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**PUBLIC SPACE - URBAN DESIGN IN
LATIN AMERICA & THE CARIBBEAN**



A1 Teotihuacan, Mexico, Diego Berruecos, 2014

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

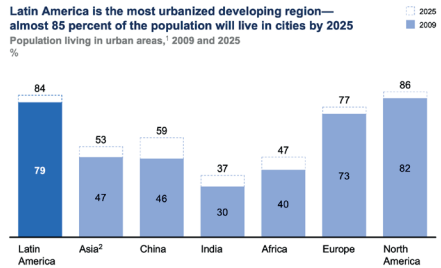
Public spaces play an important role for urban life in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Offering space for all activities related to social life like politics, communication, trade, representation, religion, sports and leisure. The public space symbolizes the society of its formation and has changed significantly over the last 700 years in the continents troubled history. Indigenous society, colonialism, slavery, revolutions, migration and the modern city of consumption have all left their marks and form the fundament of today's cities. Fragments of all times can still be found today but recent developments dominate modern public spaces in LAC, ranging from shiny shopping centers to dusty voids

between informal settlements. However these inequalities led to a growing awareness, „that public space is the only urban land use where all social classes are welcome“.⁶

Being regarded as the most urbanised continent of the planet (80% living in cities) as well as the most unequal (75% of the cities present high levels of inequality) public space reflects this challenging reality. While some citizens enjoy benefits and high levels of public services, millions of Latin Americans live with insecurity, ambiental destruction, gender inequality and lack of opportunities.¹⁸ As public spaces offer common meeting space, promote equity and shape identity they inherit a crucial part for the future of



A2. Over-view: Montevideo, Uruguay, 2016



¹ Urban population according to national definitions.
² Excluding China and India.

Latin America has 198 large cities with a population of 200,000 or more





A4 balloons on colombian street, J. Hermans, 2019

LAC societies.

Although categorizing a diverse continent can be difficult, similarities in the region can be drawn. The following pages shall give an overview about public spaces in LAC, involving developments in the past, current opportunities, as well as promising initiatives working on accessible spaces for the future. These insights will be set in comparison to the use and availability of public space in Cuba and balance the adaptivity of continental experiences to the unique environment of the Cuban Island. Examples of several public space projects focus upon participative elements for the public.

DEFINITION OF THE PUBLIC SPACE

The UN Habitat considers public space

as „all places of public property and public use, accessible and enjoyable by everyone, free of charge and without pecuniary reward, this includes the streets, open-air ground as well as public facilities.“²⁰ The public space in LAC represents a strong dimension for urban life, offering space for public interaction as well as being an indicator to the status of society on political, economical and environmental scale.

HISTORY OF PUBLIC SPACES [LAC]

Recent history

Plans to modernize the Latin American cities in the 1980ies aimed to reduce the differences between „la ciudad rica y la ciudad pobre“ (rich city and poor city).²¹ But the rise of privately financed gated communities, the fragmentation into a functional city

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A5 Barrio Retiro Buenos Aires, 2017

as well as uncoordinated city growth fueled the division of cities on micro-scale. During this time investment into public space was neglected while public spending focused on new roads for a growing middle class.

During the 1990 this segregation process mirrored in the occurrence of consume-orientated indoor places and other adaptations of northern-american urban concepts. The urban landscape partitioned itself further, public spaces dissolved and the citizens behavioural habits changed. Cities developed into an insulation concept of isles of private residence isles, production, consumerism and informal, precarious life. Building a stark contrast to the former open Latin American city. Society isolated it-

self further while daily-life for some means private transport between private schools & universities to malls, membership clubs and their private residential area, while others are excluded from societal change and economical growth.

„Urban growth in LAC cities during the 20th century occurred at an accelerated pace, with little or no regard for planning. Public space was not considered essential and even deemed undesirable since unattended space risked being illegally occupied with informal housing. When compared to economically developable property, public space appeared to be an inefficient use of land.“⁶

Since the late 2000s public spending

Since the late 2000s public spending went into maintenance and development of infrastructure and new public spaces mainly occurred co-financed by company sponsors and NGOs. The 2010s saw the rise of a new urban movement forcing to eradicate the inaccessibility of highly populated areas for people with lower income, in a dense city. e.g. cable cars in Medellin and La Paz. Architectural lighthouse projects such as libraries or museums in precarious areas fostered hope for a shift public space policy.

TODAY

In recent times, after years of economical growth and political stability many countries throughout the region were hit by economical crisis and political shifts, tightening public space budgets once again. A shift towards the promotion of public space is at threat. Planned public spaces are still not as common in LAC cities as to other parts of the world. LAC cities perform poorly in public space index, with major cities offering less than 4,0 m² of public space per person. This minor existence leads to overuse or abun-

dance of the place, while sometimes it can not be recognized as such.⁶ Security is regarded as a big factor of political debate and private life in LAC. Whereas a feeling of insecurity led to a more cautious use and vanishing of public space, hope is connected to the public space as a key element to work against inequality. Statistics show that access to well-conditioned public space increases trust among social groups and improves personal safety.⁶ With the resurrection of public space for everyone stigmatisation and prejudices in society could decrease and open the way for a more heterogeneous society of equal opportunities.²

STATE OF URBAN PLANNING IN LAC

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have experienced an intense urbanization process for at least six decades. This process has been highly decentralized and has copied several models from different parts of the world. So far, with few exemptions, the region lacks an urban planning model that can deliver good quality of life standards to citizens while preserving physical and environmental assets for

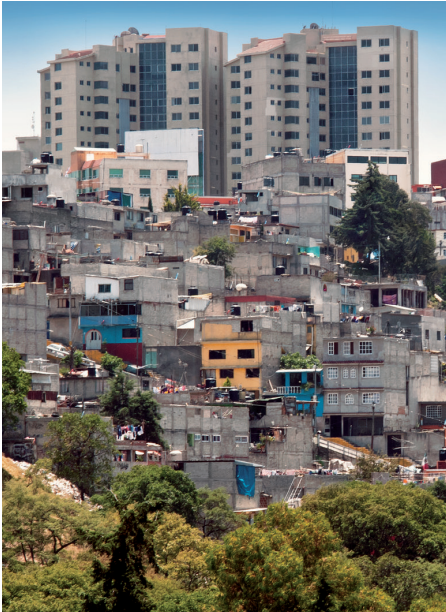


A6 Colombia series, A. Polman, 2019



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STATE OF URBAN PLANNING IN LAC



A7 Huixquilucan, México, 2017



A8 Barranco, Lima, 2018



A9 Cartagena, Colombia, 2019

future generations.¹⁹

In recent years two forms of city making have established in the cities of LAC. While governments use a city planing „from above“, private initiatives approach to create city „from below“, dividing cities into formal and informal cities.²⁰ Informal city making is mainly driven by local actors and reproduces the existing socioeconomic inequalities. Associations who rebuild parts of the city in their favour can range from all spectrums of society and mainly unite people from a similar socio-economic background. Their contrary efforts can sometimes lead to boundaries between bordering quarters as both gated communities

and slums/favelas establish their own social network adjoined to one another.

Public spaces reflect this segregational evolution in micro-scale, mostly notable in the quality of the neighbourhood's public space. In their publication about the current state of public space in LAC two local initiatives affirm an inequality of accessibility, usability and a broad spectrum of quality are common features among cities from the region. Also „machismo“ and discrimination make public space sometimes inaccessible to historical discriminated groups, such as women, LGBTQI, indigenous people,



A10 La vida entre laderas, Ocupa tu calle , Lima, 2018

women, LGBTQI, indigenous people among others.

Insecurity and violence play a big part LAC political debate and personal life and affected the use and planning of public space. Poorly lit areas, minor conditions reinforce the feeling of insecurity in public space.¹⁹

FUTURE OF PUBLIC SPACE IN LAC

While instability poses as a steady companion, forming political initiatives is traditionally common practice in LAC. In recent times an urban movement determined to tackle the decline of public space has formed. Transport free sundays in Bogota let people reconquer the streets and the anger about metro prices was the tipping point for democratic protests against

inequality in Chile.

Local initiatives debating about use and formation of public space occur all over the region, interconnecting to networks, which look for new strategies to reinstall accessible public spaces for the years to come. Their main goals are a small scale urbanism, treating the city with urban acupuncture, reintroducing human scale, put a focus on placemaking, develop a sustainable urbanism and enable sustainable mobility.

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FUTURE OF PUBLIC SPACE



1. MY ROOT IS by Boa Mistura_ Cuba / Divisare 2012

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CURRENT PUBLIC SPACES IN LAC

STUDYING PUBLIC SPACES IN LAC

By studying the different public space projects in Latin America, we come up with the following four general categories.

Actually we tried to evaluate these projects in terms of organization/design parties, material, scale, function (day and night use, flexibility, complexity of the intervention...), users (age, number of people), impact on the neighborhood and duration of intervention.

For sure there are some project that can be considered in two or three categories rather than only one group.

1. ADDING ONE LAYER TO THE CITY

Basically these public interventions are made of mono-element which

adds another layer to that urban space.

It is designed in community scale and mostly done by close cooperation of the citizens and visitors. This layer, which is mostly connected through the art, can be a series of verses painted on the different places of a neighborhood, a series of umbrellas covering a street, or a graphic painted on a huge square, or a large colorful canopy installation creating a plaza.

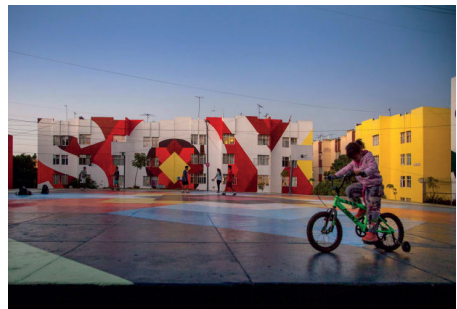
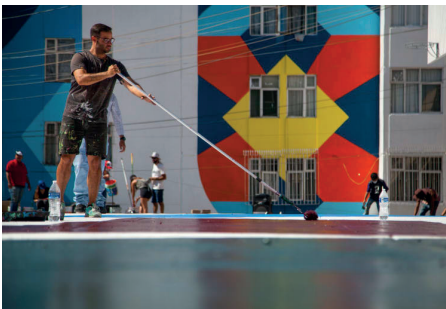
In these types of projects colors play an important role to attract people's attention and welcome passer-bys' minds to a different world.

They mostly create a temporary stop space for passer-bys and have a small physical impact on the urban space.





Nierika by Boa Mistura_Mexico / divisare 2017



3. Nierika by Boa Mistura_Mexico / divisare 2017

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4. Take the Space by 3 + 1 architecture / Archdaily 2015



5. Playachomo by Fundamental_ Guatemala / Divisare 2016



2. OFFICIAL PUBLIC SPACE DESIGNED BY PROFESSIONALS

In this category, governments and developers play an important role. These projects are almost built by considerable financial support from the public or private institutes with the mission of city developments. And rarely citizens

participate in design and construction phases. These projects are trying to respond to the neighborhood's basic needs including playgrounds, sport courts and facilities, and gathering places. So landscape and its relationship with urban space is instrumental in these projects.



6. Caracolí Park 19-135 by Diana Wiesner Ceballos _ Colombia / Archdaily 2019

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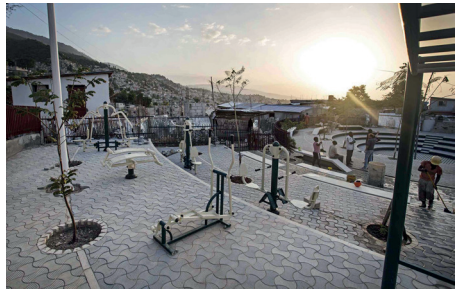
7. Forest of Hope by Mazzanti Arquitectos-Colombia / Archdaily 2017



8. Lajeado Square by SIAA _ Brazil / Danielcalvoruiz



9. Tapis Rouge by EVA Studio _ Haiti / Archdaily 2017



10. Caracolí Park 19-135 by Diana Wiesner Ceballos _ Colombia / Archdaily 2019



3. FLEXIBLE SMALL SPACE INTERVENTION

The most common feature of the projects existing in this group is flexibility, a small city furniture that not only can be moved and located in different places but also can have different functions according to the location and the requirements of the space.

These installations are mostly design-

ned for special functions that can not be available in every part of the urban spaces like a book shop or a local music studio.



11. Habitación Fundamental by República Portable _ Chile / Archdaily 2015



12. LEA by Lugares Publicos _ Mexico / Divisare 2017



13. Catalyst Cube by Incursiones, Will Sandy_ Venezuela / Divisare 2020



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EXAMPLES

4. REDESIGNING AND GIVING A NEW MEANING TO A SPACE

By manipulating and reusing the already existing space and infrastructure, designers tried to put a new meaning to it. But the interesting point is that the definition of designer varies according to the actors existing in the community and project.

It can be recovering the empty and

abandoned rubbish space to an open space concert hall by a group of artists, reusing the sidewalk as a fundamental element to constitute a healthy urban landscape, using an unfinished abandoned skyscraper as a vertical city for informal communities, or re-designing a playground in cooperation of the local community.



14. Torre David_ Venezuela / developingsolutions



15. The Wave by Scarcity and Creativity Studio_ Chile / Divisare 2012



16. All Colors Sidewalk by Zoom Urbanismo Arquitetura e Design + LAO Engenharia & Design_ Brazil / Archdaily 2020





17. Public space and wi-fi park in Centro Habana_Cuba / Amber C. Snider 2017

URBAN LIFE IN CUBA

Havana, the city which at first glance seems to be frozen in time, can be a container of all types of public spaces in Cuba. It represents all history of Spanish, Moorish, and Soviet influence. “While other nations have been afforded the chance to have a voice in their own globalization efforts, Cuba represents one of the last places on earth that straddles the line between a Cold War past and the increasing influence of western Capitalism. Havana’s skyline, which for years remained largely intact, is now dotted with cranes as they face yet another wave of invasions- the 21st-century luxury developer”, Kaley Overstreet says.

“From all the buildings existing in the city, it is clear that Havana was once an opulent city with much wealth, but now the wealth seems to be interspersed with extreme poverty and crumbling infrastructure. It makes for a varied and confusing landscape”, Elsie Gilmore says.

Kaley Overstreet writes “Until recently, most of the architectural projects in Cuba focused on the restoration of Havana’s homes and businesses, two-thirds of which were estimated to be in a deteriorating condition.” But Nguyen Rodriguez Barrera, a Cuban architect believes that “Cuba’s most urgent architectural “problem” isn’t historical restoration, but the creation of social-

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ly-conscious, flexible public space inside these historical structures.”

For instance, Fábrica de Arte Cubano is a former cooking oil factory in Havana which is redesigned as a new art gallery and club. Although there are many debates regarding the open atmosphere of this art gallery, it is considered as a symbol of Cuba's accelerating opening to the world. But the question is how the Cuban nation will deal with globalization?

Kaley Overstreet writes “attention has now been placed on what happened when the United States gave Cuba a preview into what a post-embargo government might look like, beckoning the country to sell off development rights for a quick dollar in order to create a high-end tourism industry. While some architects are fearful of what might happen when the relationship between the US and Cuba is inevitably repaired, others are optimistic that Cuba is not a money-hungry nation, and that their national pride will save them from greedy economic ambition. The hope is that their

appreciation for their history will also save them from a potentially disastrous urban renewal. Also the Cuban people are hopeful that the policymakers will profit from the other negative examples of market-centric urban development countries, and combine preservationist ideals with strong planning mechanisms that could strike the perfect balance. Havana is on the brink of transformation and as it's historic fabric is long overdue for rehabilitation, they also enjoy the ability to create their own path forward. While a few of tourism-focused hotels, a shopping mall, and a handful of other in-progress development projects may seem like a premature eyebrow raise, Havana understands that this is their moment to join the rest of the world in a way that remains authentic to who they are without ever becoming another indistinguishable skyline. But with each passing day, and with every new moment of unregulated western influence, the time for preservation seems to be running out”.



18. Fábrica de Arte Cubano_Cuba / lahavana



19. Fábrica de Arte Cubano_Cuba / Marita Acosta 2018

POLITICS AND PUBLIC ART IN CUBA

“Communism is a very utilitarian form of government. The dictionary definition of communism is “a political theory derived from Karl Marx, advocating class war and leading to a society in which all property is publicly owned and each person works and is paid according to their abilities and needs.” While nice in theory, this doesn’t seem to be how communism plays out in reality. Additionally, communism doesn’t seem to make room for what one of the fundamental aspects of life, art”, says Elsie Gilmore.

Alos Madeleine Zoe Hordinski writes “The government does not clamp down on privately-owned or operated avant-garde spaces such as a Cuban-owned galleries or foreign embassies. Rather, it cares about heavy foot (or eye) traffic. If something is visible in the street view (like public street art, or its equivalent on social media), it is either shut down in secret, or an owner is encouraged or forced to take it down. Anything visible from the packed streets of Havana will certainly be seen. Large critical art displays visible to the public or dis-

plays in galleries like La Fábrica de Arte Cubano, that continuously have thousands of visitors on a monthly basis, are also shut down or encouraged to do so if their art is deemed “too political.” The Cuban government of the Post-Fidel era does not have that totalitarian feeling because of their varied approach to the censorship of political art, but they still work in the shadows of some private and public spaces, leaving many Cuban artists afraid to speak their mind. Censorship in Cuba is not applied everywhere, but there are spaces where critical artistic thought is allowed. This distinction across public and private art also relates to the different kinds of markets that operate in Cuba — the communist market and the participation in a global capitalist market”.

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Elsie Gilmore believes that in terms of infrastructure, “many of the public spaces in Cuba are very depressing. They serve a purpose but without any joy or creativity, Many of the parks are mostly pavement, with benches spread throughout. Even the Malecón



20. Cuban graffiti artist who forced to clean his art works _ Havana / Roman Espinosa 2017

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21a. A playground in Havana / Elsie Gilmore 2017



21b. An Internet Park in Havana / Elsie Gilmore 2017



21c. Malecón in Havana / Elsie Gilmore 2017



21c. Paseo del Prado / Elsie Gilmore 2017

– known as a meeting place for lovers, philosophers, poets, traveling minstrels – is a stark wall of concrete with no joyful properties”. Although she believes that “The median between the two opposing lanes of Paseo del Prado is one of the nicest public spaces. The buildings along this street tells the history of wealth and splendor that no longer existed in most of Havana”.

STREETS AS PUBLIC SPACES

Maybe Havana suffers from lack of public space infrastructure, but it may have more street life than any other city in the world. If children playing in the streets is an indicator of a successful city, then Havana has a lot

to build on (Ethan Kent, 2015). This shows the high quality of security and safety existing in the city that children and teenagers can easily have their own activities in the streets.

On the other hand, because of the limitation in access to TV and Internet on the island (especially for elderly people), if people need to have entertainment, they have to get outside of their houses and find it. This is why Cuba has a friendly culture, because the relationships are based on person to person interaction.

“An exceedingly walkable city, Havana could be made even more so. Sidewalks are narrow (traffic lanes are not), and they are not well defined.



22. Kids playing in the streets of Old Havana _ Havana / Vibeke Johannessen 2017

Cuba has been blessed with limited access to cars and gasoline - but that is changing. Demand for cars is being heavily driven by a lack of alternatives. A strong bus system would seem to be a cost effective and very compatible solution to many of the city's problems, including housing demand, pollution, and cost of living. Reconfiguring major intersections (or Right-sizing) and restrictions on parking are a few of the measures that could help Havana avoid many of the problems that most developed cities are now facing. While the activity, human scale, and sociability of the streets is the best traffic calming measure, streets need to be designed as places to support the social uses that the community desires", Ethan Kent says.

MARKETS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

Ethan Kent regarding the markets in Havana writes "Havana's public markets, from small corner stands, to larger managed markets and neighborhood markets, are the major form of retail, and the centers of many neighborhoods. With high quality produce and strong customer connections, these markets play an especially important role here creating jobs and supporting a major portion of the food system that is otherwise somewhat fragile. But beyond the very common markets and food stands, there is not a strong retail economy. Many stores seem somewhat temporary and have low stock and limited display. Streets that may have at one time had many stores, seem to only have a couple that



23. mercado agropecuario [farmer's market] _ Cuba / Robin Thom

are only open when supply warrants. Certainly this is reflective of a minimal cash economy and no ownership of property, but finding ways to support retail would go a long way to improving and making use of existing building and street infrastructure”.

A WEALTH OF HISTORIC SQUARES, FORMAL PARKS

Ethan Kent writes “Parks and squares are all over, and their historic qualities are well preserved. A system of small parks and squares, while not always beautiful and polished, are points of pride, sociability, and comfort.

The narrow - though important - focus on preservation has not allowed the parks to evolve past their historic form. The many parks and squares

should be able to showcase and help evolve the culture and community of the city and its neighborhoods.

The squares in Old Havana should have music in them for the public and not just the paying café customers. Many youth and lovers use these parks, but parents and small children do not seem to have reason to use them. Play areas geared to small children and more small restaurants (there are a few) near these play areas would start to attract new uses and help manage and maintain a feeling of safety in these parks”.

BROAD BOULEVARDS

“The Boulevards (Paseo del Prado, Avenida de los Presidentes, Paseo, etc.) are major amenities that rival



25. Paseo del Prado _ Havana / havana-live 2020

the world's best center median boulevards and are the defining icons of their neighborhoods. Despite the fact that they are well used, these generous public spaces need more uses and destinations. The Prado could potentially exceed the Ramblas in Barcelona, while the Paseo and Avenida de los Presidentes could perhaps showcase some small cafes with shaded public seating areas and local art from living artists", Ethan Kent explains.

A WATERFRONT CITY

"This waterfront is clearly one of the city's greatest assets and already an identifying icon, but the public spaces along the waterfront need the most improvement. The Malecon, while beautiful in postcards, is not really that usable for pedestrians. A wide and fast

six lane highway with no crosswalks is flanked by a narrow promenade (really just a sidewalk) and limited destinations with no uses or amenities", Ethan Kent says.

PRESERVATION ARCHITECTURE WITH PUBLIC LIFE

"While it is the many uses and pervasive sociability that is what stands out most in Havana, behind this activity is some of the best-used urban architecture and public spaces we have seen. Though in disrepair and with a limited retail economy, the building stock through their scale, intricate detailing, balconies, and ground level activity manage to support the social life spilling out onto the streets. The public spaces of Havana flourish like no other. From open air celebrations

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24. El Malecón _ Havana / Roman Espinosa 2017

to haircuts, board games to baseball, the streets of this unique city truly celebrate humanity. We hope that this vibrancy can be preserved, along with the architecture and public spaces that support it.

Sadly, the lack of available capital and incentive to improve property is leading to the deterioration of some spectacular buildings throughout the city. While there has been a great deal of attention to full renovations and retrofitting of buildings in the tourist area of Havana Vieja, this has probably gone too far, too fast, and is often out of context with the surroundings on many levels. A better investment, rather, could be in structural and preventative measures in buildings throughout the entire city. This has been a common mistake of many UNESCO heritage areas fo-

cus on the built environment and capital projects while ignoring (and often pushing out) the life and people that make the area work and created it in the first place. UNESCO, and similar preservation projects, should be able to focus on uses and preserve the connection between the culture, community, and economy within the built environment.

Preserving and supporting the people of Havana's strong use of its public spaces is perhaps how to best help the city thrive through increased outside investment. Through centering their development strategy around public spaces, place and Placemaking, Havana can ensure that the benefits of new investment go to the fragile communities that this beautiful city is meant to serve", Ethan Kent writes.

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 Ciudad Emergente, Santiago de Chile, Chile <https://ciudademergente.org/contacto>
 Abono / Venezuela
 Al Borde / Ecuador (www.albordearq.com)
 AXP Arquitectura Expandida / Colombia (www.arquitecturaexpandida.org)
 HSF Hábitat sin Fronteras / México (www.habitatsinfronteras.org)
 Independiente / Venezuela – España
 Oficina Lúdica / Venezuela (www.oficialudica.tumblr.com)
 PGRC Plataforma Gestión Residuos de Ciudad / Venezuela <https://p-g-r-c.tumblr.com>
 PKMN pacmanArchitectures / España (www.pkmn.es)
 TXP Todo por la Praxis / España (www.todoporlapraxis.es)
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PUBLIC SPACE

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