



The Polycentric City

A Look at Lima BY ALDO PANFICHI

IT'S SIX IN THE MORNING AND THE *COMBI* PULLS up to a crowded stop in an outlying community of Lima. Commuters are pushing to get a seat on the small bus, larger than a minivan and almost always jammed, seeking to make the long trip to downtown Lima. Micaela, who works in a Starbucks on Arequipa Avenue, joins the crowd of passengers pressing against each other as the driver's helper yells, "Get on, get on, there's room in the back!" The *combi* makes its way through a din of honking horns and assorted insults from other drivers over some bad turn or other; children get on to sing or play an instrument in order to earn their fare to get to school. Some poorer kids get on the bus to hawk candy.

The regular riders come from the *conos*—periurban areas located in the northern and southeastern parts of Lima, formed by migrants during the last century. Saleswomen and owners of small businesses are the first to get off along Perú Avenue. And then the workers depart for the factories in the industrial park on Argentina Avenue. Finally, young people start leaving, first at the university preparatory academies, and further on at the National University of San Marcos. The *combi* almost empties out at the private Catholic University, letting out students who come from upwardly mobile North Lima. A few blocks on, in the districts of Pueblo Libre and Jesús María, senior citizens, most of them retired employees, climb on to the *combi* with difficulty, and some passen-

gers give up their seats to them. At the end of Cuba Avenue, Micaela, the Starbucks employee, calls out, "Getting off, getting off!" stepping agilely over the merchandise-filled bags of other women passengers. They are headed for the traditional Victoria neighborhood, site of the Gamarra commercial emporium, where they will sell the products of their informal and family workshops.

The passengers don't know each other, but they may have crossed paths before. Perhaps Micaela may have served coffee to some of them or bought their knockoff clothing or walked by some of them at the university. In the *combi*, no one makes eye contact; all glance out of the corner of their eyes at fellow passengers.

A BIT OF HISTORY

The academic literature about 20th-century cities describes how Lima, the colonial "city of the kings," experienced extraordinary expansion due to migratory waves of peasants from the Andean highlands. The dominant image is one of a divided city in which a largely migrant population surrounds the traditional center inhabited by elite residents who wall themselves off in their increasingly threatened space (see, for example, Jürgen Golte and Norma Adams, *Los Caballos de Troya de los Invasores. Estrategias Campesinas en la Conquista de la Gran Lima*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1987). The concept portrays a city disconnected between the central area and the zones of expan-

Combis and cars dominate the streets of Lima, a city no longer organized by its downtown.

sion, and one in which public spaces are ignored. The separation of living spaces is imposed through walls, gates, private guards or simply making access difficult for groups other than one's own.

Today, this image of Lima organized by the center-periphery dichotomy is becoming obsolete. The city has a new dynamic, and recent research suggests new analysis. Lima indeed does continue to be a city of immigrants, although the weight of such immigration is less every year. In 1940, immigrants made up a third of the population, and by 1972, 40 percent—two out of every five Lima residents—came from elsewhere. This figure has slowly begun to diminish, dropping to 34 percent in 2007, according to the Peruvian Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI, 2007). The newcomers, those who arrived in the city between 1993 and 2007, make up an even smaller percentage: only 6 percent, and they also are a different type of immigrant. Young men with little education and practically no job training made up the peasant migration in the 1960s and 70s. Today, immigrants to the city are also young, but they have more education and job preparedness. About half have gone to high school, and more than half (52 percent) are women, according to the 2007 census figures. The new immigrants prefer to live in the central districts of Lima and the eastern *cono*, where many vocational institutes and universities offer

opportunities to study, and the service sectors provide new openings, as Víctor Pontolillo observes in *Migración Interna Reciente y el Sistema de Ciudades, 2002-2007* (UNFPA/INEI, 2011). These findings indicate that the migration to Lima in the first decade of the 21st century is made up of skilled young people in search of better educational opportunities and employment in the modern sector of the urban economy.

In recent decades, Lima has ceased to organize itself around its downtown and instead is now a polycentric city with four consolidated centers. These are the Miraflores Shopping Center, the San Isidro Financial Center, the Gamarra Industrial Center and the Central Market. In addition, other concentrations, such as those in San Miguel and Los Olivos, are in the process of consolidation, according to a 2012 study by Efraín Gonzales del Olarte and Juan Manuel del Pozo Segura. This trend represents a major historical change, given that the political and economic power for the entire country has been concentrated in downtown Lima since 1535. Downtown Lima—what we call Lima Centro—continues to be an articulating axis for the other Limas, but now it serves a complicated framework of relations and movements among them. Lima residents journey great distances to study or work, creating interactions among the far-flung parts of the city.

Mobility produces occupational adjustments. Downtown Lima and East Lima have the highest concentration of people who are more highly educated and have the most spending power. Downtown Lima is home to 56 percent of public employees and 45 percent of professionals, but only 16 percent of blue-collar workers, while the up-and-coming East Lima has 22 percent public employees, 21 percent professionals and 26 percent service workers. North Lima is somewhere in between, and is actually considered to be the place where a new middle class is emerging. This neighborhood houses 19 percent of the professionals, 23 percent of mid-level technicians, 21 percent of office employees, but also 26 percent of the workers.



Mega Plaza

The Mega Plaza Shopping Center in Lima Norte is a good example of polycentric Lima. Inaugurated in 2002 in an area that was still considered poor and peripheral, the shopping center raised a lot of eyebrows. Now, 40,000 shoppers visit it daily, and its sales volume is the second or third greatest in the capital. But this is no ordinary Latin American mall. Mega Plaza connects well culturally with a population whose lifestyles are impregnated with their regional cultural heritage, but who at the same time identify with modernity and the technology associated with global capitalism.

The shopping center's architectural design arranges the main retail stores around a central plaza that evokes the colonial plazas of provincial cities and provides an extraordinary public space where visitors congregate and circulate. Musical groups play Andean, Amazonian and northern styles of cumbia—a regional smorgasbord. A popular food court offers many different types of food with generous portions and innovative fusions such as the traditional roasted Peruvian chicken served with *papa a la huancaína*, potatoes with a special sauce. Or one can try the Andean guinea pig known as *cuy*, accompanied by corn on the cob. And there's a fast food version of typical dishes made from organ meats such as hearts, sweetbreads and *rachi*, a combination of tripe and intestines. All the food is served with Inca Kola or Kola Real, Peru's local answer to Coca Cola. And just in case one has splurged too much on the food offerings, next to the food court is the largest Gold's Gym in the entire city.

On the side streets outside the mall are dozens of regional restaurants and Western Union offices through which overseas relatives send remittances. Municipal savings and loan banks seek to attract customers with low interest rates and an abundance of notaries to legalize the transactions. All around Mega Plaza are stores and outlets whose products come from the Gamarra textile emporium in La Victoria or the industrial park of Villa El Salvador in South Lima. The demand for goods by clients who come from far-flung points of the capital can be met by numerous family firms, and the dynamism of the shopping center has its effect on other zones of the city.

Mega Plaza's success definitely reinforces the idea that a new, energetic middle class has created other Limas out of the old periphery and changed the face of this city.

On the opposite side of the scale are South Lima and West Lima, with older immigrants, mostly longtime residents who tend to be less educated and with less spending power. South Lima has 37 percent of the blue-collar workers, 18 percent of unskilled workers, and only 5 percent of public employees and 8 percent of professionals. West Lima is home to 7 percent of professionals, 11 percent employees and 10 percent blue-collar workers

With distinct rhythms and peculiarities, startups are thriving with extraordinary dynamism; various groups with their own particular identities occupy available public space. However, mobility and diversity are not immune from generating tension, jealousy and conflict. The coexistence of unequal groups reproduces forms of segregation at the local level, especially when there are marked differences in income and consumption patterns, according to Paul Peters and Emily Skop in “Socio-spatial Segregation in Metropolitan Lima, Peru” (*Journal of Latin American Geography*, 6 (1), 2007). This potential for conflict worries both authorities and residents. It is not a matter of anomie or the “law of the jungle,” as the tabloid press declares with alarm, but of tense and stormy relationships among

individuals who quarrel over goods and opportunities. But these same individuals also need to exchange information, traverse the city together and even mobilize politically. Lima residents cross borders, bridges and labyrinths every single day.

In the last few years, public spaces and shops, educational institutions, and entertainment complexes have become spaces where Lima residents encounter and interact with one another. Today, for the most part, they are not migrants, but children and grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of migrants. Here, in the working-class neighborhoods, one encounters numerous sports fields for soccer and volleyball practice that mayors and politicians in search of votes so frequently inaugurate. Here are sprawling wholesale markets with foods from different regions of the country and modern malls with brand-name stores and food courts such as the emblematic Mega Plaza. Here one also finds the commercial conglomerates of small businesses such as those of Gamarra or the industrial park of Villa El Salvador, as well as huge markets of stolen and contraband goods.

From the perspective of this modern cityscape it is better to set aside the obsolete image of a Lima fragmented

between a modern center and a backwards periphery and focus instead upon the notion of a polycentric city containing distinct sectors within a metropolis. The majority of its inhabitants were born in the city; while new migrants do arrive, they are principally young people in search of better educational and job opportunities. Yet the city is not homogeneous but made up of multiple micro-societies held together by ties of class, kinship, education, neighborhoods, lifestyles or life aspirations. In these micro-societies trust among their members coexists with distrust of other groups, the state and the authorities. However, in spite of suspicions, the Lima residents of the 21st century, with their lively streets and public places, are constructing bridges daily between these micro-societies, as Micaela demonstrates to us in her long daily journey on the *combi*.

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TABLE 1: Primary Occupation by Groups of Districts in Lima, 2007*

Primary Occupation	Public Employees	Professionals	Mid-level Technicians	Office Workers	Service Workers	Laborers	Unskilled Workers
Lima Center	56%	45%	36%	38%	23%	16%	21%
North Lima	13%	19%	23%	21%	25%	26%	23%
South Lima	5%	8%	12%	11%	16%	19%	18%
East Lima	22%	21%	19%	19%	26%	30%	28%
West Lima	5%	7%	10%	11%	10%	10%	10%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Compilation by author based on the National Institute for Statistics and Informatics-National Census 2007: XI of Population and VI of Housing

*Groups of districts are determined by their geographical location. The Metropolitan Planning Institute (IMP), named the groups of districts as interdistrict areas.