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Architectural Heritage at Estacion Central Commune (Chile): Towards a Sustainable Conservation

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Abstract. Under a neoliberal policy established since the seventies, Santiago de Chile has faced the huge consequences of an accelerated urban sprawl, related to population increase and unlimited horizontal and vertical growth. In recent decades, architectural heritage has not been considered as a central factor in Santiago's urban development. The lack of attention towards heritage can be observed in this capital city. Estación Central commune is located at Santiago's central area, attached to the city's historical center. This commune reflects the recent effects of Santiago's urban transformations, with no consideration regarding constructed memory. The origin of this neighborhood, is related to the location of the first capital city train station, in the middle of the 19th century. Local heritage is composed, in consequence, by residential and industrial buildings of that time. Nowadays, this heritage can be seen in a complex conservation state, abandoned and neglected. In recent years, several non-listed historical sites of this commune, have been demolished. Non-strong legal preservation framework was established, and construction regulations were permissive. In recent months the explosive construction of high density buildings in this commune has reached local authorities opinion and national press. Non-quality apartments of reduced surfaces are progressively replacing and erasing the historical tissue of this area. The lack of an adequate heritage policy is related to this process: in fact, Estación Central commune has only 12 listed buildings in its whole territory of 1 550 hectares. Chilean preservation policy works around a monumental heritage concept. Lower scale architecture remains, often, outside the preservation framework. Also, monumental, but not yet identified historical buildings remain out of legal protection. The absence of a sustainable urban policy in Chile related to architectural heritage conservation, has led to historical buildings' deterioration and demolition. Linking cultural heritage with urban planning, is nowadays a pending challenge. Conservation public policies should start from the knowledge of local cities urban memory. Understanding the past, could lead us to project its future. New ways of dealing with constructed memory should be proposed, in order to reach a new equilibrium related to our collective memory. This article analyses the amnesic phenomenon in progress at Estación Central, and identifies non-listed heritage existing in this commune, as a first step for its valorization.

1. Introduction

In recent years, architectural heritage in Chile has been gaining attention, and progressively becoming an important subject. This attention has been materialized in different cultural initiatives, such as the increase of listed national monuments [1], and the recent creation of the "Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Heritage"



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[2]. After decades of neglect, architectural heritage is achieving a role of importance, and public institutions are reflecting this positive change. Even if public policies today are going forward in order to preserve Chilean collective identity and its historical material pre-existences, the traces of neglect of recent decades are visible. This lack of attention towards heritage can be found in local cities, and is relevant in Santiago, the capital of Chile. At Santiago is difficult to find a dialogue between contemporary architecture and the city of the past. Under the neoliberal policy established during the 1970's, Santiago has been facing huge consequences of accelerated urban sprawl. Its population increased, alongside unlimited horizontal and vertical growth. Within this logic, architectural heritage has not been considered as a significant factor in Santiago's urban development. Chilean heritage legislation framework operates around a selective concept that guides what remains and what is forgotten at local and national level. Given this, only a selection of historical buildings remains, chosen by national authorities one by one, meanwhile the rest of the urban tissue disappears under the rapid urban development. This phenomenon is still on going in cities across the country, and nowadays is taking place in Estación Central Commune, an old and historical district located at west of Santiago city centre.

2. Legal Architectural Heritage Framework

Chilean preservation policy works around a concept of selective and monumental heritage; by the year 2000, safeguarded monuments amounted to 500 buildings nationwide [3: p. 3]. According to the official heritage catalogue updated by January 2018, the safeguarded heritage today amounts to 1.680 buildings, architectural and natural sites [4]. The growth has been exponential, but still, under this structure, lower scale architecture often remains outside legal protection. Furthermore, monumental heritage not yet identified as such, can remain without protection as well, until its relevance is officially detected.

Chilean architectural conservation works based on two national legal dispositions: Law N° 17.288 of National Monuments, published the year 1970 [5], and the Decree N° 458, General Law of Urban Planning and Construction, published in 1976 [6]. According to the actual legislation, buildings and areas are protected by authorities, selected one by one, based on their detected "value". The "value" of this heritage is assigned to monuments according to its historical, aesthetic and commemorative relevance. Only the officially recognized heritage remains under the protection of the Government.

Safeguarded constructions cannot be demolished, and they can only be intervened with authorization from the corresponding authorities, represented by the National Council of Monuments and the Regional Ministerial Secretary of Housing. According to this conception, only selected fragments of local cities are preserved: the ones where exceptional value was detected.

Nevertheless, is important to mention that, once safeguarded, buildings and zones are not included in strategic management plans, which could ensure adequate conservation for the future. Given this, urban planning, economy and heritage are currently three areas that exist and act without dialogue or connection in the development of Chilean cities. Generally, architectural heritage does not get consideration for rehabilitation plans, or plays a role in economic or financial systems which could ensure its adequate conservation. This situation implies, in the case of several heritage buildings, decay and neglect. In the absence of efficient rehabilitation public policies, safeguarded buildings and zones generally become an obstacle for cities' development, as well as an economic burden for its owners.

Estación Central Commune is part of the city of Santiago and is a case that presents vast problems related to heritage preservation. In recent years, the landscape of this historical area of Santiago has drastically changed, without taking into account almost any cultural consideration. Several non-listed historical sites of this commune have been demolished because they have not been detected and protected on time. Besides, safeguarded heritage does not have any role, weight or influence as to affect efficient management plans which could guarantee its adequate conservation.

3. Estación Central, Santiago's Early Periphery

Estación Central Commune is located in an historical and central area of Santiago. This Commune is attached to the city's historical center, and it was the early west periphery of the capital. The administrative district of Estación Central was established officially in 1985; however, the history of this territory started earlier. The slow urbanization of this area began in colonial times, [7] nevertheless, the consolidation of it as a distinguishable neighborhood started after the location of the main train station for the city of Santiago, called Estación Central, by mid-19th century.

The establishment of the most important railroad terminal in the city, promoted the placement of several industries and railway warehouses in this area. Progressively, working-class neighborhoods were developed in this territory, conforming its current appearance and structure. Some of these early residential projects still remain present in the local urban tissue. During the second half of the 20th century, several social housing projects were constructed in Estación Central. Nowadays, these residential complexes can be seen in a regular state of conservation, but in function.

Architectural heritage of this part of Santiago is, firstly, constituted by residential and industrial buildings of the end of the 19th century. Secondly, other historical testimonies of a most recent past can be identified, such as historicist and modern architecture, and social housing projects. Nowadays this heritage is still in existence, nevertheless it presents a complex situation given its state of conservation, either because of overuse, interventions and lack of care, or because of abandonment and neglect. Most of this heritage is not officially safeguarded.

In recent months the rapid development of high-density buildings, has caught the attention of local authorities and the national press. Non-quality apartments of reduced surfaces are progressively replacing - and erasing- the historical tissue of this area. The process has been fast and complex (see figure 1), and has put into question regulations on this district. In this part of the city, urban regulations are very permissive, due to an adjustment process of the regulatory local guidelines. In consequence, apartments from 17 square meters of surface area have been offered, inside high-rise buildings of up to 42 stories high [8]. Some of these projects contain more than a thousand residences each, heavily increasing the density of this old neighborhood, which was, until recently, characterized by low scale passages built in adobe, wood and brick masonry.

Non-adequate legal framework for preservation was established in this Commune, and construction regulations, are allowing the replacement of the old low scale city by a new high rise density one. The lack of an adequate heritage policies has contributed to this amnesic process: nowadays Estación Central Commune has only twelve listed buildings in its whole territory. In 1550 hectares of surface, Estación Central accounts for only one safeguarded area, protected in 2007 as "Zona Típica". This area, called Maestranza San Eugenio, includes eight of the twelve protected buildings present in this zone of Santiago.

4. Architectural Heritage at Estación Central

Even if there are twelve monuments in Estación Central, this architectural heritage is concentrated in only five sites (see figures 2-12): the Central Railway Station ("Estación Central" or "Alameda" built in the middle of the 19th century, and safeguarded in 1983), the School of Arts and Crafts (Escuela de Artes y Oficios built in 1884 and safeguarded in 1986), the Paris Pavilion (Pabellón París built in 1889-1894 and safeguarded in 1986), the Maestranza San Eugenio (built in the beginning of the 20th century, and safeguarded in 2007, concentrating 8 monuments within this site), and the Evangelical Cathedral (Catedral Evangélica, built between 1968 and 1972, and safeguarded in 2013). In general, the state of conservation of these places is regular. The sites under the care of an institution, like the Paris Pavilion and the Evangelical Cathedral, have been better preserved and they are regularly maintained. On the other hand, there are sites characterized by abandoned and neglect, as Maestranza San Eugenio. This Maestranza originally was used for maintaining and repairing urban trains, coming from the Central Railway Station located nearby. In

recent decades, no contemporary activities have replaced the original functions of this safeguarded area. Besides, no plans or public financing have been projected to give this interesting abandoned industrial site new uses or purposes.



Figure 1: Urban speculation has taken place in the Commune of Estación Central at Santiago de Chile. In consequence, non-listed architectural heritage is nowadays vulnerable to be demolished and replaced by new speculative architecture. Font: Photograph taken by Magdalena Montalbán.

Excluding these five safeguarded “monumental places”, the rest of the existing urban tissue in this Commune has no legal protection. In spite of its notable antiquity and its historical importance, no more buildings are safeguarded today. This means that, with the exception of these five selected places, all the rest of Estación Central’s urban fabric could be legally demolished.

It is possible to affirm that there is more architectural heritage in this historical area of Santiago. This heritage is, nowadays, in a vulnerable condition, unprotected and existing on a context of accelerated urban transformations. These buildings have not been safeguarded neither by local authorities or national ones. Generally, these constructions are part of a “non-monumental” heritage group, category that often remains outside the official regard in Chile. This group of buildings is composed by industrial heritage, old workers housing and historicist catholic churches. Also, within this category, a group of known and monumental buildings of recent date and representative of the Modern Movement in architecture, has yet to be officialised as Chilean heritage.

In this group of non-safeguarded heritage, we can mention at least three important residential complexes at Estación Central. The first one, is a project of the beginning of the 20th century, the “Conjunto Residencial Matucana”, built in brick masonry, as a housing solution for the migrant population arriving to this area of Santiago at that time. A second one, is a project built in the 1930’s, “Población El Riel”. This residential heritage, is a material testimony of that time, executed by the National Railways Company for its employees. This site is located next to the Maestranza San Eugenio ensemble and could be understood as part of this industrial site, although it is not considered as such. Finally, we can mention the famous “Unidad Vecinal Portales”, constructed in reinforced concrete during the second half of the 20th century, following the international principles of the Modern Movement. Other traces of modern ideas are present in this Commune, and can be observed at the Technical University of the State (“Universidad Técnica del Estado”,

UTE). This institution was created in 1947, and the complex today is owned by the Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Usach. This is also a non-protected historical site.

Other buildings that remain outside official protection can be mentioned: the old Agriculture Practical School, the School República of Venezuela, the Aeronautical Technical School, Las Carmelitas' Chapel, the Amengual Convent and Santiago Apóstol Chapel. The municipal Government proposed some of these buildings to be declared and protected in 2006-2007, according to the guidelines of Decree n°458, but the process fell through, and this architectural heritage was not protected. The Planetary must also be mentioned, as a unique building of its kind in Chilean territory, still functioning today. This building was inaugurated in 1980's, and represents a symbol of Santiago: it is recognized as an important part of collective identity by local population. Besides, the Gasometer of Estación Central or "Fábrica de Gas San Borja" (1910), cannot be excluded of this group of non-safeguarded heritage. This building is an important trace of Estación Central's industrial past, when gas production was relevant at urban scale, for lighting and heating houses and industries.



Figures 2 - 12: Safeguarded architectural heritage at Estación Central is concentrated in five sites of this Commune: Maestranza San Eugenio, Central Railway Station, Paris Pavilion, Evangelical Cathedral and School of Arts and Crafts. Photographs taken by the Dicyt Research Project Team

This non-official heritage was built mainly during the 20th century and represents different testimonies of local history. This heritage is relevant for the neighborhood's identity. In order to prevent its demolition, it is urgent to recognize the interest of these sites, safeguarding them as national heritage. Identifying and valuing heritage at all levels, in this old part of Santiago, is necessary in order to prevent its disappearance.



Figures 13 – 21: Some cases of non-safeguarded architectural heritage at Estación Central Commune: Ancient Agriculture Practical School, School República de Venezuela, Aeronautical Technical School, Amengual Convent, Santiago Apóstol Chapel, and Las Carmelitas' Chapel. Nowadays this architecture is in use, but still vulnerable of demolition. Photographs taken by Dicyt Research Project Team

5. Conclusions

The history and characteristics of Estación Central Commune, illustrate the complex situation of Chilean cultural heritage. The cities' past is not considered in urban planning. Nowadays architectural heritage conservation has no meaningful role in urban planning. Recognizing and safeguarding the heterogeneous heritage existing in local cities, is a topic that needs to be addressed urgently, in order to start taking steps for its future conservation.

Contemporary speculative architecture does not take into account context or history for its development. A process without reflection goes on, demolishing, reconstructing, modifying and eliminating non-protected architectural heritage, which is vulnerable in matters of urban, legal and economic planning.

Setting new strategies for urban development considering the past of our cities is an issue widely open for discussion in Chile. As non-visible heritage does not exist for authorities, the development of research and knowledge appears as a crucial base for setting and suggesting new ways of dealing with historical urban tissue.

Historic amnesia, present in Estación Central, needs to be addressed in order to evolve towards a more sustainable city. Knowing the past, its meaning, and its social and cultural importance, could be a first step for this target, moving away from speculative urban development, focused only on economic concerns. Legal protection of sites could contribute, and combined policies of public management and economical strategies related to heritage could prevent abandonment and neglect. Past and future should be included as complementary factors in cities development. This should be the path for the next decade's urban policies.

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