ARMANDO SILVA – BOGOTÁ IMAGINADA

TAUROS PUBLISHING, 2003, 344 PAGES

Reviewed by Vanessa Maschio

There is nothing new in the fact that Latin American citizens, when traveling around other South American countries, are surprised not only by the peculiarities of the places visited, but also by their latent cultural similarities. This state of familiarity is due, in some cases, to vestiges of a common colonist matrix; in others, to the contemporary condition of the urban between large cities; or to geographical proximity, to a common political system, or, finally, to an intersection of all of these. Inspired by the wealth of such scenarios, scientific research was undertaken in twelve Iberian-American cities and one in Spain, namely: Bogotá, Santiago, Montevideo, Quito, Mexico City, Caracas, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Lima, La Paz, Panama City, Asunción and Barcelona.

As he wished to track contemporary Latin-American urban culture and also to draw up a model for comparative assessment between cities and sub-cultures, the general coordinator of this survey, Armando Silva, took up the investigation method he put forward in his book Imaginarios urbanos (Urban Imaginaries from Latin America) (Tercer Mundo Editores, 1998). This consists of gathering primary data through investigations by direct observation and distinct recognition by the citizens, based on visual, olfactory, auditory and taste-bud recall of these cities. Efforts were concentrated on obtaining results that could both inform and make society more aware with regard to cultural problematics, which have become increasingly complex as the world becomes more urbanized.

In order to carry out this investigation co-terminously, Armando Silva had the support of co-partners in all the countries involved, as partnerships were established with universities and entities in the cities referred to, and some regional coordinators selected. Thus, a satisfactory survey sample was developed to be applied in all the urban centers investigated, yet liable to being adapted to suit particular expressiveness. As a result of this survey, a model of categories of ‘citizen perception’ was built up. The data gathered has been organized into three main parts (‘The City’, ‘The Citizens’ and ‘The Others’), based on semiotic-cognitive studies and on the psychoanalysis of collective wishes. All cities investigated follow this same analytical structural model and, in almost all cases, such studies resulted in the publication of books, which form parts of a collection. Bogotá, as the headquarters of this great social inter-cities investigation, is the theme of Bogotá Imaginada (Editorial Tauros, 2003) and the focus of this review.

Bogotá Imaginada is divided into four parts, of which the first introduces us to the questions referred to in the social investigation of the thirteen thematic cities and discusses the methodology employed for the research on the urban cultures. The three parts that follow deal with the structure mentioned above: ‘The City’, ‘The Citizens’ and ‘The Others’.

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The chapter on *The city* deals with the references to the city in the physical and historical senses; divided into three sections, it captures the physical qualities of Bogotá, the qualifications attributed to it and the recognition of its urban settings, so as then to reveal the qualities that identify it. The first section *Qualities: wounded Bogotá* deals with the social physiognomy of the city, translated into symbols of the senses that, according to the citizens, represent it, convert it into a sensorial image, and make it distinct and unique. Among Bogotá’s qualities, the most prominent one, according to the author, and the one which “survives like a great wound”, is the image of violence, the murder-rate, and drug trafficking. Nevertheless, other images are also associated with it, such as the Bogotá of cycleways and new public spaces, the pride and joy of Bogotans. The section *Qualifications: aesthetic Bogotá* aims to find values with a collective meaning on a given aspect, by investigating the way Bogotá is sensed by the citizens when they think about their environment. So the author launches the question: “how do Bogotans recognize their city when defining distinct aspects of their daily life?”, the results of which denote a predominantly non-satisfactory, insecure and disordered quality of life. The section *Sceneries: challenging Bogotá* deals with the city as the stage where civic events happen, or, according to Silva, “the city as the site where events and people interact”. In it, the men and women of Bogota project themselves as family people meeting at public spaces, but who consider the home, first and foremost, as the place of honor to receive visitors. The settings which exude bad smells are associated with those which present the greatest danger, while those with fragrant smells are associated with pleasant places for recreation, such as the Simón Bolívar Park.

The second chapter, entitled “The Citizens”, deals with the creators of social reality, and those who construct urban cultures. A look at this is taken from three perspectives: the times, leaving marks and routines. Armando Silva demonstrates that the city, under this point of view, “is converted into an aesthetical space which is the stuff of citizenship”, by going beyond the physical space built by architects, and establishing itself as the way of living, feeling and being of the citizens. In the section *Times: temperamental Bogotans*, time is changed into a tool that makes citizen action possible and allows us to identify some characteristics of those citizens. Bogotans have a feel for time under different headings: times to share with the family, to cultivate passions, to be alone and at peace with themselves, and to be on the move. The section *Marks: virtual Bogotans* deals with the way Bogotans leave their mark on their city and are marked by it. Bogotá is ranked as a chaotic, noisy city and one with bewildered, stressed and aggressive citizens. Bogotans are classified under five ways of leaving marks - the ones they most readily acknowledge: technological, media-hungry, illusory, religious and body-fixated. The section *Routines: public Bogotans* tackles systematically repeated citizen actions that are a mark of a collective style or form, which characterize everyday life symbolically. The routines are organized into three dimensions: simple acts of personal acceptance, such as living as a couple or as a family; the construction of emblems from people’s collective actions, such as watching a soccer game or going to a concert in groups, or climbing the Monserrat hill; and the creation of rites, when the citizen act is imbued with values that express some strong affective or spiritual charge.

In the third and last chapter, *The Others*, the main object is to tackle the image that Bogotans construct out of the other twelve cities studied. The author has grouped them under categories established according to the evocative answers Bogotans associated with each city. Three groupings have been created in this way: *Near cities*, *Distant cities* and *Desired cities*. *Near cities* are those most cited by Bogotans when asked “Which cities show some affinities with Bogotá?”. Caracas is seen by Bogotans as a sister city, with whom there can be most dialog, and with which it is possible to identify themselves. Apart from its
physical attributes, given that Caracas is a Caribbean city, at sea level, and with tropical characteristics, in contrast to alpine and cold Bogotá, the judgment that they are alike deals essentially with how they are constructed culturally, by achieving their identity through their beautiful women, the ‘miss’ beauty contestants, the soap operas, petroleum, Hugo Chávez and Simón Bolívar. Other cities with which Bogotans identify themselves are Mexico City, on account of its public spaces; Lima, referred to mainly by Bogota women; and Quito, imagined by Bogotans to be the “Bogotá of 60 years ago”. ‘Distant cities’ are those seen as remote, or those in which Bogotans do not recognize themselves. When asked about their affinity to La Paz, Asunción, Panama City and Montevideo, Bogotans had very little to say.

The ‘Desired cities’ are those Bogotans admire for their qualities. These are aspiring emotions; ones which are present in contemporary Bogotá, a city that, for example, craves the same public spaces as Buenos Aires, the order of Santiago, the range of entertainment of São Paulo, or the cosmopolitanism of Barcelona. In the Bogotan imaginary, Buenos Aires is seen as a city of monuments and beautiful architecture, of handsome but petulant men; São Paulo is imagined by Bogotans to be a gigantic city, that is a mixture of the industrial, business deals, and Carnival, thus getting confused with Rio de Janeiro, when Bogotans associate São Paulo with the image of sensual, charming and desirable women; Santiago is one of the cities best-known by Bogotans, given that only 4% of Bogotans reported that they had heard nothing about it, and bears the image of an ordered and well-developed city with a high quality education system; Barcelona is seen as a city distinct from Latin-American ones, and evokes a country of another continent. What Bogotans see in Barcelona is bullfighting, Gaudí, the Ramblas, evoking, according to the author, a tourist image of that place and desiring this quality for themselves. In the concluding section ‘I see my mirror in the others’, Armando Silva analyzes the comparative results between Bogotá and the other twelve cities, and comments: “when a city casts a comparative glance at another city, inevitably it looks at itself”.

This book, in sum, deals in a very particular way with the multiplicity of images the city evokes in the form of an urban imaginary in which the meaning of the urban condition in distinct but near cities is spelled out, be it through language, history or geography, while the meaning of ‘being urban’ unhooks itself from the already worn-out and homogenizing tradition that, until now, has always adopted the idea of the ‘culture of a continent’. This is a solid contribution to the management of public policies, with an attentive look at the cultural and imaginary aspects of the cities, the reason why places are distinct and have a sense of being pertinent.