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Caracas, Departure City: Urban planning after emigration and collapse

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The recent deterioration of living conditions in Venezuela has resulted in an unprecedented migratory crisis, infrastructure collapse, and institutional decline. In the middle of this complex situation, migrants' left-behind properties are being transformed into new uses. These changes often contradict zoning regulations, prompting a series of legal, social, and spatial strategies to conceal them.

This article examines ongoing spatial and programmatic transformations of vacant homes in Caracas, the country's capital, framing these changes within disciplinary discourses of shrinking and departure cities and in a specific experience of collapse that shapes daily life in the city. The article studies spatial transformations in terms of their material conditions and the opaque and informal procedures that produce them, describing the process from the point of view of various actors, from architects and entrepreneurs to local residents and planning authorities. Through interviews, site visits, and photographic documentation, the article describes the challenges and possibilities for social organization and institutional renovation in a climate of emigration and uncertainty.

Keywords: Caracas, crisis, emigration, social mobilization, urban planning

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Introduction

For several decades, Venezuela has been immersed in a conflict characterized by political antagonism, economic decline, social upheaval, and infrastructural breakdown. The rapid deterioration of living conditions since 2014 has triggered an unprecedented migratory crisis. It is estimated that nearly eight million citizens (Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, 2023), around 26% of the population, have left the country, with more than five million leaving since 2015 (Freitez *et al*., 2021). While the outward and more dramatic aspects of the migratory crisis have been the focus of academic research, the local impact of emigration remains understudied. Indeed, its speed and magnitude have transformed life within the country, creating a local manifestation of emigration that has social and spatial dimensions, and is entangled with the broader collapse.

In Caracas, Venezuela's capital and largest city, emigration has produced an over-abundance of vacant domestic spaces. These spaces, however, are not abandoned or ruined. Instead, the preservation of migrants' left-behind patrimonies, in an environment of economic crisis and institutional decay, has turned vacant properties into sites of emergent economies, new modes of social congregation, solidarity practices, and temporary inhabitation. These changes occur through informal and opaque procedures that elude state oversight, fiscal and urban regulations, and offer an outlet to daily hardships. Furthermore, these socio-spatial transformations transcend the domestic scale upon which they operate and have an urban impact.

This paper examines the reconfiguration of migrants' vacant domestic spaces and the interaction between emergent economic actors, architects, local residents, and planning authorities around these. It looks at how evading fiscal and urban regulations, in a context of corruption, uncertainty and emigration, relies on specific spatial strategies and produces precarious material conditions. Amid the diminished role of planning authorities, activists and neighbors' organizations have come to the fore to monitor and protest unsanctioned transformations, resulting in a confrontation that undermines prospects for urban growth or harnessing economic opportunities. In this sense, the paper aims to expose the limitations of top-down planning practices amid widespread collapse and propose possible ways forward in this troubled context.

The research focuses on the programmatic and spatial transformation of single-family houses in the Chacao municipality in Caracas. Focusing on a small sample area, the research aims to highlight transformations observable in other (former) middle class residential neighborhoods in the city. The research draws from urban studies literature to engage with the concept of 'departure city', while paying close attention to the crisis, represented both statistically and as a daily experience.

The article's findings are based on fieldwork carried out in Caracas in November 2022 and between July and August 2023. It included site visits and visual documentation through photography and architectural surveys, and interviews with municipal authorities, real estate agents, urban activists, architects, and entrepreneurs. These semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, thematically coded, and translated into English. Questions revolved around the crisis' impact on professional activity, with attention to institutional decline and the prevalence of informality, as well as the effects of emigration on the built environment. Participants' occupations overlapped around vacant domestic spaces in various ways. Therefore, it became important to examine how actors positioned themselves and operated upon this singular spatial condition. Interview excerpts and fieldwork observations are

incorporated into the narrative to describe spatial transformations, emergent dynamics, and the positions of various actors. Some interviews were anonymized at the request of participants.

The text is organized in four sections. First, it offers an overview of the urban context of the municipality of Chacao in Caracas. Then, it frames the discussion around the concepts of shrinking and departure cities, while considering the Venezuelan collapse as a framework that shapes daily actions. Subsequently, the article delves into the specifics of the case study by examining the transformation of domestic spaces and relation to their context, as well as the social, professional, and institutional environment in which these occur. Finally, concluding remarks point to possible ways forward under the present circumstances.

Chacao: emergence and decline of a middle-class neighborhood

Venezuela's rapid urban expansion during the 20th century was underpinned by expanding oil revenues and framed within a broader discourse of progress and modernization. Starting in the 1920's, the Venezuelan state embarked on a grand project aimed at uplifting the nation from its agrarian past towards a modern urban society (Blackmore, 2017; Mondolfi Gudat, 2020).

In Caracas, expansion beyond the historic city center had begun in the early 20th century in the form of garden-style suburbs for the urban elites. The redistribution of oil proceeds beginning in the 1920s had profound territorial and demographic impact. Urban populations grew rapidly, and with it, the need for housing an emerging middle class.[1] The *urbanización*, a form of urban development based on European and later American style suburbs, rapidly took shape. Led by private capital, new developments sprung up increasingly further from the city center by parceling and urbanizing agrarian land, resulting in a patchwork of disconnected and morphologically varied suburbs (Landa, 2004). The regulating plan of 1951, developed by Josep Luis Sert, Maurice Rotival, and Francis Violich introduced zoning ordinances and marked a final departure from the planning principles of colonial times in favor of Anglo-Saxon models (Vegas and González Viso, 2015). The metropolitan plan of 1951 lay the foundations for an expansive city with independent areas interconnected by vehicular arteries that predominates to this day. A new residential typology emerged in hand with this process of urban expansion: the detached, single-family house. Locally known as *quinta*, [2] this typology had made an early appearance at the turn of the 20th century in the form of large, detached villas for the urban elite. A few decades later, it had evolved into a smaller format, becoming the architecture of choice for an aspiring urban middle class whose expansion was underpinned by state-backed mortgages in a climate of sustained economic growth.

Presently, the metropolitan district of Caracas is composed of five municipalities, with an estimated population of 2.964.365[3] and an area of 810 km². Chacao is the smallest and wealthiest of these, with a population of 71.500 and an area of 13 km². The municipality is centrally located within the city and effectively connected to metropolitan thoroughfares and

[1] By 1920, Caracas had a population of 92.212. By 1936, it had grown to 235.150. By 1950, it reached nearly half a million. See Negrón, as cited in Landa (2004)
[2] The term *quinta* is a colonial legacy, referring originally to a recreational country house. It has evolved in different ways in Latin America. In Venezuela, the modern *quinta* appeared as urban elites moved to isolated houses in spacious lots in the outskirts of the capital. As the city expanded, American style suburbs became common, and houses became smaller, the term lost its exclusive overtone.
[3] Based on the last official census of 2011, the metropolitan area of Caracas had 2.904.376 inhabitants. The population projection for 2021 was 2.964.365. This variation must take into account the 1.12% yearly national population growth between 2010 and 2015, and a negative growth rate of 1.13% between 2015-21. See: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (2014).

public transport networks. It also has lower crime rates than the city's average.[4] These conditions have traditionally made Chacao an aspirational location for the city's middle and upper-middle classes, embassies and, recently, international organizations that have set up local offices during the humanitarian emergency, accentuating its enclave status.

Historically, the area developed around the mission town of Chacao outside of Caracas' colonial center. The capital's expansion in the mid-20th century engulfed Chacao and its surrounding agricultural land. Zoning ordinances implemented in the 1950s stipulated land use, construction areas, and building heights, dividing the municipality into a lower area of high density and mixed uses and upper suburban-style residential neighborhoods. The first was dominated by mid-rise residential buildings with street-level commerce, while the second was populated by detached *quintas*. As this zoning combination became common throughout the city, single-family houses and apartment buildings conformed the architectural repertoire of the city's urban middle class.

In Chacao and elsewhere in Caracas, years of uninterrupted emigration have created an oversupply in the housing market, leading to a significant decrease in prices. According to urban planner Martín Fernández, the price of existing residential properties in the city experienced a drop of 40 to 50% between 2013 and 2020, only to stabilize afterward (Fernández, 2021). In Chacao, residential vacancy is generalized. In the words of Soraya Alfonzo, director of the Local Municipal Planning Office (OLPU in Spanish), 'there is no official census of vacant properties in the municipality. However, based on interviews with neighbors and personal experience, we estimate that 50% of apartment buildings and houses stand empty' (S. Alfonzo, personal communication, November 11, 2022). Additionally, residents who stay behind are often elderly and cannot afford to maintain properties in good condition.[5] Therefore, the decline of public infrastructure is mirrored in the generalized dilapidation of private properties, contributing to the slow but persistent environmental degradation throughout the city.

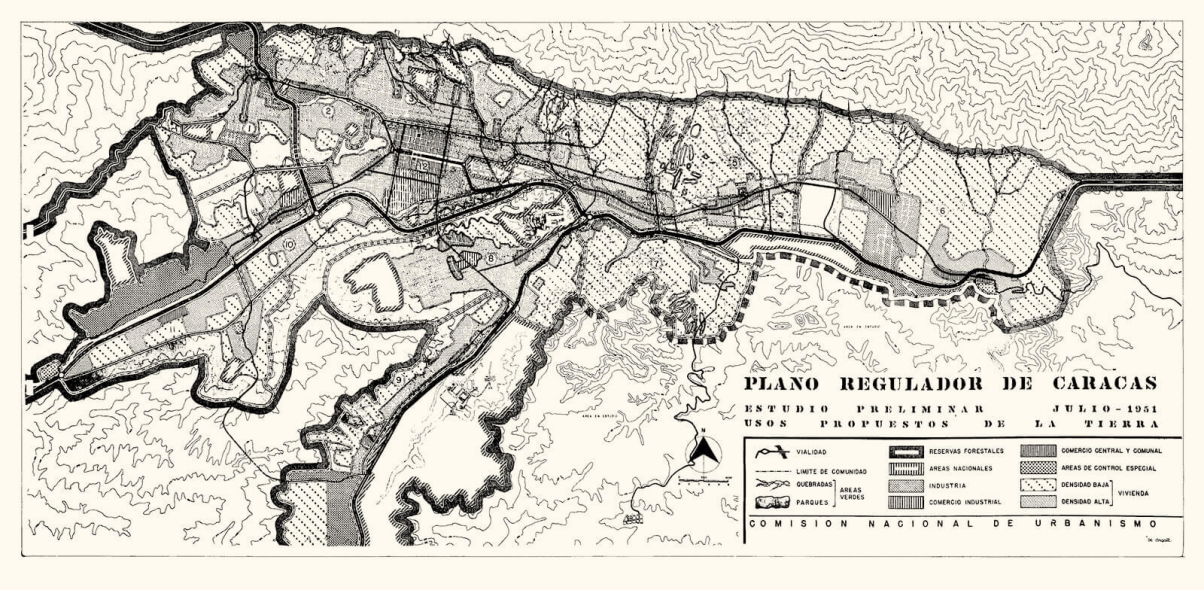

Figure 1. *Regulating Plan of Caracas, 1951. Source: De Sola (1967)*

[4] In 2022, the city averaged 61 violent deaths per 100.000 inhabitants, while Chacao averaged 41. See: Observatorio Venezolano de la Violencia (2023)
[5] By 2022, 86% of migrants were between 15-49 years, that is, the most economically productive segment of the population. See Freitez et al., (2022)

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Theoretical Framework(s): Departure City, Fragile State[6]

In the field of urban studies, the most widely used framework for analyzing the impact of outward migration on cities is the 'shrinking city'. This concept explains urban decline associated with economic or political restructuring, de-industrialization, suburbanization, or demographic changes. While urban and demographic decline are age-old phenomena, the shrinking city has been identified as a mode of urban transformation specific to globalization and the impending end of global population growth. Within this framework, growth and shrinkage coexist globally or nationally at the expense of each other, as 'poles of growth' attract population from peripheral regions, resulting in their depopulation (Oswalt et al., 2006, p. 6). Despite its focus on decline, the literature has moved past negative implications of depopulation and argued for a future 'culture of shrinkage' centered on 'distinct forms of renewal and change.' (Oswalt, 2019, p. 26). Shrinking cities have been re-conceptualized as sites of cultural and environmental repair through practices that exploit the restorative potential of abandoned spaces, leading to innovative forms of urban development, governance, public art, or community organization.

For its part, the 'departure city' has been associated to urban environments where space 'is fundamentally shaped by emigration' (König, 2016) and 'places of co-habitation where multiple translocal spaces and flows overlap' (König and Vöckler, 2018, p. 411). The departure city framework aims to expand disciplinary discussions beyond growth-shrinkage oppositions by pointing to a situation where the conflicting forces of outward migration, population growth and urban development coexist, producing socio-spatial transformations. These include informal and temporary housing solutions, diaspora investment, the emergence of an emigration infrastructure in the form of specialized businesses and transport hubs, the 'symbolic presence of the elsewhere' (König, 2016) through western-like architectural styles and foreign nomenclature, and the general synchronization of daily life with the rhythms of emigration (König, 2016; König and Vöckler, 2018; Coman, Grubbauer and König, 2019). The departure city depicts an environment whose physical constitution and cultural features sustain and stimulate emigration.

The departure city framework has been used to explain urban transformations in post-socialist and post-conflict countries of the European periphery characterized by circular labor migration with the European Union. Research has focused on migrants' economic involvement in cities of origin through enterprises that shape the built environment and building culture. Urban transformation in the departure city is a specific expression of transnational networks and the flow of financial resources, knowledge and information these networks sustain. While the concept has been limited to the European context, authors have called to expand 'the scale and scope of the departure city in its manifold realizations [through] empirical work' (König and Vöckler, 2018, p. 415).

Conceptualizing Caracas as a departure city offers an opportunity for probing this concept beyond the European context and for considering emigration as a driving factor of urban transformation. In Caracas, the consequences of emigration and its entanglement with collapse cannot be reduced to abandonment, ruin, and the disappearance of urban life. Outward migration is partially compensated by internal arrivals from an even more precarious periphery. Amid growing national decay, the central government has gone to great lengths to maintain a certain level of functionality of the capital, reflected in the relative stability of electricity supply and the maintenance of public infrastructure. Amid economic volatility, real estate investment has become a haven for capital, leading to a boom in high-end commercial

[6] This theoretical framework is a central part of an ongoing doctoral dissertation. Parts of this section have already been published. See Gzyl (2023)

and residential construction. Speculative development has resulted in millions of square meters of vacant space that overlap with migration-related vacancy (Fernández, 2021).

Migrants' vacant dwellings sit at the intersection of emigration and the broader crisis, offering an opportunity to examine their interaction. A singular feature of Venezuela's migratory crisis, particularly of the middle class, is the fact that migrants retain local property. Abandonment, understood as giving up claims or rights over property, is rare. For migrants, local property extends ties to the homeland and the possibility of future return, while challenging the nature of transnational exchange beyond the one-way flow of economic remittances. Economically, retaining property prevents investment loss, generates income, or provides housing for left-behind family members. However, in a context of high crime rates, institutional precarity, and laws that provide no protection against invasion, migrants resort to informal mechanisms to protect patrimonies. Trust and personal connections substitute legal arrangements, partial use and the simulation of occupation are common, and a niche economy of caretakers and property managers has emerged in the city. As will be shown, these considerations are also entangled with migrants' needs to sell on short notice or a desire maximize profits, opening left-behind spaces to creative transformations that have relevant spatial and urban implications.

In Venezuela, the impact of emigration on urban development has received scarce scholarly attention and an outlook on migration as cause of urban transformations is generally lacking. Architect and scholar Marco Negrón, who has studied urban transformations in their entanglement with broader political and economic circumstances, gives a cursory treatment to migration in a recent study of Caracas' urban problems (Negrón, 2021). In a detailed analysis of urban decline in Caracas from the perspective of urbicide, urban planner Alberto Lovera (2023) briefly mentions emigration, framing it as consequence of deteriorating living conditions in places of origin. An exception is the research of architect and scholar Lorenzo González (2020, 2023), whose concept of 'urban osteoporosis' describes a condition in which structures remain intact but are internally weakened. In his research on the urban impact of emigration, González draws parallels between the Venezuelan capital and historic processes of urban decline, suggesting the future incorporation of the city's vacant architectural stock through repurposing schemes within new institutional, economic, legal, urban, and professional frameworks. His examination of vacancy ends by pointing to the need for 'structural changes' before measures for urban recovery can be effectively implemented. Notwithstanding the need and relevance of structural changes, this research argues that the creative reincorporation of vacancy that González aspires to is already taking place. Moreover, its occurrence challenges –in its logic and outcome—the very idea of 'structural change' as a prerequisite for action.

The Venezuelan crisis. Collapse and emergent knowledge.

The Venezuelan collapse is characterized by a combination of economic mismanagement, political conflict, institutional fragility, and social fracture that have drastically reshaped the country. Disentangling the multiple facets of this collapse and tracing their origin is a difficult task. Some of its features, such as poverty or service deficiencies, are an amplification of historic shortcomings that can be traced to an uneven and fast-tracked modernization of the country during the 20th century, while others, like massive emigration, are entirely new and can be specifically located in the rapid deterioration of living conditions that began in 2013. This period coincides with the rise to power of Nicolás Maduro and the acceleration of democratic backsliding that had begun with Hugo Chávez in 1999 (Corrales, 2022).

Between 2014 and 2022, the Venezuelan economy shrunk by 75% (IMF, 2023). As of December 2022, 81.5% of the population lived in poverty; a large percentage of the population was under-or-unemployed, and informal employment encompasses 44% of the economy (Freitez et al., 2022). The health and public education infrastructure have collapsed and public services like transportation, electricity, and water are subjected to frequent breakdowns. The setback of political freedom and civil liberties, press censorship, and human rights abuses have been widely documented. Violations of private property, including invasion, expropriation, fines, or temporary occupations, have been sanctioned by a legal framework gradually established by the government over the last two and a half decades.

In recent years, economic impact of widespread international sanctions, the country's isolation from the global financial system (Bull and Rosales, 2020), the low salaries of public employees (Rosales, Bull and Sutherland, 2023), and the average citizen's survival needs (Vásquez Lezama, 2019), have established 'ways of doing'(Mbembe and Roitman, 1995, p. 340) that shape daily life. In this sense, collapse should be examined beyond statistical representations through its physical manifestations and the operative framework for action that it creates. Disinvestment and lack of maintenance have resulted in the ruin of public infrastructure, service failure demands the recourse to private alternatives, and informal occupations compensate formal employment or completely replace it. In addition, crime and violence limit access to public space and have displaced social life towards controlled environments, resulting in the privatization or abandonment of the public realm (Lombardi and Gzyl, 2015; Freitez et al., 2017). In this sense, collapse is 'inscribed in the everyday urban landscape, in its material structures such as roads, residences and office buildings, and in social interaction and relations of power, profit and subsistence.'(Mbembe and Roitman, 1995, p. 327). In parallel, daily life requires constant improvisations, course corrections, and negotiations to survive, resist, or profit from uncertainty. Collapse shapes the outcome of actions and projects, a situation in which the makeshift and tentative rule over the permanent and definitive. This provisional quality is visible in the material constitution of the built environment and the procedures for its production. In this uncertain context, urban development is the outcome of processes 'that fundamentally depend upon the capacity of actors and institutions finding ways to continuously strike agreements on accomplishing things together, even if the rules of such collaborations are opaque and fluid' (Pieterse, 2013, p. 14). The lack of clear rules and constantly shifting procedures challenge distinctions between legal and illegal, formal and informal, and their corresponding imaginaries, purporting informality as a pervasive condition shaping the city. As the spatial transformations documented here will show, it is not that actors play both sides, but rather that it is unclear what the sides are.

Transformations of vacant houses in Chacao

Urban and spatial strategies

As stated above, middle-class migrants often retain property in the city. This opens left-behind spaces to new possibilities, whether by lending them to friends or relatives in exchange for looking after or renting them for profit. However, the line between caretaking, preservation, and transformation is not clearly drawn, as migrants' desires to retain their properties and maximize their profitability often subjects them to changes in use or to spatial reconfigurations. María Christina Silva, Director of Urban Management for Chacao municipality, explains that single-family houses are of little value in an oversaturated market. 'However, converting them into other uses increases their profitability. Working illegally, outside the scope of obsolete zoning regulations, reports a considerable income' (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022). Beyond their 'illegality', spatial transformations are entangled in the dynamics of emigration and a volatile economy. They are immersed in a web of relations

where new economic actors, emergent clienteles, migrants, architects, municipal institutions, and residents operate in complicity, confrontation, or subservience, disfiguring legal frameworks, bypassing urban regulations, and increasing conflict. Negotiating all these factors relies on corruption and legal loopholes to circumvent zoning laws and architectural strategies to conceal and minimize transformations.

Spatially, a salient feature of recent changes can be termed the 'dual existence' of commercial venues that operate out of domestic spaces. This duplicity is evident in the contradictory relationship these locations establish with the digital and physical public spheres, aimed at maximizing social media exposure while minimizing impact and interaction with the immediate surroundings. Businesses located in residential areas of Chacao have a vigorous digital engagement and can be easily located on platforms like Google Maps, increasing their visibility and accessibility. Simultaneously, they are concealed behind tall perimeter walls with little or no signage identifying them. However confounding this duality may seem, it does not respond to a need to evade authorities but to attract a specific clientele. It is common for these semi-clandestine establishments to advertise themselves in terms of isolation, refuge, or escape, a language directed 'towards a new public who looks for privacy, exclusiveness, and luxury,' according to María Christina Silva's view (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

Figure 2. *Recently converted homes. New uses are concealed behind tall walls and domestic exteriors. Photos by author.*

Achieving privacy and seclusion relies on a single spatial device: the perimeter wall, a ubiquitous architectural feature of residential architecture in Caracas. Its existence predates recent, migration-led, transformations, responding historically to a need for safety amid rising crime rates. As architectural elements, perimeter walls have become the default façades of houses and buildings (Capra-Ribeiro, 2014), an ever-evolving construction where successive layers of masonry, barbwire, vegetation, electrical fencing, and surveillance technologies are added over time, often surpassing the legal limit of two and a half meters above the sidewalk. Walls, fences, and checkpoints have transformed the city and people's habits, limiting interaction and turning Caracas into a 'city of feuds' (Zubillaga and Cisneros, 2001, p. 162).

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The experiential gap between vacant streets and lively interiors does not exacerbate a boundary between traditional categories of public and private as much as it highlights a growing economic divide amplified by collapse. In this context, the reprogramming of vacant homes, underpinned by spatial devices and technologies of security, conjugates a new form of gathering space, while the 'real' public realm remains as 'the option for those who have nowhere else to go,' in the words of María Christina Silva (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

Figure 3. *Construction of additional layers on existing perimeter wall. Photo by Edgar Martínez*

The inward-facing transformations of vacant houses also produce a singular architecture. In a climate of economic instability, with a small consumer market and avid competition, and amid precarious leasing conditions, entrepreneurs aim for minimal investment and immediate returns. This strategy results in a makeshift architecture of temporary structures, outdoor shacks, hanging lights, and plastic furniture that supports new programs and introduces new material conditions but leaves underlying spatial structures intact, and with this the possibility of reversing changes. In the words of a restaurant owner operating out of a single-family house, 'I have made several alterations to the space myself, but nothing is permanent. I can take everything with me when I leave.' When asked about the reason for this strategy, they answered, 'Because if I have to leave this house, or the country, I can just pack everything up and go. There are no certainties. All you can do is live in the present and seize opportunities.' (Anonymous participant, personal communication, August 2, 2023). Despite this critical outlook, the restaurant has been operating out of its present location since 2017. At the time of our meeting, the business owner was in the process of renovating a larger venue elsewhere. The decision to move responded to several factors, like mounting and arbitrary rent hikes, permanent complaints from neighbors, off-the-books payments to municipal authorities, and recently finding a location out of which to operate legally. As stated by architect Oriana Ferrer, whose firm Obra Verde has been involved in various residential transformation projects in Chacao,

> There is an ongoing transformation that authorities have not dealt with, or have dealt with wrongly, that is, by trying to stop it instead of acknowledging that the city is evolving. Clients simply assume this change and they do so because the precedent is everything around them already operates as commercial spaces. (O. Ferrer, personal communication, July 7, 2023)

Another example of how opacity and fluidity produce specific spatial strategies is the case of 'Streat Market'. For two years, this venue operated out of a single-family house in a residentially zoned block in Chacao. The property was owned by five sisters, three of whom lived abroad. Streat Market had a six-month contract for the property's use, maintenance, and repair. The owners demanded short-term leases in case they needed to sell swiftly. In addition, the document prevented any permanent alterations to the space. These contractual conditions were the basis for Streat Market' architectural strategy, a radical reprogramming of the house that left its spatial structure unaltered. Most of the program was concentrated outdoors, along lateral and front setbacks, where self-standing food kiosks where operated by individual vendors and patrons sat on long communal tables. The interior of the house contained a video arcade and an exhibition space. Some rooms remained closed off and contained the owners' belongings, overlapping the house's commercial use with its former one as a family residence. Tall perimeter walls screened clients from the street, a contradiction considering the venue's name –a word play between 'street' and 'eat'— and its inspiration in European street markets. Streat Market opened in early 2020 and permanently closed two years later, after being shut down various times. 'When we started, we tried doing everything transparently. We knew the Mayor's office had internally approved zoning changes, but the City Council had not passed it due to political backlash,' explains David Ogaya, of the partners. 'We received a temporary business license and our permits were up-to-date' (David Ogaya, personal communication, July 6, 2023). His account of how events unfolded from this point expose internal conflicts among various municipal departments, corruption, and the various mechanisms available for bypassing restrictions that have become standard practice for businesses operating out of vacant houses. The business owner quoted earlier expressed it as follows: 'There is a theory that the municipality will not change zoning because they live off illegality as well. It is profitable for them' (anonymous participant, August 2, 2023).

Precarious practices, opaque milieus

Architects interviewed for this research spoke of how residential transformation projects have increasingly become part of their practice. The design and construction phases proceed quickly and the final product resembles more an installation or a scenography than a permanent intervention. This spatial precariousness is accompanied by unfavorable contractual conditions, informal agreements, and a general disregard for professional expertise. According to Camilo Lander, a local architect with over twenty years of experience, 'accumulating expertise is not profitable. We find ourselves competing with young firms who charge much less for simple projects.' (C. Lander, personal communication, November 10, 2022). This opinion reflects a frustration with the conditions of professional practice and the absence of institutional frameworks to regulate professional practice or mediate disputes. In addition, according to Mr. Lander, the 'formal, informal, and illegal economies are deeply entangled', making it hard for professionals to draw lines as to what can be considered ethical practices.

As architects Gabriel Fossi and Jose Guinand commented, 'We operate in a state of generalized informality. If you want to do things through regular channels, everything gets complicated. This makes people take alternative routes.' (G. Fossi, J. Guinand, personal communication, November 10, 2022). As an example, the architects point to the interaction

with municipal authorities during construction. ‘Permits are irrelevant. Regulating entities know what gets built, but due to their economic deficit, they look the other way in exchange for payoffs or other arrangements like paving a street or fixing street lights.’ These entanglements and negotiations that shape professional illustrate what urban scholar Edgar Pieterse (2013) called the need to find ways of working together under opaque and fluid conditions.

Figure 4: *Outdoor area of Streat Market, Chacao. Photo by David Ogaya*

Contested positions

Chacao’s Municipal Planning Office was established in 1992 to regulate and oversee urban development by designing and implementing urban plans. It is itself ascribed to the municipality’s Urban Management Direction. Until recently, the OLPU consisted of five departments and was staffed by a team of twenty urbanists, engineers, lawyers, and technicians. Because of administrative restructuring and low salaries, it has been reduced to three departments and six employees. In November of 2022, the office offered a vivid description of institutional decline: a large space with lights partially turned off and rows of empty desks, walls stacked with project binders and hallways filled with glass-encased models of public buildings, some inaugurated decades ago, others never built.

Staff and budget shortages have greatly diminished OLPU’s possibilities of monitoring zoning violations in the municipality. In the face of municipal inaction, residents quickly take on to social media and often block streets to protest illegal transformations, objecting the increased traffic, parked vehicles, and loud music. However, in this conflict, ‘neighbors also realized they hit a wall. They protest and close off streets, but business owners find a legal loophole to bypass them’, adds María Christina Silva (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022). In response to illegal use changes, the municipality’s fiscal administration (not the OLPU) springs into action, closing down venues for lack of business licenses. When this

happens, entrepreneurs often introduce legal protection orders in higher courts, rendering local authorities powerless. According to business owners interviewed for this research, judges have turned this procedure into a standard and fee-based practice, charging between 20 and 30 thousand dollars for issuing court protections. In the words of Soraya Alfonzo, these measures represent the worst of all outcomes of this conflict: 'Businesses reopen with a protected status, overriding our authority and without solving any of the problems they generate' (S. Alfonzo, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

To address the issue, the municipality has surveyed illegal transformations and started a conversation with neighbors, most of who are elderly and long-time residents. However, possible solutions to this impasse have been on the table for a long time. OLPU first drafted an update to obsolete zoning regulations in 1995, proposing a mix of uses and densification in residential areas, but the opposition of neighbors' associations historically prevented its implementation. The recurrence of illegal conversions and the mobility restrictions during COVID-19 has finally aligned neighbors and the municipality after years of standoff.

> People were not open to change, but since the pandemic, they have come to realize there are obvious advantages to walking to the market or the pharmacy. There is a growing awareness that mixed-use is positive as long as there are clear guidelines for the relationship between commercial and residential uses (M. Silva, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

For architect Enrique Larrañaga, neighbors' groups are a reaffirmation of the individual 'against the State and instances of power' (Carvajal, 2018), a position that explains the historic opposition to municipal zoning changes. However, the emergence of new power groups and their involvement in unsanctioned use changes has shifted the focus of complaints and created common ground for residents and local authorities.

The fact that the future-oriented vision of institutional planning has been endorsed at a moment when the municipality's capacities are so greatly compromised should be taken into consideration. Despite OLPU's best efforts, comprehensive urban plans must undergo several stages of revision and approval, rendering them a too-little-too-late tool in light of rapid recent changes. Additionally, zoning upgrades carry a high political cost for mayors and Council members, who shy away from their implementation for fear of losing reelection. In the view of Soraya Alfonzo and Maria Christina Silva, the problem is primarily political, pointing to an institution at odds with itself.

Cheo Carvajal, a journalist and urban activist, perceives a different situation. In his opinion, 'institutions have changed in a revealing way. Emergent capital is moving with freedom and radically transforming spaces in the city.' In his view, 'Institutional power merely accompanies this process, losing its role as coordinator of urban life through public policies. Institutions let things happen and then manage discontent' (C. Carvajal, personal communication, November 22, 2022). Amidst this perceived inaction and dependency, Carvajal sees new opportunities for social mobilization within activism as a channel for expressing dissent. For him, trying to influence what happens in the city includes making evident how institutions have become a tool of economic power. Nevertheless, activism faces its own challenges: as the crisis shifts citizens' focus to daily struggles, engagement with medium and long-term issues is not a priority. In this precarious context, activist groups have adjusted their strategies, including increased social media presence and an atomization into topic-specific networks that tackle limited problems and denounce abuses. This multiplication of voices also includes neighbors' associations that have existed for several decades but have recently found in social media an outlet for exposing irregularities, expanding engagement and organizing protests.

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Conclusion

This article has examined the spatial and programmatic transformation of vacant domestic spaces in Caracas in the context of emigration and collapse. It has reviewed disciplinary discussions on the urban impact of emigration and pointed to gaps in the literature, where the focus is on emigration as consequence rather than cause of urban transformations and approached spatial changes in terms of their material conditions and the opaque procedures that produce them. It has described the process of spatial transformation from the point of view of various actors involved: entrepreneurs, institutions, architects, and residents. At the same time, the article has emphasized the need to consider a singular experience of collapse. As living conditions in the country deteriorate, concerns with the immediate –sometimes manifested in terms of pure survival— acquire greater significance, overriding long-term considerations and concerns about legality or ethics. This mindset has found fertile ground in vacant domestic spaces, intersecting the migrants' needs with an institutional disarticulation, economic opportunity, and an emerging clientele. Underpinned by the legal vacuum created by institutional collapse, unregulated transformations are creating isolated instances of commercial activity and socialization at the margins of legality. While experts have pointed to the need for structural changes that can frame urban growth within political and economic recovery, the cumulative impact of small, isolated transformations, is starting to have an impact on the city. The question is not to propose an apology of the crisis, but to understand its logic of incremental changes and harness it towards positive urban changes. Considering the reduced capabilities of local planning institutions, the disarticulation between various municipal bodies and levels of government, and the alleged political costs of conventional planning instruments, a case can be made for questioning the relevance and feasibility of all-encompassing urban plans, in terms of both their spatial ambitions and temporal horizons.

Despite occurring as a reaction to rather than a directive of transformation, recent efforts of both OLPU and residents to overcome a historic impasse are an example of what urban scholar Abdoumaliq Simone refers to as 'the space opened up by virtue of turning uncertainty into a resource'. Uncertainty can be factored into the decision-making process rather than contended with (Simone, 2013, p. 251). As the use of migrants' left-behind houses changes due to economic pressures and a sense of opportunity that escape OLPU's control, it becomes less important to anticipate what happens than how it happens. For the institution, this entails, on one hand, a shift away from a concern with the use of private lots and towards the public realm, currently a no man's land, as well as the interface between both. This may entail provisions requiring a greater level of openness or permeability of walls, the requirement of front terraces to replace parking places, or creating a legal framework for what are now informal transactions with architects and business owners, such as private investment in public space.

On the other hand, OLPU's role as a mediator can provide a framework for proliferating actors to act in concert, articulating a latent potential of social movements that is currently lost due to their atomization. Limitations create incentives for new modes of negotiation that rely on alliances aiming to generate accord between various actors. If the departure city acknowledges the intertwining of emigration with instances of economic growth and urban development, a relevant question is whether, in the case of Caracas, emigration can create a basis for re-institutionalization. Considering the conditions under which emigration has taken place, that migrants' properties represent a symbolic claim on the city, and that their reliance on local actors to look after, inhabit or transform their vacant properties is driven by economic needs and by fears of loss or invasion, actively involving this group in decision-making processes can create instances of cooperation that transcend private interests, opening vacant properties to public management or collective use.

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Declaration of interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethics declaration

Research participants expressed their written consent to be part of it. Approval of the study was granted by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork.

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