

Caracas *MetroCable*: Bridging the Formal/Informal City

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Caracas, Venezuela, is located some 1,000 m above sea level, in a 20km-wide valley – a megalopolis of 800 square kilometers, home to nearly six million people. To the extent that the rest of the world knows Caracas, they associate it with Venezuela's staggering economic growth, its membership in OPEC, the machinations and manipulations of its leadership. This is one Caracas. But Caracas is two cities: the formal city of tall buildings, gated homes, enormous wealth, and private transportation, and then there is the informal city. The latter, sprawling to the east, covers an area four times larger than the city's 1950s metropolitan boundaries and is home to some one million families. Much of this informal city of densely packed, ramshackle structures clings to Caracas' steep mountainsides. Planned and built almost exclusively by the residents themselves, these *barrios* have no streets in the conventional sense, no paved roadways; people move around on foot, along pathways established by habit, and up and down steep stairs. To the extent that there is a transportation *system*: it is pedestrian. Barrio-dwellers do not own cars.

Since petrol is cheaper than water in Venezuela, it is hardly surprising that formal urban development has favored the private automobile. The program of highways was laid out in the late 1940s by none other than Robert Moses, then New York City's chief planner and master builder. Today, Caracas' freeway system has come to resemble that of Los Angeles in its effect: the arbitrary and irreversible separation of entire communities from one another.

It is possible to visit Caracas – indeed, to spend considerable time there – and remain unaware of the barrios. They are, to adapt an expression of the architect Peter Eisenman, present in their absence from the daily life of the formal city. They are also absent from any presence on Caracas city maps.

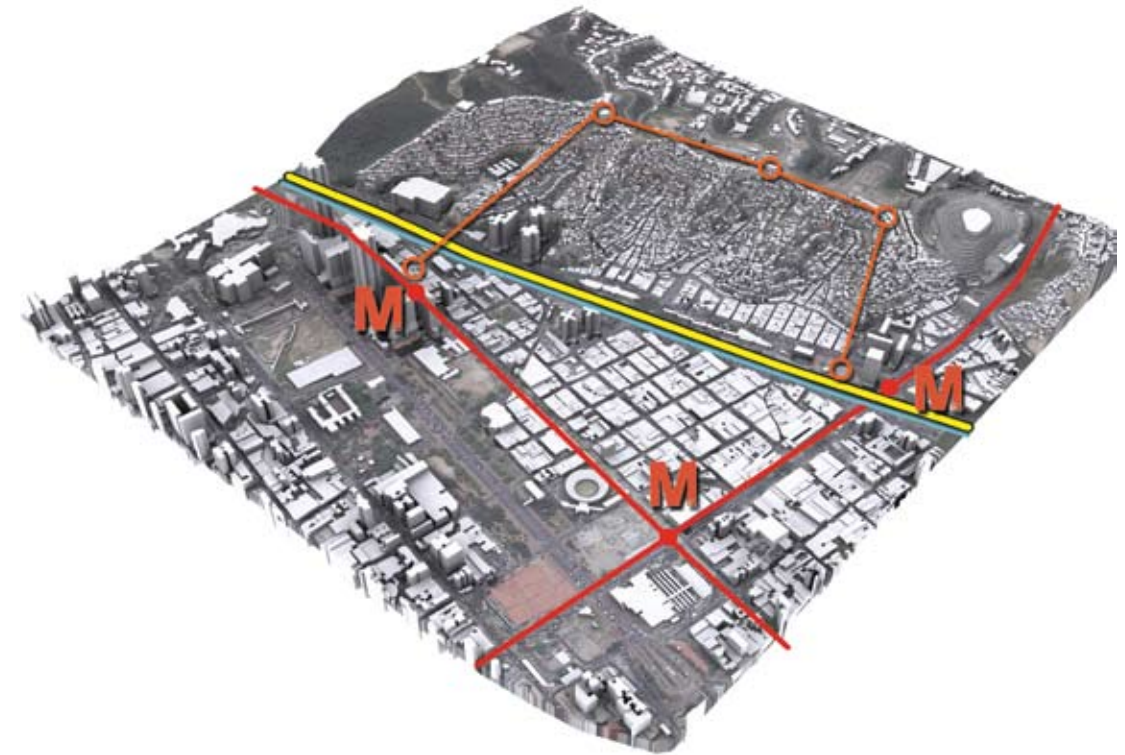


Fig. 1: Info-graphic map showing how the *MetroCable* connects the informal city with the formal public transport system (Barrio San Agustín, Caracas).

Not the Brave New World

In recent years, the visibility, if not yet the circumstances of the barrio-dwellers, has begun to change. Following the uprisings of 1989, constitutional reform produced a new legal structure enabling barrio-dwellers to participate actively in the public sector and to influence formal government and its public policies. Coupled with other, even more revolutionary changes – not least of these the new information-sharing technologies – enfranchisement brought new ways of thinking to the barrios, whose occupants have gone, as they themselves describe it, from resistance to action. They are increasingly unwilling to cede complete authority and responsibility to politicians and *experts*.

In this climate, the Urban-Think Tank (U-TT) has been working for some years now. Our premise from the beginning has been to work with residents of the barrios, specifically with their informal but well-established leadership, to discover their needs and wishes and, with them, to devise solutions that are in every sense sensible. And it is in this climate that a government transportation scheme for San Agustín crumbled in the face of fierce resistance from the residents of that barrio.