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The Best Place

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Abstract (Article Summary)

An inviting metropolis of 1.6 million, the city of Curitiba strives to avoid social, economic, and service-sector problems that plague Brazil's other urban centers. Here, Holston features Brazil's urban paradise, Curitiba, including the success of their surface transportation system, innovative public programs, and its extensive inventory of parks and protective areas.

Full Text (2980 words)

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[Headnote]

Curitiba, Barazils's Urban Paradise

The small information booth is festooned with red flags, T-shirts sporting the bearded face of Latin American revolutionary hero Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and stacks of left-leaning literature. The eye-catching collection of symbols of the international socialist movement wouldn't be out of place in Paris, Rome, San Francisco, or dozens of other cities around the world. They might even attract a crowd of students, sympathizers, and the curious. But here, the disheveled volunteer purveying the mounds of tracts, pins, and other leftwing paraphernalia merits nary a passing glance, despite a steady flow of local residents sauntering past on the mosaic tile, pedestrian-only boulevard.

It's easy to understand why Curitiba (pronounced "Koo ree CHEE bah"), the capital of the state of Parana in southern Brazil, might be a tough place to sell a standard version of leftist philosophy. For nearly half a century, the city has nurtured an envious reputation as a kind of provincial urban paradise. Nestled in the coffee-growing plantations of Brazil's most European-influenced region, this wellscrubbed, inviting metropolis of 1.6 million appears unaffected by the pollution, crime, poverty, and overcrowding that plague such urban centers as Sao Paulo, Recife, Belo Horizonte, and Rio de Janeiro.

Despite that, the Workers Party, a major political player in the country's big industrial cities (its leader, Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Suva, was elected Brazil's president in 2002), hasn't given up on making inroads in Curitiba. That's why a young Canadian expatriate from Toronto who traveled to Brazil over a decade ago with revolutionary zeal in his heart is manning the party's stand this sunny spring afternoon.

"Don't believe what you hear about Curitiba being such a paradise," he cautions me, begging to speak in Portuguese, claiming that his long tenure in Brazil has dulled his ability to communicate in his native English. "There's a lot of injustice here and police brutality. It's not as perfect as they claim. That's why the Workers Party is here-to get out our message about how to achieve more opportunity and justice for workers and other marginalized citizens."

Our conversation catches the ear of a short, barrel-chested man in his early sixties who brusquely approaches to weigh in with his views. He's far from an apologist for the status quo. Three decades ear lier, he'd been part of an urban, left-wing underground movement that waged a losing battle against the powerful military government during the most repressive years of Brazil's military dictatorship, which ruled the country between 1962 and 1985. he paid a high price for his revolutionary activities when he was captured, imprisoned, and tortured.

"Don't tell me what's right or wrong about Brazil," he chides the Workers Party volunteer. "I'd be the first to speak out if the city government weren't doing the right thing here, but it's doing a good job. For average people, this is the best place in Brazil."

Putting people first

In the past three decades, through a locally evolved brand of urban planning that emphasizes such quality-of-life values as environmental protection, social programs, and economic development schemes, Curitiba has attracted international attention-and envy-as an urban center where the needs of people of all economic classes come first.

For over two decades, the municipal government has earned world recognition for its efforts to create a more hospitable environment for its citizens. Social, cultural, and educational programs have dramatically improved the life of the average Curitibaano. Examples include keeping an excessive number of vehicles off the road by encouraging residents to take the bus, walk, or ride bicycles and maintaining an extensive system of parks and greenbelts.

This bustling urban expanse-the greater metropolitan region, which includes twenty-four surrounding cities, claims a population of almost 2.5 million-has become the envy of much of the developing world and many industrialized cities in North America, Europe, and Asia. Although it suggests a model for how to make city life less burdensome for the masses, Curitiba remains somewhat of an enigma in Brazil. "I'm not even sure if it's a Brazilian city," jokes a resident of notoriously chaotic Rio de Janeiro, where crime, poverty, and pollution share the exotic tropical setting with opulent excesses and reinforce the stereotypes of disparity associated with Latin American countries.

Curitiba, on the other hand, radiates egalitarian values at every turn, from the architectural character of its ethnic neighborhoods to the well-groomed visages and courteous manner of its citizens. The positive civic spirit is even reflected in the look and bearing of police officers on street patrol. Elsewhere in Brazil, state and municipal police forces often resemble an occupying military force. "Tourists tell us our uniforms remind them of the Canadian Mounties," an officer on a downtown street tells me with a smile. "We appreciate the comparison." Brazilians elsewhere may look at their southern cousins as an aberration from the national norm, but officeholders in other cities are increasingly seeking to replicate Curitiba's remarkable success.

History of urban planning

Urban planning has a long history in Brazil and has produced both success stories and monumental failures. When the country's visionary young architects and urban planners began designing the futuristic federal capital of Brasilia in the mid-1950s, they brought revolutionary concepts to the daunting project. Lucio Costa, the new city's master designer, and such noted collaborators as architect Oscar Niemeyer brazenly cut against the grain of social mores that had dictated the physical shape of Brazil's cities and the social character of its citizens since colonization by the Portuguese began in the early 1500s. The goal was to lure Brazilians away from the comfort of their coastal enclaves and into the nation's vast and undeveloped interior. The planners believed that the change of scenery would produce the higher level of efficiency needed to propel Brazil into the ranks of the world's leading developed countries. They were sadly mistaken.

Brasilia, a model of urban organization and home to stunning architectural achievements, was born a city without a soul. Its look-alike blocks of apartment complexes and arrow-straight transportation arteries denied residents the familiarity of plazas, street corners, and other public spaces. Historically, such sites have played an important role in the social and cultural life of a people who crave the social interaction that comes from hanging out in *na esquina* (literally, "on the street corner").

Modern urban planning techniques have been part of Curitiba's civic persona since the 1940s. It wasn't until 1971, however, that a master plan detailing transportation, land use, and economic and cultural imperatives began to be enacted. The function of public spaces in making city life more pleasurable was recognized in the early 1970s, when Mayor Jaime Lerner (the son of a Polish immigrant, Lerner today serves as governor of Parana) saw the specter of unorganized growth and streets choked with polluting traffic. he took steps to put the city on a different path.

An architect who possesses a passion for urban planning, Lerner began by creating pedestrian-only zones in the city's charming center, luring citizens back to enjoy leisurely strolls along streets accented by colonial-era structures, flower markets, and myriad other attractions. The centerpiece of the scheme is the Rua das Flores, or Flower Street. Many of the city's most important *pracas* (squares), the cathedral, university, opera house, and an endless variety of shops and cafes are on the street or nearby. The scheme won overwhelming favor with locals and became a model for the pedestrian-friendly areas that are today common in Rio, Salvador, and Belo Horizonte.

Lerner was just getting started. He wisely chose not to invest in a costly subway (three Brazilian cities-Rio, Sao Paulo, and Porto Alegre-have subterranean train systems). he opted instead to overhaul the bus system to achieve the same results at far less expense. Today, Curitiba's bus system, with three specialized lines, one of which essentially functions as a surface subway, is a model of efficiency that has yet to be duplicated anywhere in the world. (Former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, on a visit to Curitiba in the late 1990s, called the bus system "big subway cars on tires" and lamented the fact that LA's urban transportation system lagged so far behind.)

One of the system's most innovative features, designed by the mayor himself, involves the use of large Plexiglas and metal tubes that serve as loading and disembarking stations for commuters on the heavily used express line. Passengers enter the tube, pay their fare, and wait a minute or two until the next 270-passenger, biarticulated bus arrives. Receiving new passengers and disembarking others takes a fraction of the time consumed by ordinary city bus operations in the United States and elsewhere. Ensuring that the system moves at a quick pace keeps riders happy and gets them to work, school, or play inexpensively and on time.

The success of the surface transportation system has taken thousands of personal vehicles off the street, reducing congestion and dramatically cutting air pollution. City planners cite an impressive list of statistics to prove just how important the bus system has been to the city: the lowest vehicle accident rate in the country; gasoline use that's about a third less per car than in other Brazilian cities; and daily use by virtually every city resident-a rate that has increased fivefold in just two decades. Even cabdrivers, who have fewer fares as a result, don't seem to mind. "I ride the bus myself," a cabbie readily admits as he drives me to city hall. In Curitiba, cars aren't a necessity, just one of a number of transportation options.

Innovative public programs

One of Curitiba's nicknames is "the Social Capital." A growing number of projects underscore the city's fundamental philosophy: serving the needs of its citizens through carefully considered programs that provide benefits on many levels.

At first glance, the fazenda looks like many other small, specialized farms that dot the rolling landscape of Brazil's fertile southern states. But this agricultural operation is different. At Fazenda da Solidaridade (Solidarity Farm), the workers wielding the hoes and rakes aren't seasoned countryfolk working to make a living off the land. They are drug addicts and alcoholics from the city who've surrendered themselves to this grueling routine for a chance at turning around their lives. From the soil they till to the finished products that travel through the farm's gate to consumers in Curitiba, every detail of this unique operation has a well-thought-out purpose.

The 43-acre farm is located just a few miles from the city's southern outskirts beyond a ring of car factories and other industries. About a dozen medicinal plants are cultivated, including chamomile, babosa (Aloe vera), and carqueja (*Baccharis tirnera*). They are processed into a variety of herbal teas, syrups, poultices, and other products destined for cityrun cooperative health food stores. "To cure maladies of the body and soul" is how Verde Saude (Green Health), the project that oversees the operation, describes its mission. A program of the Municipal Secretariat of Agriculture and Provisions (known by its Portuguese acronym SMAB), Verde Saude utilizes the farm to produce maximum benefits for the city's residents.

The workers voluntarily enter the program for a term of up to nine months; in exchange for their labor, they receive counseling, medical care, job training, and a dose of healthy country living to get them back on their feet. Some of the products they and a small staff of specialized technicians turn out are distributed free of charge, among them, the 240,000 packets of herbal tea produced annually. More artistic creations, such as tapestries created from hemp and a variety of paper products and decorative notebook covers made from sugarcane and the leaves of palm, banana, and maize plants, are for sale at five boutiques in the city-some of them located at principal tourist sites.

Verde Saude is one of a long list of projects that have made Curitiba the envy of progressive urban planners around the world. Cambio Verde (Green Exchange) is a program in which residents exchange the trash they've collected for surplus vegetables and fruit. Citizens who live on a shoestring scour the streets for discarded items and are given a kilo of food for every four kilos of refuse they turn in. The trash is then sent to recycling centers.

Another recently inaugurated program brings a variety of city administrative functions, including paying utility bills and taxes, applying for licenses, and obtaining other official papers, closer to where most people live. Conveniently located at sites in outlying barrios, the so-called Rua da Cidadania (Citizen's Street) alleviates the need to travel to the city center for routine services, easing the strain on the transportation system and making daily life just a bit easier.

One of the most promising new initiatives is an incubator service for budding entrepreneurs. The city makes available small industrial sites and startup support through a project titled Linhao do Emprego (Employment Line). As with all other services, this program was developed to take advantage of the existing bus transportation network and other projects.

It's working exceedingly well for Maria Sizue and Gilmara Albuquerque, who have partnered to start a small candle factory. The women are enthused about their chances for success once the start-up phase is over and they've moved on to the unsubsidized and competitive open marketplace. In adjoining workshops at this stop on the Linhao, employees are busy fabricating such products as disposable diapers and backpacks for students. In another shop, Manuel Figueredo, an engineer, proudly shows off custom-made equipment he's designed for manufacturers who need specialized components for assembly line operations. As Figueredo's array of gleaming, high-tech prototypes attests, his is a first-class operation. But it likely wouldn't have gotten off the ground without the city's assistance.

The special needs of children get the same kind of well-conceived attention. Day-care centers for working mothers focus on nutrition, art, physical training, and an appreciation for the environment; kids plant and maintain little gardens at the sites. Old buses have even been equipped to provide mobile day-care services for children. Throughout the city, forty-five so-called Lighthouses of Knowledge, neighborhood libraries topped by a beacon, are open well into the evening. Each houses over five thousand books. A city brochure boasts that they provide "a poetic allusion to the light of knowledge and safety."

A model for the world

Our parks are like beaches for other Brazilian cities," comments Celia Hosoume. Indeed, Curitiba's extensive inventory of parks and protected areas more than lives up to the city's reputation as Brazil's ecological capital. Its location on an inland plateau, some four hours by road or rail from the Atlantic coast, makes park visits especially appealing. Curitiba has responded by providing its residents some 22 million square meters of green space—more than three times the amount recommended for urban dwellers by the World Health Organization. The parks fill aesthetic, recreational, and environmental needs. For instance, an estimated 27 percent of all visits to parks are made by cyclists, while the vast green zones also serve important flood control and water supply purposes. One of the city's most attractive parks, Tangua, occupies space that once served as an industrial waste dump.

Hosoume is the director of public relations for popular Mayor Cassio Taniguchi, and, like her boss, is a member of Curitiba's small but influential Japanese community. Taniguchi served as minister of planning during Lerner's several terms as mayor and is the first Japanese-Brazilian to be elected mayor of a Brazilian city. The contributions of their ancestors and those of Portuguese, Polish, Ukrainian, Italian, German, and Arab origin are commemorated in monuments to the immigrant communities that dot the city's landscape.

However laudable, Curitiba's triumphs have come at a price: The city's successful efforts to create a livable urban environment with myriad social programs and opportunities for economic advancement have been well publicized throughout Brazil. In recent years, the positive buzz has produced a steady influx of new residents from throughout the country, drawn by the promise of public services that don't exist to this degree elsewhere. During the 1990s, the city grew from the tenth to the seventh most populous metropolitan area in Brazil, and it continues to expand rapidly.

With that growth has come increasing crime and other social problems. Carla Pimenta is an immigrant from Portugal who came to Curitiba with her mother and father to help manage the aging but elegant Eduardo VII hotel on the city's historic Praca Tiradentes. She loves the charm of the downtown district but recognizes increasing dangers: Her father was recently mugged and robbed just two blocks from the hotel. Not far away, drugaddicted prostitutes prowl the leafy paths of the city zoo in broad daylight, looking for customers to support their habit.

Curitiba's civic planners consider their next move, knowing full well that with every new program they bring online, even more of their fellow Brazilians may decide to move to this inviting city. It's a risk, however, that officials like Luiz Hayakawa, president of the Municipal Planning Institute, are willing to take. Hunched over a map of the city, he thoughtfully discusses fine-tuning plans to accommodate Curitiba's growth and the needs of its citizens for decades to come. The institute's headquarters is a two-story wood-frame house built nearly a century ago by German immigrants. The original furniture still fills the home's burnished interior. In the garden, 100-year-old castanheiras trees, protected by law from being cut, provide shade. The structure and its grounds are a kind of living metaphor for Curitiba, underscoring the city's deep respect for people, culture, and the environment. Being here and watching Hayakawa at work leaves little doubt that Curitiba's future is in good hands.

[Author Affiliation]

Mark Holston writes about Latin American topics for a number of international publications, including Americas, Hispanic, and Seis Continentes. The author wishes to thank the Intercontinental Hotels Group and Varig Brazilian Airlines for their assistance. Information on Curitiba may be found at the municipal government's Web site, www.curitiba.pr.gov.br.

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