

FOR A LATIN AMERICAN ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM

To reflect on the state of architectural criticism in Argentina and, as much as possible, in the southern cone of Latin America does not seem like a particularly promising task. But it is in fact inescapable if we wish to prevent architecture in the region from developing as merely pragmatism or fashion. The weaknesses I will discuss here characterize how public opinion is formed as much as how professionals behave.

Architectural criticism is practiced in the region with a limited sense of responsibility. Since it has developed in relatively small and isolated national cultural contexts, conditioned by the economic and political interests that underlie the essays in question, this criticism tends to limit itself to bland description or easy praise, and rarely risks thoughtful value judgments. In the architectural press, it is unusual to find critical writing driven by the simple (but in a way risky) criteria that scholars Patabi Raman and Richard Coyne refer to as “performance evaluation”: efficiency, economy, sustainability, and the degree to which a building achieves its practical goals.¹

Even though advanced analytical writing is limited, this is not to say that no one has been active in the field. On the contrary, especially since the 1980s and as in other zones of the subcontinent, a line of criticism has developed that has been strongly articulated in professional praxis. This criticism has defended the condition of “Otherness” of Latin American architecture, based on a simple “inside/outside” model that takes for granted that such homogeneous cultural entities exist and essentially

positive values belong to the “inside,” while negative values characterize the “outside.” The defense of Otherness in Latin American architecture occurred in parallel with such an argument from those abroad who formulated ideas like “interpretive communities,” thus paving the way to cultural relativism—that is, the radical negation of a universal cultural space.²

Thus, paradoxically, while from the “exterior” we are asked and encouraged to live exclusively in our “interior,” the local defenders of our Otherness invite us to joyfully celebrate the fact that we are insular.

The cult of Otherness reached a privileged position in the North American academy thanks to the spread of so-called post-colonial studies. Terry Eagleton linked this typically Postmodernist position to a reaction by the intellectual Left to the massive entrenchment of a strongly conservative climate and the putative “end of history” resulting from the process of globalization. For Eagleton, “If the system is deemed all-powerful, a view which overlooks the fact that it is at once formidably resourceful and spectacularly unsuccessful, then the sources of opposition can only be found outside it.” Imagining how the representatives of such a culture would feel stuck in their reactions, Eagleton describes what has actually occurred in recent years: “Some, one might predict, would assume that the dominant system was entirely negative—that nothing *within* this seamlessly non-contradictory whole could by definition be of value—and turn from it in dismay to idealize some numinous Other. This cult would no

doubt be coupled with a guilty self-laceration on the part of some scions of the first world who would hanker to be just about anybody but themselves. One might forecast an enormous upsurge of interest in the alien, deviant, exotic, unincorporable.”³

In architecture, the fact that Euro–North American Postmodernists and Latin American nationalist-populists see eye to eye can be clearly observed in the success of the formula of “critical regionalism” and its local counterpart, “appropriate modernity.” Created more or less simultaneously, the first by English critic Kenneth Frampton, based in the United States, and the second by Chilean critic Cristian Fernández Cox, these notions are variations on the same theme. Both proclaim the necessary existence of a substantive Euro–North American canon and of some productions derived from it and therefore modifying it. In the first case, the architecture thought and built in Latin America that is of value is not Modern *tout court* but rather critical regionalist; in the latter, “appropriate”/“appropriated.” Now, just the presumption alone that Euro–North American architecture resulting from modernization constitutes a homogeneous whole with universal value makes possible the assertion that there existed a canonic “Modern architecture.” Conversely, a simple understanding that modernity is represented *ab initio* all over the world by different Modernist formulas is enough to conclude that this homogeneous canonical Modernism is no more than an effective ideological invention lacking any basis in reality. And if that is the case, then the search for subordinate or different expressions becomes obviously misguided.

In any event, thanks to the good offices of the defenders of critical regionalism and Otherness, the architecture produced in peripheral nations still retains the possibility of entering into the Euro–North American master narrative in “special” chapters. The problem is that those who have defended and continue to defend the nationalist-populist inside/outside model are unaware of some of the drawbacks that derive from these theories: one, that accepting such a condition means declaring ourselves unable to explore and discuss the world around us in complete liberty, without restrictions on our aims or methods; two, that when we link the division between good and bad with political geography, we lose any possibility of specific appraisal of the architecture (in this way, real monstrosities have been declared good projects); and three, that the model is no more than the inversion in appearance of the Euro–North American narrative. (I say “in appearance,” because strictly speaking, it defends the same values.)

The defenders of Latin American Otherness like to use the well-known map of America drawn by Joaquín Torres García with the south at the top and the north at the bottom. They haven’t realized that this version, just like the conventional one, share the idea that it’s better to be above than below. But, why should it be better to be above than below? This is not a value in real space, and in any case, if the point is to play metaphorically with the drawing, wouldn’t a horizontal map be more appropriate to an egalitarian notion?

To those who would like to read a good critical writing on contemporary Latin American architecture, I suggest asking whether it wouldn’t be more productive to aim for a Latin American criticism of contemporary architecture—that is, a criticism of the ideas and works currently produced around the world, carried out by those of us who by definition have a point of view permeated by the realities of our subcontinent. From this standpoint, for example, one cannot help but become indignant in observing in the panorama of the Euro–North American media industry the frivolity and cheerful, provincial celebration of its own riches, or the cynical and utilitarian approach to the urban dynamics of the poorest that is common currency today.

Forced to live every day with the enormous and heartbreaking material and spiritual needs of our own people, with the distortions of our processes of scientific and technological development, and with our weak structures of cultural production, the drug that excites our Euro–North American colleagues and allows them to satisfy their creative impulses by twisting virtual amoebas has no effect on most of us in South America. Our realities require that we see the world and its necessities with a different urgency and with other priorities. That is why I am convinced that an architectural criticism shaped by contemporary experience and debates here in Latin America and in the world will, assuredly, be not only productive and fully justified but also indispensable. ♦