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The Caretaker

Reinventing Domestic Worlds amid Collapse in Caracas

Stefan Gzyl

The Caretaker

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in Caracas

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Reinventing Domestic Worlds amid Collapse
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by

Stefan GZYL

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He sold the donkey and the chickens, indeed,
but for the house no one offered a penny.
Miguel Otero Silva, *Casas Muertas*

If I leave, I have to start from zero,
but if I stay, I start from zero every day.
Benjamín. Resident of *La Vega*. 2017

Summary

This dissertation examines Caracas as a city living through collapse. It considers Venezuela's ongoing migratory crisis a defining feature of the country's breakdown, and takes the vast domestic world left behind by migrants as an entry point into the city's collapse, examining how these material residues are maintained, used, or transformed locally. The investigation departs from accounts that view the Venezuelan collapse as either a prolonged crisis or a terminal condition and focuses on breakdown as a daily experience that informs routines, relationships, and future outlooks. In dialogue with collapse theory, care ethics, debates on shrinking and departure cities, and contemporary Venezuelan scholarship and cultural products, the dissertation situates Caracas as an uneasy fit within established frameworks for studying the urban impact of emigration and breakdown.

The investigation centers on the figure of *the caretaker*, who manages the vast material inventory of the emigration on behalf of its absent owners. Caretakers are part of the socio-economic ecosystem of collapse, thriving in the interstices of formal, informal, and illegal economies. They forge new relationships around migrants' left-behind patrimonies, creating dependencies that extend beyond the provision of a service. Their work challenges preservation as mere suspension in time and imbues mundane tasks with symbolic meaning around the question of what is being maintained. Caretaking is a balancing act between seemingly opposing forces: between the urge to preserve something "as is" and the need to adapt it; between spatial transformation and its reversibility to an original state; between the obliteration of collective memory and its protection by the work of a myriad individual caretakers. In a context of infrastructural failure, legal insecurity, and economic precarity—and against the backdrop of wealth that characterized twentieth-century Venezuela—the caretaker is a figure through which to think of societal collapse anew, reframing it as a prolonged *meanwhile*, an interstitial state in which endurance and transformation coexist in unresolved tension.

Methodologically, the research is based on multi-sited fieldwork in Caracas between 2022 and 2024. Successive research stays, characterized by the routine encounter with caretakers amid the spaces and objects they looked after, produced their own form of accumulation: a collection of fragments that resisted classification and were assembled into a mosaic-image of collapse. The dissertation is organized as a series of episodes that bridge description, interpretation, and speculation, aiming to remain close to the lived experience of the field while opening material residues to new (architectural) possibilities.

Like the contingent, shifting articulations that the fieldwork documented, the dissertation is intended as a snapshot of a historical moment in the country's turbulent decline, articulating a broad vision of the role of architecture amid sweeping societal transitions.

Samenvatting

Deze dissertatie onderzoekt Caracas als een stad die leeft te midden van instorting. Ze beschouwt de voortdurende migratiecrisis in Venezuela als een bepalend kenmerk van de disintegratie van het land en neemt de immense materiële wereld die door migranten is achtergelaten als uitgangspunt om de stedelijke ineenstorting te benaderen. Daarbij wordt onderzocht hoe deze restanten lokaal worden onderhouden, gebruikt of getransformeerd. Het onderzoek neemt afstand van benaderingen die de Venezolaanse instorting beschouwen als een afwijking van een gevestigde koers of als een terminale toestand, en richt zich op de neergang van het land als een dagelijkse ervaring die routines, relaties en toekomstbeelden vormgeeft. In dialoog met de theorieën over instorting, zorgethiek, debatten over krimp- en vertreksteden en hedendaagse Venezolaanse wetenschap, positioneert de dissertatie Caracas als een ongemakkelijke fit binnen bestaande kaders om de impact van emigratie en aanhoudende crises op de stedelijke omgeving te bestuderen.

Het onderzoek richt zich op de figuur van de verzorger (*the caretaker*), die het omvangrijke materiële inventaris van de emigratie beheert namens de afwezige eigenaren. Verzorgers maken deel uit van het sociaal-economische ecosysteem van de instorting en gedijen in de tussenzones van formele en informele economieën. Zij smeden nieuwe relaties rond de door migranten achtergelaten patrimonia en creëren afhankelijkheden die verder reiken dan het leveren van een dienst. Hun werk stelt het idee van behoud als loutere bevriezing in de tijd ter discussie en doordrenkt alledaagse handelingen met symbolische betekenis rond de vraag wat er precies wordt onderhouden. Dit maakt van zorg een evenwichtsoefening tussen schijnbaar tegengestelde krachten: tussen de drang om iets "zoals het is" te behouden en de noodzaak het aan te passen; tussen ruimtelijke transformatie en de mogelijkheid tot omkeer daarvan; tussen de uitwissing van collectief geheugen en de bescherming ervan door de handelingen van talloze individuele verzorgers.

In een context van infrastructureel falen, juridische onzekerheid en economische precariteit—en tegen de achtergrond van de rijkdom die het Venezuela van de twintigste eeuw kenmerkte—is de verzorger een figuur om maatschappelijke instorting opnieuw te doordenken, waarbij deze wordt herkaderd als een verlengd tussentijds bestaan, een interstitiële toestand waarin ontstaan en verdwijnen, volharding en transformatie, herinnering en verlies voortdurend worden onderhandeld.

Methodologisch is het onderzoek gebaseerd op multi-sited veldwerk in Caracas tussen 2022 en 2024. Opeenvolgende onderzoeksverblijven, gekenmerkt door de routinematige ontmoeting met caretakers te midden van de ruimtes en objecten waarover zij waakten, brachten een eigen vorm van accumulatie voort: een verzameling fragmenten die zich aan classificatie onttrokken en werden

samengebracht tot een mozaïekbeeld van ineenstorting. Het proefschrift is opgebouwd als een reeks episodes die beschrijving, interpretatie en speculatie met elkaar verbinden, met als doel dicht bij de geleefde ervaring van het veld te blijven en tegelijkertijd materiële residuen te openen voor nieuwe (architectonische) mogelijkheden.

Net als de contingente, veranderlijke articulaties die het veldwerk documenteerde, is de dissertatie bedoeld als een momentopname van een historisch ogenblik in de turbulente neergang van het land, waarin een brede visie wordt verwoord op de rol van architectuur te midden van ingrijpende maatschappelijke transities.

Resumen

Esta disertación examina Caracas como una ciudad que atraviesa un colapso. Considera la crisis migratoria venezolana como un rasgo definitorio del derrumbe del país y toma el vasto mundo doméstico dejado atrás por los migrantes como punto de partida para estudiar el colapso de la ciudad, analizando cómo estos restos materiales se mantienen, se utilizan o se transforman localmente. La investigación se aparta de relatos que consideran el colapso venezolano como una crisis prolongada o una condición terminal y se centra en el colapso como una experiencia cotidiana que moldea rutinas, relaciones y perspectivas de futuro. En diálogo con la teoría del colapso, la ética del cuidado, los debates sobre *shrinking cities* y *departure cities*, y la producción académica y cultural contemporánea sobre Venezuela, la disertación sitúa a Caracas como un caso que no encaja fácilmente en los marcos existentes para estudiar el impacto urbano de la emigración y el colapso.

La investigación se centra en la figura del *cuidador*, quien gestiona el vasto inventario material de la emigración en nombre de sus propietarios ausentes. El cuidador forma parte del ecosistema socioeconómico del colapso, prosperando en los intersticios de la economía formal, informal e ilegal, y forjando nuevas relaciones en torno a los patrimonios dejados atrás, y creando dependencias más allá de la prestación de un servicio. Su labor cuestiona la preservación como mera suspensión en el tiempo e imprime a las tareas cotidianas un significado simbólico en torno a la pregunta de qué se mantiene. El cuidado es un equilibrio entre fuerzas aparentemente opuestas: entre el impulso de conservar algo “tal como es” y la necesidad de adaptarlo; entre la transformación espacial y su reversibilidad; entre la aniquilación de la memoria colectiva y su protección mediante la acción de un sinnúmero de cuidadores individuales. En un contexto de falla generalizada, inseguridad legal y precariedad económica—y con el trasfondo de riqueza y ascenso social que caracterizaron al país en el siglo XX—el cuidador permite repensar el colapso, reformulándolo como un “mientras tanto” prolongado, un estado intersticial en el que la permanencia y la transformación coexisten en una tensión no resuelta.

Metodológicamente, la investigación se basa en el trabajo de campo realizado en Caracas entre 2022 y 2024. Sucesivas estancias de investigación, caracterizadas por el encuentro repetido con cuidadores en medio de los espacios y objetos que atienden, produjeron una acumulación de fragmentos que resistían una clasificación definitiva y fueron ensamblados en una imagen-mosaico del colapso. La disertación se organiza como una serie de episodios que abarcan la descripción, la interpretación y la especulación, buscando permanecer cerca de la experiencia de campo mientras abre los restos materiales a nuevas posibilidades (arquitectónicas).

Al igual que las relaciones provisionales documentadas durante el trabajo de campo, la disertación ofrece una fotografía de un momento histórico en el turbulento declive del país, articulando una visión del papel de la arquitectura en medio de profundas transiciones sociales.

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Acknowledgements

The line between voluntary and forced migration is as shifting as it is narrow. It moves back and forth between hope and indecision, ultimately drawn by the realization that it is no longer possible to carry on with daily life, whatever this impossibility means for each person. In my case, the specific moment and factors that contributed to this realization are not illuminating when considered individually, yet meaningful as part of the collective experience of urgency and exhaustion that has driven millions of Venezuelans out of our country over the past decades.

While this experience unites Venezuelans as we scatter around the world, it is not only trauma that links us to our country and that organizes the diaspora. This connection also sustains the possibility of shaping something that lives on independently of the homeland. The tension between connection and independence cuts through the experience of every diaspora, and this research is no exception: it would not exist without the reality it studies, the deep immersion of fieldwork, and the unequaled access that being a *caraqueño* afforded. Yet this project also distanced me from Caracas, each return marked by greater estrangement. Whether this is a result of approaching the city as a *field*, an inevitable consequence of emigration, or a combination of both is unclear. Making this tension productive, however, also means accepting the impossibility of its resolution and of it creating a space in which individual positions and belonging constantly shift. This is the singular vantage point that diasporic knowledge can claim, with the hope that what it produces can spark ideas, stir debates, expand networks, and nourish shared hopes and imagination.

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Introduction

Return to "this is it."

The origin of this dissertation is a collective project titled *Plan B: Caracas, Departure City*, developed between 2018 and 2020 with the sponsorship of the Goethe-Institut and the Deutsches Architekturmuseum.[1] *Plan B* came into being at a moment when the steady trickle of migration out of Caracas suddenly became an unstoppable stream, and those of us who had not left (yet) were confronted with the desolation caused by its relentless pressure. Conceived as *a critical exploration of what emigration left behind*, the project formulated eight original "theses" or propositions, each describing conditions in Caracas as a "departure city".[2] Each thesis was accompanied by a spatial installation built from cardboard boxes, deployed for one day before being dismantled and rebuilt differently in another location. One of these installations was called *The Watchtower*; it consisted of a large triangular enclosure whose walls had partially collapsed, revealing the remains of a domestic environment. Its accompanying thesis claimed that the departure city had someone to take care of it, a *guachimán* (the Venezuelan adaptation of the English term "watchman") who looked after the remnants of past lives. For the duration of the installation, several actors played the roles of watchmen, inhabiting a cardboard structure filled with migrants' abandoned possessions and telling visitors stories about them.

This installation had a foothold in reality. A brief online search on vacant houses in Caracas will reveal numerous reports from national and international media about migrants' domestic spaces, dating back to 2017, when migration began to have a noticeable impact on the city. One account refers to the unlit windows at night, and another one points out the sudden decrease in car traffic;[3] a recurrent theme is the proliferation of empty houses and apartments, the fears of invasion looming over them, the loss of value due to the surplus of residential properties, and the emergence of a new occupation: *el cuidador*—the caretaker—who looked after migrants' empty homes and whose shifting field of action tracked both migrants' trajectories and the unstable conditions of the country.[4]

[1] This collective effort was coordinated by Béla Kunckel, Gerardo Rojas, and Stefan Gzyl. The team included Yonel Hernández, Eddymir Briceño, Edgar Martínez, Abraham Araujo, Kyril Elneser, Ezequiel Carías, Raúl Moreno, Diana Volpe, Marisela Montes, Ana Valenzuela, and Incursiones, among others.

[2] These propositions established a dialogue with the eight theses of the "arrival city". See: Peter Cachola Schmal et al., eds., *Making Heimat. Germany, Arrival Country* (Hatje Cantz, 2016).

[3] See, for example, Andrea Tosta, "Viviendas desocupadas, el secreto mejor guardado del inmigrante," El Estímulo, March 18, 2017, https://elestimulo.com/climax/economia/2017-03-18/viviendas-desocupadas-el-secreto-mejor-guardado-del-inmigrante/.

[4] See El Nacional, "El venezolano que se dedica a cuidar las casas de los que emigraron," El Nacional, August 9, 2018, https://www.elnacional.com/sociedad/venezolano-que-dedica-cuidar-las-casas-los-que-emigraron_247296/; Humberto Márquez, "Casas vacías en Venezuela: sus dueños se fueron y no las pueden alquilar ni vender," El Estímulo, September 28, 2023, https://elestimulo.com/economia/2023-09-28/casas-vacias-en-venezuela-sus-

Initially, this doctoral investigation provided an opportunity to expand upon one of the thematic lines of *Plan B* and to continue an inquiry into Caracas as a city shaped by departure. However, when I returned in November 2022 after more than three years abroad, I was confronted with a city in the midst of a voracious transformation: fast-paced construction of office towers, teeming nightlife, a proliferation of restaurants, sharply illuminated streets, and music festivals featuring international artists. The comatose city I had left behind in 2019 had been brought back to life by an injection of (opaque) capital, internal migration, and car traffic—an undisputed sign of recovery. The territorial distribution of emigration had shifted, spreading to rural areas rather than concentrating around Caracas and major cities. The capital city accrued for the majority of the country's wealthy households, and the relative stability of services turned it into a destination surrounded by an even more precarious periphery. The dollarization of the economy, an ideologically contradictory but pragmatic measure implemented by the government, was reportedly having a positive impact. Extreme poverty levels had decreased, and an aggressive social media campaign promoted the slogan *Venezuela se arregló* (Venezuela is fixed). The persistent outpour of people by land, air, and water was neither in the headlines nor a topic of conversation. It was as if emigration had been collectively suppressed and relegated to the private realm, concealed behind closed doors as the city embraced the possibility of a new beginning. For those who had stayed, the "readiness to leave"[5] of the departure city days had been replaced by a different form of "preparedness", a need to exert themselves against future hardships, and a total commitment to staying.[6] Not having lived through this revival of sorts, I interviewed colleagues, activists, and city officials, hoping that interpretation would fill an experiential lacuna. "It seems as if a wave has gone over us," said one interlocutor. "A page was turned," said another. "This is it; this is how things will be from now on," said someone else with resignation, referring to the newfound stability and the high costs paid to achieve it.

As this bubble of prosperity burst and the country continued its relentless decline through corruption scandals that exposed an unprecedented scale of fraud, through presidential elections that decimated any prospects of an orderly political transition, and through renewed fears of hyperinflation and shortages, emigration continued, unyielding, no longer the outcome of a passing crisis but instead one of the definitive manifestations of the country's collapse. In its wake lay the vast material world accumulated over decades of economic growth and upward social mobility, a world hidden from view and preserved on behalf of those who had left it, yet also open to reinvention by those looking after it. It is precisely this duality, which the caretaker sustains, that constitutes an entry point for studying the country's collapse as a process that does not *end in* decay or abandonment but instead *opens up* a space where new dynamics and relationships flourish, an *interstitial state* where appearance and disappearance, endurance and transformation, memory and loss, are in tension, persistently shattering any attempt of congealing into a "this is it".

duenos-se-fueron-y-no-las-pueden-alquilar-ni-vender/; Laura Helena Castillo, "Las Casas Muertas Que Revive Mairín," Prodavinci, January 25, 2024, https://lascasasdemairin.prodavinci.com/p20761053/.

[5] Jonas König, "Pristina: Departure City?," Eurozine, February 16, 2016, https://www.eurozine.com/pristina-departure-city/#.

[6] AbdouMaliq Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 424, https://doi.org/https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/173743.

The Venezuelan collapse

The Venezuelan collapse is the result of a combination of factors that have fundamentally reshaped the country. Offering an univocal or causal explanation of collapse—what, when, or how things failed—is a challenging task, complicated by the uneven trajectories, evolving nature, and deep interwovenness of the multiple factors that comprise it. These considerations often obscure the possibility of reconstructing timelines and differentiating causes from consequences. Some features of the country's collapse, like marked economic inequality and institutional fragility, are the magnification of historic trends and longstanding problems that Venezuela shares with many Latin American countries;[7] others, like the consolidation of an authoritarian regime, have occurred incrementally over the last twenty-six years,[8] while economic decline happened so swiftly that it is often taken as the main indicator and synonym of collapse. Despite this complex entanglement, prevailing explanations of the country's breakdown give preeminence to a political system that has, on one hand, eroded democratic values, captured independent institutions, and wiped accountability,[9] and on the other hand, grossly mismanaged the economy, increased the dependence on oil, politicized the oil industry and dismantled its infrastructure, expropriated enterprises, invaded private property,[10] suffocated the private sector,[11] and expanded public spending. During most of Hugo Chávez's government,[12] a windfall of oil revenue covered the effects of failed economic policy; however, when oil prices plunged in 2012, the country unraveled.[13] Instead of correcting course (at the expense of political control), the government resorted to a combination of political and economic measures that unleashed an unprecedented

[7] Latin America is the most unequal region of the world. A decade of economic decline has increased inequality in Venezuela, turning into the most unequal country in the region. See Anitza Freitez et al., "Encuesta Nacional Sobre Condiciones de Vida 2024," Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2025, 55, https://www.proyectoencovi.com/encovi-2024.

[8] Indeed, graduality is the defining feature of the process of "democratic backsliding" of which Venezuela is a relevant example. See Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Penguin Books, 2019).

[9] For a detailed account of the this political process, see Margarita López Maya, "Venezuela: ¿por Qué Cayó La Democracia?," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, no. 86 (n.d.): 119–43; See also Javier Corrales, *Rising Autocracy: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism* (Brookings Institution Press, 2022).

[10] In 2001, the Land and Agrarian Development Law allowed the government to expropriate and redistribute underutilized agricultural land. This was followed by aggressive expropriations of private companies in key economic sectors, as well as seizing urban lots and unfinished buildings to be used for public housing, without due compensation to owners. In 2011, a package of laws allowed the government to control residential rent prices and prevent evictions, leading to the collapse of the formal rental market. This framework has turned the possibility of property loss into a looming fear for migrants. See CEDICE, "CEDICE: Observatorio de Derechos de Propiedad," CEDICE, 2023, https://paisdepropietarios.org/propietariosve/.

[11] According to Fedecámaras, approximately 370,000 private companies closed by 2019, which represents 60% of the 620,000 that existed in 1998. In contrast, ConIndustria, the industrial employers' federation, estimates that 8,000 industries closed in the same period (a number that refers specifically to the manufacturing/industrial sector). EFE, "Conindustria: 8.000 empresas han cerrado en el país en los últimos 20 años," Runrun.es: En defensa de tus derechos humanos, May 16, 2016, https://runrun.es/noticias/261903/conindustria-8-000-empresas-han-cerrado-en-el-pais-en-los-ultimos-20-anos/; See also: "370.000 empresas han cerrado desde 1998," Banca y Negocios, July 16, 2019, https://www.bancaynegocios.com/cusano-370-000-empresas-han-cerrado-desde-1998/.

[12] Hugo Chávez was president between 1999 and his death in 2013. He was succeeded by Nicolás Maduro.

[13] In 2012, oil prices averaged US$103. By 2015, they had fallen to US$44, to continue descending to US$33 in 2016. See Miguel Angel Santos, "Venezuela: Running on Empty," *LASA Forum* XLVIII, no. 1 (2017): 8–12.

debacle.[14] Between 2013 and 2019, the country's GDP decreased by 74%,[15] triggering a self-reinforcing cycle that decimated salaries,[16] increased unemployment, resulted in food shortages, and created an unprecedented humanitarian emergency;[17] it also resulted in the physical devastation of hospitals, universities, schools, museums, archives, and libraries, and in chronic shortages of electricity, water, and cooking gas.[18] To retain political control amid these unfavorable conditions, the government resorted to censorship, violence, persecution of dissent,[19] suppression of protest, militarization of public space,[20] and electoral fraud, as well as corruption, extortion,[21] the expansion of extractive activities,[22] and the increasing intertwining of legal and illegal economies.[23] In 2017 and 2019, as a response to political repression and systematic human rights violations, the United States, the European Union, and other countries, imposed economic sanctions that severed Venezuela from the international financial system, restricting access to funds and limiting its capacity to commercialize oil, eventually prompting a series of "counter-strategies" that further criminalized the economy and curtailed possibilities of economic or democratic recovery.[24]

Beyond quantitative representations, Venezuela's collapse must also be understood in its tangible and mundane dimensions: the ruin of infrastructure and services demands the continuous adjustment of daily routines or the recourse to private alternatives; informal occupations compensate formal employment or completely replace it; fear and distrust mediate human interaction, limiting access to public space and displacing social life towards controlled environments. Collapse is

[14] To cover its deficit, the government cut imports, froze public salaries, stopped paying suppliers, swapped gold reserves, printed money, and borrowed against future oil extraction, among other measures. It also imposed price control on food and basic goods and forbid layoffs, transferring the cost of economic mismanagement onto the private sector. Ibid., 11.

[15] This is the largest economic contraction ever recorded for a peace-time economy. Considering the partial recovery experienced until 2023, the cumulative GDP decline is 67,9%. See Francisco Rodríguez, *The Collapse of Venezuela. Scorched Earth Politics and Economic Decline, 2012-2022* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2025), 26.

[16] At the time of writing, the minimum monthly wage in Venezuela is Bs 130, the equivalent of US$ 0.58. The salary of a full-time assistant professor in a public university is less than US$ 5.00 per month.

[17] By the end of 2024, 73% of the population lived in poverty, earning less than US$3.00 per day. In 2023-2024, 78% of homes experienced some degree of food insecurity. A decade of decline has also reconfigured the country's work force, with more informal employment, less participation of women in the labor force, and less diversification of the job market. See Freitez et al., "ENCOVI 2024."

[18] For a quantification of the breakdown of public services, see: CEDICE, "Servicios Básicos - CEDICE," CEDICE, July 24, 2020, https://cedice.org.ve/ogp/gasto-publico/servicios/.

[19] In 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council established an independent Fact Finding Mission to investigate systematic human right violations, including political persecution, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and torture. To date, the Mission has issued sis reports with its findings. See OHCHR, "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," OHCHR, September 22, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffmv/index.

[20] See Keymer Ávila, "The State of Exception as Daily Life: Political Remilitarization and Its Impact on Citizen Security in Venezuela," *DIKAIOSYNE*, no. 37 (2022): 37–69.

[21] According to the Corruption Perception Index, Venezuela is the third most corrupt country in the world. See "Corruption Perceptions Index 2024," Transparency International, February 11, 2025, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024.

[22] See Crisis Group, "A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South | International Crisis Group," Crisis Group, July 29, 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/b53-curse-gold-mining-and-violence-venezuelas-south.

[23] Drugs, gold, and gasoline trafficking, accounted for 21% of the country's GDP in 2022. See Transparencia Venezuela, "Illicit Economies in Venezuela. Sheltered by Corruption," Transparencia Venezuela, 2022, https://transparenciave.org/economias-ilicitas/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Illicit-Economies.-June-2022.-Transparencia-Venezuela-ENG.pdf.

[24] Sanctions also targeted government officials accused of human rights violations and money laundering. To this day, the effectiveness of sanctions is a divisive topic among experts. Benedicte Bull and Antulio Rosales, "Into the Shadows: Sanctions, Rentierism, and Economic Informalization in Venezuela," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 0, no. 109 (2020): 107–33, https://doi.org/10.32992/erlacs.10556.

thus “inscribed in the everyday urban landscape, in its material structures such as roads, residences and office buildings, and in social interaction and relations of power, profit and subsistence”.[25] Its daily management requires constant improvisation, adaptation, and negotiation to survive, navigate, resist, or profit from instability and uncertainty, perpetuating conditions it tries to escape.

Inscribed in the realm of everyday life, collapse is simply referred to as *la situación*—the situation.[26] *La situación* is malleable and unpredictable; it shapes relationships, plans, and future outlooks; its daily experience instills a state of permanent emergency, displacing a man-made tragedy to the realm of a natural calamity, a space where there are no culprits and “no one to complain to”.[27] As a daily experience, collapse remains faithful to its etymological origin: “to fall together”, an event that “unites those who experience and witness it—making them a kind of community, a communion of collapse.”[28]

The Venezuelan migratory experience

Collapse has transformed Venezuela—historically a host country—into the world’s largest producer of migrants. According to UNHCR, there are nearly 7.9 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees globally.[29] Independently, *Observatorio de la Diáspora Venezolana*, a non-profit organization tracking migration since 2014, has suggested that the actual number of migrants is 9.1 million,[30] equivalent to more than 30% of the country’s population.[31] Other estimates, based on satellite images of night-time illumination, yielded much lower numbers.[32] Beyond these divergent estimates, there are no official migratory statistics. The Venezuelan government has systematically denied emigration and explained the migratory crisis in political terms as resulting from “unilateral coercive measures” by the United States. [33]

[25] Mbembe, A., and Roitman, J. "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis.”, 327

[26] Gisela Salim-Peyer, “The Price of Humiliating Nicolás Maduro,” The Atlantic, December 21, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2024/12/venezuela-post-election-repression/681104/.

[27] Manuel D’Hers Del Pozo, “Tiempos de Crisis, Resistencias e Infrapolítica En La Migración Inmóvil Venezolana,” *Horizontes Antropológicos* 29, no. 65 (2023): 21, https://doi.org/10.1590/1806-9983e650407.

[28] Mark Losoncz, “Architecture in the Shadow of Catastrophe and Collapse,” *Khōrein: Journal for Architecture and Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2025): 102, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14809289.

[29] This number is the result of self-reporting by destination countries. Notably, it excludes populations in transit or with irregular migratory status, as well as Venezuelans living abroad with dual citizenship. Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, “Home,” R4V, 2024, https://www.r4v.info/.

[30] El Nacional, *Observatorio estima que más de 9 millones de venezolanos migraron: una cifra mayor a la reportada por Acnur*, June 18, 2025, https://correodelcaroni.com/sociedad/observatorio-estima-que-mas-de-9-millones-de-venezolanos-migraron-una-cifra-mayor-a-la-reportada-por-acnur/.

[31] According to World Bank data, the Venezuelan population reached 30.4 million in 2016, declined to 27.2 million in 2022, and climbed to 28.4 million in 2024. On the other hand, the National Statistics Institute estimates the population at 34 million, a steady climb since the 2011 census. See “World Bank Open Data,” World Bank Open Data, accessed November 23, 2025, https://data.worldbank.org.

[32] Equipo ANOVA, “¿Cuántos habitantes tiene Venezuela? Una estimación a partir de imágenes satelitales y luces nocturnas.,” ANOVA, June 20, 2022, https://thinkanova.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ANOVA-Nuevas-Bases-Demogra%CC%81ficas-v2-Venezuela.pdf.

[33] See, for example: United Nations Network on Migration, “Revisión regional sobre la implementación del pacto mundial para la migración segura, ordenada y regular en América Latina y el Caribe,” United Nations, December 4, 2020, 7, https://migrationnetwork.un.org/resources/venezuela-republica-bolivariana-cuestionario-voluntario-revision-regional-america-latina.

Nearly 90% of migrants have left the country since 2015.[34] Before this date, emigration was a calculated option for the country's middle class, but as the situation deteriorated, it became an urgent measure cutting across the entire social spectrum, a "flight" no longer driven by the desire to improve personal living conditions but by the need to minimize the risk of staying.[35] The migratory pattern that developed between 2016 and 2020 was characterized by young, working-age men or women of diverse socio-economic backgrounds and education levels, leaving the country by land to neighboring countries, often without planning or proper visa requirements.[36] This trend, which coincided with the period of rapid economic decline, authoritarian consolidation, and infrastructural breakdown, is consistent with documented cases of "rapid change" that force families to send a member abroad to ensure the survival of the rest.[37] Recent developments following the COVID-19 pandemic and a phase of economic liberalization point to a surge in family reunification abroad, a phenomenon linked to the stabilization of migrants' economic situations and to effective integration policies in receiving countries.[38] Most importantly, this pattern corresponds to the formation of established migratory systems that characterize emigration countries, which, once initiated, tend to evolve independently of local developments.[39] Indeed, as reported by UNHCR, "the outflow of Venezuelan refugees and migrants to neighboring countries and beyond continues."[40] A nationwide survey conducted in March 2025 showed that 44.6% of people considered migrating, of whom 9% (nearly a million people) had concrete plans to leave "as soon as possible".[41]

Internally, emigration has resulted in a loss of human capital and a decrease in economic productivity and consumption, as 89% of migrants are between 18 and 49 years old.[42] Sustained emigration over the last decade has distorted the country's population pyramid, with a noticeable decrease in birth rates and a large number of left-behind children and elderly, often in the care of one another.[43] Emigration has fractured family structures and contributed to a reduction in household size from 4,1 persons in 2014 to 3,2 in 2024.[44] Presently, more than 70% of households have at least

[34] Anitza Freitez et al., "Encuesta Nacional Sobre Condiciones de Vida 2021," Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2022, 32, https://www.proyectoencovi.com/encovi-2022.

[35] The distinction between maximizing gains by leaving and minimizing risks of staying is one of the trademarks of forced migration. Peter Fischer et al., "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," in *International Migration, Immobility and Development. Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 1st ed., ed. Tomas Hammar, et al. (Routledge, 1997), 50.

[36] Scholars identify four migratory waves since the turn of the century, each corresponding with critical political or economic developments. Marianela Lafuente and Carlos Genatios, *De fuga de cerebros a red de talentos. La diáspora venezolana: anáisis y propuestas* (Ediciones CITECI-ANIH, 2021), 28.

[37] Castles, S. (2000). The Impacts of Emigration on Countries of Origin. In S. Yusuf, W. Wu, & S. Evenett (Eds.), *Local Dynamics in an Era of Globalization.* Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 46

[38] Osío Cabrices, R., & Yonekura, K. (2022). The Elastic Families of Venezuela's Forced Migration. Caracas Chronicles.

[39] Malmberg, G. (1997). Time and Space in International Migration. In T. Hammar, G. Brochman, K. Tamas, & T. Faist (Eds.), *International Migration, Immobility and Development. Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (1st ed.). Routledge, 22

[40] UNHCR, "Venezuela Situation," UNHCR, May 2025, https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/venezuela-situation.

[41] Meganálisis, "Encuesta CATI Meganálisis," Meganálisis, March 2025, https://www.encuestadorameganalisis.com/encuestas-publicadas.

[42] Freitez et al., "ENCOVI 2024," 32.

[43] As early as 2019, the NGO Cecodap estimated nearly one million children left behind by migration. See Cecodap, "En 2019 hay más niñez dejada atrás que habitantes en el estado Nueva Esparta," Cecodap - Por los derechos de los niños, niñas y adolescentes, November 18, 2019, https://cecodap.org/en-2019-hay-mas-ninez-dejada-atras-que-habitantes-en-el-estado-nueva-esparta/.

[44] While emigration has contributed to this reduction, the size of homes has steadily declined since the 1990s, when it s 4.8 persons. See Freitez et al., "ENCOVI 2024," 6.

one member abroad.[45] As only 6% of recent migrants have returned and 82% of all migrants have no concrete plans of returning, the impact of emigration will persist, with profound demographic and societal implications.[46]

Emigration has been unevenly spread across Venezuela's territory, shifting from large cities to rural areas. This process has been accompanied by the displacement of more than two million people from the country's hinterland to its large cities, with Caracas as the primary receptor of internal migration,[47] a phenomenon that has partially offset the city's demographic decline. According to one estimate, there are one million vacant or underoccupied homes in the country.[48] However, institutional opacity and the lack of a legal framework that protects private property create strong incentives for migrants to disguise vacant properties. Thus, it is virtually impossible to establish the footprint of emigration.

Collapse narratives

Scholarly research on present-day Venezuela concentrates, to an exceptional degree, on the country's collapse. These investigations often begin with a long enumeration of record-breaking statistics and facts, each more daunting than the next, painting a picture of Venezuela's failure in one sweeping stroke and laying the groundwork for argumentation. Considering the depth and scope of the country's problems, there is no shortage of calamities to pick from. For example, William Neuman's *Things Are Never So Bad That They Can't Get Worse* takes the 2019 electrical crisis as a literal and allegorical entry point for examining the country's devastation;[49] political scholar Carlos Lizarralde's *Venezuela's Collapse: The Long Story of How Things Fell Apart* explains the rise and fall of the *Chavista* regime as the result of longstanding ethnic divides and a caste system in place since colonial times, likening the country's failure to a process of "self-destruction";[50] economists Ricardo Haussmann and Francisco Rodriguez's edited volume *Venezuela Before Chávez: Anatomy of an Economic Collapse* examines the economic decline and institutional weakening of the late twentieth century, which created favorable conditions for the radical change that Hugo Chávez embodied when coming to power in 1998.[51] More recently, Rodríguez has returned to the topic of collapse in his book *The Collapse of Venezuela: Scorched Earth Politics and Economic Decline*, suggesting that the country's current situation is the result of the combined impact of disinvestment and international sanctions, two separate crises that crippled the oil industry.[52] In the field of urban studies, Alberto Lovera's

[45] Freitez et al., "ENCOVI 2024," 6.
[46] Anitza Freitez et al., "Encuesta Nacional Sobre Condiciones de Vida 2023," Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2024, 35, https://www.proyectoencovi.com/encovi-2024.
[47] Ibid., 63
[48] Lorenzo González Casas, "Osteoporosis urbana: los efectos de la diáspora en la ciudad venezolana," Debates IESA, 2020, http://www.debatesiesa.com/osteoporosis-urbana-los-efectos-de-la-diaspora-en-la-ciudad-venezolana/.
[49] William Neuman, *Things Are Never So Bad That They Can't Get Worse: Inside the Collapse of Venezuela* (St. Martin's Press, 2022).
[50] Carlos Lizarralde, *Venezuela's Collapse: The Long Story of How Things Fell Apart* (Codex Novellus, n.d.), 3.
[51] Ricardo Hausmann and Francisco Rodríguez, eds., *Venezuela Before Chávez: Anatomy of an Economic Collapse* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).
[52] Rodríguez, *The Collapse of Venezuela.*

examination of Caracas in the first two decades of this century draws a link between "savage populism"[53]—a mix of populism and state capitalism—and urban decline, depicting a scenario in which exacerbated political conflict is the driving factor of the city's demise, while architect and scholar Marco Negrón has approached collapse from the perspective of governance, focusing on the urban repercussions of institutional dismantlement, a process that resulted in a hyper-centralized system incapable of governing amid declining oil prices and political upheaval.[54]

These titles, to name a few, focus on different dimensions of Venezuela's decline over the last two decades, suggesting various paths towards economic recovery, political stabilization, or urban governability. This approach highlights two features common to expert literature. First, the treatment of collapse as a complex crisis, which frames the country's present problems as a deviation from an established norm and aims to make sense of reality by comparison with states outside itself.[55] Consistent with this analytical perspective, a given problem (democratic erosion, currency devaluation, oil output decline, the breakdown of water supply, or the failure of the public health system) is defined, isolated, and traced historically like a thread separated from a woven fabric, arriving at a present when the implementation of specific measures would revert a negative trend or restore a lost balance. Second, the fact that despite the centrality of collapse, the literature offers very little in the way of a definition of the term. Collapse is often denoted by its synonyms—failure, breakdown, downfall, destruction, havoc—or examined through the causes that trigger it and the conditions it creates, as if the mere invocation of the word made definitions redundant. This omission is neither a coincidence nor limited to the Venezuelan case, as the study of societal collapse is complicated by the complexity, breadth, and interrelatedness of the problems it explains (an observation that often accompanies definitions of collapse as a warning of their own insufficiency). This complication has resulted in several "scholarly conversations"[56] across academic disciplines, whose differing methodological approaches have produced no shortage of conceptual discrepancies. To this discussion, one must add the popularity of fictional narratives that inform public opinion and sustain an imaginary of collapse as a "war-of-all-against-all"[57] for resources and survival. As anthropologist Joseph Tainter has suggested, collapse is "a concept in the wild",[58] proliferating, mutating, and acquiring new meanings as it intersects with public concerns and academic discourses.

Explanatory theories of societal collapse draw from two key sources. The first is Joseph Tainter's seminal study, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. Drawing on historical examples, Tainter defines collapse as a rapid loss of "complexity," a term that refers to a society's capacity to become increasingly diversified and

[53] Alberto Lovera, "Caracas. Urbicide and Precariousness of Urban Life at the Beginning of the Venezuelan Twenty-First Century. The Worst of Capitalism and Savage Populism," in *Urbicide*, ed. Fernando Carrión Mena and Paulina Cepeda Pico (Springer International Publishing, 2023).

[54] Marco Negrón, "La Accidentada Travesía de La Ciudad de Caracas y Su Área Metropolitana," in *Ciudades Capitales En América Latina: Capitalidad y Autonomía*, ed. Fernando Carrión Mena and Paulina Cepeda Pico (FLACSO, 2021).

[55] Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

[56] Danilo Brozović, "Societal Collapse: A Literature Review," *Futures* 145 (January 2023): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.103075.

[57] Joseph Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 19.

[58] Joseph Tainter, "Archaeology of Overshoot and Collapse," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 60.

interdependent through the collective management of resources. He argues that complexity reaches a point beyond which it is untenable, leading to a reversal to simpler modes of collective organization. Despite its focus on economic theory, Tainter's explanation is political, as it concerns political entities such as nations or empires and results in their fundamental restructuring, a process taking no more than "a few decades".[59] However, the author has recently suggested that there is little consensus on what this temporal "threshold" is.[60] This dissertation does not aim to answer this question, but rather to explore what it is like to live through this threshold.

Tainter's ideas have provided a widely used framework for explaining historical cases of collapse, but they have faced scrutiny for their implied inevitability of collapse, their inattention to environmental and cultural factors that contribute to societal breakdown, and their abstraction in treating historical processes that entail substantial human costs.[61] Nonetheless, Tainter offers numerous clues for identifying what a rapid decline in complexity produces; specifically, a society that is "suddenly smaller, less differentiated and heterogeneous, and characterized by fewer specialized parts; [displaying] less social differentiation, ... less control over the behavior of its members ... and less capable of providing subsistence and defensive security",[62] conditions that challenge political legitimacy and social cohesion. Relevantly, this process is accompanied by the incapacity to deliver public services or maintain infrastructure, requiring the population to become self-sufficient, as well as by a decrease in construction and the reuse and adaptation of existing buildings.[63]

Complexity is, for Tainter, a synonym of progress. This equivalence, in his view, explains the popularity of his theory, as it resonates with prevailing discourses about how modern industrialized societies developed. Within a worldview that values complexity, collapse is the undoing of progress. For Tainter, this view persistently frames the study of collapse as a concern with the question "What went wrong?"[64] Reconsidering his own stance, the author has critically evaluated this question, uncoupling collapse from connotations of "failure" and focusing instead on what can be gained by considering periods of decline and the fundamental socio-political restructuring they entail within broader historical developments.[65] It is this nuanced and forward-facing approach to collapse, less interested in determining causes—what, when, or how things failed—than on studying what collapse produces, that is relevant to this dissertation.

The second theoretical strand explains collapse as the result of a society's inability to cope with environmental pressures and resource shortages, a view that has gained traction in a world increasingly burdened by anthropogenically induced climate change. This explanation primarily draws on historian Jared Diamond's book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. At the outset of his study, Diamond

[59] Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 4.

[60] Joseph Tainter, "Why Collapse Is so Difficult to Understand," in *Beyond Collapse. Archaeological Perspectives on Resilience, Revitalization, and Transformation in Complex Societies*, ed. Ronald Faulseit (Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 33.

[61] Brozović, "Societal Collapse," 11,12.

[62] Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 38.

[63] Ibid., 20.

[64] Tainter, "Beyond Collapse," 30.

[65] For Tainter, this implies that "nothing necessarily goes wrong in a collapse." It is this detachment from the human cost of breakdown that has merited criticism. Ibid., 37

defines collapse as "a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time."[66] This condensed, criteria-rich definition is subsequently expanded through a comprehensive analytical framework that Diamond applies across a wide range of cases. While acknowledging the role of factors like environmental damage, climate change, war, trade, and society's capacity to adapt and respond to challenges,[67] the author places a central importance on population decline. Where Tainter sees this factor as one of the many negative outcomes of a political process, "for Diamond it is primarily depopulation that *is* collapse."[68]

Despite its historical scope and contribution to raising awareness about global environmental decline, Diamond's theory has been challenged for its reductionist view of historical processes that did not end in civilizational extinction but instead led to new forms of societal organization, as well as for directly extrapolating from past and geographically isolated instances of decline to a globally interconnected present. As his critics have argued, "when closely examined, the overriding human history is one of survival and regeneration … rarely did societies collapse in an absolute and apocalyptic sense."[69] Nevertheless, in the context of this dissertation, the relevance of Diamond's definition rests on the equivalence it establishes between societal breakdown and population decline, sidestepping the causality dilemma that so frequently underlines the examination of emigration in the context of the Venezuelan collapse.

Drawing on these two theoretical strands, and in contrast with expert literature on the Venezuelan case, this dissertation does not approach collapse as a terminal condition or a problem to be solved. Rather than searching for causes or recommending measures to revert a negative outcome, the dissertation considers collapse as a form of societal transition, an interstitial state that informs relationships, understandings, and future perspectives. It examines this "threshold"[70] as a *knowing, embodied experience*. If "studying collapse is like viewing a low-resolution digital photograph: it's fine when small, compact, and viewed at a distance but dissolves into disconnected parts when examined up close",[71] this investigation is interested precisely in this detailed view, where the full picture breaks down into countless overlapping processes and misaligned storylines, opening a space of understanding that is foreclosed by other vantage points. Of the many "disconnected parts" that can be examined, the dissertation focuses on the domestic spaces of Caracas' middle-class migrants, studying how they are used and maintained, but also creatively reinvented by local caretakers. Caretaking's spatial orientation situates the study within a disciplinary field, underpinning architectural reflections and affording a critique of care practices.

[66] Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Penguin Books, 2005), 3.
[67] Ibid., 11, 429.
[68] Guy Middleton, "Introducing Collapse," in *Understanding Collapse: Ancient History and Modern Myths* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 15 Emphasis added.
[69] This observation, and the edited volume in introduces, illustrates the point on scholarly discrepancies. Patricia McAnany and Norman Yoffee, eds., *Questioning Collapse: Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability, and the Aftermath of Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22.
[70] Tainter, "Beyond Collapse," 33.
[71] McAnany and Yoffee, *Questioning Collapse*, 22.

Central to the conceptual reframing of collapse as an interstitial state is Steven J. Jackson's proposition that socio-technical breakdown can be "generative and productive"[72] in its own right, constituting a creative disturbance that "sets in motion worlds of possibility" that disappear under stable conditions.[73] This project thus aligns with an expanding body of interdisciplinary research organized around the notion of "broken world thinking".[74] In his influential essay *Rethinking Repair*, Jackson begins his argument by asking, "what happens when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points"?[75] a provocation to think about the world as continuously destabilized by human action, unraveling beyond the point of return. By acknowledging the irreversibility of human action, broken world thinking resists the temptation of course correction and challenges prevailing assumptions about the end of civilization, offering a framework for studying breakdown as a forward-facing state in which repair and maintenance practices are brought to the forefront. Notably, *Rethinking Repair* is not a theorization of societal collapse along the lines of other scholars—the word "collapse" is all but absent in Jackson's writing. Instead, it offers an analytical and methodological framework pertinent to contemporary sensibilities that engage with the fragility and instability of the world. Indeed, Jackson's approach to breakdown, while compelling, describes an event with clear temporal boundaries (there is a "before" and an "after" breakdown) as exemplified by the notion of "aftermath",[76] which denotes the moment when repair comes to the fore, and which acquires, for the author, the status of historical time, as suggested by the affirmation, "we live in the aftermath".[77]

To reinforce the conceptual link between collapse scholarship and Jackson's broken world thesis, this investigation argues that breakdown itself—rather than its aftermath—can acquire the status of historical time, suggesting that the potential of practices of repair and maintenance rests not only in their capacity to bridge across "old" and "new" worlds[78] but to occupy and qualify the threshold between them. As the "extended period of time"[79] of collapse becomes an inhabitable, evolving present, it acquires the status of an *interstitial time* in which old and new, emergence and disappearance, order and disorder, memory and loss, coexist and are constantly negotiated. In this sense, collapse is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it is situated in the lingering traces of past life-worlds, which collect histories and are the center of new discourses and societal reinvention. As a verb, it is conjugated in the present continuous, as an ongoing action. *Collapse is not an aftermath but a meanwhile.*

[72] Steven Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, MIT Press, ed. Tarleton Gillespie et al. (Cambridge, 2014), 223.
[73] Ibid., 230.
[74] Ibid., 221
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 223
[77] Ibid., 239.
[78] Ibid., 223
[79] Diamond, *Collapse*, 3.

The meanwhile

In this study, the *meanwhile* is defined as *the permanently deferred possibility of course correction*. The meanwhile gathers various strands of thought organized around notions of interstitial time and space that are pertinent to the dissertation's understanding of collapse. For historian Benedict Anderson, the concept refers to the construction of a national time, describing the shared temporalities and the simultaneity of daily life that foster or hinder the formation of national identities.[80] Migration studies relate the notion of meanwhile to the lack of synchronization with daily rhythms and routines in destination countries and with migrants' efforts to "keep in touch" with distant homelands.[81] In this literature, the meanwhile has also been examined as a spatio-temporal condition claimed by refugees and asylum seekers forcefully held and subjected to protracted bureaucratic timeframes, for whom it allows "to restore some predictability and sense of control in a context of uncertainty and imposed waiting."[82] The meanwhile is thus entangled with notions of "waiting", a concept that features prominently in the research of anthropologist Shahram Khosravi, both in relation to irregular migration[83] and to the protracted wait imposed upon societies by those in power. For Khosravi, waiting constitutes "a process and a practice", a dialectical condition through which "the now and the not-yet constantly make and remake each other."[84]

In his essay *On Waiting*, sociologist Giovanni Gasparini characterizes waiting as an interstitial category of time, which ceases to be perceived as wasted and is instead filled with "substitute meanings"[85], a protracted temporality no longer defined by what precedes and follows it but instead acquiring its own value. Gasparini's observation on the potential of waiting for individual actors to regain a sense of agency is relevant to this research, albeit not in the context of the complete control of time imposed by totalitarian societies as the author suggests, but instead against the systematic breakdown of the rhythms and routines of daily life. Throughout the dissertation, the meanwhile is verbalized by participants through statements such as "waiting to see what happens with the country"[86], or "staying here and seeing what happens."[87] As will be shown, this wait is not passive but charged with possibility. This disposition for (creative) agency amid an otherwise paralyzing *situación* aligns with recent ethnographic studies of the Venezuelan collapse, highlighting how the "rupture of the everyday" eventually "forges a new normality through individual, family, or sometimes community management, as acts of adaptation to contingency,

[80] Melanie Griffiths et al., "Migration, Time and Temporalities: Review and Prospect. COMPAS Research Resources Paper.," *COMPAS*, 2013, 5, 23, https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/RR-2013-Migration_Time_Temporalities.pdf.

[81] Saulo Cwerner, "The Times of Migration," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 22, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183002002484 9.

[82] Isabel Gil Everaert, "Inhabiting the Meanwhile: Rebuilding Homes and Restoring Predictability in a Space of Waiting," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 19 (2021): 4328, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1798747.

[83] Christine Jacobsen et al., eds., *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration* (Routledge, 2021).

[84] Shahram Khosravi, *Waiting – A Project in Conversation* (transcript Verlag, 2021), 18.

[85] Giovanni Gasparini, "On Waiting," *Time & Society* 4, no. 1 (1995): 31, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X95004001002.

[86] Nelson Candia, personal communication. September 2, 2024.

[87] María Raquel Ferrer, personal communication. July 21, 2023.

where the minimum conditions for subsistence are assumed as personal responsibilities."[88]

Lastly, in *Speed, Time, Infrastructure*, Jackson extends "broken world thinking" to the domain of time, arguing for the capacity of repair and maintenance to institute a specific "temporal sensibility".[89] For the author, the capacity of these practices to articulate continuity between past and future material configurations introduces its own temporalities, which counter processes of decay to "gather and blend the unruly timelines of things."[90] As the defining temporality of collapse, the meanwhile is a state characterized by myriad individual efforts and temporal overlaps, where the provisional and tentative rule over the long-term and the certain.

The meanwhile is transnational; as an indefinitely postponed possibility of change, it creates a shared sense of expectation among Venezuelans in and out of the country, shaping future outlooks and migratory plans, and, relevantly, informing decisions about the fate of *left-behind* belongings, which are immersed in the complex temporalities of the meanwhile. Migrants' decision to hold on to their possessions preserves not only their material integrity but also the possibility of restoring or recovering a broken timeline.

Spatially, the concept of "meanwhile use" has become common in urban development and city management in European cities, referring to temporary activities in vacant or underused sites. Meanwhile uses belong to the realm of tactical urban interventions or "transitional urbanism"[91] that provide social or economic benefits and can inform long-term planning decisions. The notion of meanwhile is not foreign to theorizations of Caracas. In a critical analysis of the city's continual transformation, José Ignacio Cabrujas coined the phrase *Mientras tanto y por si acaso* (meanwhile and just in case) to describe its makeshift nature.[92] The provisionality Cabrujas denounced is part cultural trait and part material condition, a disposition towards demolition fueled by a permanent sense of dissatisfaction, producing a city impossible to remember through its architectural or urban landscape.[93] This impossibility does not result from the imprecision of its features but instead from its permanent destruction and re-founding. Writing in 1988, in the fallout of the oil boom that produced an overnight metropolis on the remains of a quiet colonial town, Cabrujas portrayed a city of fragments and dissonant overlaps, torn between disappearances and half-finished visions, within which another—hidden—city exists. This other city is interior, invisible, and relies on intimate memories, sounds, and anecdotes for arriving at anything that resembles an identity. "Meanwhile and just in case" is a social diagnosis verified through architectural values. Like an ominous warning, it predates the collapse and provides a conceptual anchor for the radical

[88] D'Hers Del Pozo, "Tiempos de Crisis, Resistencias e Infrapolítica En La Migración Inmóvil Venezolana," 22.

[89] Steven Jackson, "Speed, Time, Infrastructure: Temporalities of Breakdown and Repair," in *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, ed. Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd (Oxford University Press, 2016), 179.

[90] Ibid.

[91] ARUP, *Meanwhile Use London: A Research Report for the Greater London Authority* (ARUP, 2020), 128, https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/meanwhile_use_for_london_final.pdf.

[92] José Ignacio Cabrujas, "La Ciudad Escondida," in *Caracas En 25 Afectos*, ed. Tulio Hernández (Editorial CEC, S.A., 2012).

[93] As Arturo Almandoz points out, the critique of the rapid transformations that resulted of Venezuela's embrace of modernity was a recurrent topic for twentieth century intellectuals. However, only Cabrujas was able to locate it with such precision in urban conditions. See Arturo Almandoz, *La Ciudad En El Imaginario Venezolano IV: Del Viernes Negro a La Caracas Roja* (Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2018), 171–81.

dissonances that define it; on one hand, a city (still) driven by a demolitionist will, and on the other, an interiority in which material residues—the lingering stuff of former life-worlds—accumulate histories while waiting for their disappearance.

Residual accumulation

Residual accumulation is the sum total of the material world left behind by departure, amassed over decades of sustained economic prosperity and upward social mobility. As examined by this dissertation, residual accumulation is a fraction of a much larger material world, which includes vacant offices, boarded-up businesses, burned-down libraries, and closed-down industries, a testimony to an ongoing and more thorough process of dismantling and devastation. Here, however, it is restricted to domestic environments and their contents—the houses and apartments spread throughout Caracas and the myriad objects they contain.

The notion of "residual" alludes to things left *behind* and *after*. In this sense, residual accumulation is not only a consequence of departure but also the outcome of decades of oil-backed growth, industrial production, and commercial expansion that "brought modernity home",[94] shaping imaginaries of progress and patterns of consumption for an emergent middle class.[95] Writer Ana Teresa Torres has suggested that Venezuelan society lives in a state of mourning over a double loss; on one hand, emigration, and on the other, the loss of the "aspirational country" of the twentieth century, a period during which economic prosperity and upward social mobility were underpinned by the ease of acquiring material goods.[96] Residual accumulation is the tangible point of coincidence of this double loss.

As the remnant of a historical process of growth, material accumulation is also a "*left with*";[97] for those who live in its midst, managing it on behalf of absent others, residual matter shapes daily routines, provides livelihoods, and takes space. As an "accumulation," it accrues alongside departure and gathers histories of individual ownership or collective lifestyles. In this sense, residual accumulation resonates with notions such as "debris", "detritus", or "rubble", employed by scholars to examine how the physical continuity of matter sustains social order after the disappearance of the regimes that gave rise to them.[98]

[94] Lisa Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity. Dictatorship, Space, and Visuality in Venezuela, 1948-1958* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 187.

[95] For a discussion of social classes, material possessions and social habits in Venezuela, see Roberto Briceño León, *Venezuela: Clases Sociales e Individuos* (Fondo Editorial Acta Científica Venezolana, 1992).

[96] Ana Teresa Torres, "Luces y sombras del país de hoy," La Gran Aldea, August 24, 2021, https://www.lagranaldea.com/2021/08/24/luces-y-sombras-del-pais-de-hoy/.

[97] Ann Laura Stoler, "'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Duke University Press, 2013), 9. Emphasis in original

[98] Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler employs the notion of "debris" to illuminate the material and cultural persistence of colonial power. Sharad Chari uses the concept of "detritus" to describe disenfranchised lives amid industrialization and state racism. Gastón Gordillo turns to the notion of "rubble" as an expanded field for examining material remains of buildings and landscapes in their connection to histories of colonial rule and industrial devastation. See Stoler, "'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination.". See Sharad Chari, "Detritus in Durban: Polluted Environs and the Biopolitics of Refusal," in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Duke University Press, 2013). See Gastón Gordillo, *Rubble : The Afterlife of Destruction* (Duke University Press, 2014).

Amid collapse, residual accumulation is also a left-*over*, the post-consumption *resource* of emigration and economic growth readily available for reuse, circulation, and transformation. Thus, the material residues of departure occupy the complex intersection of various temporal, spatial, and social conditions. Their liminality opens them to multiple and even contradictory readings, as evidence of endurance and transformation, failure and possibility, to be readily destroyed or painstakingly protected.

Residual accumulation has several properties that pertain to this investigation. First, it can be (theoretically) quantified, expressed as the millions of apartments, houses, and cars; tens of millions of books, furniture, appliances, paintings, utilitarian and decorative objects stored away drawers, boxes, or closets, resting on shelves and hanging from walls. Nevertheless, these quantities are so vast that they render futile any individual effort to count or classify them.

Second, residual accumulation persists simultaneously across multiple registers: material, evocative, legal, and digital. It endures through the daily tasks of maintenance and repair that extend migrants' ownership and attachment, it lives on in the memory of absent owners, property deeds, and inventories that keep track of possessions and their whereabouts, and it has a concentrated existence in online platforms where migrants' things are sold as secondhand goods. Through these simultaneous existences, residual matter endures and circulates in ways that challenge preservation as a mere suspension in time and diffuse the limits between protection and transformation.

Third, despite its prevalence, residual accumulation belongs to the realm of the private and the interior, hidden from view and absent from the city's public exterior. There is no conclusive explanation for this suppression; it is sometimes rationalized in purely practical terms by fears of property invasion or by the need for discretion around informal working conditions or financial arrangements. It is also explained away as a survival strategy, as a naturalization of the crisis, or as a lack of critical capacity of those who live amongst it.[99] In either case, interrogating this concealment means probing into the space that departure occupies in the collective psyche.

Fourth, like emigration itself, residual accumulation has a differential impact on the city and describes a specific geography. Therefore, to trace this geography is to construct a mirror image of the location preferences of the twentieth-century's middle class, that "aspirational country" that Venezuelan society mourns.

At the center of these material and spatial articulations is the caretaker, who turns residual accumulation into an object of care, exposing the mechanisms through which it endures and reconfigures social worlds amid collapse. Caretakers' action upon these material remnants determines the conceptual and methodological limits of this investigation, from a focus on the practices through which matter endures, to an attention to the qualitative and symbolic dimensions of caretaking over its measurable and quantitative aspects, the design of a methodology that allows access to migrants' domestic spaces and accounts for fragmentation and concealment, and to the territorial scope of the inquiry.

[99] I thank anthropologist and historian Rogelio Altez for his insights on this topic.

Caretaking: definition and scope

Caretaking is a unifying term for a number of spatial and material practices that maintain, repair, salvage, use, inhabit, or transform migrants' spaces and objects. These practices operate upon the material residues of departure at multiple scales, engaging with matter and space in ways that often complicate the distinction between discrete activities. However, all modes of caretaking have a similar orientation: extending the life of left-behind spaces and things. Achieving this goal entails constant attention to migrants' economic needs and possibility of return, to their fears of invasion and loss of value, to economic opportunities opened by local entertainment trends or by municipal corruption, to mechanisms for evading fiscal regulations and maximizing profits, and to caretakers' own and often precarious living conditions. Caretaking challenges the understanding of preservation as mere suspension in time, and imbues mundane actions like watering plants, cleaning houses, or collecting books with a symbolic meaning. Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift's question of what we maintain when we maintain something, "is it the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it, or some 'larger' entity?"[100] is one that caretaking embraces, understanding "we" as the collective reliance on the work of the caretaker and "order" as a category persistently unsettled by the very in-betweenness of collapse.

In her examination of decaying matter in a rural Montana homestead, Caitlin DeSilvey points to how "certain deposits of material open up breaches in the categories we use to order the world and to structure our attempts at remembering the past."[101] The caretaker occupies and activates these "breaches." Caretaking is inseparable from the meanwhile of collapse, as it performs the daily tasks that allow loss and separation to be permanently deferred. Through mundane caretaking activities, this threshold gains meaning, becoming an economically, socially, and spatially productive state.

Caretaking is at once generalized and concealed; it is widespread yet largely unnoticed, taking place behind the closed doors of apartments and the tall perimeter walls of houses. Its disguise is strategic and symbolic. Strategically, it ensures the safety of the world it looks after. In this sense, caretaking becomes evident only when absent, as a lack of attention that can result in the loss of property. To prevent this, caretaking *simulates occupancy* through strategies that create an appearance of inhabitation. Symbolically, caretaking displaces mourning into the realm of the interior, where it can be dealt with privately and out of public view. In this regard, caretaking is as much studied as it is *exposed*. Exposing its concealment is one of the tasks of this dissertation, carried out through a singular fieldwork method.

Like the migrant, the caretaker is a socially transversal figure, present in every socio-economic stratum. Caretaking is an opportunity for personal reinvention, in which professional expertise or social connections are oriented towards new goals. For example, Luis Saavedra was a consultant for the oil industry before becoming the

[100] Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, "Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 3 (2007): 4, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075954.
[101] Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 26.

caretaker of his neighbors' vacant apartments.[102] Mairín Reyes worked as a librarian and managed a beauty salon before starting a business that helps migrants close down apartments and sell their belongings.[103] Zaida Osorio was the office manager at an architecture firm for more than twenty-five years; after it closed and its founders emigrated, she took over the maintenance of her employers' house, an arrangement that not only delays their decision to sell but also postpones Zaida's reliance on a meager state pension.[104] Emiliana Romero studied documentary filmmaking before founding *Casa Viva* in 2017, at a moment of economic instability "when [she] felt that only necessity-based work would be successful".[105] Juan Montes and his wife, both electrical engineers, started a property management business in 2018 after losing their jobs; they manage apartments and cars, and care for elderly relatives of migrants. "One thinks, 'what else can I do, what plan B is there to emigrating,' and this idea came up," they expressed in an interview.[106] Other caretakers are photographers, lawyers, economists, architects, ceramists, or biologists. Caretaking is an opportunity that presents itself, an alternative to emigration, an unexpected "coming across" or "up with"; it is *a meanwhile occupation* that gives meaning to a protracted wait, while one "sees what happens with the country."

Caretakers create and constantly update their field of action; however, this creativity should not be taken as evidence of an entrepreneurial spirit harnessed by a flourishing economy, but rather as proof of the breakdown of formal employment. To characterize caretakers' work as "management" is fitting, since to manage something entails handling it with a specific set of skills (both of the job to be carried out and the context), succeeding in doing so despite difficulties (as in coping), and treating it as a resource (as in exploitation or stewardship).

Caretakers are part of the socio-economic ecosystem of collapse, which includes an array of helpers, brokers, money exchangers, second-hand sellers, and contrabandists that have emerged in the absence of legal frameworks of employment and at the muddy intersection of formal, informal, and illegal economies.[107] Like other ad hoc occupations, caretaking is integrated into (transnational) networks of solidarity and economic exchange; it generates employment and creates spaces for new audiences that have emerged in the city. However, caretaking is not a bottom-up practice; it has no aspirations of adding efforts to create impact or inform policy; instead, it creates an atomized landscape of individual efforts that interacts strategically with instances of power, coopting established structures (neighbors' associations, condominium boards) to achieve particular—i.e. private—objectives.

In Venezuela, the figure of the *cuidador* who looks after others' properties predates emigration and collapse. It is often inscribed within a tradition of domestic

[102] As reported by Tom Phillips, "The Fallen Metropolis: The Collapse of Caracas, the Jewel of Latin America," Cities, *The Guardian*, December 18, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/dec/18/the-fallen-metropolis-the-collapse-of-caracas-the-jewel-of-latin-america.

[103] Castillo, "Las Casas Muertas Que Revive Mairín."

[104] At the end of 2025, the monthly pension is equal to the minimum monthly wage of 130 Bolívares, or US$ 0.50 per month.

[105] Emiliana Romero, personal communication. November 14, 2022.

[106] Univision Noticias, "Cuidar Casas Abandonadas: Los Nuevos Empleos Que Están Surgiendo En Medio de La Crisis Venezolana," August 17, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5Pps8yvdI0&ab_channel=UnivisionNoticias.

[107] For an overview of these occupations, see Rafael Osío Cabrices, *Venezuela: Memorias de Un Futuro Perdido* (Catarata, 2024), 57.

employment that has developed in pragmatic and informal ways, tied to social and economic circumstances.[108] Caretaking also overlaps with a generalized cultural practice in Venezuela, namely, the reliance on domestic workers by middle- and upper-income households. The tasks of the domestic worker include cleaning, cooking, washing, and gardening, and also caring for children and the elderly. Historically, this role has been assumed "by migrant, poor, uneducated, and often indigenous or black women", a fact that underscores the gender divisions, inequalities, and colonial legacies that persist in Latin America.[109] Domestic work is poorly paid, non-contractual, and often excluded from labor legislation.[110] It is a site of complex and nuanced relationships that straddle the professional and the affective, exposing social and racial biases, shaping domestic architecture, and organizing activism and policy.[111] While domestic work is not a blueprint for the practices examined in this study, some of the tasks performed by domestic workers continue after emigration, creating intersections with caretaking. In some cases, those looking after migrants' homes outsource specific tasks to domestic workers; in other instances, caretaking is the extension of a longstanding relationship of (domestic) employment. The common denominator of these caretaking relationships is trust, a condition that illuminates relevant aspects of caretaking practices.

In Caracas and other Latin American cities where poverty, social exclusion, and infrastructural deficiencies are prevalent, practices of solidarity or resource pooling have historically filled the gaps left by the state. In Venezuela, some of these practices have become widespread over the last decade as living standards decline and the state's safety nets unravel. As with domestic work, there is an overlap between these practices and caretaking, since those looking after migrants' spaces are embedded in social worlds marked by precarity. However, this dissertation is not centered on caretaking as an act of solidarity; instead, it analyzes these practices as sites of spatial and social reinvention, economic reactivation, and urban environmental regeneration, forging new interdependencies as they maintain or transform the objects they act upon, arguing for the centrality of the caretaker as a social figure.

[108] Consider, for example, the film "Hôtel Humboldt", about the caretaker of the famous hotel atop the Ávila mountain. See: *Hôtel Humboldt*, Documentary, directed by Thomas Sipp (Archipel 33, 1999), 52 minutes, https://www.film-documentaire.fr/4DACTION/w_fiche_film/6209_0.

[109] Elvira Blanco, "Enchanted Commons and Politics of Possession: A Reading of Jorge Thielen Armand's La Soledad (Venezuela, 2016)," *A Contracorriente. Una Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos* 20, no. 2 (2023): 8.

[110] However, in Venezuela, domestic work is regulated by Law (*Ley Orgánica del Trabajo, las Trabajadoras y los Trabajadores*, Cap. III, 2012), which defines wage, working hours, social protection, and other provisions.

[111] In Venezuela, the majority of middle- and upper-income homes include bedrooms and bathrooms for live-in maids. Their location, near the kitchen, speaks to the social segregation that cuts across these work relationships. See: Valentina Dávila, "The Servantful House: A Case Study of Venezuelan Quintas," in *Care: Gta Papers 7*, ed. Torsten Lange and Gabrielle Schaad, Gta Papers (gta Verlag, 2022), https://doi.org/10.54872/gta-4647-02; For a detailed examination of worker-employer relationships, see the work of Livia Barbosa. For instance "Domestic Workers and Pollution in Brazil," in *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination*, ed. Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox (I.B. Tauris, 2007); For recent policies, see "In Latin America, We're Not Just Recognizing Care Work – We're Rebuilding Economies around It," UN Women – Headquarters, June 27, 2025, https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2025/06/in-latin-america-were-not-just-recognizing-care-work-were-rebuilding-economies-around-it.

Caretaking as practice and value

For the feminist political theorist Joan Tronto, the notion of "practice" refers to a mode of engagement that integrates action and thought towards a specific end. "Action" refers to physical activity or labor, carried out with specific skills and according to certain standards, and "thought" entails a sense of responsibility for "the unmet needs of others" and "a recognition that one can act to address [them]."[112] The integration of thought and action is echoed by Virginia Held in *The Ethics of Care* through the notions of "practice and value".[113] For Held, care "is not a series of individual actions, but a practice that develops, along with its appropriate attitudes."[114] Therefore, "it is not enough to think of care as simply work, empirically describable," but to consider as well "the cluster of moral considerations"[115] that inform caring relationships. These considerations are crucial for understanding the bonds that caretakers form around their objects of care. As the research will show, these bonds extend not only to the migrants on whose behalf caretakers act, but also to broader audiences. The collective reliance on caretaking recasts these practice as socially and spatially relevant.

In her study of care, Held is less concerned with offering a precise definition of care than with understanding the conditions that any practice must meet to qualify as care. Held compares and comments on the views of numerous authors, contrasts care against broader categories of labor and work, and identifies several conditions that care must satisfy. First, care is *relational*; it creates specific relationships between individuals and around an object of care. Second, care requires acting on behalf of others, creating *dependencies* between individuals. In this sense, caretaking extends beyond the provision of a service, as the need for care cannot be met by another party. Third, care relationships are based on *trust*. As will be shown, in the absence of legal frameworks protecting private property or regulating employment, trust plays a central role in the evolving relationship between migrants and caretakers.

Lastly, Held argues that care is *transformative*, alluding to a creative capacity that transcends the mere sustenance of life and can shape human sensibilities, well-being, and cooperation.[116] This feature is evident not only in caretaking's capacity to define and update its field of action, attentive to migrants' needs and to shifting local conditions, but also in its handling of the things under its purview. In some cases, "transformation" entails actual alteration through reprogramming, renovation, or repair; in others, it involves rescuing, salvaging, or reselling, removing residual matter from trajectories of decay and placing it in new value systems. Caretaking's transformative potential extends to its objects of care, opening them to literal and symbolic reconfiguration and reinvention. This resonates with Caitlin DeSilvey's observation that "the act of extending care actually produces value" rather than in

[112] For Tronto, thinking of care as a practice is central to her political vision, and to avoid idealizing care as a sentiment. Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1993), 106, 118.

[113] Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford University Press, 2006) See chapter 2: Care as Practice and Value.

[114] Ibid., 42.

[115] Ibid., 38.

[116] For Held, "care has the capacity to shape new persons with ever more advanced understandings of culture and society and morality and ever more advanced abilities to live well and cooperatively with others." Ibid., 32.

reverse.[117] Reflecting on the preservation and display of otherwise ordinary domestic objects rescued from old farmsteads, the author questions the assumption that (historical, symbolic, sentimental, or economic) value is an inherent quality of an object, threatened unless cared for. DeSilvey's observation illuminates the duality between intrinsic and assigned value that permeates the caretaker's work. For example, the preservation of books and the display of domestic objects as second-hand commodities bring this duality into focus, casting the caretaker as a figure with a distinct cultural role.

Care in architecture and urban studies

In recent decades, the disciplinary interest in care has produced a substantial body of knowledge spanning research, pedagogy, practice, and activism. This work is at the convergence of multiple intellectual sources, which have expanded over time to inform architecture's capacity to engage with a broad range of contemporary concerns. Despite its complex genealogy, the foundations of the disciplinary interest in care lie, firstly, in feminist studies in ethics and political theory, which provide the ethical framework and vocabulary for thinking of architecture through notions of interdependence and relationality. Care's emphasis on mundane, everyday practices has fostered a renewed interest in maintenance as an essential dimension of the endurance of buildings, infrastructures, and cities, shifting the focus away from the production of architecture towards how design decisions unfold over time as shared responsibility.[118]

The second foundational influence in the caring turn of architecture is an interdisciplinary field of study that encompasses breakdown, repair, and infrastructure studies in technology and sociology, where "breakdown" has been recast as "an epistemic and experiential reality".[119] Following Jackson's influential work, architecture's own awareness of the impact of human action has grounded maintenance and repair practices within the field of care. For the author, care does a mending job, reuniting "the worlds of meaning and action",[120] acknowledging the deep attachment to things that makes their maintenance possible. An ethics of care underpins novel sensibilities towards heritage preservation and adaptive reuse;[121] it also permeates the repair of the built environment, emphasizing the link between material and ecological restoration and the "health" of communities and

117 DeSilvey, *Curated Decay*, 178.

118 For the relationship of architecture to maintenance, see Hilary Sample, *Maintenance Architecture* (MIT Press, 2016); For a sharp critique on the social implications of architectural maintenance, see Andrés Jaque, "Architecture as Ultra-Clear Rendered Society," in *Everyday Matters. Contemporary Approaches to Architecture*, ed. Vanessa Grossman and Ciro Miguel (Ruby Press, 2022); For the relationship between care and infrastructure, see Hélène Frichot et al., eds., *Infrastructural Love: Caring for Our Architectural Support Systems* (Birkhäuser, 2022); For a care-based approach urban design, drawing extensively from Held, see: Juliet Davis, *The Caring City. Ethics of Urban Design* (Bristol University Press, 2022).

119 Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and Care," *Places Journal*, ahead of print, November 20, 2018, https://doi.org/10.22269/181120.

120 Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," 232.

121 Care considerations run across adaptive reuse and heritage literature, as an attitude towards the existing that is underpinned by a sense of shared responsibility and long-established relationships with the built environment. See Sally Stone, *Undoing Buildings: Adaptive Reuse and Cultural Memory* (Routledge, n.d.); See also DeSilvey, *Curated Decay*.

economies;[122] care ethics underpins the rise of a unique "aesthetics of repair"[123] that underscores the continuity between the material and social orders in contexts of urban abandonment and decline.[124]

The notion of "brokenness" has transcended the domains of technology and infrastructure to become a metaphor for the environmental destruction caused by specific human activities. Disciplinary discussions have positioned themselves differently around this issue and, in doing so, have also interpreted care theory in different ways. On one hand, this interpretation has been assumed in terms of mutually exclusive worldviews, as a fundamental shift "away from" certain models and "toward" others. For example, "away from the dominant paradigm of innovation—including the modern focus on economists, engineers, and policymakers—toward practices of maintenance and 'the collective project of repair'";[125] away from a conception of the architect as an autonomous and independent agent and toward an interconnected and interdependent view of practice;[126] away from "developer-driven and capital-centric architecture" and "toward long-term commitment to planetary care".[127] Amid the urgency that brokenness demands, care ethics offer a form of resistance against actors and practices construed as detrimental.[128]

On the other hand, the keen attention to interdependencies and reciprocities that flourish amid brokenness has allowed scholarship to explore nuances and entanglements that ultimately complicate the categorical oppositions advocated by some authors. For Jackson, for instance, repair is not antithetical to innovation; instead, it affords a subtle understanding of it, critical of its equivalence with novelty while sensitive to the innovative potential of repair.[129] Drawing on feminist theory, environmental philosophy, and anthropology, the work of Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing considers ecological ruination as the starting point of deeper forms of interrelatedness and interdependency. For Haraway, this entails a recognition of the mutual implication of humans with other species and ecological processes,[130] while

[122] Mauro Baracco and Louise Wright, "Introduction," in *Repair. Australian Pavilion 2018*, ed. Mauro Baracco and Louise Wright (Actar, 2018).

[123] Mattern, "Maintenance and Care."

[124] See, for instance Andrew Herscher, *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit* (The University of Michigan Press, 2012); See also Leila Dawney, "Decommissioned Places: Ruins, Endurance and Care at the End of the First Nuclear Age," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45, no. 1 (2020): 33–49, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12334.

[125] Torsten Lange and Gabrielle Schaad, "Introduction," in *Care: Gta Papers 7*, ed. Torsten Lange and Gabrielle Schaad (gta Verlag, 2022), 5, https://doi.org/10.54872/gta-4647-00; These authors cite Shannon Mattern to exemplify the shift they argue for. However, Mattern's call for collective engagement is more nuanced. Mattern, "Maintenance and Care."

[126] Elke Krasny, "Architecture and Care," in *Critical Care. Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, ed. Angelika Fitz et al. (Architekturzentrum Wien, 2019).

[127] Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny, "Introduction. Critical Care. Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet," in *Critical Care. Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, ed. Angelika Fitz et al. (Architekturzentrum Wien, 2019), 12.

[128] While it can be argued that an oppositional view is downstream of care being framed as an "alternative" moral theory to liberal individualism, antagonism is not the prevailing disposition in feminist scholarship, whose fundamental motivation is to integrate rather than to separate different dimensions of moral life. As Virginia Held reminds us, care "works with a conception of persons as relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals", emphasizing how any possibility of independent action is supported by relationships that make this possible. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 13,14.

[129] Specifically, maintenance and repair "are not separate or alternative to innovation, but sites for some of its most interesting and consequential operations." Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," 227.

[130] Haraway's recent work, which has been influential in architectural debates, explores these entanglements at various scales, from the intimate to the global, expanding upon her life-long scholarship around notions of situatedness, multispecies relationships, and a critique of human exceptionalism. See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

for Tsing, these complex entanglements are explored in her anthropological research on sites where resource extraction intersects with economic precarity and environmental destruction.[131]

Examining issues of interdependence, precarity, and adaptation in the context of contemporary urbanization, the ethnographic work of Abdoumaliq Simone, Edgar Pieterse, and Janet Roitman has expanded notions of "infrastructure" beyond physical support systems, denoting fluid, makeshift forms of cooperation and networks of mutual dependence that sustain communities amid uncertainty and chronic failure. The relevance of this scholarship to architectural and urban discourses has been two-fold: first, for its focus on situated methods that examine everyday life against the insufficiency of established frameworks of urban development and normative policy-making; and second, for its capacity to confront the values and moral disposition of care with the urgency of survival. Amid chronic precarity and generalized institutional failure, the conflicts between self-interest and attention to others' "unmet needs" become increasingly salient, depriving care not only of its emotional overtones but also of the possibility of ethically distancing itself from practices and actors deemed detrimental or unscrupulous. The crudeness and immediacy of survival taints care, demanding the transgression of ethical boundaries (or at least the deferment of judgment).

This dissertation aims to expand upon the disciplinary debate on care by examining practices and actors that operate under extenuating, precarious circumstances, negotiating conflicts of interest, and carving out spaces of stability amid uncertainty. These practices make use of the material residues of emigration and expose relationships between actors and positions that are otherwise deemed irreconcilable. As the experiences of caretakers in Caracas will show, thinking of care solely in terms of strategies aimed at resisting political domination or material breakdown fails to grasp the range of action that care *puts into practice* amid collapse. To care is to participate, to be involved and to involve others, to be *mutually implicated* through decisions and actions that are inseparable from the conditions under which caring relationships occur.[132] Far from being a constraint, these conditions are central to the expanded view of care this dissertation argues for, specifically in relation to architecture's capacity to productively engage with complex societal and ecological breakdown.

This argument, however, merits clarification. To expand care's range of action is not to say that amid an authoritarian regime that relentlessly extends its grip over society, there is no space for principled opposition, nor that care ethics are not essential to construct spaces of democratic participation and social inclusion that often counter these onslaughts. Instead, it points out how care's fundamental orientation towards mutual dependence allows us to examine it as a mode of knowledge of collapse.

[131] For an architectural translation of some of central concepts in the scholarship of Haraway and Tsing, see Sonal Mithal and Akshar Gajjar, *Living Together: More-than-Human Ecologies for Architectural Thinking* (Birkhäuser, 2025).
[132] Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 138.

Caretaking as a mode of knowledge of collapse

The success of caretaking depends not only on close attention to the needs of migrants but also on the practical knowledge of the "ways of doing"[133] of collapse. This includes a disposition and ability for bypassing restrictions, exploiting loopholes, bending norms, or coopting remaining institutional structures, behaviors "which belong to the register of new forms of public knowledge … particular to all times of crises".[134] Locally, this know-how goes by different names: *resolver* (to solve), *dar la vuelta* (to turn things around), *tomar caminos verdes* (take shortcuts), *ingeniería paralela* (parallel engineering). These terms signal "the capacity of actors and institutions [of] finding ways to continuously strike agreements on accomplishing things together, even if the rules of such collaborations are opaque and fluid."[135] Amid the chronic agony of Venezuelan institutions, words like "together" and "collaboration" carry a specific connotation. They confirm the routine displacement of collapse to a realm beyond anyone's control and embody a sense of "communion" in the face of adversity.

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist Anna Tsing examines the complex relationships organized around matsutake, a type of mushroom that grows in human-disturbed ecosystems. Through matsutake, she reconstructs the stories of foragers and buyers operating on the margins of society and whose lives are marked by migration and economic precarity, stories which themselves "illuminate the cracks in the global political economy",[136] exposing cycles of exploitation and devastation, and the economies and actors thriving in the fallout of progress. Tsing's observation, that "*if we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope*"[137] captures the extent to which her work can be examined as an "exercise" in broken world thinking, albeit one in which "hope" is often a narrow space of possibility etched out amid economic precariousness and ecological decline.

To advance her argument, Tsing proposes the term "collaborative survival",[138] which exposes the conflicts and frictions of international trade through the multiple value systems of which mushrooms (and their foragers) are part. Collaborative survival is a provocative term, with one leg in the world of urgency and the other in the realm of possibility; it accounts for the precarity of livelihoods and for actors' capacity to forge contingent, mutually beneficial associations with others, relationships informed equally by self-preservation and trust.[139] As Tsing argues, survival requires collaboration, or "working across difference", which leads to a state she refers to as "contamination".[140] The notion of "contamination" explains phenomena as varied as human disruptions of natural environments and cultural intercrossing; it accounts for the growth of matsutake as well as for the cultural diversity that results from historical processes of domination or violence. As a

[133] A. Mbembe and J. Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," *Public Culture* 7, no. 2 (1995): 340, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7-2-323.
[134] Mbembe and Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," 340.
[135] Edgar Pieterse, "Introducing Rogue Urbanism," in *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities*, ed. Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone (Jacana Media, 2013).
[136] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 4.
[137] Ibid., 18. Emphasis in original.
[138] Ibid., 4,19,25.
[139] Ibid., 272.
[140] Ibid., 28.

concept, contamination describes “complicated” and “ugly” stories for which “simple moral judgments don’t come to hand.”[141]

Interestingly, care is not part of the conceptual constellation that Tsing employs to describe the relationships organized around matsutake. On the contrary, it is as if she intentionally avoids the affective associations and generous disposition of care, inviting us instead to think dispassionately about relationships that expose vulnerabilities and interdependencies. “In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent”,[142] Tsing argues, reminding us that interdependence and reciprocity are not the sole purview of care but can be examined through the lens of “contamination”, which exposes crudeness, precarity, and the conflicts between self-preservation and a concern for others. For the author, these contradictions call for an ethical framework that accounts for nuances that clear-cut ethical categories are ill-equipped to grapple with.

Building upon Tsing’s ideas, this dissertation contends that caretaking exposes some of the conflicts that collaborative survival brings to the fore. Moreover, rather than disputing the core precepts of care, this expands our understanding of these practices and the values that surround them. Maintaining vacant apartments, simulating inhabitation of left-behind homes, liquidating patrimonies through informal channels, rescuing books from the homes of migrants, converting homes into clandestine restaurants, negotiating with corrupt authorities, or purchasing properties at bargain prices to turn them into bunker-villas are evidence of contingent, mutually beneficial, and “ugly” relationships that highlight the interdependence of various actors in a context of precarity and uncertainty. As a corollary, to the extent that these relationships are also materially and spatially transformative, they can expand the visual imaginaries associated with collapse beyond the conventional scenes of abandonment and decay.

Contribution to the study of present-day Caracas

Migration and decline constitute central topics in contemporary urban studies. The relationship between these two factors has led to different theories and analytical frameworks. A fundamental contribution in this area is the concept of “shrinking city”, which provides a framework for understanding how processes of deindustrialization, suburbanization, and economic or political restructuring lead to depopulation and decline. While urban decline is an age-old phenomenon, the shrinking city has been identified as “new in its foundations, spatial manifestations, and social, economic, and environmental implications”,[143] representing a mode of urban transformation specific to globalization and the anticipated end of global population growth. Within this framework, growth and shrinkage coexist at each other's expense, as national or global “poles of growth” attract population from peripheral regions, leading to

141 Ibid., 33
142 Ibid., 29.
143 Emmanuèle Cunningham-Sabot et al., “Theoretical Approaches of Shrinking Cities,” in *Shrinking Cities, International Perspectives and Policy Implications*, ed. Kristina Pallagst et al. (Routledge, 2013), 2.

depopulation and decay.[144] In an effort to distance itself from the negative associations of urban decline, recent literature on shrinking cities has argued for a "culture of shrinkage" focused on "distinct forms of renewal and change"[145] to effectively manage the fallout of urban decline. Shrinking cities are increasingly viewed as sites of cultural and environmental repair through practices that capitalize on the restorative potential of abandoned spaces, leading to innovative forms of urban development, governance, public art, or community organization.[146]

In contrast to this framework, the concept of "departure city" aims to expand the discussion of the urban impact of emigration beyond growth/shrinkage oppositions. It points to a situation in which the otherwise opposing forces of outward migration, population growth, and urban development coexist and reinforce each other within a city. The departure city describes urban environments where irregular, back-and-forth migratory flows result in specific spatial and cultural transformations. These transformations include informal and temporary housing solutions, diaspora investment in local real estate, the emergence of an emigration infrastructure in the form of specialized businesses and transportation hubs, the "symbolic presence of the elsewhere"[147] through specific architectural styles and foreign nomenclature, and the synchronization of daily life with the rhythms of emigration.[148] The departure city describes an environment whose physical and cultural constitution both stimulates and is sustained by emigration.

The departure city has served as an analytical framework for studying urban environments in post-socialist and post-conflict countries of the European periphery, where circular labor migration to the European Union is common. Urban transformation in the departure city is an expression of transnational networks and the flow of financial resources, knowledge, and information these networks sustain. These changes echo the dynamics observed, for example, between Mexico and the United States, where intergenerational migration has produced new architectural typologies and altered local economies.[149] The departure city has contributed to a renewed focus on migration in places of origin; however, the central figure in this literature is the labor migrant, whose recurrent departures and returns reorganize urban economies, family relations, and assign local actors a supportive role. At the same time, while effectively challenging the assumed link between emigration and decline, the departure city highlights prevailing center-periphery relationships within specific geographical areas. Despite its regional focus, authors have called for expanding "the scale and scope of the departure city in its manifold realizations [through] empirical work."[150]

144 Philipp Oswalt et al., *Atlas of Shrinking Cities* (Hatje Cantz, 2006), 6.

145 Philipp Oswalt, "Hypotheses on Urban Shrinkage in the Twenty-First Century," in *Shrinking Cities in Romania*, ed. Ilinca Constantinescu (DOM Publishers, 2019), 26.

146 See, for example Herscher, *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit*.

147 König, "Pristina: Departure City?"

148 Ibid.; See also Jonas König and Kai Vöckler, "Departure Cities?," *Co-Habitation Tactics - Imagining Future Spaces in Architecture, City and Landscape Conference Proceedings*, 2018, 411–18; Ruth Coman et al., "Labour Migration as a Temporal Practice in Peripheral Cities: The Case of Comănești, Romania," *City* 23, nos. 4–5 (2019): 619–30, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2019.1689733.

149 Sarah Lynn Lopez, *The Remittance Landscape : Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA* (The University of Chicago Press, 2015), ix.

150 König and Vöckler, "Departure Cities?," 415.

As a case study, Caracas fits reluctantly—if at all—within the analytical frameworks of shrinkage or departure. On the one hand, mass emigration has not resulted in the scenes of urban decay and desolation often associated with this phenomenon. In the Venezuelan capital, sustained emigration has been partially offset by internal arrivals, and the government's decision to maintain a certain level of functionality in public services has mitigated the impact of infrastructure breakdown. On the other hand, the targeted relationship with a geographically near destination and the resulting circular migration that characterizes departure cities do not align with the country's migratory patterns, nor have they produced specific architectural or urban manifestations.[151] Venezuelan migration originates from a vast territory and encompasses a socio-economically diverse population. Similarly, it has produced a veritable diaspora that reaches well beyond neighboring countries.

The possibility of examining Caracas through the lens of shrinkage faces an additional difficulty, as property abandonment—a defining characteristic of shrinking cities and often a prerequisite for their creative reinvention—is rare in the city. Middle-class migrants who acquired property during periods of economic stability do not walk away or give up ownership; instead, they devote an effort to maintaining their homes. Domestic property constitutes both an economic asset and a symbolic "mooring", a fixed point around which mobility is organized[152]. Indeed, the notion of "home" features prominently in migration literature, as "a key element in interpreting expressions of nostalgia and manifestations of grief, as well as tensions and conflicts between the sense of belonging to the place of origin, the longing to return, and the experience of uprooting in destination countries."[153] Left-behind homes extend ties to the homeland and anchor a sense of citizenship and belonging; they also prevent capital loss, generate passive income, or provide housing for left-behind family members, extending the nature of transnational exchange beyond the inward flow of economic remittances. At the center of these relationships is the caretaker, not only an intermediary between transnational and local economic flows, but also a mediator between absence and presence in symbolic terms.

Shifting the research focus to local caretakers moves attention away from mobile actors, highlighting a role that is often secondary in migration studies. However, as one switches the point of view and immerses oneself in the granularity of the domestic world that the caretaker looks after, it is the "mooring" itself that becomes dislodged. The immobility of the caretaker ceases to offer a fixed reference point and is subject to its own instability, imposed by the contingencies of collapse.[154] It is this instability that the caretaker exposes that ultimately affords a different perspective for theorizing Caracas. In this sense, the dissertation's aspiration to contribute to an understanding of Caracas as a city *living through collapse* follows a tangential approach, taking migrants' domestic spaces and personal possessions as an entry point for examining processes of urban transformation in which departure is

[151] In this, Caracas, differs from Venezuelan cities near the borders of Colombia or Brasil, which rely on transnational flows and have been historically open to cross-border influences.

[152] Griffiths, M., Rogers, A., & Anderson, B. (2013). "Migration, Time and Temporalities: Review and Prospect." *COMPAS Research Resources Paper.* COMPAS.

[153] Elena Cardona, "Casas de Desolvido. Cronotopos Diaspóricos En Las Obras de Tres Fotógrafas Venezolanas," in *Mujer, Voz y Representación: Fotografía y Materiales Alternativos En El Mundo Hispanohablante*, ed. Edurne Beltrán De Heredia (Argus-a, 2025), 165.

[154] D'Hers Del Pozo, "Tiempos de Crisis, Resistencias e Infrapolítica En La Migración Inmóvil Venezolana."

immersed in and inseparable from other dimensions of the country's breakdown. Beyond a focus on migration, this approach positions the dissertation in dialogue with other efforts to study contemporary Venezuela from both academic and non-academic perspectives.

In Venezuela, the impact of emigration on urban transformation has been a research interest of architect Lorenzo González Casas, who proposed the term "urban osteoporosis" to describe a condition in which structures remain intact but are internally weakened.[155] In his investigation, González Casas draws a parallel between the Venezuelan capital and other historic processes of depopulation and decline; he situates residential vacancy within a broader crisis and acknowledges the emergence of caretaking. Most importantly, González Casas argues for the *future* incorporation of the city's vacant architectural inventory through creative repurposing strategies within new institutional, legal, economic, urban, and professional frameworks. The author calls for the need to expand on this research, and finally ponders "whether it is feasible to start something now, without waiting for structural changes."[156]

This disposition towards postponement is also present in the study by Lovera mentioned earlier in this introduction. In his extensive review of the governance and service crises affecting Caracas, Lovera concludes that institutional reconstruction is a prerequisite for restoring urban functionality, suggesting that "when this does not occur, the people themselves generate an alternative institutionality"[157] to cope with practical problems. This dissertation aims to pick up this thread at the point where others have left it, arguing that the creative reincorporation of vacancy that González Casas aspires to is already taking place, creating partial, isolated instances of economic activity and social intensity which have an urban impact, challenging the prerequisite for "structural changes" in their logic and outcome. Similarly, the "alternative institutionality" to which Lovera alludes is the kind of procedures that authors point to when speaking of "ways of doing" and "collaborations" that flourish amid structural crises. As will be shown, these procedures do not operate autonomously of established institutional forms but often co-opt them or are integrated into their functions. Moreover, close attention to these manifestations exposes architecture's inherent limitations, both by its inattentiveness to practices that, while generalized, remain on the margins of disciplinary attention, and by attempting to "solve" collapse from the outside rather than explore the possibilities of "inhabiting" it from within.

In its effort to contribute to an understanding of the Venezuelan collapse through the lens of "brokenness", that is, as a "generative and productive" state, and to expand architecture's conceptual and operative range within this condition, this study draws on Venezuelan scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities, where this perspective has found fertile ground. Among the numerous examples that sustain or contextualize the claims put forth by this dissertation, it is worth

[155] González Casas, "Osteoporosis urbana"; See also: Lorenzo González Casas, "Un país pequeño en envase grande: teorías y prácticas de crecer y decrecer -," November 8, 2023, https://www.debatesiesa.com/un-pais-pequeno-en-envase-grande-teorias-y-practicas-de-crecer-y-decrecer/.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Lovera, "Caracas. Urbicide and Precariousness of Urban Life at the Beginning of the Venezuelan Twenty-First Century. The Worst of Capitalism and Savage Populism," 860.

mentioning the ongoing research by anthropologist Manuel D'Hers on the notion of "immobile migration", which offers a novel perspective for examining emigration's local impact. At the same time, his interpretation of collapse as a "normalized rupture of the everyday" is essential for understanding emerging individual and collective attitudes that privilege a crude pragmatism oriented towards guaranteeing basic sustenance.[158] Survival is a recurrent theme in the research of the late Paula Vázquez Lezama, examined against the backdrop of state control and the failure of the project of modernity.[159] Research by media scholar Elvira Blanco on "commoning" has been critical to understanding the potential of specific practices—including caretaking—to leverage resources through strategies that counter dominant narratives and bypass government control, as well as for emphasizing the crucial role of contemporary cultural production as an entryway into the crisis.[160] Beyond academic scholarship, contributions from film, literature, and the visual arts that explore themes of uprooting, memory, or dispersion offer an account of the traumas that cut across contemporary Venezuelan society from the perspective of those who experience them.[161] In these cultural products, "the shared loss of country"[162] serves as a node for discourses in and out of the country, which collectively create a fragmentary landscape of an event that exceeds any possibility of individual documentation. This dissertation hopes to somehow fit into this complex assemblage, establishing new connections and providing a (partial) record of this event.

Research scope and limitations

This dissertation is an interpretation of the present. The events it describes and the practices it reflects upon coincide with the timeframe of a doctoral trajectory. Dealing with an object of study that shuns exposure and is immersed in a volatile economic, political, and migratory context presents several obstacles and challenges, from fieldwork planning to anticipating results. Moments of immersion in the field were separated by periods of analysis, reflection, and recalibration (which also required constant attention to unfolding events). Moreover, immersion—however intense and dedicated—captured furtive views rather than prolonged exposures. Under these circumstances, the research can only aspire to present snapshots of a moment in time, offering a precise, situated collection of fragments from which to assemble a larger picture.

[158] D'Hers Del Pozo, "Tiempos de Crisis, Resistencias e Infrapolítica En La Migración Inmóvil Venezolana."
[159] Paula Vásquez Lezama, "Cuando Se Consume El Cuerpo Del Pueblo. La Incertidumbre Como Política de Supervivencia En Venezuela," *Revista Iberoamericana* 85, no. 266 (2019): 101–18, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5195/reviberoamer.2019.7726.
[160] Blanco, "Enchanted Commons and Politics of Possession."
[161] To name a few, the films *La Soledad* by Jorge Thielen (2016), *Once upon a time in Venezuela* by Anabel Rodriguez (2020), *Los Capítulos Perdidos* by Lorena Alvarado (2024); the novels and short stories like *It would be night in Caracas* by Karina Sainz (2019), *Venecos* by Rodrigo Blanco Calderón (2025), *Diorama* by Ana T. Torres (2021), *Arqueología Sonámbula* by Cristóbal Castro (2021), *Escribir Afuera,* various authors (2021); the work of photographers like Fabiola Ferrero, Wendy Yanarella, Vilena Figueira, or Marylee Coll; the work of visual artists like Angela Bonadies or Pepe López.
[162] Cardona, "Casas de Desolvido. Cronotopos Diaspóricos En Las Obras de Tres Fotógrafas Venezolanas," 183.

Against this fragmentary reading of the present, history offers a substrate that fills gaps and locates specific events within timelines. Venezuela's ongoing collapse is set against an uneven history of economic expansions and contractions, alongside periods of political and social stability or upheaval. An important consideration in this regard is that the rapid decline of the last decade was preceded by a windfall. Between 1998 and 2012, Venezuela's oil revenues increased more than tenfold, allowing an immense expansion in government size and social spending that buttressed the political movement led by Hugo Chávez.[163] Looking further back, the rise of *Chavismo* in the late 1990s was the outcome of a tumultuous period that saw the country's two-party system tumble, oil revenues plummet, and the state's capacities diminish amid widespread social discontent. Zooming out further and taking a general view of Venezuela's modern history, specifically from the early twentieth century onwards, the country's ongoing failure is set against a period of sustained growth and modernization during which its population rapidly expanded and urbanized. Indeed, Venezuela experienced the fastest urbanization rate in Latin America, rising from 15% in 1926 to 78% in 1971.[164] Rapid urban growth was particularly noticeable in Caracas, which saw its population increase fivefold during the same period, surging from 4% to 20% of the country's total.[165] Internal displacement to the capital was supported by the influx of large groups of migrants, particularly during the postwar years.[166] For much of the twentieth century, and especially between the 1950s and late 1970s, oil-backed modernization enabled a massive increase in social spending on education and health, infrastructure investment, industrial expansion, urban development, construction incentives, and the creation of a mortgage system that expanded the country's middle class. Politically, the ambitions of this socio-economic segment "dominated the political arena and became the source of the most significant demands for an interventionist and activist state."[167] Relevantly, the material aspirations of the middle class were underpinned by a historically overvalued currency, which supported lifestyles and consumption patterns similar to those of wealthy nations.[168]

The point of these last observations is neither to claim, in hindsight, the inevitable collapse of the rentier state nor to propose a critical revision of twentieth-century developmentalist models (as clarified, this dissertation is not a search for origins). Instead, it emphasizes that the material world of oil-backed modernization—

[163] During this windfall, however, oil production actually fell by more than 60%. When oil prices plummeted from $103 to $36, this caused an unprecedented shock to the economy. See Santos, "Venezuela: Running on Empty."

[164] Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* (University of California Press, 1997), 82; Marco Negrón, "Los Orígenes de La Urbanización Contemporánea En Venezuela: El Crecimiento Sin Acumulación Entre 1920-1945," *Urbana* 1, no. 4 (1982): 71.

[165] Negrón, "Los Orígenes de La Urbanización Contemporánea En Venezuela: El Crecimiento Sin Acumulación Entre 1920-1945," 91.

[166] For a detailed description of immigration into Venezuela during this period, see Mary Kritz, "The Impact of International Migration on Venezuelan Demographic and Social Structure," *The International Migration Review* 9, no. 4 (1976): 513–43, https://doi.org/10.2307/3002345.

[167] Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty*, 82-83,104.

[168] Since the early twentieth century, oil rents have created the problem of absorbing large sums of money into the Venezuelan economy. The solution, in place for fifty years, was a fixed exchange rate between bolívares and US dollars, which created an overvalued currency that did not reflect the country's overall economic productivity but the efficiency of the oil industry. This resulted, first, in wages that were on average above workers' productivity levels, and second, in an inability to meet demands for goods through local production, favoring imports Héctor Vallecillos, "La Dinámica de La Población y Del Empleo En La Venezuela Del Siglo XX," in *El Caso Venezuela: Una Ilusión de Armonía*, ed. Moisés Naím and Ramón Piñango (Ediciones IESA, 1984); See also: Pedro Palma, *La Política Cambiaria En Venezuela* (Academia Nacional de Ciencias Económicas, 2002).

the outcome of decades of economic stability, urbanization, industrial development, and upward social mobility—is not simply a neutral backdrop to collapse but rather its *material constitution and its symbolic mooring*. The hundreds of thousands of empty houses and apartments and the unquantifiable number of things they contain, are both tangible proof of individual achievement and collective aspirations, constituting a claim to status that is maintained or acquired as such.

Territorial scope of the study

If a socio-economic group can be defined in terms of education, income, or consumption patterns, it can also be characterized in terms of "location logics" in a given urban area, determined by market forces, state action, and its own preferences.[169] This dissertation focuses on an urban space that was built in response to the demands of the city's middle class over several decades. During this time, private developers invented a new kind of land occupation known as *urbanización*, and the architectural typologies of the single-family house and the tower evolved alongside it, while the Venezuelan state backed these projects with generous mortgages and construction credits. The research argues that this "aspirational" territory still holds sway over society at large, and that caretaking is the means through which established—yet economically diminished—groups retain claims of social standing and new elites affirm their presence, intersecting old and new *geographies of status*.

In Venezuela, the rise of a new economic elite close to political power has been crucial to the capacity of the government to withstand the negative consequences of the country's breakdown. As political scientist Javier Corrales has suggested, the regime has entrenched itself not only through conventional authoritarian means but also by distributing economic benefits to political allies and, especially, by granting the military control of key economic sectors and illegal activities, managing discontent within the armed forces and reducing the risk of a coup.[170] This has effectively resulted in what Corrales calls "a two-tier system": on one hand, a state that rules through repression, censorship, and coercion, and on the other, the emergence of a *Boli-bourgeoisie* that espouses the regime's Socialist dictum while "openly involved in processes of illicit private accumulation on the basis of state resources."[171] This emerging class has also established itself by forging business alliances with traditional elites.[172] Relevantly for this investigation, it has asserted its presence in urban space through its location preferences and through a distinct aesthetic, which, by and large, has been incorporated into official imagery. While their location preferences mirror those of traditional upper classes, the aesthetic of

[169] María Pilar García-Guadilla, "Caracas: De La Colonia al Socialismo Del Siglo XXI. Espacio, Clase Social y Movimientos Ciudadanos," in *Caracas, de La Metrópoli Súbita a La Meca Roja*, ed. Arturo Almandoz (OLACCHI, 2012), 155.

[170] Corrales refers to this special brand of kleptocracy as "function fusion". The military controls ports, the oil industry, gold mining, and drug trafficking, as well as being the stakeholders in numerous enterprises. See Javier Corrales, "Authoritarian Survival: Why Maduro Hasn't Fallen," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 39–53, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0044.

[171] Edgardo Lander and Franck Gaudichaud, "El proceso bolivariano y las tensiones de un proyecto alternativo. Conversación con el politólogo Edgardo Lander," February 2, 2009, https://www.tni.org/es/art%C3%ADculo/el-proceso-bolivariano-y-las-tensiones-de-un-proyecto-alternativo.

[172] Lizarralde, *Venezuela's Collapse*, 227.

the *Boli-bourgeoisie* has been described as the expression of a new era, aligning with the period of economic and ideological liberalization that followed the great economic contraction of 2013-2019; it "accompanies the lifting of import tariffs, de facto dollarization, Special Economic Zones, strategic alliances, and the elimination of exchange and price controls."[173] Its visual codes span public works, fashion, art, cars, and architecture, and are embraced with the same zeal by the regime as by the elite that has thrived close to political power. It is excessive, cheap, colorful, and patriotic. Notably, because it is the expression of the regime's "two-tier system" of control and profit, it operates on two (contradictory) registers simultaneously: the coercive and the celebratory, the terrifying and the spectacular; as a "logic of war" and a "permanent state of exception"[174] on one hand, and as an invitation for collective achievement and reconciliation on the other. These two registers of the spatialization of political discourse have only been studied separately. While a detailed examination of their unification is beyond the scope of this investigation, their simultaneous occurrence in public space is helpful in advancing the argument for the territorial affirmation of new elites, the "contaminated" interactions that flourish amid collapse, and the tensions between notions of "residue" and "resource".

Unlike the "residual", the lingering stuff of disappearing life-worlds informed by the traumas of departure, constantly accumulation but kept out of sight, the notion of "resource" is deeply ingrained in the collective imaginary; it constitutes one of the foundational myths of Venezuela as a modern nation where riches flow from the ground, and where the function of the state is to distribute this wealth. Rather than departing from this model, Chávez's political project deepened oil dependency at the expense of previous efforts in economic diversification.[175] Amid declining oil revenues and international sanctions, the current regime has not departed from the rentier paradigm; on the contrary, it has extended it to other realms, resulting in what political scientist Antulio Rosales refers to as "radical rentierism", the aggressive expansion of extractive practices to economic domains like gold and cryptocurrency mining as sources of rent.[176] This extractive appetite is also variedly manifested in public space. Relevantly, the surplus of residential properties makes them a cheaply available resource through which ruling elites profit economically or assert their presence. As will be shown, the (opaque) dynamics that underpin the acquisition or transformation of these properties intersect with caretaking practices in various ways, highlighting the tension between residue and resource and expanding the visual imaginaries associated with collapse.

The interest in the domestic spaces of Caracas' middle-class migrants and the aspirational territory of the city's modern *urbanizaciones* demands clarification of the research scope, specifically regarding the exclusion of self-built settlements from the study, where more than half of the city's population resides. This exclusion responds

[173] Sifrizuela, "El bodegónico temprano: luces, grama artificial y muñecas de Pdvsa," April 11, 2023, https://elestimulo.com/ub/opinion/2023-04-11/el-bodegonico-temprano-bodegonzuela-sifrizuela/.

[174] Ávila, "The State of Exception as Daily Life: Political Remilitarization and Its Impact on Citizen Security in Venezuela," 38.

[175] In the prologue to the second edition of Fernando Coronil's "The Magical State", sociologist Edgardo Lander suggest that this was, in practice, the only revolutionary trait of Chavismo. Edgardo Lander, "El Estado mágico sigue ahí," *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 274 (2018): 42.

[176] Antulio Rosales, "Radical Rentierism: Gold Mining, Cryptocurrency and Commodity Collateralization in Venezuela," *Review of International Political Economy* 26, no. 6 (2019): 1311–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1625422.

to both practical and conceptual considerations. On a practical level, access to working-class *barrios* often requires the company and mediation of individuals or organizations living or working there. During an initial research stage, I examined the local effect of emigration across a wide range of cases, including *barrios*. I found that in these spaces, it was not easy to recognize some of the patterns that were immediately apparent in middle-class areas. The fate of migrants' homes was tied to irregular migratory trajectories, to unclear forms of acquisition, shared living, and vague ownership, as well as to power relations that varied from one location to another. For instance, the presence of government-backed *Consejos Comunales* (Communal Councils), religious organizations, or NGOs in different areas determined who had access to and how domestic spaces were used after emigration.

In November 2022, during a site visit to Caucagüita, a working-class neighborhood located on the eastern fringes of Caracas, it became evident that the way in which residents of state-built (but privately owned) buildings came together to look after migrants' apartments had more in common with distant middle-class *urbanizaciones* than with the *barrios* that sprawled around these structures. Moreover, this community perceived itself and set itself apart from the inhabitants of the surrounding informal settlements in various ways, from educational levels to a long history of shared living. Relevantly, legal ownership of homes played a crucial role in this differentiation. This insight brought into focus how the possession of a title deed made a home a legally recognized *property*. This legal framework provided protection and created a vested interest that extended beyond the physical boundaries of homes, leading to the collective efforts to protect them. Ultimately, what was narrowed by this early distinction was not only an urban territory or a social group, but also the scope of caretaking itself, its objects of care, and the outcomes of its actions. This is not to say that *barrios* are not a legitimate aspirational territory or that the ways in which migrants' domestic spaces are maintained are not worth studying in their own right, but rather that their study exceeded the practical or conceptual scope of this investigation, leaving it open to further inquiry.

Method of inquiry

Doing fieldwork in Caracas

In Caracas, every opportunity to explain my research was met with familiarity. Everyone had a friend, a sibling, or a parent who had emigrated, leaving behind houses, apartments, plants, relatives, or personal libraries. Emigration was the stuff of stories of friends-turned tenants, of apartment buildings were elderly residents formed groups of mutual aid, of neighbors who broke through a wall to claim a room in a vacant apartment, and of birds that entered through an open window to nest inside; it provided input for anecdotes of personal archives lost in flooded basements or antique books rescued from shelves and placed in glass casings; for narrations of pensioners who survived by liquidating their possessions and of secondhand sellers who carried migrants through painful closures, of houses illegally converted into exclusive shopping destinations, and of plants left in the care of friends. The fieldwork only multiplied these stories, which straddled between personal tragedy

and economic profit, between loss and hope. However, gaining access to these spaces and to those who dwelled in them, cared for them, or sold their contents was not straightforward or frictionless. It required referrals, introductions, preliminary interviews, following social media accounts, or receiving secret codes that were then recited back to security guards. If the caretaker presided over a world that avoided public exposure, the fieldwork demanded developing a method for accessing it.

At the same time, research stays were informed by the same uncertainties and complications that shape daily life in Caracas, complicating attempts to schedule and plan. Appointments were often cancelled or postponed at the last minute, and conversely, opportunities arose without prior notice. For instance, an interview with a book collector turned into an impromptu visit to a nearby house whose owner had recently died, leaving behind a vast personal library in a space inhabited by a lone caretaker; an interviewee's delay allowed visiting a nearby house that had been transformed into a clandestine shopping venue, confirming the potential in pursuing this line of inquiry; stopping along the sidewalk to snap a photo of a house on sale caught the attention of an elderly resident living across the street, who later offered to act as a liaison with nearby caretakers, and so on.

In the face of these circumstances, the fieldwork demanded more than flexibility—that capacity for constant adjustment and improvisation that shapes everyday life in Caracas—it required a *disposition* towards the unexpected that routinely maximized the opportunities for coming into contact with migrants' left-behind homes and those who cared for them by following uncertain leads, by repetitively visiting the same sites, and by intentionally eliminating the distinction between formal fieldwork activities and other moments, along the lines of what has been called "accidental" field research; that is, paying "systematic attention" to chance encounters and unplanned events.[177] As anthropologist Lee Ann Fujii suggested, a sensibility to the accidental "can reveal patterns, logics, and practices that other, more procedure-driven methods cannot",[178] expanding not only the way observational data becomes a "source of insight"[179] but also how those insights reveal the limitations of conventional procedures. Fujii's observation echoes calls to develop methods of inquiry that consider the elusiveness, vagueness, and essentially "messy" nature of certain realities, as well as the need for immersion and slowness to observe the mundane and quotidian.[180] In time, the fieldwork method also afforded a different approach to journals, drawings, and other "raw material of observation",[181] which could be reassembled in ways that mirrored the messiness of lived experience. In brief, rather than treating the uncertainties and difficulties of the context as an unavoidable setback, maximizing contact with the object of study incorporated these conditions into the fieldwork's methodological setup.

[177] Lee Ann Fujii, "Five Stories of Accidental Ethnography: Turning Unplanned Moments in the Field into Data," *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 4 (2014): 526, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114548945.

[178] Ibid., 527.

[179] Ibid., 536.

[180] Albena Yaneva, "The Method of Architectural Anthropology: Six Suggestions," in *Architectural Anthropology: Exploring Lived Space*, ed. Marie Stender et al. (Routledge, 2021).

[181] Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This. Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), xi.

Fieldwork method: between fragmentation and accumulation

The fieldwork method, developed during three research stays in 2022, 2023, and 2024,[182] established a routine that negotiated the dual processes of fragmentation and accumulation of collected material. As a daily practice, it demanded the systematic, repetitive engagement with the object of study, emphasizing the possibility of going back and over again, revisiting spaces and those who cared for them. Repetition turned the fieldwork into a form of friction, a productive brushing-against-reality that eroded the layers of protection surrounding material residues and caretaking practices, opening doors into private worlds and granting access to personal stories.[183] Repetition was a way of imposing slowness and graduality to processes of observation and discovery.[184] At the same time, as a method attuned to the unpredictable and the accidental, this routine turned the day-to-day of field research into a series of encounters that stood out like discrete, spatially contained, and temporally delimited experiences. These encounters varied in duration and in their relation to each other; they could be recurrent, concatenated with or contained within other encounters, taking place over several visits to the same site or extending from one field trip to the next. Individually, these encounters constituted *snapshots* of a moment in time and of transitory material configurations; as they accrued, they became susceptible to being assembled into larger stories.

This fieldwork method was instrumental in advancing the dissertation's argument and structure in various ways. First, it exposed the vastness and diversity of the material world left behind by departure, the various value systems it was inscribed in, and the personal stories organized around it. Second, repetitive encounters made evident that the sheer quantity of material residues surpassed any possibility of individual documentation. In the face of this realization, the fieldwork could only aspire to show fragments of a vast inventory. Third, systematic engagement revealed that these material residues were not static but constantly transforming, embedded in trajectories independent of those of their migrant owners, resisting attempts to place them in immutable categories. Finally, the field method made evident how this material world was not only concealed but also absent from the collective imaginary, constituting a missing link in contemporary theorizations of the city. During fieldwork, the dichotomy between the domestic world of caretaking and the city's public, visible features resulted in nothing short of an experiential schism (a cognitive dissonance the dissertation seeks to reconcile).

Documenting caretaking

During fieldwork, a significant amount of time was spent with caretakers, *following* them as they carried out daily routines. To "follow" means to accompany, but also to trace and to pursue, to account for the specific procedures and the conditions under which the action unfolded, as well as its tangible, material manifestations. As an

[182] Specifically, a period of three weeks in November 2022, eight weeks between July and August 2023, and five weeks between August and September 2024.
[183] Anthropologist Anna Tsing employs the notion of friction to describe the capacity of actors to work collaboratively across difference, an essential feature of capitalism. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005; Princeton University Press, 2024).
[184] Yaneva, "The Method of Architectural Anthropology," 20.

ongoing, iterative action, “following” placed the emphasis on caretaking as a process that actively shaped the material world.[185]

Systematically documenting these encounters required close attention to the techniques and tools used. Regarding techniques, semi-structured interviews were the primary method for collecting information from caretakers and other research participants. In the case of the former, multiple interviews were often conducted during one or more field trips. Conversations proceeded along predefined themes with the possibility of deviating or exploring other topics that surfaced during the exchange. The majority of these encounters took place in migrants’ homes and were woven into caretakers’ routines. Other research participants included architects, urban planners, academics, real estate agents, journalists, business owners, municipal authorities, and NGO staff, whose knowledge was relevant to situating caretaking within the broader professional, institutional, social, and economic conditions of the country.

Time spent with caretakers was also dedicated to visual documentation, constantly shifting the attention between individuals’ actions and the spaces and things they acted upon. Photography was the main tool for this, and much attention went into its systematic use. Photographs were often taken during interviews, thus working in combination with written records. Photographs of domestic spaces, furniture, and objects were, whenever possible, taken frontally and at the same level as the objective, aiming for a uniformity of representation across multiple scales and environmental conditions. Detailed drawings or architectural surveys became secondary during these encounters, if nothing else, because of the time required to produce them on site, as events often unfolded in ways that hindered the prolonged attention these often demand. Instead, rapid sketches and notes were taken during or immediately after visits and interviews. In addition, a field diary was updated daily, often including drawings and reflections that were not possible during visits. Beyond these records, the fieldwork’s attention to unplanned moments produced a proliferation of physical and digital entries that included receipts, clippings, WhatsApp messages, voice notes, and social media advertisements, which informed the collection and later interpretation of information.

Driving, walking

The fieldwork’s attention to unplanned moments, fragmentation, and repetitive encounters also qualified the moments between these experiences, so that driving and walking through the city ceased to be collateral activities, oriented towards reaching a destination expediently. Instead, they claimed their own protagonism and were responsible for exposing the experiential schism between migrants’ domestic interiors—remnants of disappearing life-worlds, preserved or transformed away from public view—and the city’s outward, visible and public dimension—an urban environment in flux and generally oblivious to events taking place inside apartments and behind walls.

As fieldwork methods, driving and walking draw on scholarship and creative practices for which circulation disrupts conventions of use or habits of perception. In

[185] Ibid., 16-17

Walking Through Ruins, Tim Edensor contrasts the erratic, improvised walking that abandoned industrial sites make possible with the efficient and regulated movement of the modern city, reflecting on how arbitrary path-making[186] engages curiosity, heightens sensorial awareness, and disrupts linear narratives. In a different way, Robert Smithson's *Monuments Of Passaic* can be read as an exercise in voluntary estrangement. A key moment in the text is the artist's decision to exit the bus and walk in the midst of a car-oriented, industrial landscape. This initiatory act creates a perceptual "gap", a "point of entry" that allows a contrarian reading of an environment "intended to be perceived at a certain speed"[187] and distance. For Smithson, occupying this "gap" is crucial for the exercise that follows, in which ordinary and familiar elements are presented anew through an interplay of photography and text.[188]

Driving through Caracas (as well as stopping, descending from the car, and walking) extended the practice of retracing and repeating, of going back and over again, to the public realm. They imposed a necessary slowness to an otherwise expedient transit and instituted their own productive friction, metaphorically wearing out the city's capacity to separate two spheres of experience: concealment and exposure, the invisibility of caretaking and the visibility of urban transformation, fostering a critical engagement with Caracas as a city planned around the car and designed to be experienced from a moving vehicle.

Structure of the dissertation: episodes and interludes

In his reflections on fieldwork drawings and notes, anthropologist Michael Taussig argues for the "recursive" nature of the field journal, a record that can be "read and reread in different ways, finding unexpected meanings and pairings, as well as blind alleys and dead ends."[189] For the author, the field journal is a device for preserving rather than eliminating chance, whose capacity to recombine and juxtapose the chronological order of events speaks to the field as a construct, as an "interzone consisting of fieldworker and field creating therein a collage or intertext."[190]

Successive research stays in Caracas produced their own form of accumulation, a collection of caretakers' accounts, interviews, photographs, notes and diary entries, sketches, architectural plans, WhatsApp messages, and screenshots. This amalgam of "raw material"—a collection of snapshots of concrete practices and shifting conditions—retained the tension between fragmentation and totality that characterized its gathering, resisting attempts at classification and congealment. The "recursiveness" that Taussig proposed extended beyond the field journal as a strategy for analyzing and interpreting the entirety of fieldwork material and was assumed as an organizing principle for producing the manuscript. For instance, conversations

186 Tim Edensor, "Walking through Ruins," in *Ways of Walking*, ed. Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (Routledge, 2008), 127.
187 Marteen Overdijk, "Monuments and Mental Maps. Narrating the City and Its Periphery," *OASE*, no. 98 (2017): 37.
188 Robert Smithson, "The Monuments of Passaic," *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (1967): 48–51.
189 Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 47.
190 Ibid., 52.

with a caretaker that extended over three years could be stitched together around a recurring idea; conversely, a single interview could be broken up to support an argument dispersed across multiple sections of the text. Similarly, the recurrence of specific themes in photographs, such as libraries in vacant apartments, improvised storage rooms, or objects piled or wrapped in plastic, overrode chronological order or location, lending themselves to new juxtapositions and readings, independently of the caretaking stories they belonged to. The structure of this dissertation aims to make the tension between fragmentation and accumulation explicit, laying bare the difficulty of the fieldwork in finding patterns or placing its object of study into definitive categories. "Recursiveness" has resulted in a dissertation that was as much assembled as it was written.

How to read this dissertation

The dissertation is organized as a sequence of *caretaking stories*. These stories are the result of continued, methodical engagement with various caretakers, *assembled* in a way that a fragmentary collection of encounters accumulated over time can coalesce into concrete, coherent narratives.

The structuring element of these stories is the *episode*. Episodes are, like the events they describe and interpret, snapshots of a moment in time, individual narrations that construct a fragmentary image of caretaking rather than a linear story. Episodes function on two levels at once: as structuring devices that allow each caretaking story to integrate multiple fragments of experience into a larger entity, and as narrative resources that permit each fragment to retain the specificity and texture of the fieldwork. Episodes develop a form of *engaged description*, an obsessive, fastidious attention to the details and minutiae of material residues and the daily routines of caretakers made possible through immersion and situatedness.[191] This allows the reader to engage with the material in a way that mirrors the lived experience of the fieldwork and turns the narration into an act of documentation that inscribes the concrete, rich, and vast material world of departure into a distinct realm, extending its life beyond its original physical constitution.

Episodes follow caretakers as they clean floors, water plants, fix locks, or feed pets; but also as they collect books from vacant homes, dismantle apartments, reprogram houses, negotiate bribes with municipal authorities, sell domestic objects, or receive plants from departing friends, making explicit the dual focus on human action and material outcome. This methodological duality—the constant shift of attention between what caretakers were doing and what their work produced—permeates the narrative, which oscillates between personal stories and spatial conditions, aiming to create a tension that reflects the instability under which caretaking operates and the tentative outcome of its action. In describing these situations, the narration assumes a first-person voice, albeit one in which the "I" is not a protagonist but a witness who recedes unobtrusively into the background, allowing others—individuals and spaces—to take the stage.[192]

[191] Yaneva, "The Method of Architectural Anthropology," 27.

[192] For the use of this narrative voice in literature, see Mark Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald," *October* 106, no. Automn (2003): 102–21, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1162/016228703322791043.

Each caretaking story begins with an introduction that contextualizes the action and provides historical, economic, urban, or personal information. The narration then moves on to the episodes proper, recounting routines, spatial conditions, or material changes observed during fieldwork. Episodes begin as purely descriptive exercises. They rely on photography to induce a process of narrative reconstruction that soon becomes autonomous, extending beyond the information provided by images to include observations, interview excerpts, and reflections. In the interest of this autonomy, and to avoid undermining the evocative potential of the narration, individual photographs are removed from the text and instead concentrated in a separate section, where their accumulation invites new readings and associations.

Episodes bridge across the descriptive, the interpretative, and the speculative, emphasizing the potential of recursiveness to produce something new from selection and recombination: a mosaic-image of caretaking and collapse. To this end, lived fieldwork experiences are interpreted through a variety of analytical lenses that aim to expand the conceptual repertoire of collapse as an everyday, multi-faceted, intimate event charged with (architectural) possibilities.

The final selection of stories and episodes is inevitably partial and contingent on the fieldwork. It reflects the mix of intention and chance that informed the gathering of information, both in the choice of caretakers and in their objects of care—apartments, houses, domestic objects, books, and plants. The criteria that informed the final selection of caretaking stories considered not so much a variety of objects of care but rather how human action was able to preserve them, insert them in various value systems, networks of use or exchange, or processes of transformation, each instance articulated with webs of collaboration and producing distinct material outcomes. For example, houses and apartments make repetitive appearances in the text as spaces to be cleaned, rented, dismantled, reprogrammed, or demolished, while their contents are jealously protected or liquidated as secondhand commodities. This recurrence aims to highlight the range of caretaking, specifically its transformative capacity when dealing with material residues.

The first story centers on Carlos Ancheta, who manages a number of apartments in a small urban radius, exploring the blurred boundaries between use and maintenance, the infrastructural role of caretaking, and the concept of "reversibility" as a spatial strategy that upholds the possibility of return. From there, the narration moves on to the realm of the single-family house or *quinta.* First, it centers on the collective efforts of neighbors to disguise vacancy and ponders what this means for our understanding of departure and mourning. A second story on *quintas* examines the conversion of these domestic settings into commercial spaces. This illegal operation exposes the *implication* of spatial practices in institutional corruption and reflects on the role of architecture in creating emergent spheres of action amid collapse. Then, the focus shifts to examining caretaking at the moment of closure, a threshold state in which migrants' decision to sell their local patrimony opens left-behind objects and spaces to new meanings and possibilities of use. Expanding on the theme of left-behind belongings, the story of "The Collector" focuses on books, an object category that reveals the tensions between fragility and endurance. We follow Ignacio Alvarado as he salvages books from personal libraries and preserves them in his Museum, away from both the state and the general public.

Lastly, the narration moves on to *Quinta Sofía*, a large house occupied by various caretakers whose actions insert their domestic space into competing trajectories of preservation and destruction, exposing the contradictions of caretaking and its capacity to transform material residues into new spatial conditions.

In their sequence, these stories intentionally avoid a resolution. While their fragmentary nature and the messiness of the fieldwork they mirror open them to more than one arrangement, their order in the dissertation is not arbitrary. If there is a narrative arc than runs through these various stories, it is one in which material residues roughly trace different stages of their owners' migratory trajectories, from holding on to left-behind things through the release of the burden of ownership after a moment of closure. Along the way, these residues follow their own paths, as they are maintained, used, transformed, or sold locally. These actions expand the range of caretaking and gradually complicate our perception of the caretaker. This complication results, first, from the tension that underlies acting on behalf of others and meeting individual needs, and second, from the "contaminations" that collapse imposes. These considerations inform the theorization of care in the conclusion.

As with any collection, the criteria considered for compiling it also illuminate what it excludes. In this study, the list of exclusions entails many objects of care, from artwork by twentieth century Venezuelan artists whose recirculation has created a niche economy that intersects with global art markets, to cars and electrical appliances sought after for their spare parts, to pets which are behind a surge in animal shelters and rescue groups,[193] to children and the elderly whose abandonment exposes the crudest and most painful aspects of Venezuela's breakdown. As outlined at the outset of this introduction, the domestic realm contains but a fraction of the material fallout of collapse. Nevertheless, this dissertation begins with the assumption that it is possible to tell a big story through small actions and mundane details, exposing the seams and fault lines of systems by illuminating how daily practices intersect and interact with them.

Interwoven with episodes and as a counterpoint to stories that take place behind the closed doors of apartments and houses is a series of *interludes* that occur outside, while driving or walking through streets and other public spaces, or allegorically, by failing to gain access to private spaces when pursuing unsuccessful leads. Conceptually, interludes aim to reconcile the experiential schism between the domestic world of departure and the city's visible, rapid transformations. Through the interplay of episodes and interludes, the coexistence and transactions between these two realms of experience are revealed, albeit without resolution. This decision is essential to advancing the argument that collapse not only does not result in an urban landscape of ruin and abandonment, but also that the material residues of departure are a resource whose protection, acquisition, or transformation can expand our understanding of societal collapse as an ongoing, protracted unraveling, while implicating caretakers in ways that ultimately allow reframing care practices.

Halfway through the text, the alternation between episodes and interludes is interrupted by a "photo album" that concentrates (part of) the fieldwork's visual

[193] According to animal rights groups, abandonment of pets has increased steadily in the last decade as a consequence of emigration. See "Abandono animal sigue en aumento por migración y falta de políticas públicas," Crónica Uno, September 21, 2024, https://storage.googleapis.com/qurium/cronica.uno/migracion-forzada-y-falta-de-politicas-publicas-inciden-en-aumento-del-abandono-animal-en-caracas.html.

material. This section is intended to stand on its own, vindicating the possibility of photography to construct its own context for memory and experience rather than to illustrate an argument.[194] This section can be seen as a refusal to subordinate the visual to the written, allowing it to function autonomously both as record and as material open to recombination and speculation.

Interludes introduce the thesis, beginning with my arrival in Caracas. Thereon, they describe, interpret, and speculate about urban conditions encountered while driving and walking, reasserting the centrality of these activities within the fieldwork. They are interspersed with caretaking stories and episodes, disrupting the interiority of the action and—more subtly—its narrative tone, while relying on a direct relationship between photography and text. Their differentiation is also emphasized visually in the typesetting.[195] The conceptual and visual separation between episodes and interludes is overcome at the end of the dissertation through the "expulsion" of caretakers from the house they live in, a violent takeover that exposes actors and dynamics previously beyond reach. The forceful and abrupt closure imposed by this event is the opportunity for architectural speculation to take over the narration, turning the notion of collapse as a protracted meanwhile into a condition for spatial production, holding matter in a permanent state of unfinishedness and accounting for caretaking's potential to occupy an ethically ambiguous ground, reasserting the dissertation's function as an "exercise" that turns endings into beginnings.

[194] John Berger, *About Looking*, 2nd ed. (Bloomsbury, 2009), 65.

[195] As a narrative resource, interludes are used by authors whose work was relevant throughout this study. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015); See also John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Routledge, 2004).

Interlude: Arrival

November 8, 2022. Upon exiting the airplane, all passengers must undergo COVID-19 screening. A line forms in a long, white corridor, decorated with tropical plastic plants and yellow, blue, and red stripes stretched along the back wall. The corridor faces the glaring tarmac and the ocean beyond it. There is no air conditioning, and people are standing close together, sweating. A woman wearing a white t-shirt with the word "Interpol" written on the front paces up and down the corridor, alternatively gazing at her cellphone and looking up at the (masked) passengers lined against the wall.

At the end of the line, everyone must present a QR code with the logo of a newly-created clinical laboratory[196] and pay for a PCR test. Sixty dollars, cash only. Then, passengers walk through a purification portal, a standard metal detector modified to ooze an aromatic steam. After decontamination, we are individually escorted to improvised cubicles separated by plastic banners decorated with drawings of bacteria, test tubes, and stock images of smiling people. Staff dressed in full surgical gear—even their shoes and heads are covered—swab nostrils with practiced swiftness and deposit samples into unidentified plastic tubes. A few days later, everyone receives an email with a negative test result and a receipt.

The makeshift testing area leads to the immigration checkpoint, where airport police direct travelers to an available booth. To comply with health protocols, open booths have been retrofitted with Plexiglas. By 2024, transparent plastic will be replaced with black-tinted glass, eliminating the possibility of visual contact with the police on the other side. Instead of face-to-face communication, travelers will be required to look into a camera and hand their documents through a thin slot.

After officially entering the country, passengers proceed to the baggage claim area, an oversized hall under a massive concrete structure that stands as a relic to a time when more than one flight arrived in the country simultaneously.[197] Bags emerge—always—from

[196] A journalistic investigation into 'Casalab' revealed the fraud scheme behind a company explicitly created for carrying out COVID tests at the airport. See: Armando Altuve et al., "Casalab: la extraña empresa creada solo para hacer pruebas COVID-19 en Maiquetía," El Pitazo, June 26, 2021, https://elpitazo.net/investigacion/casalab-la-extrana-empresa-creada-solo-para-hacer-pruebas-covid-19-en-maiquetia/.

[197] Between 2013 and 2017, more than 15 international airlines ceased operations in Venezuela, a reduction of 65% of air travel. International sanctions in 2019 further restricted air travel. However, new routes and airlines appeared after 2020. See El Nacional, "¿Cuántas aerolíneas internacionales operan actualmente en Venezuela?," EL NACIONAL, January 11, 2024, https://www.elnacional.com/venezuela/cuantas-aerolineas-internacionales-operan-actualmente-en-venezuela/.

carousel number three. Skinny plastic pines decorate the center of the conveyor belt, surrounded by red gift boxes; golden garlands and twinkling lights wrap around the bottom of concrete columns too tall to be covered in their full height. It is early November but Christmas began on the first day of October, enforced by presidential decree and backed by a barrage of (American-style) decorations and themes that hang from light posts and stand in public squares across the country.

Finally, passengers are *released* into an expansive arrival lounge where relatives compete for a front-row spot to greet their loved ones as they exit. *Que florezcan los reencuentros* (Let reencounters flourish) reads a giant banner that hangs above the doorway through which passengers exit. This climactic moment of reunion is set in a space that overlaps fifty years of architectural developments, mirroring the country's political and economic unraveling. The airport's original 1970s brutalist structure of exposed concrete columns, lofty overhangs, and Vierendeel beams—the architecture of choice for a robust and ambitious state—intersects with the 21st-century aluminum-and-glass expansion, a belated implementation of the aesthetics of globalization that upgraded the airport to international standards.[198] Below the sectional embrace of steel and concrete, profuse decoration has been recently added. Geometrical shapes made of elastic fabric float above the crowd, illuminated by yellow, blue, and red LED lights. The theme is the national flag. Next to these floating lycra sculptures, vertical banners display the faces of Olympic athletes and independence heroes. On the floor, pinewood lattice screens with "Venezuela" in stainless-steel lettering serve as a backdrop for family photos. Some meters away, in a quieter area, a timeline of the airport's history takes over an entire wall, with historical developments organized against—once more—the three colors of the flag. A yellow period represents the airport's beginnings; in blue, the glory days of growth when the Concorde connecting Caracas and Paris was like an umbilical cord through which first-world status flowed into the country; in red, the difficult times of the pandemic. In the center of the composition, the face of Simón Bolívar and a bulky silhouette—Hugo Chávez?—reaching to the sky next to Venezuela's independence hero.

The paraphernalia of decoration turns the space into an assortment of installations with no cohesive material or formal language, as these considerations are subordinated to their celebratory potential. What is celebrated is arrival itself, transforming the visit (or return) to the homeland into an act of heroism through the conflation of tourism and nationalism, an ostentatious welcome (back) at a time of massive emigration.

[198] The airport's international terminal and landing strip were designed by a team led by Felipe Montemayor and Luis Sully and built between 1974 and 1978 at the site of the old airport. The renovation project was undertaken between 2000 and 2007 under the heading *Proyecto Maiquetía 2000*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simón_Bolívar_International_Airport_(Venezuela)

However, departure has a place at the airport as well: one level below, in a large hallway under dim fluorescent lights, where Carlos Cruz Diez's monumental piece *Ambientación de Color Aditivo*[199] is the setting of emotional farewells in front of airport security.[200] The 270-meter-long mosaic floor (in the colors of the national flag) has become a symbol of departure in the collective imaginary, profusely portrayed on social media and exploited for political purposes.[201] For those leaving the country, taking a photo of the dilapidated mosaic floor—and in some cases, removing the mosaic tiles themselves—has become part of the ritual of departure and a metaphor of the dispersal of Venezuelan identity around the planet.[202]

Exiting the airport, one briefly enters the dense, humid littoral atmosphere before boarding a prearranged car and driving up to the city (standard fare, $40; bulletproof van, $150). As the car climbs the 900 meters from sea level to the city, the tunnels cutting through the mountains have been decorated with patriotic imagery and their concrete vaults illuminated by a sequence of yellow, blue, and red LED lights, offering another juxtaposition of modern infrastructure, patriotic imagery, and dilapidation.[203] Along the highway, broken-down cars line the side of the road. The driver points them out, blaming the wreckage on the poor quality of imported gasoline.[204] However, for the tow trucks that drive up and down the freeway towing them home, business is booming. On the radio, a self-help guru gives tips for personal improvement, followed by a beauty segment and loops of Venezuelan folk music, a "good vibes only"[205] soundtrack to the view out the window.

[199] Translated as Additive Color Setting (or Atmosphere) this monumental work stretches over more than 2.600 m2 of floors and walls of the main hall of the airport. "Additive Color" was one of Cruz Diez's research lines exploring the interaction of color and movement.

[200] Between the 1950s and the 1990s, geometric abstraction, and more specifically kinetic art, was the predominant visual aesthetic of modernity in Venezuela. See Sean Nesselrode Moncada, *Refined Material: Petroculture and Modernity in Venezuela* (University of California Press, 2023).

[201] For example, a political rally organized by María Corina Machado's party on July 14, 2024, was called *Volver a Casa* and featured this mosaic pattern as a background on the invitation.

[202] Natalia Sassu Suarez Ferri, "'Since They Can't Put Venezuela in Their Suitcase, They Take Mosaic Tiles from the Maiquetía Airport': Carlos Cruz-Diez's Kineticism in the Time of Migration," *Third Text* 37, nos. 5–6 (2023): 585, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2023.2296207.

[203] The Caracas-La Guaira highway was inaugurated in 1953, the crown jewel of Marcos Pérez Jiménez national road network program. It connected the capital to its port and reduced an hours long journey to a twenty-minute trip. To this day, it is appreciated as an engineering feat. See Rafael Arráiz Lucca, *Caracas, Historia de Una Ciudad (1567 a Nuestros Días)* (Editorial Arte, 2023), 267.

[204] The collapse of oil industry has affected the country's refineries, which produce gasoline of less quality and in less quantity. See Florantonia Singer, "La mala calidad de la gasolina en Venezuela deja un reguero de carros incendiados," El País, May 2, 2023, https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-05-02/la-mala-calidad-de-la-gasolina-en-venezuela-deja-un-reguero-de-carros-incendiados.html.

[205] Sifrizuela, "El bodegónico temprano."

In her examination of modernism's entanglement with authoritarian politics in Venezuela, scholar Lisa Blackmore argues that notions of "spectacular" and "spectacle" were intrinsic to the state's oil-backed project of national development. Building upon Fernando Coronil's central argument in *The Magical State* that oil turned the Venezuelan state into a sorcerer of sorts, a manufacturer of "dazzling development projects engendering collective fantasies of progress,"[206] Blackmore delves into the specific ways in which novel visual and aesthetic codes were deployed through carefully orchestrated acts of government that reinforced the link between modernism and progress. As she suggests, public works were not merely built or incorporated into everyday life to shorten car journeys or facilitate international travel but were also strategically inaugurated and advertised in mass media to underpin imaginaries of development and collective improvement, in ways that actively involved citizens. Considering a longer historical perspective, Blackmore concludes that this association is not limited to the 1950s, when modern architecture and abstract art made their grandiose appearance under an authoritarian regime. Instead, she argues that "the correlation of built space and progress still holds sway over political discourses in Venezuela",[207] often overshadowing the circumstances under which public works are produced. For Blackmore, the "spectacular" is a category relevant to "unearth other inaugural ruptures marshaled to rewrite history, to analyze other grand designs devised to transform space and society, and to study how promises of progress [circulate] in public realms."[208] Blackmore's association between progress and construction is echoed in the colloquial expression *dejar obra*, by which Venezuelan society tends to evaluate government performance by the public works it leaves behind.[209] It also resonates with philosopher Sandra Pinardi's critical view of Venezuelan modernity, which she describes as an obsession with novelty for its own sake, as evidenced in state projects that embody "discourses of constant beginning, without elaboration or execution, which operate as pure inaugural pretension … undermining existence by inscribing and establishing constant annulments and ruptures."[210] Writing about Caracas, Pinardi suggests that this obsession with novelty created a city that is "seized by its imagination and its symbols",[211] besieged by its own representations of modernity, which endure in the washed-out, dilapidated remains of public infrastructure projects.

206 Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

207 Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity*, 213.

208 Ibid., 214.

209 María Elena González Deluca, *Venezuela, La Construcción de Un País…una Historia Que Continúa* (Cámara Venezolana de la Construcción, 2013), 15.

210 Sandra Pinardi, "Residuos y cegueras: miradas desde una Caracas sitiada," *Voz y Escritura. Revista de Estudios Literarios*, no. 20 (enero-diciembre 2012): 62.

211 Pinardi, "Residuos y cegueras: miradas desde una Caracas sitiada," 62.

What "promise of progress", what materialization of policy, or what notion of collective improvement underlines the display of floating lycra stars and LED lights, whose visual impact is inversely proportional to their material constitution? How do we interpret the literal and symbolic interaction of these features with the existing steel and concrete structures built twenty or fifty years ago? What can we learn about the country's historical moment from this spatial juxtaposition?

Historically, the "spectacular" has been affiliated with moments of transformative break and inauguration; it is the phase that succeeds the razing of history and loudly announces the arrival of the new, however provisional the "new" might turn out to be. The provisional character of progress that Cabrujas signaled—its meanwhileness—endures in the fascination with novelty and spectacle. In the midst of a bankruptcy that has deprived the state of the means to embody its historical role as architect of the new, the "spectacular" has acquired a new meaning. However, it cannot be reduced to the language of cover-up, disguising failure with bright lights and props. In a historical moment defined as a productive threshold between disappearances and emergences, situated on the frontier between what used to be and what has not yet congealed, the current iteration of the spectacular is not concerned with "rupture" but rather with recombination; it has replaced "inauguration" with cooptation, and the tabula rasa with a fresh layer of paint. At the airport, in the tunnels along the freeway, and in the city that begins beyond them, its products hang from preexisting structures as its institutions appropriate residual frameworks. The spectacular is the (architectural) "contact language"[212] of this space of mediation; it is improvised and fluid, borrowing signs from across space and time to allow a common basis for communication in the uneven space co-inhabited and co-produced by old and new orders.[213] What it communicates is the disposition of a new order to assert its presence *by any means*. Operating under the dual logic of coercion and celebration, the spectacular transforms an otherwise uneventful arrival process into a choreography that alternates between intimidation and awe, folding passengers into a collective body of emotion attuned to the space, (unwilling) participants in a spectacle that oscillates between fear and frivolity. The police surveillance, surgical gear, anonymous control booths, plastic Christmas trees, and floating Lycra stars are all part of a system that operates on two registers at once, as a state of exception and an invitation to reunification.

[212] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2008), 8.
[213] Ibid.

QUE FLOR
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“Not a day has passed”: Caretaking as architectural reversibility

Property ownership and the middle class

Beginning in the 1960s and with varying intensity for the next forty years, the Venezuelan state set up and injected capital into an expansive system of private mortgage banking and construction credit that accelerated Caracas’ urban expansion across vast swathes of previously untouched territory.[214] The architectural corollary of this oil-backed operation was the proliferation and perfecting of a new typology, the apartment tower—the slab had already been claimed by social housing—whose compact layout, ease of construction, and cost per unit fell below established credit limits. The operation was completed with a new legal framework, the *Ley de Propiedad Horizontal* or Condominium Law, which introduced common ownership of (parts of) buildings and inscribed the management of private property into democratic norms. From this point on, the “homes” that progress was brought into[215] were largely new, privately built apartments that turned an expanding middle class into titleholders, instilling a culture of ownership that still prevails in the country. As one real estate agent said, “Venezuelans want their own roof over their heads. … Even if it takes thirty years to pay for it, it is one’s own. Property gives people security and creates a commitment to the country.”[216]

By 2025, more than a decade of sustained emigration had left a vast inventory of vacant properties. According to one expert’s account, in 2022, there were approximately 240.000 apartments in Caracas, distributed across 12.000 buildings.[217] While it is very difficult to determine the precise territorial distribution or percentage of vacant units, there are approximations. In the municipality of Chacao, which has nearly 1.200 residential buildings, the Local Planning Office has conducted informal surveys on residential occupancy. As they explained, “there is no official

[214] For a historical overview of state housing policy, see Alfredo Cilento and Víctor Fossi, “Políticas De Vivienda Y Desarrollo Urbano En Venezuela (1928-1997): Una Cronología Crítica,” *Urbana*, no. 23 (1998): 35–52; for details on mortgage banking creation, see Carlos Acedo Mendoza, *La Vivienda En El Área Metropolitana de Caracas* (Fondo Editorial Común, 1969), 165–78.

[215] Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity* Chapter 7.

[216] Anonymous participant 01, personal communication. July 21, 2023

[217] Hugo Prieto, “José María De Viana: Más Que Privatización, Lo Que Hay Es Una Ausencia Del Estado,” Prodavinci, January 9, 2022, https://prodavinci.com/jose-maria-de-viana-mas-que-privatizacion-lo-que-hay-es-una-ausencia-del-estado/.

census of vacant properties. However, based on interviews with residents and personal experience, we estimate that, in most buildings, half of all apartments are empty."[218] In addition, the remaining populations often consist of elderly residents who struggle to meet their basic needs and cover building maintenance costs. "The middle class is stuck. They have to figure out how to stay where they are. Manage their condominium better, their expenses, *and hold on*",[219] expressed Martín Fernández, an urbanist and real estate consultant. For the elderly and the remainder of the city's middle class—those too old to migrate and those who decided to stay—the decimation of pensions and income have broken the historic correlation between income and status. Under these conditions, property—whether previously acquired, inherited, rented, or cared for—becomes a means for "holding on" to social standing. Collapse has had a devastating and dual effect on the real estate market, as apartments have lost between forty and fifty percent of their value in the last decade due to a surplus of offers[220] while also deteriorating rapidly. In this context, migrants' reluctance to sell at a loss is central to the emergence of caretaking. Yet, caretaking effectiveness also relies on a capacity to articulate itself with other actors in the daily management of collapse.

Within the material world of departure, apartments constitute a category of their own. Not only are they a (devalued) economic asset and a foothold in middle-class status, but their maintenance, protection, and possibilities of use or transformation are embedded in forms of sociality that have evolved around common property ownership, sustained by existing legal frameworks, and reorganized around real or perceived threats to protect these assets and status. As such, migrants' apartments provide a point of entry for examining how caretaking negotiates multiple—and often conflicting—interests of migrants and local residents, navigates economic crisis and infrastructural shortages, and produces new spatial conditions in its effort to preserve patrimonies and the ways of life organized around them.

The documentation of migrants' apartments constituted a distinct and continued fieldwork activity, carrying over from one site to another, from one field trip to the next. This experience was primarily organized around the daily routines of Carlos Ancheta, a photographer-turned-caretaker who managed numerous apartments in a small area of the municipality of Chacao.

Carlos arrived in Caracas in 1991 to study architecture. During his training, he became involved in the world of film and culture. He studied photography and later became the coordinator of CIEF.[221] This phase of managerial and artistic work was brought to an end due to the political situation and the economic crisis of 2017. The moment coincided with the departure of family and friends, marking a new cycle as a caretaker of their apartments, later expanding his client list through his social circle. "My work is based on recommendations. I am a reference here, and people look for

[218] Soraya Alfonzo, personal communication. November 11, 2022. According to the Municipality's registry, there are 1183 residential buildings. The vacancy estimate coincides with numbers provided by other experts and caretakers interviewed for this research.

[219] Martín Fernández, urban planner and real estate consultant. Personal communication, July 7, 2023. Emphasis added.

[220] This is an average for the city of Caracas, with fluctuations based on location. The descent was most significant during 2016-17, with a tendency to stabilize after the pandemic. See Martín Fernández, "Retos Del Mercado Inmobiliario Para El 2021," *Tir Inmobiliarios S.C.*, March 6, 2021, http://tirinmobiliarios.blogspot.com/2021/.

[221] *Centro de Investigación y Estudios Fotográficos* (Center for Research and Photographic Studies) is a private research and education institution.

someone with my profile,"[222] he explained in reference to the management expertise developed over the years in the cultural sector. Caretaking was for Carlos an opportunity for professional reinvention, arising from a mix of luck and necessity, in a moment when the high demand for his skills enabled him to select clients and properties. In November 2022, Carlos managed more than twenty apartments, a full-time job that involved maintenance, administration, and rent. By the summer of 2024, this number had halved, a reduction driven by migrants' decisions to sell or transfer property to relatives for permanent use.

In the following sections, the narration exposes the multiple dimensions of Carlos's caretaking work, observed and documented as he opened, closed, watered, cleaned, supervised, waited, or negotiated in the apartments he managed. Conversations that started in one apartment could be interrupted by a phone call or the urgency of reaching the next destination, where a painter awaited or where Carlos needed to arrive in coordination with water rationing schedules. Likewise, preoccupations revealed during one visit would be picked up again a year later, recurrent yet responsive to changing conditions. As personal routines, fieldwork dynamics, and the broader context shaped our interaction, the themes of Carlos's work and the analytical focus of the research emerged. These themes are examined as both procedures and outcomes, dealing with a state of generalized breakdown that produced distinct spatial expressions. Carlos's story is complemented by ancillary accounts of other caretakers, further expanding some of the analytic themes.

The narration begins in Carlos's own domestic space, which served as his center of operations (and was the origin or arrival point for our meetings), before moving on to other apartments. In turn, the routine of walking from one vacant apartment to another also brought into focus the singular relationship between public space and vacant domestic interiors, and the articulation of individual caretaking with collective efforts to maintain vacancy.

Chacao: rise and decline of a middle class enclave

Chacao is one of five municipalities that make up Caracas' metropolitan area. With a population of 71.500 and an area of 13 km², it is the smallest, wealthiest, and most densely populated of these. Historically, Chacao developed around a mission town outside of the city's colonial center. As the capital's eastward expansion in the twentieth century engulfed this peripheral settlement, surrounding agricultural properties were privately developed into middle and upper-class *urbanizaciones*. Zoning ordinances implemented in the 1950s stipulated land-use and building envelopes, dividing the municipality into a lower part with high-density, mixed-use areas and an upper part of suburban-style residential neighborhoods. Mid-rise residential buildings with street-level commerce dominated the first, while detached quintas populated the second.

Chacao is strategically located within the city and effectively connected to metropolitan thoroughfares and public transport networks. For most of its history, it

[222] Carlos Ancheta. Personal communication. November 18, 2022

was part of a larger municipality and economically dependent on the central state. However, the decentralization laws that have been in effect since 1990 encouraged the formation of new municipalities and fostered their fiscal independence from the central government, allowing them to generate revenue through local taxation. Since its incorporation in 1993, the concentration of businesses and real estate has enabled Chacao to collect rents proportionally higher than those of any other municipality in the city, relative to its population and area. Financial conditions rapidly "articulated with political factors to give a specific form to the urban environment,"[223] aggravating underlying socio-economic segregation, attracting high-profile businesses, diplomatic posts, and, more recently, international aid agencies that have increased their presence in the country due to the humanitarian emergency.

Since the rise to power of Chavismo in 1998, Chacao has remained a bastion of opposition politics and, for a period, a model of efficient urban governance, with more reliable infrastructure and better security than the rest of the city.[224] For example, amid the exacerbated water shortage of recent years, the Municipality has excavated more than thirty wells, connecting them directly to the supply lines of over 500 residential buildings. When publicly inaugurating "Well No. 20" in 2022, the Mayor proudly announced that "Chacao is the only place in Venezuela where the [real estate] cost per square meter has increased."[225] This inaccurate statement reinforces the connection between resource availability and narratives of economic recovery (not to mention how the image of authorities spraying water next to applauding residents is oddly reminiscent of the myth of Venezuela as a country where wealth flows out of the ground). Ultimately, chronic service shortages have triggered a range of responses, from wells to a niche economy of cistern trucks or the installation of secondary storage tanks and diesel power generators inside homes, an infrastructure-for-coping implemented in proportion to economic means.[226]

The apartment of the diaspora

"Welcome to the apartment of the diaspora",[227] says Carlos, leading the way. In the hallway, there are old washing machines, refrigerators, and microwaves waiting to be repaired or returned to other apartments. Books line the shelves and narrow the corridors; personal libraries are collected from numerous apartments, mixed up, or duplicated. Next to them is a gridded shelf, each square niche labeled with an address and occupied by a set of keys. A large wooden armoire, filled with binders and manila folders, contains the archives and personal documents of migrant friends and family.

[223] For a detailed analysis of municipal incorporation and its impact on uneven urban development, see Jeffrey Mitchell, "Political Decentralization: A New Tool for the Segregation of Urban Space? The Case of Chacao in Caracas, Venezuela," 1998, 18.

[224] García-Guadilla, "Caracas: De La Colonia al Socialismo Del Siglo XXI. Espacio, Clase Social y Movimientos Ciudadanos."

[225] Alcaldía de Chacao, "En Chacao se han beneficiado más de 10 mil familias con los pozos profundos," Alcaldía de Chacao, May 17, 2022, https://www.chacao.gob.ve/noticia/9/en-chacao-se-han-beneficiado-mas-de-10-mil-familias-con-los-pozos-profundos.

[226] For a detailed description of the impact of shortages on daily life, see D'Hers Del Pozo, "Tiempos de Crisis, Resistencias e Infrapolítica En La Migración Inmóvil Venezolana," 18–19.

[227] Carlos Ancheta, personal communication. November 14, 2022

Paintings and photographs hang on every wall, constantly rotating as they move in and out of the apartment. Modernist furniture crowds every room; in the expansive living room, lamps are standing on desks and the floor, wrapped in their cables or disassembled; there are two paintings by José Vívenes,[228] two sofas, and two hammocks; four Panton, two tulip, and two Wassily chairs; two lamps suspended over the dining table with two vertical cabinets behind it, its shelves filled with small framed paintings, wooden figurines, candelabra, and Murano vases; like a modernist Noah's Ark that saves objects from devastation, meanwhile creating a congestion that exceeds the possibilities of use by a single person. In a corner of the living room is an Eiermann office desk crowded with broken-down coffee makers; above it hangs a lithograph by Alejandro Otero[229] which Carlos brought from another apartment.

A service bedroom attached to the kitchen—a standard feature of middle-class apartments—has been turned into a room for Carlos's younger sister, who recently arrived in Caracas for work.[230] Behind the kitchen, two cylindrical tanks store fresh water, and a reverse osmosis filter turns it potable—ordinary infrastructures for coping with the city's chronic water shortage and poor quality. Incidentally, this upgrade also allows Carlos to concentrate washing and drying for various apartments in one place. In the master bedroom, there are two armchairs and an LC4 *chaise longue*, buried under a pile of clothes; various black-and-white photographs hang on the walls; a large flat-screen TV stands on a cabinet across the bed. "I didn't have a TV in my room, but because of the excess of television sets I was left with, I ended up installing one. In either case, now I watch more TV,"[231] explains Carlos. Since 2023, a second bedroom has functioned as a family room and has been used by visiting relatives. It also contains a TV. A third bedroom is used as a linen deposit; it stores the clean sheets and towels for the beds and bathrooms of other apartments. On a wall is an architectural drawing of the University City, signed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva.[232]

The apartment belongs to a close friend living in Spain; he is one of several members of a large family of academics and intellectuals. After he left, another family member moved in; he had a bookstore nearby, which became a hub for democratic gatherings during the political protests of 2017. One day, he arrived home to find the door open and his laptop and hard drives missing. Only that. Soon afterward, he went into exile. Carlos moved in later, as his own professional life came to a halt and he started managing apartments. Most of the furniture, books, and artwork here belong to people who have left, friends and acquaintances whose apartments Carlos looks after. These things are here temporarily; they have been removed from other homes to protect them from tenants, are in transit between a vacant apartment and an international shipment that will reunite them with their owners, or are waiting to be sold. As they pass through this space, they are displayed or stored according to Carlos's needs and preferences, rotating as objects enter and exit. "In one apartment,

[228] José Vívenes (1977), Venezuelan painter.

[229] Alejandro Otero (1921-1990), visual artist and a leading figure of geometric abstract art.

[230] The separation of service quarters from other private spaces is a common feature of domestic architecture in Venezuela and Latin America, a spatial interpretation of social hierarchies that date back to colonial times. Dávila, "The Servantful House."

[231] Personal communication. July 25, 2023.

[232] Carlos Raúl Villanueva (1900-1975) is Venezuela's most celebrated architect. Born in London and trained in Paris in the *Beaux Arts* tradition, he arrived in Caracas in 1928 to begin a prolific career. Villanueva is best known for his project of the University City in Caracas, built between the 1940s and 1960s.

the decision was to remove valuable things and leave only posters on the walls. That is *the sense* of this house,"[233] says Carlos, revealing the relation between his own living space and the rest of the apartments he manages, a constellation of domestic spaces connected by provisional arrangements of furniture and artwork. The apartment depends on others for its endurance, informing Carlos's own dwelling in ways that obscure distinctions between use and maintenance. Carlos explains about the things that surround him:

> I have them for safekeeping. That is the term. … I take care of them.
>
> *What does it mean to take care of them?*
>
> To take care of them is to maintain them. I use them, but I also maintain them. If they are made of wood, you have to oil them. If they are fabric, you must wash them every six months and keep them out of the sun. Take care of their physical integrity. With works of art, too. This apartment was full of [friend's name]'s things. Through a friend, he found a way to get them out of the country in a diplomatic valise. I helped with that. Just as those things went out, others came in.
>
> *It seems like these items also demand something of you. How do you use them?*
>
> I use some more than others, move them around, and try to find a place for them. … There are aesthetic and practical considerations. Sometimes, when I have visitors, I choose different places [to sit]. When I have many guests, people take up all the space. I am the oldest of my siblings. They always come; the family gathers here.
>
> …
>
> *Have you had a hard time parting with any of these things?*
>
> No, but I always think about that. One of the works was a poster signed by Joseph Beuys, and I felt like I had God in the living room. But it wasn't mine. It had to go. I have these things; I like them, but I don't have a particular attachment to them. I know they are not mine, and when they have to go, they go.[234]

In our last conversation, in September 2024, the decrease in work is visible in the apartment. The balance between things entering and exiting has shifted towards the latter, decongesting the space. Personal libraries have been donated, and many other things "are waiting to see what people decide to do about them,"[235] Carlos clarifies. The political uncertainty following the recent presidential election has altered migrants' plans to reunite with their things, seemingly accelerating their transit through the apartment and out of the country.

In his analysis of Venezuela's pursuit of modernity during the twentieth century, historian Edgardo Mondolfi suggested that the country's middle class became "an agent called to promote and act as a catalyst for the discourse of modernity."[236]

[233] Personal communication. August 10, 2023. Emphasis added.
[234] Personal communication. July 25, 2023.
[235] Personal communication. September 19, 2024
[236] Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat, "Venezuela y el discurso de la modernidad en el siglo XX," Prodavinci, December 6, 2020, https://prodavinci.com/venezuela-y-el-discurso-de-la-modernidad-en-el-siglo-xx/.

However, the domestic sphere and other emergent middle-class spaces were not sites where the project of modernity was stretched to its limits or where it acquired the monumental scale that characterized public works, but rather where it was normalized, through daily routines of use and consumption of everything from powdered milk to works of art, underpinned by an infrastructure that included supermarkets and public museums. "Traditionally, the middle class invested in art",[237] said Carlos, surrounded by the vestiges of this tradition. Indeed, as modernization extended to every sphere of life, museums became a central pillar in the configuration of Venezuelan civic society, with the state assuming a preeminent role in the formation of new publics and the promotion of art, turning the middle class into a kind of collective patron who keenly acquired artworks.[238]

The apartment of the diaspora is a place of residence and a meeting point for an extended family scattered around the country; a back-of-house space that centralizes housekeeping duties and an office to carry out daily administrative tasks; it is a holding station for things whose trajectories do not align with those of their migrant owners. It turns residual accumulation into the stuff of intimate dwelling, uncoupling the caretaker's own domesticity from individual ownership, subordinating comfort and daily habits to the surplus or availability of other people's belongings. In this uncoupling (which extends to the space itself) the apartment of the diaspora blurs the boundaries between use and maintenance, work and rest: reading on a sofa, turning on a TV, or opening a window are mundane actions that inflect inhabitation with "the obligation to keep something alive; or ... avoid something being lost",[239] reorienting mundane routines towards extending the life of other people's things.

The constant circulation of artwork and designer furniture transforms the apartment into a fluid archive of the tastes and values of a nearly defunct middle class, a testament to the institutions that underpinned its formation. It is not an archive where things move between "history" and "actuality" as two states that contrapose endurance and temporality,[240] but rather a space where human action brings them together. It is a gravitational center, the "mooring" of disparate paths and temporalities. An inventory of the apartment's contents would reveal a scattered constellation of individuals, trajectories, and timelines. Such an inventory would also lay bare Carlos's precarity and ultimate dispossession as the closure of a cycle in which every single object has finally exited.

[237] Personal communication. November 14, 2022

[238] For an overview of the civic role of the museum during this period, see Lorena González, "Mercado Del Arte y Coleccionismo: ¿una Inversión Rentable?," *Debates IESA* XVIII, no. 4 (2013): 35–38.

[239] Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* (Duke University Press, 2019), 5.

[240] Albena Yaneva, *Made by the Office of Metropolitan Architecture: An Ethnography of Design* (010 Publishers, 2009), 67.

Archaeology of modernity

From Carlos's apartment, we walk to the Mayflower building, a modernist landmark and an early example of a typology that would soon spread throughout the city.[241] The building's compact apartments, efficiently laid out along two structural bays—one for social areas and one for private spaces—feature two bedrooms, one bathroom, and separate service quarters. On the first floor is a unit Carlos is in charge of renovating; it belongs to various siblings living abroad and has been occupied by a tenant for many years. Pressed for money to pay for their father's medical expenses, the family decided to shift to a more profitable short-term rental scheme. "It's curious," Carlos pointed out, "people leave for economic reasons, but once abroad, they expect the country to provide them with income."[242] Accomplishing this contradiction entails extensive improvements that will make the property more appealing to a higher rental market. Locks have to be changed, leaks fixed, walls replastered and painted, plumbing upgraded, obsolete furniture replaced, and a reserve water tank installed. Carlos gives instructions to the locksmith and coordinates various tasks with the painter. A large, decrepit armoire stands against the living room wall, its doors unhinged and its veneer peeled, awaiting repair. "This is a family heirloom, and they want to restore it." It will be an expensive undertaking requiring specialized labor. The piece, however, will remain here for tenants to use. Metallic louvers that screen the sun on north-facing windows need repair, but Carlos admires them as evidence of craftsmanship and durability:

> It is a pleasure to reclaim this space. I try to be respectful. I am glad to be in a building by such an important architect. ... The living room flooded because part of it used to be a balcony, and they covered the drain, so I had to go to another apartment to measure its location and uncover it here. It was a work of archaeology of modernity, of undoing the mess [of others].

The apartment's transition from decrepitude to competitiveness involves a series of spatial alterations executed with almost complete autonomy. "There is an agreement that I solve everything," said Carlos of his work. This agreement extends to daily maintenance and repair tasks, which are executed without the need for communication or approval. For example:

> It is a matter of trust because I am in charge of the property and have to be on top of it. I report, 'the washing machine is damaged, we have to paint, buy linens.' The wear and tear of a property is expected. I like to report when problems are solved. If a pipe breaks and floods the apartment, I tell them, "It broke, and it's fixed." I'd rather not anguish them because their anguish passes on to me. I prefer supervising a technician than having the owner write me every three minutes.

[241] The Mayflower building is located in Altamira, Chacao municipality. It was designed by Klaus Heufer and Friedrich Beckhoff, two German architects who arrived in Venezuela in 1951 and had prolific careers, playing a central role in giving spatial form to the domestic aspirations of the middle class.
[242] Personal communication. November 14, 2022. Following excerpts are from the same interview.

Emiliana Romero, a caretaker who managed several high-end properties, expressed:

> My work is very delicate. I personally open and close each home. There are places where people took everything, but in many of them, people left everything. I arrive in the morning, open the door, check for leaks, humidity, and electrical problems. If there is nothing to fix, I leave the cleaning ladies, and if there is something, I call the plumber or the electrician. I have a team that solves problems for me.[243]

These excerpts concentrate multiple dimensions of the caretaker's work. First, they expose the personalized attention surrounding caretaking agreements, which is less a feature of an exclusive service than a result of the sense of responsibility that accompanies unrestricted access to these properties. Second, they reveal caretakers' reliance on the labor of a staff of cleaners, repairers, and installers, among whom daily tasks are distributed. Third, they show a transfer of responsibilities that imbues caretaking with a specific form of agency, inherent to the dependencies resulting from acting on behalf of an absent owner. Yet this transference is not only the result of a need for expediency, but also challenges the perception of caretaking as either a form of selfless or generous dedication to others or a mere economic transaction. As a field of action, the caretaker not only represents the interests of absent property owners but also assumes collapse on their behalf, exposing themselves to exhausting daily experiences.

The consequence of this mode of engagement with vacant spaces is that caretaking routines cannot be outsourced, turning it into an unscalable practice. This limitation has resulted, on the one hand, in the atomization of caretaking into myriad small-scale operations, each intently focused on a few spaces, independently networked, and creating spheres of collaboration isolated from one another. On the other hand, this limitation creates a need for the diversification of income sources. In the case of Ms. Romero, her caretaking business soon pivoted to real estate brokerage and later expanded into interior renovations, as migrant clients settled abroad and decided to sell locally. In this sense, not only is caretaking an alternative occupation, but it is also one that constantly reinvents its own field of action.

Finally, the repertoire of daily strategies that shield from devaluation and bypass mechanisms of state control and financial ineptitude also expedite caretakers' capacity for action, from paying staff to executing repairs. "I get paid using Zelle because my clients are abroad, and thank God there is Zelle because it saves our lives. With the Venezuelan banking system, there is no way," claimed Emiliana.[244] To pay her staff, she transfers American dollars to a third party—a second Zelle transaction—who deposits Venezuelan *Bolívares* in her local bank account after negotiating an exchange rate, or, alternatively, gives Emiliana cash. In this routine procedure (an economic niche in itself), currency flows in and out of various financial systems,

[243] Personal communication. November 14, 2022. Subsequent excerpts are from the same interview.
[244] Zelle is a US-based digital payment service that allows transferring small sums of money expediently between bank accounts.

untaxed.[245] “Everything is quite transparent. The owner gives me one hundred dollars, I pay, and on the other end, I get a receipt for that same amount,”[246] explained Carlos of his handling of maintenance costs. While this “transparency” is underpinned by opaque and elusive transactions that create ample room for fraud, the trust that binds caretaking agreements makes these dealings fall squarely within the boundaries of ethical conduct.

Migrants’ apartments illustrate how the economic incentive behind emigration—where non-migrant populations benefit financially from relatives abroad—can be reversed. In this case, retaining local property redirects money outward, creating a form of *reverse remittance* that takes advantage of local opportunities for migrants’ economic sustenance. Renting apartments requires specific architectural adaptations and technical upgrades to accommodate new uses temporarily, which materially uphold precarious livelihoods abroad while preserving the possibility of migrants’ return.

Making space

The next apartment we visit belongs to a visual artist living in the United States. It is a three-bedroom unit with a separate kitchen and service quarters in a 1980s tower. One of the bedrooms was turned into the artist’s study and partially integrated into the adjacent social areas. Carlos takes photos of a piano standing in the living room and sends them to a potential buyer; he has been asked to sell it. A tenant has recently left, and Carlos waters the plants and changes the linens in preparation for the next occupant. In the meantime, a repairman fixes the washing machine. In this apartment, furniture, plants, decoration, and an extensive library offer traces of permanent dwelling. Carlos explains that all of these things belong to the owner, who uses the apartment when she visits, clarifying that what is visible is a fraction of the contents. A guest bathroom and the service areas behind the kitchen have been turned into storage areas for everything from dinnerware to appliances and artworks. In the service bedroom, Carlos pulls back a makeshift curtain. He uncovers shelves filled with boxes, files, rolled-up artwork, and silverware, valuable personal objects set aside from the rest when the apartment was rented. As he explains:

> In most cases, people left thinking that they would return in the near future. After two or three years abroad, that changed, and when changing the use from “my house” into a rental unit, my recommendation is to try to leave the spaces as plain as possible … People are very protective; they leave their homes set up and one tries to preserve them that way, until the day they switch over [to rent] and you have to make space.[247]

[245] For a description of the daily use of currency exchange mechanisms, see Raúl Gallegos, *Crude Nation: How Oil Rcihes Ruined Venezuela* (Potomac Books, 2016).
[246] Personal communication. July 25, 2023
[247] Personal communication. November 14, 2022

Days later, we visit another apartment to pick up the key from a tenant checking out. It is a compact, three-bedroom unit on the twelfth floor of a 1970s tower, owned by university professors living in Ecuador. Here, a bedroom has been turned into a crowded storage room. A library spans two full walls, its books sharing shelves with documents, board games, family portraits, wooden naïve carvings, and other random objects, haphazardly piled and off-limits. Carlos explains that this is part of the owners' research library. However, another library occupies an entire living room wall, its contents carefully displayed and accessible to temporary guests. "Moving books is a negotiation with owners because they don't want their libraries to be touched; there is no alternative, but they do it reluctantly."[248] The circulation between these two libraries was a coordinated task in which left-behind books were placed into newly created categories: those to be preserved and those susceptible to use or damage, an intimate classification system that assigns the contents of various rooms to different trajectories and routines of use and maintenance.

The majority of the apartments Carlos manages are rented through Airbnb, making them more profitable but also requiring a more engaged management. Most importantly, this platform has made local properties available to foreign audiences who constitute ideal tenants for two reasons: they are less likely to invade the property and they can pay higher rent. The fear of appropriation is explained by legislation that protects tenants from eviction, even at the cost of the owners' property rights, while the possibility of obtaining higher rents reflects the fact that expatriates temporarily residing in Venezuela receive internationally scaled salaries that are disproportionately higher than those of locals.[249] According to Carlos, from 2018 until 2023, around 70% of his tenants were foreigners affiliated with international aid agencies or diplomatic bodies, while the remaining 30% were professional Venezuelans from other cities who came to the capital for work, medical treatment, or temporarily before emigrating.[250] For this last group, he refers to Caracas as a "trampoline of mobility" because, "as you know, the country has a low ceiling."[251] In this way, outgoing migrants continuously "make space" for incoming ones. However, this process also has negative outcomes. The demographic shift described here, a consequence of both economic liberalization and Caracas's relative stability and advantages in services and employment, has reinforced preexisting patterns of urban segregation and created new forms of exclusion. These patterns have transformed the municipality of Chacao into an urban enclave where extreme inequalities are evident not only in comparison to the rest of the city but also internally, as exemplified by the experiences of elderly or economically unproductive residents of semi-vacant, decaying buildings who can no longer afford their own neighborhoods.[252]

[248] Personal communication. November 18, 2022

[249] According to ENCOVI, by the end of 2023 the richest population decile earned in average US$347, while the poorest US$10. See Freitez et al., "ENCOVI 2023," 56.

[250] This perception coincides with measurements of internal migrants' age, education, income level, and migration intentions. See Carlos Miguel Álvarez and Leonardo Maldonado, "Migración Interna En Venezuela: En Busca de Oportunidades Antes y Durante La Crisis," Inter-American Development Bank, 2024, 16, http://dx.doi.org/10.18235/0013084.

[251] Personal communication. November 21, 2021.

[252] Camille Rodriguez, "Venezuela's Vanishing Middle Class Is Priced Out of Trendy Neighborhoods," Bloomberg.Com, April 11, 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-04-11/caracas-homes-fall-into-disrepair-as-dollarization-fuels-inequality.

The central government's decision to prioritize electrical supply to Caracas at the expense of other regions has resulted in an uneven territorial distribution of infrastructure breakdown, with cascading effects on demographic distribution and economic activity.[253] In other words, collapse is as much a consequence of infrastructural decay and mismanagement as it is a result of calculated redistribution of declining capabilities in the provision of public goods. In response to this, people often resort to the alternative infrastructures described earlier. The "unequal distribution of misery"[254] creates a landscape of enclaves of opportunity and wealth amid generalized deterioration. In this context, caretaking not only mirrors but also amplifies ongoing processes of territorial reconfiguration.

Networks and exchanges

Most of the apartments Carlos manages are in buildings constructed between the 1950s and the 1980s, in structures where installations and equipment have exceeded their lifespan. In addition to the buildings' age, the loss of income and the aging of residents themselves result in frequent malfunctions and generalized decay. As a representative of absent owners, Carlos is involved in other networks of caretaking that have emerged to sustain the physical integrity and functioning of these structures, and whose actions often extend beyond the technical to support vulnerable populations. As he explains:

> I am in the [Whatsapp] groups of each of these buildings. I have to be aware of what is going on, mainly with the water. That means getting to know each other, participating as much as possible, even if maintaining the apartment is already difficult. Some condominiums ask for collaboration for security guards, cleaning ladies. ... There is a domestic and very informal dimension to this, but as far as possible, I try to collaborate. ... If there is no light in the hallway, I recommend an electrician, or I try to get involved, depending on my relationship with the building, and inevitably, these links are created. [255]

The foundation of these "links" is the legal framework governing property ownership of apartment buildings. Presently, condominiums retain their legal basis and democratic practices—an elected board, regular assemblies, majority rule—while continuously adjusting their operating procedures to sustain the spaces and communities they represent. One example of this adjustment pertains to the collection of funds for building staff, a common form of small-scale aid that compensates for the insufficiencies of public health or employment benefits. Another example is the mundane interactions surrounding infrastructural integrity, as described by Carlos, in which residents themselves carry out repairs.

[253] Paola Bautista de Alemán, "Perspectivas Político Electorales Para Un Estado Gangsteril, Fallido y Parcialmente Colapsado," in *Autocracias Del Siglo XXI: Caso Venezuela*, ed. Paola Bautista de Alemán (Dahbar, 2020); For monthly surveys on electrical service interruptions, see CEDICE, "Servicios Básicos - CEDICE."
[254] Ibid., 362.
[255] Personal communication. November 14, 2022

However, in residential buildings, these networks of caretaking also ensure the protection of private property and vulnerable populations. In the working-class neighborhood of Caucagüita, neighbors' long history of shared living has created a sense of belonging, "so that people protect their spaces," explains Georgette Durand, a local community leader.[256] Here, knowledge of vacancy was guarded, minimizing the risk of material loss and preserving relationships that have formed over time around property. Residents have organized themselves and included migrant owners in chat groups, where they can be informed of problems originating in their apartments. Most importantly, collective action allowed residents to oust the invaders from a vacant apartment in what was effectively described as a "siege". The procedure involved several days of protests outside the apartment and the eventual involvement of the Communal Council and the National Guard under Georgette's coordination. "This was a victory for us," she explained, as the action deterred other invasion attempts.

Ms. Durand is a figure of authority in her community and serves on the local Communal Council, where she oversees food distribution in her neighborhood. Her leadership and knowledge of residents' economic situation enabled her to bypass government-imposed restrictions on food distribution and allocate resources where they were most needed. She also negotiated benefits with various non-profits that worked in the area, skillfully navigating political conflicts "for the good of the community."

These emergent networks include work that was previously outsourced to professional administrators or under the purview of public institutions. In a large tower in Chacao, one resident with a background in banking took over the building's administration after losing her job and now oversees every aspect of its operations, including maintenance, security, and finances. They acts as a general contractor overseeing repairs and coordinating specialized work, as an administrator, and as a concierge who monitors security cameras, manages cleaning staff, and assists residents. During our conversation, they refused to disclose details about the building's vacancy rate. "I can't share that information. It is delicate; one never knows. Many [apartments] are rented; otherwise, they have someone who comes regularly. There is always someone watching out for them,"[257] they explained. When taking over the building's administration, the resident began by reimposing a sense of "institutionality" in the work by restricting the building's chat and raising condominium fees to pay for urgent repairs. The building was built in the 1950s, and its problems were the consequence of years of neglect that often turned routine work into emergencies. As they explained:

> In December [of 2020], the sewage connection between the building and the street broke. Of course, we couldn't fix it ourselves. We had to ask the Municipality for help. Getting the Municipality to help us was very complicated. I sent them photos every day, and I met with people until the Mayor sent us a crew. Sewage was coming out of the parking garage. It was horrible. I have excellent suppliers who installed drainage pumps and helped with everything, but we couldn't do it ourselves since the

[256] Georgette Durand, personal communication. November 21, 2022. All excerpts from the same interview.
[257] Anonymous participant 02, personal communication. July 27, 2023. All excerpts from the same conversation.

repair was in the street. In the end, the Municipality made the repair, but we paid for all the work. They said it was the responsibility of *Hidrocapital* [the city's public water supplier], but how could I possibly reach them? ... We managed to get it done and paid for it ourselves.

How long did the work last?

Three weeks after getting the Municipality to handle it.

How long did the negotiation with the Municipality take?

Some yelling at the Mayor [over WhatsApp]. I would send photos daily through every channel. I got the neighbors across the street to support me. It was our largest crisis.

How much did the repair cost?

Finally, around seven thousand dollars, of which the Municipality took the largest share. We paid them with a little piece of paper. I went downstairs, hiding the money, and counted each bill I gave to their motorcycle driver. He signed a piece of paper because they supposedly did it for free.

In these two cases, the institutional semblance of condominium boards and the repair of broken infrastructure are instances where the relationship between individual residents, neighbors' groups, and institutional actors does not fit into clear-cut designations of formal and informal or legal and illegal. Instead, the operational continuity and material restoration of residential buildings are the result of procedures that, as suggested in the dissertation's introduction, "depend upon the capacity of actors and institutions of finding ways to continuously strike agreements on accomplishing things together, even if the rules of such collaborations are opaque and fluid."[258] This "capacity" illustrates two things. First, that institutional dismantling leaves behind a residual scaffolding that is appropriated by the "alternative institutionality"[259] identified by scholarship, and second, that this process involves the actual institution, such that dismantling and coopting are parallel procedures.

Drawing on his ethnographic fieldwork in inner-city Johannesburg, the sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone coined the term *people as infrastructure*, which alludes to the "complex combination of objects, spaces, persons, and practices"[260] that sustain social and economic continuity in the absence of institutional frameworks or consistent urbanization processes. The notion refers to the negotiations and arrangements through which residents assert their rights or access urban resources, emphasizing the flexible and provisional nature of these procedures. Despite the cultural differences and disparate urbanization paths between Africa and Latin America in general (and between Johannesburg and Caracas specifically), the concept points to a condition observable in Global South contexts in general, in which fluid cooperation and improvisation fill "the growing distance between how [people] actually live and the normative trajectories of urbanization and public life".[261] Recently, Simone has reflected on the term's renewed importance in urban studies, suggesting

[258] Pieterse, "Introducing Rogue Urbanism," 14.

[259] Lovera, "Caracas. Urbicide and Precariousness of Urban Life at the Beginning of the Venezuelan Twenty-First Century. The Worst of Capitalism and Savage Populism," 860.

[260] Simone, "People as Infrastructure," 408.

[261] Ibid., 428

its capacity to direct attention to “the vulnerabilities of collective life today,”[262] while cautioning against confusing an infrastructural understanding of human action with care practices construed around notions of selflessness or generosity. In other words, the “growing distance” to which the author alludes is not occupied by “care” in the sense of looking after or joining efforts with others who are equally vulnerable. Instead, it is expressed as a disposition towards innovation, compromise, and tolerance, as well as in the need to find “ways of ‘working’ the situation” that ultimately guarantee “the endurance of a territory, a people, a community—whatever was the imaginary designation of what was shared in common.”[263] There is a crudeness to these claims that would border on the cynical were it not for the fact that disregarding standards of honesty or moral conduct is driven by sheer need, in a context where collaboration—underpinned by survival—bridges positions previously deemed irreconcilable, such as those described in these two cases.

The “infrastructural” dimension of caretaking is underpinned by a notion of infrastructure as a web of interconnected systems responsible for the continuity of essential functions.[264] While the work of the individual caretaker can be examined from an infrastructural perspective regarding migration, its embeddedness within broader networks of cooperation highlights an interconnectedness between local actors and across levels—the individual, the community, and the institutional—that eclipses the caretaker's responsibility towards migrants. This is crucial for understanding, on the one hand, the negotiations that are central to its success, and on the other, its field of action within collapse. In these episodes, this field has been fundamentally oriented towards preserving or restoring functionality and ensuring the continuity of livelihoods and communities. Moreover, the procedural dimension of the infrastructural not only questions normative distinctions “formal” and “informal”, but also challenges their associated urban imaginaries (the planned city and the favela), purporting the infrastructural—provisional, fluid, opaque relationships—as a pervasive condition shaping the city at large.

Unfulfilled expectations

For several days in 2022 and 2023, I accompanied Carlos as he did the rounds of his apartments. During these visits, any expectation of a revelation about the transformative potential of caretaking vanished as I observed a middle-aged man watering plants, changing bedsheets, or waiting idly for the repairman to fix a washing machine. Yet, as we walked from one apartment to the next, one morning after another, year after year, riding dilapidated elevators in half-empty buildings and performing an endless repetition of domestic chores, it was the repetition itself—and its replication in routines of maintenance performed simultaneously throughout the city—that became relevant.

[262] AbdouMaliq Simone, “Ritornello: ‘People as Infrastructure,’” *Urban Geography*, 2021, 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.1894397.
[263] Ibid., 3.
[264] Christopher Henke and Sims, *Repairing Infrastructures: The Maintenance of Materiality and Power* (The MIT Press, 2020), 10.

At the same time, the systematic act of walking from one vacant apartment to the next turned the city—or at least the portion of urban space between destinations—into an interruption of an extended interiority. In other words, the city was reconfigured in relation to the domestic interiors it separated. Beyond the self-evident differences between categories like public and private, interior and exterior, there was a fundamental lack of synchronization between the city and migrants' domestic interiors, as if they were mutually impervious to one another, producing an experiential breach that offered little possibility of reconciliation. This breach is partly responsible for the difficulty of quantifying or locating vacancy, and, as such, a measure of the success of caretaking.

"What I like the most is when [clients] come back, and they feel that not a day has passed," stated Emiliana Romero in 2022, at a moment when economic liberalization and a pause in political unrest led some migrants to return temporarily to the city. In preserving domestic spaces as they were on the day of departure, caretaking leaves no traces; its invisibility is a measure of its success. From this position, however, it performs the more subtle feat of spanning temporalities, tapping into an idealized past and prolonging it. In upholding the meanwhile, caretaking preserves the possibility—or perhaps the illusion—of broader societal change.

Yet even when caretaking does result in spatial or programmatic adaptations, these are rarely irreversible: deposits can be converted back into bedrooms or bathrooms, paintings can be hung back on walls, and dispersed libraries can be reassembled. In this way, caretaking not only preserves, but also performs the possibility of return through actions that allow the eventual restoration of a previous state. As an architectural strategy, *reversibility* entails a precarious equilibrium between restoration and upgrade, between erasure and addition; it involves the repair of building technologies and the uncovering of hidden architectural features, the expert preservation of material residues and the installation of new infrastructures-for-coping; it is a field for trained architectural sensibility, technical expertise, and pragmatic collaborations that flourish amid collapse.

In the examples examined in this section, reversibility sets the limits to the caretaker's autonomy of action and produces a specific "architecture of migration"[265] of provisional redistributions, undoable changes, and temporary removal of valuables. Unlike other case studies in which migrants invest their earnings in their left-behind communities with a view towards future return, in the case of Carlos's apartments, the "dream home"[266] is the one left behind, with all the aspirations and achievements that it represents. If migrants' homes can be read "architecturally and allegorically", as domestic spaces on one hand and as a "crystallization" of the conditions that underpin migration on the other,[267] reversibility's tentative transformations are the embodiment of ambiguity and contradiction:[268] on the one hand, it ties migratory trajectories to the fate of the country; on the other, it reveals that only through reinvention and transformation is endurance possible.

[265] Lopez, *The Remittance Landscape*, ix.
[266] Ibid., 35.
[267] Ibid., 37. See also König, "Pristina: Departure City?"
[268] Lopez examines the "ambivalence" that frames migrants' spatial practices. See Lopez, *The Remittance Landscape*, 28.

Interlude: The wall, or the absence of caretaking

> **Hello… yes, the story is true. It is the story of a person who no longer lives in Venezuela, someone who has been living abroad for some years and who used to arrive at that apartment whenever he came back … But I can't tell you the name of the person because he fears for his integrity and the safety of those still living there. He doesn't want to even touch the matter …It happened at [building name] … a three-bedroom apartment became a two-bedroom. His neighbor knew [of his absence], broke through, took over the space, and closed it off [from the rest of the apartment]. From his side, my friend could see the bare blocks, which were poorly done. On the other side of the wall, I imagine the person plastered and finished it properly. But since in Venezuela one cannot complain about anything to anyone, and if you do, it can be worse … you can imagine the look on my friend's and his family's face when they saw that.**[269]

This transcribed voice note was arrived at through conversations—by asking friends who relayed the anecdote to serve as a liaison with the person who told it to them, reaching out to them to get closer to the source of the story, and ultimately failing to do so. The incident occurred in a well-known modernist housing project that once stood as a symbol of Venezuela's embrace of progress, evidenced by the rapid assimilation of its visual codes. One apartment lost a room, while the apartment next door gained one. An operation of simultaneous addition and subtraction, annexation and loss. Where there was once a door, there is now a blocked-up doorway. The operation also altered the layout of the invader's home, adding circulation or perhaps turning a dead-end room into a passage. What happened to the furniture inside the annexed room? Did the invader keep it or move it out before claiming the space? Did the migrants eventually plaster their side of the wall, as a gesture of final acceptance of their loss, or does the doorway still have bare blocks, as a reminder to reclaim the room in some future

[269] Anonymous participant 03. Personal communication. July 7, 2023

restitution? Was every subsequent arrival at the apartment marked by the fear of more annexations, of opening the door into an increasingly small home, or did the migrant owners refrain from coming back, equally traumatized by the violence of the invasion as by their truncated home? What was the relationship between these neighbors before (and after) the event? Did the invasion trigger similar incidents, or did residents organize themselves individually or collectively to prevent them?

These questions cannot be answered. The person's refusal to speak about the invasion and my own impossibility of accessing, seeing, and documenting the wall firsthand were, at first, grounds for dismissing the story. However, the voice note itself can be examined as a fragment that helps assemble a larger picture. It contains spatial, material, and political information. It is inscribed in a context of emigration, fear, and disregard for the law—the very conditions that initiate practices of caretaking and inform its trust-based, protective nature, as well as the risks of its absence, namely the failure to extend the migrant's presence by regularly showing up, watering plants, turning on the lights, or running the water. The incident created, for the migrant owner and our mutual acquaintance, its own wall of self-censorship, a division between what could be shared and what should be left unsaid. In this sense, the short voice note serves as a testimony that both describes and protects what was witnessed, painting a detailed picture while avoiding the dangers of self-exposure.

As a testimony, the note speaks of the limitations of the method to "wear out" fear and mistrust, of the need to account for both access and refusal of entry to domestic spaces, and of the broader conditions for knowledge production in a context of emigration and lawlessness: fragmented, mediated, resisting documentation, on the edge between what can be empirically examined and what can be indirectly reconstructed, between what can be described and must be imagined. Absence itself becomes evidence, a void that one circles and peers into.

In the lack of direct experience, the testimony itself partially fills this gap. The voice message begins by reaffirming the veracity of the incident and ends with an invitation to "imagine." What we are asked to imagine, however, is not a doorway filled with clay blocks; rather, we are invited to complete the picture. The impossibility of seeing the blocked doorway amplifies the power of the testimony, displacing the invasion to a realm where it can be claimed by the (architectural) imagination in different ways. On one level, the testimony serves as a metaphor for the *vicinity* of power and powerlessness, the breakdown of legality or social order, and for the territorial ambition that takes over left-behind spaces and imposes upon others the need to adapt to the conditions it forcefully creates; its allusion to an incident that occurred in a modernist landmark can be read as an allegory of the breakdown of the state or as proof of the lack of assimilation of modern institutions. It is also a metaphor for the impossibility of observing the "other side" of

the transformations shaping the city and of the symbolic possibilities of even the simplest architectural operations.

As an invitation to the imagination, the testimony serves as a point of departure for speculating about the (spatial) consequences of the absence of the caretaker, whose work becomes noticeable when it is missing. The absence of the caretaker reveals another absence, that of the migrant, unable to prevent an illegal takeover. In this sense, the caretaker is not only a proxy but also a deterrent, a dissuading presence that keeps illegality at bay, or conversely, enforces the established "order" around things.[270] As a practice of collapse, caretaking is frantically concerned with the present. Nostalgia is a prerogative of those who depend upon its labor. The absence of the caretaker exposes this privilege in the form of violence and loss. It initiates a process of spatial transformation, one that alters the layout of the apartment and displaces it entirely—even the parts that were not invaded—to a realm beyond privacy, where domestic space is shielded no longer by the fear of loss but by the terror of retaliation, of an aggression extended from the space to its dwellers.

The absence of the caretaker also invites looking at the wall from the other side, where it was "plastered and properly finished", erasing the evidence of annexation and officializing a claim of ownership. This change of perspective overwrites the initial questions. Why stop at a room instead of taking over the entire apartment, plastering the front door, and creating a space completely subtracted from the rest of the building, where ownership has been fully severed? In the absence of the caretaker, the internal "porosity" that González Casas has associated with vacancy[271] becomes the condition for radical interior reconfigurations, in which absence (of migrants, caretakers, institutions) subdivides and recombines domestic spaces according to rules agreed upon by those who remain, subverting the link between legal and spatial limits, concealing the building's internal transformation from its public face to the city.

[270] Graham and Thrift, "Out of Order," 4.
[271] González Casas, "Osteoporosis urbana."

Simulation of occupancy: Collective caretaking in enclosed neighborhoods

Street closures and the interiorization of public space

For decades, Caracas' residential neighborhoods have been closed off by residents. These interventions privatize and restrict transit in public space while disconnecting streets from the surrounding urban fabric. Street enclosures are observable in a variety of scales and urban settings, from the installation of locked doors along the narrow passages of working-class *barrios* to the construction of checkpoints and remote-controlled gates in middle and upper-class *urbanizaciones*, where access is typically mediated by the interaction with security guards or digital screens, requiring identification, destination, or prior reception of access codes. While specific street types or urban configurations, such as cul-de-sacs or single-entry neighborhoods, facilitate enclosure, more complex conditions demand the installation of additional gates or checkpoints. Often, large areas are enclosed in successive stages, adding multiple layers of obstacles and moments of interaction to traverse or reach a destination. This turns circulating around specific residential neighborhoods of Caracas into a constant confrontation with blocked streets, a quest for alternative routes, or a negotiation with security staff to be allowed passage or access. On the other side of the gate, one is confronted not with scenes of restored safety or reclaimed urban liveliness but with increased surveillance, tall walls, deserted streets, and silence.

Street closures are common in Latin America; they belong to the sphere of self-organized actions that emerge amid the state's neglect, oriented towards preserving personal and material integrity in the face of real or perceived dangers.[272] The installation of guarded checkpoints and other roadblocks is illegal in three of the five municipalities of Caracas, but amid declining capacity to provide services, particularly policing, municipal authorities turn a blind eye to them.[273] As privatization places specific responsibilities in residents' hands, new forms of

[272] Verónica Zubillaga and Ángel Cisneros, "El Temor En Caracas: Relatos de Amenaza En Barrios y Urbanizaciones (Fear in Caracas: Stories of Threats in Slums and Housing Developments)," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 63, no. 1 (2001): 161–76, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22201/iis.01882503p.2001.1.60467.

[273] Only Baruta and El Hatillo have regulated the construction of private security checkpoints, in 1991 and 2020 respectively. However in both cases ordinances emphasize that these constructions must not restrict access and free transit and that private security must be coordinated with municipal authorities. In the municipalities of Libertador, Sucre and Chacao, checkpoints and street closures are forbidden.

collaboration are necessary to manage these confined realms. Thus, physical enclosure is often accompanied by the formalization of neighbors' associations, which gives a semblance of legitimacy to the privatization of public space. Like the condominium boards of residential buildings, these associations have elected boards, hold assemblies, charge fees for security and maintenance, and set up WhatsApp groups for exchanging information. In times of political confrontation and social tension, these groups have participated in citizen mobilization and self-defense committees that have exacerbated urban segregation under the pretext of preserving private property.[274] Architect Enrique Larrañaga has argued that neighbors' associations are not an expression of organized civic society but rather "an affirmation of the individual against the State or instances of power".[275] Yet the reality is more ambiguous, analogous to a parallel structure that is irregularly articulated with the state rather than in direct confrontation with it. For instance, these groups rely on the recognition provided by the State while preserving certain realms away from public reach; they outsource specific services but complain for the lack of others; they infringe zoning regulations for their collective advantage yet denounce violations of individual actors.

As the enclosure of streets and neighborhoods overlaps with emigration, the maintenance and protection of migrants' property are seamlessly folded into the daily life of these communities. In this context, chat groups have become a vital communication channel, connecting local residents with migrants and caretakers. This transforms elements of caretaking into acts of collective responsibility. Outward signs of vacancy—such as an unkempt front garden, a broken-down garage door, or a dirty sidewalk—constitute a collective risk and demand a coordinated response from the community. Therefore, caretaking tasks extend beyond the preservation of domestic interiors to encompass the exterior as well. Activities such as landscaping, cleaning sidewalks, feeding pets, keeping lights on, randomizing visits, or (in one observed case) placing trash bags in front of vacant houses are carried out collaboratively and are fundamentally oriented towards creating an appearance of occupancy. This simulation of occupancy is crucial for minimizing the risk of break-ins or invasions. Moreover, such a coordinated approach to caretaking negotiates the spatial limits of private property, prompting a revision of how maintenance intersects with security concerns and with the collective management of mourning.

Guided walks around enclosed neighborhoods

During fieldwork, visits to migrants' houses were often accompanied by *guided walks* around their neighborhoods. This section is based on two such cases: the nine blocks of a small *urbanización* called *Parque Nacional*, which was cut off from its surrounding urban fabric by gates and a single checkpoint, and a street called AC-2 in

[274] García-Guadilla, "Caracas: De La Colonia al Socialismo Del Siglo XXI. Espacio, Clase Social y Movimientos Ciudadanos," 188–89.

[275] Cheo Carvajal, "Enrique Larrañaga: La calle es la primera institución," Prodavinci, January 24, 2018, https://prodavinci.com/enrique-larranaga-la-calle-es-la-primera-institucion/.

Caurimare, which forms a long loop and has a manned gate at its only entrance.[276] As a fieldwork method, *guided walking* was a response to the conditions of control and surveillance in enclosed neighborhoods. The role of the guide—long-time residents or caretakers who live elsewhere but look after migrants' homes—was primarily to act as a guarantor of trustworthiness, both in terms of my "right" to be there and to access information privy to residents. Thus, the company of a guide was key to putting in practice a form of improvisational walking that was not about expediently reaching a destination but about circling and wandering, keen on revisiting and recording changes that occurred from one visit to the next and from one field trip to another: a newly-erected wall, a cut tree, a recent departure, or an ongoing renovation. Guided walks operated as a form of friction, eroding the layers of protection that shield spaces and practices, maximizing exposure and increasing the chances of encounters with residents who could provide other fragments of information, as well as allowing my guides' recollections; they made it possible to observe the dynamics of collective protection and maintenance and revealed the guarded nature of knowledge about migrants' properties. Punctuated by countless stops for photographing, sketching, listening to neighbors' anecdotes, asking questions about migratory trajectories, or reconstructing timelines of enclosure, guided walks also became a way to access past life-worlds contained in these confined universes, maintained through individual and coordinated efforts.

The following paragraphs convey the impressions and comments shared by guides and residents as we walked together or spoke with them. Separated from the photographs they correspond to, they work like *orphan captions*, at once interchangeable while relying on the textual descriptions that build progressively to reunite isolated fragments and recollections.

"A topographer used to live there; that is why he had that large truck."

"This house belonged to a pilot who flew for VIASA. He passed away." The house had been vandalized, and the "for sale" sign hanging up front in 2022 remained there two years later.

"These people have a relative who lives nearby. She comes occasionally to check on the place." Peeking through the gaps in the garage gate, one could see an old car half-buried in recently cut branches.

"Our mother died, and my sister and I inherited her house. We grew up here. We each have our own place, but neither of us can afford to buy the other's half, so we take turns taking care of it."

[276] *Parque Nacional,* located in *Sebucán* in Northeast Caracas, was privately developed in the 1960s out of land previously owned by a religious order. It comprises three elongated street running north-south and various short cross streets and cul-de-sacs running east-west, which create 10 blocks. These blocks were parceled into small lots for paired houses. Around 2012, metal gates were installed in all but one intersection, where a guarded checkpoint was built. *Caurimare* is a middle and upper-class neighborhood developed in the early 1960s as part of the city's expansion to the south of the valley. Many of its streets have been closed off in recent decades.

“This is the house of Julio Borges.[277] I don’t know who looks after the place.” A year later, a police notice had been taped to the door, and unmarked cars were often parked in front of the house, an unwelcoming presence for residents.[278]

“Someone bought this house recently, but they haven’t done anything to it.” Just weeks later, a low fence that allowed a view of the house was being replaced by a solid brick wall. My guide did not know the new owners, but frowned upon the transformation, as it added to the prevailing sense of isolation and emptiness of the neighborhood. Other recently purchased houses had also been remodeled, their perimeter walls extended, and their security reinforced.

“We try to leave the lights on for passersby to see that there are people here. You never know … I told my boss that the front of the house has to be clean, impeccable. Otherwise, it looks like the house is abandoned.” Since her employer migrated in 2018, Zaida visits his house three times per week, overseeing cleaning, repairs, and feeding pets. Keeping the front of the house clean is a constant struggle, as vegetation grows fast. “We were afraid that *chavistas*[279] would take over empty or abandoned houses. You know, there was a time when they surveilled *urbanizaciones* to invade or auction off empty houses. So I would come over and spend the day, and clean. You have to give the impression that people live here.”

"I told my siblings that we had to do something … we had to take care of our patrimony. My sister, who lives nearby, would stop by every now and then and sweep the floors, but no one dealt with the house until I arrived here." This resident moved back into her parents’ house in 2021. She earned a living by selling off furniture (her own and other people’s) and looking after neighbors’ dogs in her increasingly unfurnished house. In 2024, she left for Spain; her house has been empty since then.

“This family left their tortoises behind. Now the neighbors feed them through the gate.” Fallen avocados are scattered about, uneaten. Lettuce leaves and a plastic dish filled with water lie by the gate. The curtains are drawn, blocking the view inside the house and turning it into a realm beyond collective reach. In the back, a broken-down car is half-shielded from view to protect it from the sun. Aloe plants and dracaenas hint at a lush but unkempt garden, preserved by their contact with the soil rather than by human intervention. Once a domestic garden, the intermediate space between the house and the street has become a kind of life-size terrarium. In this enclosed ecosystem, various life forms sustain one another without external input, except for the tortoises, which are contained in a space that is visible and partially accessible, from which they cannot be removed but can be collectively sustained. This operation displaces the care from the house to the animals. As neighbors throw lettuce and tomatoes for them to eat, they also ensure the survival of the habitat that supports them, and, by extension, the house behind them.

[277] Venezuelan opposition leader living in exile since 2018.
[278] Investigative journalists have exposed a pattern of expropriations of homes of exiled or imprisioned political leaders. See Claudia Smolansky, “¡Exprópiese! El Chavismo Arrebata Las Propiedades de Opositores Exiliados,” July 21, 2024, https://armando.info/expropiese-el-chavismo-arrebata-las-propiedades-de-opositores-exiliados/.
[279] Individuals who support Hugo Chávez, or in general, support the government.

Caretaking, departure, mourning

What can we learn about caretaking by walking around these streets, looking at—and partially into—these houses, and listening to what residents have to say about them? And what does caretaking, in turn, tell us about how Venezuelan society confronts the traumatic experience of emigration?

First, there is a shared knowledge about the status of migrants' houses: which houses are vacant, who the owners are, who looks after them, and how to find them. This knowledge is closely guarded, an extension of ties established over decades of vicinity, sustained through digital communication channels or the mediation of caretakers. This knowledge is also fragmentary, distributed among the remaining residents in such a way that no one has a complete picture of vacancy, complicating attempts to quantify it accurately or to determine its spatial distribution.

Second, it is very difficult to know whether a house is empty or occupied by examining a façade, a front wall, peeking through a gate, or comparing it to surrounding houses, as caretakers and residents continuously work to create an appearance of inhabitation. Simulating occupancy is a multi-modal, transnational form of coordination that the caretaker articulates. Its object is not the domestic interior but architecture's outward features—perimeter walls, facades, gardens, sidewalks. Simulating occupancy turns caretaking into a collective act of concealment and deception, the object of which is "to give the impression that people live here", as Zaida suggested. From the caretaker's perspective, "abandonment" ceases to be a legal status—the renouncement of ownership—and becomes a material condition, an aesthetic quality, and the ultimate manifestation of failure.

Lastly, in Caracas, "departure" has more than one connotation. Whatever of the twentieth century's aspirational society did not migrate in the last two decades is aging and passing, lonely occupants of houses and apartments built for large nuclear families whose members are now scattered around the world; economically unproductive, surviving on meager pensions and relying on remittances or the solidarity of neighbors; "holding on", as Martín Fernández said.[280] These modes of departure are not only conflated through language—the verbalization of emigration and death were strikingly similar—but they create a backdrop for stories of illegal invasions of apartments, of elderly professors found dead or dehydrated,[281] of dilapidated houses turned into dog shelters, of books rescued from moldy libraries, or of plants left in the care of friends. Not only did the fieldwork multiply these stories, but it also became increasingly difficult to separate emigration and death, as both modes of departure are deeply woven into the personal stories of remaining residents and have similar material manifestations.

As the possibility of migrants' return becomes less certain with the passing of time, preserving the material integrity of an empty house is no longer an activity done exclusively in the name of an absent owner but is also carried out on behalf of those still living around it. It is against this idea of simulation that one can speculate about the *space* that departure occupies in the collective imaginary and the role of

[280] Martín Fernández, personal communication. July 7, 2023

[281] El Nacional, "Hallan a Profesor de La ULA En Estado de Desnutrición Severa y a La Esposa Muerta a Su Lado.," January 25, 2022, https://www.elnacional.com/venezuela/hallan-a-profesor-de-la-ula-en-estado-de-desnutricion-severa-y-a-la-esposa-muerta-a-su-lado/.

architecture in producing and sustaining it. It is the caretaker's responsibility to keep mourning in the realm of the interior; yet, the coordinated caretaking that flourishes in the space of enclosed neighborhoods extends it beyond the domestic sphere. Bounded by the legal framework of the neighbor's association and physically delimited by gates and checkpoints, these enclosed neighborhoods constitute themselves into *communities of mourning*, which collectively guarantee the inviolability of the "right to silence",[282] as W.G Sebald called it, that unites individuals with a shared history of loss. Sebald searched post-war literature for clues on how German society dealt with the devastation of the war and found only fragments and incomplete accounts, stories suppressed in part by the very nature of the experiences they accounted for and in part by the newfound enthusiasm of post-war reconstruction. In Caracas, this "right to silence" of those who guard over and live amid fragments persists and is asserted spatially; it transforms the architecture of isolation and enclosure—checkpoints, gates, perimeter walls, gardens—into devices for the collective negotiation of trauma.

[282] W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (Penguin Books, 2003), 90.

Between plastic turf and hanging lights: Caretaking as a realm of permission

As a result of emigration, those who stay are elderly people who eventually migrate with their children or die, leaving their property behind. As zoning only allows residential use, and as a result of both emigration and the country's social, political, and economic conditions, the real estate market behaves in almost inexplicable ways. Land and [existing] houses are worthless, but as soon as you build something new, value goes through the roof ... And if you transform [the house] into a commercial use, rents are abysmal because there is a minuscule segment of the population with an enormous consumption capacity.[283]

People close to the government envisioned buying quintas, remodeling them, and putting them on the market as showrooms, restaurants, and *bodegones*. This new concept is a very easy way to launder money: all the merchandise is imported; it is expensive, you get buyers, you justify your economic activity, and with the person you have as a front, everything goes to your account without any problems, transparently. You get rid of cash and have a transparent economic activity.[284]

People want to do things. You are thirty years old and want to start a swimsuit brand. Go ahead, start. You can't. You can't start. There are no supplies, no credits. You either sell on Instagram out of your mother's house or you don't do anything.[285]

We knew that even if we complied with all the laws, we could still get screwed [by the Municipality]. You always need a 'sponsor' ... someone who offers you protection, whose participation [in the business] guarantees that no one will bother you.[286]

[283] María Christina Silva, personal communication. November 11, 2022. All excerpts from the same interview.
[284] Anonymous participant 01, personal communication. July 21, 2023
[285] Joana Rutenberg, personal communication. August 2, 2023.
[286] David Ogaya, personal communication. July 6, 2023

> [Clients] want restaurants because that is what they see around them. If tomorrow they see discotheques, they will want to design one ... These projects, despite their dimensions or costs, are installations. They are intended to last for no more than five years.[287]

Considered together, these interview excerpts reveal the multiple dynamics organized around vacant houses. They also describe a heterogenous cast of characters who have a stake in these transformations: the migrant (or inheritor of a deceased owner), the real estate agent, the emergent client, the Municipality, and the entrepreneur—a figure with many variants, from the young person who wants "to do things" to the front man or the politically-connected sponsor—and lastly, the architect, a marginal actor occasionally summoned to take part in these transformations.

Many of the caretaking routines observed in migrants' apartments are also found in free-standing *quintas* in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, where trusted caretakers water plants, repair leaks, or manage tenants. However, the spatial and legal autonomy of *quintas* as isolated, individual properties—surrounded by other *quintas*—is crucial for opening them to spatial reinventions that are unavailable to other domestic settings. The perimeter wall plays a central role in these transformations, disguising illegal uses and creating an inward realm of exclusivity, safety, and (economic, programmatic) freedom.

Seen through the lens of caretaking, that is, of trust-based practices that extend the life of left-behind patrimonies and initiate new relationships and interdependencies, the conversion of homes into commercial spaces not only brings together a wide range of actors but also exposes forms of collaboration in which regulations are invoked to compensate for insufficient salaries, subverted to maximize passive income, or broken in the name of "doing things". For those operating out of these spaces, an extreme with volatile economic conditions and provisional leasing arrangements often shapes business plans and spatial strategies.

A brief history of the middle-class *quinta*

The term *quinta* is a colonial legacy, initially referring to a country house used for recreation, which, like the architecture it evokes, has evolved differently across Latin America. In Caracas, *quintas* first appeared in the early twentieth century when urban elites moved to isolated houses on the outskirts of the congested historic center. A few decades later, *quintas* evolved into a smaller format, better suited to the economic possibilities of an aspiring middle class, incorporating the influence of American-style suburban homes that had made their debut in the oil camps.[288]

[287] Camilo Lander, personal communication. November 10, 2022.

[288] As González Casas reminds us, oil camps "introduced to the country segments of the American suburban landscape, the repetition of isolated units surrounded by a fence". See Lorenzo González Casas, "Nelson Rockefeller y La Modernidad Venezolana: Intercambios, Empresas y Lugares a Medidados de Siglo XX," in *Pétroleo Nuestro y Ajeno: La Ilusión de Modernidad*, ed. Juan José Martín Frechilla and Yolanda Texera (CDCH, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2005); See also Miguel Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (Duke University Press, 2009) Chapter 6, The Oil Industry and Civil Society.

Architecturally, *quintas* have constituted a fertile terrain for architectural experimentation[289] and, together with the apartment tower, they completed the typological repertoire for the city's expansion across the valley. Both quintas and towers are the result of the same planning principle: the subdivision of developable land into lots in which to deploy detached structures whose use would be predetermined by zoning ordinances.

The typical *quinta* is a free-standing structure set back from the perimeter and surrounded by walls. This perimeter wall is an ever-evolving construction made of successive layers of masonry, metal, barbed wire, electrical fencing, and surveillance devices. Like geological strata, each layer is the record of new threats and of the technologies to counter them. Its pervasiveness has turned the wall into the defining architectural feature and default façade of residential architecture,[290] Architecturally, the wall remains an afterthought, legislated only for its height—2.50 meters above the sidewalk—thickened into inhabitable width by the inclusion of security booths and planters. It is the product of zoning ordinances that, if nothing else, privilege the autonomy of the architectural object over the continuity of the urban block by setting back construction from the legal limits of a site. Conceptually, the perimeter wall has created a realm of unbridled programmatic and architectural freedom within its limits: away from public view, anything goes. The wall is the architectural device responsible for turning *quintas* into sites of interiorization and the most radical manifestations of collective life.

Recently, *quintas* have been examined in relation to the complex social relationship between owners and live-in domestic workers[291] and as sites where practices of solidarity and resource sharing challenge clear-cut limits between private property and public space.[292] This research underscores architecture's capacity to articulate new forms of sociality in the context of emigration and economic decline, which counter long-established links between domestic layouts and social hierarchies. It is against this openness to reinvention, which flourishes in the absence of domestic life, that this dissertation examines the conversion of homes into commercial spaces, with the caveat that, in this case, vacancy results in a surveilled, rigid, and socially narrow milieu that exacerbates socio-economic divides.

The conversion of *quintas* into commercial spaces is a recurrent phenomenon in Caracas, part of a historical trend in which economic pressure and informal rental agreements often invert the established order between urban planning and the city's actual transformation. In this sense, the occurrence of these unauthorized transformations in residential neighborhoods is not new in terms of the subversion of zoning regulations or their capacity to encourage updates to obsolete ordinances; instead, the novelty of recent illegal conversions resides in how the surplus created by emigration and the demise of the middle class intersects with emergence of a new entrepreneurial class and with the institutional weakening of local planning authorities.

[289] For an overview of the quinta and its architectural development, see Graziano Gasparini and Juan Pedro Posani, *Caracas a Través de Su Arquitectura* (1969; segunda edición, Armitano Editores, 1998), 313–40, 352–63.
[290] Fabio Capra-Ribeiro, "Los Límites Desapercibidos de La Ciudad. Reflexión Sobre El Lindero En Caracas," *Bitácora Urbano-Territorial* 24, no. 2 (2014): 31–41, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/bitacora.
[291] See Dávila, "The Servantful House."
[292] Blanco, "Enchanted Commons and Politics of Possession."

Research into illegally converted *quintas* began as a long-distance inquiry in 2021 during early doctoral stages. It included interviews with architects and entrepreneurs, as well as a preliminary survey of transformed houses based on social media accounts and Google Maps. This initial inquiry revealed a concentration of these conversions in specific upper-class residential neighborhoods, a wide range of commercial programs, and a distinctive aesthetic. At the time, the social media feeds of newly-opened venues featured photos of large crowds in open courtyards; guests sitting on communal tables or mingling at night under hanging strip lights; expansive domestic gardens turned into miniature golf-courses in which green plastic turf was laid over real grass; secluded dining in lush patios; or people sitting in the lotus position in living rooms cleared of all furniture. Yet there was more: amid a dwindling night scene, vacant houses briefly became the site of clandestine parties and dining experiences that radically altered domestic spaces but left no traces; events were announced on Instagram, and attendees were vetted as they replied. According to a designer and cultural promoter who organized clandestine raves for several years, "finding venues became easier as the city depopulated," not only because houses were more easily available, but also because surrounding homes were also empty.[293] In their view, these events served as a kind of release valve, liberating an unparalleled intensity of social activity accumulated over the prolonged confinement imposed by the economic crisis, political upheaval, and the pandemic.

This intensity extended beyond these ephemeral events, as anxious investors found in vacant homes an opportunity to bypass formal commercial leases or significant renovations, leveraging these benefits against the opaque legal framework governing conversions. In a climate of economic instability, intense competition, and precarious leasing conditions, businesses sought minimal investment and immediate returns. These conditions produced a makeshift architecture of temporary installations, outdoor shacks, cheap furniture, plastic turf, and hanging lights that supported new programs and introduced new material conditions but left the underlying spatial structure intact, and with this, the possibility of reversing changes. One architect spoke about how residential transformation projects had become increasingly part of his practice. In these projects, design and construction phases proceeded quickly, and the final product resembled more of an "installation" or a "scenography" than a permanent intervention.[294] Spatial precariousness was accompanied by unfavorable contractual conditions and a general disregard for professional expertise. This shift has coincided with the emergence of a new client profile: young entrepreneurs whose main economic activity was privately exporting Venezuelan oil and who were accustomed to quick returns.[295] The diversifying interests of emerging elites had a critical—albeit short-lived—impact on numerous economic sectors. For instance, in 2022 alone, more than 200 new restaurants

[293] Bestialo Culapsus (pseudonym), personal communication. October 25, 2021
[294] Camilo Lander, personal communication. November 10, 2022
[295] As a result of international sanctions, Venezuela's oil company resorted to dozens of small intermediaries to export its oil. The opacity of these arrangements resulted in the corruption scandals of 2023. See "Architectural Playground" in this dissertation.

opened in the city, 70% of which closed within the next two years,[296] a trend that extended to imported goods and construction.

By 2023, when arriving in Caracas for an extended fieldwork stage, the (alleged) effervescence of these inward spaces had dissipated with post-COVID normalization, relentless municipal crackdown, or the deflation of the prosperity bubble amid recent corruption scandals. Whatever endured had taken the form of discrete, introverted spaces in which domestic interiors provided a flexible framework for continued programmatic recombination, turning *quintas* into malleable containers of a wide range of commercial uses. Between July and August 2023, I visited several of these houses, documented their programmatic and spatial conditions, and interviewed business owners and architects who had undertaken renovation projects in them.[297] These forays were limited to the residentially zoned neighborhoods of Chacao Municipality, a small urban area that concentrates many of these recent transformations. The restriction of fieldwork to residential neighborhoods in Chacao also addressed the possibility of interviewing local planning authorities and the availability of information on the municipality's zoning ordinances and urban plans.

Architectural strategies: reversibility and reprogramming

The foray into converted houses begins and ends online. It starts with identifying these "clandestine" venues on Google Maps, where they can be easily distinguished from surrounding houses for their yellowish coloring and business descriptions: boutique, swimsuit brand, furniture store, shopping mall, restaurant, women's clothing, yoga studio, café, outdoor equipment, ice cream shop, beauty salon, wellness center, record label, retirement home, meditation center; a programmatic range that as varied as it is shifting. It continues by plotting routes and visiting them during regular business hours, and ends after the fieldwork by following up on programmatic changes on social media accounts.

These converted houses have a dual existence: on the one hand, they seek to amplify the visibility of their interior program through social media, creating content that draws attention to their activities; on the other hand, they retain their original domestic facades, preserving their outward appearance and blending in with their surroundings. Unlike the vacant homes in enclosed streets—which are collectively guarded by those living around them—this last operation is not the result of coordination between entrepreneurs and neighbors; quite the opposite: those living around these houses often protest illegal transformations and demand their closure. Instead, this strategy aims to attract a specific clientele, "a new public who looks for privacy, exclusiveness, and luxury," according to municipal authorities.[298] Indeed,

[296] Nicolle Yapur, "Caracas Restaurant Boom Is Going Bust After Hopes Fade," Bloomberg, April 24, 2023, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-04-24/caracas-restaurant-boom-is-going-bust-as-hopes-for-revival-fade.

[297] It should be noted that prior knowledge of the possible implication of these venues in illicit activities prompted safety measures, such as refraining from announcing my intentions as a researcher or asking questions to employees working in these establishments. If asked about the purpose of my visit, I simply stated I was browsing, as one does when visiting a conventional commercial space.

[298] María Christina Silva, personal communication.

many of these venues advertise themselves in terms of isolation, refuge, or escape. Achieving these conditions requires the coordination of architecture, surveillance technologies, merchandise display, and marketing, which together produce an introverted, guarded realm where clients are offered overpriced items carefully displayed on shelves and stands.

When visiting for the first time, one's mobile mapping application provides a more accurate confirmation of arrival than any visible sign of activity. In some cases, a house name or number matches the business information listed online, or a larger number of cars parked in front indicates a concentration of activity. Ringing intercoms and knocking on doors can result in no response, in a voice announcing that the venue is closed—is this a refusal of access or a lack of synchronization between the digital and physical realms?—or in questioning one's intentions and destination.

The first successful visit is to a venue named *La Gisela*, advertised online as "an environment that stimulates creativity."[299] A doorbell next to a metal door instructs the visitor to press a button, and upon doing so, the door opens, no questions asked. On the other side of the perimeter wall, a flight of steps leads to a second door made of wood and glass, a delicate construction unthinkable without the protection of the outer wall. Once inside the house, an unfurnished hallway connects to various rooms that have been turned into boutiques. To the left, what was once a study has become a shop selling athletic clothes, with racks along the walls; a saleswoman who doubles as a receptionist sits behind a large desk. Next to the entrance is a living room where a stack of lacquered cubes displays luxury-brand purses. Upstairs, two bedrooms have been turned into showrooms, with their names inscribed in black relief on the walls. Closet doors have been removed to expose hanging clothes, and bathrooms double as fitting rooms—*architectural reversibility* at work. An open area in front of these rooms—once a family room—functions as a photography studio, crowded with large umbrella flashes and tripods. Another door—the master bedroom?—remains off limits to customers. The kitchen is clear of domestic furniture and instead equipped with a counter separating a service area from a "co-working" space: a few square tables and wi-fi access. The back garden is now an outdoor café, furnished with glass tables and parasols, its floor covered in green plastic turf and lit by a strip of lights dangling above. According to social media, this space can be rented for corporate events. The inside of the perimeter wall is painted white and disguised by dense vegetation. Cordial employees idly scroll through their phones or arrange merchandise as they wait for customers that never seem to arrive. The complete lack of clients would be a recurrent feature of these visits. A black dog roams free; "her name is Gisela; she came with the house", one employee explains.

A second house, in *Altamira*,[300] has undergone a radical transformation. Its front wall has been thickened to include a security booth with black-tinted glass and retrofitted with a heavy-set garage door, an electric fence, and security cameras. Behind the wall, half-hidden by potted plants, is a façade that retains the features of a mid-century modernist house: white volumes, projecting roof slabs, sharp edges. The

[299] "La Gisela (@cafelagisela)," accessed May 20, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/cafelagisela/.

[300] Altamira was an ambitious urbanization project in the Eastward expansion of the city, conceived and financed by Luis Roche and inaugurated in 1944. See Arráiz Lucca, *Caracas*, 246–47.

back of the house, however, has been extended to add another module of rooms and external stairs descending to a covered parking area at the rear of the lot, where the garden used to be. This is a space where chauffeurs can wait and patrons have their cars washed while they shop. To one side is a secondary structure that houses a small shop crammed with American-made imported goods, from chips and candy to frozen yogurt, shampoo, and laundry detergent. The rest of the program includes a beauty salon (the anchor that concentrates most of the activity), a children's clothing store, a café, a shoe store, and a perfume stand. This venue is advertised on social media as an exclusive one-stop shop where clients can spend several hours socializing and shopping.[301] Upbeat electronic music plays throughout the space, and security cameras are discreetly placed in every room. The house's original layout is unrecognizable behind additions and subdivisions; the only vestige of its original domesticity is a poured-granite floor typical of mid-century residential architecture, but it also ends abruptly at the doors of various showrooms. Unlike other houses, this material investment does not seem to correspond to a provisional operation that can be easily reverted to a domestic use.

Another house, in a small residential street in *Los Palos Grandes*,[302] has been transformed into a wellness center. The front door is sealed with a large municipal sticker that reads *CLAUSURADO* (Closed)—sign of an ongoing municipal dispute—but people enter freely through an open garage gate next to it. Inside, domestic social areas now function as ballet and yoga studios, a shop, and an office. A compact staircase leads to the floors above, where bedrooms have mirror-covered walls and are filled with inflatable balls of various colors. The roof has been turned into an open-air classroom; its floor covered with green plastic turf. A small, tempered swimming pool occupies most of the backyard; next to it, under a shed accessible via a miniature arch bridge that crosses the pool, is a bar that offers protein shakes and health foods. A large, colorful graffiti of a Buddha surrounded by tropical leaves decorates the inside of the perimeter wall. Google Maps announces the existence of yet another café across the street, but no one answers the door.

Nearby is a venue named *Casa Morada* (Purple House). Its large (purple) garage gate lies wide open, with a security guard idly sitting next to it. The house is an expansive structure in the middle of a lush garden. One room is a t-shirt store; another sells jewelry and accessories; and a third is a swimsuit boutique, all three offering imported brands, with logos and names painted on the walls of what used to be the bedrooms or social areas of a house designed for a large family. The house's kitchen retains its original domestic cabinetry and appliances and serves as a breakout room. Soon afterward, *Casa Morada* would reinvent itself as a "content creation" venue; rooms became photo and recording studios, clothes and swimsuits replaced by tripods and specialized lighting. Its physical makeover was accompanied by a new online identity, a testament to a programmatic transformation that left no record in either the physical or digital realms.

This routine extended to other houses, a monotonous repetition of start-up swimsuit brands, miniature boutiques with luxury imports, specialty cafés, beauty

[301] "Casa Siete Concept Store (@casasieteconceptstore)," accessed May 15, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/casasieteconceptstore/.

[302] Los Palos Grandes was privately urbanized in 1929 on the site of a large coffee hacienda. See Arráiz Lucca, *Caracas*, 229.

salons, spas, and bars with unpredictable opening hours. After the fieldwork, which could only capture a snapshot of a volatile condition, social media feeds revealed how these domestic containers could systematically reinvent themselves through seemingly endless iterations of programs that appeared and disappeared without a trace. A yoga center could mutate into a co-working space; a shoe store operating out of a dining room could change its name and suddenly offer artisanal beer; a domestic garden could be the setting for a sushi restaurant that vanishes overnight and reappears elsewhere, adapting its "scenography" to a new setting.

In the former bedrooms and dining rooms of these vacant houses, the tentativeness and fragility of emerging business ventures found an outlet in which to test the rough waters of the Venezuelan economy, minimizing economic risks at the expense of limited exposure. These houses are laboratories where experiments rarely progress beyond their early stage. Growth is the exception. When it occurs, its pressure over the space (public exposure) can be a cause for eviction. When it doesn't, it invites speculation: is the sudden disappearance of a small business the result of competition, a poor business plan, municipal crackdown, the general economic downturn, or a money-laundering scheme that switched to another product? Converted houses offer an unsettling juxtaposition, mixing the hopefulness of emerging businesses with the opacity of corruption schemes, complicating the possibility of disentangling the two. Architectural reversibility ceases to revolve solely around restoring domestic use and becomes instrumental to dynamics that benefit from leaving a trail.

Post-mortem: Streat Market

Between 2020 and 2022, Streat Market operated out of a large single-family house *in Los Palos Grandes.* The property was jointly owned by five sisters who had inherited it from their mother. It had once been the family's home, but by the time it was leased, it had been uninhabited for nearly a decade and was in complete disrepair; its pipes were leaking, its walls were covered in mold, and plaster was falling off the walls. Streat Market negotiated a series of six-month contracts for the house's use, maintenance, and repair. The owners demanded short-term leases in case the property was sold, an arrangement common in many of these transformations. "When your only asset, which you may have acquired or inherited from your parents, is real estate, you have to make it profitable," explains María Christina Silva, director of Urban Management in Chacao. "Instead of negotiating it under the scheme of obsolete zoning, you'd better rent it for a use that is illegal but that will bring you a profit that allows you to live."

The leasing conditions prevented the business from making any permanent alterations to the space. Most rooms remained closed off and were filled with the family's things, overlapping the house's commercial transformation with its former use as a residence. Moreover, these contractual conditions served as the basis for Streat Market's spatial strategy, which entailed a radical reprogramming of the house while preserving its layout. Most of the program was concentrated outdoors along the perimeter, where patrons sat at communal tables and small kiosks offered a

variety of foods. This setup aimed to replicate the informal (urban) atmosphere of a food-truck festival or a street market, albeit screened from the actual street. The clientele was mainly families, an audience looking for "a safe space. Since it was a house, there was only one access. Kids could run and play around while their parents sat at ease,"[303] says David Ogaya, one of the venue's partners. Streat Market opened in early 2020 and permanently closed two years later, after a series of temporary shutdowns, negotiations with municipal authorities, and the partners' inability to secure a form of protection that would allow them to bypass the Municipality. At the time of our conversation, all tables had been disassembled, the kiosks had been moved to other locations, and an official notice reading *CLAUSURADO* had been glued to the door, sealing access to the property—an ending unforeseen at the time of opening. As David recalls:

> We knew that [the Municipality] had approved, behind closed doors, a change to mixed use for this zone, but because of the political cost, they didn't dare to take it to the Council. … Since they could not give us a permanent license because the house is in a residential zone, the Municipality granted us a temporary, renewable license. … We tried to be transparent and avoid shortcuts: permits, keeping the company up to date, liquor license, and advertising in accordance with the Municipality's requirements. … As soon as we opened, people started going. And all of that was without any advertising, with money out of our pockets. So much so that we made the tables and installed the plumbing for the bathrooms ourselves.

The events that unfolded from this point included unannounced fiscal controls, military inspections, agreements made with one municipal authority and overturned by another, and ultimately, the business's inability to withstand the financial pressure that these negotiations entailed. David's account sheds light on the internal conflicts among municipal departments and across government levels, the mechanisms available to bypass them, and the difficulties that arise from taking an initial stance in favor of "transparency." During this time, however, there were moments of respite, when authorities were not at the door, and the restaurant could operate uninterruptedly. What is telling is not only that achieving this temporary stability was the result of agreements, payoffs, and even offering private events for municipal employees, but also that material improvements and expansion projects often accompanied these moments. "If you compare the photos of when we opened and when we closed, you can see the changes," claims David, before clarifying that all these improvements were executed by the partners and staff themselves, since they could not afford an architectural project.

In Chacao, zoning violations trigger municipal intervention. However, it is the Municipality's fiscal administration, not its planning office, that closes down non-conforming uses for lack of a business license. Accordingly, when Streat Market was first shut down, its temporary license was revoked until payment for a new one was made. After this happened a second time, they considered seeking protection from a

[303] David Ogaya, personal communication. July 6, 2023. All excerpts from same interview.

higher court. "We knew that many venues in the area had legal protection orders, but how you get one is something that you don't find out until it happens to you." Indeed, introducing protection orders in higher courts has become a standard practice for businesses operating out of vacant houses, for which judges charge a standard fee. These measures, which allege municipal infringement of workers' rights, ultimately render local authorities powerless. In the words of Soraya Alfonzo, Chacao's director of Urban Planning, protection orders represent the worst of all outcomes, as "businesses reopen with a protected status, without paying any kind of municipal taxes and without solving any of the problems they generate."[304]

Despite this frustration, Chacao's Municipal Planning Office (OLPU in Spanish) has seen its capacities severely diminish. Until the mid-2010s, it was staffed by more than twenty architects, urban planners, engineers, lawyers, and technicians. Due to administrative restructuring and the decimation of public salaries, by November of 2022 it had been reduced to six employees. Staff and budget shortages have greatly diminished OLPU's ability to monitor zoning violations. The municipality has surveyed illegal alterations and held public meetings with residents to advocate for updates that include mixed-use and densification in residential areas, but neighborhood associations have prevented their implementation. By 2022, the extent of illegal conversions and the mobility restrictions during COVID-19 finally aligned neighbors and the municipality after years of standoff. However, by 2025, no measures had been effectively implemented.

The block where Streat Market was located is on the boundary between mixed-use and residential areas, a fringe location where numerous houses have functioned as commercial spaces for decades. With or without this venue, it is a high-traffic area, with cars permanently parked on both sides of the road. David Ogaya argued that his case was one of many illegal conversions operating in the area, claiming that local residents were among their clients and that everything around Streat Market was already commercial. He falls into the category of young, entrepreneurial individuals who "want to do things" and found an outlet in cheap, unoccupied houses. His frustration stemmed less from a conflict between clear-cut ethical boundaries than from an inability—a combination of amateurism and lack of financial means—to navigate the murky waters of the converted house business. Cash drained, Streat Market was ultimately unable to pay for a judicial order or secure the protection of a politically connected "sponsor".[305] This measure, standard for this type of transformation, would not have prevented local authorities from enforcing regulations; instead, it would have deterred them from resorting to them as an extortion mechanism. "That is how it works. There are venues where the Municipality knows they can't get in," explained David.

[304] Soraya Alfonzo, personal communication. November 11, 2022.
[305] The Spanish word used by Mr. Ogaya was *padrino*, which translates as either sponsor or godfather.

“Everything is illegal”

Through acquaintances working in the food business, I contact an entrepreneur who runs a restaurant out of a house in *Los Palos Grandes*. We exchange messages. I explain my research and she agrees to an interview, suggesting we meet at the restaurant.

I arrive at a long, ivy-covered wall in a residential street. Tall trees and half-hidden structures rise behind it. The only identification is a sign reading "Qta 19," placed somewhere between mismatching garage gates and doors. The restaurant is on the left, but the house on the right has also been transformed into a commercial venue, advertised online as a “concept store” and “meeting place.”[306] I ring a nondescript doorbell, and an employee opens a sliver of the thick metal door, barely showing his face. I explain that I have a meeting with Joana and I am led inside. The house is set back from the street wall, separated by an open-air garage where delivery motorcycles are parked. A second wall was built right up against a corner of the house, perpendicular to the street, separating this house from the one next door. Both houses belong to the same owner, an elderly woman living in a third house at the back. The house next door has been leased to an individual who sublets each room as a separate business: a shoe shop, a sunglass boutique, a beauty salon, a stationery store, and a coffee counter on wheels that can be moved around an expansive living room, the seemingly standard programmatic repertoire of converted houses. Both houses provide, by mid-2023, a monthly income of around 7.000 dollars, an amount that sustains the elderly owner and her children, who live abroad.

The house that operates as a restaurant is a compact and modular steel structure. Its domestic program, distributed across three floors from public to private spaces, serves as the basis for the restaurant's operations. On the ground floor, a makeshift wooden counter greets guests and directs them past an open kitchen, partially blocked by a wooden parapet, to an outdoor seating area in the back. This space has been fitted with—once more—green plastic turf and hanging strip lights. From the garden, clients can look back at the kitchen, which retains its domestic appliances and Formica cabinetry. The first floor, once an expansive living area, has been adapted as an office, retrofitted with workstations and office chairs. Some residual domestic furniture remains here: a sofa, chairs, and bookshelves belonging to the owner, who also uses this space to store her things. A small balcony facing the back is now a DJ booth, its speakers facing customers below and a large residential building beyond. On the top floor, bedrooms and bathrooms have become storage, filled with boxes of plastic cutlery and Styrofoam containers for packing delivery orders. Staff uniforms hang to dry in the corridor by the stairs. The master bedroom has a bed and a desk; the restaurant manager herself occasionally uses it.

It is early afternoon, and the restaurant is closed, but the staff is busy in the kitchen preparing delivery orders. The restaurant’s opening hours have been drastically reduced due to neighbors’ complaints. “Everyone operating out of a house is doing so illegally. Starting from there, how well or poorly you do depends on your relationship with the Municipality,” explained Joana Rutenberg, the business owner.[307]

[306] “Oasis Caracas (@oasis.Caracas),” accessed May 5, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/oasis.caracas/.
[307] Personal communication, August 2, 2023. All excerpts from the same interview

She has been here since 2017; this is her fourth house in the area. She is familiar with fiscal and urban regulations and experienced in negotiating with neighbors and municipal authorities. She is also well-informed about the ongoing transformation of single-family houses in this part of the city. “It was a gap in the system, a very interesting one,” she explains, an opportunity that gave oxygen to people who “wanted to do things” but were otherwise strangled by economic or legal requirements. “It can continue to work for activities that don’t attract large crowds or make too much noise,” she states in relation to neighbors’ protests. “Being in a house is exhausting, you get scared every time someone rings the bell,” she adds, emphasizing that “everything is illegal”. The constant clashes with neighbors, payments to the municipality, the owner’s arbitrary rent increases, her refusal to pay for repairs, and casual drop-ins by potential buyers for the house add to economic and psychological strains. These conflicts shape business plans, spatial strategies, and, at the time of our meeting, the decision to relocate to a proper commercial space. As Joana explained:

> I have made some interventions, but nothing is permanent. I can take everything with me when I leave: the wooden wall in front of the kitchen, the vertical garden in the back; nothing is fixed.
>
> *Why that strategy?*
>
> Because we live in Venezuela. I am not going to invest in a fixed wall. What if everything goes to hell and I have to leave?
>
> *In the new space, do you apply the same strategy?*
>
> Everything is very basic, the minimum necessary. … I am not in favor of significant investments. As long as I live in Venezuela, that will be my strategy. … When I moved to this house [in 2017], the country was a mess. If something had happened, I would have packed my things in a box and left.
>
> *But at the same time, you have been building your brand for ten years.*
>
> Yes, but with the peace of mind that if I have to leave, nothing happens. …
>
> *Have you had any contact with a municipal department, like the planning office?*
>
> There are no guarantees. They can say whatever they want. … Maybe in six months, there will be a new Mayor and the rules will be different. … There are no guarantees whatsoever, only opportunities to take advantage of.
>
> *Where is the opportunity for you?*
>
> I have an established brand, a proven product. An opportunity came up in a new location, at a consistent price, in a place that I like, where I can innovate. … For example, the new venue is perfect because Caracas is safe again, but the situation can change. That would turn my location, at street level in front of a square, into a disadvantage. You can't make a business plan for five years from now.

These statements reveal a disposition that is, simultaneously, about full commitment and about minimizing risks; they are an example of what AbouMaliq Simone refers to as “preparedness”, that is, a “readiness to switch gears” that recognizes that any

parcel of stability "is situated within a larger, more fluid arena where people must be prepared to exert themselves."[308] As an example of a pragmatic positioning within a reality in which little can be anticipated or changed, Joana's comments shed light on an experiential distinction between crisis and collapse: for the crisis subject, who retains a reference to normalcy, "the unbearable discrepancy that exists between publicly announced reality and that other constantly changing, unstable and uncertain" realm of daily life is a permanent source of confusion, helplessness, or paralysis.[309] In contrast, the denizen of collapse has learned to tolerate this "discrepancy," creatively claiming the "gap in the system" for their own benefit. Uncertainty becomes a resource; it opens up a space of freedom as long as one is willing to continuously reinvent oneself. These reinventions were realized here through a temporary architecture of portable parapets, plastic turf, and hanging strip lights that could disappear overnight, leaving no traces, and soon appear again elsewhere (as they in fact did), leaving behind a space that could be claimed by the next business venture.

Caretaking as a realm of permission

In her examination of banditry and contraband in the frontier regions of central African nations, Janet Roitman establishes a distinction between notions of illegality and illicitness.[310] The author refers to practices that, while outside of the law, are nevertheless construed as "licit" (legitimate or permissible) by those who take part in them. Moreover, Roitman argues that the domain of the licit is not an independent sphere of action but is "crucial to the urban economy, as well as to the financing of local administrations", laying the basis for economic redistribution and social mobility in times of hardship.[311] Geographic and cultural differences aside, the broad picture this scenario depicts is not so distant from the Venezuelan case in terms of institutional corruption, the precarious salaries of public employees, and the reciprocal relationship between the legal and black economies. What is at work, in both situations, is a "rationality of illegality, a disposition that is both economically strategic and socially productive."[312]

In this scenario, the state constitutes itself as an "amalgam"[313] of actors where boundaries, roles, and positions are intentionally blurred to sustain practices that make up a variety of "alternative subsistence practices"[314] for public employees. Entrepreneurs who operate out of illegally converted houses often bypass formal government procedures, relying instead on discretionary dealings with individuals in positions of power. This isn't a rare occurrence but a widespread practice that aligns

[308] Simone, "People as Infrastructure," 424.
[309] Mbembe and Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," 342, 345.
[310] Janet Roitman, "The Ethics of Illegality in the Chad Basin," in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (University of Chicago Press, 2006).
[311] Ibid., 249.
[312] Ibid., 264.
[313] Ibid., 255
[314] Antulio Rosales et al., "Depredación y Ausencia de Burocracia: La Situación de Los Empleados Públicos En Venezuela Desde La Mirada de La Capacidad Estatal.," *América Latina Hoy* 93 (2023): 18, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14201/alh.29735.

with the regime's systematic dismantling of public bureaucracy, a process that has led to the emergence of parallel power structures that weaken the state and diminish civic society's ability to respond effectively.[315]

Roitman's reflections on an "ethics of illegality" highlight participants' capacity to position themselves pragmatically rather than critically with regard to corrupt state institutions, a position that is less about virtuous resistance—a concern with whether a behavior is good or bad—than about a strategic adaptation, however contradictory that may result.[316] Along these lines, the use of the term "illegal" to denote the unsanctioned or non-conforming transformations of vacant houses in Caracas delineates a space that, while outside the limits of established regulations, is well within the realm of individual action. Participants interviewed for this research showed little confusion about the categories of legal or illegal. Yet, the distinction was not used to set boundaries to action but to carve out a space in which all actors gained something: the government official rounded up a meager salary, the entrepreneur made a profit, the real estate agent earned a commission, the public got a "safe" spaces for socialization or consumption, and, occasionally, the architect did a project. The breakdown of institutional norms and professional standards does not undermine the capacity to discern right from wrong (or an unwillingness to participate). Instead, it creates its own ethical context, a space where judgment can be permanently postponed.

At the same time, actors' willingness to work together to carve out this space reveals how collapse is construed in the collective imaginary: not as the result of government mismanagement or corruption, but as a calamity beyond anyone's control. Elevated to the status of a "natural disaster",[317] of an adversity in the face of which only survival is possible, individuals seek emancipation not from political control but from collapse itself.

Answering Graham and Thrift's question of what we maintain when we maintain something—whether it is "the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it"—is complicated by the relationships organized around these vacant houses, where material endurance and "maintaining states of illegality"[318] are deeply entrenched. This entrenchment shifts the focus to the "we" of the question above, interrogating who the caretaker is: is it the entrepreneur who starts a business out of a bedroom, is it the public official who allows unsanctioned uses to continue for a bribe, the judge who overrides local authority, the clients who shop or dine there, or the architect who designs a temporary installation that can be dismantled without altering the space? It is all of them, through the collaborative production, concealment, and use of these spaces.

Another aspect of this reflection concerns the architectural conditions that result from this collaboration. The provisional materiality of this architecture is an expression of the uncertain and illegal conditions that underpin its production, true, but its tentative and makeshift nature is also indicative of the ability of architecture

[315] When first implemented by the government in the early 2000s, this process was intended to speed up social transformation by eliminating institutional gridlocks, yet eventually led to corruption and the privatization of state functions. See Rosales et al., "Depredación y Ausencia de Burocracia," 6–7.

[316] Roitman, "The Ethics of Illegality in the Chad Basin," 265.

[317] D'Hers Del Pozo, "Tiempos de Crisis, Resistencias e Infrapolítica En La Migración Inmóvil Venezolana," 21–23.

[318] Roitman, "The Ethics of Illegality in the Chad Basin," 264.

to overwrite functional expectations and undermine of habits use, and of the tolerance that is built into it to allow seemingly endless programmatic combinations. "If shock can no longer be produced by the succession and juxtaposition of facades and lobbies, maybe it can be produced by the juxtaposition of events that take place behind these facades and in these spaces",[319] wrote Tschumi of the capacity of the "event" to destabilize relationships between form and function. In these converted houses, the "shock" potential of programmatic recombination was strangled by an array of temporary uses that turned exclusiveness into the highest expression of boredom. Yet in their short-lived effervescence, before becoming neighbor-friendly and self-restrained versions of themselves, these spaces contained the germ of an experiment in which shock value had all to do with the possibility of invisibility and reversibility. As philosopher Sandra Pinardi observed of the anti-government protests of 2003, which took over viaducts, freeways, and other public infrastructure, the civic potential of these actions was in their capacity to "produce new places within spaces, inverting or *dysfunctionally activating* the very body … of the city."[320] It is this "dysfunctional activation" that these conversions can produce, actions in which the perimeter wall and the possibility of reversibility play key roles. The wall's potential is not a consequence of its material qualities, but of the conditions it can generate within its perimeter: a realm of unbridled programmatic and social freedom, away from public view and government control; a parcel of stability etched out of uncertainty, between plastic turf and hanging lights. The wall emerges not only as an architectural device that separates distinct categories—public and private, exterior and interior—but also as a political mechanism for carving out a realm of permission and freedom, a space where the illegal-but-legitimate can flourish, disappearing without a trace.

[319] Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjuncture* (MIT Press, 1996), 254–55.
[320] Sandra Pinardi, *Espacio de Ceguera, Espacio No Presencial* (Ediciones Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2006), 20 Emphasis added.

Interlude: Architectural playground

In recent years, the neighborhood of *Las Mercedes* has undergone a profound transformation. Massive constructions have replaced low-rise buildings, altering the urban profile, while new businesses have appeared overnight. This epicenter of cheap luxury and instantaneous wealth in the middle of the general breakdown of the city, offered a concentrated version of the tensions and negotiations shaping Caracas at large. Here, however, tensions disintegrated under the sheer pressure of emergent capital, and negotiations made crudely explicit the freedom with which it operated, its disregard for building regulations or historic preservation, and its entanglement with political actors and the discourses promoted by the regime.

In the context of a fieldwork predominantly concerned with spaces and routines that avoided public exposure and often left no tangible trace, *Las Mercedes* stood out as their ultimate opposite. Its scale of redevelopment, the optimism it (briefly) exuded, and its total devotion to the new made up for a realm of experience that was difficult to reconcile with the introverted spaces of migrants and the imperceptible work of caretakers, exerting a magnetic pull precisely for this reason. Over the course of three years, I returned repeatedly, circling it and traversing it by car—sometimes at high speeds, others stuck in traffic—but mostly parking and walking. Driving aligned with the area's historic vocation as a collection of isolated destinations, confirming the orientation of its urban features—from LED screens to building plinths to the strategic placement of billboards and architectural icons—towards the car. Walking, in contrast, revealed layers of urban life otherwise missed from the speed and enclosure of a moving vehicle; it entailed exposure to a hostile environment that had nothing but contempt for the pedestrian.

In *Las Mercedes*, walking became an instrument and a metaphor for *probing* the city, a focused exploration that continued until it could no longer go on, either by running against the makeshift parapets of construction sites and catching glimpses of ongoing demolitions or by accessing inactive websites or outdated social media accounts. What these probes showed, in return, were the limitations of the method. Like a cartographer who can trace the outlines of a continent but must reconstruct its interior from travelers' accounts, driving and walking

around Las Mercedes revealed the limits of a project of description, signaled the dead ends of excursions, and pointed out architecture's capacity for concealment. The snapshots of ongoing transformation that successive visits yielded were partial clues that could not be decoded through direct experience alone, but that had to be complemented by anecdotes, (anonymous) interviews, hearsay, economic reports, and the work of investigative journalists, all of which offered partial windows into financial flows, negotiations, and the general political and economic atmosphere of the moment. These snapshots could not be organized into a linear narrative, forming instead an uneven, incomplete map of empirical and anecdotal evidence. A structure under construction on one field trip was an empty skeleton the next; a boarded-up house could sprout into a tower in months, overlapping trajectories of undoing and redoing.

Like other twentieth-century *urbanizaciones* of Caracas, *Las Mercedes* was privately developed from agricultural land, in this case a sugarcane plantation on a low-lying, wedge-shaped floodplain tucked between the river and the hills. In the 1940s, the new neighborhood was promoted as the central piece of an oil district where foreign corporations located their headquarters, department stores, hotels, schools, and clubs. Its architecture was a sample of the diverse cultural influences driving the city's urban growth: developed by a Mexican immigrant, with American-designed landmarks and a peculiar diasporic architectural style called neo-Basque. *Las Mercedes* soon boasted of its own gas station—accompanied by an abstract geometric sculpture[321]—and the city's first American-style shopping center,[322] a Miesian steel and glass box surrounded by parking that completed the transfer of the "primordial modern landscape"[323] from the oil camp to the city. This structure sealed the fate of *Las Mercedes* as the city's playground, a space for recreation and an arena for the display of new aesthetics and consumer culture.[324] Soon, its lofty *quintas* were turned into shops, restaurants, or dental clinics. In the nineties, zoning caught up, legalizing commercial land use and allowing the integration of individual lots for the development of larger structures. This measure reinstated the modernist fantasy of the *tabula rasa* and cleared the way for the eradication of whatever heritage remained. Construction scaled up, driven first by demand, then by the promise of future returns—brick and mortar as a safe haven against a devaluing currency—and, recently, by opaque money-laundering and corruption schemes. Decoupled first from actual need and later from real estate speculation, architecture entered a realm of boundless possibilities, projecting above zoning restrictions and over budget estimates to maximize capital recirculation.

[321] Nesselrode Moncada, *Refined Material*.

[322] Las Mercedes shopping center, designed by American architect Don Hatch. See González Casas, "Nelson A Rockefeller y La Modernidad Venezolana," 198; See also Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy*, Chapter 6.

[323] González Casas, "Nelson A Rockefeller y La Modernidad Venezolana," 176.

[324] Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity*, 192.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, amid the regime's economic liberalization and international sanctions that targeted both state enterprises and government figures, *Las Mercedes* reasserted its status as the architectural playground, reinventing itself as an urban enclave of luxury consumption and (re)circulation of capital for the minuscule segment of the population that retained most of the country's spending capacity.[325] Its newly built glass towers, markets selling imported goods, casinos, luxury car dealerships, boutiques, and restaurants constituted the last and most visible link in a long chain of economic exchanges between actors profiting from the regime's economic liberalization or operating seamlessly between the legal and illegal economies. "The economic groups that could not take their money out of the country as they used to, started to invest locally. First in *bodegones*, then in restaurants and construction. The new buildings of *Las Mercedes* were built in two years, all of them",[326] explained a real estate agent who specialized in high-end listings. Their clients included government officials and businesspeople associated with them.

In November 2022, *Las Mercedes* had more than seventy active sites under development in an area comprising barely thirty blocks; cranes and towers in various stages of completion marked its skyline, and a procession of trucks delivering concrete interrupted traffic. Construction and destruction spilled out to the streets, rendering sidewalks unusable and systematically razing existing buildings and trees. Protests over the loss of architectural heritage mounted, while massive deforestation transformed *Las Mercedes* into a heat island with temperatures two degrees higher than the rest of the city.[327] The speed and scale of redevelopment turned *Las Mercedes* into the poster child of recovery narratives and a model to be replicated at a smaller scale in other Venezuelan cities. The concentration of new construction and businesses provided content for the viral promotion of a new slogan, *Venezuela se arregló* (Venezuela is fixed), a controversial, regime-backed social media campaign that reframed the products of kleptocratic investment as signs that Venezuela had "risen from the ashes and recovered its international might".[328] This inflated recovery had little connection to reality. "When they sold us the content that Venezuela was fixed, it created a false sense of improvement; it was only *Las Mercedes* that had changed," said the real estate agent. This "change" was reinforced through the crude juxtaposition of luxury

[325] Between 2020 and 2021, improvements in living standards were largely concentrated on the top decile of the population, while income decreased for the large majority. See: Equipo ANOVA, "¿Venezuela Se Arregló? Tendencias Recientes En La Distribución Del Ingreso," ANOVA, May 2022, https://thinkanova.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ANOVA-Policy-Brief-Notas-Sobre-Distribucio%CC%81n-1.pdf.

[326] Anonymous participant 01, personal communication. July 21, 2023

[327] Armando Altuve, "Las Mercedes Se Calienta Con Un Lujo Abrasador," Alianza Rebelde Investiga, October 2022, https://alianza.shorthandstories.com/las-mercedes-se-calienta-con-un-lujo-abrasador/.

[328] Nastassja Rojas Silva and Sergio Angel, "The Year of Official Propaganda: 'Venezuela Fixed' Paradox Gallery," *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)* 43, no. 2 (2023): 405, https://doi.org/10.4067/s0718-090x2023005000117.

architecture, large-scale billboards, LED screens, and patriotic imagery, dilapidation, with dilapidated structures and urban misery.

By the summer of 2023, many of these projects sat unfinished; their developers had been recently arrested for their part in a massive fraud that defrauded the oil industry of billions of dollars. Paraded in orange jumpsuits in front of the press,[329] impresarios and government figures became the faces of a criminal investigation that reached private enterprises and public institutions. Constructions halted, investors withdrew, and consumers held back. Architects and entrepreneurs complained about the economic slowdown and the lack of work, withdrawal symptoms from the entanglement of legal and illegal economies. "There was an economic muscle that was being moved by people close to the government. That is the reason why many people see a slowdown now," confided the real estate agent. "When they stop, we all stop; it has been a rough time for us."[330] In *Las Mercedes,* this "economic muscle" was concentrated in a handful of construction companies that often doubled as architecture firms, material suppliers, and buyers for their own projects, forming a complex web of recently created enterprises and long-established industry players.[331] The social media accounts of jailed contractors featured renderings of glittering towers boldly lit against dusky skies, as well as photos of structures under construction, accompanied by inspirational quotes from famous architects.[332] In reality, completed buildings stood in total darkness next to bare structures that exposed their innards to the city, their entrances sealed off with police notices, and their completion dates indefinitely postponed.

A year later, in the aftermath of a contested presidential election and widespread repression, *Las Mercedes* was recast as material evidence of the failure of an economic aperture that reached a few while spreading inequality for the many, its paralyzed constructions an example of how empowered elites can soon develop political ambitions of their own.[333] In the end, the short-lived construction frenzy in Las Mercedes caused no more than a dent in the country's depauperated

[329] Marianna Parraga, "Exclusive: Middlemen Have Left Venezuela's PDVSA with $21.2 Billion in Unpaid Bills," Reuters, March 21, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/middlemen-have-left-venezuelas-pdvsa-with-212-billion-unpaid-bills-2023-03-21/.

[330] The reasons for the economic slowdown between 2022 and 2023 are more complex, yet for the most part politically motivated. See Tony Frangie Mawad, "Bellum Bodegonicum: The Bubble Pops," Caracas Chronicles, March 27, 2023, https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2023/03/27/bellum-bodegonicum-the-bubble-pops/.

[331] Investigative journalists exposed the opaque entanglement between these enterprises. See Carlos Crespo, "Desde lo alto de estas torres, una extraña alianza les contempla," Armando.info, August 7, 2022, https://armando.info/desde-lo-alto-de-estas-torres-una-extrana-alianza-nos-contempla/.

[332] See, for instance, "Constructora HP (@constructorahp)," accessed June 5, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/constructorahp/.

[333] Marcos Planchart, "Opening the Economy May Now Be Maduro's Biggest Mistake," Caracas Chronicles, November 28, 2024, https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2024/11/28/opening-the-economy-may-now-be-maduros-biggest-mistake/.

construction industry.[334] According to experts, its *real* collapse would result from actually completing and using the architecture it produced.[335] Yet there is little risk of this happening: it would take more than twenty-five years of economic growth and a threefold increase in the labor force for the market to absorb the surplus of office space built in recent years (discounting the availability of existing vacant structures).[336]

A low-rise residential building, a vestige of *Las Mercedes'* original architecture and urban scale, sits below the unfinished towers that define its new skyline. It, too, seems to await transformation: its signage removed, interior vacated, and windows covered in paper. A few meters away, security guards occupy empty structures to prevent invasions, improvising shelters out of unused construction materials, crude office interiors are (allegedly) used for cryptocurrency mining, and luxury restaurants fill the top floors of otherwise empty office towers, their lavish interiors accessed directly from garages where VIP drop-offs share space with the diesel generators installed to cope with recurrent power outages. The infrastructure that holds the playground together also reveals the thin veneer of its exclusiveness.

A walk around the block—any block—exposes a dimension of urban life that exists together with high-end destinations of the playground: a dilapidated sidewalk extends along a wall with barbed wire projecting outwards at eye level; at one point, the wire wraps around the trunk of a tree whose roots have cracked open the sidewalk, forcing pedestrians down to the asphalt. Further ahead, green plastic turf lines the parapet that separates a restaurant from the street. Loud music is playing, but the place is empty. In front, several children who were picked up from the street are held inside a police van; at the corner, the zebra crossing ends abruptly against an unfinished brick wall that extends to the edge of the sidewalk; it is the protective enclosure of an ongoing construction and will be torn down when the building is finished, if it ever is. A rectangular advertisement blocking the sidewalk displays a sign that reads "Design takes over Caracas"; the structure is tilted at an angle from the impact of a car that hit its concrete base. Crowded hot-dog stands are surrounded by large motorcycles belonging to private bodyguards, who wait for their employers to dine nearby. Private security guards stand idly by the gates of a luxury showroom, negotiating with homeless men who wear yellow vests and hurdle traffic cones up and down the street, securing

[334] According to the Venezuelan Construction Chamber, this sector contracted 98% between 2013 and 2024.

[335] Tony Frangie Mawad, "El este de Caracas navega a la deriva urbanística," El Estimulo, February 26, 2022, https://elestimulo.com/de-interes/2022-02-26/el-este-de-caracas-navega-a-la-deriva-urbanistica-las-mercedes-construcciones/.

[336] Martín Fernández, personal communication. July 7, 2023. See also: Fernández, "Retos Del Mercado Inmobiliario Para El 2021."

parking spots for tips. Inside the showroom, imported Italian furniture, German porcelain, and Spanish tiles expand architects' material repertoire, which "have given projects a breath of fresh air, for the better or the worse"[337] after years of shortage. Turn another corner, and a long line of poles, the national flag flying on each, blends with the billboards along the freeway; get closer, and the stench of the river will be overwhelming. Across the street, a neo-Basque landmark awaits its turn for demolition; glimpses of its architectural details are visible over the temporary parapet that conceals the destruction. Along the sidewalk of a deserted side street of this pedestrian wasteland, discreetly taped to a *wall*, almost imperceptible even to those walking by it, was a small, makeshift ad that read:

> **You can change your life with immigration to Canada**
> **whatsapp4149084886##500$**

Was this an art installation, a scam, an actual opportunity for those lucky enough to see it (or those daring enough to call), or simply another way in which the "elsewhere"[338] makes itself present in the city?

***Las Mercedes* has created its own form of residual accumulation, as the interrupted transit from destruction to completion creates space for new opportunities. These thrive not so much on the margins, but out of the ambiguous conditions created by half-empty, semi-demolished, and not-yet finished structures. Here, incompletion has acquired the status of legacy, giving a new meaning to the expression *dejar obra.* Vacancy introduces a space of tolerance where the concrete and the speculative can meet, a collusion instigating its own set of social utopias and architectural fantasies: consider, for instance, the infamous *Torre de David,*[339] multiplied by dozens,[340] wrapped in LED screens and hidden behind billboards that advertise high-end restaurants or the latest imported luxury car; architectural speculation as a tool for making explicit the fiction of real estate speculation.**

[337] Gabriel Fossi, personal communication. November 10, 2022

[338] König, "Pristina: Departure City?"

[339] *Torre de David* is an unfinished office tower in Caracas. Its construction was halted in the mid-nineties during a financial crisis. In 2007, with the approval of the central government, it was illegally squatted by hundreds of families, who built precarious dwellings inside and lived in dangerous conditions. In 2014, under opaque circumstances, families were evicted and relocated. The building has been featured in photographic documentaries and architectural speculation.

[340] I am grateful to architect Franco Micucci for his insights around this idea.

puedes cambiar tu vida con inmigración a
Canada whatsapp4149084886##500$

The junkyard: Caretaking at the threshold of closure

Domestic objects, from belongings to commodities

As a category, "domestic object" encompasses an extremely wide range of material possessions—everything from cooking utensils to home appliances, furniture, tools, equipment, clothes, toys, or decorative objects—a category so broad that it is more easily defined by what it excludes than by what it includes, as well as by the logic of this exclusion. It is a category based not on kind but on *treatment*: the common feature to all things included in it is their having been left behind, together with the rest, not being singled out and separated, packed in migrants' suitcases or left to someone (as is the case with personal archives, artwork, or plants examined elsewhere in this study). This inattention determines, first, their management after emigration as the stuff that makes up domestic environments and, later, their status as commodities to be sold, treasures to be reunited with their faraway owners, or burdens to be disposed of. Second, this lack of attention also involves a lack of discrimination, a kind of "lumping" together of domestic objects that flattens their individual value and which creates, later, the need to "singularize" things to determine their fate.[341]

Initially, these objects are inseparable from their domestic setting, infused with—and infusing homes with—individual histories of inhabitation or extending the presence of absent owners. As things to be used, maintained, or repaired, they are the purview of a mode of caretaking examined earlier in this dissertation. However, when migrants sell their left-behind homes, the extension of life that constitutes the central motivation of caretaking shifts from use and maintenance to recirculation. The tasks involved in separating objects from their domestic environments—classifying, pricing, selling, donating, storing, or shipping—are the concern of a mode of caretaking specifically mobilized around *closure*. At this moment, the caretaker negotiates practical and affective considerations against the possibilities of local secondhand markets, informal working conditions, or export restrictions. The trust, interdependence, and relationality that underpin caretaking practices extend to this moment in specific ways, with the caretaker operating as a hinge figure that mediates between "before" and "after" states, managing an administrative procedure and an *experience* of separation on behalf of an absent migrant, acting as a liaison with local actors, and negotiating between different value systems (on one hand the devalued

[341] For a detailed examination of "lumping" and "singularization", see Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 71,83.

economic worth of left-behind domestic objects, and on the other hand the heightened sentimental value these things have for those who left them). To achieve this, the *caretaker-as-closer* creates scenarios in which objects and their domestic environments work together to reconcile differing expectations and values. These scenarios not only transform homes into temporary commercial spaces but also aim to restore a sense of singularity and importance to left-behind possessions, anonymizing things and spaces, removing the possibility of personal identification, and wiping clean traces of ownership.

The relationship between human displacement and material possessions is a recurrent concern for material culture studies. However, the literature focuses on objects that move with migrants and whose transit stands in for individuals' capacity to transfer identities or forge new senses of belonging through the objects they carry on their journeys.[342] A focus on the migrant as a mobile actor, whose displacement entails uprooting and assimilation, extends to the examination of the roles that architecture and urbanism play in these processes, as well as the susceptibility of dwelling spaces and cities to be shaped by (and to shape) migrants' experiences.[343] In contrast, the examination of how things left behind circulate or are appropriated locally draws on cases of forced displacement and evaluates the afterlife of objects in the context of the violence that often surrounds such events.[344] In both cases, the literature offers few points of overlap for examining the specific ways in which middle-class migrants in Caracas retain ownership of their domestic objects and eventually participate—through the mediation of caretakers—in their exchange, donation, or disposal.

The analytical framework for examining domestic objects at the threshold moment of closure is Arjun Appadurai's *Commodities and the Politics of Value*. In this influential essay, Appadurai defines a commodity as "*any thing intended for exchange*",[345] shifting the discussion away from the phases of production or consumption of goods towards their circulation. Challenging traditional economic perspectives that view value as inherent to a commodity, he argues that value is socially constructed, and asks what can be learned about a cultural context from the way commodities are exchanged. Appadurai expands the terminology for studying and visualizing exchange, suggesting that things have "trajectories" and "careers" and they can enter and exit commodity stages more than once and in different ways.[346] He proposes three criteria for examining exchange: the "commodity candidacy"[347] or potential, or whether an object can be exchanged; the commodity phase, or how an object may be considered a commodity at one moment but not in another; and lastly,

[342] David Parkin, "Mementoes as Transitional Objects in Human Displacement," *Journal of Material Culture* 4, no. 3 (1999): 303–20, https://doi.org/10.1177/135918359900400304; See also: Vanessa Agnew, ed., *What We Brought with Us: Things of Exile and Migration* (transcript Verlag, 2024).

[343] See Stephen Cairns, ed., *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy* (Routledge, 2004); See also Doug Saunders, *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World* (Vintage, 2011).

[344] See Yael Navaro-Yashin, "Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1 (2009): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.01527.x; See also Sarah Gensburger, "Witnessing the Looting of Jewish Belongings During the Holocaust: What Can History Do with Images?," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 28, no. 2 (2014): 74–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2014.911525.

[345] Arjun Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9. Emphasis in original.

[346] Ibid., 13,15.

[347] Ibid., 13.

the context of the exchange, or what Appadurai refers to as the "social arena"[348] where the exchange occurs and where value is negotiated—a bazaar, an auction, or a market. The author examines commodity exchange across a variety of historical and economic contexts, from small-scale preindustrial societies to contemporary capitalist economies, briefly considering situations where exchange deviates from established value paths, such as crises, wars, or conditions of extreme hardship; in general, contexts where "value and price have come almost completely unyoked."[349] Building upon this tangential topic in Appadurai's essay, this study asks what the exchange of migrants' left-behind domestic objects tell us about collapse, arguing that collapse is not a transitory deviation from a trajectory of exchange, but that it creates its own exchange context, in which caretakers deploy a series of (spatial and commercial) strategies that turn vacant domestic environments into "social arenas" where value is not only negotiated or recovered but also created.

Caretaking at the moment of closure is examined through three episodes: *dismantling, exit sale, and showroom*. Each of these corresponds to a different fieldwork experience and is centered on the daily routine of a specific caretaker operating in a singular spatial situation and an economic niche. The descriptive and analytical focus of all three in the exchange of domestic objects highlights the capacity of caretaking to act as a node of social and economic activity, producing value through the articulation of objects and spaces. Thus, dismantling, exit sales, and showrooms allow the moment of closure and its relation to generalized breakdown to be examined in a novel way through the exchange of domestic objects.

Dismantling refers to an occupational niche that includes classifying, packaging, selling, donating, discarding, or exporting the contents of domestic spaces. These physically intensive tasks occur in parallel with the elaboration of detailed inventories of home contents. Dismantling transforms domestic spaces into temporary, informal, small-scale distribution hubs, from which objects are dispersed in multiple directions. It is off-limits to the public but accessible to individual buyers or beneficiaries of donations. Orchestrated by the caretaker, dismantling entails the expedient and efficient vacating of a property while mediating a process of separation, along the way providing profits, access to goods, and donations to a variety of actors.

Exit sales are events in which domestic objects are offered to the public in migrants' homes. They are publicly advertised on social media accounts or privately disseminated through WhatsApp groups and contacts, where the contents of the sale can be previewed. The sale itself is the culmination of a process of classification, inventorying, appraisal, and spatial organization carried out on behalf—but in coordination with—an absent owner. Exit sales typically take place over several weekends and involve various phases: first, a pre-sale for selected clients; then an open sale; and finally, a clearance where remaining items are sold at reduced prices. In this sequence, the gradual depreciation of objects opens them to circulation across socio-economic strata. Often, the highlights of each sale—an antique clock, a dining room table, a Persian rug—receive additional attention through dedicated social media posts. What remains after the clearance is donated or discarded. Exit sales

[348] Ibid., 15.
[349] Ibid., 14

organizers set prices based on knowledge of secondhand or specialized markets, and handle the payment, packaging, and dispatch of merchandise. As with dismantling services, the outcome of the sale is a vacant property to be sold or rented, its contents scattered across myriad locations.

Showrooms are reprogrammed domestic spaces that display a curated selection of unique items from specific historical periods or geographic origins, with a marked prevalence for the broad category of "midcentury modern." These showrooms are the local equivalent of commercial spaces that sell specialized merchandise, privileging quality over quantity, relying on marketing and display strategies that highlight the singularity of the objects, and catering to an exclusive clientele rather than the general public. Like their international counterparts, Caracas' showrooms were once fed by garage and estate sales; however, they are increasingly supplied by emigration. The overwhelming surplus of material residues determines showrooms' spatial strategies—the constant rotation and reorganization of contents to highlight the alleged uniqueness of objects—and their need to distance themselves from other market segments—a growing secondhand market that sells migrants' objects—by being increasingly selective. Established actors who have been in the business for decades pride themselves on their connections to collectors rather than appealing to a massive market or to new elites. Showrooms operate discreetly out of houses in upper-class neighborhoods, accessible only with prior knowledge of their location and hours, or by appointment.[350]

Each of these three instances focuses on a specific stage of closure, from the moment migrants' closets and cabinets are opened and their contents exposed, to their sale in migrants' homes or their transfer to other locations where they are displayed and sold as exclusive items. Each instance is an example of trends observed during fieldwork, part of the socio-economic ecosystem that has flourished through occupational reinvention amid collapse. "Since no one has work, people have found an opportunity in this activity,"[351] as one long-time seller expressed. These three instances do not define isolated spheres of action and economic exchange, but instead have permeable boundaries that are traversed by domestic objects and caretakers alike. For example, dismantling services and exit sales often provide merchandise for specialized showrooms, whose owners may also organize exit sales and personally purchase items to sell them separately. Likewise, a caretaker who looked after a home may later supervise its dismantling and sale, and be responsible for liquidating its contents. These diffuse boundaries also expose caretakers' adaptability, balancing the commodification of domestic residues against a need for constant reinvention.

Secondhand markets are also responsive to economic restrictions and government controls. For instance, secondhand sellers consulted for this research reported that in 2017-2018, when imported goods were scarce, buyers desperately sought used home appliances, such as refrigerators and washing machines, to replace

[350] In September of 2024 there were in Caracas two showrooms operating out of residential spaces and a third one located in a commercial space. All had been in operation for at least two decades, and in their current location, for at least ten years.
[351] Javier Torres (pseudonym), personal communication, September 14, 2024.

their old models or obtain spare parts.[352] In addition, corruption in ports and customs makes international shipping expensive and risky.[353] As a result, vintage and collectible items that could be exported and sold competitively abroad are landlocked, confined to a territory where their circulation and audience are limited. Internally, the surplus of left-behind objects has resulted not only in a loss of value by mere demand and supply imbalance—too many things that no one wants—but also in "a loss in the capacity to recognize value"[354] on the part of new sellers and buyers, as one well-established reseller claimed. In this disadvantageous context, expertise, connections, and creativity in reaching new audiences and showcasing items become crucial. Thus, dismantling services, exit sales, and showrooms rely on sellers' personal networks of customers, collectors, or shipping agents, and insistently employ social media and domestic spaces to amplify their reach, generate desire, and *recoup* value.

Access to residues and the geography of closure

There is a proliferation of social media accounts dedicated to secondhand sales in Caracas: hundreds of Instagram handles with thousands, and even tens of thousands, of followers, showcasing millions of objects in never-ending feeds.[355] This digital accumulation, which provides a glimpse into the vastness and diversity of the material world left by departure, offers a concentrated version of objects scattered across the city, secured in apartments and houses behind walls and guarded checkpoints. While online platforms publicly advertise the contents of exit sales and showrooms, physical addresses are shared privately, making access to left-behind domestic objects an effortful transition from the digital to the physical. "You have to be in the medium to have access to the information,"[356] one well-established collector and seller said. This transition, which introduces steps and expectations into otherwise smooth online transactions, is in itself a form of productive friction, adding a layer of exclusivity around admission to material residues and negotiating safety concerns by providing an opportunity to screen potential visitors. In this process, the all-too-familiar security features of residential architecture are incorporated into these exchange dynamics as a kind of dramatization of security: access to buildings, houses, and closed-off streets requires receiving codes—i.e., passwords—that must be recited to security guards at checkpoints or keyed in to open gates.

The left-behind domestic objects contained in vacant homes are pursued by different audiences. However, the interests and market knowledge differ for casual consumers, collectors, and resellers. While the first group may approach secondhand sales out of need or to acquire an object at a discount, collectors and resellers pursue

[352] This scarcity was the result of the government's radical budget cuts and increasing political control. See Santos, "Venezuela: Running on Empty."
[353] For an overview of port corruption, see Transparencia Venezuela, "Illicit Economies in Venezuela. Sheltered by Corruption."
[354] Anonymous participant 04, personal communication. September 5, 2024. All excerpts from the same conversation.
[355] See, for instance, the Instagram handles @ventas_exit.caracas, @garagebychristian, @mobiliarte, @ventasdemilagros, @jjyeventas, @qurucuteando_ando
[356] Anonymous participant 04, personal communication.

objects that meet preestablished criteria, such as an affinity for Colonial art or for mid-century design. They rely not only on invitations and online previews to view content, but also on geography: if a sale takes place in a mid-century house in a mid-century neighborhood, it is more likely to contain mid-century objects. This relation is not so much a reflection of wealth or economic status as it is an indication of *when* people acquired their household objects. Consequently, the city's secondhand market reflects the socio-economic transversality of emigration in both its contents and its location. The geography of closure is a mirror image of processes of social mobility and material accumulation of the twentieth century.

Dismantling a middle-class apartment

Clothes are laid out on beds, ready to be folded and boxed; plates, cups, and kitchen utensils are piled on counters next to open drawers and empty cabinets; porcelain figurines stand in line at the edge of a cupboard waiting to be packed; empty picture frames are arrayed on a sideboard, their photos carefully filed in a manila envelope; a collection of random objects rests on the small dining room table: expired cold medicine, band-aids, bundles of half-used pencils and crayons, markers, tape, scissors, and sheets of paper for identifying the boxes that are piled up against the walls in every room. At first glance, this seems like a scene from a regular domestic move: pack everything into one place and unpack it in another, with the collateral disposal. However, this is a different operation: it is a *project* of dismantling, proceeding methodically along a pre-arranged plan and perfected from one iteration to the next. Each object in this apartment is being taken out, photographed, listed, and separated according to its next destination; surfaces once used for sleeping, cooking, or eating now serve to expose and classify, turning the apartment into a transitional space between two migratory stages, a provisional emigration and a definitive separation. Things are being sold, shipped, donated, or discarded, each trajectory approved by an absent owner, recorded in an inventory that expands daily, as objects from the apartment are dispersed to locations around the city and beyond. The apartment belongs to a retired university professor living abroad with one of her grown children. It is a compact and efficient three-bedroom, two-bathroom unit on the fifth floor of a residential tower overlooking the busy *Avenida Rómulo Gallegos*, on the edge of the municipalities of Chacao and Sucre. Its size and layout are consistent with the typical configuration of privately developed residential towers. The apartment is the work environment for Mairín Reyes, the woman in charge of its dismantling. Her expanding business exposes the combination of skills acquired over decades of work—first as a librarian, later in customer relationships for Venezuela's national telephone company, and finally as the manager of a beauty salon—with the adaptability and capacity for reinvention developed amid the breakdown of formal employment and the dismantling of state enterprises. Her nephew and her sister-in-law—a lawyer by training—assist her in her work.

Mairín's clients are mostly middle-aged professionals who have migrated in the last decade, since "someone who has a property is someone who is already a certain age, who has worked, who has children, and whose children, in some cases, are adults

and are also out of the country." [357] She has dismantled dozens of apartments like this one, all of them "in the East and South-east of Caracas", in middle-class *urbanizaciones* like *Colinas de Bello Monte*, *Santa Eduvigis*, *El Cafetal*, and *Los Naranjos*, privately developed as part of the Eastward expansion of Caracas.[358] Once vacated, the apartment will be cleaned, repainted, and handed over to a real estate agent (procedures that Mairín will also oversee).

Since 2021, when she founded *Soluciono Por Tí* (I Solve It For You) to help migrants manage the closure process, she has dismantled more than thirty homes.[359] Each project entails several weeks of work, during which Mairín and her staff carefully empty out closets and drawers and show their contents to owners who have been away from their homes for "one year, sometimes two; even eight years", and who rely on photographs and videos to decide the fate of their left-behind objects. Information is exchanged over WhatsApp and systematically recorded in online spreadsheets, where the contents of apartments are registered "item by item" together with appraisals, destinations, and sales records. Beyond their practical purpose, these inventories symbolically act as "markers of rupture that demarcate the end of one mode of being and the beginning of another"[360] for the objects they list and their owners alike. As the written record of the threshold moment of closure, inventories simultaneously trace objects to their precise locations in a home and anticipate their following destinations, facilitating an organized dispersal.

Mairín's account of what she finds in vacant homes speaks to the tentativeness of migration: a used coffee cup left in the kitchen sink, worn clothes thrown over the back of a chair, indications of a hasty departure that did not anticipate a prolonged absence. She speaks of domestic objects as "findings" and "discoveries," as if they had been uncovered from an archaeological site; things that her clients often forget they had until they see them again. "'What should I do with this?' I ask [them]. 'Keep it, break it, toss it', [they] respond, depending on the object", summarizes Mairín of the procedure.[361] In Mairín's words, she is "the eyes" of her clients, assuming through her embodied presence a process of separation and reporting it back in real time to an absent party; "an emotional work for one side and the other"[362] that creates its own form for intimacy and sociality around the uncovering and classification of personal objects. Left-behind objects provide Mairín with material for the imaginative reconstruction of lifestyles and habits of people she has never met; whether a family hosted large dinner parties, or someone played a specific sport, or enjoyed reading on a lounge chair by the window are preferences and routines that can be traced through objects, their use, and location in the home. These things are also a record of consumption patterns of social groups at specific times: bronze Easter eggs, Capodimonte figurines; "Caracas is filled with Lladró", Mairín claims, alluding to the prevalence of the Spanish brand of painted porcelain figures in middle-class homes.

[357] Mairín Reyes, personal communication, September 11, 2024. All excerpts are from the same interview.

[358] Colinas de Bello Monte was developed in 1951; the lower section of Santa Eduvigis likely parcelled together with the construction of Avenida Gallegos in the 1950s; El Cafetal was privately developed between 1959 and 1964; Los Naranjos was part of a further Southern expansion of this area in the 1980s. See Arráiz Lucca, *Caracas*.

[359] Daniel Alarcón, host, *Inventario Del Éxodo*, 15.4, Radio Ambulante, n.d., 38:52, accessed October 22, 2025, https://radioambulante.org/audio/inventario-del-exodo.

[360] Vanessa Agnew, "Lists of Things," in *What We Brought with Us: Things of Exile and Migration*, ed. Vanessa Agnew (transcript Verlag, 2024), 20.

[361] Castillo, "Las Casas Muertas Que Revive Mairín."

[362] Mairín Reyes, personal communication.

Being "the eyes" of absent owners speaks to the trust, dependency, and personal connections that frame caretaking. However, her relationship with clients also exposes the caretaker's role as a kind of interpreter of collapse for people "who [are] not in the country and who, after being away for a long time, [have] lost relationships" and are out of synch with the fluid mechanisms for solving everyday challenges. Mairín relies on various brokers, resellers, shipping agents, and beneficiaries who help her distribute the contents of apartments. Like Carlos and other caretakers who manage migrants' properties, Mairín is the central node of a tree-like diagram with branches that radiate in numerous directions. This arrangement turns migrants' decisions to keep, break, or toss their objects into economic niches occupied by individual agents. Mairín refers to this assemblage as her "allies", a business term that adds a patina of credibility to agreements often made on the fringes of informality and legality. Sellers, for example, are people from her immediate entourage or university students "for whom it is a plus to have this commission." Each seller specializes in a category of domestic objects (to avoid competition), advertising it through their own network and referring potential buyers back to Mairín, who handles the sale (at the home in question), distributes commissions, and reports the proceeds on the online spreadsheet. A newcomer to the secondhand business, Mairín admits to lacking the discerning eye of expert valuators or collectors, instead selling "whatever we find in a property, from Tupperware to crystal glassware." Her approach is geared towards reaching a large audience, crossing socio-economic barriers, and opening domestic objects associated with a middle-class lifestyle to a "market segment" otherwise excluded from them.

Clothes and toys are donated to charitable organizations, and books are given away to non-profits that distribute them to libraries and schools. Mairín selects these beneficiaries from a wide range of candidates who collect donations directly at homes, expediting the emptying process. Personal objects that hold sentimental value are packed and shipped abroad to be reunited with their owners. As Mairín explains about this category:

> We provide separate, adequate packaging, protect them, and contact our allies who handle international shipments, ensuring compliance with all required permits so they arrive at their destination. And we watch over that transit, tracking it until we know that our client has satisfactorily received what we sent from here.

This verbalization of a routine procedure, which combines business terminology and affective vocabulary, underscores the administrative and emotional aspects of closure that Mairín's work continuously straddles. It exemplifies not only a methodical approach, but also an affective disposition towards migrants' most valuable possessions, reflected in setting them apart, carefully handling them, and "watching over"[363] their transit. Finally, for the domestic objects that are not sold during dismantling, Mairín created a "custody, exhibition, and sale service." Migrants' stray possessions are advertised on a separate Instagram account—an independent "sales channel" managed by "the children of a close friend"—and are physically kept in a

[363] The word used by Mairín in Spanish was *velar*, which has no direct English translation and is employed for watching over something or assisting someone, or keeping vigil.

300m2 garage. This commercial space operates under a temporary business license and can be visited by appointment. Privileging online exposure and controlling access to a physical store are, for Mairín, part of a repertoire of strategies developed to find loopholes and succeed in a restrictive business environment,[364] where operating a commercial space—even a secondhand business that provides social benefits—requires "[complying] with the permits, which is tedious." Instead, "You have to turn it around", Mairín explains.

Mairín's dismantling turns migrants' homes into "social arenas" in two ways. First, as nodes of dispersal, domestic spaces mediate between absent owners, local buyers, sellers, and recipients of donated goods, highlighting their role as a connective social tissue under the caretaker's supervision. Second, during closure, migrants' objects exit the sphere of individual ownership and familial lifestyles and enter the realm of collective memory. As a project, dismantling sits at the threshold of undoing and redoing: it assists in a voluntary destruction-by-dispersal of individual histories of accumulation. Yet it is also an act of *unmooring* that opens domestic objects to new audiences and possibilities of use, entering into new affective relationships and qualifying new domestic spaces. Furthermore, dismantling-as-project not only navigates an emotionally turbulent separation with detached rigour and administrative efficiency but also leaves a written, systematically organized record of an otherwise non-traceable procedure. In this sense, it produces a record of collective dispersal and loss that is part of a cumulative inventory of emigration's material residues, with the caretaker as a private custodian of records awaiting public disclosure.

Exit Sale

"What's the password?" asks the guard from across the gate. After hearing the four-digit code I had received via WhatsApp, he nods approvingly and presses a button. The motorized gate opens. "Make a left at the first intersection; first house on the right," he instructs.

The destination is a large house at the end of a cul-de-sac, concealed behind a tall wall. The house has its back to the street while its front faces an expansive view of the city on the opposite side. The bell by the front door is broken and covered in spiderwebs. The garage entrance, a metallic gate wide enough for two cars, has a rusted chain dangling across it and shrieks as it slides. The driveway slopes down and to the right. At the bottom is a simple roof structure supported by four corner columns that shelters two dust-covered cars. One of them is propped up with a hydraulic jack, its rear wheel missing, and surrounded by tools and random parts. Beyond this roof structure is a dense tropical forest that flanks one entire side of the house, kept at bay by a low wall. Along the inner side of this wall runs an unkempt garden that will soon be claimed by the forest. The only visible entrance into the house is a small service door leading to the back-of-house areas: service rooms, a

[364] According to World Bank data, due to excessive government regulation, Venezuela ranks 188 out of 190 in ease of doing business. See "Ease of Doing Business in Venezuela," Trading Economics, accessed November 25, 2024, https://tradingeconomics.com/venezuela/ease-of-doing-business.

pantry, a dark bathroom, and a service corridor with chairs and tables piled against a wall. Not a human being in sight.

The service corridor leads to an expansive, bright kitchen, where all sense of abandonment immediately dissipates. Every drawer and cabinet has been emptied, and their contents have been carefully laid out on countertops and displayed on shelves; pots, pans, glasses, containers, trays, cutting boards, measuring cups, mixing bowls, and cooking utensils have all been classified by material and use, forming an improvised architecture of pyramids, towers, mounds, and stacks of plastic, metal, and wood. Each item is labeled with a price tag —a masking-tape rectangle with a handwritten number: stainless steel fondue set, 50; salt and pepper shakers, 4; coffee mug, 1; strainer, 1; hand-painted Italian ceramic bowl, 10; stainless steel bread knife with a worn-out wooden handle, 2. No currency symbol.

The kitchen leads to a heavily decorated dining room, with a large wooden table centered under a crystal chandelier. The table has been set as if for a formal dinner, with each place displaying a sample of luxury dinnerware and a hand-written tag corresponding to the entire set. The next room is a double-height hall with Persian rugs spread on the floor and rolled up against the walls, Baroque and Colonial-style chairs against the walls, and glass cabinets filled with decorative porcelain and antiques. From this hall, a broad staircase leads up to the bedrooms or down to other social areas.

On the upper floor, private spaces have been arranged in sequence, beginning and ending at opposite sides of the stair landing. First, to the left, is the master bedroom, where bed sheets, towels, and embroidered linens have been folded and displayed on the bed and on nightstands. Next to this room is a study filled with old office equipment: staplers, punch-hole openers, binders, photo equipment, printers, monitors, scanners, video projectors, mice, keyboards, and loose cables whose technological obsolescence is evidence of the time that has passed since the house was last inhabited. Then, in shocking contrast to this room filled with outdated equipment, is the children's bedroom, decorated with plush toys, the beds made as if the kids had just left for school. Except the family hadn't left that morning; they had emigrated eight years ago and only recently—in the aftermath of the latest stolen elections—decided to sell the house along with everything in it. The place has been locked for nearly a decade, the windows boarded up with plywood. Recreating this domestic setting was the culmination of two months of cleaning, classifying, discarding, and organizing.

Finally, the kids' bedroom connects to a small room overflowing with Christmas decorations: pine cones, balls, garlands, Santa Clauses, snowmen, nativity scenes, angels, plastic Christmas crowns; a collection of holiday traditions stacked on tabletops and shelves and pouring out of open drawers. "People used to sell their dining furniture and their artwork; now they sell everything,"[365] the seller would explain later.

On the lower level, to the right of the main staircase, is a living room with geometric abstract art on the walls and Baroque-style armchairs. Between two chairs is a coffee table filled with empty photo frames, equestrian artwork: horse statues

[365] Javier Torres (pseudonym), personal communication. September 14, 2024. All excerpts from the same conversation.

and busts, engravings of antique carriages, and show-jumping trophies. Next to the anonymity of the imageless frames, these trophies are the only vestiges of the owners' identities. Across the living room, to the left of the stairs, is a more private dining room where the family's glassware collection has been displayed: hundreds of glasses arranged by shape and color in neat rows set on various tables in the center of the space and along the perimeter, accompanied by more dinnerware sets, silver trays, and bowls. Directly in front of the stairs, facing the city, is a loggia that runs the length of the entire lower level, opening onto a large garden with an empty kidney-shaped pool. Next to the pool is a large shed overflowing with wheeled barbecues, plastic coolers, foldable chairs, and inflatable toys, the kinds of things necessary for a large pool party. Other parts of the large house are off-limits to the visitor: an empty guesthouse located somewhere in the garden, and a closet where the owners' clothes and other items excluded from the sale have been stored.

Out on the loggia, Javier Torres, the man in charge of the sale, stands behind an improvised workstation as he speaks with a customer. He is holding a list of all the objects in the house, surrounded by items that are either on their way out or waiting to enter. Next to him is a roll of masking tape, a pair of scissors, and a line of small yellowish squares ready to be placed on objects. A civil engineer by training, Javier worked in construction and started collecting Colonial art in his youth, gradually amassing an extensive private collection. At one point, in the early 1990s, he studied restoration and opened a specialized gallery. It was then that he began organizing estate sales for his clients. At that time, these events occupied a small niche in an already reduced secondhand market, with only a handful of people specializing in distinct periods or styles. Over the last decade, emigration and a lack of formal employment have drawn more people to the business. As newcomers gain ground, clients value his expertise and rely on him for appraisals, connections to collectors, and discretion. "I have clients who have been waiting for several months to show their houses," explains Javier in reference to the increasing workload. The "showing" itself is the result of a process that begins with the documentation of a home's contents, followed by appraisals and inventories, and the setup of the sale itself, which can be, as in this case, an arduous process in itself. There is, he explains, a parallel and more subtle side to his work that entails "preparing" clients not only for the moment their homes will be open to the public and the separation from their possessions, but also for the devalued market in which they will circulate.

As the culmination of a private, administratively rigorous, and emotionally straining process of classification, appraisal, and spatial organization, exit sales transform domestic architecture into temporary social arenas for exhibition and exchange, where the display of domestic objects closely follows preexisting relationships with their environments: cooking utensils in the kitchen, linens in the bedroom, and inflatable toys by the pool; nothing travels far from where it was once used or stored. Reinforcing these associations between objects and spaces transforms closure into a *performance of domesticity*, turning intimate spaces into stages where domestic objects perform as props in their own commodification, dramatizing the homeliness of the setting to heighten their own value. Exit sales rely on carefully orchestrated strategies of display and selective access to create the appearance of exclusivity and recover some monetary value. Unlike the clandestine events that transform homes into party venues for a few hours, or the boutiques that

turn houses into commercial spaces, all of which overwrite “hierarchical relationships between form and function”,[366] exit sales are *anti-events*; they don’t subvert but reinforce habitual associations through the interaction between spaces and objects. What impresses and overwhelms—what “shocks”, to use Tschumi’s term—of the exit sale is the sheer quantity of things and the sense of destitution that surrounds them, not because they have been separated from their owners but because it is inconceivable that this amount of things will be used again.

Showroom

Quinta Anita is located in a residential street in *Altamira*. The house was designed by Jan Gorecki in 1961.[367] It is elegant and spacious, with numerous social areas, four bedrooms with private bathrooms, a front garden, independent car access, service quarters; an expansive domestic program distributed across three floors. It is surrounded by other single-family houses, which, like *Anita*, are partially concealed behind tall walls and metal carports. This house, however, is raised half a level so that its upper floor is clearly visible from outside as three projecting volumes that provide shade to the lower level. The front wall was later fitted with an electrical fence and punctuated by security cameras covering every angle. A bright red door on the right side of the wall has a narrow slit that slides open to screen visitors who ring the bell. When its original owner passed away ten years ago, the house was supposed to be sold and the proceeds divided among the successors. However, in a real estate market devalued by a surplus of residential properties, the inheritors preferred to “wait and see what happens in the country.”[368] Suspended in the meanwhileness of an indefinitely postponed market recovery, it was instead rented as a showroom specializing in mid-century design, managed by Milagros Candia and her husband Nelson. The couple has been in the second-hand business for more than twenty years. Over the last decade, business has grown, but so has the competition, requiring the establishment of a unique brand and the adoption of creative display strategies. The house, concretely its interior and its contents, has a parallel existence on the Instagram account *Ventas de Milagros*.[369] Like other converted houses in the area, its commercial use is concealed by the house’s domestic exterior. Unlike other venues, however, the showroom’s location is not advertised online. Therefore, visiting the showroom for the first time requires contacting its manager and receiving an invitation.

Upon ringing the bell, the narrow slit in the door slides open, and a pair of eyes inspects the visitor—a final instance of friction in an interaction that originated online. On the other side of the wall, the setback that separates the house from the street is replete with garden furniture scattered around an artificial turf: wrought-

[366] Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjuncture*, 255.

[367] Jan Gorecki was a Polish architect who arrived in Venezuela in 1951. He designed more than 600 buildings and had a prolific career that spanned over half a century. He died in a second exile in Miami in 2019.

[368] Milagros Candia, personal communication. September 2nd 2024. All excerpts are from the same interview.

[369] *Ventas de Milagros* (Milagros’ sales) takes its name after its owner, Milagros Candia. However, the name is also a word play with the other meaning of *milagros* (miracles).

iron benches, nylon lounge chairs, tables, umbrellas, and Buddha statues resting on top of miniature fountains. The entrance leads directly to the main showroom, which occupies the entire front of the house. Once the main living and dining area, it now contains three separate living room scenes pressed tightly together with narrow paths between them. In the back of the room are two dining room tables with table settings; paintings, engravings, drawings, and abstract wire sculptures hang from walls and ceiling; one wall is lined with cabinets whose shelves are filled with glasses and cups of all shapes and sizes, meticulously arranged, spotless, and protected behind glass. Low-tempo house music plays from speakers discreetly placed next to security cameras. The adjacent room recreates this scene at a smaller scale: two living room settings, walls lined with cabinets filled with glasses and cups, and a selection of modern floor lamps, ceiling lamps, desk lamps, paintings, drawings, and various decorative objects. To one side of this space is a smaller room—once used as a pantry connecting to an off-limits kitchen—with two tables replete with glass trays, bowls, cake plates, vases, bottles, and piles of dinnerware; more cupboards and cabinets filled with glasses against every wall. On the other side is a deposit with heavy-duty shelves along three walls, each shelf holding dinnerware sets whose plates, bowls, cups, and saucers are stacked on top of one another. On the upper floor, a family lounge contains additional dining sets, chairs, and tables, with complete dinnerware sets piled on top, surrounded by more cupboards and cabinets filled with glasses, which compete for space with floor lamps, desk lamps, ceiling lamps, and random decorative objects. Two bedrooms have been turned into even smaller displays of modern chairs, Scandinavian bureaus, ceiling lamps, and abstract sculptures, while a third room is dedicated to pieces that deviate stylistically from the rest: naïve wooden saints, Colonial-style chairs, Chinese jars, Polynesian figurines, and a cabinet filled with carefully polished silver trays and tea sets. The fourth room is a miniature boutique offering vintage clothing and luxury-brand suitcases.

"Most of these things belong to people who have left,"[370] explains Milagros. Other objects come from estate sales, from the elderly who downsize and have no space or family to leave their things to, and from people who need cash for urgent expenses. Every item on display in the showroom has a hand-written label with three numbers: the first is the owner's code; the second is the item's inventory number; the third, preceded by a "#", is the price: Scandinavian glass plate with leaf motif, 033, 203, #5; Eames molded-plywood chair, 067, 022, #350; Baccarat liquor bottle, 025, 142, #40; Achile Castiglione Arco floor lamp, 104, 006,#300. This coding system operates at two levels: it tracks ownership—these objects still belong to others and are here under consignment—and anonymizes objects' trajectories and their relationships to individual stories of migration, demise, and precarity. The showroom is an aseptic environment that allows objects to re-enter the commodity sphere with a clean slate, unburdened by their history, their ownership decoded in privately kept inventories, together with dates of arrival and records of transactions. Consignment extends the original ownership of objects, turning closure into an open-ended process that continues after separation, underscoring the objects' transit and the house's role as a temporary holder during a protracted exchange.

[370] Milagros Candia, personal communication.

“We focus on nice things, fine things. We select and curate; otherwise, we’d have no room,”[371] explains Milagros. “[We would need] an entire building,”[372] adds Nelson. “People send me so many things, but I just can’t. … they don’t meet the requirements,”[373] Milagros continues. The “sending” happens on WhatsApp, where Milagros interacts with clients and decides what to accept or decline. As departure and downsizing create a growing market for second-hand goods, the lack of space is not inevitably a problem; instead, it allows the couple to become increasingly selective, turning the house into a filter through which very few items pass. “I insist on people that this [showroom] is for selling or buying special pieces, because there is so, so, so much.”[374]

However, the “specialty” Milagros refers to is not only the result of careful selection; it is also produced through a routine of rotation and display, as objects in her collection are constantly rearranged to create new combinations, mixing and matching between existing and newly-arrived things in coordination with the modernist architectural background: one day, a rare 1970s Thomas dinnerware set[375] is downstairs, arranged on a dining table against an abstract painting; the next, it is in one of the rooms upstairs, resting on a mid-century sideboard before returning to its shelf next to similarly unique pieces; each iteration documented and advertised on social media with a musical background, a descriptive caption, and the price (or the indication to ask for it privately).

Sale prices are agreed with owners beforehand, a process that requires the couple’s expertise to consider a variety of concrete and elusive variables. First, the item’s international retail value, available on secondhand websites or auction records, is determined by its historical origin, authorship, or rarity. Second, the object’s condition. Third, a sense for what sells locally. Finally—and the most elusive variable—is a local depreciation factor: a 75 to 90 percent reduction of the international price point, because in a country isolated from international markets, with a declining middle class and a new elite with no taste for used things, “that is what the market gives you.”[376] In this negotiation, the owners’ emotional attachment to their objects is excluded from the calculation, yet it is offered to clients in the form of advice: don’t sell. As Nelson explains:

> The advisable thing to do, and I recommend this to people who bring us their things, is that, for the price you are going to sell these things, you give them to your relatives, because maybe you will get... I am going to give you an example: this liquor bottle you see here is worth forty dollars, but on eBay or elsewhere it might cost three hundred dollars because it is a Baccarat bottle. So you say, “Well, shall I sell it?” Well, look, you sell it because you have to, but if you raise the price, you won't sell it.[377]

[371] Ibid.
[372] Nelson Candia, personal communication.
[373] Milagros Candia, personal communication.
[374] Ibid. During our interview, Milagros would often repeat adverbs and adjectives as a way to indicate excess of quantities, and employ terms like “jewel” or “marvel” in reference to second-hand domestic objects.
[375] Specifically, this was a large set of the Scandic Shadow dinnerware series in bright orange, designed by renowned Swedish ceramist Hertha Bengston.
[376] Nelson Candia, personal communication.
[377] Ibid.

Like the exit sale, the showroom is a dramatization of domesticity. Its curated selection of sofas, rugs, tables, chairs, lamps, and cabinets is combined to recreate an infinite number of living or dining scenes out of the material residues of departure. Performed in coordination with architecture, this spatial operation is designed to maximize the physical and digital exposure of an ever-growing collection of items to an increasingly smaller audience. As a scene of exchange, it is a form of prolonged exit sale in which a rotating collection of material residues is wiped clean of dust and history and offered as prized finds. The showroom is a "temporary" reprogramming made possible by the postponement of migratory or financial decisions. However, unlike other commercially converted houses showcasing brand-new imports, the contents of the showroom are also immersed in their own transition, inseparable from the architecture.

The junkyard

Closure displaces domestic objects and unsettles their value. It does this not by altering their physical integrity but by creating a sense of desire and exclusivity around their commodification, as well as through display strategies that maximize the exposure of objects while erasing singular histories of ownership and use, wiping patinas, and concealing identities.

"My goodness, how one accumulates things!" claimed Mairín Reyes.[378] Initiated by the rituals of opening, exhibiting, quantifying, and inventorying, closure is the moment when the residual accumulation amassed over decades of material well-being becomes shockingly evident. Closure makes public a surplus that was obscured by storage and ownership, releasing objects from the burden of domestic belonging into new possibilities of use. "We receive things that are very valuable because Venezuela had a time of great abundance," said Nelson Candia. Closure exposes the undoing of a decades-long order, uncovering the feeble logic that equated material progress with a fascination for the new and the means to acquire it.[379]

If collapse is not a temporary or reversible detour from an established course, commodity exchange should not be examined as a mere diversion from a path of established value regimes, nor as a conflict in the value systems of buyers and sellers.[380] Amid collapse, domestic objects reenter a commodity stage under conditions fundamentally different from those under which they exited, where a combination of precarity and surplus informs their value and exchange possibilities. However, these conditions not only flatten value but also perform a more fundamental conversion, by which mundane goods are transformed into treasures and luxury items become worthless junk. Closure is the moment when this conversion occurs. Closure inaugurates the junkyard, reframing it from a terminal condition to an opening stage in the trajectories of domestic objects.

378 Castillo, "Las Casas Muertas Que Revive Mairín."

379 Consider how the demands of the middle class shaped state policy, specifically the overvaluation of currency and salaries that did not reflect actual productivity levels. See Vallecillos, "El Caso Venezuela."

380 Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value," 20.

The junkyard is the unavoidable outcome of the number of things surpassing their potential users (or their willingness to take responsibility for them). "These objects are 20% knick-knack and 80% fantasy",[381] one secondhand seller said. It is this "fantasy" the value that caretakers sustain, which demands the constant maintenance, rotation, exhibition, and inviting background music. The junkyard brings to the fore, through spatial reconfiguration and creative action, things that otherwise would have "dropped out of history and *imagination*."[382]

As collapse reduces the threshold for commodification, the caretakers' mandate to sell anything and everything increases the (human) cost of extending the life of the objects offered for exchange. Expert knowledge, taste, an "eye" for quality, or access to international auction prices are, when not anecdotal, simply referential: a fixed post against which to measure the devastation.

Like the bazaar, the auction, or the stock market,[383] the junkyard is a social arena; the value regimes it mediates are not between buyers and sellers—worthlessness is a collective agreement, surplus is a self-evident truth—but between a society's aspirations and its capacity to cope with its own demise: the junkyard is a space of reckoning.

[381] Anonymous participant 04, personal communication, September 5, 2024.
[382] Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," 226 Emphasis added.
[383] Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value," 15, 51.

Residual accumulation: a photo album

The following excerpts correspond to photographs taken in the course of the fieldwork. They describe conditions of the domestic environments that the photographs portray. However, listed without their corresponding images, they are *orphan captions*, inviting the reader to find the corresponding photograph and opening the visual material to new associations:

A kitchen is dismantled after a gas leak and its appliances are given away to a neighbor.

A living room becomes a deposit for a family's belongings, constantly reorganized as they await valuation and sale in secondhand markets.

A bedroom is transformed into a studio apartment, cramped with a foldable mattress, a table for one, a refrigerator, an electric stove, an Italian coffee pot, and various paintings and family portraits, as other rooms in the house are closed off.

A worn-out sofa left by a neighbor becomes a prized possession, reorganizing the house around itself, wrapped and protected until it is sold for a commission.

A left-behind painting is hung back on a wall of an empty house to simulate dwelling.

A living room becomes a seamstress's atelier and an adjacent study is used as a makeshift dressing room.

A planter in a patio becomes a habitat for left-behind tortoises, whose feeding schedule determines the frequency of visits to an empty house.

A house is deemed unsuitable for human occupation by the last remaining family member, who decides to turn it into a dog hotel.

A heap of branches and chopped-up tree trunks wait to be sold as firewood.

A living room is turned into a bookstore, its stacks so close together that there is barely enough room for walking.

A garden is turned into an orchard, a junkyard, and a repository for friends' plants.

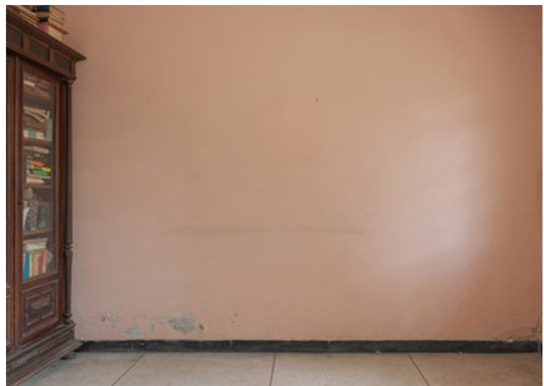
This selection of photographs of various domestic environments was taken over three years of fieldwork. Many of these images illustrate the various sections of the text; others belong to homes that did not become caretaking stories and episodes, but which, during field research, reiterated patterns of departure and care, and in the process, exposed the vastness of residual accumulation.

The order of the photographs does not follow the sequence of episodes, the chronological order of the documentation, or the geographic proximity of homes. There is an intentional interchangeability between these photographs and the stories they belong to, which stems from the difficulty of cataloging and classifying some of the material. Is this a bedroom or a kitchen, a bathroom or a deposit, a garden or a junkyard? This difficulty attests to how living amid residues—and often off of them—is an exercise in spatial reconfiguration, in which use and hierarchies that otherwise inform domestic architecture are overwritten by maintenance, storage, or the need to make a profit. Residual accumulation resists classification.

Photographs are grouped according to spatial correspondence (spaces that were living rooms or bedrooms), storage or display strategies (wrapped objects, metal shelves, book shelves, objects placed upside down), or material and formal similarities of spaces and objects (the prevalence of wood or circular shapes). This arrangement should be read as a further play on interchangeability, as an invitation for the reader to form new connections, and as a reference to middle-class taste or the aesthetic preferences associated with specific periods. Ultimately, this photo album is also an assemblage, mirroring the dissertation's structure in its dialogue between fragment and whole.

Whenever possible, photographs were taken frontally and digitally edited to reduce contrast and brighten dark tones. The visual uniformity of the collection is also a form of flattening and denuding, intended to lend the material the character of a mechanical report. While many of the documented items are carefully organized, labeled, and displayed on shelves and in cabinets to highlight their singularity and value, the album's juxtapositions and repetitions challenge this quality, shifting the focus to quantity. In this sense, this collection exposes a minuscule portion of the immeasurable material residues dispersed throughout the city, stacked on shelves, piled up against walls, carefully organized in glass vitrines, or haphazardly stored in thousands of houses and apartments.

In these photographs, a living indoor plant, a carefully arranged display, or a cluttered desk all attest to human presence, evidence of an attention that often blurs the distinction between inhabitation, maintenance, and subsistence, yet remains confined to the realm of the interior. Amidst the accumulation of things are caretakers whose lives revolve around these objects, watering plants, selling a piano, holding a book, pulling back a curtain to expose even more things, or presiding over the remains of demolition.



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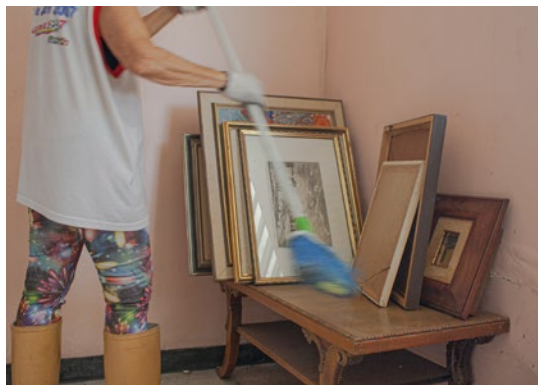

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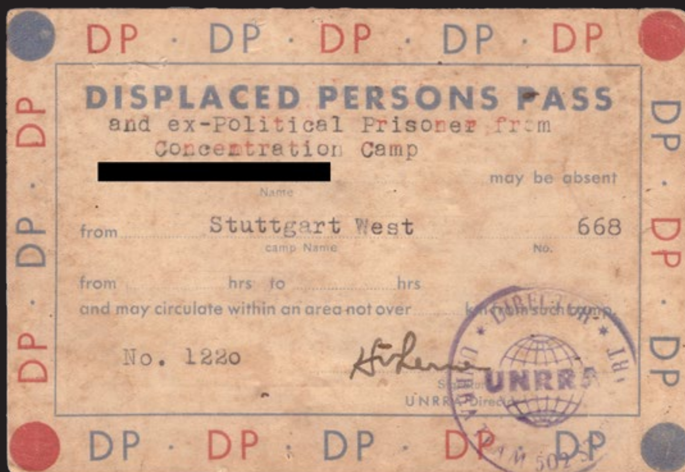

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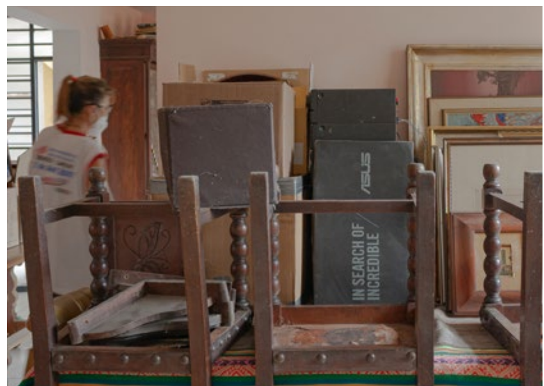
ASUS
IN SEARCH OF INCREDIBLE

CHINON
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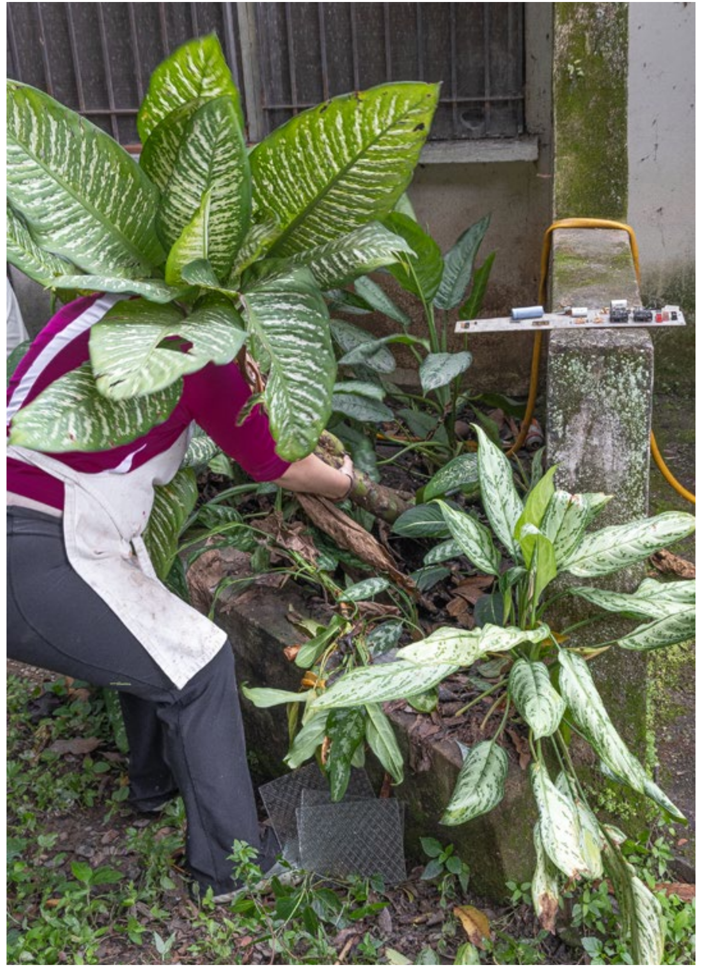


NISSAN

The collector: Caretaking as preservation of collective memory

Institutional dismantling and “the collapse of memory”

Over the last two decades, Venezuela’s public libraries and archives have undergone a systematic dismantling that has targeted both their physical infrastructure and the documents they contain. This has included the irregular discarding of tens of thousands of volumes for recycling, the selective elimination of books from the central and regional library branches for their “capitalist ideology”,[384] the deletion of records containing names associated with historical events of the recent past,[385] as well as the chronic disrepair of mechanical equipment necessary for archival preservation, the inappropriate storage of photographs and microfilm, the eventual flooding of deposits, and the meager salaries of qualified staff.[386]
This devastation extends beyond the National Library to other public institutions, exemplified in the burning of the library of *Universidad de Oriente* in 2020—a deathblow to years of pillage and destruction of its physical infrastructure—the academic and material annihilation of *Universidad Simón Bolívar* since 2021 by imposing regime-friendly authorities, the immiseration of public university professors and staff, the ideological takeover of state editorials and public funding institutions, the closure or confiscation of newspapers including their facilities and archives, the control over paper imports for book and press printing, the bankruptcy of local editorials and booksellers,[387] the departure of international publishers and the imposition of tariffs for book imports, all of which amount to a systematic charge against not only the preservation of collective memory but also the production and dissemination of knowledge that is eventually incorporated into it. This prolonged destruction has been documented and denounced, and it has been the subject of intellectual reflection and artistic experimentation. Photographer and curator Vilena Figueira produced a moving visual account of the National Library’s lost visual

[384] Laura Helena Castillo, “La Destrucción de La Cultura,” Siete Días, *El Nacional* (Caracas), March 20, 2009.
[385] Yeannaly Fermin, “Entre la oscuridad y el calor se pierde la memoria documental de la Biblioteca Nacional,” Runrun.es, July 18, 2023, https://runrun.es/rr-es-plus/505484/entre-la-oscuridad-y-el-calor-se-pierde-la-memoria-documental-de-la-biblioteca-nacional/.
[386] Isaac González Mendoza, “Soledad y abandono: una visita a la Biblioteca Nacional,” El Nacional, August 19, 2021, https://www.elnacional.com/2021/08/soledad-y-abandono-una-visita-a-la-biblioteca-nacional/.
[387] Florantonia Singer and Alonso Moleiro, “La soledad por el cierre de las librerías en Caracas y los libros que no emigran,” El País, November 6, 2022, https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-11-06/la-soledad-por-el-cierre-de-las-librerias-en-caracas-y-los-libros-que-no-emigran.html.

archive, where she worked for decades,[388] Ángela Bonadies created a series of works around Venezuela's archives and those looking after them,[389] while writer and editor Jacqueline Godlberg has written about "the collapse of memory" in relation to the disappearance of public archives and the loss of writers' personal documents after emigration.[390]

In *The Power of the Archive and Its Limits*, Achille Mbembe proposes a dual reading of the archive as both architecture and document, asserting that the function of the former is not simply to store material records but also to permit the "rituals" through which the archive is produced and used.[391] In this sense, the breakdown of the National Library's physical enclosure and its contents—its flooded basements, unlit hallways, filthy toilets and mold-infested stacks—has also decimated the possibility of executing the mechanisms through which documents are incorporated into or made available by the archive, replacing rituals of production and use with the mundane procedures of precarity and survival that define public sector employment in Venezuela.[392]

If, as Mbembe suggests, "the power and status of the archive derive from this entanglement of building and documents",[393] we can ask what happens to each one if the other one fails, if the "entanglement" is undone by damaging the building or by destroying its contents. Mbembe warns us of the risks to the state in attempting to eliminate archives, delete evidence, and complicate the future reassembly of historical events, or to shut down the past while pretending to start anew. Such actions, in the author's view, displace the memory and contents of the archive to a realm where it can be reclaimed and reconstituted by the imagination.[394] It is precisely this possibility of reclamation and reconstitution that these episodes explore. These procedures are embodied in the figure of the collector, who has access to collective memory as a scattered universe preserved in empty houses, who selects and chooses from the personal libraries of migrants and deceased elderly, and who is part of a network of booksellers and collectors who operate on the margins of visibility and against the sustained dismantling of the country's public archives.

Initial encounter with a book collector

Rows of heavy-duty shelves create long, narrow aisles, barely wide enough for walking, which are stacked from floor to ceiling with books so tightly pressed together that it is difficult to remove one. The top of the shelves is haphazardly held

[388] Inger Pedreáñez, "Vilena Figueira: 'Todo rescate de la memoria nace de una pérdida' Vilena Figueira: 'Todo rescate de la memoria nace de una pérdida,'" Cinco8, October 31, 2020, https://www.cinco8.com/perspectivas/vilena-figueira-todo-rescate-de-la-memoria-nace-de-una-perdida/.
[389] Cristina Pardo Porto, "Reframing Archives from the Venezuelan Diaspora: Ángela Bonadies's Photographs," *Art Journal* 84, no. 4 (2025): 56–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2025.2566620.
[390] Jacqueline Goldberg, "Venezuela: el colapso de la memoria," Letras Libres, January 1, 2025, https://letraslibres.com/revista/goldberg-venezuela-el-colapso-de-la-memoria-01-01-2025/.
[391] Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Springer, 2002), 19.
[392] Rosales et al., "Depredación y Ausencia de Burocracia."
[393] Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 19.
[394] Concretely, for Mbembe displacement reconstructs the archive as "fantasy" or as "specter". Ibid., 23

together with cut-out sections of the same L-shaped profiles used to build the stacks, constructing a single interconnected structure. In the middle of the room, a gap in the shelves creates a transversal passage; beyond it, the aisle spacing is even narrower, an intentional misalignment to make room for more shelves, disrupting the linearity of the rows and their alphabetical arrangement. In every corner, piles of books wait to be shelved or discarded. The floor is poured granite with a rhomboid pattern, typical of Caracas's mid-century residential architecture. However, its color changes halfway from white to black, the transition mediated by the remains of a demolished wall. By their location in the house, we can infer that these joined rooms were once a living room and a dining room. At the far end of the room, a large window faces a front garden planted with grass and sparse plants. All these lingering traces of domesticity go almost unnoticed amid the books. There are more than 100.000 of them, arranged on shelves, piled in corners, and stored in boxes, a massive inventory assembled from donations and the liquidation of personal libraries.[395]

The house was designed by Rafael Bergamín in 1955.[396] It was used as a private residence for several decades and operated as a kindergarten for fifteen years before being converted to its current use in 2014. Its materiality and domestic exterior remain largely intact, but it has been internally subdivided into spatially and economically independent units. In the back of the house, what used to be a kitchen is now a beauty salon with independent access and business hours. In the front, a former study has been converted into a separate shop where books—the surplus of the surplus—are liquidated for two to five dollars apiece. Upstairs, the bedrooms have been converted into rental spaces: one for coworking, another for a swimsuit boutique, and a third for small gatherings. A fourth bedroom is being renovated to accommodate an exhibition space. Soon, it will house carefully curated displays of rare books and first editions (tickets sold downstairs).

This fragmentation follows a crude logic: "I get three hundred dollars a month for renting each room, that is the salary of one employee."[397] explains Ignacio Alvarado, the house's owner. The compartmentalization of the house has become a tool for financial survival, a spatial measure that increases the "maneuvering margins" for managing daily challenges amid precarity.[398] Most importantly, it allows Alvarado to concentrate his efforts on collecting books for his museum, a project gradually taking shape in the house's basement, where a light and humidity-controlled space contained, in the summer of 2023, one thousand volumes that made up the collection of *Museo del Libro Venezolano* (Venezuelan Book Museum).

Identified on social media as a "Private non-profit dedicated to the conservation and dissemination of Venezuelan books",[399] the Museum's objective "is to store books, to treasure them for future generations,"[400] as explained by Alvarado in a promotional Instagram video. The Museum is neither a private collection destined for

[395] For reference, the library at TU Delft's Faculty of Architecture has approximately 45.000 volumes.

[396] Rafael Bergamín (1891-1970) was a Spanish architect who lived and worked in Venezuela between 1938 and 1958.

[397] Ignacion Alvarado, personal communication. July 18, 2023. All interview excerpts from the same date.

[398] Vásquez Lezama, "Cuando Se Consume El Cuerpo Del Pueblo. La Incertidumbre Como Política de Supervivencia En Venezuela," 112.

[399] See https://www.instagram.com/museodellibrovenezolano

[400] Museo del Libro Venezolano (@museodellibrovenezolano), "¿Cuál Es El Objetivo Del Museo Del Libro Venezolano?," *Instagram*, December 27, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DEGEgB8vbed/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

personal use, nor a public one, institutionally managed or universally accessible; instead, it falls in the ambiguous territory of individual enterprises assuming the state's functions of custody of national documentary heritage. This overlap of roles exposes simultaneous trajectories of dismantling and (re)assembly of the country's collective memory, where the systematic undoing of public institutions is (partially) countered by individual initiatives. However, the aim of these initiatives is not to reinstate books into the state's sphere but to guard them in an ambiguous space where they can be both protected from it and claimed as a collective heritage.

When I arrive at the house, Ignacio is walking in carrying a stack of books. An elderly neighbor recently died, and his family asked him to visit his personal library and take any books he found valuable. Our conversation begins haphazardly as he organizes the proceeds of his excursion. I ask him about how the secondhand book market overlaps with emigration. He explains:

> Unlike works of art, used books have no commercial value. It is not worth taking them out [of the country]. That is why they remain in Caracas. This has created a surplus that makes people give them away for free, literally. Seeing this recurrently convinced me to start the Museum. You just saw me walking in with those books. Beautiful books are lost because they are abandoned, get wet, are given away, or discarded. I felt sorry and thought they should be rescued. That is what I am trying to do, because they are being lost.

The conversation moves seamlessly between books and artwork to the closure of bookstores in the city and the devaluation of the real estate market, as if all were manifestations of the same phenomenon. "The house next door went on the market for 400.000 dollars. They sold it for 160.000, a third of the price." As we speak, he offers a cursory tour of the house, omitting the spaces that are not part of his book business. We descend to the basement:

> Let me show you what we have, overall, so you can see how we are trying to save it … This is the conservation area … Here, books are maintained, with air conditioning and dehumidifiers … This is eighty to ninety percent of the books we will have in the future. They are valuable books for various reasons: for their beauty, for their content, for their rarity, for being bestsellers, for being manuscripts, for being books from the first decades of the nineteenth century… Here they are, selected, kept, and cared for.

Ignacio likens his work to the Global Seed Vault, buried in the Norwegian Arctic, which preserves seeds for the future. Our conversation turns to the National Library and its facilities.

> Every time I go there, I leave depressed and happy. Depressed for the Library and happy for what we have achieved. The first editions of Doña Bárbara, Lanzas Coloradas, Memorias de Mamá Blanca, for example, are not there. How is that possible? They have some copies, but they are bound and for loan. They are in ruins. It is not possible that the most

> important [Venezuelan] novels of the twentieth century are not in the National Library. That is just one example. There are a lot of incomplete magazine collections whose numbers have been stolen. The film and photographic material are lost due to poor preservation. The employees, imagine, who can work for ten or fifteen dollars a month?

A foray

Ignacio offers to return to the house he just visited. “We can go right now. It's right close by ... It's very interesting because it is a typical house from the early sixties, decorated as it was at the time.” He knows this neighborhood well; as we walk the short distance, he recalls how houses in every street are either vacant or occupied by a caretaker, while others have been invaded. “These are all occupied by someone who cares for them. In *La Lagunita*, there are more than a hundred, in *Prados del Este*, around fifty; here in *San Román*,[401] in the street where I live, there are five vacant houses.” He points at another house with a broken-down carport and exclaims, “Look at this house. The ones that don't look like this are because some relative is looking after them.” He turns his gaze to a construction site down the street with a newly-built gate and a long brick wall. “A lawyer with money bought those two houses. He razed them.” Up the street, an elderly Holocaust survivor lives alone in a large house; she arrived in Venezuela as a young girl and moved to the area in the sixties after getting married. Across from her is a house with a “for sale” sign barely visible behind overgrown weeds. Next to it, is a dilapidated modernist house owned by a middle-aged woman who inherited it from her parents. Another house was recently bought by a member of the military; it has been repainted and its perimeter lined with barbed wire. The juxtaposition of decrepit structures next to newly renovated houses turns our short walk into a repetition of the processes of decay and transformation observable in other parts of the city.

We arrive at a large house looked after by a middle-aged couple, who are overseeing its closure after the owner's passing. The house is not yet on the market, but its contents are for sale. The man tries to lure Ignacio into buying furniture; he offers a piano and proudly notes its German origin. The expansive living room is already halfway dismantled; the remaining furniture—an assortment of colonial-style chairs, marble coffee tables, a large porcelain tiger, and paintings with vaguely patriotic themes—is set up in the center of the room, an island of inhabitation that will shrink as the furniture is sold. Paint is peeling off the walls and mold stains are spreading through the ceiling. Next to the living room, behind a closed door, is the library. Unlike the living room, this room is neatly preserved; dirt and vacancy are kept at bay in here. Dark wooden bookshelves line three walls and are filled with carefully organized volumes. There is a large, elegant desk with two facing chairs, the national flag, family portraits, and a photo of a man with Pope John Paul II. “I walk

[401] *San Román* is a residential urbanization developed in the early 1950s by Mexican developer Gustavo San Román, who was also responsible for the development of much of the South-East Caracas, including the neighbourhoods of *La Lagunita* in 1957, *Prados del Este* in 1961, and *Santa Paula* in 1959. See: Arráiz Lucca, *Caracas*.

into houses like this one every day. There's always a good library," Ignacio remarks, standing in the middle of the office. But he had already taken what he considered had a place in his own collection. "This is part of my routine," he would explain later. "I have become incredibly selective and only rescue books for the museum. Hundreds, thousands of books are being lost, and there is nothing to do."

Why did we come here? What is the meaning of this visit? This foray constitutes an episode within an episode—an experience that stands on its own, clearly delimited in time and space, with the possibility of branching into new directions, yet also inseparable from the episode within which it is inscribed. This house was being lived in and looked after on behalf of someone absent, its contents reinserted in a commodity sphere; yet, the space also fell within Ignacio's orbit, as part of his routine and intersecting with his own value regime, one oriented not towards recouping economic worth but towards restoring cultural meaning. Rescuing books tied this junkyard to the museum nearby, connecting the dead man's library to it as if by an invisible umbilical cord that feeds its growing collection. Its eventual disappearance, when the house is vacated and its contents liquidated, donated, or sold as pulp, turns the museum's collection into a bastion against destruction and an opportunity for re-founding that is inherent to collecting.[402] Yet the visit also exposes the radical embrace of chance that underlies Ignacio's work, transforming collecting into an activity that transcends practical considerations and borders on the irrational.

Collecting as a collective effort

There is a relevant, albeit somewhat obscure, historical precedent to this form of collecting in the work of the writer Mikhail Osorgin and other intellectuals who, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, opened a bookstore in Moscow to trade books that would have been otherwise lost. In the short essay *The Writer's Bookstore*, Osorgin describes their effort to save books and historical documents by buying them from famished university professors or dispossessed aristocrats, collecting them, selling them, or trading them for food while evading State control and confiscation, undecided to donate them to museums "for fear of 'purges' analogous to those that public libraries and private archives had suffered,"[403] an utterly unprofitable endeavor that eventually succumbed under the weight of taxes. Osorgin's account reveals the book's complex status as an object, at once fragile and enduring, worthless and treasured. As a commodity whose recirculation value is more often determined by its constitution—paper to be sold by weight—than its contents, the work of the collector is to pull them out from a trajectory towards oblivion. Like Osorgin, Ignacio Alvarado is not a self-appointed curator of memory; instead, his work must be viewed within a landscape of cumulative and collective efforts by individuals, private entities, and ad hoc groups patiently reassembling the fallout of institutional collapse.

[402] John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, "Introduction," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Reaktion Books, 1994), 1.

[403] Mikhail Osorgin, *La Librería de Los Escritores*, trans. Selma Ancira (Ediciones de la Central, 2007), 38.

Gran Pulpería del Libro Venezolano[404] occupies an eight-hundred-square-meter underground parking garage, accessible via a ramp-turned-stairwell, with no natural light and pipes hanging from the ceiling, running in every direction. It is a maze of dark aisles with deep shelves holding two rows of books, and staff who use walkie-talkies to communicate and locate books. At over three million volumes, it is the largest bookstore in the country, constantly recycling its inventory to make room for new books. "The main problem of any bookstore is space,"[405] said Rómulo Castellanos, manager of *Gran Pulpería*. At the time of our conversation, he had just received the full collection of a recently closed specialty bookstore. He had stored it at his deceased parents' home, which he turned into an improvised deposit for more than 200.000 volumes. Mr. Castellanos receives daily calls from people offering to donate their personal libraries. "Of the ten calls I get a week, I may visit one ... I can accept certain books that interest me, but unfortunately, I can't accept everything," he said. "I get calls from people leaving, people whose relatives died, people who sell their apartment and need to vacate it. I ask them not to tell me what they will do with their books."

Mr. Castellanos sees the bookseller as "having an enormous responsibility", whose work complements official record-keeping. "I have more books than the National Library, for sure. I also have many books that the National Library is missing. Not now but since always ... As booksellers, we rescue these memories so they are at the service of people." He speaks of a "network" of second-hand booksellers connected beyond commercial interests, who are aware of each other's interests and constantly share their findings.

In the residential neighborhood of *Santa Paula*, in southeast Caracas, the non-profit organization *MFM Lectura* turned a large warehouse into its headquarters. MFM relies on private donations that it distributes through schools, libraries, thematic fairs in public spaces, and a book exchange system. The staff divide their time between domestic pickups in the mornings and receiving contributions in their warehouse in the afternoons, in what one employee described as a never-ending cycle of collecting, sorting, and donating books.

The systematic charge against the editorial world has occurred in parallel with a decrease in consumer spending and increasing rents for commercial spaces, which have drastically reduced the bookstore business. It is estimated that 75% of bookstores in Caracas have closed in the last two decades,[406] and the remaining ones have either pivoted to other commercial activities or are anchored to cultural venues that draw a public. Long-established independent bookstores have also reinvented themselves around the second-hand market. "The diaspora somehow feeds us," said Katyna Hernández, director of *El Buscón*, "80% of what I receive is from people who leave, and I have almost no space left."[407]

These ancillary accounts of underground book mazes, vestigial booksellers, and exchange systems suggest a creative intersection between economic survival, spatial

[404] The term "pulpería" translates roughly as convenience or general supply store, alluding here to the vast diversity of titles the store carries. *Gran Pulpería de Libro* was founded in 1981 by historian and diplomat Ramón Castellanos as a second-hand and rare books store. Since 1999, it operates in its current location.
[405] Rómulo Castellanos, personal communication. August 29, 2024.
[406] Singer and Moleiro, "La soledad por el cierre de las librerías en Caracas y los libros que no emigran."
[407] Ibid.

transformation, and reappropriation of left-behind patrimonies examined throughout this investigation. They also expose the vastness of the accumulation produced by emigration and the incessant pace at which it accrues, overwhelming individual efforts to organize it. Yet the coordinated effort of private collectors and booksellers is no longer about filling the gaps of official collections but about countering systematic institutional devastation. Against this process, these accounts add up to a collective effort to *make room*—a room that is scattered but a room altogether—against the dispersal of residual material, a central feature of collecting.

Upgrades

When I return to the museum one year later, a large banner hangs from the front wall of the house, facing the street, announcing the exhibition inside: "*Ifigenia, 100 años*." On the front terrace, a fabric awning covers the seating area from the sun. Orientation signs have been placed on the walls, directing visitors to the different spaces associated with the Museum: "café", "bookstore", "back terrace", and "exhibition tickets". These physical upgrades have a digital parallel in an engaged social media campaign that constantly showcases additions to the Museum's collection and advertises writing workshops and literary events that aim to position it as a cultural hub. However, the house's unofficial program—swimsuit boutique, offices, beauty salon—remains unacknowledged by the signage, nominally eliminated from the institutional image while supporting it economically. A sign reading "restricted area" forbids access to the basement, whose collection has now grown to 3.000 volumes. In the bookstore, piles of books still crowd the corners and the ends of every corridor, waiting to be organized. Employees walk the aisles, searching for books for clients, and report their findings via WhatsApp.

The thematic decoration in the entrance hall and stairwell anticipates the exhibition on the second floor, where the bedroom-turned-gallery hosts an exhibition dedicated to Teresa de la Parra's debut novel announced outside. It is a thoroughly documented and carefully curated display that includes the book's first French edition from 1924 and subsequent publications, together with the author's correspondence and other writings, a short film, and 1920s women's dresses, everything carefully encased in transparent displays. Interpretive texts guide the visitor through the exhibition, and each book is accompanied by a label indicating its publication date and place. However, any information on these books' individual trajectories—their previous ownership, the date and place of their "rescue"—is omitted.

Pursuing books in Caracas

In her examination of the ongoing and profound reconfiguration of Venezuelan society, anthropologist Paula Vázquez Lezama has argued that "survival" is the gateway to understanding the country's historical moment, one in which "Venezuelans live and see themselves as survivors in different ways and in their own way."[408] For the author, the collapse of *Chavismo* and its economic model has transformed Venezuelans into collectors who gather, trade, or accumulate goods for future use at an enormous personal cost. Beyond the sense of urgency that "survival" conveys, the term also carries a symbolic dimension when considered as a future-oriented practice that entails an emotional cost and sustains the material endurance of threatened cultural patrimonies. In this sense, the fervor for "rescuing" books, for preserving fragments of individual libraries and turning them into collective memory—and the marked feelings of impotence and loss that surround this action—can be inscribed within the genre of behaviors that Vázquez considers as inherent to the crisis.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Vázquez suggests that collecting is the manifestation of a failed project of modernity, subverting established mechanisms of consumption and occurring amid the remains of infrastructures and institutions consolidated during the democratic period (of which the National Library and other dismantled institutions are an example).[409] However, as Susan Buck-Morss reminds us in her analysis of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin did not regard the remnants of historical material as mere "failure" but rather as the incarnation of a tension between "extinction" and "creative potential".[410] To frame this tension within a central proposition of this investigation—that collapse is not a terminal condition but a productive threshold—what is relevant is what the collector *produces* by drawing from material residues and what is inevitably lost in the process. In this sense, this research's interest in collecting does not aim to describe the profile of the Caracas' secondhand bookseller but rather to construct the collector as one of the many manifestations of the caretaker. Operating amid departure, institutional decimation, and economic precarity, the collector selectively gathers from an increasing inventory of left-behind material, rescuing individual patrimonies from the brink of oblivion. At the same time, as he takes over the functions of a negligent state, he turns collecting into a "transformative" act that exceeds the individual sphere. Benjamin's reflections on book collecting further illuminate this dimension.

In *Unpacking My Library*, Benjamin is concerned with various aspects of collecting books. First, with the various ways of acquiring the items that make up a collection, and with how acquisition turns the collection into an index of places visited and a record of previous ownerships, a personal archive of knowledge and experiences. "How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I

408 Vásquez Lezama, "Cuando Se Consume El Cuerpo Del Pueblo. La Incertidumbre Como Política de Supervivencia En Venezuela," 112.

409 Ibid., 104,106.

410 In Buck-Morss' words, "all categories in Benjamin's constructions have more than one meaning and value, making it possible for them to enter into various conceptual constellations." See: Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (MIT Press, 1989), 66.

undertook in the pursuit of books!"[411] exclaims Benjamin of collecting as a mode of engaging with the world that turns the strange into familiar. However, Benjamin is also preoccupied with what the collection makes possible, specifically with how things brought together by a combination of intention and luck constitute a means "to renew the old world".[412] This renewal is, for him, a "balancing act"[413] between retaining the object's history—its previous ownership, date, and mode of acquisition—and placing it in the context of the collection; an operation of simultaneous preservation and detachment that creates an order out of disorder.[414]

"The pursuit of books" in Caracas reconstructs the routines and fallouts of departure; it speaks of the loss and dispersion that come of emigration and demise, and of their overlapping with the systematic dismantling of public archives, the bankruptcy of the editorial world, and the devastation of the public cultural apparatus. It exposes the trajectories of books stored in boxes and lining shelves in empty homes and traces the loss of those under the state's purview, revealing processes of decay, destruction, and recycling that surround their preservation.

In Caracas, books are a recurrent feature in left-behind apartments and houses and the object of dedicated attention. In some instances, they are locked away in rooms that double as improvised deposits. In other cases, migrants' personal libraries are displayed as if they were still in use. Under the purview of a mode of caretaking oriented towards extending migrants' presence, books remain inaccessible to the collector, whose duties commence *after* closure. Always on call, the collector is prompted into action at a stage of departure when books are ready to be separated from the domestic sphere and released from their role as personal possessions, collecting in accordance with a selectiveness akin to Benjamin's "tactical instinct."[415]

Of the different ways listed by Benjamin for assembling a collection—borrowing, stealing, purchasing, inheriting—rescuing books from abandoned libraries constitutes not only a methodological innovation, but also initiates a conversion that can *potentially* insert them into the category of public heritage. However, the collector does not complete this transition; instead, he (with)holds his collection in preservation chambers and glass casings, as if embargoed on behalf of an abstract future. In this sense, we are before a collector who performs a different kind of "balancing act", whose task consists in accumulating not only for himself but also for others—and for an uncertain future—yet one whose labor transcends personal gratification and is assumed as a social responsibility.

As the proceeds of forays into vacant homes find their way to the vault in the basement, to the cramped shelves of the secondhand bookstore, or to the clearance space, the house's spatial and programmatic diversification subordinate architecture to the objective of allowing the collector to collect. Spatially, this entails making room for the collection's perpetual expansion. We can interpret the house's constant transformation—the incessant addition of shelves and narrowing of aisles, the informal sources of income, and institutional reinvention through literary colloquia,

[411] Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library. A Talk about Book Collecting," in *Illuminations*, 3rd ed., ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (Penguin Random House, 2015), 64.
[412] Ibid., 63.
[413] Ibid., 62
[414] Ibid., 62. See also Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 207.
[415] Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," 64.

writing workshops, thematic exhibitions, and flash sales—as means to an end: their objective is to ensure the "persistence of incompleteness"[416] that defines any collection. As this sense of incompleteness haunts the collector and drives the urge to collect, the limited availability of space demands his increasing discrimination. In the act of collecting, disassembly and assembly are not symmetrical procedures but include a range of collateral processes—decay, destruction, recycling—in which parts of an "old world" are irrevocably lost while others are preserved. Thus, as one collection is assembled at the expense of the disappearance of many others, the Museum is also an index of extinction, constantly confronting the collector with all the books for which there is no room.

Finally, the tension between extinction and possibility, fundamental to Benjamin's reading of historical material, is also present in his own approach to collecting. As he reminds us, a collection is also a "threshold",[417] a space in which books retain part of their history and identity, while entering a space in which they are open to new readings by virtue of their place among others. With this image in mind, we can speculate about the house as a threshold, at once a domestic environment embodying the material aspirations of a disappearing middle class and a space that selectively eliminates or conceals parts of its identity in order to fit its newfound institutional role; simultaneously a memory machine and an erasure device, whose continuity is only possible through the selective deletion of its domestic history and the effective concealment of inconsistent uses, while amplifying the features that allow it to endure. It is at this threshold that the subversive potential of this collection can be realized, as an archive that society can reconstitute, away from the control and dismantling imposed by the state.

[416] Beatriz Sarlo, "La Persistencia En Lo Incompleto," in *Walter Benjamin: El Coleccionismo*, ed. Beatriz Sarlo (Ediciones Godot, 2022), 10.
[417] Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," 63.

Interlude: Ominous enclosures

"Caracas is for sale. All of it",[418] said the real estate agent in reference to the overwhelming surplus of residential properties. Years of sustained departure have produced an oversaturated market in which houses can be bought at bargain prices from eager migrants or inheritors of deceased owners. The "For sale" signs visible throughout the city are not an indication of a healthy real estate market but the last resort of a campaign that includes word of mouth, WhatsApp messages, social media ads, and online classifieds. After they are sold, houses are often demolished and replaced with larger constructions better suited to the tastes and standards of the new *Bolibourgeoisie.* The aesthetic preferences of this emergent class include a fondness for complex façade compositions in which projecting volumes are visually held together with "ribbons" of floor-turned-wall-turned-parapet, oversized garage doors with abstract patterns—a homage to the country's tradition of geometric abstraction?—electrical fences, security cameras, and sparse—preferably xerophytic—vegetation. The material palette employed on these architectural exteriors—exposed concrete (or its less expensive stucco imitation), ceramic tiles, blue-tinted windows, and wood paneling—is available at a range of prices that ensure aesthetic homogeneity across different budgets. Most importantly, this new social class has closely followed the location preferences of traditional elites, affirming its status by acquiring property cheaply in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods.

> ***Let's talk about your clientele. Who is buying in premium areas or apartments for primary offering?***
>
> > **The people buying are connected to the government. Mostly military. About 70% of the buyers are affiliated with the military. The military has bought, commercially, almost everything.**
> >
> > **…**
>
> ***Regarding the residential market, what areas are this clientele looking for, and how do they want to live?***
>
> > **They are interested in living in *Las Mercedes, Campo Alegre*, some in *Cumbres de Curumo*, because of the proximity to[the military base of] *Fuerte Tiuna*. Some in the upper part of *La***

[418] Anonymous participant 01, personal communication. July 21, 2023.

***Castellana*. They are moving to these places. More and more, the trend is to buy several properties in one building ...[419]**

New or existing buildings?

Mostly new, but in *Campo Alegre* and *La Castellana* there are older buildings that fit. They look for luxury properties with everything in the building: gym, home office, rooftop, because, obviously, these are people who avoid moving, and if they can have everything in the same place, the better. They tend to buy several properties in the same building, or entire buildings.

For example, what one sees in the upper parts of* Altamira, Los Palos Grandes, or La Castellana, *where two or three individual plots disappear, and suddenly a huge house appears, with tall walls...

Those are governors.

Governors?

People with political positions.

Isn't it the same public?

There are some military, obviously, but mostly people with political positions are buying quintas to turn them into compounds. For example, Delcy [Rodríguez] bought in *Los Palos Grandes*[420] … And so, each one of them has bought quintas and built those constructions that are like bunkers.

I imagine that they must also have everything. Gyms, offices…

They are bunkers. They have everything.[421]

The transformation of devalued properties into new homes ranges from façade makeovers or volumetric alterations to more radical operations that combine several plots to produce the *bunker-villa*, a mutation of the long-lived typology of the *quinta*. This iteration transfers the programmatic variety of a residential building into a single-family house, adding the possibility of complete independence from the outside world to the seclusion normally afforded by the wall.

The process of architectural transformation of old *quintas* into new villas is concealed behind makeshift enclosures that constitute a unique architectural condition, characterized by an interstitial material configuration that mediates between past and future scenarios; they retain traces of the material world they are about to erase, turning residues into fragile records of before-states, while ominously announcing the architecture to come. These *ominous enclosures* are outside the scope of the architectural project but possess some of its anticipatory properties. What they anticipate is not only a new

[419] In *Cumbres de Curumo*, fourteen separate houses located in a cul-de-sac were purchased, through intermediaries, by members of the presidential family. See: Patricia Marcano, "Los Hijos de Cilia Flores Se Compraron Una Calle Para Ellos Solos," November 10, 2019, https://armando.info/los-hijos-de-cilia-flores-se-compraron-una-calle-para-ellos-solos/.

[420] The acquisition and expedient transformation of this large property was investigated by journalists. See: Armando.info, "El misterio de la viuda precoz, su rosca de negocios y la casa 'de Delcy,'" February 26, 2023, https://armando.info/el-misterio-de-la-viuda-precoz-su-rosca-de-negocios-y-la-casa-de-delcy/.

[421] Anonymous participant 01. Personal communication. July 21, 2023.

architectural aesthetic but a new urban and social condition, in which the freedom afforded by the perimeter wall creates a territory of heightened interiority, the legitimization of opacity disguised as personal achievement. The systematic documentation of these provisional enclosures offers a snapshot of the process by which "old" becomes "new", a rare glimpse of procedures otherwise hidden from public view, and an opportunity to examine the negotiations and conflicts that shape the city's urban transformation.

Documenting ominous enclosures requires stopping, descending, and framing a shot. As one drives through the city, this intentional pause creates a perceptual "gap" in movement that provides "a point of entry"[422] into an urban landscape that would otherwise disappear from view in the corner of one's eye while focused on the road ahead; it allows the "field" to emerge from the city through the "work" of repetitive engagement with an inconspicuous urban element. Repetition disrupts the familiar, but in this case, it also confirms the existence of a system of urban reconfiguration:[423] while each enclosure is nothing more than an efficient response to privacy and security during construction, achieved with whatever materials are at hand, considered collectively, these enclosures confirm how the city can be altered by "small and repetitive gestures."[424] These gestures lay bare the process of emergence and disappearance that accompanies the spread of (opaque) capital throughout Caracas. It allows us to examine territorial affirmation as a *project*.

Concentrated in upper-class neighborhoods in the Northeast of the city or strategically located next to business hubs and military bases, mapping the location of these sites of architectural transformation would trace a new geography of power and its territorial overlap with middle-class ambitions of the second half of the twentieth century, confirming the notion that the "aspirational country" that flourished in this historical period has not died but instead mutated together with the means for achieving social mobility.

Selecting, arranging, and visualizing these enclosures in a grid exposes a variety of materialities and construction techniques; yet it also overwrites the individual features of each instance, expressing a continuity of intentions that underscores the possibility of examining them as a totality. This exercise also creates a continuity between documentation and interpretation, between systematic engagement with shifting urban conditions and their theorization.

In their material constitution and construction methods, these enclosures reveal a wide range of possibilities. In one instance, agricultural nylon mesh has been stretched to its limits over a garage gate, partially revealing a lush garden on the other side, about to be

422 Overdijk, "Monuments and Mental Maps," 37.
423 Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza, "Learning from Little Haiti," *E-Flux Journal*, no. 6 (May 2009): 1.
424 Ibid., 2.

torn down. In another case, a plane of corrugated plates has been propped up from behind, creating a shiny and undulating surface that distorts reflections. Elsewhere, black plastic tarp has been stapled over a fence; it expands and contracts with the wind, as if breathing. The poetic possibilities are endless. These enclosures often recycle existing building components, such as doors and garage gates, giving them a second life before they are discarded. Other times, remnants of perimeter walls are covered with a patchwork of discarded construction materials, held in place with wire and nails. In their construction, these enclosures display the ingenuity that accompanies precarity, but they also exhibit a total disregard for endurance. They are what Robert Smithson called "ruins in reverse",[425] decaying as they come into being. Invariably, their material decomposition is countered by adding more layers of perishable material, coordinating their lifespan with the construction of the final perimeter wall behind them: taller, stable, and technologically equipped.

Ominous enclosures often fail to fully conceal the architectural transformation occurring behind them. This is not a consequence of their material precarity but a property of the (architectural) freedom that the perimeter wall allows. In recent years, several houses in an enclosed residential street in *Caurimare* were purchased separately, demolished, and replaced with structures that exceed the height, construction area, and setback requirements established by building codes, encroaching on streets and neighbors. All of these violations were visible over the flimsy enclosures that separated them from the street, as if to openly announce contempt for regulations and norms of coexistence. In this case, neighbors' complaints to municipal authorities were not fruitful. "We let the municipality know, but in the end, power won",[426] said a local resident of the house being built behind his own. However, the process by which "power wins" often benefits those who protest, exposing dynamics that complicate the assumption of principled stances in the face of infringements. As one architect explained, "municipalities are clear about what is happening, but because of their budget deficits, they look the other way or reach agreements with private developers. For example, by letting them pave a street, install public lighting, and turning a blind eye [on violations]."[427]

Like the transformations they conceal, these temporary enclosures are sensitive to the vicissitudes of national life. At any moment, the currency can devalue, a fraud scheme can be uncovered, a political purge can force flight, or an impasse with authorities can halt construction. These events alter the life cycle of temporary enclosures, extending their existence beyond their ordinary duration and turning

[425] Smithson, "The Monuments of Passaic," 50 Emphasis in original.
[426] Anonymous participant 05, personal communication. July 31, 2023
[427] Jose Antonio Guinand, personal communication. November 10, 2022

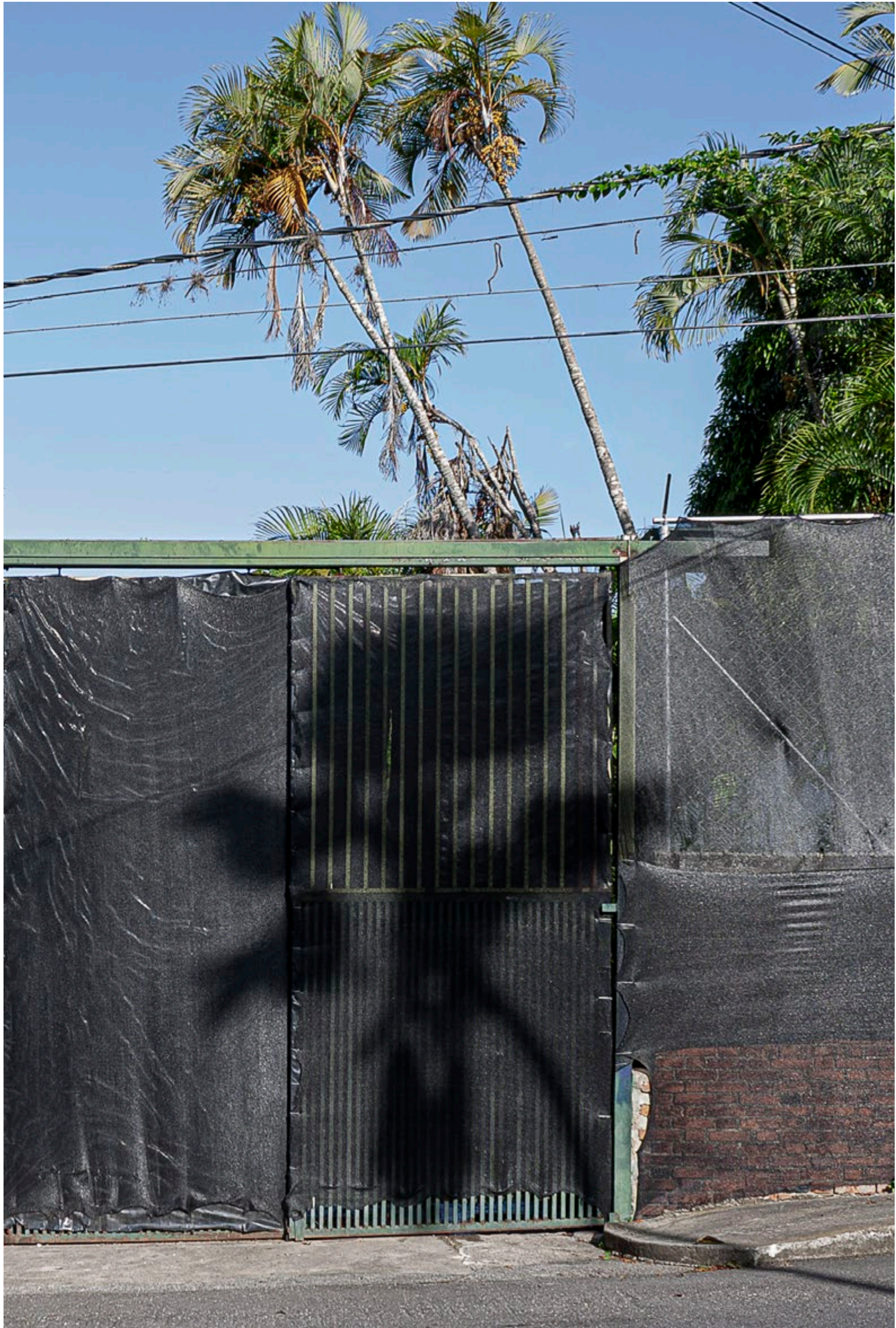
them into a historical record of economic fluctuations or political power shifts. In one case, corrugated metal panels precariously obscured a house under construction. The work had stopped, and a "for sale" sign hung outside. This sign indicated a pause that, if prolonged, risked devaluing the property to the point where it would have to compete with other dilapidated houses around it. The simultaneity of demolition, construction, and ruination compressed various stages of the property's life into a single moment, all precariously held together by the enclosure.

In another instance, several houses were torn down and replaced by a steel structure built to the edge of the site, violating setbacks and partially engulfing existing perimeter walls. At one point, the new structure was entirely wrapped in a black tarp. However, the tarp deteriorated and was blown away, partially revealing an unfinished interior. Instead of being replaced, its remains were secured in place with steel mesh and metal bars, which also rusted, making it impossible to tell whether construction was progressing or deteriorating. Eventually, the addition of another level to the structure answered the question: it was both. In a corner, an old garage door had been incorporated into the enclosure. Standing next to the neighbor's gate, of roughly similar dimensions, this remnant of a previous state served as a reminder of a life in common and of a mode of cohabitation in which "neighboring amounted to more than mere contiguity."[428]

Finally, as if unwrapping a gigantic, ominous gift, temporary enclosures are dismantled in an act that is as much an inauguration as a closure.

There is a correspondence between the old and the new in these architectural transformations, revealed in the act of enclosing, recycling, and discarding. This correspondence expands the visual imaginary associated with collapse: both the decrepit house for sale, whose owners have migrated or passed away, and the bunker-villa next to it are manifestations of failure, albeit not as flip sides of the same coin but instead connected by the process through which the former becomes the latter. The makeshift enclosures that populate the city are the material expression of relationships that span survival and opportunity, where interest over a resource—property—results in imposition, conflict, and cooperation between sellers and buyers, long-time residents and newcomers, authorities and violators, turning the city into a plane of interaction where seemingly irreconcilable conditions coexist and depend on each other along a continuum.

[428] Sandra Pinardi, "Plan B: Caracas, Ciudad de Salida.," unpublished manuscript, Caracas, 2019.



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Sofía and Esperanza: Caretaking as world-making

Biography of a Garden Suburb house

In 1928, real estate developers Luis Roche and Juan Bautista Arismendi built *La Florida*, a new *urbanización* East of Caracas' historic center. In charge of the project was Manuel Mujica Millán, a young Spanish architect who had recently arrived in Venezuela.[429] With curving, tree-lined avenues, *La Florida* was a "textual transfer" of the morphological principles of the English garden suburb and served as a model for the city's eastward expansion.[430] Its streets were named after trees and densely planted with the corresponding species; its curved grid was laid over agricultural land, minimally connected to the existing road network. *La Florida* introduced "for the first time in Caracas, irregular streets and heterogeneous blocks,"[431] and generated more than 200 plots with space for ample front and back gardens. Unlike its European precedents, where variations in lot sizes fostered a desirable social mix, the allotments of Caracas' new garden suburb became fertile ground for the development of large *quintas*, the typology that would become the architecture of choice for aspiring middle- and upper-class urbanites.

In 1938, Carlos Raúl Villanueva designed two contiguous *quintas* in the new garden suburb. Financed by the developers, the houses were purchased by one Miguel González Villaesclusa, who named them after his daughters.[432] *Quinta Esperanza* was designed in the neo-Basque style, with a symmetrical front façade and a pitched roof; Quinta Sofía was in Art Deco, with rounded corners and volumetric variations.[433] These stylistic differences disguised the houses' nearly identical floor plans: a compact layout with social and private spaces distributed over two floors in a main volume and service quarters seamlessly attached in a one-story block. The authorship of the houses remained anonymous until the 1990s, when an architectural historian identified Villanueva's signature in drawings stored in the municipal archives. Following this discovery, *Sofía* and *Esperanza* were surveyed, photographed,

[429] Manuel Mujica Millán (1897-1963) was a Spanish architect who arrived in Venezuela in 1926 and had a prolific career in the country. As a student in Catalonia, Mujica had designed a garden city in the outskirts of Barcelona, also named *La Florida*, privately developed in previously-agrarian land. See: V. Casals Costa et al., "Manuel Mujica Millán y El Urbanismo Novecentista En Cataluña, 1917-1927," *Biblio 3W. Revista Bibliográfica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Barcelona* XVI, no. 925 (2011), https://www.ub.edu/geocrit/b3w-925.htm.

[430] Izaskun Landa, "Transferencias Del Modelo Urbano de Urbanismo Jardin Europeo: El Caso Del Primer Suburbio Jardín de Manuel Mujica En Caracas," July 17, 2004, 10, http://hdl.handle.net/10872/22463.

[431] Ibid., 8.

[432] Luis Polito, "Las Quintas de Manuel Mujica Millán y Carlos Raúl Villanueva" (Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1996), 266.

[433] Ibid., 168.

and ascribed to Villanueva's "historicist" period.[434] Architectural critics later labelled the houses "minor works" by a major figure.[435] *Esperanza* and *Sofía*, like most of Villanueva's early houses for private developers, were excluded from the architect's catalogue and omitted from heritage lists and architectural guidebooks alike.

Over time, *Sofía* and *Esperanza* were merged into a large property of 2.000 m². As children grew and reproduced, the houses were internally subdivided into independent apartments, their facades modified and terraces enclosed, and two additional structures were built to accommodate different branches of the family. In the late nineties, perimeter walls were erected. Inside them, between the original houses and later additions, secluded from the street and adjacent properties, was a large garden. Residents' testimonies and residual infrastructure—a built-in barbecue, a shed, outdoor furniture—suggest this central open space was often used as a meeting place for a large, gregarious family.

Throughout its life, the property belonged to descendants of the original owners, an entrepreneurial family that fled when the government forcibly acquired their coffee business in 2009.[436] For several years after this expropriation, the property remained uninhabited except for the regular visits of Jesús Hernández, a long-time family employee who had previously lived in the house and who would move back in 2014. After years of emptiness, the house was in a state of general decay and disrepair, and only the large trees in the garden survived. By 2017, more people arrived. Internal subdivisions and additional constructions that once housed various branches of the family became a means to maximize income, allowing multiple tenants—acquaintances of the owners—to live in the house in exchange for a combination of rent and maintenance. This informal agreement required constant negotiation between tenants and owners over shared and individual expenses.

In July of 2023, *Sofía*'s lower level was shared by a young professional family and a theater director who used his apartment for drama workshops. The upper floor had become a ceramic studio; its dining room turned into a workspace, its living room into a showroom, its bedrooms cramped with large ovens, and its corridors crowded with pots and plates waiting to be baked. In 2017, María Raquel Ferrer, the ceramist who ran it, had arrived with her family at an annex across the garden, which they referred to as "downstairs". *Esperanza*, unoccupied for decades, was in an advanced state of decay, with collapsed ceilings, peeled walls, bricked-up windows, plants taking over rooftops, and a large Ficus growing out of a wall and protruding through the facade, its roots so entrenched that removing the tree would have made the entire house collapse. Its rooms were used as a deposit for theater props, discarded domestic furniture, and expired office equipment from the owners' lost businesses. The second annex, built directly against this house and internally integrated into it, was occupied by Jesús. Thus, annex and house formed a continuous architectural element that occupied one side of the lot, creating a clear spatial division between

[434] Juan Pedro Posani, a close collaborator of Villanueva, explained the architect's early historicism as a "cultural tactic" that withheld modern architecture from a traditionalist Venezuelan society until it was ready to receive it. See Gasparini and Posani, *Caracas a Través de Su Arquitectura*, 366.

[435] Azier Calvo Albizu, "Obras mayores y obras menores," Arquitectura Hoy, *Economia Hoy* (Caracas), September 20, 1996.

[436] *Fama de América* coffee company was expropriated by Presidential Decree No. 7.035 of November 10, 2009. Since then, it has been a state-managed company. See Poderopedia, "Fama de América," Poderopedia Venezuela, accessed February 24, 2025, https://poderopediave.org/empresa/fama-de-america/.

him and the other residents. The houses' central open space had been turned into a lush, densely planted garden, maintained by María Raquel and her husband, a biologist by training.

After years of unsanctioned transformations, economic crisis, and emigration, few of the original houses of *La Florida* remain intact. Many have been turned into restaurants, tire-repair shops, and car dealerships, their architecture disfigured by signage and additions or concealed behind walls and gates. Other houses remain inhabited by the original residents or a caretaker looking after the remains of once-prosperous lives, the occasional "for sale" sign hanging out front. The neighborhood's historic allure as an upper-class area and its proximity to the city's historic center (where many central government offices are located) have made these dilapidated structures a target of aggressive acquisition by emerging economic actors and government officials.

La Florida's rapid transformation loomed over *Quinta Sofía* like an ominous anticipation of its own fate, temporarily postponed by the exiled owners through meager rental income, emotional attachment, or inheritance complications. As owners settled abroad, dispersed around the world, or died, remaining family members decided to sell the property. After lowering their asking price by more than half, potential buyers appeared, attracted by the sheer size of the lot. One of them spoke of building a supermarket; another one said he needed a depot for imported merchandise. "They are going to tear everything down, and there will be nothing left,"[437] said María Raquel, reflecting on the likely consequence of the house's sale. "I can't leave these plants here to be chopped up." Anticipating an outcome that would destroy the garden, she outlined a scheme that could be activated if the sale materialized: she classified the plants, contacted recipients, planned transports, and gave away cuttings, preemptively disseminating the garden around the city.

In August 2024, the house was sold.

This biography, reconstructed from residents' testimonies, historical records, and academic texts, produces a fragmentary timeline in which the outline of distinct stages emerges—construction, nuclear-family residence, growth, dispersal, decay, recovery, destruction—inscribing these stages within a broader historical context. These stages are not clear-cut but fuse into each other, underpinned by a spatial flexibility—internal subdivisions and empty space for additions—that permitted the gradual adaptation of the house to changing needs. Most relevantly, a biographical perspective on the house-as-thing, while focused and partial, highlights the interdependent trajectories of the object and the claims over it.[438]

Towards the final stages of *Quinta Sofía*'s life, after it was left behind and occupied again, the house was an amalgamation of livelihoods and modes of caretaking, held together by a preexisting bond with its owners and the space and by each dweller's precarious situation. Everyone had permission to live there; no one had the authority to evict others, and no one could afford to leave. This relationship was best described by Jesús as "I don't mess with them, and they don't mess with

[437] María Raquel Ferrer, personal communication. July 21, 2023. All excerpts are from the same interview.
[438] Kopytoff, "The Cultural lography of Things."

me,"[439] a form of cohabitation that, while not strictly transactional, did not instill any sense of community. What should be stressed is that the house was not merely lived in or used differently by different people; instead, each party had a different *claim* over it, whether as an economic asset and a source of passive income, a place of work and the site of professional reinvention, an unstable foothold in middle class status, a last bastion against dispossession, or a mere deposit for obsolete props. These claims produced new spatial boundaries and demarcations that overruled original living configurations. Most significantly, these claims turned the house into a resource in such a way that "getting by"—the daily coping with collapse—was not something that merely occurred *at* the house but rather *through* the house, by materially and programmatically altering it, in turn inserting different parts of it into divergent trajectories of preservation or destruction.

Considered together, the events observed and documented during numerous visits to *Quinta Sofía* in 2023 and 2024 expose the limits of caretaking practices, inasmuch as they must be examined against a backdrop of increasing precarity, in which material continuity and human survival converge rather crudely. At the time of the fieldwork, there were four different tenants at the house. However, the following narrations center on two residents whose actions exemplify conflicting claims over space through the susceptibility of material residues to be used as resources. These actions take the form of distinct episodes in which the chronological order of fieldwork experiences is set aside to present them as parallel occurrences, each one pulling the house in opposite directions, as it were. These two stories converge when the house's impending sale materializes, an event that brings residents together not so much around a common threat but by making salient the precarity of their own lives.

Evocative objects

In a corner of the garden is a glass table with various potted plants. "This is Karen Alexandra," María Raquel points out, holding a round ceramic pot with a specimen of *Peperomia obtusifolia*. Its leaves are round and shiny, and she scrapes some dirt off one of them with her fingernail. "I usually name plants after the person who left them to me, to remember them," she explains. Karen, the plant's original owner, was her business partner in a graphic design venture; she inherited the plant from her mother, who had died in 2012. Karen emigrated in 2014 and left the plant to María Raquel. A few years later, Karen's sister also left the country and brought more of their mother's plants here. Then, María Raquel tells the stories of Adriana, Anita, Bárbara, Chacho, Claudia, Helen, Humberto, Leo, and Veronica, alternating between friends' personal stories and those of their plants. Anita, a fishbone cactus (*Epiphyllum anguliger*) with long branches that hang in various directions, belonged to a ceramist who returned to her natal Germany in 2016; before leaving, she liquidated everything and gave the plant away. Adriana, a lily (*Eucharis grandiflora*) with dark leaves, came from a friend's apartment; she left during the pandemic and

[439] Jesús Hernández, personal communication. September 6 2024. All excerpts from the same interview.

never returned. Claudia, a rare species of *Phalaenopsis*, was brought from Maracaibo by an architect friend who now lives in the Middle East and whose father was an orchid collector. A potted cactus (*Echinopsis calochlora*) belonged to a high school friend who died in a climbing accident; his mother left it to María Raquel before leaving for Mexico. Its round, prickly arms grow fast, and she constantly gets new plants out of it. Walking around the garden, María Raquel stops next to a rare *Musacea* that once belonged to a friend now living in Spain. Then she walks over to a small coffee plant (*Dieffenbachia camilla*) that had lived in her mother-in-law's apartment for decades. "We used to go there to water the plants because she wanted them there for when she returned, but it was easier to bring them here," María Raquel explains. A *Philodendron burle-marxii* was left by a friend who moved to Europe; "I have distributed this plant all over Caracas; architects love it", she says. A rare *Begonia maculata* was bought at a nursery before its Portuguese owner passed away, and his descendants turned the lot into a (more profitable) parking garage. A dracaena (*Dracaena fragrans*) stands in a plastic pot under a mango tree in the middle of the garden, dirty but thriving, its roots breaking through the bottom to reach the soil; it is one of seventeen plants that came from the office of an opposition mayor who went into exile during the political protests of 2017. "Veronica kept going back to her boss' office to water the plants until she found another job. That is when she brought them all here," María Raquel continued. "I gave away the others and kept one." Planted in the ground, attached to trees, climbing walls, or scattered in the ceramic pots she made in her studio, these plants live alongside dozens of others received or collected over the years.

The garden also includes plants found on the streets around the house. Various Elkhorn ferns (*Platycerium bifurcatum*) were rescued when their habitat, one of the neighborhood's original houses, was converted to a car dealership in 2020; María Raquel fixed them to trees around the garden, where they thrived. A row of snake plants (*Sansevieria trifasciata*) that lines the driveway has a similar origin; "these are plants that I have collected from the garbage. ... when they buy houses, they cut everything down, and the garbage dumps in front are always full of the plants that they throw away," she states. A large potted plant in a corner is "the only house plant that survived while the place was vacant"[440] explains Carlos, María Raquel's husband. When the couple arrived in 2017, the garden was reduced to weeds and dirt, its trees filled with parasites from years of neglect. Its current state is the result of years of work that fell outside their duties as tenants and caretakers. Excluded from maintenance agreements, yet in the middle of the separate apartments where they live and work, the garden is a space the couple assumed as their own.

Later, María Raquel talks about an ecological project that aimed to rescue endemic orchids from an endangered mountain in eastern Venezuela and give them to volunteers until their habitat could be restored and the plants returned. The project never materialized, but through it, she draws a parallel between ecological and human dispersal, preservation, and return, which amplify the socio-ecological possibilities of her own garden. "I made a connection with that situation and thought that maybe someday people will come back and I will return plants that were once theirs, or they can visit my garden, which is full of these stories," she explains. Yet the

[440] Carlos Peláez, personal communication. July 21, 2024

possibility of materializing such a space is inseparable from the precarity and uncertainty of her own situation:

> I don't know what will happen to me, whether I will have my [garden], or if someone will return. In the meantime, the stage in which these plants accompany me and I tell their story is enough. I hope that someday I will have a space that tells this story, and I can say, "This plant is already sixty years old, the owners are gone, and the grandson comes and I give him a cutting." That would seem to me an ideal closure. ... In a country where there is money for those spaces of preservation, for telling stories. ... I stayed here, and I will do what I can here, and that is receiving people's plants and seeing what happens.

Whether adopted, abandoned, bought, gifted, entrusted against a promise of return, salvaged from dumpsters, or rescued from vacant apartments, plants' acceptance into the garden involves a transfer of responsibility and a guarantee of continued existence. At an intimate level, this obligation is framed by preexisting relationships and extends them into the future; plants are a way to stay in touch with distant friends or a record of ongoing urban transformations. Plants also serve as reminders of moments of separation and of María Raquel's own circumstances at those times—what she was doing or where she was living, whether she was recently married or pregnant—her own biography organizing the disparate timelines of numerous plants. At the same time, plants are a tool for making sense of the sweeping collapse that has forced millions of people out of the country. The following excerpt offers an indication of how they simultaneously fulfil an affective and intellectual function:

> All these plants link me to [people who have left], to migration, to what happened to us [as a country]. Plants are how I narrate the situation in Venezuela, in my own way, with my own interests. ... Plants' stories, of those who cared for them, of the memories of their grandmothers or of those who leave and want to take a cutting with them, these stories link me to the tropics, to Venezuela, to what was lived and lost. ... That is why I welcome them.

Sociologist Sherry Turkle has proposed the notion of *evocative objects* to examine the lasting connections that scientists, designers, and artists establish with specific objects throughout their lives and careers. The term denotes singular items that serve both "as companions to our emotional lives [and] as provocations to thought."[441] This concept is fitting for understanding the complex relationship with plants, at once sustaining personal connections across time and space and providing a sense of stability amid uncertainty. Turkle's understanding of "evocation", however, is not limited to objects' capacity to elicit memories or help rationalize complex situations; instead, the author suggests that what makes objects evocative is their ability to form "active partnerships",[442] extended alliances through which objects' meaning, and even

[441] Sherry Turkle, "Introduction: The Things That Matter," in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, ed. Sherry Turkle (MIT Press, 2007), 5.
[442] Sherry Turkle, "What Makes an Object Evocative?," in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, ed. Sherry Turkle (MIT Press, 2007), 308.

their material constitution, change over time as they ground abstract concepts in concrete form. In this sense, evocative objects are not only tools "to think with"[443] but also tools to *do* or *make* with. It is this expanded possibility of the concept for connecting across a range of affective, intellectual, and creative realms that proves helpful in examining the displaced plants of *Quinta Sofía*, as a space that was not simply an accumulation of isolated recollections but a future-oriented construct, an ongoing *project* in which maintenance gave way to a creative action that ultimately inserted parts of the house into a trajectory of socio-ecological regeneration.

Plants constitute a specific category of residual accumulation, one designated not only by origin, mode of acquisition, rarity, or by the individual stories they collect, but also by their status as living organisms. Through plants, abstract concerns over endurance and preservation acquire a concrete and urgent connotation; conversely, practical notions of rootedness or dissemination attain through plants a symbolic dimension. Domestic plants, if neglected, either die or grow uncontrollably—both visible signs of abandonment. Earlier in this study, plant maintenance was examined as part of caretaking routines in migrants' homes, where watering or trimming schedules determine the frequency of visits or are part of a repertoire of strategies for simulating occupancy of vacant spaces. In these cases, plants' fixity to place is a proxy for inhabitation; their essential immobility is a promise of regular human presence, a literal extension of life. However, the plants of this garden were separated from their original domestic habitat. Their displacement became the prerequisite for opening them to new meanings and classifications, allowing them to function simultaneously as intimate companions and as the constitutive material of a new spatial construction, ultimately admitting them into the realm of the speculative, where the garden flourished.

If "classification precedes collection",[444] the garden of *Quinta Sofía* is not the product of careful selection. Instead, it is founded on an affective "welcoming" and an undiscriminating impulse for saving, borne out of the knowledge of the demise that awaited plants otherwise. Nevertheless, there is an urgency to this garden that resonates with the essential themes of collecting: memory and desire, loss and endurance, order and disorder.[445] The concrete form that these themes take is inscribed within the genealogy of the garden as an enclosed, cultivated space. The wall, the architectural device responsible for freeing the interior of the single-family house of its relation with the outside world, becomes here a refuge against the systematic clearing of the Garden Suburb's patrimony. The privacy and protection afforded by the house's perimeter wall turns its central open space into a secluded landscape, a veritable *hortus conclusus* that thrives on the unresolved tension between opposing conditions—the permanent threat of demolition and the growth of plants. The garden is both separated from a hostile exterior yet pervious to its dynamics; like the gardening tradition it is inscribed in, it is an attempt to "understand the landscape it denies [and] explain the world it excludes"[446] through the careful preservation of nature.

[443] Ibid., 322.
[444] Elsner and Cardinal, "Introduction," 1.
[445] Ibid.
[446] Rob Aben and Saskia de Wit, *The Enclosed Garden: History and Development of the Hortus Conclusus and Its Reintroduction into the Present-Day Urban Landscape* (010 Publishers, 1999), 22.

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault recurs to the metaphor of the grid as the space in which order becomes evident and is organized in a specific way.[447] This metaphor allows him to conceptualize epistemological disruptions as moments when the grid-as-framework shifts, making possible new forms of classification and knowledge. Foucault examines botanical gardens, herbaria, and zoos—spaces that collect and organize nature—as three-dimensional extensions of the grid, where novel arrangements of natural species made possible "a new way of connecting things both to the eye and to the discourse."[448] As Foucault reminds us, what changed in the 17th century was not so much our curiosity about plants and animals but "the space in which it was possible to see them and from which it was possible to describe them."[449]

The plants of this garden are a record of emigration and loss, of public offices vacated in haste, of the country's failing institutions and disappearing middle class, and of the urban transformations rapidly erasing the city's architectural and ecological heritage. Their arrangement overrides scientific systems based on plants' visible features, privileging memory over the senses. The categories they fall into are based simultaneously on their biographies and their lives *beyond* and *after* the garden. These categories make up a taxonomy both of intimacy and of urgency, which organizes species based on their history of ownership and the places where they've lived as well as the possibility of saving them, their possible destinations, and likely recipients. There are plants to sell or give away for free, plants for friends or for specialized collectors, plants to place in apartments, and plants that will end up in a weekend house outside the city; conversely, there are plants to cut with a machete, to chop with a chainsaw, and to burn on site. As a space of symbolic re-founding, the garden functions as a repository of memory and an opportunity to turn a shared experience of loss and devastation into one of shared reconstruction. Moreover, the garden, imbued as it is with a personal decision to remain in the country and to accumulate plants, carries a sense of social and historical responsibility and gives meaning not only to María Raquel's labor as a gardener but also to her work as a ceramist: she manufactures portable substrates for the propagation of memory.

Drawing from Foucault's grid metaphor, the intimate and urgent taxonomies of the garden allow us to consider collapse not merely as a shattering of order, a grid-less state in which things lose their place and relation to what surrounds them, but rather as the gradual imposition of a new system of relationships that overlaps with previous ones. The garden thrives in this interstitial space, the protracted meanwhile between plants' former lives and their future dispersal.

[447] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Vintage Books, 1994), xx.
[448] Ibid., 131.
[449] Ibid.

The scavenger

In the middle of the room is a small table with a checkered plastic tablecloth and handwoven placemats, four chairs, a lamp, potted plants, and a plastic jar. An improvised clothesline runs behind, deformed wire hangers dangling on it; a battered Tolomeo lamp illuminates the scene, and a small diesel generator—a common household appliance in Caracas—rests on a crate. This domestic setting is surrounded by heavy-duty shelves stacked from floor to ceiling with calculators, printers, expired toner cartridges, picture frames, bread baskets, pots, pans, and various decorative objects, remnants from the owners' business ventures and domestic life, brought here after offices were vacated and apartments were sold or rented. All of these items are for sale. Behind the table, half-hidden from view, is a glass vitrine that contains an array of domestic objects: champagne glasses in their original packaging, coffee cups, plates, silverware, and a figurine of a virgin. Every object has a hand-written price tag: whiskey tumblers, $20; wine glasses, three for $10; ceramic bowls, $10 each (a year later, the cabinet has been moved closer to the door and a second case added next to it to display a growing collection of domestic items).

The adjacent room has still more industrial shelves, filled with obsolete printers and decaying binders that contain the fiscal records of defunct companies; beyond it, the rooms and corridors of *Quinta Esperanza*, uninhabited for decades, are crammed with broken-down copiers, printers, washing machines, and refrigerators, collecting dust until they are eventually dismantled and sold for scrap. Outside, beneath the centennial mango tree where rescued elkhorns grow, is a mound of wrought iron window bars, louvers, grills, tubes, sections of steel trusses and columns, electronic motherboards, and furniture parts. This pile of metal grows steadily until it is large enough for a scrap dealer to pick up; then the cycle begins again.

All the things in this description were gathered and sorted by Jesús from various apartments and annexes; either cleaned and displayed or disassembled and thrown into the pile. There are conflicting accounts of how things found their way into these glass cabinets and rusting mounds: Jesús asserted that he was authorized to sell the family's possessions for a commission, but other residents claim he walks around the house, appropriating whatever he finds and deliberately dismantling equipment and building parts. These inconsistent explanations are part of a relationship of mutual distrust and resigned cohabitation. Indeed, the enduring presence of Jesús in the house is perceived by other residents as a remnant of times of financial slack, when a family could afford a permanent employee for occasional maintenance and repair work. As a "remnant", Jesús is the embodiment of a type of caretaker or groundskeeper whose existence predates emigration and collapse, but also a figure whose own historical deprivations become salient amid the crisis, exposing the relationships, the precarities, and the social and racial divisions that surround domestic labor in Venezuela, as well as the spatial configurations that support these relationships.[450] Underpinned by a history of employment, by his immediate needs, and, most likely, by a knowledge of *Quinta Sofía* inevitable demise

[450] For an examination of the relationship between domestic space and labor in Venezuela, see Dávila, "The Servantful House."

(at which moment his long relationship with the owners would dissolve), Jesús's claim over the house has transformed it into a limited yet carefully managed source of material to ensure his sustenance. The house is his last bastion against dispossession.

If, as Anna Tsing reminds us, precarity is a precondition for new worlds to flourish,[451] this also requires a fundamental shift in Jesús's long-term role as a caretaker, from a maintainer and a repairer to a scavenger, who turns discarded materials into an economic resource by isolating them or accelerating their decomposition. Under these conditions, the cabinet in Jesús's living room and the pile under the tree are both products of the same practice: rummaging through the house for discarded things and obsolete parts on a trajectory towards becoming waste. Scavenging turns a familiar environment into a site of discovery and extraction, and inserts its findings into the categories of treasure or rubble, two conditions at opposite ends of formal configurations and value regimes. On one hand, scavenging isolates residues from a corrosive environment, "stabilizing"[452] their material integrity and restoring their economic value. On the other hand, it classifies objects by material and reduces them to a single quantitative variable (weight), extracting the last remaining value. For this, scavenging must first let decay run its course, rot to take hold, and mold to grow; it must insert matter into a trajectory of decomposition from which it is either rescued or pushed further into. The caretaker's imperative to extend the life of left-behind things is interpreted by Jesús as strategic neglect, watching over and selectively choosing how—and when—it acts upon the residues it watches over.

The cabinet and the room it is in—with its shelves full of obsolete office supplies and domestic objects with makeshift price tags—are a showroom of sorts, albeit one where the clumsiness of the setup crudely exposes the precarity and desperation that underlie their commodification. The pile in the garden, for its part, is integrated into a large-scale, institutional system of scavenging dedicated to dismantling and exporting Venezuela's broken-down and bankrupt industrial park as scrap metal.[453] The articulation of domestic dismantling with a market of scrap dealers turns the house into a point of contact with opaque networks that trade in other forms of patrimony. Scavenging is the entrepreneurship of the survivor (individual or state) who finds value in waste and has the knowledge or power to insert it into new avenues of commodification.

[451] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 4.

[452] DeSilvey, *Curated Decay*, 29.

[453] Scrap export has served as an economic "escape valve" for the government, providing a new source of income amid oil decline. In 2021, the government decreed scrap a "strategic" sector, concentrating its commercialization in a handful of assigned contractors. Much of the material originates from the dismantling of the country's abandoned industrial facilities. Transparencia Venezuela, "Nuevas Exportaciones: la Chatarra como Válvula de Escape," Trasparencia Venezuela, June 2022, https://transparenciave.org/economias-ilicitas/nuevas-exportacionesla-chatarra-como-valvula-de-escape/; Erick Camargo, "El negocio de la chatarra en Venezuela y el colapso de la industria petrolera Observatorio de Ecología Política de Venezuela," *Observatorio de Ecología Política de Venezuela*, March 11, 2022, https://ecopoliticavenezuela.org/negocio-de-la-chatarra-y-el-colapso-industria-petrolera/.

In her detailed examination of material residues in an abandoned home in rural Montana, Caitlin DeSilvey confronts the reader with matter suspended in a state halfway between preservation and decomposition. The ambiguous condition described by DeSilvey prompts a critical examination of the clear-cut categories and rigid methods that guide heritage preservation (which often isolate and preserve things indefinitely or not at all) and lays the foundation for experimental approaches that intentionally work *with* decay.[454] While recognizing the intricate relationship between memory and material endurance, DeSilvey argues that a surplus of heritage and/or a shortage of resources for its preservation constitutes an opportunity to conceptualize decay as a culturally and ecologically "productive" state.[455] As the author explains, "when protection can no longer be sustained at the levels we have become accustomed to, we will need new ways of making sense of the world and our relationship to it."[456]

In each of the cases examined in her investigation, DeSilvey extends her reflection beyond analysis to "propose [her] own experiments with curatorial and interpretive practice",[457] providing suggestions for the broader application of experimental or speculative approaches to heritage preservation. Finally, in her closing reflections about the possibilities of historic conservation beyond established institutional parameters, DeSilvey explores the relationship between caretaking and endurance, considering whether "withholding repair and letting the thing carry on with its changes"[458] can be considered a form of care. In her argument, by intentionally and strategically *not doing*, human action can shift away from stopping decay to accompanying it, a still "care-ful attitude" that leads to a "reciprocal relationship"[459] with material residues. Reciprocity, in this context, implies a quite literal correspondence between human and material trajectories of physical decline and vulnerability. Within this experimental framework, decay admits an interpretative openness foreclosed by more rigid (institutional) approaches.

As has been argued throughout this investigation, the residual accumulation of departure is neither frozen in time nor does it have an existence independent of human action; rather, it is constantly in the orbit of the caretaker, who can use it, maintain it, or transform it, but also neglect it and destroy it. With this idea and DeSilvey's approach in mind, we can reframe Jesús's scavenging as a mode of caretaking that "negotiates the transition between presence and absence"[460] in a novel way, tilting the scale towards the latter not only by carefully "withholding repair", but also by dismantling and demolishing, by strategically undoing or accelerating the pace of material transformation. In this sense, we can re-imagine *Quinta Esperanza*, locked and uninhabited for decades, overtaken by mold and plants—yet always under the caretaker's purview—not simply a deposit but as environment that acts as an accelerator of decay: everything that goes into it will come out rotten, rusted, expired, devalued and on its way to be sold as scrap.

454 DeSilvey, *Curated Decay*, 23–45.
455 Ibid., 5.
456 Ibid., 16-17
457 Ibid., 6.
458 Ibid., 180.
459 Ibid., 179.
460 Ibid.

Interlude: Expulsion

At 4:50am on Friday, August 30, 2024, a massive blackout left Venezuela in the dark. In the capital, power would not be restored until late that day. Blackouts had become increasingly frequent in recent years, but nationwide outages were rare.[461] Amid the political upheaval that followed the recent presidential elections, it could mean anything: a coup, a wave of arrests, or another breakdown of an outdated, poorly maintained, and strained electrical grid. A few hours into the morning, María Raquel received a text message from the realtor: the buyer's staff were on their way to start clearing the lot. Soon afterwards, a large crew stood outside the gate, waiting to be let inside. Two large dump trucks came in first, followed by a flatbed truck carrying a hydraulic excavator. A squad of workers marched in, led by a man wielding a machete; they called him *El Capitán.* Last came the buyer's bodyguard riding a large, black motorcycle, a gun holstered on one side. Immediately, the crew set to work. They cut down a side of the centennial mango tree to make room for the excavator and cleared one half of the garden, driving the machine into the bamboo forest that grew at the back of the property, ploughing through thicket and trees. The excavator's shovel dug its teeth into the soil and extracted large sections of plants and trees, lifting them into the air, where the men chopped them into smaller pieces with machetes before the machine dumped the loads into the back of the trucks. They moved quickly, with the excavator marking the pace of destruction. When both trucks were filled to the brim, there was a pause in the work. One side of the garden was razed. The captain and the bodyguard then came over to the space between the houses, where María Raquel and her husband were standing. The men looked around and assessed the space.

"We are coming here next," said the captain, waving the machete at the garden.

"Give us a moment to move the plants," asked María Raquel.

"Hurry up," the bodyguard replied.

María Raquel and her husband rushed to save whatever they could: they carried pots from one side to the other, piling them in a corner. There were pots of all shapes and sizes that had accumulated over the years. In the rush, many toppled and broke. Plants were thrown across the garden or ripped from the ground, tearing their roots. Carlos

[461] For a detailed account of the electrical crisis, see Neuman, *Things Are Never So Bad That They Cant't Get Worse*.

disappeared to the back and emerged minutes later carrying part of a giant Monstera, which he laid carefully on the ground. María Raquel moved on to the lateral wall, where climbing plants had taken hold. She detached them from the surface, breaking them into smaller pieces by hand; they would survive if replanted quickly. Then she took a small shovel and separated bromeliads and ferns from the tree trunks. The pile of plants on the corner of the garden grew steadily. What appeared to be an act of destruction was in reality a desperate attempt to save the garden from imminent obliteration. A friend, summoned as the garden was being razed, arrived and loaded whatever plants he could onto the back of his pickup truck. He lived in a house with a large garden where plants could be planted or gathered temporarily.

In the weeks that followed, tenants rushed to pack boxes and organize moves against the noise of the excavator flattening the terrain. Jesús's piles grew faster, and eventually scrap buyers were invited into the house to take their pick. More plant transports were scheduled; gardeners and collectors came with picks and shovels to select plants and dig out roots, leaving only large trees behind. María Raquel liquidated years of her ceramics production, inserting plant cuttings into pots and giving them away to customers. Verbal agreements and moving timelines were ignored in the rush of the sale. "For years, the owners have relied on us; now we are in the way,"[462] María Raquel said. "I knew they were selling the house, but I wasn't prepared … Everything is happening too fast," claimed Jesús later.[463] All their anticipation, planning, and gradual dismantling did not contemplate this episode of violent expulsion. The owners remained abroad, negotiating at a distance and spared from the sight of the demolition. As the final assumption of collapse on behalf of others, caretakers were not only victims of violence and witnesses of destruction, but the house's sale displaced them as well. Their eviction was an example of the otherwise invisible unmooring that accompanies migration, complicating clear-cut distinctions between mobile migrants and immobile locals.

Soon after all tenants left, the houses were demolished and the lot was cleared to make way for a warehouse.

In the fieldwork, the expulsion from the garden was a collision between the irreconcilable logics of preservation and violent takeover, a forceful conflation of realms of experience that had been kept apart until that moment. This abrupt episode of violence exposed dynamics that had remained beyond the possibility of direct scrutiny, of which only contours had been drawn and descriptions approximated through others' experience. The need for caution when documenting events, the fear of taking out the camera or of asking questions, transferred to a domestic interior conditions that had, until then, been associated with

[462] Personal communication. August 30, 2024
[463] Personal communication.

other spaces of the fieldwork, namely, with the unprotected exterior of the city. The turn of events had placed me on the other side of the flimsy parapets and makeshift enclosures that mediate between before and after states of architectural transformation. Moreover, the destruction of the garden also introduced actors that had been marginal until then: the architect, the topographer, and the engineer, who succeeded the demolition crew with plans, measuring instruments, and estimations, a realm of expertise that began with the tabula rasa, definitively foreclosing the unresolved tension between undoing and redoing that the caretakers had upheld until then.

The Garden of the Meanwhile: A fictional ending

And the last remnants
memory destroys.
W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*

At 4:50am on Friday, August 30, 2024, a massive blackout left Venezuela in the dark. Amid the confusion, the caretakers of *Quinta Sofía* realize that saving the house demands an extreme measure. They must lock themselves inside, permanently. Hastily, they chain gates and lock garage gates. They immediately understand this is not enough; locks can be forced, chains can be cut; anyone can peek through the vertical bars of the front gate. Instead, they seal themselves in. They block doorways with rubble, branches, metal debris, garden furniture, and office equipment they gather from the garden. By the time power is restored, all openings on the perimeter have been closed off with piles of junk that butt against the inside of the wall, with pieces of steel columns and chair legs protruding in various directions, a mound that looks more like the aftermath of demolition than an of construction. As more discarded material is added, the precarious mound begins to consolidate under its own weight. As materials rust and layers compress, they weigh down the layers below. Soon, the mound is covered in soil, and plants begin to grow on top, turning it into a large, soft, roundish shape intersected by the straight vertical plane that separates the house from the city. Eventually, the garage door that the pile of junk had initially blocked is also consumed by rust and absorbed by the organic mound, which continues to evolve. By climbing its steep slope, the dwellers can reach the top of the wall and have an elevated vantage point over their surroundings. The perimeter wall is also reinforced with improvised spikes made of cut window bars, broken champagne glasses, and various thorny plants. The wall is a foundational act. As it grows and thickens, it achieves its ultimate purpose, fulfilling the (architectural) fantasy of creating a realm completely detached from the city, an interior whose autonomy is allowed by the fertility of the garden and the bounties of the tropical climate. From an urban perspective, the sealed-off site is pure absence, a vacuum into which nothing enters and from which nothing escapes. In time, however, the garden will become the negative image of its neighborhood, where relentless ecological undoing of the Garden Suburb is countered through patient gardening.

Debt collectors appear at the door, municipal authorities ring a dilapidated doorbell covered in spider webs, curious architects stop and take photos, drawn by the sight of a wall that seems to be evolving and collapsing at the same time; real

estate agents and potential buyers show up but soon desist, deterred by dwellers who look down on them menacingly from the top of the mound; they appear increasingly unhinged (it's just an act, or perhaps it is those on the outside who have become deranged; in either case, communication is impossible). The owners, who cannot return to the country, are unable to verify the state of the house; at the same time, they are caught in a bureaucratic ordeal quietly instigated by one of the caretakers, which forever delays the succession paperwork and renders the property unsellable.[464] Appealing to the owners' emotional attachment, caretakers send them daily photos of a garden whose plants and flowers have grown more lush and colorful than ever. Caretakers choose the best angles, carefully framing images against the parts of the house that remain inhabitable, which are increasingly reduced as plants breed and take over former domestic spaces. The organized sequence of rooms in the modernist villas allows for new classifications of plants that once belonged to friends and family: damp bathrooms become perfect environments for ferns, west-facing, sun-filled rooms are ideal for cacti; floor slabs are cut and roofs are broken through to make room for growing trees. The house is strategically undone, reducing maintenance and accelerating its transition from cultural to organic matter.[465] The caretakers watch over the process and control the pace of transformation, dwelling in the space between attention and abandonment, preservation and destruction, occupying the threshold between what used to be and what could have been. Like the books locked away in a basement not far from this house, withheld from public access and preserved for the abstract citizens of an imaginary future, the garden of the meanwhile is a space where the material residues of bygone lives are contained without being allowed (yet) to enter collective memory, a realm where their survival could not be guaranteed.

The garden extends the notion of meanwhile into the territory of architectural imagination by proposing a scenario where prolonged wait propels matter into the future as intentionality rather than expectancy, where the house's untenable status as either heritage or left-behind patrimony lays the ground for a new condition, a state in which undoing and redoing are indefinitely unresolved, where memory is no longer lodged in an architectural but in an ecological patrimony. To accept this ending is to admit the possibility that architectural imagination can flourish in the space between loss and possibility, forever postponing an outcome. Speculation also occupies a meanwhile. This state unleashes caretaking's true potential, yet it does so at the expense of betraying trust, of violating the mandate to act on behalf of (absent) others, instead fully incorporating the "ways of doing" of collapse into its repertoire of spatial strategies. To accept this ending also demands considering the meaning of "alternative", a space more effectively claimed through implication than through resistance.

[464] In reality, Jesús's daughter, who works for a public institution, helped the owner to expedite inheritance paperwork.
[465] DeSilvey, *Curated Decay* See chapter 4, "Orderly Decay."

Conclusion

During fieldwork in Caracas, confronted on a daily basis with migrants' domestic spaces and the accumulation of every imaginable object they contained, I was haunted by a recurrent question: What will happen to all these things?

This is not a question this dissertation has set out to answer; nevertheless, it is a question that exposes the intricate and evolving connection between the fates of matter and country—the former as a mirror image of the latter—that runs through the work. This connection sustains caretakers' mundane acts of maintenance and migrants' decision to hold on to their left-behind things. It is at the heart of spatial strategies that uphold the possibility of returning and, subsequently, of reopening boxes, hanging pictures back on walls, and returning books to their shelves. In its most radical—hopeful?—version, the association between matter and country equates the idea of return with a kind of restoration, the revival of an ideal past and its projection into the future, as if taking an alternative route that sidesteps two and a half decades that have irrevocably changed the country. Politically managed, this association turns hope into nothing more than the careful dosification of waiting.

This dissertation's examination of caretaking practices amid the country's generalized breakdown opens the possibility of shifting our attention away from the future implications of the question above and towards what is happening to these things in the present, and what this tells us about the nature of societal transformation, its projection into the future, and its historical foundations. The contribution of this dissertation to the study of societal collapse is in its focus on the ordinary and intimate experience of breakdown. Through the mundane labor of the caretaker, collapse comes into focus as an interstitial space in which appearance and disappearance, endurance and transformation, memory and loss, are in constant tension. In Venezuela, this interstitial condition has acquired the status of historical time through the persistent postponement of the possibility of political change.

The shift in gaze this research proposes, away from a search for the origins of collapse and from recommendations for recovering a lost path, centers on a figure that eludes easy characterization. Caretakers are simultaneously motivated by an assumed responsibility for the unmet needs of migrants and by a keen seen of opportunity, by a selfless obligation to others and an attention to their own immediate survival, by a mandate to preserve things "as they were" and the autonomy to make something new out of them, by an adherence to longstanding norms of civic coexistence and by a first-hand knowledge of the procedures imposed by fiscal barriers or institutional frailty. Caretaking is a balancing act between opposing forces and conflicting interests; the caretaker is an *entangler*, thriving on a capacity for mutual implication. Ultimately, the caretaker embodies the very conditions of collapse as a state in which productivity entails a capacity for connecting across

temporalities, for holding conflicting interests in balance, and for participating in relationships of interdependency that emphasize collaboration as they expose the contradictions of mutual reliance.

Collapse, care, architecture, and residues

Societal collapse can be broadly defined as a transition along a trajectory of decline. This definition emphasizes the graduality of change over the finality of a catastrophic outcome, framing collapse as an ongoing process rather than a civilizational end. Collapse's "trajectory of decline" can be regular or irregular, marked by accelerations and decelerations, booms and busts of economic activity, and the redistribution of resources or population. These events can mark an uneven territorial pattern of breakdown, creating enclaves of prosperity amid landscapes of decline. This "trajectory" can be potentially mitigated or theoretically reversed—mitigation and reversibility are often the focus of policy and political ambitions—but in practice, it remains unchanged. It is the permanently unfulfilled possibility of "change" that produces the everyday dimension of collapse, which shapes routines, relationships, and future outlooks. If anything can be generalized from the Venezuelan experience of collapse, it is that even if "change" is permanently held as a possibility, collecting hopes and plans for the future, this expectation exists side by side with a realm of daily life that is rooted in immediacy and—for the vast majority of the population—urgency. Against these conditions, the possibility of change becomes, simultaneously, more pressing and more diffuse, in such a way that any version of it will be welcome as immediate relief yet inextricably implicated in the conditions that it tries to escape.

The reframing of societal collapse as a gradual transition has implications for how we think about care practices, for architecture's capacity to engage productively with breakdown, and for the incorporation of material residues into spatial practices and environmental discourses. It also underpins the dissertation's reading of present-day Caracas and its contribution to the study of the urban dimensions of emigration. Reflecting on each of these aspects also presents an opportunity to propose how they can continue beyond the scope of this study.

Dirty care

As has been argued, collapse creates its own moral context, in which individual action—motivated by urgency, immediacy, or by simply "wanting to do things"—postpones judgement and expands the realm of what is ethically admissible. The concept of *dirty care* embraces caretaking's relational capacity as a disposition for contamination. Dirty care engages with the contingent, the mutually beneficial, and the unpredictable. It challenges a general tendency in scholarship that frames care as an "alternative" point of entry into urgent issues, and as an (ethical) shield against practices and actors construed as harmful. Care flourishes amid collapse precisely because it is able to participate, forming dependent relationships based on mutual benefit and trust rather than offering resistance, restoring a lost equilibrium, or

carving out an autonomous—uncontaminated—space of action. Care comes out soiled from its dealings with breakdown, stained by its disposition for compromise. As such, *dirty care* does not occupy a marginal corner of an alternative approach, but is care at its fullest potential, for to care is to cross lines, to reach across difference, to be mutually implicated. Care is, essentially, a dirty word.

Contamination, in this context, results from the collaboration between actors who are otherwise perceived as being in opposition (across uneven power relationships or ethical red lines), the coopting of regulations, parallel institutions, and negotiation that underpin individual or collective achievement. When scholars allude to actors' capacity of "finding ways to continuously strike agreements on accomplishing things together",[466] it is the togetherness that is crucial. A word of caution seems necessary at this point, for the notion of dirty care should not be interpreted as an embrace of opacity or a justification for illegality. Instead, it aims to stir debate on the operationalization of care in spatial disciplines by moving beyond oppositional or emancipatory positions and showing how carved-out spheres of action are neither clean nor impermeable. Moreover, the preservation of "order" *implicates* care in webs of interdependence that ultimately shape the material world it oversees. Dirt may be "matter out of place", as Mary Douglas famously stated,[467] but caretakers remind us that keeping matter in place—i.e., preserving "order"—is dirty work. The concept of dirty care dialogues with calls to "move past the disgust and engage with the dirt"[468] in our dealings with the world, literally and figuratively. If collapse means, etymologically, "falling together",[469] shouldn't care entail getting dirty together? Lastly, can an expanded ethics of care inform an *ethics of collapse*? These questions point to future implications of this research regarding the interaction between the concepts of care and collapse, as well as the role of architecture in this relationship.

Collapse and the expanded architectural field

Caretaking's capacity for constantly reinventing its field of action, its inscription within the realm of so-called informal occupations, its orientation towards operating upon residues and extending the life of what already exists, and its preference for process over product are fundamentally at odds with architecture's disciplinary attention and professional organization. The territory where caretaking flourishes is the same territory where architecture stalls. It is not a coincidence, then, that architects are almost entirely absent from this study, or that they appear on the scene after the caretaker has exited. This absence was the subject of reflection around the reprogramming and transformation of *quintas*, where architects' work was seen as the carving out of a limited space of action in which specific expertise and professional conventions could be deployed to various degrees of success.

This limited sphere of action, however, illuminates a broader insufficiency; namely, how architecture is not expanded by collapse but rather constrained by it. This constraint has less to do with the visions of crumbling structures and ruined

466 Pieterse, "Introducing Rogue Urbanism," 14.
467 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; Routledge, 2001).
468 Hélène Frichot, *Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture* (AADR–Art Architecture Design Research, 2019), 6:5.
469 Losoncz, "Architecture in the Shadow of Catastrophe and Collapse."

cities that so profoundly shape the imaginary of collapse than with the fact that architecture is fundamentally ill-equipped to deal with uncertainty and instability. Collapse exposes architecture's core fragility, rendering pointless its pursuit of control, as its primary tool for acting upon reality—the project—is useless if not as an instrument of anticipation. Pointing out this limitation does not imply that the paradigm of the architectural project is exhausted; rather, it constitutes an aspiration to reorganize it around new kinds of problems. Architecture's capacity to connect the concrete and the speculative can articulate its role amid sweeping societal transitions, expanding our understanding of collapse and the imaginaries associated with it.

Residual accumulation as a creative resource

The material residues of departure, the lingering stuff of obsolete life-worlds that collect histories and are the center of new discourses, are one instance in which the continuities and ruptures between past, present, and future acquire a concrete, tangible condition. The work of the caretaker brings these tensions to the surface without resolving them. Instead, it diffuses the limits between notions of "residue" and "resource" and opens these categories to multiple readings, free from their long-established associations with progress and failure. In the context of the dissertation, the notion of "resource" has referred to something readily available for use, an asset possessing symbolic or economic value, and to the creative ability to deal with a situation, as when speaking of the resourcefulness of the caretaker. The reframing of the residual matter of collapse as a resource transcends the specificity of the case study. It aligns with the observations above regarding architecture's disciplinary frameworks and expectations, since the architectural project's capacity for anticipation is codified in standards and conventions, estimated in schedules, and quantified in spreadsheets of material and unitary costs. Just as collapse's enduring instability is at odds with architecture's anxiety for control, so does approaching matter as a substance in flux—as a "bridge" between "worlds"[470]—stand in opposition to the profession's engagement with the stuff through which it comes into being and with what ultimately constitutes the discipline's *corpus*. As the "transformative"[471] nature of care extends to the material world, it imbues matter with a singular vulnerability, different from structural frailty or material impermanence, and operating at an epistemological level; namely, a resistance to classification into clear categories, as objects of care can be simultaneously symbolic attachments, commodities, heritage, records of previous lifestyles, and markers of change. The short speculative ending that precedes this conclusion, in which a house and its garden become the site of a deliberate process of physical ruination, allows the notion of "meanwhile" to play itself out materially, privileging transition over final configuration and engaging architecture with the inherent vulnerability of its material constitution. As Steven Jackson has pointed out, innovation entails more than the constant pursuit of the new and is essential to maintenance and repair

[470] Steven Jackson, "Repair as Transition: Time, Materiality, and Hope," in *Repair Work Ethnographies: Revisiting Breakdown, Relocating Materiality*, ed. Ignaz Strebel et al. (Springer Singapore, 2019), 223.
[471] Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 32.

practices.[472] One question, for architecture, is how to uncouple its own search for novelty from the production of new buildings. Valerio Olgiatti and Markus Breidschmidt's notion of "newness" provides one answer to this question. By emphasizing that the role of architecture is the creation of unprecedented spatial experiences,[473] the authors open a venue for creative speculation along the line of architecture's capacity to bridge the epistemological and experiential realms—as "a thesis about man's relationship to the world"[474] and a reality that "plays itself out in the experience of spaces".[475] In short, newness uncouples novelty from the production of new buildings—the undisputed realm of architectural innovation. In doing so, it leaves the door open to methodological speculation around the possibility that existing buildings become a "resource" from which new spatial experiences take shape.

The duality between residues and resources merits further reflection. As stated, the notion of resource resonates deeply with Venezuela's history as an oil nation. Oil's influence in every aspect of national life for the last century, its vital role in sustaining the country's sweeping modernization and rapid urbanization, its centrality in the construction of collective imaginaries of riches, and in buttressing societal aspirations and material progress, is unquestionable and has been extensively studied. This centrality is so poignant that the country's unraveling is often explained in terms of an *absence* of oil.[476] Oil's absence, like that of migrants, is one that shapes everyday life and whose vast material heritage exerts demands in relation to deeply rooted values. To the extent that both absences overlap in the domestic realm, caring for individual left-behind patrimonies is also about managing Venezuela's cultural legacy. As caretaking shines its ambivalent light on oil's legacy, it illuminates it as different things at once. On the one hand, this material exposes the feeble foundations of the country's project of modernity; it serves as indisputable proof of decades of misguided policy, during which an overvalued currency distorted perceptions of wealth and promoted consumer habits that exceeded society's productive capacity. On the other hand, caretaking allows us to see this material legacy as evidence of a political will and demographic trends that were *built into* specific living standards, which underpinned the consolidation and endurance of the middle class. Moreover, focusing on the domestic realm of Caracas's middle class has exposed a material world that is both local and global, simultaneously anchored in Venezuela's specific historical and cultural developments while being the expression of consumption patterns that have spread across much of the planet since the second half of the twentieth century. These patterns associate progress and the expansion of the middle class with material abundance. Collapse has not been able to eradicate this association; instead, it has exacerbated its most voracious aspects, intertwining material affluence with crude needs of survival, radical inequality, and unrestrained

[472] Specifically, maintenance and repair "are not separate or alternative to innovation, but sites for some of its most interesting and consequential operations." Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," 227.

[473] Specifically, buildings that "[embody]a quality of something that has never been present before for a person in the way that they encounter it". Valerio Olgiatti and Markus Breidschmidt, *Non-Referential Architecture* (Simonett & Baer, 2018), 75.

[474] Ibid., 77.

[475] Ibid., 83.

[476] Consider, for instance, William Neuman's explanation that Venezuela ran out of (oil) money, or Francisco Rodriguez's detailed study on the dual impact of disinvestment and sanctions. See: Neuman, *Things Are Never So Bad That They Cant't Get Worse*, 119; Rodríguez, *The Collapse of Venezuela.*

extractivism. The Venezuelan case allows us to visualize societal collapse not as the reversal of an upward-trending curve, an about-face of the long path of progress, but rather as its distorted mirror image; a stage in which deeply rooted cultural traits persist but acquire ever more ominous qualities. What this means for the city is that while collapse is a driver of urban change, this does not necessarily result in urban decline (nor in its associated imaginaries of abandonment and ruin). Instead, collapse manifests itself in the appropriation of established visual codes and the borrowing of aesthetic references, a dreadful conflation of the provisional and the spectacular, exposing an urgent need for legitimacy. In this process, architecture is a destabilizing force, its inherent optimism its most perverse feature.

Lastly, the tensions between notions of "residue" and "resource" open Caracas to novel theorizations. This dissertation's examination of the material remains of departure has retraced, broadly, the geography of the twentieth century's aspirational society, which increasingly intersects with the territorial claims of an emergent social class. Contrary to what commentators have argued, this intersection shows that historic aspirations have not simply perished with the country's collapse. They live on, as vestige and heritage, in the jealously guarded apartments of migrants and the decaying homes of elderly residents; they endure as a forward-facing ambition in the makeshift showrooms of vacant houses that allow young entrepreneurs to reinvent themselves against every downturn of the economy, and they persist in the bunker-villas and vacant office towers built by elites who pin their hopes to money laundering or political allegiance. The "demolitionist" impulse that Cabrujas so sharply criticized as a defining cultural trait of Venezuelan modernity[477] has found in the material residues of departure a cheap and abundant resource for satisfying a historical fixation, one that equates erasure with material progress. In Caracas, the aspirational and the demolitionist society are one and the same. As this dissertation has shown, their coincidence in space and time is not devoid of conflict.

The productive threshold in which the residues of departure are recirculated and reinvented allows a contrarian reading of Caracas. On the one hand, this reading runs counter to the city's historical fixation on novelty and inauguration; on the other, the evaluation of modernity (as the material expression of progress) as a failed project. For Venezuelans in and out of the country, progress is an ideal deeply ingrained in the collective imaginary, sustained by the certainty of resource abundance and historically promoted by a paternalistic state. Progress is, in the present, a broken plotline, whose rupture has left Venezuelan society reduced, scattered, and unmoored, grasping at threads to reconnect it; "holding on", as Martín Fernández said, to whatever fragments remain of it. Benjamin's inexhaustible thought-image of the angel of history, who, propelled forward by the storm of progress, stares back at the destruction,[478] offers a suitable metaphor for visualizing the country's historical moment, and for generalizing from it. As we look closely at the wreckage at the angel's feet when the storm has subsided, what we see are not formless piles of rubble but clean sidewalks and pruned trees, unspoiled homes with shelves of carefully lined books and glass cabinets filled with shining glassware, a vast

[477] Cabrujas, "La Ciudad Escondida," 25.
[478] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 3rd ed., ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (Penguin Random House, 2015), 249.

inventory of fragments charged with meaning, "made whole"[479] through the quiet, dirty work of the caretaker. This junkyard—city, country, planet—is our inaugural stage, a site thriving on the unquantifiable, unmeasurable, unclassifiable.

To summarize, the key findings of this dissertation are: a definition of collapse as a historical time characterized by a transition of decline, and a contribution to the study of societal breakdown that focuses on the lived experience of this transition. This shift in attention, in turn, offers new avenues for scholarly investigation and creative speculation. On the one hand, it expands the range of care as practice and value for its ability to engage with uncertainty and participate—rather than only oppose or withstand—in forms of cooperation that allow "survival", understanding the term as both individual sustenance and cultural endurance. On the other hand, this shift in attention lays bare the limitations of architecture to productively address conditions that challenge long-established disciplinary procedures and professional orientations. In the Venezuelan case, the experience of collapse as a historical time in disappearance and emergence coexist, affords a critical reading of historical processes of modernization through the tension between resource and residue. The vast material inventory left in the wake of the emigration and demise of the country's middle class comes to the fore as the lingering stuff of obsolete life-worlds and a source of individual, societal, and architectural reinvention. While architecture is ill-equipped to cope with its own transitory nature, its capacity for speculation constitutes a territory through which to overcome this limitation.

Fragmentation and accumulation: a reflection on method and structure.

This study has alternated between fieldwork in Caracas and remote research in Europe. Each of these moments—and the feedback between them—has been crucial to advancing its thesis, and each one has been shaped by the instability and uncertainty of the Venezuelan collapse. The country's volatility demanded constant updates of facts and figures, the regular revision of scholarly, journalistic, and social media output, and the adjustment of methods, assumptions, and frameworks. In this context, the fieldwork was not merely an opportunity to verify hypotheses or collect data according to a prefigured scheme; instead, it operated as a destabilizing moment, unsettling expectations, claims, methodological designs, and my own experiences from earlier life in the city.

When conducting research that involves immersing oneself in others' daily routines and living environments, the researcher is inevitably at the mercy of circumstances beyond his or her control. In the context of this study, each return to Caracas was preceded by a planning stage that was routinely overturned by the realities of the context, rendering futile any attempt to advance according to a predefined plan. Each research stay was informed by the country's political and economic climate—from the optimism that surrounded the economic liberalization of

[479] Ibid.

2022, to the cautiousness amid the political purges of 2023, or the fear of renewed political repression in the aftermath of the presidential election of 2024—but it was also shaped by the difficulties and uncertainties of daily life in the city. In the face of these circumstances, the fieldwork demanded a *disposition* towards the unexpected. Maximizing contact with the object of study incorporated the difficulties of the context into the methodological setup rather than treating these as inevitable setbacks. This disposition allowed the fieldwork to consider the vastness, nuances, and intricacies of domestic residues, revealing specificities of caretaking that would not have been possible otherwise—the very specificities that make looking after a plant and a book two different activities in terms of the articulations that each object allows, the networks and value systems they are embedded in, and the life-worlds that they are open to. It was this routine of repetitive exposure that allowed the fine-grained descriptions in this study to emerge, and ultimately, the proposition of collapse as a productive transition to take shape. As argued, this mode of engagement also fragmented the everyday into a series of temporally delimited, spatially situated experiences that accumulated day after day, visit after visit.

The duality between fragmentation and accumulation is at the heart of the method's potential and limitations, illuminating the incomplete, dispersed, and mediated conditions of knowledge production amid collapse. On the one hand, the tension between fragment and totality allowed isolated experiences to stand as valid and autonomous sources of knowledge. As they accrued, these moments did not line up cleanly with others, but instead formed a mosaic-like assemblage in which patterns either formed and dissolved, creating overlaps through repetition rather than through synthesis. Ultimately, the fragmentary nature of episodes and interludes is not evidence of the method's inadequacy; rather, fragmentation creates the condition for accumulation to acquire its own meaning. On the other hand, accumulation does not aim to resolve the fragmentary nature of individual episodes but depends on them to generate nuances.

As the collection of snapshots of transitory configurations yielded by the fieldwork routinely resisted classification, what was ultimately undermined was the possibility of achieving a definitive sense of order. This points to a limitation of the method as a means for arriving at overarching theories or organizing a multiplicity of data into a unified narrative. This is to say that just like attempting to read a coherent story into a context of collapse would be an imposition, forcing fragmentation upon another situation could be equally burdensome. In this sense, the methodology developed in this dissertation does not offer a fixed set of reproducible procedures but a (still-perfectible) framework that acknowledges that, under certain conditions, fieldwork cannot proceed along a predefined path and the conditions it observes and documents may not be readily accessible or classifiable. This does not imply a lack of rigor but instead calls for a critical attitude towards conventional notions of "data collection" and analysis, as well as attention towards the implications of "blurring" disciplinary boundaries. Just as a specific field methodology can hardly be considered the purview of a sole discipline, the use of documentation techniques nominally ascribed to a field by another should not be taken as a sign that disciplinary boundaries have been crossed. That is to say that to label this study as ethnographic is an unfitting label in terms of object of study, methods, and objectives, amounting to

what Tim Ingold has referred to as "an usurpation of [ethnography] for other ends".[480] Its aim has not been to describe a group of people but rather to theorize and (architecturally) speculate by directly experiencing and critically evaluating the conditions of life in a specific time and place.[481] Expanding architecture's capacity to engage with uncertainty should consider methods of inquiry that allow methodological promiscuity and openness to inform disciplinary knowledge production.

Caretaking's capacity to uphold matter in transit was made explicit by a method that placed emphasis on repetition and iteration in such a way that an apartment that was the object of zealous preservation at one moment could be expediently dismantled at another as its contents were dispersed throughout the city; a decrepit house one day could become a heavily-secured villa the next; or a cactus could be, simultaneously, a personal memento and the constitutive matter of a garden threatened with demolition. In this sense, an approach to fieldwork that aimed to increase opportunities to access specific spaces and practices required expanding the techniques and tools used to document these encounters. This yielded, in turn, a vast amount of information, which lent itself to reassembly in ways that extended the logics of fragmentation and accumulation beyond the fieldwork. The outcome of this process is a dissertation that has strived, first, to translate the lived experience of the field onto the written page in such a way that its potential to produce its own reality is evident, and second, to navigate the duality between fragmentation and accumulation in such a way that its structure retains both a measure of order and the latent possibility of recombination. In this sense, the complication of creating categories permeates into the dissertation in the form of both a limitation and an invitation, a reluctant congealment that constitutes a mosaic-like image which, due to the transitory nature of what it attempts to hold in place, can continue to grow.

In Caracas, the recurrent encounter with the residues of departure made evident how their accumulation exceeded any possibility of individual documentation. Herein lies an opportunity for this investigation to contribute to an ongoing, collective, and patient effort to produce a (visual) inventory of the material devastation of the country. A dispersed and irremediably incomplete version of this inventory exists across myriad social media accounts and web pages that advertise migrants' objects as second-hand goods, as well as in the work of photographers, filmmakers, journalists, and scholars, for whom the "shared loss of country"[482] is an experience that transcends national borders. To the extent that this endeavor transforms these material residues into the input for cultural production, extending their life, it is both a record of collapse and a practice of collective caretaking.

In retrospect, the recurrent engagement with the inward and protected spaces of caretaking had no resemblance to anything previously experienced in my own city as "daily life". The singular procedures by which "the *field* emerged out of the city" were at the core of a process of estrangement that permeates the contribution to the knowledge of the Venezuelan collapse that this dissertation aspires to be, at once deeply invested and detached. This is the threshold productively claimed by diasporic knowledge.

[480] Tim Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 4.
[481] Ibid.
[482] Cardona, "Casas de Desolvido. Cronotopos Diaspóricos En Las Obras de Tres Fotógrafas Venezolanas," 83.

Epilogue

In the early hours of January 3rd, 2026, the United States military carried out a raid in Caracas and forcefully removed Nicolás Maduro from power. During the two-hour operation, numerous airfields, communications centers, and other military and civilian infrastructure in and around the capital were bombed. More than eighty people were killed. Venezuelans inside and outside the country received the news of Maduro's capture with disbelief. Our collective bafflement only grew when, in the aftermath of the operation, Donald Trump announced that his administration would recognize Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's Vice-President, as its interlocutor, in charge of a provisional government subservient to American interests. This ideologically contradictory—yet crudely pragmatic—decision was justified by the need to prevent a power vacuum that would further destabilize the country, as if removing the regime was like disarming a bomb by carefully cutting one wire at a time. In effect, this decision has shifted the Venezuelan conflict into an uncharted territory, testing, once more, the regime's capacity to mutate to secure its survival.

At this point, it is unclear what "provisional government" means; whether we are witnessing the beginning of a transition that will restore democracy and set the foundation for the country's reconstruction, whether it will lead to a form of American-supervised authoritarianism, or whether it is the beginning of a scenario which, like the present moment, no one predicted. The country lingers in the *meanwhile* of a change that is both at arm's length and out of reach. Political analysts interpret Trump's social media posts like fortune tellers reading tarot cards, projecting their audiences' wishes and anxieties into them. Anything sticks. Historian Margarita López-Maya characterized this moment as *una evolución dentro de la situación* (an evolution within the situation), aptly capturing the viscosity and undefinition of the moment.[483]

In a recent forum, economist Ricardo Hausmann argued that the unequivocal sign of the country's recovery would be "when Venezuelans [abroad] say 'We can go home'."[484] Until then, as one caretaker said, we are all "waiting to see what happens."

February 2026

[483] EfectoCocuyo, *Llegaron Los Gringos - Margarita López Maya:"Estamos En Un Gobierno de Facto Todavía, Pero Tutelado"*, 2026, 28:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyDGCfo6WI4.

[484] Ricardo Hausmann, speaking in a session on Venezuela at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00puSblSbTk

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Biographical note

Stefan Gzyl (Caracas, 1978) is a Venezuelan architect, educator, and researcher. He holds a professional degree in Architecture (magna cum laude) from Universidad Central de Venezuela and a Master's degree in Architecture (with Distinction) from Harvard University. After working as an architect in the United States and France, he returned to Venezuela, where he co-founded *Central Arquitectura*. Since 2014, he has been an Assistant Professor of Architectural Design at FAU/UCV, where he also served as the academic coordinator of *Taller* X Design Unit. He has taught design and research courses at the University of Oregon, TU Delft, and Fontys Academy of the Arts.

Since 2017, he has been co-director of *Incursiones*, a non-profit architecture practice that aims to improve civic engagement, education, and access to public space through design interventions. *Incursiones*' projects range from exhibitions and workshops to installations and public space infrastructure, supported by competitive grants and institutional cooperation. Their work has been exhibited internationally in Mexico City, Santiago de Chile, Frankfurt, London, and Rotterdam, and the practice has received various awards for its projects. Beyond his teaching and professional activities, Stefan Gzyl has served on the editorial board and as a regular columnist for various architectural publications.

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