

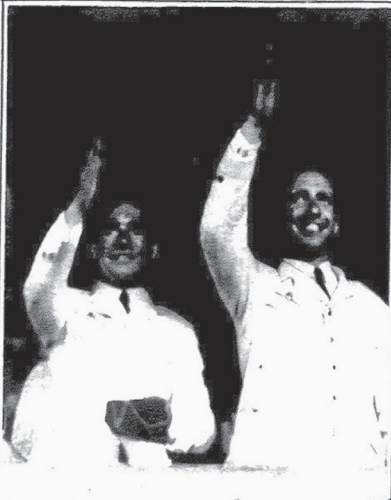
Temple of the Benevolent Dictator

Simulacra, Political Theatre, and Revolution

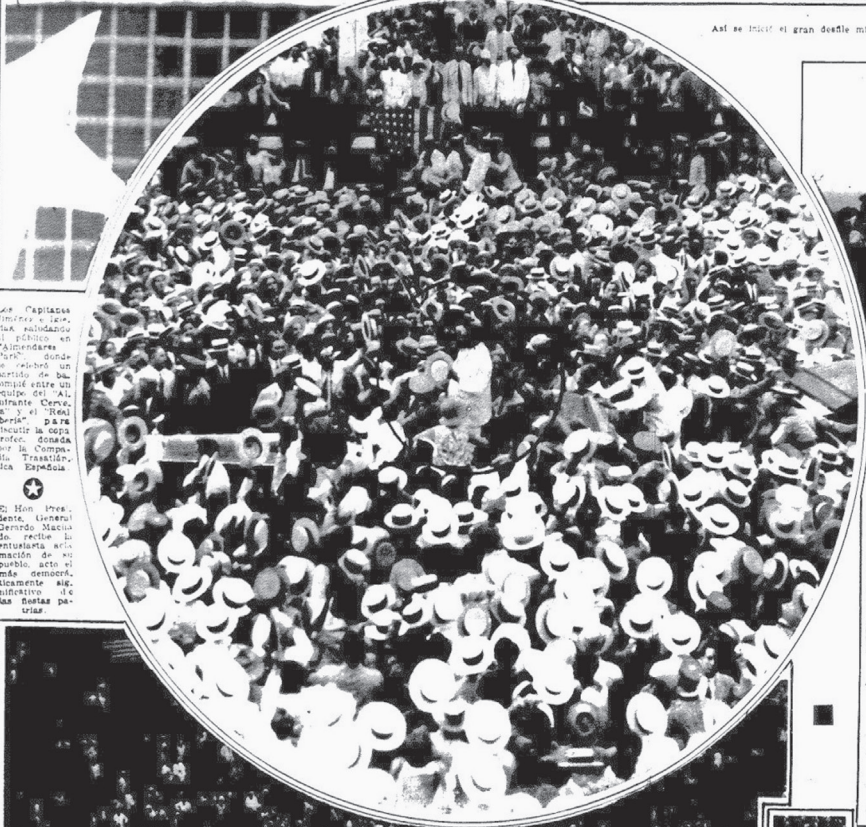
MAY 20, 1929, the noon sun lit up a bright sky in Havana, Cuba. A crowd gathered along the wide boulevard called the Paseo de Martí, but better known as El Prado. A circular photograph from a montage on the front page of Cuban newspaper *Diario de la Marina* captured the moment, as the city's old monumental center transformed itself from stone to flesh (Fig. 1.1). The day's *New York Times* described the scene as "a restless sea of bobbing straw hats."¹ The shutter opened and clicked shut. One exposure documented two events in Cuban history. The inauguration of a major public building, El Capitolio, the national capitol building; and the swearing in for General Gerardo Machado y Morales's second presidential term.²

As the photograph captured an instant in black and white, it streamlined a more complicated situation in Machado's built environment and in the cultural politics of twentieth-century Cuba. The photograph hinted at but did not show how the massive neoclassical Capitolio activated a simulacrum of republican

DOMINGO 26 DE MAYO DE 1929

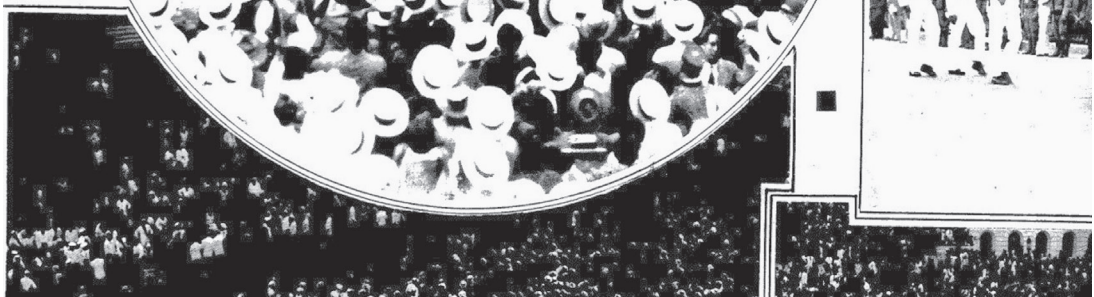
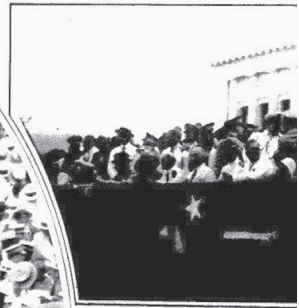


Así se inició el gran desfile militar, que constituyó uno de los números de entusiasmo popular.



Los Capitanes
marcharon en
la A. saliendo
el pueblo en
"Alcázar", en
"Park", donde
se celebró un
sorteo de ba-
lones entre un
equipo del "Al-
trante Cervé-
s" y el "Real
Berlín", para
buscar la copa
refec. donada
por la Compa-
ña Transatlán-
tica Española.

El Hon. Pres.
sente, General
Jesús María
So. recien la
entusasta aci-
mación de su
pueblo, acto el
más democrá-
ticamente sig-
nificativo de
las fiestas pa-
trias.



1.1. Photomontage of Paseo de Martí Covered by Cuban people, May 20, 1929, photograph, 1929. Found in *Diario de la Marina*, May 26, 1929.

space, at once spectral and concrete, for Machado's patronage. The building's form, its spatial and visual presence, and the meanings evoked therein were figments of the regime's political imagination. Not surprising that the Machado government touted it as a sign of their "benign rule." Machado's flamboyant Secretary of Works, Carlos Miguel de Céspedes, went so far as to describe El Capitolio as "el templo de la Patria" (the temple of the [Cuban] nation). It was a sacropolitical structure capable of signifying republican values across time and space.³

Machado's well-documented 1929 oath of office within the majestic halls of El Capitolio communicated to critics and supporters alike. El Capitolio was at once a symbol of bourgeois decadence and republican ideals. With a deft application of modern Western architectural idioms, Havana's enormous classical revival Capitolio evoked a tangible form of republicanism. It was a visual and spatial end to justify and mask the means of Machado's bare-knuckle politics. As an elegant stage for the commencement of Machado's second term, El Capitolio served a political and rhetorical function. The grand white stone and marble edifice set a phantasm of republican ideals before local and international observers. It possessed citizens and onlookers.⁴ Perhaps that is why, when asked at the 1929 inauguration whether their president was a dictator, many Cubans answered equivocally, "Yes, but a benevolent dictator."⁵

El Capitolio announced the monumental ambitions of Machado's Ley de Obras Públicas (Law of Public Works), enacted July 15, 1925. The building was to be the ultimate manifestation of Machado's first-term campaign promise for "Water, Roads, Schools!" (¡Agua, Caminos, Escuelas!)⁶ It was a promise to physically transform Cuba into a true democratic republic after suffering years of colonialism, foreign rule, and homegrown political corruption. Networks of highways, aqueducts, and public buildings—schools, hospitals, prisons, and government centers—were to bring modernity and moral reform at once to the young nation. The palatial seat of Cuba's Senate and Congress was the showpiece for that massive public works program. The giant Cuban capitol building was to be the spatial apex of Machado's Havana and, by metonymic extension, the center of Cuba itself. It stood at the crossroads of Cuba's highway system, and at the heart of Havana's tree-lined civic center along the Prado. There, it marked the urban frontier between the old colonial city along the eastern bay and the new modern city developing to the west.

The United States' political and financial interests were tightly woven in the fabric of the regime's building campaign. Machado was a populist and practical president, adept at negotiating Cuban national concerns around U.S. investments. To meet the demands of local politics and foreign capital, Machado created an urban stage of modernist dreams and nationalist fictions. Here the built environment represented but did not necessarily make real the ideals of *Cuba Libre*: a free Cuban Republic imagined already by patriots like the revolutionary

poet José Martí in the nineteenth century. El Capitolio was the centerpiece for that political stage set. Cuban storyteller Alejo Carpentier called it the “apotheosis” of Machado’s “Capital of Fiction.”⁷ In the course of his political career, Machado would turn from a gutsy reformer into Cuba’s first dictator. Amid violent crackdowns on students and labor, El Capitolio became the embodiment of his regime’s “promise without proof.”⁸

El Capitolio monumentalized a mirage of benevolent authority. That false munificence soon evaporated in coming years. Cuba’s sugar-based economy collapsed during the global depression of the 1930s. Student and labor organizers mounted massive public protests. Civil unrest provoked police brutality. El Capitolio and the public spaces built by Machado’s regime changed from a stage for political theatre to one of revolution. On August 7, 1933, Machado’s police shot to death twenty-two protestors near El Capitolio’s steps. Less than a week later, a popular revolution and military coup sent Machado into exile on August 12, 1933. *Habaneros* (citizens of Havana) stormed the streets. They shot and killed members of the dictator’s police, toppled busts of Machado and other official statues, and attacked the grand doors of El Capitolio itself, so as to efface two bronze bas-reliefs of Machado’s face (Fig. 1.2).⁹ These violent gestures attempted to erase Machado from Cuba’s national memory. Yet his regime’s stone and steel artifacts of an imagined republic survived. El Capitolio remained unscathed, but for a scratch on the door.¹⁰

The public defacing of Machado’s figure served as a popular condemnation—a cultural purge. But the buildings and spaces of Machado’s regime endured and remained central in subsequent constructions of Cuban national identity. Damages created by vandalism and looting were largely inconsequential. El Capitolio and the other monumental works of the regime were quickly restored.

The Cuban government and populace chose to maintain and make use of Machado’s temple. In the political arena, the Cuban Constitution of 1940 was later drawn up within El Capitolio’s majestic halls. In cultural affairs, the Vanguardia, the Cuban avant-garde, took advantage of the building as a place to mount groundbreaking exhibitions, over a decade before Cuban architect Rodríguez Pichardo finally finished construction of the Palacio de Bellas Artes in 1954.¹¹ The first exhibition of contemporary Cuban painters occurred in El Capitolio in 1941. The exhibit’s catalog made extensive commentary over tensions between the first and second generation of painters in twentieth-century Cuba. The artists displayed at El Capitolio had to be called “contemporary” in order to avoid conflict with the old guard, who claimed the term “modern” for themselves. But the organizers (Domingo Ravenet, Rafael Suárez Solís, and Guy Pérez Cisneros) made no commentary on the placement of the exhibition in El Capitolio itself, the erstwhile temple of the “benevolent dictator” Machado.

That is probably because the building’s controversial legacy did not necessar-



1.2 *Disfigured faces of Machado and Céspedes on Capitolio doors.* Author's photograph, 2018.

ily merit mentioning. El Capitolio had already become something else in the Cuban cultural and political imaginary.¹² The built environments of the *machadato*, and especially El Capitolio, were transformed into markers of Cuban sovereignty and national identity. The hopes of a young, modern nation took shape and occupied space in those works. Machado and his reign persisted in the island's collective subconscious. Just as the visions evoked by El Capitolio, its visual and

architectural promise, continued to operate in Cuba's cultural history long after the revolution of 1933.

NATIONAL MIRAGE: EL CAPITOLIO AND THE HISTORY OF SIMULACRA

To suggest that El Capitolio served as a simulacrum of republican space, an artificial temple of the Cuban *patria*, requires us to reexamine the history of that philosophic term. The Greek roots of the word "simulacrum" first appeared with Plato's *Sophist* in 360 B.C.E. The academic philosopher labeled the verbal distortions of his rivals to be mere simulacra, or "phantastic art." Far more recently, contemporary philosopher Jean Baudrillard argued that simulacra were not copies of the real, but instead constituted a "realm of truth" in their own right, the hyperreal, a negative reality epitomized in the vapid dreamscapes of Florida's Disney World. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze, meanwhile, saw simulacra as radical agents of change, arguing that the creation of a simulacrum was not a mere gesture of imitation, "but rather the act by which the idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned."¹³ That is to say: When repeated enough, the distinction between an original "model" and its "copy" becomes irrelevant and even dangerous for some. And it is precisely that almost-but-not-quiteness that makes an architectural object like El Capitolio, so visibly plucked from the classical canon, symbolically powerful in the local realm of cultural politics.

The evident ambiguity between a "model" and its many copies suggests an alternative means of access to ideologically charged buildings like El Capitolio. To call the regime's nationalist temple a simulacrum is not to degrade its architectural value. It is rather to challenge the "privileged position" of traditional and Eurocentric discourses, espoused by ancient and postmodern philosophers alike, which would make exclusive claims to originality and beauty. Viewing Havana's neoclassic architecture in a broader history of simulacra calls into question stale paradigms like "model" and "copy," thereby allowing us to confront the stagnation of popular center-periphery models that have attempted to explain colonial and national artifacts outside Europe and North America.¹⁴ Styles, designs, and technologies appropriated from those of the United States and Europe take on markedly different valences in the specific context of ex-colonial states like Cuba. Classical reproductions made for a U.S.-backed Caribbean despot lay bare the double consciousness of coloniality within modernity, testing the limits of both traditionalist and democratic myths associated with Greco-Roman forms.¹⁵

Paradigms of "modernity" and "tradition" (as conceived and self-perpetuated in the West) have historically left little room for alternative readings in the post-colonial context.¹⁶ Ironically, the Machado regime suffered condemnation for its use of the *derrière-garde* classical canon, just as the prewar works of the *avant-garde* in Cuba, the Caribbean, and Latin America faced accusations of merely copying European originals. Such assessments of artistic quality, founded on Pla-

tonist notions of the real and its lesser copy, simply maintained the prejudices and hierarchies of European colonialism and later U.S. imperialism. The late medieval art historian Michael Camille once offered a provocative means of escape from those Western tendencies, while also remaining attendant to their cultural and psychological pervasiveness. That is, the history of art and architecture is better written as a history of simulacra. Rather than separate the “real” from the “imagined,” the “model” from the “copy,” we should record their intermingling, just as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and the surrealists met at the crossroads of fantasy and actuality.¹⁷ The history of El Capitolio emerges from that same borderland.

Havana’s capitol building offers a rich history of artistic repetitions and unknowable models. To describe the form of El Capitolio, scholars and the very architects of the building invariably turned to the authority of other objects, be it the U.S. Capitol Building of Washington, D.C., the Pantheon of Paris, or Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Prolific U.S. historian of Cuban culture Louis Pérez Jr., for example, called El Capitolio “an exact replica of the U.S. Capitol, only smaller.”¹⁸ The mid-twentieth-century Jamaican journalist, novelist, and travel writer W. Adolphe Roberts, meanwhile, lamented that he wished “Cuba had had enough originality to adopt some other form of architecture than the Graeco-Roman of the United States Capitol.”¹⁹ Even as the building was still under construction in 1927, Spanish writer and politician Luis Araquistain observed in a book dedicated to the dangers of Yankee imperialism that El Capitolio would surely rival in splendor that of the United States. He followed with a cynical quip: “I only hope that its inner greatness matches its material.”²⁰

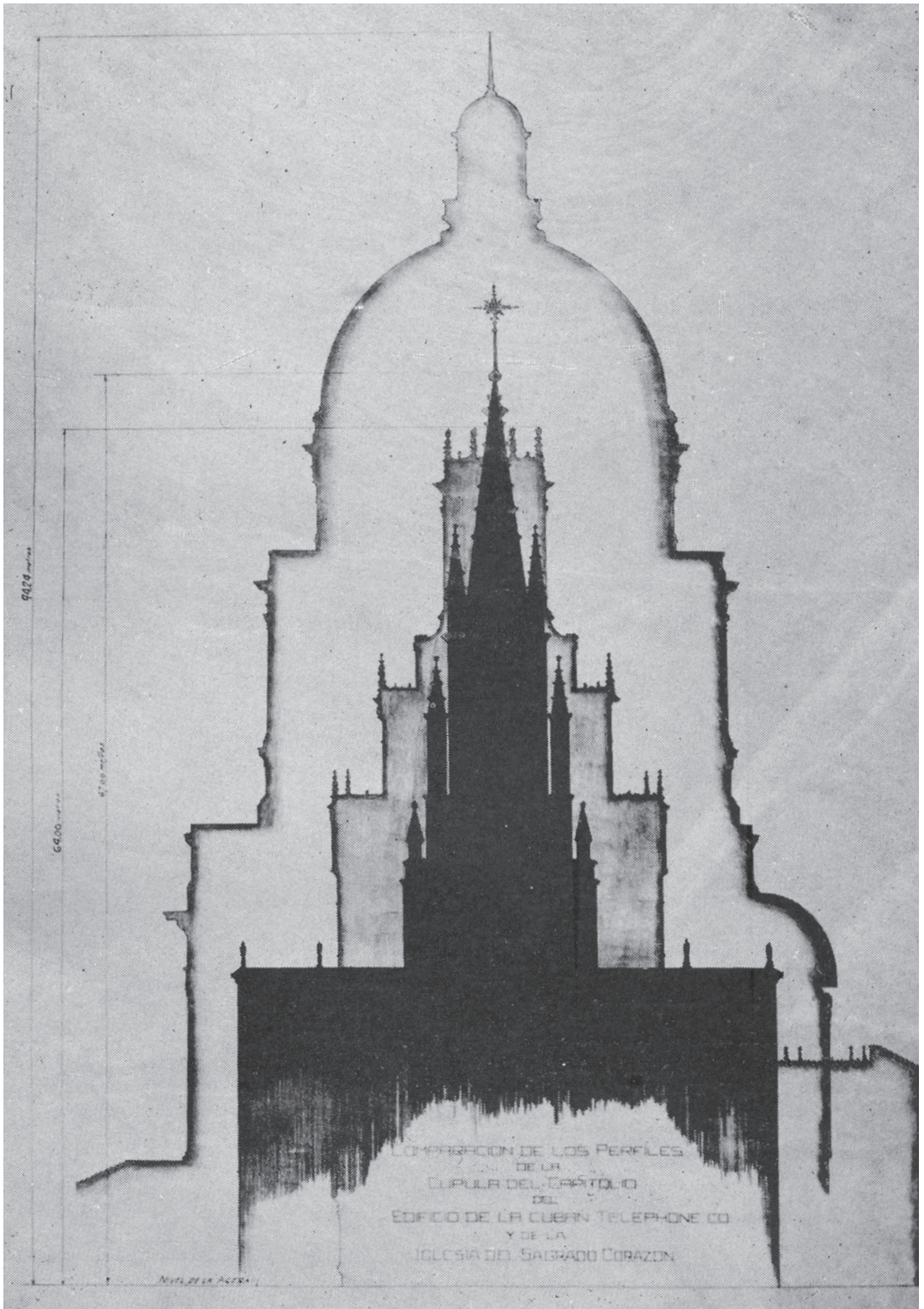
Rather than a copy of the U.S. Capitol building, Machado’s Secretary of Works Carlos Miguel de Céspedes located El Capitolio’s origins elsewhere. He noted conversely that the eighteenth-century French architect Jacques-Gabriel Soufflot’s design for the Pantheon of Paris served as the “principal model” for the artistic and technical directors Raúl Otero and Eugenio Rayneri y Piedra, following the original designs of Evelio Govantes and Félix Cabarrocas.²¹ The Cuban Capitol’s prominent copula found its inspiration in that of St. Peter’s in Rome, famously designed by Michelangelo.²² The name of El Capitolio referenced the legendary Temple of Jupiter that once resided on the Capitoline hill during the Roman republic.²³ In all these circumstances, whether evoking an architectural symbol of U.S. governance, authoritarian France, the Italian Renaissance, or the glories of ancient Rome, El Capitolio repeatedly emerged as a symbolic reproduction of something else. Even though many of its architectural and decorative components were drawn from local traditions, the building’s Vitruvian form had a *look* of elsewhere about it. El Capitolio rose over its citizenry: a nationalist mirage in stone and steel of distant uncertain genealogies.

The “foreignness” of El Capitolio went beyond its surface. The building’s

construction history reflected a similar tension between the outside and inside. Multiple firms submitted bids for the construction of El Capitolio. The top three included the U.S. firm Purdy & Henderson and two Cuban companies known for their work in the tourist industry and public sector: Arellano y Mendoza and Lens y Díaz. The Machado government ultimately chose the U.S. firm because of its reputation for carrying out their projects on time and under budget.²⁴ Machado's Ministry of Works made explicit their hopes of having the project completed by 1928. They wanted to use the building as the site for the Sixth Annual Pan-American Conference to be held in January that year. Purdy & Henderson had the clearest plan to reach that goal, including a package for financing. They had already established their bona fides through successful building projects in Havana, which included, among others, the Banco Central (Central Bank) and the Centro Asturiano (Asturian Center).²⁵ Based in Chicago and then New York, Purdy & Henderson maintained several branches around the world, with a major one (run largely by Cuban professionals) in Havana. Known in the U.S. for their dynamic use of reinforced steel and concrete, Purdy & Henderson had garnered an international reputation for tall buildings.²⁶ As a case in point, at the same time that the U.S. firm erected El Capitolio, the organization also collaborated with architect H. Craig Severance on the Bank of Manhattan Trust Building. For one month in 1930, the New York bank was the tallest in the world—a fleeting witness to the firm's ability to realize institutional longings: the bigger, the better.

On March 15, 1926, the U.S. construction firm Purdy & Henderson was retained to materialize the machadato's grand vision of a splendid congressional palace. Three years and some fifty days later, Havana had its own Capitolio. The timetable was incredible, considering the fact that the project had started and then been abandoned over a decade ago. Still, despite every best effort, the U.S. firm failed to meet the 1928 deadline. And the building went well over budget, costing close to seventeen million pesos—roughly equivalent to the same amount in U.S. dollars at the time.²⁷ Purdy & Henderson did deliver a building to rival and even surpass some of the greatest works of Europe and the United States. Most notably, they managed to make El Capitolio's dome just slightly taller than that of the Capitol in D.C.—a fact proudly touted by the Cuban press (Fig. 1.3). Here, in measurable terms, the “copy” had truly bested its “model.”

Purdy & Henderson's designs were but one chapter in a much deeper history of reverie and replication, tracing back to the very soil on which El Capitolio still stands. In the colonial period, the site of El Capitolio was a vast swamp outside the old walled city of La Habana Vieja. Spanish officials drained that bog to accommodate the needs of Havana's growing populace in the eighteenth century. Wealthy classes began building houses in the new salubrious zone of the *extramuros*, outside the city walls. In 1795, a local philanthropic group (La Sociedad Económica de los Amigos del País) proposed the construction of a botanical

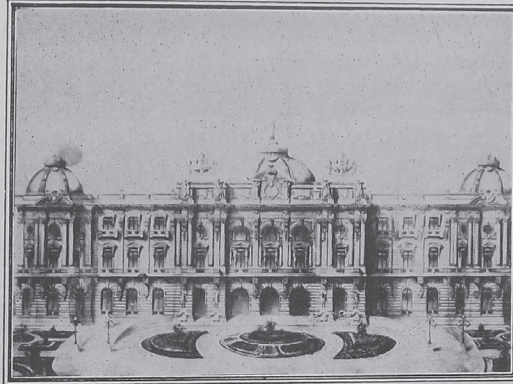


1.3 "Outline of Capitolio's Dome Compared to Other Buildings in Havana," drawing, circa 1929. Found in special issue of *El Arquitecto*, May 20, 1929. Courtesy of OHCH Centro de Documentación de la Empresa de Proyectos de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, RESTAURA. © 2019 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

garden at the exact spot in which El Capitolio stands today. That project reached fruition in 1817. With it, an odd colonialist staging of tropical “nature” emerged, too. The botanical garden was, ironically, composed of trees and plants mostly imported from Florida and Martinique. It lasted only a short while. The Villanueva train station replaced the structure in 1839. Like the botanical garden before it, the station faced its own demise circa 1910. A new central train station replaced it at the site of the former Arsenal in 1911.

The Senate under Liberal president José Miguel Gómez, then only the second president in the republic’s history, had already proposed building a presidential palace at the site of the abandoned station. The U.S.-trained Cuban architects Eugenio Rayneri y Sorrentino and his son Eugenio Rayneri y Piedra drew up the initial designs for Miguel Gómez’s presidential palace. The early design concept, drawing heavily from the French Renaissance, was a tri-domed building remarkably similar to that of El Capitolio, though more ornate and lacking the finished palace’s round hemicycles. Under the Conservative president Mario García Menocal the proposed building was officially changed to a congressional palace in 1914. New plans—now including the hemicycles, staircase, and a more robust dome—were drafted by the Cuban architects Félix Cabarrocas and Mario Romañach (Fig. 1.4). Local firm La Nación oversaw the new project. Francisco Centurion and Luis Echevarría worked as inspector engineer and architect respectively. Construction began in 1917, but the building was never completed. Following an economic boom during the First World War, known as the “Dance of the Millions,” sugar markets plummeted in the early 1920s, effectively halting Cuba’s economy. In those austere times, popularly known as *las vacas flacas* (the age of skinny cows), Popular Party president Alfredo Zayas y Alfonso stalled construction at the site in 1921.²⁸

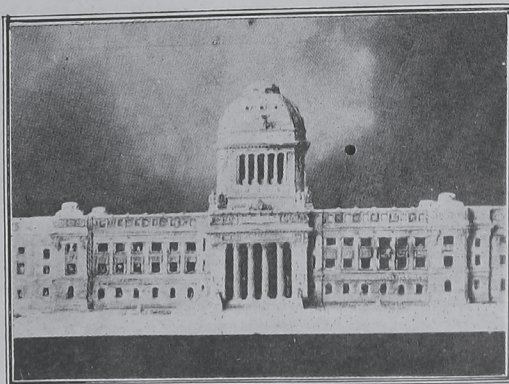
By the time Machado took office in 1925, the Cuban government had sold the capitol building grounds to private companies. In a scene stranger than fiction, the abandoned congressional palace had become a skeletal frame for Havana Park, a recreational theme park. The first neon sign in Cuba rose alongside it, irreverently depicting a green frog and the phrase “El agua sola cría ranas, tómela con ginebra La Compana” (Water only makes frogs, drink La Compana gin).²⁹ Photographs from the period show rollercoasters careening through the ruins—a whimsical echo of the Villanueva train station that had once brought the trappings of modern progress to that locale (Fig. 1.5). When one considers those scenes of cheap leisure in the ruins of national interests, Machado’s decision to build the capitol building at all costs must have come across as a measure of long-promised reform. Joaquín Blez, a Havana-based studio photographer best known for taking photos of female nudes and clothed famous men, including Machado himself, captured the latent and impending violence of those future reforms in visible terms (Fig. 1.6).³⁰ In a rare live-action street photograph, perfectly timed,



Proyecto de Palacio Presidencial de los arquitectos Eugenio Rayneri, padre e hijo, que comenzó a construirse durante el Gobierno del Grai. José Mienel Gómez.

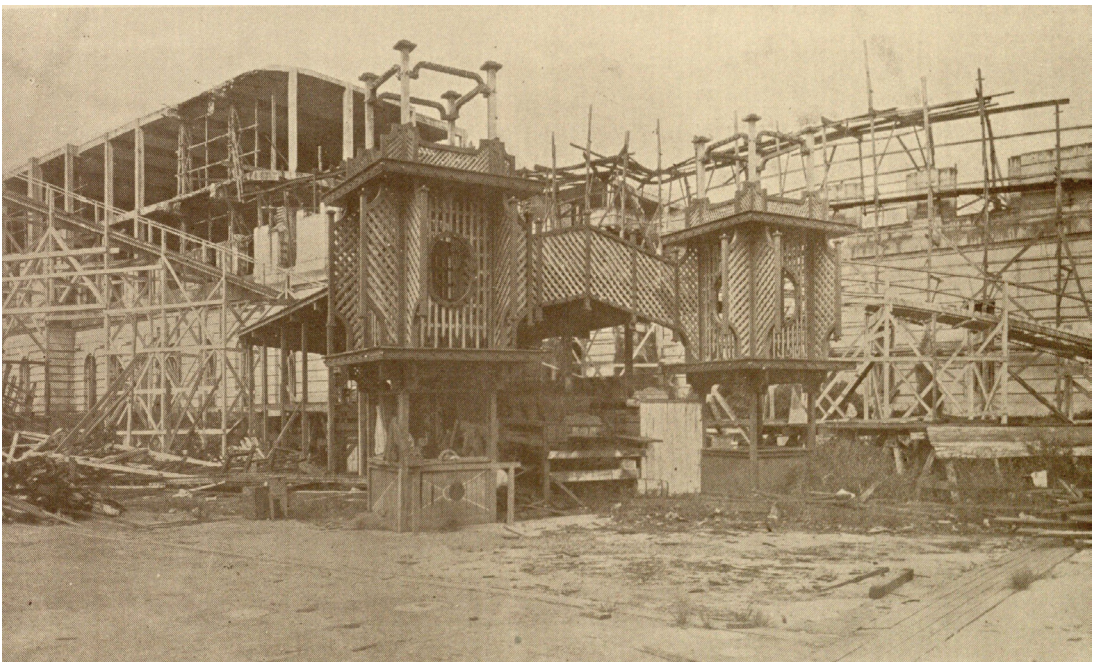
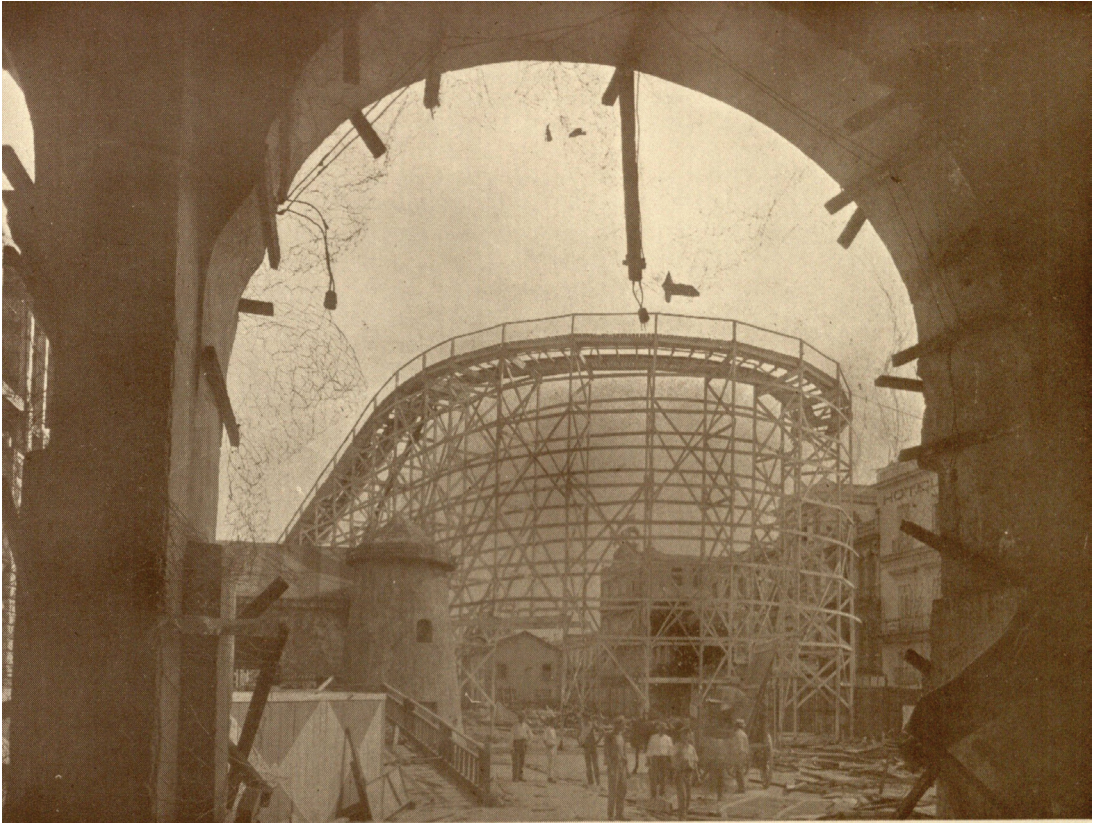


Proyecto definitivo del Capitolio tal como se ha terminado.

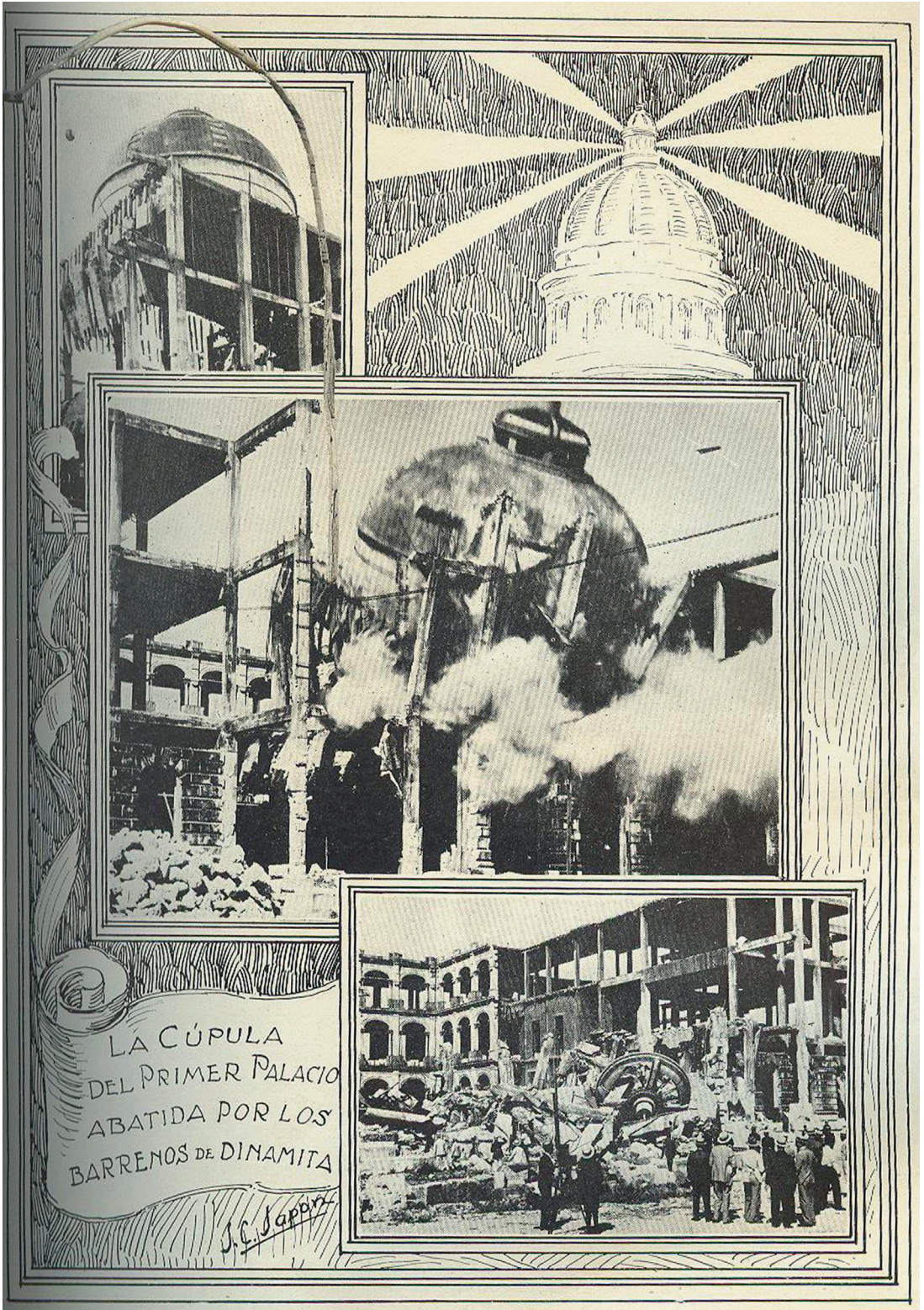


Estudio del arquitecto Félix Cabarrocas adaptando para Capitolio el proyecto de Palacio Presidencial que se estaba construyendo.





1.5 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *La Montaña rusa del parque de diversiones establecida en los terrenos de la Estación de Villanueva al abandonarse las obras del primer proyecto para Palacio del Congreso and Aspecto del parque de diversiones que durante la administración del Dr. Zayas, se estableció en los terrenos de Villanueva al ser abandonadas las obras del Palacio del Congreso*, photograph, circa 1925. Found in Céspedes, *Libro del Capitolio*, 86.
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1.6 J. C. Japan, photomontage featuring Joaquín Blez, *Demolition of First Dome*, photograph. Found in Special Issue of *El Arquitecto* May 20, 1929, p. 57.

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the old dome of the original republican palace collapses in a plume of dust, demolished by dynamite to make room for the nation's new and first legislative building.³¹ Government corruption and commercial exploitation soon occupied those ruins. But the symbolic act signaled the beginnings of El Capitolio and its phantasmal promise: to replace the infrastructure of trains and modern consumerism with the simulacra of classical, republican values.

Through photography, industrialization, and consumer culture, the history and prehistory of El Capitolio married philosophic questions of simulacra in modernism to debates over art and technology in the age of mechanical reproduction.³² The story of El Capitolio emerged out of a history of cultural reproductions in Cuba and worldwide, whose characteristics the machadato shared with their "opponents" in the Cuban Vanguardia. As was the case for Cuba's avant-garde and the art world of the 1920s, the regime's neoclassic building offered a mimetic stew of modernization, nationalism, and the collective dreamworlds of capitalism and modernity. The classical-looking form of the Cuban Capitol, swiftly made with industrial materials of concrete and steel, even almost paralleled cultural theorist Walter Benjamin's notion of artistic "aura" and its loss in modernist film and photography. Just as photography (artistic and documentary) claimed to replicate reality while also imitating the compositional techniques of old master paintings, Havana's modern temple invoked but ultimately lacked the ritualistic uses of its historical sources. Rather, Cuba's rapidly manufactured Capitolio materialized itself out of the practice of politics in the twentieth century. It simulated the experience of republican space, as it confused political fact with fantasy. In so doing, the building gestured at a renegotiation of modernity in terms of the ambivalent relationship between model and copy.³³ El Capitolio was a refracted monument of Cuban nationhood, born in the age of mechanical reproduction. Formal analysis of El Capitolio and its urban context reveals the opacities that defined both the building and its relationship to cultural politics.

LIGHTHOUSE, GIANTESS, DIAMOND, GARDEN

El Capitolio is a four-story building made of a concrete base, steel frame, marble, and Cuban limestone known as "piedra de Capellanía." It is enclosed in a large quadrilateral urban space between the Prado Boulevard and the streets Dragones, José de San Martín, and Industria.³⁴ Viewed at a distance from the east in the old colonial district of La Habana Vieja or from the newer El Vedado neighborhood to the west, the two-hundred-meter-long Capitol building rises like a stone goliath over the low two- or three-story buildings that occupy most of Havana's skyline. Miles out to sea, the tourist approaching the island's northern coast can make out the building's 91.73-meter-tall domed copula.³⁵ Before the Cuban Revolution of 1959, this copula housed five rotatable reflectors that transmitted a beam of light brilliant enough, stories tell with some exaggeration, to be seen off the coast of Florida.³⁶



1.7 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *Centellador on Top of El Capitolio*, Havana, Cuba. From *Album fotográfico de los actos celebrados*, photograph, 1929. Courtesy of the Wolfsonian, Miami Beach, Florida.

As civic temple and lighthouse both, El Capitolio engaged a symbolic discourse between visibility and surveillance during the machadato. The lit dome at night made El Capitolio a sight to behold. It also allowed the building to return the onlooker's view, to project itself as light into the city below. German cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch once observed, following French poet Gaston Bachelard: "Everything that casts a light sees."³⁷ In that sense, the bright lights of El Capitolio embedded themselves in a system of "surveillance, counter-surveillance, and mutual surveillance" during the machadato.³⁸ Epitomizing that system was *la Porra*: plainclothed agents deployed by the regime to watch, harass, and, even at times, murder dissidents. Machado's surveillance state took an equally threatening if not more conceptual form in a 1929 government photograph of the Capitolio at night (Fig. 1.7). In the image, the bright white Capitolio sends out beams of light from its copula. Grey diagonal lines cut through a dark, black sky. Beneath the beams, newly installed street lamps transform the urban core around the building into a scene of will-o'-the-wisps and shadow. The photograph shows

how the machadato sees and is seen through El Capitolio, even in darkness. The building simulates the omnipresent vision of the Cuban state.³⁹ Tread carefully, for even the streetlamps are watching.

El Capitolio possessed more than luster and bulk, though. A closer examination reveals the harmonic disposition of that stone giant. Two adjacent hemicycles, originally intended to house the Cuban Senate and Congress, lend the building its monumental symmetry. Metopes sculpted in bas-relief by various artists adorn the eastern front of those wings. They include works by Cuban artists Juan José Sicre, Alberto Sabas, and Esteban Betancourt (famous for their sculptural works throughout Havana and the twentieth century, from the Barcardí Building to the José Martí memorial); and international artists like the French Leon Droucker, the Italian Gianni Remuzzi, and the Belgian Richard Struyf. Working in a corporate effort and following then popular models of neoclassicism and art deco, the artists' individual works meld together on the walls of El Capitolio. A similar thematic blending happens in the scenes of national life depicted on the metopes. Universal and local ideals intermingle. Family and commerce appear next to Cuban agricultural products like pineapple, tobacco, and sugar cane (Fig. 1.8). The images carry haunting colonial resonances, too. Seminude, class-cized indigenous servants farm and sow seeds. Beautified slaves gather sugar and tobacco.⁴⁰

The decorated hemicycles flank an elaborate eastern facade, while a humbler entrance designed for convenient automobile access lies to the west. Both entrances situate themselves on the same axis as the copula, which occupies the center of the building along with two interior courtyards. These courtyards, a student of typologies may observe, emerge from the Spanish-then-Cuban tradition of the *patio*—an open-air space commonly placed in the center of colonial homes to facilitate the movement of wind and the entrance of light.⁴¹ The central facade, the impressive eastern face of the building, consists of a temple-like portico and an imposing *Escalinata*, a massive staircase of fifty-five steps ascending through three platforms. Two colossal bronze sculptures by the Italian artist Angelo Zanelli frame these stairs on either side. Each measures six and a half meters tall. On the left stands *Work* (*El Trabajo*) and on the right *The Tutelary Virtue of the People* (*La Virtud Tutelar del Pueblo*), both embodied in human form as a seminude Greco-Roman man and woman, respectively (Fig. 1.9–10).

The figures stand before the massive portico of El Capitolio, made of two symmetrical rows of twelve granite Corinthian-style columns, over fourteen meters tall. Beyond the portico are three large bronze doors with bas-reliefs designed largely by the Cuban artist Enrique García Cabrera. They depict scenes from Cuba's national history and ex-presidents, including two panels with Machado, now disfigured. Above the doors are two grand marble friezes with bas-reliefs also by the Italian Zanelli. They depict mythical and allegorical scenes of war and peace.



1.8 Leon Droucker, *Sugar Harvest Metope on El Capitolio*, marble, bas-relief, circa 1929. Author's photograph, 2018.

These grand doors open onto an elegantly decorated interior space, known as the *Salon de los Pasos Perdidos* (*Hall of the Lost Steps*), so called for its acoustic effects. This sound-swallowing space serves as the main artery between the two hemicycles on either side.⁴²

In this domed hall Machado began his second term. He was sworn in at the foot of a fifteen-meter-tall bronze giantess, again by Zanelli, known as the Statue of the Republic (*La Estatua de la República*), or simply *La República* (Fig. 1.11). As Cuban news media proudly announced, the figure was the second tallest interior statue in the world at the time.⁴³ The sculpture itself represents a lightly clad woman whose features fall somewhere between art nouveau and neoclassical: sexualized yet austere. The inspiration for the republican symbol, Cuban sources observed, came from Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of war and wisdom and patron deity of ancient Athens. Despite the statue's European figural type, Zanelli was careful to match the phenotypes of Cuba's citizenry in his execution of *La República*. According to recent news reports, two Cuban women, a white, elite *criolla* (Cuban-born woman) and a mixed-race *mulata* posed as models for



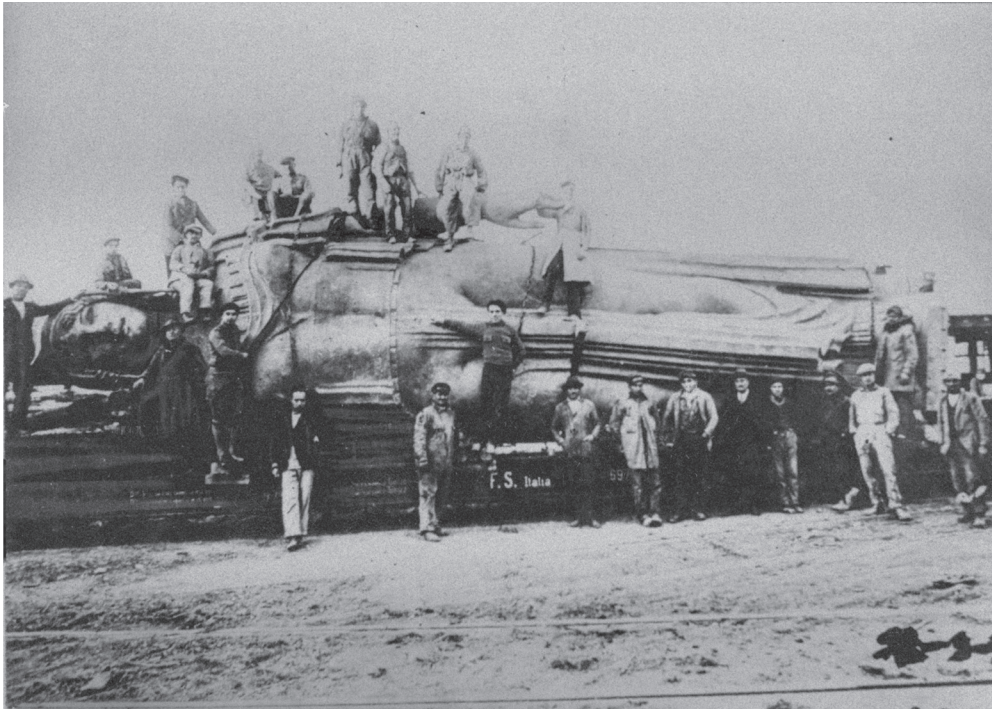
1.9 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *Escultura de Zanelli simbolizando el esfuerzo humano, en la gran escalinata* (Sculpture by Angelo Zanelli symbolizing human spirit, in the great staircase), photograph, circa 1929. Found in Céspedes, Libro del Capitolio, 309.



1.10 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *Escultura de Zanelli representando la virtud tutelar del pueblo en la gran escalinata* (Sculpture by Angelo Zanelli representing the Tutelary Virtue of the People on the grand staircase), photograph, circa 1929. Found in Céspedes, Libro del Capitolio, 311.



1.11 Cuba's Office of Public Works, Republica de Cuba, Capitolio Nacional, Rotonda y Estatua de la Republica en el "Salon de los Pasos Perdidos", photograph, May 20, 1931. Courtesy of la Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana. OHCH Centro de Documentación de la Empresa de Proyectos de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, RESTAURA.

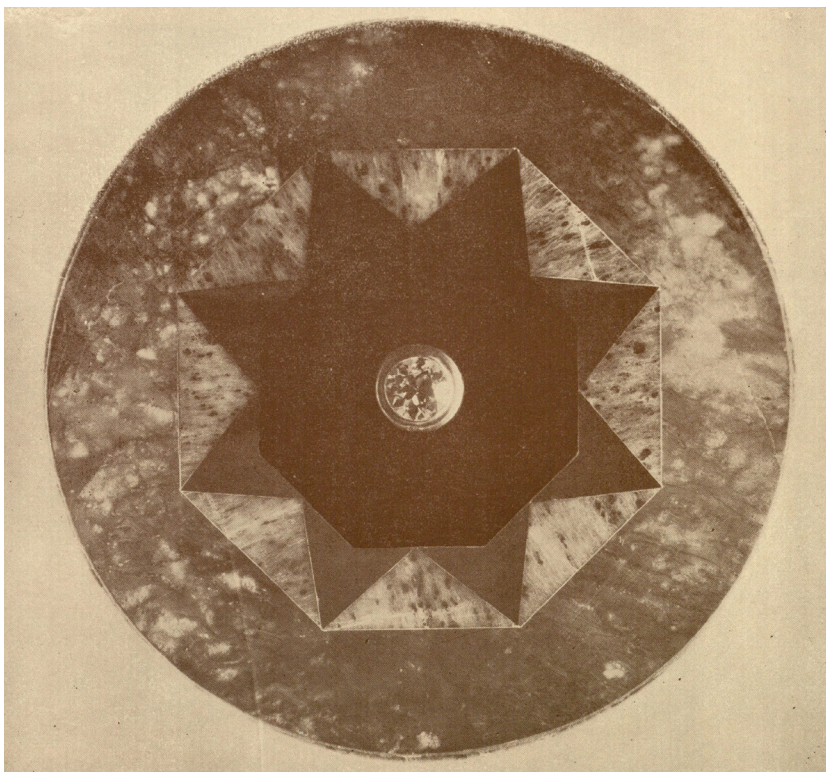


1.12 *Angelo Zanelli and twenty-four workers around the Statue of the Republic at Zanelli's studio in Rome, photograph, circa 1929. Courtesy of Jorge Oller Oller.*

Zanelli—a significant fact in terms of Cuba's multiracial identity to which we shall return in chapter 2.⁴⁴

With this larger-than-life admixture of Cuba's racially and socially diverse citizenry along with the mythological, Western ideals represented by the goddess Athena, Zanelli's nearly fifty-foot woman fit well in Machado's "Capitol of Fiction." The success of the Cuban Republic conflated itself with the colossal scale of its capitol building and Zanelli's massive Statue of the Republic. Zanelli's sculpture was so grand he had to cast *La República* in Rome in three separate bronze pieces. These were then covered with twenty-two carats of gold weighing forty-nine tons in all. It took fourteen massive crates to ship the monumental statue and its companion pieces from Rome to Havana, where it was later assembled inside El Capitolio. In a scene like Gulliver before the Lilliputians, a 1928 photograph taken in Rome shows Zanelli and twenty-four workers around the upper body of the grand Cuban sculpture (Fig. 1.12).⁴⁵

La República embodies a Titaness—tied, captive, and ready to sail, it seems, to a nation of equal proportion. Certainly, this supersized rhetoric spoke to Cuban and foreign audiences alike. At least since the nineteenth century, modern



1.13 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *El Brillante*, photograph circa 1931. Found in Céspedes, *Libro del Capitolio*, 327.

nations have defined their success through a misleadingly simplistic equation of height with progress.⁴⁶ Cuba's domed Capitolio and its gigantic statue engaged a similar rhetoric to that of Paris' Eiffel Tower or New York's Statue of Liberty. In a word: size mattered.

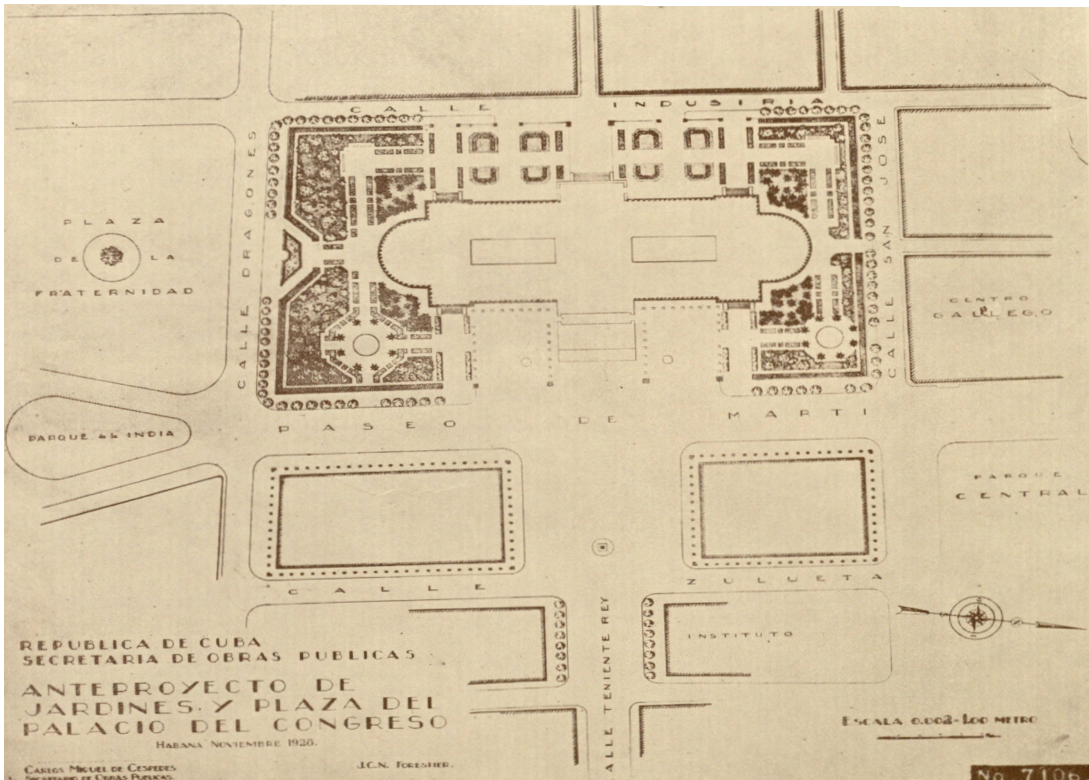
There was more outsized grandeur in that majestic hall. A great twenty-four-carat diamond, *El Brillante* (*The Gemstone*), was later set within a bronze star-shaped frame in the center of El Capitolio's rotunda in 1931 (Fig. 1.13).⁴⁷ Legend has it that the diamond originally adorned the second crown of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. A Turkish jeweler, Isaac Estéfano, purchased the diamond in Paris and brought it to Cuba at the end of the First World War. The merchant believed the jewel cursed. While in possession of it, Estéfano had to shutter his jewelry business in Havana after being brutally robbed. The jeweler sold the diamond to the Cuban government for nearly twelve thousand pesos. Inspired by the integration of monuments and infrastructure in the Roman Empire, the designers of El Capitolio purchased the gemstone to mark Kilometer Zero on Cuba's newly built Central Highway (*La carretera central*). Largely constructed during Machado's



1.14 (Advertisement for Bacardi rum, *El Diario de la Marina*, May 26, 1929. Courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba Jose Marti.

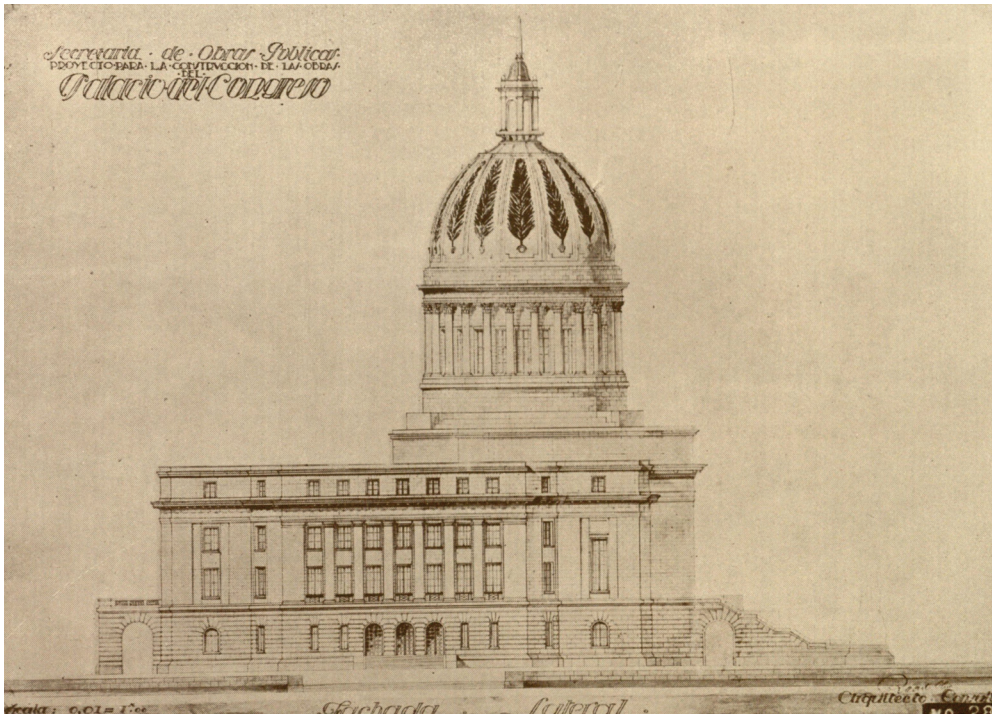
first term, the highway stretched east to west from Pinar del Río to Santiago de Cuba. It effectively wove all parts of the mainland through Havana, the nation's capital. The road also connected via ferry to U.S. Highway 1, which still runs from Maine to the tip of Florida. El Capitolio's gigantic diamond united the commercial progress of the Cuban and U.S. highways to the symbolic architecture of the Machado regime. The diamond was the beginning and end for the Central Highway and Machado's Cuba. It evoked the economic life of U.S.-style consumerism, and simultaneously marked El Capitolio as the symbolic center of the nation.

The celebration for the highway's inauguration coincided with the installation of the Cuban Congress in El Capitolio, February 24, 1931.⁴⁸ In that spatial and political arrangement, the dream of a sovereign Cuban nation converged with the tourist's dream vacation. That ongoing tension between Cuban nationalism and international consumerism was well encapsulated at the time in an ad for Bacardi rum, which appeared in a *Diario de la Marina* issue dedicated to Machado's second term and El Capitolio's inauguration. The advertisement juxtaposed El Capitolio's majestic dome with a bottle of rum (Fig. 1.14). In a clever visual play, national monument and consumer product stand at equal height. The dome shrinks as the bottle grows.



1.15 Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier, *Ante-proyecto de los jardines (Plan for the gardens)*, design sketch circa 1925. Found in Céspedes, *Libro del Capitolio*, 127.

Highways and diamonds, domes and colossi: Machado began his second term within the majestic halls of El Capitolio with good reason. After all, the construction of El Capitolio and the highway were a matter of public policy. The regime’s public works agenda transformed Cuba, and most of all Havana. As El Capitolio came into being, the urban space around it took a new form. The building rested in an island of newly designed gardens, parks, and parkways, reminiscent of a tropical and urban Versailles in miniature. The resemblance was no coincidence. French urbanist Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier, with a team of Cuban and French architects and engineers, had designed and installed that system of parks in Havana, including El Capitolio’s gardens, between 1925 and 1930.⁴⁹ The Capitolio gardens, like the parks being built throughout the city, featured Cuban trees and fauna arranged according to the design principles of the French Beaux-Arts and the American City Beautiful Movement. Indigenous plants in straight lines and terrazzo paths of white, grey, and black surrounded the building (Fig. 1.15). A network of Cuban flowers (purple *lantanas*, red and yellow *cannas*, and vi-



1.16 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *El Capitolio—Un Anteproyecto de la fachada lateral (El Capitolio—a design sketch of the lateral facade)*, black-and-white sketch, circa 1925. Found in Céspedes, *Libro del Capitolio*, 95.

olet *embelesos*) framed El Capitolio. Gatherings of royal palms—Cuba's national tree—marked the four corners of the building's rectilinear gardens.

Those living trees memorialized, in a sense, Cuban architect Raúl Otero's earliest design sketches for El Capitolio's iconic dome. Designed in collaboration with French architects on Forestier's team, Theodore Leveau and Louis Heitzler, Otero's widely published proposal showed a plan to surround the building's cupola with sixteen bronze palm fronds (Fig. 1.16).⁵⁰ The design never came to fruition owing to the mounting costs of goods and labor. But the living gardens of El Capitolio offered a complementary vision to that of Otero's palm-laden dome. In both cases, architectural classicism aimed to tame Cuba's wild tropicality within a utopic and ordered urban environment.

The gardens of El Capitolio marked an important node in a much larger project to control and arrange the heterogeneous, racially and socially complex social landscapes of Havana. The "tropical" masterplan of Forestier's team, officially titled the "Havana City Project" (1926), envisioned a grand proposal for extensive urban reform.⁵¹ The project called for a citywide network of axial boulevards and extensive parks. Following the tenets of garden city design popular at the time,

Forestier's team viewed those urban parks as natural remedies to the widespread moral degradations associated with the modern city.⁵² The same parks, as though rehearsing the colonial episteme, conflated the moral good of the Cuban nation with its natural bounties: Ceiba trees, royal palms, and native flowers.

The machadato, no doubt, chose Forestier to head that urban reform project because of his reputation. The French urbanist began his career with landscape architect Adolphe Alphand, a collaborator in Georges-Eugène Haussmann's renovation of Paris in the late nineteenth century. Forestier had worked for some forty years in places as far-flung as France, Spain, Morocco, and Argentina before arriving in Havana.⁵³ What's more, and perhaps equally important, Forestier had connections to local business interests in Cuba. Enrique Connill, who owned several pieces of prime real estate in the Cuban city, had facilitated the architect's initial hire under the Menocal administration a decade earlier in 1918. Forestier redesigned the area around the Castillo de San Salvador de la Punta of Old Havana at the time. Perhaps less than coincidentally, in their urban plans of 1926, the French architect and his team proposed shifting Havana's civic center to a hill in El Vedado owned by Connill (La loma de los Catalanes).⁵⁴ Machado's Secretary of Public Works later claimed that the Frenchman's selection was due to a direct endorsement by the French Minister of Culture.⁵⁵ But Forestier's contract probably had as much to do with his decades-old connections to Havana's wealthy classes and political elites.

Questions linger surrounding Forestier's exact role in Cuban architectural history. The embittered Cuban urbanist Pedro Martínez Inclán went so far as to claim that Forestier had based his 1926 urban plans on the Cuban architect's original proposals from 1919.⁵⁶ And the execution of the "Havana City Project" during the machadato surely resulted from the hard work of Forestier's young Cuban and French team (all in their twenties and thirties) as much as the sexagenarian "master of gardens," who was nearing retirement and ultimately died in 1930.⁵⁷ Regardless, the urban landscapes that rose out of those collaborations between French and Cuban talent offered an indisputable contribution to the history of Havana. The team's masterplan attempted, and in some ways succeeded, at transforming Havana into a modern capital, replete with traditionalist architecture, Beaux-Arts landscapes, and great domed government centers.

Not just replicating French and American styles, that same masterplan also drew from Spanish colonial practices, described already in the Law of the Indies (*Leyes de las Indias*) of 1680.⁵⁸ Those mandates, aimed at controlling the hybrid and nonwhite populations of the colonial urban sphere, called for all cities in the empire to be arranged as a grid around a central plaza: the nexus of religious and secular power in the viceregal city. Echoing Spanish colonial traditions, the "Havana City Project" likewise featured two large (and ultimately unfinished) axial boulevards, intersecting in a cross formation at the newly proposed civic center

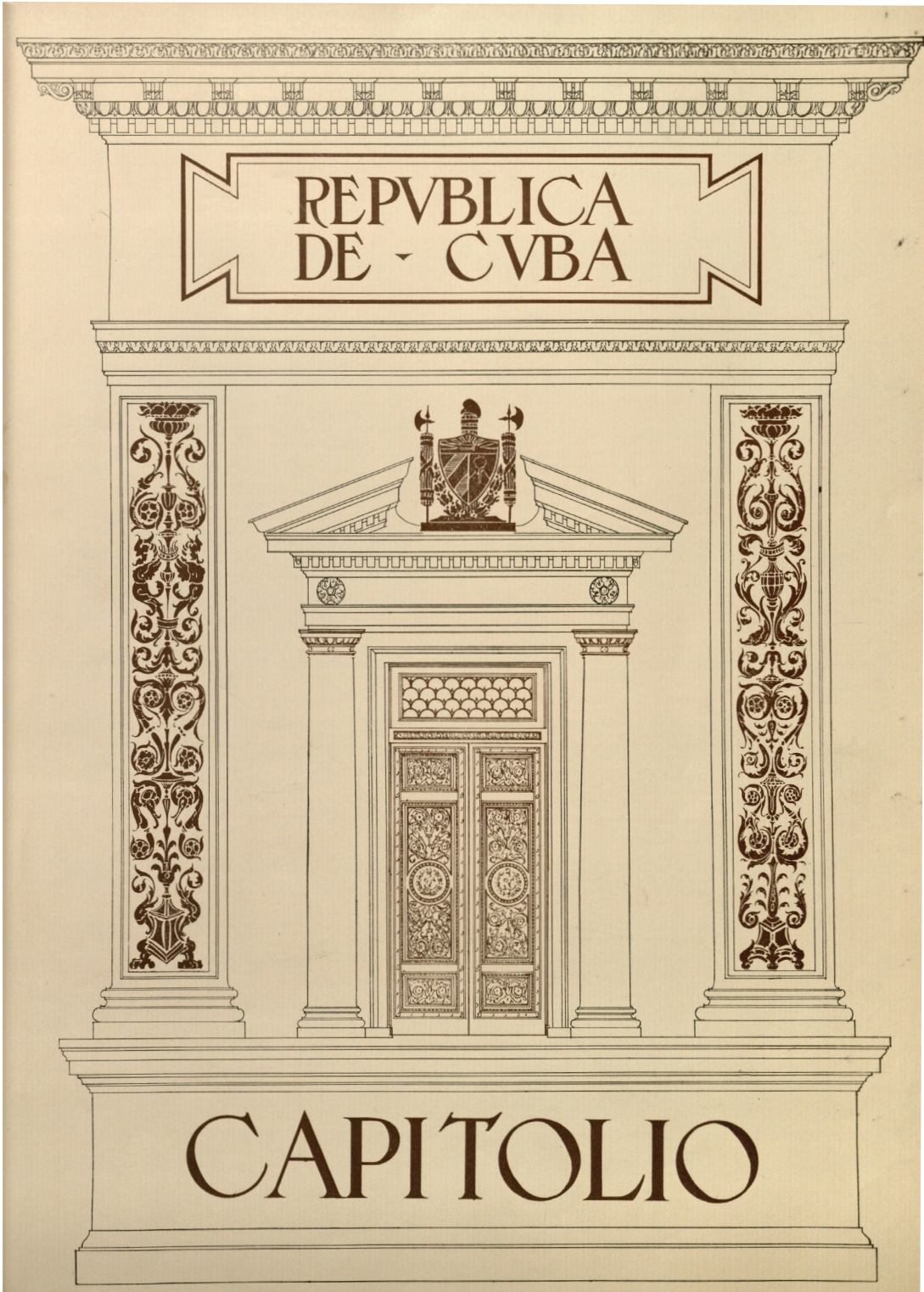
of El Vedado. As an extant architectural monument, the gardens of El Capitolio represented an integral component of that unrealized plan to reform Havana's urban space. It spoke in multiple geographic and temporal terms, whether "French," "American," "Spanish," or "Cuban." The gardens that emerged around the building rearticulated the same ephemeral vision of Cuba Libre as El Capitolio. In so doing, the building and its gardens resounded the age-old colonialist and imperialist histories that have long defined the monument's site: From bogs and botanicals to abandoned palace to recreational theme park, then neoclassic Capitol building and Beaux-Arts gardens.

A BOOK, A BUILDING, AND A CIRCLE OF DREAMS

The current Cuban government now works to revive and maintain the old gardens of El Capitolio, Abandoned and left fallow immediately after the Revolution of 1959, using texts and photographs from the late 1920s and 1930s. Many of these visual and textual materials first appeared in a 730-page tome titled *Libro del Capitolio* (The Capitolio book). The Havana-based Typographic Studios of P. Fernández y Cía printed the book as a limited edition in 1933. The exact distribution amount remains unclear. Only a handful of costly copies exist today. The *Libro* glorified El Capitolio and its simulation of republicanism. It showcased full-page photographs, legal documents, original design sketches, contracts, and even copies of the multiple Cuban constitutions written between 1868 and 1901. The photographs carried no attributions. Instead, they represented a corporate effort of Cuba's Office of Public Works and the newly formed Department of Photography, then headed by Manuel Martínez Illa and Valentin Rivero. We shall return to discuss the works produced by that department, and especially its director Martínez Illa, in later chapters.

Suffice it to say in this case: with photos and testimonials, the *Libro del Capitolio* offered a textual and visual reprise of the Cuban Capitol and the imagined republic for which it stood. Secretary of Works Carlos Miguel de Céspedes confirmed that the *Libro* "perpetuates in words that which El Capitolio perpetuates and symbolizes in stone."⁵⁹ The book and the building were political tools, manifesting a vision of Machado's Cuba. As a textual and photographic simulation of the Capitol building and its grounds, the book effectively conjured a simulacrum of a simulacrum, a phantom of a phantom. In his 1940 tale *The Circular Ruins*, Argentine fabulist Jorge Luis Borges once wrote of a wizard who dreamed into existence another man, only to discover that he himself was a dream. Like the self-actualizing wizards of Borges's parable, the *Libro* bound El Capitolio, the Cuban Republic, and the machadato into a knot of materiality and unreality impossible to loosen fully. The book was a factory of duplicating metaphors: building, image, nation, Machado.⁶⁰

The 1933 *Libro* begins with a printed frontispiece of a viceregal double door-



1.17 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *República de Cuba: Capitolio*, black-and-white printed frontispiece, 1933. Found in Céspedes, *Libro del Capitolio*, 1.

way similar to the one in the *Salón de los Pasos Perdidos* ornamented with the Cuban crest (Fig. 1.17).⁶¹ The frieze above that heraldic image of Cuban nationhood bears the phrase *República de Cuba*. On a pediment below appears the name *Capitolio*. In this composite image, the Cuban Republic and the capitol building share a single form. They are two aspects of one imagined space. In a subtle way, the printed image suggests that *El Capitolio* is more than a copy of some “original” model from Italy, the United States, or France. In point of fact, it acts as a stand-in for an idea or, better stated, an ideal—the Republic of Cuba itself. The stones and marbles of the capitol building raise a phantasm of an idyllic Cuban Republic: a ghostly haunt during the machadato.

The book verbalizes and visualizes the practice of politics inherent in the form of the Cuban capitol building. Not surprisingly, after a lengthy index, the first photograph one encounters is a half-length portrait of Machado himself, stoically gazing rightward through his iconic round black glasses (Fig. 1.18). On the following page appears a glamor shot of his minister, Céspedes, self-possessed and smiling coquettishly at the camera in a set of matching black frames (Fig. 1.19). Behind these two self-fashioned masterminds of *El Capitolio*, and implicitly the Cuban Republic, come photographs of the 1933 heads of the Cuban Senate and Congress, Clemente Vazquez Bello and Rafael Guas Inclán.⁶² This self-serving collection of images spoke to a basic assumption upon which the Machado regime hedged its bets. *El Capitolio* simulated a healthy republic. It provided a space for law and order in Cuba’s fledgling democracy. The two men at the head of this young nation, the stoic and the flirt, tied their political identities to the building and the republican ideals it appeared to articulate.

Following these well-placed photographs, the remainder of the 1933 book is organized in several sections, principally divided between the history of the building and the history of the Republic. In the coverage of the building, the first section examines *El Capitolio*’s prehistory, the second looks to the building’s construction process, and the third describes the interior and exterior of the finished form. The remaining three-hundred-plus pages of the book are filled with essays on constitutional life as well as historic documents on the nation, the Senate, and the Congress.

Photographs enliven each section of the *Libro*. They offer a profound material trace of the Machado era. The printed images, mechanically captured light and shadow, possess their own stakes and illusory meanings, which are difficult to parse from the rhetorics of *El Capitolio* and the other public works of the machadato.⁶³ Photographs of men at work bring the sometimes harrowing building process to life, while busts of famous independence heroes and present-day politicians give a face to the Cuban Republic of 1933.⁶⁴ Other photographs from the *Libro* call attention to *El Capitolio*’s state-of-the-art amenities—brand-new elevators, modern toilets, a fine barbershop, and a classy, top-floor restaurant. The pro-



1.18 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *General Gerardo Machado y Morales*, photograph, circa 1933. Found in Céspedes, *Libro del Capitolio*, 11.

pagandistic message for foreign and local audiences: El Capitolio, like the nation, represents both the vanguard of modernity and the age-old traditions of Cuba.

Photographs and textual elements from the *Libro* formed a vision of the Cuban capitol building and the republic it counterfeited. In a circular manner, the book and building served together as dual-simulacra of republican space—phys-



1.19 Cuba's Office of Public Works, Dr. Carlos Miguel de Céspedes, photograph, circa 1933. Found in Céspedes, *Libro del Capitolio*, 13.

ical artifacts of an imagined Cuba. Like the wizard of Borges's tale, El Capitolio (with its book and photo documents) unwittingly oscillated in a circle of simulacra, found in its form and history. In a formal sense, the building's shape recalled the spirit of other buildings, which in turn found their shadows in even earlier forms. Indeed, the Greco-Roman U.S. Capitol building, the Pantheon of Paris,

or St. Peter's Basilica could just as easily be called simulacra themselves. They all simulated the fantasy of the Roman Republic and Empire. The Romans, in turn, replicated the grandeur of both the Etruscans and the Greeks. Ancient Greece, for its part, looked to the spirit of Mycenae and Egypt. In that vortex of imitation and adaption, one begins to understand what so concerned Plato and what yet fascinates art historians like Camille (and myself), as the original and the copy ultimately collapse into a transhistorical sea of fantasy wrought from desire. El Capitolio thus may well have been, and still is, a dream of a dream, a copy of a copy. But it is also a Cuban dream, whose context quells any uncertainties implicit in the aesthetic debates that may surround its form.

CODA: THE PHANTOM OF EL CAPITOLIO LIVES

El Capitolio holds sway in the Cuban political imaginary even today. After the Revolution of 1959, Fidel Castro's government demoted El Capitolio from the seat of the Cuban Senate and Congress to that of the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment (Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología, y Medio Ambiente).⁶⁵ In official terms, the building stood as an artifact of bourgeois excess, Yankee imperialism, and republican-era dictators. It seemed more suitable as a site for tourism than emancipatory politics. El Capitolio bore those connotations since its inception. Already in 1939, Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, Havana's city historian and member of the anti-Machado and avant-garde Grupo Minorista, bluntly condemned the building. He stated in acerbic terms that El Capitolio "is an over-the-top display of consumption, both in the building itself and in the nouveau riche frills displayed within. Quite simply, it contradicts those sincere democratic ideals pursued by the apostles, heroes and martyrs of the Revolution for Independence, which surely they had intended to continue as the basic norms of our republican society."⁶⁶ It is hardly surprising that decades later the Castro administration would choose to strip El Capitolio of its role in Cuban governance. Instead, the Museum of Natural Sciences, as though reviving the botanical garden of the nineteenth century, came to occupy the interior of the building in the 1960s. It included a dubious Soviet-era display of archaeology and anthropology under the umbrella of "nature," and then "primitive Communism" from the 1970s into the 1990s.⁶⁷ The building itself was largely left to molder on the edge of Havana's city center, save for some essential maintenance.⁶⁸

That is, until recently. The Soviet Union's dissolution in the 1990s created a decade-long economic collapse in Cuba, known as "the Special Period." Searching for new sources of revenue, the Castro regime began restoring Havana's colonial monuments to attract international tourist dollars. Today, as U.S. cruise ships dock once more in Havana's bay, the government has now decided to reinterpret the architectural monuments of the twentieth century, too, most notably El Capitolio. New things are in store for Havana's white Goliath. El Capitolio is receiv-

ing a much-needed multimillion-dollar makeover by the Cuban government, a project that has lent the building new prominence in the international press. Raúl Castro even announced in 2013 that Cuba's communist parliament would return to El Capitolio's majestic halls. A ceremony to celebrate that political homecoming occurred in 2016. And on February 24, 2018, 89 years after the building's inauguration in 1929 and exactly 123 years after Cuba's War of Independence began in 1895, Castro and Cuban officials held a press conference to honor the building's partial reopening to the public. Cuba's revolutionary president devoted the majority of his speech to praise of El Capitolio's patriotic iconography, including its *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*, a memorial site dedicated to the fallen *mambi* soldiers of Cuba's War of Independence.

That Cuba's revolutionary government would so publicly embrace an architectural icon of Machado's Cuba may have taken some by surprise. Castro's nationalistic praise of El Capitolio would have been almost unthinkable fifty years ago. After all, Havana's domed legislative building looks suspiciously like a U.S.-style government building—hardly an ideal sign for a revolutionary society.⁶⁹ It has an obvious resonance with the Capitol of D.C. (1800) and state capitols like those of Texas (1888) and Minnesota (1905). It also happens to uncannily resemble other legislative buildings, built at almost the same time, throughout the ex-colonies of Spain and then neocolonies of the United States: the Philippines' Legislative Building (1926) and Puerto Rico's own Capitolio, inaugurated the same year as Cuba's (1929).⁷⁰

Transnational, colonial, and imperial memories haunted the building. Though time and economic necessity may have worn down those old connotations, one cannot simply erase colonial or autocratic pasts. Rather, the Castro government's decision to restore and rehabilitate El Capitolio in Cuban statehood must be understood in light of the building's particular and complex history. El Capitolio has served as a stage for Cuban identity politics and even revolution from the beginning.⁷¹ As early as 1892, well before Miguel Gómez, Menocal, Zayas, Machado, or Castro would try over and again to build and rebuild this majestic structure, revolutionaries in Cuba's War of Independence dreamed of Havana's Capitolio too. In the newspaper *Patria*, published in New York by Cuban exile, poet, journalist, and revolutionary José Martí, the poet and painter Rafael Castro Palomino once described an imagined Capitolio, as the seat of a future Cuban Republic. Two weapons of the Cuban revolution would unite in Castro Palomino's vision of El Capitolio: the pen and the sword. As Castro Palomino saw it, "the pen will lift up El Capitolio, the sanctuary of our laws. While the sword," he wrote, "will open paths and create new roads, so that all might have access to this sanctuary."⁷² In Machado's 1929 Capitolio, the seat of Cuba's legislature and Kilometer Zero for the nation's highway, Castro Palomino's vision seemed to have come to fruition.⁷³

Castro Palomino gave voice to an architectonic vision of a future Cuba, a

prophecy likewise foreseen by his friend and compatriot José Martí. Both men embraced the dreamland of Cuba Libre: Free Cuba—a sovereign territory liberated by pen and sword. The phrase “Cuba Libre” first appeared in the Cuban revolution of 1868, known as the Ten Years’ War.⁷⁴ It was the battle cry of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the Cuban planter who freed his slaves and began Cuba’s first fight for independence. A young Martí took up the slogan, as well, after arrest, hard labor, and then exile to Spain for his outspoken views against Spanish rule and slavery in Cuba. In a letter that Martí wrote directly to the prime minister of Spain in 1873 he cried bullocks to the notion of Cuba Española (Spanish Cuba) and “viva” to Cuba Libre (Long live free Cuba).⁷⁵ As Martí saw it, the recently formed Spanish Republic remained a hypocritical democracy—incapable of legitimacy while Cuba continued as a vassal state. After Martí’s death during the Cuban War of Independence in 1895, “Viva Cuba Libre” became the rallying cry of the island’s revolution.⁷⁶ From there it spread north.

Yellow journalists of the United States picked up the phrase and employed it liberally to drum up support for U.S. military intervention in Cuba. With pressure at home, following reports of brutal Spanish internment camps and the mysterious explosion of the U.S.S. *Maine* in Cuban waters, President William McKinley took sides with Cuban rebels and declared war against Spain on April 15, 1898. Soon U.S. soldiers, including Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders, cried “Cuba Libre!” as they charged into battle. After U.S. victory and Cuba’s liberation, the revolutionary phrase quickly took on a commercial meaning. It became the name of a Caribbean mixed drink made of Coke and rum, still called Cuba Libre today. Legend has it that a U.S. soldier invented the drink in Cuba in 1898.⁷⁷

The critical irony: Cuba Libre, a revolutionary ideal made manifest in El Capitolio, has its own long and sordid history with U.S. imperialism, consumer imaginings, and the formations of the Cuban state. A visual metaphor for that compromised national history offers itself up in a government photograph taken in 1927 (Fig. 1.20). The photo shows us a maquette of El Capitolio, then under construction. The miniature monument is part of a *carroza* (carnival float). It stands next to a comparably gigantic and broken bottle of rum. The entire coach, labeled after Cuba’s Ministry of Works, traverses a barren landscape. Here, we see the afterparty of Cuba Libre during the machadato: a copy of a copy and a shattered container meet together on a destitute highway.

The phantasmagoric power of El Capitolio emerges from that borderland between consumption and patriotism, nation and empire. The Cuban Capitol building, from its conception, has embodied a “look” of long-held nationalist ideals. It is a reified mirage of a free Cuban Republic. In 2019, as it did in 1929, El Capitolio continues to simulate, without necessarily making real, certain nationalist ideals. Or, to appropriate Roland Barthes’s description of Paris’s Eiffel Tower, El



1.20 Cuba's Office of Public Works, *Negociado de Construcciones Civiles y Militares*, *Palacio del Congreso*, *Carrosa del Carnaval de 1927*, no. 552, photograph, Cuba, 1927. Courtesy of OHCH Centro de Documentación de la Empresa de Proyectos de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, RESTAURA.

Capitolio allows the visitor to “participate in a dream of which it is (and this is its originality) much more the crystallizer than the true object.”⁷⁸ El Capitolio is the simulacrum of an imagined republic that has always already existed—whose history is made invisible by the material monumentality of the structure itself. The association of El Capitolio with Machado and later Batista tainted the building’s republican ideals, but time has also blurred and turned to stain those old regimes. Only the fantasy of a free and fully sovereign Cuban nation lives on. Perhaps that is why, in an echo of Machado’s efforts to build El Capitolio at all costs, the current Cuban government was (and is still) willing to spend millions to complete its restoration. In that unfolding chapter, the history of El Capitolio comes full circle. A dream of a dream of Cuba Libre rises once more over Havana and its citizenry. It remains as beguiling and indeterminate as ever (Fig. 1.21).



1.21 Frontal View of Capitolio. Author's photograph, 2013.