

OBSERVATIONS ON SÃO PAULO'S CULTURE OF SIEGE

You don't have to go far to leave home. Being a mobile extension of the home, the car provides needed protection in a city of 18 million inhabitants when all hell breaks loose. The ever-increasing discrepancy between rich and poor spawns an industry of security attending to both a real and a manufactured sense of safety – raised to the level of a status symbol. The more security deemed necessary, the more important you are. Here, the bullet-proof car – the so-called blindado – indexes a pervasive condition, one of social segregation taken beyond the confines of locality. From fortified home, to gated community, to armored vehicle, a tentacular urbanism emerges. As the car moves through the city, an infrastructure of empowerment gradually insinuates its way into and around things, thereby creating safeguarded networks from one locale to another while negating anything in its path. Notwithstanding the myth of personal freedom attached to the automobile, a form of auto-entrapment ensues, tantamount to a self-inflicted siege that nurtures collective paranoia.

Contrary to the assumption that the contemporary city follows the principle of open systems, a closed-door policy is actually advanced, which in effect yields a stronghold urbanism set against the backdrop of roaming gangland opportunism. A formal powerbase shielding



BROCHURE ILLUSTRATING MULTILAMINATED SECURITY CONSTRUCTION OF A CAR'S PASSENGER WINDOW, SÃO PAULO, 2001. IMAGE COURTESY THE AUTHORS.

itself from its surroundings is matched by an informal powerbase made up of the worst of the worst in a highly stratified society. It would be a mistake, however, to fall into the trap of believing that this other class is underprivileged, for this is the new elite. Although bidden from official view to the extent of veritable nonexistence, this phantom-class has the city in its grip. Organized crime is its business: robbery, hijacking, smuggling, prostitution, narcotics, and weapons trading. Guerilla warfare is its tactic of choice, the city its theater of operation.

Fortune, however, does not distinguish between formal and informal economies. Although locked in a violent battle for control, the two classes share

common objectives as they are each driven by profit-making, while all the same keeping the afflicted masses at bay. Democracy aside, here we are witness to a pirate economy that is fueled equally by legal and illegal dealings. Political leaders are caught in a bind insofar as they are pressed into both these circuits. Loyalty becomes ambiguous, yet the message is clear. Maintain power without being caught in the act or assaulted along the way. Above all, remain mobile at all costs. The car is king and security paramount. So get an armored vehicle and don't leave home without it! – Marc Angéllil and Cary Siress

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