

I N T R O D U C T I O N

RETHINKING THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF MODERNITY

The deeds spoke for themselves; there was no need for political speech. As a spectator, *el pueblo* was invited to applaud them silently.

• FERNANDO CORONIL

We were going up like a rocket . . . today everything in Caracas is tiny, minimalist and modest. The tragedy of this city is that it has lost its pretensions.

• JOSÉ IGNACIO CABRUJAS

- Midway through the twentieth century Caracas earned the nickname *sucursal del cielo*—an outpost of heaven on earth that boasted all the possible comforts of a modern metropolis. Dubbed a city of the future and the storefront for a land of opportunity, Venezuela's capital underwent a dramatic makeover as it was stocked with emblems of progress contrived to dazzle locals and lure foreign investors (figs. I.1–I.4). While bulldozers carved a highway linking the capital to the coast, a cable car scaled the Ávila Mountain, taking passengers above the clouds to the five-star Hotel Humboldt where they could enjoy panoramic views out over the Caribbean Sea. In the city Carlos Raúl Villanueva spearheaded an embrace of modernist architecture, adapting it to the tropical climate and promoting a “Synthesis of the Arts” through which he commissioned pioneering modern artists to paint façades of fifteen-story *superbloques* (superblocks) and to fill the new Ciudad Universitaria with sculptures and murals.¹ While Venezuelans left rural provinces for expanding regional cities like Valencia, Maracaibo, and Maturín, Caracas's urban population trebled. By the end of 1953 a headline on the front page of *La Esfera* newspaper declared the birth of “La nueva capital venezolana”—the



Figure I.1. Unidad Residencial 2 de Diciembre (now 23 de Enero), with the twin towers of the Centro Simón Bolívar in the background.

Hamilton Wright Organization, circa 1957. Archivo de Fotografía Urbana.

new Venezuelan capital.² As readers flicked through the paper, they encountered official instructions on new road networks and long lists of bridges, schools, roads, and hospitals ready to be inaugurated nationwide. The message was obvious: the country was being remade in the mold of modernity.

A burgeoning oil industry fueled this boom-time atmosphere. From 1948 to 1957, the number of active wells rose from some six thousand to over ten thousand, bringing seven billion dollars into the nation's coffers.³ International events boosted prosperity; the Suez Canal closure and the Korean War bolstered prices and helped Venezuela cement its status as a leading oil exporter in global markets. Flush with revenues, the government assured the populace that "the majority of our problems can be solved by engineering" and bankrolled ambitious public works initiatives.⁴ The road network



Figure I.2. *Superbloque* (superblock) under construction in Caracas. Anonymous, circa 1953. Archivo Histórico de Miraflores.

all but quadrupled, and its forty-five hundred kilometers of asphalt made literal inroads into the interior, providing access to emerging steel and mining hubs, state-run agricultural communities, and a chain of hotels created to incentivize tourism.⁵ A fifteenfold increase in industrial activity from 1950 to 1957 was accompanied by trebling foreign investment and a growing import economy, filling showrooms with American cars, shops with newfangled televisions, and canned groceries that promised progress at the dining table.⁶ Foreign journalists lauded the audacious architecture, mineral wealth, and embrace of consumerism declaring—as did one English-language documentary screened in cinemas abroad—that the world was witnessing a “miracle in Venezuela.”

Far from a miraculous act of grace, this jubilant narrative was a meticulously crafted missive, constructed according to a specific political agenda. On November 24, 1948, military officers Marcos Pérez



Figure I.3. Viaduct under construction on the Autopista Caracas–La Guaira, circa 1953. Archivo Histórico de Miraflores.

Jiménez, Carlos Delgado Chalbaud, and Luis Felipe Llovera Páez had led a coup that ousted the national novelist and Acción Democrática politician Rómulo Gallegos—the first president elected to office (in 1947) by popular vote after Venezuela began emerging from the long period of autocratic rule under Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–1935) that had dominated the twentieth century. However, the reforms instituted under Gallegos’s tenure were not fast enough for some. Railing against alleged ineptitude and inefficiency, the Junta Militar argued that true democracy consisted in firm rule in line with a *Nuevo Ideal Nacional*—a New National Ideal that would discharge modernity by “getting rid of all that tradition of bajareque, spider webs, and soggy literature, penetrating in the jungle to create real cities there too,” as one minister put it.⁷ In Caracas, the quest to remake Venezuela meant removing traces of urban poverty. Makeshift homes built by families that had migrated to the capital were declared the enemy of



Figure I.4. Completed viaduct, circa 1953. Archivo Histórico de Miraflores.

the *Batalla contra el rancho* (Battle against makeshift homes), a state-run plan to bulldoze unplanned settlements and rehouse residents in high-rise blocks.

This pledge to build modernity made political legitimacy contingent on the regime's construction capacity. It also linked the nation's stability to the Junta's ability to engage Venezuelans in a common quest for *superación* (literally, "overcoming"), a recurrent term in the parlance of the era, used to refer both to ideals of social improvement and to the prospect of national development. While this regime buzzword offered personal and national progress, in the shadows cast by towering bridges and modernist housing the military government clenched its fist and began to rule by *mano dura* (with a firm hand). First, it instituted censorship and demobilized political parties and trade unions, then it reneged on a pledged return to democracy by rigging the 1952 presidential elections and declaring

defense minister Marcos Pérez Jiménez victor. Five years later, as the dictator organized a plebiscite to ratify his presidency by calling for a yes/no vote on the public works program, he laid bare his political ideology. As the vote approached, he warned Venezuelans that democratic debate was tantamount to outright anarchy: “Think of a country convulsed in political battle between different parties, each trying to get votes by speeches filled with threats and defamation mixed with promises and offers of well-being; of streets in cities and towns painted and papered to saturation point with posters designed to incite; of the populace abandoned to discussion and mental struggles, to screaming and tumult.”⁸ Modern buildings, growing revenues, and upbeat propaganda served as palliatives to fill the silence of open political debate.

During the ten-year dictatorship, the political police—euphemistically called the Seguridad Nacional (National Security)—curbed dissent and neutralized detractors. A Junta de Censura cowed journalists into reproducing a consistent official libretto: “Nothing must reveal repression or incarceration. There can be no mention of public administration. Everything about the dictatorship is perfect.”⁹ Exiles and political activists in Venezuela circulated counternarratives complaining that the nation was living *bajo el signo del terror* (under the sign of terror), but outwardly Venezuela looked like a success story of capitalist development: rising GDP, industrialization, and the forward-looking aesthetics of its architectural overhaul were a recipe for a nation brand in tune with the times. As the Cold War inflected Pan-American politics, the dictatorship’s vocal anticommunism and release of oil concessions kept the United States at bay, while the strongmen rulers in Columbia, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay, and Peru stood shoulder to shoulder with Venezuela’s military leaders.

Even so, toward the end of the 1950s support at home waned. Military officers became disgruntled, grumbling about exclusion from the affluence that benefited the ruling clique. The economic downturn of 1957 fostered unrest among local entrepreneurs, and the plebiscite made it obvious that the elections enshrined in the Constitution were just dead letters.¹⁰ A cross-party alliance, the Junta Patriótica, intensified calls for the reestablishment of democratic rule. As the year drew to a close, the New Year dawned with a military rebellion that—although unsuccessful—served to shatter the veneer of unity. After church and society mobilized for a strike on January

21, 1958, insurgent officers dealt a deathblow to the dictatorship, sending Pérez Jiménez fleeing to the Dominican Republic in the wee hours of January 23.¹¹ As moves were made to institute democracy anew, politicians, historians, and postdictatorship testimonies swiftly reframed the previous decade: it was not a golden age of progress as the military rulers professed, but a period in which darkness and hubris reigned.

However, despite this backlash it soon became clear that the idea of modernity retained affective purchase over large sectors of the population. Even after Pérez Jiménez was found guilty of embezzlement and sent to prison in 1968, his pledge to deliver modernity through public works continued to have traction: the idea that development could be discharged by firm governance retained its appeal. Pérez Jiménez fought back, leveraging sympathy at his imprisonment and reaffirming his commitment to build modernity. That same year he was elected to the National Assembly as a senator, but the courts barred him from occupying office.¹² The significance of the former dictator's election a decade after the demise of his regime should not be underestimated. His election disclosed ambivalences about the type of political regime that Venezuelans associated with progress, thus undermining the idea that democracy had dawned after dictatorship. At the same time, the enduring support for Pérez Jiménez's bid to build modernity disclosed a deep-rooted association among Venezuelans, who saw modernist aesthetics and monumental buildings as harbingers of progress.

CULTURAL TREASURES AND POLITICAL AMNESIA

Today, the legacy of the dictatorship's bid to build modernity is still visible and palpable. Visitors who arrive at Maiquetía airport, perched on the edge of the humid Caribbean coast, take the same multilane highway to the capital that was lauded as a hallmark of military efficiency. Just before entering the final tunnel, a cluster of modernist housing blocks suddenly appear, outsizing all other constructions around them but also showing their age. As the car emerges from the darkness, the valley of Caracas comes into view, its urban sprawl a three-dimensional map of towers, intersections, and sinuous barrios that hug the hills and ravines. Sixty years back, the city's population totaled barely one million; now the metropolitan area is home to five times as many. The pressures on water and power

supply, transportation, housing, and health care all weigh heavy on the capital's infrastructure, and with the population at some thirty million these pressures are replicated nationwide.

Against this backdrop, the construction and economic boom of the 1950s is often evoked with nostalgia, lauded as the unsurpassed peak of *la modernidad venezolana* (Venezuelan modernity) whose political circumstances are often dismissed by strategic caveats or outright amnesia. Yes, Pérez Jiménez was a dictator, some say; but look at his legacy—the man built this nation from the ground up; if only there were more like him. For others, the aesthetic modernism that flourished in the 1950s is a source of national pride that has nothing to do with politics but proves that Venezuela was an exceptional case, ahead of its time in spearheading the vanguard of modern art in South America. The artists and architects responsible for the modernist designs and monumental buildings that the regime claimed as proof of military efficiency were invested in aesthetic innovation. Excused from their collaborations with dictatorial leaders, these pioneers are credited with simply adopting “universal” styles and bringing visual culture “up to date.”

These ambivalent and depoliticizing appraisals are symptomatic of a general tendency in cultural history, which correlates modernity to a celebrated canon of experiments in urban modernization and aesthetic modernism. Over recent years, modern legacies from Latin America have become more visible than ever before, as surveys of design, architecture, and geometric abstract art are commemorated as entry points for the region's nations into the modern world.¹³ But while this visibility is positive insofar as it fosters awareness of important spatial and artistic developments from the mid-twentieth century, problems arise when conventional accounts shy away from the entanglement of modernist aesthetics with political agendas of modernization.

It is no challenge to see how picturing Latin America permanently “in construction” revives developmentalist tropes of the region as a preindustrial backwater or proto-modern space that “belongs specifically to the airplane.”¹⁴ Likewise, conjuring abstract artworks as evidence of a blanket cover of progressive politics omits the stake that authoritarian leaders had in mid-twentieth century modernism.¹⁵ Beyond these dubious framings, a further problem arises in the flattening equation of modernity with a select canon of aesthetic



Figure I.5. Aerial view of Plaza O'Leary at Carlos Raúl Villanueva's Reurbanización El Silencio, circa 1950s. Archivo de Fotografía Urbana.

modernism, commemorated in art and architecture. Rooted at the interfaces of nationhood and heritage, commemoration tends to fetishize artifacts and to found compensatory and sometimes amnesiac narratives. Even as it seems to stimulate engagement with the past, the commemoration of exemplary heritage can create a screen that diverts attention from uncomfortable and often violent upheavals.¹⁶ While recent scholarship is beginning to contribute more nuanced perspectives of the uneven and ambiguous territories of modernity, the challenge remains to avoid reducing modern legacies to fetishized “cultural treasures” whose contentious pasts are shrouded in collective amnesia.¹⁷

The legacy of Venezuelan modernity calls for a mode of cultural inquiry that addresses simultaneously—rather than separates— aesthetics and politics, modernism and modernization, progress and



Figure I.6. Cipriano Domínguez’s Centro Simón Bolívar, with El Silencio in the background, circa 1950s. Archivo de Fotografía Urbana.

dictatorship.¹⁸ This task is crucial because commemorations of the 1950s as the zenith of Venezuela’s “modern spirit” evade the question of how the country’s aesthetic innovations served military ideology.¹⁹

In one conventional thesis, modernity appears as a teleological mode of progress whose linear thrust is traced through the changing aesthetics and expanding size of two adjacent iconic works of architecture located in downtown Caracas. Thus, Carlos Raúl Villanueva’s 1940s Reurbanización El Silencio in the 1940s and Cipriano Domínguez’s 1950s Centro Simón Bolívar are cited as evidence of the transition from *primera modernidad* to *plena modernidad*—from early to fully-fledged modernity. Villanueva is credited with “gently” introducing architectural modernism in dialogue with the urban overhaul that French planner Maurice Rotival drafted in his Plan Monumental (1939), through his combination of traditional internal



Figure I.7. El Silencio (top) and the Centro Simón Bolívar (bottom), in 1949 and 1955. *Así progresa un pueblo* (1955).

patios and covered walkways with functional apartment blocks and the bold statues Francisco Narváez made for the Plaza O’Leary (fig. I.5).²⁰ Architecture critics pinpoint Venezuela’s fully modern credentials by citing Domínguez’s embrace of Le Corbusier’s “Five Points towards a New Architecture” (1926) and incorporation of a steel and reinforced concrete structure, *pilotis* (reinforced concrete stilts), and *brise-soleil* windows into the government and commercial complex.²¹ The blend of twin towers and public squares, subterranean thoroughfare and bus station, raised terraces and underground services, is considered an exemplar of the interconnected and functional city envisaged by modernism advocates (figs. I.6–I.7).

Formal analyses such as these sustain the claim that the transition from one site to the other marked Venezuela’s entry to modernity. Yet for all the insight into architectural style it offers, such scrutiny does little to clarify the connections between pioneering buildings and the political context in which they emerged.²² More striking still, this linear reading is haunted by the undeviating path to progress that



Figure I.8. Model of the Centro Simón Bolívar displayed in government exhibitions in the 1950s. Archivo de Fotografía Urbana.

formed the core of military propaganda, in which architectural models like that of the Centro Simón Bolívar were displayed as heralds of modernity and their realized forms lauded as symbols of the New Venezuela.²³ Whether Domínguez was a devotee of Le Corbusier or engaged the animated debates about the “new monumentality” was immaterial to the military rulers. What mattered was that modernist architecture was undeniable proof of progress that justified the rupture from democratic rule, borne out by before-and-after images of the changing urban landscape.²⁴ When contemporary accounts focus doggedly on celebrating the “heroic scale” and “titanic dimensions” of modernist buildings, it is no challenge to see how commemoration eclipses complexity in discussions about the 1950s (figs. I.8–I.9).

In another orthodox account, the rise of modernist aesthetics propelled Venezuela into the global echelons of the artistic avant-garde—placing the country *a la altura de los tiempos* (up to date; literally “at the level of the times”), as one critic has it.²⁵ This thesis hinges on



Figure I.9. Model of the Plaza Cubierta and Aula Magna at Villanueva's Ciudad Universitaria, 1950: *El espíritu moderno*, exhibition. Charlie Riera, 2005. Fundación Corp Banca, Caracas.

the rupture from figurative art realized in 1950, when Los Disidentes (The Dissidents), a group of Venezuelan artists based in Paris, published a manifesto rejecting Caracas's "bogus" artistic establishment and saying "no" to the tradition of landscape painting.²⁶ Once back in Venezuela, the group's members encountered a propitious environment for their break from convention, receiving commissions to contribute to public works like Villanueva's Ciudad Universitaria (fig. I.10). As well as a celebrated experiment in architectural modernism, the campus is credited with certifying Venezuela's entry to the visual culture of modernity, widening the rupture from figurative art by placing works by emerging Venezuelan artists like Alejandro Otero, Mateo Manauere, and Oswaldo Vigas among modern luminaries like Fernand Léger, Jean Arp, Victor Vasarely and Alexander Calder.²⁷ Even though figurative traditions and historical tableaux by no means disappeared from the visual arts or, indeed, from modern architecture itself in the 1950s, these "unfashionable" trends have been relegated to the wings of art history. As geometric abstraction



Figure I.10. Central Library with Spanish artist Baltasar Lobo's *Maternidad* (1954) in the foreground and an untitled mural (1954) by Venezuelan artist Mateo Manaure on the wall of the concert hall. Ciudad Universitaria, undated. Archivo de Fotografía Urbana.

dominated subsequent decades and resurgent interest has recently peaked, the spotlight has continued to illuminate the 1950s as the foundational period for Venezuela's "exceptional" modernism.²⁸

Although commemorative discourses flatten the concept of Venezuelan modernity by equating it to a canon of aesthetic innovations, it is no challenge to pinpoint the entanglement of modern art and architecture with the political agenda of the 1950s. The Ciudad Universitaria is a case in point. No one would deny that the university city brought daring modernist aesthetics to the heart of Caracas. Yet the fact remains that the campus's speedy construction and ceremonial inauguration served more pragmatic ends. The military government was keen to assert its credibility and to confirm Venezuela's geopolitical im-



Figure I.11. Aula Magna with Alexander Calder's *Nubes* (Clouds) hanging from the ceiling. Ciudad Universitaria, undated. Archivo de Fotografía Urbana.

port on the world stage, so hosting the Inter-American Conference of 1954 at the Ciudad Universitaria was the perfect opportunity to do so.

As three thousand leaders and delegates from the region gathered in the Aula Magna for the start of the conference, all eyes were on Caracas. Once the inaugural events of March 1 were out of the way, the next day Pérez Jiménez led a series of public ceremonies, inaugurating twenty-five of the campus buildings in one fell swoop and thus ensuring that the fruits of his rule were visible to all (fig. I.11).²⁹ As the meetings and discussions ensued over the following

weeks, the United States lobbied leaders to wage a common fight against Communism, pushing the item at the top of its agenda. It was there, under the multicolored roof of Alexander Calder's *Nubes* in Villanueva's Aula Magna, that delegates signed the historical resolution that declared Communism an immediate threat to peace and security. For his part, Pérez Jiménez took full advantage of the events, standing center stage to receive the Legion of Merit medal that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles pinned to his military uniform.³⁰ As declassified documents later confirmed, what the United States really wanted was *carte blanche* to police ideologies in its "backyard" and legal justification for precisely the type of intervention that was realized in Guatemala just months later.³¹ Both Pérez Jiménez's opportunistic use of the conference and the geopolitical turn the event brought for the region make it clear that neither Venezuelan modernity nor modernist aesthetics can be accounted for by the commemoration of "cultural treasures" alone.

DICTATORSHIP, SPACE, AND VISUALITY

In an interview in the 1990s Venezuelan playwright José Ignacio Cabrujas cast his mind back to the 1950s. Even though he opposed the dictatorship on political principle, he recalled vividly the exhilaration that its central tenet awoke in him. *Progresamos porque edificamos* (We progress because we build), the regime declared. That was the "real world," Cabrujas explained, the one being remade before everybody's eyes, whether or not they supported the regime. There was nothing exceptional about Pérez Jiménez's plan to promote public works; in fact, he was convinced that someone else could do it better. Later he realized this wasn't the case; "nobody did it better," he confessed in the interview, "it's almost blasphemous for me to say that, but it's the truth; or I feel like it's the truth."³² Albeit a passing comment and a paraphrased one at that, Cabrujas's musings are significant. Identifying the reasonable doubt that becomes lodged between *the truth* and what *felt like the truth* serves to reorient discussions about the 1950s by illuminating a fundamental issue: how did the impression that military rule delivered modernity gain purchase as a widely accepted truth?

This question opens up further crucial concerns. If the decade of military rule *felt* like progress, what discursive, spatial, and visual

technics induced this sensation? What strategies justified the break from democracy and presented dictatorship as the guarantor of national development? And, how did aspects of daily life beyond the state naturalize and correlate mythologies of progress?

In reorienting discussions about Venezuelan modernity, these lines of inquiry do not necessarily demand the methodologies of political or social history, which might track the rise and fall of the dictatorship through a discussion of chronological events. Neither do they suggest that a “true” version of modernity can be uncovered and ratified over a “false” one. Rather, they invite a mode of analysis that conceives Venezuelan modernity as what Raymond William terms a dominant cultural formation: a sense of reality shaped by the complex interlocking of political, social, and cultural forces that permeates a whole body of practices, expectations, and aspects of life.³³

Approaching modernity from this angle intersects the political contingencies of dictatorship with theories of space and visibility so as to engage a wider scope of artifacts than those commonly addressed by art historians or architectural critics. Such an inquiry calls for awareness of the 1950s’ economic, ideological, and social conditions—and of earlier nation building and modernization projects—to probe the political discourse, spatial arrangements, visual regimes, public events, and consumer cultures that shaped the idea of modernity. The combination of historical background, cultural theory, and close analyses of artifacts provides a means to unravel the manifold forces that fabricated and naturalized a “spectacular” mode of modernity in the period 1948–1958. “Spectacular modernity” refers to the entanglement of the politics of dictatorship with aesthetic innovations in spatial arrangements and visual culture.

The concept of spectacular modernity builds on the core contention made by Fernando Coronil in his seminal study *The Magical State*. Coronil argues that the discovery of oil set the mold of the rent-oriented economy of the modern Venezuelan state and induced fantasies of instant modernity. Oil “enables state leaders to fashion political life into a dazzling spectacle of progress” that plays out as those in power mediate the interfaces of natural resources and political subjects—the nation’s two bodies.³⁴ This magical logic infused distinct political mandates of the twentieth century with a performative dimension, where “by manufacturing dazzling development projects that engender collective fantasies of progress, [. . . the Ven-

ezuelan state] casts its spell over audience and performers alike.”³⁵ During the military dictatorship of the 1950s, this meant using booming oil revenues to transplant conspicuous symbols of progress, such as hotels, highways, and high-rise buildings, onto Venezuelan soil and to claim that this impressive display amounted to modernity writ large. The claim that modernizing deeds were to speak for themselves, as Coronil puts it, simultaneously inferred that democratic debate was irrelevant and that under military rule Venezuelans were to be spectators, rather than political agents, of modernity.³⁶

Situated within this context, the terms “spectacle” and “spectacular” gain connotations that go beyond their rather limited conventional definitions as eye-catching feats and beyond the fundamental passivity of spectatorship that limits Guy Debord’s theory of spectacle. The term “spectacular modernity” raises questions about what type of spatial and visual technics were deployed to stage dazzling displays of progress under military rule. In turn, it compels an analysis of how modes of seeing, displaying, and viewing buttressed the dictatorship’s attempt to redistribute political representation. This expanded definition in turn calls forth a long critical tradition in which modes of seeing, display, and spectating are not approached as natural, unmediated activities but as the “*effect[s]*” of an irreducibly heterogeneous system of discursive, social, technological, and institutional relations.”³⁷ The pages to follow will draw on several core concepts to probe the interface of power, space, and visibility. Martin Heidegger’s writing on technology offers useful concepts for thinking about spatial and visual capture as attempts to dominate social and territorial entities. His contention that modern man tends to organize the “world as picture” is a compelling way to call forth the performative dimension that shapes modes of seeing and cultures of display. Moreover, the related concept of “enframing” (*Gestell*), which refers to the act of setting-upon the land so as to marshal it into specific forms of order, proves especially relevant when thinking through the way that top-down modernization plans have an impact on physical bodies.³⁸ Thinking about the politics of seeing is a productive route to unearthing connections between authoritarian hubris, modernization projects, and the synoptic gaze.³⁹ Timothy Mitchell takes up the term “enframing” in light of the Foucauldian analysis of disciplinary mechanisms; he uses the concept to designate the way in which grand designs conceived from the vantage point of top-down

government tender beguiling promises of development but are also apt to entail the subjugation of natural and social bodies alike.⁴⁰

As well as the politics of the gaze implicit in the modernization plans for Venezuela's undeveloped hinterlands and urban landscapes, spectacular modernity also raises the question of how public events and monumental sites in Caracas served as stages for state-led performances of progress. Even though other urban centers such as Maracaibo or Valencia grew in the mid-twentieth century, Caracas was the undisputed storefront for the military regime, fulfilling the time-honored function of capital cities as normative symbols of nationhood. On a global scale, the symbolic role of capital cities was perpetuated and ratified through the modernist plans developed throughout the twentieth century, in which designers conceived new forms of spatial arrangements and even purpose-built cities such as Chandigarh and Brasília. As designers shook off the monumental aesthetics of previous eras, the landscapes they envisaged signaled a desire to leap into the future.

This was certainly the case in Latin America, and most dramatically in Brasília. There, modernist designs and urban modernization were not only platforms for innovating the tenets of architecture; they were expedient resources for leaders eager to place the state firmly at the vanguard of development. Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer's forward-looking designs for Brasília were both important contributions to reimagining space and the perfect evidence for president Jusélio Kubitschek to claim, in his government slogan, that he had delivered his promise of "fifty years of progress in five."⁴¹ Modern constructions now stand as privileged testaments to the political, aesthetic, and affective forces that have shaped the experience of modernity. Albeit on a more modest scale, the transformation undergone by Caracas in the 1950s compels analysis on these terms. Despite the ample literature on architectural form and building techniques, scant attention has been paid to the dictatorship's tactical leveraging of the capital and the propagandistic libretto that cast Caracas as "the illustrious head that wears the dazzling crown, which confers prestige on a Venezuela that is increasingly strong and dignified."⁴² This eulogistic quote epitomizes the type of rhetoric used in official depictions of Venezuela's "miraculous" progress. Yet, returning to discourses and imaginaries produced *from* and *by* the state does not mean that they were the ultimate ciphers of modernity, nor that dictatorial hegemony was absolute.

The story of spectacular modernity is a more complex one, not least because military ideology was simultaneously benevolent and coercive. Even as the regime pursued Venezuelans' emotional investment in the project of national and individual *superación* by conjuring a social paradigm based on docile, aspirational subjects, political opponents remained mobilized and resistance endured throughout the decade. Moreover, the fact that a cross section of society—from officers to students, and businessmen to the urban poor—rallied to bring an end to military rule in 1958 proves that the spectacle of progress did not convince all who beheld it. Many were still invested in other forms of political representation, which did not relegate citizens to the role of passive spectators.

Just as the political sensibilities escaped any bids for total control, the flagship modern buildings erected during the dictatorship also resisted the restrictive framings of official discourse. For all their reinforced concrete, modern buildings were not intransigent monoliths that spoke only of military might. Built space and the people who inhabit it exceed and escape definitive circumscription, as can be seen in the swift moves to rename certain buildings to mark the end of an era after the regime's demise in 1958. In the case of the “2 de Diciembre” superblocks (so-called to honor Pérez Jiménez's fraudulent rise to power), the shift was so rapid that discrepancies emerged as to what the housing project was actually called. In one photograph held at an archive in Caracas, students celebrating Pérez Jiménez's fall brandish signs that declared: *¡Ahora el 2 de Diciembre se llama 21 de Enero!* (Now the December 2 will be called January 21). However, the move was preemptive, since the blocks were not renamed after the strike held on January 21 but were rechristened as the “23 de Enero” to mark the date Pérez Jiménez fled Venezuela aboard the presidential plane and democratic politics reentered the horizon of national debates.

This rush to rename landmarks erected on the modern landscape under military rule raises a further point about the mechanisms of political mythology and discourse summoned to rewrite history in line with fluctuating agendas. The decade-long dictatorship serves as a paradigm to think through the historiographical logic that keeps Venezuela constantly “submerged in an inaugural ritual, [where the country] never tires of constantly laying the first foundation stone,” as historian María Sol Pérez Schael has asserted.⁴³ The 1950s serve as just one example of this propensity to shape history into convenient

narratives that justify past actions and herald promising futures. The move to rename the monuments of dictatorship mirror the earlier strategy through which the Junta Militar had repackaged the coup of 1948 as the foundation stone for a new stage in Venezuelan history.

Considering the “foundation stones” of Venezuelan modernity from the perspective of cultural history and theory speaks to broader critical turns that have emerged in other fields, where scholars scrutinize the turning points and underlying agendas of dominant narratives of Venezuelan history.⁴⁴ Coronil took up this task and brushed conventional accounts against the grain, reincorporating Juan Vicente Gómez as the “first magician” of the modern state to argue that modernity had its footholds in—rather than after—autocratic rule.⁴⁵ More recently, Alejandro Velasco’s ethnographic study of popular politics in the “23 de Enero” superblocs resists the optimistic narrative that claims that the renaming of the complex in the wake of dictatorship represented a turning point in Venezuelan history that brought better times. Instead, by giving voice to the opinions and stories related by the buildings’ residents, he charts enduring discord between the petrostate, Venezuela’s political parties, and the urban poor, left unresolved by the system of political representation set in place after 1958 and written into the reinforced concrete of the superblocs.⁴⁶

In short, although the focus of this book is firmly fixed on the decade in which military rulers leveraged discursive, spatial, and visual phenomena to claim they had delivered Venezuela to modernity, it is important to remember that optimistic promises and monumental constructions are not confined to the past. The afterlives of buildings from the 1950s alone attest to the enduring ideals of modernity that resurface in various guises: as a spectral and unrealized utopia, as an idealized form of cultural heritage, and as recurrent promises of national development voiced by politicians from across the ideological spectrum and throughout Venezuela’s modern history. This transhistorical backdrop informs the inclusion in the final chapter of *El Helicoide*—a vast spiral-shaped shopping mall and cutting-edge industrial exhibition space in Caracas—whose construction began under dictatorship, stuttered during the shift to democracy, and was never entirely completed. By no means an anomaly, this truncated building, which today serves as a jail and police headquarters, stands as just one leftover of promises of instantaneous progress and economic cycles of boom and bust, joined more recently by the now

infamous Torre de David, a luxurious banking headquarters—abandoned in the 1990s and then turned into a squat in recent years.⁴⁷ Such spectacular visions of progress and their contemporary phantoms demand critical attention if modernity is to be understood as more than a moment of aesthetic innovation and fast-paced urban development.

STRUCTURE

This book is divided into three main sections: Part I, “Official Libretto”; Part II, “Setting the Scene”; and Part III, “Performing Progress.” The first chapter, “Telling Stories,” is an analysis of the historiographical mechanisms summoned by the Junta Militar to justify the coup as a necessary rupture in order to reroute the nation toward progress. This narrative logic informs the chapter’s assessment of how the regime annexed preexisting modernization projects and meticulously produced an official account of progress to confirm that it had delivered the foretold modernity. The second chapter, “Ruling Ideology,” is an exploration of the ideological and repressive thrusts of the New National Ideal, examining housing plans, model agricultural colonies, and health-care and education policies in order to show how the military rulers posed as benevolent mediators of national development and social improvement, before they turned to methods of demobilization and coercion.

In Part II the discussion departs from these narrative and ideological footholds so as to unearth the visual regime of dictatorship. The third chapter, “Nation Branding,” explores the construction of an official public image through overt and covert propaganda, public relations campaigns, and corporate advertising. The analysis shows how photo reportage, newsreels, and advertisements served as conduits for proregime missives. The next chapter, “Spectacular Visuality,” is a discussion in greater depth of the theoretical implications of “enframing” the national landscape, and it uncovers the way that Venezuelan thinkers from the 1940s onward summoned visual tropes to critique the transformations wrought by modernization. Here, close analyses of cartography, filmic images, and photographs accompany an assessment of the rational and affective purchase that the landscape acquired as aerial prospect, sublime scene, and didactic prompt devised to train the gaze to revere modernity. The fifth

chapter, “Exhibiting Modernity,” departs from a key moment in the decade, to consider how the elections of 1952 and Pérez Jiménez’s fraudulent rise to power inflected technologies of display and shaped a cult of visionary leadership. At first, the discussion covers the *Exposición Objetiva Nacional*, an official exhibition that displayed the fruits of four years of military rule as an overture to the elections, then the analysis turns to how the literary intertwinement of national history and Pérez Jiménez’s personal biography mythologized his farsighted gaze as a condition for progress.⁴⁸

Venezuelan modernity is not the story of one man, however. For this reason, the final part returns to collective settings in order to consider the performative dimension of spectacle. The sixth chapter, “Subjects Onstage,” reveals how the parade ground and walkways of Sistema de la Nacionalidad put in place a legible articulation of identity and modernity through its monumental urban design and use in carnival pageants and civic-military parades devised as scripted productions of space that would assemble bodies and identities in festive tableaux. The last chapter, “Bringing Progress Home,” reaches beyond the remit of the state to show how consumer culture and everyday life became imbricated with the dreamwork of progress and modern mythologies. Close analyses of marketing strategies, window displays, and shopping centers demonstrate how capitalist expansion encouraged Venezuelans to be consumers as well as spectators of modernity, while the discussion of El Helicoide considers overlaps between private and military investment in spectacular modernity and also the precarious grounds on which its dazzling promises were built.