

An aerial, black and white photograph of a city. In the center-right, a tall, cylindrical tower with horizontal bands of windows stands out. The surrounding area is filled with residential buildings, some with flat roofs, and a network of roads. The background shows a hazy horizon with distant hills or mountains.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Santo Domingo, Modernity and Dictatorship

■ OMAR RANCIER

In the early twentieth century, Santo Domingo was a small village. When it burst its original limits of the colonial wall and of the villages of San Carlos to the North and of Pajarito on the east bank of the Ozama River, those peripheral settlements became part of the Republic's capital.

AT THAT TIME, the modern movement was underdeveloped in Santo Domingo. Meanwhile, the European masters were carrying out their works and the *bauhauslers*, who had fled the nazis and settled in the United States, participated in a process by which the total social content of modernity was lost, according to Colin Rowe.¹

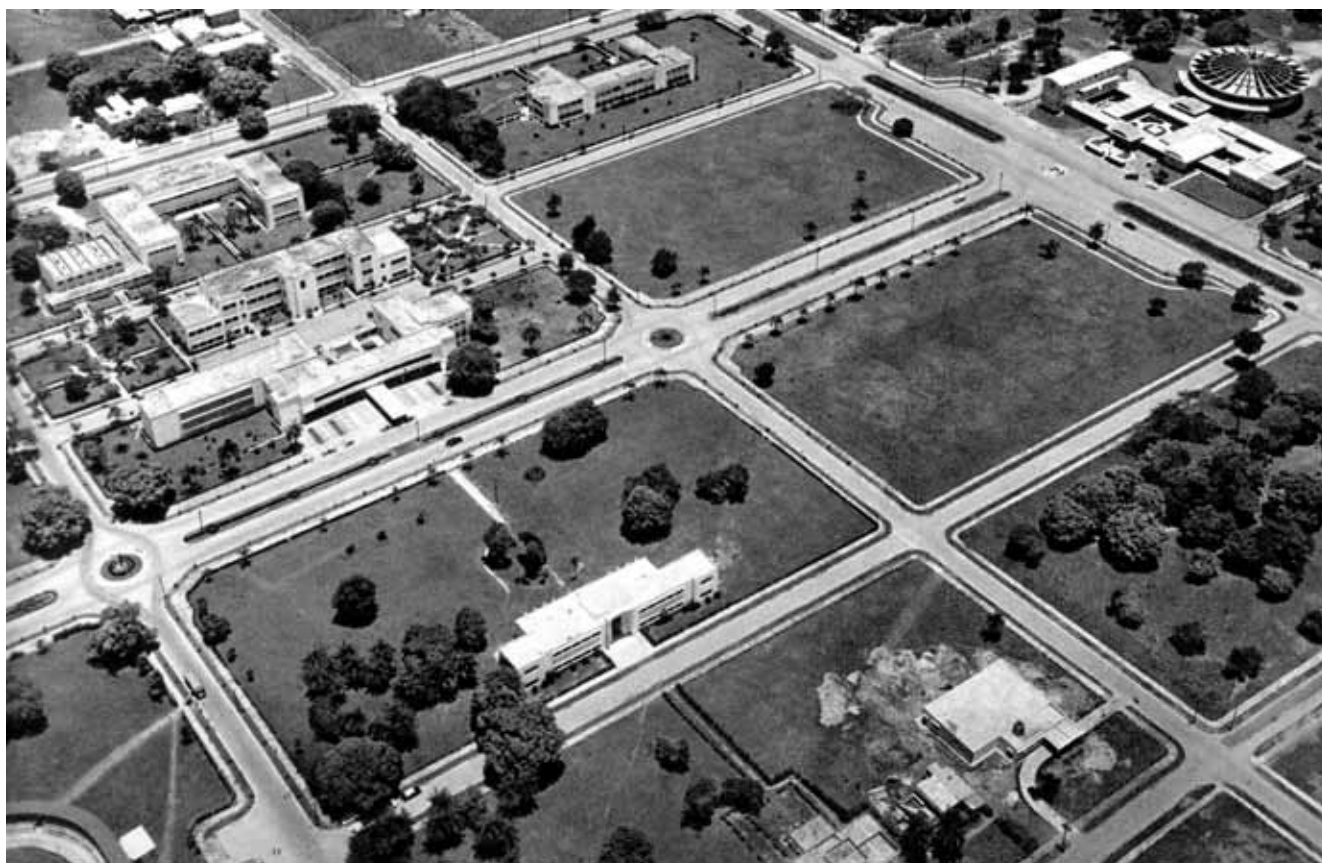
After nine years of the Trujillo nightmare the city changed its name to Ciudad Trujillo. This change was marked by the first consistently modern structure, the Copello building, erected in the emblematic Calle El Conde in 1939. Thus, modernity came to Santo Domingo during the mandate of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, the dictator who held Dominican society in his fist for three decades from 1930 to 1961. In his own person Trujillo assumed the role which the amorphous Dominican bourgeoisie did not take on, a pattern that became the usual strategy of other contemporary Latin American dictators: Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela, Machado and Batista in Cuba, and Perón in Argentina. Santo Domingo initiated its major modern urban projects, dividing them into two major divisions: on the one hand, public housing projects, such as the Barrios Obreros (Henry Gazón),² the Barrio of Maria Auxiladora to the north of the city and the Barrio of Los Mina (Ramón Báez López-Penha and Pablo Mella) in the center, and on the other hand, institutional projects like the University City (José Antonio Caro Alvarez, Humberto Ruiz Castillo and André Dunoyer de Segonzac). The Fair of Peace and Fraternity of the Free World (Guillermo González), Caro's Medical School and González's Governmental Palace of the Federal District are emblematic works of the Dominican modern movement. Other relevant urban works are the

Malecón, an enormous urban space more than twenty kilometers long, also known as the George Washington, which preserved the city's seascape, Máximo Gómez Avenue and Fabrè Gefrard Avenue and other thoroughfares, which created the first north-south axes of Santo Domingo. All these works were directed by engineer Ramón Báez López-Penha.

ONLY IN THE MID 1950s, with the Regulating Plan of Ciudad Trujillo drawn up by Ramón Vargas Mera, does a vision of a modern city for Santo Domingo appear. This is in spite of two urban plans for the city, more neoclassical than modern, one of which was conceived by Guido D'Alessandro and José Antonio Caro in 1937,³ and the other by José Ramón Lopez-Penha (1938). Virgilio Vercelloni called Lopez-Penha's plan 'comical and banal.'⁴ Modernity is impeded by the need to satisfy the central and hegemonic powers. So, on the one hand, projects are executed which attempt to make the city more efficient and which fulfill the requirements of motorized transportation, and on the other hand, which render the city a medium to promote the dictatorship's power and presence.

THE CREATION of a formal repertory⁵ made of a full neoclassical catalogue is conceived by Henry Gazón.⁶ It extends the regime's power, from the capital to the distant and troubled frontier with Haiti.

PERHAPS one of the most interesting aspects of the transition to modernity in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo's rule is the use of a double code. This enabled



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Fig. 2. José Antonio Caro, José Ramón Báez et al, aerial photography of the campus of Santo Domingo University, circa 1945

the regime to appear as a modern, even democratic, government in its hotels, schools and hospitals, all of which are conceived and built in a mature modern idiom. On the other hand, buildings which house organs of social control, such as police detachments, court houses, fortresses and other government buildings, have an almost fascist look. Conforming to the semantics of the regime, they are called 'palaces.'⁷

THIS DOUBLE CODE also appeared in the works of some the main Dominican architects of the period, namely Guillermo González and José Antonio Caro. In his housing projects, González worked within a traditional idiom, and in his institutional buildings he worked within a modern idiom, stark and of colossal scale. In his modern idiom, he was equally skillful in rotation (Hotel Jaragua) and frontalness (the Palace of the City Government of the Federal District). In his Secretariat of Education and his Central Bank, Caro does not impose himself, but rather minimizes his own personality, which results in a neoclassicism far from the modern plasticity of his Medical School of the University of Santo Domingo or from the Bauhaus rationality of the Engineering and Architecture School.⁸

THIS STYLISTIC INCONSISTENCY of modern architects is not exclusive to the Dominican Republic. In the preface to her fine book *Malaussena: Arquitectura Academica en la Venezuela Moderna*, Sylvia Hernández de Lasala, writes of the Venezuelan Luis Malaussena: "A worrying

and seductive question arises which needs examination: how can a work like the headquarters of the Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, known as the White Palace, and of a neoclassic appearance, have been conceived at the same time as the Guaicamacuto Hotel, today the Marcuto Sheraton, and the Maracay Hotel, which are both examples of the purest international style?"⁹ Ever since Haussmann in the nineteenth century laid out long perspectives which were incidentally also useful for controlling rebellions with grape-shot, almost all dictators have preferred imposing projects and grand avenues in their urban plans.¹⁰ We see this in Caracas in the monumental works of Malaussena and in Havana in the grand avenues designed by Forestier. In Santo Domingo, during the consolidation of modernity which occurred during the Trujillo period, there was no structured will expressed in a master plan. Rather, what occurred was a series of unstructured works which fulfilled very defined needs but which in the end orchestrated a proposal for a modern city.

The engineer Ramón Báez López-Penha wrote about the urban regulations enacted to remedy the effects of the 1930 hurricane San Zenon: "let us continue assembling housing developments mechanically and uncreatively without any plan or specific goal so that we can continue to lack what we lack today, that is, clear and precise plans to guide us."¹¹

The direction of Máximo Gómez Avenue, also planned by Báez, demonstrated this lack of structural vision

when the construction of General Andrews airport mutilated this avenue's north-south line. This axis was completed only in the final years of the dictatorship when the airport was moved to Cabo Caucedo, its present location, thirty kilometers east of the city. This group of traffic arteries was completed with a project which became the paradigm of the Trujillo era's architecture and urbanism: the Fair of Peace and Fraternity of the Free World, completed in record time in 1955 to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the regime. It was designed by Guillermo González Sánchez and was influenced by the EUR 42 and the University of

Rome.¹² Caro's plan for the University of Santo Domingo (in collaboration with Humberto Ruiz and the French designer of the Basilica of Higuey, Dunoyer de Segonzac) dates from this period.

IT SHOULD BE POINTED OUT that Caro's urban schemes for the University and González's for the Fair recognize the postulates of modern urbanism. They are particularly axial, defined by the two main axes with their monumental end points, the Alma Mater building at the University and the Plaza of the Nations (better known as 'the little ball of the world') at the fair. The modernity of

Fig. 3. **Guillermo González et al**, aerial photography of the Fair of Peace and Fraternity of the Free World, Santo Domingo, 1955



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Fig. 4. **Rafael Tomás Hernández**, urban development of the barrio de Honduras, Santo Domingo, 1966

Fig. 5. **Rafael Tomás Hernández**, urban development of the barrio del Hoyo de Chulín, Santo Domingo, 1988

these ensembles is seen in the design of their buildings and in their urban installations, but not in their conception of space or their management of vehicular traffic.

Trujillo compromised Dominican modernity when he commissioned a catalogue of works representing the regime throughout the country. Gázon Bona created a 'Trujillista' typology of Dominican architecture in a series of projects in San Cristobal, where he built hotels, housing projects and schools; in Santiago with his Monument to Peace of Trujillo and dozens of 'palaces;' and in the frontier region where he designed hotels, barracks, municipal government buildings, law courts and branch offices of the Dominican party.

Santo Domingo never had a structured vision of a modern city (or to be exact, of any kind of city), unlike Cuba during Machado's dictatorship, for whom Forestier worked, as he also did in Argentina.¹³ In reality, the city's urban project appears to be only the sum of independent and punctual works, linked to the city to optimize and adapt it to the new times without touching to the historical center, as José Lluís Sert proposed for Havana in 1959.¹⁴ The architect Ramón Vargas Mera, author of the Regulating Plan for Santo Domingo in 1956 recognized a bit of this when he wrote: "Demolishing the historical center and building towers in its place is not what is proposed. The center is to be respected, with its architectural and urban values."¹⁵

Vargas Mera was the only one to demand a vision of a modern city for Santo Domingo. Nevertheless, his vision questioned orthodox modern urbanism, as he noted when writing about the plan: "The system of zoning according to function, central to the CIAM and the Athens Charter, is to be substituted by a system of mixed zoning in which the predominant activity will stimulate the character of the zone and secondary activities will complement the zone's use."¹⁶

The fact that Vargas Mera's plan was rejected, once it conflicted with the regime's political interests, reaffirmed the refusal of political will to conceive of the city as an integrated whole. This attitude continues today.

AFTER THE FALL of the Trujillo regime in 1961, Santo Domingo recovered its name and became an open city which continues to enforce its vision of modernity. However, it has still not drawn up a master plan, and we continue to hope to see it converted into a better city. Although modernism was practiced during the Trujillo era, a modern city, participatory, functional and democratic, remains to be constructed. Joaquín Balaguer, elected president with the support of the invading troops of the Organization of American States, was more interested in the colonial city, bad housing and large parks. Nor have subsequent governments really involved themselves in the city. And so, after five centuries, Santo Domingo, lying by the Ozama River, still awaits a contemporary identity, which has yet to arrive.

OMAR RANCIER, architect, graduated cum laude from the University Autónoma of Santo Domingo in 1979. President and founder of the group *Nuevarquitectura*, organizer of architectural biennials in Santo Domingo, author of numerous articles and essays in Santo Domingo's major specialist journals, professor at the school of architecture at the University Pedro Henríquez Ureña (UNPHU). Omar Rancier was also director of the Faculty of Architecture at the University Iberoamericana (UNIBE).

Translated by **Jon Kite**

NOTES

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2 Eugenio Pérez Montas, *La Ciudad del Ozama* (Barcelona: Patronato de la Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo & Centro de Altos Estudios Humanísticos y del Idioma Español, 1999), 284.

3 *Ibid.*, 283. Taken from J. Chez Checo, *El Palacio Nacional de la República Dominicana: 50 Años de historia y arquitectura* (Santo Domingo: Secretaria Administrativa de la Presidencia, 1997).

4 Virgilio Vercelloni, *Atlas Histórico de Santo Domingo* (Milan: Cosmopoli, 1991).

5 Architect Ramón Martínez, "El Significado de la Arquitectura de la Era de Trujillo," paper presented at *Arquitectura Contemporanea en la República Dominicana*, organized by the Grupo *Nuevarquitectura* (Casa de Teatro, September 4-6, 1981).

6 "In its time, by which it was inspired, the typical neoclassicism was born, which was extremely characterized by its lines. These limpid creations resemble a past overflowing with tradition and nationality." Henry Gázon Bona, *La Arquitectura Dominicana en la Era de Trujillo* (Collection Henry Gázon Bona, 1949), 1.

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8 Omar Rancier, "Versatilidad estilística en la Arquitectura de Guillermo González," *Nuevarquitectura* 43, *El Siglo* (February 23, 1990): 6B.

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11 Engineer José R. Báez López-Penha, "Santo Domingo: Su Fundación y Crecimiento," paper presented at the round table on urban planning (National University Pedro Henríquez Ureña, July 6-8, 1972). *Codia* 26, May/August 1971.

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16 *Ibid.*