

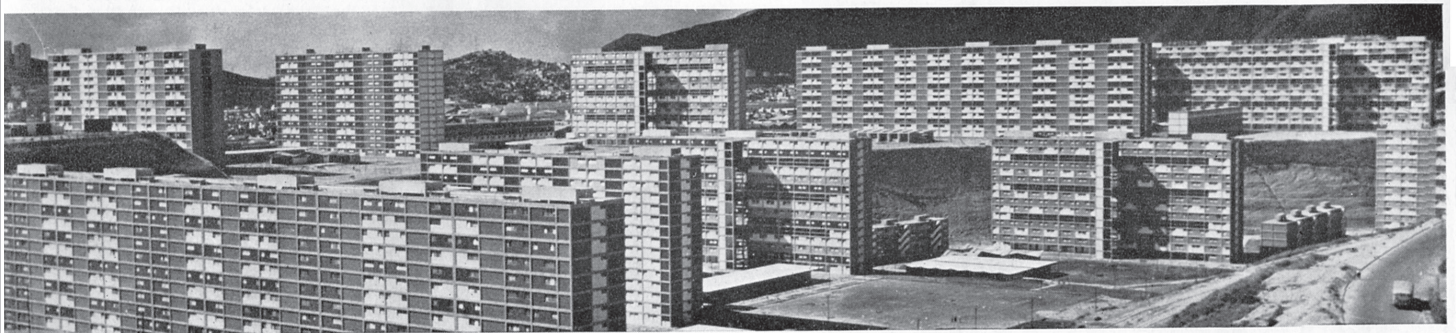
Left: plan of a typical flat in a typical superblock. The area is 840 sq. ft. (76m²)

Mass urban re-housing problems

Superblock programme of Banco Obrero, Caracas, Venezuela, 1954–1958

Caracas is situated in a narrow valley and an increasing proportion of its population, which has doubled each decade since 1940, lives in 'ranchos' (squatter settlements) on the hillsides round the city. By 1959, when construction of the superblocks was suspended, these ranchos housed 30 per cent of the city's total population of 1,285,000; the intention of the superblock programme was to eradicate the ranchos and re-house their inhabitants.

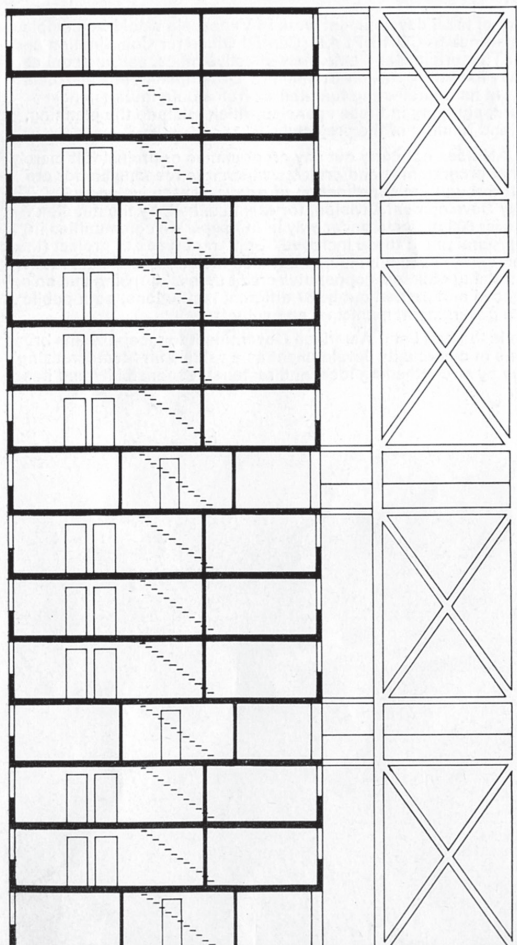
Between 1954 and 1958, the final year of the Perez Jimenez regime, 85 superblocks had been built along with 68 four-storey blocks. In 1959, these housed 160,000 people in 17,399 apartments—12 per cent of the city's population.



Above: panoramic view of development '23 de Enero' in Caracas, which consists of 38 superblocks housing a total population of about 100,000

Below: typical living-room and kitchen interiors for an average family—6 or 7 persons with a monthly income of about \$59.40

Photos by courtesy of the Banco Obrero



Left: section through a typical superblock. Later designs were modified to avoid internal staircases and to provide balconies to the flats





After the end of Jimenez' administration, a now famous evaluation study of the programme was made, and, subsequently, certain sectors were the subject of social rehabilitation and community development projects complementing the administrative re-organization of the Banco Obrero. Although the necessity for these projects is a startling commentary on a newly completed scheme, their success shows that the blocks can function well and suggests that the failure of social and financial planning, at least partly due to political interference, was the cause of the initial failure rather than the original concept.

In a country with as much money available as Venezuela had at the time, in a city with very little building land in which the government owned suitable sites, and with an adequate proportion of the blue- and lower white-collar class able to buy or rent this type of dwelling, a strong argument can be made for the superblock solution. Planners and designers of low-cost housing tend to favour very low densities which exaggerate socially as well as physically horizontal stratification; and, although superblocks are not the only means of achieving higher densities, it is worth spending some time in studying this programme's potentialities.

Here it should be mentioned, parenthetically, that the Banco Obrero is now developing a satellite town, for about 200,000 inhabitants initially, in the valley of Guaremas to the east of Caracas.

The following summary of selected data gives an idea of the form, use and problems of the superblocks:

The occupants: from the sample surveys it appears that 75 per cent of the inhabitants are immigrants from the provinces and that the majority are members of aggregate families with an average of 8 persons. In 1959 there was a rather high proportion of semi- and un-employed: 30 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. As might be expected, a similar proportion (55 per cent) suffered from undernourishment. Incomes varied too much for an average to give any clear idea but three main groups were distinguished with three monthly averages: \$214.90, \$195.80 and \$115.20. All types of blue-collar and the lower paid white-collar occupations are represented.

The project: the basic general data has been given above. The superblocks are distributed, mostly on the north and west sides of the city, singly, or in pairs or threes (15 blocks); in larger groups of 8 to 13 (32 blocks); and in one very large group of 38. The 85 superblocks cover a total area of 750 acres with a net density of about 215 persons per acre. A great many more community facilities were designed and even built than were in use at the time of the survey: of the 40 schools only 15 were in use; these accommodated 16,000 out of the 40,000 children of school age. Of the 25 nursery schools provided, only three were in use; seven of the 18 medical posts and consulting rooms were in operation and four police posts manned.

Financing and administration: the average construction cost per unit is stated to be \$10,000 and the monthly maintenance cost in 1959 was \$53.44. Even discounting the inexplicable maintenance costs (there appears to have been little or no maintenance and very little administration) which have since been greatly reduced, the cost of the apartments was far too high for the income of the occupants—assuming that the ratio between monthly income and the investment should not exceed 1:24—the majority occupy property worth two or three times the amount they can reasonably afford to pay for; even if all the occupants paid what they could and should the State would still have to pay the major part of the capital cost as well as the maintenance. In 1959, however, slightly less than 5 per cent of the tenancies were legalized and recovery was negligible (over 5 million US dollars were owed). By the time the dictatorship finally collapsed the superblocks were in social chaos which, even now, has only been partially resolved. The incomplete and unoccupied apartments and many community buildings were invaded; squatter settlements sprang up in the 'green' spaces, blocks were controlled by gangs, the utilities and even the lifts broke down, the filth, especially in the internal staircases, was unimaginable, community facilities were totally inadequate, the groups were often isolated, by difficult communications, from the rest of the city, and, on top of these and many other difficulties the political situation made it extremely difficult to do anything about it all.

Nevertheless, a great deal has been done, as the illustrations show. In April 1959, following recommendations of the evaluation project organized by CINVA (the Interamerican Housing Centre of the Pan American Union in Bogotá), groups of social workers started two pilot projects. The writer visited one of these projects in November last year (Simón Rodríguez) and the blocks seen were in good order, the people friendly and proud of their flats, and the social workers' claims that there is an effective and developing community were supported by the sum of the impressions received. If the majority of the occupants were, not so long ago, peasants from backward areas, then the transformation is extraordinary. Superficially there seemed to be little essential difference between these and any other working-class blocks anywhere; the main difference being, perhaps, a greater degree of participation in, and responsibility for, the improvement and maintenance of the property, both the individual flats, which are mostly owner-occupied, as well as the communal areas.

There are eight superblocks in the 'Simón Rodríguez' group with a population of about 10,000; the tenancy of the 780 invaded or otherwise illegally occupied flats had been legalized, maintenance costs had been reduced and the monthly payments received had increased from \$72,360 in 1958 to \$1,969,000 by mid 1961.



Above and below: occupants of the housing development '23 de Enero' take part in the programme of Communal Development—playing basketball, making the pitch, painting corridors or murals
Photos by courtesy of the Banco Obrero, Caracas

