

Archipelago

by Hannia Gómez*

Archipelago, 1522

From the it. *arcipelàgo*, primitively the name given to the Aegean Sea (thus qualified as the "main sea") and its islands.¹

Caracas major Modern Park is the Parque del Este (Roberto Burle Marx, 1956-61). This magnificent work of Landscape Architecture is located in the eastern part of the city on the lands of the Colonial Hacienda San José-La Ciénaga (i.e. "The Marsh"), thus called for its flooding terrains, placed between two creeks. It is the city's public park of highest use, with three millions and a half visitors per year, and is also internationally considered to be "Roberto Burle Marx's most important public work."²

This park of international landmark status is the testimony of a traditional city that bet to transform itself through the best mid-century modern art, but is as well the memory and the modern metaphor of the place. Burle Marx's design was of great beauty and understanding of the land's pre-existing natural conditions, following a free design principle of a bucolic landscape in which the ornamental species were placed after an adjustment process. The park Botanist, Leandro Aristeguieta, recalled how once put to work on the 190 acres of land, the landscape master defined "ecological environments and gardens, incorporating the widest possible number of native ornamental species."³

The Parque del Este is primarily comprised by three spaces: "an open, fluid, gently, wavy landscape of disperse shade trees and grass fields of subtle topography; secondly, a forest landscape, spatially dense with winding roads, and third, a sequence of paved gardens with intimate patios that refer to the colonial past of Venezuelan culture, and that expose plants, ceramic murals and fountains."⁴ In all of these spaces and their different gardens, Burle Marx employed the rich variety and exuberance of the tropical flora and the multiple presence of water as main compositional elements.

The valley of Caracas is a territory with a heavy rain season. Here, water travels from north to south coming from the springs, cascades and creeks of El Avila Mountain to plunge into the main Caracas River, El Guaire. Water drains naturally to meet the river and then run eastwardly to reach the far away Caribbean Sea. The Parque del Este's site was originally very heavily marked by this multiple water path, being a slightly inclined terrain leaning towards the river bed, dotted with open plains within the vegetation, where it was retained to form temporary lakes of different sizes; a timeless archipelago of broken mirrors for the reflections of El Avila mountain.

The design story of Burle Marx's modern metaphor of this pre-existing ephemeral archipelago has just begun to be told. Thanks to "The *Jardineiro* of America", an exhibition curated on 2009 to celebrate Roberto Burle Marx's centennial, it was first understood how the Brazilian artist created a collection of thirty gardens within the park ("The Thirty Gardens of the Parque del Este") to narrate the site's natural cycle.⁴ Nowadays, when walking by the park, it is wonderful to read this narrative in the project. But it can also be read in Jaime Gili's painted *Lakes*. Here, the artist abandons the traditional angles and straight lines of his former works to start following the seductive curvilinear forms of Burle Marx. And here, just as in the real park, we enter by the park's northern gate to visit

The Lakes. From there on, the *promenade*, real and the artistic, performs a southward circle through a splendid sequence of chained precincts and colorful scenarios.

The *promenade* begins in what could be a metaphor of El Avila mountain's wells and cascades, the rectangular ponds of the Patio de las Paredes de Azulejos (The Patio of the Tiled Walls) to follow with the monumental water jets of the Patio del gramado con círculos (The Patio of the Circle-spotted Lawn), both included in the set of the Formal Gardens of the Patios. Walking southward beyond these geometric courtyards, opens up the wide perspective of the more naturalistic Hygrophilous Garden, or Lake N. 1 of the Aquatic Plants, a big bacteria-shaped lagoon spread among the grass and planted with monumental colonies of tropical species. This first green-colored lake sets the aesthetics for the next water spaces that as a *catena d'aqua* flow one into the other: the so-called Lakes of the Animals, which complexly mingle together to create a continuum of shadow and light, liquid and flora over the bridges and under the trees; the central Lake N. 2 or Lake of the Herons; the Eastern Lake or Lake of the Ducks, and the Western Lake or Lake Carlos Guinand Sandoz.

Having trespassed these first aquatic realms, one is already inside the eternal woods of the Hacienda San José-La Ciénaga, the Parque del Este's Arboretum. Big towering trees, winding walkways, and architectural modern *follies* are to be found here. More ahead, still under the forest, we encounter more *lakes*: the enclosed small pond of the Serpentarium (or House of the Snakes, showed in the picture); the clover leaf-shaped Otters Lake; the big Reptiles Lake, the island-filled pond of the Monkeys Lake and the sunken Tigers Lake, this one already out of the forest area.

Here, the circuit has taken us south and down within the park's domain. This is the place where all the waters used to accumulate in the past when it rained hard, and where the neighboring creeks emerged from their river beds to flood the entire area. Wisely, Burle Marx, acknowledging it, decided that this was the area to locate the park's greatest lake, named the Southern Lake for Small Boats, or Lake N. 9, where all the waters meet. Further south, the empty plains of the Airport La Carlota are a reminder of a former Burle Marx project for expanding his park design, and turning that huge flatland into a bigger urban park in the same Burle Marxian spirit.

The Parque del Este and its vast archipelago has been functioning and being preserved for decades. In 1998, the park was officially designated as a Good of Cultural Interest of the Nation in 1998. This designation comprised the protection of all of its environments, from "the ecological gardens, xerophyte, hidrophile and humid tropical forest; the formal patios with *jardinières* and water fountains; the fauna collection; the gardening school and nurseries; the planetarium; the Museum of Transportation, the lake to row" and also an object alien to the original design, regretfully introduced in the lake in the 1970s against Burle Marx's will, a replica of Christopher Columbus' ship, the *Santa Maria*. Sadly, only now that it is already more than half a century old, the city moved from the necessary topic of its conservation to the drama of the struggle for its integrity and the safeguard of its very existence.

Although Venezuela's capital city has a magnificent modern heritage, this is, nevertheless, a nuisance for many today. Among the most talked-about and polemic cases of the past years lays that of the Parque del Este. As the use of the park increased wildly, it was brought almost to a collapse. This eroded the frontiers of its protection. The alterations of the original project multiplied, the superficial flora was almost totally lost and, day after day it seems more susceptible to bigger

transgressions. Such is the case of all the illegal constructions that proliferate today, being the biggest and most critical of them all one known as the Leander Project, a fake ship and underground museum which began construction since mid 2008 on Lake N. 9.

One wonders how a situation like this could have ever been allowed in such a fundamental work in the history of modern landscape architecture. It all began, evidently, with the mistake of building the *Santa María* vessel on Lake 9, and mistakes are paid expensively. During the 1970s, when the vessel was installed, Burle Marx repeatedly declared his displeasure for a fact that he described as a “barbarity” that ruined Parque del Este’s coherence and design.

The rampant abandonment of the park took to the ship’s rot, thus becoming unusable. Without ever being removed, it was a daily deplorable spectacle. Is in this context that in 2006 a group of followers of Venezuela’s Independence hero Francisco de Miranda, convinced the President of Venezuela of replacing Columbus ship with a replica of the *Leander*, “the ship of freedom”. The matter would not have become more if one boat was merely substituted by another of equal characteristics. A ship floating on the water can always be removed, and is a reversible intervention. The problem is that from a simple ship the project evolved to an ambitious building that affects the lake area and the entire park’s designed cultural landscape. In the section of Lake N. 9 that would have the museum underneath, it will be no longer possible to row. The truth is that once the new cultural attraction opens, this theme park menaces with turning the whole park into its backyard.

Fortunately, there is an alternative, or an exit to the entire affaire, as Jaime Gili cleverly points out in this exhibition. There can exist a brand new Lake N. 10, on which any ship, boat or vessel can harbor. A contemporary lake, built on the flatlands of Airport La Carlota, when it is converted into the new urban park that the city is so badly asking for: the green Parque La Carlota, the extension of the Parque del Este. Just as Roberto Burle Marx dreamed, back in 1961.

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NOTES:

1. Corominas, Juan, "PIELAGO", *Breve Diccionario Etimológico de la Lengua Castellana*, Editorial Gredos S.A., Madrid, 1976, P. 457.
2. Berrizbeitia, Anita. *Roberto Burle Marx in Caracas: Parque del Este, 1956-1961*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture Series, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
3. Gómez, Hannia. "The Anti Monument". theurbantimes.com/ London, September 7th, 2010; Opinion, *EL NACIONAL*. Caracas, Tuesday, September 23rd., 2008.
4. CENTRO de la Ciudad, "Los treinta jardines del Parque del Este", in: "El Jardineiro de América", Patio de los Espejos, Trasnchocho Centro Cultural, Paseo Las Mercedes, Caracas, Nov. 2009- Jan. 2010.