

○ Caracas

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The cultural spaces and infrastructure of Venezuela's capital were once the envy of Latin America.

Decades of decline have taken their toll

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□ Photographs by Fabiola Ferrero



AVEL'S

Caracas once looked like a glimpse of Latin America's future.

When petrodollars flowed into Venezuela in the 1960s and '70s, the nation's capital experienced a building boom. Highways ringed the growing metropolis, which boasted a university suffused with public art and the region's tallest skyscrapers. Big American cars prowled the streets, thanks to generous fuel subsidies, while world-class museums and theaters and state-managed housing complexes were built.

But when Caracas turned 454 years old on July 25, it was less a cause for celebration and more of a reminder of the city's reversal of fortune. A spate of economic crises ensued in the '80s after oil prices crashed and the government accrued massive foreign debts, setting the stage for the election of President Hugo Chávez in 1998 and the socialist project known as *Chavismo*. After Chávez's death in 2013, Venezuela endured political turmoil, and economic sanctions imposed by foreign governments on his successor, authoritarian President Nicolás Maduro, have hastened the capital's decline. Today, many of Caracas's most beloved urban spaces and architectural treasures have been pummeled by years of crisis, mismanagement, and bitter political battles.

With the Venezuelan government isolated and broke, Caracas is in a strange state of flux. Water and power infrastructure is crumbling, gasoline is a luxury, and 18 months of lockdowns to combat Covid-19 have battered city life. Still, businesses are opening as authorities roll back controls on commerce, and some parts of the city are seeing efforts to make cosmetic fixes.

A close look at several of Caracas's landmarks today reveals how much this metropolis of 3.5 million people has unraveled and how residents and leaders are trying to preserve what they can of its former luster.

← Dancing the tango at Caracas's Parque Central complex, August 2021



→ Part of the Museum of Contemporary Art, located in Parque Central



○ Parque Central

Near downtown, slender towers of concrete and blue glass crown the massive Parque Central complex. Envisioned as a city within a city when it was designed and built in the 1970s, its 10 buildings house more than 1,200 apartments along with everything from museums to elementary schools and hair salons to swimming pools.

“It was like something out of *The Jetsons*,” says Enrique Fernández-Shaw, son of Daniel Fernández-Shaw, one of the complex’s architects.

- ↑ Parque Central's buildings
- ↓ The complex under construction in 1977



When the last tower opened in 1983, Parque Central’s amenities, including suction trash chutes and live feeds from lobby security cameras, drew young professionals from Venezuela’s emerging middle class. Four decades later about 15,000 people still reside in Parque Central, but many say that they’re desperate to leave. Air pollution and water leaks have stained the skyscrapers’ facades. A fire tore through the East Tower in 2004, and parts of the building are still not fully operational. Robberies are so frequent that residents have closed off corridors and padlocked some emergency exits.

Many of Parque Central’s woes are decades in the making. Instead of a homeowners association, it’s managed by a state corporation that’s in charge of making repairs. “You have no authority,” says Jacobo Sarevnik, an architect who’s lived in Parque Central since 1980.

○ Museum of Contemporary Art

Parque Central’s cultural installations have also suffered. The Museum of Contemporary Art of Caracas—home to a collection that includes works by Warhol, Picasso, and Monet—saw its autonomy whittled away over the past two decades. In 2001, Chávez fired the museum director on live television, and four years later the institution lost control of its main functions when it was brought under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture. Since then the museum hasn’t been able to create its own budget or receive private donations without state approval.



↑ The museum’s galleries in 1982

Its collection has grown little since. More worrying, former staff say, is that maintenance of the air conditioning system stopped years ago, putting irreplaceable works at risk.

Security has also been a concern. Last year museum staffers were caught stealing drawings of Venezuelan modernist masters when they tried to sell them to a local gallery. The museum has been closed since the beginning of the pandemic, leaving many to fear the worst. “No one knows what’s happening inside,” says María Luz Cárdenas, a former director of curatorship.



↑ A tunnel at the Children's Museum
 ↓ A space-themed exhibit in 1999



○ Children's Museum

A private institution on the other side of the Parque Central complex, the Children's Museum, is also trying to stay afloat. Known for dangling rockets, psychedelic tunnels, and rainbow stairs that connect its exhibits, the museum opened in 1982 but lost state funding in 2000. Crime in the area has scared off student trips, and though tickets cost less than the equivalent of \$1, that renders the museum inaccessible to many visitors. Annual visits dwindled to 40,000 in 2019 from more than 1 million when it first opened its doors.

The flow of private donations has also slowed, but Mireya Caldera, the museum's director, has managed to secure some funding. "There are always people willing to help," she says.

Caldera, the daughter of former President Rafael Caldera, has used her personal network to bring in donations from businesses big and small and people with childhood memories of the institution. The museum now broadcasts weekly educational content, such as scientific videos and readings of short stories, over social media. "We are not going to cry for all this," Caldera says. "Our mission is to educate."



○ Teresa Carreño Theater

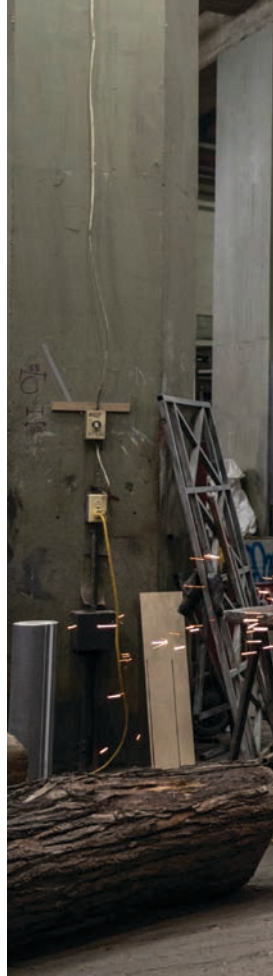
Close to Parque Central, across a pedestrian bridge over one of Caracas's main avenues, lies the Teresa Carreño Theater, a stepped brutalist building with kinetic art integrated into its ceilings and stage curtains. Designed by Dietrich Kunckel, Tomás Lugo Marcano, and Jesús Sandoval and opened in 1983, it was Latin America's largest art space until 2015 and Venezuela's main venue for operas, ballets, and concerts. Its two concert halls have hosted artists from Luciano Pavarotti to Dionne Warwick.

→ Renovation work in progress at the Teresa Carreño

These days there are no big-name acts, but the theater has become a frequent setting for government rallies. "Political events are more widely broadcast than artistic ones, but we hold many artistic events that simply aren't broadcast," says Irving Peña, executive director of the theater.

The theater's role hosting state functions has likely helped keep it in good condition: Shortly before Teresa Carreño was closed to the public because of Covid in 2020, officials launched a major renovation, installing new air conditioning and lighting systems. Since May the theater has been overseen directly by the office of the president, which is funding much of the restoration.

"Our hopes have been made real—we're receiving huge support at a very difficult time," Peña says.





← The Ríos Reyna Concert Hall inside the Teresa Carreño Theater
↓ While the concert halls are renovated, the theater's resident ballet company rehearses in common areas



○ University City

Sixty years ago, Venezuelan architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva completed his most ambitious urban project: the University City of Caracas. A modernist masterpiece, the campus of the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) in the city's southeast was envisioned as a model city in the tropics. The complex of 89 buildings, murals, and sculptures was recognized as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2000.

"It was a futurist project for the country that promised much but didn't end up happening," says Paulina Villanueva, a professor of architecture at UCV and daughter of Carlos Raúl Villanueva.

The campus was created as a "synthesis of the arts" for the university, which was founded in 1721 and is the alma mater of more than a dozen Venezuelan presidents. UCV has also long served as a staging ground for civil disobedience, in part because, though public, it maintains independence from the federal government. But over the past two decades it's been

starved of funding amid clashes with the ruling socialists. University leadership says the school has received only about 2% of its requested budget for 2021.

As a result, much of the campus has fallen into disrepair. The ceilings of classrooms leak, and laboratories are shuttered. A covered walkway designed by Villanueva to connect the buildings collapsed last year. In June the School of Political Science caught fire while the university was without water service. Firefighters were powerless to put out the blaze.

Little-used corridors have been occupied by the city's homeless. Earlier this year, students released videos showing the Aula Magna—an auditorium with cloud-shaped acoustic panels designed by Alexander Calder—littered with trash, feces, and used condoms. The government has made modest cleanup efforts. A few weeks ago, public workers started trimming the grass and fixing up basketball courts, in violation of the university's autonomy.

Faculty and staff earn salaries the equivalent of a few U.S. dollars a month, and about 2,000 professors have left their posts, while dropout rates are estimated to be as high as 50%. But alumni, students, and staff are rallying to help UCV survive. Their fundraising campaigns have supported operations at the School of Architecture, helped pay for repairs to the zoological museum, and are now being used to renovate the Aula Magna.

"Those of us who decided to stay have a duty to keep these spaces open despite the circumstances," says Elizabeth Ball, a dermatology professor, who in March organized a crowd-funding campaign to supply a laboratory with materials and to repair equipment. "People want to help the university because it gave free education to thousands and thousands of Venezuelans."

← A classroom at UCV
↓ A desk is used to lock a room amid a rise in vandalism and squatting



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↑ An escalator in the Bellas Artes station
 ↓ A train at the Plaza Venezuela station

with neighborhoods in which they otherwise may not have ever stepped foot.

“The metro created a sort of backbone for the city that it didn’t have before,” says Tulio Hernández, a director of the Caracas-based Urban Culture Foundation. The draw of cheap, quick, and well-managed transportation had white-collar workers rubbing elbows with the city’s poor, and for decades the metro instilled a sense of pride in *Caraqueños*.

“People were grateful for a place of order, when outside there was none,” says Cheo Carvajal, director of Ciudadlab, a group that promotes activ-

ism in Caracas’s public spaces.

But scenes of riders calmly filing into trains have given way to rush-hour gantlets for frustrated commuters. Soaring private transportation costs have caused more people to use the metro, straining capacity. Meanwhile, the fleet of trains has shrunk amid mounting debts and an exodus of staff. Only about 20% of trains on Line 1, the busiest corridor, are operational, Metro Family says. Many escalators are broken in the cavernous stations, and occasional blackouts and floods halt service entirely.

Local transit advocates say the system simply can’t afford its outsize subsidies for metro fares. A single ride costs less than the equivalent of 2¢, and it’s often essentially free, because ticket counters run out of paper, leaving riders to blow past turnstiles without paying.

As the system erodes, locals must adjust to its limitations. “In the end,” says Metro Family’s Ricardo Sansone, “people end up doing less and less.” —*With Fabiola Zerpa*

○ Caracas Metro

When the Caracas Metro took its inaugural journey in 1983, it was billed as “the great solution for Caracas,” a traffic-choked city that spills out of a narrow valley. The metro opened with just eight stops on a line running east to west and was equipped with French-made trains from the company now known as Alstom, which produces rail cars for the Paris metro. Over the years it expanded to 51 stations across a web of four lines above and below the city, at points traveling almost 100 feet underground. Until 2014 its trains and linking bus system were transporting some 2.5 million daily riders around Greater Caracas, according to Metro Family, a nonprofit comprising former transit workers that monitors the metro.

The sleek mass transit system was often celebrated as the public work that most modernized the capital of this petrostate that, until recently, was home to the world’s cheapest gasoline. Beyond cutting commute times, it linked residents