Hailed in the 1950s as a beacon of Latin America’s modernist architecture, Venezuela’s El Helicoide is a futuristic fantasy gone sour. At its conception, this drive-through shopping center embodied a narrative of progress, fueled by soaring oil prices, consumerism, and car culture. Yet a very different story unfolded on its spiral ramps. Caught in the transition from military dictatorship to democratic rule, El Helicoide became a site of abandonment, encircled by slums, and repurposed in 1979 as an emergency shelter for flood victims. Since 1985, it has been both a headquarters for national intelligence and security police agencies, and an infamous prison. Combining archival documents, critical analysis, literary texts, and visual commentary, Downward Spiral traces the turbulent history of this living ruin and reveals the dystopian side of urban modernity.

Of all the radical transformations to the Caracas landscape during the 1950s oil boom, none is as poignant in its revelations of modernity’s paradoxes as the failed drive-through shopping mall of El Helicoide, constructed at the apex of modernist architectural innovation. This anthology offers a veritable 360-degree tour of El Helicoide’s history from conception to ruin, revealing in its various twists and turns a profound view into more than half a century of Venezuelan politics, as well as the fallacies of 20th-century automobile urbanism.

Upon his arrival in Brazil in 1935, Claude Lévi-Strauss famously commented on the “premature aging” of New World cities, caught “in the grip of a chronic disease” that made them “pass from freshness to decay without ever being simply old.” As this book vividly illustrates, this urban progeria (or premature rubble syndrome) is but the symptom of a tropical modernity whose violent, syncopated, and contradictory temporality is materialized in and as space. Downward Spiral does a marvelous job of taking us into this vortex, perhaps nowhere as emblematically set in stone as at El Helicoide.

Delving into one of Latin America’s most iconic modernist projects, Downward Spiral is both a fascinating collection of essays and a highly imaginative compendium of visual and literary responses to El Helicoide. Wide-ranging and richly illustrated, this book is a landmark contribution to the history of architecture and urbanism, not just in Venezuela but in Latin America and beyond.

UR is a book series devoted to speculation about the condition and future of the city. We publish projects ranging from the practical to the utopian, from community-generated plans for neighborhood transformation to outstanding outcomes from academic studios, visionary propositions by designers burning the midnight oil, and collations of arguments about the most urgent issues of urban growth and survival. Our remit is to get the word out about solutions that exceed the imaginative reach of “official” planning and design and to encourage the most vigorous debate.
Downward Spiral: El Helicoide’s Descent from Mall to Prison
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 refugee for almost ten thousand people in the late 1970s, and then as a police headquarters and penal institution from 1985 on. This book, the first to critically address El Helicoide’s 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—particularly 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 expand the locally construed and relative character of 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 discourse, but also to the diverse ways in which modern ruin’s material decay.

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 1935-1980, the 1985 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 Stephen Cairns, Brian Dillon, Tim Edensor, Julia Hell, Jane Jacobs, and Andreas Schönle, 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 US 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 encroachment 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 by gushing oil wells and transnational capital flows. EL Helicoide’s project was bolstered by the petroleum boom and the post-WWII economic recovery that made this Caribbean country a hotbed of modernist experimentation and speculative ventures. Its goal was to imitate 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-to-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 a relatively stable democracy earned by relegating violence to remote or hidden places that stultifying whatever it touches. Here, “petromodernity” has come close to becoming “petrifed 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 many other buildings conceived under the utopian promises of modernity and speculative ventures that have backfired. This, in turn, raises questions about the entanglement of democratic politics and 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 ensure 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 insights of how architecture in the 20th century innovations that continue to shape urban modernity today. In doing so, they address broader concerns of how architectural and urban criticism might provide a common ground accounting for the politics and cultural narratives of postmodernism and neoliberal economies. They address not only the aesthetic programs and functions that motivated the building’s blueprint designs, but also the ways its afterlives have stayed from the original plans.

The archival images and documents included throughout the book, many of which are published here for the first time, provide a comprehensive look at the history and history of the site. They reveal early models and earth movements, the site’s conversion to an emergency shelter for flood victims in the late 1970s, and its current use as a jail for political prisoners and a police training center. Additional materials come from artists and writers employing formats such 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 repre- senting 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 Burgueño’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 site’s role as an experimental site 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, 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 Brazil to 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 their essays, the authors address broader concerns of how architectural and urban criticism might provide a common ground accounting for the politics and cultural narratives of postmodernism and neoliberal economies. They address not only the aesthetic programs and functions that motivated the building’s blueprint designs, but also the ways its afterlives have stayed from the original plans.

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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. As EL Helicoide’s urban frontier advanced, it confronted the visual conundrum of these informal settlements, which, despite being patent 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 Topographies, surveying EL Helicoide’s urban fortress arrived in their midst, including personal anecdotes and testi- monies from residents who grew up around or worked
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 Rotonda, producing a sort of inverse panoply 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.

Further Reading


Seguridad para el peatón

Es el Helicóptero, el tránsito será tan seguro que un niño de corta edad podrá recorrerlo integrando un peligro de accidentes. Los edificios e interiores de escaleras de emergencia, en la puerta de accesorios a escaleras mecánicas. Hay ocho accesorios iluminados —sede global— en capacidad para cuarenta personas cada uno. Hay además escaleras móviles, escaleras corrientes y escaleras corrientes. El recorrido interior se efectúa cómodamente, sin esfuerzo, pero las escaleras son tan suaves que no es como los que fuesen los fachos para evitar que el agua se entusique.
Cover and selected pages from “Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya: Centro Comercial y Exposición de Industrias.” Promotional brochure, later included in Integral 5 (December 1956).