

# **Back from Utopia**

## **The Challenge of the Modern Movement**

Hubert-Jan Henket & Hilde Heynen editors

Long before the 1932 'International Style' exhibition gave it a name, modern architecture began as disparate attempts in many European and American countries to find new forms for radically changing economic and social conditions. In Europe and the US, industrialization, explosive urban growth and new communication, transportation and constructive technologies had made a new world seem both possible and necessary, and many architects felt called upon to build it. In Latin America, these possibilities and needs grew out of social revolutions and emerging national identities.

In recent years, critics have recognized the diversity of national and cultural sources of modern architecture. In the 1992 edition of *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Kenneth Frampton paid as much attention to precursors in non-industrialized countries such as Italy, Sweden and Finland as to those in England, Germany and France.<sup>1</sup> He thus acknowledged the emergence of the Modern subject – a subject that then had power to transform the world by modifying or rejecting tradition in different contexts and taking action by different means. However, when he discussed new architectural forms outside of Europe and the US, Frampton seemed unable to perceive their originality, introducing them in the chapter titled 'The International Style: Theme and Variations'.<sup>2</sup> This implies that modern architecture in Asia, Africa and Latin America originated as uncritical, if locally flavored, reflections of European and American examples and ideas, rather than as a series of creative responses to local conditions.

In Latin America, Frampton regarded modern architecture as the creation of European émigrés and of local architects influenced by them and by Le Corbusier, especially during and after his 1930 lecture tour in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.<sup>3</sup> Early manifestations of modern architecture in Latin America were seen as derivative, in a context in which modernism was merely 'one style among many'. Many influential Latin American architectural historians and critics have also adopted this interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Thus Max Cetto – himself an émigré architect in Mexico – illustrated in his survey, *Modern Architecture in Mexico*, the presence of the International Style in his adopted country by emphasizing examples that fit that view, while glossing over, criticizing or excluding those that did not, such as Juan O'Gorman's Kahlo/Rivera houses and studios designed in 1931.<sup>5</sup> In this essay, I examine this project as exemplary of a homegrown modernity and of an esthetics that attempted to reconcile tradition and transgression, history and utopia.

**Modernization and modernity** The modernization of Latin America started in the late 19th century, after the wars of independence and decades of civil turmoil in most of the newly established nation-states. Capital cities grew rapidly but maintained low densities overall, demanding investments in infrastructure and public transportation – investments that were partially financed and almost totally controlled by foreign capital. The region's

1 Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Part II: Chapters 22–23, pp. 192–209, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992.

2 Ibid. Part III: Chapter 1, pp. 254–57.

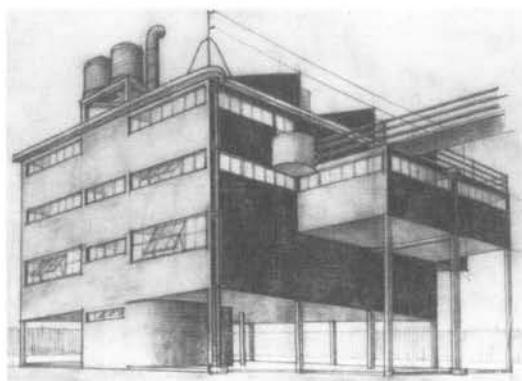
3 Ibid. p. 254.

4 Ramón Gutiérrez, *Arquitectura y Urbanismo en Iberoamérica*, Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid 1983, pp. 601–603. Gutiérrez has denounced on several occasions the apparent eagerness of Latin American architects to reproduce styles and forms that are celebrated in dominant cultural centres.

5 Max L. Cetto, *Modern Architecture in Mexico – Arquitectura Moderna en México*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York 1961, p. 29. Cetto refers thusly to O'Gorman's own house, which is included in his book: 'The demoniacally bewildering strangeness of O'Gorman's house is the product of speculation and mania ... It is the pole opposite classical objectivity, reason, fixed rules, faultless details ... for here the devil, contradiction, madness and dissolution reign supreme.'

6 For a concise political history of Latin America, see James D. Cockcroft, *Latin America: History, Politics, and US Policy*, Nelson Hall, Chicago 1996.

7 By 'cultural memory' I mean something different from 'the historical past', or 'the historic patrimony'. I am using this concept as it was developed by Jan Assman in 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique* 65 (1995), to signify collective memory inscribed in rituals, texts, images and monuments recalling momentous historical events.



Drawing by the architect Juan O'Gorman for Diego Rivera's house and painting studio, showing the bridge to Kahlo's house, San Angel, Mexico City, 1931.

participation in the global economy was based on agriculture and mining, and railroads were laid out not to connect points in the interior of countries to one another, but points of primary production in the hinterland to the region's capitals and port cities. Thus the beginning of modernization reintroduced a pattern of territorial and resource exploitation and distribution that had only recently been cast off.<sup>6</sup>

Manufactured goods for elite consumption came from Europe. Members of the ruling oligarchy routinely commissioned well-known French architects to design their *hôtels particuliers*, while civic buildings and public spaces were the subject of international competitions, in which foreign architects were the likely winners. Cities like Buenos Aires and Mexico City, rejecting older Spanish colonial styles, took on a cosmopolitan look, with new buildings in fashionable eclectic styles built by successful members of the Italian and Spanish immigrant communities, and newly widened streets in emulation of Parisian avenues. Colonial government structures were replaced with parliamentary houses that emulated the US Congress building, further situating the urban culture of Latin America in a modern global (i.e., European and North American) context.

Like their wealthier compatriots whose lifestyles involved spending extended periods of time in London and Paris, Latin American writers and artists looked to Europe for cultural validation. The elite went to shop and be pampered in ways unavailable at home. The artists sought – among other things – a subculture of sustained artistic production and exposure to an audience, both lacking in their home countries. Many came to question the identity of their own cultures and nations when access to metropolitan systems of recognition was blocked, outside their own circles of expatriate Latin Americans. Living in countries that lacked the cultural hegemony of Europe and the United States, Latin American artists throughout the 20th century sought to define their cultures through the tension between national identity and international participation.

Today, national identities continue to be in the process of definition, and identity construction continues to be central to cultural theory. Two recurrent aspects of this construction are the periodic recovery and loss of cultural memory, each recovery accompanied by a recurring sense of responsibility of the artist towards society.<sup>7</sup> The periodic recovery of cultural memory leads to reinterpretations of the narrative of colonial depend-

View from Kahlo's house looking towards Rivera's by Guillermo Kahlo. Structure to right is a photo lab for Guillermo Kahlo, who was Frida Kahlo's father. San Angel, Mexico City, 1932.

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View of Rivera's and Kahlo's houses, taken by Guillermo Kahlo (Frida Kahlo's father) after completion in 1932. San Angel, Mexico City.

Drawing by the architect Juan O'Gorman for Frida Kahlo's house and painting studio, showing the exterior stair that connects to the terrace and bridge to Rivera's house. San Angel, Mexico City, 1931.



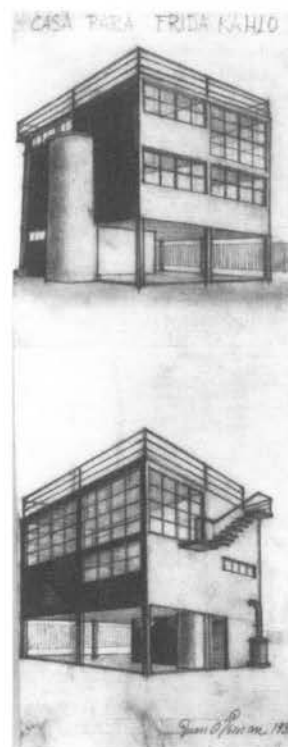
ency, including the violent subjugation of indigenous and poor populations and their continuing marginalization in the processes of modernization. The periodic loss (or denial) of cultural memory permitted focusing on being part of a shared global urban culture, characterized by international mobility and a plethora of resources, even though few could enjoy them.

**Modernity, revolution and cultural identity** During much of the same period as the First World War and revolutions in Europe, Latin America also experienced great social and political upheavals in the beginning decades of the 20th century. The most violent and widespread of these was the Mexican Revolution, beginning in 1910, but violent class conflicts – sometimes between proletarianized peasantry and landowners, sometimes between urban workers and their employers, and often against the sitting government – erupted in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru and elsewhere. Everywhere they could, the urban bourgeoisie created new political parties to demand greater participation in political decisions. Students throughout Latin America emulated those in Argentina, who in 1918 had gained radical reforms of university governance to include student participation. Writers including the Argentinean Ricardo Rojas, the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña, the Peruvians Carlos Mariátegui and Raúl Haya de la Torre, and the Mexican José Vasconcelos promoted different versions of an emerging pan-American cultural nationalism that began to redefine the region's cultural horizon. Young intellectuals and artists then framed this movement in Hispanic and Indo-Americanist terms.<sup>8</sup>

8 In architecture, these trends were prominently promoted and displayed in the Seville and Barcelona international fairs of 1929, which emphasized regional diversity within the unity of Spain. Diversity was displayed along the Plaza de España's hemicycle in Seville, and in Barcelona, in the Pueblo Español. Barcelona compared itself the rest of Europe, while Seville's Neo-colonial pavilions recalled Spain's imperial past in America. Mexico's pavilion in Seville, inspired by pre-Hispanic monuments, and Germany's modern pavilion in Barcelona, however opposite in their aesthetic programmes, constituted overt critiques of the fairs' ideological premises: Mexico's by making present the cultures vanquished by Spain and Germany's by making obvious that after the First World War, Europe was ready to create a new world from the ruins of its faded empires.

9 José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica*, Espasa Calpe, Mexico 1948.

10 Hayden Herrera, *Frida, A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Chapter 15, pp. 241–253.



In Mexico, the revolutionary turmoil engulfed almost all the national territory and continued for over ten years. Politically awakened peasants and workers were the driving force, beginning with the armed revolts led by Zapata and Villa demanding 'Land and Liberty', the defeat of dictator Porfirio Díaz in 1911 and the bloody struggle among different political and class factions that ensued through the establishing of the constitution in 1917 and beyond. José Vasconcelos, philosopher and fervent advocate of Latin America's role as the mixing vessel for the creation of a universal cosmic race, was instrumental in supporting a new form of art based on Mexico's pre-Hispanic and recent revolutionary history.<sup>9</sup> As Minister of Education (1921–24) under President Obregón, he appointed the painter Diego Rivera to oversee and create a series of murals with popular themes on the walls of the brand new Ministry of Education. Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros would develop the Mexican muralist school from this commission, and create an enduring fusion between modernity and nationalism.

In 1929 Rivera married the younger, emerging artist Frida Kahlo, whose work was inspired by popular narrative painting genres such as 'retablos' and who had changed her birth date to coincide with the Mexican revolution's ousting of Porfirio Díaz. Little known at the time, she would eventually receive international recognition as a major modern artist.<sup>10</sup> Kahlo and Rivera, together with the twenty-six-year-old architect Juan O'Gorman, who was two years older than Kahlo, and had been her friend and classmate in the Escuela Preparatoria, created in 1931–32 a dwelling formed by two joined houses located in San Ángel – a former colonial *finca* in one of Mexico City's suburbs – that is



The Kahlo and Rivera houses and studios after their restoration in 1997 by architect Víctor Jiménez. San Ángel, Mexico City.



today considered one of the most important works of modern architecture in Mexico.<sup>11</sup>

The 1997 restoration by architect Víctor Jiménez has made the project visible again, after disappearing from public view for several decades, and this new visibility will enable its re-evaluation since the days when it was judged a derivative of Le Corbusier's house and atelier for the painter Amédée Ozenfant.<sup>12</sup> O'Gorman's early interest in *Towards a New Architecture* and his embrace of Le Corbusier's call for an engineer's aesthetic coincided with his own rebellion against the lack of social commitment by academic architects and his commitment to a socialist building programme to provide schools and workers' housing at a national scale.<sup>13</sup>

Because the history and evaluation of buildings has seldom included the role of clients in their design, Kahlo and Rivera's own participation has still not been appreciated. The uniqueness of the houses within O'Gorman's architectural work, and their relationship to the site and to one another suggest that they can be seen as an embodiment of Kahlo's struggle to construct an autonomous identity within the context of her marriage to the internationally known Rivera, on whom she depended financially. Kahlo and other contemporary women – such as Truus Schröder in Utrecht and Aline Barnsdall in Los Angeles – were defining themselves as Modern subjects through the design of their own dwellings. In the process they contributed to the creation of a handful of canonically modern houses.<sup>14</sup>

The Rivera–Kahlo residences became a 'cause célèbre' among Mexican artists and intellectuals, who could not see the separate structures with their separate entrances as

11 Antonio Toca Fernández, 'Arquitectura del siglo xx en la ciudad de México', pp. 47–52, *Arquitectura y Ciudad*, Instituto Politécnico Nacional, Mexico 1998. The essay details a 1996 survey of eleven Mexican historians and critics, whose selection of fifty buildings of modern architecture in Mexico City is ranked according to the number of mentions given to each project. O'Gorman's Kahlo/Rivera houses share second place with three other projects.

12 The restored houses have been the subject of a special feature, 'House for Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: Juan O'Gorman's Architecture and Mexican Modern', *Space Design* (Japan), May 1998, pp. 61–82.

13 O'Gorman had an early chance to implement his social activism when commissioned to design twenty-

nine school projects in Mexico City in 1932–33 by Narciso Bassols, the Secretary of Public Education, who was in charge of developing a major literacy drive.

14 For an incisive analysis of the role of women clients in the design of canonic modern residences, see Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History*, Harry N. Abrams, New York 1998.

15 Hayden Herrera, op. cit., p. 179.

16 The houses were discussed as manifestations of an 'animalistic functionalism' and also referred to as 'the devil's house' by Raúl Castro Padilla in a conference convened by the Mexican Society of Architects in 1934. See *Pláticas sobre Arquitectura*, Sociedad de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Mexico 1934, pp. 49–50. Kahlo's references to the colours' meanings in her diary include: 'Reddish purple: Aztec, old blood, prickly pear. The most alive and oldest' and 'Cobalt blue: electricity and purity. Love'.



View of Kahlo's house from the rear by Guillermo Kahlo (1932), San Ángel, Mexico City, showing the exterior stair that connects to the terrace and bridge to Rivera's house.

Kahlo's statement of her desired autonomy; instead, they referred derisively to her house as the 'casa chica', or the apartment where a man keeps his mistress, in contrast to the family house, or 'casa grande', as Rivera's house was described.<sup>15</sup> The pipe organ cactus fence so common a sight in poor rural communities, and the houses' strident colours reminiscent of peasant dwellings – whose meanings are explained in Kahlo's diary – were particularly disparaged by academic architects as being in extremely 'poor taste'.<sup>16</sup> Yet these were the very elements that contributed to the originality of the design. The colors gave each house a distinctive personality, denying their abstraction. The functional landscape inscribed the houses in a utopian context of politically engaged artists signaling their identification with Mexico's indigenous peoples. Kahlo, the daughter of an assimilated German-Jewish immigrant, constructed her identity in association with Mexican peasant women, whose garments and ornaments she used and collected. Her modernity, rooted as it was in a national identity defined by the Mexican Revolution, resonated with O'Gorman's own cultural and political agenda.

Jean Franco has noted in *The Modern Culture of Latin America*, that Latin American authors in the first decades of the 20th century 'tended to borrow whatever [literary] instru-



ment seemed most suited to [their] purpose, and then abandon it when some new situation arose'.<sup>17</sup> And, because the 'Latin American experience simply could not be fitted into European moulds', they had to justify their role by 'paying more attention to content than to form'.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, O'Gorman recombined elements gleaned from the schematic and incomplete documentation of the Maison Ozenfant included in *Towards a New Architecture* with local building techniques in designing the first functionalist house in Mexico for his parents in 1929. He then expanded the functionalist lexicon with the colours and landscape of rural Mexico in the neighbouring Rivera/Kahlo houses. Finally, to explore the limits of plastic integration between murals and buildings, he covered exterior and interior building surfaces with mosaics of coloured Mexican stones depicting indigenous myths in his own house, partly built and partly carved from the lava stone of Mexico City's Pedregal district (1949) and again in the Library of the National University campus (1950–51). Today we would be tempted to view such a practice as a post-modern one 'avant la lettre'; O'Gorman saw himself as an artist allied with the aims of the Mexican revolution, whose role was to provide spaces and architectural forms for newly defined social actions.<sup>19</sup>

Communications between the architect and his clients during the design and construction of the houses have not been documented. It is not difficult to imagine that O'Gorman would have a greater familiarity with Kahlo than with Rivera, the well-established 'master' 19 years O'Gorman's senior. Lucienne Bloch, one of Rivera's assistants and a friend of Kahlo remembers her describing the houses thus: 'I can work, and he can work.'<sup>20</sup>

In 1931, when O'Gorman had started designing, and while on her first trip to the United States, Kahlo had painted her own wedding portrait. She depicted Rivera as the much larger figure, holding a palette and brushes – the attributes of the artist. Kahlo represented herself as a tiny woman clad in the peasant finery that she would continue to use as the subject of her own work. The figures look away from one another and occupy separate spaces, joined gingerly by their hands. Like the figures in the portrait, the houses are also unequal in size, Rivera's the larger and taller one, Kahlo's, stuccoed in cobalt blue, the more eye-catching. In Rivera's house the painting studio is the most prominent exterior feature, in Kahlo's, bedroom and studio share a floor and are perceived as equivalent. The houses are joined by a bridge connecting the roof of Kahlo's house with the balcony level in Rivera's studio, and by the kind of exterior cantilevered staircase that would be found in rural dwellings.

O'Gorman had adopted Le Corbusier's dictum 'a house is a machine for living' as his own. Yet he and his clients did not see 'living' as the conventionally bourgeois condition that is implicit in Le Corbusier's residential projects. Abstract forms could be moulded more easily to the construction of an identity invested in a revolutionary nationalist ideology; they could be both transgressive and accepting of tradition. This project's aesthetic of reconciliation between modernity and tradition, between erudite and popular sources, would become more intelligible several decades later in the work of Luis Barragán. And it remains a valid issue as everywhere in Latin America (with the possible exception of

17 Jean Franco, *The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist*, F.A. Praeger, New York 1967, p. 17.

18 Ibid. p. 18.

19 Ida Rodríguez makes an important distinction between Le Corbusier's social vision, allied with capitalism, and O'Gorman's application of functionalist theory to Mexico's post-revolutionary society. Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *Juan O'Gorman. Arquitecto y Pintor*, Universidad Autónoma de México, Mexico 1982, pp. 21–22.

20 Hayden Herrera, op. cit. p. 156.

21 Hitchcock states that the Latin American exhibition 'will be found, I believe, to exceed ["Built in the USA"] in variety of interest ... In certain fields, notably university cities and public housing, the United States in recent years has had little to offer as extensive in scope or as brilliant in design as the best Latin American work.' Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Latin American Architecture since 1945*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1955, p. 13.

22 The multi-purpose Televisa building, awarded in 1998, was designed by TEN Architects SC: Enrique Norton and Bernardo Gómez Pimienta; the São Paulo State Picture Library restoration was designed by Paulo A. Mendes da Rocha Arquitetos Associados: Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Eduardo Argenton Colonelli and Weliton Ricoy Torres. For additional information on the Mies van der Rohe Award for Latin American Architecture, see <<http://www.miesbcn.com>>.



23 Among recent publications on Latin American architecture that successfully challenge the Eurocentric framework, see Valerie Fraser, *Building the New World: Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America 1930-1960*, Verso, London-New York 2000 and John A. Loomis, *Revolution of Forms: Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1999.

24 For a history of this debate, see Susana Torre, 'Cultural Identity and Modernity in Latin American Architecture', in John A. Loomis (ed.), *Other Americas: Contemporary Architecture and Issues in Latin America*, Design Book Review 32 / 33, Spring/Summer 1994, pp. 16-21.

Cuba): the pre-modern past exists alongside the present in the lives and reality inhabited by large sectors of the population.

**Frameworks and controversies** Henry-Russell Hitchcock, not without a tinge of envy, curated *Latin American Architecture since 1945* in 1955 for New York's Museum of Modern Art. In spite of stating that the US had "little to offer as extensive in scope or as brilliant in design as the best Latin American work"<sup>21</sup> during the same period, he considered this project a pendant to his 1952 exhibition and book *Built in the USA: Post-War Architecture*, filtering his selection of Latin American buildings through the framework of the International Style. Hitchcock's and other surveys during the 1950s and '60s contributed to burying the beginnings of modern architecture in Latin America as local 'variations' of the International Style. Since then, many respected Latin American historians and critics continue to think of the origins of modern architecture in the region as uncritical reflections of imported ideas and, consequently, pay little attention to the processes of trans-culturation and to ideas and forms that travelled both ways between Latin American and European or North American architects and designers.

The limitations of this vision have been evident in the two awards so far bestowed by the Barcelona-based Mies van der Rohe Foundation in its new programme for the international exposure and recognition of Latin American architecture, with the first given to the high-tech multi-purpose building in Mexico City for the multinational telecommunications giant, Televisa, and the second, in acknowledgement of the importance given to history and patrimony preservation in Latin America, to the restoration, refurbishment and adaptation of the 1905 State Picture Library Building in São Paulo.<sup>22</sup> Ideologies aside, both projects represent current developments in Latin American architecture. The debate over whether one or the other better represents the region's cultural identity will continue to leave out those challenging projects where an aesthetic of reconciliation was attempted and a difficult synthesis achieved.

Today the historical narratives constructed by Hitchcock and others, are being deconstructed, and notions such as centre versus periphery, the technological imperative of modern architecture, the supremacy of the architect's authorship and the marginal practices of so-called Critical Regionalism – among others – are being contested in new studies about modern architecture in Latin America and non-Western countries.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, modern architecture continues to be an unfinished project in the discourse of Latin American architecture and the idea of an 'appropriated modernity', mindful of regional cultural identities, past histories, adverse economic conditions and craft-based construction, has engaged a pan-American debate that convenes in biannual conferences and has generated a large number of publications.<sup>24</sup> The controversy over the Mies van der Rohe awards obscures a more fundamental polarization in the practices of Latin American architects, between those who want to be part of the international scene, regardless of typical local conditions, and those who want to create exemplary work out of the specificity and adversity of those conditions.