Out of Buenos Aires – “Estancial” Sprawl

It is said that mega cities are as much the result as the cause of urban sprawl. Approaching Buenos Aires from the brownish Rio de la Plata, the horizon between sky and water slowly reveals a green-grey coastline. The first signs of human presence are the towers of global enterprises like Sun and Microsoft. Before arriving at the port, the functions and the structures of the city are becoming clearer. The view is focused upon the skyline of Argentina’s capital: the ecological reserve on the left and the docks at the right. Stepping out of the boat, touching the ground of tango dancers and beefeaters, one enters into a city of 13 million inhabitants, which is 37% of the whole Argentine population.

Buenos Aires: how to discover it, how to read and understand it? A taxi takes you through a modern, pulsing city. Everywhere, the signs of globalization, say McDonaldization can be seen. How to know that you are in Buenos Aires and not in Madrid or in L.A.? The grid pattern of the city doesn’t help with orientation. People walk fast; they seem to be busy as in every big city. Florida Avenue is the main pedestrian zone, one which could be anywhere. Where is the center and the heart of this city? Finally, at the obelisk on the Avenida 9 de Julio, screaming supporters wearing shirts and flags of Boca Junior – the most popular soccer team in the southern hemisphere – kiosks selling postcards of “God’s son,” and national hero Diego Maradona, all leave no doubt that you are in Buenos Aires.

Buenos Aires means “good air”. Where is the good air? Pollution from traffic is high. So is the pollution of the rivers and ports. Dirty city? No. The streets and parks are clean. It seems that the city still has enough money for cleaning services. What about the recent economic crisis? Not long ago, we all saw the images on TV: long queues in front of bank counters, riots in the streets, presidents for one day, the fear of new military coups. But surprising for somebody from outside, in November of 2003, there is no real sign of the economic crises or of political problems. A few beggars on the sidewalks and people pushing shopping carts with plastic bags and cardboards for night shelter cross your way. Walking down to the Plaza de Mayo you see Indian demonstrators and lots of armed police that give an idea of existing social and potential political problems.

The city centre is comprised of a diverse mixture of functions: residence buildings, shops, offices everywhere. The sky, if it can be seen from the deep and narrow streets, is full of patrol helicopters as well as arriving and departing planes. However, there are public parks, green areas of leisure and soccer playing kids. Buenos Aires is a mega park city. Although statistics claim that there exist only 2 square meters of parks per habitant, one has the impression that this ratio is much higher.

Leaving Buenos Aires northward or southward offers the same image: buildings for mass low-income habitation intermixed with obviously spontaneously built housing, small one-storey brick houses on small plots or just huts made of corrugated iron sheets. It is here where unemployment is high, crime is present, and where poverty determines the life of people. Here, the typical problems of mega cities can be found. The inner city highway just passes by and over these settlements which have no direct access to it. It is the same picture as in other big cities: both spatial and social segregation. However, the ghettos of poor and rich often border each other.

What is amazing in Buenos Aires is the phenomenon of gentrification. There is a kind of wealth-driven urban sprawl that takes place far outside of the city. I am talking about second
residences or weekend homes in the mosquito prone Paraná River Delta and the Country Clubs, which are being founded on those incredibly big farms that are called “estancia”.

The center of the estancia Villa Maríia is a three floor Norman Tudor mansion, built in 1920 by architect Alejandro Bustillo in the commune of Maximo Paz, which is 50 km from Buenos Aires city. Surrounding the mansion is privileged landscape comprised of a 74-hectare park, designed some 70 years ago by famous landscaper Charles Thays. The overall surface of the estancia Villa María is 1.489 hectares.

In the near future, around 1/5 of the whole surface will be transformed into a country club for permanent residence. 350 plots from 1.600 m2 to 5.100 m2 will be offered for sale. However, the residential area will only cover 30% of the so-called “Club de Campo”. Over 166 hectares will be “common area”, enclosing the park of Villa María, an 18-hole golf course, soccer and tennis facilities, and a swimming pool. The mansion will become a clubhouse with bedrooms and a restaurant. Bordering the Club de Campo area and surrounding three polo fields, another 42 tree lined “estanzuelas” from 10 to 30 hectares will be allocated. For these small estancias, no plan exists until now. They can become residential areas for rich, can be subdivided by commercial investors, or may be used for cattle farming.

Thus, the Villa María estancia will become a new town of more than 1.000 inhabitants. This “estancial sprawl” will be part of the sprawl of Buenos Aires. Sooner or later, the outskirts of the capital and the estancia areas will border each other. The park landscape will disappear; urban forms and structures will fill the land in-between. Future visitors will have many more difficulties in finding the center, the heart, and the soul of Great Buenos Aires.