Liminal Centres: Central São Paulo and Guadalajara between Vacancy and Occupancy

Authors: Luis Angel Flores Hernandez & Jeroen Stevens


Contact: luisangel.floreshernandez@kuleuven.be

Abstract

By means of a comparative diachronic analysis of the urban centres of São Paulo (Brazil) and Guadalajara (Mexico), this article develops the notion of ‘liminal centre’ for coming to terms with the distinctive ambivalent urban condition of Latin American historical urban centres. It unfolds a long-durée urban development history of both centres, drawing particular attention to the iterative making and remaking of their material urban forms, consisting of principle landscape features such as geomorphology, topography and vegetation, as well as the built materiality of urban morphologies, plot structures and building topologies, as they mutated throughout five centuries of urbanization. Historical cartography, urban analysis and fieldwork observations provide therefore the main data sources. Bound up with broader Latin American urbanization patterns, both cases illustrate notorious iterations of vacancy and occupancy, eternally alternating between planned interventions and spontaneous practices of various social groups. Both centres consequently appear wedged between formal and informal constituents of urbanism, incessantly oscillating between sheer decay and prompt renewal, between abundant vacancy and thriving occupancy. ‘Spatial liminality’ will therefore be proposed as a useful theoretical denominator for capturing such paradoxical and ambiguous urban condition.

Keywords: Spatial liminality, Historic centres, Latin America, São Paulo, Guadalajara, Urbanism, Architecture
Introduction: Urban centrality in Latin America and beyond

Centrality in Latin American cities —and elsewhere— is a commonplace entry-point in urban studies. It has consequently been understood in manifold ways. Functionally it has been related to particular spatial concentrations of density and activities; while geographically often denoting a relational position in the territory (Hillier, 1999). As a research theme it has seen advancements in quantitative methods by coupling indexes with new analytical models of urban networks (Pereira et al., 2013; Agyyczov et al., 2017). In addition, classic studies as Whyte’s (1988) ‘rediscovery’ of New York’s centre and Low’s (2003) thick description (Geertz, 1973) of public life in central Latin American squares have drawn particular attention to centres’ peculiar public life. Nonetheless, the inherent ambiguity of Latin American centres has overall been surprisingly taken for granted. Most commonly, research staggered around issues of heritage and patrimony conservation, and related challenges vis-à-vis capitalist urban (re)development (Jones & Varley, 1994; Carrión & Hanley 2007). Although Latin American historic centres are often replete of complex and unplanned spatialities, informality studies predominantly engage with peripheral self-help settlements and other ‘spontaneities’ found in the widespread self-constructed and self-managed favelas (Brazil), barriadas (Peru) or colonias populares (Mexico). Up to today, the most celebrated proponents of the human settlements’ debate in Latin America build on peripheral empirical work (Camínos, Turner, & Steffian, 1969; Gilbert, Hardoy, & Ramírez, 1982; Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1989; Newirth, 2016; J. F. C. Turner, 1976; Ward, 1982). Similarly, successive United Nations reports on ‘slums’ hardly draw attention to downtown informal living (UN-Habitat, 2003). Exceptions in that regard have focussed, amongst other things, on downtown ‘slum’ tenements (Eckstein, 1990; Harms, 1997; Lewis, 1961; Stevens, De Meulder, & Sanches, 2018) or squatted buildings (Brillembourg & Klumpner, 2012; De Carli & Frediani, 2016; Earle, 2017; Stevens, 2017). All in all, the Latin American urban centre, as a complex composite of formal and informal spatial patterns, remains a largely understudied territory. This article proposes therefore the metaphorical notion of ‘liminality’ to discuss the ambiguous urban nature of historic urban centres in the Latin American cities of São Paulo and Guadalajara.

Comparing habitats

São Paulo and Guadalajara are very different Latin American cities. São Paulo organically developed as a trade town near the East-coast of Brazil, a largely informal occupation of an outspoken tropical landscape. Guadalajara, on its turn, was laid-out in a more rigidly planned way on a flat plateau in West-central Mexico, build right-away as a monumental Spanish civic colonial centre. São Paulo eventually developed into Latin America’s second largest metropolitan region, housing almost 22 million inhabitants, while Guadalajara evolved into the second largest conurbation of Mexico, with more than 4.5 million denizens. It needs no saying that both cities’ oldest districts underwent disparate transformations over time. Nevertheless, they resonate with highly comparable urban development patterns that afflicted Latin American cities in like manner (Gilbert, 1994).

In what follows, both centres’ urban histories will be dissected, specifically focussing on the successive juxtaposition of spatial artefacts (urban projects, street morphologies, building typologies, and the like) and the particular urban livelihoods (dwelling cultures, everyday politics, economic enterprises, and so forth) these brought in their wake. The
urban centre is therefore singled out as a ‘strategic sample’ of the city. As the metropolis’ oldest district, the centre is regarded as a *pars pro toto* of the city's urban history, in as much as it simply absorbed material detritus of each urbanization wave that engulfed the urbanizing territory.

In popular media, at least in São Paulo and Guadalajara, the old centre is depicted simultaneously as a tourist attraction and as a no-go zone. It is frequently casted as the city's skid row afflicted by criminality, homelessness, black trade, and decay, attributing an urban imaginary of squalor and sloth, while at the same time bearing the city's collective memory; a genuine cultural venue, a destination and place to be. For making sense of such contradictory narratives, both urban centres are investigated here as ‘stages’ that simultaneously reflect and steer urban development and urban life (Heynen, 2013). As architectonic sceneries, the centres’ urban form stems from an amalgamation of architectural artefacts, jointly forging a giant man-made object in its own terms, ceaselessly transforming into renewed material and social constellations (Rossi, 1966). In such light, both centres contain material traces and remnants of each urbanistic orthodoxy that was bound to remake the city according to prevailing aspirations and perpetually renewed imaginations. If the Latin American city is a palimpsest (Corboz, 1983), then its old centre must undoubtedly be its most densely written and rewritten piece.

The comparison proceeds by discussing the historical metamorphosis of central São Paulo and Guadalajara through a series of epochs that fundamentally influenced their contemporary urban condition. Through these phases of structural urban change, the basis of a conceptual framework on Latin American urban centrality is sketched out. Each phase will make a comparison between the central areas of São Paulo and Guadalajara, highlighting context-specific urban planning regimes and their actual material outcomes vis-à-vis inadvertent processes of informality. The final section will put forward some concluding remarks on the spatial liminality that emanates from both urbanistic histories, speculating on potential patterns that allow extrapolation to Latin American urban centres in general. These provisional conclusions intend to spark further research on the distinctive ambivalence of contemporary urban centres in Latin America. This article draws therefore from urban analysis, historical cartography and extensive fieldwork in central São Paulo and Guadalajara.

**Between divergent inceptions of centrality**

**São Paulo: Informal precursors of a colonial settlement**

The urbanized territory denominated today as São Paulo’s ‘centro’ consolidated halfway through the 19th century as a small trade town, connecting the harbour of Santos with Brazil's productive hinterlands. The contemporary centre would be built on a densely forested plateau, with wide meandering waterways and steep hills. Long before the first Portuguese disembarked in the 16th century, nomadic Tupinakins occupied the land with dispersed *aldeias*, villages of a few large communal houses around a central square, surrounded by slash-and-burn farmland (Morse, 1958). With large earthworks, roads, fields and countless settlements they significantly cultivated and manipulated the so-called ‘pristine’ Brazil's East-coast (Denevan, 1992).
From the 16th century onwards, São Paulo’s region concentrated intense mingle and trade, increasingly hosting dispersed mixed villages of indigenous tribes and European arrivals who rapidly immersed in the indigenous world (Metcalf, 2005). In 1553, following successive reports of European ‘paganism’, and clerics as much as traders ‘going native’, Jesuit missionaries erected a wooden shack that served both as chapel and school at the Piratininga Plateau. It was a strategic location, combining the fertile grounds of the coastal plain, a benign microclimate, open grazing lands, high defensible grounds, and at the junction of two waterways that penetrated deep into the hinterlands. On the triangular escarpment of red stone and slate the incremental concentration of inhabitants forged the informal foundations of the settlement that developed into São Paulo’s centre (Dominian, 1958).

Compared to the Spaniards in Guadalajara, the Portuguese were hardly concerned with establishing monuments of imperial prestige abroad. The settlement served more as a logistical outpost for resource extraction and distribution than as an explicit attempt to impose civic order. Consequently, building codes were almost non-existent, and wattle-and-daub huts and townhouses spontaneously accrued around religious, governmental and economic institutions, organically settling between indigenous trade routes and landscape elements (Rolnik, 1997). Embryonic São Paulo’s urban tissue adapted to the local topography and expanded ad-hoc. Squares emerged from unbuildable residual spaces, irregular plots, flood zones or church yards and forecourts. By 1600, São Paulo was a modest informal town, who’s small mongrel population left large areas vacant, riddling the colonial town with vacancy from the very moment it was occupied. At least until 1850, its material appearance hardly changed. Free occupation of land was the most commonplace urbanization formula, since the ‘wild’ territory was anyhow considered vacant, uncultivated and unexploited (Rolnik, 1997). Central São Paulo’s primordial urban form was impromptu pieced together to bring vacancy in the orbit of development.

Guadalajara: a colonial monument

Contrasting with São Paulo’s utilitarian colonial conformation, Guadalajara’s materialization, its built form and to a certain extent its socio-spatial landscape, aroused from a preconception of space based on both symbolic and practical features, accounting for a relatively short but nevertheless rich history of Spanish building practices in America (Lopez Moreno, 2001). Guadalajara was founded in the heart of the Atemajac Plateau in 1542 as a space in which the powers of the colonial enterprise were materialized. Its morphological structure was composed by a stringent grid of streets, which expanded as far as necessary, with the Plaza Mayor as its central point. By superimposing a geometric regularity in the allegedly ‘wild’ landscape, the centre was supposed to radiate puresness, bringing ‘order’ amidst the ‘chaos’ of the unconquered territory, which was regarded as vacant and devoid of any meaning or rationality. The racial segregation between the official centre –where the Spanish population dwelled–, and the peripheral barrios –where natives and mestizos settled– was an attempt to institute spatial-political relationships of centre/periphery, and consequently of domination/subordination (Hardoy, 1978).

However, by analysing space as the stage on which social life plays out (Heynen, 2013), it is possible to recognize the centre’s ambivalence: a half-vacant space bedecked with grandiose architecture, but lacking real urban centrality. The latter, in fact, was much more present in the barrios, where density, encounter, movement and exchange dictated everyday life (Lomell Suarez, 1982). The grid instead, during the first 200 years of colonial rule, accommodated low-density habitation, stillness and minimal encounter, periodically
animated by weekly *tianguis* open-air markets and religious processions in contrast with ‘peripheral’ barrios’ vibrant urbanity (Lomelí Suarez, 1982; Mata Torres, 1979). Born as a monument, Guadalajara’s centre afterwards got caught up in continuous contention on what the meaning of this monumental space might, could and should be.

Between formality and informality — São Paulo: formalizing informality

After 1850, São Paulo rapidly mutated into a metropolis. By the closing of the century, the city’s conurbation tripled. A brand new and formally designed urban centre ‘*Republica*’ had to materialize the prosperity of the newly independent city, heralded by orthogonal squares, parks and boulevards, echoing the Parisian urbanistic orthodoxy of the times. Together with the prestigious municipal theatre and other monumental projects designed by European-schooled architects, these sought to turn it into the novel governmental and cultural heart of the nascent metropole. While train- and tramrails were laid-out, a first exodus of inhabitants left the overcrowded centre forsaken, favouring the more fashionable areas, in new designed centres or residential neighbourhoods, if not in rustic peripheral villas. Meanwhile, the surging working class was partly evacuated and reallocated into distanced labour districts and industrial compounds that replaced former fields and marshlands. While new centralities were built from scratch in its immediate vicinity, the old one assembled vacancy. Instantaneously, abandoned constructions were covertly subdivided into tiny cubicles, rented-out to the lowest income urbanites. The resulting proliferation of downtown ‘slums’ or *cortiços* were jam-packed with massively arriving migrants and erstwhile slaves (Stevens, De Meulder, & Sanches, 2018). Overcrowding and consequential devastating hygienic conditions legitimised ‘cleansing’ operations to ‘sanitize’ the decrepit centre by the closing of the 19th century (Bonduki, 2006). The ‘old’, outdated and worn-out colonial centre was piecemeal patched-up, sporadically ‘updated’, ‘rectified’ and partially ‘normalized’ with hygienist interventions to purportedly prevent it from falling apart. Formal urbanistic measures sought to make-up for centuries of uncurbed urbanization, without ever succeeding to completely integrate it in its more fashionable and modern surroundings.
As the city centre entered the 20th century, utter transformations paralleled exponential urban expansion. A genuine civic centre was projected on the organically grown architectural ‘cacophony’. Streets were widened, squares inserted and renewed, public gardens commissioned (Frugoli, 2000). Urban ‘renewal’ was the new mantra, and the eradication of cortiço-quarters cleared the ground for a monumental centre worthy of the germinating ‘global’ metropolis. Successive urban management regimes continuously tinkered and fiddled with the existing urban fabric to fit ‘contemporary’ imaginations. Ambitious new plans tentatively adjusted and manipulated the centre’s form in accordance with paradigmatic and ambitious urbanistic reveries of all-encompassing modernisation. As a result, it became impossible for the area to live up to successively renewed expectations. If anything, 20th century downtown São Paulo dwelled betwixt and between decay, slummification and renewal, caught up in a transitional passage from renounced decrepitude towards aspired modernity, a liminal condition that would extend eternally.

Guadalajara: republican ‘order and progress’

Central Guadalajara, in turn, after independence and through the Revolution of 1910, was highly compatible with the mercantile city model that had been taking shape since the colony, with an urban landscape composed of highly-accessible commercial establishments coexisting with aristocratic residences, and civic and religious premises (Gonzales Romero, 1988). Dismantled by new political ideologies, the dualist order and its natural border dividing Indian and Spanish domains also dissolved. The river was transformed into a parkway, and what used to define the threshold between the ‘two republics’ developed into preeminent public space. The grid’s ‘symbolic centrality’ gave way to actual ‘urban centrality’, concentrating primary urban functions (Nuñez Miranda, 1999). The grid of Guadalajara, a huge monumental void during the colony, gradually engulfed all the intensive activity of the barrios. The centre, without the aura of the ‘pure’ and its exclusionary character became –thanks to its morphological constitution– the stage where vibrant urban life unfolded (Nuñez Miranda, 1999).

Echoing São Paulo, mixed-use buildings framed the coexistence of mixed populations. Guadalajara’s eclectic architectural typologies housed the rising mercantilist bourgeoisie on top of ground floor commercial premises, sheltered by portales. These spaces functioned as thresholds between public and private domains; as articulators of formal and informal vending, ambulant and permanent; and apart from the main plaza, they provided much of the material ground on which social life was reproduced (Villaseñor Villaseñor, 1990). Such intensive ‘informalization’ of this seemingly formal and rigid spatial layout underscores the divergence between the grid's spatial model, associated with an ordered urban planning regime, and its actual materialization and social hereafter. The grid gradually absorbed urbanity, and proved an open spatial device, capable of accommodating discrepant uses and meanings.
Between progress and regression

Modernization & development, for the better and the worse

As in the rest of Latin America, Import-Substituting Industrialization (ISI) policies paved the way for sheer economic and urban development from the 1930s onwards (Gilbert, 1994). The car and the interrelated metallurgic industry incited drastic adaptations of São Paulo’s infrastructure and urban fabric. A city-wide masterplan was drawn up, and its half-baked implementation engendered excessive demolition works for facilitating a new network of roadways and adjacent vertical constructions (Somekh, 2014). Once again, a ‘modern’ high-rise metropolitan centre was fudged together on the wreckage of the old one. Despite the vast urban makeover, the old centre was never entirely substituted, but rather complexified with another layer of urban detritus (Stoler, 2013), colliding with existing spatial elements into an intricate urban collage (Rowe & Koetter, 1978) of formal and informal urban systems.

For decades to come, the Plano de Avenidas defined the city’s main urban development recipe, opening up more peripheral lands for new ‘healthy’ habitation, while the centre was largely dedicated to commerce and services. Parks, boulevards and squares alike were remodelled for accommodating parking, highways, and transport hubs. While the periphery was urbanizing at an unprecedented phase, the old centre paradoxically surfaced more and more as an internal periphery, left in sheer regression and overrun by vertical constructions (Nakano, Campos, & Rolnik, 2004).

Insofar as reconversion works were geared towards improving the macro-accessibility of the metropolis’, they meanwhile jeopardized the liveability and micro-accessibility of many central districts. Increasingly reduced to a giant traffic junction, the centre further eroded, especially where its urban tissue was ripped up by renovation works. The 1972 zoning plan unwittingly added insult to the injury by designating the centre as a merely commercial enterprise (Nakano, Campos, & Rolnik, 2004). Large areas were pedestrianized to square
off traffic congestion, and metro and bus terminals were assembled below and on top of former public spaces. Slowly but surely, the centre came to be an outstretched walkable transfer hub, a vital site of expenditure, exchange and passage, not of residence or inhabitation. As overcrowded it was during the day, as deserted during the night. In 1975, the Folha de São Paulo poignantly designated ‘o centro’ into ‘one big dirty slum’ (Folha, 29/11/1975).

Fig 3. Central São Paulo as a large traffic junction (1951)

‘Modernity’ and its legacies in Guadalajara

Contrary to São Paulo’s irregular growth, Guadalajara’s grid offered a ‘stable’ medium in which successive social and economic models evolved (Lopez Moreno, 2001), and held the ability of framing different political and cultural paradigms across time. Guadalajara’s morphology and low-rise structure remained largely intact for centuries, however, in a relatively short amount of time (1947-1952), the historic core’s physiognomy was brutally modified. ‘Modernity’—or what was locally understood by it (Flores-Hernandez, 2018)—swept through the architectural heritage. Coinciding with the modernization bonanza across Latin America, the enlargement of Guadalajara’s main avenues, new street openings, and creation of new civic spaces implied the destruction of hundreds of historic buildings, displacing many families while permanently modifying the centre’s form (Sanchez del Real, 2008). Concurrently with the centre’s physical destruction, local elites voluntarily exiled towards new aristocratic settlements in the west. Initially opposing such
radical transformations, landlords ended up supporting these interventions, foreseeing increased property values (Nuñez Miranda, 1999).

All this resulted in more commercial premises, new office spaces, higher flows of car traffic, and a plummeting housing stock. The centre of Guadalajara consequently consolidated as a hybrid low-rise central business district, an ambivalent place at the same time vacant (as residential use was gradually diminished) but simultaneously populated by strong urban activity. Breaking and recombining the physical features of the centre was a constant up until the end of the 20th century. Most notably, the Plaza Tapatía megaproject (1980) concurrently increased both vacancy and urbanity. Businesses, markets, and public space replaced more housing. The new plaza epitomized the centre’s ‘popularization’, a favoured working class meeting and vending space. As a tourist attraction, it was possible to see hordes of locals and foreigners coexisting with homeless and dispossessed.

Fig 4. Central Guadalajara 1944, highlighted demolitions (1948-1980).

Between vacancy and occupancy

São Paulo: Propagating Vacancy

During the last decades of the 20th century, São Paulo’s chief banks and corporations increasingly migrated from the ‘old’ to ‘new’ prestigious centres South-West of the city
(Frugoli, 2000). Numerous high-rise buildings that were hasty cobbled-up during the hectic 'verticalization decades' proved contemporary office-demands unworthy, and also plentiful cultural, recreational and public institutions abandoned the outmoded centre (Silva, 2000). Although the metropolitan population increased by 42 per cent during the 20th century’s last two decades, the centre’s oldest district lost approximately 40 per cent of its inhabitants. While new peripheral developments mushroomed, the discredited historic core increasingly imploded.

In the oldest district of Sé, 3055 dwellings were found abandoned in the census of 2000, accounting for a vacancy rate of 26.77 per cent. The whole centre accumulated about 40,000 registered inhabitable vacant dwellings. Ironically, almost a fifth of the centre’s housing stock is left obsolete, in a city of homeless. Actual vacancy rates remain uncharted, as the census do not include the unabridged assortment of deserted hotels, offices, governmental and commercial buildings, factories and industrial warehouses, neither deficient residential constructions. All in all, at least a third of the centre’s architecture was probably abandoned by the end of the 20th century, counting more dwellings without people than people without a dwelling. While middle class residents and activities evaded the centre, poorer residents and secondary enterprises recycled many of their renounced spaces. Posh establishments made room for popular lanchonetes or snack bars, exclusive galleries become mundane bazars, renown cinemas turned into peepshows, well-known hotels into promiscuous motels. In addition, the concentration of criss-crossing commuters attracted informal street vendors and small businesses, while numerous of the ramshackle buildings turned into cortiços.
Fig 5. Unused (white) and underused (grey) buildings, inviting partly squatted (red) or recycled as central slums (pink).

Although the centre aggregating vacancy, it remained also fundamentally central, in part because its diachronically accumulated symbolic value could not possibly be reproduced elsewhere (Teixeira, Comaru, Cymbalista, & Suti, 2005). For urbanites dependent on public transport, it is still the city’s best-equipped area, congregating low-skilled jobs, public services and affordable cultural amenities. Moreover, large political demonstrations, parades, processions and cultural events take place precisely here, because indeed, it is in the middle of things, the most symbolic space of the city to address. Paradoxically, while accumulating vacancy, urbanity is vibrant. The centre became a highly intricate architectural composite, in which exclusive galleries sit aside of overcrowded cortiços, high-rise mirror-glass towers overlook a landscape of crumbling ruins, and important cultural and political buildings highly contrast with adjacent squatted edifices. Unsurprisingly, this mixed architectural collage accommodates mixed social and cultural groups, integrating countless homeless street-dwellers as much as the most well-afforded helicopter-commuters, exclusive shop-keepers amidst informal street hawkers, international businessmen amongst criminal gangs, drugs-traffickers and –addicts, while tourists sleep over in the vicinity of red-light and queer nightlife quarters.

Guadalajara: vacant and contested

On the verge of the new millennium, Mexico was shaken by a series of political-economic transformations, delineating an urban development characterized by booming suburban expansion, displacement of all population sectors to the newly built urban fringes, physical degradation and lack of investment in the heart of the metropolis (Cruz Solis, 2012; Harner et al., 2009). By 2010, Guadalajara lost more than 151,000 inhabitants, while the periphery tripled its population (Cruz Solis, 2012). A constellation of urban voids with different characteristics emerged downtown; comprising of empty or ruinous buildings with newly vacated plots (Flores Hernandez, 2016).
Fig 6. Central Guadalajara 2016. Uninhabited (red) ruinous buildings (pink) vacant plots (white).

More than 4000 hectares of vacant land and buildings is conservatively estimated to be found within the central municipality (Fausto Brito & Rábago, 2001). In 2010, 260 estates are said to be at high risk of collapse; 350 three years after\(^2\). Within the official boundaries of the historic centre, 51% of the total built fabric is either abandoned, ruinous or in bad conditions\(^3\). Insecurity, grubbiness and neglect are common denominators of downtown amongst local media and middle-class citizens alike, contributing to its stigmatization. All of this however, without affecting the centre’s economic primacy (Harner, 2010). The majority of wholesale, services and retail activities in the city can be found within the highly permeable grid of streets and plazas. A rich culture of trade practices persists. Possessing an autonomous metabolism, during daytime, urbanity saturates the place; while in the evenings there is no one to be seen. The colonial architecture, which in the distant past housed the local Spanish aristocracy, accommodates today a wide variety of commercial and service business lines. The outstanding vacancy found from the ground floor-up in the city centre is occupied by a myriad of goods offered for sale. Most of the present centre’s little residential architecture houses products, not people. Refurbished buildings are
transformed into warehouses, colonial structures are camouflaged by large shop signboards, and an outbreak of public parking lots replaces heritage constructions. The 21st century centre's eclecticism consists more and more of sporadic architectural gems in a sea of mediocre edifices.

Nevertheless, urbanity thrives in and around this puzzling landscape. Walking through the centre is entering into a multi-coloured street bazar, where everything from drinks, sweets, flowers, clothing, to pirated DVDs, and puppies is offered for sale. Restaurants, terraces and canteens brimming with mariachis animate the soundscape. In between such vigorous activity, the leviathan of inequality manifests. As 60% of the total Mexican workforce belongs to the so-called 'informal' economy, and with no other working opportunities, a multitude of ambulantes street vendors fills the streets of the centre in order to make a living. The now pedestrianized spaces concentrate the highest amount of tourist flows, becoming the medium of subsistence of thousands of families who are plunged into socio-economic precarity, who thrive on the centre’s flourishing centrality and concentration of transit for eking out a living.

Urban practices attributed to the periphery –such as informality– percolate the heart of the once noble and –partly still– gallant historic core. In this way, also the perception of the centre is double: a unique, cultured and decorous space reflecting in its architecture all the historically accumulated aristocratic powers, and at the same time popular, mainstream, and therefore plebeian, common and even vulgar. Unsurprisingly, middle class denizens retreat to other shopping locations such as the dozens of big-box malls (Harner, 2010).

Informality as the modus operandi of contemporary Mexican urbanism stands in contradiction with the gentry's idiosyncrasy, giving rise to revanchist strategies regarding the 'proper' use of the historic centre (Flores Hernandez, 2016a). Alternating political regimes with their respective economic power-constellations frame the iteration of urban orders in the city centre, without determining however, the always sophisticated and paradoxical urbanism that unfolds on the ground.

Concluding Remarks on Latin America’s Liminal Centres

Central São Paulo and Guadalajara depart from disparate urban development trajectories, stemming from the respective intermingling of Portuguese and Spanish colonial planning traditions with context-specific spatial factors. Their centrality also resulted from opposite processes: as a spontaneous concentration of previously dispersed activities in the São Paulo region, and as a deliberate well-planned, yet half-successful intervention in the ‘vacant’ territory that would become Guadalajara. However, with all their fundamental differences in terms of structural morphology, architectural typology, and social dynamics, both sites accommodate a peculiar form of urban ‘centerness’, characterized by spatial dynamics that oscillate between consolidation and deterioration, full and empty, static and dynamic. Both centres, as the oldest urban districts of the city, throughout post-colonial and modernization waves, developed a particular deviation from the rest of the city, each in its own way concentrating a set of activities and symbolisms unconceivable elsewhere in the urban territory. The coming and going of urban planning regimes and urban design interventions paradoxically propagated urban vacancy, large demolitions and architectural
eyesores in both urban centres, but concurrently forged urban areas with fundamental semiotic importance. While in São Paulo the centre served as a laboratory for subsequent imaginative conceptions of an aspired urban ‘centre’, in Guadalajara, the monumental inception of the centre was constantly (re)appropriated and instrumentalized for advancing historically-contingent agendas with different materialities.

In São Paulo, successive accumulations of vacancy invited for ‘other’ uses and users, allowing the inclusion of a lot of the usually excluded. Partial attempts to formalize a fundamentally informal urban site never managed (and perhaps never truly indented) to remake it. In Guadalajara, the numerous efforts at first transforming and then preserving its formal monumentality never fully succeed in uprooting its mismatching popular character that goes hand-in-hand with informality. São Paulo’s central district was neither considered a marginal periphery nor wholly controlled or rationalized, as it was seldom conceived as a prime urban centre. Guadalajara's formal and clear structure needed centuries to attain true urban centrality, and when finally acquired, marginality never ceased neither. Instead, in both cases, a highly ambivalent, double-coded and hybrid urban environment was forged over time, integrating traits of centrality and marginality, rich and poor, renewal and decay, occupancy and vacancy. Both centres were never completely neglected, neither wholly remade.

The accumulation of diversity and complexity in both centres, fuelled and was fuelled by a myriad of spatial conceptions on these sites, and keeps doing so. Perhaps, it is exactly because of their primacy that these spaces reflect the inherent contradictions of the socio-political landscape of the time, providing a preferred urban laboratory for testing urban regimes in situ. The centres’ architectural realm, hence, surfaces as an eminent urban pars-pro-toto, a materialized amalgamation of urban imaginations and projects coming together in one and the same multi-layered urban physiognomy.

Borrowing from Turner (1974), both centres surface as particularly liminal spaces, perpetually betwixt and between abandoned hereafters and aspired futures that never materialize. As liminal centres, they are in perennial transition, never consolidated, but unceasingly caught up in the iterative vicissitudes of erosion and regeneration, maintaining a temporality that extends into eternity. They are never made, but merely remade over and over again. In keeping with Turner, the endured crisis that liminality implies propagates a radical moment of creativity, since it is from the twilight zone between the old and the new that alternative possibilities radiate. In their persistent liminal momentum, the centres escape inherited preconceptions or unequivocal definitions. Their conceptualization as liminal spaces underpins instead the contradictory urban traits they amassed across time, without ever excluding or erasing one another. In this ‘permanent state of temporality’ (Thomassen, 2009: 17) a stretched ‘interim’ materiality allows older uses and meanings to gradually intertwine with new ones, accumulating architectonic, social and cultural diversity and complexity, consequently facilitating the paradoxical coexistence of disparate social worlds within the confines of one and the same spatial realm. Such liminal space is never simply one thing, but inevitably multiple things at the same time. Hence the at hindsight incongruent concomitance of exclusion and inclusion, rich and poor, dominion and insurgence, posh and degraded, elites and pariahs. As liminal spaces, they are never finished or consolidated, but bound, instead, to be continuously remodelled according to shifting urban imaginations. They are simultaneously inert in their structural endurance, and elastic in their perennial transformability. The extent to which such spatial liminality applies to Latin American urban centrality in general would need more research, which is what comparison between São Paulo and Guadalajara hopes to provoke.
Bibliography


Notes:

1 Fieldwork in São Paulo was conducted between 2012 and 2018, as part of a VLIR-UOS funded research project on urban movements in central São Paulo. Fieldwork in Guadalajara took place between 2015 and 2017 in the context of the author's doctoral research on Guadalajara funded by CONACYT


3 See: Patronato del Centro Histórico de Guadalajara http://transparencia.guadalajara.gob.mx/patrimonio-cultural-edificado-en-el-municipio-de-guadalajara
According to INEGI, in April 2015, 57.8% of the worker force in Mexico belonged to the informal sector. See: http://www.inegi.org.mx/saladeprensa/aproposito/2015/trabajo0.pdf