

# Managing migrants' spaces after emigration: Caracas, Departure City

Gestión de espacios de migrantes después de la emigración:

Caracas, 'Departure City'

Gerir os espaços dos migrantes após a emigração:

Caracas, 'Departure City'

Pratiques de gardiennage dans un contexte d'émigration:

Caracas, 'Departure City'

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## Abstract

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The deterioration of living conditions in Venezuela has triggered an unprecedented migratory crisis. More than seven million Venezuelans have fled the country. While a continental refugee crisis and an emergent diaspora have received attention, the local impact of emigration remains unexplored. Locally, emigration manifests itself as an ever-growing and unique vacancy. In Caracas, migrants' left-behind domestic spaces are managed through relational, trust-based, and dynamic practices that revolve around their preservation and reinvention, implicating local actors in the migration process and creating new forms of transnational cooperation. This article examines emergent practices of care in Caracas. It presents an overview of the Venezuelan crisis and the disciplinary frameworks for examining the impact of emigration on urban development. Through interviews and photography, the research offers accounts of *cuidadores* and highlights their role in protecting and reinventing migrants' domestic spaces. Preliminary findings show the important role that local actors play in supporting migration and the use of vacant spaces to satisfy local needs. These findings also suggest potential spatial and urban transformations taking place through practices of care and cooperation in a context of emigration and collapse.

**Keywords:** Caracas, caretaking, crisis, departure city, emigration

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## Resumen

El deterioro de las condiciones de vida en Venezuela ha desencadenado una crisis migratoria sin precedentes. Más de siete millones de venezolanos han huido del país. Mientras la crisis continental de refugiados y la diáspora naciente han recibido atención, el impacto local de la emigración permanece inexplorado. A nivel local, la emigración se manifiesta como un vacío singular y creciente. En Caracas, este vacío se gestiona a través de prácticas de cuidado dinámicas, relacionales, y basadas en la confianza que preservan y reinventan espacios domésticos, implicando a actores locales en el proceso de migración y creando nuevas formas de cooperación transnacional. Este artículo examina prácticas de cuidado emergentes en la Caracas de hoy. Se presenta una síntesis de la crisis venezolana y los marcos disciplinares para estudiar el impacto de la emigración en el desarrollo urbano. A través de entrevistas y fotografías la investigación recoge diversos testimonios de cuidadores y destaca su papel en la preservación de espacios domésticos de migrantes. Se ofrecen hallazgos preliminares que señalan el papel fundamental que juegan actores locales en el apoyo a la migración y el rol de espacios vacíos en satisfacer necesidades locales. Estos hallazgos sugieren el potencial de prácticas de cuidado así como a las posibilidades más amplias de la arquitectura en reconocer el potencial de espacios vacíos y prácticas de cuidado en la transformación espacial y urbana en un contexto de emigración y colapso.

**Palabras clave:** Caracas, cuidado, crisis, ciudad de salida, emigración

## Résumé

La détérioration des conditions de vie au Venezuela a déclenché une crise migratoire sans précédent. Plus de sept millions de Vénézuéliens ont fui le pays. Alors qu'une crise de réfugiés continentale et une diaspora émergente ont attiré l'attention, l'impact local de l'émigration reste inexploré. Au niveau local, l'émigration se manifeste sous la forme d'une vacance croissante et unique. À Caracas, les espaces domestiques laissés par les migrants sont gérés à travers des pratiques relationnelles, basées sur la confiance et dynamiques qui tournent autour de leur préservation et de leur réinvention, impliquant les acteurs locaux dans le processus de migration et créant de nouvelles formes de coopération transnationale. Cet article examine les pratiques émergentes de soins à Caracas. Il présente un aperçu de la crise vénézuélienne et des cadres disciplinares pour examiner l'impact de l'émigration sur le développement urbain. À travers des entretiens et des photographies, la recherche offre des récits de cuidadores et met en évidence leur rôle dans la protection et la réinvention des espaces domestiques des migrants. Les premières conclusions montrent le rôle important que jouent les acteurs locaux dans le soutien à la migration et l'utilisation des espaces vacants pour satisfaire les besoins locaux. Ces résultats suggèrent également des transformations spatiales et urbaines potentielles qui se produisent grâce aux pratiques de soins et de coopération dans un contexte d'émigration et d'effondrement.

## Resumo

A deterioração das condições de vida na Venezuela desencadeou uma crise migratória sem precedentes. Mais de sete milhões de venezuelanos fugiram do país, resultando em uma crise de refugiados continental e uma diáspora emergente. No entanto, o impacto local da emigração permanece pouco explorado. Em Caracas, a emigração se manifesta como uma crescente e singular vacância. Localmente, os espaços domésticos deixados pelos migrantes são gerenciados por práticas dinâmicas, baseadas na confiança e nas relações, que visam preservar e reinventar esses espaços, envolvendo atores locais no processo migratório e criando novas formas de cooperação transnacional. Este artigo examina as práticas emergentes de cuidado em Caracas, oferecendo uma visão geral da crise venezuelana e dos quadros disciplinares para analisar o impacto da emigração no desenvolvimento urbano. Por meio de entrevistas e fotografia, a pesquisa relata as experiências dos cuidadores e destaca seu papel na proteção e reinvenção dos espaços domésticos dos migrantes. Resultados preliminares revelam a importância dos atores locais no apoio à migração e no uso dos espaços vagos para atender às necessidades locais. Essas descobertas também indicam transformações espaciais e urbanas potenciais ocorrendo por meio das práticas de cuidado e cooperação em um contexto de emigração e colapso.

**Palavras-chave:** Caracas, cuidado, crise, cidade de partida, emigração

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**Mots-clés:** Caracas, soin, crise, ville de départ, émigration

## Introduction

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For more than two decades, Venezuela has been immersed in a complex crisis marked by economic decline, political instability, violence, and infrastructure breakdown. The rapid deterioration of living conditions since 2015 and the ensuing collapse have triggered a migratory crisis of unprecedented proportions. More than seven million Venezuelans—24% of the population—have fled the country (R4V, 2022)<sup>[1]</sup>. This exodus is opening new migration corridors along the continent, creating extraordinary pressure on neighboring countries, and producing a diaspora that plays an increasingly important role, both economically and symbolically. While the outward aspects of the migratory crisis have been the focus of academic research, the local dimension of emigration remains largely unexplored. Indeed, the sheer speed and magnitude of the migratory crisis are transforming life within the country, creating another manifestation of the problem that is experienced locally.

In Caracas, Venezuela’s capital and largest city, emigration has resulted in an over-abundance of vacant homes and apartments. These spaces, however, are not abandoned or ruined. On the contrary, migrants’ need to protect their left-behind properties has set in motion emergent practices that revolve around the preservation and reinvention of domestic spaces. These practices create new relations between migrants and their local counterparts, supporting migration and expanding transnational exchange beyond a one-way flow of economic remittances. As left-behind spaces are incorporated back into the dynamics of everyday life, they sustain local livelihoods, economies, and new forms of solidarity and social life. This article argues that these practices of preservation, use, and transformation of vacant spaces in Caracas depart from the predominant framework used in urban studies for describing the impact of emigration in cities, organized around the notion of “shrinking city” (Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2013; Oswalt et al., 2006; Oswalt, 2019). As a case study, the Venezuelan capital contrasts with dynamics of urban shrinkage and potentially expands on the novel concept of “departure city” (König, 2016; König & Vöckler, 2018) proposed to describe the complex and often contradictory forces at play in contexts of contemporary emigration.

This article aims to contribute to the topic of the current issue by examining the role of local actors in supporting migrants’ trajectories through the management of their left-behind domestic spaces. Furthermore, the theme of the call allows framing human action itself as infrastructural, sustaining survival, solidarity, and social life amid collapse and emigration. To address these ideas, the article will answer the following research questions: How do local actors interact with absent owners? What is exchanged and through what platforms or mechanisms? How does generalized collapse, from the absence of institutional frameworks to the organization of daily life, shape this relationship? How are spaces restructured or transformed to allow for new uses and needs?

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[1] Statistics compiled by international cooperation agency R4V are the most widely used for quantifying Venezuelan emigration. However, this estimation does not consider populations in transit, with irregular status in receiving countries, or Venezuelans residing abroad with double nationality.

*Dado que el conocimiento es un proceso de construcción social, es relevante sustentar la relación que posee el discurso con la formación del urbanista a través de una revisión de investigaciones, como sí de un trabajo colaborativo se tratase.*

Through individual accounts of local *cuidadores* or caretakers, the article presents initial findings on emergent practices in the context of departure. As part of an ongoing doctoral investigation, these preliminary results show relevant participation of local actors in migrant trajectories through emergent practices that also allow ways of coping with everyday challenges. At the same time, these findings suggest transformations that extend beyond the domestic realm and have an urban impact. However, exploring this potentially significant implication is beyond the reach of the present article and remains open to future investigation. An examination of spatial transformations in Caracas through the lens of emigration can allow a dialogue with global debates, expanding on the conceptual framework of the departure city while considering the Venezuelan capital as a site where abandonment and ruination are creatively challenged, opening new horizons of possibility for urban transformation amid crises.

Methodologically, this article is based on the findings of two research stages. First, a phase of remote inquiry of one year between 2021 and 2022. Through literature review, social media search, interviews, and analysis of real estate data, the research uncovered a broad range of practices entangled with emigration, from preserving the lives of left-behind children and elderly to maintenance and repair of left-behind properties, simulation of occupancy, temporary inhabitation, adaptation and repurposing of vacant homes, sales and auctions of personal objects, and citizen activism. Subsequently, a fieldwork phase in November of 2022 focused on specific cases of management of left-behind domestic spaces. Five caretakers, who look after migrants' properties in various ways, were interviewed individually around a similar set of questions. Nevertheless, the varied circumstances of their engagement, personal backgrounds, education level, occupation, and context of the interviews shaped each conversation. These semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded (Patton, 2015). Interviews were carried out in Spanish and translated into English for this article. Pseudonyms are employed for the protection of sources.

This article is organized into four sections. First, it presents an overview of the Venezuelan collapse in quantitative and qualitative terms. The crisis is presented not merely as background but as a volatile milieu that shapes everyday actions and attitudes. Then, the theoretical framework of the departure city is discussed, aiming to place Caracas within it. The section on

'caretaking stories' presents excerpts from five interviews in a narrative form, capturing common aspects of these practices across various domestic spaces, scales, and socio-economic settings. These stories are then discussed and contextualized as preliminary findings, finally offering concluding remarks on the study.

## The Venezuelan Crisis and Emigration

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The Venezuelan crisis is characterized by a specific combination of economic mismanagement, political conflict, institutional decline, infrastructural breakdown, and social fracture that have fundamentally reshaped the country. Between 2013 and 2020, Venezuela lost over 75% of its GDP (IMF, 2023). As of November 2022, 81.5% of the population lived in poverty (Freitez et al., 2022). Approximately 38% of the population is under-or-unemployed, while informal employment encompasses ever-larger sectors of the economy (Freitez et al., 2021). Venezuela has been defined as a failed state (Naím & Toro, 2018), a precarious state (Ávila, 2022), a weak state (Polga-Hecimovich, 2020), and a fragile state (Fragile States Index, 2023). The setback of political freedom and civil liberties, press censorship, and substantial human rights abuses have been widely documented. Violations of private property, including invasion, expropriation, fines, or temporary occupations, have been sanctioned by a legal framework gradually established over the last two decades. Public services like transportation, electricity or water are subjected to frequent breakdowns. Almost 80% of the population lacks access to sufficient food or food of quality (Freitez et al., 2022), evidencing the multidimensionality and complexity of the crisis. Additionally, the decline of state institutions has been accompanied by the dismantling of the instruments for its quantification (Bello Rodríguez, 2023). There are few official statistics, leading to voids, lack of access to information, and contradictory estimations, complicating accurate assessments of the multiple aspects of the crisis.

The perspective of the collapse as a prolonged, continuous unraveling prevents its conceptualization as a clearly outlined episode from which the country can emerge or break with, creating a setting where established parameters for evaluating disasters and implementing urban recovery are rendered useless. As Thomas Vale and Lawrence Campanella (2005, p. 7) have pointed out, "protracted socioeconomic decay

makes urban resilience exceptionally difficult to sustain.” From the point of view of urban resilience, the effects of a long and complex crisis have resulted in a city that is not able to safeguard human life, provide adequate employment, access to health, critical services, or transport infrastructure, nor guarantee the right to education, participation, or justice (ARUP & The Rockefeller Foundation, 2014).

Beyond quantitative representations, the ‘reshaping’ that the crisis is responsible for must be understood through its physical dimension and the operative framework it creates. Public service collapse demands continuous adjustment of daily routines or the recourse to private alternatives. Informal occupations compensate for formal employment or completely replace it. Fear and distrust mediate human interaction, limiting access to public space and displacing social life towards controlled environments (Freitez et al., 2017). The crisis is thus “inscribed in the everyday urban landscape, in its material structures such as roads, residences, and office buildings, and in social interaction and relations of power, profit and subsistence” (Mbembe & Roitman, 1995, p. 327). Its daily management requires specific “ways of doing” (Mbembe & Roitman, 1995, p. 340), constant improvisations, course corrections, and negotiations to survive, navigate, resist, or profit from unstable and uncertain conditions.

Any account of the Venezuelan crisis would be incomplete without considering emigration’s wide and profound impact. Generalized collapse has rapidly transformed Venezuela –historically a host country– into one of the world’s largest producers of migrants, on par with Ukraine and Syria. Of the more than seven million migrants<sup>[2]</sup>, five million have left the country since 2015 (Freitez et al., 2022). What began as a slow, economic-driven, and calculated decision limited to the middle class has become an urgent measure cutting across the entire social spectrum, a ‘flight’ no longer driven by the desire to improve personal living conditions but by the need to minimize the risk of staying, one of the trademarks of forced migration (Fischer et al., 1997). The migratory pattern that developed between 2016 and 2020 was characterized by unaccompanied men or women of productive age, diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and education levels, leaving by land with little planning or proper

[2] *Observatorio de la Diáspora Venezolana* estimated 7.35 million migrants in November of 2022. ANOVA Policy Research, using satellite image analysis, independently estimated 4.4 million migrants in 2020, one million less than UN numbers at the time. See *El Nacional* (2022) See also ANOVA (2022), an example of the contradictions that occur in the absence of official numbers.

paperwork (Lafuente & Genatios, 2021). This trend is consistent with documented cases of rapid change that force families to send a member abroad to ensure the survival of the rest (Castles, 2000). Recent developments following the COVID-19 pandemic point to new migration routes to North America and to a wave of family reunification abroad related to the stabilization of migrants’ economic situation and effective integration policies in receiving countries. As Gunnar Malmberg (1997) has pointed out, this pattern corresponds to the formation of established migration systems that characterize emigration countries, which, once initiated, can evolve independently of local developments. Despite its impact on neighboring countries, Venezuelan migration is by now a worldwide phenomenon, consolidating a veritable global diaspora<sup>[3]</sup>.

In Caracas, the consequences of emigration and its entanglement with the broader crisis are evident at various levels. While its population appears to be decreasing<sup>[4]</sup>, the spatial and urban transformations the city is undergoing cannot be reduced to abandonment, ruin, and the disappearance of urban life. Outward migration is partially compensated by internal arrivals from an even more precarious periphery. The housing surplus created by emigration has led to a 40% decrease in prices in the last decade (Fernández, 2021). Paradoxically, in a climate of economic volatility, real estate has become a haven for capital, leading to a localized boom in high-end commercial and residential construction, which has produced more than one million square meters of vacant space that overlap with migration-related vacancy (Fernández, 2021).

## Theoretical Frameworks

In the field of urban studies, the most widely used framework for analyzing the impact of outward migration on cities is the “shrinking city.” This concept explains urban decline associated with de-industrialization, suburbanization, economic or political restructuring, or demographic changes. While urban decline is as old as cities themselves, the shrinking city has been identified as “new in its foundations, spatial ma-

[3] *Observatorio de la Diáspora Venezolana*, has recorded Venezuelan migrants and communities in more than 90 countries. See *El Nacional* (2022).

[4] For the official census of 2011, the population of Caracas was 2.904.376 inhabitants. ENCOVI’s population projection for 2021 was 2.964.365. This variation accounts for a 1.12% yearly population growth between 2010 and 2015, and a negative growth of 1.13% between 2015-20. See *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, República Bolivariana de Venezuela* (2014).

nifestations, and social, economic, and environmental implications" (Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2013, p. 2), as a mode of urban transformation specific to globalization and the impending end of global population growth. Within this framework, growth and shrinkage coexist globally or nationally, yet at the expense of each other, as global or national "poles of growth" (Oswalt et al., 2006, p. 6) attract population from peripheral regions, resulting in their depopulation and urban decay. However, the discourse on shrinking cities has recently eschewed the negative implications of urban decline and argued for a future "culture of shrinkage" centered on "distinct forms of renewal and change." (Oswalt, 2019, p. 26). Shrinking cities have been conceptualized as sites of cultural and environmental repair through practices that exploit the restorative potential of abandoned spaces, leading to innovative forms of urban development, governance, public art, or community organization<sup>[5]</sup>.

For its part, the departure city refers to places where space "is fundamentally shaped by emigration" (König, 2016). The concept aims to expand the disciplinary discussion on the urban impact of migrations beyond growth-shrinkage oppositions. In this sense, the departure city points to a more complex situation in which the apparently conflicting forces of outward migration, population growth, and urban development coexist and reinforce each other within a city, producing specific spatial and cultural transformations. These transformations include informal and temporary housing solutions, diaspora investment in real estate, the emergence of an emigration infrastructure in the form of specialized businesses and transportation hubs, the "symbolic presence of the elsewhere" (König, 2016) through western-like architectural styles and foreign nomenclature, and the general synchronization of daily life with the rhythms of emigration (König, 2016; König & Vöckler, 2018; Coman et al., 2019). In this sense, the departure city portrays a built environment whose physical and cultural constitution sustains and stimulates emigration.

The concept of departure city has been employed to describe urban environments in post-socialist and post-conflict countries of the European periphery where circular labor migration with the European Union is common. In this context, the research focus has been on migrants' experiences and economic involvement in cities of origin. In the literature, these

topics have been explored through migrants' participation in local building activity in future-oriented, desire-driven, individual projects that shape the built environment and building culture. Urban transformation in the departure city is a specific expression of transnational networks and the flow of financial resources, knowledge, and information these networks sustain. In examined cases, this specificity lies in migrants' participation in local building activity through future-oriented, desire-driven, individual projects that shape the local environment and building culture. While the concept of departure city has been limited to European cities, authors have called to expand "the scale and scope of the departure city in its manifold realizations [through] empirical work" (König & Vöckler, 2018, p. 415).

The impact of emigration on recent urban development in Venezuela has received little attention. In a detailed analysis of urban decline in Caracas from the perspective of urbicide, Alberto Lovera (2023) only dedicates a few lines to emigration, framing it as a consequence of deteriorating living conditions in places of origin. Marco Negrón, who has written extensively on Caracas and framed urban problems within political and economic circumstances, briefly mentions migration in his detailed analysis of the city's recent urban development (Negrón, 2021). An exception is the research of Lorenzo González Casas (2020, 2023), who coined the term 'urban osteoporosis,' alluding to a condition in which structures remain intact but internally weakened. The author draws parallels between the Venezuelan capital and historic depopulation and urban decline processes and suggests the future incorporation of the city's vacant architectural inventory through recycling and repurposing strategies within new institutional, economic, legal, urban, and professional frameworks. His analysis ends with whether structural changes are necessary before any measure for urban recovery can be effectively implemented.

In this disciplinary landscape, a thorough examination of the impact of emigration and its intersection with a generalized collapse in Caracas is a pending task that exceeds the scope of this article. However, conceptualizing the Venezuelan capital as a departure city is an opportunity to probe this theoretical framework in Latin America and to examine the city's urban transformation through a new lens, highlighting migrants' involvement, transnational cooperation, and the role of local actors in shaping the built environment. The individual stories presented here should be seen in this light.

[5] One relevant example are the numerous grassroots and artistic initiatives in Detroit and rustbelt cities in the United States in recent years. See: Dewar & Thomas, (2013)

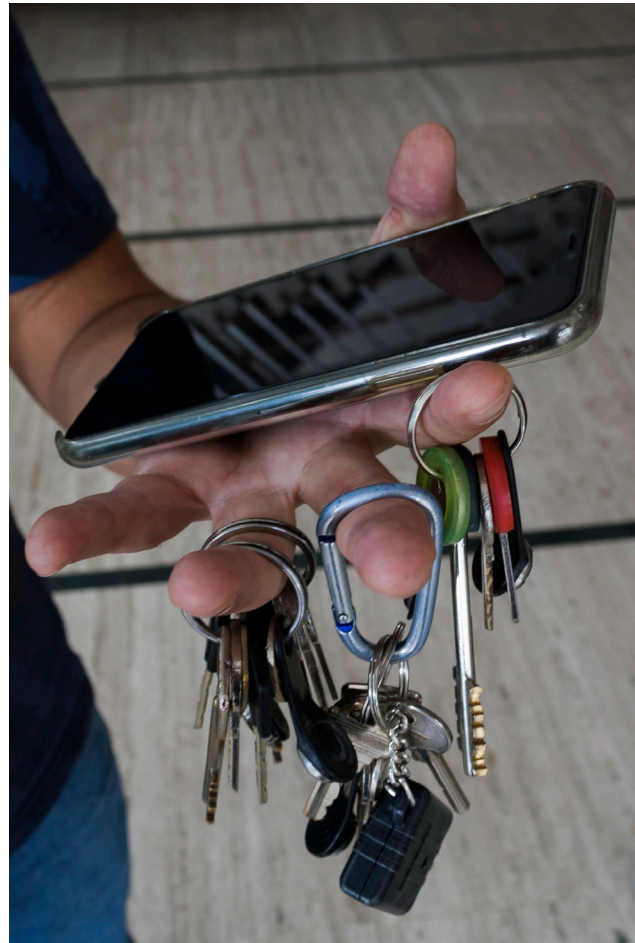
## Caretaking Stories

This section focuses on the individual stories of five *cuidadores* or caretakers who look after migrants' domestic spaces. The connection with the spaces and far-away owners, new relations with neighbors, daily routines, maintenance or transformation of spaces, as well as the entanglement of work with personal trajectories and the country's crisis, were the main topics. Exploring these aspects required expanding upon predetermined questions, allowing a deeper understanding of each case. In the cases of Luis and Aída, accompanying them to the homes they look after allowed a glimpse of their routines and the state of these spaces.

Luis is a photographer, teacher, and cultural promoter. He became a caretaker gradually and looking after the apartments of relatives and friends coincided with the closing of a cycle of his professional life due to the situation in the country. "I started by taking care of my ex-partner's property, then of his family, friends, and acquaintances," he comments. "My job is based on referrals. I am a reference here, and people look for someone with my profile", he explains, alluding to his managerial capabilities. His work requires constant supervision and responsibility, and Luis feels a personal identification with the properties. "I look after them as if they were mine," he adds.

Luis manages twenty apartments in ten different buildings in Chacao, the smallest and wealthiest municipality in Caracas. According to his estimations, half of the apartments in every building are empty. Vacancy creates problems as absent owners fall behind on payments. As a result, buildings fall into disrepair. In response, new forms of collaboration have emerged around common problems, generating new relationships among neighbors. "I'm on the condominium chats groups for each of these buildings," Luis explains. "I have to be attentive to what's going on. That involves getting to know each other and participating. There's a domestic and very informal dimension," he adds. "Figuring out everyday matters requires a special effort; it is in itself an enterprise", he admits, in relation to the knowledge required to navigate daily challenges.

The cell phone is Luis' main work instrument. With it, he manages repairs, sells furniture, receives payments, and interacts with owners, tenants, and neighbors. Luis manages a team of cleaners, plumbers,



**Figure 1.** Keys to several properties are in Luis's hands as we walk the neighborhood. **Source:** photo by author

painters, and electricians who assist him in daily tasks. He thinks of his work as "looking after those who left and helping those who stayed."

Luis's clients are middle-class professionals and artists who left the country in the last decade. "After migrating, people realized their properties could provide them with an income. It's curious. You leave because of the crisis, but once abroad, the country provides for you." According to him, "People left their houses set up. They emigrated thinking about coming back. After a few years, this changed". For Luis, this has meant putting away valuable objects and rearranging furniture, making spaces suitable for tenants and appealing in the rental market. Thus, most apartments contain migrants' belongings, and rooms are often turned into locked storage. The apartments are advertised online as a way to reach a foreign audience, who are the ideal tenants because they can afford higher fees. Properties are rented to staff who work



for many of the international organizations that have arrived or increased their presence in Venezuela in recent years to work on the most urgent aspects of the crisis. A small percentage of tenants are families from other cities who come to Caracas for medical treatment or paperwork.

Lina, who studied filmmaking in the United States, runs one of the several property management businesses that have emerged in Caracas in recent years. She started her company in 2018, at a moment when, due to the crisis, she felt "only necessity-based work would be successful." Despite a strong social media presence, she relies on word-of-mouth recommendations. She describes her work as "very delicate," referring to the trust that mediates her relationship with her clients, all of whom live abroad. At the time of our interview, she managed eight properties, both apartments and houses. "I personally open and close each home. I check that everything is in order, and if something needs repair, I have a team that can fix it." She updates owners after every visit by sending photos and videos from her phone. For her work, she receives payments in US dollars to a foreign account, a practice that evades the Venezuelan fiscal system, as her company is not legally registered. She speaks of her work as the protection of value. "I don't want people to lose their properties." "My work preserves an asset so that when the time comes, the property can be sold or rented."

Aída looks after a large single-family house in the southeast of Caracas. Her boss, a German immigrant who arrived in Venezuela in the 1970s, left in 2018, moving his family back to Europe. In a country with a precarious social welfare system, Aída's continued engagement after her employer's emigration constitutes her main source of economic sustenance. However, her work is an extension of a professional relationship and an affective connection to her boss and his family. Her work also sustains her employer, albeit not economically. "My goal is to support the boss so he is at ease over there. Give him the peace of mind that someone is looking after his patrimony here," says Aída. She is present at the residence three days a week, overseeing cleaning, maintenance, and feeding pets. The large house was built more than forty years ago and is overflowed with problems that demand attention, from leaks and mold to fallen trees. Reparation costs are an economic burden for her employer, but the family does not intend to sell, rent, or return. The maintenance of the house extends beyond the limits of the property onto the sidewalk in front, kept clean and



Figure 2. Second bedrooms often become storage for owners' belongings.

Source: Photo by author

well-illuminated to create an appearance of occupancy. Aída is also part of the local Whatsapp chat group, where neighbors coordinate security actions, from lights and cameras to the distribution of trash in front of the vacant houses on the street, a measure intended to simulate the occupation of vacant homes.

The surplus of single-family houses has also led to covert transformations that defy zoning regulations. In *Los Palos Grandes*, a middle-class neighborhood, vacant houses are rapidly converted into restaurants, offices, and high-end shops. Daniel, a structural engineer turned entrepreneur, is a partner in a dining venture. His business now closed, operated for three years out of a vacant home owned by a migrant family. According to Daniel, the business had a yearly contract "for maintenance and repair of the property, but it did not allow any alterations." This contractual clause became the basis of the architectural strategy: a radical reprogramming of the house that left the spatial structure intact and concentrated all of the commercial activity in the garden and setbacks, where vendors operated food kiosks, and the crowds shared large communal tables. Some rooms remained closed off and contained the owners' belongings, overlapping the house's commercial use with its history as a family home. Exposure to the street was minimized, screening intense social and economic activity from the street. Daniel's venue operated with a temporary license secured through a contact in the municipality before being finally shut down. According to staff from the municipal planning office interviewed for this research, the proliferation of illegal businesses in vacant houses has prompted local residents to accept zoning upgrades, which the municipality had been promoting for many years.



Figure 3. Aida feeds left-behind tortoises as part of her routine.  
Source: Photo by author

Caucagüita, at the eastern edge of Caracas, was built in the 1970s and 80s as a state-sponsored *urbanización* for low and middle-income families. As in similar developments, residential blocks were soon surrounded by self-built settlements. The area known as Sector la A has 440 units distributed in 22 buildings. There, the coordinated action of neighbors looks after left-behind apartments and those living in them. There is no official emigration census, but Ana, a local community leader, recalls vacant units in every building. Her account of collective organization reveals dynamics more in common with those of distant middle-class neighborhoods than with nearby barrios. Residents have lived here for many decades, “everyone knows each other, and there is a sense of belonging, so people protect their spaces,” she explains. In contrast, “in ranchos where there is more mobility, the problems are different.” Ana describes an occasion when she noticed a leak on a ceiling and immediately notified the owner abroad and a time when neighbors collectively averted an invasion attempt on a vacant unit.

In Caucagüita, as in most of the country, migrating men and women of productive age often leave behind the elderly and children, sometimes in the care of one another. As emigration restructures families and living spaces, apartments have become a hub for extended families. Overcrowding is common and private-public boundaries are blurred as social areas are used for sleeping. Reliance on solidarity-based initiatives, NGOs and remittances and *bolsas*, bags of food distributed by the central government, is frequent. The inefficiency and political biases of this program<sup>[6]</sup>

[6] The use of government subsidies and social programs with political ends by the Venezuelan government has been widely documented. See for example: Vásquez Lezama, P. (2019).

prompted Georgette, a teacher by training, to run for a post at the local *Concejo Comunal*, where she is now in charge of food distribution in her neighborhood. Her leadership and knowledge of local living situations allow her to bypass government-imposed restrictions and allocate resources where they are most needed. She also negotiates benefits with various NGOs active in the area, skillfully navigating political conflicts “for the good of the community.”

## On the Management of Vacancy: Preliminary Findings

This section lists preliminary findings of the study. Each finding is synthesized as a statement and briefly developed as a separate paragraph.

Emigration does not univocally result in ruin and decay. In Caracas, the migratory crisis manifests itself through a growing and distinct form of vacancy, not equal to abandonment. On the contrary, abandonment—understood as breaking ties or giving up ownership—is rare in the city, particularly in the domestic realm. For middle-class migrants, property constitutes a ‘mooring,’ a fixed point around which mobility is organized and a site inevitably entangled in migration dynamics (Griffiths et al., 2013). As evidenced by participants, maintaining property prevents investment loss, generates income, or provides housing for left-behind families. Symbolically, properties extend ties to the homeland and the possibility of return, preserve a sense of citizenship and belonging, and question the finality of migration.

Vacancy is a space of possibility. Its management sustains livelihoods and economies and supports new forms of habitation, solidarity, community engagement, and social encounter. As shown by the stories above, the profile of the *cuidador* cuts across age, occupation, or class distinctions. Vacancy is a site of professional reinvention and entrepreneurship that have emerged amid the crisis. In this sense, the term ‘management’ is fitting for its multiple connotations since managing something entails handling it with a specific set of skills (both the job to be carried out and the context), treating it as a resource (as in stewardship or exploitation), and succeeding in doing so despite difficulties (as in coping).

Managing vacancy is a manifestation of the collapse of formal structures. In the absence of legal frameworks that protect private property or regulate employment, trust plays an essential role in mediating relationships between migrants and locals. The care of domestic properties creates specific relations between individuals, where economic considerations are entangled in personal relations that extend affective connections with the object of care. In acting on behalf of absent owners, these practices create new dependencies across international borders beyond the one-way flow of economic remittances.

The management of migrants' domestic spaces involves local actors in the dynamics of emigration. This involvement recasts emigration as a shared experience across international borders and brings non-mobile groups into the focus of migration research. This aspect has been explored in migration and departure city literature (Coman et al., 2019; Tan & Yeoh, 2011). However, local actors are typically framed as passive and supportive characters. While *cuidadores* in Caracas sustain migrants through labor, vacant spaces are reconfigured and re-signified spatially, programmatically, and symbolically. This process gives local actors a specific agency, a capacity for action that allows coping and navigating adverse circumstances of the crisis. In the Venezuelan context of emigration and breakdown, *cuidadores* are strategically positioned to meet the needs of migrants in such a way that it benefits and sustains them too. Vacant spaces and those who look after them are infrastructural in line with AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) notion of 'people as infrastructure' whereby individuals are part of a "complex combination of objects, spaces, persons, and practices" that create a platform for the reproduction of urban life (Simone, 2004, p. 408). This process creates complex yet provisional and fluid relationships around migration and locally within the city, from bypassing fiscal regulations to the tactics employed to simulate occupancy or the new networks around food distribution, security, and maintenance.

In light of the above, considering Caracas as a departure city can expand the disciplinary discussion around this concept by pointing to the socio-economic and urban regenerative potential of vacancy through the coordinated agency of migrants and non-migrants. This coordination shows a distinct mode of migrant participation and cross-border cooperation that differs from documented instances of diaspora involvement through remittances and real estate development. This process also repositions of local



Figure 4. View of residential buildings in Sector la A, Caucagüita

Source: Photo by author

actors with respect to the local environment through their involvement in migration dynamics.

## Concluding Remarks

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This article examined how specific practices emerging in a context of departure and crisis simultaneously sustain migrants' and locals' needs, expanding forms of exchange across borders and repositioning local actors with respect to their environment. Through stories of local *cuidadores*, the article aimed to depict various aspects that organize the management of migrants' spaces, from their daily routines, new forms of cooperation, the trust that mediates relations, as well as programmatic and spatial implications. In Caracas, caretaking provides an entry point for examining the interplay of broader phenomena at even the small scale of objects or domestic interiors. The management of vacant spaces points to architectural and urban transformations that can potentially expand disciplinary discourses on architecture and the city. As the Venezuelan crisis unravels and migratory patterns evolve, the conditions for spatial production will inevitably shift. In this volatile setting, the research cannot aspire to present more than a snapshot in time that captures the interaction of multiple factors. These considerations, which require the development of a singular methodology that draws from architectural and ethnographic sources and is aware of the limitations of the local context, particularly in terms of statistical and quantitative data, will be examined in subsequent stages of this research.

At the same time, expanding the theoretical framework of the departure city requires understanding emigration within a broader economic, social, and political context, broadening the cast of characters that fall within the scope of the research, and building common ground between geographically and culturally diverse instances of departure. Here, however, research should acknowledge the unique dynamics at play in a context beyond the Global North and the difficulty of fitting these within normative frameworks of urbanization. Vacancy and post-occupancy can provide a new point of departure for urban transformation. Thus, examining the mechanisms for managing left-behind spaces through local practices and cross-border cooperation can result in relevant knowledge in the context of other crises, most notably sustainable development, climate migration, and the global population decline of the 21st century. Instead of an outlook that begins with structural overhaul, small and incremental instances of transformation in the domain of everyday living that often coexist with collapse challenge the notion of structural change as a prerequisite for action and can potentially reinforce top-down measures when and if implemented.

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