



FROM BENEFICIATION HACIENDAS TO HERITAGE PUBLIC SPACES IN THE CITY OF GUANAJUATO: THE CASE OF PLAZA DE LOS ÁNGELES

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ABSTRACT: Several centuries ago, the city of Guanajuato was divided into neighborhoods in which a beneficiation hacienda would be typically located. Various activities related to mining and metallurgy were characteristic for the region known for quicksilver and the casting of metals. With the passage of time, these beneficiation haciendas were subdivided, the families of the workers remained on farms adjacent to the big house (where the owner or head smelter would live), opening these spaces to the public to be visited and admired by tourists. In some cases, the land use changed, while in others it continued the predominant tradition. Another, no less important factor is the observable state of conservation. Although there are some buildings whose infrastructure does not receive proper attention, this has not affected the popularity enjoyed by the spaces in question.

KEYWORDS: nabeneficiation haciendas; public space; land use; state of conservation

Introduction

This article aims to show the progress of research on the evolution of a particular place – Plaza de los Ángeles – from an anthropological perspective. Beneficiation haciendas are settlements that provided economic and housing sustenance to various families, and during the mining boom saw arduous work since the majority of the population in the city of Guanajuato was employed in this sector.

Although the initial impulse was to explain how the constantly changing society has influenced the transformation of public space, research later focused on obtaining slightly more precise knowledge about the transition from the housing function of buildings, where work activities would also be carried out, to public space, considered as “the product of a two-pronged process, on the one hand social and on the other, historical; in it, citizenship and social encounters are built. The analysis of public space is a question that involves discursive and philosophical aspects” (Borja & Muxi, 2003). It is the place for public expression and discussion of topics of common interest. Arendt (1958) states that the only determining factor for the formation of public space is freedom since that is what configures the world as diverse. Thus, public space is a common area where inhabitants of a certain place can express their culture and customs in daily life, negotiating what is correct and agreed upon by a community as well as its perspective on values, as long as the plurality that defines the space remains unthreatened.

Public space can be approached from various disciplinary fields: sociology, urban design, architecture and anthropology, among others. However, according to the approach mentioned above, our reference is the anthropologist Gérard Althabe (1984), who mentions urban ethnology as a subdiscipline articulated around the concept of social identity and its historical dimension, with three currents: ethnology in the city (tension between the professional and residential spheres, work and family relationships); ethnology of the city (focused on urban sociability in contrast to rural or traditional societies); and finally, imagery in the city (relationship between public space and the practices of its inhabitants in terms of agents in the production of the city as well as its appropriation and use). The last current is the focus of research presented in this article.

Beneficiation haciendas

Beneficiation haciendas, or mill farms, are rooted in practices existing since the sixteenth century, and developed by Bartolomé de Medina, which consisted of grinding, smelting, refining and beneficiating silver – work directly related to the capital of the person who owned it. It created a system of mills for working with minerals and raw materials such as silver (Puy Alquiza, Ordaz, Castro, 2013).

In the fifteenth and seventeenth century, Guanajuato was structured through beneficiation haciendas. In this period, there were eight beneficiation haciendas in what is now the historic center, and sixteen haciendas in total. These were: Hacienda de San Javier, San Matías, Escalera, San Luisito, Rocha, Pardo, Salgado, Durán, Cervera, Alonso Rodríguez Correas, Duarte, Sebastián Rodríguez, Jasso, San Jerónimo, Pastita, and finally, the Hacienda de Sirena (Barajas, 1981).

Of those haciendas, the main house would today be the colonial estate. There were also “cuadrillas” or houses for mine operators: a large working-class group of indigenous people.

They later gave rise to current neighborhoods, especially the oldest and most popular ones (Lara, 1999).

The roads between mines and haciendas, and even between the latter and buildings with fiscal and clerical functions, are in fact today's roads, streets and alleys. Likewise, the wide spaces for depositing minerals, first milling and ore washing, as well as patios with sheds and galleries are now the squares, gardens and small squares of the city, including the chapel. Crucially, it was in the year 1745 that old properties were purchased, and new plots developed (Lara, 1999). The mineral beneficiation haciendas were created due to industrial needs. It was by the end of the 1760s that the extractive industry was at its peak, especially with regard to silver. For this reason, in Guanajuato, the eighteenth century would become known as the "golden century". Since metal beneficiation can be done by smelting or quicksilver, this factor was decisive in the choice of the location for the settlement. Speaking specifically of quicksilver beneficiation of mined minerals, it was necessary to ensure considerable extensions to locate the patio and the relevant offices, and closeness to a water source. The river was a physiographic element that catered for vital needs in the metallurgical processes, also offering a communication route between the building and the squares, as well as connecting with different royal mines. The city had a vast hydraulic system that was eighteen kilometers long, extending from the Olla Dam to Jardín del Cantador. There was also a secondary hydraulic system of thirty more kilometers. Foundry haciendas did not require large spaces and were located on smaller plots of land, inside the city or on its borders. These constructions were not meant to boost the growth of population, but to support inhabitants by linking properties and ensuring territorial distribution. They were necessary to maintain balance when it came to the mining industry. The owners (*hacenderos*) had to be registered as miners, since quicksilver was only delivered to such individuals (Lara, 2001).

Plaza de los Ángeles

Plaza de los Ángeles is currently located in the Benito Juárez avenue, by a tunnel that leads to the underground street, in front of corner houses located between the two flights leading to the San Fernando square. The name of this square refers to the fact that in the eighteenth century there was a chapel near Cerro del Gallo, which had quarry angels in its front part and would be the obligatory place for prayer during burial processions passing on their way to the pantheon of San Cayetano (Prado, 1990).

The location of this square corresponds to the Beneficiation Hacienda called "El Patrocinio", which was situated very close to the river (currently the underground street). It was a farm of considerable size, and given its access to water, it would work with quicksilver to isolate impurities from minerals in order to process them.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, beneficiation haciendas located in the historic center were relocated to the outskirts of the city (current the area of Marfil). Since this area is large, it was subdivided and bought by families of laborers who worked there. Gradually, private homes were built in the square.



Fig. 1. Plaza de los Ángeles and underground street. After: Facebook, Guanajuato en el Tiempo

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a clothing store called “La Aurora,” located in what is now a building owned by the Banco Nacional de México. This establishment suffered a fire, and in an attempt to try to put it out the neighbors used figures of angels. However, there was no way to stop the fire and all the merchandise was burned. Still, the celestial figures did not suffer any damage and were since regarded as protective of what is now known as the Los Angeles neighborhood (Prado, 1990).

Another story suggests that the chapel was consecrated precisely to Archangels Miguel, Uriel, Rafael and Gabriel (Andrade, 2023).



Fig. 2. View from Plaza de los Ángeles. After: Facebook, Guanajuato en el Tiempo

Land Use

Over the years, as the space of the hacienda was fragmented into individual lots, some of the buildings that were located there continued to hold the function they were given when first established. However, there were several that changed the way they used space to something different but nevertheless related. Based on the Zoning, Use and Destiny of Land Regulations (2006), it is possible to argue that “use” may refer to the particular purposes to which certain areas or properties in the municipality are dedicated. Some of the most important uses are:

- predominant use: the one that characterizes the area;
- compatible use: use or uses related to functions that are fully consistent or complementary with regard to the predominant uses of the area;
- conditioned uses: use or uses that develop complementary functions within the area, but which require detailed study to be submitted for approval so that they will not negatively impact the area;
- special uses: this category includes service and industry facilities which, given the activities they carry out, require a special location.

The Regulation also lists categories of uses according to intended purpose:

- I. Housing
- II. Zonal or Basic Urban Equipment
- III. Microregional Urban Equipment
- IV. Specialized Urban Equipment
- V. Low Intensity Trade
- VI. Medium Intensity Trade
- VII. High Intensity Trade
- VIII. Low Intensity Services
- IX. Medium Intensity Services
- X. High Intensity Services
- XI. Special Services
- XII. Light Industry
- XIII. Medium Industry
- XIV. Heavy Industry
- XV. Risk Industry
- XVI. Ecological Preservation
- XVII. Agricultural Preservation
- XVIII. Ecological Promotion

- XIX. Agricultural Promotion
- XX. Tourist Promotion
- XXI. Water bodies
- XXII. Special Uses

According to the aforementioned Regulation, after applying this framework to Plaza de los Ángeles, it can be argued that it has one predominant use: residential. Most of the properties that offer commercial services are situated on the ground floor, while upper floors are used as homes. Thus, existing categories of uses in this area are: Housing, Low Intensity Commerce (shops) and Medium Intensity Services (bank and pharmacy). A tentative sketch was made using AutoCAD (fig. 3).

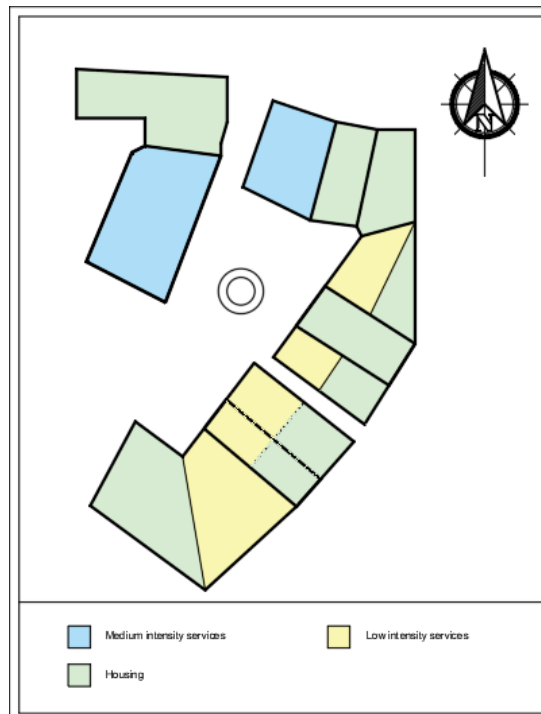


Fig. 3. Land use in Plaza de los Ángeles. Elaboration by the authors

It is observable that the initial use of this space, which was residential, remains such within the area. There are few buildings whose function changed; however, these settlements attempt to facilitate, through the services offered, the comfort and security for the predominant group (housing), providing these users with required supplies. In addition to being a public transit space, the area also offers services to occasional passers-by.

State of conservation

Importantly, this analysis of the state of conservation was carried out in order to show that the buildings have a lot to tell, since they have been silent witnesses to incalculable events on a day-to-day basis. One clear example of their permanence is the state they are in. Although it is

impossible to guess with the naked eye how old each building is, it is possible to assert that it has witnessed numerous stories as a silent and permanent spectator within the environment.

Conservation is understood as the preservation of material objects in order to preserve them for the future. A society is identified by its culture, and the objective proof of its individuality is precisely its cultural heritage. Protecting it means taking care of the testimonies of its identity. In a contemporary society, it is not possible to separate the problem of cultural identity from the process of protecting its traces of the past (Varela, 2001).

Cultural identity is closely linked to the relationships between individuals and the natural and built environment, since they carry out their daily activities within it, leaving their own imprint, which characterizes and distinguishes them (Varela, 2001).

In this sense, the built environment, the urban fabric, the settlements, and the site itself constitute the basis of cultural identity as projected onto the environment. Real estate constitutes units that are defined as container objects of identity traits, both collective and individual. The loss, destruction or alteration, voluntary or not, of these units causes moral damage to the principles of the social unit (Varela, 2001).

This study identified three parameters in analysis of facades of buildings that surround the square. It is considered to be in good condition when a property does not present any type of loss of material in its structure, such as paint or mortar; regular condition when it presents slight, inconspicuous loss of material; and finally, the state of conservation when there is visible loss and deterioration of the structure. A sketch of the state of infrastructure in the Plaza de los Ángeles was elaborated using AutoCAD (fig. 4).

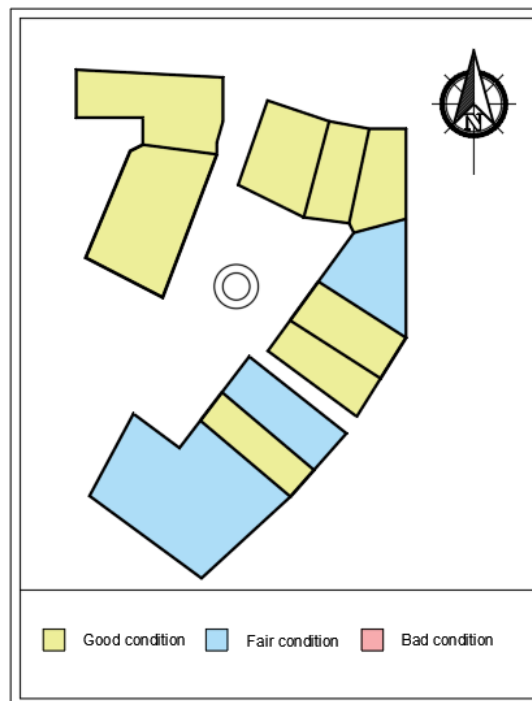


Fig. 4. State of conservation at Plaza de los Ángeles. Elaboration by the authors

As analysis shows, there is no property in poor state of conservation. In general, the infrastructure is in good condition, and objects in regular state have only minor flaws such as a few cracks in the paint. This is perhaps rooted in the fact that this is a very crowded space with huge tourist potential and it is important for it to project a good image.

Conclusions

With the passage of time, the sites where beneficiation haciendas were built changed. Following the transformation of the buildings and their functions, only the homes of those who operated the farms remained. It is important to highlight that the mining activities and metallurgical processes carried out on this site corresponded to those of a quicksilver farm, since one important characteristic of this type of work was the need to access a water source. However, the possibility that it was also a mixed-activity hacienda is not ruled out, and it could also have been dedicated to metal smelting.

It can be seen in the area that although centuries have passed, the basic conditions of land use have been preserved. In the particular case examined here, that of Plaza de los Ángeles, residential use has prevailed, even with the appearance of businesses that usually occupy the ground floor of the houses, and other services such as bank or pharmacies. Due to its location, it is a busy and crowded square, in addition to the fact that it is a meeting point for citizens. Given the above, it can be argued that space evolves along with society; although the square is still predominantly residential, it is currently equipped with services to meet the basic needs of locals who consequently do not have to travel long distances.

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