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THE CITY OF CARACAS IN THE GUZMANCISTA PROJECT: AN APPROACH TO THE SEPTENIO (1870–1877)

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Abstract

This work is part of ongoing doctoral research. The aim of this article is to analyze the role played by public works in the context of nineteenth-century European urban planning in the Guzmancista project during the Septenio (1870–1877). This analysis was carried out from the perspective of urban cultural history, therefore, a systematization of the most important buildings constructed or planned in the Venezuelan capital during that period was carried out, as well as a review of documentary and literary sources that allow us to understand the intention of the evident process of transfer of European urban ideas to Caracas sponsored by Guzmán Blanco and their assessment in relation to his power project. Both official sources and testimonies from Venezuelans and foreigners or travelers who left records and expressed their opinions about the city's transformations were consulted. Initial findings show a direct relationship between public works and the objectives of modernization, progress, and centralization promoted by Guzmán Blanco, shaping the city as a political and cultural artifact that reflects the progress-civilization binomial that would serve as a platform from which to carry out the transformation of society. This advance reaffirms the hypothesis that the construction and transformation of physical space became a privileged means for the consolidation of Guzmán's project and the longed-for modernity.

Keywords: city, urbanism, Guzmán Blanco, cultural history, Caracas, 19th century.

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Sustainable Development Goal(s) (SDG) to which the research work is directed

This work explicitly aligns with three Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations' 2015 Agenda:

SDG 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION

It addresses the importance of the city in the Guzmán Blanco regime's power project and the creation of infrastructure and basic services to modernize Caracas.

SDG 11 – SUSTAINABLES CITIES AN COMMUNITIES

It examines the planning of public works, monuments, and spaces that, while not intended to be sustainable, bear witness to our history in the pursuit of a better city.

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The city of Caracas in the Guzmancista project: An approach to the Septenio (1870-1877)

Introduction

The study of the city, the setting of civilization par excellence, as well as the imagery or ideas associated with it, can tell us a lot about time, the material existence of an era and place, as well as the society in which it has been generated. This is true not only for the construction of new cities, but also for those undergoing a process of transformation in their space, regardless of its size. Whether it is a huge city like Paris or a modest one like Caracas.

Thinking about the city and the ideas associated with it as an object of study involves a network of disciplines that do not belong exclusively to architecture, art history, or urban planning. In the case of Latin America, approaching the history of cities and urban life means approaching the history of nations, of the projects of societies that emerged after independence, the imaginaries of the elites, the intelligentsia, as well as the very concept of modernity that serves as the foundation for these projects.

The 19th century is of particular interest in this regard, as it was a period of increasingly rapid transformation, much of which was evident in cities. The effects of the Industrial Revolution were felt everywhere. The world seemed to become smaller and more interconnected as communication and transportation technologies advanced. Leading this movement was Europe, which, compared to other regions of the world, felt triumphant and would develop all kinds of discourses to justify its dominance and influence over considerable regions of the world. This process of change would also leave its mark on cities, especially European capitals, where the material manifestations of this phenomenon would be more than evident. Urban growth and new monumental constructions would create the ideal setting to showcase the glories of civilization.

In this context, Latin American nations, in an unequal manner, sought to join the global capitalist market and find a place among the nations, especially in relation to Europe, which had become a symbol of progress and modernity. This quest would not be easy, as many of the

former Spanish colonies faced enormous difficulties once they broke their ties with the Spanish crown and began their journey as independent countries.

In order to understand the transformation of the city of Caracas and the role it played within Antonio Guzmán Blanco's power system, this research paper will examine the importance of public works and the urban process during the period known as *El Septenio*, which began in 1870 and ended in 1877. During this time, the country's capital underwent a series of important improvements and constructions thanks to the public works programs carried out by the *Illustrious American* in a relatively peaceful context compared to previous years.

In this vein, this research finds its link to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 11 (2015). In this sense, the work addresses the importance of the city in Guzmán's power project and the creation of infrastructure and basic services to modernize Caracas. This connects with SDG 11 by examining the planning of public works, monuments, and spaces that, although not intended to be sustainable, bear witness to our history in the quest to achieve a better city.

Contents

Europe and the changing pace of life

The concepts of civilization, modernity, and progress, very much in vogue among intellectuals and in political discourse in the mid-19th century, were intrinsically linked to the European world, not to say that they were considered synonymous. By the second half of the 19th century, Europe was at the height of its power and was a reference point in every respect, especially in political, economic, scientific, and military terms. It was the civilizational model par excellence for most of the world's nations, which sought to emulate it. Carpentier and Lebrun (2006) state that

> Against the backdrop of expansion and growing domination over the world, Europe may believe that its civilization is the only one, that it is <civilization>. Through science and education, progress and peace will spread, and there is already a Europe of culture that is lived in Vienna, Paris, or Berlin (p. 431).

We find ourselves in a world where the European powers and, to a lesser extent, the United States and Japan, are experiencing rapid growth driven by advances in science and technology. Manufacturing and the creation of new jobs attracted a significant concentration of immigrants to the cities. Industrialization will be a key accelerating factor in this era of disruption.

This triggered a whole series of tensions that demanded not only greater state intervention to provide minimum standards in housing, hygiene, health, worship, and recreation, but also a need to reconfigure and, in some cases, transform urban spaces (Lutz, 2008). The city was undergoing a transformation; little by little, it ceased to be the domain of aristocrats and courts and became that of the burgeoning national bourgeoisie.

There are many material expressions that will proliferate throughout almost all regions of the world during that century. Communication was transformed as a result of the revolution in the ways in which people and goods were moved around. "[...] Let us remember, first of all, the technical revolutions, which greatly reduced the spatial and temporal barriers to the exchange of information thanks to the railroad, the telegraph, and, later, the telephone." (Lutz, 2008, p. 5).

Another important element that should not be underestimated is the effort to successfully build the state, organizing the administration and administrative techniques that will adapt to changing geopolitical and market situations. Capitalism and modern state bureaucracy were two sides of the same coin (Lutz, 2008). The rationalization of administration, although not new, would gain increasing momentum as the functions and scope of states grew in relation to their societies.

All these changes would have far-reaching repercussions on cities, as it became necessary to plan for progress. Soon, in addition to improving living conditions in rapidly expanding cities, it became necessary to make this progress visible through all kinds of public works that would also improve living conditions in the metropolises. Cities such as London, Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Birmingham, and many others doubled or tripled in size in fifty years (Lutz, 2008). There are numerous examples of large government and justice system buildings, not always because of their aesthetic appeal, but because of their monumentality compared to other types of buildings. The facades of these buildings were intended to express "the continuity, authority, and dignity of the state and its institutions" (Lutz, 2008, p. 183).

Furthermore, "The numerous administrative buildings of the 19th century are stone testimonies to the widely developed cult of the State" (Lutz, 2008, 183). This cult also had an important personal aspect, as the cult of the ruler was also a common element. Regardless of whether they were monarchs, presidents, or chief magistrates, they were often, for most Europeans, "tangible embodiments of the state order." Thus, rulers repeatedly brought their public presence into play with the specific aim of consolidating the authority of their regime (Lutz, 2008, p. 184). For this reason, decoration, public buildings, and urban reforms were key elements in this game, as they showcased the greatness of the ruler and the progress of his government and even of the nation itself.

These spaces were necessary to display this discourse through all kinds of events. It is no coincidence that, compared to previous centuries, the 19th century saw an increase in the

number of public festivities that were not religious in nature. National holidays, celebrations, receptions, parades, colorful uniforms, etc., were all key elements of this game described above. As Tombs (2002) mentions, "[...] cities achieved the integration of their populations through schools, social and sports clubs, unions, churches, and political parties" (p. 35). To that list we can add theaters, museums, squares, and other places where the public could participate in the new culture. These were places that marked the role played by the public in all aspects of the cultural life of a given country. Moreover,

> these buildings were public places in a way that no court or traditional community had been before. At least in theory, they were accessible to anyone, opened their doors during regular hours, and were generally maintained with public money (Tombs, 2002, p. 135).

These buildings somehow reflected the fundamental norms and ideals of that century. The important commissions that architects received were no longer churches or religious monuments, but museums, libraries, and other types of public buildings. True to the liberalism in vogue, much of 19th-century European culture, especially in France and Great Britain, was "[...] predominantly secular, based on secular values and directed towards secular goals" (Tombs, 2002, 155). Architecture, as a cultural sign, had become both a medium and a message. Munizaga (1999), on this point, argues that "man makes his cultural landscape, fabricates it and changes nature and humanizes it. The city is an artifact of history" (pp. 23-24).

Each culture must find its own material expression, and this materiality will achieve significant meaning when it is a vital sign that communicates. In the European case, styles such as Neo-Gothic and Neoclassical, which allude to a specific past and reinvent it in response to present needs, are as important as the type of buildings that are constructed and the materials or techniques used in them. All are testimonies to the time of change that characterized the 19th century, especially from the second half onwards. As George Mosse (1997) mentions, "[...] it was the modern city that became the global symbol and metaphor of modernity [...]" (p. 27).

Munizaga (1999), on the importance of the city and the mark it leaves on its inhabitants, adds the following:

> The city thus acquires a historical being that, in turn, has an impact on human social behavior. A city is founded and gradually develops through the actions of the community that inhabits it. In this way, the lines of that vital process are traced on it, that culture in which customs, rites, traditions, feelings, and attitudes that characterize a particular community are involved. And conversely, as these elements become engraved in the city, they end up constituting a second nature that determines its inhabitants: the city acts upon them. (p. 43).

In other words, the remodeling of old buildings and new public works carried out throughout Europe turn the city into an organism of cultural articulation. It is both a product and an agent of its time. It is a product because it is a material manifestation of the styles, materials, techniques, and needs of its time; it is an agent because of the way it conditions the role played by its inhabitants and their sociability, through the modes and uses that are characteristic of the urban lifestyle and in which those who live there participate.

Latin America and the urban process

In Latin America, cities have played a vital role since their foundation. Initially, they served as centers of power, seats of colonial authorities (both peninsular and creole), platforms for exchange and communication with the metropolis, distributors of production from other regions, among other things. They grew gradually and unevenly during the long period of Spanish rule in America. Later, once independence had been achieved and republican experiments had begun, cities, especially capitals, would become even more important as centralization became more effective and societies underwent the numerous transformations of the nineteenth century. After all, the reestablishment of the internal power structure and the consolidation of the national state towards the end of the 19th century made it necessary to have an adequate space for its projection and functioning.

Likewise, this space would become even more important as the city became increasingly associated with civilization, in contrast to the rural world and barbarism. Many individuals considered the urban phenomenon as a tool for modernizing and "civilizing" a given society, especially given the progress-civilization binomial that characterized the second half of the century (Almandoz, 2006).

Thus, for many actors in the former colonies, the concepts of civilization and modernization were synonymous with adopting the ways of European nations. Their power was at its zenith, and it was not until the outbreak of World War I in 1914 that Europe, as a model, began to be displaced by the United States.

The concepts of civilization, modernity, and progress, very much in vogue among intellectuals and in political discourse, were intrinsically linked, as mentioned earlier, to the European world. By the second half of the 19th century, Europe was at the height of its power and was a reference point from every point of view, especially in economic, scientific, and military terms. It was the civilizational model par excellence, which many nations around the globe sought to emulate. Furthermore, drawing closer to the Old Continent achieved another fundamental objective: integration into the global capitalist system.

Hebe Vessuri (2007), on the reality of Latin American countries and their relationship with the 'civilized' world, argues that "constant vigilance was necessary to ensure that the international personality of the new states was not undermined, so that they would not be treated like the barbarian kingdoms of other regions" (p. 538). In other words, enormous efforts had to be made to transform, or at least appear to be part of, that progress, to belong to that world despite the precarious situation in much of the region due to the endemic instability and institutional weakness of many of the countries that emerged from the wars of independence.

The city would be one of the centers of this development; urbanization began to increase at a rapid pace as a certain stability was achieved towards the second half of the 19th century. Furthermore, Jean-Paul Deler (2007) adds:

> Population growth, changing customs and mentalities, the development of education, new trades, and new class solidarity profoundly altered the face of the city, as did the modernization of lifestyles and changes in the urban environment. At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, most major cities were equipped with urban public service networks (...) Municipalities acquired public buildings and equipment from Anglo-Saxon countries, France, or Italy, whose taste and aesthetics were also found in the residences of the new local and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie. (pp. 55-56).

These cities and their new bourgeois aesthetics were important because they allowed the ruling elites to feel part of a culture that they generally considered superior, an idea that seemed to be reinforced by the European imperialism in regions such as Asia and Africa, which had gone from being zones of influence to territories where European powers exercised direct or indirect control. Regarding the role of the city and the urban in the ideological sphere, it is important to add what Leyton and Huertas (2012) state:

> In this context, the city appears as one of the most complete expressions of Western modernity; moreover, in the Latin American case, it serves to invent modernity, to extend and reproduce it, regardless of whether the city in question is a physical reality or a more or less utopian idea. The city—the urban—emerges, in short, as an ideological artifact of modernity (pp. 23-24).

Furthermore, they continue

> Other cities in Latin America will seek the same identification with the clean, orderly, and segregated European bourgeois city, in accordance not with the colonialist idea of castes, but with the most modern notions of

> science and technology (...) A hygienic city that must be properly sanitized to avoid miasmas and pestilence, but also other social dangers, such as those generated by a significant part of the population (the poor, vagrants, unsuccessful immigrants). (Leyton and Huertas, 2012, p. 24).

Caracas during the Septenio (1870-1877)

Venezuela, as mentioned a few pages back, was no stranger to the historical context, much less to the process of transferring European urban ideas to the Latin American continent. Among the numerous and turbulent governments that Venezuela had during the 19th century, the long period under the leadership of the autocrat Antonio Guzmán Blanco (1870-1888) stands out. known in Venezuelan historiography as "*el guzmanato*," which can be seen as a particular episode not only from an ideological point of view in reference to the formation of national consciousness, but also from a material point of view through the numerous public works that were carried out under a climate of relative security and stability. Numerous architectural works were built during this period and came to play an important role in the new configuration of power and the image that was sought to be presented of a nation little known to the civilized world.

Numerous changes took place in the country during these years, linked to the modernizing ambitions of the man who held the reins of power. New public buildings and decorations, the dissemination of a new aesthetic and iconography of power, great pomp and circumstance for the heroes of the War of Independence, modest urban growth, and the vision of the city as an agent of modernization would be some of the key elements of the project undertaken by the caudillo who triumphed in April 1870.

The architecture and public works carried out under the various governments of the *Illustrious American* would, in turn, be a means and a message that progress had arrived and was 'tangible'. This idea would be key to Guzmán's project, which, as Carrera Damas (1988) mentions, stands out from his predecessors, since "Of all the Venezuelan rulers of the 19th century, the only one who came to power with a coherent program of political, administrative, and ideological action was Antonio Guzmán Blanco" (p. 34). This ideological sphere and its material projection would be closely related and would leave a palpable mark on Caracas in the last quarter of the 19th century.

The Caracas prior to Guzmán's arrival at the highest office after the April Revolution (1870) was not suitable for the display of his power and the satisfaction of European tastes. After all, if we stick to the testimony of Friedrich Gerstaker (1989), who visited the country in 1868, three years before the Septenio began. This traveler paints a bleak picture of the conditions in Caracas: *"*...rich coffee plantations and estates, with truly sumptuous old trees, soon to be

replaced by old ruins from the Spanish era—collapsed and abandoned as left by their former masters and owners of the country..." (p. 23).

In relation to the above, Munizaga's (1999) statement is illustrative: "It must be emphasized that there is necessarily a political process behind every idea and reality of a city" (p. 28). This statement makes even more sense when another historian, Tomás Straka (2010), comments that "modernizing codes are created; social life is secularized; a tremendous effort is made to attract foreign investment, especially in infrastructure" (p. 34). It was necessary to "(...) overcome the colonial past by integrating ourselves into modernity" (Straka, 2010, p. 34).

Furthermore, the German traveler recounts that there was widespread anarchy and gangs that terrorized landowners:

> There was, of course, a constitution in the country, but there was no law (...) The fields along the roadside had also been completely devastated, and the horses and draft animals had been loaded with corn and sugar cane. What is more, soldiers were already raiding the most remote estates and bringing loads of stolen grass and cattle from the valley on the backs of donkeys. (Gerstaker, 1989, p. 24)

The bleak picture described above would be largely changed by the triumph of the April Revolution in 1870. Although *the Septenio* was not entirely peaceful, there was enough peace for the country to regain some momentum in terms of culture. It was also a time of reform and modernization of the state: the public treasury was reorganized, laws were codified, ministries and development boards were created, etc.

An interesting account is that of the daughter of the French chargé d'affaires, Jenny de Tallenay, who kept a diary of her trip to Caracas in 1878, a year in which, although Guzmán was not in power, as he was in Paris, his presence was almost omnipresent. In her work, Tallenay (1989) highlights the autocrat's vocation for reconstruction. "The country had been violently shaken by civil wars, and he set about erasing their traces" (p. 64). This reinforces what authors such as Lutz (2008) have said about European capitals, as well as Straka (2010) and Almandoz (2006) in the case of Venezuela, about the effort to provide modern infrastructure and change the image of the city, regardless of the fact that many of these were mere facades and decorations.

Regarding the public works and monuments found in Caracas in 1878, Tallenay (1989) comments that "almost all public monuments in Caracas date back to Spanish rule or the administration of General Guzmán Blanco." (p. 91). He also makes a kind of apology for his autocracy: "Although limited, resources were not lacking; what was lacking was vigorous and intelligent leadership, authoritarian action" (Tallenay, 1989, p. 91). Likewise, it was "thanks to

an energetic concentration of power that it has been endowed with civil monuments, public promenades, gardens, and parks." (pp. 91-92). The young Frenchwoman's vision clearly shows the dual nature of Guzmanism: on the one hand, it meant a cultural renaissance and a certain stability, and on the other, the concentration of power in a single man (Gorrín, 2016).

This idea can be seen in Vaamonde's (2018) study of Guzmán Blanco's ideas on the people and politics, where he shows that part of Guzmán Blanco's project was focused on disputing, concentrating, and maintaining power, reorganizing the structure of the state, eliminating alternative centers of domination represented by caudillos or other enemies, and producing a narrative to legitimize his authority. This requires imposing the authority of Caracas over the rest of the regions, that is, centralization. For the project not to fail, proper leadership from above and even authoritarian measures are necessary.

In addition, the urban environment is also used as a tool to stimulate the expansion of *modern* social actors (high society) and the spread of new forms of sociability and, in particular, the imaginaries they convey.

The Caracas that Almandoz (2002) calls the "Capital of the Belle Époque" (p. 34) is thus presented to us as a modernizing tool and also as the desire of the local bourgeoisie to "recreate the metropolitan myth: in this sense, these spaces confirmed the 'daily imitation of Europe' within an urban- y culture that went from 'patrician' to 'bourgeois', according to the characterization provided by José Luis Romero" (Almandoz, 2002, p. 34).

This was also the era of popular manuals on urbanity in Latin American countries, which sought to shape citizens for the city where the modernity described by Leyton and Huertas (2012) would be staged. In the case of Venezuela, this would be *the Manual de urbanidad y buenas costumbres (Manual of Urbanity and Good Manners)* published in 1853.

Both the manuals and the various urban processes that were taking shape or had been consolidated towards the end of the 19th century sought to prepare the inhabitants of these nations to abandon customs that were considered "barbaric" by the Latin American elites and therefore unrefined or uncivilized when compared to the model par excellence: European society. In short, the aim of modernization was not only to rationalize the state and its laws, or cities and their public buildings, but also to modernize the people themselves.

In this sense, Guzmancismo (1870-1888) served as a kind of threshold for the definitive and indisputable establishment of Caracas as the country's capital, both factually, through a more effective centralization of power to the detriment of the regions by means of the Constitution, a cohort of officials, and a framework of laws, as well as visually through reforms, new constructions, and monuments.

Inés Quintero (2011), referring to Guzmán's national project, states that one of its objectives was to establish and consolidate "a set of integrative national values, an integrative road infrastructure, and a rule of law that had everything necessary to function as such" (p. 13). These integrative values, so important for a sense of national identity, would seem to have demanded an imaginary consistent with the discourse and actions of the government presided over by Guzmán Blanco (1829-1899) on various occasions.

In Guzmán's discourse, public works were directly related to progress and civilization, as can be seen in the following speech recorded by González Guinán (1954), which was delivered on October 28, 1872:

> Everything we witness here is not yet the apotheosis of the Liberator. That apotheosis will take place when a few decades have passed and the great and unyielding destinies of America have been fulfilled; when ten or more powerful and happy nations, seated at the foot of the Andes, with forty or fifty million inhabitants each, open the immense ports of their peaceful ocean to send to Europe the products necessary for the existence of those peoples in exchange for what the Old World has discovered and advanced over long centuries, fruitful for industry, for the arts, for progress and civilization; when thousands of steamboats plow the immense network of their mighty rivers from the Orinoco to the Strait of Magellan, and locomotives cross their vast regions, and only the noise of work and the ferment of ideas are heard in all directions, with a multitude of opulent cities. Then it will be that, in the midst of all this greatness, the figure of Bolívar will be displayed, radiating his glory across all the horizons of the earth, just as the sun radiates light across all the spaces that the universe presides over(pp. 115-116).

That is why, during the period known as Guzmancismo, great efforts will be made to create, as in no other previous period, an aesthetic atmosphere in keeping with a certain ideology and a discourse of modernization and progress. To this end, the Ministry of Public Works was created in 1874, as noted by Arráiz Lucca (2023), and it soon became one of the most important institutions of the Guzmán government. It was the only way to properly honor Simón Bolívar, and at the same time, the cult of his figure was part of that process. Monuments such as the National Pantheon, Plaza Bolívar in Caracas, and the equestrian statue of the Liberator were expressions of these ideas. The troubled republic, under the rule of *the civilizing autocrat*, sought by all available means to anchor, through plaster, marble, and bronze, an image of a Venezuela that had begun its path toward progress. In addition to creating spaces for citizens to participate in this imaginary.

An example of this would be the old Plaza Mayor, later renamed Plaza Bolívar after the War of Independence, which would be renovated and crowned with a bronze equestrian statue

to honor the glories of the Liberator. It would become the central axis around which part of the city's public life would revolve, especially for the wealthiest and most influential sectors. This interest in the works is recorded by a witness such as Gonzalez Guinán (1954), who comments on how the State proceeded with this renovation in 1872:

> Also on September 11, the Credit Company was appointed to manage the erection of an equestrian statue of the Liberator in Bolívar Square, and later other public works were decreed. Since this movement of material progress began, the General President believed that he should appeal to individual competition for its development. To this end, he created the system of Development Boards to oversee the works and administer the allocated funds. (p. 121).

Also important were the new public buildings such as the Capitol, perhaps one of the most important symbols of the Septennium, whose construction in stages was, according to the official discourse, a testament to the material progress achieved under the *Illustrious American*. This building would be of special interest, as can be seen from the work of González Guinán (1954):

> The administrative work of the General President was as diligent as it was fruitful. All branches of public service were under his jurisdiction and inspection, with special attention given to public education and public works. Of these, the Federal Capitol, under construction, deserved daily examination, as he wanted the legislative chambers of 1873 to be installed there. (p. 121).

Guzmán himself is quite emphatic not only about the importance of the building, but also about what it symbolizes. On February 19, 1873, the work was delivered, and in his speech, according to the historian:

The General President replied as follows:

> "The Capitol should not be considered a simple building, but rather a monument symbolizing the triumph of the April Revolution. I have built it so that the Congress of the Nation may find in it the beginning of a new era of freedom, progress, and civilization, as a result of the aspirations of the great popular movement that I have presided over. It is not success that justifies revolutions, but the goals they pursue, the transformations they bring about, and the beneficial use they make of victory for the benefit of the people" (Gonzalez Guinán, 1954, p. 141).

As Francisco Javier Pérez (2011) states, there was a "cultural renaissance" (p. 93), with Guzmán being the main architect in the aforementioned testimonies. This *rebirth* was stimulated

by the period of relative peace brought about by Guzmán's triumph over his enemies, as well as by the pacification and alliances between caudillos that Diego Bautista Urbaneja (2016) calls the Guzmánist system of power or yellow liberalism. While this system remained in place, Caracas at that time saw the emergence of numerous works in all areas that served as a stage for its deployment.

Conclusions

Having completed this brief overview of the 19th century and the role played by cities in the new rhythm of changing times and their relationship with Latin America and its search for modernity, we can affirm that the study of the city as a cultural artifact is valid and beneficial for historical knowledge.

The urban phenomenon and its associated elements have gained ground over perspectives that tend to consider the city as a mere backdrop to human activity, whether as the habitat of the individual on which we focus our attention or as the simple place where certain events took place.

The architectural transformations and milestones that took place during those years, however modest they may have been when compared to cities such as Santiago de Chile or Rio de Janeiro, have been of little interest compared to the great events such as battles and great heroes that fill the pages of Venezuela's national and political history. That is why new studies focusing on the city and the imaginary are so important, as they allow us to better understand Caracas at the end of the 19th century and, at the same time, the city as it is today.

The nineteenth-century city is of interest in understanding how the urban process of that city was a manifestation of centralism and the ideas of modernity in vogue among the rulers and elites who drew on ideas from Europe.

The form, organization, and transformations carried out in European and Latin American capitals are, to a certain extent, a summary and at the same time an expression of a specific historical period; therefore, their analysis is extremely rich in helping us to understand the imaginaries of their inhabitants and the elites who direct or influence their growth. The same is true of the way in which the scientific and technological advances of the Industrial Revolution permeated these societies and brought about changes in society.

This situation led the *Illustrious American* to devote much of his attention and discourse to making the city the stage for his personalism and his civilizing project. The works end up being yet another facet of the quest to publicize his presence with the aim of consolidating

the authority and legitimacy of his regime. After all, making progress "visible" would earn him considerable praise, although, as already mentioned, it was not a profound change.

Caracas and its architecture can tell us a lot about its time, especially if we take into account the styles, techniques, and materials used. But also the function of the works that are built. The capital of Venezuela during the Guzmán era would be the autocrat's canvas and would itself serve as the stage for his personal power, cemented on an alliance of caudillos and a discourse of modernity and material and moral progress.

In the new buildings, as well as in the facade renovations that were carried out during the Guzmancismo period, there is a clear objective to convey a sense of modernity. Not forgetting that this was ow ly to *the Regenerator*, a strong man of action who seemed to make all this possible. In other words, just as many of the public works respond to the search for the satisfaction of real needs (bridges, roads, lighting, aqueducts, etc.), the architecture also reflects the ideal aspirations of a nineteenth-century society that seeks by all means to look in the mirror and find the distant reflection of a triumphant Europe. This is vitally important for understanding the course of Venezuelan society in its quest for modernity.

The modest urban transformations of the Guzmán *Septennium* reveal a critical tension between aesthetic modernity and the institutional precariousness of the time, which was very common in the nascent nations of Spanish America. Although the construction of monuments such as the Federal Capitol symbolized the triumph of "civilization" and a break with the colonial past, this transformation often served as a necessary "facade" to project certain ideas. While administrative buildings expressed authority and civilization, the internal reality continued to be marked by endemic instability and institutional weakness. Therefore, the monumentality of Caracas was not only an architectural advance, but also an ideological artifact designed to mask the shortcomings of a state in formation, prioritizing the visibility of progress over the consolidation of a profound legal and social order.

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