

# Urban morphology and cultural expressions: qualitative methods to understand the city's dynamic in a self-built area in Caracas, Venezuela<sup>1</sup>

## 1. What is this research about? - As the introduction

This chapter exposes the methodological approach applied in a research regarding religious processions as an expression of Popular Catholicism as an activity in the urban space of self built areas<sup>2</sup>. In that order of ideas the aim of the research is to explore the relationship between the urban morphology and its inhabitants within the process of the religious procession and how a sense of place is constructed within this urban-psychosocial practice, which is the interpenetration of procession and this specific morphology. This research targets to understand one of the most relevant activities of the human being, as it is the manifestation of the sacred in the form of movement, in a very specific place in order to comprehend the complexity of the urban space and the role of this particular use in that environment.

With the intention to comprehend the aforementioned relationship, it has to be specified that both urban space and popular Catholicism are taken as cultural expressions, not only because they are perpetuated by family members, but also because both of them are ways of living, recognizing and interacting with the world. It is for that matter that is vital the use of qualitative methodology, in order to thoroughly understand and approach the sense of place and the interactions between urban morphology and people, topic that we will discuss below. In that order of ideas, this theme is approached taking into consideration three axes: the morphology of self built areas; the procession as a cultural practice; and the sense of place that is constructed within this urban psycho-social process.

It is well known that around the world almost half the population resides in cities (Negron, 2004, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2005). In Venezuela, urban living is even more consolidated, thus almost 88% of its inhabitants live in cities. From this percentage, specifically in Caracas where the research is being conducted, 50% of this urban

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<sup>2</sup> *Self built areas* are places originated by invasions of undeveloped land, where informal settlements have been established by new inhabitants. The terminology arises in contrast from slum, because of the houses materials and conditions that have developed from during time.

population live in self-built areas, called by Venezuelans: *barrios*<sup>3</sup>. In Caracas, the *barrios* occupy almost 50% of the city surface (Cilento, 2002).

Nevertheless, as important as the urban space itself, inhabitants are the ones that keep cities alive, with their actions, activities and ways of living and utilising this place. People make the city a dynamic and complex entity. Delving into inhabitants, we have to acknowledge that those citizens have perspectives, routines and habits, perceptions, customs and self beliefs. Framed in the aforementioned we can find religiosity, which is a fundamental part of the human life. According to the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (2009), 88% of the world population hold some kind of religious believe; of which 32% claim to be Christians. In Venezuela, 96% of its inhabitants are Catholics (Pollak-Eltz, 1992).

For religious believers, who make up a large number of people in the city, there are different manifestations of the sacred, as well as other forms of expression of their religiosity, among which are the paths, specifically the processions. Such processions are conducted in different environments, in different places, in the urban space.

In order to develop the aforementioned research topic, three main objectives were determined related to the axes previously stated:

1. To analyse the different processes taking place in the (physical) **urban space in *barrios*** while processions are being held.
2. To reconstruct the complexity of urban space in *barrios* and the different **activities** that take place in them, emphasising on religious processions as one of the uses of those spaces.
3. To interpret the **sense of place** to the local residents of the sacralised space through the procession.

## **2. Where is the research being developed? - The context of study**

It is important to realise that choosing a case study is embedded in the methodology. When choosing an area to work with we have to be certain that it responds to the research objectives and with the paradigmatic perspective we are adopting. The establishment of clear criteria is essential to evaluate and conduct a proper research based on case studies.

Therefore, considering all of the above, the chosen general context of the research is the group of ecclesiastic parishes that make up the *Arciprestazgo*<sup>4</sup> of Petare<sup>5</sup> within the East Pastoral Zone of the Caracas Archdiocese.

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<sup>3</sup> From this point on we are going to refer to self-built areas as *barrios*.

The *Arciprestazgo* of Petare is composed of nine ecclesiastical parishes, comprising almost 140 km<sup>2</sup>. Half of the area is inhabited by nearly 1.5 million residents, in low-rise high-density dwellings, where overcrowding is common.

The criteria to choose this area as a general context of study are connected to urban morphology and personal factors:

- Morphological factors: The cluster of *barrios* that make up the *Arciprestazgo* is characterized by its position on the hills surrounding Caracas, which results in a morphology determined by the slope. This urban shape is mainly constituted by a continuous urban edge and skyline, small compact grain, with few defined gaps (predominantly used as vehicular and pedestrian roads), all adapted to the topography. This situation is representative of the physical reality of the Caracas *barrios* in general (Photo 1).
- Personal factors: In order to work in *barrios* there is the requisite to approach the settlement with someone involved with the community. This follows from the fact that *barrios* residents generated over years a deep sense of place and territoriality. Moreover, *barrios* usually have a low-income population, making them concentrated areas of poverty and need, where high criminality rates can be found. The case study was thus selected because of the author's existing relationship with the priest of one of Petare's *barrios*, who performed as the primary link with other priests of the different parishes, community leaders and other residents participating in the processions.

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<sup>4</sup> *Arciprestazgo* is an intermediate territorial field, led by an Archpriest, between the Archdiocese and the Parish.

<sup>5</sup> Petare is a region located in the eastern part of the Caracas, Venezuela, where live mostly low-income population. Morphologically it is very diverse, going from colonial urban fabric to self-built areas.

Photo 1: Aerial View of part of Petare.  
Source: <http://www.20minutos.es/data/img/2005/05/16/104636.jpg>

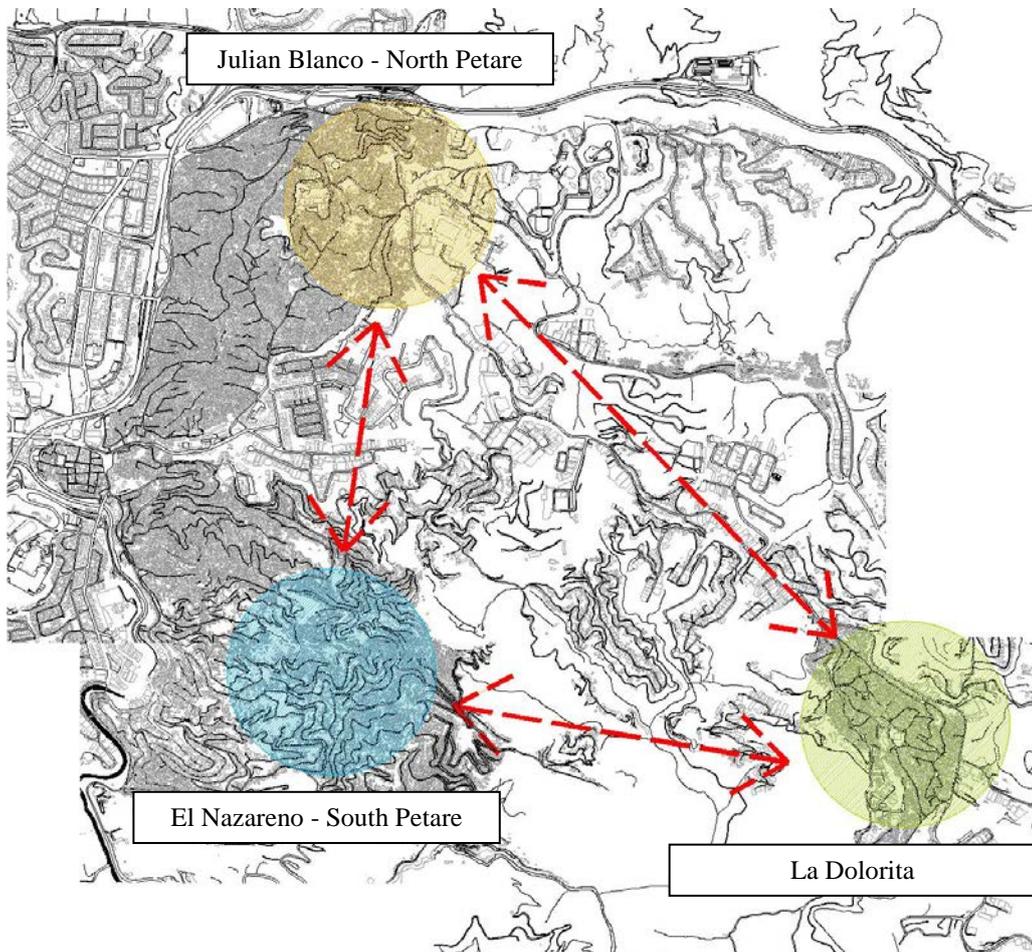


In addition, other criteria that were considered to select specific case studies were the population and the number of processions that took place during the *Holy Week*<sup>6</sup>. Responding to the aforementioned criteria, within the Arciprestazgo of Petare three parishes were selected: (1) St. Francis de Sales in La Dolorita; (2) Our Lady of Fatima in El Nazareno; and (3) the Evangelization Centre of Julian Blanco (Map 1).

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<sup>6</sup> *Holy Week* in Venezuela is the most important religious event that lasts from Palm Sunday until Easter. The most important days of it are both the aforementioned, in addition to Holy Wednesday, Maudy Thursday and Good Friday.

Map 1: Selected areas of study.



### 3. How do we want to achieve our goals? - Methodology

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives and to address the different aspects related to researching sense of place, and urban culture and living, the methodological approach was thoroughly considered. This section exposes the different aspects on methodology relevant to this research.

#### 3.1. Paradigmatic and methodological approach

In order to begin a high-standard research the first thing that has to be done is to understand the nature of the process that we want to study in order to choose a paradigmatic approach. The latter refers to the perspective which researchers mobilise to embrace and study phenomena.

The paradigmatic approach embedded in this research is constructionism, also known as the *emergent paradigm*, which arose due to the concerns regarding the positivism paradigm and its way of “understanding” different phenomena (see part I of this book). Within this general perspective, we embrace socio-constructionism, which states that reality is constructed through social interaction, and that the only way to seize it is through recognising as equals the actors involved in the actions and places we are studying.

Consonantly with the aforementioned, *qualitative methodology* was adopted; for the purpose of it is "to reconstruct reality as we observe the actors in a pre-defined social system" (Hernández, Fernández-Collado and Baptista, 2006, p. 9 – Translation by the author). The intention is to be aware of the situation in relative terms as presented in its diversity. Moreover it is intended to deepen a specific topic through case study material.

We embraced this methodology with the aim to comprehend the relationship between urban morphology and people, in a deep and significative sense, not in a statistical matter. This approach presents itself as fundamental in getting to know a vital part of Venezuela's *barrios* through their people's cultural expressions, specifically catholic processions.

### 3.2. Research design

While developing a research, its design must also suit the action and place that is being studied. In planning coming from a long-lasting *rational* background (positivistic), it has long been a tendency to approach phenomena with preconceived ideas that limit our understanding of the complexity of the urban space and its dynamics. However, when working with communities, who have values, beliefs, traditions and their own ways of living, arriving with an open mind is important to really get to know what is important and relevant for them, from the inhabitant's perspective. While understanding community dynamics and their priorities, it becomes clear what we need to address in our own researches.

Considering the aforementioned, an emergent design was the appropriate strategy, because we were getting involved in an unfamiliar context (physical, cultural and community). It became therefore necessary to begin the research with no pre-defined conceptions of what was important to study. This design allows the researcher to elaborate and conduct the study as the findings arise. Moreover, an emergent design was adopted, as the theory is created from the data rather than verifying a previously existing theory (Hernández et al., 2006).

### 3.3. Participants

Regarding the participants, it is emphasized that in qualitative research they are intentionally selected in order to explore their unique perspectives regarding the phenomenon under study. Considering this, it is anticipated that there is no discrimination of gender or age for the development of this research. However we take into consideration that people involved, participate in the processions we are studying and currently live or have lived in the selected areas. These elements are emerging as critical to understanding the meaning of sacralised space, as these features allow establishing comparisons between the everyday meaning of space and the sense of place constructed through the procession. The number of informants was not previously determined. Moreover, it is vital to establish in advance the importance of the concept of saturation, which we take into account for this research, which occurs "when new interviews or observations do not allow deeper and broader understanding" (Vieytes, 2009, p. 73 - Translation by the author). However, we have established as the minimum to interview for each area of the context three informants, including others if they have not reached saturation point.

### *3.4. Data collection*

The data collection methods were selected in accordance with both the paradigmatic and methodological approach as well as with the three fundamental axes outlined in the research: the physical-spatial, the psycho-social, and the procession as an activity. For that matter, we selected different techniques, developed scripts and tools, developed a pilot and staged several phases.

#### *3.4.1. Techniques*

The techniques we choose should have close relationship with the object that we want to study. Understanding that each type of phenomenon requires a specific method that also suits the paradigmatic perspective to look at it, is as important as selecting the proper case study. In this specific case, when dealing with places and people and their relationship, there is the need to widen the planner's perspective of understanding the physical context through maps (plans), diagrams and schemes which were also used in this research.

The techniques that are being used for this research and discussed below, were chosen because their analysis and interpretation, helped to comprehend part of the urban space complexity from an integrated perspective.

Participant observation. This technique, originally taken from ethnography, encourages the researcher to be a part of the culture she / he studies, more than just approach it with a distant lens. Our immersion in the popular Catholicism processions in *barrios* was at first a task of getting to know the area in order to establish rapport with the inhabitants in order to be allowed by them into their religious routines and everyday lives. As this was taking place, we could not only observe what actions people made regarding this ritual and the urban space, but we also became a part of them thus building relationships with the participants, which enabled us to understand their sense of place and their feelings and meanings that were related to our research. During participant observation, researchers took *field notes*<sup>7</sup> of elements that are relevant, specific details, noticeable and common characteristics related to the activity / space / people, aspects we needed to enquire about, etc. Furthermore, in this research, we developed a data collection tool comprised of a table with information that needed to be filled in regarding participants, urban space and the procession.

Interviews and informal conversations. In understanding people, it is vital to give them a voice, and relate that voice with the urban space. Interviews aim to allow participants to express their thoughts, belief, knowledge through limited guidance about a certain topic or issue that relates to them. Through this method we could deepen what we observed during their everyday life and during the different stages of the processions. We thus organised *in-depth open* interviews, which were structured only by main topics linked to the three axes we wanted to discuss with key actors of this cultural expression<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, in the process of reviewing the expression of the participants, the meaning of this cultural expression and the meaning of the space during its occurrence were remarkable. Moreover, the interviews allowed the researchers to contrast and compare our own field notes and observations as part of the process of analysis so as to reach some understanding about *barrios*' morphology and living.

Also informal chats during the activity with participants involved in the phenomenon that we were studying, revealed insightful information about their relationship with it, understanding the feelings generated by it as a relationship. This helped in the interpretation of sense of place.

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<sup>7</sup> Field notes could be written or audial, see chapter 3.2 by Silverman.

<sup>8</sup> Specific questions were outlined in a script to enable conversation and keep participants focused. For further information regarding those contact the author.

Audiovisual / photographic survey. Besides the aforementioned, we used audiovisual and photographic collection, to complement the information obtained by the participant observation and the interviews. Furthermore through audiovisual data collection, it is possible to observe the actual interaction between people and the space, related to the specific activity that is happening in the moment. It also helps us understand that the phenomenon that is taking place in urban space is not the only activity, evidencing that the built environment is a dynamic continuously changing entity.

Through photographs, we can compare spaces in different times, looking closely at the changes and transformation that occur there in relation with each activity. We can look at people's facial expressions, which denote feelings associated to the activity and to the place, we can observe also the interaction between people and their place.

Bibliographic review. This method was used in order to obtain official data about dates and places mentioned by the participants, as well as historic facts about the urbanization process of the context of study.

#### 3.4.2. Piloting

Within qualitative methodology, a way to clarify a research with an emergent design and to test the script and tools you are applying, is through a pilot test.

A first aspect regarding piloting, relates to a primary approach to the community where you start understanding what is really important for them, which eventually is going to define the path and focus of your research. In our experience, we considered at the beginning of the study it was relevant to study all the religious processions that took place in the selected areas. Thus, we participated in two small-scale processions and conducted interviews with the organisers, which helped us understand that we shouldn't focus on all processions that took place all over our context, but only certain processions in certain areas. We got to embrace that not all processions were as meaningful, and therefore that we should only focus on the Holy Week.

The second aspect about piloting is testing the data collection techniques and the stages that we planned to use. Evaluating the interview script, the usage of a plan for the community to draw (this was discarded) and the on-site data collection tool helped us realise what questions and facts weren't relevant to the research, as well as what information that arose as vital we weren't considering. Through piloting, both tools were revised and improved.

### 3.4.3. Research stages

Once having finished the pilot, and having established the focus of the research, it was necessary to set when and how the study was going to take place. Considering the timeframe of the research, the limited resources, the fact that Holly Week is a compilation of several days<sup>9</sup> that occurred only once a year, and that we had to participate in three different areas simultaneously, it was decided that the data collection was going to happen during 2009, 2010 and 2011, so the main researcher could attend at least once to each set of processions per place.

Additionally, the compilation and immersion in this socio-cultural phenomenon was established in three stages around the processions that were being studied: (1) prior to the procession, (2) during the procession, and (3) after the procession. The first one corresponds to the period of preparation of the event (from 3 months to 1 day before the religious manifestation); the second is the day of the event, from the immediate preparation, the journey itself, and the end of the procession; and the third corresponds to the days after the demonstration is performed. Finally, a 4th stage is added, which occurs along the entire investigative process, formed by the continuous integration and analysis of the data collected in the phases previously exposed.

Table 1 shows a summary of specific activities to be performed in each of the mentioned stages:

Table # 1: Table summary of information collection and analysis

STAGE			
1st (Before)	2nd (During)	3rd (Post)	4th (Analysis)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversations with the key participants of the procession (priest, organisers, community members).</li> <li>• Photographical survey of the urban space.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant Observation.</li> <li>• Informal chats with the participants of the procession.</li> <li>• Field notes.</li> <li>• Photographical and audiovisual survey of the urban space and the procession.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview key participants in the organization of the procession.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integration and analysis of collected data</li> </ul>

### 3.5. Data analysis

<sup>9</sup>This research focused on Palm Sunday, Holy Wednesday and Good Friday, since those are the only days that involve processions.

Another focus regarding methodology is the data analysis, which according to Fetterman (2008), begins from the moment the researcher selects a problem to study and ends with the last word of the report. For the analysis of the information constructed through the interviews, field notes, informal chats with participants, as well as the audiovisual methods, qualitative analysis of content was applied, which allows entering into a semantic and sense level as well as conative level taking into account the relationships and their interpretation (Vieytes, 2009). In order to achieve the above, the program Nvivo was used, which enables the linkage of the aforementioned data collection techniques.

The structure of the qualitative analysis of content, focused towards the full comprehension of the concept of sense of place, is based in categorising the key elements as said and repeated by people as important. Besides repetition and emphasis of themes and the experience commented in the interviews, the interpenetration of people with the procession evidenced in the audiovisual recordings, gives an understanding about the meaning of the activity studied and of the space it occurs.

In addition, in order to understand the link between the sense of place constructed through the procession and the morphology of the *barrio*, a series of urban analyses such as detailed grain, public space system, urban fabric, land uses, paths, among others, are linked to the places people recognise as meaningful.

### 3.6. *Developing findings*

When discussing the methodological approach, developing the findings *after* the data analysis presents itself as one of the most important parts in research. In this stage, which is actually being developed throughout the whole research, findings from the literature review and theoretical background, are integrated with the researcher's knowledge and the data collected and analysed.

In this specific study, knowing about *barrios'* morphology and the concepts of religiosity and meaning, were basic to delve and develop the findings. In *barrios*, public open spaces are those left after the construction of the self-built houses. Therefore it is quite difficult to find a square or a park. Most often there are narrow streets, a few sport courses, and roundabouts where the buses must do "U" turns to guarantee their circulation through the settlement.

In this order of ideas, regarding the *barrios'* public space, Hernandez Bonilla (2005), highlights the lack of public spaces, stating streets as the only ones. Considering this, it is in these streets, as public spaces, that various activities (such as the religious ones) occur giving

meaning to these places. Considering the popular religiosity in the temporal and spatial domains, it can be said that urban space is in constant process of sacralisation, thus it becomes a dynamic sacralised public place.

As one finding, the appropriation and meaning of the *barrio's* urban space during religious processions is expressed by various comments and actions of the parishioners and other participants. One example of this is the appropriation of places taken by criminal gangs, which highlights the influence of Catholicism in public spaces. A sports field located in the *barrio* Julian Blanco, which almost 364 days of last year was taken by the gangs of the area, is an example of this. In some informal conversations (during participant observation) and interviews with residents, they emphasised the fear they feel to simply walk by this spot because it had become a very dangerous place. However, there is one day of the year, Good Friday, that this court is used by the community. On this one day the community demands its right to use that place, as this is where by tradition the procession ends. You could say that this space becomes sacralised in that moment, because of its meaning given by the participant in this particular activity in that urban space.

Getting to know aspects like the aforementioned exposes the importance of the methodological approach, for the chosen one was the best for understanding the meaning within space and culture. There is no statistical method nor questionnaire that would have given us the proper information that arose from people, from participants during the procession.

Another reflection generated during this research, specifically with respect to physical space where the procession takes place, is that the streets and their morphology become a determinant of this religious activity. During the Good Friday procession, in an informal conversation with a key participant, when asked for reasons behind the choice of the different stops of the procession (the Way of the Cross' stations), the answer was as simple as: "Can't you see this space is bigger? Here more people can be accommodated". In this sense, the *barrio's* morphology, with its narrow streets, define this other cultural - religious experience. Once again the importance of the methodological choices is exposed.

#### **4. Sense of place, morphology and methodology - As a conclusion**

In Urban Design and Planning, besides dealing with morphology, it is common to address the issue of sense of place. Although this concept is closely related to the built environment

disciplines, it is lightly embraced by academics and practitioners, exposing generally that by developing “better” spaces and plans, it can be created or enhanced.

Wiesenfeld (2001) defines *meaning*, the base of the concept of sense of place, as a social construction developed through experience and interactions of human beings in a particular context. Related to that, Hernandez Bonilla (2005) states "the meaning of public space is expressed through forms of appropriation exercised by the people, where the various daily practices, individual and collective interests and interactions of the community are essential elements of this process" (p. 195). The author also expresses that this process of appropriation can only be generated connecting the space and people's experiences; all of this is mediated by the culture of the inhabitants.

Therefore, researching about sense of place in Planning and Urban Design enhances the knowledge of practitioners and academics about the city, thus generating more appropriate and high – quality urban proposals and solutions. It is important to realise that truly delving into this concept allows us not only to develop closer links to the community that we work with (for), but also to get to know the place from other perspectives rather than the expert one.

It is vital to understand that the public space varies its activities; and although sometimes activities shape the space and change it, it also happens that space shapes what people do in it. In *barrios* where you don't have a vast amount and diversity of recreational spaces, or public spaces at all, the street becomes a place of market, a place of playing and having fun, a place of pilgrimage or religiosity intertwined with culture.

Relatedly, regarding the methodological approach, as exposed before, it is important to comprehend the nature of the phenomena we are studying. In this case, to understand the meaning within the space and culture, the qualitative case study approach and ethnographic methods presented themselves as the most accurate option, since there are no statistical methods nor questionnaires that would have given us the proper information that arose from people, i.e. as *meaningful* data.

The appropriation and meaning of the barrio's urban space during religious processions is expressed by various comments and actions of the parishioners and other participants. One example of this is the re-appropriation of places taken usually by crime (gangs), which highlights the influence of Catholicism in public spaces.

In addition, deepening methodological concerns, in the process of establishing rapport, the researcher gets involved with people, developing relationships with the participants and key actors. This combines both an advantage and a challenge for the research. The first one refers

to the possibility to get a more insightful feedback from participants since a respect and trust based interaction has been created. The challenge it can bring is that while being involved there are parts of the phenomena that are not being considered by the researcher, since from this paradigmatic approach *objectivity* does not exist.

From the socio-constructionism paradigm, it is stated that our interpretations of our experiences and our own beliefs are involved in the research process. Therefore, related specifically with this study, considering that a research team developed the data collection, we do not only go through the double hermeneutics that Giddens (1987) described. In this case, we get a triple or quadruple interpretation of this phenomenon, considering all of our backgrounds and subjectivities were involved in the process of re-constructing the link and meaning of religiosity as culture and the open urban space.

Finally, the theme of religious processions and the urban space reveals a large content of aspects that are relevant to humans, specifically for the *barrios'* inhabitants. Now, understanding that in Venezuelan cities there are different areas and that they harbor different types of morphologies, space must be understood in the same way that cultural manifestations must be differentiated from each other. In the *barrios*, places less studied than other city areas, spatial configuration is the result of the development and consolidation of structures and residual spaces in an uncontrolled manner, and the religious processions that take place there are therefore also particular.

Researching about sense of place in both the urban planning and urban design contexts is vital in order to generate new knowledge and some guidelines for practitioners and academics, for we work for cities and communities. In addition, understanding sense of place, by applying the proper methodology, is important in order to comprehend a bit more the urban complexity, and to generate effective and high-quality proposals for the inhabitants we work for.

