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Deconstructing Utopian Informality: A Historiographic Analysis of *El Centro Financiero Confinanzas* and Urban Think Tank Project *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities*

From the beginning of the colonial encounter, the geopolitical entity of "Latin America" has served as a laboratory for Western experimentations in built *utopia*. Early demonstrations of this utopian experimentation can be seen in the colonial grid and its hegemonic impositions of formal order on space, and later manifestations can be seen in the various architectural state modernisms constructed in postcolonial Latin American cities throughout the course of the twentieth century. Patricio Del Real defines the virtue of the modern project as the construction of *utopia*: "the creation of a better world through the exposure of historical deficiencies and the building of a new society."[1] But Del Real also argues that this "better world", this *utopia* that modernity grapples towards, is one insidiously entrenched in colonial thought– one that sees the world in terms of a Western center and a secondary, inferior periphery. As architectural historical Keith Eggener states: "no matter how vital, the peripheral is other than, deviant from and less than the center, the norm"[2]

When Keith Eggener critiqued this center-periphery dialogue in 2002, he was critiquing Kenneth Frampton's architectural framework that had emerged twenty years earlier: the framework of critical regionalism as an "architecture of resistance." Eggener argued that critical regionalism denied a singular formal style while simultaneously presuming a singular style of thought and approach that emphasized architecture as tectonic fact. In other words, Eggener

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[1] Del Real, Patricio. "Building the Barbacoas in Havana, Cuba: Informal Construction Sheds Light on Modernity in Latin America.". Encounters Encuentros Recontres, 2005.:10

[2] Eggener, Keith. "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism," Journal of Architectural Education 55, no. 4, May 2002.:. 232

argued that the Western framework of critical regionalism still attempted to extract a model of built utopia from its non-Western case studies. And in doing so, critical regionalism:

> absorb(ed) culturally and geographically situated activities within an overarching, Euro-American generated discourse, one bearing relatively little interest in local perspectives on local culture… (leading) to an *interpretive flattening of diverse cultural materials*, and a misunderstanding or devaluation of their founding intentions and most immediate meanings.[3]

In his critique of critical regionalism, Eggener criticized Frampton's framework for its colonial leanings in the academic study of the architecture of postcolonial cities. And similarly, in this paper, I seek to critique another postcolonial academic framework that has emerged in *contemporary* architectural discourse: that of **informality**.

Contemporary studies of urban informality (that, like those of critical regionalist studies, are largely conducted by Western European and North American institutions in non-Western contexts) continue to engage in postcolonial binary dialectics, placing informal settlements as "architectures of resistance" oppositional to the "formal" architectures constructed by the neoliberal city. I argue that these studies, including the work done by ETH Zurich-associated research group, Urban Think Tank (U-TT) which I will discuss in depth in the next sections, operate as, taking urban historian Jane M. Jacob's words, "revisionary form(s) of imperialist nostalgia that define the colonized as always engaged in conscious work against the core."[4] Although, as these institutions have identified, there is significant knowledge to gain from studying and learning from informal settlements, the act of posing informal settlements as

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[3] Eggener, Keith. "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism," Journal of Architectural Education 55, no. 4, May 2002.: 233

[4] Jacobs, Jane M. "Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City." London: Routledge, 1996.: 15

laboratories for built utopia takes these informal settlements out of their embedded sociopolitical context, and in effect, divests responsibility from the capitalist (and colonial) systems of power that produce the precarious conditions through which informal settlements arise.

In the next section, I look at a vertical slum with a contemporary history that exemplifies the problematic implications of "informality" as a discursive framework. The normative gaze of the architectural discipline transformed *Torre David* in Caracas, Venezuela from a precarious space of living for its squatter residents into "a vital source of innovation and experimentation for urban problems in our hyper-urbanized world."[5] U-TT's work presented *Torre David* in a very progressive manner that went against the building's preexisting stigmatization (as a vertical slum) in modern discourse, yet it did so in a way that participated in what Eggener refers to as a postcolonial "interpretive flattening of diverse cultural materials:"[6] U-TT's utopianization of the tower's architectural tectonics invisibilized the inextricable socioeconomic and historical *colonial* context through which *Torre David* emerged.

The Story of Torre David Part 1: Venezuelan Modern Project Half-Realized
  El Centro Financiero Confinanzas, or as it is colloquially known as, *Torre David*, was a vertical slum in Caracas, Venezuela that was occupied by some 5,000 squatters between the years of 2007 to 2014.

Urban Studies scholar Clara Irazábel, in her paper "The High Rise and the Shack: Rhizomatic Collisions in Caracas' Torre David"[7] provides an excellent in-depth analysis of the

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[5] Urban-Think Tank and Justin McGuirk, "Venice Biennale 2012: Torre David / Gran Horizonte," ArchDaily, https://www.archdaily.com/269481/venice-biennale-2012-torre-david-gran-horizonte-urban-think-tank-justin-mcguirk-iwan-baan

[6] Eggener, Keith. "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism," Journal of Architectural Education 55, no. 4, May 2002.: 233

[7] Irazábal-Zurita, C. E., Sosa, I., & Schlenker, L. E. (2020). The High-Rise and the Shack: Rhizomatic Collisions in Caracas' Torre David. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, *19*(1), 1–34. Retrieved from https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1855.

specific Venezuelan sociopolitical context in which Torre David emerged and was constructed, which I summarize to provide context for my critique of Urban Think Tank's 2012 Venice Biennale exhibition.

El Centro Financiero Confinanza's colloquial name, *Torre David*, comes from the name of the late American investor of the original skyscraper building, David Brillemburg. As exemplified by the initial ownership of the skyscraper, *Torre David* was constructed in a context of grandiose international investment in Caracas, Venezuela.

Lisa Blackmore explains how beginning from the 1950s, during the Cold War United States-backed spectacular dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-1958) and Jiménez's Plan Regulador, the city of Caracas served a stage for political-aesthetic spectacle and the materialization of grandiose visions of colonial modernity fueled by Venezuela's, at-the-time, prosperous oil capital.[8] Clara Irazábel explains how, throughout the 1970s, Venezuela continued to accrue huge profits from the oil market management of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) during the ongoing Cold War. This profit margin allowed for the Venezuelan state to continue their mass-spending projects in spectacular architectural modernity throughout the 1970s. Beginning from the 1980s, however, amidst fluctuation in international oil markets, the Venezuelan state no longer possessed the capital backing to fund their grandiose architectural aspirations. But despite this shift in economic prosperity, international and domestic developers continued to speculate and verticalize the city of Caracas.

It was in this context of speculation without domestic economic security that David Brillembourg and his Grupo Confinanzas broke ground for their new headquarters located in the

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[8] Blackmore, Lisa. "Introduction: Rethinking The Politics And Aesthetics Of Modernity," in *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space, and Visuality in Venezuela, 1948-1958.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2017.

modern Central Business District of Caracas in 1990 (Figure 1). The skyscraper was planned to be a spectacular monument to capitalist modernity; private money combined with eighty million dollars from Caracas' city agencies would fund architect Enrique Gómez' design containing interiors of Italian marble, a helipad, private swimming pools, and twenty-three elevators.

But then, midway through the construction of the skyscraper, in 1973, the main investor David Brillembourg died from cancer. Construction was soon halted after Brillembourg's death with the tower at only 60% completion, and the Venezuelan Banking Crisis of 1994 would confirm the complete abandonment of the half-finished modern project of Torre David, with ownership of the skyscraper completely transferring to the Venezuelan state who were politically and economically uninterested in continuing the tower's construction.

The Story of Torre David Part 2: Spatial Reclamation of the Abandoned Monument
For over a decade, *Torre David* remained abandoned within a central area of Caracas. According to Irazábel, during this time, pilferers and black-market looters earned money by stripping the skyscraper (alongside other similar abandoned modern projects in Caracas) of any materials that had value and reselling them. [9]

Then, on a rainy night in October 2007, a large group of houseless Caracans took shelter in *Torre David*, let in by the building's two security guards. Following this initial penetration into the skyscraper, the occupation of *Torre David* would grow significantly in scale with thousands of Caracans reclaiming and rehabilitating the 28-floor space of the tower over the course of months evolving into years.

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[9] Irazábal-Zurita, C. E., Sosa, I., & Schlenker, L. E. (2020). The High-Rise and the Shack: Rhizomatic Collisions in Caracas' Torre David. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, *19*(1), 1–34. Retrieved from https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1855.: 12

At first, *Torre David* lacked basic infrastructural necessities. Irazábel describes how at the beginning of the tower's reclamation, "there were mid air gaps between buildings and along staircases; no elevators to transport people or goods multiple stories; no water, power or waste management systems; and no viable ventilation ducts" leading to nauseating stenches from accumulating waste.[10]

In response to these precarious circumstances that threatened the health and safety of its inhabitants, residents organized and constructed their own solutions. Residents divided up the space on each of the twenty-eight floors of the skyscraper, electing a representative for each floor. In alignment with, what Irazábel outlines as *an ethos of collective self-sufficiency,*[11] the residents of *Torre David* made agreements towards the communal maintenance of the space and appointed coordinators for salient functions including security, tenant affairs, internal circulation, water distribution, etc. Figure 2 shows the self-maintained electrical system (tied to the state-owned electrical grid) installed within the tower.

The communal collaboration among the residents of the tower transformed *Torre David* into a stage for participatory democracy. Out of precarious conditions, the *Torre* residents constructed a vibrant community space within the tower. Irazábel describes how the tower contained a church, recreational facilities, commercial spaces (shown in Figure 3), restaurants, a weight-room, and a housing cooperative that allowed tenants to forego rent and only pay monthly maintenance bills that would directly towards pay the housing settlement's water and electrical bills tied to state-owned infrastructural systems.[12]

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[10] Irazábal-Zurita, C. E., Sosa, I., & Schlenker, L. E. (2020). The High-Rise and the Shack: Rhizomatic Collisions in Caracas' Torre David. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, *19*(1), 1–34. Retrieved from https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1855.: 12
[11] Ibid.:13
[12] Ibid.

Figure 4 shows the ways that residents reclaim the monumental, modern skyscraper form to become their own home. The photograph captured by Iwan Baan shows how each window facade of the skyscraper is uniquely constructed by a specific inhabitant who uses their own desired formula of an economical brick-tile construction. Laundry lines with freshly-washed clothes hang out from some of the skyscraper windows while colorful curtains drape other spaces, veiling these private spaces of home from the public eye.

The Story of Torre David Part 3: In-Situ Self-Construction

A close, critical viewing of the photographs that Iwan Baan and Urban Think Tank captured of the Torre David space (examples shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4) and included in their book, *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities* (2012), shows so much and speak volumes about the radical reclamation and social production of space by the *Torre David* residents.

Yet, the architectural narratives that accompanied Urban Think Tank's *Torre David* project, and their 2012 Venice Biennale exhibition, obscure and decentralize the pivotal role and agency of the residents in the revitalization of *Torre David*. Both visually with representational imagery and semantically with words, Urban Think Tank's presentation of their *Torre David* research invisibilize the *Torre David* residents.

Figure 5 shows a spectacular image of the modern skyscraper's monumental rectilinear form with a *Torr*e resident reduced into a small black silhouette in the shadow of architectural modernity's formal language. Figure 6 shows two architectural section drawings of *Torre David* rendered by the U-TT architects. The section drawing is devoid of people; it erases the social production of space by the *Torre* residents and in its place, it offers a pathway for the formal architectural extraction of space. Figures 7 and 8 show images of the spectacular gallery exhibition that sensuously recreated the space of *Torre David* for the bourgeois eyes of Venice

Biennale visitors. Disingenuous recreations in the form of an overpriced arepas stand and a meticulously designed series of brick-tile room dividers, attempt to reference the Torre David residents' dynamic social productions, but within the gallery space, the resident's work have been fetishized and transformed into objects of bourgeois contemplation.

Furthermore, on Urban Think Tank's website on the T*orre David* project, torredavid.com, Urban Think Tank describes their project in the following way:

> Where some only see a failed development project, U-TT has conceived (Torre David) as a laboratory for the study of informal vertical communities. In exhibitions and a book, the architects lay out their vision for practical, sustainable interventions in Torre David and similar informal settlements around the world. They argue that the future of urban development lies in collaboration among architects, private enterprise, and the global population of slum-dwellers. U-TT issues a call to arms to their fellow architects to see in the informal settlements of the world a potential for innovation and experimentation, with the goal of putting design in the service of a more equitable and sustainable future.[13]

This description of *Torre David* is loaded with normative language that incorporates the decolonial self-sufficient settlement (*decolonial* because of its participatory democratic nature) into a postcolonial paradigm of thinking.

U-TT first frames themselves," the *architects"*, as the disseminators of visionary knowledge, and in doing so, U-TT erases the agency of the residents that constructed *Torre David* themselves. U-TT then invite their viewing audience of other *architects* to selectively extract "sustainable" and "innovative" architectural resources from *Torre David*. U-TT proposes that the *architect* will be the agent that "puts design in the service of a more equitable and

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[13] Urban-Think Tank, "The Torre David / Gran Horizonte," Torre David, https://torredavid.com/post/31459501308/the-torre-david-gran-horizonte-by-urban-think

sustainable future." In other words, U-TT suggests that the anthropological study of Torre David will allow for architects to construct new *informal utopias*.

The (Decolonized) Story of Torre David Part 3: Self-Construction In-Situ

      Despite my criticism directed towards Urban Think Tank's work in the earlier section, I acknowledge that Urban Think Tank's approach towards posing *Torre David* as a model for learning was praiseworthy and well-deserving of the 2012 Golden Lion prize at the Venice Biennale Exhibition. Rather than critiquing Urban Think Tank as a singular entity, I seek to critique the essentializing and normative modes of *representation* entrenched within the architectural discipline, and I seek to highlight how the framework of "informality" operates as a postcolonial construction in contemporary architectural discourse. I use U-TT's project on *Torre David* as a mere case study for my critique, and through this research paper, I open up the question of how *Torre David*, specifically within its geopolitical context of Caracas, Venezuela, could have been better contextualized and contextually represented in U-TT's project.

      In Fernando Lara's research on the dissemination of architectural knowledge contemporarily occuring in the favelas of Brazil and the self-construction of new vernacular modernisms by the marginalized favela residents, he highlights the agency of *people* as the vectors of the dissemination of design. Lara advocates for the necessity of a new framework for studying the dissemination of design knowledge, a new framework that operates *outside* of rather than within existing modern academic disciplines. Lara highlights the necessity in tracing and understanding how design ideas are disseminated *without* architects *among people*.[14] I argue that

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[14] Lara, Fernando "Learning from the Favelas: What Informal Settlements Tell us About the Dissemination of our Knowledge," in *97th ACSA Annual Meeting Proceedings: The Value of Design*, eds. Mark Gillem & Phoebe Crisman, 2009, 615-621.

the study of the self-construction informal settlements, generally, should be approached similarly

without necessitating the guiding, essentializing vision of the architect.

A 50-minute film documentary produced by Caracas-native Irene Sosa, titled Vertical

Slum (2015)[15] presents a narrative of *Torre David* centered around the geo-political context of

Caracas and the *Torre* residents that constructed the architecture. Rather than asking how the

architecture opposes modernity (like "informality" does), Sosa's documentary asks how the

architecture reflects *ideology*– how is *Torre David* simultaneously a reaction and resistance of

colonial modernity?

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[15] Sosa, Irene "Vertical Slum," 2015. https://as.nyu.edu/research-centers/clacs/events/spring-2016/cineclacs-presents-vertical-slum.html#:~:text=About%20the%20film%3A,three%20decades%20of%20Venezuelan%20history. .

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Urban-Think Tank, "The Torre David / Gran Horizonte," Torre David, https://torredavid.com/post/31459501308/the-torre-david-gran-horizonte-by-urban-think

Figures

Figure 1. Location of Torre David in a central area of Caracas and at the intersection of formal and informal, traditional and modern urban fabrics. Credit: JdB, Creative Commons (2015).

Figure 2. Photograph of Resident's Self-Constructed Electrical Infrastructure within the Tower connecting to the State Electrical Grid. Iwan Baan, Urban Think Tank (2012).

Figure 3. Photograph of Resident Self-Operated Market located within Torre David. Iwan Baan, Urban Think Tank (2012).
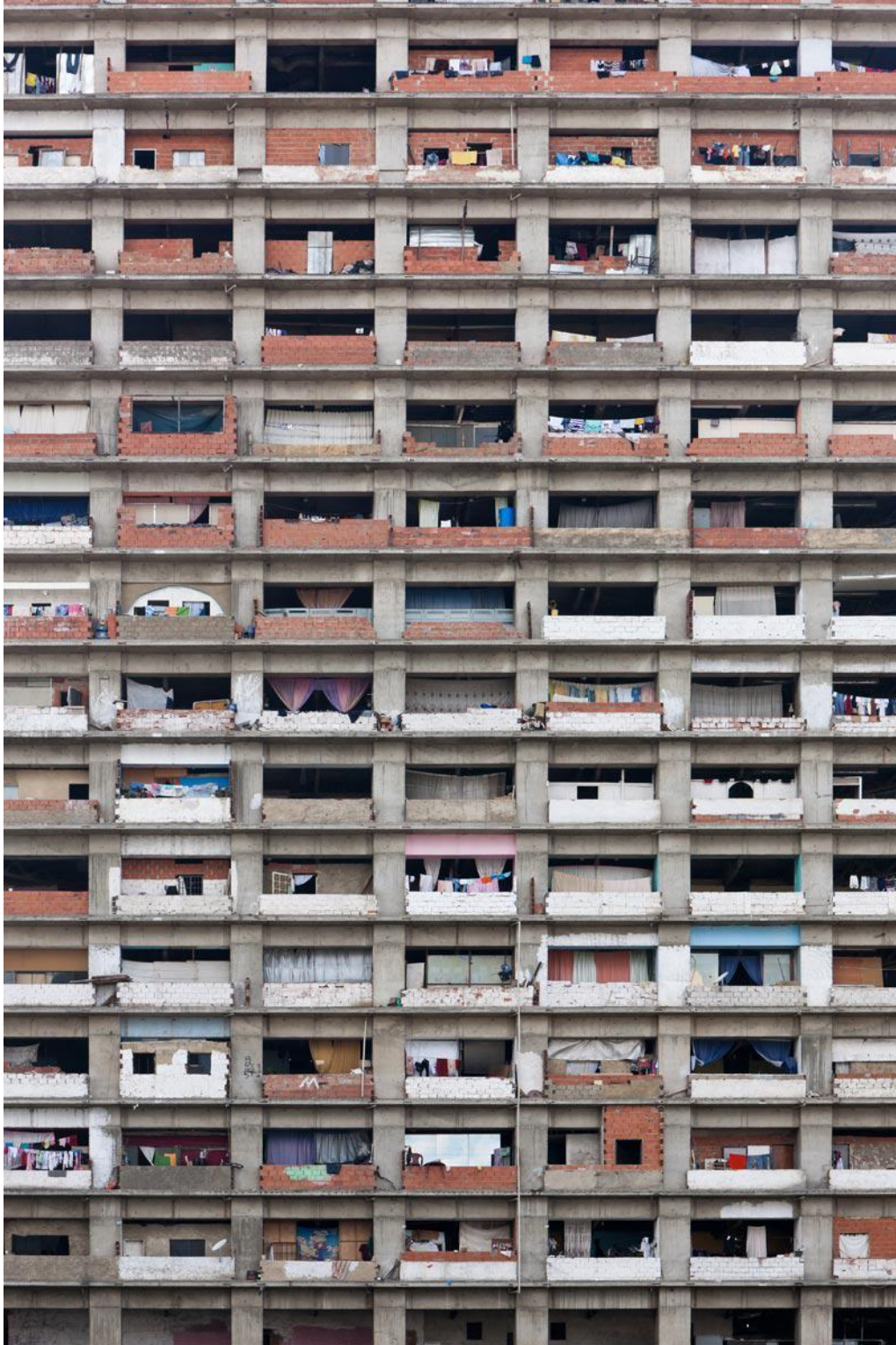
Photograph of Torre David from the Perspective of the Windows Reclaimed by its Residents. Iwan Baan, Urban Think Tank (2012).

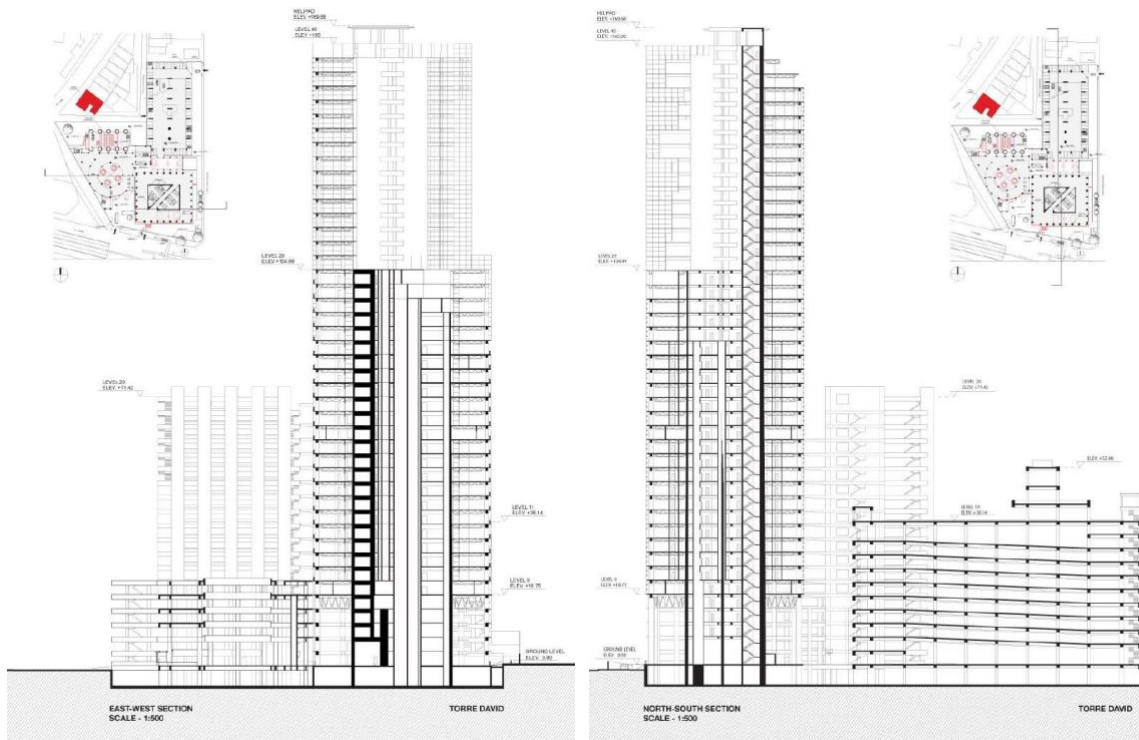Figure 5. Spectacular Photograph of the Inside of Torre David. Iwan Baan, Urban Think Tank (2012).

Figure 6. Section Drawings of *Torre David* rendered by Urban Think Tank Architects. Urban Think Tank (2012).

Figure 7. Venice Biennale Gallery Design including Brick-Tile Dividers and Gentrified Arepas Stand. Daniel Schwartz. U-TT Archives (2012)

Figure 8. Arepas Restaurant in Venice Biennale as Space for Bourgeois Contemplation and Conversation. Daniel Schwartz. U-TT Archives (2012)