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Transforming the City. An Ethnography of Contested Public Space in Venezuela

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ABSTRACT.

My research falls within urban anthropology, as it examines how supporters and opponents of the Venezuelan government have manipulated symbols in attempting to control certain public places in Venezuela's capital city, Caracas. My thesis is that by using public places to advance their respective agendas, President Chávez’ supporters and opponents have struggled for power and have exacerbated the country’s social segregation, territorial division and political intolerance. My study reveals that despite its particular topography and socioeconomic structure, Caracas –Venezuela’s capital city— has a characteristic cartography of political segregation. This cartography has been created by groups of government opponents and supporters that want to present their political principles and values throughout the city. Both groups, claiming the exercise of their civil rights and ethos, attempt to manipulate symbolic places such as Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira. Their purpose is to create a social space to exhibit symbols and ideas that belong to them, but need to be promoted to the entire city and country. By doing this, Caracas has been divided into two political areas: East and West. Neither corresponds to a geographic reference. In order to set apart the “other” from the “self,” both groups –opponents and supporters- need to claim both territories physically and symbolically. In this process, Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira have become common mental images carried by numbers of Caracas inhabitants to construct a political apartheid. Opponents and supporters have used, and re-created both sites, investing them with their ethos. Therefore, these places have become the setting where relations between both groups are performed and where the symbols of those relationships can be read. These symbols are physical and/or conceptual, and in both forms they have redefined the relationship between people and places.
TRANSFORMING THE CITY.
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CONTESTED PUBLIC SPACE IN VENEZUELA.

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology in the Graduate School of Syracuse University.

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Chapter One.

Uncovering the path.
CHAPTER ONE.
UNCOVERING THE PATH.

1.1. INTRODUCTION.

I arrived in Venezuela the last week of September 2005 and moved to its capital city—Caracas—at the end of October. Immediately I started to explore the city, walking, riding the subway and buses; trying to reacquaint myself with the city in which I lived twelve years ago. Although Caracas still had the same urban configuration, many things had changed. For instance, the population had increased almost thirty percent and the city seemed unprepared for its growth; there were more shantytowns surrounding the urban areas and street vendors were nearly everywhere. The increased vehicular traffic had become an obvious problem, and a lack of urban maintenance was reflected on almost every corner. For instance, according to the Metro Company, in 1996 the subway transported an average of seven hundred thousand passengers per day [Monday-Friday] and in 2005—while the Metro continued to offer essentially the same numbers of cars and had the same general infrastructure—the numbers had increased to almost one million two hundred thousand passengers per day. Rush hours were critical, and the crowds had created the opportunity for more crime. Despite these not-so-positive aspects, I still found Caracas a progressive city where avant-garde fashion, art, architecture, music and the latest technology are available. That was the city that welcomed me back in 2005, and where I lived for the next year to carry out the fieldwork that feeds this research project.

In conversations with my landlady she complained how streets, sidewalks and public spaces in general had been invaded by buhoneros [street vendors]. She explained
how they were selling merchandise of every sort, from clothes, fabrics, food, electronics, and even the latest Hollywood DVDs. These informal merchandisers also offered services, such as doing hair or nails on the street, or performances, like an acrobatic show for motorists stopped at a traffic light. But she also referred to a different kind of “invader,” saying “…not only have buhoneros taken over the streets but also the political protesters…”

During the last decade, the number of public demonstrations in Venezuela have significantly increased (Provea 2002; Provea 2003; Provea 2004; Provea 2005; Provea 2006), with demonstrators taking over many public spaces either physically and/or symbolically. This increase seems to be related to the ascent of Hugo Chávez to the presidency in 1999, which brought about substantial political changes. On one side, the rise of a left-wing political party supported by popular vote has increasingly empowered the minorities that were traditionally excluded from political participation. And on the other side, groups that have traditionally benefited from the government have found that the Chávez agenda is a threat to their privileges. In this dynamic, popular groups have gradually gained more and more public and collective presence on the streets, questioning the traditional bourgeois hegemony over iconic places around the city.

Meanwhile, middle and upper-class groups —despite living in the isolated security of their condominiums, residential buildings and gated communities— have also taken to the streets and expressed discontent against the government.

During these years, public spaces in Caracas have become not only a forum for political expression but sites of geopolitical struggles. Given the symbolism, urban design, and past and recent events that have taken place in Caracas’ Plaza Bolívar and
Plaza Altamira, I am particularly interested in the study of these two places that have become territories of the contemporary politics of public places. I frame my research within the politics of urban design and public space to study how the urban experience influences individuals’ political actions and participation within the world and vice versa. My general goal is to explore the social, cultural, economic and geographic relations involved in the construction/production of public places and conversely examine the effects these places have on people’s lives (Kuper 1972; Low 1996c; Low 2000). I look at space not only as a physical reference but as the substratum that supports and feeds and also is supported and fed by social interactions, history, economy, politics and culture (Bourdieu 1977; Dovey 1999; Herrera Gómez and Piazzini Suárez 2006; Lefebvre 1993).

I explore the influence of the physical and symbolic dimensions of public space on the development of political demonstrations as well as their influences upon the preservation of free speech and political participation in Caracas during President Chávez’ administration. Contrary to the idea that in modern times public places are losing their urban role, in this project I recount and analyze everyday life in two emblematic Caracas squares to illustrate the dynamic re-appropriation and re-symbolization of public places in contemporary Venezuela. My thesis is that by using public places to advance their respective agendas, President Chávez’ supporters and opponents have struggled for power and have exacerbated the country’s social segregation, territorial division and political intolerance. For the empirical analysis I focus my attention in the production, appropriation, accessibility, domination and social use of the space through a “grid of spatial practices” (Harvey 1990:220-221) that intersects experience, perception and imagination of space (Lefebvre 1993:33).
My project reveals that there is a relationship between the physical and symbolic dimensions of urban public space and the potential for political participation. It also demonstrates that this relationship is a symbiotic one because urban public space and people’s political participation depend upon each other by receiving either a beneficial or detrimental reinforcement from each other. It also shows that everyday life in urban public spaces replicates on a smaller scale the struggles for power over the whole city.

I demonstrate that despite its particular topography and socioeconomic structure, Caracas has a characteristic cartography of political segregation. This cartography has been reinforced by groups of government opponents and supporters that attempt to present their political principles and values throughout the city. I found that political protesters—whether government supporters or opponents—express particular interest and attachment for specific places. Such attachments are linked to the articulation of urban forms, histories, identities and symbolic representations, and these aspects lead to the configuration of territoriality and belonging throughout the city.

Both government supporters and opponents, claiming the exercise of their civil rights and principles, attempt to manipulate symbolic places such as Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira for their own specific purposes. Their goal is to create a social space for the exchange of symbols and ideas that belong to them, which they attempt to promote throughout the city and country. In so doing, Caracas has been divided into two political areas: East and West sides. Neither concept corresponds to specific geographic references; usually “East side” and “West side” are designations with specific geographic connotations, but in this case the terms instead have an association with certain classes of people, their political affiliations and the types of neighborhoods in which they live. The
East is popularly defined as the prosperous and wealthy area where “oligarch, imperialist and government opponents” live, while the West is the poor and disadvantaged area, home of most government supporters.

Based on this cartography, political groups gather either on one side or the other, reinforcing the imaginary division where East/West represents concepts of public exclusion/inclusion. In addition to the political segregation, these concepts have emphasized social segregation, which is expressed through urban intolerance and political hatred. In order to set apart the “other” from the “self,” these groups need to claim both territories. In this process, Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira have become common mental images carried by numbers of Caracas inhabitants to construct a political apartheid or informal ghettoization based on people’s political preferences. Opponents and supporters have used, and re-created both sites, investing them with their ethos. Therefore, these places have become the setting where relations between both groups occur and where the symbols of those relationships can be read. These symbols are physical and/or conceptual, and in both forms they have redefined the relationship between people and places. In summary, my project constitutes an ethnography of public places in Venezuela, particularly in contemporary Caracas and examines the uses and meanings of these two places and their roles in the politics of the city.

1.2. WHEN DOES PUBLIC SPACE/PLACE EXIST? PUBLIC SPACE IN LATIN AMERICA.

Since the 1980s several studies about the role and significance of public spaces have taken place in the Latin American context, especially in Mexico, Colombia and
Brazil. Despite the affirmation that public places are vanishing or “dying” (Cabales Barajas 2002; Caldeira 2000; García Canclini 1995; Jacobs 1961; Mitchell 2003) because they are frequently privatized, many recent studies show that Latin American public places are very much “alive”.  

Without doubt, cities around the world have dramatically changed throughout recent decades, and Latin American capitals are no exception. High population growth, increasing traffic, pollution, insecurity and poverty combined with overwhelming technological innovation have changed not only the way we live but also our cities. In addition, the ways in which we communicate, interact, exposed to or protected/hidden from others have also modified cities and particularly our definition of public or private places (García Canclini 2004:13). Changes in the ways we live together—or changes in our daily lives—continue to shape and re-shape the conditions of public places. Moreover it is recognizable that due to changes in public life some public places are now used for private purposes (Carr 1992:xi), conditions that have caused a variety of concerns and led to predictions of an apocalyptic end to public places.

Concerns about the development of more “corporate plazas, shopping centers, malls, re-created streets and theme parks” (Signorelli 2004:116-119) are based on the fact that these segregated, specialized and enclosed environments “do not favor heterogeneous, anonymous encounters” (Caldeira 2000:327). I agree that as the twenty-

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1 This concern is partially based on the fact that public places have lost their political quality or because politics have disappeared from them (Signorelli 2004:120). There is extensive literature in geography that makes this claim and offers examples from around the world. For instance the Symposium held in New Orleans 2004 under the title The Privatization of Urban Space discussed cases from England, Lisbon, Bulgaria, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, China, South Africa, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

first century has progressed, social interaction in capital cities has drastically changed but not necessarily disappeared. Before going further with that argument we need to define public space/place. In doing so, I follow what García Canclini suggests as “the use of a new ontological paradigm that instead of asking “Qué es?” [What is it?] asks “Cúando hay?” [When is there?] (García Canclini 2010). The classical ontology has taught us to look for answers based on questioning “what is this/that?” but as globalization and technologies “dis-inter-connect” the world, I maintain the call for a new paradigm is imperative. So instead of asking “what is public space/place?” I will try to answer the question “when does public space/place exist?” Removing the ontological clause we have to search for the conditions that allow the existence of public space/place. García Canclini summarizes the question, citing the title of Antonio Deltoro’s book “Hacia dónde es aquí?” (1984) which translates as “Where is here?” Then…

1.2.1. Where is Space/Place?

Depending on the variety of theoretical approaches and features highlighted we could bring together numerous categories to classify spaces and places, i.e., Euclidean space, Cartesian space, open space, individual space, green space, social space, “embodied space, gendered space, inscribed space, contested space, transnational space” (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003:1) and many more. Categories are not mutually exclusive and a list would be inconclusive (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003:1) however no empirical project could be undertaken unless we categorize the object of analysis (Kilian 1998:115) in this case “public” and “space”.

There are many definitions of space and place as disciplines; as Kuper says, “space is one of those complex concepts that has been approached from different angles
and at different levels—philosophical, scientific, and social—and it is obvious from dictionary definitions that the word ‘space’ has a whole range of meanings related to these different approaches” (Kuper 1972:411). In ancient Philosophy Plato [c 427 B.C.] considered space as the third genre of reality (Ferrater Mora 1965a); in the Timaeus [d. 347 B.C.] he explains that space—which is eternal and indestructible—provides a position for everything that comes to be—“space is a receptacle and a seat or place ‘in which’ things occur” (Waterfield and Gregory 2008:1).

Aristotle rejected the Platonic idea of space; he insisted that space was neither a receptacle nor an empty space. He considered “space” as the sum total of all places occupied by bodies, and “place” [Greek, topos] as that part of space whose limits correspond with the limits of the occupying body (Ferrater Mora 1965b:561). Thus, Aristotle viewed space in terms of place, which he defined as the inner or adjacent boundary of the containing body or receptacle, and space as the sum total of all places (Ferrater Mora 1965b:561).

After the middle of the twelfth century, Aristotle’s views came to dominate the Middle Ages, and authors referred more to the idea of place and made classifications such as sacred or profane places, urban and/or rural, etc (Ferrater Mora 1965b:562-564). Later, philosophers such as Descarte, Newton, Kant, Hobbes, Hume and Hegel, among others, argued over this concept and most of them agreed to define space as a ‘universal container’ (Ferrater Mora 1965b:564-566). Nowadays our understanding of space has undergone many transformations, from the time of Plato to the most revolutionary theories. However, those diverse definitions were not considered in anthropological
theories until the end of the nineteenth century in the writing of Sir Henry Maine, Herbert Spencer and Lewis Henry Morgan (Kuper 1972:411).

In anthropology, as Kuper quotes, the concept of space was initially defined “as a principle in the structuring of social relations” (1972:411) and it was Durkheim [1915] who first defined it as a universal “collective representation” (1915:10-12) socially constructed. Studying the ways in which different societies classify space, Durkheim concluded that different cultures have different understandings of space and this understanding reflects the structure of each particular society.

Later, anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard continued studying the relations between space and social structures and found links between communities’ territorial organization and aspects of their political, economic and social structure. Radcliffe-Brown, for example, describes tribes from Western Australia and cited for instance that every male in those tribes was attached by birth and throughout his life with a particular territory while women became attached to the territory of their husbands (Racliffe-Brown 1976:170).

Malinoswki included an extensive description of communities’ territories as a part of his ethnographic fieldwork and encouraged all his students to develop an ethnographic method, as he did in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* [1922], where the territorial characteristics were recorded as components of “the organization of the tribe, and the

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3 Using ethnographic data from Australian aboriginal, native American and Chinese societies Durkheim and Mauss (1963) illustrate their arguments about time and space. For instance, the authors found that the Zuni classified the universe into a system of seven regions: North, South, West, East, Zenith, Nadir and the center. This division of the world is exactly the same as that of the clans in the pueblos of Sioux. Conversely, the Chinese, based on their astronomical, geomantic and horoscopy divinatory system, divided the universe according to four cardinal points with an animal presiding over an identified region. Each region has the same color of the animal and assigned things bearing characteristics of the animal, —Azure Dragon/East, Red Bird/South, White Tiger/West, Black Tortoise/North and the four cardinal points are divided into a total of eight divisions or powers.
anatomy of its culture” (Malinowski 1999:9). He emphasizes the importance of space and
time in any cultural analysis. In his classic ethnography of the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard
(1940) analyzes the interaction of territorial units from a structuralist rather than
functionalist perspective, and finds a social dimension in the Nuer’s settlement patterns.

In the third chapter of his book *The Nuer* the author introduces the concept of “structural
distance” which postulates in a structural functionalist perspective that Nuer social life is
structurally ordered and that a person’s obligations and duties are determined by his/her
position as determined by territorial divisions.

In the sixties, Lévi-Strauss emphasized the connection between spatial
organization and social structure and advised anthropologists that “certain native societies
project into space a schema of their institutions, therefore studying the spatial phenomena
permits to grasp the natives’ own conception of the social structure” (Levi-Strauss
1963:331). His book *Tristes Tropiques* published in 1955, a masterpiece in anthropology,
reveals Lévi-Strauss’ interest in space.

Theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Manuel Castells (1983), Michel de
Certeau (1984), David Harvey (1990; Harvey 1996), Anthony King (1980; King 1996),
theoretical frameworks to understand the relationship between the social production of
space and the political economy. They all agree that places are socially and culturally
constructed as well as politicized by the people who inhabit them.

Both social and cultural perspectives have brought to today’s anthropological
theory different approaches to understanding space and how it is transformed into place.
These perspectives have focused on the social relations, experiences, or meanings of
space and place. For instance, anthropologist Hilda Kuper observed three decades ago that people interact and shape space and time according to cultural variables. As a consequence, social interactions may be empirically defined through their use of sites and symbolically configured through the language of sites (Kuper 1972:421).

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) produced a theory that recognizes that the world may be ordered by powerful rules and norms that determine human action, but also recognizes that human action may modify those rules and norms. Bourdieu interprets social life as constituted by both individual decision and supra-individual structures. In this perspective, body and space exist in a dialectical relationship, as the one illustrated through Bourdieu’s description of a non-capitalist society such as the Kabile. As he illustrates, space emerges through “the movements and displacements” of “going in and coming out, filling and emptying, opening and shutting, going leftwards and going rightwards, going westward and going eastwards, etc” (Bourdieu 1977:90-91). Using that approach he analyzes the Kabyle house. For Bourdieu (1977) the space is constructed in the practice of the world of objects and in the symbolic manipulation of body experience. I find Bourdieu’s theory important because it links bodies as sites of social differences with the production of social space and the socio-spatial order. Based on his perspective I think that urban space can be analyzed as a sort of structure which suggests and allows certain style of life while restraining others, however urban space is not alien to the social

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4 Therefore, the Kabyle house is above all the principal locus to express the system of hierarchies between things, persons and practices. The opposition between the sacred of the right hand and the sacred of the left hand, between nif and haram, between man, invested with protective, fecundating virtues, and woman, at once sacred and charged with maleficent forces, and, correlative-inively, between religion [male] and magic [female], is also reproduced in the spatial division between male space, with the place of assembly, the market, or the fields, and female space, the house and its garden, the retreats of haram.” (Bourdieu 1977:89).
practice or agency that occurs in it or vice versa. It is from the interaction between both—the urban form and the practice of the world—that urban space is constructed.

Another way of looking at space and place through practice is presented by Michel de Certeau in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). De Certeau’s ideas about space and place are engaged as part of his extensive set of discourses about the body as a cultural process and an orientation in space; however, the author distances himself from Bourdieu’s practical theories to move closer to the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. To de Certeau “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements... a place is the order in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence...” (De Certeau 1984:117). A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions; “space is a practiced place” made by social practice (De Certeau 1984:117). The distinctions the author makes between space and place are more like the one established by De Saussure between language and parole. Space refers to the abstract system of rules and conventions over which practice occurs while place refers to concrete instances of its use. The work of de Certeau makes us think about the dynamic of place, which rather than being a container of human activity is made of it.

To analyze place as both socially and culturally constructed, Augé (1995) offers his definition of “anthropological place.” For Augé, an anthropological place is a “concrete and symbolic construction of space, which could not of itself allow for the vicissitudes and contradictions of social life, but which serves as a reference for all those it assigns to a position however humble and modest... it is a principle of meaning for the people who live in it, and also a principle of intelligibility for the person who observes it”
(Augé 1995:52). And at the same time Augé’s ‘anthropological place’ is characterized as a “place of identity, relations and histories” (Augé 1995:52).

The first characteristic of the anthropological place describes it as a component of individual and social identity. Thus “to be born is to be born in a place and the place of birth is a constituent of one’s individual identity” (Augé 1995:53). The second attribute recognizes place as capable of holding the order in harmony with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence beside one another. For instance, once one is born “there are rules of residence which assign a child a position and inscription to the land he shares with others according the position in relation to his mother, his father or maternal uncle or grandmother” (Augé 1995:54). All relations are inscribed in a place and also in time. As a consequence, a place becomes automatically historical; this is its third characteristic. From the same moment those who live in a place may recognize landmarks which do not have to be objects of the history as science, but are part of their own lives and memories (Augé 1995:54); they are living in what Augé defines as anthropological place.

Using a different language, David Harvey (1996) also shows that places are socially constructed; however his attention is focused on the established forces that rule society — capitalist rules. Harvey bases the process of place construction on two premises, the first being that “spaces become charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Harvey 1996:294) and they turn into places. Secondly, places are the locus of “imaginaries”, “social relations” and “material practices” (1996:294). Therefore, places are “heterogeneous, dialectical and dynamic configurations of relative ‘permanences’ within the overall spatio-temporal dynamics of social-ecological
processes” (1996:294). In other words, Harvey looks at places as permanent entities in constant tension with the new styles of production and consumption, and it is the mobility of capital that determines the social relations and material practices that constitute places.

More recently anthropologists like Setha Low (1996b; 1996c; 2000) have approached the concept of place through a perspective of social production and social construction of space, in which people are seen as “social agents.” By “social production” she refers to the physical creation of the material setting, while the “social construction” is reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social process such as exchange, conflict and control (Low 1996c:861). According to Low’s thesis, “the social construction of space refers to the transformation of space in place through people’s social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting” (Low 1996c:862).

Contemporary geographers such as Don Mitchell (2002) also emphasize the social and cultural construction of place; he explains for example that people create places “they not only live in [or on] they make those places their own by investing them with meaning” (Mitchell 2002:215). Therefore, places are the locales where interactions between the self and the other are performed, and where those interactions can be “read” through symbolic behavior. These symbols can be physical and/or conceptual, and in both cases they re-define and control tensions between social groups.

Despite the examples mentioned above, until the 1970s most anthropologists considered space as merely the location and stage of human activities. After that time, anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists developed new perspectives that explored different interpretations of spatiality to more deeply explore its social and cultural
aspects. Nowadays most disciplines have come to recognize that people do not live in a fixed grid of Euclidean geometry but in a world made of social relations, meanings and feelings.

Considering space and place as socially and culturally constructed categories has given room to a variety of interpretations which analyze, for instance, class inequalities and urbanization in capitalist society (Castell 1983; Harvey 1996; Lefebvre 1993; Massey 1991), peoples’ emotional attachment and space (Tuan 1977), space, gender and power (hooks 2000; Massey 1994) politic, identity and space (Soja 1989) and globalization and space (Harvey 1990) among other aspects.

I consider space to be one of the “universal concepts of the human mind” (Durkheim 1982:180); however the way in which people deal with space make it also a social and cultural construction. That is, the whole is more than merely the sum of the parts: the whole in this case--the abstract spatial form--should be considered in terms of the social relations through which it is constructed (Massey 2005). The whole is not just one thing but the co-existence of many things. Now, how do things occupy and correlate to the whole? This question requires further investigation, I agree “there are no general rules of space and place, in the sense of a universal politics of abstract spatial forms…Rather, there are spatialised social practices and relations, and social power.” (Massey 2005:161). Therefore, “particular answers, to particular questions of space and place must be sought” (Massey 2005:166).

In search of some answers that could illuminate the studies of space and place, I analyze in this project two specific public places as units “socially and culturally constructed” (Low 1996c) over time; as “focus of the imaginary, of beliefs, longings,
and desires” and also “intense focus of discursive activity, filled with symbolic and representational meanings, …product of institutionalized social and political economic power” (Harvey 1996:316) which represent the dynamic of spatialized social practices, relations and power in contemporary Venezuela.

1.2.2. The conditions of public space/place.

According to the Oxford Dictionary the word “public” originated around 1400-50 from the Latin word *pūblicus* or “pertaining to the people,” which was similar to the earlier words *pōblicus*, *pōplicus*, and *populus* that also referred to “people.” Currently the word *public* has various applications, for instance as an adjective it refers to “open, accessible or shared by all members of a community” and as a noun means “something provided by the government and for the use of people in general” (Ercan 2010:22). Overall all the meanings refer to the affair, entertainment, and service open or known to people “indicating a relationship to both society and the state” (Madanipour 2010b:8). According to that *public space* could be described as “a space concerning the people as a whole, open to all, accessible to or shared by all members of the community, provided by the public authorities for the use of people in general” (Ercan 2010:23).

However, the idea of *public* as an absolute value has been strongly criticized, first, because “public is not a single entity, [but one] composed of different strata [therefore] with a different set of characteristics, interests and powers” (Madanipour 2010b:9). In theory “public is by nature a universalizing construct that assumes a collective whole” but what one experience in reality is that “public is fragmented into marginalized groups, many of whom have no voice, position or representation in the public spheres” (Ercan 2010:24). Critics have shown that differentiation and “maintenance of boundaries
between public and private social worlds has often excluded women, the elderly, children, ethnic minorities and the poor form the public interest agendas to privilege the elite” in other words to justified for instance “the power of the elite at the expense of the poor” or the male superiority versus female inferiority (Madanipour 2010b:8).

A second critic is that public should not be presumed as a radical opposition to private but as a continuum movement between levels of “publicness” and/or “privateness.” From this point of view we understand that an “urban environment” should not be dichotomized as a single and ideal unit “composed of absolutely public and private spaces” but one defined by varying “degrees of ‘publicness’ and ‘privateness’ (Ercan 2010:25). Subsequently the degree to which a place is public needs to be defined.

As suggested by some authors three main characteristics should be considered to determine the extent to which a place is public: access, actor/agency and interest (Benn and Gaus 1983; Ercan 2010; Madanipour 2010b). These three characteristics refer to “the rules of access, the source and nature of control over entry and the rules of use” of a public space. This categorization enables the instrumental delineation of publicness degrees and establishes —as summarized in the chart below— that public space should offer physical and social access to all and the opportunity to equally participate in activities, discussions and exchange of information. Moreover, public space should be run by public actors and use by the public for the common and general welfare of all members of society.

Nonetheless a fourth category is added to also consider the symbolic dimension of public space (Madanipour 2010b:10). This additional category makes room for the analysis of qualitative values such as the “performance and assertion of identity”, and the
“set of emotional and meaningful [collectives] ties” to public place (Light and Smith 1998:3; Madanipour 2010b:10).

The table below summarizes the definitions of ‘public space’ based on the criteria of access, actor, agency and symbolism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PUBLIC SPACE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Physical access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A space that is physically accessible to all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A space that is socially accessible to all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Access to activities and discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A space where the activities and discussions on its development and use processes are accessible to all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Access to information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A space where the information regarding its development and use processes is accessible to all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actor</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A space that is controlled by public actors, and used by the public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interest</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A space that serves the public interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symbolism</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A space that allow the affirmation of collective identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.a. These dimensions are not exclusive but overlapping and they are useful to define the varying degrees of public space’s publicness (Ercan 2010:23-25; Madanipour 2010b:9-10).

Assessing these four features delineates levels of public space’s publicness but they also need to be analyzed in terms of social relations and practices. Certainly individuals as much as institutions using their political, economic and cultural power and influence have shaped and determined some of the features of the urban space (Madanipour 2010a:237). Traditionally, “the more powerful individuals and institutions make substantial physical and institutional changes in the cities [and its public places], while the claims by the less powerful groups may take softer, temporary forms” and stay misrepresented (Madanipour 2010a:237). Then “public space is not only defined by its use but by the process of its definition” (Kilian 1998:117). Considering these variety of
perspectives public space should be defined by its materiality, uses, representation and by the power relations that exist within it (Kilian 1998:117).

Society exists because of social interactions, and social interactions and practices exist because of their presence in public space, the space “where social groups and social relations become visible and public” (Mitchell 1995:116). But public space is not only where social relations are embedded and perceived but also where they are constantly re-invented and re-created. Additionally, if public space is the space for representation —given its dynamism— it is also the space for misrepresentations and manifestations of absence and inexistence. Historically “public space has been anything but inclusive” and “a site for and a source of conflict” (Mitchell 1995:121) where not everyone gets to be represented. A brief look at the way in which public spaces have functioned throughout history shows that they have never been places of completely free access and unmediated interaction, but often places of inclusion/exclusion (Mitchell 2003; Pardo 2008; Salcedo Hansen 2002), as I will illustrate later in the case of Caracas.

From this perspective, public space is a material location where physical and social access and use is ideally opened for the shared and general welfare of all members of society. And it is also a site which expresses the multiplicity of people’s social lives, and how life gets linked to places through processes of socio-political and economic interaction and power struggles (Low 2000; Mitchell 1995). Relying on these theorizing perspectives I add that public “places are the product of social relations that are most likely conflicting and unequal” (Massey 2005:152) making them more than anything places to express and practice power.
Based on this argument I consider that few spaces and places are, or ever have been, “absolutely” public; pragmatically speaking, the quality or gradient of public or publicness of a space constantly varies and the variations can be historically and culturally examined through the analysis of public space’s publicness and its categories of social interactions. For instance, the transformations of Latin America’s public space illustrate how people’s lives are linked to places’ material and social form through processes of power struggles as described in the next section.

1.2.3. Latin America’s public space.

As Pardo (2008:29) suggests, the origin of Latin America’s public space is linked to the genesis of public space in Europe, not only as a physical construction but also as a political and cultural concept. Although certain forms of public spaces existed in several pre-Hispanic cities, three centuries of Spanish and Portuguese colonization forced a “radical renunciation of traditional values and repudiations of a style of life” (Lévi-Strauss 1992:339), in which most idiosyncratic and local forms of urban life were either lost or devalued. With few exceptions—in which the new cities were built on the sites of existing indigenous towns—“almost all new squares [in Latin America] were traced out of virgin land” (Hardoy and Hardoy 1978:70). Therefore a significant part of the origin of Latin America’s current public spaces can be traced back to Europe.

In the medieval city “public spaces were the places of transition such as atriums, palaces entrances, streets but most importantly the markets” (Pardo 2008:30). These spaces offered the opportunity for social gathering, but the market, despite its form and/or location, was the main public place.

“The medieval city had only one essential kind of square; the market place…to whatever formal type it may be considered to belong, was not planned in three
dimensional terms, as something to be seen… According to medieval ideas, the market square was not the visual culmination of the city but its centre in the functional sense — the place of exchange from which all urban culture stems: exchange of goods, of course, but also of cultural information and stimulus” (Pahl 1978:28).

Later during the Renaissance the socio-economic dynamic and intellectual ideas were completely different than in the Middle Ages. The idea that “even if a man has no inherited possessions he can by personal efficiency take part in economic life and have a share in industrial power” not only fed the European early capitalistic period but also replaced any mystical previous ideology (Pahl 1978:32). If during the feudal days the individual only gained status, either as a member of a lordly or servile group, the Renaissance declared the individual’s independence and personal expression as the driving force of the new economic and cultural development. These principles were immediately manifested through art, architecture and urbanism. Cities were redesigned and stratified by zoning and social status (Ackerman and Rosenfeld 1989:21-22) and public places such as squares were rapidly re-created “as decoration for the city, as evidence of the citizens’ artistic taste, as work of art in their own right” (Pahl 1978:33) and not necessarily as spaces of socialization for everyone.

In the Renaissance, spaces that were conceived as public were most of the time reserved for the exclusive access of the bourgeois class. For instance, squares were dedicated to the exchange of goods and reserved for members of certain guilds, and parks or gardens were fenced off for the exclusive use of the royal families (Pardo 2008:31). Later in the period of emerging absolutism those aspects were emphasized; the Baroque square became the space to “provide [the] scenery… which would impressively demonstrate the pretensions to sovereignty, the claims to power, of autocrats and their
institutions” (Pahl 1978:38) and their access was also kept restricted. But it was during the Renaissance that the morphology of the European cities reached perfection and then became widely spread in Latin America (Claval 1984:36).

In Spain the plazas that would later inspire those of Latin America became the civic and administrative centers of the city and headquarters of the local authorities (Hardoy and Hardoy 1978:68). The space of the plaza evolved to reach a characteristic monumentality as shown in Valladolid, Madrid, Salamanca and Vitoria, whose plazas were completed by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and served as models for those built in the colonies (Hardoy and Hardoy 1978:68).

By the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, due to population increases in European cities the idea of public parks emerged as a response to the recreational needs of the inhabitants (Pardo 2008:32) but this was just the excuse to impose an elitist agenda of social exclusion. Parks were conceived as open spaces in terms of access and function but they were also used for political confrontations. For instance, Rotenberg illustrates the opposition between absolutism and liberalism expressed in the design of the baroque gardens, “gardens of liberty” and “gardens of pleasure” (Rotenberg 1995). Paris was the center of this new concept of spaces and boulevards, and spacious streets became part of the new urban process. These spaces were initially designed for leisure and entertainment, but after the confrontations that took place in Paris during the nineteenth century, public spaces gained a new meaning and function. The bourgeois utopia claimed these spaces for the citizens, however the popular classes were always excluded (Pardo 2008:33) and once again these models had an impact on the Latin American colonies.
In Latin America archeological research has confirmed the existence of pre-Hispanic cities approximately two thousand years ago. These cities began to appear in Mesoamerica between 600 – 0 B.C and on the southern Andean and Peruvian coast during 200 – 600 A.D. Their complexity and sizes varied, but these cities also had common spaces dedicated for meeting, work and exchange. Cities with more defined open spaces began to be built toward the year 1200 B.C. and Teotihuacan is one of the best examples:

“The cruciform outline adopted [in Teotihuacan] served as a basis for the planned layout of a quadriform space with similar modules. At the junction of the two axes a ceremonial complex was built, now called the Ciudadela, quadrangular in form, with sides 400 meters long, sunk to a lower level than the platform surrounding it. The sunken square could hold almost all the population of Teotihuacán, estimated at about 85,000 inhabitants at the height of its importance, between the fourth and sixth centuries A.D. In front of the Ciudadela were found the ruins of another complex, never excavated, thought to have served as the city’s market” (Hardoy and Hardoy 1978:60-61)

There is no specific evidence regarding the function of these open spaces, but studies suggest that most likely these squares have been used for ceremonial functions and as spaces for the marketplace. In the case of Tenochtitlán—the main city that the Spaniards found when they arrived in Mexico for the first time—the market square was an open and ample area that held tens of thousands of people (Hardoy and Hardoy 1978:62). In Cuzco—the Inca capital in modern Perú—and Tikal—the Mayan city in Modern Guatemala—the central square also served as the center for feasts, ceremonies and the market. In these pre-Hispanic cultures, social stratification was also practiced and spaces were classified to maintain the social divisions.

Once the Spaniards arrived in the colonies, the new cities adopted European ideas, and squares were the places for gathering, but according to the hierarchies of a rigidly
stratified society. For instance, Indians were separate from Spaniards and had their own square for market and trade (Hardoy and Hardoy 1978:69-77). These conditions remained through the end of the colonial period, when boulevards and public parks became the new open and public—but also socially restricted—spaces.

The twentieth century witnessed the overwhelming population growth and density of the modern cities. In Latin America, modern urbanism led the cities into the ideals of vehicular transportation, highways and communications; the main goal was to move toward the progress inspired by the automobile and the industrial society (Pardo 2008:34). This movement emphasized socio-spatial segregation, relocating the popular classes to the less-favored areas and reducing public spaces to whatever was left over after the intense private occupation of the city (Pardo 2008:34). By the 1960s a serious urban revision took place, but most Latin American capital cities were already composed of fragmented and disconnected pieces working in synch with increasing privatization interests. Shantytowns and tangential urban development grew, disconnected from the cities, and became characteristics of the landscape, emphasizing social segregation.

In this urban crisis, despite the current concern about the loss of public space, plazas and squares are recognized by Caracas’ inhabitants as significant and vital public places. My project constitutes an ethnography of public places in Venezuela and examines the uses and meanings of these places and their roles in the politics of the city. The latest changes in Venezuela’s political life present the ideal locale for anthropological research, which can help us to understand the role public spaces play in the opportunities for political participation here and elsewhere.
This approach may help us understand how people are situated in the world and how they think and act politically within it, and fill in gaps in the English-language academic literature that deals with the anthropology of space and place, urban design and architecture in Latin America. To the best of my knowledge, the research will be the first in Venezuela to offer a coherent documentation of the use of public space as a powerful tool in the re-definition of power, history and citizenship. This research will contribute to analyses of the meanings invested in public spaces as a way to approach the social conflicts taking place therein, and its consequences for democratic practice and symbolic representation.

1.3. THE RESEARCH PROCESS.

1.3.1. My Research Interest.

I was born in Maracaibo, Venezuela to a middle-class family in the mid-sixties during a peaceful political period of democratic history. My Venezuelan identity was at first legally acquired with a document called “Partida de Nacimiento”\(^5\) which later became a secondary document, replaced by my “Cédula de Identidad,”\(^6\) a card that clearly states, [in capital letters] my status as “VENEZOLANO.”\(^7\) According to the law, these documents are sufficient steps to guarantee one’s status as a legally-recognized Venezuelan citizen, but I add first time participation in the presidential elections as a third important step. Although I had never been involved with any political party I had always been interested in Venezuelan political life, and alongside many other young citizens, I eagerly awaited the opportunity to consolidate my status as Venezuelan

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\(^5\) This is a document to prove that one was born in the Venezuelan territory and whom are his/her parents.

\(^6\) It is the Identity Card required for any legal transaction such being registered at school, college, university, etc.

\(^7\) Venezuelan citizen.
through voting in the 1988 presidential elections. Thereafter, my interest in politics grew, particularly after 1998 when Hugo Chávez was elected president.

I completed a B.A. in Architecture at Zulia State University in my home city of Maracaibo in 1994. After three years of working as a freelance architect, I began teaching at the School of Architecture at Zulia State University. While working as a professor, I completed a Master’s Degree in Anthropology; that program allowed me the opportunity to combine my interest in architecture, urban spaces, history, power, identities and heritages with my teaching and research activities. In 2002, I received a Fulbright Scholarship to pursue my PhD in Anthropology at Syracuse University, and that provided the opportunity to develop this research project, which combines my interest in urban spaces and politics.

Despite my Venezuelan identity, at the moment of conducting this research I found myself being an outsider in my home country. I could identify myself as a “native” but I strongly agree with Narayan in the fact that as researchers we are set apart from those we study by factors beyond “the loci which we are aligned with,” for instance, factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class or race exceed in importance the cultural identity we associate with “native” and “non-native” (Narayan 1993:671-672). Then as an “outsider” doing research in her home country, I had the benefit of years of association with Venezuelan culture, which combined with my fluent Spanish skills helped in pursuing my fieldwork in its subtlest and most nuanced cultural aspects. But these benefits came with struggles of “the uneasy distance created by the very nature of researching what for others is taken for granted,” (Narayan 1993:682) in addition to the distance produced by three factors of my cultural identity:
The first one was my identity as a graduate student from an American university; this fact frequently aroused skepticism in my informants, particularly from those who supported the government and were most likely against the “US Empire;” they did not feel comfortable with a study that could be related to any US institution even though it was not a government-linked investigation. However, this was reconciled with my identity as a professor in the School of Architecture from a local university interested in her own country and particularly in Caracas’ public places.

The second factor was shaped by my identity as “maracucha” or “marabina;” both terms describe my origins from the city of Maracaibo and for most “Caraqueños” [Caracas natives] visitors from other Venezuelan cities are nearly equivalent to foreigners.

The third and more conflicting aspect was my apolitical identity. Since I was working with two specific opposing political groups, both sides expected to gain empathy and support from me. They frequently asked about my political preferences, but usually after explaining my research project and given the nature of our conversations, they recognized there was little risk in talking to me. If they insisted on knowing my political preferences, I always tried to keep it simple by recognizing the positive aspects of each group and admitting that in 1998 I did not vote for President Chavez or the opposition party candidate but for Irene Sáez—the third and only female candidate. This helped me to alleviate the concerns of both groups regarding my own political position.

In my case, as Narayan (1993) suggests, recognizing the variety of cultural identities that are part of us as individuals surpasses the fixity of a distinction between “native” and “non-native” (1993:671-672). I had assumed that I would face less
difficulties than an outsider would, but because of my “multiple identities” I had to recognize and assume my dislocation even within that space that I had considered as familiar (Lal 1996:105).

In the end, objectivity is only possible “by an involvement that is unabashedly subjective as it interacts with and invites other subjectivities to take place in anthropological production” (Narayan 1993:682) by constantly re-negotiating between identities and positions of insider and outsider (Lal 1996:108).

1.3.2. In The Field.

After a three-year stay in the United States completing the course work and program requirements necessary to pursue my fieldwork, I moved to Caracas in October 2005. Before going to the field, I identified a variety of public protests addressed during President Chavez’ administration and recorded their locations. In April 2002, while living in Maracaibo, I had documented the attempted *coup d’etat* in Caracas and the way the situation was experienced in Maracaibo by recording the news broadcasts of two local TV stations. I also gathered news from different daily newspapers in the country. Later, while in the United States, I followed international reports on Venezuela’s continuing political demonstrations and collected from the latest national and international reports information on the different marches and congregations that took place, including the daily government and opposition’s reactions and counter-reactions.

My fieldwork combined archival research with ethnographic interviews and participant observation over a period of twelve months. In November 2005, I began my visits to two locations: Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira, given the significance and relevant political events that had taken place in both locations prior to that. During the
first two months I randomly visited both squares, trying to spend the same amount of
time in each place; some days I would visit one plaza during the morning and the other
one during the afternoon or vice versa, just observing, taking notes and drawing sketches
of the daily activities. In January 2006 I started conducting routine observations Monday
through Sunday from morning through afternoon hours; this time I tried to spend full
days or weeks in just one location to be able to record the sequences of daily/weekly
activities. For instance, when I met the prayer group in Plaza Altamira I participated on a
regular basis in their Rosary for almost five months. On average, I spent approximately
twenty weeks in each location. On every visit I took notes at the events that occurred
during the visits, recording them both in my pocket-sized notebooks and with more
refined notes in electronic format using NVivo software.

From the preliminary observations at Plaza Bolívar, I discovered five groups of
subjects who visited the site on a daily basis and tended to remain there throughout:
Government supporters who concentrate on the northwest corner; retired men who
occupy the southeast side, the evangelical group that gathers in front of the cathedral;
informal merchandisers in the plaza and people who cross the plaza in their daily routine.

Although the casual outside observer might perceive visitors to the plaza as just
ordinary people coming and going, frequent visitors are well organized and recognize
each other within the plaza limits. This plaza is a very dynamic space in—which
according to one of my informants—“Everything happens.” All kinds of political,
commercial and social activities occur there, always framed by amazing holiday
decorations, shows and cultural performances.
In Plaza Altamira, however, groups of people vary depending on the time of day. In the mornings and early evenings, the Plaza is congested with large groups of people using the Altamira Metro station either as a final destination or as a connection to other suburban areas. Daily at 8 am one group of people prays the Rosary in front of a Virgin Mary statue. During the evening most people in the plaza are couples or families. Later usually, a few groups of political activists can be found. Much later every night the plaza is used by large groups of prostitutes and homosexuals. Plaza Altamira is also usually decorated for holidays and in December 2005 was the scene of a large International Fashion show.

My primary informants were individuals that regularly visit both plazas and that have been involved in the political activities that have taken place in both. During my first stages of visiting both places and in the process of recording the activities that were going on, I was not able to approach people; I felt somewhat intimidated by the diversity of people coming and going, and I was able to establish only a couple of informal conversations. But in the course of my fieldwork I visited these two locations almost daily and with the help of a colleague that I had met at La Universidad del Zulia, I was finally able to contact members of “La Esquina Caliente” [The Hot Corner] in Plaza Bolívar. This colleague helped introduce me to members of this group, which constituted my main informants from Plaza Bolívar. At the beginning, some of the group’s members were fairly uncommunicative. But after two months, and once they knew the topic of my research, they began to talk freely about their connections with Plaza Bolívar, as well as of their personal political experiences. In the process of making these contacts I found that working in a community with unspecific and fluid territorial borders requires double
the time of working with a specific settled and constrained group. In other words, each Plaza has its own dynamic and many users randomly come and go; therefore establishing contact with them became a real challenge.

At the same time, I also found some contacts in Plaza Altamira. I approached the prayer groups that regularly met at the Plaza and joined them during the Rosary. They welcomed me, and allowed me to participate. This group had an interesting background. They have gathered daily in Plaza Altamira since October 2002, when the Plaza was taken over by the military in opposition to President Chávez. Through this group, I was able to contact a couple of other informants who regularly visited Plaza Altamira and have also been involved in political activities.

Through the course of my fieldwork I conducted open-ended and in depth interviews with thirty-two political participants and recurrent visitors in both plazas for a total of sixty formal interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted on site, but depending on my informants’ schedules, we sometimes had opportunities to share a cup of coffee elsewhere, including their houses. All these interviews were conducted in the local language –Spanish—and I only translated into English the portions that are cited in this dissertation.

In order to identify some of the key public places in the city, I asked informants to sketch maps of Caracas, asking them to first point out its main public places and then to identify the ones that have been politically used.
Figure 1. a. Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira’s location.
Figure 1. c. Plaza Altamiras' location - www.arcgis.com
This graphic freelist technique not only helped me as an introductory exercise to break the ice with my informants, but it was also a useful instrument to get additional information as part of the semi-structured open-ended interviews. These representations or cognitive maps “reflect the world as some person believes it to be;” these maps represent people’s understanding of their environment (Downs 1977:6).

While official, formal cartographic maps are useful instruments to define geopolitical borders, the “vernacular” sketch maps I collected in a sense dissect the official cartography by revealing those forms that are not imposed but voluntarily chosen by people (Mujica 2005). Maps exist in governmental offices and libraries but cognitive maps are drawn and re-drawn constantly in people’s minds. I was able to collect a total of fifty-six sketch maps that I used to identify and describe the cultural domain defined as public places, and explore in more detail information about Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira.

I have used pseudonyms and numbers to protect my informant’s identities, but in most cases I opted for referring to them either as a government “opponents” or “supporters”. In some cases they asked me to use their actual names since their identities were public knowledge. Despite that, I have tried to keep their identities confidential.

Combined with my field visits, informal conversations and interviews, I conducted local archival research mainly in Venezuela’s National Library, looking for documents, ordinances, civic regulations, photographs, maps as well as national and local news items that would help me document life and activities in the selected public places. I found a set of old photographs that showed political demonstrations in Plaza Bolívar, as well as several books and documents describing its history. Since Plaza Altamira,
compared to Plaza Bolívar, is of newer construction there was not much data available, so I decided to collect oral histories from my informants, and compose my own Plaza Altamira historical outline. I was able to contact some relatives of Luis Roche—the real estate investor and designer of Altamira—who provided some pictures and blueprints.

As part of the methodological approach I also participated in several political events that took place in both plazas. For instance, I joined meetings and marches prepared by both government supporters and opponents. To celebrate the January 23rd Anniversary of Venezuela’s Democracy [on the same date in 1958, Venezuelans had defeated their last dictatorial president]. I joined the opposition’s march on Saturday January 21st and the supporters’ march on Sunday January 22nd, taking notes and pictures of both events. I recorded as much information as possible and spoke informally to some participants.

I kept a diary with my field notes and also recorded the in-depth interviews using a digital recorder. After completing the fieldwork the digital files were transcribed into NVivo file format in order to code and classify the data for the analysis.

1.4. IN THE TEXT.

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters, which includes the introductory section and continues with Chapter Two: “From the Land of Grace to The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Five Hundred Years.” In this section I draw a preliminary sketch of the Venezuelan cultural map starting with a brief historical review that leads to the country’s present socio-cultural and geopolitical configuration. The chapter discusses Venezuela’s urban configuration [Caracas’ in particular] and demonstrates the extent to which society, territoriality and spatial forms have reciprocally interacted over time.
Chapter Three, “Cacerolas, marches and public demonstrations: Taking over the city,” analyzes how in the last ten years public places have been recaptured by citizens to be used as forums of public and collective contestation. Contrary to the idea that public places in Venezuela have lost their urban role due to changes in lifestyle, this section describes how Venezuelan public places have gained instead a re-interpretation of their roles.

Chapter Four, “Symbolic Struggle in Venezuela: The Transformation of Plaza Bolívar” discusses the manner in which Plaza Bolívar has been symbolized by Caraqueños, and its use for political purposes. In that process, the notion of “Plaza Bolívar” has become a common mental image carried by many Caracas inhabitants to construct a territorial segregation around public spaces and maintain their power.

Chapter Five, “Expanding the City: Chacao and Altamira” analyzes the current urban configuration of Caracas, comparing Libertador and Chacao Municipalities and the urban role of Plaza Altamira from its inauguration to the present day. I illustrate how the current geopolitical polarization between these two municipalities in Caracas has not been accidental but rather caused by sociopolitical circumstances.

Chapter Six, “Public Plaza, Private Agendas: The Transformation of Caracas’ Plaza Altamira” analyzes the prior militarization and later “religiousfication” of Plaza Altamira, in the context of current civic resistance from the opposition. I explore how some groups in Caracas use Plaza Altamira to push their social, cultural and political agenda to keep and preserve power.

Finally Chapter Seven summarizes the findings and presents ideas about the future of public places.
Chapter Two.

From "The Land of Grace" to
The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela:
Five Hundred and Twelve Years.
CHAPTER TWO.
FROM THE “LAND OF GRACE” TO THE BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA: FIVE HUNDRED AND TWELVE YEARS.

2.1. THE SURROUNDINGS AND PHYSICAL SETTING.

Venezuela—or the República Bolivariana de Venezuela as it was renamed in 1999—is a Latin American country with a richly textured cultural background, characterized by a long democratic political history and substantial national oil income. In addition, the country is known for having the world’s tallest waterfall, as well as for its beauty pageants, telenovelas [soap operas], and not least, for its controversial president, Hugo Chavez Frías. In this section I draw a preliminary sketch of a Venezuelan cultural map starting with a brief historical review that leads to the country’s present socio-cultural and geopolitical configuration. Using Caracas—the capital city—as the key example in this chapter I discuss Venezuela’s urban configuration and demonstrate the extent to which society, territoriality and spatial forms reciprocally interact and affect each other.

Geographically speaking, Venezuela lies on the north coast of South America facing 2,800 kilometers of coastline by the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. The country has a total area of 912,050 square kilometers—an approximately the size of Texas and Oklahoma states together. The borders are shared on the east by Guyana, on the south by Brazil, and on the west by Colombia. Despite its relative small size, the territory contains four different ecosystems: the Maracaibo lowlands in the northwest, the highlands to the west and along the coast, the wide Orinoco plains—or Llanos—in...
central Venezuela, and the Guyana highlands in the southeast; given the diversity each ecosystem offers an extraordinary variety of shapes, colors, textures and aromas. For instance, the Maracaibo lowlands are surrounded by mountains and open to the Caribbean on the north; the topography is very flat with only a few rolling hills. This area is one of the hottest and most humid regions in South America and is famous for having the biggest lake on the continent—Maracaibo Lake—with a total area of 12,500 square kilometers. Approximately 45 percent of the country’s oil production comes from the prolific oilfields located in this area (CNTI 2010). The Venezuelan highlands are a branch of the Andes and an extension of the eastern mountains of Colombia. The city of Mérida—surrounded by the country’s two highest mountain chains—is located there at an elevation of 1,625 meters and it is home to the world’s highest cable car, traveling 4,765 meters [approximately 15,633 feet] to Pico Espejo in the perpetually snow-capped Andean peaks. The cultivation of strawberries, onions, potatoes, garlic, cauliflowers, plantains and coffee are the main source of income in this area (CNTI 2010). The Llanos is a vast plain that extends from the Caribbean coast to the Colombian border between the northern mountains and the Orinoco River. The lands are low and wet, with elevations that never exceed 200 meters and gradually rise to the surrounding highland areas. These features favor the production of livestock, agriculture and fluvial fishing. The Guyana Highlands are located at the South of the Orinoco,\(^9\) which is the third longest river in South America. This territory covers over half of the country’s area and is rich in mineral

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\(^9\) The Orinoco defines much of Venezuela, rising from its headwaters deep in Amazonas, and traveling 2,150 kilometers [1,335 miles] to the Atlantic in the Orinoco Delta region. As it travels east and north, the Orinoco widens, splits and reforms. The Delta is a vast region marked by islands and large rivers [small in comparison to the Orinoco], and is home to a large number of birds, making it a birding paradise. The Warao Indians inhabit this area, still using their native language and existing in a manner that has not changed greatly over the centuries [US Department of State, 2004].
resources such as iron, bauxite, gold and diamonds, and in developed and undeveloped hydropower. The region is also known as La Gran Sabana and is characterized by the flat-topped mountains called “tepuis,” the Pemón\textsuperscript{10} name for mountain. Among these tepuyes,\textsuperscript{11} one can find Angel Falls —979 meters high—the world’s highest waterfall.

The Venezuelan territory is subdivided into 25 administrative areas, classified in 23 states [estados], one capital district [distrito capital] and one federal dependency [dependencia federal]. The federal dependency embraced the eleven Venezuelan island located in the Caribbean. Each state is divided into districts with a capital city. The local government is run by states’ governors and district majors.

Caracas is the country’s capital city located 900 meters above sea level in front of the Caribbean Sea. It is a valley bordered by two branches of the coastal Cordillera, the Naiguata and the Avila mountains in the north, and a chain of hills edges in the south. The capital district is a modern center, and Caracas city is described as one of South America’s more cosmopolitan cities, and also as a land of contrast. The metropolitan area is as advanced as it is underdeveloped, as plain luxurious as it is violently crime-ridden, and as chic as it is downright dirty (Wardrope 2003:48).

\textsuperscript{10} Indigenous group that inhabit the Amazon.

\textsuperscript{11} These natural attractions are among the oldest land forms in South America and the oldest geologic regions in the world.
Figure 2. a. Venezuela's map.
2.2. THE PRE-COLUMBIAN TERRITORY.

Unlike Africa, Asia and Oceania, in the Americas there are no traces of human evolution, however archaeological evidence suggests that the first settlers came from Asia across the Bering Strait between 50,000 B.C. and 9000 B.C. (Lucena Salmoral 1990). In Venezuela’s case, several archaeological researchers place the occupation of its territory at about 5000 BC (Jennings 1983), with the theory that the original population resulted from the migration of both Arawak and Caribe cultures. These groups lived by hunting, fishing, gathering and pottery-making and did not have a centralized political structure such as that of the Inca or Aztec. When the Spaniards arrived they found a large number of relatively small and unrelated tribes that represented different cultures.

Although most literature underestimates the relevance of those indigenous communities, these groups had a rich heritage; according to Sanoja (1997) many had developed permanent villages, roads and transportation; they also hunted with traps, arrows, dart throwers and blowpipes. They managed to domesticate numerous species of plants such as maize, manioc, pumpkin, pineapple, papaya, etc. They also knew how to prepare the fields for agriculture by felling trees and burning vegetation and used methods of irrigation, terracing and fertilization to increase crop yields. Venezuelan natives also developed pottery skills to create cooking utensils. As is illustrated in *El Arte prehispánico de Venezuela* (Arroyo, et al. 1999), this was an old tradition, and pottery can be traced back to 3500 – 3200 AC in the Orinoco area (Sanoja and Vargas Arenas 1999:164).
Figure 2. b. Caracas' relative location.
Most of these groups were semi-nomadic in territorial organization and had no need to divide, claim or own the land; bands or families could provisionally assign part of an area to smaller groups but they shared territory and even houses. For instance, the archives from the fifteenth century describe the common round or rectangular collective houses where an entire community—a couple of hundred individuals—could live (Gasparini 1986:38). The houses described are similar to the *churuatas* still built by Ye’kwana, Panare, Piaroa and Pemón communities in the Venezuelan Amazon and the *bohío* Barí built in the northwestern mountains. These houses hosted various families who shared common land. Nevertheless, other native groups lived in houses that hosted only one family, although it is likely that such spaces as the *fogón* [cooking space] were shared among various families. Compared to the Europeans’ territorial organization, for Venezuelan natives private control over space was less restricted and regulated.

The fifteenth century arrival of the Spaniards brought changes in the territorial organization and spatial forms of the native communities. As Gonzalez (2005:57) explains, the concept of the Renaissance city arrived in the New World aboard the Spaniard’s ships, whereupon it was used as a legal formula that allowed the Conquistadors to claim and transform the new territories. The blueprint of the original city imagined by the Conquistadors provided them with a place to stay, ensuring both secular and religious control.

2.3. THE COLONIAL CONFIGURATION.

On May 30, 1498 Christopher Columbus left the port of San Lúcar de Barrameda in southern Spain, setting his compass for the New World on his third voyage. By July 31, the Admiral had decided to navigate directly to Dominica, the island he had
discovered on his second voyage. He then changed his course to the southeast, finding Trinidad Island that same day. While the crew was collecting water in Trinidad, they spotted the coast of South America, becoming the first Europeans to see that continent (Pickering 2004). On the morning of August 13th, the fleet sailed out of the Gulf of Paria at its northern entrance, and when Columbus landed on the Venezuelan shores, he named the region "Land of Grace" because of its natural splendor.

_Coro_ [1528] was the first city established in Venezuelan territory; soon afterwards, several other cities were organized including Maracaibo, founded by Ambrosio Alfinger in 1529, and Caracas, founded by Diego de Losada in 1567. All of these cities were organized following a grid with an open center space or _plaza mayor_ surrounded by the main buildings; “la iglesia, el cabildo, la casa del gobernador o la casa de la audiencia” (González 2005:62). This urban form or “colonial city” was designed not only to accommodate the newcomers but also as an instrument to limit and claim territory. The role of the city was to guarantee control over the land, to preserve the colonizers’ culture and to promote the region’s development (Romero 1976:17).

To settle the first cities of the New World, the newcomers relied on their intuition and previous experience, as well as the general directions established in the Papal grants and the Treaty of Tordesillas [1493].

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12 According to the historical archives, Maracaibo had three different attempts at foundation: 1. In September 1529, the German Captain Ambrosio Alfinger founded a town inhabited by native settlers that he established as the main city. 2. In January 1569, Captain Alonso Pacheco rebuilt the town and named it Ciudad Rodrigo de Maracaibo, but four years later it was abandoned. 3. Finally in 1574, Captain Pedro Maldonado founded the city as Nueva Zamora de la Laguna, which was consolidated at the beginning of 17th century(IDFA 1996).
Figure 2. c. First map of Santiago León de Caracas drawn by Antonio Munoz Ruiz from the original map located at the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Spain (De-Sola Ricardo 1967).
The first instructions and norms about the territorial organization were prepared in 1513 by Fernando the Catholic and then a century later by Philip II who enacted “The Ordinances for the Discovery, the Population and the Pacification of the Indies” (Gasparini 1991:14-16). The Ordenanzas de Descubrimiento13 [Ordinances of Discovery] —1513, 1526 and 1543— and Las Leyes de India [Law of the Indies] —1573 stated:

“No. 111. Those who will comply [with the Ordinances] will execute them in the following manner; arriving at the place to be settled by the people, we order that the location shall be unoccupied, and it can be occupied by our order, without prejudice to the Indians and natives, or with their free consent; make the plan of the place, distributing space for its plazas, streets, and solares, with measuring cord and rule, beginning from the principal plaza, and from there taking the streets to the gates and principal roads, and leaving sufficient open space to that even though the population might increase, it is possible always to proceed in the same manner, and having laid out the site and place that is to be chosen for settling, make the ground plan in the following manner” (Snow 1990:60-61).

At the beginning, colonizers unaware of these rules established modest towns that combined European and local traditions, resources and knowledge with order and practicality, for instance Santo Domingo —the first Spanish city founded in America— had an irregular urban shape as many other cities founded in the late fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth centuries. The goal was to impose Christianity as well as to maintain feudal and monarchic authority (Sack 1986:95). Therefore, the design of the new cities combined both religious and secular spatial forms that worked as instruments to achieve the mission. A perfect orthogonal grid was the ideal and most convenient solution, although in reality most of the towns were laid out like an irregular

13 Phillip II of Spain promulgated in 1573 a series of regulations called Ordenanzas de Descubrimiento [Ordinances of Discovery] that specified the founding of settlements in the Spanish new world. These Ordinances specified all the requirements for the selection of sites to build a town and capital and to lay out the settlement (Tigges 1990:4).
Many studies have been done about the origin of the urban grid that Spaniards brought to Latin America. Some theorists give credit to the Helenist and Roman cities, others the medieval and Renaissance European models, while still others recognize the existence of the gridiron plan in pre-Columbian cities. Despite the origin of the urban style, the grid or chessboard was the easiest solution for the foundation and design of colonial cities.

The plaza was the “political and social center” (Lejeune 2003:39) and stood as the key space of the city, at the intersection of the main axes or streets. Despite its emptiness, the plaza powerfully contrasted with the visible hierarchy of power represented by the Catholic churches and civic buildings in the surrounding area (Lejeune 2003:39-40).

The motivation for founding the first Venezuelan cities was fueled by the belief that the Venezuelan coasts were rich in pearls and gems that could be easily exploited. When colonizers realized the land did not contain the wealth they expected, their interest diminished rapidly, and instead they decided to use the coast as a strategic secure port that helped protect their ships from attack by foreign enemies and pirates while they explored other territories.

As a consequence, the first Venezuelan cities developed slowly, and it was not until the late sixteenth century when agriculture became Venezuela's principal economic facet that the urban centers started to expand. The rich farmlands of the Andes, the western plains, and especially the fertile valleys surrounding Caracas made Venezuela agriculturally self-sufficient and also provided a surplus of products for export, such as wheat, tobacco, and leather. By 1620, cocoa became Venezuela's principal export and for

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14 Two relevant references for the urban morphogenesis since the ancient Roman cities are Leonardo Benevolo (1980) and James Vance (1990).
the next two centuries its sizable profits attracted a significant immigration of Spaniards, whose plantation culture created a great demand for African slaves during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and attracted Dutch and British merchants as well.

The coexistence of natives, Europeans and African slaves was possible through a diverse social classification and stratification. For instance in colonial Caracas, natives, mestizos, blacks, mulatos, pardos and zambos were located at the bottom of the social and spatial hierarchy while white Spaniards and creoles were at the top holding all the rights and benefits. However the colonial city had a peculiar dialectic tension. On the one hand, it spatially segregated to the point of exclusion those at the lowest levels, but on the other hand it embraced under one religious belief and language all the inhabitants thus articulating a cultural syncretism. Therefore, in theory, the colonial city was an imported western model, but in reality it combined local and European forms, symbols, expressions and technology.

2.3.1. Santiago León de Caracas.

Since its establishment in 1578, Caracas was designated the capital of the Venezuelan Providence [1577] and later capital of the General Captaincy of Venezuela [1777] and its organization was laid out following the colonial pattern. According to this model the Plaza was the heart of the city and society, and it was designed following the Ordinances of Discovery:

“No. 112. The principal plaza from where it [the settlement] is to start…should be an extended quadrangle, that should be at least one and half [times] as long as its width; since in this manner it is best for processions on horseback and many other that might be made. No. 113. The grandeur of the plaza should be proportionate to the number of citizens…it should not be less than 200 feet in width and 300 in length, nor greater than 800 feet long and 400 wide. No. 114. From the plaza shall
begin four principal streets, one [shall be] from the middle of each side, and two streets from each corner of the plaza; the four corners of the plaza shall face the four winds… **No. 115.** Around the plaza as well as along the four principal streets which begin there, there shall be portals… **No. 116.** In cold places the streets shall be wide and in hot places narrow; but for purposes of defense in areas where there are horses, it would better if they are wide. **No. 126.** In the plaza, no lots shall be assigned to private individuals; instead they shall be used for buildings of the church and royal houses and for city use, but shops and houses for the merchants should be built first to which all the settlers of the town shall contribute… **No. 127.** The other building lots shall be distributed by lottery to the settlers, continuing with the lots closer to the main plaza, and the lots that are left shall be held by use for assignment to those who shall latter come settlers…and so that this may be ascertained better, the town shall maintain a plan [*traza*] of what is being built” (Snow 1990:61-62).

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**Figure 2.** d. Map of Caracas circa 1775 (Desantes 2010).
As mentioned before these regulations were expedited throughout the new territories not only to assure that the urban ideals of Southern European utopia and Baroque fantasy were imposed, but also to insure that people would be segregated according to social characteristics; Santiago León de Caracas was no exception.

The city was settled in a rich valley with an agreeable climate; the lots were distributed to build houses, prearranged according to the hierarchy of the settlers. The space for the plaza and the church were left empty and in symmetrical order with the streets. The Plaza Mayor was the focal point; farther out were the homes of the important people, while the lower social classes occupied outlying areas. In a social context, Caracas’ foundational layout followed the regulations and stratified the population in a concentric scheme in which the urban elite, made up of an aristocracy or a high class of white landholders (Castro 1993:19-20)—most of them Creole—clustered around the Plaza Mayor. Meanwhile, less wealthy people—such as newcomers from Spain, pardos, Indians, and blacks—lived in areas more distant from the center (González-Casas 2002:238).

Figure 2. c. Plaza Mayor circa 1866 (Bravo 2008).
Additionally, Caracas’ Plaza Mayor was surrounded by structures housing the Cathedral [1666], the Royal Audience [1786] and Royal Consulate [1793] and the seat of the Archbishop [1803], along with other important commercial and residential structures. These buildings were the city’s primary landmarks; among the most important was the Cathedral. This edifice had three naves, and the façade combined classic and baroque elements accentuated by a bell tower, which made the Cathedral the tallest building in the city, and an icon of Catholicism.

Figure 2. f. Caracas Cathedral circa 1867 (Noticierodigital 2010).

Caracas’ Plaza Mayor became not only the main stage where daily community life was performed, but also a symbol where secular and religious powers were concentrated. As in other Latin American cities the Plaza Mayor dynamism is described by Hardoy as follows:
“It was in the square that the population assembled, ranged in raised stands or predetermined places according to the hierarchies of a rigidly stratified society, to witness an auto-da-fe or an execution, take part in a procession, celebrate the feast of the city’s patron, the arrival of a new heir to the throne or his baptism, some military victory or the announcement of the annual visit of the Indies fleet, receive the new viceroy or governor, acclaim a bullfighter or the winner of a game of jousting or hoops or a poetical contest, listen to a royal edict or merely the municipal decrees announced by the town crier to the sound of the drum. The canonization of a saint, the arrival of sacred relics or of a bishop provided the occasion for a procession. The plaza was the site for the market, daily in the cities, weekly in the smaller ones. Cloths or mats were spread out on the stones or dust to display the fruits of the earth and there were permanent stands for exhibiting the woven cloth and the arms, wines and skills that came from Spain… they were…marked out at the same time as the outline of the city and planned or developed to serve a society that had known and used them in Spain and wished to introduce them in the new country”(Hardoy and Hardoy 1978:69-70).

Throughout its colonial days, Caracas had become the most important trade center in the Captaincy of Venezuela exporting cocoa, tobacco, coffee and cotton. All top governmental positions were held by Spaniards, who established and enforced the trade and customs laws of the Crown. The foundation of the city was structured under colonial urban rules, and its buildings helped to support the political structure and hierarchical order. And, far from replicating the Spanish homeland, the city conformed to its environment, resources, available technologies and sociopolitical conditions.

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15 A more detailed study of the role of the plaza in Spanish and Spanish colonial life can be found in Miguel Rojas Mix (1978) La Plaza Mayor and Ramon Gutierrez (1983) Arquitectura y Urbanismo en Iberoamerica.
Figure 2. Caracas’ Plaza Mayor or Plaza del Mercado circa 1851, drawn by Federico Lessman (Bravo 2008).
2.4. THE POST COLONIAL TERRITORY.

Events in the nineteenth century Europe were crucial to the progress of Latin American Independence. In 1808, French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Spain and two years later the Spanish throne was under French control. Meanwhile, on April 19, 1810 the Caracas cabildo\textsuperscript{16} refused to recognize the new European authority and proclaimed itself an autonomous government. A transitory junta was constituted with local members, and on July 5, 1811, they formed a congress and declared Venezuela independent from Spain. Venezuela’s elite were divided among those that wanted to be governed by Bonaparte and those that did not recognize either the Spanish or French monarchy. At that moment the independence struggle was not only against the European colonial power, but also against the white criollo\textsuperscript{17} elites that had neglected the social aspirations of nonwhite Venezuelans. In the end, independence was social liberation for the dominant sectors—particularly Creole—but still not for the subordinate pardos and black inhabitants. After all, “the government and society remained under the same structural inequalities inherited from the Spaniards” (Cannon 2004:287) and because of that, the post-colonial configuration did not modify the original structures of inequality and exclusion that had emerged under colonialism.

In essence, independence transferred power from the Spanish mainlanders to local sectors of the elite criollo class, whose main concern was to maintain and increase their privileged socioeconomic status. The local elites, however, were incapable of producing a new republican government and merely replaced the legitimacy of the old Spanish order with a local one. Consequently, the remainder of the nineteenth century and the early part

\textsuperscript{16} Town council.
\textsuperscript{17} People born in Venezuela with exclusive European ascendency.
of the twentieth century, better known as the *caudillos’* period, was an era characterized by political conflict between central government, regions, and political factions.

In March 1831, Jose Antonio Páez—considered one of the key Venezuelan caudillos—was elected constitutional president of Venezuela. He started his term when the war ended but when cocoa prices fell in the 1840s, the economy collapsed and the elite divided into two factions: ones that supported Páez [the Conservatives] and their opponents [who called themselves Liberals]. These two groups began a power struggle known as the Federal War that resulted in the triumph of the Liberals; thus began the 18-year presidency of General Antonio Guzmán Blanco.

After Independence and the Federal war, the colonial cities were physically devastated but they stood as political centers. Both conflicts resulted in human and economic loss for the country, and in the end Venezuela’s cocoa-based export business was in ruins. Local entrepreneurs saw the coffee trade with the North Atlantic nations as a new alternative to replace cocoa and get the economy off the ground.

The development of coffee production, plus the generosity of foreign loans helped to stabilize the Venezuelan state for nearly two decades. President Guzmán had access to considerable resources to maintain his support and to develop infrastructure; this was the beginning of the Venezuelan “bourgeois cities” (Almendoz 1997:14; González 2005:82).

2.4.1. *Caracas: The bourgeois city.*

Years after political independence the urban order took on a new form: a French-inspired urban style spread throughout the young Latin American republics. While Britain had become the main source of economic exchange, France had managed to reinforce its cultural prestige. For example, the new types of public spaces designed in
France, such as the *Champs d’Elysees* [Paris], were replicated in many urban Latin American city centers, such as Havana, San Juan, Lima, Bogotá and Mexico City (Lejeune 2003:42). These designs evolved into an Hispanic interpretation of the French boulevards that were called *paseos*, which developed into new places of businesses, theaters and cafes, away from the traditional colonial city center (Lejeune 2003:42).

The new European urban dynamic transformed the Plaza Mayor of numerous Latin American cities; colonial plazas were turned into parks with planted gardens, fences, gates, and memorials. The language of the Beaux Arts system and its eclectic vocabulary, symbols of modernity and “civilization”, extended to architecture, urban infrastructure, and the design of public spaces and gardens. Overall, these changes resulted not only from the continued integration of the major Latin American cities to the global economic system, but also reflected the massive waves of European immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which sought to reproduce models from their mother land (Lejeune 2003:42).

Both boulevards and parks opened new areas for social activities; their aim was to improve public health and hygiene due to increased opportunity for relaxation and recreation, and they became symbols of urbanity and power. However, the sanitation agenda had a double goal; to clean the city’s infrastructure of its physical deterioration and remove its undesirable poor and low class members. This elitist program was meant to exclude those who could not afford to sponsor the new infrastructure. The state conceived of and redesigned these spaces to promote ideals of progress and civilization as well as to emphasize social differentiation.
By the end of the nineteenth century, Caracas was transformed, undergoing a new urban spatial order. President Guzman Blanco, who had lived and studied in Paris, was determined to bring ‘order and progress’ and to transform the city into a ‘Little Paris’. The powerful dictator became a patron of artists, literati and architects, and the city started changing under his influence to become a symbol of modernism. Extraordinary theaters, schools, alamedas and parks were built, along with a variety of other modern buildings; consequently, the former Plaza Mayor was transformed into a “Republican Square,” with green areas, fences and an elegant equestrian statue of Simón Bolívar in its center. The statue itself embodied a spirit of national independence and triumph, represented in the portrayal of Bolívar as a victorious military leader. The transformation of the plaza was part of a national urban project designed to propel Venezuela into the modern era. Therefore, in most of Venezuela’s major cities, each Plaza Mayor was replaced by a modern Plaza Bolívar complete with its own Simón Bolívar statue. The old Plaza Mayor concept represented the “barbaric colonial system” while the new Plaza Bolívar was intended to become a symbol of civilization (González-Casas 2002:225-226).

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18 González Casas, for example, explains that Guzmán Blanco’s ideas were inspired by Napoleón III and Haussman: “He met Napoleón III in Paris and was acquainted with the work of Baron Haussman... The attempts made by Guzmán Blanco to transform the small settlement into a modern city were clearly inspired by the new ideas obtained from the enlightened rhetoric of Napoleón III” (González-Casas 2002:220).
19 A tree-shaded promenade or public park.
20 Following the example of Paris, after 1850, the urban Venezuelan system became more complex and the Plaza Mayor was transformed into a planted garden adorned with statues. This square became an urban typology specific to Hispanic countries, and conversely to its pair colonial plaza; this new typology is called republican square.
Replacing the traditional marketplace, the plaza became a place for class-differentiated leisure. The enclosure of this public space by a fence symbolized the new segregated social dynamic. The square became the site of meetings of the urban bourgeois society, who came to enjoy the *retretas*,\(^{21}\) to exhibit their clothing and also to model, through their behavior, habits of dress and morality (Quesada 2002:259).

The world of consumption, with the desire for entertainment, was in sharp contrast to the world of agriculture and poverty and the precarious health conditions in which the large majority of the Venezuelan population lived. Silk dresses, flowers, perfumes, mirrors and many other French articles were exhibited in the fashionable stores in the city: Paris Fashions, the Pharmacie Française, the Cable Français, the Boulangerie and Pâtisserie…and the Compañía Francesa (González-Casas 2002:222).

When describing the new Republican Square, González Casas shows that the colonial plaza was re-created as a place of elegance:

The different appearance of the space was probably an expression of modern European ideas of urban recreation, or the notions of leisure and flânerie among

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\(^{21}\) Public performances or concerts by a military band.
the emerging urban social classes, who were fond of the new manuals on courtesy and good manners. The old market was removed to the nearby San Jacinto square...Allegorical fountains were placed in the four corners of the square, representing no more and no less than the four seasons which were non-existent in the country (González-Casas 2002:226).

According to González Casas, in contrast to the colonial order based primarily on theology, the new social order was secular and based on science, replacing the religious cult with a “Cult to the Hero,” specifically Simón Bolívar. Order and progress were the leading themes in government discourse, and education, transport and infrastructure were considered priorities throughout the country (González-Casas 2002:223). In addition, the new French urbanism set the scene for the emerging bourgeoisie, who according to the Haussmannic principles had to occupy the best areas in the city, relegating the poorest inhabitants to the periphery.

Although the secular order could not displace the Cathedral—which preserved its original shape and represented the religious cult of Catholicism—other public buildings surrounding the plaza were either redesigned or demolished to conform to the new ideals. For instance, the presidential residence known as the Casa Amarilla22 [The Yellow House] was built across from the Cathedral. This building was based on an eclectic European pattern, was erected to represent the division between civil and religious powers; its architecture emphasized the neoclassical style in clear reaction to traditional fashion (González-Casas 2002:224).

Another example of the secular order was the Capitol building—the seat of Congress—located at the southwest corner of Plaza Bolívar, which was also built during

22 The name came from President Guzman Blanco who in 1870 ordered it to be painted in yellow, as his party’s representative color. Nowadays, the building is no longer used as the presidential house; instead, it serves as the main offices of the Ministry of International Relations.
the Guzman Blanco regime. It is a dome of Classical style, its interior walls decorated with portraits of Venezuelan heroes and scenes from the Battle of Independence painted by local and French artists. A tall iron gate, brought from England by Guzman Blanco and decorated with his initials to symbolize his limitless power, surrounds the grounds.

“[This building] was conceived of as an almost free structure, removed from the traditional alignment and surrounded by boulevards. The interior courtyard opened onto two sides and allowed one to see from one street into the next. This effect preceded the ideas of transparency found in modern twentieth-century architecture” (González-Casas 2002:226).

The city—including its Plaza Bolívar—was transformed into a social place which physically and symbolically reinforced social segregation.

2.5. THE PETROLEUM BOOM AND THE MODERN CITY.

President Guzman Blanco ran the country between 1870 and 1887, after which Venezuela was governed by a series of interim caudillos. In 1908, President Juan Vicente Gómez became dictator for almost thirty years, during which time the country experienced apparent political stability along with economic prosperity. During the early years of his government President Gómez benefitted from the increased revenues from greater volumes and the higher prices of coffee exports; however, it was the exploitation of Venezuela's petroleum resources that provided the government with its largest revenues ever.

During his administration, Gómez relocated from Caracas to Maracay\textsuperscript{23} and this village, located sixty miles west of Caracas, “served as the de facto national capital for

\textsuperscript{23} Goméz disliked cities and distrusted Caracas’ elite and found Maracay’s rural surroundings more secure and convenient for him. “He also located Venezuela’s most important military bases in Maracay, away from the intrigues of Caracas but close enough to occupy the city in less than a day” (Ellner and Myers 2002:99).
more than twenty-five years” (Ellner and Myers 2002:99). During those years Caracas was relegated to a secondary governmental role and its development was not a priority.
In general terms, the most important feature of urbanism in Caracas through the early twentieth century was the European influence, visible in each phase of the city's growth. However, the adoption of modern urbanism was limited to some areas of the capital, particularly the downtown, bringing the first significant alterations and expansion of the grid plan that had dictated the traditional morphology. The leaders who transformed the urban landscape in the early decades of the twentieth century aimed to erase the Spanish colonial image. As a result, the uniform colonial city of adobe houses and tile roofs was gradually replaced by individual buildings of eclectic styles, in order to create a new city with a European and/or American façade.

Throughout that era, Plaza Bolívar remained a place for gathering and socializing; the retretas and carnival became well-known celebrations, and people went to the square to see and to be seen. In December 1935, President Gomez died, and political protests took place throughout Caracas; Plaza Bolívar became the core of these political demonstrations. February 14, 1936 marked a historic moment in the history of Plaza Bolívar, when approximately forty thousand people gathered to protest against Caracas’ governor who had suspended constitutional rights and ordered government censorship of news media. In the ensuing unrest, six persons were killed and around one hundred and fifty were seriously injured (Hernández 2000). Thereafter, it was said that Plaza Bolívar had become the birthplace of Venezuela’s democratic era (Berroes 1997). The end of Gómez' period marked the completion of a Venezuela's century of caudillismo and the beginning of Venezuela's modern period.
2.6. ESTABLISHING DEMOCRACY.

Thanks to large petroleum reserves that attracted foreign investment and generated high revenues, after three decades of rule President Gómez’ administration left the country with a flourishing economy; however, his dictatorial era left the nation without political parties and leaders. His successors, General Eleazar López Contreras [1935-1941] and General Isaías Medina Angarita [1941-1945] returned the center of government to Caracas, which once again became the center of national power. They also tried to modernize government and integrate Venezuela into the global economy; during President Medina Angarita’s term, two political parties were legally registered: Acción Democrática [AD] and the Communist Party of Venezuela [PCV], facilitating political progress toward a more democratic system.

Along with political reforms, President Medina addressed problems associated with uncontrolled city expansion, and advanced public works projects to improve living standards (Ellner and Myers 2002:99). An initial city project was the complete rebuilding of El Silencio [1942], an impoverished neighborhood close to the downtown. Medina’s initiative is considered the beginning of a new era in Venezuela’s architecture and urbanism; the project—designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva—had seven apartment buildings connected through a series of courtyards with two open public squares which became a successful reference for future urban developments in Caracas.

During their terms, Presidents López and Medina also worked to concentrate political power in Caracas. Both presidents viewed control of the capital as critical for maintaining their power; in 1936, President López passed a law giving the president direct control over the federal district, which at that time included two-thirds of Caracas
and the port of La Guaira. With this law, the president of the republic directly appointed and removed the federal district’s governor, who was required to be a member of the president’s cabinet. And under special circumstances, the president would have absolute authority to control and maintain order in the federal district24 (Ellner and Myers 2002:100).

From 1935 to 1948, a succession of unsuccessful presidents led the government and despite the implementation and enforcement of new policies to promote democracy, economic development and general welfare, on October 18, 1945 a military coup took place, led by members of Acción Democrática, a popular leftist party. From 1945 to 1948, the nation was governed by a revolutionary junta. In December 1947, democratic presidential elections were held and Rómulo Gallegos, representing AD [Acción Democrática] won the process. Gallegos became the first Venezuelan president elected through universal suffrage in the country, but his government lacked power to rule during the political transition. Consequently, only nine months after the election Gallegos was defeated by a military coup25 conducted by General Marcos Pérez Jiménez, a dictator who then ruled the country for seven years, from 1950 until 1957.

Despite the political and economic turmoil, Caracas grew in size and population; according to Gutiérrez (2005:673) the population grew from 100,000 inhabitants in 1925 to 700,000 in 1950 and reached a total of 1,492,378 inhabitants by the end of 1960 [See Figure 2.h and 2.i]. This abrupt growth was due to the petroleum boom and rural and

24 Most Venezuelan political leaders were in agreement that the president must have control over the capital city; despite reform of the municipal law in 1986, the federal district has historically remained as an independent area serving the government.
25 This coup was referred to by AD’s leaders as golpe de teléfono, or a coup by phone, because President Gallegos received a phone call from the military to inform him that the presidential palace had been taken. “There were no spontaneous social protests, no riots, no strikes, no public demonstrations, and therefore no repression. Not a weapon was fired… the first democratic regimen in Venezuela… passed away without protest in streets, factories or fields” (Coronil 1997:143).
foreign immigrants who moved to the capital city seeking opportunity. The control of epidemic diseases such as malaria, yellow fever and smallpox also helped to reduce the mortality rate\(^\text{26}\) and increase the population growth (Fundación-Polar 2000). The city was unprepared for this sudden expansion. As a consequence, shantytowns sprouted throughout the valley and the colonial part of the city was overtaken by a modern and complex urban landscape.

Venezuela had rapidly undergone a flood of changes manifested in its principal cities, as the country switched “from a poor country to a relatively rich one; from an agricultural to an oil industrial economy; from a rural to an urban society; from a low to a high demographic growth; from a provincial and homogenous community with few foreigners, to one which was cosmopolitan and heterogeneous; from an authoritarian to a democratic regime; and from an oligarchic and traditional community to a business-oriented and modern society” (González-Casas 2002:230). The demographic changes were accompanied by new methods for occupying the landscape — shantytowns being one example — but the urban order was still guided by a positivist discourse based on the scientific ideas that stretched the division between “civilization and barbarism” (González-Casas 2002:231). After President Gómez’ death [1935], a variety of urban and regional plans were developed to promote Venezuela’s modernization. But due to the lack of local expertise, foreign designers were brought in to develop new urban solutions guided by European ideas (González-Casas 2002:231).

\(^{26}\) Anuario Estadístico de América Latina y el Caribe 2009 published by CEPAL/ECLAC.
Figure 2. Map of Caracas 1940 (De-Sola Ricarde 1967).
Figure 2. Map of Caracas 1954 (De Sola Ricordi 1967).
As mentioned earlier, one of these plans was presented by President López Contreras in 1938 and it included proposals in fields such as education, immigration, roads, public works, agriculture and politics (Almandoz 1997:269). Specific institutions such as the Comisión Municipal de Urbanismo [CMU, Municipal Commission of Urban Planning] and the Dirección de Urbanismo [DU, Directorate of Urban Planning] were created to develop general planning for the country. In 1939 a plan for the capital city, called Plan Monumental, was presented and it was approved a decade later; this plan conceived of the city center as a multi-functional nucleus developed along great corridors, designed to launch Caracas into modern realms of transportation and communications (González-Casas 2002:235).

In social terms, these new urban criteria determined the direction of urban expansion in Caracas, and the elite groups moved away from their traditional locus near the main plaza, toward the suburbs. This process started slowly during the first decade of the twentieth century with the creation of neighborhoods such as El Conde, San Agustin Norte, La Florida y Los Caobos, and one of the most significant examples: the Country Club [1928], designed in the “Mission Style” according to the North American suburban model (González-Casas 2002; Gutiérrez 2005). Exclusively residential, this neighborhood comprised individual houses located on generous lots, surrounded by a golf course that buffered its inhabitants from the chaotic traditional downtown area.

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27 Plan Monumental was the first urban project that proposed general planning for Caracas. “The plan of the city was clear, with a main centre as the prevailing element of the urban image, which was symbolically connected with the interior and exterior of the country by great roadways” (González-Casas 2002:234).

28 Mission Style houses feature arched dormers and roof parapets. Some resemble Spanish mission churches with twin bell towers and elaborate arches. By the 1920s, architects were combining Mission styling with features from the craftsman and Prairie movements (Craven 2005).
This dynamic altered the traditional patterns of urban segregation, and disseminated the hierarchical concentration of power around downtown and Plaza Bolívar, introducing a new pattern of settlement. Neighborhoods on the east side such as La Florida, Las Delicias, Campo Alegre, El Country Club, Los Palos Grandes and El Sebucán were characterized by their wide avenues and new houses designed for middle and upper classes, while neighborhoods such as El 23 de Enero, Cerro Pilato, and El Silencio were growing in the western, less expensive areas of the city for the working class that lived in multi-family housing geographically opposed to those of the elite.

This new expansion created an inexorable urban tension between the traditional urban center and the new developments. The progressive and modern urban projects developed by urban planners, private promoters and governmental entities were out of sync with the colonial model. Ultimately the tension was resolved with large-scale demolition of older areas to make room for modern new buildings, great highways and avenues (González-Casas 2002:236). This process was intended to create progress and order, but instead resulted in helping to erase the city’s colonial and republican past as it introduced a new symbolic language of even greater segregation and power.

After World War II, the Plan Monumental [Master Plan] for Caracas was redesigned to place more emphasis on boulevards, wide spaces, rational circulation, monumentality and urban zones promoted by the Congress Internacionaux d’Architecture Modern [CIAM] (González-Casas 2002:237). The newer standards rejected the narrow streets and row houses typical of the old city, and during the mid-1950s approximately 250 buildings around Caracas’s downtown were demolished in
order to build spacious and ample avenues that symbolized the new urban ideal in opposition to the past (Gutiérrez 2005:578).

The 1950s were the years of President Pérez Jiménez’ government and his *Nuevo Ideal Nacional* [The New National Ideal], that promoted national unity and progress through an emphasis on public works. Pérez Jiménez’ goal was to construct a civilized, advanced nation through its material structure. His slogan was “The rational transformation of the physical environment,” which was considered an instrument to “discipline the social body” (Coronil 1997:174). His administration believed Venezuela’s lack of progress was due to the lack of infrastructure, hence by changing the habitat people would change; this assumption—based on the nineteenth-century positivist point of view of progress—convinced Pérez Jiménez to promote modern dwellings to modernize society and build a new nation (Coronil 1997:152). Based on his ideals, Pérez Jiménez advanced the construction of new and luxurious hotels, such as *Hotel Humboldt* and *Hotel Tamanaco*, superhighways such as the one that connected Caracas and La Guaira, public places such as *Los Próceres, Los Ilustres y Los Precursores*, a modern University campus—*Universidad Central de Venezuela*—and countless office buildings, public hospitals, apartments, neighborhoods and even a cable car system that helped transform Caracas into an apparently modern city.

President Pérez Jiménez, armed with his *Master Plan for Caracas*, became the main promoter of modern Venezuelan architecture and urbanism; however by the 1960s the extensive migration\(^{29}\) into the capital city had saturated the physical infrastructure, causing chaotic transformation. By 1962, “planners calculated the Caracas housing deficit

\(^{29}\) Between 1952 and 1957 approximately 45,000 immigrants -mainly from Spain, Italy, Portugal and Canary Islands- had moved to Venezuela (Troconis de Veracoechea 1992:250).
at 110,000 units” and “the city’s reservoirs could only hold a three-day reserve of water, and notorious traffic jams clogged the poorly planned transportation network” (Myers and Dietz 2002:106). On one side, the eastern part of the city was growing with new subdivisions and neighborhoods designed for the wealthy. On the other side, lower- and middle-class people looking for opportunities in the capital were helping construct an unplanned and overpopulated city in the western and southern areas around the downtown.

With this modern movement, a blend of various architectural and urban styles was brought to Caracas. While the French taste, manifested through the CIAM, maintained its influence, it became only one alternative among the various styles that arrived via the United States [e.g. international style, neo-colonial, Mission style, Hispanic, Art Deco]. At this point “Latin America’s Belle Époque urbanism” had ended and American urbanism emerged as an ideal model (Almandoz 2002a:21). The United States’ political, economic and technological supremacy was seen as a symbol of modernization and industrialization by many Latin American governments (Almandoz 2002a:22) and the northern urbanism model was enthusiastically received and combined with the European styles.

In Venezuela, as in other Latin American countries, urban planners, rather than following the European model, moved towards the functional approach suggested by the north. This urbanism projected the ideals of modernization and industrialization, which combined progressive technologies and the use of automobiles with the construction of suburban houses. This model emphasized the ideal of a functionalist city with great highways and avenues, and focused the search for a new modernism.
After Pérez Jimenez’ military administration a new process of democratic elections was called, and Rómulo Betancourt became the new president, thus opening a new era of democracy in Venezuela’s history that continues to this day. By the 1960s, democratic stability and economic prosperity continued to bring more changes to Caracas, and enormous sums of money were invested to build modern office buildings and suburban neighborhoods. Caracas became a bigger and more complex city and while the main political buildings still surrounded downtown, the colonial historic city and Plaza Bolívar became symbols of national heritage, history and the symbolic heart of the city.

2.7. CONTEMPORARY CARACAS.

By means of agreements among the different political parties, Venezuelan democratic order was regained after 1957. Different leaders joined efforts to preserve and guarantee new democratic elections with a non-violent alliance. This pact was known as Puntofijismo, or Pact of Punto Fijo, and was signed by the three noncommunist parties—AD, COPEI and URD—on October 31, 1958, to prevent potential coups and the recurrence of sectarian party politics. By way of this agreement, Venezuela’s democracy transformed into a political style that avoided conflict and pursued consensus between politicians, entrepreneurs, military officers, the Church hierarchy and representatives of

30 All the parties [except the Communist Party], it was agreed, would have a share of power and of its responsibilities and benefits, regardless of which candidate won. The private sector would have significant participation in the government and a voice in policy making. AD, the party most likely to win, was at the same time the one most interested in securing this agreement. In order to obtain and maintain power, it understood that it had to share its spoils. The top military leaders endorsed these decisions. The Church and the military, through this pact and other formal and informal agreements, were given ample reassurance that their roles in society would be respected and supported (Coronil 1997:219).

31 Punto Fijo is the name of the house, belonging to Rafael Caldera, where democrats negotiated the pact that facilitated the transition to second wave democracy.
other major interests, including the labor force (Coronil 1997:220). After this agreement, in December 1958 Rómulo Betancourt, the AD’s candidate, was elected with 49 percent of the total votes and was confirmed as president for a five-year term beginning in February 1959. Since then, Venezuela has enjoyed the uninterrupted democratic administrations of ten presidents.32

On the economic side, the petroleum boom that had started at the beginning of the twentieth century brought enormous revenues into the country and benefited the government. However, by the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, world oil prices had destabilized, strongly impacting Venezuela’s economic situation. Despite advice to “sow the oil” by Arturo Uslar Pietri,33—to use oil proceeds to invest in and help diversify the economy—the state became dependent on oil income, and its political and economic stability fluctuated with the rhythm of oil prices. On January 1, 1976 President Carlos Andres Pérez nationalized the Venezuelan petroleum industry,34 and during the post-nationalization years “the fiscal income from oil increased from U.S. $1.4 billion in 1970, about 10 percent of GDP35 to U.S. $ 9 billion in 1974, a staggering 40 percent of GDP” (Mommer 2003:133). The exorbitant oil income, and the contracted international loans made by the Pérez government to promote his agenda, went far beyond the capacity of the national economy. At that time, “the country needed

33 In 1936 Arturo Uslar Pietri—the eminent Venezuelan politician, academic, journalist and writer—coined the phrase _Sembrar el Petróleo_ [Sow the Oil]. He encouraged Venezuelans to invest the oil export revenues into productive investments in the country, rather than spending it on futile expenditure.
34 During his administration President Pérez widely distributed oil revenues, mainly through subsidies to domestic businesses and social programs.
35 GDP: Gross Domestic Product.
managerial skills” rather than surplus money (Mommer 2003:133) and as a result an inefficient administrative plan sank Venezuela in its petrodollars.

Meanwhile public works in Caracas promoted two goals: “To provide amenities and demonstrate progress” (Myers and Dietz 2002:106). While the subway system was constructed to alleviate traffic and improve transportation, other resources were invested in housing projects; one of the most significant was the Complejo Parque Central 36 [Central Park Complex]. This multiple residential complex was built between 1979 and 1984 and included two office towers —each 57 stories high— plus seven residential buildings —each 44 stories high— with commercial areas, banks, restaurants, hotels, museums and theaters. The two office towers remain the tallest buildings in South America. They were expected to hold a workforce of 10,000 employees and the complex was rated as the biggest residential

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36 The complex was built by Centro Simón Bolívar, a government division created in 1953 and responsible for planning and maintaining urban and architectural projects for the capital city.
project in Latin America (IPC 2009:142). Parque Central[^37] was conceived as a self-sufficient micro-city within the city and became a symbol of so-called Venezuela Saudita [“Saudi Venezuela”], an obvious reference to the government’s richness in petrodollars.

Despite the government’s effort to improve the city’s built environment to reinforce its political legitimacy, neither AD nor COPEI were able to improve urban conditions. As a consequence, other self-constructed, but not self-sufficient—as Parque Central was—“cities” continued to sprout in the form of ranchos or shantytowns throughout Caracas, emphasizing social differences, lack of economic opportunity, poverty and segregation.

[^37]: “Today’s sprawling Parque Central, with its multiple-use towers of more than sixty stories, reflects COPEI’s commitment to housing the Caracas middle class and to concentrating the bureaucracy in the national capital” (Ellner and Myers 2002:107).
Beginning in the 1980s, a second oil boom brought Venezuela a new bonanza. “This boom produced an initial doubling of the per-barrel price of petroleum, from $12.70 in 1978 to $28.67 in 1980 but this boom quickly turned to bust as oil prices started downward in 1983” (Terry Lynn 1997:161). At that time, “PDVSA was the only strong, functioning institution left standing within the national economy” (Mommer 2003:134) and with the stated purpose of stopping the irrational use of the country’s liquid assets, the oil company introduced an international investment policy. This policy allowed PDVSA to shift profit abroad, but according to Mommer (2003:225), this plan never generated profits for the country. Meanwhile, the 1980s saw the construction of modern malls, skyscrapers, gated communities and condominiums where the middle and upper classes secluded themselves from the city’s chaos.

The presidential terms of Luis Herrera Campins [1979-1983] and Jaime Lusinchi [1984-1988] were used to postpone profound policy changes that sooner or later needed to be made. Instead of starting a gradual downward adjustment, these two presidents increased public spending, and by 1992 public expenditure surpassed by fifty times the government’s spending in 1972 (Terry Lynn 1997:164). This overspending, and the reduction of PDVSA’s capacity to produce the enormous returns of the past, left Venezuela with no money for public investment.

As a means of controlling the economic crisis, on February 28, 1983 the government of Herrera Campín’s devalued the national currency, signaling “the beginning of not only a material but also an ideological crisis from which the country never recovered” (Hellinger 2003:27). After that day, it became clear to most Venezuelans that “democratic governments, no matter which party was in power had failed to fulfill the

38 PDVSA: Petróleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anónima [Venezuelan Petroleum Company].
promise of a modern Venezuela” (Marquez 2003:200-201). The reality was that despite some urban development Caracas was overwhelmed by poverty, with 50 percent of its population living in shantytowns and low income housing (Marquez 2003:201). The Venezuelan Black Friday opened the debate between the ruling elites and the civil society which questioned through a series of protests the collapse of the political and economic system (López Maya 2005:49).

During the second presidential term of Carlos Andre Pérez, in 1989, adjustment finally occurred, causing severe economic and social consequences for the country. By the end of the 1980s, the state had enormous foreign debt, lacked foreign currency reserves, inflation was running at 60 percent and the country’s currency was overvalued almost 300 percent. Consequently, the state was almost bankrupt (Marta-Sosa 1993:6) and announced a macroeconomic adjustment program. During the weekend of February 25th and 26th, 1989 a 100 percent increase in the price of gasoline was declared and public transport fares were increased; consequently a substantial social uprising shook Caracas and other principal Venezuelan cities between February 27 and March 3, 1989. This popular protest was known as the Caracazo o El Sacudón. “Both Caracas and most of the main and secondary cities of the country witnessed barricades, road closures, the burning of vehicles, the stoning of shops, shooting and widespread looting… The cost in material and human losses was very high…” (Lopéz-Mayá 2003:117). This massive protest seriously debilitated the government and its institutions and marked the beginning of a series of protests that have lasted for the last two decades (López Maya 2005:40).
As a means to alleviate social tension, congress passed laws that gave more autonomy to the states. One of the most important was *Ley Organica de Regimen Municipal* [Municipal Regimen Law]. This bill established an autonomous administrative and electoral system for each state and a new territorial sub-division. Each state was divided into districts, sub-divided into municipalities and separated into parishes. Each municipality was governed by a powerful, autonomous locally-elected mayor.

Therefore, this law not only enabled states and municipalities to directly vote for their own authorities and receive more resources to manage them according to their own plans but it was also the “trigger which sparked off the changes in the Venezuelan political configuration” (Marta-Sosa 1993:9) bringing onto the scene new political leadership. The decentralization brought new territorial, economic and political reconfigurations to the country, which in many cities effectively reinforced the pre-existent pattern of social exclusion/inclusion caused by the unequal access to resources.

Nowadays Caracas is divided into two politically independent entities, Miranda State and a Capital District, and includes five municipalities. The Capital District embraces the Libertador Municipality, while the other four —Chacao, Sucre, Baruta, and

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40 It was a relevant political shift in the reorganization of power and territory; the goal was to promote democratic participation and reduce the centralized administration. At the time this law was passed, the bipartisan tendency in the presidential elections was already “slightly weakened and by 1993 [votes for] the two traditional powerful parties –AD and COPEI– fell below the total number won by all the other parties in the presidential elections. As a consequence, the results of the 1993 elections were labeled a ‘political earthquake,’ because for the first time since 1948, AD and COPEI lost a direct presidential vote.” The results of this election and the increasing rate of non-voting [40 percent in 1993] showed the disillusion that most Venezuelans had from the traditional political parties’ administration. Additionally in 1995 “the number of non-AD/COPEI governors rose to seven [of twenty-one, or 31.8 percent], while in the mayoral contests in the country’s twenty-seven largest cities, non-AD/COPEI mayors won eleven races” (Álvarez 1998a:259) re-emphasizing a new political topography.
El Hatillo—belong to Miranda State. In April 2009 a new law for the Capital District was passed, changing some important administrative rules that will be discussed latter.

2.8. CONCLUSION.

The grid or chessboard was the most practical solution for the foundation and design of most colonial cities in Latin America. That urban model brought to the Spanish colonies not only a characteristic urban configuration, but also an entire group of institutions, culture and ways of life that lasted for a couple of centuries. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Venezuelan cities were still socially and economically under the monopolist control of the richest families and the Spanish Crown. After independence, the physical features of the cities changed somewhat, which led to changes in the central square as the focal point of social activities. With the growing influence of French urbanism, new paseos and boulevards moved the center of the city away from the

Figure 2. n. Caracas' municipalities 2006.
colonial plaza and new buildings and public spaces became symbols of modernity and civilization.

The new urban layouts varied according to areas in the city, but in every case they tended to distort the colonial grid. New transportation and communications systems, physical infrastructure, centers and styles of production and consumption modified the cities’ infrastructure; as a consequence, new configurations appeared in order to satisfy the changes. Hence some places were devalued, destroyed and redeveloped while new places were created (Harvey 1996:296). Venezuelan society had to decide which places could be remade to mesh with the new types of spatial relations, as well as with their national identity and history.

In Caracas, for instance, the secular and anticlerical movements promoted at the end of the nineteenth led to the redesign of the colonial plaza, the development of paseos and the demolition of a number of religious buildings in order to create monuments to the civil heroes (González-Casas 2002:224). Along with these actions, churches and seminaries were transformed into museums, universities, and civic monuments to give impetus to, and exemplify the country’s modernization. Squares, paseos and buildings were used to celebrate nationalism and distanced from Spanish influence. Thus, Caracas inhabitants re-configured their city and in taking French urbanistic ideas to symbolize society’s modernization, they were re-inventing a place for their history and identity and reproducing a symbolic economy, or “decisions of order and disorder and of aesthetic power” of the elite groups (Zukin 1995:7).

Between 1900 and 1950, the bourgeoisie’s modern utopian vision set up infrastructures, erected new buildings, and designed new urban spaces such as vast
boulevards which resembled either European or American cities. This mask of modernity veiled both the lack of meticulous urban, social and institutional reforms, and the contradiction between the modern urban city and the colonial countryside. Massive internal migration into the main cities increased social disparities and created urban ghettos, resulting in the juxtaposition of the very rich and very poor (Lejeune 2003:48).

In 1920 Caracas’ population was estimated around 118,000 inhabitants; in 1956 it climbed above one million, then to two million by 1965 until it reached three and a half million inhabitants by 1990 (Cartay 2003:54). During the second half of the twentieth century, the city grew almost uncontrollably while social inequality, financial crises, unemployment, administrative corruption, rising crime rates, insecurity, limited opportunities in professional fields and declining salaries plagued the country.

Meanwhile, certain architectural and urban projects became part of political strategies to mask poverty, economic crisis and social inequality. In those years, construction of tall buildings for office and commercial use, modern malls, closed condominiums and gated communities proliferated. An increasing deterioration in the quality of life changed the nature of public spaces, and the quality of public interaction was frequently based on “suspicion and restriction” (Caldeira 2000:258). Developers instituted all sorts of practices to control access to private or public spaces by erecting barriers, security checkpoints, closed communities and private malls.

The geographical restrictions of Caracas’ valley pushed masses of new inhabitants to invade the hills. The city grew from east to west and also from the bottom to the top; the valley was crowded with tall buildings while the surrounding hills were crammed with shantytowns. The city “lost its soul, became polycentric and had no urban plan or
rules to guide its growth” (Cartay 2003:55). Status and social hierarchy were defined by the economic value of the occupied land. The poor lived in the western and eastern hills of Petare, Catia, Caricuao, Tacagua, Caucaguita, and others. The middle classes lived in residential buildings in San Bernardino, Los Palos Grandes, Sebucan, Santa Fe, Caurimare, and El Cafetal while the wealthy moved to the best locations with accessibility, infrastructure and privacy in the southeast side: Colinas de San Román, Prados del Este, La Lagunita, La Alameda or Colinas de Valle Arriba (Cartay 2003:68). These contradictory changes led the city into more profound socio-political transformations at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
Chapter Three.
Cacerolas, Marches
and Public Demonstrations:
Taking Over the City
CHAPTER THREE.
CACEROLAS, MARCHES AND PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS: TAKING OVER THE CITY.

By the end of the twentieth century increasing privatization and urban fragmentation—characteristic of most Venezuelan cities—turned urban public spaces into apparent residual sites lacking a sense of collective ownership; leftover pieces that nobody wanted to take care of. These public places lost their initial urban and social roles as modern malls, gated communities and condominiums emerged as alternative pseudo-public places. After 2002 however, political demonstrations in key public places around the country revealed Venezuelans’ feelings of deep attachment to their cities’ spaces; several public places were recaptured by citizens to be used as forums for public and collective protest.

After the presidential election in 1998 cacerolazos become the first step in the appropriation of public places: protesters against President Chávez banging pots and pans ventured beyond the boundaries of their homes, claiming their right to be heard. By the end of 1999, statistics revealed that protests against the government had increased by 102.6 percent over 1998, for a total of 855 protests in that year (Acosta 2008; Provea 2002). The number of public demonstrations continued to grow, and between 1999-2000 there were 1,414 protests registered; between 2000-2001 the figure was slightly lower at 1,312 and between 2001-2002 the number was 1,262 (Acosta 2008; López Maya 2003; Provea 2002; Provea 2003). In the initial year of President Chávez’ administration, supporters and opponents each established their own individual mental images of the areas of political protest. After the attempted coup d’etat of 2002 those images solidified
and the city became a battleground where government supporters and opponents each claimed certain key areas and places.

In this dispute over the city, Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira stand as two iconic political bastions. During my fieldwork I collected a series of 56 “mental maps” of Caracas from informants in both plazas. I first asked them to draw a map showing the main public places of the city, and I asked them to describe briefly the reasons for their selections and I asked if those places were used for political purposes. All my informants were regular visitors of either of the plazas, and they had previously identified themselves as government supporters or opponents. Since they were regular visitors of either plaza it was not surprising that both groups included their own plazas in their maps. Interestingly, the co-occurrences of both places were low and out of 56 informants only eleven shared both places in their maps. I interpret this as an expression of the symbolic tension and polarization these two places represent in people’s minds.

Contrary to the idea that plazas in Venezuela have lost their urban role due to modern lifestyle changes (Caldeira 2000; Jacobs 1961; Marcano 2000), this section recounts the events that led Venezuelans to re-appropriate and re-symbolize a number of public places in Caracas. I describe the process that guided Venezuelans in that urban dynamic, and using the mental maps that informants drew of the city, I show that Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira stand as emblematic poles of geopolitical tropism and attraction.

41 Tropism, a biological term, refers to the tendency of an organism to move towards an external stimulus.
3.1. VENEZUELAN ELECT HUGO RAFAEL CHÁVEZ FRÍAS AS PRESIDENT.

During the 1990s several economic and social events consolidated the decentralization of Venezuela’s political system and led to territorial reconfiguration. As mentioned, the country is divided into states and with the passing of the Municipal Regimen Law [1989] each state was divided into districts, sub-divided into municipalities and separated into parishes. This division specified that each municipality would be governed by autonomous, locally-elected mayors. This geopolitical re-configuration was expected to improve the quality of life that by the end of the 1980’s had severely deteriorated at all levels, but the socioeconomic situation worsened and in 1992 Venezuela faced two military coups d’etat in which the perpetrators attempted to kill President Carlos Andres Pérez.

The most significant coup attempt was led by future president Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías and his Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement [MBR], composed of both military members and civilians. Despite the failure of this attempt, Chávez became an “instant folk hero” (Terry Lynn 1997:182) who severely censured corruption and neoliberal policies. After the failed attempt, he was given over a minute on television to make a public call to the other Lieutenant Colonels involved in the coup asking them to surrender to the country’s military forces. That minute on TV became one of the transcendent moments of Chávez’s later political campaign.

42 Many Venezuelans felt it was the first time in history that a Venezuelan authority figure had honestly and publicly accepted responsibility for his public acts. Chávez delivered his short but memorable speech and proclaimed his most famous words: “Por ahora!” [For the time being].

43 Gott transcribes Chávez’s speech: “First I want to say ‘good morning’ to all the people of Venezuela, but this Bolivarian message is directed specifically to the courageous soldiers of the parachute regiment of Aragua and the tank regiment of Valencia. Comrades: unfortunately, for the time being, the objectives that we had set for ourselves have not been achieved in the capital. That’s to say that those of us here in Caracas have not been able to seize power. Where you are, you have performed well, but now is the time to rethink; new possibilities will arise again and the country will be able to move definitively towards a
This attempted *coup d’etat* marked the collapse of *puntofijismo* — the pact signed in 1957 by the three noncommunist parties—and a rearrangement of political parties immediately took place.  

*Causa Radical*, founded by leftist guerrilla leader Alfredo Maneiro, emphasized the importance of a social and workers’ movement, and captured the attention of the Venezuelan Workers Confederation. The party gained a presence in Congress as well as control of the mayoralty of Caracas (Hellinger 2003:36). Its members negotiated improved benefits for workers and also called for a Constituent Assembly to replace the Congress. However, in 1997 personal differences among the *Causa R* party members caused its separation into two factions.  

With the division of *Causa R*, the MBR [Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement] remained the only option to drastically change Venezuela’s political future.

In 1998, Venezuelans —eager for political change— elected Chávez as their president. His political plan, called *Proyecto Bolívar 2000* [Bolívar Project 2000], was his first attempt to demonstrate his intention to solve the critical issues of health, security, education, housing, food and employment. Chávez also proposed constitutional reform to guarantee the success of the project. The new constitution was approved in December

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44 According to Hellinger (2003), three social forces filled the vacuum left by the collapse of *puntofijismo:* “An obrerista [workers’] movement that gave rise to *Causa Radical;* a managerial sector consisting of executives from PDVSA and middle and professional classes; and the military, especially the *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario* of Hugo Chávez Frias.” (2003:27)

45 One faction formed a new party called Fatherland For All /PPT (*Patria Para Todos*), which included a majority of the *Causa R* parliamentary deputies.
1999\textsuperscript{46} and was modified in March 2000. Several changes were introduced, including the extension of the president’s term from five to six years, and allowing for an immediate consecutive reelection. A new National Assembly was elected, and power and primary decision-making was concentrated under its 131 members, where 92 seats represented the president’s political party (CNE 2009).\textsuperscript{47}

Although the price of oil rose during 2000, the country still faced one of its most distressing economic situations ever. In November 2001, as a palliative to the situation, Chávez spearheaded the passage of 49 new laws at once. Among them were important reforms, such as a law prohibiting foreign control of oil-producing operations, and agrarian reform that threatened property owners with land redistribution in favor of peasants and small farmers. Powerful businessmen in Venezuela turned against Chávez for his apparent attempt to abolish the right to own private property. But the president insisted that the government would only have the right to appropriate land that was not being used “properly.”\textsuperscript{48} Adversaries also accused Chávez of using drastic language and confrontation against foreign landowners. Many foreign companies closed their Venezuelan branches, moving to other places in search of a more profitable and stable environment. Meanwhile, an opposition movement against President Chávez began a series of apparently endless public protests.

\textsuperscript{46} “By December the document was ready and it was submitted to a national vote. 71.8% of the voters approved the new constitution, with an abstention rate of 55.6%.” (Wilpert 2003).

\textsuperscript{47} “The constitutional assembly vote in July 1999 attracted over one thousand candidates, including gays, evangelists, firemen, artists, animal lovers, soldiers, and singers. The result was another triumph for Chávez, whose slate of candidates secured 90 percent of the vote [with 54 percent abstention], winning 126 out of 131 seats in the assembly” (McCaughan 2005:89).

\textsuperscript{48} “Under the Lands Law, idle land was subject to expropriation [article 42] while owners of underutilized land were given two years to grow crops in accordance with a national plan and were obliged to pay a special tax” (Ellner 2008:113).
3.2. CACEROLAZOS: MOVING FROM THE PRIVATE TO THE PUBLIC REALMS.

Those opposed to Chávez began daily protests in different forms; blocking streets was the most common but soon cacerolazos became a very common form of protest. The term cacerolazo or cacerolada refers to the action of making noise with pans, pots and metallic utensils, in order to protest. In the Latin American context they were first used during the 1970’s in Chile as a rejection of Salvador Allende’s government. On December 1, 1970 a significant concentration of women (most of them middle class) organized to express their discomfort with the regime; they walked along the main streets in Santiago de Chile shouting and making noises with their cacerolas. Later, Argentina’s women used the same strategy. On December 19 and 20, 2001 after a severe economic crisis, a popular rebellion in Buenos Aires led to the resignation of the democratic government of De La Rua. The cacerolas had become an instrument to express the distress and worry of Argentine people. The first cacerolazos in Venezuela can be traced to 1992 against President Carlos Andres Pérez. Later, President Rafael Caldera was targeted by several of these protests, and cacerolazos against President Chávez have been innumerable.

Initially cacerolazos were led by middle class and professional women protesting the reforms of the Ley Educativa [Education Law]. Protesters claimed that the reform was a unilateral project that threatened the private system and freedom that characterized education in Venezuela (Salas 2004:98-99). They were convinced the state was trying to pass an education law that would require indoctrinating children in government ideals.

Protests and cacerolazos increased after the president imposed mandatory coverage of his weekly discourses by all television and radio stations. As expressed by
some informants, women were motivated by a sense of impotence provoked by Chávez’ *cadenas*⁴⁹ into taking their pots and pans and making as much noise as possible from their houses; often entire neighborhoods would join in a single *cacerolazo*. These women were looking to express their displeasure, and were attempting to symbolically silence the president by raising their voices louder than his. As one informant explained, “It was kind of incredible just to sit and listen to the *cacerolazos*, because you could hear that pans and pots were louder every time the president announced something they disagreed with.” The practice surpassed their own expectations, and many people, women and men, began to regularly *cacerolear* whenever they disagreed with a political decision. *Cacerolazos* were scheduled nationwide and if protesters did not have access to pots and pans they used whistles, car horns and even played *cacerolas* CDs to add more noise to the protests. By using *cacerolas*, protesters, especially women, exceeded their normal boundaries, their voices transcending the walls of their houses. Some informants described the process as healthy therapy, a means to vent their anger and frustration. Informants also recalled that neighbors would call each other in order to agree on a time to start making noise; and if it were safe, they would walk around the neighborhood looking for others to join them.

By using their own houses and neighborhood surroundings as places to raise their voices, people exposed themselves to public spaces through the noise produced. *Cacerolear* signified the transition of protests from the private to the public space; with *cacerolazos*, the protesters were unified in a single goal: to raise their voices and find a public space for them. Shortly thereafter, men also began to join public protests, and

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⁴⁹ Radio and TV network speeches. Or as described by McCaughan “chain time, *cadenas* is a mechanism by which the President could legally sequester airtime on radio and television” (McCaughan 2005:89).
*cacerolas* went to the streets. These were the first attempts to control public space by the opposition.


Without doubt, *cacerolazos* were just the beginning of an endless series of protests that had taken over the city. Between 1999 and 2007, public protests became a part of Venezuelans’ daily lives; for instance, figures reported by Provea and compiled by Acosta (2008) reflect the following statistics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Estimated number of protests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 1998 to September 1999</td>
<td>855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1999 to September 2000</td>
<td>1414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2000 to September 2001</td>
<td>1312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2001 to September 2002</td>
<td>1262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2002 to September 2003</td>
<td>1543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2003 to September 2004</td>
<td>1255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2004 to September 2005</td>
<td>1467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2005 to September 2006</td>
<td>1405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2006 to September 2007</td>
<td>1521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12034</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These protests took many forms including “blocking streets, holding mass meetings, closing of local institutions, *cacerolazos*, community protests, and symbolic actions such as people chaining themselves or holding mock funerals of different politicians” (López Maya 2003). These acts of marching, banging pots and congregating in the streets were to the urban system “what the speech act is to language”; they became “spaces of enunciation” that in a radical political gesture allowed participants to claim parts of Caracas’ topographical system (De Certeau 1984:97-98). Beyond the phenomenological interpretation I also add the bodily experience of places (Lefebvre 1993) because when we trace people’s movements on a map we need to be aware that those movements are more than just lines on a map but also tangible marks on the space.
When walking, people take the streets and sidewalks of the city for their own use and particularly when they march in groups—in this case either supporting or opposing the government—the appropriation became a massive claim over the space. In Caracas certain streets and public places have been symbolically re-constructed as a result of the struggle between their appropriation for political representation and for regular circulation and entertainment.

Some statistics show that between 2002 and 2003 some of the common places for demonstrations and protesting routes used by the opposition and supporters were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
<th>Supporters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 23, 2002</td>
<td>From the UCV to Plaza Morelos</td>
<td>From the 23 de Enero to the National Assembly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 21, 2002</td>
<td>From La Florida to La Candelaria</td>
<td>From Plaza Morelos to the National Assembly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 08, 2002</td>
<td>Megamarcha from Parque del Este to PDVSA-Chuao and then to Miraflores</td>
<td>Palacio de Miraflores and Avenida Urdaneta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 11, 2002</td>
<td>Plaza Morelos to downtown</td>
<td>From El Poliedro to Puente Llaguno.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 01, 2002</td>
<td>Plaza Morelos to downtown</td>
<td>From the Fiscalia to Puente Llaguno.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 11, 2002</td>
<td>different points around the city to Parque del Este</td>
<td>Plaza Caracas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13, 2002</td>
<td>From different points in the city to Parque del Este</td>
<td>Plaza Caracas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 02, 2002</td>
<td>Libertador Ave to Miraflores</td>
<td>Palacio de Miraflores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 11, 2002</td>
<td>Blocking streets around the city</td>
<td>Puente Llaguno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 10, 2002</td>
<td>From Parque del Este to Bolivar Ave.</td>
<td>From El Poliedro to Bolivar Ave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Octr 13, 2002</td>
<td>From different points in the city to the CNE</td>
<td>CNE surroundings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 04, 2002</td>
<td>From different points in the east to PDVSA-Chuao</td>
<td>PDVSA- La Campiña</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 04, 2002</td>
<td>From Chuao to Hotel Meliá</td>
<td>PDVSA- La Campiña</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 05, 2002</td>
<td>From PDVSA-Chuao to PDVSA-Campiña</td>
<td>PDVSA- La Campiña</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 14, 2002</td>
<td>From different points to Francisco Fajardo Ave</td>
<td>Pantón Nacional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 17, 2002</td>
<td>From Distribuidor Altamira to the Pantón Nacional</td>
<td>From Caracas, La Bandera and Parque del Este to PDVSA- La Campiña</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 20, 2002</td>
<td>From different points in the city to Plaza Venezuela</td>
<td>From Catia, La Bandera and Parque del Este to PDVSA- La Campiña</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 22, 2002</td>
<td>Bycicles from PDVSA-Chuao rode around the city</td>
<td>From different points in the City to Victoria Ave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 29, 2002</td>
<td>From different points in the city to Victoria Ave.</td>
<td>From different points in the City to Victoria Ave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 31, 2002</td>
<td>Distribuidor Plaza Altamira</td>
<td>Distribuidor Plaza Altamira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 03, 2003</td>
<td>From different points in the city to Los Próceres</td>
<td>La Bandera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 25 - 26, 2003</td>
<td>Francisco Fajardo highway was taken over and block</td>
<td>From La Bandera and Parque del Este to Bolivar Ave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 31, 2003</td>
<td>From different points in the city to Hotel Meliá</td>
<td>From La Bandera and Parque del Este to Bolivar Ave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 08, 2003</td>
<td>From different points in the city to Hotel Meliá</td>
<td>From Fedecameras to La Campiña</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 13, 2003</td>
<td>From Fedecameras to La Campiña</td>
<td>From different points in the city to La Campiña</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 19, 2003</td>
<td>From Plaza Altamira to CNE</td>
<td>From Fedecameras to La Campiña</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[The table is based on data from Acosta 2008 and Provea 2003]

These routes reinforce the fact that most supporters come from the less affluent areas in the city’s west and southwest, while the opponents come from the wealthy east
and southeast (García-Guadilla 2003; Irazábal and Foley 2008). This relation is illustrated by Irazábal and Foley (Irazábal and Foley 2008) based on the results of the 2004 recall referendum and a map with 1998 data of the yearly income per household in Caracas. They found that a majority supporting the national government during the 2004 referendum lived in the areas with the lowest household income, concentrated in Libertador Municipality. Meanwhile the majority opposing the national government lived in the highest income sectors located in Chacao, Baruta and El Hatillo Municipalities.

I found on the other hand — beyond the correspondence between the socioeconomic geography, political preferences and struggles for public places — that the city is not homogenously divided and different social fabrics intersect and overlap in real life. Therefore, in many cases participants from both groups come from neighborhoods such as El Valle, La Vega, Plaza La Candelaria, Los Ilustres, Catia, Petare y Caricuao where middle class and low-income families live. There is a clear social polarization expressed in the territory but the political preferences intersect certain shared spaces. As also reported by Provea, between October 2002 and October 2003 both groups — supporters and opponents — clashed in different demonstrations that they called either ‘reconquista’ [reconquering] or ‘defensa’ [defense] of their territory and the neighborhoods mentioned before were claimed by both groups (Provea 2003:344).
Figure 3. a. Mapping these routes illustrates the tendency of people to move toward the city’s political center. The opposition—marked in blue—comes from the east, while supporters—marked in red—come from the south or northwest.
Contrary to what is reflected on the map, these urban spaces also exemplify the political diversity and the struggles for the appropriation of place for political representation from both groups. As I mentioned previously, government opponents and supporters come from various economic strati: upper, middle and low income classes. However, I do not underestimate the power of the map; because “a picture or map is worth a thousand words,” what I want to emphasize also is that “realms of representations [are] as important as … the materiality of spatial organization itself” (Harvey 1990:233).

As I will show later — comparing Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira— these protests throughout the city claimed domain over sites that had a characteristic location in terms of a socioeconomic geography but more than the location the symbolic meaning, attachment, “the provisional and unfixed” (Massey 1994:168-169) identities of places and sense of belonging are key factors when government supporters or opponents decide to act politically in one or other site.


If “being, walking and marching” became acts of claiming parts of Caracas, abandoning the streets was another significant way of claiming the territory. A significant general strike on December 2001 marked the beginning of another series of major confrontations between government opponents and supporters. Venezuelan entrepreneurs organized, and led by the Venezuelan Workers Confederation, protested the president’s agenda and planned a national strike, which was held during December 10. Most businesses throughout the country stopped their activities for 12 hours that day. Employees were not penalized if they wanted to join the strike; nor were they prevented
from working if they wanted to, and the opposition group kept track of the percentage of the population that opposed the president’s administration. The strike successfully paralyzed almost the entire country for a day, leaving the streets completely empty. However, that afternoon the president addressed the nation on TV to declare that the country’s situation was normal, and that the strike called by his opponents had failed. At the end of his speech, he demanded that the CTV never call another strike, warning, “You do not want to face severe sanctions.” The country entered a period of critical social and political disorder, with social upheaval worsening daily. By organizing national strikes, the opposition sent shouts of silent protest that effectively showed the city’s emptiness as their domain. After this national strike, polarization and divergence between both parties increased, with the streets and public places becoming stages upon which to measure each other’s strength (Salas 2004:99).

January 23, 2002 was the date of one of the first significant public opposition meetings. Approximately 250,000 participants took to the streets to express their differences with President Chávez and marched from Plaza Morelos to Plaza O’Leary in the downtown area (Notitarde.com 2006). Carrying banners and demanding Chávez’ resignation; they banged their cacerolas and carried national flags. These were the initial symbols that the opponents used in their meetings, but eventually the flag became a symbol of struggle between both groups. Each opposition rally or protest was characterized by the display of the national flag and the singing of the national anthem; opponents claimed “moral monopoly” over the nation’s symbols by their appropriation (Jakubowska 1990:11). As Salas explains, “the national flag gained a major visibility in opponents’ hands, who used it as a sign of Venezuelanity and resistance, while Chávez
supporters frequently carried red flags representing the revolution;” he concludes “supporters were revolutionary, and opponents were nationalist” (Salas 2004:99). Later on, President Chávez ordered a re-design of the national flag to include another star, which he based upon a congressional decree from 1817 in which Simón Bolívar included the territory of Guyana. The decree was executed in March 2006 by Dilia Flores, the leader of the Parliament, who publically announced the law reforming the national flag, proclaiming, “We are rescuing the national symbols” (El-Universal 2006).

Figure 3. b. The national flag with seven stars carried by the opposition.

\[50\] In addition to the eight stars, in the coat of arms the position of the horse was changed from right to left; also an arc and arrow were included representing the weapons used by indigenous, afro descendents and peasants. These changes were finally approved on March 2006.
Opponents interpreted this action as a capricious decision by Chávez to claim the flag for his own revolutionary agenda, while supporters considered it a vindication of Simón Bolívar’s decree (Nolia 2006). In resistance to this change, opponents continued to carry the old flag in their protests and duplicated it on countless items such as umbrellas, hats, purses and t-shirts, despite a governmental prohibition against using the national flag for public protests. Usually the national flag is a “dominant symbol” and a representation of nationality used to “unify disparate significata” (Turner 1967:28); however in Venezuela’s case, “the flag became a symbolic battleground” (Klatch 1988:142) between government supporters and opponents. Instead of providing an ideal of unity and social solidarity the flag is now an “anti-structural” (Turner 1974:49-50) symbol that has emerged in a Venezuelan “liminal” political period to contest the existing sociopolitical structure and differentiate the opposition from the supporters’ spaces.

Figure 3. c. The national flag with eight starts.

On February 7, 2002 a group of military officers publicly asked President Chávez to resign, accusing him of authoritarianism. They claimed the president divided the nation and used the army to support his authoritarian rule. They also expressed concerns with Chávez’ close relationship with Cuba, particularly the policy of giving petroleum to the island and receiving nothing in return. A great number of military officers resigned their positions and lost their rank within the army, joining the opposition movement and announcing that they would no longer support the Chávez government. The president denied the accusations, ignored the rebels and announced a new economic plan.
Two months later on April 7, 2002 during his 101st weekly program of *Aló Presidente*, Chávez strongly attacked the mass media and accused *Fedecamaras* [Federal Chamber of Commerce] and CTV of being conspirators against the nation, threatening them with legal sanctions if they did not support his administration. Later on the same television program, the president asked for a whistle, which he hung around his neck. Then, acting as though he were the arbitrator in a soccer game, he read a list that contained the names of the highest executives of PDVSA, the state petroleum company. After he read each name he blew the whistle and shouted, “*From now on you are out! You are out of a job!*” (Chávez 2002). He publicly fired seven of PDVSAs top executives,51 claiming they opposed his changes to the petroleum company and had instigated strikes that seriously affected oil production.52 According to Chávez, they were members of a “political elite”53 who had not attained their positions through a legitimate meritocracy, and they had rejected the organization of a new structure within PDVSA. In addition, he said their salaries were disproportionately high compared to the salaries of other PDVSA employees, pointing out that in December 2001, the top bosses received bonuses of 80,000,000 VEN Bs each —the equivalent of $37,000— in addition to their regular salary and benefits.

These firings had an explosive effect within the company and throughout the opposition movement. CTV capitalized on the instability, calling for another national

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51 Eddy Ramírez, Director Gerente de Palmaven, Juan Fernández, Gerente de Planificación y Control de Finanzas, Horacio Medina Gerente de Estrategia de Negociación, Gonzalo Feijoo, Asesor Mayor de la Estrategia de Refinación, Edgar Quijano, asesor laboral en Recursos Humanos, Alfredo Gómez, Analista Marco Regulatorio de PDVSA Gas, and Carmen Elisa Hernández Analista de Proyectos de PDVSA Petroleum, were fired by Chávez from PDVSA.

52 The entire program can be retrieved through http://alopresidente.gob.ve/n

53 Nowadays President Chávez is accused of creating an “oligarchy” that has misused oil revenues (Coronel 2005).
strike to pressure the president to change his stance. On April 9, *Fedecamaras* – the nation’s main business organization, headed by Pedro Carmona and the CTV, led by Carlos Ortega—called for the 24-hour general strike and then announced the protest would continue until President Chávez rescinded his actions. Since the goal was to protest the appointment of the new oil company board, PDVSA employees also joined the strike. Once more the opposition dominated the city’s space by presenting the emptiness as their domain.

On April 11 another call was made for a march and rally, with PDVSA employees again joining the event. Attendance was greater than expected—approximately 350,000 participants (Acosta 2008)—and included a cross-section of Venezuelan society; it was dubbed the *Megamarcha*. People were called to gather in *Parque del Este* and march to PDVSA’s offices in Chuao,⁵⁴ but instead the march headed toward the Presidential

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⁵⁴ At this time, PDVSA’s offices in Chuao were an emblematic bastion of the opposition and the square located in front of the building was renamed *Plaza de la Meritocracia* [Meritocracy Square].
Palace. The first leg of the rally had all the necessary legal permits, but the march toward the Presidential Palace to demand Chávez’s resignation did not and the event ended up in a confrontation with the president’s supporters who congregated around *Miraflores* and *Puente Llaguno*.

That Friday there was a tense calm around the city; most university students did not go to classes, and many public employees had decided to join the strike so public transportation was not operating on its regular schedule. Many businesses closed mid-day because there were few customers on the streets, and anxious rumors swirled throughout the city. People stayed home and watched the rally on TV; the mass media had suspended regular programming in order to cover the anti-government congregation in Caracas. Those in other cities watched in amazement as the number of protestors grew around PDVSA headquarters. Since there was a general suspicion that media information was biased, those with family in the capital called them to try to get reliable information. Thousands of mostly middle-class civilians attended the rally, and afterward marched toward the presidential residence.

Figure 3. f. PDVSA Chuao taken over by the opposition
http://www.venezuelanuestra.org
This was the first time that Venezuelans had had the opportunity to witness a rally of this size. Televised images showed women and men marching toward the presidential residence, banging their *cacerolas* and chanting: “*Ni un paso atrás, ni un paso atrás!*” [Not a single step backwards, not a single step backwards!]. Most carried the national flag and wore clothing with the national colors, as a sort of counter-revolutionary reaction to President Chávez, who had used the national colors and flag to identify his own revolutionary agenda. As previously mentioned, by wearing these colors and carrying flags, protestors not only attempted to show their patriotism, but also claimed their right to use patriotic symbols, thereby giving those symbols a new meaning not associated with Chávez’ own revolution.

At 3:00 pm, President Chávez interrupted the live broadcast of the march with a *cadena nacional*\(^{55}\) in which he calmly announced that the capital city was stable. He repeated throughout his speech that there was no reason for concern, that the situation in Caracas was absolutely normal. However, as the march was getting closer to the presidential grounds, the private television channels —ignoring the presidents’ orders to transmit his speech exclusively— split the screen and showed both events at the same time, with half the screen showing the president announcing that things were under control, while the other half showed protesters marching towards *Miraflores*.

The protest ended in an armed confrontation. Gunfire apparently came from three sources: a group of government supporters, the police who had an order to activate *Plan Avila,*\(^\text{56}\) and snipers located in buildings around *Miraflores*. It was impossible to determine who started the shooting; the opposition group blamed *Chavista* paramilitary

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\(^{55}\) All the TV and radio stations were transmitting together with the government TV Station.

\(^{56}\) A Venezuelan military plan to open fire against people considered “subversives.”
groups, while the president’s supporters blamed Caracas’ police department, which acted under the directions of the city’s anti-Chavista mayor.

The images on television were confusing; although people knew the march had been dispersed and had ended chaotically,\(^57\) no one knew exactly what had occurred. Many tried to get information through international television and radio stations but information was scarce. Some Colombian radio stations, monitored in Venezuela, reported that Chávez had been arrested by military officers in a *coup d’etat*. Around 6:00 am on April 12, the leader of the Venezuelan army announced on television that President Chávez had voluntary submitted his resignation. Meanwhile a group of revolutionary civilians proclaimed Pedro Carmona—Fedecamaras’ President—as the nation’s provisional president.

Questions surrounded the circumstances of the coup. Venezuelans never directly saw or heard President Chávez resign his position; rather they were informed by an army general that Chávez had signed a resignation letter.\(^58\) Approximately ten to fifteen thousand supporters congregated in front of Miraflores and Fuerte Tiuna\(^59\) demanding to see the president or to see evidence of a formal letter to prove that he had resigned voluntarily (Medina, *et al.* 2007:119). Meanwhile, groups blocked the main highway to Caracas, while other supporters, waving copies of the Constitution\(^60\) joined the crowds. Provea (2002) reports that during the two days in which president Chávez was out of office seven demonstrations demanding his reinstatement took place in popular

\(^57\) “The result was nearly two dozen deaths” (Ellner 2008:115)

\(^58\) Later the general admitted publically that he never actually had the letter in his hands.

\(^59\) *Fuerte Tiuna* is an army base located in the center of Caracas.

\(^60\) The new Constitution was edited and published as a pocket blue book and freely distributed throughout the entire country, these people as described by Medina (2007:14) march holding “their little blue book” in hand.
neighborhoods such as Petare, Carmelitas, Caricuao, La Candelaria, Catia and El 23 de Enero. These neighborhoods—among others—are some which backed President Chávez’ administration. On April 13, in a surprising turn-around, leaders from the Venezuelan Army declared their support for President Chávez and he was returned to power.

The series of spatial practices that took place the days before, during and after the attempted coup d’état affected how Caracas was “experienced, perceived and imagined” (Harvey 1990; Lefebvre 1993) throughout those days and afterwards. First, the opposition experienced the appropriation of the city by walking as a united group, holding the national flag and singing the national anthem and shouting slogans while demanding Chávez’ resignation. In opposition to those symbols, government supporters marched holding the new National Constitution and demanded the reinstatement of the president to office. Secondly, the city was represented based on the perceptions of different groups. While the government tried to create a visual representation of order and authority most of the media portrayed a chaotic and rebellious city. Lastly, the spaces of representation—product of the previous experience and perception—divided the city into spaces of fear and resistance where images of violence got embedded. Most people from both groups remember those days because of the lives lost and the struggles for representation.

In summary, the three dimensions involved in the production of Caracas’ urban spaces were influenced by government supporters and opponents as a means to gain political representation and power. Both groups took to the streets and formed recurrent
urban journeys or “secular pilgrimages”\textsuperscript{61} to carry out their political missions. In Caracas’ case certain public places gained a special connotation or representation and either government supporters or opponents felt obligated to visit them to express political devotion. Plaza Bolívar, Puente Llaguno, Avenida Bolívar, Miraflores\textsuperscript{62} and the downtown area—all spaces in Libertador Municipality—became the domain of President Chávez’ followers. Meanwhile, PDVSA square in Chuao, streets in Los Palos Grandes, La Florida, El Paraíso and Francisco de Miranda Avenue became opposition terrain. I believe this was a key moment in which Caracas’ space transformed into two different representations.


The territorial polarization defined in the previous year was re-emphasized during 2003 and 2004, particularly after the militarization of Plaza Altamira by the opposition and the continuing presence of supporters in Plaza Bolívar and at PDVSA’s building located in La Campiña (Provea 2003:343). Both political and territorial polarization grew physically and symbolically in arithmetical proportions.

By the end of 2002, another national strike—also supported by the petroleum company—lasted almost two months, causing disruption and disorder throughout the country. During those months conditions in cities throughout the country became chaotic; they became territories of conflict. There were gas shortages, and access to transportation, food, medicine and other public services was severely restricted. What

\textsuperscript{61} In religious terms a pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place with a religious purpose such as to “acquire supernatural aid, fulfill a vow, pay penance, accumulate merit, meet a requirement, express devotion, or several or all of these… The sacred place is often known as shrine and it may be anyplace but is often a place where “a miracle is believed to have occurred, or a saint or other religious leader to have been born or to be buried.” (Winzeler 2008:153).

\textsuperscript{62} Miraflores is the name of the president’s office.
was seen by the opposition as a strategy to empty the streets created the opposite effect and people were forced to walk everywhere to find the quickest and most effective ways of satisfying their essential needs. The military took over the main cities and after two months its superior power to command space allowed the government regain control of the situation; as a result the strike weakened the opposition and reinforced Chávez’ strength.

After the strike ended in 2003, the opposition parties proposed a democratic method for removing President Chávez from office, calling for a referendum. However, a series of violent events occurred, and the opposition “launched the Guarimba Plan, consisting of aggressive street tactics including open confrontation with security forces” (Ellner 2008:120) that exacerbated the conflict between opponents and supporters. However, most opponents did not see a positive outcome from those street tactics and kept working for the referendum, and by the end of 2003 they submitted a petition with approximately 1,480,000 signatures demanding a call for a referendum to the National Electoral Council. In February 2004, some of the signatures were rejected and more public protests took place around the CNE but ultimately the referendum vote was approved.

On August 15, 2004 citizens voted to decide whether the president would remain in office; the results confirmed Chávez would indeed remain. The opposition claimed that fraud was committed in the president’s favor, and expressed frustration and

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63 Venezuelans were asked to respond “yes” or “no” to the following question: “Do you agree with removing President Chávez from office, after he was elected as president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela by democratic and popular election?” The results: Total voters registered: 14,037,900, total voters 9,815,631, NO: 5,800,629 [59 percent], YES: 3,989,008 [40 percent] and 4,222,269 abstention [30 percent] (CNE 2009). It is important to recognize that only 41 percent of the voters registered expressly disagreed with the referendum, while 30 percent did not express their opinion by voting, leaving the abstention figures almost identical to those that agreed; in my opinion there was no fraud but a relevant abstention favored President Chávez: in other words “silence implies consent”.

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disappointment, refusing to participate in the mayoral/gubernatorial elections of October 2004 unless changes were made to the CNE. The request was ignored and Chavistas were able to remain in the majority, winning most of the votes in all but the states of Zulia and Nueva Esparta.

By the end of 2004 specific places in the city were clearly identified either as opposition or supporters’ territories. For instance, Plaza Altamira became the territorial emblem of the opposition among the neighborhoods located on the east and southeast side, while in Caracas’ downtown, places such as Plaza Andrés Eloy Blanco, Puente Llaguno and Plaza Bolívar were under supporters’ control (Provea 2004:337).

3.5. THE SITUATION WHILE IN THE FIELD.

3.5.1 Electing the National Assembly, October 2005 and Presidential Elections December 2006.

After the referendum’s defeat, the opposition mostly abandoned the streets, but continued to organize rallies to demand radical changes to the Electoral Council. They insisted that the CNE was biased in favor of the government, and demanded reforms for the Parliamentary elections on December 4, 2005. A rally organized by the opposition in August 2005 resulted in harsh confrontation with the president’s supporters (BBC-Mundo 2005) and a few months later Antonio Ledezma—one of the opposition leaders—announced “Operation Purple,” consisting of “a series of symbolic acts and unique public events to express their disagreement” (CorreodelCaroní 2005). Protests took place, with the opposition attempting to sabotage congressional elections. The opposition leaders called on their candidates to withdraw from the process and to refuse to vote, denouncing irregularities with the electronic voting machines and the CNE’s procedures. The
electoral council denied accusations of pro-government bias and removed fingerprint machines at polling stations after opposition leaders said the identification system threatened voter confidentiality. But the compromise failed to satisfy the opposition parties and electoral abstention and voter disappointment were the final result. At that moment, electoral abstention was seen by the opposition as the only remaining instrument to sabotage the elections and threaten the government.

In reaction to threatened voter abstentions, President Chávez accused the opposition of plotting with the US to destabilize the country, and proceeded with the election without the participation of the opposition parties (Alvarez 2005). President Chávez’ supporters did not abandon the streets, and before Election Day they marched to show their support, carrying their candidates’ banners and chanting “A votar, a votar, a votar” [Let’s vote, vote, vote] and “El pueblo no se retira” [The people do not withdraw]. At the end as Petkoff predicted “electoral abstention was not a combative arm, but just a way to express frustration.” (Alvarez 2005). Ultimately Chavistas not only won the elections and took control of the National Assembly but also took control of the streets. After this action, only the December 2006 presidential election remained for the opposition to keep up their fight against the government.

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64 As Petkoff advised, “there are moments characterized by massive demonstrations, street participation and fighting spirit, but if things do not result as people expect, then, frustration, disappointment and demobilization rise” (Alvarez 2005).

65 “The Assembly was overwhelmed by Chavismo but with questioned legitimacy” (Alvarez 2005). The electoral abstention was 75 percent: out of 13,933,494 voters registered only 3,281,970 participated (CNE 2009).
Chapter Four.

Public Places in the Mind of Caraquenos
CHAPTER FOUR.


Through the last decade, Caracas’ streets and public places have became an instrument to measure government supporters’ and opponents’ strength; each time one group organized a rally or meeting on one side of the city the opposing group organized a counter event on the city’s other side. In this process both groups have claimed specific public places in Caracas as their territories. In order to identify some of those key places while doing my fieldwork I asked informants to sketch maps of Caracas, first pointing out its main public places and then identifying the ones that have been politically used. These maps illustrate the “representational spaces” (Lefebvre 1993:33) of both groups within the city. Even though spatial practice, representations of spaces and representational spaces work as a triad, the last ones “obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness,” they are indicative of “imaginary and symbolic elements” and “they have their source in the history of a people as well in the history of each individual belonging to that people” (Lefebvre 1993:41). Therefore they express people’s particular memories, dreams, images and symbols within a shared history. In other words, these sketches constitute government supporters’ and opponents’ interpretations of Caracas’ urban spaces in recent political history.

I was able to collect a total of fifty-six sketch maps that I used to identify and describe the cultural domain defined as public places [Figure 4.a]. I listed the places included in the maps and then sorted them in order of decreasing frequency.
Figure 4. a. Mental maps.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Items/Public Places</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Respondent %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parque del Este</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Plaza Bolívar</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>El Avila</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Plaza Altamira</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Parque Los Caobos</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>El Metro</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>El Panteón Nacional</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Parque del Oeste</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Parque Los Chorros</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Plaza Venezuela</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Plaza Venezuela</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Parque Zoo Caricuao</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Plaza Caracas</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>La Catedral</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Plaza El Venezolano</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Los Próceres</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Parque Central</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Teatro Teresa Carreño</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>El Teleférico</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jardín Botánico</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Museo de Ciencias</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Chacaito</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Cuadra de Bolívar</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Galería de Arte</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Plaza de La Pastora</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Plaza Oleary</td>
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<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Sabana Grande</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Torres CSB</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Ateneo de Caracas</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Casa Nacional del Libertador</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>CNE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>El Capitolio</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>La Candelaria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>La playa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Miraflores</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Parque El Pinar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Plaza Andres Eloy Blanco</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Plaza Bolívar de Chacao</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Plaza Isabel La Católica</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>UCV</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. b. List of places mentioned by the informants.
A preliminary list included all the places mentioned by more than one respondent and the total of places was forty [Figure 4.b]. Then I chose the top ten items in order to reduce the number of places to be analyzed. This cut includes the items that were mentioned at least by fourteen percent of the informants as shown in Figure 4.c.

Out of the ten items/places, Parque del Este, Plaza Bolívar, El Avila and Plaza Altamira were pointed out by at least fifty percent of the informants, Parque Los Caobos by twenty percent and then Parque del Oeste by sixteen percent.

![Figure 4. c. Ten top places on the list.](image)

Although Parque del Este and El Avila mountain were mentioned by more than fifty percent of the informants, for this study I have chosen only Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira since during the last years they have been claimed by government opponents and supporters, respectively, as their territory. Interestingly, all the informants that drew mental maps in Plaza Bolívar included it in their sketches, the same way the informants in Plaza Altamira did. But in a matrix that compares the co-occurrences among the freelisted public places I found that only nine respondents out of fifty-six mentioned both plazas in the same list—six informants from Plaza Altamira and three from Plaza Bolívar included both places as shown in Figure 4.d.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Info #</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Plaza Bolivar</th>
<th>Plaza Altamira</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Plaza Altamira</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Plaza Bolivar</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
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Figure 4. d. List of informants that mentioned both, Plaza Bolivar and Plaza Altamira.
4.1. MENTAL MAPS.

The data for my research were mainly drawn from focused interviews with a number of actors that regularly use Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira, participant observations and the series of mental maps collected which were instrumental pieces of analysis. I scrutinized these mental maps according to two main categories that I called “dimensions and layout of the sketch” and “representation and finish of elements”, then both categories were sub-divided into more specific features.

When looking at the “dimensions and layout of the sketch,” I considered whether the sketches were drawn using the whole page, half page, quarter page or less; also whether the sketches had a portrait or landscape orientation; a concentric, axial or irregular composition and where either Plaza Bolívar or Plaza Altamira was located in the arrangement —up, down, left, right or centered. When considering the “representation and finish of elements” I looked at the use of architectural, environmental or abstract elements and also at the inclusion of people or additional written information -- for instance, the inclusion of street or building names.

Caracas is located in a valley surrounded by a chain of mountains; *El Avila* is the predominant one. In most of the maps this natural element was emphasized and clearly represented, with the mountain generally drawn in the upper area of the map. With this orientation, the maps followed the natural north, emphasizing it in the upper area of the page. The presence of this natural element in daily life serves as reference in many different ways, but particularly it divides the city into north, south, east or west. Fifty percent of the informants included *El Avila* in their reference; however when placing the different public places, particularly Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira, informants did not
correlate their locations with the real geographical position offered by the presence of *El Avila* [Figure 4.e]. Since this natural reference had a strong physical existence, I would have expected to have the public places located in relation to their actual geographic position, but instead informants followed a random topographical order.

![Figure 4. e. El Avila is located at the top of the sketches and the public places are in a lower level surrounding Plaza Altamira.](image)

The mountains served as a frame for the city as a whole, but when locating the public places in the composition -- particularly Plaza Bolivar and Plaza Altamira - people emphasized different locations. In Plaza Bolivar’s case, thirty percent of the informants located it on the upper left side of the map, followed by the center and upper right as the main locations [Figure 4.f].
Meanwhile, thirty percent of the informants from Plaza Altamira located it in the upper right corner, then lower-right, lower-left, and center as the subsequent locations [Figure 4.g]. The fact that thirty percent of the informants from each plaza placed them on either the left or the right side of the map may show a relationship with west and east geographic references. The representations of Plaza Bolivar and Plaza Altamira emphasize the importance that these places have in people’s minds as recognizable symbols located in both geographic sections of the city. In the case of Plaza Bolivar, the square was also re-emphasized in some cases with a rough sketch of Bolivar’s statue [Figure 4.h].
In representing Plaza Altamira, most informants included sketches of the obelisk which accentuated its presence in the general picture [Figure 4.i]. Both elements—Bolivar’s statue and Altamira’s obelisk—are known as unique landscape features that mark two significant locations in Caracas. They are what Lynch called “landmarks” (1960:48); urban elements of special historical, aesthetic, or cultural meaning. In fact, both have been declared as part of Venezuela’s architectural and cultural heritage and have received a special status requiring their preservation by the Venezuela Institution for Historical Heritage.
Figure 4. h. In the left upper corner Plaza Bolívar is represented by a 3D sketch of Bolívar's statue.

Figure 4. i. Plaza Altamira is at the center of the sketch but the additional public places are organized along a main street.
For many people, streets, sidewalks, transportation lines and other sorts of paths are the way to observe the city while moving through it and recognizing its urban elements (Lynch 1960: 47). Moreover, when giving directions, people generally refer to streets or paths to guide one to his/her destination; these urban elements take us to physical locations and also to places in our memories. In the mental maps collected, seventeen percent of the informants included streets or paths; in these cases they served to arrange the public places in a coaxial composition [Figure 4.j.].

![Figure 4. j. Plaza Bolivar as a node that articulates the other places.](image)

Despite the significance of streets and paths in our daily lives, forty percent of the informants—rather than following paths or streets—drew their mental maps based on a concentric composition; in these cases the informants organized the public places either
around something that they symbolized as the city, or around their representation of Plaza Bolivar and/or Plaza Altamira [Figure 4.k.].

Figure 4. k. The name of Caracas is at the center of the sketches in capital letters, and around it the main public places including Plaza Bolivar.

These predominant concentric compositions echo the natural configuration of Caracas as an enclosed valley. The maps with this circular alignment -- which represent twenty percent of the informants -- in many cases accentuated Plaza Bolivar and Plaza Altamira as strategic spots in the city, from which they organized their entire mental image of the city [Figures 4.l. and 4.m.].
Figure 4. m. Plaza Bolívar as a node that articulates the other places.

Figure 4. l. Plaza Altamira as the main feature, almost at the center of the composition.
Another particularly interesting aspect of these mental maps is the level of detail represented. Forty-three percent of the maps included architectural representations, such as buildings and urban infrastructure, and nearly half of the maps had environmental elements such as trees, water and mountains.

Caracas is in fact a very modern metropolis, with a large number of its population living in multifamily apartment buildings (Metropolitan Caracas has an estimated 3.2 million inhabitants). Caracas is crowded with buildings, traffic, and people, but is surrounded by mountains and vegetation; these aspects are symbolized in many informants' sketches. The level of detail is usually most elaborated around the public places that are most familiar for each particular informant. Not surprisingly, most informants from Plaza Bolívar included in their maps public places located on the west side of the city, while informants from Plaza Altamira did the same with public places from the east side. This might explain the lack of co-occurrences among the freelisted public places that I mentioned initially, where only nine respondents out of fifty-six mentioned both plazas in the list (six informants from Plaza Altamira and three from Plaza Bolívar included both places). But since these two places are relevant landmarks known by all, I affirm that the lack of instances of mental maps including both plazas is the result of the social and geographical polarization between east and west described in previous chapters.
Figure 4. n. Map from one inform in Plaza Bolívar. He included Plaza Bolívar in the center and Plaza Altamira at the left down corner.

Figure 4. o. Map from one inform in Plaza Altamira. He included Plaza Altamira in the left upper corner.
4. 2. CONCLUSIONS.

Mental maps are representations of how spatial knowledge is structured in our mind, they are “the images and associations of places that we carry around in our heads” (Reynolds 2004:80). Through mental maps we make sense of our position in the world in relation to the physical and social environment. “Mental or cognitive mapping refer to a person’s cognitive capacity to understand where things are in relationship to one another, sense of direction, or sense of distance…they hold the cognitive images in our minds about a place, a route, or an area” (Reynolds 2004:82). These mental images, even though individually stored in each particular mind, “are a form of [shared] ‘imagined geography’ that illustrate the complex relationships between the social and the spatial” (Reynolds 2004:84). In Caracas’ case, President Chavez’ supporters and opponents have established a daily routine visiting Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira, and in our conversations they included both places as main elements in their mental maps. Through these representations, they expressed their spatial and social experience with these specific locations; as one informant from Plaza Bolívar expressed while talking about his mental map [Figure 4.p.].
“The Panteón square is very important because it there where the Libertador is buried. But it is in Plaza Bolívar where everything really happens; there are always social, political and cultural activities here. People from the shantytowns come here to enjoy the cultural events. And here, people are free to talk.”

In his map, this informant drew *El Panteón* at the very top, and Plaza Bolívar in oversized proportion at the bottom. This map tells us how his spatial perception is affected by his relationship with those public places. His selection was not arbitrary, but
based on positive experience and values embedded in those places. I found comparable illustrations from my informants at Plaza Altamira.

Based on the interviews, observations and mental maps I found that in terms of “material accessibility” or “experience of the space” (Harvey 1990:220) Plaza Bolívar is more accessible to the west side residents of the city -- where most government supporters reside -- while Plaza Altamira -- located in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods on the east side -- is more accessible to residents of the east side of the city, where most government opponents live. In terms of symbolic accessibility, or “imagination of space” (Harvey 1990:221), Plaza Bolívar attracts those following the Bolivarian ideals promoted by the government, while Plaza Altamira symbolizes a site of resistance for the opposition. Over the last few years, both groups have had different spatial experiences, which have influenced how they situate themselves in Caracas. For instance, government opponents and supporters have filled their minds with stereotypical images of Caracas’ downtown and east side. In accordance with those images, they continue to reinforce the polarization of the city through experience and perception.

The co-occurrence in the matrix could be interpreted as an expression of the tension between the two political groups that claim both places. Public places are mirrors of social values, customs, and culture and they reflect the interaction between physical, social, political and economic realities. In the cases of Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira, these places symbolize the larger society and culture in which they exist. They have acquired meanings through their different functions, activities and roles in people’s lives; particularly by the political events and actions that they have held in recent years.
Summarizing, mapping is a spatial practice that shows links between people and their physical, social and cultural environments. As illustrated in this research, government opponents’ and supporters’ political crusades through Caracas’ public places is mainly determined by contested places and geographies of exclusion/inclusion. Even though official, traditional maps do not reflect the boundaries that divide both political groups, there are clear imaginary frontiers that are expressed through my informants’ mental maps. The way in which each group has mapped Caracas’ public places is related to their political activity and experiences of the city. They have turned Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira into meaningful places by occupying and embodying them with recognizable and tangible political characteristics, as I illustrate in the following chapters.
Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FIVE.
SYMBOLIC STRUGGLE IN VENEZUELA: THE TRANSFORMATION OF PLAZA BOLÍVAR.

The site of Plaza Bolívar in central Caracas has occupied an iconic place throughout Venezuela’s history. When the capital city was originally laid out in 1567, the Plaza Mayor and marketplace were located there. After the Independence movement of 1874, the plaza was transformed as part of a citywide upgrade project designed to launch Venezuela into the modern era. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the plaza remained the symbolic center of the city and the preferred place for gathering and socializing. After World War II, as Caracas became a bigger and more complex city, Plaza Bolívar no longer remained the center of power; it had become, however, a symbol of national heritage and history.

Since April 2002, Venezuelan cities, particularly Caracas, have witnessed regular scenes of conflict between supporters and opponents of President Hugo Chávez. Both groups, claiming the exercise of their civil rights, attempt to present their political principles and values through demonstrations and other acts of protest. They have created and re-created their own places and symbols throughout Venezuelan cities to frame their identities, relationships and political agendas, and have made certain public places their own by investing them with meanings. In this process, downtown Caracas and particularly Plaza Bolívar have become sites of symbolic struggle.

For instance, supporters of the president have demanded control over Plaza Bolívar and have transformed it into an icon of the Bolivarian Revolution,\(^66\) establishing

\[^66\text{The Bolivarian Revolution refers to President Chávez’ political project which seeks the implementation of Simón Bolívar’s ideals, or Bolivarianism.}\]
spatial and symbolic markers there to promote their political agenda. This section discusses the manner in which Plaza Bolívar has been symbolized by *caraqueños*, and its use for political purposes. In that process, the notion of “Plaza Bolívar” has become a common mental image carried by many Caracas inhabitants to construct a territorial segregation around public spaces.

5.1. BOLIVARIANISM.

During the democratic elections held in Venezuela in 1998, ex-army Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías nominated himself for the presidency. Before his nomination and after his release from jail, President Chávez dedicated four years to traveling throughout Venezuela, visiting everywhere from the most impoverished barrios to large public universities. He employed a campaign that proclaimed nationalism with a “deep tradition of populist caudillism” (Hellinger 2003:41). Throughout this campaign, Chávez was driven by an impulse to recreate the Venezuelan past, using elements of national identity as symbols of his revolution. He utilized a “trinity of heroes” consisting of Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez and Ezequial Zamora as the main characters in his rhetoric (Hellinger 2003:41). These three actors and their mythic reputation were continually exalted by Chávez in his speeches and used to stress his anti-oligarchical and anti-capitalist message.

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67 In 1992, Venezuela faced two military coups d’état attempting to overthrow then-Venezuelan president Carlos Andres Pérez. One of the most significant coups was led by current president Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías and his Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement [MBR], constituted of army groups and revolutionary civilians. After the coup, Chávez was given a prison sentence, locked up for two years and released in March 1994.

68 Simón Bolívar was an early nineteenth century Venezuelan and Latin American revolutionary leader, prominent in the South American Wars of Independence and South America’s emancipation from Spain.

69 A famous philosopher, also Simón Bolívar’s teacher.

70 A Liberal caudillo assassinated in 1860 during the Federal War.
Throughout his campaigning, Chávez exhibited an enthusiastic vitality and exuberance rarely seen in contemporary Venezuelan politics. Characteristically wearing a red beret along with his military campaign uniform, the charismatic Chávez persuaded Venezuelans, seemingly one by one, to give him their vote. He frequently visited shantytowns, shaking hands as well as talking and spending time with their inhabitants. Chávez’ campaign drew unprecedented support from the lower classes, while his public speeches condemned the traditional rich and upper classes. In December 1998, six years after trying and failing to take power through a frustrated *coup d’état*, Chávez was elected president of Venezuela with approximately 56 percent of the popular vote.\(^{71}\)

Immediately thereafter, he proceeded to rewrite the constitution, calling for a more participatory democracy oriented toward social programs, guided by what was known as *Movimiento V República* or MVR [Fifth Republic Movement] that sought to govern in favor of the masses rather than by the oligarchy. The Fifth Republic’s main goal was to erase that which was related to Venezuela’s political past; Chávez changed not only the Fourth Republic’s\(^{72}\) rules and principles, but also its symbols.

One of the key symbols that Chávez has appropriated and re-interpreted is that of Simón Bolívar. This historical celebrity has been co-opted by Chávez to become an ensign and symbol of the revolutionary process and principles. Bolívar is known as Venezuela’s liberator and father of the Motherland; he was born in Caracas on July 24, 1783 when the city was a small colonial town with around forty thousand inhabitants. He received a high-level education, typical of wealthy white Creole adolescents of that era,

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\(^{71}\) The electoral population registered in the Venezuelan CNE [National Electoral Council] in 1998 elections was 11,013,020 citizens out of approximately 23,410,158 inhabitants. The total participation was 6,999,398 voters while the abstention was estimated in 36.5 percent equivalent to 4,024,729 voters; and President Chávez received 3,673,685 votes (CNE 2009).

\(^{72}\) Refers to the Venezuelan political period between 1958 and 1999.
and also had the opportunity to travel throughout North America and Europe where he was exposed to French and American revolutionary ideas. On April 19, 1810 when Venezuela declared its independence from Spain, Bolívar began his military and political campaign, fighting against colonialism. His campaign crossed Venezuela’s borders; he also liberated Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia from Spanish rule. After his death in 1830, Bolívar was regarded as a hero of near-mythic status; nowadays nearly every city and town in Venezuela has its own Bolívar statue and a street or building named after him as a public tribute.

Figure 5. a. Bolívar El Libertador – El Libertador de las Américas. By Dario Hernández.
Today, Simón Bolívar is regarded as the most relevant personage in Venezuela’s history; the study of his life and military campaigns are mandatory subjects in primary, middle and high school curricula, and his name is known by all Venezuelans. Bolivar’s legacy is immense and his ideas and ideals are difficult to summarize in a single paragraph, but using Bolivar’s own words as cited by Lynch, this is what Bolivar wanted for Venezuela:

‘A republican government: that is what Venezuela had, has and should have. Its principles should be the sovereignty of the people, division of powers, civil liberty, prohibition of slavery and the abolition of monarchy and privileges. We need equality to recast, so to speak, into a single whole, the classes of men, political opinions and political custom.’ (Lynch 2006)

The strong popular devotion to Simón Bolívar has been described by Carrera Damas (1969) as a culto a Bolívar [a cult to Bolívar]. According to Carrera Damas, Bolívar is present in all aspects of Venezuela’s life and his cult is based on a deep historic and ideological structure, which exalts Bolívar’s values and translates them into daily life (Carrera Damas 1969:19). After 1842 when Bolívar’s remains were brought back to Venezuela, he became the “god” of a “second Venezuelan religion” whose goal was to bring order and balance into the chaotic political situation (Carrera Damas 1969:61).

This culto a Bolívar has been embraced and legitimized by each successive Venezuelan government, which regularly pays tribute and glorifies the hero through a series of secular acts. Likewise, state governors have become sort of official priests and custodians of Bolivarian knowledge. Throughout Venezuela’s contemporary history, these “secular priests” have preserved the official traditions and rituals of Bolivarianism, and have designated the sacred objects and public places of Bolivarian worship. By acting as secular priests, governors gain popular favor in the name of the hero —Bolívar—who represents the secular god that legitimizes their political power and
actions. In addition, by identifying Venezuela with Bolívar, governors help “people to conjure up the notion of the nation state and treat it as part of their universe” (Kertzer 1988:17).

President Chávez has taken full advantage of—opponents would say he has exploited—this Bolivarian cult. He has renamed the country República Bolivariana de Venezuela [The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela] and he affirms that Bolívar’s ideals are the principles of his Revolución Bolivariana [Bolivarian Revolution], Socialismo Bolivariano del Siglo XXI [21st Century Bolivarian Socialism] and Proyecto Nacional Simón Bolívar [Simón Bolívar National Project]—Chávez’ socio-economic project. The president has accused former Venezuelan leaders of betraying Bolivarian ideals and has called upon his supporters to reinvigorate the Bolivarian cult. Consequently, President Chávez’ supporters have declared Plaza Bolívar as their territory and have used it not only as a shrine to glorify the hero Bolívar and consecrate his memory, but also as a “vessel” to be filled with Chávez’ ideals.

To Venezuelans, Plaza Bolívar, with its monumental sculpture of the hero, represents—as do certain other historical buildings and monuments in downtown Caracas—what Nelson and Olin describe as “the desire to commemorate, to mark a place, to represent the past to the present and future, to emphasize one narrative of the past at the expense of others” (2003:2). But nowadays the plaza has been claimed—physically and symbolically—by Chávez loyalists intent upon separating government opponents not only from the physical confines of the square but also from the symbols that are shared by all Venezuelans.
5.2. MARKING THE TERRITORY: “TERRITORIO CHAVISTA, OR PLAZA BOLÍVAR ES DE TODOS”?

Plaza Bolívar has been characterized as the “historical core” of Caracas and is associated with the city’s imagery. The plaza is indeed a symbol to *caraqueños* and Venezuelan citizens of their national identity, and has been described as “the heart of the city and the country.” As one informant recalled: “Plaza Bolívar is the center of Caracas, a historic place and a tourist attraction, a place to relax and *caraqueños* see it as a place to pay respect to *Libertador*.” Another informant added, “Plaza Bolívar? It is Simón Bolívar’s square, our Libertador’s square — Plaza Bolívar is a symbol.” Even a foreigner who has lived in Caracas for approximately 40 years said, “Even though I was not born in

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73 Caracas inhabitants.
Venezuela, Plaza Bolívar has been always for me a symbol of Caracas.” In simple words, “Plaza Bolívar is the city’s heart” summarized another informant.

After the *coup d’état* in April 2002, serious confrontations took place in Plaza Bolívar. Part of the turmoil can be explained by aspects of conflicting sovereignty over the plaza: on one hand, the square belongs to Libertador Municipality, governed by Mayor Freddy Bernal. On the other hand, it also is part of the Capital District, ruled by a different mayor, Alfredo Peña. Initially both mayors were members of president Chávez’ political parties but later Mr. Peña politically distanced himself from president Chávez. In 2002 both mayors had a dispute over the administration of Plaza Bolívar, after which Mr. Peña, arbitrarily took over the square, lining it with policemen armed with guns and dogs. Groups of Chávez supporters, including members of *La Esquina Caliente* [The Hot Corner] protested Mr. Peña’s actions. The square became the scene of armed confrontations, described as resembling “*un campo minado*” [a mining camp] (Cañizales 2002). It took months before the square recovered its regular dynamic; however since that last conflict, Plaza Bolívar has been claimed by Chávez’ supporters as *territorio Chavista* [Chávez territory].

One of President Chávez’ popular slogan alludes to his socialist agenda: “*Ahora Venezuela es de todos*” [Now Venezuela belongs to everybody]. The slogan refers not to

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74 The Republic of Venezuela is divided into 23 states, a capital district and federal dependencies. The states are divided into districts, which are further divided into municipalities. The municipalities are divided into parishes. The capital district includes much of the Caracas metropolitan area and encompasses five municipalities. The municipalities are: Libertador, Chacao, Sucre, Baruta and El Hatillo, and all them are part of Caracas Metropolitan District.

75 This phrase refers to the position on the third base of a baseball diamond where the “hottest” or most important plays take place; in this case it refers to the group of president Chávez’ supporters that gathered on one of Plaza Bolivar’s corners.

76 Main reported “At the beginning of last week the police violence reached its peak [April 11th, 12th and 13th excepted] with two people killed and a dozen injured in Plaza Bolívar [including one or two Metropolitan police officers who, unbeknownst to many TV viewers, had been striking for several weeks, protesting both unpaid dues and the deployment of their corps for political ends]” (Main 2002).

a map representing Venezuela’s states and municipalities, in which areas are distributed among population figures, but to an imaginary territory in which everyone has equal rights despite his or her social class. But who is “everybody” in president Chávez’ rhetoric?

It is important to recognize that President Chávez’ social programs, called *misiones* [missions], have benefited thousands of ordinary Venezuelans who were excluded and ignored for many years by the government. He has worked in making resources and services available to the masses—as his slogan states “Venezuela belongs to everybody”. His programs have brought educational, economic and medical assistance to many barrios where the popular classes live. But while he proclaims “*Venezuela es de todos,*” President Chávez also insists that those who do not support him are against him, and therefore he refers to them as *oligarcas* [oligarchs], *escuálidos* [nobodies], *imperialistas* [imperialists], *pro-yanquis* [pro-Yankee] and Venezuela’s betrayers. By this declaration, Chávez obviously leaves no room for his opponents and thereby marks a clear division in Venezuelan society. This division is experienced in ordinary and extraordinary ways throughout the country. For instance, many families have been divided by their political preferences and have moved far apart physically and emotionally from each other, and long-term friendships have been broken due to political differences. As an example, one of my research subjects lived in *San Martin* with her two daughters, who—against her wishes—are *Chavistas,* . When the referendum*77* was called in August 2004, she vowed to her daughters that if Chávez were re-elected, she would leave the house and never return, a promise that she has kept. Now, she says she is

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*77* This referendum was called to confirm that Chávez would rule until January 2007 when his presidential period was to end.
overwhelmed by sadness, and blames Chávez for the division of the country and its families, “The innombrable”\(^{78}\) has tried to divide us, he has tried to divide the country, but now I feel more connected with my people. Chávez has divided my family, and now my daughters are with their father. Although Chávez doesn’t like it, we are all Venezuelans and there are no differences among us.”

But this social division goes beyond political preferences, and is expressed in the territory of the city.\(^{79}\) For example, Chávez’ supporters usually congregate near downtown, or on the west side where lower-middle and popular classes live, and have claimed that Plaza Bolívar belongs to them. Meanwhile, opponents mostly gather on the east side of the city, around the middle and upper-class neighborhoods. They have renamed Plaza Altamira as “Plaza de la Libertad” [Liberty Square] and claim that as Plaza Bolívar has been taken over by Chavistas so has the country. As sarcastically expressed by one informant—a government opponent whose sister was killed by a government supporter while protesting in Plaza Altamira after the 2004 Referendum—

“No sir, this country belongs to everybody, here everyone has room. How come people have to worry about it? I’ll tell you, it’s either because of “La Esquina Caliente” or the Hot Balcony! You can’t go to Plaza Bolívar because supporters will attack you and throw stones at you. That’s totally incredible, unbelievable; that is the greatest demonstration of ignorance. We don’t want others to call us Third World, but people here act as if they were from a Fifth World. I haven’t seen anything similar anywhere else. Where, especially in this century, have you seen that public places are just reserved for a few people?”

Some informants shared similar concerns; because they have explicitly and publicly opposed the government, they feel too vulnerable to visit Plaza Bolívar. For

\(^{78}\) The informant refers by this term to president Chávez, meaning that he is the one whose name cannot be mentioned.

\(^{79}\) Barry Cannon, in his article titled “Coup or Popular Rebellion? The Myth of a United Venezuela” analyzes how the current polarized division of Venezuelans into two blocs has deep roots in the country’s historical class division (2004).
them, the plaza remains a symbol of their history but they will not visit it to avoid harassment due to their political affiliation. Other informants echoed similar sentiments:

“Plaza Bolívar has always been a historical symbol; it is as a mental postcard that you carry with you to remember your city. The plaza condenses the city’s and downtown’s history but nowadays it has been appropriated by hawkers and government supporters. I don’t visit downtown any more, especially now; could you imagine me with my political background visiting Plaza Bolívar? People instantly recognize me as a government opponent. I feel in danger visiting that place”.

Another informant expressed, “Nowadays, plazas are no longer public places with free access. I used to visit downtown with my mom but now I don’t go there anymore.” Said another informant, with disappointment,

“Plaza Bolívar is not the best place to visit; however it is an interesting place, an icon; it’s a beautiful plaza and it’s in the downtown area and it preserves our history. It would be best if we could all visit it under normal conditions but given the political situation, some people feel restricted from going there. People feel insecure because the plaza has been taken over by a political group. I remember when each corner belonged to a different political group; on one corner were Lina Ron’s supporters, on the other one a different group; trying to access the plaza was a complete threat.”

Not surprisingly, government supporters have a different viewpoint; for them Plaza Bolívar belongs to the people and can be visited by everybody without apprehension. They insist that President Chávez is the first president in democratic Venezuelan history that has fought for social equality, has stood by the poor and opened public access to places that had been overtaken by the dominant classes. They claim that government opponents have tried to take over Plaza Bolívar, but they –Chávez supporters– have recovered it and returned it to the people. For them, Plaza Bolívar is the most important public place in the city not only because it represents Venezuela’s history; it also represents their revolutionary fight.
5.2.1. **La Esquina Caliente.**

Supporters of President Chávez express their commitment to *el proceso* [the process]—or revolution—through symbolism. By wearing characteristic clothing, chanting specific slogans, talking in certain ways and joining political activities and events they consider themselves—and are considered by others—to belong to *el Chavismo* [in support of the ideology and programs of Chávez]. In this way the president’s supporters become part of the political organization by adopting the symbols associated with it, and are recognized as members by others in the organization. As explained by Kertzer (1988), symbolic representation is very important because it helps to preserve the organization’s identity and continuity; in this case President Chávez’ supporters have used their own specific symbols to mark Plaza Bolívar.

One of the first symbolic and physical markers placed there by supporters was called “La Esquina Caliente” [The Hot Corner]. After the *coup d’état* in April 2002, Chávez’ supporters gathered on the corner next to the Cathedral and loudly defended the merits of his government. For them, Chávez represented a change and hope for a better future. The corner was converted into “Radio Bemba,” not an actual radio station but a place where, through word of mouth, groups in favor of revolutionary change were kept informed about the political process. Members gathered there wearing red attire—symbolic of their support for Chávez—and raised banners and distributed a variety of political propaganda. According to one member of “La Esquina Caliente,” the group was initially created to defend Plaza Bolívar when Alfredo Peña\(^80\) decided to take over the square; today Chávez supporters continue to supervise this place to prevent further

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\(^{80}\) Mayor of Libertador Municipality.
confrontations. As the member explained, “When Peña was here, he had something like 1,600 police officers, and no one could enter the plaza. He came and closed the plaza, he blocked off each corner with police officers and dogs. These police officers were armed, and even though we only had stones and homemade bombs to throw, we confronted them, because we had to reopen the plaza. So the members of La Esquina Caliente opened up the plaza and removed the roadblocks and the people reclaimed the plaza. Now we are always here, not all at the same time, but there is always someone who is keeping an eye on the process, and whatever happens, they let us know what’s happening. As for me, I am always here”.

Months later when La Esquina Caliente was dismantled and removed from Plaza Bolívar by the local government, members of the Corner remained in the Plaza and sabotaged acts of political protest organized by the opposition. Additionally as one informant explained, the group trained residents of other cities to defend the Plaza Bolívar in each of their own cities. The training was based on learning Venezuela’s history and the role played by Simón Bolívar. The group believed that since the most important political institutions and events have always surrounded this plaza, learning history was essential to promote the national values and symbols that were represented there.
They also believed that each Plaza Bolívar throughout the country is a symbolic bastion; as a result, they trained supporters to confront opponents of the president in other cities. As one informant recalled, they attempted to create an “urban guerrilla force” to watch over other plazas: “We have to protect Plaza Bolívar… We don’t allow any escuálido [nobody] to come here and place a wreath! I remember once when Salas Romer\textsuperscript{81} came to place a wreath, there was a big confrontation and we got in the middle of it, and one of us walked behind the guy and hit him on his head, tore down the wreath and they had to leave!”

Nowadays, Plaza Bolívar attracts more supporters of President Chávez than any other location in Caracas. For them, the plaza has become a medium to learn, participate, share

\textsuperscript{81} Salas Romer was the governor of Carabobo state and in 1998 he ran for the presidency of Venezuela.
and work for their political party, and stopping there is a mandatory part of their daily routine. One supporter explained,

“Here in Plaza Bolívar many of us share not only similar ideals but also a revolutionary past. We have always fought to have a more fair and just country, with fewer inequalities, and that’s the reason we support President Chávez, because he is pursuing those ideas as well. We, members of ‘La Esquina Caliente’, have always fought for a better country, and I have been in this fight in different places around the country, but during the last years we have concentrated on Plaza Bolívar because this is the most important place of the revolution... This is a place that fills my life with joy and happiness. Here every day you see something new and better; this has became a social forum where you can freely participate in public discussions, raising your hand and voice as a citizen; you didn’t see that before!”

On August 11, 2006, Nicolas Maduro –Venezuela’s Foreign Minister— presided over a ceremony in Plaza Bolívar to formally re-establish La Esquina Caliente; this time they moved its location closer to the municipal building and placed a tent there containing chairs and tables as a location to promote President Chávez as a candidate for the December 2006 presidential election. The corner had become a symbolic as well as a physical marker of the supporters’ presence in Plaza Bolívar.

5.2.2. Sanctuary of the Bolivarian Revolution.

After the political independence of Latin American colonies through the early and mid-nineteenth century, Venezuela entered an era of “cultural re-invention” due to the strong economic, political and cultural exchange between the local elites and the “most advanced countries of North Atlantic capitalism” (Almadoz 2002b:6). This influence manifested itself in Latin America through the adoption of artistic styles, literature, fashion and especially urban and architectural ideas (Almadoz 2002b:6). In the case of Caracas, the city adopted neo-classical standards in its buildings to reflect the modern rational and scientific ideals, in contrast with the theological and colonial former style
The goal was to modernize the city and build a "secular republic," (González-Casas 2002:225) to move away from the traditional and theological way of thinking.

The construction of this new republic was promoted by president Guzman Blanco in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, who became an expert on "the game of secularization and celebration of national heroes" as an instrument to reinforce his political and economic power (González-Casas 2002:225). As part of his renewal projects, Guzman Blanco renamed Plaza Mayor as Plaza Bolívar and ordered the installation of the statue of the Liberador. This sculpture — designed in neoclassical style by an Italian sculptor— represents Bolívar as a victorious horseman with western features, and imitates sculptures from classical antiquity. According to Alvarez (2004:14), the sculptor attempted to produce a work reflective of the dignity and dedication of his subject.

In general, the goal of Western sculptors was to present their subjects as the epitome of heroic perfection. The artists’ had to imbue their sculpted metal or stone with the idealized and patriotic values inherent in their subjects and “sanitize” any of their physical and moral imperfections; his mission was to present the subject as a semi-god rather than as human being (Alvarez 2004:12-13). The sculpture was placed in the middle of the square and became one of the most explicit demonstrations of the new political process. In that way, the plaza was used as a social and spatial pillar to build new historical traditions that became a medium to legitimize political power. The meaning embedded in Plaza Bolívar perpetuated the hero as a role model with a halo of perfection similar to that of a religious icon. By promoting this image, President Guzman Blanco

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82 “Public works became essential governmental tasks and physical testimony of President Guzman Blanco’s agenda” but also a personal revenue from “the financial and business arrangements tied to the construction” of the modern city (González-Casas 2002:220-223).
was not only venerating the values represented by the hero, but also attempting to gain support from the people who venerated Bolívar’s memory. Initially, patriotic dates were regularly celebrated in the plaza to reinforce ideals of nationalism and identity; over time these celebrations have changed but their purpose remains the same. One could affirm that over the two last centuries Plaza Bolívar has become a patriotic altar that condenses a series of moral values and acts as a symbolic shrine for Venezuelans and visitors that come to pay tribute to Simón Bolívar.

In Caracas over the last eleven years, several new monuments have been erected while others have been restored to celebrate the ideology of the new government. President Chávez has created a peculiar syncretism in Venezuelan history. He has tried to integrate
different religious beliefs and has attempted to establish a unique national thought. For example, in the new educational project known as *Escuelas Bolivarianas* [Bolivarian Schools], books for primary and elementary schools have been rewritten incorporating new elements into the national history. In a similar way, places of national heritage have been re-created to support the ideals of the Bolivarian Republic. Since these places are *lieux de mémoire* (Pierre 2010) “that serve to maintain a group’s sense of connection with its roots in the past” (Logan and Reeves 2009:2) the government has used them to retell the national history. For instance on December 8, 2001, President Chávez, in an emblematic ceremony, took the ashes of indigenous tribal leader Guaicaipuro83 to the *Panteón Nacional* [National Pantheon].84 By doing this, Chávez recognized Guaicaipuro as a national hero who should be placed next to other important leaders such as Simón Bolívar, thus incorporating marginalized groups under the aura of heritage sites. The event was attended by seven of the most important indigenous communities from Venezuela, Brazil, Perú and Ecuador. The speaker was a Warao woman, who expressed her pain for the many years of suffering, social exclusion and segregation of indigenous communities in Venezuela, and expressed her gratitude to the Government for having taken Guaicaipuro’s ashes to the National Pantheon and receiving him as a national hero. That day, Chávez opened a new symbolic space and reinforced the National Pantheon as a monument of collective memory to preserve the myths and celebrate a heritage that includes marginalized groups. His frequent discourses have converted some symbols into instruments to reinforce national identity and political cohesion; they have become a legitimization of his own political projects and have attempted to reinforce his power.

83 Chief of Los Teques and Caracas tribes who fought against the Spanish conquest. He died in 1568.
84 National Pantheon, monument where is located the remains of several national heroes.
The renovation of Plaza Bolívar has also been a part of President Chávez’ national project. In 2003, the government invested approximately $135,000 US to restore the entire plaza (Decarli 2003; Pineda 2003), particularly the statue of Bolívar and its lighting system, fountains, and part of the base, and installed an exclusive radio station for the plaza. This station broadcasts only Venezuelan music, and its purpose is to promote national music, history and culture. As stated by Freddy Bernal—Mayor of Municipio Libertador—the radio station “will be an instrument to inform and educate, and also to reinforce national identity and culture” (Pineda 2003). The radio station broadcasts from 8:00 am through 6:00 pm daily, and in addition to music, it transmits announcements of the government’s projects and achievements.

Nowadays, images of Bolívar have become symbols of struggle; those in office use the hero as an image of their political projects, while opponents accuse them of misusing it for political purposes. Both groups—government supporters and opponents—embrace Bolivar’s image and ideas, however government opponents disagree with the government’s modification of national history and its promotion of a socialist or communist image of Bolívar (González D. 2005). Meanwhile the “cult to the hero” is more popular than ever before, but in order to participate in the public rituals at Plaza Bolívar one has to also pay tribute to the government; as expressed by a supporter: “This is our Plaza! How could we not love this Plaza? This Plaza represents Bolívar, and loving Bolívar is like loving and respecting my father and leader who is our president.”
In addition, for government supporters the Plaza represents freedom and social justice, and it is a “sacred place” where supporters’ social rights have been restored. As one informant said, “Plaza Bolívar is a historical site. The most important protocol takes place here, the plaza is like a stage of Caracas culture; it is a place for all caraqueños and Latin Americans because Bolívar is a symbol of the Latin Americans’ struggle. Caraqueños used to be ignorant, we didn’t know about our rights as citizens but we have learned about them here; our citizenship has been vindicated in this plaza. Now you can walk and talk freely. Bolívar represents something very special; this plaza is like a sacred place.”

The idea of national unity achieved in the plaza as a symbol for Venezuelans has been intentionally designed to separate government supporters from opponents. Plaza Bolívar acts as a symbolic place of segregation, and while supporters constructed their
links with the place they put more distance to separate the “others” from it. In this way, the plaza has become a contested place where supporters compete with opponents for legitimacy and power.

5.2.3. The Red Plaza.

Among the most prominent symbols of Plaza Bolívar are the government supporters themselves, and their characteristic style of dress. Supporters gather in the plaza dressed in red, a color which President Chávez has made a characteristic element of his clothing. In most of his public speeches he wears a red guayabera shirt and red beret. In addition, members of Chávez’ cabinet, political party, governors and followers wear the color red as part of their daily dress code.

A visual hallmark of any march or public gathering in support of president Chávez is the thousands of red-garbed bodies that create a vivid red human flow moving through the streets, which has been referred to by the president and his supporters as la marea roja [the red tide]. Additionally, swarms of people wearing red berets, hats, t-shirts, scarves, sweaters and jackets have become something of an itinerant political text and typical “bodily practice” (Connerton 1989:10) characteristic of the Bolivarian
Revolution. In this daily dress code one can observe a connection between the language of dress and the language of politics as a way to discipline mind and body and create a connection between dress and space.

In general, the social world expects bodies to be dressed, however the understanding of a dressed body fluctuates from culture to culture and can range from a variation of permanent tattooing or makeup to a complex set of layers of fabric (Entwistle 2001:33). And despite the general belief that clothing is intended mainly to protect the body it also makes bodies meaningful to society. As Entwistle points out, “conventions of dress transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture and are also the means by which bodies are made ‘decent,’ appropriate and acceptable within specific contexts.” (2001:33). Therefore, the human body is a dressed body that wears certain social codes and norms.  

85 Then, if the human body is a dressed body “the social order is a dressed order” (Corrigan 2008:5) as well.
Dress is not an individual and random option, but a socially structured body practice essential to social order. And despite the interest in personal appearance, individuals normally dress according to the circumstances, and their choice of clothes is not only a matter of individual identity but also a response to the social forces that regulate their bodies (Entwistle 2001:97). In other words, people wear clothes, conscious of a dress code that they can obey or reject, and based on their choices they will be accepted or rejected by others in society.

As discussed earlier, in contemporary Venezuela President Chávez has made red the color that symbolizes his political party. In Venezuela’s politics, this color has been associated historically with the Communist party but was never broadly and constantly worn by the party members. Nowadays, whenever President Chávez calls for a political meeting all participants wear at least one piece of red clothing in order to show they are
rojos, rojitos [red, really red].

Most of this red clothing is given to meeting and ceremony participants, particularly to employees that work for governmental institutions and for misiones. For them, the wearing of red is mandatory, since it is required by the employers and political organizers.

In November 2006, just a month before the presidential elections, an amateur video of Venezuela's energy minister—Rafael Ramirez—was released, causing a tremendous political storm. In this video Mr. Ramirez demanded that state oil workers back President Hugo Chávez or leave their jobs. He proclaimed that the state oil company is “red from top to bottom” in reference to the color worn by President Chávez’ supporters. In his discourse Mr. Ramirez emphasized,

"Here, we are backing Chávez, who is our leader, who is the leader of this revolution, and we will do everything we have to do to support our president... Those who do not feel comfortable with that orientation, should give their jobs to a Bolivarian [a Chávez supporter]." (BBC-Mundo 2006).

Despite generally negative public reaction, President Chávez supported Mr. Ramirez and said that public workers should support the revolution. Defending Mr. Ramirez, he said, “Of course PDVSA is revolutionary.” [Its] workers are with this revolution, and those who aren't should go somewhere else. Go to Miami" (BBC-Mundo 2006).

In this case—as in many others—employees have been forced to accept and support President Chávez, and the use of the color red has become part of an institutional symbol of supervision and control. As Foucault (1977) points out, this type of bodily

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86 Some even do extreme things as dying their dogs red as shown in a news article on BBC News. See the link http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/06/in_pictures_caracas___city_of_contrasts/html/7.stm
87 In 2003, around 19,500 PDVSA employees were sacked. They joined the two-month long strike demanding President Chávez resignation from office and after that they were all removed from their positions.
practice shows the way in which humans are subject to power and are discursively constituted. In this instance President Chávez, guided by the principles of his Bolivarian Revolution and the desire to create social equality, has chosen red as a unifying symbol articulated through individual physical appearance. President Chávez attempts to show that red clothing is characteristic of his political project. By imposing this new body practice he has set apart his supporters from his opponents and encouraged the former to populate the city as representatives of his power.

In Caracas, physical demonstrations of divisions are evident throughout the city, particularly expressed in the landscape. The middle and upper classes tend to live in the flat and lower-lying areas, while half of the urban poor population lives in precarious barrios on the surrounding slopes. However, in recent years many people have benefited from Mr. Chávez's missions, or social programs, and by wearing red –the symbolic color of his revolutionary agenda and misiones—supporters pay honor to the government in a gesture of gratitude and support. For instance, one supporter wears her red apron while doing clients’ hair in her improvised barbershop around Plaza Bolívar. She declares that she has been a revolutionary even before Chávez. She worked as a secretary but now she has had the opportunity to enroll at the Bolivarian University to study law, and hopes to find a better job. She says that doing her comrades’ hair is part of her contribution to the Bolivarian Revolution; she charges the equivalent to $1.00 US, which she claims is the cheapest service in the area. Her equipment consists of a mirror, three small stools for her clients, a cover, a pair of scissors, comb, some water, gel and a red apron intended to show her support and gratitude to President Chávez [Ultimas Noticias 2006].
In fact, the color red has become so deeply associated with President Chávez’ political philosophy that during the electoral campaign in 2006, after he wore a blue guayabera for one of his political advertisements, his followers complained, proclaiming that red, not blue, is the true color of the Bolivarian Revolution.

In daily Caracas life, urban troops cover the city in red; they might be members of the misiones, government employees, masses of kids attending public elementary, middle or high schools [where red is the color of their new uniforms], people attending the weekly broadcast of “Alo Presidente,” or just supporters going about their daily routines. But Plaza Bolívar is an especially “red place,” where employees from nearby public institutions, members of La Esquina Caliente [The Hot Corner], and political activists and supporters regularly gather wearing their red garb. Consequently, some of President Chávez’ adversaries refer to Plaza Bolívar as La Plaza Roja [the Red Plaza].

But far from unifying, the color has divided people to the extent that opponents refrain from buying or wearing any items of clothing in the color red. In one instance, two vendors that import clothing from Miami to Caracas commented that despite the economic crisis and the current exchange regulations, people in Venezuela are still willing to buy and pay high prices for imported clothing, which is difficult to find in the country. However, the vendors explained that those opposed to the government refuse to buy any red items. For instance, the vendors were stuck with some of their red Victoria’s Secret handbags because their customers — a majority of them government opponents— did not want to be mistaken as government supporters for carrying a red handbag. In another case a mother refused to buy a Disney t-shirt for her child because it featured the character on a red background. I was also told about a man who decided to wait a couple
of months to buy a car for his wife, since the dealer only had the model he wanted in stock in the color red, and his wife didn’t want to be mistaken for a Chavista.

Although access to Plaza Bolívar and some other public places has not been physically blocked, there are clear ways in which these places have been marked and defined as Territorios Chavista [Chavista territory]. For instance, anyone is free to walk around Plaza Bolívar, but according to those in the opposition, the square has been taken over by Chavistas who make those who are opposed feel unwelcome; to opponents, Venezuela is not para todos [for everybody], it truly does not belong to everybody.
5.3. CONCLUSION: PLAZA BOLÍVAR OR CHAVISTAS’ SQUARE.

Throughout this section I have explored the representation of Caracas’ Plaza Bolívar along with its history and contemporary meaning for President Chavez’ supporters. The loss of the colonial city—with its model of concentric circles organized around the Plaza Mayor—made room for a modernist city disconnected from the traditional model, and left Plaza Bolívar behind in its progress. However, the new city, in search of national unity, came to function as a symbol of the nation, representing not only ideas of progress but also recreating the Venezuelan past.

In an attempt to reinforce national identity, President Chávez has also recreated the Venezuelan past throughout the city. In his public discourses he has introduced elements such as Simón Bolívar and the national flag, using them as symbols of his revolution. Motivated by a “nostalgic impulse” (Harvey 1990:86) Chávez evokes Venezuela’s historical past to construct the symbols of his political program. By preserving the past the state is preserving the self, but a collective self, a national self. Since “the past is the foundation of individual and collective identity, objects from the past are the source of significance as cultural symbols” and “continuity between past and present creates a sense of sequence out of aleatory chaos” (Hewison 1987 as cited in Harvey 1990:86). Then Simón Bolívar is a key piece in the system of meaning of Chavez political project. Evoking and recollecting objects from the past has been used as a social palliative to reinforce a new national identity (Hewison 1987). Supporters identify those symbols as parts of a common heritage and have politically claimed them, however opponents reject the changes under the new nationalism.
Nowadays, Caracas has been divided into two political areas: east and west side—but neither concept corresponds to a precise geographic reference. The east is defined as the prosperous and wealthy area where “oligarch, imperialist and government opponents” live, while the west is the poor and disadvantaged area, home of most Chavistas or government supporters. This cartography defines where political groups gather—either on one side or the other—reinforcing the imaginary division where east/west represents concepts of public exclusion/inclusion and polarization. In addition to the political separation, these concepts have emphasized social segregation, which is expressed through urban intolerance and political hatred. And in order to set apart the “other” from the “self,” both groups—opponents and supporters—feel the need to claim territories physically and symbolically.

As discussed in this section, President Chavez’ supporters have claimed Plaza Bolívar as theirs. For instance, members of *La Esquina Caliente* guard the plaza to assure that supporters do not make permanent use of the space; they insist that Plaza Bolívar is their territory. Political leaders representing Chavez’ party use the plaza for a variety of events—meetings, public services, civic ceremonies, celebrations, etcetera—which are mainly attended by the president’s supporters; they use Bolívar as an image of their political programs and Plaza Bolívar as the site to venerate him. With their actions, activities and their presence “in red” [clothing], supporters legitimize the social order and differentiate themselves from government opponents. People wearing red circulate throughout the cities as “troops” of the Bolivarian Revolution, making a discernable statement about their political affiliation.
Dressing in red as both a social and personal practice is a discursive and useful choice for the president’s supporters. They wear red to make their bodies compatible with their social situation, to avoid social condemnation and to access social benefits. By wearing the color, they fit within the rules and norms of the social space that Chávez has created, and by making evident their political affiliation they gain access to the benefits of that social space. Therefore, the space affects individuals’ decisions over their clothes, but at the same time individuals shape the space with their specific garments.

Despite the development of other urban centers, Caracas downtown with its emblematic Plaza Bolívar exists as a territory of struggle over political and symbolic control. In this process, the concept of Plaza Bolívar, along with certain other public places, has become a common mental image carried by many Caracas inhabitants to construct a sort of political and territorial apartheid or sort of informal ghettoization of government supporters. By claiming Plaza Bolívar as their own, supporters not only demand rights over the physical space but over its symbolism as well. Supporters have used and re-created the square, investing it with their ethos, while opponents claim that Plaza Bolívar has been “ghettoized”88 by Chávez’ rhetoric and supporters.

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88 Sharon Zukin (1995) uses this term to refers to the division of cities by mechanisms of public rhetoric and economic investment.
Chapter Six.

Expanding the City: Chacao & Altamira
CHAPTER SIX.
EXPANDING THE CITY: CHACAO AND ALTAMIRA.

Venezuela's transition to a modern democracy has been a difficult one, which only started in the mid-1930s after thirty years of dictatorial leadership under President Juan Vicente Gomez. This section analyzes the urban configuration and expansion of Caracas during the twentieth century, comparing Libertador and Chacao Municipalities. It also explores the urban role of Plaza Altamira from its inauguration to the present day, and discusses the manner in which this plaza has been symbolized by caraqueños as a common mental image to construct a territorial segregation around public places. While Libertador Municipality hosts the seat of the national government and many of the most important historical and traditional buildings of the city and includes Plaza Bolivar, Chacao Municipality represents its counterpart with modern buildings and includes Plaza Altamira. I illustrate how the current geopolitical polarization between both municipalities in Caracas has not been accidental but rather caused by sociopolitical circumstances.

6.1. CARACAS’ DECENTRALIZATION AND CHACAO’S BEAUTIFICATION.

“Chacao is like a gold mine, a privileged territory with a generous budget, and there people behave differently. For example, if a motorcyclist doesn’t wear a helmet he gets a ticket. Even bus drivers have to respect the bus stops to avoid tickets, and when you travel by the Metro, once you pass Chacaito and get close to Chacao, people just change,” reported one informant. Moreover, “if you travel by Metro the air conditioning only works from Chacao going east. Once you pass Chacaito and travel west, I am convinced they turn off the air conditioning,” complained another informant. These two
statements exemplify how some citizens who live on Caracas’ west side perceive Chacao Municipality and compare it to their own, poorer neighborhoods. These two micro-narratives represent what Silva [2003] calls “urban imaginaries” which constitute not only mental constructs about the city but also perceivable tangibilities from which several images emerge. Urban imaginaries refer to “how people construct collective ways of being, living, inhabiting and abandoning our cities based on common desires and sensibilities” [Silva 2003:11] and these imaginaries are not fictional because they are based on empirical re-creations of the city. However they change according to the variety of points of view; in this case those outside Chacao have “directly lived [that space] through its associated images and symbols” (Lefebvre 1993:39) therefore ,they share the representation of an “ideal municipality” when they refer to it. Now how has Chacao been beautified and represented?

Under the decentralization process in 1989, the metropolitan area of Caracas was divided into five municipalities –Libertador, Chacao, Sucre, Baruta, and El Hatillo. The decentralization was designed to re-distribute national power among the states and municipalities, reducing bureaucracy and promoting citizen’s participation. The final goal was to stimulate local development and attack urban problems such as lack of housing, education, and recreation, congested transportation systems, high crime rates and severe pollution. The main resources for the states’ and municipalities’ development came from a Constitutional Revenue [Situado Constitucional] administered by the national government, but after the 1980s economic crisis the national government was loaded with an oppressive external debt which reduced the resources intended to stimulate the states’

89 As Goldfrank explains, the most severe new problem was the water shortage. By 1993 “it was reported that 30 percent of the population of Caracas did not receive water regularly and one million people relied on water trucks that in most cases arrived once a month”(2004b:109).
and municipalities’ development. Together with political corruption and mismanagement the marked reduction in government spending was detrimental in the standard of living across Caracas (Irazábal and Foley 2008:146). For instance, “between 1980 and 1993 per capita spending was reduced by 40 percent …education spending was slashed by more than 40 percent, housing and urban development projects by 70 percent, and health services by 37 percent… [and] the economy continued to deteriorate throughout the 1993-2003 period” (Irazábal and Foley 2008:146).

In terms of resource allocation and service provision, the poorest sectors were the most affected. For instance, in Caracas 65 percent of the poor population was located in Libertador and Sucre, the two largest municipalities with “the highest density, lowest land value, lowest household income and mostly characterized by the informal urbanization” and lack of infrastructure (Irazábal and Foley 2008:147-148). On the other side, Chacao, Baruta and El Hatillo were the privileged municipalities, with “highest land values, lowest density and largest income with a characteristic formal urbanization” (Irazábal and Foley 2008:148). To illustrate the differences between these two zones, in 1998 the average household income in Libertador and Sucre was “$6,300 US per year while in Chacao, Baruta and El Hatillo [it] was around $23,800 [except for the barrios within Baruta where income was $12,300].”

This geopolitical and social schism in Caracas has not been accidental; rather it has been caused by sociopolitical circumstances. Historically, “Caracas has been the

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90 Goldfrank (2004a) offers similar figures in 1993: “Libertador’s budget was Bs. 5,342 per capita in 1993 compared to Bs. 26,102 per person in Chacao. Libertador’s per capita budget is small not only relative to Venezuelan cities, but to other Latin American cities of a similar size. In 1995, Libertador’s administration could spend about $83 per person, while Bogotá’s could spend nearly 10 times more, about $800 per person”. According to articles 167 and 179 from the Venezuelan Constitution, resources for the states and municipalities come from the Constitutional Revenue [Situado constitucional] and local taxes.
place to be for anyone who wanted to influence Venezuela’s politics, economics and culture” (Myers and Dietz 2002:95). Consequently, Venezuela’s presidents have created different mechanisms to control the city’s space. In 1864 the federal district—covering two-thirds of the Caracas valley and the port of La Guaira—was created, and despite some changes in 1936, the federal district remained intact until 1986. This district was the instrument which “separated caraqueños from the geopolitical jurisdiction of the Providence of Caracas and prevented them from exercising political authority at the seat of national power” (Myers and Dietz 2002:100). The law in 1936 gave the president authority to rule and maintain order in the federal district and to appoint or unilaterally remove its governor. In 1989 a new law was approved dividing states into districts, subdivided into municipalities and separated into parishes. Each municipality was governed by a powerful, autonomous locally-elected mayor. Caracas’ territory was divided into two politically independent entities, Miranda State and a Federal District, which includes five municipalities. The Federal District embraces the Libertador Municipality, while the other four municipalities—Chacao, Sucre, Baruta, and El Hatillo—belong to Miranda State. With this structure, Libertador Municipality—which includes most government buildings and institutions—became the center of power ruled by the national government. This municipality concentrated one of the highest low to middle-low income areas and it was not only geopolitically separated from the metropolitan area but it was kept in constant administrative confrontation and struggle with the other more prosperous municipalities.

The 1978 Organic Law of Municipalities established means to improve citizen participation, allowing voters to choose municipal councilmen in separate elections. In
1984 the Commission for State Reform [COPRE] finally approved the direct election of governors and the creation of a mayoral figure where each municipality got the right to elect its own mayor—including Libertador municipality. But since the Federal District—which overlapped Libertador Municipality—was not a state, it was not subject to the decentralization law, and the governor of the Federal District was chosen by the president. This duality kept Libertador Municipality in a constant state of political tension between the appointed governor for the Federal District and the popularly-elected municipal government.

This tension grew in the years between 1989 and 1999, when most of the popularly-elected mayors came from a different political party than the appointed governor. “The overlap of both entities developed confrontations between the appointed governor and the elected mayor and confrontations sometimes occasioned paralysis [in the city] that had to be settled by the president favoring the governorship” (Myers and Dietz 2002:113). For instance, Claudio Fermín, Aristóbulo Isturiz and Antonio Ledezma were the three elected mayors of Libertador between 1989 and 1999 that had “autonomous political power.” However, they had to compromise with the federal district’s governor during their administrations, assisting the national executive’s interest rather than the municipality.

Despite the governmental problems that Libertador municipality faced, the decentralized administration benefited other municipalities such as Chacao, which became a prosperous territory. Once it was detached from Sucre and Petare’s poor residents, Chacao’s prosperity was a major economic blow (Alvarez 1998a:269). Under the new administrative division, Chacao kept the most exclusive commercial areas and its
wealthy population. The division transformed this municipality into a small, autonomous entity with the lowest population density and poverty rate in the country. In fact, Chacao became “the richest and least problematic of all Venezuela’s municipalities” (Alvarez 1998a:269) despite the general lack of budget coming from the national government.91

In addition, in 1988 Irene Sáez—a former Miss Venezuela—was elected Chacao’s mayor, and during her administration the municipality went through an urban beautification, or so-called “Irenezation” program, that transformed Chacao into a sort of local “Magic Kingdom” or Irenelandia [Ireneland], as someone sarcastically referred to it. She formed two separate police forces, composed of “young students and professionals who tend to be taller than average and lighter-skinned than most of the police in the city and supplies them with uniforms that were more up-to-date than in other areas” (Alvarez 1998a:270). These two police forces were portrayed as the ideal model of law enforcement for the country.93 The beautification promoted by “Sáez influenced other candidates’ campaigns, who promised their voters a life like that in Chacao” (Alvarez 1998a:270).

As part of Sáez’ agenda, Plaza Altamira was turned into a center of cultural events that oscillated between public fashion and television shows, Christmas ornamentation and public parties. The Plaza was declared one of the symbols of Chacao when it appeared on the Municipal Coat of Arms in an ordinance passed by Sáez in 1994.

91 In 1993 Chacao had a budget of Bs. 26,102 per person while Libertador—holding half of the territory of the metropolitan area of Caracas and approximately three million inhabitants—had a budget of only Bs. 5,342 per person (Goldfrank 2004b:108-110).

92 Sáez was elected Mayor of Chacao with the support of a coalition that included AD and COPEI (Alvarez 1998a:269).

93 “This image is important because in Venezuela, and especially in Caracas, the police are looked down upon. They are regularly accused of being corrupt and of violating human rights. Their blue uniforms are generally disheveled. They are badly armed, badly paid, and tend to live in the poorest part of town, next door to the very criminals and gang members whom they are supposed to control” (Alvarez 1998b:270).
During the 1990s the Plaza became an idealistic model of urban perfection, serving one of the most exclusive areas of Caracas.

At the same time, Libertador Municipality remained one of the most conflicted territories. It was the seat of the national government, with its historical buildings representing power and authority, but it was also surrounded by the poorest shantytowns and overpopulated neighborhoods, and Plaza Bolívar became one of the main places to address these differences, as was discussed in Chapter 4.

In 1999, President Chavez proposed unifying metropolitan Caracas because the decentralization initiatives were proved to be dysfunctional (Delfino 2001; Ellner and Myers 2002:121). Chavez wanted to refuse the municipalities of Libertador, Chacao, Baruta, Sucre and El Hatillo into a Metropolitan District where an elected main mayor would govern the district and governorship of the federal district would be eliminated (Ellner and Myers 2002:121). When the reforms were approved, the ambiguity between governor and mayors was now extended over Chacao, Baruta, Sucre and El Hatillo, all of whom had to answer to Miranda’s state governor as well as to the mayor of the Metropolitan District. Nevertheless through the last ten years [1999-2009] this reform has proved to be ineffective as well.

In November 2008, Venezuelans voted in elections to choose new state governors and mayors. As a result, Chavez's governing party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela [PSUV], won in 17 out of 23 states, but lost the Metropolitan District of Caracas and the country's two most populous states —Miranda and Zulia. These were perhaps the most distressing results for Chavez’s supporters who saw an opposition

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94 Caracas population was in 2002 estimated around 3,180,000 inhabitants where 1,975,787 were part of Libertador Municipality.
leader—Antonio Ledezma—winning the elections as the Greater Caracas mayor with 52.45 percent of the vote. In addition, Chavez’ party also lost the eastern Caracas municipality of Sucre, leaving four out of Caracas’s five municipalities in control of the opposition. In January 2009 Ledezma took office, but he was banned from entering his own city hall by PSUV supporters.

In April 2009, the national assembly passed a law redefining the role of the capital’s mayoralty, which transferred its powers and resources to a presidential appointee. President Chavez approved the new law and declared Libertador Municipality an autonomous part of the Metropolitan District again ruled by a “chief of the Capital District” appointed directly by the national president. In this occasion Jaqueline Faria was appointed in that position—directly by the president— affecting the power and resources that Antonio Ledezma—the Metropolitan Mayor and opponent of President Chávez—had won by popular vote. Opponents of Chavez described this action as a violation of the popular vote, while supporters described the political and budgetary reorganization as an "act of justice" for Libertador Municipality, the largest and poorest of the five municipalities making up Caracas (Pearson 2009b). With this law the new Capital District includes Libertador Municipality while the Metropolitan District of Caracas covers only the four municipalities from Miranda state—Baruta, El Hatillo, Chacao and Sucre. “The District Capital will receive resources out of the national budget, and overall should receive more resources than it is currently. Legislators shepherded the law saying the extra resources would help to improve the quality of life of its population” (Pearson 2009a). Indeed, a predominantly lower-middle class and lower-class population have been caught in the borders of this new Capital District, whose geopolitical division
facilitates the government’s control over the territory but it is not a solution for the lack of infrastructure and development of this area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Appointing President</th>
<th>Federal District Governor [Appointed by the president]</th>
<th>Main Mayor for Metropolitan Caracas [Popularly elected]</th>
<th>Libertador Municipality Mayor [Popularly elected]</th>
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Figure 6. a.Metropolitan and Libertador Mayors.
Figure 6. b Caracas’ geopolitical division. Source: (Delfino 2001).
The decentralization process of Venezuelan politics has not been easy, and it has brought an extraordinary power struggle to the streets. The emergence of new political options led by President Chavez has weakened the national political power of the elites, and has increased the struggle for control at the local and regional levels. In the case of Caracas, the control over the city has been more than anything a symbolic warfare. On an administrative level, the constant reconfiguration of Caracas’ geopolitical boundaries respond to economic factors such as taxation revenue, service provision and property values but it has also been used as a “mean to augment social power” (Harvey 1990:233). This constant re-territorialization has proven to be an administrative failure. In the last ten years however, the territorial distribution of administrative power has stimulated the division between supporters and government opponents, influencing the ways of representing space and the spaces of representation of Caracas (Harvey 1990:233).

Libertador municipality represents the seat of the national government with all its traditional and historical buildings, which include Plaza Bolivar, while Chacao—the prosperous and rich municipality—represents the privileged and opposition groups, with its modern buildings including Plaza Altamira.

In this conflict, government and political leaders have seen the city’s geopolitical division as a rigid structure to divide their domains; however in citizens’ daily lives those borders are fluid and nearly shapeless. For the everyday person, borders are more like thresholds that constantly bring one in or out of “spatialized” images, memories, sensations, and mementos in life. The geopolitical division of the city might be not only ambiguous, but impractical while the symbolic divisions are very effective instruments to segregate the city.
In Caracas, political struggle and resistance against the elite classes for control of the city has been taken to the streets and public spaces. Opposition groups feel President Chavez is the source of Venezuela’s problems and resist the idea of incorporating masses of President Chavez’ supporters into the city’s fabric. After the 1998 elections, the physical and symbolic construction of public spaces has been one of the weapons that both supporters and opponents have used in the struggle for control of the capital city. Particularly after the 2002 coup d’état, public places in Libertador Municipality became government supporters’ headquarters and loci of public meetings for government political topics and propaganda, while public places in Chacao became government opponents’ territory. Nowadays the national government not only needs to control the financial resources that a Capital District would generate, but also the symbolic capital embodied in its traditional and historical buildings, by one more time separating Libertador Municipality from the metropolitan city.

6.2. EXPANDING THE CITY FOR THE MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASSES: 

**URBANIZACIÓN ALTAMIRA.**

Roche—a well know Venezuelan real estate investor and urban designer—brought modern ideas to Caracas and by the 1940s he was planning to develop Urbanización Altamira. This neighborhood was an example of the new social and urban segregation brought by the modern ideals. Its residents—families headed by professionals, businessmen and bureaucrats—would develop a distinct architectural culture in the city. The houses built in Altamira, along with its monumental square, reflected the adoption and reinterpretation of modern American and European styles. This suburban neighborhood was built on the lands of an old plantation that belonged to “Ana
Cecilia Branger and Teresa Zaragosa and was known as El Paraíso” (Alcaldía-Chacao 2006). The land covered approximately 272 acres and had a trapezoidal shape; “a sort of ham leg” explained one informant. Mr. Roche bought the property in 1942, and in 1944 he founded a company called Altamira to develop a subdivision with the same name. He processed the permits and requirements from the Concejo Municipal [City Council] to start the development, and by 1950 the property was subdivided into lots with the necessary infrastructure (Alcaldía-Chacao 2006). There were no houses there at that time, and in the area reserved for the plaza the view extended north to the mountain slopes of the scenic El Avila. One of Mr. Roche’s relatives explained that, Luis Roche saw the potential of this area with its spectacular view to the mountain, and despite the lack of infrastructure he decided to invest in its development. An informant remembered that when Plaza Altamira was built she lived in Los Palos Grandes —a neighborhood next to Altamira— but that area was underdeveloped: most of the streets were not paved; there were lots of haciendas and the houses were scattered. She explained, “This area was completely rural, in my backyard we bred hens, and some families even had deer visiting their yards. All that area where the St. Honore Bakery is located was just wild land, and kids enjoyed going on field trips around those lands and getting to explore the mountain.”

At that time, Urbanización Altamira was far from the city and Luis Roche had to attract the attention of potential investors; he designed a grid with a main square and two wide avenues as the central features. The main avenues were 24 meters wide, and the plaza’s centerpiece was a colorful illuminated fountain and obelisk surrounded by green areas decorated with multicolored capacho flowers [Alcaldía de Chacao 2006]. These

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95 Refers to a large estate or plantation in Spanish-speaking countries.
96 Canna Generalis Bailey.
avenues went from north to south and merged in a loop around the monumental obelisk. Mr. Roche’s intention was to recreate French urbanism in Caracas and attract wealthy families who desired to live in a modern European style. “The obelisk reflects the attraction and influence that Luis Roche had from his several trips to Europe,” said another of Roche’s relatives. French inspirations were considered “symbols of architectural sophistication” (Larrañaga 2004:215); therefore the design of Altamira combined “Parisian urban-planning paradigms and modern linearity, expressed in the ground plan with neo-baroque and neo-colonial elements used in the obelisk and the bus stops designed by Manuel Mujica Millán, a well known Spanish architect” (Larrañaga 2004:215).

As described in the archive of Alcaldía de Chacao, the obelisk was intended to be taller than the Cathedral’s tower –the tallest structure in the city at that time– and on the site of its construction there was a sign that read: “Here will be built an obelisk taller than Caracas’ Cathedral.” Upon its completion, the obelisk indeed became the tallest structure in Caracas, “and it was known as the ‘lightning rod,’ because that area had only

Figure 6. c. Original bus stops in Plaza Altamira reflecting a Parisian style to attract potential investors and families in search of a modern lifestyle. (León 2010)
plantations and there was nothing built around it, and the obelisk was the only thing taller than the trees to attract the lightning,” explained Mr. Roche’s relative.

When the obelisk and the fountain were completed “a thousand people gathered in the plaza on August 11, 1945 to witness the opening and illumination of the fountain with its changing colors” (IPC 2005:47). In order to attract potential buyers, Mr. Roche then
organized a series of events such as concerts and performances that took place on the plaza, bringing people that would have the opportunity to visit the subdivision.

6.2.1. Life in Altamira.

Two important attractions in Urbanización Altamira were the Bambilandia Zoo and the so-called “Coney Island.” The zoo had been located in the Transversal 5 and then relocated to the edge of El Avila and renamed Tarzilandia (Alcaldía-Chacao 2006), while Coney Island was on Francisco de Miranda Avenue. These two attractions were significant ones: “Coney Island was a very special place where famous singers like Estelita del Llano, Hector Zavarse, Lila Morillo, Yolanda Moreno, Magdalena Sanchez, Raquel Castellano and Nestor Zavarce sang. Every Saturday and Sunday people had the opportunity to enjoy these events and during the weekend masses of locals and visitors enjoyed Coney Island. If you were visiting Caracas, Coney Island was a must. And the roller coaster was the best ride, once you were on the top the ride rushed down and you could see Francisco de Miranda Avenue in front of you— it was great!” described one neighbor. Both Coney Island and Bambilandia were icons of Urbanización Altamira that disappeared over time but the plaza, its obelisk and the events around them remain.

Mr. Roche’s relative remembers that as a kid he used to play around the obelisk, and he even ventured inside the empty building to climb the ladder that took one to the very top. “We lived in Edificio No. 5 and I remember that as soon as I was back from school I went downstairs to ride my bicycle around the plaza, which was one of the most pleasurable pastimes. I also enjoyed visiting my grandmother; she lived in Edificio Altamira with my granddad. We used to stop by to greet her, and she would always give

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97 According to the archives from Alcaldía de Chacao, the Russian Ballet performed in Plaza Altamira with its famous ballerina Stefanova, also El Retablo de Maravillas performed there, which was a local group led by the Venezuelan ballerina Yolanda Moreno, among other attractions.
me one *medio* [25 cents] to buy a hot dog, and after that I returned to our apartment to do my homework. I remember that we used to climb to the top of the obelisk where the light is. I also had a sailboat that worked with batteries and we always met around the fountain to play with the boat.”

![Figure 6. e. Sailing boats in Plaza Altamira (León 2010).](image)

Both *Edificio No. 5* and *Edificio Altamira* —the first buildings around the plaza— were conceived with modern European referents in mind; for instance *Edificio Altamira* “ended with a particular emphasis on the top that echoed the main façade creating a balcony at the top of the terrace roof. *Edificio No. 5* was similar, and since the roof was open and accessible we used to have parties in that part of the building. In *Edificio Altamira* the two stories at the very top were conceived as penthouses and one was my granddad’s residence. In the middle of the two penthouses there was a nice space that expressed the volume and had an open view of the plaza; this space was his office,” explained Mr. Roche’s relative.
*Edificio Altamira* was certainly an example of Venezuelan modern architecture that manifested principles of simplicity in its facades, windows and semi-garden terrace. It was designed by Turkish architect Arthur Kahn, and the building was recently included in Venezuela’s catalog of cultural heritage (IPC 2005:41). It is seven stories tall, and functions as an urban screen, enclosing the plaza on the north side while providing a visual transition between the plaza and the mountains. *Edificio No. 5* is also seven stories high and is divided into two volumes that formally connect through a central space that concentrates the circulation; because of its style this building was also included in the catalog of Venezuelan cultural heritage. These main buildings were the first two in the area and they were owned by Roche, but within a few years different investors built additional apartment buildings, such as *Edificio For You* and *May Flowers*.

The Carnival in *Plaza Altamira* was another important attraction that lasted for several years. “These Carnivals were the most important in the entire city and people from all over Caracas came to dance and celebrate here. The pool was drained and closed, creating a stage and people had a lot of fun dancing all night long until sunrise,” remembered one informant. According to her, “the official Carnival was originally celebrated in *Los Proceres* with a parade of colorful floats and the election of the carnival queen, but people preferred *Altamira* because of the orchestras and the liveliness of the parties; *Altamira* turned out to be the main spot to celebrate Carnival. In *Los Proceres* you could see the big and colorful parade and the Misses representing each county, but *Altamira* was the main place to celebrate.” Another informant recalled that *Plaza Altamira’s* carnivals attracted people from the entire city and renowned orchestras such *La Billos Caracas Boys* animated the celebrations, playing merengues, with dancing all
night long. Another attraction was the negritas,\textsuperscript{98} “I remember that my aunt was a really good seamstress and dressmaker and most of her female clients ordered a negrita costume for the Carnival; these costumes entirely covered them, allowing them to celebrate without restraint,” described an informant.

Other important events were the patinatas\textsuperscript{99} [roller skating parties]. One of Altamira’s neighbors cherished them as one of her best memories. She moved with her aunt to Edificio Univers located in front of Plaza Altamira and “in December all the kids got together around the plaza for the patinatas. Kids constantly roller skated and early in the morning they used to steal the fresh milk from the main doors of some houses.”

By the 1960s, Plaza Altamira and its surroundings soon experienced intense urban modernism with the construction of apartment buildings and houses. During those years, buildings like Edificio Humboldt, Edificio Palic, Edificio Mónaco, Edificio Niza and Edificio Univers\textsuperscript{100} became residential examples of the modern and international style\textsuperscript{101} and also suitable environmental solutions, conforming to the weather and local technologies.

\textsuperscript{98} During the 50’s and early 60s las negritas was a common costume used by both women and men who wanted to mask their identities to fully enjoy the Carnival without restrictions. Las negritas covered their faces, arms and torsos in black coverings and wore brightly colored dresses.

\textsuperscript{99} Refers to the occasion when a group of kids and teenagers get together to roller skate in a public place or street.

\textsuperscript{100} This building conserves a colorful mural made in mosaics covering one of the main facades.

\textsuperscript{101} Several of these apartment buildings have been registered in the Venezuelan Cultural Heritage Catalog 2004-2005.
Up to this point, most of the memories around Altamira are of the good times people had there, but the sad and tragic events of July 1967 marked a division: “The Carnival parties faded away by the end of the 60’s when Caracas suffered the earthquake of 1967.” That was a catastrophic date for all caraqueños, but especially for the neighbors located on the east side. One informant described, “I remember that terrible day; fortunately I was not in Altamira but as soon as the earthquake happened, my mother went to pick me up at my friend’s house and we ran to Altamira to find her sister. When we arrived, the area was covered with a big cloud of dust. Just on the northeast corner of Plaza Altamira there was a building called Mansion Avila, and the residential building next to it fell down; it is said that the fault line goes through that area. I saw a lady

102 On July 29, 1967 Caracas was struck by an earthquake and 236 people died, 2,000 were injured and the total material loss was estimated at Bs. 450,000,000.00 (Campos, et al. 2006).
injured, disoriented and covered with dust walking between the ruins. I remember people walking around completely confused and lost.”

After the chaos, Plaza Altamira became the meeting place and a makeshift public shelter for the homeless. After that experience, in a sort of mass hysteria, many feared an upcoming destruction of Caracas through apocalyptic images of the mountains being divided and the ocean coming in to cover the city: “We moved out of the city for three months and did not want to talk about the tragedy. It took us time to recover from the fear,” remembered one informant.

By the late 1960s, as the city rebuilt from the destructive earthquake, it had started to undergo a radical urban transformation manifested in its public places. Social activities moved from outdoors to indoors, from the plaza to the living room. As one informant expressed, “The city changed from the public to the private.” At that time, television brought entertainment indoors and people felt more comfortable there. Fewer public performances were presented; more private bars and restaurants were built to compete with the convenience of private entertainment at home. People removed themselves from their public places and it was no longer chic to dance in the squares and open spaces, but instead in the nightclubs or bars. “El Sunset, La Lechuga, The Flower were some of the trendiest night clubs and while I enjoyed La Sonora Matanzera the younger generations fell in love with The Rolling Stones and The Beatles. Once I grew up, the city had changed its shape and urban form, and we were disconnected from the public places,” an informant recalled.

103 Cuban musical group founded in 1924.
In addition to television, the automobile, highways, and suburban neighborhoods—in other words, “progress”—helped establish a new dynamic of social interaction. Caracas was re-designed around streets, zones and clusters, and public places were affected by this transformation. Less social interaction occurred on the streets; instead the city encouraged the use of cars and highways. In addition, hundreds of thousands of migrants had already moved to the city, and Caracas’ traffic and transportation soon became serious problems that required attention.

After several studies, the government decided to develop a mass-transit system to connect the east and west sides of the city, and in 1968 hired two American companies to develop the initial plan—Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade & Douglas from Nueva York and Alan M. Voorhees from Washington (C.A.-Metro-de-Caracas 2010). In 1977, the government founded the Metro de Caracas Company to develop a subway system. El Metro—as it was named—brought a new dynamic, and Plaza Altamira became an
important node. *Plaza Altamira*—as did all the spaces located on the west-east axis of the Metro line—had to be redesigned to make room for the Metro infrastructure, and it took some time to complete the renovation. The first segment of *El Metro* started in August 1977, but it was not until twelve years later in November 1989 that the section under *Plaza Altamira* was completed. “The Plaza totally changed when *El Metro* arrived; people felt that their space was taken away. We did not understand what they were planning. Nobody was informed about the project; all we knew was that *El Metro* was being built. Neighbors and people in general were wondering what they were going to do with the pool, but at the end we were all surprisingly pleased with the results. The solution for the pool with the magnificent falling water was great, and the iconic obelisk was there as always. *Plaza Altamira* had become an icon; it represents our childhood, our city, the 1950s and we had been worried about the future of this place,” confessed one neighbor.

![Plaza Altamira 2006](image)

*Figure 6. h. Plaza Altamira 2006.*
Plaza Altamira’s history illustrates part of Caracas’ urban evolution and how from the colonial checkerboard the city became a European and then American oriented metropolis. The government, urban planners, civil engineers and private real estate investors produced a new system of representation of the city, and Altamira neighborhood with its great avenues and monumental plaza represented in small scope the transformation of public space in Caracas from the middle of the last century. In addition, Altamira also illustrated the forces involved in the production of a new territorial, architectural and urban planning. At that moment, access to economic resources allowed private investors to appropriate the best lots in Caracas’ valley and develop private neighborhoods with their own physical infrastructures. By doing this, entrepreneurs and investors as well as business elites “stamped their identity as a ‘patrician class’ manipulating the symbolic city languages of exclusion and entitlement” (Zukin 1995:7) in Caracas.

The new urbanism “reflect decisions about what – and who- should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and of use of aesthetic power” (Zukin 1995:7) and the new aesthetic represented a new architectural discourse. Altamira’s design followed a series of new patterns and its spaces were shaped to showcase the lifestyle of a privileged group. Thus Plaza Altamira’s re-presentation embodied symbols and ideas of an elite caraqueña class. In this sense, Altamira symbolizes the vitality of Caracas’ financial sector, its social life, leisure activities and entertainment, which created a social space for the exchange of symbols and ideas that belonged to that group but were consumed by the whole city (Zukin 1995).
6.3. FROM PLAZA ALTAMIRA TO “FREEDOM SQUARE”.

Returning to the year 2002, a group of fourteen military members declared itself in “legitimate disobedience” to the government, and on October 22 took over Plaza Altamira, declaring it an “independent territory” within the country. This group called for citizens to join them in “legitimate disobedience,” and those in agreement immediately moved to Plaza Altamira with whole families. Their goal was to stay there until President Chávez resigned. These military men referred to Article 350 of the National Constitution which alludes to the right to disobey the government:

“El pueblo de Venezuela, fiel a su tradición republicana, a su lucha por la independencia, la paz y la libertad, desconocerá cualquier régimen, legislación o autoridad que contrarie los valores, principios y garantías democráticos o menoscase los derechos humanos.” [Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999]

[The Venezuelan people, loyal to their republican tradition and the struggle to achieve autonomy, peace and freedom, will disobey any regime, legislation or authority against democratic principles and values that would violate human rights].

Protesters accused President Chávez of violating the democratic principles established in the Constitution and demanded his resignation. For many months, Plaza Altamira became their bastion and a public stage to promote their resistance; they renamed the square Plaza de la Libertad [Freedom Square]. The stories told of these events reveal the fear, insecurity and violence experienced in those days, but also of the religious faith and belief that everything would work out with the “help of the Virgin Mary.”

One of my informants recalled the beginning of that event: “October 22, 2002 was the day in which the military showed up at the plaza; that day everybody —the entire city— was just puzzled, we did not understand what was going on. The people in the opposition had already organized many rallies. I remember one at the very beginning was
called, ‘Do not mess with my children,’ but then there was this first political demonstration in the plaza. That day I was visiting my mom, and my co-worker called me asking, ‘Have you heard what is going on in Altamira? People are saying that the military is congregating there!’ A few minutes later my sister arrived at mom’s house, saying that she was going to Plaza Altamira, so I decided to join her. When we arrived it was just amazing, the people congregated there, everyone wanted to know the reason for the mobilization.”

She also described how day after day more people joined this demonstration, showing their support and expressing the hope that the military would remove President Chávez from office. As described by my informants, Plaza Altamira became the place to express the opposition’s frustration and disappointment with the government: “The first day we stayed there until 1:00 am. Some people left, others stayed, but the next day we were back and there were more people than the day before. A day later we decided to stay all night to witness the entire event. Everybody was there, and they just talked and talked about everything; whatever people wanted to express was welcome. I remember being close to the stage listening to an impoverished woman from San Martin;104 she had a bunch of papers in her hand. She was showing what the government had promised to her and said she had received nothing so far, and she was taken to the stage to express herself, in the same way anybody that just wanted to express his or her ideas was welcome to talk, either for good or bad. The stage was public domain, but coordinated by the military”.

In our conversations, some of my opposition informants insisted that the government has tried to portray that all poor people support Chavez, which they

104 San Martín is a poor neighborhood located on the southwest side of the city.
recognize as only partially true; according to them some lower-class people disillusioned with the government also support the opposition, as evidenced by the poor woman that came from San Martin to join the group in Plaza Altamira.

According to one informant from the opposition group, most poor people have to remain quiet if they want to receive social benefits from the government; he expressed, “the poor have a bozal de arepa [muzzle made of bread] that keeps them quiet”. “The poor” have been used as a political flag in the revolutionary process, and while some figures show that most poor sectors support President Chávez, in this struggle the opposition has tried to present itself as a diverse and open group composed of different classes.

Between October 2002 and January 2003, television broadcasted daily images of the crowd of people in Plaza Altamira; the shots from buildings around the plaza showed hundreds of people. The plaza’s obelisk was decorated with long pieces of fabric in the colors of the national flag. Protesters wore the same colors and held anti-Chavez banners, blew whistles and banged cacerolas.

On the stage was a bust of Simón Bolívar illuminated by a torch: “I don’t know how this happened, but one day I found that bust on the stage and people started bringing
figures of saints, angels, and Virgins illuminated with candles. There were so many of these figures that they surrounded the fountain. I guess there was also witchcraft because I found images of Santa Barbara,” reported one informant. Goméz explains that on the stage there were nineteen Virgins, plus two images of the Divino Niño [Infant Jesus], two of San Miguel Arcangel, two of Nazareno de San Pablo and one San Judas Tadeo [St. Jude] (Goméz 2002). At this point, religious symbols were rapidly becoming used as political instruments.

The crowds got bigger and bigger, and people set up tents and shelters: “Initially there was just a stage but then they got several canopies; in one of those canopies there was the food that people from all over Caracas sent to feed the crowd. I remember this Italian guy every morning would bring a lot of food, and I thought he had to own a bakery to be able to provide all that food, but he didn’t,” explained another woman.

According to the national news, at one point there were around a hundred military members, plus their families\textsuperscript{105} and hundreds more supporters. “There were many volunteers like me; we did anything we could to help. Mostly women were in charge of the food, but I got involved with the Rosary; I don’t know how, but I became part of that,” said one informant.

Praying the Rosary was a daily activity while the military was in the plaza. A group of women was in charge and they organized a weekly Sunday Mass; people brought statues of Virgins and cards with religious pictures in all sizes and shapes; as my informant explained, “That first week, since we had to work during the day, my co-worker, my sisters and my nieces agreed on going on Friday night to stay over. Saturday

\textsuperscript{105} They had access to rooms in the Four Seasons Hotel located next to Plaza Altamira to use the bathroom and rest.
morning around 7:00 am, three women asked the military for access to the stage to pray a Rosary. One of the women invited us to join them and we formed a group of six praying. That night, one of these women contacted me to invite me to join them the next day, so I promised God to wake up early and join the Rosary to pray for my brother’s health—he was going to have a serious surgical procedure—but most people prayed for Venezuela’s peace and democracy.”

The effect of prayer has been the subject of much research; some researchers “claim that praying, believing in God and attending church make people healthier,” but studies have also show that “religiosity does not necessarily promote health” (Bowen 2008:91). Even though my informant reports she was praying for her brother’s health, what mattered to the opposition was the solidarity that prayer offered as a symbol of opposition to the government. As expressed by another informant, “Praying is very important, especially praying as a group. Most people refrain from joining us because they are afraid of being in a public space and being recognized as opponents of President Chávez. People are very scared, but I’m not, I am not afraid! We are praying together.” Informants also expressed that they pray together to “beat the evil” that President Chávez represents, following the belief expressed in the Bible: “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Therefore, praying together was considered the key to achieving their hope of getting rid of President Chavez.

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106 In the Catholic Bible in Matthew 18, 19-20.
On the night of December 6, 2002 during the traumatic two-month national strike, a civilian supporting the president drove by Plaza Altamira and shot and killed a teenager and two adults, and injured twenty people. The media covered the event, effectively conveying the collective mood of fear and frustration. The days were tense, but the opposition remained in Plaza Altamira believing those would be the final days of Chávez’ presidency. But by the beginning of 2003, the national strike had ended, the economy was in shambles, and the military mobilization in the Plaza had lost its popular support. Many of the military members involved were politically persecuted and forced to leave the country, but some of the civilians involved refused to stop their struggle and continued to gather in the plaza.

Plaza Altamira’s process of militarization was led by some of Caracas’ urban and military elites who radically opposed Chávez’ administration and who attempted to impose their points of view, principles and political agenda throughout the city and the country. During those days, Plaza Altamira represented the interests of one political group; it seems to me that although after those events Plaza Altamira’s public character remained open to the entire city, it was ruled and dominated by a symbolic barrier constructed through the narratives surrounding the plaza.

Although Plaza Altamira is an open and public space that serves the entire city, its distinguishing location makes it more accessible to certain social and cultural groups. Public space is socially produced through its use as public space (Mitchell 2003), but who are the users of Plaza Altamira? One should expect that public space is urban in the sense that it offers a meeting place for strangers, but public space is a concept constructed

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107 “At 7:10 pm Friday December 06 2002, three unarmed civilians were killed in Plaza Francia de Altamira: the teenager named Keyla Guerra, Mrs. Josefina Inciarte and Professor Jaime Giraud Rodríguez; and at least twenty other people were injured by Joao De Gouveia” (Colmenares).
upon exclusion and inclusion where everybody is or is not allowed to be. Plaza Altamira represents the separation between two political groups in Caracas, and by analyzing it I found the relation between people and places is shaped through social, cultural and political agendas.

Plaza Altamira became the exclusive territory of the opposition, members of which organized different political activities using the plaza as their base. One of the most significant was a signature petition drive undertaken at the end of 2003 calling for another referendum. Every day, opponents taking advantage of the crowds that visited the plaza, collected as many signatures as possible, and in less than three weeks they had more than two million signatures (Medina, et al. 2007:181). On November 4 they organized a rally, starting in Plaza Altamira and ending at the Electoral Council, to submit their referendum petition. Street confrontations ensued, with attempts to block the marchers. However, a group was able to introduce the petition to the Electoral Council with all the necessary signatures. Instability within the Electoral Council —as reported on the news— made it unpredictable due to differences among its members. The president of the CNE resigned and the decision regarding the referendum was postponed. The opposition feared that the call for a referendum would be rejected and continued to march, protest, gather and pray in Plaza Altamira with the Virgin Mary as their focal point. But how did a Virgin Mary statue become part of Plaza Altamira?
Chapter Seven.

Public Plaza,
Private Agenda:
The Transformation of Caracas'
Plaza Altamira
CHAPTER SEVEN.

PUBLIC PLAZA, PRIVATE AGENDAS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CARACAS’ PLAZA ALTAMIRA.

For the last ten years in Venezuela —particularly in Caracas— streets and public places have been taken over by continuous public protests that either support or oppose President Chávez. In this sense, both groups have developed a huge socio-political spectacle. On one hand, President Chávez has developed, in the style of “bread and circuses,” his own movement attempting to pacify the large number of Venezuelans who live in poverty. He has provided them with food, scholarships, medical services, education and many other services through his Missions [Misiones], and entertained them with his long but captivating speeches and political propaganda on TV and radio.

On the other hand, the opposition groups —mainly consisting of a coalition of businessmen, workers’ unions, political parties and civic groups— have protested against the President using their own “urban spectacles,” regularly broadcast by government-opposition media that report the collective resistance against Chávez’ political “revolutionary process”. These urban spectacles have taken different shapes, but I analyze in the next section the “religiosification” of Plaza Altamira, in the context of current civic resistance from the opposition. In this section, I explore how some groups in Caracas use Plaza Altamira to push forward their social, cultural and political agendas. In

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108 David Harvey (1990:88) explains “bread and circuses” is an ancient instrument of social control that has been consciously organized by those who hold the power to pacify restless or discontented elements in a population.

109 The missions are a series of social programs generously subsidized by oil revenue. The government believes they help solve poverty in Venezuela, but others consider that the impact of the missions is very limited because, as Nestor Luis Luengo explains, “They act on the consequences of poverty but not in the causes.” This professor insists that Venezuela has had a real revolution in social policies (Hernández).

110 President Chávez has been accused by Alfredo Keller of being an “illusionist” and “magician, seller of dreams” (Giusti 2005).
doing this I analyze how politics and spaces are related, and how religious symbols are used to express this relationship. My thesis is that in the context of political change, individuals re-signify public spaces as a means of preserving and reinforcing their territoriality and symbolic capital.

7.1. IMMACULATE VIRGIN MARY QUEEN OF PEACE AND QUEEN OF PLAZA ALTAMIRA.

“My co-worker and my sisters gave up, but I kept praying every day. Even the women that initially started the Rosary also gave up but I did not; somehow I had in my mind what one of my clients told me before: I was told that the only possible way to get away from Chávez was through the help of the Virgin Mary” said Elba, one of my informants.

I met Elba in April 2006 when I decided to observe the daily Rosary in Plaza Altamira. She has led this prayer group for the last four years without missing a single day, although driving from her home to Plaza Altamira and finding a parking spot at 8:00 am is not an easy task in Caracas. She has a profound faith in the power of the Virgin Mary and believes the Virgin is the way to bring peace to Venezuela. Most of the Rosary participants live close by or work near Altamira, and usually a group of six women and two men join Elba to pray; some days the group is bigger, but I never counted more than fifteen persons—the only exception was on October 22, 2006 when the group celebrated its fourth anniversary and around forty-five participants joined in the special celebration. The Rosary is prayed in front a statue of the Immaculate Virgin Mary—known in the Venezuelan tradition as Virgen de la Milagrosa. The group prays in front of the obelisk, Monday through Friday at 8:00 am, and Saturday and Sunday at 9:00 am.
The statue is approximately 4 feet tall, but sits atop a wood base that measures 5 feet, 7”, so the shrine is more than 9 feet tall. Believers usually place flowers around the base, where there are also several pots containing palm trees. Elba and a group of volunteers take care of the statue, collecting money to buy flowers and checking that everything is clean. At night the statue and altar are illuminated by two reflector lamps and an illuminated cross; these features make the statue more visible.

Throughout the day, people stop to look, pray or make the sign of the cross. On a typical morning while waiting for the Rosary to start, I noticed a young man who was jogging stop at the statue and kneel, followed by a man wearing a jacket and tie who also
stopped to make the sign of the cross, then a group of teenagers in school uniforms did
the same, followed by a young woman with a baby in a stroller and finally a couple of
women—all these visitors stopped within a period of fifteen minutes.

Mr. Ramón is a regular visitor, joining the Rosary almost every day, for a special
reason: his wife, Maritza came to Plaza Altamira the day after the August 2004
referendum to join a protest, and was shot and killed in a drive-by shooting which also
injured eight others. Mr. Ramón admits that he had never prayed before that, but says he
now tries never to miss a Rosary.

Mr. Ramón has painted a silhouette representing his wife’s body—similar to a
chalk outline at a crime scene—on the sidewalk of Plaza Altamira, to remind people of
her death and to send a political message. That silhouette has become a contested image
in which government supporters constantly draw slogans in support of President Chávez.
This representation of death combines “martyrdom, patriotism and violence” and not only
“rejects the government which claims to rule on behalf of the people” (Jakubowska
1990:11) but also holds the government responsible for this casualty allowing “private
grief to be parlayed into a public statement” of political confrontation (Harvey 2006:31).
Next to the silhouette, Mr. Ramón has posted a newspaper clipping from El Universal111
titled “Prohibido Olvidar” [Forgetting is Prohibited], which keeps track of the days’
political events in Plaza Altamira. Mr. Ramón says he will never forget, nor forgive
losing his wife in such unjust circumstances.

111 El Universal is a well-known newspaper in Venezuela.
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Figure 7. b. Silhouette in Plaza Altamira representing a dead body. Inside the silhouette Ramón Torregrosa has written in white letters “Aquí me mataron el 16/8/04 los pistoleros. Maritza Ron de Torregrosa” [Here I was killed by the hired gunman August 16, 2004. Maritza Ron de Torregrosa]. Meanwhile, President Chavéz’ supporters have written over the silhouette stating “Sí, sí, sí, la Plaza Altamira está con Chavéz” [Yes, yes, yes, Plaza Altamira is with Chavéz].

Figure 7. c. Newspaper clipping from El Universal titled Prohibido Olvidar [Forgetting is Prohibited] (El Universal 2006). In the second column it says “06/12/2002 MASACRE EN PLAZA ALTAMIRA. Joao Gouveia descargó dos cacerinas de un arma automática contra los manifestantes de la Plaza Francia en la noche. Van 1165 días. Una persona sentencia y condenada a 29 años de cárcel.” [MASSACRE IN PLAZA ALTAMIRA. Joao Gouveia shot two protesters with an automatic weapon in Plaza Francia. One person was sentenced to 29 years in jail. 1165 days ago.] In the sixth column it says “16/08/04 TIROTEO EN LA PLAZA. Una manifestación opositora es agredida en horas del mediodía por tres pistoleros motorizados que disparan a mansalva. Van 546 días. Un fallecido, 8 heridos y 3 detenidos.” [SHOOTING IN THE PLAZA. A demonstration against the government was attacked in mid-day by three gunmen on motorcycles shooting randomly. One death, eight injuries and three arrested. 546 days ago.]
7.2. DISLOCATING PLAZA ALTAMIRA.

When I asked Elba to recount the story of the Virgin in Plaza Altamira, she immediately recalled the days in which the military was there and people would pray the daily Rosary. She says she is certain that the Virgin is the instrument that will bring peace and political balance to the country.

During the militarization of Plaza Altamira in 2002, Elba decided to visit a Virgin Mary figure—located at Colegio Belen [Belen School]—that was said to have appeared to a military member at Fuerte Tiuna [Fort Tiuna]. “One day I drove over to Colegio Belen to find out more about that Virgin. Somehow something told me to find out more about this; I had that feeling. When I got to the school, I asked for information about the Virgin, so they walked me over to the chapel, where five nuns were praying. I sat in the last row and waited. Finally one of the nuns approached me, and I told her, ‘I’d like to know the history of the Virgin.’ She asked me to wait, and once they finished they left the chapel and I approached the Virgin and started talking to her. I told her that I wanted to learn more about her”.

In the Catholic tradition, the Virgin, as are the saints, is a mediator who has special ties with God; she is part human and part divine, and worshippers recognize her duality when venerating her or God (Gudeman 1976:714). The Virgin is always present in times of conflict, and a person may speak directly to her, offering a devotional act and requesting help in return. Because of this special duality, the Virgin may intercede between God—who is the ‘One all powerful’—and humans (Gudeman 1976:712). Anyone may talk to her directly—as Elba did—asking for her intercession as mediator between the divine and the mundane.
The nuns later told Elba that the Virgin was in *Fuerte Tiuna*, and one day a Colonel noticed that the Virgin’s veil was stained. He thought that perhaps somebody had spilled something on it, although his office was always locked. The Colonel contacted the nuns, who noticed the veil was covered in glitter, and they asked to keep the statue with them; in exchange they sent the Colonel and *Fuerte Tiuna* two replicas that came from Italy.

After listening to the nuns’ story, Elba asked them if she could borrow the statue to take it to the Plaza, but they denied her request. Later while in the plaza, Elba shared this story with some of the military and expressed her desire to bring the statue to Altamira. Surprisingly, later that night she got a call asking her to contact the parish priest to organize the Virgin’s visit. Elba explained she was very pleased with the news but she was also worried about getting things prepared for such a visit; bringing the Virgin to the Plaza was not only an honor but a huge responsibility. She was told that the statue would be moved if the conditions were not appropriate: The Virgin had to have an escort and flowers to go on its short pilgrimage. Additionally, the parish priest had to contact the bishop to get the permits, and then the priest had to formally request that the Virgin go in a procession from Plaza Altamira Sur to the main plaza, and then return. In these public processions—which are very common in Latin America—the Virgin is always treated with the honor befitting a high ranking personality, reinforcing “her identity in the popular imagination, less as Mother of God and more as an individual who intervenes on behalf of individuals in modern, industrialized societies” (Bowen 2008:142).
Elba explained that she was responsible for organizing everything for the visit, arranging the transportation, flowers and escort. She went to the office of the Chacao municipal police, who made available two police mobile units to escort the Virgin, and a friend offered his pickup truck for the transportation of the statue. On the procession day, people brought three large plastic containers full of flowers to the plaza. Later she picked up the statue, and when she arrived with the statue at the plaza, the Virgin had flowers and an escort waiting. She explained, “We walked around the plaza singing canticles. At the end, the Virgin was taken to the stage while we prayed the Rosary and the most impressive thing was when the military got down on their knees and prayed together with us.”

During the celebration of the Virgin’s visit, participants made use of the symbols involved such as canticles, flags, flowers, candles and body gestures. They honored and escorted the Virgin with flowers and music; they respectfully lit candles\(^\text{112}\) and walked with the statue in a relaxed and peaceful manner. The procession started from the Plaza’s southern side, moved toward the north and ended in the center of the Plaza on an elevated stage. At the end of the ceremony, the military —despite their rank— made a symbolic act and knelt to honor the Virgin, asking for her assistance in exchange for votive prayers and gestures.

This Virgin was returned to its shrine in Colegio Belen, but on December 8, 2002 another Virgin was brought to the Plaza. At this time, the women leading the Rosary were praying early in the morning and were informed that somebody was bringing a life-size statue of the Immaculate Virgin Mary Queen of Peace. My informants told me that

\(^{112}\) The fire is traditionally used in Christian rites as a symbol of purification.
this Virgin had “expressed her desire” to visit Plaza Altamira, so the owner decided to bring the statue to the plaza. The statue’s owner said she had no prior interest in Plaza Altamira, nor had she visited the plaza before: “Plaza Altamira has nothing to do with my life; the only relationship I had with that plaza was through the stories and memories of my dad, who always remembered that the plaza was being built when he studied medicine at college—almost sixty years ago. Besides that, I had no contact with Plaza Altamira at all; unfortunately the events that took place there, much to my regret, made me get involved with it”.

She remembers that after an event on December 06, 2002 when a young girl named Keyla Guerra was killed at the plaza, she had a feeling that pushed her to bring the Virgin to the plaza: “It was a voice that told me to take the Virgin. I couldn’t sleep well and I realized that I had to take her there”. She explained that since she had gotten the statue, she has taken it on pilgrimages, everywhere “from individual houses to religious seminars and convents; any place that requested her presence, I took her there.” However she emphasized that she did not consciously want to take the statue to Altamira, but had been driven by a feeling inside: “I did not want to do it because I didn’t want the statue of the Virgin to be involved in a political conflict, but I did what the Holy Spirit was telling me to do”.

“That morning—December 08, 2002—after praying the Rosary, we took the image and carried it to the stage, and that same statue stayed with us in Plaza Altamira for more than two years and became the Plaza Altamira Virgin and Queen of Peace,” said one informant. The statue’s owner had bought it in Europe by special order; she said she did not have the resources but said she prayed to God, and some friends offered to help
her: “It did not even take 15 days until people were getting in touch to help me to bring the statue.” Through what she described as a “holy mistake,” her order was duplicated and she ended up with two statues from Europe—one became hers and the other one became the property of Mrs. Marisabel de Chávez.113

The owner also explained that when the Virgin finally arrived in Caracas it had been transported by the three different national military forces—Army, Air Force and National Guard—but never by the Navy because it never travelled by sea, but that day when she brought the Virgin to Altamira, she was surprised because the navy was assisting her. “The Admiral, Daniel Comiso, leading a group of officers all dressed in white received her, and that was pretty shocking for me. I walked with her to the stage in Plaza Altamira and the group of Navy Admirals welcomed us, and when they saw the statue they were moved to the verge of tears;” described the owner. Up to this point, the events described by my informants reinforced their belief that the Virgin was meant to be in Altamira, supporting the opposition’s mobilization.

De Certeau explains that “the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to the language or to the statement uttered;” in other words by walking, individuals appropriate the topographical system of the city just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language (De Certeau 1984:97). But not only does the walking create sentences, but also the gathering; both walking and gathering are spatial acting out of the place, and

113 Mrs. Marisabel de Chávez is President Hugo Chávez ex-wife. The owner of the Virgin worked with her on some projects and both became good friends. Mrs. Marisabel helped her with the transportation of the figures to Venezuela. “Mrs. Marisabel de Chavez divorced President Chavez in 2002. In an interview with El Universal newspaper, she cited a contrast of personalities and admitted having differences with Chavez’s views — particularly his self-proclaimed revolution in favor of the downtrodden (Rodriguez 2009).
both imply relations which make it possible to define those practices as spaces of enunciation.

But if as pedestrian we create readable statements, as speakers we also create inhabitable spaces; we produce through different narratives and discourses spaces in which to be. De Certeau refers to those narratives as signifying practices which exist in relation to spatial practices through three distinct functions: “the believable, the memorable, and the primitive” (1984:105). The believable designates what “authorizes” or make possible or credible the spatial appropriations, the memorable designates what is recalled form the remote memory and the primitive function establishes what is structured and marked by origin. These three functions are considered “symbolic mechanisms [which] organize the topoi of a discourse on/of the city [legend, memory and dreams] in a way that also elude urbanistic systematicity” (De Certeau 1984:105).

Therefore, the narrative of the Virgin Mary in Plaza Altamira not only “authorizes” the spatial appropriation of Plaza Altamira but keeps remembering what it is unforgivable/unforgettable from the memory—for instance the militarization and deaths in Plaza Altamira.

The Virgin’s narrative covers Plaza Altamira, making it a habitable and believable place for the opposition; it is a fracture in the urban system that saturates Plaza Altamira with signification and symbolism leaving no room for those whose disagree with it. This narrative is becoming a “local legend which offers the opportunity to store up rich silences and wordless stories” (De Certeau 1984:106) that the opposition has constructed over Plaza Altamira at the time that creates an exclusive place for them.
By recalling the story of the different Virgins and events, opponents “make visible the presence of diverse absences” and by designating what is no longer there they “indicate the invisible identities of the visible” (De Certeau 1984:108) and those stories become the very definition of Plaza Altamira as a place composed of a series of displacements and memories that tie the opponents of President Chávez to that particular place.

7.3. THE VIRGIN VS. CHÁVEZ.

The Virgin stories reaffirmed to believers that the statue was meant to be in Plaza Altamira especially the one which reveals that a similar replica of the Virgin in Altamira was in the presidential house but when Mrs. Marisabel and President Chavez divorced in 2002 she moved to her hometown in Barquisimeto and the replica of the Virgin was relocated with her (Vinogradoff 2002). Some informants have reinterpreted this as the Virgin opposing “the evil” President Chávez and supporting the opposition. According to Sanabria-S (2004:78), “Each time the evil is manifested in certain Catholic imaginary, the Virgin appears in order to combat it.” In accordance with this belief, the Virgin has visited Plaza Altamira to combat the “evil” represented by President Chávez’ persona. Throughout the last eleven years, both the government and the opposition movement have competed against each other for legitimacy through the control of certain symbols. In that struggle, the opposition has tried to de-legitimize the government as their representative by portraying it as evil and immoral. In conversations recorded with my informants, they insisted that Chávez is a communist that wants to destroy the Catholic faith. They also accuse him of practicing witchcraft, sorcery and worshiping evil spirits: "That guy is evil. He performs satanic rituals, he bathes himself with blood, I know that,
it is like I am telling you, he does those things,” said one informant. Another informant insisted that “Chávez has an amulet to protect him and he has made a pact with Guaicaipuro and some other evil spirits to help him”. In his public speeches, Chávez regularly cites Jesus Christ and quotes passages from the Bible as examples of his own political ideals, mixing them with a variety of secular characters—Simón Bolívar, Che Guevara, Marx and others. Despite that, since taking office in 1999, Chavez has engaged in a constant battle with Catholic leaders, accusing them of taking political sides and supporting the opposition; in 2002 he addressed them, saying “[you] are not on God’s path” (BBC-Mundo 2002)\(^{114}\) and again accused them of sabotaging the government.

Several other confrontations occurred, including a significant one during my fieldwork, when Cardinal Castillo Laras blamed President Chavez for turning the country into a dictatorial system in front thousands of worshipers during a Mass in honor of the *Divina Pastora*—one of the most venerated Catholic icons in Venezuela. Cardinal Laras called President Chavez an “arbitrary and authoritarian person” and accused him of orchestrating an “anachronistic political project” which goal was to establish “a disastrous regimen similar to Cuba.”\(^{115}\)

In reaction to the barrage of criticism, President Chávez has kept attacking the Catholic hierarchy and “over the last few years, Chavez has done his utmost to cultivate the support of Protestants, which make up twenty percent of the population. He even declared that he was no longer a Catholic but a member of the Christian Evangelical Council” (Kozloff 2007).\(^{116}\) Based on these confrontations, the opposition has portrayed

\(^{114}\) The original quote is in Spanish, “No andan por el camino de Dios” (BBC-Mundo 2002).

\(^{115}\) Quotes were taken from Cardenal Laras’ speech transmitted on the news on January 15, 2006.

\(^{116}\) Kozloff analyzes in his article the relationship between President Chávez and the leader of the Catholic Church between 1999 and 2007 in Venezuela.
Chávez as an enemy, a non-Christian and pagan, while the Virgin Mary has become an instrument to reject and delegitimize President Chávez’ administration.

Time passed and after the national strike ended in January 2003, the military left Plaza Altamira, however the Virgin stayed there with other figures; “Little by little we tried to keep just the main statue since the military was not there anymore, and the local government was trying to recuperate and reorganize the plaza for the regular Christmas activities, so we tried to make room just for the main figure,” explained Elba.

On December 6, 2003 President Chávez’ supporters were celebrating his fifth year in office with a rally, starting on the east side of the city and ending on Bolívar Avenue downtown. The rally passed in front of Plaza Altamira, at which time a group of government supporters decided to take over the place, tearing down the Virgin and painting pro-Chavez slogans. “Chavistas stayed at the square for almost two hours, as if they had reclaimed a lost territory. Neighbors looked at the Plaza in shock, as walls were spray-painted with pro-Chavez slogans, and chavistas celebrated their victory” (Venezuelanalysis.com). “Chavistas came to the Plaza and tore down the Virgin from the altar and treated it with irreverence, urinating and pretending to have sex with the statute. She was violated; they wrote on her veil the name of Chávez and some other graffiti in red paint. But the Virgin is powerful, and somehow she intervened, because they left without causing more problems,” expressed one informant.

After those events, the people in charge of the Virgin felt much frustration and vowed to clean up the statue and restore her to her place: “And the Mayor sent people to clean all the mess around the Plaza and we took care of the statue, washing her and putting her back on her altar.” Later on, they celebrated a mass in remembrance of the
people who were killed on the plaza in 2002, “and that mass was packed; there was no
room to be seated, and people were standing all over,” remembered Elba. They also
organized another mass in the plaza, this time a healing ceremony led by Father Gerardo
Tardif; according to the informants this mass was to “release all the anger and pain,
liberating the place of the accumulated negative feelings and actions.”

After these masses, local authorities insisted on removing the stage and the
Virgin, “but there was a strong resistance, and women lay down on the ground around the
Virgin, claiming that they would not move unless killed. The people wanted to keep the
Virgin at the plaza, so we reached an agreement. We decided to remove the big stage, and
the mayor offered a small altar for the Virgin. He also provided some containers with
palm trees to decorate the altar and help it blend in with the plaza,” explained Elba.

However, there were other hostile actions against the Virgin and people worried
that the Virgin might be stolen. One time, a group of men tried to steal her, but my
informants reported that the statue became very heavy and the thieves could not move
her. In another attempt, the men tore her down but they carried her just a few meters;
again the informants insisted that the Virgin resisted leaving Plaza Altamira.

Two years passed, and one day, the statue’s owner got a call from somebody close
to the mayor asking her to pick the Virgin up. The owner explained that the local
authorities wanted to “demystify” the plaza and did not want more trouble around the
Virgin. She said she felt disappointed but agreed to take the statue back. However it was
not easy for her, since after two years people in Plaza Altamira had developed a strong
connection with the statue and it had become a symbol of political struggle and
resistance. “It was impressive how she had become an icon, not only for the opposition
that saw the image as a symbol of hope, but for the people on the other side who feared her power and tried to destroy her on a couple of occasions”. The owner explained that very important people called her asking that the Virgin remain in the plaza -- serious and respectful people; “they insisted that although the Virgin was mine, now she belonged to Plaza Altamira and the people there.” They claimed that she had left a vacuum and they needed her back: “I even got calls from outside Caracas; many people called me at home and on my cell phone. I understand that it was very painful for them. People got really attached to her because she became a symbol of hope — of political hope.” But from the owner’s point of view, the Virgin was in Plaza Altamira to unify, not to separate people, because “the Virgin cannot take one or the other’s side, those that they — people from Plaza Altamira— opposed so strongly are also daughters and sons of the Virgin Mary,” she explained.

Figure 7. d. Original Virgen 2003.
When the owner went to retrieve the statue, people on the plaza accused her of supporting the government instead of supporting them: “That day people were very anxious but I decided not to say a word. I asked some friends of mine for help, and I told them to tell people that I was taking the statue to be restored. So I started singing songs to the Virgin, and the people calmed down. Once I had her, I asked everybody to form a line so they would be able to say goodbye one by one, but some people were worried. They stood in front of her and knelt down to worship her. It was a very moving farewell, almost sixty people saying goodbye to her and crying. I kept singing and finally put her inside the truck.”

The Virgin, apart from its role in Plaza Altamira, carries different meanings for different groups in Caracas, but the context and circumstances in which this specific Virgin had appeared have raised questions concerning her meaning. The Virgin Mary, by itself, is not a symbol of the opposition movement, but that specific Virgin located in Plaza Altamira has become a symbol of the struggle against President Chávez.

7.4. EPILOGUE.

After this event, a smaller replica of the Virgin was brought to the plaza, which was later stolen and then replaced with the current one. “I wish we could have a Virgin like the original one, I really wish we could get the original back to Altamira” said Elba. Nonetheless, for the last seven years a Virgin Mary statue has been located in front of Altamira’s obelisk and a group congregates there to daily to pray the Rosary, in addition to its numerous regular and unexpected visitors. The Rosary is led by a different person every day and follows a set pattern: it starts with the “Sign of the Cross” followed by the "Apostles' Creed," one “Our Father,” three “Hail Marys,” one “Glory be to the Father”
and the announcement of the daily “Mystery”.\textsuperscript{117} Each “Mystery” is followed by one “Our Father,” ten “Hail Marys” and one “Glory be to the Father” and ends with a final prayer that combines a brief part of the Litanies and the Salve Regina. Each Rosary is completed by five “Mysteries,” which in summary add ten “Our Father” and 50 “Hail Marys” followed by a few additional prayers. In the closing prayer the Virgin is honored as the Virgin of Plaza Altamira and Queen of Peace and people implore her assistance in bringing peace to the world but especially to Venezuela; altogether the daily prayers last from thirty to forty minutes.

In October 2006, I observed the celebration of the fourth anniversary of Plaza Altamira’s Virgin. The event was held on Thursday, October 26. The Rosary group posted an invitation on the Virgin’s altar two weeks in advance and circulated invitational flyers and emails to the Rosary and mass, saying:

\textit{Praying together we will find peace in the new Venezuela!}

\textit{Invitation}
\begin{quote}
At the time of the fourth anniversary of the Rosary for the Peace that is daily prayed in Plaza Altamira, we would like to invite you to join us in a celebration on October 26, 2006 to pray together. We will congregate in Plaza Altamira at 5:00 pm to pray the Rosary and then we will go in a procession to Don Bosco Church to celebrate a Thanksgiving Mass. We want to give thanks for the faith and determination that have kept us loyal to the Virgin Mary through the last four years. Please join us! We hope to see you there!
\end{quote}

On October 26 people began congregating at 5:00 pm in front the Virgin; Elba had previously ordered flowers but several people brought their own floral offerings as well. The altar was cleaned and the palm trees were rearranged to make room for the \textit{Divina Pastora} statue brought by one participant. The Rosary was prayed as usual and 
\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{117} Pope John Paul II explained in his Apostolic Letter titled \textit{Rosarium Virginis Mariae} that there are twenty mysteries reflected upon in the Rosary divided into five Joyful Mysteries, five Luminous Mysteries, five Sorrowful Mysteries and five Glorious Mysteries, and they all “contemplate important aspects of the person of Christ as the definitive revelation of God” (Pope 2002).
\end{quote}
when it ended the statue was taken in the back of a pickup truck escorted by two Chacao municipal police officers. Participants walked in procession, singing and praying, toward Don Bosco Church located a mile north at the Avila. At the church, the statue was taken through a side door and placed on top of an elevated table next to the pulpit, to the right of the main altar. The mass followed the traditional structure of the Catholic mass according to the *Redemptionis Sacramentum* 118 prepared by Pope John Paul II: starting with the introductory rites, then the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Sacred Communion and the closing rite. During the intercession prayers, participants called upon “Holy Mary Mother of God,” asking for her help in bringing peace among Venezuelans; they also thanked the Virgin Mary for supporting them with her presence in Plaza Altamira. Then canticles in honor of the Virgin were sung, and the statue was returned to her altar in Plaza Altamira.

The festive procession not only honored the Virgin but celebrated the anniversary of her supporters’ and opponents’ presence in Plaza Altamira. Through this public parade, participants celebrated the Virgin’s religious relevance, masking the statue’s symbolism as part of a political spectacle.

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Figure 7. e. President Chavéz’ opponents praying in front of the Virgin Mary statue in Altamira.
This group has created a daily public ritual that combines the traditional Catholic Rosary with their definition of political participation and civic responsibility. They believe they must guard Plaza Altamira and protect it from any evil action that comes from the government, therefore they pray and honor the Virgin, light candles, offer flowers, celebrate her anniversary and gather in that specific place. The daily prayer provides them with an opportunity to express not only their frustrations with the government but also makes their presence visible to the public. Along those lines, the statue of the Virgin has provided a way to claim the territory in the same way a Conquistador plants his flag once he has reached land he wishes to claim. In this way, the plaza has become a public site and spatial location for the opponent’s political demonstrations.

Figure 7. f. Celebrating the fourth anniversary of Plaza Altamira’s Virgin.
Since the beginning, Plaza Altamira has been ruled by principles in opposition to the city. Initially, its design was conceived as a rejection of the old and traditional city. Its obelisk was erected as a symbol of progress and modernity, breaking the predominant horizontality of the colonial landscape. Through the years the plaza has kept its iconic style and has become the meeting point for neighbors that had abandoned the core city in search of a more progressive lifestyle. Then briefly in the 1980s, Plaza Altamira was covered with the dust of progress to emerge later completely renovated. At that time, the plaza became a node in which hectic flows of people converged to travel from east to west and vice versa. Now, and during the last seven years, Plaza Altamira has attained a new symbolism; it was renamed by government opponents as Freedom Square, and has
become their meeting place. Those that support the government call the plaza *Plaza de la Conspiración* [Conspiracy Square] or *Plaza de los Escuálidos* [Squalid Square]; as a pro-government informant emphasized, “Are you asking about Altamira? That’s just the Squalid Square; that place is full of political enemies.”

Plaza Altamira has a strategic location in the city; it is accessible by Metro and other public transportation and it is located in an area of commercial and administrative activities in one of the wealthier municipalities, but despite its physical accessibility its access has been symbolically limited for government supporters. Foley and Irazabal (2008) found a correlation between the socio-economic characteristics of Caracas’ municipalities and the use of public spaces for political purposes. They found that most government supporters live on the west side of the city—low and middle income areas—and opponents in the east—higher income areas—therefore for these authors proximity and accessibility seem to be key aspects when people decide where to gather to protest. According to them, supporters choose places and streets around the west side, while opponents stay on the east. However, they also found that along with accessibility, determination to achieve a political goal is the motivation that drives people to take over certain areas within the city despite the location. While I agree, I add that accessibility not only depends on the physical location but on the symbolic boundaries that limit certain spaces.

Accessibility is more than the ability to walk or drive to get to a place; as one informant argues, he can walk across Plaza Altamira or take the Metro from there, but he will not enter that particular plaza. He says he feels unwelcome there and is afraid that if someone sees him there, they will think that he is not a government supporter. He made
clear that he and his comrades refuse to visit the square or even to be linked with it; they
center the place a threat. From his statement, I recalled his discomfort: “It’s not right
for me to be visiting that place, Altamira and its surroundings are prohibited territories
for me and my buddies. I feel dread visiting that plaza, if somebody sees me there they
might think that I am a traitor or political conspirator. I could even lose my job as a
teacher because they might question my credibility. If any of my friends know that I am
visiting that plaza, they will tell other friends and they will wonder what I am I doing
there, or what I am really teaching at school. I can circulate around the plaza, take the
Metro and walk by but I can’t stay there, it’s very dangerous. I work in a public middle
school and many people know me so I can’t expose myself there. I have friends that
oppose the government and sometimes we gather together but we try not to discuss our
political affiliations, if that happens I just apologize and leave without further debate. But
I know my friends gather there with opponents, so if they see me there they will find me
highly suspicious. Listen, I can freely walk around Petare, people know me there and
they support President Chávez and are grateful for all they have received from him, but in
Altamira, no way; if I start visiting that place I will be seriously risking my job and
everything else.”

Even President Chavez admitted in his weekly show that he cannot visit Plaza
Altamira anymore because it is opposition territory:

¿a quién se le va a ocurrir por ejemplo, a qué revolucionario se le va a ocurrir
convocar una concentración en la Plaza Altamira?, yo pudiera ir a la Plaza
Altamira ¿no es Venezuela pues? pero no debo, ...¿a quién se le va a ocurrir, voy
yo de , irresponsable? ni lo haría ni lo permitiría a ningún seguidor mío y estoy
seguro que ninguno lo haría, pero ni los más radicales lo han hecho, atreverse, a
una provocación de tal magnitud (Erlich 2005:30).
[who would think, for instance, that a revolutionary would call for a meeting at Plaza Altamira?, I could go and visit Plaza Altamira, isn’t that Venezuelan territory as well? But I should not go there… who would think about doing that, would I? That would be irresponsible. I would not do that and I would not let any of my supporters to do that, I’m sure that they would not do that, but some radical supporters have done it and they have caused serious troubles]

Symbolic boundaries exist, they may not be physically tangible but people recognize them in different ways. In Plaza Altamira for instance, the Virgin Mary statue is a reminder of the symbolic barrier constructed by government supporters since the militarization of the plaza. The Virgin has much symbolism, but that specific statue is used as an icon against President Chávez.

In February 2009 Noticias24.com reported that the statue of the Virgin in Altamira had fallen over due to weather and erosion. The article explained that PoliChacao\textsuperscript{119} took possession of the statue and it would be repaired and returned to its altar. In the meantime, a smaller statue was temporarily placed there (Noticias24 2009).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7.png}
\caption{Figure 7. h. Noticias24.com, February 2009.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{119} Chacao’s police department.
In October 2009, the Virgin and its adherents celebrated their seventh anniversary in Plaza Altamira. While the original Virgin statue most likely will never be returned to the plaza, Elba is raising money to buy a replica similar to the original one. I therefore conclude that Plaza Altamira is “opposition territory;” the statue of the Virgin will be kept there as long as the opposition claims Altamira as their territory. As one of my informants stated, “I am against Chávez and I am not afraid to proclaim it. The only single free space that we still have is this square, and nobody is going to kick us out of here. This Virgin has been here with us for all these years; although she is not the original statue her presence is here with us, and nobody is going to kick her out, and nobody is going to get rid of us either. We are here and we are going to stay here. What's more, this Virgin has her feet on top of the evil snake, she is above the evil, and controls it, therefore, nobody can move her or us away from here”.

Figure 7. i. Current smaller statue replacing the one that broke on February 2009.
During the last seven years the concept of Plaza Altamira has become, along with Plaza Bolívar, a shared mental image carried by many Caracas inhabitants to maintain a political division. In Plaza Altamira’s case, opponents have used and recreated the square, investing it with their ethos; one could say that Plaza Altamira has been “religiousized” by the rhetoric of Chavez’ opponents.
Chapter Eight.
The Divided City:
Geography of Political Struggle.
CHAPTER EIGHT.

THE DIVIDED CITY: GEOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL STRUGGLES.

8.1. TWO PLAZAS, TWO CITIES?

The eleven years that President Chávez has spent in office [1999-2010] has been the most controversial period of democratic government in Venezuela’s history. Economists, sociologists, political scientists, journalists and various academic and non-academic experts have studied and analyzed this particular Latin American phenomenon. Chávez’ opponents see nothing positive in his programs, saying his populist agenda has jeopardized Venezuela’s economy. They claim that Chávez has wasted Venezuelan resources by giving away oil to Cuba, and has “bought” support from the poor classes through his social programs called misiones. On the other hand, his supporters maintain that Chávez has radically addressed poverty and inequality and attacked neoliberal policies in Latin America.

Opponents have also expressed concerns about the democratic system and have accused Chávez of being communist and violating human rights. Meanwhile, supporters feel that for the first time in history a Venezuelan president has truly respected citizens’ rights. These two opposing points of view have polarized the country, dividing opponents and supporters while these differences are expressed and spatially constructed through the cities’ public spaces.

During the twelve months between 2005 and 2006 that I lived in Caracas while carrying out my fieldwork, I concentrated my study on two specific public places—Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira. I observed, recorded and participated in numerous activities in both plazas and analyzed the ways in which political differences were expressed.
through their physical form, conceptualization and representation—experienced, perceived and imagined space (Harvey 1990; Lefebvre 1993). Both places share similarities as “landmarks” (Lynch 2002:48) of the urban fabric, but they have also been reconstructed as symbolic barriers to articulate political differences. Despite the fact these two plazas remain nearly out of sight among the forest of buildings that characterize Caracas, in terms of their physical and symbolic presences, Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira are well-known references among Caraqueños. Their emblematic design, location, and history have granted these plazas an iconic status in the city. But at the same time and due to recent events that have taken place in both plazas, they now stand as sort of “political ghettos” of either supporters or opponents of President Chávez. Beyond the recreational, leisure, contemplative and pedestrian purposes of both plazas, the everyday practices that take place in each are tinted with political colors, turning both into sites of permanent political dispute. Despite their shared quality as public spaces where every person has legal access, both plazas, rather than unifying and enforcing togetherness have been conceptualized as symbols of the sociopolitical polarization among Caraqueños and among Venezuelans at large.

The social and political tensions between supporters and opponents of President Chávez are spatially manifested through public spaces and extend throughout the cities and the country. In Caracas, as in Venezuelan society in general, there exist clear social divisions that have been historically reinforced through urban forms. As described in Chapter 2, since its origin, the colonial city established patterns of socio and territorial segregation according to the established hierarchies. Those differentiations remained throughout the urban evolution of the post-colonial city and basically re-structured during
the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to the rise of new hierarchies based on the dynamic of the industrial society and the effect of capitalism. By the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the emerging oligarchies were in search of secluded residential areas outside the traditional city. These groups appropriated the best locations of Caracas’ valley while the wave of migration attracted by the petroleum boom invaded the historical center and the inhospitable hills with their informal houses.

In the twenty-first century, Venezuelan cities are more polarized than ever before; people not only have recognized divisions based on class, gender, ethnicity, race and religion, but particularly on political affiliation. These divisions are physically manifested through gated communities, fenced parks, restricted commercial areas and malls, and also conceptualized as divisions that “mark the transition from one sphere of control to that of another” (Low 1996a:161); they are boundaries made of differences and contrasts, particularly differences of ideas—in this instance political ideas. In this final section I compare Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira and sum up not only the differences between the two plazas, but also between the two political groups.

8.1.1. Plaza Bolívar vs. Plaza Altamira.

Comparing both plazas I found seven aspects that account for the particular spatial and territorial logic that divides and polarizes Caracas’ spaces between Chavista and anti-Chavista territories.

A. The origins.

To begin with, Plaza Bolívar is located in downtown Caracas in the location where the colonial city and Plaza Mayor were established in 1578. In 1863 a project and
budget was approved to renovate the entire square; in 1865 some of the commercial buildings there were demolished and finally in 1874 President Guzman Blanco re-founded and re-named the space Plaza Bolívar, having redesigned it according to a project of French architect A. Roudier (Cardona García 2006:2). The plaza, with its characteristic European style, brought a symbol of “progress” to the city. A statue of Simón Bolívar was placed in the middle of the square—at the intersection of the two diagonal and central paths—emphasizing the new secular social order in contrast to the theological colonial one. The square became an area for social activities, offering the opportunity for relaxation and recreation as well as a space to promote ideals of progress and civilization which were necessary for “a good government” (González-Casas 2002:222). The plaza became a symbol of nationalism, patriotism and modernity at the city’s center.

In contrast to Plaza Bolívar, Plaza Altamira was built in the 1940s outside of the colonial and traditional downtown—approximately five miles east of Plaza Bolívar. The surrounding neighborhood of Altamira was an example of the new social and urban segregation brought about by twentieth-century modern ideals. Its residents were mostly families headed by professionals, businessmen and bureaucrats that wanted to live away from the congested downtown. The houses built in Altamira, along with its monumental square, reflected the adoption and reinterpretation of modern American and European styles.

The plaza’s centerpiece was a colorful illuminated fountain and a monumental obelisk surrounded by green areas, decorated with multicolored flowers to recreate French urbanism in a neoclassical style. The plaza and its neighborhood were designed
according to modern standards that emphasized wide spaces, rational circulation, monumentality, boulevards and urban zones. Plaza Altamira since its origin was conceived as the polar opposite of the traditional urban center.

In terms of time, there are clear distinctions between the two places. If we trace its origin to the foundation of Caracas, Plaza Bolívar is four hundred and forty three years old. Alternately, if its origins are traced only to the renovations of President Guzman, it is one hundred thirty-six years old. In any case, Plaza Bolívar is known as “the city’s heart,” “the historical core,” “the center of Caracas” and “as the place to pay respect to Libertador.” To the contrary, Plaza Altamira’s historical references date back no more than sixty years and allude to Caracas’ modern era, and informants connect their memories of the plaza with more contemporary and “in progress” events.

In their public speeches, political actors from either the government of from the opposition, and followers on both sides have re-signified aspects of Venezuela’s history to serve their own agendas. The government has emphasized the historical significance of downtown Caracas and has coordinated activities to renovate some of its buildings and open spaces. In this process, given the cultural heritage that Plaza Bolívar represents, the government has strategically claimed the plaza as symbol of a new nationalism while opponents of that plan identify the Plaza as Territorio Chavista. Meanwhile, opponents associate Plaza Altamira with their recent political struggles while supporters see Altimara as an anti-Chavista square.

**B. Location.**

Plaza Bolívar occupies a key location in the center of the city; it is surrounded by and located near the most important public political buildings. The national Capitol
building is located on one of the plaza’s corners, and the Casa Amarilla, a historical building which hosts the Venezuelan Department of State, is on the west side of the plaza. The Libertador Municipality Mayor’s Office is on the south border and the Metropolitan Mayor’s Office is on the north side; Miraflores –President Chávez’ office—is only four blocks away. In addition, major banks, historical monuments, commercial buildings, restaurants, street vendors and a subway station complete the scenery. Despite downtown congestion, Plaza Bolívar stands as a secluded green oasis in the middle of the city.

Figure 8. a. Plaza Bolívar’s location.
In contrast, Plaza Altamira—despite the city’s urban growth—is located in a less congested area. Despite many residential buildings nearby, one can enjoy an unobstructed view of Avila Mountain from the plaza. On the plaza’s southeast corner sits an overwhelming hotel and office complex—two towers of thirty-two and twenty stories each—and an eight-story semi-cylindrical building hosting a parking garage. Next to this complex, on Luis Roche Avenue, various residential buildings from the 1950s and 1960s extend to the north. On the plaza’s north side, Edificio Altamira—Luis Roche’s residency—functions as an urban screen, enclosing that side of the plaza while providing a visual transition between it and the mountains. On San Juan Bosco Avenue, Edificio No. 5—one of the area’s first structures—preserves Roche’s architectural values and functions as a residential building surrounded by similar structures.

Plaza Altamira faces Francisco Miranda Avenue—one of the busiest streets crossing the city from east to west—and is also connected with the Metro system. The area is characterized by commercial activities combining fine restaurants, cafes, bakeries and art galleries, with offices and residential buildings.
Figure 8. b. Plaza Altamira’s location.
Figure 8. c. Sketch with the location of Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira.
Both plazas have strategic locations in the city, one in the middle of downtown, and the other at “the entrance” to the city’s east side. Both locations are accessible by Metro and other public transportation. Due to their architectural and historical value, most of the buildings around both plazas have been included in Venezuela’s Catalog of Cultural Heritage (IPC 2005). Both areas are centers of commercial and administrative activities. However Plaza Bolívar is located in Libertador, one of the two most-populous municipalities, while Plaza Altamira is located in Chacao, one of the two least-populous municipalities.

In terms of their geographical locations both plazas are strategic landmarks. If we look at the map in Figure 7.a they are in balance considering their location within the city’s urban fabric; one is at the midpoint of the city’s east while the other is at the midpoint of the west. However in real terms they seem to be out of balance with their environments: Plaza Bolívar appears to be overwhelmed by the density and population of Libertador municipality, while Plaza Altamira—serving Chacao municipality—sits in a more relaxed and less congested area.

As previously discussed I found that accessibility not only depends on the physical location but on the symbolic boundaries that limit certain spaces. Accessibility is more than the ability to walk or drive to get to a place; one can walk across Plaza Bolívar or Plaza Altamira but some people will not enter those particular plazas. They feel unwelcome and even afraid that if they are seen there, members of their own political groups will consider them traitors. Informants who oppose or support the government stated that they refuse to visit Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira because given their political preferences, they envision them as sites of risk.
C. Visibility.

Another attribute of these plazas, together with location, is visibility. Cities have a variety of public spaces varying in size, age and proximity to the city center but some are more “in the spotlight” than others. When protesting, people want to be seen as well as heard, so visibility is a key aspect when opponents and supporters choose their places in the city. Both Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira occupy prominent locations; people circulate through these places and use them as meeting points with relatives or friends as part of their daily routine. As one informant from Plaza Bolívar—while waiting for his friends—told me, “here you will always be seen.” Visibility is a must for protests; President Chávez’ opponents did not choose what they considered the “out-of-the-way” Plaza Bolívar in Chacao—located only a few blocks from Altamira. Instead they chose Plaza Altamira, located in front of Francisco de Miranda Avenue and “right in the spotlight”.

D. Design and form.

According to its design and form, Plaza Bolívar is a square divided by two crosses [from the diagonals and the centers] as shown in Figure XXX. At the intersection of pedestrian circulation stands the equestrian statue of Simón Bolívar. Filling the spaces between the pathways are ample green areas with trees and four decorative fountains. The plaza also has ornamental fences and streetlamps of wrought iron, emphasizing its European style.

120 Approximately 85,000 square feet.
Plaza Altamira has a rectangular shape, the middle point is anchored by an obelisk and surrounded by a fountain. Originally the plaza contained streets, allowing cars to circle the obelisk. Today, however, those streets are gone and the plaza is a single rectangular stage with two decorative pools; one ends in a cascade that leads to the Metro station on its lower level. Despite the years that separate the construction of one plaza from the other, Plaza Altamira was also designed according to neoclassic and European principles.

Figure 8. d. Outline of Plaza Bolívar.

121 Estimated at 140,000 square feet.
Comparing one plaza with the other, Plaza Altamira is double the size of Plaza Bolívar in capacity and urban equipment. Plaza Altamira has more paved paths, sitting areas and open spaces that invite visitors to wander or just sit and relax. Plaza Altamira’s open spaces also facilitate holding mass events such as concerts, fashion shows, art and book exhibitions, and school fairs and fundraisers, among other things. On several occasions, the surrounding streets have been closed for competitions such as marathons.
or go-kart races. The plaza also contains plenty of benches\textsuperscript{122} in the shaded front or sunny back sections. Conversely, Plaza Bolívar is much smaller; benches appear only around its borders and are most of the time exposed to the sun. Frequently people sit around the base of the Bolívar statue, but that is generally seen as inappropriate and disrespectful. The plaza regularly holds a variety of events, but the available area is half the size of Plaza Altamira’s. Therefore, the availability of space is a vital issue when comparing these two public places. In the case of Plaza Altamira, the huge civilian and military gatherings that took place between 2002 and 2003 were possible—among other reasons—due to the greater available space.

\textit{E. Activities.}

Both plazas as discussed in Chapter One were designed as places for leisure, gathering and socializing. During my visits to Plaza Bolívar I recorded a variety of events; from Monday to Friday during daylight hours there were frequent political acts organized mainly by the mayor’s office of Libertador; they normally would set up canopies and chairs to host various causes: to instruct people about community programs, to campaign for the President’s programs, to honor and offer flowers to Simón Bolívar or other important historical personalities, as well as other public causes. These acts followed a protocol and depending on the formality of the event the national anthem was sung and a political or distinguished personality opened the event with a speech, which was usually covered by news media.

The local government also sponsored a variety of cultural events, which took place during the week and on weekends, holidays and at Christmas time. There were

\textsuperscript{122} Containing approximately one hundred benches with a capacity of three to four persons each.
concerts with traditional music, folk dances, puppets, handicraft exhibitions, book exhibitions, holiday parties and related events.

On weekends and patriotic holidays the Liberator Guard of Honor performs a ceremony at the statue of Bolívar. Four soldiers dressed in formal uniforms walk in military formation from the Concejo Municipal toward the statue, led by a superior officer. They stand at each of the platform’s corners, unsheathing their swords until dismissed. This has become a public tradition, attracting spectators young and old.

On the plaza’s north side, there is an underground level which contains a small public library; the area is very comfortable and visitors regularly stop there to read the newspapers.

On the plaza’s northeast corner, an evangelical group gathers daily in front of the cathedral; they preach, pray, sing and distribute pamphlets promoting their beliefs. Street vendors wander through the plaza all day selling balloons, candies, popcorn, coffee, juices, sodas, newspapers, ice cream, snow cones, and lottery tickets and offering to take instant pictures of you with the statue of Bolívar.

Plaza Bolívar is visited by transient and regular visitors; the transient visitors are people that come downtown to run errands and stop to relax on their way to other destinations. The second group is constituted of four sub-groups; the retired men that daily occupy the southeast side with their friends, the government employees that work in the buildings around the plaza, the government employees that work on the maintenance of the plaza and finally the government supporters identifying themselves as members of the “Hot Corner.”
Government employees usually utilize their time out to smoke or drink coffee and converse with co-workers. The janitors who take care of the plaza work in shifts to make sure that the place is always clean; most of them are easily identified by their red attire as discussed in Chapter Four.

As previously discussed, outsiders might perceive the plaza merely as numbers of ordinary people coming and going; but frequent visitors are well-organized and recognize each other within the plaza limits. Plaza Bolívar is a very dynamic space, in which according to one of my informants, “everything happens;” all manner of political, commercial and social activity.

On the other hand, the daily activities at Plaza Altamira are more informal and events from Chacao Municipality are more sporadic and less official. The Mayor’s office sponsors various events such as concerts, art and book fairs, fashion shows, school and fundraising events, marathons, aerobics and sport exhibitions. In December, the plaza is decorated with huge Christmas trees, holiday ornaments and a Nativity scene, and on New Year’s Eve people gather around the plaza to celebrate.

Street vendors are prohibited in the plaza and the Chacao police unit located next to the plaza enforces that law, however the traditional ice cream trolleys that circulate around the city stop occasionally there, and during the early morning hours you can find informal food vendors offering coffee or empanadas semi-concealed near the Metro station.

Based on my observations, I divided the plaza into three sectors according to their uses. The first sector is located between the border with Francisco Miranda Ave. and the first fountain with the cascade. This area is very busy during morning hours on weekdays.
because of the Metro station entrance and bus stop; you see people coming and going in all directions. Later in the day in this same area, people sit and relax on the benches under the trees’ shade while reading the news, talking to friends, or gathering in groups. The middle sector covers the obelisk up to the second pool; in this area people pray the Rosary daily in front of the Virgin Mary statue. Since this sector is exposed to the sun during the day, most people walk through or pause for a few minutes in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary. In this sector there are some benches, but people mostly use them late in the afternoon. The third sector is located on the north side of the plaza, and is usually very busy at night with couples that regularly frequent it as a “romantic spot”.

Late afternoon and in the evening there is activity throughout the plaza; groups of neighbors who identify themselves as political activists and opponents of President Chávez sit on the benches in the first sector, moms and kids generally play around the obelisk and couples occupy the third sector.

Both plazas hold a variety of users and activities; however Plaza Bolívar stands out principally for being the daily scenario for the promotion of the government and facilitating the daily gathering of government supporters. Meanwhile Plaza Altamira hosts activities sponsored only by Chacao’s Mayor—who has been for at least the last ten years in opposition to the national government—making it easier and more comfortable for government opponents to meet there.

\textit{F. Symbolism.}

As analyzed in previous chapters, Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira are both Caracas landmarks. For instance, Plaza Bolívar is known for its history and origins but particularly because of Simón Bolívar’s significance and relevance in Venezuela’s
Since antiquity, statues have been identified with powerful symbolic meaning and “have been used by monarchs from the Age of the Enlightenment as much as by incapable democratic regimens or weak or really powerful governments” (Gutiérrez 2005:469) to commemorate themselves. The Simón Bolívar statue is no exception; since it was placed in the middle of the original Plaza Mayor, both the statue and the plaza gained a new symbolism associated with ideals of progress, nationalism and patriotism. President Chávez has re-interpreted this symbol and has used Simón Bolívar as a key element in his political agenda. As discussed in Chapter Four, President Chávez renamed the country the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, public schools across the country are called Bolivarian Schools, the current government program is identified as the Simón Bolívar National Project, and so on. This “Cult to Bolívar” has been used by previous administrations, but President Chávez has taken full advantage of it, accusing former presidents of betraying Bolivarian ideals and calling upon his supporters to embrace those ideals. Consequently, Plaza Bolívar is a sort of secular shrine to honor the hero and President Chávez’ supporters have claimed Bolívar as their symbol and have declared Caracas’ Plaza Bolívar as their territory.
In contrast, Plaza Altamira carries different symbolism; originally its obelisk was the ideal monument to represent ideas opposed to the historical downtown. Gutierrez (2005) explains that reproducing monuments such as obelisks from foreign contexts was a sign of Latin America’s lack of architectural and urban creativity and intellectual laziness during the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but I interpret the proliferation of these monuments more as an intention to break with the ideas of nationalism and history represented by the colonial downtown. In Plaza Altamira’s case, when the obelisk was being constructed a billboard posted next to it announced that the monument would be taller than the cathedral. This statement reveals the competition between the new urban expansions with the traditional buildings. The monument was
built as a reference to progress and in later years it was adopted as Chacao’s municipal emblem. But the obelisk never evolved into a national symbol as did the concept of Simón Bolívar. For the last eight years a statue of the Virgin Mary has remained in front of the obelisk, not only as a religious symbol, but also as a political symbol of the opposition. That statue was placed when the military took over Plaza Altamira and various attempts to remove it have been carried out by people identified as Chávez’ supporters. Despite the controversy, the statue—with certain modifications—has remained in the same place as a social and political symbol, transforming Plaza Altamira into a sort of religious shrine for the opposition’s political cause.
Given the strong association of Bolívar with the government and the symbolism of Plaza Bolívar as *Territorio Chavista*, for President Chávez’ opponents it was more convenient to claim and re-signify Plaza Altamira—a place lacking association with the government—with their own political ideas. In addition, it was easier to rename and imbue Plaza Altamira with a new symbolism, calling it “Liberty Square” and “Independent Territory” and also by claiming as theirs a religious symbol that plays a key role in Venezuela’s social cohesion. For them, Plaza Altamira is an icon of democracy and a territory of freedom, a concept which meshes with their political agenda; however for supporters it is seen merely as anti-Chavista territory.

*G. Us and Them.*

Venezuela is a profoundly polarized society; groups are either strongly in favor or strongly opposed to President Chávez. This sharp division has made it almost impossible to find a middle ground from which to be critical of both sides without being labeled a “traitor, escuálido, imperialist, sifrino, oligarch and golpista” or “chavista, communist, horda, chusma, monkey and ignorant”. This negative and discriminatory conceptualization of “the other” manifests not only the verbal, physical and symbolic violence but also the extreme socioeconomic differences created and reinforced by the inequality, social exclusion and lack of an effective administration over several years (Lozada 2004:199). This polarization has made visible the accumulated social resentment among classes and the general political discontent. These two opposing images refer to differences of class, gender, race, and religion, among others. Additionally the differences are reinforced through elements of Venezuela’s political history, patriotic heroes and symbols, military discourses and campaigns. Religious creeds and images
have also been involved in the conflict; one group claims they represent virtue and morality while accusing the other of being immoral and evil; religion is used to sanctify or demonize one side or the other.

All these differences have been expressed throughout the city in contradictory ways; Caracas is now more than ever a city of contrasts where masses of extremely poor residents live next to the few extremely rich, where precarious makeshift houses are built on top of each other facing luxurious residential apartments, where gated condominiums are accessed through different sets of elevators for owners and domestic employees and where informal street vendors compete with modern, exclusive malls. Caracas is a city where people divide spaces with fences, gates, watchmen, warnings signs stating *Se reserve el derecho de admission* [We reserve the right to deny entry] and also by political signs. For instance, schools and universities have been renamed Bolivarian, some private supermarkets have been nationalized and several buildings and private institutions have also been confiscated and nationalized. This is an ongoing battle of principle and domain over spaces where social, economic and political differences intersect, with the battlefield’s “ground zero” being public places such as Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira.

8.2. CLOSING THOUGHTS.

As several authors have discussed, the organization of spatial relations is fundamentally cultural. All human beings perceive space through their senses but since they live in different cultural worlds, their perception of space varies accordingly. Different cultures perceive and express their experience of space in different ways. The
purpose of this project was to explore how culture is expressed through space, particularly through public spaces in Caracas.

As discussed in the first chapter, public space is socially and culturally produced and constructed; it is a representation and also representational, but most importantly public space is the space for representation where social groups and social relations become visible and public (Lefebvre 1993; Mitchell 1995:115). Society exists because of social interactions, and social interactions and practices exist because of their presence in space. But public space is not only where social relations are embedded and perceived but also where they are constantly re-invented, re-created and even mis-represented. Public space is the stage where events—for better or for worse—determine the trend of all future proceedings in the city and its constant permutations account for the city’s re-invention and emergence of new urban dynamics.

Venezuela’s Constitution, approved in 1999, calls for—among other principles—development of a more participatory democracy. Within that framework, public spaces in Venezuela have become forums to continually express political agreements and disagreements reinforcing those democratic principles. However, in practice the encounter with “the other” has not occurred within the democratic ideals of tolerance and respect, but instead those of exclusion and prejudice. In this process, supporters on one hand have used and re-created Plaza Bolívar, investing it with their practices, while opponents claim that Plaza Bolívar has been “ghettoized” by Chávez’ rhetoric and supporters. In the case of Plaza Altamira, on the other hand, opponents have used and recreated the square, investing it with their style of life; one could say that Plaza Altamira has been “religiousized” by the rhetoric of Chávez’ opponents.
While writing these final lines, on April 19, 2010 Venezuelans celebrate two hundred years of independence. News media are reporting that the government has made a major effort to renovate the downtown area for this important celebration. The project has included cleaning and repairing streets and sidewalks, giving buildings a face-lift, restoring green areas and removing advertising and graffiti. Plaza Bolívar was part of this renovation and the Bolívar statue has been polished, floor titles replaced and the fountains unclogged and re-started. Buildings surrounding the plaza were repainted and windows and balconies were decorated with national flags. This renovation project reportedly will continue until all the buildings are refurbished (Páez 2010).

The celebration was inaugurated in the National Pantheon by president Chávez—dressed in military uniform—accompanied by the presidents of Cuba, Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador, who paid their respects to Simón Bolívar at the site of his remains. A colorful parade followed in Paseo los Proceres, which opened with the chant, “Patria, socialismo o muerte! [The Homeland, socialism or death!],” a well-known slogan used by Chavez to reinforce his intention to continue fighting until his political programs are completed (Ruiz 2010:14).

Meanwhile leaders from the opposition celebrated the anniversary by inaugurating a new square on the city’s east side—Plaza Los Palos Grandes. The local mayor and political opponents joined the celebration and in their speeches articulated their concerns for Venezuela’s democracy and implored the opposition to keep fighting for their rights as citizens (Ruiz 2010:14).

To summarize, public spaces are used by supporters and opponents to express political principles and materialize ideas; for the government this means re-creating
places and symbols throughout the country and investing them with nationalism and patriotism. For the opposition this means creating new places — *Plaza Los Palos Grandes*, for instance— which can be filled and signified with their ideas.

In an article entitled *La ciudad es el espacio público* [The city is the public space], Borja (2003:82) defines the city as a trilogy. The city is *urbs* because of its demographic status, it is *civitas* because of its quality as a center of culture and citizenship and it is also *polis* because it is a place of power. Therefore, Caracas is a collection of narrow public spaces where *Caraqueños* display their similarities and differences, where they express themselves through their struggles but they do not fully recognize or accept the “other.”

As long as political divisions remain and neither side feels truly free to visit the other’s sites, one must question whether these public spaces are indeed public.

In Caracas’ polarized landscape, new urban practices have proliferated, illustrated by the events at Plaza Bolívar and Plaza Altamira. The antagonism and conflict occurring within these contemporary public spaces forces us to re-think the idealistic concept of public spaces as inclusive and completely accessible. What truly characterizes public spaces is the dynamic and constant struggle of society’s differences and disagreements.

If, as Venezuela’s President Chávez states, “*Venezuela es de todos*” [Venezuela is for everyone] we must truly reconsider public spaces, not only as the space for society’s representation, but also as sites of political struggle and change.
GLOSSARY.

**AD**: Acción Democrática.

**Alameda**: A tree-shaded promenade or public park.

**Arepera**: refers to a place in which you can buy *arepas*—round pieces of pre-cooked cornmeal, fried in a pan or baked in an oven that constituted Venezuela’s staple food.

**Buhoneros**: street vendors

**Bohío**: a round hut.

**Cabildo**: Town Council.

**Caudillo**: military leader.

**Caudillismo**: a state or government in which a caudillo exercises absolute power.

**Causa R**: Radical Cause.

**Cacerolazos**: The term *cacerolazo* or *cacerolada* refers to the action of making noise with pans, pots and metallic utensils, in order to protest against a situation. In the Latin American context they were first used during the 1970’s in Chile as a rejection of Salvador Allende’s government. On December 1, 1970 a significant concentration of women [most of them middle class] organized to express their discomfort with the regime; they walked along the main streets in Santiago de Chile shouting and making noises with their *cacerolas*. Later, Argentina’s women used the same strategy. On December 19 and 20, 2001 after a severe economic crisis, a popular rebellion in Buenos Aires led to the resignation of the democratic government of De La Rua. The *cacerolas* had become an instrument to express the distress and worry of Argentine people.

**Cadenas**: Radio and TV network speeches. Or as described by McCaughan “chain time, *cadenas* is a mechanism by which the President could legally sequester airtime on radio and television” (McCaughan 2005)

**CEPAL**: Comisión Económica de América Latina y el Caribe or ECLAC, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, it is one of the five regional commissions of the United Nations. It was founded with the purpose of contributing to
the economic development of Latin America, coordinating actions directed towards this end, and reinforcing economic ties among countries and with other nations of the world. The promotion of the region’s social development was later included among its primary objectives.

**CTV**: Confederacion de Trabajadores de Venezuela (Venezuelan Workers Confederation)

**Churuata**: collective house of certain native tribes in South America.

**Comisión Municipal de Urbanismo**: CMU - Municipal Commission of Urban Planning.

**Criollo**: People born in Venezuela with exclusive European ascendancy.

**Dependencia Federal**: geopolitical division for Caracas.

**Dirección de Urbanismo**: DU, Directorate of Urban Planning.

**Distrito Capital**: geopolitical division of Caracas equivalent to Libertador Municipality.

**Estados**: states.

**Fogón**: cooking space.

**La Gran Sabana**: region that sits atop the Guyana Shield in the southeastern corner of Venezuela.

**Leyes de India**: Law of the Indies.

**MBR**: Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement.

**MVR**: Movement of the Fifth Republic.

**Mulato**: of mixed race (black and white).

**Ordenanzas de Descubrimiento**: Phillip II of Spain promulgated in 1573 a series of regulations called Ordenanzas de Descubrimiento [Ordinances of Discovery] that specified the founding of settlements in the Spanish new world.

**Pardos**: Mestizos or mixed race.

**Paseos**: boulevards ample streets design with commerce and sidewalks mainly for the pedestrians.
Puntofijismo: when Venezuela’s democratic order was regained after 1957 all the parties [except the Communist Party], it was agreed, would have a share of power and of its responsibilities and benefits, regardless of which candidate won. The private sector would have significant participation in the government and a voice in policy making. AD, the party most likely to win, was at the same time the one most interested in securing this agreement. In order to obtain and maintain power, it understood that it had to share its spoils. The top military leaders endorsed these decisions. The Church and the military, through this pact and other formal and informal agreements, were given ample reassurance that their roles in society would be respected and supported. (Coronil 1997)

PCV: Communist Party of Venezuela.

PDVSA: Petróleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anónima - Venezuelan Petroleum Company.


Punto Fijo: it is the name of the house, belonging to Rafael Caldera, where democrats negotiated the pact that facilitated the transition to second wave democracy (2002)

República Bolivariana de Venezuela: Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Retretas: Public performances or concerts by a military band.

Solar(er): lote.

Telenovelas: soap operas.

Tepuy: geological formation resembling a mesa or table top.

Zambo: person of mixed black and Amerindian origin.
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