

# Marginalization of the “Other”

JOHN B. HERTZ  
Universidad de Puerto Rico

## INTRODUCTION

For Latin America, architecture plays a defining social role and is imbued with political meaning. Mar de Plata, Mexico City, San Juan, and other historically under-discussed sites of contemporary architecture of Latin America are far from being Kenneth Frampton's *peripheral nodes*.<sup>1</sup> To accept the view that architecture from the regions of Latin America has an *anticentrist consensus*, is to marginalize that which is not western modernism. The architecture created there is neither a reaction to the West nor to global culture. Rather, it is a response to local conditions that has developed in parallel to western contemporary architecture. This is not of the margins; this is the architecture of the “other.”

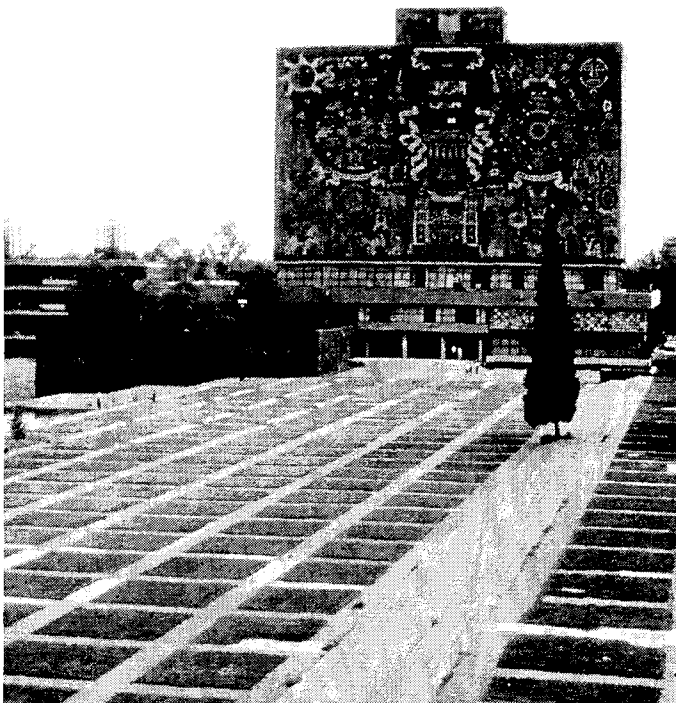
To speak of the relationship between architecture, politics and culture in Latin America requires facing up to the historic circumstances that are its “discovery,” conquest and eventual “liberation.” Here history is written in the tumultuous cultural changes caused by colonization, and where its scars have a living presence.

## ARQUITECTURA FUNCIONALISTA

Throughout Latin America, and clearly evident in countries like Mexico, architecture was a fundamental instrumental in realizing the revolutionary changes that swept through the former Spanish colonies. The violent upheaval that came to Mexico at the turn of the century, the civil war known as the Revolution of 1910, propitiated a later artistic and intellectual transformation of gigantic proportion beginning in the 1920s, which by the 1930s created the foundation for the contemporary Mexico of today. The Revolution of 1910, which destroyed much of the economic base of the country and took as many as one life in eight, provided a later opportunity for young Mexican architects to forge a modern, Mexican *arquitectura funcionalista*. This current formed part of the every-day political thought and political rhetoric of what was to become the dominant party, the

*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or PRI. A distinguishing characteristic of modern Mexico, the intimate relationship between architecture and social purpose, is the product of a society forged in fires of a violent civil war. This architecture is of a character appropriate to place and time in its tectonics, plasticity and typologies. This is not an architecture developed in reaction to Western culture, that is, not the architecture of resistance, nor the product of a process of binary oppositions, of core/margin. Rather, it is an architecture developed in parallel to western contemporary architecture.

The architecture of Mexico created in the last century is clearly a “child of the revolution.”<sup>2</sup> What occurred in Mexico, more so than in Western Europe and America, was the unhampered opportunity to put into practice ideas that linked architecture to social purpose. Unlike Europe, where this experiment was interrupted by war, or the United States, where modern architecture became the tool of unbridled speculation and capitalism, in Mexico these ideas were implemented in an undiluted form. Not only what had been destroyed needed replacement, but also, even more important, there was the urgent need to provide for the “have-nots,” products of the many years of the repressive Diaz regime.<sup>3</sup> The 1930s began a period of rapid expansion and extensive construction. The centralized government was quite explicit that its goal was to bring social justice to all. The new “functionalist” architecture became the means to solving the needs of housing, education and health, all which had been neglected since the colonial period. The fundamental ideals of this architectural revolution became institutionalized by the PRI which governed Mexico for an uninterrupted seventy years, and formed part of every day political thought and party rhetoric, as well as part of the ongoing effort to transform society into the shape of a political image.<sup>4</sup> It was clearly understood that modern architecture played a pivotal role in that process. Thus the European concept of positive social ideals being incorporated into architecture was fundamental to the evolution of modern Mexican culture. Unlike Europe, which suffered the dislocations caused by the rise of Nazism, where the Bauhaus was closed and most of the leading proponents of the modern



movement forced to flee the continent, what transpired in Mexico was an unhampered opportunity to put these ideals into practice.

Mexico City became the testing grounds of these new ideas, and the seminal buildings of this period are almost all found there or in its environs, all built by the government for social benefit. The list of the most influential projects include: Juan O’Gorman’s Technical Institute and other school buildings which followed his studio for Diego Rivera – then a leading artist and leftist who befriended Trotsky when he escaped to Mexico – (all from the period between 1929-35); the Huilpulco Hospital and Institute of Cardiology by José Villagran, the father of functionalist architecture in Mexico (1929-36); the Social Security Institute by Carlos Obregon Santacilla (1945); and a number of buildings at the UNAM campus by architects such as Enrique Yañez and Juan O’Gorman, the second generation of Mexican modernists.<sup>5</sup>

The role of architecture in the transformation and cultural changes of post-revolutionary Mexico transcended rhetoric and its importance is seen in the real changes that occurred between 1910 and 1930: the urban concentration of the population increased by 50%; the population of Mexico city tripled; and construction as a percentage of economic activity rose from practically nothing to almost 20%. These developments accelerated thereafter as well. By the 1940s the central government dedicated 40-50% of its budget to the construction of infrastructure – roads, irrigation systems, water supply – and physical facilities to solve the massive problems of education, housing, and health. The general lack of economic dynamism

in Mexico made the impact of the efforts of these architects, all involved with the central government’s programs, all the more notable. The physical and financial damage caused by the Revolution of 1910 lasted until the middle of the century, severely affecting the capacity of the private sector and the church to generate significant projects, which added importance to governmental efforts.<sup>6</sup>

The pioneering works of two of the most important post-Revolution architects, Jose Villagran and Guillermo Zárraga, were followed by a second generation of designers that included Enrique del Moral, Juan O’Gorman, and Juan Legarreta, among others. For these disciples, Mexican “functionalism,” whether orthodox or radical in nature, was clearly identified with social idealism and the glorification of architecture for the poor. Enrique del Moral, one of the leading figures in the design of the new campus for the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), referring to architecture itself, said, “The program for Mexico is that of poverty.”<sup>7</sup> Juan Legarreta, in a fiery statement to the 1933 meeting of the Mexican Society of Architects, wrote, “A people that inhabit shacks and huts can not *speak* of architecture. We will make the people’s houses. Esthetes and rhetoricians – hopefully they all die – can have their discussions later.”<sup>8</sup>



Government action and public architectural education is still permeated by this revolutionary ideal. The idealistic notion that architecture can foment positive social change and improve lives, especially for the economically disadvantaged sectors of the population, is still a fundamental part of the education of many architects in Mexico. The academic catalogues of the Facultad de Arquitectura of the UNAM, the largest and most important school of architecture in the country, still address the social and economic inequities in Mexico and the responsibilities of practitioners to change them, although there has been a marked decline in this rhetoric in the post-NAFTA period.<sup>9</sup>

The design studios of the UNAM stress the importance of the role of architecture in ameliorating social and economic inequities and the architectural projects produced in them

emphasize public housing, medical care and education for the masses. As stated in the description of the Taller Hannes Meyer, one of the sixteen “talleres” (design studios) of the Facultad de Arquitectura at the UNAM: “We consider it important to direct our work principally towards those sectors of the society which are found to be practically marginalized, including, among other things, the use of professional knowledge to better their conditions of living, or of reorienting expectations in relationship to the definition of an architecture that is identifiable with the cultural practices of the masses of this country.”<sup>10</sup>

The campus of the UNAM serves as the most important complex of buildings produced by the modern period in Mexico. Two principal architects coordinated teams of different designers, each assigned a particular building. The underlying concept and spatial development reflected an evolution of traditional ideas about public space, linked to pre-Columbian precedents, that gave a specific meaning to the project and speak directly to the role of architecture in creating cultural identity. The integration of local materials and craftsmanship into a modern idiom and the innovative manner in which buildings and site were meshed, created a complex that expressed *Mexicanidad*, while having a radically new architectural manifestation.<sup>11</sup> So appropriate was the UNAM project to a decisive moment of cultural transformation in the country that the architectural history of Mexico must be divided into a “before and after” of its construction. To describe, in the words of Frampton, these projects as “locally inflected manifestations of ‘world culture’”<sup>12</sup> is to marginalize and devalue the meanings and intentions of the architecture produced by a culture with more than 3,000 years of built history. This is hardly practice from the margins, but rather a development in the manner contemporary with Euro-American directions.

## TROPICALIDAD

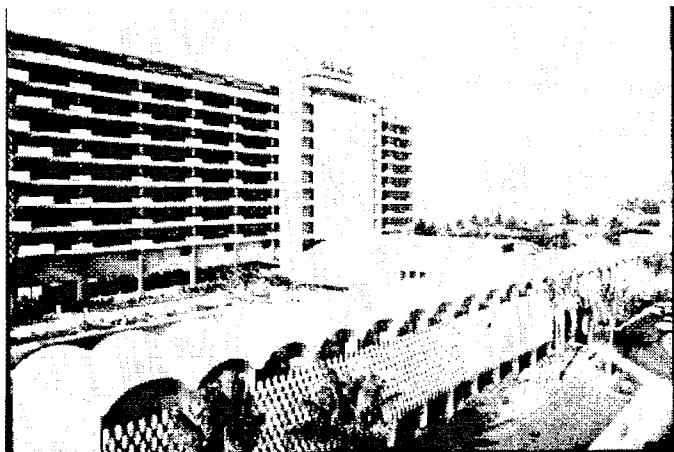
Distinct in scale but not in meaning is the Hotel La Concha in San Juan, Puerto Rico, which embodies the struggle over the issue of political status of Puerto Rico and by extension the very nature of Puerto Rican culture. The Hotel La Concha can be “read” in the light of two distinct visions of Puerto Rico. On one hand, La Concha is an icon produced during the post-WWII period of the first elected governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Muñoz Marín of the *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD) – the pro-Commonwealth party – that in 1948 would make the transition to greater power with his taking office. Its designers sought a tropical architecture for Puerto Rico that would be the vehicle to a world of progress and present a new iconography that followed the agenda set by the PDP. It resulted in the first, internationally recognized, concrete efforts to transform both the image and culture of an agricultural Puerto Rico into a modern and progressive society. However, the economic and political philosophy of nationalism and state capitalism that created La Concha, and that it represents, is diametrically



opposed to the vision of the *Partido Nuevo Progresista* (PNP) – the pro-statehood party. For the PNP, La Concha has become an anachronism, both as an architectural and development model, that would be better supplanted by private enterprise operating within a global economy and by a project with an “Hispanic” image of the tropics that speaks of a future with Puerto Rico as the first Spanish-speaking state of the union. This project, like that of the UNAM campus, represents a local projection of culture. It is far removed from being a regional architecture from the margins that is “critical of modernization.”<sup>13</sup> In fact it, like the main campus of the UNAM, embodies the struggle with modernity and reflects the divergence of contemporary design from Euro-American tendencies.

At the time of its construction, Hotel La Concha was a groundbreaking model of tropical architecture. Designed in the late 1950s by the Puerto Rican architects Osvaldo Toro y Miguel Ferrer, the first indigenous exponents of a vision of modernity and progress, this “new” architecture for Puerto Rico was based on the particular characteristics of place first articulated by the architect Henry Klumb – topography, orientation, climate, use of local materials, and an economy of means of construction – that sprung from need rather than any modernist manifesto. The intention of their strategies was to represent an image of progress and industrialization within a tropical context, rather than the picturesque normally associated with Puerto Rico.<sup>14</sup>

The vision of these architects was harmonious with the agenda of the PPD, which in wanting to distance itself from the use of historic ornament and typologies associated with the colonial periods, embraced *tropicalidad*. This was not a matter of creating a Caribbean style, but rather “to assimilate the conceptual foundations—not the stylistic cosmetics—of the many currents that inform the expression of the contemporary.”<sup>15</sup>

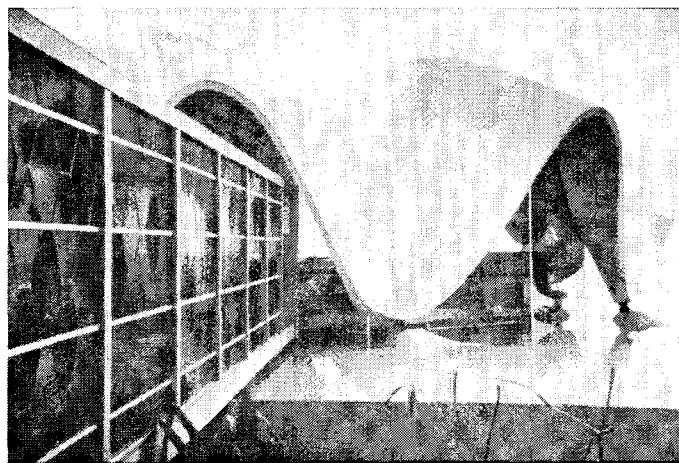


The architecture of La Concha accentuates structure and takes advantage of climatic conditions through cross ventilation and natural illumination by the manipulation of screening, shading devices and *brise-soleils*. Its open lobby promotes the connection between inside and out and it allows for visual transparency and integration with the climate and landscape. La Concha demonstrates a sophisticated spatial development and the use of construction details as ornament without the need to revert to historic allusions, with the goal of defining a truly tropical expression. The project uses a new vocabulary predicated on an expression of the lush tropical context.

The hotel is not simply a “modernist” building translated to a tropical setting, but rather springs from fundamental architectural ideas unique to the Puerto Rican context. For example, La Concha uses the *batey*—the central interior patio of traditional indigenous public space around which the structures of the Island’s pre-Columbian pueblos were organized—as an organizational scheme. This space is also sympathetic to the interior patios of traditional urban housing typology found in San Juan. The long single loaded corridor of the hotel echoes the circulation systems around the traditional patio space and the articulated *brise-soleils* make reference Puerto Rican housing typologies with their traditional shuttered galleries. The upper level of the hotel, which uses the rooms and support spaces as a lookout towards the sea on one side and the city on the other, is akin to the *mirador*, a typical San Juan residential element.<sup>16</sup> As a direct link between the architecture and the site, the use of water as a design theme, in conjunction with other references, yields a building specific to an island setting. The influence of an explicit political and social agenda acting on the fusion of

the vocabulary of modernism with architectural roots and morphologies derived from a 400 year-old Spanish tradition found on the Island, created a unique expression appropriate to the tropical setting of Puerto Rico. Recognizing the exceptional nature of this project, it received considerable international press coverage, including appearing on the front of *Progressive Architecture* in August 1959.

When the demolition of the Hotel La Concha was recently contemplated, it became the focus of a struggle between the almost equally matched pro-statehood and pro-commonwealth political machines, pitting issues of nationalism and state capitalism against globalization and private enterprise. The debate was not solely about which development model would prevail, but what was the appropriate architectural expression as an instrument for growth. Both the Governor of Puerto Rico and the Mayor of San Juan, each representing two different political parties, used the power of their offices to wage a legal and public relations battle to demolish or preserve La Concha as a means of advancing their dispirit visions for the Island.



To make the argument that this building is just another example of “critical regionalism,” where La Concha is posited as the architecture of resistance, the architecture of the periphery against the center, and by inference that the Hotel is the product of the margins, is difficult, given that it is truly part of a parallel development to contemporary Euro-American architecture seen elsewhere. La Concha is not just an isolated example that is the exception to the norm, but rather is part of a substantial body of work that is similar in embodying cultural values.

#### THE “OTHER”

These projects, found in places as distinct as Mexico and Puerto Rico are case studies of an architecture that plays a defining social role and is imbued with political meaning. While often ignored and under-considered by the history taught in most

European or American schools of architecture, the contemporary architecture of Latin America is neither a reaction to the West nor to global culture. Rather, it is a response to local conditions that has developed in parallel with western contemporary architecture. While it has been marginalized by the bias of architectural history, it is not of the margins. This is the architecture of the "other."

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Kenneth Frampton, "Place-Form and Cultural Identity," John Thackara, ed., *Design After Modernism* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1988): p. 55.
- <sup>2</sup> Beach Riley, "Social Progress and the New Architecture," *The New Architecture of Mexico* (N. Y.: Morrow and Co., 1937): p. 18.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid: 18.
- <sup>4</sup> F. Brandenburg, *The Making Of Modern Mexico* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964):p. 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Israel Katzman, *La Arquitectura Contemporanea Mexicana* (México, D.F.: SEP, 1963): p. 156.
- <sup>6</sup> Ramón Vargas Salguero, "Las Reivindicaciones Históricas en el Funcionalismo Socialista," in *Apuntes Para la Historia y Crítica de la Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX: 1900-1980*, Vol. 1 (Mexico, D.F.: SEP/INBA, 1982):p. 102.

- <sup>7</sup> Ramón Vargas Salguero, "La Polémica del Funcionalismo," *La Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX* (México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994): 178. (Translation by the author)
- <sup>8</sup> Francisco J. Treviño, "La Ciudad Universitaria y la Arquitectura Contemporánea de México," in José Rogelio Álvarez Noguera ed., *La Arquitectura de la Ciudad Universitaria* (México, DF: UNAM, 1994): p. 112.
- <sup>9</sup> *Información Básica de la Facultad de Arquitectura, 1999: Información Básica de la Facultad de Arquitectura, 1993* (México, D.F.: UNAM). (Translation by the author)
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid: p. 99. (Translation by the author)
- <sup>11</sup> Alberto Manrique, "El Futuro Radiante: La Ciudad Universitaria," in *La Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX* (México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994): 212-13, 221.
- <sup>12</sup> Frampton, 315.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, 314-315.
- <sup>14</sup> Enrique Vivoni, "Palimpsesto Tropical," in Irma Nieves and Carlos Gil, ed., *Polifonia Salvaje* (San Juan: Editorial Postdata, 1995), p.76 (Translation by author)
- <sup>15</sup> Roberto Segre, "Architecture and the City in the Caribbean: The Reinvention of Paradise," in Alexander Tzouis, Liane Lefavre and Bruno Stagno, ed., *Tropical Architecture: Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalization* (Great Britain: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), p. 143.
- <sup>16</sup> Jerry Torres Santiago, "The Invention of the Gates of Paradise," in Enrique Vivoni, ed., *San Juan Siempre Nuevo: Arquitectura y Modernización en el Siglo XX* (Río Piedras: Archivo de Arquitectura y Construcción de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2000), p. 156.