

# Aesthetics as a social need

Interview with Florencia Rodríguez

Max Zolkwer and Ana Rascovsky

## Abstract

*Florencia Rodríguez emphasizes the present good moment of Latin American architecture and describes some historic clues that allow a better understanding of the current process. She warns that “Latin American architecture” is nothing more than the way in which we incorporate ourselves into the narrative of occidental history and that today we have the chance to liberate ourselves of discourses inspired in foreign ideas.*

*Rodríguez maintains that we, Latin Americans, have intellectual relationships that are more fertile than mere spatial proximity in order to understand our own architectural experience. She insists on the need to put to the test new categories of analysis that account for the local dimension of the work of some architects, like Giancarlo Mazzanti or Solano Benítez.*

*Finally, Rodríguez revalues aesthetics as a social need and rejects the distrust generated by visually attractive works.*

*Florencia Rodríguez is director of PLOT magazine, a platform that develops narratives committed to our own cultural production. For Rodríguez, we are at a very interesting moment: after a century of production crossed by our own experiences, Latin American architecture has the opportunity to become free from historical narratives constructed on what came from outside. It all depends on knowing how to take advantage of this kind of “Latin American fashion” with intelligence.*

**Ana Rascovsky: We are very interested in your view on the context. How do you see the present moment in Latin America?**

*We are at a very interesting moment, with many renewed views. However, we must not forget that “Latin American architecture” as such, is merely a geographical invention. And that it is related to the language: it is the way in which we are incorporated into the narrative of occidental history.*

*There are evident relationships of nearness, but they are not necessarily spatial. For any analysis, intellectual proximities are more fertile, or those that stem from a similar tradition that generates cultural developments with common problems. But it is difficult to understand, under the same look, countries so dissimilar as Brazil and Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia or Argentina. Each one of these areas has its own characteristics and I do not think it is healthy to reduce them in order to force a kind of pseudo-theory of the region. But we have to take advantage of this kind of Latin American fashion in an intelligent way. Undoubtedly, it*

*is a very good opportunity to review those historical narratives that I mentioned before, but this time as active participants and committed to our cultural production.*

*As far as architecture is concerned, it seems that from abroad, Latin America is seen as the modern epitome. Possibly, this is based on the mixture of two factors. The first one, probably true, is that in the XIX century we began a process of post-colonialist participation in the global stories; and that symbolic rupture consisting, in the most interesting cases, of regional architectures consonant with their time, detaches us from the past with certain audacity. The second factor is that this brings as a consequence a fantastic idea: Latin America was seen as an open territory with the potentiality of becoming a modern laboratory. Brasilia<sup>(1)</sup> is the most revealing sign of that utopia.*

*In the first half of the last century, Latin America produced as many examples of foreign architecture as of much more committed localisms and acculturation. Since many canonical texts of modern architecture were not translated into Spanish or Portuguese, only some groups of architects had access to them. In their interpretations, there would undoubtedly be a transformation. It is interesting to see what happens in that translation, perhaps a bit clumsy or naïve some times, but which makes Latin American architecture begin to look at itself, to problematize itself for the first time and to generate ideals which, if still linked to Europe and North America, it is totally marked by what is its own.*

Thinking about the Latin American tradition has to do with liberating oneself of that narrative formed on what came from abroad, with understanding that for a century we have had an architecture totally crossed by our own experience. Not against the other, but nurtured by both. I would not want to use words like crossbreeding, nor hybridation, that is something else.

**Max Zolkwer:** *In that sense, in countries like ours, the direction of the flow of information is very important. A magazine may be useful to introduce world trends in the local sphere or to publicize the local production at home and abroad. It may be useful to strengthen an identity or to influence it. It is a position of power. What is the position of PLOT regarding that power?*

*It's time to erase that dialectic situation between the outside and the inside. Enough with that fight! The concept of architecture and, above all, the Latin American critic that collaborates with the development of the discipline have to leave their enclosure. Today we need to try and understand new categories of analysis in a world that is far more complex.*

*PLOT has a clear editorial position about that. We are in the world and from there, we build thought. Latin, Asian, Indian, European and North American are categories that matter, but they are not enough. We have to learn everything and obtain a contemporary look from other places.*

*We are at a particular moment, Latin America benefits from different situations. Some have to do directly with us, like the more favourable conditions that certain political and*

*economic scenarios seem to show in some countries. Others are related with things which go beyond us, such as the lack of renewal of some ideas in other places, being tired of star architects, the dizziness of the 90s and the clear social and environmental emergency situations that need to be dealt with without delay.*

*And retaking this idea of "power" that you suggest: let us make the most of this way of thinking as a strategy of publicity for Latin America, of what is being built and of what is being thought.*

**Rascovsky:** *How do you analyze an architectural project from there?*

*Latin America is going through its own maturing process. At the same time, the economic situation of the last decades has made us separate more drastically from some international ways of making architecture, in many interesting cases, simply because in most of our countries that type of architecture was impossible. There was a natural shift to some strategies that made it possible for some disciplinary improvements in typological and material terms and of urban development.*

*For example, one can take recent Colombian architecture, which could be interpreted lightly in tune with some "international" trends. But the meaning of a form is different from one place to another, a different way of using it, a load of particularities that go from daily rituals to climate conditions or the use of materials. And what cannot be seen in the picture is an essential part of it.*

*Mazzanti<sup>(2)</sup> may be interpreted as more or less formalist or more or less eclectic if he is analyzed in relation to*

*the impact of his work on the urban tissue of the neighbourhoods of Medellín where he locates his libraries,<sup>(3)</sup> or to a Colombian tradition which is very strong. In any of the cases, his work has completely different meanings from which it would have if he were in Holland. Another example: we cannot even imagine what use would one of the houses of Solano Benítez<sup>(4)</sup> have in the south of Argentina. And not for aesthetic reasons, but because its spaces are linked in a radical way to the local customs and the climate. Its use would be different. It would be another house.*

*It is important to think about the commitments that a project makes, how it relates to the place and to other specific problems, such as technology, form and aesthetics. For some time I have been consciously reassessing aesthetics because in the critical discourse of the region appears a confusion that disturbs me: what is very attractive in plain sight seems to generate distrust. And aesthetics is a social need, a very powerful cultural and ideological vehicle.*

**Rascovsky:** *What common points are there in Latin American architecture?*

*We can find conceptual nearnesses. There is, for example, a very interesting work on the subject in many places where they research how to work with non typical materials. There is a search for spatial and, in many cases, social aesthetics, which is very interesting. We are also chased by that tendency to turn modern movement into mere stylism, something that in some way appears in every country. In the magazine, we receive houses that could be in*

any country, we have to pay careful attention to the technical specifications card to know where they are.

**Zolkwer:** *There are technologies, economies and a cultural canon that crosses every country. Perhaps there are more aesthetic, cheaper and universal ways to resolve architecture.*

*There is a universally "correct" architecture which does not run so many risks.*

*Another one of the relationships or nearness is sustained by small scale works, near installation. In these works, it is interesting that actually, the setting up of a cheap architecture or of recycled materials has nothing to do with a discourse about it. There are questions which clamor in any place of the earth: what is architecture, what is our role as designers and what kind of world we want to build. The only certain thing is that we want a more just and diverse world. And that the place where we are born marks our identity, but does not dictate our destiny. [in](#)*

#### NOTES

(1) Population 2010: 2.562.963 inhabitants. Foundation: 1960

(2) Giancarlo Mazzanti (Barranquilla, 1963): Colombian architect, a symbol of the social transformation of Medellín. He won the first prize at the Biennale di Venezia (2006, town planning and landscape design).

(3) Parque-Biblioteca España (Santo Domingo neighbourhood) and Parque-Biblioteca León de Greiff (La Ladera neighbourhood).

(4) Paraguayan architect (Asunción, 1963), winner of the BSI Swiss Architectural Award (Lugano, 2007).

# 1. The Biennial and the jungle

## 2. Talking around the world

Two interviews with Mirta Demare

Stephane Damsin, Max Zolkwer, Ana Rascovsky and Manuel de Rivero

#### Abstract

*In these two interviews, the first done in 2002 and the second in 2011, Mirta Demare analyzes her work planning refugee camps and speaks about the role art has in her life. Demare explains the problems suffered by war refugees, very different from those faced by people who are forced to leave their homeland because of natural disasters, and describes the creative process as well as the way in which the settlements work.*

*Demare talks about her theoretical referents and tells about her work in Argentine cooperatives at the beginning of the 70s and her work around the world with international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of the Red Cross, the European Union and the World Bank. She details the characteristics that a place needs to meet in order to receive refugees and the challenges implied in the maintenance of security, especially for the women.*

*In 35 years, Mirta Demare has planned fifteen provisional settlements for war refugees and victims of natural catastrophes. In order to heal the marks of so many wars, this pioneer of Latin American activist architecture opened a contemporary art gallery in Rotterdam ten years ago. Demare talks about her theoretical referents and reviews several landmarks of her work, from the organization of cooperatives at the beginning of the 70s in Argentina, to her work around the world with humanitarian aid organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.*

#### 1. THE BIENNIAL AND THE JUNGLE

*We have known each other since 2009, when Supersudaca invited you as a guest speaker in the context of an intervention we did in a public space in Haarlem,<sup>(1)</sup> across the street from the Carlton Square Hotel. The project,<sup>(2)</sup> a camping made of beach tents, questioned refugee and political exile camps, a reality you know very well since you arrived in Holland with that status in 1975. Many things have changed since then, haven't they? Now you have an art gallery. How did you decide to change your life?*

*I opened a gallery in Rotterdam in 2002. But I would not say I changed my life, although I admit I do feel split. In 2002 I decided to stop working in camps for a while. I was in the second Intifada<sup>(3)</sup> in Jerusalem and that was not fun. I left. I went to Eritrea afterwards and that was also very hard. I was sent to Angola in the project framework of a peace agreement that was going to be signed. There was no agreement, I was between two fires and had to run away*