Framing an Approach to the Urban

Many approaches can be taken to questions about urban life. Different disciplines begin with different lines of inquiry and apply different methodologies. The results or understandings produced by each discipline are therefore prefigured to varying degrees by their epistemological underpinnings, their methodologies, and the their medium of representation. Opening up interdisciplinary space has, time and time again, produced more robust understandings about questions that humans ask. Reframing the initial question often allows for the production of new hypotheses, theories, and answers which, if nothing more, gesture towards new territory. The notion of new territory in this case is built on a notion of progress, but also regress, insofar as the goal is to reverse specialization in academic knowledge. Furthering the division of knowledge into micro-taxonomies produces deeper prefiguration of answers given the hyper-specific approach. Micro-taxonomies of knowledge created by splintering disciplines produce tautological knowledge.

This paper seeks to open up space between urban design and anthropology. It is motivated by a distaste for both urban design’s recycling of modern principles of spatiotemporal efficiency and with anthropology’s impotence, sometimes called paralysis by analysis. In the case of Transantiago, the public transport network of Santiago, Chile, it is patently obvious that the improvement of spatiotemporal efficiency does not improve the quality of transportation, nor the overall experience of the city. In fact, it has damaged trust between the government and its people. It is also obvious that anthropologists are usually content to throw critiques from their desks, having difficulty articulating their

---

1 ‘Do not talk to the driver’. Signs like these are posted in the front of many buses, and indicate a designed antisociality that is discussed further.
findings with the pragmatism necessary to collaborate with city planners. It is of my belief that both can benefit from the other.

The central case analyzed here is that of Transantiago, the multi-modal public transportation network of Santiago, Chile. It is public-private partnership which moves millions daily across the expanding city of almost seven million. The brief historical context of Transantiago is outlined, including its implementation, successes, and failures, followed by a discussion of the anthropological research and its applicability to design. Ultimately several conclusions are drawn about the nature of materiality, space and place, and the prevailing technocratic paradigm in planning.

**Historical Context—Las Micros Amarillas**

The pre-2007 bus transportation model was a loosely organized system of hundreds of small private service providers that ran direct point-A to point-B routes. Fees were paid directly to the driver, or to an assistant, either of whom kept and managed the money and register while driving. Drivers made their wages purely on the number of clientele carried, the private provider allotted a percentage of each fare to the driver, and took a certain percentage for general operation costs, managerial wages, etc. Because of this, many bus drivers actively raced each other for clients. They also made sure to be very vigilant about collecting fares from everyone except young children, the elderly, and the handicapped. Companies had some degree of freedom in fare-setting for the routes they travelled, but they usually kept within a consistent range relative to the consumers’ needs and the fares of competition.

Santiago has historically been a monocentric city, meaning that jobs and wealth were centered in the middle of the population distribution. Therefore busloads of employees from working class residential neighborhoods clogged central corridors both at the morning hora punta (high hour) and the evening hora punta. This traditional Latin American model of bulls-eye centralization of urban wealth prevailed until the late 20th century in Santiago. The well-documented neoliberal political-economic shift of the 1980’s resulted in an increase in car ownership and a desire to escape the clog and increasingly poor air quality of the main river valley. As wealth stratified with shifts in economic policy, the wealthier and fiscally capable were encouraged to migrate upward and outward. This expansion upwards towards the northeastern sections of the city, more frequently referred to as towards the cordillera, followed American suburban morphology and was driven by a similar escapist impetus. This has somewhat stretched the concentration of wealth along a central corridor as opposed to the previous mono-center, but this corridor was increasingly clogged and hardly navigable. The recent transition of Santiago towards a financial service economy, coupled with its relatively steady economic growth across that period, has produced a robust and highly competitive

---

2 cordillera means ‘mountain range’ in Spanish, or simply ‘mountains’. Typically Latin American cities have their wealth centered in valleys and lowlands, near rivers or water, while the poor are relegated to the distant foothills. U.S. suburban patterns place the wealthy upward and outward, while the city centers often deteriorate. Santiago makes this transition in the the mid-eighties, discussed below.
economic sector, symbolized by the Costanera Center, the tallest tower in Latin America. This shift has obviously been accompanied by negative social costs as well.

Among issues that plagued the old system were excessive air pollution, bus-clogged central corridors, dangerous competition between drivers to get to clients, and underutilized and expensive subway transit. In the early 2000s, in response to these growing issues, the presidency of Ricardo Lagos began to formulate plans to implement a new transit system. Given the task were a group of what Alfredo Joignant calls technopols (2011). These are politicians who have expertise as technocrats, as opposed to knowledge of the people and their values. Technopols are often trained in foreign countries and have a firm belief in their field of technology as a way of the future. Several public transportation success stories in other Latin American cities encouraged this, namely Transmilenio of Bogotá, Colombia and the Rede Integrada de Transporte (Integrated Transport Network, RIT) of Curitiba, Brazil, the pioneering Bus Rapid Transit model that experienced great success and global notoriety.

**Implementation**

Transantiago was implemented as a beacon of progressivity in February of 2007 and is widely considered to be one of the most ambitious public transportation projects undertaken in Latin American history. Within the emergent global ‘Smart city’ discourse it is cited as exemplary. The Smart city is a relatively understudied off-shoot of the World and Global city discourses first introduced by Friedmann (1986) and Sassen (2005), respectively. A “Global city” is a hub for international financial flows, or a prominent node in the global economic system. Cities like New York, London, and Tokyo are great examples. The Smart city is slightly different, however. These are cities that distinguish themselves based on the efficiency, social responsibility, and intelligence with which they appropriate technology in the use of resources and management of capital. Environmentally efficient, affordable, and capable public transportation is a key element of the Smart city. Again, the Smart city is not only an established hub of international capital investment, but is also smart in its utilization of resources. The Smart City is one that uses its resources well, distinguishing it from a city that simply has a lot of resources. Transantiago is statistically comparable to other global transportation systems in terms of environmental efficiency and size of ridership. However, it consistently ranks as one of the worst government services in Chile; according to the Indice Nacional de Satisfacción del Cliente, it is the single worst (National Index of Client Satisfaction, 2012 and 2013). It becomes clear that we have differing narratives and points of view surrounding Transantiago.

The implementation of Transantiago was largely modeled on that of other cities, and was a gargantuan failure. The goal was not only to solve the immediate problems, but also to brand the city as both smart and modern. Paula Jiron summarizes the “Big Bang” implementation:

On February 10, 2007 Transantiago became the new urban transport system in the city of Santiago, Chile. The new system aimed to modernise public transportation in the city by making the existing, yet complex, network of public buses, or micros amarillas, more efficient, comfortable, and safe (Malbran, 2005). The project was financed by
international agencies and corporations (including banks and transport consortia). However, the implementation of the modernisation plan proved to be highly problematic and it resulted in travel chaos for hundreds of thousands of urban residents. As a result, Transantiago has been considered to be one of the most disruptive public policy interventions in Chilean history.

Ideally, the development of Smart city infrastructure is not only immediately beneficial, but is largely driven by branding, which helps a city to attract international capital. However, as Jiron notes, the case of Transantiago was a huge domestic failure on the ground. Conceiving of the urban as a technical space rather than a socially textured space, planners and technopols developed behavioral and usage models that were incommensurate with historical entrenched mobility. They stood on conceptual ground that championed statistical indicators of value in mobility, as opposed to markedly more complex and entrenched value. In a rushed attempt to rebrand the city as Smart, like Bogota and Curitiba, the government generated a chaos.

**Today on the Bus**

The new buses are larger, can carry more people, are safer, and more environmentally efficient. The new “trunk-feeder” route organization has allowed for fewer buses to cover the same amount of space, faster. The central corridors of the city are no longer as clogged and the number of required buses has decreased sharply from the era of the micros amarillas. There is no refutation of these facts. It is important to realize, however, that this is a complicated picture where there are many pros and cons. It is also important to understand that statistics are only one of many ways to represent truth. Stories are another way, and if human beings continue to live in storied worlds, imagined worlds, and local worlds, then anthropology considers one of its principal duties to represent these different modes of representation. Statistics are part of projects; that is to say that they are collected, distributed, and designed by individuals who have goals in mind. They are not, as many consider them to be, a more solid form of truth. If this were the case then every person in Santiago would be happier about Transantiago, which is statistically superior on all fronts than the earlier system. How then are we to address the dissatisfaction? Observations and interviews reveal some pertinent insights into this question.

On the 18th of June, 2014, Chile beat Spain in their second group match of the World Cup. Santiago went crazy, as is standard for a victory at this level. Plaza Italia, which is located in the very center of the city, was filled with thousands and thousands of people who left some damage to public infrastructure in their wake. This is standard; police and city services have a routine operating procedure for sporting matches like this. It is not uncommon for protests, riots, marches, celebrations, holidays, and victories to take place in the Plaza Italia.

But in this instance, the city had an added problem, a relatively new problem. As reported by Tele 13, a prominent television news source, about 300 buses were seriously damaged after Chile’s group stage victory, 50 of which were put out of commission for a substantial period of time. These buses were subject to destruction from people, who, in hysterics, broke windows, smashed mirrors and lights, stomped holes, and spray painted
all over the buses. This seemed peculiar, so I asked several drivers about it who had driven before and after Transantiago. The following is a snippet from my fieldnotes.

“This never used to happen to the buses, not during the micros amarillos era. It never happened to me [as a driver]. Now people treat the buses poorly, because the don’t belong to anyone anymore! They have no personality, every bus is the same.”
Mario Ramirez, Driver

Then he proceeds to explain all of the elaborate décor in his old bus, the one he drove every day. It had flags, banners, decals, and music. It was an issue of personality, of attachment. He said no young person would have ever ‘tagged’ [spray-painted] a bus with spray paint, it was a mutual understanding that the driver was a person, and that the spray paint was damaging the property of another Chilean. This leads me to think of the buses as increasingly inert, inanimate, lifeless; like dead space. A teen would spray paint a dead space, a dead city surface.

I conceptualize some of these changes around the notion of ‘dead space’. No hable con el conductor means ‘Do Not Talk to the Driver’. It is in this way that the new design rejects elements of sociality that were previously integral to the system. There is a damage that these changes incur, which may not be immediately recognizable. In the case of Transantiago, people have not appreciated the fact that buses are designed to be highly efficient. That is to say, designed to get x-amount of human weight across inert space. The importance of idiosyncrasies in daily urban experience may be a poorly understood element of urban phenomenology. I cannot say that it is key, but perhaps the case of Transantiago demonstrates this. People do not respond favorably to the death of idiosyncrasies. As many as 30% of drivers reportedly went on strike during Chile’s June 23rd match against the Netherlands in fear that personal safety may become an issue, win or lose.

This leads into another key point of observation, which is that the interior of the buses are increasingly shaped like that of a train car, like that of the Metro. Indeed more people can fit on the newer buses than before. Borrowing from models initially designed for Curitiba, the articulated and biarticulated buses of Santiago are much larger than before. A sign posted in some of the buses says

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capacity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seated: 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing: 75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of the main-line buses are designed explicitly for standing, like in Metros. This is unfortunate in light of the fact that these buses do not necessarily follow linear routes and are subject to repeated starts and stops in congested areas. This is made worse by environmental regulations and congestion limits that allow less buses to travel. Standing for many minutes, sometimes an hour or more, is obviously an environmental burden unequally carried by the poor. Riders watch from the packed bus as the new Costanera Norte Highway facilitates rapid private vehicular movement along the main corridor of
the city. Those driving cars are obviously ones making decisions about urban issues like public transit.

The concept of ‘meat moving’ emerged as a theme; many informants repeatedly returned to the theme of livestock.

I counted. On the old busses there were forty eight seats, and now there are only twenty five seats, even on these giant buses. Look! Count! Only twenty five! These buses carry over one hundred people on my route. … it’s, it’s like we’re livestock, it’s like we are just animals packed on here. Seventy five people, or more, standing. Packed on like sardines, like one hundred sardines. … And I wait twenty minutes in the cold for this?! I stand for one hour on the bus, then stand all day at work, and I stand for an hour on the way home, then I cook. Then repeat. (Angelica Moreira, 58, Resident of Quilicura)

Obviously crowded buses are not particular to Santiago, and the buses pre-2007 buses were often time very full, but the important element to consider is that environmental regulations are increasingly the burden of the poor. The geography of Santiago has generated one of the lowest air quality standards of any city of the world. During the winter especially, little wind crosses the region, and the smog hangs thick across much of the city. As mentioned above, the increasing mobility of the wealthy has allowed them to establish enclave-like neighborhoods in the hills of the northeast, where pollution is less of a concern. This reproduces U.S. suburban patterns that we now know to be very dangerous for the long-term health of cities. Spatial segregation can generate class-based cultures that are increasingly distinct and divided. They create distinct ways of inhabiting the world that are incommensurate and opposed.

Eriks Harms succinctly captures the paradox of growth and modernity on the edge of Ho Chi Minh City, rather than deriding or championing the progress. His fieldwork was conducted on the urban edge, in a peripheral district called Hoc Mon. This district was comprised of rural fields ten years ago, and will be urban in another ten. The district has recently been cut through with a Pan-Asian highway that expands in width by a number of meters per year; each year a new lane, cutting the neighborhood apart more and more. He says “Hoc Mon moves closer to Ho Chi Minh City but farther away from itself.” The paradox of Santiago is different, but thematically similar: the smarter the city becomes, the worse it is to inhabit.

**Fare Evasion and Urban Theatre**

It is not difficult to understand that riders would be unhappy with these changes, and therefore take subtle or overt forms of resistance. Evading the fare is one of these everyday forms. It has become common for people to simply not pay. Chilean rhetoric pulls heavily on collective notions, undoubtedly a feature of the socialist-era political discourse. Even as societal stratification continues to widen concurrent with the shift to a neoliberal capitalist political economy, this has proved to be a durable discursive feature in popular media, politics, and even in civil society realms. It is a deployable ideology that remains heavily used. This South American trope is played here, but in this case against the urban poor who cannot afford to pay for transit. Below is a short financial breakdown coupled with a discussion about urban theatre and the casting of the poor as detractors from the rhetorically public system. Themes of robbery, sin, and evil are
associated with those that do not pay. They are cast as the sinners or detractors from the otherwise healthy system.

The new system features a fixed fare, which during July of 2014 was approximately 580 CLP ($1.20) depending on one’s route and time of day. This fixed fare now covers multi-modal transfers (eg. Bus-to-Metro-to-Bus) within a designated window of time, such that one does not have to pay twice to switch from the Metro to a bus on their way to work. Over the past seven years the fare has crept up continually, as the system remains largely supported by international and private subsidies. Though designed to be 100% fiscally self-supporting after the initial infrastructural implementations, the system continued shortcomings have required perpetual help. The private service providers contracted by the government have needed subsidies since the beginning. In February of 2014, Alsacia\(^3\) required 15.2 million USD from the Chilean government if it was to stay afloat.

These problems have been augmented by an increasing rate of fare evasion. Not paying for one’s trip constitutes evasion. People evade by either entering the bus through a back door, simply not scanning their Bip! card at the front (the normal pay mechanism), or jumping or skirting the turnstiles if the bus has them. Evasion has exceeded 20%, though different studies have produced different data. This means that the collective monthly loss distributed across the seven private service providers is nearly 5.5 million USD per month. Evasion has become a kind of scapegoat, and has been selected as the largest detractor from the quality of the service. Most media sources regularly run updates on the battle against evasion. For example, an article featured in *La Tercera* from July 8, 2014 was titled:

**Reducing Evasion: The Great Challenge of Transantiago\(^4\)**

Combating this practice should be a priority based on the giant sums of lost money, but the issue still doesn’t have its due urgency.

NEARLY $5.5 million: the amount that the Metropolitan Region [of Santiago] loses monthly due to the high rates of evasion recorded on the buses of Transantiago. …

The short article discusses the dynamics of evasion, ultimately positing that stopping evasion would heal all of the system’s wounds. The subtext of these arguments implies a deep moral shortcoming on the part of those individuals that choose to evade. A widespread series of advertisements on the outside and inside surfaces of the buses depict a person pointing sternly at the viewer accompanied by large, bold text that reads ‘PAGA EN ESTE BUS, TODOS PAGAMOS’, which translates to ‘PAY ON THIS BUS,'
EVERYONE PAYS’, or simpler, ‘PAY, WE ALL PAY’. These images (seven out of the eight are heavy set males, one female) appeal to a collectivist sentiment on the one hand, while also positioning the individual as the culpable unit. The problem with these ads and their associated sentiment is that the new system has destroyed much of the collective accountability that everyone relied on previously.

The minimum wage of Chile was approximately 210,000 CLP per month. This means that for a minimum wage worker, 20 round-trip commutes per month (40 individual trips) equals about 13% of one’s income. If one makes 25 round-trip commutes and 10 off-hour single trips (60 total trips) in one month, than they would technically need to pay about 22% of their salary. Against global standards, this is an astronomical percentage of one’s wage that goes towards mobility. This statistic obfuscates the reality that many working class people have a variety of supplemental income sources, but it highlights the fact that a large group of the population would be severely limited in their mobility if they were required to pay for every trip. Luckily most drivers are now complicit with evaders in a new articulation of a working class commonality, seeing as how the drivers are now paid fixed wages. This is the collective sentiment still at work, just now it is against the bus companies and the government. This is the sentiment that the anti-evasion ads would like to appeal to, but they do have the purchase needed.

The destruction of trust and sociality on the bus is a key problem generated by the technocratic mentality. Drivers at one time collected their fees and drove their own bus, prices floated freely according to the neighborhood demographic. Now they are paid fixed wages, which solved the problem of inter-driver competition for clients, but now drivers and riders act in complicity in evasion. Not only do the drivers have no fiscal incentive to stop evasion, but they can’t. The new legal design of the buses not only mandates a separation between drivers and riders, but the physical design has also put them in a kind of glass-shielded cockpit. Headed north along Vicuña MacKenna Avenue groups of twenty people will enter at once; the women will usually say permiso to the driver, half asking for free passage, half making the statement that I am not going to pay, while the males usually ignore him altogether. He simply stares forward, while the riders herd onto the bus without paying. In this way an unintended collective form of everyday social resistance undermines the technocratic plans of the system.

Conclusions - Idiosyncrasy and Sociality

The process of conceptualizing urban space as a technocratic space requires pulling apart humans from their daily patterns of mobility throughout the city, often generating radical change in habits (Jiron 2009). For precarious populations, unreliable, late, or changing transportation patterns can be disastrous, resulting in losing a job for example. Unfortunately, most urban design is centered around what Hine and Mitchell refer to as “the universal, disembodied subject”, the idealized subject which shapes transport policy and modeling (2001). The poorly orchestrated shift in transportation patterns resulted in a large-scale loss of trust amongst many of these subjects, many of whom still experience trouble with unreliable and unaffordable transportation.

Designing public spaces, such as buses, around lifeless subjects creates spaces that lack life themselves. Transantiago has chosen to qualify itself on statistical
indicators, such as the amount of passengers moved daily, which winds up turning citizens into livestock. As Mario Ramirez recounts, his bus used to belong to him. No one spray-painted it. But now, just like the curbs, the concrete walls, and the light posts, the bus has been designed as a dead space. Its interior is made of hard plastics and metals, it rides on broken suspensions, and it is hosed down inside and out every night. The youth are blamed for the graffiti that coats the interior, and the poor are blamed for the evasion. The city is unable to continue funding the system, but at least they made it into the New York Times.

But this is not to lament in nostalgic fashion, because as noted, new forms of collective everyday resistance, in the form of driver-passenger evasion complicity, have generated successful strategies for eating the system from its insides. The technocratic plan for Transantiago attempted to control every variable and has failed for want of planning for unintended forms of sociality. For precarious residents of lower class La Pintana, the bus can be free, because the driver understands that it does not affect his wage either way, and he too resents changes to the system which attempt to control his workday with streaming computer mileage data, etc.

Yi-Fu Tuan in his book Space and Place, makes a relevant articulation about the jump from a space to a place, the latter being the intimate and the secure. “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” But for Santiago, what was at once a place, the local bus, has become more like an undifferentiated space, the bus of Transantiago. Buses at once felt homey, social, reliable, and unique. They now feel like the rollercoaster version of the Metro. Sociality is actively resisted by design, given the seating layouts and official mandates about driver-passenger interaction, but new forms of sociality have worked against these mandated designs of dead-space and antisocial space.

Bibliography

Friedmann, John. 1986. The World City Hypothesis


