

# A Hybrid Discourse for Latin America's Urban Landscape

by Elisa Silva

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(19min)

*Barrios* are an urban phenomena that parallel the development of modern architecture in Latin America, which witnessed its peak in cities like Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires during the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, and even sooner, barrios were dotting the undeveloped peripheries and environmentally vulnerable landscapes of these very same cities. Each house in the *barrios* was built by a construction worker who migrated from the countryside to help build the modern city.

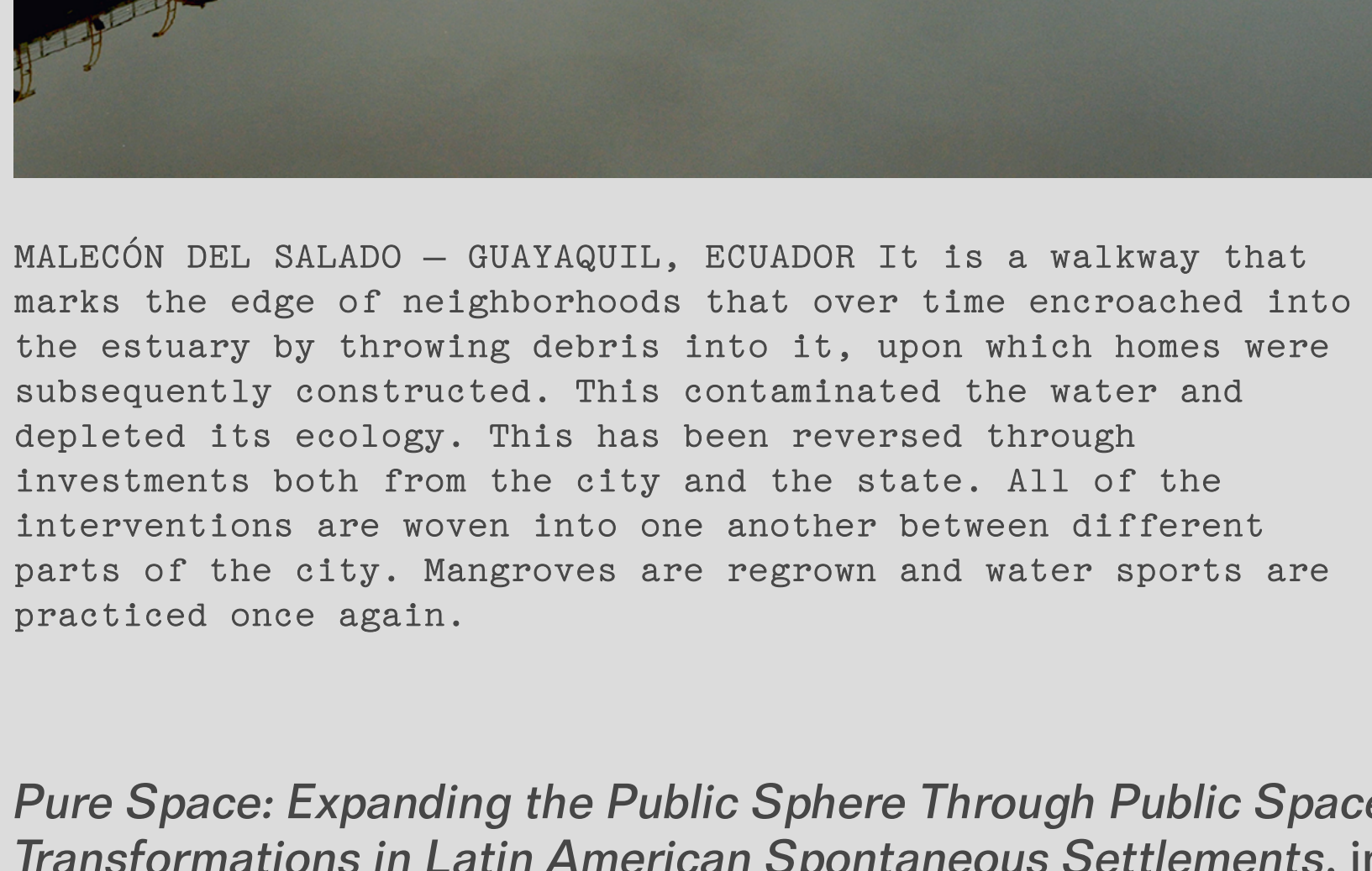
The *barrio* El Guarataro in Caracas, for example, dates back to the 1920s. By 1966 *barrios* represented 17 percent of the urban territory of Caracas; in 1983, 36 percent of the population lived in them. In other words, while architects focused their attention on advancing the modern project, they were also adept practitioners of denial and sustained a blind belief in progress, which allowed them to ignore the fact that a completely different form of urbanity was growing 2.5 times faster than the so-called modern city.<sup>1</sup>

It took forty years of sustained *barrio* growth before architects and urban planners working in Latin America shifted their approach from *barrio* eradication and social housing to *barrio* "upgrading." During the 1990s, the World Bank made millions available for rehabilitation projects in Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia and the Inter-American Development Bank invested \$300 million in Rio de Janeiro alone.

Field studies in 2012 provided the opportunity to experience and learn from the urban investments accumulated over the previous two decades.<sup>2</sup> These observations embraced the spirit of Stan Allen's "field conditions," which he defines as the acceptance of the real in all its messiness and unpredictability. "Field conditions are bottom-up phenomena: defined not by overarching geometrical schema but by intricate local connections. From matter, but not so much the forms of things but the forms between things."<sup>3</sup> Another way of putting it might be the way George Baird talks about the city—the entire city, all that is built—as matter available to architects for consideration and the subject of design's engagement.<sup>4</sup>

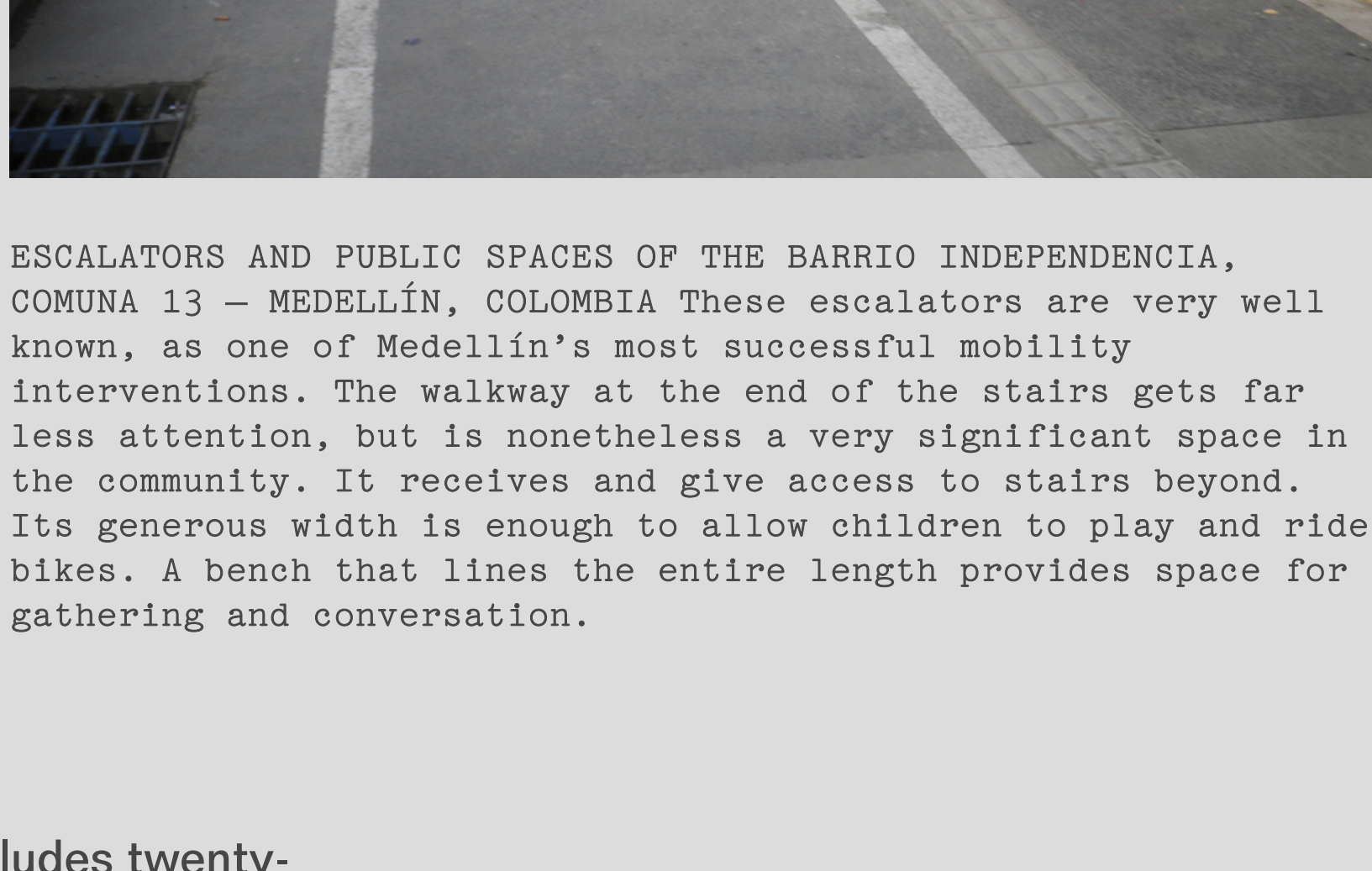
The projects studied ranged from environmental mitigation measures, waste management, transportation and mobility, new buildings, cultural centers, schools, nurseries, libraries, housing, and health centers. They had various degrees of success in terms of inserting themselves into the dynamics of the community. Some did so more gracefully and, in other cases, it was apparent that the insertion came by force. But the instances of public space were particularly effective. Ironically, out of the nineteen projects originally documented, only two were conceived and funded as public space projects. The rest represented secondary or complementary components of other types of operations and investments.

(FIG. 1)



**MALECÓN DEL SALADO – GUAYAQUIL, ECUADOR** It is a walkway that marks the edge of neighborhoods that over time encroached into the estuary by throwing debris into it, upon which homes were subsequently constructed. This contaminated the water and depleted its ecology. This has been reversed through investments both from the city and the state. All of the interventions are woven into one another between different parts of the city. Mangroves are regrown and water sports are practiced once again.

(FIG. 2)



**ESCALATORS AND PUBLIC SPACES OF THE BARRIO INDEPENDENCIA, COMUNA 13 – MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA** These escalators are very well known, as one of Medellín's most successful mobility interventions. The walkway at the end of the stairs gets far less attention, but is nonetheless a very significant space in the community. It receives and gives access to stairs beyond. Its generous width is enough to allow children to play and ride bikes. A bench that lines the entire length provides space for gathering and conversation.

*Pure Space: Expanding the Public Sphere Through Public Space Transformations in Latin American Spontaneous Settlements*, includes twenty-three projects that illustrate different programmatic approaches toward public space production: conservation, waste management, risk management, infrastructure, buildings and pavements, and activity.<sup>5</sup> They also reflect a range of existing financial approaches to funding public space, including municipal or state funds, private funding, foundations, and public-private partnerships. Different social approximations, from programs that supported specific interventions, culture-based programs as well as ones geared toward disenfranchised youth and women, were used. And finally, the projects are located in a variety of cities and regions in Latin America. The following are a few examples.

Several significant publications on public spaces in Latin American *barrios* precede this research: Flavio Jánchez and Max Rohm in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Jaime Hernández in Bogotá, Colombia, and Melanie Lombard in Xalapa, Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Their arguments tend to center on issues of meaning, methods, and language and their professional work and advocacy further strengthen the pertinence of this non-housing approach to urban development.

(FIG. 3)

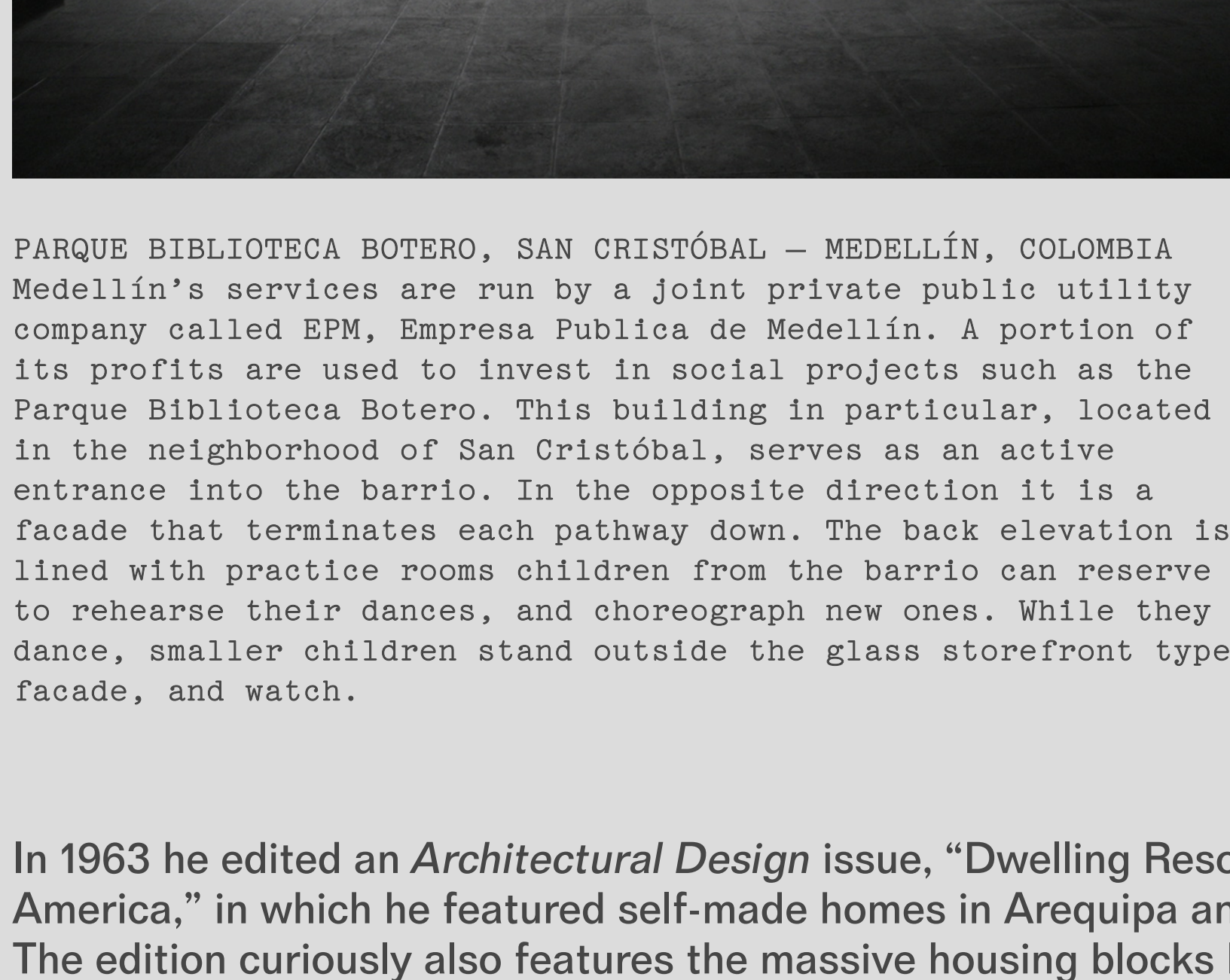


**CHAPÉU MANOUEIRA – BABILÓNIA, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL** This is essentially a reforestation project of a natural reserve that had been completely deforested in the 1990s. The community, with the support of an NGO, harvested their own plants and embarked on an ambitious reforestation project. The ascent into the natural reserve affords amazing views of the Copacabana and Flamengo Bay, Sugar Loaf Mountain and the Corcovado beyond. At the top, children from the favela often fly kites. Reaching the summit is an activity shared by locals and people from the entire city.

Another important reference is the voice of the English architect John Turner and his unapologetic descriptions of the construction work he witnessed in the urban *barriadas* of Peru in the 1950s. An article published in the January 2021 issue of *Architectural Review* by Kathrine Golda-Pongratz explains that Turner was "invited by Peruvian colleague Eduardo Neira, whom he had first met at a CIAM summer school in Venice in 1952 and who shared a fascination for Patrick Geddes. Turner moved five years later in 1957, working as a young architect first in Arequipa and then in Lima, with both international and state housing agencies."<sup>7</sup>

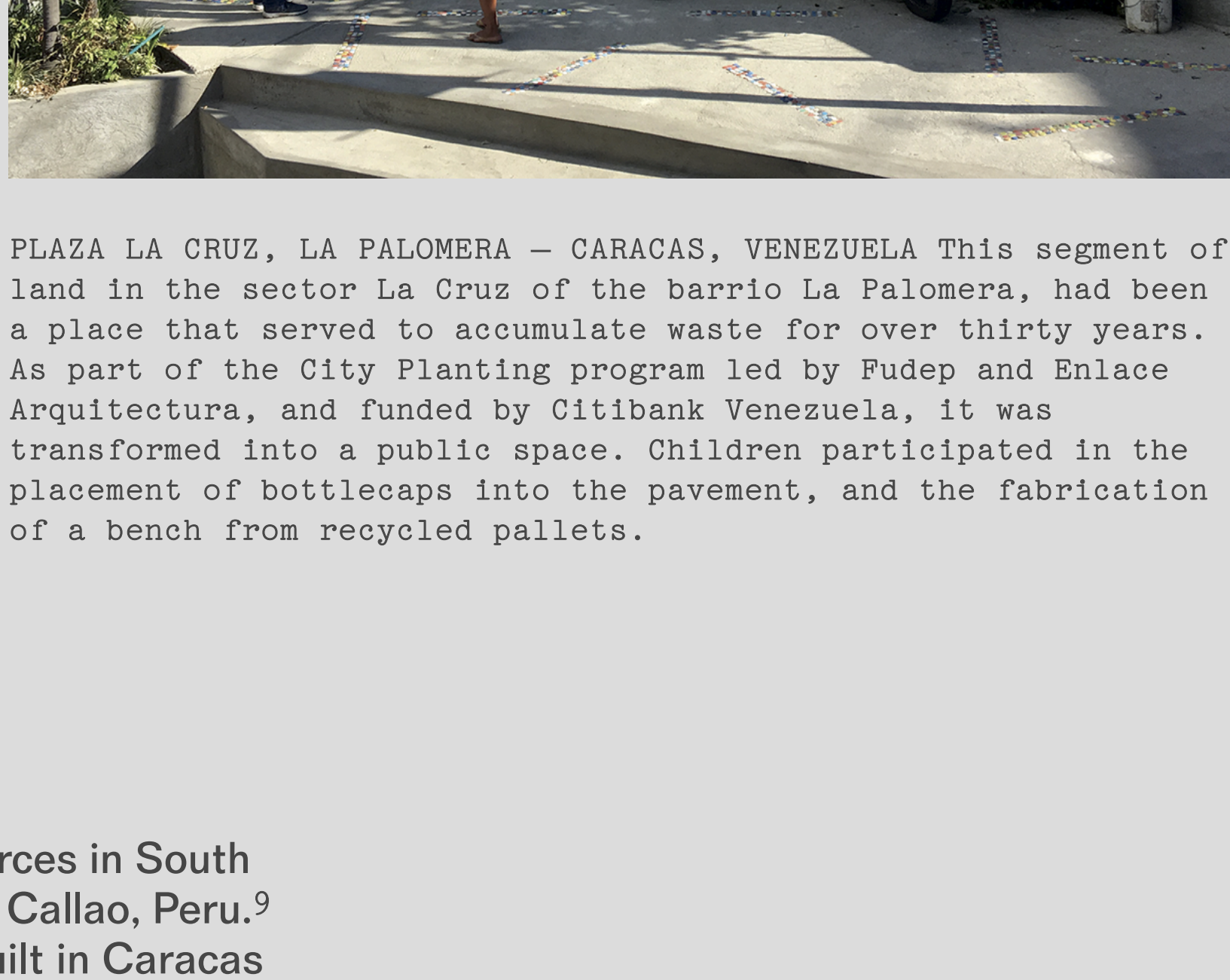
Turner's education at the AA in the 1950s and encounters with architects such as Giancarlo De Carlo whom he met in Venice, may reveal some of the motivation behind his interests. De Carlos' famous essay "Architecture's public" states that "cities are too important to be left to architects" and echoes Turner's attitude as he observed Peruvians building their own homes, with deference and approval.<sup>8</sup> He did not set out to devise better construction techniques nor propose more orderly spatial distributions. He understood that the important issue is what housing does for people much more than the aesthetic or material qualities of housing. Golda-Pongratz states that "borrowing from Ivan Illich, author of *Deschooling Society* and someone Turner also admired, he was 'de-schooled as an architect' when working in Peru." His approach was pragmatic, real-politick, but also profoundly utopian and democratic.

(FIG. 4)



**PARQUE BIBLIOTECA BOTERO, SAN CRISTÓBAL – MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA** Medellín's services are run by a joint private public utility company called EPM, Empresa Pública de Medellín. A portion of its profits are used to invest in social projects such as the Parque Biblioteca Botero. This building in particular, located in the neighborhood of San Cristóbal, serves as an active entrance into the barrio. In the opposite direction it is a facade that practices each pathway down. The back elevation is lined with terraces rooms children from the barrio can reserve to rehearse their dances, and choreograph new ones. While they dance, smaller children stand outside the glass storefront type facade, and watch.

(FIG. 5)

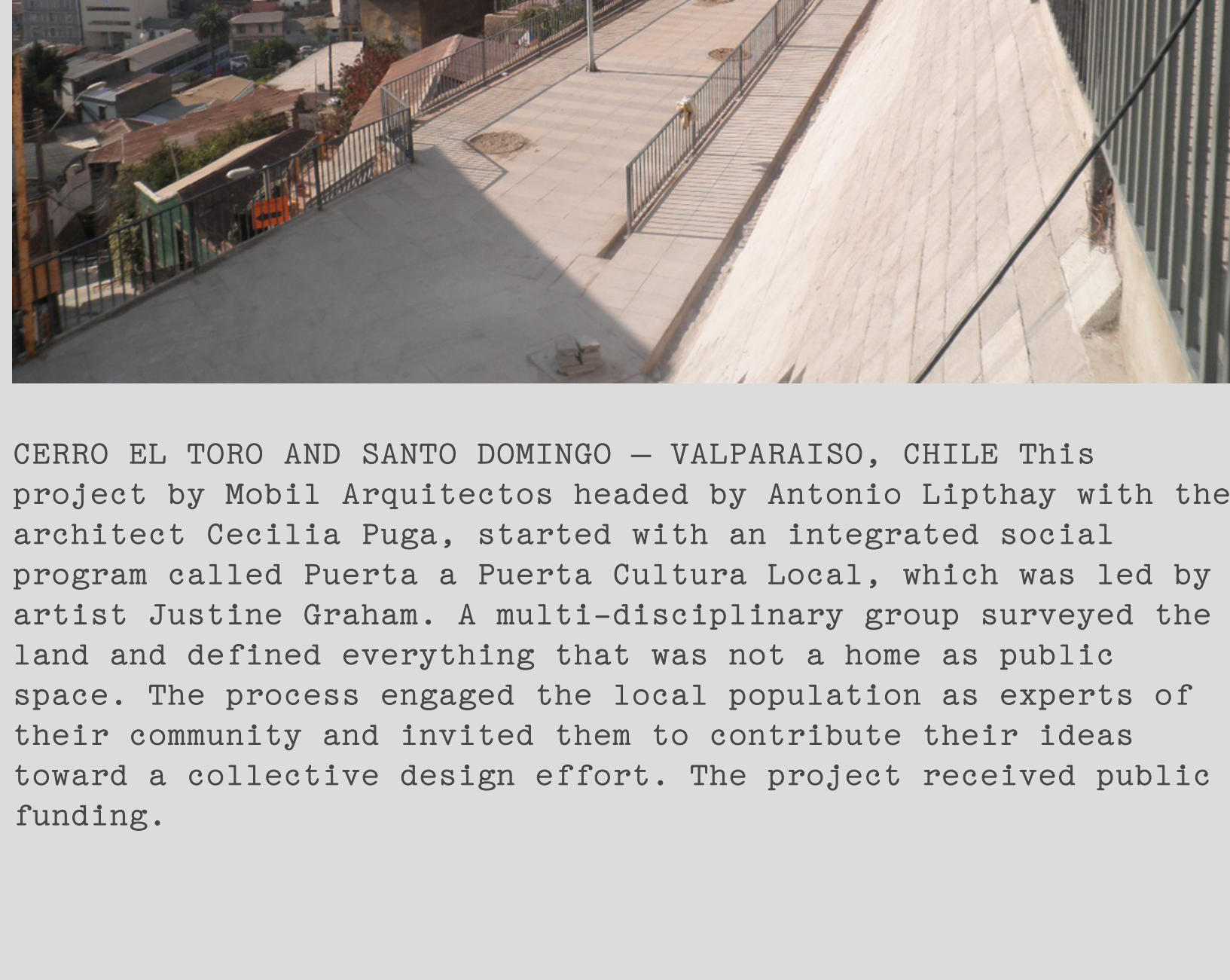


**PLAZA LA CRUZ, LA PALOMERA – CARACAS, VENEZUELA** This segment of land in the sector La Cruz of the barrio La Palomera, had been a place that served to accumulate waste for over thirty years. As part of the City Planting program led by Pudep and Enlace Arquitectura, and funded by Citibank Venezuela, it was transformed into a public space. Children participated in the placement of bottlecaps into the pavement, and the fabrication of a bench from recycled pallets.

In 1963 he edited an *Architectural Design* issue, "Dwelling Resources in South America," in which he featured self-made homes in Arequipa and Callao, Peru.<sup>9</sup> The edition curiously also features the massive housing blocks built in Caracas known today as 23 de Enero, which he acknowledges—with some reservation—could potentially work given Venezuela's unusually abundant resources. Turner likely encountered them while visiting his Peruvian friend Eduardo Neira, who started working as an urban development consultant for the IDB and Cepal in Caracas in 1960.

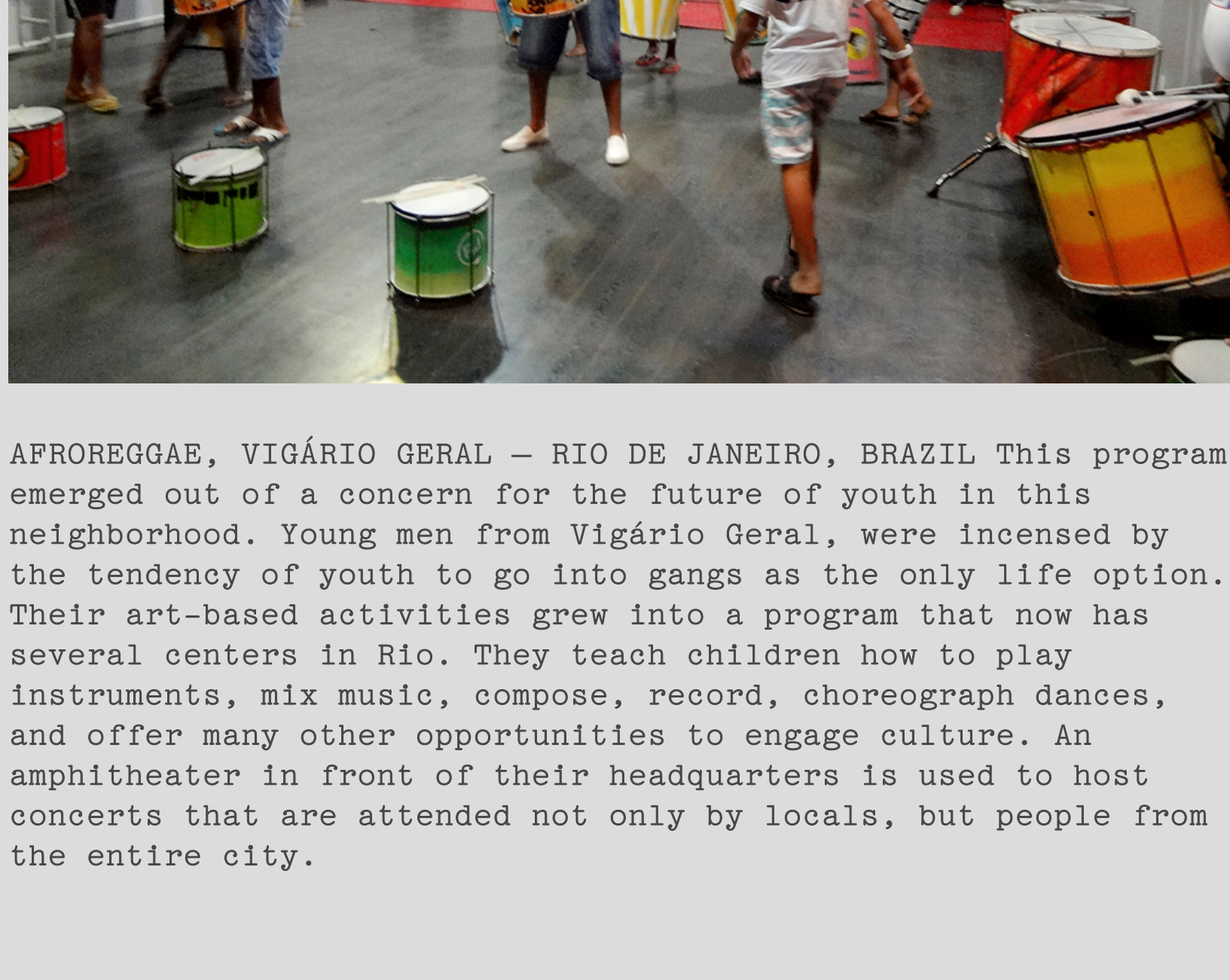
Over the next decades, Turner's advice was eclipsed by the Caracas-style focus on massive housing and a rather vicious condemnation of *barrios* that unfortunately set the urban discourse for Latin American cities back several decades. The *barrio* upgrading efforts of the 1990s represent the beginning of a more realistic and useful approach. But even though they offered better services, amenities, and access to education for underserved communities, it must be noted nonetheless that these improvements were performed much like an operation on a sick subject. The approach was heavily informed by the cleansing tones of the modern movement, presenting each intervention as a charitable offering of good intentions. Furthermore, the fact that the projects are generated outside the community by government officials, professionals, and academics, also means that they are implemented with a set agenda, timeline, goals, and indicators that supersede the voices of the community. So forced and choreographed, they can hardly be posited as exemplars of a democratic process. The projects also tend to consider *barrios* as separate from the city, where inclusion is the consequence of what is done to the *barrio*, as though formal insertions were not only invested with a rather hubristic power of legitimization but also more valuable than the existing urban fabric, built over many decades and generations.

(FIG. 6)



**CERRO EL TORO AND SAN DOMINGO – VALPARAÍSO, CHILE** This project by Mobil Arquitectos headed by Antonio Lipthay with the architect Cecilia Fuga, started with an integrated social program called EPM, Empresa Pública de Medellín. A portion of its profits are used to invest in social projects such as the Parque Biblioteca Botero. This building in particular, located in the neighborhood of San Cristóbal, serves as an active entrance into the barrio. In the opposite direction it is a facade that practices each pathway down. The back elevation is lined with terraces rooms children from the barrio can reserve to rehearse their dances, and choreograph new ones. While they dance, smaller children stand outside the glass storefront type facade, and watch.

(FIG. 7)



**AFROELEGGAE, VIGÁRIO GERAL – RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL** This program emerged out of a concern for the future of youth in this neighborhood. Young men from Vigário Geral, were incensed by the tendency of youth to go into gangs as the only life option. Their art-based activities grew into a program that now has several centers in Rio. They teach children how to play instruments, mix music, compose, record, choreograph dances, and offer many other opportunities to engage culture. An amphitheater in front of their headquarters is used to host concerts that are attended not only by locals, but people from the entire city.

A lingering positivist mindset can be traced to the approach of many professionals with respect to *barrios*. For example, Alejandro Aravena advances a method of inclusion through the Elemental housing scheme that is based on the capitalist notion that the economic situation of lower-income families improves by carrying them into the middle class through the increased property value of their home. In other words, inclusion occurs by inserting people into the hegemonic economic system and increasing their opportunity for consumption.<sup>10</sup> The mode of deployment is top-down, and a rather narrow interpretation of inclusion. Decades of property-centered investment and capitalism worldwide have only exacerbated social and economic inequality. Presenting it as a natural remedy to the housing crisis and *barrios* is fraught with inconsistencies. Chile has since entered a completely new social and political phase in its history where youth and disenfranchised groups are protesting its stagnant and unjust economic structure.

A stubborn predilection for economically homogeneous urban enclaves by developers, the elite, and wealthier individuals, has fueled the fragmentation of cities. The value of property is perceived to be greater, the further away it is from territories labeled as slums, ghettos, or *barrios*. In Latin America, not only have *barrios*, *favelas* and *villas* conveniently kept Indigenous populations, foreigners, and the descendants of rural migrants separate, their different "urban form," lack of planning and personal insecurity are used to justify the city's scarce investments in them and their rather blatant discrimination.

These tacit "justifications" are almost too easy to contest. The formal argument falls apart with the example of most European cities, which are comprised of multiple urban fabric typologies. Those that predate the Enlightenment are, like the *barrios*, a conglomeration of self-built homes in close proximity with organic building patterns and narrow passages. And yet in places like Italy, Greece, and Spain, they coexist with the *ensanches* (as they are called in Spain) and, over time, services were brought up to the same standards as the more modern parts of the city. They are so desirable today that their problem is rather their unaffordability. In any case, disenfranchisement due to urban form is duplicitous at best. Violence is also an excuse used to avoid dealing with *barrios*. But even in highly consolidated and economically stable ones where levels of violence are no different than elsewhere in the city, the stigma remains.

With the publication *Arrival City* in 2010, Doug Saunders offered a completely different way of understanding *barrios*.<sup>11</sup> He presents them as incredibly dynamic urban systems and much more than a collection of precarious structures as they are commonly considered. *Barrios* are the home of migrants and their descendants who settled decades ago, in some cases nearly a century ago, and long before most of the expanded twentieth century city. They represent an affordable option for newcomers seeking opportunities and a better quality of life. *Barrio* inhabitants are making the political statement that they want to be in the city, use the city, and contribute to its productivity.

Paradoxically, there is also a lot to learn from the formal and operative aspects of *barrios*. For example, homes in *barrios* tend to have shops or stores on the levels that meet the walkways and streets, in other words, they are productive, live-work spaces. Multiple generations live in the same structure, which allows grandparents to watch over young children while parents work either in the home or away. Seniors have an important role to play in the family economy, avoiding the costs of daycare, and the family is generally the caregiver for its older generation. Most homes have vegetable gardens that are important contributions to the family's calorie intake. Structures grow and adapt to accommodate multiple and varying scenarios. With Covid-19, these hybrid conditions have become more desirable, while urban areas segregated by use have proven to be not only inefficient but wasteful. *Barrios*, in other words, are compact and multi-functional. Furthermore, the public spaces of *barrios* also exhibit qualities the "modern" city lacks. Without the presence of cars, families feel comfortable allowing their children to play outside with other kids in the neighborhood. Children appropriate spaces to play marbles, *caimaneras* (a kind of informal baseball game played with broomsticks and bottle caps), or *futbolito* (a reduced version of soccer). These examples not only contest arguments commonly used to delegitimize *barrios*, they also illustrate the inadequacies of certain modern urban ideals.

Latin American cities intrinsically have multiple forms of urban fabric, the only difference with respect to their European or North African counterparts is that their development occurred at the same time. Latin American culture is inherently hybrid, or rather it undergoes a constant process of hybridization as explained by Nestor Garcia Canclini in his book *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. He argues that it is simultaneously modern and traditionally, "where traditions have not yet disappeared and modernity has not completely arrived."<sup>12</sup> He advocates instead a much more nuanced, complex, and, at the same time, richer understanding of art and culture in Latin America and offers yet another way to understand the utility in treating *barrios* as a definition in opposition to the city.

Binary definitions are seldom useful. The *barrio* is in fact part of the city. It is part of a hybrid, constantly transforming expression of culture, the economy, and the political engagement of people who identify with urban life. But its recognition as such is not only to be won through arguments but through people's desire to complete the city in their experience and know. Public space can serve as an important facilitator in this process of urban integration, and when this potential is understood the how becomes much more important than the what. It parallels John Turner's appreciation of housing for what it does more than what it is. In this sense, architecture—understood as a record that can encourage participation, but in also a progressive, ever-evolving record of layers, additions, and adaptations—has the potential of creating persuasive urban scenarios for inclusion and integration. But first, the designer's approach requires adjustments. Stan Allen encourages architects to learn to design without determinacy and absolute control. He advocates for design that emerges from an internal spatial, economic, and social logic, and not foreign impositions.

How to engage all the complexity and indeterminacy of the city through the methodologies of a discipline so committed to control, separation, and unitary thinking? This is the dilemma of the architect working in the city today. Architecture and planning, historically aligned with technical rationality and committed to the production of legible functional relationships, have had tremendous difficulty thinking about their roles apart from the exercise of control.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, some de-schooling is required in a discipline that is still heavily persuaded by formalism and the "civilizing" rhetoric of modern architecture. In that sense, the challenge is more on architects as thinkers and practitioners than it is on the constraints of the *barrio* or the challenges of securing funding. Curiously, undoing or "deconstructing" the cultural constructs that have been projected onto barrios through post-structural arguments, for example (which has inspired feminism, the post-Anthropocene, and many social justice movements), remains underdeveloped when it comes to *barrios*.

In addition to the discipline's de-schooling, it could also benefit from a deeper engagement with its political implications including emotions, desire, and identity. Architecture's relevance in the discourse of urban integration could be understood in terms of its ability to inspire people's desire to acknowledge the *barrios* as part of the city.<sup>14</sup> For example, could architects facilitate the recognition of *barrios* as the expression of a hybrid culture? Could they help advance more nuanced readings, and discover or invent forms of urbanism that include the knowledge of the people that built the *barrio*? Could more opportunities to acknowledge the *barrio*'s history, its celebrations, music, and dances be created? *Pure Space* does not directly answer these questions. It does, however, seek to open a discussion that goes beyond the usual tropes of the upgrading discourse—the betterment of services and physical conditions, and acquiring legal land tenure—and into questions of how integration and recognition can be facilitated. It presents public space as a critical platform for storytelling, shared activities, and the layering of collective memories, where *barrio* neighbors and their urban context become conceptually accessible and knowable. It also suggests that public space is uniquely positioned to produce a more fluid passage between different types of urban fabric. Designers can play a key role in the urban integration of cities—they need not come up with answers so much as open conversations and encourage neighbors, visitors, and everyone to do the same.

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- Elisa Silva, CABA: Cartography of the Caracas Barrios: 1966-2014 (Caracas: Fundación Espacio, 2015).
- The research was made possible through the Wellwright Fellowship from Harvard University for the project "Interpreting design knowledge through slum upgrading in Latin America," which was awarded to Elisa Silva in 2011.
- Stan Allen, "From Object to Field," *Architectural Design*, 67 (May-June, 1997), pp. 24-31.
- George Baird makes this point directly and indirectly in his publications *The Space of Appearance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), *Public Space: Cultural, Political Theory Street Photography* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2011), and in essays in *Writings on Architecture and the City* (London: Artifice Press, 2015).
- Pure Space: Expanding the public sphere through public space transformations in Latin American spontaneous settlements*, edited by Astor and with the support of Graham Foundation and CAF grants, was published at the end of 2020. It was preceded by an itinerant exhibition titled "Pure Space," which took place in Caracas, Toronto, Miami and Buenos Aires, between 2013 and 2015.
- Flavio Jánchez, *Public Space in the Fragmented City: Strategy for Socio-Physical Urban Intervention in Marginalized Communities* (Buenos Aires: Piedra Papel & Tijera, 2012), p. 5. Jaime Hernández García, *Public Space in Informal Settlements: The Barrios of Bogotá* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 177. Melanie Lombard, "Constructing ordinary places: Place-making in urban informal settlements in Mexico," *Progress in Planning*, 94 (2014), p. 1-53.
- Kathrine Golda-Pongratz, "John FC Turner (1927-)," *Architectural Review*, 11 January 2021, <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/reputations/john-fc-turner-1927>.
- Giancarlo De Carlo, "Architecture's public," ed. by Peter Blundell Jones, Doña Petrosou and Jeremy Hill (London: Spon Press, 2005), pp. 3-22.
- John Turner (ed.), "Dwelling Resources in South America," *Architectural Design*, 1963.
- Alejandro Aravena, and Andrés Jacobelli, *Elemental* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2016).
- Doug Saunders, *Arrival City* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012).
- Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: strategies for entering and leaving modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), 1995.
- Stan Allen, "From Object to Field," 1997.
- I have spoken elsewhere about our work in promoting acknowledgement with the program "Integration Process Caracas" undertaken by Enlace Foundation and Ciudad Laboratorio. Some of this work is presented at the 17th Architecture Venice Biennial 2021 "The Complete City: La Palomera, acknowledgement and celebration."