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Lisa Blackmore

Makeshift Modernity: Container Homes and Slumscrapers

Figure 1 El Helicoide's ramps lined with container homes, February, 1982.
Gobernación del Distrito Capital, *Proyecto Helicoide* (Caracas: Gobernación del Distrito Capital, 1982). AFU/PH

Figure 2 La Torre de David during occupation, 2010. PHOTO: Ángela Bonadies

evacuations, and proposals for each building's reinvention shows how outsized architecture remains a potent symbol of progress even as makeshift modernity takes root in and around it.

El Helicoide's "Great Occupation"
Trailer Park

After democracy was reestablished in 1958 following a decade of military dictatorship, Venezuela came to be viewed as a regional exception, a "privileged Third World nation." The theory, dubbed the "Venezuelan Exceptionalism Thesis" by historians, held that oil wealth and a solid political culture differentiated the country from other Latin American states mired in dictatorships and economic strife. This image was supported by stable oil prices and social mobility, as well as the country's feted art and architecture, inherited from the "spectacular modernity" of the mid-20th century boom [n. 7]. The sporadic squatting that took place in El Helicoide during the 60s and early 70s directly contradicted this positive national brand, since it blurred distinctions between forward-looking architecture and "backwards" ad hoc housing. Occupation turned the building into the antithesis of the modernity and prosperity that underwrote Venezuela's "exceptional" status, contributing to a malaise summed up by one commentator's complaint that El Helicoide had been "turned into a slum overnight, just another of the many hills in Caracas tattooed by ranchos where poor people vegetate" [n. 8].

This dilemma only got worse when the State used the would-be shopping center as an emergency shelter in 1979. After storms laid waste to ranchos in the hills, leaving hundreds homeless and destitute, the government of Luis Herrera Campíns (in office 1979–1984) ordained a Gran Ocupación (Great Occupation) of El Helicoide. This entailed lining its ramps with 150 shipping containers for temporary shelters, raising sheetrock shacks (barracas) under the cantilevered roofs in spaces originally designed for boutique stores, and placing the building under army "surveillance and organization" [n. 9]. Over the next three years, thousands of squatters moved in, creating an eventual population of over nine thousand residents. A lucky few among those moved in by the state were given shelter in the shipping containers, which were considered the "deluxe" housing, as the ironic sign "Res. Sheraton" on one of them indicates. The majority, however, were not so fortunate and had to live in the *barracas* [n. 10]. Most of them were genuine *damnificados*, a term —literally meaning "the damaged"—used to refer to people left homeless. However, some of these officially sanctioned occupants claimed that a large number of the population was made up of *invasores*—that is, "invaders" or squatters who had illegally seized spaces in El Helicoide to make ad hoc homes.

Whether they were officially sanctioned or not, the press tarred all residents with the same brush, depicting them as modernity's festering underbelly. In one graphic opinion piece from 1982, El Helicoide was portrayed as "a mixture of giant rats, stinking sewage, muck, feces, tons of trash, scrap, hundreds of destitute families, and corruption at all levels" [n. 11]. Another more humanitarian journalist described the building as a community "with no work and no future," where children cried all night and parents labored with tin cans to bail out floodwater that inundated the shacks [n. 12]. Emphasizing the connection between stable housing and social improvement, the writer asked, "Who can progress in a home that collapses with the first downpour…?"

Video footage filmed inside El Helicoide reveals the challenging living conditions at the time, a hodgepodge of sheetrock-and-zinc-roof shacks wedged between columns, flooded concrete wastelands, unplumbed wood-frame-and-zinc-sheet toilet blocks, and jerry-rigged stairwells [fig. 3 p. 160]. Outside were the tightly packed shipping containers, at least two rows per level, and the clotheslines residents had strung along the edges of the building's concrete ramps.

The temporary refuge showed signs of becoming a permanent settlement, evidenced by the proliferation of garbage disposal units, an onsite clinic, and improvised stores in shacks and trailers that sold everything from *empanadas* and ice creams to "fine shoes

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7 Steve Ellner and Miguel Tinker Salas, "The Venezuelan Exceptionalism Thesis Separating Myth from Reality," *Latin American Perspectives* 32.2 (2005). I develop this concept fully in *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space and Visuality in Venezuela, 1948-1958* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).

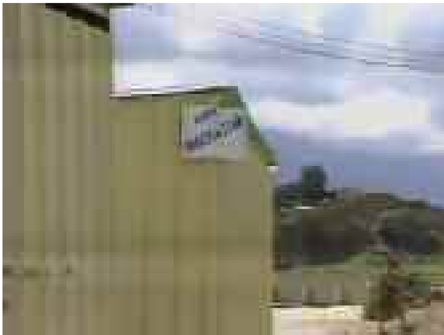
8 Lino S. Revilla, "Damnificados por las lluvias reubicados en el Helicoide," *El Universal*, May 5, 1972; "Convertido en centro de construcción de ranchos El Helicoide," newspaper article, source unknown, February 14, 1966.

9 Eleazar Pérez Peñuela, "750 familias en El Helicoide," *El Universal*, September 13, 1979, 40. "Instalarán 150 viviendas tipo trailers en el Helicoide," *El Universal*, June 4, 1979.

10 1,209 families lived in shacks, 407 families in the shipping containers, and the rest crammed into shared accommodations. Gobernación del Distrito Federal, *Proyecto Helicoide* (Caracas: Gobernación del Distrito Federal, 1982), 35.

11 Héctor Fleming Mendoza, "La Roca Tarpeya," *Diario de Caracas*, April 5, 1980.

12 Mariahé Pabón, "La vida nómada de los damnificados signa su trágico destino," *El Universal*, April 25, 1980.



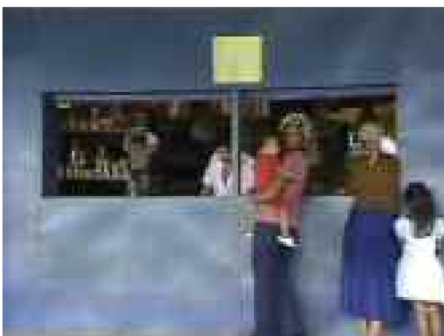


Figure 3 El Helicoide during the Gran Ocupación. Video stills from raw footage of the residents' evacuation, 1982. Archivo Audiovisual/Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela.

for men." In a nation that prided itself on its high-rise towers and "exceptional" political and economic stability, El Helicoide's Gran Ocupación only seemed to reinforce further the idea that makeshift constructions stood in the way of progress. More so, the occupation inside this modernist icon became a powerful symbol of modernity gone awry.

Curing the Tumor

As the occupation dragged on, it threatened to implicate political leaders for leaving their already destitute constituents in an increasing state of plight. Politicians needed an alternate narrative for El Helicoide to cast the State as a guarantor of social welfare, and to reinstate the tarnished ideal of Venezuela's urban modernity. With the occupation at nearly three years, Caracas governor Rodolfo José Cárdenas assembled a Comité de Rescate (Rescue Committee) to this end in February 1982. Divided into culture, infrastructure, and social branches, the committee was tasked with evicting squatters, clearing their shacks, and rehousing them by the end of that September. Both video footage and the official report on the process published by the governor's office and titled *Proyecto Helicoide* underscore the desire to create for posterity an optimistic account of the evacuation, through which El Helicoide and its inhabitants were saved from their fates [n. 13].

Healthcare had long been a concern for the team overseeing the occupation, with medical care and vaccination programs administered onsite. However, by the time of the eviction the report presented the building as a malaise that needed treatment. The section of *Proyecto Helicoide* detailing the evacuation weaves a narrative of redemption, which begins by framing El Helicoide's dilapidated state as antithetical to the logic of hygiene upon which modern urbanization has long been predicated [n. 14]. The authors portrayed a "helicoidal tumor" of cracked cement that was a breeding ground for disease, overflowing with a constant stream of sewage and trash. They equated the unhygienic conditions with a moral deficit, describing an "infrahuman" den of drug use, prostitution, alcoholism, and crime—a "*sancta sanctorum* of transgression" that the police dared not enter [n. 15]. Worse still, the report's authors extrapolated the state of this "helicoidal tumor" to the broader proliferation of barrios in Caracas. Their prescription was an "almost therapeutic drainage," i.e., an effort to raze makeshift homes and incentivize inhabitants "to return to the natural habitat they should never have left." Only by removing informal settlements from the social and urban landscape could the ideal of Venezuelan exceptionalism be restored to health.

If provisional occupation and moral decay were El Helicoide's afflictions, then the evacuation of its residents in mid-1982 was to be their cure. An onsite team led the process, with logistical support from the Metropolitan Police. Further support was provided offsite by the governor's office and the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (INAVI, National Housing Institute). At the relocation office, evacuees could view photos of new housing projects located outside Caracas and check the availability and costs of apartments. With these logistics taking shape, the physical purge began. To "achieve the total cleanliness of that sickening cement hill," the inhabitants—or the "deformed contingent," as the report dubbed them—were paid to remove every trace of their former homes, and then to paint and clean the building. In so doing, they symbolically expunged the polluting miasma of their occupation, in what seems an imposition of the hygienic principles governing what the theorist Ivan Illich termed the "utopia of the odorless city" [n. 16].

As residents left and shipping containers were freed up, the government team moved families from the more precarious *barracas* into the vacant structures. Video footage shows residents demolishing shacks in a matter of minutes, while others sweep away debris, paint the concrete ramps, and load their belongings onto trucks. Whereas El Helicoide's spiral design and round-the-clock construction were once held up as its most memorable features, now the report lauded the

13 Gobernación del Distrito Federal, *Proyecto Helicoide* (Caracas: Gobernación del Distrito Federal, 1982). The report was published in October and the project was coordinated by the sociologist Sonia Miquelena de Cárdenas. The report remains an important document of historical information about El Helicoide, which charts its history from colonial times to the appearance of Roca Tarpeya on maps in the 19th century. It also provides information about the original construction project, the failed rehabilitations during the 70s that turned the building into a white elephant, and the stunted project to turn it into a cultural complex after the evaction of its temporary occupants. The unedited 80 minutes of footage about the evacuation is held at the Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela (National Library) in Caracas. It was first shown publicly in 2014 in a six-minute, edited version by PROYECTO HELICOIDE in its exhibition *El Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya (1955-2014): Proyectos, usos y ocupaciones*, Museo de Arquitectura, Caracas.

14 Fabienne Chevallier, *Le Paris moderne: Histoire des politique d'hygiène* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010).

15 These derogatory terms appear over just four of the seventeen pages dedicated to the evacuation process. Quotes in the following section are taken from pages 37-45 of the section on El Helicoide's evacuation.

16 Ivan Illich, *H20 and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (London: Mario Boyars, 1986), 48.

"rotating mechanism" of the building's "uninterrupted evacuation." So the building was gradually emptied: the team moved families out of shipping containers, housing the *barraca* inhabitants in them, then demolished the empty shacks. As the process went on, the team removed vacated shipping containers and dumped them at a depot outside city limits to ensure there were never vacancies that could lead to new occupations. All the while, the police oversaw "systematic searches, surveillance, and control of access points" to the building—using, in the report's euphemistic terms, "other peculiar modes of persuasion" to ensure that prostitutes, drug users, and troublemakers left the premises.

A handful of interviews in the video footage reinforces their report's redemptive theme. Perhaps encouraged by an interviewer, a woman standing on the ramps against a backdrop of shanties looks into the camera and says, "We can't complain, it's great here. There are policemen who protect us against all the things that happen in other barrios." In another shot on the roof of El Helicoide, lines of children stand to attention and do exercises in formation, led by adults in sports clothes, while a man interviewed explains how a group of *damnificados* got together to organize these juvenile police training sessions for young occupants to "rescue them from the twisted path of vice and criminal activity." Much like the principle that structured architectural forms set progress in place, here the implication was that bodily discipline and order would straighten out society.

As the footage traced the evacuation process to its conclusion, an unidentified government representative surrounded by journalists appears on camera to explain that El Helicoide's residents are headed to "top notch homes" with access to electricity, water, and plumbing. Moreover, relocation areas would feature transportation, job opportunities, and investment opportunities; in short, all the necessary systems and structures to ensure the future development of El Helicoide's outgoing occupants. In the background of this shot, men continue to pull down walls with their bare hands while others pack their belongings. The Gran Ocupación was coming to an end. By September 21, 1982, the last makeshift home was removed from public sight and the "thoroughly rescued" inhabitants had been relocated to sites throughout Venezuela [n. 17]. El Helicoide's "tumor" had been cured.

Infinite Spirals

With the evacuation complete, attention shifted to El Helicoide's future. In a radical break from the building's original purpose, the government decided to reinvent it as the Complejo Cultural Helicoide y Museo Nacional de Historia y Antropología (Helicoide Cultural Complex and National Museum of History and Anthropology). The center was meant to host a range of activities including theatrical and dance performances, textile conservation, films, photography exhibits, and new media installations. It would also feature several schools that would serve as research institutions and provide outreach programs incorporating local communities. Returning to a theme of redemption to present their ambitious plan, project leaders claimed the museum would change the face of Caracas, providing an antidote to short-sighted city planning and the prioritization of luxury services over basic needs. Trading a proposed shopping center for a museum would fight invasive marketization and the rising hegemony of foreign consumer culture. Converting its vehicular ramps to pedestrian walkways would foster public space and loosen the hold of automobile culture. In this sense, El Helicoide's proposed transformation had a wider connotation: it would enact an ideological shift in the urban fabric, winding back capitalist expansion and returning to ideals of the public good and national belonging.

This new use for El Helicoide was clearly meant to restore positive elements associated with Venezuela's exceptional status, enshrining democracy as the true path toward the "highest levels of social, economic, and political justice and organization" and serving as a microcosm of identity and polity that would "gather all moral, cultural, and spiritual resources, activate memory, and liberate creative energies" [n. 18]. Governor Cárdenas lauded this wholesale reinvention in his prologue to the report, reframing the building's helical form as a metaphor for an uplifting journey of progress. In this building "enveloped in modernity," he wrote, future generations' sense of cultural identity would "ascend in infinite spirals [toward] a comprehensive image of Venezuelan reality, offering a perfect sense of who we are as a people and making us masters of our true national identity" [n. 19]. No mean feat, indeed.

A month after the eviction, research and museology teams were busy designing content for exhibits, while the architecture group was planning new uses for

17 Relocation took place in Nueva Cúa, Caucaguita, Barquisimeto, Barinas, San Félix, San Felipe, Acarigua, and Maracaibo. "Totalmente desocupado quedó el Helicoide," source unknown, September 23, 1982.

18 Gobernación, *Proyecto Helicoide*, 57–58.

19 Gobernación, *Proyecto Helicoide*, 23.

the building and installing the geodesic dome at its summit. Although the project made headway, a change of government interrupted ambitious plans for the site [n. 20]. Ultimately it was those images of young *damnificados* engaged in police training that presaged El Helicoide's future. In 1985 the intelligence police moved into the building, three years after the eviction. Once again it was retrofitted with makeshift structures, but this time they were security facilities, not homes. Today, prisoners still live in conditions reminiscent of the Gran Ocupación thirty years ago, locked away in dark, two-by-three meter cells amid "a vile smell caused by recent problems with sewage, and a stench that pervades the corridors … inhabited by roaches, rats, and all sorts of things" [n. 21]. El Helicoide has not so much come full circle as stayed put, consolidating its role as a provisional place that turned out to be permanent.

La Torre de David as Slumscraper

Space Invaders

As the removal vans rolled down El Helicoide's ramps, one man in the video footage called for an end to the precarious conditions that had taken root at the site. "In an oil nation like ours," he said, "things like this simply cannot happen." Yet over subsequent decades such occupations have remained a firm fixture of the urban landscape, keeping poor communities caught in a cycle of insecurity and destitution. The lack of regional industry characteristic of Venezuela's petro-economy continues to push people to urban areas where they raise homes on seized land. In Caracas, ongoing population growth has led to a proliferation of slums in ravines and on steep hills. Changes to the country's weather patterns, symptomatic of the broader problem of climate change, have also impacted vulnerable communities and their unstable dwellings. Increasingly erratic rainy seasons regularly wreak havoc in the barrios, causing mudslides that destroy houses and uproot *damnificados* who must be relocated to emergency shelters and then permanent new homes.

This challenging situation has only been aggravated in recent years. In 1999, the same year Hugo Chávez came to power, a series of catastrophic mudslides displaced some 200,000 people in Caracas' adjoining state of Vargas, prompting the installation of new emergency shelters anywhere possible, from hotels in the capital to provincial army barracks. During Chávez's four consecutive terms as president until his death in 2013, unpredictable deluges and continuing housing shortages generated a growing population of *damnificados* housed in ad hoc shelters, awaiting state-built homes. This pattern of bottlenecked relocation programs and persistent rainstorms made a visible impact on the urban fabric. In 2010 alone, a heavy bout of storms at the end of the year left more than 22,000 families homeless in Greater Caracas [n. 22]. The govern ment made refuges out of any space available, including government ministries, tax offices, and even the presidential palace. The Museo Alejandro Otero placed artworks into storage so that 350 people could set up home there; hundreds of families were transferred to 43 hotels in downtown Caracas; and 650 people were moved into grand-stands at La Rinconada racetrack, which lacked even basic facilities like toilets and showers [n. 23].

Perhaps inspired by the Gran Ocupación, one large-scale solution was to house some 3,000 *damnificados* at Sambil La Candelaria, a downtown mall that Chávez had expropriated in 2008, just before it was about to open [n. 24]. This huge structure with more than 12,917 ft² of commercial space is one of a chain of Sambil malls opened across cities in Venezuela since 1998. However, much as had occurred at El Helicoide, instead of the businesses poised to open up stores in the shopping center, in December 2010 the Sambil ended up being retrofitted as an emergency shelter. Bunk beds lined passageways, mattresses covered bare concrete floors, and as the refuge became more established, people attached satellite television

20 On earlier attempts to repurpose the building, see Celeste Olalquiaga's "Riches to Rags" in this book.

21 Christhian Colina, "Revelan condiciones en las que Rosmit Mantilla es castigado en El Helicoide," *Caraota Digital*, November 11, 2016. For a first-hand account of the prison's conditions, see the interview with Rosmit Mantilla in this book, and on the security forces occupation, see the chapter by Luis Duno-Gottberg in this book.

22 Jorge Hernández, "Dos años nuevos cuentan damnificados en refugios," *El Universal*, December 29, 2012. Hernández cites official figures that refer to 22,583 families of damnificados in 2010 the metropolitan area of Gran Caracas.

23 This bout of rain wreaked havoc in the states of Falcón, Miranda, Anzoátegui, Vargas, and Nueva Esparta. On the Museo Alejandro Otero, see Dubraska Falcón, "El Museo Alejandro Otero acoge a 350 damnificados," *El Universal*, December 7, 2016. On the use of hotels as refuges see "Libertador: 43 hoteles serán usados como refugios," *Reportero24*, December 4, 2010. Conditions at the Rinconada racetrack were particularly bad, with families still living there in July 2013 amid unhygienic conditions, and without bathroom facilities; see Angélica Lugo, "Insalubridad en La Rinconada ha deteriorado salud de damnificados," *El Universal*, July 1, 2013, and Airam Fernández, "La Rinconada: Invasores dudan correr con la suerte de los damnificados (I)," *Contrapunto*, August 22, 2014.

24 The decree to expropriate the building became official in November 2010, after publication in the *Gaceta Oficial* (which publicly announces new legislation and changes to existing laws). Chávez ordered the expropriation on the grounds that the Sambil should be converted in a Socialist marketplace.

Figure 4 The occupation of La Torre de David, 2014. PHOTOS: Guillermo Suárez.

Figure 5 The occupation of La Torre de David, 2014. PHOTOS: Guillermo Suárez.

receivers to the mall's façade. To offset mounting criticisms regarding the insalubrious conditions in this and other shelters, the local mayor's office published photographs of children doing exercises in the Sambil's empty car park, boasting that the sports training would produce high caliber athletes [n. 25].

And, much like El Helicoide, the occupation dragged on. Two years after the floods, dozens of families were still living in the mall. As people tired of waiting to be relocated, similar tensions arose to those that had surfaced in the Gran Ocupación. Some residents complained that a number of their neighbors were *invasores*—not real *damnificados*, but invaders who were squatting so that they could be assigned new government-built homes [n. 26].

Damnificados were in fact the minority, at least in the area around the Sambil, which had become a hub for squatters, with 20 or more abandoned buildings subject to occupation. The most prominent among them was La Torre de David—the unfinished banking, commercial, and hotel complex located between the Avenida Andrés Bello and Avenida Urdaneta. Such seizures were symptomatic of a longstanding housing deficit that in the new millennium had reached 400,000 homes in Caracas and 3 million nationwide [n. 27]. Often branded *invasiones* (invasions) or *tomas* (takeovers), they became a common strategy under Chávez's government, which tolerated squatting and practiced expropriation itself. Towers that had been abandoned after the financial meltdown of the mid-90s became easy targets, and from 2003 to 2006 squatters took over 145 buildings in Caracas, commandeering more than 30 in January 2006 alone [n. 28].

As Chávez shifted from reformist promises to stridently socialist rhetoric, these two types of makeshift occupation—emergency shelters and illegal seizures—became increasingly entangled with political controversies and internal divisions that cut across Venezuelan society. Amid the national strikes, coup attempts, and protests that rocked the country from 2002 onwards, opponents cited the government's sluggish rehousing of *damnificados*, expropiation of private property, and lenience on illegal squats as proof of its inability to uphold the rule of law, secure social welfare, or preserve the image of a modern, oil-rich nation. It was this antagonistic political setting that made La Torre de David's seizure a particularly contentious topic.

It was October 2007, when 2,000 people forced their way into the site, hanging hammocks, pitching tents, and cordoning off spaces with bed sheets. As months passed and the government continued to turn a blind eye, the occupation gained ground. People built homes around the empty elevator shafts and unguarded stairwells, knocking through walls and replacing the glass curtain with cinder blocks [figs. 4, 5 *pp 164–165*]. "We admit that we invaded this place, but after two and a half years we can't call ourselves invaders, but a community," one resident told a journalist in 2010. He explained that after ejecting thieves and drug users, 500 residents had registered the squat as Cooperativa Cacique Venezuela, a cooperative that would "promote the construction and urban planning of dignified homes, apartments, a community meeting room, a preschool, a nursery, parking areas and a multifunctional room" [n. 29].

For all the cooperative's talk of strict rules, floor monitors and penalties for sloppy trash disposal, living conditions in this shell of a building were undeniably precarious. Some 4,500 people lived there by 2014, without sewage systems or even running water. Moreover, the supposed cooperative was in fact run by Alexander "el niño" Daza, an ex-criminal turned evangelical pastor [n. 30]. Perhaps unsurprisingly, media outlets across the world seized on the story of the occupation and La Torre de David became the subject of wild speculation. Some saw a den of iniquity, others a group of empowered commons of citizens taking their futures into their own hands. As the squat's oscillating symbolism reached fever pitch, it was even awarded the Leon d'Oro at the Biennale di Venezia in 2012, celebrated for its role as a laboratory of

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25 Alcaldía de Caracas, "La Alcaldía de Caracas promueve deporte social," January 21, 2011.

26 Hernández, "Dos años nuevos cuentan damnificados en refugios."

27 Between 1999–2010, only 28,000 homes were built of 100,000 that were needed. See: Peter Wilson, "The Skyscraper Slums of Caracas," *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2012, and Simón Romero and María Eugenia Díaz, "45-Storey Walkup Beckons the Desperate," *New York Times*, March 1, 2011. The Chávez government later set out to compensate for this by launching the Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela (Great Venezuela Housing Mission) in 2011. To date, the program has built nearly 1.4 million homes.

28 Rafael Sánchez, "Seized by the Spirit: The Mystical Foundation of Squatting among Pentecostals in Caracas (Venezuela) Today," *Public Culture* 20.2 (2008): 277–278. La Torre de David was 60 percent finished when construction ground to a halt after the financial crisis of 1994. The site was taken over by the state's Fondo de Garantía de Depósitos y Protección Bancaria (FOGADE), along with other assets belonging to the Confinanzas group. For more context, see my chapter "Out of the Ashes" in this book.

29 Nancy Velasco, "Se consolida invasión de la Torre de David tras dos años y medio," *El Universal*, April 17, 2010. "*Cacique*," in Spanish, refers to a tribal chief.

30 For a profile of Daza, see: Jon Lee Anderson, "Slumlord," *The New Yorker*, January 28, 2013.

experimental housing solutions [n.31]. The next year, however, the pendulum swung back, and the tower was recreated as the setting for an episode of the television series *Homeland*, in which it was depicted as an apocalyptic hovel inhabited by Chávez supporters and drug lords.

Dignifying the Damnificados

Preoccupied with political turmoil and overwhelmed with the pressure to relocate *damnificados*, the government simply ignored this world-famous squat [n.32]. Seven years after the original seizure, Chávez's successor Nicolás Maduro finally announced that La Torre de David would be evacuated in 2014. Operación Zamora (Operation Zamora), as the plan was called, would bring the squat in line with the emotional and moral cornerstones of Chávez's revolutionary philosophy, known as *chavismo*.

Fittingly, the anthropologist Paula Vásquez traces the foundations of *chavismo* back to the aforementioned bout of devastating mudslides that occurred in 1999, generating a national emergency [n.33]. Referred to as the *Tragedia de Vargas*, or Vargas Tragedy, these mudslides laid waste to homes in the coastal states of Vargas, Miranda, and Falcón, killing at least a thousand people. Popular memory refers to the disaster in almost biblical terms, as "the day the mountain advanced toward the sea." It led Chávez to expound the concept of redemption through state humanitarianism, led by government and military forces. With a characteristic play-on-words, he asserted that *damnificados* should instead be known as *dignificados*: "the damaged" should become "the dignified" [n.34].

This same idea provided the framework for the State's media campaign surrounding the evacuation of La Torre de David. They launched Operación Zamora live on national television on July 22, 2014 [n.35]. A press conference was led by Ernesto Villegas, a journalist-turned government minister, who was joined by representatives from state institutions, security forces, and citizen protection agencies [n.36]. Explaining that "the building lacks even the minimum conditions to live safely and with dignity," Villegas emphasized that the operation was not a coercive eviction (*desalojo*) but a peaceful, unarmed evacuation (*"desocupación sin armamento"*) devised to ensure occupants' welfare. The humanitarian theme played out through split-screen coverage combining live reportage with pre-edited footage. As government representatives described the evacuation on one side, the other switched between vertigo-inducing shots of unguarded stairwells to ones of smiling children waving from windows and soldiers helping residents carry boxes.

Just like the earlier footage of El Helicoide's evacuation, the press conference at La Torre de David gave an overall sense of the relocation process from start to finish. As the televised coverage advanced, evacuees lugged boxes down stairs and loaded them onto military trucks, guards lent a hand, then buses filled up with people ready to set off to their new homes in Ciudad Zamora. This "socialist city" built outside Caracas symbolized, as president Maduro later declared in another press conference, "the emergence of a new Venezuela" [n.37].

As the evacuation progressed, the question of La Torre de David's future hung in the air. Where Ciudad Zamora represented a new start, the skyscraper itself was vilified as "monument to the failure of neoliberalism," a ruin worthy only of demolition [n.38]. This resonated with the idea that *chavismo*, as a political movement, existed to clear away the wreckage of previous administrations, eradicating corruption and social exclusion to reinvent Venezuela. Villegas gave

31 Curated by the architecture collective Urban-ThinkTank, the exhibition and prize generated widespresad controversy, since it was unclear who was receiving the prize: the squatters who had taken over the tower, or the architects who used it as a blueprint to draw up novel housing solutions. For favorable depictions, see Justin McGuirk, *Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture* (London: Verso, 2014) and Urban-Think Tank, *Torre David* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2013). For criticism, see Dan Hancox, "Enough Slum Porn," *The Architectural Review*, August 12, 2014, and "Golden Liar, Roaring Lie," *Latorrededavid.blogspot.com*, September 21, 2012.

32 In 2012, Chávez was forced to admit its existence on live television, after asking a store worker where she lived and being told that she was a resident of La Torre de David. See Irene Sarabia, "Chávez dijo desconocer de invasores en Confinanzas," *Últimas Noticias*, August 8, 2012.

33 Paula Vásquez, *Poder y catástrofe: Venezuela bajo la tragedia de 1999* (Caracas: Taurus, Santillana, 2009).

34 Diddier Fassin and Paula Vásquez, "Humanitarian Exception as the Rule: The Political Theology of the 1999 *Tragedia* in Venezuela," *American Ethnologist* 32.3 (2005), 399.

35 Extracts from the press conference are available from: "Se inicia desalojo de la Torre de David," *Últimas Noticias*, July 22, 2014. All subsequent quotes from the press conference are from this source.

36 The institutions included the immigration service (SAIME), the fire service; the chief of National Guard's Comando Regional Número 5 (CORE 5); the National Statistics Institute (INE), and the Ministry for Internal Affairs, Justice, and Peace.

37 "Nicolás Maduro entrega viviendas desde el Complejo Ciudad Zamora," *Venezolana de Televisión*, February 8, 2014. Squatters were relocated to government-built housing projects in Ciudad Zamora (Cúa), Ciudad Bicentenaria (Santa Teresa del Tuy), and Lomas de la Guadalupe (Ocumare del Tuy).

38 "Rueda de prensa internacional del Pdte Nicolás Maduro," *TeleSUR*, July 23, 2014.

weight to this interpretation after the evacuation, going to television to proclaim that the squat's undignified and dangerous conditions were the fault of *neoliberalismo* (neoliberalism), not *chavismo* [n.39]. Presenting the building as the embodiment of obsolete political and economic models, state media broadcast images of Villegas knocking down makeshift walls inside the tower with a sledgehammer, then welding shut the doors of vacated apartments [n.40]. The clear suggestion was that the building's clearance and demolition would put a final nail in the coffin of the old political order.

The evacuation moved apace. By Christmas 2014, 12 floors of improvised housing had been demolished and only a third of the squatters remained in the building [n.41]. However, the talk of demolition turned out to be more subterfuge than a serious plan. The fact remained that La Torre de David was just one among many occupied buildings in the capital. If the government went ahead with razing it, then how many others would have to meet the same fate? In May 2015 newspapers were reporting an alternative solution: the government had allocated funds to renovate the area around La Torre de David and the nearby Sambil mall, which at that point was still partially occupied by *damnificados* [n.42]. Even if total evacuation of Caracas' squats was impossible, then at least this area would benefit from 5,000 m^2 of new public space while *damnificados* awaited relocation.

As for La Torre de David, in mid-2015 Maduro visited the site to announce its transformation into "a grand center for culture, sports, art, and security" [n.43]. A project of this magnitude could not help but evoke the string of abortive proposals to reinvent El Helicoide as a beacon of culture. Maduro speculated that the failed skyscraper could become a hub for manifold cultural institutions, from Venezuela's youth orchestra, El Sistema, to "cutting-edge film studios that will make Hollywood squeal." A year later, with the complex effectively under the control of the security forces, this plan had stalled. Instead, La Torre de David's empty shell had found a more fitting function: rather than a filmmaking hub, it provided a realistic mise en scène for a nationwide earthquake simulation staged in 2016 [n.44]. As the former squat played the part of a collapsed building in a search-and-rescue drill, firemen barked instructions to actors, and police dogs searched for fictitious victims amid the rubble of now demolished homes. With its life as a vertical barrio curtailed, La Torre de David's unfinished structure found a purpose again, if only for a day.

Eternally Provisional

Despite the decades that separate them, retracing El Helicoide and La Torre de David's respective descents into informal settlements unearths cracks that run deep in Venezuela's national identity, its quest for "spectacular modernity," and the upheavals that punctuate its political and economic development. Through their transient occupations, these buildings tell much more complex stories than those envisaged in their original grand designs. As figureheads of capitalist expansion through industry, consumerism, and speculative finance, El Helicoide and La Torre de David projected images of urban modernity that buttressed Venezuela's "exceptional" status as a prosperous, albeit developing, nation.

The grand scale of their architecture was conceived to overshadow precisely the marginal communities and precarious dwellings that might undercut the national vision of progress. However, these buildings' transformation into makeshift housing opened them to the same vulnerable groups and provisional constructions that tend to be excluded by formal systems of spatial design and economic development. Part monumental contour, part improvised shelter, El Helicoide and La Torre de David became unintentional symbols of makeshift modernity: a complex reality shaped by a range of factors, from architectural hubris and economic volatility through to climatic catastrophes and political capriciousness.

As emblems of this phenomenon, El Helicoide and La Torre de David's discontinuous narratives lurch between arrested futures and knee-jerk reinvention plans. Politicians' compulsion to stage dramatic redemptions of squatters, and to remake these buildings on scales as ambitious as their original plans, highlights the extent to which occupied buildings have generated malaise in recent Venezuelan history, but also the fact

39 Ernesto Villegas was referring to the Gran Misión Vivienda (Great Housing Mission) on *Zurda Konducta*, an opinion program on the state-run channel Venezolana de Televisión, August 20, 2014.

40 "Vea cómo fue clausurado el piso 28 de la Torre Confinanzas," *Contrataque Guerrilla*, *YouTube*, July 25, 2014; "En marcha sexta fase de la Operación Zamora: 49 familias se mudan," *Comisionado Presidencial para la Transformación Revolucionaria de la Gran Caracas*, August 11, 2014.

41 "Villegas asegura que 66% de la Torre Confinanzas ha sido desalojada," *El Universal*, December 24, 2014.

42 "Aprueban recursos para mejoras en el entorno de la Torre Confinanzas," *El Universal*, 22 May, 2015.

43 "'Torre de David' será un centro 'para las artes, la cultura y la seguridad,'" *El Universal*, May 29, 2015.

44 "Realizan ensayos de rescate en la Torre de David," *El Universal*, June 29, 2016.

that spatial arrangements continue to be linchpins in political agendas that, no matter their ideological stance, promise to deliver citizens to a better future. Thrust back into public attention, these futuristic-designs-turned-makeshift-shelters threatened to undermine the prospects of progress and renewal that undergird political administrations. When various commentators labeled El Helicoide and La Torre de David as antithetical to urban modernity, eviction and reinvention provided incumbent governments with a way to turn the stories of these squats around. Moves to demolish makeshift structures, relocate residents outside the city, and moot ambitious rehabilitations can all be understood as attempts to restore the idea of state-led development so often rooted in a spatial imaginary in which grand designs trump provisional realities.

The pattern that emerges from El Helicoide and La Torre de David's occupations reaffirms Foucault's assertion that even as architectural designs promise "to ensure a certain allocation of people in space, a *canalization* of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations," designs and intention do not govern social or spatial relations. Rather, it is "the perpetual gaps between intentions in relation to one another," and the disparities between design and use that shed light on the challenges and inequalities that are part of the experience of modernity [n.45].

45 Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 253; 247.

46 Quoted in Malcolm Linton, "The Helicoide: Rising Above its Past?," *The Daily Journal*, August 8, 1983, 15.

Those cracks reveal glimpses of the makeshift modernity that has shaped Caracas and the many other cities where aspirational designs and social deficits visibly converge. This modernity demands spatial arrangements that not only project development and inspire awe, but that also respond to the needs of the communities that remain excluded from formal urban and economic structures, relegated to precarious sites whose foundations are apt to come unstuck.

The repeated, and failed, attempts to refurbish El Helicoide with new and grandiose functions should thus serve as a warning in discussions about the future of La Torre de David and other spaces that have been caught adrift in moments of upheaval. As one inhabitant of El Helicoide put it four decades back, "We want something stable and permanent. In this country the provisional is eternal" [n.46]. As meta-narratives for national development and social welfare, the ideals of urban modernity and progress through architecture clearly retain potency. Yet, the patterns of faulty planning and provisional use that emerge in El Helicoide and La Torre de David's occupations and evacuations signal demands to which architects and politicians so often fail to respond. Their status as icons of makeshift modernity reveals a need for architectural structures and social policies that will not only marshal collective optimism about future horizons, but that will also safeguard citizen welfare even as the climate keeps changing and the economic tides continue to turn.

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