

La Ciudad Abierta

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Abstract: Planned cities can be recognized as such from certain clues that help you to discover and then to interpret the layout and design of their roads and buildings. These clues are mostly of a geometric kind, in addition to various structural symmetries and the evidently contemporaneous realization of the most characteristic parts, such as the perimeter walls or the inner “cores” of these cities. In this sense, planned cities can be considered as “closed”, while a planned city with a structure that is not determined or designed from the start is “open”. This is an important initial consideration for understanding the *Ciudad Abierta* (CA), or “Open City”, situated just a few kilometres north of the city of Viña del Mar in Chile: This extraordinary place covers an area of about 270 hectares, facing the restless shores of the Pacific Ocean that are subject to much seismic activity. The main road that follows the coastline from Valparaiso to Quintero in the North separates the site into two portions: to the west a large area of sand dunes that extends down to the ocean, and to the east an area that rises to an altitude of about 120 meters consisting of green hills, the westward facing sides of which are sometimes very steep with deep canyons and crevices.

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Valparaiso - Chile

The feature that the CA has in common with other planned cities is the homogeneous nature of the community that led to its creation, and that continues to live there. It mainly consists of academics, in addition to the students of the Faculty of Architecture of the *Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaiso* (PUCV). The Faculty was established in 1952 with the support of the Jesuits in the Chilean province of Valparaiso. In those years a group of teachers and professors coalesced around two charismatic characters with rather different cultural and academic backgrounds: the Chilean architect Alberto Cruz Covarrubias and the

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Argentine poet Godofredo Iommi, who had moved to Chile thanks to his friendship with the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro. After graduating from the *Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile* in Santiago Covarrubias started working there as a teacher but in 1952 he was expelled due to his participation in a series of demonstrations by the teachers and students, which aimed to effect a renewal of the whole academic approach and culminated in a symbolic burning of Vignola's textbooks of architecture that were still considered as being fundamental for the teaching of architectural planning and design.

The members of the group that formed in Valparaíso in the fifties soon went to live in a number of neighbouring houses located in the *Cerro Castillo* district that had recently been constructed at Viña del Mar. The professors of architecture of the PUCV gradually formed a community that not only had cultural aspects, based on family life and mutual sharing, but that was also of an economic nature. They were able to totally immerse themselves in conceiving and developing various new ideas regarding teaching and training, as well as elaborating the projects of the school of architecture as a whole, which were not attributable to a single designer or creator.

In 1970 the *Amereida* cooperative was set up by the architecture professors, who used the proceeds of the professional activities they conducted together to finance their experimentation and to buy the land upon which the CA would be built. The cooperative takes its name from the first of a series of journeys or *travesías* of research and exploration that they have undertaken from 1950 until the present day. *Amereida* is a portmanteau term, formed by combining the two words *America* and *Aeneid*. Godofredo Iommi coined this neologism to refer to a journey in the American continent with a creative and “foundational” aspect, due to the ability of the New World to autonomously produce original cultures. In this sense it was similar to the long journey of the legendary Trojan hero Aeneas, narrated in the *Aeneid* and culminating his definitive landfall on the coast of Latium, which represented his discovery of the land where Rome would eventually be founded by his descendants.

The discovery of the Americas by Columbus was very different from this kind of mythical process of foundation according to destiny or a divine plan. Instead it can be seen as a sort of gift from the gods, as Columbus was not even searching for America. His discovery of the continent at the end of his journey was completely unexpected, and it did not lead to any divinely ordained act of foundation. Such an act would require a preliminary exploration and reconnaissance of the

continent, and Iommi therefore carried this out by means of a series of *travesias* (literally “crossings”).

The first *travesia*, the *Amereida*, was made in 1950 by a group of professors of the school of architecture who set out from Punta Arenas (in the extreme south of Patagonia) intending to travel to Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia. They never actually got to their destination, as Che Guevara was conducting a guerrilla war near Santa Cruz at that time, but during their long journey the group stopped to carry out many poetic ‘actions’, documented by the photographs they took. The poem that Iommi wrote, simply entitled *Amereida*, addressed many of the above-mentioned themes. In this work he used an expressive language, which was full of metaphors and neologisms, and it is still studied in the school of architecture of the PUCV.

The acquisition of the territory of the CA was favoured by the agrarian reform launched by the government of President Frei Montalva six years before the military coup in which General Pinochet took power during the presidency of Allende. The actions of Pinochet’s regime regarding the universities of the country did not have any particularly negative repercussions upon the CA and the school of architecture of the PUCV was not prevented from continuing with its activities although, due to their unconventional approach and unusual methods, its teaching staff were treated rather dismissively and dubbed “los locos de Valparaiso” (the madmen of Valparaiso).

This lack of respect or serious consideration was no doubt largely due to the approach that was adopted right from the beginning in constructing the buildings of the CA, which were basically inspired by the relationship between poetry and architecture, rather than being based on the usual well-defined geometrical outlines and structures of planned cities or towns, which makes them so easily identifiable as such. One could say that this geometrically predetermined aspect of planned cities is metaphorically embedded and incorporated within the first stones of the city, which are hidden under and inside the buildings, but in the CA the metaphorical dimension has completely taken over as, in a certain sense, this is a non-functional city, where the purposes of the various different buildings and constructions and the relationships between them is not evident in purely physical terms.

An important manifesto published by the school of architecture of Valparaiso in 1967, anticipating the student movements that would soon shake up American and European universities, culminating the following year, examined the significance of a “Catholic University”,

the way activities of study and research should be carried out and the possibility of teaching in a less rigid and academic way that would encourage students to develop and discover their own inner potential, in the real sense of the word “education”. The manifesto also mentions *pobreza* or “poverty”: an idea which would become a fundamental aspect of the work done at the PUCV. This concept was clearly distinguished from the idea of “misery”, since what is poor should not necessarily be miserable, and it took shape in the creations of the CA that were made in a cheap or “poor” way by the professors working practically together with the students in a way that soon became a fundamental aspect of the academic curriculum. This is a very distinctive aspect of their work, and it has led what I have elsewhere called a “deconstructivist misunderstanding”, which is a common error made by a number of commentators and critics while attempting to analyze the constructions and activities of the CA.

I now wish to return to the connection between poetry and architecture, so that we can understand it better. The beginning of each work, which we might consider as the laying of the first stone, consists in a “poetic act” or *faena*, to use the language of the CA. This is a specially arranged meeting of the students of the school, who are continually involved in all of the activities that are regularly conducted at the CA. During the *faena* a poetic act is carried out in a playful way, under the guidance of Iommi, in the spirit of the statement made by the poet Comte de Lautreamont: “poetry must be made by all and not by one”. Here, as in surrealist poetry, words are not so much used to describe, but rather to create images related to the inherent rhythms of language. Subsequently the same thing happens with the various elements that go to make up each building, and that often do not seem to have clearly identifiable functions. Instead they have an intrinsic meaning, which can stimulate our emotional reactions, above all the vital sense of curiosity that is the wellspring of learning and creativity. In this way each work is created by everyone, applying the principle of the *trabajo en ronda*. This is work that is done together in such a way that each person receives ideas and cues from the others, and then elaborates them in an individual way. Such an approach to working together is like a relay race, with all of the athletes seeing, or “witnessing” those who have already run their lap, receiving the baton from them, feeling the urge to run faster and being inspired to make their own contribution as a continuation of the work of those who have preceded them. This fact of participating within an on-going process is closely connected with

the idea of a “tradition”, a word which comes from the Latin *tradere*, meaning “to deliver” or “to bestow”. All of these considerations are fundamental features of the existence of the CA.

The actual material activity of building and construction is necessarily preceded by the groundwork in the classroom, involving discussion of some aspects of the work, but the *trabajo en ronda* means that a project or plan cannot take priority over the dynamic process leading to the final building or structure that will be realized and thus there are no definitive plans, or at least not in the usual sense of a plan.

The construction work is instead always done in a spirit of collaboration and continual evolution. A natural consequence of this is the fact that the building can be transformed over time, so that one could say that in the CA every construction is ‘open’. Thus the idea that a game can be interrupted and then continued, as pointed out by Johan Huizinga in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, is applied to the letter. At this point we must also emphasize that the extreme consequence of this idea of the open work is that one must fully accept the possibility of its destruction or death, without any regrets. This was the case, for example, for the *Casa de los Nombres*, realized in 1992 to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the school of architecture of the PUCV (Figs. 1, 2). It was a large covered space intended to house exhibitions, meetings and other activities, built in an area of sand dunes where some prefabricated structures in reinforced concrete were installed, using as few mechanized vehicles as possible and otherwise constructed in the manner we have described above, without any previous planning. Some exceptionally simple and clever solutions were used to realize the extensive covering. The side of the building facing towards the prevailing winds was blocked off with a slanting wall made of wooden planks against which the sand soon began to accumulate. This was part of a sort of game because the sand soon erased the footsteps of visitors and covered the paths that had been laid out and it thus became a metaphor for one of the main principles underlying the methods used in the CA, namely *volver a no saber* or “returning to not knowing”. This basically means keeping the mind free from the knowledge it has acquired, and carrying out everything as if from a state of ignorance each time you do it, in an incessant return to the direct and sincere attitude of virginity. As a consequence five years after it was installed the roof was already torn and tattered by the wind and very little remained of the floor made of bricks without mortar (Figs. 3,4). What still remained of the building was dismantled soon afterwards.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Of course this does not always happen in the CA. Many of its buildings have been inhabited by a series of teachers of the school who have maintained them over time. The mind must always be kept clear in order to accommodate all the images that come from the continuous, obstinate and relentless practice of observation, applied to everything that appears before our eyes every day and that immediately becomes a part of the creative process.

When I wrote my book on the CA (published in 2000)² I focussed particularly on the practical aspects of the buildings and their construction, since what had previously been written about it was mainly limited to the poetic and philosophical themes that had inspired the founders of this extraordinary place, giving vitality and energy to their experiences and those of the people who continued its development. This one-sided emphasis was perhaps due to the fact that those involved with the CA did not want their experiences and activities to be discussed by people from outside the school. I therefore decided to try to fill this void and upon examining these buildings and constructions I soon realized that each one of them was associated with an essential theme regarding practices of architectural composition, and this was then examined and elaborated in more depth within the buildings, in a way that was free from the usual constraints associated with their practical functions.

In the *Hospederia La Alcoba* (in the context of the CA *hospederia* refers to any structure that offers a welcome or accommodation) the central theme is that of vertical growth, by means of the helicoid rotation of a single module or cell supported by a framework with a simple and rigorous geometry (Fig. 5). The position of the *hospederia* in the vicinity of a higher dune subsequently allowed a significant modification of the structure, with the creation of a new entrance as well as the original one at the base of the spiralling structure (Fig. 6). Instead, in the *Hospederia De la La Entrada*, which is raised on wooden piles, there is an experimentation with a linear way of assembling similar units, which ingeniously manages to resolve the various problems connected with the terminal elements at either end of the series (Fig. 7).

The *Sala de Musica* (“Hall of Music”) is based on the classic structure of the Roman house, or *domus*, with a square ground plan and a small central *impluvium*. The location of the entrance has been altered

2. To see more images and for a more extensive discussion of the issues described in this paper please refer to my book *La Ciudad Abierta*, subtitled “a community of architects, an architecture created in common”, published in 2000 by Editrice Librerie Dedalo, Rome.

so that it is no longer on one of the two central axes, as in the *domus*, but on a corner through a projecting entrance porch or cubicle (Fig. 8). In this way the movement inside the space becomes slow and rotational, instead of being a crossing or traversing directly through the space. Also in this case the technological solutions adopted, both structurally, especially for the roof, and from an acoustic point of view, are very ingenious (Fig. 9).

It seems that this kind of inventive and inspired approach to the process of planning and design derives from the idea of *volver a no saber*, so that even the most seemingly trivial component is reinvented, tested and redefined. In the CA there are many other cases in which the use of basic geometric forms and themes gives rise to unpredictable spaces in which this essential rigour is almost unrecognizable, as it has led to a kind of architecture that has been freed from the rules and that is constructed by means of a continual fragmentation of its constituent parts. This is certainly the case for the *Doble Hospederia* and the *Hospederia de Los Diseños* (Figs. 10, 11).

Godofredo Iommi died in 1992, followed in September 2013 by Alberto Cruz, who had kept a clear mind and an enviable level of commitment to his work until a venerable old age. Both were buried in the cemetery of the CA in the hills overlooking the site. The funeral procession moved along a beautiful pathway along a defile in the hillside, the paving and sides of which were made with bricks evenly laid upon the flattened ground, following the route that a person would naturally take to climb the hill (Figs. 12, 13, 14). Simple refreshments were then served during the reception at the *Palacio del Alba y Ocaso* where, with his usual intelligence, Alberto had realized a series of curved screens just over two meters high arranged in a polygonal pattern to create the ideal acoustics for meetings and conferences. The first course of bricks was laid on the ground without the use of mortar or cement, so as to enable the upper part of the wall to move freely without collapsing during the frequent earthquakes that affect this zone of the Andes. From the funeral reception the *Hospederia del Errante* (Fig. 15) could be seen standing on the summit of the hill with its roof that resembles a tent, constructed so as not to oppose, but rather to deflect the strong westerly winds. It was the result of a study co-funded by a Chilean government research institute (*Fondecyt*) on the initiative of Manuel Casanueva Carrasco, one of the most creative professors of the school of architecture of the PUCV, who also sadly died quite recently.



Fig. 5. Photos: M.A.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14