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EVOLVING ICONIZATION AND DESTINATION BUILDING: THE EXAMPLE OF CARTAGENA, COLOMBIA

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**Abstract**
This paper deals with the city of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, as a case of urban transformation geared towards tourism development. It intends to research the main processes which took place in different eras and shaped the city as it discovered its tourist potential. After a short introduction to Cartagena’s tourist space, the focus will be on the processes which effectively transformed a run-down colonial harbor city into a vibrant destination in less than a century. This is done by looking into the interplay of spatial and sociopolitical questions. This description is framed within theories of icons, iconization processes and semiological spaces. Since the city possesses an outstanding architectural heritage, it is intended to set this paper in the broader context of urban “icons” to see how the main attraction of Cartagena, namely its built heritage, has been managed and has contributed to shaping the city’s tourist profile.

**Keywords:** Destination development, Iconic development, Tourism stakeholders, Latin American historic city centres, Cartagena de Indias

1. **Introduction: Cartagena de Indias as a Tourist Space**
The city of Cartagena de Indias is considered Colombia’s ‘first’ tourist destination. Cartagena retains its fortresses and city walls from the colonial era – structures which have been marked as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO since 1984. Further, as it is on the shores of the Caribbean, the surrounding area is a sun-and-sand area, especially so the Islas del Rosario, an archipelago located close by, which consists of small islands with pristine waters, coral reefs and white-sandy beaches. Thus, the city has the potential to attract different types of tourism, as stated by the Columbian national tourism portal [www.colombia.travel](http://www.colombia.travel):

*The sea breeze and the sunset that transform the colors of 400-year-old houses enchant visitors in Cartagena. A World Heritage Site, this city was founded by Pedro de Heredia in 1533; the colonial architecture of its buildings is protected by the most complete set*
of fortifications in South America. The historic center enclosed by the walls of Cartagena is the soul of the city that inspired Gabriel García Márquez, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982. In addition to taking in the history of centuries-old cobblestone streets, you can explore the Castle of San Felipe or experience the wonder of the city’s many churches [...]. Known for the 6.8 miles of walls built around it by the Spanish, Cartagena has a historic center that should be explored slowly and without a care in the world. A number of festivals devoted to film and classical music are held here. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984, Cartagena is ideal for honeymoons, scuba diving, and cruises, among other activities. This city is an open air museum, but has much more than just culture and history. Cartagena is also a destination for sun and beach, water sports and crafts, among other options for travelers.

Founded by the Spanish conquerors, Cartagena quickly became a prominent port in the network of transportation of goods from the Americas to Spain. Its proximity to the Panama and Darien regions, as well as its role as gateway to the inland Andean region, made it a highly strategic location (Figure 1). That is why throughout its history it suffered from many invasions and ravages, so soon it had to be strongly fortified. Inside the walls, the city was developed in square blocks, much like any other city in Hispanic America, with the building of churches, convents, palaces and houses. Many of these buildings are still standing, contributing to the beauty and uniqueness of the place.

The historical and architectural value of the military heritage in Cartagena is clear, as Kagan (2000:124) states: “Cartagena de Indias erected what was surely among the most impressive arrays of artillery platforms, fortresses and walls ever constructed in the New World”. Today, Cartagena displays the longest stretch of colonial city walls in the Americas, some 4.5 km long.

The city descended into a declining socioeconomic and urban situation during the 19th century, after decades of decadence caused by the independence wars in 1810-1825. However, within the first few decades of the 20th century, and after a certain economic rebound, it became Colombia’s main tourist destination. This process was mainly pushed by the national elites which were supported by the local elites (Colombia, 1996), managing the
space in a clear attitude of *laissez faire.* The outcome is the production of the particular space and economic structure of Cartagena as we know it today. This process will be explored in greater depth in Section 4 by reviewing the historic evolution of the destination. As a multi-faceted, well-developed destination, Cartagena is especially appropriate to study the setup of icons and the shifting processes of iconization through time and space, that’s why a semiotics framework has been chosen for this article.

2. Framework and Methodology
To go beyond the mere historical chronicle of a particular destination, it is useful to test our research efforts against two theoretical frameworks to see how the destination ‘performs’, so as to make conclusions more explanatory. Two frameworks have been sourced within the literature about icons’ management, both simple but at the same time powerful explanatory tools. The first one is a model proposed by Sternberg (1997) and helps us to understand how far the icon(s) of a place are set out for tourism. This author argues that for tourist attractions to work – Sternberg uses the case of Niagara Falls – the iconic tourist experience needs to be carefully planned or ”prepared” for the visitors through two processes: staging and thematising. “Staging” refers to the display of the attraction by facilitating information and access to visitors, whereas “thematising” is related to the use of the attraction as a means to present stories or events relating to it, which might be real or fictitious. Sternberg insists that if one of these two processes fails, the tourist experience will come short of its goals and the iconicity of the site will diminish.

The other framework we chose draws its roots from De Saussure’s definition of the meaning of “signs” and the subsequent works about semiotics by Peirce. The semiotics paradigm applied to the interpretation of urban spaces has been used for some time: Demytrie (2000) studied the city of Tashkent under this theory. In tourism, semiotics was introduced by researchers like McCannell (1976) and Urry (1994; 2002). We will follow the theory as set out by Donaire (2008:201-211) where icons (or “symbols”) and their surroundings are explored and further broadened into “semiological landscapes”, retaking a concept originally developed by Urry. This concept provides us with a powerful apparatus in order to explain the

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1 French expression which translates as “Letting Do”. It is used to describe a minimal intervention of public authorities in certain matters, which are then taken over by the private sector.
evolution and current situation of Cartagena as a destination, especially its historic center, where most of its “iconic” architecture is located, including the city walls surrounding it. This approach introduces the concept of “semiological landscapes” as an “idea” more than a “real space”, so one can speak about semiological landscapes of the kind of an “Arab market”, a “Latin American Historic Centre”, a “European medieval town”, etc. Such landscapes are more than the sum of the nodes/points (i.e. individual monuments or icons) that make them up, as these are transformed into the “idea” of a type of landscape the tourist might have in mind. Regardless of its basic status as an “idea”, semiological landscapes also must accomplish certain features to be acknowledged as such: uniformity, uniqueness and exceptionality being some of these features – which are not easy to “objectively” measure. One of the purposes in this paper is to see how Cartagena’s historic center fits into this framework and to what extent it conforms to the “rules” defining semiological spaces.

Despite the obvious interest of this approach and its ability to deliver powerful explanations, this framework has not been much used by the tourism research community. While there is an abundance in research about iconic architecture as a developing catalyst for urban places or about the social aspects of icons and iconization processes (Section 3), only a handful of researchers have considered the semiotics framework as an analysis tool: Pennington and Thomsen (2010) or Thomsen and Prinzlau Vester (2016) are some of the few to do so. In fact, this framework is still being conceptualized by the tourism research community (Zhang and Sheng, 2017). Probably, as icons are more concrete and easier to conceptualize than the general semiotics approach, they have received much more attention. That’s why we depart from them in our literature review (Section 3). Even less attention has been payed to semiological landscapes and their dynamics, a gap which this paper tries to remedy.

The semiotic framework in tourism brings together two strings of research; the interpretation of meanings of places as described above, and the consideration of the geography of places. Wall (1996) develops three categories in which attractions might fall into, these are: spaces, arcs (or lines) and nodes (or points). The connections with the semiotic framework are that icons correspond to nodes (or nodes along a line) and spaces correspond to semiological landscapes -- when both nodes and spaces have undergone iconization processes.
this relationship is not a one-to-one, it is nonetheless hoped that the conclusions of this article will be of interest to both geographers and semiologists.

The fieldwork supporting this research consisted of interviews to several city actors in which they explained or gave their opinions about recent or past events in the destination. A total of 7 actors belonging to academia (2), public sector and organizations (3) and businesses (2) were interviewed at length about the destinations’ history and development. From here, we inferred the iconization processes presented further below. The rationale behind the interviewees’ choice was their knowledge and expertise about the city’s tourism development or with its urban management. To better grasp older periods, and to have further sources backing the study of more recent developments, we resorted to the literature and newspaper archives as well as some final projects of students of the Universidad de Cartagena. We then checked the information gathered from these sources in shorter interviews with 8 further local and national experts from the industry.

3. Literature Review: Icons, Icon Management and Iconization Processes
This section offers a review of the main topics around icons and their processes. We do so by grouping the reviewed papers under headings so as to offer the reader an overview.

1. Icons are socially constructed. Becken (2005) defines them as attractions which, via a consensus among the destination’s actors, have become “important”. Icons are quickly recognizable, built over time and, perhaps most importantly, “icons are famous because they are famous” (Urry, 2002), a sentence that shortly summarizes the self-reinforcing processes one can observe in many icons. Ram, Bjoerk and Weidenfeld (2016) conclude that an icon is socially constructed by the residents of a destination, who bestow upon it an “authenticity” of character. Rey Castillo-Villar (2016) stresses the social and identity component of this process and describes icons as “elements of the urban landscape able to influence urban identities and the experiences of people”. This social aspect of the definition opens a door to the multicultural construction of icons, so Tang, Morrison, Lehto, Kline and Pearce (2009) notice that Chinese equate iconicity with antiquity but Americans with modernity. In fact, most current authors attempting at a definition of icons ground them on their social, collective aspect,
making it a highly prominent one. Implicit in this approach is the reading that icons might become ground for contestation, as in Bruce and Creighton (2006), studying European walled cities and heritage “dissonances”, an article of special interest in consideration of Cartagena’s city walls as potential icons.

2. **Icons materialize in a variety of ways.** The literature gives an astonishing wide array of types of objects which can become icons: they can be natural (Tremblay, 2002; Wei Liu, Vogt, Lupi, Zhiyun and Jianguo, 2016), man-made attractions (Dybedal, 1998), of cultural nature (Ramukumba, 2014; Sharpley, 2007; Grodach, 2008; Tze-Ngai Vong and Ung, 2012) or intangible (Pearce, Morrison and Moscardo, 2003; Gómez Schettini, 2013). With several authors considering some events also as iconic (Section 3.5) attempting to formulate a definition along this line would be futile.

3. **Icons vary in their geographical sizes and spillover effects.** Icons’ scales as well as their range of influence can greatly differ: larger sections of the city can be considered iconic, for example certain streets, so the claim of Golan (2015) for Tel Aviv’s Rothschild Boulevard. Kong (2007) records the efforts of several large Asian cities to position themselves via cultural icons and place strategies, giving a fine-grained account of motives and goals which are more political than economical. But icons are not only important to big cities: Patachi (2015) chronicles the efforts of three middle-sized European cities at rebranding themselves through iconic architecture. Icons may also have spillover effects over a whole region, thus Simon (2010) reports the efforts that Paris and its region Ile-de-France are making to this purpose. Cànoves and Prat (2015:455), when inquiring about Barcelona’s spillover capabilities, ask: “What strategies must be designed to expand the tourist traffic beyond the attractions of the city of Barcelona to all of Catalonia?” In the conclusions we will retake this topic and apply it to Cartagena and its region.

4. **Icons show dynamic and complex processes, require careful management.** The modern construction and signification of icons has a long history: Billinge (1993) reviews the history of London’s Crystal Palace and the attempts at a modern-day reconstruction of it, with both eras full of political significance. Smith (2007) examines the
monumentality of Barcelona in two different epochs, studying the political tactics that were behind these two periods and uncovering interesting parallels. As exceptional marks, icons help to differentiate a destination and thus to highlight the location’s unique proposition(s). They might also be a source of diversification, as shown by Prat Forgas and Cànoves Valiente’s (2012) analysis of the Costa Brava and the Dalí Museums in the area. However, icons sometimes pose huge problems in terms of space and image management: Andre, Cortés and López (2003) report about the case of Figueres, Catalonia, in which the Dalí Museum functions as an icon but “surpasses” and consequently overshadows the town in which it is located. As a result, the same icon can be a blessing or a blight, therefore requiring a very careful management. In the conclusions section, we will return to this point as we think it has affected Cartagena’s product mix. Grodach (2008) in his study about Californian museums acting as flagships, points further that the space in which the attraction is located can favor or deter its regenerating potential, so automatically linking icons and regeneration of places would be wrong. Note that this partly contradicts what is said in the next section about iconic architecture. Additionally, other authors state that icons must be “renewed” in due course, no matter their importance, for instance Rabbiosi’s work on (2015) Paris.

The need to carefully manage icons, as stated by the authors reviewed in this subsection, connects with one of our theoretical frameworks, namely Sternberg’s. His proposal might be a practical solution to the questions posed by some researchers in this subsection and the previous one.

5. **Icons are anchors for renovation and development.** More than the “inherited”, historical icons, in recent decades the new iconic buildings by the world’s ‘starchitects’ have aroused huge interest (Specht, 2014). Among these, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao has become an “icon of icons” and possibly the most studied of this type (McNeill, 2000; Plaza, 2008; Franklin, 2016). The Guggenheim museum is not only interesting as an icon in itself, it is also an outstanding example of urban regeneration and rebranding. Therefore, there have been more studies which have researched into the built environment’s influence on the production and representation of space than
studies about the iconic character of the building itself. Andersson (2014) extends this idea to five “iconic” hotels which give rise to “iconic spaces” in different locations in Sweden. This combination of an icon and place renewal, the so-called “iconic development”, a concept discussed by Taylor, Beza and Jones (2016), has been imitated throughout the world since Guggenheim’s success: Zenker and Becken (2013) chronicle Hamburg’s efforts at rebranding itself through the Elbphilharmonie building, a project for renovating a larger area as well, while Miles (2005) illustrates the tensions of cultural regeneration in Newcastle, England. However, these authors recognize the social aspect as a crucial one: “The success of investment in iconic cultural projects depends above all upon people’s sense of belonging in a place and the degree to which culture-led regeneration can engage with that sense of belonging, whilst balancing achievements of the past with ambitions for the future” (Miles, 2005). Some events are also considered ‘iconic’ contributing thus to a city’s iconicity and rebranding, as the case of Barcelona with the Olympics of 1992 (Degen, 2004; Smith, 2007) or even the events held in smaller places (Eizenberg and Cohen, 2015). Obviously, ‘starchitecture’ and events bring icon management closer to place strategy and place branding initiatives.

6. World Heritage Sites (WHS) as icons: mixed blessings. Some years ago it seemed quite straightforward that UNESCO nominations created strong brands which protected and strongly marketed a site (Shackley, 1998), therefore setting off an iconization process. Later on, it was found that this process was not such a straightforward one and had to be refined on a more case-specific line (Leask and Fyall, 2006). So Dewar, Du Cros and Li (2012) as well as Tze-Ngai Vong and Ung (2013) found a very low WHS brand awareness in Macao’s cultural tourists, which amounts to implying that the UNESCO brand has, in certain circumstances, minimal effects on the heritage it marks. Currently there are even some scholars openly defying the alleged benefits of a WHS nomination, as Poria, Reichel and Cohen (2011) who found very low brand equity at several UNESCO sites or Caust and Vecco (2017) with the meaningful title “Is UNESCO World Heritage recognition a blessing or burden? […]”. So it seems that, in recent years, faith in the WHS brand and its effects, for some scholars, has diminished. This point is
to be taken into account when studying Cartagena, as the city’s built heritage is a WHS site.

In the next sections, we will take a closer look at some of the points raised here, like the social construction of icons, which are the object of a public consensus or the basis of strategic city development. Eventually, icons benefit not only a city but a whole region around it or even the country in which they are settled. And in some cases, icons “surpass” or absorb their surroundings. To what extent does this apply to Cartagena?

4. The Production of Tourist Space in Cartagena and the setting up of the Tourist Industry
This section reviews some of the milestones of the city in becoming a tourist destination while, at the same time, producing the adequate tourist space. We have selected the facts we think are most relevant, but, as the city’s history in relation to tourism stretches over a century, this section also necessarily “compresses” these events to form an abridged historical overview. The subsections below as well as the timeline template (Table 1) shall help the reader in navigating through the different eras of the destination. While the turning of Cartagena’s urban space into a tourist destination under a semiotic reading is this paper’s main point of interest, secondarily it will be touched upon topics like economic development, urban management, built heritage production or public investment.

4.1. Discovering Tourism: 1920-1950
Cartagena’s tourism is considered to have started in the 1920s as it became a port of call in the circuits of the nascent US cruise liner industry, so several authors consider this decade and the 1930s as the “foundation” years of the tourism industry in which the city “discovered its tourist vocation” (Ávila Domínguez, 2008:59; Galvis and Aguilera, 1999). The destination offered those visitors two main monuments: the castle of San Felipe and the monastery of La Popa (Figure 2). These were two landmarks located far away from the historic center, which was excluded from the city’s sightseeing program, as it was at that time in a deplorable state of decay.
In 1924, the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas (“Public Works Society”) was founded, an institution made up by the local elites whose goal was to ensure the maintenance of the city’s military built heritage. They would fulfill this function for the following 90 years. With the foundation of the Society, it became clear that the city walls were to be saved from demolition and the city’s military built heritage would be kept. In retrospect, the Sociedad showed three traits that would prevail in Cartagena’s built heritage management for decades: the first one was the elites safeguarding the city’s heritage mainly for their own enjoyment, excluding the lower classes. The second trait was the economically self-sufficient management of the monuments as an early push towards neoliberal place management. Finally, the third one was putting forth the military architecture as the city’s sole heritage -- only in the 1980s with the UNESCO nomination did other types of heritage become visible, and only in very recent years have intangible attractions emerged. Interestingly, the start of regular cruise tourism took place in the same period that the Sociedad was founded and the city decided to preserve its military built heritage; therefore the production of space and the selling of it were almost contemporary, as far as this era is concerned.

In the 1930s, two noticeable facts to boost tourism took place: following one of the first national tourist regulations, the local Tourist Information Office was inaugurated in 1931. So was the sea terminal at Manga, relatively close to the city center, which started operations in the mid-thirties to better serve the cruise liners arriving to the city (Figure 2). The success of cruise liners in those decades, as between 1935 and 1940 some 90,000 tourists visited the city in almost 650 ships, can be linked to the city’s continued interest in promoting itself as a cruise destination. These beginnings of international tourism also partly explain, in the author’s opinion, why Cartagena has shown much more interest in attracting foreign tourists than national tourists.

Not long after this initial opening up of the cruise industry, in the 1930s another process started, which was the festivalization of the city. This process has been continued and enlarged over time. It began as early as 1935 with the first beauty contest pageant for Miss Colombia and, over the years, other cultural or musical events have joined in this festivalization effort, so as to give the city a “cultural allure”. In the literature, a great deal of authors argue that, in many cases, festivalization tends to produce social segregation as well
as control and domestication of public space. Under this vision, festivals provide public meeting spaces for the elites, whose status is reaffirmed, and at the same time marginalize the lower classes by excluding them from the event, so Belghazi (2006) for the case of Fez, Morocco. In other cases, festivalization becomes a more inclusive strategy, although still centrally controlled (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz, 2011; Ross Macdonald, 2012). In the case of Cartagena, festivals have been a form of exclusion against the lower classes as no effort has been made to involve them in the events. On top of this, the Miss Colombia contest falls together in the same dates as the local festivities, which has meant that, with the passing of time, the former has emptied the latter of significance and resources. Only very recently, some local institutions have worked hard to make the local festivities attractive for the population but this is more of a resistance gesture than an organization of a mass appeal.

Festivals and large events in Cartagena have used the city’s built heritage as a necessary backdrop, especially the city walls. They have thus served as a promotional tool and have in turn reinforced the city’s architecture, especially the colonial military structures, as an icon in the city, along the lines pointed out in Section 3.5. Consequently, in Cartagena, as soon as the space is produced, it becomes marketed as well – and this is a process that began very early in the tourist history of the city. Interestingly, the festivalization and its consequences have remained mostly unseen by local researchers, who have favored spatial and socioeconomic causes to explain the city’s sharp social segregation.

The early touristification and iconization processes continued into the 1940s with the nomination of the city as the "first national tourist destination" by the national government in 1941. Following this, the national government heavily invested in the destination for decades. This is clearly explained in Colombia (1996:118) which ascribes to the national government the biggest burden in initiatives and investments in Cartagena throughout the decades, leaving the local government and the private sector in quite a secondary place as far as destination development goes. Another noticeable date is 1946, the year in which the city’s first international tourist hotel opens, the Hotel Caribe (Table 1), still operating nowadays. Deavila Pertuz sums up this era as follows:

What ultimately takes place in Cartagena during the 1940s is a restructuring of the city profile. The local politicians around the city’s government, the businessmen and the
civic leaders began to realize that tourism could become the basis of the local economy. Trade, which had been up to then the spine of the economic activity in the city, had no choice but to give way to a powerfully emergent tourism industry. Deavila Pertuz (2010:2)².

4.2. Developing Tourism and Re-discovering the City Centre: from 1950 to 1980

In the years from 1950 to 1970, tourism evolved very slowly in the city. It was a form of tourism essentially based on the appeal of sun and sand, reflecting the tastes of travelers to other parts of the world at that time. The tourist activity revolved around the peninsula of Bocagrande as, due to a very bad state of conservation, the historic city center and its walls played a very secondary role in the hierarchy of local attractions. Therefore, “cultural visits” were limited to the castle of San Felipe and the monastery of La Popa, both monuments well outside the historic center (Figure 2). Hotel owners in Bocagrande were against the development of tourism activities in other parts of the city than the beaches, as they thought tourists might be lured away from them. This partly explains that, for decades, the city’s main product was sun and sea and not built heritage.

In the 1970s, as sun and sand tourism was fully developing in Bocagrande, some members of the national elite set their eyes on the historic center as an alternative, quieter space. Several among them bought houses there and refurbished them, a process that became popular in the course of that decade and points towards a “re-discovery” of the historic center by the national elites. Rojas (1999) states that, in most cases, this process was more of a “heart-driven” one than a “reason-driven” one, for it was unlikely that the investments made would be profitable and few people were thinking of their newly-acquired properties as assets. According to Rojas,

The private sector began investing more heavily in the historic center in the 1970s because of Cartagena’s growing reputation for tourism, and because it offered the wealthy a refuge from the massive tourist development that had sprung up [...] in Bocagrande. Rojas (1999:53).

² Quotations in Spanish translated into English by the author
The renewal of historic centers was not only a local tendency but one that can be retraced worldwide starting from that era. Almazdoz (2015:158) suggests that a whole host of Latin American historic city centers started renovations by the 1970s out of the need for cities to differentiate themselves by introducing ‘variety’ in their urban landscapes, which puts these efforts in the frame of neoliberal ‘strategic planning’. So a pattern which became quite common throughout the continent was that the public sector paid for the renovation of spaces in the historic centers and some elites bought properties and renovated them, without caring much about the value of their assets, as stated above. Scarpaci (2005:123) enlarges this general philosophy of ‘strategic city planning’ as to encompass the whole of the 20th century, stating that letting the city centers decay first and renovating them later on were two sides of the same coin.

Alongside investment in private houses, hotel investment took place in the historic city center of Cartagena in a mutually reinforcing process. Rojas (1999) sees the development of the historic center of Cartagena as an almost “perfect cooperation” between the public and private sectors, which happened “by chance”, and brought together public and private interests. As a result, one of the “most vibrant and dynamic city centers in Latin America” emerged. In the words of Bromley:

In Cartagena, planning for tourism and its development outside the historic city has been critical in drawing private investment into the historic center. This private investment is associated with the staying visitor, who would probably not be there had it not been for tourism planning and the wider tourism attractions of Cartagena (Bromley, 2000:39).

Rojas (1999:34-35) compares the case of Cartagena with Quito, Ecuador, and Recife, Brazil, and remarks that authorities in Cartagena were the most liberal ones, as far as public intervention was concerned, keeping their functions in the revitalization process to a minimum and giving much room to the private investors. This contrasts with the cases of Quito and Recife, where authorities intervened by partly taking over functions of the private sector. Monsalve Morales (2011) compares Cartagena’s management with Cusco, Peru, coming to the same conclusions as Rojas does. Nova, Fegali and Senior (2001) also think that the city
planners have mostly applied the principles of laissez faire. That is probably why Scarpaci (2005:148) presents the case of Cartagena chiefly from the point of view of land value and real estate, uncovering phenomena like gentrification or change of functions, phenomena which have become much more advanced in the course of the last decade, as discussed in Section 4.5.

4.3 Iconization Processes of Cartagena’s Built Heritage: 1980 to 2000

The perfect touchstone for the iconization of the city’s military built heritage was of course its nomination as World Heritage Site in 1984. The city expected some promotion from the nomination, but mainly funding for renovation, according to several interviewed experts. However, despite its potential effects, it is worth noting here that the UNESCO declaration had a relatively minor impact on the urban processes that were going on in the historic center at that time. If anything, it just pushed them a bit further -- which is surprising, given the powerful, transformational changes that UNESCO nominations generally bring about nowadays. Samudio Trallero (2006) states that, in the year of the nomination, “the world set their eyes on Cartagena’s historic center and a frenzy of building activity started there”. This cannot be the case, as we have seen that building in the historic city started in the 1970s and by the end of that decade it was well under way. It is conceivable that the 1984 nomination merely accelerated this process, not started it. In fact, De Pombo Pareja (1999:253) sees the beginnings of the building activity in the historic center around 1960 “with the subsequent change of uses and inhabitants”, a fact confirmed by Colombia (1996:117) in a report which states that the renovation of the historic center had been going on for three decades and in the mid-1990s “was about to be completed”. With Rojas (see above) asserting that building activity started in the 1970s and was “well under way” in the 1980s, we have to be very careful with the claims about the speed at which the renovation of the historic center was made. It is worth mentioning here that Scarpaci (2005) shows evidence that the concession of building permits in the historic center in the 1990s fluctuated greatly from one year to the next, and were quite flat by the beginning of the century as terror and crisis would strike Colombia. However, all this shows an evolution towards a more rational approach to real estate in the 1990s and 2000s than the heart-driven approach reported by Rojas for the 1970s.
It is also important to note that the UNESCO declaration had a very low impact in the promotion of the city, which continued to market itself as a sun and sand destination. Also in 1985, due to severe natural catastrophes and terror waves, Cartagena’s nomination effects dissolved into oblivion. This would put Cartagena on the list of WHS properties whose iconicity did not change much after nomination, as in Section 3.6. However, and according to several of our informants, a surprising effect of the nomination was the rise in importance of the domestic and religious architecture of the city, until then quite overlooked. Although the UNESCO nomination only made reference to the military architecture, apparently the combined effect of renovating the city and the World Heritage nomination resulted in an increased awareness of these two types of architecture. In fact, the most reputed studies about Cartagena’s domestic architecture to-date are from that era: Téllez and Moure (1982), Covo (1988) as well as Téllez and Moure (1993).

City planning and conservation were reinforced after the nomination, so that for each building inside the walls conservation rules were given and a typology of edifices was set up in 1992. So finally what the nomination did was to give full recognition to the different types of architecture in the city, until then quite overshadowed by the military architecture. Needless to say, in this rebalancing of monuments and attractions, the military architecture in general, and the city walls in particular, lost some of their weight as icons but the overall image of the city’s heritage became better balanced. According to the theories we have introduced in Section 2, a crucial point must be emphasized: this is the beginning of the construction of a “semiological landscape”, i.e. the making of the historic center into an “idea” rather than a functioning space; this will be further discussed in the final section.

A push for the revival of the historic center in that epoch came from an area which had been, at least in part, a competitor to it: since the end of the 1980s, the beach area of Bocagrande started showing some signs of maturity, with infrastructure problems and densification, as no urban plans had been set up for this area, according to an expert interviewed for this paper. Probably the most damaging of these problems was the collapse of the sewage system, so that dirty waters would flow into the beaches making them unusable in the years 1992-3. Therefore, the industry started then to look to the northern areas of La Boquilla and Los Morros (Figure 2) as new development areas. At the same time, the historic center was seen
as an alternative to the beaches and, for the first time, all of the city’s actors became aware of the potential of the built heritage as a tourist attraction. This further reinforced the value and iconicity of the city’s built heritage. The Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas started renting parts of the structure to private enterprises (mainly restaurants or cafés) or for events, a value-catching policy seen in many other historic city centers as well.

While too much building on a seaside area might be related to environmental problems, in the case of Cartagena, the dual space “beach – historic center” has been a benefit to tourism in general, and to heritage conservation in particular. Bromley very clearly explains this fact and makes a highly interesting proposal:

A symbiotic relationship between beach resort and historic city has meant that the detrimental effects of tourism have tended to be concentrated in the beach resort city. The historic city has not become a crowded tourism attraction. The beach resort has attracted enough tourism interest to draw investment into the conservation of the historic city, but not so much tourism as to have negative effects. The balance is beneficial. A policy lesson might be that in historic cities where there is no obvious alternative tourism attraction to the urban conservation area, then it would be advantageous to create such an attraction. The alternative tourist attraction could then adopt the roles both of generating some of the additional income necessary for conservation investments and also of removing some of the potentially damaging tourism pressures from the historic conservation area. Bromley (2000:40-1).

4.5 A Critical View of Today’s Cartagena Historic Center

As for the city’s current situation, it must be said that, since the 1990s, rehabilitation of the historic city center and gentrification have gone hand in hand to produce a sanitized and “museumified” space for today’s tourist in Cartagena. Nova, Fegali and Senior (2001) found the city to be in a “heritage crisis” due to bad planning and management. Contributions to Angulo Guerra (ed.) (2001) claimed for a wider concept of planning which avoids “museumification” by welding at the same time the historic center with the newer neighbourhoods. Some of our interviewees criticized the historic city’s “museumification” process, which is followed by land speculation and high real estate prices, all of which evicts locals (Posso, 2015). Tax incentives for residents to renovate their houses have been found to
be too tepid in the course of the last decades, as we can see from the literature and our interviews. Some fifteen years ago, Scarpaci (2005) still found the different uses of the historic city well balanced, though he pointed at the issue of façadism when reporting about house restorations. But in the intervening years, the loss of administrative functions of the center and the displacement of its inhabitants are more than evident, according to Bustamante (2015) and our own observations. Thus, recent renovation efforts by local authorities have apparently failed in attracting residents and diversifying the economy. An example of this is the Plan de Revitalización del Centro Histórico (2006-2010) which went under the motto “Living Center” but was only partially executed and came short of its goals, according to several informants. It comes as no surprise therefore that Bustamante (2015) claims that only a clear political vision with the aim to balance residents’ living and tourism development can save the historic center from becoming completely gentrified, like other historic centers in Latin America.

An open question here is whether iconization of spaces and gentrification must necessarily go hand in hand and whether there is the chance to create a highly symbolical space without having locals evicted and the area’s economy totally geared towards visitors.

5. Discussion, Conclusions and Proposals
This article has explored the central issues and processes which have shaped the city of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, and made it the tourist space it nowadays is. The author has tried to combine the analysis of different aspects as space production and urban regeneration under the heading of the iconization the city has experienced.

Until the 1970s the city displayed several “standalone” monuments or landmarks to its visitors like the castle of San Felipe or the monastery of La Popa and, to a lesser extent, the city walls. The historic center was not then a semiological space. The materialization of it came mainly in the 1980s as a semiological landscape was created by avoiding the emergence of single icons, i.e. by conserving and promoting all types of architecture which were present in the historic center. The production, or rather the emergence, of a semiological space which corresponds to the “Latin American colonial city” developed without authorities having planned for it, just by providing recognition to all forms of built heritage in the historic center,
notwithstanding the fact that UNESCO’s nomination made reference only to the military built heritage. The historic center developed thus, as a whole, into an icon, an almost perfect one, i.e. a space with single monuments without any of these being of a “higher value” than others, forming a unique and coherent space for visitors. In fact, there are impressive cathedrals, churches or palaces in other Latin American cities, many of them remarkable standalone monuments (“icons”) but only few places on the continent display such a powerful symbolic space as Cartagena’s historic center does. Further, it is noticed that the local tourist board promotes Cartagena’s historic center as a semiological landscape, and the long citation in Section 1 is a good example of this: save for San Felipe, no monuments are named therein, but the text is full of expressions suggesting an “ideal space” and how to interact with it.

Icons are dynamic by nature (Section 3), so icons in Cartagena have changed in the course of the last century: as was said in Section 4, until the 1970s the castle of San Felipe and La Popa’s monastery were the most prominent sights; however since the 1980s, with the emergence of a semiological space in the historic city, it is the historic center which has become the most iconic space, overshadowing the other two which are now standalone monuments well outside the center (Figure 2). These interactions among different icons in geographically close spaces are relatively unknown so they are an area for further investigation.

Additionally, the semiological landscape of the historic center of Cartagena is a double-edged one: inside the city walls, one wanders calmly through an idyllic Hispanic colonial city. However, when the place is seen from the outside, either on land or on sea, the city walls and bastions emerge in all their power, suggesting visions of war and military strength, visions which are quite contrasting to the colonial city space inside the walls. Perhaps the semiotic approach to tourist spaces should take into account that some of these spaces are multifaceted, depending on the making of the space as well as the stance of the observer.

In the conclusion of the literature review, key points were raised about the city’s iconic development. First, the social component of the iconization processes is confirmed in our review of the destination’s history: in the case of Cartagena, it is mainly the social factor, either deliberately or via *laissez faire*, that explains the touristification of the city and the creation of iconic spaces within it, much as seen in Section 3.5. In the literature review, the question was
raised about the ability of icons to disperse their beneficial effects over a whole region – or “surpass” it. Cartagena is no doubt a Colombian national icon and, as such, it may be a gently disruptive influence on the perception of an extremely diverse country by overshadowing other landscapes or monuments. This danger is acknowledged in some way by the national tourism authorities who in 2015 produced a promotional video for the whole country... excluding Cartagena and having the local tourist board rejecting it (El Heraldo, 2015). But at a regional level the city has limited spill-over effects: Cartagena’s region is currently not profiting from the tourism development of the city and in fact tourism there is in quite an early stage of development. The conclusion here confirms what Donaire (2008) says about the power of icons: they are so dominant that they “engulf” every other tourist resource at both national and regional levels, making their sustainable management very hard.

What has happened at a regional or national level in Cartagena has also happened at a local scale; the semiological landscape of the historic center is so strong that it has prevented the emergence of other types of attractions. This explains why other local resources have had such a meager development when compared to the military built heritage. That is the case for the art déco architecture from the turning of the 20th century, an exquisite heritage in several neighborhoods, or the intangible heritage (gastronomy, music, dance, etc.) which have been considered very marginal products—if at all—by the local tourist industry. So apparently strong semiological spaces may overshadow the geographical product mix of a region or nation but also they strongly bias the local product mix as well, confirming the discussion in Section 3.4.

We also have checked the city’s heritage, particularly the military built heritage, against Sternberg’s framework as mentioned in Section 2, and found out that attractions’ staging is impressive: the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas have taken good care of the city’s military heritage and have done a good job in restoring and keeping it, opening it to visitors and locals. Thanks to an activity program targeted to schools and residents, the local population has gained access to the military heritage and has been able to engage with it. The staging of the city walls could of course be much improved if the city had an interpretation center for them: the walls are a distinguishing trait of Cartagena and they have changed over time (as have the surrounding fortresses), according to the different defense schemes adopted by the city. All this is today –very sadly- invisible to the visitor, who leaves the city without having grasped
how the walls worked as a defense tool, in combination with the rest of the fortresses which are scattered throughout the Bay of Cartagena.

The second step Sternberg proposes is thematization. Here we must say that the city lags behind: there are no proposals to make the city walls and the rest of the (military) heritage come alive. Cartagena could be a city of navigators, a city of conquerors or a city of pirates, possibly with festivals organized around these topics. Staging a sea battle on the Bay, for example, would be a most attractive event. Reviving the city’s characters of the colonial and republican eras would be very appealing. And this staging would be of interest to locals and tourists alike. So we think there is a long way to go until this heritage has been brought back to life or ‘thematized’. Certainly, by thematizing a place one risks overriding its authenticity, so the former must be carried out in a way that does not conflict with the latter – which is easier said than done.

To conclude, we summarize some of the contributions of this paper: we have revealed that the city’s UNESCO nomination in 1984 did not essentially alter the urban processes that were in course but just pushed them slightly further. The emergence of the heritage product in the city did not diminish the importance of sun and sand tourism until the 2000s and the UNESCO nomination helped to level the different types of Cartagena’s architecture, creating thus a semiological space. Comparing Cartagena with other Latin American destinations, we have seen that elsewhere the state took up a much more active role in renovating the historic center, whereas in Cartagena a much more neoliberal approach was taken. Therefore, the processes of space creation and urban renovation as well as the making of Cartagena as a destination have seen massive public investment on one hand, but on the other hand a management by the private sector with all the social, economic and managerial consequences that this implies.

Future work building on this article will have to tackle issues left out because of limited space. Governance, financial and social issues or planning history are just examples of topics that would widen our research. Also, a broader comparison comprising other Latin American historic centers would surely shed more light onto the processes we have studied in this paper.
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