

Caracas, ciudad de secuelas

Prácticas de cuidado después de la emigración y el colapso

Gzyl, Stefan

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Caracas, City of Aftermath. Caretaking Practices After Emigration *and* Collapse

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Stefan Gzyl

Technische Universiteit Delft



This article examines the caretaking practices of vacant domestic spaces amid a migratory crisis and generalized collapse. Caracas is conceptualized as a 'city of aftermath', where the material residues of modernity are reconfigured in response to the logic of crisis and the needs of migrants, re-signifying spaces and extending their life beyond the conditions of their production. The text is centered on the figure of the caretaker. Based on interviews, site visits, and photography, the article examines the daily routines of Carlos, who looks after more than twenty apartments in Caracas. His work is entwined with migrants' trajectories and local needs, generating new economies and support networks around the maintenance and adaptation of vacant spaces. In this way, caretaking practices offer clues for a reading of the city that transcends progress/decline oppositions and their respective imaginaries: the new and the ruin.

Keywords

middle class

crisis

ruin

maintenance

repair

Stefan Gzyl—Ph.D. Candidate in the research group Borders & Territories at Delft University of Technology. Architect, graduated from the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of Universidad Central de Venezuela, with a Master in Architecture from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. He is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of Universidad Central de Venezuela, and co-director of Incursiones, a platform for public space and architecture. His work as a researcher focuses on analyzing how crises and conflicts shape contemporary spatial production, with particular emphasis on the Venezuelan collapse. Recent articles include 'Managing Migrants' Spaces After Emigration: Caracas, Departure City' (*Bitácora Urbano-Territorial*, Vol. 33, Issue 2) and 'Translating Practices: Cultural Interference between Europe and Venezuela in the Work of Five Architects' (with R. Avella; *OASE*, Issue 115). His projects with Incursiones have been published in the catalog *XII Bienal Iberoamericana de Arquitectura y Urbanismo* (Fundación Arquía, 2023) and *Citizen-Led Urbanism in Latin America. Superbook of Civic Actions for Transforming Cities* (IDB, 2022).



Caracas, City of Aftermath. Caretaking Practices After Emigration and Collapse

Stefan Gzyl

Technische Universiteit Delft
Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment
Architecture Department
Delft, Netherlands
s.gzyl@tudelft.nl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8492-3173>

THE VENEZUELAN CRISIS AND THE EMERGENCE OF CARE PRACTICES

For over two decades, Venezuela has been involved in a complex conflict characterized by economic decline, political authoritarianism, social upheaval, violence, and the collapse of infrastructure and services. Since 2014, the accelerated collapse of living conditions has triggered an unprecedented migratory crisis. Over 7.7 million people (25% of the population) have emigrated (Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes, 2023).¹ This exodus has opened new migratory routes, created demographic pressures in host countries, and led to a significant diaspora. However, the issue also has a local dimension, associated with what emigration leaves behind.

In Caracas, one of the consequences of massive emigration is the excess of empty or underutilized domestic spaces. However, these spaces have not been abandoned. On the contrary, the need of those who emigrate to preserve them has triggered practices around their protection and transformation. These emerging dynamics occur at the intersection of emigration and collapse, creating new relationships between migrants and local actors, supporting migratory processes, and expanding transnational exchanges beyond the unidirectional flow of remittances. Likewise, these vacant spaces have been incorporated into the everyday dynamics of the city, serving as a support for new economic activities, expressions of solidarity, and forms of encounter. Faced with an exodus that cuts across Venezuelan society, migrant housing has undergone transformations that adapt to various needs and opportunities—from providing bedrooms for children in poor areas or generating economic opportunities, to maintaining social status by renting housing in affluent neighborhoods at low prices.

In this context, the article focuses on the caretaking of apartments left behind by the Caracas middle class. It examines an emblematic figure in present-day Caracas: the caretaker, who embodies a series of practices involving maintenance, repair, occupation, and transformation of empty spaces. Specifically, the text describes the daily routines of Carlos, who takes care of more than

¹ The figure provided by the organizations network Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes (R4V) is the most commonly used to quantify Venezuelan emigration. However, this estimate does not take into account populations in transit, those in the country illegally, or individuals with dual nationality, so the actual figure could be higher.

twenty apartments, framing his actions within a complex scenario in which caretaking practices and values intersect with emigration, the need for survival, the crisis-specific 'ways of doing' (Mbembe & Roitman, 1995), and the dynamics of the city. What is exchanged, and how? How are the challenges of the crisis coped with? How does care facilitate new modes of occupying space? What is preserved when we maintain something? "Is it the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it, or some 'larger' entity?" (Graham & Thrift, 2007, p. 4).

The article addresses these questions to elucidate the role of caretaking in a crisis context, its role in migration processes, and its impact on the transformation of the city. As part of ongoing research, the in-depth analysis of the spatial and urban implications of emerging practices in the city's transformation goes beyond the scope of this article, remaining open to future inquiries.

The article is organized into four sections. First, the methodology and urban context are described. In a theoretical section, the research is framed within the literature of maintenance and repair, Caracas is conceptualized as a 'city of aftermath', and an approach to the crisis as an everyday experience is provided. Subsequently, the caretaking routines are described from Carlos' perspective. Finally, a reflection is offered, situating caretaking in a unique reading of the city, where the extensive built heritage of the nearly extinct middle class becomes subject to new dynamics, extending its life and that of the city, and opening new horizons of possibility.

METHODOLOGY

The material for this article was collected in two stages. Over a year, between 2021 and 2022, remote research collected bibliography, social media data, real estate figures, and testimonies through interviews with architects, NGO personnel, and municipal authorities. This phase identified a broad range of practices emerging amid the crisis, such as the protection of children and the elderly, the clandestine transformation of vacant houses, new forms of habitation, or the caretaking of homes left behind. In November 2022, a three-week fieldwork focused on the latter practice. Five caretakers were interviewed about similar aspects of their work, including their daily routines, their relationships with owners and neighbors, and the spatial changes resulting from caretaking. It was crucial to delve into the everyday experience of collapse and formulate the city's reading proposed from there. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded.

In Venezuela, there is a fear among migrants that their properties might be invaded.² This influences the relationship with the caretaker (invariably, a trusted person), the scope of their work (from representing an absent owner to simulating occupancy of the property), or preferences for a tenant profile (foreigners renting for short periods). Knowledge of this fear and its transfer to the caretaker

² In Venezuela, the tenancy law protects the tenant, making eviction very difficult, even when there has been a breach of the contract (such as non-payment). Numerous cases of invasions and illegal occupations have been documented over the years. See Cedice: Observatorio de Derechos de Propiedad, 2023.

influenced participants' recruitment and field research. In three cases, the caretakers were acquaintances, which facilitated the initial contact, willingness to participate, and the possibility of visiting and documenting spaces. In the other two cases, participants were contacted through intermediaries. This did not hinder detailed descriptions of their work during interviews, but prevented access to the spaces they care for, as they claimed it would jeopardize the owners' trust. Carlos, who had already contributed to the first phase of the research, agreed to participate again. Once in Caracas, it was possible to accompany him to eight apartments over several working sessions. These visits allowed to observe his routines, delving into the topics of analysis, and documenting spaces through photographs and architectural surveys.

URBAN CONTEXT

There are no official figures on emigration from Venezuela, and its exact territorial distribution is unknown. Additionally, amid the national collapse, the central government has managed to maintain a certain level of service operation in the capital (at the expense of other regions), turning Caracas into a destination for people escaping more precarious conditions in other cities.

Carlos takes care of apartments located in the municipality of Chacao, the smallest and most socioeconomically affluent in Caracas. This sector developed around the old town of Chacao, which was absorbed by the city when it began its expansion in the 20th century. Many of the residential neighborhoods comprising Chacao were developed by private developers who urbanized and subdivided large estates. These new 'urbanizations' became the preferred destination for the emerging urban middle class during the second half of the 20th century (González Viso et al., 2015, p. 58), whose housing was financed by credit programs amid sustained economic growth. Years later, this middle class would spearhead emigration (Freitez et al., 2021, p. 34; Lafuente & Genatios, 2021, p. 27), leaving behind immense material wealth.

Due to its location and relative safety, Chacao is attractive to consular offices and international organizations that have established local offices during the humanitarian emergency. The factor has driven an increase in the real estate market in the area, accentuating its status as an enclave with housing and businesses aimed at a public whose purchasing power exceeds the national average.³ The majority of Carlos' tenants are foreigners residing in the city for short periods. Others are young professionals or families who have come to Caracas from other parts of the country.

The apartments under Carlos' care are in buildings constructed between the 1950s and 1980s. In Chacao, the vacancy rate reaches fifty percent.⁴ Both factors, along with the loss of purchasing power and issues with public

³ According to the ENCOVI survey, by the end of 2022, the richest decile earned individual monthly incomes of US\$553, while the poorest decile barely earned US\$7.10. See Freitez et al., 2022, p. 43.

⁴ Venezuela's last census was conducted in 2011, and there are no updated official data. The figure provided by Carlos aligns with estimates from other caretakers and the calculations of interviewed municipal authorities, who gathered information through surveys of residents.

services, contribute to the deterioration of these structures. This is reflected in out-of-service elevators, water supply problems, unlit hallways, and deteriorated facades.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At the beginning of 2023, Caracas was experiencing the consequences of a brief but intense economic recovery. This situation was intertwined with a severe political, humanitarian, and migratory crisis resulting from the debacle caused by falling oil prices and rampant corruption. These issues had been preceded by years of economic prosperity that followed the republic's re-foundation and a radical political change. These events, in turn, followed a turbulent decade in the 1990s, when the long-standing state-driven modernization project wavered amid social upheavals, coups, and so forth.

This sequence, experienced as a series of inaugural episodes, political turns, and new opportunities accompanied by "discourses that are nothing but a constant beginning" (Pinardi, 2013, p. 62), had concrete manifestations in the city and its architecture, perpetuating the myth of Caracas as an ever-new city (Hernández, 2012), driven by an ambition for permanent renewal (Torres, 2015): a 'demolitionist' city that constantly knocked itself over (Cabrujas, 2012, p. 25). Conceptualizing Caracas as a city of aftermaths implies a perspective contrary to the prevailing narratives and collective imaginaries, focusing not so much on the manifestations produced *by* or *for* each of these inaugural moments, but on what they leave behind. Specifically, it entails analyzing how the residues of this perennially renewing impulse are reconfigured by practices that respond to current and changing needs. In a context of emigration and collapse, managing vacant spaces allows for the adoption of modes of action that operate on the residual as "epistemic and experiential reality" (Mattern, 2018), revealing not only infrastructural decomposition but also cracks in the foundational narratives upon which modernity has been built.

The notion of 'aftermath' is associated in the literature with post-collapse states of decomposition and rupture, where maintenance and repair displace innovation as a paradigm of economic production and social reproduction. The significance of maintenance and repair lies not so much in the production of novelty from a material perspective but in the capacity of these practices to preserve a certain order and extend human values (Graham & Thrift, 2007; Jackson, 2014; Mattern, 2018). For Steven Jackson, "repair occupies and constitutes an *aftermath*" (2014, p. 223). In this relationship, repair transcends practical considerations and takes on social and historical dimensions due to its ability to articulate new connections among actors and bridge two 'worlds'. Repair is a way of acting on the world that does not restore it to its original state, but opens the door to a new order,

“growing at the margins, breakpoints, and interstices” of systems in a constant state of decomposition and rupture (Jackson, 2014, p. 223).

This reference to margins and interstices is crucial, as it conceptually links maintenance and repair practices with approaches to contemporary inhabitation that seek to transcend the opposition between progress and decline, accounting for a complex situation where seemingly contradictory conditions and discourses coexist. In her analysis of Visaginas, a Lithuanian city planned around a Soviet now-defunct nuclear power plant, Leila Dawney (2020) identifies practices that give meaning to existence through appropriations and transformations of material remnants, outside state policies, challenging the logics of deterioration and ruin. For Dawney, the continuity of existence in this environment is a form of resistance and survival that introduces an ‘afterlife’ (2020, p. 42) to a failed modernity project. On the other hand, anthropologist Gastón Gordillo has conducted a critical assessment of ruins in rural environments in Argentina, where the material remnants of multiple periods lose their historical specificity as they are incorporated into everyday dynamics. The practices examined in this article are precisely oriented toward resisting ruin, understood as the crystallization of a past condition without present life (Gordillo, 2014, pp. 8-9).

These practices make the reevaluation of discourses and imaginaries in present-day Caracas possible. The crisis in Venezuela has given rise to a specific genre of ‘ways of doing’ (Mbembe & Roitman, 1995): improvisations, experiments, and agreements aimed at overcoming, resisting, or benefiting from a precarious environment. The consolidation of political authoritarianism, the destruction of job sources, the disintegration of the social fabric, censorship, corruption, and the collapse of infrastructures have pushed the Venezuelan population to a state of survival. As Paula Vázquez Lezama (2019) proposes, this condition offers an entry point for understanding the present-day country. For said author, “Venezuelans live and conceive themselves as survivors in different ways” (Vázquez Lezama, 2019, p. 112). Other research has identified ‘political survival strategies’ in reference to coexistence agreements reached by vulnerable populations in contexts of armed violence (Zubillaga et al., 2019). Both works acknowledge the creative dimension of survival as the ability to produce strategies that ensure the continuity of existence. However, the spatial dimension of these strategies has not been directly explored by these investigations. Thus, the care of apartments allows for studying how the survival strategies that shape everyday life become spatialized.

This article argues that survival intersects with care, not so much by compromising values such as trust or interdependence, but as an added layer that potentially makes its understanding more complex and richer (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 10), considering care in everyday situations where affections and responsibilities towards people and objects are intertwined with basic subsis-

tence needs. The care practices examined in this article occupy this ambiguous space: they operate outside professional and institutional spheres, bypassing fiscal controls, with a sense of both commitment and opportunity, transforming spaces left behind according to the interests of absent owners and the logics inherent to the crisis.

THE CARETAKER

The caretaker is a character that cuts across society, since his or her existence signals the collapse of state structures and legal frameworks related to employment and housing, as well as the boundaries between the formal and informal, the local and transnational. Moreover, the care of domestic spaces has become a scene for professional reinvention and is part of an economic and social ecosystem that has emerged in response to the void left by emigration. These practices extend far beyond homes; they include everything from personal objects and libraries to plants and pets, mobilizing resources and creating transnational support networks. As seen in Carlos' case, caring for apartments involves maintenance, protection, repair, adaptation, and changes in use. Each of these activities entails specific and differentiated actions in material and spatial terms. Furthermore, his work generates local employment, is integrated into neighborhood support networks, and creates spaces for new audiences that have settled in the city amid the crisis.

In this section, the text exposes the multiple dimensions of the caretaker's work, observed over several days as Carlos opened, closed, watered, cleaned, supervised, waited, and negotiated in the apartments he cares for. Conversations that started in one apartment could be interrupted by a phone call or the urgency of reaching the next destination, where a painter awaited, or we needed to coordinate water rationing schedules. As the dynamics inherent to the routine and the city shaped the interaction, the described themes emerged.

New Cycles

Carlos arrived in Caracas in 1991 to study architecture, and during his training, he became involved in the world of film and culture. Later, he studied photography and became the coordinator of the Centro de Investigación y Estudios Fotográficos (Center for Research and Photographic Studies). "This cycle of managerial and artistic work had a closing due to the political situation and the crisis," he tells us. "The moment coincided with the departure of family and friends, and marked the beginning of a new cycle." The apartments Carlos takes care of belong to his family and social circle. "My work is based on recommendations. I am a reference here, and people look for someone with my profile," he explains, referring to his managerial skills, developed over years of cultural management.

The Apartment of the Diaspora

Carlos lives in the apartment of an exiled family. At the entrance, washing machines and microwaves are stacked, waiting to be repaired or installed. A gridded shelf organizes numerous sets of keys. “Welcome to the apartment of the diaspora,” he says, pointing to libraries, archives, and art collections. “These objects, left behind due to their dimensions, are gradually being taken out [of the country] or stored in warehouses.” The apartment is crammed with books, paintings, sculptures, and designer furniture that need maintenance or use while awaiting their final destination. In the master bedroom, the walls are decorated with black-and-white photographs by a renowned artist, and a Chaise longue LC4 peeks out from under a mountain of clothes. The secondary room serves as a storage space for linen (sheets, towels, curtains, etc.) from all the properties. The apartment is simultaneously a residence, archive, storage room, and operations center.

Figure 4: The apartment of the diaspora. Libraries, personal items, and artworks fill Carlos’ apartment. Photograph by the author (fieldwork in Caracas, November 2022).



Bonds and Exchanges

The responses that have emerged to address the deterioration of public services include private alternatives and new forms of collaboration. In addition, management and maintenance tasks that were once the responsibility of manage-

ment companies are now handled directly by condominiums, which communicate through chats and collect payments in cash. This collapse is generating new relationships. Carlos explains:

I'm on the condominium chats of each of those buildings. I have to stay attentive to what's going on. That involves getting to know each other and participating. Sometimes they request money for unforeseen events or bonuses for employees. If there's an electrical failure, I recommend an electrician. Inevitably, bonds are formed.

I ask him about the challenges posed by the crisis. "Solving our daily life is an endeavor. You must make an effort for the simplest tasks," he explains and gives an example: "To do laundry, I have to be at home when the water arrives. You get used to it, but it's not normal. It's precarious." Water shortages in Caracas have led to a proliferation of survival strategies at multiple scales, from secondary storage tanks to a market for tanker trucks, and more recently, the digging of wells to extract water from underground sources.⁵

⁵ For more information on the topic, see Observatorio Venezolano de Servicios Públicos, n.d.

Regarding his relationship with apartment owners, Carlos comments: "It's a matter of trust. As the property caretaker, I have to stay on top of things. Wear and tear are normal. If there's a problem, I like to inform them when it's already resolved." Sometimes, maintenance needs must be negotiated. "Some owners are aware that the property requires constant investment, and their apartments are in better condition," he explains. "I can postpone some tasks, but at some point, I tell them, 'We need to paint, change the linens'." Carlos' job implies several aspects. "In addition to maintenance-related tasks, I manage and look for tenants. Each task has its demands. A pipe or a heater breaks, and the emergency needs to be addressed." I ask him if this happens frequently. "Not frequently, but it happens. There are twenty apartments, so there's always something to do. Trying to prevent damage requires constant supervision." I ask if he has a local team to support him. "I have a handyman, whom I need daily. Now and then equipment maintenance is required, so I generate jobs for third parties." Carlos sees his work as a way of taking care of those who left and helping those who stayed.

Archaeology of Modernity

Our conversation continues in an apartment that Carlos is renovating for rent, in a building from the 1950s designed by Klaus Heufer, a German architect who arrived in Venezuela in the post-war period. The apartment belongs to several siblings who need money to cover their father's medical expenses. "It's interesting," says Carlos, "people leave the country for economic reasons, but once abroad, they expect the country to provide them with income."

Figure 2: Carlos gives instructions to the painter. Photograph by the author (fieldwork in Caracas, November 2022).



The property is in poor condition and needs to be painted, locks changed, and leaks repaired. A rickety cabinet needs to be restored. “This piece of furniture is a family heirloom, and they want to restore it,” Carlos adds, giving instructions to the locksmith and painter. As we walk around the place, Carlos stops in front of a lattice and admires the details of the metalwork. I ask him what aspects of his work he enjoys. “Recovering a space fills me with satisfaction,” he replies. He cites this apartment as an example. “The living room was flooded, and I had to go to the upper floor to locate the drainage. It was a work of archeology of modernity, of righting wrongs.”

Making Room

In the next apartment, Carlos takes photos of a piano and sends them to a potential buyer. His cell phone has become his primary work tool for managing repairs, selling furniture, paying bills, receiving international transfers, and interacting with owners, tenants, and neighbors. He then waters the plants and changes the linens. A tenant has just left, and he needs to prepare the apartment for the next one. In this space, the furniture, decoration, live plants, and a large library reveal a permanent occupancy. Carlos clarifies that what is visible represents only a small



Figure 3: In front of the double enclosure to control light and ventilation. Photograph by the author (fieldwork in Caracas, November 2022).

part of the owner's belongings. "People left with the idea of returning, leaving the house set up," he comments. "When renting, I have to organize and store many things." In this case, the maid's room serves as storage space, where objects and books are stacked on improvised shelves. "Moving libraries always involves negotiation. People don't want their books touched and protect them zealously, but when renting, you have to make space," Carlos adds.

The apartments under Carlos' care are rented through Airbnb, making his work more profitable but also more demanding. Those who use this platform have high expectations and demand a level of attention similar to that of a hotel. "Lights must turn on, there can be no leaks, everything must work. It's a constant maintenance job," explains Carlos.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined caretaking practices amid a migration crisis and widespread collapse by investigating the daily work of Carlos, who maintains the domestic spaces of Venezuelan migrants. The empirical findings described above underscore the need to engage in a dialogue with the theoretical framework and make methodological adjustments. The figure of the caretaker, as a 'trusted' person,

Figure 4: In some apartments, certain rooms are turned into storage spaces that house the owners' belongings. Photograph by the author (fieldwork in Caracas, November 2022).



highlights the absence of a legal framework protecting private property. During the fieldwork, the insecurity and mistrust that mediate interpersonal relationships posed a challenge, as recommendations from third parties and institutional endorsements were not enough to establish trust. Since the existence of a personal bond is a condition for accessing the spaces under study, building this connection must be considered part of the research methodology, with the responsibilities and opportunities that it entails.

The theoretical section has alluded to the creative dimension of survival in relation to the strategies that make the continuity of existence possible amid collapse. As shown by the case study, caretaking demonstrates the spatialization of survival in two ways that, although intimately linked, are worth examining separately.

Firstly, survival manifests itself in agreements, exchanges, and expressions of solidarity that emerge amid the crisis, from maintaining common areas to repairing facilities and contributing to medical expenses. As a framework of action, survival prevents interpreting caretaking as a mere 'turning to the other' with generosity and selflessness, as the caretaker not only represents the interests of absent property owners but also assumes the collapse on their behalf, exposing themselves to exhausting daily experiences. This forces the caretaker to connect with support networks operating at other scales, and whose exchanges go beyond practical aspects. These actions exemplify what AbdouMaliq Simone calls the infrastructural dimension of the human condition, in which a "complex combina-

tion of objects, spaces, persons, and practices” makes economic and social continuity possible in the absence of formal frameworks (Simone, 2004, p. 408). Amid the collapse, these caretaking infrastructures allow us to interpret the notion of survival in a broad sense, encompassing everything from the economic subsistence of caretakers and migrants, to the durability of a material heritage. Care expands human relationships and extends the life of spaces beyond the conditions that gave rise to them; it is both survival and self-preservation.

Secondly, survival is spatially revealed in the physical adaptation of apartments and buildings to accommodate new uses or address service failures. Rearranging spaces, dismantling libraries, safeguarding valuable pieces, and installing water tanks are actions that have a dual orientation: protecting heritage and extending its use. Both facets occur simultaneously: one makes the other possible. This simultaneity overlaps multiple temporalities and forms of occupation in the same space. Thus, caretaking positions itself as a form of negotiation (Graham & Thrift, 2007, p. 4) between fundamentally different conditions, making disruptions and continuities between them visible.

Taking care of apartments reprograms the city from material pre-existence, leveraging available human infrastructures. Not producing ‘novelty’ is precisely its contribution, allowing for a critical assessment of the spatial transformation processes that define present-day Caracas. From this premise, the possibility of a *culture of care* emerges not as an opposition between extremes, but through the acknowledgment of their entanglement. This culture of care can take shape from the margins, relying on the exchange of resources and knowledge, giving rise to actions that bring about incremental changes. In this context, care acts as an antidote to a double threat: abandonment and the constant pursuit of novelty. **D**

Figure 5: Libraries filled with books from the original inhabitants demonstrate an overlap of different modes of occupation. Photograph by the author (fieldwork in Caracas, November 2022).



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