze São Paulo from an urban perspective in the 1990s. The data and a large volume of analytical cartography sought to reflect a process of change that had been maturing since the 1970s, which led the metropolis to a stage at which industrial activity began to lose its hegemony. Our central interest was to analyze the urban territory. The research received a decisive boost in the year 2000, when the Center for Metropolitan Studies [CEM] was created as one of the Research, Innovation and Dissemination Centers [CEPID] financed by FAPESP, in conjunction with CEBRAP, the State Data Analysis Foundation [SEADE], TV Cultura and the Social Service of Commerce [SESC; today, the CEM also has offices at USP's School of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences [FFLCH-USP]]. In 2005, the FAU-USP group separated from CEPID and set up the Metropolis Urbanism Laboratory [LUME]. It was one of the most important initiatives that I participated in at FAU-USP. The creation of LUME paved the way for further research. In the same year, we began a new study that resulted in a second book on the São Paulo metropolis: *A leste do centro: Territórios do urbanismo* [East of the Center: Territories of Urbanism], published by EDUSP and IMESP in 2010.

What was it about?

It was a study focused on urban growth and the transformations of a sector of São Paulo that stretched from the central area to the city periphery. The initial emphasis was on the historical transformation of a region defined as the “vector east of the Center,” covering the traditional industrial neighborhoods, such as Bom Retiro, Brás, Mooca and Pari, as far as the eastern border of the municipality. The research was highly transdisciplinary, including content on the city's historical construction, urban structuring promoted by public transport and an environmental evaluation. We also attempted to define a set of guidelines for urban projects. We introduced a new planning and design tool: the Metro-

politan Interest Zone [ZIM]. We were able to evaluate the impact of the mass transport links between the city center and its more populous periphery, located 30 kilometers away, where the greatest number of housing developments were installed by the government in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, these developments were constructed with no consideration of the daily commute that residents would ultimately face. The study reinforced the idea that rather than treating cities as “still lifes”, we must work with them as spaces in permanent movement.

How did your activities change after you retired?

Retirement did not signal the end of my academic involvement. I still participate in many activities at the university. I conduct academic research, supervise master's and doctoral students and teach graduate courses, which is a daily commitment. My academic career has been a little *sui generis*. Most professors have taken more diversified career paths. Mine was marked by great didactic activity with new course proposals, working in teams and supervising many graduate theses.

To what do you attribute this singularity?

This choice was not deliberate. In hindsight, and taking a very critical view of the past, I think I enjoyed the academic activities associated with the classroom. Perhaps I could have balanced my activities better and dedicated myself to attending more conferences, for example. I spent considerable time involved with day-to-day university life. I also did not extend my career overseas. The emphasis on getting published in foreign journals came a little late for me. I was recently guest editor for a special São Paulo issue of *Revista de Urbanismo Iberoamericano* [Ibero-American Urbanism Magazine]. It is a very reputable publication that specializes in urbanism and is published simultaneously in Buenos Aires and Barcelona. I have only recently started doing this kind of work.

What kind of disciplines did you create?

I created elective disciplines for contemporary urbanism. Until the 1980s, our courses revolved around modern-

ism. But it became important to teach students the difference between issues of urbanization and those of urbanism. The understanding that urbanization is a process, while urbanism is the effects this process has through the implementation of all kinds of projects, from infrastructure to construction, was introduced at FAU-USP in the 1960s through studies and books by professor Nestor Goulart Reis. It was valuable work that greatly influenced teaching both within the college and outside it. However, despite this methodological collection, some courses still failed to make the distinction, which I considered detrimental. I tried to show, through my courses, that urbanism is inseparable from design and is always propulsive. This was my contribution to the students and young architects who graduated in the 1990s and 2000s.

Why was this emphasis so important to you?

I think it was necessary to be clear about which issues related to urbanism and which related to the urbanization process. In addition, to complicate matters further, there was another issue to be faced in urban planning. At FAU-USP, there is a set of disciplines exclusively concerned with urban planning, taught by some very active and productive professors. However, in terms of approach and production, these subjects differ from those that address urbanism and urbanization. Urban planning promotes a procedural perspective, as is required to implement urban projects. These fields of knowledge, rather than complementary, are totally interdependent. It is interesting to remember that these distinctions were always very clear in courses on the history of urbanism, urban planning and urbanization. The materials that make up these histories are distinct, specific. In addition, in practice, in regard to urban intervention, which is propulsive, it is important to recognize the difficulties that arise from the disconnect between a plan that does not materialize because of the absence of adequate urban projects, and projects and plans that are drawn up without properly considering the urbanization process.

What is the key to solving the city's problems today?

That question is almost unanswerable. Solving the problems of the city and the metropolis is a continuous and complex goal that can only be approached in stages. It is impossible to point to a single, linear path. The word “strategic” has been incorporated into planning vocabulary and gives an idea of the need to constantly review the objectives and above all the tools of action. One possible route to understanding the current dilemmas faced by the city of São Paulo is considering the consequences of its limitless and ungoverned territorial growth, particularly the pattern of outward expansion of its peripheries. One enlightening perspective may come from the evolution, or rather the “devolution,” of its public transport system and this pattern of urban expansion. While working on the themes of the 1950s for my thesis, I realized that in the 1930s, we did not just choose an operational model for the city; we chose a destination. Opting for the construction plan proposed by the mayor at the time, Prestes Maia [1938–1945], we walked inexorably towards a road model. Today, it is clear that one of the city’s greatest problems is the traffic and lack of public transport. Since the arrival of the freeways and with the growing number of motor vehicles, mobility and traffic issues have monopolized urban proposals in São Paulo. The fate of the city was sealed when, in the 1930s, a proposal to build a subway was rejected. Mayor Prestes Maia argued that a subway was the best solution in terms of mass transportation but inadequate as an urban proposal for São Paulo at that time. In his view, it was necessary to first establish a strong and coordinated road system and then to introduce a subway network later. The decision was fatal.

Did the fact that you studied your undergraduate degree in Brasília, a city renowned for its excellent planning, influence your conceptions of urbanism? Brasília at the time was a true laboratory for urban functionalism and architectural modernism. At UnB, there seemed to be no other way of thinking about cities. I studied and lived in Brasília in a very uncritical way. My three-year-old son walked to school alone while I watched him from the window. I boasted about this to mothers I knew in São Paulo who

took their children to school by car. I considered my life on the superblock a wonder. Furthermore, the city was still under construction in the early 1970s, and we all felt similar to “builders” that were a part of the process, despite living under a military dictatorship.

When did you start to see Brasília more critically?

While living there, I got to know many people who worked in Plano Piloto [the administrative region] and lived in the satellite cities (Gama, Taguatinga, Sobradinho). People commuted from a long way away every day and needed to get to the bus station, located in the geometric center of the city. From there, they had to reach their workplaces on the superblocks or in other sectors of Plano Piloto. It became clear to me that there was an unresolved issue. I realized that the plan had not addressed the issue of spatial/urban segregation very well.

And what is your opinion of the Brasília project today?

I think it is a city that was born from a theory, which had already completely defined its adult image during its infancy. In addition, throughout its development, it was not capable of incorporating the transformations it went through, what with being the child of functionalism’s most orthodox theory. There is no denying that Brasília showed its weaknesses quickly; everyday life has made it clear that this is not the best way to design the cities of the future. The closed project, designed based on the conditions of the 1950s, left few openings to incorporate the new. I think it was the intense experience of living in Brasília that led me to urbanism as the subject of my study and work.

How was your vision influenced by the graduate program in London?

I arrived at the Architectural Association School of Architecture [AA] in 1976. The school is at the vanguard of architecture, and I found many texts that were critical of the purposes of orthodox functionalism. I reluctantly realized that I needed to review my preconceptions. What I knew was an urbanism created to solve the problems faced by industrial cities built from scratch, guided by the organization of their functions — living,

working, leisure and movement — all addressed separately. I realized that cities built from scratch no longer represented the challenges of contemporary cities. I did not want to ignore everything I had learned, but I had to bow to the evidence. Almost as a return to that phase of my studies at the beginning of graduate school, I recently wrote an article about the book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* by Reyner Banham, published in 1971 but translated into Portuguese just four years ago. In the article, published in the FAU-USP journal *Revista Pós*, I revisit my interests of the 1970s. Banham was a professor at the Bartlett School of Architecture, where I studied during the second stage of my graduate program after leaving the AA. His thinking influenced me considerably at that time.

When you returned to Brazil, were you able to apply what you had learned?

Soon after arriving, I was given the opportunity to lead the city’s Department of Historic Heritage [DPH], associated with the Department of Culture, from 1983 to 1985. I made a great effort to confront the issues and themes related to preservation of the historical heritage specific to São Paulo. After a few months of work, during which time I was involved in the development of the city’s master plan, coordinated by architect and Planning Secretary Jorge Wilhelm, I began to think that the preservation of heritage would be better managed by a planning agency. Secretary of Culture Gianfrancesco Guarnieri was very angry with my position on the matter, and I was dismissed. My participation in the discussions and development of the master plan in the early 1980s sparked an interest in the issues regarding central São Paulo to which I later returned. After leaving the DPH, I took a position at the State Department of Culture, where I managed a project proposed by Secretary Jorge da Cunha Lima called Luz Cultural [“Cultural Light”]. The aim was to create a neighborhood where culture would be the primary focus. It was influenced by projects in Europe that sought to create urban spaces designed for cultural activities which, in turn, would promote urban regeneration processes. In Europe, the migration of large food markets from city centers to

more peripheral areas paved the way for radical redevelopments. Despite the logical intuition of the proposal, I do not think the cultural function would sustain the urban transformations desired for the region.

What changes did you witness at FAU-USP?

Architecture and urbanism were shaken by the impact of the Modern Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, which inevitably affected practice and teaching. There was intense theoretical reform, which should have had a heavy impact on course content, but reviewing our convictions and consequently the teaching methods themselves proved a difficult task. There was a degree of entrenchment against the new theories, particularly those that called aspects of modernism and urban functionalism into question. This opposition to new theories greatly affected urban planning and urbanism. Here is a compelling example: there was an emblematic urban planning agency in London called the Greater London Council [GLC], which coordinated and united all the required information for urban planning and design. It was envied worldwide for its efficiency and forward thinking. The agency was closed in 1983, after Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister [1979–1990]. The rise of Thatcherism in London's case, and of neoliberalism in general, sent urban planning and urbanism into a rapid retreat. Until the 1980s, the municipal and state planning departments in São Paulo were important agencies. But since the 1990s, they have played a much less decisive role. All this hindered the acceptance of important criticisms that arose at that time.

How did you approach these changes in your teaching?

In 1991, I proposed a new discipline, known as “Intervention in existing cities: the process of urban design.” The objective was to discuss foreign and Brazilian projects with the aim of developing the student's ability to critically analyze contemporary urban projects. We made a great effort to ensure that the exercises developed in class and the course in general encouraged an understanding of the complexity of contemporary cities — existing cities — so that the students

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could then extract from it the different possibilities of these projects. The determining factors of this complexity should be the starting points of the project. This course was the main reason for my involvement at the undergraduate level.

At the same time, as the planning crisis overseas, Brazil was heading in the opposite direction, with the social functions of housing defined by the 1988 Constitution, the approval of the Cit-

ies Statute (2001), the creation of the Ministry of Cities, the master plans...

This contrary direction actually comes down to important developments in the legal frameworks, some of which are still incomplete and lacking essential elements. The Ministry of Cities itself is not very effective. Despite the dominance of urban areas in Brazil, the ministry does not play a very significant role in how the country thinks about its cities and metropolises. Its only highlight is the introduction of the Minha Casa, Minha Vida program [“My House, My Life”], which has now spent somewhere around R\$300 billion producing housing projects that have all the characteristics of the dismal pattern of peripheral expansion of the 1960s. Planning has taken an almost irrelevant position. Somebody in planning should have checked the cost of building transport links against the value of the land, for example. Many housing projects do not even consider the impact of building a subway line and stations. The contradictions are blatant. The transport network in São Paulo is expanding, and soon the subway will reach areas that are still lacking in basic infrastructure. It is totally disorganized, but we must defend the arrival of mass transport, which is essential to improving the lives of residents.

You have always defended an idea that was once controversial, of increasing the population density in the center of São Paulo.

Defense of the densification was not controversial. There was almost a consensus that the city center was becoming unoccupied. In addition, this is a waste, because there is clearly sufficient infrastructure there to house many more people. There was a time when residents of the city center were moving to the peripheries. I defended the idea, which today is commonplace, that it was necessary to repopulate the center. Population density is a way of taking advantage of the infrastructure already in place. The central region provides the second-largest number of jobs in the city. The sectors of the municipality with the highest traffic today are strictly residential districts of very low population density, such as Morumbi. In contrast, in an area of mixed use, it is possible to get almost anywhere on foot. ■