

Spatial Manifestations in Pluralist Cultures: The Case of the Isleta de San Juan

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the complicity of architecture with structures of power¹ and dominant ideological agendas in society, which implicates architecture in the political project. Primary to my discussion are the manifestations of cultural identity in space.

I focus on the isleta of San Juan, Puerto Rico because of its particular physical and social position within the Americas. The unique history of San Juan and current status makes it a rich place for reflection on the impact of architecture's complicity within ideological projects. Puerto Rico is a culturally distinct country that has not had sovereignty since the Spanish arrived in 1508. However, at least since the mid-1700s, Puerto Ricans have had a strong sense of self-identity separate from their colonial rulers. In addition to their ethnic pluralism Puerto Ricans since 1898 have had to mediate between their local socio-cultural condition and their economico-political condition as a U.S. territory. The capitol, San Juan, has developed at break-neck speed under the considerable influence of the United States, leaving the content of their built spaces in tension with cultural and social realities. I started this investigation with a couple of questions. What happens spatially when a number of cultures come together, as they do so frequently in the contemporary world? What are the implicit issues, caught up in material expression in cities and architecture that have to do with power? I argue that the like to these questions has to do with the relationship of power to the production of architecture, which requires looking at power as material. It seems to me then, that architecture needs to be examined in a way that questions its relationship to 'economico-political' constructs as well as cultural ones.

A persistent problem in the profession has been, even with the awareness of the 'other', the presumed supremacy of a particular worldview over another. Architecture as a practice and a material product, is deeply embedded in society and culture but all too frequently it 'represents' only a particular fraction of the place it is built. The figure of the architect is largely conceived of as separate from the political project because he is generally understood to be working within 'techniques' of 'style', which simultaneously allows for a personal distancing and a claim to a 'rational (read: politically impartial) process'.

What are the implicit issues, caught up in material expression in cities and architecture that have to do with power?

Architecture often functions subtly within the socio-political project. While it is generally understood to be a social construct, its role of enforcing the agendas of power can often be *invisible*; both in the way it disciplines space and in the assumptions we make about it. In the first type of invisibility – *the disciplinization of space* – the ideological impetus behind architecture is elided or hidden but always present. Andrea Kahn clearly describes this invisible aspect of architecture's capacity to signify politics as follows:

*"[T]he political nature of architecture is rooted more deeply in architecture as enclosure and in the manner in which enclosure is perceived...By transforming part of a general spatial domain into a specific site for a particular use (public or private), architecture divides, organizes and manages...Architecture is the disciplinization of space, and, by virtue of its capacity to regulate action, exerts control and constitutes a form of power."*²

So architecture can represent power and can also be an instrument of power through the 'disciplinization of space'. Typically, we are not as focused on examining, looking at, or understanding the built spaces surrounding us; rendering architecture more *invisible* than things we understand as 'objects' or 'works' that are meant to be pondered and gazed upon, such as the fine arts (painting, sculpture, etc.), monuments, and advertisements. Architecture is not typically understood to be communicating knowledge, its overt role in conveying meaning has been diminished and therefore our understanding of its political implications are veiled, rendered invisible, or ignored. The type of meaning conveyed by many of today's structures generally do not speak to particular ideologies about culture or man's relationship to the world but increasingly its primary purpose appears to be the generation of economic capital (I suppose it can be argued that this in itself is an ideology). The challenge in this work is to render visible the affects of these latent conditions by different subjects.

The second type of invisible 'power' is *the assumptions or suppositions that are made about space*. I am interested in examining the under-interrogated ideological assumptions that we make in 'every day space' when we view architecture as an objective figure within our constructed landscape. The assumption that architecture represents all parts of society takes for granted the underlying, latent, and invisible aspects of our built spaces. More important than a change in style, however, is how we conceptualize space and how that conceptualization might affect our built environment through a reformed process of architectural design.

Architecture is one of the few places where resistance to homogenizing forces in society through physical space can be manifested. Because it is necessarily place-bound, it has the potential to forego homogenizing strategies and manifest plurality, which could be read, ironically, on both the local (in support of and interaction with the community) and global scale (through tourism, knowledge, and signification). The assumptions being made in Puerto Rico about space and power relationships go almost unchallenged, which has resulted in a strong material presence by predominant economico-political forces. Historian and planner Aníbal Sepúlveda refers to the Isleta de San Juan as a place that contains "the history of Puerto Rico".³ The built environment of the isleta clearly manifests three major phases in Puerto Rico's political history 1) Spanish colonial rule through Viejo San Juan, 2) American rule through the Monumental District, PuertaTierra, and

La Puntilla, 3) the rule of semi-autonomous local government of Puerto Rico through the areas surrounding and including the Supreme Court Tribunal. Contained within this small piece of land are evidence and traces of the relationship between architecture and power, which accentuates the incommensurable differences between the spatial and the societal, especially as they are manifested in invisible or latent forms.



Fig. 1 View of the Isleta de San Juan

Located within the isleta in three discrete locations are three governmental buildings — La Fortaleza (Government House), El Capitolio, and El Tribunal (Supreme Court Building). Together they create a symbolic ‘governmental spine’ through the isleta. While their aesthetic expression differs they each attempt through architecture to represent power and thereby locate and uphold certain constructions about colonization; Puerto Rico: the colonizing power (us/other), North American Protestantism: Latin American Catholicism (rationalism/passion), Northern climates: tropical climates (cool/hot). The way that these buildings mediate the debate and struggle for cultural identity within San Juan, the way they mediate the space of the isleta, and their stylistic evolution, create a story about the tensions inherent in spatial expression within San Juan’s environment.

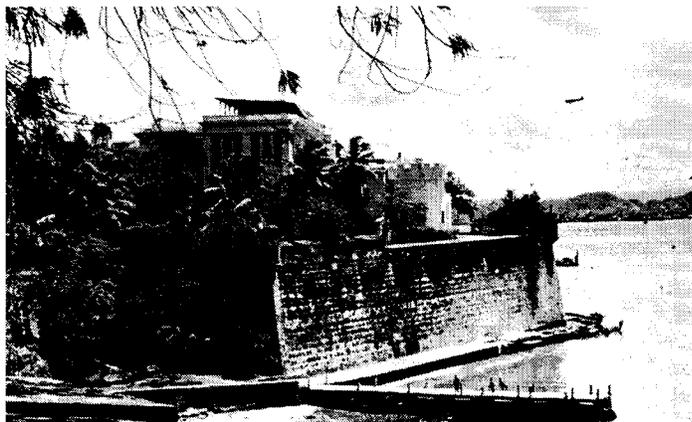


Fig. 2 La Fortaleza (2001)

LA FORTALEZA

La Fortaleza, built in 1533, was the first fort built to protect San Juan. It sits along the old city wall allowing it to conceptually appropriate the wall as an extension of its political force in defining space. It speaks to a previous epoch of colonial conquest and the type of spaces needed to execute the colonial project. Since then it has undergone numerous changes as an architectural symbol of government and power. La Fortaleza is one of the oldest Spanish colonial buildings in Puerto Rico and as such has been an object of pride, endowed with high symbolic value.⁴ La Fortaleza has two readings; 1.) It is a source of pride presumably because it is evidence of the age of Puerto Rican society,

thereby proving the value of this culture 2.) as the seat of government. Since its construction it has been a symbolic reminder of Spanish colonial rule, creating a strain between the desire for the building to contain symbols of identity, worth, and self-definition and the building as symbolic reminder of colonial rule. Age is an irresistible ingredient for most societies — the older the structures are the more valid the culture is (if we take Alois Reigel’s description). Certainly across the Americas those countries whose border inscriptions *accidentally* encompass stationary Indian societies (the ruins of Mayan, Aztec, and Incan empires) are talked about as ‘great cultures’ while those on nomad Indian land are considered to be of a lesser cultural richness; they are too new. This makes it more difficult for these societies to provide evidence of their culture through traditions, ironically so because in post-industrial societies traditions are largely invented.⁵

At the time that the US took control of Puerto Rico as part of their bounty for “winning” the Spanish-American war, La Fortaleza was strongly associated with the Spanish colonial government. In order to insert themselves, the US government began a process of dismantling and rewriting all existing symbols of power related to the building.

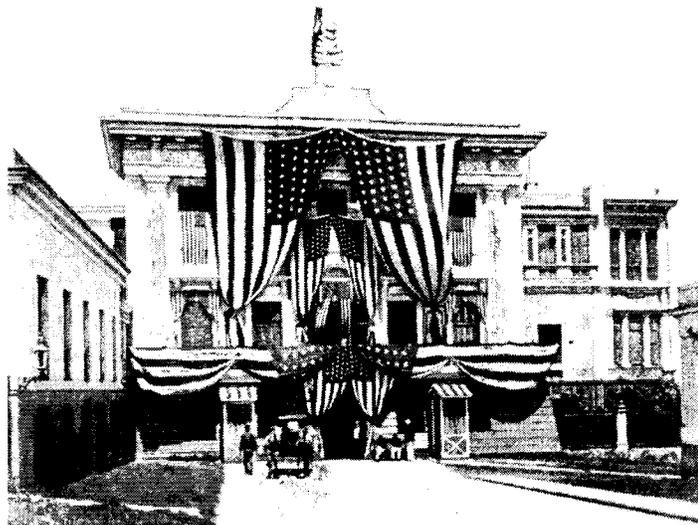


Fig. 3 La Fortaleza on July 4, 1899

This photograph, showing La Fortaleza covered with American flags, was taken on July 4, 1899, a year after the Americans arrived, in a gesture celebrating a holiday that had no relevance to Puerto Rico or the US relationship with the island. The flags afforded the US government the symbolic *material* presence that they initially lacked compared to the abundance of symbolic spaces left by the Spanish. They did not have the time to wait for architecture to be built so they *wrote* over existing institutions. The act of covering La Fortaleza with Old Glory momentarily altered, dramatically, the local understanding of signification that the building held. It could be understood as the literal triumph of one power over another vis-à-vis the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ technique. Precipitously for the United States, La Fortaleza’s clean neo-classical style did not present any ideological challenges either. If it had been a style from Spain with strong Moorish influences, which are not uncommon in the Caribbean, it may have required more than red, white, and blue fabric to mediate this space. Ironically, both the Spanish government in the 1800’s and the US government in the 1900’s used neoclassical architecture to project the image of an ordered and efficient government; something they both believed the Puerto Ricans were incapable of.

The *assumption* that we make about La Fortaleza's spatial and formal expression and Puerto Rican society are that one represents the other.⁶ Spatially, this building occupies a very specific moment in the history of San Juan, contributing to the Puerto Rican conceptualization of space but not fully representing it. However, the assumptions made about its formal qualities could be deconstructed and rewritten to correspond to an ideology different from the Spanish colonialism. As we will see later on not all buildings have this ability.

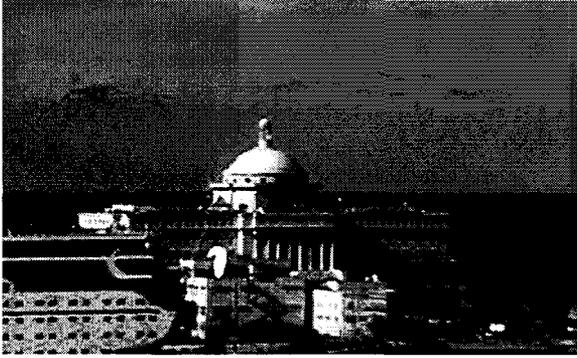


Fig. 4 El Capitolio

EL CAPITOLIO

Four miles away and 420 years later sits the Capitol Building (El Capitolio), which houses the legislative branch of the Puerto Rican government. At the turn of the century the offices of the local government were scattered among a variety of buildings until the Food Commission of Puerto Rico donated \$600,000 to the construction of a new capitol building. The money came from Puerto Rico but the control over the buildings representation remained in Washington. A design competition for El Capitolio was held in 1907. The decision-makers were composed of two groups: the competition jury, made up of three American architects, and the Capitol commission, comprised of local politicians. However, the difficulty in sorting out an appropriate 'style', as opposed to an appropriate design, lasted until 1919 when the Government of Puerto Rico finally commissioned a new design from state architect, Adrian Finlayson. *Architectural Record* published an article on the project in 1921, which is interesting for a number of reasons but one in particular. The author, Sylvester Baxter, comments on the stylistic variations in this new proposal and their appropriateness for embodying Puerto Rican identity as opposed to a model based on the capitol building in Washington, which was apparently the preferred progenitor at that time.⁷

*"A welcome departure from the conventional dome so much associated with our capitol buildings in the United States is the pavilion-like superstructure, or "monitor", as it might be called, which with the quality of conspicuousness served by the dome combines that of utility, which the dome seldom possesses. The dome, moreover, in countries whose antecedents are Spanish, is commonly more associated with ecclesiastical than with secular architecture."*⁸

The reference to the dome as sacerdotal object rather than a secular one hints at the underlying identities that went into making the New World but were rarely considered. However, Finlayson's design never gets built and the 'Washington model' wins in the end.⁹ The government of Puerto Rico was symbolically and physically wrapped up in the iconography of the United States, dome and all. The fact that the neoclassical style was used in both La Fortaleza and El Capitolio is not as incongruent as it might initially appear. Neoclassicism may have been the first "international style" symbolizing the notion of universal civilization for a variety of different cultures. For the Spanish the notion

of civilization was probably rooted more in the notion of aristocracy, where civilization in late nineteenth century USA had more to do with "modern technological society, in opposition to pre-industrial human values."¹⁰ The Spanish and US governments would have wanted to anchor themselves in *civilization* that contrasted with the 'other' Puerto Rican *culture*, which in the early part of the 20th century was seen as a poor, agricultural, pre-industrial society.

El Capitolio's style, however, is only the most immediate evidence of how it affects its surroundings. The way the building disciplines space has consequences that are more latent but as powerful. Its sitting is distinct from previous governmental structures, like La Fortaleza, because it sits in a field of 'monuments'. During the first few decades of the 20th century, the US government established its own civic center in contrast to those inside the city walls. The fact that it is referred to as the Monumental District is telling enough but even within that context El Capitolio is distinct. An awesome structure sitting high above water level, El Capitolio anchors the hinge point on a spine of government buildings starting with La Fortaleza to the west in the old city, and ending with El Tribunal in the east. The building is located at the most 'pinched' moment on the isleta, facing north overlooking the ocean towards North America. Even the urban edge that defines Viejo San Juan is eradicated in and around El Capitolio. Spanish colonial architecture is more *compact* in terms of its spatial domain. The urban fabric and military structures (walls, forts) are the predominating forms. Buildings are established on open squares within that. American developments, however, tend to establish buildings in isolation and *away from* the fabric, like El Capitolio.

El Capitolio is strikingly out of place. Like the cruise ships that are docked in front of it, El Capitolio appears to be a transient body, odd and out of scale. In these ways, it points more stridently to some of the assumptions we make about architecture as a representation of 'man' and 'society'.

These works illuminate the tendency to define architecture as a practice of representation. The symbolic associations attributed to style tend to be more prominent than the spatial affects of marking, delineating, defining, enclosing, or excluding, making the practice seem removed from the tactics of power, contributing to the invisible and often latent quality of these affects. El Capitolio does not only exclude through overt means of representation like style, it is even more aggressive in terms of the way it disciplines the space around it: setting apart, maintaining distance, elevated position, etc. It visually dominates the landscape. Most striking is the way El Capitolio controls the space within the building. It is an entirely anti-tropical structure, closed off to the outside and requiring artificial means to regulate the air inside, which tends to be stifling in the areas of the building that do not have air conditioning. Through its spatial definition, this building suggests the privileging of a particular group and the exclusion of several other groups. It is northern architecture imposed on a tropical space. It is a hermetic space: a one-liner totally caught-up within American colonial ideologies.

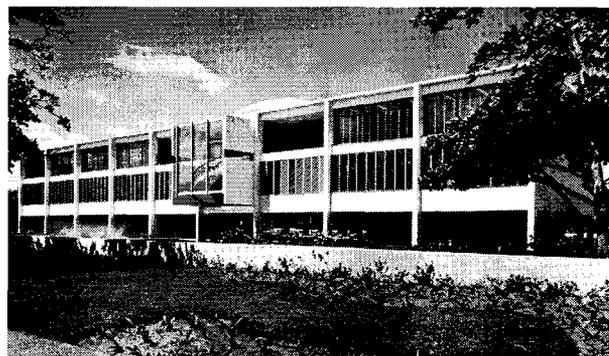


Fig. 5 El Tribunal

EL TRIBUNAL

El Tribunal, the final building along the 'governmental spine', houses the judicial branch of government. This building, an example of tropicalized modernist architecture designed by the Puerto Rican firm Toro y Ferrer, was the first major public structure commissioned by the recently instated Commonwealth government (established in 1952). The new government chose to align with a modernist aesthetic clearly that clearly distinguished them from both Spanish and American colonial architecture. This modernist expression was particularly suited for the tropics; the brise-soleil, open floor plans, etcetera, all worked to not only articulate a clean and efficient architecture but also responded climactically to the needs of the inhabitants.

What is largely missing in El Tribunal is the influence of the socio-cultural condition to the extent that it is distinguished among other modern works. While being an impressive departure from colonial architecture and a strong statement about modernity, it is not a uniquely radical spatial statement. By the 1950's, the modernist international style was already widely used by governments and institutions across the globe. Modernist architecture at this point refers to a specific static style.¹¹ Aesthetically, therefore these works in part aimed to show that Puerto Rico was the same or rather equal to 'central cultures'. Not all architecture needs to act radically but in Puerto Rico's colonial condition, El Tribunal's relationship to identity must be questioned. The success of El Tribunal, particularly when read against the other two buildings, is its ability to sustain multiple readings within the Puerto Rican context.

El Tribunal's difference lies in the way space is delineated, the outdoors is 'let in', the approach towards the building, and more metaphorically through the use of plate glass. Built spaces in Puerto Rico are able to have a very different bodily relationship to nature because of climate, blurring the lines between what is properly inside and what is properly outside of the building. The design does not highlight the binary condition of us and them climactically through hot/cold but instead responds towards local climatic conditions in a way that allows the building to contain certain local understandings about place and identity while simultaneously working within a global language.¹² The architects used form, subordinating mechanics, to address the environmental conditions of site.

The approach to El Tribunal is a process of crossing thresholds where one is never wholly inside or outside; again a contrast to El Capitolio's intimidating head on entry, an experience that sets up El Capitolio as a body that one must penetrate. The use of plate glass in this tropical setting is markedly different from similar architectural types in colder climates because the glass is not always required to act as a barrier between inside and outside. The literal transparency in the building alludes to a kind of political transparency that is very different from El Capitolio and La Fortaleza. It does not necessarily follow however that the use of physical transparency results in political transparency. Here, the use of representation in architecture is rooted in a political schema. El Tribunal does not in fact represent a clean, transparent, and rational government, as the predominant 20th century glass metaphor would have it, but rather the government's desire to be seen as such.

Again, for me the notion that the answer to our current spatial needs lies in a response to a crisis of style will always be a dead end because meaning can alter and shift. The idea that architecture is representation or style may allow it to claim impartiality within the socio-political project, but the invisible tactics of enclosure and regulation of space contain the ignored "political nature of architecture". El Tribunal and particularly the work of Toro y Ferrer and Henry Klumb are very important examples of ways that Puerto Ricans have used architecture to mark out their own territory establish a ground of resistance, and create their own spatial reality relative to colonial structures.

INVISIBILITIES

I have pointed to overt examples where architecture has been used as a tool for expressing power and the invisible or latent aspects that are caught up in its production and physicality. Examining the ideological assumptions made about space may further elicit additional considerations for the design process. One of these assumptions is that *architecture does represent society*. As the three buildings show, a singular work of architecture does not represent the whole of a particular culture but rather a specific element of that society in a particular spacio-temporal condition. Some of these unquestioned associations are 1.) La Fortaleza's neoclassicism = aristocratic civilization/ order/rationality, 2.) El Capitolio's neoclassicism = democratic civilization/progress/order/rationality, and 3.) El Tribunal's international style = progress/modernity/ social order. A rational representation of society, or at least the claim to it, appears to be the overriding assumption in each of these buildings.

A second assumption is the perceptual break between *representation and the disciplinization of space*. This presumes that because a building was designed within a 'rational' style it is not connected to larger ideologies of power through its actual definition of space.¹³ Equating architecture to science – with attributes like rational, studied, impartial, etc. – in terms of its expression suggests that it is detached from social and cultural constructs. Additionally, this implies a distancing of the architect from social-political issues and suggests that the architect is the sole skilled authority on space.¹⁴

The last "assumption" that I will point out here is the *distinction between architectural expression and capitalism*, or the idea that the creative architectural act is separate from the economic enterprise required to build it. Even though Puerto Rican spatial sensibility had been heavily influenced by 400 years of Spanish building strategies – the portion of San Juan built since the turn of the century bears no resemblance to previous development due to the change in governing powers. This demonstrates two things, one that economics are tied up with architectural and urban production and therefore expression, and two it makes more egregious the spatial impositions of assumed 'universal' or 'impartial' architectures, like El Capitolio.¹⁵ This reading of La Fortaleza, El Capitolio, and El Tribunal, makes simultaneously evident the spaces of cultural discord and the complicity of architecture within agendas of power. These examples point to how social, political, and cultural issues are manifested materially, which can potentially inform the architectural design process.

Some have argued that modernist architectural pedagogy does not provide an adequate framework for the production of space within pluralist cultures; noting that this modernist pedagogy was created or born out of a particular milieu originating mostly in the previous century. However, the advent of post-colonialism¹⁶ has provided alternatives, shifting our foundation for viewing the world by questioning Western primacy in creating a world-view. Post-colonialism looks at power as material and is concerned with issues of domination: looking at the dialectical other in terms of modernity. For architecture this change has not come about and indeed both the profession and education have been slow to recognize or understand it. Mary McLeod has noted:

"Yet despite this embrace of 'otherness' in some of its theoretical sources, poststructuralist tendencies in architecture posit a notion of 'other' that is solely a question of Western dismantling of Western conventions for a Western audience."¹⁷

'Otherness' is often rendered as fragmented or multiple Western styles, as in post-modernist architecture for example. Architecture's insular habits have allowed the profession to remain largely within its homogeneous shell of Western representation. I do not propose that we need to eliminate this particular viewpoint that would be contrary

to the point of my study. However, architectural production needs to be assessed in terms of this post-colonial ethic by looking at our plurality and its implications for the production of space.

NOTES/REFERENCES

¹I am talking about the 'power over' – domination of one person over another – and not 'power to'. See Dovey, Kim, *Framing Places: Mediating power in built form*, London: Routledge, 1999

²Kahn, Andrea, "The Invisible Mask", in Kahn, ed. *Drawing/Building/Text*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991

³In an interview I conducted with Anibal Sepúlveda on March 23, 2000 in San Juan.

⁴The governor is the highest elected official, it is akin to the US White House in terms of symbolic value.

⁵See Hobsbawm, Eric, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", Hobsbawm and Ranger, Eds, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999

⁶The history of architectural production and conceptualization has been embedded in particular assumptions about the way we see as architects: both in design and practice. For one such argument see Boys, Jos, "Neutral Gazes and Knowable Objects", in McCorquodale, Rüedi, and Wigglesworth, Eds. *Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender, and the Interdisciplinary*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 1996

⁷Vivoni Farage, Enrique, "The Architecture of Puerto Rican Identity", in Alvarez Curbelo and Vivoni Farage, eds. *Hispaniofilia: Arquitectura y Vida en Puerto Rico, 1900-1950*, San Juan: ACAAPUR, 1998

⁸Baxter, Sylvester, "Porto Rico's New Capitol", *The Architectural Record*, Vol. XLIX, No. 2, (Feb. 1921): 172-179

⁹Construction on El Capitolio started in 1925 and the building was inaugurated in 1929 and was declared an historic monument in 1997, not for its architecture but for the events that have taken place inside of it.

¹⁰Colquhoun, Alan, "The Concept of Regionalism", in Nalbantoglu and Wong, Eds. *postcolonial space(s)*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997

¹¹Here, I would like to differentiate between the terms modern/modernism and modernist as they are used in architectural discourse. Modernism began as an act of liberation through a universalizing subject against predominant societal relationships and prejudices. To be modern then is to have the capacity to challenge our condition and recreate our values through our 'productive powers', as Marx would refer to it. Marshall Berman notes that it is not the end product but the process that makes things new:

"What makes all these changes distinctively modern is not the inventions themselves, but a process of incessant enquiry, discovery and innovation, and a shared determination to transform theory into practice, to use all we know to change the world." (Berman, 1996:35)

So if to be modern is to transform, if it is a "process of incessant enquiry, discovery and innovation", then we are all moderns, including post-modernists. Modernity in the above definition is not about style but about questioning and proposing. The term

modern changes dramatically in architectural discourse: the *modernist style* for example. This is where architecture consistently attaches itself to superficial ideas of representation rather than to generative ideas in spatial logic. Modernist and post-modernist architecture refer to aesthetics that, as such, are continually trapped in their moment. Deconstructivist architecture is the same. Derrida himself says that "deconstructivism is a North American invention" and that he refers to the notion of deconstruction. While this may be arguable, my point is that the use of style as a representation of theory is a terminal act and not a generative one. [Second line] Aesthetics are very important in architecture and necessary to support the quality of space, the success of spatial production cannot be separated from it. However, to talk about aesthetics is one thing and style is another. According to the above description, modernism should have multiple readings in terms of form, even continuously evolving pluralist readings.

¹²See Frampton, Kenneth, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster, ed., New York: The New Press, 1998

¹³The focus on representation through style rather than on how a particular structure disciplines the space around it divorces the physical disciplinization of El Capitolio's form from architectural and social discourse about the building. It is seen as representing the U.S. government through the architectural language of style – "American capitol building" – but is less frequently questioned in terms of the spatial disciplinization that happens in and around it and the consequences, if any, of that disciplinization.

¹⁴"Surely it is the supreme illusion to defer to architects, urbanists, or planners as being experts or ultimate authorities in matters relating to space." Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, London: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1998, pg. 95

¹⁵This includes a number of other spaces within San Juan as well, such as low-income housing structures and the urban development of Puerta Tierra.

¹⁶Architecture theory and practice has tended to believe in generalizing ideologies, which have typically not allowed for the individual genius of various socio-cultural bodies (women, minorities, etc.). However, the term "postcolonial space" conveys both a negative moment that displays and displaces binary constructions and fixed categories and a positive one of a promise of becoming for new languages, new subject positions, and new modes of spatiality." G.B. Nalbantoglu and C.T. Wong, *postcolonial space(s)*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997

¹⁷McLeod, Mary, "Everyday and 'Other' Spaces", in Mary, in D. Colman, E. Danze, and C. Henderson, Eds. *Architecture and Feminism*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996 p.11. Edward Said has also commented on this Western emphasis within predominate discourses: "One of the canonical topics of modern intellectual history has been the development of dominant discourses and disciplinary traditions in the main fields of scientific, social or cultural inquiry. Without any exceptions that I know of, the paradigms for this topic have been drawn from what is considered exclusively Western sources." Edward Said "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World"