

ALBERT LÓPEZ —

# Still Constructing... “Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955–1980”

Saturday. Early afternoon. MoMA was a mad house. Weekend tourists from the four corners of the map converged on this shrine of a once international modernity, this temple of a purportedly present and popular global culture.

I was there for the much-anticipated exhibition, “Latin America in Construction.” Once I arrived at the museum’s sixth floor, I approached the walls emblazoned with graphics and text that hinted at what lay behind them. I was lamentably unsure of which of the two openings in the exhibition’s perimeter wall to take into the space. Two young Venezuelan women walked with purpose toward the entrance on the left, which helped me make up my mind. I went after them, not able to avoid eavesdropping as they spoke in a thick *caraqueño*-inflected English, commenting that this is the first time they have visited MoMA.

It was the wrong way into the exhibition. The crowd-directing angle of the wall panels, the massive font of the exhibition title, and the explanatory paragraphs on either side of the opening seemed to indicate the contrary, but the contents that lay immediately behind this monumental portal did little to prepare the visitor for the entirety of this exhibition’s themes. And it’s a shame that it didn’t, since a large number of the people present that day appeared to be making the same mistake. The works found immediately through this entrance—visually stupendous archival drawings pertaining to the architectures of fantasy: Body-transforming spaces by Mario Gandelsonas and Antarctic colonies by Amancio Williams—instead functioned as the preamble to a possible alternative reading of this exhibition. The drawings of the Ciudad Abierta by the Chilean Cooperativa Amereida stood out in particular, setting a parallel tone (in my mind) for much of the exhibition that was to follow. The numerous images of the cemetery that was built within this fanciful experiment of alternative living following the death of the young son of one of its builders, wittily if unintentionally hinted at the fact that the specters of utopia were present throughout this exhibition. Loss, nostalgia, yearning, and occasional delusion appear to flow just under the surface—a gentle but dangerous undertow threatening to pull the visitor under and away from the narrative that MoMA and its curators intend to present.

And just what is this official narrative? According to the few paragraphs that are stenciled onto the exit-cum-entrance, I found a narrative

Citation: Albert López, “Still Constructing... ‘Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955–1980,’” in *The Avery Review*, no. 8 (May, 2015), <http://averyreview.com/issues/2/still-constructing>.

of modernity that focused on the following themes: 1) Latin America as a collective region, played a key role in the Cold War–era conceptualization of the “Third” or “Developing” World. Therefore, Developmentalism—defined by the curatorial team as “the doctrine that the state should promote modernization and industrialization in all aspects of life”—was the predominant guiding force that generated much of the work contained in the exhibition. 2) Modernity in Latin America was essentially a narrative of struggle, challenged by the political vicissitudes of a region that vacillated between democracy and authoritarianism, and marked by the more classical predicaments of modernization such as population growth, migration, and socioeconomic restructuring. 3) The politics of development and the struggles of modernity were most concentrated in the city, toward which political conflict, economic restructuring, and populations tended to gravitate.

Keeping these themes in mind, it makes more sense that the official entrance can be found past the fascinating “Development Calculator” by the Uruguayan architect Carlos Gómez Cavazzo and through the glass doors on the far right of the wall that divides the gallery from the rest of the sixth floor. Dominating the room is the installation titled *Poetics of Development*, a commission by Los Angeles–based filmmaker Joey Forsyte. This visually enrapturing presentation utilizes seven screens to display archival footage that documents the parallel growth and expansion of México City, Havana, Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires. Visitors in the room soon find themselves glued to the seductive imagery of rapidly growing towers, flyovers by German zeppelins, endless streams of rocket-finned North American automobiles, and masses of stylish citizens representative of the growing consumer classes of these cities. The filmic presentation is appropriate content for a prelude to the exhibition if we accept the claims in the paragraph stenciled onto the wall next to the now apparent exit and its emphasis of urbanization as the region’s dominant constructive catalyst. However, this visual spectacle is less a narration of history and more a projection of a contemporary paradigm. Instead of truly narrating the epic, expansive, and fragmented “poem” of Latin American development, this attractive display sings a rather florid but restricted seven-voice madrigal that reframes and simplifies the loci of the region’s development. Ignoring that development during the period was also conceived as a national and at times continental project, it can be argued that this element of the exhibition tells us more about the current sociocultural and economic condition and its fascination with the so-called “global” city than it does about midcentury modern development.

A pronounced fetishization of the city is present through much of the exhibition. This is certainly not wholly inappropriate given its temporal and geographical parameters. *Urbanismo*—its practice as well as its instruction—was a dominant topic in the architectural discourses of the period, covered due to the undeniably rapid expansion of Latin America’s cities. In the wake of the nascent industrialization, relocation, and concentration of rural populations that marked many nations’ individual development, a rationalized reorganization of the region’s urban agglomerations had to be put into practice. Failing the project of reformation, construction of the city ex nihilo was also a possibility, given the perception, however mistaken, of the continent’s tabula rasa–like quality. The ability to create the ideal city—a recurrent dream and actuality

within the culture of triumphant modernity—has never ceased to inspire architects. For that reason, one can find a side chapel reserved for the adoration of Oscar Niemeyer’s Brasilia as well as the contemplation on unbuilt visions for this renowned city that would have made the likes of Ludwig Hilberseimer or Paul Rudolph blush.

However, this pronounced focus on cities and their architectures ironically exposes a weakness in the exhibition’s narrative of modernity and development via urbanization. Largely ignored are the practices of regional and national planning, variously worded as *planeamiento* or *planificación* (if we are to use the neologism that was coined in Latin America during the twentieth century). The evolution of urban planning commissions into larger national bureaucratic bodies such as Colombia’s Departamento Administrativo de Planeación y Servicios Técnicos (founded in 1958) or Cuba’s Junta Nacional de Planificación (founded in 1955), demonstrated the era’s climate of political and socioeconomic dirigisme. Because of an inclusion of architects (at times in a directive position) along with other fellow members of the “technical” class, these institutions emphasized the value of an integral (and aestheticized) structuring of the world of objects. As the mysterious developmental “gadget” of Gómez Cavazzo implies, architecture and public space, infrastructures of transportation and communication, urban and rural centers of production and revenue, and various other overlapping frameworks of social, legal, and economic import were being systematized by members of a profession trained in design. Rather than utilize this demonstration of structural interdependence as a leitmotif through which to organize the exhibition, it is a theme left insufficiently explored. Throughout the galleries on the sixth floor, architectural projects such as the graphically well-represented Ciudad Universitaria of the UNAM are left in a decontextualized state. The curators missed an opportunity to display the masterpiece of Mario Paní and Enrique del Moral along-side the contemporaneous macroscopic plans of national government that had been sketched by the project’s general construction manager, the architect Carlos Lazo. The University City was, after all, an idealized encapsulation of not only the metropolis but also the nation and perhaps even the continent.

It is only in the exhibition’s focus on the issue of housing—displayed magnificently and chronologically in the multimedia-enhanced timeline titled “A Quarter Century of Housing” and covering the entire southern wall of the



Installation view of Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980 at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (March 29-July 19, 2015). Photo by Thomas Griesel. © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

exhibition—that we begin to grasp the overlap of political, economic, and social forces that came into play in the development of Latin America. Furthermore, it was perhaps the only segment (albeit the largest and most elaborate) of the exhibition that gave the viewer a sense that the modernization and construction of Latin America was not a discrete process wholly defined by the will of individual nation-states. This was achieved in part by the curatorial team’s use of a linear presentation, relying on a layering of contextual information and archival material—a decision that produced a useful continuity between individual territories and disparate regimes of power. The role of extra-national, continental, and Pan-American forces is finally given some credit here, if only for the stated importance of the foundation of the OAS-inspired Inter-American Housing Center in Bogotá, Columbia, and its role in “self-help” housing, the U.S.-supported initiatives through the Kennedy-era Alliance for Progress, and the well-known U.N.-sponsored Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda (PREVI).

This exceptional narrative of a more continental effort of development through housing, accurately shown as a heterogeneous mix of international cooperation, national initiative, and at-times foreign instigation, was tempered by the parallel narrative of development that countered the present (if not entirely dominant) capitalist motives of this method of modernization. The Cuban Revolution and its efforts to house a growing population through socialism and prefabrication provides an excellent counterpoint to this larger story. But unfortunately, it is with the framing of the Cuban housing narrative that the exhibition falls back into a dominating tendency to emphasize a history of development that was primarily urban. While laudable attention is given to the notable urban housing project of La Habana del Este, there is no elaboration on the full breadth of the “Cuban model,” which lent itself to the disurbanist and rural-centric policies of construction in the later years of the revolutionary era. Likewise, the story of Cuban housing construction comes dangerously close to contradicting one of the main premises of the entire exhibition—which is to emphasize Latin America as a producer and exporter, and not just an importer and consumer of ideas. A great deal of attention is given to the *gran panel* system of prefabrication that the Soviets sent to Cuba following the massive destruction caused by Hurricane Flora in 1963. Also noted in passing was the use of the same I-464 building system that was being used in Cuba by Chile during the Allende years—an example that does contribute to this portion of the exhibition’s strength in framing the international nature of the architecture of housing. But these two examples of construction are not Latin American, and rather exemplify the architecture of another foreign hegemonic power in the region. A more appropriate topic of investigation could have been found in Cuba’s development of its own *girón* and *sandino* systems of prefabrication and its deployment of this technology to the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Peru in a campaign to build rural schools during the 1970s and ’80s.

Four years of organization for this exhibition, propelled by the involvement of an army of assistant curators, writers, archivists, model builders, and film editors, have led to an impressive agglomeration of content. Aside from the mandatory references and display of devotional objects pertaining to the work of Oscar Niemeyer, Lucio Costa, Luís Barragan, and Carlos Raúl Villanueva—iconic figures that featured prominently in the 1955 MoMA exhibition “Latin American Architecture Since 1945”—much of the material that com-

prises the exhibition has been newly rediscovered or never before displayed to the public. The decision to organize the majority of the exhibition around a panoply of thought-provoking topics promises to fulfill desires that this exhibition will launch a series of discussions and debates within the field. There should be no lack of these, since many a viewer likely moves through the exhibit becoming not only sensationally indulged, but also intellectually overwhelmed. Dozens of narrative framings push and pull the viewer through a gallery that is—with the exception of the timeline of housing—a very nonlinear progression. Coupled with the ambiguity of entry point, this made for a certain degree of peripatetic freedom in moving around on the floor. This freedom led me, and I suspect a few others, to accidentally enter the timeline in reverse—reading the narrative from 1980 to 1955.

While I corrected myself on this error in circulation, the idea of heading backward in time to conclude in the year when MoMA last did a survey on Latin America as a region didn't strike me as being wholly inappropriate given the nature of how public exhibitions by institutions in need of maintaining relevance can function. Walking along the timeline from left to right instead of the intended right-to-left decontextualized many of the displays, therefore objectifying many of the architectural projects that they contained. It allowed for viewers, assuming that they were ignorant of the official linear histories behind these works, to overlay their own current interpretations upon them—at least until they took a few more steps forward in order to piece the curators' narrative together. This unintended option of reading the timeline in reverse led, while I was there at least, to myriad spontaneous feelings and discussions about what was being presented. I witnessed the following situation while concluding my rather erratic three-hour wandering around the sixth floor of the MoMA:

*“Esta completamente abandonado. It's closed now.”*

One of the young Venezuelans that I had first followed into the exhibition was engaged in a collective lament with her fellow countrywomen. They were huddled around photographs and drawings of the once-iconic *Hotel Humboldt* by architect Tomás José Sanabria, describing its history to an inquisitive American friend:

*“Why is it closed?”*

*“The government. Era un lugar de lujo... The rich [used to] go there. The government is socialist, so they take it all away.”*

Their friend nodded in amazement, while the Venezuelans—apparently either recent wealthy émigrés or fortunate tourists who can afford to leave the country on vacation and who aren't afraid to criticize the Maduro administration as it loses the ability to govern the country—collectively exhaled in frustration and resignation as they faced the reality that their architectural symbols of a bygone modernity are quickly decaying into mere memories.

However, if the pessimism of an irretrievable loss marked the impressions of some of the exhibition's visitors, so, too, did an optimism founded on what I would like to call (if I may play on the exhibition's title) a Constructive, or rather Reconstructive nostalgia. An incident demonstrative of this occurred as I decided to pay one last homage to two hand-drawn perspectives of Cuba's National Schools of Art by Ricardo Porro. A small cluster of people gathered around these artifacts—many of them likely familiar with the documentary *Unfinished Spaces* or the book *Revolution of Forms* that helped return these

buildings to the spotlight a few years ago. As in many crowded exhibitions in New York, there was always a handful of onlookers and well-dressed “experts” giving their opinions on the content within. One of these clusters had formed around one of Porro’s drawings as well as the model of Vittorio Garatti’s ruinous School of Ballet. They informed each other of the debacle that arose a few years ago with Norman Foster’s invitation to rehabilitate the school, and even more loudly voiced the question:

“What if they finished it?”

Indeed, this may be a question that many a visitor to the exhibition—both local and foreign—may ask about Latin America’s modern project as they reflect on the news of our day and age. Despite the decline of powerhouses such as Argentina and Venezuela, the region as a whole largely exhibits a dynamic flux and upward mobility that is interpretable as a newfound “prosperity.” The flash of new constructions in the region’s increasingly “global” metropolises, and the steady continued growth of a vibrant architectural culture elicit the possibility that the dream of a constructive modernity, despite the cruel twists that its interpretation and implementation has sometimes taken, could either exist again or, in fact, has never ceased to exist.

The institutionalization of modernity has of course created this rather peculiar sense of cultural continuity with a period that has also been described as a discrete and closed historical phenomenon. The shadows of the contemporary tropes that define the much-fetishized archetypal city of our “late” stage in capitalism therefore aid in the organization of the content of the exhibition: “Campuses” (a relevant parallel to the increasing commodification of knowledge in the culture and service economies); “Density and Innovation” (a use of terminology that indirectly references the recent primacy of “compact” cities and the new “creative classes” in income-driven urban discourses); and “Utopia” (an ever popular obsession that most recently aligns with the dreams and preoccupations of techno-libertarians, a professional “protest class,” and other “nonconformists” that reside and dream along the fringes of our current consumer age). With that in mind, it could be that MoMA’s show is not the objective history of Latin American Construction that many of its casual guests may take it for. Instead, as is often the case in the curatorial “sciences,” it is a current narrative imbued with the effects of its circumstances. It is a reflection of a broadly collective, but by no means all-encompassing desire for the con-



Tomás José Sanabria. Hotel Humboldt, Caracas, Venezuela, 1956. © Fundación Alberto Vollmer.

**tinuation and the enrichment of a contemporary mode of urban development as well as a call to action aimed at a global audience to bring this potentiality (rooted in what can be described as a “tradition of modernity”) into reality.**