

Little New York

by Melisa Vargas

The Dominican Republic reflects a long history of the United States impositions and influence on Latin America. Today the country builds its image on a clumsy idea of progress, in a collective dream that its society synthesizes in the image of one city: New York.

Santo Domingo was the first city the Spanish colonizers founded on the continent back in the 1500s, it is the capital of the country and today its most important urban center where 2.3 million Dominicans (25% of the population) live. In general the country had a troubled history. A past that, similar to other parts of Latin America has shifted from colonialism, failed and successful independences, annexionism, U.S. military invasions, dictatorships, revolutions, corruption and the now well established neo-liberal aftertaste of all of them fused and diffused. Social difference became the distinctive character of the second half of the century and political oligarchies institutionalized corruption as the *modus operandi* of the government and turned it into a capitalist machine.

In the face of a declining agricultural economy, people from all parts of the countryside saw the city as the only space of survival. A migration process started and the capital, as well as other important centers grew in size and population. The United States entered the Dominican collective imagination via cable television in the late 80's and morphed into the "Dominican Dream". Since then, New York represents for many Dominicans a social and economic utopia; first as a promised land but later also as a cultural and social model.

The city still is the number one destination for Dominican emigrants. Today New York City is home to more than half a million Dominicans who form the second largest Hispanic group in New York City, following the Puerto Ricans. New York is the 3rd largest city of the Dominican Republic, in terms of population and but also in economical and social terms: in 2005 the country received US \$2.7 billions through direct money transfers from expatriates (around US \$301.35 per capita), out of which a 53.2% live in New York. The money sent directly from the "Dominican-Yorks" (1) represents 18.6% of Dominican Republic's GDP. Dominicans in New York have their own socio-spatial culture, Washington Heights, a neighborhood located at north-west of Manhattan, is known for Dominican restaurants, sings in Spanish (preferably with the use of Dominican slang) and for being a welcoming piece of home for the newly arrived. The presence of Dominicans in New York has also made present New

York in the Dominican Republic; visits from Hillary Clinton and Rudolph W. Giuliani (current senator of the State and ex mayor of New York City) are not uncommon. In fact, as part of her senate campaign, Mrs. Clinton spent some time in the country giving press conferences and appearing on television

But New York shifted from utopia to alter ego in 1996, during President Leonel Fernandez first term when he promised that he would turn the country into a "little New York". Since then the city has had an immense impact in the popular imaginary but it has been a strange and at times counter-productive role model.

Santo Domingo, the capital, has always been the center of the most dramatic and paradigmatic moments in Dominican history, the "NewYorkization" of the country has been strongest there. The city, a constant reflection and a concrete manifestation of power, now loses itself in a maze of infrastructure: bridges, tunnels, highways and most recently the excavations for a metro line, all of which have been planned in the fast, uncoordinated and extremely expensive logic of 4 year terms between elections.

The obsession with infrastructure imposes a strange vision on the city; it destroys public space, fragments the urban fabric and shamelessly indulges in excessive investments that dramatically reduce the chances



Santo Domingo



New York City

for the country to overcome its underdeveloped present situation. New York is one of the key paradigms of the world's urban history. It epitomizes the idea of centrality, concentration and monumentality. It has some of the most famous squares, plazas, streets, avenues, parks and buildings of all times. However, Santo Domingo, a city that also has great urban spaces (the colonial district, marine drive or Malecón, urban parks, the river and some of its main avenues), insists on neglecting and destroying them. Although New York also had its moments of brutal infrastructure construction, it is hard to imagine the city deciding to place a highway on top of Broadway.

But one may wonder: why the obsession? Why is the city in such a desperate rush to build itself the image of New York? If it is so expensive, why has the current administration prioritized the construction of the metro in the national budget above areas like education, health and nutrition, while taking incredibly compromising loans from the international community?

Organized traffic and public transport rank high among the non-realized dreams of Santo Domingo, they represent the population's Achilles heel. They have been pressing issues over the last 40 years and have produced one of the strongest syndicate groups of the country. These issues have been –demagogically or not- used as means to obtain political sympathy by the different administrations. A population that des-

perately desires and strives for improvement has fallen many times into the acceptance of mediocre and arbitrary solutions . And these mostly only benefit the construction sector. ww

Due to a lack of political will the city has resorted to physical interventions, pretending to solve problems that go far beyond infrastructure and have a lot to do with lack of organization and disrespect of the law. The State's inability or unwillingness to follow any long term plan or investment has over the years created a host of neglected programs such as organized bus lanes and specialized traffic police.

The use of New York as a reference is an attempt to legitimize such actions. The City is after all an effective massive and palpable image of built accomplishment and as such embodies a goal for development, albeit an unrealistic one. It also is a narrow image that conveniently focuses on Robert Moses' New York of the 1950's that favored highways over public transit and made important physical transformations within the city.

Maybe if making parks, creating programs for education and organizing the population were more profitable for the engineers and entrepreneurs that donate to political campaigns, probably the small New York would be less about expensive roads, tunnels and metros and more about its organization and the qualities of its public spaces.

Meanwhile the cities, both incarnating the tensions and anxieties of the Dominican community, represent the longing for progress and the difficulties to obtain it. And so I conclude by quoting the Dominican journalist Ana Mitila Lora: *"the present economic storm could cause Dominicans to forget the "little New York" dream, and instead turn to concentrate on building a "big Santo Domingo", this time free from political and business complicity."* (2)

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notes:

(1) Dominican York : 1. A Dominican immigrant living and working in New York City. 2. An American-born person of Dominican descent who was raised in NYC. E.G.: The current president of the Dominican Republic. (www.urbandictionary.com)

(2) "Nueva York Chiquito", www.dr1.com, july 2003

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