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# **Clashing Power-Geometries:** **geographic thought and the transformation** **of centrality in Caracas**

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# Clashing Power-Geometries: Geographic Thought and the Transformation of Centrality in Caracas

Ryan Centner

**Abstract:** Contributing to inquiries into the geographies of theory, this article examines the vicissitudes of creating a “new power-geometry” in the urban environment through physical and social interventions in the center of Caracas, Venezuela, where the state elevated Doreen Massey’s axiomatic geographical concept into its revolutionary (“Bolivarian”) program in the late 2000s. Although not formulated for direct practical application, Massey’s notion was embraced by Hugo Chávez to enact measures and promote popular initiatives that would replace inherited structures of deep inequality in Venezuelan society. Focusing on the urban scale, the paper draws on fieldwork in the capital that surveyed Bolivarian projects of place-making to show how power-geometry was invoked as part of a new urban agenda intended to be both radical and *popular* (“of the people,” in Spanish). This is not, however, a straightforward utopian project; it is tied up with competing interests and clashes with the Caraqueño landscape constructed under earlier regimes with priorities and economic scenarios that were vastly different. There are also clashes with emergent, competing visions (alternative – sometimes reactionary – power-geometries) at odds with Bolivarian policy and practice. By focusing on new social housing in central Caracas as part of the Great Venezuela Housing Mission [*Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela*], the article highlights the intractable ways bricks-and-mortar interventions are caught up in clashing power-geometries, creating environments that transform centrality but illuminate the quandaries of applying critical geographical thought in policy, and the limits of revolutionizing the city – a project that has been prominent in numerous, politically dissimilar Latin American cases.

**Keywords:** power-geometry; geographies of theory; Massey, Doreen; revolutionary urbanism; built environment; Venezuela

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## 1. Introduction

*One of the many impressive aspects of the Bolivarian revolution is its active and explicit use of “ideas.” ... It is utterly invigorating to be in a situation where ideas really matter.*  
(Massey 2008b, 496)

Two towers rise vertiginously above a complex of massive buildings already soaring well beyond most of the Caracas skyline. Their hundreds of meters of windows and metallic cladding gleam under the Caribbean sun, yet are pocked by decades-long decay and disrepair in 2015. Still, their presence is imposing, even dizzying on first glance from near their base on the valley floor. This is *Parque Central* (Central Park), not actually a park at all, but an assemblage of structures originally crafted for high-income residences, offices, and hotels in the 1970s (Violich 1987, 141-143). These towers were the tallest in all of Latin America for nearly a generation, granting the complex an impressive scale that symbolized Venezuela’s prowess, rooted in oil wealth – an icon of what Fernando Coronil (1997) labeled the “magic” of the Venezuelan state, and was certainly an exclusive space. Yet in the mid-2010s, among a labyrinth of mezzanines and brutalist flourishes, Venezuelans who would have once been unwelcome because of their modest clothing, and possibly the color of their skin, are now present in abundance: moving between shops, chatting on benches, listening to *reggaetón*, canoodling in corners. Parque Central is still part of central Caracas’s monumental landscape, surrounded by other grand constructions – wide avenues, plazas, parks, hotels, theaters, and government buildings – built in the 1950s-1980s, coalescing as a showcase of modernist grandeur and petroleum-exporting largesse (see Dembo et al. 2012; Hernández de Lasala 2015; Blackmore 2017). But most of these, also, are now used by a noticeably vaster and poorer public than when first established. These have become spaces for popular leisure and work, but also significant sites of housing and political symbolism since the early 2000s. Such a transformation has been an experiment in making the Venezuelan capital a new kind of urban center, accessible to and increasingly inhabited by “the people,” including the Venezuelan masses once dwelling only in more distant, precarious, stigmatized areas. Officially, this urbanism is “revolutionary,” and part of the state’s aims of forging “a new power-geometry” as a reconfiguration of space and power relations in line with the Venezuelan revolution’s political ideals. This article considers the geographies of theory in which this experiment has taken place, and what the experience of converting geographic thought into urban practice can

help us understand about the dilemmas of interpretation and implementation in physical form amid a politicized, transnational circulation of ideas.



Figure 1: Towers of Parque Central, with Plaza Bellas Artes in foreground – where a “grand fair of the people’s economy” is permanently installed. Photograph by author, 2015.

Nestled in a valley on the edge of the Caribbean that channels development in a mostly lineal form, the Caraqueño landscape is marked by spectacular architectural installations from decades of petroleum-exporting largesse which contrast with expanses of self-constructed housing, known locally as *ranchos*, blanketing much of the steep surroundings. The Bolivarian revolution spearheaded by Hugo Chávez (President of Venezuela, 1999-2013) sought to rupture such unequal terrain through interventions to broaden the benefits of Venezuelan resource extraction and cultivate bottom-up improvements. Pivotal in this break has been Chávez’s explicit imperative to create a “new power-geometry,” borrowed directly from the work of late British geographer Doreen Massey (1993; 1999). By considering the urbanization of this notion in Caracas, we gain lessons about how this idea has traveled and features of its use, living on well after both Massey (1944-2016) and Chávez (1954-2013).



Figure 2: Map of Venezuela within Latin America, showing Caracas near the Caribbean coast. Source: GoogleMaps 2019.

Over the last decade, growing attention to the geographies of theory (Roy 2009; Jazeel 2011; Livingstone & Massey 2014; Livingstone 2019; Craggs & Neate 2020), as well as the afterlives of geographic thought (Blomley 2008), has considered how these have interacted with “power-geometries of knowledge production” (Sidaway et al 2016, 783). These contributions point to the geographically uneven influence and diffusion of ideas, as well as disciplinary histories, following geopolitical hierarchies of presumed prestige or even “civilization,” often with the consequence of obfuscating the production of knowledge in the many parts of the global South, or undermining its circulation. More than redirecting our focus to other sites and forms of knowledge, this scholarship opens the way for studying the complicated, formative itineraries of geographic thought as it travels and transforms. While there have been extensive studies of “policy mobilities” (McCann and Ward 2011) in Latin America, with important focus on the travels of “best practices” and “lessons learned” from Bogotá to São Paulo (Caldeira and Holston 2015; Maclean 2015; Jajamovich 2016; Montero 2017a; Montero 2017b; Porto de Oliveira and Pimenta de Faria 2017), there is a particular opportunity in Latin America to look at the circulation of theory and its implementation – including what has been built from it, physically. Geographers have engaged with this context of experimentation in Latin America on other political fronts (e.g., Lyall and Valdivia 2019;

Halvorsen, Fernandes, and Torres 2019), and in terms of the instructive aesthetics of emergent landscapes elsewhere (e.g., Cloke and Dickinson 2019), but bringing these points of focus together can help us grasp Latin American geographies of theory in circulation as well as in construction.

Latin Americanists have particularly been tracing the region's "geography of *critical geography*" (Finn & Hanson 2017; emphasis added) – as work that is focused on understanding, critiquing and intervening in sociospatial inequality – including the itineraries of Latin American thinkers on space and their engagements with critical geographic thought (e.g., Melgaço 2017; Ferretti 2019). Recent studies of urban policy reforms in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Belo Horizonte (Friendly 2013; Earle 2017; Friendly 2017; Nogueira 2019) carefully dissect how Henri Lefebvre's (1967) influential notion of "the right to the city," which derived from midcentury French activism and analysis, became an official part of the legal framework for Brazilian urban planning since 2001, yet has experienced difficulties or surprises in implementation due to competing interests and bureaucratic hurdles. While we gain great insight from this work into the complexities of instituting an idea from critical geographic thought amid clashing social movements and political maneuvers, there is not a focus on what urban Brazil's experience with this concept could teach Lefebvre, nor on what such experiments could instruct us about this idea as it has taken on a life of its own.

In contrast, this study's aim goes beyond noting the uptake of Massey's critical-geographical idea in Venezuela, and beyond casting further light on how influential were her scholarship and engagement, as several scholars have carefully and thoughtfully done already (see Featherstone and Painter 2012; Peck et al. 2018; Haesbaert and Rocha 2020). Rather, the goal is specifically to trace the geographies and afterlives of her concept that was bent into the service of remaking central Caracas, and that can speak back to geographical thought with lessons from its journey. This study shows the conceptual shifting that occurred in the popularization and application of Massey's idea to a context of revolutionary change – one that impassioned Massey, but was well beyond her control. What we find is features of the city constructed by a revolutionary government inspired by "power-geometry" and operationalizing a particular interpretation toward its own ends. Studying this urbanization of Massey's concept in Caracas reveals how the idea was literally built into the city since the mid-2000s, but it also illuminates the spatial politics of its use in Venezuela, which outlines some intellectual and political dynamics of this key geographical idea in practice.

While the concept of "power-geometry" in Venezuela has largely been applied to revolutionary policymaking at the national scale and its interface with various local

geographies (Briceño Méndez 2014; Angosto-Ferrández 2015), there is an emphatically urban story to the Venezuelan itinerary of this concept. In Caracas, literally rising out of the contours of inherited inequalities, new or repurposed social housing blocks soar upward from central squares and avenues, populating the heart of the city with dwellers formerly from remote neighborhoods; and strategic edifices are adorned with messages that signal the achievements and struggles of the revolution. For the Bolivarian state, these are elements in a recharted urban centrality – that is, a transformation where prioritized populations and interventions are in physically central locations in the capital city – featured within the larger effort to remake Venezuela’s power-geometry (Menéndez 2013). Although power-geometry could always include the built environment, in the Venezuelan capital the notion has had an explicitly physical implementation. The Bolivarian-era landscape of Caracas, then, clashes with older orders of power, and presents challenges to new alternative projections as well. Even as Venezuela confronts a dire ongoing crisis with dramatic human costs (see Llorens 2018; Vera 2018; United Nations 2019; Hetland 2019), it is worth understanding how this experiment in revolutionary urbanism unfolded, as this sheds light on the kinds of territory rendered for struggles in Caracas today (see Halvorsen et al 2019). Rather than celebrating or vilifying the Venezuelan program of transformation – despite the staunch polarization of discourse around the governments of the late Hugo Chávez and successor Nicolás Maduro (Mallen and García-Guadilla 2017; Buxton 2018; Samet 2019) – my aim here is to analyze Caraqueño engagements with concepts from geography, highlighting the nature of incongruousness between critical ideals and revolutionary implementation in order to facilitate dialogue across this transhemispheric geography of theory.

Venezuela’s Bolivarian revolution captured the imagination of many geographers and other social scientists keen to see Latin American policies targeting entrenched inequality as an alternative path for development, and an impressive raft of research grappled critically with the emergent context of broad urban social change that took shape as “21<sup>st</sup>-century socialism” underwritten largely by profits from petroleum exportation (e.g., Fernandes 2010; Velásquez Atehortúa 2014, Wilde 2017). Volatile petroleum profits have fallen precipitously from their peak during Chávez’s rule (see Macrotrends 2019), contributing significantly to Venezuela’s crisis, yet the program of advancing a new power-geometry continues despite major deprivation on numerous fronts. The present study focuses on this one specific theory that Bolivarian governments have attempted to materialize in the city – if only as part of a vaster, more flexible deployment of the idea of “new power-geometry” at numerous scales (Briceño Méndez 2014). Classic geographic theories of centrality, imported from France and Germany,

were plainly pivotal in Caraqueño urban planning for decades in the mid-twentieth century (Martín Frechilla 1993; Almandoz 1999; González Casas 2002), contributing to an urban geography denounced as reprehensibly unequal and unsustainable by Chávez (Ciccariello-Maher 2016). Those inherited landscapes have been marked and re-marked by quite divergent political projects over the last half-century (see Velasco 2015); the Bolivarian strategy has been to draw a stark contrast between a singular “old” power-geometry in the city and the revolutionary “new.” This article illuminates recent Bolivarian efforts to remake centrality in Caracas as part of an urban implementation of a new power-geometry, cast officially as a “geometry of the people’s power” [*geometría del poder popular*].

## 2. Urbanizing a “New Power-Geometry”

The material presented here draws on fieldwork conducted in Caracas,<sup>1</sup> as well as archival research in Brazil, the United Kingdom, and Venezuela during 2014-2019, and documentary analysis of both Massey’s and Chávez’s publications, videos, and transcripts in Spanish and English, to shed light on transformations in central parts of Caracas related to housing and public spaces. Carried out over May and June 2015, fieldwork included targeted interviews and a focus group with Caraqueño urban planners, architects, geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists about the conceptualization and execution of Bolivarian urban initiatives, as well as the nature and content of Venezuelan public university instruction and research programs in relation to urban studies.<sup>2</sup> I also conducted observational transect walks as a method (see Paasche and Sidaway 2010; Pierce and Lawhon 2015) in both the colonial core [*casco histórico*] and the axes of Avenida Bolívar and Avenida Libertador, as well as Sabana Grande (see map in Figure 3) to document place-making and place-marking initiatives showing explicit Bolivarian content. Comprising two different, partially overlapping paths, these walks totaled 13.69km (8.51 miles) of cumulative observations. Brief interviews (n=32) were conducted during these transect exercises with Caraqueños – both residents and passersby –

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<sup>1</sup> As a fluent Spanish speaker, working directly in the local language helped open many doors. My Argentine accent raised some surprise but never impeded access; in turn, my appearance – classed variously and openly by Caraqueños as “*rubio*” (“blond,” despite my dark brown hair), “*algo alemán*” (“kinda German,” despite not being from Germany), or simply “*del exterior*” (“from abroad”) – meant that I was often visually out of place, but on no occasion was I denied a conversation in person. In contrast, I benefitted from relative privilege with my positionality as presumably non-Venezuelan, yet plainly a fellow Hispanophone, rendering a productive curiosity in research encounters.

<sup>2</sup> Participants in the focus group, comprising eight urbanists with varying combinations of academic and applied expertise, were assured anonymity.

around centrally located GMVV housing blocks, focusing on questions about their use and perception of these sites. Lastly, I hired a Venezuelan research assistant to aid with data access and logistics during my stay in Caracas, as well as with follow-up inquiries later in 2015.

Within the capital's symbolically charged landscape, I focus on the expansion of social housing that has made the city's traditionally privileged center a more accessible terrain as part of the national campaign *Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela* [Great Venezuela Housing Mission].<sup>3</sup> By concentrating on how the built environment and its platforms are a conduit for and a barrier against fundamental change, I show how old and new power-geometries are evident in these spaces, and how their clash renders places in line with no ideal vision for the city but instead a landscape of experiments in egalitarianism riddled by challenges and contradictions. This study investigates their remaking as physical sites that are visually evocative, shot through with new and contested symbolic meaning. The results of the research documented here do not delve deeply into any one population's collective view of these places; it does not assume to be an "ethnographic" record (see Pierce & Lawhon 2015). Rather, it presents a qualitative investigation of place in terms of intervention, semiotics, and differential use, exemplified in other geographical studies of transforming places. In her work on cities as the turf of spectacular statecraft, geographer Natalie Koch (2018) argues that understanding urban spectacle requires examining its geographical "others." Indeed, the urbanization of a new power-geometry, particularly via GMVV installations in central Caracas, can be understood as a spectacular clash with older power-geometries that had limited poor Venezuelans' presence in the capital. Of course, Bolivarianism has entailed far more than mere spectacle, but it has also hinged on spectacular features, not entirely unlike "the iconography of power" (Bonnell 1999) evident in earlier revolutions from which it drew inspiration. In analyzing these key aspects of implementing a new power-geometry in the city, we gain an understanding not only of what revolutionary urbanism has aimed to render, but also insight into the instantiation – albeit quite partial – of Massey's life work (Massey et al. 2009; Saldanha 2013; Cisterna and Ricci 2014), and the kinds of lessons this itinerary can offer back to some of her ideas.

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<sup>3</sup> The places studied in this article are not at all exhaustive of the vast repertoire of Bolivarian policy transformations, urban or otherwise. Moreover, they are not intended as neatly representative of the revolutionary program. Indeed these sites were chosen because of their remarkable rather than prototypical nature. The focus here is on places that have been showcases of power and privilege, and thus exclusion, in the past (see Violich 1987, 140-143).



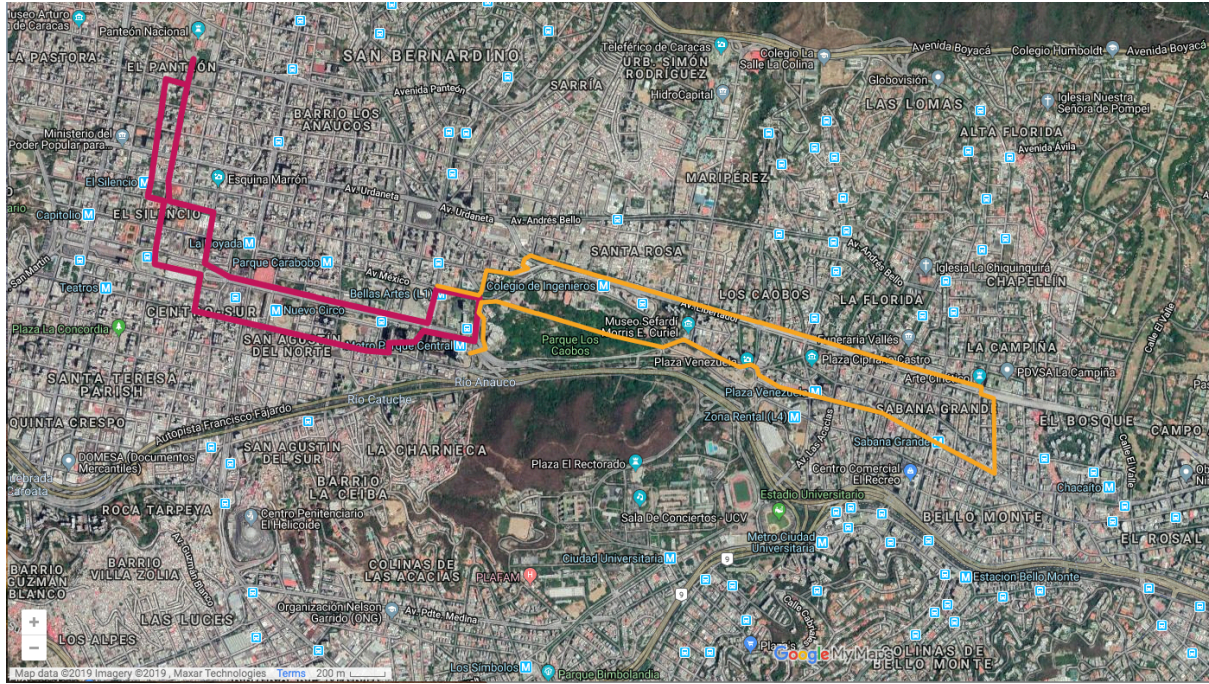


Figure 3: Map of study area, including two transect routes, in central Caracas. Source: GoogleMaps 2019.

The article proceeds through three further sections to show the significance of, and lessons from, these spectacles of revolutionary urbanism in Caracas. First, I detail how Chávez’s government mobilized Massey’s concept when conjuring “a new power-geometry” as a “motor of revolution,” from the mid-2000s – including an urban-scale agenda. Second, I demonstrate how Bolivarian physical interventions aimed to overhaul the Caraqueño center from an earlier landscape of monumentality to a new one. The installation of new social housing was especially key in this effort, contributing to a new power-geometry that has achieved substantial transformations even while falling short of its own larger goals of a city that “belongs to everyone (Chávez, in Sesto 2016, 149; author’s translation).” In the conclusion, I discuss how this application of Masseyian notions in some ways does, but in other important ways does not, resonate with Massey’s own analysis and aims. This allows for reflection on what this experiment teaches us about the circulation and practice of geographic thought in Latin America, for a wider audience interested in the region as well as the ideas in question.

### 3. Geographic Thought and Bolivarian Transformations

During three presidential terms after being democratically elected in 1998, and briefly but violently deposed during a *coup d’état* in 2002, former general Hugo Chávez instated a course



of ideological and institutional revolution in Venezuela. He served as head of state until his death from cancer in 2013, and tightly associated himself, his personal image, and his own pronouncements with the national program of change. This “Bolivarian” revolution invokes one of Latin America’s nineteenth-century anti-colonial liberators – Simón Bolívar – as explicit inspiration (see Bolívar 2003), underwriting the priority of national improvement through an ethos of pride and fairness for people across Venezuela territory and social differences. In the new Venezuelan constitution that came into effect in 2000 (see República Bolivariana de Venezuela 1999), the framing of “*poder popular*” [power of the people] distinguished this from previous governing charters of the country, and set the tone for a new kind of democracy with priorities on broad participation of, and service to, “the people.” Drawing income from Venezuela’s vast national oil reserves, which have been the mainstay of state power but also fueled dramatically unequal wealth distribution among Venezuelans over the twentieth century (Coronil 1997), Chávez articulated a vision for “21<sup>st</sup>-century socialism” (Hellinger 2017). This expanded social spending, particularly as *misiones* [missions] – locally rooted projects and programs aimed at providing direct access for Venezuelans to a range of services, from healthcare to women’s rights to vocational education to cultural programming. Although nationwide, *misiones* especially improved quality of life in deprived urban neighborhoods (Valencia 2015), within agglomerations that were markedly unequal – most notably in the capital – before the inauguration of Bolivarian reforms. Overall, oil-funded socialism in Venezuelan cities generated a policy context for urban residents, including the poorest, to become “protagonists” in shaping the city as a more “inclusive” terrain in line with revolutionary precepts (García-Guadilla 2012, 178). All local areas became demarcated as territorial bases (or *comunas*) for engaged, participatory, communal decision-making. Cities have thus been a pivotal geography for the Bolivarian revolution.

After Chávez’s re-election in 2006, he enunciated five “motors” of revolution, to deepen Bolivarian reform. These were: (1) the greater enablement of the executive branch of government to introduce reforms, including the other four motors; (2) “socialist reform of the constitution,” (3) the expansion of “education for the people,” led by volunteer “brigades,” (4) the creation of a “new power-geometry,” and (5) “the explosion of communal power,” aiming to strengthen local councils that linked residents and policies affecting their area (Chávez 2007a).

When Chávez (2007a) announced these motors of revolution during a cabinet speech in January 2007, he explained each in some detail. Introducing the idea of “a new power-geometry,” he asked his colleagues to bear with him even though “it sounds a bit technical,”

because the concept was key for an explicitly socialist rearrangement of Venezuelan space as well as its place in the world. Later that month, in government ceremonies, Chávez (2007b) lectured his colleagues how “geometry” was above all about measuring distances and content, applicable to analyzing the structure of Venezuela’s economy and society as an object of political action: “This is why I’ve been talking about a new power-geometry across the full extent – the entire volume and content – of our territory.” This signaled a very particular geographic vocabulary, focused on metrics and the importance of physical location. Two weeks later, he underlined the importance of “new power-geometry” in particular, proclaiming:

Believe me, this is one [of the motors] about which I’m most passionate. Because we in Venezuela have a divided country, almost as the Spanish conquerors divided it...more than 500 years ago. It’s a colonial, exclusionary geometry that divides the national territory instead of uniting it” (Chávez, 2007c, author’s translation).

This inheritance was to be replaced with a new set of power relations to create “socialist space” at every scale in Venezuela – a maxim that quickly traveled in Bolivarian circles as a distinction between old and new power-geometries.



Figure 4: Venezuelan government poster showing ‘All motors to maximum revolution...on the road to socialism!’ The ‘Fourth Motor’ reads ‘The New Power-geometry: The socialist reordering of the geopolitics of the nation.’ Source: República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2007a, author’s translation.

The idea of power-geometry originated, of course, in the work of British geographer Doreen Massey (see 1992; 1999), whose geographic vocabulary certainly focused on exclusion in the way Chávez invoked, but never adopted his tone of pat physical determinacy. In an early articulation, Massey (1993, 61) illustrated this notion as capturing unequal social and spatial positionings in relation to globalization:

[D]ifferent social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these [transnational] flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't ... it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement. ... [S]ome are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.

Turning to how this view enables an analytical shift, Massey (2009, 18-19) argued that:

not only is space utterly imbued with and a product of relations of power, but power itself has a geography. ... The idea of «power-geometries», then, is simply an attempt to capture both the fact that space is imbued with power and the fact that power in its turn always has a spatiality.

Massey's frequent interventions in critical geography debates through the 1990s (see Massey 1998) culminated in this understanding of power-geometry becoming axiomatic among many Anglophone geographers (see Featherstone & Painter 2012). However, despite Massey's longstanding commitment to understanding Latin American spatialities and assisting in projects of social-spatial transformation in the region – beginning with her work in the Nicaraguan revolutionary context in the early 1980s (see Massey 1987; Massey 2005, 1-8; Massey 2012; Lee 2018, 166) – her writings on power-geometry and other topics of spatial inequality were not widely circulating in Venezuelan academic or activist contexts before this official turn to Massey's work (see Estaba 2007; Banko 2007), within a national discipline long-defined largely by positivist perspectives (Smole 1964; Trinca Figuera 2008). It was Venezuelan geographer and eventual cabinet member Ricardo Menéndez who introduced

“critical geography,” including power-geometry, to Chávez in the mid-2000s; laying out the policy relevance of Massey’s concept, Chávez waxed about his affinity for the discipline:

I like geography very much. All sciences, I like – we ought to like them. But geography is elemental: space and time. ... [T]hose are like two anchors for understanding the life of a people, the evolution of a society, the ‘where are we?’, the ‘where did we come from?’, [the] ‘where are we going?’ Those are essential questions of philosophy of all eras, of life. (Chávez 2007c, author’s translation)

Caught unawares, Massey (2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2012) described simultaneous thrill and concern around her concept taking on a life of its own in a setting of vigorous political engagement. Catapulting Massey’s idea into national discourse, the Chávez government invited her to Caracas to engage with ongoing discussions over massive policy reform. Arriving in Venezuela as a celebrated official guest in 2007, Massey (2008b, 492) recounted the dismaying exhilaration of driving into the capital from Caracas airport past “a huge, red hoarding, one of many draping the city, arguing the case for the Bolivarian revolution,” including her own concept strung up in gigantic Spanish text:

*‘La Nueva Geometría del Poder.’* The new power-geometry. This is a concept I’ve been arguing for, and trying to work with for some years, and now here it is, in huge letters. And at the heart of one of the most radical of attempts to shift the balance of power, to re-imagine society, in a Latin America that is, once again, trying to re-invent itself and to refuse its supposed destiny of subordination to the imperium in the North. Clearly, this engagement as a ‘public intellectual’ is going to be different from anything I’ve tried before. (Massey 2008b, 492)

The Bolivarian government’s engagement with power-geometry was indeed unprecedented. Menéndez (2013, 233), Chávez’s closest geographical advisor, outlined how the Bolivarian state would transform Venezuelan territory, wherein “the construction of the social fabric of the revolution involves creating new geometries of power.” This official application of was extensive and multiscalar. State presentations about the policy framework

for implementing a new Venezuelan power-geometry illustrated reform targets to enable “the power of the people” at all levels from local “communes” to national development and foreign policy (González Marregot 2010). Moreover, annotated cartography by the Venezuelan National Assembly mapped out territorial strategies for creating “socialist space” across the spread of the country, including local, regional, national, and international features for achieving multiple “equilibria” (Briceño Méndez 2014, 17-25). These policy shifts were “oriented toward correcting the enormous social distortions of exclusion and injustice” (Briceño Méndez 2014, 38) inherited from previous governments. Without a doubt, forging a “new power-geometry” was set as a massive official task, entailing ambitious goals and long-term policy visions – but also varied and flexible definitions, particularly in scalar terms.

These projects raise questions regarding their theoretical coherence, their relations with each other, and their compatibility with power-geometry as a concept created for understanding space as always in formation, never fixed or balanced, never in masterfully orchestrated “equilibrium.” Despite progressive aims, these abundant invocations of “new power-geometry” pronounce an orderly dominion over territory, vividly performing the masculinist gaze that Massey had critiqued so extensively among fellow Anglophone geographers (e.g., Massey 1991). Chávez-era programs under the banner of fostering a new power-geometry in Venezuela did create local communal councils with decision-making autonomy, indicating an institutional openness in the Bolivarian redesign of territorial control, which simultaneously signaled official enfranchisement of long-marginalized groups, including working classes, and African-descent and indigenous Venezuelans more broadly (see Angosto 2010; Rey 2017). Massey saw Bolivarian *comunas* as hopeful opportunities for an ongoing, dialogic tussle of views among residents and the state (Massey 2009, 24). But the formulation of area-based *comunas* as straightforward conduits for participatory expression of local interests betrayed an assumption of the local as equivalent to place (Ramírez Velásquez 2010, 170) – directly contradicting Massey’s view of the open-endedness and relationality of place, of spatial multiplicity and contestation, and her call for endless negotiations of coexistent differences to achieve greater spatial justice (Massey 1999, 272).

While Massey faced these selective interpretations in Venezuelan policy, she held criticism in abeyance, advocating for these notions to take on a new geography within Latin American experimentation:

This concept (of ‘mine’) has travelled, been adopted by Chávez.

It’s being used in a particular way. What responsibilities does

one have in a situation like this? Whose concept is it now? ... One of the many impressive aspects of the Bolivarian revolution is its active and explicit use of ‘ideas.’ ... It is utterly invigorating to be in a situation where ideas really matter. But also one where they are not simply taken as ‘truth.’ Concepts are drawn on and reworked in the complexity of the actual situation. This is part of that long Latin American endeavour of developing a voice of its own. (Massey 2008b, 496)

Summoning the legacy of Simón Bolívar in the spirit of ongoing reforms was fundamental in Venezuela’s endeavor to assert “a voice of its own” as part of a regionwide “left turn” beginning in the 2000s with divergent manifestations across the continent (Massey 2012). So too was the drive to augment these autochthonous efforts with the aid of critical frameworks from abroad, especially Massey’s, through its range of scales and potential recastings. Within the multiplex geographies of Bolivarian transformation set out by Chávez (see Smilde and Hellinger 2011), the city held a particularly strategic position, its center a key site for staging 21<sup>st</sup>-century socialism and for unmaking the “exclusionary and fragmenting dynamics” of the past (Cariola et al. 2014, 139). To remake the city in line with revolutionary precepts, then, required a transformation of centrality as the urbanization of a new power-geometry.

#### **4. Remaking Caraqueño Centrality**

The tactic of physically constructing symbols of development into the fabric of the city has been widespread in Latin America (e.g., Almandoz 2015; Bergdoll 2015), part of a well-documented urbanistic lineage in the region stretching to the colonial era (Romero 1976; Duer and Vegliò 2019). Prior Venezuelan governments since the 1940s, at ideological odds with Chávez, consistently fit central Caracas into projections of urban advancement (Blackmore 2017), focused especially on architecture and infrastructure linked to an expanding terrain of modernity in the metropolitan area (Violich 1987, 164-165; Kingsbury 2017). Against this continental and local backdrop, Chávez’s decision to intervene in the highly unequal Caraqueño landscape as a politicized strategy was hardly an unusual way to demonstrate concrete change. However, the Bolivarian remaking of centrality went against regional precedents as a self-consciously “revolutionary” urbanism, with Caracas a stage for socialist

innovation, rather than being dismissed as anti-revolutionary artifact – as had been the case in Havana, where there was a policy of promoting “ruralism” (Gugler, 1980; Slater 1982, 14-26) and urban “*débourgeoisement*” (Eckstein 1985), and later in Managua, where priorities of basic survival preempted any broad urbanistic interventions (Slater 1986; Massey 1987; Rodgers 2008, 107-109), after the triumph of Cuban and Nicaraguan socialist revolutions, respectively. The Bolivarian government decided to affirm urban centrality as a locus of priorities, in a quest to make the capital’s core into a physical example of new power-geometry.



Figure 5: Teresa Carreño theatre complex (1983) in central Caracas is characteristic of the multi-layered, concrete-laden landscape of modernist development from the 1950s-1980s, funded by profits from petroleum exportation. Photograph by author, 2015.





Figure 6: Northern edge of the historic core, a series of government buildings from the 1970s-1980s continue the central Caraqueño landscape of concrete monumentality that pre-dated Chávez. Photograph by author, 2015.

“The city belongs to everyone,” Chávez proclaimed (Sesto 2016, 149), and in making it accessible to all Venezuelan citizens, the “right to the city” became part of Bolivarian “geometry” for the capital – bringing together Lefebvre’s (1967) and Massey’s concepts in application.<sup>4</sup> Chávez’s conflation of these two Marxist contributors to geographic thought from different eras is not intellectually straightforward, but it aligns with his syncretic repertoire of political and spiritual inspirations, publicly invoked to undergird his thinking, particularly in animated addresses.<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city emphasizes the importance of access to city space and urban resources by all, and the ability to shape what the city is, in the interests of a broad public. While not opposed to this, Massey argues that there is no single

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<sup>4</sup> Although Massey shared a concern for spatial justice with Lefebvre, and foundations in Marx’s class analysis, their analytics vary sharply – partly due to their divergent stances toward Althusser (Saldanha 2013, 48; Hart 2018, 377), but also in their vision of what it means to engage geographically with the pursuit of justice (Pierce 2019).

<sup>5</sup> In one particularly famous example of patchwork inspiration, Chávez (2007a) – during the inauguration of his new presidential cabinet members – lauded Vladimir Lenin and Jesus Christ as equally foundational in his revolutionary thinking.



city, no single place, no single inhabitant, but a multiplicity of interactions and identities that are differently positioned within power-geometries – not old and new, but multiple and simultaneous, in her conceptualization. Yet in the Caracas context, the notions of “right to the city” and “power-geometry” are denuded of their complexity, and certainly the nuances of theoretical lineage. This allows Chávez’s circle of urbanists and policymakers to distill these as guidelines for achieving social justice by the state through “subversion” of earlier economic, social, and political orders (Sesto 2016, 37).

The incongruity between Lefebvre (right to the city) and Massey (power-geometry) as tools for Bolivarian urbanism was recast as an opportunity for new interventions by Caraqueño urbanists who participated in a focus group during my fieldwork. While not entirely expressing consensus, they positioned the right to the city in a novel light, as offering space for negotiation, and specifically the “protagonism” prized as broad, locally accessible involvement within the official language of the new power-geometry (see Briceño Méndez 2014). One planning professor asserted that “the right to the city is open to interpretation; it presents a variety of paths for working with communities in the project of revolutionary urban planning.”<sup>6</sup> She pointed to the very localized scale of remaking spaces in the city as a way of instating a new power-geometry in sites of residence and leisure, not just in massive regional plans of development. An architect, situated evenly between teaching and practice, spoke of how Marxist vocabularies taken up by Bolivarianism – including both Lefebvre and Massey – had become a means for him to explain the importance of intervening in certain sites,

because centrality is a factor in accomplishing a more just form of design – urban design – bringing people who have lived on the margins, literally in ravines, in total precarity, now into the center of our society, here in the heart of the capital of the Bolivarian revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Chávez highlighted the common etymological foundation of “*ciudadano*” (citizen) and “*ciudad*” (city) – shared by Spanish and English alike – to argue that a Bolivarian revolution for all citizens needed to make the city an inclusionary terrain, rather than a landscape of exclusion (Sesto 2016, 149-150). And this could only be done by bringing “the people” into

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<sup>6</sup> Focus group participant 1 (urban planner), Universidad Central de Venezuela, 4 June 2015. Author’s translation.

<sup>7</sup> Focus group participant 2 (architect), Universidad Central de Venezuela, 4 June 2015. Author’s translation.

the heart of the city as never before. The center of Caracas, then, needed to be wrested from elite interests and reframed as a platform for revolution, enabling a new configuration of power relations – of the power of the people. Much of this transformation would entail the implementation of novel political practices, especially in the institutionalization of participatory, communal government (see Massey 2009; García-Guadilla 2011). But there was also a very clear call for “urbanistic” intervention (Sesto 2016, 149-153), of physical change in the bricks and mortar of the city. Two realms for this material transformation were, first, the use of the capital’s pre-existing monumental landscape, including its formerly neglected colonial core, to position the moral stance of Bolivarian government toward its citizenry but especially in geopolitical relation to the rest of the world, as an assertion of shifts in larger power relations represented in the physical components of the city; and second, the mission to address Venezuela’s “housing deficit,” initiated by Chávez, culminating in a vast national program to accelerate social housing construction, including blocks concentrated in the center of Caracas. By exploring the topology of these broad instantiations of government priorities in urban space, we can understand how power-geometries in Caracas – old, new, and potential – clash in the city’s center, and with what implications for the geographic thought that animated them.



Figure 7: New social housing block installed on Plaza Bellas Artes in Caracas, across from Parque Central, with Chávez’s four-storey signature in red, as with all new constructions by the GMVV. Photograph by author, 2015.

To make Caracas a showcase of 21<sup>st</sup>-century socialism required imposing a certain kind of order on the city's resignified center – a Bolivarian order, representing a “new socialist ethic” and “moral re-foundation” (República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2007b, 5-9; author's translation). While there was transformed use of many private constructions, including Parque Central, it was especially in public spaces and new social housing blocks where the aims of the revolution could be marked, and an urbanized new power-geometry most visibly demonstrated. These measures were about creating “spatial memory”<sup>8</sup> that encapsulated novel configurations of geographical relations on display in the city.

In the colonial core of Caracas's center, senses of both inclusion and emergent geographies have been a fundamental feature of recasting the landscape to illuminate a new power-geometry replacing the old. Years after his death, Chávez's name, quoted commentary, and personal image are depicted along the side of massive buildings. Bolivarian messaging highlights the heroism of Chávez (sometimes connected to Maduro) on behalf of the Venezuelan people and toward the rest of the world. One sidewall reads:

I AM CHÁVEZ [*suggesting all Venezuelans could also claim being Chávez*]. We will continue looking for all possible alternatives to increase the quality of life of the Venezuelan family. (Author's translation; see Figure 8)

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<sup>8</sup> Focus group participant 3 (anthropologist), Universidad Central de Venezuela, 4 June 2015. Author's translation.



Figure 8: “I AM CHÁVEZ” – example of Bolivarian government messages adorning the full length of tall buildings in central Caracas. Photograph by author, 2015.



Figure 9: “WE ARE HOPE” – example of Bolivarian government messages adorning the full length of tall buildings in central Caracas. Photograph by author, 2015.

Another message, draped over the national Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information, calls directly on the United States to end its antagonistic stance toward the Bolivarian republic, displaying a collage of diverse Venezuelan face portraits above a stylized national flag and proclaiming “VENEZUELA IS NOT A THREAT – WE ARE HOPE” (Author’s translation; see Figure 9).

Other Bolivarian adornments of the central Caracas landscape figure Venezuela directly into a new kind of power-geometry at the global level. Around the historic Plaza Bolívar, a jubilant panel of official political art shows the smiling likenesses of Chávez (1954-2013), José Martí (1853-1895), Simón Bolívar (1783-1830), a castanet-snapping Che Guevara (1928-1967), and Fidel Castro (1926-2016) playing dominoes together against the festive backdrop of a salsa-dancing block party (see Figure 10). This image forges an amicable link across these late Venezuelan and Cuban revolutionary leaders, leisurely enjoying a depiction of stereotypical male recreation in the Hispanic Caribbean. While some of these men indeed knew each other personally, others’ lives were separated by many decades, underlining the fictional



yet strategic symbolism in this portrait of transnational Latin American solidarity. Nearby, an impressionistic painting (see Figure 11) – also state-sanctioned – across multiple panels depicts the valley walls of Caracas as densely but beautifully built up, Chávez’s head looming protectively over them, literally larger than the sun, and adjacent to a contrasting ghoulish image of a devilish figure of similar proportions, but with vampirical fangs and a Mickey Mouse hat, who has taken the Statue of Liberty hostage and converted her torch of freedom into a simmering warhead to spread not light but death and destruction throughout the world.



Figure 10: Fictional depiction of Venezuelan and Cuban revolutionary leaders across generations, playing dominoes together – an example of Bolivarian government artwork in central Caracas, positioning Chávez, and Venezuela, in a particular configuration of geopolitics in the Americas. Photograph by author, 2015.





Figure 11: Rendition of the United States as a threat to humanity rather than personification of liberty – an example of Bolivarian government artwork in central Caracas, positioning Chávez, and Venezuela, in a particular configuration of geopolitics in the Americas. Photograph by author, 2015.

The above examples are especially colorful and chart an international geography for Bolivarianism by remaking central Caraqueño spaces, directly clashing with geopolitical alignments prior to Chávez, particularly with the United States. More materially, in the heart of the Venezuelan capital, an even more mundane, immediate, yet substantive power-geometry has also been remade: people’s homes, and their place in the city, as integral to the Bolivarian effort to urbanize a new power-geometry.

#### 4.1 Social Housing at the Heart of Bolivarian Urbanism

Just across from the Parque Central complex, in a vast midcentury plaza, there are clear signs of intervention seeking to make urban space more directly suited to Bolivarian precepts. In a formerly unpeopled sweep of concrete following the modernist style typical of Brasília that fetishized openness but was so ill-suited for pedestrian use under a beating tropical sun, there is now a “popular market” [*feria de economía popular*; see Figure 1], situated under a sprawling tarpaulin. Despite the appearance of an encampment, this is a long-term market for

craft commerce that is “*popular*” [“of the people”] and thus accessible to a range of producers, vendors, and consumers of modest means. This market was created after the banning of vendors from both the colonial core and a variety of nearby areas that the Chávez government considered overrun, with this dedicated market presented as an orderly, more secure alternative (Rojas 2010, 32-38). Now, emblazoned with various Bolivarian government logos, the market presence indicates this monumental and formerly austere central public space as now occupied by “the people” and endorsed by a state representing “the power of the people.” On the eastern edge, a massive block of recently constructed social housing rises up 10 storeys, adorned in vibrant stripes of yellow and orange with red accents. Most notably in red is the signature of the late Hugo Chávez, which runs the height of four flights on the side of the building. Together, the residential block and the people’s market represent a picturesque pairing in place, with centrally located housing for the poor adjacent to a site of both potential employment and affordable consumption. Not all new social housing in the center is as directly connected to potential economic opportunities, however; nor is it clear that the majority of vendors benefit from this new, concentrated location. Nonetheless, this is a striking example of the effort to urbanize a new power-geometry within the Bolivarian revolution.

As capital city, Caracas is a complicated overlay of jurisdictions, with several shifts in governance during the Bolivarian era rendering a delicate policymaking context, especially in relationships between opposition parties and the national Bolivarian government, personified in direct antinomy among various mayors and the Chávez and Maduro administrations (Hetland 2014). One might imagine this an inauspicious setting for expropriating land and subsequently constructing tens of thousands of social housing units. Yet scores of central Caraqueño locations for housing the poor were precisely what Chávez and his successor Maduro have managed to achieve since 2011. Impelled by a national “housing deficit” decried in Bolivarian circles, and then precipitated more acutely by heavy rains in late 2010 that devastated several precarious settlements, Chávez and the National Assembly created the first of a new species of *misiones* – the “great missions,” orchestrated at the national level – in the form of the Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela (GMVV), focused on rapidly constructing 2,000,000 units of social housing within seven years (Fernández Cabrera 2013, 136). While there were precedents for public investment in Venezuelan housing throughout the twentieth century and into the early Chávez administration years (see Maya Fuentes 2014, 1-7; Torres, Pineda, and Rey 2017, 60), nothing approached the scale or audacity of this Bolivarian program.



Chávez announced five new “vertices” comprising the GMVV model in 2011: (1) a census to identify families with “at risk” or insufficient housing; (2) a registry of available land for the construction of new housing blocks; (3) contracts with foreign construction firms from countries sympathetic to Bolivarian goals and/or leadership at the time – Belarus, Brazil, China, Iran, Portugal, Russia, and Turkey; (4) a finance model with half of funds coming from the state, half from private banks induced to serve “the poor” and to avoid “mechanisms of speculation”; and (5) the use of domestically sourced construction materials to help stimulate the Venezuelan economy more broadly (Provea 2012, 2-14; Cariola, Fernández, and Jungemann 2015, 26-33). Since 2011, GMVV as a program has contributed to the massive expansion of public housing construction, entailing hundreds of thousands more units than any earlier era (see Table 1), and a decrease of inadequate housing rates in many regions (FundaVivienda 2018, 8-10).

<b>Years of presidential administration</b>	<b>Total new social housing units constructed, nationwide, per period</b>	<b>Average new units per year</b>
1999-2005 (Chávez)	101,105	14,443.57
2006-2011 (Chávez)	329,542	54,923.67
2012-2013 (Chávez, with GMVV in effect)	400,405	200,202.50
2013-2016 (Maduro, with GMVV in effect)	603,305	150,826.25
<b>TOTAL, 1999-2016</b>		
<i>Before GMVV, under Chávez (1999-2011)</i>	<b>1,434,357</b> 430,647	<b>79,686.50</b> 33,126.69
<i>During GMVV, under Chávez and then Maduro (2012-2016)</i>	<b>1,003,710</b>	<b>200,742.00</b>

Table 1: Social housing units created in each Venezuelan government administration since Chávez's first election; GMVV is initiated in 2011. Source: author's calculation based on data from FundaVivienda (2018, 5)

While the GMVV entails a national-level agenda, Chávez took the task to the heart of the capital city. Relying on an advisor's estimation that, in terms of housing capacity, “within [the space of] Caracas would fit [the population of] yet another Caracas more” (see Sesto 2016, 190), Chávez pushed for new GMVV social housing blocks to be concentrated in central districts more than anywhere else in the metropolitan area – documented in fieldwork by Venezuelan urbanists to be distant from areas of economic deprivation and informal housing (García, 2015). The GMVV produced more than 2,500,000 units of social housing throughout Venezuela by April 2019, according to government sources (see Ministerio del Poder Popular para Hábitat y Vivienda 2019a). In the Caracas region specifically, there were more than

100,000 units constructed by 2014 (Cariola et al. 2014, 140); the central location of new GMVV housing in the capital became an explicit Bolivarian goal, envisaged as an enactment of “the right to the city” because it would connect new, formerly marginalized inhabitants to all that central Caracas had to offer, from jobs to amenities to political engagement – as outlined by Chávez’s closest urban advisor:

*The right to the city* implies the right to the enjoyment of those material goods, those facilities and comforts. To the use and enjoyment in equal conditions of the spaces, services, resources for life in common, for work, for leisure, for shelter, for the ‘good life’ ... It’s no small thing: affirming this is already something subversive by itself within a class-based society whose functional logic is based on the privileges of capital possession. But to put it into practice is then more than subversion: it is revolution. ... The intention of carrying this out forms part of the Chavista vision of the *right to the city*. It is an essential requirement for the construction of a truly human society. And thus it is an irrevocable cause of the Bolivarian Revolution. (Sesto 2016, 36-37; emphasis in original; author’s translation)

The location of new social housing in vacant lots and underutilized public spaces of the central city was imagined as linking to opportunity, and yielding automatic benefits, but these have not always accrued. The case of the GMVV block directly across from a popular marketplace near Parque Central (see Figure 7) is the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, the locational strategy of the GMVV as executed in central areas of Caracas has been criticized by Venezuelan urbanists – including by those aligned with Bolivarianism. Carlos Aponte Blank (2012, 14; author’s translation), while offering detailed praise of Chávez’s social missions through the 2000s, expressed concern that the GMVV’s initial focus on “generating a more effective integration of [social housing] with the whole of the city” was quickly “displaced by a ‘shelterist’ (*viviendista*) vision,” which prioritized building as many units as possible rather than fostering greater quality of urban life by neglecting to install amenities alongside housing, and failing to improve existing areas of substandard housing.

Bolivarian urban planners, including consultants for government projects, simultaneously extolled the mission's values and openly worried about the opacity of the GMVV's siting and acquisition processes, calling them "unknown"<sup>9</sup> [*desconocido*] in practice, even to them. While hailing the importance of densification in Caracas, and bringing the poor into more privileged, central locations, there was concern over their positioning in previously underused parcels as having insufficient "articulation with necessary services around them, such as schools and transportation," while "their utilities within the new buildings have, in some cases, already been surpassed [in less than five years], so people are living in central sites but in inadequate conditions."<sup>10</sup> There was agreement, however, that even among these significant drawbacks, most inhabitants of central GMVV sites are now living in better circumstances than their previous places of residence: "These are people who have come from some of the most destitute environments in and around the capital, or beyond. We all deserve dignified housing, but even the worst among these quickly constructed blocks offers more dignity than the houses on the verge of collapse that many residents have now escaped."<sup>11</sup> Despite basic humanitarian gains, a variety of urbanists still decry that the GMVV, while urbanizing a new power-geometry, has essentially been building shelter without building the city in a more multidimensional sense. In contrast, architects working within the GMVV claim "the importance of urban design" and functional as well as social integration in their projects within Caracas (Yorley Luna and Hernández 2018; author's translation).

Whether the GMVV in Caracas has succeeded in its stated mission "to revert exclusionary and fragmenting dynamics to advance toward a more integrated and just city" (Cariola et al. 2014, 139), there is no debate over the symbolic importance of the new social housing blocks. Since Chávez's death in 2013, the GMVV has been exalted by the Maduro government, which uses the label "builders of socialism" [*constructores del socialismo*] for the various actors and institutions involved with the housing mission (Ministerio del Poder Popular para Hábitat y Vivienda 2019b). Even more striking are the visual elements embedded in the physical manifestation of the housing itself. Despite motley materials and styles, all GMVV buildings include the massive, distinctive signature of Hugo Chávez painted on at least one face of the block, spanning multiple floors (see Figures 12-14). Many also exhibit the equally

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<sup>9</sup> Focus group participant 2 (urban planner), Universidad Central de Venezuela, 4 June 2015. Author's translation.

<sup>10</sup> Focus group participant 4 (urban planner), Universidad Central de Venezuela, 4 June 2015. Author's translation.

<sup>11</sup> Focus group participant 5 (sociologist), Universidad Central de Venezuela, 4 June 2015. Author's translation.

distinctive, watchful eyes of Chávez – not an entire face – depicted on higher levels of the block, casting a suggestive gaze over the housing and its surroundings.



Figures 12-14: New GMVV social housing blocks in central Caracas, including Chávez's eyes overlooking some complexes, and his signature covering multiple storeys on each block. Photographs by author, 2015.



Residents and passersby comment on the variety of aesthetic features of these structures in central Caracas, claiming to recognize the national origin of the building firm responsible for each: “This one came from the Iranians, with their experience of seismic bolting [see Figure 12], but these others on Avenida Libertador show Chinese design,” remarked a taxi driver who



regularly traverses the area.<sup>12</sup> Others, however, contradicted these observations by asserting that they could see how the same buildings were clearly Russian, or Brazilian. Regardless of uncertainty over the nationality of the buildings, the geographies beyond Venezuela that they signify to Caraqueños are remarkably consistent in delineating a finite set of foreign allies of Bolivarianism built into the landscape of the central city.

Many inhabitants have given little thought to the foreign origin of their block's construction, instead taking note of how this piece of the city that is now theirs came very clearly from Venezuela, in the Bolivarian spirit. Pointing upward to the gaze of what she referred to as "the eternal commander" – Chávez's eyes, painted across the upper two floors of her building – one resident put it simply: "The revolution gave me this, a home, here in the city."<sup>13</sup>

While Bolivarian iconography is integral to the presentation of GMVV blocks installed in central Caracas since 2011, the location and construction of these housing assemblages go far beyond two-dimensional aspects in their efforts to forge a new, urbanized power-geometry. Housing is only one feature of a remade Caraqueño centrality, but it is a particularly fundamental, quotidian one which roots Venezuelans who had never before experienced the kind of right to the city that would bring them into the heart of the capital. They are now availed of the physical armature to have a fixed – rather than fleeting – presence in Caracas, to participate in the localized features of the Bolivarian state *comunas*, and thus to engage as citizens within a system that privileges local areas in communal policymaking, as had so inspired Massey (2009, 22-23).

Central Caracas, long a locus of powerful elements in Venezuela, remains a stage for powerfully projecting a vision for society. These landscapes now materialize an ensemble of priorities that clash with the exclusionary city of the past, setting in place "conflicting political spatialities" (Massey 2007, 191), or a clash of power-geometries that forms the experiential crux of daily life in the center of the Venezuelan capital. In addition to remaking Caraqueño centrality in its material and symbolic dimensions, this urbanization of a new power-geometry creates dynamics that resist other, newer intercessions of power – especially in the form of protests and insurgencies. Observing massive manifestations in Caraqueño streets, Venezuelan urbanists Irazábal and Foley (2012, 317) note that "spaces and buildings have become symbolically and practically imbricated with the conflicts underway, which allows the

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<sup>12</sup> Interviewee 1 (taxi driver), Transect B, 2 June 2015. Author's translation.

<sup>13</sup> Interviewee 2 (homemaker), Transect B, 5 June 2015. Author's translation.

polarization and social inequalities of the country to find expression, and contestation, in the urban space of the capital.” By forging a new power-geometry in the bricks and mortar of the city over the last decade, Bolivarian projects of revolutionary urbanism have done more than begin addressing the housing needs of thousands of poorer Caraqueños; they have also cast the capital as Bolivarianism’s own terrain, imprinted with a Chavista “politics of culture” (Blackmore, Jarman, and Plaza 2019), such that little space can be claimed by others in the capital’s central landscape except in desperate measures of major upheaval – in an effort to intercede, to clash anew, as materializations of alternative, and sometimes quite reactionary, power-geometries. This is the urban setting of the current humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, which is far more complicated than could possibly be addressed here (see United Nations 2019; Doocy et al 2019; Hetland 2019), but it is the physical and symbolic Bolivarian inheritance within which grave scarcity, pitched conflict, and political grandstanding between different materializations of power-geometries are finding their operative terrain. Even as crisis spirals, and various achievements of Bolivarian projects are thwarted or effaced (García-Guadilla and Torrealba 2019), the Venezuelan government continues to channel funds into “constructing socialism” via the GMVV, presenting this program as a stalwart success (e.g., Ministerio del Poder Popular para Hábitat y Vivienda 2019b) – an urban bulwark of its new power-geometry.

## **5. Conclusions**

The Venezuelan itinerary of urbanizing Massey’s power-geometry concept shows how geographic thought gained revolutionary traction, yet underwent important conceptual sacrifices to become operative in that setting, particularly in the form of aesthetically charged physical interventions that remade the content of Caraqueño centrality. The material presented here, and the debates in which it is situated, point toward at least two broader insights for geographers and Latin Americanists interested in geographic thought: (1) the power-geometries in which geographic thought and vocabulary, including critical geography, are enmeshed, which shapes their circulation in new geographies; (2) the challenge of building from theory, as geographic thought is taken from circulation into construction. On both these fronts, Caracas illuminates the nature of limitations around mobilizing critical geographic thought to implement transformation, even as new strategic territories and landscapes are forged.

First, the Venezuelan case highlights the power-geometry of geographic thought itself, and how this led to concessions in the very interventions that Massey advocated. Chávez found in Massey an inspiring, rebellious scholar who was passionate about Latin America, syncretically embracing indigenous, marginalized perspectives, and enthusiastically participating in Spanish-language critical dialogues from Argentina to the Canaries (e.g., Massey 2011; Massey 2013; Haesbaert and Rocha 2020). There is no doubt that Massey (2008b, 496), in turn, found Venezuela “invigorating” intellectually and politically; indeed, she saw Chávez as a beacon of hope for transformative politics (Lee 2018, 166). But from her initial visit to Caracas, Massey was confronted with her own geographical ideas – developed through extensive, incisive debates in the discipline – being used in ways that were essentially at odds with her careful, complex, and fundamentally feminist contributions about the openness of place and the importance of relationality in shaping identities and life chances (e.g., Massey, 1998). The aspects of these Masseyian ideas, including power-geometry, related to calls for social justice were well-received in Venezuelan policymaking. But Bolivarian discourse, especially the words of Chávez (e.g., 2007c) and his close advisors (e.g., Briceño Méndez 2014), emphasized certain vocabularies of “geography” – i.e., “extent,” “volume,” “distance,” “equilibrium,” “territory,” “centrality,” and the need to measure and master these – that were much more fixed (both knowable and non-dynamic), binary (e.g., correct/incorrect, new/old, positive/negative, Bolivarian/imperial), and indeed masculinist (i.e., with a view toward controlling and dominating) than any genuinely Masseyian perspective would allow. Feminist geographers have long criticized how geographical terms, and perspectives attributed to geography, can be used to cast space as inert and dominable (e.g., Rose 1993; Sundberg 2003). We can see the way Massey’s notions became part of revolutionary policy in Caracas was especially inflected with these impulses to measure, master, and dominate – even within a progressive agenda.

Another expedient sacrifice of Massey’s repertoire in its Venezuelan circulation has been its conflation with Lefebvre’s (1967) notion of the right to the city. In the eyes of Bolivarian officials, both contributions, when denuded of their complexity, enter a toolkit of critical ideas for ready application; in this case, making Caracas a more just city through measurably greater residential inclusion in central, symbolic locations. Either thinker may well have supported the progressive arc of Bolivarian policies as worthy of burying their own nuances and philosophical inconsonance. However much the drift toward a singularly populist discourse – about *the* people, retaking *the* city – might have resonated with some of Lefebvre’s sensibilities, it would have certainly given Massey pause as to just how “critical” was this “new



power-geometry” now under physical construction. “To be ‘critical’ means different things in different places,” reflected Blomley (2008, 290) in his treatise on the different trajectories of “critical” geographic work beyond the Anglophone world. In Venezuela, this article shows how Massey’s concept of power-geometry was dramatically shorn, beyond her control, to justify an emphasis on surfaces and aesthetics as manifestations of political claims on place.

Second, we see in this case what gets built from Massey’s theory in the politicized construction of new material and symbolic geographies, as strategic territories (Halvorsen et al 2019) and showcase landscapes (Lyall and Valdivia 2019; Cloke and Dickinson 2019) of Bolivarianism. Massey believed firmly in the inseparability of theory, practice, and politics (Lee 2018, 148-149), yet there are relatively few examples of literally building from such a critical and far-reaching theoretical intervention as power-geometry. Massey viewed power-geometry as a lens for seeing inequality and how it operated geographically, for thinking about ways to grapple with changing its composition. The idea of creating a whole “new power-geometry” as a national agenda was rather more sweeping, exceeding while also simplifying Massey’s (2008b, 497) envisagement. Attempting to build this theory into policies, programs, infrastructures, and places has been a major experiment in Venezuela, and its traces in the center of Caracas are one especially visible, urbanized application of Massey’s contribution. Regardless of one’s views on Chávez, or Maduro, or the larger Bolivarian project and its trajectory, we can see in Caracas that theory has been built into something tangible, which can be analyzed in terms of its benefits, its flaws, and its consequences in the places it has rendered.

Apart from the fidelity of the official Venezuelan implementation of Massey’s theory as revolutionary city-building, we can also glean lessons about how building speaks back to theory. These physical constructions signal one form of inclusion in the city, but they stand alongside deprivation in Venezuela’s worsening crisis. They show an emphasis on the semiotic demonstration of allegiances, yet these are also particularly substantial rather than superficial constructions – as homes and everyday spaces of belonging. Ultimately, the projected landscape of Bolivarianism in Caracas does cast a kind of ownership over the terrain, a common sense, that becomes the norm against which critics must argue, and a territory upon which supporters can mobilize. For some, this projection becomes easier to dismiss, especially in the crucible of staggering humanitarian crisis. For others, having a home – a locus of physical belonging in the city – is difficult to diminish, even more so in the face of other threats or uncertainties (e.g., Zubillaga, Llorens, and Souto 2019; Leon 2020). This is a physical and emotional foothold, a source of pride and inclusion despite wider suffering, that many

marginalized Venezuelans have never experienced before, with constant visual reminders throughout central Caracas.

Writing three decades ago about the earlier Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutionary contexts, geographer David Slater (1986, 181) pondered:

To what extent is it possible to combine new forms of socialist democracy with a viable and reproducible strategy of socio-economic transformation, when the inherited structures of peripheral capitalism throw up so many barriers and plant so many constraints?

Slater was suggesting that the limits of critical intervention and uplift in the Caribbean and Central America resulted from their position in what was, essentially, a proto-vision of a broader power-geometry of capitalist development. Massey – an intellectual comrade of Slater’s – would not introduce the power-geometry concept for another decade, but this articulation of disadvantageous positioning presaged some of the challenges facing the Bolivarian project of transformation yet to come. Despite the Venezuelan advantage of access to oil resources even in crisis, the culmination of a new, urbanized power-geometry in practice has limited itself to a *viviendista* (shelterist) delivery of centrally located housing units, but without connecting to a broader project of rebuilding or retrofitting the city in a more open-ended process of socialist place-making. The Caracas experience, then, shows us an attempt to “revolutionize” the city otherwise, with a particular application of critical geographic thought – different from its Latin American socialist forebears, but also from its non-socialist Latin American contemporaries that have garnered far more attention, such as Brazil and Colombia (see Maclean 2015; Friendly 2017; Montero 2017a). Rather than dismissing these Caraqueño interventions as simple propaganda or shoddy authoritarian implementation, this openly politicized endeavor must be taken seriously as shaping the territorial context in which strategies of loyalty and dissent in the current, deep Venezuelan crisis are unfolding in the capital.

While neither Chávez nor Massey survived to see the maneuvers of urbanizing a “new power-geometry” that have been implemented today, features of this trajectory were clear from early on, when both were alive and engaged in conversations with each other about the importance of “ideas” (Massey 2008b). Although Massey did voice disagreements on process and some conceptual definitions related to the institutionalization of revolutionary policies by

Chávez (see Ramírez Velásquez 2010, 169-170), as far as primary-documentary evidence indicates she never applied the kind of devastating critique – and certainly not the sharp feminist insight for which she became well known – to the geography turn in Bolivarian Venezuela.

We might imagine that Massey would argue that transformation of urban landscapes against both an imperialist world order and a longstanding class hierarchy within Venezuela are worthy endeavors; but it is unlikely that she would have ever supported the personalized iconography of marking a space as “Bolivarian,” nor that she would have seen the insertion of spartan social housing units in the interstices of the capital’s center as any kind of tidy solution to larger, multiplex social problems. These kinds of interventions, however, come from that masculinist view of geography, and are grounded in elements of geographical vocabulary that are powerful precisely because they are simplistic. This suggests a certain power-geometry to geographical vocabulary itself, as well as why Massey did not intervene more forcefully here. Massey was impeccably rigorous in her intellectualism, but as her longtime academic companion Roger Lee (2018, 173) eulogized, “she also ‘needed political heroes’ and was, perhaps, ‘unduly kind and blind to the weaknesses’ of those who, like Hugo Chávez, enthusiastically understood the world politically in line with her own views.” Supporting the Bolivarian geographical project in relatively uncritical fashion, then, was most likely a strategic move, recognizing the larger power-geometry in which Chávez was enmeshed, and which any transformative effort deploying geographic thought must confront. In these moves and mutations, we can also discern particular contours to the geographies of theory (Roy 2009; Jazeel 2011) in which Massey’s ideas were able to circulate with significant influence – to the point of concrete operationalization – but also suffering substantial alteration. Such paths, priorities, and transformations illuminate the importance of understanding more than just how “power-geometry” as a concept has traveled; these routes and their unique materializations only make sense, and can be critically assessed, if we engage with the power-geometries that underpin the geographies of theory themselves, such as the position and composition of the Bolivarian experiment in Venezuela.

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