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# Understanding coastal spaces through territorial heritage. Case study of the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires, Argentina

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**UNDERSTANDING COASTAL SPACES THROUGH TERRITORIAL  
HERITAGE. CASE STUDY OF THE METROPOLITAN REGION OF  
BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA.**

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by <http://www.aiki-translations.com>.

## INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on the space in motion, defined from the point of view of its complexity, makes us think about the metropolitan coast as a process that leads to morphological changes, due not only to the structuring cycles present in every metropolis, but also to the characteristics transmitted by “**territorial heritages**” and new emerging configurations (Carut, 2003 b).

Thinking about the motion and complexity of a territory allows us to conceptualize space through Doreen Massey's (2005) work, which starts from three ideas:

- Space results from **interrelationships**, regardless of the scale.
- Space is the sphere of possibility for **multiplicity**.
- Because space is the product of “relationships”, it is always being made, becoming, **never finished** and never closed.

This argument allows us to perceive the historical expression of a territory, because territorial organization is the consequence of an expression of the valorization of space made by the actors, agents and social groups through time. Thinking about territorial organization as a **process loaded with historicity** implies the study of the territorial transformations that will allow to decipher those valorizations and to understand that such spatial organization has historically favored certain areas to the detriment of others (Carut, 2003 a).

Understanding space as “*the matrix resulting from the imbrication of a territorial configuration and a spatial organization*” (Cóccaro, J. and Agüero, R, 1998:83), where the arrangement or distribution of natural and social objects “located” in a moment is the expressed consequence of the reproduction of the spatial structure that derives from power relationships between sectors with particular interests (Cóccaro, J. and Agüero, R, 1998).

The current space of organization is not a passive category; its role is loaded of historicity. It is malleable to the so called “natural and social” impulses, which continuously act upon it through time and create guiding grooves for social, economic and political force-fields, channeled by the dominant power structures manifested at that place in diverse historic moments (Cóccaro and Agüero, 1999).

The possibility to detect spatial valorization trends and their territorial “weight” in the area we work on – the fluvial and estuarial front of the Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires (MRBA) – is a way to differentiate coastal subspaces, elucidating the “**weight of heritages.**”

**Why do we speak of territorial heritages instead of events?** According to the Spanish Royal Academy's Dictionary, an event is an occurrence of certain importance, while heritage “*refers to features or circumstances of cultural, social, economic or other nature that having served as a way of characterizing someone are still perceivable in his or her descendants or followers.*” This is to say that, from the territorial perspective, we can state that an event is related to actions or facts that may not have left their imprint, while heritages refer to the marks left on the territory.

A first attempt to approximate this operationalization was made in 2002 within the context of the project for the “*Argentine Coastal Atlas*”<sup>2</sup>. Following the guidelines and methodological path defined at that time, we define as the spatial scope towards the coastal zone lands, in this first attempt, the limits of the coastal departments (partidos) of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.

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<sup>2</sup> Cooperation and Exchange Agreement between the National University of La Plata, the National University of Mar del Plata (both in Argentina) and the Université de Bretagne Occidentale (France).

This analysis can be framed within the historic process of structuring of the Argentine territory. The role played by the relationships within power and decision structures, multi-scalar and multinational, becomes an essential part of it, as well as the degree of "adaptive" insertion of the Argentine space in this context, in accordance with the characteristics and the "climate of ideas" that define the historic stages (Stagnaro, et al. 2000).

The emerging configurations and the spatial organization process that "signify" them cannot be understood without considering the evolution of global events, as many of its specific characteristics have resulted from the specific ways in which Argentina has connected itself to the world with relationships of various strength, which resulted in local and regional impacts.

Within this context, the coastal MRBA has not been unaffected by these circumstances. It is important to highlight that the resources, the "assigned" functions, the capitals and decisions that have shaped and still shape –as a reaction to the relationships of the participating forces in the historic process of territorial organization– neither have been, nor are, contained within the narrow municipal limits.

Starting from the ideas previously sketched, we propose the following course to decipher the characteristics of the current spatial organization in the territory subject to our analysis: the determination of the structuring guidelines of **historic-spatial valorization trends** and the identification, in the current spatial organization, of **territorial heritages**.

## METHODOLOGY

To delineate the spatial valorization trends and elucidate their "**territorial imprints**" we take into account the historic average of occurrence of significant facts that have established, in our opinion, the base for its organization. When we mention the average of historic facts we mean the impact of "**significant**" facts, within the same historic stage, which links the variables and their time-space context in a dialectical way. *"The reconstruction of the successive time-space sequences is essential to determine the historic content of the territorial today and to decipher the different historic weights of the times compressed into it."* (Stagnaro et al, 2000:3).

Through Argentine history, the value assigned to the fluvial zone was different. The country's efforts to integrate itself to global commerce and to the rest of the world in a broader sense, define asymmetrical power relationships that result in diverse levels of regional development and benefits.

The Argentine economy has been an "economy of adaptation;" its basic behavior was, and still is, that of adjusting to opportunities created by other economies. Technological behavior, adaptive and belated, tried to "accommodate" to "major innovations" and not to create them. This is why scientific and technological policies had a secondary role.

This behavior has not led to a process of development phases or cycles, but to a series of "booms" or "bubbles" that, when worn out, left just a few isolated "drops" of technical and productive capacity instead of a new style of capacities on top of which a new development cycle could be generated. (Azpiazu, D and Nochetff, H; 1994: 27). This bubbles of adaptive expansion were molded by an economic elite that was particularly flexible to adapt to the changes of the international economy and to identify and exploit "soft options", creating monopolies that weren't eroded by competition.

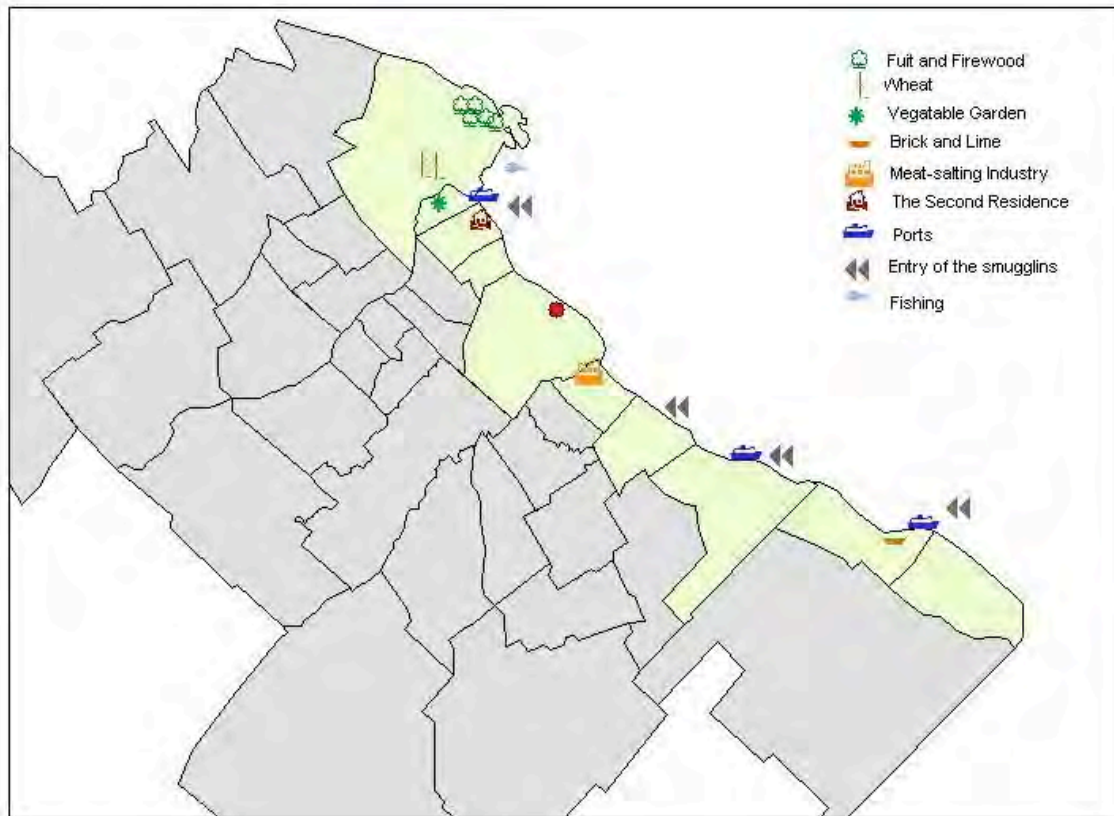
Azpiazu and Nochetff (1994) define, for Argentine history, three bubbles: the one driven by the exporting of primary products; that of the import substitution industrialization led by transnational companies; and the bubble driven or led by external borrowing. Taking those as a starting point, we define the following: the first signs of territorial organization, territorial organization in primary expansion (1852-1930), the beginnings of import substitution (1930 – 1952), the territorial organization of

reform (1952 -1976), the interrupted organization (1976 – 1983) and the territorial organization of restructuring.

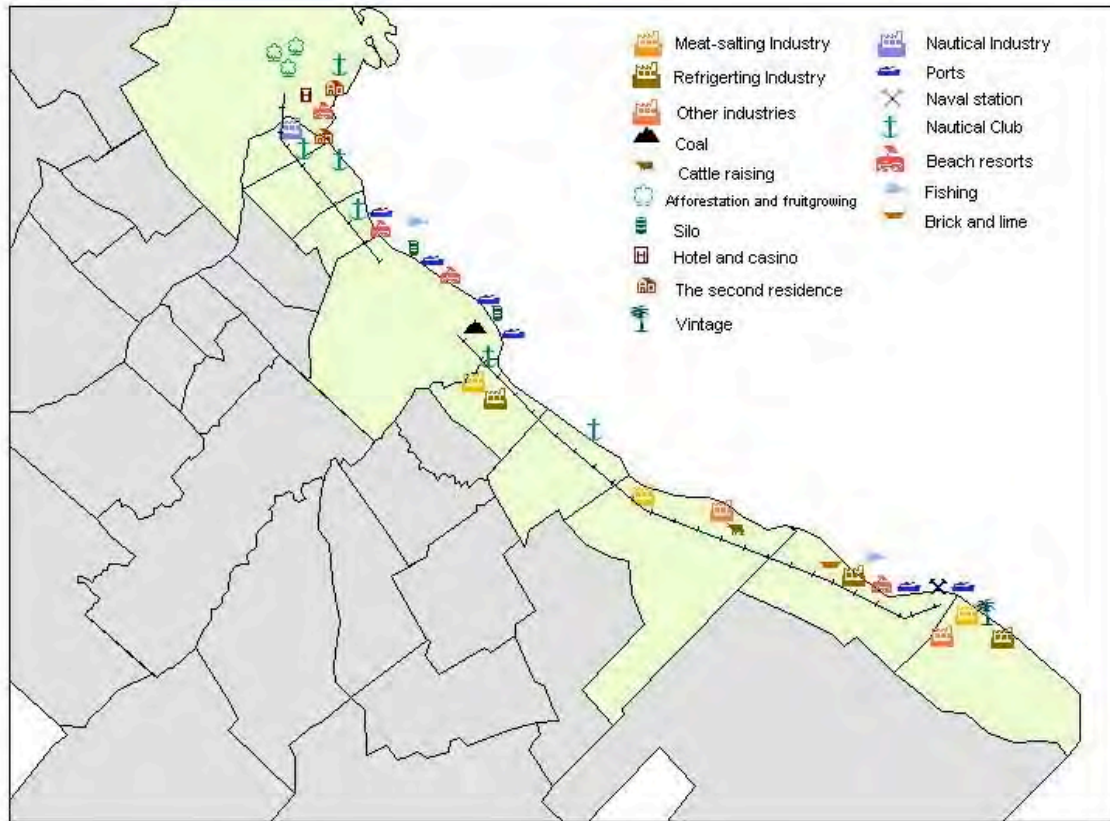
## FINDINGS

We prepared a series of maps for every stage, where the most significant characteristics of organization and their heritage for the next stages can be seen.

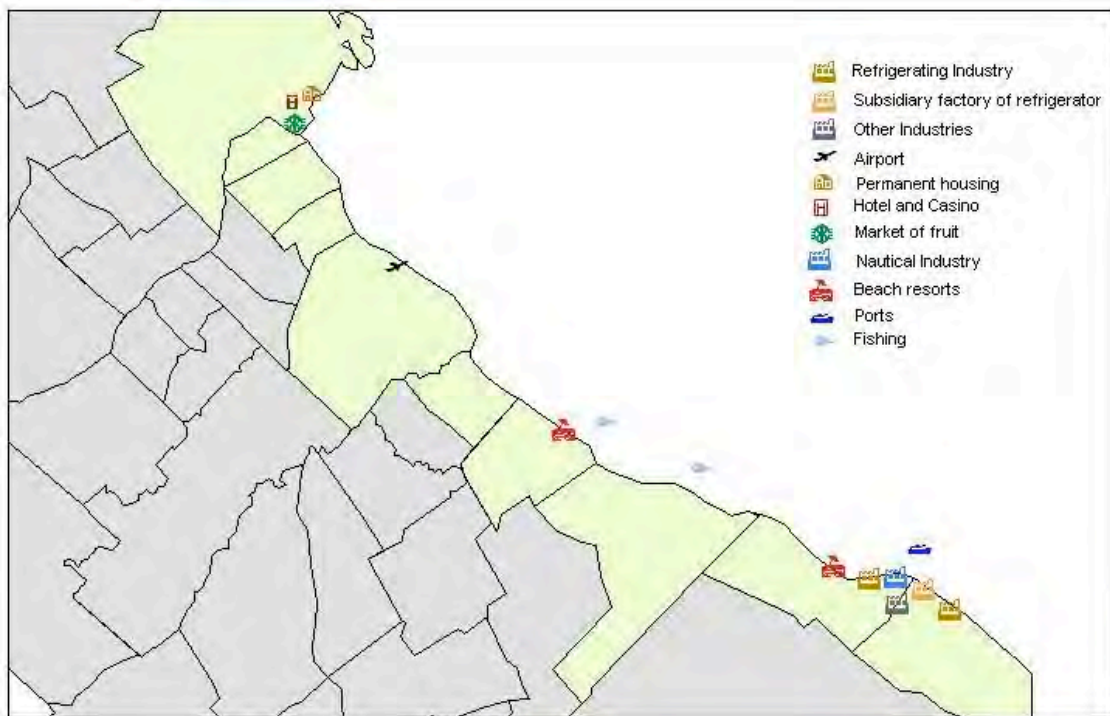
### *The first signs of territorial organization*



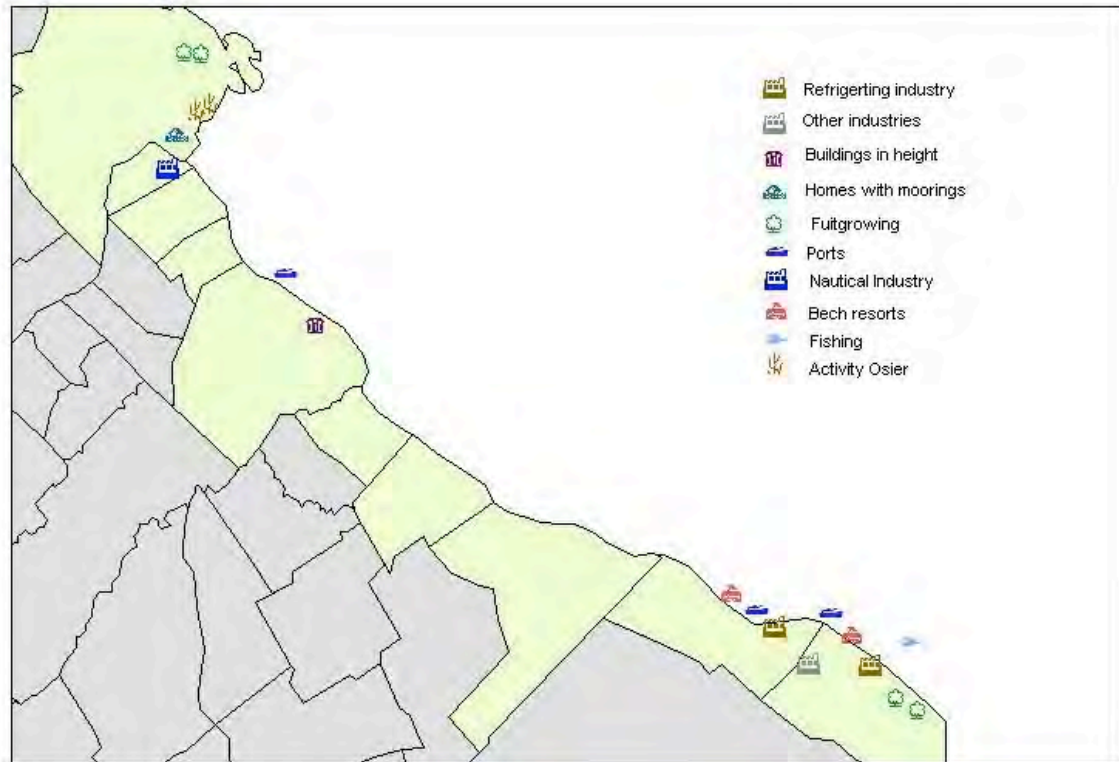
### *Territorial organization in the primary expansion*



*The beginnings of import substitution*

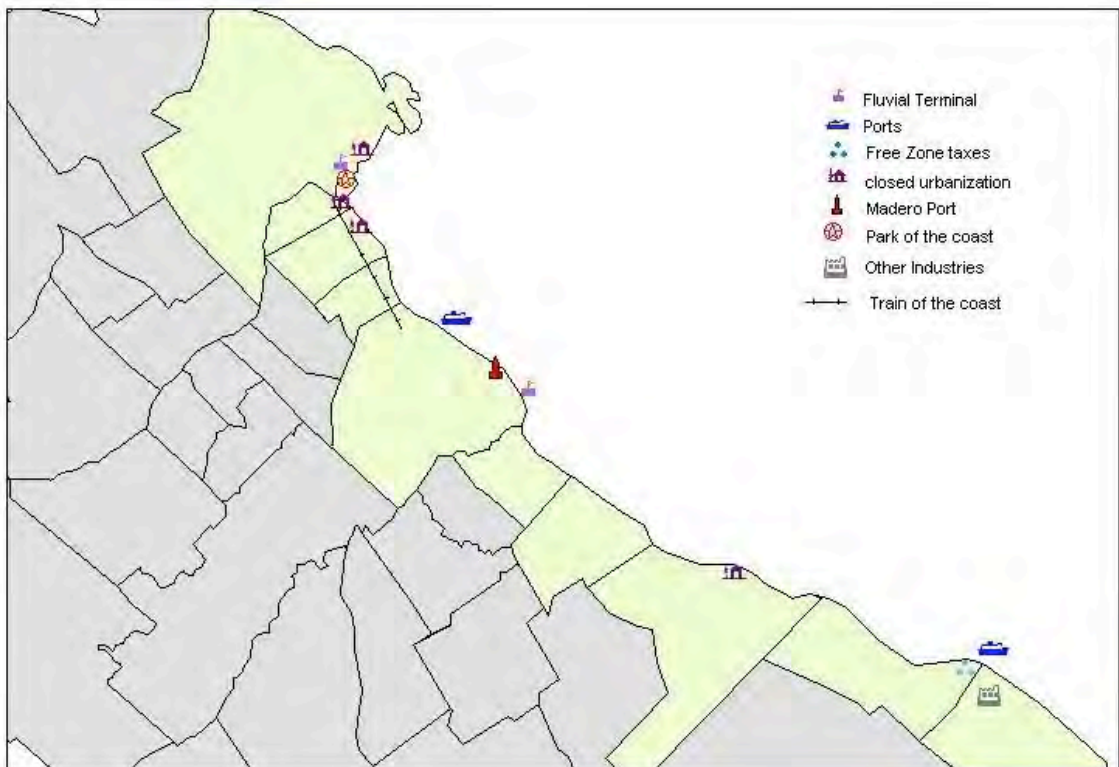


*Territorial organization of reform*



Between 1976 and 1983 development came to a halt in the area under study. That is the reason why we were unable to represent that period in a map. We have called this stage that of "interrupted organization."

*The territorial organization of restructuring*



## CONCLUSIONS

Although the coastal MRBA has a common denominator, the emergence as a strategic point for the defense of the smuggling colony, it is at this time when two different spaces can be already seen. The South, related to the **beginning of the first exporting productive model as the salting industry** and the North, related to the **provision of products to the capital, also linked to recreational places for the local aristocracy**.

The territorial organization during the primary expansion was the time of major transformations: a hinge where an evident rupture is indicated by the concordance of the coastal zone with the most recent historical territorial "marks" that depict this differentiation between the North and the South.

The exporting model is intensified in the South because of the need to eliminate "pollution," or anything that could be "detrimental" to development of the Northern area. Even though all activities are organized around this model, there is a group not directly related to it, but nonetheless useful to answer the needs of workers and the constructions in progress. We thus found the coastal recreational sites (balnearios), which lack the characteristics of those built in the North: the removal of shell and lime, among others.

The railroad driver of territorial changes of the time, together with the harbors, answers first to the needs of the Metropolitan North and only then to the ones of the South. In the North the appearance of rowing and sailing clubs intensified (created mainly by the English society), second homes and garden houses.

In the successive stages, to a larger or lesser degree, these characteristics remained: a Southern coastal heavily influenced by the industrial harbor, and the North more linked to marinas and water sports.

*"History shows the dialectic between large rivers and important cities where valuable cultures have flourished..."* (Pando, H and Vitalli, O, 2002:129). In the MRBA, however, this dialectics have shaped a structure **with two faces, that of the land and that of the estuaries**. The land face, however, keeps remnants of a longing to be estuarial.

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