

THREE APPROACHES ALONG THE RIO DE LA PLATA: LANDFILL, DEVELOPMENT, AND MONUMENTALIZING THE PAST

Margaret F. Boorstein
C.W. Post College of Long Island University
720 Northern Blvd.
Brookville, NY 11548
maboorst@liu.edu

ABSTRACT: *This paper shows how three cities, Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Colonia del Sacramento, have over the past few decades changed their portion of the shores of the Rio de la Plata. Social, economic, political, and environmental factors have led to three different land uses. Buenos Aires has created a nature center. Montevideo has rebuilt a sidewalk and highway that attracts public gatherings as well as use of the beaches. Colonia del Sacramento has become a World Heritage site, based on its being a critical part of the political and architectural history of the colonial era.*

Keywords: *Rio de La Plata, Coasts, Land use, Buenos Aires, Montevideo*

INTRODUCTION

Developed and developing countries use waterfront development to revitalize their cities and their national economies. Ferreira and Visser (2007) explain tensions of the transformation of the waterfront of Cape Town. Bunce and Desfor (2007) discuss how, especially recently, redevelopment of urban waterfronts involves all sorts of conflicts, political, economic, social and environmental. Gospondini (2006) examines how landscapes of the post-industrial city are transformed by economic activities, new governance strategies and innovative design.

The Rio de la Plata has been used to enrich three cities with similar climate conditions and physical landscapes and, despite separated by national boundaries, broadly similar social and economic conditions. Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay, are located across the river from each other, and Montevideo, Uruguay, lies near the mouth as it flows into the Atlantic Ocean as an estuary (Figure 1). Over the past few decades, each city has taken a different approach to the development and use of its shores. Buenos Aires, through default, developed part of its riverfront as a nature preserve; Montevideo transformed a section for mixed land uses; and Colonia del Sacramento incorporated colonial remnants to give birth to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site.

Despite all these similarities, this paper argues that distinctive land uses resulted from happenstance combined with political movements popular at the time. Yet, decades later, the original incentives are gone and so is much evidence of their existence in the ways the lands are used

Rio de la Plata, literally River of Silver, may have been given that name because of its color and also for the silver from the mountains through which it flows. All three cities are well-served by public transportation, and tourists and residents take good advantage of the services. Regularly-scheduled and frequent ferry ships connect Buenos Aires with the two Uruguay cities, which themselves are separated by approximately two hours' highway travel time. Buenos Aires and Montevideo, besides being national capitals, are centers of industry and important ports and trading centers. Tourism is vital to their economies. The populations of both cities are largely of European descent with Italian and Spanish ancestry dominating. Colonia del Sacramento is a contrast. It is much smaller and its economy is overwhelmingly dependent on tourism, emphasizing its colonial history and its heritage of Spanish and Portuguese colonial architecture.



Figure 1. Rio de la Plata flowing into the Atlantic. Colonia del Sacramento is located across the estuary from Buenos Aires. Derived from CIA Factbook.

THREE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE SHOREFRONT

Starting with Buenos Aires and Montevideo, and while recognizing that port activity is extremely important to both cities, this discussion will center instead on land uses where deliberate change has led to different public land use.

Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires has created Reserva Ecologica Costanera Sur, a natural conservation area, on the south end of the city. Montevideo has built La Rambla, a walk along the shore. The conservation area and the walkway are different today. Yet, their original forms date from the beginning of the twentieth century. Over the past decades, they developed from different economic, political and social forces and currently they serve different functions.

Both accidental natural and deliberate human-made changes created the Reserva Ecologica Costanera Sur. In 1918, Buenos Aires opened the Municipal Bath on the south Costanera promenade. For the next several decades, summer days and nights saw thousands of people from Buenos Aires walking the promenade and swimming in the water. Rich, poor and middle class all frequented the bathing areas. Art Deco monuments and statues were built alongside new bars and coffee shops. However, by the 1950s, the area had lost its charm and

deteriorated. The river waters were filthy; the government forbade swimming. The coffee shops went out of business and many buildings were demolished (Buenos Aires Government, 2007).

Little happened in the area until 1978, when the city government decided to create more land, not for recreation, but for corporate and municipal development. Embankments were built from demolition debris and the areas within were filled with sediment dredged from Rio de la Plata. Despite all these efforts, the desired result of an administrative center surrounded by a green area did not come to be. Nevertheless, more debris was dumped in the area until 1984 when the project was abandoned (Buenos Aires government, 2007).

As economic development and building construction did not happen in this area of grasslands and ponds, birds and other wildlife and plants flourished. Nature lovers, joggers, bicyclists (not necessarily mutually exclusive), and even foreign bird watchers passing through Buenos Aires visited the site. After extensive lobbying from public interest groups, the Buenos Aires City Council passed Ordinance 41.247 on June 5, 1986, to protect the area and establish the Reserva Ecologica Costanera Sur (Buenos Aires government, 2007; Gobierno de la Ciudad Autonoma de Buenos Aires, undated).

Twenty years later, the natural conservation area is serving its purpose, with its attractive walks and grassland vegetation. Signs and posters inform visitors about particular plants and animals. The area is still under construction, including the engineering of a water system to provide fire protection. The

original promenade is itself attractive to Buenos Aires residents. Some of the old Art Deco structures remain, although in a slightly dilapidated state. The restaurants are gone, replaced with stands serving a wide variety of foods and drinks. Yet, once the old paved sidewalks end, the neighborhood becomes one of mixed land uses, including residences and repair shops, with well-trampled dirt paths. One might consider such a drastic change from a park to a semi-industrial area strange for a major city and a national capital.

Within the conservancy, vegetation supports wildlife and birds. The landscape is reflective of calm and beauty, a contrast to the urban land use of Buenos Aires with modern commercial and residential buildings to the north and a power plant along the river to the west. Yet, the fringe area of the conservancy near the old promenade is strewn with garbage. In some cases, beer bottles outnumber the waterfowl.

Montevideo

La Rambla in Montevideo, also a public space along the Rio de la Plata, evolved from different stimuli. La Rambla was built in the early twentieth century. It was conceived, designed and built as a part of “a city for the future” (Remedi, 2005). La Rambla was seen as and continues to be “a fine piece of urbanism, architecture, and landscaping” (Remedi, 2005). Over the decades, Montevideo and all of Uruguay have changed and some feel La Rambla reflects social, economic and cultural transformations and divisions. Most of the original structures are gone. Today, La Rambla is a granite-paved walkway, with a highway with traffic lights, which runs parallel on the inland side. A few public buildings are on the river side. On the other side of the highway are private and public buildings, some new and some in various stages of disrepair.

Thus La Rambla, from an academic or theoretical perspective, can be seen, again according to Remedi (2005), as a “façade...that... reflected the city and its culture.” But, as Montevideo has changed, including newer and unfamiliar or strange or “disturbing characters” (Remedi, 2005), such as squatters becoming “more and more the fabric of the city” (Remedi, 2005), so have the functions of La Rambla. A walk might allow La Rambla to “do its aesthetic, spiritual, and ideological ‘work’” (Remedi, 2005). But Montevideans must remember not to “fall victim to its spell, which can also be a cause of memory loss,...of losing touch with reality...and lack of vision and social sensibility” (Remedi, 2005). As beautiful and inspiring as La Rambla is, it is seen

both as a reflection and a contributor to social challenges Montevideans face today.

Its present-day incarnation is largely the result of a socialist government from 1984 to 2004 wanting to make La Rambla and the river more accessible to the population as a whole (Remedi, 2005). Accessibility to the beaches and the sea is very important to Uruguayans. For the most part, the government succeeded. Concerts and public gatherings of all sorts are frequent. Upper and middle class families are attracted to newly-built high-rise buildings. Yet, apartment houses for the poor are nearby as well as mixed land uses, some not so desirable. La Rambla can be thought of as a link between “the old city and the new city orbiting the shopping malls, the tourist circuit,...the new affluent neighborhoods” (Remedi, 2005). Montevideans take visitors to La Rambla to impress them with the beauty and wonders of their city. On this road of so much history and significance to Montevideo and its citizens, ordinariness occurs as well, as fisherman fish and people jog or stroll while others walk their dogs.

For a non-Uruguayan visitor, La Rambla is an impressive and beautiful granite walkway. But for Uruguayans, and especially Montevideans, La Rambla seems to have almost spiritual properties and political ramifications.

Colonia del Sacramento

Colonia del Sacramento is a UNESCO World Heritage site and uses the coast differently from La Rambla or the Reserva Ecologica Costanera Sur. Colonia currently consists of a residential and commercial area directly on the Rio de la Plata as well as another interior zone designated as the heritage site. Part of the heritage site is also on the estuary. The inscription in 1995 was justified by the architecture and the layout of its buildings (World Heritage Committee, 1995b), which contributed to the “nature and objectives of European colonial settlement, in particular during the seminal period at the end of the seventeenth century” (World Heritage Committee, 1995a). Understanding that no place exists without history, Colonia’s particular history, called unique by the World Heritage Committee, is vital to its current status, largely because of the influences, not always friendly, of Spain, Portugal, Argentina, and Uruguay.

Colonia del Sacramento was founded in 1678 as a Portuguese settlement. The Spaniards in Buenos Aires felt threatened by the Portuguese presence and “attacked and sacked the town” (World Heritage Committee, 1995a), in 1680. Over the next century Spain and Portugal alternately signed treaties

and waged war and control of Colonia. Even after Uruguay gained independence from Spain in 1828, battles continued, now with Argentina, until 1851 (World Heritage Committee, 1995a).

In the twentieth century, Colonia's status changed with a movement to designate it a national monument. Despite "a generous allocation from the national budget" (World Heritage Committee, 1995a), the first attempt in 1924 failed, as did others over the next decades. These efforts contributed to its inscription in 1995 as a World Heritage site, for its cultural heritage. The justification included its "unquestioned influence on architectural development in the colonial style on either side of the Rio de la Plata" (World Heritage Committee, 1995a). Its fusion of Spanish and Portuguese and Uruguayan architecture from the nineteenth century was noted as well (World Heritage Committee, 1995a).

According to Carbajal and Daniels (1991) Colonia was "saved" from development and destruction "because it was regarded as a marginal district of a city in the interior without a capital's potential for growth. Crammed as it was (and still is) into a peninsula the town grew by spreading out over a beautiful stretch of coast...Abandoned by the well-to-do, its official buildings emptied [and] it turned into a warren of tenements, brothels, and miscellaneous crumbling structures." Another factor contributing to its preservation "was the small scale on which it had originally been laid out and which did not lend itself to grandiose projects. It was practically impossible...to erect apartment towers on the small properties" (Carbajal and Daniels, 1997). And local interest was so strong that spokesmen continued to push for its preservation and ultimately for its designation as a World Heritage site.

The officially designated historical part of the city, called Barrio Historical or Historical Barrio, is not spatially distinct from surrounding areas. Over the centuries, structures have been built within the barrio and on its fringes. Thus the barrio is more a hodgepodge of buildings and land uses, rather than a pure historical site. Within and immediately outside the World Heritage site are tourist shops, small hotels, restaurants, car repair shops as well as people just living their lives.

Barrio Historical's overall contribution is not one of great drama as is often true of other World Heritage sites. Although record-keeping has been careful and detailed, little reconstruction has been done. One exception is the gate which was rebuilt between 1968 and 1973 (Uruguay Natural, undated). This approach of minor changes adds to the legitimacy of the site.

Colonia does not have a visitor's center, which is a good indication of its character as a quiet

place respectful of the heritage it is preserving. Visitor information is provided, but only through a small building housing the local chamber of commerce. Much of the literature in the office is commercial, especially real estate offerings. This mixing of local commerce and historical preservation might be indicative of a view of Colonia as an integral part of the Uruguayan economy and everyday life.

Several of the oldest buildings currently house museums which are open on an ad-hoc basis. Although official hours are posted, the operators may not always choose to open, then the museum is closed. The admission cost is miniscule from American and European standards, about 35 cents to visit all nine museums, if they are open. Yet, the keepers of the entrances are emphatic on visitors having tickets and stamp the ticket so they cannot possibly be reused. The Municipal Museum contains more than 50,000 Spanish and Portuguese documents and "wide-ranging collections of colonial furniture, cannon-balls and stuffed animals...a number of utensils and weapons used by the Charrua Indians,...who were massacred and dispersed by colonization" (Bailby, 1997). Despite their uniqueness, the content of the museums is generally not of high quality; nor are the exhibits well laid out. This is not a cynical comment from a jaded New Yorker, but an objective statement about exhibit spaces, equipment, photos, and paintings that appear to be of limited significance to world or even local historical interest or value or quality.

From a broad perspective, Colonia gives the impression of a tourist attraction more than a conservation area. Souvenir shops make up a large proportion of commerce. Restaurants are as or more expensive than those in the nation's capital. This casual observation is supported by official recommendations from The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the World Heritage regulatory body. ICCROM, which is supposed to exercise oversight, has taken its typical gentle approach to non-heritage type activities. In its 2004-2005 reports, ICCROM recommended that the managers of the site coordinate planning with the local planning commission. ICCROM also suggested that the proposal to build of a casino be seriously reviewed (World Heritage Committee, 2004; 2005). Despite these recommendations, a casino hotel was opened in July 2007.

Objectively, a casino is incongruous with a historical site valued for its fusion of architectural styles of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. One might question the legitimacy of its designation as a World Heritage site. One might

wonder as well if public and private preservation efforts and funding were being rightfully and truly applied.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last decades of the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century, the form and functions of these three areas along the estuarine Rio de la Plata changed first through deliberate government action. Later, the functions and, to some extent, the form, were transformed through specific efforts by local interests. Decades later, the forms and functions have been modified still more to varying extent. Contradictions abound. Where once all segments of Buenos Aires society enjoyed the shore and waters of the Rio de la Plata, Buenos Aires wanted to build an administration and commercial center. But problems in the national economy led to its abandonment. Then, by accident, a nature conservatory grew, literally and figuratively, instead. Today, the riverfront resumes its function as a place of recreation for all the people of Buenos Aires, with a natural conservation twist suitable to the early years of the twenty-first century. Montevideo opened its beaches and waterfront to the public, as part of its socialist aspirations. Although all segments of society use La Rambla, the class differences are evident. Dilapidated and crumbling buildings co-exist with fancy hotels and pleasant parks and beaches. La Rambla may be serving as a microcosm of Uruguayan society. Colonia del Sacramento presents a different perspective. The Uruguayan government was able to persuade the World Heritage Commission to inscribe Colonia del Sacramento as a World Heritage site. Within a little more than a decade, tourism, and tourism of a most commercial type in the form of a casino, has invaded the adjacent area.

For all three cities, the manifestations of the redevelopment plans changed over time, reflecting and responding to cultural, economic, and social forces. As a result, the current land uses bear some resemblance to the original intentions, but differ from what was envisioned when first conceived. As silver shines and reflects light and sometimes tarnishes, so may the areas along its shores. The meaning of Rio de la Plata may have more connotations than its original associations.

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