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Touristification of heritage areas in Latin America

by Natasha Cabrera Jara

At the end of the XXth century, many cities went through important processes of transformation and reconfiguration of their built environments, linked to a neoliberal economic model that promoted urban policies aimed at maximizing economic benefit¹ and market power, while also allowing for real estate speculation². Thus, the quality of urban life was defined by the capacity for consumption and investment, with little regard to the needs of vulnerable sectors³. Studies on the implementation of this economic model in Latin America⁴ show how historical, heritage and symbolic values played a fundamental role in the transformations experienced during the last decades⁵, particularly heritage areas with international recognition from institutions such as UNESCO⁶.

¹ J. Amado, *Procesos de transformación urbana en áreas centrales. Aportes para el abordaje de la gentrificación en américa latina*, in «Revista San Gregorio», 2016, pp. 113-123.

² C. De Mattos, *Financiarización, valoración inmobiliaria del capital y mercantilización de la metamorfosis urbana*, in «Sociologías», vol. 18, n. 42, 2016, pp. 24-52.

³ V. Delgadillo, *Mejoramiento habitacional en las áreas urbanas centrales de América Latina. Del combate de tugurios a la rehabilitación habitacional progresiva*, in «Revista INVI», vol. 63, n. 23, 2008, pp. 89-120.

⁴ C. Ruiz, *Análisis del sistema de gestión sostenible de los centros históricos de América Latina: el Caso de Quito y Lima*, in UIDE (ed.), *Enfoques de Turismo y Conservación*, Quito, Ecuador, UIDE, 2017, pp. 17-47.

⁵ M. Janoschka and J. Sequera, *Procesos de gentrificación y desplazamiento en América Latina, una perspectiva comparativista*, in J. Michelini (ed.), *Desafíos metropolitanos. Un diálogo entre Europa y América Latina*, Madrid, España, Catarata, 2014, pp. 82-104.

⁶ C. Vergara and A. Casellas, *Políticas estatales y transformación urbana: ¿hacia un proceso de gentrificación en Valparaíso, Chile?*, in «EURE Revista de Estudios Urbano Regionales», vol. 42, n. 126, 2016, pp. 123-144.

The many attributes present in central areas – historical, heritage, symbolic, functional, political– are valued by both the real estate market and cultural tourism. The latter was presented as a «chimney-free industry», and as a sustainable alternative for cities and regions in need of restructuring their production systems due to increased competition and changing market conditions⁷. However, there are abundant warnings on the risks and harmful effects to cities that have adopted tourism as their main development axis.

Conservation, tourism and displacement: An invisible relationship

In the contemporary world there is both a growing interest in the conservation of the heritage built environment, and a significant demand for cultural tourism. On the one hand, the conservation of heritage requires the investment of large sums of money, and local and national governments consider tourism as a financing option to conserve and enhance their heritage⁸; on the other hand, the industry sees in the cultural, historical and symbolic attributes of heritage an opportunity⁹ and a triggering component of the tourist prestige of a destination, alongside the raw material which supports visitors' cultural consumption¹⁰.

Tourism development demands favourable public policies that reduce fiscal obligations and promote public spending on tourism infrastructure, ranging from subsidies and economic support for the rehabilitation of private property, to the regeneration of public space in heritage area and surroundings. Nevertheless, these interventions entail the progressive displacement of the original inhabitants, and the prohibition of certain uses

⁷ A. Vázquez, *Desarrollo endógeno y globalización*, in «EURE Revista de Estudios Urbano Regionales», vol. 16, n. 79, 2000, pp. 47-65, p. 58.

⁸ L. García, N. Smith and M. Mejías, *Gentrification, Displacement, and Tourism in Santa Cruz de Tenerife*, in «Urban Geography», vol. 28, n. 3, 2007, pp. 276-298.

⁹ F. Carrión, *Urbicidio o la producción del olvido*, *Foro Habitar el Patrimonio*, Instituto Metropolitano de Quito, Quito, 2013.

¹⁰ D. Navarrete, *Turismo gentrificador en ciudades patrimoniales. Exclusión y transformaciones urbano-arquitectónicas del patrimonio en Guanajuato, México*, in «Revista INVI», vol. 32, n. 89, 2017, pp. 61-83.

previously allowed in public spaces, such as the sale of goods and services on the street, busking and other artistic endeavours, and even the occasional practice of athletic and sports-related activities, all in order to make spaces primed for tourism¹¹.

In effect, various authors¹² point out that, in Latin America, gentrification processes in historical heritage cities are very frequent and directly related to the tourism industry¹³, which operates to promote regeneration of urban areas possessing heritage value with tourism potential. This phenomenon demands a change in the use of these areas, from residential or mixed land with traditional commercial activities to commercial use and services of an international character¹⁴.

The tourism industry promotes this transformation with the promise of sustainable development that achieves the functional recovery of heritage and the revitalization of local economies. However, the main strategies to promote tourism in urban heritage areas have appealed to a logic of competitiveness and marketing that seeks to increase the satisfaction of the tourist and not that of the inhabitant, thus triggering a permanent fight for space¹⁵. Lower-income families, who frequently inhabit historical heritage areas in Latin America, are not replaced by inhabitants of the same city with greater purchasing power, but by tourists or short-stay residents. This situation has led to a constant dispute over space¹⁶, the abandonment of

¹¹ M. Janoschka, J. Sequera and L. Salinas, *Gentrificación en España y América Latina: un diálogo crítico*, in «International Journal of Urban and Regional Research», vol. 38, n. 2, 2013, pp. 155-171.

¹² I. Díaz, *Introducción. Perspectivas del estudio de la gentrificación en América Latina*, in V. Delgadillo, I. Díaz and L. Salinas (eds.), *Perspectivas del Estudio de la Gentrificación en México y Latinoamérica*, México DF, México, Contested cities, 2015; F. Rojo, *La gentrificación en los estudios urbanos: una exploración sobre la producción académica de las ciudades*, in «Cuadernos Metrópole», vol. 18, n. 37, 2016, pp. 697-719.

¹³ R. González, *Metodología para establecer orden de prioridad de intervención en un centro histórico con vista a su desarrollo turístico*, in «Retos Turísticos», vol. 2, n. 6, 2007, pp. 9-13.

¹⁴ D. Navarrete, *Turismo gentrificador en ciudades patrimoniales...*, cit.

¹⁵ E. Campuzano, C. Tello and J. Everitt, *Spatial Segregation in a Tourist City: The Case of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico*, in «Journal of Latin American Geography», vol. 13, n. 3, 2014, pp. 87-112.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

productive activities in favour of those of a speculative nature, environmental permissiveness coupled with the evasion of fiscal obligations in this sector, and excessive public spending on touristic infrastructure¹⁷. Navarrete¹⁸ points to this phenomenon as a process of «touristification».

Case studies in Latin America

Studies on this phenomenon in Latin America have as a reference the research of Jones and Varley from 1999, which analyzed the conservation projects of the colonial city of Puebla, Mexico, and highlighted the role of tourism in Latin American urban heritage areas¹⁹. These authors pointed to displacement and dispossession as frequent phenomena in the region, where the tourism industry was identified as the main actor, operating as a promoter of the «rehabilitation» and «regeneration» of urban areas of heritage value with tourism potential. The restored and regenerated heritage then became a picturesque and isotropic version of the city; the patrimonial urban space was «touristized», commercialized, while the city became a consumer machine²⁰.

Although the relationship between heritage, tourism and displacement is part of a global process, in Latin America it presents concrete particularities the study of which is growing. There are important studies such as those of Hiernaux and González²¹ in Querétaro and Mexico City; Gómez, Almirón and González²², and García and Sequera²³ in Buenos Aires; Frúgoli

¹⁷ J. Borja, *Revolución Urbana y Derechos Ciudadanos*, Madrid, España, Alianza Editorial, 2013.

¹⁸ D. Navarrete, *Turismo gentrificador en ciudades patrimoniales...*, cit.

¹⁹ M. Janoschka, J. Sequera and L. Salinas, *G Gentrificación en España y América Latina...*, cit.

²⁰ E. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space Social Theory*, London, United Kingdom, Left Books, 1990.

²¹ D. Hiernaux and C. González, *Turismo y gentrificación: pistas teóricas sobre una articulación*, in «Revista de Geografía Norte Grande», vol. 58, n. 1, 2014, pp. 55-70.

²² M. Gómez, A. Almirón and M. González, *La cultura como recurso turístico de las ciudades. El caso de la patrimonialización del tango en la ciudad de Buenos Aires*, in «Estudios y Perspectivas en Turismo», vol. 20, n. 5, 2011, pp. 1027-1046.

²³ E. García and J. Sequera, *Dinámicas de gentrificación en metrópolis de la cultura: aproximación comparada a las estrategias de Madrid y Buenos Aires. Seminario internacional de investigación en urbanismo*, V Seminario Internacional de Investigación en Urbanismo, Barcelona-Buenos Aires, 2013.

and Sklair²⁴, and Goulart²⁵ in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro; Díaz²⁶, and Leyva²⁷ in Bogotá; Posso in Cartagena de Indias; and Sabatini, Sarella and Vásquez²⁸, and Mathus²⁹ in Santiago de Chile. Although these cases show that the regional phenomena possess similar characteristics, each case also shows marked differences.

A review of these studies shows cross-cutting aspects, such as the fundamental role of public policies led by national and/or local governments. Benefits of increased tax revenue in the area, job generation, improvement in the inhabitants quality of life, recovery of urban functions and competitiveness³⁰ have been argued to implement renovation strategies in heritage areas. Thus, public policies have directly influenced this process. In Mexico City, for example, a series of deregulatory policies allowed the suppression of rent protection and facilitated the commodification of land and the entry of real estate capital. Another example is Buenos Aires, where the policy, based on a type of urban entrepreneurship, fostered public-private alliances from which the real estate sector ended up benefitting.

However, the policies with the highest incidence have been the protection of heritage, present to varying extent in all the cases reviewed. These policies were based on conservationist discourse stemming from the guidelines

²⁴ Jr. Frúgoli and J. Sklair, *O bairro da luz em São Paulo: questões antropológicas sobre o fenômeno da gentrificação*, in «Cadernos de Antropologia Social», vol. 30, n. 1, 2009, pp. 119-136.

²⁵ R. Goulart, *O processo de reabilitação urbana na cidade do Rio de Janeiro e suas perspectivas*, in «Scripta Nova, Revista Electrónica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales», vol. 9, n. 194, 2005, pp. 1-44.

²⁶ I. Díaz, *Introducción. Perspectivas del estudio de la gentrificación en América Latina*, in V. Delgadillo, I. Díaz and L. Salinas (eds.), *Perspectivas del Estudio de la Gentrificación en México y Latinoamérica*, México DF, México, Contested cities, 2015.

²⁷ N. Leyva, *El papel de las instituciones culturales en el proceso de gentrificación del barrio La Candelaria de Bogotá: un estudio de caso*, in «Cuadernos de Música y Artes Escénicas», vol. 1, n. 2, 2015, pp. 83-106.

²⁸ F. Sabatini, M. Sarella and H. Vásquez, *Gentrificación sin expulsión, o la ciudad latinoamericana en una encrucijada histórica*, in «Revista 180», vol. 24, n. 1, 2009, pp. 18-25.

²⁹ C. Matus, *Estilos de vida e imaginarios urbanos en nuevos residentes de Lastarria y Bellas Artes: el barrio patrimonial como escenario de diversidad, distinción y movilidad*, in «EURE Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Urbano Regionales», vol. 43, n. 129, 2017, pp. 165-186.

³⁰ N. Leyva, *El papel de las instituciones culturales...*, cit.

of supranational entities such as UNESCO, which have led to the formulation of regulations for the protection of built heritage. These regulations have contributed in various ways to gentrification processes, since they demand actions based on strict conservation rules that leave out users and their demands. In the case of Bogotá, for example, they made investment in heritage areas less attractive, accelerating deterioration and increasing the «rent gap»; enhancing the gentrifiable nature of these spaces, a process which led to a subsequent massive inflow of capital. In cities like Cartagena de Indias, heritage protection policies had an impact on the citizens identity and imaginary, generating wide acceptance and making displacement invisible.

The review of these studies showed a common pattern, where tourism was presented as the magic solution and a promoter of sustainable development. To become a competitive destination, these cities promoted a series of interventions and political reforms, which required state investment. This action ended up displacing the local population and less picturesque traditional uses and rites. The studies reviewed indicate that the benefits were not for the city itself or for its average inhabitants, but for the wealthy classes and multinational companies. Furthermore, the income reported by tourism was very unstable as it depends on international urban rankings and changes in tourism supply and demand.

This brief analysis attempts to configure a general framework on touristification in Latin American heritage areas. It reveals the predominance of planned touristification between public authorities and large capitalists, which, as Quiroz and Cadena³¹ point out for the Mexican case, has been based on the renewal of public and private space in historic centres and the attraction of new social groups. However, these same cases reveal that the phenomenon is much more complex, and displacement is one of the facets to be analyzed.

³¹ I. Díaz, *Introducción. Perspectivas del estudio...*, cit.

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