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The prospect of 'interstitial practice' in the in-between spaces of Caracas

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Abstract

This paper delves into interstitial practice, a phenomenon unfolding in the in-between spaces, with a specific focus on Caracas, Venezuela. It explores the complex relationship between space, art, and power, comprehensively analysing interstitial practice as a flexible resource shaped by diverse interests, thus empowering its political nature and impact on immediate surroundings. Through a multi-faced methodological approach, findings suggest that the institutionalisation of this practice near vulnerable areas becomes a focal point for political sources, emphasising the community sentiment to shape a collective urban identity. This research offers a foundational reference for understanding the dynamic interplay of territory, urban interventions, and power in urban contexts and provides profound insights into the transformative potential of in-between spaces in contemporary cities.

Keywords In-between spaces, Interstitial practice, Public space, Caracas, Power

Introduction

Informality has existed since earlier times but this term has recently seen a revival of interests in Urban and Social studies gaining different interpretations about the essence of urban landscapes. To some scholars, this term signifies procedures and phenomena that take place outside regulated processes (Wells 2007), a state of exception and ambiguity (Roy 2009:8), a dynamic that releases energies within the urban landscape (Gausa et al. 2003:343), or a mode of production of space defined by the territorial logic of deregulation, normally associated to the poor (Roy 2009). Conversely, others (Roy 2005; Dovey 2013) perceive informality as a nuanced form of architectural practice, specifically addressing urban interventions that challenge the acceptability and legality boundaries set by formal authorities, particularly where planners must learn to work with the unplannable exceptions to

the other of formal urbanisation. As informality gains renewed attention in Architecture and Urban Design disciplines, it becomes evident that these discussions are not isolated but deeply rooted in the historical interplay between architecture and power dynamics.

Over time, architecture has served as a tangible expression of prevailing authorities' desires, often reflecting societal aspirations and political agendas. Within this context, the undefined yet potent in-between spaces that exist on the fringes of formal regulations become focal points where state, society, and architecture converge, projecting their intentions and messages. These spaces play a key role acting as arenas for new critical projects, expressions, and interventions that articulate political, cultural, and social narratives through the mediums of art and architecture. This paper specifically delves into a phenomenon unfolding in these in-between spaces of cities, termed interstitial practice.

The primary aim of this research is to analyse the close relationship between space, art, and power, seeking to comprehend interstitial practice as a malleable resource shaped and guided by diverse interests and combinations. Thus, this paper offers an in-depth exploration of the territorial dimension of interstitial practice within the

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public domain, investigating the interplay between different stakeholders, the inherently political nature of this practice, and its impact on the immediate surroundings. This research also probes the significance of interstitial practice and its position in the in-between space, striving to elucidate alternative perspectives on urban spaces from a variety of urban actors, with an emphasis on its role in shaping a collective urban identity.

In this study, the Venezuelan capital, Caracas, serves as a canvas to explore a myriad of interventions in the in-between spaces, including posters, stickers, stencils, sculptures, muralism, graffiti, counter-graffiti, culture jamming, festivals, and more. Despite this multifaceted urban landscape, a comprehensive examination of interstitial practices within contemporary cities remains notably absent from scholarly discourse. This research, in turn, serves as a foundational reference for those interested not only in interstitial practice itself but also in the transformative nature of in-between spaces. In the context of highly politicised cities like Caracas, where vulnerable communities are stigmatised as either political allies or opponents, coupled with the perceived threat to middle and upper-class groups, antagonism and spatial regulation have become prevalent. This paper raises pertinent questions about whether the utilisation of interstitial practice becomes a political tool for the most vulnerable instead of serving as an active solution to address collective problems. Therefore, this paper provocatively raises questions concerning resource allocation and creative problem-solving in the face of collective challenges. Are these endeavours genuine attempts at community empowerment, or do they mask political manoeuvring? These inquiries underscore the complex interplay of politics, power, and spatial dynamics in the urban landscape of contemporary cities.

The first part of the paper focusses in the comprehension of the in-between space and the interstitial practice concept from theoretical lenses. It explains the in-between space envisioning the idea of a socio-spatial continuum by surpassing the urban dichotomies that serve to define divided cities. It later explores the idea of interstitial practice, a term inspired by the 'Critical Spatial Practice' concept (Rendell 2006), which addresses the transgression of the limits of art and architecture. While rooted in the theoretical framework of practice theory, notable distinctions between these conceptualisations are elucidated. After explaining the methodology and methods used in this investigation, it is briefly introduced the political background, governance and urban landscape of Caracas, a city that serves as a case scenario to display this phenomenon. The second part of the paper focuses on the critical analysis of interstitial practice in the Venezuelan capital. Firstly, it provides an analysis and categorisation

of this practice, offering a valuable resource for others aiming to study this phenomena. Secondly, interstitial practice is explored as a tool to territorialise power. And lastly, the exploration of several interventions in the municipality of Chacao puts into manifest the close relationship between interstitial practice and the in-between spaces highlighting their interactive, imaginative, expressive, and functional components. The paper concludes with a discussion underscoring that territories are not merely geographical entities but are profoundly shaped by specific socio-spatial relations and power dynamics, offering profound insights into the enhancement of a collective identity within certain areas of the cities.

The empowerment of the in-between

Urban dichotomies have played a pivotal role in shaping what is termed the in-between space, a sort of "intermediate space" (Tagliagambe 2008, Herrera Napoleón, 2014, Stevens 2006, Maciocco and Tagliagambe 2009, Lazzarini 2020) where different spatial, social and creative forms [of production] become manifested.

Sociologist Saskia Sassen urges a departure from dichotomous thinking to comprehend urban complexity, emphasising the interplay between spatial form and social, cultural, and economic processes (Sassen 2005:83–87). Sassen sees the intersection of formal and informal as a fertile ground for cultural, social, and economic innovation. The author contends that understanding the city necessitates a shift from traditional dualistic approaches, focusing on the borderland where hybridisation and relational spaces emerge, rather than fixating on rigid boundaries (ibid). As Sassen argues, borders are critical elements of the public space, identified as spaces comprising what are commonly seen as discontinuous and mutually exclusive spaces. Sassen exposes the need for change in perspective to redirect our attention from the dividing *borderline*, which crosses, cuts and separates the space. Instead, she encourages us to focus on the *borderland*, where a complex interweaving of hybridisation and relational spaces occurs between two spheres (in García Alcaraz 2022:19).

In contemporary urban landscapes, specific areas emphasise the social aspect of cities characterised by instability, indistinctness, dynamism, mobility, temporariness, recyclability and reversibility (Mehrotra 2008), which are the fundamental elements upon which the spatial concept becomes structured. In this regard, scholar Laura Lutzoni (2016) conceptualises the interstitial space as "a metaphor for a physical state of the contemporary city that enables the conception of urbanism as a foreseeable entity a priori to be surpassed. This condition enables to understand better the hazy line between formal and informal as well as the

progressive change in roles of people and spaces in the urban society” (Lutzoni 2016:2).

Architect Rahul Mehrotra (2003, 2008, 2013) delves into Mumbai’s urbanism, identifying two intertwined yet opposing cities: the static, monumental city portrayed on conventional maps, and the kinetic, a city in constant motion, defying two-dimensional constraints. For Mehrotra, “architecture is the spectacle of a static city” (Hernández 2010:121) because the static city represents power and control, being conceived as stable and durable; and contrarily, the kinetic city refers to the performances of people within the confines of the static city. Mehrotra’s exploration reveals their coexistence, creating an interstitial space where the static and kinetic intersect and re-signify each other, fostering a complex relationship beyond physical boundaries (Mehrotra 2003). In here, this interstitial space does not mean in itself a negative factor (Sousa Matos 2009); it challenges traditional perspectives, emphasising fluidity and ambiguity, making it difficult to decode or map (Mehrotra 2008). This interstitial space represents a unique fusion of architectural, economic, and socio-political elements, redefining urban dynamics.

This emerging space between these two cities is related to the nature of “gray spacing” (Yiftachel 2009); a term coined by the geographer Oren Yiftachel, who understands it as the space “positioned between the ‘whiteness’ of legality/approval/safety, and the ‘blackness’ of eviction/destruction/death” (Yiftachel 2009:89). Yiftachel’s concept establishes a continuum between two extremes: encroachment from below, where peripheral populations infiltrate urban areas through migration, squatting, auto-construction, and illegality; and encroachment from above, where privileged groups breach laws and plans with state approval. This theoretical framework delves into the causes and consequences of rapid expansion in temporary urban development, marked by informality intertwined with citizenship issues, political conflicts, and ethno-class stratifications. Gray space transcends traditional urban dichotomies such as planned and unplanned, formal and informal, foreigner and citizen, legal and illegal, black and white. These relational categories are fluid, constantly evolving within the sphere of public policy, mobilisation, and resistance (in García Alcaraz 2022:21).

In this regard, Camillo Boano and Ricardo Martén—in their writings on the Jerusalem case—conceive the land between Jerusalem and Israel as “the space of flow in its elastic and shifting geography, a boundless border zone that could never be represented by drawing lines at the risk of simplifying its spatiality and its ‘thickness’” (Boano and Martén 2013:11). Both scholars exemplify the thick line between the two states with the concept of the Möbius strip:

“Like the two sides of the Möbius strip, in any point along its length what seems to be happening is that both the camp and the polis become visible poles of antinomy where the ambivalent logic of inclusive, biopolitical exclusion portray a “neither leave nor enter” logic. As biopolitics begins its work of normalisation, the polis and the camp align and the no-man’s land that separates them disappears” (Boano and Martén 2013:11).

Various terms are employed to understand the areas that both connect and divide distinct entities—intermediate space, interstitial space, *borderland*, *grayspace*, or *Möbius strip*—being labels used to define the realm this paper delves into: the in-between space.

The in-between space is grasped as a relational and convivial sphere meant to enrich the urban discourse, engaging with terms that imply commonality, integration, juxtaposition, and alternative forms of urban coexistence. Here, [re]identification or [re]formulation can occur organically, free from the constraints of hierarchical dominant cultures. The in-between space serves as a platform where latent contrasts between urban binaries exist, prompting discussions rooted in alternative perspectives that favour hybridity processes, simultaneousness, diversity, and coexistence. In this context, understanding current city developments hinges on recognising the complex interactions between urban dualities within the socio-spatial continuum. As traditional dualist patterns dissolve, an alternative view to observe the city emerges. And, within this new vision, new spatiality and diverse forms of urban life come into focus, highlighting the necessity for spatial comprehension to transcend the binary framework of modern cities and embrace multiple, varied conceptions of space.

Interstitial practice: between art and architecture

The urban sphere comprises a multiplicity of representations and practices, forming a social field that acts as a semi-independent arena. Within this dynamic realm, there exists a multitude of disciplines, positions, skills, orientations, and attitudes, all interconnected with the Arts. The artistic underground practice scene, including street artists, skaters, and activists, constitutes a territorial ensemble. These actors vary in their levels of professionalism, purpose, dedication, and militancy. Urban interventions, ranging from architectural works to temporal actions such as performances, ephemeral installations, murals, and graffiti writing, create a complex field whose definition is problematic as it is difficult to establish or define their boundaries (Mubi Brighenti 2010). These actions juxtapose and merge with numerous other disciplines and practices occurring in the urban space, defying

clear categorisation. Moreover, these interventions cannot be isolated from related practices such as art and design, law, politics, and the market, which are intricately linked to aesthetics, vandalism, messages of resistance or liberation, and the creation of marketable products (Mubi Brighenti 2010).

The delineations drawn around the oppositional notions of what is public and private, formal and informal, or east and west are not fixed lines but rather fluid contours shaped by cultural and social constructs. These boundaries change over time and reflect specific sets of values. The theorist and architectural historian Jane Rendell (2006) draws on Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction to illustrate how hierarchical relationships between binary terms can shift based on one's perspective: "everything that one is, the other cannot be, thus limiting the possibility of thinking of two terms together" (Rendell 2006:9). According to Rendell, the meanings of terms like public and private, and the nuances in between, vary among individuals. And, given the rapid privatisation of public spaces, it becomes crucial to carefully define and understand how these terms are employed. Rendell introduced the Critical Spatial Practice concept in 2003 to explore the space between art and architecture, focusing on the ambiguous territory that exists in between:

"Art has to engage with the kinds of restraints and controls to which only architecture is usually subject. In many public projects, art is expected to take on 'functions' in the way that architecture does, for example to alleviate social problems, comply with health and safety requirements, or be accessible to diverse audiences and groups of users. But in other sites and situations art can adopt the critical functions outlined above and works can be positioned in ways that make it possible to question the terms of engagement of the projects themselves. This type of public art practice is critically engaged; it works in relation to dominant ideologies yet at the same time questions them; and it explores the operations of particular disciplinary procedures—art and architecture—while also drawing attention to wider social and political problems" (Rendell 2006:4)

The concept of Critical Spatial Practice aims to transcend the boundaries of art and architecture, delving into the realms of the social and the aesthetic, the public and the private. It not only emphasises what is critical but also focuses on the spatial dimension, exploring interdisciplinary practices or processes that operate in the intersection between Art and Architecture. The use of the term 'Practice,' in the singular, denotes a sense of

cohesion among a loose collected set of *practices*, in the plural, and in part, looks at works that encourage active participation in shaping every-day spaces that have been unevenly affected by current capitalist developments (Rendell 2006).

Rendell's work has paved the way for other academic terms, such as Liminal Spatial Praxis, coined by Belfast architect Aisling Shannon. Shannon (2020) employs this term to evoke a practice of being in-between, exploring the margins, particularly through community projects in Northern Ireland, Israel, and Palestine. Shannon perceives the in-between as a liminal space erasing hierarchies, where psycho-social, physical, and palimpsest places converge. For the author, the in-between is a space where practices redefine, invert, and manipulate conceptions of the proper place through active engagement.

Scholars Ben Campkin and Ger Duijzings introduce the term Engaged Urbanism to define the "work that critically and purposefully responds to the concrete problems and issues that are important to improving quality of life for city dwellers" [that involves] "collaboration across disciplines and other knowledges and a dynamic use of bodies of historical and theoretical knowledge" (Campkin and Duijzings 2016:3). Engaged Urbanism aligns with Rendell's concept, taking place outside traditional academic environments, fostering robust collaborations among professionals, academics and other urban agents. Within this framework, practitioners implicitly or explicitly support an engaged, hands-on urbanism sensitive to local contexts, particularly addressing vulnerable groups using collaborative and interactive tools.

Andrea Mubi Brighenti (2010), in a paper based on analysing the territorial dimension of graffiti writing in Northern Italy and its relation between the urban, social and artistic domains, defines the act of graffiti writing as one of the interstitial practices that occur in the public realm:

"An interstitial practice is precisely a practice about whose definition and boundaries [of] different social actors hold inevitably different conceptions. It is interstitial because, when we look at it from the perspective of one of the different social fields (...), writing seems to be located precisely in a residuum of one of those fields" (Mubi Brighenti 2010:3)

For Mubi, graffiti writing embodies a practice with diverse actors and varied spatial conceptions, inherently interstitial due to the lack of a universally agreed-upon their definition. Mubi employs the term interstitial to describe the porous nature among this practice.

The anthology presented does not aim to provide a simplistic blueprint of terms but rather endeavours to

provide a comprehensive spectrum of concepts to elucidate what this paper terms as interstitial practice. 'Interstitial,' as delineated by Mubi, encapsulates the ambiguous yet interconnected nature inherent in these practices that occur in the urban sphere. Correspondingly, the term 'practice,' employed in the singular form, signifies a unifying principle threading through a diverse collection of practices, as proposed by Rendell.

The terms utilised by Mubi (2010) and Rendell (2006) draw from practice theory in its emphasis on the embodied, situated, and contextual nature of practices. Practice theory gained significant prominence within social sciences and cultural studies, particularly through the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1972) and Anthony Giddens (1984). This term examines how practices are socially constructed, reproduced, and transformed through everyday actions and interactions. It highlights the recursive relationship between structure and agency, where structures shape practices, and practices, in turn, reinforce or reshape structures. However, both concepts depart from traditional practice theory in its focus on the interstitial or in-between spaces and moments that exist between and within established practices. On the other hand, interstitial practice examines the gaps, fissures, and interstices that occur within and between established practices. It explores the creative potential of in-between spaces, where new practices can emerge, existing practices can be subverted or challenged, and alternative modes of being and doing can be explored.

In essence, interstitial practice builds upon practice theory's insights into the socially constructed and embodied nature of practices but shifts the focus to the in-between spaces and moments that exist between and within established practices. It explores the transformative potential of spaces, where alternative modes of being and doing can emerge, and where marginalised practices and resistive strategies can challenge dominant paradigms.

Methodology and methods

This paper is part of a broader research study that analyses, categorises and explores the in-between spaces of Caracas as spheres to embrace urban togetherness.

The methodology employed in this research is characterised by its multi-faceted approach, drawing inspiration from Low (2017) in her ethnographic and socio-spatial approach to examining the interplay of culture, society and the built environment. This study incorporates semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders, non-participant observation, and an extensive literature review spanning disciplines such as architecture, history, anthropology, human geography, and visual and cultural studies. By synthesising insights from these diverse fields, this paper offers a comprehensive perspective on the role

and significance of interstitial practice in shaping urban landscapes.

Grounded in an immersive fieldwork from 2012 to 2021, conducted within the Venezuelan capital, it is important to recognise that this study does not adhere strictly to an ethnographic research. While informant perspectives are valued as essential sources of data, the research also draws upon the methodological insights of scholars such as Mitchell (1995) on the politics of public space, and Kelbaugh (2000) on the critical study of everyday urbanism, relying on the researcher's own analytical interpretations of the in-between spaces and interstitial practices under investigation. Drawing upon insights from art and architectural history, including the application of semiotics, iconography, and socio-cultural history, the researcher aimed to decode the symbolic meanings embedded within specific urban spaces and their contributions to broader socio-political narratives.

Complementing the socio-spatial analysis, an extensive programme of 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with grassroots activists, scholars, politicians, and urban planning professionals, both in-person (in Caracas and London) and remotely. Interviews were structured around four overarching themes: (a) the holistic understanding of the city, (b) the interplay of politics within the urban sphere, (c) the identification of in-between spaces across Caracas, and (d) the act of intervening the urban space amid turbulent times. Additionally, insights gleaned from informal conversations with residents in different areas such as *barrio of El Calvario* (El Hatillo), *Casco Histórico Macarao* (Libertador), and *barrio El Bucaral* (Chacao), as well as analysis of local news media outlets, and social media discourse, contributed to a nuance understanding of public perceptions surrounding interstitial practice. Recognising the limitations inherent in social media data, I do not claim its representativeness of broader public opinion; however, these sources served as valuable qualitative indicators in diverse, multifaceted public debates.

To identify and quantify the interstitial practice of Caracas—many of which comprise the overarching trends of aesthetically improve neglected surroundings, an ethnographical approach was used to observe and map each intervention. A total of 92 interventions were studied, and over 400 photographs were captured to create a detailed dataset for each intervention documenting key attributes such as title, code, authors involved, year, location, position, type, description, aims, consequences, impact, and reflections (Figs. 1 and 2).

Furthermore, a spatial analysis was conducted to geographically locate the observed interstitial practice using Computer-Aided Design (CAD) mapping techniques. Despite the challenges posed by the dynamic nature of

CHACAO

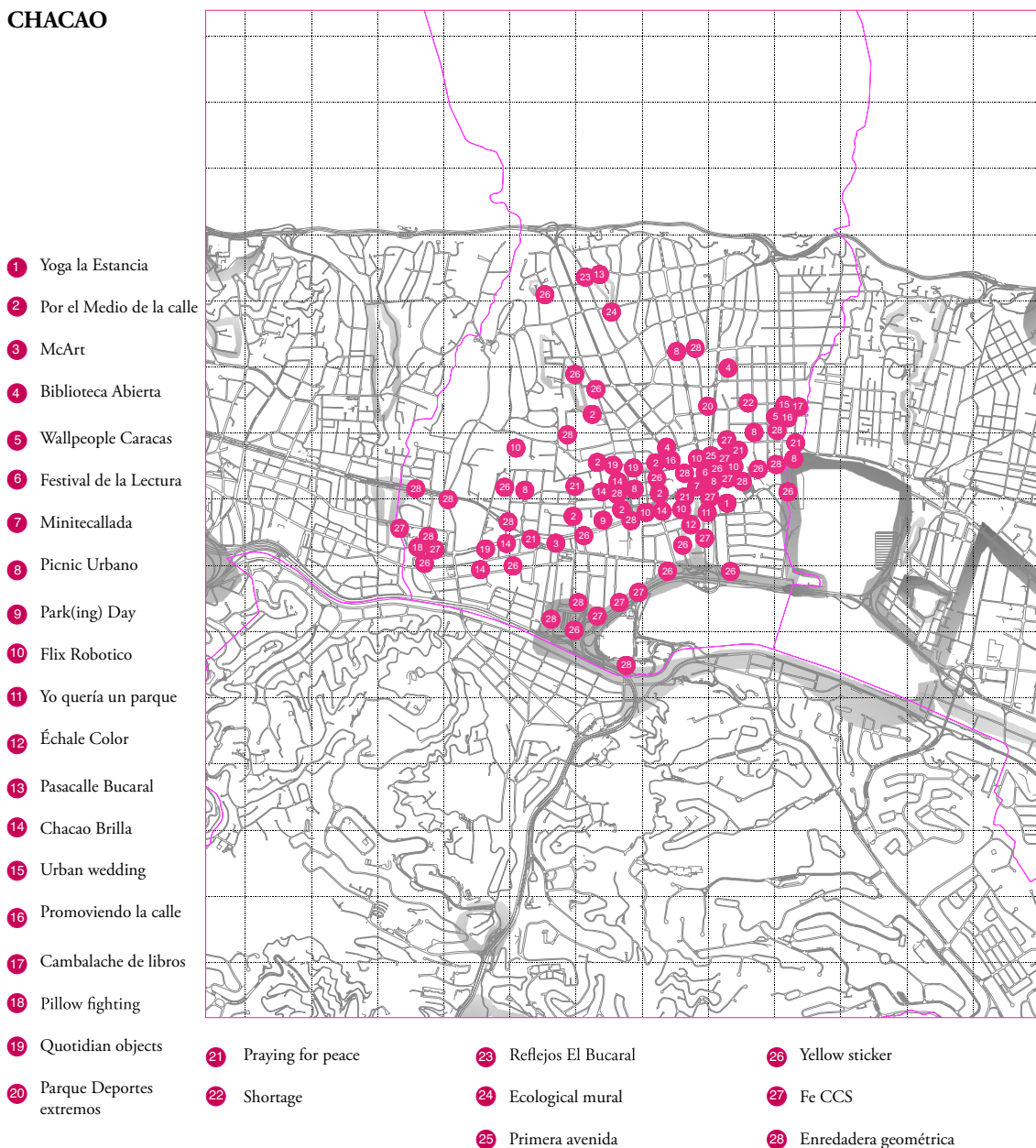
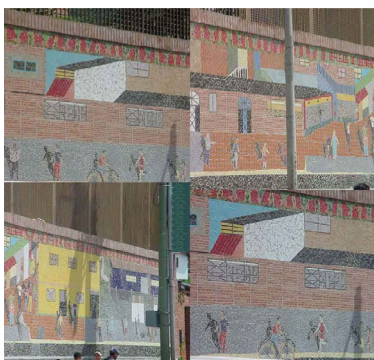


Fig. 1 Map and location of the interstitial practice and in-between spaces observed in the municipality of Chacao. Author

urban spaces and the availability of data, these mapping efforts provide provisional insights and hypotheses regarding the distribution and characteristics of interstitial practices in Caracas. The base map was provided by *Instituto Metropolitano Urbanismo Taller Caracas (IMUTC)* as part of the former *Alcaldía Metropolitana de Caracas*. The data collection process and production for this map drew from diverse sources: intensive fieldwork within the five municipalities of the capital city, local publications, snowball sampling via interviews and online networks, news

stories, and site visits. While the produced map is not exhaustive, it enables preliminary assessments, particularly in the in-between spaces, and helped to locate, catalogue, classify and code interstitial practice with an impact at local and metropolitan scales (Fig. 3).

The methodological rigour of this study extends to the sourcing and verification of data, acknowledging the limitations inherent in conducting research within the Venezuelan context. In light of these challenges, a cautious approach is adopted, with the researcher personally

**Type of intervention**

Public art/ Mural

Description

Creation of a colourful and ceramic mural in front of barrio El Bucaral in order to display motifs and stories of its inhabitants. This commissioned artwork is part of a municipal initiative called “Del museo a la Calle” that pursues to empower local identities of the barrios of Chacao.

Aims

To promote the local identity of El Bucaral.

Consequences

In this case, the mural illustrates and represents through art common stories and memories of the settlement. This mural is respected and admired by the inhabitants of El Bucaral.

Impact

Even though this mural remains intact, it has become part of the urban landscape and no one notices its presence anymore. Cars are stopped in front of the mural and the space next to it is used as a dumping site.

Reflections

This mural was part of a political strategy that is understood as a sort of gift from the municipal authority to inhabitants that reside in the barrios of Chacao. Even though actions like this mural are appreciated and valued, barrios urgently need more tangible and palpable solutions to improve their daily lives related to sanitation, lighting or security projects.

Fig. 2 Information sheet sample used to document interstitial practice in Caracas. Author

Reflejos El Bucaral

23

Code

CH-23

Urban agents

Artist: David Bello

Municipal government: Alcaldía de Chacao

Year

2003

Location

Wall in front of El Bucaral, in 4a transversal de la Castellana

Position

Sectoral

overseeing the observation, documentation, and coding of each space and intervention. This hands-on methodology ensures a meticulous and reliable representation of the phenomena under investigation, despite the constraints imposed by the research context.

Introducing Caracas (2012–2021): politics, governance, and urban landscape

Caracas, capital of Venezuela, encapsulates a varied cultural diversity and rich history deeply intertwined with the nation’s political, social and cultural fabric. The

metropolitan area is divided into five municipalities: Libertador, Sucre, Chacao, Baruta, and El Hatillo (IMUTC 2012; Vallmitjana 1995), each with its unique character and headed by its respective governor. Libertador, the central and largest municipality, also encompasses the Capital District. It houses the foundational core of the city and all government institutions, embodying Caracas’ political power and significance (see works of Imbesi et al. 1995; Marcano 1995; Negrón, 1995; Vallmitjana 1995). This administrative structure and governance of the metropolitan area of Caracas was built according to

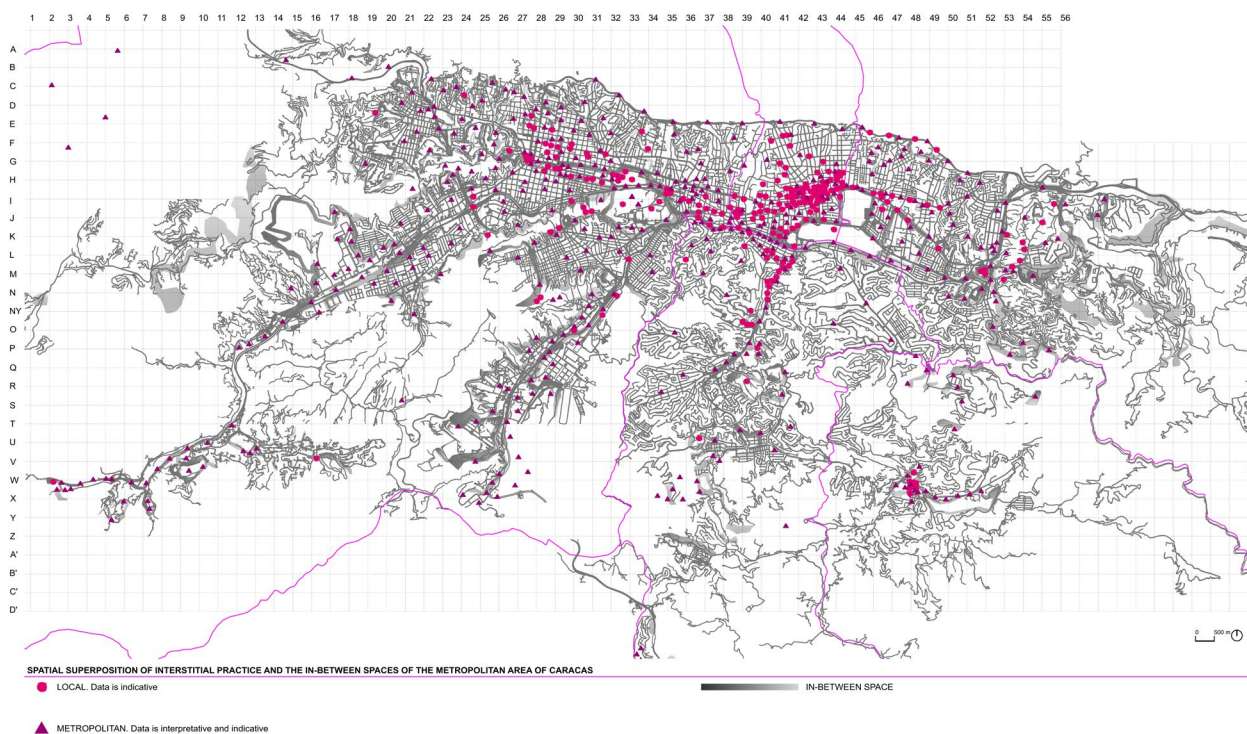


Fig. 3 Map and location of the interstitial practice and in-between spaces observed in the Metropolitan Area of Caracas. Author

specific requirements from those in power which has rapidly led into an apparent incompatibility of its parts; a sort of conglomerate of different entities that are separated by both physical, perceived and symbolic frontiers (Antillano et al. 2020; Barrios 2001; Bolivar et al. 2017) (Fig. 4).

During the presidency of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013), Caracas underwent significant social and political transformations under the influence of *Chavismo*, the prevailing political movement of the era. These changes included the widespread imposition of massive social housing units throughout the city (known as Great Housing Mission Venezuela), the proliferation of gated communities catering not only to the affluent demographic but middle and lower classes, the establishment of innovative forms of communal organisation, and the pervasive dissemination of Chávez's imagery across the urban landscape. These alterations have had a lasting impact on the urban fabric of the city. Presently, Caracas contends with economic hardships, heightened politicisation, and profound polarisation. Consequently, the intricate political milieu has become interwoven with the ongoing evolution of Caracas, profoundly shaping the city's identity and character.

In this complex scenario, Caracas grapples with diverse realities ingrained within its urban fabric, delineated into four macro-territorial units: the old quarter areas,

reminiscent of Spanish villages, accentuate the city's historical narrative, obeying the colonial grid mandated by the Law of the Indies (García Alcaraz 2022:184). Meanwhile, the areas of barrios, representing slums, harbour the city's most vulnerable populations. These macro-territorial units are often characterised by challenging living conditions, marginalisation, and poverty. In contrast, areas of estates—mono-functional complexes such as large shopping areas, business parks, military, or industrial areas—emerged in the mid-twentieth century, exerting significant influence on their surroundings differing in proportion, use, density and urban dynamics. Lastly, areas of growth-by-expansion encompass the sprawling territories that expanded across the valley, either through the expansion of the colonial grid or the incorporation of new neighbourhood schemes. The automobile serves as a defining element in these units, shaping their configuration and functionality amidst the diverse forms and meanings they encapsulate.

The juxtaposition of two of these macro-territorial units, where different realities merge and coexist, generates an in-between space (García Alcaraz 2022; Herrera Napoleón, 2006, 2014). These in-between spaces, understood as liminal spheres existing outside regulated processes and urban plans, have become arenas for new critical projects and expressions, what has been termed interstitial practice, blurring the boundaries between

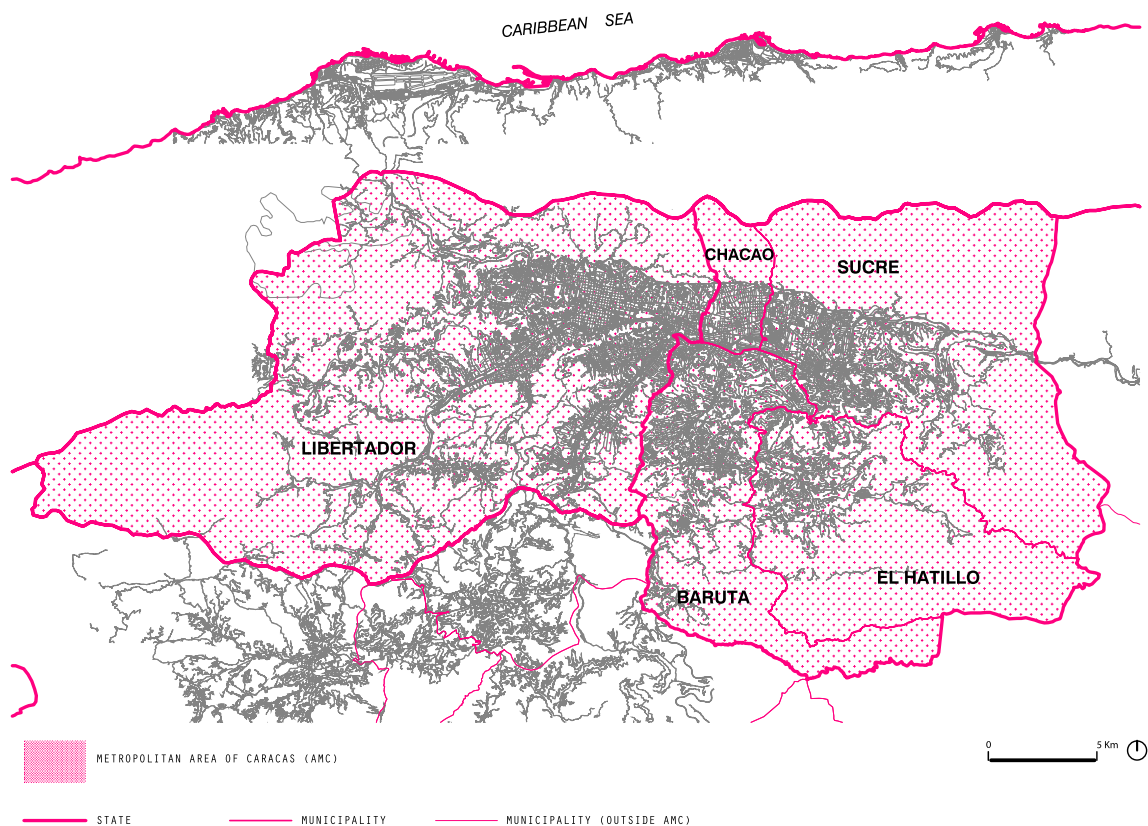


Fig. 4 Politico-administrative composition of the Metropolitan Area of Caracas. Author

opposing meanings of the space reflecting the interplay of social, political, and architectural forces (Fig. 5).

Trends and categorisations of the interstitial practice in Caracas

This study diverges from conventional approaches to artistic analysis, shifting its focus towards an examination of the interstitial practice within the urban landscape of Caracas. To offer a novel perspective on the city, it is elucidated the significance and ramifications of these interventions on both its inhabitants and spatial dynamics. Through a systematic categorisation, six distinct typologies of interstitial practice have been delineated, thereby establishing a comprehensive framework for the exploration of their respective impacts, spatial distributions, and socio-cultural contexts:

- **Street Art:** This category encompasses spontaneous and often subversive artistic interventions, including but not limited to stencils, stickers, graffiti, posters, and installations. Notably, such expressions are characterised by their independence from institutional or organisational support, operating at the margins of conventional power structures.
- **Urban Art:** Representing a spectrum of interventions commissioned by either public or private entities, this typology encompasses a diverse array of cultural and social enrichments within the urban milieu. These interventions, which may include installations, murals, festivals, and advertisement murals, serve to animate and imbue public spaces with cultural significance.
- **Propaganda:** Actions falling within this category are imbued with intentional or inadvertent alignment with governmental or political party ideologies, serving as vehicles for the dissemination of specific agendas and ideologies. Manifesting through various forms of visual and performative communication, such interventions exert a significant influence on public discourse and perceptions.
- **Tactical Urbanism:** Characterised by its ethos of low-cost, temporary interventions, tactical urbanism seeks to effectuate incremental changes within the urban fabric through initiatives such as pedestrian plazas, parklets, and pop-up urban installations. Operating at the intersection of grassroots activism, architecture, and urban design, this practice often

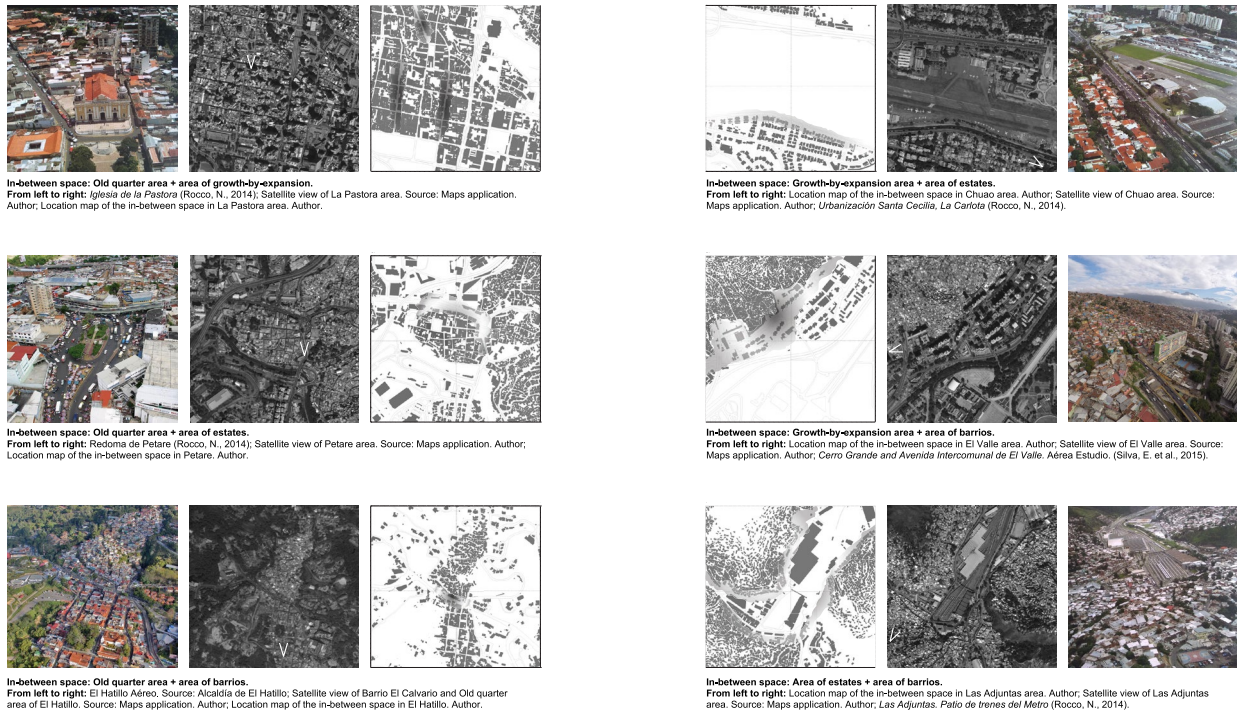


Fig. 5 Representation of the in-between spaces of Caracas as juxtaposed arenas between different macro-territorial units. Author

circumvents traditional channels of authority and governance.

- **Facilities:** This category encompasses permanent interventions undertaken by public or private entities, leveraging technical expertise to enhance specific urban locales. Examples include the development of skate parks, community spaces, and the urbanisation of boulevards, which serve to augment the city’s infrastructural and recreational offerings.
- **Events and Festivals:** Constituting temporary civic activities aimed at fostering social and cultural cohesion, events and festivals play a pivotal role in revitalising specific urban areas. Spanning a range of initiatives, from reading initiatives to sporting events, these gatherings serve as catalysts for community engagement and collective identity formation.

Findings underscore the deliberate and multifaceted nature of interstitial practice, meticulously crafted to fulfil diverse objectives. These objectives encompass the attainment of extensive visibility, the engagement with large community audiences, seamless integration into the urban fabric, revitalisation and repurposing of public spaces, or the reclamation of neglected urban areas. Each intervention, in its unique manifestation, serves diverse

functions and conveys distinct meanings. However, it is the ambivalence and uncertainty inherent within the in-between spaces that render them ideal grounds for such creative endeavours. As explored, interstitial practice is situated within the ambiguous realms delineated by indeterminate boundaries and regulatory frameworks. These in-between spaces lack clear authority, ownership, or direct influence from urban policies. Drawing insights from interviews conducted with street artists, it emerges that this very ambiguity serves as the primary catalyst propelling artists to intervene in these specific and nebulous domains of the urban landscape. As stated by one interviewee: “These [in-between] spaces don’t belong to anybody”(…) “We transform them and give them some meaning”. Indeed, interstitial practice embodies an exploration of the potential for creative and transformative engagements within these liminal spaces.

It is at this juncture where interstitial practice intersects with, and diverges from, prevailing practice theories. Primarily, interstitial practice expands the concept of practice. Despite, practice theory typically focuses on established, routine practices within specific social contexts, interstitial practice expands this notion to include activities that challenge or disrupt conventional practices, often operating at the margins of established structures. Secondly, interstitial practice emphasises liminality and

transformation; it foregrounds the liminal zones between established practices, where norms may be more fluid and open to reinterpretation. Thirdly, interstitial practice creates agency and resistance. While practice theory often emphasises the role of practices in reproducing social order, interstitial practice examines how individuals or groups use it to challenge dominant norms or power structures, generating new forms of cultural expression or social critique. And lastly, interstitial practice pays attention to the spatial and temporal dimension of social life, considering how physical and temporal boundaries shape practices and experiences. It looks at how actions unfold across different contexts and scales, from the micro-level interactions of everyday life to broader processes of social change.

Therefore, this categorisation and distinction reveals the close relationship between the in-between space, highlighting its interactive, imaginative, expressive, and functional components, and interstitial practice offering a framework to understand how individuals and groups navigate the ambiguities and contradictions of social life, forging new pathways and meanings into the process.

The interstitial practice as a tool to territorialise power

The pursuit of a counter-culture to global consumerism is primarily expressed through artistic manifestations. According to Sujatha Fernandes, cultural identities during the Chávez era served as a medium for class and ethnic divisions, becoming a battleground for conflicting forces in Venezuelan society (Fernandes 2010:114). Fernandes further emphasises that repertoires of meaning, cultural idioms, and social formations shaping consumer identities in Venezuela are deeply embedded in broader processes of identity formation and cultural-political symbolisms and ideologies (Fernandes 2010:247). This fragmentation is vividly reflected in the artistic and cultural realm, where the concept of tradition emerges as a symbolic marker representing diverse cultural and imagined identities related to specific individuals and locales.

An examination of interstitial practice in Caracas unveils two distinctive trends that mirror the urban cultures of the city. The first trend adopts a subjectivist approach, drawing inspiration from the global urban art scene influenced by cultural globalization. Artists embracing this trend utilise symbolic constructions on posters, stencils, paintings, and performances to convey subjective, cryptic, or playful concepts. Rooted in the ethos of culture jamming, these expressions serve as a platform for social criticism, addressing counter-hegemonic or pacifist themes while challenging the functionality of political propaganda (Ejército

Comunicacional de Liberación 2011). In contrast, the second trend emerges from social responses and explicit political alignments, embodying a broader sense of agitprop and communicational guerrilla tactics. Influenced by movements such as the 1968 May protests, the Youth International Party (Yippie movement), and the *Guerrilla Comunicacional Zapatista* (EZLN), this trend finds fertile ground in the western part of the capital city (ibid). Despite these two trends permeate both the eastern and western parts Caracas, the former predominantly manifests in Chacao, Baruta, Sucre, and El Hatillo municipalities, epitomising a subjective and ludic urban art form seeking distance from political propaganda. On the contrary, the latter, prevalent in Libertador municipality, draws inspiration from Soviet agitprop, situationist *détournement*, and non-repressive cultural resistance experiences in Latin America. This trend operates as an aesthetic tool of alternative communication, wherein artists, often funded by the state, disseminate messages related to emancipation, social transformation, and critical examinations of political and economic power vis-à-vis neoliberal capitalism (Ejército Comunicacional de Liberación 2011, Jaimes Quero 2003).

Interstitial practice encompasses a spectrum of attitudes ranging from institutional sponsorship to grassroots activism. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's concept of tactics and strategies (De Certeau 1984), interstitial practice can be interpreted as a tactical manoeuvre by artists to challenge dominant power structures while navigating the constraints imposed by institutional frameworks. For instance, tactical urbanism and street art interventions transform mundane infrastructure into vibrant works of art, challenging conventional notions of urban space and functionality. These interventions not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of public spaces but also convey social and political messages, reflecting communal needs and lack of intervention from authorities. This practice signifies a new relationship between art, space, and power within the urban space (Fig. 6).

However, in Caracas, the fact of involving street artists into institutional frameworks raises complex questions about the nature of artistic expression and its relation to power. This is, artists' works lose the inherent transgressive value of anonymity, illegality and spontaneity suggested by Armando Silva (1997) yet maintain their powerful communication with viewers through art.

"In recent years, urban interventions, particularly street art, have become increasingly prominent in public spaces. The acceptance of street art in our daily lives has led to formal invitations to show-



Fig. 6 Venezuelan urban activists gather on Avenida Rómulo Gallegos, reclaiming space for pedestrians with a pedestrian-crossing intervention, ensuring safer access to the metro station. Courtesy of Cheo Carvajal



Fig. 7 Political mural in the adjacencies of Bellas Artes station in Caracas, 2012. Author

case [our] work in galleries and other venues, with mayors and private institutions playing a significant role in promoting this trend” (interview with a street artist, 2014).

The institutionalisation of interstitial practice gives rise to tensions between artistic autonomy and co-optation. While collaboration with institutions may offer

artists greater visibility and resources, it risks diluting the subversive potential of their interventions.

In the case of Venezuela’s *Comando Creativo*, their integration of avant-garde ideas into everyday life has evolved from being merely an individual stance to becoming a collective political endeavour on a national-mass scale (Fig. 7).



Fig. 8 Art work in Plaza Altamira, Caracas, 2014. This intervention features the word 'Park' ('Parque' in Spanish) alongside several children, painted on a wall encircling a vacant lot. It serves as a powerful assertion, declaring the community's rightful claim to a park. Source: courtesy of Flix

Resistance against institutional co-optation represents another dimension of interstitial practice in Caracas. Some artists actively resist institutional co-optation by refusing to create commissioned [political] artworks. Instead, many utilise interstitial practice as a form of resistance, amplifying dissent against societal conditions and challenging dominant power structures. This tension reflects broader debates within critical theory regarding the co-optation of resistance movements by hegemonic forces.

The arbitrary distinction between legal and illegal interventions underscores the constructed nature of authority and control over public spaces. Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of the production of space (Lefebvre 1991), interstitial practice can be regarded as a form of spatial resistance, challenging dominant narratives of urban development and ownership (Fig. 8).

An examination of interstitial practice in Caracas reveals the hierarchical role of the macro-territorial units and the ambivalence inherent in this practice. As encountered, in-between spaces next to areas of barrios are predominantly covered by interventions developed, promoted, or supported by government institutions. Whether through tactical urbanism, urban art, or festivals, all foster cultural memory and promote local identities amidst political intrusion. It is in here where the territorialisation of power is visually exerted through interstitial practice, being authorities (or its subordinated bodies) able to use their mechanisms to delimit, control and dominate certain spaces and people.

The role of interstitial practice in Chacao

Entered the twenty-first century, a new wave of street art emerged conveying messages that reclaimed the right to the city, questioned issues related to habitation, historical roots, and local identities, and delved into the broader cultural-political struggle represented by the Bolivarian process (Jaramillo 2015). Since the 2000s, the municipality of Chacao has actively collaborated with artists and creative groups, orchestrating events like the 'Red Bull High Spray' under *Cooltura Chacao*, street festivals like '*Por el Medio de la Calle*', and urban projects such as '*Chacao Brilla*'. This project involved painting walls and metallic gates on main commercial roads, demonstrating a concerted effort by local authorities to beautify Chacao and deter unauthorised street art in favour of curated urban art (García Alcaraz 2022). In 2001, the municipality introduced '*Arte en la Calle*' (Art in the Street), a program aiming to enhance public spaces through diverse artistic disciplines. In 2003, the initiative '*Del museo a la calle*' (From the Museum to the Street) engaged artists and residents collaboratively to beautify street walls highlighting the involvement of local authorities in vulnerable areas. This effort resulted in the creation of seven murals,¹ five of which were strategically positioned in the in-between spaces to visually empower barrio areas. As gathered, "these murals served as a 'visual gift' from the municipal institution

¹ *La Montaña y sus colores* by Ignacio Ojeda in Barrio Nuevo. *Concierto Pictórico* by Jorge Pizzani in Barrio Nuevo. *Pajaritos* by Patricia Van Dalen in Barrio Los Pajaritos. *Reflejos del Bucaral* by David Bello in Barrio El Bucaral. *En el Cruce de los Palmos* by Rubén Falcón in Barrio El Pedregal. *Danza de las tradiciones* by Oscar Molinari in Sabas Nieves. *Entramados* by Víctor Hugo Irazábal in Distribuidor Altamira.



Fig. 9 Pasacalle Bucaral intervention at the entrance of the barrio, in 2018. Source: Courtesy of ColectivOX

to the poorest residents, enhancing the aesthetic appeal of their surroundings” (interview to an urban planner working in the Chacao municipality). “The message behind all these artworks emphasise and reinforce a local identity sentiment, further solidifying their connection with barrio residents” (interview to former worker of the municipal authority of Chacao). The in-between spaces next to barrio areas serve as locations where authorities wield their influence through interstitial practices, imposing regulations and strategies that often prioritise individual or partisan interests. Interventions evident in these spaces denote a deliberate act of territorialisation aimed at specific demographics, characterised by allegorical motifs of nature, local identity, historical figures, and traditions.

However, this approach extends beyond Chacao’s administrative limits, where similar tactics are employed by pro-government institutions, muralists, committees, and artistic collectives. Many artworks in form of macro-murals pay tribute to Latin American heroes who fought for freedom and justice, narrating moments of history, oppression, land, and resistance. These curated interventions, strategically placed in central parts of the city, serve as instruments to deploy power, asserting dominance over certain locations and populace (Fig. 9).

Barrio El Bucaral, located in the Chacao municipality, emerged more than 60 years ago as a progressive settlement from the countryside to the city and today is

home to approximately 2800 inhabitants (Planchart Licea 2003). It exemplifies how the exercise of power becomes evident, manifested through deliberate interventions and territorialisation efforts.

A striking example is the ‘Ecological mural’ situated in the *Tercera transversal* street of La Castellana urbanisation, nestled in the in-between space adjacent to the barrio. Similarly, the ‘*Reflejos del Bucaral*’ mural, located in the in-between space of the *Cuarta transversal* street of La Castellana next to the barrio, was part of the local initiative ‘Art on the Street’ with the purpose to beautify the municipality, nurture a robust collective identity, and foster connections between the artist and barrio dwellers (Planchart Licea 2003). Furthermore, the ‘*Pasacalle Bucaral*’ intervention, positioned in front of the aforementioned mural, stands as another testament to this trend.

The Pasacalle Bucaral intervention, which took place in 2014 as part of the ‘Global Community Week’, was a collaborative effort involving *Zurich Seguros Venezuela*, the Chacao Mayor’s Office, *Fundación Deporte para el Desarrollo*, ColectivOX, and street artist Flix. Before its conception, an activity took place at the *Alcides Zorrilla* multipurpose court, a communal space adjacent to El Bucaral located at *Cuarta transversal* street. This activity involved the creation of a mural entitled “Excellence”, which adorned the bleacher area of the

court. The aim of this initiative was to actively engage residents of El Bucaral, encouraging their participation and voluntary involvement in painting the interior wall of the local sports facility. However, residents of El Bucaral requested their involvement in the mural painting be contingent upon the implementation of a corresponding intervention within their own community. In other words, representatives from El Bucaral expressed their willingness to participate on the condition that the municipality funded an urban intervention within the barrio. It is pertinent to mention that residents from the urbanisation of La Castellana—also residing on the same street—were not invited to voluntarily participate in painting or collaborating.

Subsequently, *Collectivox*, in collaboration with El Bucaral residents and urban artist Flix, embarked on negotiations with local authorities to implement an urban intervention aimed at bolstering concepts of identity and local community recognition (extracted from an interview with a member of *Collectivox*). This negotiation led to the establishment of the 'Pasacalle Bucaral', which involved the installation of an entrance signage situated at the threshold of the barrio. What it was initially the focal point for a mural in a sports facility ended into an intervention operated within a barter system. This arrangement proved mutually beneficial, providing the local authority with a platform to assert its presence in popular areas, and affording residents of El Bucaral an opportunity to reassert their identity within the urban landscape. Despite the fact that the barrio was already surrounded by interventions enhancing its identity and roots in the city, such dynamics underscore the nuanced power dynamics inherent in territorial spaces.

Barrio El Bucaral gradually transformed into a new territoriality where power is exercised through interstitial practice inherently subverted by local authorities. This case showcases how interstitial practice serves as a locus for critical engagement with power dynamics and territorialisation within the urban art scene. By exploring the intersections between art, space, and [political] power, this analysis underscores the transformative potential of interstitial practice in contesting dominant narratives and empower marginalised voices. As Caracas' urban landscape continues to evolve, interstitial practice remains an indispensable tool for negotiating power dynamics and shaping the contours of urban life.

Conclusions

In contemporary cities, public spaces function as contested arenas where power dynamics are negotiated through interstitial practice, which has emerged as a significant phenomenon blurring the boundaries between sanctioned and unsanctioned interventions.

This research vividly illustrates how power dynamics find expression through deliberate interventions and territorialisation efforts, especially in areas inhabited by vulnerable groups. Many interstitial practice act as tools wielded by authorities to exert influence and control over specific spaces and communities. These artistic endeavours, seemingly benign, become potent instruments in the larger urban and political landscape.

Caracas, a city inherently politicised, witnesses the direct influence of political context on spatial regulation and community interactions. Vulnerable communities living in barrios often bear the brunt of stigmatisation, occasionally being labelled as political allies by the state. This politicisation leads to targeted and populist initiatives showcasing the interplay between art, power dynamics, and the urban spaces of the city. Therefore, interstitial practice emerges as a formidable [political] tool within the urban landscape.

Beyond its aesthetic value, artworks carry profound messages, reinforcing ideologies and shaping public narratives. The selective placement and content of these interventions in the in-between spaces reveal a strategic deployment of art, strategically utilised to influence public perception and foster a common identity. This raises a reflective note whether more inclusive and comprehensive approaches are necessary to uplift marginalised communities, challenging conventional methods and prompting innovative solutions to solve urgent problems.

Interstitial practice assume roles far beyond mere aesthetic enhancements. Many interventions serve as platforms for self-expression, fostering community pride and a profound sense of belonging among residents. Yet, beneath the surface, questions linger about the true motivations and agendas guiding these projects. This ambiguity underscores the importance of critical analysis in understanding the deeper layers of urban identity and community empowerment. The case study presented shows that territories are profoundly shaped by intricate socio-spatial relations and power dynamics. This understanding offers profound insights into the empowerment of identity within the complex configuration of the urban landscape, particularly in cities like Caracas.

In the urban complexity of Caracas, these themes converge to shape the urban landscape. The interplay of socio-spatial relations, power dynamics, artistic expression, inequality, and national identity crafts a narrative that transcends the physical structure of the city, delving deep into its social fabric. Understanding these complexities is essential for architects, urban planners, policymakers, and citizens alike, offering a nuanced lens through which to perceive and navigate the urban landscape of Caracas and cities alike.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available in the TTGA4de4.pdf repository <https://upcommons.upc.edu/handle/2117/363394>.

Declarations**Competing interests**

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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