

NOCTURNAL HERITAGE

AWAKENING THE HISTORIC QUARTER OF VALPARAÍSO

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INTRODUCTION

Due to their special features—history, density, centrality, culture—historic centers are urban areas with great economic and social potential. In the past, historic centers were not only the places where economic, social, political, religious, and cultural activities took place, but also the residence of the majority of the population. Victims of urban expansion, these urban areas have gradually lost their residents and become run down or underutilized.

Out of 142 world heritage sites in Latin America, one third are historic quarters and urban centers.¹ Since the 1980s, the deterioration of these areas has sparked processes of intervention and calls for innovations in local management and governance.² Drawing from the results of a qualitative study conducted in 2019, the following article will illustrate the advantages of a new approach to managing historic urban areas. The article will focus on the current situation and historic quarter of Valparaíso, a city whose legacy as the first and most important merchant port of the Pacific coast of South America earned it a designation as a world heritage site, but whose

decline over the past decade has made its struggle to stay relevant.

NOCTURNAL HERITAGE: PROTECTING A CITY'S NOCTURNAL VALUE

In the words of former mayor of Bogotá Antanas Mockus, a city is not only made of *hardware*, or infrastructure, but also of *software*, or culture. Part of the success of the consecutive administrations of Enrique Peñalosa (1998-2001) and Antanas Mockus (2001-2003) was the complementary proposals: while Peñalosa prioritized the hardware—such as through the expansion of its bus rapid transit system (TransMilenio) and the construction of miles of bicycle lanes throughout the city—Mockus spearheaded a series of citizen culture campaigns to improve mobility, tolerance, safety, and quality of life. Today, this terminology of *hardware* and *software* has become part of the jargon of urbanists in the region when referring to the components of an urban development strategy. A third component refers to the group of actors responsible for planning, financing, and managing urban areas: the system of *urban governance*.

The notion of urban software refers not only to a city's cultural traditions, but also to local attitudes and practices that are based on memory. Citizens form clear mental maps of the city they live in, and negative memories—such as a fight in the street or a story about a theft—are enough to deter them from returning to a particular area.³ At night, urban heritage acquires all kinds of meanings and interpretations, and new actors become involved in the way it is managed and used. A city's nighttime establishments, such as bars, restaurants, and clubs, form an important part of its cultural history and constitute its “nocturnal heritage.”

When we think about heritage, probably the last thing that comes to mind is a red-light district. Cities like Amsterdam, Antwerp, Shanghai, and Hong Kong have special neighborhoods that cluster prostitution and sex-oriented business such as strip clubs, sex shops, and adult theaters. While these cities were prominent trade centers back in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, brothels and dancing halls flourished in these districts as sites of leisure and entertainment for sailors. Today, these areas have evolved into more sanitized entertainment districts that preserve the history of their maritime past. For instance, Amsterdam's red-light district (RLD)—known locally as “De Wallen”—is the oldest part of the city, one with a legacy as one of the largest harbors in the world. In the 1960s, Amsterdam's harbor was moved to the western part of the city, and De Wallen entered a period of decline. However, a set of policies that included city marketing, tourism, branding, and public-private partnerships have spurred the transformation and revitalization of the area over the past two decades. Today, De Wallen has become an emblem of Amsterdam as a “left-wing city” in relation to drug use, prostitution, and

LGBTQ+ rights.⁴ Due to the area's unique atmosphere and concentration of amenities, it is perceived as an international “free zone”⁵ and has become an important part of Amsterdam's nocturnal heritage.

The urban night has traditionally been a highly regulated space where restrictive policies such as curfews and drinking bans are enforced to “strike the right balance” between a flourishing and diverse nighttime economy and growing residential populations. Strict regulations and controls often give way to the emergence of homogeneous nightlife districts that combine shops, restaurants, and bars where locals and tourists can interact amid a safe, but sterile, nocturnal landscape. High rents and restrictive nightlife policies, among other factors, are linked to the disappearance of traditional venues such as pubs or public houses in London. A recent survey revealed that 54 percent of those who visit London go to a pub during their stay, highlighting the great value of these spaces and their tight connection to local culture.⁶ Public houses are traditional meeting spaces where people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds gather to share celebrations, sports, and historic events.⁷ However, between 2001 and 2016, the city lost 25 percent of these establishments, a huge toll on its nocturnal heritage.

Aside from their cultural value, nightlife venues make important tangible contributions to cities. For instance, New York estimates that its 25,000 night-time establishments generate almost 300,000 jobs a year and contribute \$697 million in local tax revenue.⁸ A concept that has encouraged cities to quantify the value of their nocturnal heritage is that of the “nighttime economy,” which refers to “the assemblage of bars, clubs, cinemas, theaters and cultural festivals and events which are, in a context of urban entrepreneurialism, supposed to

contribute to urban regeneration and economic growth.⁹ In practical terms, most cities define their nighttime economy as everything that occurs between 6:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. This concept has its origins in the 1990s, when a group of European scholars adopted a temporal approach to urban planning and realized that urban centers present a series of features—high density, walkability, mixed uses, and good access to public transport networks—that facilitate life at night.

However, as urban density increases so too does sensitivity to the impacts of entertainment, particularly after dark. In a recent book titled “Soft City,” Gehl Architects partner and creative director David Sim explains that there are two seemingly contradictory sides of humanity: the need for individuality, and the need for sociability.¹⁰ The traditional strategy that urban planners have used to minimize nuisance and urban conflict is the separation of uses and activities; for instance, separating residential uses from business and entertainment. Under this premise, many cities have chosen to create specialized nightlife districts or to locate entertainment services inside of shopping malls. This separation is not only problematic from a transportation point of view—forcing revelers and night shift workers to rely on the car to reach these destinations—but also encourages largely homogenous and artificial nightlife areas that are disconnected from the city’s cultural identity. In line with Sim’s thesis, potentially conflicting activities such as working, partying, and sleeping can be brought together, rather than segregated, in urban areas. Furthermore, greater proximity between these activities reduces commuting times and costs—both economic and environmental—and results in better quality of life.

THE DECLINE OF THE JEWEL OF THE PACIFIC

Situated only 120 kilometers (75 miles) from Santiago, Valparaíso was a major merchant port on the Pacific coast of South America in the 1800s and a popular stop for travelers on their way to the California Gold Rush. But the golden years of Valparaíso came to an end with the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, an event that marked the beginning of a slowdown in the city’s development and its transition from a port city to a smaller tourist destination.

Two events made 2003 an important year for Valparaíso. In May, the Chilean Senate officially recognized the city as the country’s Cultural Capital,¹¹ and a few months later, UNESCO designated its historic district as a World Heritage Site. Once known as the “Jewel of the Pacific,” Valparaíso was considered a testimony to early phases of globalization and an “excellent example of late 19th-century urban and architectural development in Latin America.”¹² With a natural amphitheater setting that inspired many artists and poets like Pablo Neruda, the city’s early industrial infrastructures and monumental architecture wonderfully inhabits its challenging topography of steep hills accessible through stairways and its distinctive funicular elevators.

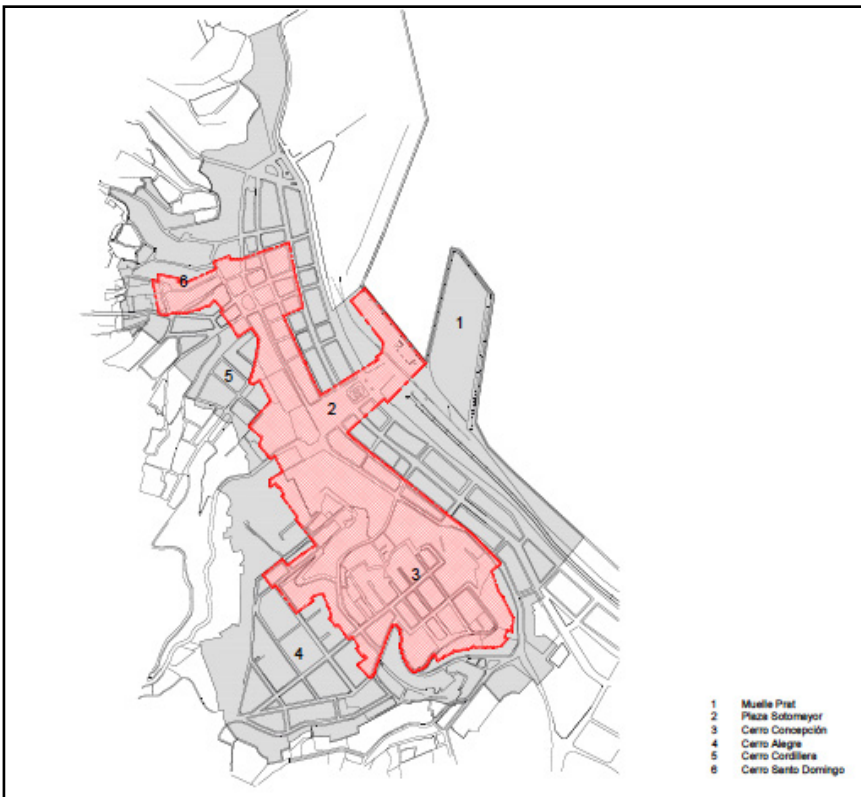
This designation was initially seen as an opportunity to develop the city and to strengthen its image as a cultural and tourism destination around the world. Representatives of Valparaíso’s hospitality industry affirm that UNESCO’s recognition brought along a temporary boost to the local economy. However, it could not stop the slowdown and decline that was already underway due to the expansion of air travel, the automation of the port, and the rise of other tourist destinations such

as neighboring Viña del Mar. Today, both Valparaíso's streets and many of its monuments are covered in graffiti, while informal vendors and stray dogs occupy sidewalks and public spaces throughout the day. One of the areas most affected by this decline was the city's seaport district or Barrio Puerto, which has lost most of its residents and becomes a ghost town after dark.

In June 2019 I embarked on a qualitative study and characterization of the city's night scene as part of a technical cooperation between a multi-agency group of local and regional representatives led by the

Municipality of Valparaíso and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The study consisted of a series of focus groups and interviews with public officials, members of local organizations, residents, and representatives of the nightlife and hospitality sectors in order to identify the challenges of reactivating Valparaíso's historic quarter at night. Based on this information and through the use of GIS mapping software, this study produced recommendations and identified opportunities to transform this area into a platform to build a renewed urban identity based not only on

LIMITS OF THE HISTORIC QUARTER OF VALPARAÍSO, DESIGNATED AS A WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN 2003



Source: UNESCO

local tradition, but also on current needs. The following section will outline some of the insights gained from this study.

MAPPING VALPARAÍSO'S HISTORIC QUARTER AT NIGHT

Valparaíso's historic quarter was the center of its economic and political activity in the nineteenth century. While UNESCO's designation recognizes the city's legacy as a port, Valparaíso has developed other identities over the years. The first of these identities is being a tourist city, with award-winning boutique hotels, urban art tours, and a

rich gastronomy that attract visitors from all over the world. The second is being the home of more than 40 higher education institutions and 60 thousand students from all over the country. Based on its vast musical tradition and its legacy as the birthplace of jazz and rock in Chile, Valparaíso's third and most recent identity is as a Creative City of Music, designated by UNESCO in October 2019. These three identities—tourism, higher education, and music—add to its long history as a port, but often contradict one another from a spatial perspective. An example of this contradiction lies in the city's weak connection to the water: the



Valparaíso during the day (top).



Valparaíso at night (bottom).

Photos: Andreina Seijas, 2019



**Nighttime gathering in one of the city's stairways (above).
Valparaíso's waterfront (below).**



Photos: Andreina Seijas, 2019

port occupies most of its seaboard, a major missed opportunity to develop a waterfront where tourism and cultural activities can flourish.

Another contradiction becomes evident at night. Due to the city's position as a tourist destination, most of its nightlife activities are fairly expensive for locals, particularly for students. As a result, young people gather in stairways and plazas to drink and socialize at night, making noise, urinating in public spaces, and disturbing neighbors wishing to sleep. This situation is also motivated by a low sense of belonging. Many young students who live in Valparaíso only stay in the city for a few years while completing their studies, which furthers social disconnection and a lack of interest in preserving public spaces. While young people are often unaware of Valparaíso's heritage, they are more likely to be familiar with the city's music culture. In this sense, its recent designation as a Creative City of Music is an opportunity to build a stronger connection with younger generations.

In line with this recent designation, a key area of opportunity for Valparaíso to reactivate its historic district lies in its vast nocturnal heritage. Like Amsterdam, Valparaíso once had a prominent red-light district that covered a large sector of the city and its current Barrio Puerto. A few bars and taverns from that era still exist today: Bar Liberty, established in 1897; Bar La Playa, established in 1908; and Bar Cinzano, established in 1896. On Thursday nights, locals meet to sing and dance cueca at Bar Liberty, one of the few places in Valparaíso where this traditional style of music is still present. A strategy to revitalize the area must preserve the legacy and cultural relevance of these establishments as a reminder of the city's golden era and a tribute to its nocturnal tradition.

One of the most promising projects in

the district is the city's Mercado Puerto. Almost ten years after closing its doors, the city's public market is expected to reopen and provide 50 stalls for local vendors and producers. If reopened, the market could be a catalyst to transform this area, not only by creating new jobs and attracting private investment, but also as a new tourist destination at the heart of the historic district. However, affordable housing options, along with improvements in safety and lighting, are necessary to bring this once bustling area back to life. By using georeferenced data, I was able to identify that while the city center feels like a ghost town, other sectors of the city have a saturation of nighttime activity or a high concentration of liquor licenses—some of them illegal—which creates many mobility, sound, and access issues. Therefore, a strategy to reactivate the city center at night could help redistribute nightlife in the city while preserving an area with an already high concentration of nocturnal heritage assets.

Heritage designations must be participatory and include residents, young and old, and from different income levels. A strategy for the regeneration of a city center as a culturally vibrant and open space must take into account citizens' changing needs and desires.¹³ Among other projects, the Municipality of Valparaíso is overseeing the restoration of a building located one block from the market to create affordable housing for the residents of the Barrio Puerto. These improvements in the area's hardware are essential to ensure that its revitalization adds value not only to the city's tourists, but also to its current residents—particularly the youngest ones.

CONCLUSION

Almost two decades after Valparaíso was recognized as a world heritage site, its

designation could be in danger. Already in decline, the city has been gravely affected by the wave of countrywide protests that began in October 2019. Along with Santiago and Concepción, Valparaíso is one of the three cities most affected by the demonstrations. Protesters have vandalized many of the stores in the city center and set several buildings on fire, including the headquarters of *El Mercurio*, the country's oldest newspaper. This situation has also taken a toll on the city's tourism industry and the engine of its local economy. For Chilean architect and heritage expert Paz Undurraga, "tourism can no longer be seen as an economic transaction but as a process of cultural exchange."¹⁴ As we explored in this article, the reasons that led to the city's designation by UNESCO are largely disconnected from its current reality and the needs of its citizens, and this gap becomes even more evident after dark.

In 2017, following the lead of Amsterdam and more than 40 other cities around the world that have appointed "night mayors" and nocturnal governance structures,¹⁵ mayor Jorge Sharp designated a "nocturnal delegate" responsible for promoting collaboration among residents and the nightlife industry, and reactivating the city's night scene in a safe and productive way. Though the nocturnal delegate role no longer exists in Valparaíso, it finally placed the night in its agenda, recognizing its rich nightlife history and the need to reactivate its historic quarter after dark.

The night has long been an overlooked part of the day, particularly in urban studies. By gathering new data and analyzing the situation of the city under a new light, this study hopes to provide an innovative platform that could help bridge Valparaíso's many identities and encourage the city to develop a more robust governance approach that speaks to the current reality

of the "Jewel of the Pacific." Though a nocturnal approach to heritage preservation will not be able to solve all the issues and needs—both in hardware and software—that the city is currently facing, it could provide a new model of socialization and collaboration between public and private actors that leads to a more inclusive vision for Valparaíso not only during the night, but also during the day.

This article is part of a study and upcoming chapter in a publication on World Heritage Sites in Latin America produced as part of a collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank.

ENDNOTES

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