From politics, profession or academia, the Chilean architect Fernando Castillo Velasco [FCV] resisted conventions and defied any possible classification. But beyond the obvious, it is possible to argue that the very idea of autonomous enclaves that protect themselves from the environment, resisting through solidarity – which FCV explored in various formats – is in itself an architecture of resistance.

It is not very common for an architect to succeed in so many different facets of the discipline. In his 94 years of life (1918-2013), Fernando Castillo Velasco demonstrated that this was not impossible. Partner in the Bresciani Valdés Castillo Huidobro office (BVCH) between 1947 and 1966; mayor of the district of La Reina for three terms (1966-1967, 1992-1993, and 1996-2004); democratically elected rector of the Pontificia Universidad Católica between 1967 and 1973 (and the first lay rector in the history of the university); active opponent of the dictatorship, both from exile (1974-1978) and after his return to Chile; intendent of the Metropolitan region (1994), and co-founder of the ARCIS University.

In this trajectory – which permanently resisted specialization – there is perhaps only one thing that Castillo Velasco never ceased to be: a moral referent. This condition was not only reflected in the fact that his colleagues awarded him the National Prize for Architecture in 1983, but also in the way his peers in academia and politics respect him to this day.

But beyond being a person who managed to resist labels, Fernando Castillo also designed architectures of resistance. The logic of autonomous enclaves that protect themselves from the environment, resisting through collective solidarity is visible not only in the communities that he developed from the 1970s, but also in projects such as La Reina Housing Neighborhood (1966) [Fig. 1], the Andalucía Neighborhood Complex (1992) [Fig. 2] or, even, in the system of departments that he implemented during his term as rector of the Pontificia Universidad Católica.

The following interview, conducted by Francisco Díaz and Hugo Bertolotto on Thursday, July 15, 2010, in his
house next to the Quinta Michita in La Reina, covers the career of this outstanding architect with questions that emphasize this enclave logic which, however, Castillo Velasco deftly resists.²

**FD, HB: The 1960 Santiago Intercommunity Regulatory Plan (PRIS),** by Juan Honold and Pastor Correa, worked with the idea of ‘city-system,’ proposing urban growth based on autonomous and self-sustaining nuclei connected by infrastructure. Those principles coincide with many of the themes that were raised in the Portales Neighborhood Unit, designed and built between 1954 and 1966, while you were in BVCH. Did you know about these ideas? Or were those issues on the air?

**FCV:** No. We were greatly influenced by Le Corbusier at that time. Regarding the plot, I go a lot to the Portales Neighborhood Unit nowadays – because they are transforming it – and I realize that I would not do it like that today. But back then we asked ourselves an absolutely subjective question, in one sense, but very objective in another. We thought that we should respect
the urban fabric but respect it in a way that fulfilled our architecture and urban planning principles. So, the block is manifested in the length of the building and the separation of the building is also manifested in the block. In other words, we thought that, when going from one building to the other, people should feel like walking one block, and the length of the building as another block. So, as it was like the urban fabric of Santiago, we used to say: “We respect it.” Meanwhile, the two taller buildings exist because, back then, one could stand there and look at the mountain range in an impressive way. We thought that Santiago had its western limit there and therefore it was necessary to capture that space through architectural works.

FD, HB: You thought of this building then, within the Santiago grid, rather than within this new scheme of autonomous nuclei?

FCV: Within the urban Santiago. And we also thought something else: that the architecture should come from the vegetation that was there, because there were avenues of holm oaks. The five-story buildings are the oaks, the houses that are on the first and second floors are the fruit-bearing trees that were also there. These were of great spatial containment for the great valley of Santiago.

FD, HB: In the mid-1960s, in different parts of the world, a series of participatory movements appeared in art, which later spread to architecture in the early 1970s. In this sense, the La Reina Housing Neighborhood, which started in 1966, would be a pioneer of this type of participation in architecture. Were you informed of these artistic trends or was it really a preview?

FCV: I actually did it instinctively. When I became mayor, I found out that there was an eviction decree against the people who were living in deserted plots. With that decree on the table, I called the dwellers’ organizations – which, since the 1964 presidential
election, were politicized – and I told them: “I’m going to rip this decree in front of you, you are neighbors of La Reina, just like any other, and I promise that we will look for ways to ensure that you have your own house as neighbors of La Reina.” So, when I was a professor at the School of Architecture [of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile], I made the class study a project at the La Reina estate for them. I took the dwellers’ leaders to the school to see the proposal and they did not like the houses. So, I went ahead and said to the students: “Excuse me, but here we do what they want because they are going to build their houses, so please put down these plans.” And the dwellers became part of the process. It was a very unforeseen thing. For example, at Portales Neighborhood Unit we should have asked to speak to future clients, who were affiliates of the Private Employees Fund. But we didn’t have that idea. However, in La Reina, we did think of it, perhaps due to that disagreement over the project presented by the students of the school.

FD, HB: In 1967, after the student protests, you were elected Rector of the Catholic University of Chile (the first democratically elected, and also the first layperson to reach that position). In your term as rector, you established the department system, which consists of relatively self-regulating academic communities that produce knowledge autonomously. Where did this idea come from? How did this notion of ‘academic community’ relate to what was happening at the Institute of Architecture in Valparaíso? Can we consider this idea as a worldview that was later transferred to architecture through communities?

FCV: The departmentalization was not our invention; it was used by many universities in the United States. The idea was intercommunication, because the university created the Faculties, which cover niches of greater or lesser power, coexisting internally, but have no permeability towards other sciences or human activities. So, the departmentalization was a net of different departments in which the student would make their own cultural history, saying “I want to study this, this, and this,” with a tutor. We put that into practice before computers were invented, so implementing it was pretty chaotic. I think that what happened in Valparaíso is quite different from what the [Católica of Santiago] university was proposing. The university [in Santiago] postulated its full and total participation in the culture of the Chilean people and its objective was to improve those virtues and that quality through scientific research and work. The idea was to train a professional without blinders, one with a wide range of possibilities. It was not so important to obtain a degree, but to prepare an essentially educated person, with their own culture. I was very uncompromising about ‘what’ the students we sent abroad would study. They had to study how to take advantage of what they did there, but not to bring it here. In other words,
educating themselves personally, without aiming to bring back the ways of acting from there.

FD, HB: It is interesting to compare again this idea of a ‘system city’ that was in the air with the 1960 PRIS and what you established with the departments at the Pontificia Universidad Católica: the principle of interconnection between different autonomous parts, very similar to what had been thought of for a city in the (PRIS), this time transferred to the scale of an institution. A relationship between them is perceived. Were you aware of that?

FCV: No, no. The whole world was in fact orbiting towards that. It’s strange how it has suffered such a setback. Because in those years there was, of course, a collective will. Chile was a paradise; you were not born yet. Well, there was a collective euphoria; an optimism; a hope; and I think President Frei made the efforts to make this thing work, but it did not.

FD, HB: It seems that what happened with Frei was that the aspirations that he was encouraging in people outweighed what he was capable of doing, wasn’t it? People’s expectations far surpassed what could actually be met...

FCV: Sure. It happened with the students of my time; the student leaders who eclipsed Frei and left, they did not settle. At the end of his government, a year before, Frei had to appoint a new Minister of Housing, because Juan Hamilton went to the Senate, so he invited me. He took me by the arm while walking through the corridors of La Moneda and told me: “How do you withstand this thing of the youth? Come here to the ministry and let’s make buildings.” My answer was: “In fact President, I’m more intimately satisfied by being Minister of Housing than by being rector of the university”; something that I also got wrong. But I arrived at the university and found that the patio was full of people, all screaming that I couldn’t leave. How did they know? [The word] spread before I got back. But I warned Frei that I had to work things out with the university. I was very fascinated by the idea of being Minister of Housing, although he had little time left. I had helped Hamilton a lot – and that’s why I think Hamilton told Frei about me – in a savings and construction plan, of which I don’t even remember the particulars, but it was about a [dynamic] expanding house and the wiring of the money to the family following its different stages, but that plan came to nothing. Well, and then Allende offered me the same thing. I also accepted. He said to me: “I want a good architect for the Ministry of Housing.” And I answered: “Yes, President, I accept to be Minister of Housing, but I believe that we are not going to make any houses.” We were only two months away from the coup... And Allende told me: “Yes, the situation is not looking well at all.” To which I replied: “This is a political question; if I accept and go to the ministry and then my party kicks me out, you will be left
with lumps and you will not know what to do with me, so it has to be with the permission of the party; you have to speak to Patricio Aylwin.” “I'll have permission, I'll talk to Aylwin on the phone,” he said. “No, this cannot be on the phone, the conversation has to be more profound,” I said. The next day he calls me and says: “Look, I'm doing very well, so you, who go around without a tie, put a tie on.” In the end, the matter was lost when the council of the PDC [the Christian Democratic Party, of which Castillo Velasco was a member] voted, by six votes to eight, or something like that. At that moment Allende agreed with me, without the consent of the party I would have had no support.

FD, HB: As you have commented in previous interviews, the BVCH office rejected many projects in order to follow modern architecture. But in a 1971 interview, you also said that your first buildings were much more dehumanized due to formal and stylistic concerns. As the protagonist of one of the most active offices in the introduction years of modern architecture in Chile, how do you assess the architectural concerns of that time?

FCV: I think I was referring to the Portales Neighborhood Unit. It was the desire to be modern, as a principle, not as a style. Because we did not see it as a style but as something that was proper to the architect, and the rest was a betrayal, in a moral sense: it was illogical to think of making a French or Georgian style house. So, when we turned down clients, it was not with BVCH, where we had already reached a level in which there was no need to reject, but during the first years when relatives or friends asked us to “make a French-style house.”

FD, HB: In the same interview by Adriana Valdés (1971), you said that it is possible to adapt models of traditional Chilean architecture to the present, using the Santa Adela Housing Neighborhood in Cerrillos as an example. Considering that the recovery of local tradition was a taboo subject in modern architecture, where did these new problems of adaptation of the traditional arise from?

FCV: What happens is that [that interview] refers to a question of architectural art, which is very different from how architecture is lived, though both points can coexist.

“The university [in Santiago] postulated its full and total participation in the culture of the Chilean people and its objective was to improve those virtues and that quality through scientific research and work. The idea was to train a professional without blinders, one with a wide range of possibilities. It was not so important to obtain a degree, but to prepare an essentially educated person.”
In other words, I want to accept myself in the past and do modern architecture, while being uncompromising regarding the modern, because everything evolves in life. Certain things that are not values in themselves can be implanted, such as the tile roof or the wood sticks in the windows, things that give characteristics to a style. But, in that interview, I was not referring to that, but rather to the sense of how one lives.

FD, HB: So, one could think that modern architecture had its own way of life, it was not only a plastic style...

FCV: There was a plastic approach... I suppose we did not think at all about what was happening to people. We suffered, yes, because when we made our own houses, the sun made us suffer.

FD, HB: From that ethical and human point of view you’re referring to, is there any self-criticism that you would make about your work?

FCV: I think that in the Portales Neighborhood Unit we were not aware of the scale of what we were doing. It was impossible to get twelve thousand people into a community in the same way ten families live in a project. So, we totally lost that scale. What we dreamed of and was never materialized was that the entire pedestrian system connecting the terraces – the roofs of the houses and the large plaza – was supposed to be the humanized place of coexistence. But coexistence does not occur at these levels in terms of quantity of people; it is always lost. I have never thought about what we would do today in the Portales Neighborhood Unit.

FD, HB: After completing your period at BVCH you began a solo career, where the starting point can be set at Quinta [Estate] Michita. This case is not only the first community project, but also evidences another architectural sensibility, which is different from the works you carried out next to your former partners. What changed in your way of designing once working alone? How do you explain this new formal sensitivity? What are the main differences that you see between both stages?

FCV: In the office, we had already made some attempts, we had made a housing project in Vitacura, the Brasilia Condominium. This was already a first step in designing common spaces for communal use and integrating houses to private spaces within the community. But I got this idea of doing this here, in a property that was essentially mine, in order to live with the people with whom I was working. I had no other intention. I did not think about profit, nor did I think about anything else than how we could live better together. So, you had to have meeting places, where you could practice sports, culture, entertainment. With the whole group that was going to come to live here, we designed this in the council rooms of the university, where we had meetings about Quinta Michita.
FD, HB: After the coup d’état you went into exile to England. From that period, when you worked as a professor at Cambridge, you have made comments on the project in Algiers and on the ‘rediscovery’ of brick. At the time, extremely interesting things were happening in England, such as the decline of Archigram, the Georges Pompidou Center Competition in Paris, the work of James Stirling, the reform of the Architectural Association in 1971, and the incorporation of Leon Krier as a professor, just to name some examples. Did you have any contact with what was happening in the English environment before arriving? Did Cambridge have any connection to what was going on outside?

FCV: We had connections after we finished Algiers. We did a study of the Thames in relation to the Seine and we got together with French architecture students from Paris. We did an exchange to see the context. And things that have been done now in England, like taking advantage of the docks, came from that experience I think, maybe not that particular solution but somehow the issue of how to rehabilitate and make sense of what was thrown away did. So, at that time we had relations with the government and the ministry in England and with French officials. In the architectural environment, there was a lot of harmony with what was being done. There was this great architect, my dean, in fact, an eminence: Leslie Martin. His vision influenced me, the English, and the students in general. The Swedish Ralph Erskine was also there.

FD, HB: Regarding this, in Cambridge, you lived in Clare Hall, a 1968 project by Erskine, who had been...
making groupings of houses with great emphasis on the interaction of individuals and communities since the 1940s. Did this influence your community projects when you returned to Chile?

FCV: Yes, I think England influenced me a lot, a lot. I was very fascinated with what they did, their very simple and humble way to conceive a project. I remember a student, who obtained a maximum grade with her great project, where she climatized a building in Algiers through air currents and passing through water. When she got to the final exam, she started by saying: "It seemed to me that, when walking on the sidewalk, I had to somehow show in my walk that there was this piece that I was going to do, so it had a step." That way of thinking: she started with the smallest detail, one that had inspired her for so many things. I highly appreciated that and the subjective issues that one considers creating a work of architecture.

FD, HB: At the end of the 1970s, you returned to Chile. What role did politics play in the architecture of that period?

FCV: It was the time when I had the most work because all these communities arose from the demand that I had from people living abroad, asking us to have a house in Chile upon their return, and sending us their savings. When I came back from England, I came packed with dollars to do projects. That was when I thought of starting the Jesús condominium, which is in La Reina: I bought a plot and bought the end of the backyards from all the owners of the block, gathering about six or seven thousand square meters, I think, at a very low price, because I visited people offering a gift and they just moved the fence. They enjoyed the money they received, and I was amassing an important amount of land.

FD, HB: Considering that you were a firm opponent to the military regime, expressing your opinions in the Análisis magazine, for example; how do you understand the fact that your peers recognized you with the National Architecture Prize in 1983?

FCV: I think that the board members of the Colegio de Arquitectos were also political opponents. I think that, even more than the quality of the applicant, they were influenced by the political decision of giving a sign that we were alive.

FD, HB: In the communities that you designed and built between the 1970s and 1980s, three things can be seen in almost all projects, which make a hallmark: the very idea of ‘community’ (with all the programmatic operations it implies); a permanent game with the zig-zags in plan (visible even in Quinta Michita); and a formal language based on bricks, elements such as arches, diamond windows and gabled roofs, which
are very close to the postmodern ideas in architecture. What can you tell us about this language that characterized your architecture in this period?

FCV: The professors would greet me and do something like this [he moves his arm diagonally], as if saying “you do everything diagonally.” Note that if I had a characteristic, it is that I invented many things that are normally used in door frames, incorporated the frame into its fixed part so the window could run, I invented all of those things. So, I was tying myself to what I was repeating. And that happened to me with the brick: it was a process of enrichment together with the workers so that they could do the things we wanted to do. This created a kind of culture of our ‘how-to,’ which involved being all the time inventing new ways of laying bricks, just playing. I did not see then the significance that I give to it now. When I look at them now, I see them and say: “look how curious, why did I do this like that? Why was I so concerned with detail? Why did we have to draw each wall, in elevation the brick was vertical, horizontal, then it was diagonal...?” That is why I have always been accumulating the idea that architecture is characteristic of every human being — builder by essence — but in the architect the desire to discover becomes more evident, to create more than accumulate too much knowledge. Every time we had a project, we would close all the books: we had to have a clean mind to face the problem at hand, unlike other offices that I see, coming with projects, jammed with magazines showing all the examples.

FD, HB: In the Andalucía Neighborhood Complex (1994) you carried out a settlement project for 200 families in the heart of Santiago. That project fused the idea of community and participation on a larger scale, and even precedes the dynamic social housing that Elemental would make in Iquique 15 years later. Why do you think this project did not have the impact that other subsequent cases of dynamic social housing had?

FCV: I actually think that that’s very unfair. It is an example, of course, but in the Andalucía project [FIG. 2], Spanish architects came and stayed with me for several months, the office of Eduardo San Martín and Pedro Gastón Pascal also participated, so I have never done things alone. I think the house in Algarrobo may be the only thing I have done alone. So, don’t refer to me as the sole protagonist. In general, I think that, in the projects we did in the office, we distributed its management according to who had won the contest, which was also relative, because the four of us got into everything thoroughly. In the case of the Andalucía Neighborhood Complex, the form of growth was really just an invention; I did it for the first time there. Later, as mayor here in La Reina, I made circles that are much more perfect: it is a circle with a central patio of about eight meters, a ring where there are ten houses with an entrance towards this central patio, with a sewer chamber that serves the ten houses. If you spread the houses on a street, they would occupy a
hundred meters, but here they occupy only twenty-five. The trick is the same one that we invented in Andalucía: an empty structure of thirty square meters, but with triple height, without floors, putting the facilities below, bathroom and kitchen, and one room. That was the destination of the residents who worked permanently with us and who lived there, the same who later returned to their place. That was the beauty of it. I thought that two or three years later I would return and hopefully there would be a house built, but after only six months it was all finished. They had made their expansions, multiplied by three the surface of the house, with an investment certainly much inferior to what the State had spent. But what matters is participation, contribution, knowledge, pride. The other day, after the earthquake [of February 27, 2010] I went to see what was happening and they were all applauding me when they found out I was there. And I started looking and there was damage in various parts, so I said to them: “Sir, why are you applauding my work?” And one of them tells me: “Nothing has happened here compared to other neighborhoods.” An attitude of an evident pride.

FD, HB: How do you see the state of Chilean architecture today?

FCV: Either very bad or very good. But there is no good, favorable, fairly good standard, let’s say. I think what you see on the street is disastrous, although there are also examples of great things.

FD, HB: How do you assess the level of self-criticism that currently exists among architects?

FCV: No one knows, because there is anonymity now. There are three or four architects whose works are known, for their quality, for their expression; but the rest of the architects are under the real estate and economic interests, so I would not know which architect managed 99% of what is built today. I would not know what trend they are following, what they think or who they are. I think we have totally lost ethics because, in a very large percentage, architects are true slaves of economic interest and of tremendously uneducated people, and what they force architects to do is something completely wrong: get the most out of the land and exceed the norms in order to build one more square meter. It is the worst business possible, monetarily speaking, but also from urban planning terms or socially speaking.

FD, HB: Is that figure of the current architect different from that of the time when you were active?

FCV: Yes. I think that although the architects of today stand out a little more, in the past we were a much more respected profession. It is that today there are groups of great architects (in each country there is a small group of great architects who set the level of architecture), but the great mass of architects is totally
unknown, with nothing to show, nothing to say. So, I would say that the profession itself, on average, has lowered its levels of participation in society in different areas. Architects are also highly subjected to the people who tell them what to do.

FD, HB: Finally, in your teaching, what do you want students to learn?

FCV: I try to instill in them a broader vision of the world, not restricted to the fact that an architect is a building designer, but that an architect is an important institution in society. I believe that an architect in any board, in any human activity, has a particular point of view to look at things, that unites, that relates, that links things, and although they may not know anything about the required specialties, they are there as a point of communication. I have felt this very strongly as rector of the university, as mayor, one does not know what is happening, but the context, the communion of interests that is needed, drive us to unite everything in a light of strong will. I think that architects, their training, requires that sense of human activity, but they do not use it much because they are crushed, they cannot break free. ARQ

**Notas / Notes**

1 This piece is an excerpt from the original interview. The complete publication in Spanish can be found at: Francisco Díaz and Hugo Bertolotto “Fernando Castillo Velasco: El ojo crítico y autocrítico del hombre que marcó su huella en la arquitectura chilena”. Ciper Chile, 02.08.2013. Accessible in: <https://ciperchile.cl/2013/08/02/fernando-castillo-velasco-el-ojo-critico-y-autocritico-del-hombre-que-marco-su-huella-en-la-arquitectura-chilena/>

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**Fernando Castillo Velasco**

Architect, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (1947). His work, among which is worth noting his community housing projects and his participation in the BV office, was recognized in 1983 with the National Architecture Prize. He worked as a professor at the UC School of Architecture, the University of Cambridge, the Universidad Central de Venezuela and, finally, at the Universidad ARCIS, of which he was also a co-founder. Along with this, he was appointed rector of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (1967-1973) and served as intendant of the Santiago Metropolitan region (March 1994 - September 1994) and as mayor of the district of La Reina (1965-1968; 1992-1994; 1996-2004). He passed away on July 18, 2013.
Quinta Michita

FERNANDO CASTILLO V., EDUARDO CASTILLO I., CRISTIÁN CASTILLO E.

Simón Bolívar, La Reina, Santiago
1973-1974
Planta vivienda tipo / Typical house plan
E. / S. 1: 200

Planta vivienda Fernando Castillo Velasco / Fernando Castillo Velasco house plan
E. / S. 1: 200
Curso / Course: Seminario de investigación, 2º semestre 2010, Escuela de Arquitectura UC / Research seminar, second semester of 2010, UC Architecture School

Profesor / Professor: Alejandro Crispiani

Comunidad Las Alamedas
Las Alamedas community

FERNANDO CASTILLO V., PABLO LABBÉ,
JOAQUÍN VELASCO, JOSÉ PÉREZ DE PRADA,
EDUARDO CASTILLO I.

Carlos Silva Vildósola, La Reina, Santiago
1984

Planta emplazamiento / Site plan
E. / S. 1: 2.000
Planta comunidad Las Alamedas / Las Alamedas community plan
S. E. / N. S.
Planta viviendas 9 y 10 /
Houses 9 and 10 plan
E. / S. 1: 200

Cortes viviendas 9 y 10 /
Houses 9 and 10 sections
E. / S. 1: 200

Curso / Course: Seminario de investigación, 2º semestre 2010, Escuela de Arquitectura Uc / Research seminar, second semester of 2010, UC Architecture School
Profesor / Professor: Alejandro Crispiani

Comunidad Los Castaños
Los Castaños community

FERNANDO CASTILLO V., PABLO LABBÉ, PATRICIA RUBIO, JOSÉ PÉREZ DE PRADA, EDUARDO CASTILLO I.

Av. Vicente Pérez Rosales, La Reina, Santiago
1984
Planta casa lineal / Line house plan

E. / S. 1: 200

Corte casas Cubo y L. / Houses L and Cube section

E. / S. 1: 200
Plantas primer y segundo nivel, casas Cubo y L /  
First and second level plan, L and Cube houses  
E. / S. 1: 200

Curso / Course: Seminario de Investigación, 2º semestre 2010, Escuela de Arquitectura UC / Research seminar, second semester of 2010, UC Architecture School  
Profesor / Professor: Alejandro Crispiani

Villas y comunidades de Fernando Castillo Velasco en Santiago / Collective housing projects by Fernando Castillo Velasco in Santiago.
Fuente / Source: Dibujo de Ediciones ARQ con información otorgada por Margarita Castillo. / Drawing by Ediciones ARQ based on information provided by Margarita Castillo.

LEYENDA / LEGEND
1. Villa La Reina / La Reina Housing Neighborhood, 1966
2. Quinta Michita, 1973-1974
3. Casas entre medianeros / Houses between partition walls, 1977
5. Quinta Hamburgo, 1979
6. Comunidad Vicente Pérez Rosales / Vicente Pérez Rosales Community, 1981
7. Comunidad Los Almendros / Los Almendros Community, 1982
8. Las Tinajas, 1983
9. Comunidad Los Castaños / Los Castaños Community, 1984
10. Comunidad Las Alamedas / Las Alamedas Community, 1984
11. Comunidad El Espino / El Espino Community, 1984
13. Comunidad Los Jazmines / Los Jazmines Community, 1987
15. Comunidad Las Higueras / Las Higueras Community, 1988
17. Villa Andalucía / Andalucía Housing Neighborhood, 1994
18. Villa Ukamau / Ukamau Housing Neighborhood, 2017
19. Comunidad Mirador de Los Almendros / Mirador de Los Almendros Community, 2020