

TENSIONS OF VISIBILITY AND SOCIALIZATION

TEMPORAL ARCHITECTURE AND CARNIVAL:



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Figure 1: Carnival masqueraders in Port of Spain, Trindad & Tobago.

## INTRODUCTION

There is often a notable permanence that validates the need for observing the context in which a site, building, or structure is analyzed from an architectural point of view. From historical monuments to everyday apartment buildings, urban space is mostly categorized through the relationship with permanent features of a city, an area, or a street that create a specific environment through which people exist.

However, knowledge of architectural forms and intentions can be applied to structures with a more temporary presence in communities. The context through which temporal architecture is constructed is often the most informative in understanding the implications, uses, and significance of these temporary spaces. This disruption to everyday life and the familiar organization of space allows for new social dynamics to become prevalent.

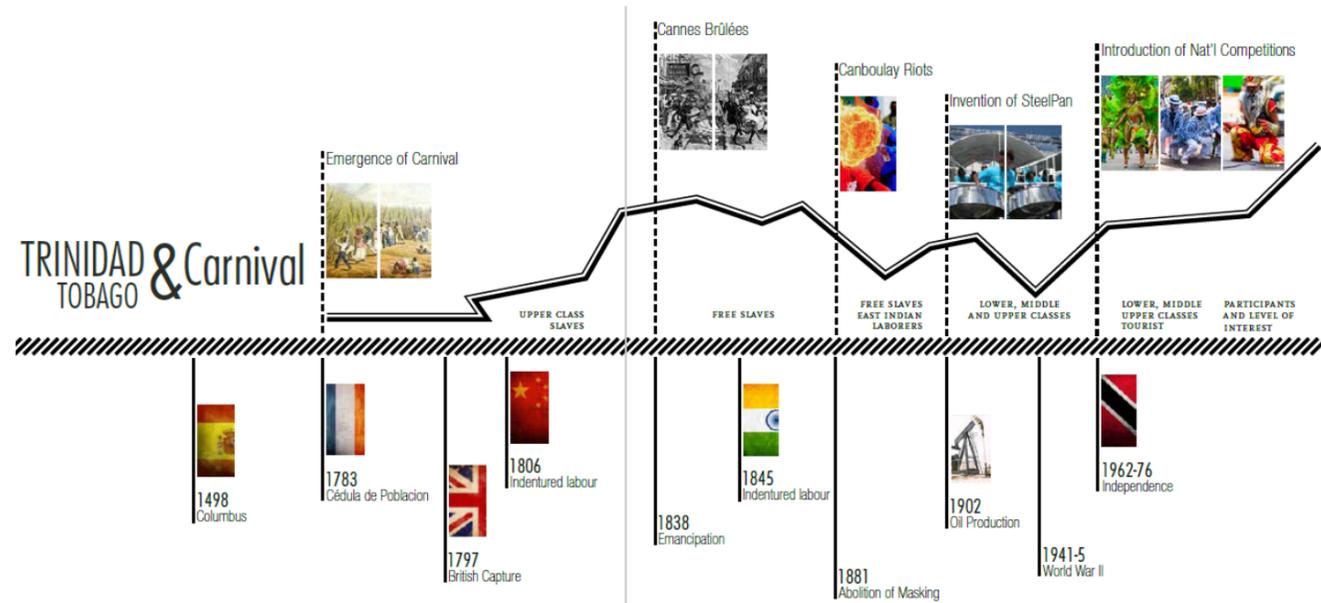


Figure 2: Timeline of Carnival in Trinidad & Tobago

Trinidad’s proud tradition of Carnival presents an opportunity to examine how seasonal temporary structures can transform urban environments and societal roles to fit certain themes, traditions, and narratives. Currently, it is the culmination of over 200 years of history, and a unifying experience that also showcases the diversity of the people of Trinidad.

*“[CARNIVAL] WAS BORN FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRINIDADIAN SOCIETY, BEGINNING WITH SPANISH, BRITISH, AND FRENCH COLONIALISM, SUGAR AND COCOA PLANTATIONS, SLAVERY, INDENTURED SERVITUDE, INTERNATIONAL MARKETS FOR OIL, ANTI-COLONIALISM, DECOLONIZATION, POST-INDEPENDENCE NATIONHOOD AND FINALLY CAPITALISM.”<sup>1</sup>*

For Carnival, the narrative differs in that there is a cycle of construction and de-construction of these temporal structures. The main stage for Carnival festivities is located in the Queen’s Park Savannah in the capital city, Port of Spain.

Some of the main architectural tropes in the region, especially in tourist spaces, have origins from some of the earlier temporal structures. As an example, the use of thatched roofs in slave quarters built around plantations—which were considered to be “impermanent structures” for the tobacco industry<sup>2</sup>—has been appropriated into the vernacular of traditional Caribbean architecture and is widely used in tourist spaces around the Caribbean.

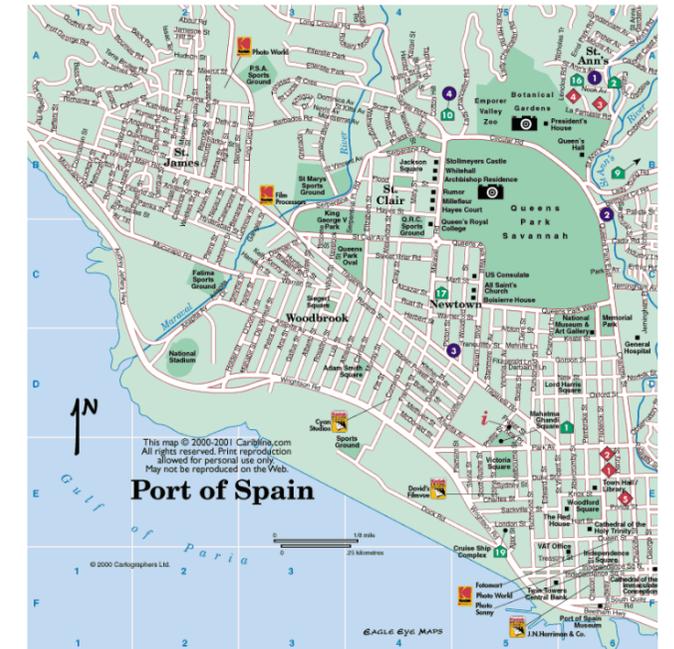


Figure 3: Map of Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad & Tobago.

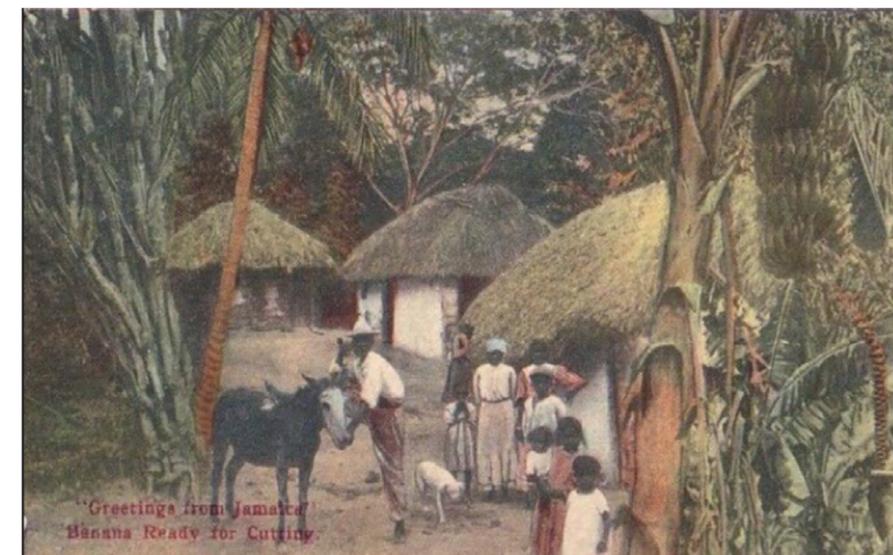


Figure 4: Image showing freed slaves next to their houses, previously slave quarters, in Jamaica



Figure 5: Map of the Carnival setup at the Queen's Park Savannah

As seen in figure 5, the main three elements that contextualize the space are the 'Grand Stand' (permanent), the 'North Stand' (temporary), and the stage located in between them (temporary) — also known as the 'Big Yard'. This area serves as the focal point of Carnival, with masqueraders passing through the center stage and observers watching them from the stands and towers around the stage. This is where the parades begin and end. The engagement with this temporal form of architecture validates its existence and extends permanence to the disruption of the space. In his Master of Architecture Thesis, (In) Visibilities of Temporal Space: the reordering of space and time in Carnival, Mark R. Talma argues how engagement in Carnival festivities "masks" the temporal structures of Carnival as permanent.

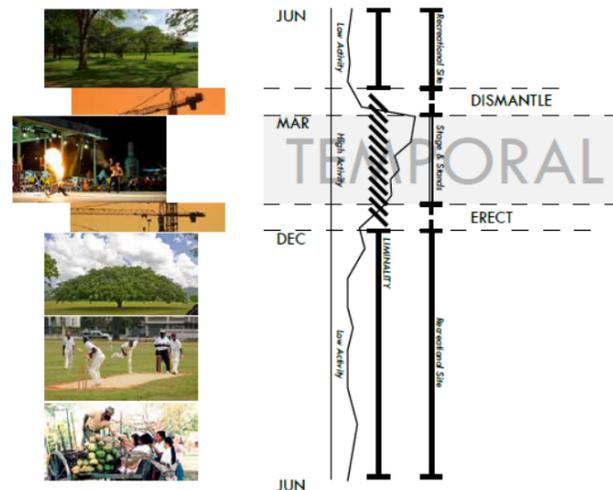


Figure 6: Timeline of Carnival construction and respective activity level at the Queen's Park Savannah

Figure 6 shows the transformation of this park throughout the year from a space of leisure to a construction site, center of festivities, and then back to a space of leisure<sup>1</sup>. There exists a great distinction between what the park looks like at the time of Carnival and at all other times. From the difference in available functions of the park to the varying levels of activity, and the striking visual contrasts, the absence of Carnival's influence for most of the year increases the significance of its presence. Hence, the temporality of these Carnival spaces and the festivities that go alongside them are inherently what extend a sense of permanence to their existence in places like Queen's Park Savannah.

### FESTIVAL WORLD VS. WORKADAY WORLD:

The disruption of the urban fabric through the presence of temporal structures of Carnival is not, however, the only consequence. Social norms and expectations are also impacted by the changes brought forth by Carnival festivities. In *Time Out Or Time In? The Urban Dialectic Of Carnival*, Milla Cozart Riggio discusses how

This exists in multiple spaces and at varying levels. Public space, as one example, is re-organized to allow for a diverse audience, larger accessibility, and a new set of activities to take place. Sidewalks are transformed from serving as intermediary spaces to essential in organizing spectator versus masquerader, building rooftops become viewing towers, and streets become congregation spaces. This reorganization is possible through the use of temporal structures and organizational signifiers that direct focus away from the existing urban environment and towards the Carnival events.

At the same time, however, these structures would not be able to serve these specific functions if not for the existing 'permanent' environment in which they are placed. This creates a tension that ends up being essential for the themes of Carnival to prevail. Crystal Mohammed's thesis, *Re-stating the "Carnival" in Architecture*, highlights how themes present in Carnival parades, plays, dances, and songs can be reflected through the temporal architectures of Carnival, including

*"ABSTINENCE, REVERSAL, INTENSIFICATION, TRESPASS, RHYTHM, CONFRONTATION, AND WANDERING."*<sup>4</sup>

*"CARNIVAL CELEBRATIONS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DISTINGUISHED BY TIME AND LOCATION" AND ARE "CHARACTERIZED BY PARADOX AND CONTRADICTION."*<sup>3</sup>



Figure 7: Steelpan players on a parade float in Port of Spain

Figure 8: Masqueraders on the main stage of Carnival



*The festival world*

*Concepts of time: seasonal*

- Movements of the ocean
- Diurnal – light
- Agrarian (mango, puoi)
- Sense of the eternal

*Social structuring*

- Family
- Neighborhood
- Community
- Church as folk worship

*Significant social spaces*

- Yards
- Streets as festive arenas
- Domestic spaces
- Public space, freely accessed

*Epistemology*

- Imagination, intuition

*Activities (vocations) of value*

- Rites of passage
- Art in all its forms
  - Music, painting, costume-making
  - Poetry, drama
  - Imaginative creativity
- Resistive/constructive play
- Transgressive behavior

*Essences*

- Spiritual, metaphysical
- Fantasy, magic
- The primacy of the unseen

*The workaday world*

*Concepts of time: clock time*

- Regularity
- Punctuality
- Steady measurement
- Temporal materiality

*Social structuring*

- Urban infrastructures
- Government
- Policing agencies
- Church as institution

*Significant social spaces*

- Factories
- Streets as thoroughfares
- Corporate/government offices
- Regulated public spaces

*Epistemology*

- Rationality, logic, logical cause and effect

*Activities of value*

- Money making
- Commerce, trade, manufacturing
- Consumerism
- Law and legal processes
- Progressive development
- Obedient behavior

*Essences*

- Material
- Science
- Phenomenology

Figure 9: Comparison between the Festival World and the Workaday World.

Carnival challenges a lot of pre-fixed ideas about societal roles and purposes, centering play and presence in this ephemeral yet ever-lasting Carnavalesque space. The architecture becomes the boundary, then, between the festival world and the workaday world, and Carnival becomes of the city<sup>3</sup>.

As seen in figure 9, the festival world creates a new set of rules through which space, time, and social relationships can be navigated. With an emphasis on imagination, creativity, and grandeur, temporal architecture inherently becomes what sets the scene for the festivities. There is also a very important communal aspect to these structures. The vision for design does not come from an individual or with an individual in mind; the design rationality is largely focused on a group experience of space, time, and performance.

Role reversal is an additional part of the Carnival experience that is enabled by the dynamics presented in the urban landscape. Figure 10 showcases how some of these reversals can occur. Talma’s discussion about the hierarchical shift that occurs, the inversion of rules in many cases, fits into Riggio’s comparisons of the Festival World and the Workaday World<sup>3</sup>.

This social inversion is also applicable to the utilization of space. The social contextualization of temporal spaces through the association with Carnival allows for their seasonal presence and absence to be more significant than that of permanent structures. Who engages with these structures also plays into this. The make-shift aspect of public space is validated more frequently and passionately due to the huge crowds that engage with it, as opposed to private viewing spaces for “elite” spectators whose experiences are not as communal, and thus, not as aligned with the spirit of Carnival.

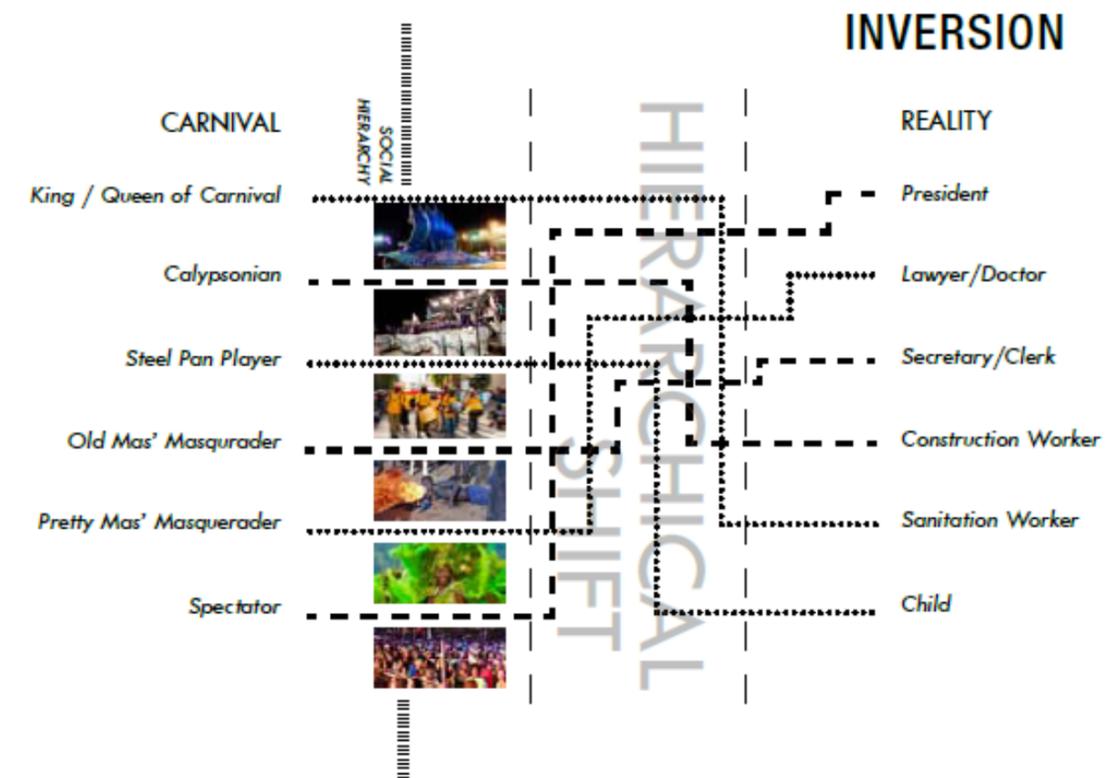


Figure 10: Diagram showing the inversion of social dynamics during Carnival

In more recent developments, this temporality is getting challenged by the government's focus on permanent structures that exist to serve the tourist experience more than that of the locals. The construction of a permanent "North Park" instead of the usual North Stand is an example of that. With a mostly economically driven proposal, a greater focus on tourist spaces begins to challenge the essence of Carnival and with that, the role of temporal spaces in the festivities.

What restrictions, thus, does this impose on the relationship between Carnival and the tension it creates in the urban environment? Clearly, permanent structures have their own role to play as the backdrop for Carnival structures, parades, and attendees to interfere with. Tourism also adds to the shift in Carnival structures, both in terms of built structures and the structure of festivities. In its essence, Carnival is about celebrating the diverse and lively culture of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Talma talks about Trinbagonian "transculturation", which was coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s, to describe the nature of cultural interactions present in the country and that inherently influence both Carnival's purposes, elements, and the way in which its relationship with space and time can be best defined<sup>1</sup>. In a sense then, incorporating touristic influences into Carnival goes along with ideas of transculturation being a key driving force for Carnival.

On the other hand, however, it can be seen how the touristic imagination and tropicalization of the Caribbean can be more harmful both socially and with respect to the built environment. The tourist gaze can be seen to have played a part in the need for a more polished, permanent structure—North Park—that gives the impression of a safer, better-organized experience that affords them the mix of luxury and performance that they desire. Tourists' role in Carnival is not to walk in the parade or put on shows, but to act as the observer. However, they partake in a different type of observation than that of local participants. There is no communal aspect to their participation; it tends to be more of an individualistic desire for wonder from gazing at a different 'other'. The lack of fluidity in this relationship, hence, matches that of the imposed permanent structures that become less characteristic of Carnival.

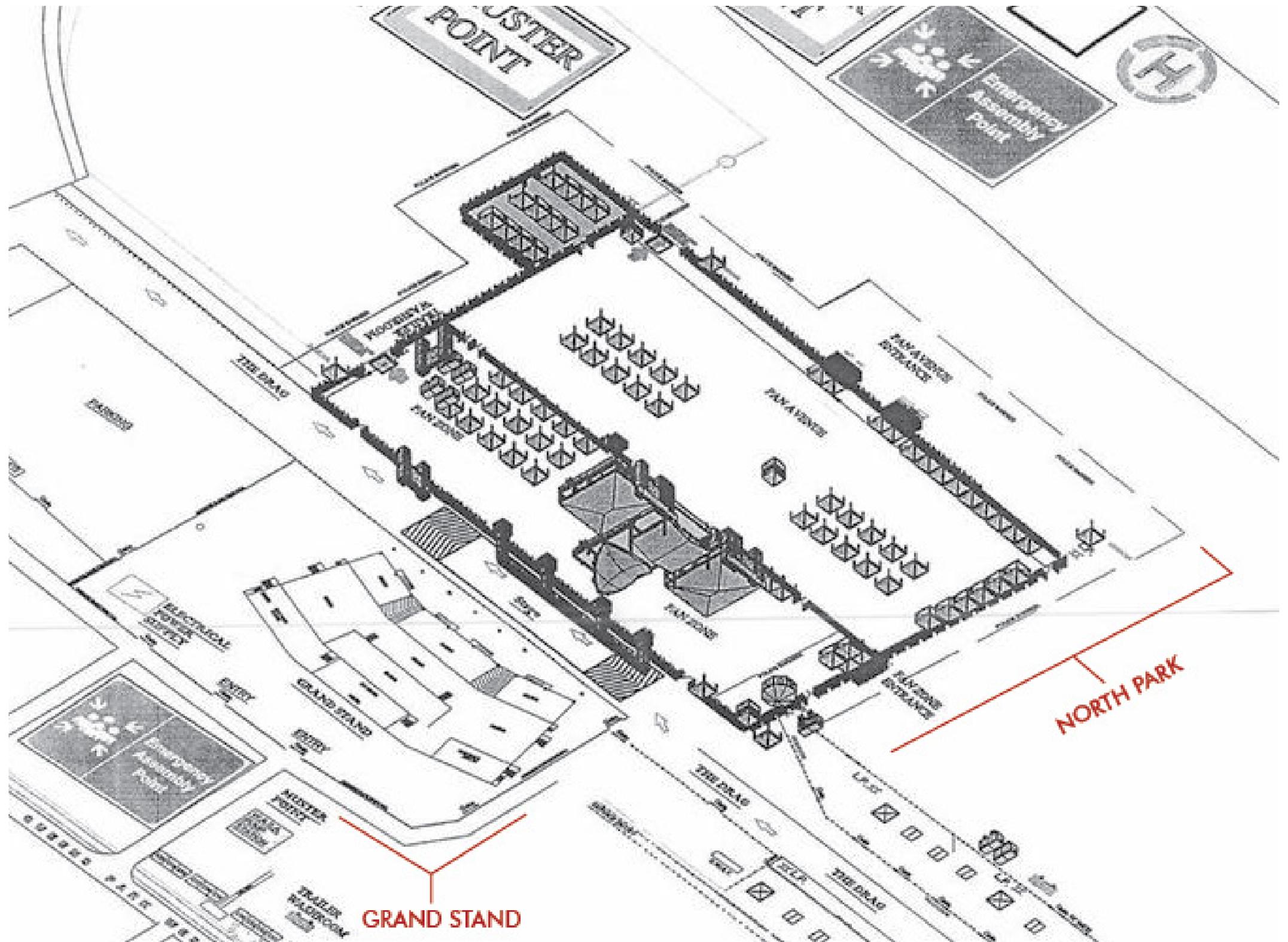


Figure 11: Construction plan for North Park at Queen's Park Savannah



Figure 12: Carnival preparations

Therefore, the complex nature of Carnival extends to the characteristics it lends to what is around it, from architecture to social dynamics, and relationships with time and space. When it comes to the temporal architectural interventions of Carnival in Port of Spain, a juxtaposition is created between that which is seasonal, temporary, and communal to that which is permanent, unchanging, and stand-alone. From the dynamics of the parade stands and stages and the changes to Queen's Park Savannah at the time of Carnival to the re-purposing of elements of the public space to reorient focus and attention towards the festivities, Carnival and temporal architecture are forever interlinked. In this case, one cannot exist without the other, and yet the dynamic is continuously challenged.

The routine of the workaday world is thus contrasted by the expected spontaneity of the festival world, the latter of which is given a sense of permanence due to the stark shift in culture between its presence and its absence. These interactions all inform what communal approaches to architecture can mean for the future of not only Carnival and Port of Spain but also cities around the world.

Through this exploration, it can be seen how the purpose and culture of space are ever-changing, adapting, and pushing the boundaries of the definitions imposed on these spaces. Carnival's welcome imposition onto the urban landscape has a logic of its own that absorbs that of the city's fabric but challenges it to find new meaning through play, creativity, and community.

Despite having a large tourist presence nowadays, Carnival's identity will forever be that of the people whom it celebrates, and it does the same for the architectural systems it brings along with it. Beginning to understand how temporal architecture can help communities express their needs and celebrate their heritage allows for a deeper knowledge of how imposed binaries can be blurred and challenged by a holistic, people-driven approach to design.



Figure 13: Central stage area of Carnival

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5. Nduom, Dahlia. *Tourism, Tropicalization, and Colonial Consumption*. September 21, 2021. *Tourism, Tropicalization, and the Architectural Image*.

L I S T O F I L L U S T R A T I O N S

- Figure 1: <https://www.essence.com/lifestyle/travel/first-timers-guide-to-trinidad-carnival/>
- Figure 2: [https://issuu.com/mrtalma/docs/mark\\_talma\\_thesis](https://issuu.com/mrtalma/docs/mark_talma_thesis)
- Figure 3: <http://www.caribbean-on-line.com/islands/tt/psmap.shtml>
- Figure 4: Nduom, Dahlia. "Greetings from Jamaica" *Banana Ready for Cutting*. September 21, 2021. *Tourism, Tropicalization, and the Architectural Image*.
- Figure 5: <http://saucytrini.blogspot.com/2006/10/national-carnival-and-arts-centre.html>
- Figure 6: [https://issuu.com/mrtalma/docs/mark\\_talma\\_thesis](https://issuu.com/mrtalma/docs/mark_talma_thesis)
- Figure 7: <https://www.travelbeginsat40.com/event/trinidad-carnival/>
- Figure 8: <https://www.fodors.com/world/caribbean/experiences/news/15-places-to-experience-carnival-in-the-caribbean>
- Figure 9: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203646045-02/time-time-urban-dialectic-carnival-milla-cozart-riggio?context=ubx>
- Figure 10: [https://issuu.com/mrtalma/docs/mark\\_talma\\_thesis](https://issuu.com/mrtalma/docs/mark_talma_thesis)
- Figure 11: <https://whensteeltalks.ning.com/forum/topics/a-look-at-grand-stand-the-big-stage-north-park-all-at-carnivalc>
- Figure 12: <http://nvsurban.blogspot.com/2015/>
- Figure 13: <https://nationaltrust.tt/the-queens-park-savannah/>
- Figure 14: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bazdreisinger/2021/08/17/trinidad-carnival-2022-to-be-or-not-to-be-a-qa-with-the-trinidad-and-tobago-promoters-association/?sh=7bedfbc4a48>



Figure 14