Guayaquil (Ecuador): the spectacular urban metamorphosis of a port-metropolis

The principal city of Ecuador with 3 million inhabitants, Guayaquil is not only the economic capital of this small Andean country (population 15 million), but also its largest port. Today a total of 22 million tons per year moves over the port of Guayaquil. In addition to its historical role as the port serving the towns of the "Sierra", the high plateaux, and the capital, Quito, it is now the great metropolis of the "Costa", a rich agricultural region with plantations of bananas, cocoa, tropical fruits and sugar for agro-industrial uses, and an aquiculture industry (prawns). The city lies along the banks of the Guayas estuary, at the confluence of the Babahoyo and Daule rivers. The new port, built in 1963, has for years been suffering access problems from the Gulf of Guayaquil, and the land earmarked for port development has long since fallen to anarchic city growth. Today, the port (2 terminals in concession and 13 privates terminals) no longer has room for the new infrastructure necessary for its modernisation. The commercial port abandoned its historic installations in the city centre, with quays along the estuary, decades ago.

Today, the Municipality is promoting studies in order to dredge the access canal to 11 metres and for an ambitious new project to re-site the port downstream at Posorja, closer to deep waters and where plenty of land is available. This project should bring new life to the port and the city of Guayaquil as Ecuador’s principal port. It will also reflect the particularly strong economic growth enjoyed by the country over the last decade. In the north, the ports of Manta (bulk cargoes) and especially Esmeraldas (oil exports from Amazonia – 30 million tons) should undergo similar extension works in the next few years.

The relocation of port traffic downstream and the abandoning of the historical site of maritime activity have also given the city of Guayaquil an opportunity to completely redevelop its waterfront along the Guayas Estuary. Started 20 years ago, the "Malecón 2000" project has profoundly altered the city's image by giving the centre a facade on the Guayas Estuary. It has been hailed as one of the best and most successful urban renewals of Latin America.

A city adrift

When Leon Febres Cordero, ex-president of Ecuador and a local boy, became mayor of Guayaquil in 1992, the city was in a situation described by all observers as catastrophic. The majority of public buildings were in an indescribable state of abandonment, as were basic sanitation services. Urban construction was out of control, municipal finances were at an all-time low while the levels of insecurity were peaking... Today it is hard to imagine the state of the city only two decades ago!

Swift, decisive action was needed. Backing onto the city centre, and the few historic buildings which had resisted the ravages of time, the banks of the Guayas had been abandoned since 1963, when the new port had been built further down the estuary. Here as elsewhere, the city turned its back on its waterfront. In the first half of the 20th century,
cargo vessels still used to tie up at the end of a series of jetties, and the wharves were the scene of an intense social life. Once it had solved the problems of its infrastructure and basic services, the new municipal administration decided to make this abandoned river bank the spear-point of its urban regeneration project.

**A pragmatic method of exemplary effectiveness**

Several key ideas have dominated the execution of this ambitious project:

**Speed.** The situation was urgent, and the choice of a pragmatic approach was made at once with the decision to set up an operational structure, Fundación Malecón 2000, with a substantial work force in all fields, which would be capable of advancing sector by sector while ensuring coordinated management of the whole project.

**A strategic master plan:** « Image-Objective ». In 1996, the "Image-Objective" was drafted on the initiative of a local bank, "La Previsora", and a team from Oxford Brookes University, modelled on the regeneration of waterfronts in North America, Europe and Argentina. « Image-Objective » was accepted by the Municipality in the same year, and the project was started.

**Public spaces.** Ignoring calls for privatisation, the so-called "Malecón Simon Bolivar" project was designed from the outset as an open, public space, including private cultural and commercial facilities open to the general public. On completion, the project had to be capable of generating the financial means necessary for its upkeep and evolution in the long term.

**A principle of urban regeneration.** The need was immediately perceived for the project to be a strong force for drawing the urban regeneration of the whole city behind it. The political, economic and social forces active in the city have been heavily involved in the definition of the project, which has proved successful in mobilising action. The local population has supported the project whole-heartedly, especially through the Malecón 2000 Foundation.

**A specific tool.** The need soon became apparent for a specific operational tool for planning, developing, building, administering, financing and maintaining the future Malecón Simon Bolivar. The Malecón 2000 Foundation was born in 1997 to meet this need. Legally the foundation is a private, non-profit-making organization which brings together the most diverse and representative institutions of Guayaquil. The city has handed over to the Foundation all the land on which the Malecón is built, consisting of 17 hectares along the river bank, on a 99-year lease.

**Complementary financing.** Finally, to finance the projects, two modes of operation were selected. On the one hand – a fairly classic solution for this kind of operation – concessions
were granted for the commercial operation of certain private facilities (commercial premises, restaurants, IMAX cinema, etc.). On the other, a law was passed on 15 October 1997 establishing that 25% of donations or grants made by natural or legal persons to projects developed by the foundation could be deducted from tax liabilities for the financial years 1997 – 2002.

The latter financial mechanism allowed the Municipality to draw on considerable private funds to spend on the project immediately, although its own initial contribution could not exceed 25,000 USD. The number of private donors reached the remarkable figure of over 47,000 in 2001, a clear sign of public enthusiasm for the initiative! The redevelopment of the public spaces, which form 80% of the total area, thus benefited immediately from high quality work with a very carefully designed urban infrastructure. It is worth noting that 90% of the funds received by the foundation must be spent on effective project execution, and that a very strict control system has been set up.

To define and execute the project, an international team of urban planners, architects, landscape designers, etc., working in conjunction with Ecuadorian professionals, was rapidly appointed by means of international competitions. The operating team installed in the Foundation's offices was coordinated by the British project leaders from Oxford Brookes University.

2001: "Guayaquil Siglo 21" Foundation set up

To complete the existing package, and considering the scale of the task of urban regeneration, a new operational instrument was set up in 2001. The Guayaquil Siglo 21 (Guayaquil 21st Century) Foundation, the sword in the Municipality’s hand, has wider powers than the Malecón 2000 Foundation, and its mission is to execute all the city's urban redevelopment projects. A Municipal Foundation in private law, Guayaquil Siglo 21 now manages the municipal urban renewal budget without assistance from private donors. Under this regime it has financed numerous urban regeneration programmes; it is contractually bound to the Malecón 2000 Foundation, which continues to carry out its mission to redevelop and manage Malecón Simon Bolivar and other wharves located on an arm of the sea known as Estero Salado.
Malecón Simon Bolívar, a successful waterfront project for an ambitious urban regeneration plan

This ambitious first project in Guayaquil’s urban renewal is a continuous promenade 2.5 kilometres long running along the city’s riverbank. The central point is a monument commemorating the meeting between two leaders of South America’s Independence, Simon Bolívar and José de San Martin, where 9 de Octubre Avenue, the city centre’s main artery, meets the promenade. The long promenade ends at the foot of Las Peñas hill, which is also being redeveloped for tourism under another programme. The colourful two-storey traditional buildings are being preserved and refurbished for handicrafts shops and tourism services.

In what has become the classic pattern of waterfront regeneration, the rhythm of the promenade is strongly marked by some of the typical recreational, commercial and cultural activities of waterfronts.

The whole project has been constructed in little more than ten years, a remarkable achievement which many elected officials in Europe can only dream of!

The principal structures from south to north are:

1) The « Palacio de Cristal » (the Glass Palace), an old commercial hall belonging to the Eiffel workshops, which has been transformed into a multicultural space;
2) a commercial centre housing more than 200 commercial premises of varying sizes;
3) a big public area around the monument to Bolívar and San Martin, with two spectacular viewpoints giving views over the estuary;
4) a huge botanical garden and children’s play area;
5) two museum spaces dedicated to archaeology and contemporary art;
6) a theatre and the IMAX cinema;
7) underground parking below the Malecón surface.
This very diverse range of spaces is also a response to the cultural demand of a large, international city. Each structure was subject of specific competitive tenders, producing high quality projects. Today, Malecón Simon Bolívar is not only a favourite Sunday walk of the people of Guayaquil, but also one of the city’s principal tourist attractions. It is used by more than 20 million people every year.

So this operation to renew the Guayaquil waterfront, now remarkably well maintained, is a complete success, and demonstrates the viability of the management model applied. One of the keys to its success is certainly the continuity of Municipal policies since the initiative was launched in 1992. After Leon Febres Cordero, Jaime Nebot, mayor of the city since 2001, remained committed to actively pursue his predecessor’s urban redevelopment project. The model applied to create the Malecón Simon Bolívar has been reproduced with identical success along Estero Salado, an arm of the sea which forms the western boundary of the city centre and is connected to Malecón Simon Bolívar by the emblematic 9 de Octubre Avenue. It too has now been completely redeveloped.

Puerto Santa Ana, the emergence of a new residential and business district

To the north of Malecón Simon Bolívar, on the other side of the historic Las Peñas district where the city was founded in 1547, Puerto Santa Ana is a prolongation of the city’s transformation along the Estuary. The operation in this old port and industrial district was started in 2007, during the first term of the current mayor Jaime Nebot, and presents an evolution in the technique for urban transformation.

The whole ex industrial site, in particular with large breweries, was purchased by the Municipality. After the banks had been consolidated and roads built, half of the area was sold to private sector investors who are obliged to respect a very strict set of specifications. In particular, they are required to preserve and redevelop an important part of the existing industrial heritage. For example, silos in the sector have been converted into flats. The district is basically earmarked as a new residential sector with a collective housing for high earners.
Meanwhile the Municipality, through the Guayaquil Siglo 21 Foundation, has redeveloped public spaces with the same care shown in earlier operations. 50% of this space remains public and forms an extension of the promenade along the estuary. With the sales of these areas for the construction of dense private projects, the city hopes to obtain revenues with which to continue its urban regeneration policy.

Redevelopment work continues to the north with the introduction of residential and office blocks, such as "The Point" – at 36 storeys the highest in the country – which will become emblematic of Guayaquil’s burgeoning new business district.

PORT-CITY GOVERNANCE FOR THE FUTURE?

Other challenges lie ahead for the port-city of Guayaquil. The announcement of the relocation of part of the port’s functions and the creation of new container terminals should trigger overall consideration on development of the port-city zone, especially road transport problems.

Moreover, the city of Guayaquil is regularly affected by the "El Niño" weather phenomenon, and better coordination between port and city development would probably allow problems resulting from flooding of the rivers to be handled better.
The current institutional situation of the port-city, where management of the principal port is directly dependent on a Port Authority attached to the national Port Directorate, and completely independent of the Municipal administration, does nothing to facilitate dialogue. The site for the relocation of the port is particularly controversial.

AIVP is very familiar with this type of situation, but there is little chance of evolution without awareness of the benefits of setting up a port-city partnership which will serve the global ambitions of Guayaquil the port-city!

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*The City of Guayaquil is a member of AIVP*