

# Asunción, Mother of Cities

## The Temptation of an Ecologic Utopia

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to reveal how an original sequence of syncretism characterizes the development of architecture and urbanism in Asunción, capital city of Paraguay, unique in the mainstream urban history of Latin America. This investigation focuses on how a series of cultural syncretism mediate through time the tensions between endogenous and exogenous practices: vernacular material ecologies related to the cultural techniques of the Guaraní, and colonial urban models introduced by the Spanish monarchy and the Jesuit missions. Articulated through an ecological, socio-cultural, and spatial understanding of Tereré and its tea rituals. It lies at the navel of every single spiral of syncretism: in its materials, symbols, and forms. As they mutate, so do its territories, urbanisms, and architectures. Even though it shares a history of Spanish colonialism with other capital cities, the grids of the Laws of Indies and the Jesuit castrum organization of space could not completely subdue the environmental logic of the Guaraní nation. Thus, the project aims to highlight the cultural values imprinted within an accretion of syncretism which offers a wealth of spatial expression in Asunción as it stands today.

### **Keywords**

Heritage Protection, Protection and Utilization, Yellow River Basin.

### **How to cite**

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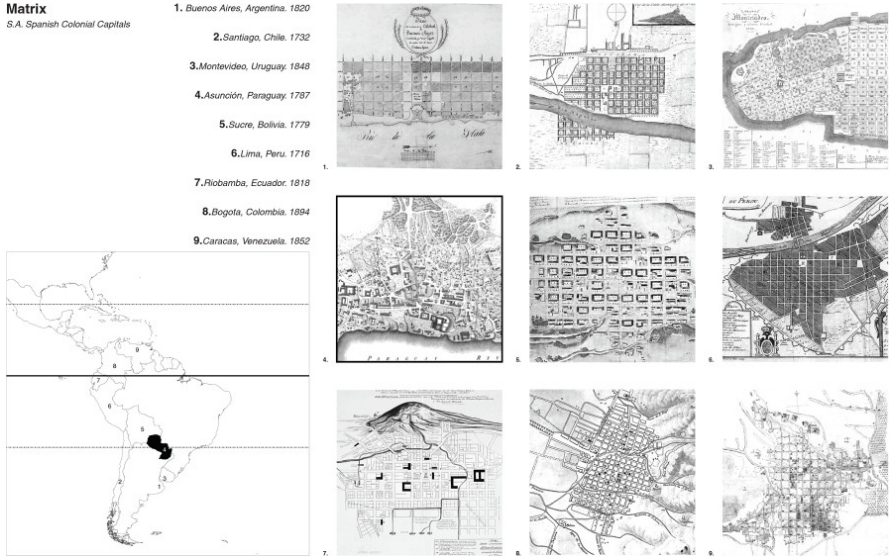


Fig. 1. Matrix of South American Spanish Colonial Capitals from early 18th Century until late 19th Century. The grid system of urban layout is predominant throughout the main capitals of the South American Region, except for Asunción, a unique case in mainstream South America colonial urban history.

## HOPSCOTCH

The characters explored in this narrative emanate from a multi-scalar historical investigation. They were not chosen at will, nor did I have a say on what their role in this investigation was going to be. Rather, they emerged as silent elements of resistance that persisted through the wreckage of events that transcended the history of Paraguayan civilization. As a result, this research does not follow one chronological thread, but rather a variety of patterns. Still, it attempts to weave the several stories of these characters that make up the image of Asunción today.

## COLONIALISM

Paraguay shares a similar Spanish Colonial history to most of the continent's countries. In their endeavours, the Spanish explorers managed to deploy over 500 cities in the span of 100 years. For this, they adopted the Roman Castrum of urban layout, a fast deployment colonialism mechanism. Colonialism unleashes and mobilizes the utopian social potential contained in the grid-shaped heterotopias of Latin America. Three aspects are of particular importance: a) the possibility of registering the absent; b) the distinction between data and addresses; and c) the potentially infinite extension in time and space, as discussed by Bernhard Siegert<sup>1</sup>. In figure 1, a matrix illustrates the South American Spanish colonial capitals from the 18th and

19th Centuries. We can observe that the Laws of Indies and the grid system are employed generally as a cultural technique. But what becomes evident in this case is the fact that Asunción does not follow the same systematic process of colonization and urbanization, but instead becomes a unique case in the mainstream urban history in South America.

## THE LAND WITHOUT EVIL

*“Si languideciera nuestra cultura también se debilitará la tierra, todo el cosmos entrará en riesgo de hacer crisis en el futuro. Si las nuevas generaciones no la conocieran, si los mayores no les enseñáramos estas cosas nuestras, ocurrirá lo indeseable, lo temido por todos”.<sup>2</sup>*

*“If our culture languished, the land would also weaken, the entire cosmos would be at risk of crisis in the future. If the new generations did not know it, if we, the elders, did not teach them these things of ours, the undesirable, what everyone fears, would happen.”<sup>3</sup>*

### GUÁRA

Before the conceptualization and delimitation of territorial boundaries established by the Spaniards, the Guarani communities were scattered throughout the land in a set of zones that they called Guára. In this culture, the term is conceived as a sociopolitical concept that encloses a well-defined region, delimited by rivers. As a result, the Indians had to make use of these extensions of land strictly for sustaining the communities that were scattered within this boundary, through agricultural practices and hunting. However, neighboring communities were not welcome to enter another community's Guára. Thus, perpetuating a notion of belonging and regional unity, that would render the available natural resources and lands as an exclusive property for its inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>

### TEKO'A

This implies agglomeration and coexistence of multilineage in a single place. The Teko'a refers to a self-sufficient social unit based on a lineage that shared communal tasks such as production, consumption, and religious life. Therefore, these communal modes of living would be charged with symbolic, religious, economic, and social connotations that synthesized the cohesion of its members. Moreover, these settlements were a diverse element that did not disturb the natural ecosystems of their surroundings.<sup>5</sup>

### OGA GUASU

Represents the cultural identity, resilience, and communal values of the Guarani people. It is a testament to their deep connection with the land, their ancestors, and each other. These communal houses served as multifunctional spaces where families not only gathered for daily activities but also rested at night. The open layout of the Oga Guasu allowed for flexibility in

accommodating sleeping arrangements. Within it families would have designated areas or sections where they would lay out sleeping mats or hammocks for the night, organized based on familial ties, with extended family members sleeping close to one another. Additionally, the communal nature of the Oga Guasu fostered a sense of security and solidarity among community members as they shared the same living space. Sleeping in the Oga Guasu not only provided practical benefits such as protection from the elements but also reinforced social bonds and cultural practices within the Guarani community. It was a way for families to connect and with their cultural heritage in a shared living environment.

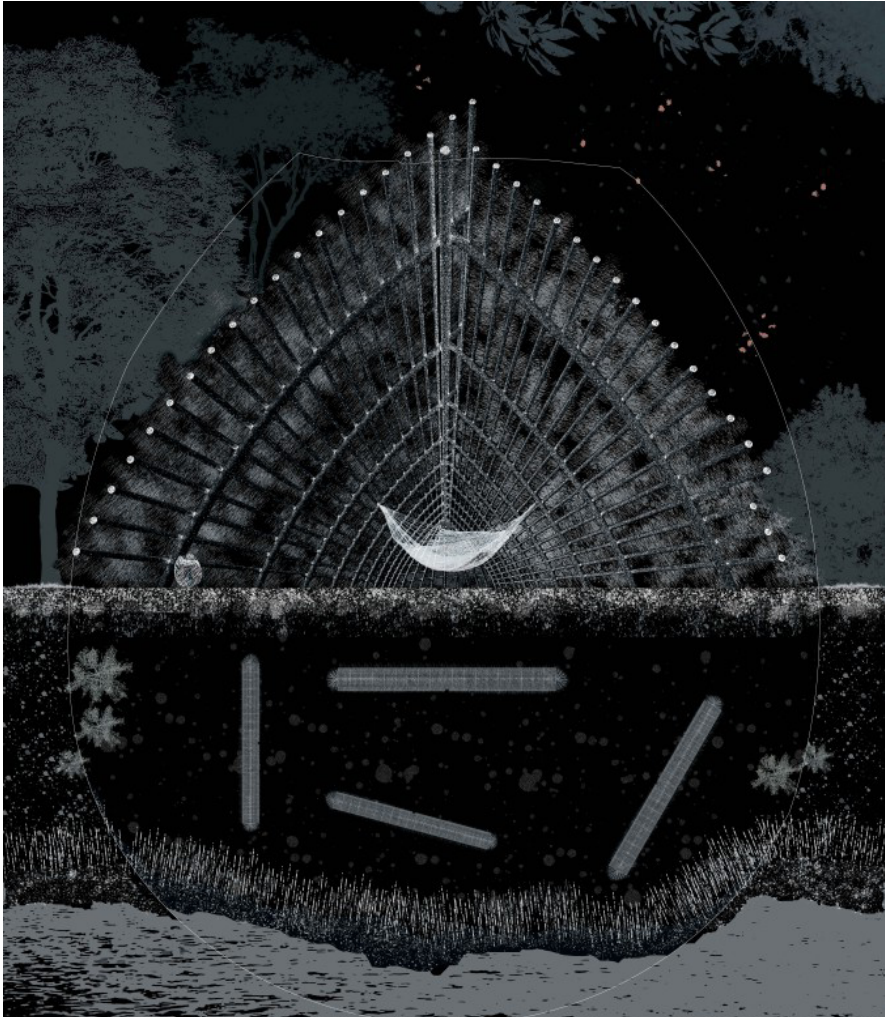


Fig. 2. Artistic representation. Synthesis of the Guarani Culture's spatial logic, in constant dialogue with the natural landscape. From top to bottom: Oga Guasu section perspective, Teko'a Arrangement in plan



Fig. 3. Representation of the Primitive Fort of Asunción, illustrating the syncretism of Indigenous bluff model of settlement, with European architectural typologies, in connection with the Paraguay River and natural landscape.

## NAVEL

Today, the ritual dictates that the youngest member of the round pour the Tereré in honor of Saint Thomas, and consequently hand it to the eldest. Once the latter takes the first sip, the gourd is shared by the members; Tereré is a socio-cultural phenomenon that dictates the rhythm of the Paraguayan community. Rooted in Guaraní culture, it lies at the navel of every single spiral of syncretism: in its materials, symbols, and forms. As they mutate, so do their territories, urbanisms, and architecture. The Ka'a or Yerba Mate is a tree native to the Eastern Paraguay region, on the banks of the Paraná River. Once the leaves and branches are collected, they are first flash dried through direct heat (Sapecado), secondly toasted (Barbacua), and thirdly coarsely ground (canchada or mborobire).

## GROUNDING AND LANDING

### PACT

The act of conquering is a human phenomenon that, in historical anthropological terms, represents the first step in the formation of early civilizations, propelling sociocultural and socio-political change. The manifestation of the Americas to the Western civilization led to the realization of their eccentric views and blinded by their mission - or the precious metals- proceeded to impose their reign on a vast territory rich in ancestral cultures and natural landscapes. But amid this fast-paced colonial machine, it is in the heart of South America where a unique manifestation of repeated cultural syncretism takes place between the Guaraní culture and the exogenous forces: Paraguay.

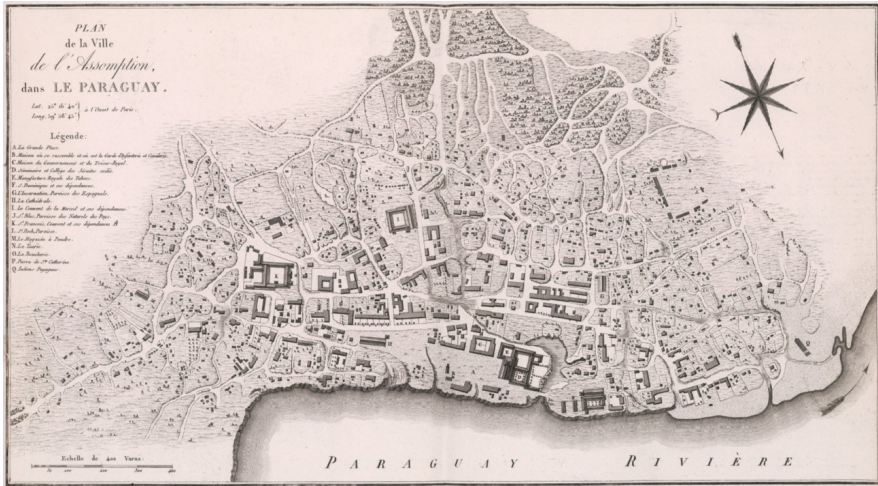


Fig. 4. Map of Asunción during the colony. The city sits on top of irregular bluffs, the grid system is non-existent. Author: Julio Ramón de César, 1787-92

The base of the Paraguayan nation is rooted in the first encounter between the Carios (Guarani culture that was settled along the Paraguay River) and the Spanish explorers who were on their way to Peru. After an initial dispute, the two worlds settled on a pact that benefited them accordingly: the Spanish would protect the indigenous community from the neighboring tribes in exchange for means and supply for subsistence in their path to El Dorado. As a result, the two entities established the fort of Asunción; they became a mutualistic community that coexisted on the banks of the Paraguay River.<sup>6</sup>

### LOMA CAVARA

The Fort of Asunción was located in the Guára of Chief Lambare, on a site that allowed easy access to land from the river, as well as a substantial height that would offer protection to the community. The natural conditions of the land and its topography were dominated by water; numerous streams molded the land at its pleasure, creating a series of irregular bluffs (referred to as Lomas) throughout the banks of the river.<sup>7</sup>

### COLONY

Julio Ramón de César rendered the first evidence of Asunción during the colonial period in the early 1790s. From its conception, the city presents an exceptional characteristic of irregularity, with the riverbanks and the main street running parallel to it acting as the main axis of its urban structure. This morphological condition took place due to the heavy rains that eroded the land, and a fire that occurred in 1543, which destroyed the original Fort and led to the reconstruction of the city in casuistry and dispersed form that would mitigate any fire to propagate in the city.

This preconceived informality, implies a new form of rational order in response to natural conditioning and an adverse experience, leaving the Plaza Mayor and the port as the main points of Asunción's operations. The houses were scattered in the periphery of Bluffs (Islotes) that were created by the flow of water, creating spaces for agriculture between them. As we can observe, the uniqueness of Asunción lies in the constant dialogue between the built and natural environment.<sup>8</sup>

## PARAGUAY RIVER

“The word Paraguay, taken from the Guarani language admits some meanings. The only one disclosed in the books is that of Rio Coronado (Crowned River), deduced from the decision, and, river, and Paragua, crown, or Luarnalda. The motif of this royal appellation lies in the multitude of birds that populate the banks of the river, which with the beautiful variety of their showy plumage highlight the rays of the sun, and form links of vivid colors, as crowning the banks. On many occasions by the Paraguay, we have been persuaded that the name, of crowned, was in the idea of the Guaraníes another beginning. The Paraguay in its dilated course, forms continuous semicircles, and almost circles, which the Spaniards and Portuguese who trafficked in it, called turns. Each of these in its figure represents a kind of crown, composed of greens, and flowering plants, large and small, disposition and ornament, which incidentally illuminates the Guarani to leave Paraguay the expressive appellation of Crowned River of continuous turns. Something of this we hint at, and another etymology of Paraguay in the place quoted.”

## WHAT MAKES ME PAGAN TO YOU, IS WHAT DOESN'T MAKE YOU CHRISTIAN TO ME.

“When you see this, the vast earth unfolds itself, and the vast rivers recede in great abundance. It is the side of America, the land that stretches to the south, which a wild nation worships naked with its whole body. A few towns are held by those born of Spanish blood and who have barbarously surrendered theirs. This land, warmed by the blood of the sacred heroes, feels to the plowman that the god is within him. He put on human beings without sense, the nation put brutal manners under him, and Christ barbarous necks under the yoke. But how much the culture stood with the blood of the novel, the illustrated table shows with examples”

## CULTURAL SYNCRETISM

The term syncretism is defined as a combination of different forms of belief or practice, or the fusion of two or more originally different inflectional forms<sup>9</sup>. The evidence collected suggests that the latter adjusts best to the events that occurred in Asunción and to a greater extent - in Paraguay. As illustrated by Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos: “The Jesuit experiment remained like the book written by illiterate people who did not know writing but who knew

the language and the magic of myths, the social ritualization of life, the nourishing energy of nature. The social and cultural syncretism of the Missions was even, as a human phenomenon, more interesting than simple ethnic or biological mestizaje.”<sup>10</sup>

## MISSIONS

Along with the explorers came the Jesuits. Men of action destined to submit even more indomitable societies, they were at the same time natural philosophers and historians who contributed to the serious knowledge of American space<sup>11</sup>. Parallel to their scholarly endeavours, the Jesuits were to carry the Spiritual Conquest as an alternative to the Spanish explorers who were brutally abusing the local inhabitants and their resources. In this regard, they attempted to create the ideal civilization of the heavens on earth, between the temporal and the eternal, manifested in the form of the Jesuit Missions.

From 1640 until their expulsion in 1768, the Jesuits consolidated a total of thirty pueblos along the Paraná River. In essence, the Missionaries adopted the Roman Castrum as an organizational element with the square plaza as the heart of the complexes. Then, the Church, convent, school, and cemetery flank one side of the plaza symbolizing the path of a man's life from its conception until he ascends to the heavens. On the other sides of the plaza, the housing for the priests, the Guarani, and their chief are laid out by the proportions of the main space.

## JESUIT HOUSE

The housing typology introduced by the Jesuits departs from the primitive instincts of shelter. The first observation that we can perceive is the adoption of the Basilica typology, which becomes apparent when we visualize the section cut of the houses, which reveals the introduction of the portico as a response to the natural conditions. In the plan, the architecture communicates a similarity with the Oga Guasu, with the inclusion of partition walls that subdivide the singular rectangular form into equal rooms.

## YERBALES

“For the same reason, the Guaraní Indians experience serenity in the fire of their blood with the use of their favorite drink, which they call, Caaygua, and the Spanish Mate. Rarely do such Indians drink the infusion of the Paraguayan Herb in hot water. Its most ordinary way is reduced to putting it in cold water, and this in its most tiring tasks, and burning suns. I believe that grass, which has little fire, attracts and receives the blood that is ignited; and this is why they feel relief from their heat with this drink...”





Fig. 5. Early Nineteenth Century lithograph of José Gaspar Francia, ruler of Paraguay (1814-1840). Artist unknown. Dressed in a European fashion, with a Tereré in hand. Standing in a gallery space with vernacular materials, framing the exuberant landscape.

## THE REPUBLIC

### DEVELOPMENT

A social revolution shackled the chains of the colony; Asunción wanted its freedom from the Spanish Monarchy. Achieved in 1811 and after a period of political uncertainty, Dr Jose Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia - El Supremo- took the lead of a Nation that was craving their own path. Cities have historically served the political powers as a transgenerational medium. The colonial infrastructure of the city was not responding to the growth of its inhabitants. With this scenario, Francia envisioned a progressive nation, and traced one of the first urban revolutions in the South American continent.

### ANCHORS

With development came industrialization. Building on the aspirational ideas of Dr Francia, Mariscal Lopez molded to new economic and political policies in the 19th century. The introduction of the Port and the Railroad anchored the financial hub Asunción, while consolidating the grid envisioned earlier. How can I leave an imprint in history? Whether it is a question or an impulse, I dont have the capacity to say. But, during the time when López was in charge of the country, he followed the route that his predecessors had taken. With the opening of the market as an attempt to be part of the global discourse, he commissioned Italian architects to bring a European aesthetic into Asunción.

### QUINTA

La Casa Quinta de López was the president's house. In a period where urbanization and industrialization reconfigured the structure and image of Asunción, his house stands as a paradoxical element. In the plan, the program is separated between public and private, services and spaces to be served, all separate from each other. Interestingly, the layout of the two most prominent areas -the dormitories and the social spaces- resemble the elongated form of the Oga Guasu, with the interior subdivision similar to the Jesuit house. Within these, the house was built with vernacular methods of construction from the Guarani, making use of the natural resources available to the proximity: the walls consisted of a wood structure that acted as a skeleton, which then was covered with soil. Similar to the walls, the roof was made out of wood, a membrane of dried palm leaves was visible from the interior but covered with clay roof tile. The dormitories followed the same logic as the social spaces, with the exception that the exterior walls were made out of brick, and the interior walls were made with vernacular methods. The construction and aesthetic rendering of the house leads us to interpret the president's aspirations for the nation he was leading, as he also embraced his cultural roots.

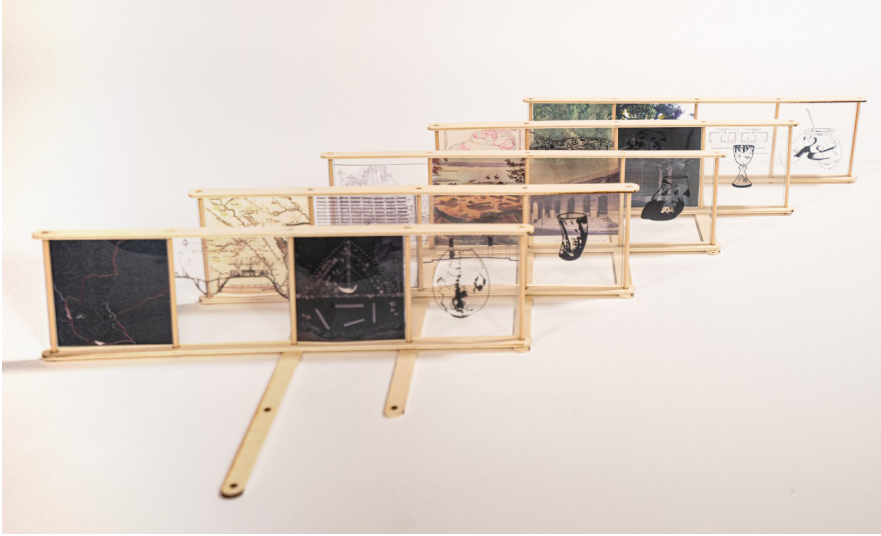


Fig. 6. Asunción as a dynamic palimpsest. The different time periods are arranged from top to bottom, the diverse scales are arranged from Object to territorial scale (Right to left).

## CONCLUSION: THE TEMPTATION OF AN ECOLOGIC UTOPIA

### PALIMPSEST

The Merriam -Webster<sup>12</sup> dictionary defines it as something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface. In this manner, the palimpsest forged by the territory, urbanism and architecture of Asunción allows us to observe the perseverance of the Guarani roots in syncretistic dialogue with its contemporary time periods. Figure 6 comprehends the diverse time periods that have been explored in this investigation, arranging the different scales, from left to right as follow: Territory, Urbanism, Architecture, and Tereré. When this structure is collapsed, it shows us the palimpsest that is Asunción today. However, when the structure expands, we are able to establish different multi-scale, non-linear relationships.

### TERERÉ

The ritual presents itself as a medium for the transgenerational passing of knowledge, and it is practiced at different scales within the society. This has reinforced the cultural identity of Asunción, and consequently the country; a process in which the sharing of the drink establishes ribbons of kinship and fellowship, only possible by the communion involved in the making of Tereré. Consequently, the ritual can be considered as a symbolon, due to the fact that the tradition departs from the pre-Columbian times; it transcends the boundaries of conventional sign, and within this, elements such as the gourd, flask and metal straw come into play in order to avoid the pollution of the symbolic.<sup>13</sup>

## UTOPIA

This investigation sheds a light on the term Utopia, as it departs from its original meaning: rather than promoting Asunción as an ideal ecological model to be followed, the concept of Utopia takes the form of a series of repetitions that persist through different scales and time periods as silent elements of resistance, locating the capital city as a culture that unconsciously seeks to conserve its cultural roots within the pressures of globalization. As a result, it is in the repetition of these silent elements of resistance where we can find possible answers for a better future ahead.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

I am within and without; a condition I embraced from the first time I stepped foot in Asunción, and she welcomed me with open arms regardless. This notion has catalysed a two-way street exploration between the city and myself, which I hope extends to a larger comprehension of her inhabitants and, to a greater extent, the South American civilization. On this note, my role in this play of historical events is similar to that of a detective, who submerges in the scenes almost omnipresent of what is occurring and based on the evidence found, speculates on the meaning of these series of events that led to such results.

## ENDNOTES

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## IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1 Guareschi, Juan M. Matrix of South America Spanish Colonial Capitals. 2024. May 6, 2024.

Figure 2 Guareschi, Juan M. Guaraní Spatial and Communal Synthesis. 2024. May 6, 2024.

Figure 3 Gavaldá, Francisco T. Primitive Fort of Asunción. Painting. Date Unknown.

Figure 4 De César, Julio R. Asunción Colonial. Map. 18th Century

Figure 5 Robertson, J.P. & W.P.: Letters on Paraguay, comprising an account of four years' residence in that Republic, under the government of the Dictator Francia. London, J. Murray, 1838, 2 vols.

Figure 6 Guareschi, Juan M. Asunción: Unlayering the Palimpsest. 2024. Physical model. May 6, 2024.

