

contingent) will allow operating on some processes of the contemporary territory.

Beauty (the seduction of the landscape): The construction of the landscape is, necessarily, an aesthetic construction. Therefore, the landscape is the place for beauty. We believe, then, in something that we could call "active beauty".

Fiction (the invention of landscape). A new landscape exists only if a story gives it meaning, if a narrative construction is capable of inducing reactions and, therefore, meta-stories. The construction of fiction is developed in time (between the "novella", or what has already happened, and the story, or what will happen). Fiction connects the written landscape with the one that is about to be written (what is real-past and what is possible).

Distance (the look of the landscape). Finally, this aesthetic fiction incorporates a peculiarity: distance. The look of the landscape is a distant look. Like the look of the voyeur or the traveller, of the one who constructs the landscape from the displacement and from the stay, it imposes a particular distancing. As Michel Houellebecq suggests in his itinerary, climbing between the idyllic Michelin map and the sordid mycotic microscopy of the tissues in The Possibility of an Island, the landscape wanders between the gigantic and the infinitesimal, and far from finding its locus in a particular scale, it is its continuous contractions and dilations that define its rhythm and its nature.

<http://colectivosarquitecturasa.wordpress.com/2011/05/12/fabrica-de-paisaje/>

(1) Surface: 180.000 m²

Program: Conversion of Mausoleum into cultural center.

Landscape, public space and equipment design.

Integration of existing programmes into the project.

Management ideas of the project.

(2) It is part of the Metropolitan Area of Montevideo. It concentrates industries, commerce, fairs and popular events. It used to be a quarrying site.

Population: 69.222

(3) In 1811 the Eastern army under Artigas defeated the Spanish troops under frigate Commander José Posadas.

(4) José Artigas (1764-1850): Uruguayan military officer and statesman; máximum hero of his country.

(5) Tree of the leguminous family, known in Uruguay as the Tree of Artigas.

(6) Name of a number of coastal resorts in the Department of Canelones, Uruguay.

(7) The Territorial Ordinance Plan 98-05 is being revised by the Intendencia Municipal of Montevideo in agreement with the Universidad de la República. <http://agenda.montevideo.gub.uy/proyecto/2241>

(8) Originally the term made reference to drawings easy to market. It refers nowadays to pretentious objects, outdated or in bad taste. See DORFLES, Gillo: *El kitsch; antología del mal gusto* (Kitsch, anothology of bad taste)(Lumen, 1973).

(9) Milan Kundera (Brno, 1929): Czech writer established in France. Author of *La insoportable levedad del ser* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) (1984).

(10) Giovanni Antonio Canal o Canaletto (1697-1768): Venetian painter, famous for his views of Venice. He is one of the main exponents of the pictorial genre called "veduta", consisting in urban paintings in perspective that exalt the beauty of a place with commercial purposes.

(11) Province of the Argentine Patagonia.

Population: 550.344

Density: 5,85 hab./km

Capital: Neuquén

(12) Brumeville is a manuscript that describes a phenomenon that occurred on 1st of January 2013, two years before being written.

The political dimension of Architecture

Interview with Justin McGuirk

Ana Rascovsky

Abstract

Justin McGuirk analyzes the causes for the world interest in Latin American town planning and details the reasons that took him to research a new type of architecture, "activist architecture". He emphasizes the social dimension of professionals like Alejandro Aravena, Urban Think Tank, Jorge Mario Jáuregui and Teddy Cruz, and stops to give details of the historic referents that sustain such dimension: the work of John Turner on the Peruvian neighbourhoods, the PREVI housing experiment in Lima and the work of Vilanova Artigas, Sergio Ferro and Carlos Nelson in Brazil.

McGuirk values the creation of urban infrastructures that are not governed by capitalist rules and emphasizes the work of the Tupac Amaru social Movement in the Northeast of Argentina. He stresses that Latin America found a political dignity that the developed world has lost. By means of examples such as the improvement of Paraisópolis and the introduction of alternative transport systems in cities like Caracas, Medellín and Rio de Janeiro, he can assure that Latin America is teaching lessons to the rest of the world.

For Justin McGuirk, former editor of ICON and critic of the English newspaper The Guardian, Latin America is producing a new kind of architecture, “activist architecture”. By means of experiments that stand out for their social dimension, some Latin American architects are giving valuable lessons to the rest of the world. However, for McGuirk, it would be really innovating if someone would think of another way of producing the city, one not based on increasing the value of property.

Can you say there’s a global role for Latin America and consequently its urbanism and architecture?

I believe it is inevitable that Latin America will play a global role: not just because of its rich resources but because there appears to be a collective political will at work now; because it will accept all the time less the Washington Consensus; because the richest man in the world⁽¹⁾ is Latin American; and because it’s only a matter of time before the President of the USA is a native Spanish-speaker. Urbanistically, Latin America is already charting new territories. It is home to some of the biggest cities in the world, and the sheer rate at which cities such as São Paulo⁽²⁾ and Mexico City⁽³⁾ have grown makes them laboratories for new forms of town planning. We, delicate Europeans, may not like what we see, we may think they are cautionary tales, but we cannot deny their place in our imagination. Even if it is not always in a very structured or schematic way, Latin American countries are dealing with extremes that we simply do not face in Europe - extremes of scale, social inequality or violence. Historically,

these have delivered extreme solutions. Latin America, for instance, is where the European modernist idea of social housing was taken to its logical conclusion, with mega-block complexes like 23 de Enero⁽⁴⁾ in Caracas and Nonoalco Tlatelolco⁽⁵⁾ in Mexico City. But the more dramatic the problems, the greater the rewards when an experiment goes right. It might be a gymnasium built by Urban Think Tank⁽⁶⁾ in a Caracas slum (that reduces crime by 30%) or a pavement and bus lane scheme in Bogota that transforms life for the average citizen.

Why were you interested in doing research in LA? Do you have new interests after coming here?

A few years ago I began to accept that Latin America was producing a new kind of architect. For the purposes of my own work I define it as the “activist architect” – one can agree or not with the term, but what I find useful about it is the notion of self-initiation – of action. The activist architect doesn’t wait to be approached by a client, or to enter a competition, he/she finds a context in which work needs to be done and creates the conditions in which to make it happen. By definition this would be in a context of need or scarcity – a slum or favela. It might require lobbying local government, designing funding structures or new forms of housing subsidies, it demand calculating how to achieve the maximum effect with the least means, and it would certainly depend on communicating with a community to understand its needs. Alejandro Aravena⁽⁷⁾, Urban Think Tank and Jorge Mario Jauregui⁽⁸⁾ are the kind of architects I’m talking about.

What is important to me about this work is the social dimension, which almost disappeared from the architect’s agenda after the 1970s, with the profession’s preoccupations with form, autonomy and ultimately the rarefied world of the culture industry along with the glories of urban branding. In some senses I feel that a certain kind of Latin American architect represents the conscience of the profession, but let’s not go too far with such romantic notions. Of course in Europe we don’t have favelas, but that doesn’t mean architecture should have lost its social dimension.

*It’s not so much that I have new interests but my research into activist architecture is starting to take on some historical depth. There’s an alternative history of Latin American architecture that is not at all well known outside of the continent – we tend to think of heroic modernists like Niemeyer⁽⁹⁾ or lyrical engineers like Candela⁽¹⁰⁾ and Dieste.⁽¹¹⁾ I’m interested in a more political strain. When I first started my research I wasn’t particularly aware that Aravena, Urban Think Tank, Jauregui and Teddy Cruz⁽¹²⁾ belong to a lineage, or a tradition, of activist architecture in Latin America. I was ignorant of John Turner’s⁽¹³⁾ work in the Peruvian *barriadas*, or the PREVI⁽¹⁴⁾ housing experiment in Lima, or the work of Vilanova Artigas⁽¹⁵⁾ and Sergio Ferro⁽¹⁶⁾ and Carlos Nelson⁽¹⁷⁾ in Brazil. This is fairly obscure stuff in Europe, and one of the reasons I’m trying to familiarize myself with this history is because I believe we need to rediscover the political dimension of architecture.*

Can you define some leading (or possible) innovation in LA and its architectures?

I was recently sent a fat book of contemporary Chilean architecture – a kind of catalogue raisonné of the last decade. It was funny to see it all collected together like that because as a magazine editor I used to publish a lot of architecture from Chile – from here in London, it really seemed to be the place in South America where interesting things were happening. But in hindsight it all looks so similar – Modernism Strikes Back. We'd been seduced by these concrete cubes on dramatic cliff tops, these weekend retreats for the wealthy. There's absolutely nothing innovative about it.

What would be innovative is if someone could think up another way of producing the city that doesn't rely on raising property values. The city – almost universally now – is created by and for private interests. Only in Latin America did I manage to find an original model. In the northwest of Argentina, the Tupac Amaru⁽¹⁸⁾ social movement is building houses and giving them to the poor, in compounds like exclusive country clubs, with swimming pools and theme parks. There are no architects or private developers or construction companies involved, and everything is achieved using government subsidies and highly efficient collective organization. In that example alone there are two innovative achievements: first, creating social housing by asking not what the minimum is but the maximum; and two, creating pieces of built environment that do not play by capitalist rules. This idea of architecture as a form of direct action

– one that doesn't produce a favela – is fascinating to me.

Historically, PREVI was an incredibly innovative project – one whose influence may not even have arrived yet. The idea of a framework or platform within which a community can expand organically still seems remarkably useful, and not just in Latin America. There are other examples I could mention, including a descendant of PREVI's: Elemental's half-a-house model of social housing. This is still a solution that could be deployed elsewhere in the world (now that it's no longer needed in Chile), but you already know all about this.

What can the world learn from LA? Is architecture and urbanism included?

This may sound odd from your own perspective but, as an outsider, Latin America appears in the last decade to have rediscovered a kind of political dignity that we are in danger of losing in Europe and America. I'm simply referring to the resurgence of the left across much of the continent, and the adoption of some kind of social agenda within the political one. In Britain, for instance, we are busy dismantling what's left of our social democracy in favour of a neoliberal agenda of the free market – and this in spite of the disastrous effects that neoliberalism has had not just on society but on the fabric of our cities. In Latin America, the poor are back on the political agenda, you're rightly suspicious of neoliberalism (especially in Argentina), all of which implies a degree of sanity.

I don't want to dwell on politics, however, because it would be ludicrous for me to generalise. In urbanism, Latin

America undoubtedly has lessons for the world, if only because it experienced unprecedented urbanisation in the mid 20th century, long before the phenomena that have been taking place more recently in China and India. In a sense Latin America "survived" rampant urbanisation, and it didn't do so by accident. There were strategies for dealing with it – some of them enlightened and only so effective, others brutal and extremely effective. The favela or *barriada*, for instance, is arguably a more effective solution to mass urbanisation than the huge modernist social housing complexes of the 1960s and 70s. We may not like them, but they are facts on the ground – facts that shame decades' worth of the political establishment. Only now are real steps being taken to improve the situation of the favelas. I'm certainly not talking about the slum clearances taking place in Rio for the Olympics, but projects like the upgrading of Paraisópolis⁽¹⁹⁾ in Sao Paulo. There, new housing is being introduced, along with infrastructure such as drainage systems, schools and even some public spaces. Or take what has happened in Caracas, Medellin and Rio, where cable cars were introduced to connect the informal and formal cities – a completely unpredictable solution. It is in these experiments that Latin American architects are providing valuable lessons for the rest of the world.

I don't believe in absolute innovation or in universal design values so much as contextual ones. For instance, Latin America didn't invent the cable car, but it re-invented it as a mode of urban transport – and now even London's getting one across the Thames.


Do you see differences between the role of architecture in Europe and LA?

I don't see many differences in terms of how architecture is considered – both cultures treat architecture as a cultural artifact. And I think that's a problem because I don't think Latin America has that luxury. It's not that because you have favela that means you can't have spectacular museums – Niemeyer was producing icons long before Gehry or Zaha. It's just that by definition architects in Latin America only operate in half the terrain: in the formal city. And in that respect architects risk becoming irrelevant.

I've learnt quite a lot about how Latin Americans see their context. In Europe we take layers of history for granted, so it was an eye-opener for me to be in Lima with Manuel de Rivero⁽²⁰⁾ from Supersudaca, and to hear him say, "Everyone thinks this city looks shit. Of course it looks shit, it's brand new. This is just the beginning." I don't believe that degree of optimism is even possible in a European architect. On the whole, we expect decline, not improvement.

Can you say there's a Latin American architecture?

I believe there is, just as at some deep cultural level there is a European architecture, even though it would be almost impossible for me to elucidate what it is exactly without generalizations about history, religion and culture. But since you ask me, the question is almost more interestingly phrased as how does Europe see Latin America. Because "Latin American architecture" has been an entity in Europe since Le Corbusier, when European modernists thought this

continent was the future of architecture. Even Latin Americans believed that for a while, building their Brasilia⁽²¹⁾ and their 23 de Enero. Until 2008 Europe saw Latin America as a bastion of heroic modernism. Since the recession, however, a new cliché has taken hold, and architecture students now want to go create an "intervention" in a favela, while every magazine wants to publish some jewel-like school in a slum in Medellin. It worries me because it reduces genuine social progress to a trend. 

NOTES

(1) Carlos Slim Helú (Mexico City, 1940). Fortune: 74,000 million dollars.

(2) Population of São Paulo in 1890: 65,000 inhabitants. Population of São Paulo in 2010: 11.244.369 inhabitants. Population of the Metropolitan Area in 2010: 19.672.582 inhabitants.

(3) Population of Mexico City in 1910: 471,000 inhabitants. Population of Mexico City (D.F.) in 2010: 8.851,080 inhabitants. Population of the Metropolitan Zone in 2010: 20.137.152 inhabitants.

(4) Construction: 1955-1957
First stage: 2,366 houses
Second stage: 2,690 houses
Third stage: 3,150 houses
Architect: Carlos Raúl Villanueva

(5) Construction: 1960-1964
Departments: 11,916
Buildings: 102
Architect: Mario Pani

(6) Founded in Caracas (1993) by Alfredo Brillembourg. Hubert Klumpner is co.director since 1998.

(7) Executive Director of Elemental (Santiago de Chile).

(8) Director Architectural and Environmental Planning, PAA (Rio de Janeiro).

(9) Oscar Niemeyer (Rio de Janeiro, 1907): Brazilian architect who projected the buildings of Brasilia.

(10) Félix Candela: Spanish architect (1910-1997).

(11) Eladio Dieste: Uruguayan engineer (1917-2000).

(12) Founder of ETC (San Diego).

(13) John F. C. Turner (London, 1927) worked in the "barriadas" of Lima and Arequipa between 1957 and 1965. Most influential author on social housing in the developing countries.

(14) The Experimental Housing Project (PREVI) was an initiative of the Peruvian government and the PNUD, who, starting in the 60s, organized four Pilot Projects to improve the "barriadas".

(15) João Batista Vilanova Artigas: Brazilian architect (1915-1985).

(16) Brazilian architect and artista born in Curitiba (1938).

(17) Carlos Nelson Ferreira dos Santos: Brazilian architect, town planner and anthropologist (1943-1989).

(18) Tupac Amaru District Organization: Founded by Milagro Sala, it has built 3,800 houses in Jujul since 2003.

(19) Neighbourhood developed from a favela of the same name. It has between 80 and 100 thousand inhabitants.

(20) Architect and town planner born in Lima (1973). Founder of Supersudaca.

(21) Population 2010: 2,562,963 inhabitants. Founding: 1960