Empire of Cities. Urban Models in Spanish America
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Abstract

The Colonization of Spanish America was shaped through the foundation of cities. This paper will deal with several aspects related to its model and evolution. On the one hand, it will show how the Renaissance European city was finally in a broader sense the new American city. The ordinance of 1573 and other regulations obliged to take into account Vitruvian principles and much of the corpus and new ideas about the construction of cities at that time. Secondly, it will deal with issues related to the experience of the first American global cities, Mexico and Lima, like that of a metropolis. Finally, it will focus on the Bourbon reforms and its effects in the American cities.

The greatest urban colonization implemented in the Western World took place in the American continent during the Early Modern period. In fact, what we now call the “discovery and colonization of the Americas” was in the case of the Spanish an urban offensive to control the New World. The frontier of cities opened from 1492, with the foundation of the first Spanish fort – Fuerte Navidad – in the northern coast of what is today Haiti. In a rather conventional historical approach, that first American urban frontier closed in 1573, because that year the promulgation of an ordinance related to the new foundations shaped the future of the city of the conquistadors. Deeply rooted in the idealistic utopias from the European Renaissance, it was the expression of the American native cultures and environments as well. The gridiron plan, the size of the streets, the establishment of lots and quadrangular parcels, the dependance of a territory without limits, or the aspect of the geometric, functional and symbolic center defined its main character, still visible today. At the same time, in the suburbs a humanity of mixed race people earned their living. It was the real limit of that urban utopia.

The place of the cities in the mythology of the discovery of America was very important. Columbus outlined his project to reach Asia navigating towards
the West through readings from classic books and maps and the testimonies of medieval travelers. The palace of the king of Cipango (Japan) with golden walls as described by Marco Polo spurred the imagination of the discoverer, whose mystical dream was not humble. He wanted to reconquer Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple of Salomon. The legend of Ofir, a biblical region located to the north of India, also ask for his attention. In another mythic episode, Columbus recalled the “island of the seven cities”, its beaches, as told by a crew of sailors, plenty of golden sand.

After Columbus, the culmination and very frequently the only possible justification of a failed discovery was the foundation of a new city. The beginning of such a process was the possession by law, the “toma de posesión”. This act transferred to the Spanish empire some part of an American “res nullius” or empty land, according to the rules of the Roman law, and then to an individual conquistador. It turned by a ceremony of legal witchcraft the american space "without owner" into territory. The possession by law preceded and ordered the procedure of foundation of cities. Its regulation, as ruled by the Code of laws of the Indies, assumed nevertheless particular circumstances. The discoverer had to cut branches, to walk, to take some earth in hands, to drink water and give shouts. The public escribano raised written testimony and the pregonero gave voice to the whole events, finished with the drawing of the streets and the appointment of the members of the new cabildo, the town hall.

Fuerte Navidad, the first european fort in the New World, did not last. When Columbus returned in his second trip, he found that 39 men he left with merchandises to trade, artillery and a small boat had been massacred by the natives. He quickly founded the first european city in the Americas, Isabela by the name of the queen. It was populated with sailors, some hidalgos (low rank nobles) and woman, craftsmen, farmers and friars. But the first important city was Santo Domingo, founded in the southern coast of the island of Hispaniola in 1498 and moved in 1502. A very active port, it had certain regular planning, parallel streets and an important central area, slightly displaced towards the river Ozama. Soon the first American cathedral rose in a gothic style, divided into three spaces and two chapels; unlike the foreseen costume, the main
façade was not oriented to the plaza mayor, the main square of the city and the center of the gridiron. Near it was the palace of Diego Columbus (1510-1514), the hospital of San Nicholas of Bari (1533-1552), the tower of the fortress, the atarazanas—a shipyard—and the first American university, opened in 1538. The first account of population, from 1528, indicates that 433 men lived in Santo Domingo, 281 of them as head of households, almost two thirds having a sword or other arms and a mere 14% having a horse.

The establishment of coastal cities in order to provide the conquest places for advancing towards the west and the south was then the objective. After Santiago, the first Cuban capital, founded in 1511 in a great bay protected by two promontories, there was Havana, founded in 1515 and changed three times of location, or San Juan of Puerto Rico and Panama in 1519. That year the foundation of Veracruz in the coast of Yucatan was the beginning of the conquest of Mexico, the foundation of a new city in the ruins of the aztec Tenochtitlan being the final act of power fulfilled by Hernán Cortés. In the same mood, the conquest of Peru resumed in the occupation of Cuzco and the foundation of a new capital in the coast, Lima, in 1535. There was new capital cities in New Granada (Bogotá, founded in 1538), Venezuela (Caracas, founded in 1567), San Agustin of Florida (the first city in the United States, in 1565), Chile (Santiago in 1541) or Buenos Aires, in 1580 for the second time. By then, it was clear that Spanish America was a urban expression indeed. In 1574 their 241 cities had 23,493 so-called spanish neighbours, usually men and fathers of an extended family with a house and rents, may be indians paying tribute and african slaves. In the case of the capitals, Santo Domingo had 500 neighbours, Havana 60, San Juan of Puerto Rico 200, Caracas 55, Mexico 300, Guatemala 500, Panama 400, Santafé of Bogota 600, Quito 400, Guayaquil 100, Lima 2,000, Cuzco, 800, Santiago of Chile 375, La Paz 200, 400 Potosi and Asunción of Paraguay 300. This figures help to approach to total population numbers. In the case of Mexico, there was at the beginning of the seventeenth century 15,000 Spanish persons, 50,000 free and slaved negroes and mulattos and about 80,000 indians.

Lima had at that time more than 3,000 spanish neighbours, in addition to
12,000 women of different origins and 20,000 persons of mixed race origin. The creole limeño metropolis in formation was populated in a diverse manner. At the top there was some high-rank royal officers (viceroy, oidores of the audiencia or high tribunal, royal officials, archbishop and canónigos, members of the cathedral), the members of the cabildo or town hall and encomenderos in possession of lands and indians. An then there was some middle rank people, priests, lawyers, notaries, doctors, merchants and traders, and the whole universe of the city’s other inhabitants, craftsmen and people of handicraft (barbers, tailors, silkmanufacturers, button sellers, old clothing sellers, pott makers, carpenters and sailors and others passing-goers). Living among them, many free blacks or mulattoes who had acquired their freedom in some event of the conquista, some act of charity of the owner or the majority because the payment of the manumission. They usually worked like craftsmen, sailors, gardeners or peasants. Finally, Lima was full of ladinos –african slaves accustomed to live in the New World with europeans- although there was a great number of bozales, slaves recently arrived from Cartagena and Africa living in the African heart of Lima: Malambo.

"God is in heaven, the king is in Spain and I am here". This declaration by a conquistador from Chile in the 1550s expressed without ambiguities the American circumstance, the obligation of creating new cities and communities in the New World. The cities provided the meanings to stay there. The araucano “caudillo” Lautaro told his companions in 1556 near Santiago of Chile: “Brothers, you know that this christians must be killed here where they are born, so that they do not born any more”. The freedom of will of the conquistadores in the urban frontiers of the New World was nevertheless in a balance because of the high influence of the royals officers and the crown. They obtained recognition and legitimacy in exchange for submission of the distant but unquestionable real authority. In another words, the city of the conquistadores was deeply rooted in the experience of an imperial power. At the same time, according to law, it was a political city with a balance of european, native and african population mixing very fast: that urban experience was above all the experience of an Atlantic world.
No wonder the crown paved the way for the regulation of the american cities in the ordnance of 1573, simple, clear in the regulation of its foundation and future developments. From 1569, Juan de Ovando, visitador of the Council of the Indies, met with governors and officers to make a new code of laws. It was divided in seven parts, full of common sense rules and laws, regulating the existing planning with the doctrines of Vitrubio. Cities had to be founded in regions of health and good climate, “of good and happy constellation, the clear and benign sky, the pure and smooth air, without excess of heat or cold, and having to choose, it is better if it is cold”. The sites would be nor in coastal or high mountains, in places with fertility, wood, fresh water, roads, “without poisonous animals or air corruption”. The initial population of a new city had to be 30 neighbours (approximately 180 people), in addition to indians and blacks. Each neighbour having a house and land, while the city would have common lands –comunes- and a place for cattle, the ejido. In the city, once chosen the place for the main square or plaza mayor, with several sides devoted to built up the cathedral, royal houses and parcels for important families or beneméritos, the streets and other squares for churches, hospitals, market and convents could be drawn.

The task of building up a city meant to open an “entrance to the lands”, to maintain a frontier or to settle and take roots in the indigenous world. From 1600 onwards, with the whole Hapsburg monarchy collapsing in Europe, it was clear that a new era had arrived to the Spanish American cities, that of the creole power as such. The invention of a tale about the past and present of the american cities was a key element of the creole identity. The Renaissance city of the conquistadores turned to be a creole metropolis, organic by nature, living like a biblical Jerusalem, at the same time in the center and the periphery of the world, having all the meanings in itself and expressing through the artistic languages of the baroque. That creole Jerusalem appeared in the signs of nature, the signs of god to its inhabitants. As a baroque city, it was going to be dominated by status and circumstance. Its space and time was conformed like enjoyment and forgiveness of faults and sins through celebrations, rituals and ephemera. It rose according to the gridiron plan, the space divided in lots whose hierarchy depended on the distance from the center. Some were capital
of great magnitude, while others remained in the status of provincial cities, regional capitals or small towns. Nevertheless, the great creole metropolis were the capitals of the viceroyalties of New Spain, Mexico, an Peru, Lima. As cities governed by a powerful town hall, the expression of local power, politics were above all local politics. The arrival and exit of viceroys and governors, royal birthdays, celebration of saints –specially the local ones, some of them americans and some of mixed race like San Martin de Porres in Lima- and fairs and markets as well set the living of the cities. The amplitude of the streets and the seats and the perspective opened by the gridiron plan favoured the fiestas and processions. In the end, the chance for the different social groups and nations to celebrate their status in the American city were fulfilled. In the religious celebrations and the civil commemorations each one had the chance to negotiate their status, asking for a change through the mercy of the powerful. The hierarchy of the society became visible.

Although it is not clear when came to an end the time of the creole metropolis, an when the baroque belonged to the past, the Bourbon reforms started roughly in 1750 changed the idea of the American city. First of all, the politics of the new age, the reforms, paved the way for a change in the description of the city. Corruption and disorder suddenly filled letters and reports, depicting the creole metropolis as a source of chaos for the monarchy. The cause of public progress badly needed the end of its authonomy, a virtuous assault to the cabildo and other traditional institutions dominated –it was said– by corrupt creoles and their servants. The wise city of the conquistadores was lost in a labyrinth of dirty streets, narrow passages, "abandonment and stupidity". The enlightened american city had arrived in History. If the government from the city was taken into accountability by royal officers, the implantation of intendances limit the authonomy of the municipalities. The extensive jurisdiction that had conferred an organic political body to the cities, paving the way for the existence of medium and small cities based in the interaction with rural towns and hamlets was coming to an end.

If the important creoles who had patronized the city for centuries were finally under control, the rest of the population realized their life in the city was
going to change as well. On the one hand, it was settled the idea of public
works and social order through the construction of parks, roads, public libraries,
water provision, channels and bridges, hospitals, the lighting system, jails and
factories (Mexico had in 1802 a tobacco factory with 7,000 workers). On the
other, suddenly there was a huge number of rules governing the life of the
inhabitants of the city. Games, drink, theater, were sometimes forbidden, a
police for monitoring the population was organized. As a big difference with the
creole metropolis, the public space was segregated from private, with a
pretension of absolute transparency. The representatives of the new Neoclassic
urbanism tried to impose regularity, symmetry, proportion and perspective. The
city was suposedly organized for the happiness of their inhabitants by the
meanings of science and industry and the implantation of hygienic, moral and
rational conducts. It was at that time that the first churches of Mexico were lost,
like that of the Love of God, replaced by a store and a house; or the one of San
Felipe, turned into a house.

The changes in the American cities in the end arrived elsewhere. Lima
was furnished with an academy of beaux arts, an anatomical cabinet, a hospital
and a nautical school. Buenos Aires, a city with the roads collapsed by the mud
and the number of cows on the roads, had new streets, adorned with a lighting
system. Santiago of Chile opened a new cathedral, customs and a town hall,
while in Quito there was a new palace of government. In Caracas, the bridges
of Charles III and the Trinidad were built, a theatre of comedies and a big
avenue like that of the Prado in Madrid constructed. The American city of fallen
houses and churches and streets full of mud and water belonged to the past.
The arrangement of the urban space was linked to long term policies. But as
Alexander von Humboldt puts it in 1803 America “was a continent of color”,
specially in the cities. The sense of order, the division in districts and quarters,
was determined to expel poor whites, mestizos, free mulattoes, indians and
free blacks from the center, put into discipline the population. But it was
nonsense, the nonsense of the recently arrived “modern politics” in the
american city. Finally, the dream of an order in the city without taking into
account the people: an order against its finest traditions.
Bibliography