TAKING BACK THE CANAL ZONE: A CHALLENGE FOR PANAMA CITY

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Gustavo Araújo, 2000. Quarry Heights.

Anyone visiting Panama City for the first time will be surprised by its extremely long and narrow shape (it measures almost 70 kilometers from one end to the other) and its dense tropical forest very close to the modern skyscrapers of the financial district. Still more striking: even though the metropolis has developed along both sides of the Panama Canal, the canal itself cannot be seen from the city's most populated areas.

How did these circumstances come about? Panama City's peculiar development during the twentieth century can only be understood by taking into account the existence of the *Panama Canal Zone*, a United States enclave consisting of 1,400 km^2, created in 1904 and lasting until 1979. During its seventy-five years of existence, the Canal Zone, which divided the country in half, was in effect a separate country that could be reached from Panama City by simply crossing a street. Today the Panamanian capital has 1,200,000 people (forty times more than at the beginning of the twentieth century), but it still shows traces of that past.

The Territory of the Canal Zone

The Panama Canal was finished in 1914 at the cost of thousands of lives and more than three hundred million dollars. It opened a new chapter in the history of the country as *tierra de paso,* or land of passage, its destiny ever since Spanish control was consolidated in the sixteenth century. Naturally, at that time the transisthmian route was different from what it is today, since it involved a combined river-and-land route, and the city of Colon, on the Caribbean

shore, did not exist yet. The present-day route was defined by the transisthmian railroad (1850-55), a project sponsored by U. S. business interests that were taking advantage of the Gold Rush. The Railroad Company founded Colon as a port.

The canal itself was not begun by the United States but by a French company managed by Ferdinand de Lesseps. He worked on its construction for seven years but went bankrupt in a spectacular fashion in 1889. When the U. S. decided to take over the failed project, it supported Panama's independence from Colombia. But there was an ulterior motive: in November 1903, only two weeks after independence, the new country was forced to approve the Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty, which ceded the waterway to the United States "in perpetuity" and stipulated the creation of the Canal Zone. For Washington, it was important to have no interference.

The boundaries of the Canal Zone were defined and modified on various occasions through agreements between the two countries. However, neither Panama nor Colon, cities that bordered directly on the "Zone" (the term used in popular speech when referring to the Canal Zone), were visually separated from it. For more than fifty years the border was fluid; to pass into "Zonian" territory (another local idiom), one had only to cross Avenida 4 de Julio in Panama City and the Avenida del Frente in Colon. On the other hand, anyone not employed by the canal company or by the United States military was subjected to many restrictions when moving around the Zone. Residents of Panama City and Colon were well aware of these regulations.

The Canal Zone was obviously very different from Panama and from the United States itself. It was really unique in the world, despite certain resemblances to U. S. territories such as Guam or the large military bases in Hawaii and the Philippines. Its main characteristics were evident in the territorial concept, unmistakable because of the vast green areas and sparsely populated towns.

This concept did not develop by a stroke of a pen. Actually, at first the U. S. administration simply continued what the French had begun, whose camps of prefabricated wooden houses coexisted alongside surrounding villages and rural holdings without very clear separations. During the construction of the canal many proposals were discussed concerning the future structure of the Zone, proposals that reflected pressures of various types exerted by politicians in Washington and by high-level officials of the armed forces. The definitive decisions were made in early 1907 when Colonel George W. Goethals was named chief engineer. He governed the Zone almost like a dictator until 1916 and represented the military "hard line."

Official policy with respect to the Canal Zone was formulated in 1912. The successful completion of the canal could already be foreseen, and the Zone was shaping up as a permanent political entity, not as an area of transitory camps. This policy was reflected in the Panama Canal Act passed by the U. S. Congress on 24 August 1912. That law created an administrative and legal structure to be headed by a governor. At the same time, schools, a judicial system, etc., were created: that is, everything needed for a modern organized society.

In addition, the presidential decree of 5 December 1912 declared that the entire land area within the Canal Zone was essential for the operation of the canal and ordered Goethals to take possession of it in the name of the United States. The entire population not needed for the operation of the canal was expelled from the Zone, including residents of villages dating back to colonial times such as Matachín, Gorgona, and Cruces. Landowners in the region received indemnity payments.

At that moment, total control was established over Zonian territory and all private property disappeared: a clear policy of occupation of the land in the Zone —with a reduced number of definitive settlements– was put in place. There was absolute control over land use, including a rigorous allocation of areas for the operation, maintenance, and defense of the waterway. In accordance with this concept, an administrative center —a sort of capital of the Zone— was laid out in an uninhabited site called Balboa, near the new harbor installations. Next to Balboa were the residential areas of Quarry Heights and the enormous hospital complex of Ancon, all this barely two kilometers from downtown Panama City.

Goethals' idea was to leave the greater part of the Canal Zone as a large forest reserve, justified for strategic reasons. It is striking that there were so few roads within the Zone, and not one went from one ocean to the other: the Transisthmian Highway was constructed in 1942 on the Panamanian side. Gaillard Road was an exception, since it ran to Gamboa passing alongside various bases and camps on the east side of the canal.

Zonian society consisted of two sectors, one civilian and the other military. The civilian sector operated the canal, but in practice, the military group was in command since responsibility for the canal fell directly on the Secretary of War (now Defense). For that reason, the governors of the Canal Zone, beginning with Goethals himself, were mostly career military men. It is also not surprising that the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers always had a decisive voice in the design process and spatial layout of the Canal Zone, even though details of all buildings depended on the corresponding governmental agency: the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC), later the Panama Canal Company (PCC), or the Department of War. This explains why Zonian buildings of the period from 1900 to 1940 resemble those constructed by the U. S. Armed Forces in the Philippines, Hawaii, and Guam, all located in tropical climates.

In addition to the physical layout typical of a military camp of the Canal Zone, the notorious Gold Roll and Silver Roll became established in the towns and installations of the ICC and PCC. At first these terms applied only to how salaried and day workers were paid (some in gold and others in silver), but in daily practice they implied a strict caste system defined by the rank and race of personnel: white single or married employees, European workers, Hindus, blacks, etc. Separation according to race and income was rigorous and was a fundamental element of life in the Canal Zone; it lasted until 1964, when the Civil Rights Act was passed by the United States Congress.

Military areas, less segregated than those of the PCC, grew during the first half of the century. When the canal was finished in 1914 (the formal opening took place barely two weeks after the

beginning of the First World War), the need to defend the waterway against possible aggressors was clear. Although there had been a U. S. military presence in Panama since 1903, at first only a few troops were stationed permanently in the country. In 1913 the U. S. Congress appropriated the first large sum of money for the defense of the canal and for the first time considered establishing a large chain of military bases on the isthmus. An army of 3,000 men was envisioned to begin with, and plans for the corresponding installations were formally presented by the Secretary of War in November of that year. In 1914 additional twelve million dollars were appropriated for the defense of the canal.

Once the First World War was over, the Department of War enlarged its installations and a veritable cluster of bases was created around Panama City and Colon. At its peak during the Second World War, almost 100,000 people were living in the Canal Zone, mostly members of the armed forces. Additional military installations were built in the interior of the country: one well known example is the airstrip at Río Hato. However, when the Cold War began changes in military strategy and technology caused the canal to lose some of its importance; budget cuts began in 1951. The Zone was fenced off after anti-Yankee disturbances in 1959, a situation that worsened dramatically in 1964. In the seventies, the Canal Zone had become something like a dinosaur for Washington's strategists, and the U. S. decided to get rid of it. The reversion began with the Torrijos-Carter treaty of 1977. The Canal Zone itself disappeared in 1979, but military bases were phased out slowly in a process that lasted until 1999.

The Architecture and Urban Development of the old Canal Zone

Even though the Canal Zone no longer exists, a large part of its legacy does survive, evident in the large architectural and urbanistic complexes and extensive green areas. This legacy actually consists of an ingenious array of buildings adapted to the humid tropics. This creatively adaptive process, codified in standards and typologies, was very effective until air conditioning was introduced.

Zonian architecture began as a direct continuation of the wooden structures inherited from the French, mostly consisting of camps of individual houses derived from the bungalow, with wide porches and roofs with large eaves. The first U. S. contribution –beginning in 1905, the year the route across the isthmus was cleared– was the introduction of metal screens as protection against mosquitoes. Unfortunately, almost all of these wooden buildings have disappeared and may only be envisaged through plans and photographs.

The part of Zonian legacy that still remains vivid in memory consists, above all, of the monumental buildings erected since 1914. The principal point of reference for those concepts was the City Beautiful Movement, which arose in the United States as a result of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Aside from clear Greco-Roman and Palladian influences evident in Zonian public architecture, Neo-Gothic elements also appeared in religious architecture, along with a kind of diluted Mission Style for houses. The Renaissance-type country villa in Italy, with its fondness for nature, was another important point of reference allowing architectural classicism to be integrated with the natural landscape.

The most outstanding project of the Canal Zone was the new government center in Balboa, built in 1914-15 and designed by New York architect Austin W. Lord, at that time Dean of the Department of Architecture at Columbia University. The masterpieces of that grand complex are the Administration Building and the avenue in front of it, called El Prado in memory of the famous Havana boulevard of the same name.

This enormous building, which resembles a royal palace, was erected atop an artificial hill with a view toward the entrance to the canal. In spite of its classical appearance, it has a steel skeleton and walls of cement blocks: an advanced construction system at that time. The rotunda, of course, resembles the capitol in Washington, most certainly a point of reference, but on the outside the building has no dome and its style departs quite markedly from the usual Palladianism in North American public architecture. Its most striking element is the large tile roof. According to a press note published at the time, the building *"adapts the Renaissance of the fifteenth century in Italy to modern building conditions and materials,"* a comment that refers not to the architecture of Brunelleschi or Alberti in Florence, but to lesser known works such as the Villa Medici in Poggio a Caiano, a house elevated above its surroundings where we find a large-eaved roof and a harmonious relationship with nature ("tropicalness" in Zonian architecture, then, turns out to be quite European after all).

El Prado Avenue leads to the real center of civilian Zonian life, a plaza with the Club House for the white population, a commissary, the Post Office, and other installations. This avenue creates a real axis of symmetry, and from it the Administration Building can be seen in its entire splendor: the palatial allusions are heightened by the momumental staircase that is frankly baroque. On both sides of El Prado, individual buildings were constructed of reinforced concrete and cement blocks, with tile roofs and some decorative motifs derived from the Mission Style.

Architecture in the military sector evolved in similar fashion. Just as in the civilian area, the practice of constructing with masonry and reinforced concrete rather than wood was established. In the various military bases, the barracks followed traditional patterns, although beginning in the twenties, details of Spanish inspiration already mentioned (arches, elaborate finials, tile roofs) became common, very similar to Austin W. Lord's design of the area around El Prado.

The resulting urbanistic concept, both in civilian and in military areas, can be described as very low-density suburban. Much has been said about this so-called "garden city," perhaps not well interpreted in this context, although certainly the landscape acquired great importance and is perhaps the only element that gives some warmth to an architecture that was extraordinarily severe by itself.

The "Golden Age" of Zonian architecture ended in the fifties –and not only because of budget cuts: air conditioning had arrived, so it was no longer necessary to design buildings with large

roofs and verandas. Cross-ventilation became obsolete, and Zonian authorities began closing up porches and windows, often clashing with the original character of the buildings.

Zonian Echos in Panama City

For three quarters of a century, whatever happened in the Canal Zone could not pass unnoticed in Panama City —the other side of the coin. According to the 1903 treaty, this small city of 30,000 inhabitants remained like an enclave within the Zone. As a result of negotiations in 1914, a corridor towards the northeast was carved out of Zonian territory, thus allowing the city to grow, although only in that one direction. From the forties on, when the highways to Colon and Tocumen were finished and the population of the city surpassed 100,000, urban expansion followed these two routes in the characteristic shape of a "Y." Towards the west, the city had to "leap over" the Canal Zone. After ten miles of forest, urbanization continued in Arraiján.

Despite territorial separation, a large North American influence was evident in Panama, mainly because the Panamanian economy was dependent on the U. S. at all levels, beginning with its currency. In addition, Washington saw the Republic of Panama as a protectorate, a condition kept explicitly until the thirties. Canal Zone authorities also held specific prerogatives in the capital. For many years, the Zonian Health Office controlled construction permits, water supply, and garbage disposal.

The peculiar symbiotic relationship between Panama City and the Canal Zone could be perceived from the moment one arrived at the railroad station on Plaza 5 de Mayo, gateway to the city until the forties. The station itself, an imposing neo-classical building designed in the U. S., belonged to the Zone and was located in Panamanian territory. With its great colonnade, it dominated its noisy and colorful surroundings. The boundary of the Zone, the Avenida 4 de Julio, was only 200 meters away, and there the contrast was even more striking: on the Panamanian side were stores, businesses and night clubs (famous locales like the Ancon Inn and the Jardín Atlas, forbidden in the puritanical Zone); on the other side, manicured lawns, trees, a house here and there and the grand Tivoli Hotel, a symbol of colonial life-style with its wide verandas and spacious halls painted in white. After the 1964 riots, the street acquired two different names: on the Panamanian side it was called “Avenida de los Mártires” (Martyrs Avenue), and on the other "President Kennedy Avenue."

One clear sign of dependence was tenement housing for workers who had been expelled from the Canal Zone beginning in 1912. These large districts, almost all poor and dirty, arose in the gap between the Casco Antiguo (the historic district) and the boundary of the Zone. The classic tenement building was wooden and had two or three floors, rooms laid out in rows and shared bathrooms. Around 1940, some eighty percent of the population of the city lived in these tenements.

Some monumental buildings also reflected the Canal Zone style. Of the public projects inspired by Zonian design, the most important was doubtlessly the enormous Santo Tomás Hospital

(begun in 1920), which echoes the Gorgas hospital complex in Ancon. The architect in charge was James C. Wright, a U. S. citizen who lived in Panama and envisaged a classical design similar to the Administration Building in Balboa, with colossal columns and a tiled roof with large eaves.

Upper-class residential architecture in the new suburbs kept in step: it was inspired by the North American experience of very comfortable, picturesque houses of irregular massing and well-tended gardens. The effects of the Mission Style and the Spanish-colonial Revival style – which developed in California, Texas and Florida around 1910— were widely known in Latin America through magazines, books, and movies. The same was true in Panama, except that the Mission Style had first appeared in Zonian architecture and spread from there to the capital in the twenties. Since the country was a true melting pot of architects and clients, many combinations were possible.

In a certain way, the architects who worked in Panama City had an advantage over those in the Canal Zone: upper-class suburbs turned out picturesque and diverse, thus avoiding the monotony of Zonian settlements. The most unexpected mixture occurred between luxurious Spanish-colonial revival mansions —such as those in Beverly Hills, Pasadena, or Coral Gables— and Zonian military barracks. Since many contractors worked both in the Zone and in Panama City, it was natural to apply the concepts of massed living quarters of a military base to apartment buildings. Some typical details of Zonian architecture of the twenties, such as the tiled eaves supported by wooden braces or elaborately profiled concrete brackets, were so functional that they spread immediately throughout the whole country, and the same was true of the doors protected by metal screens. Entire sectors of Panama City, particularly Bella Vista and Campo Alegre, followed this example. Unfortunately, real estate speculation of the last twenty years has destroyed a good part of this unusual legacy, which can only be reconstructed mentally with the aid of historical photographs.

Perspectives

The 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaties established the abolition of the Canal Zone and the gradual "reversion" of the waterway and all its territory to Panama. This process began on September 1979 and concluded the last day of 1999.

With the reversion of the Canal Zone, half of its territory has been incorporated into the District of Panama, which constitutes the greatest part of the capital's metropolitan area. This has set an unprecedented situation in the region, whereby a city virtually doubled its size with the stroke of a pen.

The reversion of the Zone is a great challenge for the spatial planning of the entire transisthmian area. The nation drafted two major plans: a general one (1996) and the plan centered on the capital's metropolitan area (1997). However, Zonian land was transferred, not to one, but to several institutions: namely, the Panama Canal Authority (ACP), The Interoceanic Region Authority (ARI) and the National Environment Authority (ANAM). ANAM cares for the

forests and other protected areas, ARI is in charge of privatizing the majority of the former military bases, and ACP, aside from managing the canal, has inherited large patrimonial sites. Each institution holds on to its feud and priorities; some of these are open to dialogue, others are not. ACP, for example, maintains the salaries and structures inherited from U.S. rule, thus behaving like a government within the government. Some see ARI like a big real estate firm, anti-conservationist almost by definition.

At present, Panama City is "colonizing" the Zonian territory little by little; it has begun by incorporating Balboa, Ancon, the docks, and Albrook and Clayton bases to the existing urban fabric. Of course, not all the available territory can or should be developed: the Metropolitan Natural Park, which begins only a kilometer away from the banking district, should be maintained at all costs; fortunately, the general consensus agrees.

The attempts at integration have brought about the construction of big highways and the formation of new nodes. The best example is the new bus terminal that along with the gigantic shopping mall that accompanies it, have become a magnet for people who never went to the "Zone" before.

Of all the former military bases and residential areas, Albrook is the most symptomatic of the changes taking place. One part has been taken over by state institutions, but the most important sector has been transformed into a high-end residential area. The standard housing of the thirties and forties has given way to the individualized grand-residence concept, enhanced by signs typical of the social climber: columns, arches, balusters, big stairways, and so on —usually of dubious taste. Many fences have been built —there were none before—, although one must admit that security conditions in the Zonian days were very different from now.

In view of the Canal Area architecture's many assets regarding its natural surroundings (especially when compared to the crowded and jumbled architecture of Panama City, notoriously insensible to the climate) an ongoing discussion is taking place concerning the importance and possible conservation of this architectural heritage. The World Monuments Watch included the Panama Canal Area on its List of One Hundred Most Endangered Sites for 2004-06, and specific conservation laws have been proposed recently, although their aims and priorities are not yet entirely clear. A first step has been to propose the Administration Building and El Prado as monuments, although there is strong state opposition to this designation. Within the different communities there has also flourished a will to preserve their established character as "garden cities".

One should keep in mind that what many people find attractive about the architectural, landscape and urban legacy of the Canal Zone —beyond its obvious adaptation to the tropical milieu— is a product of Panamanians' nostalgia: faced with the chaos of Panama City today, the Canal Zone seems a paradise of order, tranquility, and ampleness. But it is also true that the monumental and residential ensembles of the Canal Zone were purposely developed with their backs turned to Panama City and Colon —and according to highly-controlled conditions that

cannot be repeated in an environment where private ownership of land prevails. For this reason, even though the territory is no longer divided, substantial differences between the Canal Area and the rest of the country still persist.

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