

# Latin American Issues in Architecture: The Making of a Discourse

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Architectural curricula in the United States today are in a state of flux. This is due in part to historians and theorists who wish to bring diversity issues such as gender, class, and culture into the classroom. New classes are offered as survey courses that showcase topics in architecture that have been historically neglected, as well as courses that attempt to divulge the operative methods of architectural discourse. The latter course type looks past the study of the built artifact and focuses instead on the architectural text. The overall aim is to elevate students' ethical and social awareness and to expose students to the rich contributions that these neglected or overlooked topics have to offer.

To underscore the value of inclusion, scholars point to the damage that a marginalized topic's exclusion from architectural history, or its iterative misrepresentations can have. "Diversity" courses examine this problem by seeking answers to questions beyond the concerns of traditional architectural discourse. These questions border on political discourse: Why have these marginalized topics been left out? How can tacit assumptions of the past be re-evaluated and re-interpreted, not for the sake of reparation, but to guide discussions taking place today about representation and cultural identity? With these questions in mind, the graduate seminar discussed here, "Latin American Issues in Architecture: The Making of a Discourse," delves into the architectural text as it relates to Hispanics in the Americas, an immense topic that has largely been excluded from architectural discourse in the U.S. and Europe. It is, perhaps, the only formal course offered in a North American architecture school that addresses this complex and important field in its entirety. To understand the intersection between the development of the seminar and the rhetoric of culture, let us consider the seminar's focus in a historiographical context.

## CULTURAL RHETORIC AND ACADEMIA

Interest in "culture" is discussed here in the context of architectural education's development, when American historians continuously re-examined the contents of historical texts and their relevance in academia. This interest is char-

acterized by the fundamental quest for an American identity. In architectural education, it began with the late nineteenth century shift from a myopic study of European architecture to the inclusion of American, and then Non-Western architecture. This observation is not a new one; it has been convincingly outlined by Gwendolyn Wright in her essay "History for Architects." Likewise, Spiro Kostof made reference to this period of self-discovery in his book, *A History of Architecture*, in the section on architecture for the New World, which he called "The Search for Self."

The first stage of development occurred in the late 1860s, when newly established architecture schools of North America embraced the ideologies of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, at that time considered the finest institution of architectural training in the world. American scholars then were interested in studying their European roots, and neither indigenous nor colonial-American architecture was considered historically significant or representative of a "culture." Evidence of this may be seen in the most widely used historical text of the time, Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, where "only five pages were devoted to the United States, followed by a cursory overview of "The Non-Historical Styles," which included Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Islamic, and a single page on pre-Columbian architecture."<sup>1</sup> European architecture was accepted as a legitimate field of study, but there was serious concern about "American" pedagogical development. When William Robert Ware founded M.I.T. in 1868, he expressed his intentions to "establish an academic tradition uniquely geared to American society and culture."<sup>2</sup> Ware's influence in re-shaping American architectural education was immense. Architect and Columbia University professor A.D.F. Harnlin, who was taught by Ware, was also critical of the continued dominance of Beaux-Arts pedagogy.<sup>3</sup> Harnlin became interested in an independent American architecture leading to, in the following decades, the exploration of a "national style." The momentum of this movement continued for several decades, until the advent of Modernism in the 1920s and 1930s shifted attention back to European architectural agendas.

The next stage of development occurred roughly in the 1950s, when history was augmented with the inclusion of the diverse local architectural heritage of many U.S. regions. Gwendolyn Wright suggests that some leaders of architectural institutions believed "that students could learn equally well from many sources; that there should be no hierarchy."<sup>4</sup> Although non-traditional architecture was slowly introduced into architectural education, it remained at the periphery. By 1975, Fletcher had increased its coverage of pre-Columbian architecture from one to ten pages, but the chapter on modern architecture contained only a brief mention of buildings in Latin America. What little architectural scholarship that did exist was neglected by the architectural publications and was often mostly recognized in the field of art. Gwendolyn Wright also suggests that its study allowed Western architects to feel sensitivity to a broader range of "cultures," but that they stopped short of treating non-Western architecture with rigorous academic study. She writes that "the so-called Third World, was conceived as an unselfconscious, anonymous domain, without change or will, always cohesive and environmentally responsive," and that "historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists were delving into the multiplicities of experience and the cultural dimensions of power, yet architects remained aloof from such academic exploration." Curiosity about "other" cultures continued at an arm's length.

Today's search for "diversity" in architecture is the logical extension of the development described above — a continuation of America's desire to learn more about its identity. It is also a result of the political advancement of marginalized groups in this country and the creation in universities of new areas of study. Beginning in the late 1960s, the impact of the civil rights movement was felt on campuses across the nation. The face of the professoriate changed, as did its educational goals. Development in the curricula and a re-allocation of funds followed, but this did not immediately affect architecture schools. Universities concentrated first on Liberal Arts curricula, establishing new areas of study such as Black Studies, Chicano Studies, and Women's Studies. This development was supported by marginalized groups, whose demand for fundamental reform in civil rights paralleled their desire to be included in legitimate history and to be recognized for the contributions that were their cultural legacy. Of particular importance at this time were the connections that critics of the education system made between knowledge and power, pointing to the acceptance of traditional, canonical studies and their interference with the recognition of marginalized members of society. Although the Eurocentric foundations of the American school curriculum were, and still are, under attack, the overriding concern was that of inclusion. The arm's-length interest in non-Western topics that Gwendolyn Wright observes was addressed by groups in the United States who did not see marginalized subjects as the "other," but saw them as extensions of themselves. These groups demanded substantive and long-lasting inquiry into these subjects. Today,

architectural discourse relies heavily on scholarly development in these new fields of study for the exploration of "diversity" they offer.

### LATIN AMERICAN ISSUES IN ARCHITECTURE

This seminar was developed with the intention of bringing relevant texts in this field of study to the roundtable of architectural education. That objective alone exposes two problems; the first is the dearth of Latin American architectural scholarship that is published in English, and the second is the wealth of information that exists in Latin America but that awaits translation into English. Scholarly work has basically traveled in one direction only; journals and books published in Latin America remain unknown in the United States and Europe, while publications from these regions continue to inundate Latin America.

Issues regarding the architecture of Hispanics in the Americas appeared in American architectural journals as early as the 1920s; these appearances, however, have not been consistent. In the last decade, publications such as *New City* and *Places* have devoted substantial attention to Hispanic architecture. Of even greater importance, however, is the emergence of publications and conferences that focused on the collective picture — the whole of Hispanic architectural production in the American continent. The first occurred in 1987, with the conference "Hispanic Traditions in American Architecture and Urbanism," sponsored by the Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture at Columbia University. In the concluding remarks for this conference, the coordinators wrote: "The relationship between the cultural identity and urban form has been of increasing interest to historians and architects in recent years. These discussions within the context of Hispanic-American culture are especially timely because people of Hispanic heritage will soon be the largest group in the nation. Much has been written on this growing population, but very little of it has focused on architecture and urbanism of contemporary Hispanic Americans, although there are sizable Hispanic populations in all major cities."<sup>6</sup>

The second event occurred recently, in 1994, with the publication of *Design Book Review's* issue called "Other Americas: Other Architecture." The editor made a similar plea. He wrote: "The architectural culture of Latin America remains largely invisible north of the Gulf of Mexico and the Rio Grande. It is noticeably absent from both architectural publications and the curricula of most North American architecture schools. We hope this [effort] will not be merely another fleeting moment of visibility, but will instead serve to open an accessible, ongoing dialogue on the architecture and the theoretical debates surrounding the architectural culture of Latin America, and their potential impact on North America." The success of this issue was due in part to the inclusion of translated essays by scholars that have been writing about Latin American issues in their respective countries for years. This issue and the conference described above are important, as well, because

they combined two traditionally separate disciplines: Latin American Studies and U.S. Latino Studies. Joining the two subjects provided a richer and more inclusive discourse.

Other conferences include the 1994 "Deans of the Americas: Conference on Architectural Education," which marked the creation of a dialogue across national borders among administrators of architecture schools. Recently, CLEA (the Encounter of Latin American Students of Architecture), held its 12th conference in Lima, Peru. This conference provided an interchange between professors and students from Latin America and the U.S. at an impressive scale — over one thousand participants attended. The sentiment expressed on all occasions above, and the agreement that attention to this area of study is long overdue, today prompts many scholars to critically explore this field of study. The seminar described below is one approach.

### READING THE ARCHITECTURAL TEXT

In discussing the subject at hand — the totality of Hispanic architectural production in all the Americas — nomenclature must first be defined. In the seminar, Hispanic architectural production in the Americas from colonization onward is grouped together under the term "Latin American." This is done without regard for historic period or geographic locale; in this case, it is important to be able to blur borders. Hispanic people, with their interconnected heritage, may be understood as belonging to a single group outside of the context of present-day country and state borders. Therefore, Mexican and Mexican-American architecture are both considered in the seminar. National and regional distinctions are addressed, however, when the discussion becomes more specific.

The seminar begins by examining the architectural text through historiographical questions such as, "who writes history?" and "is it written with a biased perspective?" The text is reviewed, not as stated fact, but as one person's interpretation of events. When discussing biases in written history, we identify the rhetoric of "otherness," the way in which marginalized groups have been defined by the dominant culture. Readings of theories such as Edward Said's "orientalism" frame discussions about how the subject of Latin America may have been treated by American and European publications. The manner in which Greeks considered everything non-Greek as "barbaric," even though their own culture appropriated aspects of existing sub-cultures, serves as a model for understanding U.S. and European perceptions of Latin American culture and architecture. Similarly, the manner in which Islamic architecture has been "orientalized" by European travelers is studied. Yet, the dichotomy of the Occident and the Orient is not easily transferable, because Latin America is, of course, part of the West, and has had a long-standing neighboring relationship with the United States. Nevertheless, Latin Americans in the United States today are still considered part of the "other" by the dominant culture.

Proceeding chronologically, texts dedicated to pre-Columbian, colonial, post-colonial, modern, and contempo-

rary architectural discourse are examined in the seminar. Theories put forth by Spanish friars from the sixteenth and seventeenth century are studied. These theories attributed the pre-Columbian ruins to Old World peoples such as the Ten Tribes of Israel, the Phoenicians or Carthaginians, and the survivor of the Lost Continents of Mu or Atlantis.<sup>8</sup> The theories assumed that these people had traveled to Latin America and brought civilization to the "barbarians." Texts of this nature reveal that European colonists doubted the indigenous people's ability to think substantially and build intricately crafted structures. In the early 1800s, English travelers and chroniclers depicted the New World as exotic, barbaric, and mysterious. The manner in which information was disseminated, in side-shows and fair-style exhibits, unfairly tainted people's understanding of these civilizations. By the 1840s, books on the ruins of the Mayans and Aztecs had become popular in America and Europe; their characterization of the natives perpetuated prejudices and limited the discussion of pre-Columbian architecture to the aesthetic and the awesome. The superficial portrayal of Latin American indigenous cultures in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago showed how, once again, there was no substantive discourse.<sup>9</sup> Finally, theories expounded by notable scholars such as Viollet-le-Duc in his essay, "Antiquities Americaines," confirmed these biases. One author wrote:

Seeking to prove that the builders of the Mexican cities were not endemic to the region and instead migrated from the northern Europe, Africa, or Asia, Viollet-le-Duc identified a complex of series of racial epochs and influences in specific architectural motifs. It was believed that these motifs represented unchanging, seemingly genetically programmed racial characteristics. According to this theory, for example, only Aryans and Semites built with dry stone, while the use of mortar indicated Finnish blood.<sup>10</sup>

In the end, the decorative arts became the purveyor of pre-Columbian architectural styles, most notably during the Art Deco period and the Mayan Revival Style, popular during the 1920s and 1930s. Fascination for the pre-Columbian "exotic" had appeared in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright as early as 1915. Aztec, Mayan, and Incan styles were often lumped together, usually relegated to reliefs and moldings, without differentiation between the three styles. This interest was later revived by a few post-modern architects.

The seminar continues with a study of the architectural text surrounding the next period of conquest and colonialization. This period reveals the complex interchanges between the Iberian and Indian cultures. Historical anecdotes about the urban consequences that resulted from the mixing of the two groups reveal the unique conditions of colonial Latin America. Studies of the "Law of the Indies," published in 1573, reveal the effects it had on the already solidified urban patterns in the Americas. One of the most devastating effects of colonialism was the stripping away of the cultural identity of a people; this superimposi-

tion of cultures marked the beginning of a search for one's identity that continues today. The reality of having both European and indigenous pasts, still present in contemporary Hispanic communities, is important when considering perceptions of space that are misunderstood by the "dominant culture." Difference between the mysterious and ephemeral indigenous side and the rational European side have traditionally been overlooked or oversimplified. The question of cultural identity is further complicated when one considers the many cultures of Latin America, including African, Asian, and the Moorish influences transported by the Iberians. It is important to note that the colonization of the Americas was also a time of discovery for both the "self" and the "other," for the colonizer was considered the "other" by the indigenous people. While this was a time of self-definition, actual exploration of this did not occur until later, after the Industrial Revolution.

The consequences of modernity in Latin America were featured as early as 1930 in Europe, in Le Corbusier's *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*. This publication was based on Le Corbusier's South American lectures, where he drew comparisons among the urban conditions of Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, New York, Paris, and the USSR. By indicating that their similar plight was representative of modern times, Le Corbusier, in fact, brought the built world of Latin America into international attention. In 1937, the United States was exposed to modernity in Latin America with a feature story on Mexican architecture published in *Architectural Record*. The following introduction captures the United States' tainted perception of Latin American architecture at that time:

The quantity of [modern architecture in Mexico] comes as a surprise. We have thought of our neighbors as engaged in pursuits different than ours. These people were our opposites. Their territory was all mountainous, contrasted with our level central basin; it was occupied chiefly by Indians, not white men; colonized by Spaniards instead of Englishmen; spotted with huge ruins older than Rome and of a scale comparable to Egypt. The inhabitants, we were led to believe, supported themselves chiefly by handicraft, lacked a sense of time, were of a mystical rather than practical bent of mind and, in countless other ways, differed from us as much as human beings could; besides they were much happier."

The work of modern Latin American architects featured in this essay showed how European modernism had already thoroughly influenced their methods of construction and aesthetic explorations. This importation of ideas would later be questioned by Latin American scholars. Latin American architecture was featured again in the U.S. by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in its 1942 exhibit "Brazil Builds," and then again, in its 1955 exhibit "Latin American Architecture Since 1945," curated by Henry Russell-Hitchcock. Mention of Latin American architecture in U.S. and European publications after this remained spotty.

Conversely, as early as 1914, architectural discourse had emerged in Latin America with great vigor in the architectural magazines; historian Ramon Gutierrez recently studied eighty-five magazines and concluded that architectural discourse in Latin America had consistently explored issues of modernity, cultural identity and regionalism.<sup>12</sup> In reviewing discussions about the role modernity played in Latin America, one sees that many architects utilized the modern idiom when exploring their nationalistic identity. An example of this identity-searching was seen in the work of Luis Barragan, and most recently in the work of Ricardo Legoretta, who has been described as, "the man who makes Mexico look like Mexico."<sup>13</sup> It has been hard, however, for Latin American architects today to seek a common ground in their continent's architecture, when such questions remain unresolved at a national level. Similarly, Hispanics in the United States continue to explore their own cultural identities. This group has not had much contact with the modernist idiom, except through government-mandated projects such as subsidized housing or the architecture of border crossings. This brings us to another inquiry that also demands attention.

While historical architecture has been covered in a few publications, the present condition of Hispanic architecture has not been critically studied in academia. Historical Hispanic architecture has been featured in a few architectural books. For example, the book *America's Architectural Roots* offers a cursory view of Southwestern Hispanic and Southeastern Spanish architecture. The architecture featured here is mostly religious, residential, and militaristic from the colonial epoch.

To understand the present condition of Hispanic architecture, however, the seminar also considers Hispanic architecture in popular culture: that is, the built world that appropriates Hispanic idioms, but that does not necessarily affect the Hispanic population. For example, California's historic romance with Spanish architecture in the 1920s is looked upon as part of Hispanic architecture, even though it was mostly promoted by developers for middle to upper-class Anglo-American families. Similarly, in the 1950s, the development of the ranch-style house, prompted by *Sunset Magazine*, exhibited the first formal analysis of Spanish and Mexican-American built forms in a U.S. publication. The result, however, was an equally romanticized view. The famous *Sunset* pattern books by Cliff May, who was in fact half-Hispanic, were the largest disseminators of the ranch-style house after World War II. The appropriation of Hispanic architecture conveniently filled the identity gap of the American frontiersman and the construct of *Western Living* at this time. The western world's concealment of the intersection between the Mexican and the ranch house, however, are testimony today that "other" cultures were still not taken seriously. This harkens back to the mythification of the Western cowboy, who in fact was a direct descendant of the Mexican *ranchero*. The seminar also examines the Hispanic's built environment as it is experienced in Spanish and Mexican restaurants. These building types are studied for their methods of perpetuating Latin American idioms. Attention is brought to how this building type freezes architectural discourse while it

mainly serves the American desire to be treated occasionally to a "cultural experience."

The present condition of Hispanic architecture has been the focus of a few scholars who have explored Hispanic architectural idioms within the suburban lot and the urban dwelling. For example, ADOBE LA, a collaborative group of architects and artists, has researched the Hispanic community and issues of identity. ADOBE LA was recently featured in the journal *Assemblage* as part of the Wexsner exhibition "House Rules." In this issue, the editors wrote, "redirecting architecture toward specified points, even with resolutely partisan means (feminist, marxist, race-based, sexuality-based, and the like), seems to be the very task we should set ourselves. House Rules is such an attempt to analyze and make architecture from specific social positions, to suggest the ways in which the world could be changed by the production of new narratives."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, attention to this concern was short-lived; a following issue of *Assemblage* called "The Politics of Architectural Discourse," was devoid of gender, class, and cultural issues, despite the misleading image on its cover of African-Americans parading down the streets of New Orleans. The fact that the journal stopped short of further inquiry reminds us that new narratives rarely occur in architectural publications with a frequency necessary to build upon past work, and in effect, create an active discourse. The inclusion of such topics is left to the whim of the editorial staff.

Towards the end of the seminar, attention shifts from historical texts to the "power of the press." How Latin American architectural scholarship can be brought to the round table, and whether it should be, is discussed under the heading "The Making of a Discourse." When discussing how this subject can be included into architectural discourse, curricular activity is studied, including syllabi of courses that focus on gender, class, and cultural issues. Students are placed in an atypical role, as evaluators of methods presently in use in North American schools of architecture. This part of the seminar tends to yield personal discussions about students' prospective graduate work, and their roles as future architects or professors. The seminar concludes with readings of a diverse collection of texts that explore how other groups have dealt with "diversity" issues in academia. The course ends with a look at recent pursuits into cultural identity and representation, as well, with projects such as Dolores Hayden's work with the non-profit organization, "The Power of Place," and the Chilean school's design-built project near Valparaiso, "Ciudad Abierta" (Open City). These two discursive examples are chosen because they surpass the closure of the built artifact as they provide an interchange with the public or student. They leave a line of communication open for constant re-interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

Hispanic architecture has had a significant presence in the United States since the sixteenth century. Issues of cultural identity, multiple interpretations, and representation, as they relate to the Hispanic people, warrant a more consistent and

frequent coverage both in the classroom and in the printed text. Because written history naturally reflects, in part, a writer's sense of self-discovery, we must consider a critical reading of "history" in the classroom. Today, architecture programs reflect these concerns with the creation of seminars and lecture courses such as the one described above.

Many schools are persistently bringing issues of diversity into the classroom. Most Ivy League schools today offer courses on Asian or Islamic topics, but only a few have looked at pre-Columbian work. Some schools have offered courses that focused on multicultural space; other schools have dealt with these issues in their design studios. This observation, however, does not suggest a permanent change in the curricula. One can only speculate on the future of these areas of study, as they are contingent on budgets and the changing goals of schools. They are also contingent on the fifty-four criteria required by the National Architectural Accreditation Board. This organization still remains ambiguous about its definition of "diversity;" the semantics of their written criteria do not always reflect the specific requirements made during their accreditation visits. The present fluctuation of architectural curricula is an important part of this development; its outcome, however, remains unknown. Presently, inroads are being made that will certainly change our perspectives of architectural discourse in the future.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, ed., "History for Architects," *The History of History in American Schools of Architecture, 1865-1975* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), 20.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Plunz, "Reflections on Ware, Hamlin, McKim, and the Politics of History on the Cusp of Historicism," *The History of History in American Schools of Architecture, 1865-1975* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), 54.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.
- <sup>4</sup> Wright, 36.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.
- <sup>6</sup> "Hispanic Traditions in American Architecture and Urbanism," Final Performance Report to the National Endowment for the Humanities, submitted by the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, Columbia University in the City of New York, May 20, 1988, 1.
- <sup>7</sup> John Loomis, "From the Editor: Other Americas, Other Architecture," *Design Book Review* 32/34, Spring/Summer, 1.
- <sup>8</sup> Marjorie I. Ingle, "Historical Precedents: Early Explorers, Chroniclers and Sideshowers," *The Mayan Revival Style*, (Salt Lake City: G. M. Smith Publication, 1984), 2.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.
- <sup>10</sup> Keith F. Davis, *Desire Charnay: Expeditionary Photographer* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 17, quoted in Marjorie I. Ingle, "Historical Precedents: Early Explorers, Chroniclers and Sideshowers," *The Mayan Revival Style*, (Salt Lake City: G. M. Smith Publication, 1984), 3.
- <sup>11</sup> Esther Born, "The New Architecture in Mexico," *Architectural Record*, 1937, 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Ramon Gutierrez, "Architectural Journals and the Means for Discourse in Latin America," translated from the Spanish by Richard Ingersoll, *Design Book Review*, 32/34, Spring/Summer, 22-4.
- <sup>13</sup> Jan Russell, *Texas Monthly*, November 1995, 112.
- <sup>14</sup> Editors, *Assemblage* 24, 1994, 6.