

44. Between the lines of memory and places: Urban rehabilitation and sustainability in the process of preservation of the material-culture heritage in the city of La Plata/Argentina (1982-2008)

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Abstract La Plata was planned to become the capital of the Argentinian province of Buenos Aires, in 1882. In the second half of the twentieth century, in line with other capitals in Latin America, the city was wrapped in a process of strong population growth and consequent change in its urban landscape. This generated a heated debate between maintaining the hygienist "ideal city" standard of the late nineteenth century or allowing the progress of the civil construction industry. This research aims to analyse the historical process of preservation of material-cultural heritage of La Plata (1982-2008), taking into account contributions from the field of urban sustainability. As sources of study, in addition to the use of legislative instruments and other written documentation, Oral History is used as essential methodological resource to clarify gaps in written records. With that in mind, the debate about memory and places of memory is quite complex and full of *between the lines*, the prospect is that such narratives allow the capture of the sensitive side of the symbolic relationships between social memory and preservation. Finally, this research is expected to transcend the local area of La Plata and collaborate for fruitful reflections in different cities transiting through similar circumstances.

Keywords: Heritage preservation, Sustainability, Urban rehabilitation, City Memory.

1 Introduction

The themes of heritage preservation and urban sustainability are on the agenda of the current academic debates. At the same time, government agencies are seeking more effective ways to keep the balance between city preservation and growth dynamics. Given this background, this article aims to present partial conclusions of the homonymous doctoral thesis to its title¹, which objectively analyses the historical process of preservation of material-cultural heritage of La Plata city and also examines the actions aimed its protection and appreciation between 1982 and 2008. To this end, this work aims at developing a multidisciplinary study of History and Architecture and Urbanism, with the purpose of generating proposals to help in future work in urban rehabilitation. It emphasizes that such proposals are based on actions of urban sustainability and are aimed to help improving the quality of life of city inhabitants.

2 Considerations about theory and method

A multidisciplinary study in History and in Architecture and Urbanism requires full consideration about the dynamics of *time* and *space*. Understanding the inherent complexity of human life in their time and space is essential to plan actions of *urban rehabilitation*. In this research, the term urban rehabilitation means the rehabilitation of a degraded space with or without compatibility with the current needs, in search for the consonance with the quality of life of its inhabitants (concept related to *urban renewal*, coined by the North American economist Miles Callean during the 1950s). The logic of urban rehabilitation is very wide and it should take other fields into consideration. This paper proposes a direct dialogue with the *heritage preservation* and *urban sustainability*. Sustainability is understood here as the acting capacity of permanence of a certain process, system or element over time. It is worth remembering the provisions of the 1987 Brundtland Commission, that is, the pursuit for meeting the necessities of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. Such provision comes together to the creation of a social welfare situation, one of the *three pillars of sustainability* (economic + social + environmental). As an extension of the social sphere, this work intends to see the local culture and its varied facets in the social logic: cultural values and practices, which is, the tradition itself, which conform to the particular identity of each social group. The signs and symbols of group identification that humankind has produced throughout its history are deeply expressed in a set of evocations and memories, corroborating the composition

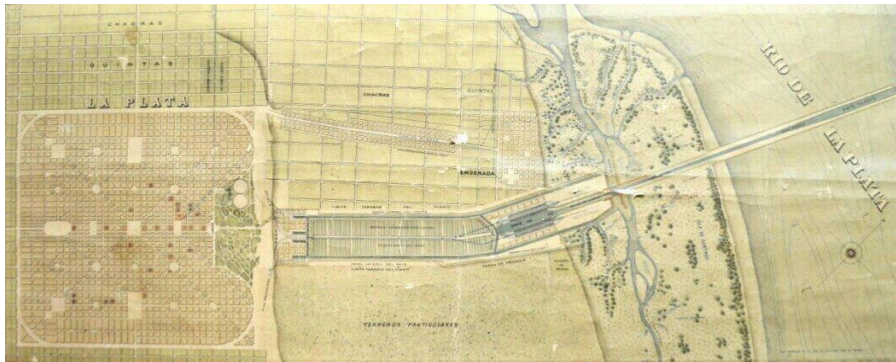
¹Director thesis: Fernando Francisco Gandolfi, National University of La Plata / Argentina; Co-director: Maria del Pilar Mercader Moyano, University of Seville / Spain; Co-director: Eduardo Mosquera Adell, University of Seville / Spain.

of a collective memory (Halbwachs, 2006). In its turn, the concept of *material-cultural heritage* is directly related to this collective memory, being composed of buildings and historical sites that make up the urban-historic landscape of the city (Bandarin et. Al. 2012), that is, the feature set that defines the characteristics of each city and that are connected to the identity and memory of every social group. Pierre Nora noted that the acceleration of change in history has generated more concern for the "places where memory crystallizes", taking into account the dissolution of identities that occurs because of globalization, massification, democratization or the "mediatisation" (Nora, 1993: 07-08). Consequently, he believes that if we still lived our memory, we would not need to dedicate places to it, which we preserve to keep alive the memory that is about to be lost. To Andreas Huyssen, this unbridled memorialization also comes from the "fear of losing" the past, giving rise to the fear that we have about our future (Huyssen, 2002).

Given such statements, it is noticeable that the debate about *memory* and *places of memory* is complex and full of "between the lines". To achieve a successful conclusion of the proposed objective, as a methodological principle, this work has chosen research strategies of the Humanities, undertaken in the following process: *heuristics* (or external documental criticism: search from primary sources as various written documents, objects, images, audio-visual resources, oral stories, etc.); *hermeneutics* (or internal documental criticism: depth and relational analysis of sources); and *synthesis* (completion of the analysis, producing the final writing of the research). As part of the heuristics, it is important to mention the utilization of the resource of *Oral History*, a method of creating new historical sources where written sources are missing or insufficient (Fraser, 1993:131). The applied technique is based on personal interviews (audio recorded and transcribed), promoting the documentary legitimation of the life experiences of people who participated actively in the process of heritage preservation in La Plata. In hermeneutics stage, the macro view of criticism of the documents was based on the methodology of *Content Analysis*, examining the inference of knowledge related to production conditions or, possibly, to perception. This inference might or might not use quantitative indicators (Bardin, 1977: 38). *Enunciation Analysis* (Bardin, 1977: 169-184) was used in the case of written sources, since this kind of analysis is not hermetic and can be adapted to different materials, such as laws, urban planning codes, letters resulting from international conferences and university journals on architecture, among others. The analysis of oral documentation was based on questions of the methodology of Oral History, with the addition of some questions outlined by Luois Gottschalk (Gottschalk, 1950). At the end of the evaluation of the sources, the investigation focused on the technique of *Relations Analysis* (Bardin, 1977: 197-212), a methodology that concentrates on correlations of the evaluated data, making reflections about intertextuality.

3 LA PLATA: An ideal and hygienic city

The city of La Plata was designed in 1882 to become the capital of Argentina's province of Buenos Aires. Analysing the planning of La Plata, both in plan and section, it is possible to notice two noticeable lines of thought, which are not isolated from each other and fuse to compose the complexity of its founding macro plan. The first is based on a concept of "ideal city" taken from the Renaissance matrix², which is routed directly to a second theoretical matrix, which would be hygienist³. Such affirmative is verifiable in the legislation of the time, that is, in the Decree of May 7, 1881: "It shall be consulted, at the same time of the best



convenience for our people, the possibility to maintain the *hygiene*, as will allow the latest scientific advances and the *beauty* of its streets and squares".⁴

Fig. 1 Macro Foundational Plan of La Plata, 1886. Archive of Geodesia (La Plata / Argentina)

Like any planned city in the world, the initial proposals for the project of La Plata underwent transformations with the passing of time, becoming adapted to the empirical possibilities, conceptions and corresponding needs for each new histori-

²The Renacentist concept of an "ideal city" was based on a kind of planning that is orderly, streamlined and harmonious. Geometry is a fundamental element of urban composition and it can be highlighted the emergence of diagonal pathways that move from a centralized point of the plant. In the Baroque period, green developments start to become prominent (formal garden), as well as central axes with monumental character, which can be seen in the palatial planning.

³ The concern with urban hygiene have an important role in the second half of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the enormous and unhealthy growth of industrial cities. In this sense, cities full of green vegetation were designed, with solar penetration allowed by low profile edifications and with a sanitation system based on running water.

⁴Highlighted in this paper. In: Official Gazette of the Province of Buenos Aires. 1881. p.287.

cal moment.⁵ Thus, the city has a gradual vertical growth in its urban profile that initially did not generate great commotion. This situation changed in 1977, when the fire at Argentinian Theatre (important of the foundational period), triggers the start of the concern about the heritage preservation in the city. A broad debate about the restoration or demolition of Theatre starts, ending with the government's decision to demolish the remains of the edification (1978) and to hold a competition for the design of a new building, won by the architects Bars, Garcia, Germani, Ribio, Sbarra and Ucar.⁶ Those were the state of affairs as the 1980s started, permeated by a conducive climate to the consideration of the dimension of material-cultural heritage in La Plata.

3.1 The process of heritage preservation in La Plata

The concern about heritage preservation is boosted by the proximity of the centenary of the foundation of La Plata, in 1982, when the first rules (Municipal By-law n°. 5338/82) concerning buildings older than 1930 were created. These rules referred to the prevention against demolitions, expansions, partial or total changes in use and modifications to the main characteristics of the property, without complying with the Commission of Architectural, Monumental, and Urban Heritage of La Plata (*Comisión del Patrimonio Arquitectónico, Monumental y Urbanístico de La Plata*– CPAMU). This commission was also created in 1982, having the task of managing all matters related to the preservation of the material-cultural heritage of the city. In 1985, it was replaced by the establishment of the Architecture and Urban Infrastructure board (*Dirección de Arquitectura e Infraestructura Urbana*) and Private Works and Planning board (*Dirección de Obras Particulares y Planeamiento*).

In late 1983, the country opens up to democracy and elections are called. In La Plata, the Radical Party ascends to power, Juan Carlos Albertí as Mayor (December, 1983 to December, 1987). In an attempt to "erase" the vast majority of actions undertaken during the dictatorial period, the issue of preservation of material-cultural heritage of the city eventually stagnates. It would be 1986 when the idea of creating the Heritage Preservation Area was put forward, together with the emerging of the Bylaw n°. 6485/86, which declares that several public buildings of

⁵ Foundation process (1882-1910); Consolidation process (1910 - 1935); Transformation process (1935 - 1960); Growth process (1960 - 1980); Decharacterization process (1980 - present).

⁶ E.C.T.A.S.E. (Ente de Construcción Teatro Argentino Sociedad del Estado). National Preliminary Competition for the Construction of the Argentinian Theatre of La Plata: 1st Prize Architects Studies Bars, Garcia, Germani, Ribio, Sbarra, Ucar. Without date.

La Plata are of public interest, registering as part of the urban architecture heritage.

A new political change at the town hall occurs in December, 1987, with the start of the administration of Carlos Pinto, also radical, which remains in office until December, 1991. At that time, the architect Isabel Lopez becomes Director of Planning of the municipality and transforms the Heritage Preservation Area in Department.⁷The architect Alfredo Conti was appointed as the head of Department of Heritage Preservation. During his administration, it is important to emphasize the recovery work done to the main building and surroundings of Meridiano V, the first railway station of La Plata, where a highlight is the talks that took place in conjunction with the community residing in the area. However, the Department of Heritage Preservation is dissolved within a few months of the first administration of Julio Alak, in 1992.

In terms of built heritage, specific interventions were made in some municipal public spaces during the 90s, with the completion of the towers of the Cathedral (1997-2000) becoming the great urban topic of the end of the century. The discussion about heritage preservation in the city peaked in the year 1999, when the Foundation Center for Studies and Projects of the Environment (*Fundación Centro de Estudios y Proyectos del Ambiente* – CEPA) proposed the nomination of La Plata for the list of World Heritage Site. This was postponed by UNESCO due, among other things, the loss of *integrity* that the original city planning suffered in recent decades (Icomos, 2000:48). It is important to note that in the three government spheres (national, provincial and municipal) there was no clear and viable intentions to govern the issue of heritage preservation in the moment of the application attempt. As a result, in the same year of 1999, legislation started to appear at provincial (Law n°. 12121) and national (Decree. 1308) levels, emphasizing the heritage significance of La Plata. In this regard, there was a vacuum in terms of public institutions and effective regulations related to heritage protection. For that reason, the Site Commission (*Comisión del Sitio* – CODESI, bylaw n°. 9103/99) was created as an agency of public participation with the objective of managing municipal planning, focusing on the preservation of material-cultural heritage and, subsequently, to implement the Plan for Site Management (*Plan de Manejo del Sitio*, which identifies its architectural urban components - Bylaw n° 9232/2000). It was only in the year 2000 that the Code of Territorial Urban Planning and Land Use (*Código de Ordenamiento Urbano Territorial y Uso del Suelo*) was promulgated, which includes a chapter determining special areas of heritage preservation (Bylaw n°. 9231/2000).

With the refusal of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the Argentinian government withdraws La Plata candidature before the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO could handle it, given that any disapproval issued by this body precludes a subsequent application. In the meantime, the municipality begins to make an agreement with the Faculty of Architecture

⁷ Interview with Isabel Lopez, recorded on July 11, 2013.

and Urbanism of the National University of La Plata, realisation for an inventory of assets. The architect Eduardo Gentile was responsible for preparing the city's Pre-inventory and Inventory of Public and Private Assets of Heritage Value. The first survey carried out on 55,000 plots of the founding town (about 30 km²), where he identified about 15,000 assets. They were buildings that had historical, architectural and environmental value, grouped into categories for which degrees of value and protection were defined. After presenting the result of the work, the CODESI recommended the review and reduction of the catalogue. In that way, three categories of heritage value and four degrees of protection, reaching a total of 1770 goods to be preserved given their value and 227 given their morphology.⁸ Finally, with the proposal of Special Areas of Conservation, that inventory was promulgated by the Municipal Decree n°. 1579, in October 2006.

A new nomination of La Plata to World Heritage Site was made in February, 2006 (FOUNDATION CEPA, 2006), but the application was again denied by the ICOMOS (2007:258). Such consideration was disclosed in May-June 2007 and the Argentinian government, again, withdraws the candidacy of La Plata, before it was analysed by the World Heritage Committee. As a result, there was never a direct rejection by UNESCO to the case of La Plata, which let the door open for another nomination. This possibility is still maintained by Ruben Pesci, president of the CEPA Foundation and responsible for both previous applications.⁹ In the viewpoint of Ariel Iglesias, the administration of Julio Alak transformed the recognition of La Plata as a World Heritage Site as a political banner.¹⁰ Despite not having received the title, to the architects Fernando Gandolfi and Graciela Silvestri the application "[...] helped to install a climate of debate about possible links between preservation of constructed heritage, urban development and quality of life" (Gandolfi et al. 2004:56).

At the end of 2007, Pablo Bruera takes office as mayor of the city and there is an evident reversal of interest with respect to urban development. At that time, CODESI is dissolved and the Inventory of Heritage Assets stops being published in the municipality website, fuelling the perception of a clear drop in concern of municipal agencies in addressing the issue of heritage preservation. In the same vein, the new Code for Territories and Land Use points to the development of the civil construction industry, in detriment of the maintenance of the heritage sites of the city (Bylaw n°. 10703/2010).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the past three decades produced a wide range of bylaws and rulings about assets, declaring buildings, streets, areas,

⁸ These are: Woodland walk and University areas, Monumental Axis and Central Area School 8 and environment, Neighbourhood Saavedra Square and Meridiano V.

⁹ Interview with Ruben Pesci, recorded on May 27, 2013.

¹⁰ Interview with Ariel Iglesias (Undersecretary of planning and urban development of La Plata throughout the government of Julio Alak (December 1991 to December 2007), recorded on May 10, 2013.

among others, as part of the city's heritage. However, that was not enough to balance the multiple interests at stake in relation to how the urban development of La Plata should happen. Moreover, it is noteworthy that not all preservation initiatives emerge from the government. Non-governmental groups remain active in the discussions about preservation of the historical heritage and the environment, in addition to the spontaneous popular calls.

4 Final considerations

In recent decades, La Plata underwent great changes in its historic townscape. There was also a clear degradation of its material-cultural heritage. The narrative presented in the previous sections provokes some questions that exceed the scope of La Plata in particular and serve to fuel broader thoughts on the subject: Is it necessary for a city to "crystallize" in time to be understood as a heritage asset? Still, is it *possible* for a city to "crystallize" in time? Can't it change and be heritage at the same time?



Fig. 2 Aerial Photo of La Plata.
Photo by the author in 2011.

Preservation does not "freeze" assets, as a *symbolic re-elaboration* occurs in articulation between past and contemporary language, aiming to accommodate current social practices (Madsen Melo, 1998:33). The very process of urbanization is ongoing and is not "frozen". However, the many instances of government should regulate this process, seeking for a harmonious output between development and preservation.

In the case of La Plata, its status as a planned city generates discussions about the maintenance of the model stipulated by its designers in late nineteenth century, as well as about the changes that occur outside this model, related to the city's own growth and the creation of new interests according to each era. Given that there is "no turning back" in time, urban sustainability in modern times can be translated to an *update* to its founding hygienist model.

The city keeps its course, growing vertically and (re)seeking or (re)building its identity. Amid this situation, it is important to ponder: What will be the future of urban La Plata? To what social groups is heritage preservation more interesting and to what others is more interesting the promotion of civil construction? Would the so-called "city of diagonals" keep the essence expressed by its designers or create a new identity? And, mainly, who are the stakeholders most affected in the midst of this crash of forces?

These are questions that invite us to reflect, not only about the urban future of La Plata, but also about a number of other cities that go through similar circumstances. Thinking about these issues is critical to the debate about what urban model we would like to generate in our present and leave for future generations.

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