

Allegories of the Postwar

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The design and realization of Carlos Raúl Villanueva's new campus for the *Universidad Central de Venezuela* spanned from 1943 to 1967. This chronology alone makes the *Ciudad Universitaria* an exemplary postwar project. But more significant are its numerous intersections with themes of postwar architectural discourse, one of which I will address here by examining Villanueva's formulation and execution of the *Area Central*, the ensemble of buildings and covered plaza that served as the Core of the campus. Rather than propose a forensic account, this examination will advance a strategy for reading this architecture in the context of a postwar periphery where modernism confronted as much as complemented modernization. In this context, the *Area Central* posed questions about the possibility and character of a modern civic space; questions about reconciling the individual and the collective; questions which, I will argue, could only be rendered – and answered – allegorically. Allegory, then, understood through its contemporary theorizations, will offer a strategy for reading, one that discerns without resolving tensions inherent in these questions.

The concept of the Core, or the civic center, permeated CIAM discussions in the first postwar decade, providing the theme for the Eighth Congress in Hoddesdon in 1951. The Core, CIAM members claimed, would remedy the increasing alienation and isolation of urban life, restoring a sense of community by providing a space of social activity to embody, express and make visible the collective sphere. This space would provoke more than the mere “aggregation of individuals” by making citizens conscious of their relation to that collective sphere. Advocates pointed to architectural precedents such as the agora as models that drew together political and religious structures around an opening at the heart of the city. The contemporary Core could, they claimed, transform spectators into actors by stationing symbols of civic life – “administration buildings, museums, libraries, concert halls, promenades, exhibition halls, etc”¹ – within spaces suited for planned and spontaneous congregation.

I want to argue that the *Area Central* must be understood as a Core, as an attempt to shape a collective space for the University City. The campus certainly operated as a community, combining academic, administrative, and residential functions, and accommodating the public with its sports, cultural, and medical facilities. It was expressly intended to provide a setting to transform students into citizens, training them “to contribute to the formation of a national conscience.”² Furthermore, Villanueva explicitly related the CIAM vision of the Core to the local typology of the Plaza Mayor in a 1952 article, written as he began the design of the Central Area.³ He subsequently claimed that, “the architectonic system that has as its basis the Library and the Main Auditorium constitutes the spiritual center and will be the active nucleus of all cultural manifestations of both the University and the Capital.”⁴ But in the postwar context of the University City, an unequivocal designation of collective expression – one that claims the symbolic clarity of the agora or the Plaza Mayor – would have difficult to achieve.

To illustrate this, I need only point to the inauguration of the Central Area in 1954 by the Tenth Inter-American Conference, a meeting of government officials from North and South American nations. Selected two years earlier as the site for this event, the buildings of the Central Area were assigned their temporary conference functions while still under construction. The Rectory, an administration building housing the office of the Rector, or president of the University, served during the conference as offices for senior staff; the adjacent museum housed exhibitions; the communications building provided its facilities for delegates; the library was used by working groups and committees; the two smaller halls for small or impromptu meetings, and the large auditorium, the Aula Magna, for the full plenary sessions. The Plaza Cubierta, the covered plaza, connected all of these activities and venues.

The Tenth Inter-American meeting and the Central Area itself were both showcases for Colonel Pérez Jiménez, the dictator who had emerged from the ruling junta to seize the Venezuelan presidency in 1952. The event and its setting represented, politically and physically, his advocacy of modernization, and

were meant to secure status and support for his regime.⁵ But his repressive, autocratic rule prompted one boycott of the conference, and numerous spoken and unspoken criticisms, while some artists who participated in Villanueva's design were regarded as collaborators in both senses of the word. Villanueva's own status as an employee of the government and a member of the social elite further complicates the reading. Although he intended these buildings to signify modernization through their adoption of a progressive modernist idiom, this progressive vision was undermined by the authoritarian practices of the government that sponsored it.

From the opening session in the Aula Magna, the Central Area served as a space of national and international political expression, but the expression was of political hegemony rather than the "symbol of civic communion" envisioned by CIAM. What was the meaning, or indeed even the possibility of a civic space under dictatorship? Would the formation of a collective that was more than an aggregate of individuals necessarily occur at the expense of the individual? The difficulty in situating the individual in relation to a collective, of balancing between aggregation and hegemony, suggests that the Central Area does not symbolize the collective sphere, but allegorizes it. The word allegory itself prompts such a claim, combining as it does the words *allos*, meaning 'other', and *agoreuein*, meaning 'to speak in the agora'. To speak allegorically, then, is to speak otherwise in the agora, to veil one's speech, disguise one's meaning in the space of public assembly. The motivation for speaking otherwise lies in the need for self-censorship in the civic realm; more generally, though, it points to the disparity of the private experience of a subject and the public sphere of a collective, and the consequent necessity for some translation between these two.

Allegory insists upon a distance between its literal and figural meanings. Rather than embodying content in a form, as a symbol might claim to do, allegory associates content and representation while accepting and preserving their non-identity. Although this non-identity indicates an incommensurability, allegory formulates a provisional span across this distance without denying its presence, visibly structuring a relation between the objects of difference. An allegory of the civic sphere would then reveal rather than conceal the differentiation of the collective and the individual while still establishing the mutual dependency of the two. The formulation of a civic space that does not resort to aggregation—a denial of collective consciousness—or hegemony—a denial of individual agency—requires the manifestation of this dependency. In the University City, the allegorical architecture of the Central Area attempts just such a negotiation. A demonstration of this potential requires first a consideration of the evolution of the design itself.

In Villanueva's original plan for the University City, conceived in 1943, the campus resembled a Beaux-Arts composition, with

its buildings symmetrically disposed to either side of a central axis anchored by the hospital and the stadium. The only other building placed on this axis is the Rectory, which is flanked by the Library and the Auditorium in a curving tripartite arrangement at the heart of the campus. The buildings themselves are independent objects, but their role and character are fixed in relation to the whole by the symmetrical, axial structure of the scheme, and by their accommodation of the specific programs—Rectory, Library and Auditorium—that constituted the collective identity of the university.

By 1952, when he began to design the initial detailed schemes for the Central Area, Villanueva turned to a very different model: Le Corbusier's 1936 scheme for a Ciudad Universitaria in Rio de Janeiro. Villanueva had clearly made use of this precedent in 1943, for his own plan, although academic in form, appropriated Le Corbusier's programmatic distribution. In 1952, Villanueva discarded the academic style and used the *parti* of the central buildings in the Rio project for his own initial configuration. Villanueva's preliminary drawing shows a grouping of the three primary buildings, with the fan-shaped auditorium at the center, flanked by a tall slab for the Library to the right and a lower bar for the Rectory. This differs from his original plan, which proposed the Rectory rather than the assembly hall as the central component, but it corresponds exactly to the campus center designed by Le Corbusier, whose Rio scheme contains the same configuration centered upon a fan-shaped hall, with slab and bar situated on perpendicular axes as in Villanueva's drawing. The low mass used to connect the three buildings marks a further similarity between the two designs. As employed by Villanueva, this connection departs from his 1943 plan by physically joining the three buildings, but he still permits the buildings, as objects, to dominate the less assertive connection between them.

Villanueva soon moved away from this static conception, as a later drawing shows. Here, Villanueva has rotated the Aula Magna, opening its fan toward the northwest, and thus introduced a more significant tension into the composition. The Aula Magna no longer sits centered upon the campus axis; the Library and the Rectory maintain their positions, but two smaller halls are introduced, one ceremonial and the other for concerts, along with a reading room angled off from the Library slab. With the further addition of another administrative bar adjacent to the Rectory, this configuration was implemented as the final design. But now the connections between the buildings, the Plaza Cubierta and the adjacent covered walks, assume a dominant role that undermines the independence of the buildings they surround. The column grid and the winding form of the Plaza Cubierta, its elaborate edges and folds, dislocate the representational emphasis from figure to ground.

The Plaza Cubierta transforms the Central Area from a collection of figures within a ground, understood formally by the space outside them, to an internal space in which the

ground itself assumes the figural role. With this transformation, walls and enclosure do not necessarily define the limits of interior space. The edges of the Plaza are open and porous, with entries scattered on all sides; within the Plaza, Villanueva erodes the edges of the main buildings themselves. From the Rectory court, to the foyers of the halls, to the Library entrance, the Plaza Cubierta creates a collage of transitions with dramatic, idiosyncratic architectural language. Sequential courtyards, plain walls transformed by color, overhanging eaves, fluid forms – all provide vigorous dynamic effects; masonry lattices inspired by Villanueva's careful study of colonial architecture create cascading patterns of filtered light to reinforce a fragmented environment of light and shadow that suggests rather than enforces perimeter conditions. Deployed together, these architectural elements undermine the stability of boundaries within the space, challenging the coherence of the Central Area as a whole.

I want to emphasize the transformation from an architecture of figure to an architecture of ground, or, to put it another way, an architecture in which the ground has become figural, because this reintroduces the question of allegory. If an initial, literal reading equated the functions of the buildings – the figures – with a conception of the collective, what is the implication of this latter formal transformation? Fredric Jameson, in his theorization of allegory in relation to contemporary architecture, has insisted that attention be paid to the representational ground: “the hypothesis that the building itself is . . . an allegory, is not to be understood as a positive one, . . . where each of the elements stands for another element in the other system . . . Here it is the differences that are analogized . . . not the terms but the gaps correspond.”⁶ This argument emphasizes the fact that allegory proposes multiple figures and, more importantly, the relation between those figures as its representation. An entire set of representational conditions, a layering of qualities and characteristics, are mapped onto a set of conditions at the conceptual level. Complexities within the representation may then correspond to complexities within the concept, providing the ability to articulate exchanges, conflicts and discontinuities. Such an articulation signifies for Jameson a necessary and historically specific “representational failure,” a representational crisis exposed and narrated allegorically by ambiguities and contradictions.

Villanueva's architecture certainly does not direct attention solely to the “terms” – the positive figures of Rectory, Library or Aula Magna – but to the ground, the figural space of the Central Area, invoking an allegory understood through its “gaps.” These “gaps” are not, or not only, interstices and openings, rather they are the equivocal expressions in the architecture of the Plaza Cubierta, the overlaps and transitions created through physical arrangement and phenomenal effects. For example, as the ramped foyer of the Aula Magna projects into the center court, the path of circulation cuts through the arc defined by the ramps; the envelope of the auditorium is

conflated with the perimeter of the plaza; above, a seam opens between the canopy and the roof, indicative of the now uncertain boundary between spatial objects. Does this assign priority to the figure, or the figural? The relation of figure and figural becomes an unstable condition, its reception dependent upon position, movement, and intention. Here a sharp distinction should be drawn against the influential CIAM proposals for new Cores: Corbusier's plan for the reconstruction of St-Dié and Sert's proposed civic center for the new town of Chimbote in Peru. A comparison reveals that the CIAM schemes insist upon a firm differentiation of figure and ground – Corbusier disposes the figures as independent objects within an open field, while Sert gathers them to outline an enclosed plaza of open space. Both architects intended these cores to be activated by gatherings and temporary performances, but the static clarity of both projects nevertheless suggests a corresponding permanent order in the collective experience they sponsor.

The contrasting formal mutability of the Central Area has something different to say about collective experience, an experience of what Villanueva described as “an open world, anti-dogmatic, in constant evolution, where truth itself is always a process of relations and never a permanent fact.”⁷ The Plaza Cubierta makes visible this process of relations, of relative truth in its own historic context. Villanueva's design brings together the functions that will draw the community into a collective space, a space both ceremonial and everyday that perpetually evokes consciousness of the collective through organized and incidental interaction. But that interaction takes place within an architecture that undermines the construction of any fixed relation between elements. The fragmented and shifting layers of the architectural ground question the assertion of a coherent whole, and consequently invert the terms of the earlier concern that the Central Area was the site of hegemonic civil space; it now seems to suggest that nothing more than aggregation can be achieved after all.

This suggestion can be answered in its turn by further elaborating the idea of allegory in relation to the role of artworks in the Central Area. Villanueva commissioned prominent Venezuelan and European artists – such as Arp, Legér, and Navarro – to contribute murals, bas-reliefs and sculptures to a projected Synthesis of the Arts. This Synthesis, like that advanced by CIAM in parallel with the concept of the Core, aspired to restore to modern architecture an emotional dimension. This restoration would assume its greatest significance in a civic center where the combination of architectural space and the expressive capacity of artworks could forge a unified setting for collective life.⁸ In Villanueva words, the very concept of the Synthesis was “to corroborate, to accentuate; or, contrarily, to destroy and project into space the architectural groups.”⁹

In the Central Area, Villanueva forcefully disperses the artworks within an already dispersed space. Many of the murals and sculptures are not approached frontally, but obliquely; they

stand off to the side, lying parallel to the direction of movement, or in the periphery of the viewer's path. The freestanding murals in front of the Aula Magna might appear to be confronted more directly, but these murals are curved, their bent shapes causing a constantly changing perspective as the viewer walks past. One of them, by Léger, is two-sided, thus preventing a complete view of the mural from a single glance or a sustained look. No single position is privileged or even fixed, an effect sustained by an architectural environment that casts a changing palette of light on and around the artworks.

As a result of these dynamic configurations, the viewer proceeding through the space is made intensely conscious of her own movement, her own position in space; the inconstancy of her physical relationship to the artwork reflects back to the viewer an awareness of the individual body. Villanueva clearly intended such a response, as evidenced by the diagram he produced and published shortly after the completion of the Central Area.¹⁰ This diagram illustrates the routes of an individual moving through the space, showing in the varying thickness of the lines the modulations of pace caused by the artworks, which are themselves captured in the diagram by oblique viewing angles: two courtyards are denoted as "four-dimensional elements," to indicate a heightened sense of time corresponding to a heightened sense of space and light. Even the most determined path toward, say, an assembly in the Aula Magna, is, according to the diagram, deflected and distorted by the collage of art and architecture.

By creating this heightened awareness of physical movement, the kinetic effects of the architecture prompt an individual self-consciousness. The palpable presence of multiple viewpoints further emphasizes, through differentiation, multiple individual experiences. Contrast this with the emphasis that would have resulted from an implementation of the original Beaux-Arts plan, with its organization of symmetry and axis rendering subordinate the position of the individual. Yet the functions represented in the original plan—Rectory, Library and Aula Magna—are precisely those incorporated in the realized design, making evident a tension between the collective, which is invoked programmatically, and the individual, which is asserted experientially.

Another theorist of allegory, Paul de Man, argued that such a tension, one provoked by the presence of contradiction, constituted the very operation of allegory. The incongruence of its two levels, its literal and figural readings, sets allegory in motion—in motion because de Man saw allegory as a process rather than a device. In his words: "two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings . . . have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it."¹¹ Allegory acts out this confrontation, overcoming one reading with the complication of another. This process would seem to be the experience of the Plaza Cubierta, with its heightened sense of

radical subjectivity intercepting the spectator at the anticipated moment of community, with the figural—the ungraspable, contingent space of the Plaza Cubierta—overcoming the literal—the coherent form and program of the individual buildings.

But de Man cautions that allegory does not imply a resolution of this contest of figural and literal: "Nor can we in any way make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can exist in the other's absence."¹² Following de Man further, one finds that the literal continues to assert its own complexity and ambiguity, or, in de Man's compelling articulation, that allegory "persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do."¹³ This is precisely the gesture posited by Villanueva's Synthesis, the gesture that *simultaneously* "corroborates" and "destroys." While the architectural enforcement of individual experience reveals the inevitably contingent cast of subjectivity, the Plaza Cubierta nevertheless does gather the spectators of the University City, turning them into actors, actors who perform for one another as part of the elaborate choreography of the Plaza Cubierta. Paths cross, lines form, groups assemble. With each constituent now both a spectator and an actor, the architecture realizes the collective while revealing individuality.

Taking up the issue of the Core in the political and discursive periphery in his postwar Venezuelan context, Villanueva responded to the CIAM conception of an architecture of universality, objectivity, and immediacy by creating an architecture of locality, radical subjectivity, and highly mediated form. Villanueva's Central Area creates a Core by questioning the constitution of a space of assembly, by exposing the incommensurability inherent in a civic space that conjoins the individual and the collective. But if the architecture renders these questions, they are answered through the performance of the allegorical reading. For it is allegory that registers the presence of what Jameson describes as moments of "productive" representational failure.¹⁴ By redeploing the contemporary theorizations of allegory within the artifacts of the postwar, one can read the uneven spaces of the periphery as sites of a crisis of representation, sites of a failure that created new potentials. The tensions and contradictions of such a space require allegorical readings precisely because the space itself is an architecture that veils its words, but reveals its meaning; an architecture for speaking otherwise.

NOTES

¹ Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, ed. *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life*. (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952), 11.

² Armando Vegas, *La Ciudad Universitaria De Caracas: Documentos Relativos a Su Estudio Y Creacion* (Caracas: Editorial Grafolit, 1947), 5. (Translation by author)

³ Carlos Raul Villanueva, *Caracas En Tres Tiempos* (Ediciones Comision Asuntos Culturales del Cuatricentenario de Caracas, 1966), 41. [Doesn't this

recommendation," he asked. "signify the return to the objective of the 'Plazas Mayores.' . . . the return to the purpose of our old Civic Plazas, head and heart of our colonial cities?]"

⁴ "Caracas University City," *Arts & Architecture* 71 (1954): 18. (Translation in original).

⁵ For the official government account of the New National Ideal, Jiménez' modernization program, including the project for the Central Area, see Informativo Venezuela Servicio, *Venezuela Bajo El Nuevo Ideal Nacional* (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1954).

⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Allegories of Anywhere," in *Anywhere*, ed. Cynthia Davidson (New York: Anyone Corporation and Rizzoli, 1992), 177.

⁷ Carlos Raúl Villanueva, "Influencias Del Concreto Y Del Progreso Tecnico Y Cientifico De La Arquitectura De Hoy Y De Mañana," *Punto*, no. 4 (1961). (Unpaginated in original)

⁸ See for example the key texts of the monumentality debate: Sigfried Giedion, Fernand Léger, and Jose Luis Sert, "Nine Points on Monumentality," in *Architecture Culture 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*, ed. Joan Ockman and Edward Eigen (New York: Rizzoli, 1993). "In Search of a New Monumentality," *Architectural Review* (1948). Also see the discussions in Tyrwhitt, *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life*.

⁹ "Caracas University City," 18.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*: 14-16.

¹¹ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 12.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁴ Jameson, "Allegories of Anywhere," 177.