

## Old Town and Dock Area: Structural Changes in Ciudad Vieja of Montevideo

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Ciudad Vieja is the oldest part of Montevideo, a small district close to the centre and solitary at the same time. Situated on a peninsula, it is almost surrounded by water. A low ridge stretches across the terrain offering views of the sea and the port. Protected and restored historic buildings stand next to derelict houses. Narrow streets and dense buildings shape the urban landscape. The prevailing colour is grey, but from any street corner the view to the water reveals brightness, vividness and vastness.

The intention of this paper is to give an insight into characteristic features of structural change in Ciudad Vieja of Montevideo, the historical centre and port-related district of the city. An ethnographic view of local transformation aims at focusing on the diversity of urban life and on concurrent processes of change which do not correspond to only *one* logic of transition. Although structural alterations can be related to global aspects of transformation of port cities, transition in Ciudad Vieja of Montevideo has to be considered as an open process. Current urban developments are not submitted to a general revitalisation plan for the dockland area as in Dublin or Hamburg, but as part of the master plan for Montevideo, they are linked to projects of different social and cultural actors and their urban practices.

This paper presents results from my recent research in Montevideo on consequences of global transformations on the local level of a dock-related quarter (Trier 2005), emphasising the specific context of this particular city. My approach takes into account the social practice of actors, their strategies of action, ways of perception and appropriation of

space and place, discourses, identities and representations within the scope of a changing local setting.<sup>1</sup>

Following the model of Hoyle (1988), city ports are submitted to vehement processes of transition.<sup>2</sup> Technological changes, in particular containerisation and computerisation, are to be seen as starting points for a new era in maritime development. The waterfront, as interface between port and city, is changing, too, leading to a revitalisation of port-related areas. As a consequence of these processes docklands are losing their “traditional” cultural role. Urban planning projects are usually dedicated to multiple uses such as offices, services, housing, cultural activities, tourism, etc. attracting new middle classes and in many cases initiating displacement or exclusion of old neighbourhoods. In other words, revitalisation processes are often accompanied by the effects of gentrification.

Montevideo seems to be on the edge of these processes. Ciudad Vieja eludes any explicit categorisation. It is both, old town and dockland area. Ciudad Vieja does not represent a “typical” dock area, although it is the major national port location. A large number of banks, trade companies, business and public authorities are situated in Ciudad Vieja, at the same time it is home to predominantly poor inhabitants. Deterioration and decay gave rise to images of danger provoking avoidance of the area. However, inhabitants of Montevideo recently rediscovered Ciudad Vieja as an urban space and as a place for leisure and entertainment. Nevertheless Ciudad Vieja remains a neighbourhood with a close social structure as well. Transition seems to occur as a contradictory process, various trends and developments are happening simultaneously pointing to different directions. But undoubtedly, in Ciudad Vieja things are changing.

In the following article, I shall describe these inconsistencies and interconnections on the local level, and relate them to processes of transformation on the global level. The article explores current processes of change, identifies groups of actors, their practice within the setting, the implication of the port-city interface and the consequences of transformation.

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- 1 The research project is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Montevideo between 2003 and 2005. In order to ensure the anonymity of the local actors and interviewees all names referred to in this paper are changed.
  - 2 See Schubert in this volume.

## Ciudad Vieja: Evolution and features

As the historical centre of Montevideo, Ciudad Vieja is the point of departure for the history and urban development of Montevideo. Particularly relevant in this context are transformations during the second half of the 20th century, which led to a dramatic decay of the district. Today Ciudad Vieja seems to be at a turning point, again.

Montevideo was founded 1724 as a fortress to defend Spanish colonial interests against those of the Portuguese empire. Located on the estuary of the Río de la Plata and situated on the shore of a protected bay, Montevideo evolved as a port. Nevertheless, the city and port of Montevideo remained small and provincial until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until then, Ciudad Vieja represented the political, economic and social centre of the town, all relevant and representative institutions, organisations and enterprises being located there including the residence of middle classes and national and local governments.<sup>3</sup>

The country's history, since the 1830s, has been greatly affected by mass immigration. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Uruguayan government established new political guidelines related to industrialisation, urbanisation and constitutional reforms, a modernisation of the nation-state which aimed at attracting European migrants who became the main protagonists of this evolution.<sup>4</sup>

Montevideo prospered both as a port of exit for raw materials, and as a port of entry for European migrants. The population increased enormously within a few decades.<sup>5</sup> Montevideo rapidly expanded beyond the boundaries of the old town. In Ciudad Vieja, port and port-related trade and industry became the driving force of economic growth. At the same time the resident population began to decrease, especially middle and upper classes abandoned the district gradually transforming Ciudad Vieja into a poor part of the city. This process led to deteriorated housing conditions as one relevant feature. Many people felt constrained to live in so-called *conventillos* and *casas de inquilinato*, both kinds of room by room tenancy in former residential colonial style buildings.<sup>6</sup> In

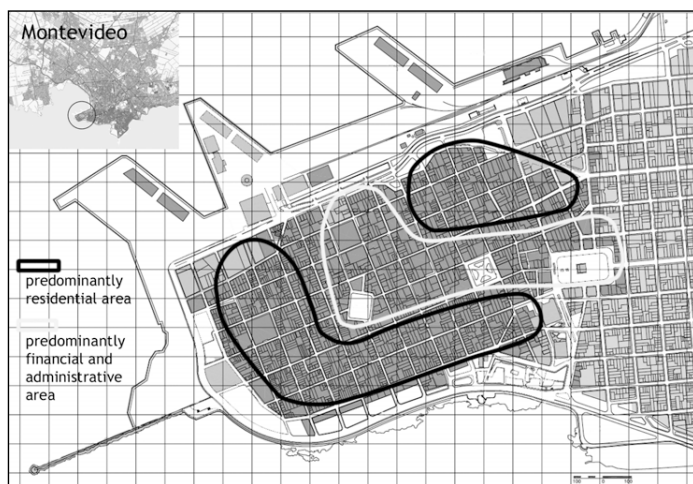
3 For further details see for instance Barrios Pinto/Reyes Abadie (1997), Barrios Pintos (1998), Gans (1987), Grupo de Estudios Urbanos (1987).

4 For further details see Caetano/Rilla (1997).

5 Growth in population concerning Montevideo: 1830: 14,000 inhabitants; 1905: 250,000; 1914: 380,000; 1935: 655,000. Today the number of inhabitants of Montevideo amounts to 1,32 millions approximately, considering the metropolitan area to 1,66 millions. In Ciudad Vieja reside about 12,000 to 15,000 inhabitants. Recent statistical data refer to another unit than the regarding district.

6 For further details see for instance Di Paula (1996).

the 1950s, a severe economic crisis caused, among other things, progressive degradation and decline of Ciudad Vieja. Deprivation and deterioration increased under the rule of the military regime (1973-1984). Due to guiding principles of economic liberalisation, more and more old houses were demolished while new office buildings were built. As a result of the continuing crisis those sites increasingly remained empty. Derelict houses were occupied by families affected by extreme poverty.



*Fig. 1: Ciudad Vieja: Areas with different uses and functions (Reproduced by kind permission of IMM; adapted by Mijal Gandelsman-Trier)*

Since the beginning of the 1990s the situation gradually changed. Today, Ciudad Vieja can be described as a heterogeneous district. It is a historic city centre and residential area; it is a representative location for public and private institutions and a place where poor segments of the population live; it is a tourist attraction and a dockland area. Many historic buildings are under preservation orders, while at the same time others are collapsing. As an inhabitant pointed out, “there is not only one Ciudad Vieja, there are many” (field note, 11/10/2005).<sup>7</sup> Different uses can be assigned to different spaces. Functions can be approximately localised in specific zones. To mention the most relevant distinction, edifices related to administration and finances are predominantly located in the centre of the district, residential buildings are mostly situated close to the waterfront. But perception of different spheres within Ciudad Vieja

<sup>7</sup> Translation of quotations from interviews from Spanish (original) into English by myself (M. G.-T.).

is not organised in a dichotomised manner. There are no definite demarcations separating one area from another, transition prevails against boundaries. Emphasising discrepancies: There is a significant difference in the numbers of people staying in Ciudad Vieja during the day, and during the night or at weekends.<sup>8</sup> After work hours, most areas of the district seem to be deserted and public life is restricted to few places.

Meanwhile, the docks still occupy the same territory in which they were constructed historically. In Ciudad Vieja the port did not retire from the city. Therefore, relevant revitalisation projects concerning the port-city interface do not exist.<sup>9</sup> However, the area remains a relevant location for port-related firms, such as import and export companies, insurances, etc. In the 1990s, structural adjustments to global conditions in seaport systems led to an enormous reduction in workplaces within the port of Montevideo. A large number of stevedores and dock workers lost their jobs. Subsequently most cultural sites related to the docklands such as pubs, bars, brothels, etc. disappeared.

Presently, different plans to redevelop the area exist, including private, public, and social projects.

## Current processes of change

In Montevideo processes of change are embedded in a consistent concept of urban planning, the “Plan Montevideo”, a master plan for the whole city, and the “Plan Especial Ciudad Vieja”, a subsequent executing plan dedicated to the district of the old town. Within this master plan, urban development is conceptualised as a momentum of social and cultural integration. Concepts and measures are considered as instruments to improve urban setting through guiding principles. Relevant objectives stated in the documents include the preservation of the historical architectural fabric, the struggle against the decline of population in the city centre by promoting projects to resettle inhabitants, counteracting urban segregation, opening more urban space to the public, and consolidating the image of the district in order to strengthen the process

8 According to a personal information from “Centro Comunal Zonal No. 1” during office hours about ten times more persons stay in Ciudad Vieja than after business hours. (14/01/2004)

9 One project to revitalise former port areas exists in the adjacent district La Aguada. The so-called “Plan Fénix”, however, had to be stopped due to the economic crisis between 2002-2003. For further details see for instance: Zillmann 2001.

of cultural, social and economic revaluation (IMM 1998; IMM 2004).<sup>10</sup> “Plan Montevideo” and “Plan Especial Ciudad Vieja” have been elaborated by the municipal department of urban planning on behalf of the government of Montevideo.<sup>11</sup>

Current changes are related to the physical environment as well as to the social structure of the area. Particularly within the last decade several architecturally relevant buildings have been restored. Due to a project focused on vocational training of disadvantaged persons, a number of house fronts have been painted.<sup>12</sup> A larger intervention into urban space is connected with the project of a pedestrian precinct on Sarandí Street, the east-west-axis along the peninsula emphasising Ciudad Vieja’s characteristic shape. This axis opens the view of the waterfront: the sea respectively Río de la Plata on the one side, the harbour bay on the other. Besides its geographical significance, Sarandí Street represents a relevant reference for all kinds of economic and cultural activities.

In recent years Ciudad Vieja has regained an attractiveness as a significant place of cultural<sup>13</sup> interest. A number of renovated buildings are now used as museums or cultural centres. Particularly artists, craftsmen and other cultural actors have discovered the area as a place to settle. Studios, small art galleries, arts and crafts stores and jumble shops have been opened, but this new cultural scene is competing with an older one, which is directed towards a more affluent clientele, offering antiques, jewellery and art. In between, there are street vendors selling arts-and-crafts objects, and flea markets around the main square. In addition, mostly young people from all over Montevideo have discovered restaurants in Ciudad Vieja as fashionable places, and new cafés, pubs and bars were set up. The quarter is one of the prominent locations for cultural events. Due to historical places of interest and colonial style build-

10 Relevant guiding principles of planning policies are for instance: To preserve the urban texture, to improve urban space, to recover the communal patrimony, to ensure circulation of public transport, reduction of number of vehicles and improvement of situation of pedestrians, to improve the quality of life of inhabitants and users of Ciudad Vieja, to define and consolidate the image of the district. (IMM 2004: 34f)

11 Mariano Arana, a professor of architecture who, at the time of the military regime, founded the “Grupo de Estudios Urbanos”, an oppositional urban planning group, was mayor of Montevideo from 1995 to 2005. His ideas on urbanity influenced the master plan.

12 The project is called “Ciudad Vieja Renueva”. During 2004-2005 many activities were developed supported by funds from the EU. For further information see: <http://www.montevideo.gub.uy/ciudadvieja/>.

13 At this point and particularly in the following section “Emerging cultural scenes” I emphasise a meaning of “culture” as practice related to art institutions and to the art scene.

ings Ciudad Vieja is among the most relevant tourist attractions of the city and is incorporated into regular sightseeing tours. In order to further enhance the area's attractiveness, the tourist authority, as well as local actors, promote its closeness to the port, hoping to attract more visitors from the cruise ships.

House building cooperatives are an important feature in the transformation processes of the old town. The cooperatives are part of a social political movement, representing an important tradition of protest and civic action groups within the national context.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Ciudad Vieja the purpose is to combine the objective of obtaining living space at a reasonable price for families with low income, and the idea of renewal of old buildings. The contribution of members mainly consists of volunteering their manpower. Since the 1990s several pilot projects started. Meanwhile a few projects have been completed and members of the cooperative projects have moved in with their families. A lot of further buildings are under construction. The municipal authorities of Montevideo encourage the settlement of cooperatives in Ciudad Vieja. Members of the cooperatives are supposed to be socially committed people, willing to get involved in public issues affecting the neighbourhood.

Present activities and developments within the district of Ciudad Vieja have effects on the residential composition of the area. After the number of middle-class residents had declined for decades, there is now a return movement of the middle-class to the quarter. At the same time features of decay persist: deteriorated buildings, houses in danger of collapsing, historical edifices not being restored. There are streets with dilapidated houses mostly inhabited by squatters, poor families with little or no income, and children living in the streets. These different processes coexist simultaneously. There is an unequal development within the small area of Ciudad Vieja. Changes take place at different sites of the district, they are not restricted to certain locations, but transformations do not occur all over the area. In short, changes are selective but related to the quarter as a whole.

Most of the inhabitants living in Ciudad Vieja settle on the edge of the peninsula. Their daily life in the district is restricted to a small area close to their houses, to neighbours, and to shops. Within the scope of Ciudad Vieja they identify themselves as belonging to the *barrio*.<sup>15</sup>

14 For further details see Nahoum 1999.

15 District or area of the city (translation from Spanish). The concept of *barrio* plays an important role for the construction of distinct urban identities within the city of Montevideo and refers to social as well as to spatial references.

Relevant and emblematic markers to describe the *barrio* include sports grounds of local clubs, the *escollera*<sup>16</sup>, a small beach, a square, etc. These places are situated in different areas of Ciudad Vieja, but common to all is that they are located outside of the centre of the district. Actors do usually not consider this part of the peninsula as part of their *barrio*, in some cases people refer to it as *la city*.<sup>17</sup> In this way they create a boundary between themselves and those related to the administrative and financial sector, a boundary that to a small degree can be denominated as physical but to a larger degree as symbolic. Residents distinguish the *barrio* from *la city* by identifying streets and other landmarks, this way constructing physical boundaries between both areas. By using terms like *la city*, they symbolically emphasise a distance towards administrative and financial concerns.



Fig. 2: Pérez Castellano Street  
(photo: Mijal Gandelsman-Trier)



Fig. 3: Setting within the barrio  
(photo: Mijal Gandelsman-Trier)

Other markers for a local identity refer to memories of the past. Many residents tell stories about a “better past” which is predominantly situated in one’s own childhood.<sup>18</sup>

16 Embankment to protect the port. The dam lengthens the line of the Sarandí Street extending the east-west-axis.

17 For instance: Ricardo 12/01/2004; Marcela 28/10/2005; Nuria 11/11/2005; Francisco L. 28/11/2005; Fernando D. 01/12/2005; Hugo T. 01/12/2005.

18 See the following example. Similar statements: José 21/10/2005 and 26/10/2005; Carlos F. 04/11/2005; Alfredo 08/11/2005; Silvia 23/11/2005; Hugo T. 01/12/2005.



“Ciudad Vieja was a good thing for me. We had a good time here. We were poor, of course, almost the whole vicinity was poor, but we had a way of subsistence, there was always work, that is, there was no problem. And among the neighbours there was a lot of help, that is, whenever someone fell ill, they came running to look what happened or they went to the hospital and so on. And, of course, it was a very nice time of my life, of most of the people who lived here [...] and some of us who stayed in Ciudad Vieja remember it when we meet.” (Pepe, 10/01/2004)

Life in those times is considered as more familiar, by emphasising the importance of neighbourhood and solidarity. The evocation of a united everyday practice in the neighbourhood is partly owing to former housing in *conventillos* and *casas de inquilinato*. Apart from hard living conditions, the *conventillos* in particular represent an important point of reference in the collective memory of Montevideo.<sup>19</sup> Neighbourhood and solidarity between the poor seem to be a relevant category for the image of a *barrio*.

Residents also attach importance to the protection and maintenance of colonial style houses. Looking at the past as a marker for identity seems to be related to an idealised image of patrimonial edifices.<sup>20</sup> Local actors expect historical buildings to be preserved without any changes. In this case they refer to the district as a whole and not only to the *barrio*. Changes occurring in Ciudad Vieja are noticed and commented on by the residents, but most of them do not intervene in processes of transformation.

Different types of actors live in the context of Ciudad Vieja. Their diverse local practices do coexist most of the time, but occasionally they clash, showing distinct effects on utilisation, appropriation and representation of public space, and influencing the processes of change. In the following sections, I shall present three examples of contested space, contested images and representations, illustrating the ambiguities of transformation in Ciudad Vieja.

19 *Conventillos* are associated with the former way of life of afro-Uruguayan in Barrio Sur, a central quarter of Montevideo with one very famous *conventillo*, the so-called “Medio Mundo”.

20 For example: Pepe 06/10/2005; Alfredo 13/10/2005; Norma 02/11/2005 and 02/12/2005.

## Emerging cultural scenes

Going for a walk through Ciudad Vieja on a late Saturday morning in summer: Starting from Plaza Independencia, a large and representative square – the place of transition between the centre of the city and the old town – and crossing Puerta de la Ciudadela. This ancient entry to a former citadel today is the most representative access to Ciudad Vieja. Sarandí Street, the pedestrian precinct of the old town, commences here. Most of the time it is extremely windy at this point. A little further, people sit in cafés in the open. Close by, small but expensive shops offer products like leather goods, jewels, antique books, and art. Small wooden stalls are set up on Saturdays along the wall of a historical building. They all look the same, since they belong to a corporation that gives licences to artist-craftsmen. Craftsmen sell their goods: self-made jewellery, decoration, souvenirs, craft commodities. In the middle of the street, young people put up their products for sale on a piece of cloth on the ground. They are informal street vendors.

Approaching Plaza Matriz, the central square, the scene becomes crowded with people. Acrobats and mimes show their skills. In front of the Cabildo, the seat of government in colonial times and nowadays a museum, is a small stage, where music and dance groups, among them many children, perform regularly. The presentations are organised by the same corporation that manages the street vending of arts and crafts. Plaza Matriz is bathed in light. Old plane trees offer plenty of shade creating a vivid play of light and shadow. On the paths intersecting the square many stands are put up which belong to an autonomous organisation with specific rights linked to the square. They sell small antiques like silverware, porcelain, and jewellery, coins, books, jumble and arts and crafts. The right to hold a market at this privileged place on Saturdays implies the duty to be present on certain other days<sup>21</sup>, a problem for traders and craftsmen who work full-time in one or two other jobs. Many visitors and strollers walk around, look at the presented goods and have a chat with a trader on the history of a product, maybe about a glass milk bottle from the 1960s. But only few people buy something: To go to the market of Plaza Matriz means a nice family trip looking at interesting and curious old objects, explaining to one's own children how things worked in the past. Most of the visitors are Montevidean, some are tourists from Argentina or Brazil and occasionally there are travelers from afar. On the other side of the square, next to the cathedral, a

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21 Market regulations based on an agreement between trader organisation and the municipality of Montevideo.

young man with a megaphone announces a bus tour through Ciudad Vieja and the port. He belongs to a small association<sup>22</sup> that buys and repairs old busses and presents them to the public on simple sightseeing tours. Leaving Plaza Matriz and following the east-west-axis toward the point of the peninsula the street is growing emptier. On both sides houses are currently being renovated, due to the transformation of this section of Sarandí Street to a pedestrian mall. The end of the street offers a panoramic view towards the dam and the sea.



*Fig. 4: Craftmen offering their goods (photo: Mijal Gandelsman-Trier)*



*Fig. 5: Sarandí Street (photo: Mijal Gandelsman-Trier)*

Turning north, the view alters, overlooking the port with few cargo ships, a modern container terminal, cranes, perhaps a cruise ship, the bay in the background and the Cerro, Montevideo's emblematic hill, on the opposite shore.<sup>23</sup> Following Pérez Castellano Street small shops and galleries offer paintings and objects of arts and crafts. However, here is only little business on Saturday morning. Sometimes a few passengers from a cruise ship pass but most of them are taken by tour operators to conventional tourist attractions. There is more activity near the supermarkets, the fruit seller and greengrocer, the bakery, the butcher's shop

22 The name of the association is "Equipo Recopilador Histórico de Tránsito – ERHITRAN", in translation: Team Historical Collection of Transport.

23 The hill is a relevant symbol of national identity represented on the coat of arms. According to a legend the Cerro was the reference for the name of the city of Montevideo.

and the pharmacy. Residents use this part of the street to buy everyday essentials and for informal meetings. At the end of the road there is a little square, an open space in front of the former port market, today a well-known location for restaurants. This square is used by street vendors and craftsmen. In the course of the day, at lunchtime, the area will be crowded with people, Montevideo residents and visitors who eat out on Saturday. The place is situated near the waterfront but cut off from the bay by a busy road and by the port, nowadays closed to the public. At this point, the walk comes to its end.

Most of the craftsmen and artists as well as other shop owners are organised in “Portal Pérez Castellano”, an association founded in 2004 consisting of residents, actors of the cultural scene and businesspeople in the immediate vicinity of Pérez Castellano Street. The objectives of “Portal Pérez Castellano” are to improve the local standard of living, and to embellish the environment. They aim at a more attractive milieu for commerce, tourism as well as for the residents. The idea is to create a “cultural district” and to decrease petty crime, counteracting the persisting image of a “danger zone”. In order to reach these goals, the managing committee of the association is involved in local politics and urban planning, e.g. in transforming part of Pérez Castellano Street into a semi-pedestrian street in order to invite more visitors arriving at the port to walk through. Nevertheless, there have been disputes between members of the association, since several shop owners fear disadvantages in business, whereas the cultural scene as well as resident members expect improvement. Other types of activity are cultural events which take place particularly in the summer, such as mural painting, performances or exhibitions. Many academics, artists and other residents involved in the cultural sector join the ideas and objectives of “Portal Pérez Castellano”, while most other residents more or less ignore this association. Not all members of the association are residents of the district, since many artists do not live there, however they spend most of their time in their studios or galleries in Ciudad Vieja. Thus, “Portal Pérez Castellano” represents special interests within a limited area of Ciudad Vieja and not the (imagined) entirety of the local residents.

On the opposite side of the district, another organisation deals with cultural activities as well. Founded in 1999 by businesspeople and companies, the corporation “Paseo Cultural de Ciudad Vieja” aims at revitalising the old town by promoting culture, tourism and commerce. “Paseo Cultural de Ciudad Vieja” organises the above-mentioned craftsmen on Sarandí Street and the performances in front of Plaza Matriz. While the “Paseo Cultural de Ciudad Vieja” publicly presents itself as a corporate actor, the firms and companies it represents do not appear

in public. In contrast to “Portal Pérez Castellano” it does not develop its pursuits collectively, but by means of a small office that manages and realises all projects. This practice of “Paseo Cultural de Ciudad Vieja” does not include residents and individual actors. Both organisations have similar purposes and deal with cultural events in order to change the image of Ciudad Vieja and to increase its attraction, but they work on different levels. While “Paseo Cultural de Ciudad Vieja” is better known, more influential and deals with more financial funds, “Portal Pérez Castellano” acts on a grassroots level. The association is related to an emerging cultural scene in the area.

Not all actors mentioned before agree with these two organisations or feel represented by them. Instead, there are a number of particular interests: The traders on the antiques market on Plaza Matriz do not want to be bothered by “Paseo Cultural de Ciudad Vieja”, they prefer to remain independent. The street vendors in front of the port market do not feel accepted by “Portal Pérez Castellano”, they suspect that they will be no longer wanted in case of a transformation of the zone into a semi-pedestrian street. The interests of the informal craftsmen on Sarandí Street run contrary to those of the businesspeople selling jewellery, arts, etc. Some shop owners have met to organise their protest against the street vendors and several additional issues by which they felt obstructed, whereas the craftsmen try to conquer an area of public space by establishing a common-law right to stay. In some ways Sarandí Street can be considered as a contested space.<sup>24</sup>

Cultural activities play an increasing role in the practice of actors within Ciudad Vieja as well as for the image of the quarter. Apart from local associations and the influx of artists, a lot of museums are located in the district and have recently been renovated, opened or re-opened. The prestigious theatre “Teatro Solís”, for example, is situated near Puerta de la Ciudadela, a place of transition to the adjacent centre of the city. Several cultural centres work within the area. One prominent example is the “Centro Cultural de España”, set up in a famous former ironware store with funds from the Spanish government. Besides, particularly young people from the middle classes go out in Ciudad Vieja, frequenting pubs and bars and transforming a few streets nearby the Puerta de la Ciudadela into an entertainment area over the weekend nights. Some of these institutions and activities have existed for decades, but the cultural potential of Ciudad Vieja has only been rediscovered in

24 The current municipality of Montevideo aims at solving such kind of problems on a political level open for talks, avoiding expulsion, looking for a compromise or offering alternatives.

the last decade. Nowadays, there is an incipient dynamic, a process which attracts actors involved in arts and culture from all over Montevideo to the old town.

## Politics on a local level

Since the beginning of the 1990s the government of Montevideo has introduced policies to encourage decentralisation and participation.<sup>25</sup> In order to achieve these goals, Montevideo has been divided into 18 zones, each of these endowed with a communal structure to enable the residents of each district to influence political decisions on a local level. Since then, civil involvement has been a strongly discussed issue. There is a continuous public discourse on what is going well and what does not work with participation, and on how it could be made more effective and how more people could be motivated to join in.<sup>26</sup> The district of Ciudad Vieja and adjacent quarters belong to “Centro Comunal Zonal No. 1”. On an organisational level, these communal centres combine employment on a full-time basis and volunteer work of local representatives. The office is represented by a teacher, a social worker, a technical engineer, administrative assistants, and the political chair person. They are well grounded in the matters and problems of the area. Representatives of the residents are organised in a local council, they are considered to be the advocates of local interests. In the course of time most of them have become experts for their district, too. Both levels are expected to offer contacts and agency for the residents. The communal centres are supposed to take up the causes of the citizens, suggestions as well as complaints and recommendations, to work on the issues, to pass them on or to put them into action.

Most relevant topics during the period of my fieldwork dealt with questions related to housing, employment and public safety. Regarding these points transformation of the area seems to be a merely implicit

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25 Decentralisation and participation are key concepts within policies of local development, urban social policies and local government. For further details see for instance Gallicchio (2004) referring to different concepts within the scope of Latin America, IMM (2001a) referring to a network of involved cities as well as IMM (2001b) and Reballato/Ubilla (1999) concerning the particular case of Montevideo.

26 During my fieldwork in Montevideo I had the opportunity to participate in a forum on the municipal level (“Foro Ciudadano Departamental”) and similar events on the local level where among others those kinds of questions were discussed. See as well: IMM (2001b). The volume comprises a mid-term review on the debate.

concern. But as a closer look at the questions shows, they are nevertheless linked to changes occurring in Ciudad Vieja. For several decades, housing shortage, respectively lack of affordable flats, has been an essential problem of people living in the area.<sup>27</sup> The issue can be traced back to the 1970s when the military regime took a new line in policy and pushed economic liberalisation. However, the deterioration of buildings had already started before due to lack of owners' investments as a consequence of an economic downswing and frozen rents. Living conditions of large parts of the urban poor in *conventillos* and *casas de inquilinato* were bad even then. Resulting from a cycle of increasing rents, empty structures, demolition of and construction of new buildings, mainly for the purpose of offices, housing conditions got even worse. At the same time, low income groups began to move from the outskirts to the city centre looking for jobs and trying to minimise transportation costs. Strategies to diminish rental fees consisted in sharing a flat, moving in *casas de inquilinato* or into so-called *pensiones*<sup>28</sup>. People without any income began to occupy abandoned houses. In the case of Ciudad Vieja they occupied former famous high-grade hotels.<sup>29</sup> When the period of the military regime came to an end, housing policy gradually altered but a lot of problems continued. Today, in Ciudad Vieja some families still live under miserable conditions in abandoned and dilapidated houses. Boarding houses are the only option for many poor families, although they are not at all cheap. However, for renting a flat, a deposit would be required in advance on top of the monthly rent, which those families could not afford because they have no permanent jobs. In the *pensiones*, they have to pay weekly or daily, which adds up to more than a regular monthly rent, and beyond that they have no rights or securities. But most of them either do not have or do not know any other options.

Within the "Centro Comunal No. 1" there is a housing commission which cooperates with local residents. The group consists of employees and volunteers of the centre, actors belonging to the housing cooperative movement as well as few inhabitants who live in *pensiones* themselves. The objective of the commission is to improve housing conditions within the zone. Parts of their activities include advocating the interests of residents and reporting about housing problems in the area. Most efforts however are directed towards the actual support of affected fami-

27 The problem exists although there is a persistent decline of population in the centre. For further details see Di Paula (1996).

28 *Pensiones* are boarding houses that rent low-grade single rooms per family with common bathroom and kitchen.

29 In the beginning of the 1990s most of these people were moved to quarters in the outskirts of Montevideo by the municipal authorities.

lies. During my fieldwork, the commission assisted the organisation of an emerging cooperative of people living in *pensiones* in order to initiate the necessary steps to apply for a building to be restored. At this point there is a close cooperation between local politics in the form of the housing commission, and members of the socio-political cooperative movement. Representatives of already renovated cooperative buildings help incipient cooperatives by instructing them in legal issues and self-organisation.<sup>30</sup> It is part of their social and political commitment to contribute to the improvement of their neighbourhood. Thus, cooperatives can be identified as another actor within the transformation process. On the political level, the housing commission is in contact with the municipal administration and negotiates issues related to urban development on a local level. Another aspect of the commission's practice is a close cooperation with a network of institutions and non-governmental groups of social work and welfare.<sup>31</sup> These groups also focus part of their activities on housing issues, particularly because many of them deal with children from disadvantaged families. In recent years the number of children living in the streets has been increasing. Most of these children are not street kids in the sense that they literally live in the street, but spend most of their time, day and night, in the streets although they have contact with their parents and a place to sleep.<sup>32</sup> Families residing in *pensiones* run a high risk, since it is forbidden for children to stay inside the building and play during the day. Therefore it is not surprising that they spend most of their time on the street. The network of social work aims at strengthening the needs and interests of poor residents in the area, thus emphasising the appropriation of local urban space by actors who are usually not visible in public. A counter-discourse is headed by a group of businesspeople who feel their interests threatened. They argue issues of general safety, begging, petty crime, dereliction and the control of informal street vending. Although they demand eviction of people living illegally in dilapidated houses, they do

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30 There is a national umbrella organisation that represents most of the housing cooperatives called FUCVAM ("Federación Uruguaya de Cooperativas de Vivienda por Ayuda Mutua", in translation: Uruguayan Federation of Housing Cooperatives for Mutual Help). FUCVAM gives as advisor administrative and legal support to all member cooperatives. The complicated procedures and manifold experiences in the process of setting up a building as cooperative cannot be treated within the scope of this article. See for instance Nahoum 1999.

31 The network is called "Red 'Acercándonos' de Ciudad Vieja".

32 They are called "*niños en situación de calle*", in translation "children in circumstances of street".



combine their claims with social demands invoking the danger of exploding social problems.<sup>33</sup>

Within the local setting of Ciudad Vieja, various groups and institutions are socially and politically involved with issues concerning social development. Currently they are opposed by businesspeople who advocate particular interests. But, despite contrary positions, both sides share some common values as well. This seems to correspond to the high value traditionally ascribed to the former “hyper integrated society”<sup>34</sup> in Uruguay. Nowadays, the attribution is usually applied to the past, thus contrasting social disintegration of the society today.<sup>35</sup> With regard to Ciudad Vieja, divergence and fragmentation characterise the current situation as well. The interests of businesspeople, entrepreneurs and other representatives from the middle classes differ to a high degree from the hopes of low-income groups. Whereas the former strive for a district rid of petty crime, drugs, dereliction, etc., the latter want to conserve their *barrio* as it is and to improve living conditions. The expectations of the business people correspond to features of gentrification, while particularly poor residents oppose big changes. Images and ideas of the future of Ciudad Vieja seem to be contested. Nevertheless, these differences and contradictions have not led to open conflicts at this moment.

To sum up, transformation processes in Ciudad Vieja refer to developments not directly related to the port. Nevertheless, the harbour plays a relevant role in the image of the area. Structural changes in the port are reflected by the residents, alter their relation to the port and have an effect on their perception of the quarter. In this regard it is of particular importance that the imaginary of Montevideo is closely intertwined with pictures related to the waterfront.<sup>36</sup>

33 Data from participant observation at a meeting of the neighbourhood council, 17/10/2005, and subsequent interviews.

34 According to a concept of the Uruguayan Rama (1995: 40-43) the term “hyper integrated society” characterises the highly socially integrated structure of the Uruguayan society up to the 1960s. It is particularly evoked as reference to the period of the *batllismo* during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, relevant for the nation building process.

35 See for instance De Armas (2005) with the significant title “De la sociedad hiperintegrada al país fragmentado. Crónica del último tramo de un largo recorrido”.

36 Moreover, see the cases of Istanbul and Varna in this volume as other examples for the significance of the waterfront for the imaginary of a city.

## The port and the waterfront

In Ciudad Vieja, unlike many other port cities, there are no relevant planning projects concerning the waterfront with effects on the physical urban space.<sup>37</sup> Due to geographic conditions and economic circumstances, Ciudad Vieja has not been affected particularly by dereliction of waterfront areas during recent decades.<sup>38</sup> The physical narrowness of the peninsula and the specific historical quality being both dock area and residential district have impeded the extension of the port. Unfavourable economic conditions affect the current enlargement of the port, and the implementation of goals defined within the port authority's master plan by means of gaining new space from the bay (ANP 1999).

The port of Montevideo is losing its significance for Ciudad Vieja from the point of view of planning as well as with regard to the economy. Looking at the waterfront there is a sharp division between port and quarter marked by the access road to the port, which is busy and mostly used by heavy lorries and container trucks. Economically, the port has lost its position as predominant employer and as a driving force for the development of the area. In the beginning of the 1990s the port authorities started the privatisation of services and equipment. Due to this development, and to continuous automation of work processes, thousands of dock workers lost their employment. This in turn provoked the decline of other jobs within Ciudad Vieja linked to the port as well. As local actors describe the dynamic port quarter of the past in contrast to the present situation, "the port is turning its back to the *barrio*".<sup>39</sup>

Today the port area is not open to the public, and only a visual connection to the bay is still left. In the past, the residents of Ciudad Vieja had access to the shores. There was a small beach strip where people used to go for a swim and a sports club located close to the water. A barge anchored in the bay which encouraged people to swim out there and to do sports. Today, this place is occupied by a modern container terminal. Residents of the *barrio* feel strongly affected by the increasing distance between their quarter and the bay. Having lost direct access to the shore a few years ago, today they are concerned about losing the view of the bay. Containers piled up in lines have the effect of a wall that is getting higher and closer. The view of port and bay nevertheless

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37 See for instance the case of Dublin within this volume.

38 However, in adjacent districts like La Aguada exist large areas with abandoned warehouses and depots, also shut down industrial plants around the bay.

39 For example: Pepe 10/01/2004; Raúl 17/01/2004; Teresa 19/01/2004; José 26/10/2005; Carlos F. 04/11/2005.

remains from elevated points in Ciudad Vieja. Roof terraces are very common in local colonial style buildings and frequently offer a free view of port, bay, and Cerro. The master plan for Ciudad Vieja considers the particular topographic conditions of the peninsula and lays down protected visual axes not to be obstructed (IMM 2003 and IMM 2004). A continuing latent conflict exists between urban planning and economic interests represented by the port authorities. Even if the port lost its prominent role for the residents' every day activities, it remains a strong point of reference for constructing images of the quarter and of the past. Numerous stories do subsist, relating to former jobs as dock workers, to smuggling, to earning money by selling snacks at the change of shifts, to bars and brothels existing in abundance near the harbour entrance. Besides, the port has always been a very popular place for a Sunday trip that many interviewees remember from their childhood. The attachment to the harbour is particularly visible at open days, when the docks are crowded with people from all over Montevideo.



*Fig. 6: View from a roof terrace (photo: Mijal Gandelsman-Trier)*

Beyond the port and bay there are other relevant points of reference related to the waterfront in Ciudad Vieja. On the one hand there is the *escollera*, a pier at the point of the peninsula, a breakwater to protect the port marking the boundary between bay and sea. The *escollera* is an emblematic place, as significant for the past as for the present. Residents remember going fishing with their fathers as little boys at the weekend.

Today, the *escollera* still remains a popular fishing ground, and a place to go for a walk and to look at the sea and the sunset. In contrast to other districts of Montevideo, Ciudad Vieja nowadays has no beach apart from a small and dirty strip not even authorised, but nevertheless used by residents.

The *rambla*, the coastal road of Montevideo, stretches more than 20 kilometres along the shore, at the same time transit road and site for leisure time activities. The *rambla* is a popular meeting place, a place to fish, to sit down and drink a *mate*<sup>40</sup>, to do sports, etc. The *rambla* has no specific significance for Ciudad Vieja but for the whole city. The *rambla* can be considered as one of the most emblematic places of Montevideo. Many people refer to it describing relevant and popular places in Montevideo and constructing this way the imaginary of the city (Silva 2003).<sup>41</sup>

The waterfront plays an important role in the imaginary of Ciudad Vieja. Various references and connections are related to memories, as well as to activities and practices of today. Only few of these references are concerned with the port. Nevertheless, the port remains present in the mind of the residents although there is an increasing distance between port activities, and the daily life of the inhabitants.

## Conclusion

Ciudad Vieja experiences a process of change that does not take one singular course. Transformation is characterised by disparities and contradictory movements. Differing practices make use of the setting, for instance street vending of crafts, right next to the sale of expensive jewellery, or big business transactions and financial institutions next to robbery, begging, drug-taking, etc. Living within the *barrio*, incorporated into the networks of the neighbourhood, differs very much from the lifestyle of people working within the administrative and business zone dealing on national and international levels. Newly renovated buildings stand next to derelict or demolished houses, splendid sections turn into decayed areas. However, there is no fixed boundary between all these different spheres and spaces.

Montevideo's port and the district of Ciudad Vieja are undergoing a process of separation according to the global development of city ports

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40 Herbal infusion, very popular in the south of Latin America.

41 For further details see: Aguerre (2003); Álvarez/Huber (2004); Silva (2003).

(Hoyle 1988; Schubert 2001). The docks decreasingly need the vicinity of the city, and as a result the port has lost its importance for the everyday practice of local residents. Although many port-related institutions remain in the area, this spatial proximity no longer has much effect on the economic and cultural life of the district. This trend is illustrated by a great physical and architectural division between the harbour and the city. In contrast to other cities, port authorities in Montevideo do not influence urban development by proposals on waterfront revitalisation. Transformation processes in Ciudad Vieja largely happen beyond port development.

As demonstrated in various examples, transformation in Ciudad Vieja cannot solely be described in terms of waterfront renewal. Instead, it seems to be an inconsistent movement with an open outcome. Some features look like an incipient process of gentrification, such as the emerging cultural scene that has recently begun to settle down in the quarter or those pubs and bars that came into fashion among middle class youth. Current studies of gentrification have emphasised segregation as a relevant feature of such structural urban change.<sup>42</sup> But in the case of Montevideo, segregation is not characteristic of the ongoing development. Almost all groups acting in the local political milieu stress the aspect of integration, concerning measures against social exclusion. Even the group of businesspeople link their demands against marginalised people with suggestions for social assistance. Segregation is not a dominant discourse within the current socio-political context of Montevideo.<sup>43</sup> For instance, the master plan for Ciudad Vieja explicitly refers to the problem of gentrification (IMM 2003: 33) and recommends several measures to prevent such developments. Support of housing cooperatives is stated as one relevant measure to combat exclusion and to promote integration within Ciudad Vieja (IMM 2003: 39).

Differing social practices of local actors, as well as inconsistent developments within the architectural environment, point to ambiguous qualities of transition in Ciudad Vieja with an uncertain outcome. Ethnographic research focuses on transformation of this particular quarter and emphasises the diversity of urbanity and local practices.

42 See for instance Lees (2000); Slater (2004); Smith (1979).

43 Since 1990 the city of Montevideo is governed by the leftist "Frente Amplio" coalition.

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