

**Zeitschrift:** gta papers  
**Herausgeber:** gta Verlag  
**Band:** 7 (2022)

**Artikel:** The servantful house : a case study of Venezuelan quintas  
**Autor:** Davila, Valentina  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1046639>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 17.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Servantful House

## A Case Study of Venezuelan *Quintas*

Valentina Davila

### Homes

Modern Latin America's colonial past, with its marked inequality in the distribution of wealth, has resulted in a segregated population and service relationships based on gender, race, and class. This pattern has proved strikingly persistent across different times and political systems: democracy, authoritarian military rule, popular revolutions, and socialist experiments, including Venezuela's own socialist experience since the late 1990s. A tradition of hiring impoverished domestic workers to care for the middle and upper classes has long persisted. Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, a period of oil-infused economic prosperity magnified Venezuela's socioeconomic differences. In contrast to other economies, the number of impoverished women entering domestic service multiplied.<sup>1</sup> This dynamic strengthened a culture of dependence upon service workers, materializing in a vernacular bourgeois housing type locally known as the *quinta*, a general term of uncertain origin that implies affluence, land, property, walls, and, within them, the trappings of status. *fig.1*

*Quintas* are large, detached homes surrounded by gardens, picturesque vegetation, and diverse interior and exterior spaces for social events and private life. The interior architecture of a *quinta* typically follows a pattern that separates the core family's living spaces from those prescribed for women hired to perform maintenance and care work. For service areas, including the kitchen, laundry, and domestic workers' bedrooms, homeowners use cheaper, lower-quality materials, which amplify a sense of displacement from the rest of the house. This combination of spatial segregation and austere materiality reflects an unspoken need to separate the middle-class's domestic experiences from those of "others." Depending on their place in the building, employee and employer have markedly different personal stories. While inextricably linked through the dynamics of space and care work, the workers' and the employers' experiences are two sides of a multilayered reality.

This article focuses on the relationship between domestic architecture and care work from the perspective of Venezuelan domestic workers. It looks at *quintas* to highlight how the figure of the domestic care worker has influenced Venezuelan architecture and material culture. By placing these domestic workers at the center rather than at the margins of the narrative, it asks

Valentina Davila is a doctoral candidate at the Peter Guo-hua Fu School of Architecture at McGill University in Montreal.

<sup>1</sup> According to 2001 census statistics from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Venezuela, some 5.7 percent of the workforce is employed as domestic servants. For comparison, the United States has around 0.5 percent of its workforce so employed, and Australia 0.1 percent. See *Domestic Workers across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection* (Geneva: International Labor Office, 2013), 126.



how architecture shapes the dynamics of labor, especially care work. Inversely, to what extent does the figure of the domestic worker shape architecture?

My own starting position, with all its attendant bias, is what makes my observations possible: I grew up in the 1980s inside a beautiful *quinta* located in an upper-class neighborhood. My unquestioned privilege hinges on multiple generations of exploitative domestic labor relations. Our four-bedroom, 300-square-meter house was home for me, my brother, my mother, and a domestic worker named Mariana and her two children. From my vantage point, ours was a happy childhood. In hindsight, however, precisely those differences that were most successfully normalized now seem to me to be most jarring. These retrospective insights are at the core of my ethnographic method. Today, my memories of growing up as a member of the employer's family transform when I shift the narrative to fit Mariana and her children's perspectives. From an early age, labor dynamics teach Venezuelan children to differentiate between those who serve and those who are served, perpetuating an ideology in which race, gender, and labor correlate in specific ways. fig. 2

Architecture frames a set of rituals, routines, and everyday relations that inform people's standing in society. <sup>2</sup> The position of care workers' children inside the house determines their status in the broader social world, not least through the privileges visibly denied to them but given to employers' children. <sup>3</sup> Housing is therefore both a model and a crucible of the country's situation, an essential contributor to the social conflicts that have fueled Venezuela's ongoing turmoil.

Shortly after obtaining my architecture degree in Venezuela, I collaborated with a small domestic workers' co-op working to obtain federal funding to build their homes. This professional engagement permitted me to enter the *quintas* from the service entrance, both literally and figuratively: my experience as the domestic worker's "guest" stood in sharp contrast to my previous position at the receiving end of care. This was the moment at which I began to realize the different ways domestic space could be inhabited and that, in Venezuela, separate personal stories develop depending on their subject's place in the building. This interaction marked the beginning of my research into the territory of the Venezuelan domestic worker.

A decade later, from 2017 to 2020, I spent several months studying domestic workers' laboring and living conditions through multisited ethnographic work in private homes. To ensure that domestic workers were not forced to participate, I approached them informally in public spaces in the late afternoon hours after

<sup>2</sup> See Juhani Pallasmaa, "Identity, Intimacy and Domicile — Notes on the Phenomenology of Home," in David N. Benjamin, David Stea, and Eje Arén, eds., *The Home: Words, Interpretations, Meanings and Environments* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995), 131–47, here 131.

<sup>3</sup> See Mary Romero, *The Maid's Daughter: Living Inside and Outside the American Dream* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

they had finished their work. In my hometown, Merida, I visited areas (e.g., La Mara, Las Tapias, Alto Chama, and Belensate) where I knew domestic care workers were employed. Once they left the *quintas*, these women became hypervisible on the empty streets. fig. 3

Only after the domestic workers agreed to participate in my research did I contact their employers. I asked for a short interview and permission to access and photograph their homes. Most willingly opened their doors to me because of our shared class status. Once inside the *quintas*, I focused on domestic workers' spatial experiences, following in their steps, entering the buildings through the back, and remaining with them at all times. I acknowledge the limitations of my own practice to map and document the workers' embodied experiences. In many ways, I am attempting to act as a translator and commentator navigating between the two extremes of labor dynamics. 4

Despite the fact that the *quinta* presents a form of housing for the upper and affluent middle classes, this type is not a European import but is part of the vernacular building tradition of Latin America, and in some crucial regards it spatially reflects particular local relationships. The act of ethnographic (re)drawing of these particular buildings captures the spaces of those serving and being served in their entanglement. Drawings have the capacity to archive undocumented and invisible labor even in the spaces between objects and in the relation of sites of care, labor, and

4 See Debi Mahāśvetā and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories* (New York: Routledge, 1995), xxiii.



**fig. 1** A Venezuelan *quinta* built in 1971 and impeccably maintained by its architect-owner. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020

**fig. 2** The employer and domestic worker's grandchildren find common ground to play and jump at the back of the house. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2017

refuge. 5 My method included dimensioned drawings of floor plans that illustrated spatial relations such as those of the constrained service areas. I annotated these plans with subjective observations based on my field notes, seeking out seemingly insignificant details that are revealing nevertheless. fig. 4 a

Later, I translated the initial drawings into architectural plans for the *quinta*. They form an atlas of domestic care workers' spaces. fig. 4 b In Venezuela, the consultation of public records frequently depends on partisanship, favoritism, or corruption, and the infrastructures for storing and maintaining documents are often in a poor state. In the context of the flawed bureaucratic control of municipal building records (including architectural plans), my decision to draw the buildings and publicize these drawings is also politicized.

**fig. 3** Domestic workers walking in the streets of La Mara, an upper-class neighborhood populated with *quintas*. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020

5 Huda Tayob, "Subaltern Architectures: Can Drawing 'Tell' a Different Story?," *Architecture and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2018), 203–22, here 214.



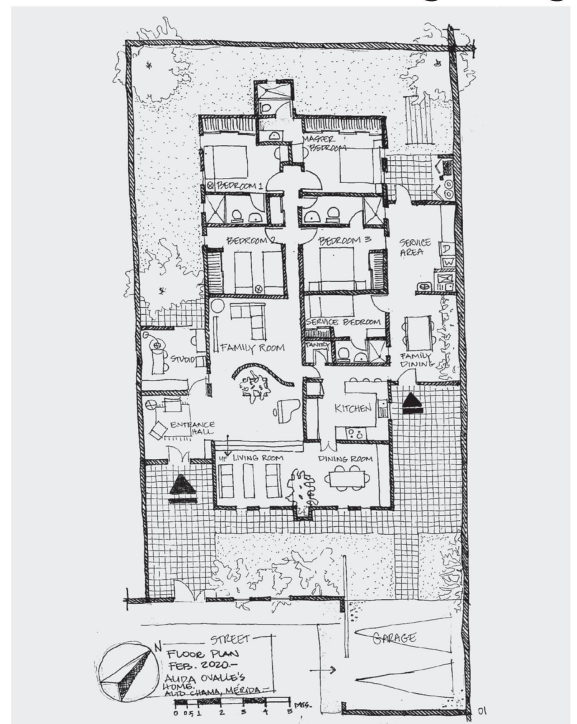
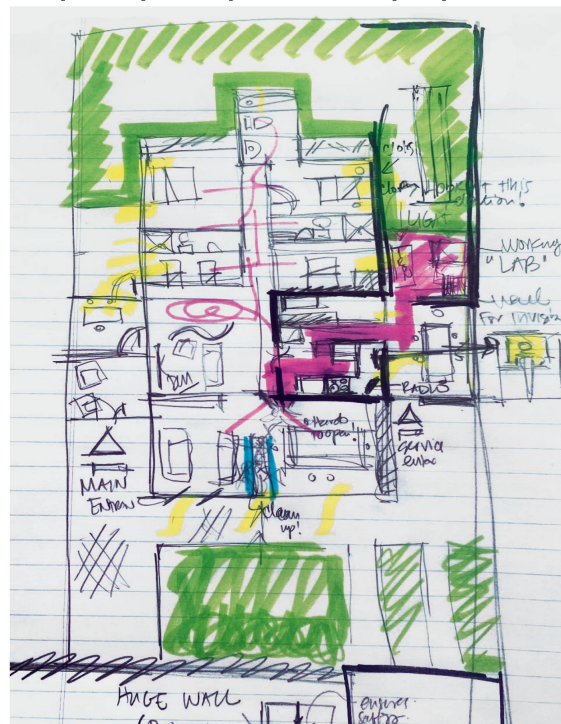
## Oil

Before turning to the workers' everyday experiences of *quintas*, we need to understand how the socioeconomic developments in twentieth-century Venezuela created a proliferation of middle-class households that hired domestic workers as symbols of status and wealth. In the early twentieth century, Venezuela transformed from an agricultural economy with few substantial exports other than coffee and cacao to become, for some decades, the world's largest exporter of oil. 6 The switch from an almost feudal society to a progress-oriented rentier state profoundly impacted the country's urban landscape and domestic architecture. However, the transformation of the built environment, the modernization of architecture, and urban development provided only the illusion of progress and did not result in prosperity across population sectors. Instead, the growing

6 For episodes in this well-studied history, see Franklin Tugwell, *The Politics of Oil in Venezuela* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975); and Edwin Lieuwen, *Petroleum in Venezuela: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), 116.

fig. 4 a *In situ* sketch showing the drawing process and personal notes and codes. Field notes, Valentina Davila, 2020

fig. 4 b Re-drawn using architectural conventions. Valentina Davila, 2020



inequalities disrupted the modernization process, which could not resolve the contradictions of the unwavering colonial structure clinging to social, political, and economic power. 7

The radical change of economic structures caused a rural exodus and an unprecedented influx of people into the urban centers, which underwent a housing shortage. From 1941 to 1971, the rural areas in the Andes became almost depopulated. In addition, poverty pushed numerous underage and adult women, many of them of indigenous origin, to leave their homes "just as much as men did," 8 usually to procure a position as domestic workers in nearby urban centers.

For thousands of disenfranchised girls and women in Venezuela, domestic care work is the only form of wage labor that

7 Penélope Plaza-Azuaje, *Culture as Renewable Oil: How Territory, Bureaucratic Power and Culture Coalesce in the Venezuelan Petrostate* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 3.

8 Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols and Kimberly J. Morse, *Venezuela* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 158.

provides immediate access to the even more urgent prerequisites of food and shelter. In one of my case studies, Elena left her home at age nine to clean, cook, wash, and iron for a middle-class family; she had to combine these responsibilities with caring for the family's two children, who were only a couple of years younger than herself. Elena explained that her family's agricultural production barely sufficed for domestic consumption. When her mother gave birth to another baby, Elena's entering the workforce meant at least one less mouth to feed and the possibility of earning a meager income to help relatives back home. fig.5

## Quintas

The prestigious materials and desirable location of *quintas* broadcast the financial means of their middle- and upper-class owners. These spacious buildings come with high maintenance costs for gardening, repair, and restoration. In addition to the material conditions of the house, which demand onerous cleaning, dusting, polishing, waxing, and washing, everyday life requires someone to cook, serve, and care for the family. From the beginning, architects and homeowners planned these labor-consuming buildings with the expectation of support from a full-time resident domestic worker.

Life inside the large, clean *quintas* keeps employers and workers entangled in an exploitative dynamic of labor. The typology of the *quintas* embodies architecture's ability to limit women's freedom. On average, each *quinta's* footprint encompasses 200 to 500 square meters divided into public, private, and service areas. The public spaces include the dining and living rooms and, at times, a sunroom, allowing ample space for social gatherings of family and friends. The private zone is the family's most intimate environment and usually consists of three or four bedrooms, an equal number of bathrooms, and a den. Finally, the service area consolidates all the reproductive and life-sustaining activities at the back of the house. Homeowners and architects conceive it as a space for domestic workers to live near and work for, but away from, the hiring family. fig.6

Middle-class families hire an outsider to take over the household's care work and reproductive labor. Although these housing dynamics awkwardly pierce the nuclear family's private bubble, they do not trump the benefits of outsourcing the strenuous domestic tasks. For gender theorist Judith Butler, "up againstness" expresses this type of extreme interpersonal proximity. <sup>9</sup> Architects and homeowners rely on space and material strategies to establish proper distancing and alleviate the anxieties brought about by "unwilled cohabitation." <sup>10</sup> An established

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012), 134–51.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," 134.



11 Rebecca Ann Ginsburg, "At Home with Apartheid: The Cultural Landscapes of Suburban Johannesburg, 1960–1976" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2001), 4.

fig. 5 Elena's employer gave her a white first Communion dress and a party to celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation. Clara and Sara, her employer's children, stand next to Elena, who is only a couple of years older than them but is employed as their carer. Merida, Venezuela, ca. 1962. Photograph: private collection

catalog of standard design elements — remote location, walls, small windows, and swiveling doors — offers the necessary tools to separate the coexisting domestic realities: well-being and conviviality from hard work and solitude. Much like the spatial relations of domestic housing under South African apartheid described by Rebecca Ann Ginsburg, *quintas* enclose two "different social and physical spheres" within a limited radius.<sup>11</sup> These spheres are supported by spatial rules and material regulations that separate the family and the resident domestic worker. For example, traditional designs limit the service bedroom to around 2 by 3



12 Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Introduction: Domestic Work in the Colonial Context: Race, Color, and Power in the Household," in Dirk Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Silke Neunsinger, eds., *Toward a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, Studies in Global Migration History (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 245–53, here 248.

13 Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, "'So Close and yet So Far': European Ambivalence toward Javanese Servants," in *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherlands Indies 1900–1942* (Amsterdam University Press, 2000), 85–120, here 101.

meters, allowing barely enough space for a single bed, closet, and old TV set. Inside, cheap materials and worn furniture characterize the room and the en suite bathroom, and the spaces are usually deprived of daylight or natural ventilation. The service area's marginal location in the building and its below-standard materials solidify the class-formation process.<sup>12</sup>

According to a simplistic reading, the spatial distribution in the house relegates the domestic workers to a subordinate position with no possibility of social connections or recreation with their employers. The home becomes a vector that extends colonial encounters through space and time. Strict spatial limitations cinch the workers' alienation and guarantee their psychological, ideological, and social distance.<sup>13</sup> This particular narrative is well-known; however, the actual mechanisms of exploitation are both more internalized and more complex. I found that all *quinta* residents expect clear limits and follow the established spatial cues to separate themselves. That is, the need for privacy

goes both ways. For example, Patricia and her employer, Nancy, are the only residents in the house; therefore, they keep each other company in front of the TV at night. However, respecting the strict rules of deferential behavior compensates for breaching the spatial hierarchies. While Nancy sits on the den's sofa, Patricia stands behind the ironing board folding clothes or ironing bedding. "I like keeping busy during our nightly routine. I wouldn't feel right sitting next to her on the sofa; it would be weird. I have my bedroom for that, and I enjoy resting in my own time inside my space; when I work, I work, and when I rest, I rest." <sup>14</sup> Following the established spatial patterns helps these women navigate unprecedented forms of intimacy.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia, interview by author, Merida, January 21, 2020.

Inside the home, small-scale spatial metaphors reflect a strict social organization. Feminist anthropologist Shirley Ardener argues that design elements such as walls, corridors, and doors are not neutral but influential components that delimit space and determine people's domestic realities. <sup>15</sup> For example, the construction materials differ inside Elena's *quinta* depending on their positioning. The public and private areas' windows have thick, carved wood frames, while the service part has simple, black metal

<sup>15</sup> Shirley Ardener, "The Partition of Space," in Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden, eds., *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 112–17, here 113.

**fig. 6** A typical domestic worker's bedroom. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020



ones. The long, lateral party wall has natural brick veneers throughout the front yard, but the veneers are unmaintained once they cross the threshold to the servant's quarters, and consequently stained. The carefully maintained exterior terra-cotta floors transform into cement surfaces past the service entrance. The house's wood or marble floors halt at the kitchen door and switch to ceramic or terrazzo. These abrupt material changes reinforce the front and back divide, thus creating a phenomenology of service. The service area's consistency, size, and neglected nature speak of profoundly ingrained class arrogance that assumes domestic workers' needs and wants are different from their employers. From employers I often heard, "this is a good space for them; they wouldn't appreciate finer things, and if given to them, they would break or damage them." <sup>16</sup> The construction embodies the employers' conception of their workers' character as humble, improvident, lazy, ignorant, and unappreciative of quality. <sup>17</sup> Another factor, however, was the underlying anxiety that, if the difference between worker and employer was not actively maintained, it might collapse into a threatening overfamiliarity. **fig. 7**

<sup>16</sup> Leticia, interview by author, Merida, February 8, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> These coincide with some of the attributes that Venezuelan musician, educator, and diplomat Manuel Carreño attributed to the poor. In 1853, Carreño published his "Manual of Civility and Good Manners," a book that, in Latin America and Spain, became the quintessential guide in lessons and instructions on how educated people should behave in public and private places, such as home, family, school, and work. See Manuel Antonio Carreño, *Compendio del Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras: Arreglado [por el mismo] para el uso de las escuelas de ambos sexos* (New York: D. Appleton, 1860).



## Working, Not Living, Inside the *Quintas*

Interacting with domestic workers, I soon identified the employer's proximity concerns as unfounded. For the working women, *quintas* represent nothing more than a workplace and a means to generate income and support their own families. Immediately after emerging from the service bedroom in their work outfit, domestic workers are constantly moving, following a strict self-crafted routine to maximize time and increase their productivity. In our exchanges, live-in domestic workers never considered their employers to be family. While most participating employers and workers appeared to have excellent relations based on mutual respect and even feelings of love, workers clearly understood their contractual relations, sometimes better than their employers. As a result, domestic workers circumscribed their relationship with employers to the perimeter of the *quintas*, where they occupy a subordinate position. On the other hand, they enjoyed describing their own houses and spatial interventions, such as kitchens, large altars, and bedroom additions. Workers talked lovingly about their own absent homes, where they belonged, center stage, next to their children, grandchildren, animals, and flowers. They laughed or cried when sharing their expectations for the future or their concern about their relatives' bad choices. Many would break off our conversation when employers entered the kitchen, demonstrating how they sharply divide their personal and professional lives. fig. 8

Domestic workers keep pictures and small family tokens inside their purses instead of exposed in their *quinta* bedroom, even if they sleep there six out of the seven days of the week. Sometimes, live-in domestic workers erect small, portable altars next to their beds; however, they keep the spatial interventions to a minimum. <sup>18</sup> For example, they place their clothing in the closet and their personal care items in the bathroom but never personalize or decorate their surroundings. Next to a typewriter and a rotary phone, I observed a pair of golden high heels in the closet in Dora's bedroom; when I asked who they belonged to, she shrugged, no idea, but still she did not move them. This attitude reflects their mercantile relationship with the house, a place they would never consider a home.

Inside the *quintas*, employers expect workers to coordinate their movements around the house so as to avoid awkward interactions with guests and family members. However, the domestic worker's invisibility sows a problematic seed; delegating

**fig. 7** The exterior area at the back of the house. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020



**fig. 8** A domestic worker and her employer inside the kitchen. When the employer came in to check on her, the worker said to her son on the phone, "I have to go, call me after work." Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020



<sup>18</sup> For more on the domestic workers' altars, see Valentina Davila, "Altars of Hope: Venezuelan Domestic Workers and the Material Culture of the Divine," *Buildings and Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 29, no. 1 (2022), 67–93.

socially reproductive labor breeds an idea of a nuclear family exempted from any care work, erasing the physical and emotional effort required to fuel households and societies.<sup>19</sup> The standard architectural practice of segregating the kitchen and the service area at the back of the house disconnects living from working, cooking from eating, cleanliness from scrubbing, building from maintaining, and loving from caring.

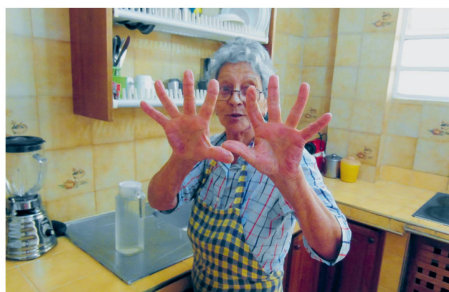
<sup>19</sup> See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Domestic workers keep a strict distance from their employers' personal choices. Employers see *quintas* as a home worth protecting, while workers perceive it only as a place of employment worth preserving. This internalized perception prevents them from fostering strong feelings of attachment or assuming any responsibility for the building's arrangement. For example, I asked Sioly if she would like to sleep somewhere else in the house. After giving me a confused look, she said,

*"What do you mean? I come here to work, not to sit and enjoy the view! I have my house for that. There, I make all the decisions: the color of the walls, the size of the furniture, and the kitchen's shape; here, my only responsibility is to clean. The rest is up to the owners."*<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Sioly, interview by author, Merida, February 21, 2020.

Contrary, then, to the employer's belief that the distinction in spaces refers to the character of the worker, it is clear to domestic workers that the *quinta's* architecture and material culture reflects the employers' values and prejudices. I learned from domestic workers that they prefer having a designated space



away from or invisible to the family. The possibility of operating away from the employer's private life corresponds with their professional stance and limits interruptions. Workers prefer to operate in an enclosed kitchen and remote service area, a layout that responds to

**fig.9** Inside the service area, domestic workers feel free to be themselves, away from the family's gaze. Here, Amanda shows me how clean her hands are after using her home-made soap. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020

their need for concentration and privacy. The back of the house is a center of operation with reduced opportunities for interruptions or monitoring, a zone to organize their work and regain professional agency. **fig.9**

Domestic workers have ample professional experience. For most, a lifetime in domestic service offers a profound understanding of the processes necessary to maximize efficiency. I noticed that each domestic worker I interviewed was a highly organized individual who systemized her tasks, developed a mental map of the house, and coordinated it with the available resources to complete her work efficiently. Workers calibrate their movements around working patterns, rotating between the large service area at the back and ephemeral cleaning and polishing



stations, consisting of a bucket and rag or brush, at the front of the house. For instance, workers handwash the clothes in different stages: soak, treat stains, submerge under stones for an hour, swish, scrub, rinse, and repeat. They move away from the laundry station to wash bathrooms or clean bedrooms between the handwashing steps.

Employers often disassociate from everything maintenance-related, including the spaces at the back of the house, which they perceive as dirty, ugly, and disorganized. They expect workers to make sense of and operate in those precarious spaces. They also limit the employees' demands for additional brushes, rubber gloves, a specific detergent, or a new bucket. Hence, care workers become master administrators operating with restricted technology, supplies, and space. They repurpose shirts into rags, fill wine bottles with cleaning detergents, employ large receptacles as buckets, and polish mirrors and windows with old newspapers. Domestic workers transform the back into a maintenance hub organized by activity. Their bodies move confidently from one station to another, honoring a process that relies on simultaneity, coordination, and organization to achieve daily tasks.

**fig. 10** Cleaning at the back of the house. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020

Domestic workers understand the back as an area free from the employer's control or concern. This power void allows workers to provisionally control space, make changes, and develop specific processes. For example, they keep buckets full of water around the laundry area; these reserves are vital during the frequent water outages to boil, cook, wash, clean, and flush.



Workers use their practical knowledge to solve all sorts of domestic matters and construct allegiances both licit and illicit, with materials, animals, and human beings. Betty secretly feeds a stray cat she named Peluda; it hangs around the house and hunts rats and mice.

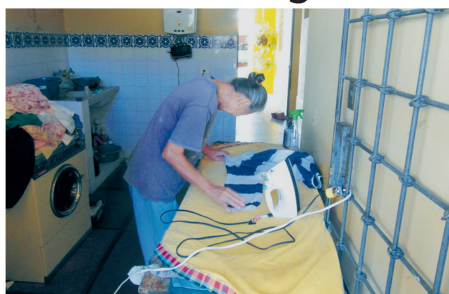
*"Señora doesn't like animals, and she wouldn't like to know I've been feeding a cat. But I know for sure she would die if the house's rat population kept growing. So Peluda and I have an agreement, I feed her, and she gets rid of pests. She especially loves cockroaches. Now I need to teach her to stop killing the birds too!"* <sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Betty, interview by author, Merida, January 28, 2020.

Josefina <sup>fig. 10</sup> prepared a large stone to sharpen the knives at the back. Nearby the kitchen, she also assembled a "secret" garden to grow herbs and spices that she affirms taste better because they grow in soil she brought from her hometown.

Inside their sphere, domestic workers recreate a world of their own, a bubble that they can mostly control. They tune the

radio to their favorite station to connect with their social worlds, humming to familiar music, checking on bus schedules, or learning about issues important to their communities. In the privacy of the service area, they take microbreaks to answer their families' text messages or respond to personal phone calls. Inside



their realm, workers take small but significant steps to improve the *quinta's* state without explaining them to anyone—except me. For example, Ingrid boils and grinds the plantain peels to enhance the plants' health. Alicia sews discarded linen shirts into filters

for the "imported" drip coffee maker to solve the shortage of paper filters. And Olga offers a piece of cake or lemons from her home to the trash collectors in exchange for them not throwing and breaking the plastic rubbish bins. Domestic workers do not take anything from the *quinta* to use in their home unless the employer has discarded it or given it to them. For instance, Betty freezes animal bones and other organic residues to feed her animals and plants back home. And most workers save half of their assigned meals to take home to their families. All this would perhaps not be possible but for their invisibility.

Luz is a fifty-five-year-old worker, one of the few specializing in ironing. Unlike regular domestic workers, ironing workers are hard to find and keep. Therefore, employers tend to comply with their needs and increase their salaries. She claimed to accept work only in houses with a service area at the back where she could plug in the iron, turn on her radio, and "disconnect" from the world. <sup>22</sup> **fig.11**

*"I need my space. Somewhere where I set the ironing table on one side and a pile of clothes on the other. That way, I can sort my work and settle into my routine. I can't iron with people around me, looking, asking questions, and demanding that I do other things. I need to maximize my time, and I need isolation from the family's hustle."* <sup>23</sup>

Luz explained that working in the back of the house guarantees the required space and time to accomplish her tasks. She is a perfectionist who takes pride in her work and does not like changes. "I do things a certain way. Ironing requires lots of light and ventilation, two electric outlets, and space to hang the clothes. I like to work in the same houses because I know what to expect." Pepa and I listened to Luz speak while following her hand movements, mesmerized by how she perfectly ironed what seemed like thousands of pleats in one of the employers' skirts. Pepa smiled and nodded to Luz's comments. She then said,

**fig.11** Luz explains that ironing is an activity that requires light, ventilation, and... music. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020

<sup>22</sup> Ironing is one of the most time-consuming and difficult activities in the house. I found that most workers dislike doing it, and some even specify upon hiring that they will not iron the family's clothes. Therefore, employers either hire women who specialize in ironing to come weekly or monthly, or they bring their delicate garments to the drycleaners.

<sup>23</sup> Luz, interview by author, Merida, February 4, 2020.



*"I agree. I did not enjoy the times I worked in small apartments or one of those new houses that muchachas — young girls — now like with the open kitchen to cook in front of everyone. I don't have a place to change or shower, and I can't turn on the radio; I feel like everyone is watching me. It is too uncomfortable. I usually avoid working in those places. There is no space for one to do one's job freely."* <sup>24</sup>

**24** Josefa, interview by author, Merida, February 10, 2020.

Thus, domestic workers understand the space at the back as an essential part of their contract. A reconfiguration of the home that eradicates the service area but still employs domestic workers disrupts the spatial dynamics that allow a separation between living and working.

## The Postrevolutionary Home

Today, Venezuela is far from the wealthy country in which the *quintas* proliferated. Two decades have passed since the beginning of the Bolivarian Revolution, a new political era inaugurated by the late president Hugo Chavez and characterized by opposition to American "imperialism" and a robust ideological connection and trade relationship with Russia, China, Iran, and Cuba. Regardless of intentions, Chavez's planned economy, anti-poverty campaigns, and social policies all collapsed under the weight of corruption and plummeting oil prices. <sup>25</sup>

Venezuela's economic and political crisis affects all social strata. The economic crisis has severely limited the middle class's disposable income, but domestic workers are among the most stricken group. Hundreds of thousands of women, around 15 percent of the female workforce, <sup>26</sup> continue to rely on domestic work as their primary source of income. Many of them earn between one and two dollars per day, and some trade one of their workdays for their meals. Marcela explains,

*"I thought I was poor before Chavez, but I was so wrong! I didn't have much additional money, but I still managed to go to the store, find everything I needed and eat well. Twenty years ago, if I only had ten bolivares, I would buy ten bolivares worth of rice or cheese from the store. Now, even if I had ten bolivares, the supermarkets are empty! There's nothing I could buy. And did you hear Señora? Did she tell you she needs to pay for her cancer treatment in dollars? She cannot afford that! So it turns out that now we are all poor! She pays for two of the three days I work here. On the third day, I come, eat breakfast and lunch, and we divide the leftovers, so I have something to take home for*

**25** For a recent book on the topic, popular rather than scholarly, see Raúl Gallegos, *Crude Nation: How Oil Riches Ruined Venezuela* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

**26** "Who Are Domestic Workers," International Labour Organization, <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/who/lang--en/index.htm> (accessed April 26, 2022).

**fig. 12** Throughout economic and political crisis, *quintas* continue to require large amounts of work for their maintenance. Merida, Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020



my husband. I am lucky that I found work the remaining two days and some Saturdays cleaning a private hospital.” 27

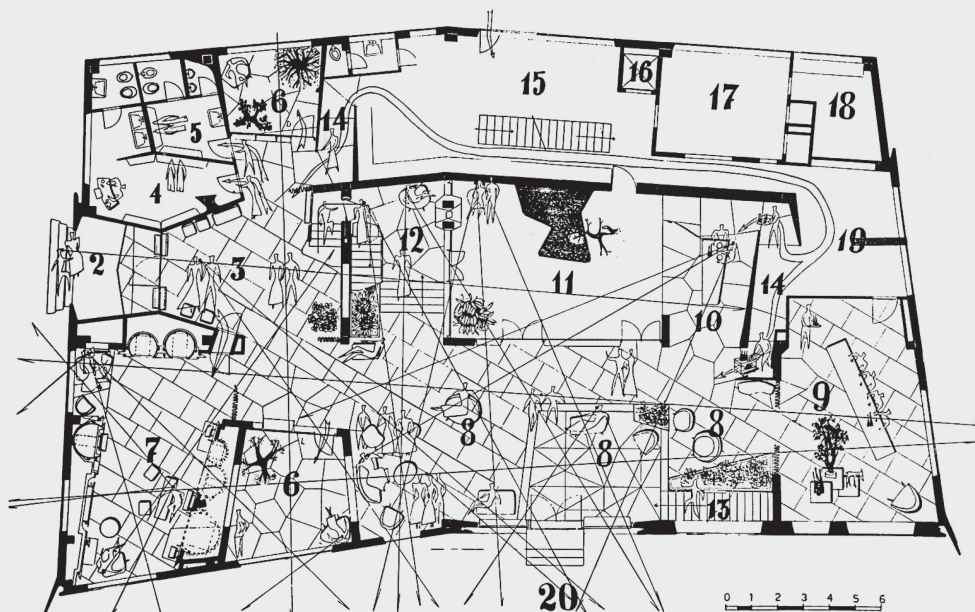
27 Marcela, interview by author, Merida, February 28, 2020.

The middle class’s diminished economic power eliminates the possibility of hiring a full-time domestic worker. Moreover, the decline in service demand coincides with high rates of male and female unemployment, directly affecting domestic workers and lowering their already dismal possibilities of negotiating salaries and working conditions. This study’s participants had all at some point fulfilled the common ambition of moving out of the employer’s house and into their own homes. However, gas shortages and the increasing price of public transportation have pushed many domestic workers out of their homes and back into live-in work. “What can we do with a house of our own and no money? For us, being a poor women means either working or dying. Luckily, I love working as much as I love living.” 28

fig. 12

28 Betty, interview by author, Merida, January 28, 2020.

**fig. 13** The social arrangements of the contemporary *quinta* is also mirrored in the villas of the wealthiest strata of society. This line-of-sight diagram for Gio Ponti’s *Villa Planchart*, built for a wealthy Cadillac dealer in Caracas (1957) shows the ground floor criss-crossed by social gazes. Only the service rooms (numbered 14–19) are unmarked, invisible to the guests. “Una villa fiorentina,” *Domus* 375, (February 1961), 1–39, here 3



The once desirable middle- and upper-class homes have degraded from privilege to burden, especially for aging homeowners. The large *quintas* have become increasingly hard to maintain and almost impossible to sell or trade. Once symbols of economic prosperity, this housing type has become a liability, forcing the declining middle class to financial expenditures beyond their capabilities. However, while many middle- and upper-class women have drastically reduced their housekeeper’s hours, they have not entirely abolished the outsourcing and monetizing of domestic labor, as they lack the necessary skills to maintain their own homes. fig. 13