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## Espacios Sucre: Interdisciplinary program to develop a system of small- and medium-scale interventions in public spaces

Daniel Belandria

Fabio Capra-Ribeiro  
fribeiro@lsu.edu

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Editors:

Freddy Cooper

Margarita Greene

Denise Pinheiro Machado

Kris Scheerlinck

Yves Schoonjans

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# Creative Adjacencies

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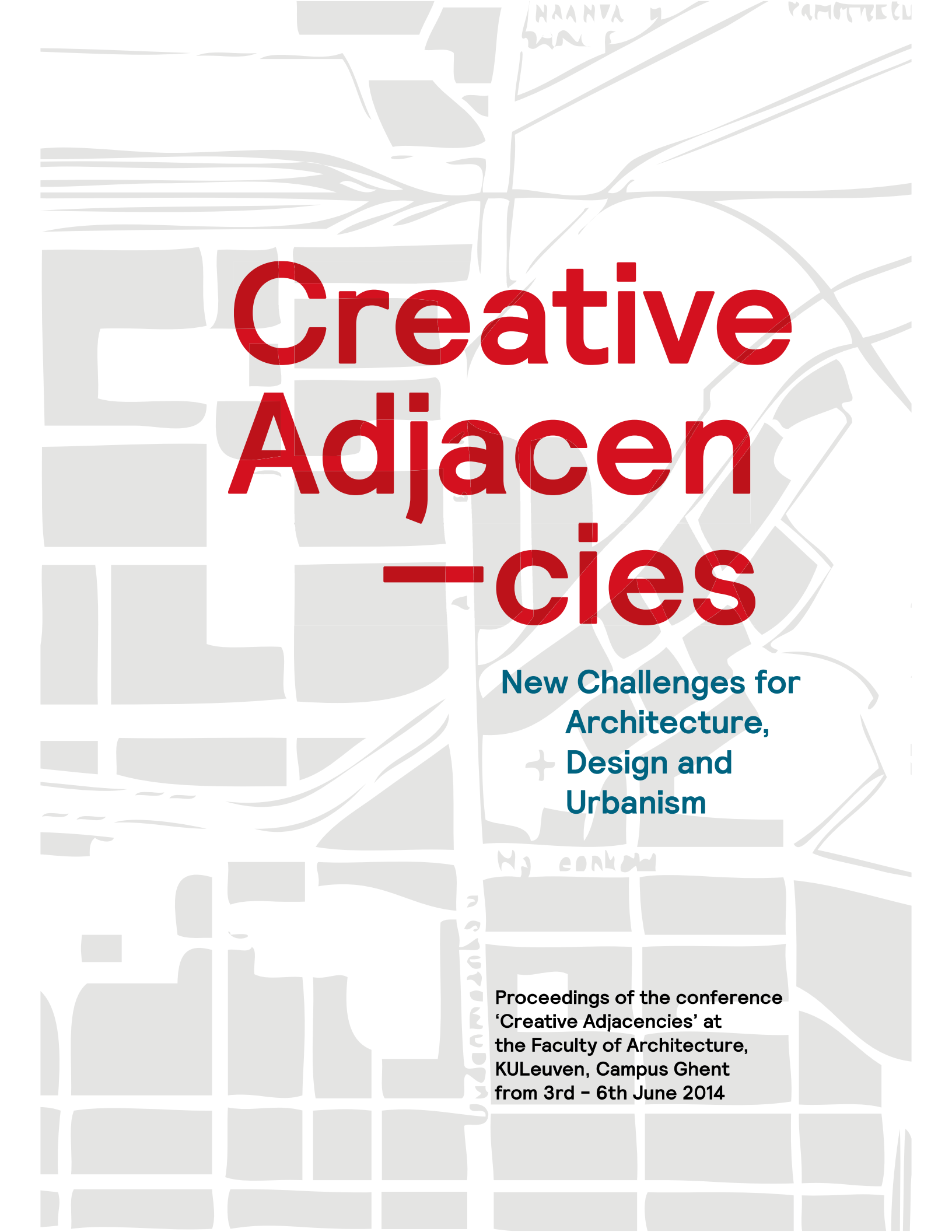
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A stylized, light gray background map of Ghent, Belgium, showing the city's characteristic grid of canals and streets. The map is oriented with the city center towards the top right.

# Creative Adjacen —cies

New Challenges for  
Architecture,  
+ Design and  
Urbanism

Proceedings of the conference  
'Creative Adjacencies' at  
the Faculty of Architecture,  
KULeuven, Campus Ghent  
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## ESPACIOS SUCRE

Interdisciplinary program to develop a system of small and medium scale interventions in public spaces.

DANIEL BELANDRIA<sup>1</sup>, FABIO CAPRA<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Universidad Simón Bolívar, Venezuela,

<sup>2</sup>Universidad Central de Venezuela, Venezuela

<sup>1</sup>danielbelandria@gmail.com,

<sup>2</sup>caprafabio@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*With the accelerated growth of most Venezuelan cities, many of them show precarious settlements where residents seek to resolve their housing needs while services, facilities, and public spaces in particular have been neglected. This is the case in Caracas and within the Municipality of Sucre, the second largest in size and population of the whole country. In this context, the Espacios Sucre Program, an interdisciplinary initiative with the main purpose of building networks of public space in both small and medium scales, not only works to confront the deficit but also to relate the contrasting areas of the Municipality and strengthen its identity as a whole. To achieve this, all the parties involved share authorship and they work in teams to solve problems. The parties involved include: Sucre's Municipality team of professionals; teachers and students of architecture working in the studios, in internships, and in community service projects; organized communities; artists; freelancers; and private companies. This approach, in addition to serving the inhabitants, emphasizes two important points of the current university curriculum. These points include preparing future professionals into the interdisciplinary context and exercising hands on work with the communities. After four years, all this work has produced 37,000 square meters of new or rehabilitated public space, which has been developed with a particular sense of social integration.*

### KEYWORDS

*Interdisciplinary work; urban design; public space; community service.*

## INTRODUCTION

Most of the world is facing rapid growth of the urban population, especially in developing countries where it is expected to exceed 80% of the total population living in cities by the end of 2015. In this context, Venezuela stands at over 94% for the same year (CELADE, 2005). This increase comes to intensify the weaknesses already present in most Latin American cities where, on average, a third of the population lives in favelas (World Bank, 2014). Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, is no exception to this reality. On the contrary, over 45% of the population is living in slums.

One of the main weaknesses of the Venezuelan capital, in addition to its homelessness, is its limited public space, which is the result of the extensive self-constructed areas without any planning. The minimum of 10 meters squared of public space per inhabitant is recommended by the World Health Organization, Caracas only has 1.5

meters squared. There is not any space available for pedestrian mobility, such as wide sidewalks, or illuminated and clean public transportation. The slums, which are home to a high proportion of the population, have very limited public space available (Alcaldía Metropolitana de Caracas, 2011). Within a city as complicated as this one, the work is specifically developed in the Sucre's Municipality, a district with a population over 600,000 people (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2013) of which two thirds live in favelas. There is a sharp division between these areas and the more formal neighborhoods (Rodríguez, 2012).

Considering this problem, a research has been proposed to address the issue in terms of building a sense of unity in this territory and to reduce their need for public space. To develop this issue, a couple of topics are being developed in this paper including: research specifications, objectives and methodology, interdisciplinary structures which have been proposed and tested, results and conclusions.

## RESEARCH SPECIFICATIONS

The investigation shows a quantitatively large and qualitatively complex problem. Briefly, it refers to the marked difference between two fractured sectors of the urban fabric, showing an enormous lack of public space as a major common weakness. Furthermore, none of the stakeholders of the city including: communities, authorities, private, and professional; are able to respond to such a complex problem by acting alone.

The high contrast and weak identity of the area, is the place where a group of public spaces with different levels of deterioration and another important set of residual condition exists. Observing this problem as a whole, it is possible to recognize a variety of components of the problem concerning the issue of public space including: insufficiency, inadequacy, inaccessibility, heterogeneity, and non-systematization.

From this complex problem, it is hoped that, through an interdisciplinary structure of co-participation and the development of a network of interventions in the public space, cohesion between the communities and the territory can be accomplished. In other words, combining efforts between local government entities, universities, private enterprises, communities, and among others, it will be possible to generate a series of targeted interventions that could tie the knots between the different sectors of the local urban fabric. Also, the organizational structure could serve as an example to be duplicated in other contexts and cases.

The methodology selected for this research has been based on the Action-Investigation: a form of research which allows linking the study of the problems in a determinate context with the social action programs. This allows achieving knowledge and social changes simultaneously (Vidal and Rivera, 2007). This structure is expected to work on improving the quality of life of communities building a body of knowledge to be used in similar situations. From there as well as emphasizing the importance of the various social parties involved in the research, the methodological structure has been specified to work with the IAP, which is the Spanish acronym for the *Action Research Participation*: which is the process of intellectual creation and social struggle, which specifically refers to the intervention of employees as well as the people's organizations (Rojas, 2009).

## CO-PARTICIPATION AND CO-MANAGEMENT

In this context, one of the weaknesses that seem to show up repeatedly more often in urban projects is the disconnection between those who plan and those that live in the city. For this reason, efforts to intervene in the municipality have intensely involved communities, mainly looking to be aware of the realities that cannot be known from the project's office. To truly know the city and be aware of its full potential, we must understand it and be responsive to all its possibilities and its natural beauty (Vegas, 2007). In that knowledge of the city, we the citizens from Caracas, as Caracas itself, are the most knowledgeable ones to talk about the circumstances either good or bad.

While *Espacios Sucre Program* has proposed a different way of understanding and designing the public spaces in both small and medium scales, this kind of innovation is not just in the strict disciplinary. Implementation of these ideas also exists as a number of human mechanisms that reflect a huge social component. In order to make the realization of the projects possible there are two possible directions to go. The first direction is by bringing in organized communities and the local government. This is called co-management. The second direction is to involve different social parties including: private enterprises, emerging architects, emerging artists, foundations, college students, and academics. This is called co-participation (figure 1).

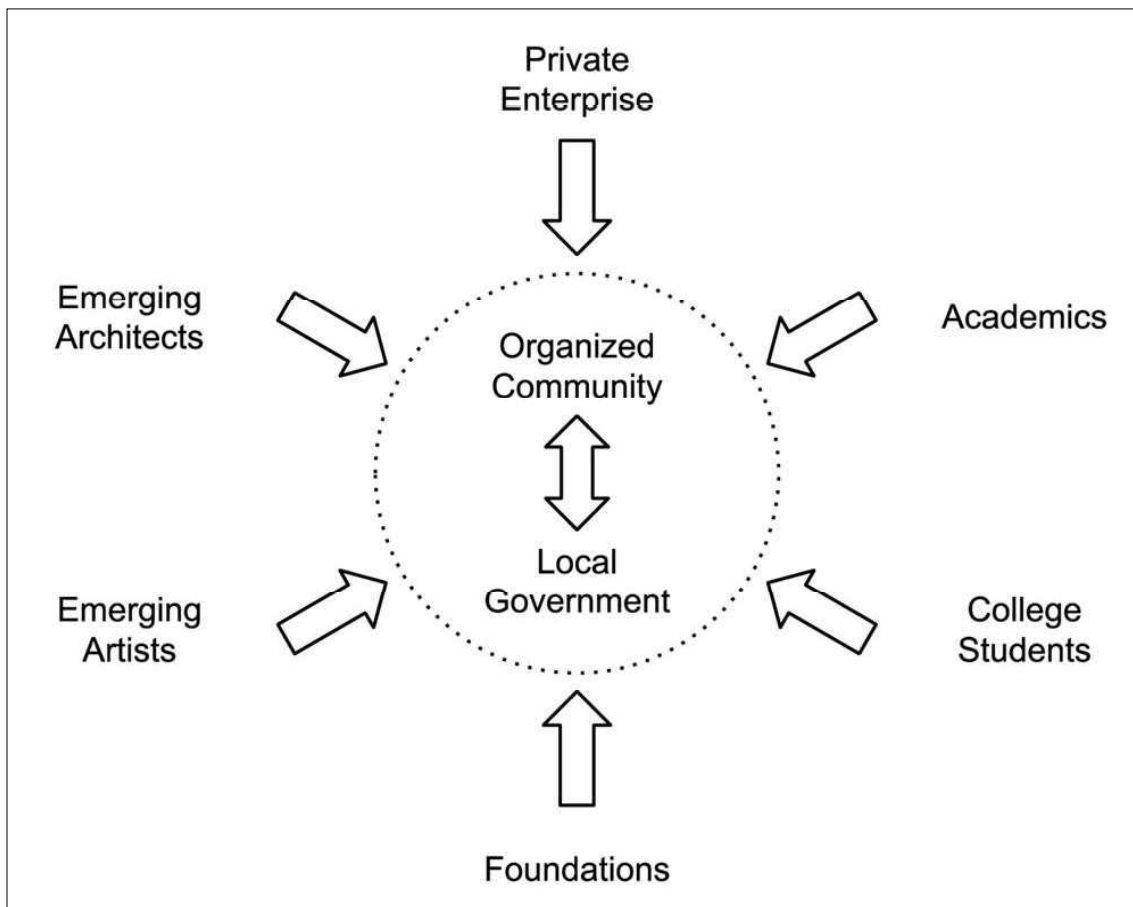


Figure 1 – Unified co-management and co-participation relations raised by the *Espacios Sucre Program*

## CO-MANAGEMENT MECHANISM

In recent decades, the political and the social Venezuelan history have moved its citizens towards the search for a democratic model involving both management and government, which combines the traditional representation and new forms of participation. Under these assumptions and with the goal of bringing organized communities and the local government involvement of three specific areas is necessary. These three areas include the communicational, the economical, and the technical. Three mechanisms have been proposed:

- Political-administrative division of the territory: This involves the reorganization of the municipal geographical space in macro-political zones such as natural linkages between communities, which are represented by a coordinator. In this mechanism, the chain of communication is simplified in both directions and the knowledge in real time of the conditions is guaranteed (figure 2).

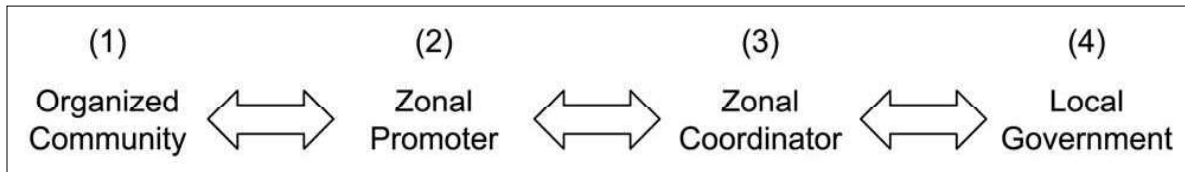


Figure 2 – Chain of communication of the political-administrative division raised by the current management of the Municipality of Sucre

- Participatory budget: This involves the provision of part of the annual budget (between 20% and 40% depending on the level of revenue) for administration by the communities themselves. This provides the creation of a new distributive model that invests the priorities, the power sharing between both the government and the people, and the most efficient confrontation of corrupt practices (Chaves and do Carmo, 2006).
- Participatory design: it consists in linking potential users into making decisions on projects that develop professionals and students. It is an interdisciplinary method used to solve increasingly complex problems posed by society (Taranto, 2013). During this process an exchange of knowledge between planners, designers, and users occurs which leads to higher levels of consciousness in the draft resolution of the project. This mechanism raises three possible levels of participation: minimum level, the middle level, and the high level. The minimum level is where decision-making is shared by planners and designers with users only in advanced stages of development and marginal aspects of the project. The middle level is where decision-making is shared by planners and designers with users from the middle stages of development and in some important aspects of the project. The high-level is where decision-making is shared by planners or designers and users from the early stages of development and the core aspects of the project.

Ultimately, these co-management mechanisms, lead to the empowerment of the communities. Within their capabilities, they can be the protagonist and drive their destinations.

## CO-PARTICIPATION MECHANISM

It sustained lack of human and financial resources from the local government to meet the requirements of a vast territory that over time has become a palpable crisis of works and services. Even with good planning the situation can be reversed, it would take several years before the public offerings and the social requirements are balanced. This difficulty adds to the desire of communities to have tangible result and no future promises. This is when the search for potential partners outside the local government starts with relatively little effort, and in return for no financial reward, may help cover deficits as win-win principle. This point is then recognized and three different parties associated with the process. They include:

- Private initiatives: they are represented by companies and foundations seeking to comply with the social responsibilities they share, are required by law, or are simply interested in participating in. In general, they are aware that they may be contributing to the social environment and they also recognize a potential benefit associated with the promotion which they may get.
- Emerging professional: they are mainly architects and plastic artists interested in joining the work because they can see an increase in their value in the eyes of the industry, the profession, the academia, and the potential customers. In the way that relations have progressed, it has been observed that many of the professionals involved have been interested not only in their work but in bringing investigations and experience in both disciplinary and social manners.
- Universities: involved mainly through the Community Service program. They host activities which are to be performed by students in the communities in order to contribute to both the social welfare and the construction of citizenship in the country (Comisión de Servicio Comunitario FHE-UCV, 2011). This initiative is also supported by programs of short and long term internships have become one of the main pillars of *Espacio Sucre Program*. It sets a framework for the disciplinary-social exchange that seeks to achieve the research. Thus, under the philosophy of the participating design, students visit communities while actively transmitting knowledge and developing preliminary designs, which are then given and managed by the communities themselves and materialized through the participatory budget. All this is done under the facilitation of the local government. A feature that is important to note about this sharing mechanism, is that it allows students to perform community service while applying the knowledge they acquired during their career, so this means that in addition to social satisfaction and discipline an important incentive to participate is also involved. Another no less important feature is that, in the implementation of community service, students are assisted by University Professors who, act as their mentors and provide knowledge which leads to an experimental space which then results in research and architectural innovations, which is certainly another important incentive not only for the students but also for the professors.

The search for mechanisms of co-participation is completed when new relations are explored especially those that allow them to fit into different social parties in a network of common objectives.



## NETWORK OF PUBLIC SPACE

Inscribed in this investigation, the network of public space starts with logistics that are based on previous experiences. This configuration starts with abstract concepts that guide the understanding of living spaces through the definition of contours (Zanini and Confín, 2007). Considering the logistics imposed by the sense of sight and movement developed in these limits.

The result of the peculiar feature of the vision, the edge is the main sign of recognition of things and, therefore, the living space. At the same time, opposite of the edge is the center. The center is usually the most representative part of each space. Between the edge and the center the middle develops, what makes up the living space itself. In relation to the middle, the sight opens gaps to movement which multiplies the possibilities of those limits, defining places which can be penetrated (Venturi, 2007). Entering these places, two important concepts related to movement are discovered. The first one is the living space defined as the intermediate path between two extremes: a beginning and a destination. This is called connectivity. The second is the living space defined from going in and going out. This is called accessibility.

Based on these concepts, accurate groups of operation are unfolded. These include: bordering, centering, intermediating and/or connecting, and accessing. At the same time, these operations are developed and embodied in a set of spatial devices including: railings, bars, voids and occupied centers, hard and soft flooring, and controlled and opened porches, among others. Finally, space devices end up forming a catalog of project materials used.

These materials are a finite number of elements and, when they are combined, they either follow a visual logic or a kinetic logic, to configure public spaces which are limited by borders or are extended as intermediates. Although, each intervention has an autonomous implementation, common manners and elements are perceived, which makes their relationship explicit even after being physically separated and allowing the construction of a system (figure 3).



Figure 3 — Two parks: “Bulevar Praga” and “Los Querubines” (respectively), showing the repetition of components and strategies



Each intervention is a unique and a discrete event on the community's landscape which is done on purpose for the pedestrians to distract themselves as they walk down the sidewalk. However, in a broader view, interventions are regularly repeated events in the municipal landscape. This is when certain features will remain in the memory of users who either coming or going through the town, are able to identify other interventions and then creating a network of public spaces, or a system (Fig. 4).

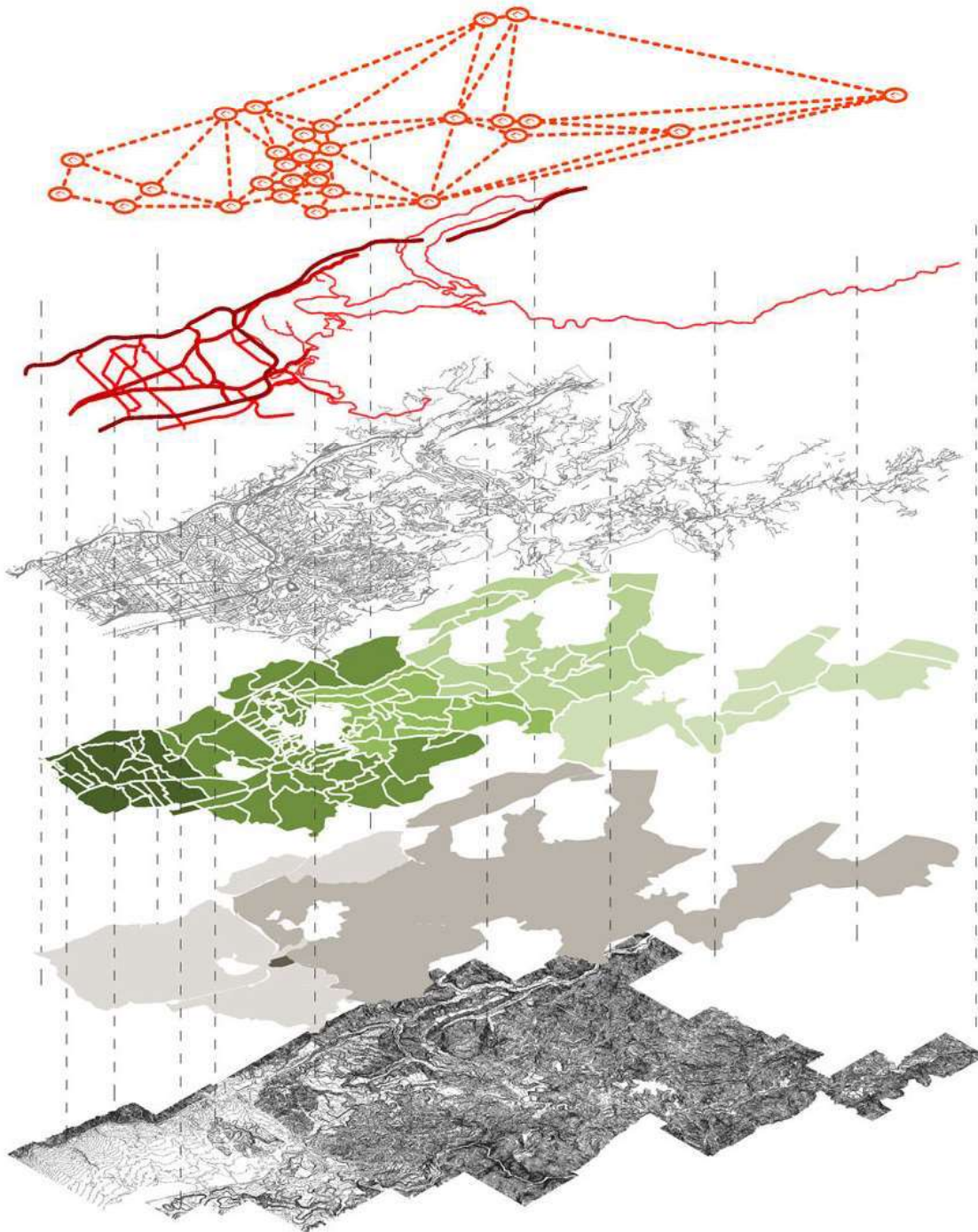


Figure 4 — From top to bottom: public space network, roads, urban structure, municipal areas, urban fabric, and satellite image

## RESULTS

Among the most visible result of this investigation is that the network of public space has begun to emerge. Even with its limited presence due to its extensive territory, the fragments have started to be woven by the memory of those who visit them. At the beginning of this work, only a couple of communities let the Municipality to intervene. Nowadays, the application forms asking for new projects are received faster than they can be addressed. It is clear that the system has reached the needs of the people; which is another important outcome.

However, the meaning of urbanity will always be given to places and relations by the inhabitants (González, 2005), that's why all stakeholders in the process have been urged to reach out and connect with the work in order to strengthen the results and contribute to social cohesion. This has been considered the main contribution of this research model of participation for the win-win relationships that has been structured between different parties and it could also be replicated in similar contexts at least within the country (Fig. 5)

| Social actor          | Capital                                 | Needs                   | Contribution                                  | Concession         | Benefit                 |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Organized Community   | Human capital                           | Public spaces           | Organization                                  | Time               | Public spaces           |
|                       |                                         |                         | Knowledge                                     |                    | Workstations            |
|                       |                                         |                         | Manpower                                      |                    |                         |
|                       |                                         |                         | Validation                                    |                    |                         |
| Local Government      | Institutional Capacity                  | Construction            | Links                                         | Protagonism        | Construction            |
|                       | Organization                            | Promotion               | Organization                                  |                    | Promotion               |
|                       | Economic resources                      | Validation              | Permitology                                   |                    | Validation              |
|                       |                                         | Supportive Environment  | Validation                                    |                    | Supportive Environment  |
| Private Enterprise    | Economic resources                      | Social Responsibility   | Economic resources (of Social Responsibility) | Economic resources | Supportive Environment  |
|                       |                                         | Supportive Environment  | Economic resources (of Social Responsibility) |                    | Promotion               |
|                       |                                         | Validation              |                                               |                    | Tax reduction           |
|                       |                                         |                         |                                               |                    | Validation              |
| Foundations           | Social Capacity                         | Social experience       | Social work                                   | Fees               | Social experience       |
|                       | Organization                            | Validation              | Economic resources (trought sponsors)         |                    | Validation              |
|                       | Economic resources (trought sponsors)   | Promotion               |                                               |                    | Promotion               |
| Emerging Architects   | Technical capacity                      | Professional experience | Public space projects                         | Fees               | Professional experience |
|                       |                                         | Validation              |                                               |                    | Validation              |
|                       |                                         | Promotion               |                                               |                    | Promotion               |
| Emerging Artists      | Abilities                               | Professional experience | Projects of plastic interventions             | Fees               | Professional experience |
|                       | Economic resources (trought collectors) | Validation              | Economic resources (trought collectors)       |                    | Validation              |
|                       |                                         | Promotion               |                                               |                    | Promotion               |
| University Students   | Technical capacity                      | Community Service       | Projects of public spaces                     | Time               | Community Service       |
|                       |                                         | Professional experience |                                               |                    | Professional experience |
|                       |                                         | Validation              |                                               |                    | Validation              |
|                       |                                         | Promotion               |                                               |                    | Promotion               |
| University Professors | Institutional Capacity                  | Extention               | Projects of public spaces                     | Time               | Extention               |
|                       | Organization                            | Investigation           | Validation                                    |                    | Investigation           |
|                       | Technical capacity                      | Validation              |                                               |                    | Validation              |
|                       |                                         | Promotion               |                                               |                    | Promotion               |

Figure 5 – Overview of the structure of relationships developed through research

This diagram summarizes the place given to each program's component, taking into account the following factors in the organizational structure: the capital or the potential that it has to give, the needs that it could attend, the tangible contribution, the concession that it could yield, and the profit that it could get. While it is true that the table takes into account all the experience developed so far, it is also true that it is a synthetic image that leaves out some particularities, trying to build a more general proposition and an integrated and replicable model of mutual collaborations.

With particular emphasis on the association with the academic world, the work has established an interesting setup of relationships between students and activities outside of the academia. The exchange with this particular workplace has allowed students to experience the world that awaits them but from a controlled area while still guided by their professors. With this project students have gotten the chance to interact with other professionals and face interesting interdisciplinary situations. Students have also witnessed the work of public institutions where in the future they may participate in, and they have been able to better understand what it means to be a freelancer having to relate with artists and architects involved with the program, and manage their own time and productivity.

But the considerations about the educational aspect goes ever further, perhaps the most enriching knowledge that these young people have obtained in the program is the ability to interact with communities of different social classes which they used to refer to them in a very impersonal way during their courses in college. In the same way they have been able to face the real needs and desires of a group of people as they try to respond to them through their proposals. Even the fortunate ones, have seen their projects being built, after a thorough review by the community and the technical team of the municipality, allowing them to confront some of the real difficulties of the execution, interaction with the staff, material requirements, reduced budgets, etc.

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the most interesting observations that can be extracted considering the whole process is that, while the investigation had clear objectives and hypotheses at the beginning which emerged from the necessities of the population, it was not known the exact parties who would participate in the final part of the process. This made many of the decisions and notions that became part of the theoretical framework slowly become incorporated into the project as the work progressed. For the program itself, this difficulty also had consequences, rather than be conducted by a *conventional planning*, if that is even possible, a *contingent planning* had been applied which emerged from understanding the crisis of the context. You could then speak of a dynamic structure, both in research and in the program, which had been adapted daily to the constant changes including: opportunities, links, offers, and demands. In a few words, besides the projective role, the main task of the coordinators of this work had been to glimpse and accurately establish relationships among the parties involved, organize and analyze the different processes, and finally stepping back giving away protagonist and reaching conclusions.

It is true that today there are a number of difficulties in the implementation of almost any type of approach in Venezuela but by staying in this apocalyptic vision is to look at the reality of the present when the truth is that we can choose to build a better future with daily work (González, 2005). The *Espacios Sucre Program* who was originally destined to attend the necessities of public space and fragmentation of the urban fabric has now been able to overcome important challenges through the creation of a network of relationships among multiple parties, where universities have played an important role, allowing strengthen education by presenting students with challenges that await them in

the future but done in a controlled manner. The program has enabled students to become aware of the major role that knowledge could play in a complex world that seems to require significant interdisciplinary dialogues. What is left now is the task of experimenting with the results of this work in other contexts, in order to enrich the proposal and make it more *universal*.

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