

**Resource Architecture –  
XXI World Congress of Architecture, 22 to 26 July 2002 in Berlin**

**Plenum 3: Innovation and Tradition**

### **URBAN SPACES IN LATIN AMERICA RECENT PROJECTS**

**25.07.2002**

**Silvia Arango**

In many latin american cities, during the last two decades, an interesting and meaningful phenomenon is taking place: the design of public spaces that affects important portions of the existing city. These urban designs, of different scale and character, have some things in common: they imply great inversions, have been pushed forward by local authorities and seek for a big social impact.

Why is that social space within the city, longly abandoned, has become a main political concern ?

There are several reasons that could explain such a change. On one hand, the increasing globalization of the economy has impelled the cities to compete in order to attract tourists and highly qualified investors that demand not only efficient services but also a nice and enhancing environment. On the other hand, there are reasons that come from the historic characteristics of the urban development of the latin American cities; in the second half of the XXth century they suffered a big decay in quality of life terms, due to the vertiginous urban population growth but also because the modern urban models applied, privileged the automobile circulation. Social pressure towards the improvement of open spaces to develop an intense social interaction, which is culturally meaningful in latin america, could be an additional factor to explain the interest that the local authorities manifest in public urban space.

In this brief presentation, I wont refer to those proyects that are relatively scenographic and superficial, to concentrate on some examples of recent interventions on urban spaces willing to recover ancestral memories and uses, and thus, more capable to interpret the cultural identity of the latin american city nowadays .

**Punctual Urban Spaces**

**Plazas:** The re-design of highly symbolic plazas, like the Plaza de Armas of Santiago (Chile) or the Plaza Mayor of Quito (Ecuador), seeks for covering both civic life at the scale of the metropolis (like processions or political meetings) and daily common activities.

Neighbourhood Parks: In several cities, spaces have been designed at a domestic scale to rescue the neighbourhood's life and cohesiate their communities. Such spaces, commonly built nearby schools, markets or playing courts, can be the trigger for a sense of belonging specially when made in precarious contexts or deprived areas, like the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

Promenades: From the colonial times, the use of the afternoon "walk around" still has a significant place in social life, particularly in cities with a tropical climate. The Princess Paseo in San Juan (Puerto Rico), the malecón (sea-side walk) of Guayaquil (Ecuador) or the Chabuca Granda Paseo in Lima (Peru) are succesfull recent examples of the recovering of this tradition.

#### Urban interventions at a metropolitan scale

Transport systems: The use of bicycles as an alternative transport system, has caught the attention of people in big cities. In this sense, the experience of the 7 million people city of Bogotá (Colombia) that is building an extense network of cyclo-roads, is an interesting experiment to follow.

Hydric Systems: One of the biggest problems faced by latin american cities is the different types of pollution. I would like to present just two examples of the efforts that are being made concerning de-contamination of hydric systems. Both in Bogotá and Mexico, the recuperation of the regional hydric system includes ecological long term considerations as well as a geographic memory of the original landscape and of a peculiar way of relating with nature.

Before the spanish conquest, the high land savanna of Bogotá was a lake that urbanization slowly drained; there still some marshes, streams and brooks, with its own flora and fauna, as remains of that past. This surviving water presence within the actual urban tissue began to be recuperated, as well as the main, greater river that borders the city. Similarly, Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital was built in the middle of a lake that disappeared under the continuous growth of the modern Mexico city. From the lakes of the valley of Mexico, remains only Xochimilco, that an ambitious project is regaining in a ladscaping and architectonic sense and also in social development. The enormous park includes the re-construction of callampas - floating cultivated islands of indigenous origin- to provide means of life to the surrounding population.

If during the XXth century Latin America suffered a hasty and uncontrolled process of urbanization that only allowed, and with great difficulties, to face quantitative urgencies, now, at the begining of the XXI century there are hints of a hope that we will be able to face qualitative challenges. There are reasons to think that maybe we won't be richer, but it might be that the 340 millions of people that inhabit our cities will have a better urban life in the days to come.