

# Botanical Urban Landscapes

## Lessons from Roberto Burle Marx's Botanical Garden in Maracaibo, Venezuela

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This research begins at the Botanical Garden of Maracaibo (JBM), Venezuela, which was conceived by Roberto Burle Marx and Leandro Aristeguieta, in 1983 as a Garden School for the preservation of the Tropical Dry Forest and as the First School of Horticulture in Latin America. Having achieved the reopening of the garden in 2013 after 20 years of closure, the first part of this article aims to frame the conversation about the botanical garden's future as a creative process. The second part presents the five kms long '5 de Julio Avenue' Landscape Master Plan, in Maracaibo, as a hypothetical expansion of the JBM. Finally, the article delves on the emergence of a cultural landscape preservation method that embraces rigorous historic analysis, as well as prospective engagements.

### The Botanical Garden as a creative process

One of the key unique characteristics of the JBM is the simultaneity of research and action. The garden-school was designed to be built while teaching its constructors how to do it. At the JBM, the students embarked on expeditions, collected plants

and learned about taxonomy, phytogeography, aesthetic qualities, etc., to later construct the garden and attend on-site classes with Burle Marx and Aristeguieta. The opening ceremony of the garden was also the commencement of the first promotion of Landscape Horticulturists of Latin America. Such pedagogical mission is expressed in the JBM through three key strategies: a) a garden structure designed to reproduce the logic of the regional phytogeography, ranging from the driest to the wettest habitats displaying differentiated collections of native and exotic species capable of adapting to similar conditions; b) water armature systems designed to follow the natural topography and serve as biologic connectors, similarly to way water bodies function in a region that hosts the largest lake in Latin America: the Maracaibo Lake; c) a network of botanical/place-making centralities articulated across the 265 acres of the JBM, in order to host key exhibitions of endangered local species and to offer spaces for civic encounter and artistic production. In the context of such conjunction between regional logics and local relationships, a double enigma

1. The JBM as an expansive systems of relationships among the regional, urban and local, María Villalobos, 2014 (Top); R. Burle Marx at the JBM, Fundación Jardín Botánico de Maracaibo, 1982 (bottom)



2. Botanical Areas, Water Armatures and Programmatic Enclaves at the JBM during the restoration process, Fundación Jardín Botánico de Maracaibo, 2013



emerges. First, there is the question about what preservation means in restoring a living landscape to an 'original condition'. What kind of an 'original condition' is possible when dealing with an evolving landscape? Could one instead imagine a middle ground, which seeks not to restore an object, but rather to steward the essence of a changing creative experience supported by strategic principles? Secondly, there is a chance to delve into the intricacies of a historical multi-scalar and elliptical relations among the territory, the botanical garden and the urban landscape. In this regard, such research/action proposes a process of preservation, not to recover an impossible past, but rather as the expansion and adaptation of a unique landscape system to the larger territorial scale.

### The Botanical Garden towards the urban landscape

The 'Avenida 5 de Julio' Landscape Master Plan serves as the first experimental example of how the hypothetical expansion of the JBM could work, based on the three principals:

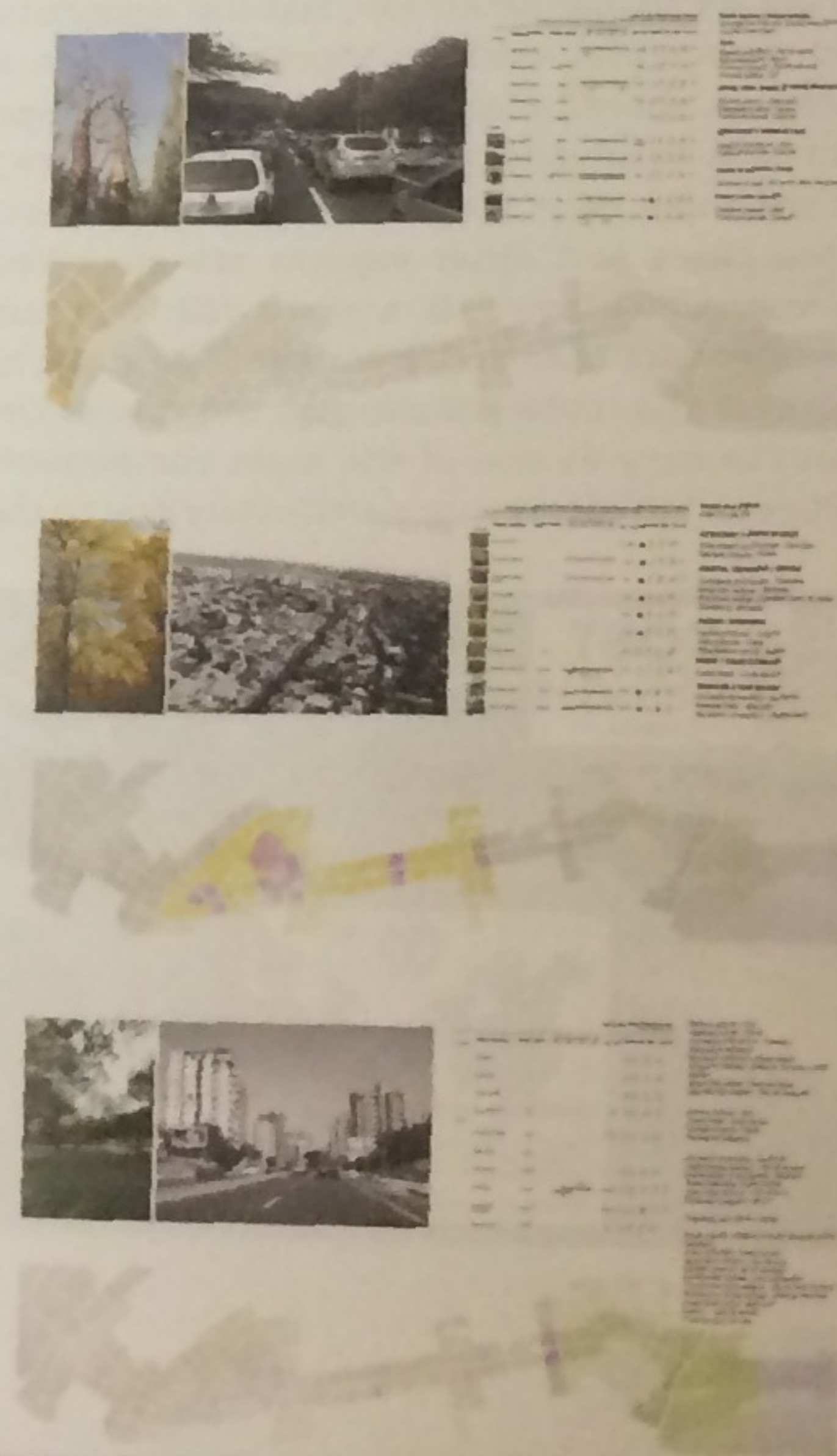
- a) The garden's phytogeographical structure and sequence translates into an urban learning adventure that takes citizens from the most arid life zones at the highest elevation of the city (where the central park of the city is proposed by the plan as a dry forest reservoir), through the different native forests and towards the lake's waterfront at sea level, in correspondence to the geotechnical characteristics of each area.
- b) The continuous water armature becomes a living support system and an experiential device to connect the native forests. The plan proposes a water-based continuity from the highest to the lowest elevations along the avenue, through three types of relationships: constant water presence in the lake and the ravines, intermittent water in topographical depressions and flooding areas, and the invisible presence of water in subterranean drainage systems and aquifers.
- c) The network of botanical centralities where the water armatures occupy more space and function as

outdoor classrooms. The plan proposes a sequence of oases for artistic-botanic educational program. While observing the geological and hydrological characteristics of the land, the oasis function as transition points between different kinds of native forests. The oases simultaneously contribute to the goals of memorability and sustainability. Finally the article goes back to the preservation of the JBM as transformation beyond the garden's enclave. In this sense, the case study has the potential to serve in similar situations by delivering a message of resilience and adaptation; one that emerges from a garden-school that builds itself, where 'practice is research' and where endurance is the celebration of the constantly transforming landscape.



3. '5 de Julio' Landscape Master Plan as a phytogeographic journey toward the Lake of Maracaibo, Venezuela, Botanical City, 2015

4. Oasis systems and water armature along the 5 kilometers long commercial corridor of '5 de Julio', Maracaibo, Venezuela, Botanical City, 2015



5. Native Forest systems along the 5 kilometers long commercial corridor of '5 de Julio', Maracaibo, Venezuela, Botanical City, 2015

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All contributions submitted have been divided into four thematic lines investigating some emerging questions in the practice of landscape architecture:

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