

Worldwide

Argentina: Puerto Belgrano, the military port of Argentina

Graciela María Viñuales
TICCIH. Argentina

cenbarro@interserver.com.ar
centrobarro@hotmail.com

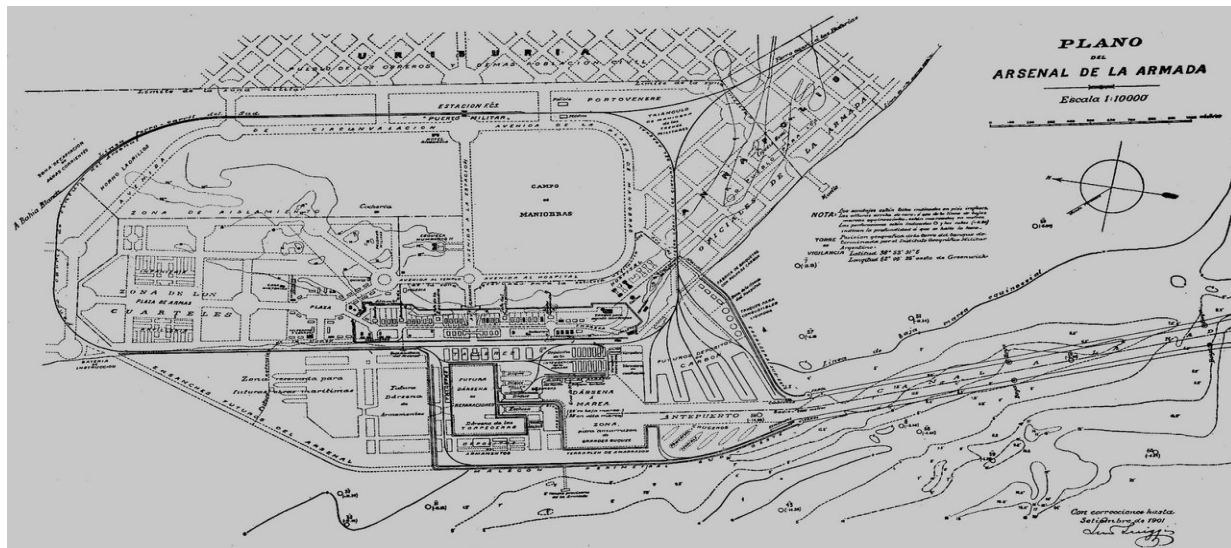
In the late-nineteenth century, Argentina decided to construct a military port, 700 km south of Buenos Aires. Its location was defined by a young officer, Félix Dufourq, and the Italian engineer Luigi Luiggi, who also designed the port facilities and the city where the marines and civilian personnel who worked on the site still live. It was a location like any “company town”, but with the care a strategic defensive point should have.

The law creating the port was passed in November 1896 and shortly afterwards construction of the port area began, finishing in 1908. Over the years, new buildings were included, according to subsequent technical and strategic developments.

The site is located in the Bahía Blanca estuary, an area of sandy deserts, and was preceded by a series of batteries that protected the entry with Krupp cannons and a signal optical system. In the port area stand out dry docks, pump houses, cranes and facilities for carpentry, metalwork, stonework and power plants.

The city was designed to an orthogonal grid and structured by avenues that linked the civilian area with the harbor port, grouped around housing for officers, commanders and NCOs. There were other buildings like the casino (or mess) for sailors, school, church, hospital, grocery, sports fields, nursery garden, as well as fruit trees and the use of hot springs and afforestation to fix the dunes, among other features.

Railways connected the batteries and the port with the city of Bahía Blanca, 25 km away, the first of them named “Estratégico” because its path was not visible from the sea and allowed movements of troops without being seen by enemies.



General Plan of the Arsenal by Luigi (1901). Below: reserved area for the dams and other port facilities, complemented by the railroad. Above: a set of avenues structure the civilian town.



Dry dock in use during 2006. At present time, Argentinian Navy ships and foreign merchant vessels are repaired here.

Photo: Alejo Gutierrez Viñuales. Archivo CEDODAL

Worldwide

The site had a very advanced design in comparison with similar settlements of the first decade of the twentieth century, even having an airfield. It was officially named “Puerto Belgrano” in 1923, when it had become a self-sufficient city, its afforestation had grown and the military port was the pride of the Nation, receiving distinguished visitors such as Edward of Windsor in 1931.

Today the batteries are disabled but have been declared a National Monument. Their dry docks maintain constant repair services for Argentine and foreign ships. It has set up a commercial port and the city has new features such as the NCOs training centre, high schools, shops, museums and a hotel. However, many of its facilities have become obsolete for different reasons.

A study conducted in 2006 defined the status of the heritage and proposed some guidelines for preservation. As a military site, it is hard to achieve these recommendations, despite their value as port facility which was innovative at the time and the number of individuals and companies from around the world with which Puerto Belgrano has been involved.

The main proposal is to make an inventory of the buildings. Thereafter, the heritage must be seen from a specialist perspective, not just for maintenance. Restoration should be focused in

the Temple because the tower has major problems due to its slenderness, and the winds and salty air. Also the Signal Tower must be treated at the foundations.

The oldest buildings look Italianate in style, such the Post Office, while others have a Tudor character, such as officers’ Casino. Several houses are picturesque and neo-colonial, but there are also constructions of the Modern Movement, such as the Optical Center. Singular buildings in the reserved area and in the common zone, and also the urban complex, such as the hospital or housing neighborhoods, should receive conservation treatment and perhaps restoration activities. New uses should be considered for the hotel, some sports facilities and many of the houses, which now are unused. The old railway station has been converted into a museum. Reuse programs are recommended to help their survival and generate greater unity between them.

All the signage and street furniture ought to be rearranged and repaired, helping to recover the unity and integrity of the heritage of the naval base. Finally, more attention needs to be given to the surviving records, especially those in the “Instalaciones Fijas” office, which are the original archives.

References: VIÑUALES, Graciela María, *Patrimonio urbano. Base Naval Puerto Belgrano*. Buenos Aires, Armada Nacional, 2006.



The Italianate style Signal Tower is situated at the top of a dune and is a local landmark, even though the optical system no longer works.

Photo: Alejo Gutiérrez Viñuales. Archivo CEDODAL