

Aportes multiculturales a la configuración del espacio público del Parque Colon

Multicultural contributions to the configuration of the public space of Parque Colón

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RESUMEN

La función sociocultural de la arquitectura suele estar vinculada a los contenidos que se pueden codificar y expresar en su envolvente. Estos elementos son percibidos por los distintos grupos sociales desde el espacio público, que es donde se producen los procesos de construcción de la memoria colectiva, la imagen de la ciudad y los escenarios urbanos. El caso de la Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo no escapa a esta realidad. Aunque ocupa algo menos del 1% del territorio de la capital dominicana, este singular centro histórico mantiene una vitalidad cultural sobresaliente, debido a las relaciones que se establecen entre su arquitectura y el espacio urbano que la contiene. El presente artículo procura analizar las relaciones existentes entre algunas de las más relevantes piezas de la arquitectura que define el emblemático espacio urbano del Parque Colon, antigua Plaza Mayor, de la Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo. además, se presentan algunos de los cambios en su proceso evolutivo como espacio de actuación cultural colectiva y evidencias de la permanencia de usos ancestrales que conviven con la potencia de una dinámica social cambiante, que ha recibido los influjos de algunas de las diversas expresiones culturales que han incidido en la configuración de la dominicanidad.

Palabras clave: centros históricos, Ciudad Colonial, Santo Domingo, Parque Colon, espacio público, patrimonio, cultura y espacio público, parques dominicanos.

ABSTRACT

The sociocultural function of architecture is usually linked to the content that can be codified and expressed in its envelope. These elements are perceived by the different social groups from the public space, which is where the processes of construction of collective memory, the image of the city and urban settings take place. The case of the Colonial City of Santo Domingo does not escape this reality. Although it occupies a little less than 1% of the territory of the Dominican capital, this unique historic center maintains an outstanding cultural vitality due to the relationships established between its architecture and the



urban space that contains it. This article seeks to analyze the relationships between some of the most relevant pieces of architecture that define the emblematic urban space of Parque Colon, former Plaza Mayor, of the Colonial City of Santo Domingo. In addition, some of the changes manifested in its evolutionary process are presented as a space for collective cultural action and evidence of the permanence of ancestral uses that coexist with the power of a changing social dynamic, which has received the influences of some of the diverse cultural expressions that have affected the configuration of Dominicaness.

Keywords: historic centers, Colonial City, Santo Domingo, Parque Colon, public space, heritage, culture and public space, Dominican parks.

Introduction

The cultural use of the space that we recognize today under the name of "Parque Colón" dates to times before the founding of the city of Santo Domingo. There is archeological and historical evidence of the use of this territory by the Taíno people. The decision of the Spanish crown to occupy the lands of the old indigenous settlement on the western bank of the *Ozama* River early in the 16th century established the beginning of a dialectic urbanization process: morphological transformation together with symbolic preservation. The use of the old Taino ceremonial plaza will influence the decision on the location of the old Plaza Mayor of Santo Domingo.

For over a quincentennial, Taínos, Spaniards, French, Haitians, and Dominicans have contributed to the configuration of one of the most welcoming public spaces in the capital city and one of the most relevant cultural spaces in Dominican national history. By highlighting the multicultural traces present in this space, we seek to contribute to its historical understanding. In addition, its capacity to adapt to change without affecting its integrity will be revealed.

The aim is to make a contemporary reading of Colon Park as an experiential space of the multiculturalism that identifies the diversity of the Dominican Republic, based on the analysis of the image of some of the architectural works that configure it as a public space and the transformations that the square has undergone in its

morphology and use over time.

From the *batey* to the square.

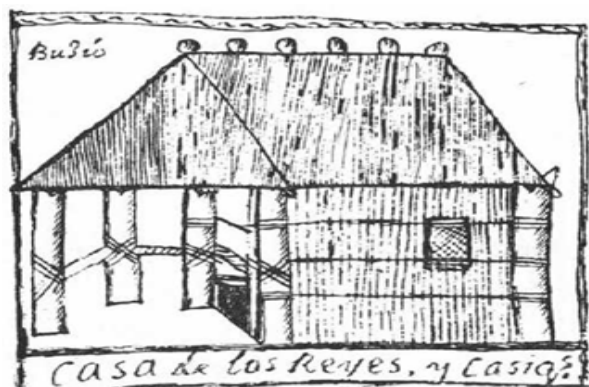
Influence of the Taíno and Spanish cultures

Scientific evidence on the existence of a *yucayeque* or *Taíno* settlement on the western bank of the *Ozama* River establishes some important premises for understanding the pre-Columbian use of the space that today houses the Parque Colón. It is known that these ancient settlers had "full control of the natural environment, aspects that were surely taken advantage of by the conquistadors" (Roca Pezzotti, 2007). Accounts such as those of the chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, testify to these early contacts. Oviedo states that late in the 15th century, when Bartholomew Columbus, Esq. arrived at the outlet of the *Ozama* River, he decided to found Santo Domingo on its eastern bank "so as not to remove the chief Catalina¹ from here [the western bank]" (Fernandez de Oviedo, 1853)² (Fernandez de Oviedo, 1853). But the chroniclers do not only provide details about the facts of the foundation. They also recorded important data on the cultural use of the common, open space and its relationship with the constructions in those settlements. The contribution of the chroniclers on the morphology of the Taíno settlements allows us to make some inferences related to the existence of a hierarchical center in the *yucayeques*: The *batey*. This space consisted of a central square around which the *bohío* of the main chief and his family, the houses of the *nitaínos*³ and the *behiques* or

religious leaders were established.

The *batey* was a vital space for society because it housed several constructions that made up an open structure, a social meeting place where religious manifestations such as the *areíto* ceremony or sporting events such as the ball game were expressed. These events revealed the values, beliefs, and aspirations of Taino society. The record of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in his "*Historia de las Indias*" (*History of the Indies) (De las Casas, 1875) sheds light on the shape and use of this space when he indicates that "they have a square, usually in front of the door of the house of the lord [Cacique], well swept, three times longer [long] than wide, surrounded by some small hills of a palm⁴ or two high..."

This description evidences the rectangular shape that in most cases the squares of the *areíto*⁵ fear. The establishment of a precise geometry to define functions in the public space allows inferring a conscious attitude in the symbolic and cultural appropriation of this space.



Sur Norte
CASA DE LOS REYES Y CASIQUES

Image 1. Drawing from 1492, of the home of chief *Guacanagarix*, credited by Esteban Prieto to Pedro de Salcedo.

It is necessary to establish the relationship between the plaza and the cacique's *bohío* or palace. Fray Bartolomé De las Casas indicates that this construction was in front of the rectangular plaza. Other authors also establish that the rectangular shape of the *bohío* differs from the *caneyes*, or huts, the common dwellings of the Taínos whose floor plan was circular or polygonal. The *bohío* had a roofed transition space without walls, a sort of portico, from which the cacique presided over public events such as the *areíto* ceremony, battle scenes or the ball game (see image 1).

The use of the "plaza" of the *batey* and its relationship with the architecture of the *bohío* is evidence of the existence of cultural processes common to those imported by the Europeans even before their arrival. The multifunctional public space, limited by the representative structures of power and the spatial transition in the architecture of the *bohío* could constitute a parallelism with the European medieval traditions of the use of the plaza as a multifaceted space provided with buildings loaded with symbolism and with transitional spaces in which architecture and where architecture and city converge.

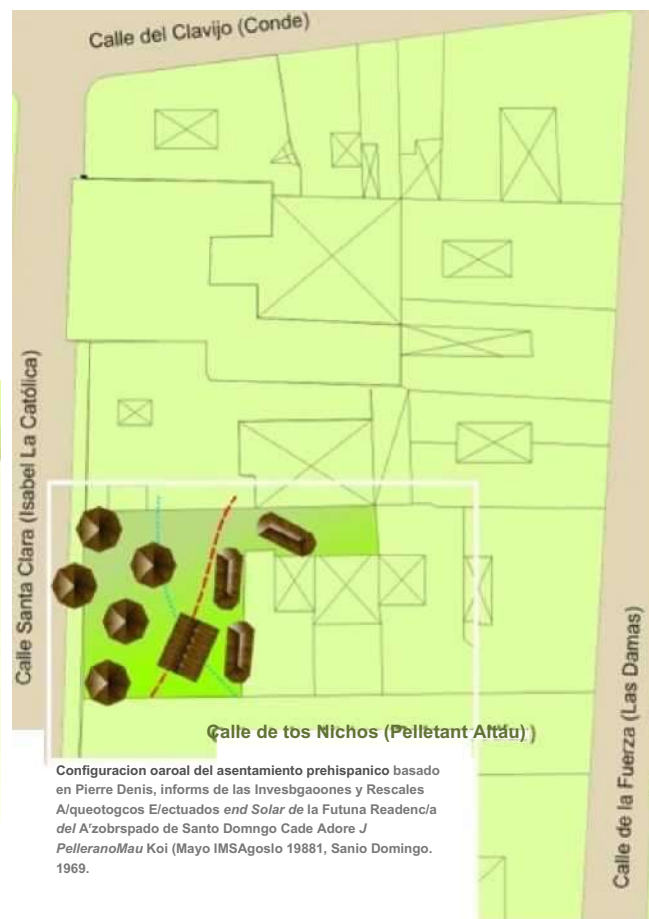


Source: Native architecture in Hispaniola. Conference published on *Clío*, the official journal of the Academy of History of the Dominican Republic.

The archaeological investigations carried out around Parque Colón provide valuable information on the cultural use of this space, even in periods prior to the Taino occupation. In the stratigraphy carried out as studies prior to the construction of the residence of the Metropolitan Archbishop of Santo Domingo, between the months of May and August 1988, evidence was found on the use of this space by the *Ciguayos* and later by

the Taínos. Traces of construction posts, burials, ceramic fragments, and many other anthropological objects show how consolidated the settlement was prior to the founding of the city of Santo Domingo (Denise, 1989, p. 1).

Image 3. Graph showing the key findings discovered by archeologists Pierre Denise and Harold Olsen Bogaert in the vicinity of the Plaza Mayor (Parque Colón).



Source: Urban spaces and blueprint of the city of Santo Domingo in the 16th century. Roca Pezzotti, Linda, 2007.

Around the same time, archaeologist Santiago Duval carried out work in the apse of the cathedral, located on the southern border of Parque Colón and reinforces the premises recorded in Pierre Denise's report from the residence of the Archbishopric of Santo Domingo. Duval states that: "The abundant material manifestations,

recovered in the cited works, leads us to conclude that the place where the Cathedral of Santo Domingo is located, was the original settlement of two pre-Hispanic group that developed in this area, taking advantage of the resources in this place, until the Spanish occupation." (Duval, 1988, cited by Rancier, La Plaza Mayor de la Ciudad Colonial de

Santo Domingo, 2013).

Although there is still no specific documentary evidence on the exact shape and location of the batey of this ancient settlement, it can be deduced, from the dynamics of later Spanish foundations in American lands, that it may have been where Parque Colon is today. Examples such as those of ancient Mexico Tenochtitlan, present-day Mexico City, expose the policy of functional supplanting used by the Spanish colonizers. This process of supplanting implied the substitution of temples, palaces and public spaces culturally consolidated by the pre-Columbian civilizations, for the new contents and expressions imported from Europe; but which in the end would result in a syncretic culture in which some of the pre-existing values permeate, perpetuating the social function of the collective use of public space and ratifying the strategy of relying on architecture to give meaning to these spaces.

With the arrival of Frey Nicolás de Ovando in 1502, the establishment of what would become the new capital of the colony on the Spanish island began and many of the pre-Hispanic structures that had been respected disappeared from the island's territory.

As has been observed in the case of Santo

Image 4. Aerial view of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Santo Domingo, showing the convergence of styles in the portico sustaining the ecclesiastical chapter with Parque Colón.



Photo by: Jorge Marte, 2021.

Domingo, there are indications that point to the permanence of uses of space for cultural functions like those that had been established by pre-Columbian societies.

Ovando, on behalf of the Catholic Monarchs in 1503, ordered the construction of important infrastructures and facilities in Santo Domingo (Perez Montás, 1998). Ovando organized the city around two centers of concentration for the management of power: one in the extreme northeast, near the port, and the other in the center of the newly traced grid. To the north are located the palaces of the governor and the *Real Audiencia* (*Royal Justice Palace), as well as the *Casa de Contrataciones* (*House of Recruitment of the Royal Alcazars), a fundamental institution in the commercial management between the colony and the metropolis. In the center, the Plaza Mayor, the church, the city hall, and the prison are located. This space coincides with what was once the consolidated nucleus of the old Taino settlement.

No documents or physical evidence have yet been found on the shape and specific location of the ancient batey of the *Zameaca* yucayeque; however, historical, and archaeological evidence suggests that Parque Colón probably coincided with the ancient Taino square (Roca Pezzotti, 2007)

Image 5. View of the Town Hall from Parque Colón. The balconies and arcades of the portico establish closeness between the architecture and the public space.



Photo by: Jorge Marte, 2021.

With an evident influence of the Roman castrum, Ovando moved the functions of the city that had been founded by Bartolomé Colón on the eastern bank of the Ozama River to the space previously occupied by the Taino yucayeque on the western edge.

The consolidation of this space as the image and symbol of the city was achieved through the construction of architectural works that gave a renewed symbolism to this territory. To the south, the Cathedral stands as a symbol of religious change and the primacy of the Catholic Church as the main spiritual guide of the colonists (Image 4). To the west, the Palacio Consistorial rises as a symbol of a new American society linked to the European metropolis, while facing the disaffections of the New World (Image 5). As the common ground between both worlds, the plaza appears as a multifunctional center: a space for gathering during public events and processions, a bullring, a pillory for the execution of the condemned in front of the prison, among many other functions.

Image 6. View of the Herrera – Borgella Palace from the Parque Colón.



Photo by: Jorge Marte, 2019.

Unlike what can be observed today, the streets originally merged with the square; thus, generating a perceptual and functional extension of that space until its encounter with the architectural style. The main buildings that make up this urban scenario feature transitional spaces that allow for

the experimentation of a gradual change between exterior and interior. This condition is very noticeable in the porticoes of the Palace of the City Hall and the Herrera-Borgella Palace, and to a lesser extent in the structure of the ecclesiastical chapter of the Cathedral (see images 4, 5 and 6).

These transitional spaces closely link the public function of the plaza with the public use of the architecture. It is a process of mutual appropriation between architecture and plaza, a value that is not always generated in architectural or urbanistic incursions. The spatial transition from the bohío to the batey showed signs of this lesson of vital integration that is maintained later in buildings such as the Palacio Consistorial. It is very unlikely that the reference for these transitions was given from the knowledge of Taino structures. The intention of this article is not to affirm the documentary evidence that points to European references in this sense. However, it is noteworthy that there was a state of functional awareness that allowed for spatial continuity in both Taino and Spanish cultural processes.

From the square to the park. Influence of the French and Haitian culture.

The French and British supremacy over world culture and the incorporation of the tree as a protagonist of the city late in the 19th century allowed the transformation of the urban image of several American cities. Such is the case of the Alameda, *Paseo de la Reforma* (*Promenade of the Reform), and the Chapultepec Forest in Mexico, as well as the Paseo del Prado in Havana, Cuba.

Image 7. Scenic view of the Plaza Mayor or Spanish Square of Santo Domingo. In the background, the Town Hall c. 1880.



Source: Historic venues and monuments of Santo Domingo. Rodríguez Demorizi, Emilio. 1980.

Santo Domingo is part of a similar process of transformation of its public spaces, which coincides with the preparations for the celebration of the fourth centennial of the discovery of America. Around 1891, the old Plaza Mayor underwent many transformations in its morphology: the streets were hierarchized to define its new limits and "flowers and trees were planted, benches, streetlamps, and flower beds were placed" (Szabo, 2010) (see images 7 and 8). These transformations were followed by a new and ambitious denomination: now the square would become a "park", despite its modest extension.

Image 8. View of the Town Hall from Parque Colón in 1898.



Source: Santo Domingo, Imagination & Life, 1860 - 1960. Portillo, Julio, 2003.

One of the most relevant traces of this period is the inauguration, in 1887, of the sculptural group that features Christopher Columbus as the main figure on a pedestal, next to the figure of a Taino woman, to whom multiple identities have been attributed.

Image 9. Sculpture of Christopher Columbus in the park.



Photo by: Jorge Marte, 2021.

The sculpture of the admiral (Image 9) marks a milestone, generating a new focus in the park of the same name. The work by the French sculptor *Ernet Guilbert* (City Hall of the National District, 2009), emphasizes to a great extent the influence of French culture on the young American republics and their spaces of representation. The flowerbeds, shrubs, trees, and fountains arranged based on a Cartesian structure manifest the taste for Versailles-style gardening in the old Spanish Square.

The architecture is not isolated from this process, the old colonial buildings are reformed both in their interiors and in their facades. The old palace of Diego de Herrera had been transformed during the Haitian occupation to house the palace of Governor *Gerome Borgella* and now the old prison, with parliamentary functions, adopts the triangular pediment and moldings. The academicist influence was definitively established, the most outstanding example being the project developed and built by *Antonín Nechodoma* and Osvaldo Báez for the Town Hall (Penson, 2005).

Image 10. View of the Town Hall, seen from the intersection of the streets El Conde and Arzobispo Meriño.



Source: Jorge Marte, 2021.

The effort to cohere the façade of the Town Hall under the tutelage of classical orders was successful. The addition of a tower on the corner of El Conde and Arzobispo Meriño, for the placement of a public dial, establishes a subtle tension with the sculpture of Columbus, whose index finger points to the orb placed on the dome of the tower.

Image 11. The old Siboney building (Conde 15), located North of Parque Colón.



Image 12. The Roselló building, which hosts the Hotel Conde de Peñalba, located northwest of Parque Colón. **Photo by:** Jorge Marte, 2022.



Photo by: Jorge Marte, 2022.

The transformations in the Town Hall are carried out focusing on the integration with the city, on the public interaction of architecture.

The positive and progressive vision of the late 19th century is reflected in the architectural expression of the main buildings surrounding Parque Colón.

From the romantic park to the democratic space. The influence of Catalan culture and international style

It would be inappropriate to disdain the contributions made during the twentieth century to this powerful urban space. One of the most significant urban dialogues in the surroundings of Parque Colón takes place between the Town Hall and the Rosello building, located on the northeast corner of the intersection of El Conde and Arzobispo Meriño streets. This work is attributed to the Catalans Tomas Aunon and Joaquín Ortíz, whom in an effort of urban integration go beyond

urban mimesis and synthesize the forms of their towering neighbor. Omar Rancier, in his article "*Edificio Rosello, 1943*" (*The Rosello Building), describes the dialogue between the Town Hall and this work as follows:

"The dialogue] takes place in the vertical articulation of the different levels that correspond to the consistory, [...]. The lowered arches of the second-floor portal in the Town Hall correspond to the pointed arches of the Spanish arches in the Hotel. Likewise, the balconies dialogue in different but coinciding languages.

The appropriation of the corner of the Rosello, a curve that stitches the tower opposite, is a delightful design nod, a sort of urban flirtation, to Osvaldo Baez's building". (*Rancier, Rosello Building, now Hotel Conde de Peñalba, 2018*).

The architectural value of the current Hotel Conde de Peñalba has been recognized by Dominican critics (*Brea & Delmonte, 2006*); however, the most relevant cultural expression occurs through the extension to the public space of the activities of the Café - Restaurant that takes place on the first level. This place is known as the "*Palacio de la Esquizofrenia*" (Palace of Schizophrenia), a name that refers to the "overdimensioned creativity of the ideas presented by its legion of habitués" (Sánchez Fernández, 2011).

Another work that highlights the diversity in the cultural approach of Parque Colón is the building located at No. 15 on Ave. El Conde. The height of this building has generated controversy in the past; however, in terms of urban scale it does not produce visual noise in the environment. The use of a simple volumetry, the "store front" that maintains the scale of the El Conde pedestrian avenue and the balcony placed in an asymmetrical position on the façade at the height of the ground floor buildings of the blocks, produces a pleasant contextual insertion despite its avant-garde stylistic expression.

This building, also known as Siboney, "is an important piece of Dominican modernity. Its simplicity, scale, and proportion are sufficient for its integrity to be maintained" (Rancier, *Edificio Conde 15, 2018*). It is a fundamental piece for the study of architects Guillermo González⁶ and William Reid, and an important reference for the understanding of modern architecture in Santo Domingo.

Parque Colón: The representation of modern-day Dominican cultural diversity

Considering everything analyzed herein, it can be concluded that the collective construction of the public space and the architecture that defines Parque Colón is the product of a multicultural synthesis, whose contributions date back to pre-Columbian times, evolving and transforming its semiotic capacity to the rhythm of changes in the society that has constituted today's Dominican Republic.

Today, this space is the heart of tourist activity in Santo Domingo, but it is also a meeting place for young people and adults. It is the scene of diverse cultural events and manifestations (see images ...). Books, poetry, music, gastronomy, dominoes, and social gatherings coexist with literature and patriotism, with nature and architecture. In short, Parque Colón is a space that expresses Dominican multiculturalism in the center of the Colonial City of Santo Domingo, declared a World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO⁸ in 1990.

Image 15. Flashmob organized by the Office of the Mayor of the National District in Parque Colón.



Photo by: Jorge Marte.

Image 13. “Frio - Frio” o “Guayao” trolley, a traditional Dominican beverage made with tropical fruit flavor essences, and shaved ice.



Photo by: Jorge Marte, 2019.

Image 14. ".Everyday scene in the Parque Colón: Taxi drivers playing dominoes, young people and adults spread out at dusk. In the background the umbrellas of the Café-Restaurant Conde de Peñalba also known as the "Palace of Schizophrenia".



Foto: Jorge Marte.

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Notes

- ²Catalina is the Castilian name given by the colonizers to Zameaca, the chief who oversaw the Taíno settlement located on the western shore of the Ozama River until early into the 16th century.
- ³This bibliographic citation is taken from book I, of the first part of the *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, published in October 2018 by biblioteca-antologica.org.

⁴Advisors and/or assistants to the chiefs. Conformed the equivalent of a court in Taino society.

⁵A "palmo" (palm) is equivalent to about 22.2 centimeters (8.75 inches).

⁶There are reports of the existence of oval and circular ceremonial squares (García Arévalo, 2019). ⁷Considered the father of modern architecture in the Dominican Republic.

⁸United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



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Cursó maestría en Conservación de Bienes Culturales en la Universidad Nacional Pedro Henríquez Ureña (UNPHU), donde es docente y en actualidad se encarga de la línea de investigación sobre patrimonio y memoria de la ciudad. En las últimas dos décadas trabajo en la Dirección Nacional de Patrimonio Monumental y departamento del Centro Histórico de la Alcaldía del Distrito Nacional donde colaboro en diversos proyectos y publicaciones sobre el patrimonio arquitectónico y urbanístico. Dirigió la realización de la primera guía del color para los centros históricos dominicanos. Participo en el equipo que desarrollo la “Guía de arquitectura de Santo Domingo”. Colaboro con la sección “Nuestros pueblos y ciudades” de la revista “Hábitat”. Dirigió el proyecto del Sistema de Inventario del Patrimonio Arquitectónico de Gazcue (SIPA - Gazcue) en Santo Domingo.

Master's Degree in Conservation of Cultural Property from the Universidad Nacional Pedro Henríquez Ureña (UNPHU), where he tenures and is currently in charge of the line of research on heritage and memory of the city. Over the last two decades he has worked in the National Directorate of Monumental Heritage and the Department of the Historic Center of the Mayor's Office of the National District, where he collaborated in various projects and publications on architectural and urban heritage. He directed the realization of the first color guide for the Dominican historic centers. Participated in the team that developed the "Architecture Guide of Santo Domingo". He collaborated with the section "*Nuestros pueblos y ciudades*" (*Our towns and cities) in "Habitat" Magazine. He also directed the project of the Gazcue Architectural Heritage Inventory System (SIPA - Gazcue) in Santo Domingo.