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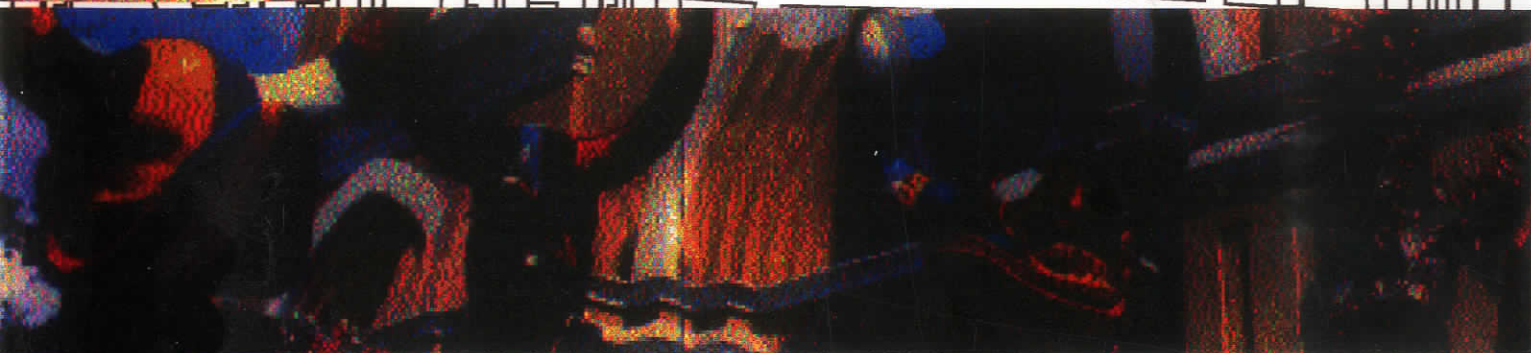# Education Through Architecture: Carnival and Merengue Museum

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Education through Architecture

Carnival and Merengue Museum

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Education through Architecture

This thesis examines the ability of architecture to educate through experience. Architecture creates environments which represents the history, folklore and tradition of a region by way of semiotics. Individuals interact with the building and become part of it by providing their knowledge and recollection of the signs and symbols. Through the representation of symbols, and the re-creation of events, the building evokes the collective memory of the individuals who experience them. Folklore relies heavily on experience, as does architecture. The interaction of event, program, space and form result in architecture that provides all the elements necessary to educate folklore. By representing folklore, the spaces become educational tools that house educational activities within.

Folklore

The term folklore refers to knowledge that is transmitted from one generation to another. Folklore consists of the traditional beliefs, practices, legends, and tales of a people. Younger generations learn it by word of mouth, imitation or through experience. Folklore exists in the present, it is a living entity found in the daily activities of any group of people; in order to perpetuate a group's folklore, it is essential that people continue practicing traditions and rituals. Today, traditions that have existed for many years are slowly disappearing as new generations do not learn from their ancestors. In order to educate people and maintain the traditions and the folklore of a group, it is necessary to continue teaching; otherwise, folklore becomes history. Contrary to folklore, history can not be experienced because it is in the past.

As societies have evolved, the methods for studying and analyzing folklore have evolved with them. Literature has played a very important role in perpetuating folklore; as technology advances, more methods are created to replace the oral and written tradition. Folkloric education must take the shape of a medium that is available and accepted in today's society.

The experience of architecture is three-dimensional and multi-sensory, as is the case with folklore. The education of folklore can be achieved through teaching, but the essential learning is realized through participation in events and activities. The folklore of the Dominican Republic manifests itself primarily in its music, *merengue*, and its carnival. Both are events in and of themselves and one must experience them in order to completely understand them.

Santiago de los Caballeros

The Dominican Republic occupies the Eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with Haiti. Santiago is the second largest city in the Dominican Republic. It is the most important city in the "Cibao" region, which consists of the provinces on the northern half of the country. The city is founded in 1495 on the banks of the Yaque river by Christopher Columbus. Shortly after, a second village bearing the same name is founded slightly North of the first in Jacagua. The village continued to grow in Jacagua until it was destroyed by an earthquake in 1562; the surviving population moved to the original site near the Yaque river, where the city continues to grow today.
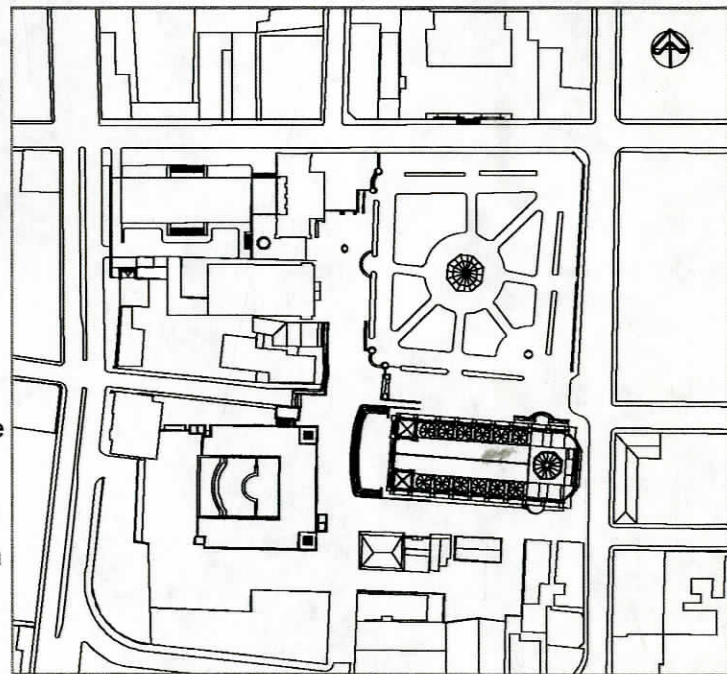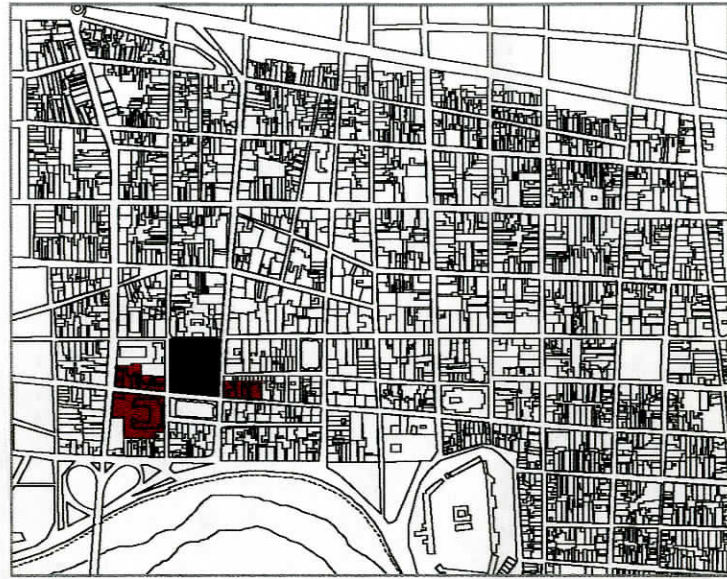
The *Leyes de Indias*, a guideline for Spanish settlements, called for villages to be developed around a Plaza Mayor. Such plaza should have one wide street running on each of its sides which would serve as the defining elements of the developing urban grid. Santiago's Plaza de Armas serves as the plaza for the Cathedral, which lies on the plaza's southern end facing west. The buildings that surround it have historically been cultural and civic institutions. The Plaza is an integral part of the city's history and has hosted many gatherings of political importance. Santiago has always been the military leader of of the Cibao region, and the plaza has seen many soldiers pass through it before departing to engage in the battles that have established the nation's freedom. Presently, the Plaza serves as a social gathering place where citizens get together and enjoy their surroundings.

**Top: plan of the city of Santiago. Plaza de la Cultura shown in gray and proposed sites in red.
Above: Plan of the Plaza de la Cultura.**

The plaza has always been a participant in the celebrations and assemblies of Santiago's community. The traditional carnival procession passed by the plaza before continuing to the rest of the city. Every Sunday during the carnival, the community gathers there and in the city's other plazas to observe the activities and the many costumes.

In recent years, an organization was established to preserve many of the neglected buildings adjacent

to the plaza and convert them into cultural institutions, creating the Plaza de la Cultura (Cultural Plaza), as it is known today. Several of those buildings have been transformed and the number of museums in the plaza continues to grow. To the west are the Centro de la Cultura (Cultural Center), the Centro de Recreo (Recreational Center), and the Palacio Constitorial, which is the former City Hall and now houses the Museum of the City of Santiago. To the east is the Tobacco Museum, and to the north the Museum of Modern Art.

The eclectic nature of the country's population is embodied in its architecture. There are many types present in the architecture of the city representing the different architectural periods that the city has experienced. Several earthquakes, battles, pillages and fires have robbed the city of most of its architectural history. In 1863, during the war of Restoration of Independece against Spain, the Dominican troops set fire to the houses surrounding the Fortress of San Luis in order to force the Spanish troops to evacuate. The fire spread throughout the city and few buildings were spared. Santiago's architectural history begins after the patriotic fire; hence, no examples of colonial architecture remain. The Plaza de la Cultura represents the architecture of Santiago. It is composed of buildings that stand for the many types that form the palette of Santiago's architecture, becoming an architectural collage.

Folklore Museum

The Don Tomás Morel Folklore Museum was established in 1962 with the intention of rescuing the disappearing folklore of the region; it remains the only of its kind in the country. The museum houses a collection of artifacts collected by Mr. Morel, the founder, throughout his life. Even though it is a few blocks away from the Plaza de la Cultura, the museum is not part of it and is not well known, even to the city's residents. It is located on Calle la Restauración in the house in which Mr. Morel grew

The Don Tomás Morel Folklore Museum.

up. The house's arrangement is similar to those found in the Colonial houses in Santo Domingo. A central space, separated from the street by an elevated porch, is flanked by secondary rooms; one of the lateral arms extends away from the street forming one side of an exterior court. Its architecture is typical of the Cibao region and very common in Santiago. The collection has long outgrown its residence and is arranged and presented more like a gallery than a museum. The core of the collection consists of prize-winning carnival masks from the museum's annual competition. The masks and other folkloric artifacts, although grouped by topic, are scattered about the rooms haphazardly. This collection, with the many mediums available for museums and given a site as important as the Plaza de la Cultura, would provide the country with a place to learn about its folklore.

Museums are one of the most important and effective educational tools available. They provide a way to learn through experience by utilizing different mediums to reach their audience. Traditional educa-

tion is also very efficient; lessons or workshops allow people to get hands-on experience. The program of the proposed project thus consists of a museum and artisan workshops. The museum will house a permanent collection dictated mainly by the existing collection of masks and musical artifacts from the Morel Museum, along with spaces for temporary exhibits, and folkloric presentations and events. Its intent is to produce an atmosphere embedded with symbols and representations of the Dominican folkloric tradition that stirs the memories of those that visit. The workshops will provide an area for teaching the process of constructing carnival masks, musical instruments and other objects related to the Dominican carnival and merengue. By supplying different spaces for education, experience and event, the museum provides a place where the Dominican folkloric tradition can continue to grow and become part of daily life.

Collage

The history of the Dominican Republic is best described as a collage. Like many of the European colonies in the Americas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries, the nation experienced a mixture of cultures, traditions and rituals the moment the Spanish ships reached the island's coast in 1492. The *taíno* Indians were on the island when Columbus and his men arrived and were forced to work in the gold mines established by the Spaniards. Their population was slowly reduced soon after and as result, no taínos remain on the island. Their legacy lives on in the Dominican people and the many *taíno* words that form the Dominican dialect of Spanish. African slaves were taken to the island when gold became secondary to the sugar cane plantations and the Indian work force was not enough. As in many of the other colonies, the African race withstood the many hardships and their influence is found in many of the Caribbean nations. The combinations of the *taíno*, Spanish and African races created new races: mulatto, a mix of white and black blood; *indio*, a mix of black and Indian blood; and mestizo, a mixture of white and Indian blood, which represents three quarters of the Dominican population.

The national music and dance of the Dominican Republic, merengue, also embodies the blend of customs. The main instruments all come from different places and cultures. The *tambora*, or drum, is of African descent; the *güira*, a metal scraper, was originally used by the *taíno* Indians; finally, the accordion was invented in Germany. Merengue is said to have originated soon after the Dominican independence war in 1844 to express the freedom of the new nation and the birth of a new identity.

The Dominican carnival is further materialization of the cultural diversity. The celebration of carnival dates back to the Egyptians and its history was diverse before it was celebrated on the Hispaniola. On the day of Corpus Christi, the devil was presented to the people to remind them of eternal life. The devil was separated from Corpus Christi and started to be associated with the celebration of *carnestolendas*. The italian word *carnevale* refers to the removal of meat from the diet during Lent; the carnival usually started in January or early February and continued until Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. Later on, the Dominican Independence day was celebrated on February 27. Because of its proximity to the carnival, some people started dressing in their carnival costumes for Independence day. Today, the carnival is celebrated each Sunday of the first weeks of

February with a large celebration on Independence Day.

The *papier maché* masks introduced by the Spaniards were similar to the masks found in the carnivals of Venice and New Orleans. Once local artisans learned the technique, they introduced new features and materials to the masks such as horns, cotton, seeds and teeth. The most popular costume during carnival celebrations in Santiago is the *lechón*, Spanish for pig. It is called *lechón* because its mask resembles a pig. The mask represents the devil, as the original Spanish mask did. The men from the neighborhoods of La Joya and Los Pepines originally dressed up as *lechones*, since they were the only two neighborhoods at the time, and challenged each other to fights with whips and hard balloons. Originally, both wore the same masks, but in order to distinguish rivals, the men from La Joya wore masks with many small horns attached to the two main horns while the men from Los Pepines kept the smooth horns. The street that runs along the east side of the Plaza de la Cultura, Calle 30 de Marzo, served as the dividing line between the neighborhoods and by crossing it, one was challenging his rival. The celebration today is more peaceful, although the lechones still hit bystanders with their hard balloons. As the city grows, people from different races, classes and neighborhoods join the celebration and erase the social lines that exist in daily life.

Representation

Architectural semiotics will be the primary tool in completing the building. The Architecture must establish a language, or system, of signifiers that clearly point the visitor, or reader, towards the signified. A clear language avoids confusion and misinterpretation by the reader. The language consists of symbols that are easily recognized by the reader. The symbols represent elements directly associated with Dominican folklore and culture, specifically the carnival and merengue. The symbols need not be literal, they can be open-ended to provide the readers an opportunity to contribute their collective memory to the symbols. Memory allows the reader to participate in the exhibits and allows the architecture to become a teaching tool.

Folkloric activities engage the senses and the architecture must do the same. Vision, smell, hearing, and sometimes taste, are engaged through the three-dimensional quality of the architecture. The tactile experience is achieved through materials and tectonics. The sixth sense of emotion must be addressed. The carnival and merengue are activities of celebration and the architecture must capture their festive atmosphere, perhaps through the notions of *genus loci* , *Zeitgeist*, or both. The involvement of the senses transforms the architecture into an experience unique to the city.

The tectonics of Dominican architecture are used to represent its evolving typology and capture its many periods. The architectural typology of the region itself must be represented. This includes the typical arrangement of plans for houses and public buildings through history. Again, the representation should not be literal; it should be abstract, but identifiable. The building will be placed on a corner site; hence, the corner typology will be studied and considered as a possible way of addressing it.

The aforementioned collage nature of the nation and its people must be represented in the architecture. The compositional qualities of the site, that of a collage, are to be personified in the architecture. The purpose is not to copy the qualities of the buildings on the site; but instead, to copy the eclectic

nature of the site and continue adding to it. The building should address both the plaza and the Cathedral in a way that they are clearly part of the project since both are involved in the celebration of the carnival.

Architecture and folklore are directly related to experience and event and would not be complete without them. Architecture does not stand by itself; it is the result of the combination of factors, components, problems and solutions individual to each building. Event, program, space and form are all factors that influence, or are influenced by, architecture. The interaction between architecture and those factors determines the outcome of the building. In order to represent the carnival and merengue, the architecture must not only contain these events, but also be an event itself. By being an event, people experience the architecture.

Carnival and Merengue Museum

> Carnival and Merengue exhibits
  - A space to educate visitors about the history and traditions that make up the carnival and merengue.
  - Representation of symbols and icons of the carnival and merengue that evoke memory and allow individuals to provide their own memories to the experience.
  - Provide spaces for exhibits of carnival mask collection, costumes.
  - Exhibits for merengue instruments, typical clothing.

> Events area
  - Used for presentations, lectures, discussions and other events.
  - Used as an informal stage within the exhibit for daily presentations of merengue and carnival rituals and events.

> Workshops
  - Educational area for learning the crafts associated with merengue and the carnival.
  - Artisan workshops for making merengue instruments, carnival masks and costumes.

> Temporary exhibit areas
  - Rotating merengue and carnival exhibits.
  - Display of art based on the carnival and merengue.
  - Spaces to exhibit annual carnival mask competition entries.

> Observation Deck / Roof Terrace
  - Facing the Plaza for observing carnival activities.
  - Serves as a place for social gatherings associated with the museum.

> Library
  - Space for learning about Dominican folklore through literature is complimentary to the experiential nature of the building.

> Museum Store

> Café

> Service Area

> Administration

Base Documentation

- Geographic and political maps of the Dominican Republic.
- Street and topographical maps of Santiago.
- Aerial photographs of Santiago and the Plaza de la Cultura..
- Land use map of the Santiago.
- Street and property plans of the Historic Center of Santiago.
- Plan of the Plaza de la Cultura.
- Facades of the Streets surrounding the Plaza de la Cultura.
- Plans of most of the buildings on the Plaza de la Cultura.
- Photographs and video of the Plaza de la Cultura.

Resources

I will develop the program of the project through the analysis and documentation of museums and buildings that share ideas similar to those found in this project and others that may serve as aesthetic, programmatic and organizational precedents. I will research these precedents through the Syracuse University Libraries and my personal library.

I will obtain site documentation through government and private offices in Santiago and through the Syracuse University Libraries.

Additional Material

The Final Thesis document will contain more information on the geography and history of the Dominican Republic and the city of Santiago. It will expand on the history and development of the carnival and merengue. The program description will be more detailed. The document will contain analysis of the site and of the precedents that will be used for the design process. The architectural issues of collage, semiotics, representation and typology will be further developed.

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