

JUAN PABLO CALVÁS

They painted pretty little birds in the air for us

Four decades of broken promises by Colombian presidents

MARANDÚA: MIRAGE OF THE PLAINS

How many times have we been told that Colombia's future lies in the eastern plains? How many times have we heard talk of ambitious projects to transform that vast expanse of land shared by the departments of Meta, Casanare, Arauca, and Vichada into the country's productive epicenter, its breadbasket, and Colombia's new north?

Asking these questions seems to take us back to history and geography classes in school, but in reality, it should lead us to examine the history of one of those projects that was never realized by our recent leaders.

For the indigenous people of the Colombian Orinoquía, Marandúa means "the messenger who brings good news from the jungle," but in the mid-1980s, Belisario Betancur adopted that word to name his dream of creating a great city of the future in the heart of one of the departments most remote from the country's center and, why not say it, one of the most neglected by Colombian governments: Vichada.

One could say that the Marandúa project was born long before Belisario became president of Colombia. We have to go back to the mid-1970s when the World Bank wanted to develop an interesting colonization project in Vichada, or even further back, to 1971, when the Centro Experimental Las Gaviotas was established on a vacant lot in the middle of that land belonging to everyone and no one, which is, ultimately, the vastness of the Colombian high plains.

Las Gaviotas is the brilliant brainchild of a restless young man of French-Italian descent named Paolo Lugari. He wanted to create a

self-sufficient city on the site that years earlier had housed the camp for the construction of the Orinoquía Highway (which, of course, was also never completed), and which consisted of nothing more than a few dilapidated shacks and sheds. Lugari set out to make this a community capable of surviving in complete isolation, without needing to depend on the rest of the country. And so, with windmills, solar panels, greenhouse crops, and hand pumps, what could be considered the first self-sustaining and environmentally friendly community in Colombia was formed. While fossil fuels remained the primary energy source in the rest of the country, Las Gaviotas successfully established a model that minimized waste generation and the production of pollutants, while simultaneously enjoying the production of food, drinking water, and electricity through its own means.

The innovative nature of the Centro Las Gaviotas for its time caught the attention of the Bank of Colombia. In fact, to move this initiative forward, the people of Las Gaviotas were hired to meticulously replicate the model that had already been successfully tested for several years at the Centro Experimental Las Gaviotas and implement it in the new community. A site located twelve hours east of Las Gaviotas was chosen as the location for Tropicalia. The design of its residential neighborhoods began to be imitated, even copying the architecture of the experimental center's buildings, while work continued on installing the power generators and water pumps essential to bringing the new city to life. In short, the first steps were taken to create the "first new town" in the Colombian Orinoquía region. However, a lack of funding ultimately stifled the Tropicalia project, which, with the end of the 1970s, also saw the end of its possibility of existence.

However, this World Bank experiment, as well as the evident success of the Centro Experimental Las Gaviotas, became a source of inspiration for Belisario Betancur when, at the beginning of his presidency, he began to look toward the eastern plains as a kind of new frontier to be conquered.

At the start of his presidency, he traveled with Lugari to the department of Vichada, arriving together at a place near the Tomo River, not far from where the Tropicalia project had been located. While there,

Betancur had a powerful epiphany. The president recalled that in his youth he had visited the eastern plains, and a Guahibo shaman, who read tobacco smoke to predict the future, mentioned the messenger spirit of the jungle wind and told him its name, which remained etched in the future president's memory: Marandúa. Inspired by this memory and influenced by the surprising results that Lugari had shown him at the Centro Las Gaviotas... He began to promote his initiative to travel to the vast reaches of the Orinoco and Amazon regions to build a city that, like Brasília in Brazil, would be a new administrative center for the country, created on clear and modern urban design principles, but also with that essential characteristic of Las Gaviotas model: built in complete harmony and respect for nature.

Thus, in May 1984, the government of Belisario Betancur enacted Decree 1119, which marked the first step toward the creation of Marandúa. According to the text of the decree itself, “the Marandúa Development Project in Vichada constitutes one of the most far-reaching objectives pursued by the national government to integrate border territories into national development.” One reads the document and gets excited, until one realizes that when our governments speak of far-reaching projects, it's best to interpret them as “unattainable.” Not surprisingly, a coordinating committee was established for this purpose (yes, one of those committees that serve every purpose but accomplishes nothing), composed of the head of the Administrative Department of Police Stations and Intendancies, the president of the Association of Architecture Schools, the manager of INCORA (Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform), the director of the Agustín Codazzi Institute, and the manager of Inderena (National Institute of Renewable Natural Resources). The objective of this working group was to define the guidelines and stages of the project and, once it was underway, to ensure the coordination of all stakeholders to achieve harmonious collaboration among the entities.

The new city that Belisario envisioned would be the spearhead of a gigantic project to give a new face to the border region with Venezuela, because the construction of Marandúa would complement the government's Border Plan, generating new development dynamics in peripheral areas, while simultaneously creating a key new agro-

industrial hub to give a major boost to the national economy. Finally, Vichada would be more than just a vast, inhospitable, and uninhabited department in the east of the country! Vichada was the future!

According to projections (or optimistic calculations, call them what you will) made between 1983 and 1984, 1.5 million hectares dedicated to agriculture, commerce, and industry would be developed in Marandúa. Enthusiasm for the project was such that Belisario began calling it "The New Colombia," and around this idea, a massive campaign was launched to position the plains as the country's future development hub. Stamps celebrating the birth of Marandúa were even issued. Belisario declared that the city would be the new capital of Colombia, just as Brazil had become with its model city, Brasília. And so, in early 1985, settlers began arriving to bring this new endeavor to life.

Simultaneously, but on the same site as "La Nueva Colombia," the construction of an air base was initiated. This base would serve as both an airport for Marandúa and an operations center for the Air Force, which urgently needed a presence in that part of the country to address the region's public order needs and ensure sovereignty along the border with Venezuela. Construction of both projects progressed slowly during the first months of 1985 until the violence of the drug trade and the tragedies of the Palace of Justice siege and the avalanche that buried Armero in November of that year brought Marandúa's development to a halt. The government had to redirect the resources allocated for the new city to the emergency situations plaguing the country. In other words, Marandúa was aborted.

What became of Belisario's dream? An air base, perhaps proof of the tragic fate of our country condemned to see how the only thing that survives crises are the institutions of war.

What a shame! Marandúa could have been a true city of the future and an example for the entire world in terms of urban sustainability. Colombia would have been decades ahead of the world we live in today, threatened by global warming. A shame for Colombia and a shame for the planet. Peace to Marandúa, and may perpetual light shine upon it.