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Change the City to Change Society. Republican Plazas in the Province of Buenos Aires (Argentina) 1820-1943

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Change the City to Change Society: Republican Plazas in the Province of Buenos Aires (Argentina) 1820-1943

One of the most significant episodes in Argentinian urbanization was the establishment of more than a hundred cities and towns in the Province of Buenos Aires during the 19th century. These cities were built following an urban model that combined the Spanish colonial tradition with new republican ideas. In this model, the central square was the main civic center and represented spatially the quest for modernization of the new nation state in newly populated territories. This article analyzes the location, design, and cultural and social functions of these squares by studying the original plans of the cities and the urban development. These places had a singular meaning for the city and its citizens due to their central location and composition, but mainly because of the buildings located around them: they housed the new activities related to the “civilizing process” of this territory. The republican plazas spatially reflect the attempt of the state to modernize a rural society by creating social cohesion between people with different cultural backgrounds.

1. Introduction

The pampa is a huge herbaceous plain that occupies approximately one-fifth of the total area of Argentina (about 500,000 square kilometers). This plain, originally inhabited by nomadic tribes, remained marginalized from the Spanish occupation until the end of the 18th century. It was only when the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata was created in 1776 that attention became focused on the economic potential of this area, and the city of Buenos Aires – the capital of the Viceroyalty – began to transform from a village into an important port.¹

As there were very few settlements prior to 1776, many efforts were made after this time to populate the area. However, when the colonial period ended with Argentinian independence in 1816, the new state took possession of all the territory – occupied by indigenous tribes – in order to make the land available

¹ For overviews on the history of Argentina in English, see: David Rock, *Argentina, 1516-1987. From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*, Berkley 1987; Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina*, Berkley 1991; Jonathan C. Brown, *Socioeconomic History of Argentina, 1776-1860*, New York 1979.

for agricultural production. But the new country had many political issues, and it was only after years of civil strife that a period of relative stability began in the 1850s. Technology, together with a political philosophy that could be summarized with the maxim “*gobernar es poblar*” (to govern is to populate)² and good economic prospects, made possible the advance into previously unexplored interior territories.³

The occupation of the inner lands was consolidated by a unique process of urbanization: more than a hundred new cities were founded, most of them built between 1850 and 1916.⁴ This episode is part of the colonization of the world’s major plains during the 18th and 19th century (the United States, Canada, Australia, Africa, and Russia). In Argentina, this most resembled the North American example, even though here the city played a more important role as a device for civilizing the land than in the North of the continent.⁵

The urban form of these towns followed a new pattern that we call the “pampa model.”⁶ The town consisted of a part intended for agriculture (the

² Ideas of the influential political theorist Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810-1884) are explained in his book: *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República de Argentina*, Buenos Aires 1852.

³ The creation of a functioning political and administrative structure at the national level allowed the building of the necessary infrastructure to develop the hinterland. Many technological advances contributed to the modernization process, for example the introduction of electricity, telegraphy, and wiring systems for properties. As a consequence of this process, the whole Province of Buenos Aires began to produce cattle and cereals for export. Economic progress enabled Argentina to join the international market and position itself as “the world’s granary” in the early 20th century.

⁴ These towns have been studied from a historical perspective as a set (for example in Ricardo Levene, *Historia de la Provincia de Buenos Aires y la formación de sus pueblos*, La Plata 1941) or authors have focused on the local history of each individual town. There is not a lot of research on their urban form. See Patricio Randle, *La Ciudad Pampeana. Geografía Urbana, Geografía Histórica*, Buenos Aires 1969; Cristina Vitalone, *Cuadrículas Bonaerenses*, in: *Anales LINTA*, 1993, pp. 39-45; Cristina Vitalone, *Cuadrículas en la organización del territorio bonaerense del siglo XIX*, La Plata 2013, and, more recently, Fernando Aliata/Omar Loyola, *Transformaciones en el hábitat rural. Los planos topográficos de Chascomús, 1826-1854*, in: *Mundo agrario. Revista de estudios rurales*, 10:20, 2010, pp. 1-35; Fernando Aliata, *Las raíces del árbol de la libertad. El legado ilustrado en la fundación de pueblos en la pampa bonaerense durante el siglo XIX*, in: *Nuevo Mundo, Mundos Nuevos*, March 23rd, 2010 (online: <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/59222>, accessed March 11th, 2011).

⁵ For this episode see, for example, John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America. A History of City Planning in the United States*, Princeton 1965.

⁶ We adopted the term “pampa model” to reference the environment in which the towns were established: a huge plain with few topographical landmarks, served by multiple streams. See Melisa Pesoa, *Sembrando ciudades. La fundación de ciudades en la Provincia de Buenos Aires (1810-1916)*, in: *QRU. Quaderns de Recerca en Urbanisme* 4, 2014, pp. 98-

ejido) and another for the urban settlement. Together, they formed an urban productive unit, separated from the rest of the territory, which was dedicated mainly to cattle farming. The urban sector was structured over a regular grid of streets, where the crossing of the two main avenues pointed to the location of the main square.

The central square plays a key role in these towns as it is the center of the formal composition. Although its relationship to the Hispanic colonial squares is evident, in the republican period, it acquired different characteristics. It shared its position in the center of the city with the colonial squares, but in shape and character it developed in substantially different ways. It contained elements of modernity that represented the ideas of contemporary intellectuals such as Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811-1888), President of Argentina from 1868 to 1874, who believed that in order to change society, it was necessary to change the city.

To analyze the city squares of the republican period, research was undertaken in the archives of the former Department of Topography⁷, to find the original plans made by land surveyors of almost one hundred cities. Every map was drawn again in order to have an “atlas” of all the new towns at the same scale and with the same drawing code. With this atlas, it was possible to identify and study the characteristics of the urban model and its key elements in the new towns of the Province of Buenos Aires.

We will focus on a wide time span – from 1820 to around 1943 – and will subdivide this into two periods, in order to analyze the changes in the society of the pampa region that will be visible in the space of the main square. The first time period ranges from 1821 – when the Province of Buenos Aires was confirmed as a sovereign and independent state – to the administrative and cultural change that emerged from the federalization of the city of Buenos Aires in 1880. The latter changed its status from capital of the province to capital of the country and redefined the relationship between the capital and the territory. The second period extends to the Revolution of 1943, which marks the beginning of a different political, social, and economic context.

This article has three parts: first, we highlight the formal aspects of the squares – general urban structure and position, composition, size, and scale;

115; Melisa Pesoa, *Cien ciudades para la pampa. Idea, técnica y construcción de la forma urbana en las nuevas ciudades del siglo XIX de la Provincia de Buenos Aires*, in: RIUrb. Revista Iberoamericana de Urbanismo 7, 2012, pp. 3-17.

⁷ The works of the former Department of Topography are available today at the Department of Historic and Cartographic Research, which is part of the Directorate of Geodesy of the Ministry of Public Works of the Province of Buenos Aires and is located in La Plata, capital of the Province of Buenos Aires.

second, we analyze the configuration of the environment of the square, which was closely related to the social life of the town; and third, we shine light on the cultural and social encounters that took place in the squares and discuss the results.

2. Formal Aspects: Position, Composition, Size, and Scale

The plans for a new town usually began with an outline of the future *ejido* by the land surveyor, which always started from the central point of the town: the main square. It served as a common boundary stone or common reference for all measurement works in the town. Unlike in the colonial cities, the foundational act was characterized by a remarkable faith in rationality⁸:

“I proceeded then to the trace of the *ejido* and to this end, according to my instructions, I first determined a point essentially favorable for the main square but leaving suitable space so that the entire town was over good ground. [...] [A]nd at that point a landmark was placed corresponding to the axis of the town and its *ejido*.”⁹

In 1828, state legislation established that each town had to have five squares – one central and four secondary – with one located in each of the quadrants into which the town was divided. However, secondary squares had little civic importance in comparison with the main one.

Generally, the size of the square was determined by the size of the block as the main module of the urban grid, which was variable (from 86 to 120 meters, with a rectangular or square shape). The square was configured using one, two or four blocks together. Therefore, sizes varied according to the geometric composition. Our atlas, made from the original plans, indicates that sizes ranged from the minimum of one square block with a side length of 86 meters (7,400 square meters) to four blocks with a side length of 100 meters plus the area of the streets (62,500 square meters), enclosing an enormous space.

The square sometimes appeared oversized in comparison to the size of the town but was related to the town’s expected urban development. Many of the new towns started with few families (around a hundred inhabitants), but ten

⁸ The founding ceremony of colonial cities had another kind of symbolism. After making the religious invocations, the “roll” (a column of stone with a cross) was erected. This was the insignia of jurisdiction and also served as a pillar, where normally the heads of the executed were placed: Miguel Rojas Mix, *La Plaza Mayor. El urbanismo, instrumento de dominio colonial*, Barcelona 1978.

⁹ Measurement procedure n. 10, Department of Las Flores, performed by surveyor Adolfo Sourdeaux in 1855, Archivo Histórico de Geodesia, Provincia de Buenos Aires. All translations from Spanish by the author.

square kilometers. According to the analysis of the original plans in the atlas, 30 percent of its territory were streets, and 7,5 percent were occupied by the squares. Therefore, 10 of the 120 blocks were meant to be open public spaces.

Municipal authorities were sometimes tempted to create more plots by dividing and selling public space to private owners. In cases such as Lobería, Trenque Lauquen, and Saladillo, we can observe the reduction of the original square of four blocks to only one.

3. The Configuration of Urban Space for a Modern Society

In order to achieve the modern society intended by the Argentinian government and its administrative elites, it was necessary to build the infrastructure for a “civilized” country. In the towns of the Province of Buenos Aires, the conformation of the physical space of the main square demonstrated the evolution and maturity of the city and its institutions over the course of the century.¹⁰

What were the changes from colonial times to the republican period? In colonial times, there were normally located around the main square: the town hall, main church, arsenal, treasury, court, and prison. The buildings represented administrative, religious, and judicial functions. The colonial square was a bustling place, filled with different social classes, carts, and animals – a place full of mud and dirt. It also provided the stage for the execution of public acts of justice, religious celebrations, commercial markets, and the distribution of water.¹¹

Even though the importance of the colonial tradition cannot be denied, we want to highlight the novelty of the new institutions that appeared in this space during the republican period. They were related to social changes of the time. Civic and religious powers had been present in the square since the colonial period, but during the 19th century, additional institutions were created as a result of the attempts by the state to achieve a “civilized” society. This new society was meant to rise above the “barbarism” that – from a contemporary perspective – characterized the colonial and indigenous pampa.

The *town hall*, seat of the local authorities, continued to occupy a privileged place in the main square, as it had done since colonial times. The type of build-

¹⁰ Juan Bautista Alberti defined “education through the things” as the only way to teach the population about good and civilized habits. Quoted in: Oscar Terán, *Historia de las ideas en la Argentina. Diez lecciones iniciales, 1810-1980*, Buenos Aires 2015 [first published in 1980], pp. 61-108.

¹¹ We can assume that the characteristics of a colonial square were present until the mid-19th century in the plazas of the oldest towns of the province. However, since most of the towns in the pampa were established after 1850, this stage was probably skipped.

ing varied between modest constructions and huge and profusely decorated palaces, depending on the number of inhabitants of the town.

The *public school*, a new institution, gained a lot of importance in the 19th century, with the introduction of a national education system. This was seen as an instrument to create national conscience in a new country populated by people with different cultural backgrounds.¹² In 1884, primary education became compulsory, public, secular, and free. This meant that schools provided by the state had to be available to all children. Therefore, the primary school building received special treatment in the urban structure, usually being located at the front side of the square and with a more monumental character than the seat of the municipality itself, as it was often the largest public facility.

National banks were also a new development in the republican period. They were key institutions for the growth of the agricultural and livestock sector, as well as for medium and large enterprises, and, above all, for the development of large infrastructures.¹³ Both the Bank of the Province of Buenos Aires and the National Bank of Argentina resided in remarkable buildings, with wide facades facing the square, often highlighting one of its corners.

At the end of the 19th century, as a result of the arrival of a large number of immigrants, mutual solidarity organizations or social clubs were set up. In these *social centers*, ties between the different ethnic groups were maintained and strengthened, but a mixture of cultures was also fostered. Many of these facilities were located in the square or in the surrounding streets.

Another new element that helped shape the central square of the cities and owed its existence to the immigrants were local *theaters*. By the end of the 19th

¹² Elementary education during the colonial period was limited to certain social groups, and the teaching at the state schools was quite inadequate in the first half of the 19th century, with rather antiquated and religion-related contents. For this reason, private schools run by foreign teachers proliferated and were preferred by people of better economic standing, while many rural families were reluctant to send their children to school at all. However, the situation improved after 1860, when the state recognized education to be necessary for generating progress and maintaining social order. The school was the institution in charge of fostering national conscience in the new territories. See Cielo Zaidenweg, *Amar la patria. Las escuelas del territorio rionegrino y la obra argentinizadora en el Sur*, Rosario 2016, which shows the strategy used by the Argentinian state to spread its national project.

¹³ The Bank of the Province of Buenos Aires, the first in the country, was founded in 1822 and became state owned in 1854. In 1856, it became the first South American banking institution to grant mortgage loans, and it began to expand in the provincial territory by opening new branches in each city. A second important bank, the National Bank of Argentina, was founded in 1891. Branches of this bank were also established in the most important towns of the province.

century, society's strict customs were becoming liberalized, and people increasingly wanted to see and be seen on public occasions. Both the public school and the theater, together with other cultural associations, favored social cohesion and encouraged the exchange between different groups of immigrants.

While the influence of Catholicism diminished with the rise of economic liberalism, social progress, and the commitment to religious neutrality of the Argentine Constitution of 1853, the *church* still held a powerful position at the local level. The church building remained an urban landmark and point of reference that even gave the new towns the image of old settlements, since it adopted a historicist architectural style, mostly Gothic or neoclassical. In its outer appearance it formed a strong contrast to the other buildings of the city, which were mostly flatter and less impressive.

To complement the civic functions, some commercial activities were also present around the square. Normally, a major store was located at one of the corners, with the residence of the owner on the top floor. However, the actual commercial district was located not in the streets adjacent to the square but in the neighboring streets.

4. Cultural and Social Encounters around the Square

As stated in the introduction, our period of analysis is subdivided into two phases. In the first, before 1880, there was not much difference between rural and urban life in the towns of the pampa because the towns had only recently been established. Consequently, in this period, there was an important issue related to the spatial settling of the population in the towns. Inhabitants wanted to build their houses as near as possible to the main square, as they wanted to live close to the central public space and the central powers of the city. This caused many conflicts and lawsuits between the neighbors and the commission that was in charge of distributing the land, leading to a certain representative composition of the town center. Aliata and Loyola mention the problem generated in the 1820s by the allocation of land in the center to the most favored social sectors of the population:

“In effect, the Regulation for the Towns in the Inner Lands, approved on January 19, 1825, includes a provision whereby houses and enclosures of vacant lots granted in the eight blocks nearest to the square ‘must be made of raw or cooked adobe in consideration of the best perspective and decorum of the town’. This determination implies, in fact, a social zoning since the people from the lower classes are not able to build with such an expensive technique. Hence, the work of the Commission is directed, in part, to enforce this zoning

by expelling the poorer settlers from the central area, even if they have inhabited the central plots since the time of the founding of the town.”¹⁴

Although many villagers complained to the government about this situation, the example shows that the restructuring of the town implied the revaluation of urban properties and that in this process the most powerful neighbors determined the organizational structure: they wanted to live near the main square, and therefore, the number of plots in this area and the perimeter of the square had to be increased.

This motivated surveyor Miguel Vaschetti, who designed the town of Nueve de Julio in 1865, to recommend a central square of two rectangular blocks of 120 x 90 meters, “according to the number of applicants who want to have a plot facing the square.” Again, it was imposed that in the plots facing the square, the houses had to be built of bricks. An additional advantage provided by this large plaza, according to the surveyor, was that “there could be a camp entrenched where the population can shelter and defend their main interests in case of an invasion of the indigenous tribes.”¹⁵

In the second period, the society transformed its frontier character into a more urban and Europeanized one, and again, this was visible in the urban space. It is worth remembering that in the capital city of Buenos Aires this change began in the 1820s, during the administration of Bernardino Rivadavia (1780-1845)¹⁶, and regained force during the administration of Torcuato de Alvear (1822-1890), who served as mayor of Buenos Aires from 1880 to 1887. Changes in this latter period had to do with urban reform efforts based on the beautification of the city and its streets and the creation of parks and promenades, following mainly the French model.¹⁷

¹⁴ Aliata/Loyola, pp. 1-35, quote: p. 12. Usually, middle and lower classes of the time built ranches of *quincha* (reeds or rushes covered with mud) or straw.

¹⁵ Measurement procedure n. 35, Department of Nueve de Julio, Archivo Histórico de Geodesia, Provincia de Buenos Aires.

¹⁶ Fernando Aliata, *La Ciudad regular. Arquitectura, Programas e Instituciones en el Buenos Aires posrevolucionario, 1821-1835*, Bernal/Buenos Aires 2006.

¹⁷ Ideas of the “City Beautiful” movement came from D. F. Sarmiento’s travels to the United States in the 1860s, and they influenced the public works of Buenos Aires over the following years. During the Alvear administration, the works in the city were highly influenced by Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s urban strategies for Paris. Carlos Thays (1849-1934) arrived in the capital in 1889, recommended by J. Ch. Alphand, who had worked with Haussmann. Thays became the Director of Parks and Promenades of Buenos Aires in 1891. He made a career in Argentina and introduced the picturesque design on the urban scale. French urbanism had a powerful influence in Argentina, mainly through the French Association of Urbanists (created in 1914). This association disseminated texts, and its members were active outside Europe. One of them, J. Claude Forestier (1861-1930), Director of Parks and Gardens of Paris and author of the book *Grandes villes et Systèmes de*

As in the capital, the influence of beautification ideas was present in the small and medium-sized towns of the Province of Buenos Aires. There was a progressive monumentalizing of the urban layout, with wide boulevards, tree-lined access roads, and gardens, etc., which was particularly evident in the main square. During the last third of the 19th century, the layout of the square was geometrized and accentuated axes and diagonals. Pavements were installed to mark the pedestrian walkways and separate them from the *parterres*. Often, ornamental fountains and benches were included. Green space was also important for health reasons, since the capital city had suffered large yellow fever epidemics, for example in 1870. Because of this, trees were central elements of the squares, and exotic species were often incorporated, as the local ones were very limited.



Fig. 2: Main Square of Junín in 1927.

While the colonial square comprised multiple functions (administration, religion, justice, commerce, and military power, etc.), with the passage of time new ideas about health and the beautification of the city favored the relocation of the most “problematic” functions – such as markets or cemeteries – to the suburbs. Thus, the square changed its character and became a more ceremonial space. At the end of the 19th century, squares, together with parks, were the instruments to counteract “negative urban situations” and strengthen democratic values, according to the ideas of the time.

parcs (1906), was hired several times as a consultant in Buenos Aires. He participated in the Comisión de Estética Edilicia, responsible for the Plan for Buenos Aires in 1923-1925. See more in: Jorge F. Liernur/Fernando Aliata, *Diccionario de Arquitectura en la Argentina. Estilos, obras, biografías, instituciones, ciudades*, Buenos Aires 2004.

The approach of the centenary of the Revolution and Independence (between 1910 and 1916) was an ideal occasion for reinforcing the national identity, particularly in the context of a vast immigration flow. According to Gorelik, this was the opportunity for the emergence of the monumentalizing of public space, not only in Buenos Aires, but also in the small and medium towns of the interior.¹⁸ The search for a national iconography and the exaltation of patriotic values led to the installation of statues of national heroes in all the squares of the province.

As the population grew steadily due to immigration from abroad, even rural areas became more urban in character. As a consequence, by the end of the century, a new middle class emerged as a main social characteristic of small and medium towns, blurring the migrant's regional identity into a national one. However, all these changes did not create a rupture with their past, because the "rural" component remained visible in many customs. As Pasolini points out, in the beginning, "civilized" customs affected only the upper classes, but in the 1920s and 1930s, they were also characteristic for the middle classes of the small and medium-sized towns of the pampa.¹⁹

The plaza reflected the incorporation of both "civilized" and "rural" traditional customs into the life of the towns. For example, the plaza was the setting for "*corrida de sortija*", a traditional equestrian game consisting of catching a tiny ring hanging from an arch with a small stick of wood. It was also the place of religious processions, which circled the plaza. National and local festivities, such as the commemoration of Argentinian Independence and the revolution, included civic parades around the plaza. The plaza was also used as an extension space for the school, being the setting for important formal acts such as the beginning or end of classes. Also, it was the place of informal leisure activities on Sundays and afternoon strolls on weekdays. All of these activities had to do with the idea of seeing and being seen and with the adaptation of the place as a space for sociability.²⁰

Both the change of character and the use as representative space are expressed in the various events that took place in the square, for example the celebration on the main square of Chascomús on the occasion of the inauguration of the popular library in 1873, which was located in the municipal building:

¹⁸ Adrián Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque. Espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936*, Buenos Aires 2004 [first published in 1998].

¹⁹ Ricardo Pasolini, *Vida cotidiana y sociabilidad*, in: Juan Manuel Palacio (ed.), *Historia de la Provincia de Buenos Aires 4: De la federalización de Buenos Aires al advenimiento del peronismo (1880-1943)*, Buenos Aires 2013, pp. 363-392.

²⁰ Leisure activities gained importance with the establishment of Sunday rest in 1905 and the so-called "English Saturday" in 1932.

“The main square had been carefully decorated, especially in the area opposite to the municipal building. There was an extraordinary illumination. Rockets and flares were burned. The fireworks were the true note of joy for the huge crowd that had gathered and witnessed the wonderful show. Balloons were released, which thanks to a gentle breeze from the east side, fell into the waters of the sleeping lagoon. A band played popular pieces until after midnight. Meanwhile, in the municipal hall, the youth participated in the great gala dance, enlivened by an orchestra hired in Buenos Aires for that act, which lasted until the wee hours of the morning. The party was superb and left a pleasant memory in the minds of those who were lucky enough to attend.”²¹

5. Conclusion

The central squares of the new towns of the pampas were their main civic spaces, due to the functions that were concentrated around them and the special formal configurations that distinguished them from the rest of the town. They had their roots in the structure of the colonial square, but this model was adapted and formally adjusted in the 19th century. New functions that represented the ideas of civilization and modernity of the new national state were located around the central square. It was no longer a place of transit and carriage parking but a formal garden, clean, monumental, and surrounded by institutions of the new civic society.

In order to identify the reasons for this transformation, the political ideas prevailing at the time were examined: the creation of a more egalitarian society and social cohesion between the divergent social strata of the local society and the vast number of immigrants. The town hall squares are thus a clear example of how urban development and architectural projects went hand in hand with the profound political, economic, and social changes of Argentina at the end of the 19th century and how they complemented each other.

In this process, the physical boundaries of the square were redefined and clarified: streets and avenues replaced buildings as borders, thus the space of the square was formally separated from the rest of the city. Later, its design was “Europeanized” and incorporated geometric designs and symmetrical axes typical of the French tradition and in accordance with the contemporary state of urban health.

The idea of “changing the city to change society” was carried out beyond the city of Buenos Aires, in more than a hundred cases of new settlements for the growing population in the middle of the pampa. In this context, squares

²¹ Francisco Romay, *Historia de Chascomús*, Chascomús 1967, p. 100.

that initially appeared as empty blocks in the urban designs of the surveyors were progressively transformed into civic places. In this close interaction between space and society, the square became a key element of the urban fabric aimed to establish and foster certain activities and social relations, which in turn helped to shape the urban space. In this way, the circle was closed.

Abbildungsnachweis

Abb. 1: Measurement work n. 49, Department of Las Flores, Archivo Histórico de Geodesia, La Plata.

Abb. 2: Álbum Centenario de la Ciudad de Junín, 1928.