

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW: BACKGROUND**

The current chapter will provide an understanding of some issues related to the contextual characteristic of Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República. The intent of this chapter is to allow the reader to obtain an understanding of the historical background of plazas in Venezuela, their location and setting in Maracaibo and their contextual characteristics. It allows presenting some characteristics of Venezuelans and Marabinos (the inhabitants of Maracaibo). In addition, the climatic and security conditions in Maracaibo will also be discussed. This will provide a general perspective of the urban environment of Maracaibo, which relates to and influences the problems to be addressed in this study.

### **4. Historical Background of Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República**

Addressing the historical background of plazas in Venezuela and specifically Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República can inform the reader about why these urban spaces were created, understand the urban initiatives and goals which created them and the intentions behind those who built or renovated them. Therefore, this topic will specifically present the history and renovation processes in both plazas.

#### **4.1 Historical background of public spaces and cities in Venezuela**

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According to Frank Marcano, Venezuela's public spaces have suffered a metamorphosis through the years. Originally, plazas were one of the key components of the traditional urban structure. In the modern city, however, public space has become a secondary element in the modern urban matrix. Venezuela's modern cities have developed according to functionalist conceptions, which have given more importance to the car than to pedestrian use. Under this approach, public spaces become less valued spaces for the public life. Currently, public spaces are residual settings with no sense of ownership that could encourage attitudes of stewardship and attachment from people. The spaces available for public gardens and plazas have been modified and destroyed in order to provide more space for mobility in the city. Public space in the modern city has become independent from the urban matrix and its hierarchy is now subordinated to the road systems. This can provide an understanding of the limited value plazas have acquired through the years. Urban plazas, which are the main topic of this study, exist in Venezuela separate from the urban and social role they were originally conceived. Although the main objective of this study is not to understand the process of this unfavorable evolution, providing the general historical background of plazas can further explain the origin of many problems that influence the livability and enjoyment of these spaces today.

In Venezuela, the modern city of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began in the 1940's when the oil industry fueled economic development. This modern period drastically changed the urban life in Venezuela, which was

characterized by urban renewal and opposition to the historic built environment in favor of urban progress and growth (Marcano 1997). The ideal of the modern movement in architecture and urbanism merged with full blast in Venezuela and still is present with some traces of exhaustion. The modern epoch brought the obliteration of the traditional urban matrix by a rationalist one, where road systems, vehicular dominance and disintegration of existing city structure through different zoning are predominant. This modern ideal has influenced urban development and urban life in recent years in Venezuela. Now, two urban structures with different roles coexist in most cities of Venezuela: the traditional and the modern structure. Within these two different urban matrices also coexist the traditional and modern plazas. Historically, plazas in Venezuela had specific urban roles such as marketplaces, which were very busy and livable. Most old town Plazas in Venezuela named after the national liberator, Simón Bolívar, were structured by locating important civic and religious buildings around them, such as a City Hall, cathedrals and theatres, which had important urban functions that constantly drew people to those spaces. Modern plazas, on the other hand, have become residual open spaces in the city, with no supportive urban activities around them. Without a viable urban role and location, these spaces become objects of continuous interventions and renovation processes based on the new spatial needs for more roads and transportation. Traditional plazas are valuable as important historic spaces in the city, whereas modern plazas are unvalued and misused by people.

If most public spaces in Venezuela are not representative of the social life and activities of citizens and become unused and disrespected spaces, it may be caused by people's cultural values and needs or by the design intentions behind them. This is particularly why it is so important to know about their history and know about the intentions or urban objectives that created them. And also this is why the topic of Venezuelans' social and psychological profile is included in this chapter. If a place is not meaningful for people, it can be a reflection of some existent problems that need to be explored. Although the study will not focus directly on the meaning of these places in Maracaibo, it will address the problem of livability that particularly is related to the notion of meaning and to the historical background. Therefore, understanding this historical perspective provided by the architect and urban specialist Frank Marcano, supports the research problem, and demonstrates that plazas in Venezuela have lost their urban role due to changes in the mode of life of people and through the transition of the traditional to the modern city in Venezuela.

The history of plazas can provide a comparison of the roles urban spaces had in the past and today. Therefore, the following topic will be presented with the intention of briefly understanding the history behind the two plazas addressed in this research.

## 4.2 Plaza de la Madre

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Plaza de la Madre was built as a commemoration of the 450 years of the discovery of Lake Maracaibo and for the inauguration of a Prenatal House. This is the only monument in homage to motherhood in the entire Zulia State. According to Frank Osorio, a chronicle that researched the plaza's history deduced that the origin of the plaza might be the only love of Alonso de Ojeda: the Indian Isabel (Ojeda was a Spanish settler who discovered the territories that are now part of Zulia State). Isabel was the first aboriginal mother who officially had three children from parents of the two continents. Therefore, she was a symbol of motherhood in the new continent and the union of two worlds: Europe and South America.

The construction of the plaza began in August 1949, assigned by the governor of Zulia State, Mr. Apolodoro Chirinos, and inaugurated January 20 of 1952. The mother statue was created by Rolan Quintero and is 10 feet high (3 meters). The statue appears as a mother sitting down with three children—two children in her arms and the third standing next to her. The mother sculpture was created with white cement and marble powder and was inscribed with the phrase: “Plaza de la Madre 20.01.52”. In the area where Plaza de la Madre is located, a horse racetrack called Santa María existed before the plaza was built. In this racetrack, the first Olympic Games of Venezuela were held in 1924. The initial urban equipment of the plaza consisted of the mother sculpture, seventeen streetlights, benches and walkways, and abundant vegetation consisting mostly of palms. Next to this installation also existed a golf course. Today neither the golf course nor the horse track exists. The demolition and construction of new spaces helps one understand the changing role public spaces have had in Maracaibo. Particularly in the United States, many old buildings and public spaces remain in the urban setting for many years. Maracaibo is perhaps a changing environment where many important buildings and public spaces have disappeared through the city's history. The changing attitudes and needs and the devaluing of such spaces among people could cause this. This has affected the history of the city. Sometimes buildings that have no urban role, that arise against the climate conditions, have displaced historic buildings in Maracaibo. Therefore the character of many places in the city has changed over the time.

It was known by a neighbor of Plaza de la Madre, who has lived for many years in the sector that the plaza had another use in his time. Originally young residents of the sector intensively used Plaza de la Madre, especially college students. Initially the sector was predominantly residential and most young people used the plaza as a studying and socializing urban space. In that period the plaza was remembered as a very comfortable place to be. For this neighbor the plaza has a lot of meaning because he has been a resident of that sector for many years, particularly the meaning of Plaza de la Madre, a plaza dedicated to the mother, was also very important. Now the plaza does not have that image and same meaning for people. It was also known that the sector originally had a very good reputation

because a lot of professionals in the city, predominantly doctors and lawyers, lived around the plaza. Now Plaza de la Madre may not be considered an important sector of the city and the famous professionals that once lived around the plaza have moved away. The sector is currently recognized by people as not very safe because of the presence of low-income barrios close to it. This has affected the use and livability of the plaza along the years. Previously the plaza was a very important urban space, perhaps not very popular among all Maracaibo residents but it was very important for those that lived around it. Now Plaza de la Madre is surrounded by mixed-use activities where many residents have modified most houses to suit commercial activities. The information provided by this plaza user and neighborhood resident indicates that the plaza's prominence has deteriorated over the years.

Knowing the historic evolution of Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República has provided an understanding of the changing role of these two public spaces, which provides indications of what it is today and what needs to be further explored through the survey methods of this study. This historic evolution has affected the livability and experience of the plaza among the residents. Therefore, it has been very useful to provide directions on what should be further explored in this study.

#### **4.2.1 Renovation Processes**

- Renovation has consisted of the incorporation of a round fountain in 1977, under the management of Balduino León Fernández, president of the Municipal City Council.
- The second and most recent renovation began in June 1999 and concluded in May 2000. The Governor assigned the plaza renovation to Fundación del Instituto Municipal de la Energía (FIME, which is the Municipal Institute of Energy Foundation), and under a special petition made by the Neighborhood's Association called AVESMAR.

Before the plaza was re-inaugurated in 2000, a regional newspaper released a promotional article that reported the initiative of improving the aesthetic quality of plazas in Maracaibo, adopted by Governor Rosales as an action similar to that taking place in the plazas of Madrid, Spain. This evidences an imitation attitude that has characterized many of the actions taken by Maracaibo citizens.

*“Similar to the Spanish Madrid, where monuments, buildings and public spaces of interest for people are the subject of a restoration process since the past summer for becoming part of the so-called European Union, Maracaibo has also acquired this same scheme of arranging spaces and become a city in ample growth for the inhabitants” (Llabanero, 1999. Diario Panorama p. 8-9)*

This newspaper article evidences an imitative intention behind the renovation process of this plaza. In this same article it was also mentioned that the plaza was almost rebuilt again due to a natural gas pipe leak that was occurring. This intention to destroy and create a new image instead of recycling

some portions of the plaza structure again evidences the intentions of destruction and renewal in modern day municipal authorities.

**Figure 3 Plaza de la Madre before renovation**



**Figure 4 Plaza de la Madre after renovation**



The architect and landscape designer of Plaza de la Madre was also interviewed for this study in order to understand the design intentions and the problems he confronted through the renovation process of the plaza. Architect Andres Struve created the new landscape design of Plaza de la Madre, which involved a complete renovation and creation of a new plaza. Before the renovation process took place, Plaza de la Madre was in very bad condition, which required a landscape design and elimination of many vegetated species that grew in a deformed way due to the gas leak. Renovation of Plaza de la Madre took approximately a year. A four-inch gas pipe, which crossed the plaza, had severe leaks that damaged and polluted most of the existing vegetation, as well as very thick layer of underground soil that had to be removed. This explains the reason why most existing vegetation which gave character to the plaza, were removed. The renovation process involved the replacement of the gas pipe, underground soil removal, and the developments of a new landscape design. Struve mentioned that Plaza de la Madre was in such a bad shape that two indigents lived in it, a cave-like habitat around the central space made with cardboards and boxes. All the gas installations were removed, a new irrigation system was incorporated in the green spaces and the fountain was reconditioned. The existing benches were also recovered: scraped, cleaned and left with a natural finish. A new pavement with brick-like texture was incorporated, and now municipal workers are assigned to give daily maintenance to the plaza.

**Figure 5 Plaza de la Madre deforested during renovation**



Figure 6 and 7 **Plaza de la Madre's garden renovation**



The new plaza now has more open space, more transparency and views and the sensation of spaciousness that was missing in the old plaza. The trees were located close to the benches in order to provide shade. The central space, which initially was covered by vegetation, now is paved and has enough space to be used widely by people. The renovation process that took place in Plaza de la Madre, besides being a necessary fact due to the need to fix the gas leak, also reflects prevailing attitudes of destroying and regenerating spaces that has been characteristic of the modern ideals. The new design did not preserve any of the characteristics or structure of the original design. The new spatial arrangement now provides better views and a better perception of security for the user. Although most vegetation was arranged to provide shade for most sitting spaces, the landscape designers did not mention considering people's climatical comfort or applying any bioclimatic strategy to improve the climatic conditions of the place. Although currently the plaza has a lot of vegetation, the young trees are not providing enough shade to improve the climatic comfort of the plaza, but this is expected to improve once the trees grow.

Figure 8 **Plaza de la Madre after renovation**



The previous information has been very valuable for understanding the intentions behind the renovation process of the plaza, which in summery has been mainly spatial and aesthetic. The renovation has brought a new image to the plaza that needs to be further addressed in this research. Therefore, it

will be important to understand through this thesis study, how satisfied users are in relationship to these changes, understand the effects of this renovation process on the livability and enjoyment of the plaza and in general know users' impressions and attitudes about this new character that has been created.

### **4.3 Plaza de la República**

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This plaza was created as a community initiative. It was built during the years of 1944 – 1945 under the regional government of Hector Cuenca. The plaza was made in honor of the Federal Entities of the Republic of Venezuela, which could associate the plaza with the expression of nationalism. The obelisk was originally planned to be a watching tower with an internal elevator, which could never be developed. The obelisk was made with few economic resources and money from the Zulia State. It is 161 feet high (49 meters) and was built by Alberto López, an electrical engineer and Prefect of Maracaibo. The plaza was originally built with the acoustic shell and the fountain. The acoustic shell has two rooms that originally housed a children's library and Maracaibo's Friend Association. The obelisk for example, is a symbol of modern status and power. Subsequently, the obelisk might be incorporated as a reflection of the political and economical power of that historical moment in Venezuela and particularly Maracaibo with the oil industry development, although this plaza was not created with oil company money. The obelisk has shields of the Federal District and Federal Territories of Venezuela incorporated as ornamental features at its base. The plaza currently represents an important urban landmark that is visited daily by approximately 1000 people and is recognized by people as a memorable place in the city.

Historically the plaza frames the beginning of the modern epoch or way of living in Maracaibo. Plaza de la República did not emerge as a product of the oil industry development of that period; it emerged as a space that Maracaibo residents demanded and therefore created. Plaza de la República became a public space in which people had the chance to relate with the emerging modern city of the 1940's, which has been defined by scholars as the second colonization process of Maracaibo (the first colonization being the period of Spanish settlement). Plaza de la República reflected progress, modernity and a connection to this new modern way of living. Plaza de la República therefore became a public space that emerged as an urban landmark from a community initiative.

The plaza has clear traces of an Art Deco Style. Art Deco was used as a stylistic and symbolic element, which is recognizable in its formal elements such as the planters that define the plaza's periphery, the symmetry, and the fountain shape, for example. Today, Plaza de la República, although many years has passed, has not suffered a major renovation process that has changed drastically the image and original structure of the plaza. Perhaps this is a reflection of the greater meaning and a respect that citizens and municipal authorities have for the plaza. This particularly becomes an important issue to

explore in this research and understand the factors that influence the meaning and possible respect of this place for people.

Similar to Plaza de la Madre, Plaza de la República has also been the subject of improvements along the years, which needs to be addressed in this research. Particularly knowing about the renovation processes of this plaza can provide an understanding of the physical and functional demands the plaza has fulfilled in order to better suit people's changing needs in the public spaces. The historical process of the plaza will also indicate what questions should be asked of people in relation to the problems addressed in this research.

#### 4.3.1 Renovation Processes

Plaza de la República was the subject of two renovation processes. One took place in 1995-1996 and the most recent one in 2000.

- Between the years of 1990 - 1994, Plaza de la República was in very bad physical condition and virtually abandoned. Most trees were drying out and there was no turf. Therefore, a first renovation process took place between 1995-1996. According to the agronomist engineer Andreína Hernández, who is a construction manager in charge of the Maintenance Department of IMA (Environmental Municipal Institute), Plaza de la República was practically abandoned until a foundation was created and coordinated by the Public Service Director's Office and supported by different municipal entities and private companies, with the purpose of doing the first plaza renovation. During 1996, the clock over the acoustic shell was incorporated, the fountain rearranged and activated and the plaza completely re-vegetated. The different amenities were repainted, including the obelisk. During this period two plaza workmen were assigned to work daily for the plaza maintenance.

Figure 9 and 10 **Plaza de la Republica before renovation process of year 2000**



- The most recent renovation took place between October and November 2000. The renovation has drawn more people to the plaza. The renovation processes was more of an horticultural one than a design oriented process, because most professionals were agronomic engineers and construction managers. The plaza renovation involved the planting of new vegetation that added life to the plaza, the recondition of the fountain, the incorporation of a timer for the greenery irrigation system and a timer for the fountain. Some new species were incorporated around the fountain area to reduce the sense of symmetry of the plaza and therefore create a much more dynamic arrangement. In the turf spaces small slopes with different plants were located to make contrast with the symmetry of the landscape arrangement.

Figure 11 **Plaza de la República before renovation process of year 2000**



Figure 12 **Plaza de la República new landscape design after renovation**



Andreína Hernández affirmed that every year the plaza needs reconditioning after “Feria de la Chinita”, which is the most important regional holiday in Zulia State, commemorating the apparition of the Virgin of Chiquinquirá and the beginning of the Christmas Holidays. After this regional festival, the plaza is completely devastated due to people stepping over the green spaces that later demands the replacement of 30 to 40 % of the vegetation. This evidences an uncontrolled or unconscious attitude of some people that use these urban spaces in Maracaibo. People seem to behave carelessly in environments that are different than their homes.

Particularly knowing about the history and renovation process of Plaza de la República has been very important for understanding that the community have participated strongly in the improvement of this plaza. This plaza has been improved based of community initiatives, and not necessarily from the municipalities. This could evidence a certain attachment and value of this public space by people. On the other hand, Plaza de la Madre was created with the intention to commemorate something that people might not find relevant nowadays. Plaza de la República has also experienced moments of abandonment,

but perhaps the location and character of this place has caused its livable presence and urban role to prevail in Maracaibo.

Knowing about the history and renovation processes of these plazas has provided understandings of the political and social initiatives that created those spaces, about the uses and character the plazas initially had and explore the changes in the quality of the public life. Obviously, the changing needs of people and municipal institutions have influenced the transformation of these two plazas through the years. Knowing about the history of plazas not only provides knowledge of how plazas used to be in the past, but also evidences that these plazas constantly fall into abandonment, which have required later renovation efforts. This pattern of abandonment and lack of constant maintenance could be also related to the changes in the regional and municipal governments in Maracaibo and their political goals along the years. The current governor has demonstrated an intention to renovate, recover the value and care of those spaces in Maracaibo, which has become a positive step for Maracaibo's city image. But these improvements of public spaces demand a deeper approach that could include other variables such as people's needs in public spaces and Maracaibo's climate. This background has provided an important direction towards the questions that should be asked of people and has provided an understanding of the nature of the problems that those public spaces in Maracaibo confront. Although people genuinely seek to improve spaces in the city, this historical review also evidences that a more informed approach in the arrangement of these places is needed.