



PHOTOS MIGUEL LOOS.

DEAR MARK,

I'D WANTED TO GO TO CARACAS FOR YEARS. BESIDES THE FACT THAT I HAVE A WEAKNESS FOR OUT-OF-THE-WAY CITIES TO WHICH MYTHS STICK LIKE MOSQUITOES TO SWEATY SKIN, MY BOYFRIEND SPENT HIS CHILDHOOD THERE. I'D HEARD SO MANY STORIES FROM HIM AND HIS FAMILY: STORIES ABOUT THE TROPICAL *DOLCE VITA*, MODERNIST

'CARACAS NEVER LOST ITS VOCATION AS A JUNGLE'

— Gabriel García Márquez —

skyscraper housing projects in luscious green gardens, steamy drives across the city to the only German baker, but also about a high-security childhood on supervised playgrounds. It was time for me to get my own impressions.

As we exited the airport, the heat enveloped us like a damp, warm wool blanket. The taxi driver turned the air conditioner down to refrigerator level and we drove onto the highway that connects the airport, on the Caribbean coast, to the city. In between, the Ávila mountain range reaches up to 2,700 m. Nothing but green mountains surrounded us for a long time, until the first *barrios* – or slums – came into view. Increasing numbers of ramshackle brick huts stacked themselves on the mountain slopes next to the highway. You know you've reached the city when a few gigantic skyscrapers suddenly appear in the middle of the sea of huts, making the scenery look like a photographic collage by Superstudio. This is the *23 de Enero* housing development, which was squatted by slum residents immediately after it was completed. Behind them, the informal *barrios* slowly morph into the formal centre of Caracas – as much as you can speak of formalities here. An avalanche of badly clad metallic skyscrapers, rough concrete and lit billboards pours into a 20 km-long high valley, infiltrated here and there by rampantly growing greenery. Women, children and dogs walk along the shoulders of the motorway; young men in signal vests hop between the cars and hawk little bags of banana chips and peanuts. For the only thing that isn't truly dynamic here is the chronically jammed traffic.

'Caracas never lost its vocation as a jungle,' Gabriel García Márquez once very aptly asserted. Instead, a concrete jungle replaced the real wilderness . . . in record time. The Spanish founded the city in 1567, but it remained extremely provincial for centuries. Only after oil wells were discovered in western Venezuela did the city undergo an unbelievable growth spurt. In 1935, Caracas had 136,000 residents; 20 years later it was already 800,000. Today, conservative estimates place the population at 7 million, of which a third lives in the *barrios*. While the slums proliferate on the western and eastern city perimeters, the villa quarters in the south creep ever further into the valleys. Only in the north is there a very delineated, very un-Caribbean border. This is formed by the city highway *cota*

mil, which runs exactly 1,000 m above sea level. Behind this the city ends abruptly and the mountains of the Ávila National Park rise like a huge, dark-green theatrical set in front of which the city centre's skyscrapers rise into the heights.

As beautiful as its location is, you can immediately see that Caracas has seen better days. Its '15 minutes of wealth' were in the 1950s and '60s, when Venezuela was one of the richest countries in South America. Back then Caracas was sophisticated and very, very modern, a fact that's also visible in the architecture. In 1953, the *New York Times* wrote: 'Start with a bit of Klondike, add a touch of Paris and New York, sprinkle liberally with the flavour of old Spain and the mixture comes out as present-day Caracas.' When my boyfriend lived there in the 1970s, this mixture was about the same. Today – several decades after the gold rush and with Hugo



PARQUE CENTRAL.

Chávez as president, the recipe would be described a little differently. It's a peculiar cocktail of turbo-capitalism, proto-socialism and Caribbean lifestyle, which is obvious in the streetscape as a melange of McDonald's advertisements and wall paintings with Chávistic propaganda.

On the first few days, however, I could see all of this only through the windows of the taxis in which we moved through the city. The *Caraqueños* like to talk about the city's high crime rate as much as they discuss the country's political status or endless traffic jams. The average is five murders per day; tourists are of course free game, and in questionable areas, the taxi drivers bomb through narrow alleys like kamikaze pilots to ensure their passengers' safety.

When I got the idea to walk around the centre on foot, people thought I had a death wish. In many places in Caracas, the middle and »

upper classes have lost the right to walk freely on the streets. I do it anyway, albeit with a constant tickling in my gut that oscillates between fear and excitement. Along the way, my very Eurocentric understanding of city and public space is badly shaken. We walk through the few streets whose old colonial buildings have been spared the effects of earthquakes and over-modernization; we walk over the formerly modern showcase boulevard Sabana Grande. Now, after years of neglect, it is *'de todos'*, as the Chavistas call it, and we look at the Parque del Este, which was designed by no one less than Robert Burle Marx in 1956.

Not far from the park is a prime example of what the more wealthy residents of Caracas consider safe public space: the Sambil shopping mall, one of the largest in South America. Hordes of people move through the shopping levels, fast-food restaurants and children's amusement areas. The contrast couldn't be greater between this fully air-conditioned, fast-moving glitter world and the rough city centre, where it looks like nothing new has been built since the early post-modern era. Because of the economic situation, 80% of all new houses are self-built, meaning that they stand in the slums. At the same time, the lack of funds has also luckily ensured that many architectural gems from the city's short bloom have remained more or less in their original condition.

It's raining softly as we walk across the Central University campus. Between 1947 and 1970, Venezuelan architect Carlos Raul Villanueva realized more than 40 structures and filled them with more than 100 works by artists like Vasarely, Léger, Calder and Soto. Meandering concrete roofs connect the department buildings and are flows of movement that have become architecture. Admittedly, the tropical modern in Caracas never took on the playful, elegant forms it did in Brazil. But the city – 900 m above sea level – has a climate architects elsewhere could only dream of. In the eternal early summer, you don't need layers of insulation or air conditioners, just a little roof overhang and natural ventilation. Otherwise you can play with interior and exterior space and their various intermediary forms, which Villanueva did extensively. Everywhere on campus, roofed plazas open up and seamlessly segue into half-exposed foyers. These in turn lead to buildings with Brise-Soleil façades. Between them, Calder mobiles swing in the wind and the colours of

glass-mosaic reliefs shine. The university campus is a huge late-modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*. That it remained intact without renovations or additions is likely because for decades, there was simply no money for such things. The irony of destiny.

Like a few much more famous colleagues in Europe or Brazil, Villanueva understood how to

'WHEN I GOT THE IDEA TO WALK AROUND THE CENTRE ON FOOT, PEOPLE THOUGHT I HAD A DEATHWISH'

connect Brutalism with poetry. This is also obvious in the Complejo Cultural Teresa Carreño, a theatre building in the centre of Caracas, which he finished in 1983. It conceals an interlaced, half-open space under a bulky hood in exposed concrete. We stroll through this womb-like hall for a while and forget that directly behind it is a city highway and behind it, a barrio threatens its approach. But it doesn't take long for reality to catch up with us. It already happens on the other side of the street; with the *Parque Central*, to be precise. Upon viewing it, my jaw drops.

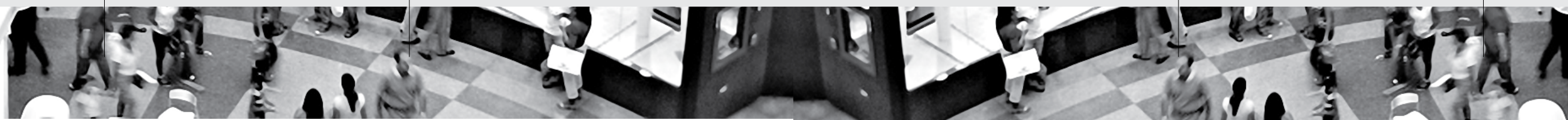
Parque Central has nothing to do with a park. Instead, eight angular, 44-storey skyscrapers with slit-like ribbon glazed windows tower around me. The sight sends shivers down my spine. Wherever one looks is concrete coated with the veils of dirt that 30 years of tropical rain can leave behind – a nearly apocalyptic urban scenario I only knew from Manga comics. At this moment I look at my boyfriend and see that his mouth is open even wider than mine. 'When

these were new, my parents looked at a condo here,' he says, dumbfounded. 'Back then it was ultra-fashionable.' Today, one of the two 225 m-high office towers that complete the ensemble is only a shell above the halfway point. It burned out in 2004, and is still waiting to be renovated and reopened.

Something like this can take a little while in Caracas, which is obvious in the cable car up to the Ávila. It had been broken since the late 1970s, but reopened last year. Now, Venezuelans in wool caps again queue up in the valley station to take the gondola up to the 2,140 m-high Pico El Ávila. Here, high above the city, a small amusement park along with an ice-skating rink – of course decorated with Chávistic propaganda – awaits them. But the Hotel Humboldt, which also looms on the Pico, is still empty. The 17-storey hotel tower was built in 1957 and at the time had to have been the epitome of decadence. Since there was no road on the Ávila, guests were transported directly from the airport to the mountain via cable car. It was a little like an 'Eagle's Nest' for then-dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. The rooms offer a Caribbean view on one side and from the other side a look down onto the city, which could be reached in the other cable car. Seen from up here, everything flows picturesquely over the high-valley hills. As they say in Spanish, Caracas *'tiene un buen lejos'*: It looks especially good from a distance.

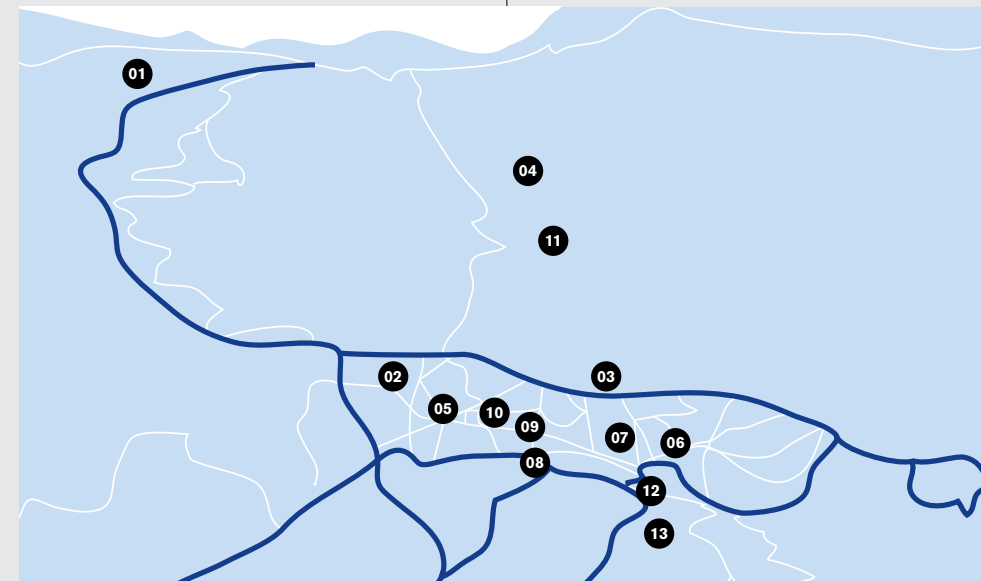
After Pérez Jiménez was overthrown, the cable car on the Caribbean side of the Ávilasoon fell into disrepair. The hotel building mutated into a time capsule that includes original interiors from the 1950s. With its isolated panorama, it's still a permanent presence in Caracas' cityscape – especially at night, when it's lit and seems to float high above the *cota mil*. Like a vision of the Virgin Mary, the hotel silhouette hangs in the night sky as we sit with a drink at the pool bar of the Hotel Tamanaco a couple of hours after our Ávila excursion. Not that we could afford a night in the white 1940s luxury hotel, but my boyfriend first learned to swim in its kidney-shaped pool, and that justifies at least one Cuba Libre for old times' sake.

Behind the Hotel Tamanaco begins Caracas' chic southeast, which consists primarily of villas behind high walls and manicured housing complexes with doormen. From the outside, you can see only the upper storeys of the »





HOTEL HUMBOLDT.



- CARACAS.**
 01 AIRPORT
 02 23 DE ENERO HOUSING DEVELOPMENT
 03 COTA MIL
 04 ÁVILA NATIONAL PARK
 05 BOULEVARD DE SABANA GRANDE
 06 PARQUE DEL ESTE, DESIGNED BY BURLE MARX
 07 SAMBIL SHOPPING MALL
 08 CENTRAL UNIVERSITY CAMPUS
 09 COMPLEJO CULTURAL TERESA CARREÑO
 10 PARQUE CENTRAL
 11 HOTEL HUMBOLDT
 12 HOTEL TAMANACO
 13 QUINTA EL CERRITO, DESIGNED BY GIO PONTI



high-rises, with their balcony boxes bursting with bromeliads. You rarely see their residents in the city. They enter public spaces only behind the tinted glass of their SUVs, on the way to the shopping centre or country club or some other 'safety bubble'. Ironically, the area's architectural highlight is visible to everybody, since it sits atop the highest hill in the area like a cherry on a cream cake. It's the butterfly-shaped Quinta

El Cerrito, which Gio Ponti built in 1957 for a Venezuelan industrialist couple, although Ponti didn't even know which country Caracas lay in when they first met. While the couple was still alive, they made the villa into a foundation. It is thus still unbelievably well preserved. Almost too well, you could say. I don't even know where to look first in this amazing *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the decorative moderns. From the façade to the toilet to the pastry fork, everything is Ponti. And everything is so beautiful you could cry.

On the way back to the airport, the city centre's roughness seems almost liberating. Am I getting used to this city? We drive again through the valley of the Guaire River, which is actually just a cemented sewage chute, past a no-tell motel's absurdly orientalised onion towers, the botanical garden's palms and a high-rise office building topped by a huge Nescafé cup. I can't form an opinion on Caracas. The city is far too fragmented and kaleidoscopic. Almost as picked-to-pieces as the Maggi advertisement that suddenly appears over a tunnel entrance. There, a dozen slum huts have been re-appropriated into a huge advertising poster with yellow and red paint. It's the last image of Caracas I take with me. «

Best regards,
 Anneke Bokern