



El Capitolio: Símbolo de La Habana y de la nación

La arquitectura como emblema:

Aproximaciones al pasado,
el presente y el futuro del
Capitolio Nacional

Héctor Maseda

La atmósfera que hoy se respira en los alrededores del Capitolio de La Habana es muy diferente a la concebida por quienes tuvieron bajo su responsabilidad la creación de esta obra arquitectónica, construida entre los años 1926 y 1929 en el corazón del entonces Campo de Marte: filas interminables en las que languidecen miles de personas que esperan la guagua o el popular “camello”; vendedores ambulantes que ofrecen cualquier tipo de producto casero, comerciable o no; decenas de policías uniformados acompañados de perros entrenados para detectar drogas, armas u otros artículos no autorizados —que piden constantemente identificación— son el pan de cada día en esta zona de la capital.

El otrora Campo de Marte —área verde refrescante y celosamente atendida años atrás— actualmente se muestra en todo su abandono. La famosa esquina de Monte y Cienfuegos, estimulada con algunos nuevos establecimientos estatales que comercializan en dólares, se ha convertido en punto de contacto de jineteras y proxenetas, quienes acuerdan citas amorosas con turistas que arriban a la Isla en busca de placeres baratos.

ALGO DE HISTORIA Y OTRAS APROXIMACIONES

Los estudios de factibilidad del Capitolio se comenzaron el 15 de marzo de 1926, durante el gobierno del General Gerardo Machado Morales. Las obras concluyeron el 20 de mayo de 1929 y se proyectó un presupuesto original ascendente a 3.5 millones de pesos (que en la época



Fotografía: Jason Jo

guardaban paridad con el dólar estadounidense), lo que no incluía el decorado interior, la preparación de áreas exteriores, las oficinas del Congreso y personales de los parlamentarios, el mobiliario y la urbanización de los accesos al edificio.

Entre el proyecto original y lo que finalmente resultó existen semejanzas generales, pero diferencias en cuanto a dimensiones, calidad de los materiales empleados, distribución interior, ornamentación, decorado y dotación del mobiliario.

La denominación de Capitolio no se adoptó caprichosamente. Fue resultado de una encuesta pública —a modo de referendo—, patrocinada por el entonces Secretario de Obras Públicas, Carlos Miguel de Céspedes.





Al parecer, pesó mucho en la decisión popular el prestigio latino del Capitolio de Roma .

Desde el comienzo de las obras se observaron dificultades no previstas. No era posible utilizar los cimientos de su antecesor (muros, pilares de fuerza y cubiertas), el Palacio del Congreso , tal y como se había pensado, debido a que las nuevas cargas estructurales serían muy superiores a las anteriores.

Las primeras modificaciones se debieron al hecho de que era imposible desarrollar el proyecto de una vez, dada su magnitud. Se observó que los hemiciclos del Senado y la Cámara de Representantes eran reducidos, sin suficiente ventilación e iluminación. Era necesario re proyectarlos en sentido opuesto, es decir, hacia el exterior, por ser una

disposición de mayor funcionalidad y hermosura. Su cúpula respondía a las proporciones iniciales de la obra, pero fue necesario reconsiderar mayor área y altura a la misma. Se estimó que el uso de piedras blandas, cuyo costo era inferior a las de capellaniatura de cincel —como se previó al principio—, no se correspondía con las dimensiones monumentales de la edificación, razón por la cual se eligieron las segundas, que aunque más costosas eran materiales de insuperable calidad y resistencia. El cambio aparejó otros en la búsqueda de la obligada relación constructiva y la seguridad estructural. El pórtico central, la gran escalinata y las secundarias, proyectados en piedra, fueron levantados en granito, así como el zócalo central que rodea el edificio.



The Capitol: A Symbol of Havana and the Cuban Nation

Héctor Maseda¹

Architecture as an emblem:

An approach to the past, present and future
of the National Capitol

The environment around the Capitol in Havana is nowadays quite apart from the purpose of those who were responsible for the creation of this architectural work, built in 1926-29 in the heart of what was then known as Campo de Marte. Now we have there endless lines of languishing people waiting for the guagua (Cubanism for bus) or the popular camello (slang for another means of transportation); street vendors trying to sell any home products, whether marketable or not, and plenty of uniformed policemen, who constantly ask people to produce their identification papers, with their dogs trained to detect illicit drugs, weapons or other unauthorized items. This is the daily routine in this area of the Cuban capital.

The former Campo de Marte is a green, refreshing and well-kept area is now totally neglected. The well-known street corner of Monte and Cienfuegos, somewhat enlivened by several new State merchant establishments that trade in dollars, is the meeting point for jineteras² and pimps who arrange dates with tourists who arrive in Cuba looking for cheap pleasures.

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY AND OTHER APPROACHES

The feasibility studies of the Capitol began on March 15, 1926, during the government of General Gerardo Machado. The work was completed on May 20, 1929. The original projected budget reached the figure of \$3.5 million Cuban pesos (a currency that at that time had par value with the U.S. dollar), not including the interior decoration, the

preparation of the surrounding areas, the Congressional offices and those to be used by senators and congressmen, the furniture, and the urban development of the access ways to reach the building.

There are general similarities between the original project and the finished work, but there are also differences regarding dimensions, quality of the building materials, interior distribution, ornaments and décor, and furniture.

The name of “Capitol” was not lightly chosen. It was the outcome of a public survey, somewhat like a referendum, sponsored by Carlos Miguel de Céspedes, the Secretary of Public Works. It seems that the prestige of the Roman Capitol³ weighed heavily on the popular decision.

Unforeseen difficulties arose since the very beginning of the works. For instance, the foundation of the previous building (the Congressional Palace⁴), including walls, supporting pillars and roof coverings, could not be used because the new structural loads were going to be much heavier than the existing ones.

The first modifications were due to the fact that it was impossible to develop the project all at a time because of its magnitude. It was realized that the hemicycles of the Senate and the House of Representatives were rather small, with poor lighting and ventilation. It was necessary to re-project them in the opposite direction, i.e., towards the exterior of the building, in a more functional and beautiful arrangement. The cupola was faithful to the initial proportions of the projected work, but it became necessary to reconsider the dimensions regarding its area and height.



It was also concluded that using soft stones, cheaper than the chisel capellaniatura stones⁵, did not agree with the monumental dimensions of the building. Therefore, the latter ones were chosen, in spite of their high price, on account of their insuperable quality and resistance. This brought about other changes in the search to establish the necessary relationship with structural safety. The central portico, the majestic stairway and the secondary stairs, initially projected in stone, were erected in granite, and also the central socle that surrounds the building.

The outside décor went through major changes. The best specialists in monumental decoration, from around the world, were consulted. Those in charge of the technical and artistic management of the Capitol supervised all the projects. The bronze statues sculpted by Zanelli, the famous Italian master; the bas-reliefs; the huge metallic doors, and the sculptures carved in stone and marble, located in front of the building, had not been included in the initial budget. French and Italian artists were hired to make those sculptures.

The floors were also changed. To this effect, the best and more expensive materials were bought, including different types of marble showing 58 different colors. The furniture was modified as well in order to enhance the décor, and all this entailed a remarkable increase of the costs. The kitchen, the central refrigeration, the ventilation equipment and the dehumidifiers of both hemicycles, as well as the outside lighting and many other details, also entailed great

additional expense. The same thing happened with the chandeliers, lamps and appliques cast in bronze. Furthermore, many valuable art works were added, whose value would increase even more with the passing of time.

To summarize it all, the total cost of the Cuban Capitol reached the figure of 16,640,730.00 Cuban pesos, quite a fortune at that time.

We hope that, after the changes that took place inside the Capitol during the last 44 years (such as the locations of the National Library of Scientific and Technical Studies; the Museum “Felipe Poey” of Natural Sciences, and the central offices, laboratories and workshops of the Cuban Ministry of Science, Technology and Environmental Affairs, among other minor adaptations) the art works and other priceless objects that were in the Capitol, perhaps are still there or in other safe places, and not in the residences of foreign collectors, corrupt politicians or elsewhere ... Who knows?⁶

There were several famous capitols in the ancient past, in cities such as Carrabona, Antioquía, Catua, Pompeya and Ravenna, and nowadays we have capitols in Washington, Buenos Aires, Toulouse and Havana. The latter shows still its monumental majesty, although perhaps has lost some of the beauty and splendor it had during its first three decades.

Nevertheless, the Capitol still stays there as a watchtower over the hopes and strong aspirations of the Cuban people, at least of all those Cubans who see in the Capitol a symbol of the city and the Nation.

1 The author of this article, a Cuban independent journalist, is a member of the “Decoro” task force. He entrusted to us a valuable article on account of its realistic criticism about the current social environment of the Cuban Capitol. (Antonio Ramos Zúñiga, a specialist on the Cuban cultural heritage, contributed all the following footnotes.)

2 A Cuban idiomatic word used to identify nowadays street prostitutes in Cuba.

3 According to some writers, President Machado gave specific directions to build the Capitol according to the precedent of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., although larger than this in the diameter of the cupola.

4 The author probably refers to an unfinished building of 1912-1921, based on a project of Architect Eugenio Rayneri Sorrentino and his son, also an architect. Several projects were involved in the construction of the Cuban Capitol, from the beginning until its completion in 1929. The final 1926 project, ordered by President Machado, was in charge of the firm of architects of Félix Cabarrocas and Evelio Govantes. Other architects, however, also took part in the executive and redesigning tasks,

including Raúl Otero, Eugenio Rayneri Piedra, Mario Romañach Sr., José Bens and the French architects Jean C. Forestier and Theo Leveau. The North American contractor company of Purdy & Henderson was in charge of the construction of the building, considered as one of the six most elegant monumental palaces in the world.

5 The word “capellaniatura” refers to the so called “piedra de capellanía” (“capellanía” stone), the building material most widely used in the construction of the Cuban Capitol.

6 The Capitol very sadly, did lose one of its most valuable jewels: the Library of Congress, dismantled in 1986 under orders of Rosa Elena Simeón, with the approval of the authorities of the Cultural Heritage Office. Thousands of books and documents were to the garbage dump or are in the possession of different individuals. This is an aggression against our Cuban heritage, and we have denounced it several times. Please refer to our article “Cuban national heritage: destruction and safeguard”, published in *Herencia*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Miami, Florida, 1996, pp. 10-11.

