

## REBORN FROM THE CENTER: THE CASE OF ASUNCIÓN HISTORIC CENTRE Ecosistema Urbano

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**Ecosistema Urbano** is a Madrid based group of architects and urban designers operating within the fields of urbanism, architecture, engineering and sociology. Their approach is defined as a urban social design by which they understand the design of environments, spaces and dynamics in order to improve self-organization of citizens, social interaction within communities and their relationship with the environment.

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Asunción, capital city of Paraguay, was one of the most notable settlements in the history of South America. From the also called 'Mother of Cities' many expeditions departed and several cities — including Buenos Aires — were founded in the surrounding territory, now mostly part of Argentina and Brazil. It was a primary vector of local development during colonization and also one of the first places to rebel against the colonial dominion.

Its center, burned down and rebuilt a few years after its foundation in 1537, now extends its wide and regular grid over seven hills — like a second Rome, they say —, and then scatters in a wide patchwork of urban fabrics with decreasing density towards the borders. During the past decades, Asunción has come to surround and swallow all towns nearby in a single conurbation.

During the past years, different communications started to refer to the downtown as the "CHA", acronym for 'Centro Histórico de Asunción' (Historic Downtown of Asunción), and it is gradually becoming a day-to-day byname or even a common noun for this part of the city: "How's the *cha*?".

To tell the truth, the *cha* is noticeably degraded. The accelerated expansion of the city, fueled by the rapid growth in population, the lack of proper regulations, the low price of land in the outskirts and the appeal of a ground-level, tree-surrounded lifestyle, has turned this capital city in an enormous low density tissue, where the heart beats heavily — crowded by day, empty at night — and the circulatory system roars around, grey and overloaded.



Signs of urban livelihood like local businesses, family activities or simple enjoyment of public space are more remembered than seen, the population having shrunk by three quarters in just two decades of urban development. Daytime activity, mostly related to services and trade, fades along with the last car leaving the downtown. Barely a few night clubs and some cultural initiatives begin to sprout, trying to lure citizens back into the half-abandoned heart of the city. The whole CHA is flecked with abandoned buildings of all kinds and conditions, from the elegant examples of post-colonial architecture to the sparse and generally failed attempts towards high rise development, dating from a few decades ago.

Like many other cities in the world, Asunción is also the stage where the big national dramas end up being played. Whole families see themselves displaced by conflicts in the interior of the country, where latifundia keep proving incompatible with sustainability and social justice. Barely have they settled in the *bañados*— floodplains by the Paraguay river — right in front of the city that now allows them to survive, the floodings turn them back into refugees. A symptom, again, of unequal environmental and human conflicts that are created in one area and discharged in a different one.

The CHA is the complex coexistence of those worlds. It is the old city center, apparently stable and decadent, and it is the Chacaritaneighbourhood, precarious and full of life in its double presence: the Chacarita Alta, socio cultural root of the city and the country, and the Chacarita Baja, the crude result of demography, economy and other general dynamics.

However, aged and apparently exhausted as it looks, the downtown of Asunción maintains an indefinable dignity, as if it was refusing to be given up for lost, and shows its values and potential to whoever wants to see them.

During the year 2011, the CHA begun to recover its role as a public place capable of supporting social, cultural and economic manifestations of the city and the country. To this contributed the celebration of the Bicentenary of the Independence of the Republic of Paraguay and some initiatives of high cultural impact like Puerto Abierto — Open Harbour — , shortly followed by others. Soon, the Alliance for the CHA was formed through collaboration of several national and local institutions. It was because of this Alliance that finally, during 2014, an international competition for the Masterplan of the Historic Center of Asunción was launched, and won by EcosistemaUrbano.

### **From the plan to the process**

The Masterplan for the Historic Center of Asunción, also called Plan CHA, is driven by the will several institutions and people in Asunción put into the revalorization of the downtown, aiming for a way to breathe new life into it in a permanent and enriching way.

Approaching it from an European perspective, an urban environment like the CHA feels unfinished, like something that still has to crystallize and thus is much more alive, less 'resolved' and with more possibilities; much more malleable when undertaking such a transformation process.

Reality is, naturally, much more complex than that, and the project had several challenges to overcome: How to combine the international experience of the team with the local

idiosyncrasy? How to solve the complexities and contradictions that arise during a process of this kind? How to take the plan beyond the 'just another document in a drawer' situation?

One of the first actions by EcosistemaUrbano was getting to know its history and to recognise local impulses: previous plans and proposals, citizen initiatives, key stakeholders and existing agendas. This was already made visible in the panels sent to the competition, which included a first mapping of local initiatives and actors. They also showed the intention to work on a 'glocal' level, merging local values with international experiences that could bring new and necessary components into the urban development of Asunción.

Another important part of the approach was to understand the plan more as a process than as a document. No city is capable of driving, in a single burst, a revitalization process like the one the CHA was needing. The city being a complex and mutant organism, it is not possible to analyze or design guidelines in one single moment of its life. A traditional masterplan, developed without any interaction with urban reality and the citizens that create it, cannot properly respond to the needs of change. To cover the need for a sustained negotiation with the context, some management tools were incorporated into the proposal, so the process of designing the plan would become just the first step on a path — a path the city should be able to traverse by itself.



Fig. 01 to 34: Aerial views, diagrams, processes and places of intervention. Source: EcosistemaUrbano.



On top of the usual development strategies used in this kind of projects, and together with the idea of turning the 'master plan' into a 'master process', three lines of work were emphasized that would allow the plan to be carried on. Those three aspects were participation, pilot projects, and the creation of a new entity devoted to driving the process of revitalization at a local level.

## **10 strategies, 100 actions, 40 pilot projects**

The final document, as it was delivered, develops 10 institutionally driven strategies that provide a general vision for the Historic Center of Asunción. Each one of them, located around a specific place or aspect of the city, sets a direction in which to direct all efforts from the public institutions operating in the CHA.

Those 10 strategies, in turn, contain an Action Plan consisting of more than 100 specific actions, each one of those related to a physical space and an implementation timeline. This way, the proposed development model could be translated into specific goals.

Finally, 40 demonstrative Pilot Projects are defined, identifying places or aspects of the Historic Center that will provide a clear opportunity to begin the implementation of the Plan, rapidly showing signs of change to citizens and institutions alike, and at the same time acting as urban prototypes, tests that will provide feedback to improve the general strategic vision.

Those pilot projects, conceived as 'executable packages' that combine a proposal, several key stakeholders, a strategy and a suggestion for funding, are an essential part of the document and a relatively simple mechanism to make it happen. They focus on actual urban development since the very beginning — actually, some of them were active even before the first draft of the Plan was delivered —, helping all involved actors to focus on the next step while keeping a much needed coherence with the general approach.

## **Making a better city, with citizens**

To undertake an open and sustainable urban regeneration process, it is necessary to connect the investment in infrastructure and other institutional projects with usually smaller, but generally very transformative citizen-driven initiatives. Along this line, the process of defining the Plan served as a platform to launch a participatory process which, while deployed during a relatively short period, managed to respond to specific goals and achieved multiple results.

On one side, it allowed the team to listen directly to the different actors involved and to gather their proposals, reflections and ideas about the present and the future of the CHA. This was the primary goal of activities like the workshops, the tours inside the Chacarita, the meetings with real estate developers, or the workshop about urban management that supported the proposal for a new 'urban lab'.





On the other side it created new spaces for dialogue and mutual connection between the key organizations and individuals. The strengthening of personal and institutional relationships is one of the most powerful effects of any participatory process. This activation and articulation not only gives more legitimacy to the whole project, but also empowers local stakeholders to act as promoters and guarantors to turn it into a moving reality beyond its initial development.

This process also acted as platform for citizens to experience an active way of participation and intervention in their own urban environment. This effect was particularly visible in the workshop with students and citizens, during which participants begun a comprehensive mapping and documentation process about the physical conditions of the CHA, and several urban actions — like the first bike lane prototype in Asunción — were launched within a very short timeframe but with great communicative and educational impact.

### **An urban laboratory for Asunción**

The 'master process' proposed for Asunción is a living process that needs a place to reside in, grow and be taken care of. Therefore, the first action proposed in the Plan was to kick-start a new hybrid entity to boost this development: the ASULAB (LaboratorioAbierto de Asunción or Open Laboratory of Asunción).

ASULAB, now under development, will be a physical, digital, legal and organizational interface between institutional management and citizen impulse: a place for the execution of the official planning, but also an open space where any person or collective will be able to launch a new regeneration initiative or join an ongoing one. It will also work as a meeting point for private and public actors capable of giving economic support to the regeneration of the CHA by funding specific projects.

This 'urban lab' was initially defined to include some generic functions — communication, mediation, connection, design, coordination and support — necessary for the development of the CHA to continue. This tentative definition was later developed through a participatory workshop where diverse and complementary stakeholders were invited — experts, government, non-profit civil society and entrepreneurs among them — to explore the characteristics of this future urban lab and draft some possible operational models. The outputs of that workshop were then merged into the definition of ASULAB as revised goals: to look after the Plan CHA and make sure it is implemented; to mediate, involve and link actors; to communicate and give visibility; to gain support; to promote or catalyse initiatives; to rethink the CHA, creating new spaces for reflection; to observe, document and make the process transparent.

All those key activities are the rationale behind the future organization, its primary mission, and as such they were embodied as part of its definition. This way, the document of the Plan contains in itself the keys to its subsequent development, and tries to perpetuate the dynamics of citizen and institutional engagement just initiated during the participatory process.

## The Plan CHA starts beating

The final presentation of the Plan CHA, with an exhibition and a giant model of the city made in collaboration with students and showcased at the historic Casa de la Independencia in Asunción, could also be considered the beginning of the actual urban development. Thanks to the commitment of the promoters of this process, already during the final phases of the Plan in 2015 several steps were taken towards the creation of a ministerial council that would give institutional support to the future ASULAB. Some months later, funds were raised to create the first core team, thus planting the seed of the future urban lab.

As of today, ASULAB — while still being an embryo of what it will be in the future — has already been working to communicate the possibilities of the CHA to economic, political, cultural and social actors in the city, as well as coordinating and managing the beginning of several pilot projects. It is starting a joint work with the SENAVITAT (Ministry of Housing and Habitat) to favor a more dynamic and affordable real estate market, capable of bringing new inhabitants to the CHA. It is also mediating between the main projects that affect the city center, like the Bus Rapid Transit System or Metrobús, the Master Plan for the harbour area and the Plan CHA itself. Steps are also being taken towards a single-window system for all procedures related to heritage, the creation of a Citizen Advisory Board for the Plan CHA, and the construction of the first civic, ecologic and dynamic corridor in the center.



**Fig. 35 to 47:** Project perspectives. Source: EcosistemaUrbano.

The Municipality of Asunción, meanwhile, has recently created the new Municipal Department for the Revitalization of the Historic Center of Asunción, which is now the city interlocutor with ASULAB and has adopted the Plan CHA as a roadmap. During the last months this office has announced the implementation of several pilot projects and developed high impact activities like 'Latidoamericano', an urban art festival aligned with one of the pilot projects included in the Plan.

These first steps, together with citizen-driven or private initiatives, are causing the first qualitative changes in the way the CHA works and is perceived in relation to the rest of the city. Barely a year after the official presentation of the Plan, the revitalization process is



already showing its transformative potential and its main challenges are becoming apparent. Asunción is now reinventing itself by its own means — being reborn from its very center.

## Credits

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