

CRÓNICAS DEL TRANVÍA EN SAN JOSÉ

CENTRAL AVENUE STOP

Historical Context:
It is the capital's oldest and most important thoroughfare, and its importance as a center of everyday life for the people of San José has made it the city's most significant urban artery.

From "Calle Real" to "Avenida del Comercio":
Walking Along San José's Central Avenue.
When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the Americas and established the various settlements that would eventually become today's Latin American cities, they established a main street known as a calle real, or royal road.

This street was generally the main route leading to the church and the governor's residence. People with a certain level of economic status within colonial society lived in the surrounding area.

San José, the present-day capital of Costa Rica, is a particular case because it was not the first established capital. It became the capital following the War of Ochomogo (1823), after Cartago lost its status as capital. Therefore, its urban structure was shaped primarily by religious circumstances.

Urban and Architectural Space:
importance to the growth of the city, the formation of its grid, and the definition of public space and spaces of power in San José. Manuel Antonio Chapuí de Torres (1713–1783) was San José's first parish priest. In 1776, he ordered the construction of a new adobe church for the parish—the building that is now the Metropolitan Cathedral—which was completed in 1781.

A central plaza was built in front of the church, in accordance with Spanish urban planning principles. Gradually, the hierarchy of urban space developed around this center of power, as the city's most prominent residents settled in the surrounding area.

Other important buildings were located around the new central plaza. These included the relocation of the city council, or cabildo, to the northeast of the main plaza in 1799, and the establishment of the main military barracks to its northwest in 1828. The urban axis was thus shared between these two centers of development and power, giving San José a distinctive character. This configuration led the street now known as Central Avenue to become, during the nineteenth century, the well-known Avenida del Comercio, where most commercial activities converged.

1 Florencia Quesada Avendaño. Historia de San José: ciudad hace 200 años. San José, Costa Rica: La Nación, October 18, 2013. [HTML]



Avenida Central (1931): in front of the streetcar, one can see where the Avenida Fernández Güell stop begins. Avenida Central.



La Sabana. 1928. President Cleto González Víquez. Photograph by Manuel Gómez Miralles.



Central Avenue. 1898. Central Avenue (Fernández Güell).



Funeral Car at the Pacific Station. 1917. Photograph by Manuel Gómez Miralles.



CRÓNICAS DEL TRANVÍA EN SAN JOSÉ

CHELLES RESTAURANT-BAR STOP

Historical Context:
Chelles Restaurant and Bar was one of San José's most emblematic establishments during the twentieth century. It was a meeting place that remained open 24 hours a day. It was founded in 1909 by an American businessman known as "Mister Chase."
Throughout its history, the building underwent several changes. For example, a fire damaged part of the restaurant's second floor in 2005; however, the establishment remained open.

It closed in 2020, after more than 100 years of history, after struggling with high operating costs. It continues to serve as a landmark for giving directions in the capital because of its central location.

It was established when the tramway was the most widely used means of transportation in the capital, occupying a strategically privileged location for those who got off at this stop to have a meal and enjoy the atmosphere of the place.

Urban and Architectural Space:
The architectural style in which the establishment can be classified is Costa Rican vernacular architecture, referring to architecture produced in this country with specific characteristics. Its main attribute, however, is that its development is shaped by the particularities of the country's climate—that is, by regional bioclimatic conditions.
It bears the influences of an isthmian bridge, meaning a land bridge that connects two continental masses with strong cultural and geopolitical forces. As a result, it represents a syncretism between ancestral traditions, immense biodiversity, and the newness of architectural styles, materials, and technologies of the period.

According to Andrés Fernández, an architect at the Heritage Center: "It is one of the last vernacular Josefinan buildings: an entrance at the corner, a side entrance, a second-floor balcony facing the corner, colonial architectural heritage that reminds us of adobe and bahareque houses, wooden construction with decorative woodwork, and windows influenced by Neoclassicism," the architect explained.



Chelles Restaurant and Bar. 1967.



Central Avenue. Chelles Restaurant was established when the tramway was the most widely used means of transportation for reaching San José. 1928.



Tramway at the Central Market Stop. 1928.



Northwest Corner of the Central Market. 8th Street. 1921.
Photograph by Manuel Gómez Miralles.



CRÓNICAS DEL TRANVÍA EN SAN JOSÉ

STOP ON CUESTA DE MORAS, AT THE SITE OF THE PRESENT-DAY JADE MUSEUM

Historical Context:
The area surrounding the present-day Jade Museum is known as Cuesta de Moras, a steep section of the avenue with historical significance for San José.

The origin of the name appears in colonial documents dating back to 1770. In 1835, a battle was fought here against forces from Cartago during the so-called War of the League, the second civil war in the history of Costa Rica, which took place between September and October 1835.[1] This confrontation resulted in the permanent consolidation of San José as the capital of Costa Rica. Cuesta de Moras is located between Clorito Picado Street (17th Street) and Tomás Guardia Street (11th Street).

Urban and Architectural Space:
In the 1940s, the National Insurance Institute (INS) became involved in cultural activities by acquiring several works of art, primarily portraits of its first employees. Later, it supported the state policy of protecting archaeological heritage and, beginning in 1973, acquired Costa Rican pre-Columbian and ethnographic objects. During the 1970s, the INS's collection of archaeological objects grew in both number and variety of materials, with jade becoming particularly prominent. In 1973, the name of the permanent exhibition was changed from "Archaeological Collection" to "Jade Museum," as the collection was the largest collection of pre-Columbian jade in the world.

Until 1999, the museum was located on the ground floor of the INS headquarters, on 7th Avenue, between 9th and 11th Streets. In 1999, it moved to the site where the present-day museum is located, occupying a modern five-story building.
In 2014, construction of a new five-story building was completed at a cost of $21 million, making it possible to display the entire collection of archaeological pieces. This makes it unique among the museums of San José. The building was designed by Costa Rican architect Diego van der Laat.
The Jade Museum building occupies 6,970 m², and its conceptual design is based on a block of raw jade divided into two sections, allowing natural light to enter the central area of the building.

It has five floors, each housing one exhibition hall, except the third floor, which has two. It features a special ventilation system and was designed to work in harmony with the environment. It includes a temporary exhibition hall, a fully equipped auditorium, classrooms for academic activities, a café, a shop, and a cloakroom.
The new building was inaugurated on May 5, 2014, although it did not open to the public until May 26. Its architectural style is Postmodernist.

2 Zeledón Cartín, Rafael Elías (2004). "La Cuesta de Moras." Del Viejo San José (1st edition). San José, Costa Rica: EUCR. p. 179.



Tramway on Cuesta de Moras. 1928.



Central Avenue. 1901. Carts alongside the tramway.



Tramway Tracks on Cuesta de Moras.



Tramway Derailed at Cuesta de Moras. 1915.
Photograph from the "Mi Costa Rica de Antaño".



CRÓNICAS DEL TRANVÍA EN SAN JOSÉ

CASTILLO AZUL STOP

Historical Context:
Castillo Azul is one of the four buildings belonging to the Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica and once housed the office of the President of Congress.
The building's various uses were closely connected to the Costa Rican politics of the period. The 1914 elections ended without a winner. Under the constitution then in force, the system of direct voting, together with several other events, ultimately led to Alfredo González Flores becoming president. At the time, he was a member of Congress representing the Republican Party. The building became Flores's residence during his presidency. Months later, his Minister of War, Federico Tinoco, overthrew his government and lived there with his wife, María Fernández Le Capellain, daughter of Mauro Fernández.

During the Tinoco brothers' brief government, the house witnessed some of the most elegant balls and receptions hosted by the First Lady for the capital's grateful oligarchy, which had supported the coup d'état. In 1919, when the Tinocos went into exile in France, the house was dismantled. The following presidents chose not to live there, so the property returned to its original owner, Máximo Fernández, who sold the building to the United States Department of State to establish a diplomatic mission that would serve as an embassy.

In the 1930s, a group of military officers seized Bellavista Barracks with the intention of carrying out a coup d'état. This event prompted the Americans to put the building up for sale. The property was subsequently acquired by Dr. Carlos Manuel Gutiérrez Cañas, who invested a significant amount in restoring the building to its original form and furnishing it.

During the administration of José Figueres Ferrer, the National Palace was demolished, and the Legislative Assembly moved to this house. In 1989, as part of the celebration of the Centenary of Costa Rican Democracy, the Government of the Republic acquired the building so that it could become part of the Legislative Assembly.

Urban and Architectural Space:
The building was constructed in 1911 by the engineering firm “Andreoli e Induni,” commissioned by Máximo Fernández Alvarado, leader of the Republican Party, who aspired to the presidency of the Republic and planned to use it as the Presidential House and his personal residence. This explains its location near Bellavista Barracks, the main military barracks in San José.
It features a Mediterranean-European colonial architectural style. It has two floors and approximately 1,000 m² of space.



Tramway Passing by Castillo Azul. 1920



Tramway Passing by Castillo Azul and Bellavista Barracks. 1922.



Tramway beside the Spanish Consulate in San José. 1922.



Tramway Undergoing Repairs. The Electric Tramway in Costa Rica. Collection of the Historical and Technological Museum of ICE



CRÓNICAS DEL TRANVÍA EN SAN JOSÉ

19TH–21ST STREETS STOP

Historical Context:
This site marks one of the boundaries of the historic center of San José. It is of great importance to the city's historical development because, during the nineteenth century, it was one of the first points of contact with the capital for many foreigners entering Costa Rica through the Caribbean. Its proximity to the Atlantic Station made 19th–21st Streets an important area for Costa Rica's nineteenth-century elites. It is therefore not surprising that the Atlantic Station was chosen as the starting point for the tramway.

It is important to note that the railway project in Costa Rica was promoted as a major undertaking by several governments, beginning with Braulio Carrillo. However, the construction of the Atlantic Railway is largely attributed to the efforts of Tomás Guardia, who first signed a contract with Henry Meiggs Keith, after which the project was transferred to his nephew, Minor Cooper Keith.

Tomás Guardia's objective was not only to create an impressive building for the Atlantic Station, but also to ensure that its surroundings were worthy of the country's capital. This area provided visitors arriving by railway with their first impression of the capital. It was from this vision that an area began to take shape around this emblematic building, with civic and political buildings and parks designed to enhance the appearance of the capital.

Urban and Architectural Space:
important structures were later developed. It can be classified within the Eclectic architectural style, as it incorporates mainly Victorian, Neoclassical, Baroque, and Art Nouveau influences. The building was designed by engineer Juan Dijon and architect Jaime Carranza.

However, it is important to note that other significant buildings were established around it, including the Station Plaza (now National Park), which reflected the Art Nouveau style; the former Presidential House (now the Supreme Electoral Tribunal), built under Tomás Guardia; and the National Liquor Factory (now CENAC).



Inside a Tramway Car, Passengers Traveling to Guadalupe. 1905.



Inside a Tramway Car, Passengers on the Way to Guadalupe. 1905.



Inauguration of the Guadalupe Route. From The Electric Tramway in Costa Rica. Collection of the Historical and Technological Museum of ICE.



From La California to the Obelisk and La Sabana. From La Nación. August 2025.



The corner on the right is where Pulpería La Luz would later be located, approximately 100 meters east of Kentucky. At this point, the tramway line crossed the railway tracks, which still exist today along the section connecting the Pacific Station and the Atlantic Station.

At this junction in Barrio Escalante, where the Atlantic and Pacific routes met, there was a sign bearing the name “Ambos Mares.” A pulpería was later established on the same corner and given the same name.
Source: Fotos Antiguas de Costa Rica.