PUNTA ARENAS: Identity of a City at the End of the World

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The Beginnings of Its History

Punta Arenas is the southernmost city of the American continent. There are more cities further south, but they are located in the islands of the great archipelago of Tierra del Fuego. Punta Arenas sits by the Straights of Magellan. Because of its location, the city’s importance and prosperity has risen and fallen together with the trade in the world’s historic trade route. From the days of exploration, to the running of pirates, to a first great boom during the Patagonia gold rush and later the California gold rush, as a haven for great clipper ships, to a downfall after the Panama Canal opened, to a new prosperity as the center for Chile’s international wool trade, to the production of oil, to a current development of international tourism. Punta Arenas has adapted to these and other minor changes and rapidly evolved from a small settlement and penal colony to a city in the full sense of the word.

The city is located on the eastern shore of the Brunswick Peninsula, the last peninsula of the American continent, facing the Straights of Magellan at almost equal distance from the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, romancing this both of them. Its latitude is approximately 54 degrees south, about 2,200 kilometers south of Santiago. Originally it was called Punta Arenosa, a literary translation of “Sandy Point”, the name given to this site by John Byron in the 17th century. But it was Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa in the 16th century who gave this site its first name. He named it Cabo San Antonio de Padua.¹ The actual foundation of the city by the Chilean government dates to 1948. Today it is the capital of the XII Region of Magallanes y Antartica Chilena. The city has approximately 120,000 inhabitants.

In order to better understand the city one has to know that the city’s history, the forces that made and shaped her. This started much earlier.

The Spaniards

After the discovery of America, the Spaniards started the enormous task of exploring, discovering, conquering and colonizing the New World. We can assume that the occupation of a territory so vast and seemingly endless, so varied, as it was the New World, was for the Spaniard one of the most creative and notable adventures of Western Culture.² This vast, seemingly endless new territory, expanded in all directions beyond the imagination of the tired sailors. To the south, beyond Brazil, beyond the Rio de la Plata, beyond the vast pampas south of Buenos Aires, the explorers discovered Patagonia. Bruce Chatwin said that since its discovery by Magellan, Patagonia was known “…as a country of black fogs and whirlwinds at the end of the habited world… the point beyond which one could not go”.³ Patagonia became known as a land of giants, the Patagones; and the land of strange beasts, like the penguin. Some sailors believed that the penguins were the souls of drowned comrades.⁴ The whole region was shrouded in mystery and
many myths were born out of this distant and compelling place. Some myths were used to gain power in the courts of Europe, such as an alliance with armies of giants: the Patagon Indians grew taller and stronger in the vivid imagination and far fetched tales of the explorers and their respective governments.

In order to understand the nature of the urban experience in the Americas, one must examine the urban experiences in the Iberian Peninsula. These experiences were homogeneous and contradictory: from planned Roman “castrum” to the organic medieval development, to the clear Moorish trace (grid) from the south of Andalucia. With this background, the Spaniard in America projects himself as a synthesis. Due to the enormous task, he generates a response that incorporates some variables and experiences, discards others, and creates an ordering model able to give formal and structural unity to the occupation of the land. This new politics of population feeds on the previous experience and knowledge of the Conquistador, but it is also informed by external sources. There are strong influences such as the theoretical models of the Renaissance, the publishing of Vitruvius’ The Ten Books on Architecture, the principles of the Christian Ideal City as expressed by Santo Tomas and Eximenic, and the new founding praxis in America. 

These influences contribute to the definition of the “new urban order” in the New World. This order produced thousands of cities, towns, and villages throughout the Spanish Empire. It became for the Spaniards “the way a town should be.” Punta Arenas, founded centuries after the beginnings of urbanism in the New World, responded to the same principles, the same philosophy. There are some slight differences that are worth noting that will be shown later.

The Roman notion of the municipality (civitas) was conceived and understood as an instrument for “civilizing” rural peoples. Within this idea, the city became an instrument for appropriating land and for “incorporating” and “civilizing” people, while being subordinated to the policies of a patrimonial center, first the Spanish Crown, then the newly formed government in Santiago de Chile. The European colonial city in Latin America was thought of not as a work of art, but as a center from which administrative, trading, and production functions spread out over the territory and where they connected with the European markets. We have noticed that there are two great forces that propel the conquest and colonization of the Americas in general: the exploitation of its riches and the messianic impulse for implanting and defending the faith. Like most Spanish colonies, the church had a strong presence in all activities of the crown. Since 1535, with Diego de Almagro, priests were assigned to the expeditions. We can also see very clearly the religious influence and its transformation throughout time in the placement of religious and secular buildings around the main plaza – the importance and position of the buildings tell the story of the political struggle between religious and secular interests.

The physical image of the city had to be of a didactic character, able to generate a system of comprehension. This applied to the colonized Indians as well as to the different European countries that were developing interests in the Americas. In both cases, the
city had to be read as a well defined, clear in its intentions, and with no doubts, as a powerful entity, representing a powerful government.

Chile was one of the territories in which colonization was carried out inland, chained to rural and urban developments based on agriculture, mining or the military. The major reasons for this were: the geography, the difficult navigation of the Pacific Ocean until late 18th century, and the protectionism exercised by the Viceroyalty of Peru. This left the Chilean coast uninhabited for most of the colonial times, with a few exceptions. The Spanish interests were mostly limited to the vast and fertile central valley and its agricultural and mineral riches.

The second half of the 18th century promoted significant changes in this philosophy. First, it reveals the English intentions that result in the eventual occupation of the Falkland Islands (The Malvinas). From there the English explored the coast of Patagonia, established relations with the natives, and helped English settlers move in. It was believed that from there they could stage a war against the southern possessions of Spain. At that time, from the Straights of Magellan to the island of Chiloé, very few Spaniards were in residence. North of Chiloé to Valdivia and even to Valparaiso, the Pacific coast was in general sparsely inhabited by Spaniards, and the native peoples were indomitable. Therefore the English had large stretches of land, free to roam. Here we find Captains like Francis Drake in 1578, for example. But the English were not the only ones. Many foreign ships crossed the Straights -- the French, the Dutch, even the Germans. First they were Corsairs, Pirates, and Buccaneers; then, organized armies with full backing from their governments. The local geography with thousands of islands, bays, and other natural amenities served as stopping or hiding points for the foreign ships. It is important to notice that at the beginning of the 19th century when most Spanish provinces were about to become independent, England escalated its incursions into South America. This includes for example, the English invasions of Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 19th century. These invasions were stopped by the locals and by reinforcements sent from Chile.

First Spain, then the new government of Chile, sent explorations to the southern part of their territory. Since Magellan, attempts have been made to settle the shores of the Straights. The far side of the Capitania General only saw a few eccentric mariners venture through the awesome landscape and fierce climate. Juan Ladrillero, in 1557-1559, once more took possession of the Straights of Magellan, all the lands and islands of the region. In 1580, following orders from the Viceroy Toledo from Peru and in search of Drake, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa crossed the Straights, commonly referred as of Magellan. He renamed the straights Madre de Dios. He navigated to Spain and returned with the unfortunate expedition of 1584 that founded settlements that ended with almost all inhabitants dying from starvation. These were the settlements of Nombre de Jesus first, on the desolated Atlantic side, and Rey Felipe, better known as Puerto de Hambre or Port Famine by the Punta Santa Ana, deep in the forest of the Brunswick peninsula. It was the English corsair Thomas Cavendish who gave it this name in honor to the pain suffered by the colony. The name stuck, and the settlement is now virtually only known by this name.
It was in Puerto de Hambre where the first fort was built. By 1590, the fort had a wooden wall, a bastion over the sea, and 6 pieces of artillery on a covered platform. Wood for construction was accessible and of good quality. From the other end, moving south from Santiago, it is not until April of 1770, that the Spanish fortifications reach the island of Chiloé, designed by the engineer Carlos de Beranguer. As a time reference, the first cities in Chiloé were Castro and Chacao dating from 1576, virtually two hundred years before the first fort was built.

The Independence

On September 18, 1810, a local government was formed in Chile with the intention of becoming independent from Spain. The new government generated the development of the first national defense plan for the province. Concern about the English and also about Napoleon Bonaparte who, by this time was very much interested in the Americas created a sense of urgency about this matter. The French saw the Straights as a stopping point towards their new possessions in Oceania. Great political and social changes in Europe directly affected the colonies: the French revolution of 1789, the break up of the Spanish Empire, and the corresponding struggle for independence of its colonies after 1800. Especially in Chile, this moment must have been of profound cultural and political disorientation. It must have been also a period of high vulnerability.

The national concern about the geo-political position, took the country to the next logical step: the real possession and the fortification of the Straights of Magellan. The Straights are the first opening or pass between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. At that time it was the only known way to go from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. As a response to foreign attacks, a defense plan emerged, and fortifications were planned and built as the final stage of this process. The first fortifications of the plan were built in key locations for Chile and also for the whole continent. Although built in the 19th century it was Hernando Colon who made the original recommendation to Carlos V in a document presumably dated 1536 to build fortifications on the Straights. Since 1581, concrete plans to build two forts on the Straights of Magellan ended when the pass through the Cabo de Hornos (Cape Horn, originally Cape Hoorn) was discovered and made an alternative route, despite its dangerous nature, that is too unpredictable, frightening and dangerous even today; when significant improvements were developed in ship-building; and when Sarmiento failed to establish a settlement at the entrance and exit of the Straights. It is worth noting that it was in the 17th century that the defense of the coast became a serious concern for the Spaniards. The Viceroy of Peru stated in a document that the occupation of a port near the Straights of Magellan by a foreign power would imply the fall of the port of Valdivia in Chile, and after it, the fall of the port of Callao in Peru.

After the independence of the country, Bernardo O’Higgins organized the Chilean Navy. He hired Lord Cochrane, created the Naval Academy, and died obsessed with the occupation of the Straights of Magellan. It is said that as O’Higgins was dying, his last word was “Magallanes”. The initiatives of possession and population embarked on by
the new Republic were closely associated to navigation and the edge of the sea. Still, the region had to wait for that to happen. The emerging country found itself with the urgent responsibility of founding a Nation. The war of Independence brought to the surface a common dilemma. The existing tradition was hated; it was found uncomfortable, backwards. This represented a crisis based on the duality of not being able to deny the historic essence and the search for a new personality far from being defined.\textsuperscript{24} One could argue that a crisis of identity based on this type of duality still exists in the country. It has only changed emphasis.

\textbf{The Port City in the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century}

The 19\textsuperscript{th} century is the founding period for most port cities in Chile. This period corresponds to the colonial times for the cities in the interior of the country. Most port cities were founded, grew and reached maturity as pre-industrial cities in only five decades, a relatively short period of time for the development of an urban center. We have to look at this from the perspective of urban developments in that time. It is not really until the 20\textsuperscript{th} century that the “instant city” becomes a reality. Within the port city development it is worth mentioning in Chile the examples of Iquique in the north and Punta Arenas in the south. Both cities implemented their grid design with services, infrastructure, and architecture of permanent structures. This allowed them to survive the adverse conditions of WWI (because of the markets of nitrates in the north and wool in the south), and the opening of the Panama Canal.\textsuperscript{25} But let’s go back a few years to better understand the process.

In 1843, the Chilean Government sent an expedition to the Straights under the command of Captain John Williams. John Williams was an experienced war mariner, English and at the service of Chile since the independence of the country. He changed his name to Juan Guillermos in order to fit and deal better with his sailors.\textsuperscript{26} They reached and established camp by founding Fuerte Bulnes in honor of the Chilean President Manuel Bulnes. The Chilean Government was aware of Argentinean and French interests in the Straights – the French war ship Phaeton arrived two days later on its way to the South Pacific, and due to a protocol misunderstanding, it created the first diplomatic incident between the two countries.\textsuperscript{27} This Fort was just a few yards away from the almost three centuries old Puerto de Hambre. This settlement was not a city. This settlement was not a city. This was just a military advanced post. Fuerte Bulnes, originally at the command of a lieutenant, was within two years expanded and under the command of a captain.

A true city development did not started happening until 1844 with the arrival of the first Governor, Don Pedro Silva.\textsuperscript{28} (According to Diaz, Contardi &C., the first Governor was Justo de la Rivera). The settlement grew with the arrival of settlers, a priest, a doctor, sixty soldiers from an artillery unit, and a translator. Immediately after that, a group of prisoners arrived to the fort. The prisoners were sent there by the National Government, and the process was modeled on the newly created penal colonies of Australia. Because of this population input, the official buildings were improved, a chapel and a jail were built, and by the sea, thirty houses constituted the bulk of the settlement. The settlers
suffered and survived the inclement weather, the lack of resources, food shortages, the 
lost sanity of the commander, and the chronic infestation of rats. The site was not living 
up to its expectations, and the authorities seemed to understand it. To convince further 
the current Governor of this fact, a great fire destroyed half the buildings in the colony. 
The new Governor, Jose de los Santos Mardones, arrived in 1847. He brought years of 
military experience, and it is interesting to notice that Mardones was 17 years old when 
he fought the English in Buenos Aires. By 1848, the population of the settlement 
doubled because of the arrival of more prisoners, some with their families. The 
population became too large for the original site. What worked fine as a defense out-
post, was not suitable for the true development of an urban center.

In 1848, Mardones moved the population just over 50 kilometers north to the present 
location of Punta Arenas. This is the place where Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa camped in 
and described almost three hundred years earlier, but did not stop there to found his 
second city. Mardones established a settlement between the Rio del Carbon (now Rio 
de las Minas) and the Sandy Point. This was a sheltered and inhabitable site, and it 
offered abundant wood, coal, and water. It also offered good fishing, better soils for 
cultivation, and a milder climate due to its transitional location, between Atlantic and 
Pacific weather influences. Actually, the beginning of the use of the site dates from 1847 
when first cattle, then vaqueros and soldiers arrived. The place was called Destacamento 
del Norte. A house was built and potatoes were planted, representing the first true 
symbolic act of possession of the land. When Mardones founded the city, he was 
acting on his own. There was no government decree, no founding ceremony, not even 
authorization from the Chilean Government. Even if Mardones requested authorization, 
the papers never made it back to the shores of the Straights. By this time the colony 
could count on one supply boat every six months.

In the new site, the land was cleared and a single street was traced: Maria Isabel, today 
known as Magallanes. The first street was traced next to the cliff, at the edge of the 
costal terrace. This rectangular patch of cleared land was the extent of the city for several 
years. The city then occupied an area of about two hectares. The Maria Isabel street had 
houses on both sides. The structures included a hospital (with its own room for women), 
the house of the priest, the cattle foreman, a small wood mill, and the headquarters of the military (called La Fija de Magallanes). Beyond that, one could find the Government 
building with its central patio. Most houses were small and primitive. Wood from the 
clearing of the site and from the dismantling of Fuerte Bulnes was used to build them. 
Further to the north (by Avenida Bulnes) a field called Pampa Chica was cleared for 
cattle grazing and horse racing. By this time Punta Arenas looked like a medieval town, 
surrounded by a wall of sharpened tree trunks and a gate. The colony was very 
concerned and afraid of an Indian attack, an attack that never happened.

Soon after, the National Government decided to send to Punta Arenas the worst 
criminals. The small settlement became a harsh penal colony. Life, despite the number 
of prisoners and the weather, was relatively calm. There was even a sense of confidence 
about life there. Houses were being built, drinking water was being piped into the city, 
and a pier was planned. By 1851, the prisoners accounted for 65% of the male
population and for 57% of the total population if we consider their relatives. The large percentage of prisoners of all types, and the harsh conditions of the colony resulted in two bloody events.

These big setbacks shook the stability of the new town. In 1851, a terrible mutiny called El Motín de Cambiaso destroyed the city and the city was abandoned for eight months. Under the command of Cambiaso, military prisoners rebel and took over the city. Then they ran away in hopes of escaping justice. After the capture of the rebels, the city was rebuilt and actually re-founded. The Chilean Government understood the strategic location of the city and its importance in defining the National Territory and it was committed to have a permanent settlement in the area. As a matter of fact, in 1853 Punta Arenas became the headquarters of the Territorio de Colonización de Magallanes. This was done precisely for the consolidation of the territorial possession and the defense of the nation. New immigrants were brought, amongst them 14 German craftsmen. By then, the foreign population represented one tenth of the total population. The city continued being a penal colony. In 1877 there was a second mutiny by military prisoners called El Motín de los Artilleros. Most important buildings were burnt to the ground in the colony. Again, order was restored and the city rebuilt. None of this seemed to end or discourage the existence or growth of the new city.

The Tracing and Retracing of the City

From an area defined by geological terraces, used as a pasture, and later defined by the tracing of a single street, the María Isabel, Punta Arenas began a series of what can be called urban transformations. The first retrace of the city happened in 1868, and it lasted really until 1920. But it is not until 1880 that the then Governor Oscar Viel Toro mandated a regular grid with the intention of transferring the group of existing houses and buildings into a regular city that would grow evenly in all directions. The proposal established a central plaza, Plaza Munoz Gamero, and 40 blocks (100 meters square divided into 10 lots each and separate by 20 meters wide streets). Three avenues (with planting medians) and the edge of the waters determined the original plat of the city. To the west the city was taken all the way to the Cerro de las Siembras, today Cerro de la Cruz. There a sixty-meter avenue was traced: Avenida de la Libertad, today Avenida Espana. To the South and at about 250 meters from the Rio de las Manos, Avenida de la Independencia was created. To the East, the original trace reached Calle O'Higgins, still a few blocks away from the shore. To the North, a third avenue called Avenida Cristobal Colon was established as the edge of the city, a few meters shy of the Rio del Carbon, a natural barrier. And further to the north, across the river, about 50 lots of one hectare each were established for agricultural purposes. This was defined as the “rural” area. (See figure on page 21)

As the city grew it also became cosmopolitan. To the national immigrants that arrived after 1866 we have to add the immigrants from Switzerland, France, England, Scotland, Spain and Germany that arrived between the years 1873 to 1877. Later we can add Portuguese, Italians, several Nordics, more English and more Spaniards. This
immigration was conceived and supported at the National Government level and dealing
directly with the Argentinean Government and the large numbers on European
immigrants arriving in Buenos Aires. The immigration to Punta Arenas, as well as the
administration of aspects of the colony, including basic supplies, and room and board for
eight days, was provided by the Central Government. This was not a private enterprise,
this was a conscious act of government in order to populate and control the straights. The
private sector had a different kind of influence in the character of the city. The relative
fast growth of the city with influence from different nationals and the tragic mutinies did
not alter its appearance. As a matter of fact, Punta Arenas is an interesting case of
survival of the Spanish system because its historic center has not experimented any major
changes since its conception.

From an urban design point of view, there are in Punta Arenas two types of growth:
concentric circles and cells. The concentric growth happened between 1869 and 1920.
After that the growth become cellular. The concentric circles growth is characteristic of a
city that is surrounded by the necessary space and the right conditions that allow for an
even spread of blocks. A logical development when the physical center is the economic,
social, religious, political center of the city. Residents would like to be as close as
possible to where things are happening. In Punta Arenas there are three basic concentric
circle periods, each due to its own set of reasons. The three periods were 1868-1885,
1885-1900, and 1900-1920. (See figure page 22)

The first expansion, 1868-1885, has its origins in the trace ordered and executed by the
Governor Oscar Viel Toro. The basic shape of the new city is based on an orthogonal
grid with its center on the main public space, the Plaza de Armas. This is the first urban
plan of importance for the colony. This is the first time when one area is designated
“urban” and a second area designated “rural”. For the first time on the shores of the
Straights of Magellan the concept of “urban” is applied to a settlement. The word urban
is used here only in concept. It is not until 1895 that Punta Arenas can really be
considered as urban.

There are important economic factors that contribute to the growth and permanence of
the city. Between the mutiny of 1877 and the turn of the century, the census reveals an
economy that one can classify as “an economy of the colonizing frontier”. To this one
has to add that the Straight was a constant source of income due to the shipping industry.
But there are two more very important factors to consider. First, at the end of 1878, gold
was found in Tierra del Fuego. This produced an international gold rush that lasted just a
few years. Gold was not the only mineral extracted in quantities. Coal was a much-
needed source of energy for the colony and for the new steamer boats crossing the
Straights.

The third factor was the introduction of sheep by the late 1870’s, and this action started
the real economic development of the region. From that time on we see a rapid
development of other economic areas such as commerce, mining, fur trade, etc. This is
what is called the colonizing period of the pioneers. With this development and the
stability that represented, the city grew in numbers and size. The trade became essential
to the survival and development of the new city. A new pier was built giving the city its first municipal dock in 1886, only three years after Valparaíso got its own municipal dock. Before 1886 boats used private and commercial docks.

Between 1885 and 1900, Punta Arenas experienced a second expansion. This expansion was of about 2.3 square kilometers. The second expansion is the most important period in the concentric circles type of growth, and it is known as the Golden Age of Punta Arenas. The expansion is due to immigration, and the corresponding concession of urban sites. A modest process at the beginning with foreign immigrants, growth increases with the later arrival of national immigrants, mainly from Chiloé. Because of need, people settled in what used to be considered “rural” areas. The city grew, services improved, better buildings replaced more primitive ones, etc. But the distribution of lots remained an exclusive act of the local Government. Very little private real estate enterprise existed at this time. This represents the strict control that the local authorities had over the size and shape of the city. The city diagram shows a very orthogonal expansion, with few deviations. It is also important to see here that the coastal terrace allowed for this growth to be somewhat uniform. There were no significant topographical obstacles. (See figure page 23)

From the turn of the century through 1920 constitutes the third concentric expansion of Punta Arenas. This period is mainly characterized by rapid growth. It is a consolidation of the previous Golden Age period. The Central Government of Chile did not stop the uncontrolled distribution of lots that started to occur, even when it legally attempted to do so in 1905. People took possession of lots designated reserved and rural lots next to the city and even took possession of empty urban lots. The original grid was oriented NS and EW. Because of the fast nature of the possession of the rural lots, these new expansions become askew from this original grid. Apparently no one took the time to retrace the city. This is clearly visible to the North and in a few spots to the West. The change of direction to the North is visible at the Avenida de la Pampa, today Avenida Bulnes. Most of the northern expansion took place in a rural lot of 24 hectares. The significant size of this lot determined the further direction of the growth around it. The original grid had become obsolete.

The expansion to the North significantly changed the direction of the grid. To the West, the expansion was more homogenous; the Cerro de la Cruz was completely divided in the manner of the original trace. To the Southwest a regular expansion was more difficult due to the geography of the area around the Rio de las Manos. This generated a series of lots taking advantage of the high ground creating an aspect of urban disorder.

This is a period of economic maturity for the city. The port itself, the most visible sign of this, grew enormously. By 1914 it reached its peak with 1,539 ships crossing the Straights of Magellan. By the end of this period, the city had 4 Banks, over two hundred hospitality businesses, and a large number of local companies of significant size, able to sustain the now established economy. The rapid economic development of the city allowed for it to expand and survive, despite its short existence. By the end of 1920 the
golden era of Punta Arenas had reach its peak with a thriving population of over 20,000 inhabitants.

The concentric expansions allow us to read the growth of the city. The Centro remains the heart of the city. From there the city radiates in all directions, growing as it can in a more or less equal way. The limitations of the land provide the speed on which this growth happens because the government intends balance, and in consequence it does not determine the direction or speed of the growth. This system works until 1920. There we can see significant changes in the pattern.

From 1920 until 1975, the city grew in what can be called “cellular” expansions. The first is between 1920 and 1955, the beginning of the new traces added to the city and responding to the original division of the land for small farms. The period is marked by a series of important events. The opening of the Panama Canal slowly produced a drain on the economy, loosing Punta Arenas its importance in world trade. In addition social unrest of the early 1920’s, the Depression and both World Wars contributed to this uncertain times. It is important to notice that it was the Municipality that attempted to reorganize the city in these times. One could say that the local government has always kept a certain control over the development of the city. While it was the citizens that brought new styles of architecture and new ways of building to Punta Arenas, it was the local government that kept control over the urban trace. This control was relative due to rapid expansions over rural traces and the advent of the poblaciones.

A second cellular expansion happened after 1955 and lasted until 1970. The importance of this expansion is that in only 15 years, the city virtually doubled its size. The incredibly fast growth generated a new type of development called Poblaciones. These poblaciones represent a different typology from that of existing neighborhoods. They are mostly medium-low and low-income areas, mostly residential, but with a strong commercial component. Some poblaciones were legitimately conceived; others were the result of “land invasions”. Because of this, some poblaciones are organized in a regular grid, but others are organized in several different ways, mostly still responding to some orthogonal nature. It is interesting to notice that the poblaciones are somewhat similar in construction style due to the socio-economic and cultural homogeneity of the residents. Most residents of these poblaciones are immigrants from Chiloé and Llanquihue.

Most poblaciones, even the most marginal ones, started a process of integration with the city during the 1960’s. This process was facilitated due to the gradual recovery of the economy due to the oil industry and the expansion of the Free Port status for the city. The Municipal Government coordinated different agencies and established an emergency plan to urbanize and solve the problems of all marginal developments. Here again we can see the urgent assumption of responsibility by the local government. Many actions of the municipal government can be discussed and criticized, but that is not the point here. There are many social, economic, and political factors that have and still influence the decisions that affect the urban environment. In all cases, the city saw itself as a city, and all urban and/or urbanized lots were part of the same city.
The third cellular expansion of the city happened between 1970 and 1975. After the large and unplanned cellular expansion of the previous period, the city organized itself and promoted smaller expansions in order to be able to keep up with the services. This is also a product of a new Regulating Plan established in 1971 and replacing the previous plan dating from 1948. New urban limits were drawn, plazas and green areas were design, and the expansion of streets and avenues was taken into account.

Since 1970, the city has continued with the policy of planned expansions, the development of more and better green areas, the expansion of streets and avenues, and the beautification of them. Even with its fast growth and large size, the city has been able to maintain the original character defined a hundred years ago. Today that character is mature and represents an asset for the city. This asset provides benefits to all. The urban improvements and the beautification of public spaces affect everyone. The exponential increase of international tourism has brought to Punta Arenas a new sense of prosperity. The tourism is mainly because of the natural attractions around the area of Magallanes, but it is also due to the history and the character of the city. (See figure page 24)

We now need to understand the nature of the urban environment, or the physical manifestation of this fast growing entity. For that, it is necessary to go back to the moment at which the city defined itself as a port city.

The Port and the Pier

The first municipal dock was built in 1886, signaling the beginning of the maturity of the city as a common urban entity. The existence of a pier instantly defined the port condition of a place. Around the pier, spaces were created into which the city grew, interweaving the interests of a society seriously attached to marine life. Major ports are entities able to meet the material, human and administrative demands of medium to long distance navigation. This requires all the support elements necessary for this enterprise (the port). By 1900, the total population of Chile was 3 million people with 10% living on the coast. While Valparaiso had over 120,000 people, Punta Arenas had only about 3,300. By 1920 the city has grown to 20,437 inhabitants. This rapid growth shows the success and development of the city from village to urban center. By the turn of the century, Punta Arenas was the only real city at the end of the world. Most of Southern Region was as wild as the time of its discovery. This location and condition must have created a demand from its citizens to almost instantly become a full fledge city. Despite its remote location, the city had relatively easy access to the large capitals of Chile and Argentina, and to all of Europe. It had a theatre where all sorts of performances from Europe and the USA were shown. By 1898, the city had a telephone system and electric lights, the first in Chile.

Even by 1900, the vast majority of boats used for domestic or inter-oceanic crossing were made of wood. Every boat that ran the coast of Chile had at least one carpenter and his tools of the trade. These were specialists able to repair a boat, make a raft, make a rowboat, and build furniture. The boat industry was changing by introducing more and
more metal steamers. The sea carpenters, once on land, become the carpenters that built warehouses, houses, hospitals, churches, and all sorts of other buildings required in the city. It is not farfetched to attribute to them the coastal architecture predominant in Chile: a substitution of the heavy masonry of the interior by the lightweight wooden structures of the coast. If one looks at the coastal architecture of Chile, one will notice a certain similarity in the design. There is clear distinction in the application of architectural details. The basic architectural moves such as veranda, dormers, balconies, and projecting volumes, vary from region to region, but the character of the buildings have an astonishing similarity. Sometimes it is the dramatic topographical differences or strong cultural backgrounds that give the building a regional identity. (See figures page 32)

From an urban design point of view, Punta Arenas was founded and developed in a similar manner to the Chilean colonial city. The colonial towns responded to the urban design guidelines established by the Consejo de Indias in Spain: a grid iron system of square blocks, equal in size and organization, able to multiply endlessly throughout the new landscape from a central or main plaza. This will allow for a simple, somewhat equal and endless supply (repetition) of solares or city lots. The open-ended nature of the city, the ability to easily grow, responded to the belief of the Argentinean Alberdi: “to govern is to populate”. In the colonial city, the central area is always structured around the main plaza, the Plaza de Armas or Plaza Mayor, where one can find all major public buildings. The quantity and quality of the public buildings depends on the quality and complexity of the urban nucleus. The founding of the city responded to the same principles that generated every city in Spanish America: defense of the territory through the creation of cities. Punta Arenas was born precisely out of that principle.

It was practice in the New World to have the plaza as the central element of the urban fabric. This urban element normally was placed against the edge of a river, lake or ocean when the city was founded near water, and protected by a fort. This design does not occur in Punta Arenas and other port cities of Chile. This is a very special and unique characteristic of the country. This specific characteristic makes the port cities of Chile unique in their design.

Looking at Valparaiso, we see that it is the prototypical port city in Chile. It was not a model of urban rational; it was a model of specialization and a model for programs of buildings. The original linear zone at the beach became the port zone. There the government built customhouses, warehouses, transport links (wagons, trucks, trains), firehouses, hotels, post office, telegraph, and workshops for repairs and maintenance. The port zone became somewhat independent and self-sustained. From here a connection was made to the main plaza and, in consequence, to the streets of the grid of the city. This created a concept of a port city with a city behind. The difference between the two zones has become less evident in the past century, but it is still visible in the urban fabric. (See figure page 25)

The port zone buildings are more haphazard and respond to a logic that can only be understood historically. First the sea carpenters contributed to the look of the buildings. After them, many foreigners arrived to these ports. They brought new ways of building,
especially wood frame construction (fast, efficient, cheap). These new forms of living and building gave the port cities a different look, a character of their own. Of course regional variations provided them with local color. The arrival of artisans and carpenters meant the execution of better buildings, replacing the old primitive construction methods. The actual “becoming a city” happened later because of architectural expectations and attitude. This more mature architecture was done with more “noble” materials, with prestige, with elegance, and because of a conscious decision of the authorities and residents to “make a city” by applying building regulations and making adjustments to the city grids, without altering the special characteristics of the port.61 The rich landlords, industrialists and other powerful businessmen lived in Punta Arenas. They built their mansions in and around the main plaza. This residency is very important because they became instrumental in the development of better services and urban amenities that defined the quality of life in the remote city. (See figures pages 26-29)

It is not until the 20th century that the city fully adopted the iron grid as a development form, even if it happened as it grew. The original grid was strong and simple and the land around was relatively flat. This made it easy to just add more blocks when needed. There is though a strong difference between the “port” and the “civic” areas of the port city. The coexistence of these two forms, despite the strong social contrasts, give Punta Arenas and other port cities their special character, unique in the urban development of the country.62 Of course due to its size, Punta Arenas never had a port band of significance, like Valparaiso or other larger port cities of the north. But it is there and it is still visible. This characteristic added to the specialized architecture, and defined the port cities of Chile.

The Port City on the 20th Century

Among the port cities of Chile, Punta Arenas is no exception in its layout and in the main features of its design. The main plaza became the generator of the city assuming the old conquest model of political power (municipalidad) and religious presence (cathedral). The plaza became the stage in which one can find the essential activities of the emerging community: the civic order, the religious aspect, the recreational and commercial.63 In Punta Arenas, the Municipalidad, the Intendencia and the Cathedral share the same block and face the plaza and the waters of the Straights of Magellan from the same street. This implies that at its foundation there was an equal power or a balanced sharing of power over the development of the city. One must notice that across the plaza, commerce and banks are located except were now is the Hotel Cabo de Hornos, and to the sides, the mansions of the rich and powerful pioneer families. These are the families that brought such modern conveniences as the telephone and city electric lights. One can still see this balance of civic power, even with changes in the ownership of the buildings. The Sara Braun mansion became in 1960 the Club de la Union, a most powerful social club in Chile. The Palacio Jose Menendez became in 1971 the Club Militar of the Chilean Army. And the Palacio Montes in 1966 was acquired by the Municipalidad and become the Casa de la Cultura, a cultural center and museum, and later, it became City Hall. There are other mansions that became museums, courthouses and community facilities, but they are located away from the plaza. It is interesting to see that in a society with a
strong sense and tradition of civic buildings, many of the old private residences and commercial buildings from the Golden Age of the Punta Arenas are becoming the face or image of the city. Of course this is due in part to the historic importance and nature of these old buildings. (See figures page 34)

If the Plaza generates the streets, then the four streets that touch it become of special significance. From the NS streets, Bories is the main commercial street of the city and the North entrance to the city. Magallanes, originally Maria Isabel Street, is the oldest street and the Southern entrance to the city. The two EW streets became spaces for more municipal and commercial buildings and the contact with the port zone. (See figure page 30)

After the Motin de los Artilleros, the Governor, Carlos Wood, decided to rebuild the city using brick instead of wood for the major buildings. The manufacturing of bricks requires money and knowledge. Swiss immigrants that arrived in 1877 created the first brick ovens and manufacturing plants. An earthquake destroyed them soon after that. Rebuilding the plants allowed the city to relocate them away from the center. Once brick became available to the residents, the sequence and speed of the new brick buildings was dramatic. The first brick building was a one-room house built in 1892. The second was the residence of Jose Menendez, a prominent businessman, who built his house the same year with bricks brought from Buenos Aires. The third building was the cathedral built between 1892 and 1901 with bricks from Punta Arenas. This was followed by the Government house, 1894 – 1899, and immediately by the mansion built by Sara Braun, a colossus in comparison to the existing surrounding wooden houses. The end of the 18th century saw the beginning of a growth period for the city. The first brick paved sidewalks didn’t occur until 1928. Before this streets and sidewalks were paved with large rounded river stones. While practical and beautiful in appearance, somewhat uncomfortable to use. (See figure page 33)

There are many reasons as to why the city developed the way it did. One reason is simply money. Business ventures in the emerging city grew, and economic growth became stable. If one adds the lack of threat of new mutinies, one can understand how the local population started to pay more attention to city services and the built environment. Professionals were brought to work at all levels, from architects, engineers, to masons and carpenters. The building of Sara Braun’s house brought the first architect to practice in Punta Arenas. Numa Mayer probably arrived in 1895 for this purpose. He was involved later in other projects such as the important Teatro Colon, today the Teatro Municipal, as well as commercial ventures such as the Compania de Luz Electrica, the first Electric Company in the country, in partnership with businessman Jose Menendez. This is an example of the strong private influence on the design of the city. Prominent citizens look back at their roots in Europe and to their local large cities, Santiago and Buenos Aires, for images of the built environment. Both Santiago and Buenos Aires were receiving strong influences from Italian and French design. The influences were not limited to publications. European architects, especially French, were being invited by the Government to come practice and teach in Chile. This architectural influence directly affected the people that brought them. But it also filtered down to the less wealthy
sectors of the society. One is able to find imported architectural details in much smaller houses around the city.

Another important factor is the creation in 1898 of the Direccion de Obras Municipales. This became the urban authority for all new construction, numbering of buildings, overseeing all public streets, building inspection and permitting, supervision of municipal works, water and sewer. From here it is significant to notice that in a city of about 3,300 people, between the years of 1900 and 1907, 1,084 building permits were issued for new construction and 306 permits for remodeling and repairs of front elevations. The Direccion de Obras Municipales helped organize the city and promote better architecture by developing long-range plans and by developing a more efficient building code.

A third factor was the arrival and incorporation of highly trained professionals. Although Numa Mayer was the first architect that practiced in Punta Arenas, the first registered architect was Antonio Beaulier, license #1. Beaulier was born in Paris in 1856. He arrived in Chile in 1889, and finally arrived in Punta Arenas in the mid 1890’s. He took over the Direccion de Obras Municipales. This factor is very important because many European architects arrived in Chile by this time and deeply influenced the architecture of the times. The French Neo Classical decorative style was the most dominant, but Italian, English and German architectural elements were also used. The European influences rapidly transformed the urban look of the village allowing it to become a small great city. One has to understand that these imported styles do not have the quality, size, details, and rigor of the original. The country and the city of Punta Arenas were not as wealthy as Europe. Even the interiors were much simpler, with a few exceptions. Both interior and exterior were modified and adapted, including even local language, more domestic. Not all architects were Europeans. There were several Chilean architects, but many of them were trained in Europe. Many countries in Latin America received and accepted this European influence. Punta Arenas, at the end of the world, was no exception. To a certain degree it was this architecture that defined the Golden Age of Punta Arenas. It was this architecture that defined the aspirations of the city for years to come. And it was this architecture that the city preserves today and still defines its essence, far away, at the end of the world.

Until the opening of the Panama Canal, all shipping lanes converged in Punta Arenas. It became a mandatory stop for all sorts of ships. Because of this, the small city was very much in contact with the new trends in Europe and in the United States. It was hard to avoid contact. The cosmopolitan population of the city had family, business, or cultural ties to all major countries in Europe. It was not unusual to go to the theatre to enjoy a performance by European or USA companies. The distance then was not necessarily an issue for isolation. It was only distance. Many of the children of the prominent families went to Europe for education and travel, molding their taste accordingly.

After WWII, the center of world power shifted, and Europe began a slow descent while the United States became the dominant cultural influence in the world. Punta Arenas experienced the new influence. It is common for Chilean scholars to travel to the United States to obtain graduate degrees. Because of this and because of many other factors, the
duality of the Chilean identity has gradually shifted towards the United States. In the urban aspect of Punta Arenas, new residential developments began to imitate the developments in the U.S. There is now a certain embryonic “suburban culture” that is replacing the old desirable neighborhoods for the wealthier classes. Even the architecture began to imitate the trendy architecture of the U.S., sometimes to the point of importing an entire house. This bypasses the traditional development of the local architecture. Nevertheless, some architects continue to practice an evolution of Spanish-Chilean architecture. This is an architecture that is deeply rooted in the cultural mix that has energized the city throughout its entire life. (See figure page 35)
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