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City profile

Montevideo

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The city of Montevideo has experienced in the last 20 years significant urban changes that cannot be dissociated from a global context. In particular while the total population has remained stable, an ongoing urban restructuring is taking place. The emergence of 'new centralities' and 're-centralisation' processes can be observed with the construction of new consumption spaces, which generated a new peripheral condition of the city's traditional commercial 'centre'. In addition, significant changes in planning authorities and policies have led to an important debate on the strategies applied and the possible consequences of a market led and unpredicted urban growth for the future of Montevideo city. This city profile focuses first on the different stages of development of Montevideo describing geographical and historical conditions. Following the present urban structure is explored describing land use, population and socio-economic organisation. Finally, the last 20 years of the city's development and the effects of economic changes under globalisation on urban form and management structures are analysed.

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Introduction

During the past 20 years Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, has experienced significant urban changes that cannot be disassociated from a global context. While the country's population has remained stable, there is an ongoing urban restructuring through

which a number of 'new centralities'¹ are emerging and 're-centralisation' processes are taking place. This phe-

¹Saskia Sassen (2000) analyses the continuity of centrality in global economy systems. Urban structures need to be reorganised to maximise the possibilities of geographic dispersal. In this context 'new forms of centralities' away from the former central business districts are observed. In other words the centre can be extended to metropolitan areas in the form of a grid of nodes; additionally a 'transterritorial centre' can also be identified, partly constituted in digital space but needing the physical area of the world's most powerful business centres: New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, Frankfurt, Los Angeles, etc.

nomenon can be particularly observed in the *Coastal* strip, which has experienced significant urban growth with the waterfront becoming a major area of attraction for investments. Areas of 'new centrality' are also appearing in the city with the construction of shopping centres and mixed-use complexes, thus generating a 'new peripheral' condition for the traditional commercial *Centre* of Montevideo.

A lack of consistency in planning policies from both national and local authorities has led to an important debate in public-administrative and private circles and a call for attention to the consequences that this unpredictability could have on conservation of the territory's natural resources.

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The economic crisis that affected the River Plate region in the late 1990s had significant consequences for the development of national plans and on the implementation of governmental and foreign investments. The present condition of Montevideo reflects processes of urban and social restructuring with growing inequalities, minimal investments and internal migrations. These processes are generating an urban territory with increasing vacant areas, low quality public spaces and social services, and a noticeable intensification of the needs of the low-income population, leading to socio-spatial segregation.

This article first focuses on the history of Montevideo and its geographical location, investigating the different stages of development of the city, with special attention on the particularities generated by its historical relationship with the rest of the world: Spanish and British

Empires and the United States. Montevideo's existing urban structure is examined in the subsequent section, describing land use, population and socio-economic organisation. The final part analyses the last 20 years of the city's development and the effects of economic changes under globalisation on urban form and management structures, identifying the key issues of Montevideo's present condition.

Location and physical constrains

Uruguay's coastal location and level topography create a relatively uniform, temperate climate that is moderate, rainy and humid. The country's rolling grassland landscape, interspersed with wooded riverbanks offers expansive views of distant horizons. The southern plain, where Montevideo is located, shares with

Argentina the River Plate Estuary, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean.

The coastal ecosystems of Uruguay consist of important wetlands, migrating sand dunes and long stretches of beach separated by exposed rocky outcrops. The core of Montevideo is located in a natural bay on the River Plate front, but the city's sprawling urban area has generated a metropolitan region that extends along the east coast and towards north and west, containing almost two thirds of the country's population (see Figure 1).

History of Montevideo and urban form

Early history

The aboriginal population in the River Plate region at the time of Spanish colonisation was not settled in permanent organised communities such as those found in other Latin American regions, *Charrúa*, *chana* and *guarani*



Figure 1 This image indicates the location of Montevideo in Latin America. Source: © NASA Digital Archive: 'Earthlights' C. Mayhew & R. Simmon.

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