

LUIS ARMANDO DURÁN SEGURA

Escuela de Arquitectura y Escuela de Geografía. Universidad de Costa Rica

## *Travel, experience and landscape. The Limón-San José route in foreign literature (Costa Rica, 1880-1940)*

Before the appearance of engines, travelers were accustomed to move inside a spatial continuum at a pace that integrated them sensorially with the environment. Travel implied an organic connection between space, time and body. The carriage, the ox cart, the stage-coach, and the horse made possible the close and intense contemplation of an omnipresent nature.

In addition, commuting was subjected to the eventualities presented by the states of the roads, climatic circumstances, and animal traction. This sense, of an assumed speed and an itinerary controlled, in part, by the same people, resulted in landscapes being experienced as living entities.

However, the emergence of the railroad, since the mid-nineteenth century, changed the experiences, the travel, and the landscapes substantially. Traditional commuting was replaced by mechanical commuting which produced and industrialized consciousness. This demonstrates that, with the train journey, not only materialities were transformed, but also sensitivities and sociabilities. In other words, infrastructural changes in the territory caused people, while mobilizing, to have different perceptions of the landscapes.

This article is precisely interested in exploring the railroad route that connected the city of Limón and the city of San José from the experiences of foreigners who visited Costa Rica between 1880 and 1940. In their accounts, these travelers narrated, extensively and in detail, typical events of train journeys from the Caribbean Coast to the country's Central Plateau. Therefore, there is an emphasis in the relationships that are woven between

travel, experience, and landscape from: i) the stories, ii) the movements, iii) the bodies, and iv) the encounters.

Most of the analyzed accounts were written by Americans, Germans, and French who arrived to Central America for different reasons such as adventure, journalism, botany, and ethnology. These accounts captured travelers' confrontations with temporalities and spatialities that were different from theirs. Thanks to these written sources, it was possible to study the experiences by means of the analysis of the deep registers that they passed on, many of them personal and intimate.

### STORIES

The railroad, like no other means of transportation in Costa Rican history, significantly changed the territories through which it circulated. It was originally linked to the achievement of state projects of modernization, political control, and agricultural colonization, and later, with the development of private and international capital. Thus, it represented one of the most powerful symbols of industry, progress, and civilization.

By 1871, the date of the first contract for the concession of the work given to Henry Meiggs, a US businessman, the train was a first order necessity. The liberals' rulers aspirations, especially President Tomas Guardia, was to have an "iron road" which would connect the cities of the Central Plateau (Cartago, Heredia, Alajuela, and San José) with the ports in the Caribbean Coast (Limón and Moín), through the so called Northern Railway Line.

Minor Cooper Keith, the nephew of the first person who was awarded the concession, was in charge of the conclusion of the work and, at the same time, assumed the financial exhaustion of the first concessions. Keith experimented with banana plantations in order to give a continuous occupation to the railroad and requested to be awarded the lands that surrounded the route, which he used for his company, the United Fruit Company, to export the product to the United States. Simultaneously, he continued with his navigation and commissary businesses under his other firm, the Northern Railway Company.

In this context, mobility practices were the great beneficiaries. Few places were out of the anthropic reach and, natural obstacles, which had interfered with all human-related matters for centuries, were avoided by the reach of the railroad lines. The route's duration, now measured by the constancy of the engines and not by animal traction or weather conditions, was reduced from four days to six hours.

### MOVEMENTS

The coming of this new mobility broke with the constraints of traditional travelling, and promoted the exchange between spaces that, until then, were thought only for themselves. The railroad promoted the circulation of goods and people and, in this sense, it behaved as a movement system. That is, not as a set of technological innovations, but as a network of interconnected elements, a grid that motivated the intense transit of objects and bodies.

The mechanical traction contributed to the increase of celerity and, incidentally, to the establishment of particular ways of experiencing these travels. First of all, it called for kinesthetic actions that consequently produced subjects in agreement with the dynamics of these movements. Second, it provoked some panoramic gaze, liberated from the immediate spaces. And, third, it stimulated a social commotion, unprecedented until then, that was characterized by complex urban dynamics.

### BODIES

The mechanization of the routes, the safety of the trips, and the prefixing of the routes allowed travelers' bodies to stop making big efforts to mobilize themselves. The exhausting travelling days were replaced by more expeditious itineraries which allowed contemplation and recreation activities. Activities that involved less abrupt,

more controlled, monitored, and uniform movements. The routes, although they will go through fast-paced and twisted courses, common in the national territory, assured ergonomic comfort, individual tranquility and aesthetic pleasure.

In addition, the railroad favored corporal practices that adapted to this new mobility. On one hand, tactile and sonorous sensations of artificial origin related to machines appeared, on the other, numerous recreation and leisure possibilities appeared as well. Thus, the itinerary from Limón to San José intensified a modern spirit of curiosity and exploration, converting travelers into observers of the cultural and natural contrasts found along the way.

### ENCOUNTERS

With the railroad it was possible to, not only reach remote places quickly, effectively, and safely, but to get in touch with people from different origins, inside and outside the wagons, through the windows, and at the arrivals and departures areas at the train stations. For this reason, the journey experience involved a relationship of subjects who, before the railroad, were divided by historical and geographical circumstances. These encounters involved forms of negotiation and transculturation, and in some cases, even of subordination, both in an individual and collective sense.

Consequently, the wagons and train stations were contact zones. Spaces where subjects from different cultures interacted and struggled, normally in asymmetric conditions. For instance, the conflicts that occurred as a result of the clashes between European and American travelers and Afro-descendant populations who worked in the banana plantations in the Caribbean lowlands. In the same way, the divisiveness that occurred due to the work occupations that originated parallel to the railroads.

### CONCLUSION

The technical transformations in the studied road that linked the Caribbean Coast with the Central Plateau altered the travelers' experiences in regards to the spaces and times traveled and, as a result, affected the construction of the landscapes between 1880 and 1940. For this reason, it was decided to make visible the potential of travelling accounts, diverse in terms of style, format, and themes, as useful resources to study the emergence of

historical experiences linked to movements, bodies, and encounters.

The replacement of the traditional means of transportation, especially horse and carts, by mechanized means affected the relationships between trip, experience, and landscape in three different aspects. First, the speed caused people to notice the landscapes no longer from a sensorial integrity, as happened in the journeys prior to the creation of the railroad, but to notice them from a panoramic, distant way. Second, travelers' corporealities in the railroad system were no longer linked to fatigue and boredom from the travel, but with bourgeois enjoyment and the admiration of the natural resources. Third,

the encounters that resulted from the railroad consented areas of contact of significant racial conflict palpable in the clashes that travelers had with the local communities.

In the future, a diachronic interpretation of these regional processes will become necessary. It will be required to question how; for example, the freeways modified the relationships between travel, experience, and landscape in Costa Rica during the second half of the twentieth century. In other words, it will be essential to check the effects that the creation of vehicular infrastructure had, the metropolization of urban spaces, the improvement in connecting networks, the massification of the commuting in sensibilities and sociabilities.