
The *23 de Enero* public housing in Caracas.

Re-thinking the relationship between the formal and informal city

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ABSTRACT. The 23 de Enero public housing in Caracas (Carlos Raul Villanueva 1955-1958), is a huge scale housing complex (9,000 apartments) and a significant Modern architecture example, today recognized as Bien de Interés Cultural. Despite this, it has been heavily transformed by the squatters that invaded it in January 23rd, after the dictator Jiménez fall. This transformation involved the dwellings and the open areas, where a lot of barracks were illegally built. Nowadays the 23 de Enero can be considered as a symbolic representation of the contemporary city model of developing countries, which opposes the high rise buildings of the formal city to the low rise spontaneous and illegal settlements. Starting from this hypothesis our aim is to focus on a possible methodological and critical approach to preserve the value of the 23 de Enero as cultural and social evidence.

KEYWORDS Modern Movement, patrimony, densification, social housing, illegal city.

Roberta Lucente* _ Patricia S. Travanti Mendes**

**Università della Calabria*

Dipartimento di Strutture, Ponte Pietro Bucci, cubo 39/B, 87036 Rende (COSENZA)

Email: roberta.lucente@unical.it

***Sapienza Università di Roma*

Dipartimento di Architettura e Progetto. Piazza Borghese, 9. Roma.

Email: patristefy@gmail.com

1.Introduction

The *23 de Enero* housing complex represents a great effort made by the Venezuelan Government of the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez to create a social policy of public housing in Venezuela, under the context of Latin America greatest modern architecture works. This complex is an excellent example of modern architecture in Venezuela which has been declared patrimony for its unquestionable value, as a testimony of a historical process in the Caracas' urban transformation. But just before its completion, the housing complex was invaded by a group of citizens, and just a decade later, all its surroundings were fulfilled with *ranchos* (barracks), giving a new character to the quarter.



Fig. 1

2.Historical context

The petroleum boom in Venezuela in the latest 20's caused the emigration trough the cities, especially Caracas. Due to this situation, it was necessary to propose public housing as a way to solve quickly the emerging need of accommodations. In order to fulfill this need, the government created the **Banco Obrero**, a public organism responsible for designing and building social housing projects. Between the year of 1951 and 1955, the Nacional Housing Plan was approved, and then

between the years of 1953 and 1954 the *Plan Cerro Piloto*, which would offer the best example of social housing complex in Caracas: *Urbanización 23 de Enero*. This project was designed by TABO (*Taller de Arquitectura del Banco Obrero*), Banco Obrero's technical office, led by the important Venezuelan architect **Carlos Raúl Villanueva**.

3. Architectural Project

Unidad Residencial 2 de Diciembre, called after a dictator's election day commemoration on December, 2nd of 1952 (On January, 23rd of 1955, the complex changed its name), is located on a hill in Catia on the west side of Caracas, in an area of 220 acres. The *23 de Enero* is a complex developed in large terraces designed in a pattern consisting of different units repeated with variations and adaptations according to the topography. It includes residential units with commercial services, educational, religious and sport areas.



Fig. 2

The plan was to build 9.176 apartments distributed in 28 buildings with 15 floors plus 42 smaller buildings (to accommodate 60.000 people) with 17 kindergartens, 25 commercial buildings, 2 markets, 2 social centers and schools. These buildings were categorized in four types as follows: superblocks of 15 floors with 150 apartments; super twin blocks with 300 apartments; super triple blocks with 450 apartments; and smart buildings with 24 apartments.

The construction began in 1955 and it was carried out in stages: after six months was inaugurated the first phase on December 2nd, 1955 (2.336 apartments), then in 1956 (2688 apartments) and the final stage in 1957 (4122 apartments). The complex was finished, but not occupied until 1958, when the dictatorship fell and the buildings were flooded on January 23rd, of that year. It was a very chaotic situation which from that day on characterized the social trend of the settlement, leaving its true calling in forgetfulness. The district name changed to *23 de Enero* as a sign of conquest by the people over these buildings.



Fig. 3

Around 1960, the new democratic governors demonstrating a clear lack of policy on social housing, allowed and even encouraged the transfer of people from countryside to the city increasing the barracks. These new barracks were located favoring the existing topography in the common areas and free spaces around the superblocks, even in very dangerous areas without access to services. This, despite the *Banco Obrero* advised to keep clear the areas surrounding the blocks to ensure their architectural and urban quality. During the years, the situation has become more dramatic: currently control planning is not exercised, so 70% of the population lives illegally in areas without controls and high risk of flooding and unstable soil. About 80% of the buildings have structural problems, water leaks, failures, broken elevators, garbage ducts blocked, problems that would require a contribution from the inhabitants that they cannot afford. The lack of electrical services, water or garbage collection are common problems in this neighborhood, which the inhabitants are used to live with. In a social matter, *23 de Enero* evokes the rebellion of a population, anarchy, theft, vandalism and drugs. Since the beginning of the quarter as a result of the invasion, the community has organized in several ghettos or gangs. The lack of a social policy to educate this population to live in a community has determined in part this failure, plus the lack of programs to integrate people with their neighbors and into the city, adapting to their new way of living. The *23 de Enero* district revealed a very complex situation to manage and very expensive to repair, which led to its physical and social deterioration.

In recent years, several works have been held by the municipality to address specific problems such as water, electricity and garbage collection, but like all urban problems in the city of Caracas, after a while the problem reoccurs. The lack of maintenance by the authorities and lack of resources by the association of neighbors involves a profound degradation that requires a strong action to adapt to users the facilities and services.



Fig. 4

4.23 de Enero as Patrimony and its architectural value.

The *23 de Enero* was declared ***Bien de Interés Cultural*** in 2006. From that moment on, it is protected by *Ley de Defensa y Protección del Patrimonio Cultural*, and under the tutelage of *the Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural* and *FundaPatrimonio*, public organisms.

The indubitable and recognized architectural value of this residential complex has been certainly obscured by its rough transformation and its really controversial social situation. These problems can't obstruct the debate on the architecture in itself and on its role and significance in the history of Modern architecture and urbanism. It's not merely a problem of preservation or philological restoration: this so singular modern masterpiece opens some new perspectives for rethinking the role of public space in modern neighborhoods. In a contemporary perspective, the *23 de Enero* can be considered as a symbolic representation of the typical contemporary city model of Latin America and the developing countries: a model which opposes the high rise buildings of the so-called formal city to the low rise spontaneous settlements of the informal city, illegally and spontaneously built.

Due to the quarter's evolution, it is mandatory to rethink the relationship between the building and its surroundings. The necessity of a clear strategy to solve the densification and the problems caused by the spontaneous constructions is a priority to preserve the value and the identity of the *23 de Enero* as an example of modern architecture.

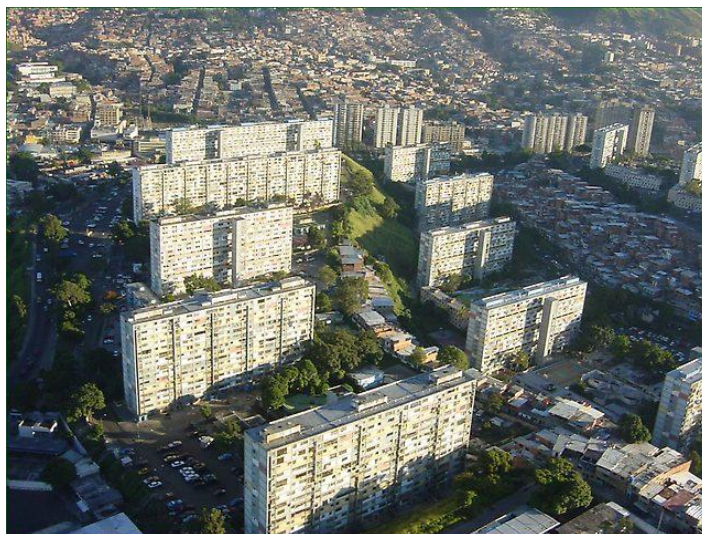


Fig. 5

5. Towards a critical and methodological perspective

The aim of this work is to focus on some methodological and critical issues, really significant for the discipline of architectural design, by means of this singular example.

In a general perspective of the study case, it's necessary starting from some fundamental elements.

First of all the need to identify *ad hoc* restoration methods for the buildings and open public spaces designed by Villanueva in *23 de Enero*. As it is considered patrimony, restoration, intervention and conservation are the concepts we must apply in order to restore the value of this complex. Restore and preserve the building designed by Villanueva and with patrimonial value, and intervene through punctual projects the carpet of barracks that are located in the surroundings of the buildings.

The presence of the *ranchos* is not to be interpreted just as a problem: it has to be valued as phenomenological evidence. The social relevance of this transformation has to be studied also looking at its typological effect. In this sense the *23 the Enero* can be assumed as a metaphor of the contemporary South American megalopolis. According to the main contemporary studies on the *favelas* it's necessary to gain the right approach, to the spontaneous typological expression showed in the *ranchos* system as well as to their indubitable health and services' needs. The superposition between *ranchos* settlement and Villanueva's one opens a new perspective in restoration approach, which involves both architectural and urban scales. One of the topics in this approach could be the typological analysis of the relationship between the typological modern attitude of Villanueva in dwelling design and the spontaneous creation of different living models by the users themselves. In the same way one of the start points has to be, in this analysis, the

relationship between the urban form envisaged by the project by Villanueva, inspired to Modern urban models, and the new and more complex form generated by spontaneous additions and transformations.

Subsequently, the work aims to propose some methodological and critical issues within a wider scientific perspective, opening to some possible questions:

- Can the increase of spontaneous reorganization and saturation of open common spaces be assumed as a model of regeneration of social settlements related to Modern urban heritage?

The need, on one hand to regain some of the open spaces lost in the original masterplan and on the other hand to guarantee the enormous number of dwellings required and illegally built, opens towards the opportunity of working in a surgical way, rethinking both the original modern open space model and the spontaneous one.

- Can these forms of spontaneous "densification" be interpreted and reorganized also as an approach for more sustainable use of urban soils?

A further issue of this approach could be, moreover, the experimentation of a possible new model to regenerate social settlements related to Modern urban heritage, looking at the redefinition of its public space. A successful example of densification of this kind has recently been that one of the social neighborhood of La Mina in Barcelona, even if aimed at creating also a social *mixité*, by a varied offer of public and private lodgments. In this sense, this spontaneous form of "densification" can be seen in the line of more sustainable use of urban soils, in the same way of some experiments already pursued in the XIXth century urban courts, like in Paris, with new residential units or services like nurseries.

- Is it possible to consider these spontaneous processes of densification as an occasion for improving the inhabitants' sense of belonging and for approaching the architect's will closer to the users' will?

A last but not least result of this new possible way of looking at these spontaneous settlements can be considered, finally, also the possibility of improving the inhabitants' sense of belonging and for approaching the architect's will closer to the users' will, aspect which has been interpreted like one of the reason of the failure of some Sixties social housing complexes¹.

Notes:

1. This essay comes from a coordinated work carried out by the two authors. The common vision is shared by them. More precisely the parts from 1 to 3 can be attributed to Patricia Travanti, the parts 4 and 5 to Roberta Lucente

Legends

Fig. 1: Aerial view of the *23 de Enero*. Photo courtesy of *Caracas Virtual*.

Fig. 2: Aerial view of the *23 de Enero* from Caracas' downtown. Photo courtesy of *Caracas Virtual*.

Fig. 3: The *23 de Enero* after the invasion. Photo of Mateo Pinto.

Fig. 4: The *23 de Enero* public housing at the 1960's: the construction of the ranchos in their surroundings. Photo courtesy of *Caracas Virtual*.

Fig. 5: The *23 de Enero* nowadays. Photo courtesy of *Noticias Caracas*.

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Roberta Lucente, is an architect, graduated in the School of Architecture of Rome "La Sapienza". She has a PhD in Contemporary history of architecture (Université de Paris I Panthéon -Sorbonne) and at present is Senior Assistant of Architectural design at the University of Calabria. She directs the session in Barcelona of International Master's Degree in Level II "Project management of architectural design", organized by the University of Rome "La Sapienza", School of Architecture Paris-La Villette with the collaboration of Escuela Técnica Superior d'Arquitectura del Vallès. She carries out research activities on the themes of the theory of architectural and urban design, the logic of architectural project, the use of typological studies as a evolutionary key of the modern city, and multi-scale dimension in the development of contemporary urban complex.

Patricia Stefany Travanti Mendes is an architect, graduated in the Universidad Simón Bolívar at Caracas, with studies of architecture heritage in the Politecnico di Milano. She has an International Master Degree in Project Management of Architecture projects (University of Rome La Sapienza and Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Val de Seine). Her interests are focused on conservation of modern architectural heritage and social housing. She currently works as an architect coordinating and designing social housing projects of the Municipio Libertador in the city of Caracas.