

**The struggle to belong**  
***Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.***

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**Creating Capital Cities.**  
**A Comparative History of Modern Urbanism in Buenos Aires and Bogotá.**

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## Introduction.

Latin America today is primarily an urban region. Current research on marginality or social inequality amongst other popular subjects bases some of its arguments on the premise that these phenomena are the results of the industrial urbanization processes<sup>1</sup>. This seems obvious today as we look at such megacities as Mexico D.F., Buenos Aires, Lima, and even Bogota. Nevertheless, it is not because cities are big that their urban dynamics happen the way they do. This answer might be pragmatic, but it is incomplete. It is by examining throughout history how we have created our cities that we can understand how they operate.

During the twentieth century most Latin American capital cities experienced major changes. Bogota for instance, a small city counting less than 100 000 inhabitants at the beginning of the century became a six million metropolis by the end of the millennium<sup>2</sup>. Buenos Aires, a harbor city became the federal capital and most important urban center of Argentina counting more than ten million dwellers. These outcomes might not represent the desires of their governing elites. Politicians and other forms of power did not always carry out successful strategies to control space production. Nevertheless, political leadership did have a significant influence on the transformation of cities in Latin America.

As a matter of fact producing the city is a collective exercise that combines the dynamic action of individuals, groups, and different forms of power. And even if urban planners such as Le Corbusier are often remembered because of their individual genius, we must also keep in mind that they never acted alone, not in Bogota, Buenos Aires or even in Chandigarh. Cities are always collectively produced and urban projects are also always the product of team work.

What I will develop here is a reflection on the urban history of Latin America. My general purpose is to explain how urban space production mechanisms were

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<sup>1</sup> See GERMANI 1967, QUIJANO 1971, CASTELLS 1971.

<sup>2</sup> Population by census: 1898: 78 000 ; 1907 86 328 ; 1912 : 116 951. In MEJÍA, Germán. (2000). *Los años del cambio. Historia urbana de Bogotá 1820-1910*. Bogotá, CEJA, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, ICANH. p 230.

Sources : 1898: VERGARA Y VELASCO. (1901). *Nueva geografía de Colombia escrita por regiones naturales*. 1 Ed. Oficial Ilustrada. Bogotá, Imprenta de Vapor.

1907: "Censo por papeletas". *El Nuevo Tiempo*, octubre 26, 28 y 30, 1907.

1912: Colombia. (1912) *Censo de la República de Colombia levantado el 5 de Marzo de 1912*. Bogotá, Imprenta Nacional. N° incluye pas Nazareth ni Pasquilla.

Source: DEPARTAMENTO DE ESTADÍSTICA E INVESTIGACIÓN SOCIAL. (1950). *Anuario municipal de estadística*. Bogotá, Contraloría Municipal.

According to DANE (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística) in 2005 there were 6 778 691 people à Bogotá. DANE. *Censo general 2005*. Bogotá, 2005.

<http://www.dane.gov.co/censo/files/libroCenso2005nacional.pdf> téléchargé le 8 avril 2011.

formed in Latin American capitals. I will address this objective by trying to answer questions such as, how were cities in Latin America formed through history? What were the governmental mechanisms to control and direct urbanization? And more specifically what role did urban planning play in the political, institutional and social transformation of capital cities?

One of the premises on which I base my reflection is that behind the work carried out by urban planners there are always structures of power supporting their production. Therefore, in order to understand how urban projects really operate, we must comprehend the institutional and social ground upon which they stand. An urban project is an element amongst many others in a sociopolitical configuration. And to comprehend the role played by projects, we must identify the elements that make up the network of actors and institutions in which it participates. Hence, urban projects are not independent guidelines for urban action. They must be read as elements in a social, political and institutional configuration. In that sense, I believe that to examine urbanism projects it is necessary to observe the sociopolitical configuration in which they are created.

In this paper I will examine how urban elites reached the notion that their cities had to be changed. What I hereby intend to explore is how the need for a plan was created. Then, I will examine the process of project presentation. I will reflect on the process of the consolidation of urbanism projects as central elements in urban government. And finally I will explore the reception of projects in different professional and social circles.

1. A new urban proposal.

In 1929, Le Corbusier was invited by the *Sociedad de Estímulo de las Bellas Artes* to give a cycle of ten conferences in Buenos Aires. By the end of his visit he had spoken about everything concerning his way of conceiving architecture and urbanism, but most importantly he gave his opinion on how to plan and transform the Argentinean capital. This was not a strange behavior in Le Corbusier's conduct. "When he gave conferences in foreign countries he almost always started by making positive remarks about the population, architecture and landscape, he continued with his analysis of the city's organization and concluded with an urban plan to solve the problems he had found." (BENTON, 2007, p. 36-37). A similar event happened years after in Bogotá. In June 1947 Le Corbusier was invited by politician Eduardo Zuleta Angel to deliver two conferences on urbanism and architecture, and once again, like almost every time, he could not help himself from proposing major transformations for the Colombian capital.

Both visits gave rise to the creation of major urban projects. None of them was developed. Some researchers have named these plans as “Paper urbanism or urbanism on paper.” (ALMANDOZ, 2002) But even if they were not physically developed they were both approved by local authorities. However, other projects had been approved by local authorities before, without being developed, this is not exceptional. However both projects generated passionate reactions in different social, political, academic and economic groups, this was an interesting shift in urban planning.

Questions such as what were the city’s real problems and how should they be solved, became frequent in local and national newspapers, in professional journals, political institutions and universities. In Bogotá, the plan was developed by an international team headed by Le Corbusier, José Luis Sert and Paul Lester Wiener, and in Buenos Aires the team was directed by Juan Kurchán, Jorge Ferrari Hardoy and Le Corbusier himself. The teams, in both cases, made profuse use of different media in order to make their work visible for a large audience. They made themselves active not just in the planning and designing process but most importantly in displaying the proposal. They constantly designed and adapted their communication strategies. They were concerned about convincing several circles of society of the moral imperative of their project rather than just developing physical structures.

The reception of these plans was important for the institutionalization of urban planning and included groups and institutions that were formerly not considered. But how did urban planning become a question of newspapers and specialized press more than just a matter of political structures? In cities where during the nineteenth century individuals had to make their own spaces by themselves, how did the matters of living in the city become collective concerns?

## 2. The need for a plan.

Spatial forms and political order are closely interrelated. This statement is especially evident in spaces where power issues are significant, such as capital cities. Let us look at the way Latin American cities were built to understand the relationship between the political and the spatial worlds.

First of all, where do the cities we know today in Latin America evolve from? According to Jose Luis Romero they don’t come from old indigenous urban formations such as Tenochtitlán or Macchu Picchu, but from Spanish invasion, conquest, and colonization patterns. The Spanish empire, for more than three centuries, based its political hierarchies on very clear urban patterns. Cities, villas, and towns were clearly organized according to imperial domination. And, even if

these urban conglomerates tended to complexify themselves, they functioned with clear operation thesis. Buenos Aires was mainly was a minor port and Bogotá a political center with minor economical importance. And not only were there hierarchies between urban nodes in the empire's territory but also these urban centers had spatial hierarchies within their individual limits. Political and spatial dynamics within each city were strongly related. The Spanish colonial urban pattern based on a checkerboard grid, was much more than a geometrical construction; it was a spatial translation of political power and social hierarchies. And in this manner, the urban form reinforced and assured the social and political domination of the imperial system.

Early nineteenth century independence movements in Latin America changed the forefront geopolitical order. The Spanish imperial government system was overthrown by new republican establishments and spatial urban systems were no longer perfectly coherent with political order. Nonetheless, these political changes did not imply major immediate urban and architectural changes. There were even so other less visible physical changes, for example, in Bogotá colonial houses were subdivided and sublet to satisfy an important housing deficit (MEJIA, 2000, p. 298). However this was not a result of central political determinations, in Colombia during the nineteenth century the municipal and national government did not have clear housing policies or projects for urban centers. Let us look quickly at the way cities were organized during the nineteenth century in order to understand why there was no major morphological change accompanying radical political transformations.

We can understand the nineteenth century as a time of the dismounting of Spanish imperial power structures. For example, in Bogota ecclesiastical parish zoning that gave order to the civil world was replaced progressively during the nineteenth century by a new order formed by police districts (MEJIA, 2000, p.481). But old colonial patterns were not easy to dismount because they transcended beyond the political principles. Spanish main beliefs and conduct patterns were embedded in the social, cultural and religious practices of society. It is a fact that not every social and spatial structure changes at the same time, however speed is not a proof of the failure of the new political system. Actually as Oscar Saldarriaga said, 'the urban form is an instrument of territorial integration that imposes an ensemble of rhythms but also conjugates, superposes, assimilates, excludes and annuls. In the city coexist biological rhythms, technical and productive rhythms, the rhythms of social groups, administrative ritual and aesthetical rhythms' (SALDARRIAGA 1990, p. 14). In this sense, we can understand that a process of deep social change occurs at different velocities. Everything does not have to happen at the same time, especially when there is no new city being built. The

reflection is different when new cities like Brasilia and Chandigarh were created, and even then different processes have different rhythms.

Political change was quickly acquired, and in the lapse of ten to fifteen years most countries established republican governments. Nevertheless, "The political independence of Latin American colonies from Spain and Portugal -which came about in most of the continent between 1810 and 1825- did not imply either an economic or a cultural release from Europe."(ALMANDOZ, 2000, p.2) Yet, influences no longer came from a single source, other models, such as the French and English industrial city became sources of inspiration or imitation for governing elites in Latin America. A new social and political model had to be constituted and nourished, and for these purposes other urban realities like Paris and London participated.

However, different sociopolitical projects with strong European influences struggled to dominate in the newborn countries. In some cities, such as Medellín, Monterrey, or Guayaquil, industrial urbanization dominated as an urban organization thesis. This is consequent with the idea that "Every city has once wanted to be another. In particular moments of history, cities have tried to copy some admired, and sometimes remote, models. The notion of influence, conceived as a passive one-way movement, is not itself able to describe properly this kind of relationship. In fact, this sort of process of imitation, has sometimes proved to be of a very creative nature." (PEREZ and RIVAS, 2002, p 109) Most models and social projects for cities were in fact based, both in the nineteenth and twentieth century, on other existing forms, and in Latin America most of them were European or North American. Now this sentence portrays a major but frequent error, cities do not have the faculty of will. Behind urban action there are always individuals, organizations, corporations, groups and institutions, and it is they who imitate and direct the development of a city. On the other hand, Perez and Rivas consider an important point, influence and imitation are not passive one way movements, I will address this subject later on. But before proceeding I must underline an important point. Urban action in republican systems, but also in other political regimes is a negotiation between different actors and forces.

The freshly sceptered local elites proclaimed a desire to imitate models such as French art and architecture, English productive industry, and North American democratic politics. However, instead of rising as a new block portraying these characteristics, Latin American nations were incorporated in an already existing industrial, cultural and political domination system. Like in Buenos Aires and Caracas much of the industry in Latin America consisted on preliminary processing of primary products (STANN, 1975). Dependence as an economical and industrial system was not an invention of the second half of the twentieth century.

In spite of the cosmopolitan desires of a pretentious but impoverished bourgeois class, cities in the region did not become London, Paris or Washington. According to Romero, none of the different political and social projects presented by the new elites were strong enough to dominate over the urban centers. As new political elites discussed in the most violent possible terms, the morphology of old colonial cities remained. In the words of Almandoz, "Despite economic diversification and political independence, there were no major changes in the urban geography of Latin America until the second half of the nineteenth century." (ALMANDOZ, 2002, p. 15). Now as we have seen in studies such as Mejia's and in nineteenth century literature like *Las tres tazas* (VERGARA, 1971) internal domestic spaces did change significantly. Yet, it wasn't until the end of the century that bourgeois elites empowered themselves sufficiently to lead the countries and thus establish their own urban and cosmopolitan way of life as the dominant social model to physically transform major cities.

The sociopolitical configuration at the end of the nineteenth century is radically different from that of the beginning of the century. And it was these bourgeois groups that led the beginning of major physical transformations of capital cities. So, what was this group's urban mentality based on? As Romero says the "[...] nucleus of the bourgeois mentality was defined by its progressivity, by the opposition against stagnation and endurance of old lifestyles. And beneath this mentality underlies a notion of Latin American society that did not make reference to its reality –stuffed with old racial and social problems- but based in its capacity of transformation." (ROMERO, 1976, p.310) Perhaps these late nineteenth century changes were not politically as big as those of the beginning of the century, except in Mexico, Panama and Cuba, but they led to a new kind of political action in which the construction of the future was one of the most important elements.

In this sense, the bourgeois elite started dealing, through government, with the idea of changing the space of the city for the future. Now as David Harvey says "each social formation constructs objective conceptions of space and time sufficient unto its own needs and purposes of material and social reproduction and organizes its material practices in accordance with those conceptions." (HARVEY, 1990, P.419) Considering this, new notions of time and space of the city were being defended in the core of political discussion. Hence, material practices had to be developed in accordance with these conceptions. Included in the list of practices were several actions that radically changed the aspect of cities. For instance, at the dawn of the nineteenth century new transportation systems like horse drawn tramway and later on electrified streetcars were built in Caracas Bogotá and Buenos Aires (STANN, 1975). Other services like public lighting and

water supply were also starting to be dealt with. But, one of the most important new practices was urban planning.

Consequently, in the late nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, Latin American cities had experienced a major social change in their government elites. This change pierced the old colonial checkerboard grids and triggered modifications in urban morphology. Clear examples of these changes are the diagonal boulevards made in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century. Nonetheless, these readjustments were not random or fragmented, government action centralized them. This action required practical, institutional and political mechanisms. The urbanism project and later on the urban plan, were considered as the tools needed to transform the city. The need for a plan started from a desire of an elite group and became an institutional and material reality within municipal governments.

### 3. Groups and projects

Major changes in the social structures were accompanied and supported by real and visible transformations. The freshly introduced notion of the future had to be sustained by material practices. As the modes of government action changed, the responsibilities taken by public powers also evolved. Even in conservative governments such as in Colombia where the State and Church were never really separated we can notice modernizing evolutions concerning the way the city was governed. And with several chronological differences most cities started experiencing these changes at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. "Since the 1880's several Latin American cities started experiencing new changes, this time not just concerning their social structure but also their physical appearance." (ROMERO, 1976, p. 247). This way a social transformation process resulted in real changes that severely modified space and politics. Planning the city was just one of the strategies of change, according to Almandoz "Urban renewal was part of a more ambitious package of reforms intended to modernize the social structures, whereby countries such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Mexico decided to improve the image of the then untouched 'colonial cities', as well as to restructure their regional networks of urban settlements by the introduction of railways." (ALMANDOZ, 2002, p.17) But cities didn't just change by themselves, as we said earlier, it was individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and different forms of collective action that transformed their spaces.

Every city is a space in which forms of power express and materialize. However in a national construction context such as Latin American nineteenth century, the capital city plays an exceptional role. This is a fundamental space of power, it is the place where national and local political struggles are expressed and it pretends to



portray the identity of the imagined community that is the nation. In this sense, the forces that are constituted in the capital city and the forms they make visible in urban space, transcend the local corporative and political interests. Plus, what happens in the capital never stays within the limits of its physical boundaries. Newspapers and several national channels of opinion operate from the capital. I do not intend to discuss this topic in depth but I point out this aspect because it allows us to understand the importance that the transformation of these particular spaces acquires in national social and political structures. We could even argue that the capital is also the most visible and dynamic space for international relations.

Now, in the cases of Latin America, the groups and individuals that participated in the creation of urban projects actively were frequently coordinated by foreign experts. According to Christiane Crasemann “The rapid development of South American cities in the late nineteenth century, and a growing awareness that city planning required specialized knowledge, created a climate that welcomed experts from abroad. Active in the Southern Cone during the first decades of this century were the Frenchmen Joseph Antoine Bouvard (1907, 1909-10), Jean Claude Nicolas Forestier (1923), and Léon Jaussely (1926) in Argentina, and Alfred Agache (1927-30) in Brazil. Karl Heinrich Brunner spent time in Chile (1929-33), then moved to Colombia (1933-48) before returning to his native Austria.” (CRASEMAN, 1995, p.209). The list of names presented by Craseman is not exhaustive but it allows us to bring up an important point. The planning process in Latin America coordinated a local socio-political project to build a modern government and city, with a professional order in Europe counting on organized planning systems. Forestier, Agache, Rotival, and Jaussely for instance, were members of the Société Française d’Urbanisme just as Le Corbusier, Sert, and Wiener were members of the CIAM movement. These individuals were representatives of strong European planning movements. Urban projects became the vehicle on which different local political and foreign professional forces stated negotiations to intervene cities in the region.

An underdeveloped urbanism in Latin America was an important aspect that permitted the rapid and strong inflow of European planning experts and groups. However, and sometimes because of some actions started by planners themselves, local bourgeois elites progressively developed a complex local urban bureaucracy with technical, administrative and corporate muscle. At the same time, the professionalization of urban disciplines became a reality in local universities. In Colombia for example the first Architecture program was created at the National University in 1929, and in the late 40’s and early 50’s four other universities in Bogotá created Architecture Faculties (Universidad de los Andes, Universidad Javeriana, Universidad de America, Universidad Gran Colombia). These actors,

professional architects with knowledge on European urban planning, became active receptors of projects, so as to establish a network directly concerned by urban transformation. Projects presented by foreign experts were interpreted and publicly criticized by local groups. At the beginning of the century hygienist doctors also criticized urban development, this was not an entirely new practice, some individuals with a degree of authority used to tell local politicians what they should do with cities. But, what was new was the existence of conversations in the same terms between authorities, local professional groups and foreign experts.

In Bogota for instance, in 1946 the first number of a specialized journal concerning urban and architectural issues, *Proa*, was published. This magazine was the voice of an already existing group called the *Sociedad Colombiana de Arquitectos*. This kind of professional and academic groups existed earlier in Argentina. In Buenos Aires for example existed the *Sociedad de Estímulo de las Bellas Artes* that invited Le Corbusier in 1929, the *Sociedad de Amigos de la Ciudad* that invited Hegemann in 1931 or even the *Sociedad Central de Arquitectos* founded in 1886. Now what I intend to underline here is that at the same time that government action started to modernize social structures creating the need for urban projects and plans, new groups with the capacity to receive this complex object were also being created. In this sense, urban action became a dynamic activity with the participation of political leaders, foreign experts and corporations, and local organized receptors.

These dynamics are not exclusive to the Argentinean and Colombian cases "Most of the national or municipal offices of urban planning in Santiago, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, México City, Rio, Lima, Bogotá and Caracas were a joint effort between local and national governments, new professional associations, and urban research centers." (ALMANDOZ, 2002, p.32) Nonetheless, this joint effort was rarely harmonious, in fact, the different factions frequently presented major differences that blocked the development of any particular project. In the case of Bogotá, even if there were different tendencies on architecture, only one of them, the *Sociedad Colombiana de Arquitectos*, represented by *Proa* organized itself as an opinion force. Their professional criticism, their urban projects and also their corporate interests were somehow expressed in their periodical publications. Municipal offices such as the *Departamento de Urbanismo* and its leader Karl Brunner were vigorously criticized by this group (ARANGO, 1989, p 213). Now this society was not entirely responsible for the dismantling of this office. But its participation as a constituted and legitimate opinion against this office helped its already existing opponents to create the need for change.

In the Argentinean case, several legitimate organizations existed. And pursuing their individual interests they managed to successfully block each other. Le

Corbusier and Hegemann were witnesses of this competition; “Within barely two years of each other, Le Corbusier in 1929, and Hegemann in 1931, were invited to lecture and to consult with two antithetical segments of Argentine society. Both were striving to make the capital city emblematic of their ideological and political ambitions, to enhance its appearance, and to ameliorate blatant urban problems. Beyond making recommendations and actual proposals, the experts from abroad were expected by the various factions to lend them support in the local power struggles.” (CRASEMAN, 1995, p. 210). This way, different groups of society mobilized different sources of legitimacy for their own projects. The original desire of governments to control the production of space was only partially acquired because the existing official institutions did not generally succeed in the moderation of several conflicting forces. Nonetheless sometimes urban planners did acquire enough power to convince powerful and capable sectors of society of their projects.

At the beginning of this process, before the first projects were presented, urban change was a matter of politics. In Buenos Aires, as the first projects were developed at the end of the nineteenth century, specialized groups of opinion started to constitute themselves. Where as in Bogotá, the organization of local specialized opinion groups started some years before the middle of the twentieth century in response to Karl Brunner’s work. There was a chronological difference but what we can confirm is that those first projects that started to create physical changes in both cities triggered the organization of local specialized groups. In this sense, by the time modern urbanism (CIAM) arrived in Latin America, a complex opinion network able to mobilize sources of legitimacy was already constituted.

The question that rose then, in socio political configurations where once again none of the groups had enough power to fully develop an urban project was, whose job is it to control the production of urban spaces? How should an urban planner deal with the political and social obstacles of a project? Alfred Agache defended a system in which the planner had to develop social and political strategies to convince a certain audience of the moral imperative of his particular project (UNDERWOOD, 1991, p. 139). His idea of urban planning was clearly influenced by his sociological background.

This system in which Le Corbusier arrived, both in Bogotá and Buenos Aires not only agreed with Agache’s perspective, it required that the planner actually developed these strategies. When Brunner arrived to Bogotá, the political structure allowed him to work without looking for consensus in other areas. But by the end of his period, convincing several actors of the moral imperative of every project was an important part of the planning job. Likewise, in Buenos Aires by the end of the twenties, the local struggles of urban planning were held by very specialized

groups. The arrival of a new proposition had to be much more than a political and programmatic negotiation. Groups like the *Sociedad Central de Arquitectos* or the *Sociedad Colombiana de Arquitectos* had to be included in the discussion in some way.

#### Final considerations

I have pointed out some aspects of the history of urban planning in Latin America. First we took a glimpse at the way two projects arrived in two different capital cities. Then we explored a major change in the social structures of cities and understood how the need for a plan was created. And finally we looked at the process through which new groups and organizations were formed in a new sociopolitical configuration.

As authors like Tim Benton and Yannis Tsiomis have said, Le Corbusier did much more than drawings and designs for cities. He played an active role in the network of actors and negotiations that made decisions in urban planning. Convincing an audience of the imperative character of his projects was an activity that he did well. For this purpose, Le Corbusier used strategies such as conferences and made sure he was well informed about everything that was publicly said about his projects. It was these activities that interested me more than the actual plans and projects.

Changes in urban centers were preceded by profound changes in social and political structures. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Spanish imperial order witnessed major political shifts leading to independence in most countries. These changes were followed by a progressive dismantling of Spanish spatial domination patterns. As a result a new bourgeoisie imposed itself by the end of the century as a political and social elite. This group stated its urban and cosmopolitan lifestyle as the leading social patterns of society. And, in the center of their ideologies they proclaimed change and progress. The old spatial patterns that remained in the cities had to be changed in order to be coherent with the new bourgeois leadership.

Many different actors saw the opportunity to participate in a time of change. Foreign professional organizations such as the *Société Française d'Urbanisme* sent some of their best representatives to negotiate with an inexperienced Latin American bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, local actors did not remain passive receptors of European proposals. Specialized groups were organized and responded publicly to every project presented. This way a complex network of actors that surpassed political institutions was constituted. Le Corbusier and his team mates, Sert, Wiener, Kurchan and Hardoy worked in accordance with this socio political reality.

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