



**FIG 1** Imagen de la portada del *brochure* promocional del proyecto. / *Promotional brochure's cover image.*  
Dibujo / *Drawing:* Mathias Klotz

# **SINGULARIZING LIFESTYLES**

**FABRICATING IMAGINARIES**

**IN SANTIAGO'S GATED COMMUNITIES**

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**While the real estate market engenders its own imaginaries, it is also influenced by the ones coming from the outside; for example, images of ideal potential consumers that prompt changes in supply. This research delves into real estate executives' imaginaries to illustrate how they transform housing supply and, what is more, how they manage to adapt the offer when these imaginaries do not match the expected target.**

KEYWORDS · housing, client, real estate, urbanization, Klotz

FIGURE 1 shows one of the images used by the company Socovesa to introduce the real estate project “Singular” to the public. Located in the Chamisero area, “seven minutes away from Vitacura,” and envisaged so that “the children from the condominium were able to meet, interact and play outside without the menace of cars,” the project was designed by Mathias Klotz, “one of the outstanding exponents of contemporary Chilean architecture,” as indicated by the project’s instructive brochure. Unlike the traditional graphic representation used by real estate developers, the image echoes the idea of a freehand creative author rather than a standardized production system. The choice of a sketch as representation strategy reveals the attempt of singularizing the project, intensifying the meaning of the name (FIG. 2). The image does not specify materials or relationships between components; it outlines a design exercise, a sort of referential imaginary – regular and pure volumes, large glass surfaces, trees and two silhouettes – presenting the way of life the project evokes.

In this text we seek to dive in the understanding of key moments along the project preparation process, analyzing the strategies and imaginaries mobilized in the proposal. We intend to open the ‘black box’ of this type of real estate projects (Latour, 2005), providing an empirical analysis of how the processes of ‘packaging’ operate behind these housing condominiums for Santiago’s high-income sectors.

While there has been a growing interest in studying the expansion of condominiums and gated communities in Santiago, and their resulting impacts on segregation and spatial fragmentation (Hidalgo 2004; Sabatini, Cáceres and

Cerda 2001), the empirical studies that have investigated the back office of these real estate projects are scarce to date. In this sense, rather than being concerned on urban effects and lifestyles that unfold under these postulates, this article shifts towards the understanding of the practices, devices and strategies mobilized by the actors themselves to define the customer's categories and values, the houses' attributes and structural characteristics, in addition to the values and traits that sought to comprise the design of these condominiums. How are the users of new urban products and their attributes defined? What kind of knowledge and criteria are used to represent and signify the potential inhabitants of these projects? And, finally, what possible representative and forming effects do these imaginaries have on society?

Trying to answer these questions – and observing how the design of these projects is intertwined with a form of sociology of high-income sectors – appears as an extremely relevant element in understanding how the real estate industry perceives the city and how it outlines the lifestyles of Santiago's inhabitants. As shown by studies explained below, each infrastructure, product or technology comprises doctrines and imaginaries regarding its users and future scenarios, foreshadowing particular versions of the world and predisposing certain actions (Akrich, 1992).

Based on an ethnographic study consisting of semi-structured interviews with key informants and on-site observation of the condominiums,<sup>1</sup> this text describes two opposing but central actions in the aligning and nature of the Singular project. On the one hand, it analyzes the singularizing process in which the actors involved in the project seek to equip and coordinate the attachment of distinctive attributes and meanings to the housing proposal. On the other, a process of de-singularization will be described. That is, the actors, once confronted with the reactions generated by the architectural program, are forced to re-evaluate the attributes and meanings of the project, removing certain components that were in the very definition of what they regarded as the proposal's 'singularity.' Thus, it will be showed how the project's original imaginary – based on sociological and moral representations regarding lifestyles compatible with Singular – is adjusted, ensuing a primarily economic assessment and valuation of the project.

### **FABRICATING IMAGINARIES AS A MECHANISM FOR SOCIAL DISTINCTION**

The development of real estate projects is not only relevant because of the socio-spatial transformations they introduce, but also given how formal and architectural criteria overlap with knowledge and building strategies concerning imaginaries, profiling and social categorizations. It is interesting to identify

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<sup>1</sup> The empirical survey of this study was conducted between March and June 2016, and was attended by students of the Masters in Sustainable Architecture and Energy of the School of Architecture at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and researchers associate to the FONDECYT project N° 11130556: José Caamaño, Christiane Delucchi, Mari Paz and Daniela Poblete.



**FIG 2** Sala de venta y material promocional del proyecto Singular en terreno.  
*Singular project's showroom and promotional material.*  
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how certain social categories circulate and become operational in the creation of value of these housing projects, as well as how their characteristics contribute to crystallize certain imaginaries and social identities.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu made a major effort to understand how specific attributes or imaginaries conveyed in certain objects play an outlining role in class identity – what he calls ‘habitus’ (1984a, 1984b). The concept of habitus – defined as the set of dispositions to practice – while taking into account a structured social and cultural framework, is also opened to contingent possibilities operating in the individual ways of being and doing. For Bourdieu, actors are constantly developing strategies and practices to objectify and signify, to secure and reproduce positions into the social world, finding in the procurement of goods and objects an instrument in the battle for symbolic differentiation. Thus, taste – rather than a subjective and relative matter – should be understood as a practice of symbolic distinction that contributes to the reproduction of certain positions. The author insists that people are not necessarily aware of these determinants and, on the contrary, tend to make aesthetic judgments as if these were free choices motivated by the pleasure of the beautiful or the functional.

Other perspectives described below have analyzed not how people develop social differentiation mechanisms, but how other actors (brands, companies, institutions, policies, products) construct taxonomies and imaginaries, user profiles and categorizations of social life. The interest lies in understanding the multiple strategies and knowledge – whether economic, sociological, psychological, commercial – mobilized to represent the social world and the implications of such practices in the production of socio-cultural meanings and imaginaries.

Luc Boltanski’s work (1982) traces the rise and manufacture of a socio-professional group in France (*le cadre*), showing that it is the result of a socio-historical process of objectification and institutionalization that has progressively endowed a social

group with certain values. Boltanski's originality is that instead of granting substantial and inherent properties to a particular group, he aims to identify the heterogeneity of agents – both material and symbolic – involved in its configuration. From this perspective, a social group's identity or value is not an intrinsic property, but rather the result of operations regarding social production and the manufacturing of imaginaries or categories, subjects of empirical study (Muniesa, 2011).

In this line, other studies have analyzed how experts represent the environment where their products or services will develop. Akrich (1992) observed the manufacturing processes of the script that engineers deploy in the design of technical objects, that is, the worldviews they seek to introduce in order to anticipate the reception of goods or services.<sup>2</sup> Adopting a semiotic perspective, the author argues that any object or innovation that hits the market needs to introduce a script – mobilizing a worldview of meanings – that ensures the interest and acceptability of the product by future consumers. Some authors have examined technical devices as places where certain users and future scenarios are qualified and stabilized (Wilkie and Michael, 2009), in addition to the calculation techniques used to assess features of certain goods (Callon et al., 2000). On the subject, Helgesson and Muniesa (2013) suggest not to understand the value of things under the traditional dichotomy subjectivity/objectivity, but rather to delve into the study of those concrete activities that are building the reputation of a particular entity.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the work of Ariztía (2014) shows how a set of spatial and constructive concerns in real estate projects targeting Santiago's middle-class segments depends on scripts developed for an aspirational middle-class profile. The argument displays how middle-class narratives are encompassed in designs and materials, while the effects of these operations set the terms for the production of class identity, validating imaginaries on social mobility.

## **PRACTICES AND OPERATIONS OF SINGULARIZATION**

Having acquired in the 90s a considerable area of land in the Chamisero sector, municipality of Colina, the company Socovesa<sup>4</sup> decided to undertake a real estate development in the area (FIG. 3). It was on this blank page – due to the lack of preexistences – where the construction of an architectural imaginary started. The goal was to single out an area where value and meaning were unclear, a place whose attributes were far from being stable (as it occurs in other consolidated high-income neighborhoods). This scenario forced Socovesa to identify value and differentiation criteria, materializing a real

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<sup>2</sup> On the notion of script applied to other objects and technical devices, see Tironi 2014.

<sup>3</sup> "Value is therefore the result of a process of social work and a wide range of activities (production, and combination of circulation and evaluation) aimed at making things valuable" (Helgesson & Muniesa 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Socovesa (Affordable Housing Building Society) (Sociedad Constructora de Viviendas Económicas s. a.) is a group of companies that, since its foundation in 1967, has been directed towards social housing, although today has enlarged its scope to real estate products of different targets and users.



**FIG 3** Emplazamiento de la primera etapa del proyecto Singular (demarcado en línea segmentada blanca) / *Site of the first stage of the Singular project (drawn in white dotted line).*

Fuente / Source: Servicio de imágenes del planeta Google Earth™



**FIG 4** Vista general de la primera etapa del proyecto Singular. *Overview of the Singular project's first stage.*

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estate development associated with 'novelty' (with respect to its formal, constructive and narrative characteristics).

The manufacturing of value was key for defining the project; thus Socovesa ensured a virtuous relationship between the benefits acknowledged by users and the costs associated with them. However, a discrepancy between the economic models (and their utility paradigms) and the subject's specific practices (Bourdieu, 2012) was – as always – established.

#### CREATING VALUE FROM ARCHITECTURE

Socovesa's Singular proposal mobilized a greater number of actors than usual. Besides commercial and development departments, market researchers and other marketing departments joined the project. For one of the interviewees, the fact that the company's ceo was involved implied it was "an unusual project for Socovesa." The development department was responsible for the economic side of the project and the analysis of land characteristics, current legislation and the possibilities of residential construction, to define only after the product through a market area analysis (FIG. 4). At this point, the company's market research department played a key role, as it had to provide information about prospective homebuyers.

Notwithstanding these considerations, an element emerged that would largely structure the project's vocation, from subdivision organization and housing design to the marketing campaign. It was the appointment of the architect in charge: "We said, let's look for an architect who increases brand awareness, who adds value to the project, who does things that have not been done before. And in that sense, three or four names of architects who were doing things differently came up, and, among those, the one we liked the most was Mathias Klotz, given the profile of people who would buy here, who are younger people," stated one of the individuals responsible for the project.

The strategy was clear: the differentiating factor would be left in the hands of architecture. A local architecture figure had



**FIG 5** Sala de venta en terreno del proyecto Singular con un video de presentación del arquitecto Mathias Klotz. / *Singular project's showroom with a video presentation by the architect Mathias Klotz.*  
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to be selected as value generator for the new property product. But before trying to show any constructive or spatial attributes, it was intended to generate some form of rapport, that is, an imaginary associated with the architect's name (FIG. 5). As stated by one of the interviewees: "Here the main attribute was a home seven minutes away from Santiago, designed by Mathias Klotz, with a different architecture and urbanism." This construction of the project's imaginary was constantly reinforced by categories and values characterizing the design, but which above all, spoke of the architect's 'talent': "simplicity of volumes," "urban look," "visual expansion," and "a house that is contemporary today and will still look contemporary in 20 years" (FIG. 6).

For the company's culture, the strategy represented a major innovation, since "in the last ten or eight years nobody new had entered... I mean, we had always worked with the same three or four external architecture offices." This reinforces the idea of uniqueness of the project itself. The hypothesis behind Singular seemed strong: the real estate proposal would acquire 'premium' character and would strengthen audience targeting by adhering the 'Klotz' brand to it. This was necessary in order to ensure "good architecture," not only in a functional sense, but also from the point of view of the imaginary and attributes that the architect's name could trigger on clients.

#### CREATING REAL ESTATE ATTRIBUTES AS A STRATEGY FOR ADDING VALUE

Once the choice of architect was defined as a key decision for the construction of the project's imaginary, the attributes that would characterize the proposal began to be set. While the location was considered a positive factor given the proximity of the Northeast highway, the project stakeholders were aware that this peripheral condition involved more than just a matter of accessibility: "If you are going to live outside (Santiago) you have to completely change your lifestyle, you



**FIG 6** Casa piloto, etapa 1A, fachada a patio interior.  
*Model house, stage 1A, inner courtyard facade.*  
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**FIG 7** Casa piloto, etapa 1A, detalle de revestimiento exterior segundo piso. / *Model house, stage 1A, second level facade detail.*  
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have to take your children to a far away school, your friends are also far.” Consequently, given a place with no history, with unclear contextual attributes, and which meant a ‘foundational’ option for customers, the need to provide the project with extraordinary, new, and unique attributes became clear.

In reviewing the list of attributes corresponding to the three housing types proposed for the project’s first stage – 167, 189 and 205 m<sup>2</sup> – attention is drawn to the double height dining room, the large family room on the second floor and EIFS<sup>5</sup> thermal insulation. This construction system – incorporating thermal insulation on the external surface of outside walls – can be a significant improvement in terms of performance when compared with traditional solutions. Similarly, the façade’s metal cladding became a distinctive element in terms of value given its contribution to constructing the Klotz imaginary associated with the project. According to an interviewee, “the selection of ‘quadroline’<sup>6</sup> was due to Mathias wish to install this coating (...) which allowed to combine different colors, different shades, providing some freedom to the volume” (FIG. 7). This was crucial, since it not only emphasized the project’s authorship and brand, but also defined the singularity of each house in a homogeneous whole.

#### THE CREATION OF THE NAME AS A SINGULARIZING STATEMENT

The last step in creating this imaginary would be given by the definition of the condominium’s name, established close to the date the houses’ sale began. In this kind of projects, names

<sup>5</sup> Acronym which means Exterior Insulation Finishing System.

<sup>6</sup> Commercial name for a facade product developed by the company Hunter Douglas.



are not innocent as they must embody and make visible an identity, a set of values and representations supposedly appreciated by the target audience. If a house designed by Klotz was initially considered an appealing attribute for users craving to show a taste in their ways of living and consuming, then the name of the condominium had to be tuned with that same imaginary, marked by simplicity and minimalism. The name “Singular” emphasizes that indeterminate, single, individual, specific condition associated with the construction of the project’s expected user. Thus, starting from target studies of audiences able to afford a house valued in approximately 12,000 UF (roughly 480,000 dollars),<sup>7</sup> this imaginary was charged with new attributes related to “young families” or “taste for design.”

### **REDEFINING THE PROJECT: DE-SINGULARIZING OPERATIONS**

The moment of truth in this process of formal and symbolic construction on the notion of singularity was represented by the condominium’s selling phase. At this stage, the imaginary meets its target audience, testing the willingness of the latter to buy the product. Although it could be positively evaluated, the project presented initially lower sales than expected. At first, project managers perceived it as a consequence of the proposal – entailing certain risks – and, perhaps as a result of enthusiasm, did not anticipate that the country’s economic expectations could deteriorate. At the same time, a mismatch between the product offered and the district’s ability to absorb this component was also perceived. This resulted in the Singular project’s first stage houses costing about 12,000 UF, while in the rest of the area offer prices ranged between 8,000 and 10,000 UF (around 320,000 and 400,000 dollars).

However, since real estate projects are developed in stages, they have the ability to face different requirements and difficulties that may arise. In light of the results, once concluded the project’s first stage (called 1A) and instead of developing the stage 1B (with the same characteristics of the above), a new phase (2A) was developed considering several adjustments (FIG. 8).

This stage is characterized by the reduction of original expectations, de-singularizing the project in some specific aspects. First, in commercial terms, the price dropped to 8,865 UF, which entailed a significant area reduction of sites and houses. This generated an impact on the imaginary constructed in accordance with the project’s targeted audience. Thus, given the situation that “apparently there were not so many people who valued buying a Klotz house after all” – in the words of an interviewee – the target audience shifted to “young couples – living in a apartment in Providencia or

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<sup>7</sup> The UF (Spanish acronym for ‘development unit’) is an account unit used in Chile. The exchange value between the UF and the Chilean peso is periodically adjusted according to inflation, so that the net value of the UF remains constant. This unit is used to determine the cost of construction, property values and mortgage loans. According to the Chilean Central Bank, to October 5, 2016, 1 UF = US \$40.



**FIG 8** Construcción etapa 2A proyecto Singular.  
*Construction of the stage 2A of Singular.*  
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Las Condes – who did not have enough to buy a house in the original project, but could now afford its most basic version.” That is, although certain characteristics representing the imaginaries of original buyers were waived, there was at least an intention to preserve the most important attribute: the singularity of the architecture by Mathias Klotz.

Now, in the second step of the adjustment process, surfaces and technical attributes were affected. Here, the de-singularization process was carried out under the premise of budget reduction where – in the words of those interviewed – “the first removal was the EIFS thermal insulation.” However, this also had representative and moral implications, because although it obeyed an obviously functional reason ( $UF/m^2$  cost), this feature was also part of the expectations of the public accessing the new project. Indeed, each time the price is reduced, the value assigned to these technical or energy efficiency attributes is diluted. In an interviewee’s words, the logic guiding the purchase decision would not be given by the argument “lets buy here the apartment or house because they are sustainable and more efficient (...)” On the contrary, it could be said, “we are far from that, and people will buy only what they can afford.” This is how the project’s original program, oriented towards an exclusivity criterion, was redefined in terms of performance indicators and interaction within the saleroom.

#### **FINAL REMARKS**

The intention was to show here how architecture becomes an instrument for spreading social meanings and a helpful strategy in real estate projects when capturing customers and tuning with imaginaries of social differentiation. We described how the process of defining value for a condo in Chamisero placed the architect Mathias Klotz as one of the distinctive and structuring attributes of the project. The Klotz operation was symbolically effective by generating a

form of social distinction on potential customers (Bourdieu, 1984b), becoming a singularization instrument both for the consumer – aspiring to reproduce attributes and values – as for Socovesa – who, through the architect's name, sought to crystallize rapport in consumer niches. On the other hand, a solid architectural style was relevant to counter the 'emerging' status of the site. In this sense, the Klotz brand came to re-populate and invest singular meaning to an area whose imaginaries were in the process of stabilization.

Likewise, the difficulties experienced by the project when confronted with its real audience were described, exemplifying the introduction of changes made in order to sustain the projected sales program. We have named this process 'de-singularization': the original proposal, oriented towards an exclusivity criterion, had to be re-evaluated or assessed according to the data delivered by the selling stage. Rather than failure, it showed an asymmetry between the representations and values that supported the proposal and the actual purchasing dispositions.<sup>8</sup>

It was also shown how the representational strategies deployed by ideologists behind this kind of projects – through tactics and socio-technical devices belonging to marketing and advertising – are always struggling with experiences and practices that fail to be 'dominated' by the program's meanings and narratives. The scenarios and moral assumptions that they sought to crystallize not only are usually re-signified by users, but are often desecrated and politicized (Akirich, 1992), questioning the implicit imaginaries in the object.

Finally, one of the most important findings regarding this case study is how the Singular project managed to be loaded with attributes and values that not only refer to economic or demographic characteristics, but also mobilize a sociological understanding of high-income sectors and their lifestyles, values, desires and expectations. Therefore, the knowledge produced in these areas goes far beyond the purely engineering, financial or architectural one, and draws on a wide range of circulating discourses and representations on the identity and desires of Santiago's wealthiest sectors. While the task of understanding empirically how the cultural meanings and taxonomies built by these real estate projects impact on these social sectors' identity is still pending, it does not seem entirely spurious to sustain a relationship between the social imaginaries comprised in these proposals and how the actors reproduce certain dispositions and practices in their social world. Imaginaries built by real estate projects can be designed as class anchors, contributing to generate narratives for identification, setting ways of being and doing. As elaborated previously in other areas (Callon, 1999; Tironi, 2014), discourses, imaginaries and meanings not only represent an 'external' reality, they also involve or model the world they describe, formalizing realities and giving consistency to certain entities. **ARQ**

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<sup>8</sup> Some authors (Hennion, Meadel, et al., 1989; Akirich 1992; Ariztía, 2014) suggest that far from objectively describing a social reality, these strategies of representation and classification reflect the projections of the makers themselves, helping to shape stereotypes and certain social values

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