The Paradigmatic City

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The paradigmatic city may be defined as the city that displays more clearly than other cities the fundamental features and trends of the wider urban system. The paradigmatic city serves as a model, a laboratory for analysis. In the 1920s and 1930s, in North America, Chicago was often viewed in those terms. The Chicago School is best known for the human-ecology approach and detailed empirical field research on issues such as land-use patterns, urban life styles, ethnicity, and a variety of urban social problems. At a general level, Chicago was considered emblematic of the processes of urbanization at the time, in particular with regard to the effects of urban living and the urban environment on social behavior.

More than half a century later, in the 1980s and 1990s, Los Angeles emerged as a similar type of “prototopos” (Soja 1989: 191). The Los Angeles School is best known for its Marxist roots and postmodernist leanings, and for its focus on the linkages between processes at the micro- and macrolevel. The city is viewed in the wider context of the spatial organization of capitalism. Generally, Los Angeles is considered paradigmatic in terms of the role of the city in present-day capitalism and its social consequences for life in the city. The Los Angeles School is vibrant to this day, even if a strong theoretical and empirical case for that city’s paradigmatic role has yet to materialize (e.g., Davis 1990: 84; Garreau 1991: 3; Cenzatti 1993; Dymski and Veitch 1996: 36; Dear and Flusty 1997, 1998; Scott and Soja 1996).

The bulk of the research by the Los Angeles School has been confined to case studies of Los Angeles, and there is a lack of much-needed comparative studies. This point has not gone entirely unnoticed. In a recent article in this journal, Michael Dear and Steven Flusty (1998: 52) acknowledged that: "The validity and potential of the [LA] school will only be decided after extensive comparative analysis based in other metropolitan areas of the world." This article is in some ways a response to that call. It compares Los Angeles and Miami against the backdrop of the arrival of a new millennium. More generally, this is a debate about the paradigmatic city in North America at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Since this article is primarily intended to stir debate, only some very basic data are included. More extensive empirical data may be found, for Los Angeles, in an abundant literature, so there is no need to reiterate all that is already known about that city. Hence, within the comparative framework, the discussion in this paper focuses more attention on Miami than on Los Angeles. As far as Miami is concerned, I base my arguments in part on empirical analyses presented in some of my earlier writings (e.g., Nijman 1996a, 1996b, 1997). The unit of analysis is the urban region at large. (For Miami, it corresponds to Miami-Dade County, and for Los Angeles, Los Angeles County and parts of Orange, San Bernardino, and Ventura Counties.) The terms city, urban region, metropolis, or metropolitan region are applied loosely and in interchangeable fashion.

A paradigmatic city is extreme in the sense that it displays fundamental traits and trends of the urban system more clearly than do other cities. Thus, the paradigmatic city is exceptional, but only in terms of the extent of it being characteristic of general trends. Obviously, any extreme city does not necessarily have paradigmatic qualities. The difficulty of distinguishing the model city from the outlier is complicated by the time factor: the paradigmatic city is supposed to be ahead of the curve. Thus, it will display features and trends that are not yet as easily discernable in other cities. There is a certain tension between the city as simultaneously extreme and paradigmatic, and this may be a source of confusion. The assumption is that many cities will be fundamentally affected by trends that are presently manifest in the paradigmatic city. That is quite a different thing from saying that other cities will turn into replicas of the paradigmatic city. The value of the concept of the paradigmatic city lies in exploring and identifying general directions of change across the urban system.
A great deal has been written in recent years about Los Angeles, and the literature is riddled with allusions to, and suggestions about, this city's paradigmatic qualities. These claims, however, are rarely explicated and/or supported with explicit theoretical and empirical arguments. A good example is an edited volume with the promising title, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Scott and Soja 1996). The preface to the book claims that Los Angeles has emerged as “one of the most dramatic and concentrated expressions of the perplexing theoretical and practical urban issues that have arisen at the end of the twentieth century” (vii). But then it goes on to acknowledge that this book only aims to present “an interlocking mosaic of descriptions of different aspects of Los Angeles and, in this way, to move tentatively toward a new kind of urban analysis” (viii). I should emphasize that the book contains a range of interesting and worthwhile chapters. The point here is not that this or any other publication on Los Angeles lacks value, but that ultimately they teach us little about the centrality of Los Angeles to urban theory at the end of the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, it is possible to derive from the literature some key premises about Los Angeles's paradigmatic qualities. The foci of these arguments are closely related to the broader theoretical and philosophical concerns of the school's associates (e.g., Soja 1989; Davis 1990; Scott and Soja 1996; Dear and Flusty 1998; Cenzatti 1993). As far as I know, these four arguments are not presented anywhere else in this particular form or order. Instead, I have derived them from a variety of writings by prominent authors. In fact, in the literature, these four—closely interrelated—premises are not always clearly distinguished from each other. They may be briefly summarized as follows.

First, Los Angeles is considered a prototypical city, emerging in the most recent historical stage of capitalism: Los Angeles as a postindustrial, postfordist, and global city. The LA School often reads Los Angeles as an integral part and reflection of the spatial organization of the latest stages of historical capitalism. In this way, Los Angeles is viewed as the latest incarnation of the emblematic capitalist city, succeeding such earlier places as New York or Chicago.

Second, Los Angeles is said to be paradigmatic in the sense that it combines a variety of spatial expressions of capitalism with distinct historical origins (Soja's claim that “it all comes together in LA”). This is related to the first claim, but it goes a step further. It is argued not only that Los Angeles is the latest incarnation of the capitalist city, but that its historical origins and evolution have resulted in an exceptional layering of social and economic experiences that are stored in the material and social environment.

Third, Los Angeles is asserted to be the first purely American (capitalist) city, with a host of political, economic, and social implications. In this sense, Los Angeles expresses a broad historical shift of the economic and cultural points of gravity from east to west in the U.S., a process of gradual de-Europeanization and Americanization. California at large is considered as terra firma of U.S. culture, and Los Angeles, in turn, as the symbolic capital of the region.

Finally, Los Angeles is presented as the quintessential postmodern city. The exact meaning of the term postmodern varies a great deal, but in general, in this context, it refers to the punctuated and diverse presentations of the city's landscapes, their cultural hybridity and spatial (dis)orders (see, e.g., Knox 1993; Short 1996). While the postmodern nature of urban landscapes in general (and of Los Angeles in particular) is sometimes related to the capitalist organization of society in the late twentieth century, it is often defined in cultural terms not so easily directly linked to such fundamental economic developments.

I shall use these four arguments, or criteria, to frame the discussion in the rest of this article. In the next four sections, I will debate the theoretical validity and consistency of these respective arguments and apply them to the two cities in question. In some cases I will propose a modification of the theoretical argument. Overall, I will argue that a consistent comparative empirical analysis, based on these (modified) criteria, renders Los Angeles as the quintessential twentieth-century city and points to Miami as the paradigmatic city of our time.

**The Latest Stage of Historical Capitalism in the U.S.: From Los Angeles to Miami**

Urban areas can be usefully characterized according to the historical context from which
they emerged as major cities. In this sense, for example, New York is a typical preindustrial city, Chicago a typical early-industrial city, Los Angeles late-industrial, and Miami postindustrial. The accompanying transport technologies that facilitated the rise of these cities in their particular locales and at their particular times were, respectively, ships, trains, automobiles, and airplanes. Thus, the ongoing development of transport technologies facilitated the progressive geographic dispersal of the urban system to places that were previously not conducive to urban growth. Put differently, transport and communication technologies have always played a key role in the integration of previously excluded spaces in the capitalist economy.

The initial transformation of Los Angeles from a sleepy agricultural town to a big city was spurred by the arrival of rail connections from already prominent cities, such as San Francisco and Chicago, in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Los Angeles emerged as a major city in the American urban landscape during the first quarter of the twentieth century, in the late industrial stages of urban development in the U.S. The city’s population grew from 100,000 in the year 1900 to one million in the year 1920.

In earlier times, Los Angeles’s location would have been considered unfavorable for urban growth. It did not have a very attractive natural port and, in this capacity, was overshadowed by San Francisco. Neither was the city located near other important waterways or natural resources for industrial use (the oil industry did not play a significant role until the twenties and thirties), and it lacked a significant hinterland. Its growth, therefore, had much to do with new transportation technologies; first, railroads, and later on, more significantly, the introduction of the automobile and the construction of the first highways (Warner 1972; Meinig 1979). These innovations facilitated the continuing westward movement of people and economic activity in the continental U.S.

The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 coincided with the construction of a new port in Los Angeles, and from this time on, the city was also positioned well with regard to oceanic trade. The Second World War in the Pacific, and later the Korean War, underscored the strategic importance of Los Angeles and other ports on the western seaboard and helped secure federal subsidies in the defense industry and military installations. Finally, to complete this broad historical sequence, the dynamic growth in the second half of this century of Japan and other East Asian economies implied a steady flow of capital and immigrants to Los Angeles from across the Pacific, and was accompanied by a notable westward shift of the U.S. industrial center of gravity. By 1990, Los Angeles had become the second largest metropolis in the U.S. with, at present, an estimated ten million people in the metropolitan region.

When the population of Los Angeles reached 100,000 at the turn of the century, Miami counted only five thousand inhabitants, and the municipal city of Miami had been incorporated for only four years. Even if Miami’s growth was considerable on a relative scale, it was far behind Los Angeles: when the Angelinos passed the one-million mark in 1920, Miami’s (Dade County) population had reached only 42,000. Miami was not connected to the north by rail until 1896 (considerably later than most cities on the west coast of the U.S.), and the construction of the first highways followed soon after.

Miami’s geographic location is indeed extreme. It is the southernmost city of its size in the continental U.S., eccentrically positioned at the southeastern tip of the Florida peninsula. It has a poor natural harbor that, even after reconstruction, does not allow deep vessels carrying bulk cargo. The Miami River is a small artery that leads northwest as far as Lake Okeechobee and does not connect Miami to other significant places (it is not navigable west of LeJeune Road, a few miles inland from the estuary). To the west of Miami are the Everglades, and to the north are the southern and central parts of Florida that have, through most of their history, been sparsely populated and lacking in significant economic activity. South Florida, too, lacked natural resources for industrial use and, on top of that, during most of the year, its climate was a deterrent until the introduction of universal airconditioning in the sixties. It is not surprising, therefore, that Miami did not develop into a major city until very recently.

Like Los Angeles, Miami was, at first, a product of the automobile era. The suburb of Coral Gables, in particular, stands out as an early (1920s) example of planned residential areas for transportation by automobile. Miami’s location, however, was too peripheral, too far away even for motorized transport on highways, to facilitate integration in the U.S. urban system and the national economy and to spur substantial
growth. Miami's take-off was stalled for nearly another half-century.

It is hard to think of a city that, according to traditional locational criteria for urban development, was so poorly positioned as Miami—that is, until the advent of mass air transport that would connect Miami to the rest of the nation and, more important, to the Caribbean and Latin America. Miami's major growth period was in the third quarter of the twentieth century, some fifty years behind Los Angeles. The population tripled during this time, from about half-a-million in 1950 to one-and-a-half million in 1975. At present, metropolitan Miami (Miami–Dade County) has roughly two million inhabitants.

In the late twenties, Miami was already the hub of one of the first U.S. airlines, PanAm, which maintained schedules between Key West, Havana, and later, other Caribbean and Latin American cities. But in those years, air travel and air cargo transport were still marginal phenomena. This changed dramatically after the Second World War. In the past few decades, Miami International Airport has become of central importance to the city's growth and prominence in the region (far more significant than the seaport). In the process, Miami has become closely connected with the nearby economic region of the Caribbean and South America, and in some ways, these linkages prevail over Miami's ties with the U.S. economy. A comparative analysis of air traffic for Los Angeles and Miami reveals that, both in absolute and relative terms, Miami is more internationally oriented (Nijman 1996a). Miami has the largest number of scheduled foreign airlines of any airport in the world. It is also the largest airport in the country for international cargo shipments. Compared to Los Angeles, Miami is less connected to the U.S. national economy and urban system, and has a more pronounced international orientation.

Los Angeles's economic structure, then, is, in part, the result of its passing through various stages of economic history, from industrialization through deindustrialization and the rise of high-tech and information-based industries.

Miami's economic structure, on the other hand, has a more recent history, shows less of a layering of successive economic periods, and is less diverse in terms of economic activity or economic geography. Indeed, where Los Angeles has both old manufacturing and new high-tech industry, and shows rustbelt characteristics, Miami has little of that. The latter's main economic sectors are trade, tourism, construction, and finance and producer services. At any rate, Miami's economy has a decidedly postindustrial profile, one that is barely constrained by the remnants of earlier times. This is, of course, directly related to the timing of Miami's emergence as a major city.

Table 1 lists some basic indicators of the urban economies of Los Angeles and Miami (see Nijman 1996a, for a more elaborate discussion). It is important, in any comparison between Los Angeles and Miami, to acknowledge their differences in size and scale. The Los Angeles population is about five times larger, and so is Los Angeles's geographic area, the size of the workforce, and the size of the metropolitan economy. The table shows that Miami has traditionally lacked manufacturing. The city's economy has always depended more on the service sector and trade. In recent years, the rise of producer services has occurred at the expense of both manufacturing and other services, including tourism. Further, for its overall size, Miami has a relatively large producer-services sector. Producer services are often but not necessarily linked to the local manufacturing sector. While the producer-services sector cannot exist without manufacturing, they need not be in the same

It All Comes Together in Los Angeles?

One of the main reasons that Los Angeles has been held up as a model for present-day and future urban growth in the U.S. is, in Soja's often quoted words, that “it all comes together in LA”:

Los Angeles combines different cities of different urban evolutionary stages: Coming together here are especially vivid exemplifications of many different processes and patterns associated with the societal restructuring of the late twentieth century. The particular combinations are unique, but condensed within them are more general expressions and reflections. One can find in Los Angeles not only the high-technology industrial complexes of Silicon Valley and the erratic Sunbelt economy of Houston, but also the far-reaching industrial decline and bankrupt urban neighborhoods of rust-belted Detroit or Cleveland (Soja 1989: 193).
place (Sassen 1994: 64–65). One of the consequences of the process of globalization is that these different economic activities are increasingly separated in space. In the case of Miami, it seems that many producer services emerged in relation to the city's economic internationalization and increased ties with the Caribbean and Latin America. Thus, Miami’s producer services are more internationally oriented than those in Los Angeles (the latter having a comparable share of producer services but a substantially larger local manufacturing sector).

Finally, Table 1 compares Miami and Los Angeles with regard to their roles in international banking. In 1994, Miami was the third largest foreign banking center in the U.S. (in terms of the number of offices) after New York and Los Angeles (Chicago ranked fourth, behind Miami). The comparison of Miami to Los Angeles should again be made against the background of their difference in overall size. It allows us to see the extraordinary international orientation of Miami’s economy.

In sum, on the basis of postindustrial economic activity and the international orientation of the urban economy, Miami appears more prototypical than Los Angeles. The latter is situated somewhere halfway on the trajectory between industrialism and postindustrialism and halfway between the national and the global economy. Miami is more unequivocally a postindustrial and a global city.

The existing literature is not always very accurate when using the term “postindustrial.” Often, and confusingly so, the term is used to refer to a past history of industrialization. This meaning of “postindustrial” is literally incorrect: strictly speaking, what is meant in the literature is ex-industrial, not postindustrial. Further, such usage is inconsistent with the historical categories of U.S. cities referred to above (e.g., New York as a preindustrial city). Hence, it is not Los Angeles that is the “quintessential postindustrial city” (Abu-Lughod 1995: 174), but Miami. Los Angeles, on the other hand, is the “quintessential late-industrial city” that in its current state, shows a range of elements of urban development that were characteristic for twentieth-century America.

At the conceptual level, the question is why this quality of a layering of successive economic periods is essential to the model city to begin with. And if it is, why not stick to New York as the city that really has it all, from preindustrial to postindustrial? On the other hand, if we are primarily interested in the latest developments that are shaping our cities, i.e., the most recent layer, then Miami fits the bill.

The First American City and the First Global City

Los Angeles is said to be the “first American city,” in the sense that it is the first “American city to separate itself from European models and to reveal the impulse to privatization embedded in the origins of the American revolution” (Weinstein 1996: 22). As such, Los Angeles and, more generally, the California region (in contrast to the northeast of the U.S.) are a very pure reflection of American culture, one in which individualization, commodification, and materialism prevail. In this section, I will argue that

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**Table 1.** Selected Indicators of the Size, Composition, and Orientation of the Metropolitan Economies of Los Angeles and Miami

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Los Angeles</th>
<th>Miami–Dade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimated GDP(^a) of metropolitan area, in billions, 1996</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total workforce in millions (county), 1991</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce in manufacturing (county), 1981, %</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce in manufacturing (county), 1991, %</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce in producer services (county), 1981, %</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce in producer services (county), 1991, %</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of branches of foreign banks (metro), 1994</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total assets of foreign banks in billions (metro), 1994</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Gross Domestic Product.

Miami finds itself one step further in this evolutionary scheme: as the first global city. This does not mean that Miami is not an “American” place, for in some ways, it may be viewed as ultra-American. Rather, Miami’s emergence is closely related to the globalization of the American culture and economy. In this sense, one might label Miami the first global American city, or, say that Miami is fundamentally a product of America but no longer America (for two good volumes on the effects of globalization on U.S. cities, see Warf and Erickson [1996] and Wilson [1997]).

Los Angeles and Miami share a number of important characteristics, including social and spatial polarization, the retrenchment of public life and public space in favor of the advancement of privacy and private property (e.g., gated communities), excessive materialism, a weak social contract, high crime rates, and a fragmented urban community. But there are some notable differences and nuances, too. One such difference concerns the role of immigrants in trends of social polarization; an important nuance concerns the territorial identity of the cities’ inhabitants and its implications for urban civic society (see Nijman 1996b and 1997 for more elaborate discussions).

Miami is unique in the sense that no other major U.S. city has an absolute majority of recent immigrants. While the absolute size of Los Angeles’s immigrant population is much larger than that of Miami, the latter is nonetheless more “foreign” than Los Angeles. It has the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any major city in the U.S., and the largest proportion of residents that speak another language besides English (see Table 2). In this respect, and in a qualitative sense, Miami is more international than Los Angeles. In Miami, the group generally labeled “non-Hispanic whites” shrank from eighty percent of the population in 1960 to about thirty percent in 1990, and “Hispanics” surpassed the fifty-percent mark to become a majority of the metropolitan population in the early nineties. It is not only the relative size of the immigrant population that is unusual: so is its socioeconomic status. A relatively large number of immigrants in Miami are wealthy, educated, and possess considerable entrepreneurial experience and skills. This is not only true for the first waves of Cuban migration before the mid-sixties, but also for more recent migration from other Caribbean and Latin American countries. While the overall Hispanic population is not quite as well off as native whites, they fare considerably better than native blacks.

One of the main reasons for the marginalization of blacks is that they did not take as much part in the internationalization of Miami’s econ-

Table 2. Selected Social and Economic Indicators of Total and Black and Hispanic Populations in Los Angeles County and Miami–Dade County in 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Los Angeles</th>
<th>Miami–Dade</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total foreign-born population, %</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population not speaking only English at home, %</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic population, %</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black population, %</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic household income as % of that of whites</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black household income as % of that of whites</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic families in poverty, %</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black families in poverty, %</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Hispanics in professional/managerial jobs, %</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working blacks in professional/managerial jobs, %</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Hispanics in producer services, %</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working blacks in producer services, %</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic representation in producer services(^a)</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black representation in producer services(^b)</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) The ratio of the Hispanic share of total employment and the Hispanic share of employment in producer services only. A score of 1.0 indicates perfect representation; a score of <1.0 represents underrepresentation and a score >1.0 indicates overrepresentation.

\(^b\) The ratio of the black share of total employment and the black share of employment in producer services only. See note a.

Blacks did not occupy the kinds of key economic positions on which newcomers depended, such as the banking sector (initially, this sector was almost exclusively dominated by Anglos). These were the kinds of industries that were vital to Miami’s international reorientation. Moreover, blacks found it hard to obtain a place in the newly established, internationally oriented sectors of the economy that became dominated by Hispanics and Anglos. This was due in large part to cultural, ideological, racial, and language barriers (Rose 1989).

Thus, we see that Hispanic immigrants, compared to local blacks, are more involved in economic sectors and businesses that are articulated with the wider international economy, particularly producer services (see also Portes and Stepick 1993). As Table 2 suggests, Miami’s Hispanics hold better jobs than do blacks, and Hispanics are much better represented in the producer services sector. The pattern in Miami is opposite that of Los Angeles, where the situation is similar to New York, Chicago, and other urban areas in the U.S. (Nijman 1996b). In more “normal” U.S. cities, including Los Angeles, it appears to take Hispanic immigrants considerable time before they catch up with other local minorities in terms of climbing the socio-economic ladder. On the other hand, in a “global” city like Miami, we find a cosmopolitan class that is of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds, many of them migrants or transients, with spending power that far exceeds that of many locals.

With increased mobility, for many the complexion of international migration has changed from a one-way and permanent settlement in a new destination, to a much more flexible existence in two places simultaneously. Alejandro Portes refers to these migrants as “global villagers,” giving rise to “transnational communities” (Portes 1996). Today’s migrants are increasingly capable of maintaining strong ties to their community of origin. Of course this is not true for all migrants, but it is true for this emerging cosmopolitan class that has played a key role in Miami’s growth.

The U.S. has a long and well-known history of immigration and population diversity. “Hyphenated Americanism” is a typical feature of that history: urban populations in the U.S. are comprised of Irish-Americans, African-Americans, Arab-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and so forth. As a rule, however, assimilation would occur, and in as far as ethnic designations continued to be used, they were little more than folkloric window-dressing. In a city like Miami, however, even hyphenated Americanism seems to be ruled out. Cuban-Americans (most are naturalized) are known as Cubans, Nicaraguan-Americans are referred to as Nicaraguans, etc. Presumably, there is little in terms of a shared “American” identity in this city.

It is the overwhelming presence of a “footloose” cosmopolitan class, and of the relatively large and more or less self-reliant immigrant communities, that has significant implications for Miami’s civic culture. According to Néstor Rodríguez, “Binational existence affects intergroup relations in immigrant settlement areas by reinforcing the immigrants’ internal social and cultural infrastructure, reducing dependency on mainstream social resources” (1995: 215). Thus, if immigrant groups are sufficiently large, cohesive, and mobile, they are less likely to assimilate within other urban mainstreams. They are also less likely to identify with the city as their place of belonging. These kinds of immigrants seem more prevalent in Miami than in Los Angeles, at least on a relative scale. The cosmopolitan classes brought Miami their wealth, but they did not necessarily enrich it with their citizenship.

The results are the absence of an overarching urban community and of a shared place-based identity, a weak social contract, excessive materialism, the weakness of grassroots social movements, and exceedingly high crime rates. Of course these are also salient characteristics of urban life in Los Angeles, but Miami may be more extreme. Where Los Angeles has its California-style social movements—even if they are no match for the forces of capital and urban restructuring—Miami has virtually none. For example, the dramatic gentrification and skyrocketing rents during recent years in the area around Lincoln Mall Road on Miami Beach (closely related to the rapid emergence of one of the largest immigrant gay communities in the U.S.), has occurred without the kind of conflict seen elsewhere (Smith 1996). Where Los Angeles exhibits the struggling remnants of unionized labor, this is, for all practical purposes, absent in Miami. Where Los Angeles’s political leadership is under fire from local constituencies about its urban planning practices and its treatment of immigrants and minorities, Miami’s city government had, at the time of writing, effectively ceased to
exist after years of rampant corruption, mismanagement, and bankruptcy (Garcia and Morales 1998). The mayor of the city of Miami was forced to resign in early March 1998 after a Circuit Court Judge found proof of election fraud, and subsequently, it was unclear who was in charge of city government. Miami’s failing political apparatus and dysfunctional democracy, as depicted on national television (CBS’s 60 Minutes [1998]), seems at least partially rooted in the lack of urban citizenship described above.

The relative weakness of the social contract in Miami, and the lack of a solid civic culture that spans all ethnic groups and classes, may well play a part in the city’s unrivaled crime rates. Miami acquired its notorious reputation for crime in the early eighties. The New York Times of December 23, 1980, reported on its front page that crime had gone “berserk” in Miami, allegedly exceeding the crime rates in places like Los Angeles and New York (Rawls 1980). In 1981, a Time cover story depicted Miami as a “paradise lost,” and presented an extremely bleak and harsh picture of life in South Florida (“Paradise Lost” 1981). It suggested that the social costs of Miami’s rapid growth and extraordinary development had been too high. In subsequent years, Miami has not been able to rid itself of its image as a high crime city. According to FBI statistics, Miami ranked first in total crime among the nation’s seventy-nine large metropolitan areas in 1992 and 1993. It also ranked first in violent crimes (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1994). In 1992, Miami’s violent crime rate on a per-capita basis was sixty-seven percent higher than that of Los Angeles (Miami Herald 1998).

Materialism sometimes seems to function to compensate for Miami’s social poverty, and the two seem mutually reinforcing. Miami’s pronounced materialist culture is mainly the product of migration. The bulk of Miami’s many immigrants came there to advance themselves economically. This is also true for the Cuban community, driven to “prove Castro wrong” by building its own economic success story. At the same time, many of the native whites who chose to stay in Miami (most moved elsewhere), did so predominantly because of economic motives and despite becoming a minority.

Because of the lack of communal values across the urban area and a shared place-bound identity, and due to the absence of grassroots movements, Miami lacks the social constraints on material growth found in most other cities. The often-referred-to relationship between globalism and localism, in the sense of place-rooted reactionary movements against the perceived threats of globalization (Mlinar 1992), is virtually absent because so few of Miami’s inhabitants are, in fact, rooted in this city.

Postmodern Urbanism

Dear and Flusty’s 1998 Annals article, in which they presented Los Angeles as the quintessential example of newly evolving “postmodern” urban form, seems at times strikingly accurate, even though it is quite difficult to determine the degree of postmodernity of any given urban landscape. Clearly, more is needed in terms of the development of a methodology for comparative analysis. Such solutions lie clearly outside the scope of this paper. Instead, I will limit myself to a brief replication of the exercise by Dear and Flusty, applied to Miami.

One of the key elements of Dear and Flusty’s (1998: 67) “postmodern urbanism” refers to cultural hybridity and spatial (dis)orders. In general terms, postmodern urbanism refers to a condition in which “in the absence of a single new imperative, multiple urban (ir)rationailities are competing to fill the void” (1998: 50). The results are diversity or hybridity of landscapes, the lack of a singular identifiable signature of the city, eclecticism in the styles of the built environment, and an overarching spatial mosaic that has the appearance of chaos and disorder. More concretely, Dear and Flusty identify a series of cultural and esthetic ingredients of the postmodern urban landscape that are particularly salient in Los Angeles. These are “privatopia,” “cultures of heteropolis,” “city as theme park,” “fortified city,” and “interdictory space.” Let us assess the relevance of each of these labels to Miami’s urban landscape with some brief examples.

“Privatopia” refers to the fall of public life and the rapid emergence of spatially defined residential communities whose raison d’être is the exclusion of others. Gated communities, in particular, are a widespread phenomenon in Miami, although no efforts have yet been made to carefully measure their proliferation over time. It is also a phenomenon that is increasingly taking hold in less expensive, middle-class residential areas, hence it no longer exclusively pertains to
the “hyperdefended enclaves of the very rich” (Dear and Flusty 1998: 55).

What is rather special about Miami’s privatopias is the abundant use of waterways as a “natural” community border: the renaissance of the moat. This is particularly relevant for the (very) rich areas on the islands in the Intracoastal Waterway on the east side of the metropolitan region. Access to these islands can be controlled easily. Thus, the affluent community on Key Biscayne seceded from the (poor) city of Miami and decided to raise tolls on the only bridge connecting it to the mainland. On the even more affluent Star Island, positioned between Miami and Miami Beach, property owners went a step further and completely privatized the island. The community installed on their (!) bridge a checkpoint with guards to keep out all but locals and invited visitors. On Fisher Island, presumably the richest of the rich, they apparently decided that a bridge was altogether a bad idea. Instead, the community operates a small ferry on which only cars with appropriate decals and people with valid identification are allowed.

“Cultures of Heteropolis” is a term that refers to ethnic enclaves that have formed in the wake of large-scale immigration into the urban area. Obvious examples in Miami include Little Havana, Little Haiti, and Little Managua. As in Los Angeles, some of these areas are very homogeneous in terms of their ethnic identity (as are the three mentioned above), while others are more mixed. Due to the high socioeconomic status of a relatively large number of Cuban and other immigrants, Miami displays some interesting variations of residential segregation in which ethnicity and class collide. Ethnic segregation is the strongest among the lowest social strata, while economic class prevails over ethnicity only among high-income groups. Thus, the cosmopolitan classes of various ethnic groups cohabit the privatopian islands mentioned above. In contrast, the lower class areas of Hialeah (Cuban) or Liberty City (African American) are overwhelmingly inhabited by a single ethnic group.

When it comes to the “city as theme park,” another ingredient of the postmodern urban landscape, Miami seems hard to beat. Authenticity is a rare find in this “Magic City,” where even the palm trees, the pink flamingos, and the beach sand are imported and part of an engineered and artificial environment. Entire areas, such as Coral Gables, were built in Mediterranean style, and all the street names refer to places in southern Spain and other Mediterranean regions. This area may now be partially inhabited by Hispanics, but the connection between their ethnic identity and the cultural origin of the surrounding architecture is no more than a coincidence. Farther east, on Miami Beach, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish renovated original Art Deco buildings from new imitations. This is arguably the worst “scanscape” of its kind because there is authenticity in between the fakes, but the average visitor is no longer able to discriminate. South Florida’s tackiness is rather obvious to most perceptive visitors.

Finally, Dear and Flusty use the labels of “fortified city” and “interdictory spaces” to indicate the growing usage of space, in a wide variety of ways, for purposes of control by corporate or residential interests. Gated communities and fortified office towers are a part of this, but there is much more. Flusty’s (1994) creative taxonomy includes a range of such types of spaces, all designed to either contain, or exclude, or protect, or survey, or condition a specific kind of behavior only (e.g., shopping, passing through, etc.), or facilitate or impede passage from one domain to another. The result is “an acute fragmentation of the landscape” (Dear and Flusty 1998: 57).

The emergence of interdictory spaces is closely related to the other ingredients of the postmodern urban landscape, as discussed above, and therefore it is no surprise that this label, too, is so appropriate to Miami. It is particularly evident in the city’s night-life areas and adjacent domains. For example, the center of Coconut Grove in the east-central part of the metropolis is a popular area for tourists and locals, with line-ups of restaurants, shops, bars, terraces, and kiosks. Especially crowded at nights and on the weekends, this area is intensively patrolled by the police. Friendly-looking police officers are rarely out of sight, be it in cars, on bicycles, or on foot, often mingling with the crowds.

Just to the west, the area borders sharply and acutely on what is known as the “Black Grove,” a poor and dilapidated, relatively small, African-American neighborhood. In the Black Grove, the police are virtually absent, except for a steady patrol car on a shoulder of a major intersection of Grand Avenue in the middle of the ghetto, a sight that has almost become a landmark. The patrol car is there to ensure the safe passage of visitors to and from the center (on the other
side, the Black Grove borders on the lush and affluent “suburb” of Coral Gables). Such passersby routinely lock their car doors while moving through the area.

The contrast is painfully sharp. In the glitzy center, the police are present to keep out undesirable elements (the drug dealers who are doing their business one or two blocks away), allowing the well-to-do to have a good time. Here, the police officer appears a friendly servant with a smile on her/his face. On the other hand, in the Black Grove, the locals are left to fend for themselves. The police are not there so much to protect them, but to protect others from them: the occasional lost tourists and those who are passing through. There, the police officers appear impersonal and aggressive, separated from the environment inside their vehicle, their entire presence a symbol of deterrence.

In sum, Miami appears to showcase a great deal of the postmodern urban landscapes that Dear and Flusty (1998) observe in Los Angeles. There is, however, one important factor of distinction that is of relevance: the great difference in size between Los Angeles and Miami. Abstractly, the landscapes of both Miami and Los Angeles are probably about as amorphous, diverse, disjointed, eclectic, and polarized as they get in present-day American cities. But in the case of Miami, all of this variety and all of these spatial patterns are crammed into a metropolitan area roughly one-fifth the size of Los Angeles. It is this difference in scale that makes the subjective experience of Miami’s postmodern urbanism much more intense: the transitions in Miami’s urban landscapes are faster, more frequent, and more punctuated.

Conclusion

Compared to Los Angeles, Miami has not received nearly as much attention in the urban studies literature. Its image is still largely determined by earlier writings on its unusual ethnic composition and the Cuba connection (e.g., Didion 1987a, 1987b; Boswell 1993). Such characterizations of Miami were valid in their own right, but they tended to overshadow or even obfuscate the city’s emerging paradigmatic qualities. Further, Miami is home to only a fraction of the number of urban scholars based in Los Angeles, and it has not been nearly as “represented” in the academic literature as Los Angeles. Perhaps Miami has seemed too recent and too eccentric to fit in current understandings of urbanity in the U.S. In some ways, Miami feels like a lonely city because it is “out there,” and it seems the only one in its cohort. It is a city without peers, without a past, and certainly without the film industry that placed Los Angeles (and California) so firmly in the American imagination (Meinig 1979: 171). Miami is still a very peripheral phenomenon on the mental map of the average person in the U.S., often viewed as something of an aberration or even a freak of geographic nature. To many casual observers at the end of the twentieth century, it seems, the city’s extreme appearance still overshadows its paradigmatic qualities.

But many cities in the U.S. are likely to be affected fundamentally by trends that are found in extreme form in present-day Miami. This is not to say that any other city in the U.S. is likely to turn soon into a metropolis with a majority of Hispanic immigrants and a highly globalized economy. The concept of the paradigmatic city is about general directions of change across the urban system, rather than about idiosyncratic local outcomes. Urban economies will become increasingly reliant on producer services, finance, and trade; manufacturing will continue to dwindle; the orientation of urban economies will become increasingly global; air travel will be the main connection with the outside world; urban populations will become increasingly multicultural and transient; urban cultures will increasingly display the lack of a locally shared place-based identity; urban landscapes will increasingly take on a postmodern appearance; and urban elites will be increasingly cosmopolitan in nature.

And what about LA? Los Angeles, that quintessential late-industrial city, epitomizes urban growth and development of twentieth-century America, an era that has drawn to a close. If the city of the twenty-first century is accurately described above, then Miami moves firmly into the picture as the paradigmatic city of our time. Am I becoming delusional? Perhaps it is time to move to California.

References


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