

Curitiba 1960s transformations and postmodern ideas

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Abstract

Over the course of a few decades Curitiba evolved from a mid-twentieth century provincial capital city in southern Brazil to an ecological capital and a model city. How did Curitiba become a world model city? Contemporary planning ideas in global diffusion certainly contributed to it. Events such as the creation of the local planning institute and the establishment of the first local architecture and urbanism course triggered a series of urban transformations. Likewise, young, migrant architects introduced challenging ideas. In a stimulating environment, international experiences and connections fostered the development of innovative proposals. Moreover, differing from the nationally hegemonic modernist architecture and rationalist urbanism, Curitiba's planners focused on the actual needs of the city, its specific physical context and social milieu, despite vocal resistance to the term postmodernism. Local identity, belonging, cultural memory, revitalization, recycling, and pedestrianization were valued as planning targets, as well as the preservation of the natural environment. Drawing upon a few paradigmatic designs, this paper accounts for the successful planning of Curitiba and its promotion internationally. It critically traces the planning history of this world-class city in the broader context of Brazilian planning by presenting the early postmodern urbanism implemented in Curitiba.

Keywords

sustainable development, environmental planning, postmodern urbanism, planning model, planning diffusion.

Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

Curitiba, the capital city of Paraná state in southern Brazil, has been referred to globally as an ecological capital and ‘environmentally sustainable model city’¹. The city has undergone several decades of town planning since the French urbanist Alfred Agache presented his proposal for improving and modernizing the provincial city in 1943. Over the years a combination of factors and ideas have contributed to the celebrated image of the city we know today. This paper explores those factors in order to answer the question, how did Curitiba become a world model city?

Thus, I explain that in 1960s the establishment of the first local course of architecture and urbanism, the preparation of a new town plan and the creation of the Curitiba Institute for Research and Town Planning (IPPUC) triggered a series of urban transformations. A group of young, migrant architects worked together at the university and the planning institute as well as in private commissions and successful competitions. Some of these professionals had been trained in São Paulo, which led to the misconception that Curitiba’s architecture was just a ‘by-product’ and a ‘dialect’ of the ‘paulista school’². In fact, in a favourable and stimulating environment, the international experiences and connections of these architects fostered the development of innovative proposals. The professional practice in 1960s Curitiba thus contrasted with the paulista brutalism as well as utopian Brasília. Unlike the nationally hegemonic modernist architecture and rationalist urbanism, Curitiba’s planners focused on the actual needs of the city, its specific physical context and social milieu.

As early Curitiba’s planners also worked as architects I intend to analyse both architectural designs and urban proposals. Publications dedicated to Curitiba’s planning history almost not correlate architectural and planning proposals authored by the same architects³. I explore a few architectural projects implemented in Curitiba in order to relate them to contemporary ideas in global circulation. By doing this, I argue that shifts from modern to postmodern rationale contributed to the city’s present image. Postmodern ideas refer to those proposals whose expressions and design intentions represented a farewell to modernity, which is defined in terms of constant improvement and linear progress. In short, postmodernism escaped from that development logic and rejected the notion of novelty, by re-evaluating old values⁴. As I claim, planners in Curitiba tacitly rejected rationalist proposals, despite their objection to the term postmodernism. Drawing upon original documents, I critically trace the planning history of this world-class city in the broader context of Brazilian planning by examining the early postmodern urbanism implemented in Curitiba.

ENGAGING OPPORTUNITIES

In 1943 Curitiba celebrated the 250th anniversary of its foundation. As part of the celebrations the city was provided with a new, comprehensive town plan prepared by the French urbanist Alfred Agache. His plan established radial axes for urban growth and concentric connections for proposed specialized centres (administrative, sportive, military, polytechnic)⁵. The civic

centre idealized by Agache could only be built a decade later, when the international price of coffee had reached its peak since the beginning of the century. By 1960, coffee production in Paraná state comprised one-third of the world production and half of the Brazilian production⁶. Coffee had been cultivated in northern Paraná since the early 1930s and Curitiba, as its capital city, was profiting from that regional income as well.

By the time the modernist buildings of the civic centre had been planned, Paraná was celebrating the centennial anniversary of its independence from São Paulo (1953). A series of urban projects was then implemented. The favourable economy, the modernization process of the provincial capital and the centennial celebration of the until-recently poor and unnoticed state strengthened a cultural movement in pursuit of a Paraná identity. Local fauna and flora – particularly the *Araucaria angustifolia*, also known as the Paraná Pine, and its seed – along with some indigenous geometric motifs came to be widely incorporated into contemporary artistic expression and architectural ornamentation.

Stimulated by increasing urban development, a course of architecture and urbanism was created in 1962 at the Federal University of Paraná in Curitiba. A long-established course of civil engineering had been responsible for the formation of professionals engaged in building and town planning. Some of the engineering graduates from this course enrolled on the new architecture and urbanism curriculum – one them was Jaime Lerner. In 1965, São Paulo-based Italian-born architect Jorge Wilhelm was hired for the development of a preliminary study for a new town plan, and formed a local team for that task. They proposed the establishment of a local planning institute, which became effective with the creation of the Institute for Research and Town Planning of Curitiba – IPPUC, in 1965. Urban progress and the new academic course attracted young architects from elsewhere, particularly from São Paulo, who joined both the university and the planning institute. These professionals collaborated on numerous proposals submitted to national and international competitions, giving students opportunities to participate. The 1970s was a fruitful period for this team, which became known as the ‘group from Paraná’. In varied teams, they were awarded thirty-five prizes and honourable mentions in a single decade.

Brazil had been under a dictatorship since 1964 and the military regime came up with a development plan which was responsible for significant growth rates from 1968 to 1973. During this period known as ‘economic miracle’ the annual GDP jumped from 9.8% in 1968 to 14% in 1973. In 1968, elections were suspended and mayors and governors were appointed by the central government. After serving as president of the IPPUC in 1968-1969 (while continuing as a professor at the university), the architect, urbanist and civil engineer Jaime Lerner was twice appointed as mayor of Curitiba (1971-1975; 1979-1984) and elected for a third term (1989-1993).

Since 1965, eleven out of fourteen mayors have either been associated with the IPPUC or the city planning activity⁷. The fact that political leaders worked together and in accordance with the Institute’s technicians assured continuity and implementation of town planning decisions in Curitiba – an unusual and positive instance in the country’s planning history.

GLOBAL INTERACTION AND INDIGENOUS CONTRIBUTIONS

The diffusion of architecture and planning ideas in Curitiba reveals evidence of negotiated imposition, selective adoption and adaptation. It followed the global circulation of people, documents, images and knowledge through the interplay of actors from different geographical contexts and cultural backgrounds, in work experience abroad and at international conferences and courses; during external technical advisory; in contact with world institutions and financing agencies; and via international policies determined by the Global North.

Theory and practice of architecture are largely propelled by what Avermaete and Nuijsink termed ‘architectural contact zones’, i.e. the social spaces where cultures clash, often in contexts of asymmetrical relations of power; ‘following this encounter, architectural ideas bounce back and forth and undergo a process of cultural negotiation and adaptation’⁸.

An exemplary case of the cultural encounter involved in the diffusion of architectural and planning ideas is the employment of Jaime Lerner at the Paris office of Georges Candilis, Alex Josic and Shadrach Woods in 1962. Lerner joined the Team 10 members’ office at the time they were working on the design of Le Mirail, a satellite town of Toulouse. Lerner ‘fell in love with that design’. He also worked on the Fort Lamy project⁹.

International mobility meant an influx of new information. The IPPUC experts travelled abroad to attend courses and meetings, engaging with a specialized international audience. It is worth mentioning that an IPPUC staff member attended the Habitat I conference held in Vancouver in 1977 and returned home particularly inspired by the discussions about social housing. But international news also arrived by mail. The IPPUC has maintained a library and subscription to international publications since the early 1970s. International professionals, invited by Jaime Lerner, also travelled to Curitiba, such as the North-American urban designer Allan Jacobs in the late 1980s.

Networking was key to promoting the city abroad and diffusing local planning ideas internationally. During the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, while presidents and prime ministers met in Rio de Janeiro, mayors, city officials and urban experts gathered in Curitiba, at the World Urban Forum. The international emergence of Curitiba was also affirmed when the city applied for international financing for implementation of urban projects. The World Bank approved financing for the Curitiba transport system in 1978. Such international encounters were also an opportunity to contribute to the circulation of planning ideas.

Jorge Wilhelm, the architect who had led the team responsible for the preliminary study for the new Curitiba plan in 1965, presided over the International Union of Architects (UIA) meeting held in Curitiba in 1972, with attendees from France, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Turkey, Lebanon, URSS, in addition to the IPPUC. Later on, Wilhelm was appointed Deputy Secretary-General of the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II - 1996). The conference, which was held in Istanbul, exhibited the bi-articulated bus designed in Curitiba, the “Ligeirinho”. After that, in the same year the Interamerican Development Bank held a seminar in Washington in which the Curitiba transport experience

was discussed, prompting the Bogotá TransMilenio project. Colombian planners made several subsequent visits to Curitiba. Interestingly, it seems that the term BRT (Bus Rapid Transport) was used when the word *Ligeirinho* was translated for a group of North-American visitors to the IPPUC. As a consequence, the Los Angeles BRT system recognizes the adaptation of the Curitiba *Ligeirinho* system¹⁰.

The reports from the United Nations Conferences on Human Settlements (Habitat I -1976, Habitat II - 1996, and Habitat III - 2016)¹¹ resonated through the Curitiba master plans (1966, 2004 and 2015). Although the 1966 plan was prepared before the Habitat I Conference, it absorbed ideas already in global circulation which anticipated the new paradigm that allied development and sustainability. Not surprisingly Curitiba planning might have reinforced those policies.

Curitiba certainly gained more global visibility after receiving the 1997 World Habitat Award for the project Urban Management in Curitiba - Building Full Citizenship¹². The prize recognized 'how an imaginative and innovative city planning approach has created a sustainable urban environment and a strong sense of citizenship'¹³.

Since 2003 the Brazilian site of the International Training Centres for Local Authorities and Local Actors (CIFAL), a division of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research is based in Curitiba. CIFAL provides training for people involved in local development and it has promoted the interchange of experiences between Curitiba planners and Latin American technician¹⁴. International cooperation has certainly promoted the influx of new ideas.

Amid globalization and the processes of interaction and negotiation, planning ideas imagined in one specific context have been re-imagined somewhere else. The diffusion of planning ideas in Curitiba has relied on negotiated imposition and voluntary assimilation. In these cases, the local contribution is both theoretical and practical, in varying degrees, with potential differences between them¹⁵. All in all, overlapping territories and intertwined histories imply cultural interdependencies¹⁶. The global and connected character of the contacts and networking previously described ensures that the planning history of Curitiba cannot but be referred to as a 'connected history'¹⁷.

POSTMODERN REASONING

The large number of urban proposals implemented in Curitiba have been deemed 'attractive, innovative, functional, cost-effective, and replicable'¹⁸. They were drawn upon the real city, its weaknesses and potentials, and involved public transportation, 'historic and cultural preservation, a revitalized and pedestrian-friendly downtown, effective environmental programs, and a series of urban design and architectural catalyst projects'¹⁹.

A preliminary study for a Curitiba subway was carried out by the IPPUC staff in 1969. Different technologies and systems of public mass transportation in more than thirty cities around the globe were analysed, in addition to the solutions implemented in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. After this analysis it became clear that, given the local physical, economic

and social conditions, a solution for a Curitiba transport system could not be imported from economically developed societies. Despite its title, the final decision of the Curitiba Subway Preliminary Study did not favour a costly subway system, but rather a light, flexible and expandable transport system, which would integrate the new urban structure of linear axis proposed by the 1966 town plan. Thus, the prototype of the future Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) was initiated, seeking to adapt a bus system to the operational advantages of a subway system²⁰.

The IPPUC also implemented a new, environmental approach to planning, diverging from the dominant practice of treating urban drainage and sanitation separately. A global and integrated vision of environmental problems led to a project for an urban parks system which jointly addressed urban river flooding and the creation of leisure areas. In the early 1970s, four urban parks were created: Barigui, Barreirinha, São Lourenço and Iguaçú. Within these parks, small dams were built in order to accommodate seasonal flooding. At the São Lourenço Park, an old industrial building was transformed into a cultural centre (Figure 1).

Likewise, in 1971 an old, deactivated Gunpowder Depot built by the Army was transformed into a theatre, due to its circular shape (Figure 2). The IPPUC thus worked to revitalize the past by activating the local memory and valuing the cultural heritage. Curitiba had only a few really relevant buildings in architectural and historical terms and there was a need for affirmative urban symbols. Therefore, the IPPUC became dedicated to the preservation of the city's history and the enhancement of its identity by establishing a Heritage Sites Preservation Plan along with the creation of cultural facilities and the rehabilitation of historic buildings. The Heritage Sites Preservation Plan, proposed by the IPPUC in 1970 and implemented during the Lerner administration (1971-1974) recognized and delimited the historical city centre as cultural heritage, giving prominence to its colonial, eclectic and art-deco buildings, echoing the Venice Charter published in 1964.

The construction of the March 29th Square celebrated the foundation of Curitiba and its design draws on symbolism and a sense of belonging (Figure 3). Jaime Lerner co-authored this project in which an artistic relief on a bare-concrete wall portrays the history of the city through images, words and phrases. In consonance with the postmodernist mass-communication efforts, the figurative work of art depicts the encounter between colonizers and indigenous people, the foundations of the village, the arrival of the immigrants, the economic cycles and their products, the urban progress and its machines, the construction of the cathedral, and contemporary urban life. The Araucária pine and its seeds are also represented. The celebration of Curitiba's history in urban design proposals followed in the footsteps of an earlier similar artistic movement, *Paranismo*. Since the 1920s, this movement endeavoured to elevate [the image of] Parana relative to other Brazilian states, by promoting its natural features and recounting its indigenous legends. This tribute also encompasses an appreciation for the various immigrant groups established in the city – Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, Italians – and their traditions as well.



Fig. 1. The conception of São Lourenço Park involved environmental planning, heritage and preservation



Fig. 2. The Paiol Theatre recycled an old gunpowder depot, endorsing the value of cultural heritage preservation



Fig. 3. Artistic relief at the March 29th Square recounts the history of the city, fostering the sense of belonging



Fig. 4. The Free University of the Environment was built with traditional construction methods

In his book *Urban Acupuncture*, Lerner stressed the need for ‘maintenance or retrieve of the cultural identity of a place or community’²¹. According to him, ‘identity is one of the most important components of quality of life. More than good infrastructure and nice facilities, it is important for people to feel a sense of belonging; I think that is a fundamental component of the Curitiba identity, of the identity of any person in any town’²².

In the early 1970s the Paraná State Electricity Company was replacing old wooden lamp-posts with new concrete ones. The wooden posts were then recycled and re-used for the construction of buildings in Curitiba’s parks – definitely an innovative, post-machine-age, ecological initiative. Ironically, Lerner used to say that in Curitiba what really worked was the ‘modern post’, thus disdaining the ‘post-modern’²³. One of these buildings is the Free University of the Environment. Designed by Lerner’s professional partner, the architect Domingos Bongestabs, in the early 1990s, the environmentally-friendly building draws upon traditional building techniques and materials, and rejects the modernist features that characterized Brazilian architecture throughout the twentieth century (Figure 4).

Praise for the ‘heart of the city’ and the creation of pedestrian streets were topics of the VIII CIAM, when Candilis was appointed its council member²⁴. The 1951 conference proceedings stated that the core of the city should be the ‘pedestrian dominion’, and this was later reaffirmed in the Preliminary Study for the Curitiba Plan. Relatively subtle revisions to the CIAM doctrine came from within by Sert, Rogers and Tyrwhitt in favour of more pedestrian street life and responsiveness to existing urban contexts²⁵. CIAM and Team 10 shared the idea that no boundary could be drawn between architecture and city planning, and that the built environment could be shaped by design. Team 10 retained Sert’s emphasis on the pedestrian urban experience, though rejected the concept of the ‘heart of the city’, as Sert had revived the *City Beautiful* focus on architecturally designed urban centres²⁶. The ideas of Team 10 did not always break radically from those of post-war CIAM, though they generally used a different rhetorical style²⁷.

The idea of pedestrianizing some central streets in Curitiba was launched by Wilhelm’s team and implemented by Mayor Lerner. The beginning of the street refurbishment, already relieved of motor car transit, coincided with the UIA meeting in Curitiba in 1972. International delegates praised the initiative, recalling successful European examples. Local newspapers referred to the site as a mix of square and street, garden and avenue²⁸. Drawing upon a Portuguese colonial traditional, Curitiba’s pedestrian streets were paved with stone mosaics, which depicted stylized figures, particularly the Araucária seed (Figure 5).

To sum up, Curitiba’s successful development process counted on international connections as a source of contemporary innovative ideas and it accommodated diverse interests around a single political project. It entailed a massive media dissemination of the new city image²⁹.

Curitiba’s urban design proposals in the 1970s reveal the ideas and themes debated at the time by local professionals, such as ecological thinking, city and urban history, and identity policies³⁰. Curitiba’s projects reflected the postmodernist turn towards social and the environmental issues. As with other forms of postmodern expression, Curitiba’s urban projects drew inspiration from the site, the social context and mass culture. Unlike Brasília, they clung to

the idea of designing contextually and ‘in the vernacular’, and managed to re-everything – revitalize, recycle, reuse, renew, etc. – as did the postmodern urbanists³¹. Vernacular design has two main referents: the past (historicism) and the locale or site (regionalism)³², and both are evident in Curitiba. Regional symbols, conventional features and an infatuation with the past contributed to a valuable sense of place.

In general, though, urbanization and urban problems in 1970s Brazil were the scope of town planning, which then focused on macro analysis, one of a technocratic and deterministic kind. Socioeconomic approaches then prevailed over design and the physical aspects of the urban form. The Seminars on Urban Design (SEDUR) has been considered a milestone of the institutionalization of urban design in mid-1980s Brazil. Its first edition (1984) affirmed the failure of rationalist principles, the importance of design as a fundamental tool for improving urban form – and, thus, the quality of urban life-, and a signal for a new agenda for designing cities, which included issues such as urban preservation, renovation, and transformation³³. The proposed agenda focused on the existing urban forms, thus abandoning pre-conceived rationalist urban models, and recommended a new approach to public spaces, involving appreciation for local communities. It therefore meant a change in scale and the way the city is perceived in order to intervene in the urban tissue. However, the IPPUC had anticipated and converged with SEDUR’s main ideas, despite having not attended the seminar; Lerner, for instance, had advised urban intervention on a small scale and emphasized the architecture of the city.³³

CONCLUSIONS

The continuity of the IPPUC work through different political administrations, which is rare in Brazil, guaranteed long-term perspective and positive results in Curitiba. Collaborative work is a remarkable characteristic of the architectural and planning proposals developed in that city, which contrasts with Brazilian modernist designs. This was also a factor for the circulation of ideas, in addition to international networking, travel abroad and foreign literature during a period of economic prosperity. Pragmatic actions, short on utopian and dogmatic thought, addressed the real city as a singular cultural artefact. Contextualism (historical, physical, social, and mass cultural), in contrast to modernist urbanism’s break from the past and the site, promoted a sense of belonging. Local identity, belonging, cultural memory, revitalization, recycling, and pedestrianization were valued as planning targets, as well as the preservation of the natural surroundings and environmental planning. These topics are largely responsible for the urban environmental quality and sustainable development of Curitiba. Understated criticism of modernist thought and the early reception of certain postmodern ideas, though negating this term, updated and refreshed architecture and urbanism in 1970s Brazil.



Fig. 5. The pedestrianised street was paved with colonial stone mosaic depicting ornamental motifs related to regional features

ENDNOTES

1. Irazábal, "Urban Design," 202; Macedo, "Curitiba;" Macedo, "Planning a Sustainable City;" Ward, "Cities as Planning Models."
2. Zein, "Arquitetos no Paraná," 29; Segawa, "Outro Programa de Passeio," 32
3. See Irazábal, "Urban Design;" Dudeque, *Nenhum Dia*; Macedo, "Curitiba;" Macedo, "Planning a Sustainable City."
4. Vattimo, *O Fim da Modernidade*.
5. "Plano de Urbanização."
6. Cancian, *Cafeicultura Paranaense*.
7. Medeiros, "Idealizações de Cidades," 308-309.
8. Avermaete and Nuijsink, "Architectural Contact Zones," 5.
9. Rego, Januário and Avanci, "Lerner, Friedman, and Candilis-Josic-Woods," 36.
10. Medeiros, "Idealizações de Cidades," 259.
11. Respectively, the Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements; the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements; and the New Urban Agenda.
12. Medeiros, "Idealizações de Cidades," 295.
13. <https://world-habitat.org/world-habitat-awards/winners-and-finalists/urban-management-in-curitiba-building-full-citizenship/>.
14. Medeiros, "Idealizações de Cidades," 287. Since 2009 CIFAL has worked separately from IPPUC.
15. See Ward, "Re-Examining."
16. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.
17. Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories."
18. Irazábal, "Urban Design," 202.
19. *Ibid.*, 202.
20. Viana, "O Plano de Curitiba," 447-449.
21. Lerner, *Acupuntura Urbana*, 13.
22. Faria Junior, "Poty Lazzarotto," 137.
23. Lerner, *O Que É Ser Urbanista*, 61. Remember that Denise Scott Brown also denied being a post-modernist.
24. Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse*, 206.
25. *Ibid.*, 268.
26. *Ibid.*, 254.
27. *Ibid.*, 271.
28. Dudeque, *Nenhum Dia*, 203-232; Vianna, "O Plano de Curitiba," 358.
29. See Irazábal, "Urban Design," 213.
30. See Dudeque, *Nenhum Dia*, 348.
31. Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*, 4; Vattimo, *O Fim da Modernidade*.
32. Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*, 56.
33. Leme, Rego, Pescatori and Roldan, "Favelas and Urban Design."

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IMAGE SOURCES

- Fig. 1. The author, 2020.
- Fig. 2. Biblioteca IBGE [ID: 42360].
- Fig. 3. The author, 2021.
- Fig. 4. The author, 2021.
- Fig. 5. Wikicommons.

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