

CARACAS 23/01.

CONSTRUCTING SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC SPACES WITHIN APPROPRIATED STRUCTURES

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LUXURY FOR ALL

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As declared during a public lecture held within the frame of the “Wohnungsfrage Academy: The Housing System” course, 22-28 October 2015 (Wohnungsfrage Academy, 2015).

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Jean Philippe Vassal (cited by Malmberg, 2016) during his *Inhabiting, pleasure and luxury for everyone* lecture held within the frame of the “Architecture Day Seminar: A Home for All”, Helsinki, Architecture Information Centre Finland / the Finnish Association of Architects SAFA / the Museum of Finnish Architecture / the Alvar Aalto Museum, 3 February 2016.

Only a few months back in 2015, Jean-Philippe Vassal reflected on the current “housing question” by redefining the notion of luxury in the name of a widespread and collective well-being. In the designer’s opinion, luxury for all consists of offering a maximum of possibilities and space to users by working with the existing¹. Anticipating a message that would be reiterated on subsequent occasions, Vassal underlined how “spaciousness, diverse usability and the availability of options” were key for the re-articulation of comfort in dwelling environments². Offering users opportunities is, in Vassal’s view, a prime task for designers who should cherish the idea of constant change within buildings and be open to the idea of transformation beyond their control. These ideas have found materialization in a number of projects implemented in France, including the refurbishment of stigmatized social housing estates. All in all, the consideration of housing and living as a single complex is a major driver of Vassal’s work as a designer and its related positionality.

With Vassal’s views on the housing-user nexus in mind, this contribution reflects upon the modernist social housing estate located in the Venezuelan Capital of Caracas known as the *23 de Enero* (23rd of January). The housing complex has been intensely transformed by its

residents since its conception in the 1950s, and raises a number of questions on what appropriated spaces can mean for cities where modernism has been vibrantly re-signified by means of everyday changes and necessities. More specifically, this contribution reflects further upon a research by design project conceived by the author to a number of community-based spatial articulations that have found room within the modernist frame of the housing complex and its surroundings³. An underlying objective of this endeavor, aligned with the *23 de Enero* community's aspirations to thrive both socially and economically, was to understand, document and envision how the creation of cultural and economic prospects independent of the formal economy could be fostered together with the development of space for popular education. The approximation apprehends the "lived" spaces within the *23 de Enero* as a means to challenge the rigid physicality of the multi-storied slabs (Lefebvre, 1991). Design-based projections make visible the generative grammar that an array of appropriations advances during the everyday transmutation of a modern ideal. Potentials for further occupancy after the subversion of change and adaptation are proposed. Learning from user-based appropriations as a means to deliver "everyday luxury" was therefore an underlying aim of both the design experience and this critical reflection. (fig. 1)

This contribution therefore follows a designerly approach to interpret and projectively apprehend the modifications made by residents to a multi-story slab typology conceived at the height of Venezuela's modernization frenzy. It differs from several recent works on the same topic that have privileged historical methods of analysis and archival research when analyzing the implementation of modernist housing prototypes across the globe (Model House Research Group, 2013; Beyer, 2012; Wimmelbücker, 2012; Habibi and De Meulder, 2015; Lin and Chen, 2015). Part of this distinction derives from the fact that the architectural history of the *23 de Enero* has already been an object of research by both local and foreign scholarship. Most studies focus on their design as part of the oeuvre of Venezuela's most noteworthy modernist architect, Carlos Raúl Villanueva (Moholo-Nagy, 1964; Villanueva *et al.*, 2001). A second set of authors concentrate instead on the role played by Caracas modernist housing "offensive" in placing Venezuela on the map of modern architecture, and the political and cultural implications of having implemented such an intensive program without understanding the dynamics of underdevelopment and colonialism's legacy (Gasparani and Posani, 1969; López, 1986; Fraser, 2000; d'Auria, 2013).

Spaces of modernity play indeed an incisive role in the rapidly transforming cities of the global South such as Caracas. Here, the architecture of modernity, once promising the future, is now in

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This reflection expands on a research by design experience (MScAAD thesis) by the author under the supervision of Dr. Ola Uduku and Dr. Jonathan Charley at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow in 2004. The author completed fieldwork between 2002 and 2003 during a student exchange program with the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas. The thesis project *Caracas 23/01* was developed in retrospect in 2004 and was shortlisted for *The Archiprix International* 2005, the *3rd International Bauhaus Award* 2005 and received the *N-Morcós Assad Award* for Excellence in Design.



FIG. 1. URBANIZACIÓN 23 DE ENERO /I/ 2003. © PHOTO: KATHARINA ROHDE.

a state of decay. The everyday image of decay suggests that society has accepted that the future as it was supposed to be, will no longer happen (Olalquiaga, 2003). Once promising progress, modernism is no longer expressed through its utopian projects, but by what contradicts them: through their ruins. Built to be both symbolically modern and overtly functional, modernist buildings lose their newness not only because of their material erosion but also due to the fragmentation of the modernist national ethos that shaped them (Jaguaribe, 1999). What these “ruins” make evident is how the contraposition between “representational spaces” and “lived spaces” advanced by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (2003) is gradually eroded. The image of the modern city produced by architects and planners in order to define and regulate it, was rooted in spatial abstraction. By contrast, vernacular space and room for the development of collective identities was largely overlooked by the open and rational settings of modern architecture. By observing the physical as well as the human structure of and within the *23 de Enero*, one can note how space has been expanded by its users in accordance to its “content”. At the other end of the spectrum of the abstract functionalism that generated the housing complex, flexibility is accorded to accommodate inhabitants’ needs - and not vice versa.

These initial stances raise questions on how to deal relationally with the leftover and eroded legacies of modern architecture and city planning.

Such interrogation continues to be a relevant one for urbanism today, not only in the discussion around modern heritage and its spatial forms, which remain fascinating due to their dimensions and formal language. Furthermore, the question of lost traditions and collective identities is key to the reflection of modernist spaces. Understanding modern architecture as a “transformable frame” for the implementation of spaces for economic and socio-cultural activities engages with the potential of instant developments for alternative city-making (le Roux, 2014). A relational maintenance of modernist structures in the city appears therefore like an inspiring proposition to work with the existing and thereby to preserve the cultural heritage of modern architecture, not by focusing on its decay but rather on its potential. By learning from insurgent actions, this same potential can be unfolded in its spatial, socio-cultural and economic opportunities. The research presented here aimed to do just that, and viewed the *23 de Enero* as a landscape reconverted by its residents to ensure a more “luxurious” inhabitation – in the sense intended by *Lacaton et Vassal*.

CARACAS 23/01: A BRIEF HISTORY

Under the dictatorship of General Marcos Perez Jimenez (1952-1958), the state housing institute named *Banco Obrero*, began to finance larger projects through the national housing plan⁴. The underlying agenda was to obtain quick, visible and impressive results without protracted, expensive research into the social and economic issues of housing delivery and existing dwelling cultures. The implementation of these housing projects coincide with the doubling of Caracas’ population between 1936 and 1952, a demographic upsurge that made the self-built *ranchos* (shacks) visible as they gradually occupied the dramatic topography of Caracas’ slopes.

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The *Banco Obrero* was founded in 1928 to finance workers’ housing. By 1941, its role had expanded to that of tackling the nation’s overall housing backlog. In 1951, the architectural office of the *Banco Obrero* (TABO - *Taller de Arquitectura del Banco Obrero*), was established to develop prototypes for an intensive housing programme expected to eradicate informal settlements in Venezuela. The National Housing Plan (1951-55) foresaw the realisation of over 12.000 residential units. For an overview of the *Banco Obrero*’s work see: *Banco Obrero* (1951; 1988).

As the chief advisor of the *Banco Obrero*’s architectural office, the Venezuelan architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva designed and built a series of massive housing developments modeled on Corbusian tenets and experimenting with the “superblock” typology (*superbloques*). This residential type consisted of slabs of thirteen to fifteen stories, grouped in large complexes, constituting high-rise neighbourhood units (*unidades vecinales*) dominating the scene, that were expected to be self-sufficient providers of main urban functions such as education, leisure and retail. As part of the urban structure and as representatives of an extraordinary experience in Caracas, the superblocks were basically a schematic expansion of rationalist theories (Posani, 1979: 110). Their scale, intensity and rapidity of realization were parallel to the ambitions of clearing the Venezuelan capital of all *ranchos*.

The *2 de Diciembre* (2nd of December) housing complex was named as such to commemorate the ascent of Perez Jimenez as the President of Venezuela. It was the epitome of Perez Jimenez' radical intention of eradicating all "slums" from Caracas and other major cities. Their unsightly and patent presence in the capital, developed due to the vast migration of people from the countryside and neighboring countries, evidently contradicted the dictator's slogan that Venezuela was uniformly happy and prosperous. From 1952 to 1957 rapid urbanization and state-led housing developments reshaped the city's surface radically, but did not fundamentally alter the precarious political and social situation of its inhabitants.

The *2 de Diciembre* housing complex consisted of 85 apartment buildings, making it the biggest of all superblock interventions in the city. The architectural forms of the development comprised both mid- and high-rise low-income housing complexes combined with community buildings to compose cohesive neighborhoods units. The complex was built on a relatively unoccupied hillside in Caracas. The bareness of the cement skeletons was intended to be overcome by colorful treatments developed by the architects' team in collaboration with Venezuelan artist Mateo Manauere. The overall planning principles were recurrent and included the ideal dimensions of a neighborhoods unit, the buildings' settling within the landscape and the separation of pedestrian from motorist flows.



FIG. 2. 23 DE ENERO INAUGURATION. © SOURCE: UNIVERSIDAD DE VENEZUELA ARCHIVE.

The blocks were oriented in various directions; and monotony could here-with be avoided. The interaction between indoor and outdoor activities was supported by arranging the blocks into groups. Previously existing ranchos as well as the undulated landscape were bulldozed into a terraced, and open modernist ground plane. A celebratory notice of the time affirmed that: “the appearance of the superblocs is spectacular, brightly painted in multi-colored hues, and arrayed in majestic groups on hillside sites, with less than 20% land coverage” (Carlson, 1960: 199; quoted in Klein, 2007). (fig. 2)

In 1958, during the popular uprising against the dictatorship of General Marcos Perez Jimenez, 4000 of the 9000 apartments of the *2 de Diciembre* superblocs were squatted by the rural-to-urban migrants known as *campesinos*. In 1966, the project was renamed *23 de Enero* to commemorate the date of the end of the dictatorship. Since then, *23 de Enero* has been a highly politicized urban site, which hosts radical social movements and organizations.

LEARNING FROM ... LIVING MEGASTRUCTURES

Social space is produced and structured by conflicts. With this recognition, a democratic spatial politics begins. (Deutsche, 1996: xxiv)

Interviews conducted by the author in Caracas in 2002-2003 enabled a direct experience of how people had reclaimed space for their needs and desires⁵. They were further compiled together in a collaboratively produced video documentary. From this first-hand experience it became clear that the buildings' occupation was a first step in a more complex process of appropriation, where intended uses and functional subdivisions lost ground in the light of renewed needs and incrementally expressed necessities. As one resident summarized when recounting how the process of change started:

People just came here. There were no doors, no toilets. There was nothing. It's that way with government buildings. They are government buildings, but they're just sitting there and so people come and take them over and slowly get the things they needed. It didn't only happen here.

Neiza de Alvarez Zespa, resident of the *23 de Enero*
(quoted in *Living Megastructures*, 2003/2004).

Interviews with residents and other key respondents were accompanied by an analysis of residents' living conditions in the *23 de Enero* superblocs. This exploration showed that people had modified the floor plans of the apartments to accommodate their particular needs. Families of 6-10 were now sharing

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The author participated in the project *Informal City: Caracas Case* funded by the German Cultural Foundation and fostered The Caracas Urban Think Tank in 2002-2003, in addition to collaborating with the Austrian artists Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber on the production of the video documentary *Living Megastructures* (2003/2004) which reflected upon the appropriation of the *23 de Enero* superblocs as well as the newly installed Venezuelan constitution.

residential units that were initially designed for the average family of four. Taking out walls or adding them on in order to make space more adherent to daily needs was registered as a common practice. Modifications had further taken place in the facades of the superblocs windows had either been taken out or had been enlarged to increase brightness. Alternatively, openings may have been downsized in order to ensure privacy facing the public walkways. These actions showed how residents were appreciating the modernist structure as a frame to be filled rather than a predetermined space to obey to.

Surrounding the superblocs, ranchos have started to grow again on the hillsides of Caracas. This was already the case immediately after their supposed eradication. While the self-built structures located lower down in the valley are relatively well constructed, *ranchos* along the slopes were more precarious. The former were mostly inhabited by the lower middle class and featured the use of multi-story structures built of bricks and concrete. The latter on the other hand, served the poorest of the poor as shelter and were made of cardboard, corrugated iron and plastic. Today the spatial conditions of the *23 de Enero* superblocs feature high densities and informality, intended here as auto-construction and self-organization. The alterations of the facades illustrate the modification of architectural space by the people who squatted the unfinished apartments back in the late 1950s. Due to these self-organized changes, the density, the lack of formal infrastructure such as garbage collection have led to the consideration of the housing complex as a “vertical slum” (Bittner and Weber, 2005: 14-21; Brillembourg *et al.*, 2005: 112-121). (fig. 3)

Nevertheless, despite this powerful yet stigmatizing description, spatial potentials do exist even in the densest and informal settings. More particularly, within the superblocs the ‘left-over’ spaces and niches were identified by the author as the most relevant for understanding the subversive adaptation and transformation of ‘representational’ modernism. Spaces that within the context of modernist planning were reduced to one pragmatic function, such as the long and empty walkways connecting the flats and the staircases, and that had not yet been fully appropriated, provided potential for profound re-inscriptions because of their residual nature. The largely underemployed rooftops offering a great view over the city were hardly used, except by youngsters for occasional gatherings and allowed for the re-imagination of space for cultural and economic developments. The walkways on ground level that had remained empty enabled alternative occupations for the accommodation of economic activities, such as markets. They could furthermore act as a connection to and extension of street life in the area and therefore could turn into spaces for the enhancement of collective identities. (fig. 4 and 5)



FIG. 3. *FACADE MODIFICATIONS*. © PHOTO: BITTER/WEBER.



FIG. 4. *WALKWAYS*. © PHOTO: BITTER/WEBER.



FIG. 5. *VIEW FACING THE BARRIO FROM THE SUPERBLOCK'S WALKWAYS*. © PHOTO: BITTER/WEBER.

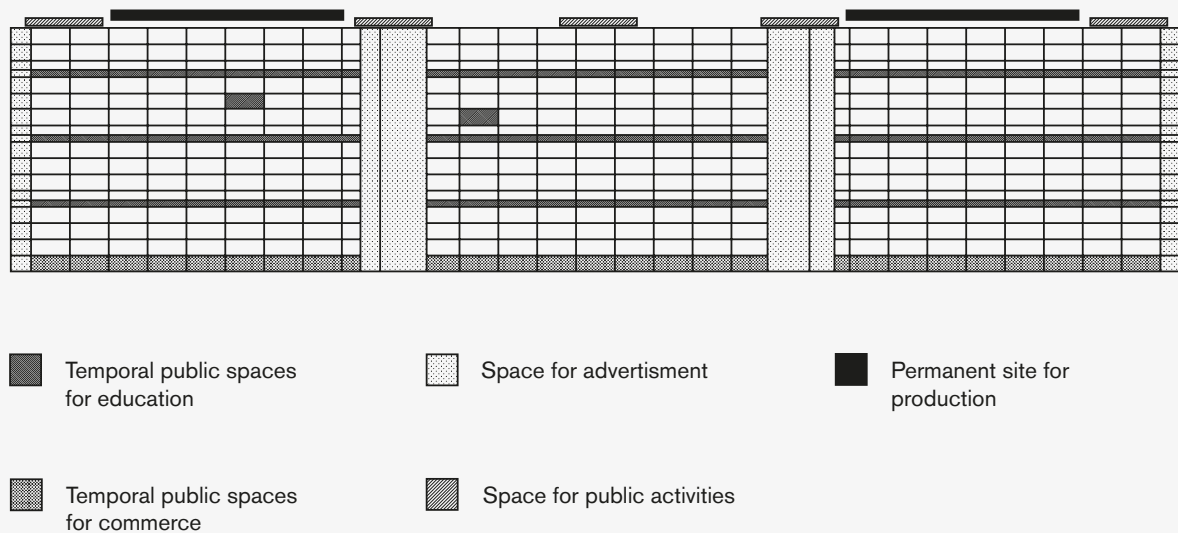


FIG. 6. PROGRAMMATIC ORDERING OF THE SUPERBLOCK FOR NEW USAGES © ILLUSTRATION: ANTOINE BEGON, 2016 (BASED ON: KATHARINA ROHDE, 2004).

Quantitative research helped corroborate initial findings derived from the interviews and participant observations. An inventory of the *23 de Enero* area and its inhabitants was fabricated by combining information on inhabitants' growth since the first occupations; the development of shack infrastructures in and around the superblocks over time; as well as income groups, and existing cultural and professional skills. The population of the area initially consisted solely of the urban poor and people in search of improved economic prospects. They migrated from the Venezuelan countryside as well as from neighboring countries, mainly Colombia and were predominantly from rural areas with no experience of urban life in high-rise apartments. By transferring their customary living arrangements to their new homes, many continued to inhabit the blocks much as they had lived in their rural shacks. This resulted in "overcrowding" of the apartments when compared to expected planning standards. In terms of material culture interiors were modest in nature but often combined with kitsch decorations and sometimes large TV screens operating mostly as status symbols. The majority of unemployed people living in the *23 de Enero* area were women, often single mothers with an average of 3 to 4 children, living under precarious conditions in shacks. A high number of the unemployed women showed knowledge in artisanal crafts, embroidery work and textile production. Since the late 1990s the population shows a slight shift, as some of the inhabitants have been able to better their lives and belong now to the city's lower middle class. They nevertheless remain in the area for reasons of asset accumulation (such as investments in their property), their embeddedness in social networks or proximity to work. Community organizations within the area have thrived over the years. Some have initiated cultural productions to activate social and political change, but were constrained by the slab's conformation and absence of collective spaces, i.e. for rehearsal and performance.



FIG. 7. COLLAGE ROOFTOP. INSPIRED BY THE EXAMPLE OF COOPA-ROCA, A SEWING COOPERATIVE IN ROCINHA (SOUTH AMERICA'S LARGEST FAVELA, IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL), PROVIDING FLEXIBLE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES TO WOMEN FROM LOW-INCOME FAMILIES, PARTICULARLY OPPORTUNITIES FOR SINGLE MOTHERS TO WORK FROM HOME, AND DUE TO THE EXISTING KNOWLEDGE AND ARTISAN TRADITION OF WOMEN IN THE 23 DE ENERO, A SITE FOR TEXTILE PRODUCTION WAS PROPOSED ON ROOF-LEVEL. FURTHER SPACE WAS DEVELOPED FOR CULTURAL PERFORMANCES. © ILLUSTRATION: KATHARINA ROHDE, 2004.

Further educational programs and health care initiatives were organized by community organizations but also lack spaces for regular usage. By conducting interviews with local stakeholders, inhabitants, activists, politicians and local architects, the multi-faceted complexity of the dwelling environment became manifest. The socio-cultural competences of the dwellers, such as the vibrant community initiatives, and economic challenges to find employment, were key concerns to later re-envision the spaces of the *23 de Enero* and their broader setting in a research by design experience.

Inspired by *Lacaton et Vassal's* approach of working with the existing and due to the very dense and informal conditions, the spatial projections that followed as part of the author's research were developed within and on top of the superblocks' present structures. Spatial interventions that suggested room for socio-cultural and economic activities helped layer the slabs programmatically. Inhabitants' changes were furthered by spatial adjustments and additions on various levels providing more space – and “luxury for all” – within the existing structure. (fig. 6 to 9)

AFTER-THOUGHTS

The initial aim of building the superblocks to eradicate the unsightly slums from the hillside of Caracas has failed, as has the inherent attempt to discipline behavior through this rigid modernist planning. As many other large-scale modernist motifs of their time, the superblocks of Caracas have accumulated criticism and have been considered part of a ‘landscape of disillusion’, within

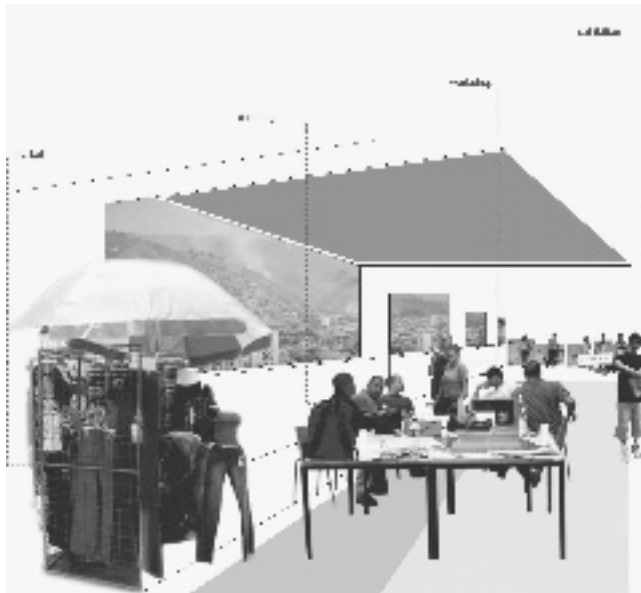


FIG. 8. *COLLAGE WALKWAYS*. IN ORDER TO ACTIVATE THE EMPTY WALKWAYS CONNECTING THE FLATS AND THE BUILDING EXITS, SMALL INSERTIONS WERE DESIGNED WHERE POPULAR EDUCATION COULD TAKE PLACE, OR WHERE WOMEN WOULD BE ABLE TO WORK IN FRONT OF THEIR APARTMENTS.
 © ILLUSTRATION: KATHARINA ROHDE, 2004.



FIG. 9. *COLLAGE GROUND LEVEL*. ON GROUND-LEVEL, THE WALLS BORDERING THE STREET WERE TO BE DISMANTLED IN ORDER TO CONNECT THE SPACE WITH THE STREET; FURTHER INTERVENTIONS, I.E. BENCHES WERE TO BE INSTALLED CREATING SPACE FOR INFORMAL TRADE SUCH AS COMMUNITY MARKETS SELLING PRODUCTS FROM THE ROOFTOP TEXTILE INDUSTRY. © ILLUSTRATION: KATHARINA ROHDE, 2004.

which they stand out for their particular monumentality and massiveness (Lizardi Pollock, 2012). Aligned with the ideology of its time, the institutionalized activities of the TABO focused on creating representative housing complexes but did not show an interest for the social networks of incoming migrants and their implicit needs.

The research by design on the other hand, made it a priority to engage with the community on a spatial as well as a human scale and triggered reflection not only on the different modes of appropriation articulated in accordance to dwellers' actual needs, but also on the question of how modernist planning accommodated such transformations over time. How to progress from there onwards was a key question for inhabitants and professionals who were facing the challenge of political and social renewal but also had had the experience of modernism's sweeping impact on the problematic fabrication of model neighborhoods and dwelling types:

We must have democratic structures and we must have popular education. How is this reflected in architecture? I think, beyond 23 de Enero, it's possible to believe or propose that architecture has to be realistic. Not in a negative sense, but an architecture that does allow and encourages participation. One should see an architecture that helps participation and does not confine it within structures that do not fit the conditions of the people [...] So it (the 23 de Enero housing complex) is an interesting experience and in thirty or forty more years we will be able to draw conclusions. I hope those conclusions can lead to a new perspective with a deeper understanding of how to really transform a society and how to develop an architecture that is really appropriate and adapted to the situation. (Posani⁷ quoted in Living Megastructures, 2003/2004)

As housing continues to be viewed as a key component for restructuring society, particularly in the migrating communities of the growing city - not only in the global South - it is relevant to learn from experiences such as the *23 de Enero*, particularly from the users' perspective. Inhabitants' appropriations indicate how the superblocs started to turn into scaffolding for the sustenance and renewal of residents' social structures. In retrospect, the mass squatting and the subsequent appropriation of space in the *23 de Enero* neighborhood could be considered an insurgent participatory practice (Holston, 2009). Indeed, as has been noted, "insurgent spaces emphasize the potentiality of the city as a place of civic exchanges, debates and discussions. Some tactics are temporary; others take advantage of the gaps in urban space or legislation. By appropriating, reclaiming, pluralizing, transgressing, uncovering and contesting public space, several groups not only question but attempt to transform the city" (Hou, 2010).

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Juan Pedro Posani, architect, was Villanueva's life-long collaborator from 1949 onwards. Active in the field of history and theory of architecture, Posani played an important role in renewing the curriculum at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the Central University of Venezuela.

The action of urban citizens in the creation of new exemplary spaces shows the potential to subvert rules and regulations of institutionalized urbanism and in this way produce alternative spaces. Instances of insurgent space, such as the *23 de Enero* superblocs, emphasize the ability of citizen groups and individuals to play a distinctive role in shaping their urban environment. Rather than being subjected to planning regulations or to limited participatory opportunities, citizens and citizen groups can undertake initiatives on their own to effect changes. As noted elsewhere, the gradual occupation of land around the superblocs, besides that of the slabs themselves, enriched the otherwise monotonous programming of the mega-structures, as well as offering both physical and social infrastructure. Moreover, self-organization avoided the *23 de Enero* from becoming unmanageable in spite of the institutional retreat in terms of service provision (Supersudaca, 2009). The 21st Century has therefore seen the *23 de Enero* neighborhood thrive while maintaining much of its spatial and social ambivalence.

Katharina Rohde is an architect, curator, social-designer and urbanist. In her work she explores spatial, social and economic inequalities and visualizes inherent potentials and strategies of urban actors in the production of their (survivalist) habitat. Through interdisciplinary projects, she initiates participatory processes and dialogical formats between professionals and non-professionals as urban experts, aiming to enable sustainable and socially just urban visions. By staging innovative urban spaces, in which communication and negotiation takes place, new and sustainable social structures become possible as well as the manifestation of a multiplicity of voices as a means of knowledge production. At present Katharina Rohde is a PhD candidate at the Department of architecture at KU Leuven in Belgium and conducts research on "Migrants and Refugees as urban actors" in Europe and Africa.

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