

6. Socio-cultural background

Venezuelans' and Marabinos' socio-cultural background will provide the urban scenario and the general cultural context in which Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República developed. The topic of the urban life in Maracaibo will be presented also to provide an understanding of the customs and culture of Marabinos. Therefore, the following will include the psychological profile of Venezuelans in order to understand the nature of people's attitudes among others and possibly in public spaces, also, will be presented to the reader some characteristics of the public life in Maracaibo in order to provide a general profile of whom Marabinos are. This becomes particularly important to know because the current thesis is based on a social study of plazas. Hence, knowing about people's social and psychological background can support the study's findings and orient further recommendations for public space design in Maracaibo.

6.1 Psychological Profile of Venezuelans

The psychological profile of Venezuelans and the urban scenario of Maracaibo, are presented in this chapter in order to allow the reader understand some aspects of the public life in Maracaibo and some characteristics of Marabinos. Presented here is a psychological profile of Venezuelans made by Manuel Barroso, a psychologist specializing in organizational development, who has written several books related to Venezuelans and their psychological characteristics. It is important to note that this is only a particular point of view, and although generally well accepted, can be a matter of disagreement by others. Public spaces are a reflection of a society, their values and needs. Therefore, knowing about the individuals that use public spaces is important for this research. As shown in the historical background of plazas, if a place is not meaningful for its citizens it may be due to the existence of problems that need to be explored. Knowing about those who use public spaces and about general attitudes of Venezuelans can enhance the understanding of the factors that make a public plaza livable and enjoyable by people.

Manuel Barroso a psychologist and expert in human system management processes has studied Venezuelan behavior and attitudes based on socio-cultural and political events during the 1990's in Venezuela. Some general notions of Venezuelans provided by the author are the following:

Venezuelans are not sure of their needs and therefore, misuse their potential, lack clear life objectives and values. They lack clear definition of the family, marital, organizational and social roles. What Venezuelans are internally as individuals contradicts whom they are in other contexts, which creates a plurality of roles and identities that are contradictory. Venezuelans have lost the capacity to look inside themselves in order to be aware of the problems that affect them and therefore be responsible of their needs. Their problems deal with lack of consciousness of

the totality and of a bigger whole. The crisis in Venezuela is caused by a lack of credibility in people, lack of credibility in the national leaders and the governmental institutions. The contradictions and paradoxes of individuals, the social structure, and the inefficiency of everyone to find real solutions also cause this crisis. (Barroso, 1997 p. xxvi)

Manuel Barroso states that average Venezuelans, which total more than 80% of the population, have arisen from abandonment, from broken family ties and been raised without parents, which has reduced social contact, communication and self-esteem in people. Venezuelans live in marginality, which means that they have lost self-consciousness, are not sure who they are and what they need, because they lack of fundamental mental maps of respect, communication and contact with others (Barroso, 1997 p 5). He also mentioned that the remaining 20 % of Venezuela's population is conscious of their needs, of the surrounding context, with a certain vision of future inherited by their parents, with personal objectives, with energy and impulse and consciousness of their life and mission. This is an optimal and desired condition, which favors people having self-esteem. Therefore, Venezuela co-exists among contradiction, contrasting populations, between optimal and marginalized individuals. This situation, in which most individuals are in conflict and trying to find their identity, is highly negative to Venezuela.

Perhaps a more specific historical origin, which supports many of Barroso's statements, and explains the way Venezuelans are, has been the colonization process. Many years of domination and colonization have influenced the way Venezuelans feel today. According to Barroso, Venezuelans have been raised in three cultures. First is the culture of abandonment, which originated in the period of colonization. This stems from the subjection of the indigenous population by the Spanish who sacked, violated and imposed a sterile mode of living; very different from the first inhabitants' roots and culture. Through the years, this has affected Venezuela's social structure. Venezuelans from a psychological and historical perspective end up abandoned by their parents, by governors, by the medical system, by teachers and by their friends. The culture of mistreatment also has an historical origin. The Spanish dominated and mistreated the Indians and black population through slavery. Soon frustrations and more distress began when indigenous people mistreated other indigenous people, when men mistreated women, when mothers mistreated their children and teachers their pupils, initiating a chain of mistreatment still found today. Now mistreatment and disrespect is part of their daily lives. Mistreatment now includes bad institutional service and bad customer service, bad laws, lack of control, and political abuse. Finally, is the culture of ignorance, which resulted from many years of no educational systems in Venezuela. Nationwide education began late, during the 1940's, at a time when many other countries had centuries of academic progress and achievements. The first educational models imposed in the country were alien and non-effective to the existent social conditions. Today, public education is one of the least paid and respected jobs of the country, where most teachers permanently strike in order to defend their rights and demand a proper salary. When education (one of the most important tasks for battling

ignorance), is ineffective in a country, illiteracy, lack of culture, lack of awareness, unconsciousness and poor decision-making appear in a society. Educational systems have created professionals who are technically capable of many tasks, but lack the ability to shape students values and create better people.

Venezuelans have been trapped between these three cultures and submerged into contradiction and ambiguity. This ambiguity has created mental maps of ignorance, isolation, lack of identity, lack of cultural values and lack of awareness of the country's needs. This has also created a society, which is careless about the nation's own history and problems. One of the reflections of this ignorance, mistreatment and abandonment has been the lack of support leaders and governmental institutions have given to the basic socio-economic, security, health and education needs of the country. Therefore, people end up abandoned, which generates a negative cycle that makes the country drift apart and enter a crisis. Individuals, families, communities and the nation enter this crisis because nobody listens and seems to care about others; this is particularly reflected in the poor sense of community and attachment towards others and the nation. And even worse, there is no shared decision to escape from this crisis, which everybody is responsible for. Therefore, instead of a sense of consensus to find solutions to many problems, there is a sense of individualism because everybody is submerged in their own personal conflicts. Venezuelans need to regain self-esteem, civic-mindedness, and ecological conscience. Self-esteem creates a consciousness of people's roles in society, a consciousness of others and the surrounding environment, which makes individuals responsible for and committed to the problems in the country.

In order to depart from this crisis, Venezuelans need more structured mental maps of solidarity and a clearer image of their roles as part of a community. There is a great need to not only redefine people's roles in the community and to find themselves, but also learn to identify the needs and goals the country demands. If Venezuelans ever reestablish this contact with themselves, the capacity to consider and respect others can be reestablished. It is important to eliminate individualism and self-centeredness; gain self-esteem and self-appreciation, but also to gain appreciation towards others. Although many problems and contradictions exist, the origin is not outside but within each individual. Venezuela's crisis therefore is the crisis of individuals: of the persons, of their intimacy, dignity and values. Venezuelans have forgotten who they are and what they want, and therefore are uncertain about their goals, mission, roles and needs. They end up misusing and mistrusting in their own potentials (Barroso, 1997 p. 5).

Although Barroso's interpretative remarks are over critical and pessimistic, his observations hold true in Venezuelan culture. It represents an interesting point of view that explains the nature of some prevailing attitudes and behaviors in Venezuelans as a result of many problems that have affected the stability of the nation and particularly negatively influenced the psychology of individuals. Due to the historic culture of ignorance, mistreatment and abandonment, Venezuelans have not been aware that

many of their thoughts, attitudes and actions also influence the social stability of the country. The existence of a current paternalist, centralized government, a previous dictatorial system, and the Spanish colonization, represents centuries of domination and imposition, which has led the county to drift apart, erasing people's sense of identity and self-esteem as a community and diminishing people's ability to face existing problems. Barroso's ideas also set a starting point to understand why and how people behave in public spaces. Since most are considered to live marginalized from others, and are somewhat careless about the community system, this can explain why people have acquire careless attitudes about public spaces. In addition to this, many plazas, parks even historic buildings that are community supportive environments have been destroyed in Maracaibo, eliminating their social role. This has also influenced the careless attitudes towards the pollution of Maracaibo Lake, the litter problems and explains why many plazas have been abandoned in Maracaibo. People seem to devalue, abandon, mistreat and ignore places that are unknown in them; this is why public spaces must be preserved in the public life. But this also shows signs of a failing of authorities in supporting and nourishing public space. According to Barroso's interpretations, if most Venezuelans do not know exactly who they are as a community and as a nation, they will unavoidably devalue many things of the cultural patrimony, and therefore express poor attachment to spaces that are public. Perhaps the way Venezuelans are can be reflected through people's behavior in public spaces. This does not mean that people who use public spaces have necessary low self-esteem or are isolated from others, but knowing this background can help explain why people act in public in certain ways. However, nothing can be said until the results are presented in this study. Perhaps the research results could show positive behaviors different than what have been presented by Barroso. It is important to also mention that every setting has a different influence on people's behavior and attitudes, and perhaps settings such as Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República can create positive feelings. This particularly needs to be studied in the public spaces in Maracaibo, to explore people's behavior, needs, attitudes, know their impressions about the places that are an important component of public life in Maracaibo. The psychological profile is just a way to make the reader understand the historical and social background of those who are being addressed in this research.

Barroso's theories are confirmed by the ideas of Laureano Márquez, a known political specialist and humorist in Venezuela who has made reference on how humor represents a tool to interpret society and make people reflect about the current crisis. He states that "we have never found our destiny as a nation and culture, and this situation has kept our people lost spiritually as a community. Through our history, most revolutions and changes inevitably ended up in failure. It has been difficult for us to find a clear destiny because we live in permanent anguish.... The difference between an Englishman, for example, and a Venezuelan is that the first wakes up each morning and turns on the television to see how the weather is in order to take an umbrella or to see if it will snow that day... a Venezuelan on the other hand, wakes up every morning and turns the television set to see if there is still a country to go out

to. Everybody has the feeling that our country is going to collapse at any moment and have a violent turn, a revolution or coup d'etat" (Marquez, 2001 p. 1). He states that Venezuelans do not perceive themselves correctly, at least not as a nation. Therefore, Venezuelans know that they are not okay and that they need solutions. People would like to see the country improve, but that does not depend on a government but on the nation's culture. He considers that a key answer is to flourish culturally; people need to think and reflect; diversity and plurality of ideas are needed in Venezuela. People also need to express themselves in order to see a clear path: if there is no cultural flourishment, people will continue being lost. **Cynthia Rodríguez. Interview section with Laureano Márquez: "Chavez is a joker". el nacional.com, June, 2001**

The previous ideas express the need to create a sense of community that can be supported through the existence of public spaces in Maracaibo. Plazas can be important places for community life where people can express opinions, learn from others and exchange ideas, which support the local community's culture. This is one of the main roles of public spaces, and this is what Venezuela needs: spaces for culture, social interaction, information exchange that could create critical thought in people. Although Barroso and Márquez present a pessimistic profile of Venezuelans, both of these thinkers agree about the need for a community consensus, which can particularly be supported in public spaces.

6.2 The scenario of the urban life in Maracaibo and Marabinos

In this section some characteristics of the community life in Maracaibo will be presented. This will help the reader understand some characteristics of the Marabino community and Maracaibo, the context in which Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República exist.

Marabinos or Maracuchos, which are the inhabitants of Maracaibo, have a reputation of laziness perhaps caused by the city's weather conditions. Actually as temperatures soar during mid-day, the city practically becomes deserted until 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. when establishments and offices re-open. Most activities halt during mid-day hours, as people are found in their homes having lunch, taking naps or resting while viewing noon soap operas. This behavior is very common during noon hours, because it is very uncomfortable to be in the outdoors or out of the home's air-conditioned comfort. Most public spaces are not sheltered from the climate's conditions; consequently, being outdoors is only recommended while under shade or a tree at this hour of the day. This is also why most social life develops during the afternoon and evening hours when temperatures in the city are cooler. They are known nationwide as extroverted, friendly and humorous people but very loud and ordinary in their speech. Marabinos are a matter of jokes due to their marked regionalism, always advertising the region's richness and economical potential. They often affirm that thanks to the Zulia State's richness in natural resources and economy, they could be an independent country from the rest of Venezuela.

In Maracaibo, there is a lot of inefficiency in the public institutions: customer service is deficient because there is no culture of service and attention. Clerks often feel annoyed if too much work is demanded from them. If somebody ever needs any legal issue to be settled promptly it will take days and will become a bureaucratic process. In the city it is common to see indigent people, street cats and dogs, and eccentric people who do not fail to join public events in the city shouting out loud political ideas. But this is also characteristic of the rest of the country.

In Maracaibo, when street traffic is hectic there is a lot of chaos while driving. This is caused by poor police control over cars that speed and disobey the traffic signs. Maracaibo is the only city with the so-called, "carritos por puesto" which are independent, very badly conditioned old vehicles that provide alternative and low-cost public transportation per seat or space available. Most "carritos por puesto" are very damaged and if ever placed in the US would not pass a vehicle safety inspection. Drivers from this transportation service are the first to be seen speeding, disrespecting the traffic laws and becoming a menace to public safety due to their carelessness in driving. In Maracaibo, the transportation system is a mess: bus stops are almost invented as they go and most existing ones are not respected. Drivers stop anywhere people like them to. There is also no programmed schedule for bus transportation. Additionally, when using public transport, one runs the risk of being assaulted. To ride a bicycle in streets is sometimes dangerous. There is very little consideration of the biker and pedestrian because streets are very car orientated. Car robbery is common, especially if somebody has a big truck or pickup. Maracuchos have a tendency to be aggressive and impatient while driving especially if they have no air conditioners in their vehicles. But most drivers (public and private) behave the same way. This is reflected in the popular phrase: "if you are capable of driving in Maracaibo you are able to drive anywhere in the country." Being in downtown areas is somewhat dangerous: If somebody is well dressed or wearing jewelry, they could be the targets of thieves.

Maracaibo is not a very tourist-orientated city, although there are many historic and natural places to visit. Some of these public spaces are in bad conditions and others are in state of abandonment. This has made many public spaces the havens for thieves. Maracaibo has rich legacy of traditional architecture that adapts to the climate conditions and brings comfort to people. They provide lesson of good architecture (unconsidered by designers) that could be incorporated in Maracaibo's contemporary buildings. The historic character of traditional buildings, although cannot be reproduced today due to differences in the current social and cultural structure, represent living examples of what sustainable and comfortable environments should be. Most of these buildings are also colorful, reflecting the Marabinos expressiveness, cheerfulness and outgoing character, which are some positive qualities of people. In contrast to this downtown-historic environment is the contemporary urban environment that is characterized by the excessive use of concrete material in most buildings and urban spaces, lack of vegetation in some areas, which intensifies the climate heating effect in the environment.

Figure 45 Images of downtown buildings in Maracaibo



Currently, Maracaibo has made positive improvements in the urban environment, thanks to the work of Governor Rosales. His public administration has been more assertive in this matter, but the results are only a naive aesthetic effort not addressing urban problems such as the climate, for example. This intention to solve things superficially has been common in governors and most people in the country. People often apply foreign styles and solutions into architecture and urban design that are not suited to the existent conditions, which may be the cause for not adapting buildings to the climate. Maracaibo's attitudes towards the climate can be also seen by looking at how they dress; they sometimes wear long pants and long sleeves. But this is also a reflection of the cool temperatures in most indoors spaces which depend mostly in mechanical cooling systems to provide thermal comfort. Also, the use of some particular clothing brand is sometimes more important than feeling cool and comfortable. Maracaibo is the land of the beloved sun, of the unrooted culture that has risen from anti-ecological attitudes towards the environment and towards other people. Maracaibo is a city of laziness, of carelessness, of contrasts between the rich and the poor and of the abandoned lake. Maracaibos have turned their backs on Maracaibo Lake. The waterfront is a barrier of tall buildings that provide views for apartment residents, and aligned together to make a virtual wall, which disconnects visually the rest of city from the lake. There seems to reflect a careless attitude about the everyday environment.

Figure 46 A view of Maracaibo's waterfront along Milagros Avenue



Maracaibo is a city in chaos, a chaos that many people have gotten used to. This discussion reinforces an understanding of the existing problems in Maracaibo. Many of these problems can be caused by poor control over people's actions. These people's attitudes and other problems related to security and climate in Maracaibo (which will be further addressed in this chapter), make Maracaibo's urban spaces severe and hostile to people. There seems to be a pattern of misuse and devaluing public

places in Maracaibo due to many problems that the urban environment confronts. Although this occurs in the outdoors, in the indoor public spaces such as malls and other important indoor commercial spaces, people's behavior seems to be very different and less anarchic. This can be a reflection of the severe outdoor conditions, the way it affects people and a need to somehow improve those environments in order to generate more comfort and enjoyment of public spaces. This also reflects the great influence places have on people and the need to somehow improve qualitative and quantitatively the public spaces in Maracaibo.

Figure 47 General view of a residential area in Maracaibo



The city and its people have particularities that make it unique and culturally rich, but unfortunately the problems are within people's attitudes and values in recognizing this potential. Therefore, it is particularly important to restore the sense of value and identity not only of the culture but also recover a sense of belonging in terms of public spaces as sites of community. By understanding the public places, how people behave and the human needs that need to be addressed it will be possible to find positive solutions to many of the urban problems and people attitudes in those spaces. It is only through the recognition and study of the problems that affect social life in plazas that it will be possible draw more people to those spaces, and therefore enforce a sense of community that is needed. Solutions to problems affecting public spaces can be obtained from deeply understanding the nature of the problems. Therefore, researchers must know the socio-cultural background, know how people tend behave in those spaces and know how people are in particularly a city. By knowing the cultural background, design problems in public spaces can be studied in more depth, focusing on people and not on superficial aesthetic approaches, for example. By understanding all of the ideas presented in this section, one would wonder how this influences the research that is being developed. The set of conditions expressed through the socio-cultural background reflect the general social scenario in which public plazas and public life in Maracaibo takes place. Maracaibo's urban life is very complex, many problems of different natures coexist, and one of the main problems is a people's attitude.

In general, the ideas presented in this portion of Chapter II provide an understanding that many problems of public spaces are socially based. It has demonstrated that community life needs to be reinforced in public spaces, that public spaces can become important urban scenarios for increasing the cultural expression of people and that can be learning environments in which people could develop a social tolerance and awareness towards others and the surrounding (natural) environments.

7. Maracaibo's Climatic Conditions

Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República are imbedded in an urban context that is characterized by severe heat and humidity. These conditions are a factor in any kind of outdoor activities and will particularly influence the enjoyment and comfort of the public spaces in Maracaibo. Due to the severe conditions of Maracaibo's climate, it will be necessary to present the climatic data of the plazas addressed in this study. The following will provide the meteorological characteristics of Maracaibo, the human comfort zone and the general climate design recommendations for architecture and urban design for Maracaibo.

In the past 20 years, Maracaibo has experienced a population growth that has led to urban sprawl and a rise in density, which in turn has negatively influenced the environmental quality of urban spaces. Maracaibo's climate conditions, with high annual average temperatures and high levels of humidity, create difficult conditions for people to widely use and enjoy the outdoor spaces because of the intense sun incidence and lack of structured public vegetation in the urban setting. Particularly for the indoor spaces, these severe weather conditions have influenced a high dependence on air conditioning devices and high electrical consumption in order to increase thermal comfort. DOE, the Department of Energetic Optimization from ENELVEN (Electric Energy of Venezuela) has found that poor electricity consumption habits, the inefficiency of electrical equipment and severe urban climatical conditions creates high levels of electrical energy consumption. Due to all these factors, Maracaibo's severe climatical conditions require bioclimatic or energy-efficient design strategies to improve the thermal comfort of indoor and outdoor environments. In IFA, which is the Research Institute of the Faculty of Architecture – Universidad del Zulia, bioclimatic research (related to environmentally friendly materials and building design strategies) have been developed in order to provide thermal comfort and reduce the dependency on non-renewable energy resources for mechanical cooling purposes. Understanding the climate and knowing how to mitigate its severe effects is very important when dealing with urban design issues. The following are some climatic data that have been registered and studied by different authors, which provides the scope of Maracaibo's climatical conditions for this research.

W. Koppen's climate classification divides the Zulia State into five climatical typologies, in which Maracaibo consists of the *Bsi* Dry Tropical or Semi-arid Climate. The *Bsi* characteristics consist of

elevated temperatures during the entire year, with an annual median temperature above 78°F (25°C). Precipitation is scarce; annually it oscillates between 250 and 500 mm. The rainy season occurs during the end of each year. In Maracaibo the predominant vegetation is xeric or semi-arid owing to the characteristic low precipitation, sandy permeable soils and long periods of drought in the region. In areas very close to the lakeshore, halophile vegetation is found, predominantly composed of palms and beach grape trees, due to the poor soil and lack of vegetative ground cover. The type of vegetation consists of dry tropical forest species. Humidity is typically low for this type of climate; hence, the proximity to water masses such as the Caribbean Sea and Lake Maracaibo creates microclimatic conditions that increase the levels of humidity in Maracaibo's climate. Therefore, the proximity to the Caribbean Sea and the influence of the humid northwest winds passing through the Lake Maracaibo increases the levels of humidity and therefore creates a hot- humid or semi-arid humid climate.

Particularly in Maracaibo, an urban meteorological station located in IFA (Architecture Research Institute) – Faculty of Architecture at Universidad del Zulia has registered the following temperatures and humidity figures in 1997:

Table 1 **Climatic data of Maracaibo**

| Climatical Factor | Data |
|--|---|
| Maximum annual average temperatures | 91.2 °F (32.9°C) |
| Minimum annual average temperatures | 80.4 °F (26.9°C) |
| Average temperature | 85.3 °F (29.6°C) and the amplitude 43 °F (5.9°C) |
| Average temperature during the day | 78°F and 95 °F (25.3 °C and 34.9°C) Note: In urban areas like Maracaibo, temperatures are 36 °F (2 °C) higher than the less densely populated places in Zulia State. |
| Average relative humidity | 60% and 91% |
| Annual average wind speed | 1.5 meter / second Note: Average daily rates are 2.3 m/s. Prevailing average winds arise from 30° NNE. Between June and October winds can arise from ESE 110° |
| Annual average of global maximum solar incidence | 784 w/ m ² Note: average daily rates are 233 w/ m ² |
| Solar radiation and precipitation | The months of most solar radiation coincide with the months of low precipitation. Solar incidence is very high in Maracaibo. Precipitation occurs between the months of May and |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| | November. |
|--|-----------|

When understanding the climatic conditions of a setting, one must be aware of how these conditions affect people's comfort. For Maracaibo, according to Professor Eduardo Gonzalez the human comfort zone is between 72 °F and 84 °F (22°C and 29 °C) with humidity limits of 27% and 20%.

Table 2 Human climate comfort zone

| Author | Temperature limit | Humidity limits | Observations | Maracaibo's temperature and humidity (reference) |
|------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Baruch Givoni | 70 °F to 79 °F (21 °C - 26 °C) | 5- 17 mm hg | Human comfort maximum limit allowed | |
| V. Olgyay | 75.02 °F to 85.1 (23.9 °C – 29.5 °C) | 20% - 75% | Tropics | |
| Eduardo Gonzalez | 72 °F (22 °C) 84 °F (29 °C) 79 °F (26 °C) | 27% - 75% 20% - 40% 20% - 17 mm hg | Inferior limit Superior limit Maximum limit of vapor pressure | Average temperature: 85.3 °F (29.6°C) Relative humidity: 60% - 91%. |

Source: Proyecto Clima y Arquitectura No. 1. E. Gonzalez.

The previous table shows that Maracaibo is mostly out of the comfort zone rates provided by the authors, during most of the months of the year. This also provides an understanding of the severe and hostile climate conditions in Maracaibo that affect most citizens and particularly will affect the enjoyment and comfort of users of public spaces.

According to the prevailing climate conditions in Maracaibo and in order to optimize the levels of comfort (in outdoor and indoor spaces), the following are some basic strategies for urban design, which have been addressed by the academia:

1. Maximize the ventilation in order to reduce high humidity in the air and reduce the effects of high temperatures.
2. Provide enough shade to reduce the intense sun incidence on surfaces and outdoor environments, particularly through the incorporation of trees, shrubs and groundcovers.
3. Public space surfaces such as walkways and equipment such as benches, must be protected from the sun in order to reduce heat gain and radiation to the environment.
4. Materials used in public space equipment should be clear or light in color in order to reflect solar radiation rather than accumulate heat. If these materials are exposed to sun, shade and protection from the sun are recommended. The use of light colors (especially white) is recommended for buildings and horizontal outdoor surfaces in order to reduce heat absorption from sun and reduce sun radiation to the environment.

5. Buildings and outdoor spaces should be oriented with its smaller sides or surfaces towards the east and west. Long surfaces should face north and south, which also is a favorable orientation for capturing winds from the northwest.

These design strategies can be incorporated in public spaces. Most plazas in Maracaibo, lack favorable conditions for human comfort and therefore require an immediate incorporation of these strategies. Perhaps one of the most important recommendations consists of the incorporation of trees for shade and ventilation in pedestrian ways, streets and public spaces such as plazas.

The previous discussion shows that the climate can be a determinant in people's enjoyment of and comfort in public spaces. When climate conditions are hostile, as in Maracaibo, the severeness of the climate is compounded by a lack of shade and trees. Designers and municipal authorities should be aware of Maracaibo's climate and implement the design recommendations provided above in order to provide better outdoor conditions for people. Although applying these climate recommendations would add complexity to the design task, it would provide better conditions for people to enjoy outdoor spaces. Given the importance of the climate in terms of human comfort it will be necessary to study the climate effects on people's comfort in Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República. Also it will be necessary to analyze this climatic variable from people's perspective in order to create design implications according to the existing climatic comfort of plazas in Maracaibo.

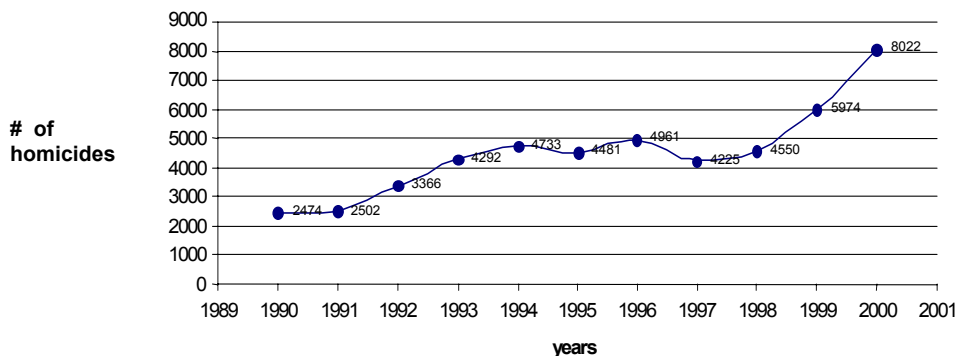
8. Security Concerns in Venezuela

In addition to the intense heat and humidity experienced in Maracaibo, high levels of criminality also characterize the urban context. These conditions will influence any kind of outdoor activities and particularly the enjoyment and comfort of the public spaces in Maracaibo. Because this factor will influence the public life of plazas in Maracaibo, it will be important to provide the reader some general crime conditions present in Venezuela and Maracaibo. This will set a background for better understanding social life of plazas in Maracaibo and will determine asking questions to people related to this issue. The following will present the general crime characteristics of Venezuela and Maracaibo.

Rising crime rates have become one of the greatest problems in Venezuela. The Technical Body of Judicial Police (CTPJ) has registered 49,580 homicides from various sources stemming from police-delinquent confrontations to robberies and assaults, between the years of 1990 to 2000. Therefore, the number of violent deaths has risen during a decade, which has made the country very unsafe. An online special edition of *el nacional.com* (a national newsletter from Venezuela) entitled: *Beware! Citizen*

security in crisis has stated that the number of murders in the country surpasses the death rates registered in war conflicts like Kosovo.

Table 3 Number of Homicides from 1990 to 2000 in Venezuela



Source: dependencies of the Technical Body of Judicial Police (CTPJ) Venezuela

El-nacional.com / Especial Edition: " **Beware: citizen security in crisis**" / Documentation: Enma Castro, June 2001.

Unfortunately, Venezuela has become one of the most dangerous countries in the hemisphere. Consequently, security has an important place in the country's public agenda, and it is one of the biggest challenges faced by the government. One commonality between Venezuelans is the fear of being a victim of crime. Each day violent crime rates rise and new ingenious modalities of robbery appear. Beyond worrying about the political changes, economic crises and current oil prices, for example, which are common citizens concerns, Venezuelans wake up each day with the fear of losing their lives and their personal possessions (Castro, 2001). Both the rich and the poor are victims of crime. The fear of crime has affected the way of life and the stability of the nation. Crime is present in many public spaces; thieves and assailants are found committing creative robberies with complete impunity. William Bratton, a policeman famous for reducing the number of homicides in New York and one of the people responsible for increasing security in this city, indicated that Venezuela has one of the most severe crime conditions he has ever known of and confronted (Castro, 2001). These crime conditions have affected people's behavior in public settings. People act defensively and rudely in public spaces because of fear. Therefore, this has affected negatively the way people behave in public spaces and contributed to the diminishment of enjoyment and social interaction in public spaces in Maracaibo.

These severe crime conditions confirm a reality in the whole country. No urban space, whether in low or high-income areas, escapes from the hazards of crime. Everywhere, in the streets, plazas, even in people's own homes, individuals can be victims. Many plazas have physically deteriorated and abandoned, becoming havens for vandalism and undesirables. This creates unfavorable images of public spaces that discourage people's use. A recent urban phenomenon in Maracaibo has been the creation of fortress neighborhoods with controlled access, which addresses the fear of crime and provides well-being

to residents. Unfortunately, from an urban design point of view, this has isolated new housing developments from Maracaibo's urban structure. Another urban phenomenon has been the substitution of private indoor spaces such as commercial malls, cafés and restaurants that offer more control and security for public outdoor spaces. Security is one of the issues to be addressed in this research because this matter has highly influenced social life, comfort and enjoyment in public places.

The socio-cultural background of Venezuelans, the historical background of plazas in Venezuela, but also some characteristics of Maracaibo and their people, have contributed to visualize the nature of many problems that influence the success of public spaces in Maracaibo. Therefore, understanding this background provides an opportunity to identify historical and cultural factors that may be influencing the quality of life of public spaces. This background has also demonstrated that Maracaibo's urban environments and in this case plazas, require improvements in order to enhance people's comfort, attachment and value to these spaces. Particularly, environmental psychologists have demonstrated that hot climate conditions and lack of security can increase stress in people; on the other hand, Barroso has also demonstrated that community life should be recovered in Venezuela to overcome many social problems. These authors and other considerations presented in Chapter II have given relevance to the study of public spaces as environments that are able to support a necessary sense of community in Venezuela and increase the well being and comfort of people in the outdoors. Therefore, these issues need to be addressed in Maracaibo's public spaces and explored in more depth by surveying users needs, their impressions (likes and dislikes) and the quality of the interactions among people in these spaces through observation and interviews.