

Ricky Burdett

Counterpoint: designing inequality?

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Counterpoint

Designing Inequality?

Jaime Lerner ends his Foreword in this issue of *AD* by restating that he is an optimist for cities. He reminds us that cities are the solution, not the problem: not only in Brazil or Latin America, but across the world. As a passionate urbanist, it is hard to disagree with the views of this inspirational city leader. Yet, the more I study cities and how they are being transformed, the more I question the ability of the design professions to grasp the social and environmental implications of the spatial decisions they take. In this regard, Brazil is no exception. From Rio de Janeiro's Porto Maravilha to Porto Madero in Buenos Aires, from New York's Hudson Yards to Hamburg's HafenCity, from Barcelona 1992 to London 2012, urban policymakers, designers and investors are engaged in an ongoing struggle to reconcile the spatial and social dimensions of contemporary urban form.

In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis's canonical 1990 study of social exclusion in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, ([M Davis, City of Quartz, Vintage Books, New York, 1992](#)) the author pinpoints the connection between social exclusion and design with a powerful black-and-white photograph of a bench next to a bus stop in what was then a dilapidated downtown LA. The seat of the bench has been expertly designed with a series of timber slats that create a curved, faceted surface – easy to perch on, but impossible to lie on. The client for the bench was the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), which wanted to make sure that undesirable, homeless people – many of them black young males – did not sleep on the benches and 'pollute' the street. The designers were able to use their imagination and skills to create a socially exclusionary object that satisfied the brief. They achieved this with 100 per cent efficiency.

A scan of many urban projects of the last decades – especially those in geographical areas marked by increasing social exclusion and inequality – belong to the 'LAPD bench' category. Gated communities and enclaves proliferate. They cast differences in stone or concrete. Not for a few undesirable outcasts, but for generations of new urban dwellers who continue to flock to the city in search of jobs and opportunities. The key question for urban designers and policymakers alike is what role, if any, does the design of the physical environment play in exacerbating or alleviating inequality? Should we, as Suketu Mehta, author of *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004), has recently asked, design cities that are fully inclusive? Or should we settle for urban neighbourhoods that at least don't exclude anybody?¹ In Brazilian cities, inequality is indeed a stark reality. Despite recent improvements, Rio and São Paulo still top the Gini index charts, which measure the differences between the more affluent and more deprived members of society. Inequality in Rio and São Paulo is nearly twice that of London or Berlin, even though it remains less extreme than some African cities like Johannesburg or other Brazilian cities like Fortaleza, Belo Horizonte and the highly planned capital Brasília.²

All cities display some level of inequality. Some are more pronounced than others, depending on their national and regional contexts, and the level of economic development. What we are observing today, especially in cities of the developing world, is that social inequality is becoming increasingly spatialised. In her observations about inequality in São Paulo, the anthropologist Teresa Caldeira, who is Professor of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley, has described a dual process of confrontation and separation of social extremes. The former is captured by the

overexposed but powerful photograph of the water-deprived favela of Paraisópolis in São Paulo (featured in Hattie Hartman's Introduction to this issue [on p xx](#)) overlooked by the expensive residential towers of Morumbi with swimming pools on each balcony. The latter Caldeira defines as a form of urbanisation that

*contrasts a rich and well-equipped centre with a poor and precarious periphery ... the city is made not only of opposed social and spatial worlds but also of clear distances between them. Since these imaginaries are contradictory – one pointing to the obscene neighbouring of poverty and wealth and another to a great distance between them – can both represent the city?*³

These imaginaries translate into distinct urban realities. Designers, developers, investors and policymakers are faced with increasingly tough choices as to how to intervene within changing urban physical and social landscapes. How do you maintain the DNA of the city when it undergoes profound transformations? Who is the city for? How do you reconcile public and private interests? Who pays and who gains? The city planners of London, Paris, Barcelona, Hamburg and New York are grappling with the same questions as the urban leaders of most Brazilian cities, even though the levels of deprivation and requirements for social infrastructure are of a different order of magnitude.

London, for example, has average income levels four times higher than Rio de Janeiro. Yet, it has a marked intra-urban distribution of inequality. The most deprived neighbourhoods are concentrated in the east and south, with more affluent residents concentrated in West London and the periphery of the city (the suburbs on the edge of the Green Belt). In Paris, by contrast, social deprivation is concentrated on the edges of the city, with poorly serviced, predominantly migrant communities living in 1970s block typologies in the *banlieues* beyond the Périphérique.

While few European cities display the stark racial and spatial segregation of so many US cities – like Chicago, St Louis and Los Angeles – they are equally exposed to what the sociologist William Julius Wilson has characterised as physical islands which breed an inward-looking mentality where fantasy about others takes the place of fact bred of actual contact.⁴ Despite a deep-set recognition of the 'right to city' enshrined in the Brazilian constitution, the trend towards greater physical separation of distinct socioeconomic groups is being implemented across the urban landscape of many of the country's cities. In this respect, architecture and urban design play an important role in laying the ground for potential integration rather than creating environments that are intentionally exclusive.

Porto Maravilha: An Exemplary Redevelopment?

Porto Maravilha on Rio's waterfront stands out as an emblematic project in this regard.⁵ Not only because of the immediacy and scale of its transformation in the run-up to the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, but also because of its typological resonance with other large-scale transformations of redundant port areas in cities across the world – like Buenos Aires, Hamburg, London and New York. The real-estate-led upgrading of the exceptional stretch of waterfront makes much of its social and economic ambitions and the innovation of its delivery vehicle, the Porto Maravilha Urban Operation. Yet the spatial and formal discontinuity of its proposed architectural solutions – emphatically displayed by Trump Towers Rio⁶ - underscores the physical barriers that the project will undoubtedly introduce to an area that hitherto had a basic urban structure based on connectivity and continuity.

The critique is not about the nature of the architectural gymnastics of the proposals, but about the simplification, homogenisation and severance of the public spaces of the new urban terrain, which runs contrary to the language of integration and improvement, especially for the nearby residents of the Morro da Providência. Whatever we think of the architecture of the project, as an urban intervention it is being designed to keep (some) people out.

Balancing the Imbalance

Porto Maravilha is not alone in confronting such deep socio-spatial questions. But it also illustrates the complex interrelationships between different levels of government, the private sector and the community in establishing a common vision on the most equitable way of managing urban change. In Brazil, the competing interests of federal, state and municipal government are often as equally divided as the conflicting aspirations of landowners, investors and developers, and existing residential communities. Political expediency and the need to implement urban projects within electoral cycles work against the slow and complex process of democracy, resulting in at times brutal compromises that fail to contribute to the quality of life and the environment.

This is why London's planners have for decades invested in East London, in various attempts to redress this visceral imbalance by bringing jobs, education, health services and new homes to this historically deprived area. Since the London 2012 Games and the establishment of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park by the London Legacy Development Corporation, the main focus has been around Stratford. Luckily perhaps for London, there have been positive and negative examples to follow. While the urban regeneration of the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona provided a source of inspiration for its 'acupuncture' approach to urban retrofitting (especially in the highly deprived Raval neighbourhood) and insistence on urban grain and continuity along its waterfront, London did not have to look far to know what not to do.

With all its strengths and economic benefits, Canary Wharf in London's Docklands represents an extreme model of intentional seclusion. While the district has succeeded in creating 100,000 high-end jobs in an area of profound deprivation, it still stands apart from its mixed surroundings even though new housing and other services are being constructed as public transport is improved. In Teresa Caldeira's words, this is a case of 'worlds set apart' where physical disconnection exacerbates the fragmented social and economic fabric of existing communities. Hudson Yards on the Far West Side of Manhattan along the Hudson River is one of New York City's few remaining urban 'gaps'. It encompasses a large tract of underdeveloped land that is isolated from the subway system and has few public amenities and little open space. The current transformation, however, provides a slick reinterpretation of a similar spatial model, where building footprints are magnified and the porosity of the urban grid is frustrated.

It is not by chance that KCAP Architects & Planners, the original masterplanners of the London Olympics project slowly taking shape as a 'piece of city' in East London, designed the urban diagram of the former docks of the mercantile city of Hamburg. [\[image HafenCity\]](#) HafenCity's dense urban structure simply extends and intensifies the grain of the older city, with buildings and landscapes of a confident contemporary nature. Created by the municipal authorities, HafenCity's delivery agency has succeeded in attracting investment from private investors to construct housing, offices and cultural buildings that constitute the building blocks of a normal, fine-grained urban extension to a city that has to cope with high-levels of migration and associated integration. At best, London's

Olympic Park will succeed in creating a similarly seamless urban quarter that warps and weaves with the dynamics of its surroundings. The fact that a sizeable proportion of the £7 billion budget was dedicated to building more than 30 bridges, links, paths and routes has, to my mind, created the potential of an 'open' urban system rather than one that turns it back to the surrounding city.

Towards Porous Urbanism

Ultimately, the urban question revolves around issues of inclusion and exclusion. As we have heard, for Suketu Mehta what matters is 'not that everyone is included. It's that no-one is excluded. It's not that you'll get invited to every party on the beach. It's that somewhere on the beach, there's a party you can go to.'⁷ The spatial dimension in this equation is critical. It is the loss of porosity and complexity that Richard Sennett has identified as the critical characteristic of contemporary urban malaise. In his words: 'I don't believe in design determinism, but I do believe that the physical environment should nurture the complexity of identity. That's an abstract way to say that we know how to make the Porous City; the time has come to make it.'⁸

The reality of the urban condition reveals that in many parts of the world urbanisation has become more spatially fragmented, less environmentally responsive and more socially divisive.⁹ With their unique political, social and spatial DNA, Brazilian cities have the ability to make more of their urban potential. Adaptable and porous urban design, coupled with social mix and density will not solve social inequality on its own. But they will go a long way in mitigating the negative impacts of LAPD bench urbanism. By developing a more open form of urbanism that recognises how the spatial and the social are inextricably linked, perhaps Jaime Lerner will – in the end – be proved right that cities can provide solutions and not just create problems.

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Notes

1. Suketu Mehta, 'Beyond the Maximum: Cities May be Booming, but Who's Invited to the Party?', *The Guardian*, 30 November 2015: www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/30/beyond-maximum-cities-booming-party-ny-rio-mumbai.
2. '2.2 The Economic Divide: Urban Income Inequalities', State of the World's Cities 2010/11, Unhabitat Org: www.unhabitat.org/jo/en/inp/Upload/2233036_pages%20from%20Report-Englishrd-2.pdf
3. Teresa Caldeira, 'Worlds Set Apart', LSE Cities, December 2008: <https://lsecities.net/media/objects/articles/worlds-set-apart/en-gb/>.
4. William Julius Wilson, 'More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City', *Poverty & Race*, 18 (3), May/June 2009
5. For more on the Porto Maravilha Urban Operation managed by the Rio de Janeiro Port Region Urban Development Company, see: www.portomaravilha.com.br/.
6. See www.trumptowersrio.com/about/.
7. Suketu Mehta, *op cit*.
8. Richard Sennett, 'The World Wants More 'Porous' Cities – So Why Don't we Build Them?', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2015: www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/27/delhi-electronic-market-urbanist-dream.
9. Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic, *Living in the Endless City*, Phaidon, London, 2011, page 8

