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To cite this article: Maria Victoria Correa Baeriswyl and Magdalena Montalban Larrain 2019 IOP Conf. Ser.: Mater. Sci. Eng. 603 022012

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The Swiss Circle of Magallanes: European Architecture in Chilean Patagonia

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Abstract. In recent years, legal protection of buildings and sites in Chile has increased. Also different initiatives regarding cultural heritage have been developed through public financing, at both regional and national levels. An appreciation of architectural heritage has achieved an important role in the country. This article presents the results of historical research, regarding the headquarters of the Swiss Circle of Magallanes. This building was constructed in the 1920s in Chilean Patagonia, in the city of Punta Arenas. The organization of both the Swiss Circle and its building are part of the city’s history related to the European immigration that took place in the region during the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The immigration process in Chilean Patagonia was led by means of colonization policies, by the national government. The aim of these policies was to consolidate the occupation and development of this remote territory, historically hard to populate. The distance from populated economic centers, as well as the cold weather and difficulties for agriculture were the factors that made these lands hard to be effectively occupied. Immigrant groups arrived at Punta Arenas from different European nations. Italians, British, French, Spanish, Croats, Germans and Swiss were some of the nationalities that arrived to the city; some of them were organized according to the official settlers groups. It is possible to determine the arrival of Swiss settlers to Punta Arenas since the second half of the 19th century. The establishment of the Swiss Mutual Aid Society in 1902, and the creation of the Swiss Circle in 1920, reflected the social organization of Swiss settlers and their descendants, many of whom stayed in the region. This social organization finally materialized in the construction of the headquarters of the Swiss Circle of Magallanes, still preserved nowadays. The Swiss Circle was built of timber following the European concepts related to traditional Swiss chalets. This building represents the adaptation of foreign ideas and styles to a local context, related to the international immigration in Magallanes. For almost a century, the Circle has served the Swiss community and the residents of Punta Arenas. Even though, some interventions have modified the building over time, the original design still remains, and it can be recognized as a Swiss chalet located in this southern Chilean city. The Swiss Circle of Magallanes bears witness to the colonization efforts made in Chilean Patagonia since the second half of the 19th century, as well as the complex social settlement process of immigrant groups at that time. This building also represents an interesting synthesis that combines foreign and local building techniques and styles. Nowadays, the Swiss Circle is a space for cultural dispersion of Swiss traditions and it is materially and immaterially deep-rooted in the local memory. This building relates to the Chilean national history of territorial occupation, and it is a relevant part of the city’s special character, built upon by immigration. In recent years, the Swiss Circle has been recognized as an official heritage and efforts have been made locally to plan for its future restoration.
1. Introduction
This article presents the main results of the historical research related to the Swiss Circle of Magallanes, a relevant material testimony of Swiss immigration into Chilean Patagonia. Built during the first decades of the 20th century, this building is part of the official architectural heritage of the city of Punta Arenas, located in Southern Chile.

During the second half of the 19th century, European immigration contributed towards populating this isolated and strategic Chilean territory, located facing the Magellan Straits. This immigration was encouraged by the Chilean Government of the time, successfully managing to settle down stable population there; hard to come by since Colonial times.

The Swiss Circle of Magallanes represents part of this colonization history of European immigration that took place in Punta Arenas more than a century ago. Descendants of this immigration process still make up a part of the local population of the city today. With almost a century of history, the Swiss Circle has been preserved as a relevant regional architectural heritage. It was built between 1920 and 1921, and it was conceived as a space for social gatherings, as well as the headquarters of the Swiss Mutual Aid Society.

Even if some modifications have been made to the original building, the Swiss Circle still possesses features typical of a Swiss chalet; for example, its configuration, design and construction materials. Built using timber, the Swiss Circle of Magallanes can be described as European architecture located in Chilean Patagonia. This article presents some aspects of the history of this building and its relevance at a regional and national level.

2. Swiss Immigration into the city of Punta Arenas
During the 19th Century, the Chilean government considered that bringing European settlers to less inhabited parts of Chile would allow a more effective occupation of the national territory. This was the case of Swiss settlers in Punta Arenas.

The city of Punta Arenas was founded in 1848. This urban settlement is located in the southern part of Chile, on the coast of the Magellan Straits. During the 19th century, the location of this city has determined its history, because of its strategic importance, both economic and political. Historically, the Magellan Straits were the only safe passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, until the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, and so this strategic location made the effective occupation of this territory urgent and important for the national government of the time. The region was far away from the country’s populated areas and it was marked by extreme weather, so its occupation was difficult.

During the 19th century, the Chilean Government encouraged national and international immigration, which had important results. In 1867, after other previous initiatives, President José Joaquín Pérez established a series of benefits that promoted the settlement of stable groups of population in this territory [1]. In 1868, Punta Arenas was designated as a “minor port” and as a “free port” [1]. This context contributed to a rapid city’s development. Numerous European settlers arrived to the region, as well as local immigrants, coming from other Chilean cities [2]. Other foreign groups arrived as well, not related to colonization policies.

The immigrants established themselves in Magallanes and contributed greatly to its development in all aspects, from economy to urban improvement. The censuses for 1867 and 1874 already recorded the presence of immigrants in Magallanes [3]. In the case of the Swiss, most of the families migrated because of a lack of land in Switzerland.

3. The Swiss Circle of Magallanes
The immigration process in Punta Arenas generated numerous organizations that connected the new population with inhabitants from their countries of origin, through mutual aid and cultural societies. In fact, numerous societies were created locally in Punta Arenas, characterized by a strong connection with their nations of origin, such as the Sociedad de Beneficencia Portuguesa and the Societá di Mutuo
Soccorso Fratellanza Italiana (both created in 1893), the Sociedad Cosmopolita de Socorros Mutuos (1894), the Sociedad Española de Socorros Mutuos (1895), the Sociedad Dalmata de Socorros Mutuos (1896), the Societé Francaise de Secours Mutuels (1897), the Deutsche Kranke und Sterbekasse (1897), the Sociedad Chilena de Socorros Mutuos (1898), the Mutual Benefit Society (1899) and the Yugoslovenko Pripocno Drustvo (1900) [4].

Regarding Swiss Societies in Chile, the first two were created in Santiago, Chile’s capital, in 1886. These societies were called “Sociedad Suiza de Beneficencia” (Swiss Charitable Society), and “Sociedad Suiza de Socorros Mutuos Winkelried” (Winkelried Mutual Aid Society) [5]. In Punta Arenas, the first created Swiss association was the “Helvetia Swiss Mutual Aid Society” in 1902. As a society, this association served as an aid network. Later, in the 1920s, the Swiss Circle of Magallanes was established, with a role focused more on culture and socialization. Both societies existed alongside each other for a few years and worked closely together. It is highly probable that the members of both associations overlapped. During the 1920’s, these social organizations established their presence in the territory with the construction of a representative building for the society’s use: the Swiss Circle of Magallanes.

The first news of a land purchase for the Swiss association dates back to 1916. The piece of land was bought by the Swiss Society of Mutual Aid [6], and it is on this property where the present building of the Swiss Circle is located. Documentary evidence from the early 1920s, in the form of a contract, proves that the Aid Society could make free use of the Circle’s premises [7]. We can observe the close collaboration of both associations in this agreement until the dissolution of the Mutual Aid Society in 1929, due to a general lack of interest of most of the members, who did not attend the meetings and did not pay the fees [8].

The construction of the Swiss Circle building was commissioned by contract on September 22nd, 1920, to Messrs. Tonizzo Brothers. This contract established that the Circle would provide the builders with the timber ready to be assembled [9]. Although the building was supposed to be finished by the end of October 1920, the works were delayed, and the building was inaugurated on February 26th, 1921 with a celebration dinner and a ball. On April 1921, the land and the building were sold by the Mutual Aid Society to the Swiss Circle, and both have been the property of the latter Society ever since.

The building of the Swiss Circle has always welcomed the members of this association and of the Aid Society as well, as a place for social gatherings with activities such as balls, bingos, dinner parties, and the celebration of Switzerland’s national day on August 1st. This space has also been used for activities related to the running of the Circle; for board and committee meetings, as well as for the different groups related to the Circle, such as the Swiss Ladies Circle or the Youth Circle, that existed during the 20th century. The large space of the main hall was often rented for special occasions, such as weddings, children’s birthday parties, dinners and other celebrations [10]. From early on, the Circle had a food service in the building, which could sell beverages and cigarettes [11]. Soon after it opened, a pool table was bought; there was also a library with books and Swiss papers available for the members [11]. Since its foundation, the Circle had connections with the Swiss Embassy, the Swiss Consulate and other Swiss societies as well; both national and international.

4. The Swiss Chalet

It is interesting to analyze the characteristics of the Swiss Circle of Magallanes, because of its similarities to a traditional European Swiss Chalet. A “chalet” is a typical Swiss building, distinguished by its practicality, adaptability and resistance [12]. Generally, regional and national differences can be spotted, depending on their uses – such as a shed, a shelter or a house - and also the geographical location of the building – hills, valleys, snowy winters - nevertheless, the chalet always generates a dialogue with the landscape where it is placed [12].

Some aspects that link the Swiss Circle to a typical Swiss Chalet are related to its design and construction materials. The Swiss Circle’s structure is made of wood, and its foundations are laid out on piling of the same material. The building is coated with corrugated metal, a local technique often used.
in Magallanes and all over the South of Chile, in order to preserve the wood from weather damage. Other features of the Swiss chalets can be also recognized in the Swiss Circle: the sharp angled roof and its projection over the walls, the traditional design of the facades, and the elevation of the building above the terrain in order to avoid humidity. Nevertheless, the Swiss Circle facade ornaments are simpler, less colored and less detailed than the ones in a traditional Swiss chalet. The windows have some similarities too, because they are divided into smaller glass modules with wooden frames. These elements were initially covered by wooden blinds, which can be observed in historical photographs. These blinds are no longer preserved. Other relevant elements are the central balcony on the first floor, and the main facade’s entrance balustrade. These elements reveal a clear symmetrical axis.

Even if some differences can be found, it is noticeable that the Swiss Circle of Magallanes is a local architectural adaptation of its European reference. In fact, this building was known locally as “La Casa Suiza de Punta Arenas”, which means “The Swiss House of Punta Arenas”.

The building has sustained two major interventions. Firstly, some very extensive repair works were carried out between 1968 and 1972, with the addition of the canteen to the right of the main hall, as well as the modernization of the kitchen and restrooms. Between 1995 and 1996, the main hall was extended, eliminating the left veranda.

5. Conclusions
The arrival of Swiss and other European immigrants in Magallanes and Punta Arenas since the second half of the 19th century gave a relevant impulse to the development of cities in southern Chile. This process was encouraged by the national government of the time.

International immigration generated the creation of different mutual aid groups, societies and associations in the city of Punta Arenas. The organization of these institutions can be interpreted as a reflection of the successful settling down process of these new inhabitants, as well as the conservation of their ties with their distant country of origin.

The Swiss Circle building is a testimony to one of the associations involved in this historical process of immigration that took place in Chilean Patagonia. The Swiss Circle was built in 1920 and it is heir to the first Swiss network in Punta Arenas: the Swiss Society of Mutual Aid, called “Helvetia”, founded in 1902.

The construction of the Swiss Circle began in 1920, and it was inaugurated in 1921. Local and foreign techniques were incorporated into its construction. The result is a building that combined the typical elements of a Swiss chalet, applying the traditional architectural solutions of Southern Chile whilst responding to the local availability of materials, resources and weather conditions. This building is a unique synthesis that combines the adaptability of the Swiss chalet with local building solutions.

Nowadays, the Swiss Circle is safeguarded by the urban zoning plan of Punta Arenas and it is preserved as a material testimony of Magallanes’ history. This building is considered cultural heritage, because of its historical and architectural attributes, and because of its symbolic and social role for the local community. The symbolic interest of this building lies in its connection with newer generations and the arrival of their families to these territories. Nowadays, the building operates as a center for meetings and activities for the Swiss community still present in Magallanes. In this building, the annual festivities of the Swiss colony are celebrated, and the lectures on cultural affairs are given. The Swiss Circle building represents a place of remembrance of personal and family history by the Swiss descendants, as well as individual and collective memories for the city of Punta Arenas. This building is also related to a cultural exchange process of knowledge, materials and architectural styles, in a city marked by the presence of foreign immigrants who contributed to its development.

The Swiss Circle was built almost a century ago, and it has been present in the city of Punta Arenas, always owned by the same association. Although some modifications have been made to the building over time, the structure has preserved important features of its original design. The Swiss Circle is
nowadays a cultural and social space dedicated to the conservation of Swiss traditions, customs and history in Punta Arenas.

At a regional level, this building is a part of the identity of Punta Arenas as it represents the successful settlement of the Swiss community in Magallanes, and it generates a link between this community and their land of origin, with cultural exchanges between institutions in Chile and Switzerland.

Acknowledgment
This article is the result of an undertaken historical research developed for a cultural project called: “Círculo Suizo de Magallanes: Puesta en Valor de una Arquitectura Europea en Patagonia Chilena”. This project was funded by the National Fund for the Development of Arts and Culture (FONDART), awarded by the National Council for Culture and Arts (Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes CNCA) in 2017, Line of Architecture, Modality Creation, Chile.

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