# Rich and Poor Hills in the Americas

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As complex forms created by an aggregation of simple elements, hill-towns of the Mediterranean basin have become models for the design of multifamily housing. Suffused with a sense of civic order, physical coherence and continuity with their environments, these towns have a strong appeal to architects, urban theorists, historians and photographers. Among their most attractive features is their integration with the surrounding Topography. Prospective designers of new towns have tended to concentrate on the physical form of hill towns without regard to their sociological or symbolic organization. The coherence of the architecture suggests an underlying reluctance among town dwellers to construct displays of wealth, but behind such seeming restraint, anthropologists have discovered symbolic and cultural structures that establish distinctions of social class or economic standing. According to Doxtater[1] (1989) the town of Mijas in Andalucia sits on top of a relatively steep hill that has a small chapel at its crest and roughly opposite and below the town is the cemetery. Thus the structure replicates the spiritual axis of above and below, heaven and earth. In larger towns Doxtater finds that the wealthy occupy the center, the middle class a concentric area around it, and lower classes the periphery.

As Spiro Kostof has noted, towns arrayed on steep slopes tend to have terraces such as those in Assisi or Gubbio in Umbria; ridge towns have linear shapes; round dome-like mounds yield towns with concentric or radial street patterns. (Kostoff[2] 1991) Claval[3] (1991) identifies three types of hillside cities: ridge, acropolis and slope. These systems of formal classification are difficult to apply to larger cities such as San Francisco or Rio de Janeiro, as important distinctions between superficially similar configurations would be overlooked. Valparaiso, Chile's main port with hills that fall steeply into the sea, could be classified as sloped city, but there is a small but significant area of flat land around the port harbor. The topography of Los Angeles is mostly flat land interrupted by occasional hills. Los Angeles neither an acropolis nor a ridge city would also have to be classified as a sloped city. But only a small proportion of its population lives on inclined surfaces; and as opposed to Valparaiso, a very small percentage of the population experiences both hills and flatland on the same day. Berkeley, California, another sloped city, has a proportion of flatland to hillside that falls somewhere between the two previous examples. Thus the proportion of flatland to hills and people's experiences of topography are sufficiently different in these three cities that a simple system of topographical classification obscures complex relationships between flat land, hills and urban experience.

Hillside cities that grew due to the accelerated expansion of commerce or industry in the nineteenth century formed less cohesive configurations than their smaller earlier antecedents. As such neither their social nor formal structures has attracted the attention of architects, despite the opportunities for analysis provided by their broad vistas and accessible heights. Not unlike the picturesque garden tradition that offers a glimpse of the whole only to lose and recover it at a later stage in the journey, hillside cities are typically observed by alternating glimpses of part and whole. By contrast cities on flat land must be understood by an imaginative reconstruction of episodes and fragments. In some cities, Chicago for example, the advantages of a hill are approximated by an elevator ride to the top of a skyscraper much taller than the surrounding buildings. The Sky tours of the John Hancock Tower offer the ultimate observatory experience, information that has surprised even the most seasoned Chicagoans. But ascent is possible only during business hours and takes place on private property. Cities built on hills offer exceptional opportunities to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of an urban whole from a variety of locations. It is tempting to speculate that the strong sense of civic pride felt by citizens of Valparaiso, San

Francisco or Rio de Janeiro is related to the idiosyncratic quality of their urban structures as well as the spectacular nature of their settings.

While urban historians have shown little interest in analyzing relationships between form and topography in nineteenth century cities, the social component has been ignored altogether. Relationships between topography and social class are clearly evident in cities of the western United States. Berkeley, California is divided into a flat and hilly zone, each settled by different demographic groups: the flatland settlers were mostly immigrants, Irish, Catholic and working class; those who settled in the hills were, mostly native-born, Protestant and professional. While the flatlands remain working-class, the ethnic composition of the flats now consists mainly of Latinos, African Americans and Asians, while residents of the hills are wealthier and mainly non-Latino Caucasian, a pattern that continues to be repeated all along the west coast. During the closing decades of the twentieth century, hillside developments proliferated on the California coast as previously untouched parcels of land with panoramic views were subdivided and built upon.[4]

Establishing social, economic and class distinctions by lower or higher elevation is a practice not limited to North America. Towards the middle of the twentieth century, upper social classes in Andean Latin American cities such as Quito, Lima and Santiago de Chile — laid out in the sixteenth century according to grid and plaza model of the Laws of the Indies — abandoned the historic town centers for the periphery by moving to higher ground. The heights provided the usual advantages: better views, cooler temperatures, access to cleaner air, seclusion, physical separation from the lower classes and because access to their properties was more difficult, a greater sense of security.

Racial, ethnic and cultural divisions in Latin America are tied to income, social class and ancestry. Even though the racial stocks, the mixtures and the ways in which social races are defined differ from region to region, in the Americas direct descendants of European dominate socio-economic relations throughout the new world.[5] The great majority of those of Native American or African origin belong to the lower income and social classes, and the Caucasian descendants of the Spanish conquistadores to the upper strata of society. The Amerindian population predominates in the highland countries all along the Pacific from Mexico to Northern Chile. The black population in the Caribbean basin, the North American lowlands and Brazil and Caucasoids are most visible in the North American North and the South American South including Chile, Argentina and Uruguay.[6] According to Robert J.C.Young colonial power relations consist of a dialectic of attraction and repulsion that becomes threatened through the perception of de-civilization activated by processes of hybridization and miscegenation.

"Let any man turn his eyes to the Spanish American dominions, and behold what a vicious, brutal, and degenerate breed of mongrels has been there produced, between Spaniards, Blacks, Indians and their mixed progeny" remarks Edward Long in1774 in his book "The History of Jamaica or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of the Island: with Reflections on its Situation Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws and "They are a disgrace to human Nature" states Robert Knox in The Races of Men,; a philosophical enquiry into the influences of race over the destinies of nation. 2d ed, in1862 blaming the perpetual revolutions of South America on their degenerate racial mixture."[7] While fresh air or distance from infected waters makes elevations attractive to the wealthy, class and race conscious Americans( North and South) also use the hills from whic attain broad sweeping views as powerful metaphors for their (racial and financial) superiority. In a pattern that recalls European colonial settlements throughout Asia and Africa, much of the desirable higher ground in the Americas was taken over by descendants of the first Spanish settlers or later European immigrants, while people of mixed blood remained farther down the slopes. or in less desirable areas further away from the main business centers.

Expressions and colloquialisms such as high or low living or high life defined as a luxurious existence capture the socio-economic implications of topographical heights as places of privilege. These relationships are not ubiquitous as geology, climate, land cost of construction can make hills (living high) undesirable. Poor migrants looking for employment opportunities in large South American cities such as Santiago, Lima, Tijuana, Mexico Caracas or Rio often end up living on remote or unstable hillsides. These informal, often-illegal settlements take place mostly in areas considered marginal or unattractive by the real-estate market with substandard connections to the central business district. Another factor that inhibits settlement by the middle or upper classes is the rapid downward movement of rock, earth or landfill caused by rainfall runoff. The differences in geological or climatic conditions or connections to the business district therefore determine the settlement of hills by race and or class.

In Valparaiso, Chile Cerro Alegre and Cerro Concepción, with the best connections to the downtown area,

became privileged enclaves for wealthy immigrants and the descendents of Europeans settlers. Other more distant hills remain to this day working-class districts inhabited by people of mixed race Being situated in a kind of topographical bowl surrounded by mountains on three of its sides the city of Santiago de Chile's suffers a bad smog problem that is less acute on higher elevations. To escape the bad air and live in fashionable suburban houses, the wealthy started moving in the twenties to the foothill of the Andes to an area called Providencia, and continue moving east and up to this day. Some of the more expensive properties on the market are offered in places such as Lo Barnechea situated higher up then the older neighborhood of Providencia. Because there was land obtainable at various elevations, available choices of building parcels were also determined by distinctions of class and race in Lima, Peru.[8] In addition neighborhoods such as Monte Rico in Lima offered good connections to the commercial areas and warmer and drier days during the winter.

Similarly, Rio de Janeiro was first established at the foot of Sugar Loaf Mountain, but in 1655, the city was moved up to the Morro do Castelo for purposes of civil defense and to escape the disease-breeding swamps of the flatlands. By the end of the seventeenth century, settlement had resumed on the lower slopes but the Catholic Church continued its tradition of building churches and convents on the hilltops. When the Portuguese established the royal court in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of nineteenth century, efforts to expand residential development on the hills acquired new momentum.[9] Just as in Valparaiso, the foreign community developed a taste for living on the hillsides, with the French and the English claiming the hills of Gloria and Catete while the Germans colonized Santa Theresa.

The French also established residences a little further away from the center of town in the forests of Tijuca Mountain and the English founded the town of Alto da Boa-Vista in the same mountainous area. At the higher elevations, the elite found good views, escape from mosquitoes and a distance from odors emanating from the swamps. Today there are still elegant neighborhoods of single-family mansions, such as the upper areas of Gavea, that enjoy spectacular views, but flat areas with proximity to the beaches, such as Ipanema and Leblon are the most desirable areas of town.

But the higher elevations of Rio were never the exclusive enclaves of the privileged classes. Unstable ground, landslides, difficult access to transportation and long commutes to the beach left many of the most spectacular hillside sites in Rio occupied by favelas, or shanty-towns. In fact during the 18th and 19th centuries, the hilly areas around Rio had also become the most sought-after refuge of runaway slaves, who established independent towns there. With the abolition of slavery in 1888, newly emancipated slaves joined them.

With the decline of agriculture and the spread of Brazilian industrialization in the nineteen forties, strong migratory movements developed towards the cities. Migrants escaping northern Brazil's droughts arrived at the capital searching for opportunities. Because ''standard' housing is scarce and expensive around central areas of Rio and immigrants are motivated by the need to live close to work, the migrant population found shelter in favelas on ground that escaped real-estate speculation such as unstable hills, swamps or flood prone ground. According to some estimates there are close to six hundred favelas in Rio, containing twenty percent of the city's population, mostly immigrants from the countryside or the urban poor. Favela dwellings in Rio are built of brick infilled concrete frames and metal sheeting.



Fig. 1. Favela Andarai, Rio de Janeiro

Visually seductive because of the organic way in which they appear to cling to the hillsides they are difficult environments in which to live. With narrow dark streets that admit little light and or fresh air, no infrastructure or services such as garbage disposal and small precarious looking houses, favelas have become a symbol of poverty throughout the world. Often similar looking at a distance they feature a great variety of differences. Some favelas are more overcrowded than others are and many have been improved over time featuring social services and open spaces for play and or gathering. Surveys have shown that income is slightly higher in

those settlements that are located close to high-income neighborhoods.[10] Morro do Timbau, as other favelas has a labyrinthian street system but the dwellings are spaced more distantly from each other. Unlike Rosinha for instance, Brazil's largest favela vehicular traffic up the hills is possible on many of its roads.[11] Located between Sao Conrado facing Praia de Pepino (Pepino Beach) and Gavea, two of Rio's wealthiest enclaves Rocinha with an estimated sixty-thousand to two hundred thousand people living is of a size that would qualify it as a mall city in its own right. Governed by drug lords the favela has a semi-autonomous government that makes it feel isolated from the rest of the urban fabric. But in actual fact there are many relations between the formal and informal sector of the city particularly as it relates to work and recreation. And while favelas look unpleasant from the outside it is common to find neatly arranged interiors, carefully tended flower pots on window sills or little courts and terraces and carefully painted doors and windows.

A common sight in South America, shantytowns are not necessarily the result of the same socio-economic conditions. Nor are they always illegal settlements although this might often be the case. Around Mexico City for example the settlement of the hills is distinct in that it occurred when the local population became impoverished rather than, as is frequently the case the in Rio the result of migration from distant places. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the area around the hill Cerro de Judío, immediately North of Mexico City consisted of agricultural land and scattered villages. The relatively steep inclination of the slope kept its higher elevations free of farming. By the 1940s as the nearby town of Bernabe began to decentralize the first houses appeared on the lower hillside. Poor management and low returns from crop production drove small farmers whose ownership of their land had been the result of Mexico's program of land reform to work on construction sites, and in the rapidly expanding factories of nearby Mexico City. As the impoverished farmers were forced to their sell their land, they moved with their families to the hills.[12]

The common association of certain classes to particular geographical areas suggests the relationship between class, race and topography is static, but urban hills can have dynamic patterns of settlement. Rincon Hill, at the western end of the Bay Bridge in San Francisco is favored with a relatively mild microclimate sheltered from winds and fog. Unsurprisingly, the city's wealthiest families colonized it first. But after the execution of a grade cut through nearby Second Street to ease traffic flow, Rincon Hill lost its place as the socially preeminent hill. 13(Shumate 1988). By the time of the great San Francisco Fire in 1906, Rincon Hill had become despite its privileged location a rundown area of boarding houses, sailor bars and small factories. 14(Caen 1973) In the 1990s during the dot-com bubble when many of the old factories and warehouses were converted into office spaces, Rincon Hill temporarily recovered but it has now reverted to a somewhat depressed state, like much of the surrounding area.

Other areas such as Boyle Heights in Los Angeles or Golden Hill in San Diego lost their appeal to the social elites when the introduction of cars made it possible to reach hilltop areas that had untill that time been either to far from down-towns or inaccessible without them. Established in the late-1800s, Boyle Heights is Los Angeles' oldest residential neighborhood outside of the old pueblo center. But by early 1900's there were already visible concentrations of Jewish, Japanese, Mexican, and African Americans and by the 1920s Boyle Heights had become Los Angeles' most heterogeneous neighborhood with a large population of Jewish immigrants. Today the neighborhood is primarily Latino. (Boyle Heights 2001) It has been suggested that the ubiquitous spread of the plain grid over North America is expressive of equality of opportunity and the democratic ideal; when superimposed on a landscape of hills and valleys, the grid provides more favorable situations for some then others.

Yet the example of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles or of Rio de Janeiro suggests that the categorical imposition of social or political constructs on landforms may result in erroneous conclusions. Topography is only one the many factor that determine the value of urban real estate, or establish distinctions of race and class.

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