

Uruguay

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Along the twentieth century, Uruguayan modern architecture, through some of its qualities -among which could be highlighted its wise articulation of buildings and urban issues, its synchronicity with international debates and projects, its competent execution of projects and construction performed with modestly and accuracy, and its quick reach throughout the country- gave shape, could be said, to a “voice of its own”. This voice, however, was expressed only discreetly, at low volume, such that few works and names have achieved international recognition. Still, Uruguayan architecture has produced very interesting works (though somewhat remote from the main stream), from its swift affiliation with modernity at the beginning of the century through the political turmoil of the 1970s.

By the 1920s modernism had taken hold in Uruguay, and soon became a good option for public and private initiatives: the first major transformation of Uruguayan architecture had begun. Academy-trained young architects translated the International Style into their own idiom, and the new architecture was favorably received by the public. Uruguay was experiencing a period of prosperity, optimism, and social equilibrium, without significant income disparity; a liberal, secular, republican ideology grounded in *batllismo*—named for José Batlle Ordóñez, president between 1903-1907, and 1911–1915 who encouraged the social development through broad government regulation-. The architecture of the period was a natural and timely reflection of the reigning spirit of modernity and progress.

Real estate investments tended to be small in scale. One- and two-story houses proliferated in cities all over the country, mainly in Montevideo, resulting in low-density expansion. New architectural modes were accepted fluidly, not only because of its image but also for its spatial organizations. A favorable stimulus was the 1928 Ley de Higiene de la Vivienda (Law of sanitary housing), which mandated that all housing should be built with decent amounts of light and ventilation, throwing the inward-looking structures of the past in crisis. In the domestic as well as the institutional sphere the transition to modernist forms of housing was rapid and smooth.

During the 1920 there were few urban plans or projects, with the sole—and highly relevant—exception of La Rambla (boardwalk), a large-scale project, along the coast of Montevideo that changed the structure and ambient of the city. Although little planning, modern architecture has built large sections of town with a kind of cohesion that we cannot speak of the city as a mere result. In this architecture there is an implicit awareness of urban construction: the city reaches the consistency from a fine wisdom to collect the little things. Nor was there abundant writing on architecture in this period except, perhaps, Mauricio Cravotto and Leopoldo Artucio. The *Revista de la Sociedad de Arquitectos*, (Magazine of the Architectural Association) created in 1914, was published regularly, with monthly issues between 1922 and 1931. The Uruguayan response to the avalanche of manifestos and theoretical discourses of the era was offered principally by architects who were immersed in its praxis and teaching at the architecture school at the Universidad de la República. It was in the humanist and relaxed atmosphere of the school (created in 1915, though studies of architecture had begun nearly thirty years earlier) where a solid and lasting project-based tradition was established. It

was there that the features that characterize Uruguayan architecture were forged: rigorous practice, urban consciousness, and—particularly through the work of Julio Vilamajó—a marked awareness of space.

Over nearly three decades, a broad range of works was constructed in Uruguay by a group of brilliant architects, including, the Facultad de Ingeniería (1938), Casa Vilamajó (1929), Villa Serrana (1946-47), the Juncal (1936) and Moncault (1947) buildings, by Julio Vilamajó; the Palacio Municipal (1935) and Casa Cravotto (1931), by Mauricio Cravotto; the Estadio Centenario (1930) and Escuela Experimental (1929), by Scasso; the Centenario building (1930), by Octavio De los Campos; and the Hospital de Clínicas (1929) by Carlos Surraco (all in Montevideo except Villa Serrana, at Lavalleja).

The second moment of evolution in Uruguayan architecture arrived at midcentury, as mass media, film, and television brought about the dawning of mass culture, and the world of architecture witness the expansion of the International Style.

Uruguay's social structure changed as the distribution of income became increasingly asymmetrical. The country's economic resources were more concentrated, in few hands looking for new forms of investment and who were willing to take on the risks inherent in large-scale construction projects and commercialization processes. These conditions, along with a general public that seemed willing to shift its cultural preferences, made it possible for greater undertakings. Investors and clients focused on high-rise housing and sought zones where it could be built. Once again, regulations helped things along, in this case, the 1946 Ley de Propiedad Horizontal (Condominium Law). The conditions were ripe for architectural transformation—what remained was for the public to move toward creative ownership of them: a new generation of architects was ready for it.

Some of the pioneers from the first half of the century played a role in this era, but it was primarily their students who turned an attentive parallel gaze to the international debate and to the possibilities for local interpretation of it, and who produced architecture with a wholly new style. The effects were felt across the country in extremely diverse public and private projects, by such outstanding figures as Raul Sichero and Luis García Pardo, both of them rigorous and imaginative in integrating form and technology; Mario Paysée Reyes, who incorporated the artistic conceptions of Torres-García (painter and sculptor) into his architecture of subtle spatial transitions; and Eladio Dieste, whose inventions in structural terra-cotta bricks were developed in his church in Atlántida (1952) and mainly all along his industrial buildings. Other important projects quickly emerged, transforming the landscape of Montevideo's neighborhood Pocitos and its Rambla: the La Goleta (1952) and Panamericano (1960), buildings by Sichero; the Pilar building (1957), by García Pardo; and—on older parts of town and among many others—the Gilpie (1955) and Positano (1959) buildings, by García Pardo; and the Mónaco building (1953), by Guillermo Jones and Francisco Villegas. The resorts along the east coast were significantly expanded both in number and size and new housing appeared there as well: the Arcobaleno complex (1959), by Jones and Villegas; the Puerto building (1959), by Guillermo Gómez Platero and Rodolfo López Rey; and the urban project and houses in Punta Ballena by Antoni Bonet (1946).

Along with the renewal of space and technological concepts, there were changes in the role of architects who began taking responsibility for investment, development and construction, as well as design. Public works also incorporated

new concepts and aesthetics; in a wide range that reaches from the education buildings initiated by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (Ministry of public works), to the unavoidable Bayardo's Columbarium (1960). At the Facultad de Arquitectura, radical changes were proposed to the curriculum in order to update it and deepen the school's social commitment: studies in technology and social sciences were emphasized, while Beaux Arts practices were gradually abandoned. New research was undertaken, and two new journals, one by the architecture school and the other by the Students Association were published; aside from these and the *Revista de la Sociedad de Arquitectos*; the only other regular writing on architecture was in a column in *Marcha*, a weekly paper, between 1950 and 1956.

Uruguayan society and culture were devastated during the brutal military regime that began in the early 1970s.

A new architectural phase of interest was beginning to take shape supported by a new law, in this case La Ley de Vivienda (which allowed cooperative ownership of a building). Bulevar Artigas complex and the Mesa cooperatives built by the young architects of the Centro Cooperativista del Uruguay are notorious examples. But architecture entered a state of suspension during the crisis, and only a few isolated interesting projects emerged, principally in luxury housing tied to real estate speculation. Among them are El Torreón (1980), by Estudio 5, and the Manantiales complex (ca 1977), by Manteola, Sánchez Gómez, Santos, Solsona, Sallaberry. With the return to democracy, in 1984 starts a slow mutation towards the mixed current situation, out of the range of this text.

The work of uruguayan architects reveals a parallel gaze of unpremeditated coherence to modernist currents, but the recorded history of this period is nearly nonexistent. To understand it one must delve deeper into a critical history of this architecture attentive, thorough, and dedicated; patient, and with a light touch. This history makes magnificent foundation for ideas that seek to understand architecture from within its very processes, themes, problems, and solutions. We should not simplify and devalue (via references, influences, and linear causalities) what happens when ideas take architectural form. Now is the time to formulate genuine critical arguments that might recover a passion—ever more fragile—for the discipline before the shifting times disperse the coherence of Uruguay's parallel gaze, before the sensibility that allows the joining together of small things disappears, before amicable coexistence and simple idiosyncrasy lead to forgetting.