Learning to Read Sidewalks

Segregation and Spatial Identity in São Paulo — Rua da Mooca, Avenida Paulista, Rua Aspicuelta

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Introduction

The Sidewalk as a Mirror of the Metropolis São Paulo

In June 2013, more than one million Brazilians took to the streets to protest against social injustices, a wave of demonstrations that became known as the "Brazilian Spring," demanding reforms in education, healthcare, and public transportation (cf. Vicino/Fahlberg 2017: 1001). Initially sparked by increased public transport fares, the protests escalated due to police violence and growing criticism of government spending on mega-events (cf. Earle 2017: 105). São Paulo, as Brazil's industrial and financial hub, was a central stage for these events (cf. Vicino/Fahlberg 2017: 1002). Here, the effects of increasing urbanization and social segregation converge, manifested in spatial separation, legal insecurity, and a lack of state regulation (cf. Earle 2017: 68). At the same time, new forms of urban negotiation and resistance emerge in public spaces (cf. Carlos 2018: 31, 34). This paper examines the sidewalk as a micro-level site; an arena of everyday practices, encounters, and social dynamics. The aim is to develop a deeper understanding of how social structures, spatial production, and urban identity are interwoven in São Paulo.

Research Design and Methodological Approach

The study examines how everyday use shapes public space, particularly sidewalks, and contributes to the formation of specific identities. In three streets of São Paulo, ten hours of observation were conducted in each, along with 45 interviews with passersby, supplemented by photographic documentation, historical visual sources, and literature review. The goal is to make visible the small-scale, often overlooked dynamics of urban life and thereby deepen the understanding of urban spaces. The researcher adopts a detached external perspective that requires critical reflection on her own cultural assumptions. Through the analysis of individual behaviors within their spatial and social context, a comprehensive insight is gained into how public spaces are lived in, interpreted, and continuously transformed.
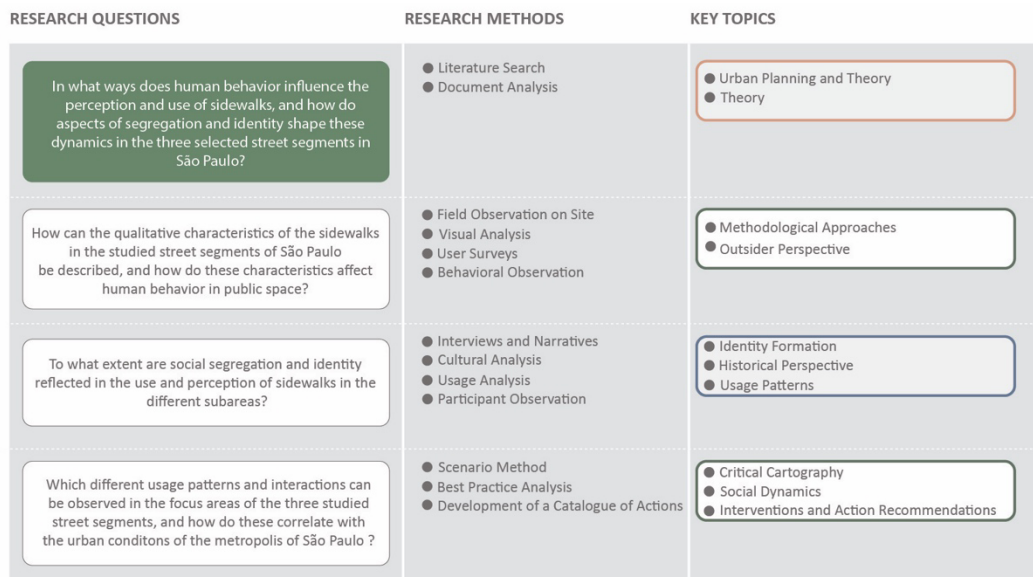
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Figure 1: Linkage of Research Question, Research Methods, and Key Topics.

Source: own illustration.

From Metropolis to Sidewalk - Theoretical Positioning in São Paulo

Sidewalks as Places of Urban Interaction

The street is more than just a space for traffic; it serves as a central place for social and cultural interactions, such as cafés, theaters, and public squares that enable encounters and communication (cf. Lefebvre 2003: 18). "Self-appointed public personalities" like shop owners play an important role by building social networks and trust through their presence (cf. Jacobs 1961: 67–79). These everyday contacts foster a sense of community and social safety that cannot be replaced institutionally (cf. Jacobs 1961: 67–79). Jacobs describes streets and sidewalks as the "vital organs" of the city, whose design shapes the overall impression (cf. Jacobs 1961: 2, 27). However, streets are increasingly shaped by consumption and control mechanisms, which restrict their social function and degrade them into mere passageways (cf. Lefebvre 2003: 20). Public spaces should be designed democratically and responsively to enable comfort, relaxation, and social interaction (cf. Carr et al. 1992: 19, 91–92). Whyte observed that urban spaces typically only promote social encounters when special attractions are present (cf. Whyte 1980: 14). Three features are central to a safe and lively city street: a clear separation between public and private space, buildings oriented towards the street, and active areas that allow social control by residents (cf. Jacobs 2015: 28–32). The presence of strangers, especially at night, also contributes to safety by activating street life (cf. Jacobs 2015: 36).

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Segregation and Spatial Identity

In São Paulo, social and spatial segregation leads to the fragmentation of the city, where wealthy and poor communities increasingly live separately (cf. Schubert 2000: 44–45). Gated communities for the affluent and marginalized poor areas reinforce this fragmentation and weaken public spaces as social meeting points (cf. Hoerning 2016: 15). Housing pressure shifts growth to the periphery, where favelas gain economic significance but are often associated with poor infrastructure and environmental problems (cf. Novy 1997: 274; Rolnik 2001: 471). The growing social separation is also reflected in the expansion of private residential areas with physical barriers and security measures that deepen the division of urban society (cf. Caldeira 1996: 118–121).

Identity is not a fixed state but a dynamic, socially constructed process that is always context-dependent (Sturm 1999: 2–3; Keith/Pile 1993: 28–30). It emerges in the tension between external expectations and individual self-determination (Goffman 1967; Mead 1968; Emcke 2010: 99). Migration highlights the conflict between self- and external ascriptions (Schöningh 2012: 45). Foucault emphasizes the influence of social power structures on identity (Emcke 2010: 138). Space is socially constructed and influences identity emotionally and culturally (Sturm 1999: 4; Knaps 2021: 39–42). Cities and architecture shape identity spaces that reflect social and cultural diversity (Lynch 1960: 46, 119; Castells 1996: 240). Space is an expression of societal power relations and affects access and social practices (Castells 1996: 410–411). Spatial identity operates on various scales (from neighborhood to nation) and can create loyalty conflicts (Welchhart 1990: 75–79). Places with clear structure promote stronger attachment (ibid.).

Three Streets In Fokus: Avenida Paulista, Rua da Mooca, and Rua Aspicuelta

Exploring the Street: Walking, Photography, and the Perspective of Being a Stranger

The selection of the three streets in São Paulo reflects the city's urban diversity. Avenida Paulista represents economic power and cultural progress. Rua da Mooca stands for a traditional working-class neighborhood with historical and religious landmarks. Rua Aspicuelta embodies an alternative leisure and nightlife culture. The distinct characters of these streets provide clear insight into the diverse social and spatial dynamics of the metropolis.

The approach draws on the science of walking, which explores urban spaces through walking and thus makes social and spatial power relations newly perceptible (Bürgin 2020: 231; Burckhardt 2012: 251; De Certeau 1988: 99-101). A distinction is made between the flâneur, who experiences the street as a stage, and the tourist guide, highlighting different modes of perception (Rohde/Wildner 2020: 241). Photographs serve as a social scientific tool to depict urban contexts and power structures, whose meaning depends on the viewer and

the context of the image (Dirksmeier 2009: 151-159). Historical and ethnographic photographs reflect colonial and cultural power relations (Ivanoff 2020: 61, 75). Strangeness arises relationally through social boundary processes, shapes urban anonymity, and differs between public and private spaces (Mack 2023: 129-140). It is increasingly seen as culturally productive and requires ongoing reflection of both one's own and others' identities (Mack 2023: 152; Müller-Funk 2016: 15).

Figure 2: Location of the three streets.

Source: own illustration.

Based on the theoretical knowledge as well as the methodological approaches from the science of walking, photography, and the concept of otherness, the analytical focus now turns to the three selected street sections. For this essay, an exemplary segment from one of the three studied sidewalk areas is examined in more detail.

Avenida Paulista: From the Coffee Elite to São Paulo's Financial Center

The Avenida Paulista was established in 1890 by Joaquim Eugênio de Lima and other co-founders as a broad boulevard in the European style (cf. Pimental/Carranza 2020: 3). Originally, it was a residential area for the coffee elite and a symbol of São Paulo's economic rise. It fundamentally changed the city's structure by expanding the traditional city center (cf. Brinkmann 2019: 48–49). From the 1950s onwards, it developed into the financial and business hub, characterized by modern skyscrapers (cf. Rolnik 2008: 14). As early as 1904,

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Gabriel Muniz Franco praised its beauty in comparison to European avenues. Since the 1990s, it has also been a site for political and cultural events (cf. Hoerning 2016: 190). The "Ruas de Lazer" program led to temporary closures of the street to car traffic (cf. de Oliveira Eugenio 2021: 116), and in 2015 it was permanently opened to pedestrians and cyclists (cf. Cordeiro et al. 2019: 2). Today, Avenida Paulista symbolizes São Paulo's urban, cultural, and social transformation (cf. Pimental/Carranza 2020: 13).

Sidewalk subsection at the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP)

The sidewalk area in front of the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) is structured by clear spatial boundaries. Bollards and daily-installed barriers separate the museum area from the sidewalk and are monitored by security personnel and video surveillance. During the observation period, no violations of rules occurred; however, a diverse range of interactions with these boundary elements was observed. People lean against the barriers, use them for support, or place stickers on them, indicating everyday appropriation. Bollards are often used as seats or surfaces to place items. Distinctive objects such as the red MASP sign or the stone statue at the entrance serve as meeting and orientation points. Temporary separations due to construction further structure the space and are also functionally used as information surfaces.
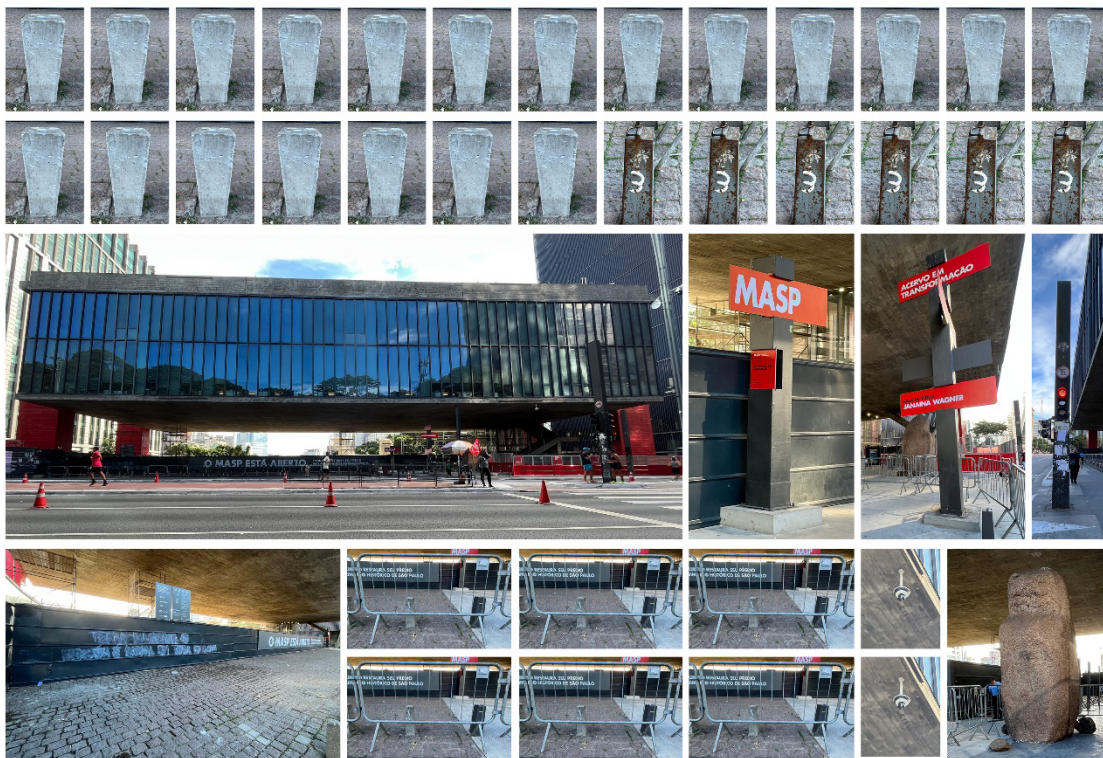

Figure 3: Elements: São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP).

Source: own photographs.

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The sidewalk area surrounding the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) is characterized by a pronounced security infrastructure, including surveillance cameras, municipal security personnel, and a nearby police station. Several security officers are present daily, monitoring both the sidewalk and the street vendors. The use of the area varies throughout the day: in the morning, dog owners frequent the adjacent park, and street vendors set up their stalls and clean the area. Commuters cross the sidewalk on their way to the office buildings along Avenida Paulista. In the evening, the stalls are dismantled, and the police presence intensifies again. Especially on Sundays, when Avenida Paulista is closed to vehicular traffic, the atmosphere becomes vibrant with additional market stalls and street musicians cheered on by passersby. On this day, the area transforms into a public space that fulfills not only economic but also cultural and social functions.

Avenida Paulista is a central symbol of São Paulo's identity, embodying the city's cultural diversity and dynamic lifestyle (cf. Interview 3, Avenida Paulista, [00:00:53.72]). It serves as a key hub for work, culture, and leisure, attracting many people every day. The street facilitates encounters between different social and cultural groups and offers publicly accessible cultural opportunities such as museums and markets (cf. Interview 2, Avenida Paulista, [00:01:43.20]; Interview 8, Avenida Paulista, [00:02:00.71]). At the same time, Avenida Paulista also reflects the social segregation present in São Paulo: affluent and disadvantaged people meet here directly, making social inequalities visible (cf. Interview 1, Avenida Paulista, [00:01:24.52]). Moreover, the street is perceived as a site of social power structures, where societal hierarchies become clearly evident (cf. Interview 7, Avenida Paulista, [00:01:19.39]).

Mooca: From Working-Class Neighborhood to Cultural Melting Pot

Mooca, a historic district in the eastern part of São Paulo, was founded in 1556 and its name means "house of a relative" (cf. de Oliveira Lupia 2016: 109–110). In the 19th century, it developed into one of the city's first working-class neighborhoods, shaped by Italian immigrants (cf. de Oliveira Lupia 2016: 108). Industrialization along the Jundiaí–Santos railway led to the emergence of workers' settlements starting in 1870 (cf. Gunn/Correira 2004: 82). Despite modern developments, Mooca retains its historical identity and strong neighborhood culture, heavily influenced by Italian traditions (cf. de Oliveira Lupia 2016: 115–118). The district's history is closely linked to the 1917 general strike and the broader Brazilian labor movement (cf. Miranda 2002: 92). Today, Mooca is primarily a residential area, with preserved factory buildings and increasing vertical urban development (cf. Kusznir 1999: 15).

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Sidewalk Area at Praça Alexander Fleming Park

At Praça Alexander Fleming, the benches are positioned along the park wall facing the sidewalk and are used by individuals and small groups for eating, socializing, or people-watching. In the rear area of the park, larger groups often gather, frequently with music, and stay for up to half an hour. However, the quality of stay is diminished by scattered trash. In addition to the benches, the adjacent wall is also used as a place to sit or to set down personal belongings.

In the mornings, the area is mainly frequented by parents with children; around midday, office workers use the space for breaks; and in the evenings, local residents walk their dogs. A homeless man uses the park as a place of retreat, quietly observing the surroundings.

Figure 4: Action space: Praça Alexander Fleming.

Source: own photographs.

Rua da Mooca is perceived as a predominantly white neighborhood shaped by traditional values and a relatively homogeneous middle class, which, despite relative poverty, considers itself to be well-off (Interview 7, Rua da Mooca, [00:00:57.30]). Social classes are clearly divided: affluent white residents operate many of the businesses, while Black and Brown

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individuals are primarily employed in the service sector; the neighborhood is seen as socially normative (Interview 7, Rua da Mooca, [00:02:06.01]).

The population is largely long-term and closely tied through familial bonds (Interview 8, Rua da Mooca, [00:00:07.28]). Clear social hierarchies are evident in the housing situation: simpler settlements are located in the lower part of the street, while more elegant apartments are found in the upper section (Interview 9, Rua da Mooca, [00:02:00.00]). Overall, the identity of Rua da Mooca reflects a combination of tradition, social homogeneity, and hierarchy.

Hotspot Rua Aspicuelta: From Traditional Neighborhood to Creative Hotspot

Vila Madalena was founded in the early 20th century by Portuguese migrant workers and developed through the establishment of churches and infrastructure (cf. Afonso 2002: 27ff.). From the 1970s onwards, it began attracting students, and starting in the 1990s, the area underwent commercialization and gentrification (cf. Verri 2014: 134). Today, the neighborhood is known for the "Beco do Batman" and its cultural diversity (cf. Barcelos 2019: 121).

Sidewalk Section at Boteco São Bento

The sidewalk section in front of Boteco São Bento is strongly shaped by the bar's facade, which features a retractable awning. In case of rain, plastic tarps are lowered and secured to the ground. Prominent street signage further structures the space and serves as a meeting point or leaning spot in the evening. A palm tree and additional plants contribute to upgrading the area, creating an inviting atmosphere. Security cameras on the facade highlight the high priority placed on surveillance and safety. Flower pots frame the bar's entrance, completing the design of the public space. The corner location of the establishment enables various forms of interaction: street vendors lean against the signs and address potential customers, while the security guard monitors both the bar and the sidewalk, occasionally placing orange cones to reserve parking spots. Activity patterns divide into two time periods: in the mornings and afternoons, the sidewalk is relatively calm, used for waiting or deciding which bar to visit. After 6 p.m., the presence of street vendors, security personnel, and groups with drinks increases. Street children offer plastic roses, and the area is frequently used for taking photos and videos. Interaction between the security guard and the vendors is especially noticeable. Interviews describe the neighborhood as diverse and vibrant, shaped by a mix of young, modern individuals, families, and international visitors ("gringos") (Interview 2, [00:00:25.66]; Interview 5, [00:02:24.85], [00:01:45.53]). Despite an openness to different groups, there are limitations; particularly for elderly people and individuals with mobility impairments, due to uneven ground conditions (Interview 2, [00:01:29.53]; Interview 6, [00:00:55.77]). Moreover, social divisions are evident through economic disparities, which restrict access to certain areas (Interview 9, [00:02:30.00]).

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Figure 5: Overview of street interviews: Rua Aspicuelta.

Source: own illustration.

Conclusion from the research

The use and design of sidewalks are central factors for social life in urban spaces. Using three street sections in São Paulo (Avenida Paulista, Rua da Mooca, and Rua Aspicuelta) as examples, this study shows how the physical characteristics of space influence human behavior and are simultaneously imbued with meaning through that behavior. Sidewalks are much more than mere traffic areas: they function as social spaces where identities are negotiated, belonging becomes visible, and social differences become tangible.

The qualitative aspects of sidewalks, such as width, amenities, accessibility, and comfort, directly affect movement patterns and interactions. While well-designed spaces, like those on Avenida Paulista, encourage social encounters, cramped or traffic-heavy areas, such as Rua da Mooca, restrict social interaction. Nevertheless, creative appropriations by local populations emerge precisely in these areas, where the public space is actively and collectively used despite infrastructural shortcomings.

At the same time, it becomes clear that sidewalks act as mirrors of social segregation. Where people linger, interact, or are excluded is strongly influenced by social, cultural, and economic conditions. In Vila Madalena, for example, increasing gentrification manifests itself through spatial and social fragmentation — despite, or perhaps because of, the lively use by diverse groups. The sidewalks of São Paulo reveal the complex interplay of spatial design, social structure, and urban identity, highlighting the political dimension of seemingly everyday places.

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Prospect

Urban planning must not be purely technocratic but must take into account the social and political dimensions of city inhabitants. Burckhardt emphasizes that political and technical decisions are inseparable, especially regarding the equitable distribution of infrastructure, which often disadvantages poorer neighborhoods (Burckhardt 2012: 122). Critical urbanism theory, according to Marcuse, therefore demands planning that places social justice at its core and makes public spaces accessible to all (cf. Marcuse 2012: 37). The sidewalk is a central site of social and political negotiation and reveals the complexity of urban spaces. Just city development can only succeed through dialogue among urban planners, politicians, and citizens to create public spaces that enable social participation and justice.

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