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The Servantful House A Case Study of Venezuelan Quintas Valentina Davila

Homes

Modern Latin America's colonial past, with its marked inequality Valentina Davila is a in the distribution of wealth, has resulted in a segregated population and service relationships based on gender, race, and class. School of Architecture at McGill University in 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. 1 This dynamic strengthened a 1 According to 2001 culture of dependence upon service workers, materializing in a census statistics from the Instituto vernacular bourgeois housing type locally known as the quinta, a de Venezuela, some 5. 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, beta around 0.5 percent of its workforce 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 multilavered 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

doctoral candidate at the Peter Guo-hua Fu School of Architecture

Nacional de Estadística percent of the work-force is employed as domestic servants. For comparison, the United States has around 0.5 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 every-day relations that inform people's standing in society. 2 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. 3 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

2 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.

³ 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 Debī Mahāśvetā and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Imaginary Maps: Three Stories (New York: Routledge, 1995), xxiii.







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 Photograph observations based on my field notes, seeking out seemingly fig. 3 Domestic workers 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.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

walking in the streets of La Mara, an upperclass 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.

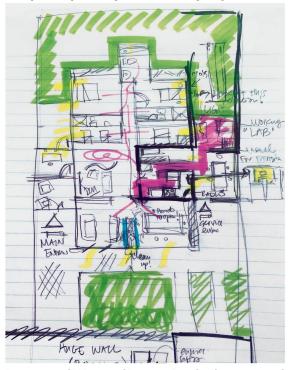
Oil

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," susually 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),

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 "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Strenuous domestic tasks. For gender theorist Judith Butler, "up Ethics of Cohabitation," againstness" expresses this type of extreme interpersonal proxi- The Journal of Speculative Philosophy mity. , Architects and homeowners rely on space and material strategies to establish proper distancing and alleviate the anxi- Life, Vulnerability, eties brought about by "unwilled cohabitation." 10 An established Cohabitation," 134.

The Journal of 26, no. 2 (2012), 134-51.

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. 11 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

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 Flena who is only a couple of years older than them but is employed as their carer. Merida, Venezuela, ca. 1962. Photograph: private collection



12 Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Introduction: Domestic Work in the Colonial Context: Race, Color, and Power in the Household," in Dirk Hoerder, Élise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Silke Neunsinger, eds., Toward a Global History of Domestic and Ćaregiving Workers, Studies in Global Migration

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 Índies 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. 12

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 History (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 245–53, here 248. 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. 13 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." 14 Following the established spatial patterns helps 14 Patricia, interview by these women navigate unprecedented forms of intimacy.

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. 15 For example, the con- 15 Shirley Ardener, struction 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



ones. The long, lateral party wall has Introduction (London: Routledge, 1993), 112–17, natural brick veneers throughout the front vard, 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 to the poor. In 1853 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 how educated people them." 16 The construction embodies the employers' conception of their workers' character as humble, improvident, lazy, ignorant, and unappreciative of quality. 17 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

The Partition of Space," in Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and lain Borden, eds., Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction (London:

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

- 16 Leticia, interview by author, Merida, February 8, 2020.
- 17 These coincide with some of the attributes that Venezuelan musician, educator, and diplomat Manuel Carreño attributed to the poor. In 1853, his "Manual of Civility and Good Manners, a book that, in Latin America and Spain, became the quintessential guide in lessons and instructions on 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 work-



ers 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 alters

next to their beds; however, they keep the spatial interventions to a minimum. ¹⁸ For example, they place their clothing in the closet and their personal care items in the bathroom but never personalize or decorate their surround-



ings. 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

18 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. 19 The 19 See bell hooks, standard architectural practice of segregating the kitchen and the service area at the back of the house disconnects living from Routledge, 2015). working, cooking from eating, cleanliness from scrubbing, building from maintaining, and loving from caring.

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." 20

20 Sioly, interview

Contrary, then, to the employer's belief that the distinc- by author, Merida, February 21, 2020. tion 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. fig. 9 Inside the The possibility of operating away from the employer's private life corresponds be themselves, away from the family's gaze. with their professional stance and limits interruptions. Workers prefer to operate in an enclosed kitchen and remote Merida, Venezuela.

Photograph: Valentina service area, a layout that responds to

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

service area, domestic workers feel free to Here, Amanda shows me how clean her hands are after using her home-made soap. Davila, 2020

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!" 21

Josefina fig. 10 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

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

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 sig- fig. 11 Luz explains that nificant steps to improve the quinta's ironing is an activity that requires light, state without explaining them to any- ventilation, and music. Merida, one—except me. For example, Ingrid Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Davila, 2020 boils and grinds the plantain peels to enhance the plants' health. Alicia sews discarded linen shirts into filters

ventilation, and ...

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. 22 fig.11

"I need my space. Somewhere where I set the ironing table the most time-consuming and difficult on one side and a pile of clothes on the other. That way, I can I found that most sort my work and settle into my routine. I can't iron with people around me, looking, asking questions, and demanding that will not iron the family's I do other things. I need to maximize my time, and I need isola- employers either hire tion from the family's hustle." 23

Luz explained that working in the back of the house guarantees the required space and time to accomplish her tasks. garments to the drycleaners. She is a perfectionist who takes pride in her work and does not 23 Luz, interview like changes. "I do things a certain way. Ironing requires lots of February 4, 2020. 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,

²² Ironing is one of the most time-conworkers dislike doing it, and some even specify clothes. Therefore, women who specialize in ironing to come weekly or monthly, or they bring their delicate

"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." 24

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. ²⁵

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, 26 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).

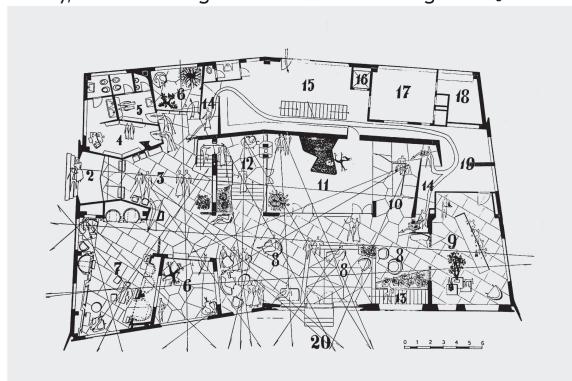
26 "Who Are Domestic Workers," International Labour Organization, https://www.ilo. org/global/topics/ domestic-workers/ who/lang--en/index. htm (accessed April 26, 2022).

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

The middle class's diminished economic power eliminates by author, Merida, February 28, 2020. 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 crisscrossed 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,

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