Modern Architecture in Latin America

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The research carried out over more than two decades by the Form group belonging to the ETSAB Barcelona School of Architecture of the Polytechnic University of Catalunya (ETSAB-UPC) currently finds continuity in UPC’s IForm group. Its main goal is to strengthen the knowledge of Latin American architectural works attuned to the principles of the Modern Movement. While the period that spans the group’s research is from 1950 to 1965, we acknowledge that the object of study is of such a dimension and involves such a broad range of countries that in certain cases that period may be extended. Each of the countries under study have had a different political, economic, and cultural development. The creation of schools of architecture and the origins of local architecture have also followed different processes within them, causing professionals to travel between these countries in this initial period. If the exodus of European architects to Latin America as a result of the Second World War is added to this mix, the resulting architectural landscape is of such richness that it deserves attentive analysis. It should also be noted that the majority of architects who built in Latin America were not constrained by strict theoretical postulates, but rather approached architecture from a visual perspective with a clear command of modern formal resources.

Many were the works built, but many were also left totally or partially incomplete. To the effect of tracing a complete history of the evolution of modern architecture in Latin America, many of these incomplete works have been studied, given that they constitute a fundamental historical contribution. The existence of multiple well-versed publications in this initial period of modernism has aided the recovery of this significant modern heritage.

Paraguay’s singular geographical location as well as the lack of a school of architecture until 1957 fostered a continuous relationship with bordering and nearby countries—Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay—and this relationship also manifested itself in the field of architecture. Thus, viewing the evolution of architectural modernism in these countries and their relation to Paraguay is a matter of interest. This view will center upon architects and their work, given that the historical, economic, and social aspects have been thoroughly reviewed in most books about Latin American architecture. Another aspect that should be acknowledged is that the contribution of these architects to the development of modernism is not limited to their architectural production, but also encompasses an educational project which meant the creation, in some cases, and the renovation, in others, of schools of architecture.

Argentina tuned in immediately to the principles of European modernism from its very inception, in part due to the influx of European architects to the country. Figures such as Vladimiro Acosta, who arrived to Buenos Aires in 1928, contributed to this early modernism which coincided with an economic resurgence from 1930 onwards. Architecture congresses also played a part, such as the First Panamerican Congress of
Social Housing of 1939, allowing the exchange of ideas between different countries. Modern architecture publications and magazines of the period, such as Nuestra Arquitectura (Our Architecture) and Revista de Arquitectura (Architecture Magazine), reached a wide audience and also served as vehicles for the dissemination of modernism. People such as Mario Roberto Álvarez, who started working as an architect in 1936, traveled across Europe reviewing the works of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius to then project an extensive set of works, belatedly acknowledged, that marked Argentine modernism for more than half a century. Antonio Bonet Castellana—an architect who worked in Spain and Argentina, and who had trained in Le Corbusier’s studio—worked as a correspondent for several magazines that contributed to divulge Latin American architecture in Europe.

In Brazil, the first documented modern architectural works correspond to the mid 1920s and 1930s, with names such as those of Gregori Warchavchik, Julio de Abreu Jr., and Frederico Kirchgässner, among others. However, until the 1940s, they were still practically unknown internationally.

Le Corbusier’s second visit, in 1936, strongly influenced the creation of Brazil’s modern movement. López (2012) considers this architect “to have been the great inspiration for the blossoming of an architectural expression that, although influenced by his theories, developed into a genuinely Brazilian and autonomous one”. The peak era of Brazilian architectural production starts with the construction of the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro, considered by a great many historians as the starting point of a modern architecture imprinted with Brazilian identity and, according to Goodwin, “the most advanced building in the Americas”. This era would continue until the start of the 1960s.

In 1939, Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa design the project for the Brazilian Pavilion at the New York World Fair, which became the great propagator of Brazilian architecture abroad. The images and reviews, mostly very positive, appeared in the most prominent international magazines, achieving significant impact and putting Brazil among the topics of discussion of the “new” architecture, underlined as a reference point for a mature production of great quality and technique, as well as with its own identity.

Affonso Eduardo Reidy stands out among the most relevant figures of the period. Named architect-in-chief of the Engineering Department of the Distrito Federal City Council in 1932, Reidy started designing modern buildings in search of logical answers to the program, with the rationalization of uses and circulation, an emphasis in illumination, ventilation, and sunlight, the use of reinforced concrete in completely modulated structures, and the total absence of ornaments.

Saturnino de Brito—who would afterwards establish himself in Asuncion, becoming one of the great figures of the modern movement in that city—graduated from the University

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of Rio de Janeiro and then, in 1936, started working at the Department of Architecture and Urbanism of the city of Pernambuco under the direction of Luis Nunes. He remained in the department until its dissolution in 1937.

However, the architect whose work has undoubtedly been the most disseminated in carioca\(^3\) architecture is that of Oscar Niemeyer, who propagated carioca architectural design across Brazil. He achieved recognition after the success of the Brazilian Pavilion in the New York World Fair, adding to this the project for the Pampulha complex in the city of Belo Horizonte in 1940; by 1956, he consolidated once and for all his prestige and career with the project for Brazil’s new capital.

Brasilia became a reality when President Juscelino Kubitscheck started a modernization project for the country. It is the culmination of the Brazilian modern movement’s great project, granting enormous opportunities to modern construction, given that the great majority of government buildings were to be built according to the new techniques and trends.

The significance of the São Paulo Biennial of 1951 and 1953 for the dissemination and exchange of architectural production from other countries should be highlighted. In the course of both editions, Brazil hosted internationally acclaimed critics, historians, and architects, which was crucial to expand the knowledge of Brazilian architecture abroad, as well as to reinforce it domestically. Among those present, the names of Sigfried Giedion, Mario Pani, Alvar Aalto, Josep Lluis Sert, Ernesto Rogers, and Marcel Breuer stand out. These biennials served to showcase the success of Brazil’s new architecture, where architects from Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and other states exhibited their work and were awarded recognition, many times both things simultaneously. That was the case for Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Reidy, Henrique Mindlin, Rino Levi, Oswaldo Bratke, and Paulo Ribeiro, among other prominent names.

In Uruguay, an economy on the ascent by the middle and end of the 1930s resulted in a construction boom of public buildings, giving way for projects expressed in modern language.

The modern movement consolidated itself in academia by the start of the 1950s. The School of Architecture of the University of the Republic did not only educate architects such as García Pardo, Lorente Escudero, Payssé, and Sichero, who shaped Uruguayan modern architecture, but was also the place that trained many Paraguayan architects such as Homero Duarte, Francisco Canese, Ramón González Almeida, and Natalio Bareiro, among others, who introduced the principles of modernism into Paraguay and contributed to the creation of the School of Architecture of Asuncion.

The renewal of the School of Architecture curriculum in 1952, which proposed a break with the preceding tradition and a new approach to the medium, enriched the architectural landscape. Architects, among them Lorente and Payssé, participated in

\(^3\) Carioca: Brazilian noun or adjective used to refer to anything related to Rio de Janeiro, the capital and the homonymous state of Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil.
the blossoming of a relevant movement that addresses modern architecture from teaching and professional practice.

According to Lorenzo Zuccolillo, professor and member of the International Association of Art Critics, AICA/PY, “the School of Architecture of of the University of the Republic would become in those years one of the most important institutions for the dissemination of advanced architectural ideas in the Southern Cone”.4

In the professional field, Martín González claims that the enactment of the Ley of Horizontal Property, that regulated the city’s vertical development—developed during the so-called “golden decade” (1950-1960), which saw a general construction boom in Uruguay and of horizontal property specifically—was critical to the start of Uruguayan modernism. From that time on, architects begin “a search for new roads that point to solutions of subjects related to single family and multifamily housing. [...] Architects such as Raúl Sichero Bouret stand out with functional and clear floor plans, simple structures that rationalize costs, and an aesthetic influenced by Le Corbusier”.5

Resulta siempre difícil sintetizar en un breve artículo la valoración de la importancia del legado arquitectónico latinoamericano. No obstante, al revisar la arquitectura moderna que se desarrolla en ese continente entre 1950 y 1965, pueden extraerse algunas reflexiones que facilitan la comprensión del fenómeno.

It is always difficult to summarize in one brief article the significance of modern Latin American architectural heritage. However, reviewing the modern architecture developed in the continent between 1950 and 1965, some insights that aid its comprehension may be derived.

La primera es que, más allá de la voluntad de definir una arquitectura nacional, el constante flujo de profesionales de un país a otro, profesionales formados en diferentes escuelas, por docentes provenientes a su vez de lugares diversos, constituye un entramado de relaciones tan complejo que las obras producidas en este contexto configuran lo que puede definirse como Arquitectura Moderna Latinoamericana. La mayoría de las escuelas de arquitectura que se crean en este periodo nacen ya con la modernidad aprendida, lo que da lugar a un conjunto de profesionales que construyen edificios modernos de calidad.

The first one of them is that, beyond the will to define a national architecture, the constant flux of professionals from one country to the other—professionals who were trained in different schools by professors who, in turn, came from different countries—created such an intricate web of relations that the works produced in this context comprise what may be defined as “modern Latin American architecture”. Most of the schools of architecture created during this period were born having learned

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4 “Notas para la consideración de la obra de Homero Duarte en el escenario de la modernidad plástica y arquitectónica del Paraguay”. Lorenzo Zuccolillo. 2012.

5 “La modernidad uruguaya de los años cincuenta. Mario Payssé Reyes y Lorente Escudero, desde la docencia y la práctica.” Martín González. 2010.
modernism, which resulted in a group of professionals who built quality modern projects.

The second is recognizing the way in which the initial propositions of modern architecture, generated in Europe, were skilfully gathered in Latin America by both European and local architects, with a rigorous will to adapt to local demands, both in terms of climate and financial constraints, while learning from traditional architecture and incorporating it into their work.

Geographical borders were no impediment to the flow of architectural ideas that, benefitting from the context of growth and development in the given period, gave way to a modern heritage which, in both quantity and quality, constitutes perhaps modernism's most valuable body of work.