Introduction

My interest in the work that follows first arose in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when I was a professor at the Catholic University in Campinas (Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas, PUCC) and an architect at the São Paulo Housing Development Company (Companhia de Desenvolvimento Habitacional e Urbano, CDHU). My professional experience as an architect at that time ranged from an internship in France to research architectural aspects of social housing to my daily architectural assignments on public low-income housing projects. As a professor, I frequently took my students to tenement houses (cortiços) and slums (favelas), trying to inject service learning into their courses of study.

In both endeavors, my objective was to understand, as best I could, the historical roots of modern Brazilian life, particularly regarding politics, architecture, society, and urban culture. In Brazil, my projects, teaching, and writing taught me about the complex interaction between professionals and academics in public life, the importance of being sensitive to and respectful of multiple narratives, and the vital role of interdisciplinary collaboration. Upon coming to the United States, I began my doctoral studies. The change from my professional status in Brazil to a quite different academic and cultural life in Miami challenged me to rethink my work experiences. The core of this book rests on an interdisciplinary exploration of Brazilian cultural history through a reconstruction of the roots of work practices, institutions, and mechanisms that were still strong and alive during my professional life—practices that were and still are deeply in tune with Brazilian social expectations and firmly grounded in its culture. Urban Space and National Identity in Early Twentieth Century São Paulo, Brazil explores urban professional practices of the 1930s and 1940s by focusing on people, institutions, and sociocultural mechanisms that made possible the continued reproduction of these practices. These mechanisms, parts of a historical process, turned into culturally arbitrary procedures.

Rather than analyzing urban politics and its impact on peoples’ lives, this study focuses on sociocultural ideas and practices reflected in middle-class professionals’ work to explore how architecture and politics crafted the space within which this increasingly important group prospered in São Paulo during the 1930s and 1940s. By disentangling intertwined intertwined narratives in the urban space, Urban Space and National Identity in Early Twentieth Century São Paulo, Brazil highlights how professionals from private and public agencies made a concerted effort to contribute to a grammar of identity that interpreted and defined the
space of the city not only geographically but also within people’s minds. Hence, this book is about urban professionals and the historical space they occupied in the construction of national and regional identities.

The book stresses the unfolding regional construction of a modern identity in São Paulo, which came to define both the state and the nation in the twentieth century, through the interactions and interplay among three leading urban groups: a Paulista engineering firm, the F.P. Ramos de Azevedo Technical Firm (established 1896); a local public agency, the Municipal Works Department (created in 1900); and a private Anglo-Brazilian development company, the City of São Paulo Improvements and Freehold Land Company Limited (established 1912).

The Place of Space

Urban history has been a fundamental component of the paradigms that evolved within the broader field of Latin American historiography. However, when I started my research more than a decade ago, very few scholars conceptualized urban space using a cultural historical approach. To place urban history in context, it is important to consider the place of space within different themes, perceptions, and accounts of urban groups as developed in varying historical paradigms.

In the late years of the nineteenth century, a patriotic local “Brazilian” history emphasized foundational urban myths. In São Paulo, professionals dedicated to history and geography founded in 1894 the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico de São Paulo (São Paulo Historical and Geographical Institute, IHGSP). The period between the end of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, known in political terms as the Old Republic (1889–1930), saw IHGSP scholars (e.g., Teodoro Sampaio, Affonso d’Escragnolle Taunay, Albert Loefgren, and Orville Derby) devote themselves to the study of national and regional themes. The first histories they produced conveyed a turn-of-the-century regional discourse that reflected an inflated rhetoric emphasizing economic growth and pioneering identity. This kind of rhetoric was later translated into a language of hope for the future and development in what became known as the “classic” works on São Paulo’s urban evolution. Works by Richard Morse, Glenn Beyer, and Jorge Hardoy—required reading in the 1970s for most Latin American university students of urbanization—strived to answer why Latin American cities had developed “differently from cities in other parts of the world.” Though a few works analyzed the process of urbanization from the perspective of either the history of ideas or the role of “secondary” cities, most studies focused on the economic and political role of capital cities in relation to the rural hinterlands, where agricultural exports were produced.

The economic approach attracted the attention of city planners and urban sociologists and stood as the basis of historical diagnoses supporting contemporary policies of urban development. In many ways, such diagnoses tended to be neglectful of a larger social reality. First and foremost, those ideas turned into