

Out of the Ashes: Building and Rebuilding the Nation

In 1825, just four years after Venezuela had 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.”¹ Bolívar’s riff on the debris of empire was an attempt to reconfigure a scene that made sense: in this urban panorama, gleaming monuments were footholds that illuminated the route toward the consolidation of the nation state. In this entanglement of architecture and development intimated by Venezuela’s founding father, spatial arrangements symbolize prospects of renewal—future horizons where the nation takes shape over and above the amorphous rubble left in the wake of struggles and strife.

Bolívar’s gloss on Caracas’ ruinous landscape was but a rhetorical exercise, yet the task of making such scenes a tangible reality has overshadowed nation building projects ever since, not least because the urban scene he envisaged was no mundane skyline: this was a quixotic spectacle in which ruins shone with freedom. This image of gleaming debris implied that if *this* feat of transfiguration was possible during emancipation from imperial rule, then the future landscapes of a sovereign Venezuela were sure to be even more dazzling and grandiose. These great expectations have inflected the governmental agendas, political mythologies, and spatial arrangements to such an extent that they have recently been declared the *herencia de la tribu*—the burdensome “inheritance of the tribe” that compels politicians, from post-independence to the present, to build the bright future that Bolívar pictured.² Thus, bound to found the nation time and again, incoming leaders discard their predecessors’ projects, promising new political and spatial orders that will elevate Venezuela to its preordained role at the helm of the region.³

¹ Bolívar’s letter was to Esteban Palacios and dated 10 July 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 dates from April 19, 1810, but was formally achieved with the Battle of Carabobo on July 5, 1821.

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

³ This regional pre-eminence is a recurring theme through discourses about Venezuelan nationhood, which stems from the magnitude of the feats of Simón

If Bolívar set the tone to envisage the postcolonial nation in dazzling forms, the advent of oil economy provided fuel for quests to render the modern [Venezuelan](#) landscape [into](#) a high-gloss reflection of first world development: [a scene in which](#) monumental [constructions](#) like [El Helicoide became flagships of progress](#). The propensity [towards](#) periodic reinvention only intensified in the twentieth century as Venezuela became an oil nation and soaring revenues. [In](#) Venezuela's "magical state," [as Fernando Coronil termed its modern iteration, petroleum booms have driven](#) political leaders to abandon existing projects and channel petrodollars into new "spectacles of progress" tasked with setting the mold of definitive development.⁴ The contemporary landscape attests to the trials of nation building, which have left in their wake not only gleaming monuments, but also bright objects whose lights have been turned out.

Venezuela on a Pedestal

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 the nation-state. The independence struggles had caused wideranging devastation, killing more than thirty percent of the population, forty six percent of slaves, and leaving only a quarter million of four and a half million cattle, which, as historian Elías Pino Iturrieta puts it, turned Venezuela after 1830 into an "archipelago:" a profoundly disintegrated and disorderly territory, where the lack of roads, bridges, and security turned each region into its own isolated island.⁵ Although "Venezuela was born into a cradle of good intentions," attempts to reorganize national life set in motion in the initial decades after independence were stunted by the civil conflict unleashed by the Federal War of 1858-1863.⁶

Bolívar (1783-1830) in the liberation of five different nations: Colombia (1819), Venezuela (1821), Ecuador (1822), Peru (1824), 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.

During this protracted conflict, even the debris left by the earthquake of 1812, which had destroyed the main colonial buildings, was yet to be cleared. It was only after 1870 that efforts began to put assemble a picture of stability. The dominance of the bourgeoisie class and centralized governance provided the necessary conditions to formulate a plan to rebuild the nation, develop infrastructure, and expand capitalist production. Under General Antonio Guzmán Blanco, who dominated politics from 1870-1887, Venezuela began to emerge out of the wreckage of war and internal displacement.⁷ The Illustrious American, as he was known, promised to remake Venezuela by developing urban infrastructure, such as railways, theatres, aqueducts, abattoirs; building 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, designating fifty percent of all state constructions works commissioned from 1870 to 1888 for the capital.⁸ Decked out with widened avenues, a neo-Gothic university, theaters, and public spaces, the restyled city was a marker of modernity for locals and foreigners alike.

Public monuments were at once levers of power and seeds to grow nationalist sentiment. Guzmán Blanco initiated a paradigm shift in urban space that was devised to shake off Spanish heritage, cement the nascent “cult of Bolívar” in honor of the independence hero, and bring republican values to sites of public assembly.⁹ Across the land, the Plaza Mayor at the heart of the colonial grid was rechristened as the Plaza Bolívar. In the capital, this transformation was marked by a public ceremony on October 11, 1874, in which Guzmán Blanco and his entourage gathered to watch as two metal boxes were lowered into the cavity of a hefty pedestal that weeks later would be topped with a heroic statue of Bolívar cast in bronze (Fig. 1). Like a time-capsule of a national identity in the making, the pedestal was filled with objects that

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

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) and 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).

attested to the solidifying state apparatus, among which were constitutions and laws, portraits of Guzmán Blanco, the first national census of 1873, and an atlas of Venezuela's entire territory. This was no simple mount for Bolívar's effigy: the plinth was a monument in itself.¹⁰

FIG. 1- PENDING IMAGE OF BOLIVAR'S PEDESTAL FROM AFU

In the ensuing years, public monuments and infrastructure works alike served as premises for public festivities, as well as backdrops for Guzmán Blanco to posture as chief architect of the nation's sovereignty and modernization. Amid sparkling firecrackers and booming cannon shots that marked the inauguration of the aqueduct and urban promenade at El Calvario park in Caracas, the president forecast a providential scene: Venezuela would be a land "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."¹¹ The future was bright indeed.

Forest Fortress

While not exactly as Guzmán Blanco predicted, at the dawn of the twentieth century Venezuela did undergo drastic transformations. Oil prospectors had been exploring the hinterlands for some time on the hunch that "black gold" was bubbling away in the subsoil. By July 31, 1914, Pozo Zumaque in the western state of Zulia became the nation's maiden oil well. Six years later a torrent of petroleum gushed from the ground at Pozo Barroso, baptizing Venezuela in "the devil's excrement" and confirming the potentials for instant wealth. This boon enabled autocrat General Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935) and his acolytes to benefit from their inside track on oil concessions and other enterprises to line their pockets with gold. Gómez presided

¹⁰ 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 & Beatriz González Stephan (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 2006), 89-115.

¹¹ Such festivities were a hangover from colonial life but after Independence were reframed without royal iconography. See: Pedro Calzadilla, "El olor de la pólvora: Fiestas patrias, memoria y Nación en la Venezuela guzmancista 1870-1877," *Caravelle* 73 (1999): 111-130.

over Venezuela's transition from indebted agricultural economy to solvent oil exporter with a centralized state, new hydrocarbon legislation, and a monopoly on military muscle that prevailed over regional strongmen who might have designs on power.¹² Surrounded by Positivist ideologues that justified his regime with dubious arguments that Venezuelans' racial mix made them an unruly bunch that needed a firm hand, Gómez ruled the nation like a patriarchal *hacendado*, accumulating a personal fortune so vast that he was reputed to be the wealthiest man in South America.

[A one-time cowboy from the mountainous Táchira state who soon positioned himself as an important cattle rancher, Gómez was more](#) at home in the leafy provinces than the bustling capital, [taking up](#) official residence in the garden city of Maracay [and thus shifting](#) the spotlight [from](#) Caracas.¹³ Beyond the public infrastructure erected in [this](#) de facto capital, Gómez set his sights on a pet project that embodied his pursuit of personal wealth and far-reaching control. He would build a hideaway deep in the cloud forest of the cordillera that separates Maracay from the Caribbean coastal towns of Choroní and Chuao. The dictator dreamt of an Alpine-style retreat in which to entertain diplomats and dignitaries, socialites and businessmen—a place where backhanders and concessions would be brokered out of sight, while a sweeping panorama stretching across three states would be right at his feet (Fig. 2). And he got what he wanted. In the early 1930s, Gómez commissioned French engineer André Potel to design the four-story art deco palace of Rancho Grande, complete with tunnels where he could take refuge in case of fractures in the social order.

Rancho Grande is a clear forerunner of the type of forceful earth moving that would later characterize El Helicoide, and redolent of the unstable foundations of hubristic designs. At the location, set off a winding mule track at the Portachuelo Pass, workers began chipping away at the rock face to build this “fortresslike building of concrete

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.

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.

and stone” which would sit perched “in a niche carved from the mountainside, curving to fit [it] like an inverted question mark.”¹⁴ Banked up by ramparts against the cliff, Rancho Grande was a dramatic mix of the obscure and the spectacular. Behind the scenes, a dark and narrow labyrinth corridor wound its way between the structure and the rock face to cell-like rooms. Up front, a grandiose 100-foot veranda spread out along the cliff providing view of the landscape. Works advanced apace and the building was nearing completion when just before Christmas 1935, the ailing and ageing Gómez died.

INSERT FIG 2: RANCHO GRANDE

Alexander Wetmore, *Album 2: Venezuela* (Washington: Smithsonian Field Book Project, 1952).

With Gómez gone, Rancho Grande’s construction stopped, and the task of building democracy took over. Military officers like General Eleazar López Contreras (1937-1941), who had been a government minister under Gómez, and then Isaías Medina Angarita (1941-1945), presided over this transition as newly formed parties formulated political agendas for democratic representation and a shift away from caudillo rule. After decades of economic corruption, discussions about how to best use the nation’s oil revenues came to the fore amid the continual rise of petroleum power, which was concentrated in the hands of the Rockefeller family through its Standard Oil subsidiary the Creole Petroleum Corporation. Yet, instead of following the lead of Mexico, which nationalized oil in 1936, that same year intellectual Arturo Uslar Pietri made a now-famous call for to state to *sembrar el petróleo: to sow oil profits* back into traditional industries.

As these debates about reformed economic policy played out, others complained that Gómez’s successors were holding back on full democratization. A decade after the demise of dictatorship, Rómulo Betancourt (founder of the Acción Democrática party, AD), pacted with a military clique led by General Marcos Pérez Jiménez, to form a civic-military alliance that seized power on October 18, 1945. Still, the democratic interlude that led to Venezuela’s first universal elections in 1946, which brought

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

novelist and AD politician Rómulo Gallegos [to power](#), was shortlived. Frustrated that national development remained sluggish, on November 24, 1948, a Military Junta took politics back into its own hands, [placing](#) democracy on the backburner once again.

Above the Clouds

Although the Junta promised free elections in December 1952, this prospect disappeared when a fraudulent vote count instated defence minister and coup-leader Pérez Jiménez in power. Over a decade of initially soft then increasingly harsh military rule, the regime curbed party politics, imposed censorship, and curtailed trade unionism, offsetting these social costs with an ambitious public works programs bankrolled by the oil boom caused by the closure of the Suez Canal and the Iranian crisis of 1954. Rising state revenues and the influx of foreign—mainly US—investment created a favorable economic setting, giving the regime an open checkbook to materialize promises laid out in its *New National Ideal*. This ruling ideology, condensed into a few lines, pledged a return to the core values of military-led independence, Venezuela’s refoundation as an “ever more prosperous, dignified, and strong” country, and spatial transformations as guarantors of development. Democracy was a nothing but a lot of hot air, the new leaders claimed. It was deeds not words that mattered.

By consequence, modern architecture and infrastructure took center stage as markers of national progress and military efficiency.¹⁵ If Bolívar depicted post-independence debris as the foundations of sovereignty, for Pérez Jiménez demolitions and earth moving were tangible proof of modernity. 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*](#). [In this](#) “battle” against [the](#) makeshift homes [that were](#) spreading across the hills of Caracas, [machines would](#)

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

destroy [provisional dwellings and replace them with](#) modernist high-rise blocks, devised to house the city's growing population.¹⁶

The forward-looking aesthetics of mid-century modernism offered an expedient resource for Pérez Jiménez in his bid to outshine the advances made under democracy. Although skeptics grumbled that the capital had become a delusive “prism of appearances,” comprised of 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 entrench the message that Caracas's makeover was proof of the nation's unstoppable progress.¹⁷ As a “storefront” of modernism, Caracas was the centerpiece of a nation branding campaign that presented the military rulers as architects of Venezuela's transformation, even though in truth many flagship projects were birthed during the democratic interlude after Gómez. Such was the case of Carlos Raúl Villanueva's celebrated University City, birthed by democracy but inaugurated under dictatorship in 1954 to provide a stunning backdrop for the X Inter-American Conference, 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 shone](#) a light on the nation as an emergent global player and fertile terrain for capitalist enterprise.

FIGURE 3

Tomás Sanabria's Hotel Humboldt. [SOURCE INFO](#)

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.

If verticality was a marker of modernity, as twentieth century skyscrapers implied, then this new oil country was attempting to rise up over the traditional red roofs associated with its colonial past. The topography of Caracas lent itself to this endeavor and the dictatorship attempted to scale real heights. Like Gómez, Pérez Jiménez had his own Alpine-inspired pet project: the construction of a cable car that would climb the Ávila Mountain to a fourteen-floor luxury hotel built at over two thousand meters above sea level (Fig. 3). Designed by Venezuelan architect Tomás Sanabria and landscaped by 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 the rapid pace and by 1955 Pérez Jiménez was boarding the gilded presidential cabin ready to rise above the clouds.

The project is paradigmatic of the spectacles of progress that characterized military rule. Stripped of their democratic rights to elect their 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 serve as the support for El Helicoide, the Ávila Mountain became a plinth for the monumental Hotel Humboldt: a dazzling centerpiece of modern architecture, tasked with symbolizing the conviction that Venezuela was moving onwards and upwards. 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 loosened the dictatorship's grip on power. At the same time, structural factors such as greater urbanization and fast-paced industrialization that developed alongside the oil economy, paved the way for regime change and the "creation of a reformist political space."¹⁸ In 1957, political parties rallied Venezuelans to action, the church adopted an increasingly critical stance, and national strikes and protests ousted Pérez Jiménez, who fled the nation as dawn broke on January 23, 1958. Over the following months, [leading figures from Venezuela's three main political parties, Acción Democrática, COPEI, and Unión Republicana](#)

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

[Democrática](#) brokered the Punto Fijo Pact, [which paved](#) the way for elections by setting in place guarantees for [democratic representation](#).

If the fifties was the decade of earth moving, in the sixties it was the tectonic plates of politics that were shifting. [Although the Punto Fijo Pact cemented a new political order that enshrined national unity by establishing a shared agenda that was to go beyond party politics, the](#) re-establishment of democracy was rife with tensions.

Factionalism in the left, guerrilla activities, anti-government protests in the arts, and an assassination attempt on president Rómulo Betancourt (1959-1964), masterminded by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, a right wing ally of Pérez Jiménez, all dominated the national agenda. 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 marked sea changes in the region's political barometer. Marking a turn to austerity, Betancourt abandoned the dictatorship's most pharaonic plans, scaling back designs for a new exhibition and government complex planned to host a world fair-inspired International Exposition in 1960.¹⁹ Instead, the same site in Caracas's eastern reaches took on a more modest scale, inaugurated by Betancourt in 1961 as the Parque del Este, a park landscaped by Burle Marx and associates, which replaced dictatorial hubris with public amenities.

While the following years saw a two-party system take shape, as Acción Democrática and COPEI, the Christian Democratic Party, took turns in power, by the next decade events in the global economy proved a gamechanger in Venezuela once again. Amid the oil crisis of 1973 prices for crude petroleum increased four-fold, sucking up "money 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.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*. This vision rekindled dreams of instantaneous development, casting the

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.

²⁰ Coronil, *The Magical State*, 237.

state as the driving force of industrialization achieved by import substitution and the nationalization of oil and steel.

FIGURE 4

Parque Central. **SOURCE INFO**

As public spending soared, privately funded buildings shot up alongside it, 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, comprised of a pair of 59-storey skyscrapers, residential towers, complete with cultural and commercial facilities and a heliport to boot (Fig. 4).²¹ Located off the Avenida Bolívar, at the foot of the San Agustín del Sur neighborhood on whose hills El Helicoide had been built, Parque Central furthered Venezuela's rebranding as an economic and cultural powerhouse. Its iconic towers, long the tallest in Latin America, shaped up to the country's nickname of *Saudi Venezuela*. While tenants ascended the forty-four-floor residential blocks, government employees whooshed up two main glass-covered 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 whose construction began in 1973.

In the early 1980s, Parque Central's newly-inaugurated towers continued to glimmer in the Caribbean sun, but the economy lost its shine. The books were no longer balancing: foreign debt rose, oil 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 memory of instant wealth enjoyed by local investors in the previous boom years lingered on. Debt repayment took precedence over state-led development, but still private banks displayed signs that a turnaround could be imminent, tapping the metropolitan imaginary of global finance as they commissioned new skyscrapers. One nearby building project was even set to rival the Parque Central

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

towers: the Centro Financiero Confinanzas—a banking complex spearheaded by banker David Brillembourg and designed by Enrique Gómez and Associates, which would comprise a forty-five-storey tower and four additional buildings, complete with 30,000m² office space, a luxury hotel, apartments, a twelve-storey car park, swimming pool, and helipad (Fig. 5).²²

FIGURE 5

David Brillembourg poses with a model of the Centro Confinanzas. Ricard2, 1989.

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, its glass curtain was to be manufactured by the same firm that had clad the ill-fated Twin Towers with its specular surface. To be sure, La Torre de David was built on an act of faith. Despite the economic crisis six years earlier, when construction began in 1989 the banking group's slogan resounded with optimism. *Confinanzas, renace la confianza*, it promised, using a word play to suggest that with (speculative) finance, confidence is reborn. Given Brillembourg's conviction that the economy would rise again from the ashes, his tower was set to be a phoenix of sorts. The high gloss glass curtain evoked an aspirational scene of first world development, in which Venezuela's buoyant economy was steered by speculative finance and awash in flows of transnational capital.

Venezuelans remained invested in a similarly auspicious future, and in 1989 elected Carlos Andrés Pérez to a second term in office, banking on a renewal of the Great Venezuela he had promised amid the oil boom of the previous decade. However, instead of the economic revival, the Grand Turnaround (*gran virage*) that Pérez pledged materialized as a package of neoliberal austerity policies: a shock policy drafted to reassure foreign creditors against the threat of default. As state subsidies and price controls disappeared, and interest rates were cut loose, violent protests and looting erupted in the *Caracazo* of February 27, 1989.²³ Not only had the rebirth of investor confidence that Brillembourg predicted been crushed, political discontent

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

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

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 president and the banker met their demise: Pérez was imprisoned on embezzlement charges and Brillembourg died from cancer. As the Confinanzas group caved, construction on its new headquarters stopped and La Torre de David began its journey to abandonment and ruin, later to be occupied by vulnerable communities and dubbed pejoratively as a “slumscraper.”²⁴

Diamonds and Pearls

Continued economic strife and a further austerity package introduced in 1996 created a fertile ground for the ascendancy of Hugo Chávez and his Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), [the basis for the subsequent United Socialist Party of Venezuela \(PSUV\).](#)²⁵ [A lieutenant from a humble family on the Venezuelan plains, Chávez became inspired by leftist guerrillas still at large in the country and founded a political cell with fellow officers in 1982. The *Movimiento Bolivariano-200*, which marked the second centenary since Bolívar’s birth in 1783, was the basis for the failed coup of February 4, 1992, during which Chávez had appeared on television, telling his fellow insurgents that he had failed to secure control of the strategic targets in Caracas *por ahora*—for now. The short speech made this underground insurgent into a television star.](#)²⁶

[Amid growing support, the](#) coup leader [was](#) freed from jail in 1994. [As](#) he campaigned to be elected to office [four years later](#), he offered a departure from the political model of the past, arguing that the two-party system forged after 1958 had expired and that Venezuela needed a new republic founded on social welfare, economic reform, [and citizen power](#). Chávez received a majority backing for a revised constitution ratified by popular referendum in 1999. Support soon waned, however, especially as the president shifted the political compass toward his mentor

²⁴ On this topic, see my chapter “Makeshift Modernity” in this volume.

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* \(London: Penguin, 2013\).](#)

Fidel Castro. National strikes, a failed opposition-led coup in 2002, and an unsuccessful recall referendum in 2004, all fanned the fires of deepening political polarization. For some, [the “Twenty-First Century Socialism” he began to advocate after 2005](#) was the solution to [longstanding](#) economic disparities; for others, it was a flashback to failed models that [was turning](#) back the clock on progress.²⁷

Even with oil at \$100 a barrel in the 2000s, Chávez turned his back on the metropolitan skyscrapers that had enthused his predecessors. Instead, symbolic capital for his imaginary of national renewal came from none other than Simón Bolívar. The country’s official name was changed to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and Chávez cast his political movement as the Bolivarian Revolution. Shining new lights onto the independence struggles 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 wrecked by neoliberalism, US imperialism, and local oligarchs.

FIGURE 6

The new mausoleum under construction. Gabriel Méndez, 2012.

Although famed as an orator, this was not just rhetoric. Chávez took a literal approach to restoring the nation’s founding father to his bygone radiance. In 2010, he mandated the exhumation of Bolívar’s dusty remains, repatriated from Colombia in 1842, commissioning forensically-generated portraits to reveal the “real” face of Bolívar. Next came the construction of a new 150-million-dollar mausoleum for the Liberator, appended to the original National Pantheon in downtown Caracas (Fig. 6). Clad in white tiles, the fifty-four-meter high, 2000m² mausoleum was likened to a skateboard ramp, whose curved roof rose eight meters above its nineteenth century predecessor. On the black granite inside, set among colored illumination, Bolívar’s remains were

²⁷ The PSUV was created as an umbrella for disparate pro-Chávez parties. For a sympathetic account of the Revolution, 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.

enclosed in a brand-new mahogany coffin: a glittering casket “encrusted with diamonds, pearls and golden stars.”²⁸

Nearly two hundred years on, Bolívar’s evocation of monuments gleaming with freedom emerged like a phoenix out of the ashes once again. Reigniting the fires of patriotism, Chávez updated his forebear’s trope to claim the nation had been reborn, emancipated this time by 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 ignited, passing away on March 15, 2013, in a battle lost to cancer. In the turmoil that has intensified since his death, the mausoleum has paled into the background, overshadowed by increasing political strife brought by the rule of his successor Nicolás Maduro (2013-). [In the face of](#) violent protests, record homicide rates, hyperinflation, plummeting oil prices, and the scarcity of basic goods [and medicines](#), discussions about the shape the nation should take are less concerned with ambitious architecture and shining monuments, and more preoccupied 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 prove that the paradigm of nation building through dazzling architecture has both enduring traction and unstable foundations. For Bolívar, as for politicians over the next two hundred year, spatial arrangements should illuminate the path to future glory; but these great expectations are notoriously hard to satisfy. Not only do titanic constructions pose practical challenges in themselves; enduring ideological conflicts and economic turmoil make for a complex terrain on which to build monumental architecture, thus making it especially vulnerable to curtailment and abandonment.

This predicament might explain why [Venezuelan playwright José Ignacio Cabrujas](#) called [nation building a “collective delirium:](#)” a recurring spectacle based on the

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

conviction that the destruction of provisional forms will allow definitive ones to emerge in their place.²⁹ By recurrently glossing over ruins to declare Venezuela reborn, this mode of nation building is grounded in a propensity to active amnesia, a process of forgetting stranded monuments and the lessons they might offer, in order to fixate on the next auspicious future molded in new, and purportedly definitive, forms. Charting the geneses and afterlives of symbolic sites like El Helicoide offers one means to counteract this will to oblivion, recomposing a picture of Venezuela's making that shines a light on its past conflicts, as well as present faultlines. In the shadows cast by gleaming monuments, the debris that lies at the intersection of nation building and architecture has its own story to tell.

Works cited

Blackmore, Lisa. "El Helicoide and La Torre de David as Phantom Pavilions: Rethinking Spectacles of Progress in Venezuela." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (2016) doi:10.1111/blar.12524.

Blackmore, Lisa. *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space, and Visuality in Venezuela, 1948-1958*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.

Calzadilla, Pedro. "El olor de la pólvora: Fiestas patrias, memoria y Nación en la Venezuela guzmancista 1870-1877." *Caravelle* 73 (1999): 111-130.

Calzadilla, Pedro Enrique, "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*. Edited by Jens Andermann & Beatriz González Stephan, 89-115. Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 2006.

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

Carrera Damas, Germán. *El culto a Bolívar*. Caracas: Alfa, 2003.

[Carroll, Rory. *Comandante*. London: Penguin, 2013.](#)

Castro Leiva, Luis. *De la patria boba a la teología bolivariana*. Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1987.

Ciccariello-Maher, George. *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

²⁹ [José Ignacio Cabrujas cited in Milagros Socorro, *Catía, tres veces* \(Caracas: Fundarte, 1994\).](#)

[d'Auria, Viviana. "Caracas' Cultural \[Be\]longings: The Troubled Trajectories of the TABO Superbloque." In *Latin American Modern Architectures: Ambiguous Territories*. Edited by Patricio del Real and Helen Gyger, 115-134. New York: Routledge, 2013.](#)

Duno Gottberg, Luis. "Mob Outrages: Reflections on the Media Construction of the Masses in Venezuela." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 13.1 (2004): 115-135.

[Gott, Richar. *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution*. London: Verso, 2011.](#)

Grant Gould, Carol. *The Remarkable Life of William Beebe: Explorer and Naturalist*. Washington D.C.: Shearwater Books, 2004.

Karl, Terry Lynn. "Petroleum and Political Pacts: The Transition to Democracy in Venezuela." *Latin American Research Review* 22.1 (1987): 63-94.

López, Virginia. "Simón Bolívar's new tomb is monument to Chávez, say critics." *Guardian*. November 21, 2011. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/21/bolivar-tomb-chavez>. Accessed October 7, 2016.

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

Martín Frechilla, Juan José. "Construcción urbana, profesiones e inmigración en el origen de los estudios de urbanismo en Venezuela: 1870-1957." *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos* 11:3 (1996): 477-519.

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

Pino Iturrieta, Elías. *El divino Bolívar*. Madrid: Catarata, 2003.

Pino Iturrieta, Elías. *País archipiélago: Venezuela, 1830-1858*. Caracas: Alfa, 2014.

Socorro, Milagros. *Catia, tres veces*. Caracas: Fundarte, 1994.

Torres, Ana Teresa. *La herencia de la tribu: Del mito de la independencia a la Revolución Bolivariana*. Caracas: Alfa, 2009.

Urban-Think Tank, *Torre David*. Zurich: Lars Müller, 2013.

Yarrington, Doug. "Cattle, Corruption, and Venezuelan State Formation during the Regime of Juan Vicente Gómez, 1908-35." *Latin American Research Review* 38:2 (2003): 9-33.

Velasco, Alejandro. *Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015.

“Venezuela honours Simon Bolivar with new coffin.” *BBC*. December 18, 2011.
Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-16236105>. Accessed
October 7, 2016.