



Urban Vibration: The Evolution of the Cathedral Block in Santiago de Chile

Fernando PÉREZ-OYARZUN, Prof. Dr.
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile
fperez@uc.cl

It is a well known fact that Latin American cities, especially those founded by Spaniards, are based in a regular blocks grid design. This trace, repeated with slight variations, differ from other colonial patterns like those used by British foundations in North America or Australia. From Buenos Aires in Argentina to Santiago de Chile and from Bogotá, Colombia to Montevideo, Uruguay a same pattern of a regular grid can be recognized. This original pattern has been fundamental for the development of a great majority of Latin American cities. In fact this way of founding cities was replicated in foundations happened during XVIII and even during XIX centuries.

Different interpretations have been made in connection to the Latin American urban grid. Some authors have underlined its classical or medieval origins and others the military meaning of the grid. Its importance in connection to the urban development and growth of great cities -as for instance Buenos Aires- has also been connected to the capacity of receiving urban migration and even to a certain democratic spirit.

Numerous studies have been done in connection to the evolution of the urban grid under the pressure of urban development, including the way in which the original pattern has been modified by geographical accidents. Similar situations can be described in relation to the agricultural territorial structure or simply to the characteristics of urban development process.

Less attention has been paid to what can be called the block dynamics; that is, the way in which the blocks themselves develop, either modifying their perimeter or their property subdivisions. The form in which different building types accommodate within the block is also a significant ingredient of this process.

The proposed paper wants to focus in a specific case of a block dynamics. It attempts to describe the way in which a particular block in the city of Santiago, Chile, evolves from its origins to the present day. Located in the old Plaza de Armas, the cathedral block was from its very beginnings partially destined to the church. During more than 400 years it has suffered different changes in the property structure and in the architectural pieces which sit in the place. This evolution is an expression both from the inherent properties of the model and of a varied set of social, political and economic factors. The research done tries to reconstruct this evolutions looking at various sources and relating this specific urban process to the immediate and mediate urban context.

The central hypothesis of the paper is that Latin American urban grid is not simply a steady trace but a dynamic reality which, within certain limits, evolves both internally and externally to respond to a variety of stimuli coming from the urban and social development. In this context, present day situation in the studied block can be seen as the result of a long process which includes both tensions and a rich set of social and institutional interchanges. The traces of this long and complex process are still visible on the urban fabric and testify the diversity of historic layers which have superimposed during the city history.

KEY WORDS: Urban transformation, urban form, architecture, building types.