

WHAT BUILDING IN THE CITY WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE DEMOLISHED?

RAÚL CÁRDENAS

Such was the question that the artist Gustavo Artigas posed to the people of the city of Los Angeles, as part of the development of a project for the LAXART gallery in the same city. *Voto para demolición* (Vote for Demolition) invited the public to participate in an open referendum to choose a building which, owing to its lack of aesthetic value, deserved to be torn down. Into the mix the project added the idiosyncrasies and prejudices of a group of local architects who helped select the short list of candidates for demolition. If the public at large wanted to participate they were able to do so by submitting their votes online¹. The results were documented so that they could be forwarded, together with a formal letter, to the appropriate local government agency.

It was not the first time that Artigas had organized this particular exercise in citizen participation, in doing so generating a platform that allowed people to decide how their urban landscape might be improved by the “disappearance” of urban landmarks. He had introduced the

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project in 2007 at the Lisbon Art Triennial, where the curatorial framework had been structured around the idea of “urban voids.” Mexico’s entry at the Triennial had been organized by a group of young architects who had been involved with the Mexican pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale the previous year.² This group, led by Enrique Martín Moreno³, decided to summon a group of artists—each of whom, to a greater or lesser degree, had a direct relation to urban space and to various social spheres—as well as a number of architects who had demonstrated a vision for reassessing the profession they had been trained in. The representatives from Mexico included, in addition to Artigas, Jonathan Hernández, Tercerunquinto, Teddy Cruz, Iván Hernández / Ludens, Homeless, Minerva Cuevas, María Alos, Rodrigo Alcocer, Taro Zorrilla, and Raúl Cárdenas / ToroLab. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the team’s proposal was the exploration of how the projects they developed clashed with the context of the Triennial, a context which, within the dynamics of its own presentation, was just as conservative

as the projects presented by the pavilions of the participating countries. In the face of the architectural profession's custom (or rather, reputed custom) of planning and calculating its work down to the smallest algorithmic detail, combined with the curatorial group's decision to explore the possibilities of collaboration with a group of artists, many of whom had developed projects that involve the participation of "users," Guillermo Ruiza de Teresa,⁴ a member of the curatorial and production team of the Mexican pavilion, addressed the question of what motivated them to select people from outside the country's established architectural circles:

"We viewed the selection of participants, as it pertained to artists or architects, more or less as a way to use critique and reflection as elements of interference and direct transformation, as tools and as a means of approaching the implicit problems in a city."

With those words, one might argue, Ruiz is outlining a territory at odds with his own professional training. Historically, architecture has defined itself and reevaluated itself by means of conflicts that have taken place along constantly shifting fault lines. In Latin America, these have been related to an economic and geopolitical environment governed by the elusive yet powerful and exclusive caste of "the client," a caste that is more economic than social in nature.

As a rule, and perhaps for perfectly legitimate reasons, the arts have been populated with all sorts of commonplace notions, judgments formed on the basis of who is consuming the works, on who happens to be the user or client. This shouldn't, however, be the kind of thinking that underlies a practice like architecture. This is because architecture, as opposed to the arts, involves the very functions that make a city work, and is therefore implicated in human survival itself. Nevertheless, there are so many loose ends and incongruities in this

business-school discourse that borders become porous and permeated by dialogues with art; and architects, for their part, end up creating what looks like, and in many cases is, art.

200 Years of Semi-linear History; or, Form, Function, and All That

I have no intention of writing about history but there are, in fact, certain parallels that are hard to avoid. The most obvious lie with the movements of emancipation from the Spanish crown initiated in Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Venezuela in the early years of the 19th century. But there are also parallels to the active responses to structural changes in the European powers and to the nearly instantaneous birth of the immense enterprise of the “never-ending project” of constructing sovereign nations. As Klaus Dodds has remarked:

“The ideas and practices associated with sovereignty are critical in shaping the prevailing geopolitical architecture based on states, borders, and national territories ... National governments, while endorsing the importance of sovereignty, have frequently violated those ideas and principles.”⁵

It all becomes a great deal more complicated once the initial euphoria surrounding the “victory” of the independence movements has receded, and even more so in view of the geographical condition of the continent, where another nascent power—the United States of America—is also a player.

In coming to Latin American shores, Modernism underwent one of its strangest journeys; as I see it, it was born in the United States but only came to us, decades later, via Europe. The odyssey began with Horatio

Greenough, a North American sculptor, best known for his statue of George Washington⁶. Greenough is a pivotal figure because of his essays on art, in which he launched a fervent attack on the architectural conventions of his time. He ignited a bomb—one that would later come to be known as functionalism⁷—when he stated that, in design, form should be subservient to function.⁸ With time, Greenough's theories, along with John Ruskin's writings proposing new models of social and even spiritual economies, led to the advent of the modern European avant-garde. Against this background--a favorite of many contemporary art historians--new technologies and radical changes in European geopolitics sparked one of the most rapid periods of artistic development in history, one in which the mingling of various arts and disciplines, of concept, function, and form, produced a new aesthetics with a distinct whiff of revolution. With the innocence of childhood and the arrogance imparted by reason, the age of manifestos was born.

Some of the most important manifestos were already gestating—and at least one had already been published⁹—one hundred years after the first era of emancipation. After losing more than half of its territory to the United States, and after surviving a woefully misbegotten French invasion, it was in Mexico that the first social revolution of the 20th century broke out, in conditions similar to the Bolshevik movement in Russia but preceding the events of the Red October by seven years. This fact is relevant only because of two pivotal figures, Hannes Mayer and Leon Trotsky, whose activities on the artistic and political stage cast a special light on the entire history of European migrations in the context of the Latin American adventure. This history, tinged with a modern touch, was rearticulated within the framework of the avant-garde.

A point of convergence in this era can be found in the years between 1919 and 1933 with the brief but influential Bauhaus school, which created, through its professors and guest speakers, a network of pedagogical

cal resources dedicated not only to architecture but also to education as a whole in line with the modernist project. In 1933, when the school was closed because of pressure from Germany's National Socialist Party, its three directors emigrated to the New World.¹⁰ Walter Gropius established himself in Boston, Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe in Chicago. In 1938, Hannes Mayer, an ardent proponent of social reform through design and the closest of the three Bauhaus directors to the political thinking of the left, arrived in Mexico, where he was received by President Lázaro Cardenas, joined the staff of the National Polytechnic Institute, and accepted several positions in government.

In that year of ferment, the avant-garde group UAS (Union of Socialist Architects) was formed in Mexico. Its members established direct connections between the fields of art and science by means of an architectural practice directly linked to social policies. They saw their projects as systems for change; their architectural projects were launched not through plans or perspectives but by means of machine diagrams that reflected the usefulness and poetic metaphors of the context. At this time, as Louise Noelle¹¹ has noted, Juan O'Gorman published a fiery article in the magazine *Frente a Frente*, in which he criticized the government of the Federal District of Mexico for engaging in the shameful--and anything but revolutionary-- practice of supporting neoclassical architecture to the detriment of the national modernist avant-garde. In this same article, a group of "the most advanced architects of Mexico" signed on to his denunciation. They included UAS members like Alberto T. Arai and, of course, Ricardo Rivas, whose Lerma River waterworks project in collaboration Diego Rivera will be discussed below.

Our other pivotal figure is the revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky, who arrived in Mexico in 1937 and soon began a love-hate relationship with the Mexican muralists, living with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera until he fell out with the latter permanently in 1939. (David Alfaro Siqueiros

himself would attempt to kill Trotsky in 1940.) It was through Rivera and Kahlo that Trotsky met André Breton. In July 1938, they composed the *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*. This document, which for “tactical” reasons was signed only by Rivera and Breton, called for “the independence of art—for the revolution; the revolution—for the independence of art.”

It’s common knowledge that Rivera was the cornerstone of the construction of Muralism within the Mexican nationalist movement and its logical plastic integrations with functionalism.¹² Such was the case with the project for the building of the Lerma river water system that Rivera undertook in collaboration with the architect Ricardo Rivas, and with works like *El agua en la evolución de la especie* (Water in the Evolution of the Species) in 1951¹³. The special feature of the latter was the blurring of borders between disciplines, technologies, and expressions. This encouraged practices through which it became increasingly easier to establish baselines that were unwritten yet committed to multi-disciplinary collaboration and cross-disciplinary projects. The foundation was thus laid for encounters between art and architecture that had no need to redefine practices but instead established a common ground over which to move and operate.

Post-revolutionary Mexico exercised a special magnetism because of the fact that the revolution was a modernist endeavor. The creation of the Ciudad Universitaria, the campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, was an example not only of architecture, but of a program for the creation of the new modern Mexican citizen. In the words of the anthropologist Tarek Elhiak¹⁴, “the notion of an anthropological isomorphic/Euclidian culture is needed to define a revolutionary and nationalist project such as Mexico’s, situated through the modernization project with a lag-time in terms of defined objectives from the rural to the urban.”¹⁵ This lends the established models for a country like Mexico

a weight based on the schizophrenia of reality, and produces an illusion of modernity based on territorial and political realities. José Castillo refers to this as “the combination of modernity beyond the control of spatial discourse; there is Tlatelolco and there is Chimalhuacán; there is UNAM and there is Neza. This is accompanied by the departure of art from the gallery spaces in the 1960s”¹⁶. In an effort to paraphrase Nestor Canclini: a paradox of modernism, an exuberant culture combined with a deficient modernity; when all is said and done we remain pre-modern. Here the avant-garde and its ideas are created or destroyed on the basis of frank need, from recurrent models to forms that go beyond the language of architecture. The norms that are established between a population, its demography, urbanism, and the nurturing of this population as a community project leave gaps between different negotiations and transactions that neither institutions nor conventions attend to. Freedom of movement within this fluid territory is a natural action, one that can be not only redefined through artistic practice but also slated for diagnosis and exploration.

To cite a few examples, today in Mexico we see works like those of Francis Alÿs, whose study of urbanism is made evident in his promenades; the spatial definitions of Gabriel Orozco; Teresa Margolles with her articulations and life cycles of the human body and of the bodies of buildings. In the United States we find Rick Lowe with his *Row Houses* project; Gordon Matta-Clark; or Vito Hannibal Acconci who created, together with Steven Holl, the *Storefront for Art and Architecture** project where the program of the space itself gives rise to these territories of dialogue between professions. These are born from the same need that Ayn Rand saw in her book *The Fountainhead*, when her main character carries on even after his expulsion from the architecture school of the Stanton Institute of Technology. Before expelling him, the director of the program reproaches him, declaring that “...all the projects that you have had to draw... you have made ... by violating the principles that

we are trying to teach you, countering all the established precedents and artistic traditions. You may think of yourself as a modernist... it's nothing but mere folly.”

1 *Voto para demolición* project website: <http://www.votodemo.com/>

2 Cities, Architecture and Society. 10th Venice Architecture Biennale, 2006

3 Enrique Martín-Moreno (Mexico 1974). Holds a Master of Architecture from Harvard University. Curator of the Mexican pavilions at the Lisbon Architecture Triennial 2007, the Venice Architecture Biennale 2006, and the Rotterdam Architecture Biennale 2005.

4 Guillermo Ruiz de Teresa (Mexico 1982). Architect; editor of the art, architecture, and design newspaper supplement *Excelsior TOMO*; founding member of *Pase usted*. Guillermo Ruiz de Teresa interviewed by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna, Abril 2010.

5 Klaus Dodds *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, p. 56–57.

6 *George Washington* (1840), by Horacio Greenough. Currently exhibited on the second floor of the National Museum of American History.

7 It should be noted that the phrase “form follows function” as such was coined years later by the American architect Louis Sullivan, teacher of Frank Lloyd Wright. F.L.W. worked as an apprentice at Adler & Sullivan from 1888–1893, in a very close relationship with Sullivan, whom he would later refer to as Lieber Meister, “Dear Master.” (*Years With Frank Lloyd Wright: Apprentice to Genius*, Edgar Tafel, Mineola, N.Y. 1985, Dover Publications. p. 31), *Architectural Research Quarterly* 7, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, p. 157–167.

8 Horatio Greenough's ideas were captured in essays that were published in 1947 under the title: *Form and Function: Remarks on Art by Horatio Greenough*. Edited by Harold A. Small. Berkeley, University of California Press.

9 *Futurist Manifesto. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti 1908*, published by the French newspaper *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909.

10 *Walter Gropius, after a brief stay in London, emigrated to Boston, taught at Harvard's School of Design, and founded the TAC group.*

11 *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, Spring, Year/Vol. XXIII, Number 078, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City. p.189–202

12 Ibid.

13 Orlando S. Suárez, *Inventario del muralismo mexicano*, Mexico. UNAM, 1972, p. 280

14 *Tarek Elhaik*, PhD, University of California at Berkeley, professor of anthropology at *Rice University and UC Berkeley*.

15 According to 19th-century notions of cultural anthropology, the basic isomorphic link for the understanding of modern culture has a Euclidean correlation in the bonds between territory, people, and customs. Tarek Elhaik, interviewed by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna, April 2010.

16 Jose Castillo, México, 1969. Bachelor's Degree in Architecture from the Universidad Iberoamericana, Master's and PhD in Architecture and Urban Planning, Harvard University. Researcher, Curator, and Head of the Department of the School of Architecture of the Universidad Iberoamericana and at University of Pennsylvania's School of Design. Interviewed by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna, Abril 2010

*Editors Note: Although Acconci and Holl were directly involved in the design and construction of *Storefront*, and exercised a major influence on the project, the founder and first Director of this New York important venue was the urban critic and activist Kyong Park.