Downward Spiral: El Helicoide's Descent from Mall to Prison

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El Helicoide's Descent from Mall to Prison
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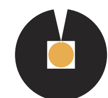

Celeste Olalquiaga and Lisa Blackmore, Editors

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Celeste Olalquiaga and Lisa Blackmore

Introduction

El Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya is more than an amazing building: it is a cultural phenomenon that represents the complexities and irregularities of urban modernity and, in Venezuela's case, of democracy as well. Built as a futuristic beacon of private capitalist development and consumption in the late 1950s, El Helicoide's peculiar shape and monumental volume generated great admiration in the United States and Europe, contributing to Caracas' growing reputation as a modern Latin American capital. Yet the project faltered mere months from completion and the building's unfinished concrete ramps were relegated to the backdrop of the city's slum-covered hills.

Despite myriad private and public attempts at recovery, El Helicoide has only known two uses: first, as a temporary refuge for almost ten thousand people in the late 1970s, then as a police headquarters and penal institution from 1985 on. This book, the first to address El Helicoide's extraordinary architecture and history, seeks to rescue this singular site from oblivion. Doing so is also a way of recovering the collective memory of Caracas, where fast-paced change tends to overlook urban feats and letdowns alike. The city's modernist heritage, now mostly demolished or degraded, deserves to be protected and studied. It bears witness not only to one of the most outstanding periods in Venezuela's architectural history, but also to the social and political upheavals that modernity has entailed.

Latin America's Living Ruins

The transition from the 20th century to the 21st has prompted reappraisal of the former's successes, partial achievements and failures—in particular the concepts of modernity and industrial modernization, which theorists of postmodernity like Fredric Jameson have been questioning since the 1970s. Among other things, this reappraisal has sought to expose the locally construed and relative character of a modernity that the West had long assumed was a unified, monolithic model. In so doing, focus has shifted not only to those regions that had been excluded from this hegemonic model, but also to the diverse ways in which the highly irregular modernization process was produced and lived.

For Latin American architecture, this has meant a renewed interest in the depth and extent to which modernist aesthetics were integrated into nation-building projects across the continent and the Caribbean, as shown by *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980*, the 2015 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Far from imitative or subordinate, the social scope and imaginative nerve of Latin American architecture made clear that countries once considered to be "third world" in fact were able to creatively integrate and transform modernism into a bold, formal language of their own. El Helicoide, which was featured in the exhibition, is one of the most striking examples of what might be called "Tropical Futurism," where formal codes, in this case the spiral, were reworked to innovative ends. As often occurs in the Global South, however, the dramatic social realities underlying this steamroller modern project swiftly undercut its grand blueprint.

As the dust of last century settles, the importance of salvaging the remnants of projects that uniquely attest to their historical moments, however inadequate or imperfect they may be, is more apparent than ever. Understanding modernity's utopia through its forgotten traces, as Walter Benjamin proposed a century ago, enables us to study urban processes without reducing or regulating their singularities and contradictions. Recent attention to modernity's innumerable industrial and urban ruins has fostered a timely reassessment of a culture where material excess encountered a quick obsolescence. Scholars like Tim Edensor, Stephen Cairn, Jane Jacobs, Julia Hell, Andreas Schönle and Brian Dillon, among others, have shown the different ways this phenomenon has played out in Europe and the United States. Similarly, in Latin America and other postcolonial contexts, a growing body of research has begun to study the fallout of fast-paced modernization projects, exposing the political underpinnings of architectural designs and analyzing the intricate cultural layers embedded in modern ruins' material decay.

As Caracas continues to burst beyond the contours of 20th-century plans for its urban growth, El Helicoide's unfinished spiral has been either fetishized as a relic of a bygone age of national development, or dismissed as a modernist flop that ultimately merged with the surrounding informal urban fabric. Neither attitude accounts for the political, economic, and social conditions that fostered the project. Likewise, neither evaluates the factors that have kept the building perpetually unfinished and lost in time, a status that ultimately casts a mystifying veil over the police activities that have taken place there for over 30 years.

In an effort to avoid the pitfalls of such binary thinking, this book presents El Helicoide as a living ruin, with its paradoxical status as a half-abandoned, half-occupied site best understood as more than the sum of its parts. A product of mid-20th century geopolitical and developmentalist models, the building offers an unparalleled look at the consequences of adopting U.S. consumer culture as an ideal of social progress. It also provides a case study of the frictions between

monumental architecture and urban precariousness, which surfaced as El Helicoide's futurist form took shape over and above Caracas' ever-growing marginal communities. The stagnation of the building's construction and its gradual enclosure by the adjacent barrios show how paradigms of development have backfired. This, in turn, raises questions about the structural factors that both fueled and stunted dreams of modernity.

A Monument to Petromodernity

Venezuela spent the 20th century caught up in the peculiar quandary common to oil economies, seeking to position itself as a buoyant economy kept afloat by gushing oil wells and transnational capital flows. El Helicoide's project was bolstered by the petroleum boom and the post-World-War-II economic recovery that made this Caribbean country a hotbed of modernist experimentation and speculative ventures. Its goal was to implant modern consumer culture in Caracas and catapult Venezuelan society into "first world" development.

El Helicoide is the embodiment of what Stephanie LeMenager has called "petromodernity," a modernity fueled and infused by the oil industry where boom-and-bust cycles disrupt even the best-laid plans. This condition has been exacerbated in Venezuela by a chronic lack of continuity and maintenance, seemingly reverting to the dead quality of oil's fossil origins and stultifying whatever it touches. Here, "petromodernity" has come close to becoming "petrified modernity" instead. And El Helicoide is by no means the only project to embody the vagaries of instant modernity. Other incomplete structures, such as the infamous Torre de David—a banking complex designed in the 1980s as Caracas' answer to Wall Street, then abandoned during the financial meltdown of the 1990s—attest to the asymmetries accompanying oil bonanzas and other forms of speculative capitalism. Failed buildings like these give the urban landscape an uneven and spectral guise, littering it with reminders of unfulfilled promises.

Although a monument to petromodernity, El Helicoide is no dead space. It is a living site immersed in the very ad hoc urban fabric of the impoverished communities that the oil industry created as it pulled workers from agricultural areas into the cities. The building's peculiar relationship with its surrounding barrios—some of the oldest, largest, and most dangerous shantytowns in Caracas—provides a striking portrait of the social conflicts and complexities that emerged from the modern utopia of rapid development. Few places in the world offer such a crude, obvious contrast or such compelling material proof of systemic economic inequality and entrenched urban neglect.

Surrounded by informal settlements, El Helicoide encapsulates ongoing debates about urbanization models and development in the Global South, exemplifying the similarities between failed architecture and informal settlements, which are both often overlooked, stigmatized, or literally left "off the map" of urban planning and political agendas. Furthermore, as climate change takes hold and deluges and landslides become increasingly frequent, El Helicoide's use as an emergency shelter for flood victims in the 1970s serves as a stark reminder that it is marginalized communities who suffer the most from the devastating impacts of natural disasters.

El Helicoide also provides an opportunity to scrutinize political narratives, compelling us to recognize that collective amnesia and willful omissions undergird the telos of progress. In the second half of the 20th century, when other Latin American nations were run by strong-man dictatorships, Venezuela's combination of oil wealth and a relatively stable democracy earned it a reputation as an exception to the regional rule. El Helicoide's shifting fate, however, tells a more complicated story in which democratic rule and social inclusion are not guaranteed. The building was conceived during a dictatorship bent on constructing modernity in pharaonic forms, then left adrift during the transition to democracy. Over the subsequent 40 years of two-party rule, a string of aborted reinvention projects was planned for the site. This can be seen as a symptom of the stop-start rhythm of electoral politics, in which campaign pledges tend to become forgotten promises. More generally, it suggests a stuttering "on-and-off" modernity that shifts in speed and scale with changing governmental administrations and economic fortunes.

Furthermore, El Helicoide's use as a police headquarters and prison over the past 30 years raises questions about the entanglement of democratic politics and disciplinary apparatuses, which recurrently call for technologies of surveillance and discipline in the name of social order and national security. All too often, these technologies entrench power discrepancies by relegating violence to remote or hidden places that military jargon terms "dark" or "black sites." In this context, El Helicoide's use as a jail shows how modern governments retain coercive tendencies, even as political projects from across the ideological spectrum promise to protect freedom, democracy, and social justice.

In Venezuela, the most recent national narrative rose with the late president Hugo Chávez, whose election

in 1998 heralded the "pink tide" of socialist governments that reoriented Latin American politics at the turn of the millennium. It entailed a shift away from the spectacles of petromodernity, as the government turned its attention to the urban poor, aiming to repay the social debts incurred by alternating administrations since El Helicoide's construction first faltered in 1958. Despite promises of national rebirth, Chávez's rule soon became mired in a violent polarization that divided Venezuela. The country's spatial politics quickly became embroiled in these disputes, a situation worsened by governmental leniency regarding citizen seizures of abandoned buildings, including iconic modern sites.

In this contentious setting, land tenure, the degradation of Venezuela's modern architectural heritage, and the enduring problem of urban crime have become highly politicized topics, leveraged by critics of Chávez's Revolución Bolivariana (Bolivarian Revolution) as proof of the country's wholesale decline. El Helicoide's dual status as a paragon of bygone modernity and as a home for state police forces has made it an ideological battleground. As a result, El Helicoide not only encapsulates the aporias of modern Venezuela through its ambitious design and tumultuous afterlife; it also embodies the contemporary conflicts that ensnare the nation in a state of perpetual upheaval.

One Building, Many Perspectives

This book's contributors are mainly Venezuelan scholars from a variety of fields, but we have also included colleagues from Chile, the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe to provide a diverse panorama of El Helicoide and similar modern constructions. The essays here account for and speculate about the place of architecture in the fabric of everyday life, offering diverse and sometimes diverging viewpoints that enhance the scope of this inaugural in-depth study on El Helicoide. They address not only the aesthetic programs and functions that motivated the building's blueprint designs, but also the ways its afterlives have strayed from the original plans.

The archival images and documents included throughout the book, many of which are published here for the first time, likewise track El Helicoide's ups and downs. They reveal early models and earth movements, the site's conversion to an emergency shelter for flood victims in the late 70s, and its current use as a jail for political prisoners and a police training center. Additional materials come from artists and writers employing forms as diverse as literary essays, short stories, comics, photo essays, and digital cartographies. All of these contributions provide diverse vantage points onto the lived and imaginary dimensions of that monumental fiasco called El Helicoide.

Downward Spiral is divided in five sections representing the building's cultural history. ***Lost in Time*** contextualizes El Helicoide's journey through the lens of 20th-century Venezuela's modernization process. This section traces the building's trajectory from riches to rags, from Jorge Romero Gutiérrez's original conception through to its current use as a dark site for Venezuelan state security. This overview is complemented by descriptions of the project's design and promotion, and the cutting-edge construction and commercial technologies it employed. The authors evoke the effervescent economic and cultural milieu of 1950s Caracas, which attracted international luminaries from architecture and urban planning. This section also addresses more broadly how architecture and nationhood intertwine—a question that has shaped the Venezuelan landscape from its independence in the mid-19th century, right up through present nation-building endeavors.

Geometric Detours sets aside El Helicoide's concrete ramps to explore other spiral buildings and automobile-oriented designs. From Oscar Niemeyer's unrealized project for a Museo de Arte Moderno (Museum of Modern Art) in 1950s Caracas, to Chile's *caracoles* (literally "snails"), the spiral-shaped commercial sites that proliferated in the 1970s, to worldwide buildings driven, quite literally, by car culture, these essays probe the intersection of architecture, technology, and capitalism. Their assessments of automobile culture, neoliberal economics, and the entangled logics of industrial mines and commercial spaces delve into the 20th-century innovations that continue to shape urban modernity today. In so doing, they address broader concerns of how architectural and urban criticism might create a common ground accounting for the politics and economics of aesthetic form, and how architectural typologies are established and function.

Informal Topographies returns to El Helicoide's immediate setting, in this case the sprawling slums that surround the building. This section explores the consolidated growth of Caracas' barrios from their scattered origins in the previous century—in particular those of the traditional area of San Agustín del Sur. It confronts the visual conundrum of these informal settlements, which, despite being patently evident in the landscape, are often minimized on official maps and urban plans. It draws on established history from the communities who lived on and around Roca Tarpeya before El Helicoide's urban fortress arrived in their midst, including personal anecdotes and testimonies from residents who grew up around or worked

Ingeniería Municipal, Plano de Caracas (1956), in Irma De Sola, *Contribución al estudio de los planos de Caracas, 1567–1967* (Caracas: Ediciones del Comité de Obras Culturales del Cuatricentenario de Caracas, 1967), 197.

in the building. In so doing, these essays assemble a patchwork of perspectives that reveal a heterogeneous city shaped as much by the urban poor as by ambitious architecture. This take on modernity—as a frequently makeshift phenomenon where grand designs and provisional dwellings overlap—is reinforced by comparisons between El Helicoide's use from 1979 to 1982 as an emergency flood shelter and the more recent citizen seizure of the "slumscraper" La Torre de David.

Cursed Towers expands its field of view to encompass other problematic architectural experiments from Caracas' modern history, revealing their uncanny and outright ominous facets. Specifically, it peers into the dark hearts of El Helicoide, Parque Central, and La Torre de David, three failed projects from the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s, respectively. This section branches out into analyses of cinematic and literary portrayals of these buildings, as well as more experimental pieces that are crafted as fiction or comics. Furthermore, after being retrofitted in the 1980s as a headquarters for the state security forces, El Helicoide came to replicate the sinister jails of the turn-of-the century prison La Rotunda, producing a sort of inverse panopticon in an eerie continuity between the 19th and 21st centuries' penitentiary traditions in Venezuela. Finally, an interview with an activist recently incarcerated at El Helicoide plumbs the depths of the site's dark corridors and airless cells.

The final section, ***Living Ruins***, examines how neglected monuments and buildings in Venezuela and abroad have created a particular cultural landscape made of the ruins of modernity. The book's concluding essays address the importance of these ruins as material leftovers that live on in rapidly changing environments, pondering how modern ruins relate to each other across countries, generations and cultures, and what they have to say about modernity and the contemporary city's civic culture (or lack thereof). Here, the Venezuelan Pavilion, built in 1955 for a Free World's Fair in the Dominican Republic, stands as an outpost of the ubiquitous urban decay that results from institutional inconsistency and basic lack of maintenance. At this juncture of lingering architectonic traces and the receding promise of concrete artifacts, the book probes the very physical matter of ruin.

Caught between an unrealized future and an uncertain present, El Helicoide's spiral monolith shows the paradoxical ways in which modernity takes place, only to swirl into unpredictable detours and, sometimes, downward spirals. Rather than a cause for melancholy, this living ruin presents an opportunity to rethink the cultural, economic, and political pacts that run through the very core of its concrete ramps and into the ramifying pathways of the slums and the city beyond. In a sped-up present bent on forgetting the past and moving forward no matter the social or ecological costs, retracing the circuitous routes back to El Helicoide is one way to approach the task of understanding how this building came to be, and how it lost its way.

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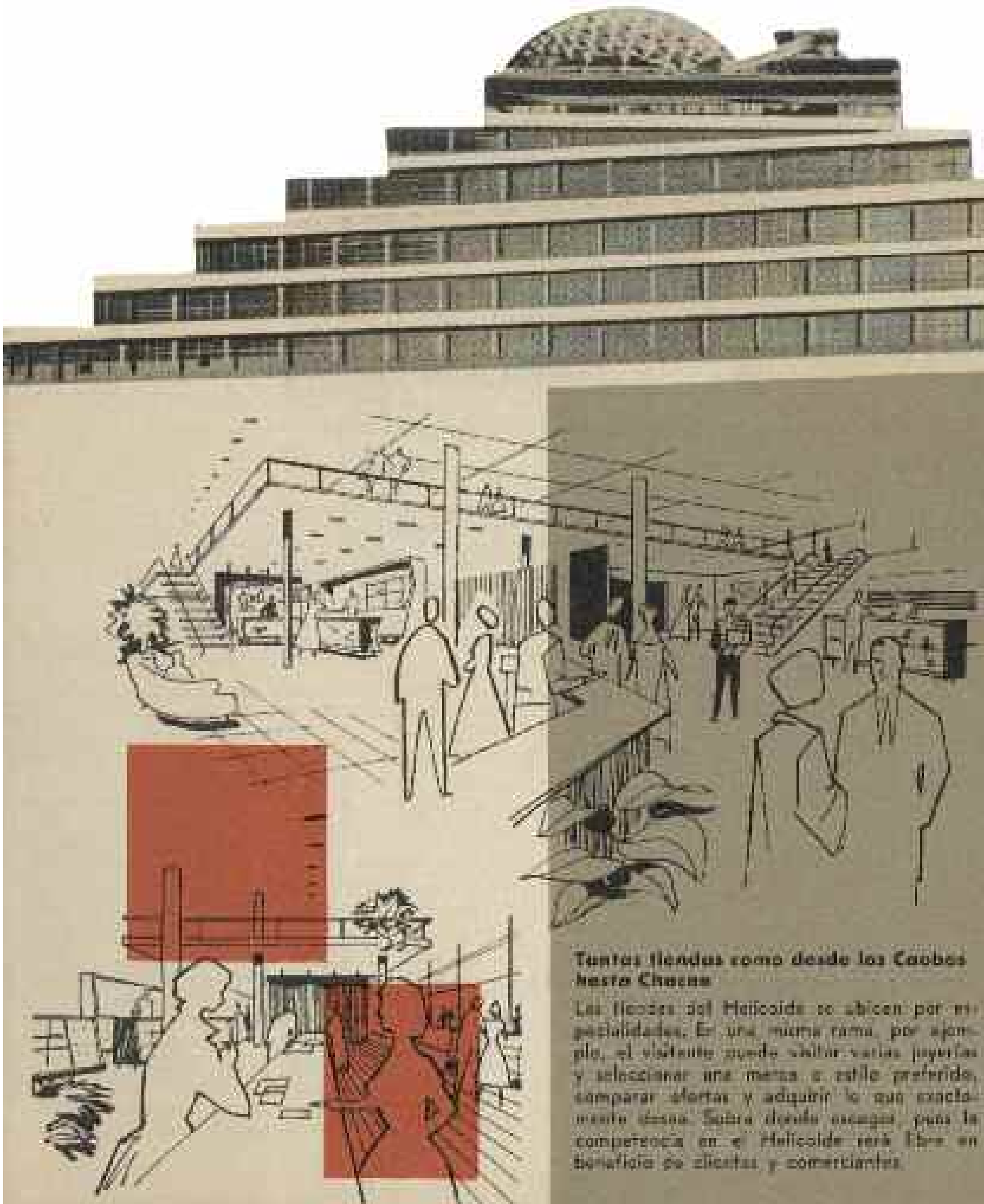
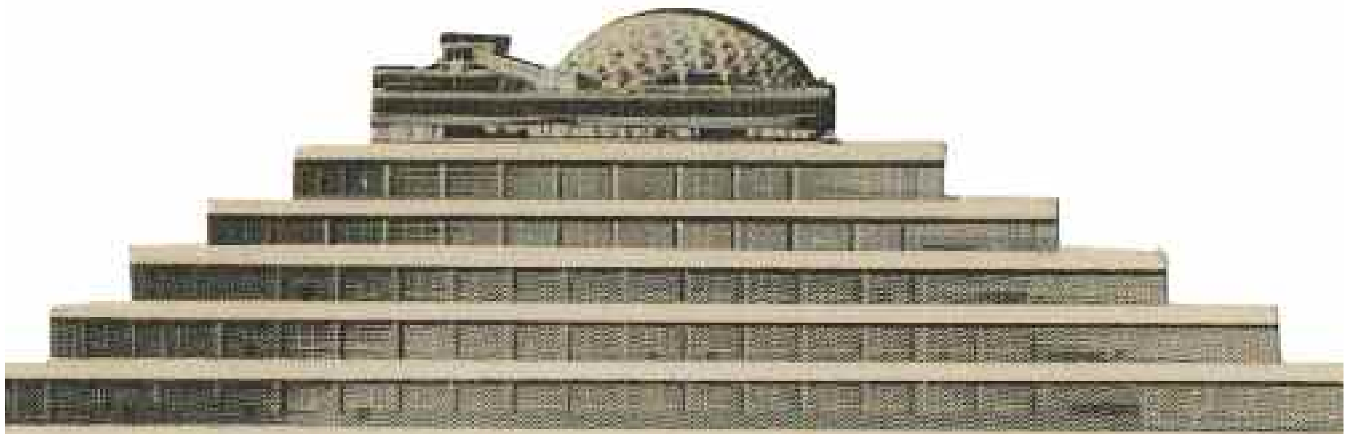
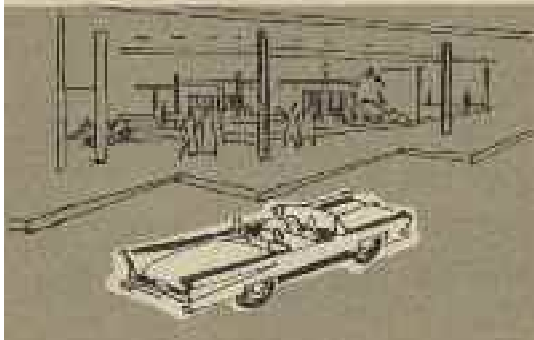
Interior and Exterior Design

Cover from "Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya: Centro Comercial y Exposición de Industrias." Promotional brochure, later included in *Integral* 5 (December, 1956). AFU/PH



Selected pages from "Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya."
Promotional brochure detailing interiors and services, c.1958-1960. AFU/PH



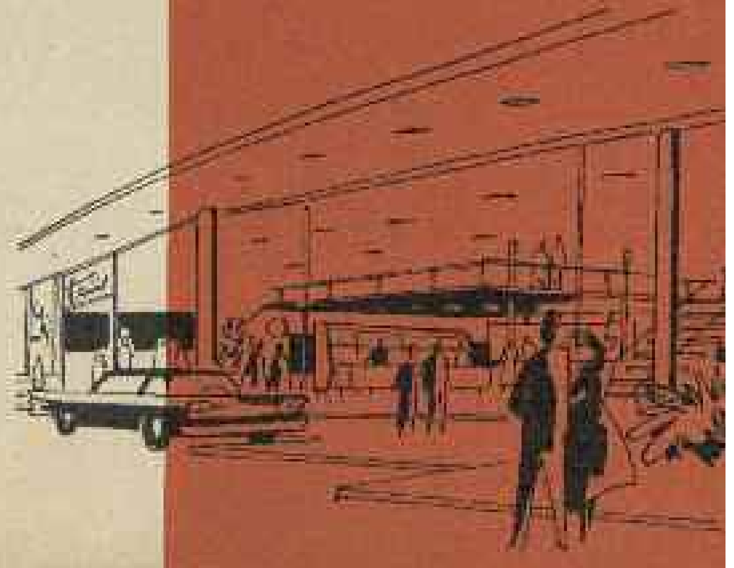


Seguridad para el peaton

En el Helicoide, el tránsito será tan seguro que un niño de corta edad podrá recorrerlo íntegramente sin peligro de accidentes. Los autobuses o carros de alquiler dejarán al visitante en la puerta de ascensores o escaleras mecánicas.
Hay cuatro ascensores inclinados —novedad mundial— con capacidad para cuarenta personas cada una. Hay además escaleras mecánicas, ascensores corrientes y escaleras corrientes. El recorrido interior se efectúa cómodamente, sin esfuerzos, pues los declives son tan suaves que son como los que tienen los techos para evitar que el agua se estanque.

Ni cruces, ni semáforos, ni choques, ni accidentes

La circulación dentro del Helicoide se verifica en una sola dirección pues se asciende por rampas impares y se desciende por las pares. No hay cruces entre el tráfico de peatones y de automóviles, por lo tanto no existirán semáforos ni posibilidad de accidentes. Aún en el caso de vehículos averiados resultará fácil y sencillo ubicarlos en lugar conveniente sin que estorben.



Cover and selected pages from "Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya."
Promotional brochure detailing interiors and services, c.1958-1960. AFU/PH

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