

AN APPROACH TO URBANISM IN ARGENTINA. Urban types and their evolution over four hundred years.

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ABSTRACT

From the colonization of the present Argentine territory by the Spaniards onwards, the foundation of towns and villages implied the effective occupation of the land. Towns were settled along the main commercial routes, while villages appeared in relation of the defence of the frontiers or the exploitation of natural resources. Most urban centres were constructed according to a previous plan that included urban layout and plots system. After the independence from Spain, new towns and villages were founded, especially in territories not occupied in colonial times. The regular grid pattern layout introduced by the Spaniards continued to be predominant up to the 20th. century, something that allows to refer to typical Argentine urban features with incidence in the country's cultural identity. The purpose of this article is to introduce the evolution of the most typical urban layout over four hundred years and a reference to the present situation of the main Argentine cities.

KEY WORDS

Argentina – urbanism - territorial structure – urban morphology

Introduction

In a certain way, it could be stated that all towns in Argentina are, or were, new towns. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, just a little part of the actual national territory was occupied by urban cultures. The existing villages were not used by the Spaniards to settle their towns, that were built up on vacant territories. From the Spanish occupation onwards, most Argentine cities and villages were constructed according to a previous plan, where the urban layout and the plot system were determinants for the urban morphology.

A city is a complex system that includes different types of components (natural conditions of the site, urban layout, plot system, individual buildings, free spaces, infrastructure, etc.). As a living organism, it is in a constant process of construction and mutation, according to social, economic and cultural conditions. A city cannot be described, studied or assessed as a static object but rather as a process resulting from the relations among these components. Some changes are not only unavoidable but desirable, since the city is constructed in order to house a society that changes over time.

The components of the urban system bear different dynamics of permanence and change. Among these components, the layout is perhaps the most alike to permanence over time, while others, like buildings or gardens, tend to be more sensitive to change, alteration or disappearance. Urban layout can be defined as the arrangement on the territory of the different urban components: streets system, spaces limited by streets (blocks), public buildings, etc. (1). They can be classified in spontaneous, if the components are attached with no previous plan, or deliberated, when a previous plan exists. At the same time urban layouts can be regular or irregular, according its relation to a geometric scheme. From a formal point of view there are three basic types: radio-concentric, linear and grid patterned. The combination of this three basic types produces a wide range of possibilities.

In Argentina, most towns were erected according to deliberated and regular schemes and there is an absolute predominance of towns that can be defined since the presence of two basic components: grid pattern and central square. This type is deeply rooted in Argentine urbanism, it was introduced by the Spaniards and survived, with slight changes, over four centuries. Norms ruled the foundation of towns and villages, defining a type that kept its basic elements, even incorporating new elements that enriched and made more complex the original simple model.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the evolution of cities in the country over a span of four hundred years, focusing on urban layouts, showing how the grid pattern schemes became a fundamental component of Argentine urban identity.

Spanish towns

From the end of the 15th century onwards, when Spain undertook the enterprise of occupying and colonizing vast territories in the Americas, the foundation of a town implied, through the establishment of permanent population, the effective domain of the land. The norms given by the Spanish kings to rule all the aspects of the colonization, gathered in the 17th. century under the name of *Leyes de Indias* (Indian Laws), included prescriptions on the foundational ceremony and on the functional and physical features of towns. The first instructions were given by King Fernando in 1513, recommending a previous plan for towns that should appear clear in the disposition of square and church, of streets and blocks. This quite vague idea was translated, during the first half of the 16th. century, into the regular grid employed in towns as Mexico City, Puebla or Lima. Sixty years later, in 1573, the King Philip II signed an Instruction that in 149 ordinances compiled and completed all the existing norms (2). According to these ordinances, the main square, or *plaza*, would be located in the centre of the town and constitute the departure point of the grid and of four main streets. The plaza had to be rectangular, with an obligatory relation between sides and bear minimal dimensions

according to the population of the town. The main streets and the blocks sides facing the plaza would have arcades for the protection from sun or rain. Around the plaza some plots would be reserved for church, town hall, gaol and other public buildings, emphasising the importance of the plaza as social, political and religious core of the town (3). The ordinances introduced the idea of territorial planning, since beyond the boundaries of the urban centre the territory was arranged in belts bearing specific functions: extension of the town, pasturage lands and farms (4).

By 1573, however, most Spanish principal towns had already be settled in the Americas and the ideal model established by the ordinances was practically never employed. On account of practical reasons, the plazas were not rectangular but the result of leaving a single block free of edification. This allows to speak of a “theoretical” type, defined by the ordinances, and a “classic” one, a result of the interpretation of the norms (5). The main variation to this simple type was referred to towns located by the sea or next to rivers, where the plaza did not occupy the centre but was placed next to the shore.

The blocks were divided in four plots, the *cuartos*, something that allowed not only the construction of fairly big houses and gardens but to have some land for vegetables gardens and stables. The primitive *cuartos* were however soon divided into narrower plots. As buildings were built up on the front line of the plots, the urban result of these colonial towns was a continuous facade along the street, with a tendency to a continuous height of construction. Only churches and town hall interrupted with their higher volumes and towers the predominance of the low rise urban fabric.

Only a part of the present Argentine territory was effectively occupied during the Spanish period. The localization of towns was determined by a territorial structure defined by the main trade routes, some of them already existing prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The main routes converged in the city of Buenos Aires, founded in 1580, and took to the North (Bolivia and Peru), the Northeast (Paraguay) and the West

(Chile). Every region bore its own architectural characteristics and there was a certain balance among the different regional economies. The main towns founded by the Spaniards, today provincial capitals, were located along the main routes.

Minor towns or villages were related to the defence of the territory, especially in the boundaries of the colonized areas, the exploitation of mines or the development of agriculture. Even in the case of spontaneous formation of an urban centre, for example around a rural chapel, the tendency was to arrange the layout according to the grid pattern model. A special case were the Jesuit missions located on a territory belonging today to Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay; here the plaza was once again the core of the village, one side was occupied by a block of buildings containing the church, the school, the priests house and the workshops while the other three sides were reserved for housing, this time grouped in rows.

Towns of the 19th. century

After the independence from Spain in 1816, many other towns were established all over the country, especially in the vast territories not occupied during the colonial period. The development of agricultural activities, especially in the *pampa*, the enormous plain in central Argentina, took to the establishment of population stemming from immigration policies implemented by the government since the second half of the century. The railway system, introduced in 1857, was designed in order to take the agricultural goods to the ports to proceed to the exportation to Europe. By the end of 19th. century a new territorial structure appeared, this time formed by a railway system converging in the ports along the Paraná and Plata rivers and the seashore. Buenos Aires became the main point of the system and the main railway lines had their terminal stations next to the city harbour. Many towns and villages were established along the rails, often with particular urban layouts.

As in the Spanish period, a set of norms regulated the foundation of towns. A decree of 1814 advised to use the square shape instead of the circular, because it was easier to divide the land in similar and regular plots. It established as well that the layout of towns had to begin in the central plaza (6). A decree of 1821 established that the Engineers Department of the Province of Buenos Aires would be in charge of drawing the plan of every town and that a territory around the towns would be reserved for agriculture, recreating the Spanish model of an urban and agricultural unit, where the town was the centre. In 1825, a decree established that in all towns some plots facing the main plaza would be reserved for the institutional buildings (church, town hall and school), retaking the idea of the plaza as functional and spatial core of the city. In the province of Buenos Aires a decree of 1828 established the features of the towns to be erected next to the rural fortifications built up for the defence of the land: the plan had to be square shaped, the boundaries defined by a periphery avenue, there would be five squares and two avenues converging in the plaza would act as main entrances to the town (7). This decree determined a layout that would be employed for the total occupation of the province in the Buenos Aires and in some other regions of the country. The Immigration and Colonization Law of 1876 confirmed the validity of the type when establishing, in order to home the foreign population arriving to the country, an urban and territorial layout defined in a square shape, the grid pattern and the plaza as main open space (8). The city of Chivilicoy, in the province of Buenos Aires, founded in 1856 is one of the earliest examples of the employment of the new layout (9).

In these new towns, the plot system tended to a rational outline, introducing two models identified as H or X on account of the figures formed by the plots. In the first case the purpose was to define plots of similar surface by varying the dimensions while in the latter the idea was to maintain a constant width varying length and surface of the plots according to their position in the block (10).

This 19th. century type implied an easily legible system of structural components of the urban centre: the main plaza, secondary squares, entrance avenues. Some components acted as inductors for the formation and consolidation of the urban fabric since the progressive occupation of these towns began around the plaza, following along the avenues. The introduction of the railway took to a change in the urban structure, the railway station became a new urban pole, including commerce facilities, restaurants and hotels. Usually, the street linking the station to the main plaza became the main commercial street of the town, introducing a linear scheme in the urban structure.

The main urban creation of the 19th. century was the city of La Plata. Once declared Buenos Aires federal capital in 1880, it was necessary to find a new capital for the province. After assessing and rejecting some existing towns, the provincial government decided to proceed to build up a new city. The design took into account the current legal prescriptions but incorporated the most advanced urban ideas of the time, including those belonging to the hygienic trends of the century, developed in Argentina by a group of physicians (11).

The idea of a square city surrounded by land for agriculture was retaken in La Plata. It was a condition for the election of the site the possibility of a port, that was integrated to the territorial scheme. The main features of the urban design can be summarised in the following items:

- the city has the shape of a square of some 5 Km. per side and defined by a boulevard 90 metres wide
- the grid pattern was used, with blocks of 120 metres per side, including one avenue every six streets
- a system of diagonal streets is superposed to the grid. There are two main diagonals linking the vertices of the square and six more linking the main parks and squares.

- a central ribbon is defined by two contiguous avenues, forming the main functional axis of the city. At every side of this axis, the blocks reduce their width to 60 metres, increasing it progressively by ten metres per block up to reach again the common measure of 120 metres per side.
- the central axis concentrates the main institutional buildings: cathedral, town hall, theatre, provincial parliament, provincial government house and police station. Other administrative buildings and main banks are located along secondary perpendicular axis.
- The green spaces system includes an urban park located at one of the central axis and 23 squares and minor parks located on the crosses of avenues. These squares and parks vary in shape and dimensions according to their localization in the plan and in relation of the presence or not of a diagonal street.

Some towns and villages were not conceived according to the predominant type, among them, those established along the railways. In these cases, it is usual that the railway station occupies a central position and becomes the core of the urban composition. Sometimes the plaza is located just in front of the station or, in other cases, the main street is the axis taking to the railway ensemble.

The evolution over the 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th. century the norms for the establishment of towns and villages did not define a determined urban type. Law 3487 of the province of Buenos Aires on towns foundations, of 1913, establishes that no matter how the layout is, most streets should be oriented in order to assure proper sunning. The norm recognizes the presence of a main square although there are not prescriptions for its localization. Some towns of the first decades of the 20th. century derive from the process of industrialization of the country, when villages were erected next to the factories in order to home and provide commerce, education and health facilities for industry workers. In

these cases, it is possible to find examples with particular urban features. Clear zoning is usual, worker's houses are ranged along a street taking to the factory, while the administrators houses and social facilities occupy specific areas.

The most outstanding example of new town of the second half of the century is Nueva Federación in the province of Entre Ríos. It was constructed to re-lodge the inhabitants of the ancient Federación, that would be covered by the lake resulting of the construction of the Salto Grande barrage on the Uruguay river. The urban layout retakes some aspects of Argentine traditional towns, like the grid pattern, but at the same time some ideas stemming from modern urbanism are introduced: the strict zoning and distribution of functions, poles of concentration of social facilities linked by traffic axis and an open urban fabric different from the compact traditional block.

The evolution followed by existing towns over the century show similar processes practically all over the country, that can be summarized as follows: progressive occupation of the urban centre, extension of the urban areas beyond the original boundaries, occupying land intended for vegetables culture or agriculture and urban renovation, especially in the central areas, consisting in the individual replacement of buildings for new ones. The introduction, from 1950 on, of high rise buildings produced changes in the scale and in the original harmony of the townscape.

The plans elaborated along the 20th. century tended to urban renovation and were not sensitive to the conservation of traditional features, something that makes difficult the identification of homogeneous areas belonging to different stages of the construction or evolution of cities. In general, the possibilities of situations that can be found are:

- a) Traditional urban fabric without renovation: it is possible to verify the persistence of the original features and the correspondence and coherence among the diverse urban and architectural components. The area constitutes a testimony of a determined stage of the evolution of the town.

- b) Traditional urban fabric including renovation: renovation could occur maintaining a continuity of the original morphological features (modes of occupation of the plots, buildings height) or based on new ways of occupation and exploitation of the soil, many times introducing high rise buildings.
- c) Incomplete traditional urban fabric consolidated over time with diverse ways of occupying the soil. This gives results similar to b.
- d) New urban fabric corresponding to areas of recent consolidation. They differ from the more ancient areas on the way of occupation of the space and in architectural types.
- e) Incomplete new urban fabric. Areas in process of consolidation where the total occupation of the plots has not yet occurred. They belong to the periphery of cities or suburban areas.

Conclusions

This short introduction of urban types and their evolution in Argentina allows to conclude that most urban centres in the country bear common features deriving from the tradition started with the colonial towns. These features (urban layout, divisions of the urban soil, urban fabric, buildings types) allow to refer to a national or regional tradition and play a significant role in the nation's cultural identity. The process of evolution and renovation was seldom directed by plans, and when there were plans they did not take into account the preservation of traditional features. The most frequent current situation is the mix of diverse types of urban fabric and architectural types, sometimes originating tensions produced by the differences in volumes scale or architectural expression. A challenge for architects and planner is how to manage these cities in order to encourage renovation and change while preserving those essential features linked to a cultural tradition of four hundred years.

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