Colombia has continuously endured extreme political polarity, first during colonisation, its struggle for independence from the Spanish monarchy and today between the established government and paramilitary groups operating outside of the state’s jurisdiction.

These conflicts can be explored as a series of attempts to form an interior condition; a space which sets itself apart from its surroundings and within which defined social and cultural systems can exist and develop. The interior becomes a means of affirming a particular set of values, claiming for itself a space in which these can be enacted. (Pimlott, p9)

Bogota’s inner city is a microcosm of such spatial contestation, today exhibiting contradictory conditions that exist side by side in a delicate balance. From here, the history of this contemporary Latin American metropolis began with the founding of the colonial city. Today the tensions between the ideal principles of the city’s foundation and the realities of its development remain in stark contrast.

These conditions are loosely strung together by Eje Ambiental - a route that runs along the old path of the San Francisco river from the foot of Monserrate to the start of Avenida Caracas. Now a vital multimodal public boulevard, this urban figure runs along the North edge of Bogotá’s historic centre connecting several distinct urban conditions that make up Bogotá’s downtown and together form the city’s earliest layers.

Beginning at the Universidad Los Andes, Eje Ambiental runs West to intersect Carrera Septima. This is the city’s primary cultural and institutional axis, linking Plaza Bolivar at the centre of La Candelaria to the central business district to the North.

Further West the route meets San Victorino, a poor but thriving commercial district that is notably more volatile than the political centre only a few blocks away. Here the pedestrianised route ends and Avenida Carracas begins, crossed...
by the city’s fast-moving longitudinal route, the Autopista Norte.

Beyond this intersection lies the La Sabana train terminal, a large complex that has long since stopped functioning as a transport hub. To the South of the station is Voto Nacional, one of the inner cities most deprived and dangerous neighbourhoods and a significant commercial centre for building materials and auto repairs.

Weaving its way through these distinct inner city conditions, the Eje Ambiental touches on Bogotá’s earliest foundations, highlighting its contemporary successes, failures and challenges.

The research addresses La Candelaria, San Victorino, Parque Terceiro Milenio and Voto Nacional as disparate yet intimately linked components of the city’s downtown area.

Tracing the morphology of the city from its tabula rasa starting point at the foot of Monserrate, Bogotá was founded in accordance with the 16th Century Laws of the Indies. The document, issued to Spanish conquerors, consisted of a body of laws complete with instructions on how to establish new settlements in foreign terrains and concisely specifying the initial means of spatial intervention. In the formations of such settlements, European powers hoped to interiorise the vast new lands that they encountered. Through the implementation of a homogenous urban grid, an assertive process of interiorising is readable as an explicit spatial intervention.¹

The Laws of the Indies acted as an ambitious handbook for founding an ideal city - a city whose template was considered so absolute that it could be implemented regardless of the local physical and social conditions it sought to control. The grid shaped the city in its earliest form, imposing a new rationality on the landscape and projecting itself in all directions to accommodate anticipated expansion. A central plaza could be carved from this stable framework; a single block in the grid left as a void to form the settlement’s primary public space, within which defined social and cultural practices could take place.

Today Bogotá’s founding plaza remains enclosed by a national Cathedral, the Congress building, the Supreme Court of Justice and the Mayor’s department, affirming its status as a national interior and a dwelling space of the Colombian state.

The morphological development of the city since its foundation is set in close relation to the development of its transport infrastructure. This began with the arrival of the Fontibon road as the primary gateway into the city, encouraging periphery neighbourhoods to develop along the Western bank of the river. This gateway established a condition commercial and social exchange that has persisted until today as the present location of San Victorino market.

The next major development in transport infrastructure was the construction of a rail terminal at La Sabana, reinforcing the Western neighbourhoods of the inner city as Bogotá’s points of entry. The increased movement of

both people and goods sustained commercial activity at San Victorino and Plaza España, where livestock and materials were traded.

In the mid twentieth century the road network was intensified along the North-South axis to replace part of the obsolete railway. Following the demise of the rail network and prominence of the car, Plaza España operated as a key transport interchange for the inner city, supporting a plethora of auto-parts businesses and workshops which still dictate the commercial nature of the neighbourhood today. (Competition doc) But at a point in time where many affluent residents had left the inner city for suburbs to the North, this modification further deprived the Western neighbourhoods by segregating them from La Candelaria. Since the mid century, Voto Nacional and San Victorino became severely degraded sites of poverty, crime and drug use, less than a kilometer from the home of the President and the National Congress building.

In contrast to the stable and idealised principles of the initial settlement, the major commercial hubs at San Victorino and Plaza España have continuously operated as spaces of encounter and exchange, where lodging, food and sex were commodified and supplied to a population that was in a constant state of flux. Today the deprivation of these neighbourhoods opposes moves to revitalise the historic centre of an increasingly cosmopolitan city.

Together these developments tell a story of a city founded on idealised principles that are in stark contrast to the spontaneity and unpredictability of the modern South American metropolis. A study of Eje Ambiental and its surroundings thus uncovers a constellation of distinct conditions, bringing to the fore competing notions of the ideal and the chaotic, the static and the transient, and perhaps most strikingly, the powerful and the excluded. (Competition doc)

What remains evident is the sharp divide between the depravation of the Voto Nacional neighbourhood in comparison to the national political base only six blocks East. Finding ways of bridging this divide is perhaps one of the most pressing spatial challenges in downtown Bogota.

The poor living conditions and high rates of crime that plague Voto Nacional and parts of San Victorino stand in contrast to the potential economic value of such centrally located land. This is likely to be exacerbated by the arrival of the metro network in the near future, which includes plans for a station bridging the Autopista Norte at Plazoleta Los Martires, linking Voto Nacional directly to Plaza Bolivar. Together these circumstances create a substantial opportunity for heavy-handed gentrification, placing those who now dwell in these neighbourhoods under significant risk of eviction and displacement.

In her book ‘Learning from Bogotá’, Rachel Berney analyses the problematic relationship between these downtown neighbourhoods using the Parque Terceiro Milenio project, constructed in 2000 under Peñalosa, as a case study.²

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1538
Bogotá is founded in accordance with the Laws of the Indies, between two rivers to the North and South and with the mountains to the East

1784
A major route leaves Bogotá heading West across the river. The settlement grows at this crossing and a small clearing forms at present day San Victorino.
The project redefined 165,000 square meters of the city centre between Plaza Bolivar and Voto Nacional and directly South of San Victorino, making it one of most ambitious public landscaping projects in the history of the city and dwarfing the existing plazas in scale.

The project intended to address two ambitions. First, to radically alter the public landscape of Bogota’s downtown, creating a park that aimed to alter the established social practices of the area, improving the behaviour of the public and signifying a bold new future for the city centre. Secondly, in doing so Peñalosa sought to reform the highly problematic Cartucho neighbourhood. Formed in the 70s and 80s, Cartucho had become a hotbed of violence, prostitution and deprivation, described by Villegas as an area which "...fed the progressive deterioration of the city centre."

The reform of such terrible conditions was dealt with forcefully, involving huge displacement of residents and destruction of many buildings - Berney cites the displacement of almost 4,000 residents and 1,000 businesses, along with the destruction of 615 buildings, but acknowledges that other sources estimate the number of people displaced to be closer to 12,000.

Ultimately the erasure of the Cartucho neighbourhood did not end the impoverished conditions of the residents, but rather shifted these conditions to surrounding areas. Berney describes the formation of ‘Cartuchitos’ in neighbourhoods close by - fragmented enclaves formed by those who were displaced, where social problems and poor living conditions continued to prevail.

Furthermore the park itself has proved far less successful than anticipated, due to it’s unsuitable scale, problems with visibility, and scarce public amenities. The expensive soft and hard landscape elements fail to weave themselves into patterns of use across the area and form a harsh edge with those remaining elements of the Cartucho neighbourhood that were not removed.

Public projects of this nature are not uncommon across the world, as municipalities attempt to drastically improve the material conditions of the city and to attract investment from both citizens and foreigners. But the displacement inflicted on those who occupy the sites of such projects casts this approach in a more sinister light. In his essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, Isaiah Berlin discusses the tyranny that can emerge when individuals or groups, such as leaders or states, impose their notions of development on others under the conviction that this is carried out for the greater good. While Berlin uses the example of mandatory public health insurance as a case where such an approach could seem desirable, he extrapolates this to demonstrate how the rights of the individual can be totally disregarded once

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the idea of a greater cause is asserted forcefully.5

The Parque Terceiro Milenio is a clear example of the state implementing its ambitions and ideals spatially as a concrete project, attempting to absorb a problematic instance of otherness into its own vision for the city. In its dominating spatial implementation the park takes on a symbolic role, projecting a new set of values onto a landscape that did not previously adhere to these.

This means of translating socio-political ambitions into a concrete spatial intervention is relatable to those methods used nearly five hundred years previously in the initial formation of the city. Peñalosa envisioned the park as a public space that would transcend the colonial-era plaza in scale, signalling a new future for Bogotá, but in the physical execution the creation of Plaza Bolivar and the new park follow a rather similar logic of interiorising otherness.

The capacity of spatial intervention at the urban and architectural scale to create a condition of interiority, and simultaneously to exclude the other, will be used as a lens through which to interpret the fieldwork carried out in this complex part of Bogotá, and to further elaborate on the spatial nature of the city.

Harsh edge between Parque Terceiro Milenio and remains of the Cartucho neighbourhood
Berney, R. ‘Learning from Bogota’ (2017) p84
The fieldwork conducted around Eje Ambiental provides a direct experience of the city, understanding the city from the part rather than the whole. It begins purely from observation, using the material reality of the city as a means of revealing commonalities in building types, everyday objects and associated social practices.

The method of investigation is rooted in representational techniques developed in Japan over the past century, which evolved in response to the country’s rapidly changing urban conditions.

The familiar axonometric drawings made by Atelier Bow Wow, previously employed by students investigating Bogotá, trace a lineage through Terunobu Fujimori’s Roadway Observation Society to Wajiro Kon’s Modernology.

Kon’s work is characterised by a gaze that is sensitive to everyday physical and social contexts as revealed through material culture, observing spaces and objects in use by people going about their daily lives. He countered the general shift towards Modernist principles in the early twentieth century in its sincere documentation of these everyday realities that were often considered banal by architects. He used this gaze to reflect shifts in culture that were taking place in Japan, recording furniture, utensils and fashion as well as buildings.

The development of his methodology owes much to his university education at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, where he studied until 1912. The curriculum was in part shaped by a progressive integration of Western art education. From 1896 onwards, the school’s Western painting department was headed by Kuroda Seiki, who went to great lengths to ensure that foreign methods were fully explored.

At the same time the curriculum also institutionalised the traditional studio training of the famous Japanese Kanō school, based on copying the works of previous masters. Okakura

Sketches of Shacks Following the Great Kanto Earthquake, Wajiro Kon, 1923
Tenshin and Ernest Fenollosa, the founders of the school, believed that Western art would afford students the chance to experiment freely and become independently creative early on in their education. Combined with a more traditional training, this would enable students to approach the established Kanō techniques from an innovative perspective, reinvigorating national art. Through the copying-based teaching of the Kanō style, students would have been exposed to many great works and patterns in order to understand them. While Kon was strongly influenced by Western thinkers and makers such as Ruskin and Morris, he would also have developed a familiarity with Japanese art through careful study.

“It trained people who could work in a variety of fields, transcending the dichotomy between pure and applied art... The Zuanka approach did not focus on drawing for the purpose of faithful reproduction of nature but used it to analyse and grasp the phenomena of the real world through observation...”

In the 1910s Kon joined Hakuboukai (White Thatched Roof Group), where he surveyed the environmental, social and material living conditions of rural people. In 1922, he published the first results of these surveys in Nippon no Minka (Rural Houses in Japan), and continued to produce such surveys throughout his career. For these surveys he produced highly detailed plans, sections and views of the vernacular minka farmhouses, making comparisons between the inhabitant’s movements and their patterns of use, and the arrangement of objects within the house. The drawings were produced quickly in sketch books as subjects were encountered, containing acute observations that enrich what at first appear to be simple, sketched diagrams. Black outlines capture impressive amounts of information while retaining a lively simplicity.

They capture the feeling of things very effectively without becoming too restricted in pursuit of realism. This perceptive ability and skill enabled Kon to convey large amounts of information with surprisingly few strokes of the pen, in a style that simultaneously playful, analytic and true to the essence of the subject.

Following the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, Kon applied the same techniques to recording the lives of those most badly affected by the disaster with a group of colleagues, this time in the urban context of Tokyo. While previously he had been observing changes in the livelihoods of rural people, now he started to search for the emergence of new customs and patterns of spatial appropriation in the city. In addition to the inherent pressures of rapid modernisation, inhabitants of the city were forced to deal with severely limited resources and the loss of much of their property. In the years following the earthquake he continued to record recovery...
and change in various parts of Tokyo, thus marking the beginning of Kon’s Kōgengaku (modernology). This included three themes of study: architecture and fashion, property, and behaviour, inspired by his experiences with stage design.\textsuperscript{3}

The exercise of recording the common material culture of the city at various scales shows the way in which Kon and his contemporaries went about observing changes in the city. Spatial appropriation is dealt with at varying levels of scale and permanence, and with equivalent attention to detail.

The subjects of the modernology drawings are often arranged into inventories or catalogues, making similarities and differences easily observable. In this format they are combined with statistics, to show the frequency of one observation in relation to another. The modernology drawings work primarily as tools for gathering and recording information about people and places. As bodies of images they create fragmented but vivid portrayals of the lives of people and their relationships to the surrounding environment.

This methodology provides the basis for the fieldwork in Bogotá, offering an expanded understanding of Modernology and the work that continues to follow on from it. The fieldwork is treated as an exploration of this approach, applying Kon’s gaze to a new urban context.

It has been carried out by sketching the city as it was encountered, seeking common conditions that are easily appropriated by people. The drawings focus on those everyday spaces, buildings and objects that would typically be dismissed as banal or uninteresting by designers.

Various street vendor’s stalls,
Eje Ambiental

September 2016, from sketchbook

Vendor’s stalls under fixed shelters,
Eje Ambiental

September 2016, from sketchbook
The Unicompras commercial centre was the first shopping passage we visited, walking towards Plaza Santander from a TransMilenio stop on Carrera 14.

Facing the street, the building is three floors high and topped with a glazed vault that lights the interior. An atrium punctures this triple height volume to mark the entrance, beyond which a main staircase accesses the upper galleries of shops.

Deeper into the plan, the building drops to two storeys, where a second atrium connects the ground level and galleries. This atrium is used as a cafe, where we sat for some time drinking coffee, making drawings and watching customers come and go.

Most of the shops provided products and support for businesses, offering stationery, print supplies and copying services, internet access and telecom services.
This commercial centre on Carrera Septima reflected the excitement of the street life outside, occupied by shops that provided entertainment and fun to customers. Here we found shops selling toys, games and DVDs, candy shops and small kiosks selling soft drinks, as well as barbers and beauticians offering cheap haircuts and manicures.

Towards the back, a barber shop spilled out into the centre, where men had set up plastic chairs to sit and chat. The atrium was again used as a cafe space, where we sat for a while having coffee and making drawings.

The chimney from the cafe’s kitchen shot through the floor above, where it was masked by a number of additional fake chimneys. These had been bent into curves to form a round bench. This, and most of the other fittings, were finished in chrome and brass, giving everything the feel of a run-down casino or amusement arcade.
The Veracruz commercial centre blurred the distinction between established business and informal appropriation more than the other interiors we visited, situated in a building that appeared to be an old auto repair garage.

It had recently been fitted out as a shopping centre, apparent from the pieces of steel frame that were lying on the floor ready to be assembled into small cubicles for new shops. Some merchants had already occupied those closest to the entrance. Further back, others were trading openly on the floor. One man sat repairing guitars in a dimly light corner. Power cables and lighting fixtures hung loosely from the ceiling, above ladders and tool boxes.

What was special was the surprisingly large, busy food court situated furthest back from the street on the first level, beneath the vast steel roof trusses. To one side, two small kitchens provided food to clients. To the other side, two kiosks sold additional snacks, cold drinks and coffee.

Centro Commercial Veracruz,
near Eje Ambiental

October 2016, from sketchbook
The Fortaleza passage was the first we visited in San Victorino. The order and cleanliness of the interior contrasted strongly to the chaotic and unpredictable streets outside.

After returning from New Jersey, the owner had hired an architect to design his passage. He had seen similar commercial spaces in the US and asked for a vaulted, transluscent roof that would improve daylight. The highly rationalised steel frame structure formed modules that could be combined or separated to form shops of different sizes, with an attic above for storage accessed by ladder.

All of the stores sold supplies for making cosmetics, including empty, unlabelled bottles, chemicals and scents, as well as a vast catalogue of lab equipment.

At the centre, the owner ran a small café selling freshly ground coffee. In the attic space above he had created a comfortable seating area completely withdrawn from the street.
This cafe, seemingly tiny at first glance, was visited at the very start of the fieldwork. Situated on an old winding street in La Candelaria, the building was characterised by its thick walls, heavy wooden door and the mountain of clay tiles that formed the projecting roof.

The entrance leads into a bar space where drinks can be ordered. Moving beyond this, through a small door at the back, the cafe opens into a beautiful and unexpected double-height atrium. Visitors move along a gallery and then step down into this semi-outdoor space filled with small tables. The atrium steps down further to a small garden beyond.

Squeezed behind the bar, another small room connecting to the street is used as a kiosk and store, selling snacks and cigarettes to passers-by.
An office building on the corner of an intersection near Carrera Septima created an active edge condition where diverse but inter-related activities could take place.

The ground floor was set back, widening the street to form a sheltered gallery. Internal spaces provided services such as a cafe, a barber shop and a tailor. The external space of the gallery had been occupied by kiosks and tables selling lottery tickets, flowers, children’s toys and magazines.

The selection of goods on sale targeted the bankers working inside; lottery tickets for those pursuing financial success and with spare money to burn, flowers and toys as gifts for families, and tailors and barbers to maintain a professional appearance. The busy corner appeared as a self-contained eco-system - a typical office building that supported numerous activities and brought together different types of people.
The Universidad Rosario is one of Bogota’s most prestigious humanities schools. Towards the end of our visit we managed to enter using our student cards. The building is exemplary of Spanish colonial architecture and has been immaculately preserved as a national monument.

The courtyard echoes the space immediately outside, with a statue placed similarly at the centre. But the atmosphere is placid and restrained, in contrast with the public plaza where teenagers gather to drink and merchants follow. Here, merchants also sell an assortment of small rocks and gems, claiming that these relate to the geological research of nearby faculties.

Moving along the courtyard’s gallery, the roof line cuts off the surrounding city and instead frames views of the mountains and sky. From within the school the spontaneity of the city is much less perceptible, giving the impression that the visitor has left the outside far behind.
The experience commonly evoked by these interiors is one of seclusion, countering the expectation of animated interaction with the street. While elements closest to the perimeter engage passers-by directly, the deep plans quickly detached themselves from the unpredictability of the outside.

As a result these large interiors have relatively localised points of interaction with the rest of the city, making them easy to secure and control. Much of the downtown shares this quality - shallow, unexpressive facades mask the vastness of the eighty by eighty metre city blocks, often closing off the interior using robust steel shutters that deny physical entry and visual permeability. When open, pedestrians quickly disappear into atriums, passages and rooms buried behind this thin veil.

In his essay ‘The Rights of Retreat and the Rites of Exclusion’, Robin Evans discusses the role of architecture in excluding that which people wish to remove from their immediate experience, arguing that “the way of the retreat asserts the right to retire from the arbitrary assaults of a cacophonous and disarrayed world”. He notes that while some architects treat buildings purely as climatic filters, in fact buildings also actively filter those social and ideological conditions deemed undesirable by its users.¹

For Evans the retreat is a terrain defined by the ideologies of those who make use of it, and its spatial form facilitates this. The notion of the retreat sheds light on both the city’s historical forms and its contemporary public interiors. In Bogotá, where security on the street can be problematic, the opportunity to inhabit a

controlled environment that works to exclude risk can be understood as a highly desirable quality.

As noted earlier, the grid of the colonial city permitted the creation of a strongly defined network of plazas, acting as large urban courtyards. In this manner the colonial city succeeded in inserting familiar conditions into a foreign and contested landscape.

Likewise, the cavernous quality of Bogotá’s shopping passages and atriums echo the security of the courtyard, turning themselves away from the chaotic unpredictability of the streets between them to create a reclusive interior condition.

These centres group together traders offering similar or complementary services, resulting in the creation of distinct micro-communities that develop identities defined by those who sell and those who visit. For example, several accommodated an almost exclusive combination of tattoo studios and erotic shops, whilst another was made up of stationery suppliers and printing services. Others dealt only in chemicals and lab equipment for cosmetics manufacturing. While the forms of these commercial centres were similar, the users were all different. By grouping compatible businesses together, the stability of the form nurtured a stability of identity that was immediately clear when entering.

In his article ‘Belonging’, Neil Leach explores the relation between space, social practices and identity, attempting to address how we attach meaning to spaces in rapidly changing and alienating urban contexts. Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, Leach proposes that space takes on meaning through continued repetition of actions performed by users - a process he terms territorialisation. With each re-enactment, users recall memories of the space while adding to it’s evolving meaning. Following this definition, the identity of a space exists in a state of flux. Acts of territorialisation thus also imply a process of de-territorialisation, through which spaces lose an established significance when the social practices they accommodate end or change. Leach argues that this treats spatial identity as a "continuously re-negotiable site."

In his essay Less is Enough, Pier Vittorio Aureli links the formal development of the retreat with the practice of asceticism, a means by which one removes themselves from their surroundings seeking control over their self.

For Aureli, this ancient act was institutionalised and given an architectural form in the creation of the Christian monastery, at which point the original intention of the practice was drastically altered. In order to sustain their isolation inhabitants of the monastery formed highly productive, autonomous communities, subsequently accruing large amounts of wealth and power.

This form of community organised established

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Cloister at La Cartuja Monastery
Granada, Spain
Photograph taken July 2017,
patterns of behaviour, repeated each day to suppress the unpredictability of the individual and form a collective identity for the self. While for Aureli this routine is enabled by the architectural form, Niel Leach argues that it is through the repetition of behavioural patterns in individuals and groups that identity is given to a space.

Connecting Leach’s notion of performative territorialisation and Aureli’s reading of the retreat, the introverted architectural form can be understood as a device for ensuring that the same individual or group can repeat behaviours in a space without risk of it being contested. Both through the physical enclosure of space and the repetition of behaviour, the presence of the other can be rejected.

For Berlin, this exemplifies a notion of the self that moves beyond the individual and instead encompasses a group working towards a common condition. Both for Aureli and Evans, the monastery is the architectural manifestation of this, capable of organising a collective existence that simultaneously rejects otherness. Evans argues that this type has given rise to both places that keep others out - hotels, hospitals, shopping malls, schools; and places designed to keep people in - asylums, prisons and so on.

Acknowledging the persistence of these forms from the vernacular to the contemporary makes a romanticised reading of Bogotá’s enclosed spaces deeply problematic. It asks us to consider the effect that such forms have on maintaining existing power relations in the city by establishing explicit notions of control and ownership.

Furthermore it reveals an established pattern for absorbing vacant space in the city - held speculatively until it can be enclosed and made productive. In Bogotá the courtyard, and by extension the atrium, continue to be used as architectural forms of enclosure to insert desirable conditions into the city whilst systematically excluding otherness, those practices which undermine the smooth operation of the interior.

Threshold and Courtyard in Universidad Rosario, La Candelaria

October 2016, from sketchbook
Bogota was founded as an ideal city, based on a model that intended to insert a foreign condition into an uncertain terrain.

The early architectural forms of the city established clear notions of the interior as a secure space detached from the sponteneity of its surroundings. The relationship between the interior and its context established in the colonial city is traceble in contemporary forms of public interiors, which maintain a restricted relationship with the street. There a contradiction between the formality of this condition and the informal, unpredictabictable quality of the city.

This relationship has faciliated the spatial exlusion of people and social practices, and in attempting to extend this condition of control has resulted in forceful displacement and conflict. Enclosure has been employed at the architectural and urban scale to secure land in the city and homogenise its identity.

The project sets out to challenge the conventional absorption of left-over spaces into the productive logic of the city through acts of spatial enclosure, by reconsidering the relationship between the interior of the city block and the street.

In doing so, it uses the notion of performative territorialisation to understand the co-presence of distinct users as a means of destabilising the homogeneity of an interior.

Ambiguity and multiplicity become desirable characteristics of an alternative interior condition; one in which the presence of the other is actively maintained rather than systematically excluded.

In doing so the project proposes new relationships between private, collective and public spaces, in order to reflect on the possibility of architectural intervention in deprived and excluded inner city neighbourhoods.
The chosen area of intervention encompasses three blocks in the Voto Nacional neighbourhood, West of San Victorino and North of El Bronx.

These blocks are particularly interesting as they form an axis of plazas in Bogotá’s downtown. Plaza España, Plazoleta Los Martires and Plaza Bolívar form a line through the inner city, although this axis is cut by the Autopista Norte, detaching Plaza Bolívar from the ensemble. With the arrival of Bogotá’s above-ground metro a new link will be established, reinforcing the presence of this axis and increasing the development potential of the area.

Within these blocks, empty spaces vary significantly in size and proportion. Numerous patches of small openings provide buildings with shafts for daylight, ventilation and outdoor storage.

Larger voids are the result of speculative holding of entire plots, which have been left undeveloped or have been cleared of buildings. These sites are typically used as car parks, lined with small garages that can function as storage or as small kiosks and guardhouses. The regularity of plot division, set out in the original formation of the urban grid, gives these larger plots more regularity in their size and proportions.

An investigation into how empty plots are integrated into the city fabric presents an opportunity for redefining relationships of control and ownership as this neighbourhood becomes an increasingly contested part of the city. These sites are therefore well suited to test the conclusions of the fieldwork.

A number of empty plots join to permeate all the way through a block, introducing the possibility of new routes and creating a range of distinct conditions.
Leftover plots in Voto Nacional, shown in grey.
Project sites shown in black.
Photographs of site entrances show the continuous articulation of the edge of the block, securely enforced thresholds and gateways, small kiosks and guardhouses. Buildings are typically constructed with concrete frames or loadbearing block work. Deep, blind party walls contrast the articulated and heavily signed street facades.

From top left, images 1-4 show site entrances. Images 5-9 show entrances to similar sites nearby.
Oblique drawings showing shallow threshold of street facade, masking the depth of the voids
Stan Allen’s ‘Field Conditions’ positions the architectural intervention as an emergent, open-ended configuration that begins from localised relationships and develops additively. By interacting with existing field conditions and adapting accordingly, complex localised fluctuations are able to develop without breaking the relations between parts.

Allen defines field configurations as “loosely bound aggregates characterised by local interconnectivity. Overall shape and extent are highly fluid and less important than the internal relationships of parts, which determine the behaviour of the field... interval, repetition and seriality are key concepts”.

In doing so he moves away from the notion of the closed architectural form, which sets its constituent parts within an overarching geometrical composition.

The fieldwork identifies the array of leftover sites within Bogotá’s city blocks as an existing field, active between the urban block and the street.

A configurative intervention within this field seeks to modify the relationship between these sites and the city, treating them as distinct phenomena rather than speculative lots and activating them within the existing urban fabric.

In order to do so the intervention focuses on developing localised, flexible relations that are applicable across sites while adapting to the irregularities of the existing field.

Working model using simple elements to divide site into a sequence of shallow spaces receding from the street.

Ground plane is gently varied in height and material. Site is layered in plan.
Developed working models showing sequences of planes into the site, pilotis, floor plates and openings.

Site is layered in plan and section.
Additive and subtractive gypsum cast study model, using displacement of parts to create a banding effect.

Displacing of volumes provided a means of vertically and horizontally connecting spaces, controlling access and creating independent routes through space.
Tectonic and Stereotomic models combined into a fragment of the project.

Enclosed masses puncture through freeflowing spaces, allowing for access and circulation to operate independently within the same volume.
Modularity and repetition are familiar concepts within Modern architecture, harnessing the potential of an industrialised building industry to produce standardised solutions efficiently and consistently.

Repetition is also a characteristic of Stan Allen’s Field conditions - an approach that is assertively different to Modernist principles. Allen’s loosely woven figures champion local variations, emergent behaviour and engagement with other existing fields. Simple relations are established locally, but global form is fluid and less controlled.

Allen argues that relinquishing global control by focusing on localised rules is a key compositional tool that emerged from Post-minimalist art in the 1960s. Through studying the work of Eva Hesse and Barry Le Va, as well as projects by Sanaa and Fujimoto, the totalising nature of a modular system was averted by loosening and freeing relations.

Using a base variation of 600mm, a range of bay widths were formed such that they could be combined in different ways in response to local site conditions. This resulted in a fluctuating structural rhythms that respond to the local site dimensions.

By aligning adjacent volumes only where they connected, these rhythms were freed from an overarching geometric scheme, appearing instead as localised occurrences.

The same process was applied in the section, establishing the connecting layer at the first floor as a consistently maintained datum from which other floors could be scaled independently.

Within a highly systematised intervention, every room becomes slightly different, interacting with variations in the site to produce complex effects from a simple set of relational principles.

Dimensional variations departing from a regular structural grid.

Zoning into three latitudinal bays creates ancillary spaces of 1800mm for circulation and climate buffer.

Central latitudinal bay is either 4800, 5400 or 6000mm

Longitudinal bays are either 2400 or 3600mm.
A datum along the first floor maintains connections between blocks, allowing upper floors and the ground level to fluctuate in a more animated relationship with ground and sky.

Combined with variations in plan, rooms take on distinct widths and heights creating a variety of spaces within the same configurative system.
Case Studies
Ground floor plan

Diagrams (left to right)

Nine square grid
Stable composition
Plaid grid
Servant spaces
Sequencing
Quinta de Bolívar, Bogotá

Oblique drawing.
Sequence from Gateway to Courtyard

November 2016
In this canonical project Kahn employs a typical cruciform plan, placing four pavilion elements around a central void of the same dimensions in plan using a classical nine-square grid.

In their structure, materiality and scale, each pavilion is identical such that none establish a hierarchy over the others. The stable relationship between parts informs the composition of the whole and affirms the idealised nine-square grid.

Despite this regularity, Kahn achieves distinct conditions in the plan by varying the presence and position of dividing walls between the dominant column elements, and by rotating these columns to open in different directions.

In doing so, the resulting plan is in fact not symmetrical along any axis, despite its cruciform composition.

Kahn expands the points of intersection of the grid into habitable spaces, dividing the project into served and servant spaces. These servant spaces accommodate transitional circulation conditions, showers and toilets, leaving the centre of each square free. In this way the composition of the supporting structure sets up a plaid grid, sub-dividing the nine-square composition and diversifying the spatial experience of the building.

Ground floor plan

Diagrams (left to right)

Nine-square grid
Stable composition
Plaid grid
Servant spaces
Like the Trenton Bath House, Louis Kahn’s Adler House departs from an ideal nine-square grid, this time creating five square pavilions and leaving the remaining four squares open.

In plan, these pavilions are identical and non-directional. The supporting columns adhere to this non-directionality, but in this case their edges align to the grid rather than their centres such that no pavilion shares its supporting structure with another.

Unlike the stable composition of the Trenton Bath House, here Kahn uses acts of displacement to subvert the clarity of the grid and create a plan with multiple possible interpretations.

What makes this possible is that the displacement is such that the overall composition never adheres fully to the nine-square grid. There is always some part that falls outside of this order.

Furthermore, the way in which the off-centre columns of the structure combine through this displacement creates three distinct conditions, with each asserting a different directionality to the scheme.

This makes it impossible to determine a definitive original condition, subverting the possibility of conceiving of a whole.

The building is parts only, and while these parts themselves are compositionally stable, through their relationship to one another the plan becomes charged with ambiguity.

In ’Ten Canonical Buildings’, Peter Eisenman shows that the plan can be understood through a Classical reading as a displaced cruciform plan (ABA), or as an asymmetric Modernist composition (BBA), affirming the possibility of multiple readings into the composition.
Following Kahn’s two projects, Fujimoto’s House NA can also be read as a nine-square grid exercise.

Adler House uses displacement both to subvert the possibility of a part-to-whole relationship and to introduce an ambiguity of temporal progression.

In contrast, Fujimoto uses distortion of the idealised grid to create an ambiguity of relations, comparing the house to a small forest, or cluster of trees amongst which the inhabitant moves around in search of spatial moments suited to their activity at the time.

Spatially this distortion addresses a tension between the specific and generic that is observable in other contemporary Japanese architecture - particularly in works such as Ishigami’s KAIT building and SANAA’s Moriyama House - but is already present in canonical vernacular projects such as Katsura Palace. It interrogates the capacity of a rationalised system of parts to create a diverse set of conditions through subtle variations of each part, such that they are similar rather than identical.

In this regard such projects are the architectural equivalents of the American post-minimalist art discussed by Stan Allen in his ‘Field Conditions’ text. They search for ways in which these parts can be made different, without losing the understanding that each is a version of the same thing.