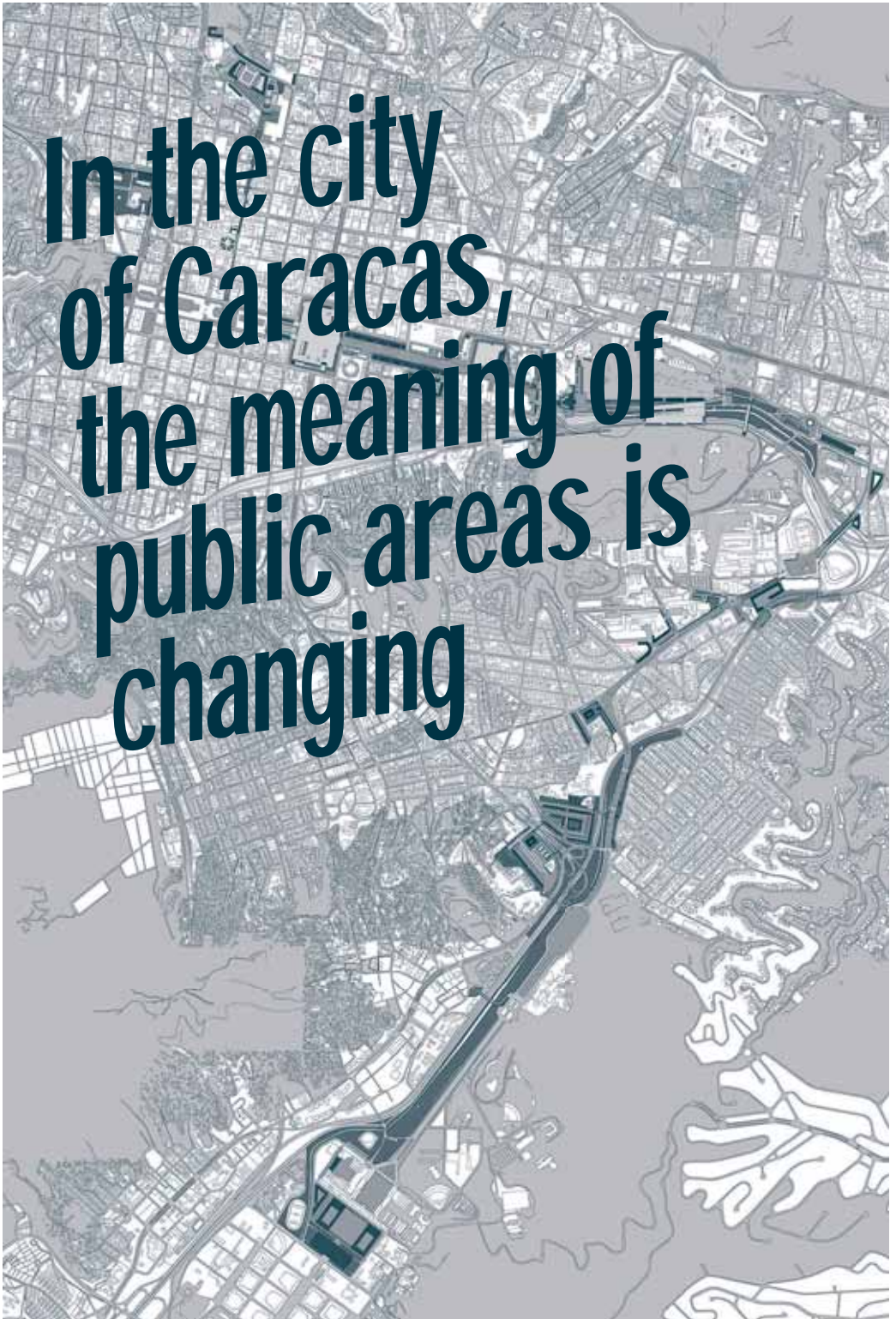


**In the city
of Caracas,
the meaning of
public areas is
changing**



Situated in the place where the Caribbean and South American tectonic plates collide (in the area of influence of the famous *Boconò* fault), protected by a Caribbean mountain range known as *Sierra de la Costa* with peaks higher than 2000m and in a valley located 15 km from the coast and 900 m above sea level, *Caracas* is a mountain city. The *Guaire* is the main river that strives to bring the city to life.

In this city, on behalf of a new model of territorial development, a breakaway from the usual paradigms that guide human activity is taking place, in other words, from the paradigms based on economy, on spatial segregation and on social asymmetries, in the political context of a multidimensional liberation process that includes the entire republic. Awarding constitutional recognition of *the Right to the City*² would be a significant symbolic gesture.

The urban pathologies that have developed in *Caracas* legitimise the sense of breaking away from the usual paradigms we have mentioned. As if *Caracas* has realised its health problem. *Caracas* has carried the burden of being the main node for the entire republic and has brought about the following interrelated phenomena:

- a. The proliferation of improvised settlements brought about by social urgency and the proliferation of deficient housing when the decision is taken not to live in the street. The spaces between the urbanised area and the semi-urbanised area have increased, unsettling the bond between urban spaces. This phenomenon is linked to the expansion of the settlements known as *Barrios* (*Villas* in Argentina, *Favelas* in Brazil), in other words, to the growth of the informal city.
- b. The generalisation process in the various supply systems in the city, from the drains to the water supply. There are many problems behind this phenomenon in public health. For example, the increase in diseases caused by water and the influence this has on the infant mortality rate.
- c. The collapse of all means of transport. The huge growth in the flow of cars is unending and, paradoxically, the transport system is becoming slower and slower. On top of this, the fact that one euro can buy 22 litres of petrol does not help things. The need for organising the city favours only the cars and is far removed from the needs of pedestrians. The cars take over the public spaces and the sensation of citizenship begins to topple.
- d. The acceleration of the erosion process throughout the city and the proliferation of uncontrolled urban waste. The accelerated development of recent years has left the city in an offside position. Demographic pressure and the resulting increase in consumer needs, as well as the unending pressure from motor vehicles, affect the urban furniture, the streets.

Besides these phenomena, and with my eyes closed, I am going to give you a summary of the city's characteristics in one single image: it is a phallic city, dominated by verticality, with all that implies in today's modern times when we

are in favour of horizontality. The force of nature is evident. Indeed, there is a predominance of trees on the boulevards, which break up the pavements and make room for the sudden appearance of tropical flowers in any puddle.

Whatever the case, the current concern is how to keep ahead of this critical, complex situation. Thought is at least two stops behind, with the aim of creating the necessary revolutionary discourse as a basis for an epistemology that differs from the problems of urbanism.

First stop: we need a discourse that overcomes the distinction between the *formal city* and the *non-formal city*, which is a pejorative categorisation that corresponds to a sectarian regime. Therefore, the aim is to overcome the space based so far on savage social segregation; all individuals, whatever they possess, are part of the city and have the right to consider the city as their own and, what's more, the *power* has to legitimately recognize the homes, habitat and community they have built with their efforts.

Second stop: We need the urbanistic appearance that corresponds to a Bolívar socialist city of the 21st century. In colonial times, the aim of urbanistic policies was the imposition of power, all carefully measured around a central point. This was followed by dispersion and private interests stuck close to the city like patches. Now we need icons that show the social links; in other words, we must give priority to public spaces and, before beginning to design the urbanistic concept, we need to plan the various types of public spaces and then everything else.

Thus, as progress is made, the following questions arise:

How to invent the new code and new urbanistic policy needs in a space that has already been built up, already written; in other words, how to write a new novel in a notebook that has already been written in? By correctly analysing the options offered by controlled explosions to achieve a *blank sheet*.

The city has begun to be seen as a cultural event with a view to turning the current situation around and giving rise to a different epistemology when speaking about urbanism. With this objective in mind, the *Urban Factory* has been created, a platform that depends on the Ministry of Culture. As there is a great lack of information for the appropriate planning and future outlook, priority must be given to intuitive diagnoses.

The strategy in favour of public spaces is now under way. The ideological stance has already been adopted: first the demand for independence and then subordination; first the individual and then the capital interests of the market; first the community and then the individual; first the pedestrians and then the cars. To reflect this ideology in urbanism, political, physical and symbolic measures must be combined.

The political measures include the full democratisation of the until-now private open spaces. Thus, what were once private clubs for the oil industry

now belong to the people. They have been placed at the disposal of popular cultural development e.g. the so-called *La Estancia*. The functional vocation of the golf club, the *Country Club* and the private airport *La Carlota* in the heart of the city have begun to be returned to the people. The people will decide what they want to do.

The physical measures include the design of interconnected public spaces that cross the city of *Caracas* to promote citizenship, to make the city more passable. The aim is to develop bonds with the city, to overcome the separation imposed by the current road systems, posing routes from one end of the city to the other exclusively for pedestrians, cyclists and skaters.

The symbolic measures include the processes for changing names, which have already begun. This year celebrates 440 years since the creation of the city of *Caracas* in keeping with a European, colonialist urban model. The name *Santiago de León de Caracas* is to change this year and will become *Cuna de Simón Bolívar, El Libertador y Reina del Warairarepano*³. The aim is to promote commitments of this type in favour of the development of collective identities (e.g. what was yesterday *Plaza España*, will today be called *Plaza Euskal Herria*). These name changes are upheld as if they were part of the symbolic fight against the history of the imperialist conqueror that has been repeated in many imposed histories and thus defends the historic memory that has no place or which needs to be created. In this case, in the city of *Caracas* (and everywhere in the Republic), the aim is to find a place for and remember a pro-independence, pro-Indian tradition.

To conclude, after what has been said about the city of *Caracas*, what is clear is that the urbanistic policies that give priority to public spaces are the policies that are giving this new era its personality.

¹ I would like to thank Natalia Medrano, coordinator of the *Factoría Urbana*, for the time she gave me when I was preparing this article.

² If the referendum scheduled for December 2007 is successful, *the Right to the City* will become a right protected by the Constitution.

³ If the reform of the Constitution scheduled for December 2007 is adopted.



