Exploring these great cities of Brazil has been both challenging and incredibly rewarding. My time there was too short; my good-byes came too fast. I hope to come again soon to once again visit the friends I have made and the streets I have wandered.

São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro may be only a few hours apart, but they could not be more opposite. One is nestled high in a mountainous basin; the other stretches along a sandy coast. One is an endless sprawl of dense concrete towers, the other is far more intimately scaled, dotted with colorful, tile homes. While riding the subway in São Paulo, you might feel out of place without a collared shirt and pants, but in Rio, you shouldn’t be surprised if the woman standing next to you is wearing only a bikini.

However, despite these obvious comparisons, one cannot define a city through such general statements. So I will not. Rather, I will give a series of observations. Small observations in the context of a neighborhood. Cities are a patchwork of communities that are far from homogeneous.

As much as I have experienced during my month in Brazil, ultimately, I am just a tourist. I must be frank with myself and realize that my conclusions are merely that of an outsider. I am American born and raised. It is not to say that my observations are useless, rather they have served as the starting point of something within myself.

I want to look to these cities of Brazil as a case study for developing urban areas around the world. This sounds quite ambitious, but I say this knowing that change happens slowly and on a micro level. Looking back over my proposal, my plans sound rather grandiose, as if I would be proposing revolutionary changes to architecture and urban design. Looking at this experience in retrospect, it seems that a more realistic analysis is called for. I hope to take a more humble stance and simply denote what I thought about the built environment was beneficiary or harmful to its inhabitants.

This succinct method of analysis (practically creating a pro and con list) is the most effective way for me to distill my experience down to a more digestible form.

In both cities, I found that safety concerns took a noticeably dominant role in the design of the architecture. Home seemed synonymous with fortress at times. Of course, architecture is the result of necessity but it also raises an important question: At what point should architecture stop being reactionary to its environment and instead act as a proponent for change?

However, it seems that a paradigm shift has begun in Brazilian architecture’s stance towards a building’s role in its community. City ordinances have begun to prohibit the construction of walls in urban communities. Architecture has begun to open itself to the community. No longer a barrier, it instead acts as a catalyst for social interaction. This trend will hopefully begin to reverse the isolation caused by some of the walled communities.

Traveling to Brazil has increased my international awareness of design. I hope I can share some of my experience with my peers through posting my reflection and work on both my website and honors portfolio. I have shared my experience with my architecture studio and professor and I hope to encourage others to travel to Brazil.
São Paulo

Jardim Paulista
The people here live high above in concrete towers, defended by electrical wire and 20 ft walls. There is a clash between the buildings and the street, for the former is defending itself from the latter. Pedestrians become ants in a neighborhood that seems to not want you there. This relationship is two-fold. On one side, your tower becomes a micro-community, with all its self-contained amenities. Perhaps you get to know your neighbors better because you share the same greenspace. On the other side, it is hard to spontaneously interact with those who live outside the prescribed limits of the gated community. Security is a priority.

Balance security and transparency

Liberdade
Centrally located, this Japanese-Brazilian neighborhood is bustling with commercial street fairs. The streets over-flow with vendors and shoppers of all ethnicities. Though its residents are primarily Japanese descendants, it attracts people from all over Brazil and the world for its weekend festivals.

Centro
The Centro is the oldest sector of São Paulo and it is also where the colonial history of the city is most prevalent. The Catedral Metropolitana de São Paulo dominates the central plaza and its surrounding landscape. Despite its grandiose, wide open spaces, the area is notorious for its drug problems and violence. Several addicts were lying in the shade of the trees and I felt uneasy about staying in one place for too long. In contrast, the Mercado Municipal de São Paulo, which stands in the northern end of the district, was an oasis of color, food, and crowds of tourists. The massive halls of the market let in light and ventilation through their high windows. The space was immense and inviting. Unfortunately, the market seemed isolated from its immediate area. Massive boulevards of traffic trapped the shoppers to the confines of the market’s own city block.

How does a building interact with its context?

Jardim dos Estados
This suburban neighborhood rests towards the outskirts of the city. Tall trees shade the quiet streets. Despite the apparent safety of the neighborhood, soaring walls and electrical fences still barricade these quaint homes off from their surroundings. Perhaps, rightfully so. One girl recounted a story of their family being robbed at gunpoint despite their numerous security systems and safe location. Affluence attracts crime in São Paulo. I also visited the Escola Waldorf Rudolph Steiner here. The Waldorf community in São Paulo thrives here and serves as a source of much volunteerism in the city.

Monte Azul
Monte Azul, in many ways, is a success-story as far as favella histories go. Where there was once a festering river of open sewage, there now is a paved thoroughfare which connects its hilltop homes to the community center. The community center itself is run by a dedicated core of Waldorf volunteers who have been instrumental to improvements in education and quality of life.
rio de janeiro
Rio de Janeiro

Jardim Botanico
In the shadow of the famous Christ the Redeemer, lies one of the greatest treasures of the city. Towering cast iron gates mark the entrance to this tropical garden of paradise. Acres upon acres of exotic flowers, Amazonian trees, and even a variety of creatures from the northern rainforests take days to explore. At one point I noticed a small crowd of people swarming what looked like to be a small animal in the grass. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be a squirrel. Apparently they are rare in Brazil. It seemed to be the opposite case when I was the only one obsessing over a little monkey stealing scraps of food from under a table.

Santa Teresa
This neighborhood was once largely inaccessible because of its incredibly steep terrain. With the advent of the street car, development spurred and the neighborhood rapidly became one of the wealthiest in both the city and Brazil as a whole. However, it wasn’t long until the street car lines extended to Copacabana and with it went the affluent denizens of Santa Teresa. The mansions were left to crumble and the remains can still be seen today in the Parque de las Ruinas. In Santa Teresa, hillside communities wind up the mountain and are prohibitive to a gridded street layout. This in turn has created smaller, more intimate spaces as there is no expanse of land flat enough to build on a large scale. A pedestrian cannot see farther than a couple of city blocks before the ground drops out to a panoramic view of the city and the ocean beyond it.

Centro
Similar to São Paulo, the Centro of Rio de Janeiro exhibits a mix of both old and new architecture. Modernist skyscrapers dominate the financial district, similar to other major cities in Brazil. However, intermixed are a variety of treasures from the city’s past. The Travessa do Comércio and the Igreja da Candelária are both beautiful examples of how the baroque style had been redeveloped in the New World. In a similar way, the modernist movement in Brazil took on its own regional dialect. Brazilian architecture is often very expressive and experimental with dramatic concrete forms. Safety is a major issue in this neighborhood, I was held-up while crossing through a wide traffic median. High volume roadways cut off public areas such as this, leaving them unsafe and isolated.

Botafogo
An incredibly diverse neighborhood located in the valley, wedged between the beaches to the south and the Centro to the north. This is the area where I stayed. Every morning, a different street would be closed and filled with tents and vendors selling delicious pastries and fruits. The flexibility of the city’s streets proved wonderful to explore, as they allow a variety of such activities. The elongation of the street grid allows for a hierarchical differentiation between the primary east-west roadways and the secondary north-south side streets. This division of traffic allows for the side streets to be easily closed off for community events while maintaining a constant flow through the primary routes, thereby minimizing interruption.

Copacabana
The coast is molded by tourism, as if this wall of glass hotel facades has carved the line between the land and the water. It is packed, but still beautiful in its own commercialized way. The neighborhood is a gradient of dynamism that builds up to the boardwalk along the beach. The public bike share program makes this enormous stretch of waterfront easily accessible. The orange bicycles flock to this beach every morning before the sun is too intense.

Ipanema
Ipanema possesses the most natural beauty. The beach looks completely disconnected from the rest of the city. In fact, you would never guess that you were in a metropolis as large as Rio de Janeiro. It is more like a fictional coastal paradise. Rounded mountains bulge out from the water making for a dramatic backdrop to the rolling Atlantic. The pace of living is far more relaxed here.