

Today's Relevance of Latin American Modern Architecture

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Abstract

This study considers works of Latin American modern architecture that attracted international attention in the mid 20th century in order to show them as examples in the face of a continuous cultural uprooting imposed by the advance of globalization. First, the uprooting sense which modernity has imposed upon society and how it is expressed through the homogenization of architecture is observed. Then, this influence upon Latin America is analyzed showing how a generation of mid-century architects reacted towards an imposed universal design, assimilating and reinterpreting it to generate a hybrid but native expression. Finally, the current situation of world's architecture is reviewed where by the legacy of Latin American modern expression has become a valuable source to feed latent creativity and local potential.

Keywords: modernity, modern architecture, Latin America, critical regionalism.

Introduction

Nowadays few of the architectural works created in Latin America can compete worldwide. Uprooted by the effects of globalization, today's Latin American architecture is supported by the rules of a homogenized design which is out of context and to the detriment of its own cultural value. In view of this reality, it is important to bear in mind there was a period (forgotten by many) in which Latin America became one of the world's leaders in terms of *modern architecture*,¹ showing at the same time its regional feelings. This was a short period inserted between 1930 and 1960 in which various countries from the region produced highly innovative architecture; hence the rest of the world just stayed to watch.

Latin American modern architecture was internationally recognized through exhibits (such as the 1939 New York World Fair and those of MoMA²) and publications (Violich, 1944; Myers, 1952; Hitchcock, 1955; Mindlin, 1956, etc), which put in the

¹ The term *modern architecture* is applied to a large variety of styles on edifices built from the 1900s on. With similar characteristics, they occupied an outstanding position as a result of the rationality and efficacy of their designs, the simplicity of their shape and the elimination of all ornaments. By 1930s, these styles were consolidated in the so-called *International Style* which expanded throughout the world, becoming the dominant way of construction through some decades.

² MoMA (Museum of Modern Art), New York. By the exhibits: *Brazil Builds* (1943) and *Latin American Architecture* (1955).

lead the design of university cities and massive construction of public housing, but especially as a result of its creativity and way of combining modern and local features. Unfortunately, this period ended with the construction of Brasilia (1960), so the region which was first admired, only inspired apathy, since it was considered unable to design its own cities. By the 1970s, all interest in architecture was lost, since it was related to dictatorships which had promoted it and were now ravaging the region. In addition, it was left aside vis-à-vis the economic and stylistic dominance from Europe and the United States during the Post-war Period, which made the architecture of this region disappear from specialized books and lectures, and even from historic records regarding the contribution thereof to the architecture of the 20th century.

Therefore, this study tries to make a balance by considering Latin American modern architectural pieces which attracted international attention in order to show them as an example to be reconsidered today before the adversity of a continuous cultural uprooting imposed by the advance of globalization. The uprooting sense of modernity has an effect upon a society and we can observe how this feeling is expressed through a homogenization of architecture. This influence upon Latin America is then analyzed showing how a generation of architects reacted in the face of an imposed universal design, by assimilating and reinterpreting thereof in order to create a hybrid but autochthonous expression. The current situation of world architecture is viewed and finally the value of the Latin American modern legacy is presented to nourish a latent creativity and a local potential.

The Dilemma of Modernity in Architecture

Modernity is a concept expressing the quality which grants the present its differentiation from the past and guides it to the future. This term refers to the typical features of modern times and the way they are perceived; attitudes to life related with a continuously changing and evolutionary process, headed to the future, different from the past and the present. An exclusive Western concept, unparalleled in other civilizations,³ which shows a vision of time formed in a lineal, irreversible, and progressive way set within the new rational thinking model arising from the Renaissance.⁴

Established over pre-modernity, modernity has developed by periods.⁵ However, the term is most frequently applied to a period beginning between 1870 and 1910 which flows into the present, and more specifically between 1910 and 1960. Today, we say we are in a condition after modernity or *post-modernity*. A period which, although not yet defined and far from being a substitute, opens a new and more complex stratum of significance about the same modernity.

Modernity breaks with tradition and rejects the legacy of the past which creates a conflict and rebellion for a change of status having a meaning. It advances together with the westernization process giving autonomy to the fields of science (by *modernization*) and art (by *modernism*) in order to develop and perform an inherent freedom potential. It is the freedom of limitations imposed by tradition and even due to the same human

³ In other civilizations the notion of time was based on a static, cyclic concept, or as something merely earthy as opposed to divine eternity.

⁴ See Heynen (1999: 8-14).

⁵ Such as the Reform and Counterreform, the Illustration, the Romanticism, the Industrial Revolution, etc.

condition of man's destiny offering unprecedented options and improvements in the material area. Unfortunately, this resignation to the traditional field in life has headed, at the same time, to a loss of security and significance, so there is a feeling of "lack of roots" that is difficult to accept for many individuals.

Modern architecture favors this avant-garde and, at the same time, deals with tension before tradition, a tension leading to conflicts as a result of its task of materializing inhabitable spaces and keeping in mind the uprooting sense produced by modernity. Therefore, the "lack of home" has become a typical feeling in the life of any metropolis, where the sense of a home is lost in the distance before the growing instability, virtuality and large mobility which characterizes modern society. However, we must bear in mind that both home and housing are related first with tradition and safety which guarantees a rooting connection with the site. This is the dilemma of architecture today.

Alienated from nature, modern man tends to develop a non-sense habitat under mass production. Architecture should give him the chance to orientate and identify himself when evoking an image of meaning. This means the space built must be the result of integration with the surroundings (historical, cultural, geological, etc.) through a "poetic" creation of that specific site. A place characterized by the concept of *Genius Loci*, a term from the Roman mythology whose contemporary use refers to the particular atmosphere of a place or to the so-called "spirit of the place"; *-the soul of a site-*, of which modernity knew little, ignored, or stated the idea that men and their surroundings are different and separated entities. The task of real architecture should be based on making this ideal of the *Genius Loci* possible.

The Development of Modern Architecture

Modernity required making architectural language universal where the *Neo-classic* style found its first expression in that movement from the middle of the 18th century called the *Illustration*. This age was characterized by the appearance of a new vision of history which questioned the use of the classic standards in architecture, which also characterized this field as a discipline under the new rational thinking model, making it a specialization after the establishment of the first School of Engineering.⁶ This marked the beginning of technical, social and cultural transformations which led to the establishment of modern architecture.

Under this process, the *Industrial Revolution* introduced new materials which made it possible to build better and more audacious structures based on technical standards. The ideas introduced by *Romanticism* led to a closer approach of art to industrial products inspired by the value of nature to impregnate a *-soul-* into machine made products.⁷ This produced a very specific style in architecture and fine arts called *Art Nouveau* which combined this approach with the contribution offered by technology. *Art Nouveau* style became highly popular as a result to its free forms and denial of the academic tradition which degenerated in the eclecticism predominated in architecture by

⁶ *Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées*, Paris (1747)

⁷ *Romanticism* was an artistic and intellectual movement born in Western Europe by the late 18th century, which highlighted emotion and imagination as an esthetic evaluation parameter, as well as the importance of nature in art, language and its sublime experience through contact.

the end of 19th century.

Hence, the death in the use of traditional styles⁸ and the creation of a new free style with a universal point of view gave birth to a new age, so from now on, we talk about *modern architecture*. By early 1900s many architects in Europe and the United States were developing architectural solutions integrated with new technologies. The works of Antonio Gaudí (Barcelona), Otto Wagner (Vienna), and Louis Sullivan (Chicago) are the first attainments of a common struggle in order to search for new and novel solutions.⁹

By the first half of the 20th century, the simplification of architectural volumes eliminated ornament and the issue of form was subordinated to structure and technical needs. Among the new approaches, the *rationalist-functional trend* prevailed as the more representative to fulfill industrialized society's needs.¹⁰ This trend was fostered by the Swiss Le Corbusier (1887-1965), the century's most famous architect who, by means of pure volume, simple lines and smooth surfaces, imposed an economy of design based on rationality and functionality of spaces, transforming the building into a machine made to be inhabited. His vision formed a revolution with social, politic and economic effects favoring a utopian feasibility of a new world which through the rules of the International Congress of Modern Architecture -CIAM- (*Congres International de l'Architecture Moderne*, 1928-56), -founded by Le Corbusier- created the so-called *International Style* to be expanded and imposed by a standardization applicable in any part of the world.

Similar to that of the automobile, the design of the inhabited space was done in mass-production, which with the application of *The 5 Points of New Architecture*,¹¹ facilitated the creation of great and complex multifamily urban projects interesting for many governments which viewed this architecture as a tool to improve the world's social and economic condition, especially after World War II. The strongest point of the *International Style* was to offer design solutions no matter the site or the weather, so the same buildings were built throughout the world. The United Nations headquarters in New York (1947) and the UNESCO in Paris (1947), the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Museum (1951) and the National Congress in Brasilia (1960) are examples of why this style was called -international-, being applied universally without making reference to local history or the autochthonous condition of the site.

Influence upon Latin America

By the 1920s the influence of modern architecture reached Latin America when many specialized magazines, both national and international, invaded the region. Among

⁸ Such as *Neo-classic*, *Classic-Greek*, *Classic-Renaissance*, *Neo-Gothic*, *Romanesque*, *Victorian style*, etc.

⁹ For details on *Art Nouveau* and its influence on the architecture of late 19th century, see Pevsner (1968).

¹⁰ To understand the evolution of architecture throughout the 20th century, see Colquhoun (2002).

¹¹ These are 5 design parameters proposed by Le Corbusier, which set the so-called *International Style*. These are: (1) The columns raise the building off the ground, (2) The lobby is let free, (3) Facades are flat and smooth, (4) The windows must be sliding simulating smooth flats, and (5) The creation of a terrace-garden aiming to recover the land covered by the building.

these, the articles of Russian immigrant architect Gregori Warchavchik (1896-1972)¹² in Brazil are the first to state the urgent need to build based on logic without the use of ornament; he insisted on solving the social issue of housing on a large scale and this led to look for solutions which offered maximum comfort at the lowest cost. Therefore, without leaving it in simple words, he built a series of representative houses, such as Vila Mariana (1928) in Sao Paulo, a housing structure created as a machine with great simplicity, functional and faithful to the notions of new architecture. It was not too long until it gained acceptance among critics in favor of the beginning of modernity by that time.¹³

On the other hand, in Mexico, the language of modernism was introduced by architect José Villagrán García with his pragmatic design for public hospitals. But it was architect Juan O’Gorman (1905-82) who introduced Le Corbusier’s theories with his so-called “functional houses” which, besides being simple and attractive, offered maximum efficiency at the lowest cost as well. Among these, the house-workshop built for muralist Diego Rivera and painter Frida Kahlo (1931) was largely welcomed among the highest spheres of the government. Due to this success, he was later commissioned to design the network of national public schools in favor of the country’s modernization.

However, it was Le Corbusier himself who during his first visit to the region (1929) finally implanted the possibilities of this new architecture.¹⁴ His activities did not end without stating the notion of a new urbanism which influenced the modernization of some of the capital cities in the region,¹⁵ as well as on the development of vast multifamily residences and public housing complexes in urban peripheries.¹⁶ For his second visit (1936), he was invited to work together with famous Brazilian architects such as Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer on the design of a building symbol of modern architecture: the Ministry of Education and Health (*Ministry da Instrucao e da Saúde -MIS-*) in Rio (1938). This work was ruled by the points of *International Style* and could have been built in any other part of the world, but since it was a vital work within the Rio’s urban restructuration plan, the MIS building became the example of the country’s modernization, being the source of inspiration to execute numerous works in this style throughout the continent.

Built with similar buildings, the construction of Brasilia (1960) is considered the zenith in the achievement of modern architecture. The construction of this city was a significant work; unfortunately, it ended up losing reputation, since it led the country to bankruptcy and imposed on its inhabitants a rigid and extremely planned urban trace, was highly rationalized, pragmatic and mechanistic, and was ruled only through the use of automobile and CIAM’s statements. This new city did not fulfill the local needs of the time nor the expectations of a new urban thought which was already emerging by

¹² Amaral (1978: 71-74, 75-78, 79-82, 83-86, 87-91, 99-100).

¹³ Amaral (1978: 101-102).

¹⁴ Alter his lectures in Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

¹⁵ Such as urban proposals for Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo (1929), and the leading plan for Bogota’s central urban structure (1951).

¹⁶ Such as: *The Pedregulho Housing Complex* in Rio (1947), *the German Urban Center* in Mexico City (1949), and *the 23 de Enero neighborhood* in Caracas (1957).

the 60s as a reaction to modernity, demanding architecture, and the city itself be given a better relationship with the social and cultural context of the place.

Elements of Rooting and the Latin American Identity

Together with other countries, Brazil and Mexico were the main drivers of modern architecture in the region.¹⁷ Their governments considered it the most efficient means to promote themselves under the image of a modern state investing in housing and hospital constructions, and on their public buildings as well. These governments focused on social issues, and under an ideal of progress and democracy, imposed themselves after the appearance of an industrial and commercial middle class that emerged between World War I (1914-18) and the Great Economic Depression of 1929, a fact that reduced the power of the old oligarchies ruling since the 19th century.

This situation came together with cultural changes questioning European and North American supremacy as the unique source of development, which for the first time, led to an anti-imperialist feeling which has characterized the region up to the present. This was an age in which, together with a great economic optimism and social advance, a large interest to rely on and search for internal resources appeared and reconsidered Latin American idiosyncrasy in favor of the progress. Hence, all the attention was focused on the working class and Indian communities' issue, the value of race mixing and the own native expression as a means to attain modernization based on autochthonous roots.¹⁸

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) marked the first step by stating the need to modernize and create infrastructures which could allow this regime to implement programs for the working class. The muralists were the ones who first created a link with the achievements of revolution through a modern expression with a national accent. Their works criticized foreign cultural domination by showing the reality or social injustice through a didactic language which taught the people, becoming the first Latin American expression influenced by European pictoric elements of the time, but at the same time totally independent, since it was rooted on local ideas.

Afterwards, architecture played its role by trying to awake in people an innate knowledge based on their historical and cultural richness. This was an idea supported by the thought of political activist José Vasconcelos (1882-1959), who as a Minister of Education (1921-24) wished to transform Latin American society through education considered in a mystic way, and not merely relying on schools, but through creation of public works.¹⁹ Therefore architecture of the time was intended to search in its past in order to create a proper style fulfilling the needs of modern society. The so-called *Neo-colonial architecture* became the first answer that was well identified with the new ideas of the Revolution by using elements from the past.²⁰

The so-called *Neo-prehispanic architecture* was another of the expressions

¹⁷ Venezuela is highlighted as the 3rd great driver (Fraser, 2000). In other studies, the modern architecture of Argentina, Uruguay and Cuba is also included (Brillembourg, 2004; Lejeune, 2005).

¹⁸ See Larrain (2000: 93-94).

¹⁹ Thought exposed on his work *The Cosmic Race (La Raza Cós mica, 2003)*.

²⁰ This is something viewed as paradoxical since a century before and after the independence of Latin American countries it was rejected any style in architecture reminding any colonial past.

reflected in the University City of Mexico (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* -UNAM-, 1950-52). Clearly ruled by the standards of the *International Style* and built on “El Pedregal,” a district of volcanic rocks and a relevant archeological place, this work was important due to its easy adaptation to geological, historical and landscape surrounding, as well as to its murals and mosaics of Aztec reminiscence which gave buildings a proper voice. Among these, the Rectory and the University Library are symbols of Mexican modernity rooting (Fig. 1).

As a more personalized expression, *Neo-traditional architecture* was born from the works of architect Luis Barragán (1902-88), who created a sensual and poetic style by using traditional elements (fountains, textures, colors, etc) inspired by love of the natural beauty of its region. However, it was the influence of European pictorial trends and the incorporation of modern trends such as *Cubism* and *Surrealism* which gave to this architectural expression an avant-garde sense adapted to the site, its landscape and climate.

Figure 1 Construction symbol of Mexican modern architecture rooted on the tradition thereof. UNAM Library (by Juan O’Gorman and others, 1952). Mexico City.



In Brazil, this same desire to search for inner resources gave strength to the so-called *Nativism*,²¹ constant among Brazilian writers who by the end of the 19th century were already making reference to the need to rediscover the land and to value

²¹ A regionalist movement which proclaimed the return to power of natives from a colonized area and the return of native culture.

its immigrants: black and Indians whose cultural richness should be waked through art. This was an ideal which fostered a significant event in the whole region: *The Week of Modern Art* in Sao Paulo (1922) in which the consumption of European culture was discussed, trying to transform it into an expression of meaning through artistic exhibits in literature, painting, sculpture and architecture, which by showing interest on European trends represented native subjects in different ways.²²

By 1930, nativism and modernism were mixed with a reinforced nationalism as a result of World War I, nourishing the revolution of the Brazilian Integralist Party,²³ and as in the rest of the region, social reforms were implemented to attend the demand of fast urban growth accentuated by rural migration. In this urgent need for an adequate urbanism and the requirements of a new society, the MIS building in Rio was the first work which used autochthonous elements, such as the typical high columns to create a natural circulation of ventilation, the *brise-soleil* (or parapets) and *eaves* (or cantilevers) in facades to mitigate the intensity of sun from the tropic as well as to recover traditional *Portuguese Mosaic and Azulejos*.²⁴

Designed by architect Roberto Burle Marx (1909-94), the gardens of this building also became relevant as result of incorporating native plants to resemble images such as Miro's, Picasso's and Calder's of free and organic shapes, suggesting biological analogies and an asymmetric rhythm which shows the Brazilian way of expressing art, urban design and also people's feeling. In one of these gardens the minimizing idea of Amazon landscape is accentuated when one of its rivers breaks its course between the tropical vegetation masses to create an imaginary water swamp. Also, the works of architect Oscar Niemeyer (1907-) are another example of these analogies but let to a more urban place with new and imaginative forms supported by the advance of construction technology. This led to the development of his own style, granting some cities high quality spaces through the incorporation of a "Brazilian sinuosity" in building design.

Today's World Architecture and the Value of Latin American Legacy

By the 1960s, modern architecture marked a change of path, since it was unable to respond to the increase of complicated network of complexities present in the so-called late capitalism; the evolution of social and economic systems of modernity made globalization play a more dominant role. Therefore, and given the excessive simplicity and formalism of the *International Style*, there was the need to retake ornament, lost creativity and reference as an answer to local requirements. This led to the incorporation of ideas exposed in the beginning of *post-modernity*, a thought in force which favors different cultural ideas and points of view to solve global problems. It differed with modernity which, under a unitary view of the world, sought to impose in architecture a universal style which attacked and shadowed local, regional and ethnic differences.

Ghirardo (1996) shows how post-modernity in architecture is focused on these differences, left aside by dominant cultures and which are now relevant. However, all

²² Amaral (1978: XVII, 17-24, 165-176).

²³ A new version of local fascism headed by Gestulio Vargas.

²⁴ *Portuguese Mosaic* is a pavement in black, white and red venetian color commonly found on Brazilian colonial architecture. The *Azulejos* were white and blue ceramic tiles used to coat colonial buildings.

this awakening towards a better awareness of the influence of *post-colonialism*, leads to the revival of symbolism in architecture and the relation thereof with the connotations of the site in order to liberate it from the inadequate doctrines and from history ruled by the Western World. In this way, and supported by today's technological sophistication, *post-modern architecture* opens itself to a wide area of interpretations, and identifies itself as a type of language which differs in terms of the references thereof. Therefore, it has been catalogued as *Neo-eclectic architecture* by favoring again proliferation of styles; however, this time it does not depend on them, but uses them as reference material in order to innovate and recycle them within a new context of traditional styles. Hence, it uses history and symbolism ironically to reintegrate tradition to modernity and create architecture which, besides being modern and avant-garde, can be different and pluralist at the same time.²⁵

In this sense, the idea of regionalism has gained strength in architecture aimed at recovering these marginalized and even lost local differences. Unlike "simple regionalism" based on non questionable values of vernacular forms, the notion of *Critical Regionalism* appears as a strategy to counteract the lack of significance of today's architecture.²⁶ This ideal perceives the region not just as a closed unit, the identity of which blocks the flow of cultural, capital, information and goods exchange within the global arena, but as a source of values giving shape to this flow. Therefore, it calls on globalization to become the resource for exploration of the latent creative potential that exists in every one of the regions, and to integrate this potential within a new global context. Not to be considered as a global domination in order to control the local scene favoring certain interests, since this would only lead to a hard resistance within the region, limiting the development of its cultural possibilities.

The issue of architecture in the age of globalization is that, given the increase of foreign influences in a culture, these influences end up being adopted but not adapted to the context of each region, this creates, in effect, a destruction of what is considered authentic and traditional. From now on, everything will depend on the ability of the region to maintain its cultural roots while recreating its own tradition, while appropriating, at the same time, foreign influences that aim to reinforce and shape a local identity which will be valued and will play a role within the new global sphere. This is a vital capacity to be fostered in order to assimilate and reinterpret influences, which will include the creation of new hybrids as ideas and products taken from any part of the world in order to integrate them into the local conditions. This is how history has shown us this phenomenon, especially through the process of *acculturation*,²⁷ since every culture has always depended on its intrinsic development of certain cross fertilization through the contact with other cultures.

This fertilization creates the essence of Latin American modern architecture, which in response to Europe's cultural domination, became a way of resistance and encouraged the whole region to take the initiative. By the 1920s, the consumption of

²⁵ See Kolb (1990: 87-105).

²⁶ A concept sustained by Frampton (1992: 314-327) and Tzonis et al. (2001: 1-13, 14-58).

²⁷ *Acculturation* comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups.

European culture was debated among Latin American intellectuals and architects who sought to transform it into something of their own, and at the same time, to contrast its influence through a similar attitude to the one shown in Japanese martial arts: fighting without weapons and using the opponent's strength for your own benefit and to produce something new and original.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to speak about architecture in terms that identify a local and representative style in a region where a large majority live in poverty and lack homes, Latin American architecture 60 years ago became famous due to its rooting and identity, despite being a faithful expression of modernity, the rules of which were against all legacy of the past and autochthonous values. Unfortunately, its sudden success vanished immediately as a result of the political, social and economic circumstances of an unstable period for the region. Hence, the ideal of this regional architecture to remain buried under the foreign cultural hegemonic predominance; the once innovative and original style was then marked as marginal and irrelevant.

However, the sense of post-modernity today leads us to a more pluralist view which values these lost local connotations aiming at the same time to recover its essence by reinterpreting it. The internationalization of Brazilian architect Roberto Burle Marx's work is a proof thereof, which has been mimicked in other countries. Likewise, the influence of Mexican architect Luis Barragan is evident on foreign architects such as Japanese Tadao Ando who valuing the essence of traditional space in its own culture, has created a unique post-modern design. This is how the new concept of *Critic Regionalism* appears by calling today's architects to take the same approach before used in this region: to obtain a better relationship with topography, climate and culture, to develop a sense of a place through being aware, to respect local conditions, and to appropriate modern technology and its practices. This is the reach of Latin American modern architecture: it has set the bases of a true regionalism or an intelligent Latin Americanism, creative and without racism which took the best the world imposed up until them, but then proceeded to assimilate and reinterpret it to produce a style in its own right in order to recreate a local identity rooted in tradition.

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Figure 1 Courtesy of Prof. Yukitaka Inoue (Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto).