The making of a city

WANT to notice an important new book, Port of Spain: The Construction of a Caribbean City, 1888-1962, just published by the UWI Press, by American scholar Stephen Stuempel (best known here for his earlier book on the steelband movement). It’s a study of the design, use, and “representation” of the Port of Spain landscape, meaning the spaces, buildings, streets, utilities, transport, the total material environment of the city.

The study starts in 1888: the 50th anniversary of Emancipation, the period of the cocoa boom, the era of “high colonialism” when the British Empire was at its height, the time when modernity (transport, communications, infrastructure) was coming to the city. It ends in 1962 with national independence and the formal end of colonialism.

It’s one of several recent academic studies of Caribbean history which have moved away from the plantation and the village as their focus, and instead zero in on the colonial capital city and the urban scene. It’s a study in cultural geography and the specific field of “landscape studies”, a fairly new academic sub-discipline.

A key theme is the use of public city spaces for what Stuempel calls “performances”, collective expressions of opinion, whether celebrations or protests: parades, celebrations of anniversaries or jubilees, marches, demonstrations, rallies, political meetings, strikes, riots. Even during the period of high colonialism, local people (and especially those living in the capital city) always had some “agency”. They negotiated with the colonial authorities for the right to use the city spaces for collective empowerment.

Of course Carnival was a major aspect of this process, and Stuempel devotes a chapter to the contests and conflicts involved in the festival in Port of Spain, especially in the years after World War 1 (1914-1918) when the tension between “uptown” and “downtown” Carnival first emerged. The use of

Brunswick/Woodford Square provides another classic example of the use of a central public space for collective expression. Long before the “University of Woodford Square” this space was the favoured meeting place for all kinds of politicians, activists and orators.

Stuempel devotes a lot of attention to the way the city landscape was represented during his period of study. There were the visual representations: maps and plans, photos and postcards, sketches and paintings—a good selection is reproduced in the book. There were the written portraits of the city, whether travel writing by visitors, or (especially) fiction, mainly by locals. He analyses, for instance, the “barrack-yard” fiction of the Beacon writers in the 1930s, like CLR James and Alfred Mendes; and the literature of wartime Port of Spain (Samuel Selvon, VS Naipaul, Ralph de Boissière among others).

Stuempel is especially good on the almost overnight transformation of the city in 1941-45, as a result of World War 2 and the arrival of the Americans. An American took over the waterfront, George V Park became the St Clair Cantonment, Whitehall became the American headquarters—and this hardly begins to depict the upheavals in the city (and elsewhere, of course). With the war over (1945) and the Americans gone from the city, he shows how post-war town planning, and new modernist modes of architecture, ushered in the era of nationalistic and independence in the capital city.

This is a very deeply researched book, as the extensive annotations and very long bibliography amply demonstrate, and it makes an original contribution to T&T and Caribbean history and cultural geography. But it is also a fascinating read, especially if you know Port of Spain well. The last two chapters especially will probably provide a sort of “nostalgia trip” for older city folk.

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