

PIOTR STALONY-DOBRZAŃSKI*

BUENOS AIRES CORNER BUILDINGS

DOMY NAROŻNE BUENOS AIRES

Abstract

The identity of corner buildings in Buenos Aires, despite its association with legends of the town, looks very similar to the one we can find in our cities. Even examples that became symbols of the city, such as the Kavanagh building, have citygenic characteristics, becoming urban structures the same way as everywhere else in the world. We should focus on the corner building as a special case because of the unforgiving nature of its authors.

Keywords: Buenos Aires, corner buildings, city

Streszczenie

Tożsamości domów narożnych w Buenos Aires, pomimo powiązań z legendami miasta, wydają się być takie same, które odnajdziemy w swoich miastach. Nawet te przykłady, które stały się symbolami miasta, takimi jak budynek Kavanagh w Buenos Aires, posiadają cechy miastotwórcze, stając się elementami tworzącymi strukturę urbanistyczną w taki sam sposób w każdym mieście. Należy zwrócić uwagę, że dom narożny to szczególny przypadek, może przez to niewybaczający błędów autorom.

Słowa kluczowe: Buenos Aires, dom narożny, miasto

* M.Sc. Eng. Arch. Piotr Stalony-Dobrzański, Institute of Architectural Design, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology.

Manuel Cruz¹ wrote about the grotesque situation that happened to him in the Florida Garden café in Buenos Aires:

„In the city of Buenos Aires, on crossroads between the famed Florida Street and Paraguay Street, there is an old café called *Florida Garden*. A couple of weeks ago, when I had breakfast there, I was surprised to see that on the small napkins that lie on every table, there are inscriptions. Those inscriptions stated: “Florida Garden. The identity of a corner”. (...) At least I could say to myself: “Go by God (so to speak, of course), if now we have to expect that even corners have identities.”²

We can understand the irritation of the philosopher over people trying to assign identity even to corners. We should point out that further in the article, he focuses on the identity and independence of Catalonia. We understand that the situation, which he brought up, was just a pretext to debate a different topic. The author of this elaboration used it to ponder on corner buildings. It seems that the author of the napkin inscription was right after all. When we end up on Florida Street in the capital of Argentina, with time we begin understand how important of a role this exclusive pathway plays in city. We will find a reason to discover the identity of this corner. Within a short distance, we can find multiple corners with analogical examples in our towns. Often, examples that are interesting to us can be found in places where streets meet, which in typical Spanish style happens when the typical orthogonal system is cut by much wider avenues. Beginning our journey from St. Martin square, we can find Kavanagh building. The place for the future architectural city symbol was the building plot between San Martin and Florida Streets, one of the most exclusive city locations even then. The plan of the Buenos Aires Committee of Aesthetics stated: “grand gate to city”³

There is a legend associated with the project about unfulfilled love between young members of the Kavanagh and Anchorema families. The tale tells that Corina Kavanagh, driven by the need of vengeance towards the Anchorema family, wanted to hide a Church and the Palace of Holy Sacrament that belonged to the Anchorema family.

In *La Nación*, in 1934, there was a note after investors got all the needed permits:

”Buenos Aires wants to get rid of dullness, which oppress it, its designers and critics, often mentioning it, now the city has a chance to get a space much better than regular.”⁴

Edificio Kavanagh was designed by architects: Ernesto Lagos and Luis Maria de la Torre and engineer Gregorio Sánchez from Sánchez, Lagos y de la Torre design studio. It was erected in 1934–1936 in the spirit of modernism. When it was built, it was the tallest building in South America and the first that featured central air-conditioning. It has grown into the city

¹ M. Cruz is philosophy professor on University of Barcelona, and works in Modern Philosophy Department.

² „En la ciudad de Buenos Aires, en el cruce de la famosa calle Florida con la de Paraguay, se encuentra situada una antigua cafetería llamada Florida Garden. Desayunaba en ella hace pocas semanas cuando me llevé la sorpresa de comprobar que en las pequeñas servilletas de papel que se les ofrecen a los clientes en todas las mesas viene escrito el siguiente texto: “Florida Garden. La identidad de una esquina”. no pude por menos que pensar para mis adentros: “Vaya por Dios (es un decir, claro), ¡si ahora va a resultar que hasta las esquinas tienen identidad!”.” M.Cruz, *La intetidad de una esquina*, “EI Pais”, 07.12.2005.

³ L. Contreras *RASCACIELOS PORTEÑOS Historia de la Edificación en altura en Buenos Aires (1580–2005)* Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2005, p. 120.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

outline from the very first day; it became a symbol of a space known as St. Martin square. With time, even the entire Buenos Aires. In 1994, it was accepted by the American Society of Civil Engineers as a “milestone of international engineering”; in 1999, it was entered by UNESCO onto the World’s Heritage of Modernistic Architecture as a Historical National Monument. It is described in similar tone by César Pelli, explaining why it is going to be always treated as “this” skyscraper of Buenos Aires, even though is not the tallest anymore.

“It reaches beyond its height, and has the symbolic, spiritual role to be distinctive on the sky. It is agreed that [this] skyscraper is responsible for shaping the city’s outline. We cannot imagine Paris without the Eiffel Tower or New York City without the Empire State Building. Kavanagh edifice is just a good skyscraper. It touches the sky with a couple of steps full of gentleness and its base is recognisable and delicate. [...] Being the facade for St. Martin Square, it is responsible for its character and scale. [...] In a situation when the skyscraper can represent the character of the city, it gets respect and care from its inhabitants. That goes with the Chrysler Building in New York and the Kavanagh building in Buenos Aires.”⁵

Going further, we will find a mentioned of the “Florida Garden” café located in the building. We can find a similar one in every city. A corner cut at 45 degrees – corner á la Ildefons Cerdà. Next, we go to *Galeria Pacifico*, a building with history circling around *Bon Marché*; but first things first, when in 1984 the first part of Gallery, designed by Agrelo Le Vacher, based on European designs like Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan. It was supposed to be Gallery-Precinct covering the entire space between the following streets: Florida, Cordoba, San Martin, Viamonte, but because of the economic crisis of the late 19th century, the project was half finished. In 1896, part of it became the National Museum, until 1908 when the building was acquired by the Argentinean railways. Reconstruction was led by architect Juan Carlos López. In 1945, murals were added by artists like: Antonio Berni, Lino Spilimbergo, Juan Carlos Castagnino, Demetrio Urruchúa y Manuel Colmeiro. Both actions did not improve the state of the building; its best time was not to come before 1989, when it was entered into the register of National Monuments of Argentina and put under adaptation works in order to make it into a luxurious shopping centre, while keeping the original architecture intact. Now, it represents a place that is too important to skip when travelling through Buenos Aires.

On the corner of Florida and Sarmiento, we can find the museum of arts, which has been functioning since 2015, the former being the headquarters of the Buenos Aires City Bank. The building acquired its modernistic form in 1981 after all the stages of reconstruction designed by a pair of architects: Aslan and Ezcurra. The applied solutions resemble simplified examples of filling with glass and metal openings from the original building from 1907.

⁵ “un rascacielos va más allá [de la altura] y responde también al rol simbólico-espiritual de destacarse sobre el cielo. Reconoce que la gran altura trae aparejada la responsabilidad de darle forma a la silueta de la ciudad. No podemos imaginarnos a París sin la torre Eiffel o a Nueva York sin el Empire State. El edificio Kavanagh es un buen rascacielos. Llega al cielo en varios pasos reverentes y su tope es delicado y reconocible. [...] Crea además una gran fachada a la Plaza San Martín, en escala y en carácter con ella. [...] Cuando un rascacielos llega a expresar el carácter de una ciudad contra el cielo, se gana la estima y el cariño de su gente. Eso pasa con el edificio Chrysler en Nueva York y con el Kavanagh en Buenos Aires.” L. Contreras *RASCACIELOS PORTEÑOS Historia de la Edificación en altura en Buenos Aires (1580–2005)* Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2005, p. 126.



III.1. Kavanagh building in Buenos Aires , fot. Alex Proimos

In 1926, Carlos Vilar, with his brother Antonio, received the first prize in contest to design People's Bank of Argentina headquarters. Architect Norberto Feal described the work of the Vilar brothers:

"[...] it is clear that the People's Bank tries to solve the problem of articulation between the norms of neo-colonialism and abstract rationalism. In a sense, the People's Bank becomes a battlefield between difficulties to break with historicism and abstractly emerging modern design. Tensions, which will obviously arise, are balanced by the purity of craft. Those were of course intended actions in order to organise the spheres, thanks to which the Argentina People's Bank became an important and recognisable edifice, which defines (organises) a new language model, and which will crystallise in early forties and will infiltrate many of the architecture works in times of the Peronist government. Summing up, the Argentina People's Bank is an important example in which we can find signs of depletion in neo-colonial means of first articulation projects, and also the chance to modernise historicism."⁶

From this, we can understand how important this project was to Buenos Aires. Currently, the building belongs to the HSBC bank and the corner tower, twisted by 45° to the side facades, became a symbol of this place.

On the Diagonal Norte and Florida crossway, we have two corner buildings – the Bencich building and the First National Boston Bank. The former was built for Miguel Bencich and was designed in 1927 by French architect Eduardo Le Monnier. It connects elements of classicism and academic art. Looking at Roque Sáenz Peña Avenue (known as well as Diagonal Norte) from Plaza de Mayo domes Bencich monument form one of the city gates, not only to Republic Square, but to St. Martin Square as well. On the other side, we have the building of the First National Boston Bank, completed entrance portal. We can find an inscription – a citation from the main entrance to Hospital de Santa Cruz in Toledo (currently arts museum). At the end of the Florida pathway, there is the La Equitativa del Plata building, designed by Argentinean architect Alejandro Virasoro. It is the headquarters for an insurance company name, same as the edifice. The building was constructed in the art deco spirit, with elements borrowed from Aztec architecture. The corner is rounded and the growing tower is finished with a dome.

The cases that were brought up prove that corner buildings definitely can possess identity, certainly the ones presenting themselves on Florida Street, which was noticed by the owner of Florida Garden and providently used. It would be fruitful to describe many other corner buildings in Buenos Aires, like: Palacio de la Reconquista, Palacio Municipal de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Banco Alemán Transatlántico, or two examples of art-deco – the Volta

⁶ „Es claro que en el Banco Popular pretenden resolver el problema de articulación entre las pautas del neocolonial y del racionalismo abstracto. En este sentido, el Banco Popular resulta ser un campo de batalla entre la imposibilidad de abandonar la referencia historicista y la emergencia abstracta del proyecto moderno. Ciertamente las tensiones están equilibradas a fuerza de puro oficio, y es justamente este esfuerzo proyectual por organizar estos campos expresivos, lo que convierte al Banco Popular Argentino en un edificio significativo y paradigmático que va organizando un modelo lingüístico que va a constituirse a principios de los 40 y va a impregnar gran parte de la producción arquitectónica durante el gobierno peronista. En definitiva, el Banco Popular Argentino, es un ejemplo importante donde se establece por un lado el agotamiento del primer proyecto neocolonial, y por otro la posibilidad de historizar para modernizar. Norberto Feal *“Carlos Vilar. La ampliación de la Modernidad”* Buenos Aires, Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas, 2006, p. 4–5.



III. 2. HSBC (original the headquarters of the Bank Popular of Argentina) in Buenos Aires, fot. Elsapucai

building and the National City Bank of New York – or designed by Clorindo Testa Banco de Londres y America del Sur, but our elaboration focuses only on Florida Street – peculiar, because it is one of the most important (even though available only to pedestrians) and in a way overwhelmed by architecture that surrounds it.

The mentioned examples seem to confirm the words of Tomasz Kozłowski, who writes:

“One special situation plays here a very special role: it relieves the architect from studying urban motivation; this is a “corner situation”, site appointed streets that meet at (best when acute) angles, showing the building alignments.”⁷

The mentioned words, expressing different corner situations, fit the Buenos Aires case, confirming words of T. Kozłowski about avoiding searching for urban motivations. As we can notice, many cases had mentioned (as citation author wanted) an acute angle. Especially the Kavanagh edifice, which cuts air just like a ship cuts waves on a rough sea. Building alignments by themselves give pretext to build great architecture, which then can be the reason to build a city or its urban motivations. That puts more pressure on the maker and his steps, which are way more visible in opposition to a more hidden building.

Manuele de Sola-Morales wants to point this out in an interview with Catalina Serra for El Pais about the planned exhibition “Cities, Urban Corners” in Barcelona :

“(…) intersections of two streets are defining a city, and the city as a whole is a net of corners. Those are the places to find good architecture, and urban planning regains its name. (...)”⁸

As M.Sola-Morales points out, we can find good architecture when it comes to corner buildings, and the city is in a way the corners’ net, when the structure of a city finds its beginning. Very meaningful photo was taken by Alberto Kalach in 1998, close to the archaeological site called Chimalhuacan in Mexico City in one of the poor districts – on one of corner building somebody wrote, most likely for joke, “architect’s street”. It turns out that this was the legitimate name of that street. We all know what the photographer had in mind taking this photo and as a commentary lets back to M.Sola-Morales⁹:

„In every urban form, the way the streets intersect is a fundamental trait that we need to sustain as the shape of a city”¹⁰

We can approach this topic in a more poetic way. Italian photographer “D’Onofri finds the poetry of life in building corners. In the Mexican city of Oaxaca, he photographed more than a thousand corners. The photos were taken by a handmade camera Obscura. The camera had a focal length of about 14 millimetres and gave a 120 degree angle of view. The corner

⁷ T. Kozłowski, *Tendencje ekspresjonistyczne w architekturze współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2013, p. 77.

⁸ las esquinas de dos calles hacen ciudad y la ciudad en conjunto es una red de esquinas”. Son, también, el lugar en el que se evidencia la buena arquitectura y allí donde el urbanismo se gana su nombre. C.Sena, *Las ciudad es una red de esquinas*, El Pais, 05.03.2004.

⁹ M. Sola-Morales, architekt, profesor Wydziału Architektury Politechniki Barcelońskiej.

¹⁰ „En toda forma urbana, la manera en que las calles se cruzan es la característica fundamental, que conservamos como imagen de la ciudad.” M.Sola-Morales, *Ciudades y esquinas urbanas*, Los monograficos de B.MM numero 4, Barcelona 2004, p. 133.

buildings were photographed from the other side of the intersection in a way so that symmetry was exactly at the edge of a building corner. This resulted in black and white, panoramic photos, on which the eye focuses on a central sharp part, and the intersecting streets seem to never end. This effect is strengthened by the way the photos were made. The long exposure time with on-going traffic on the road made the streets look unreal.

This is what the author said: Corners as axes of intersections. Different roads, which force us to choose one or another. Intersections as symbols of choices we make in our life, very often leading us into an uncertain future, leaving other paths never knowing whatwe would meet on them.”¹¹ This is how the photographer described his work, finding reflection in corner buildings. They focus on the gaze of the pedestrian, the observer. This means that the corner building is special case, which will not forgive the creators any mistakes. The identity of corner buildings in Buenos Aires, despite the association with legends of the town, looks very similar to the one we can find in our cities. Even examples that became symbols of city, such as the Kavanagh building, have citygenic characteristics, becoming urban structures the same way as everywhere else in the world.

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¹¹ „Las esquinas como ojos de los cruces. Caminos diferentes que nos obligan a optar por una vía o la otra. Los cruces como símbolos de las elecciones que frecuentemente realizamos en nuestras vidas hacia el encuentro con un futuro desconocido dejándonos alrás otrr ocasion de vida de la cual nunca vamos a conocerque hubiera sido de nosotros” Vittorio D’Onofri, Desde Las Esquinas de Vittorio D’Onofri. „Facdearq” 04.03.2005