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Building sustainable historic centres: A comparative approach for innovative urban projects

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Building Sustainable Historic Centres

A Comparative Approach for Innovative
Urban Projects

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Catenazzi²

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, the promotion of heritage values has gradually become a relevant issue for urban planning. Together with the emergence of new peripheries, inner-city areas and particularly old historic centres, affected by deterioration due to the recession of the last decades, have been the object of study and actions. Consequently, the need to turn the historic centres into areas of development for the market, through legislative measures and investments in infrastructure and services, and the re-evaluation of the heritage value of existing buildings, oscillated between policies which, linked to the.../

Keywords: urban planning, innovative planning, urban governance, decision-making, sustainable development, historic centres, heritage values, access to the city

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mechanisms of economic and cultural globalization, promoted tourism as a source of revenue while striving to find alternatives to gentrification.

The renewed priority given to the development of inner-city areas, centred round the rehabilitation of their historic values and central nature, has generated innovative operating modes in the urban environment that seek to reconcile the challenges of modernity, particularly in regard to social inequalities with those of the past, and to rethink the central role of historic centres, their relations with the city and their development in terms of sustainability.

The goal of our contribution is to gain a better understanding of the major challenges of the rehabilitation of historic centres within the framework of 'innovative' approaches to urban planning, aiming at promoting sustainable living conditions. The analysis is based on an ongoing comparative and transdisciplinary research project, in which the decision-making processes of concrete interventions for the rehabilitation of inner-areas with heritage value are being analyzed in different cities of the world: Buenos Aires, La Havana and Bangkok. The main questions that arose in our analysis concern the contexts allowing for innovation, focusing on those institutional arrangements, which, as modes of governance, were introduced in the interventions, studied.

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1 Introduction

Since the 1980s, the promotion of heritage values has gradually become a relevant issue for urban planning. Together with the emergence of new peripheries, inner-city areas and, particularly, old historic centres – affected by deterioration, due to the recession of the last decades – have been the object of study and actions. For more than 20 years, there has been a steady increase in the number of projects to rehabilitate historic centres in various cities across the world, within the framework of a debate on heritage that has evolved from building preservation to a wider approach encompassing socio-cultural values, strongly influenced by the impact of specific rehabilitation policies at the international level. In addition to this tendency, there are the challenges of promoting access to the city for underprivileged segments of the population, which accounted for the bulk of inhabitants in decaying inner-city areas.

Consequently, the need to turn the historic centres into areas of development for the market – through legislative measures and investments in infrastructure and services, and the re-evaluation of the heritage value of existing buildings – oscillated between policies that, linked to the mechanisms of economic and cultural globalization, promoted tourism as a source of revenue while striving to find alternatives to gentrification. The experience of Bologna was, no doubt, exemplary of new operating modes that seek to reconcile the challenges of modernity – particularly with regard to social inequalities – with those of the past, and to rethink the central role of historic centres, their relations with the city, and their development in terms of sustainability.

The renewed priority given to the development of inner-city areas, centred round the rehabilitation of their historic values and central nature, has generated innovative forms of intervention in the urban environment, assuming innovation as the practical application of new concepts (Ward 2002: 396). As developed by Rabinovich (2008), it could be assumed that the character of innovation derives from a critical stance on previous, more traditional approaches to urban problems. However, over and above the dilemma of differentiating between ‘traditional’ and ‘new’, innovation appears since the late twentieth century, to be adjusting to the need to link heterogeneous players, diverse scales, and multiple dimensions.

Furthermore, the correlation of forces that has placed policies and projects for the rehabilitation of historic centres on the public agenda has come at a time when the built environment, the renovation of the existing city, has been progressively factored into urban planning. Also, the promotion of development models favouring a balance between social, ecological, and economic dimensions through participatory policies has begun to take shape, leading to the concept of sustainable urban development. Unlike projects that emphasize the capacity of the state and experts, and approaches that focus exclusively on the role of society, the aim is to identify and propose forms of intervention that take due account of the complex logics affecting the decisionmaking process. Indeed, the rebirth of participatory policies is linked to not only the distinctive leading role of sustainable development, but also to the emergence of the concept of governance, in the sense of the modes of coordination between the various players who make up society that enable public action (Le Galès 1995).

The goal of our contribution is to gain a better understanding of the major challenges of the rehabilitation of historic centres within the framework of ‘innovative’ approaches to urban planning, aiming at promoting sustainable living conditions. The analysis is based

on an ongoing comparative and transdisciplinary research project in which concrete interventions for the rehabilitation of inner-areas with heritage value are being analysed in different cities of the world: Buenos Aires, Havana, and Bangkok.¹ The studied interventions, 'self proclaimed' as innovative, sustainable and related to participatory processes, focus on habitat issues while being implemented in the framework of plans and public policies that take different approaches to heritage values.²

The main questions that arose in our analysis concern the contexts allowing for innovation, focusing on those institutional arrangements that, as modes of governance, were introduced in the interventions studied. Thus, looking at similar projects in different latitudes serves to illustrate what is similar and what is different in each context, bearing in mind that the ultimate objective is to understand the alternatives of innovation in the fields of knowledge and urban planning practices, and the way these relate to the goal of building sustainable cities.

2 Tackling the complexity of urban inner-city areas with heritage value

The approaches used to deal with urban complexity are constantly evolving, and renewing existing methods of intervention is a major issue. Indeed, the historical urbanism debate illustrates just how much urban planning theory has changed in almost half a century (Rabinovich 2008). In some ways, the advances of urban planning as a field of knowledge and practices (Claude 2006) can be seen as constellations, where technical ideas interlink with professional methods of action and forms of state regulation and intervention. In turn, these influence technical, political, and social agendas, as they are not categories but, rather, historically developed concepts that have been redefined over time and in relation to different realities (Novick 2007).

Since the 1960s, the acknowledgement of urban planning as a political activity (Hall 2005; Taylor 2005) brought with it, on the one hand, a renewal of deliberative mechanisms combined with a demand to broaden the body of actors through participatory processes (Davidoff 1965; Arnstein 1969; Healey 1997; Rabinovich 2002, 2007). Its apogee, during the 1980s, particularly in policies and development projects, reflects a re-appropriation by international, national, and local institutions of issues that had hitherto been monopolized by social movements (Bacqué 2005). This rebirth is also linked with decentralized strategies, which found their place in a new political science

¹ The research project 'Innovative Decisionmaking Processes in Sustainable Urban Projects' (2006–10) is being conducted under the guidance of Dr Rabinovich and Professor Catenazzi as part of the National Centre of Competence in Research North–South (NCCR N-S), co-founded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/77. Case studies are being carried out at local level under the direction of Dr Alicia Novick in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Patricia Rodríguez Alomá and Dr Carlos García Pleyán in Havana, Cuba; and Professor Yongtanit Pimonsathean in Bangkok, Thailand. The present contribution is based on the preliminary findings of the comparative work, where the launch of interventions is examined in an exploratory manner by the research teams in each city.

² Methodologically, the selection of concrete operations was based in a set of 15 conceptual and strategic criteria. While the first set of criteria was geared towards identifying implemented approaches for innovative and sustainable urban projects, the last set of criteria is related to the framework conditions for the feasibility of the project.

that challenged centralized decisionmaking modes. Indeed, as we pointed out in the introduction, in the late 1980s the rebirth of participatory policies was linked with the emergence of the concept of governance and that of sustainable development.

The concept of governance, which is understood as a modality for the management of public affairs, is focused on not only identifying ‘who governs’ but also the ‘how’ of the governing. According to Healey (2004), from a neo-institutionalist perspective³ the governance institutions of a society are those values, norms, and ways of acting that shape the realm of collective action – the relations between citizens, the regulation of individual behaviour in relation to wider social norms, and the organization of projects of collective endeavour. In this context, the shift to urban governance highlights a growing trend towards the territorialization of collective actions in terms of not only proximity, but also an increase in the scales of negotiating and decisionmaking networks.

The dovetail of urban planning with the concept of sustainable development is linked to the renewed priority given to the ecology and the environment on a planetary scale (Ward 2002). Applied to the urban sphere, sustainable development aims to build the city *differently*, by focusing on the finely balanced development of the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of urban dynamics (Bolay *et al.* 2000; Bolay 2004). Nevertheless, its principles are also partly ‘political compromises’, a factor that explains the still vague character of the notion, and the difficulties and contradictions encountered in its practical application (Querrien and Lassave 2000).

The recognition of urban planning as a political activity, on the other hand, led to a repositioning of substantive problems as social inequality, as priorities that had to be included again in a consistent and practical manner in the public agenda. Therefore, some planners began to promote visions of ‘livable cities’ (Evans 2002; Ward 2002) or ‘inclusive cities’ (Westendorff 2004), recognizing the need to reinforce social and integration networks with practices of the so-called ‘informal’ sectors (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1987), taking into account their multiple different conditions.

In this context, challenges of promoting access to the inner city for underprivileged segments of the population, combined with the concerns relating to the deterioration of inner-city areas and, particularly, old historic centres with heritage value, began to be addressed by concrete proposals within the framework of policies and projects. At the international level, several meetings and charters proposed measures to tackle the deterioration of historic centres.⁴

³ Neo-institutionalism does not view governance institutions as a set of formal organizations and procedures established in law and followed through in legally specified practices. Instead, institutions refer to the norms, standards, and mores of a society or social group that shape both formal and informal ways of thinking and ways of acting. Analysts focus attention on actors, interactive practices, arenas, and networks. They examine the formation and dissemination of discourse and practices, the relation between deeper cultural values and specific episodes of governance, and the interaction of the activities of specific actors and wider structuring forces (Healey 2004: 92).

⁴ For example, the 1972 UNESCO Convention, the 1977 Charter of Machu Picchu, the 1983 Declaration of Mexico City, the Washington Charter, and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre Policies.

Our research project is situated precisely within the described framework. The international research team is analysing three concrete interventions in historic centres, the aim being to combine the preservation of heritage values with the opportunities for the economic development of the area, while guaranteeing access to housing for the lower-income population.

3 Representative interventions in Buenos Aires, Havana, and Bangkok

The differences between Buenos Aires, Havana, and Bangkok are evident. Nevertheless, these cities doubtless confront some similar issues to those that form the subject matter of this contribution: inequalities in access to the city, the gentrification of their historical centres, the role of international cooperation in the interventions on central zones and outskirts, the persistence of certain international discourses about sustainable development, and the very crux of the heritage debate within urban planning.

In the mid-1980s, at a time when two of the three interventions studied were situated, the urban debate in Latin America was dominated by terms such as decentralization, participation, and sustainable development (Catenazzi and Rabinovich 2007). In Argentina, following the dark years of the military dictatorship, the restoration of democracy in 1983 included the cultural and urban recuperation of the city of Buenos Aires and, in this context, the historic centre had a place in the government's agenda. In Cuba, the failure of the socialist camp (1989) had devastating economic and social effects on the daily life of the population, but beneficial ones on fields related to the country's development strategy. Whereas the economic and social role of the state withered, experiments with community development and participatory planning abounded, leading to the emergence of a concern for the rehabilitation and conservation of the existing built heritage after decades of abandonment motivated by a policy focused on new building (García Pleyán 2006).

These elements also began to be observed in south-east Asia, where the third case study is located, albeit almost a decade later and in an almost marginal manner compared with the official urbanism plans.⁵ In Thailand, while the planning law tended to reduce citizens' opportunities to participate in the planning process, the country was moving towards decentralization (Pimonsathean 2006). This tendency reflected the thinking of the times, aligned against any hierarchical and technocratic manifestation expressed in the generation of traditional urban plans. The enhancement of the built heritage, the real versus the ideal city, were new entries into the problems of the city. On the way to the decade of paradigm shift (the 1990s), the country had to face a number of political crises that precluded taking up issues of governance and sustainability.

In this context of political and institutional change, the rehabilitation of historic inner cities appeared as an arena for innovation, as far as urban planning was concerned.

⁵ The so-called 'rational comprehensive planning' of the American approach has been the mainstream of Thai urban planning since the 1960s, as reflected by the launch of the City Planning Act in 1975 and later in 1992.

3.1 The historic centre of Buenos Aires: the ‘San Francisco Block’⁶

Initially, the San Francisco Block operation was one of the components of the San Telmo Revitalization Plan, also incorporated into PROSUR, a study diagnosis implemented by UNDP and funded by the World Bank that began in 1990 and was designed to promote the social and urban recovery of the most neglected area of the city. Patrimonial activities were systematized a posteriori under the Historic Centre Management Plan, initially under the responsibility of the Secretary of Urban Planning and subsequently transferred to the Secretary of Culture (since 2006, the Ministry) as the Main Directorate for the Historic Centre. The different programmes – such as the one for the environmental improvement of urban space and residential consolidation, among others – appeared to be innovative and pro-sustainable development. Nevertheless, the San Francisco Block did not give rise to specific action.

It was in 1989, only a few months after a change in the national and municipal government of Argentina, that the San Francisco Block Recovery Plan, targeting 114 families squatting old buildings in the Block was launched, through the establishment of a cooperation agreement between the Legislative Assembly of Andalusia (Junta de Andalucía) and the Municipality of Buenos Aires. The agreement was enshrined in the Cooperation and Friendship Treaty signed by the Kingdom of Spain and the Republic of Argentina the previous year, and made provision for the funding of various activities. In this context, the ‘Rehabilitation Programme of the San Francisco Block’ was launched. A few months after the signing of the document – simultaneously with the holding of the Open Congresses of San Telmo, and within the framework of a series of actions for the revitalization of the city centre – agreements were signed with the neighbours and some of the families were relocated in a hotel to enable work to begin. In 1993, the first phase of the work was initiated and, in 1995, the second phase began.

The Block was formed by a series of *conventillos*⁷ occupying a plot that, until 1983, had been the property of the religious order of the Franciscans and, subsequently, had become part of the City Bank’s property as payment for an old debt. When the Bank took over the property, it started to move the inhabitants out, resulting in strong protests by the neighbours. However, the programme not only responded to neighbours’ and civil servants’ requirements, but also embodied other expectations. At the time, themes such as the deterioration of the urban centre, occupied houses (squatters), and the need to promote new action modes for town planning were the problematic items on the new town planning secretary’s agenda. Novick (2006) points out that, in 1984, Jorge Enrique Hardoy was appointed president of the National Commission of Museums, Monuments, and Historical Sites. The fact that an outstanding planner assumed a central role in the protection of the built heritage indicated the new dimensions of the problem, redefining reaches and turns of heritage into an urban management issue. On the other hand, it represented an opportunity for the Legislative Assembly of Andalusia to amplify its presence in Latin America. Therefore, the operation was presented as a pilot experiment that could be replicated in other sites.

⁶ Based on Novick *et al.* (2007).

⁷ Large, old, one-family houses, where rooms were rented to different families who had to share sanitary, washing, and cooking facilities in poor conditions.

Nowadays, the renovated houses in this ideal location – two blocks away from the Plaza de Mayo – continue to be occupied by the original inhabitants. Nevertheless, the life of the neighbours is currently full of uncertainty, as they periodically receive letters announcing their imminent evacuation. Many leaders of the neighbours' committee have accumulated experience in mobilizing the different institutional bodies with a view to avoiding evacuation. Also, even though the neighbourhood currently forms part of the Historic Centre Management Plan, it is not a priority within the actions that are presently being carried out.

3.2 The historic centre of Havana, Cuba: the 'Plaza Vieja'⁸

The Master Plan for the Rehabilitation of the Historic Centre of Havana is a form of management established in 1994 to guarantee the continuity of restoration works in Old Havana after the crisis generated by the collapse of the socialist camp. In this context, the central state cut off public subsidies and endowed the Office of the Historian of the City of Old Havana with legal and financial instruments allowing the establishment of self-financed global restoration mechanisms.⁹ The Master Plan, an interdisciplinary entity devoted to territorial management and planning that launched the criteria for strategic actions in the perspective of urban intervention, was set up in 1994 to undertake complete revitalization of the historic centre. The establishment of the Master Plan has driven a significant process of intervention in the area by means of constructive action. The scheme adopted by the Master Plan allows the reinvestment of the resources obtained from tourism and other economic activities, and from international development cooperation.

In this context, the 'Plaza Vieja' project is an emblematic example for the rehabilitation of its housing – 20 buildings including 200 dwellings and 600 people – and the public space, as well as for the treatment given to its residents. Its materialization over a 20-year period reflects the changes in the vision of urban rehabilitation at the national level. The rehabilitation process started to be studied in 1979, and a UNESCO-based international rescue campaign was launched four years later. Currently, the square lies within the rehabilitated 33 per cent of the historic centre and, after a lengthy process, has been almost totally restored, with the exception of five buildings. The rehabilitation process can be summed up in two major periods, both characterized by a leading role for institutional actors.

During the first period, from 1980 to 1993 – the time when the new management model for the historic centre was applied – although the Historian's Office was responsible for five-year plans, the Plaza Vieja was exclusively maintained by the National Centre for Conservation, Restoration, and Museum Studies (CENCREM). In this initial phase, the

⁸ Based on Rodríguez *et al.* (2007).

⁹ In 1978, the historic centre was declared a national monument and, in 1981, the state began providing centralized financial resources for the rehabilitation and restoration of the neighbourhood heritage. In 1982, UNESCO declared the historic centre to be part of the Cultural Heritage of Mankind. The management model took shape in 1993, when the territory was declared a priority conservation zone, and the Historian's Office was directly subordinated to the Council of State and Ministers. In 1995, the historic centre was declared a high-priority zone for tourism by means of a resolution by the Council of State and Ministers.

square was viewed as a closed entity. Existing problems, along with those generated by the intervention process, were to be resolved within its territorial boundaries. The facades were the main thrust of conservation, while a more radical transformation of the inner spaces was taking place by means of the establishment of predominantly cultural uses, and the development of small dwellings for residential purposes. Several institutional actors were involved, but the CENCREM played a relevant role during this first period.

The second rehabilitation period runs from 1993 to the present, and is characterized by a substantial change in territorial management. Institutional leadership was assumed by the Historian's Office, in interplay with the other competent institutions, and rehabilitation efforts began to consider buildings as a whole by contemplating their integrity (instead of the previous 'facadism') and the widening of the territorial functions.

Whereas the process before 1993 was integral only from the spatial viewpoint (by considering projects concerning all buildings in the square as public space), the subsequent period was characterized by the addition of criteria such as efficiency, as well as the incorporation of the economic and social dimensions, increasing the integrality of the approach. Currently, the conflicts identified in the square can be divided into three groups: deciding on the use of the buildings, the public space, and the relocation of the resident population.

3.3 The historic centre of Bangkok: the 'Tha Tian community'¹⁰

The revitalization of the Tha Tian historic community in Bangkok, Thailand, is a case of urban intervention based on a bottom-up approach at the local level, developed against the implementation of the Conservation Master Plan for Bangkok (CMPB). The CMPB is a top-down master plan drawn up by the Rattanakosin Committee, a national conservation committee tasked with preparing a master plan for the conservation of historic towns throughout Thailand.¹¹ The CMPB, which the Cabinet approved in 1997, is based on the 'Beautiful City' concept. According to the Master Plan, all areas in the conservation district were marked for preservation or reconstruction (if they had significant value), demolition (if they did not fit into the environment), or for development freeze. Areas marked for demolition were to be replaced by open spaces and greenery. The most affected areas were communities with shop-houses that had to be pulled down and relocated: some 20 communities fell into this category.

The Conservation Master Plan was approved the same year as the 1997 Constitution, which promotes the right for inhabitants to maintain their knowledge and cultural

¹⁰ Based on Pimonsathean (2006, 2007).

¹¹ The Committee enjoys the full support of the central government insofar as it has a deputy prime minister as chairperson. It not only draws up a master plan, but also acts as a review body in order to screen, grant, or withhold permission for development proposals in the conservation area. In the case of Bangkok, the Rattanakosin Committee conservation policy is defined as follows: the promotion of open space and greenery; the preservation of historically and architecturally significant structures; and the reduction of density and intensity of buildings, sites, and traffic.

heritage, as well as a right to take part in public projects. Accordingly, the Bangkok Conservation Master Plan came in for a great deal of criticism from society.

The most important input came from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA).¹² As a local government and a subordinate body in the government hierarchy, the BMA had to implement the Master Plan. The most problematic aspect was undoubtedly the communities that were subject to relocation and demolition. As for the socio-economic aspect, the shop-house community performed certain economic activities that did not necessarily conform to the historic district. If the residents needed to move out from the community, they were obliged to seek new job opportunities outside the conservation area. At the same time, the community residents are the powerful voters of the BMA local politicians.

Mindful of the difficulties in implementing the Master Plan, in 1998 the BMA selected one community for detailed study by a research team from the university.¹³ The selected community, called 'Tha Tian', is located in the most sensitive area and, thus, is subject to the relocation scheme. This community-based intervention relied on a bottom-up planning approach, which gave rise to an alternative improvement plan drawn with the consent of the BMA and the community, with the difference that total redevelopment and relocation were not needed, and more shop-houses were to be restored due to their architectural significance. After the year 2000, the BMA finally seemed to recognize the importance of the residents in the conservation area, as reflected by the allocation of an annual budget to organize a conference and training programmes for the community representatives.

4 Building sustainable historic centres: some elements of comparison

As we specified in the introduction, our contribution is based on an in-depth description of the case studies in the frame of the research process initiated in 2006. Therefore, as a first approach to a comparative analysis, we focus on two central issues:

- How is access to the city promoted by the enhancement of inner-city areas?, and
- Which specific institutional arrangements of urban governance allowed the implementation of innovative urban projects?

First, linked with the enhancement of inner-city areas – in our case, with heritage value – the case studies show how, in different parts of the world, the promotion of historic centres gradually became a relevant issue for urban planning. While the heritage discourse has evolved from building preservation to wider approaches, the rehabilitation

¹² Bangkok has a special administrative body (called Bangkok Metropolitan Administration – BMA) of which the governor is elected (while in any other province in Thailand the governor is appointed by the central government). In terms of urban planning, according to the 1975 Planning Act, Bangkok has its own authority to formulate the comprehensive plan. The first statutory plan for Bangkok – the Bangkok Comprehensive Plan – was launched in 1992. It was first revised in 1999, and recently in May 2006. Along with the making of the physical plan, at the end of the twentieth century the BMA undertook many changes in line with Agenda 21.

¹³ The King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, with Professor Pimonsathean as head of the research team.

of historic centres has resituated the debate on access to the values of urban centrality. Each of the interventions has highlighted the potential of the urban centres as new areas for economic development with the function of housing the underprivileged segments of the population that occupy the central areas on a de facto basis.

In Buenos Aires, the transition from technocratic planning that attempted to replace historic centres, preserving only isolated buildings, to the enhancement of entire urban areas reflects new operation forms designed by the Urban Planning Department in the early 1990s. Indeed, the planning process viewed the restoration of the Historic Centre as both heritage protection and a collective resource for economic development and habitat. The plan for the San Francisco Block was included in that planning process to enhance the residential aspect of the area and the social mix, and also to ensure adequate sanitation and housing for the underprivileged through participatory processes during the preliminary and decisionmaking stages. Its strategic location, two blocks from the Plaza de Mayo, along with its heritage value, made it eligible as a concrete project for intervention (Catenazzi *et al.* 2007).

In Havana, the Master Plan, an interdisciplinary entity devoted to territorial management and planning, launched the criteria for strategic action from the perspective of urban intervention, aimed at comprehensively revitalizing the historic centre. As we explain below, major tendencies in the rehabilitation of the Plaza Vieja project can be distinguished, moving from a first ‘epidermis’ rehabilitation of buildings to more global physical and spatial interventions and, finally, to processes including social and cultural values. Within this latest period, the spectrum of territorial functions was widened, with the incorporation of commercial, gastronomic, real estate, educational and tourist-oriented infrastructures and services, while guaranteeing the rehabilitation of dwellings for part of the local residents, as the Plaza Vieja was characterized by serious overcrowding (Rodríguez *et al.* 2007).

In the case of Thailand, tensions between traditional tendencies in heritage conservation and more global discourses appear stronger than in the Latin American cases. On the one hand, the Bangkok Conservation Master Plan developed by the national conservation committee Rattanakosin is based on the values of the conservation movement; basically, the preservation of historically and architecturally significant structures. On the other hand, however, several community-based experiences are emerging. Some of them – such as, for example, the process of the Tha Tian Historic Community – are making it possible to counteract the implementation of the Master Plan in different sectors by promoting concrete alternatives for the rehabilitation of the historic centre that take the communities’ socio-cultural values into account. This local approach has been strengthened since the BMA has recognized the importance of the residents in the conservation area. In 2005, the BMA had a project to improve the environment of the community in the conservation area without relocation (Pimonsathean 2006).

As a second criterion for a comparative approach, we take into consideration the specific institutional arrangements of urban governance, including citizen participation, which allowed for the implementation of innovative urban projects. In this sense, the three case studies show innovative – but different – relationship patterns between the state, the market, and civil society. At the same time, the ideas and resources of international development cooperation form an important dimension in the preparation of plans and the implementation of the interventions studied.

In Buenos Aires, the Open Congresses of San Telmo provided a forum for participation with a view to dealing with the problems of the central area, while serving as a testing ground for the normative transformations and the formulation of plans and programmes for the rehabilitation and revitalization of the central area. Within the framework of these initiatives, mention should be made of the key leadership role assumed by the Secretariat for Planning (1989–92), whose management marked a clear change in the treatment of such issues and in the role devolved upon the international agencies. The project makes provision for a definition of the conciliatory mechanisms, as joint action by town hall, intermediate associations, other local, national, and foreign institutions and, finally, the neighbours, who had to temporarily relocate.

Indeed, if we assess the experience of the San Francisco Block recovery in terms of participation, we should say that information and negotiation prevailed over systematic incorporation of inhabitants in the decisionmaking process. Throughout the process, however, neighbours' committees were set up that are still active today. The participatory instruments applied (congresses, rounds for agreements, agreements, and contracts) fostered the institution of neighbours as agents, and their development of collective negotiating and managing abilities.

In Havana also, it was in the early 1990s that the new management approach was developed for the historic centre with the enactment of a decree declaring the territory a priority conservation zone and directly subordinating the Havana Historian's Office to the Council of State and Ministers. The Office was thus granted powers to carry out commercial activities, and to retain the profits in order to plough them back into the process of integral development. These conditions made possible a major institutional rearrangement and an enlargement of planning, legal, and financial structures and tools under the responsibility of the Havana Historian's Office, which constitutes a novel as well as a paradigmatic and unprecedented example within the Cuban context (García Pleyán 2004).

In the Plaza Vieja process in particular, an initial phase (prior to 2000) was marked by the relatively fluid operation of mechanisms for citizen participation (briefings of local inhabitants, consultations with them, and opportunities for them to raise problems) through the institutional dimension of the People's Power (assemblies with the elected delegate and meetings with the People's Council). As the delegates have had to operate with constantly shrinking resources throughout the economic crisis, they have come to be perceived as less useful. At present, when a crisis arises inhabitants tend to turn directly to the person of the Historian, or to members of the Board of Management of the Historian's Office, as they feel that the latter are better able to solve their problems.

In Bangkok, innovation was linked with the regulatory power of the local government, the BMA, which had to strike a balance between the needs of the community and the policy of the conservation committee at the national level. As the Committee did not agree with the community-based alternative for Tha Tian, their members started to improve their community in order to prove to the government that they could achieve implementation on their own. Indeed, BMA also opted for compromise by providing better lanes, pavements, and infrastructure in the community, two steps allowed by the Committee. This experience thus provides an example of alternative ways for improving historical neighbourhoods based on local partnerships.

In an initial phase, a research team from the university dealt with the community leader and the community development committee. Subsequently, community and public meetings were organized, and the BMA has recently convened meetings to hear residents' demands. Meetings involved not only Tha Tian community members, but were also extended to residents living in the whole conservation area. Both formal and informal interaction between community and government officials took place, and residents themselves handled particular improvements of the project – such as, for example, the facade refurbishment and building restoration (Pimonsathean 2007).

Last, but not least, we must note that international development cooperation has been decisive for the different interventions. The programme for the rehabilitation of the San Francisco Block came into being thanks to international financing specifically earmarked for the rehabilitation of social housing. The Legislative Assembly of Andalusia opened up a window of opportunity which made the intervention possible and helped it come to fruition, as it not only ensured the financing that allowed the work to start, but also constituted a framework allowing for continuity of action even when there was discontinuity in public management. With the Plaza Vieja, as a part of the action taken by the Historian's Office, international collaboration took various concrete forms through decentralized, bilateral, and multilateral cooperation with governments, NGOs, universities, and UN agencies. The Bangkok example is slightly different: even though international cooperation did not have a direct implication in the case of Tha Tian, its influence has nevertheless been felt since the early 1990s, through support for protests against the relocation of the populations and priority given to participation by the communities.

5 How can innovation in urban projects strive for sustainability?

Through the cases analysed, we have shown how the rehabilitation of inner cities with heritage value constitutes an arena for innovation in the field of urban planning.

It will be recalled that the selected case studies are innovative and 'self-proclaimed' as sustainable because of their approach and methodology. Their innovative character is understood in relation to the former technocratic, sectoral, and top-down decisionmaking processes, characteristic of more traditional approaches in planning and management for urban development. By enlarging the decisionmaking circle, including public, private, and social actors at different scales, the selected case studies strive to encompass governance issues. Indeed, the cases chosen make it possible to analyse the connections between planning and implementation, and illustrate different types of relationships between public and private, technicians and residents, and local and global. At the same time, they reflect forms of urban intervention aiming at promoting 'sustainable cities', as they raise the tension between the promotion of central areas' attractiveness and historic values, and the question of housing the inhabitants currently residing there – particularly underprivileged segments.

The research revealed that the rehabilitation of historic centres like Havana, Buenos Aires or Bangkok has resituated the debate not only on heritage values but also on access to values of urban centrality, such as specialized equipment or diverse job opportunities. Therefore, based on initial comparative results we can point out that in the frame of rehabilitations programmes for inner areas with heritage value, sustainable

development is linked with the articulation of these two major attributes: centrality and heritage. In order to generalize and to establish instruments allowing to improve practices, the project analysed how the different stakeholders involved in the rehabilitations programmes negotiate the aforementioned major attributes of the site among themselves, based on their interests and values.

Based on the above analysis, we formulate the hypothesis that the contribution of each experience to a sustainable city is strongly linked, on different levels, to the innovative institutional arrangements which, as modes of governance, were introduced by the stakeholders in the interventions studied and evolved along the decisionmaking processes. In fact, the transformation of institutional frameworks, norms, and regulations – in order to reflect not only on alternative solutions (planning), but also to implement them (material dimension) – is at the heart of sustainability. Nevertheless, the experiences analysed show that the perception of sustainable development is strongly context-specific. In this connection, the institutional arrangements introduced by these interventions necessarily required the establishment of trust in mechanisms for decisionmaking and consensus as bodies regulating the new definitions of aspirations to access the city.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize that innovation, linked to the sustainability of the urban interventions, presents the paradoxical need to suspend a predetermined order to allow for innovative solutions and factor in local specificities, while guaranteeing the continuity of innovation through mechanisms, making it possible to organize the city on a larger scale, which implies institutionalization and standardization. In the different cases studied, the continuity of the transformation capacity of the institutional innovations stems from its own flexibility in updating and reconciling the contradictory interests and logics underpinning urban projects aiming at organizing sustainable living conditions.

At the international level, the ongoing comparative research allowed identifying and analysing similar urban phenomena across continents linked with social and territorial transformation processes. It contributes to the debate of the planning approaches in different countries, with consideration of the sociopolitical factors, in relation to decentralization and governance, which could be a path to analyse decisionmaking processes and the role of multiple actors in promoting the development of sustainable cities. Starting from a specific territorial approach to sustainable development, the major goal of our contribution is to gain a better understanding about how urban policies aiming at promoting inclusive cities can be integrated into and help inform national and international development policies.

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