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## Coexistence between design, regulation, and negotiation in urban planning: The case of Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and São Paulo

Studies commonly reiterate that urban planning complexity is defined by the coexistence of three elements: regulation, various scales of urban design, and multiagent negotiations. We confirm this; however, we reject the idea that they can ideally interact in perfect balance with no negative impact on each other. Thus, this article analyses the limits of coexistence of these elements. We hypothesize that perfect and balanced coexistence is not possible. This is based on four main and consecutive activities: 1) a literature review concerning the roots we believe contemporary urban planning is based on; 2) a critical and qualitative analysis of the main documents containing ur-

ban planning directives currently in use by the three largest cities in Latin America (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and São Paulo) focused on the guidelines established by these documents and how they communicate with each of the three pillars; 3) identification of controversies and convergences in the interaction between the three pillars; and 4) elaboration of conclusions.

**Keywords:** urban planning theories, urban planning concepts, urban planning instruments, collaborative urban planning

## 1 Introduction

Planning theory grounded in practice is especially challenging (Bolan, 2017). This is mostly explained by the variability of social interactions and the constant conflicting interests that urban reality imposes. Not only the trajectory of planning to concrete facts may be constantly questioned, but it may be doubted whether its purpose is useful. Alfasi and Portugali (2007: 175), for instance, suggest a certain mistrust of the meaning of planning itself: “can planning offer a solution, or is it just a matter for critical geographers to investigate?” The intellectual beauty of planning is that it implies active transformation and suggests the exact implementation of what was originally intended. Designed and ideally implemented by local agents, urban planning has always been subordinate to forces from outside its political and administrative boundaries, and these are increasing. The contemporary digital augmentation of the city is certainly the most recent example of an intrinsic and historic relationship. Graham (2020), despite detecting some room for resistance, describes the idea of “platform urbanism”, in which the digital tool – the platform – is unaccountable, too big to control, too new to regulate, and too innovative to be eliminated.

Friedmann (1998: 250), however, helps solve this equation of intricacy and counterarguments by saying that, “as a practical activity in the world, planning is in constant need of rethinking.” Instead of embedding theory into planning, a theory of planning needs to be constructed (Los, 2018). Planning theory and practice are not limited to looking at current phenomena, but rather at multiple possibilities of phenomena to come. Despite intrinsic limitations or practical infeasibilities, the self-justification of planning theory and practice is tempting. In fact, these two contrasting aspects alternate in urban regulation, urban design, and negotiations. It would be interesting if they could better interact.

We begin this study by discussing the three elements of the urban planning process and how each one influences the others. For example, the regulatory approach ranges from general rules for organizing activities across the entire city or in selected compartments to detailed land-use and occupation determinations (Bertaud, 2018). At both levels, regulations are influenced by various social, economic, environmental, and circumstantial features and, consequently, negotiation is (ideally) always present, or at least unavoidable. Similarly, when regulation and design are exposed to broader scenarios in community discussions, they are unavoidably subjected to principles, ideas, and hegemonic understandings that are frequently present in theoretical elaborations. Although the

design of physical features for public spaces is often seen as a synonym for concrete intervention, it is the materialization of long and previous theoretical exercises: much less in terms of product development and much more and collectively in terms of principles, priorities, historic determinations, cultural impositions, and many other intellectual efforts.

Our scepticism toward the perfect feasibility of conciliatory and idealistic voices is echoed, for example, in the recurrent discussion on the concept of sustainability. Vogt and Weber (2019) make clear the difficulties of ideally balancing environmental, social, and economic interests or constraints. Similarly, Pengjun and Peilin (2017), in their discussion on city health, criticize the universally accepted idea that high-density development or a compact urban model could minimize GHG emissions. There could not exist such a panacea deserving our unconditional faith. The perfection of an all-purpose equation is thus criticized despite being presented as unquestionable, universal, and feasible. However, for pragmatic exercises such as the elaboration of plans, programs, and multiagent negotiations concerning urban management, the idyllic consideration of universal and well-balanced factors does play an important role and serves as an operational guide. Unconditional faith in regulation, design, and negotiation is conceptually fragile but fundamentally necessary, as are the “utopian ideas” that drive us forward.

Based on this approach, this article discusses the main constituent elements of urban planning studies to contribute to its theoretical framework: regulation, design, and negotiation. Constantly presented as necessary tools and capable of interacting in an ideal and simultaneous way, the main objective is to analyse the limits of coexistence of these elements. Our hypothesis is that a perfect and balanced coexistence is unfeasible. To develop the bases of this reflexive process, the article is structured into three main sections: 1) The three pillars of urban planning, 2) Three Latin American references, and 3) Dilemmas of coexistence: negotiation at the centre of planning.

Such elements may play a role when adopted in isolation, but they interact in a constant dispute of individual importance, determination of political priorities, and local specificities. The discussion is illustrated by a case study we developed in three cities: Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and São Paulo. The discussion presents the main insights and the conclusion avoids any approach that, to satisfy conceptual purity, may lead to inability or disenchantment concerning our tools (traditional and innovative) to positively change our cities.

## 2 The three pillars of urban planning

Designating these elements as the fundamentals of urban planning may seem pretentious and risky. Other factors also strongly influence the way urban planning is done, the way it may be done, and the chances of its success. However, the contemporary literature on urban studies repeatedly refers to three elements (termed *pillars* here) for analysing a city or technical and legal documents concerning urban topics. This section is based on the interaction of these three pillars: design, regulation, and negotiation. The conclusions show that such interactions vary between a desirable and idealized concurrence to a clear impossibility of having them equally valued.

The importance of these three pillars was demonstrated in the Burnham Plan for the City of Chicago (Smith, 2006). It presented a deliberate effort to adjust regulation, design, and negotiation. The innovation presented in terms of community participation was connected to the government practice of creating zoning parameters and legislating on private property (Cheng & Chambliss, 2016). Moreover, the design was fundamental to stimulate public interest and community agreement with the ideas in the plan. The strategy to acquire popular acceptance using design was part of the plan itself (Moody, 1912), as pointed out by Cheng and Chambliss (2016).

A primary criticism of traditional land-use plans or strictly regulated zones, which attempt to mould the urban environment by imposing regulations on space and time, stems from an analysis of the present conditions and the use of prescriptive methods. Portugali (2008) notes that the chief criticism of land-use plans or over-regulated zones is that these processes fail to consider cities as open, complex, and self-organizing systems. This argument raises a further question: if planning fully considered such attributes, would it still be able to achieve its goals? Could planning adhere to its main purpose amid considerations that seem to question its very core characteristic: the regulation of people and activities in urban space?

Acknowledging the unreliable nature of regulatory master plans and consequently advocating for “inertial, spontaneous development of urban areas” would lead to an entropic state, according to the principles of system dynamics. As Mashinsky (1990: 93) explains, this means that “the quality of a city as a complex system necessarily declines with spontaneous, inertial development.” Regulatory master plans, like all regulatory guidelines, offer the alluring promise that reality will bend to technical intentions through corrections in the creation and implementation processes. Portugali (2008) insists that we still need to find ways to identify the need to plan and regulate urban settlements. Savini et al. (2014) urge us to go beyond

the paradox between centralized control and self-organization to develop creative ways of integrating planning with the complex, interactive, adaptable, and self-organizing system that is a city. These considerations lead us to not exactly defend an ideal combination between the components of urban planning, but to at least consider their important intricate coexistence.

It took a long time for planners to consider the policy sphere as part of the planning realm and people as part of the decision-making process. In the late 1950s, after decades of modernist prescriptive plans, Crane (1960: 284) saw “environmental morality”, “the interdependence of humans and nature”, “public city-form decisions”, and “choice and flexibility of individual usages” gaining strength within the planning profession. At the same time, Jane Jacobs brought non-specialists and local communities into the planning process (or perhaps into city management), challenging the usual discussion on urban policymaking. As a result, over the past decades, the participatory approach seems deeply linked to the planning process: old plans are criticized for their non-participatory nature, and contemporary planners emphasize that this procedure must always be exercised. Paradoxical as it may seem, this trend is surpassing the original and traditional intent of planning while leaving behind the structural underpinnings of planning itself: regulation based on technical approaches and a clear vision of the future materialized over time through design. Contemporary participatory planning seems very reluctant to establish future scenarios, and instead it responds to urgent demands.

Planning and policymaking have thus become intrinsically related. This relation has been tacitly and strategically established by ignoring the fact that, regardless of the debate, there is no single optimal solution or even standard sense of social justice that will be uniformly accepted by stakeholders operating on different scales. Even the idea of a decision made “in the majority interest” seems too fragile when seen against recurrent well-intentioned reforms around the world that still result in the concentration of poverty, exploitative processes, perpetual social misfortunes, and profit-maximizing land use. Politics is by nature conflictive, and, for this reason, negotiation is essential to find common ground amid divergent interests. These attributes of contemporary planning are obligatory for any actor involved in this process, but it is unclear whether planning can be replaced by dialog or if dialog may be the ultimate urban planning tool. If it is such a tool, does it undermine the original founding characteristics of planning? Although we believe they are at risk, we see no easy substitute: either we are unable to establish new principles and methods, or we are so attached to old procedures that despite their weak outcomes the exercise of planning still satisfies us in terms of professional justification. In the twentieth century, design, regulation, and negotiation were orchestrated according to technical

assumptions and single or “universal” solutions, but the following historical period has adopted a much more complex relation of these three elements, much more locally tailored guidelines, and much more diversified possibilities to combine them.

The third common component of the planning process is design, which is understood to be the physical features of urban spaces at different scales, from public areas such as parks to buildings and interiors. Regulatory plans may already establish some key characteristics of buildings such as setbacks, heights, and permeable areas. In these cases, physical features are dictated by urban, architectural, and engineering regulations. Design-driven planning processes are intended to influence the relationship between people and their built and natural settings.

The increasing relevance that design and negotiation have acquired in recent decades seems an attempt to counter overly prescriptive and regulative planning processes. However, a clear and strong regulatory framework is still important. Healey (2003: 104), a collaborative planning advocate, argues that regulatory power is still important “to safeguard valued environmental qualities”, and Innes (2004) highlights that a legal and regulatory framework can guarantee a balance in stakeholder negotiations. Collaborative urban design processes have been tested in many rich and poor cities worldwide, and more recent ideas on collective experiences have fuelled these initiatives. This relationship between different experts that are now expected to take part in design processes (a far more interdisciplinary group than architects, designers, and engineers) at first glance seems to respond to less centralized or regulatory planning. Kerrigan (2018) determines that this collaboration is widely defended but not frequently exercised. This is a paradoxical situation considering the confirmation of growing populations interacting, new online tools and new social media technologies for sharing information and feedback, expanding segments of consumers and professionals, a rise in civic and non-profit partnerships, and more local governments supposedly engaged in participatory processes. All these factors are clearly accepted, although more general determinations established by planning guidelines, corresponding legislation, and urban management practices are still considered. Because these remain fundamental, collaborative and collective exercises are certainly weakened. From the participatory process viewpoint, this is a rather useless effort; from a more general planning perspective, this is the sole way to consider things and people in the city. The examples presented below may shed some light on this issue.

### 3 Three Latin American references

The contemporary urban planning practice in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, is based on that of the mid-nineteenth century, paired with movements taking place in European cities such as Barcelona and Paris. At this time, the first urban planning theories were presented with Ildefons Cerdà, Reinhard Baumeister, and the works of Joseph Stubben and Raymond Unwin. Novick (2005) takes this moment as a starting point to discuss the urban plans for the city of Buenos Aires: the New Plan (1907–1911), making the design of the city a combination of aesthetics, functionality, and building hierarchy; the Organic Project of the Building Aesthetics Committee (1923–1925), already confirming the tensions between urban art and the research-based priorities; and the Regulatory Plan (1932), much more a set of isolated projects than a systematic plan.

In the late 1920s, Le Corbusier (2015), displaying his visceral self-confidence, presented the city of Buenos Aires as a hopeless place unless it experienced a strong planning reaction. The plan developed by Hardoy and Kurchan and coordinated by Le Corbusier for Buenos Aires in 1937–1938 envisaged an intervention following the modernist precepts of urban rationality and sectorization of urban land use with zoning, a transit system hierarchy, and a new business centre.

That trajectory confirms a tendency from overvaluing design in the construction of a new and “European” city followed by the adoption of more regulatory actions, and more codes for the control of public and private projects. This trajectory was still far from public participation.

To illustrate the main idea of this article, we should mention an important inflection in this trajectory that questions the importance of large plans themselves. Corti (2007) talks about the victory of a postmodern, neoliberal, and fragmented way of managing cities in the 1990s, all making the traditional plan an even weaker planning tool. As stated at the beginning of this article, urban plans commonly disappoint urban managers, researchers, and certainly the people that live in cities. They repeat themselves in a quiet trajectory of metamorphosis. In fact, Buenos Aires confirmed a series of municipal and metropolitan plans that, if not linear, were at least a historic succession of written and sketched idealized city by hegemonic groups. At the time of this article, Buenos Aires was discussing its Environmental Urban Plan (*Plan Urbano Ambiental*) approved in 2008. The new plan was to be organized according to seven main objectives (Consejo, 2023), all of them presented here to illustrate and confirm the recurrent presence of the three pillars stated above and the tendency to ascribe a high value to participation.

**Table 1:** The Environmental Urban Plan of Buenos Aires and the three planning pillars.

Objectives of the plan	Planning pillars detected
To improve the population's quality of life	Mostly negotiation, some regulation, and some design
To promote more equitable development of the city	Mostly negotiation, some regulation, and maybe some design
To generate consensus among various stakeholders in institutional mechanisms	Negotiation
To promote more social, environmental, economic, and urban-planning efficiency in public and private investments	Mostly regulation, some negotiation, and maybe some design
To provide a legal and institutional framework to guarantee integrated jurisdiction between the municipal and metropolitan levels	Negotiation
To ensure that all people have proper access to healthy air, water, and food, can safely circulate, live free from pollution, and are offered open spaces	Mostly regulation, some negotiation, and maybe some design
To protect the cultural, architectural, and natural heritage of the city	Some design but mostly regulation

**Table 2:** The General Urban Development Program of Mexico City and the three planning pillars.

Objectives of the programme	Planning pillars detected
To stop corruption by giving people more opportunities for popular expression	Some negotiation, some regulation, and no design
To secure more resources to provide infrastructure and public services	Mostly negotiation, some regulation, and maybe some design
To force developers to provide urban infrastructure when creating new urban areas	Mostly regulation, some negotiation, and no design
To discuss large urban projects with local communities	Negotiation
To simplify land-use permit processes	Some regulation, some negotiation, and no design
To promote conciliatory dialogues between neighbours	Negotiation
To promote mixed use with at least 30% of social housing construction in any development project	Regulation
To regenerate eleven heavy traffic corridors.	Design

Table 1 shows a clear distinction from the previous plans proposed to the city of Buenos Aires, reiterating a historic trajectory commonly observed in other cities and in the recent history of urban planning: an increasing importance given to negotiation and a clear disadvantage of design. Regulation has certainly become more complex and easily performed. Further discussion is required to distinguish urban realities in different socioeconomic scenarios: large cities in poor countries, for example, cope with increasing parts of their territories totally unregulated and hardly officially designed, but tailoring new forms of negotiation.

Mexico City, born under the guidelines of the Spanish colonial Royal Ordinances (*Ordenanzas Reales*), never totally succeeded in erasing the influence of the former native settlement. After experimenting with partial proposals and urban works

in search of a cosmopolitan (i.e., French) face (see Christlieb, 1998), such as under the rule of Porfirio Díaz, Mexico City had its modern urban structure proposals in the late nineteenth century with intensification of the industrial sector and expansion of the railway network. In the mid-twentieth century, the city experienced the Regulatory Plan for Mexico (*Plan Regulador de México*) under the supervision of Carlos Contreras, prioritizing symmetry, order, regularity, and public health (McMichael, 2002). Still recognized as positive for the city nowadays, Contreras's plan is far from the present planning ideals. Perfectly aligned with the principles of his time, he understood public participation (i.e., negotiation) as valid only if submitted to technical rationality, research-based planning, and "modernization" interests (Aguilera, 2017). Such a plan, despite its approach based on Le Corbusier, was coordinated by a local team distinguishing itself from other Latin American

cities such as Buenos Aires with Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier, Santiago and Bogota with Karl Heinrich Brunner, Caracas with Maurice Rotival, and Rio de Janeiro with Alfred Agache (Aguilera, 2015).

The plans that followed Contreras's shifted the priority to land-use regulation. In 1997, the city adopted the General Urban Development Program (*Programa General de Desarrollo Urbano*, PGDU), revised in 2002 and still valid. In 2022, the government of Mexico City submitted to the population a new PGDU for approval, immediately criticized for the short term given to the participatory process. According to Sheinbaum (2019), as mayor of Mexico City, this new plan is organized according to eight main objectives, all of them taken here to illustrate and confirm the recurrent presence of the three pillars stated above and the current value given to public participation.

The current plan for Mexico City exemplifies the consideration of a real city, very far from that desired by its precedents, either aspiring for "modernity" and "westernization" following a French model or a functionalization as taught by international modernism. Design is hardly identified, regulation is desired but recognized as never achieved, and negotiation is declared fundamental, considering that land-use control failed and technicism has proved itself unable to respond to social complexities.

In the case of São Paulo, the urban plans proposed, adopted, or partially adopted repeat what is commonly observed in most Brazilian cities:

1. A genesis referring to European models prioritizing urban beautification projects, expansions of the road system, eradication of poor areas in downtown districts, and implementation of infrastructure. Design (and regulation as its complement) was thus an ever-present concern in São Paulo's Avenue Plan (*Plano das Avenidas*) proposed by Mayor Prestes Maia, who highlighted an urgent need to modernize a city with no attributes that could attract the attention of a foreign visitor (Maia, 1930). Prior to the Avenue Plan, São Paulo had only experienced proposals for parts of its territory, such as those for the wealthy districts (named  *Jardins*) and signed by a foreign company known as The City.
2. A series of comprehensive plans proposing zoning for the entire city and starting to organize the public administration to really control urban municipal land. In the case of São Paulo, with a clear intent to regulate urban land, two plans were approved: one in 1971 and another in 1988. The 1971 plan clearly lists a series of land-use rules and zones – still based on the modernist principles of a rational and functional city – to achieve its main objectives, meaning

exclusive dependence on regulation to create a "desirable city" (São Paulo, 1971). The 1988 plan changes the rules and the zones but maintains the same tools and general guidelines (São Paulo, 1988).

3. A new form of creating urban plans in the country was introduced in the early 2000s. Under the guidelines of Federal Law no. 10257, designated Statute of the City, urban plans started a long period of negotiation that is still valid and has eclipsed any other objective an urban plan may have (Ultramari & Silva, 2017). The current plan for São Paulo is named the Strategic Master Plan, adopted in 2014 and clearly committed to the public participation as stated in its own presentation (São Paulo, 2023). As we observed in the Environmental Urban Plan of Buenos Aires (under discussion), the current plan for São Paulo is being created according to a set of principles. Similarly, we take these principles – formally stated in the document and commonly repeated by public administration representatives – as references to confirm the competitive coexistence of the main urban pillars.

As shown in Table 3, negotiation is certainly the most important attribute of São Paulo's current urban development plan. It repeats and sometimes reinforces what was done in its predecessor in 2014 when negotiation was confirmed by its propositions, its presentation by the municipality, and mostly by the process it adopted: more than twenty-five people involved, ten thousand suggestions from various social agents, sixty public hearings, and full transparency of every event (São Paulo, 2014).

As we enumerate the urban plans developed over time for each city, many similarities can be observed between Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and São Paulo in their planning approach. In addition to being Latin America's largest cosmopolitan cities, which creates a certain proximity from the historical point of view, the three pillars of urban planning at the core of this article's discussion (regulation, design, and negotiation) coexist, each one having more or less relevance in each planning period of these cities in a similar way, offering the possibility to compare and analyse them chronologically. Whereas the earliest plans had a strong design approach including modernist influence (Buenos Aires with its New Plan in 1907–1911, Mexico City with its Regulatory Plan in the mid-twentieth century, and São Paulo with the Avenue Plan proposed by Mayor Prestes Maia in 1930), in the following plans design has gradually taken a back seat, placing more emphasis on regulation and more recently on participation (the Environmental Urban Plan of Buenos Aires, approved in 2008 and under discussion since 2020; Mexico City with its General Urban Development Program, created in 1997 and revised in

**Table 3:** Strategic Master Plan of São Paulo (in preparation) and the three planning pillars.

Objectives of the plan	Planning pillars detected
To guarantee social justice	Mostly negotiation, some regulation, and maybe some design
To improve the quality of life	Mostly negotiation, some regulation, and some design
To guarantee more rational use of natural resources	Mostly regulation, some negotiation, and maybe some design
To guarantee public participation in decisions involving the future of the city	Negotiation

2002, still valid; and São Paulo with its Strategic Director Plan, adopted in 2014, and still valid and being revised).

Regulation and popular participation increased in all three cities over time, drawing attention to the growing importance of negotiation and the range of issues that are becoming part of urban planning in an interdisciplinary arrangement. Platform urbanism is a challenge and has brought even more complexity to urban planning and the way it may be done. It has become increasingly complex to deal with the coexistence of the three fundamental pillars in association with new relevant aspects such as environmental and social issues, the growing participatory process, and the mix of planning and policymaking, and this is a challenging contemporary issue in urban planning.

#### 4 Dilemmas of coexistence: negotiation at the centre of planning

Regulation is intended to secure fundamental rights directly related to the natural and built environment, while still leaving room for adaptations resulting from open negotiations between multiple stakeholders. Although noble in intent, as even the opponents of regulation can attest, in practice land-use regulations may also limit access to urban land by low-income classes (White & Allmendinger, 2003) or ethnic minorities (Whittemore, 2016), and, undoubtedly, back financial sector interests. Alfasi and Portugali (2004) argue that over-regulated plans are a “just-in-case” approach: in other words, a comprehensive set of regulations to be used if any potential phenomenon comes to pass in the city. On the other hand, a “just-in-time” approach is more amenable to unforeseeable events, using only minimal and adaptable regulations. This is another example commonly accepted as a hallowed principle and yet rarely implemented correctly, although it is difficult to determine who has the right to judge its correctness. Again, regulation provokes similar reactions: either we reject it as an ineffective tool for controlling society and social spaces, or we are lured in by its promises while still recognizing the need for reform.

Strategic reform could begin with a partial deregulation of land; the question then arises which regulation to eliminate and which to retain. In this scenario, transparent and resilient regulatory frameworks are intended to mitigate power imbalances between different stakeholders acting on multiple scales, in what Alfasi and Portugali (2004: 34) refer to as a “para-polity . . . that is not evident in formal documents, but that accumulates implicitly as a result of individual decisions.” Fainstein (2000: 458) explains that during negotiations it is often the case that “the power of words depends on the power of the speakers”, while Innes (2004: 12) reaffirms that “everyone at the table knows who is powerful outside, who is not, and what power each player has.” From this discussion arises the negotiation dilemma: it limits regulation and is limited by design. Negotiation is consequently necessary for both regulation and deregulation, and it includes stakeholders across multiple scales: from government organizations, grassroots movements, and international organizations to private actors (Holsen, 2020).

Although techniques may vary, the essence of planning remains: an idealized scenario attained through predefined rules. Today, a major criticism of planning processes is that they are essentially “design-less” (Bertaud, 2018), although building ordinances included in regulatory planning could be considered indirect design (Talen, 2012). According to Barnett and Chafee (2008: 11), local land-use regulations are a “literal prescription for most new development”, influencing the “design of every community.” Thus, we are faced with the regulation dilemma: it limits design and is limited by negotiation.

In different scenarios, advocates of collaborative planning have increasingly emphasized the role that design can play in planning processes (Carmona, 2013; Abd & Asaad, 2021). Similarly, Fainstein (2000) acknowledges that New Urbanists, despite their formalistic and exclusive approach to design, can successfully translate principles of urban design into regulatory frameworks and consequently involve communities in the planning process. In addition, Bond and Thompson-Fawcett (2007) criticize “neo-traditional urbanism” for being a cooptative rather than a collaborative process; at the same time, they maintain that the extensive use of charrettes by New Urbanists

has reinforced the importance of design in the urban planning domain.

Even though “it has taken urban design a long time to establish a major role in planning practice in developed countries”, by the 1990s it was a well-established field (Punter, 2007: 168). However, the complexity of planning processes – which involve a variety of actors with different and often conflicting interests – is rarely considered in design proposals. As Punter (2007: 169) points out, urban design has been co-opted by public authorities to “aestheticize megaprojects”, whereas “more democratic, egalitarian and sustainable design practices are being eclipsed.” Design, as the concrete visualization of urban planning idealization, constitutes a double-operated process: on the one hand, it reduces the complexities of the negotiation by previously selecting one possible choice, the preferred one, and on the other hand it facilitates the necessary persuasion, making some proposals more attractive than others. With its unique ability to condense different urban features and identify different possibilities for the urban environment, design can be a powerful catalyst in the planning process, exploring many combinations of different temporal and spatial scales. The design dilemma is thus as follows: it limits negotiation and it is limited by regulation.

This dilemma can be observed in most examples used to illustrate a new design format, either in combination with planning and negotiation or as a solitary practice in urban management. Originally evoked by Manuel de Solà-Morales, the concept of urban acupuncture was further theorized and practiced by Lerner (2014) during his three terms as mayor of Curitiba, Brazil. Given its relatively low cost, high impact, and reliance on community development, this type of pinpointed intervention has spread across developing countries (Fabricius, 2011). As Burdett (2012: 94) notes, one of the strengths of urban acupuncture is its “resilience and adaptability of urban and architectural form that allows a greater sense of attachment and identity for the local community of users.”

Among the three dilemmas identified, it is highlighted that only the negotiation dilemma is always present in planning. Any land-use plan includes some level of negotiation, either more candidly stemming from “backstage” interests before coming into force or more explicitly in an open dialog with various stakeholders. This means that negotiation is central and fundamental in planning, so that it is not possible to apply planning without negotiation, but it is possible to do it without regulation (design planning) or without design (regulation planning). Thus, negotiation is the central pillar of planning. This fact becomes clear when analysing the historical reality of the three largest cities in Latin America.

## 5 Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction, this critical analysis of planning processes was prompted by the fact that three aspects of planning – regulation, design, and negotiation – influence each other and urban life in general. Understanding each of these components and their interrelations demonstrates how they share influence in defining cities. A critical overview of the roles played by regulation, design, and negotiation in contemporary discussions on planning is the underpinning for the framework presented here.

The proper combination of the three elements discussed here may sound like the perfect recipe for the ideal city. However, adoption of the principles assumed to be correct in a more general urban scenario may constitute fatal circumstances for such combinations in specific cases. Again, conciliatory consideration is involved, both in theory and practice, because urban matters are the ultimate context for potential controversies. Our understanding is that the challenges involved in equitable distribution of priorities and needs cannot influence our decisions in terms of what planning to adopt or what combination of components is required. Quite the contrary: the ideal city, regardless of what it is or how achievable it is, should be the sole guide in any effort to change the city. The importance of the three pillars of planning discussed in this article consists in the fact that the way these pillars are conceived can either extend or reduce the boundaries of the ideal city we can imagine. By discussing the intricacy of the three main elements of urban planning, we can ultimately understand how urban idealizations are thought about and sometimes implemented. However, desire, principles, and idealisms are necessary tools for planning a city, even though they are always transmuted when concrete efforts are implemented.

The three largest Latin American cities selected for this discussion – São Paulo, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires – have a very similar European colonization background and, despite their local differences, have shown similar approaches to urban planning over time. In the three cities, the growing importance of negotiation in urban planning can be observed because the current emphasis in planning has been placed more on participatory processes than on design results. Depending on the historical period of each of the cities analysed, the three pillars of urban planning were unequally combined: initially as a combination of design and negotiation and, more recently, as a combination of regulation and negotiation. Despite the different combinations, negotiation has always been present as a means of implementation, whether in the super-designed city or in the super-regulated city.

## 6 Conclusion

Although the hypothesis of the infeasibility of balanced coexistence between the elements is confirmed, we conclude that the search for balance is worth the effort. The search for balance, although intangible, guarantees both the necessary scepticism and the effort required to find new and important partial results. Moreover, the intentionally unbalanced articulation of these elements can set undesirable limits on the construction of the ideal city. Thus, it is possible to conclude that, even if the goal of equally balancing the importance of the three main urban planning pillars may not be fully achieved, searching for it justifies the effort. Camus (1955) sees Sisyphus's endless effort in perpetually rolling a rock up a mountain to legitimize any task we hardly believe useful in itself: we should imagine Sisyphus happy in his condemnation.

The historical similarity in terms of formal planning for the three cities of the case study leads us to think about something that is not part of the scope of this article, yet quite intriguing: as asked by Delgadillo (2014), what makes cities in Latin American countries, which have very different local, regional, and national governments, so similar in their historical trajectory regarding their plans and the way hegemonic groups tailor ideal cities? The answer is certainly not to be found in the plans, nor in local process, but rather in a larger and globalized context in which one faces a crisis in a representative democracy.

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