Reclaiming Space and Identity in La Chacarita

An Exploration of Alternative Planning Paradigms

Urban Planning Studio

Columbia University GSAPP
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to express our deepest gratitude to all those who contributed to the realization of this project. Special recognition goes to Pro-Desarrollo for being an incredibly welcoming host during our site visit during Kinne week meeting with us and hosting an asado and PechaKucha. We also want to thank the residents and organizations of La Chacarita for their invaluable expertise, insights, cooperation, resources, time, and unwavering support throughout this endeavor. Their guidance, encouragement, and belief in the transformative potential of community-driven initiatives have been a source of inspiration and motivation.

We also thank Columbia University staff for making this possible. Professors Jose Luis Vallejo Mateo and Ryan Devlin and our teaching assistant, Elizabeth Milagros Álvarez, have been invaluable mentors along this international journey and throughout the development of our report. We sincerely appreciate this enriching experience and will integrate its lessons into our future urban planning endeavors.

Lastly, we would like to acknowledge the events that occur worldwide and on the Columbia University campus this year. As we worked in this studio, unrest permeated parts of the world, particularly through the violent Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people. We would be remiss not to explicitly draw parallels between our observations of marginalized populations in Paraguay and those in Gaza and beyond. In the enclosed proposals of this project, we want to remind all readers that every struggle is connected, from the surveillance and policing of informal residents in La Chacarita to the feminist protestors in Asunción at large to the widespread militarization of American campuses and brutality leveled against peaceful student protestors. We acknowledge these systematic patterns of displacement and loss, condemn the imperial forces that cause them, and collectively shout for justice and peace.

Fig.1. Last day of field work

Photo credit/ **Luis Bogado**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Asunción, Paraguay, is characterized by distinct cultural fusion where the indigenous Guaraní language and culture harmonize with the Spanish influence. The identity of Asunción is based on the complex coexistence of two adjacent worlds: the Historic District and La Chacarita.

The studio's inception was a result of a collaborative effort between Columbia University and Pro-Desarrollo, a non-profit organization that champions formalization within the economy as a catalyst for sustainable, inclusive, and innovative economic progress. In response to the client's brief, the studio set out to explore how the two areas could be intertwined physically, socially, and economically, all while respecting and honoring the existing informal practices.

Upon further research, our studio shifted to two objectives: (1) forefronting residents' experiences in the neighborhood and (2) cultivating sustainable, equitable, and mutually beneficial relationships between the formal Historical Center and the informal enclave of La Chacarita. Through the implementation of a **(1) Chacarita Empowerment Network** and the establishment of a **(2) digital repository,** these solutions will address neighborhood stigmatization and lack of organization through counter-storytelling and establish new advantageous organizational structures.

These solutions are imperative to mend urban fabrics bridging the Historic Center and La Chacarita and foster inclusive approaches to city-building that transcend boundaries between the formal-informal dichotomy andw challenge the traditional planning roles. This report challenges conventional planning paradigms by presenting an alternative approach, demonstrating the potential for convergence between insurgent and community-informed planning processes that resonate with community aspirations.

Fig.2. A look inside la Chacarita

*Photo credit/ **Arimbi Naro***

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HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The City of Asunción was settled by the colonial government of Spain in 1537. The Paraguay River quickly became a valuable resource, facilitating urban expansion along its banks and international trade routes. Paraguay wouldn't gain its independence until 1811, enabling the expansion of informal settlements along the floodplains, which later became known as La Chacarita (Smith 2017).

La Chacarita's legacy is inextricably linked to Asunción's growth over the nineteenth century, laying the foundation for subsistence agriculture and unprecedented immigration. The neighborhood became a refuge for marginalized immigrants – particularly Guaraní Indians – who were drawn to the region's abundant land and proximity to the historic center. However, the region's indigenous influence preceded Asunción's colonial era, when the city functioned as a port for nomadic civilizations including the Aché, and Avá factions of the Guaranís. Their influence has remained embedded throughout Asunción, reflected in its language, food, and lifestyle. Roughly ninety percent of the population speaks both Spanish and Guaraní fluently (Smith 2017).
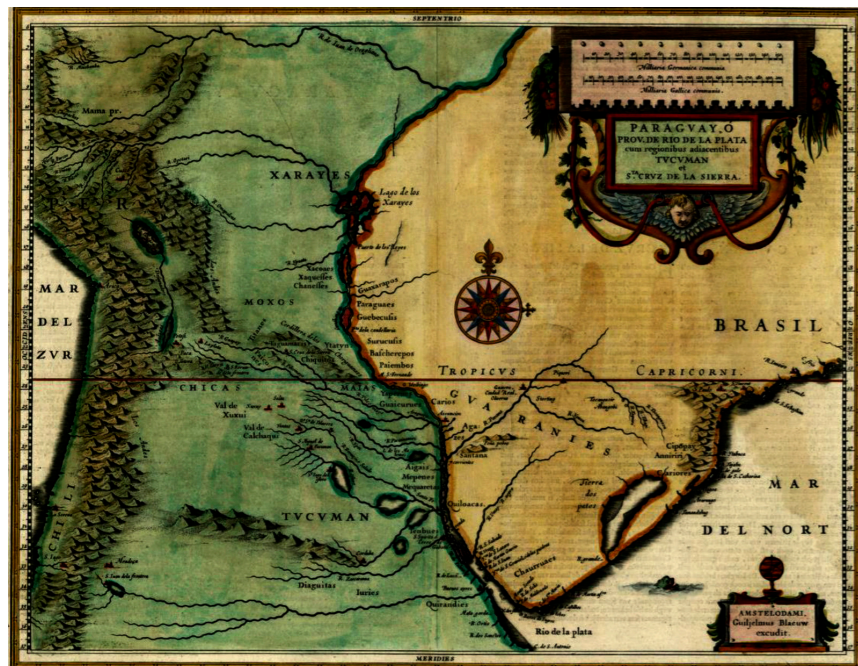

Fig.5. A series of maps showing our study site, from Paraguay to La Chacarita

*Map credit/ **Tim Small***

*Map credit/ **Tim Small***

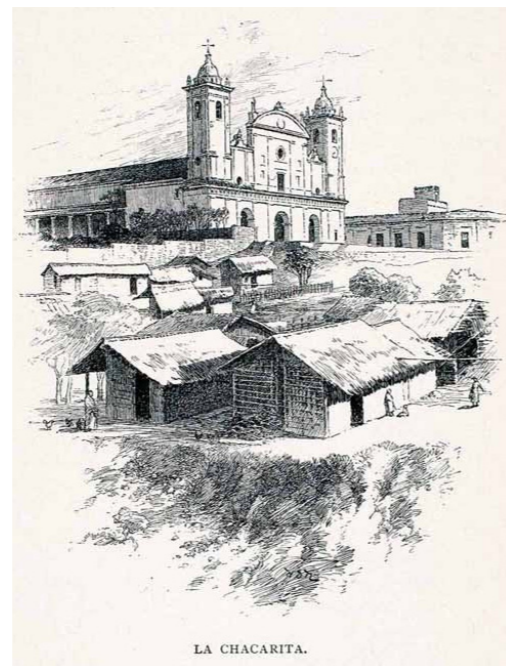**Fig.3.** Rio de la Plata represented by William Janszoon Blaeu in 1647.

Fig.4. Wood Engraving, 1891

Today, Paraguay's primary economic activity is rooted in the soybean industry, with Brazil and Argentina being its closest trading partners (Jensen-Guénec 2020). The Paraguay River is integral to facilitating this international trade, serving as a trade route for international cargo ships. The country's lenient tax laws are often exploited by international supply chains, leaving the municipal government of Asunción with minimal funding to build infrastructure. In spite of being a highly controversial project, the government recently developed the Heroes del Chaco Bridge, a 603 meter crossing of the Paraguay River. The project's controversy revolved around the land appropriations that preceded its construction, taken from Indigenous groups who resided along the embankment of the river (ABC Color 2024).

La Chacarita has been a major contributor to Asunción's cultural legacy, birthing iconic musicians like José Asunción Flores. His music has received international recognition, inspiring organizations like UNESCO to nominate Guaraní music for its Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial de la Humanidad designation (Ramirez 2023). However, the municipal government has consistently targeted the neighborhood for urban renewal projects, including the Costanera renovation project

– financed by the Inter American Development Bank – and the La Chacarita Alta housing project – a public private partnership that originated from the propositions made in its PlanCHA Master Plan. The housing initiative is currently under construction, planning to host over 700 families (Habitat for Humanity 2016).

While these proposals are under the guise of mitigating flood risk, the suggested improvements are usually contingent on the implementation of formalized housing initiatives, usually spearheaded by Non-Governmental Organizations like Habitat for Humanity (Pro Desarollo 2019).

The labor markets between La Chacarita and the Historic Center have been partially synchronized – evidenced by the growing number of residents commuting into the city for employment, ranging from "government workers, security, hospitality, administrative office work and garbage collection" (Bouchrika 2021, 27). In spite of this relationship, the housing markets across the city remain fragmented (Pro Desarollo 2019).

The Historic Center is currently overrun with vacant land, most of which is owned by foreign investors speculating on the resurgence of a city with tremendous architectural assets. Nonetheless, the city still hosts some of the nation's most notable landmarks, including South America's first railway station, built in 1854 to be integrated with the harbor (Boschmann 2022).

La Chacarita has largely remained an informal settlement, deprived of adequate infrastructure, with vernacular housing made up of recycled materials (Brugada 2017).

That being said, La Chacarita nevertheless exhibits vitality in its cultural, religious, and social institutions, while the Historical district has suffered from disinvestment and abandonment. In 2014, the PlanCHA study was conducted to assess the on the ground conditions of La Chacarita, and how the neighborhood could be better accommodated in the future of Asunción (Tramontano

2021). In doing so, the project also proposed improvements to the riverfront, civic corridors, and revitalizations of the La Chacarita Alta neighborhood. This included ten distinct strategies, ranging from the renovation of Bicentennial Park to the classification of Banco de San Miguel as a biological reserve (Tramontano 2021).

Most planning interventions into the neighborhood of La Chacarita propose formalizing the local economies and land tenureship (Tramontano 2021). These strategies suggest that the neighborhood should better accommodate the needs of the historic center, instead of the other way around. The neighborhood is perceived as an environmental hazard that needs to be revamped or relocated. The social infrastructure and ingenuity that the neighborhood has cultivated is often overlooked in planning recommendations by the municipality, consultants, and non-governmental organizations.

Fig.6. Satellite view of vacant lots and spaces in the Historic Center of Asunción
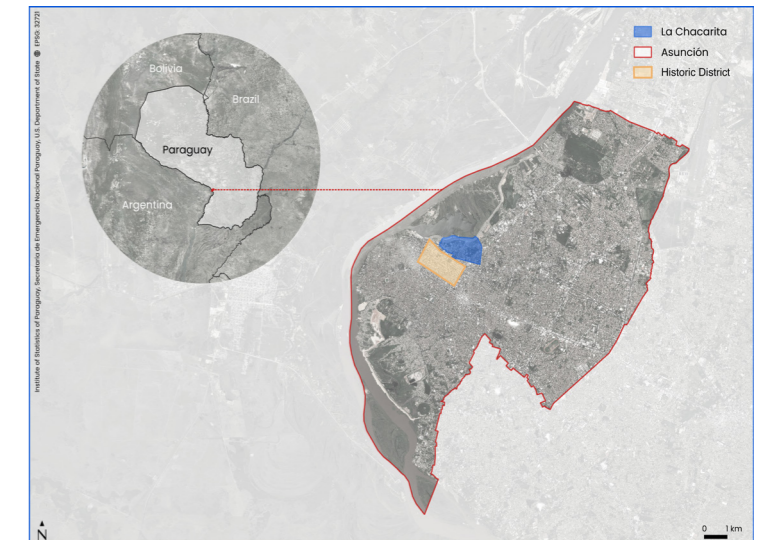
*Map credit/ **UP Studio***

CHARACTERIZING LA CHACARITA

The history of La Chacarita has been inextricably linked with the history of Asunción since its Spanish occupation. Legally the neighborhood is called Ricardo Brugada Barrio (Gurú, Chacatours walking tour, March 4, 2024). La Chacarita is situated between the Bay of Paraguay and Asunción's historic district.

Originally, Guaraní people settled where later the Spanish fort was built. The Guaraní are a group of indigenous people culturally related in South America. Even though the Guaraní are very diverse and have various subfamilies based on the area they were settled in, they remain connected through language and similar ways of living. Before the Spanish colonizers arrived, they were considered semi-nomadic as it was easier to find habitable land with the necessary resources. The bay area, where La Chacarita lies today, and adjacent to the great Chaco region proved to be very fertile land. The Guaraní and the Payaguá, another indigenous group, were fighting for the flooded land. When the river receded, the soil was very rich and people wanted to be there. They were not farmers, they were hunters, and fishermen. They came with the canoes, and settled in what today is La Chacarita. As Spanish settlement expanded, they relocated to the region around the Bay of Paraguay. This area, prone to frequent flooding from the Paraguay River, was chosen to support agriculture. Since then, La Chacarita has grown alongside Asunción. (Oscar Rivas, Sobrevivencia, March 5, 2024)

Although La Chacarita occupies the same area in the city today, it has expanded into the flood plain of the Bay of Paraguay. The neighborhood that expanded into the floodplain is called Baja (low) while the older neighborhood is called Alta (high). La Chacarita Alta is at a higher elevation than Baja which ensures its safety from flooding, but communities in Baja regularly face flooding concerns (Rossignoli, Favargiotti and Marzadri 2023). This has led to some dire consequences that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Fig.7. Map showing the location of La Chacarita between the historic disctrict and the Bay of Paraguay

*Map credit/ **UP Studio***

Fig.8. La Chacarita is divided into Alta and Baja neighborhoods based on impact of flooding
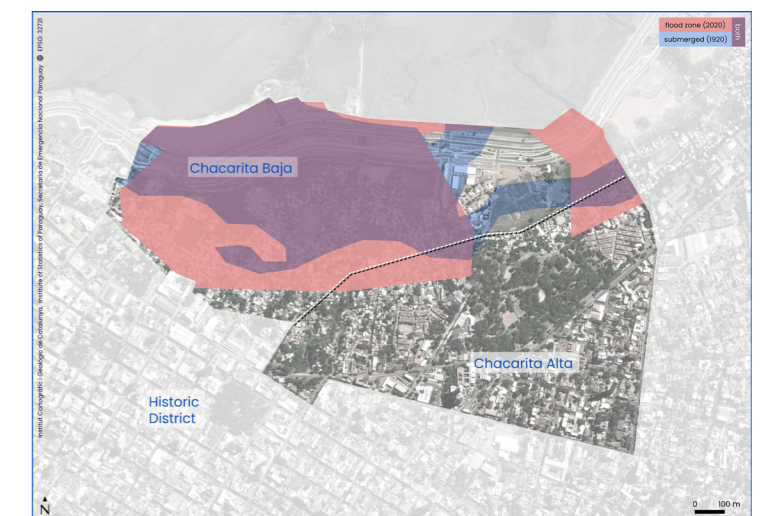
*Map credit/ **UP Studio***

Demographics

According to the Census Atlas of Paraguay (2002) conducted by the General Directorate of Statistics Surveys and Censuses (DGEEC), 10,455 inhabitants resided in Ricardo Brugada. In addition, the construction of Costanera de Asunción in 2012 – a seven-kilometer waterfront promenade along the Paraguay River – significantly altered the demographics of La Chacarita, specifically Chacarita Baja. Roughly 800 families from Chacarita Baja were relocated due to the construction. Habitat for Humanity Paraguay's 2016 research revealed that Chacarita Alta, one of Asunción's oldest and most densely populated neighborhoods, has 3,147 residents across 15 hectares.

The percentage difference between men and women has remained constant over the years. In 2016, the neighborhood's distribution was characterized by 48.9% males and 51.1% females (Habitat for Humanity Paraguay 2019). The population aged 0 to 29 years makes up 51.5% of the neighborhood's inhabitants, followed by the adult population (30 to 59 years), which accounts for 34.6%, and finally, the elderly population, representing 13.8% of the neighborhood's total population, as shown in Figure 9.

Fig.9. Population of La Chacarita

- 0-29 years old
- 30-59 years old
- 60 years old above

14%
51%
35%
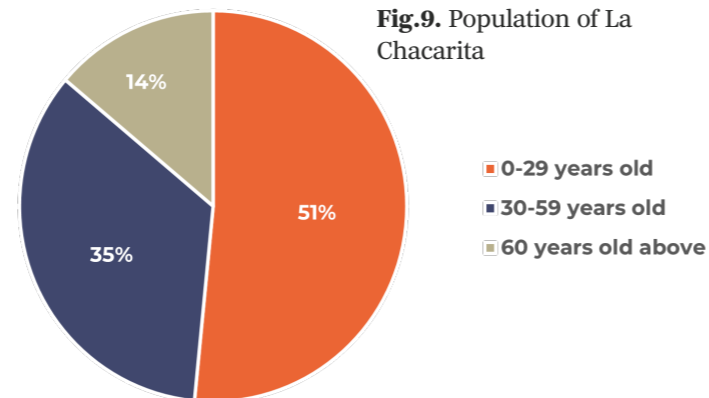
*Data source/ **Eduardo Shancez***

Rootedness

From our observations on site and by speaking with members of the community, we noticed people have a significant pride in La Chacarita and its history.

> "It's the best there is I believe, in Paraguay, in Asunción. Because it's right in the center and is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Asunción. I understand that everything that is Asunción existed before you're in the center. La Chacarita first, and it's a neighborhood full of wealth, full of stories. A lot of hardworking and battling people who [...]. They sell coffee, they sell juice or whatever, along with cardboard to survive and bring bread home. Isn't it true that we are very, very resilient, very tenacious, huh? We are also very united. When, for example, there was a fire and the firefighter didn't arrive, for instance, all the neighbors always come out to help with a bucket of water to extinguish the fire and things like that. We are very united, and we all get along."
>
> (El Princi, March 7, 2024)

> "I was born here. Yes, I am 41 years old, and I already represent the fifth generation in Chacarita. My grandfather, one of the oldest inhabitants here in Chacarita, is still alive. I am also a father, his grandfather, all of them already living here in Chacarita."
>
> (Omar González, March 7, 2024)

> "I'm fine, perfectly fine. I love my neighborhood, I cherish my neighborhood. As I say, I was born here. I'm here on Mompox Street. Then there's the church a few blocks away, and across from the church is my house, my parents' house that they left and now I'm there with my children and my sister. But it's a very beautiful place."
>
> (Miriam Galeano, March 7, 2024)

Culture

La Chacarita has a unique culture that reflects the city's diverse heritage. As the oldest informal neighborhood in Asunción, residents speak both Spanish and Guaraní, with most people using Guaraní when speaking at home (Nuñez, Chacatour walking tour, March 4, 2024). To this day, the Guaraní language remains predominantly oral, maintaining its connection with the daily lives and tasks of its speakers, who continue to pass it down from generation to generation (Villagra-Batoux 2008).

The neighborhood holds a significant place in Paraguayan music history as the birthplace of the Guaranía genre, created by La Chacarita-born composer José Asunción Flores in 1925. For the residents, Guaranía is more than just a music genre; it is a state of mind, a self-identity, and a means of self-recognition (Orrego 2022). To honor José Asunción Flores's social and cultural legacy, his former house in Punta Karapa, a neighborhood within La Chacarita, was transformed into the José Asunción Flores Museum.

Murals serve as a powerful medium for people to express their thoughts and immortalize historical moments. In La Chacarita, 45 vibrant murals stand as testament to this tradition, each telling a unique story that reflects the rich tapestry of the locality. These murals capture the essence of the place, depicting its history, its inhabitants, Guaraní culture, faith, and local fauna (Peralta, 2023). Through the "Colores de la Chacarita" project, a collaborative effort among national mural artists, the neighborhood is full of colorful paintings, turning every street corner into a living testament to the community's identity.

According to Christian Nuñez - also called Gurú - founder of the grassroot organization Chacatours, the aim is to transform La Chacarita into the world's largest open-air gallery (Gurú, walking tour, March 6, 2024). Chacatours spearheads various cultural initiatives within the neighborhood. By organizing regular events, Chacatours aims to foster a sense of pride in local culture among La Chacarita's residents, while also providing opportunities for them to develop their talents. These events range from cooking workshops and music gatherings to open mic nights, all designed to showcase the community's diverse talents and traditions. During our visit, Gurú, who organizes walking tours for visitors, showed us La Chacarita, explained to us the history behind various murals and buildings, connected us to other people in the neighborhood, and was a great help in organizing the on-site workshop.

Do you want to hear my story sir?
I'm from La Chacarita

With permission from the camalotal with adobe
raise my house

No, there is a more beautiful landscape, sir, than the
one in our bay
Not even the brush of the best and noblest painter
I paint a prettier thing

My little house was a church sir
when joining the beloved
In the light of the moon and with its cunu'u
wait for the dawn

In the biggest puddle sir
there's frog music

Yui Pacova sings his litany
attached to a branch
In the river he modulates his voice
a sad Guaranía

A fisherman rows in cones of sorrow
your distressing morning
And tomorrow is to start again
start the day
But always start and start again
waiting for tomorrow
But I erase all that image
summer rain

The flood of the river came with its song
of sorrows and anguish
My little house lost its door
the waters invaded it
In canoes of sorrow I went up and emigrated
migrate towards the height

But one day I will return to my home /
I will follow its walls / It repeats
Allied to work, the sun and faith / Once
crucible of my hope /

(Soy de la Chacarita, 1971)

Music is also used to express the voices and experiences of residents of La Chacarita. Maneco Galeano, also a musician from the neighborhood, wrote a song called "Soy de la Chacarita" in 1971. The song reflects how deeply the people of la Chacarita are attached to their neighborhood, even though floods from the Paraguay River often wash away their homes, requiring them to rebuild again.

Currently, the 26-year-old rapper known as El Princi has been inspiring the neighborhood. Born and raised in La Chacarita, he dedicated 13 years of his life to music, and in the past two years, he has gained significant attention outside Paraguay's borders. His songs express pride in being from La Chacarita, and he works hard to change the perception of people from outside the neighborhood through music. He shows that Chacarita is more than its stereotypes–it has both treasured things and struggles between good and evil.

Fig.11. Mural "Soy de la Chacarita"

Sports estimation with the face of a thug
Struggling day and night until we don't back down
Turn it on, turn it up, turn it down, this music is for the lazy

(Hey buddy, make a cumbia like before)

I'm from the neighborhood and that's not going to change (Never)
Every day we think about how to fight (Always, my king)
I'm from the neighborhood and that's not going to change (With God)
Every day we think about how to fight (We are blessed)

Reality is hidden in the darkest places
Many are born lucky, but the street made it tough for me
Few words for those who understand
The elder once told me
I know that all neighborhoods will understand me
Many black days and colorful ones too
You have to learn how to get ahead
Because today we are here, but tomorrow we might not be

Live, laugh, drink, dance
Get wasted with friends and forget about sadness
Live, laugh, drink, dance
Get wasted with friends and forget about sadness

The poor only rely on God's protection
Amen
From the slum to the world

I'm from the neighborhood and that's not going to change (Never)
Every day we think about how to fight (Always, my king)
I'm from the neighborhood and that's not going to change (With God)
Every day we think about how to fight (We are blessed)
x2

This cumbia is dedicated to all the neighborhoods in the world
To all those imprisoned by their freedom (We are blessed)
In the neighborhood, we grew up with it in our blood

(El Princi, 2022)

Economy

People in La Chacarita have a total monthly income below the average household income in Asunción. The average household monthly income in Chacarita Alta does not exceed 2,000,000 Guaraníes, which is 23% less than the average monthly income in Asunción overall, 2,695,000 Guaraníes. Additionally, 7% of Chacarita Alta residents live below the poverty line (Habitat for Humanity Paraguay 2019).

Most people in Chacarita Alta are self-employed or private employees, accounting for more than half of the occupation types. The same percentage for both job categories is shown in Figure 12. During our walking tour with Chacatour, we identified numerous home-based businesses in Chacarita Alta, such as barbershops, photocopy services, and grocery stores, spread across our walking route, as shown in Figure 13. Additionally, we noticed a street lined with home-based businesses along our way, called Florencio Villamayor Street. This street is the busiest commercial center in Chacarita, providing almost everything the residents need (Habitat for Humanity Paraguay, 2019).

The third most common job among residents of Chacarita Alta is as a public employee, as shown in Figure 12. Chacarita's proximity to the Historic District benefits both sides: residents can walk to work, saving money on public transportation, while many jobs in the Historic District are filled by Chacarita residents. These jobs range from formal occupations such as low-level staff, public and private maintenance, janitorial work, and hospitality services, to informal occupations like parking security and car washing (Smith 2018, 67).

In Chacarita, a larger portion of men work outside the neighborhood compared to women, who stay at home or run home-based businesses (Peti, March 9, 2024). According to Habitat for Humanity Paraguay (2019), the workforce in Chacarita Alta is 60% men and 44% women. Additionally, employees in the area work more than 8.7 hours a day on average, for 5.5 days a week (Habitat for Humanity Paraguay 2019).

Fig.13. Walking tour route during field visit to La Chacarita

*Map credit/ **Anisa C. Kharimah***

Fig.12. Bar chart showing the percentage of job types in La Chacarita

Job type	Percentage
Employer or boss	0.3%
Unpaid family worker	0.4%
Public worker	1.4%
Domestic employee	4.2%
Private worker	10.5%
Public employee	16.1%
Self-employed	32.9%
Private employee	34.1%

*Data source/ **Eduardo Shancez***

Environmental Concerns

Given its location in the bay of the Paraguay River, La Chacarita has had a relationship to the water around it in significant ways. This has been corroborated in our workshop as we will discuss in the next section.

Additional construction in the lower regions of La Chacarita, which is a part of the floodplain of the river, due to migration of people into the settlement over the years has led to the community facing constant concerns regarding flooding. This is further compounded by state land and infrastructure policies. The state reclaimed land from the branch of Paraguay River that fed into the Bay, which led to stagnating water in the Bay after each flooding event. Furthermore, through the construction of the Costanera, the state effectively blocked the Bay's access to the river with only one point of access for water. This led to further stagnation of water during flooding. With around 3000 families living in the flood prone region presently, this poses a significant risk to the community in terms of its health, economic and housing safety (Cutter, Boruff and Shirley 2003).

Due to this constant flooding, residents are often forced to take shelter in parks and open spaces at higher elevations which further presents the community to the rest of the city as a nuisance. The intersectional impact on environmental concerns here with its socio-economic concerns were apparent through our observations and conversations within the community.

Fig.14. About 3000 families in La Chacarita Baja experience flooding and its impacts

*Map credit/ **Tim Small***

Development

La Chacarita's complexity has drawn various private and public organizations to work on improving both its physical spaces and its community. Our research and field visits show that most development efforts are focused on Chacarita Alta and the non-floodplain areas of the neighborhood. We observed that the quality of roads and access infrastructure varies between Alta and Baja, with Florencio Villamayor Street acting as a barrier.

The development in Chacarita Alta has been outlined in a comprehensive neighborhood plan, created through a collaborative effort involving several public and private organizations, including the Ministerio de Urbanismo, Vivienda y Hábitat (MUVH), the Ministry of Public Works and Communications (MOPC), the Municipality of Asunción, the National Electricity Administration (ANDE), the Paraguayan Sanitary Services Company SA (ESSAP), and the NGO Habitat for Humanity Paraguay, in conjunction with the Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF) from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The intervention encompasses the installation of household drinking water networks and connections, construction of sanitary sewage systems, storm drainage, conditioning of water channels, improvement of neighborhood access, an extension of the electricity and public lighting network, risk mitigation, recovery and construction of public spaces, construction of infrastructure and equipment, improvement in solid waste handling and management, re-settlement of homes in high-risk areas, support for land formalization, and productive initiatives, among other measures (Ministerio de Urbanismo, Vivienda y Hábitat 2017).

Despite its historical significance, La Chacarita faces various challenges, including demographic shifts due to infrastructure projects like the Costanera de Asunción, which led to the relocation of hundreds of families. Despite this, the community's rootedness remains strong, with residents exhibiting pride in their neighborhood's history and resilience, as evidenced by murals depicting local stories and initiatives aiming to preserve and promote cultural heritage. Economically, La Chacarita struggles with household incomes below the city average and a significant portion of residents engaged in self-employment or low-wage jobs. The neighborhood's proximity to the Historic District offers employment opportunities, but environmental concerns pose serious risks to the community's health and economic stability. Development efforts, albeit mostly targeting the non-floodplain area of Chacarita-Alta, seek to improve infrastructure, and living conditions through collaborative initiatives involving international organizations. However, these efforts contribute to heightened tensions between the Chacarita Alta and Baja areas.

Fig.15. Neighborhood improvement Program

*Illustration credit/ **Roberto Camblor***

FIELD TRIP

Overview

Our studio met with several community and governmental stakeholders every day that we spent on-site in Asunción, so there was never a dull moment. During that first week of March, we participated in a Chacatours-led walking visit of La Chacarita, which gave our team excellent social and geographical context. We also visited the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) headquarters and witnessed firsthand the fracturing process of top-down community planning, often laced with surface-level claims of equity, but ultimately an unstoppable displacing force. We heard about climate and socioeconomic risk in Asunción's bañados from a previous government minister who transitioned into a role with Friends of the Earth International. We visited the home base of El Surti, a group of insurgent journalists primarily covering the climate crisis and various feminist issues.

Fig.16. Site Visit Schedule

	Sun March 03	Mon March 04	Tue March 05	Wed March 06	Thu March 07	Fri March 08
		HOTEL GUARANÍ	HOTEL GUARANÍ	HOTEL GUARANÍ	HOTEL GUARANÍ	HOTEL GUARANÍ
		PRO-DESARROLLO - INDIGENOUS MUSEUM - MUSEO BARBERO - DIRECTOR ADELINA PUSSINERI	BOAT TOUR	ROUTE HISTORICAL CENTER WITH HISTORIAN		MERCADO 4 VS EJE CORPORATIVO
			SOBREVIVENCIA NGO - OSCAR RIVAS/FORMER MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT	WORKSHOP	INTERAMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK	FIELD WORK
		CHACARITA - CHACATOUR		WORKSHOP	ACTIVISM - EL SURTIDOR	FIELD WORK
	DINNER NEGRONI	CHACARITA - CHACARESTÓ / DINNER	PANEL DISCUSSION 01 - CULTURE / CHACARITA & HISTORIC CENTER - PLACE JUAN DE SALAZAR	WORKSHOP	PANEL DISCUSSION 02- INFORMALITY - PLACE TBD / DINNER ASADO (BBQ INVITATION PRO-DESARROLLO)	PETCHAKUCHA / DINNER

Participatory Workshop

But perhaps the culmination of our on-site work was the mid-week participatory workshop that we facilitated at a local after-school center in La Chacarita. This workshop comprised a few stations that participants could wander through at their leisure and engage with as much as they desired, as well as a dedicated space where we were able to run structured interviews with a diverse sampling of the community.

The unorthodox form of community data creation that resulted was particularly unique given our participatory audience entirely composed of children (the interviews were unique in that we were able to talk to people of all ages). This demographic is often neglected in data capture and representation in urban and socio-economic analytics (O'Hare 2019), so doing such a workshop allowed for cartography "not designed as accurate topographical representations, but ways of documenting place, feelings, and associations" (Clark 2011).

The first and largest station was a large weaved canvas. Supplies were spread across and around the canvas, including paint, string, nanduti, paper, crayons, and more. Anyone in the vicinity was invited to come and use any form of multimedia to express what they saw as the future of La Chacarita.

The second station was a table where participants were asked to describe their home and identify various key Indigenous artifacts often present in traditional home structures. While many of the children began by literally representing their living spaces on the provided chalkboards, engagement quickly shifted to an extension of the primary station, where they began to represent aspects of their community over built form through names, handprints, and other natural elements.

At the third station, community members were prompted to share a representation of their neighborhood in three parts: a map of the Paraguay River, a map of their home boundary, and points representing their favorite locations within.

Ten multi-material artifacts made of paper, pen, string, and glue resulted, all subjective responses to the prompts provided. These cognitive maps bore the stories of their creators which we also transcribed in long form through casual questions. We found that when prompted, five of the kids passionately and freely shared the deeply personal contexts of their maps, further confirming how fervently they wanted to be seen and heard on their terms. These five maps along with an accompanying narrative are shown below in a collage format, where satellite imagery is juxtaposed to ground their settings.
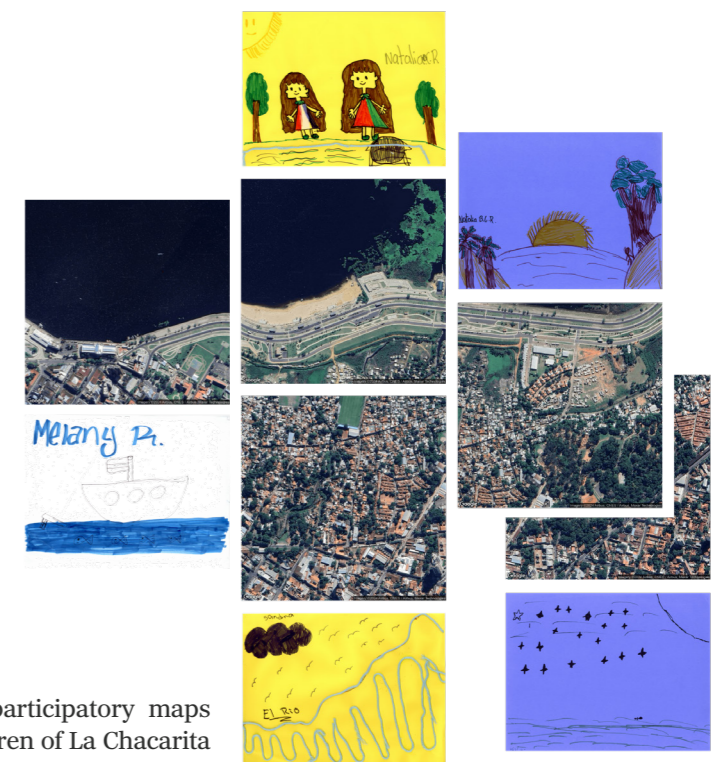

Fig.17. A collage of participatory maps drawn by children of La Chacarita

What immediately jumped out to us both during and post-workshop was the dichotomously dominant presence of the Paraguay River and lack of literal neighborhood form, at least as a representation of the built environment. The workshop itself was inspired by a study investigating religious and ethnic segregation in Jerusalem, where several dozen women were asked to denote boundaries of safety and placemark their neighborhoods (Raanan and Shoval 2014). The quick on-site pivot in approach we had to make was a good lesson in the shortsightedness of assuming transferability in spatial epistemologies across demographic bands, especially age. While segregation was and is the prevailing outcome of La Chacarita's existence at the periphery of Asunción, the kids we worked with had very different notions of boundaries and place, often claiming public parks and areas outside of La Chacarita as their collective neighborhood. The kids nearly unanimously forefronted the river and natural elements as representations of home.

One of the children, Natalia, drew two pictures, both with shared elements of water, sunlight, and trees. In the first, she is by the water with her mom, and mentioned how they wish they could swim in the bay, but that it is far too polluted. In the second, she is with a friend at a vantage point in La Chacarita, watching the sun rise or set (she didn't specify) over the river. Mili shared a map showing her lying down on a field looking up at the stars. She drew a second map of just the river cutting across the page, but only provided narrative context for the first. She described how they would evacuate families during the worst of the flooding, but because dedicated facilities don't exist, the government typically moves them into public spaces on high ground. The field she depicted herself in is Bernardino Caballero Public Park, which lies at the outer edge of La Chacarita. It is extremely poignant that she describes these experiences as not harrowing and unjust as they are, but as a moment to connect with nature. While it is paramount to remember that the glorification of resilience is problematic, these childrens' stories remind us of a quote from a recent news clipping, where Pedro Velasco, a 71 year old Dominican missionary currently residing in Asunción's Bañado Sur, says "...the most serious problem is not the flooding, but the extreme poverty" (Barba, Sept 29, 2023).

The final few maps by Melany and Sandra wholly put the river in focus, the former depicting it as a resigned and polluted carrier of freight and the latter choosing to unabashedly use it and the sky to frame what neighborhood means to her, her friends, and her family.
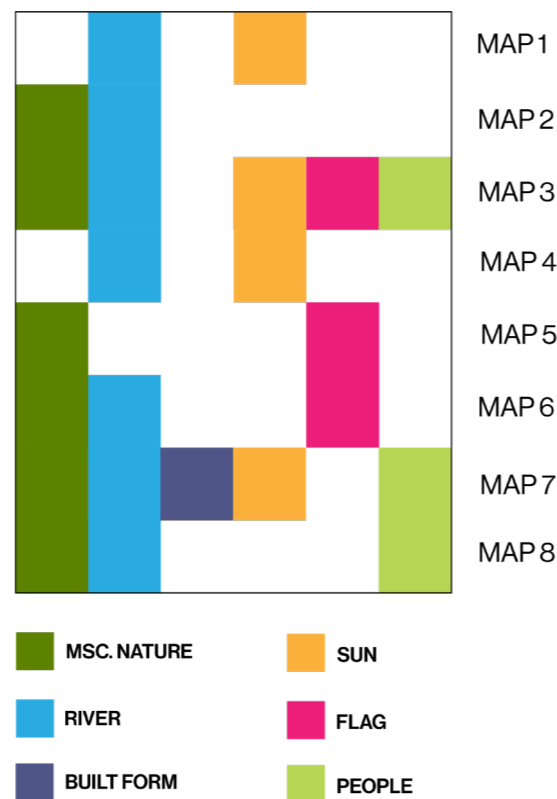

Fig.18. A visual depiction of shared elements from the series of participatory maps done in our onsite workshop

The above diagram succinctly shows the shared thematic elements present in all of the outputs from the participatory mapping workshop. While we approached this leading up to our visit with a lens of data creation and subsequent quantitative analysis, the complete redirection resulted in something even more powerful - anecdotal, narrative driven confirmations of the lived experiences of some of the most vulnerable members of La Chacarita, grounded in spatial and cartographic forms, but not bound to them.

Fig.19. Maps showing Asunción's population and population densities by barrio as per Paraguayan government data via worldpop.org

Data Unreliability

has its own drawbacks in representation and reliability.

We initially surveyed these online information sources, intending to vet their locations on-site, but soon realized after visiting La Chacarita and Asunción at large that when it comes to infrastructure, there are rifts that should supersede shared definitions, but don't. Many wealthy individuals in the city use private health providers, while those in informal areas can only afford public healthcare, which exists in various states of disrepair (Capurro and Harper 2022). This made it very hard to look into the physical presences of healthcare facilities organizationally.

Further confirmation that data transparency was nonexistent came from talking to various stakeholders on the ground. The IDB presented on housing projects in both Chacarita Alta and Bañado Sur, claiming that pushback was initially an issue from the community, but when a site plan had been made and shared, they conceded (Marcia Silva Casseb, IDB visit, March 7, 2024). On the other end of the spectrum, El Surti, an insurgent journalism collective, spoke about the hurdles of reporting on aspects of the local community that aren't widely captured and shared. To counter this closedness, they often compile data themselves to use in their reporting and share it widely on their site and beyond.

It was a challenge to effectively illustrate these rather intangible gaps in information across Asunción, especially given that half the argument represented negative space. What we decided to show are two examples of conflicting "ground truths" at the disaggregated, base level of the census.

As a first example, we chose population and population density (normalized to neighborhood area). Using data from Paraguay's open data portal to get boundaries for the neighborhoods of Asunción, we imported a population raster from worldpop.org captured in 2020. This was vectorized and summarized across neighborhoods as shown in the figures on the left.
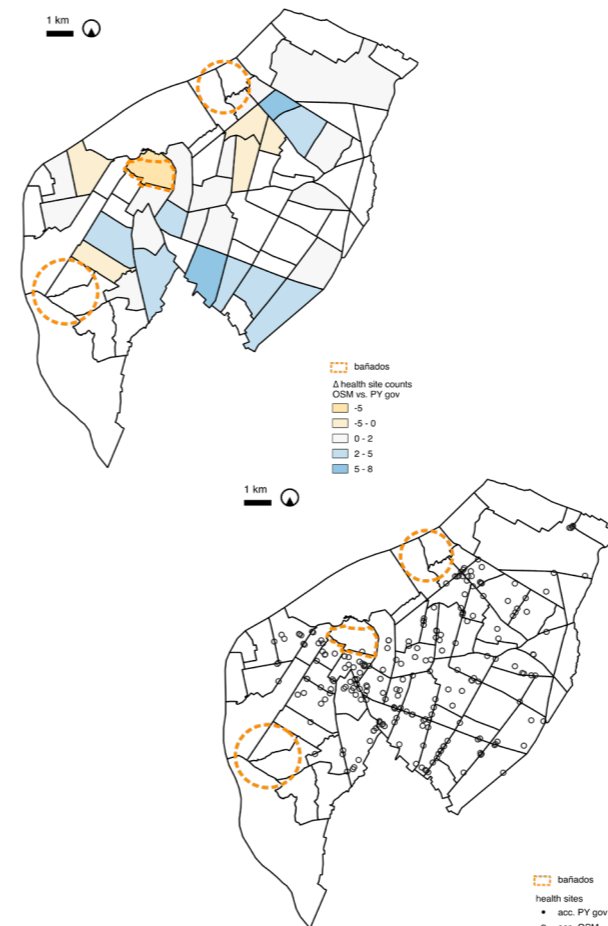
In the spirit of adding a quantitative angle to our analyses, we investigated some of the discrepancies in data availability and integrity noticed both on and off site. In December 2023, the Paraguayan government officially launched an open data portal with metrics ranging from population to infrastructural sites to cell coverage. This stands alone as one of the only authoritative data sources in the country aside from proprietary data held by institutional developers like the IDB and Habitat for Humanity. In addition, there is significant coverage of land use from OpenStreetMap (OSM), but as a crowdsourced form of data collection, OSM

After further digging, we found that the data from worldpop.org originally stems from the Paraguayan government. Summing over estimated populations in the largest informal areas, namely, La Chacarita, and Bañados Norte and Sur, yields only 5.2% of the city's population. It is a longer standing estimate that roughly 20% of the city lives in informality, however (Barba, Sept 29, 2023). That 15% of the population is unaccounted for by government data is extremely concerning.

In our second example, we surveyed the locations of health sites according to the Paraguayan open data portal as well as OpenStreetMap. Aside from the lack of clear definitions around what a health site entails on the government's end, there were huge discrepancies in counts per neighborhood that varied in magnitude across the city. On the left side of the below figure, notice differences in distributions from the two sources, and the emptiness portrayed in Bañados Norte and Sud. On the right side, where relative differences between the sources are portrayed as a choropleth, notice the concentration of negative difference in La Chacarita versus positive difference closer to the city's periphery. This is of particular significance given the inequities inherent to open source data collection - after all, it doesn't address systematic underlying issues - and shows participatory data deserts relative to government reporting in all of the major informal areas of the city.

The above two examples are illustrative of some of the deeply systemic challenges facing planners in Asunción. When information is obfuscated, it opens up space for institutional developers to introduce master plans that carry an almost indisputable weight. Data is certainly not the end-all-be-all in urban decision making, but when one side holds all of the power to wield it, communities can be left entirely defenseless.
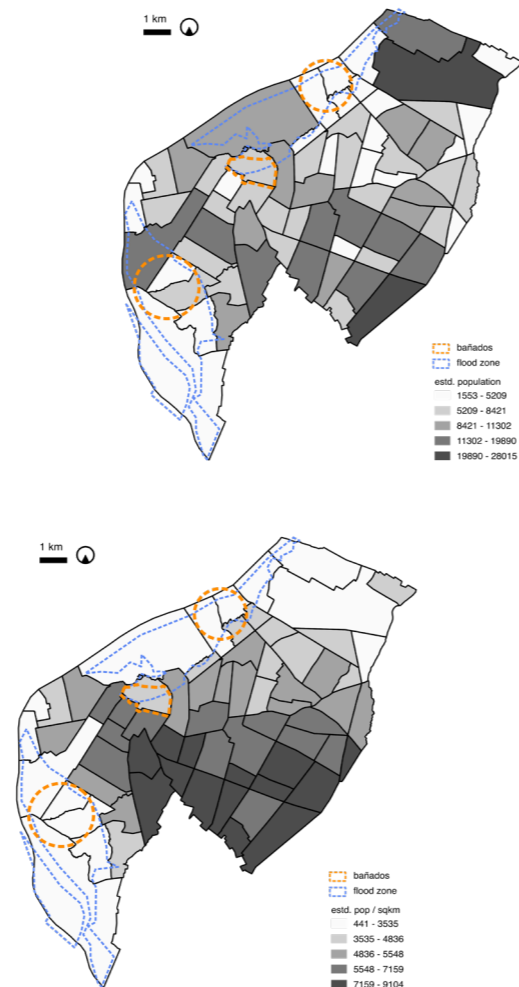

Fig.20. Maps overlaying Paraguayan government data with OpenStreet-Maps data on health sites in Asunción

Analyzing Quilt Data

For our participatory workshop in La Chacarita, we drew from the work of Artist and Architect Valerie S. Goodwin. Goodwin's art is characterized by her love for aerial views of cities and abstract expressionism, an art form that values spontaneity and improvisation, making it perfectly suited for our young participants (Goodwin, n.d.). Abstract expressionism is known for being a deeply emotional process where artists use mediums such as paint to express themselves through the pressure of brush strokes and the large spaces they cover with a single stroke on a canvas (Tate, "Abstract Expressionism").

Additionally, we were inspired by the African American traditions of quilt making, a process carried on by enslaved Africans such as Dinah Miller, known as one of the first quilt makers on southern plantations. Enslaved Black people in America used quilt-making to tell stories and build community (National Gallery of Art, 2024). Drawing from all these inspirations, we decided to facilitate an emotive placemaking, counter-cartography piece using a quilt made by local entrepreneur Marta Cañete as our base. Sourcing a quilt locally was a deliberate choice to support a local business and to ensure that the piece and

the stories it held were truly made for and by the people.

We began our workshop by laying down different crafts and paints and invited the children to participate. Understandably, many of the youth were hesitant. Eventually, a young boy grabbed blue paint and began painting an image of the Paraguay River, setting the foundational landmark that would guide some of the later contributions. This initial depiction of the Paraguay River quickly became a central reference point for the other participants. When we asked the children questions such as "Where is home?" they used the river as a marker, which helped people respond more easily to our questions and position their answers in a way they understood. We also had some local entrepreneurs like Marta, a clothing shop owner, and two other craftswomen use this landmark to place their nandutí pieces, which are traditional Paraguayan lace, where they considered "home" or where they felt "safe." This process showed an interesting and uncommon dynamic where children's contributions helped shape the adults' participation, reversing typical roles and highlighting the younger generation's influence in the moment.

Fig.21. Emotive Place-making

As the evening went on and more children arrived, the workshop and cloth map became a gathering place where people listened to music together and conversed over the fabric, people curiously dropping in and out, a space where grandmothers and mothers conversed in the corner. As the kids became comfortable, they began to handle the crafts on their own and began putting whatever they felt in the moment onto the map, disregarding the questions we prepared. They started decorating the map with drawings and elements central to their daily experiences, drawing things like soccer fields, creating figures of their siblings from pieces of strings and cotton balls, and using various depictions of the river using materials like blue yarn and paint. We also noticed that many children chose to add the sun and the river to the map to the point where we had elements of nature in every corner of the map. This emphasized the integral role of natural elements in their perception of their community. We also noticed many participants putting their names on the cloth multiple times and in various sections. We interpreted this broadcasting of names on the fabric as a desire to be seen and unforgotten. This observation may support evidence that children are oftentimes an afterthought in planning processes across cultures. This observation, however, is not our team supporting the idea of purposeful neglect in this particular case but rather a call to planners to acknowledge the contributions of youth.

Post-workshop, when we began to analyze the children's contributions, we, for the first time, understood on a deeper level what the youth of the neighborhood valued in their neighborhood. The playful yet meaningful drawings, like the river and sun, not only showed a very deep connection to the nature around them but also served as points to understanding broader cultural and environmental narratives. The outputs from the youth supported many of the stories we heard on our tours and conversations from external stakeholders, particularly that of the indigenous Guaraní people's connection to nature. Additionally, analyzing the outputs from the fabric, which served as our data points, required us to use a flexible and responsive approach. Our process showcases the value of incorporating diverse and often overlooked perspectives, particularly children's perspectives, in data collection.

In the end, we used the outcome of the participatory cloth activity to enhance our understanding of the interviews that simultaneously took place in a nearby room at the workshop. We also used the outputs to understand the conflicting narratives better while adding the missing component from our trip interactions of youth voices. Overall, the workshop enriched our understanding of the community's spatial and emotional landscapes and served as an example of how planners can and should use creative participatory tools when engaging with community members. Our experience reaffirmed the importance of embracing innovative methodologies to capture the dynamic essence of informal settlements and communities like La Chacarita.

Fig.22. A color grid representation of classified themes across stakeholder interactions on-site

Fig.23. A color grid representation of classified themes across workshop interviews on-site

External Stakeholder Meetings and Workshop Interviews

During our field visit, we gathered a diverse range of data, including interviews, observational notes, and institutional engagements. Specifically, we conducted a participatory workshop with ten community members from La Chacarita, consisting of equal numbers of male and female participants. We also compiled our collective notes from our visits to historical museum tours and interactions with community organizations such as Chaca Tours. Our data collection also included engagements with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and conversations with various governmental stakeholders.

When it came time to analyze the data from our different engagements with various institutions, we quickly realized that we received conflicting narratives on La Chacarita as stakeholders had different accounts of the history and prioritized different aspects of the neighborhood and community. This realization required us to approach our analysis carefully. We carefully combed through engagement notes to ensure we truly understood the information we gathered. Throughout this delicate process, keeping in mind Watson's critique, the need to move beyond dominant Western narratives that often overlook the complexities specific to places like La Chacarita helped us recognize the importance of developing an approach specifically tailored to the conditions (Watson, 2009). As we compiled our data, we began by highlighting the frequency of specific topics and themes that appeared in singular interactions and then themes that emerged across all stakeholder interactions. This coding system allowed us to visualize our findings carefully, draw meaningful conclusions from the community, bring them to the forefront, and amplify them.

For the coding system, we started with a granular view of our thematic analysis, as seen in Figures 22 and 23. The frequency of specific themes, as shown by the different sizes and number of colored blocks beside each stakeholder's name, was crucial in helping us understand each stakeholder's importance in different aspects of the community.

Based on the coded data, we then categorized these recurring themes with terms like 'Natural Environment' and 'Technical/Expert Knowledge.' This way of labeling allowed us to observe pat-

-terns and priorities across our various engagements. For instance, when looking at the figure, the larger clusters of a particular color will show that it was a recurrent topic across all stakeholder discussions, showcasing a higher level of interest and potential for impactful interventions. It's also important to note that certain themes sometimes have fewer blocks; however, this does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest but may require us to explore the theme more and gather more information.

Next, we compiled all of our on-site interactions into two separate categories, the first being 'Site Visits' and Interactions' and the second 'Workshop Interviews,' for a side-by-side thematic analysis comparing the frequency of topic interest as represented in (Figure 16). The side-by-side comparison seen here was critical in helping us determine the specific community aspects that stakeholders found to be important compared to what community members of La Chacarita found to be most pressing and important. As you can see in the figure, the size and density of the blocks corresponding to themes such as 'Community Participation' and 'Community Cohesion' underpin the community's vested interests and indicate potential focal points for targeted interventions.

-ly communicate La Chacarita's needs and interests to our clients and other stakeholders. This approach also allows us to hand off to the community so that they can better assess and vet the stakeholders, public figures, and institutions who align with their goals and aspirations.

The visual representations in Figures 22-25 are not just illustrations but strategic tools that have been important in helping us better understand the feelings of institutional actors and how they align or not with the desires of the people of La Chacarita. Through this analysis, we ensure our plans are not only informed by data but are responsive to the community's most pressing needs and the stakeholders' capacity for collaboration.

Fig.25. A diagram showing the simultaneous interest and influence of various parties encountered on-site

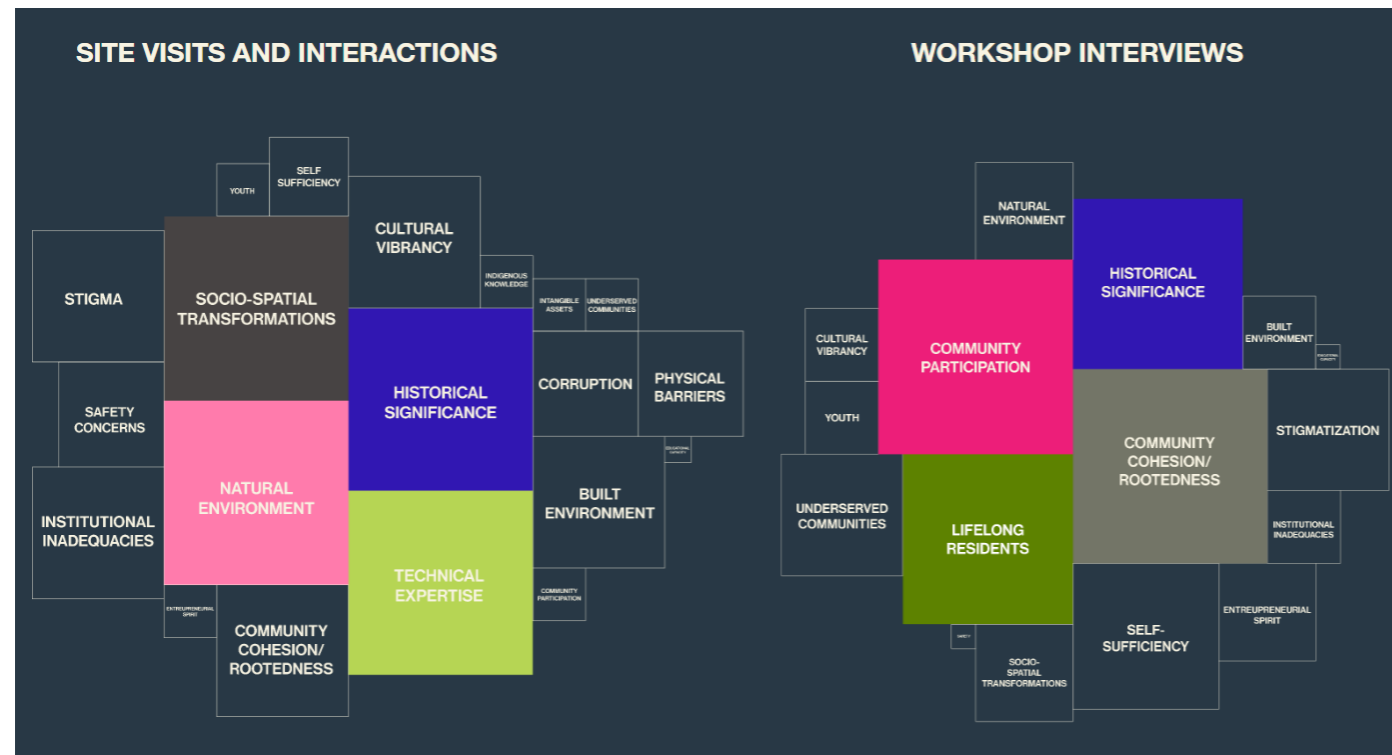*Illustration credit/* **Charlotte Boulanger**

Fig.24. A scaled representation of overlapping themes between stakeholder interactions and workshop interviews

Illustration credit/ **Charlotte Boulanger**

Finally, in Figure 25, you can see that we have organized our data into a matrix. The vertical axis represents the level of interest expressed by the stakeholders regarding various themes such as 'Destigmatization and Empowerment' and 'Built Environment.' The horizontal axis, on the other hand, gauges the influence each stakeholder possesses. By plotting these two dimensions, we were able to identify which stakeholders have a more vested interest in the community's affairs and their capacity to impact change.

This analytical approach of coding qualitative stakeholder interactions based on their interest and influence and examining the thematic frequency gave us a more nuanced understanding of where to concentrate our efforts. Inspired by Eizenberg's principles of self-organization and participatory planning (Eizenberg 2019); our methodology embraced the dynamic interplay between stakeholder influence and community interests, enabling us to leverage high-influence and high-interest stakeholders to more effective-

STUDIO APPROACHES

What does it mean to do planning in an informal context?

Planning in informal contexts, particularly evident in regions such as Paraguay, often involves the intervention of established organizations such as the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and others. These interventions typically take the form of a Westernized approach, such as formalization through infrastructure development or revitalization projects. However, despite their well-meaning intentions, such initiatives often yield negative consequences.

One problematic aspect of current informal planning interventions is the risk of displacement. Communities, often deeply rooted in their environments, can find themselves uprooted or relocated to make way for development projects. This displacement not only physically relocates individuals and families but also severs their ties to their communities and disrupts their sense of belonging (Cernea 1997). Considering that many people in these communities have spent their entire lives there, forming strong connections with the place (Nikuze, Sliuzas, Flacke, and van Maarseveen 2019).

Another notable aspect is the tendency towards non-contextual problem-solving methods (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). External organizations may apply generic solutions to complex local issues without fully understanding the nuanced dynamics at play. Consequently, these solutions may fail to address the underlying challenges effectively. Scholars argue that context-sensitive approaches, informed by localized knowledge and grassroots perspectives, are imperative for devising sustainable solutions (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). By embracing a holistic understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental context, planners can tailor interventions to suit the unique needs and aspirations of the communities they seek to serve.

Furthermore, interventions into the informal city in the traditional sense, such as gentrification, can lead to the decrease of community vibrancy. The organic social fabric and cultural richness of a community may be undermined as external interventions reshape the landscape. In these instances, the unique character that defines the community is threatened to be lost (Smith 1996).

Although existing interventions may include some level of community engagement, these efforts may not fully incorporate the perspectives and needs of the local population. Limited community involvement can result in decisions being made without considering the lived experiences and insights of those directly affected by the proposed projects (Cornwall 2008).

Moreover, even when community engagement is present, power dynamics within these interactions may favor external organizations or government bodies over local residents. This imbalance can inhibit meaningful participation and diminish the sense of ownership and agency within the community (De Weger, Van Nooren, Lujikx, and Drewes 2018).

Ultimately, despite the initial goals of fostering development and progress, current ways of informal planning interventions may fail to deliver sustainable, long-term benefits. Instead, they risk perpetuating cycles of dependency and vulnerability, as communities struggle to regain their standing.

Recognizing these challenges and proactively addressing them through more participatory and context-sensitive approaches is crucial for achieving lasting and meaningful progress. We need to look for avenues to break these cycles and promote sustainable outcomes.

How this informs our approach

Informality planning is undoubtedly marked by paradoxical thinking, which can be attributed to the fragmented rationalities and perceptions of scale that have come to define these urban enclaves. And while the phenomenon is global in nature, there are unique local challenges that inform each site's socio-spatial complexities (Fischer, McCann, and Auyero 2014). Consequently, there have been growing calls to break away from fixed planning paradigms and consider approaches that better reflect the dynamic nature of informal spaces, particularly in the Global South (Eizenberg 2019).

Epistemologies of informality have long rejected binary thinking and the strict opposition of formal versus informal processes, recognizing that the very permeability and interactions of the realms can offer opportunities for mitigating the vulnerability of residents (Roy 2005). And despite perceptions of disorderliness, recent scholars have argued that this faulty understanding arises when local forms of self-organization are not centered and instead top-down solutions are being prioritized. This phenomenon is aptly referred to by Mehaffy and Haas in their exploration of Habitat III's New Urban Agenda as "self-organizing complexity" (Mehaffy and Haas 2018, 10). As a core process of urbanization, informality is therefore marked by the reproduction of unequal power differentials through discourse and outdated best practices.

These debates point to a turn in the discipline where planning perceptions of informality are becoming increasingly malleable and fully recognize the centrality of local production of informal knowledge in the production of space (Sennett, Burdett, and Clos 2017). Informed by these contributions, this studio work engages with emerging paradigms of informality that seek to de-center traditional practice, on one-hand by forefronting community-informed planning, and on the other hand, by exploring the potential of insurgent planning approaches.

Overview of methodologies

Community-informed planning

Drawing from empowerment theory (Zimmerman 2000), which focuses on the processes through which individuals and communities gain control over their lives and environments, and how empowerment contributes to the long-term sustainability for the community (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland, 2005), this community-informed planning approach emphasizes principles of modularity, rootedness, and the paradigm of potency. Our methodology embraces a decentralized approach to planning, acknowledging the diversity of informal economies. Through participatory processes, we engage with community stakeholders to recommend a network for community empowerment. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, we aim to empower communities to take ownership of their built environment and drive positive change from within.

As urban planners, we recognize that communities possess invaluable knowledge about their own needs, aspirations, and resources. Therefore, we approach planning as facilitators rather than experts, seeking to amplify the voices of community members and support their capacity to lead the revitalization process. By centering the expertise and agency of local residents, we aim to create more responsive and inclusive urban interventions, harnessing the symbiotic relationship between Chacarita and the Historic Center, recognizing the interdependence of social, economic, and spatial dynamics.

Insurgent planning

Insurgent planning in the Global South offers a compelling framework for contending with uneven power relations through counter-hegemonic strategies of community resistance (Sletto 2023). At its core, insurgent planning questions the role of the state in shaping spaces of participation, arguing that while power is less reliant on direct forms of coercion, governmentality plays a central role in curtailing self-determination. In the context of informality, this pattern is even more so apparent and has been extensively studied by authors the likes of Ananya Roy or Faranak Miraftab. This studio draws from these approaches and recognizes the untapped potential of mobilization strategies that occur outside of sanctioned spaces, or as Miraftab calls them, "invented spaces" of autoconstruction (Miraftab 2009).

Because of the transgressive nature of this paradigm, it is crucial to not only be innovative, but to also decolonize planning theory by decentering spheres of knowledge production away from professionals and instead emphasizing the importance of embodied, everyday practices (Sletto 2023). Our studio approach is therefore unequivocally hyperlocal and value-based given the strong stigma associated with the neighborhood of La Chacarita.
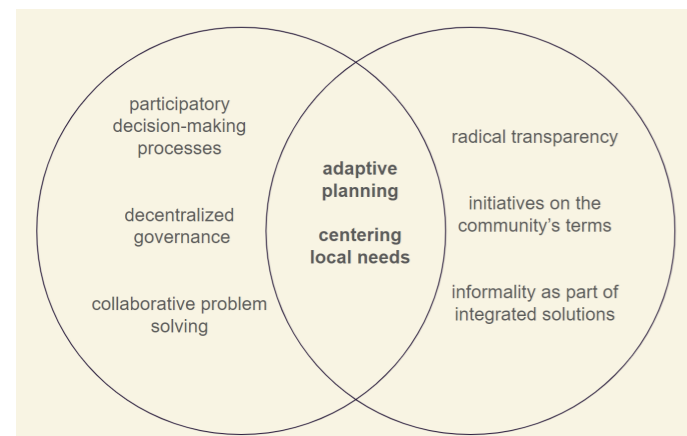
Fig.26. Comparison and Overlaps in the two Approaches

Studio positionality

This studio proposes two alternative projects that diverge from conventional planning methods and offers fresh perspectives, rooted in the belief that paradigm shifts are necessary in informal settings.

The first project embodies community-informed planning principles, emphasizing collaboration while prioritizing decentralized engagement. It seeks to empower local residents by amplifying their voices and facilitating the creation of supportive networks, fostering inclusive interventions that recognize the interconnectedness of social, economic, and spatial dynamics within adjacent areas such as Chacarita and the Historic Center.

The second project forefronts the insurgent planning approach delineated earlier by proposing a digital repository for residents of Asunción to learn more about the neighborhood and be used as a tool for mobilization. This is done in order to redefine who must carry the burden of advocacy and destigmatization.

It is important to remember as we further elaborate on the two projects that this studio work has led the team to be deeply introspective and reevaluate its own approaches and beliefs about planning in the Global South. The following projects are a testament, albeit not without their own imperfections, of how planners can differently grapple with the question of informality. The two sections build upon each other and target distinct audiences in an attempt to highlight how multilateral actions need to coexist and be cognizant of their own strengths instead of attempting to ascribe to traditional umbrella solutions.

Fig.27. Vacant building in the Historic Center of Asunción

*Photo credit/ **Arimbi Naro***

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INTRODUCTION

La Chacarita, faces significant marginalization and exclusion from formal economic processes despite its rich cultural heritage and entrepreneurial spirit. In response, Chaca-RE is proposed as a network of organizations operating under a shared charter to advocate for and empower the community.

Key points:

- The establishment of an empowerment network organization called Red de Empoderamiento Chacarita (Chaca-Re) would be beneficial to address challenges in La Chacarita.

- Chaca-Re is an umbrella organization to bring the various organizations of La Chacarita together in a structure that fosters collaboration, pool resources, and advances shared goals.

- Partnerships with local businesses, cultural organizations, financial institutions, and government entities are crucial for creating a better future for La Chacarita.

- Chaca-RE's success depends on amplifying community voices, fostering equitable access to resources, and challenging negative perceptions that perpetuate marginalization.

- Chaca-RE modular infrastructure that allows for adaptability in many different environments and allows for it to adapt for many different use cases.

- The network focuses on capacity enhancement, grassroots networking, and the development of community-driven projects.

- Flexible, low-cost pop-up spaces serve as platforms for showcasing initiatives, engaging external partners, and promoting social inclusion.

By implementing the Chaca-RE framework, the residents of La Chacarita can work towards a more inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable future, ensuring their rightful place within the broader urban landscape of Asunción

CHACA-RE

"

In this part of our studio, we focus on developing a framework that residents of La Chacarita can follow. Recognizing the informal economies and entrepreneurship in La Chacarita, we aim to **build on existing assets** and propose a framework to further strengthen them.

Our objective is to create a **network for community empowerment**, with a structure observed from the existing organizational dynamics in La Chacarita. We acknowledge the entrepreneurial spirit, local businesses, and cultural richness of the informal neighborhoods in La Chacarita, and we want to emphasize these positive aspects.

We aim to show how informal neighborhoods can inspire other places and what can be learned from them to help these neighborhoods continue to thrive. Additionally, we want to demonstrate how **informal neighborhoods can contribute to the growth of adjacent areas** by leveraging the symbiotic relationship between La Chacarita and the Historic District.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

THEORY

Frameworks of Informal Entrepreuneurship

Asunción offers an exciting opportunity to explore the relationships between the state and its people through the lens of La Chacarita. This project attempts to reconnect the two ends of public discourse – the state and the community through robust organizations to create healthy and effective networks of communication and change.

The local context of La Chacarita, shows that a 'business as usual' approach to planning is ineffective and that it requires substantial rethinking in the distribution of power. The high degree of involvement from international organizations not only keeps state institutions dependent on them (Chong and Galdo 2006), but also leads to systemic issues such as displacement, inequality and environmental degradation (Gimenez and Lugo 2014).

Due to this, traditional organizational structures are inadequate to address the concerns of the community.

Therefore, this project attempts to explore the possibilities of a decentralized community organization run by the community to mediate between the state and community. This approach to planning has been widely popular and successful in the Latin American context with trail blazing examples in Brazil (Avritzer 2006; Baiocchi 2001) and Colombia among many others (Wampler, McNulty, and Touchton 2021).

To address these concerns, the foundations of the decentralized community organization needs to be based on robust theory which is complemented by community preferences and realities. This section explores the different foundational theories that are explored to develop this organization.

1. *Social Capital Theory*

Social capital theory emphasizes the importance of social networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity within a community (Woolcock and Narayan 2000). In Asunción, informal settlements such as La Chacarita, often rely heavily on tight-knit social networks and informal support systems for survival and resilience. These networks, built on shared experiences and mutual assistance, form the bedrock of social capital within informal communities. Decentralized community organizations here can leverage these existing social ties to mobilize residents, foster collaboration, and address collective challenges. By strengthening social capital, these organizations empower residents to navigate the complexities of informal living, access resources, and advocate for their rights within the broader urban landscape.

2. *Participatory Governance*

Participatory governance theory advocates for the active involvement of citizens in decision-making processes related to public policies and services. In Paraguay, where formal governance structures often exclude or marginalize residents of informal settlements, participatory approaches are essential for fostering inclusive development. Decentralized community organizations in La Chacarita provide platforms for residents to participate in community planning, resource allocation, and decision-making, thereby amplifying their voices and agency. Through mechanisms such as community assemblies, participatory budgeting, and neighborhood councils, these organizations empower residents to shape the future of their communities and demand accountability from local authorities. By incorporating the perspectives and priorities of informal settlers, participatory governance promotes greater equity and legitimacy in urban governance processes (Avritzer 2006).

3. *Community Development Theory*

Community development theory underscores the importance of empowering communities to identify and address their own needs through collective action. In La Chacarita, the community faces a myriad of challenges, including inadequate access to basic infrastructure and economic services, insecure land tenure, and social stigma. Decentralized community organizations play a crucial role in facilitating bottom-up approaches to community planning and development, empowering residents to lead their own initiatives and create solutions that are responsive to their unique contexts. By prioritizing local knowledge, resources, and priorities, it can foster self-reliance, resilience, and sustainable development in La Chacarita (Mitlin 2008). Moreover, community-driven initiatives contribute to the social cohesion and solidarity of residents, strengthening their ability to confront shared challenges and advocate for their rights within the broader urban landscape.

4. *Collaborative Governance*

Collaborative governance theory emphasizes the importance of partnerships and collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and communities in addressing complex social issues (Ostrom 1996). In Paraguay, where governance structures are often fragmented and ineffective, collaborative approaches are essential for driving inclusive and sustainable development. Decentralized community organizations in La Chacarita can serve as intermediaries between formal institutions and informal settlements, fostering dialogue, cooperation, and shared decision-making. By facilitating partnerships and networks among various stakeholders, these organizations enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of governance processes at the local level (Ansell and Gash 2008). Moreover, collaborative

governance helps to bridge the gap between the community and formal institutions, promoting greater integration and equity within the urban landscape (Ostrom 1996).

4. *Empowerement Theory*

Empowerment theory focuses on the processes through which individuals and communities gain control over their lives and environments (Zimmerman 2000). In La Chacarita, where the community often faces marginalization and exclusion from formal decision-making processes, empowerment is crucial for fostering agency, resilience, and social change. Decentralized community organizations empower residents by providing them with opportunities to voice their concerns, access resources, and participate in decision-making. By fostering a sense of collective identity, efficacy, and ownership, these organizations enable residents to advocate for their rights and interests more effectively. Moreover, empowerment contributes to the long-term sustainability of informal communities, as residents become active agents in shaping their own futures and driving positive transformation within their neighborhoods (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2005).

In conclusion, these theories provide useful insights into the dynamics of decentralized community organizations. By leveraging these frameworks, decentralized organizations can effectively empower residents, foster inclusive governance, and drive sustainable development within La Chacarita and beyond.

The next chapters focus on applying this framework to develop a decentralized community organization in La Chacarita.

PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING

Decentralized systems prioritize participatory decision-making, allowing residents to actively engage in planning processes and influence development outcomes. Initiatives such as participatory budgeting, community assemblies, and neighborhood councils enable communities to allocate resources, identify priorities, and hold local authorities accountable (Baiocchi 2001).

BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES

Decentralized systems emphasize bottom-up approaches to community planning, prioritizing local knowledge, needs, and aspirations. Rather than top-down interventions imposed by external actors, these approaches empower communities to lead their own development initiatives, leveraging their inherent strengths and resources (Alonso 2019)

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Decentralized systems promote collaborative governance structures that foster partnerships between government agencies, civil society organizations, and local communities. These partnerships facilitate co-creation, resource-sharing, and collective action, leading to more effective and sustainable development outcomes (Abers 1998).

Decentralized systems in community planning represent a paradigm shift towards more inclusive, participatory, and resilient urban development in South America. By prioritizing bottom-up approaches, participatory decision-making, and collaborative governance, these systems empower communities to address their own needs, advocate for their rights, and shape their own futures. As cities continue to grapple with complex challenges, decentralized approaches offer promising pathways towards more equitable and sustainable urban development across the region.

Fig.28. Relevant Approaches

CONTEXT AND ANALYSIS

Fig.29. Matrix of Businesses

The entrepreneurial dynamism observed within La Chacarita serves as a compelling case study reflecting the adaptive strategies employed by vulnerable communities in response to systemic challenges. Through fieldwork and spatial analysis, the prevalence of home-based enterprises, particularly in Chacarita Alta, emerges as a testament to the community's resourcefulness amidst structural constraints such as limited formal employment opportunities and urban neglect.

In examining the typology of businesses, the dominance of food and beverage establishments underscores the economic significance of micro-entrepreneurship in shaping the neighborhood's commercial landscape. Moreover, the integration of services like barbershops and salons within residential premises not only diversifies the local economy but also fosters a sense of community cohesion through shared spaces of economic activity.

Fig.30. Proximity of La Chacarita and the Historic Center
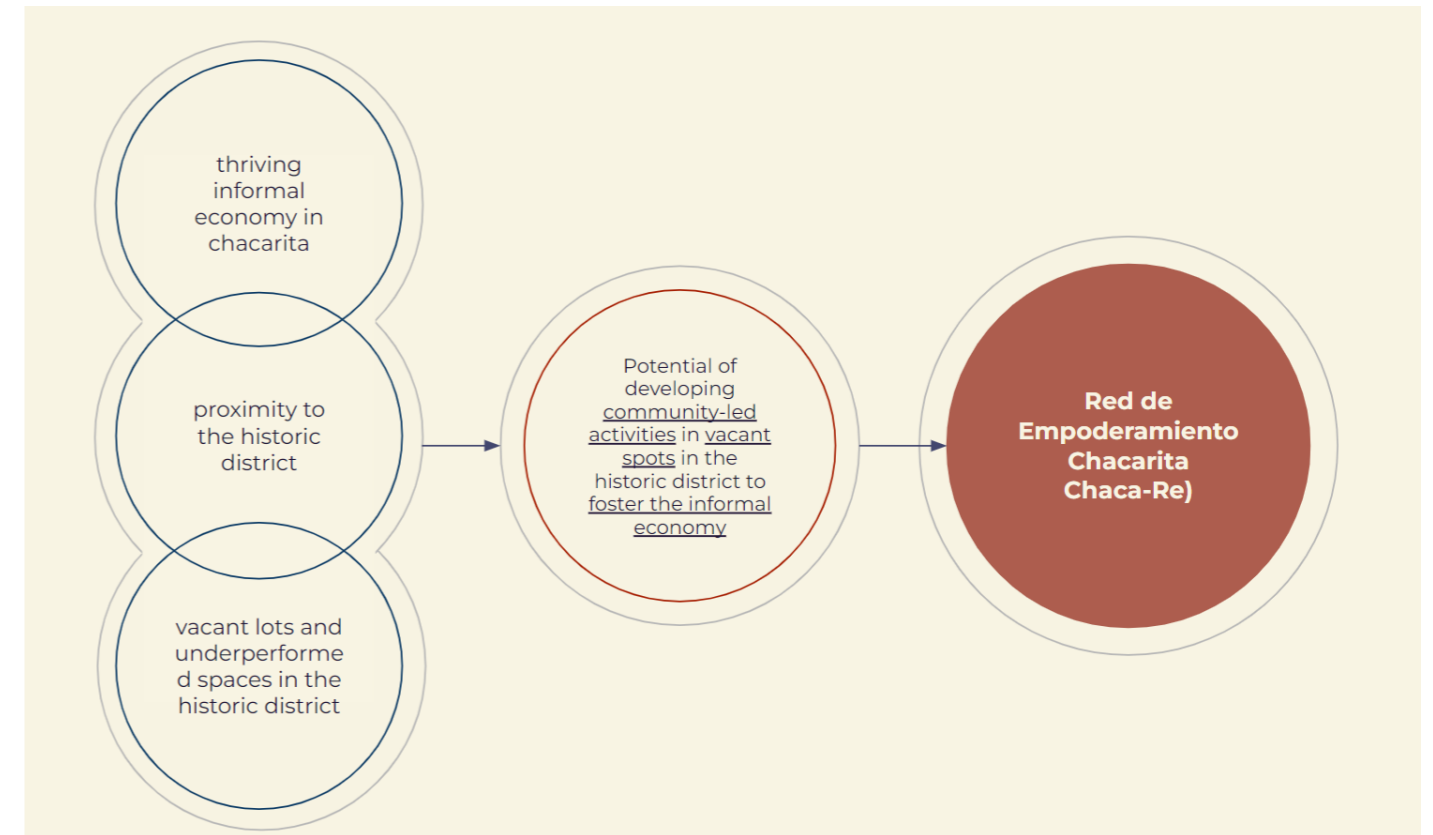
Fig.31. Synthesis Diagram

However, the narrative of entrepreneurial success in La Chacarita is juxtaposed against the backdrop of socio-spatial barriers, as elucidated by the concept of the "mental barrier." This phenomenon, characterized by residents' apprehension and restricted mobility beyond neighborhood confines, sheds light on the intricacies of urban exclusion and the perpetuation of spatial divides within the cityscape. Furthermore, the physical delineation imposed by Avenue Mariscal Lopez exacerbates this spatial segregation, necessitating comprehensive interventions to foster social integration and connectivity.

The identification of vacant spaces and the symbiotic relationship between formal and informal economies underscores the potential for strategic interventions aimed at revitalizing urban areas.

Leveraging underutilized spaces for community-driven initiatives and economic development can serve as a catalyst for bridging the socioeconomic gap between La Chacarita and the Historic District.

In conclusion, the entrepreneurial resilience exhibited by La Chacarita's residents emphasize the imperative for holistic approaches to urban development that prioritize community empowerment and social equity. By acknowledging and addressing the intersecting challenges of urban marginalization, the trajectory towards a more equitable and sustainable urban future can be charted.

CASE STUDIES

Retail in a Box

Retail in a Box, an initiative by the World Food Programme (WFP), supports food supply chains and rebuilds market infrastructure by providing pop-up stores. WFP aims to stimulate market activity in emergency situations and fragile economic contexts. By partnering with local retailers, WFP helps transition from humanitarian aid to self-sustained local economies.

Retail in a Box has two different approaches depending on the situation's urgency. In emergencies, it delivers pop-up stores to communities in need. In an economic development context, the focus is on working with local retailers to build their own stores using local workforce and materials. By combining WFP guidance—such as blueprints, shop infrastructure, retail training, and best practices—with the involvement of local retailers, Retail in a Box creates a reliable market run by and for the local community.

WFP has stimulated local economies and enhanced community capacity through Retail in a Box. In South Sudan, Retail in a Box supported 30 local retailers from host and refugee communities to establish new shops and provided training to 280 people. In Bangladesh, Retail in a Box shifted from in-kind food aid to cash-based assistance, supporting existing retailers in opening new shops to improve the shopping experience for refugees.

Retail in a Box is a prime example of how informed methods can engage local residents to address emergency situations. By maximizing local resources, such as local businesses and materials, the initiative creates a sustainable approach to ensuring food supply chains while also fostering economic development in vulnerable areas.

The Legacy Building (MN)

The Legacy Building is a brand-new Black-owned business located in South Minneapolis. It was founded by a local artist couple who believe that access to creative spaces is crucial for local artists to create and showcase their work. Through these creative spaces, they aimed to foster collaboration among artists and different types of creatives.

The opening of The Legacy Building has generated enthusiasm among local artists like Colin Mitchell, a local drummer. She mentioned that it opens up many opportunities for artists. Additionally, the creation of this space allows Black people to thrive by providing them with a Black-owned organization dedicated to uplifting and energizing creativity within the city. To support the creative industries in the city.

The Legacy Building offers both physical and non-physical support to the creative community.

It provides affordable and sustainable resources for artistic expression, including photo and video studios, a gallery, a recording studio, rehearsal rooms, and a storefront. Additionally, its creative community program is designed to foster meaningful and engaging experiences. Among the programs it offers are Accelerated Branding for Creatives, a capacity-enhancement training led by professionals, and Soul of the Southside, a free open-street festival that celebrates Black culture and the healing power of community.

The Legacy Building provides a valuable way to bring together people with similar interests and amplify their talents. Furthermore, it serves as an excellent example of how to catalyze cultural growth by spotlighting and nurturing creative Black voices.

Fig.32. Retail in a box project in Masquil Alto, a rural area in Mozambique

*Image credit/ **World Food Programme***

Fig.33. The Legacy Building in South Minneapolis

*Image credit/ **The Legacy Building***

NYC Street Lab

Street Lab, a New York City-based nonprofit, creates and shares programs for public spaces to improve urban environments, strengthen neighborhoods, and connect communities. Their pop-up approach is adaptable and can be easily deployed, making it ideal for informal neighborhoods seeking to foster entrepreneurship and build community.

Street Lab provides programming in parks, plazas, and other public spaces, creating places for people to gather and engage. These pop-up markets can host a variety of entrepreneurs, from food vendors to artists, providing a flexible platform for residents to showcase their products and build their businesses. This approach can quickly transform underused spaces into vibrant community hubs.

Street Lab collaborates with local community groups and city agencies to identify locations for its pop-up programs, focusing on underserved areas. The organization has a network of over 295 community partners and has worked in 393 public spaces across New York City. This extensive network ensures that the programming is relevant to the local community and addresses specific needs.

Street Lab measures its impact through head counts, surveys, and interviews to assess whether its programs encourage community gathering and entrepreneurship. Since 2011, Street Lab has provided nearly 2,000 days of programming in 393 public spaces, engaging over 76,000 New Yorkers, with 81% of the work focused on low/moderate-income areas. Their efforts have earned multiple awards and recognitions, highlighting the success and impact of their approach.

Street Lab's pop-up approach offers a practical solution for informal neighborhoods aiming to foster entrepreneurship. It demonstrates how a flexible, community-driven approach can quickly create opportunities for local businesses, while also building a sense of community. By transforming underused public spaces, Street Lab provides a model for other cities looking to support local entrepreneurs and strengthen neighborhood bonds.

3

Fig.34. Street Lab uses space beneath the elevated road to create a reading area

*Image credit/ **Streetlab***

THE ORGANIZATION

Forming the Organization

Residents of La Chacarita face pervasive marginalization and discrimination, often being unfairly branded as the "most dangerous neighborhood in Asunción" (de Juan, 2023). Despite its status as the cultural hub of Paraguay, the community finds itself excluded from public discourse and denied access to economic opportunities. In response to these challenges, Red de Empoderamiento Chacarita (Chaca-RE), can emerge as an empowerment network dedicated to advocating for and advancing the interests of La Chacarita's residents.

With the ongoing focus on revitalizing the Historic District, La Chacarita has garnered significant attention. However, this attention tends to be framed through a top-down approach, lacking space for genuine community input. As a result, the residents are systematically denied a voice and access to formal economic processes, perpetuating a cycle of urban neglect.

Chaca-RE proposes a collaborative framework where multiple organizations operate under a shared charter tailored to the community's needs. This charter establishes governance and conflict resolution mechanisms, ensuring accountability while allowing organizational flexibility. Entities like Chaca-Tours, Chaca-Artisanal, Chaca-Comunidad, and Chaca-Negocio, along with external partners, form a symbiotic relationship, pooling resources and expertise to advance shared goals.

Temporal flexibility is integral to Chaca-RE's approach, offering a structured process for initiation, capacity enhancement, and implementation. Through capacity enhancement efforts, organizations refine their mandates and plan advocacy initiatives. This is complemented by grassroots networking within La Chacarita, identifying key stakeholders and fostering community engagement.

Fig.35. Chaca-Re Framework

Implementation involves two key aspects: first, working with community stakeholders to develop projects addressing local needs, and second, utilizing modular pop-up spaces to engage external partners and the city. These flexible, low-cost spaces serve as platforms for showcasing community initiatives and bridging the gap between La Chacarita and the wider cityscape.

In essence, Chaca-RE aims to empower La Chacarita's residents by providing a platform for collective action, advocating for equitable access to resources and fostering a vibrant, inclusive community. Through collaboration and innovation, it endeavors to realize a better social, economic, and spatial future for La Chacarita.
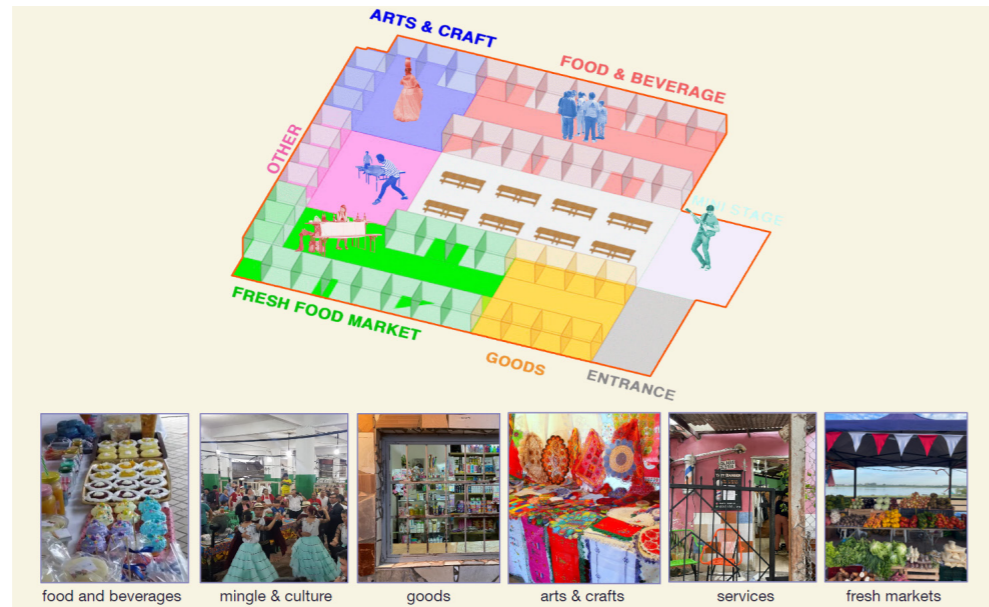

food and beverages   mingle & culture   goods   arts & crafts   services   fresh markets

Fig.36. Visualization of Pop-up Spaces

existing typology

low cost, scalable module   it's footprint can be flexible based on program and site   easy to assemble and disassemble

Fig.37. Diagram of Program Development

Stakeholder Relationship

Our client, **Pro Desarollo**, is a non-governmental organization whose primary mission is the formalization of the economy. Through impact studies like La Economia Subterranea, and strategic partnerships with financial institutions Itau and Paresa Paraguay, the organization hopes to bridge the gap between Paraguay's informal and formal activities, building partnerships with public institutions, private companies, and academic institutions. Pro Desarollo's reports have played a pivotal role in guiding public policy in Paraguay, at both the municipal and federal scale. Their emphasis on sustainability aligns with our vision for community development, ensuring that entrepreneurship works towards the protection and preservation of natural resources (Pro Desarollo 2019).

One of our primary collaborators will be **Chaca-Tours**, a tourist organization that hopes to shed light on the rich cultural heritage that remains in La Chacarita, slowly building international recognition and reframing the narrative around Asunción's largest informal settlement. ChacaTours has built plenty of connections with local businesses, which we hope to leverage as prospective partners in implementing our pop-up market. Given the negative stigma surrounding the La Chacarita neighborhood, organizations like ChacaTours have highlighted the incredible contributions of the neighborhood, challenging the notion that the neighborhood is a problem that needs to be fixed.

La Escuela de Musica: Sonidos de la Chacarita is another prospective partner for our organization, given their cultivation and stewardship of the neighborhood's rich musical heritage. Musicians like Jose Asunción Flores have become ubiquitous in Paraguay's cultural identity, sparking numerous efforts to introduce La Chacarita's music to the younger generation. The participation of organizations like Sonidos de la Chacarita would give our organization a dimension beyond its economic impact, grounding our initiatives in the region's cultural identity. In addition, it would help our organization reach the younger generation, who will define the future of the neighborhood's character

Fig.38. Sonidos de la Chacarita

*Image credit/ **Sonidos de la Chacarita***

Nuestras Manos is a prospective partner we have already established a connection with, a community-based initiative that synthesizes La Chacarita's entrepreneurial spirit with the indigenous practices of arts and crafts. Their business model epitomizes the self-sufficiency and community involvement that we hope to achieve through our community development plan. Operating out of a residential space, the organization remains true to its locally based operations, hiring residents of La Chacarita and paying them handsomely. Their organization will set the blueprint for the types of business we will pursue in implementing our pop up market.

For the financing of our initiatives, we plan on pursuing a wide range of funds, diversifying our liabilities to maintain our organization's longevity. Our client, Pro Desarollo, has partnerships with several financial institutions, including **Itau Bank** and **Paresa Paraguay**. The client's internal **Existo** program could also prove to be a valuable resource, given its familiarity with microlending and tax assessments. Another useful financial source will be the existing cooperatives that have proliferated throughout Asunción communities, including La Chacarita. Given the non-competitive, non-exclusive model of these institutions, we hope they will be willing partners in investing in a community cooperative that transcends its economic functions.

The final dimension of our community development program requires recognition from government entities, at both the local and national level.

The legal precedent for establishing our organization is guaranteed through **law 438 on cooperatives** by the Paraguayan government. In order to implement our organization's on-the-ground projects –– including the pop up market and vocational training workshops – we must receive permission from the local municipality, along with the **Ministro of Urbano Vievienda (MUVH)**, the federal governing body responsible for overseeing development initiatives and housing programs (ICA 2015). In establishing and expanding our quasi-formal development plan, the cooperation of the municipality will be integral at every step of the process.

By leveraging the strengths and resources of Pro Desarollo and neighborhood partners, Chaca-Re will create a transformative impact in La Chacarita. Through collaborative efforts with organizations like ChacaTours, La Escuela de Musica: Sonidos de la Chacarita, and Nuestras Manos, the neighborhood can highlight the cultural richness and entrepreneurial spirit, while addressing the economic and social challenges it faces. The diverse funding strategies and strong legal foundation will support the sustainable development of La Chacarita, ensuring that the community thrives and becomes an integral part of Asunción's urban landscape. With the local and national government cooperation, community development initiatives will foster a more inclusive and equitable future for La Chacarita and its residents.

Fig.39. Potential collaborators

Project Scope

Chaca-RE is envisioned as an umbrella network comprising various organizations tailored to the community's needs. These organizations, while distinct entities, collaborate under a shared charter designed to empower, advocate for, and promote the community's interests. The network's modular structure fosters adaptability, allowing for the evolution of initiatives in response to changing community needs.

Participating organizations within Chaca-RE undergo a process of public consensus to determine their inclusion, granting them access to shared resources and facilitating capacity enhancement through collaboration with external partners. This process culminates in the implementation of community-driven projects and advocacy efforts, both internally and externally.

To bridge the gap between La Chacarita and the city at large, Chaca-RE envisions utilizing flexible, modular pop-up spaces as a medium for communication with external stakeholders. These spaces, constructed from locally available materials, can be deployed in various configurations across different scales, serving as platforms for diverse activities such as market stalls, advocacy exhibitions, and community gatherings. Through these initiatives, Chaca-RE seeks to amplify the voices of La Chacarita's residents, foster economic development, and promote greater social inclusion within the neighborhood and beyond.

The envisioned structure of Chaca-RE includes a charter and organizational framework that incorporates existing community organizations. This charter, collaboratively designed by the community, serves to identify and address its needs, wants, and desires, ensuring that Chaca-RE is directly accountable for advancing community interests while allowing individual organizations flexibility within the framework. The charter would also address the issues of governance, conflict management, empowerment, advocacy, and promotion of La Chacarita activities. The organization itself would also provide guidance regarding initiation, capacity enhancement, and program implementation.

Fig.40. Stakeholder connections

This setup ensures that Chaca-RE, acting as an umbrella network, remains directly accountable for advancing its charter while granting individual organizational subgroups the flexibility to operate within its framework. Among these organizations could be Chaca-Tours, Chaca-Artisanal, Chaca-Communidad, and Chaca-Negotio, each specializing in distinct areas such as community exposure, arts and music, community advocacy, and economic development. Despite their separate identities, these entities collaborate, sharing resources, knowledge, and influence to advance common objectives through creating communication channels with the local community and outside community partners such as NGOs and the municipal government.

The network's structure promotes adaptability, allowing it to respond effectively to evolving community needs through its modular approach, which operates through separate organizations. Modifications to the charter can be made through community consensus, ensuring alignment with community priorities. Communication within the network occurs on two fronts: internally, to understand, analyze, and advocate for community needs, and externally, to convey these needs to partners and stakeholders in the city effectively. These communication channels will be leveraged to inform advocacy efforts.

Communication with external stakeholders and the city and its public at large is imagined to be done by the network through the medium of a flexible, multi-use modular pop up space. This would be a collaborative effort between all organizations within Chaca-RE. These modular spaces are constructed out of low-cost, easy-to-assemble structures. The structures will be made from local materials, can take a variety of different designs, and can be set up in a variety of configurations based on the space available. These temporary pop up spaces can be set up at a variety of scales such as sidewalks, alleyways, vacant lots (in the La Chacarita and the Historic District), parks, universities, the Costanera, and for adaptive reuse in abandoned buildings. Its use will not just be limited to grocery and food stalls and arts and crafts, but also advocacy and exhibition spaces, amphitheater, creative studio, and much more. Through this temporary programming of public space, Chaca-RE attempts to promote the work of all organizations working within its umbrella to further the interests of the community in La Chacarita.

Fig.41. Potential Activation
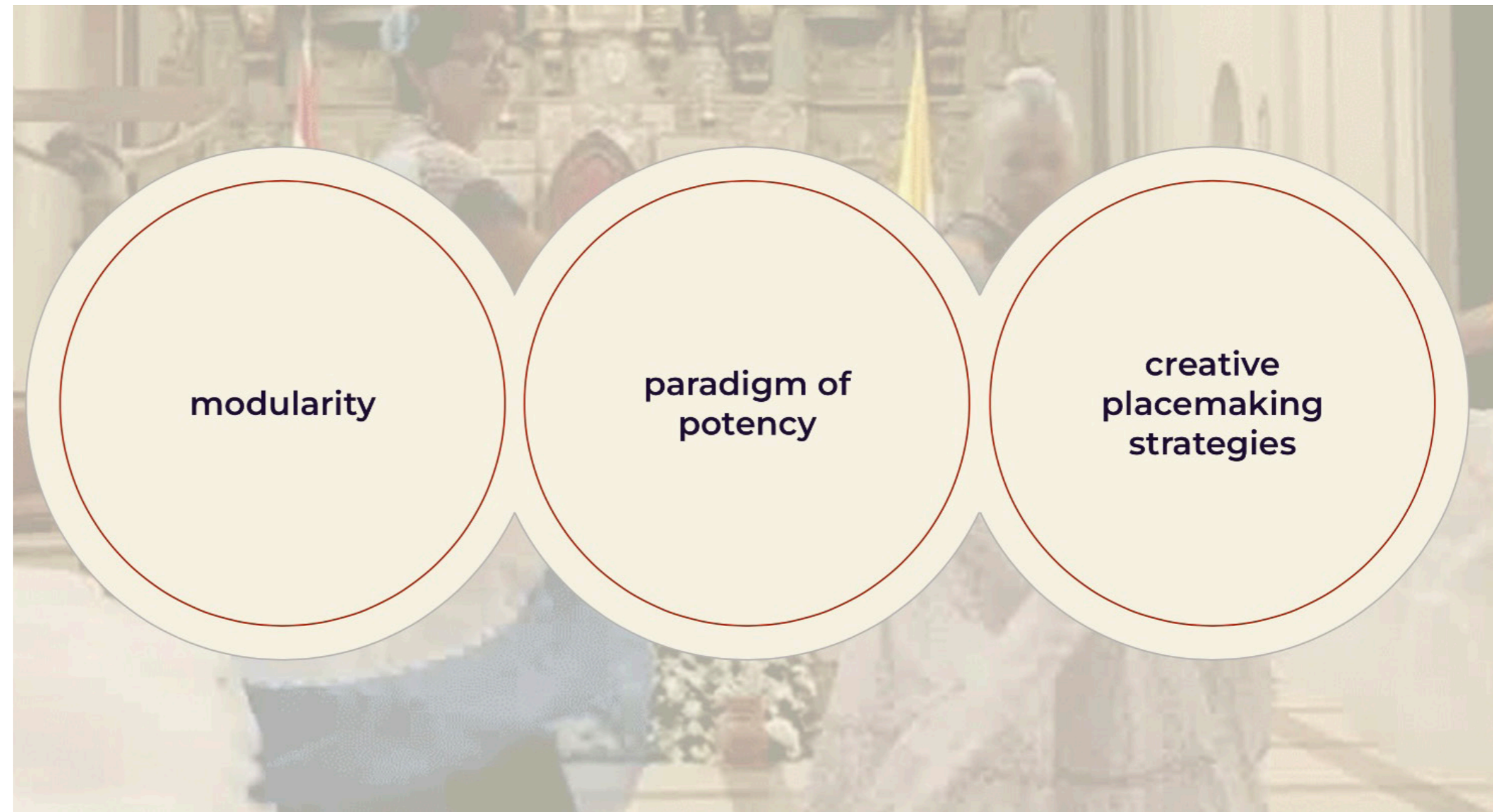
Defining Scope Subsections

Within the dynamic landscape of La Chacarita exists significant opportunity for advancement and evolution through deliberate community engagement and development initiatives. An institution committed to maximizing this potential would prioritize strategic interventions across four key domains: cooperative economic markets and workforce development, cultural enrichment and expression, public space activation, and advocacy campaigns. Grounded in the principles of modularity, the paradigm of potency, and the application of creative placemaking strategies, such an organization would strive to realize scalable and substantive outcomes, thereby contributing to the sustainable growth and enrichment of the community. If existing social networks are leveraged, there lies a profound potential for growth and transformation through strategic community engagement and development through a Chacarita empowerment network.

The paradigm of potency emphasizes the capacity of this organization to effect change by empowering individuals and the community. Through potent initiatives like business incubators and accelerators that stimulate economic growth, modular infrastructure, increasing community market space, and cultural projects that reinforce community identity and pride, the organization would not merely assist but transform La Chacarita, fostering a self-sustaining and thriving community.

Cooperative Economic Market and Workforce Development

One of the main strengths of La Chacarita as a whole was the emphasis on entrepreneurship. In order to strengthen the organization of La Chacarita entrepreneurship, a cooperative economic market would be established to foster a local entrepreneurship ecosystem. Business owners from the La Chacarita community including Viviendas Proyectivas, Mercado Cuatro vendors, Historic District street vendors, and other sponsors and the municipality. The concept of modularity—the development of components that can easily be used in different systems—would allow the organization to adapt and expand its economic initiatives as needed without overhauling its core mission. Markets could be developed in such a way that they can be replicated or adjusted based on the evolving needs of the community or the success of initial projects.

Another section of this would involve setting up a business incubator and accelerator that provides budding entrepreneurs with the necessary skills, resources, and mentorship to thrive. There could be business incubators and accelerator programs particularly for food and beverage entrepreneurs, as those businesses are prioritized by Pro-Desarollo. By focusing on sectors like craft making, local gastronomy, and other culturally relevant businesses, the economic initiatives would not only create jobs but also enhance the community's economic self-sufficiency. Incubators would focus on developing ideas for start-ups, while accelerators would focus on getting start up businesses to grow their market. Different workshops, tutoring sessions, and skill-building activities for both adults and children could be held in the community surrounding sewing, craft-making, cooking, recycling, hairdressing, music, and art/mural workshops.

Workforce development programs would be tailored to equip residents, particularly the youth, with skills in high-demand areas such as technology, customer service, and the green economy. By providing certifications and training, these programs would improve employability and support long-term career development. These initiatives would also include partnerships with local and international businesses to ensure alignment with market needs, ensuring that training programs lead directly to employment opportunities. Apprenticeship programs could also be developed to help fill the skills gap of the unemployed with skilled mentorship from the local business community.

The cooperative market could be strengthened through participation from local institutions. Programs could be created to leverage the knowledge of business and economic students to help strengthen the local economy through requests for proposals submitted to local universities. Partnerships could also be created with architecture programs with local universities to help to develop modular infrastructure to support the different economic and workforce development activity infrastructure needs at the market.

Cultural Enrichment and Expression

As cultural expression is a cornerstone of La Chacarita's identity, the organization would work to create platforms where local artists and cultural practitioners can showcase their talents, thus preserving and promoting the community's heritage. This could be facilitated through regular cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and performances in collaboration with local schools and cultural institutions. Workshops and educational programs would serve to both educate the youth about their heritage and train them in various arts, potentially creating new career paths.

A plethora of resources would also be available to local musicians, artists, and cultural stakeholders. Within the market, several creative spaces for artists would exist including a natural light studio, creative studio, rehearsal room, recording studio, and an art gallery. The organization could host different events such as art displays, collective murals, and open mic nights. Cultural showcases could also occur on important holidays, highlighting the vibrancy and large amount of tradition in the La Chacarita community. New cultural spaces such as cultural houses could be created in parks within La Chacarita and the Historic District to provide new event spaces for people of all nationalities to hold events.

Fig.42. Sites of Activation

Fig.43. Sites of Activation

Plaza de la Democracia

Estación de Ferrocarril
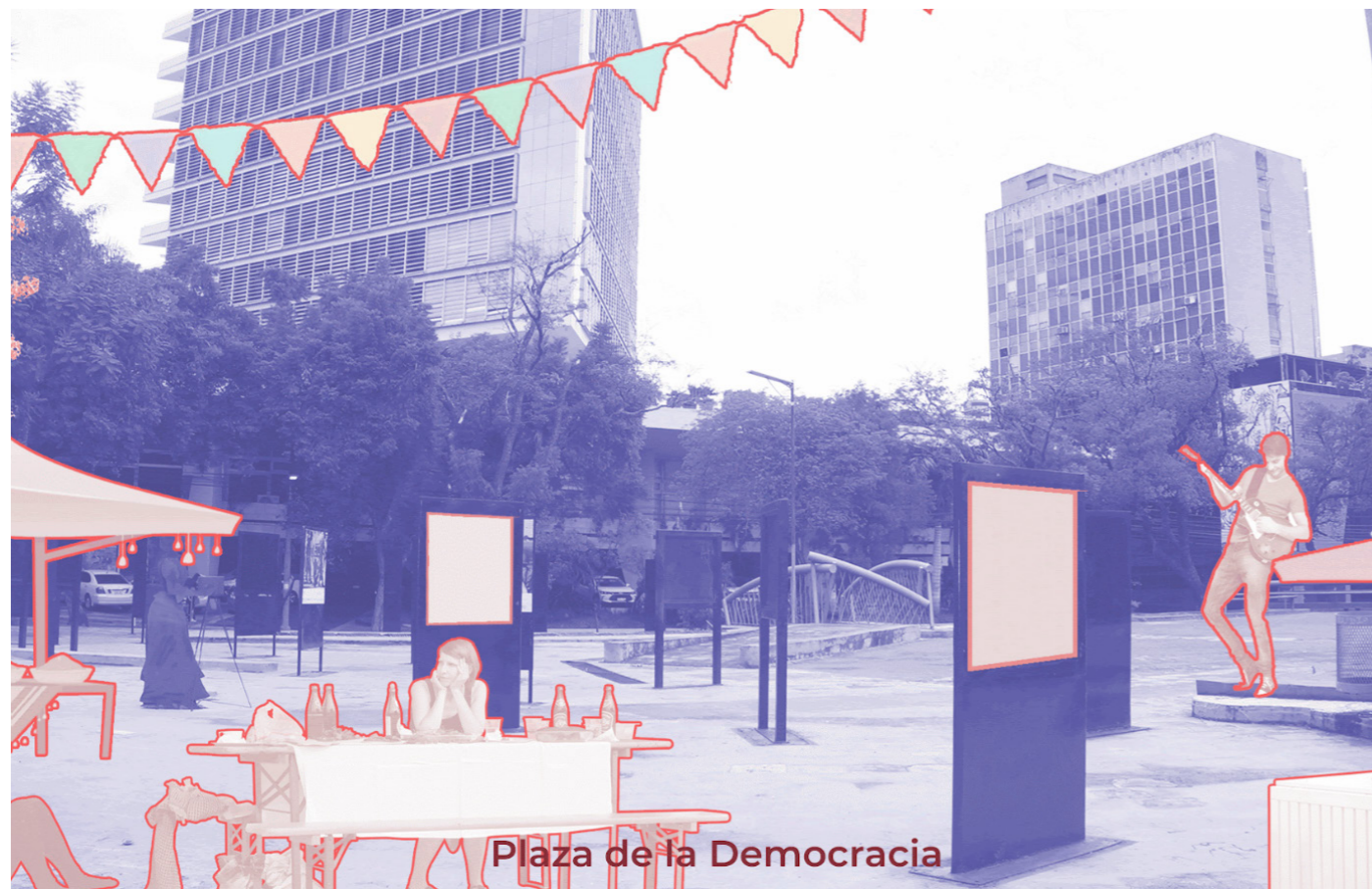
Activating Public Space

Activating Public Space in both La Chacarita and the adjacent Historic District can transform these areas into vibrant hubs of community interaction and economic activity. The organization would advocate for and implement improvements in public infrastructure, making spaces more accessible and inviting. This could include the development of open pop-up markets, green spaces, and playful learning landscapes.

Pop-up markets would be a regular feature, providing local entrepreneurs a platform to sell their goods and services, ranging from handmade Guaraní crafts to local cuisine, thereby stimulating local commerce and providing residents with access to diverse products. The pop-markets would be decided by several indicators including proximity to landmarks, other markets, schools, bus routes, government-owned vacant lots, and parcel size and capacity. Modular vending stands, tables, stages, meeting rooms, and games would compose the pop-up market.

Greening of the neighborhood would also be another priority. In community engagement with the neighborhood, nature and the water were seen as critical elements of the identity of La Chacarita. This organization would serve as a steward to expand that identity. The organization could focus on greening the areas by planting more trees and flowers, and focus on recycling programs in the community.

PLLs would also serve as a great way to activate public space around the markets. The key goals of these spaces are to leverage youth civic engagement, socioeconomic mixing, environmental sustainability, and value creation to make spaces with positive images. These spaces prioritize curiosity, imagination, and interactive design and focus on creating accessible, comfortable, sociable and welcoming spaces with many activities. These spaces would leverage human-centered co-design with youth to create learning experiences where the pop-up markets would be. Giant games such as chess and checkers could be placed around the market. Mobile sports fields such as soccer and volleyball fields could also be placed around the market. To activate the street, different activities such as Jenga, Legos, hopscotch, and video games could be utilized to activate street space. Pop-up reading rooms, art studios, building stations, obstacle courses, hands-on nature, puzzles, and street chalking could all be ways to activate the public space around the pop-up markets.

Advocacy Campaigns

The advocacy approach is critical in addressing the broader systemic issues affecting La Chacarita. Advocacy efforts would focus on ensuring that the community's needs and voices are heard in municipal planning and development projects. This would include lobbying for better housing, sanitation, educational facilities, and addressing cycles of stigmatization of La Chacarita and the Historic District. Advocacy campaigns could significantly benefit La Chacarita by raising awareness of its cultural exchange, economic potential and overall vibrancy.

Through engaging stakeholders at various levels, such as community members, local authorities, and non-profit organizations, the campaign could mobilize support for initiatives aimed at improving infrastructure, access to basic services, and more economic opportunities within the neighborhood and adjacent communities. Additionally, it could help challenge stigmatization and negative perceptions associated with informal settlements, including drugs, crime, flooding, lack of educational resources, deteriorating infrastructure, and perceptions regarding the informal economy are also issues that La Chacarita. The organization would help to foster a more inclusive approach to urban development that recognizes and addresses the diverse needs of marginalized communities like La Chacarita. Engaging stakeholders at multiple tiers to address negative consequences, thereby promoting an inclusive paradigm in urban development that prioritizes the diverse social and infrastructure needs of La Chacarita.

In summary, the scope of this organization is to integrate cultural, economic, and social initiatives that are modular and potent, ensuring sustainable community development. The organization's role is pivotal in orchestrating these changes, making it a linchpin in the community's ongoing journey towards empowerment and prosperity.

CONCLUSION

Chaca-RE emerges as a proposed network of organizations dedicated to advocating for and empowering the residents of La Chacarita. By operating under a shared charter tailored to the community's needs, Chaca-RE aims to foster collaboration, pool resources, and advance shared goals. The network's modular structure allows for adaptability and responsiveness to evolving community priorities.

Through capacity enhancement efforts, grassroots networking, and the development of community-driven projects, Chaca-RE seeks to bridge the gap between La Chacarita and the wider cityscape. The use of flexible, low-cost pop-up spaces serves as a platform for showcasing initiatives, engaging external partners, and promoting social inclusion.

By leveraging partnerships with local businesses, cultural organizations, financial institutions, and government entities, Chaca-RE strives to create a better social, economic, and spatial future for La Chacarita. The network's success hinges on its ability to amplify the voices of the community, foster equitable access to resources, and challenge the negative perceptions that perpetuate the neighborhood's marginalization.

Fig.44. A look inside a neighborhood business

*Photo credit/ **Arimbi Naro***

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INTRODUCTION

During our research in preparation for the trip, we faced various divergent narratives about the neighborhood of La Chacarita, its history, and its people. Curious about what we would experience once we were there, we encountered more conflicting narratives from people we met during our trip. In our quest to find more information about the neighborhood of La Chacarita, we found significant gaps in data across various sectors, prompting a reassessment of prevailing statistics and revealing the influence of power on decision-making processes.

Given this framework, we are acknowledging the limitations of conventional Western planning approaches, which prioritize economic growth over social considerations. We invite you to join us in challenging this status quo. Hereby, we advocate for a more inclusive and decolonized urban planning paradigm. By focusing on narration as embodied perspectives of place identity, we aim to integrate insurgent planning principles into urban development strategies more effectively.

We explored various topics through discursive interactions. To share the knowledge and stories in a way that acknowledges those from whom we were able to learn, the people living in La Chacarita, we developed a digital repository structured around four key questions.

1. Why do residents care about their home?

2. What role has La Chacarita played in shaping the city?

3. How is the neighborhood threatened?

4. What can you do about it?

The repository invites the user to engage with the website in an exploratory way. Under each question, the user learns about the neighborhood's history, culture, natural environment, and ways of life through various sources, such as oral histories, maps, images, and writing.

Our project is not just about research; it's about action. It focuses on youth engagement, aiming to educate and inspire young individuals and potential future decision-makers in addressing societal challenges and fostering connections across socioeconomic divides. Through the digital repository featuring narratives and knowledge from La Chacarita residents, we seek to amplify diverse voices and empower the community to advocate for their needs.

CHACARITA DIGITAL

"

In this part of our studio, we dedicate ourselves to exploring creative digital avenues for disseminating knowledge through narration. Acknowledging the role of discourse in shaping policy agendas, we aim to **shed light on voices and perspectives that have been systematically excluded in these conversations.**

Our objective is to create a **platform that fosters inclusive dialogue and understanding** among different communities in Asunción, Paraguay. We recognize the complexity in tackling prevailing social issues and strive to dismantle narratives that perpetuate biases against communities living in informal settlements, such as La Chacarita.

With this project, we hope to inspire reflection and dialogue, with the goal of **promoting informed action and collective empowerment**. By sharing personal narratives and knowledge of La Chacarita residents, we aim to **encourage stakeholders and the future generation of decision-makers in Asunción to reconsider their roles and responsibilities in addressing societal challenges.**

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

THEORY

Frameworks of Urban Informality

As we began developing our project, we quickly realized how urban informality plays a major role in shaping city life, particularly within cities of the Global South. Upon recognizing this, we began developing a framework that views informality and its processes, such as the development of housing and informal markets, not as these marginal or peripheral phenomena but as important components of how urban life takes shape. This perspective is important to us as it helps us understand all the unique, complex, and creative ways that space can take shape when community-driven approaches are considered the norm rather than the exception.

Building on our understanding of how place takes shape, our decision to create a digital repository was informed by the limitations of conventional Western, Euro-centric planning methods. We leaned on the work of Vanessa Watson in her critique of the Western planner, a call to be flexible, especially when working in the global south. Watson is not saying that these approaches are inherently useless in the setting, but they tend to emphasize structured regulatory approaches with little to no flexibility in approach and adaptation (Watson 2009). We adopt Watson's approach because we recognize that such methods often fall short in addressing the fluid and diverse realities of many urban areas, where inelastic planning methods can stifle the organic growth and adaptability of vibrant communities

Alongside the approach Watson proposes, we drew from a wide spectrum of theoretical insights, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on the transformative potential of subaltern voices and Efrat Eizenberg's discussion of the principles of self-organization and assemblage in urban settings which we expand on further in this section and in the following sections. By considering and drawing from these theoretical frameworks, our project challenges the status quo in planning and serves as a call to action for planners married to Western, euro-centric ways of planning and for those working outside the West and in the Global South to be mendable and embrace more flexible and people-centered approaches to planning.
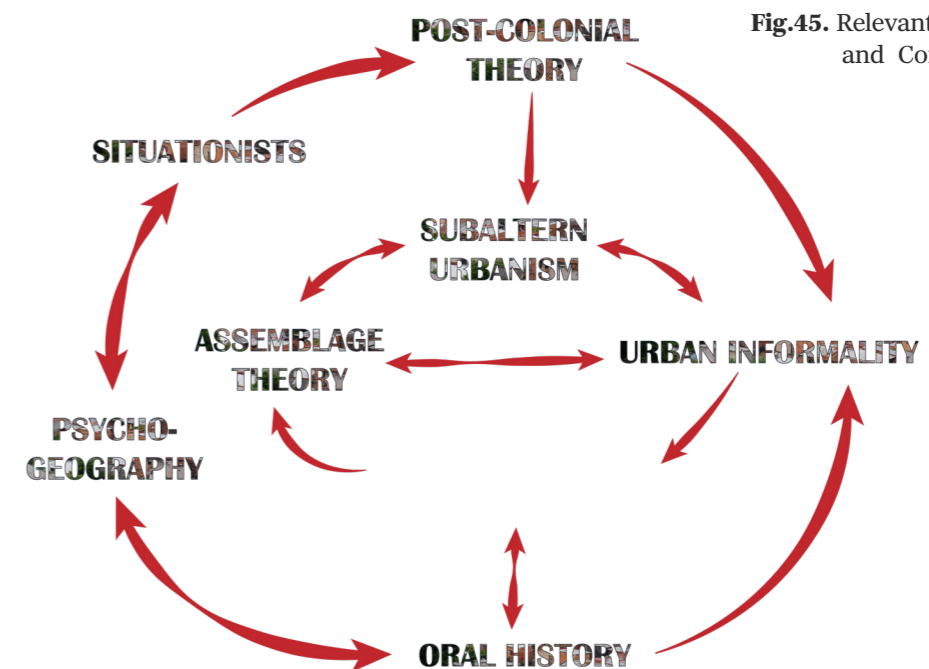

Fig.45. Relevant Theories and Connections

*Illustration credit/ **Charlotte Boulanger***

Stories of the Subalterns

To further this analysis of urban informality, we invoke theory derived from scholars of the narrative turn in organizational theory, specifically the branch referred to as "subaltern storytelling" (Kavanagh, O'Leary, and Giolláin 2003). This approach emphasizes the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, providing a means of acknowledging the agency of individuals within informal settings and offering a more nuanced understanding of urban dynamics.

When Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak posed the critical question "Can the Subaltern Speak?", she problematized agency within the hegemonic context of Western theory. In the now widely referenced text, Spivak challenges the notion that intellectual elites can advocate for marginalized groups and instead argues that they are complicit in maintaining the very structures that silence the subaltern and shape authorized spaces for discourse (Spivak 1992). These hegemonic groups universalize their own interests and by doing so relationally define the subaltern, a process of "othering" that heavily relies on knowledge creation (Kazimbaya-Senkwe and Lubambo 2010).

In informal urban contexts, storytelling is an emancipatory tool that avoids reducing complex life stories as either "dots on a map" or impersonal data sets (Maharawal and McElroy 2018). As Maharawal and McElroy argue, oral history can illuminate the intricacies of urban life, presenting individuals as knowledgeable and skilled agents rather than "passive recipients of external influences." This recognition of agency is vital for a post-colonial understanding of informal urban spaces, where power and social processes are intrinsically linked.

In the discipline of urban planning specifically, oral history reveals the discordant memories and perceptions that coexist within cities, reinforcing the importance of considering place-based identities in urban interventions (Selvi Ünlü 2019). Similarly, the co-creation of knowledge through participatory approaches results in tangible and intangible outcomes that contribute to socially just urban planning (Carpenter and Horvath 2022). Such methods therefore have the potential of fostering shared understandings among multiple partners, enhancing the inclusivity of urban development practices.

Recognizing the transformative potential of oral history as both an engagement method and a mode of knowledge transmission, commentators have nonetheless warned about the limitations of this communicative turn in subaltern studies. J. Maggio, for example, critically explored what it meant for a community to speak and proposed a reinterpretation of Spivak's original query, asking instead "Can the Subaltern be Heard?" (Maggio 2007). At its core, this revised query highlights the tendency of benevolent intellectual elites to represent subaltern voices while invertedly continuing to impose dominant modes of discourse. Here, Maggio argues that we cannot seek to represent, instead we should strive to elevate and sensitively translate subaltern forms of communication when applicable. This perspective aligns with our project's aim to ensure that subaltern narratives are not co-opted or shallowly represented, but rather, authentically heard and valued.

Invoking subaltern storytelling in the analysis of urban informality therefore allows us to challenge dominant narratives and contribute to a more equitable understanding of urban spaces. This approach prioritizes the voices of marginalized communities, ensuring their experiences and aspirations are integral to discussions about urban development.

From Theory to Project Paradigms

Our exploration of the above literature led us to identify four main paradigms that together shape the content, audience, and format of the digital repository. It is important to note, however, that while these paradigms are derived from critical theory, they are here envisioned as productive forces, pushing us to engage creatively with the topics at hand.

Fig.46. Project Paradigms

CONFLICTING RATIONALITIES

Paradigm focuses on the ways in which the local contestation of official discourses opens possibilities for alternative advocacy forms.

DECENTERING WESTERN PARADIGMS

Paradigm recognizes that value systems are not singular, making traditional planning practices contextually incompatible.

POWER, ASSEMBLAGE, AND AGENCY

Paradigm considers assemblage and community-led mobilization as a powerful strategy to negotiate space for marginalized populations.

RE-ACTUALIZATION OF SPACE

Paradigm grapples with the dynamic nature of informal environments and emphasizes the need for planning to constantly reimagine itself to meet the evolving needs and aspirations of communities.

The following report section delves deeper into the implications of each of these paradigms and is supplemented by analytical evidence from our data collection.

PROJECT PARADIGMS

Conflicting Rationalities

As alluded to in the contextual section of this report, the rationalities across stakeholders and community members in Asunción were extremely heterogeneous. This is something that we had encountered in research prior to our on-site, and that became ever evident during our in-person conversations during.

The data divides presented earlier are illustrative of gaps in access, opportunity, and representation across the socioeconomic bands of the city. Witnessing the contention between and within interested parties in Asunción provided additional evidence for the structural inequities borne by residents of neighborhoods like La Chacarita. Disagreements ranged from the date of foundation of the neighborhood (Barbes Museum vs. Sobrevivencia) to what residents need most to improve living conditions (IDB vs. Sobrevivencia vs. El Surti).

We wanted to leverage this confusion rather than shy away from it. Recalling the stakeholder nexus shared in our analysis section, our approach is to use the simultaneous fracturing of "expert" opinion and lack of internal voice as justification for rejecting de facto economic development practices and identifying the gaps that various stakeholders have the responsibility to fill given the power they hold.

Decentering Western Paradigms

Before we arrived in La Chacarita, a recurring narrative among stakeholders we spoke to outside the neighborhood was that the community was resistant to change and improvement. We set out to verify the validity of these statements, and as we engaged more with the community members and advocates, it became clear that the community's resistance was not to change per se but to the exclusionary processes by institutions that leave them in the dark. These institutions often adopt top-down planning practices, prevalent in the West and Global North, overlooking what the community finds important.

Once we arrived on-site and through our engagement on the ground, it was evident that the residents not only wished to be included in discussions about their neighborhood's future but often had their own proposals that deviated from those typically presented by the stakeholders. This disconnect highlights a major flaw with top-down planning approaches, which often fail to engage community members as active participants. Vanessa Watson critiques these standard frameworks used by Western institutions, noting they provide a "regulatory system which can be used in opportunistic ways by those with political and economic power" (Watson 2009, 2262). This insight underscores the risks of exploiting regulatory systems in ways that may deepen social inequities rather than resolve them, a concern echoed by the community.

Recognizing the contrast in desires from stakeholders and the community, as well as the community's desire to play a role in their future, we advocate for the decentering of Western and Global North traditional planning tools and call for the adoption of community-centered, equitable, and egalitarian methods of planning that are void of exploitation and embrace the lived realities of people living in informal communities like La Chacarita.

Power, Assemblage, and Agency

Despite the stigma associated with the neighborhood, residents of La Chacarita have long been politically involved, leveraging community ties to self-organize. Their day-to-day life experiences, branded as informal, can through an organizational lens be best understood as belonging to a different socio-spatial idiom of urbanization that is co-produced and sustained through assemblage (Eizenberg 2019).

During our workshop interviews, many residents echoed this sentiment and talked at length about different expressions of solidarity in the neighborhood. Chaca tours, presented earlier in the report, is perhaps the most recognizable of these initiatives, advertised not only locally but also promoted in international news outlets (Laurence 2024). However, it is far from being the only vanguard of civic engagement in the neighborhood, and a quick glance at the project's social media led us to become acquainted with other forms of more politically-minded mobilization strategies, including conferences, rallies in the historic center, or advocacy documentaries. Internal initiatives that are not promoted using traditional media include food distribution networks, safety patrols and the constant enhancement of overall programming in emerging community spaces (Workshop Interview 2024).

Overall, it is pride in the neighborhood and rootedness that foremostly fuel residents' commitment to actively creating participatory spaces and initiatives. One interviewee additionally noted, though indirectly, that exclusion from official discourse also furthers this momentum:

"Don't leave us out because the community of La Chacarita has something called dignity. It has culture, tradition, history, and the ability to give with a little political will."

- Workshop interview

These place-making strategies therefore led us to forefront assemblage as a potent paradigm that shifts the focus on productive forms of mobilization in informal settings (Dovey 2012). Our project builds on these existing community-led initiatives and recognizes that as international planners, we cannot overshadow on-the-ground voices.
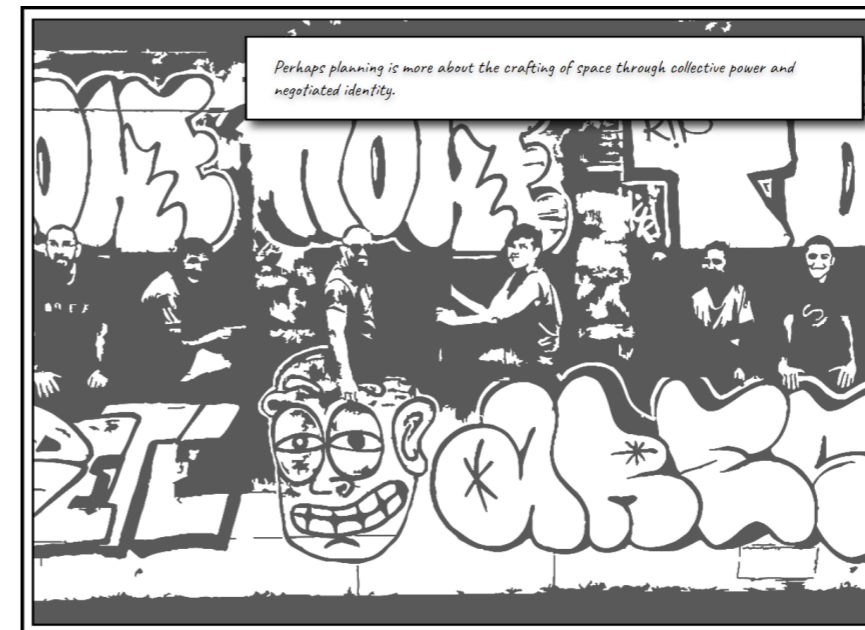
Fig.48. Colores de la Chacarita

Perhaps planning is more about the crafting of space through collective power and negotiated identity.

Fig.47. Assemblage Comic

*Illustration credit/ **Dirección General de Cultura y Turismo***

Re-actualization of Space

During our time on site, we engaged with various institutional actors and community members who had different feelings and historical tellings of La Chacarita. Of all the narratives, the stories shared by the residents in the workshops were the most consistent. Hearing all the different narratives got us thinking about the evolution of space and how people experience places differently, leading us to the concept of The "Re-actualization of Space," which states that the dynamic and evolving identity of urban areas is shaped by continuous and spontaneous interactions among its inhabitants. In La Chacarita, the natural evolution of the community's practices exemplifies this concept. We saw this firsthand through interactions with local entrepreneurs like Marta, through communal spaces like Chaca Tours, and the influence of local artists like El Princi. In the face of a lot of adversity, these community members push through everyday hurdles shaping the neighborhood, often unknowingly. Drawing from Kim Dovey's insights on assemblage theory, "Informal urbanism... incorporates informality as fundamental to understanding the productivity of cities and turns away from any notion of informality as an aberration or problem that can or should be erased" (Dovey 2012). This perspective celebrates the informal as

an essential component of a thriving urban environment, showing how these practices are integral, not incidental, to the life of communities like La Chacarita.

Instead of imposing external initiatives that align with Western planning practices, our approach to re-actualizing space recognizes and respects the organic processes that have shaped La Chacarita. Dovey's concept of "complex adaptive assemblage" illustrates this by highlighting the interplay between formal and informal elements and practices that give rise to vibrant urban environments. He states, "The urban place identity emerges as a dynamic tension between rhizomatic practices of everyday life and hierarchical systems of spatial control, between informal and formal processes. Everywhere there are striations, territories, rules, and regulations; and everywhere they are transgressed" (Dovey 2012, p. 8). By embracing this dynamic, our project recognizes La Chacarita not just as a physical space but as a living and ever-evolving space where every interaction and adaptation contributes to a collective urban environment encompassed by all of the different identities and voices.

Fig.49. Mapping workshop

*Photo Credit/ **Arimbi Naro***

Problem Statements

These paradigms converged to two problem statements:

1

There is a lack of avenues for residents to participate in decision-making and to communicate their problems on their own terms, As a result, existing knowledge gets interpreted and communicated through external actors and stakeholders, ultimately resulting in conflicting narratives.

2

There are gendered dynamics contributing to noticeable differences in entrepreneurship, perceptions of safety, and methods of participation. Recognizing such unique vulnerabilities is paramount in combating stigmatization.

Fig.50. Mapping workshop

*Photo Credit/ **Arimbi Naro***

CASE STUDIES

Museo Casa de la Memoria, Medellín, Colombia

The Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellín is a free museum that centers its exhibitions on showcasing the memories and experiences of victims of the Colombian armed conflict. The austere building was constructed in 2006 under the Victim Assistance Program led by the municipality, and stands today as a testament to the city's tumultuous history.

Through immersive multimedia installations, the museum transforms heavy and at times uncomfortable topics into a dynamic and emotionally resonant experience for its visitors. From oral histories and archival footage to digital reconstructions and virtual reality displays, each element is thoughtfully curated to provoke critical reflection and inspire dialogue. The museum successfully leverages multimedia as a powerful tool of storytelling that fosters a deeper appreciation of the

resilience and collective memory of its residents. Most importantly, for victims of the conflict, the museum is an initiative that can be understood as "symbolic reparation," as stated on the museum's website (¿Quiénes somos?). Memorialization keeps knowledge alive and makes it accessible to both residents and visitors. Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, in her ethnographic account of place-making practices in Medellín, argues that it not only contributes to active circulation, but is also a bridging practice that restores a sense of place and can be likened to survival through healing (Riaño-Alcalá 2008).

Our repository heavily draws from the museum's multimedia curatorial practices and its emphasis on living memories. By showcasing complex realities in the form of digestible storytelling, the platform likewise targets an external audience while

Fig.51. Main Exhibition Room

*Image credit/ **Museo Casa de la Memoria***

Anti-Eviction Mapping Project

The Black Exodus chapter of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project's (Dis)location series was launched in 2019 in an effort to historicize contemporary gentrification dynamics in San Francisco. Building on AEMP's existing data visualization and counter cartography strategies, it more specifically "foregrounds Black storytelling and art-making" to narrate patterns of displacement and resistance, spanning over 100 years (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project 2019).

The multi-media initiative comprises complementary components accessible on diverse platforms: a zine, public workshop contents, and an interactive collage map. Of these, both the zine and the interactive collage demonstrate the extensive historical research undertaken by the AEMP team, spotlight the creations of Black artists for the project, and share thirty oral histories by long term residents and community activists gathered between 2017 and 2019 (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project 2019). The main project interface is dynamic and user-friendly, as to facilitate one's exploration and interaction with each narrative medium. Of particular interest is the interactive collage map, which features a historical redlining map of San

Francisco, newspaper archives and historical photographs. By toggling on the page, one can click on animated features and read more about the significance of each collage component either in a pop-up format or by redirecting the reader to a separate page. Here, the conceptual origins of our digital repository can be traced back directly to these impactful visual strategies.

The Black Exodus chapter intervenes as a form of insurgent planning that actively challenges dominant narratives surrounding gentrification and displacement in urban contexts (Maharawal and McElroy 2018). Foregrounding marginalized voices and experiences, it empowers communities to reclaim agency over their collective memory in what can be best summarized as radical historiography. In many ways, our push to showcase content produced by or directly emanating from the community resonates with the work of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project as a whole. Our goals also mirror theirs: to center communities as producers and owners of social and historical knowledge, with us serving merely as conduits for visual representation and transmission (Maharawal and McElroy 2018).

Fig.52. Black Exodus/(Dis)Location Zine   *Image credit/ **The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project***

Muslims in Brooklyn

The "Muslims in Brooklyn" project by the Brooklyn Historical Society is an oral history initiative created to amplify the voices of Muslims living in Brooklyn, New York. The initiative showcases the diverse experiences and contributions that the community has and continues to provide to the city. This project consists of a large collection of oral histories that captures and showcases the personal narratives of what it means to be a Muslim American, showcasing to its audience narratives from different lenses, including Muslims from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as ages.and impact of their approach.

The project serves not only as a repository but an active engagement tool that invites its visitors to engage with the extensive histories of Muslim life in Brooklyn through audio recordings, photographs, and personal stories. The approach taken by this initiative aims to reclaim narratives from the general public by allowing Muslims to be the crafters of their own stories. It challenges the monolithic views and stereotypes about Muslim communities in the United States, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of their multifaceted identities.

Our digital repository draws inspiration from this project by using storytelling to build bridges and foster connections among diverse audiences. Like "Muslims in Brooklyn," we aim to create a platform where marginalized voices can share their stories on their own terms.

Ain't No Way Outta this Shitshow, Cian Dayrit

"Ain't No Other Way Outta This Shitshow" by Cian Dayrit is an artistic response to the cultural and ecological disruptions faced by indigenous communities in the Philippines. In this piece, Dayrit superimposes embroidered images onto a historical photograph of an Aeta circle dance, juxtaposing traditional celebrations with symbols of modern challenges such as land rights conflicts, militarization, displacement of indigenous people, and ecological degradation.

The artwork employs mixed media to critique and question the ongoing impacts of development and displacement on indigenous cultures. Dayrit's layered narrative offers a powerful commentary on these communities' resilience amidst socioeconomic adversities.

Inspired by Dayrit's way of layering historical and contemporary narratives, our digital repository aims to use similar visual strategies to convey complex social issues. By using collage and integrating multimedia elements and interactive content, we seek to engage viewers on multiple sensory levels, encouraging them to explore the interconnectedness of history, culture, and activism.

Fig.53. Project Key Illustration

*Image credit/ **Muslims in Brooklyn***

Fig.54. Aint no other way outta this shitshow. Explores the conditions of the Aeta people. Exploring issues of land theft and militarization

*Image credit/ **Cian Dayrit***

THE PLATFORM

Proposal

Audience

This section of our repository highlights our intervention proposal and our target audience. Upon return from our field visit, we realized that many of the current planning interventions taking place deviated from what the community wanted and that there has historically been a top-down approach to handling the community's needs.

During our fieldwork and in our conversations with community members at our workshop, interviewees expressed a strong belief that the future of Paraguay was in the hands of the youth and that more resources needed to be allocated toward their success. When we visited media outlets like El Surti, these sentiments were reinforced. Knowing this information informed our approach and desire to center the voices of the young people of Paraguay, particularly the young people of La Chacarita when developing our repository. The repository is targeted at youth and young adults ages thirty and under, the demographic who make up a large portion of the country's population. Also, considering the current student protests taking place in the country as of May 2023, we believe there is potential for the impact of providing a platform like ours to the youth

as an extension and tool of the already transformative work they are doing.

With this understanding of our target demographic, we want to meet them where most young adults across cultures spend their time and are the most active: online. We hope that by taking advantage of digital media, we will create an environment where young Paraguayans can engage with content that is both relevant and stimulating, as we include things like music, art, and history on the platform. We also encourage the platform to be used by activists, journalists, and educational institutions. We want to make it clear that the repository platform is not about consumption but about creating an environment for meaningful engagement and empowerment.

Although our platform has a target audience of young adults, we want to emphasize that we are centering the voices of the residents of La Chacarita, as the community is the most vulnerable in Asunción, yet they have so much to offer and teach the community. While highlighting these voices, we hope also to foster connections showcasing the commonalities across the country regardless of socio-economic status.

Fig.55. Photo of youth at International Womens Day

*Photo credit/ **Nyadeng Mal***

Why we propose it

The form of this work as a manifestation of radical planning practice is admittedly unorthodox. However, our approach is supported by precedents in insurgent urban journalism. To keep it pointed, we will specifically discuss the audience rationales of El Surti who were a primary source of inspiration for us.

Rosental Alves of the University of Texas summarizes their M.O., calling them an 'extraordinary group of journalists, designers, an emerging company that has reached younger audiences with information about the environment and other serious issues through innovative illustration and storytelling techniques' '. According to El Surti's about page, journalism is a concerted effort with the community, a collaborative creation instead of solely a description, an inherently subjective endeavor that therefore requires transparency of opinion to remain in good faith. They believe in first and foremost telling a story, and do so using many forms of media, from text and images to videos, infographics, and maps.

In doing all of this, they have successfully managed to keep themselves funded through a diversity of income sources and engaged with their primary audience; "young, progressive professionals of Asunción who care about pressing cultural and environmental issues" (Jazmin Acuna, El Surti visit, March 9, 2024). The parallels to our proposed audience are clear. We draw from the prolific youth movements in Asunción to engage with an already mobilizing tranche of demographics on the ground (e.g. Paraguay: Student activists demonstrating in central Asunción as of late April 16 to demand education subsidies 2024). We argue on behalf of existing literature that if we can get young locals to care, destigmatizing sentiment will more effectively embed itself in future generations and enact more permanent change over time (Eddy 2022).

As we were guided by our four study paradigms, we made sure to justify our approach from each angle. Our platform absorbs conflicting rationalities and displays them in their disjointed forms as an honest survey of several realities. It decenters Western planning paradigms by circumventing typical policy and masterplan approaches to urban mitigation, and instead focusing on unlocking collective potentials in urban revolution and taking participatory planning to its logical extreme. It calls directly on the people's ability to hold decentralized power and assemble with agency. Finally, it re-actualizes space viscerally by both collapsing

observation onto a nexus and providing the tooling for further study and change in urban space.

Goals

In our endeavor to foster cross sectional dialogue and facilitate social change, our digital repository follows four key objectives inspired by the work of the above mentioned artist Cian Dayrit: Education, Awareness, Organization, and Activation.

We aim to facilitate learning and understanding by presenting diverse perspectives and histories. Recognizing the power of storytelling, we provide a platform where individuals of the neighborhood share their own experiences, thereby enriching a collective knowledge base. Here, practice follows theory: through the repository, we highlight how insurgent planning offers valuable insights into citizen practices, emphasizing their significance in planning processes.

Our second goal is to raise awareness, agitate and encourage critical reflection on societal issues faced by La Chacarita's residents. By shedding light on narratives of those who have been systematically marginalized, we seek to prompt dialogue and engagement. Through this process, we aim to challenge entrenched biases and foster empathy among Asunción's youth.

Our third goal is organization. We create a platform where a variety of voices and perspectives can be collated and accessed. By centralizing resources and information, we aim to facilitate collaboration and collective action. This platform serves as a hub for individuals and groups to connect, share resources, and organize initiatives aimed at addressing social inequities.

Lastly, we want to harness the potential for collective action to mobilize individuals and communities towards positive change. By providing opportunities for engagement and participation, we empower individuals to become agents of change within their own communities. Through strategic mobilization efforts, we aim to channel collective energy and resources towards challenging systemic injustices and advocating for meaningful reforms in Asunción and beyond.

Prototype

1

Fig.56. Main page of the digital repository

*Illustration credit/ **Charlotte Boulanger***

The platform's main page displays a collage showcasing various elements that make up the fabric of La Chacarita. These elements include archival maps showing the river, pictures of the children participating in the workshop, and pictures of the neighborhood with its mural art and folk dancers. Nanduti, made by local artisans and fruit vendors, is also part of the collage and the map produced during the workshop.

The website's content is structured around four broad questions which display as the user hovers over the collage:

1. Why do people in La Chacarita care about their home?

2. Why is La Chacarita significant?

3. What are some threats?

4. What can you do?

Through a click on the question, the user is redirected to the respective page. Each page can be navigated through an ongoing scroll where the user is introduced to different forms of information, such as images, maps, and oral histories.
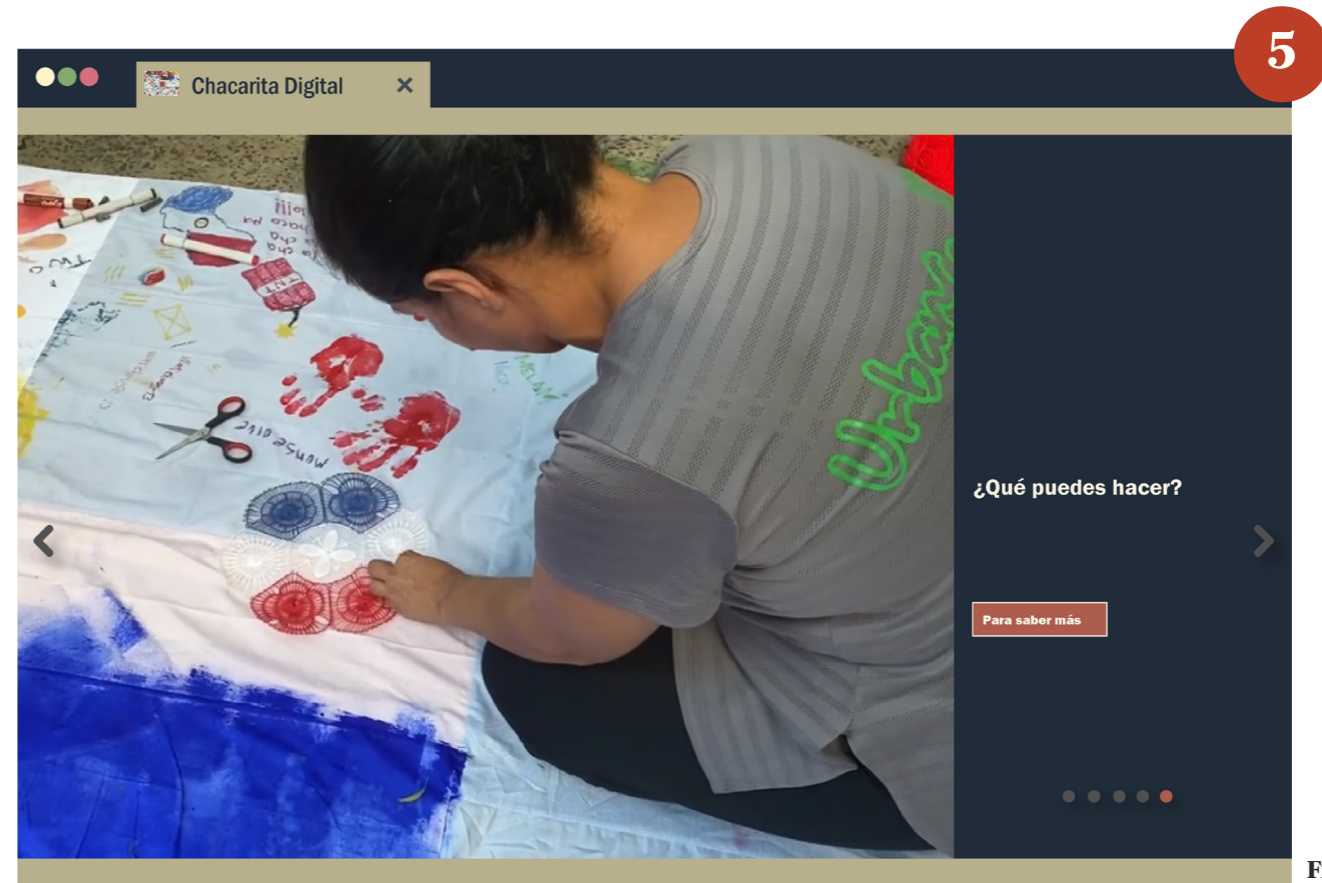
Prototype

Fig.57. Theme Pages

Prototype

¿Por qué a los residentes de La Chacarita les importa su hogar?

¿Qué hace que un hogar sea un hogar? ¿Cómo se construye y mantiene la identidad de un barrio a través de las generaciones?

La Chacarita es el barrio más antiguo de Asunción, y sus residentes han vivido en su mayoría con sus familias durante varias generaciones. Aunque a menudo se tiene una percepción negativa del barrio, es un lugar lleno de vitalidad y marcado por el sentido de pertenencia de la gente tanto a sus espacios como a su comunidad.

Esta página es su puerta de entrada para experimentar la vida en La Chacarita de primera mano, a través de las voces de sus residentes. Cada historia individual, independientemente del medio utilizado para narrar, es un hilo en el tejido de la Chacarita.

Sumérjase, inspírese y quizás descubra un nuevo aprecio por este vecindario a menudo malinterpretado. Puedes alternar entre las categorías a continuación para descubrir diversas entrevistas, dibujos e imágenes y conocer la esencia de lo que hace fuerte a su comunidad.

ENTREVISTAS   **TALLER COMMUNITARIO**   **EL BARRIO EN IMÁGENES**

¿Por qué es importante La Chacarita para Asunción?

¿Qué papel ha jugado La Chacarita en la configuración de la ciudad? ¿Cómo interactúan estas fuerzas, qué tensiones surgen?

Esta sección explora el barrio desde una perspectiva histórica. ¿Qué acontecimientos han dado forma al barrio y cómo el barrio ha dado forma a la ciudad y al país en su conjunto? Esta línea de tiempo no está completa ni afirma que sus fechas sean las más importantes. Más bien, es una colección de recuerdos que se han mencionado a lo largo de nuestro viaje.

La línea de tiempo se complementa con fotografías y videoclips que señalan el rico patrimonio cultural del barrio.

HISTORIA URBANA   **PATRIMONIO CULTURAL**

¿Cuáles son las amenazas a La Chacarita?

¿Qué fuerzas están en juego que continúan silenciando y marginando a los residentes de La Chacarita? ¿Cuáles son algunas representaciones espaciales de las injusticias de larga data que soportan sobre sus hombros?

Se presentan tres categorías generales de riesgo para mostrar la interconectividad de la lucha: inundaciones, datos y desarrollo.

Los mapas de archivo muestran un arraigo histórico en el río y extraen las ramificaciones de la pobreza de declaraciones amplias sobre la mitigación de inundaciones que a menudo benefician ulteriormente a los promotores inmobiliarios.

También se presentan lagunas en la representación de los datos y abismos en el flujo de dinero para el desarrollo en la región.

Usando los mapas a continuación, mientras explora los riesgos siempre presentes en La Chacarita, considere los poderes impulsores y las racionalidades conflictivas internas y contemple los paralelos en su propio vecindario y ciudad.

MAPAS DE ARCHIVO   **LAGUNAS DE DATOS**   **IMMOBILARIO**

¿Qué puedes hacer?

¿Qué es el estigma, de dónde viene y quién soporta la carga de la desestigmatización?

El estigma puede definirse vagamente como una percepción negativa de espacios, personas o circunstancias, a menudo determinada por normas y tabúes sociales. Normalmente, los más marginados dentro de la sociedad. Las personas de determinadas razas, géneros y niveles socioeconómicos son las más afectadas por el estigma. La manifestación del estigma varía según la ubicación y el contexto, y generalmente proviene de actores externos.

Esta página te llama a desafiar tus percepciones y contribuir a desestigmatizar a comunidades como La Chacarita. Aquí lo invitamos a emprender un viaje de educación personal y exploración cultural para desmantelar los estereotipos y profundizar su comprensión de la comunidad.

Esta página te permite interactuar con el trabajo y el arte de emprendedores y artesanos de La Chacarita. También encontrará enlaces a organizadores comunitarios y nuevos medios, como Chaca Tours y El Surti, que están haciendo el trabajo sobre el terreno. Al sumergirse en diversas narrativas y expresiones artísticas, fomenta un punto de vista más inclusivo que aprecia la complejidad y riqueza de áreas a menudo tergiversadas.
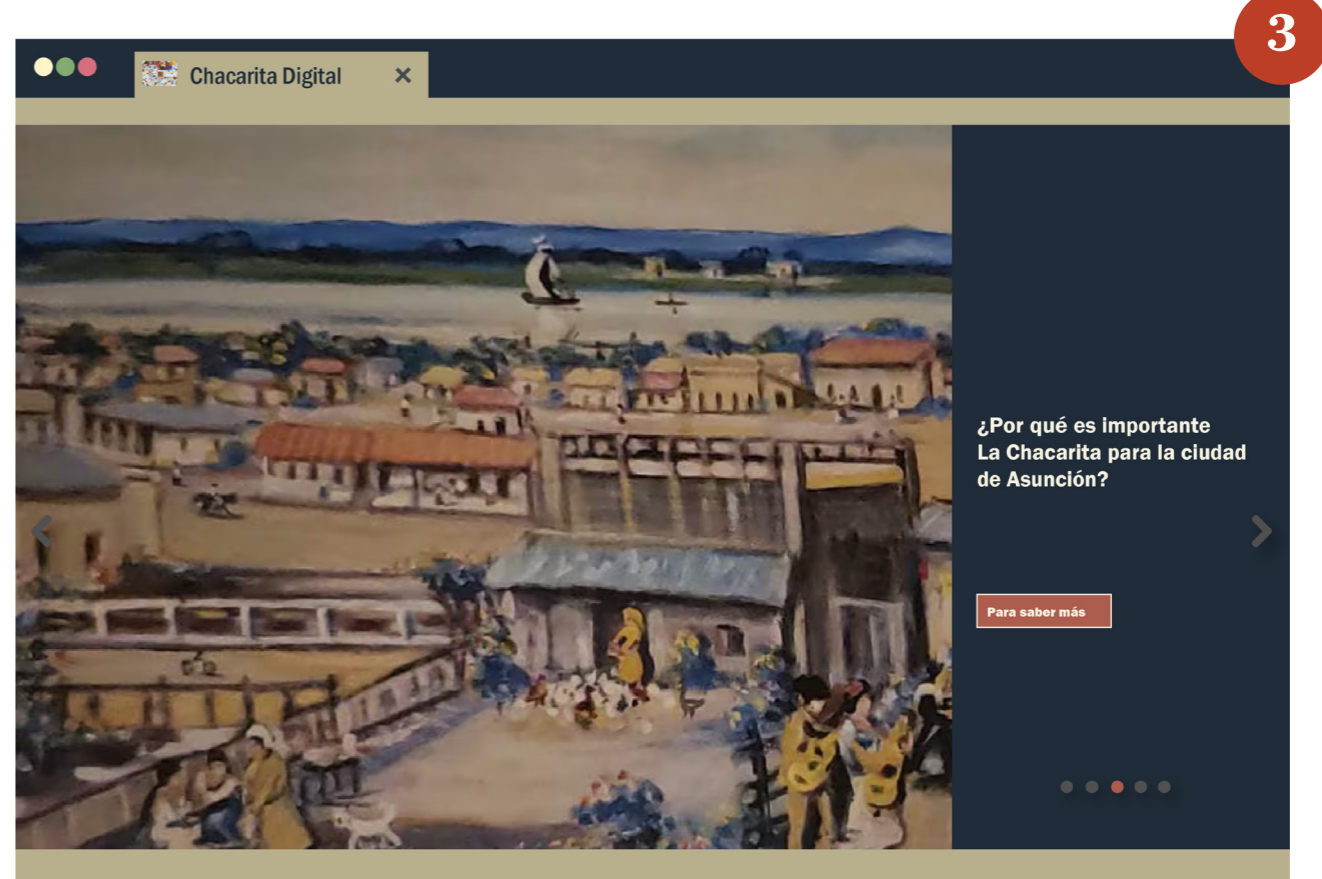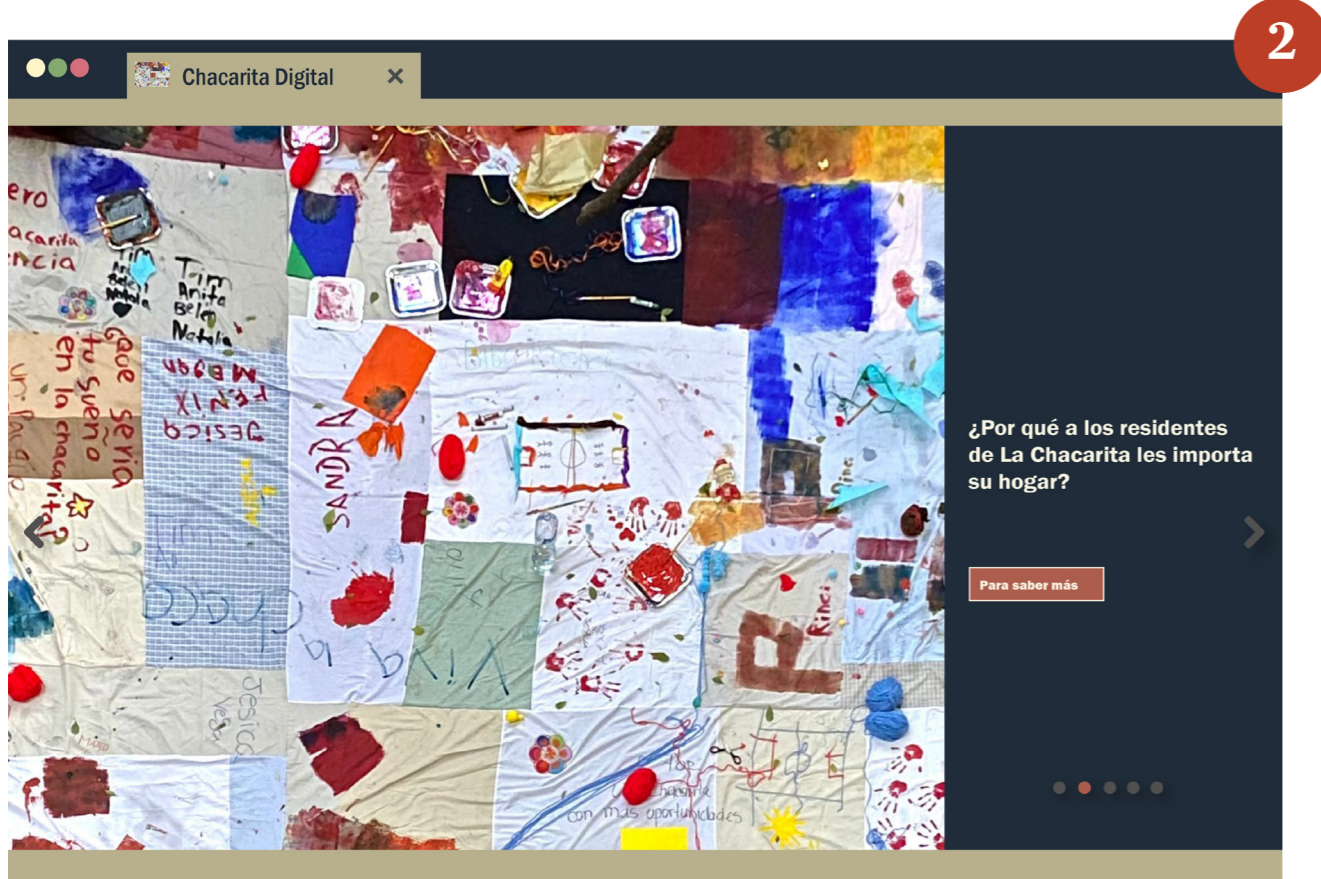
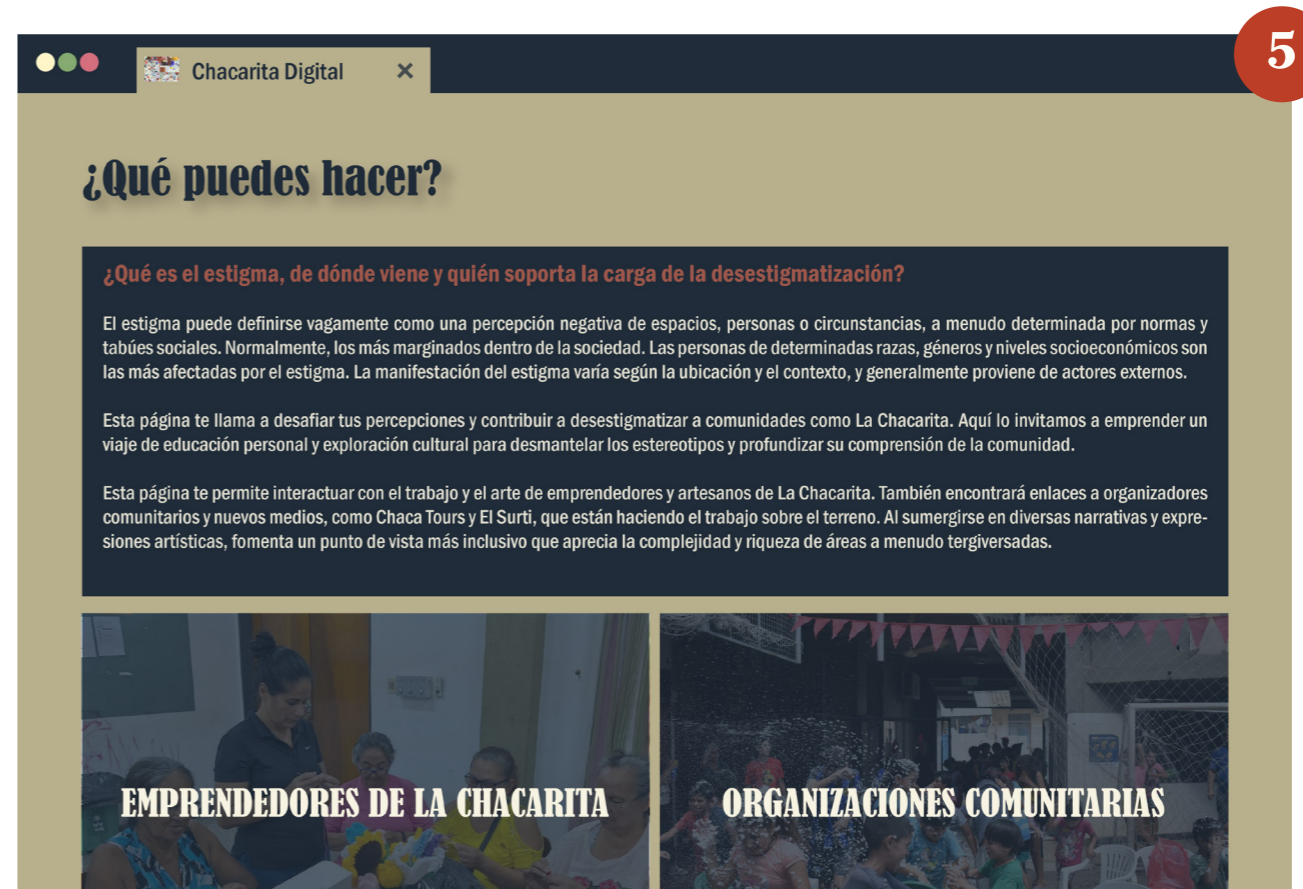**EMPRENDEDORES DE LA CHACARITA**   **ORGANIZACIONES COMUNITARIAS**

Fig.58. Content Landing Pages

Why do people care about their home?

What makes a home a home? How does a neighborhood forge an identity that endures across generations?

This first section of the repository deals with perhaps the most straightforward question many outsiders may have about La Chacarita: why do residents care so much about their home? As with many informal settlements in Paraguay, La Chacarita remains subject to stringent oversight by external stakeholders and a centralized government, which together dictate its development strategies. As attested during an on-site visit to the Inter-American Development Bank, this pervasive dynamic underlines the systemic challenges residents face in asserting their autonomy and shaping their living environment. In this context, the concept of rootedness emerges as a compelling paradigm and human-centric course of action for residents to counter official narratives and reclaim their right to the city (Huchzermeyer 2011). This section is specifically aimed for residents of the larger Asunción to gain firsthand insight into people's experiences in La Chacarita, and to combat their own preconceived ideas.

La Chacarita is the oldest neighborhood in Asunción, and its residents have for the most part lived with their families for several generations. While the neighborhood is often negatively perceived, it is a place full of vibrancy and marked by people's sense of belonging to both its spaces and community. This question of belonging struck as being central to our inquiry of La Chacarita from the onset. Prior to visiting the site, the lack of robust publicly available data to help us qualify the site set the team back, but we were nonetheless able to access one of the rare attempts at systematically surveying parts of the neighborhood. The Censo Poblacional del Bañado Norte surveyed 1900 households living in La Chacarita Baja back in 2014, and collected a wide range of socio-economic data, ranging from unemployment to health care access. Of particular interest for this section of the digital repository were two questions directly related to residents' belonging to the neighborhood.

Household members were asked how long they had lived in their current home, followed by how long they had lived in the neighborhood, and the results were unmistakable. Of the 1900 households surveyed, the census found that 1152 - or 62% - had lived for 10 years or more in their current home, with 246 - or 13.5% - having lived there for more than 40 years (Censo Poblacional del Bañado Norte 2014). More strikingly, 1646 households - or 89.5% - stated that they had lived in the neighborhood for more than 10 years, with 426 - 23% - for more than 40 years (Censo Poblacional del Bañado Norte 2014). These findings were later verified and qualitatively expanded through our semi-structured interviews conducted on site. Notably, many of our interviewees expressed that while they had the opportunity to move to different parts of the city, they chose to remain in La Chacarita and honor the long legacies of their families (Studio Workshop 2024).

As such, this first page of the repository showcases individual stories of residents through varied mediums exclusively derived from field work conducted by our team, and acts as an archival testimony of our community engagement. Overall, this section of the digital repository is intentionally straightforward in both content and analysis, as to mimic an audience's first dive into the unknown. The main page features a summary followed by three main categories appearing as one scrolls the page: interviews, workshop, photographs.

The **interview section** is a catalog of all recorded interviews conducted during our workshop on-site. Each video was edited to include subtitles, and is accompanied by a short summary of themes and a representative quote. The interviews are nonetheless displayed without further analysis in order to decenter our perspective and let the audience interpret the residents' words for themselves.

The **workshop section** features all artistic outputs of the community workshop facilitated by our team, including individual maps and a collective cloth representing the neighborhood as seen through the eyes of children. Using a storytelling approach, each output will be accompanied by a short narration derived from our team's interactions with the participants.

Lastly, the **photograph catalog** offers a supplementary visual narration of the neighborhood, taking the audience on a virtual tour of the neighborhood. This is in order for them to get a better sense of the space and potentially be enticed to take part in the Chaca Tour initiative, which will be linked at the top of the page.

Because the content of this section is entirely derived from field work, it is incomplete by nature. While it does not pretend to be exhaustive, we acknowledge our positionality and potential pitfalls of the approach. We however hope that through these stories, our audience will understand why successful community place-making strategies rely primarily on shared meanings and feelings of belonging (Ismail, Aceska, and Adu-Ampong 2023). In the case of La Chacarita, people deeply care about their neighborhood and are working diligently to uplift its people by tapping into already existing creative and entrepreneurial momentum.

Fig.59. Interview Snippets

Fig.60. Digitized Mapping Workshop Outputs

Why is La Chacarita significant?

This second question, What role has La Chacarita played in shaping the city? Or: How is La Chacarita relevant? might sound oddly pointed, but it does point out to the weird ambivalence Paraguayans have towards this neighborhood. Until now, we hope to have shown that both historically and culturally, La Chacarita has been central in shaping what today is Paraguay's capital city: La Chacarita became Asunción's first neighborhood, because of its fertile grounds when the river was low (Diego Rivas, Sobrevivencia, 2024).

The figures on the right show that indeed water has always been integral to Asunción.

Three years are presented to show the progression of Asunción's development along the river, specifically in its Historic District and La Chacarita neighborhoods.
As early as 1885, La Chacarita had an archived presence in the city nestled against the river, where Indigenous peoples settled due to fertile land.

1922 shows many similarities, with a little more metropolitan development and roadway structure.

In 2024, notice that the channel of water to the upper right of the earlier maps no longer exists. It was filled in to develop the Costanera highway. This hasn't stopped the river, however, and its ghost still demarcates a floodplain in La Chacarita which submerges annually. With no way for water to flow naturally out of the now-artificial bay, pollutants are trapped. This in combination with the lack of sanitation support for La Chacarita means that flooding is a threat not in and of itself, but as an exacerbation of socioeconomic disinvestment and neglect.

"...the most serious problem is not the flooding, but the extreme poverty" -Pedro Velasco (Barba, Sept 29, 2023)

"putting in adequate urban infrastructure would be cheaper," -Carla Linares (Barba, Sept 29, 2023)

Map credit/ **Tim Small**

Fig.61. Digitized archival maps overlaid on modern day Asunción to show the river's strong presence in La Chacarita as early as 1885 juxtaposed with the modern day floodplain
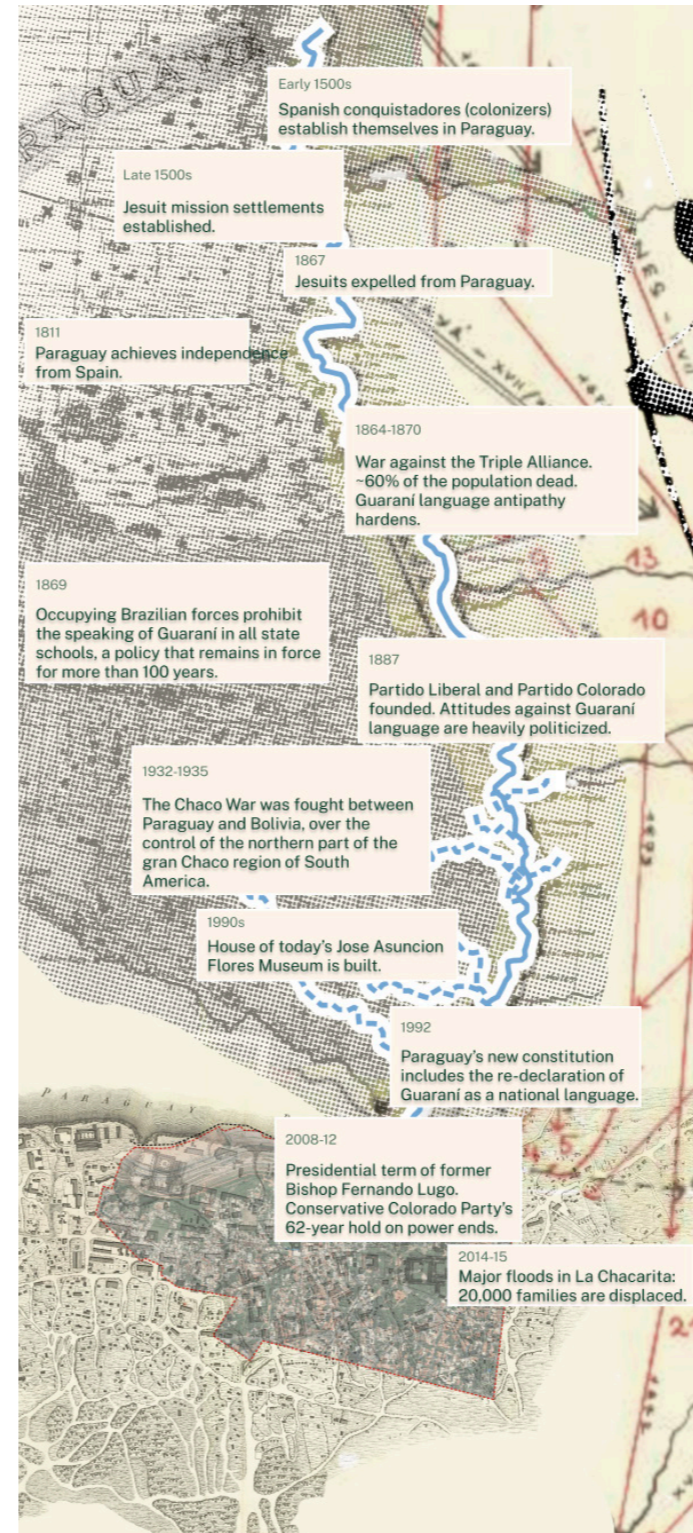

Fig.62. Historical timeline

La Chacarita is also the birthplace of Paraguay's most famous musicians and the music genre Guaranía. In this part of the repository we point towards some historical developments and moments in time that repeatedly came up during our visit, and that shaped the developments in the neighborhood, such as laws reinforcing the discrimination of Guaraní culture or major floods leaving families without a home, but also the redevelopment of the José Asunción Flores childhood home into a museum.

Music and Art will also be present in this part of the repository. As much as the neighborhood is shaped by its people, the people are shaped by La Chacarita. Musicians such as El Princi sing about their life in the neighborhood, and murals on the walls of the houses of the neighborhood offer a window into the feelings, dreams and thoughts of its inhabitants.

Fig.63. Mural of José Asunción Flores in La Chacarita

Fig.64. Local Rapper El Princi at the workshop

Threats to La Chacarita

So as to not romanticize the living conditions of La Chacarita's residents, we wanted to share both some of the tangible and nebulous risks they face on a daily basis as a way of potentially sparking positive collective action for more defined causes. Many details in this section of the repository have been shared throughout this report, so they won't all be reiterated in depth. To summarize the collection of components though we'll provide a short list with descriptions.

To begin, we'll address the elephant in the room: flooding. Most literature speaks about risk in La Chacarita and Asunción's other Bañados as monolithically an exposure to flooding. A quote by a Bañado Sur resident, Pedro Velasco was shared earlier and will be reiterated here for its significance: "...the most serious problem is not the flooding, but the extreme poverty" (Barba, Sept 29, 2023). Several talks on-site corroborated the idea that it's not new housing, but better and robust infrastructure that residents of these informal areas need (Carla Linares, On-site conference, March 9, 2024), and that in fact, "putting in adequate urban infrastructure would be cheaper," (Barba, Sept 29, 2023).

The reductionist tendencies of Western entities like Habitat for Humanity to build new housing and relocate communities without complete consideration historically resulted in people returning to their informal neighborhoods, because their displacement caused them to be stripped of their sense of community and access to the markets in which they work (Marcia Silva Casseb, IDB visit, March 7, 2024). These development decisions were justified by data and enacted using the symbolic force of site plans and maps. We found it imperative to highlight the utter unreliability of data in Asunción in order to make based claims about the ethics of these Western-inspired development efforts in the area, often performed in collaboration with the corrupt Paraguayan government and even heavily-profitable companies external to the country (De Zárate 2023).

The chasms in data reporting and inconsistencies across platforms have been shown in earlier sections of this report, but we also investigated current developments on the other bank of the Paraguay River to highlight a few case studies of economic injustice directly contributing to risks experienced by the informal community. These

projects represent the notion that the Paraguayan government has little to no interest in bolstering the health of Asunción proper, and would rather expand development outward and cater to the wealthy, choking off informal settlements further (Real estate projects transform the area with the opening of the Héroes del Chaco Bridge, April 1, 2024). This pattern is eerily reminiscent of exactly the ways in which suburbanism leveled cities of the US and decimated vulnerable communities of color (Goodman and Goodman 1947).

The figure on the right highlights some of these current developments in what is termed Nueva Asunción, a name of erasure, bulldozing the original Guaraní name, Chaco'i.

The river will continue to rise and people will be displaced. Community-focused mitigation will require more than top-down decision making and wide-sweeping economic development initiatives. Many of the thousands of individuals occupying these informal areas are on the verge of complete erasure, both physically and digitally. As simplified visual representations of absence, we expect these maps will better bridge the gap between the colloquial and complex, pushing back against the injustices that continue through the weaponization of modern tools and educational privilege. If international institutions can change neighborhoods with a printed cartographic plan (Marcia Silva Casseb, IDB visit, March 7, 2024), the communities they threaten have every right to use those same tools to protect themselves and self-determine their legitimacy.
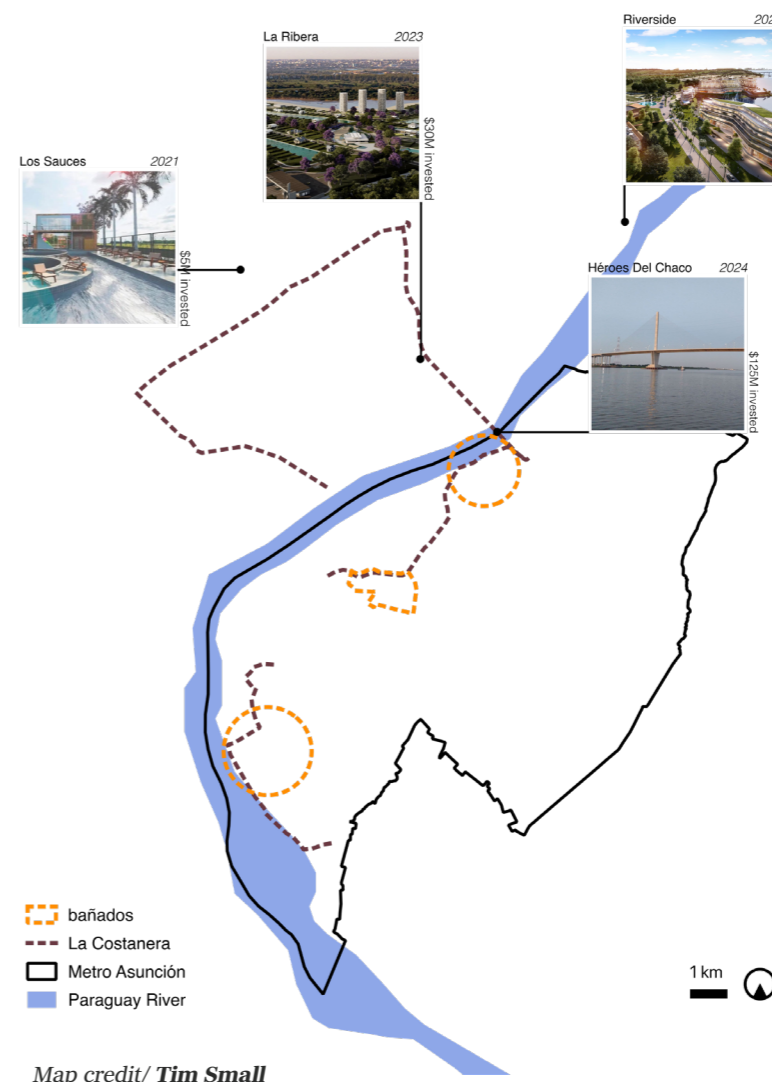

Fig.65. A map showing several new luxury developments on the opposite shore of the Paraguay River. These developments explicitly cater to the wealthy and foreign investors, and represent the disinvestment and disinterest of the government in uplifting and preserving Asunción, especially its informal areas
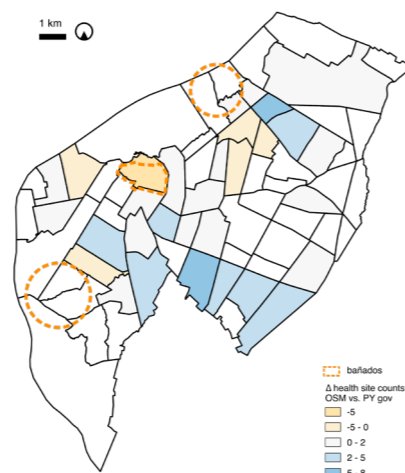
*Map credit/ **Tim Small***
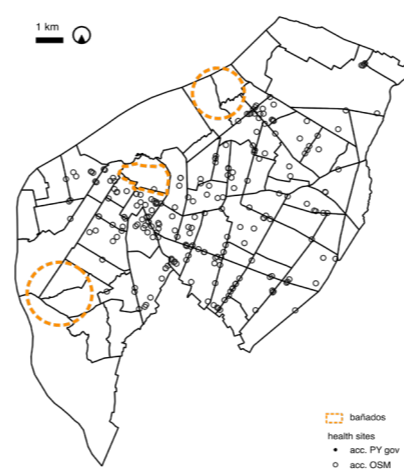

Fig.66. Data gaps health centers

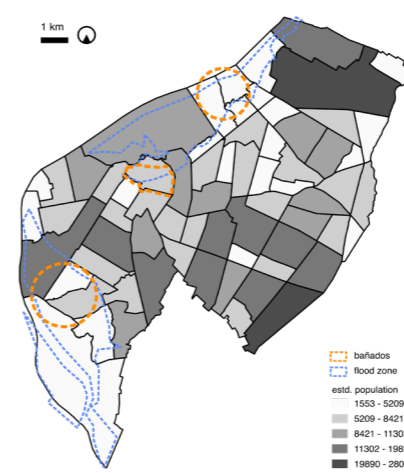**Fig.67.** Data gaps health centers

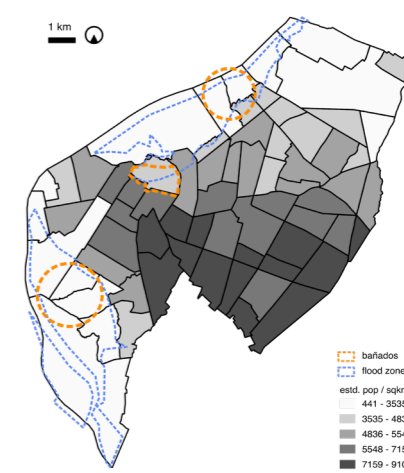**Fig.68.** Data gaps population count

Fig.69. Data gaps population density

What can you do?

The "What Can You Do?" section of our digital repository is carefully crafted to be a quick-stop resource hub that fosters understanding, destigmatizes perceptions, and actively supports La Chacarita's community initiatives. We are intentional about not framing this as a charity section so as not to exacerbate further the stigma that already exists for the community, as the people of La Chacarita are already thriving and effectively supporting their communities in many ways. Furthermore, we are careful not to invite gentrification and displacement by creating a utopic view of the neighborhood. Instead, this section provides structured guidance through carefully curated links that connect users to further studies, local projects, and engagement opportunities.

During our workshop, we got to see just how community-oriented and egalitarian La Chacarita is, one of the residents at our workshop had this to say, "We help our neighbors. When someone is sick or needs something, we all gather and share everything, as they say." These sentiments of community support for each other were prominent throughout the workshop and were a common theme across interviews. So, with this in mind, this section of the repository will also include direct links to local community-led initiatives as an extension of the mutual-aid efforts and supporting the environment of the neighborhood. The links here can offer support that respects and enhances the efforts of local leaders and organizations. This may include but is not limited to links to crowdfunding pages, local non-profits, links to support local entrepreneurs and artists, and community events that benefit La Chacarita directly.

Fig.70. Marta, a weaver from La Chacarita during our workshop

Fig.71. Community Announcement Board

CONCLUSION

In the words of Jan Gehl, "first life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works."

We want to emphasize that this digital repository is neither proprietary nor comprehensive and self-contained. It is first and foremost a tool to be used by mobilizers and the mobilized on-site in Asunción and worldwide. We tried to keep visual sensibilities pared back as much as possible to avoid introducing bias. We focused instead on organizing the collection of artifacts on an easy-to-navigate interface. We hope that the various forms of media enclosed will prove useful to students, academic researchers, activists, and other grassroots organizations in the movement for liberating and giving voice to the people of La Chacarita and Asunción's other informal communities.

Our role in the development of this project might come to a close this spring, but we hope that it will live in perpetuity in the hands of entities like El Surti, who have the power and reach to leverage its elements. We also hope that through intermediary entities like Chacatours, the stories of the people of La Chacarita displayed in this repository might be reclaimed as proof of a people living on their own terms, fully aware of the injustices and stigma placed upon their shoulders, but proud of their home and replete with dignity.

We argue that it is not the responsibility of La Chacarita's people to combat the stigma that both protects and ostracizes them. Our ultimate goal is to help facilitate and support the enacting of urban change that forefronts vulnerable communities and informal relationalities without exposing them to further damage. That is our approach to putting life first.

Fig.72. A look inside la Chacarita

Photo credit/ **Arimbi Naro**

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