FROM THE PLAZA MAYOR TO THE PLAZA DE ARMAS IN SANTIAGO DE CHILE: TRANSFIGURATION OF PUBLIC SPACE BETWEEN THE COLONIAL AND REPUBLICAN PERIODS (1710-1910)\

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ABSTRACT

This work proposes a spatial and morphological analysis of the Plaza de Armas in Santiago de Chile during the period between 1710 and 1910. The urban transformations that occurred during this span of time have been reflected in, among other aspects, the morphology, scale and form of the city. Through a continuous and progressive replacement of architectural pieces (especially in buildings of an institutional nature), in addition to certain interventions in public spaces, the image of colonial Santiago was progressively derived into a republican city. This emergent republican city had a scale, language and character very different from that which had existed up to the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century.

In this scenario the Plaza Mayor has been a key element, as in its condition as an articulating node of the founding checkerboard structure it concentrated a double function. It was both a catalyzing agent for cultural expressions as a public space, and a central public space around which institutional buildings were located and organized.

It is held that the Plaza Mayor, or Plaza de Armas, is an urban space for which the meaning and social attributes have varied continuously since its foundation and on to the present day. These transformations or mutations have been accompanied by the replacement of its architectural pieces which, confined to the borders of the plaza, have acted as spatial containers. These pieces have reflected the profound political and social changes developed throughout history, and in particular during the urban modernization process that took place and the end of the 19th century.

To study the Plaza Mayor as a central unit for the ordering of the foundational urban checkerboard structure is especially relevant from an urban, historical, and architectural perspective, as well as from the point of view of historical urban heritage. Studying this case allows for an approximation towards contemporary phenomena in Hispano-American cities (such as abandonment, degradation and deterioration of historic city centers), and in this way contributes to the understanding of such problems, as the Plaza Mayor is a key piece and representative element of historic urban centers.

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1 This paper is a result of an on going research Project financed by Fondecyt N°1110481 under the title of “One city, two cathedrals; transformations in the cathedral ensemble and the urban modernization process of the late colonial period, 1730-1800”.

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THE FOUNDING GRID AND THE PLAZA MAYOR

“The grid appears as such, in all of its emphatic simplicity, configuring that geometric abstraction, independent of time and space…” (de Terán, 2002:12-13).

In order to understand the urban, spatial and symbolic dimension of the Plaza Mayor in the Hispanic-American city, it is necessary to contextualize it within the policies for expansion developed by Spain for its new territories during the Conquest (16th-18th centuries). Within these policies, the city acquires a role that is as fundamental as it is strategic, as it represented a tool for settlements and advancing armies throughout the Americas, as well as a key element for a specific form of geographic ordering.

In effect, the city represented the structural unit from which domination was exercised and Spanish dominion consolidated in the Americas. In fact, the founding policy for urban centers and cities was, in addition to being a means of expansion, the formalization of a political, social, religious and cultural system. As such, urban centers acquired the condition of a “juridical entity [and] associative, juridical and normative apparatus of Spanish cities…” (de Solano, 1986:11). The Hispanic-American city, beyond a mere settlement, represented the proof of the power and political stability of the Spanish empire, both of which were necessary and fundamental for consolidating expansion throughout the continent.

The founding checkerboard scheme utilized by the Spanish in their colonial cities (covered extensively in specialized literature3) is structured on the basis of a relatively regular geometric layout, and made up of a network of streets and blocks (sub-divided into plots of land), plus a central square or plaza that acted as a hierarchical core. For de Solano, the plaza is understood in terms of its shape and volume: “…built up grids with open spaces (plazas) that corresponded to grids without buildings” (de Solano, 1990:158). This network, in turn, responds to a “modulated form of spatial organization, expansive, extendible, [and which acts] as the basis of an isotropic development…” (de Terán, 2002:13), which is unique to the Hispanic-American city4.

The checkerboard, in effect, far from being a rigid and unvarying model, was an effective strategic tool of urban conquest (de Solano, 1990), which was both flexible and replicable. Such flexibility was expressed, for example, in the diversity of the location of the Plaza Mayor, as it was not always located in the relative center of the urban centers. This is shown by Guarda, who proposes the existence of a series of

3 Among the authors who have referred to the issue of the grid design of Hispanic-American cities, some of the most noteworthy are Jorge Hardoy; Francisco de Solano; Gabriel Guarda; and Fernando Terán, among others. In this work, this point will not be dealt with in depth; rather it is mentioned in the general framework of the context in which the topic of the Plaza Mayor is recorded.

4 “…it is about an invention that emerged on American soil, without any direct European precedents, but definitively in continuity with prior Spanish foundational practices, of which it is a prolongation and improvement…” (de Terán, 2002:13).
urban variations in which the Plaza is located on peripheral borders of the founding area, or simply at eccentric points (Guarda, 1978:122).

On the other hand, the forms of expression and meaning that emerged within the Plaza made it a gravitating element. It is an urban scenario, on the built up borders of which the primary institutional buildings of the colonial political system were situated and organized. At the same time, it was the main public space in which a wide variety of social expressions took place: religious processions, public trials, trade and commerce, and even public proclamations and popular festivities.

Institutional structure, staging and representation in the Plaza Mayor

(... “that Spanish concentration of the functions of the Plaza Mayor represent the symbolist reunification of the rigid representation of Christian fervor, municipal freedom, and economic activities: the temple, the palace, the colonial council, banking transactions, the market, stimulating the entirety of the sphere of life achieved by the community in one single physical space in the city.” (de Solano, 1986:16).

The baroque city from the beginning of the conquest and the colonial period was characterized by, among other traits, its socially homogenous, stratus-based composition, “without many social opportunities” (de Solano, 1990:145).

This homogeneity was transformed, in turn, into a plain and monotonous cultural life, in which the spaces for recreation and leisure were scarce, being limited almost exclusively to the Plaza Mayor, which was conceived as, “the central and cohesive space (...) a socializing element of the community.” (de Solano, 1990:145). However, during the mid-19th century this panorama changed radically through the construction of new urban spaces (avenues, plazas and parks) and investment in infrastructure (new hygienic networks, street lighting and transportation). All of this made the decompression of the functions that had previously been agglomerated in the Plaza Mayor as a singular space during the colonial epoch possible.

In order to understand the particular trace of Santiago de Chile, it is necessary to contextualize it with some other examples, which illustrate how particular could be this case. The case of Santiago de Chile is inscribed in the most “orthodox” regular urban trace. As Martínez have suggested, the Hispanic-America cities can be classified in such three different categories: regular, irregular, or semi-regular traces. And the Plaza Mayor could be located not only at the center, but also on the borders or at any point. Many different examples can illustrate those differences: from the Plaza Mayor in Mexico City -one of the most relevant and symbolic urban Spanish settlements- to Quito, Ecuador. Mexico represents –symbolic and physically- the Spanish power imposed over a precedent culture (the Aztecas); taking and adapting it´s old urban trace and building’s foundations. Here the scale and the Plaza’s extension are quite different. It remains a monumental urban space. In contrast, the case of Quito represents the classical and regular city. How the
buildings were located around the Plaza Mayor, its dimension, and its building’s scale can be compared in a similar way to Santiago. Even both were, for instance, just local governments with a stretched territorial jurisdiction. Those comparisons emphasize, that in fact, Santiago must be understood not only as a particular case, but also as a regular urban scheme which were adapted to the geographical and topographical conditions.

THE CASE OF SANTIAGO DE CHILE

Santiago de Chile was founded under the classic or regular type of grid scheme (Guarda, 1978). This is to say that it was inscribed within a geometric order in which the blocks have (in plan view) an orthogonal and squared shape. The initial subdivision of these units was into four equally sized plots. The limits of this initial city were demarcated by three geographic landmarks: the Huelén hill (currently the Santa Lucía Hill) as the eastern border; two channels of the Mapocho River (the north and south borders); and the old Inca trail, which connected the south to the north and that acted as the western border.

Figure 3- Tomás Thayer Ojeda. Fundación de Santiago por Pedro de Valdivia en 1541. Churches in red: Iglesia Catedral, Ermita del Socorro, Ermita San Lázaro y Santo Domingo, 1905, map, [Martínez, 2007].

Santiago, as the majority of Hispano-American cities, ascribed to the law that placed the primary buildings for the colonial institutionality around its Plaza Mayor. In this case, on the northern edge the Royal Court, the Colonial Council and the Prison were erected. On the western border of the square the Iglesia Mayor church (latter upgraded to Cathedral) was built, along with the Bishop’s home. Within this religious headquarters, the parochial and administrative functions of the ecclesiastical institutionality were performed. The remaining two sides (east and south) concentrated a predominantly commercial area, responding to the royal
ordinances of 15735. Within these bylaws, among other aspects, it was specified that two of the Plaza’s borders had to be dedicated to trade and commerce, and respond to a type of edification made up of arcaded facades, a typical and characteristic element of the secular borders of colonial squares.

If the Plaza Mayor of Santiago is observed from the baroque era of the colonial period, it can be read as an urban scenario within which a series of expressions were developed. As such, the facades that rise up over the edges of the plaza, “represent perfect scenarios for theatrical representation, as for the elaborate stage machinery of the strange self-induced faith; similarly, the facades of the self-government and colonial council collaborate with the former in order to close off a very meaningful static scenario.” (de Solano, 1990:188). But the facades, beyond merely a “theatricalization”, are also the built up borders of the constructed entities that surround the square, and act as spatial containers of the central void. There, the leveled area is closely connected to and articulated with the buildings that conform it. As can be seen in the coming paragraphs, it is precisely this spatiality that has been gradually transforming through the centuries, and the greatest contrast of which is expressed between the colonial and republican scenarios. These are transformations that have also given shape to the changes in the use and meaning that have formed this nerve center of urban space.

THE PLAZA MAYOR İN THE COLONİAL PERİOD

The scarcity of graphic information regarding the formal aspect that the Plaza would have had during the 18th century represents a significant difficulty for analyzing its form and use. However, for the purposes of this work, some records (plans and sketches) will be used that provide an approximate idea for what the city might have looked like during that time. Fundamentally, this analysis will utilize plans that were drawn up in the same period in question; in addition, some latter representations of drawings will be used. These sketches, which correspond to the mid-19th century, are a direct reference to the physical aspect of the Plaza and some of its buildings during the 18th century, as there were no major alterations to the plaza until after the second half of the 19th century.

During the late colonial period (18th century), the Plaza Mayor was the scene of a variety of expressions. From a spiritual point of view, relating to belief and faith, the most visible and popular were without a doubt the religious processions, in which the Cathedral Church played a special role as the largest temple in the city. The symbolic charge of the cathedral complex, the bell towers, the devotion to the saints and the relation between God, daily life and extraordinary events was one of the central axes of life for the inhabitants of the colony. Likewise, the representation and meaning of the main temple in Chile was central and an obligatory reference in a

5 “New Ordinances on Population and Discovery”, decreed in Balsaín on July 13, 1573, during the reign of Phillip II. It represents a first attempt at urban regulation, in normalizing issues related to, for example, urban land use; form and disposition of official buildings; or guides for future growth foreseen for several urban centers.
city for which only the towers and belfries of the churches interrupted the horizon of the valley landscape distributed throughout what is today known as the historic city center.

On the other hand, the flip side of this devotion was represented by the fluid and noisy trade and commerce, which besides being concentrated on the south and east sides of the plaza, beneath the arcades, was also carried out within the Plaza itself. However, such trade also led to serious problems, especially in terms of hygiene and human health, as a large part of the organic waste was deposited directly into the irrigation channel that crossed through the Plaza on an east-west axis.

Politically, the Plaza was a singular urban space, providing a stage for proclamations and speeches. On extraordinary occasions, it was also a place for open sessions of the city council and debates between the authorities and the most influential inhabitants. Another function is related to the justice system. The Plaza Mayor also served as a scene for judicial processes, public trials and public executions, the later being a popular spectacle that bordered morbidity and exemplary social discipline.

![Figure 2](image-url)

All of these social and cultural expressions are no more than a reflection of the occurrences within a highly structured society, the governing organs and institutions of which were charged with directing. If such expressions, both spontaneous and premeditated, enjoyed a space and certain degree of freedom, behind them there was a framework that governed and determined such practices (to one degree or another). From the religious processions, governed and guided by the ecclesiastical and spiritual authorities, to the political speeches and debates, the sense of justice and social order, and even cultural exchange and the daily lives of the common, everyday inhabitants. All of these social dimensions were practically limited to being expressed within the Plaza Mayor.
Morphologically, the Plaza maintained its characteristic colonial traits up until the mid-19th century. Physically, it was a modest and austere setting (compared to other splendid colonial capital cities), representative of a province far removed from the great centers of hemispheric development. It consisted of a great void lacking any decoration in its interior. A stream or irrigation channel ran through it, with the presence of a central water well to provide its inhabitants with drinking water, lacking any paved roads or any other kind of urban infrastructure.

Figure 3- Rugendas, Mauricio. Plaza de la Independencia, view towards the east, drawing, 1834 [Guarda, 1997]

The borders of the plaza were presided over by the previously mentioned official buildings that represented civil power on the one hand, and religious power on the other. On the northern border, with an east-west orientation stood the Prison, the building for the Santiago Council and the Royal Court. Its architecture, through the simple work of facades, was the most highly developed and probably formed with the utmost of care. There is no doubt that these must have been the most prominent buildings in the city, the most eye-catching and the most well-built, even using precarious and non-expert labor.

The Cathedral on the other hand (currently inexistent and for which there is no graphic record whatsoever) is known from several historical descriptions that have been made of it, such as that it was built from stone, brick and adobe. It was located on a north-south orientation, in such a way that its main access faced the street and its east side faced the Plaza with a façade. The rest of the plaza’s border was completed with the so-called Bishop’s houses (which are currently represented by the Arzobispal Palace). In this way, the entire western border of the

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6 Research Project Fondecyt 1090325. The Cathedral’s Block, the plot of history. Lead researcher: Fernando Perez O.
7 A similar case is the Quito Cathedral, which in the same way as that of Santiago (standing until the end of the 18th century), was located on one side facing the Plaza Mayor.
Plaza was made up of the ecclesiastical authority in the kingdom of Chile, in a mixture between the temple and the priest’s home.

Finally, both the east side and the south were home to local trade and commerce. With buildings constructed with arcades, and articulated with heavy columns and half point arcs, all building fronts were specifically designed for this economic activity. Geometrically, a virtual diagonal line can be traced from the southwest vertex to the northeast vertex of the Plaza. The northern and western quadrants were dedicated to colonial institutionality, while the other eastern and southern quadrants went to secular properties and commercial use. In this way, the design fulfilled that which was stipulated in the norms of 1573, in which it was recommended that two sides be dedicated to institutional buildings, and the other two to commerce.

One constructed element that is especially significant is the tower or belfry of the cathedral. This vertical structure, which rose above the homogenous heights of the houses of the day (which had at the most two floors, out of fear of collapse for the continuous earthquakes), symbolized and represented ecclesiastical power, the central axis of the conquest, colonization and evangelization of the dominated native masses. It also signified a sense of liturgy. Prayer, adoration and religious devotion of a society strongly and spiritually connected to the Catholic faith, expressed in daily life. The tower or belfry also assumed a governing role, as a compass that measures time. The bells that marked the regularly scheduled hours for mass translated into the temporal division of the day (Guarda, 1978). It is, in effect, a spatial reference in the city, defining time in daily life, and the symbolic nature of the spiritual plane.

Another aspect related to the form of the Plaza Mayor itself during the period under review is the absolute lack of vegetation. For Guarda:

“Trees not only made certain functions more difficult (markets, festivities, celebrations), but fouled the clearly established appreciation for the architecture, valued only for the pavement, diagonal roads, stands in the atriums of the larger churches, when there were any, and the fountains…” (Guarda, 1978:122).

Guarda attributes this trait to functional as well as aesthetic aspects. On one hand, according to this author vegetation was looked down upon or incompatible with an activity as important as trade and commerce in the colonial city. Clearly these latter functions are favored over activities related to leisurely activities or recreation. The Plaza Mayor in this context is a cold, monolithic space that is partially or totally constructed. In fact, the main progress had to be oriented essentially towards infrastructure works such as paving, the incorporation of street lighting,
improvement of the irrigation channels, or at most improvement of the central water well that provided this valuable element. It would not be until the mid-1800s that there would be a change in the way of occupying the Plaza with the incorporation of vegetation, and the arrival of French influenced urban culture that paved the way for the use of the Plaza as an avenue, fashion center, and a replacement of the buildings for a new architectural, morphological and spatial order.

**THE REPUBLICAN PLAZA DE ARMAS**

The process of emancipation in the General Captaincy of Chile occurred at roughly the same time as the majority of its neighboring countries, during the first decade of the 1800s. In effect, the rupture and passing from a colonial system to the new republican order implied a series of institutional and social transformations and, at the same time, transformations in urban form.

However, the speed with which these transformations took place differs considerably from city to city. Regime change, motivated by the war of independence of the colonies from the hegemonic power of Spain, was probably the most tangible and visible short-term effect. As such the incipient Republic, through a series of policy measures, paved the way towards a series of gradual changes that were reflected in the social and economic order. Nevertheless, both dimensions gradually assimilated to the new order throughout the subsequent decades10.

In the urban sphere, the new scenario manifested itself in a way that was probably much more tangible, although equally gradual over time. The replacement of a colonial-style, built environment with a more refined and complex architectural form took place starting in the second half of the 19th century, reaching its zenith towards 1910, the year of the centennial celebration of independence. At this time the city of Santiago had a new form, and a neoclassic style that was a reflection of a society that aspired to the process of modernization. However, the spatial and morphological dimension of this new Santiago also had to do with a new conceptualization of the city, in which there was a new conception of public spaces that altered their form and design, the ways of using such spaces, and the number of public spaces within the urban fabric. On one hand the concepts of arborization and decorative elements such as mirrors or water sprinklers were introduced. Urban spaces acquired a recreational function, and that of a meeting point.

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10 When at the beginning of the 19th century the processes for the emancipation of the Spanish colonies in America had begun, the main change that can be observed at an institutional level and in the political structure is the passing from a colonial order, highly hierarchical and monarchical, to incipient and diffuse republican structures. However, the economic system (primary economy) maintained its colonial order until late in the century (Almazó, 2011). In the same way, from a spatial, morphological and urban dimension, the colonial city survived, in some cases, even until the end of the 19th century.
Institutionally, only the civil entities were replaced, which is evident from the abolition of one system and the installation of a new one. The buildings located along the northern border of the square were substituted or altered (to a higher or lower degree). Unlike these buildings, the Church and the bishopric maintained both their functions and their properties. However, nor the temple nor the Bishop’s house remain today. In the case of the former, the colonial temple was demolished at the end of the 18th century, in order to give way to the new Cathedral (1747-1913). In the case of the latter, where the Bishop’s house used to be, today is the Arzobispal Palace (Palacio Arzobispal). Work was finished on this palace in 1872. Legally, probably the only change that the Church experienced was the elevation from diocese to archdiocese in 1841.

The secular properties dedicated to commerce have been, without a doubt, the use that has remained in fact despite political and morphological changes, as it has conserved a persistence both in terms of its spatial location within the Plaza, as in the conservation of that element that was required by the royal ordinances of the 16th century. Only the form and the institutions have changed, but the invariability of its activity has been maintained as no other element has.

Figure 4 – Lehnert. Plaza de la Independencia (Plaza de Armas) 1854, view towards the west. Lithography of Lehnert on the drawings of M. M Miers and C. Gay Imp. Lemercier, Paris, 1854. [Guarda, 1997]
With the total replacement of the colonial buildings that made up the Plaza, a series of effects and consequences came about. Soon, the spatiality of the Plaza was affected, as all the edges were elevated in height. Thus, the visual effect (in addition to the work on the plan, the vegetation and a series of other elements incorporated into this landscape) produced effects that are very different from those that were present in the colonial void. The Plaza de Armas and the city of Santiago acquired a new dimension and a new urban scale, at the same time as the onset of the urban modernization process that was being heralded in.

Figure 5- Photograph of Plaza de Armas, view towards the west, 1895. [Peña Otaegui, 1944].

CONCLUSIONS:

The Plaza Mayor, unlike the Plaza de Armas, is characterized by its condition as a unique urban space, in which the entire basis of representation, the activities and expressions all fit within this colonial center of the city. To this the fact can be added that it was the urban scenario around which all of the buildings that represented the prevailing order were located: social, political and religious order. Afterwards, the sensation of this gluttonizing core was disseminated and decompressed over time, with the emergence of new public urban spaces (avenues, parks and new plazas). In this way, a process was produced that marked the decentralization of functions that the Plaza Mayor had previously agglomerated within the historic center of the city.

On the other hand, the sense of occupation and use of the Plaza took a turn that was marked by the incorporation of new ornamental elements. As such, from the central colonial abyss, devoid of furnishings, vegetation and pavement, emerged a space for rest or recreation, true to the second half of the 19th century and beyond.
It is about a change in the notion of public space in which the Plaza, while maintaining its functions as a point of commercial and social exchange, acquires a new social dimension as a space of urban leisure activity and stagnant space, where the role of vegetation becomes an active role.

This change was accompanied by significant measures and investments related to infrastructure and improved hygiene in the city. As such, older elements such as irrigation channels and the central water well gave way to the provision of underground sewer systems and potable water. Water came to have a decorative role or one of landscaping through the incorporation of water mirrors that complemented the landscaping development and arborization. Other elements such as streetlights or roads began to appear within the urban landscape of the Plaza.

Morphologically, it is interesting to point out how some typological elements such as the arcades located along the southern and eastern borders of the Plaza (corresponding to the secular properties) have been conserved to this day. This is an idea inherited from the 16th century. What has occurred in these cases is a typological reinterpretation in which an adaptation has been made regarding the use of these architectural elements, picking up on the same use, but configured with a different form and architectural language. Although the arcades were a typical colonial element in Hispanic-American cities, Santiago represents a special case, because they have been keeping not only a specific construction element, but also a social memory and tradition, which have been represented in different building typologies across centuries. Trading and cultural exchanges have been an essential urban-social activities that were kept alive with a strength relationship between the space and the architectural elements. In this sense, doesn’t matter how the arcades are built and which historical period they represent, because, after all, they still remain as a fundamental human activity in the urban core.

Even though there has been a series of urban, political and social transformations, the Plaza has maintained the capacity to take on all kinds of cultural expressions in different moments of its history, which reflects a notable capacity for adaptation and flexibility as a public space. In effect, beyond its formal or morphological aspect, the Plaza has been able to function as an autonomous space or void. This particular trait is reflected in the survival of the arcades. Although they have been reinterpreted into a contemporary architectural form and language, they continue to serve the functions for which they were conceived in the laws of 1573 (commerce), and are still so vital to the existence of the Plaza. In the same way, it is especially important to point out the fact that the arcades, as architectural elements of a specific typology, have transcended the legal norm that created them over time. Beyond the obligatory nature in their initial construction, their use and restructuring have been able to transcend centuries, being adapted to a variety of building forms and typologies. In a certain way, they have overcome the regulatory condition from which they were created.

The old Plaza Mayor, currently the Plaza de Armas, is without a doubt just as crucial an axis in the development of the founding city as in the contemporary city. This is because it has been witness to and formed the environment in which all the
processes of urban development that make up the city have been reflected. What is most interesting is not only the capacity for adaptation and maintenance over time; rather it is also the central void and the surrounding buildings. Beyond the built form, they are witness to the variety of historic layers of the city, of the political and social processes that have occurred there, and the cultural root and heritage that underlies the various superimposed layers within its morphology and the built environment.

Figure 6 - Photograph of Plaza de Armas, view towards the southeast, year over 2000. [Plaza de Armas de Santiago, National History Museum, 2008]
REFERENCES


