Mapping Control: The Colonial Grid and the Architecture of Exclusion

Plaza Mayor as a Case Study of Oppression in Spanish Colonial Urbanism

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Abstract – This thesis examines the role of urban planning in the establishment of colonial power structures in Santo Domingo, the first Spanish settlement in the Americas. Founded in 1502 by Governor Nicolás de Ovando, Santo Domingo became an administrative center and a spatial model for later colonial cities across the New World. Central to this study is the orthogonal grid plan and the design of public plazas, particularly the Plaza Mayor, which were not merely public spaces in the city but spatial instruments embedded with ideologies of oppression.

While scholars have explored the origins and influences of the colonial grid, as well as the social and economic aspects of labor and race under Spanish rule, relatively little attention has been paid to how these factors intersected within the built environment of early colonial cities. This thesis addresses that gap by asking: how did the spatial configuration and use of the Plaza Mayor, including features such as La Picota, function as tools of social control and racial oppression in colonial Santo Domingo, and how are these narratives embedded in the city's contemporary urban landscape?

Through spatial analysis of historical maps and archival documents, this research demonstrates how the city's urban fabric was deliberately designed to reinforce racial hierarchies and maintain colonial order. The Plaza Mayor operated not only as a symbolic and administrative center but also as a stage for public punishment, surveillance, and exclusion of enslaved and marginalized populations. The findings of this study contribute to a nuanced understanding of spatial mechanisms used in Spanish colonial urbanism and the legacy of racialized spatial organization in Santo Domingo.

Keywords – Spanish colonialism, Santo Domingo, Plaza Mayor, orthogonal grid, spatial control, oppression

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I. Introduction

Figure 1

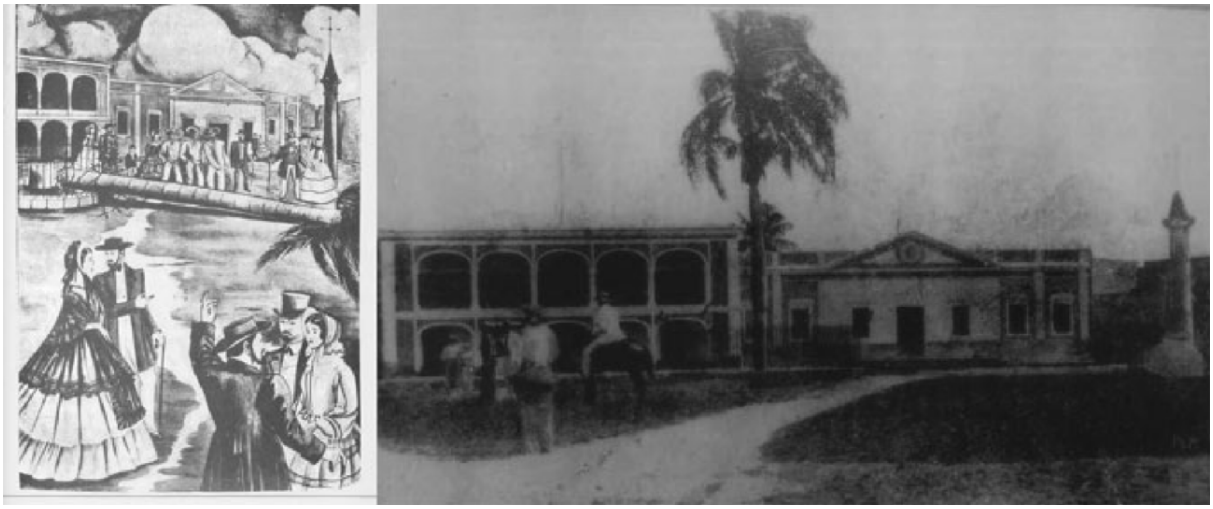
General Map of Spanish America (Lemoine, 2003).

While indigenous settlements existed before European arrival, Santo Domingo, founded in 1498, became the first permanent urban settlement established by the colonizers and the principal base for Spain's Atlantic slave trade (Quijano, 2000). Santo Domingo was founded with the primary goal of extracting mineral resources, which has left spatial and material traces in the city's morphology. In the early years of Spanish colonization, urban planning was not a neutral response to practical needs but a deliberate mode to exercise power. The grid layout implemented by Governor Nicolás de Ovando in 1502 was a spatial strategy based on defense, power, and labor, and became a template for the spread of Spanish colonial urban design (Bennett, 1993; Lemoine, 2003; Tejeira Davis, 1996; UNESCO, n.d.).

In Santo Domingo, the Plaza Mayor, currently known as Parque de Colón, was designed as the civic and administrative heart of the city, embodying the values and hierarchies of colonial rule. Until 1864, the Plaza Mayor had a column-like centerpiece called La Picota. This site functioned as a public instrument of repression where slaves who had violated the law were lashed, and in some cases, executed (de Quirós, 2005). La Picota, together with other sites like La Negreta and the slave market plaza, stands as a reminder of the brutal methods employed to sustain colonial order (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022).

Figure 2

La Picota in Columbus Park (originally Plaza Mayor) in Santo Domingo. The column-like element can be seen in the top right corner of the drawing (left) and in the right corner of the photograph (right). (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022)



An earlier study by Jose Nuñez Collado (2022) shows how the spatial and material construction of colonial Santo Domingo constituted and maintained social and racial structures of oppression. The study focused on the neighborhood of Santa Barbara, the primary neighborhood reinforcing racialized structures of labor, he claims. Nevertheless, he states that "… although the social and economic aspects of labor and race have been explored in histories of Santo Domingo, little has been written about how these aspects intersect with urban space."

The goal of this study is, therefore, to contribute to the lack of research in this field, drawing attention to the role of the Plaza Mayor in colonial Santo Domingo. This paper examines how the spatial and material construction of the Plaza Mayor in Ovando's grid plan played a role in reinforcing and perpetuating racial and social hierarchies in colonial Santo Domingo. The central research question is: How did the design and use of the Plaza Mayor, with La Picota as a centerpiece, contribute to the oppression of enslaved populations, and how is this narrative memorialized in the contemporary urban landscape? By focusing on the Plaza Mayor, this study aims to move beyond traditional narratives and instead analyze a site that represents the intersection of public authority, judicial punishment, and the enforcement of racial order. This will be done by drawing on archival documents and historical maps. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced discussion of how urban design functioned as a physical expression of colonial ideology, one that normalized violence and exclusion.

The first section of this paper contextualizes the historical emergence of Santo Domingo as a model of colonial spread and discusses the orthogonal grid pattern. The second part develops a spatial analysis of colonial Santo Domingo, drawing on historical maps to show how the urban fabric of the city underpins oppression and marginalization. Following this, an analysis of the Plaza Mayor is presented, focusing on how its spatial configuration and the practices conducted there, such as public punishments, reinforced systems of racial and social control. The final section concludes the findings of this paper and emphasizes the collective memory to understand how Santo Domingo's colonial past is remembered in the contemporary urban landscape.

Through this structure, the paper demonstrates that the Plaza Mayor was not just a public square but a powerful instrument of colonial control. By articulating the connections between urban form, public punishment, and racial hierarchy, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how colonial urban planning has left a lasting mark on the social and material landscape of Santo Domingo.

II. Spanish Colonization

A. Historical Context of Santo Domingo

Six years after Christopher Columbus set foot on the island of La Hispaniola, named after the colonial power, Spain, a settlement started to emerge on the south coast. This was the first city of Santo Domingo, founded in 1492 by Columbus' brother Bartholomew, and soon became the administrative center of the New World. The earliest historical accounts of the city's settlement are provided by Bartolomé de las Casas and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, two historians who lived in Santo Domingo in the early fifteenth century (de Las Casas, 1877; de Oviedo, 1853).

Their writings indicate that the city of Santo Domingo was first established next to existing villages of the Taínos, the indigenous people on the island, by Columbus' brother Bartholomew in 1496. This first settlement of Santo Domingo was located near the east bank of the Ozama River. A strategic choice at that time, as the Ozama River was deep enough for the ships to navigate, thus enabling the construction of a port that would become a key element for transport with Spain, as well as a defense point of the city. Another benefit of this location was the proximity to the gold mines. However, soon after its creation, the city was destroyed by a hurricane, so the governor Nicolás de Ovando seized the opportunity to establish a new city in 1502 on the west bank of the Ozama River, founding what is known today as La Zona Colonial de Santo Domingo.

B. The Colonial Grid Pattern

The urban plan implemented by Nicolás de Ovando in 1502 is characterized by a series of streets intersecting at right angles to form a regular pattern: an orthogonal grid pattern. At its heart lies a central plaza, commonly known as the Plaza Mayor, surrounded by key administrative and religious buildings, including the cathedral, the city council, and the governor's residence. Streets were deliberately wide to allow for ventilation and public circulation, while the geometric clarity of the layout was intended to reflect ideals of order (Niell et al., 2023). Finally, a fortified wall surrounded the entire city. The foundation of Santo Domingo was the first settlement in the New World and became a template for the spread of Spanish colonial urban design, shaping the foundations of cities across Central America (Lemoine, 2003; Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022; UNESCO, n.d.). This would later be codified in the Laws of the Indies (1573), a comprehensive set of planning guidelines issued by the Spanish Crown.

The origin and implementation of the grid pattern in colonial urban planning have been subjects of extensive debate. Ralph Bennett's book, *Settlements in the Americas: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (1993), presents eleven essays addressing colonial settlement issues across Central and North America. The essays span from early pioneering Spanish, French, and English settlements to those initiated in the late eighteenth century. Notably, a clear disagreement emerges concerning the origin of the American colonial grid plan, as at least seven essays tackle the subject without none of the authors agreeing. "It is clear that the grid-plan town is not a single phenomenon at all, but an interweaving of quite distinct antecedents," states Edwards (Edwards, 1996) in his review of Bennett's work.

Adding to the discussion, Setha Low (1995 #21) argues that the plaza-centered urban grid was not solely of European derivation, as there is considerable evidence of pre-Columbian influences on indigenous urban forms. Besides, Low states that the grid layout was merely a practical solution for urban organization, but also a tool for social control. She states that the spatial configuration of colonial cities, with their orthogonal grids and central plazas, served as instruments in establishing and maintaining social hierarchies. The design facilitated surveillance and regulation of the population, reinforcing the dominance of colonial authorities and the

domination of indigenous and enslaved people, a subject that will be examined in more depth in the next chapter.

René Lemoine (2003 #15) further explores the symbolic dimensions of the grid, suggesting that its geometric regularity represented the imposition of European order onto the New World. The grid served as a visual and spatial manifestation of colonial power, projecting an image of civilization and control over the perceived chaos of indigenous landscapes. He also clearly states that:

> "It must be remembered that Santo Domingo, as the administrative capital of the Antillas, was the arrival and departure point for the Americas and the place from which every single expedition departed. Thus, the nearly regular chessboard delineated by Ovando becomes the idealized model of the 'modern' city in the New World."

The three perspectives, offered by Ewards, Low, and Lemoine, show how complex it is to state where the origins lie of the colonial grid pattern and how this grid influenced the spread of colonial urban design across the New World. And these are just three examples of the many academics who have researched this colonial grid. However, it is not this paper's goal to research whether the grid originates from solely Spanish ideals or to what extent the pre-Columbian forms influenced the implementation of the colonial grid in Santo Domingo. And neither to investigate how this grid was implemented in later cities across the New World. But to contextualize this grid in the broader sense as a powerful mechanism and acknowledge its substantial influence on the spread of colonial urbanism across the New World. With that in mind, this paper focuses solely on the influence of the implementation of this grid within the context of Santo Domingo, from its foundation until the present day.

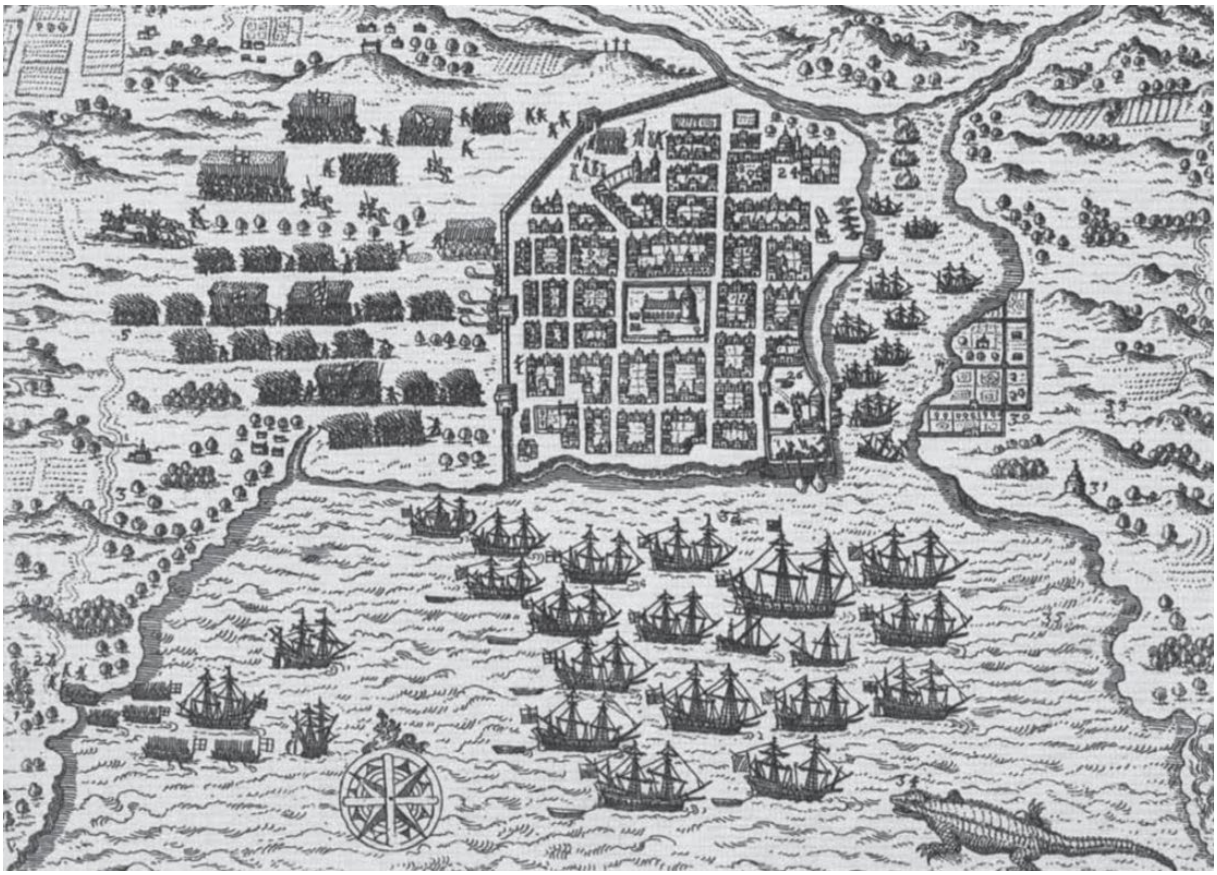
III. Marginalization and Oppression through the Urban Fabric

When founding the city of Santo Domingo in 1502, Nicolás de Ovando directly implemented a new legal system outside the city of 'encomiendas', allowing the Spanish crown to distribute land among the colonizers, based on their rank. High-ranking Spaniards were given the best properties, including ownership of enslaved indigenous people who were forced to work the land, while Spaniards with less social standing were offered smaller plots (Niell, 2008). The implementation of this system shows the very foundation of spatial segregation based on social and racial inequality, thus reflecting the beginning of marginalization and oppression through the urban fabric of Santo Domingo.

One of the oldest full representations of Santo Domingo's colonial grid layout was made by Giovanni Battista Boazio in 1586, 80 years after the city's foundation (Figure 3). The map is a representation of an idealized form of colonial urban planning. It shows how the Spaniards sought power and control by implementing the orthogonal grid pattern, originating from a central plaza and a fortified wall surrounding the entire city.

Figure 3

Plan of Santo Domingo made by **Baptista Boazio in 1588** based on Sir Francis Drake's notes on his voyage to the city in 1586 (Checo, 2008).



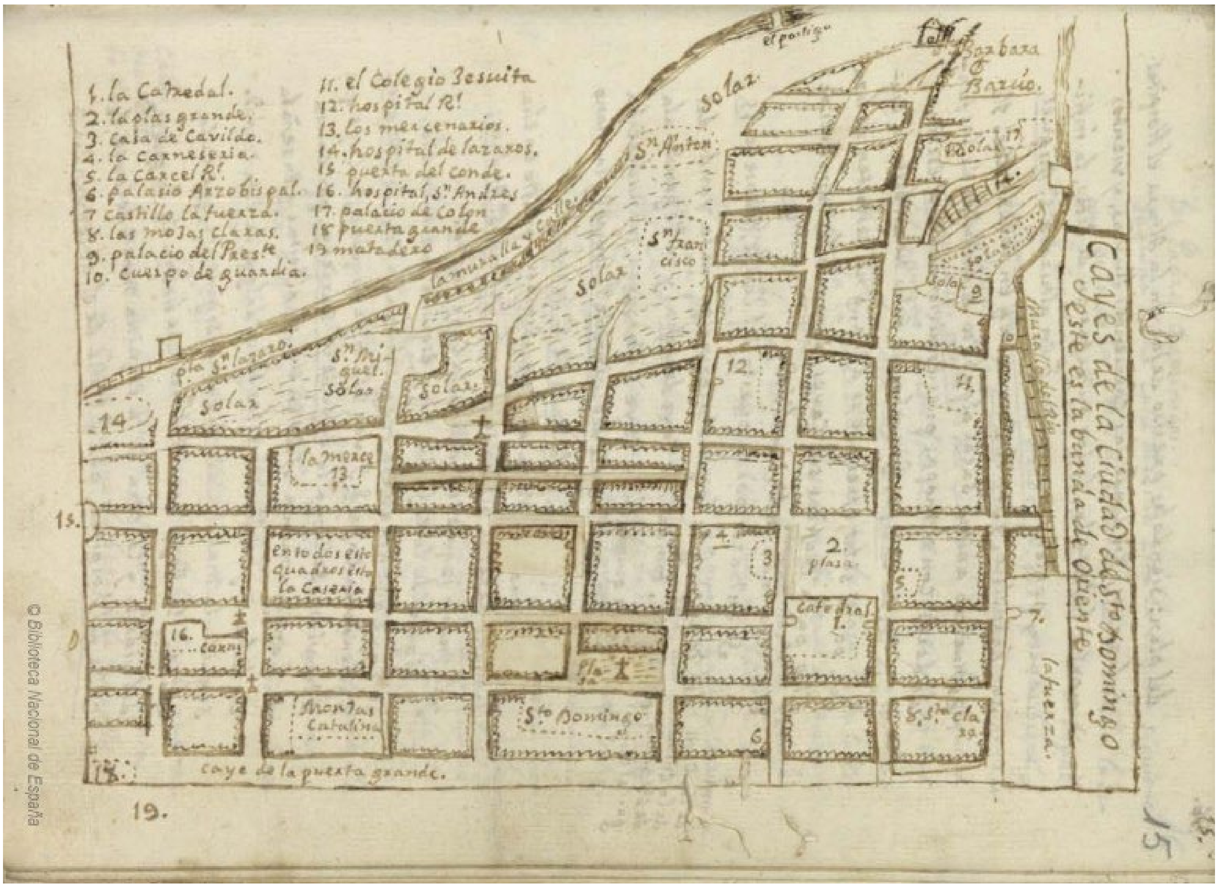
The colonial grid of Santo Domingo was more than a simple tool for urban organization; it was an instrument of power, control, and defense Nicolás de Ovando adapted the grid to its surrounding landscape. Unlike the strictly regular orthogonal grids seen in earlier European city plans, Santo Domingo's layout followed the contours of the Ozama River and the coastline, balancing order

with the demands of topography. Streets were arranged to maximize visibility – standing at a crossroad, one could see in all directions – creating a sense of surveillance and control over movement within the city. The fortified wall further reinforced this sense of control. While it protected the city from external threats such as pirate raids and rival colonial powers, it also functioned as a mechanism of segregation. The wall physically separated Santo Domingo from the surrounding indigenous settlements, ensuring a clear separation between the Spanish colonial elite and the indigenous populations (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022). The urban fabric thus became a spatial manifestation of colonial dominance, embedding racial and social hierarchies into the very structure of the city.

As Boazio's map demonstrates, cartographic representations often depicted an idealized vision of the city. The map emphasizes order and completeness, aligning with Spanish colonial ideals, yet historical records suggest that Santo Domingo was not as fully developed or uniformly structured as the map suggests.

Figure 4

Map of Santo Domingo, 1762, by L.J. Peguero, that was made based on the author's direct observations (Checo, 2008).



The contrast between idealized cartography and reality becomes clearer in later maps, such as Luis Josep Peguero's 1762 representations. As historian Frank Moya Pons has noted:

> ".. early maps show a vibrant city occupying the whole intramural space; however, there is evidence that not all the blocks were developed" (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022)

Peguero's map, based on his direct observations, reveals numerous empty lots within the city walls, particularly in the northwestern section, where the defensive wall had not been completed

until much later. This map also exposes the imperfections in the grid's geometry, challenging the notion of a perfectly ordered colonial city.

Both maps further highlight the economic and material disparities within Santo Domingo. The core of the city, particularly around the Cathedral of St. Mary of Incarnation (1502), housed the colonial elite in stone buildings. In contrast, to the north, an informal settlement emerged around the limestone quarry that supplied materials for the city's construction. This settlement developed independently, including a small village of troops which protected the Palace of Admiral Diego Colón (1509), and was built near the port of the city. This neighborhood developed independently and was later known as the Santa Bárbara neighborhood, named after the church of Santa Bárbara (1562). Making this the first informal settlement of Santo Domingo, it had its own church and plaza, yet within the fortified city.

Santa Bárbara was the most visible example of how colonial dependence on enslaved labor shaped Santo Domingo. Historical records indicate that both enslaved individuals and free black residents lived in this neighborhood for at least three centuries, with racial and labor-based social structures continuing to define the area long after (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022). The existence of Santa Bárbara underscores the contradictions of colonial urbanism: the grand structures of the formal city depended on the labor of marginalized communities living in precarious conditions on its periphery.

Figure 5

Map of Santo Domingo, 1737, by D. Fernando Gerónimo de Pineda. Showing the irregularity in the morphology of the city, materiality as well as urban layout. (Checo, 2008)

The city's morphological evolution becomes even more evident in the map created by Fernando Gerónimo de Pineda in 1737. Compared to Boazio's map, Pineda's representation reveals greater irregularity in the built environment. The city center remained the most structured and densely built, characterized by large stone houses. However, towards the outskirts, construction became less uniform, with smaller dwellings made from less durable materials.

Additionally, Pineda's map makes the different plazas more distinguishable. The emergence of the plazas can be directly linked to the religious buildings that were placed in the city. Religious buildings were strategically placed towards the outskirts of the city, serving as nodes of urban expansion as well as points of control and defense of the city (Pezzotti, 2007). The only exception is the cathedral, as it is always situated next to the Plaza Mayor and the city council in a central location. The plazas were always placed in front of the churches, thus they became the centers of population attraction, where daily life was carried out and all commercial activity would take place.

But most of the plaza's built in Mesoamerica and the Caribbean under the direction of the Spanish where merely places of social interaction and commercial activities. They were often important spatial representations of society and social hierarchy and were deeply embedded in the colonial system of oppression (Low, 1995). This was also the case for the Plaza Mayor in Santo Domingo. A place for the Spanish elite to reside, that functioned both as an administrative center as well as a place of public punishment, where marginalized individuals who defied colonial authority were executed (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022). These spatial distinctions reveal the layered and racialized nature of urban segregation in colonial Santo Domingo.

IV Urban Hierarchies

A. Public Spaces within the Urban Fabric

The disparities among the plazas within the urban fabric of Santo Domingo clearly reflect structures of colonial control and exclusion. The schematic drawing in Figure 6 illustrates the location of public spaces in eighteenth-century colonial Santo Domingo. This map was created by overlaying earlier maps produced by Pineda (1737) and Peguero (1762). It offers a reliable visual representation of the city's urban layout during the colonial period. The alignment of public spaces next to religious and administrative buildings is especially evident. The Plaza Mayor, together with the St. Mary Cathedral, functioned as the central point of urban hierarchy, while other plazas, such as those surrounding the Santa Bárbara church, the military quarry near the Alcázar, and the Santo Domingo Convent, fulfilled distinct roles within the city's social structure.

These various urban spaces differed from cemeteries, military zones, and other types of plazas. Cemeteries were consistently connected to convents or hospitals, while military spaces were positioned on the city's periphery, facing the Ozama River and the Caribbean Sea, serving as strategic points of defense. Most plazas were located adjacent to churches, with the Plaza Mayor always directly situated next to the cathedral (A1). The only exception is the Plaza del Contador, named after the Spanish royal accountants who resided nearby (Cubero-Hernández et al., 2022). A map created by William Grabado in 1810, along with other sources, suggests that this plaza also functioned as a market. Given its proximity to the port, its role in the slave trade is undeniable. It is highly likely that enslaved people were brought from the port to this market (4), where they were counted and later transferred to Plaza Santa Bárbara (2), where they were held and eventually sold.

Figure 6

Drawing made by the author, showing the open spaces in the grid of Santo Domingo, including functionality and important (religious) buildings.

B. Plaza Mayor & La Picota

Interestingly, the Plaza Mayor, conceived as the administrative centerpiece of the New World, appears less centrally located than in Boazio's early representation of idealized colonial urbanism. Situated more toward the southeast, the plaza is strategically positioned to enhance its connection with the fortress, the western mainland, the port, and the Santa Bárbara neighborhood. This spatial arrangement likely contributed to maintaining greater control over the city, underscoring the Plaza Mayor's function within the colonial order.

Moreover, the plaza is framed by broad streets with long sightlines, facilitating visual and physical connections across the colonial city. The drawing in Figure 7 demonstrates how this strategic placement, combined with the wide avenues, reinforces the plaza as a central focal point. The figure also reveals that the Plaza Mayor, while not perfectly centered, remains at the heart of the more developed zone of the colonial city.

Figure 7

Drawing made by the author, showing the main axes converging on the Plaza Mayor and the contour of the more structured core of the city.

In an article about the Spanish American Plaza in Mesoamerica and the Caribbean, Setha Low notes that:

> "Many of these plazas became the sites of executions, particularly of the indigenous residents, while others became markets, or places solely designated for the mestizo and Spanish elites."

The Plaza Mayor, together with its adjacent structures—including the cathedral, governmental offices, arsenal, customs house, and, later, the residences of the colonial elite—embodied the dual authority of church and state. These spaces were conceived and executed as "propaganda vehicles, symbolizing and incarnating civilization" (Cubero-Hernández et al., 2022). As Cubero-Hernandez points out, the plaza historically served—and in many cases still serves—as a spatial reflection of local social hierarchies and the relationships between the people and the institutional power. In the colonial context, this urban arrangement represented a racialized and stratified society.

Figure 8

Drawing made by the author, showing the buildings adjacent the Plaza Mayor.

Until the 9th of May 1864, a column-like element known as La Picota stood in the Plaza Mayor. It served as a site where enslaved people who violated colonial laws were publicly lashed, and sometimes executed (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022). Both the Plaza Mayor and La Picota stand as clear urban expressions of the city's early dependence on slave labor and the violence used to maintain it. Remarkably, few scholars devote their work to La Picota. Despite this, it continues to live on in the city's collective memory as a silent yet powerful reminder. Together with the Plaza Mayor, it holds significant value in understanding the urban and architectural history of Santo Domingo.

Figure 9

Left: photograph from 1860 gifted to C.B. de Quirós in 1943, published in a new version of 'La Picota de Santo Domingo', compiled in B.C.B. de Quirós, Una pluma en el exilio. Los articulos publicados por Constancio Bernaldo de Quirós en República Dominicana (Santo Domingo, 2009), 99. Right: Present-day picture of Plaza Mayor, what is now called Parque Colon (Google Maps).

V Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Plaza Mayor's design and use in colonial Santo Domingo functioned as a deliberate mechanism of racialized social control and that its legacy endures in the city's contemporary urban landscape. By situating Plaza Mayor at the heart of Ovando's orthogonal grid, colonial authorities created a public arena in which enslaved individuals were not only subjected to corporal punishment but also publicly shamed and rendered invisible (de Quirós, 2005). The Plaza's spatial configuration – broad sight-lines, street intersections converging on the square, and its proximity to religious and administrative buildings – reinforced the domination of the Spanish elite and mandated a clear socio-racial hierarchy (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022; Lemoine, 2003). Historical cartographies, from Boazio's idealized 1588 plan to Peguero's empirically based 1762 map, show that the Plaza Mayor was the centerpiece of colonial power, even as surrounding districts remained - built and occupied by marginalized communities (Núñez Collado & Merwood-Salisbury, 2022).

In answering the central research question, this thesis has shown that the Plaza Mayor was not a neutral public open space but an instrument of exclusion and oppression. The placement of La Picota on the Plaza Mayor transforms the square into a stage of violence, enforcing enslaved labor discipline, while the surrounding grid, formed by wide avenues, administrative buildings, and fortified walls, embodies urban order designed to surveil and segregate based on race and status. Conversely, peripheral neighborhoods such as Santa Bárbara, inhabited by free and enslaved Black populations, underscore the contradictions of colonial urbanism, as the grand structures of the formal city depended on the labor of marginalized communities living in precarious conditions on its periphery.

Today's Parque Colón preserves the Plaza Mayor's footprint, yet its colonial narratives are reframed. Physical traces of La Picota have vanished, replaced by statues, plaques, and interpretive panels that selectively commemorate Christopher Columbus rather than the violence of enslavement. Guided walking tours and heritage markers refer to the Plaza's judicial past, but the absence of a dedicated memorial to the enslaved underscores a tension in collective memory: the grid survives as heritage, yet the stories of oppression it once facilitated remain only partially acknowledged in the urban fabric. This conflict highlights the need for more research and practices that both recognize the Plaza Mayor's role in enforcing colonial racial hierarchies and foreground the lived experiences of those it condemned.

By tracing the intersections of urban form, public punishment, and collective memory, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how colonial planning strategies have left a remarkable imprint on Santo Domingo's spatial and social landscape. It underscores the necessity for contemporary urban scholarship and heritage policy to confront and integrate these fraught histories, ensuring that future interventions in the Plaza Mayor engage with its legacy of racialized violence.

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