Modelling the dynamics of Latin American Cities:
from polarisation to fragmentation

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The structure of Latin American cities has been seriously affected by spatial and social
fragmentation processes taking place chiefly in the last two decades. Application of neoliberal
economic policies and the absence of state intervention in urban planning processes led to the
development of private and at the same time, excluding urban forms: The proliferation of
suburban gated communities and subsequent appearance of shopping-centres, hypermarkets or
urban entertainment centres in their vicinity. As a result, a new, car-based lifestyle flourished,
involving a greater degree of fragmentation and spatial segregation observable in Latin
American city regions.

From a theoretical point of view, this phenomenon is a new mode of spatial production
which breaks with the polarized city expansion described in the traditional models of Latin
American cities. This paper aims at covering three basic aspects, namely: First of all developing
an analysis of recent theoretical and empirical discussion about Latin American city models in
urban geography. Criticism leads to the development of a new model which will be introduced
on a second place. Within a chronological frame from the 16th century up to now, four
different stages ranging from the compact colonial city to the actual fragmented city-region are
described in the model. Finally its applicability is shown via the empirical analysis of the central
transformation processes in Buenos Aires; The massive sprawl of gated communities and
subsequent transformation of lifestyles are evaluated through the case of Nordelta, the biggest
current real estate development in Latin America: a private and enclosed city for 80.000
inhabitants.
1. Introduction

If we analyse the term “model” from a geographical or urban point of view, it is possible to distinguish three basic and different connotations. On the one hand, city models can be a kind constructive utopia – a vision or Leitbild for further urban development just as it was the modern city in its time or the garden city movement. On the other hand, city model can also be a product from a deductive logic and be the result of theoretical works just as we knew the work of Christaller or Thünen (cfr. Borsdorf 1999). Finally, a model can also be the reduction of the huge urban complexity toward to give us a better understanding of a type of city (cfr. Borsdorf, Bähr and Janoschka 2002).

Regional city models, from the urban models of the Chicago school (Burgess 1925, Hoyt 1939, Harris/Ullmann 1945) until latest work of authors such as Dear (2000) or Soja (2000) use the latter approach of the term and try to analyse social behaviour through the modelling of city structures. In the US but also in Germany, from the 1970s until today, the discussion about the Latin American city structure and the possibilities to catch the most important elements in a model is a hot spot in urban investigation. In 1976, German geographers Bähr and Borsdorf published two independent models of the Latin American city structure which were the starting point for an intense discussion in Europe and North America (Griffin/Ford 1980, Gormsen 1981, Deler 1989, Crowley 1995, Bähr/Mertins 1981, Borsdorf, 1982). In this sense, it is possible to differentiate two kinds of models: ones which characterize the city in one special moment and the other which shows different phases as development paths.

In the last years – due to the dramatic transformations which occurred in Latin American city regions from 1990 in order to liberalization of governmental politics and real estate markets – the discussion got new impacts with the contributions of Ford (1996), Meyer/Bähr (2001) and Borsdorf (2002) who redesigned the traditional models or developed new models (Janoschka 2002a, 2002b), basing in latest empirical data. Studying these designs, Bähr, Borsdorf and Janoschka (2002) updated their studies with a new common model which integrated the different arguments of the three authors. Using a time schedule we characterize the city development in Latin America in four phases which correspond to different modes of state interaction (urban planning) on the real estate market.

This paper has its guidelines in the presentation of the graphic derived from our empirical and theoretical studies (figure 1). Central aim of the first part of the paper is the presentation and discussion of the new model of the Latin American city structure. This analysis leads us to the combination of the discussion of urban structure elements with our empirical study of the transformations of life styles in this newly built urban environment. Gated communities – and Buenos Aires biggest development Nordelta for about 80.000 inhabitants – will be the focus of this empirical discussion.

2. The model of the Latin American city structure: From colonial times until 1970s

The model presented here does not only try to explain the actual city structure and the processes which led to what we observe nowadays. It also includes earlier development phases to show the dynamics of the Latin American cities in different epochs from the colonial area onwards to show the structural transformations due to political or economic changes in the past. Four main phases are represented through a scheme which explains the structural
elements at the end of this epoch. The model is based on latest empirical studies in cities such as Santiago de Chile, Valdivia and Temuco in Chile, Lima and Quito in the Andean area, Mexico-City, Guadalajara and Hermosillo in Mexico and Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro on the Atlantic coast. We do not have empirical studies about other cities, but our own knowledge and studies from other authors let us derive the thesis that parallel developments can be observed in all big and medium size cities in Latin America.

**Figure 1:** The Model of the Latin American city structure.

**Source:** Borsdorf, Bähr and Janoschka 2002; adapted.

The model parts from the observation that the different phases of urban development are characterized through different key principles of structuring and urban policies. In the early phase, the colonial time, this principle was the compactness of the urban body and a descending social gradient in order to growing distance from the central plaza. Structural element was a gradual decline from the centre to the outskirts in a kind of ring structure. Central argument for social status was being close to the plaza due to the central social functions concentrated there. This urban model became such an importance due to the royal instructions for the foundation of cities, the subsequent implementation of the most important functions in and around the central plaza and also the installation of the colonial elite around the plaza.

After independence, linear structures began to gain stronger importance. Upper classes moved into new houses along a main street – the Prado. Along the most important streets, we found the settlement of gardening or handwork activities and later on we find also the implementation of the first industrial activities. These sectoral patterns did not change the older ring structure completely, but transformed urban structure strongly. The urban land selling regime of the elites and the administration also drew cities in this direction.

When from 1930 onwards the flight from rural areas to urban centres caused the strong population increase, the agglomeration process was accompanied by the polarization between rich and poor areas; an urban development which can be characterized as typical for the modern industrial city (Marcuse 1989). The upper class areas moved out from the centre to suburban areas in farer distance to the city centre. But the main impact for the growth in the Latin American cities was the expansion of the poor neighbourhoods. Urban politics got more and more unable to set the guidelines for the urban development – not only due to the high growth rates but also because of corrupt and polemic policies which altered with authoritarian regimes during phases of dictatorships. The sectoral principle of urban growth kept intact but was overlaid by the polarization principle. Only some time later, in the peripheries began a process of cell-type growth: In suburban or outer urban areas, neighbourhoods for social housing were built such as illegal marginal areas (favelas). We can see that a cellular principle began to gain importance in already in those decades.

3. The model of the Latin American city structure: The actual approach

During the last two decades, urban expansion follows otherwise a different scheme: Nowadays, we can observe that we still have superposition of all the tendencies we mentioned before: But the neoliberal policy implementation and retreat of the state from intervention transformed the structural principle. Today, the following aspects are the driving forces of the urban
development (cfr. Janoschka 2002c, 65f). We will answer now which are the actual principles and urban forms that drive the transformation and expansion of the Latin American metropolises. The following elements do not appear in the former models of the Latin American city:

- gated communities for the upper and middle classes which we can observe in the whole metropolitan area. This fact is breaking with the principle of a sectoral implementation of the upper class areas,
- the dispersion of malls, shopping centres and urban entertainment centres in the whole agglomeration and not only in the upper class sector,
- the trend to build each time gated communities with mayor area, integrating more and more urban functions. Complexity and size of lots of mayor gated communities are passing the level of small cities, as we can observe in Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires but also in smaller cities such as Córdoba in Argentina;
- the mayor importance of transport infrastructure; proximity to a motorways entrance is the most important guideline for real estate prices and attractiveness of detached suburban housing areas,
- the suburbanization of the industrial production and the location in peripheral industrial or business parks or centres of logistic activities,
- higher grades of impossibility to enter areas of lower social groups and marginal areas through walls or informal ways of supervision.

Due to this critics, the new scheme of the Latin American city structure responds in order to introduce these aspects in a new model: Basic spatial factor for the implementation of the new fragmentary and nodal urban structures is the transformation of the transport system; and specially the motorways from being insufficient congested to modern and effective ones. This has been made by private investment: So the baseline for the private and privatising urban development in the neoliberal political and economic system has been a private inversion which responds to the necessities of the real estate market. Only this modernization and the strong reduction in commuting time makes suburban locations really interesting for middle and upper classes due to their time restrictions.

The second important principle of structuration also follows the guideline of the postmodern urban development: The cellular elements in the periphery (which former were marginal areas) are more and more becoming integrated in the market sphere and are big investment areas for real estate enterprises. And they get bigger and bigger: Buenos Aires knows Nordelta; with an estimated population of 80,000 by 2015 – Sao Paulo knows Alphaville which already counts more than 30,000 inhabitants (Coy and Pöhler 2002). The list of more development like these could be made much more longer. These are the extreme forms of fragmentation which are transforming strongly and deeply the Latin American urban areas. We understand fragmentation on all spheres as a process which is separating functions and elements in urban space. Different from former polarization process is the local impact: We do not find open, mayor homogeneous areas (rich city – poor city; CBD – residential neighbourhood), but the implementation of heterogeneous elements or functions relatively close one to another. And this is accompanied by a strong delimitation of these small areas, often meanwhile private security services. We can explain this easily on the gated communities: They are homogeneous areas, highly segregated and protected; like islands inside the urban neighbourhood. The reasons and arguments for the implementation of these islands in the urban landscape from several points of view (inhabitants, planning institutions, real estate market etc.) will be discussed in the oral presentation from the example of Nordelta. In this way we already want to point out that the discourse of urban fear is clearly a construction of a
coalition between the promoters and the media but does not necessarily respond to real dangers.

A second element of fragmentation has to be analysed through the tendencies of allocation of functional spatial units. This is especially important in the retail sector: Although the urban centres gain new importance due to important renovation programs and other upgrading intervention, they cannot compete to the suburban malls which represent a north-american lifestyle and gain interest for all types of social groups. Social exclusion works here not through the construction of walls, but by accessibility: These islands of consume and diversion do only have access by car and exclude in this sense everyone who cannot participate in private transport. Meanwhile the first malls were clearly oriented to the upper class market in the urban upper class sector, now we can find these installations in the whole urban area – due to dispersion of the upper and middle class population. In our model, we present all kinds of malls, urban entertainment centre and also business parks with only one signature: This is reasonable because of their common location principle which coincides with the location of motorways and gated communities. In combination to proximity to airports, these elements build fragmented new economic centres which remind to north American edge cities.

In order to facilitate the comprehension of the model, we do not discuss the different types of gated communities. This discussion is resumed in three different types which reflect aspects such as structure, location and size. Urban gated communities are groups of attached houses or even urban towers without many facilities. These are gated communities for a middle or lower middle class target. Suburban gated communities are predominantly for the middle and upper classes and do have big single detached houses. They do have a lot of common facilities and sports areas. Third type is the Mega-gated community with integrated cultural and educational facilities just as described in Nordelta case study.

Poorer areas also have transformed during the last decades: The marginal areas have been integrated in the urban space – and in some cases they entered in an upgrading process. Otherwise, we also find the cases of marginal areas which kept being without any integration and now are nodes of criminality and almost inaccessible. Differentiation between legal, semi-legal and illegal marginal areas are in an neoliberal urban space without any importance and have fallen out of the model.

4. Conclusions: The applicability of the model

Figure 2: Social space and interactions with the environment from gated community inhabitants in Nordelta, Buenos Aires.

Source: Janoschka and Glasze 2003; adapted.

The analysed processes of the actual spatial transformations in Latin American city regions have shown the main guidelines which can be characterized through privatisation and fragmentation of the urban space. The applicability of this model has been shown through a series of empirical studies on the processes analysed. The presentation on the congress will emphasize on exactly this point and show the empirical case study of a series of interviews with
inhabitants of Nordelta in Buenos Aires. Fragmentation is translated into a social space which only contains moving between cellular elements of urban space. Private motorized transport is the only mode of interaction with a world organized in strong categories – the realization of the modernist’s urban utopia.
5. Bibliography


Curriculum vitae

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