

Urban Imaginaries from Latin America

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Editor

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Historic Centers: Public Imaginaries from Quito

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In the historic centers, the most varied media and forms of communication converge (telephony, radio, television, postal service, cinema, theater, schools); they embrace the greatest concentration of socializing places (public and civic spaces); they possess the greatest accumulation of concentrated information (libraries, archives, buildings); they have the greatest number of symbolic manifestations (churches, monuments, squares); they contain the most diverse means of transportation (ports, railways, vehicles); and they attract multiple users.¹

In this context, communication plays a central role. Its defects can produce alterations in the functionality and quality of life of the population that lives in the city. But it also allows us to construct imaginaries that go beyond this particularity of the metropolis, whereby its condition as center entails a relationship with the periphery. The historic center operates like a means of communication that concentrates information – from the past and present – while in the periphery information is dispersed and sparse.

Historic centers concentrate and emit “atemporal” testimonies and messages, in the sense that their reading is based on symbols constructed at a different moment in history but, thanks to the passage of time, their perception changes; not



View of Quito's historic center.

because they are newly constructed, but because the process of decoding should allow us to recognize what has happened throughout the periods of origin and development of the urban group.² Here, the concept of historic center is upheld as memory or testimony. If around 100,000 people live in the historic center of Quito, more than 300,000 visit it daily.

In the relationship center-periphery, urban imaginaries are constructed that may embody the entire city or parts of it.³ The historic center may assume that double condition, but the periphery may not. At most, it may happen that the reproduction of one in the other is sought; that is, for example, that the balcony is reproduced in the periphery, marble is simulated with paint, or an arched window is designed.

The Historic Center as Public Space The historic center has become the privileged place of the tension that is lived in the city with respect to the relationships state-society and public-private. This is so because the historic center is the place in the city that changes the most – that is, the most receptive to adopting mutations – and because it is, on an urban level, the public space par excellence.

It is a public space in the sense of being “everyone’s space.” This condition confers a collective identity on the population living in the center, beyond the center (space) and the present (time). This means that its public condition transcends time (ancient-modern) and space (center-periphery), producing a transgenerational and transterritorial legacy that generates a “derived citizenship” (through inheritance).⁴ Therefore, it is a public space with a symbolic condition. If not, how do we explain the fact that the Zapatistas trekked from Chiapas to the Zócalo, or that the Ecuadorian Indians gathered at Independence Square? And they came from distant territories with the aim that their demands would transcend the local and national to the global.

We are talking about a special public space that does not exist in any other spot in the city that has such a defined and developed public order. These are the particularities of the legal framework composed of particular laws, ordinances, codes, and inventories,⁵ and the multiple public organizations that make up the institutional framework (national, local, and autonomous). This means that management is carried out from the public level through a legitimacy of collective action, regulation, and administration.

We are living the period of privatization of public management in all its dimensions, and it arrives at the historic centers in order to take part in the largest and most important public space of each city. With the entrance of the private business sector (national and international), there is a tendency toward change in the institutional frameworks, management modalities, and politics of the historic

centers. We have the profusion of councils (Lima), corporations (Santiago), foundations (Mexico City), and companies (Quito) pressuring the municipalities. Large firms that invest directly in urban services (Cartagena, Bahía) or buildings (for example, American Express or McDonald's) and multilateral credit organizations that promote a greater participation of private employers (BID). And, in addition, we should not forget the continuous presence of small real-estate and commercial capital.

These new management modalities lead to new forms of construction of identities and imaginaries that, in turn, produce new questions: Is the sense of the national effaced in the local? Is social integration fragmented by market types? Does globalization homogenize the politics of renovation?

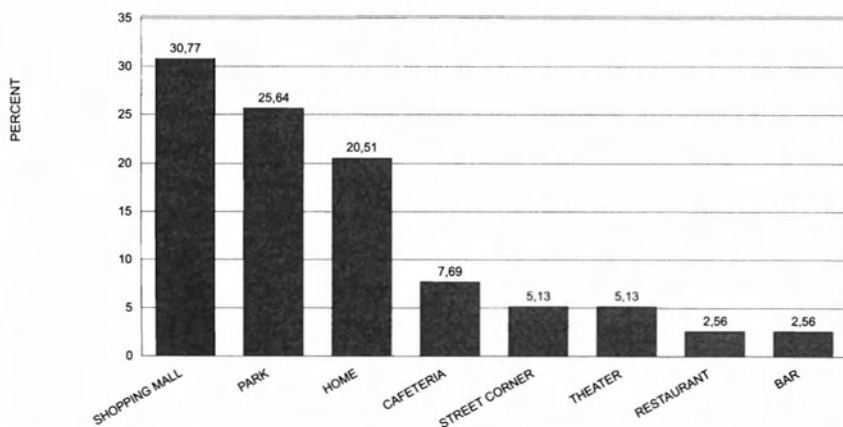
The denationalization lived by the states – from the global perspective – creates a loss of the national character of identities generated by historic centers, since their basic referents become international and local at the same time.⁶ With this tendency, historic centers become victims of civic abandonment and the loss of their condition as public space. We also observe the concentration of property, the penetration of transnational capital at the expense of small national capital, and the reduction of the population's commitment to the zone; that is, the erosion of the sense of citizenship.

Privatization raises, for the first time, the discussion between the public and the private within the historic center, which may lead to strengthening the historic center's public tendencies, to establishing new cooperative relationships between the public and the private, to encouraging the meaning that "small patrimony" has for capital, and to defining the economic and social sustainability of any undertaking, among other things. However, privatization brings with it a bundle of extremely important concerns and discussions that tie into the relationship of society and state in the perspective of reconstructing the public space that is the historic center.

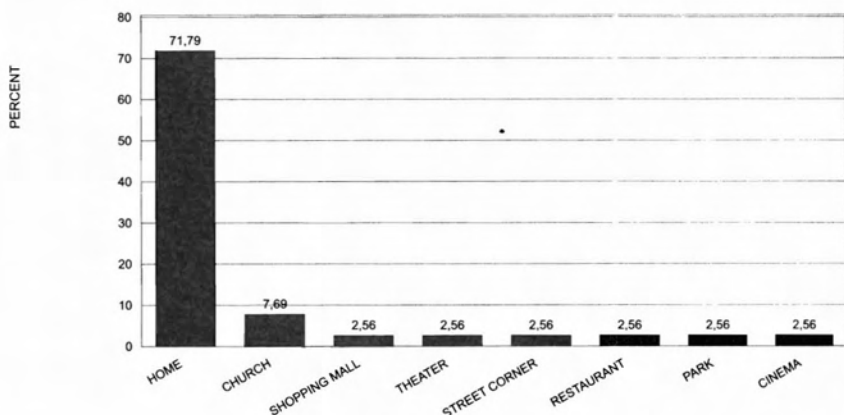
If, as García Canclini says, a change in the city as public space has occurred because it is "in the mass media where public space is now unwrapped for the population,"⁷ there is another critical factor. The media circuits now have greater weight than the traditional meeting places within the cities, where identities were formed and social imaginaries were constructed. From that perspective, historic centers are on the losing end of a competition with the networks of communication. To survive, historic centers must adopt the methods of the communications media. That is, they should operate as a communications medium that strengthens its essence and, in the necessary search for referents among the population, steers it back to the urban and historic centers.

- 1 See Fernando Carrión, ed., *Centros históricos de América Latina y el Caribe* (Paris, Washington, D.C., and Quito: UNESCO, Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, and FLACSO/Sede Académica de Ecuador, 2001).
- 2 For example, a pool of water, which originally had a very clear functionality as a source of the vital liquid and a public meeting place for the population, currently assumes a function and symbology of an aesthetic order, diametrically different, because now water is directly distributed to homes.
- 3 See Armando Silva, *Imaginarios urbanos*, 4th ed. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, 2000), p. 125ff.
- 4 This is the case of the recognition of the international community through the declarations made by UNESCO as Patrimony of Humanity. In this way, the historic center of the city is recognized as a public space that has world value. In other words, the patrimonial value acquires worldwide public recognition.
- 5 According to Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells: "Public space is a juridical concept: it is a space subjected to a specific regulation by public administration, the owner or possessor of the faculty of domain of the land, which guarantees its accessibility to all and sets the conditions of its use and installation of activities." Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells, *Local y global: La gestión de las ciudades en la era de la información* (Madrid: Taurus, 1997), p. 45.
- 6 We pass from the Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, or French referents toward a "Miamization" of local culture and, therefore, of historic centers. "What Paris, Madrid, or London signified in another period for Latin Americans is now represented, for the elite, by New York, and for the middle sectors, by Miami and Los Angeles." Néstor García Canclini, *La globalización imaginada* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1999), p. 55.
- 7 Ibid., p. 171.

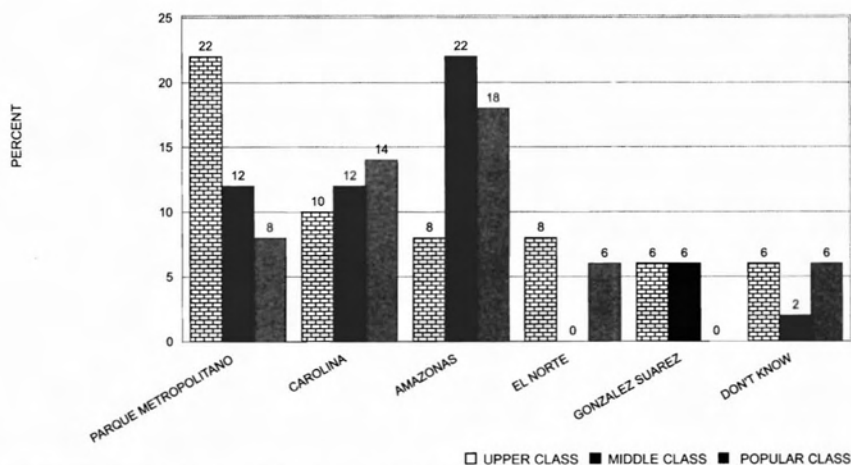
FAVORITE PLACE OF YOUTH (13-24 YEARS) IN QUITO



FAVORITE PLACE OF PEOPLE 66 YEARS AND OLDER IN QUITO



PLACE WITH THE MOST PLEASANT SMELL IN QUITO (BY SOCIAL CLASS)



PLACE WITH THE MOST UNPLEASANT SMELL IN QUITO (BY SOCIAL CLASS)

