



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

From CONTESTED_CITIES to Global Urban Justice

Stream 5

Article nº 5-007

**NUEVAS ALTERNATIVAS URBANAS
LOS MOVIMIENTOS SOCIALES Y SUS PRÁCTICAS
SOCIO-ESPACIALES Y VISUALES**

TERESA GARCÍA ALCARAZ

Article nº 5-007

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IN-BETWEEN SPACES

Impact design interventions as alternatives to better understand the city

Teresa García Alcaraz

Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya

archithoughts@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the existing frontiers in contemporary divided cities. It aims to develop a reflection on the territory through impact design interventions understood as tools to articulate the city interstices, named in this research as 'in-between spaces'. They are spaces of ambiguous meanings as they range from the apparent, characterised by a concentration of contrasting neighbourhoods, to the invisible.

Could it be possible to impulse a new way of making more inclusive cities? Could architects, designers and urban practitioners through architectural design thinking activate the in-between spaces in order to make a more cohesive society?

To inspect these questions, Caracas has served to exemplify a multitude of physical, geographical, social, political and economic differences within the space. Particularly, I will focus in two different sites and locations: a public square in the historical part of *Macarao*, mainly characterised by a long-standing concentration of low-income neighbourhoods, and several walls located in the middle income municipality of *Chacao*. In both contexts, public spaces have emerged as fragmented areas but still as scenarios for freedom of speech, sense of belonging and local identity.

So this paper will present theoretical and empirical evidence –collected from fieldwork and structured interviews- to finally conclude that impact design interventions, considered as urban tactics done in the in-between spaces, define a series of alternative ways of understanding the city that match with issues of building a more equal city, education, improvement of the individual and expanding the term communal beyond the traditional way of making cities.

By integrating impact design interventions in the interstices, this approach may help to structure and deepen the understanding of the city as a whole; in-between spaces become linkages between different realities, mitigating fragmentation and socio-spatial segregation.

KEYWORDS: Caracas, in-between space, impact design interventions, interstices

1. INTRODUCTION

In Latin America, there is historical evidence that demonstrates that the dualism unplanned- planned exists since colonialization, becoming –in the case of Venezuela- more acute with the arrival of Europeans¹ and being nowadays essential binaries to describe and differentiate Venezuelan cities.

In architectural terms, the unplanned and the informal might be associated with human settlements known as *barrios* (in Venezuela), *favelas* (in Brasil), *Gecekondur* (in Turkey), *Villas Miseria* (in Argentina), *Bidonvilles* (in France) and so on.

These human settlements are often large-scale and highly developed organisms. According to Leech (2013), what makes them call informal is that they are built outside the legal framework of city planning and they are associated –on a broad level- with the slum-like as many of these settlements are sub-standard, overcrowded and dangerous, with inadequate access to safe water and poor sanitation. In spite of that, many are now well developed and could be hard to distinguish from other parts of the cities.

This paper is essentially focused in the space that connects and stands in between the formal and the informal, which is referred as the ‘in-between space’. It has been adopted the notion of *Zwischenstadt* or “in-between city” coined by the German architect and theorist Thomas Sieverts (2003), who understands this space as the socio-spatial landscape that includes that part of the urban region that is perceived as not quite traditional city and not quite traditional suburb.

It is true that binaries such as formal- informal, rich- poor, first- third world, developed- developing countries, top-down – bottom-up and so on, need to be dissolved in order to sustain the debate of the city with other terms which imply unity, integration, hybridisation, simultaneity and other forms of coexistence.

According to Fiori (2001 p.12) and Machado et al. (2003 p. 10) referring to Rio’s Favela-Bairro updating programme it is needed a “change in the boundaries between the formal and the informal, rather than extending the formal city and its regulations into the irregular spaces of ‘non-city’... Rather than an integration which becomes synonymous with homogenization, the challenge is to make a city of integrity that is multiple and diverse”.

This paper starts from the in-between spaces, “where it makes an immediate, practical difference but with significant potential impact” (Hamdi, 2016).

2. URBAN CONTEXT

2.1 Caracas and its in-between spaces

Caracas is presented as a city in constant movement and permanent crisis. Contrast is the term that defines this city the most; it is a conflicted, noisy and congested metropolis where modern and sophisticated buildings coexist with hundreds of thousands of small *ranchos*² that fold the mountains of its valley.

¹ All Spanish settlements followed the Rules of India, which dictated the establishment of a city plan before its construction. The Plaza Mayor was the heart of the Spanish colonial city planning and it was understood as a political, military, social and commercial centre of the city. Streets would follow a geometrical pattern starting from the centre of the plaza, guided by the four cardinal points.

² Venezuelan term referring to a house placed illegally on an invaded piece of land. A rancho houses one or more families, and it grows depending on family needs. Frequently, the rancho starts as one room made out of cheap materials such as

It may happen that barrio dwellers (normally the ones who live on the top of the hill) have never gone to the city centre and vice versa, inhabitants of the wealthiest parts of the city have never walked in any barrio. Not only is there an urban problem but a social, politic, economic and cultural one.

In Caracas, urban adjustment and restructuring plans based on zoning have not been effective in mitigating socio-spatial segregation. Consequently, this is one of the reasons why the Venezuelan capital can be identified as a dual city that is divided by (in)visible powerful lines that inspire contradictory feelings.

The in-between spaces are the forgotten territory of Caracas, a city which is determined by the spectrum of leftover spaces considered as marginal, obsolete or dysfunctional by most city authorities. Those areas, the in-betweens, could be the riverbeds, the streams, the green slopes, and neglected spaces between buildings, the infrastructural lands, and underpasses as well as streets, squares, and zones alongside walls and fences... multitude of gaps identified of non-use from planning politics. They are spaces that have ambiguous meanings as they can range from the apparent to the invisible.

In-between spaces might connote spaces of opportunity and hope for the ones who live in the barrio and uncrossing lines for those who inhabit the gated urbanisations. They are understood as areas that face complexity and dynamism, discontinuous in territory and time that are opened for development and participation but, at the same time, generate political and social unrest.

Divisions within cities whether they are materialised as a wall or not, reflect the existence of a conflict. People who pass-by these boundaries experience a definition of senses and perceptions, and probably a construction of otherness in territorial terms.

According to Newman (2005), "a wall is a slab of concrete and therefore makes for the complete "othering" of the people on the other side. They become invisible, which makes it easier for people on each side to construct their own separate identities, and the identities of the "other", free from real world views and interactions. (...) the more invisible the other, the less real he/she is, and the greater is the perceived difference and feeling of threat".

The increasing concentrations of global flows have exacerbated the inequalities and spatial divisions of social classes in Caracas. In this context, it is important to look deeper to find a wide range of places to commemorate the cultures of those excluded from certain areas and the economic boom in order to find an inclusive way of making better cities. This does not necessarily lie in the formal production of architecture, but often challenge it.

Here the idea of a city is an elastic urban condition that according to Rahul Mehrotra (2013) is not a grand vision but a 'grand adjustment'. The Kinetic City can be seen as the symbolic image of the emerging urban Latin American condition. The alleys, street markets, informal vendors and slum dwellers, all create an ever-transforming streetscape – a city in constant motion where the very physical fabric is characterised by continuous change.

The Static City, on the other hand, dependent on architecture for its representation, is no longer the single image by which the city is read. Thus architecture is not the 'spectacle' of the city, nor does it even comprise the single dominant image.

But, what about the in-between spaces of the city? Which role do they have? Could it be possible to impulse a new way of making more inclusive cities starting from the in-

metal or cardboard, built by its dwellers. In time (years) a rancho can evolve to a house with many floors in brick and concrete, built by professional builders from the community, on the dwellers request. (via Phenomenon Mapping)

between? Could architects, designers and urban practitioners through architectural design thinking articulate those in-between spaces in order to make a more cohesive society?

3. TOWARDS A NEW CHANGE OF PARADIGM

3.1 Considering 'Urban' as a cultural category

The project of building an inclusive city is universal. Most cities of today are becoming essentially gated communities where some residents, normally the poor, are being excluded; insecurity, lack of basic services and disproportionate consumerism characterise some global cities of the XXI century.

The in-between spaces of Caracas are, to a large extent, the product of abandon, local self-help and self-management processes; however, a commensurate level of understanding has not been achieved from planning institutions and the public sector, partly because those spaces are often seen as spare locations with little value.

Caracas is presented as a representative case of the emerging paradigms aimed at stitching together its territory to combat social and urban segregation. The presence of artistic interventions and local culture within the in-between spaces are becoming the everyday landscape of the city, being the popular visual culture of Venezuelan cities.

There is a smart generation of professionals reshaping the city and its hidden corners through visionary projects that create a beneficial social, educational and environmental impact involving art, architecture, music, street play and culture. Those groups of city-makers range from national movements, small self-funded organisations and local community groups to anonymous individuals who develop their own built environments through their ideas, resources and economic possibilities.

“Walls, fences, fortified enclaves, graffiti and *pichações* make up a certain kind of public space where signs of inequality and social tension are unmistakable. Gestures of abandonment of the public in favour of private, protected spaces coexist with gestures that transgressively re-appropriate the public in order to inscribe on it marks that express social inequality. In this context, however, social tensions and inequalities are not expressed and negotiated by conventional political language.” Caldeira (2010)

Despite considering urbanism as a discipline that aims to study cities, and whose responsibility is to regulate and manage urban systems, it exists a parallel understanding of this term as a discipline non-disciplined of making cities, streets and public spaces. It consists of taking tools from other fields such as sociology, architecture and anthropology to create a dynamic urbanism willing to manage the production and distribution of culture through buildings, sculptures, streets or corners of cities.

It is important to build a solid base through a constant retro-alimentation in between theory, critic and practice, and reclaim an urban and architectural change of paradigm.

As Solà-Morales argues from a territorial point of view, what propositions can offer cities and contemporary architecture?

Social science and artistic making processes are more involved in the contemporary urban experience than before. It now exists -even academically- a field that implies the term 'Urban'. For instance, urban geography (related to the space in contemporary cities), urban economy (quantification of urban phenomenon) and urban anthropology (the way citizens

behave) which makes credible the hypothesis that “Urban” is a cultural category to generate areas of research and reflection apart from other disciplines.

It is totally legitimate to exchange points of view and knowledges of Edwards H. Soja or Andrew C. Harvey with the ones of Saskia Sassen, Manuel Castells, Marc Augé or Manuel Delgado. Solà-Morales (1995)

3.2 Impact design interventions

Urban art- from Latin *urbanus*, itself from *urbs* “city”- is considered to everything that encompasses different artistic expressions that are represented in the street as a simple artistic manifestation of popular, social or traditional culture. It usually has a striking message that criticises society and invites the social struggle, the political criticism or the observer to reflect about its intrinsic message, aiming to surprise the viewer. It can be performed in different styles and versions such as graffiti, street art, music, festivals, exhibitions, sculpture, architecture, etc. using multiple techniques always adopting the city as a stage.

As Florian Haydn reminds in his book ‘Temporary Urban spaces: concepts of the use of public spaces’, public space is constantly being constructed. Haydn (2006) assures that small interventions can have a big impact. They can actively change places with meaning and bring communities closer together by stimulating social networks and knowledge, which in turn may ultimately create a different urban practice. And so it does Hamdi (2016): “if you want to do something big, you start with something small and you start where it counts. You start where it makes an immediate, practical difference but with significant potential impact”.

The city becomes a showcase and an exponent of freedom of expression; it meets performances that differ from origin, form and intention. Its best-known version is the graffiti writing, considered a marginal form of culture but not inferior in its expressive capabilities.

Some urban art installations try to instigate a response and promote interaction with audiences, which could be considered as the author calls ‘impact design’ interventions, fitting in the emerging field of urban art, normally called temporary, guerrilla, pop-up, ad-hoc, DIY, urban acupuncture (Lerner (2008) or small scale projects, all of them willing to achieve a social impact. Those interventions are understood as small actions engendered from citizen participation that allow, on the territory, making visible the desire, the need or the opportunity to transform the spaces of the city with a double purpose: inviting citizens and drawing the attention of local institutions that have specific responsibilities for these spaces.

City-makers are interested in not just art itself but how their designs and ideas directly interact with spaces, meanings and people around it, generating a new socio-spatial alternative built for the people, by the people.

3.3 Case studies

Caracas has the willingness to turn blighted areas of the city into functioning neighbourhoods aiming to activate people and the urban landscape. It currently exists an architecture of social engagement involving public impact design initiatives related to urban mobility (Cycling school for children and adults, creation of bike lanes...), local development (Chair Bombing, Urban picnics,...), urban engagement and participation

(Pop-up culture, walking tours, storytelling, traditional street games...) and green environment (recycling, urban allotments...).

As Klanten and Feireiss (2010) in 'Staging space' explain, site-specific projects become platforms for social experiences and creative exchange in the city in response of what has not been done. By pushing the boundaries of art and perception, these events allow for an open exploration of reality in the spaces they create between the piece and the observer. These creative interventions deliberately rediscover performative strategies that reflect the theatrical possibilities of urban space.

3.3.1 The square of Macarao

Macarao, located in the southwest of Caracas, is one of the 21 parishes of the Libertador municipality. It is home to over 50,000 people within roughly 10 square kilometres, mainly characterised by a long-standing concentration of low-income neighbourhoods.

The main plaza of the historic part of the town is not perceived as a vibrant place but a contested site. Its dual nature can be read as an invisible strip that divides two local groups and a gathering area when specific activities take place, such as the weekly street market or religious ceremonies. The differentiation between neighbours is notable just by listening and observing how they behave and react when crossing the plaza; its use is restricted as some residents took the control of specific areas. In this case, the right to the city is not equally right.

A creative collective working in Macarao decided to take action in collaboration with local community leaders to help revive and configure the public space through a process rooted in inclusive play. In order to reclaim public spaces, support fragile communities in reasserting their right to the city and spur creativity, it was incorporated into the space abstract notions of traditional street games, using paint as a tool to transform the colonial plaza.

The mutual work –between residents and the collective- finally meant that the square was understood as a space without barriers, walls or edges accessible to all and open to all. During the intervention, children and adults put their hands on to make a positive change in their surroundings by painting and playing a traditional Venezuelan game: *el fusilao*. They decided to design a panel for playing, setting up their own rules and deciding where to draw, how big the panel would have to be, and which colours would look best. (García, 2015)



Photo 1: Children playing the *Fusilao* game during the intervention in Macarao, Caracas. **Source:** Teresa García (2011)

When this was happening, the space allowed socialisation outside what had been socially imposed. This intervention was an example of co-existence, teamwork and self-improvement. Despite the fact the intervention was not maintained afterwards because of severe threats, the impact within the community was considerable as other spaces were re-programmed and used as scenarios for street games.

In this case, it is not just the performance itself that stands out, but is instead the user's response to it that becomes the main event.

3.3.2 *The walls of Chacao*

Some emerging Venezuelan architects and artists are taking over the streets by painting urban elements, placing images, canvases or stickers onto walls and fences with the intention to deliver a message, express communal feelings and exchange experiences involving users in the visual process. These interventions generate a juxtaposed dialogue among citizens without the need of words.

This is the example of several walls located nearby the *Francisco Miranda Avenue*, particularly the one located in *Andrés Bello Avenue*, which became a spontaneous blackboard of arts and crafts.

It all started in response to a general wish to clear the litter from the street. Specific messages and detailed pieces raising awareness about waste management started to emerge. Over time, the physical appearance of the wall changed consistently as anonymous individuals felt the right to add additional creations which evolved from waste to politics, history and arts.



Photo 2: Interventions on walls and fences, Chacao, Caracas. **Source:** Teresa García (2011)

The increasing number of people passing by the wall allowed a new way of coexistence and communication among the inhabitants of the city. Nowadays, these kinds of socio-spatial processes can be more important than buildings because they engage both with people and the urban landscape as an immediate response of the inability of institutions to support these processes.

These projects have become platforms for social experiences and creative exchange in the city. By pushing the boundaries of art and perception, these social processes allow for a transformative exploration of reality in the spaces they create between the promoter (the artist, architect, designer, urban planner) and the user (the observer).

“Situationists International” movement traced the idea of reading the city as an “experience site”. The idea of experience was more important than any visual aesthetics, which is derived from the experience itself. For them, the image of the city is created less by physical boundaries such as paths, edges or nodes and more by experiences and feelings, a point of view opposed to what Kevin Lynch’s talks in “The image of the city”. (Lynch, 1960)

Close to the ideas of The Situationists, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his book “The Production of Space” discourses on how space should be understood as a social product based on values, trying to understand the relation of constructed environment and social context. He makes a distinction on meanings of space relating to social conditions. Lefebvre distinguishes the constructed space - created through representation of forms by using signs and symbols - what he calls “imagined space”, from what he called “experienced” or “suffered space”, when observing how spaces are experienced by users.

Nowadays, a contemporary movement of creatives gathers actions that reinvent our daily lives and reoccupy urban spaces with new uses recovering the collective memory. The academic work of Jan Gehl described in his book “Cities for People” is based in a methodological approach of improving the urban qualities and enrich people’s urban life. Lerner (2008), in his book “Urban Acupuncture: Celebrating Pinpricks of Change that Enrich City Life”, encourages planners, public officials and citizens to articulate common sense and urban tools to change cities, and to make and promote simple, focused actions and initiatives that ripple outward to uplift city life.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The dichotomies formal-informal and rich- poor are still vivid in the Venezuelan society, promoting divisions of all kinds instead of promoting inclusion and integration. Some still try to combat social exclusion from the heart of the barrios of the city instead of understanding the city as a whole, integrating both the ones who live at the top and also, the ones who live at the bottom.

What this paper tries to add is the identification and a comprehensive study of in-between spaces of Caracas; powerful areas that are still forgotten by city authorities and urban planners. By integrating impact design interventions in those spaces, this approach may help to structure and deepen their understanding as linkages between societies, mitigating fragmentation and socio-spatial segregation. Only when local governments understand the importance of these ribbon spaces existing in Venezuelan cities, only when they provide all citizens, not only a few, with the services they need, and only when spaces are not hardly politicized, people will be able to co-decide over the future of the city.

All cities have the opportunity to experiment with changes and promote urban transformations by reading and responding to the people's needs. In-betweens should become new transitory areas that can accept multiplicity of ideas that stitch the whole society together. But, without the involvement of city and local authorities to recognise in-between spaces as part of the city, there will not be possible to spur debates that question those practices and move beyond the local towards the wider urban level to get a more influential position.

It is important to contribute to the debate on the territory through social impact design interventions in the interstices. In-betweens become an opportunity to understand different ways of thinking about the city; they become the encounter, the meeting point, and a powerful tool to build relationships among people of different backgrounds. They are considered vital in the process of articulating the public space as they become symbols of interaction, urban interventions and the connective elements between two shocking realities that may have differentiations but never frontiers.

REFERENCES

- Caldeira, T. (2010). *Espacio, segregación y arte urbano en el Brasil, Madrid; Buenos Aires; Barcelona, Katz; CCCB.*
- Detodalavida, L. (2015). *VIII Encuentro Internacional de Arquitecturas Colectivas. Del Mundo a Extremadura. Arquitectura Expandida.* Youtube.
- Fiori, J. (2001). *Why Favela-Bairro? Transforming Cities: Design in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro.* London: Architectural Association.
- Flint, C. (2005). *The geography of war and peace : from death camps to diplomats,* Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press.
- Garcia Alcaraz, T. (2015). *Rebuilding the divided city of Caracas, Transformation.* www.urbandemocracy.net
- Gehl, J. (2010). *Cities for people,* Washington, DC, Island Press.
- Hamdi, N. (2016). *Open Class - Nabeel Hamdi -Master International Cooperation.* Youtube: UIC Barcelona
- Haydn, F. & Temel, R. (2006). *Temporary urban spaces : concepts for the use of city spaces,* Basel [etc.], Birkhäuser-Publishers for Architecture.
- Klanten, R. & Feireiss, L. (2010). *Staging Space. Scenic Interiors and Spatial Experiences,* Gestalten.
- Leech, O. (2013). *Hidden rules: are there rules and regulations even in informal settlements?* Architecture Master Thesis, Bartlett School of Architecture.

- Lefebvre, H. & Nicholson-Smith, D. (2009). *The production of space*, Malden, MA ; Oxford, Blackwell.
- Lerner, J. (2008). *Acupuntura Urbana*. Arquitectos sen fronteiras
- Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Machado, R., Harvard University. Graduate School Of Design & Programa Favela-bairro (2003). *The Favela-Bairro project* : Jorge Mario Jáuregui Architects, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.
- Mehrotra, R. (2013). *The Static and the Kinetic In: Ricky Burdett, d., LSE Cities, Ömer Çavuşoğlu, p. M., LSE Cities & Savvas Verdis, s. R. F., LSE Cities (eds.) Urban Age City Transformations Conference*. Rio de Janeiro.
- Newman, D. (2005). *Conflict at the Interface, the Impact of Boundaries and Borders on Contemporary Ethno-National Conflict*. In: FLINT, C. (ed.) *The geography of war and peace: from death camps to diplomats*. United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- Nisenbaum, M. (2008). *Temporary Uses & Creativity: a study on interim appropriations of urban space in Berlin* Architecture MA Thesis, Dessau Institute of Architecture.
- Sieverts, T. (2003). *Cities without cities: an interpretation of the Zwischenstadt*, London ; New York, Spon Press.
- Solà Morales, d. I. (1995). *Territorios*, Barcelona [etc.], Gustavo Gili.