



Building a Modern City: The Construction of Hygienic Public Schools in Santiago De Chile (1890-1930)

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From the late nineteenth century, Santiago de Chile expanded considerably. Between 1875 and 1930, its area grew around eight times and its population increased in around five and a half times. Like the rest of the Latin American region, the santiaguinos were involved with the idea of modernising the Chilean capital. Yet, the expansion of the city was not matched by any expansion of its basic infrastructure, which could not cope with the speed of growth. The lack of water supply, of a sewage system and of waste management brought misery to the day-to-day life of an important sector of the santiaguinos.

The conventillos were the most emblematic evidence of the miserable urban life in Santiago. These unhealthy type of homes consisted of groups of unventilated rooms along a narrow interior passage that lacked basic hygienic services. They were usually overcrowded, having more than two people living in a room, although records show cases of eight people living in a single room. The large numbers of people living in unhealthy housing explains why this issue emerged as an explicit dimension of urban transformations with a hygienic objective. Traditionally, the studies about urban conditions have focused on the conventillos and on the promulgation of the 1906 law of social housing, the first social law in Chile, promoting the construction of hygienic and inexpensive housing. This regulation which dealt with working class housing, prescribed the demolitions of dwellings located in unhealthy places and constructed with unhygienic material.

This paper, however, focuses on the buildings of public primary schools in Santiago. Their deplorable state, in addition to the fact that they usually were not built as educational buildings (and were established in rented houses) implied a number of problems that directly affected the health of the young children - who usually lived in conventillos - who attended them. These buildings not only lacked of pedagogic but also of hygienic conditions that explain the existence of illnesses that were known in the period as "school illnesses". The critical situation of the buildings for public primary schools in Santiago animated an intense debate during the period that was shared by the public opinion, politics and professionals- especially doctors, architects and teachers. The role of the professionals in this debate will be particularly examined as stimulated the first regulations for the construction of educational buildings according to hygienic (and pedagogical) prescriptions. Although the achievements of these prescriptions were limited during the period, it is important to examine them as part of the large debate about modernization and hygiene in the context of contemporary regional and international debates.

Considering contemporary sources, such as of those who registered the state of public primary schools, the press were public opinion criticized these buildings, and the proposals of the professionals for the construction of new and modern buildings, the paper examines how a healthy city was a central quality of a modern city. Illustrative were the words of an emblematic leader, Intendente Alberto Mackenna, for whom the improvement of urban hygiene was the only mechanism "to transform Santiago into a centre of culture, and to convert the urban centre of death and disease into a centre of life and health." In this way, approaching to the construction of hygienic educational buildings, must contribute to enlarge and refresh the debate about modernization in Santiago during the period.

KEY WORDS: Modernization, urban hygiene, housing.