

# Identity and Urban Design: The Path to Meaningfulness in Concepción, Chile

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*In her research leading to this article, Laura Rodriguez studied the urban design and place making qualities of the University of Concepción campus in Chile. Based on interviews with a select group of experts and field observations, the results indicate that the campus' strong meaning within the city image is partly due to its original conception as an overall consistent project and as part of the city grid and life.*

Every city possesses places that evoke the urban imaginary imagination, have strong meanings for the citizens, and capture the image of the city as a whole. Among the several factors contributing to this process, identity and urban design are fundamental. This article discusses a research project on place identity and urban design in Concepción, the largest urban agglomeration in Chile after the capital, Santiago. While the City of Concepción has an estimated population of 300,000 residents, its metropolitan region has 945,650 inhabitants (2012). A number of factors come into play in this investigation and our findings demonstrate that Concepcion has a powerful image built upon its infrastructure and historical process, both of which have generated a strong identity and sense of belonging among its inhabitants.

## Introduction

To write about the contemporary Chilean city is to write about the dissatisfaction shared by the majority of urban residents about their everyday experiences.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the usual frustrations associated with problems stemming from poorly functional urban systems, people share a significant loss of sense of belonging to their places (Márquez, 2006: 80). People inhabit meaningless cities, or cities where the built form does not reflect place history, context or identity. Dealing with this issue requires examining the convergence between urban functionality and the subjectivity of human experience (Munizaga, 1997: 56). It means trying to recover the sense of living in a community, to strengthen the sense of belonging to a place, and to account for place identity, an identity that

needs to be understood not only as collection of memories but also as a common future project.

Better cities are those that host multiple meaningful places, meanings that are persistent over time, but also senses that are renewed, strengthening the sense of belonging of its inhabitants who perceive a profound articulation with their own collective cultural identity in the urban form (Rodríguez, 2012: 185). In this sense, we understand place as a source of identity, and identity as “how we make sense of ourselves” (Rose, 1995: 88). Places can give meaning to urban life and become iconic for the community. It is desirable for a city to be a source of iconic meaning since, as noted by Holzapfel (2005: 55), “iconic sources are the signifiers and symbols of meaning, and the interesting thing about them is how they reveal the corporal quality of the sense.” The link between iconic places and a city’s identity can be positive and act as the re-affirmation of life. But iconic places can also be negative, acting as source of conflict (Picon, 2008).

Without pretending to develop a philosophy of space or a new theory of meaning, there are areas where an urban geographic theoretical approach is helpful to understand the relationship between meaning and place— a subject of great interest to contemporary geography. “Place is a central concept in Human Geography in general and in Cultural Geography in particular” (Gregory et al, 2009: 539). According to Rose (1995: 88), geographers use the term place in reference to the specific meanings it has for people. Feelings for a “place” are not seen as trivial and the sense of place develops from every aspect of an individual’s life experience; these senses invade life and everyday experience.

Considered by most geographers as a “perpetual state of becoming”, place is distinguished by its subjective meaning and the way by which it is constructed and differentiated. However, as noted by Cuthbert (2006: 65), there is no general agreement

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<sup>1</sup> According to census data, Chile’s total population was 16,634,603 in 2012 with an estimated 89% living in urban areas.

on how the meaning of the built environment is “produced, consumed, circulated, and exchanged, as is distorted, disguised, changed or deleted.” We also agree with Cuthbert (2006) and Castells (2003) on the dominance of historical time in determining this process. “The historical process of defining the urban meaning determines the characteristics of urban functions. For example, if cities are defined as colonial centers, the use of military force and territorial control will be their basic function” (Castell, 2003: 24). Such places become iconic locations in the city. The research discussed in the present paper is a contribution to this discussion.

### Concepción’s Insubordinate Identity

Concepción, located 512 kilometers south of Santiago, is the capital city of the Bio-Bio region. It was one of the first cities founded by the Spanish Empire in 1550 and the major military stronghold with a size and importance only comparable to Santiago. A tumultuous period followed Chile’s independence when Concepcion rejected Santiago’s aristocratic attempt to monopolize power as the new capital. Order would only return when a native of Concepcion was conducted to the presidency (Contreras, 2002: 221). The city’s rebellious identity would mesh with the emerging story of progress.

“Between 1835 and 1839, people in Concepción lived a rare phenomenon characterized by a strong attachment to the city. A keen pride in having been the military capital of the country for centuries; an undeniable resentment towards Santiago and the central power for its defeat in Loncomilla, and the legitimate desire of its inhabitants to establish transcendental institutions to head progress and advancement.” (Pacian, 2010: 20)

The ideas of modernity and progress resonated strongly in the discourse of scholars from Concepción who perceived them as the most enlightened of local aspects (Aliste & Almendras, 2010). Pacheco (1997) notes how Concepcion’s freethinkers were influenced by the discourse of reason, European enlightenment, Auguste Comte’s positivism, and the theory of evolution, against the Church’s ideology that dominated until then. The arrival of numerous professionals in the early twentieth century, the influence of the Masons, and liberal and radical doctrines gave rise to thoughts of progress, reason and science. This new value system would be reflected, for instance, in 1970 when Concepción’s Mayor declared in the local newspaper that the change of streetlights would “not only provide greater safety to pedestrians but also change the face of the city” (apud Pacheco, 1997: 13).

The value of education in development and the need to constitute a modern Concepción lead the city leaders, with the support of all other communities in the south of Chile, to create the University of Concepción in 1919 (Cartes & Mihovilovich, 2011). The university’s forum rapidly became not only the daily meeting point for students to discuss political and social but an important place for student life as well as for the lives of

all city residents (Contreras, 2002: 223) (Figure 1). Students played a unique role in Concepción’s history, a city founded in a struggle for progress, hand-in-hand with the labor party during Chile’s industrialization.

The desire to transform Concepción into modern city made education and culture decisively central among social considerations. But the stubborn rivalry with Santiago reflected in local discourses and projects. Destroyed by the 1960 earthquake, the University Theatre was one of them, a building whose scale, design, and details were meant to rival Santiago’s Municipal Theatre (Pacian, 2010) (Figure 2).



Figure 1: View towards the university Forum. (drawing: Pablo Soto)

Figure 2: University of Concepción Old Theatre. (drawing: Pablo Soto)



When discussing Concepción's qualities Contreras (2002: 226) concludes that they led to the "perception of being in an area with a better quality of life if compared to Santiago, the main and only competitor to this center of development on the banks of the Bio-bio River". Playing an important role in the city's aspirations of progress, the middle class was born early in Concepción, formed and consolidated during the Republic and in the city, not in the agricultural land. The process started with the old colonial families—impoverished, disintegrated, and uprooted from their land—but also emerged from the working-class who, thanks to the industrial boom, suddenly got rich out of luck or because of some creative drive (Campos Harriet, 1979: 267). Between 1940 and 1950 the industry became the most dynamic sector of Concepción with an annual employment growth rate of 4.3%, the fastest and most consistent in the city's industrial development (Fernández, 2006:143).

Campos Harriet noted that, during the second half of the 19th century, the working class had a leading role in defending their rights by engaging in nascent political parties. Between 1920 and 1970, the city boasted the creation of a large number of social organizations as "the population, as an expression of the proletariat, takes social identity, recognizes it for what it is, and begins to participate as a body in urban life" (Pacheco, 1997: 27). Upon displacing tradition, people moved to be ruled by rationality. They pressed for freedom, autonomy, and rejection of the past.

The University of Concepción was then created as a transcendental institution in the image of the city. The diagonal Pedro Aguirre Cerda was designed to give continuity to university life and link it to the city center (Figure 3).

"There is no doubt that Concepción has unique urban features that are crucial, as the relationship with the University of Concepción entire campus, Plaza Peru, Diagonal Pedro Aguirre Cerda, and the sequences of plazas in the city center. It is a unique structure that is clearly recognizable and unmistakable. In seeing it one recognizes it. And there are landmark elements that people also consider to have higher singularities. These are symbols that express the city's identity in the most emblematic way, such as the University of Concepción's bell tower, the courthouse, or the Plaza of Concepción, which are the most relevant built elements of the city's identity." (Sergio Baeriswyl; personal communication)

The Arco de Medicina is a singular entity that, with its high-relief mural, defines a portal facing Plaza Peru and a estate-built residential district (Fuentes & Perez, 2010: 87) (Figure 4). With its bars and restaurants, Plaza Peru is filled with youthful energy that continues down to the Diagonal and its tree-lined avenue. Its authentic beauty embodies an era of freedom and self-confidence that, according to Sepúlveda (2010: 112), inspired Enrique Giordano's poem where the Diagonal is related to the discovery of homosexual love and the ability to dream of another world: "of those screens only we know, those of all the light of dawn on Diagonal Avenue".

The places described in Giordano's poem are key to Concepción's identity and are legible in the urban design patterns, even the most conventional ones. They promote vitality and are endowed with a good form translated in the visual geometry. They are memorable because they are also designed for stability; sculptures and seats meant for pedestrians and available for social encounters and conversations. Concepción is a city of monumentalities but it is also a city of encounters – hence the impetus for this original investigation, which postulates that place strengthens and solidifies the iconic nature of a city.

### Methodology

The principles of urban design for public space considered in this investigation were outlined in Sternberg's "An Integrative Theory of Urban Design" (2007) where he conducts a meta-



Figure 3: Pedro Aguirre Cerda Diagonal. (photo: Benjamin Carrasco)

Figure 4: Plaza Perú. (photo: Benjamín Carrasco)



analysis of different authors in the past eighty years. The investigation included several methodological steps. The first was an interpretation of the city's identity based on historical-geographical narratives by various authors through secondary sources—historiographies (books and papers). This was conducted through the Critical Discourse Analysis Method used by Bolívar (2004), a qualitative method useful in determining the previous context of the study, gaining knowledge from a re-examination of questions about identity and place (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Secondly, in-depth interviews with architects and members of Concepción's academic community were conducted; a method called by Marshall and Rossman (2011) as elite interviews where the elites are considered the influential, prominent and well-informed members of an organization or community. These interviews provided an insight into the respondents' experiences not only as individuals but as part of a wider community—how personal and collective human agency generates social life and its many ties of belonging and identity, forging the knowledge that sustains them. However, the privileged social status of these interviewees does not mean that respondents were selected randomly; they were part of the sample, which can be academic or personal. The key informant technique becomes effective because of the multiple social worlds they belong—sometimes with distinctive and competing social meanings—enriches the analysis.

This ethnography of members of the architectural community was chosen because of their mastery of the subject. The discipline of architecture is based on spatial cognition and the professionals working within routinely observe the city, a method described by Zeisel (1997). The basic tenant is that when a member of a particular group the individual tends to observe and record behavioral aspects that are unnoticed by individuals from other groups. The interviews included three questions about meaningful places, evolution, and current dynamics, and one question on identity aspects of the local population. Previous research projects carried out by the author indicated that six in-depth interviews are sufficient to provide a fairly clear idea about the meaningful places in a city for that group.

The third method utilized in the investigation was a photographic record of places, dates and times indicated by the interviewees. Following a methodology suggested by Zeisel (1981) and Gehl (2006), each photo included explanatory notes on the people, their activities and behaviors, if they were alone or in groups, and the socio-cultural and physical environments.

These multiple research techniques required different strategies for gathering information, but they also had to include some quantitative data. For example, in order to measure a place's vitality we had to record the number of people in the area every 15-minute interval. This technique allowed us to observe the public in a more intimate, personal manner, allowing the researcher and assistants to gather information and analyze

places through qualitative observations and analytical sketches based on photographs, plans and sections (Jacobs, 1985; Munizaga, 1997). This allows for a keen explanation of the relationship between Concepción's iconic places, the principles of urban design, and identity.

The ultimate goal was to demonstrate that culture is not only a social construct expressed territorially but that culture is formed spatially. Identities are related to places and belonging to a place is part of the definition of self. "Human identity assumes the identity of a place" (Norberg-Schulz, 2003: 125). This allowed the research to emphasize the subjective dimension of the geographic experience.

Larraín (2001) noted that in every historical stage renowned intellectuals tried to explain identity, calling attention to the construction of discourses about national identity from a cultural-historical perspective (Torres, 2011: 39). But he also presents a structure with different points of views, some clearly contradictory. At this point, we agree with Vergara et al (2012: 23) who noted that all these points of view can be accurate but, at the same time, incomplete.

"On behalf of modern progress, Liberalism and 19th century Positivism strongly opposed the Indo-Iberian cultural identity that prevailed during colonial time and maintained a strong influence since independence. However, the "hispanicism" of the 1940s attacked the modernizing processes that occurred after independence because they made us forget our true identity based on medieval Spanish values." (Larraín, 2001: 78).

By highlighting the most important ideas at the time, Larraín manages to open a breach between overlapping discourses that indicated "the so-called 'national identity' in Chile is but a project based on temporary discourses which are often enunciated by the local ruling groups or classes" (Torres, 2011: 39).

In this article, elements of identity are distinguished from the multiple discourses that have been elaborated. Sometimes those discourses reveal narratives or visions in tension, indicating representations or identities that continue to be unresolved and challenged. Consequently, it is particularly important to perform a critical analysis of the different discourses that represent the subjective matter of identity – especially in locations like Concepción where identity continues to evolve.

## Results

The interviews revealed a total of places that strengthen Concepción's identity and cherish its memory and history (Table 1). Although there was consensus among respondents on which were the city's meaningful places, some were mentioned more often than others. Among the places cited the subsystem of the University of Concepción is especially well represented, and El Campanil (Bell Tower) serves as an underscoring icon on the campus. The university's public

Table 1: Meaningful places.

Meaningful places cited in the interviews	Times cited
The Bell Tower, Universidad de Concepción	4
Foro, Universidad de Concepción	4
Campus, Universidad Concepción	6
Plaza Perú	3
Murals of the Pinacoteca	1
Diagonal Pedro Aguirre Cerda	2
Building Tribunales and surroundings	6
Paseo Barros Arana	3
Paseo Aníbal Pinto	1
Los Tontos Corner (Aníbal Pinto with Barros Arana)	2
Red Galerías	1
Plaza de Armas	4
Corner of Concepción Theatre	1
Front of the Cathedral	2
Old City Hall	1
Old Train Station	2
Murals of the Former Train Station	1
District of the Train Station	1
Plaza España (facing old train station)	1
Bio-Bio River	2
Ecuador Park	5
Caracol Mount	4
View point Alemán	1

Table 2: Places and applied analytical categories.

Meaningful places	Memorable Aspects	Type of element
Bell Tower, Universidad de Concepción	Meaning	Place
	Legibility	
Foro, Universidad de Concepción	Vitality	Place
	Versatility	
	Legibility	
	Meaning	
	Comfort	
Campus Universidad Concepción	Good form	Place-Path-Portal
	Vitality	
	Comfort	
	Visual Connection	
	Versatility	

space is relevant and this is a direct reflection of the city's historical memory of the last 150 years.

Table 2 lists the meaningful places in the university subsystem and their memorable aspects based on the interviews. Additionally, we can see that this system of places forms a larger meaningful structure that can be represented in a map (Figure 5). One can note that many of these places are linked to the University of Concepción. The university has eight memorable aspects and its campus is the only public space that simultaneously meets the conditions of "place-path-portal" because of its spatial configuration and its degree of wholeness as public space.

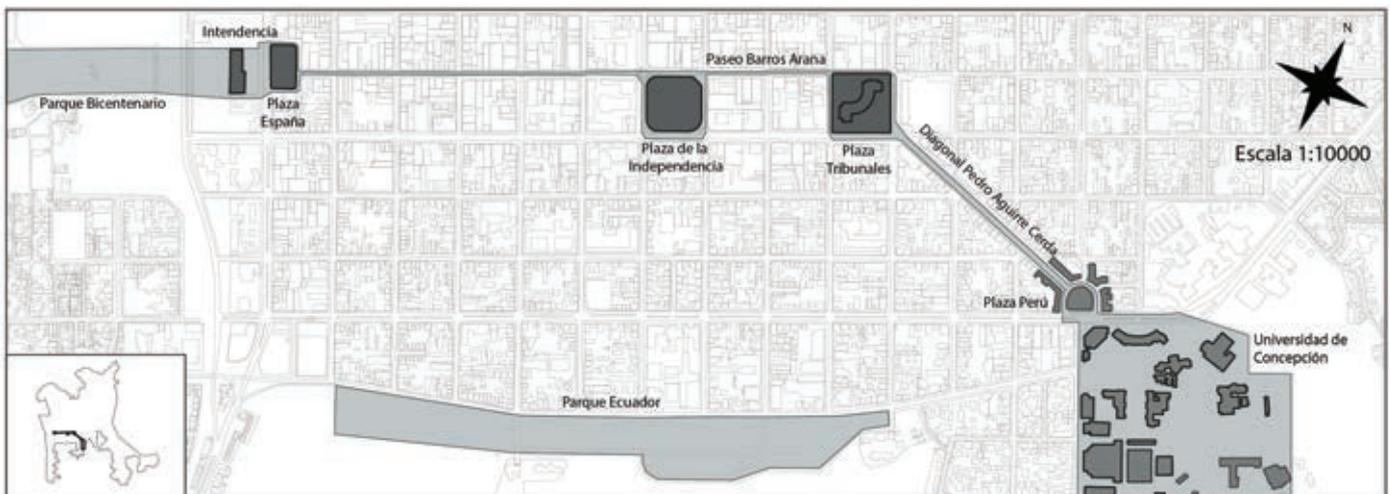
In this system of meaningful places --known as the Bicentennial Axis (Ganter & Herrera: 2014)-- one can understand the relevance of the subsystems within the greater system of places, such as the one depicted in Figure 6 (a & b). In the following sections, some of the qualities forming the university subsystem as found in the investigation and its interviews are discussed.

The Spatial Representational Meaning of Education.

The University of Concepción resulted from the aspirations of a group of people to create a regional university. It reflects various social and political practices that, along time, leave memories and marks in the campus although providing education has been a constant concern. In 1925 the university's first rector established the campus and erected the first buildings in a site adjacent to the old colonial grid where the city was founded, in a small basin surrounded by hills of medium height. It was Latin America's first university campus.

The campus had two more master plans: by Austrian architect-urbanist Karl Brunner in 1931, and in 1957 by Emilio Duhart, one of the most important Chilean architects and planners of the 20th century. Since its conception, the university campus has developed progressively and is the result of several stages.

Figure 5: Map of meaningful places.



“It has been said that big cities are faithful expressions of the culture that created them. Their people live that culture in the multi-temporal structures in which they inhabit, which not only embrace and protect them, but are like archives of urban history. Similarly, the University of Concepción campus has been materializing the life of the university community.” (Garcia, 1994: 5)

### Legibility of the Elements and the Assembly

The legibility of the Forum derives from the roofline of the buildings along the main axis, its well-defined edges shaped by the embracing buildings, and the landmark represented by the bell tower (Figures 6 a & b). Furthermore, the regular placing of the trees—all of the same species—at 14 feet intervals in the sidewalks on both sides at the Forum, and only on the south sidewalk beyond it, strengthen the overall legibility.

“The volumes are organized and molded according to their site. Major and minor pedestrian axes are recognized, generating a systematic and coherent urban fabric within the University Campus. The proposed tree planting goes beyond mere decoration; one can see a willingness to have trees configuring the elements of urban space, limiting and stressing the pedestrian experience.” (Berrios, 2007: 11)

The Duhart campus plan’s unveiled intention was, through the university growth, to provide a consistent and balanced design throughout campus. The great value of the plan was to consider architecture as part of an urban thinking and as a measure of human scale.

### Student Vitality

The notion of vitality, as used in our investigation, represents an urban design quality concerned with the number of people currently using a place; it is particularly relevant to make places meaningful. The Forum is always teeming with people, and the pedestrian arcade featuring shops and an ATM contribute to populate the place and provide more activities to vitalize the node (Figures 7 and 8).

As the university’s total student population is 23,000 the number of people we observed in the Forum is considerable as illustrated in Table 3 that resulted from just one field count. The Forum also holds different types of activities such as fairs, shows, and music concerts that help give meaning to the place (Figure 9). The Forum’s vibrant quality is maintained over time because of its spatial quality and versatility. Nevertheless, vitality is not only determined by students who move daily between classes, but also during weekends when this public space is used as a city park by families (Figure 10).

### Comfort

The habitability of the space is granted through comfort, one of the principles of urban design considered in this investigation. Comfort derives a balance between people and their environment, from both physiological and environmental conditions. In the Forum area it is provided by the tree shades and the pedestrian galleries running along the buildings enclosing it, and through the versatility of the architectural and landscape elements that people can use as seats and for other spontaneous activities (Figure 13).



Figure 6a & b: View and section of the Forum. (photo and drawing: Benjamin Carrasco)



Table 3: Pedestrians in the Forum.

Direction of movement		Time of	Number of People
North Path	People travelling in the direction of Plaza Peru	12:15 to 12:30PM	332
	People travelling towards the Faculty of Architecture		153
South Path	People travelling in the direction of Plaza Peru	12:30 to 12:45PM	116
	People travelling towards the Faculty of Architecture		92



Figure 7: Students in the Forum at noon. (photo: Laura Rodríguez)



Figure 10: Family enjoying the lawn. (photo: Camilo Arzola)

Connections to the outside

Good urban spaces are well connected to their physical context and the larger community, particularly through visual connections between them and the surroundings—both built and unbuilt. The visual connection between the campus and the surrounding landscape occurs naturally, since it is located on the slopes of Cerro Caracol. From campus one can always have a visual connection with the natural landscape of the hills (Figure 14). The sensation of being part of the city, but at its border and close to the “outside”, eases some of the tension of the busy everyday life of a city like Concepción.

**Conclusions**

Concepción’s emblematic places have seduced the urban imagination as they evoke memories and values over generations. Each person re-signifies spaces as places and makes them key elements in their sense of belonging. These places form part of meaningful trajectories and a system of places in an inter-subjective process that allows the creation of a city’s identity.

The University of Concepción produces a particularly strong image in the minds of the populace, and its campus’ identity and urban design is clearly distinguished. The campus and



Figure 8: Book fair and stage at the Forum. (photo: Laura Rodríguez)

Figure 9: The stage and steps at the Forum. (photo: Laura Rodríguez)



Figure 13: Students on the Forum steps. (photo: Laura Rodríguez)



its open spaces are frequently cited in the literature as it was during the interviews in the course of this investigation. Since the campus was planned as a project as a whole, it naturally becomes a place. It's particular design has unique qualities that render it as a path, a portal, and a place, contributing immensely to the City of Concepcion's urban image.

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Figure 15: The visual connection between the campus and its surroundings. (photo: Camilo Arzola)