

## Sao Paulo: a lesson in letterpress      REVISE 2.12.08

by Catherine Dixon

*The New York Times* travel guide to São Paulo describes the city as being possibly, ‘the ugliest, most dangerous city you’ll ever love’. While those from the city – Paulistas as they are known – may take issue with their city being identified in such terms, there is no doubting that you can fall for SP in spite of a great many things, not least its almost overwhelming size. São Paulo ranks highly as one of the largest cities in the world with some 17 million people spread over 3000 square miles. The aerial views afforded from the plane on landing certainly revealed no perceptible edges beyond the seemingly endless horizon of high-rise blocks. And then there is the traffic. Commercial export and industrial manufacture have historically brought great wealth to the city. Yet a lack of adequate planning for the resultant civic growth now sees a fast-living city crippled daily by a limited public transport system and overloaded road network.

Sitting in one of the inevitable traffic jams with plentiful chances to contemplate the slowly passing streetscapes one can begin however to discern something of the very particular visual character of this most urban of metropoli. Particularly striking is the absence of any outdoor advertising – the result of a radical initiative brought forward in 2007 by the city mayor Gilberto Kassab in an attempt to combat pollution. His ‘Cidade Limpa’ or Clean City Law targeted visual pollution in the city and enforced a ban on billboards, neon signs and advertising on public transport.[1] Eerily the hoarding structures themselves remain, either empty, simply framing the city itself, or since filled-in with the work of one of the many much-lauded graffiti artists the city is famous for.[2]

I was visiting São Paulo to speak at a design conference. Yet, such is the nature of the Brazilian people to share that my typographic experience of the city was to broaden considerably from the many theoretical conference discussions to design practice itself. I was taken to visit a letterpress workshop, the Oficina Tipográfica São Paulo, which, it quickly became clear, represented something of a hub for a wider reassessment of not only letterpress but typographic teaching more generally. Oficina Tipográfica

was set up in only 2004. Very much a late-starter in letterpress terms, it is an organisation with enough energy to more than make up for lost time. Driven forward by a vision for a reconsideration of design practice for the future, OTSP is directed towards the pursuit of as yet unimaginable creative possibilities resulting from a reconnection of practice and production processes. The use of letterpress at the Oficina Tipográfica then is no nostalgia-fest. The old typographic composition systems and their visual languages are explored not simply for the purposes of the rehabilitation of these valuable resources. Rather past practice is relived as a way of reinvigorating current ideas and advancing conceptual skills.

OTSP operates as both a digital and an analogue (letterpress) design space, in which the worlds of contemporary graphics and print are connected – not least through the location of OTSP within the Escola SENAI de Artes Gráficas Theobaldo De Nigris, a leading graphic arts school in Latin America specialising in printing technology. Letterpress at SENAI (National Service of Industrial Learning) had increasingly become irrelevant within teaching programmes aimed at delivering future industrial print workers. The arrival of OTSP brought with it not only new equipment but new meaning to the redundant machinery still at SENAI when the typographic collections of the two organisations were merged. OTSP remains however an independent agency, free of the politics driving the industry-led SENAI.

The Oficina Tipográfica agenda is then self-determined and simple, dedicated to the activities of teaching and design experimentation. Such an emphasis is unsurprising given the interests of the OTSP founders, Claudio Ferlauto, Marcos Mello and Claudio Rocha. Ferlauto (b.1944) is a well-published author on typography, who both teaches and runs a design/architecture studio in SP. Mello (b. 1964) combines design with teaching in an academic training of some calibre – he holds both a BA and Masters degree in each field. He is also a design practitioner and a Professor in design at the Universidade Anhembi Morumbi in SP. Rocha (b. 1957) is a graphic designer, type designer, author of several popular books on typography and publisher of *Tupigrafia*, the first magazine dedicated to typography and calligraphy in Brazil. Ferlauto, Mello and Rocha shared a vision for setting up OTSP, though in practice it is Mello alone who now fronts the organisation with Ferlauto concentrating on his design and teaching work and Rocha having since moved with

his family to work in Italy.

The teaching ambitions of OTSP are fulfilled through a combination of courses, collaborations and contracted services. Three courses in total are offered, two in letterpress and one in book-binding. And though these courses are only very short – one or two days maximum – they are rich in learning opportunities. The first letterpress course serves as a basic grounding in hand-composition, with the purpose of introducing students to a way of working creatively with typography in spite of the physical constraints of metal type. The creative thinking skills learned are intended to be transferable, for use by students once back in their more familiar, and typically digital, design contexts. Students also leave with a set of beautifully printed business cards they have helped to design and produce, their email addresses set as slugs from the Linotype machine. On completion of this course students are eligible to enrol on the second. Having already grasped the basics of hand-setting, they are encouraged to focus more on the expressive possibilities of typographic language in the design and production of their own letterpress poster.

The courses are run for groups of between ten and fifteen people on Saturdays, allowing for maximum accessibility especially for the many professional designers who attend alongside the large numbers of students.

Several senior designers I met in SP proudly showed off the business cards they had made on the OTSP level one letterpress course. Besides the courses OTSP is involved in hands-on design work of its own. While I was there a young couple came in excitedly to collect their wedding stationery, which had been design-managed and printed by Mello. Work is also undertaken in developing portfolios and other editorial projects. *Beyond the letter* is the first of their experimental portfolios. Published in 2007 this set of twenty or so prints (12 3/4 x 18 3/4 ins) is described as an exploration of the plasticity and the rigidity of wood and metal type, through which the content (idea) is purposefully subordinated to form (letters and ornaments) instead of the more traditional and opposite approach. And *Tupigrafia* magazine, still co-edited by Rocha, is now published by OTSP.

And then there is what Mello refers to as their ‘rice and beans work’, the more mundane print and finishing jobs, which come their way through

SENAI or other offices and outside agencies. But Mello is not complacent about the need for such work and the connections it affords to the wider print and design communities. Collaborations are actively sought. OTSP makes its equipment available for collaborative graphic work with other NGOs. It is such connections and collaborations which fuel dialogue. And the more opportunities for dialogue the further the design agenda of OTSP can be disseminated.

My Saturday morning visit to Oficina Tipográfica was set up by Henrique Nardi – a designer from SP and friend of Mello, who also runs a typographic teaching project, Tipocracia, with transformative ambitions for design of his own.<sup>[3]</sup> We had only been introduced a couple of days previously but, recognising a fellow enthusiast, Nardi had generously arranged that I should share something of the OTSP experience during my time in the city. Distance in an unfamiliar city is difficult to measure, with the scale and traffic of São Paulo further confusing one's sense of location. I quickly learned that if a Paulista describes something in terms of being just around the corner, what they really mean is that you can drive there in half an hour. The SENAI campus in which OTSP is embedded is some way from the central parts of town – beyond the borders of my tourist map – to the west of the city in a former industrial area currently in the process of regeneration.

A weekend quiet pervaded the low and fairly nondescript school buildings as we drove in and parked. It was a warm day. For all my tropical expectations of São Paulo, the weather had actually been cooler than average. So it was nice to be out of the car and strolling along sequences of vast airy corridors. The stillness outside had been misleading. While by no means at capacity, teaching was very much in evidence inside. We passed several classes in progress with small clusters of students being directed to peer at the various functions of huge and clattering litho presses set out in rows in the cavernous printing halls. In contrast to these open noisy spaces the Oficina Tipográfica workshop is much smaller and, with the sounds of the SENAI presses muffled by partition walls, to enter is to step into an altogether calmer world. Housed within just one room – modern, light (albeit mostly artificial) and clean – OTSP is home to two Minerva presses (the popular

name of a press from the Brazilian manufacturer Catu), two Heidelberg platen presses (called *leque* in Portuguese after the particular fan movement of these presses), one manual guillotine, the makings of a pantograph with which to start making wood letters, and around 300 drawers and cases of wood and metal type. One of the first things you see is a large OTSP sign hanging prominently along one of the long workshop walls – as if to confirm you are in very different territory.

I was made to feel welcome but, to my great relief, not in any kind of over-fussy or stifling way. Mello was there working with some students. So following a warm greeting he needed to get on. With the freedom and sense of ease enough to be able to explore on my own terms I could begin to rummage around the cabinets of as yet unsorted wood type, and find my bearings among the collections.

The Linotype machines at OTSP are run by a retired Linotype operator, Mr Callegari, known simply by his nickname JacarÈ, ‘the alligator’. JacarÈ comes in once or twice a month to demonstrate the hot-metal technology to the students on the letterpress courses. It was not one of his usual weeks to be there but Mello had invited him knowing of my visit. Mello suggested that Nardi and I write half a dozen or so lines of text, a kind of loose poem, which JacarÈ would then set for us on the Linotype. Of course, the first thing that happens when anyone asks you to write text on the spot is that your mind goes blank. My appalling Portuguese pronunciation had though become something of a feature of my time in SP. And there were certain souvenir phrases I had collected that I was keen to remember. Given that I couldn’t make myself understood when saying them a visual record was a great idea. These phrases became the focus for a playful and rhythmical layout to be set justified with bold text incorporated into our mark up as a way of both increasing visual texture and more fully exploring the possibilities of Linotype setting.

As he sat down to begin keying in our text JacarÈ seemed utterly at home with an audience, patiently withstanding being photographed and questioned throughout. Having returned home and found online photographs and even film footage of him on YouTube, I now realise how used to it he must be. His good humour reflected more than simple politeness

on his part. Jacarè clearly took great pride in his trade of fifty years, and found deep satisfaction in other people's interest in the Linotype process. Linotype machines only went out of final service in the São Paulo newspaper industry in 1990, and in small presses are still in use across Brazil. Out-of-service Linotypes are when possible salvaged and stripped for parts that can be reused to keep still operational machines functioning.

Just how they functioned was a matter of some fascination for me, as I attempted to follow the process leading up to casting of the new line of text dispatched with such gusto. So very different from my memory of the marching motion of the Monotype I had seen in action at House of Naylor printers in Clerkenwell back in the mid-1990s. I learned though to startling effect that such curiosity is not without its perils. Peering over the machine trying to get a clearer view of the casting, a blast of heat just past the end of my nose served as a reminder of just how dangerous these machines can be. I was fine. The machine was a mess. Unbeknown to us when we had marked up the text, justified setting can be problematic on the Linotype, with the spaces having a tendency to stick. When that happens there is nothing to stop the hot metal being shot upwards out of the machine. But because the process went wrong I learned so much more about the operation of the machine. Clearing up and starting again was though plainly tiresome, and then the same thing happened again. But there was no persuading Jacarè to abandon the justification and he persisted until finally the signal came that the lines were set. Nardi worked on spacing with Mello while I set a simple credit in an exotic upright metal script type that had caught my eye earlier on. And so to press, where Mello's considerable skill very quickly became apparent, even in the printing of such a simple job.

One of the interesting things about travel can be the observation of local idiosyncrasies. Differences in printing terminology kept us occupied for some while. In Brazil, for example, there is no equivalent to the term 'slug'. Cast text from a Linotype is simply referred to in terms of 'lines'. Encouragement at the stone to not 'pie' the text when testing a newly locked up forme was in SP a request 'not to make it rain', and as the loose type moved a little too dramatically, 'not to make a thunderstorm'. Sometimes when travelling, the identification of those things common

with home can be just as informative. When Mello was working with Nardi and I, the students printing their poster designs were helped by a much older printer, Mr PÈrsio. Mello anticipates the surprise of the unexpected print, happy to allow space for mistakes in a process, while PÈrsio favoured a more conservative approach. He certainly had some views on the bravery of typographic layout encouraged by Mello in his students, and was utterly bemused by their aggressive word breaks and emphatic changes in scale. When I explained that the printers at my college were similarly bemused by student work, everyone roared with laughter in recognition of the fact that some things are clearly the same the world over.

The revival of interest in letterpress in Brazil is, of course, not confined to the Oficina Tipogr·fica alone. It is difficult though to summarise the wider context for letterpress use in a country the size of Brazil. There are over 140 design courses in SP state alone. However, the select letterpress projects I am aware of in Brazil do seem indicative of a broader national trend towards re-examination of this print technology. Also in S„o Paulo, the commercially sponsored design school of SENAC (National Commercial Training Service) has installed letterpress at the instigation of Priscila Farias, a Brazilian academic who has published in the field of type design and typography. Back in 2000 she convinced the head of the undergraduate programme that having a knowledge of traditional typography and printing processes was critical for a quality training in graphic design, and that the best way of achieving that, with letterpress disappearing from commercial printing facilities, would be to have a typography workshop in their own building. A small local printer was moving exclusively to offset printing and sold SENAC their letterpress material. The lack of a designated technician means however that the SENAC Workshop is only open when trained staff are available.

Another fully operating letterpress workshop is housed within the School of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of S„o Paulo. The School has its own printing facility known as LPG (Graphic Production Laboratory), which, while now operating mostly with offset, has maintained letterpress for teaching and research purposes. And as other printing facilities from other schools and departments throughout the university

have since been dismantled, so additional types and equipment have been added to the basic collection. Unlike SENAC the LPG is well staffed. Instead their main challenge is the organisation of material from such a wide range of sources, much of it inadequately labelled. A similar organisational challenge has fuelled a research project in the Northeast state of Pernambuco where letterpress at the Editora UFPE, the state university press, is also being conserved and catalogued.

In part, the recommitment to letterpress in Brazil, especially in relation to education, can be seen as a result of the influence of an artisan publisher founded in 1954 known as *O gr·fico amador* (The amateur printer).[4] Four original members, Aloísio Magalhães, Gastão de Holanda, José Laurínio de Melo and Orlando de Costa Ferreira were committed to the idea of overseeing all aspects of the art of the book, not least as their collective name *Os m,os sujas* (The dirty hands) suggests the actual printing of their books themselves. While *O gr·fico amador* was only short-lived as a publishing venture, folding in 1961, its period of activity is now recognised as one of great design invention, largely attributable to the opportunity the designers had to experiment with type and print. This is certainly true of Aloísio Magalhães, who, following the closure of *O gr·fico amador*, set up his own design studio and helped with the development of Brazil's first graduate design course at the newly founded design school (ESDI) in Rio. And so the gr·fico amador ideal of engaging with design through production can be seen to have filtered its way from the avant-garde, at least in some measure, into more mainstream educational approaches. Now many from that first generation of Brazilian design graduates are themselves in key positions within education and can bring such influences and design values to bear in the resource decisions they in turn make.

The revival of interest in letterpress in Brazil is though part of a well-documented wider phenomenon involving a re-engagement with the hand-made within design internationally. As some of the Brazilian letterpress projects show, such a re-engagement is the result of a pragmatic re-evaluation of collections from expensive nuisance to irreplaceable asset. But it is also the result of a shift in thinking by a younger generation of design practitioners for whom letterpress is exciting and new

compared to more familiar and, at times, uncertain digital technologies.

Juliet Shen writes,

The enthusiasm for letterpress printing among designers these days stems at least in part from a rediscovery of the pleasure of working with one's hands to create an object that bears all the indelible traces of its making. It is no coincidence that the rise in popularity of letterpress classes at the School of Visual Concepts (SVC) in Seattle came immediately on the heels of the local dot-com bust in 2002. Web design classes emptied out, and the letterpress classes filled up. This was not due to a belief in the lucrative benefits of a career in letterpress printing; it had something to do with satisfying the soul.<sup>[5]</sup>

At a recent conference focussing on letterpress at St Bride Library in London it became clear that this technology was far from obsolete in the minds of many present, especially the young. But what was perhaps most interesting about the day was hearing from those such as Alex Cooper and Rose Gridneff of the Experimental Letterpress Workshop in London, who viewed letterpress not simply as a means to an end in itself, but, as at the Oficina Tipogr·fica, as a means of reinvigorating other fields. To have visited OTSP was then a first step in beginning to piece together a more global perspective on letterpress as it is used now. The benefits of hand-setting type to a broader design education is a philosophy I now find I share with more people than I had previously realised, though frustratingly one I still have to work hard (with other teaching colleagues) to protect. Meeting like-minded people as at the Oficina Tipogr·fica is always enjoyable. But with known resource battles ahead what I learned from my time at OTSP may yet prove vital in strengthening that ongoing protection of my own letterpress teaching resources.

## NOTES

1. The Clean City Law initiative of the SP Municipal was well received both in SP itself and internationally. It was nominated and exhibited as one of the Designs of the Year in recognition of outstanding work from 2007 at London's Design Museum. On show were a remarkable

series of photographs made by the artist Tony de Marco documenting the changes to the cityscape since the introduction of the law.

2. The cultural mix reflected in the city's populace has brought an originality to the visual language of São Paulo graffiti, which is celebrated (especially within graphic design) worldwide – from the rune-like early forms of the calligraphic tags known as 'pichação' (see *Eye* no.58, 2005) to the more intensely illustrative work of The Twins (Os Gêmeos), a renowned pair of graffiti-artist brothers.

3. Tipocracia is an educational project established in 2003 with the aim of disseminating a broader awareness of typographic culture throughout Brazil via lectures and workshops directed at both professionals and students alike.

4. Guilherme Cunha Lima, *O gráfico amador, as origens da moderna tipografia brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1997 (see also *O gráfico amador : the roots of modern Brazilian typography*, PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1993).

5. Juliet Shen, *Resurrection of a Reliance*, Seattle (USA): Shen / School of Visual Concepts, 2007.

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*This writing owes much to the help of Henrique Nardi. My thanks also to Priscila Farias and Marcos Mello.*