

## 5. The Import of a Narrative: The Role of Aesthetics and Discursive Elements in Fabricating Change in the Centre of São Paulo

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### Abstract

This chapter examines the use of aesthetic and discursive elements in the production of a narrative about República, a district in the central area of São Paulo (Brazil) that has been transformed through a real estate boom in the past ten years. We focus on newly built studio apartments, and on the efforts to differentiate them from the *quitinetes*, apartments with similar features built in the 1950s and 1960s that have been heavily stigmatized. We situate our analysis of this purposeful urban transformation within a context intertwined with urban marketing, publicity, and image making. Our research shows the strong presence of an industrial aesthetic in the area, which we understand as being a deliberate echo of the gentrification process that took place in SoHo in New York City in the 1970s.

**Keywords:** São Paulo, *quitinete*, studio, República, SoHo effect, gentrification in Latin America

### Introduction

In recent years the district of República, São Paulo (Brazil), has transformed significantly. The area, formerly known as a derelict part of the city centre, is now being celebrated in the media as being “revitalized,” and since 2012 has seen an accentuated rise in real estate activities. What is particularly interesting in this process is that a good portion of what has been produced by the recent real estate boom in the area are new small open floor apartments

marketed and sold as high-end studios. This is significant because the district has long been known for its *quitinetes*, apartments with the same features built in the 1940s and 1950s that have been widely stigmatized and linked to the centre's supposed decay. While the *quitinetes* had their prices heavily depreciated in the last decades of the twentieth century, the newly built studio apartments have an expensive square meterage that represents a rise in property value in the area. The old *quitinetes* are also finding their prices appreciating in this process.

In this chapter we will discuss the importance of aesthetics and discursive elements in the process of change currently taking place in the district, and how this process seems to reference a narrative about the transformation of central areas that originated in New York in the 1970s, with the conversion of lofts to residential use. Loft living has spread globally since then, making the trend, and the neighbourhood of SoHo in particular, into a paradigmatic case study. We argue that an effort led by developers and local government is appreciating property values in República. This development effort is designed to replicate the transformations that took place in New York, including the heavy use of industrial aesthetics in residential and commercial development and an optimistic discourse of art-led urban renewal. We demonstrate that this imported narrative serves not only as a common interpretation of the transformations taking place in República, especially within advertising and the media, but also as a way of fostering the transformation itself. This discursive creation serves as a mask that conceals many of the socioeconomic tensions present in República's everyday reality.

The visual continuity in the area studied – with both recently opened businesses and the studio's display units relying on industrial elements (such as burnt cement and exposed brick) – emphasizes a particular aesthetics of gentrification encompassing a new role of art and culture in urban renewal, an idea that has permeated the imagination of both the media and the public in São Paulo, as elsewhere. This specific discursive construction was reinforced and exploited by the studio developers in order to raise the prices of their products by distancing them from the *quitinetes* and tailoring them and their publicity to fit a broader fabricated narrative of transformation.

It is important to emphasize the role of industrial aesthetics, as discussed by Zukin (1982), in the creation and import of this narrative, not only by developers but also by the State. The area is changing due to an attempt to create a price appreciation process by fostering the perception that there is one. This is the same type of gentrification aesthetics that previously marked the famous price appreciation experience in New York. Such a use of industrial aesthetics is not merely visual. Those aesthetics are also being

used to reference the transformation process that gave rise to them in the first place, as well as the role of art and artists in urban renewal. To discuss these aspects and to better understand how the cultural elements of urban interventions can be instrumentalized by both State and private agents, we use the idea of urban-cultural interventions, defined by Kara-José (2007) as urban transformation projects that put culture in a prominent place within a context intertwined with urban marketing, publicity, and image making.

In this chapter, the centre of São Paulo will be discussed taking three scales into account. The first one is the city as a whole, so we can situate the transformations in the studied area within a broader context. The second one is the central area, that includes 10 districts, totalling 32.6 square kilometres, and when we refer to the centre we will be referring to this area. The city centre is quite heterogeneous, and although we will not be able to detail all of this diversity, it is important to mention that, as shown in the map in Figure 5.1, the districts located in the southwest part of the centre concentrate a population of higher income while the districts to the east concentrate a lower income population (Nakano, Malta and Rolnik 2004). In addition, it is also important to note that, since the centre of São Paulo is a very heterogeneous area, the different uses that can be made of the idea of living in the centre, returning to the centre, etc., can refer to different areas that benefit from, or are undermined by, the rhetorical associations. Since we will mainly be discussing perceptions, and how they can be changed, using the idea of *the* centre, as one space, can help us understand how the perception of the area is fixed in the urban imaginary, and how the ideas about the central areas of other cities can be mobilized and transposed to São Paulo's context.

The district of República, within the South-Western area of the city, borders the wealthier districts of the centre, and borders Santa Cecília and Consolação, two districts of a higher income. We concentrated our field work in this area, using a research methodology informed by direct observation that included visits to the buildings and their display units, as well as visits to cultural centres and businesses in the area. Our research also included a historical study and an analysis of the area's representation in the media. This research approach, combined with a literature review, helped to situate the neighbourhood's transformation within academic discourses on gentrification.

It is also important to note that although this chapter will not be analyzing the metropolitan scale, that scale informs the city dynamic as a whole. A key reason is that the restrictions for accessing a more centrally-located dwelling are closely linked to the peripheralization phenomenon in São

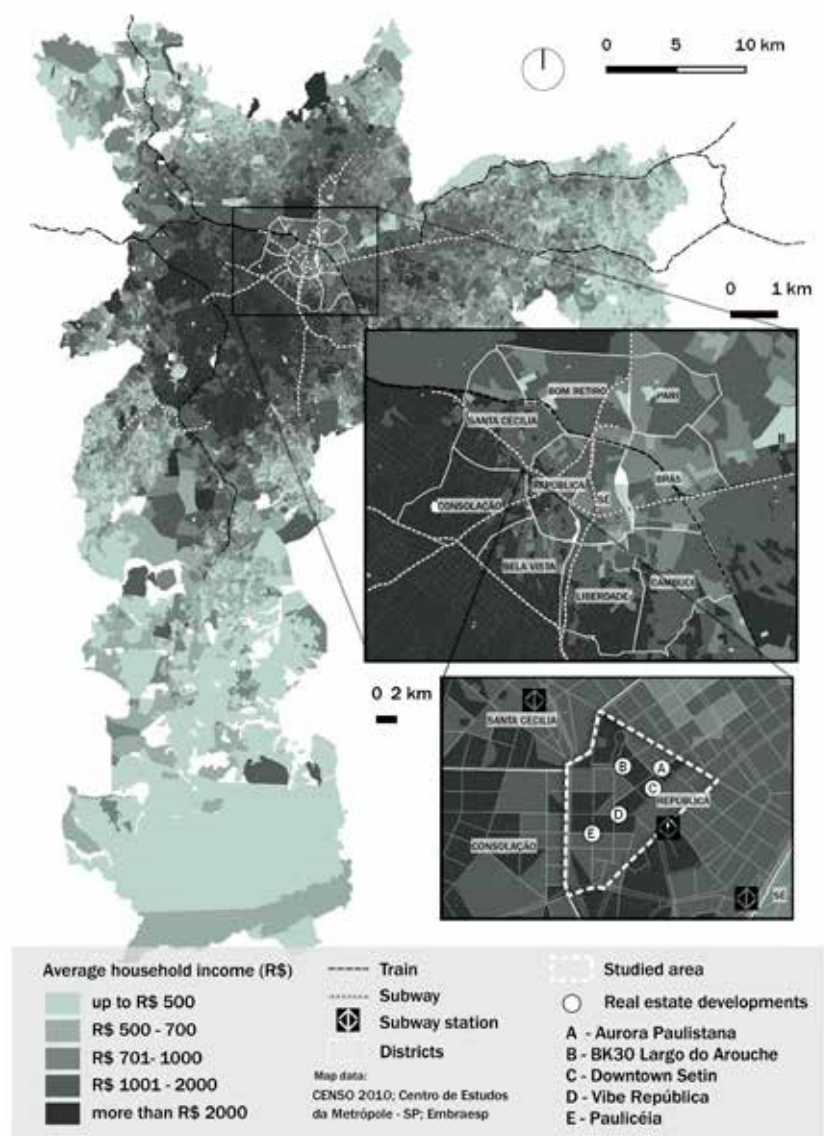


Figure 5.1: Household income map of São Paulo, with the central districts and studied area highlighted. Source: authors.

Paulo. This situation is especially dramatic in Brazil, where an unfair pattern of urbanization has left a great deal of peripheral areas with very limited public investment in basic infrastructure, perpetuating inequalities. For this reason, understanding the forces that shape the occupation of the centre is important if we want to understand how urban inequalities are perpetuated.

To develop this argument, the chapter divides into five parts, starting with introducing these transformations and followed by a short presentation of our theoretical framework. We continue by historically contextualizing the changes in São Paulo's city centre and its *quitinete* apartments, including the forces that led to their supposed decay. In the fourth part we concentrate on analyzing the transformations that are taking place in the district of República, mapping both their visual and discursive convergences, and how they fit into a larger narrative that borrows from international examples of urban transformation. Finally, the chapter concludes by focusing on how the narrative import serves as a way to mask the specific reality of the neighbourhood while simultaneously transforming it.

### **Making Urban Interventions Cultural Interventions**

In the 1970s, when the middle and upper classes left the city centre and the area was labelled derelict and blighted by São Paulo's government, at both state and city levels, many different approaches were developed to solve what was considered to be a problem, with solutions varying according to how the issue was framed. We believe, like Weber (2002), that choosing to frame the changes through terms such as obsolescence or blight, like the authorities often did, is a way of building discursive practices that tend to benefit private capital. This occurs not only because it depreciates the value of an area by maximizing a possible rent gap and justifying the transformation projects that those discursive practices themselves tend to produce. The denial of the value of the current uses that are in place takes a back seat to the promotion of ideas that those uses should be replaced by other uses considered more legitimate (Weber 2002).

Since this discourse is biased, it is impossible to dissociate the redevelopment discourse it produces from that same bias. What that mixture usually produces is an investment, often public, that aims to substitute an existing population for another with a higher income (Weber 2002) – a process that is commonly understood as gentrification. This is why, when we refer to a redevelopment plan or a revitalization plan in this chapter, we will be understanding it as a state or private project that has gentrification as its goal, as many such plans were designed to revitalize the centre of São Paulo since the 1970s (Kara-José 2007).

São Paulo's urbanists have been borrowing ideas from their counterparts in the Global North since the beginning of its urbanization, trying to mirror first European, then North American cities, following a trend that could be

traced back to the country's historical situation, first as a colony then as a dependent economy (Maricato 2000). In the 1970s and 1980s the Bologna Plan was very influential in the way Brazilian urbanists and governments thought about city centres, or at least the part of it that focused on historic heritage preservation, with the idea of maintaining the existing population being mostly left out. The idea of urban revitalization as a strategy of economic development, in partnership with the private sector, became influential in the 1980s and was mainly borrowed from US examples, such as the Quincy Market and Baltimore Inner Harbour transformations, that emphasized real estate opportunities (Kara-José 2007).

Otília Arantes (2015), while writing about an international trend to locate cultural facilities at the centre of revitalization plans in the nineties, highlights their supposed role in distinguishing spaces and attracting a target audience to an area to promote a gentrification process. The idea of cultural centre revitalization spread internationally, reaching local administrations in many countries and becoming the new vogue. When the trend reached São Paulo, the presence of a cultural elements in revitalization plans for the city centre was so ubiquitous that Kara-José (2007) coined the term "urban-cultural interventions" to describe the dynamic. In those projects both the investment in culture and culture itself are presented as apolitical and beneficial to society as a whole, generally hiding any disputes around urban policy, their beneficiaries, and those who are hurt by them.

The thinking was that urban-cultural interventions would serve as a way to attract the "right audience," filtering the public through their interest or possibility to access the new cultural spaces created, and would justify steps such as forced residential relocations through the legitimacy of art and culture and the perception of their universal benefit. The rise of urban-cultural interventions is linked with the fact that, in a context of increased competition for the attraction of international capital and people, creating a culturally-active neighbourhood is a key aspect of urban and institutional marketing for local administrations (Kara-José 2007). It is further worth pointing out that, although there are similarities between the Brazilian phenomenon and its forerunners in the Global North, the dynamics of state intervention and the possibility of property value appreciation are quite different in Latin America as a whole (Betancur 2014; Contreras and Venegas 2017).

Arantes (2015) locates the roots of culture's centrality in urban planning in the movements that rejected the modernist tendency to a totalizing planification. According to her, those movements gradually altered their contents from their embodied, critical potential to a fragmentary model of

planning that favours certain spaces within the city. These spaces tended to transform urban space into a picturesque set for target audiences. The lack of continuity between those progressive and the social practices that would give their shape substance were combined with their appropriation in the marketing of local administrations. As result, “the resistance ideal of those dissidents was transformed, with no violence, into platitudes” (Arantes 2015: 98).

One interesting example of this fragmentation in São Paulo are the *Operações Urbanas* (Urban Operations) that allow the municipality to design special urban regulations and financing mechanisms for a circumscribed area to attract private investment. The *Operação Urbana Centro* (Central Urban Operation), established in 1997, had an important role in the changes in our studied area. In the city, the fragmentary nature of some intervention initiatives, which were part of an urban planning model that allowed the government to pick a given space and transform it in an atomized manner (Arantes 2015), was combined with a tendency to aestheticize urban life. This was enacted in requalified urban spaces that try to combine culture and publicity (Kara-José 2007) in a process in which the city is at the same time the display and the commodity to be sold. In Arantes’ (2015) words:

the publicity apotheosis of the commodity form, finally universalized, resulted in the reduction of the city’s architecture to an imagetic simulation, composed of shifting signs that contain in themselves contradictory information, overlapping, contaminations, etc [...] (98)

In the cases studied by Kara-José (2007) the focus was on the way those scenarios were built by the state, which financed the construction and restoration of historic buildings and cultural facilities and created scenic spaces that were differentiated from their surroundings. What our research in República shows is a coordination of private agents that do something similar, with the use of an industrial aesthetic in the new cafés and restaurants in the area. The same aesthetic is also present in the studios’ display units, creating a visual continuity between them with a comparable scenic effect. But this is not merely a visual strategy. Rather, the situation involves appropriating the ideas that permeated the rise of the industrial aesthetic.

The industrial aesthetic rose to prominence in the 1970s. It first appeared in old manufacturing spaces in New York which were converted to residential use and work spaces, mainly by artists, who transformed them into live-in studios. But, as Sharon Zukin puts it “around 1970, as the bare, polished wood floors, exposed red brick walls, and cast iron facades of this ‘artists’ quarters’

gained increased public notice, the economic and aesthetic virtues of 'loft living' were transformed into bourgeois chic" (Zukin 1982: 2). Loft living soon became a trend, expanding across national borders and reaching cities that did not necessarily have those same manufacturing spaces to convert. The rise of live-in lofts was linked to the loss of space that the manufacturing and industrial activities experienced in some cities, so it is important to understand this process as part of an economic shift.

It is also important to remember that the prestige artists and their studios were acquiring, helped increase the value of their lofts and their neighbourhoods. Some gained by being close to those spaces, or living in them, as they increased in attraction to a greater number of people. Despite being a common narrative, the idea that this was a spontaneous change driven by artists who were then followed by the market might be naïve and may have cemented the perception of artists as main agents of urban renewal. Here it is important to note that the success of the loft conversions was linked to both an urban renewal strategy devised by the State and investments made by developers in those areas. The discourse that the presence of artists drove the renewal masked the forces shaping the change (Zukin 1982).

Still, the loft conversions in New York circulated widely as a model, along with the perception of the artists' transformative role in the renewal process. As lofts in different neighbourhoods in cities around the world were converted, one particular neighbourhood seems to have been entrenched in people's imagination: SoHo. In the case of São Paulo, this particular neighbourhood serves as a reference in plans for urban transformation for both government and private agents.

### **From the Heart of the Metropolis to the Abandonment of the Centre**

The city of São Paulo has an estimated population of 12 million people distributed over an area of 1.521,11 km<sup>2</sup>. It is the most populous city in Brazil and has an annual budget larger than that of most states in the country (IBGE, n.d.). Founded in 1554, the city began its most intense cycle of development after World War II, due to the combination of industrialization, population growth, and territorial expansion, and it was at that time that the core of the city began expanding southwest (Rossetto 2002).

The same combination that produced intense development also created the need for housing that, due to strong inequalities and legal constraints in the renting market, implemented in 1942, had to be met via home ownership. For the growing population of lower income people that the city both



attracted and produced, this mostly meant building their own houses in distant peripheries without basic services such as running water or sanitation. For the wealthier part of the population, it meant either buying one of the newly-built apartments in República or a plot of land on which to build a house. And for the new in-between class that the economic growth had produced, this created the *quitinete*.

In the 1940s and 1950s, a time with no housing finance mechanism and in which the possibility of renting was hindered, the *quitinete* was a way to create an affordable option for a growing middle class to whom the city centre meant easy access not only to their jobs, but also to a host of goods and services that would become part of a new way of life. The intensive use of the plots of land by the *quitinete* developments made living in the area more affordable, due to the division of land costs by a greater number of homeowners, and the size of the apartment itself made it possible for some homeowners to pay for them even though there was no financing systems set up for the housing market (Rosetto 2002).

The *quitinete* consisted of a small open floor apartment, having only the bathroom as a separated space, and got its name from the kitchen appliance that was common in those space-limited dwellings. Living in such small spaces was only possible due to the great number of new services around them, with many buildings having restaurants, cafes, and laundries on their ground floors (Rosetto 2002). Those apartments, however, carried a certain stigma, and were considered a place unsuitable for families and linked to what was then considered inappropriate behaviours, ranging from prostitution to the cohabitation of unmarried couples (Ferreira 2016). But although the apartments themselves carried that stigma, the district of República, where most of them were located, concentrated a great number of office jobs and a large part of the new leisure activities that were increasingly popular.

At that time the city centre exerted a symbolic appeal so intense over the population that it led Richard Morse to say, in 1954, that the people of São Paulo were “under the hypnotic spell of the heart of the metropolis, with its excitement, lights, and grandeur” (Morse 1970: 375). An advertisement for Copan, an apartment complex in República that included many *quitinetes*, published in May 25 of 1952, also builds on a similar idea by promising to “give the people of São Paulo the central dwelling they haven’t even imagined in their dreams, and yet it’s here, magnificent, full of comfort, not a step away from everything, but itself the heart of a centre with its own life” (BNI 1952). The heart of the metropolis, however, was not a fixed point, and it had been moving southwest from Sé, where the urbanization had started,

to República. The same advertising elaborates this idea in an interesting way in the section dedicated to store owners who might be interested in renting the shops on the ground floor, saying: “Reserve your store now, in the place that will soon be the fine centre of the metropolis, that once more will move, like what happened in 1934, when the city crossed the Chá overpass” (BNI 1952).

This moving heart kept moving southwest until the *new fine centre* overlapped with Copan, but it did not stop there, and government investments in new areas moved it further along in the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of the new centralities away from the city centre coincided with changes in urban infrastructure that deteriorated conditions of walkability, as the city’s heavy investment in a car-centred model transformed the centre with new flyovers and parking spaces. At a time in which automobiles emerged as the focus of both the urban agenda and the middle and upper class way of life, the city centre had become more of a node in the city’s road layout than a place to go for this part of the population. Having this radial model also meant that those who used public transport usually had to go through the centre before reaching their destination, which made the area a suitable location for commerce that catered to the same population as the public transport, and helped to consolidate its new profile in the 1970s.

While the middle classes left the centre and its *quitinetes* in the 1970s and 1980s a new population moved in. Although it is clear there was a net population loss overall in the centre, we can also say there was a population substitution. Part of the idea, so popular in the media at the time, that the area was empty and needed to be revitalized had to do with the perception of the newcomers. By that time the *quitinetes* were already prohibited from being built, since they were incompatible with a law passed in 1957 that fixed the intensity of use of land plots, but the old ones were still there, and their small size, combined with the depreciation of prices in the centre, made them a viable option for the poor population of São Paul that wanted a centrally-located dwelling (Kalichman 2019).

Weber argues, while discussing the origins of the idea of blight and its racist undertones, that “the scientific basis for blight drew attention to the physical bodies inhabiting the city, as well as the unhygienic sanitary conditions those bodies ‘created’” (Weber 2007: 526). This also seems to be true for the idea that drove São Paulo’s revitalization plans since the 1970s, and makes particular sense when we consider the perceptions surrounding the *quitinetes* – apartments that were inhabited mostly by the poor after the centre’s supposed decay.

## Building Downtown

With 24 storeys and 310 apartments, the development of Downtown República represented a big shift in the urban landscape of the district following its completion in 2018. Its blue glass exterior towers above República Square, where a metro station and busy bus stops share space with street prostitution, just across the avenue from a new rooftop restaurant. The development is one of seven buildings of Setin Developments' "Downtown" segment, which focuses on high-density buildings, consisting mainly of studio apartments with shared facilities such as laundry rooms and entertaining areas.

The idea of a "downtown" does not make geographical sense when thinking about São Paulo and the term is not commonly used, with the wording in English itself already indicating an imported idea. Still, all buildings from the Downtown segment seem to be integrated into a broader network in the area that is constructed both visually and through discourse, and that includes businesses and new residential developments in a cohesive narrative, with each one of those similar spaces being a node in a network that is strengthened with each addition. As this mesh develops, the idea of República as some kind of "downtown" is further consolidated, with the overlapping of this import weaving itself into the area's perception and materiality.

The district of República came first in the ranking of new residential units launched in 2014 and 2015 (Secovi 2016), which was a result of the ebb of a Brazilian real estate boom that had been happening between 2007 and 2013 (Rufino 2017). República served as a last frontier of this expansion, only being explored after other districts showed signs of saturation. During this process the price per square metre of the apartments in the area increased significantly, reaching prices equivalent to those in São Paulo's richer neighbourhoods (Carmagnani 2019).

Antonio Setin, developer and owner of the company that bears his name and launched the Downtown segment, attributes the recent change in the area to the shortage of possibilities in other parts of the city:

The centre's recovery happened in spite of the developers, politicians, and the market. It was the lack of *outorga onerosa* available for purchase in most neighbourhoods of São Paulo that brought the developers back. It helped me to make a decision. (Setin 2017)

*Outorga onerosa* is a form of building permit that allows its buyer to go above the set floor area ratio, with the municipal government selling a

limited stock of them per area in the city. Setin states that the lack of it is what drove investments back into the area in spite of governmental efforts, but it is important to note that the reason why the centre still has *outorga onerosas* is *Operação Urbana Centro*. The fact that it took the operation twenty years to attract its target audience, however, might be explained by the lack of *outorga onerosa* in the rest of the city that drove developers there.

Setin's statement above, given to a website focused on the centre of São Paulo, sounds quite different to what he declared to *Folha de São Paulo*, a newspaper controlled by a family who historically owned land in the centre, which may explain why the paper is frequently publishing articles about the area's supposed revitalization. In an article about how "compact and versatile apartments" were in demand in São Paulo the developer declared: "I don't sell apartments, I sell the best sandwich in town, the best nightclubs and the Mario de Andrade Library" (Setin 2016). His statement enumerates different attractions of the city centre to promote his developments, which reinforces the idea, present in the *quitinete* era, that the area around the apartments is what makes them a good option. When talking to the general public, Setin's message seems to be that he sells location and experience rather than apartments. But Setin is not the only developer to invest in the area, with a number of companies, big and small, building in República.

In this chapter we concentrated on the information collected on five large real estate developments launched between 2014 and 2018, all of them consisting mainly of studio apartments and located in the western side of República, where a lot of the real estate activity is concentrated. However, it is important to note that there are other developments being built in the area and its surroundings. What is particularly interesting is that although these developments are built by different companies their appearance is quite uniform, drawing heavily from the industrial aesthetic when it comes to their decoration.

In 2018 Brazilian *Home Vogue* said that "it seems that the industrial style won't go away this season, not if it depends on São Paulo's restaurants and cafés" (Jacob 2018). Although the magazine was referring to a wider trend in the city, the observation is particularly true for the studied area, where both the new businesses and residential developments frequently resort to a style that, according to another *Home Vogue* article "fits very well into integrated dining rooms and gives any home a modern look" (Vogue 2018). The fact that the industrial aesthetic is being heavily used in a district that has been mostly residential and commercial can be explained by the

magazine, which states that in spite of its historical origins in the conversion of lofts “today the style can be applied in brand new environments” (Vogue 2018). This perception has already been incorporated by the market, which has made a host of mock industrial materials available, such as fake burnt cement and exposed brick finishes.

Many of those materials were present in the developments we visited and in their display units. The most common features we observed were exposed piping, exposed lamp bulbs, and the use of finishes that resembled burnt cement. Interesting bike imagery appeared in decorations, and bicycles were also present in the display units as part of the depiction of the projected lifestyle of the prospective owner. One of the developments even had a bicycle in the lobby that was fully painted in yellow and stripped of its gears, highlighting its purely decorative function.

The resemblance between the developments was so strong that two of them, from different developers, had the same poster that said “WE NOT ME.” The use of the poster, one of them in a display apartment and the other in a promotional rendering, is one example of the use of English language in the decoration and of the emphasis on an idea of togetherness and sharing that, as we will see, is quite common in the narrative about the centre. The incorporation of graffiti was also quite common, matching a wider trend in the area, and the way developers absorbed an expression that had transgressive roots reminds of Arantes’ (2015) quote about the absorption of transgressive ideas in urban planning by governmental publicity.

If the visual elements present at the studios already suggested a connection to the lofts of SoHo through the use of an industrial aesthetic, this becomes fully explicit in a publicity e-book made by Setin Developments to introduce their studios to the market. The guide, which highlights the benefits of buying a studio and tries to differentiate them from the *quitinetes*, says: “You should understand that the concept of the studio is developed based on the north American lofts, that convert industrial or commercial spaces to residential ones” (Setin Developments 2018).

The advertisement of this supposedly new product in the centre requires the advertisement of the accompanying lifestyle, with two different developers producing web video series to do so. One of the web series, fully sponsored by one company, has episodes dealing with themes such as street art and its importance within city activist movements; the benefits of sharing culture, in which a tourist rents an apartment that seems to belong to the developers through a sharing platform; and street parties, that are shown as a part of the solution to prejudice and segregation in the city (Gafisa n.d.). The other



Figure 5.2: Rendering of a bedroom in BK30. Source: developer's website.

web series is produced by a consulting group that specializes in the centre, with different sponsors dictating different themes for each episode. One episode is sponsored by a developer focused on the part of República where it had its most recent property launch, presenting the place as interesting and diverse (A Vida no Centro, n.d.).

Both series present a seemingly progressive view of the city and its transformation, but offer very atomized solutions, such as fighting prejudice with street parties. It is worth pointing out that those web series are incorporating elements of urban activism into a less traditional form of publicity, blurring the lines between them while doing so and assimilating – and possibly neutralizing – their subversive potential in the process. The line between content creation, publicity, and urban activism is often blurred when it comes to the conversation about urban transformations. This is an important point to highlight in the context of the centre's fabricated narrative of renewal. In Arantes' (2015) words "the tale of the 'rediscovered city' seems to mobilize a very up to date conceptual apparatus, barely hiding in its alleged subversion an aesthetizing coexistence with the most extreme forms of contemporaneous alienation" (2015: 97).

The documentary *ARTE | TERRITÓRIO (Art Territory)*, with the subtitle 'Back to the Centre of São Paulo', produced by RedBull Station, a cultural centre owned by the brand, employs a similar strategy, while focusing on

the role of art, and artists, in a back-to-the-city movement. It starts with a voiceover of Felipe Morozini, a visual artist, saying:

What we see today in São Paulo, and anywhere in the world, is art occupying the city centre, specially the streets. I can clearly see the amount of spaces inaugurated in the last few, 10, 15 years: galleries, art spaces, cultural centres, and completely different from one another. (Redbull Station 2016)

Morosini's statement, which reflects the documentary's overall view, portrays the back-to-the-city movement led by artists as an echo of international events that reverberate in different forms according to the way they are understood locally. Here, the people interviewed interpret the transformation in São Paulo as a spontaneous movement made by a group of artists that appreciate the centre's "cosmopolitan and rich city experience" (Redbull Station 2016) as Fernanda Brenner, interviewed by the documentary, puts it.

Another example of the use of this narrative was made by Heineken. In 2018, the brand released Heineken Block, which according to an interview given by the brand's marketing director is part of the Cities platform, a global marketing strategy "by the beer company that aims to inspire the consumers to unlock the secrets of their cities and transform urban space in a positive way" (Castellón 2018). The Brazilian website for the campaign shows a video with no dialogue that is used in all countries in which the brand advertises the campaign. Although it has the mandatory "drink in moderation" warning in Portuguese, the video clearly takes place in New York, as established by many visual cues. The video shows three friends leaving a closing bar in an empty industrial street and finding a garage for rent, that they then turn into a bar. Two similar open shots are shown in the beginning and the end of the advertisement, with the first showing how the area was empty and the second how "alive" it became after the bar opening. What is more, this new bar features many of the decorative elements that we see in the Western part of República, such as string lights and neon signs.

The New York narrative of renewal is present here again, although this time the reference is more specifically to Brooklyn. The text below the video, preceded by the title in English "the city is your canvas," states:

Heineken believes that simple ideas can transform a city. NY, London, and Berlin with its Block Parties are proof of that, showing that the people are responsible for change anywhere. Inspired by the transformative vibes Heineken brings in Heineken Block to SP [São Paulo], a party that

will unblock a surreal place in the greatest capital in Brazil and foster through music, art, and gastronomy a collaborative experience, in which you'll take to the streets and show that São Paulo is yours, is mine, is everyone's. (Heineken n.d.)

The idea of the city as a canvas – the artist's *tabula rasa* – obscures the political and economic contents that come from issues that go beyond the reach of the creative power of these transformative vibes, and in the same way that the urban-cultural interventions those market strategies disguise trends themselves as transformations that would be beneficial to everyone.

Interestingly Heineken's global strategy is carefully linked to each city in which it invests, framing the city as both platform and product. This incorporates São Paulo into a common narrative about urban transformation that is created with the Global North as the reference point. Two things are worth noticing here. First, the new global scale of marketing and cultural production (Harvey 1992) that allows Heineken to use the same advertisement in many different countries is precisely one of the elements that enables the target audience in São Paulo to recognize the imported meaning and reference of the industrial aesthetic in República. Second, the inclusion of São Paulo in a common global narrative about urban change obscures the city's specificities by importing assumptions that are not rooted in its reality.

The way New York is used as an example is part of a larger trend. The transformations in SoHo in particular are so entrenched in the popular imagination as a success story about how art and culture can revitalize a neighbourhood that they were explicitly cited as a goal by one state official interviewed by Kara-José (2007) about Monumenta Luz, an urban-cultural intervention sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank that started in 1999, in an area of República much more precarious than the one analyzed in this chapter. The interviewee, who represented the state-level government in the elaboration of the plan, suggested that the housing within the project perimeter should be "aimed towards a public that consumes culture, that has the purchasing power to do so, that can appreciate living near it" (Kara-José 2007: 250). According to her, this public would be comprised of "cultural producers, people connected with cultural activities, designers and artists, a sort of SoHo, thinking out loud, in the longer term and having solved the safety issue" (Kara-José 2007: 250). A point to highlight is that "*pensando alto*," the original phrasing, can be translated both as thinking out loud or as aiming higher. One translation posits SoHo as an example, while the other sees Soho as an ambitious goal.



In both translations, however, SoHo emerges as paradigmatic and is used to think about and plan state interventions.

An interesting example of this was the seminar “SoHo Effect – Experience exchange and public policies as an antidote to gentrification” that took place at an event organized by Brazil’s Ministry of Culture in 2018. According to the event’s website “‘SoHo Effect’ is the term used to refer to artist-led gentrification, since the neighbourhood was the most famous example of this phenomenon” (MinC 2018). The use of SoHo’s image in this case is particularly interesting because it is being used in an event about the exchange of ideas in public policy, organized by the government at the national level. This reveals the full extent to which the gentrification of SoHo has colonized imaginaries of urban transformation.

It is further worth noting how the event website describes artists, stating that they are “placemakers by instinct: when artists group together in an area they inject energy, build social networks, business networks and contribute to the neighbourhood’s vibrance and distinction” (MinC 2018). Significantly, the English word “placemakers” was used in the original text, and we frequently found English being used throughout the examples studied in our research, whether in publicity material, state projects, or home decoration. The transposition of ideas without translation mirrors a broader tendency in the import of those ideas to Brazil, and sheds light on the limitations of a strategy that tries to merge two urban contexts as different as São Paulo and New York.

The idea of new bars and restaurants helping to “revitalize” the city, as shown in the Heineken’s publicity, is also prevalent in São Paulo’s media, with features titled “The guide to the restaurants and bars of Santa Cecília’s new scene,” that helps the reader navigate the new places that supposedly drove the change in the neighbourhood that borders República. Another example is “Gastronomic attractions revitalize the centre in the region between República square and Amaral Gurgel Terminal,” which is precisely the area we are focused on. This last example represents the use of media to highlight the new businesses that are supposedly changing the area and ran in *Folha de São Paulo*, the newspaper that printed the Setin interview.

What is interesting is how those bars and restaurants resemble both the studios and accompanying publicity explored here, with elements borrowed from industrial aesthetics such as burnt cement and exposed brick and other details, such as string lights, chalkboard signs with elaborate lettering and posters in English, so one can feel a certain continuity between those spaces. This continuity, that helps to establish a network of spaces referencing an urban transformation that took place elsewhere, creates a sort of simulation



Figure 5.3: Bia Hoi Restaurant, one of many businesses within República featuring an industrial décor. Source: the authors.

of the original place, but is unable to generate the same process in São Paulo. The most famous gentrification processes that originated the term took place in the Global North and were closely linked to particular political, economic, and social dynamics specific to those countries (Betancur 2014). Those dynamics are completely different in Brazil and Latin America (Betancur 2014; Contreras and Venegas 2017), yet there is an underlining similarity in their aesthetics.

Furthermore it is important to point out how the current narrative about the urban change taking place in República is in great part a fabrication, produced by a host of agents that, through the import of a narrative, try to promote their products. More than that, we want to stress how fragile this construction is, given the current situation in República. First, even though São Paulo occupies a privileged position as a financial centre in Latin America (Betancur 2014; Santos 2011) this does not mean that the city has the social structure that would allow for a traditional gentrification process to occur (Betancur 2014). Second, the level of precariousness in city centres in Latin America is far higher than in the cities of the Global North which originated the theory and narratives about gentrification in general, including those of SoHo (Contreras and Venegas 2017). In the specific case of República, the high levels of homelessness and tenements concentrated in the area (Otero, Harkot, and Santoro 2019) need to be considered, keeping in mind that these vulnerabilities are deepened by the economic crisis that widens from 2015.

## Conclusion

Whereas the middle and upper classes, along with private investments, moved progressively Southwest after the 1970s and 1980s, today there is a flowback to the area, if not by this part of the population at least from private investment. That is not to say that a gentrification process will necessarily take place in República, and a careful analysis taking into account the area's specificities will need to be conducted in a few years to measure the change. What our research showed is the strong presence of the industrial aesthetic in the area which we understood as being an echo of the gentrification process that took place in SoHo. This is not to say, of course, that all of those who mobilize those industrial elements do so with an explicit reference to SoHo or are trying to leverage a transformation like the one that neighbourhood went through. However, what our research shows is that the images that have spread in São Paulo carry with them traces of SoHo's context and origins, even if superimposed with other layers of meaning. Their instrumentalization is intentional, and is part of an attempt to increase real estate prices in the area through an emulation of gentrification that tries to foster the very process it imitates.

## Note

All translations from Portuguese to English in this chapter were made by the authors.

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