

D E S I G N B O O K R E V I E W

ue 32/33
ing/Summer 1994
3.00

Architecture

Urbanism

Landscape

Design



Other Americas

Contemporary Architecture and Issues in Latin America

Cultural Identity and Modernity in Latin American Architecture

*La interpretación de nuestra realidad conesque-
mas ajenos sólo contribuye a hacernos cada vez
más desconocidos, cada vez menos libres, cada
vez más solitarios.*

The interpretation of our reality through pat-
terns not our own serves only to make us
ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more
solitary.

—Gabriel García Márquez,
Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, 1982

During the past five years, there has been a flurry of Spanish-language publications on Latin American architecture.¹ This may seem surprising at first. The region has experienced uneven economic and urban development, with most building activities related to tourism, shopping, tax-free manufacturing zones, and international banking. Several Latin America countries have only recently emerged from civil wars, military repression, and economic stagnation or stagflation, while others (Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, and even Mexico) remain torn by violence. Dominican Joaquín Balaguer is the only Latin American president in recent years to personally embrace architecture as part of his political persona, seeking to build his political support by building housing for the poor, not to mention the most grandiose monument anywhere in the Americas: the Columbus Lighthouse, a huge cross-shaped memorial that consumes enough electrical power to illuminate Santo Domingo's still-darkened slums.

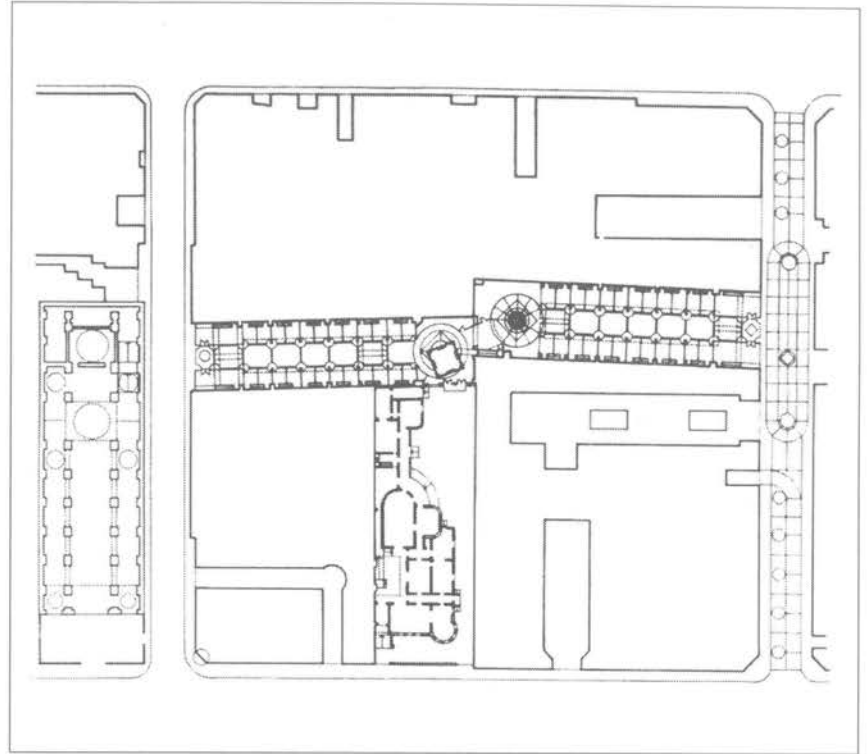
These publications—which include monographs, historical documents, and several new student- or faculty-sponsored magazines—reflect the current vigorous debate over regional and cultural identity, and represent efforts to document and preserve Latin America's architectural heritage. The debate has been spurred by major tears in the urban fabric that have been occurring to make room for offices and highly visible spaces of consumption for the global economy. Imported typologies for huge shopping centers, resorts, and highrise hotels are often the only new construction of any importance in Latin America, and are usually rendered in banal modern and postmodern styles. Thus, Latin American architects and critics rightly feel that local and foreign developers view their societies as incapable of their own cultural production.

Indeed, little of Latin America's recently real-

ized architectural and urban designs are known internationally. One exception is the work of Luis Barragán, which has been recognized in the United States since the early 1980s, and has opened the way for the work of other Mexican architects to be favorably received. Ricardo Legorreta is a notable example. His recent designs for office parks and resort hotels in the southwestern United States and Mexico have a spatial sensibility and sense of light and color that derive from local traditions. This type of cross-fertilization, however, is rare. In most Latin American countries, local design and institutional traditions have little impact on the design language and building types of new construction.

The renewed debate on Latin American architecture began with several key conferences and symposia held in the early 1980s. Among the initiators and those who remain the most active participants in the debate today are Marina Waisman and Ramón Gutiérrez of Argentina, Cristián Fernández Cox and Enrique Browne of Chile, Silvia Arango of Colombia, Mariano Arana of Uruguay, and Antonio Toca of Mexico. Through their exchanges, these critics and practitioners have sought to create the basis for regionalist architecture in their own countries and throughout Latin America.

In 1985 an international event gave the emerging regionalist discourse a symbolic reason to turn militant. That year, a biennial architectural exhibition and conference was sponsored in Buenos Aires by several architectural individuals and entities, including critic and cultural entrepreneur Jorge Glusberg, the long-established Argentine architectural magazine *SUMMA*, the national Society of Architects, and the government-sponsored school of architecture. While the featured international personalities were staged in a major, centrally located theater, presentations by Latin American architects occurred in a remote, marginally located university precinct. Several critics seized upon the symbolism of the disparity between the two locations and the resulting lack of dialogue as reason to summon the Biennial's audience to boycott the centrally located proceedings and to join instead the round-the-clock discussion on the marginality of Latin American culture. This confrontation has since been formalized in mutually exclusive biennial gatherings—one focusing on the international scene, the other on Latin America. Since in 1986, the Seminars on Latin American Architecture, known by their Spanish acronym SAL, have been rotated among various sites throughout the continent, without Glusberg's participation. The early discussions focused on questions of representation, as participants sought to define the distinguishing characteristics of Latin American architecture. In the

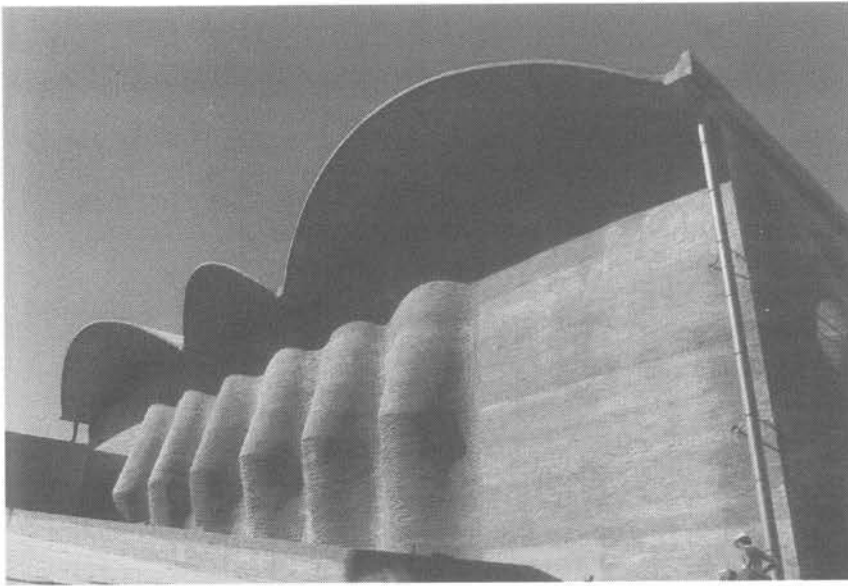


attempt to deduce a distinctive profile from an already existing body of historic and contemporary architectural works, two positions have gradually emerged: one advocates the defense of the historical past from destruction by greedy developers; the other supports the creation of a "new" design language, expressive of the local poverty of technological and material resources but capable of transcending these conditions. Mutual admonitions against "folklorism" and "cultural colonialism" reinforce the current essentialist turn of the debate.

The discussion of identity is closely associated with the belief that Latin American countries, burdened since the turn of the century by external debt and relegated in the international economy to the role of providing raw materials for foreign industrial production, never experienced modernization on their own terms, and only to the extent that was required of them to fulfill their role. Hence, whatever aesthetics of modernity were adopted by local intellectual and artistic elites could not be rooted in the facts of local social and cultural conditions. Because the experience of modernity is now perceived as vicarious and as a form of simulation, there is an intellectual drive for a redefinition of the experience and of the forms and images that create its enduring cultural presence. Fernández Cox coined the slogan that served to rally around regionalism, calling for both an "appropriate" and an "appropriated" modernity.² In Spanish, both meanings reside in a single word, *apropiada*. Examples of this approach make creative use of

local resources and means of production, while contributing fresh ideas, solutions, and forms through the critical appropriation—and transformation—of relevant foreign proposals, especially in relation to social housing, a major issue in Latin America. Fernández Cox, Waisman, and other critics in their camp reject the notion that "appropriateness" can be best—or even only—fulfilled by adhering to historical models. Instead, they seek to vindicate Latin America's right to its own modernity. This means creating imaginative, even original, responses to regional programs, local urban conditions, and artisan-based building technologies. The proliferation of shopping centers based on American suburban templates, plunking parking acreage in the middle of dense, tightly built urban fabrics, gives moral urgency to their stance. Such interventions, modeled on very different cultural and physical conditions, are destructive to Latin American cities, akin to the gutting of American urban centers by the construction of highways during the early 1960s. One example of critical appropriation, which occurs only rarely in Latin America, is a recently completed shopping center in Córdoba, Argentina. Faithful to the pedestrian quality of their city, architects Rosina Gramatica, Juan Carlos Guerrero, Jorge Morini, José Pisani, Eduardo Urtubey, and Juan Pisani located most of the parking on the roof and attached the building to an active commercial street through stores with both street and interior mall frontage. The mall has a window several stories high, an unusual feature that provides views of

Shopping mall in Córdoba, Argentina; Gramatica, Guerrero, Morini, Pisani, Urtubey, and Pisani, with José Ignacio Díaz; 1981–83. (From *Nueva arquitectura Argentina*.)



Brick-walled supermarket, Uruguay; Eladio Dieste, ca. 1959. (From *Eladio Dieste: La Estructura cerámica*.)

the city beyond. The exemplary insertion of this project into the urban fabric represents a major change in the typology of the shopping mall, yet this project remains an isolated example. If its innovations were validated internationally, it could influence the siting and design of the scores of shopping malls now being plunked down in urban centers throughout Latin America, which tend to have such disruptive social, urban, and aesthetic consequences.

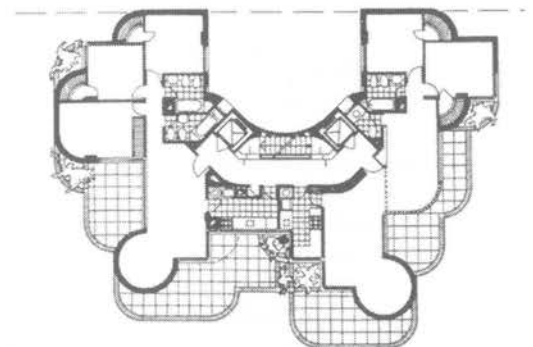
Earlier attempts to appropriate the language of architectural modernity in local terms include the work of Barragán, Cristián de Groote of Chile, Clorindo Testa of Argentina, and the architects of the so-called "white houses" near Buenos Aires, such as the ONDA group (Rafael Iglesia, Miguel Asencio, Carlos Fracchia, Jorge Garat, Lorenzo Gigli), Osvaldo Bidinost, Jorge Chute, Eduardo Ellis, and Claudio Caveri. The church Our Lady of Fátima in Martínez, designed by Caveri in 1956, inspired formal research that began to question the design orthodoxy of modern architecture concurrently with Le Corbusier's completion of Nôtre Dame de Ronchamp.³

During the last decade, the work of Rogelio Salmona of Colombia, Eladio Dieste of Uruguay, and Togo Díaz of Argentina has been praised as exemplary of the formal, cultural, and environmental concerns implicit in an "appropriated modernity." Salmona and Díaz are both in their sixties, and Dieste is seventy-five. All three architects acknowledge the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Alvar Aalto, as well as the technology of local masonry construction. Their choice of plain brick as the primary cladding or, as in Dieste's case, as a structural material, is justified on rational and economic rather than aesthetic grounds: it is a cheap material that ages well and is impervious to urban pollution; moreover, brick construction is a

regional craft and a traditional, reliable source of labor for semi-skilled workers. The work of these three architects also shares a frugality of material means and possess a sensuous rather than reductive minimalism, with their curving and rotated geometries and use of light and shadow.

Dieste, who was trained as a structural engineer, is known for his designs of long-span brick vaults and water and telecommunications towers. His original, self-supporting vault designs, built without tympana, were commissioned in order to serve as elemental shelter, market sheds, and bus stations in provincial Uruguayan towns, and as open storage for agricultural products in the frontier zone between Brazil and Uruguay. Impressive as these structures are (despite the modesty of their materials), Dieste's reputation for his inspired designs was first established with his designs for two small brick churches in working-class districts. He considers the church he built in Atlántida in the late 1950s his "first work of architecture."⁴ A pro bono project completed at the cost of \$3.50 per square foot, the building is a shell that is shaped by the doubly curved walls and roof. Dieste arrived at its structural dimensions with experimental rather than mathematical methods; calculations for the self-supporting roof vaults could not be approached analytically given the complexity of their surface. Although Dieste has extended the structural originality of this early work to his more recent and more ambitious structures, the Iglesia de Atlántida continues to be regarded as a potent example of the ability of the imagination to bypass the restrictions imposed by available knowledge and resources.

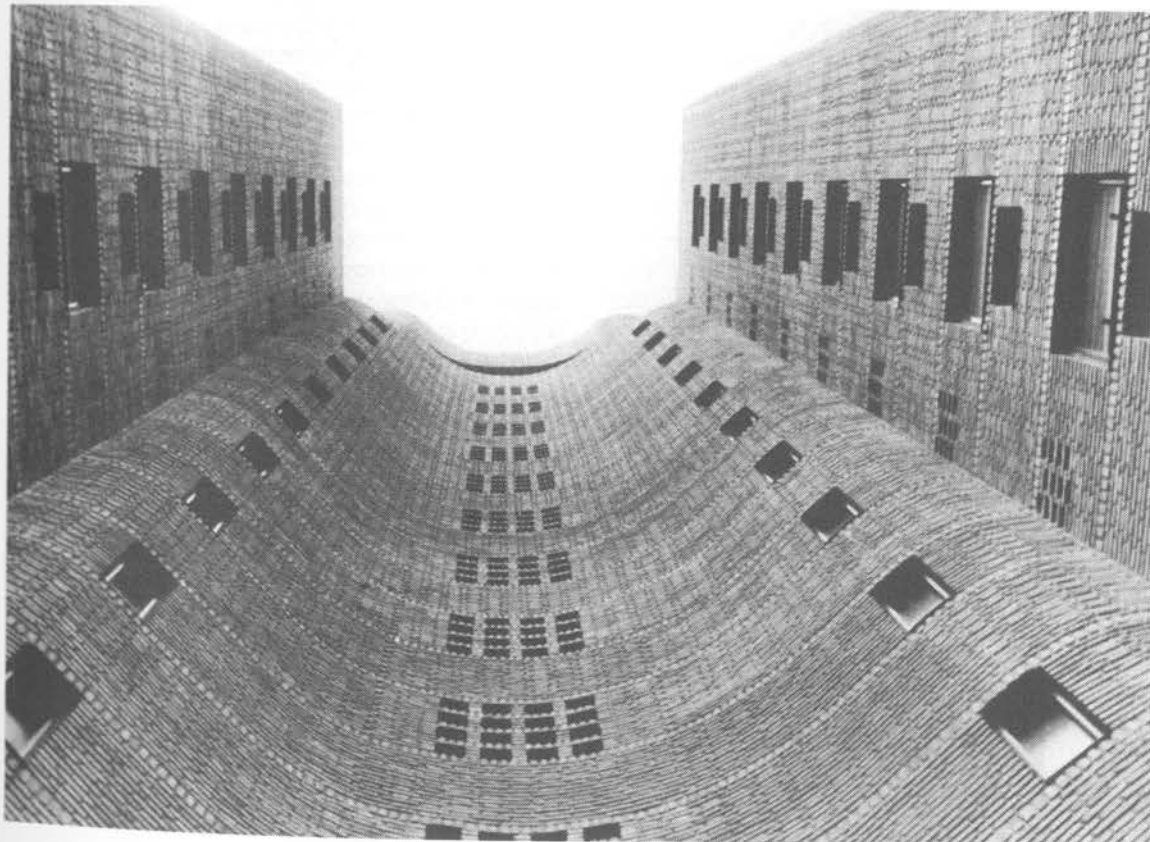
Díaz practices in Córdoba, Argentina's second largest city and the home of America's fourth oldest university, which was founded in 1621. Just beyond the colonial city center, Díaz has built more than one hundred and twenty residential buildings, all of them thirteen stories high (in accordance with the zoning limit) and clad with unfinished common brick. So signifi-



cant is their presence—for example, there are eighteen of them within four blocks of each other, located on choice city corners—that they have promoted a new urban vernacular. They have even influenced the zoning code, which now demands that corner buildings comply with the urban pattern established by Díaz. He is the co-owner of a development, construction, and financing corporation that produces apartment buildings for a middle-income clientele, and has up to ten buildings in construction simultaneously. Díaz has managed to turn the apparent limitations of working repeatedly with the same building type, lot dimensions, program, and materials into a challenge, developing a rich, transformative visual and tectonic language. His structures were among the first in the city to jump the scale from two and three stories to thirteen. Although they are infill buildings, their exposed sides are designed as a continuous skin. They act as towers, creating a counterpoint to the urban fabric below. Together, they form a new urban order that is respectful of urban continuity. One day, when the entire city reaches its maximum height, the sensuous, curved backs of some of Díaz's buildings will no longer be visible from the street. But at that point, if their tectonic and urbanistic qualities continue to influence other architects and builders, the civic mission he has invested in this typically speculative building type would be accomplished.

Salmona's professional career began under

the spell of an architectural discourse quite distant from Latin America, and reached maturity under the influence of local technologies and regionalist ideologies. Salmona interrupted his architectural studies in 1949 to follow Le Corbusier to Paris after his presentation in Bogotá of a master plan for the city. Salmona spent the next eight years working for Le Corbusier and attending Pierre Francastel's celebrated courses on the history of art at the Sorbonne. Marina Waisman and César Naselli have remarked that, after his return to Colombia in 1959, "Salmona could have become a European on American soil, a culturally displaced person, as happened to so many others under similar circumstances." That he instead came to be regarded as "a paradigm for Latin American architects" was due to his active role in proposing an architectural alternative to both neocolonial styles and international modernism as practiced by Brazilians Oscar Niemeyer and Affonso Eduardo Reidy.⁵ Closer to the essentialist investigations of Hans Scharoun and Louis Kahn than to Le Corbusier's rationalism, Salmona's public, high-end residential buildings helped reestablish the presence of red brick (a material and color that had been associated with unfinished buildings in poor areas of the city) in Bogotá's modern skyline. Colombia has undertaken more preservation projects in the last decade than any other South American country, but it has also had the highest incidence of demolition of historic landmarks and



Floor plan (far left) and upward view of a residential building in Córdoba; José Ignacio Díaz, 1986. (From *Nueva arquitectura Argentina*.)

the most radical changes in the physiognomy of its major cities. Salmona's activist role as cofounder of the Foundation Pro-City and his civic crusade to promote the idea of architecture and urban space as "public property" have been celebrated in regional conferences and in a major exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, but the impact of his legacy on younger architects is difficult to assess.

In spite of the current critical debate, most Latin American architects and students mimic the dominant international styles in their work, as is evident from the 1992 Latin American Architectural Biennial in Quito and the 1993 International Biennial in Buenos Aires. This demonstrates the reach of the international cultural centers, which is often strengthened by the architects' postgraduate experiences in the United States. These architects typically pursue their higher education when they are in their early-to-mid-30s, and usually return to their home countries to join the faculties of their local universities. Their own identities expanded by these new experiences, they regard the regionalists' insistence on local culture as folkloric and marginal to current discourse. Furthermore, the generation of architects that would have followed that of Díaz and Salmona—professionals in their mid-40s and early 50s—was decimated in both Chile and Argentina by the loss of talent due to military, political, and economic exile. Nevertheless, members of this "lost generation" have designed some of the most imaginative projects of the past decade. Two projects whose ad hoc solutions suggest larger possibilities and contexts are the Open City, an ongoing project begun in 1969, built in the dunes near Viña del Mar, Chile, and the Center for Biblical Studies in Olivos, Argentina, by Mederico Faivre and Norma Román (1988).⁶

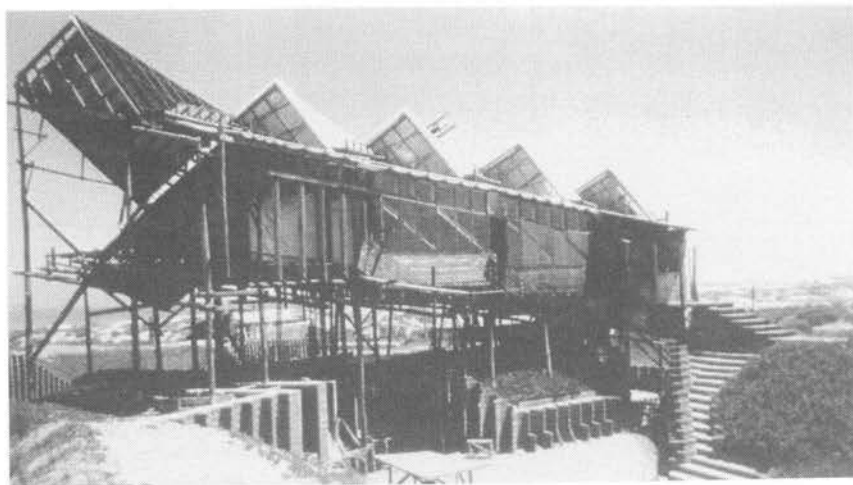
The Open City—the work of a cooperative of architects and poets which includes Carlos Covarrubias, Fabio Cruz, Boris Ivelic, and Juan

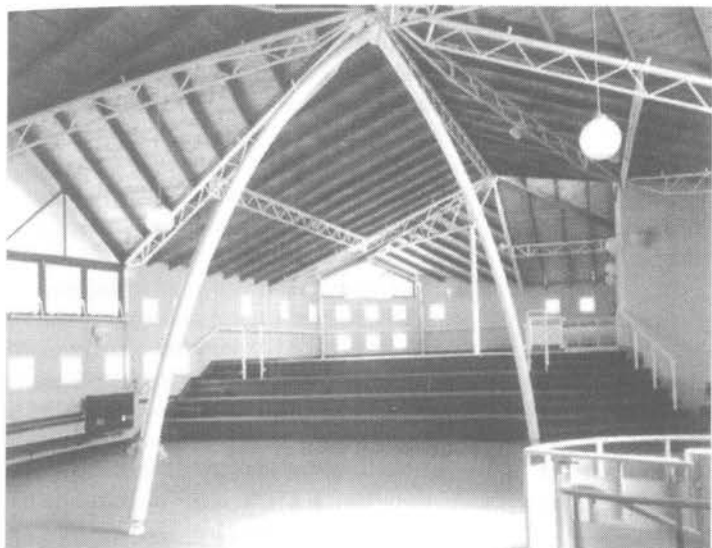
Mastrantoni—is an experiment in collective creativity and in building outside "the context of power," without institutional or financial support. Initiated as a summer project by a group of faculty members from the architecture department at the Catholic University of Valparaíso, the evolving program and configuration of the Open City are decided upon in public meetings and originate in poetic acts. The sand floor of the square at the entrance of the complex is constantly moistened by sprinklers, in order to record the changing imprint of feet and tires. The typologies include so-called *agoras*, or open spaces where decisions are made; *palaces*, or buildings for public rituals such as sharing meals, watching movies, or having parties; and *hostels*, or domestic lodgings for residents and visitors. Construction of the structures proceeds bit by bit, as cooperative members are able to contribute time and resources. The forms have evolved from the light, wind, and sand, and are rendered in inexpensive sun-dried brick, wood, and particle board.

Faivre and Román's School for Biblical Studies was commissioned by an evangelical priest who had set up a mission in a long-established shantytown outside Buenos Aires. Evangelical missions, with their emphasis on unmediated religious experiences and community development, are gaining on the Catholic church in Latin America and are particularly attractive to the poor. The project involved the expansion and complete transformation of a former manufacturing shed and its multiple accretions over a forty-year period. Severe financial restraints required the reuse of existing conditions to a degree that would be unimaginable in the United States because of the labor-intensive procedures, such as using ground-up, demolished materials in the new construction. A project of this nature, even in so-called underdeveloped countries, would be considered too hopeless to embody architectural aspirations. Instead, the architects sought to create an aesthetic for what they call "an architecture of adversity," relying on the members of the congregation and other shantytown dwellers to accomplish with hard labor what could not be bought with money. This building's bricolaged aesthetic is a hybrid of grittiness and restraint, of vernacular accumulation and cultured discipline. Because of their insistence on making forms and spaces out of adverse conditions, these projects may help redirect the discourse on regional identity toward questions about social empowerment and ecological responsiveness.

In some respects, the debate on cultural identity resembles the search for regional identity of California architects a hundred years ago. There, too, "identity" was defined as a form of resis-

Entrance to the Open City, a *hospederia* designed and built by a collective of architects and poets, near Viña del Valparaíso, Chile; 1981–present. (From ARS: *Revista Latinoamericana de Arquitectura/Chile* 11.)





tance to the controlling cultural centers—which, at the time for Californians meant New York and Boston, which themselves took their cultural cues from London and Paris.⁷ And in California then, as in Latin America now, the hegemonic centers' dominant styles—Beaux Arts then, modernism and postmodernism now—dictated the standard to be appropriated and transformed. In the contemporary Latin American debate, the insistence on a Latin American framework is itself indicative of its *reactive* character. The more the region's architects seek to define what is common to all their countries, the more they are forced to focus on their economic and cultural dependence on a "First World" led by the United States. Also, when they attempt to promote a generic "Latin Americanness" with an excessive emphasis on representation, they obscure the ecological and historical conditions specific to each country and region. Such approaches thus miss the opportunity to develop culturally independent proposals for all scales of the environment, whether creating original forms and finding the means to preserve natural ecosystems and provide social housing, or developing an infrastructure with up-to-date technologies and establishing service and educational centers for destitute populations.

In recent times, a handful of younger, well-established participants in the debate have attempted to leave essentialist arguments behind and to engage such issues as the fragmentation of Western cultural discourses, the growing acceptance of difference, the polymorphousness of postmodern identity, and the status of the object in the context of electronic imaging.⁸ In due time, these efforts may succeed in expanding the exclusive definition of Latin American architectural culture that still structures the debate. As of yet, the definition excludes many voices, most notably those of women and of the

vast *mestizo* populations, whose private and public experiences and their corresponding spatial manifestations remain unrecorded and untheorized. ■

"Los Olivos" Center for Biblical Studies, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Mederico Faivre and Norma Román, 1988. (From *ARS: Revista Latinoamericana de Arquitectura/Chile* 11.)

NOTES

1. A notable exception in English is the excellent book by architect Jorge Rigau, *Puerto Rico 1900: Turn-of-the-Century Architecture in the Hispanic Caribbean 1890–1930* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992).
2. Cristián Fernández Cox, "Modernidad apropiada en América Latina," *ARS: Revista Latinoamericana de Arquitectura/Chile* 11 (July 1989). See also Marina Waisman's essay in the same issue of *ARS*, as well as *SUMMARIO* 134, "Identidad y modernidad" (Buenos Aires: Ediciones SUMMA, 1990), which contains essays on this topic by Waisman, Silvia Arango, and Hugo Segawa (who provides a Brazilian perspective of the debate).
3. For a recent assessment of the "white houses" near Buenos Aires, see "Las Casas blancas: El Tiempo reencontrado," *SUMMA* 231 (November 1986), and especially the essay by Rafael Iglesias, "Nuestra Señora de Fátima: Lo Propio y lo ajeno y, de yapa, algo sobre las casas blancas."
4. Eladio Dieste: *La Estructura cerámica* (Bogotá: Colección SomoSur, 1987).
5. Marina Waisman and César Naselli, *10 Arquitectos latinoamericanos* (Seville: Consejería de Obras Públicas y Transportes, 1989). The introduction by Waisman and Naselli provides an excellent overview of the debate.
6. Both projects are discussed in *ARS: Revista Latinoamericana de Arquitectura/Chile* 11 (July 1989).
7. Susana Torre, "En Busca de una identidad regional: Evolución de los estilos misioneros y neocolonial hispano en California entre 1880 y 1930," in Amaral Aracy, ed., *Arquitectura neocolonial* (São Paulo: Fondo de Cultura Económica/Fundación Memorial, 1994).
8. *Modernidad y posmodernidad en América Latina*, Silvia Arango, ed. (Bogotá: Escala, 1991). This collection includes essays by Fernández Cox, Browne, and Waisman, among others. Waisman's essay is of particular interest, as is the Working Paper of the Second Iberian-American Congress on Regional Architecture, held in Santa Fe, Argentina, in September 1993.