

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF VALPARAÍSO'S URBAN VALUE AFTER THE 1906 EARTHQUAKE

MAGDALENA GIL

Profesora Asistente, Escuela de Sociología
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Santiago, Chile

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The idea that disasters become an opportunity is almost a cliché; what we never know is who or what will benefit from it. Based on the debates following the 1906 earthquake in Valparaíso, this text argues that when a city is ruined and decisions to rebuild must be taken, the difference between what is valued and what is not is clearly shown. The opportunity, then, becomes a discussion on values.

According to economics, things are worth their price in the market, following the laws of supply and demand. However, we also know that there are things that cannot be easily alienated or traded, which does not mean that they have no value. Marion Fourcade calls these goods “peculiar” – including among them wild animals, vital organs, and nature (Fourcade, 2011). The city could certainly be included in this list. While it is true that the urban land is usually traded and valued in monetary terms, the city is more than the soil on which it is located; it is a social construction, a shared experience. It is the product of a society as well as the space that makes that society possible and conditions it (Mumford, 1961). As a peculiar good, the value of a city is not openly defined, as neither



are the particular values associated with it. However, there are times when the value of a peculiar good must be discussed or contested. For example, we value a family heirloom when it is lost or a wetland once it has been contaminated. In these cases, it is the destruction of the object or place what makes the loss of value clear, and its restitution forces to define what, how, and how much that loss is valued.

This is what has happened in many Chilean cities after the great socio-natural disasters that have affected them throughout history, especially earthquakes. As described by Torrent (2016), that is the case for Chillán after the 1939 earthquake left a virtually blank plan from which a new city could be thought from scratch. Within this context, different “value economies” can be considered (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), each highlighting a particular aspect of the territory. That is, one must discuss – in many cases for the first time – what is it that it is valued from a city, what must be recovered and what can be replaced. This is because the post-disaster recovery process is not only a task for the physical world, even if determined by the need to rebuild. Recovery is also a process driven by the desire to re-engage with the social and cultural life that the disaster has endangered, something Davis and Alexander (2005) have called *genius loci* or ‘sense of place.’

An example of this is the destruction of Valparaíso in 1906, since it raised a fervent and agitated discussion about the new city plan, bringing forward different visions regarding its value as imaginary and

1 El Almendral antes del terremoto de 1906. Calle y Plaza Victoria, Valparaíso. (Actual Av. Pedro Montt). / *El Almendral before the 1906 earthquake. Victoria Street and Square, Valparaíso. (Current Pedro Montt Av.).* Fuente / Source: Postal de Colección / Postcard Collection.

2 El Almendral luego del terremoto de 1906. Calle y Plaza Victoria, Valparaíso (Actual Av. Pedro Montt). / *El Almendral after the 1906 earthquake. Victoria Street and Square, Valparaíso. (Current Pedro Montt Av.).* Fotografía / Photograph: Carlos Brandt.



commonplace. However, there was also a certain degree of consensus on the general values that should inspire the 'ideal' Valparaíso, specifically the search for a more modern, more hygienic and more monumental city. In this way, catastrophe becomes an opportunity to redesign the urban space, creating a 'window' through which the urban values of a society can more clearly be observed (Healey, 2011).

Valparaíso's destruction in 1906

On the night of August 16, 1906, an earthquake magnitude 8.2 M_w ¹ struck Valparaíso, destroying almost completely Chile's first port and second most important city. Strong swells, destructive fires and many aftershocks, some almost as strong as the major earthquake, followed the event. After a night out in the open, the scene of the next morning was devastating: whatever the earthquake had left standing was then destroyed by fire. The official number of casualties in Valparaíso was estimated at 3,800 people, with more than 20,000 injured (Zegers, 1906; Rodríguez & Gajardo, 1906)² and \$100 million in property damage.³ It was indeed the greatest catastrophe in Chile's history to the date.

From La Serena to the north and to Talca to the south, the whole country experienced the earthquake. However, no city or town suffered as much as Valparaíso, and specifically, El Almendral neighborhood. With famous theaters, cafes and department stores, El Almendral ranged from Plaza de la Victoria up to the feet of the Barón Hill in the city's flat area.⁴ It used to be the most splendid part of Valparaíso and the heart of the local elite. Even so, the mansions had to tolerate the port's proximity, while sharing space with some *cités* and even small industry. Sadly, the land of El Almendral had been reclaimed from the sea through landfills and, consequently, almost every building collapsed with the earthquake (Rodríguez & Gajardo, 1906; Martland, 2006).⁵

Unfortunately, we do not know much about the damage that the earthquake inflicted in other parts of the city, considering a third of it were *conventillos* [slums] (Urbina, 2011). According to the Mayor, destruction encompassed "the whole city"; however, specific records refer exclusively to the oligarchic city: the center, the port, and El Almendral.⁶ Recent studies have pointed out that most of the hills were effectively destroyed, mainly due to fires, but some survived in fairly good conditions (Savala, 2012). Nevertheless, the 64 totally devastated blocks in El Almendral were the ones bearing the highest value for the elite, since they not only condensed most of the trade but also of their social life. Therefore, its reconstruction became an issue of first importance and, moreover, the destruction of Valparaíso was presented as an opportunity to design a dream city that later became an example for Chile and the rest of the world.⁷

Plans for Valparaíso's reconstruction

The day after the tragedy, a group of neighbors began to organize to help and to plan Valparaíso's reconstruction. The group was known as the Comisión General de



Vecinos [Neighbors General Commission] (CGV) which, formed by about thirty elite men, it included the Mayor and the city's Intendant.⁸ To meet its goal of leading reconstruction, the CGV formed a technical sub-commission to design a new plan for Valparaíso. The CGV's proposal was radical: the government should expropriate all El Almendral (approximately 545,000 m²) while the commission would design a new city to build in its place.⁹ The plan was designed by Francisco Garnham and Jorge Lyon, both engineers and local citizens. According to Garnham's analysis, "the flat part of the city's layout contains all the conditions required by a modern city," a concept on which he designed the new plan and defined the measurements for new avenues, streets, squares, and boulevards.¹⁰ Any trace of the previous city had to be eradicated: old *conventillos* and factories were to be relocated in other areas, starting with the new 'camps' that had emerged after the earthquake.¹¹ The new rooms for these "souls" (sic) should be located in Playa Ancha, on the outskirts of the oligarchic city. The project was presented in the newspaper *El Mercurio* on August 25, drawing support from the local elite.¹² The issue, however, was that the proposal was so expensive that it could end up being "more ruinous than the earthquake itself," as recorded in the CGV minutes.¹³

On the other hand, landowners located in El Almendral were not convinced with the CGV's plan. Most did not want money for their houses, but to rebuild them in the same place. Millionaires – the owners argued – had properties elsewhere and saw the land

3 Destrucción en El Almendral, Valparaíso. / *Destruction in El Almendral, Valparaíso.* Fotografía / *Photograph:* Carlos Brandt.

4 Plano de Valparaíso señalando las zonas más afectadas por el terremoto e incendios. / *Valparaíso plan indicating the areas most affected by the earthquake and fires.* Fuente / *Source:* Rodríguez & Gajardo, 1906.

in El Almendral only as an investment.¹⁴ However, for the owners, El Almendral was their home, and a “wholesale” expropriation would deprive them of living in their neighborhood ever again.¹⁵ Consequently, the owners presented their own plan for the area designed by the architect Carlos Claussen. The proposal sought to maintain as much as possible the old city plan, thus minimizing the impact of possible expropriations (set at only 102.975 m²). Nonetheless, it also sought to build a larger, more ordered city that was better than the previous one. In this sense, the plan considered streets to be opened and rectified, without adding any new avenues, squares or boulevards. The project was much cheaper than that of the CGV’s, not only because expropriations were kept to a minimum but also because water and light services were left intact.¹⁶

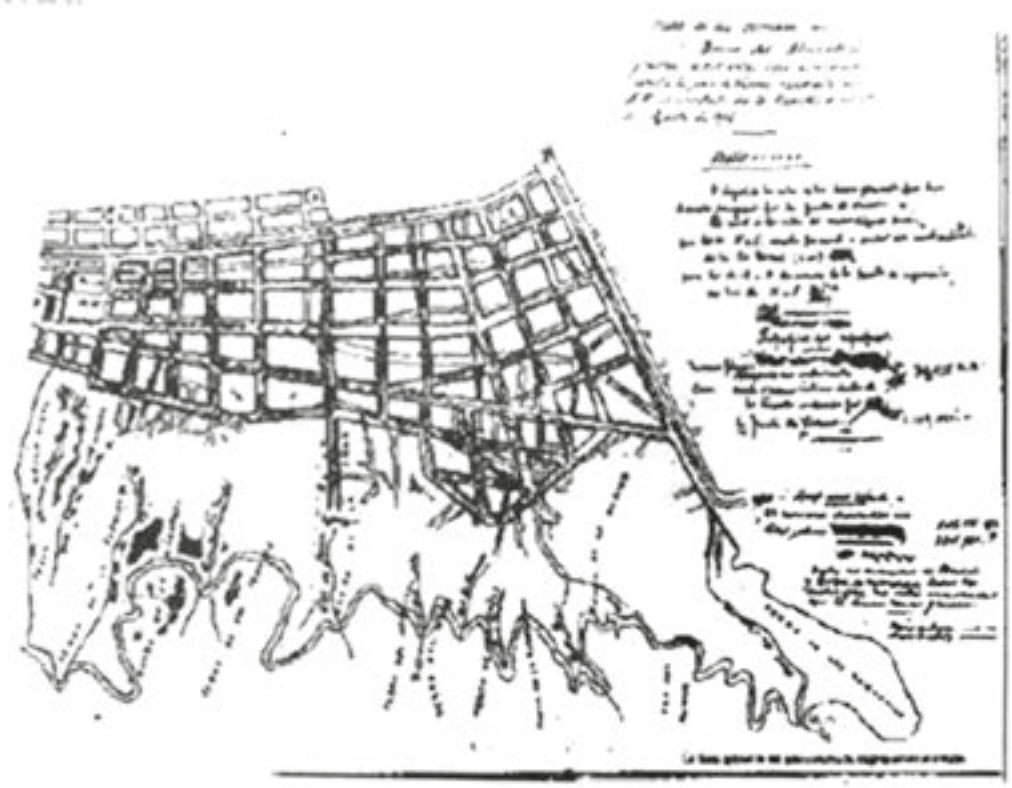
Finally, a third proposal was presented by Abelardo Arriagada, director of Municipal Works at the local Municipality, supported by some of Valparaíso’s boards of residents. The project sought to respond to different concerns by the local elite, establishing large avenues, plazas, and boulevards while only considering land expropriation when needed for these developments. The problem was that some landowners would be left with minimal plots.¹⁷

To decide on the issue, President Montt sent a law for the reconstruction of Valparaíso to Congress (Law 1876). During the debate, the CGV plan was discussed at length, as well as those presented by Claussen and Arriagada.¹⁸ Finally, on December 6, the law was passed without any specific plan. Instead, it required the creation of a Reconstruction Board (JR) with executive powers to decide on a new plan for El Almendral. Montt’s mandate to the JR was to completely redesign El Almendral, just as the CGV wanted, but maintaining the former plan “as much as possible,”¹⁹ following the landowners’ wishes.

Law 1876 gave an unprecedented freedom to the JR, since every decision had to be followed literally in all areas: design, execution, zoning, and regulation. As Martland (2006) has already pointed out, this meant that the JR took almost complete control of the area and granted immense power to the State over the city, or at least part of it. In fact, the JR was controlled by executive representatives and was subject to direct control of the executive. However, the neighbors still maintained significant power. The five men appointed

“Catastrophe becomes an opportunity to redesign the urban space, creating a ‘window’ through which the urban values of a society can more clearly be observed.”

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5 Propuesta de la cgv. Plano de F. Garnham y J. Lyon. / *cgv proposal. Plan by F. Garnham and J. Lyon.* Fuente / *Source: La Unión, 11 de octubre de 1906. / October 11, 1906.*

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6 Propuesta del Comité de Propietarios. Plano de C. Claussen. *Landowners' proposal. Plan by A. Bertrand.* Fuente / *Source: La Unión, 6 de noviembre de 1906. / November 6, 1906.*



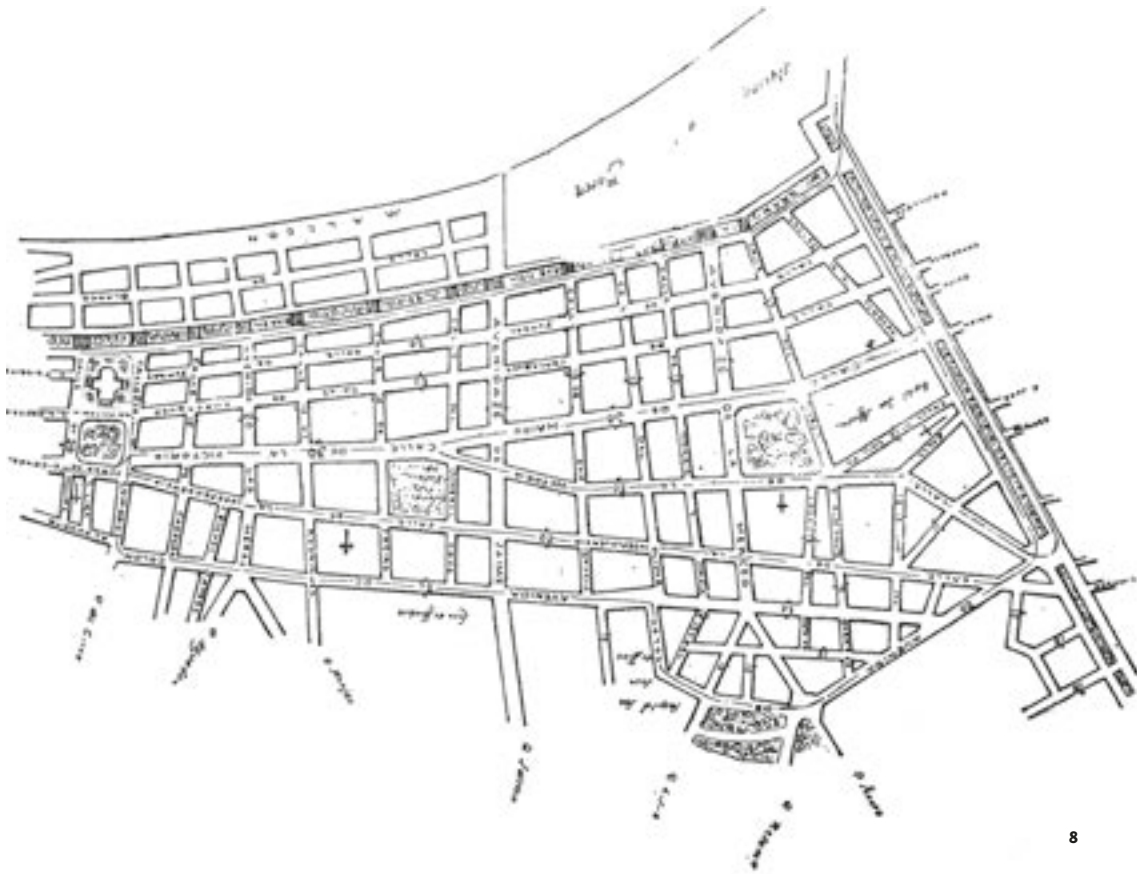
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7 A. Arriagada,
plano / plan.
Fuente / Source: *La
Unión*, 7 de octubre de
1906. / October 7, 1906.

by the President were: Francisco Valdés Vergara, head of the CGV and possibly the most powerful man in Valparaíso; Alejo Barrios Contreras, also member of the CGV, former Mayor and then Deputy for Valparaíso; Santiago Lyon Santa María, founder of the Chilean Vapor Company, who had not participated in the CGV; Domingo V. Santa María, geographer and engineer, former director of State Railways and professor at the University of Chile; and finally, Alejandro Bertrand, a distinguished geographer who had previously designed a new plan for the city of Santiago. In brief, the President appointed a commission that balanced representatives of the local elite with two engineers on behalf of the State, which was reflected in the final plan.²⁰

The final project

While it is true that the plan sanctioned by the JR encompassed elements from the different proposals, it was mainly designed by Bertrand. The engineer took into consideration most of what the executive requested, keeping part of the previous layout, but setting new guidelines for reconstruction. First, it intended to set wide and straight streets, eliminating abrupt corners and shortening routes to improve security measures. Secondly, it opened new streets and roads, in addition to introducing new squares that served as public walkways. Third, it sought to level streets and to bury water channels coming down the hills.²¹ Although this meant significant expropriations, it did not imply that all



El Almendral was to be confiscated. The requirements of the National Treasury were also taken into account since the final plan was significantly cheaper than the one requested by the CGV. It was ratified by a decree on behalf of President Montt on January 18, 1907.

Engineer Enrique Budge was appointed to materialize Valparaíso's reconstruction. However, by the year 1910, the Centennial of the Republic, the reconstruction works were still in progress. A number of issues had delayed the implementation of the Government's plan. Of major importance was the fact that many people had begun repairing their buildings without authorization from the JR, which complicated the expropriations. Likewise, the 1907 Chilean economic crisis made it harder to get funds from the State. Lastly, in 1906 a new plain roadway linked Valparaíso with Viña del Mar, turning the connection between both cities much more efficient not only by avoiding the detour among the hills, but also by including a tramway. In addition, the lack of dwelling spaces in Valparaíso after the earthquake forced people to other parts in the area. Seven years after the earthquake, the reconstruction of El Almendral was still moving at a slow pace, while in Viña del Mar there were about 500 new mansions, each with its own garden.

Still, El Almendral was rebuilt, its streets enlarged and paved, and the waterways channeled and vaulted. In Brazil Avenue, the first to be renovated, important monuments such as the British Arch and statues of Lord Cochrane and Christopher Columbus were located.

8 Propuesta final de la JR. Plano de A. Bertrand. JR's final proposal. Plan by A. Bertrand. Fuente / Source: *El Mercurio* (Valparaíso), 9 de enero de 1907. January 9, 1907.

Pedro Montt and Columbus Avenues were also opened. Secondly, riverbeds were covered by paving the streets, which prevented the continuous rain flooding. Thirdly, El Almendral was leveled according to the rest of the city, using the rubble left by the earthquake as fill. Finally, a number of squares were transformed, especially Victoria Square, which was enlarged by a whole block and received bronze statues representing the seasons of the year. Here a new urban center was established, comprising a new theater and municipal offices. The lands formerly used for these purposes were converted, in turn, into the Simón Bolívar Square (Ugarte, 1910).

Urban values expressed in the reconstruction of Valparaíso

Despite their differences, it is clear that all proposals share a relatively common view on the 'ideal' Valparaíso. Within it, a "modern" city seems to be the main theme. For most of the local dwellers, and especially for those who participated in the CGV, any vestige of the former city had to be eliminated, giving way to a new one in accordance with its time. In practical terms, this meant a more ordered, safe and hygienic city, as reflected even in the most conservative proposals. Particularly, it was thought that the "tortuous, narrow streets"²² were to disappear, substituted by a new, "smarter" layout that encompassed avenues and boulevards in the style of great European cities.²³ This was the dream of the local elite and "now," as *El Mercurio* indicated, "supporters of the wide roads have enormously increased, following all those who felt the wobbly buildings above their heads." The paper added: "This same argument, in fact, will serve to prevent the stupid opposition often made to open spaces, parks, gardens, and squares, considered by some a luxury and which are a need in every civilized city."²⁴

Within this context, the hygiene problem was fundamental. The issue had already been raised years ago,²⁵ but conditions had become much more desperate after the disaster given the tents installed among the rubble.²⁶ In fact, Law 1887 was officially named "Law to repair the damages caused by the earthquake of last August 16 in the city of Valparaíso, to prevent this city from flooding and to improve its hygienic conditions."²⁷ As described by Páez (2008), this meant a highly alarming situation for the elite once threatened by possible diseases. Given the above, all plans contemplated leveling the soil while defining a north-to-south gradient that improved rainwater circulation and prevented flooding. The local edition of *El Mercurio* summarized this vision as follows:

With the completion of the works indicated in the different issues of the [presidential] message, it will be possible to put an end, once and for all, to those infected slums that formed most of the neighborhood mentioned, and we will have transformed that area of Valparaíso into a truly modern city, with spacious, clean, and well-paved streets, with the levels needed to give water a proper exit, with hygienic

DE LAS RUINAS

La destrucción completa del centro ha hecho resurgir de las ruinas restos de Valparaíso una nueva ciudad, de edificios, estructuras, de templos sencillos y confortables como se dice de un edificio de hombre de espíritu alto y bienestar dignificado la Patria de un ciudadano, con un mantenimiento digno-cuando se que bello al mirar y producen sobre todo la fealdad y grandeza.

Al ver Valparaíso, comprendiendo nueva forma y nueva vida, resucitados de sus cenizas como el ave Fénix y resurgiendo por la gallarda de sus edificios, por su sencillez y todos los puntos de la América en la costa del Pacífico.

En el fondo, se había creado un nuevo espíritu nacional manteniendo los valores tradicionales que la enseñaron y la legaron a grandes tiempos sucesivos. Allí se ven los otros aspectos que luego tiempo han sido apreciados como un momento decisivo, como dicen que se veja, como realidad imposible.

Construyendo esta destrucción posterior existieron a la construcción de un pueblo que se muestra libre de cualquier complejo, como el orgullo de un orgullo tradicional y moderno, y un orgullo que se vea porfiriano porfiriano como otros años más tarde.

El artículo de arriba dice una interpretación total a una opinión que se vea solamente un patrimonio de todos los que son, entonces bajo la influencia de un sentimiento noble. Es que se ha dado en hacer orgullo patrio. Resucitados sobre la destrucción se dignificaron sobre la humanidad y dar sentido de un desarrollo que entonces sus hijos de experimentan.



and well-conditioned buildings, in short, with all those elements that can make life within it pleasant and safe.²⁸

This also meant, as mentioned earlier, to relocate poor segments of Valparaíso on the city's outskirts.

In brief, after the 1906 earthquake, Valparaíso was reborn from its ruins as a new city, showing a vision of the urban that valued certain aspects of the territory over others.²⁹ However, this study reveals that the process of reviving the 'sense of place' that the earthquake destroyed does not always translate into an attempt to restore that which is lost: it can also be motivated by a desire to build something total or partially different. In other words, urban destruction presents itself as an opportunity to rethink the value not only of the city, but also of its experience and its meaning. **ARQ**

9 «De las Ruinas»
"Fom Ruins."
Fuente / Source:
Zig Zag N° 82, 9 de
septiembre de 1906.
September 9, 1906.

- 1 National Seismological Center. Universidad de Chile. Important or Destructive Earthquakes (1570 to date). www.sismologia.cl
- 2 It is clear that the number of victims was larger, since there was no survey of those affected in rural areas or many other cities. In addition, casualties due to influenza or other diseases derived from the disaster should be considered. According to calculations, the final number of casualties is about 7,000.
- 3 Em-Dat 2017. The International Disaster Database. Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters. www.emdat.be
- 4 The area is usually referred to as 'the plan,' due to its flatness; however, this term has been avoided so as not to make the debate on the different urban plans for reconstruction confusing.
- 5 This was, at least, the conclusion of experts at the time. See: Hormidas, 1907.
- 6 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "Informe Oficial del Intendente de Valparaíso sobre la catástrofe," August 20, 1906. *El Mercurio* (Santiago). "El Terremoto en Valparaíso: Llegada del primer correo oficial. Texto del parte del intendente Señor Larraín Alcalde," August 20, 1906.
- 7 For further information on class struggles after the earthquake, see: Martland, 2009 and Savala, 2012.
- 8 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "La Reunión de vecinos de ayer," August 23, 1906 and August 26, 1906.
- 9 Proceedings from the Comisión General de Vecinos. In *Actas de las sesiones de la Junta de Reconstrucción de El Almendral*. Valparaíso: Imprenta de Julio Neuling. 127. See also: *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "La Nueva Planta de Valparaíso," September 18, 1906.
- 10 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "La nueva planta de Valparaíso," September 18, 1906.
- 11 Proceedings from the Comisión General de Vecinos. In *Actas de las sesiones de la Junta de Reconstrucción de El Almendral*. Valparaíso: Imprenta de Julio Neuling. 119-139.
- 12 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "Proyecto de lei para el resurjimiento de Valparaíso," August 25, 1906; "La labor de la comisión de Vecinos," September 1, 1906.
- 13 Proceedings from the Comisión General de Vecinos. In *Actas de las sesiones de la Junta de Reconstrucción de El Almendral*. Valparaíso: Imprenta de Julio Neuling.
- 14 In fact, many of the leaders of the CGV were not landowners at El Almendral. Francisco Valdés lived in Viña del Mar and Jorge Lyon Santa María in Concepción Hill.
- 15 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "La expropiación de El Almendral," September 11, 1906.
- 16 *La Unión*. "El comité de propietarios y el plano de transformación de El Almendral del Sr. Claussen," November 6, 1906.
- 17 There is no room in this article to delve into the debate on the port's reconstruction works, but it is worth mentioning that while the JR was discussing a new plan for Valparaíso, the Port Board discussed the future of this port considering for such purpose part of El Almendral. However, they did not reach any conclusion and the reconstruction of El Almendral continued its course without considering the port. For more information, see: Páez, 2008.
- 18 However, the debate was not about urban planning, but budget. For this reason, the CGV plan could not be rapidly accepted.
- 19 Congreso Nacional de Chile. *Sesiones Extraordinarias de la Cámara de Diputados*. Sesión 1^o Extraordinaria de 12 de Octubre de 1906.
- 20 Additionally, the commission was balanced in political terms: Valdés Vergara was liberal; Alejo Barrios belonged to the National Party and Lyon Santa María came from a family strongly associated with the Conservative Party.
- 21 *Actas de las sesiones de la Junta de Reconstrucción de El Almendral*. Valparaíso: Imprenta de Julio Neuling. See also: *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "El nuevo plano de El Almendral," January 6, 1907.
- 22 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "El nuevo plano de Valparaíso," September 28, 1906.
- 23 Specifically, note the influence of Georges-Eugène Haussmann's Paris Plan.
- 24 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, September 11, 1906.
- 25 Moreover, Garnham had presented years earlier a plan to sanitize the city focusing on public health.
- 26 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "El estado de la ciudad," October 29, 1906.

- 27 Law 1887, December 6, 1906.
- 28 *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. "Los problemas de Valparaíso," October 15, 1906. See also: "La Salubridad Pública y la reconstrucción de la ciudad," January 10, 1906.
- 29 For instance, it is worth noting the scant presence of a discourse on building improvements in terms of seismic protection.

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Magdalena Gil

<mogil@uc.cl>

Sociologist, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2006. Master in Sociology, Columbia University, USA, 2012. PhD in Sociology, Columbia University, USA, 2016. Is currently assistant professor at the School of Sociology and the School of Engineering at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. She is also a researcher at the Centro de Investigación para la Gestión Integrada del Riesgos de Desastres [Research Center for the Integrated Management of Risk Disaster] (CIGIDEN) CONICYT/FONDAP/15110017.