The Latin American City is today a melting pot of contrasting urban conditions, social inequality, political tension and financial de-regulation due to globalization factors. In recent history, the city of Caracas has been urban-shaped by much of these factors, including modernist-style revival in the 60s, massive implementation of road infrastructure due to the booming economy in the 70s; and explosion of informal settlements in and around the city until today. As a result, the city lost the traditional (European) public space in the form of squares and pedestrian-oriented streets, shaping itself around the use of the automobile. Additionally, recent changes in the political structure of the city, have delimited a 6 million inhabitants Metropolitan area, counting 4 Metropolitan Districts encompassing two different State jurisdictions, ruled by five Mayors, with 5 different Police forces and which contains the seat of the Central National Venezuelan Government. In others words, we see here a truly ungovernable city. However most recently, in a city where public space had been reduced to enclosed areas reachable by car, where the concept of ‘street’ had given way to the highway; and where the remaining street space has been invaded by the growing presence of the informal economy; an amazing phenomenon created by a political crisis has created an unprecedented way to re-occupy the city and validate its space as ‘public’, in the form of city-wide massive public demonstrations; which have transformed the highways in *imromptu* pedestrian boulevards, at the obvious absence of any other relevant-size public arena in the city.

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The only adequate conceptual framework for understanding the city is one which encompasses and build upon both the sociological and the geographical imaginations. We must relate social behaviour to the way in which the city assumes certain geography, a certain spatial from. We must recognize that once a particular spatial form is created it tends to institutionalize and, in some respects, to determine the future development of social process. We need, above all, to formulate concepts which will allow us to harmonize and integrate strategies to deal with the intricacies of social process and the elements of spatial forms…

David Harvey, Social Justice and the City (1)

The City as Theater of Socio-political expression

Agora: (Greek) from ageiro (to gather, probably akin to)
1 any assembly, especially of the people
2 the place of assembly a. for public debating, b. for elections, c. for trials, d. for buying and selling, e. for all kinds of business
3 market place, street

Cities have since ancient times developed spatially around the inclusion of the staging for gathering and expression of people. Traditionally, the ancient concept of the Greek Agora - the space of political, commercial, administrative and social activity in the city – has been assimilated historically as the portion of Cityscape (Soja, 2000 p.7) (2) that cities have until today
devoted to public expression, gathering and demonstration. The City Square, the locus per
excellence of the public space in the city, has evolved into such and other spatial forms
including its own version of the Agora in each particular city. Whether it is a Place Bastille in
Paris or a Trafalgar Square in London, a Piazza del Popolo in Rome or the Mall in Washington,
the socio-political expression has occupied an important role in the use of the cityspace. In the
case of Caracas, progressive disappearance of the traditional public space has virtually
eliminated the survival of this type of relevant-size public arena in the city, to stage mass
visibility as in other urban centers. The massive privatization of the cityspace in terms of
proliferation of enclosed Shopping Malls, the ubiquitous concerns for individual safety added to
urban patterns based on the use of the automobile, have accelerated the process of ‘splintering’
(Graham and Marvin, 2001 p.35) (3) in the urban structure and the creation of the so-called
‘analogous city’ (Boddy in Sorkin, 1992) (4), co-existing with the remaining street space. This - in
the case of Caracas - “[has] come to symbolize public life, with all its human contact, conflict,
and tolerance” (Boddy in Sorkin 1992 p.123) (5) in terms of serving as ‘squatted’ space for the
purpose of the growing informal sub-economy, in the form of street vendors populating the
sidewalks of the city core.

Caracas: Urban and political kaleidoscope

“The dimensions and complexity of metropolitan regions and its
unstable relations with global networks requires more than ever of
mechanism of regulation and control, which can only be exercised by
means of active form of metropolitan governments and using new
planning tools”
Manuel Castells (6)

Parallel to the splintering process that shaped Caracas urbanism, the city grew under anarchic
and arbitrary patterns not corresponding to a homogeneous city territory. Typical city growing
patterns where center and periphery play a budding role when defining the city region
occurred, however at the absence of a geo-political order. Thus, recent changes in the way the
city is structured from the geographical and political point of view, have delimited a 6 million
Metropolitan area - with the name of Gran Caracas (Greater Caracas) (7) - counting 5
Metropolitan Districts, partially encompassing two different State jurisdictions, ruled by six
Mayors, with 5 different Police forces; and simultaneously containing the seat of the Central
National Venezuelan Government. In others words, what we see is a truly ungovernable city.
Different actors impose their mandate on the use of the city space, using it as instrument to
create an urban battlefield, where ideological difference takes place in the already fragmented
city territory. However: “Even if a powerful trend towards the fragmentation of the city and the
individualization of social relations does exist; people from all social levels, ethnic groups and
cultures do create a sense of community, establishing systems of interaction and recreating the
urban society from its base “(Castells in Susser, 2001 p.473) (8). In this manner, such diverse
political mandate over city territories catalyzes urban mobilization by means of exercising
Biopower (Negri, Hardt; 2000) (9) over movement of masses, creating a momentum in the
functioning of the city and its role as the stage of socio-political expression.
Mental perception of the city and the use of the Cityspace

In *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch (1960) described the creation of ‘mental maps’ based on perception of the Cityscape by its inhabitants (10). Similarly, according to Zigmunt Bauman (1968) the social and demographic debate of place, goes beyond the idea of a container, becoming more of an *iconic* notion (11). This makes the idea of place, a more ephemeral (rather than physical) concept, so when looking at mechanisms conveying the idea of city perception, one must look at a complex referential system, tied to notions of *Heimat* and *Verhâutnis* (12). The idea of locality is present, but not fixed. It is rather a result of a familiar references’ saturated web, territorial understanding and social relationships (both inter-personal and between person-objects); along with both behavioural and interpretation patterns. All of these come from our familiar & environmental backgrounds, leading to specific lifestyles and determining the perception of our immediate surroundings, beyond consciousness. In other words, they determine “how we see the world”. This ‘how we see the world’ is embedded in our every day perception of the city, in our daily lives, patterns of movement and use of cityspace. This occurs to an extent that ‘reduces’ the perception of the city to a mental cartography, shrinking the urban map to a simpler scheme, out of which we can extract our daily city experience. In the case of Caracas the highways have become both an iconic element
and a physical presence in the urban landscape, which – due to their role on the patterns of many city users – comes to represent an important perception of city space in the mind of its inhabitants. At the obvious absence of any other relevant-size public arena in the city to stage mass visibility, the highways are perceived as a large and visible portion of cityspace to be occupied and to stage the ‘the walk of the masses’. Thus, infrastructure intended for other uses becomes a sort of post-modern variation of the agora, a new agora of the postmetropolis (Soja, 2000) (13).

**Socio-political crisis and the impromptu pseudo-public space**

During the year 2002, the city of Caracas had reached a momentum in the midst of socio-political crisis, which leaded to a chain-reaction phenomenon of re-occupying the city with political goals, which for the purposes of Urban Sociology validated its space again as ‘public’. In October of 2002, a large-size square in the Eastern part of the city was squatted to host a political rally that has lasted until today. The square, an object of urban aménagement designed in the 40s as part of a Garden City-inspired extension of the city; with a French touch and a pseudo-reminiscence of *Place Concorde* in Paris (its most visible element being a 40m-high Obelisk); was suddenly identified with notions of city expression, freedom and public manifestation. *Le Droit à la ville* of Henri Lefèvre (14) was exercised, with the support of local authorities and the Mayor of the Municipal District where this particular Square is located. In the urban imaginary, the real name of the Square – *Plaza Francia* – already heavily tied-up to the very-well known French postulates; was directly translated in the mind of the people that gathered there and changed to ‘*Plaza Libertad*’ (Freedom Square), which is how it is now called by large segments of the local population (Fig.3). Thus, a square that was for long mostly ignored by the city population and that had remained largely unused, regained a proper use in the traditional and historical sense (15)

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Fig. 3: *Plaza Francia* or ‘*Plaza Libertad*’ in October of 2002 (Photo by Jorge Diaz Urbina)
This particular case of public space renaissance in the urban landscape, contrasted with the next occurrence in the process of re-occupation of the city with the background of socio-political crisis: Starting in the last quarter of the year 2002 and with remarkable intensity during the last month of this year, entire Highways in the city became the scenario for the ‘urban re-occupation’, when they were closed and flocked by city-wide massive public demonstrations; transforming them in *impromptu* pedestrian boulevards for specific periods of time (Fig. 4). Contrary to what occurs in other countries, where road infrastructure falls under National or Federal Government jurisdiction, the existence of a ‘Metropolitan Mayor’ for the Greater Caracas Area – a figure whose role is not yet clearly defined in terms of city government – acts as the authority over the use of the Highway Network in the city; and also as chief of the Metropolitan Police - the largest Police Force in the city region. His political alignment against the Central Venezuelan Government and his alliance with other City Mayors, along with a fuel crisis in the midst of a general country-wide strike, plus the subsequent reduction of motor traffic volume; permitted the closing of such vital infrastructure for movement in the city for the purpose of protesting, with the collaboration of the above-mentioned Police Force. A phenomenon that continues until today, this type of ‘pseudo-renaissance of public space’ - regardless of the factors that cause it – truly represents a remarkable and spontaneous way for the city to re-claim its space, improvising an attempt to recreate the traditional urban agora, using whatever means possible.

Fig. 4: Highway Overpass occupied by demonstrators, Jan. 2003
(Photo by Jorge Díaz Urbina)
Far from qualifying it as ‘authentic’ public space, I would qualify it as ‘post-metropolitan’ public space induced by socio-political phenomena. This type of pseudo-public space is forced (squattting infrastructure not destined for it); unpredictable (called from one day to the next), anarchic (violating the predestined use of the space), non-designed (occurring in a spontaneous manner); non-adequate (as it has not been planned for it), as well as ephemeral (exercised in a temporary manner and not remaining permanently in time). The functioning of today’s Post-metropolis is dictated by same type of forces, especially in what refers to the Latin American City. As Edward W Soja announces: “Constitutional arguments and property rights laws severely constrained any ambitious extension of [these] principles of spatial and territorial responsibility, but there my be some room for their tactical revival in connection with reinvigorated movements for greater regional democracy and spatial justice” (Soja, 2000 p.406) (16).

Deleuzean Public Space?

“The key systemic property of a city is nodality rather than centrality...Since network cities easily exercise control at a distance, the influence of a town has little to do with propinquity and even less with formal command over territory. The spatial features of the Network System are largely invisible on a conventional map...”
Manuel de Landa (17)

Following parameters of non-linear thinking to interpret urban phenomena, we can detect the presence of attractors in the occurrence of the Spontaneous Pseudo-public Space as I have previously described it. Both the catharsis created by means of socio-political crisis, as well as the acting of the Media as a catalyst; induced the appearance of this particular phenomenon in the Cityscape of Caracas. By looking at the spontaneous and anarchic nature of the process, the existence of a Rhizome organizational structures can also be detected, showing new and unprecedented ways to qualify the nature of the cityspace (18). The city, now seen as a living and changing organism, hosts invisible networks and forces that shape the use of its space, the production of the built and non-built environment and the spatial relation between them. These relationships are highly mediatised (Fig.5), and so the newly created spatial relation induced by apparent disorganization and anarchy gives a new quality to the city as a whole. In Latin American Cities, these processes have already influenced the development of the urban fabric in term of informal settlements, and so they have now also contributed to qualify a way of utilizing the cityspace ‘sideways’, violating traditional rules. The Spontaneous Pseudo-public Space is a result of extreme de-regularization and the catharsis of a social system.
If the streets and other spaces of the city have always been the lieu of socio-political expression, in this case the transformation of the use of such spaces dictates a different way to look at the occupation of the city to call for mass visibility. “Entwined with [the] refocusing of critical studies of cities and regions and the concurrent spatial turn so integral to it has been the onset of something even more significant, the emergence of an active and situated practice of a cultural politics that is consciously driven by increasingly spatialized notions of social justice, participatory democracy, and citizenship rights and responsibilities. The impact of these spatially conscious practices has not been very great as yet, but there are sufficient indications to suggest that they are likely to play a major role in shaping the postmetropolitan future” (Soja, 2000 p.407) (19).

Fig. 5: Deleuzean public space? January 2002
(Photo by Jorge Díaz Urbina)
Bibliography


1 HARVEY, D. (in SOJA, 2000, p 106)
2 Edward W. Soja (2000, p 7), an author on critical urban planning and theory, establishes the term cityscape as “a set of materialized ‘spatial practices’ that work together to produce and reproduce the concrete forms and specific patternings of urbanism as a way of life”
3 ‘Splintering Urbanism’, a term announced by Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, denotes the phenomena of de-regularization, privatization and selective discrimination of cityspace occurring in many cities today: “Practice of splintering urbanism are starting to emerge in virtually all cities across the globe, whether in the developed, newly industrialising or post-communist worlds, as local histories, cultures and modernities are enrolled into internationalising capitalist political economies in various ways. Such practices, moreover, are closely related to the development and reconfiguration of infrastructure networks between cities “ (GRAHAM S. and MARVIN S., 2001. p 35)
5 Ibid. p 123 (My brackets)
7 Unofficial estimates as of 2001.
8 CASTELLS, M. (2001 p 473) (My translation)
9 ‘Biopower’ is the term used by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their work Empire to explain a mode of control over masses by means of media, technology and consumption (NEGRI, A. and HARDT, M. 2000).
10 LYNCH, K. (1960)
12 Heimat (German): ‘Home’. Verhâutnis is a German term usually used in Sociology to describe ‘social relations between objects and people’.
13 “I have chosen the term ‘Postmetropolis’ as a working title for what might otherwise be called the new urbanism, had not this term taken up by architects and designers for other and narrower purposes” (SOJA, E. W, 2000, p xiii)
14 LEFEVRE, H. (1968)
15 The square, with the original name of Plaza del Obelisco (Obelisk Square) was first opened on Aug. 11, 1945 in the new urbanized grounds of Altamira, east of Caracas, featuring a ‘higher than the Cathedral’ obelisk as it main visual feature. In 1967 its name was changed from Plaza de Altamira to Plaza Francia. After initial splendour, the square fell into decay until 1989, when it is renovated simultaneously with the opening of a new Subway Station on its grounds. Most recently along with its renaissance as a ‘Hyde Park corner’ in Caracas, it gained notorious reputation due to the shootings that occurred there on Dec. 6, 2002.
16 (My brackets).
17 Here De Landa highlights the dynamics of ‘city networking’ on citing Hohenberg and Lees (DE LANDA, M., 1997. p 39)
18 “The work of Deleuze, for instance, contains a similar set of functional abstractions: Talking very loosely the strange attractors are abstract machines, the paths taken by something in a basin of attraction are rhizomes and the areas of phase-shift are plateaus or planes of consistency. Stable and Chaotic systems are characterised as molar or molecular, the first being efforts of a system to act in a ‘zero’ state of fascism and the second are systems which are ‘becoming’ something else.” (From: “A brief primer on chaos” http://www.stageone.co.nz/alotronic/persona/chaos.htm - Emphasis on the original).
19 (My brackets)
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Armando Montilla Navarro is a Venezuelan architect and theorist with professional formation and work experience in Canada and the US. He was a post-graduate research fellow at the Architectural Association in London and at the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation in Germany, where he acted as Co-advisor for the Bauhaus Kolleg Program. He has extensively written essays and fiction on city theory, corporate trans-nationalism, privatisation of cityspace and the urban entertainment event; and is presently a PhD Candidate at the Human Geography Dept. of Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, on the creation of extrapolated German suburbs in insular regions of Spain. He’s also been invited critic at the ‘Metropolis’ Master Program at CCCB in Barcelona and founder of Co-lateral BCN (Colectivo avanzado de teoría experimental y radical [de la ciudad] en BarCeloNa. In Caracas He was coordinator of the Kolleg Satellite Cluster Caracas, an interdisciplinary research group sponsored by the Bauhaus