Chapter 3

Latin American Cities: Modern Grids From 1850s

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ABSTRACT

During the nineteenth century, capital cities in Latin America established a new generation of “green” grids, inherited from the tradition of Hispanic colonization that introduced new elements of modernity: technique, transport, and ecology. From hundreds of cases, it is worth paying attention to those that are most outstanding for embodying a number of characteristics: certain isolated condition, perfect geometrical layout, tram connection, “hygienist” inspiration, innovative engineering, new urban imaginary, etc. The brief presentation of some cases in Buenos Aires, México DF, Montevideo, and Sao Paolo leads the authors to assess the outstanding case of El Vedado in La Habana (1859) within its contemporary panorama. This is a canonical grid district settled in a vast and privileged area near the Caribbean Sea, with its quiet tree-lined streets and notable for its exquisite buildings. After 150 years, reviewing the transformation of this unique grid allows one to gain insight regarding the flexibility of urban grids, appreciate the splendour of its past, and explore the potential for its future.

INTRODUCTION

From the mid-nineteenth century, Latin American cities experienced urban episodes of note regarding the modernization of their urban layout. Holding certain similitudes with the extensions of the Mediterranean cities (the Borghi of Bari and the colossal Ensanche of Barcelona) several American capital cities with Hispanic roots extended...
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with new grid projects over wide territories. Some of them, located in major cities in South and Central America – such as Buenos Aires, México DF, Montevideo and Sao Paolo – are examples of minor dimension and relevance at the international level, but interesting enough to be briefly touched upon in relation to the truly outstanding example: El Vedado, the great extension of La Habana.

This research fits within the framework of the urban studies on urban grids carried out over a period of many years at Barcelona Urbanism Laboratory (LUB), led by Professor Manuel de Solà-Morales (1939-2012) who also inspired this work. Beginning in the 1970s, the LUB elaborated an innovative approach to this topic, when Engineer, Ildefons Cerdà and his Ensanche for Barcelona were rediscovered. In addition to new specific contributions to this central case, LUB researchers also expanded upon its scope through the comparative method: first, paying attention to the contemporary Ensanches of the major Spanish cities: Madrid, Bilbao, San Sebastian; then, configuring a general perspective with other international grids from different periods ranging from Petra to Philadelphia, to Montpazier to Santiago de Chile1.

It is well known that the new cities founded by the Spanish in America were developed following the so-called Leyes de Indias (Laws of Indies) of Carlos I (1523) and Felipe II (1573) ² and that they were a powerful expression of the Spanish cultural influence in the New World. The Plan of Mendoza (1561) is one of the first examples of this practice, which defines the city as a basic separation between streets and blocks (‘cuadras’ in Spanish due to its square form), which were ‘quartered’ (divided into four plots). This basic scheme was also polarized with the settlement of a hierarchical and symbolic centre: the plaza de armas and the church. However, there wasn’t any definition of the limits of the city (as opposed to the medieval walls), and it was precisely the factor of the open status of the grid that would facilitate extensive city growth, as can be seen in the Plans of Buenos Aires of 1583 and the late 18th Century.

The canonical expansion of the grids underwent substantial changes during the 19th Century within the framework of the vast progress of urbanism. From the middle of the century, the technical and socio-economic improvement would lead both Mediterranean and Ibero-American cities to draw up respective expansion plans. The emergence of the bourgeoisie, the advent of the railroad and the influence of hygienist and engineering advances were the main components that drove major changes to the shape of the city. It was in essence, a major project of economic growth, which used the instruments of nascent urban science for the purpose of progress. Paolo Sica pointed out the relationship between the land market and real estate profitability with the technological innovation of the railway in his major work ‘History of Urbanism’ (Sica, 1981, pp. 41-47).
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