



aerial view showing context within downtown São Paulo

Situation Copan | Mutual Contaminations

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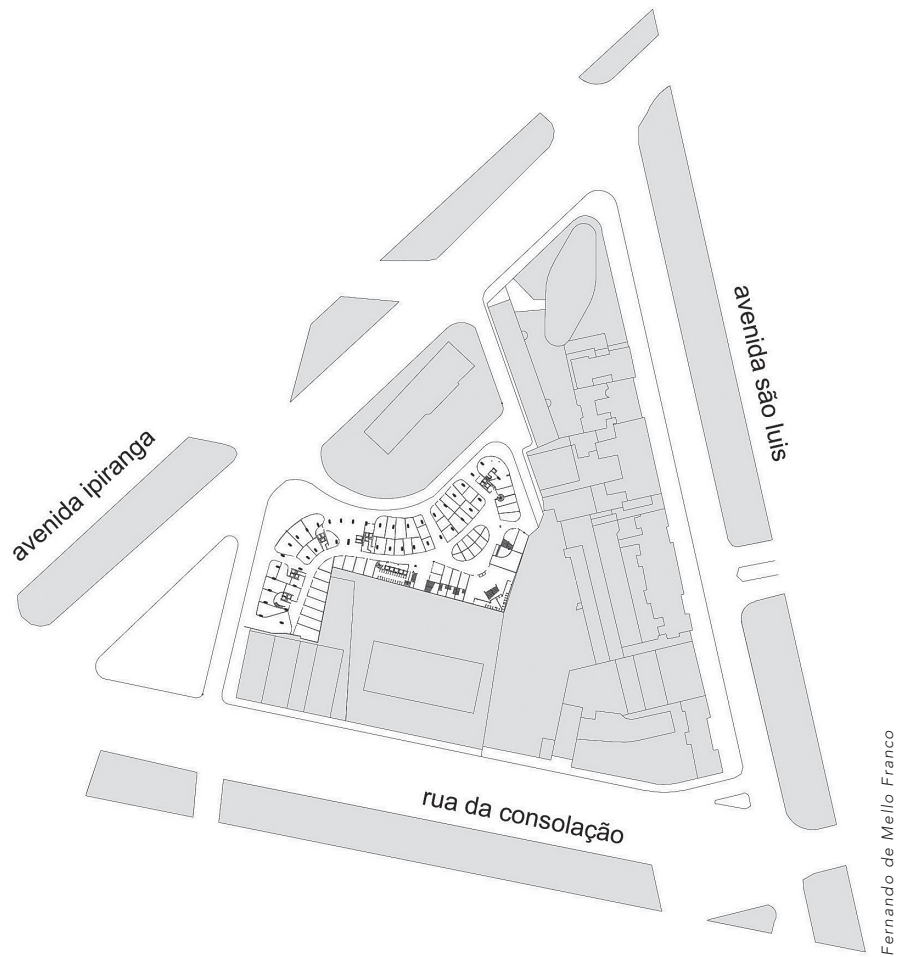
the Copan Building is usually recognized by its exuberant form and intriguing program. More than a building, it produces an urban situation. To isolate its tectonic beauty from the context of downtown São Paulo would reduce its meaning. Copan's urban situation is generated from the intersection of two matrices: the virtuosity of the architectural object and architecture as the making of a place; to understand the Copan is to understand the basis of modern Brazil — a new country made from the conflicts and qualities of an intense ethnic mix and a particular cultural blend. São Paulo, epitomising this mix, grew from the urgencies of late 19th century modernisation. In just one hundred years São Paulo has become one of the largest industrialised metropolises in the world, a fusion of all social forces.

A significant number of large-scale, mixed-use buildings built here show clear evidence of the city's transformation into a metropolis — none are as emblematic as the Copan Building, a project by Oscar Niemeyer started in 1951 and finished in 1966 (at the end, no longer under Niemeyer's direction or the administration of the original developer). Today, about 5,000 people live in the Copan with a daytime increase from commercial, leisure and employment activities.

Copan's activities are formally organised in three distinct zones. The ground floor zone, which occupies the total footprint of the Copan, concentrates all public and collective functions. Its lower levels include underground parking, a public commercial mall with cafes, restaurants, video stores, clothing stores, markets, hair dressers and offices, and an original movie theatre turned into a church. The mezzanine level is used, off and on, for parties, theatre, dance classes and meetings. The curvilinear residential tower is a zone of 32 floors in a variety of typologies ranging from individual studios to four-bedroom apartments, creating a complex social fabric. The third zone, the roof terrace, is currently closed to public access.



Zé Lino, a worker in the Copan for more than 40 years, climbs the exterior of the building —without safety gear — to clean the windows



implantação showing the Copan in its immediate context.

Fernando de Mello Franco

Living inside the Copan alters one's perspective. Copan is a maker of urbanity — the experience starts with the daily walk through the ground floor gallery for shopping, having a coffee or going to work. A winding path established by Niemeyer negotiates continuous circulations within the irregular geometry of the lot. The interior path follows the original slightly sloping topography of the land, and all the commercial stalls are levelled accordingly. Links between the ground floor and the city happen at convenient elevation points without the need to change the plane of the street. A gallery connects to neighbouring buildings making an interior fabric of public paths through the interior of the city blocks. The convergence of development interests (multiplying commercial zones) with the architect's utopia (creating a collective public space) created an extremely thin line between private and public territories in this particular typology. What results is a subversion of typical subdivisions of land: set-backs, fences and walls – the physical barriers between buildings and the city, are absent. The spatial unity of the ground floor, with its continuity and fluidity of public circulation, is a key urban model for downtown gallerias where the particularity of each building coexists with an articulated and cohesive urban organization.

The Copan residential elevator towers are found amongst the commercial spaces of the ground floor. From any apartment one reaches the 'street' without any mediation. When the elevator door opens, engagement with urban life is immediate and direct. To live in the building presumes an urban life that feeds off – or depends on – the intense experience of the city in its antagonistic dimensions of opportunity and conflict.

Above the ground level are 1,262 residential units of several sizes and types of occupation, suggesting a potentially oppressive and tense scale for city living. As one goes up, floor by floor, the towering condition increases. The higher one goes the further one is removed from the city, simulating a suburban condition. The contemplative gaze is intensified as one looks upon an immeasurable metropolis: in the impossibility of seeing either the physical limits of the city or human beings, the sight gets lost in a complex middle territory. Escape from this immensity is, paradoxically, found in the intimate spaces of the apartments. The most profoundly private situations are invisible to the city. Only a powerful zoom lens can capture the random combination of individual expressions.



The duality of being deeply inserted in the metropolis, and at the same time distant from it, explains the original meaning of the word *apartment*. As the words *floor*, or *flat* designate single physical qualities of space, apartment indicates the condition of being. Separation from the city while at the centre of its collective dynamics is what forms the lyricism of the Copan – a persistent lyricism, surviving the critics of its urban model.

Modernist paradigms do not correspond any longer to contemporary urban reality. However, to understand their historical value could support São Paulo's continued urban development, so removed from the process that transformed the city. Of all the buildings in the city following similar principles, only a few sustain a certain dignity and they tend to shelter the middle class in the more exclusive areas of the city. The project for the revitalisation of downtown, which the Copan participates in and benefits from, rescues the country's modernisation project of a city of shared property. Beyond Niemeyer and the singularity of its visual and symbolic character, the Copan is a result of a complex condition in the city. It is not limited to its interior, but instead establishes relationships with its context through the mutual contaminations between the building and the city. ■



top: view from internal street to the block Copan
above: the public space at the ground floor of the building

opposite: this is a project sponsored by the Art Gallery of Guelph and consists of images taken during the cycle of a full day in the life of the Copan: one at every 15 minutes for 24 hours. This collage for onsite is a sample from the project.

Fernando de Mello Franco is an educator at USJT and architect associated with mmbb architects in São Paulo. spmb projects [Eduardo Aquino and Karen Shanski] practice art and architecture mostly in São Paulo and Manitoba. They were artists in residence at the Copan Building under a Canada Council for the Arts grant.

