

LATIN AMERICAN VOICES AND THE ISSUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

JOSE BERNARDI

Arizona State University

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Question: What do you think about the idea that (fiction) must be engaged in the political and social issues of the times.

Jorge Luis Borges: I don't think you should try to be loyal to your century or your opinions, because you are being loyal to them all the time. You have a certain voice, and you can't run away from [it].

*- Interview with the Argentinean writer
Jorge Borges in the 1970s*

Introduction

In Latin America, all preexisting cultural structures, languages and artistic expression were dismantled by European powers. Throughout a series of processes of implantation and adaptation, Latin American architecture has produced examples of syncretic design. When development and progress became the models in the 19th century, Latin American countries were labeled as "underdeveloped," assuming that only one version of civilization was acceptable and permissible. The term "Latin America" was coined in the 19th century as an abstraction. Intending to oppose the emerging northern Anglo-American power base, the term resulted in two significant manifestations of nation south of the Rio Grande; on the other hand, it also manifested differences among these countries while distinctly interpreting the past and envisioning the future. More than in other places, modernity in Latin America was born as a result of a critique of the past, and it was imposed as a "tradition against itself." Consequently, architectural production and discussions about the role of the architect and the discipline in Latin American countries have been profoundly influenced by the coexistence of several ethnic traditions, endemic political instability, and ancestral socio-economic differences. In Latin America, economic and social concerns are inescapable.

Since the 1950s accelerated urban growth generate in indiscriminate application of modernist formulas, which resulted in an identity crisis. The contradiction between the use of a repertoire of forms but not a genuine modern agenda gave life to expressions of discontent and resulted in one of the earliest critiques of modernism. This has been a common issue within intellectual and creative circles in Latin America for the last 40 years.

Beyond this common element, it is difficult to speak of one Latin American architecture or design. Unified

behind the misleading appearance of a same religion or language, this is a vast continent with an extremely diverse group of traditions and voices defined by regions, political agendas, ideological objectives, and availability of materials and capital. This generated a profound search, although lacking articulation, for consciousness and the definition of a "certain voice," a Latin American response in architecture and design.

A Certain Voice

These phenomena of ideological consciousness has produced a rich architectural production that, according to the historian Ramon Gutierrez (1988) has been explained until recently from a strictly Eurocentric viewpoint. As Gutierrez has argued convincingly, it is time to search for an interpretation according to other terms, an interpretation that does not rely on some obvious cultural process of dependence or on chauvinistic terms.

This presentation will briefly discuss themes that have shaped Latin American architectural production, such as:

1. In most of Latin American cities, almost 95 percent of the total number of construction have been produced in the last 50 years and very few elements of the previous centuries remain, always in danger of disappearing. Consciousness about the fragility of the traditional layers of historical strata and the socio-political implications of preserving them has become an important issue. These efforts to reclaim the importance of whole areas, rather than saving only one isolated monument, has advanced to notion of "the historicity of the city as a whole."
2. The exploration of a repertory of different types and archetypes it is a clear recognition of the "historicity of all the city." This is a case of Ricardo Legorreta's Contemporary Art Museum, in Monterey. The building attempts to weave the isolated relevant elements of the urban fabric of the center of the city, totally destroyed by the rapid development of this area. The whole scheme is based on the traditional patios of the Mexican houses and public markets, with arcades, galleries and the presence of water.

The strong colors borrowed from the textiles of the area, transferred to the walls, very carefully articulate a dialogue with the spectacular surroundings, yet disguising the chaotic down town area, plenty of mediocre architecture.

3. One of the most important elements in Latin American architecture is the use of what Barragan has defined as elements of "magic, serenity, enchantment and mystery." The Giraldi house, one of the latest works by the Mexican master, has been justly presented as one example of this characteristic. But at this point, I'd like to share the work of less known, yet relevant designers, who are practicing architecture with "humble dignity." These Mexican examples from the city of San Luis Potosi talk about the relevance of the relationship between hand and object, the scale of spaces, the role of color and everyday objects, the role of memory and the ornament as a manifestation of the dreams of inhabitants of the building. These houses filled with memorabilia and objects, are always built around a courtyard, the center of the home, and with walls washed with the ever changed light that penetrates the different layers. This is an architecture which emphasizes the design of multiple sensorial perceptions — the privilege of the body and its relationship with the object and materials.
4. Finally, the presence of a free formal experimentation that derives from climate and local materials which convey a particular "deliberate technological primitivism." This is a critique of the simulation of functional or technological modernization, a surge to update forms following the last fashionable movement. It is also an attempt to use those materials produced in the area, such as brick, as in the case of Dieste, or concrete, in the case of Clorindo Testa. Dieste has explored an intermediate technology that explores the potentials of the traditional material without taking refuge on the nostalgic past. In the case of Testa, The National Library, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a project from the sixties and still in construction, it is a symbol of technological virtuosity and

constructive audacity. This characteristic is also present in the Bank of London, in Buenos Aires. There, all the force of the most brutal years are transformed with sculptural power to emphasize the corner of the old Spanish grid. The search for a synthesis of the memory from the past and the use of climatic conditions has been achieved in some of the work of the Peruvian Juvenal Baracco. In several of his houses by the beach, near Lima, the Peruvian architect uses masonry, wood and straw, and plays with the boundaries of the interior and exterior.

In this multifaceted panorama, two characteristic seems to broadly identify Latin American architecture and design. First, professionals have a strong twofold aesthetic and ethical commitment towards cities and people. As an example, the renovation and rehabilitation of the central area of Cordoba, in Argentina done by Miguel Angel Roca and his team. The proposal has been continued by and is ongoing through subsequent administrations. The proposal established the city-center as a symbolic multi-functional core, while maintaining a complementary relationship with the urban periphery. Secondly, as a reaction against an ineffective Modernism, there seems to be a consensus that economic crisis may limit development, but not diversity, in the quest for extracting universality from within the local. As an example, the Buenos Aires city Cultural Center, by Clorinda Testa, which is remodeling of a church from the 18th century and cloisters from the 19th century. Here, Testa emphasizes the clash of different languages and ever changing uses and functions in time. Here is a conscious lack of unity, an exercise on syncretism, a genuine search for a dialogue with the city and the context. Testa does not look eagerly for "one" identity, and happily accepts the problems of constructing the reality listening the several influences.

With this practice, these designers are exploring the paths for the construction of a Latin American architecture whose consciousness lies not in nostalgically recuperating what has been done, but, as the Colombian critic Silvia Arango wrote, "in imaginatively inventing what remains to be done."