

Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires, Evolution of a Warehouse Area

Introduction

Puerto Madero is the port area of the city of Buenos Aires inaugurated at the end of the 19th century. A few decades after inauguration, it became evident that the port had become obsolete, especially on account of the changes of ships dimensions and maritime transportation technology. Since a new port had been constructed next to Puerto



Figure 1: Buenos Aires in 1750

Madero, the latter was gradually abandoned until it became a degraded area next to Buenos Aires' downtown. Projects of redevelopment of the area were implemented from the mid 1980s onwards, including a master plan approved in 1991. The area was completely redeveloped and became a new and fashionable neighbourhood of the city. The aim of this text is to introduce the origin and development of Puerto Madero as a port and warehouse district up to its present situation.

Buenos Aires, a port city

Buenos Aires, the capital city of Argentina, is located by the Plata River, which is in this area some 45 km wide. A first Spanish settlement had been established in 1536 and abandoned some years later. The formal foundation of the town, according to Spanish laws, took place in 1580. The site selected for the location of the town was a plateau some 15 m higher than the river bank, which is characterised by its shallowness. The embouchure of a tributary river constituted

the harbour which made possible the protection of ships. The urban layout of the village responded to the prescription of the Spanish laws: a grid of parallel streets forming square blocks and a plaza, located next to the river bank, which concentrated the main institutional buildings: the cathedral, the *cabildo* (town hall) and the residence of the Spanish authorities (Fig. 1).

The town had a slow development over its first 200 years. Located between the river and the vast plains scarcely colonised by the Spaniards, the town had mainly a strategic importance, to control the entrance to the Parana and Uruguay rivers and the attempts of Portugal to occupy Spanish territories next to Plata River. The economic policies of Spain concentrated the economic activities in a few ports of the Americas, especially located in the Caribbean area. Buenos Aires harbour had scarce activity, especially limited to regional commerce. The situation changed at the end of 18th century; in 1776 Buenos Aires was declared capital city of the Rio de la Plata Vice-Royalty and in 1778 the King of Spain habilitated the port for direct commerce with the metropolis.

Argentina declared the independence from Spain in 1816. From this time onwards, a process of colonisation of the planes started and the young country became progressively a producer of agricultural goods. By the mid 19th century a pier was constructed to serve as a new port next to the city downtown. Nevertheless, the shallow coast of the river prevented ships to approach the pier and passengers and goods were taken from ships by boats. A new customs building was then constructed at the entrance of the town for the pier, according to the Italian influences in architecture prevailing at that period.

By 1880, Argentina started a process of modernisation designed and implemented by the national bourgeoisie and based on the production and exportation of agricultural goods. This process was characterised by the total occupation of the national territory, an economic increase, the arrival of millions of immigrants and the openness to European influences in architecture and styles of life. Buenos Aires became the official capital city in 1880 and started a process of expansion and modernisation that converted it, in the span of a few decades, into one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. This cosmopolitanism is clearly expressed in the architectural renovation experienced not only by Buenos Aires but also by other Argentine cities; the prevailing eclecticism of the period was used by Italian, French, English or German architects settled in the country or by local architects trained in prestigious European schools. The railway network, introduced in Argentina at the end of the 1850s,

was extended along the country to link the productive areas with the ports. A fan system was in place by 1890 where the port city of Buenos Aires was the main converging point.

It became evident that the old harbour was not appropriate for a country and a city which were at a rapid process of growth; the construction of a new modern port became necessary. Several projects for a new port had been proposed since the end of the 1850s; in 1882 Eduardo Madero presented a project that consisted in a series of docks on a piece of land gained to the river; the project included two entrance canals, north and south, a defensive external seawall, one basin and four docks linked by short canals and floodgates (Fig. 2). The final project was elaborated by the English agency Hawkshaw, Son and Hayter.

The western bank of the docks was dedicated to an alignment of warehouses while the eastern bank was reserved to the location of flour mills, warehouses and silos. The construction of the new port started in 1887 and the works were finished gradually between 1890 and 1897. The inauguration of Puerto Madero implied not only a new port but the extension of the city to the river through a new port and warehouses district (Fig. 3). Office buildings related to the port and the new customs building were located on urban blocks next to Puerto Madero.

The warehouses on the west bank

On the western bank of the docks warehouses were built according to the project of the agency Hawkshaw, Son and Hayter from England. Four warehouses were located in relation with each of the docks, thus forming an alignment that characterises the image of Puerto Madero up to date. The buildings were constructed by the German enterprise Weyss und Freitag between 1900 and 1905. All of them have a rectangular plan with a structure combining steel and concrete and brick facades (Fig. 4, 5, 6). Along the docks, cranes provided by the firm Armstrong & Mitchell were located to connect warehouses and ships. The buildings on the eastern bank of the docks were constructed throughout the same period included warehouses belonging to flour mills companies and silos, some of them constructed in corrugated iron. Next to the north entrance of the port, an immigrants' hotel was erected to serve as temporary accommodation for people who massively arrived in Argentina at that time.

Ten years after the inauguration, it was evident that Puerto Madero was becoming obsolete, especially because of its docks system and the changes of ship dimensions, for which the docks appeared insufficient. A new port was constructed next to Puerto Madero using a different layout; instead of docks parallel to the river bank, a finger pier system was employed, which resulted more suitably to the conditions of the site. The new port is up to date the active port of the city and the main port of the country; Puerto Madero, instead, was gradually abandoned as an active port district.

Between 1925 and the 1980s, several projects to revitalise the area were elaborated, but none of them implemented. It is worth mentioning that when Le Corbusier visited Buenos Aires in 1929 he imagined an extension of the city towards the river, an idea that he retook in his plan for Buenos Aires

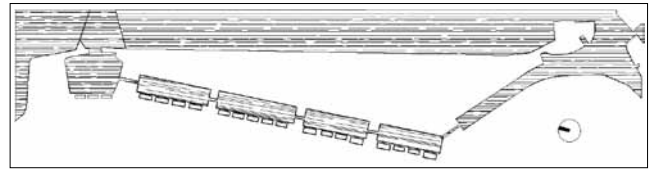


Figure 2: The port proposed by Eduardo Madero



Figure 3: The city of Buenos Aires in 1890 with Puerto Madero

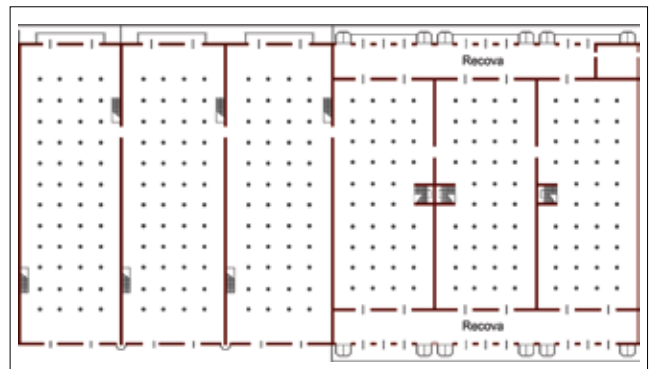


Figure 4: Original plan of warehouses

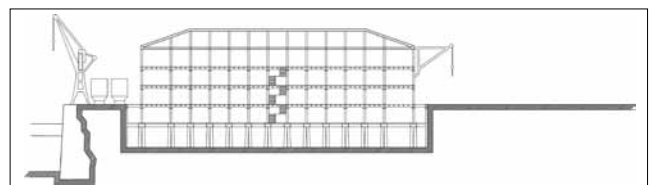


Figure 5: Section of a warehouse

in 1937. LeCorbusier proposed to preserve the system of docks and convert the area in a green park by demolishing the existing buildings.

The reconversion of the area

After several decades of abandonment and degradation and several projects for revitalization, the actions for the revi-



Figure 6: Façade of a warehouse



Figure 7: Warehouses on the western bank



Figure 8: Pedestrian promenade along the dock

talization of the area started in 1989, with the creation of a corporation integrated by the national and local governments. The area was then transferred to the corporation and the City of Buenos Aires was committed to elaborate the norms for urban development. Some plots were transferred to private investors.

The local government began, with the assistance of the City of Barcelona, studies for the revitalisation plan and convened in 1991 a national competition of ideas, from which resulted the master plan for the new neighbourhood. The realization of this plan constitutes the largest project of its kind ever held in Buenos Aires; numerous streets and avenues were opened and parks and plazas created. The area became a major centre of trade expansion with the additions of offices, flats and cultural facilities, also creating a new tourist attraction. During the recession faced by Argentina between 1998 and 2002 many major plans and projects were suspended, but a new impetus started after the recovery experienced by the country's economy since 2003.

The old warehouses of the western bank were preserved (Fig. 7). In 1991, the local government of the city of Buenos Aires approved specific protection guidelines to ensure proper interventions on the sixteen remaining buildings. A special decree protects since then all the buildings and their environment including all elements that bear testimony to the old port.

The interventions on buildings were based on strict conditions of respect to their facades and original materials to maintain the historic character of the area. Original materials were used for new pedestrian pavements and the existing cranes and minor components of the old port were restored (Fig. 8). It was established that rehabilitation works should ensure consolidation and maintenance of facades, galleries and arcades, respecting their materials and design; the existing doors and windows were respected in shape and dimensions (Fig. 9). It was accepted that new windows could be opened on the walls at the extremes of the warehouses provided that their design is contextual with the original appearance (Fig. 10). Former warehouses house today flats, offices, and restaurants and cafés on the ground floors, something that made of Puerto Madero one of the main and most renowned gastronomic districts of the city. Two buildings were bought and restored by the Argentine Catholic University to house headquarters and colleges.

On the eastern bank, most historic buildings had been demolished over the period of abandonment of the port activities. This area was considered as an opportunity for new developments: streets and avenues were opened and parks and squares created. The few remaining historic buildings were preserved; the most important is a former warehouse reconverted into a luxury hotel designed by Philip Starck. A first stage of construction of new buildings was based on the repetition of proportions and volumes of the facing old warehouses of the western bank (Fig. 11). At the beginning of the 21st century high rise buildings started to be erected, a process that has continued up to date. New facilities within the area include three five-star hotels, one university, one fine arts museum, designed by Rafael Viñoly, shops, restaurants and cafés. A pedestrian bridge linking the two banks of the docks, designed by Santiago Calatrava and dedicated to the International Day for Women, was inaugurated in 2005 (Fig. 12). Puerto Madero is today the most expensive neighbourhood of the city of Buenos Aires; for the coming years, several hotels, shops and a cinema complex are planned.

The construction of high rise buildings has completely changed the scale and the atmosphere of the district (Fig. 13).



Figure 9: Detail of restored façade



Figure 10: Treatment of an extreme of warehouse

The conclusion on the revitalisation of Puerto Madero district is that it could be considered at the same time a successful and unsuccessful intervention. From an economic point of view, the intervention has been successful: what used to be a degraded area became the most fashionable and expensive district of the city, open to residents and visitors who enjoy the promenade along the docks, parks and gastronomic and cultural facilities. It is also important as the redefinition of a new relationship between the city and the river, something lost when Puerto Madero was constructed.

From a heritage point of view, Puerto Madero is an example of a partial vision that contemplated preservation of architectural components and part of the remaining infrastructure, like the cranes, that bear testimony to the old port. Nevertheless, the redevelopment of the eastern bank makes the old warehouses, although properly preserved, appear like anecdotes in a completely new district (Fig. 14). Even if many buildings were lost prior to the master plan the integrity and authenticity of the area have completely changed. Although Puerto Madero is considered an example or urban

Figure 11: Contrast between first and second stages of construction of new buildings on the eastern bank





Figure 12: Bridge by Santiago Calatrava



Figure 13: New high rise buildings



Figure 14: General view of the current state of the area

restructuring at international level, pressures coming from real estate buildings were and are in this case more powerful than the heritage vision; and this could constitute a warning for similar cases: the big challenge is how to balance preser-

vation with development and, in this framework, it is evident that Puerto Madero is not a proper example.

Abstract

Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires: Entwicklung eines Lagerhaus-Areals

Puerto Madero ist das Hafenviertel der Stadt Buenos Aires. Es ist nach Eduardo Madero benannt, nach dessen Plänen der Hafen am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts gebaut wurde. Buenos Aires sollte damals neue Hafeneinrichtungen erhalten, um der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung und Modernisierung Rechnung zu tragen, die sich in Argentinien in den letzten Dekaden des Jahrhunderts vollzog. Aufgrund der flachen Ufer des La Plata konnte für den Bau des Hafens Land gewonnen und die Stadt über ihre natürlichen Grenzen hinaus erweitert werden. Der neue Hafen umfasste eine Reihe zusammenhängender Docks, Fluttore und Schwenkbrücken, an denen sich Lagerhäuser, Getreidemühlen und Silos befanden, alle gebaut von englischen und deutschen Unternehmen. Als er fertig war, galt der Hafen als eine der beeindruckendsten Ingenieursleistungen der damaligen Zeit. Einige Jahrzehnte später jedoch war Puerto Madero schon wieder veraltet, weil mittlerweile noch größere Schiffe gebaut wurden und sich die maritime Transporttechnologie verändert hatte. Als Konsequenz wurde neben Puerto Madero ein neuer Hafen gebaut. Das alte Hafengebiet wurde nach und nach aufgegeben und verfiel allmählich. Ab Mitte der 1980er Jahre wurden Projekte und Maßnahmen umgesetzt, um das Gebiet zu sanieren, darunter auch ein 1991 genehmigter Bebauungsplan. Ehemalige Lagerhäuser wurden in Büros, Lofts und gewerblich genutzte Anlagen umgewandelt. Der alte Hafen erblühte zu einem neuen, lebendigen Stadtviertel. Nach der schweren Wirtschaftskrise, die Argentinien zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts traf, bot sich in Puerto Madero erneut die Möglichkeit, Entwicklungsprojekte umzusetzen. Im Laufe dieser zweiten Interventionsphase wurden einige gegenüber den Lagergebäuden am Ufer gelegene Baudenkmäler unglücklicherweise abgerissen, um Platz für Hotels, gewerbliche und kulturelle Einrichtungen, Wohngebäude und Parks zu schaffen. Das neue, trendige Stadtviertel wurde zum Ziel der Immobilienprojektentwicklung. Dementsprechend wurden in den letzten Jahren mehrere Hochhäuser errichtet. Heute ist Puerto Madero das teuerste Stadtviertel von Buenos Aires und ein Muss für Touristen. Obwohl die Anordnung der Docks praktisch unverändert geblieben ist, sind im Zuge des Wiederbelebungsprozesses viele interessante Gebäude verloren gegangen. Nur die Reihe der Lagerhäuser auf der Westseite der Docks zeugt von der Industriearchitektur am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts und erinnert zusammen mit einigen Kränen und kleineren Objekten an die ursprüngliche Funktion des Gebiets.

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WEBSITE <http://www.puertomadero.com/> (Visited August and September 2011)

Sources of Illustrations

Fig. 1: <http://www.la-floresta.com.ar/cronologia.htm>
Fig. 2: Mercedes Ferrara
Fig. 3: <http://www.skyscraperlife.com/argentina/11050-mapas-y-proyectos-antiguos-de-buenos-aires.html>
Fig. 4: Gisel Andrade
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