

Dictatorship's Blocks

The Battle for the New Urban Venezuela

By all accounts, the 2 de Diciembre housing project cut an imposing figure on the Caracas landscape: thirteen residential buildings, each fifteen stories tall and containing 150 identical apartments, with only a seemingly random patchwork of colors breaking the monotony of concrete (fig. 2). The so-called superblocks rose from the hills overlooking the Presidential Palace, Defense Ministry, Congress, and National Cathedral, in an area where just months before had stood growing slums. When finished, the 2 de Diciembre project would consist of 56 superblocks and 42 four-story blocks, planned in addition to new schools, parks, athletic facilities, roads, and commercial strips. It was to become one of Latin America's largest public housing projects, capable of housing seventy thousand working-class residents while promising to remake Caracas, and the nation.¹ And it was brought to initial fruition on the third anniversary of the 2 December 1952 coup that cemented the rule of its founder, General Marcos Pérez Jiménez.

Of all the public works built during Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship—a period of such frenzied construction that some have dubbed it “the bulldozer years”²—the 2 de Diciembre housing project stood out as the most emblematic of his efforts to provide for Venezuela's rapidly urbanizing working classes a central place in the nation's body politic. Official photos of the inauguration told as much, showing Pérez Jiménez surveying the superblocks with crowds of ministers, soldiers, and onlookers flanking him, all of them dwarfed by imposing high-rises. Almost everything about the 2 de Diciembre signaled the symbolic and unmistakable ambition of Pérez Jiménez's “New National Ideal.” Razing

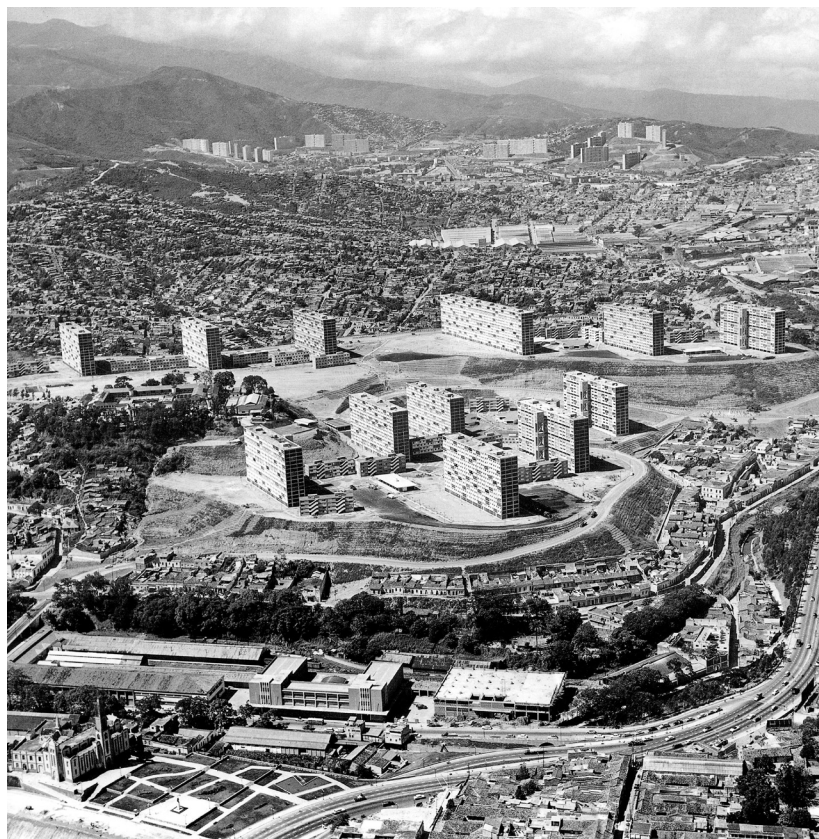


FIGURE 2. In this east-to-west aerial view from 1955, the newly completed Phase One of Unidad Residencial 2 de Diciembre stands out, consisting of Blocks 1 through 14 of Monte Piedad. In the background, pending demolition, are densely populated areas in what would become the Zona Central and Zona Oeste. Further west are the Pro-Patria superblocks. (Hamilton Wright)

slums as well as historic neighborhoods, Pérez Jiménez cleaned the slate of Venezuela's provincial past to make way for its urban future. In their clean lines and angular shapes, the superblocks—neatly arranged one behind the other—marked the triumph of order over the chaos that had increasingly characterized Caracas's unplanned growth. In its name and location, situated by the major symbols of social and political power—the presidency, the legislature, the military, and the church—the neighborhood and its working-class population represented the popular foundations of Pérez Jiménez's government. Here, in short, was the “material expression” of *perezjiménismo*.³

For Inés Oliveira the superblocks represented “a whole new way of life.” When she was 15 and her family arrived in Block 12 of the La Cañada sector of the 2 de Diciembre, they were typical of Caracas’s urban poor, forcibly moved from the crammed improvised housing that precariously hugged Caracas hillsides. Like many others, they left for their new home the night bulldozers razed what remained of their old zinc-roofed rancho. Fifty years later, Oliveira still recalled the exuberance of early life in the superblocks: “That for us was like a mansion. You know the conditions we poor people lived in? When we learned we were to be moved, no one slept from the happiness, the joy of it all. No more cockroaches, no more outhouses . . . My parents were ecstatic.” Despite the dust and the tight quarters (two bedrooms for eight people) that greeted them in their new thirteenth-floor apartment, Oliveira stressed, “that was so beautiful . . . If Pérez Jiménez hadn’t left, well, if he hadn’t been overthrown, there would be no ranchos in Caracas, because he dreamed of a beautiful Venezuela.”⁴ So it was striking that Oliveira was among those who took to the streets to celebrate Pérez Jiménez’s ouster.

At dawn on 23 January 1958, just weeks after workers laid the final slab on the neighborhood’s third and largest construction phase, Pérez Jiménez fled Venezuela on a plane bound for the Dominican Republic. His departure followed a volatile month that began with a failed coup attempt on New Year’s Day, several cabinet shuffles, an indefinite national strike, and violent street clashes between state security forces and Caracas residents. Finally, on 23 January, a junta comprised of young military officers formally seized power in the vacuum left by Pérez Jiménez’s departure. As Oliveira remembers it, at seventeen years old the self-admitted *saltamonte*⁵ “was one of those who shouted, ran through the streets, and got on a truck and yelled ‘Down with the government! Down with the government!’” The ten-year dictatorship was over.

Oliveira’s participation in the events of 23 January reveals the ambivalent relationship between Pérez Jiménez and residents of the superblocks he built to make concrete his government’s vision for Venezuela. No doubt the passage of time helps wash the past in comfortable shades. But Oliveira’s testimony reflects a complex, conflicted set of memories and emotions: a spirited appreciation for the man whose ouster she supported. In memorializations that followed Pérez Jiménez’s ouster, these complexities were largely lost. Returning from exile, political figures now cast Oliveira and others taking to the streets that day as central players in a narrative of popular insurrection by a people unwilling to accept tyranny in exchange for concrete goods, and ready

to support the promise of a democratic government, however ill-defined that promise remained. In press accounts, the neighborhood that once stood at the literal and figurative center of Pérez Jiménez's regime was now a backdrop to the coup. Press photos of the superblocks he had inaugurated with high fanfare just two years earlier now portrayed the site as emblematic of his downfall, high-rises dwarfing the crowds and tanks gathered in front of the Presidential Palace below. The very neighborhood that was founded as the symbol of Pérez Jiménez's new Venezuela turned on him to forge a new and again deeply symbolic connection with the national government. Henceforth, the 2 de Diciembre would be known as the 23 de Enero.

This chapter examines the complex social foundations of a neighborhood conceived, planned, and built to link urban popular sectors to the modern Venezuela state. Where at first the hundreds of photos that graced government publications, architecture journals, and press reports offered a gleaming portrait of a government committed to the wellbeing of its urban underclass, following Pérez Jiménez's ouster those same photos seemed more significant for what they lacked than for what they showed: scarcely any people. The buildings stood as monuments of political achievement, more to be admired than inhabited. This was perhaps the most revealing symbolic tie to Pérez Jiménez's government: whether grateful for their new housing or indignant at the dictatorship that made it possible, the opinions of people like Inés Oliveira and the thousands of others moved to the blocks hardly mattered. Symbols of the regime's popular foundations on the one hand, but effectively cast aside on the other, residents of the 2 de Diciembre held a contradictory place in the national imagination. This dynamic would become a central feature of the relationship between state and urban popular sectors in modern Venezuela, one that would follow from one regime to the next.

VENEZUELA'S "GREAT URBAN REVOLUTION"

"You have to keep in mind," says Juan Martínez to help explain conflicting attitudes toward Pérez Jiménez by residents of the 2 de Diciembre, "that we were in a dictatorship."⁶ And a particular kind of dictatorship, one that, after several decades of failed attempts by various governments to harness economic prosperity into concerted state policy, had turned oil wealth into massive construction projects aimed at moving Venezuela away from its provincial past and toward a modern and urban-based future. Martínez, a father of three, was

in his twenties when he first arrived in Block 4 in the neighborhood's Monte Piedad sector, part of the first of three phases of the project. He had come to Caracas as a child in 1935, seeking work opportunities in the capital following the death of Dictator Juan Vicente Gómez after 27 years in power. The Caracas that Martínez found was a city long held back by Gómez's provincial proclivities, though nevertheless on the cusp of dramatic transformation. Twenty years prior, a handful of oil wells had begun to sprout in Venezuela's arid northwestern plains, where petroleum seeped freely from the ground. Shell had installed Venezuela's first oil rig in 1914. But in the first decade of Gómez's dictatorship, Venezuela's economy remained tied to the fortunes of a coffee crop that since the 1830s had been a reliable if financially lackluster staple export.⁷ That Gómez's own power base hailed from Venezuela's coffee-rich southwestern Andes inhibited any serious changes to national economic policy.

But the post-World War I economic boom and the burgeoning prominence of internal combustion engines in Europe and the United States created a demand for oil that Gómez shrewdly exploited in negotiating land concessions and leases with British and North American corporations. By 1928, oil exports equaled three times the combined worth of all other Venezuelan exports, exploding from an annual production of 490,000 barrels in 1920, to 140 million in 1930.⁸ To appease coffee-planting elites, Gómez distributed revenues from oil concessions and rents through lucrative bribes; to check challenges from regions poorly favored under his "patriarchal autocracy," Gómez professionalized, modernized, and expanded the military, constructed Venezuela's first interregional road system, dispersed trusted Andean lieutenants throughout the national territory to enforce his orders, and made fast use of a vast network of spies that infiltrated all sectors of social life.⁹

In this climate, Gómez relocated Venezuela's capital to Maracay, a sleepy provincial city 60 miles west of Caracas. It was a personal choice born in part of his antagonism toward the Caracas elite—whom he regarded as a nuisance rather than a threat to his rule—and in part as a strategic play meant to subvert Caracas's growing prominence through a policy of neglect.¹⁰ Distrust for Caracas and its elites exposed deeper misgivings about urban life and culture, which Gómez viewed as "potentially revolutionary."¹¹ Yet, during the 1920s Caracas grew in political importance and size, an unintended result of the shift toward an oil-based economy. For one, the explosive growth of the oil industry replaced investment in coffee, depressing traditional coffee-growing regions and sparking peasant migration to cities.¹² As the nation's major urban

hub, Caracas proved a desirable destination for oil executives and became home to the industry's corporate offices, while rural migrants found work in the growing service sector of the city.¹³ From 1920 to 1930 Caracas's population nearly doubled, from 92,000 to about 175,000 residents. By the time of Gómez's death in 1935, 260,000 people lived in the city.¹⁴ Despite Gómez's efforts, then, the 1920s had set the stage for "Venezuela's great urban revolution."¹⁵

Still, even with efforts to institutionalize urban planning in the interwar years—for instance through the founding of a *Dirección de Urbanismo* (Urbanism Directorate) in 1938 and the unveiling of a *Plan Monumental de Caracas* (Caracas Master Plan) in 1939—early urbanization in Venezuela was more of a rudderless revolution. In the wake of Gómez's death political and economic elites agreed that Caracas would be Venezuela's main urban hub. And while they had formed part of the Gómez regime, neither of his immediate successors, Eleazar López Contreras (president 1935–1941) or Isaías Medina Angarita (president 1941–1945) shared Gómez's fear of urbanization. Instead they looked to exploit the capital's strategic "proximity to the centers of the civilized world" vis-à-vis other would-be South American competitors: Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Lima, and Bogotá.¹⁶ Yet neither commanded Gómez's power, ensuring that during this period the growth of Caracas would be debated in national politics rather than imposed by force.

For their part, the traditional elites of Caracas were committed Franco-philosophes, and had been since the late nineteenth century, when President Antonio Guzmán Blanco had tried to turn the capital into a tropical Paris.¹⁷ They favored investing oil revenue into building an ornate city that would mirror Parisian grandeur, envisioning broad tree-lined boulevards linking multiple city centers, where residential and commercial life would coexist. The city's emerging middle class also voiced a vision for their city. Made up largely of oil industry technocrats and engineers who identified with British and North American utilitarian planning methods, these new, modern middle classes emphasized the need to create a sense of urban discipline along axes of work, leisure, and sanitation, with a strong and unmistakable business hub.¹⁸

As planning debates unfolded, the population of Caracas continued to grow through the mid-1940s, drawing both from internal migration to the city and from postwar immigration from Europe. In the 1941 census, roughly 39% of Venezuela's population lived in cities. By 1950 that number had grown to 54%, marking the first time more Venezuelans lived in cities than in the countryside. As the country's largest city, Caracas experienced the greatest

growth: by 1950 the population in the capital had risen to nearly 700,000, up from 500,000 in 1945.¹⁹ But an official plan to guide Caracas's growth remained elusive. More and more, elites and middle-class sectors abandoned a city center that was becoming increasingly chaotic—the narrow colonial-era streets now filled with ever-expanding squatter settlements—establishing new communities in the old coffee estates to the east.²⁰ Rapid densification and increased segregation thus came to define the human and political geography of midcentury Caracas.

As the country's population changed, so did its politics. This period of major urban growth coincided with a short-lived period of democracy when the political party *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action) rose to power in 1945, affecting Caracas's social and political life for several decades. Founded in 1941 as a social-democratic alternative to the *Partido Comunista de Venezuela* (Venezuelan Communist Party), the leaders of *Acción Democrática* (AD) cut their political teeth under the Gómez regime. They drew on nationalist, anti-imperialist discourse to decry the dictator's concessions of Venezuelan subsoil to U.S. and European interests. They denounced the failure of the Gómez regime to distribute oil wealth across economic sectors, instead dividing the spoils among those in his milieu. But while AD differed with Gómez, the party shared the dictator's popular foundation in the countryside, taking up "Bread, Land, and Labor" as its banner and seeking to vindicate the peasantry through agrarian reform financed by redistributed oil revenues.

In 1945, AD leaders joined with a group of military officers to stage a coup and seize power, laying the groundwork for Venezuela's first popular elections. In the meantime, interim President and AD founder Rómulo Betancourt moved to "sow the oil" nationally, mandating a 50/50 revenue-sharing agreement with foreign oil companies and seeking to diversify Venezuela's economy by jump-starting long-abandoned agrarian sectors. In the process, AD cemented its support among the rural peasantry, still Venezuela's largest constituency in 1946: that year AD took 78% of the vote in Constituent Assembly elections, the nation's first contest conducted by universal suffrage; and in 1947, AD candidate Rómulo Gallegos won 74% of 1.2 million votes cast, to become Venezuela's first popularly elected president.²¹

In practice, *Acción Democrática's* focus on wealth distribution to the rural peasantry meant diverting already-limited resources and attention away from urbanization plans and projects in Caracas.²² Yet migration statistics showed that the prominence of urban popular sectors continued to grow. In November

1948, Colonel Marcos Pérez Jiménez and a cadre of midlevel military officers overthrew Gallegos in a bloodless coup centered in Caracas. What the coup revealed was a striking contradiction of Venezuela's first democratic experiment: a popular government, elected by an astonishing margin just nine months before, was overthrown without popular resistance.²³ Whereas AD had largely overlooked the political opportunities offered by the country's growing urban base, the new junta would channel oil wealth and state attention toward urban hubs, Caracas in particular. In doing so, the junta would powerfully show how urbanization had significantly shaped the future of national politics.²⁴

TARGETING THE URBAN LABYRINTH

Juan Martínez, who had moved to Caracas in 1935 at the dawn of Venezuela's urban revolution, came of age during a period characterized by shifting dictatorships and hectic growth. In 1948 he took a construction job and settled with his new bride in the Tiro al Blanco barrio at the foot of the mountain known as El Ávila, in north-central Caracas.²⁵ It was a neighborhood that well encapsulated Caracas's explosive growth in the 1930s and 1940s: a community made up mainly of provincial migrants. "[We started] with cardboard and zinc roofs," recalled neighborhood resident Francisco Suárez, a child at the time.²⁶ But as time went on "and a little money started coming in, we bought [cinder] blocks," eventually building, block by block, a four-bedroom, two-bathroom home for their seven-person family. Other houses in the community were two stories tall and had real foundations, according to Suárez—"and there were also red-tiled colonial houses." The Tiro al Blanco of Suárez's memory—a heterogeneous neighborhood—mirrored how the new military government that took power in 1948 saw Caracas: as a mix of traditional poor rancho housing amid more-sophisticated and -hygienic developments. For housing authorities, even a makeshift rancho could be seen as "part of a neighborhood," a community and constituency with political power.²⁷

Uncertainty about the new junta moved citizens in communities like Tiro al Blanco to organize. In 1948, the year Martínez settled in the neighborhood, he helped publish a weekly paper—*Laberinto*—billed as the "organ of the barrio" (fig. 3). Local business advertisements sponsored the publication and community members provided the content, everything from new features to literary fiction. In its inaugural issue, published on 30 April 1949, *Laberinto* included a story about local infrastructure needs, with a particular focus on



FIGURE 4. La Cañada as seen from Avenida Sucre in 1950: paved roads, red-tiled roofs, solid structures. Five years later, all would be razed to make way for Phase Two of the 2 de Diciembre. (Banco Obrero)

water. Poetry, birthday announcements, the first installment of a serial murder-mystery novel, and a profile and interview with a local *muchacha* from the community rounded out the issue. Later issues focused on initiatives organized through neighborhood associations in Tiro al Blanco. For example, a front-page article chronicled the formation of “water brigades,” made up of community members, to help ferry water from the area’s only spigot to individual houses, especially for those unable to make the trek.

Laberinto chronicles the emergence of a community consciousness among the urban poor of a booming city. Its pages tell the history of how local residents organized in order to attend to the needs of their community. It also reveals how daily life in the barrio built a sense of local solidarity and a unique neighborhood identity. It is a solidarity that many residents still remember with great nostalgia. Francisco Suárez, for example, recalled how the community helped a young couple arriving from the interior erect a house in a small lot in Tiro al Blanco. Similarly, Rafael Gutiérrez—who grew up in the La Cañada neighborhood just southeast of the Presidential Palace—remembered how “there was always someone” who looked after, and occasionally scolded, neighborhood youth on behalf of other parents. “There was no [formal] organization,” he observes, “but there was unity . . . and respect, a lot of respect.”



In addition to recalling a sense of community in the *barrio*, many also remember how invested community members were in the development of stable, beautiful homes. Rafael Gutiérrez's own family, he recounts, lived in a "very, very good house," explaining that "people back then worried about building properly." Mireya Maldonado, who also spent her youth in La Cañada before her family moved to the 2 de Diciembre, likewise described the neighborhood as filled with "good houses with foundations, pretty houses."²⁸ According to some, structures like La Cañada's iconic church proved so sturdy that they required dynamite to level (fig. 4).²⁹

It is of course difficult to confirm these testimonies. But they are significant for illustrating the gap between how residents and the government described working-class neighborhoods in the years immediately prior to the construction of the 2 de Diciembre. Martínez, Suárez, Maldonado, Gutiérrez, and thousands of others in Caracas's *barrios* recall neighborhoods with budding infrastructure and a community commitment to improve. What Pérez Jiménez and the military junta that took power in 1948 saw, however, were slums and obstacles to the city's progress toward modernity. For the junta, the same urban migration flows that had helped to generate explosive population growth in Caracas, coupled with grandly conceived but poorly implemented plans for the city in the preceding decades,³⁰ had littered the capital with thousands of what government

publications called “miserable ranchos” in and around the city hillsides, “generally [consisting of] one cardboard-walled room, wooden planks, and a zinc roof.”³¹ In fact, between 1941 and 1950, according to the census, the number of ranchos in Caracas had climbed from fourteen thousand to over twenty-eight thousand, fully 25% of Caracas households. Analyzing these trends, a team of planners and architects concluded in 1957 that Venezuela would need to build 78,500 residences per year for a period of twenty years in order to keep pace with existing housing shortages and projected housing needs.³²

These were staggering figures. For the junta, they offered an opportunity—one largely missed by the *Acción Democrática* leaders they had overthrown—to cement a popular base by attending to the needs of a growing urban population, especially around housing. Revisiting 1930s planning debates centered on Caracas, junta leaders favored functionalist schemes that promised “to mold and discipline the social body,” especially among working-class sectors in a capital whose rapid growth they embraced as a sign of progress and modernity.³³ In 1951, they charged the Banco Obrero (Laborers’ Bank) with developing a four-year National Housing Plan, Venezuela’s first effort to resolve its housing deficit.³⁴ The growth of the Banco Obrero (BO) mirrored Venezuela’s urban boom. Its primary function since its founding by Juan Vicente Gómez in 1928 was to develop affordable housing solutions for the nation’s working classes by building, adjudicating, and managing properties. Its first ventures during the Gómez regime were small in scope and scale, and focused mainly in the outskirts rather than in cities proper. In the 1930s, as elites debated the future shape of Caracas, the Banco Obrero made only minor interventions in housing construction in the capital. But by the early 1940s, as Caracas’s population began to explode, the Banco Obrero launched a concerted effort to attend to the housing needs of the growing urban working class.³⁵

In 1941 BO tapped Carlos Raúl Villanueva, then a rising star in Venezuelan architecture, to remodel El Silencio—“one of the worst areas of Caracas at the time, full of hovels and dangerous centers of vice”—into a residential complex of 850 working-class apartments and 400 commercial spaces.³⁶ Villanueva’s design boldly combined neoclassical, neo-Renaissance, and art deco styles into several four- and seven-story building blocks. But El Silencio’s key innovation lay in its view of the social function of the built environment. Villanueva’s design “introduced to Venezuela the new concept of spatial organization with the function of grouping families around a central recreational space to facilitate a more intense community life.”³⁷



FIGURE 5. 1952 pamphlet trumpeting “The Battle against the Rancho.” The caption at right reads: “This is how the first rancho was born. Built on the side of any which hill. In the middle—an ironic sign presumably for a client—an offer to sell, of doubtful spelling. Then came others. Built with boards [*tablas*], from which the original name of the barrio came [known as *Ciudad Tablitas*], they formed the first cluster of settlements.” (Banco Obrero)

By 1946, BO called on Villanueva to help lead its new Taller de Arquitectura del Banco Obrero (Architecture Workshop, TABO), aimed at generating ideas and projects to help tackle Venezuela’s housing shortage, especially in urban areas in Caracas and beyond. Though more aspirational than operational at its outset, TABO’s creation in the 1940s points to the slow but growing importance of urban housing development in the interwar years, which would reach its zenith under the military rule that followed the 1948 overthrow of Acción Democrática.³⁸ It was through TABO that the new junta turned its attention to urban Venezuela and its growing capital city after 1948; in turn, TABO leaders led the charge against unplanned growth and the perils it represented for a modern nation. As a TABO technical report on the issue stressed in 1954, “housing construction in [working-class barrios has] been completely anarchic and in many cases clandestine,” amounting to an imminent “threat” against “morals, health, and safety.”³⁹ The junta agreed, declaring a “battle against ranchos” (fig. 5) and selecting two slums for eradication and reconstruction, aiming to transform them into models for what a new Caracas would offer its burgeoning working classes.

The result was “a new world for Venezuelan workers” as two housing complexes were built in Caracas: Urdaneta, west of the city, and Pedro Camejo, in the north.⁴⁰ Unlike El Silencio, built ten years before with both function and aesthetics in mind, Villanueva’s new housing blocks were purely functional. They contained over 2,100 apartments in four-story blocks and single-story row units, and were equipped with sewer and electricity lines, roads, commercial space, schools, parking facilities, and recreational grounds.⁴¹ It was the community new and whole, pointing the way to a rational, scientific approach to urban planning. Together, Urdaneta and Pedro Camejo constituted “a positive conquest in the program of social action under way in Venezuela for the working classes,” and promotional pamphlets declared the two projects nothing short of victories in the battle against ranchos.⁴² More broadly, this battle was also a social one, stressing “modesty,” “sobriety,” “hygiene,” and “good taste” for the new residents. All told, “new habits, new experiences, and better opportunities to join modern social life, [were] now open to the Venezuelan worker as he [became] owner of hygienic and comfortable housing.”⁴³

The junta’s attention both to the social and the spatial functions of working-class housing was not, however, a resounding success for working-class people. Yes, the government needed to respond to Caracas’s growing housing crisis quickly and efficiently. And they were eager to attend to the needs of the urban working class, weaving them as never before into the fold of a modern Venezuela. But the urban working class was not new to Caracas. Existing popular-sector communities fit in poorly with the junta’s totalizing vision of a modern Venezuela when they were seen as being born not of planning but of circumstance. What the new functionalism of government housing projects provided was a uniform experience of modernity, one in stark tension with the socially complex, physically heterogeneous spaces that characterized many of the capital’s existing barrios.

For these communities, the tensions were “eminently political,” as Juan Martínez understood. “There came a time when the dictatorship, even though [*Laberinto*] was just a little sheet, a simple little sheet, that came out weekly, they told us we couldn’t publish it unless they saw in advance what it was going to say; and this was a newspaper that only this community saw!”⁴⁴ But it was not difficult to see why such “a simple little sheet” might rankle a government bent on modernizing the city. *Laberinto*’s focus on local infrastructure needs was a constant reminder of the chaotic origins of many of the city’s working-class barrios. And the circular’s promotion of a collective identity among

neighbors based on those needs challenged their ability “to join modern social life,” where basic needs should be taken for granted. If eliminating the city’s frenzied past and habits meant sacrificing the vibrancy of existing community life, such was the price of a modern, ordered future.

A SHOWCASE OF IDEALS, A CAGE OF EXPECTATIONS

“The first time I walked into this apartment I felt like I was in a cage unable to fly,” remembers Francisco Suárez, nine years old at the time. “My house [in Tiro al Blanco] had a yard where I played with marbles, with a kite, with a top. When I got [to the 2 de Diciembre] I felt like I was in an alley with no exit We lived at that time as though caged.”⁴⁵ By late April 1956, Tiro al Blanco was no more. In a little over two months Banco Obrero demolition crews, working alongside military personnel, razed the neighborhood to the ground. For some it was an opportunity to demand monetary compensation for their homes to invest in new properties. Others boarded trucks and traveled across town to the new superblocks where, as former residents of the now defunct Tiro al Blanco, they would become the first tenants of Unidad Residencial 2 de Diciembre. Suárez’s recollections of arriving in the 2 de diciembre likely accentuated his sense of entrapment as a child. But the fact that his negative memory lingered over the course of decades reveals a major contrast between the ideals that underpinned the project’s design and construction, and the way in which some residents came to experience, and remember, the new neighborhood.

The first years of the junta brought unprecedented national attention to urban planning and housing shortages. Those efforts would reach new heights under the rule of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. After maneuvering for four years to sideline rivals in the military junta he helped run, in 1952 Pérez Jiménez looked to consolidate power and grant his rule legitimacy by calling for a new constitution, drafted by representatives elected by way of Venezuela’s first popular vote since 1947. Set for 1 December 1952 and billed by his supporters as a proxy referendum on Pérez Jiménez’s presidential ambitions, the elections revealed instead what historian Ramón Velásquez has called Venezuelans’ “confidence in the vote as a weapon.”⁴⁶ Voters flocked to the polls: 1.8 million of them, half a million more than in 1947. It was an especially surprising, and troublesome, turnout for Pérez Jiménez, who expected the kind of low participation that might have facilitated electoral fraud if necessary. Instead, as radio stations prepared to announce the defeat of his *Frente Electoral Independiente* (Independent Electoral Front, or FEI)

party, Pérez Jiménez shut down broadcasts and strong-armed election authorities into announcing manufactured results awarding FEI an overwhelming majority over center-left *Unión Republicana Democrática* party (Republican Democratic Union, or URD, founded in 1945) and the center-right *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (Committee for Independent Electoral Political Organization, or COPEI, founded in 1946).⁴⁷ On December 2, a handpicked electoral board formalized the new electoral results granting Pérez Jiménez, at last, undisputed power over Venezuela.⁴⁸

Losing at the national level may have surprised Pérez Jiménez. But losing in Caracas was especially remarkable, and among popular sectors, even more so. After all, these were the areas where the junta had invested most of its efforts at modernization. It was also where “FEI had undertaken an intense co-optation campaign and had distributed cash, blankets, and zinc boards hand over fist.”⁴⁹ For the new undisputed President, the results offered a valuable if seemingly contradictory lesson: ridding Caracas of slums and moving their inhabitants to modern housing might be in the popular interest, but it would not ensure popular support. To modernize Caracas, and all of Venezuela, he would need to push through his vision with no expectation of popular support. As he noted years later: “There must be a leader who shows the way without being perturbed by the necessity of winning demagogic popularity.”⁵⁰

But even if his words indicated “no intention of trying to become a popular politician,” Pérez Jiménez’s policies revealed a project aimed at improving the lives of most Venezuelans.⁵¹ In the five years following his 2 December 1952 coup, Pérez Jiménez undertook the most expansive, expensive, and ambitious public works campaign in Venezuelan history, combining private investment and state spending in a plan that he would formally call the “Nuevo Ideal Nacional” (New National Ideal, or NIN). In development since before his 1952 coup,⁵² but officially unveiled in 1955, the NIN aimed to “rationally transform the physical environment and improve the moral, intellectual, and material conditions of the nation’s inhabitants.”⁵³ It was a sweeping vision for a new Venezuela. Fueling it were nearly US\$550 million—US\$(2014)5 billion, adjusted for inflation—in annual revenues derived almost exclusively from the shared profits of oil exports. Like regimes before, that of Pérez Jiménez would promote development across the nation—notably through highways, agricultural development, and investments in steel and chemical industries. But unlike with prior governments, it would be Caracas—Venezuela’s “national show window”—where the new Venezuela would rise.⁵⁴



FIGURE 6. On 2 December 1955, surrounded by ministers and onlookers, General Marcos Pérez Jiménez (fourth in uniform from left) inspects newly completed buildings in Monte Piedad, formally inaugurating Venezuela's New National Ideal. (Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación)

Already, public housing construction in the preceding years had spurred continued migration to Caracas. By 1955, the capital reached one million inhabitants, doubling its population over the previous decade. Many had come from Europe, part of the 373,000 people who immigrated to Venezuela after World War II.⁵⁵ New neighborhoods such as Pedro Camejo and Urdaneta, as large and innovative as they were, proved insufficient to house the new arrivals. Pérez Jiménez's New National Ideal, by contrast, promised ambitious solutions that would not only keep pace with growing housing demands, but eliminate housing deficits altogether. On the third anniversary of his 2 December 1955 coup, just two months after formally unveiling his NIN, Pérez Jiménez stood at the foot of the new 2 de Diciembre housing project amid crowds of onlookers and stared at his vision grandly realized (fig. 6).

It was the first stage of a planned four-stage project, conceived to settle the rancho issue once and for all by incorporating several urban housing solutions the Banco Obrero had experimented with over the previous five years. Like

Pedro Camejo and Urdaneta, the 2 de Diciembre aimed to build not just housing but a fully integrated community with support systems such as schools, parks, and commercial areas. But unlike previous working-class housing projects—characterized by high-density, low-altitude buildings—the centerpiece of the 2 de Diciembre was the high-altitude, high-density superblock. Introduced by TABO architects in 1951, in concept the superblocks consisted of freestanding vertical communities, or *unidades vecinales*, modeled after Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, France.⁵⁶ The BO inaugurated Venezuela's first superblock in 1954, in southern Caracas. Designed for middle class residents, the Cerro Grande superblock rose fourteen stories high and held 144 apartments in 3- and 4-bedroom options. It was equipped with terraced duplex apartments, rooftop walkways and greeneries, a cross-ventilated design, and community and commercial services at both roof level and on the first floor, including daycare and laundry facilities.⁵⁷

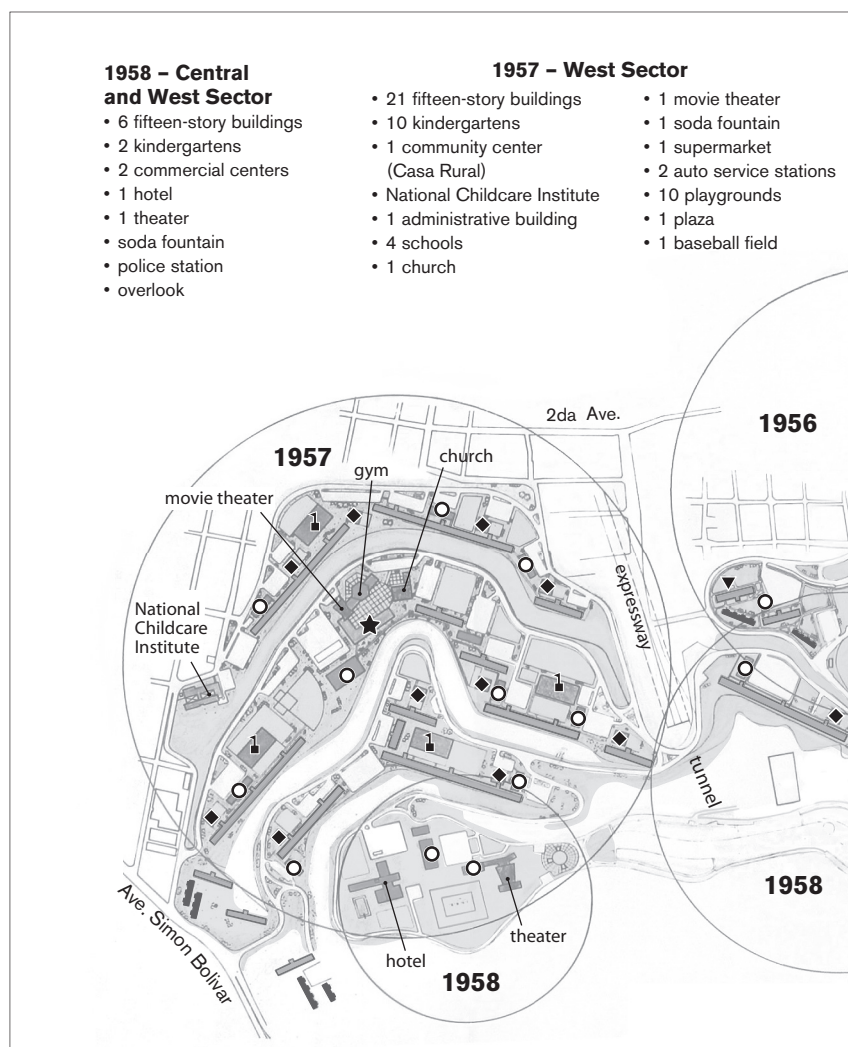
However, for the 2 de Diciembre, aimed at maximizing residential space and facilitating reproducible construction, architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva and his TABO team envisioned a more functional design, to efficiently house more residents. They drew on the high-altitude, high-density concept of Cerro Grande, but eliminated various community-building additions. For example, they cut duplex options and added a floor to bring the total number of apartments per building to 150. By reproducing the superblocks and streamlining plans, architects designed even-more-massive structures by joining together individual superblocks into buildings of 300, 450, and even 520 apartments.

The resulting design created the ideal community envisioned by the NIN, radically transforming physical space while imbuing it with deeply charged symbolic meaning. The project's colorful master plan was dramatic: over 9,000 apartments distributed among 56 superblocks and 40 four-story blocks in a space covering three square kilometers, divided into four phases scheduled for successive inaugurations, on 2 December 1955, 1956, 1957, and 1958 (map 5). Its initial phase consisted of 13 fifteen-story superblocks—including two buildings coupled to create a single 300-apartment structure—along with 26 four-story blocks, accommodating a combined total of 16,500 residents. In the neighborhood's next stage 19,000 residents would occupy 16 superblocks and 9 four-story blocks. Plans for the third stage, the project's largest and most ambitious, called for the construction of 21 superblocks—including three triple blocks of 450 apartments, and an experimental 520-apartment building—and 9 four-story blocks, in all able to house 29,000 people. In the fourth

and final stage, scheduled for completion in December 1958, 5 more superblocks would house nearly 5,500 residents.⁵⁸ Each apartment was fully linked to the electric grid, to the city sewer service, even to television broadcasts—first launched in Venezuela in 1952. Movie theaters, parks, plazas, athletic fields, gymnasiums, churches, schools, clinics, police and fire stations, a civic center, commercial spaces, gas stations, and administrative offices completed the neighborhood.⁵⁹ Seventy thousand people housed in Venezuela's largest public housing project embodied Pérez Jiménez's New National Ideal. And at its heart—fittingly represented by a uniquely shaped purple structure in the center of the master plan—would stand a sculpture “whose central figure represents Venezuela, surrounded by three bodies who symbolize the intellectual, the soldier, and the worker.”⁶⁰

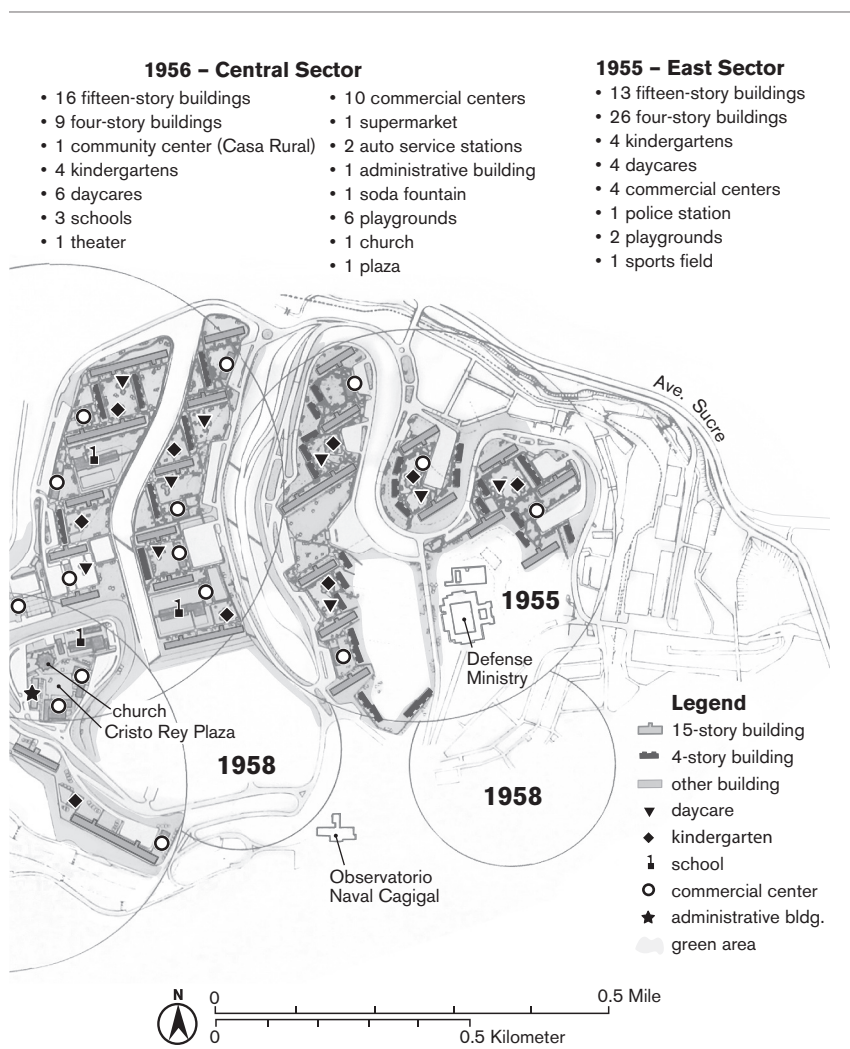
These figures help capture the scale of the neighborhood itself. But the master plan for 2 de Diciembre reveals a great deal about the project's broader place within the nation. For instance, the Ministry of Defense was symbolically located on a hill overlooking the neighborhood's first phase and the Presidential Palace. Also, a new superhighway connecting Caracas and its airport, thirty miles north behind Cerro El Ávila, was scheduled to be built between two phases of construction. Travelers to Caracas would thus enter the capital through the 2 de Diciembre and its massive superblocks, strategically positioned to face the highway. It was a project seamlessly integrated into a broader vision for an ideal Venezuela, helping transform the capital, as one foreign correspondent wrote in 1955, into “a bursting city overhauling itself so fast that the visitor who returns only once a year can easily get lost. Under clouds of dust, half pulverized rubble and half cement, new super boulevards crash through old slums, and lavender-painted buses soon roll along them.”⁶¹

The image of boulevards crashing through old slums was especially symbolic. Unlike Urdaneta, Pedro Camejo, and other housing projects, construction for the 2 de Diciembre eliminated not only ranchos but well-established neighborhoods such as Tiro al Blanco and La Cañada. This took place despite the formation of a 1954 presidential commission tasked with assessing the impact of the projected neighborhood on the very communities whose lives it aimed to transform.⁶² Still, by year's end, work on what became the 2 de Diciembre was under way with the demolition of the areas the study assessed,⁶³ as crews made no distinction between ranchos and “well-constituted and traditional” barrios.⁶⁴ In what became the 2 de Diciembre, Pérez Jiménez consigned ten barrios for demolition, covering roughly three square kilometers,



MAP 5. Unidad Residencial 2 de Diciembre (1954 Plan). (Banco Obrero; cartography by Ben Pease)

making use of a 1947 law enabling expropriation “in areas considered essential for the security or defense of the Nation,”⁶⁵ further underscoring both the neighborhood’s strategic location and its significance for the new Venezuela. Some of those barrios retained their names in the new neighborhood, even if not captured by the project’s master plan. Beneath the otherwise nondescript “Sector Este,” for instance, lay Monte Piedad, a name that would endure among



residents of the 2 de Diciembre's first phase, as would La Cañada, razed to make way for the eastern half of the "Sector Central."

Beyond the fray and excitement of the project's inauguration, signs of life remained strikingly absent. The buildings that Pérez Jiménez first inaugurated, the ones shown gleaming against a cloudless sky in government photos taken on 2 December 1955, sat largely completed but vacant, not to be assigned

and inhabited for several months. Banco Obrero publications, too, which in promoting previous housing projects had advertised dramatically staged photos of working-class families before and after moving to new facilities, in the case of the 2 de Diciembre were limited to aerial photographs aiming to capture the neighborhood's scale. Before-and-after images looked to highlight the transformation of the landscape as it existed prior to superblocks—laden with ranchos or otherwise haphazardly arranged single-family homes—and following the neighborhood's construction.⁶⁶ Meanwhile photo spreads in trade journals and magazines offered striking pictorial arrangements of the new neighborhoods and featured images of the superblocks' polychromatic façades, detailed shots of the areas' commercial facilities and schools, and effusive prose about the project's achievement. The only things missing were people, vehicles, commerce—anything that might evoke life.⁶⁷

LIFE AND PUNISHMENT IN THE EARLY BLOCKS

"That was like lightning, from one day to the next," observes Francisco Suárez. On a Monday around late March 1956, according to Suárez, BO personnel arrived in Tiro al Blanco and by Friday the neighborhood lay razed. At the beginning of the week BO census takers met with each family, determining the number of residents per household, work status, and family income. "Then they assigned you [an apartment]," remembered Priscilla de Carrero, who together with her husband and young daughter had recently moved to an aunt's house in Tiro al Blanco. "They told you how much you needed to pay up front and how much you would pay per month." The choice was stark: either take cash for their house, or move to the superblocks; staying was not an option. For Carrero, the prospect of moving to the new superblocks was a curse: "I used to go by [them] and say, 'Who's going to live in those matchboxes?' because they really looked like matchboxes. Then an aunt told me, 'Watch out, God will punish you.' 'No, God won't punish me because I don't like them.' We even looked for a house, but where we looked there was nothing I liked, so that's why I said [to my husband] José, 'We have no choice but to move.'"⁶⁸

On the day of the move, according to Juan Martínez, "the first thing they did was to tear the roof down from your house, [so] there was nowhere to go." Then, according to Lorenzo Acosta (fig. 7), also of Tiro al Blanco, trucks arrived at 90-minute intervals. "They told you to be ready, because if you're not going [to the 2 de Diciembre] you have to leave, you either go there or it's up to you

to see what you do So we had to get ready for when that truck arrived; we would have everything all set outside, right outside so we would leave more quickly.”⁶⁹ As soon as the trucks began to leave, bulldozers razed the remaining walls, leaving behind the wreckage of torn houses and lives sacrificed. Recalled Francisco Suárez: “After they razed the roof of my house . . . I saw my mother sitting on a rock, crying because it had been her life’s work. I saw her and turned away, even as a child. In other words, it affected me too.”⁷⁰ In a week’s time, said Juan Martínez, “that was completely cleaned out. There was nothing left. All the debris went into a sort of landfill.”⁷¹ Only when they arrived in Monte Piedad did the new residents learn what apartments they were to move into. Meanwhile, BO personnel checked all belongings to ensure everything entering the new apartments, from furniture to clothing to appliances, met proper standards. “You couldn’t bring *cachivaches* [worn-out or dilapidated belongings] here,” remembered Martínez, “a side table missing a leg, none of that People and objects going into the place had to be in perfect condition.” Once they passed inspection, residents were escorted aboard elevators to their new apartments, handed keys, and ushered into their new lives.

The flood of details that suffuse these testimonies, recalled decades after an event that spanned at most a week in people’s lives, illustrates the trauma of relocation, thus suggesting a tension between the abstract ideal and the lived experience of early life in the 2 de Diciembre. While on one hand the nature and pace of the relocation process exposed the authoritarian nature of Pérez Jiménez’s power, on the other hand it revealed an unflinching commitment to his national goals, unencumbered by what he had brazenly dismissed as “the necessity of winning demagogic popularity.” It was an unflinching process: those not meeting minimum income requirements received enough compensation to return to the interior or had to find housing elsewhere; those who barely qualified were offered rental contracts that gave the BO ultimate control over their housing situation should they prove unfit to continue in the superblocks. Meanwhile those with more-stable employment and income received a purchasing option, a lease arrangement by which residents paying monthly fees could, after 15 years, purchase their apartments outright from the BO.⁷²

The totalizing quality that characterized these operations is important to stress because it helps explain why residents, even while benefiting from new, modern housing, still harbored lingering feelings of entrapment that would eventually blossom into outright rebellion. This is especially the case given how regimented life was in the early days of the superblocks. New residents worked

FIGURE 7. Lorenzo Acosta in 2004, in the living room of the Monte Piedad apartment where he and his family were relocated in 1956 from Tiro al Blanco. He displays his army enlistment certificate from 1943. (Photo by the author)



to adjust to their new environment, and at times to make the new environment adjust to them. Young people, in particular, struggled to adapt. Prohibited from riding the elevator without their parents, children like Francisco Suárez, who in Tiro al Blanco had charged small fees to ferry water for area families, once in the 2 de Diciembre took to charging families to help them move into their apartments. Meanwhile Suárez and other youths found work taking lunch to the construction workers in other parts of the rapidly rising neighborhood.

New regulations and rules affected adults, too. "If you wanted to have a party," recalled Rafael Gutiérrez, whose family the authorities relocated from La Cañada, "you needed to get a permit at a Banco Obrero office that took care of that for this area . . . Everything was checked. It wasn't like I'm going to have a party because it's my house, no, no. They took neighbors into account, not bothering your neighbors, whether or not the neighbor wanted it. There were rules." According to Lorenzo Acosta any new appliance residents purchased likewise required special permits from the BO before being allowed into the apartments. The BO "almost had police powers," noted Juan Martínez. "Yes, they had watchmen around here; if by chance you dropped a piece of paper, then they would go and come up [to the apartment] and take you in [to jail]." For some residents, like Priscilla de Carrero, the trouble proved more

than it was worth, and they would withdraw into their apartments. At times, three months would pass before she saw her neighbors.⁷³

Between 1955 and 1957, experiences like these would happen again and again in areas like La Cañada as construction moved forward on the other phases on the 2 de Diciembre, razing existing neighborhoods to make way for the new Venezuela. Work on the neighborhood took place in six-month cycles. From December to May construction slowed significantly before commencing again at breakneck speed around June.⁷⁴ On one hand this peculiar practice made possible, even necessary, expeditious construction rates. "We worked two shifts," said César Acuña, part of a construction team of nearly 700 workers building the neighborhood's largest phase in 1957. "Here we worked from 7 A.M. to 7 P.M.; we worked day and night."⁷⁵ Though paid for overtime, "they were a hard twelve hours, *a ritmo caliente* [at a hectic pace]." Francisco Chirinos, too, remembered working "twelve-hour shifts, day and night, even on Saturdays,"⁷⁶ which allowed building one 15-story, 150-apartment superblock in as little as 42 days.⁷⁷ On the other hand, it also helped to generate bottlenecks in housing distribution, resulting in frustration by those forced from their homes in June only to face months of delay beyond December for their new homes.⁷⁸

But life did thrive, in part because old community networks persisted and at times grew stronger as the same population from a single street in Tiro al Blanco or La Cañada moved en masse, often to the same building, sometimes to the same floor. That was the case with Juan Martínez and his family, who ended up in Block 4 of Monte Piedad, across the way from their old neighbors in Tiro al Blanco.⁷⁹ Over time, memories of "the sacrifices we made over years to build our homes," of "the houses one built through the sweat of one's brow, through one's sacrifice," gave way to a sense that "we were getting a good residence, comfortable, dignified, with all the services," said Suárez. "One of the things that bothered people was that discipline, that imposition" of life in a community where residents were being not only relocated, but through more direct forms of social control reeducated to become the lifeblood of a new national ideal. And still, "you start to think about it and in a certain way [Pérez Jiménez] had a sense of national pride" that he looked to impart.

Martínez's conflicted memories are significant because they illustrate a major thread of social and political life in the neighborhood during those early years: though residents grew to appreciate the new space, they also remained disdainful of the authoritarian management experienced in 2 de Diciembre. In this sense, Pérez Jiménez achieved his goal: to create a symbol of his vision for modern

Venezuela. But the underside of this political project remained a palpable sense of social control, felt not in grand ideological terms but in the everyday experiences of residents inhabiting this new national symbol. Both strands were reflected in the 2 de Diciembre, not just in its form but also in the lives of its residents. This tension between modernity and political authoritarianism came to define the Pérez Jiménez government and political culture in Venezuela in subsequent years. At the end of his presidency, the very neighborhood Pérez Jiménez had built would take center stage in his political downfall.

“¡ABAJO EL GOBIERNO!”

When Pérez Jiménez’s government fell on 23 January 1958, Inés Oliveira was on the front lines of demonstrations celebrating his ouster. “I didn’t know much about politics,” she admitted, “but you get carried away in the moment.”⁸⁰ Oliveira’s enthusiasm was in part a release. In the days preceding the coup, residents of the 2 de Diciembre neighborhood found themselves under siege. “My mother forbade us from setting foot outside our apartment,” Oliveira recalled, and for good reason. In a final show of force by Pérez Jiménez’s government following nearly two months of political unrest, the streets below were “*como monte*, full of police disguised as military.” On 22 January, Oliveira and friend Carlos Germán Rivas were at the plaza behind Block 14 to watch as a group of police assembled. Then a shot rang out: “I’ll never forget it . . . my hand was covered in blood.” The bullet had hit Carlos in the right eye, knocking him unconscious and leading Oliveira to believe him dead.⁸¹ A crowd of fellow residents gathered around her. “That was a revolution . . . people were going to lynch [the policeman], tear his head off.”

But the revolution came on 23 January, when a civilian-military junta took power following Pérez Jiménez’s hasty flight from Caracas, on a plane bound for the Dominican Republic, where military strongman Rafael Trujillo awaited. That morning Oliveira, unbeknownst to her parents, boarded a truck, shouted “*¡Abajo el gobierno!*” and proceeded to the downtown headquarters of Seguridad Nacional, Pérez Jiménez’s domestic-security force. “We saw all manner of body parts there, heads, feet, breasts, penises.” It was the kind of scene that exposed an ultimately unsustainable relationship between prosperity under Pérez Jiménez and the price his government demanded in return. “With Pérez Jiménez there was no hunger,” Oliveira reflected decades later, “but there was pain in many homes.”⁸²

Pérez Jiménez had received powerful notice of that unsustainable relationship nearly two months before. On 15 December 1957, despite earlier claiming “no intention of trying to become a popular politician,” Pérez Jiménez had again tried to win popular legitimacy by holding a plebiscite on his rule. Of course much had changed in the five years since the fraudulent elections that first helped him consolidate power in 1952. Since then, Pérez Jiménez’s government had invested enormous sums modernizing Venezuela. Caracas in particular was virtually unrecognizable from the patchwork of colonial homes, hillside slums, and scattered high-rises that marked the city through the 1940s. Now, superblocks peppered the landscape and superhighways snaked through mountains; grand parks, gleaming skyscrapers, and major boulevards abounded. It was the “golden rule” of an oil-financed dictatorship.

But while golden, it was still a “rule,” aimed at changing, ordering, and rigidly regulating not just space, but daily life, as accounts from residents of the 2 de Diciembre dramatically illustrated. Now, the contradictions of a modernizing dictatorship—bent on improving the lives of many by force, not consent—brought forth another rebuke at the polls for Pérez Jiménez, who, as in 1952, again declared himself winner. This time, though, he did so without even a pretense of electoral transparency, simply announcing results before all votes were cast. In the days after the plebiscite, Pérez Jiménez’s brazen manipulation of a vote he had himself called for sowed discontent even among his strongest base of support—the military. On New Year’s Day, an Air Force contingent launched an unsuccessful bid to oust the President, staging a gun battle with government loyalists over the skies of Caracas. Though it failed, the move galvanized political sectors that had organized clandestinely for years to challenge Pérez Jiménez in the open. Public pronouncements from labor, religious, and even business sectors calling for the President’s resignation mounted quickly in the first weeks of January. On 21 January, political tensions reached a fever pitch as labor and business sectors joined forces to call for an indefinite general strike, in the process coordinating with dissident military officers in a final push to oust Pérez Jiménez.⁸³

As public opposition grew, so did repression, and with special intensity in the showcase neighborhood of the New National Ideal. The 2 de Diciembre’s proximity to key institutions of state power—the Presidential Palace and the Defense Ministry chief among them—once thought to symbolize the state’s proximity to the nation’s working classes, now stood as a potential threat, particularly as authorities quickly lost grip on control. Reports of agitators in

the 2 de Diciembre neighborhood in the days leading up to the coup contributed to a climate of confrontation. Ligia Ovalles of Block 31 in the Zona Central, then 25 years old, recalled how in the run up to 23 January “subversive flyers” would appear in the morning, sometimes wet with dew, strewn throughout the neighborhood. “Those flyers would explain to you why this or that was happening. During the general strike [begun on 21 January] they said we had to get rid of the dictator because there was no freedom of expression . . . they told you to get ready, to buy candles, matches, food.” She continued: “You had to read them and get rid of them, because if suddenly they raided your house and if they found [flyers], you went to jail.” Meanwhile, the neighborhood’s broad streets—once a marker of urban modernity—were now a strategic asset for the government, allowing easy movement of troops, which deployed en masse. By 20 January, “you couldn’t pick [the flyers] up, because the military took over this place . . . All those hallways were full of military, armed. They ordered us, with megaphones, not to turn on the lights, or else.”⁸⁴

Growing police and military presence also stoked internal tensions in the neighborhood, blurring the lines between what residents had earlier perceived as rigid enforcement of rules for daily life, and outright surveillance. “You had to be careful; you didn’t know who was who, who might be watching.” One incident in particular continued to amaze Ovalles. “One man here was a reservist. He had a bunch of bullets. And two soldiers ran out of ammunition. So he took bullets to them. Later, when Pérez Jiménez fell, the yelling started. He had to leave at dawn one day, because they were going to lynch him—the people. They said ‘We saw you giving them bullets. Watch yourself. You won’t leave here alive.’” Reflecting on the story, Ovalles recalled thinking: “That was wrong. . . . How are you going to give bullets to people who were against you? Didn’t he think of his children, his family?”⁸⁵

Cornered, Pérez Jiménez had reportedly ordered his security forces to “shoot to kill.”⁸⁶ In the 2 de Diciembre, the violence proved especially pronounced. Days later, press accounts reported on what they called “a kind of massacre against the defenseless inhabitants” of the 2 de Diciembre, whose residents “from the start,” according to *El Universal* newspaper, “demonstrated great strength and unflinching valor in the face of events.”⁸⁷ News reports likewise made special mention of the neighborhood’s dead. Of ninety-three fatalities recorded in Caracas between 11 January and 25 January directly attributable to the events surrounding Pérez Jiménez’s overthrow, twenty-one—including nine under the age of eighteen—died in the 2 de Diciembre.⁸⁸ Of those, eighteen

died on 22 January (see Appendix). They included Aura Figueroa de Ferrer and her one-year-old child, gunned down as she peered out from her apartment in Block 5 of Monte Piedad,⁸⁹ and brothers Luis and Douglas Leal, two and six years old, respectively, killed by wounds to the head and lung in Monte Piedad.⁹⁰

Instead of neutralizing political opposition, this type of repressive response had helped to fuel it among residents of the 2 de Diciembre. As Ovalles noted reflecting on the revolution: "There were those who were against the revolutionaries, but most were in favor, because you heard too much about what those people [in the Pérez Jiménez government] did, the tortures . . . Simply put [*en dos platos*], there was no freedom."⁹¹ Even people like Inés Oliveira acknowledged that Pérez Jiménez's rule, despite significant material benefits, had sacrificed popular support by restricting opportunities for popular participation. This helps explain why, as Pérez Jiménez fled from Caracas at dawn on 23 January 1958, Oliveira and thousands of other residents of the 2 de Diciembre took to the streets to celebrate his ouster. Some of them flocked to Avenida Urdaneta just east of the neighborhood, where tanks controlled by insurgent troops had positioned themselves between the Miraflores Presidential Palace and the Presidential Honor Guard barracks across the way. It was an especially dramatic scene—captured in what became one of the most emblematic images of that day (fig. 8). In the background, several 2 de Diciembre superblocs tower overhead. In the foreground insurgent crowds and tanks converge in front of the Presidential Palace. That the palace remained just out of view marked the promise, after years of dictatorial rule, of a less centralized form of government, where the kind of people filling the streets could openly and more directly participate in the exercise of power.

The image is important because it helps explain how a neighborhood that had occupied a central place in Pérez Jiménez's vision for a new Venezuela—both as a symbol and in the landscape itself—would come to serve a similar function in the new political period about to unfold. It was evidence of the kind of urban support for a change of government that had eluded Pérez Jiménez's own coups, and which would prove a vital political goal for the 23 January coup. The following day, Rear Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal took to airwaves for the first time as president of the junta that had overthrown Pérez Jiménez the day before, congratulating Venezuelans for condemning "the vices of yesterday," and celebrating their "enthusiasm for the political and moral values" that would shape the new government.⁹² On 9 February a crowd of thousands in Caracas greeted Rómulo Betancourt, leader of Acción Democrática, as he returned to



FIGURE 8. On 23 January 1958, tanks and crowds gather between the Miraflores Presidential Palace (out of view to the left) and the Honor Guard barracks (at right). In the background, Blocks 11 through 14 of Monte Piedad. Nestled in the hills on the left, behind the Nuestra Sra. del Perpetuo Socorro Church, the Ministry of Defense. (Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación)

Venezuela after nine years in exile: "The past revolution would not have been possible without a resistance begun [ten years ago], showing Venezuelans, whether in jail or in exile, that the passion for liberty was alive, exploding in magnificent fashion now."⁹³ Years later, diplomat José Luis Salcedo-Bastardo would write of the events of 23 January 1958: "[They] represented the victory of and for ordinary Venezuelans who rose up in unified rejection of tyranny."⁹⁴

While the dictator fell, his superblocs remained, giving rise to the question of what would become of a place so closely tied to the ousted regime. Within days, the 2 de Diciembre "went from being a symbol of the dictatorship

to a symbol of the democratic victory against it.”⁹⁵ In narrating the events in the ensuing days, the media reported how the “fury unleashed upon residents of that populous neighborhood . . . gave rise to a proposal asking the *Junta de Gobierno* to change [the neighborhood’s] name from 2 de Diciembre to 23 de Enero.”⁹⁶ Later accounts reported the area’s new moniker as “21 de Enero,” when the national strike had begun.⁹⁷ The confusion well reflected the spontaneity surrounding the process by which a revolution took a name, and a symbol. However, in March, a neighborhood delegation presented the Caracas city council with a petition with over a thousand signatures, formally requesting the neighborhood be henceforth known as 23 de Enero, “since Caracas has gotten used to the new name.”⁹⁸ A year later when the Banco Obrero published its official history celebrating 30 years of public works, the entity that built the superblocks captured the new meaning behind what had by far been its most significant capital investment: the new name, read its history, was quite simply “a reminder of the date when a heroic popular gesture overthrew Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s dictatorial regime.”⁹⁹

Upholding popular participation, and in particular the participation of residents of the superblocks, as a primary factor contributing to Pérez Jiménez’s fall illustrated the new government’s need to harness popular support at the service of an uncertain political project. At best, this was a project that had only tangentially looked to coordinate with the urban populace around its plans for a new government.¹⁰⁰ Pérez Jiménez had sought to make the 2 de Diciembre and its residents into a symbol of his government’s popular foundations. But that symbol had turned into an illusion. Now, as the new 23 de Enero, it would once more honor both popular strength and the promise of a political ideal, only this time at the service of a new democratic order. A new narrative now promised an era of “liberty,” anchored in the discourse of revolution, and built around the image of an active and mobilized citizenry at its forefront. Constructing the events of 23 January 1958 in these terms would prove prophetic. Endowed with a new opportunity to speak out, to make demands, to participate, residents of the superblocks brought forward needs and grievances both new and longstanding. But just as it had under Pérez Jiménez, a tense interplay between support and opposition would characterize the relationships between the new government (and future governments) and the people living in the neighborhood renamed to honor the founding date of the revolution.