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Out of the Ashes: Building and Rebuilding the Nation

In 1825, just four years after Venezuela gained independence from the Spanish crown, Simón Bolívar, the “Liberator” of the new republic, sat down to pen a letter to his uncle. “Caracas does not exist,” he wrote, “but its ashes, its monuments, the earth it occupied, now shine with freedom and are covered in the glory of martyrdom” [n.1]. Bolívar’s riff on the debris of empire reconfigured an urban scene that was no mundane skyline: it was a quixotic spectacle in which gleaming monuments were footholds that illuminated the route toward the consolidation of the nation state. In this entanglement of architecture and development, Venezuela’s founding father imagined spatial arrangements as symbols of renewal—future horizons where the nation would take shape atop the amorphous rubble of struggles and strife.

Bolívar’s gloss on ruins and monuments was a rhetorical exercise, yet the task of materializing such transformations has overshadowed nation-building projects in Venezuela ever since. If ruins could gleam with freedom during the emancipation from imperial rule, then the future landscapes of the sovereign nation were sure to be even more dazzling and grandiose. These great expectations have inflected governmental agendas, political mythologies, and spatial arrangements in Venezuela to such an extent that they have recently been declared the *herencia de la tribu*, the burdensome “inheritance of the tribe” that has compelled politicians, from the period following independence to the present, to attempt building the bright future that Bolívar pictured [n.2]. Thus bound to a program of nation founding, incoming leaders have discarded their predecessors’ projects time and

1 Bolívar’s letter was to Esteban Palacios and dated July 10, 1825. Cited in Ana Teresa Torres, *La herencia de la tribu: Del mito de la independencia a la Revolución Bolivariana* (Caracas: Alfa, 2009), 14. The struggle for independence began on April 19, 1810, but was formally achieved with the Battle of Carabobo on July 5, 1821.

2 Torres, *La herencia de la tribu*, 31-35.

3 This regional preeminence is a recurring theme in discourses about Venezuelan nationhood. It stems from the magnitude of Bolívar’s feats in the independence movements of five different nations: Colombia (1819), Venezuela (1821), Ecuador (1822), Peru (1824), and Bolivia (1825).

4 Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 3-5.

5 Elías Pino Iturrieta, *País archipiélago: Venezuela, 1830-1858* (Caracas: Alfa, 2014), 25-26.

6 Pino Iturrieta, *País archipiélago*, 61.

7 Guzmán Blanco was president from 1870-1877, 1879-1884, and 1886-1887, and handpicked his successors during the interim years.

again, promising new political and spatial orders that will elevate Venezuela to its preordained role at the helm of the region [n.3].

If Bolívar envisaged postcolonial Venezuela in dazzling forms from an early stage, the advent of oil economy in the twentieth century fueled quests to render its landscape into a high-gloss reflection of first-world development. It was in this context that monumental constructions like El Helicoide became flagships of progress. The propensity towards periodic reinvention only intensified as Venezuela became an oil nation with soaring revenues. In what Fernando Coronil has termed the country’s modern, “magical state,” petroleum booms have driven political leaders to abandon existing projects and channel funds into new “spectacles of progress” tasked with setting the mold of definitive development [n.4]. The contemporary landscape attests to the trials of nation building, which have left in their wake not only gleaming monuments, but also bright shells with their lights all turned off.

Venezuela on a Pedestal

The independence struggles had caused wideranging devastation, killing more than 30 percent of the population and about 95 percent of the nation’s cattle. This turned Venezuela after 1830 into what the historian Elías Pino Iturrieta terms an “archipelago”: a profoundly disintegrated and disorderly territory, where the lack of roads, bridges, and security turned each region into its own isolated island [n.5]. Although the new nation “was born into a cradle of good intentions,” initial attempts to reorganize national life were further stunted by the Federal War of 1858-1863 [n.6]. By the time this protracted conflict ended, debris from the earthquake of 1812, which had destroyed the main colonial buildings in Caracas, the independence struggles, and the Federal War all lingered on in the capital.

Half a century passed between Bolívar’s description of Caracas’ devastation and the first concerted attempts to clear the rubble and build solid foundations for independent Venezuela. Only after 1870 did the dominance of the bourgeoisie and a centralized government provided the necessary conditions to formulate a plan to consolidate national identity, develop infrastructure, and expand capitalist production. Under General Antonio Guzmán Blanco, who dominated politics from 1870-1887, Venezuela finally began to emerge from the wreckage of war and internal displacement [n.7]. The Illustrious American, as he was known, promised to remake Venezuela by developing urban infrastructure like railways, theatres, aqueducts, and abbatoirs; by erecting monumental

government buildings; and by reorganizing the army. In 1874, this francophile president founded a Ministry of Public Works and promised to turn Caracas into a showcase of Haussmann-inspired urban renovation. During his tenure he designated a full 50 percent of state architectural commissions for construction in the capital from 1870 till 1888 [n. 8]. Decked out with widened avenues, a neo-Gothic university, theaters, and public spaces, the restyled city was a symbol of modernity for locals and foreigners alike.

During this period, public monuments were both levers of power and seeds for growing nationalist sentiment. Guzmán Blanco initiated a paradigm shift with regards to urban space that sought to shake off Spanish heritage, cement the nascent “cult of Bolívar,” and bring republican values to sites of public assembly [n. 9]. Across the land, the Plaza Mayor at the heart of each colonial grid was rechristened as the Plaza Bolívar. In the capital, this transformation was marked by a public ceremony on October 11, 1874, at which Guzmán Blanco and his entourage oversaw the lowering of two metal boxes into the cavity of a hefty pedestal that would soon be topped with a heroic bronze statue of Bolívar [fig. 1 p. 72]. Like a time-capsule of a national identity in the making, the pedestal was filled with objects documenting the solidification of the state

apparatus, among which were copies of constitutions and laws, portraits of Guzmán Blanco, the first national census of 1873, and an atlas of Venezuela’s territory. This was no simple mount for Bolívar’s effigy; the plinth was a monument in itself [n. 10].

In the ensuing years, the construction of public monuments and infrastructure alike provided occasions for public festivities, as well as backdrops for Guzmán Blanco to present himself as the chief architect of the nation’s sovereignty and modernization. Amid the sparkling fireworks and booming cannon shots that marked the opening of the aqueduct and urban promenade at El Calvario park in Caracas, the president anticipated a providential future for a Venezuela “with a blossoming industry, with our rivers that resemble seas and our seas that resemble oceans, with hundreds of steamships from the Orinoco river to the River Plate [in Argentina] loaded with diverse and rich products from this blessed land” [n. 11]. The future was bright indeed.

Forest Fortress

While they did not match Guzmán Blanco’s predictions exactly, the dawn of the twentieth century did see drastic transformations in Venezuela. Oil prospectors had been exploring the hinterlands for some time on the hunch that “black gold” bubbled underneath the surface. On July 31, 1914, Pozo Zumaque in the western state of Zulia became the nation’s first oil well. Six years later an enormous torrent of petroleum gushed from the well at Pozo Barroso, baptizing Venezuela in the devil’s excrement and confirming the prospects of instant and copious wealth. This boon enabled the autocrat General Juan Vicente Gómez (who ruled from 1908-1935) and his acolytes to line their pockets through inside connections to oil concessions and other enterprises. Gómez presided over Venezuela’s transition from an indebted agricultural economy to a solvent oil exporter with a centralized state apparatus, new hydrocarbon legislation, and a military strong enough to keep in check any rival strongmen with designs on power [n. 12]. The positivist ideologues who surrounded Gómez justified his regime with dubious arguments that Venezuelans’ racial mix made them an unruly bunch that required a firm hand from their ruler. He ran the nation like a patriarchal *hacendado*, eventually accumulating a personal fortune so vast that he was reputed to be the wealthiest man in South America.

A former cowboy from the mountainous state of Táchira who quickly rose to a position as a wealthy cattle rancher, Gómez felt more at home in the leafy provinces than the bustling capital. He established official residence in the garden city of Maracay and thus

8 Juan José Martín Frechilla, “Construcción urbana, profesiones e inmigración en el origen de los estudios de urbanismo en Venezuela: 1870-1957,” *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos* 11: 3 (1996), 479.

9 On the cult of Bolívar, see: Germán Carrera Damas, *El culto a Bolívar* (Caracas: Alfa, 2003), Luis Castro Leiva, *De la patria boba a la teología bolivariana* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1987), and Elías Pino Iturrieta, *El divino Bolívar* (Madrid: Catarata, 2003).

10 The atlas in question was Agustín Codazzi’s *Geografía de Venezuela* (1840). See: Pedro Calzadilla, “Las ceremonias bolivarianas y la determinación de los objetos de la memoria nacional en Venezuela, 1872-1874,” in *Galerías del progreso: Museos, exposiciones y cultura visual en América Latina* ed. by Jens Andermann and Beatriz González Stephan (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 2006), 89-115.

11 Such festivities were a holdover from colonial life but after Independence they were reframed to avoid royal iconography. See: Pedro Calzadilla, “El olor de la pólvora: Fiestas patrias, memoria y Nación en la Venezuela guzmanista 1870-1877,” *Caravelle* 73 (1999): 111-130.

12 Doug Yarrington, “Cattle, Corruption, and Venezuelan State Formation during the Regime of Juan Vicente Gómez, 1908-35,” *Latin American Research Review* 38.2 (2003): 9-33.

shifted the spotlight from Caracas [n. 13]. Beyond improving public infrastructure in this de facto capital, Gómez set his sights on a pet project that embodied his ambition for personal wealth and power. He decided to build a hideaway deep in the cloud forest of the cordillera that separates Maracay from the Caribbean coastal towns of Choroni and Chuao. The dictator dreamt of an alpine retreat where he could entertain diplomats and dignitaries, socialites and businessmen—a place where bribes and concessions could be brokered out of sight, looking out on a panorama that stretched across three states [figs. 2-3 p. 72]. And he got what he wanted. In the early 1930s, Gómez commissioned the French engineer André Potel to design the four-story art deco palace of Rancho Grande, complete with tunnels where he could wait out any ruptures to the social order.

Rancho Grande is a clear forerunner of the forceful earth moving that would later characterize El Helicoide, heralding the unpredictable fates of hubristic grand designs. At a site off a winding mule track at the Portachuelo Pass, workers chipped away at the rock face to build a “fortresslike building of concrete and stone” perched “in a niche carved from the mountainside, curving to fit [it] like an inverted question mark” [n. 14]. With a cliff for a rampart, Rancho Grande was a dramatic mix of the spectacular and the obscure. Out front, a grandiose 100-foot veranda and luxurious receptions rooms provided a breathtaking view of the landscape. Behind the scenes, a dark, narrow corridor wound its way to cell-like rooms built up against the mountain. The building was nearing completion when the ailing and aging Gómez died just before Christmas 1935.

With Gómez gone, construction ceased at Rancho Grande. The task of building democracy took over. A succession of military officers oversaw this transition—first General Eleazar López Contreras (president from 1937-1941), who had been a government minister

13 Although Gómez favored Maracay, Caracas had continued to grow under his predecessor Cipriano Castro (1899-1908) and then throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, gaining new ministerial buildings, national museums, and theaters, designed by Alejandro Chataing (1873-1928) and the young Carlos Raúl Villanueva (1900-1975), who had recently arrived from Europe.

14 Carol Grant Gould, *The Remarkable Life of William Beebe: Explorer and Naturalist* (Washington D.C.: Shearwater Books, 2004), 357; 359.

under Gómez, and then Isaías Medina Angarita (president from 1941-1945). Newly formed parties formulated political agendas for democratic representation and a shift away from caudillo rule. Discussions about the best uses for the nation’s oil revenues came to the fore after decades of corruption that saw the petroleum sector continually gain power, which was concentrated in the hands of the Rockefeller family through the Creole Petroleum Corporation. Yet, rather than emulate Mexico, which nationalized oil in 1936, the intellectual Arturo Uslar Pietri famously called that same year for to state to “*sembrar el petróleo*”—to sow oil profits back into traditional industries.

As debates about economic reforms played out, some complained that Gómez’s successors were resisting full democratization. Tired of waiting, a civic-military alliance formed by Rómulo Betancourt (founder of the Acción Democrática [Democratic Action] party, AD) and General Marcos Pérez Jiménez (head of a military faction), seized power on October 18, 1945, a decade after the demise of Gómez’s dictatorship. Venezuela’s first universal elections subsequently took place in 1946, bringing the novelist and AD politician Rómulo Gallegos to power. Yet this democratic interlude was short-lived. Frustrated that national development remained sluggish, a military junta took politics back into its own hands on November 24, 1948, once again initiating a deferral of democracy.

Above the Clouds

Although the junta promised free elections in December 1952, this prospect disappeared when a fraudulent vote count installed defense minister and coup-leader Pérez Jiménez as president. Over a decade of military rule that grew increasingly harsh, the regime curbed party politics, imposed censorship, and curtailed trade unionism. They offset the social costs of these actions with an ambitious public works program, which was bankrolled by an oil boom that resulted from the closure of the Suez Canal and the Iranian crisis of 1954. Rising revenues and an influx of foreign (mainly US) investment gave the regime a blank check to make good on the promises laid out in the doctrine it baptized the *Nuevo Ideal Nacional*. The short text of this “New National Ideal” pledged Venezuela’s refoundation as an “ever more prosperous, dignified, and strong” country, through spatial transformations that would fast-track the nation to first-world development. Citing the military-led independence of the 19th century as proof that only the armed forces could deliver tangible progress, Pérez Jiménez claimed that democracy was nothing but a lot of hot air. What mattered were deeds, not words.



Figure 1 Pedestal for a statue of Simón Bolívar, c.1874.
PHOTO: Federico Lessmann. AFU



Figures 2-3 Rancho Grande, 1952. PHOTOS: Alexander Wetmore.
Smithsonian Institution Archives, Images SIA2016-007492b, SIA2016-007492a

Consequently, modern architecture and infrastructure took center stage as markers of national progress and military efficiency [n. 15]. Where for Bolívar post-independence debris was the foundation of sovereignty, demolitions and earth moving were proof of modernity for Pérez Jiménez. The dictatorship elevated bulldozers to the status of national insignia, combining military metaphor and technocratic dogma to launch a housing project dubbed the *Batalla contra el rancho*. This “battle against the *rancho*”—that is, against the makeshift homes that were spreading across the hills of Caracas—razed provisional dwellings, replacing them with modernist highrise blocks to house the city’s growing population [n. 16].

The forward-looking aesthetics of mid-century modernism expedited Pérez Jiménez’s bid to outshine the advances made under democracy. Although skeptics grumbled that the capital had become a delusive “prism of appearances,” a pastiche of “little pieces of Los Angeles, San Pablo, Casablanca, Johannesburg, Jakarta [...and h]ouses in the style of Le Corbusier, Niemeyer, and Gio Ponti,” official propaganda was there to cast the makeover as proof of the nation’s unstoppable progress [n. 17].

Caracas was the centerpiece of a branding campaign that presented military rulers as the architects of Venezuela’s transformation, even though in truth many flagship projects began during its democratic interlude. Such was the case with Carlos Raúl Villanueva’s celebrated University City. Though birthed by democracy, the project was unveiled under dictatorship to provide a stunning backdrop for the 10th Inter-American Conference of 1954, where Pérez Jiménez showcased his leadership and anti-communist credentials. Other buildings fulfilled similarly promotional functions, not

least architect Cipriano Domínguez’s Corbusian-inspired Centro Simón Bolívar, designed in 1948 and inaugurated in 1954. Promoted internationally as Venezuela’s answer to the Rockefeller Center, the government and commercial complex placed a spotlight on the nation’s aspirational image as an emergent global player and fertile terrain for enterprise.

If 20th century skyscrapers suggested verticality as a marker of modernity, then this new oil country was certainly attempting to rise over the traditional red roofs of its colonial past. Caracas’ topography lent itself to the endeavor and the dictatorship attempted to scale real heights. Like Gómez, Pérez Jiménez had his own Alpine-inspired pet project: a cable car that would climb the Ávila Mountain to a 14-story luxury hotel built at an elevation of over two thousand meters [fig. 4 p. 74]. Designed by the Venezuelan architect Tomás Sanabria and landscaped by the Brazilian designer Roberto Burle Marx, the Hotel Humboldt’s penthouse afforded the dictator his own mountaintop panopticon to survey the city on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other. Construction advanced at a rapid pace and by 1955 Pérez Jiménez was boarding a gilded presidential cabin on the cable car to rise above the clouds.

This project typifies the spectacles of progress that characterized military rule. Stripped of their democratic rights to elect leaders, Venezuelans were compelled to applaud the rational thrust of engineering, the creative verve of architecture, and the dogged efficiency of military leaders. Much as the Roca Tarpeya would provide a support for El Helicoide, the Ávila Mountain served as a plinth for the monumental Hotel Humboldt, a dazzling centerpiece of modern architecture tasked with symbolizing Venezuela’s upward mobility. Anything was possible; the future was now.

Glass Curtains

The boom did not last. The escalating costs of public spending combined with mounting public discontent to loosen the dictatorship’s grip on power. At the same time, structural factors like urbanization and the fast-paced industrialization that accompanied the oil boom paved the way for regime change and the “creation of a reformist political space” [n. 18]. In 1957, the political parties the dictatorship had suppressed rallied Venezuelans to action, the church grew increasingly critical of the regime, and national strikes and protests eventually ousted Pérez Jiménez. He fled the nation as dawn broke on January 23, 1958. Over the following months, leading figures from Venezuela’s three main political parties, AD, COPEI (originally called the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente

15 This section draws on my book: *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space, and Visuality in Venezuela, 1948-1958* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).

16 On the dictatorship’s proclaimed “Battle against the Rancho” see: Viviana d’Auria, “Caracas’ Cultural [Be]longings: The Troubled Trajectories of the TABO Superbloque,” in *Latin American Modern Architectures: Ambiguous Territories*, ed. by Patricio del Real and Helen Gyger, 115-134, (New York: Routledge, 2013). For a fascinating ethnographic history of the largest residential complex built during this project, the Urbanización “2 de Diciembre” (later “23 de Enero”), see: Alejandro Velasco, *Barrio Rising: Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

17 Mariano Picón Salas, *Suma de Venezuela* (Caracas: Controlaría General de la República, 1984), 133.

18 Terry Lynn Karl, “Petroleum and Political Pacts: The Transition to Democracy in Venezuela,” *Latin American Research Review* 22.1 (1987): 64.



Figure 4 Hotel Humboldt (Tomás Sanabria, 1955). AFU



Figure 5 Parque Central, c.1978. AFU



Figure 6 David Brillembourg poses with a model of the Centro Confinanzas, 1989. PHOTO: Ricar2.



Figure 7 The new Mausoleo del Libertador (Liberator's Mausoleum) under construction, 2012. PHOTO: Gabriel Méndez.

[Independent Political Electoral Organization Committee] and now referred to with its acronym or as the Social Christian party), and Unión Republicana Democrática (Democratic Republican Union), brokered the Punto Fijo Pact, which paved the way for elections by establishing guarantees for democratic representation.

If the 50s were the decade of earth moving, it was the tectonic plates of politics that shifted in the 60s. Although the Punto Fijo Pact cemented a new political order, establishing a shared agenda that transcended party politics, the reestablishment of democracy was rife with tensions. Factionalism in the left, guerrilla activities, and anti-government protests in the arts all dominated the national agenda. So did an assassination attempt on president Rómulo Betancourt (who returned from exile to be elected to office from 1959–1964), masterminded by the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, a right wing ally of Pérez Jiménez. In this fraught setting, ostentatious buildings like the Hotel Humboldt suddenly looked out of place—not least since the visit that Fidel Castro paid the cable car on the heels of the triumphant Cuban Revolution, which marked sea changes in the region’s political climate. Turning to austerity, Betancourt abandoned the dictatorship’s most pharaonic plans and scaled back designs for a new complex planned to host a world’s-fair-inspired International Exposition in 1960 [n. 19]. Instead, the site in Caracas’ eastern reaches hosted the more modestly scaled Parque del Este, a park landscaped by Burle Marx and associates, which Betancourt opened in 1961. Dictatorial hubris was replaced with public amenities.

While the following years saw a two-party system take shape, with AD and COPEI trading turns in power, the global economy once again proved a game changer for Venezuela in the 70s. The oil crisis of 1973 saw prices for crude petroleum increase four-fold, transferring wealth “as if by a frenzied tornado from the center nations of the first world to the oil-exporting countries of the periphery,” including OPEC founding member Venezuela [n. 20]. As he came to power in 1974, Carlos Andrés Pérez cashed in on this bonanza, declaring a second independence and the nation’s

rebirth as the *Gran Venezuela* (Great Venezuela). This vision rekindled dreams of instantaneous development, casting the state as the driving force of industrialization, to be achieved via import substitution and the nationalization of oil and steel.

As public spending soared, privately funded buildings shot up as well, with high-yield ventures in real estate, commerce, and construction generating instant wealth for investors. Conveniently for Pérez, in 1970 the state’s urban-planning body, the Centro Simón Bolívar, had already begun construction work on the Parque Central complex, which would further Venezuela’s rebranding as an economic and cultural powerhouse. Designed in 1969, the project comprised residential towers, cultural and commercial facilities, and a heliport to boot [fig. 5 p. 75 | n. 21]. Parque Central was located off the Avenida Bolívar, at the foot of the San Agustín del Sur neighborhood on whose hills El Helicoide had been built. Its iconic towers, which would long be the tallest in Latin America, lived up to the country’s nickname of *Saudi Venezuela*. While tenants ascended the 44-floor residential blocks, government employees whooshed up glass-clad 59-story towers to offices that rewarded them with sweeping vistas of the city. At street level, a brand-new Museum of Contemporary Art boasted a world-class collection of works by international masters and local luminaries, located just a stone’s throw from the brutalist Teatro Teresa Carreño arts complex, where construction started in 1973.

By the early 1980s, Parque Central’s newly finished towers continued to glimmer in the Caribbean sun, but the economy had lost its shine. The books were no longer balancing: foreign debt rose, oil prices plunged, and on February 18, 1983, Venezuela had its own “Black Friday” when the bolivar suffered an unprecedented devaluation against the dollar. Despite the crisis, the memories of instant wealth from boom years lingered on. Debt repayment took precedence over state-led development, but private banks still hinted that a turnaround could be imminent, tapping the metropolitan imaginary of global finance to commission new skyscrapers. One project was even set to rival the nearby Parque Central towers. The Centro Financiero Confinanzas—a banking complex spearheaded by the financier David Brillembourg and designed by Enrique Gómez and Associates—would have comprised a 45-story tower and four additional buildings, complete with 30,000m² of office space, a luxury hotel, apartments, a 12-story car park, a swimming pool, and a helipad [fig. 6 p. 75 | n. 22].

La Torre de David (David’s Tower, as it was dubbed and still known today) not only emulated the corporate luxury and iconic contours of the World Trade Center,

19 The project was likely inspired by the modern urban complex built for Rafael Trujillo’s Free World’s Fair for Peace and Confraternity of 1955, which celebrated his quarter of a century in power. On Trujillo’s project, see the chapter by Engel Leonardo in this book.

20 Coronil, *The Magical State*, 237.

21 On Parque Central, see the chapter by Vicente Lecuna in this book.

22 Urban-Think Tank, *Torre David* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2013), 70–73.

its glass curtain was to be manufactured by the same firm that had clad the ill-fated Twin Towers. The tower was built on an act of faith, and despite the recent economic crisis, the banking group's slogan resounded with optimism when construction began in 1989. *Confinanzas, renace la confianza*, it promised, using wordplay to suggest that "with (speculative) finance, confidence is reborn." Given Brillembourg's conviction that the economy would rise from the ashes, his tower was set to be a phoenix of sorts. Its glossy façade evoked the aspirations toward first-world development, where Venezuela's economy would be buoyed by speculative finance and awash in flows of transnational capital.

Venezuelans remained invested in a similarly auspicious vision of the future, and 1989 elected Carlos Andrés Pérez to a second term in office, banking on a renewal of the Great Venezuela he had promised during the previous decade's oil boom. Rather than an economic revival, however, his promised Grand Turnaround (*Gran Viraje*) materialized as a package of neoliberal austerity measures—a shock policy drafted to reassure foreign creditors against the threat of default. When state subsidies and price controls disappeared, and interest rates were cut loose, violent protests and looting erupted on February 27, 1989, a date later referred to as the *Caracazo* [n.23]. Not only was Brillembourg's predicted resurgence of investor confidence crushed; political discontent intensified. In 1992, military officers led by Hugo Chávez made two unsuccessful attempts to topple Pérez from power, and by the next year both the administrator and the banker met their demise: Pérez was imprisoned on embezzlement charges and Brillembourg died from

23 Margarita López Maya, "The Venezuelan *Caracazo* of 1989: Popular Protests and Institutional Weaknesses," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35 (2003): 117-137.

24 On this topic, see my chapter "Makeshift Modernity" in this book.

25 On early support, see: Damarys Canache, "From Bullets to Ballots: The Emergence of Popular Support for Hugo Chávez," *Latin American Politics and Society* 44.1 (2002): 69-90.

26 For engaging profiles of Chávez, see: Richard Gott, *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2011) and Rory Carroll, *Comandante* (London: Penguin, 2013).

27 The PSUV was created as an umbrella for disparate pro-Chávez parties. For a pro-Chávez account, see: George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). On the social tensions running through political polarization, see: Luis Duno Gottberg, "Mob Outrages: Reflections on the Media Construction of the Masses in Venezuela," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 13.1 (2004): 115-135.

cancer. As the *Confinanzas* group caved, construction on its new headquarters halted and La Torre de David began its journey to abandonment and ruin. Eventually it would be occupied by vulnerable communities of squatters and dubbed pejoratively as a "slumscraper" [n.24].

Diamonds and Pearls

Continued economic strife and a second austerity package introduced in 1996 created fertile ground for the ascendancy of Hugo Chávez and his *Movimiento Quinta República* (MVR, Fifth Republic Movement), which formed the basis for the subsequent *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV, United Socialist Party of Venezuela) [n.25]. A lieutenant from humble origins in Venezuela's plains, Chávez took inspiration from leftist guerrillas who remained at large in the country and founded a political cell with fellow officers in 1982. This *Movimiento Bolivariano-200*, which marked the bicentennial of Bolívar's birth in 1783, was the basis for the failed coup of February 4, 1992. Chávez appeared on television during that attempt, telling his fellow insurgents that he had failed to secure control of strategic targets in Caracas "*por ahora*"—for now. The short speech turned this underground insurgent into a television star [n.26].

Amid growing support, Chávez was freed from jail in 1994. As he campaigned for the presidency four years later, he argued that the two-party system forged after 1958 had outlived its usefulness, and that Venezuela needed a new republic founded on social welfare, economic reform, and the power of common citizens. Chávez was elected, and submitted a revised constitution that was ratified by popular referendum in 1999. His support soon waned, however, especially as the president modeled his approach on that of his mentor Fidel Castro, shifting his initially reformist agenda to an outright socialist one. National strikes, a failed coup in 2002, and an unsuccessful recall in 2004 all fanned the fires of political polarization. For some, the "21st Century Socialism" that Chávez advocated after 2005 was the solution to longstanding economic disparities. For others, it was a return to failed models that turned back the clock on progress [n.27].

Even with oil at \$100 a barrel in the 2000s, Chávez turned his back on the skyscrapers that had enthused his predecessors in their bids to position Venezuela at the forefront of capitalist development. Instead, he drew symbolic capital for his imaginary of national renewal from none other than Simón Bolívar. The country's official name was changed to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and Chávez called his political movement the Bolivarian Revolution. Shining new lights

onto the military-led independence struggles of the 19th century and asserting himself as the true heir to Bolívar's legacy, the socialist president updated the Liberator's musings of 1825. Venezuela was in tatters again, but he would rebuild the nation from the ruination wrought by neoliberalism, US imperialism, and the local oligarchy.

Chávez was famed as an orator, but these moves were not just rhetoric. He took a literal approach to restoring the Liberator to his bygone radiance. In 2010, he had Bolívar's dusty remains exhumed, commissioning forensically-generated portraits to reveal the founding father's "real" face. Next came the construction of a new \$150 million mausoleum, appended to the original National Pantheon in downtown Caracas [fig. 7 p. 75]. Clad in white tiles, the 54-meter high, 2,000m² tomb has been likened to a skateboard ramp, with a curved roof rising eight meters above its nineteenth-century predecessor. Colorfully illuminated against the black granite interior, Bolívar's remains rest in a brand new mahogany coffin studded with diamonds, pearls, and gold stars [n. 28].

Nearly two hundred years after Bolívar wrote to his uncle, his evocation of gleaming monuments had emerged phoenixlike from the ashes. Reigniting the fires of patriotism, Chávez updated his forebear's trope to claim that the nation had been reborn, emancipated this time by a socialist revolution. With the eternal flame burning at the new Mausoleum's summit, and the diamond and pearl encrusted sarcophagus, Venezuela had gained a shining new monument, and Bolívar's bones were polished off in the process. But as fate would have it, Chávez did not live to see the flame catch, passing away on March 15, 2013 after a battle with cancer. In the turmoil that has intensified

since his death, the symbol of the gleaming mausoleum has faded into the background, overshadowed by increasing political strife during the rule of his successor, Nicolás Maduro, who took over the presidency in April 2013. In the face of violent protests and repression, record homicide rates, hyperinflation, plummeting oil prices, and the scarcity of basic goods and medicines, discussions about the shape the nation's future should take are less concerned with ambitious architecture than with day-to-day necessities.

Although distinct in their historical and political origins, the towering structures and curtailed monuments discussed here have one thing in common. Together, they reveal the endurance—and the instability—of the impulse to conduct nation building through the construction of dazzling architecture. For Bolívar, as for politicians over the next two hundred years, spatial arrangements were meant to illuminate the path to future glory. But such great expectations are extremely hard to satisfy. Not only does the construction of titanic architecture pose practical challenges in its own right; enduring ideological conflicts and economic turmoil make for a complex terrain on which to build, inviting the possibility of curtailment and abandonment.

This predicament might explain why the Venezuelan playwright José Ignacio Cabrujas called nation building a recurring "collective delirium," based on the conviction that destroying provisional structures allows definitive ones to emerge in their place [n. 29]. By repeatedly glossing over ruins to declare the nation reborn, this model is grounded in a kind of active amnesia. Stranded monuments are forgotten along with any lessons they might offer, as the gaze fixates instead on the next auspicious vision of the future, molded in new and purportedly definitive forms. Yet, in the shadows cast by gleaming monuments, the rubble at the intersection of nation building and architecture has its own story to tell. The geneses and afterlives of symbolic sites like El Helicoide can counteract this will to oblivion, recomposing a picture of the nation's making to shine a light on past conflicts and present struggles.

28 Virginia López, "Simón Bolívar's new tomb is monument to Chávez, say critics," *Guardian*, November 21, 2011; "Venezuela honours Simón Bolívar with new coffin," *BBC*, December 18, 2011.

29 José Ignacio Cabrujas paraphrased in Milagros Socorro, *Catía, tres veces* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1994).

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