

Makeshift Modernity: Container Homes and Slumscrapers

In his seminal book *The Production of Space* (1974), French philosopher Henri Lefebvre held that inasmuch as the modern city is a product of economic systems, political power, and social forces, urban spaces and architectural sites resemble “writing-tablets” where prevailing ideologies, past events, and social relations accumulate along with traces left by the bodies of those who use them. Through its architectural formations and spatial practice, “each society offers up its own peculiar space, as it were, as an ‘object’ for analysis and overall theoretical explication.”¹ In thinking about the experience of urban modernity, the triadic distinctions between conceived, perceived, and lived space that Lefebvre set out lend insight not only into architecture’s symbolic role as a mode of projecting national development and social progress, but also into the often unpredictable and at times diametrically opposed ways in which optimistic promises associated with cutting-edge designs end up playing out in reality.²

Throughout the twentieth-century, urban design provided a metric to gauge modernity. As governments or private stakeholders sought to set in place the telos of developmentalism, grand designs of skyward constructions, futuristic aesthetics, and top-down planning stood as ciphers of progress that enshrined technology, industrialization, and capitalism. However, despite the unrelenting progress projected by forward-looking constructions, the afterlives of grand designs have proved much more discontinuous. The global histories of modern architecture, from Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse (1930) to Lúcio Costa’s Brasília (1956) have demonstrated that “blueprint utopia” and reinforced concrete alone are not enough to set modernity in place. This is especially evident in developing nations, where urban landscapes are shaped by rapid urbanization, population growth, and spasmodic economic activity.³ In such contexts the modern mechanisms formulated to systematize and regulate space by determining “what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 31.

² On the notions of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, or “perceived-conceived-lived triad” of space, see Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38-46.

³ James Holston, “Blueprint Utopia,” *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 31-41.

human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end” are dramatically undercut by what Michel Foucault terms heterotopia: unpredictable “other spaces” where mutually opposed functions and distinct realities converge on a single site.⁴

The repurposing of cutting-edge buildings as makeshift settlements is a compelling example of this unpredictability, epitomizing the way that optimistic visions can give way to the precarious experiences of social exclusion and urban decline. Over recent years, so-called “slumscrapers” and urban squats across the Global South have captured the public imagination, revealing the fissured bonds between architecture and development, and casting aspersions on governmental capacity for ensuring the welfare of vulnerable citizens.⁵ In Venezuela, the transient occupations of El Helicoide (1955) and La Torre de David (1989) epitomize the unpredictable relationship of architecture and modernity. Built in downtown Caracas, the two projects were originally designed as prospective symbols of Venezuela’s economic and urban development: the first a modernist spiral of reinforced concrete that was to be a shopping center and industrial exhibit; the second a banking complex of glass curtain skyscrapers, designed as a luxurious home to speculative finance and private enterprise. After political and economic turmoil left both grand designs unfinished and abandoned, both were temporarily turned into provisional housing, El Helicoide as a state-led refuge for destitute families from 1979-1982, and La Torre de David as a vertical *barrio* [to which the government turned a blind eye](#) from 2007-2014.

In both cases, the repurposing of failed architecture as improvised housing demonstrated the disparities between “conceived” ideals of space and “lived” experiences of them. Far from isolated problems, the temporary occupations of El Helicoide and La Torre de David undercut a fundamental paradigm of Venezuelan nationhood, one that holds monumental architecture as extant modernity, and

⁴ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986), 23.

⁵ Two powerful examples are the Edificio San Vito (1959) in Sao Paolo, a 27-storey residential building that declined into a illegal occupation, before it was evacuated in 2004, then demolished in 2010, and the cylindrical, 54-floor Ponte City (1975) in Johannesburg, which was designed as a luxury residence for 3500 people and the tallest tower in Africa. In the 1990s, it was occupied by gangs and became home to more than ten thousand residents, but after 2001 it underwent a process of rehabilitation and refurbishment and today is home to some 3000 people.

makeshift homes and land seizures (*ranchos* and *invasiones*) as its reversal. The collapse of the boundaries between aspirational capitalism and urban poverty, between planning and contingency, turned the buildings into heterotopic places, where blueprint modernity took on the makeshift forms it was supposed to eschew.⁶ Retracing the media coverage of the occupations, government-led evacuations, and proposals for each building's reinvention [shows how modern](#) architecture remains a potent symbol of progress even as makeshift modernity takes shape around it.

El Helicoide's "Great Occupation"

Trailer Park

After democracy was re-established in 1958 after the end of a ten-year military dictatorship, Venezuela came to be viewed as an exception in the region: a "privileged Third World nation" whose oil wealth and solid political culture contrasted to other Latin American countries mired in dictatorships and economic strife. The "Venezuelan Exceptionalism Thesis," as historians dub this national image, retained traction through [enviable mineral wealth](#), stable oil prices and social mobility, and by virtue of the country's feted art and architecture, inherited from the "spectacular modernity" of the mid-twentieth century boom [period](#).⁷ The sporadic squatting that took place in the modernist icon of El Helicoide during the sixties and early seventies was a direct contradiction of this positive nation brand, [since it](#) blurred spatial distinctions between forward-looking architecture and "backwards" settlements. Under occupation, the building became the antithesis of the modernity and prosperity that were emblems of Venezuela's "exceptional" status, creating a malaise summed up by one commentator at the time, who complained 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."⁸

⁶ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24.

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, npn; "Convertido en centro de construcción de ranchos El Helicoide," newspaper article, source unknown, February 14, 1966.

This dilemma only got worse when the state turned the would-be mall into a trailer park refuge in 1979. After hundreds were left destitute amid a bout of the periodic rainstorms that lay waste to ranchos, the government of Luis Herrera Campíns (1979-1984) ordained a *Gran Ocupación* (Great Occupation) of El Helicoide, parking 150 [merchandise containers](#) along its ramps as temporary shelters, [raising sheetrock](#) shacks (*barracas*) under the cantilevered roofs originally designed for [boutique-like](#) stores, and placing the building under army “surveillance and organization.”⁹ Over the next three years, [thousands](#) more moved in, creating a population of over nine thousand residents, the majority of whom lived in the *barracas*. While most [of them](#) were genuine *damnificados* (the term literally means “the damaged” [and is](#) used for those who have lost homes), [“official”](#) residents claimed that just under half were *invasores*—a derogatory label that stigmatized others as “invaders” who had occupied [El Helicoide](#) illegally.¹⁰

No matter their status, the press tarred [all](#) residents and their makeshift homes 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, shit, tons of trash, scrap, hundreds of destitute families, and corruption at all levels.”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 to scoop floodwater out with tin cans.¹² Further emphasizing the association with solid buildings and social improvement, the writer asked: “Who can progress in a home that collapses with the first downpour...?”

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, npn.

¹⁰ 1209 families lived in shacks, 407 families in [haulage containers](#) and the rest crammed into shared accommodation. 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, npn.

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

Figure 1. El Helicoide during the *Gran Ocupación*. Video stills from raw footage recorded by the rescue committee in charge of relocating residents in 1982. Archivo Audiovisual/Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela.

Video footage of El Helicoide bore out its challenging living conditions. The building's inside was a hotchpotch of sheetrock and zinc roof shacks wedged between columns, flooded concrete wastelands, unplumbed wood frames and zinc-sheet toilet blocks, and jerry-rigged stairwells (Fig. 1). Outside, haulage containers were packed in tight, at least two rows per level, and residents hung their clothes to dry along the ramps. Garbage disposal units, an on-site clinic, as well as stores improvised in shacks and trailers, selling everything from *empanadas* and ice creams to “fine shoes for men,” showed glimpses of organization in a refuge that although temporary, was now ever more permanent. In a nation that prided itself on its high-rise towers and “exceptional” political and economic stability, El Helicoide’s Great Occupation reinforced the longstanding consensus that makeshift constructions were far from the path to progress. More worryingly still, the occupation brought inside the modernist structure the very ad hoc constructions and impoverished communities adrift in the urban landscape, thus becoming a powerful sign of modernity gone awry.

Curing the Tumor

As the occupation dragged on, it threatened to incriminate political leaders for leaving already destitute communities in even more precarious conditions. Only an alternate narrative for El Helicoide and its inhabitants would ratify the state as guarantor of social welfare, and reinstate an ideal of urban modernity. Consequently, when the occupation was pushing three years, the Federal District governor, Rodolfo José Cárdenas, assembled a Comité de Rescate (Rescue Committee) to this end in February 1982. The committee, divided into culture, infrastructure, and social branches, was tasked with evicting miscreants, clearing shacks, and rehousing residents by the end of September. The video footage of the process and the detailed report that describes it, entitled *Proyecto Helicoide* and published in October 1982, both 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](#).¹³

[Healthcare had long been a concern for the team overseeing the occupation, with medical care and vaccination programs administered on site. However, at the time of the eviction it was the building's malaise that needed diagnosis and treatment. The section of the report that details the evacuation weaves a](#) narrative of redemption, [which begins with a description of El Helicoide](#) as the antithesis of the logic of hygiene upon which modern urbanization had long been predicated.¹⁴ [The authors depicted a](#) “helicoidal tumor” of cracked cement ramps [that](#) was a breeding ground for disease, overflowing with a constant stream of sewage and filled with rubble, trash, and waste. The lack of hygiene was equated to a moral deficit, through descriptions of “infrahuman” conditions in this den of drugs, prostitution, alcoholism, and crime—a “*sancta sanctorum* of transgression” that the police dared not enter.¹⁵ Worse still, the report’s authors extrapolated the “helicoidal tumor” as symptomatic of the broader problem of proliferating barrios in the capital, which called for [an](#) “almost therapeutic drainage,” [a prescription](#) that would clear makeshift homes and incentivize inhabitants “to return to the natural habitat they should never have left.” The prognosis was that only by removing the “tumor” of provisionality from the social and urban landscape would the ideal of Venezuelan exceptionalism be restored to health.

¹³ Gobernación, *Proyecto Helicoide*. The project was coordinated by sociologist Sonia [Miquelena](#) de Cárdenas, [the governor's wife](#), and the report remains an important document of historical information about El Helicoide’s [setting](#), from colonial times to the appearance of the Roca Tarpeya on maps from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. [It also provides](#) information on to the original project, its stunted construction, and the failed projects from the seventies that turned the building into a white elephant. The unedited [80 minutes](#) of footage 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*, MusArq, 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.

If provisionality was El Helicoide's affliction, then the evacuation of its residents in mid-1982 was to be its cure. This process was led by an on site team, with logistical support from the Metropolitan Police, also on site, the governor's office, and the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (INAVI, National Housing Institute). At the relocation office, residents could view photos of new housing projects and check lists and costs of available apartments, all located outside Caracas. With the logistics of evacuation taking shape, the physical purge began. To "achieve the total cleanliness of that sickening cement hill," the "deformed contingent," as the report dubbed its inhabitants, were paid to remove every trace of their homes and to paint and clean up the building. In so doing, they were as good as expunging the polluting miasma of their occupation of El Helicoide from public sight, in accordance with the principles of hygiene undergirding what Ivan Illich has termed the "utopia of the odorless city."¹⁶

Figure 2. El Helicoide during the *Gran Ocupación*. Video stills from raw footage recorded by the rescue committee in charge of relocating residents in 1982. Archivo Audiovisual/Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela.

Figure 3. El Helicoide during the *Gran Ocupación*. Video stills from raw footage recorded by the rescue committee in charge of relocating residents in 1982. Archivo Audiovisual/Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela.

As containers (considered the "deluxe" housing, as the ironic sign "Res. Sheraton" on one of them indicates) were freed up with their residents' transfer to new homes, the team set about moving people from the more precarious *barracas* into these more comfortable metal shells (Fig. 2). Video footage shows residents demolishing shacks in a question of minutes, thrashing at wooden frames, ripping out sheetrock walls, and unfastening zinc sheet roofs, while others sweep away debris, paint the concrete ramps, and load their belongings onto trucks (Fig. 3). Whereas El Helicoide's efficient design and round-the-clock construction were once held up as its most memorable features, now the report claimed it was the "rotating mechanism" of the building's "uninterrupted evacuation ... whose functional efficiency deserves to be

¹⁶ Ivan Illich, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (London: Mario Boyars, 1986), 48.

remembered.” The repeat cycle vacated the building on a gradual basis: the team earmarked shacks to be vacated, moved their occupants into vacated containers, then demolished the makeshift homes. Not only were vacant homes demolished, containers were progressively removed and dumped at a depot outside the city to ensure that no space was ever left vacant and, thus, no new occupations could occur.

Simultaneously, the eviction team rolled out strategies to restore physical and moral “health” to El Helicoide. The police conducted “systematic searches, surveillance, and control of access points” to the building, using—in the report’s euphemistic terms—“other peculiar modes of persuasion” to incite prostitutes, drug users, and troublemakers to leave.

The video footage commissioned by the rescue committee reinforces the report’s positive message of redemptive evacuation crafted through a handful of interviews. Perhaps encouraged by the interviewer to praise life in El Helicoide, a woman standing on the ramps against a backdrop of shanties, tells the camera: “We can’t complain, it’s great here. There are policemen who protect us against all the things that happen in other barrios.” Another shot shows lines of children doing exercises in formation while a man explains how juvenile police training will “rescue them from the twisted path of vice and criminal activity.” Surrounded by a swarm of journalists, an unidentified government representative also weighed in, explaining that El Helicoide’s residents were headed to “top notch homes.” Not only would they have electricity, water, and sewerage services, the transport connections and opportunities for investment and industry in this relocation hub outside Caracas ensured ongoing development. In the background of this shot, men continue to pull walls down with their bare hands as people pack up their belongings. The Great Occupation was coming to an end. By September 21, 1982, the makeshift homes had been removed from public sight and their residents “thoroughly rescued” and relocated countrywide.¹⁷ El Helicoide’s “tumor” had been cured.

Infinite Spirals

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

With the evacuation over, the official report and media attention [shifted their](#) focus to the future, heralding a higher purpose for El Helicoide. In a radical alteration of its original purpose, the building would be reinvented as a Complejo Cultural Museo Nacional de Historia y Antropología (National Museum of History and Anthropology-Cultural Complex), housing a range of activities and schools, from theater, dance, and textile conservation, through to film, photography, and new media; research institutions; and outreach programs to incorporate local communities. Deploying the same motif of redemption to present their ambitious plan, the project leaders claimed it would change the face of Caracas, administering an antidote to short sighted city planning and the prioritization of luxury services over basic needs. Moreover, the [committee report's](#) authors presented El Helicoide's transformation as an ideological shift enacted in the urban fabric. The move from mall to museum would counter invasive marketization and the rising hegemony of foreign consumer culture, while the conversion of its vehicular ramps into pedestrian walkways would foster public space and loosen the hold of automobile culture.

El Helicoide was to restore Venezuela's exceptional status, serving as a microcosm of identity and polity that would “gather all moral, cultural, and spiritual resources, activate memory, and liberate creative energies,” while enshrining democracy as the true path toward the “highest levels of social, economic, and political justice and organization.”¹⁸ Lauding this wholesale reinvention in his prologue for the report, governor Cárdenas reframed El Helicoide's helical form as a metaphor for an uplifting journey toward progress and belonging. In this building “enveloped in modernity,” he wrote, future generations would find cultural orientation that 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.”¹⁹ No mean feat, indeed.

A month after the eviction, research and museography teams were designing content, while the architecture group was planning the new uses of the building and [installing](#) the geodesic dome at the building's summit. Although the project made headway, the attempt to rebirth El Helicoide was, like earlier attempts, stunted when a change of

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

¹⁹ Gobernación, *Proyecto Helicoide*, 23.

government halted the ambitious plans.²⁰ Instead of the civic museum envisaged in the report, it was the images of young *damnificados* training as juvenile police officers that ultimately presaged El Helicoide's immediate future as the intelligence police moved into the building in 1985, [three years after the eviction](#). Once again, it was retrofitted with makeshift structures, but this time they were prison cells, not homes. Today, prisoners live in conditions reminiscent of the Great Occupation thirty years earlier, locked away in dark, two by three meter cells amid "a vile smell caused by recent problems with sewerage, and a stench that pervades the corridors... inhabited by cockroaches, rats, and all sorts."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 Slumscrapper

Space Invaders

As the removal vans rolled down El Helicoide's ramps, one man in the video footage called for an end to precarious occupations. "In an oil nation like ours," he said, "things like this simply cannot happen." Yet over subsequent decades provisionality has remained a firm fixture of the urban landscape, [keep](#)ing poor communities caught in a recurrent cycle of precarity and destitution. The ongoing growth of Caracas' population has made for an increase in the makeshift homes raised in ravines and on sloping hills. These homes, and other more established barrios with them, recurrently fall victim [to](#) the increasingly irregular rainy season, whose storms cause mudslides that dislodge homes and generate floating populations of *damnificados* who must be rehoused temporarily in emergency shelters, then permanently in new homes.

As the millennium approached and dawned, this plight [was aggravated](#). The same year Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, a series of catastrophic mudslides displaced some 200,000 people in Caracas' adjoining state of Vargas, fueling 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

²⁰ On earlier attempts to repurpose the building see: Celeste Olalquiaga's "From Riches to Rags" in this volume.

²¹ Christian Colina, "Revelan condiciones en las que Rosmit Mantilla es castigado en El Helicoide," *Caraota Digital*, November 11, 2016. On the security forces occupation, see: Luis Duno-Gottberg's "Downward Spiral."

2013, [continuous](#) housing shortages and unpredictable deluges generated a growing population of *damnificados* housed in ad hoc shelters, awaiting state-built homes. The bottlenecked relocation programs and persistent rainstorms made visible impact on the urban fabric. In 2010 alone, heavy bout of storms left more than twenty-two thousand families homeless in Greater Caracas.²² After heavy rains that began in December that year and carried on into the new year, the government turned hotels, a contemporary art museum, Caracas' racetrack, government ministries, tax offices, and even the presidential palace into refuges. Artworks were put into storage at the Museo Alejandro Otero so that 350 people could set up home there; hundreds of families were moved into 43 hotels in downtown Caracas; and 650 people were moved into grandstands at La Rinconada racetrack, which lacked even basic facilities, such as toilets and showers.²³

Perhaps inspired by El Helicoide's earlier occupation, one large-scale solution was to house some three thousand *damnificados* at the Sambil La Candelaria, a huge downtown mall that Chávez had expropriated in 2010, just before it was set to open. Two years later, although 256 families had been rehoused, dozens were still living in the mall, awaiting relocation. Much as had occurred with El Helicoide, the residents complained that some of the people who had moved into the mall were not real *damnificados* but *invasores*—invaders that had taken advantage of the situation to take shelter in the refuge and get assigned new government-built homes.²⁴ In reality, *damnificados* were in the minority in the area around the Sambil, since this downtown part of Caracas had become a hub for citizen seizures and occupations of empty buildings, [with](#) twenty or more buildings in the area turned into squats. [The most](#)

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 *damnificadas* in 2010 the metropolitan area of Gran Caracas.

²³ This bout of rain wrecked 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. Refuges also included 43 hotels in the Caracas Libertador municipality; “Libertador: 43 hoteles serán usados como refugios,” *Reportero24*, December 4, 2010. Conditions at La 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 Hernández, “Dos años nuevos cuentan damnificados en refugios.”

[prominent among them](#) was La Torre de David: the abandoned banking business, commercial, and hotel complex located between the Andrés Bello and Urdaneta avenues. Often branded *invasiones* (invasions) or *tomas* (takeovers), [citizen](#) seizures became a common strategy under Chávez’s government, interpreted as a symptom of a longstanding housing deficit that in the new millennium reached 400,000 homes in Caracas and three million nationwide.²⁵ The Chávez government’s advocacy of expropriation and tolerance of seizures created a propitious setting for squatters to take over empty buildings. Abandoned towers which, like La Torre de David, were left stranded in the financial meltdown of the mid-nineties, became easy targets, and from 2003 to 2006 squatters took over 145 buildings in Caracas, commandeering more than thirty in January 2006 alone.²⁶

As Chávez shifted from reformist to socialist rhetoric, these two types of makeshift occupation—emergency shelters and illegal seizures—became increasingly entangled with other fissures cutting through the political landscape.²⁷ Amid the national strikes, coup attempts, and protests that rocked Venezuela from 2002 onwards, opponents cited the government’s sluggish rehousing of *damnificados* and lenience on illegal squats as proof of incapacity to uphold the rule of law, secure social welfare, or preserve the image [of](#) a modern, oil-rich nation. It was this antagonistic setting that made the seizure of La Torre de David a particularly contentious topic.

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

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

²⁵ Between 1999 and 2010, only 28,000 of the 100,000 homes needed to mend the deficit were built. 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 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.

²⁶ 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 sixty percent finished when construction ground to a halt after the financial crisis of 1994. The site, and other assets belonging to the Confinanzas group, was taken over by the state’s Fondo de Garantía de Depósitos y Protección Bancaria (FOGADE). For more context and recommended reading, see my “Out of the Ashes” in this volume.

²⁷ [Cacique](#), in Spanish, refers to a tribal chief.

In October 2007, two thousand people forced their way into the site, hanging hammocks, pitching tents, and cordoning off spaces with bed sheets. As months passed and the government turned 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 tinder-block bricks (Figs. 4–5). “We admit that we invaded this place, but after two and a half years we can’t call ourselves invaders (*invasores*) but a community,” one resident [told](#) a journalist in 2010, before going on to explain that after turfing out thieves and drug users, five hundred 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, preschool, nursery, parking areas and a multi-functional room.”²⁸

For all the talk of floor monitors and penalties for sloppy trash disposal, the living conditions were undeniably precarious in this shell of a building with no running water or proper sewerage for the 4500 people who were living there by 2014. Moreover, despite the progressive idea of the cooperative, the squat was subject to the vertical hierarchy of Alexander “el niño” Daza, an ex-criminal turned evangelical pastor, who was the community’s leader.²⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, media outlets the world over seized on the story and La Torre de David became the subject of wild speculation either as a den of iniquity or home to an empowered commons of citizens taking their futures into their own hands. As the squat’s oscillating symbolism reached fever pitch, it gained a role on the world stage, now [as](#) a laboratory of radical housing solutions [which was](#) awarded the Leon d’Oro at the Biennale di Venezia in 2012, now as the star of an episode of *Homeland* in 2013, where it was depicted as an apocalyptic hovel inhabited by Chávez supporters and drug lords.³⁰

²⁸ Nancy Velasco, “Se consolida invasión de la Torre de David tras dos años y medio,” *El Universal*, April 17, 2010.

²⁹ For a profile of Daza, see: Jon Lee Anderson, “Slumlord,” *The New Yorker*, January 28, 2013.

³⁰ Curated by Urban-Think Tank, the exhibition and prize generated widespread controversy. 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,

Dignifying the Damnificados

Preoccupied with political turmoil and rehousing *damnificados* living in similarly precarious conditions, the government simply ignored the [world-famous](#) squat.³¹ Seven years after the original seizure, in 2014 Chávez's successor Nicolás Maduro announced the evacuation of La Torre de David. *Operación Zamora*, as the plan was called, would bring the squat in line with [the](#) emotional and moral cornerstones of *chavismo*, which revolutionary narrative honed over previous years, which anthropologist Paula Vásquez argues were laid in 1999, during a bout of devastating mudslides referred to as the *Tragedia de Vargas*, or Vargas Tragedy.³² In mid-December, torrential rains caused mudslides that swept through the coastal area of Vargas, Miranda, and Falcón states, laying waste to homes and buildings, and killing at least a thousand people. Chávez coined the concept of redemption through state humanitarianism during this natural disaster, referred in popular memory in almost biblical terms to as “the day the mountain advanced toward the sea.” Emphasizing the role of state institutions and military forces in saving those at risk, Chávez used a characteristic play-on-words to assert that *damnificados* should be referred to as *dignificados*: “the damaged” should become “the dignified.”³³

This same idea framed the state media campaign devised to narrate the evacuation of La Torre de David, whose launch was broadcast live on national television on on July 22, 2014.³⁴ Venezuela's television channels chained their signals to a live press conference in which Ernesto Villegas, a journalist-turned government minister, publicly launched [Operation Zamora](#), alongside representatives from state institutions,

“Enough Slum Porn,” *The Architectural Review*, August 12, 2014, and “Golden Liar, Roaring Lie,” *Latorrededavid.blogspot.com*, September 21, 2012.

³¹ 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.

³² Paula Vásquez, *Poder y catástrofe: Venezuela bajo la tragedia de 1999* (Caracas: Taurus, Santillana, 2009).

³³ 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.

³⁴ 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.

security forces, and civil protection agencies.³⁵ Explaining that “the building lacks even the minimum conditions to live safely and with dignity,” Villegas clarified that the operation was a peaceful, unarmed, evacuation (*desocupación sin armamento*) devised to ensure occupants’ welfare, not a coercive eviction (*desalojo*). The motif of humanitarianism played out through the split screen coverage, which combined live reportage with pre-edited footage as government representatives described the evacuation in one part of the frame, and the other section switched between vertigo-inducing tilts of unguarded stairwells and the twenty-seventh floor roof terrace to smiling children waving from windows and soldiers helping residents carry boxes (Fig. 6). Just as the footage of El Helicoide’s evacuation had charted this process right through to shots of the removal vans winding their way down the ramps and on to new homes, the coverage of the press conference La Torre de David dwelt on the residents’ relocation, showing buses filling up to take people to their new homes in Ciudad Zamora—a “socialist city” outside Caracas that the president had described as a symbol of “the emergence of a new Venezuela” (Fig. 7).³⁶

Figure 6. Screen shots of Operation Zamora press conference, *Venezolana de Televisión*, July 22, 2014.

Figure 7. Screen shots of press conference at Ciudad Zamora, *Venezolana de Televisión*, February 7, 2014.

Amid the evacuation, the question of La Torre de David’s future hung in the air and the building retained its symbolic status. While Ciudad Zamora marked a new start, the occupied skyscraper was vilified as “monument to the failure of neoliberalism,” a ruin worthy only of demolition.³⁷ This classification resonated with versions of Venezuela’s modern history that explained *chavismo* as a movement that would clear away the wreckage of previous administrations, eradicating corruption and social

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ “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 Bicentenario (Santa Teresa del Tuy) and Lomas de la Guadalupe (Ocumare del Tuy).

³⁷ “Rueda de prensa internacional del Pdte Nicolás Maduro,” *TeleSUR*, July 23, 2014.

exclusion to make Venezuela anew. On television after the evacuation, Villegas lent weight to this idea, claiming that the dangerous conditions and lack of dignity in the squat were the fault of *neoliberalismo*, not *chavismo*.³⁸ Presenting the building as the embodiment of a political and economic ideology that was being uprooted, state media broadcast pictures of Villegas knocking down makeshift walls with a sledge hammer, then welding shut the doors of vacated apartments inside the tower.³⁹ The suggestion was that the building's demolition put a final nail in the coffin of the old political order.

The evacuation moved apace and by Christmas 2014 twelve floors of makeshift walls had been demolished and only a third of the squatters were left.⁴⁰ The demolition thesis turned out to be more subterfuge than serious plan. The fact remained that La Torre de David was just one example of occupied buildings in the capital left over from periods of previous economic crisis. If this ruin were demolished, then how many others would also have to meet the cannon ball? By May 2015 newspapers carried a positive story: the allocation of resources to fund a grand scale reurbanization plan in the area around La Torre de David, which encompassed the nearby Sambil mall, which was still partially occupied by *damnificados* from 2010.⁴¹ With this plan, even if total evacuation was not possible in other makeshift shelters and squats in the vicinity, then at least the area would benefit from 5000 m² of new public space as residents awaited relocation to new homes.

As for La Torre de David itself, in mid-2015 Maduro visited the site to announce its transformation into “a grand center for culture, sport, art, and security,” a project whose magnitude inevitably evoked the string of abortive plans proposed to reinvent El Helicoide as a beacon of culture after its curtailment. The two buildings are cast in

³⁸ Ernesto Villegas was referring the Gran Misión Vivienda (Great Housing Mission) on *Zurda Konducta*, an opinion program on state channel Venezolana de Televisión, August 20, 2014.

³⁹ “Vea como 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*, 11 August 2014.

⁴⁰ “Villegas asegura que 66% de la Torre Confinanzas ha sido desalojada,” *El Universal*, 24 December 2014.

⁴¹ “Aprueban recursos para mejoras en el entorno de la Torre Confinanzas,” *El Universal*, May 22, 2015.

the same mold, with El Helicoide's troubled reinvention a direct antecedent of the debates that arose regarding the future of La Torre de David. As well as education and training facilities for all ages and a "grand communications, coordination, and response center," Maduro speculated that the failed skyscraper could become a hub for manifold cultural institutions, from the youth orchestra to "cutting-edge film studies that will make Hollywood squeal."⁴² A year later, with the complex effectively under the control of the security forces, this grand plan had gained scarce ground. Instead, the La Torre de David's empty shell had found a more fitting, even poetic, function. During a nationwide earthquake simulation staged in mid-2016, the main tower played the part of a collapsed building where search and rescue drills could take place in a realistic milieu.⁴³ As firemen barked instructions to groups of people crouching amid the bare walls, and police dogs searched for fictitious victims amid the rubble left over from the squatters' homes, La Torre de David's makeshift structure finally made some sense, if only for a day.

Eternal Provisionality

Despite the decades that separated them, retracing El Helicoide and La Torre de David's respective descents into provisionality unearths cracks that run much deeper than the specific controversies caused by their initial curtailments. Through their transient occupations, these buildings tell much more complex stories than their original grand designs envisaged. As architectural designs that were figureheads of the formal economy and capitalist expansion, El Helicoide and La Torre de David projected an image of urban modernity that buttressed Venezuela's "exceptional" status as a prosperous, albeit developing, nation. The grand scale of the architectural fantasies devised to incarnate this imaginary in the urban landscape was conceived to overshadow precisely the marginal communities and precarious dwellings that might undercut the vision of progress. However, when the two buildings were turned into makeshift housing, they were opened up to precisely the vulnerable groups and precarious materials that were excluded from the formal systems of spatial and economic regulation. Part monumental contour, part improvised shelter, El Helicoide and La Torre de David became symbols of makeshift modernity: a composite

⁴² "'Torre de David' será un centro 'para las artes, la cultura y la seguridad,'" *El Universal*, May 29, 2015.

⁴³ "Realizan ensayos de rescate en la Torre de David," *El Universal*, June 29, 2016.

phenomenon of failed architecture and enduring social exclusion, whose discontinuous narratives lurch between arrested futures and knee-jerk policies in which grand designs retain traction as a marker of progress.

Politicians' compulsion to stage dramatic redemptions of these buildings' inhabitants, and to reinvent the structures on a scale as ambitious as their original designs, highlights the extent of the malaise that occupied buildings have presented in Venezuela's recent history, as well as the central role that spatial imaginaries continue to play in political agendas that promise better futures. Thrust back into the public imagination, these grand designs-turned-makeshift refuges threatened to undermine the promise of ever-greater development that continues to undergird political projects for the nation, no matter their ideological framing. Amid portrayals of El Helicoide and La Torre de David as the antithesis of urban modernity, eviction and reinvention provided a way for the incumbent governments to turn the story of these squats around. Demolishing the makeshift structures inside them, rehousing residents outside the city, and mooted ambitious reinvent plans for the two urban icons, can be understood as attempts to restore the idea of state-led redemption and rehabilitate a spatial imaginary in which grand designs would once again prevail over provisional sites.

The pattern that emerges from El Helicoide and La Torre de David's occupations reaffirms Michel 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 the design and use of El Helicoide and La Torre de David, that offer glimpses of the challenges and inequalities that are part of the experience of modernity.⁴⁴ Those cracks shed light on the makeshift modernity that has shaped Caracas and other cities, where the convergence of aspirational designs and social deficits is patently visible and demands spatial arrangements that not only fulfill the desire to project and realize development,

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 253; 247.

but that also respond to the needs of the communities that remain excluded from formal economic and urban circuits.

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.”⁴⁵ As a metanarrative for national development and social welfare, the ideal of urban modernity and progress through architecture is clearly far from a depleted resource. Yet, rather than grand designs of what the future *should* look like, the patterns of provisionality that emerge in El Helicoide and La Torre de David’s occupations and evacuations signal additional demands. Their status as icons of makeshift modernity reveals a need for architectural structures and social policies that will marshal collective optimism and safeguard citizen welfare even as the climate keeps changing and the economic tides continue to turn.

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⁴⁵ Quoted in Malcolm Linton, “The Helicoide: Rising Above its Past?” *The Daily Journal*, August 8, 1983, 15.

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