

Conference: **Compatible reuse of historic buildings as a tool for the creative management of historic cities.**

Participant: **Prof. Newton José Rauseo Díaz**

Title: **San Agustin del Norte: a Caracas zone which will defend its historical heritage with an appropriate mix of new uses.**

Introduction.

San Agustin del Norte (belongs to San Agustin district) has been developed as an enlargement extension (similar to Barcelona's Cerdá "ensanche") of the historical center of Caracas since 1928 by private investment, which commercially promoted it as a new way of living for "modern citizens" at the city centre.

New ways meant not only the enlargement as a first planning extension of the city, but also a new urban layout, which is still unique for city centre urban design. This must include: the automobile influence in the morphology of the city, a new urbanization process with its blocks and plots, the corner house as a social value, variety of architecture façades as a commercial way to have profits, etc. All these things had a historical meaning in the urbanism and architecture of Caracas, because –among others reasons- the methodology references, variety in the traditional Spanish "damero" pattern as a model which became an urban form landmark, houses eclectically designed, and a successful commercial business for private investors.

However, since 1950 decade when several governments interventions (Bolívar Avenue and Fajardo motorway) and legal actions (1971 local municipality ordinance with higher densities constructions norms) took place -specially the 1975 government decree for urban renovation-, the zone has been affected because the disarranged of bulldozer planning proposals, new building constructions, and urban pressure for more profitable investments on the zone. All these matters became a real danger for neighborhoods that live there since many years ago.



Leaders of San Agustín del Norte community organizations asked the author (teacher from the Architecture School of Venezuela Central University) to help them to prevent a new urban threaten: the underground (Metro de Caracas) system and its new line that will start service soon this year with two stations in San Agustín district.

In this introductory review the starting point is my interest to explore and value (through a research still in development), the urban and architecture zone of San Agustín del Norte as a city patrimonial heritage, and the possibility of reasonable and sustainable interventions on its physical structure. The methodology of this studio, look forward to integrate three academic actions: teaching, researching and community service (by teacher and students) as a tool for new experiences to help me to achieve a better understanding of the academy social mission in the new Venezuelan political context. This paper looks to share some facts of that experience.

#### The urban and architecture physical character of San Agustín del Norte.

Looking for a comprehensive approach of the place, the author, and 20 students and community leaders, all together have done in the praxis an urban planning methodology, which consisted of three steps: a physical and researching analysis, a present situation diagnostic and a physical preliminary urban proposal that would be considered by the whole community in a further public assembly. This is in the way of incorporating experiences as part of the method for new urban planning process.

From the physical analysis, a spontaneous street contact with ordinary people who live, work or visit, was very important to know what happened and is happening in the zone. We approached to a better understanding of weaknesses and strengths of San Agustín del Norte, and the territory physical values for conservation and new development measures in terms of architecture and urban spaces. Weaknesses mean: change from a high income to a low income middle class residential zone, many houses became a cheap accommodations for poor migrants people, social disarray, inappropriate government and private physical interventions, destructions of some architecture heritage, alteration of many houses eclectic facades, pressure for urban bulldozer renovations plan, etc. Strengths mean: neighborhoods and their strong own community organizations which look for a better environment, vantages of central urban location, the conservation of much of the historical urban and architecture structure, the restoration capability of most deteriorated architecture and facades of houses, etc.

The research has allowed the author to get a better understanding of the evolution of San Agustín del Norte through the periods, I mean, from its origin as a middle class residential zone to the actual behavior which is a popular urban habitat, with a dominance of residential use. However a several complement activities have developed, increasing its character as a place; but without an appropriate urban plan that have brought many problems to its spontaneous process. This evolution had got a strong social and cultural dilemma of continuing living in the present disarrange situation or look for better life conditions; this should be drive to a proactive actions, and the academy would have a social and professional role working together with the different actors of the site.



The San Agustin del Norte urban design spaces followed the historical and orthogonal medieval “damero” layout streets, but introducing a new framework: the streets (called with epithet “bis”) which produced four smaller blocks for every ancient one, given a special urban identity to the new enlargement inside historic city centre. A new profitable plot scheme took place too, each plot more little than the referential one coming from the already divided plot of the old city scheme. On these plots were built little houses to match the growing housing market, when Caracas became centre of an oil country. A profitable busyness was the main reason of private promoters.

Houses of eclectic architecture influences settled as a continuous urban façade on the new plots; that mix traditional (from Spanish colonial) ground plant layout, with Neo-Arabs (coming from Islamic Andalusia –Spain-) and Art Deco facades styles influences.



The old bullfighting building Nuevo Circo de Caracas (designed by two architects) with its strong eclectic character (mix of Neo-mudéjar, Neo-moorish and Art Deco architecture styles) was taking as a typology by European migrants builders' masters, whom built most houses, modern style buildings and El Dorado cinema in the zone, which still remains almost identical from 1930 decade.



The dialectical of urban phenomena process has meant that many people have changed the original houses through adding spaces and reforming facades to match new families' requirements. The 1971 ordinance had strong influences in the physical urban layout and architectural buildings actual preservation.; There are very reasons, among others; norms do not match the present characteristics of the place in terms of minimum plot area for new buildings of higher construction densities. This would mean, for example, a new plot arrangement (at least 6) to promote a new building, or one private promoter buying 6 plots for new investment. Only few cases took place in the zone. The 1975 decree defined the Simon Bolivar Centre (a state agency) to take up the entire enterprise for urban renovation of the site.

In a city like Caracas where development has always meant the destruction -for extension- of many of the ancient urban street layout, demolition of monuments and any types of old buildings in the city historical centre as "normal" urban process; it is significant that in San Agustin del Norte most of original houses and others buildings are still on site, and neighbors learned how important this is for their habitat. Therefore they want that local municipality authorities and others governments agencies implement urban policies with special concern of the historic patrimonial conservation measures and news physical interventions for a better environment.

#### San Agustin del Norte as an Urban Habitat.

As an interpretation coming from the contact with communities and how they feel their urban physical built environment (private and public spaces), we consider house in San Agustin del Norte as a space strongly linked to the habitat where it take place: the historic city centre. But national and local government have always looked and worked on this site forgetting its values context.

We assume San Agustin del Norte as an urban habitat introducing matters in a higher scale from the social, economical, political, cultural and functional understanding. 1) Socially speaking, having the neighborhood and its community leaders as object and subject of this work: the customer; 2) From the economical point of view, because it is a further potential city centre services area; 3) Political understanding, because allows community to be known and recognized as the main protagonist of the urban phenomena within the historical city area; 4) Cultural, because the human values of people who live in the zone; and 5) Functional, respect to structural and morphological spaces (the uses and activities, the design and other matters) and their contemporarily as a modern and eclectic urban and architecture example of the city historical development at the beginning of twenty century.

We defined it as an urban housing place with a strong traditional character. Traditional because their urban arrangement follows the spatial criteria of historic city centre from colonial time; and because the houses materialized the architectural evolution -in terms of needs and cultural tastes of the Caracas society- at first decades of twenty century.

The research has determined that people have achieved a strong feeling of friendship to their built environment, that it is felt as part of their social and cultural context of values. People use not only the social areas inside houses, but also the public open spaces to match their needs of communication, recreation, fun and meeting for

traditional events (carnival, Easter, Christmas, saint's commemorations, community's festivals). Therefore, they socialize them to reproduce ways of individual living style into ways of collective live, although people has to invade vehicular surface because the narrow pedestrian walk sides and the total lack of squares and parks in the zone. They feel San Agustin del Norte as a locus; consequently, they look to protect it.

Since 30 years ago, small private busyness took place in many houses in San Agustin del Norte, mixing residential use, cheap accommodations, workshops and services; due -among other reasons- the influences of close location of main inter-urban bus station. This situation has strongly deteriorated the houses internal arrangement and facades, because neighborhoods do not have any professional and technical advice. Today the situation has changed: the main bus station has being moved from the zone, a 1995 ordinance delimited a small preservation area inside San Agustin del Norte as consequence of community's struggles, new laws like the Public Planning Community Council Law let residents better actions for its environment planning, management and control. But, this ordinance still determines a high density zoning measures as a further profitable macro busyness should take place in the zone by private and states urban property market; and the demolition of many heritage building for the construction of a new metro station and tunnel, have contribute on its present disarray. Its central historical city location has given it a profitable dimension for government and private investments.

#### Let Share Some Reflections On.

The modernization process of Caracas still had San Agustin del Norte in focus. A new planning approach should consider an appropriate action by its actors, guiding future interventions, in order to prevent neighborhood displacement for inappropriate urban redevelopment process as consequence of disarranged political measures that should come at short time from local authorities and private investments.

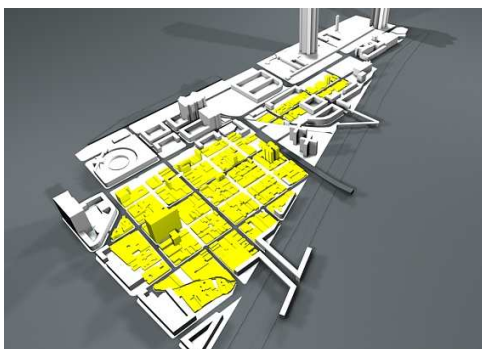
Teacher's research, student's physical analysis of the site, and community historic knowledge and support working together were crucial for the academic experience.

The consideration of urban management as dialectical process in San Agustin del Norte is on discussion. This implies to work together a politic, social, economical as well cultural context of the actors, which have been identified and should guarantee the sustainability of main interventions: local municipality, Bolivar Centre Company, private commercial's associations, San Agustin del Norte Public Planning Community Council and other communities' organizations, and the Venezuela Central University through out its architecture school. The goal is to achieve quality action, conceived as an interactive process, where the actors participate with roles clearly defined in time, making policies involving measures for heritage patrimonial conservations, buildings restorations, reasonable old houses re-use, existing public spaces interventions for people events, new open spaces and building developments.

San Agustin community's organizations are now claiming to participate in the whole planning stages, under its right given by the already mentioned law through out social committees (health, education, employment, sport and recreation, old people, infrastructure, urbanism, etc.). Therefore we put into consideration they should

management a planning process with active participation of all actors involved, as an alternative to traditional way of management just by planners of local authorities.

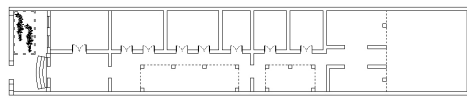
Teacher, students and San Agustin del Norte Public Planning Community Council have an approach for a preliminary general planning proposal, which include as main study the mixture of uses at different levels and scale. Environmental guides solutions through out a sustainable plan for urban and architectural historical preservation of flexible criteria, considering a wider patrimonial heritage area (yellow). Spatial arrangement of the zone which include: a new development area (red) around the patrimonial one, squares in the surface of metro stations, pedestrian net system (boulevards and bridges to link to south district zone), communal services areas (schools, health centre, sport centre), etc.



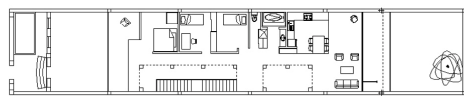
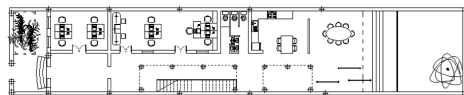
Community leaders -as main actor working in the zone- have a plan proposal that is on discussion with local authorities and will be discuss with private land property and investors too. The plan has been conceived as an integral and strategic tool for protection and development of urban and architecture San Agustín del Norte's heritage,

in the way of going from protection of culture heritage to the culture of heritage protection.

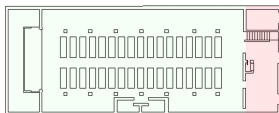
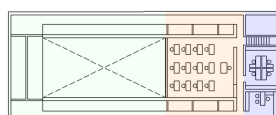
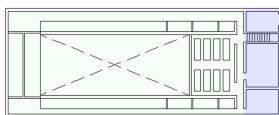
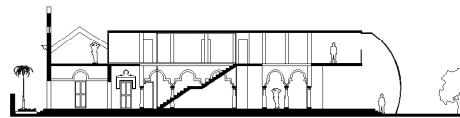
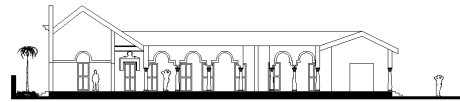
Students approached to volumetric design tests of some interesting areas for residents or new private interventions of appropriate mixes uses. For example, houses of patrimonial heritage area must keep five meters from the beginning of plot for conservation and restoration measures of its original architecture characteristic (should be financed by local municipality), but should consider new activities like: offices, local shops, etc. (at ground level) and family residence (top level). El Dorado cinema should become a cultural centre: small theatre (cinema, performances), exhibition hall, conference room, etc. New office-hotel complex should be built around the bullfighting building by private investments.



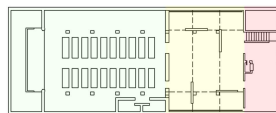
**Original House**



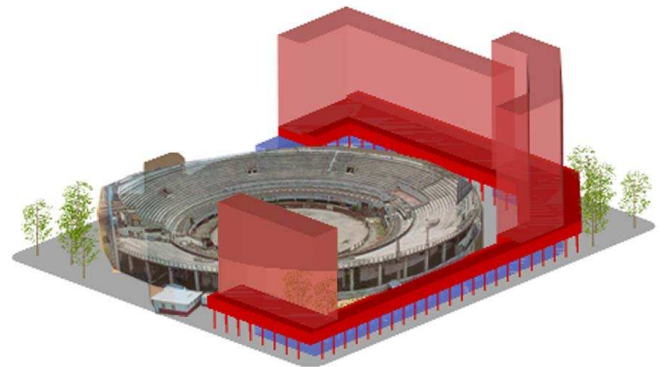
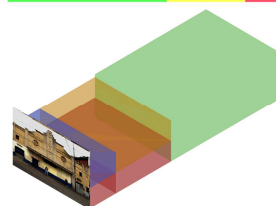
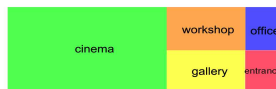
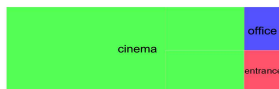
**Internal Reuse Proposal**



original cinema



internal reuse proposal





Private investors will be asked for doing investments and business with social criteria to benefit all actors. Local municipality authorities have been on discussion to make urban planning policies and investments for a better and sustainable life quality. All the approaches will be taking into the consideration of the whole community to have a solid consensus. The author is working on a project acting as professional social consultant of the San Agustín del Norte Public Planning Community Council, to be promoted into the University. The path has been starting but we still have a long way to pass through.

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