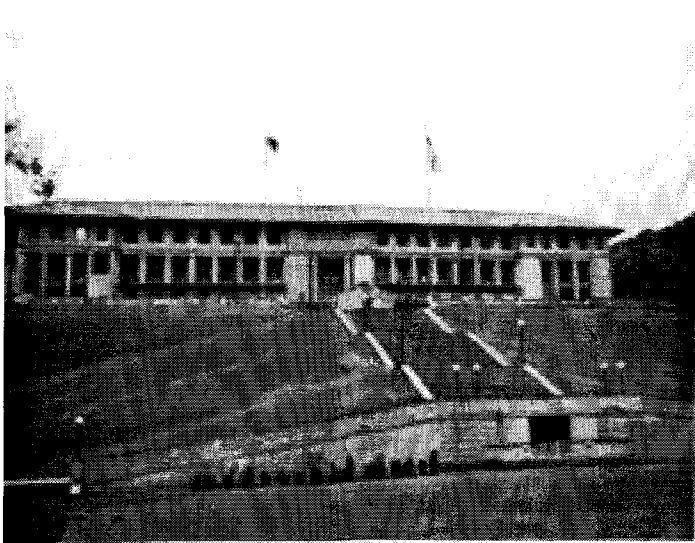


## Progress and History: The Administration Building of the Panama Canal

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January 9th, 1964. After months of public demonstrations for what could be understood as a poor acknowledgment of sovereignty, Panamanian students crossed the chain-link fence of the Canal Zone. Their mission was simple: as they planted Panamanian flags on Canal soil, they demanded the Panamanian sovereignty, blemished by the Hay-Bunau Varilla treaties, of 1903. The student protest turned into a wild riot between Panamanian civilians and American military police. Due to the number of casualties (a total of 22,) and for considering unjustified the intervention of American military police, the Panamanian government broke diplomatic relations with the United States of America for three months. As a result of these occurrences, "...the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, requested the Panamanian flag to be hoisted in all schools of the Canal Zone, along with the American flag, and later named special representatives in a Panamanian-American commission, that would structure new agreements on the Canal."<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to describe how history and progress play a significant role in the design of a particular public structure, such as the Administration Building of the Panama Canal, following American expansionist ideals of the early twentieth century. Through the description of formal characteristics, historical, conceptual, symbolic, and etymological derivations, and pictorial allusions, this paper shall offer an underground, sub rosa exposure of the Administration Building.

The Administration Building represents an American icon on foreign land: an object of desire that needs to be reappropriated; dismantled, deconstructed. Bataille explains the observers' reactions towards the building through an iconoclast example: "It is in fact, obvious that monuments inspire social prudence and often real fear. The taking of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of things: it is hard to explain this crowd movement other than by the animosity of the people against the monuments that are their real masters."<sup>2</sup>

The following descriptions will make explicit this statement.

### A. ARCHITECTURAL COMPOSITION AND FUNCTION.

Opened in 1914 under American jurisdiction, and designed by Mr. Austin Lord, of the firm Lord, Hewlett and Tallent, of New York, the Administration Building was one of the structures erected to complement the functioning of the interoceanic waterway. The original purpose of this building was to place the offices of the several departments of the Panama Canal under the same roof, for better convenience and economy both from the administration and of the general public that had business with the Canal. Besides these intentions, however, some relevant issues were ignored from its preliminary design, such as what offices were to occupy the building, how much space they would require, or how they were to be correlated.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, its formal composition renders to the building a modern palatine spirit: first, a basement five feet above the ground, suggests solidity and closeness to the earth; in-between, where human encounter takes place, a two story colonnade of square columns and two horizontal rows of windows, show a modern neoclassical spirit: finally, the third story wall, the roof, of Spanish, dark red vitreous tiles, and its eaves, evoke a horizontal movement that gives emphasis to lateral extension. These characteristics are also revealed by its low, elongated volume; its horizontal scale and symmetric distribution: its dull, light golden-grey shade; the density and sharp shadow effects of its regular fenestration, and its distinct skeletal accent: the rhythm of its colonnade, against the coherence of its third floor. It communicates with the outside world from the front through the wide porch that overlooks the town of Balboa, and on the rear, through the *porte cochere*. Its exterior walls show the hard material texture of reinforced concrete and hollow concrete blocks, stuccoed on the outside. Therefore, through a restrained formal ostentation, the Administration Building brings to its observers, at first glance, a subtle reverential and cosmic spirit.

## **B. PROGRESS AND WILL TO POWER: THE ROTUNDA.**

But, aren't there other formal and symbolic reasons ruling the design of the Administration Building? Look at the E-shaped plan and its wings. Can it symbolize something else? Perhaps, a bald eagle ready to take flight? Or, under concerns for health and function, why shall a rotunda become a priority, crowning the main hall of the building? This rotunda, surrounded by a continuous hall, and covered with a domed ceiling, works as a cyclorama, just as Grant Park's Civil War Cyclorama, in Atlanta, Georgia: as a representation that encircles the spectator. The rotunda is the point where all the movements of the building (major stairs and corridors) come to a close. Its walls, covered with canvas panels, praise the feats of the Panama Canal construction: the Miraflores locks, the Gatun spillway, a lock miter gate, and the Gaillard Cut—a massive excavation that buried alive tens of workers, and that is still occasion of continuous landslides. Painted in 1914 by William van Ingen, successor of Cole, Durand, Inness, and the Hudson River school, these panels (a total of 958 square foot) are recalled as the largest landscape American painting on exhibit outside the United States. Outside the rotunda, looking through its eight openings in the first floor, the rhythmic sequence of its panels can be perceived as the unified image of a single work of art. Inside, however, this can be a discontinuous and fragmented experience, akin to the mechanical segmentation of movement from a chronophotographic record.<sup>4</sup> When the external and internal experiences are brought together, a beat or pulse persists that, in addition of representing the mechanical movement of the machinery used for the construction of the Panama Canal—and the operative movement of the locks—, brings forth a diagonal tension that at one time constructs and deconstructs the rotunda. For this reason, the rotunda functions

as the building's powerful memory that symbolizes, within the specific temporal framework of the early twentieth century, the victory of technology and progress over nature, and the distrustful human spirit over this victory—a distrustful spirit that brought about civilian protests and riots, as the ones in 1964.

Both the Panama Canal and its buildings were conceived and erected under the lead of American expansionist visionaries, who rested their ideals on the use of mammoth machinery and logistics. For the sake of progress, and in order to open the new ditch or give birth to new public and housing complexes, many Panamanian towns were either flooded or erased from the map. As seen, since its early days, the American corporation called "Panama Canal Commission" had placed its trust on short-term profits. The "land divided/world united" and "modern society/ endless progress" slogans had enough intensity to create an American colony in foreign land, and a serious identity struggle in the minds of all Panamanians.

But, was it necessary to keep such a visually powerful memory as the rotunda in the heart of the Administration Building? Was this a demonstration of its evident bureaucratic power? Or, was there a hidden American nationalism in between?

## **C. ETYMOLOGICAL DERIVATIONS AND SOCIO-POLITICAL GROUNDS: *NOLI ME TANGERE* PAINTINGS.**

One way to go deep into the original functions of the Administration Building is via the etymology of the word *administration*, which derives from the Latin *ad*, to, and *ministrare*, serve, and involves the management of government, institutional, or bureaucratic affairs. The Latin term *ministrare* is also related to *minister* or servant that implies the presence of a *magister* or master; a person that acts for another as his/her agent, carrying out his/her orders or designs. Yet, in the case of the Administration Building, and of the socio-political relations between Panama and the United States of America, the temporal relation *minister-magister* is dualistic rather than dialectical, given that the unity of opposites, more than offering a synthesis or reconciliation, sets out a permanent state of conflict.

The pictorial representation *Noli me tangere*, made popular by the painters of the Italian Trecento and Quattrocento that depicts the apparition of Christ to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection, is a useful tool to explain the socio-political relations between Panama and the United States. On the one side appears Mary Magdalene, prostrated on the ground, with her body tilted towards the Messiah and her look directed towards his body, ready to touch him, imploring attention. On the other side appears Jesus, ready to go into Heaven, and withdrawing himself from any possible contact with the Magdalene.

What kind of attraction keeps together the tension between the Magdalene and Jesus? Between a Panamanian high school student named Ascanio Arosemena and the rifle of an unknown American soldier? Is it their reciprocal look? Instead of showing a reverential or amicable relation between both figures, an intermittent, diagonal tension prevails, produced by the space between the body that gets closer and the body that avoids contact. In an invisible, but immediate way, desire and rejection are grasped at the same time in a *Noli me tangere* painting, as antagonistic forces that are kept together by the look before clashing in the space between both figures: the provocative space where any physical contact will cause an explosive, tearing reaction.

What keeps the Magdalene from holding the hand of Jesus in a *Noli me tangere* painting? What keeps a Panamanian high school student from crossing alive the barbed wire and chain-link fence of the Canal Zone in 1964? Is it *prohibition* or *rejection*? Due to obsolete, unilateral treaties Panama's right to enter to the Zone is banned for decades by those in control of the waterway and its complementary installations. The Canal Zone is then wrapped up with chain-link fences; guarded with military bases and checkpoints. Thus, the Administration Building of the Panama Canal is erected without a direct contextual reference to the city of Panama, for the sake of economic and imperialistic interests. The prime purpose of this building is to mint the glories of progress in the name of particular heroes from a particular land in position of power.

What makes both the Magdalene and the Panamanian student pursue the unattainable? Try to deconstruct the domain of the *magister*? Is it *desire* or *will to power*? Negation eventually evolves into a sense of absence, and subjects compensate this absence with the desire to obtain the forbidden object (i.e. to touch the body of Jesus after the Resurrection, or plant "foreign flags on American soil"). In both examples, the forbidden image or object becomes attached to the subject's psyche as a memory of power, and desire prevails over repression as a consequence of an abrupt denial from those in control.

#### D. THE IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS: AN EXPERIENCE ON THE HEIGHTS.

The connection between history and progress in the Administration Building of the Panama Canal is also shown by the location of the structure in relation to its immediate surroundings. Its position, placed on a natural knoll of Ancon Hill's northern side, awakens a singular palatine spirit: it is built on a specific, prominent place, where nature appears centralized, and its view can be reduced to a single picture on a dominant position. From its top, the new town of Balboa can be overlooked, laid out on a plain, with all the public buildings and important stores of the Canal Zone (commissary, post

office, clubhouse, police station, and courthouse) located on a row along the Prado, or main avenue, as a scenic panorama from the Pacific entrance to the Canal. Originally, on the large terrace in front of the building, a flagpole was placed following the building's main axis. This flagpole, designed to hoist the American flag, and to make it flicker as a *labarum* of progress, is invested with distinct prominence into its spatial location: it functions as a *cardo* that leads the eye towards the Panama Canal. Its reinforced concrete semicircular base divides the grandiose front stairway in two, and can be observed from a considerable distance.

This spatial arrangement, that distinguished mid-nineteenth century American painting, and was represented by painters such as Cole, Durand, and Inness, from the Hudson River school, involved compositions with an observer, either assuming a position far above the ground, or with a figure seen from behind as a substitute observer. For A. Boime, this pictorial composition was directly linked to the theory of Manifest Destiny (or Monroe Doctrine,) to economic expansionism and to American imperialist trends, assimilated into popular culture, and it continues to remain a fundamental component of the national dream.<sup>5</sup> According to Boime, this Olympian bearing from the visual experiences on the heights, "metonymically embraced present, past, and future, synchronically plotting the course of empire,"<sup>6</sup> and therefore showed American will to mastery over the land in terms of progress. For Boime, these landscape compositions, that contemplated the conquest of virgin lands by the hand of man and civilization, involved a form of thought typical of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Administration Building was conceived and erected.

Thus, the Administration Building of the Panama Canal was erected mainly to an agreement between the United States of America and Panama on the use of the canal areas at the beginning of the twentieth century; an agreement that, as history and progress went by, became injurious and obsolete, and eventually inspired its replacement.

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- <sup>5</sup> Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape, c. 1830-1865* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian, 1991.) p. 1-2.
- <sup>6</sup> Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze*, op. cit., p. 1.