The inventiveness of memory: teaching history and conservation in planning

Lorenzo González Casas
Departamento de Planificación Urbana, Universidad Simón Bolívar, Venezuela

This paper explores the connection between creation, repetition, precedent, memory, and the teaching of history and preservation in architecture and urbanism. The didactic of history and preservation is examined from different contexts and times, looking for possible relations between creative acts and the freedom of creation, on the one hand, and history and the conservation of memory, on the other.

The first part of the article discusses the supposed connection between the solidity of repetition vis-à-vis the lightness of the creative instant, as well the possible role as an intermediary of memory and history. The second part analyzes the theme of the teaching of history in the professional training in architecture and urban planning, taking into account recent approaches and the evolution of academic programs, internationally as well as locally. Finally, the paper looks at the function of heritage conservation in academics, particularly from the viewpoint of its relationship with planning and urban design.

lgonza@usb.ve

1. Introduction1

Different authors have observed noticeable changes of planning paradigms and didactic over the last decades. The review of Positivism has led to an academic and professional crisis that has been somehow translated to the teaching methods of the discipline. A substantive shortage of jobs in the public sector has had a correspondence in a decreasing demand for many bachelor and graduate study programs as well as the downsizing, closing or relocation of planning departments in many places.

In correspondence with marketing problems, there has been an erosion of the legitimacy of planning as a discipline which has several possible causes. Firstly, as Fernando de Terán (1984) has argued, "the break of holistic explanations of urban and regional phenomena". Secondly, epistemic problems derived from the presence of elusive study subjects as well as the indeterminacy linked to the "abuse of the interdisciplinary that has diverted planning from the constitution of a truly theoretical nucleus of its own" (Almandoz, 1993: 636). Thirdly, the discredit of many urban renewal, housing, and highway modern projects whose authorship, it was assumed, corresponded to planners (though they were produced by professionals of many disciplines,) creating a heavy mortgage for a young discipline. Finally, and associated to the skepticism derived from lost battles before urban growth and dismissive characterizations of planning, there is a disconnection of the discipline to practice, which for some authors is leading to dark perspectives; the condemnation "of entire populations to the impossibility of projecting civilization codes over their territory, the central theme of urbanism" (Koolhaas, 1996).

Looking for answers to the crisis, as well as for the survival of the field, some trends in urban planning thought have emerged recently, among them the growth of environmental interests, the development of the discourses on sustainability and community participation, and the search for more limited and incremental explanations and proposals. Regarding the last trend, with a clear emphasis on projects, urbanism reinforces its condition as a creative intellectual activity, beyond the automatisms of models. Edmund Bacon (Holmes, 2002), the renown Philadelphian planner and author of the classical *Design of Cities*, advocates inspired proposals, useful to inspire others. Bacon argues that what is required in planning is inspiring consensus, rather than mediating consensus. In this sense, the teaching of planning has to combine two apparently conflicting objectives: the development of new proposals and the learning of technical knowledge. Dirk Schubert (1995: 75), based upon German experiences, has argued that "this is the main difficulty in the education of urban planners. Students have to obtain an analytical qualification as well as to develop creative skills." Víctor Fossi, one of the founders of urban studies in Venezuela, considers it in a similar fashion; he has sustained that students should develop their capabilities to give answers and that the trend to privilege diagnostic over decision making leads to "analysis-paralysis", a virtual blockade of creativity due to the excess of useless information.

Following these theses, the quest for more inventive as well as more practical results has supposed the return of planning to its architectural origins in many countries and schools (de las Rivas y Muzio, 1995) along with a debate about the supposed antinomy of plans and projects since the 1980s. This could be also related to a neo-traditional spatiality with specially designed environments, a turn which M. Christine Boyer (1988) has called, from a critical perspective, "the return of aesthetics to city planning." In any event, these facts suggest a strategic realignment of planning, consisting of the acceptance of precedents and the search for a more operational basis. This has some academic consequences, mainly the spread of teaching models based on studios, workshops, and labs. The issue here is the role that the teaching of history could fulfill in such scenery, considering that it conforms the vertex of an imaginary triangle completed by

the education of planners and the development of creative skills as the two other vertexes. In other words, the basic question would be: How the study of history, traditionally associated to analytical capabilities, can contribute to the development of the creative skills of the student as well as serving as a basis of her/his professional background?

2. History and creative instants

Phaedrus: Pero ¿de dónde, oh Sócrates, puede venir entonces ese gusto por lo eterno que en ocasiones se advierte entre los vivos?

Paul Valéry (2000: 17)

> *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Milan Kundera, 1991) proposes a particular interpretation of Nietzsche´s idea of eternal return: only with repetition life can gain weight. Without repetition we are condemned to the ephemeral, transitory condition of modernity because only with iteration (as the real reproduction of events) and sacred ritual (as their symbolic reproduction) is possible to summon the past and define symbol and meaning (Lasch 1999: 102).

Ritual, additionally, is considered the poetry of the function or purpose of buildings which, in turn, are material images of the values and aspirations of the communities producing them (Kostof 1985: 19). Among such values and aspirations is the expectancy of perpetuity and appeal of eternity, referred by Phaedrus in his imaginary dialog with Socrates, mentioned above. Solidity is born, paradoxically, in the fragile cords of the plumb, and inspires Socrates the memory of beauty in its solid material state: ""Guardo ese bello recuerdo ¡Oh materiales! ¡Oh piedras hermosas...! ¡Oh, cómo nos hemos vuelto leves en demasía!" (Valéry, 2000: 18). Notwithstanding, common sense suggests that the creative act is something light; "Darle rienda suelta o dejar volar la imaginación (let the imagination fly)" is the recommendation in Spanish to whoever is on the verge of producing a work and requires inspiration. The wind of creative freedom seems to be the driving force of the kite of imagination.

The question is, then: how to put together lightness and solidity in the creative act? It is clear that the relation between them is one of tension or ambiguity, since creation is linked to a will of lightness deriving from *tabula rasa*. A land free from obstacles would be the "ground zero" of the artwork. Demolition would become the eraser allowing the writing of the new. So, are the destructive forces of oblivion the mandatory foundation of all creative acts? For many authors, they certainly are. This was made explicit during the modern period, when cities were recreated by exposing them to destructive forces stronger to those used in the past by their enemies. This was the prevailing notion in key documents of modernity, such as the Futurist Manifesto (1914), which supported the end of monumental architecture and the reduction of the building lifetime, as well as that every generation had to build the city anew.

The material impossibility of fulfilling the oblivion of enormous strata of presences and meanings in the city leads to the acceptance of the actual city as an unavoidable stock. Such constrains not only mean a passive acceptance of facts but also a positive evaluation of them and the possibility of creating new milieus from old places. There are many shared spaces between memory and creation.

Greek civilization seems to have given a special symbolism to those communalities since they defined memory as the mother of the muses. According to mythology, Zeus, who was the most important god of the Greek pantheon, had nine daughters with Mnemosyne, the

incarnation of memory. The children of Zeus and Mnemosyne were the muses, who represented the arts and lived on top of Mount Parnasus, the symbolic realm of poets.

This relationship between memory and inspiration has other landmarks in Hellenic thought. For instance, the Greek word for truth is *aletheia*, which means "lack of oblivion." The search for truth begins with remembrance. Then, the main task of the poet or creative being was to reproduce and save memories; to be the guardian of truth, saving what is truth (*alethes*) from oblivion. As a result, the mission of art is to celebrate and preserve "immortal gods and glorious men achievements." Only with art in its laudatory function can human beings be saved from darkness and silence (Papaioannou, 1989: 127).

Children of memory, the Muses were called also *Mneiai* (remembrances.) Clio, the muse of history, is frequently mentioned as the first-born of the muses. Contrasting with painting or architecture, history has its own inspiring muse, which suggests that it is a creative discipline, one that establishes affinities between Mnemosyne and urban narratives, combining lightness and solidity. In this sense, the inspiration moment of a project, as Martín Hernández (1997) has posed, bridges two realms; an unconscious one, filled with previous experiences and a material one, with an architectural problem. The creative process combines, then, an instant of invention or revelation and an instant of intellectual discipline. Following these ideas, the author concludes that the ability to remember is the "gateway to intelligence."

Back to Clio, the study of history feeds the unconscious with previous experiences; with an imaginary that promotes imagination. Colin Rowe, one of the most influential educators of architecture and urban design in the twentieth century, used to say that precedent is the base of creation. His teaching method included architectural and urban examples from the past, with landscapes and cities working as a vast mnemonic system to retain collective history and ideals (Lynch, 1974: 149). Considering Rowe´s achievements, there is an enormous potential in the study of history for creative processes in planning, as well as for conceiving the future with the past in mind.

3. History and Planning

Dad, tell me what is the use of history.

Marc Bloch (1986: 49)

The city is a historical fact. As the *Zaira* of Italo Calvino (1995: 21), every city "consists of "relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past…" Zaira reminds the city of Nietzsche´s antiquarian historian. There, the longing for community goes beyond the ephemeral existence, to the reverential process of preserving the city and, with it, the individual history.[2] The history of the city intermingles with that of its citizens:

The history of his city becomes for him the history of himself; he reads its walls, its towered gate, its rules and regulations, its holidays, like an illuminated diary of his youth and in all this he finds again himself, his force, his industry, his joy, his judgment, his folly and vices. Here we lived, he says to himself, for here we are living; and here we shall live, for we are tough and not to be ruined overnight. (Nietzsche, 1983: 73)

This privileged relationship between time and place brings history to the fore as a powerful instrument to understand urban phenomena, considering that the city is a "cultural and historic artifact instead of a natural object, as the former scientism more or less explicitly saw it" (de Terán, 1984: 67). Moreover, de Terán has insisted, paraphrasing the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, that the city has no nature but history. According to these issues, the centrality of history in the epistemology of planning and its participation in the generation of the theoretical nucleus of the discipline would be out of discussion. However, in practice this is not

so and, on the contrary, those who support the preeminence of history have surely experienced something like the situation that Bloch mentioned; the question of a child to his father historian about the usefulness of history.

In his essay, Bloch (1986) outlined the problem of history as a discipline under scrutiny as well as the way modernity underscored history by privileging other natural and social sciences. Accordingly, the query about the usefulness of history has not been as innocent as that of the kid. It often has supposed prejudices concerning its legitimacy. A case in point was the substantive reduction or even elimination of history from many programs of architecture and urbanism all over the world in the mid-twentieth century, following the lead of prestigious educators such as Walter Gropius, who upon becoming head of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University proposed to reduce the influence of history, better than completely eliminate it as he had done previously at the Bauhaus in Germany. At the same time, he wanted to develop closer ties between architecture and planning in courses other than those of history (Frampton and Latour, 1980: 11).

To support the displacement of history courses to the latest moments of the education process, Gropius (1955: 53) argued that "the studies of history are better offered to advanced student who have found their own forms of expression. When the innocent student is introduced to the great achievements of the past, he can be easily discouraged to create by himself." The conspicuous idea of the Noble Savage came into college education, now with history as a pollutant of the purity of the ideas at the studio, bringing the teaching of architecture and urbanism to the false dichotomy between inventive and history.

Once reduced many anti-history prejudices, the 1970s and 1980s supposed an increased participation of history in college education –at least in architecture– both in Europe and North America. Historical approaches became central issues in discussions about architecture and didactics, at least in the English speaking world. In a lesser fashion, it also occurred with history of and for planning, a field in continuous transformation (Almandoz and González 1996). Consequently, there has been an increased interest in the study of the city during the last decades, from social to art and architectural viewpoints, and between the urban as process and as place or artwork (Gillette, 1990), between urban and city history (Delgado, 1999: 33). This has had an impact on education. For instance, some bachelors in architecture have included urban history as complement to architectural history coursework. The most ambitious I have heard of, took place in the former URSS, with an entire year devoted to a "General History of Urban Planning" (Shvidkovsky, 2003). In addition, architectural programs with clear typological and morphological emphasis –such as those promoted by Marina Waisman in Argentina– conceptualized building history as part of city history (Torre, 2002).

In undergraduate programs specific of urban studies (professional degrees or bachelors in sciences or art,) there is also course work on urban history. However, to the best of my knowledge, urban history has in these programs neither the more structured pattern nor the importance given to the field of history in architecture. For instance, a 1999 seminar of planning schools which took place in Venezuela –with representation of seven undergraduate planning programs in the Americas– was useful to compare their academic approaches. Interestingly, only three of the schools considered urban theory and history among their basic components, concentration, or axes (Chacón and Rodríguez, 2002).

In North America, there are eleven universities offering bachelors accredited by the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB). In these programs, the presence of urban history is variable. However, it is common to find American or foreign cities history as introductory or general education courses. In addition, 79 universities in the United States and Canada have graduate programs in planning accredited by the PAB. This supposes an extensive academic milieu which is very difficult of homologate, except by an accreditation process. In the US, an

urban planner should get the certificate of the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) which requires demonstration of proficiency in six themes, being History, Theory and Law one of them.[3] To assess the interest of theory and history in North American planning programs, in addition to the presence of mandatory or elective courses, one can look to the specialization of the faculty. According to the directory of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP, 2003), there are about 1,600 planning professors who belong to one or more of 36 specialization areas. From them, 122 are in Planning History, 192 in Planning Theory, and 104 in Historic Preservation. The availability of human resources —with an average of more than one faculty member per program: 1.5 in Planning History, 2.4 in Planning Theory, and 1.3 in Historic Preservation — could easily stimulate concentrations in these areas.

In Latin America, there are similar schemes of undergraduate and graduate programs in planning. In most countries, graduate programs took place first, in the 1960s, even though there was earlier planning course work in architectural and engineering colleges. In Venezuela, the first and only undergraduate program in Planning ("Urbanismo") was created as a five-year professional program at Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB) in 1974, with most faculty holding master degrees in planning, mainly from the United States and Great Britain. The teaching of theory and history in urbanism at the USB, notwithstanding a noticeable research structure, has been a lesser developed field than the teaching of theory and history for architects at the same University, which always has been a key feature of that program.[4] As a matter of fact, from the beginning there has been only one course, "Introduction to Urbanism," which explicitly contemplates the review of the historical frame in which the city is produced. This means three units in a *pensum* of 225 units; barely a participation of 1.3% (compared to 8% in architecture).[5]

In Venezuelan graduate planning programs, the presence of history and theory is noticeably more relevant in Urban Design than in other masters or specializations such as transportation, city management, or environmental planning where it is, at best, part of the menu of elective courses.

An urban planning more conscious of precedents could mean an increased demand for historical knowledge and an improved role for it in academic programs. This will happen only when the question about the usefulness of history for planning finds satisfactory answers, stimulating the inventive as well as reinforcing epistemology.

4. Historic preservation and planning didactics

> En la ciudad el tiempo se hace visible: los edificios, los monumentos y las avenidas públicas caen en forma más directa bajo la mirada de muchos hombres que los artefactos desparramados por la campaña y dejan una huella más profunda aun en las mentes de los ignorantes o de los indiferentes. Mediante el hecho material de la conservación el tiempo desafía al tiempo, el tiempo choca contra el tiempo: las costumbres y los valores siguen más allá del grupo viviente, poniendo de relieve el carácter de las generaciones de acuerdo con los diferentes estratos del tiempo.
> (Mumford, 1945: 12-13)

Historic preservation adds new options to planning practice and teaching. It becomes an additional vertex or pinnacle to the imaginary triangle of planning pedagogy, history, and creation. From the new network of relationships, that of preservation and the teaching of planning will be examined next.

Historic preservation has been considered "the central operation of the future tasks in architecture" (Martín Hernández, 1997: 61), and I might add, of the future tasks of town

planning, particularly in cities which do are not growing anymore or are growing at a slow pace. However, the re-valorization of historic preservation in academics is of new vintage; even during the post-war it was considered as a sum of somehow irrelevant, even ridiculous operations as well as another threat (along with the study of history) to modern creativity (Bluestone, 1999, 303). It was frequently considered that those in the field were the less fit for design and creation.

Today, things seem to have changed. College education has included more special courses and entire programs devoted to preserving and re-qualifying the existing built environment. There is also an evolution trend from classical restoration to integrated conservation programs. As palpable evidence, in the United States there has been a noticeable growth in the number of historic preservation programs: from three in the 1960s and 1970s (Tomlan, 1994) to 36 in the 1990s (Bevitt, 1992: 10-11). Nowadays, there are 29 programs accredited by the Nacional Council for Preservation Education (NCPE) in North America; ten undergraduate programs, with about 600 students and nineteen graduate, with about 650 students (NCPE, 2003).

Links among preservation, planning and history are reinforced with the presence of architectural and planning historians in preservation debates, as well as in the documentation of building and spaces and in the formulation of conservation plans. In addition, there are shared academic resources and common courses for each of the fields. As a case in point, the first year of the master of Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and that of History of Architecture and Urbanism of UCV were recently integrated, considering the need for rationalization of resources and the participants similar set of academic interests. This can help training preservationists with more historical background and architectural and urban historians with improved awareness of conservation issues.

The way in which preservation interests have engaged with those of college education and planning practice, proves that the need to choose between complete remembrance or oblivion, total conservation or demolition, is a false dilemma (González Casas, 2002). The most creative act –and we are not talking only about design—accepts and surely harbors resemanticizations, palimpsests, deconstructions, additions, and remodels; all illuminations of present-day and past artifacts through new and, always precarious, equilibriums.

5. Finale

History has taken different roles in the education of planners, assuming didactic schemes and narratives according to time and place. The approaches of history and their role for non-history students, such as architects and urban planners, are always polemical, as it is the teaching of history in general education (Gagnon, 1991). Positions have oscillated and continue to do so between those advocating the elimination of history from curriculum and those supposing historical knowledge as central for professional training, through those conceiving history at the service of architectural and urban design. This constellation of positions helps make clear that the relationships among history, urbanism, and creation continue to be problematic.

In spite of this, we must remember that for a better flying, a kite should be connected to earth and balanced with a weight restoring the vertical. Mnemosyne, with Clio´s support, is helpful not only to make existence less light but also to learn, understand, appreciate, and protect the built environment, the eternal, the city, the remaining there when everything is gone.

Bibliography

ALMANDOZ, A. (1993). "Consideraciones conceptuales sobre el urbanismo" *Estudios Territoriales*, vol. 1, no. 98, 1993, pp. 625-636.

ALMANDOZ A. and GONZÁLEZ L. (1996). "Notas sobre historiografía urbana: La visión de la Universidad Simón Bolívar" *Urbana* 19, 1996, pp. 122-126.

ACSP (2003), Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, http://www.acsp.org.

BEVITT, E., et. al. (1992). "Directory of College, University, Craft and Trade Programs & Cultural Resource Management (Long Term)" *CRM*.

BLOCH, M. (1986). *Apología de la Historia o el Oficio de Historiador*, Barquisimeto, Venezuela: Fondo Editorial Lola de Fuenmayor y Fondo Editorial Buría.

BLUESTONE, D. (1999). "Academics in Tennis Shoes: Historic Preservation and the Academy" *JSAH*, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 300-307.

BOYER, M. (1988). "The Return of Aesthetics to City Planning" *Society*, vol. 25, no, 4, pp. 49-56.

CALVINO, I. (1995). *Las ciudades invisibles*, Barcelona: Ediciones Minotauro.

CHACÓN R. and RODRÍGUEZ, R. (2002). *II Encuentro Latinoamericano de Instituciones de Enseñanza del Urbanismo*, Caracas: Equinoccio.

DE LAS RIVAS, J. and MURZIO, G. (1995). "El Urbanismo en las Escuelas de Arquitectura, Tensiones en una Disciplina Crítica" *Ciudades* 2, pp. 9-15.

DE TERÁN, F. (1984), "Teoría e Intervención en la Ciudad, Balance de un Periodo" Ciudad y Territorio, enero-junio, pp. 61-67.

DELGADO, M. (1999). *El animal público. Hacia una antropología de los espacios urbano*s, Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama.

FRAMPTON, K. Frampton and LATOUR, A. (1980). "Notes on American architectural education. From the end of the nineteenth century until the 1970s" *Lotus International* 27, pp. 5-39.

GAGNON, P. (1991). *Historical literacy: the case for history in American education*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

GILLETTE H. (1990). "Rethinking American Urban History: New Directions for the Posturban Era" *Social Science History*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 203-228.

GONZÁLEZ, L. (2002). *Urbanismo y Patrimonio: La Conservación de los Centros Históricos*, Caracas: Consejo Nacional de la Vivienda, Colección Premio Nacional de Investigación en Vivienda.

GONZÁLEZ, L. (2001). "Nihilismos y precedentes: la enseñanza de la historia y de la arquitectura" *Medio Informativo* 8, pp. 12-13.

GROPIUS, W. (1955). *Scope of Total Architecture*, New York: Harper & Brothers.

HOLMES, L. (2002). "Inspiring Consensus: A Talk with Edmund Bacon" *Newsletter, College of Architecture, Art, and Planning, Cornell University*, vol. 5: 2, pp. 8-11

KOOLHAAS, R. (1996) "¿Qué fue del urbanismo?" *Revista de Occidente* 185.

KOSTOF, S. (1985). *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

KUNDERA, M. (1991) *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York: Harper.

LASH, S. (1999). *Another Modernity: A Different Rationality*, Oxford: Blackwell.

LYNCH, K. (1974). *La imagen de la ciudad*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Infinito.

MARTÍN HERNÁNDEZ, M. (1997), *La Invención de la Arquitectura*, Madrid: Celeste.

NCPE (2003). National Council for Preservation Education, http://www.uvm.edu.

NIETZSCHE, F. (1983). *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

PAPAIOANNOU, K. (1989). *The art of Greece*, New York: Harry N. Abrams.

SCHUBERT, D. (1995). "The Education, Occupation and Employment Opportunities of Town Planners in Germany" *Ciudades* 2, pp. 73-85.

SHVIDKOVSKY, D. (2003). "Russian Traditions in Teaching the History of Architecture" *JSAH* vol. 62, no. 1, pp. 110-120.
TOMLAN, M. (1994). "Historic Preservation Education: Alongside Architecture in Academia" *JAE*, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 187-196.
TORRE, S. (2002). "Teaching Architectural History in Latin America: The Elusive Unifying Discourse" *JSAH* vol. 61, no. 4, pp. 549-558.
VALÉRY, P. (2000). *Eupalinos o el arquitecto*

1 This essay presents aspects of an ongoing research project on the teaching of history and historic preservation in architecture and urbanism. A first paper, with emphasis on the teaching of theory and history in architecture (González, 2001) has evolved into an article titled "Mnemosina y la Creación," soon to be published. This paper looks for gaining insight into the teaching of history and preservation for planners.

2 For Nietzsche (1983), there are three forms of history which correspond to existential or philosophical problems affecting the present time. Antiquarian history looks for preserving and revering the past. Monumental history is inspired by the greatness of the past and attempts to imitate or improve it by invoking national heroes. Critical history, liked better by Nietzsche, focuses on the needs of the present.

3 The remaining themes are Emerging Issues and Trends; Plan Making (methods, strategies, and techniques); Functional Topics; Plan Implementation; y Code of Ethics, Public Interest, and Social Justice.

4 Two features have characterized the study of urban history at the USB: the exploration of the city and its architecture from different discourses and the understanding of history as a co-essential to theory (Almandoz y González, 1996).

5 The Urban and Planning Theory and History section at the USB contributes with several graduate programs: Transportation, Literature, Political Sciences, and Development and Environment. In the last one, a core course on Historic Preservation has been included in the option of Urban Environment Management.