HERITAGE AT RISK:
Local development, a strategy for its control: historic quarter of the City of Colonia del Sacramento

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In 1995 the “Historic Quarter of the City of Colonia del Sacramento” was declared World Heritage Site, was the culmination of a process of valuation and protection of the site that went consolidating from the first decades of century XX.

The interest by the site, its natural attractive, historical one and by its quality of life due to its modest scale already had generated the interest of a certain type of Buenos Aires people eager to escape of the anxious life of the metropolis in its time of rest. In the last decades of XX century, the progressive displacement of the resident population takes place that is replaced by weekend inhabitants of much greater and being able economic, was the beginning of a current that would be like a avalanche for the site. The Census of 1975 indicated that 1289 people lived in the Historic Quarter. In a inquiry on 2009 235 were entered.

The great real estate pressure, with the consequent increase of the value of the land, was exerting a value of investment and interchange with the objective of increasing its yield.

Simultaneously, the tourist interest was in increase until, now, the tourist pressure on the site is enormous. In the five years between 2006 and 2010, the entrance of tourists was increased in a 137per cent, happened from 99,358 to 235,789 visitors. , The preliminary data of year 2011 indicate an increase with respect to the previous year, reason why the tendency stays.

Its location in the Río de la Plata, in front of the very next city of Buenos Aires (50 km), was and is, an inexorable data from its foundation to the present time. In its origins, the military siege that exerted the Kingdom of Spain as opposed to the audacious occupation that had made the Kingdom of Portugal of the “Banda Oriental” when founding Colonia del Sacramento on 1680, turned it frequent scene of the confrontation armed between the two colonial powers in the present Uruguayan territory.

Now, the affluence of the Argentine tourism as international is the generator of the great impact that Buenos Aires exerts on Colony. Notice that the passage to Colonia is offered to the visitors of Buenos Aires, like excursion by the day.

One of the most serious problems for the conservation of the site is its scale, extremely modest, that makes it highly vulnerable. The Historical Quarter occupies a surface of 16 hectares, with 282 parcels which gives account of its size. In this frame, it was tried to construct a pair of projects of great scale that had hit very seriously in the quality of the site. First a hotel - casino located in de Historical Quarter, and a second one consisting in a complex of departments, shopping and port of yachts denominated "Marinas del Sacramento", that had filled up and occupied part of the bay, forced the authority of the site, the “Consejo Ejecutivo Honorario” to ask for the intervention of the World Heritage Center. WHC sent a mission in 2008 to evaluate the impact in addition to the conservation state of the good. Luckily, they were managed to stop those projects.

But not only these extreme interventions affect the value of Colonia, also the multiplication of stores and tourist services, still small, have seriously altered to their authenticity and the spirit of the place, when moving the population and substitution of the residential use of the ancient houses.

The weakness or lack of conviction of the local government in the control of the interventions, added to difficulties to coordinate between local and national government, where the competitions and responsibilities are in prevention, causes that the management of the site is very difficult. Not yet it has been managed to make a management plan although it has been protested by the World Heritage Center in multiple occasions. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the material conservation of the constructions is satisfactory.

In the presence of these difficulties, with the objective to diminish the pressure over the heritage, and to deal with to revert or to diminish the factors
that put it in risk, generated mainly by the massive
tourism, the instrumentation becomes necessary of
alternative measures.
The idea after this strategic plan, is to harness the
heritage and tourist interests outside area “WHS”, but
in its proximities. In a radius of few kilometers a plot
of localities and sites of interest cultural, historical,
landscaping and environmental exists that give
options to the visitors, who coordinated by the local
and national Authorities allow to possibly control and
to diminish, the pressure on the WHS. As this strategy
already has been evaluated positively, it stands out
that recently the Ministry of Tourism of Uruguay
has inaugurated the “Center of Interpretation” in
Colonia where it offers to information of the tourist
alternatives of the zone and rest of the country.
Without a doubt that is not the only measurement
that would have to be taken.

The complementary supply very is varied. Options
of cultural and historical tourism are “Calera de las
Huérfanas”, Conchillas, the city of Carmelo, Real de
San Carlos, Anchorena Park, Estancia and chapel of
Narbona, in the department of Colonia. Villa Soriano
and other sites located in the near department of
Soriano. Rural tourism in several “Estancias” of
the zone, where a direct bonding with the agrarian
production in contact with the nature can be had.
Several vineyards and wine cellars are also a very
attractive alternative. Tourism of nature observation
is other value, since Uruguay has a rich fauna, specially
birds, and own flora of the region. Tourism nautical
in several sport ports: Nueva Palmira, Carmelo and
Riachuelo. In addition to the most traditional beach
tourism, since they are many those that lay out the
coast of the department on the Río de la Plata.

The next local communities can and must play a
fundamental roll of promotion, management and
control of these initiatives of micro local development.
The local government would have to be transformed
into this sense, to be an important promoter of a
participation policy and decentralization.

Moreover, a case exists that demonstrates that this is
possible, is the one of “Calera de las Hérfanas”, where
the community has taken the reins from the recovery
and putting in value of a Jesuitical site of century XVIII.

The Calera, denominated originally “Estancia de
Belén”, constructed in the middle of century XVIII,
was integrated to the system of protection and
evangelization that the Jesuits orchestrated in the
colonies, was not a Jesuit town, like the Missions
of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, but a productive
unit, that supplied to the congregation settled down
in Buenos Aires. The build set included a chapel,
residence for the priests, the slaves and some natives,
factories and furnaces of lime who supplied to Buenos
Aires. At the beginning of century XIX, the vault of
the chapel collapsed. The constructions went away
deteriorating and in addition they served like quarry
of materials for the construction of the neighboring
city of Carmelo.

At the beginning of 20th century, almost everything
was in ruins, but also the first attempts arose to
protect the rest of the chapel to impulses of ladies
of Carmelo, in 1938 obtains their declaration like
Historical Monument. After several interventions
of consolidation, in 2000 a work of historical and
archeological investigation begins, but is suspended
shortly after, nevertheless much material in the
excavations is collected.

The Calera continues in the memory of the inhabitants
of the place, who recognize it as she leaves from his
past and they value it as a historically and religious
symbol. In the presence of the impulse of the
community a ONG forms “Movimiento pro Calera de
las Huérfanas” that will manage to involve to diverse
actors: Consejo Ejecutivo Honorario de Colonia,
Intendencia de Colonia, Ministry of Tourism and the
civil society, with diverse experiences and capacities,
that generate one significant synergy.

The support of United Nations Development
Program and the City council of Vitoria-Gasteiz
(Basque Country) is obtained to finance educative
and investigation activities with center in Calera
but with greater implications. Courses of formation
of tour guides are distributed. In addition, experts
are working in the “Plan Director de Calera de las
Huérfanas”, destined to his restoration, protection
and management.

The high school students in Carmelo also participate,
acquiring training in tasks of processing of the
collected archaeological material in 2000.

The success of this “experiment” of management
and shared protection depends largely on which the
impulse of the community is continuous, since the
official supports are little. But it is obtained, will be
important by the effect multiplied that it could have.