

# Modern architectural and urban heritage in Latin American society

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## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the relationship between the processes of historical inscription and the selection of modern architectural heritage. The aim is to demonstrate that the process of historical inscription often implies a simultaneous process of extraction, abstracting architecture from its socio-cultural context. While the concept of heritage implies an intrinsic relationship between object and society, it appears that in the case of architectural heritage this relationship weakens due to the prevalence given to discourse, rather than the people for whom architecture has everyday significance. To develop this argument, I examine some of the most influential texts in the construction of modern architecture history, which are then reviewed in the light of critical theories, primarily postcolonial discourse. This article calls for an urgent reevaluation of the processes of modern architectural heritage selection and evaluation in Latin America so as to re-establish the fundamental link between architecture and society.*

## MODERN ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN HERITAGE IN LATIN AMERICAN SOCIETY

*Latin American cities are inherently modern. Since the founding of the first cities at the time of the Conquest and the Colonial time – which nowadays we call “early modern” period – to the creation of the metropolis of today, the cities of this part of the world have developed from purely modern patterns. It is a historiographic mistake to refer to the oldest areas of the city, which were built during the Colonial period, as pre-modern constructions. Having been founded with the purpose of dominating the new territory, controlling the inhabitants (imposing social hierarchies based on race) and regulating the exploitation and distribution of resources, the cities were conceived within rational patterns that go beyond their reticular design. In this sense, the parallel development of modernity<sup>(1)</sup> with the first European colonial expansion, generates the wide context in which Latin American cities emerge.*

*The adoption of modern movement principles during the first half of the 20th century, marks another historic moment, in which modern architecture is conceived as the most adequate architectural style to respond to the conditions of modernity and the processes of modernization<sup>(2)</sup>. Likewise, a new way of imagining the city is also conceived. This clarification is fundamental to understand the historic*

*place and the patrimonial value of modern architecture that corresponds to a wish to optimize the function and the physical image of the city, also allowing an efficient governability that follows a model which is no longer European but North American. Thus, this article deals with the relationship between architecture and inhabitants as an indicator of the patrimonial value of modern architecture, overcoming the process of patrimonial valuation limited to the correspondence of buildings with formal parameters dictated by modern architectural discourse. The fundamental premise of this article is that the heritage concept itself refers to a bilateral relationship between the object and the people for whom it has a value beyond its concrete existence<sup>(3)</sup>.*

*According to the history of modern architecture in Latin America, the period between 1930 and 1960 is considered the most significant, for the quantity of architectural production as well as for the impact of many of the urban plans designed and the buildings constructed during that period. Among the most important examples are the pilot plans the North American Company Town Planning Associates, formed by José Luis Sert and Paul Lester Wiener, designed between 1943 and 1956 in various countries of the continent. I mean, *Cidade dos Motores* (1943-47), *Chimpote* (1947-48), *Tumaco* (1947-49) and *Puerto Ordaz* (1951-53) – *Ciudad Guayana* today – among others, including *La Habana* (1956). Certainly, the most important was *Brasilia*, nowadays considered *Heritage of Humanity*, but one that in its valuation eliminates the spontaneous appropriations of its inhabitants, the people that give it its present vitality, an aspect I shall refer to below.*

*The pioneers of the modern movement in Latin America – Luis Barragán, Lucio Costa, Christian de Groot, Oscar Niemeyer, Rogelio Salmona, Carlos Raúl Villanueva and Amancio Williams, to mention just a few – built a large number of individual works in the continent. Although in the middle of the 20th century the architecture produced by that handful of architects already represented the “national architectural identity” of many countries in the continent, actually, modern architecture never represented the majority of the people, nor even most part of the built environment of Latin American cities, but only the wishes of an architectural elite that wished to impose a particular notion of a city<sup>(4)</sup>. It cannot be denied that 20th century modern architecture represents nowadays an important moment in the history of all the countries of the continent, since it characterizes one of the many facets of the multiple processes of modernization that took place during that period, which is why it acquired an undeniable heritage value that requires protection and preservation. However, it is important to mention two aspects that question the acceptance of modern heritage by the architectural community as well as by the general public and that also reduce the socio-political validity of places and buildings that represent this heritage. The first aspect is the way in which the architectural production of the 20th century has been included in the history of modern architecture, and the second is the dissociation between the architectural heritage and the general public as an actor and participant of the national history of each country.*

#### **THE EXERCISE OF HISTORIC REGISTRATION**

*In order to study the first aspect, I shall give a brief review of the most common method of historic registration used to refer to Latin American architecture. There are many and varied examples which include Henry-Russell Hitchcock who, in his book of 1955 Latin American Architecture since 1945, presents a surprisingly homogeneous outlook of Latin American architecture through a selection of 46 buildings, stating that the formal repertoire characterizing that work has its origin in Europe, but that the processes of design and management are undoubtedly North American (since most Latin American architects had studied in that country and because North American capitals had funded many of the projects). With this, Hitchcock acknowledges modern architectural production in certain Latin American countries, but he attributes their value to the European and North American influence. It is worth mentioning that this book served as a catalogue of the architecture exhibition of the same name, shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where Hitchcock had organised an exhibition of the international style 23 years before. Thus, it is not surprising that there is an aesthetic relationship between the showing selected for the 1955 exhibition and the one shown in its international style exhibition in 1932. Hitchcock’s work is an example of that ambivalent trend of historic registration; however, on this occasion I will emphasise the work of William Curtis, who, in his book Modern Architecture since 1900, outlines the trajectory of the modern movement to get to other parts of the world including Latin America.*

*Most of the discussion is in chapter 27 of the book mentioned above, entitled, “The process of absorption”. Actually, in the first paragraph of this chapter, Curtis states categorically that modern architecture is “the intellectual property of certain countries of Western Europe, the United States of America and some parts of the Soviet Union” (1982/2009, p. 491). This statement is followed by another, equally exacerbating, according to which “at the end of 1950, several transformations, deviations and devaluations of modern movement architecture had reached other parts of the world” (1982/2009, p. 491). With this postulate, Curtis categorically denies the validity of modern architecture in regions like Latin America.*

*Following Hitchcock’s guidelines, Curtis stresses throughout the whole chapter that the countries of the periphery “received” modern architecture from Europe through the work of Le Corbusier. It is clear that for Curtis, the spreading of modern movement ideas follows a genealogy that has its origins in Europe and is developed by an exclusive selection of architects and buildings. Curtis exerts himself to make the existing connections between Latin American modern architects and their European predecessors visible, mentioning the schools and universities where Latin Americans learned architecture or the studios where they practiced initially, or even revealing their friendly relationships with European professionals and their participation in events such as CIAM, with the purpose of showing that their work was linked to that of their European predecessors. Later, Curtis analyses a series of projects in a way that includes them in the history of modern architecture, but places them in an inferior position in relation to the work*

of Le Corbusier and other masters of the modern movement.

For instance, regarding the Ciudad Universitaria de Mexico (World Heritage for its architectural value), Curtis argues that the project is “a competent version of Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse adjusted to Mexico’s institutions and technology” (1982/2009, p. 493). There is no need to make an intellectual effort to identify the author and those who can only produce a “competent” version (a transformation, a deviation, a devaluation, as Curtis himself explains it) of the original project designed by Le Corbusier. Curtis does the same with Barragán’s work in Mexico, he then goes to Brazil where he concentrates on the work of Niemeyer, Costa and Reidy, later to examine the architecture of Venezuela where he deals only with the work of Villanueva, which he describes as “exhibitionist”. Later, in chapter 31, Curtis continues his pejorative registration of non-European architecture saying that “it was only until the 1940s and 1950s that modern architecture had a significant impact on less developed countries, although these forms did not generally have the poetic character or the importance of modern movement masterpieces” (1982/2009, p. 567) that had been produced by Le Corbusier and his co-workers. With this, Curtis accuses architects of less developed countries of not having poetic sensitivity and, even more, he questions the meaning of their work.

What we see in this type of narrative construction is an ambivalent process of historic registration that requires the immediate denial of what has been registered in order to reinforce the hierarchical system that allows

validation of buildings from their formal resemblance with previous works. In other words, Curtis implicitly suggests that the value of the work of architects like Niemeyer, Barragán, Villanueva or Salmons, among others, is not in itself, or in the way in which these buildings respond to the people who use them, but in the fact that their buildings respond to formal parameters established by the masters of the European and North American modern movement, whose work has the poetic essence that Latin Americans could not reproduce. When the “origin” of modern architecture is established – and the author’s rights are established – the patrimonial property is assigned to another socio-cultural group, different from the people who use the works. We can establish that the modern buildings Curtis refers to, represent a heritage that does not belong to the countries of Latin America but to those of Europe and North America.

If we accept this kind of historic registration, there is a dissociation created between the architectural object and the people that designed it, those who built it and those who use it every day, so that the true patrimonial value that modern architecture might have in the Latin American context is eliminated. Thus, it is necessary widely to question the registration and representation methods used to construct the history of modern architecture so as to validate the building practices and the architectural languages expressed by the people of other parts of the world in relation to the stories and traditions they emerged from, not in terms of a formal genealogy but in socio-political and anthropological terms, because it is in these aspects where lies the notion

of heritage and the patrimonial value that modern architecture might have in Latin America.

#### REMOVAL OF THE BUILDING FROM ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

After indexing the ambivalent processes of historic registration through which the written work appears in a relation of inferiority regarding its European and North American precedents (a practice not limited to Hitchcock and Curtis but common among architecture historians), I shall refer to the concept of “removal” to study the second aspect mentioned at the beginning: the dissociation between architectural heritage and the general public as an actor and participant in the national history of every country. Please note that in this case I am not referring to an international situation (among nations of Europe, North America, Central and South America) but only to national situations that occur in each country. Buildings such as the house and studio of Luis Barragán in Mexico (considered World Heritage), the Casa Curutchet in La Plata, Argentina, designed by Le Corbusier and built by Amancio Williams (nominated to be listed as World Heritage) and other buildings not yet featuring in international lists but which are considered to be part of the national heritage in several countries – like the Casa de huéspedes ilustres in Cartagena de Indias designed by Rogelio Salmona in Colombia (or some buildings designed by De Groot in Chile or Dieste in Uruguay) – have big architectural significance and represent the heritage of the 20th century. Regarding this, the question that comes up is: what is the

meaning of these works for the general public of these countries?

*I deliberately chose the three cases – the Casa-taller de Luis Barragán, the Casa Curutchet and the Casa de huéspedes ilustres – because they are private buildings which most people do not have access to. Actually, most people in Mexico, Argentina and Colombia do not know that these three houses exist or do not have the necessary knowledge to understand the value that architects assign to them. If we study superficially the documents that support the inclusion of the house of Barragán in the Unesco World Heritage List or the nomination for the Casa Curutchet to be included in the same list and the arguments of Colombian historians about the Casa de huéspedes ilustres, we can see that in the three cases the declarations refer to, in the first place, the adoption of the formal repertoire of the modern movement, making little reference to the popular traditions of each country.*

*In the case of the house of Barragán, the document says the following:*

*“Criterion I: The studio house of Barragán represents a masterpiece that gives evidence of the development of the modern movement integrating traditions, philosophies and artistic trends in a new synthesis.*

*Criterion II: Barragán’s work, in general, shows the integration of modern and traditional influences that at the time had an important impact on garden and urban design” (Unesco, n. d. a).*

*Implicit in these declarations is that the synthesis was produced by the architect and that the impact it had on other disciplines refers to the fact that*

*his gardens were replicated by other architects in projects designed for the Mexican economic elite.*

*In the case of Casa Curutchet, the document establishes, as a main criterion, that this was “one of the two buildings constructed in the Americas according to Le Corbusier’s project, who was one of the leaders of the modern movement” (Unesco, n. d. b). Later, the formal characteristics of the house are described highlighting the functional distribution and the use of the free plan with volumes supported by pilotis that hold a floating façade. In other words, there are two main criteria to consider this house as world heritage: that it was designed by Le Corbusier and that, as the document indicates “practically all the Le Corbusier principles were used” (Unesco, n. d. b).*

*In the case of the Casa de huéspedes ilustres in Cartagena de Indias, the Colombian historian German Téllez stresses characteristics like the orthogonal geometry, the use of brick and the fact that the set was conceived as an interpretation of pre-Columbian Central American architecture mixed with Moorish elements, like the small streams that run through the courtyards of the house (Tellez & Salmona, 1991).*

*In the three cases, the architectural valuation stresses the formal characteristics and the modern image of the buildings. Likewise, it stresses, directly and indirectly, the influence of Le Corbusier. In other words, as it concentrates on a series of abstract aspects, the cultural and architectural value of these three works excludes the communities for whom these buildings should represent a cultural heritage*

*– a patrimony. This happens not only because the general public has restricted access to these buildings, or does not know of their existence, but also because their morphology and speciality do not coincide with the actual conditions of habitability most people have in Mexico, Argentina and Colombia.*

*With this I do not intend suggesting that these three houses lack heritage value, since they undoubtedly have it: in their character of Latin American modern architecture. However, this value represents the interests of a reduced portion of society: architects and educated middle and high class.*

## MODERN URBANISM AND CITIZENS

*In addition to the previous question, a second question arises: how do these three works represent the urban and architectural realities of Mexico City, La Plata and Cartagena de Indias? By urban reality I mean the way in which these cities grew during the 20th century until they reached their present scale and consolidated their heterogeneous image. If we study the history of architecture and the urban evolution of Latin American cities, we realise that the 20th century produced other architectural phenomena which do not adhere to the parameters of the modern movement, but were built, are used and are therefore strongly linked to the socio-cultural and economic traditions of a majority of the community. I refer to the spontaneous architecture that appeared throughout the 20th century in almost all the cities of the continent, the favelas, barrios de invasión or slums, and also the popular appropriations of urban spaces built according to the principles of the modern movement,*

such as the case of Brasilia or Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela.

In spite of its discordant image, the apparent disorder of its urban outline and its formal architectural heterogeneity, the informal settlements around the biggest cities of the continent, some of which have been there over a century, are places that host the great majority of urban inhabitants of Latin America<sup>(5)</sup>. Furthermore, these informal settlements have become representative symbols of the urban reality of the continent, since from favelas, invasions and slums have emerged music and art expressions which are part of the identity of Brazil, Argentina and Colombia. The same can be said about Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela, internationally known countries whose economy benefits from expressions like salsa, samba, reggaetón, crafts and carnivals that originated and are celebrated in the whole continent. This, without mentioning that the informal economies produced in this type of settlement contribute in a great measure to local economies and are strongly linked to the formal national economy. Undoubtedly, informal settlements have become a fundamental component of the urban logic of the contemporary Latin American metropolis that had its origin in the 20th century.

For this reason, although they do not correspond to the parameters of modern architecture and urbanism, these popular architectural manifestations are the result of the multiple and dissimilar, but simultaneous, processes of modernization that all the countries of the continent have gone through. That is why it is essential to produce the necessary identification mechanisms

to acknowledge, without aesthetic prejudices, elements of spontaneous popular architecture and urbanism since, as I have said above, they are part of the urban identity of Latin America.

In view of the above, it is possible to affirm that the selection of modern Latin American architectural heritage has been done with a certain degree of elitism, an elitism that acquires great notoriety in the way in which the most representative work of modern urbanism of the continent has been registered. I, naturally, refer to Brasilia, a city that, as the document that supports its inclusion in the World Heritage List says, was the result of the application of the Athens Charter and Le Corbusier's urban proposal described in his *Manière de penser l'urbanisme*. Actually, according to Unesco:

*"The pilot plan of Brasilia drawn by Costa is a great expression of power and the buildings are notable for the purity of their forms and their monumental character resulting from an intelligent balance between horizontal and vertical buildings with rectangular and curved surfaces in addition to the rustic and refined finishings on the exterior of some of its structures"* (Unesco, n. d. a).

These lines reveal an apparent lack of knowledge of the social, cultural, political racial and economic reality of Brazil. It is a banal and superficial description that deals with only the formal characteristics of a city and, in fact, ignores its inhabitants. It is alarming to see the condition that ICOMOS considers for the inclusion of Brasilia in the heritage list, according to which it is required that the Brazilian

authorities adopt a legislation that ensures the safeguard of the creation of Costa and Niemeyer to keep it from being transformed, not understanding that the transformations that have taken place are part of the natural evolution of every city; they are, actually, the result of a social and economic development particular to the region: the same expression of a cultural condition that was created after the construction of the city.

The condition imposed by ICOMOS in 1987 refers to the fact that Brasilia was then surrounded by 16 "satellite cities", several of which grew spontaneously. However, most of the inhabitants of the Federal District live in these peripheral settlements, from where they commute every day to the centre of Brasilia, where they work. Therefore, pedestrians have appropriated the space of the Rodoviária (the central bus station) turning it into one of the liveliest centres of commercial and cultural activity of the city. These daily passers-by have introduced a series of activities that had not been considered in the original plan and that, consequently, in the opinion of some architects, have undermined the meaning of the architectural project expressed in the original plan of the city.

Another example of the same process of social (re)production of the urban space can be seen in the large number of informal buses that offer services along the roads which were not designed by Lucio Costa for public transport either. Likewise, since 1980, areas where multiple use buildings have been constructed have appeared on both sides of the central axis of the city, a process that is the result of a big property development speculation. These

buildings do not keep the modern iconic image of those designed by Niemeyer following Costa's plan and, therefore, it is considered that they alter the modern zoning of the original project as well as the formal language of the buildings. However, they are constructions which have legal approval and satisfy the residential and commercial deficiencies of the original project, making the city viable from the commercial and housing point of view in the present conditions.

Brasilia is a heritage site and it was included in the World Heritage List because it has undeniably great historic and cultural value. Its value is in its architecture as well as in its urban reality. In other words, what makes Brasilia an exemplary city, a patrimony for its inhabitants, for Brazil, Latin America and the humanity in general, is precisely that it is a city like any other, a city whose population surpasses the expected numbers, with problems of traffic, services, urban control, violence and high levels of poverty. A city where citizens have made alterations that allow them carrying out their daily activities and living in it.

If heritage is understood to be all the cultural goods and values which are the expression of a people's identity<sup>(6)</sup> (Unesco, 1972) or if, as established in the set of chapters of ICOMOS – according to the material available on the Internet– architectural heritage is understood as a building, a set of buildings, or the ruins of a building or set of buildings that, in the course of time, have acquired a greater value than the one originally assigned to it and goes beyond the original assignment (ICOMOS, 1965), then, it is not necessary to impose conditions to prevent

inhabitants from adapting the space they inhabit.

#### CONCLUSION

Finally, I will take a brief theoretical detour with the purpose of examining two terms introduced by the Indian critic Homi Bhabha. Here I refer to the pedagogic and performative temporalities of the nation. Bhabha introduces these two terms in his essay called "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation", initially published as an introduction to the volume *Nation and Narration* edited by him in 1990 and later in his most important book, *The Location of Culture*, published in 1994. Starting from these two terms, Bhabha criticises the concept of modern nation. The purpose of his critic is to reveal that the nation, an inherently modern entity, is formed by multiple temporalities that coexist in its geographic and social space. The fundamental aspect of his critic lies in the fact that those temporalities show the vulnerability of the structures that sustain the very idea of nation.

The concept of pedagogical temporality refers to the construction of the concept of nation, to its identity based on an artificial historicism that allows the creation of a homogeneous narrative. The desired homogeneity can only be reached if the very idea of nation, its society and its culture is reduced to totalizing empiric categories that exclude the elements that do not correspond to the desired effect. In other words, the authority assigned to the discourse of national identity is supported on an artificial construction of its past, with which it is possible to validate certain manifestations of its

present and, of course, exclude others in order to reach the socio-political and cultural unity of the nation. Summarising, pedagogical temporality refers to the nation as an entity that is made legible through its historic, selective and excluding genealogy (this takes us to the subject of Curtis mentioned before). In his book *Seeing Like the State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1999), the anthropologist and political scientist James Scott offers a more detailed historic view of the strategies used by the state with the purpose of homogenising society and implementing an effective government. These homogenising efforts, says Scott, eliminate the cultural diversity (linguistic, economic, and political) which is natural to all the regions of the world, so that the civil society constantly reacts against them. This natural process that takes place in every country of the world is expressed in what Bhabha calls the performative temporality of the modern nation, a temporality that escapes the pacifying and homogenising efforts of the state to control and keep control of the population.

Thus, performative temporality refers to the inhabitants of the nation as its fundamental component. The nation can only be understood in the present and, that is why the performative stage of the nation is understood as a counter-narrative that continually subverts the mechanisms through which national homogeneity is intended to maintain. When inhabitants are placed as the representatives of the nation and not as an empiric category represented by a homogenising and unreal narrative, the term performative refers to the art, commercial, political, religious,

*architectural and other actions that characterise its daily life distorting the possibility of a pedagogical representation. In this way, Bhabha opens spaces (not one but a multitude of spaces) that provide visibility to the great variety of socio-cultural groups that form the nation – women, ethnic minorities and religious groups, among others – and politically validates their contribution to the historic change that occurs naturally and unavoidably in every nation.*

*It is worth noting that this critic to the concept of modern nation does not devalue the nation State as a political entity. It is evident that in the conditions of economic and cultural globalization we are living, the nation State is the most solid social and political structure. The effect of this critic is that it forces us to re-examine the essentialism that makes it a static and homogeneous entity incapable of representing its heterogeneous socio-cultural reality. That is why Bhabha insists on the fact that neither temporality prevails over the other, on the contrary, the nation is permanently being created from the conflict between the multiple elements that constitute it. In other words, the nation becomes the permanent process of its own creation.*

*I have mentioned this brief discussion on the concept of performativity because it offers useful tools to question the system of historic registration that I presented in the first part of this article, when I wrote about Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Curtis. A system that judges the architectural production according to the form of the buildings and the relevance of their author in such a way that it prevents*

*the acknowledgement and valuation of other architectural manifestations that do not agree with the parameters established for such system. Resorting to the notion of performativity in architecture, it is possible to stress the actions of the users in relation to the building as well as to the city, to find how those actions have introduced new values beyond the ones originally assigned. My intention is to look for a way to reconnect architectural heritage with the people for whom it is supposed to be a cultural legacy. This decreases the suspicion there is among many architects regarding the property and the pertinence of modern architectural heritage in Latin America. On the other hand, if the general public was placed as the main actor of the process of architectural significance, there would be no doubt regarding the socio-political value of architectural heritage as an expression of a people's identity.<sup>m</sup>*

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## NOTES

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(1) Modernity, understood as a socio-economic and political-cultural condition, not as an architectural movement.

(2) See Heynen, 1999.

(3) The relationship between people and buildings has been a recurrent topic in the history of architecture and urbanism in the 20th century. Lewis Mumford discusses this relationship in his book *The City in History: Its Origins, its Transformations and its Prospects* (Harcourt, 1961); Christopher Alexander has also written about the importance of considering people, their knowledge and needs, as the origin and objective of every architectural intervention. See *The Pattern Language* (Oxford University Press, 1977) and *The Timeless way of Building* (Oxford University Press, 1979) among other books of his wide production. More recently, Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till published *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Routledge, 2011), discussing the participation of the public in the construction of the urban space and the architectural identity.

(4) Several Latin American critics and historians have written about the foreign building of modern national identities in the middle of the 20th century. See, for example, Hernández, 2015. See also the work of Bergdoll, Cavalcanti, del Real and Kahatt.

(5) Statistical information on the number of inhabitants in informal settlements can be obtained from UN Habitat (<http://urbandata.unhabitat.org/compare-cities/>).

(6) See the text of the Unesco convention in <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>