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Beyond Material Preservation: Urban Vitality in the Historic Center of Cochabamba

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Abstract

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This study examines the historic center of Cochabamba to reassess its heritage value beyond material conservation frameworks. Although its urban-architectural ensemble has been significantly altered in recent decades, the research aims to demonstrate that such transformations do not necessarily imply decline. Methodologically, the study combines a theoretical recomposition with an analysis of the relationship between heritage condition and social mixture in public space as an indicator of urban health. The results show that physical alteration has not led to abandonment but reflects adaptive social rhythms responding to new territorial dynamics. The study concludes that heritage must be understood as inseparable from dwelling, conceived as the dialectical synthesis of society and space. In Latin America, there has not been studies carried on about Historic Centers from the perspective of urban vitality, so by reframing heritage as lived and relational rather than merely material or symbolic, this research contributes a multidimensional and process-oriented perspective to contemporary urban heritage studies in Latin America.

Key words: Urban heritage; Historic center; Urban vitality; Complexity.

1. Introduction

The urban centers of Latin American cities are characterized by their rich architectural heritage, consisting of extensive ensembles of colonial and republican architecture. They are also places of great significance, since, as material testimonies of the occupation of space during colonial times, they often continue to host governmental and cultural functions. They play a very important role in urban systems, both in functional and symbolic terms.

However, due to the dynamics of urban growth and the logics of capital expansion, there is a tendency toward the abandonment, gentrification, or “touristification” of these urban ensembles as a result of urban policies, whether through direct intervention, a lack of understanding of the problem, or simple omission.

Among these actions is the implementation of conservation measures for this urban fabric within the framework of “culturalist” heritage policies of the late twentieth century, promoted by UNESCO during a period of state homogenization and modernization across Latin America. As a result, historic centers have been subjected to inventories, cataloguing, and intervention restrictions on the one hand, while on the other hand they have become sites of incentives for private investment aimed at their reactivation through large-scale commercial and real estate projects. In both cases, the experiences have been sufficiently documented to allow for a general understanding of these phenomena, their implications, and their consequences (Sequera & Janoschka, 2012; Kern, 2022; Rahbarianyazd, 2017; Vera, 2021).

However, very little research has been conducted on historic centers where neither of these two logics has been effectively implemented, and where transformation has instead occurred organically and as a “natural” result of the territorial dynamics of the city as a whole. This has indeed implied a loss of the conditions understood as patrimonial within an urban-architectural ensemble, yet there remains a significant theoretical and empirical gap in the Latin American urban literature when it comes to documenting what is actually happening in these urban centers from a complex perspective; that is, by understanding the city as a dynamic synthesis in permanent mutual transformation between society and space. There thus emerges a need to study those historic centers that do not conform to paradigms of failure or success, whether from the standpoint of conservationism or urban renewal, but rather function as spaces of reproduction and continuity of urban life, with all that this entails. Opening this new line of research may contribute in practical terms to the rethinking of urban policy and regulations in historic centers, while also providing elements for the resignification of historical heritage, transcending negative narratives regarding the loss of an architectural legacy conceived independently from the society that inhabits it.

Within this framework, the present research aims to verify the existence of correlations between the transformations undergone by buildings in the Historic Preservation Zone (HPZ) of Cochabamba, the third-largest city in Bolivia, and the

urban vitality emerging from their uses. The main hypothesis is that there will be a direct correlation between the degree of alteration of the built heritage and indicators of urban vitality, which would suggest deterioration is a result of the prolongation of the life of buildings and, consequently, of the historic center itself. Likewise, the complementary hypothesis is that the spatial distribution of the transformation of heritage buildings will respond to larger-scale territorial dynamics, such as the urban structure and, in particular, proximity to the large market district of La Cancha.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

This research, in theoretical and epistemological terms, begins from the understanding of heritage ensembles as inseparable components of a concrete spatial reality and as systems in themselves. It also assumes that the permanent movement and rearticulation of this system and its parts will produce new phenomena and emergent properties; attributes that necessarily refer to complexity theory (Morin, 2012). Along with a framework explaining the city as a complex system, a necessary context of the region of Cochabamba and its history will also be provided in this section.

1.1.1. City and Complexity

Complex thought reveals the multidimensionality of the urban and recognizes the interweaving of multiple categories and levels of objects; however, this does not mean that all of them must be considered within a single study, but rather that complexity examines them from a framework of non-linearity among the processes involved (Vázquez, 2019; Aziz Amen & Ali, 2025). In this way, it is assumed that within the city there is a continuous emergence of phenomena that do not conform to normative assumptions, making it possible to observe spatial behaviors or practices that do not correspond to the official urban project, and which in turn produce both a new materiality and their own dynamic system of imaginaries, meanings, and consciousness (Anaya, 2013).

The dynamic relationship among different dimensions of the urban corresponds to Henri Lefebvre's "spatial triad" (Lefebvre, 1984), which posits that space is a superimposition of different layers interacting within a permanent dialectical process of mutual affectation. Lefebvre conceives space as a complex and unavoidably political object because the conceived space of planners and the official project exists in permanent tension with the socially practiced space shaped through the everyday acts of the people who inhabit it; thus charging lived space with images, representations, and meanings that constitute another level of spatial experience. Within the framework of this research, the historic center projected for architectural preservation constitutes the official project or conceived space, while everyday experience unfolds according to other logics that shape practiced space (Alfaro, 2006).

On the other hand, by conceiving urban systems as complex systems, it is also understood that their evolution entails incremental complexity and not merely an intensification of predetermined functions and patterns; thus, emergent processes involve new "metabolic capacities" and the development of their own "organs" (Vázquez, 2019). In the Bolivian case, this emergence of new functions does not occur through replacement but rather through the hybridization and coexistence of apparent opposites, according to the sociological concept of *ch'ixi*, which seeks to overcome dominant binarisms and highlights the heterogeneity of mediations between perceived categories or objects (Rivera, 2018). The idea of the homogeneous constitution of the object thus disappears, and the object is instead conceived as composed of a diversity of particles different from one another, only appearing homogeneous from a distance. This coincides with the smooth–striated tension and the rhizomatic space proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2002). In this way, heritage space is not only transformed in its typology and architectural language, but the possibilities for its diverse uses also go hand in hand with an increasing complexity of spatial practices, associated meanings, and social and symbolic values, which in turn give rise to new materialities.

1.1.2. Historic Centers in Latin America

Mertins (2008) presents several typologies of historic areas, among which are historic centers, defined as "central districts of large cities with complex and diversified functions, containing architectural works and characteristics of particular importance" (p. 23). This is the case for virtually all medium-sized and large cities in Latin America (García, 2026).

Due to their testimonial significance, during the second half of the twentieth century instruments and policies aimed at protecting these urban ensembles began to emerge, generally within two clearly distinguishable — though not mutually exclusive — logics: first, the adoption of urban competitiveness policies through historical-cultural tourism; and second, an approach oriented toward the stylistic preservation of the architectural object. In the first case, this involved the open commodification of urban components, turning enclaves into touristified spaces for high-income consumers (Ettinger-McEnulty & Mercado-López, 2019; Vera, 2021). Notable examples include Cusco, Quito, and Cartagena. In the second case, there has been a strong influence from schools of architecture whose teaching of history remains deeply rooted in the French academism of the late nineteenth century, which led to the cataloguing and valuation of buildings according to the correspondence of their characteristics with typologies considered "high" architecture: Neoclassical, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, etc. (Cravino, 2012).

It was then that different frameworks for intervention began to emerge under terms such as "renewal," "regeneration," "revitalization," "revaluation," and others. The influence of the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage played a major role in all these interventions (García Vázquez, 2016; Paquette, 2020). None of them, however, achieved results free of contradictions. In some cases, revitalization succeeded in generating tourism and economic dynamization, but at the cost of the loss of residential function (Liévanos-Díaz, 2024). In other cases, rigid conservation regulations succeeded in maintaining the architectural ensemble, but by freezing the urban form and preventing its social reproduction (Carrión, 2012). For this reason, the debate surrounding heritage in the cities of the region remains ongoing, and new forms of intervention continue to be developed that tend toward integrating dimensions and increasing the complexity of the object itself (Caldas, 2016; Roldán, 2017).

In the case of Cochabamba, it is instead evident that the logic of conservation has not gone beyond strict preservation regulation in the form of a legally established Historic Preservation Zone (HPZ), but within a context of weak state agency and social anomie. Thus, without a proper understanding of the factors causing the deterioration of architectural heritage, and without sufficient capacity to enforce regulations, the HPZ has gradually been transformed by its occupants through uncoordinated actions driven by necessity and market forces.

1.1.3. The case of Cochabamba

Cochabamba is the third-largest metropolitan area in Bolivia, with approximately 1.5 million inhabitants, and is located in an inter-Andean valley surrounded by mountain ranges of the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes, at 2,550 meters above sea level. Since before the Spanish conquest, this valley had been inhabited by a diverse population primarily dedicated to agriculture, an activity of great importance to the silver economy of Potosí, which constituted the economic foundation of the Spanish Empire during its peak. For this reason, the Spanish city of Villa de Oropeza was founded in the mid-sixteenth century, and the area that now corresponds to the historic center of Cochabamba was built according to the Laws of the Indies, the regulations that governed life throughout the colonies of the New World (Klein, 2015; Solares, 2011). With the decline of the Potosí silver economy, and throughout the nineteenth century as well, Cochabamba remained largely isolated from commercial circuits, resulting in the absence of substantial demographic and urban growth (Hines, 2021). Spatially, the city essentially corresponded to what is now the ZPH. It was only in the mid-twentieth century that a major urbanization process took place, alongside the government of the National Revolution and under the technical principles of functionalist modernism. Through the 1961 Master Plan, this process aggressively intervened in the architecture of the HPZ. In the 1990s, the first urban planning instrument aimed at protecting this urban ensemble was developed; however, since its implementation, it has failed to achieve its objective of preserving the architectural legacy of the colonial and republican periods (Cabrera et al., 2017; Flores, 2021).

2. Materials and Methods

This research is exploratory, quantitative, and correlational in nature, since there are no existing studies on historical architectural heritage in correlation with urban vitality in Latin American cities. The study therefore seeks to establish an initial approach through the identification of correlations between quantitative variables. The objective of this study is to explore the correlation between built heritage loss and urban vitality in the Historic Preservation Zone of Cochabamba. The main hypothesis guiding this study is that the greater the degree of modification undergone by a heritage building, the greater the presence of conditions that support urban vitality. There is also a complementary hypothesis, which states that the spatial distribution of these modifications and conditions is linked to the urban structure and its own patterns of territorial transformation.

The sample consists of 46 street segments randomly selected within the HPZ (Figure 1), each of which constitutes a unit of analysis that includes all buildings presenting a façade onto that street segment; that is, a total of 487 buildings. This represents a sample of 72% of the 64 total blocks within the HPZ.

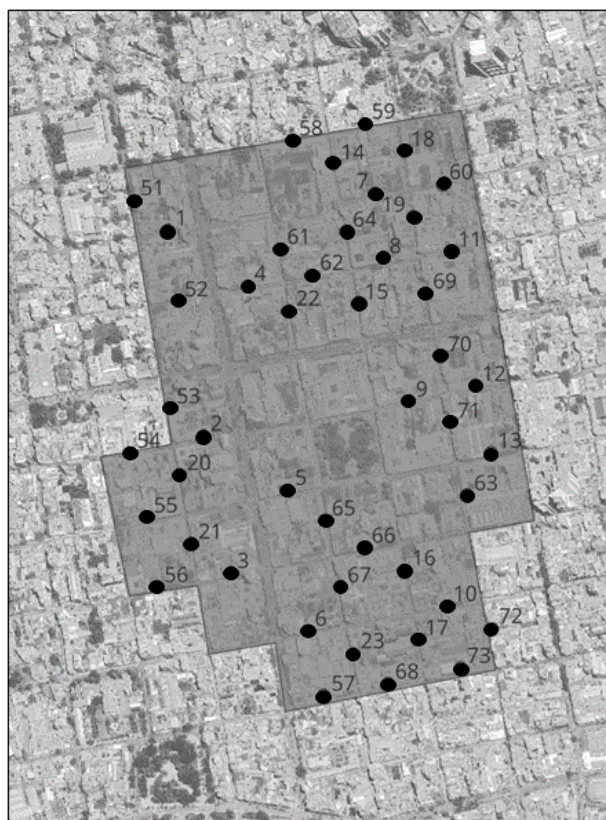


Figure 1. Historic Preservation Zone limits and study sample (Developed by the author).

To operationalize the concepts of the conservation state of heritage buildings and urban vitality, easily observable indicators susceptible to tabulation and calculation were employed. In the case of buildings, the initial objective was to distinguish between those corresponding to preservation typologies; namely colonial, Neoclassical, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco architecture (Lavayén, 2017); and those that do not. Subsequently, the aim was to evaluate the conservation state of their spatial structure and façades using a rapid assessment scale with the following possible values: 1 = heavily modified, 2 = somewhat modified, and 3 = well preserved. The conservation state of the spatial structure derives from its comparison with the Casa Patio model (Figure 2), a building typology of Andalusian origin that predominated during the Spanish colonial period in Latin America (Avendaño, 2024). Likewise, the conservation state of the façade was determined by verifying the presence of ornamental elements (cornices, friezes, capitals, and others), and by observing the rhythm and continuity of the compositional lines.

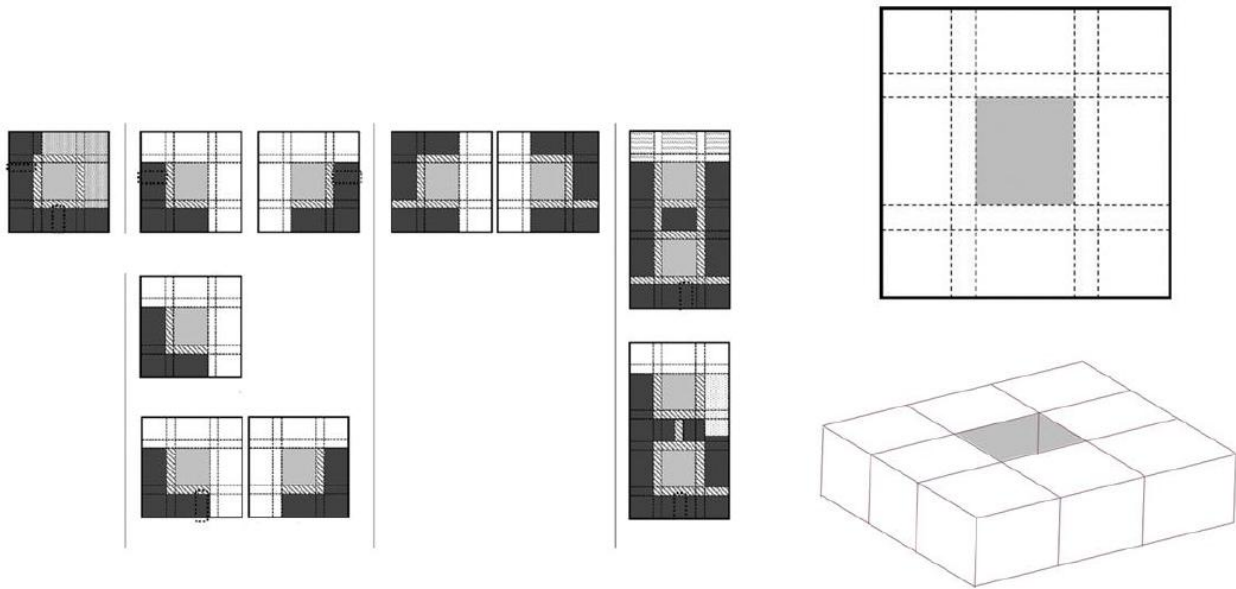


Figure 2. Spatial structure of the Casa Patio (Developed by the author).

In the case of urban vitality, indicators indirectly associated with urban vitality were considered, such as mixed uses, residential use, and ground-floor uses at sidewalk level. On the other hand, direct indicators were also included, namely pedestrian flow and the number of interactions occurring within a 15-minute period in each street segment.

Table 1: Measurement of building conservation conditions and urban vitality.

	Variable	Indicator
Assessment of historic buildings	Typology*	Is it a preservation typology? (Y/N)
	Structure conservation condition*	Conservation condition scale from 1 (heavily modified) to 3 (well preserved)
	Façade conservation condition*	Conservation condition scale from 1 (heavily modified) to 3 (well preserved)
Assessment of urban vitality	Mixed use*	Quantity of uses per building (n)
	Habitational use*	Is it used as a home? (Y/N)
	Sidewalk-level use*	Is there a sidewalk-level use? (Y/N)
	Pedestrian flow**	Quantity of people walking in 15 min. (n)
	Interactions**	Quantity of conversations in 15 min. (n)

* For an individual building, **for a street segment.

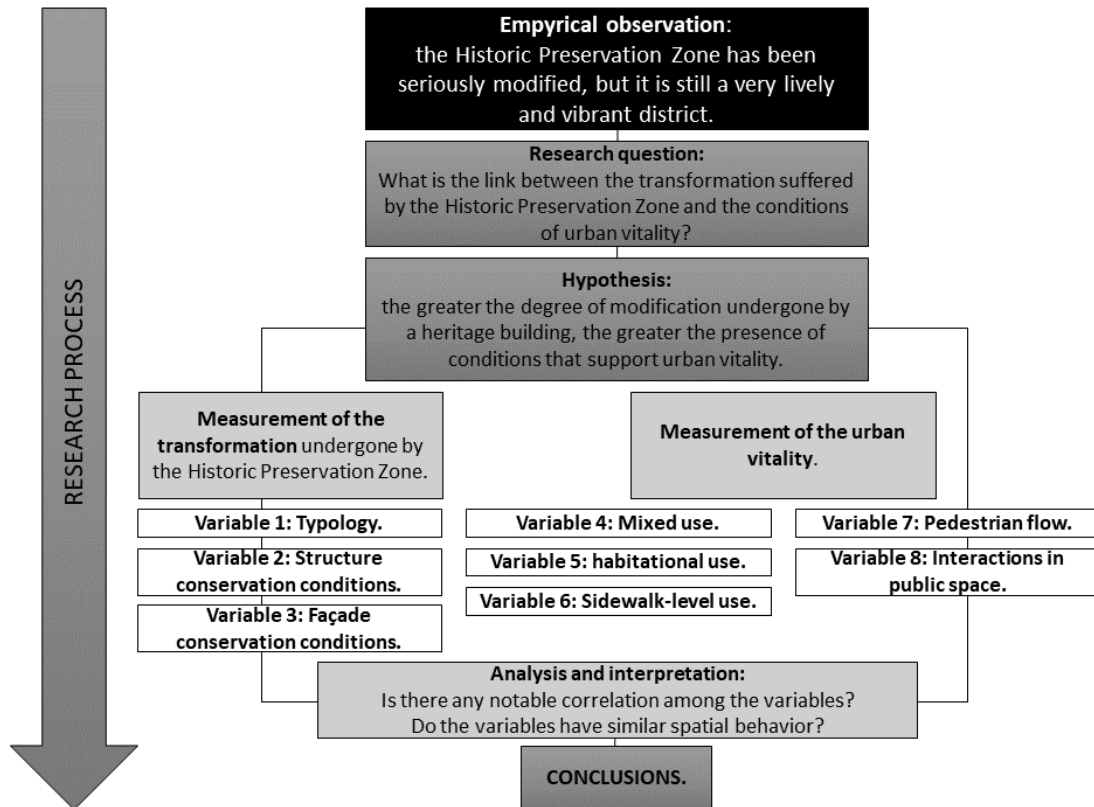


Figure 3. Research methodology diagram (Developed by the author).

All collected information has been coded by building, except for the direct indicators of urban vitality, which have been coded by street segment. The georeferencing of the information has also made it possible, in addition to identifying significant correlations between variables, to explore potential spatial correlations, which are particularly important for verifying the complementary hypothesis.

To examine possible correlations, in several cases the information was collected using the same unit of analysis (e.g., the conservation state of the building and the number of uses per building). In other cases, data normalization was necessary; for example, in order to compare the number of uses (per building) with pedestrian flow (per street segment), it was necessary to aggregate the responses at the street-segment level in order to make both variables comparable.

3. Results

The deterioration of buildings within the HPZ and their replacement with new constructions is a widely recognized phenomenon and is frequently documented in the press, although no precise inventories exist regarding the extent of the problem. This study provides some initial figures that, given the sample size (72%), may be assumed to closely approximate reality: nearly 40% of the buildings (296 of 487) do not correspond to preservation typologies, and only 17% of the total (or 28% of preservation typologies) are well preserved. As far as the urban vitality, two figures stand out. First, the historic center seems to be very diverse and heterogeneous in terms of uses: 32% of buildings have only 1 use whereas 13% have 5 different uses; and 56% of the buildings are used as a home. And second, 1 in every 8 buildings hosts some form of public space activation along its frontage or sidewalk edge.

The spatial distribution of preservation typologies appears to be concentrated in the blocks surrounding the main square, with a greater relative density toward the north and west (Figure 4).

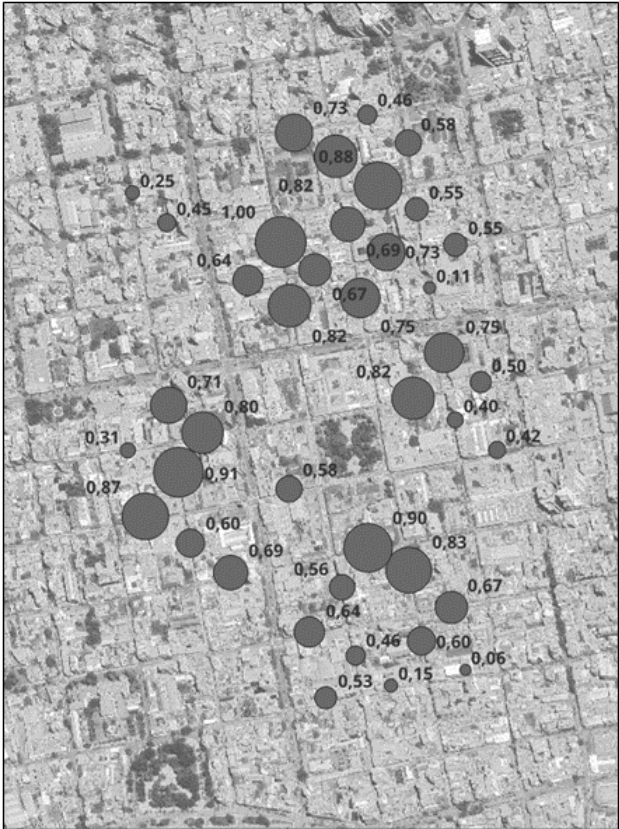


Figure 4. Share of preservation typologies by street segment on a scale from 0 to 1 (Developed by the author).

Regarding the most significant correlations, the behavior of the number of uses in relation to building typology stands out considerably. When considering all buildings within the HPZ (both preservation typologies and new constructions), both groups show essentially the same probability of accommodating different uses: around 30% of both groups contain only one use, and the proportion of buildings with two uses is also very similar. However, within the group of preservation typologies alone, when classified according to their conservation state, a very notable difference emerges: the better the conservation state, the greater the probability that the building accommodates only one use; conversely, the more modifications the building has undergone, the greater the proportion of buildings accommodating three, four, or five uses (Figure 5). When both indicators are displayed in their spatial distribution, no evident pattern or trend can be identified (Figure 6).

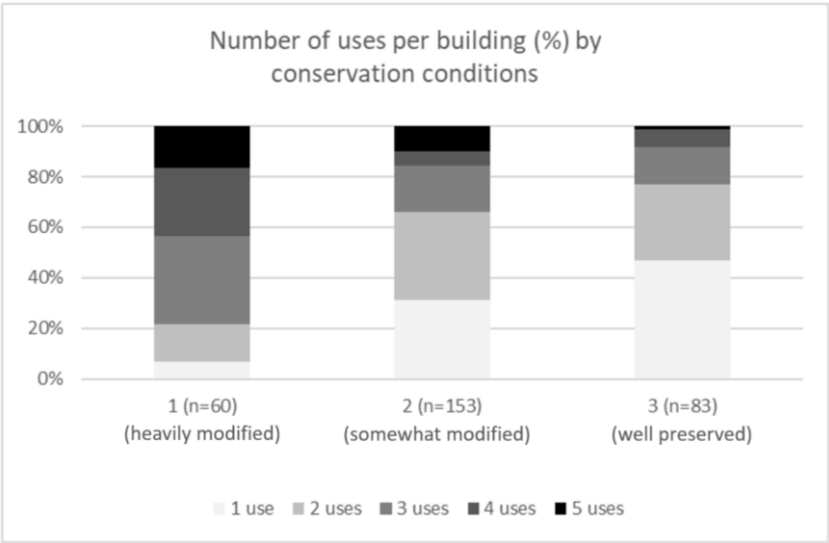


Figure 5. Number of uses per building (%) by conservation conditions (developed by the author).

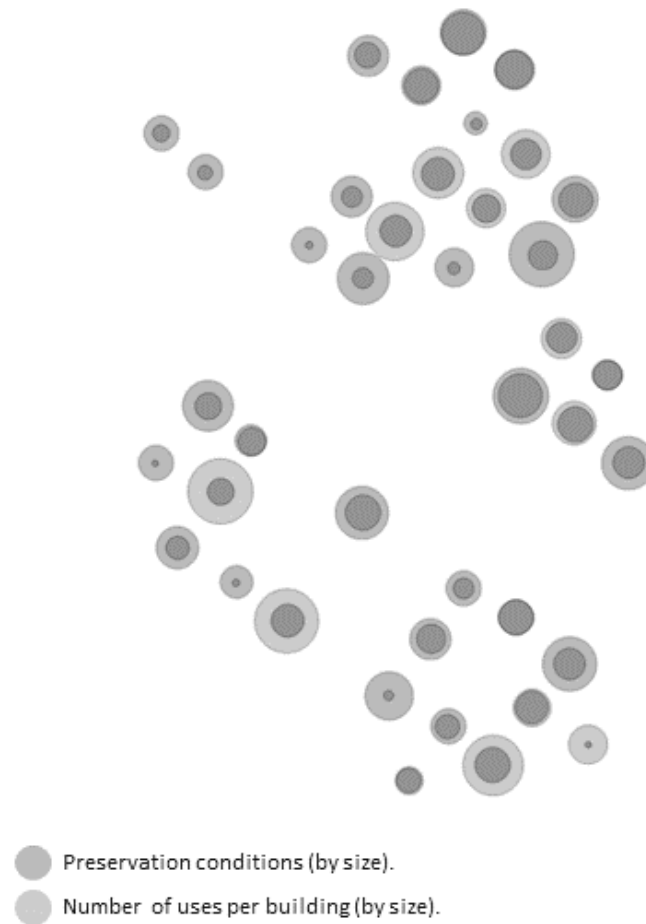


Figure 6. Spatial correlation of preservation conditions and number of uses per building (developed by the author).

When it comes to residential use, which is one of the conditions most frequently cited to produce urban vitality, no particular spatial pattern or statistical correlation with the conservation state of buildings becomes evident either (Figure 7).

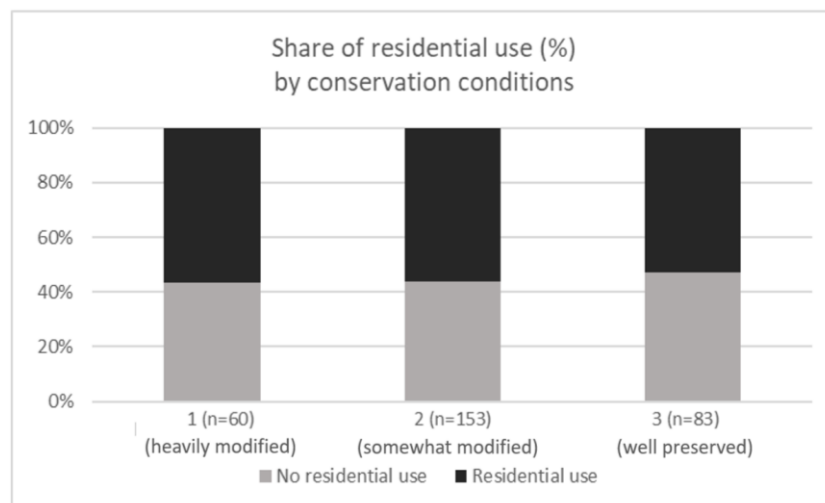


Figure 7. Share of residential use (%) by conservation conditions (developed by the author).

One final spatial correlation that should be highlighted is that between two variables that might intuitively have been presumed to be intrinsically related: pedestrian flow and the number of interactions in public space. Their spatial distribution appears to indicate two very important findings: first, that the greatest number of interactions does not occur in the places with the highest pedestrian flow; and second, that neither is it an inverse relationship, but rather that there seems to be an “adequate” level of pedestrian flow associated with the greatest number of interactions.

4. Discussion

Initially, the information produced reveals, in a representative manner, the conservation state of buildings within the HPZ, of which only 60% correspond to any of the typologies that the protection designation of this zone was intended to preserve. This indicates that examples of colonial, Neoclassical, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco architecture in Cochabamba

are becoming increasingly scarce, and that the remaining ones are also under threat: only 28% of this ensemble remains in good conservation condition. Although this reality is widely recognized, the data produced helps to grasp the concrete situation more clearly and may provide some clues as to how this has happened and for understanding why conservation regulations have not been effective. In this regard, the other variables surveyed in this study may offer additional criteria for such reflection.

As indicated previously, this research arises from the observation that the HPZ is a highly vital and dynamic district and is unlike the documented cases of historic centers in Latin America, which usually refer either to elitized centers or, alternatively, to abandoned ones. The Historic Center of Cochabamba is a vibrant district and, when considered globally, several indicators clearly confirm this empirically observable urban quality, particularly the proportion of residential use, number of uses per building, stationary activities and pedestrian flow.

The correlation between different indicators, meanwhile, does not appear to strongly confirm the main hypothesis, which assumed that the loss and deterioration of built heritage was directly correlated with the continuity of urban life in the historic center; that is, with the conditions and manifestations of urban vitality.

On the one hand, the greater diversity of uses within a single building is clearly associated with preservation typologies that have undergone substantial modifications. Moreover, when the group of preservation typologies is compared with new buildings, the proportion of buildings accommodating only a single use is practically the same. This would seem to indicate that modifications made to preservation typologies are carried out with the purpose of obtaining the best and highest use, which would logically produce the coexistence of multiple uses within a single building; and that, at the same time, new buildings are expressly designed to accommodate several uses in order to maximize rental income. This does not automatically imply that new buildings are equally favorable to produce urban vitality, since it is still necessary to examine the conditions under which each typology accommodates its diverse uses and the manner in which they articulate with public space, which is the setting where vitality manifests itself.

On the other hand, the proportion of preservation typologies accommodating residential functions is the same across the three groups classified according to conservation state: people inhabit approximately half of the heritage buildings, regardless of how heavily modified they are. This finding, combined with the diversity of uses mentioned above, makes it possible to formulate hypotheses that challenge common narratives about historic centers. While a heavily modified historic building used as housing is often imagined as a precarious and overcrowded tenement, a well-preserved dwelling in the historic center might instead suggest a wealthy family that has inherited and owns a highly valuable economic and symbolic patrimony. These two profiles usually correspond to very different moments in the life of the historic center within the urban literature of Latin America, yet the data produced by this research would seem to suggest their silent coexistence in downtown Cochabamba today. A highly fruitful line of research could emerge from this inference by asking who inhabits the center, why they do so, and how they relate to their living space.

However, the spatial distribution of the different indicators reveals a more complex picture.

The one correlation that must be highlighted is that greater spatial presence of pedestrian flow appears to be associated with the absence of preservation typologies. This seems to support the main hypothesis, since this important urban vitality manifestation would be occurring in streets where there are more new buildings. This, however, may respond to larger scale dynamics, such as proximity to the market. It will therefore be necessary to examine the extent to which new buildings, which are more prevalent in the areas surrounding the market, effectively contribute to pedestrian flow, or whether both variables are instead dependent on this proximity.

In summary, the number of uses according to preservation condition is the only statistical correlation that very clearly supports the main hypothesis. The remaining spatial correlations are not consistent with either hypothesis and instead suggest that most indicators behave independently, as the result of specific variables and processes. The implications are significant: the historic center is an area of enormous diversity in building typologies, uses, forms of interaction, and occupation of public space; and this diversity itself may be contributing to the area's strong vibrancy and urban vitality.

5. Conclusions

As said in the public discourse and corroborated by this study, a substantial portion of Cochabamba's architectural heritage has already been lost, and the remaining colonial, neoclassical, art-nouveau, and art-deco buildings within the legally protected zone continue to face a significant pressure and threat. The identification, assessment, and protection of what still persists remains an urgent task. However, the findings do not support a simple opposition between heritage deterioration and urban decline, but seemingly the opposite: there was no evidence found that could indicate that the transformation of heritage buildings is directly associated with the loss of urban vitality. On the contrary, the information suggest that heavily transformed buildings are contributing to sustain the diverse forms of urban life found in the historic center of Cochabamba.

The transformations taking place within the HPZ are not primarily driven by large-scale real estate investment, tourism-oriented development, or city planning. Rather, they emerge from the accumulated and synergistic actions of owners, tenants, merchants, pedestrians, and small-scale investors, producing a highly heterogeneous urban environment in terms of typologies, uses, and spatial practices, and pedestrians. The remarkable diversity of building typologies and uses found in this study appears consistent with this logic of transformation. Thus, the coexistence of well-preserved heritage buildings, heavily modified structures, residential uses, commercial intensification, and diverse social actors suggests that the historic center of Cochabamba cannot be adequately understood through conventional narratives of either preservation success or urban failure. Instead, it appears as a space where multiple temporalities, forms of inhabitation, and urban logics coexist simultaneously.

The spatial distribution of transformation and vitality indicators also suggests that broader territorial dynamics, such as the continuity of the urban fabric, and particularly the proximity to the La Cancha market, may play a more significant role than the architectural condition of individual buildings alone. This points to the need to understand the historic center

not as an isolated heritage enclave, but as part of a wider urban metabolism; and to examine the forms of articulation between these systems of different scale.

From a theoretical and epistemological perspective, this research argues that an exclusive focus on architectural materiality may produce a conceptual bias within heritage studies. Examining the historic center as part of a dialectical society–space process makes it possible to recognize that urban vitality, everyday practices, and the continuity of social reproduction may themselves constitute forms of heritage value, which is why we strongly recommend to open a new line of research on this matter; not from a sociological perspective but focusing on the specific link and mutual transformation between the built environment and spatial practices.

These findings open new avenues for research on Latin American historic centers that do not conform to the dominant paradigms of touristification, elitization, or abandonment. Future studies may further examine who inhabits these centers, how different social groups relate to heritage space, and how urban and preservation policies might be reformulated in contexts characterized by complexity, hybridity, and continuous transformation.

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The author(s) report no conflicts of interest.

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Not applicable.

Credit Author Statement

Conceptualisation, data curation, methodology, analysis, project execution and supervision; as well as writing, review & editing was carried out by the author.

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