Disarming Architecture
Patricio del Real

Installation view of "Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980" at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (March 29-July 19, 2015). Photo by Thomas Griesel. © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The superblocks built by the Banco Obrero in Caracas, the *2 de diciembre* housing project —today *23 de enero*— with which we started the housing component of the exhibition *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980,* was, along with *Cerro Piloto*, the most important project of the National Housing Plan implemented in Caracas in the 1950s by the architects of the Taller del Banco Obrero (TABO). Built in lightning speed, these were massive urban planning operations that aimed to transform the physical environment of the city by eradicating Caracas' shantytowns through large investments in public works. Speed and economy justified their crudeness and modest finishes, their serial production and repetitive imprint. Their rationalized production and construction was addressed with a use of color that aimed to transform these housing blocks into a colossal abstract geometric composition installed in the landscape. Under Carlos Raúl Villanueva's watchful and masterful eye we encounter a model for the concrete appropriation of the sensible and of the natural; a model to be repeated, amplified and extended. Aesthetic appeal, eloquently and decisively captured by Paolo Gasparini in his black and white photos —staged as large images in the exhibition— lift the superblocks above the plane of the everyday and into the realm of Architec-

ture, with a capital "A". Yet, albeit Villanueva's ability to humanize this project through Culture, the *23 de enero* —like so many others— cannot escape the forces that brought it into being. Standardization and the economy of production dominated; on the ground, the *23 de enero* remained a work in which the specificity of architecture as inhabitable space was reduced to a subordinate condition. This subordinate condition of inhabitation in the *23 de enero* was made palpable by the later overflow of the site with the by-product of development policies: slums.

In *Latin America in Construction*, *superbloques* and *unidades vecinales* of diverse types and different countries from 1955 to 1980, marched along the housing wall. Here, Architecture met the abstract needs of the masses as set by governments and markets. Here, architecture confronted the real needs of the individual. The decisive critique of this Architecture that aimed to address the housing question remains that it was incapable of adjusting or responding to the changing needs of the individual, for it understood the user as a passive agent in need of Culture. It is fundamental not to forget that although these housing solutions were understood as part of a scientific and technological approach to solving an urgent pragmatic problem, they

validity and currency within society, what made them, in effect, "inauthentic".[3] Put differently, for Ortega, all social practices were by necessity inauthentic. This meant that the authority of a social practice such as architecture was a kind of "impersonal preserve," a form of "credit" that could be cashed only by the collective and was always imposed mechanically upon the individual in order to complete its social mission. This credit cum authority was imposed upon the individual *velis-nolis* that is, like it or not. Following Ortega, we find architecture in the world "already there," as a social practice and praxis that acts and is transmissible "mechanically." In this, the practice of architecture is an invitation to inauthenticity. The social preexistence of human endeavors, Ortega concludes, is one of the tragic components of modern life.[4]

The inauthentic nature of human occupations solicits a need for a return, a desire to go back to some form of beginning where the "authentic" might still be found; in our case, it is a return to the moment when there was no architecture. Here we are presented with the myth of the origin. The desire for authenticity is but a wish to close the gap between Architecture and the individual. This in turn, is but the siren's call that threatens the endeavors of incrementalism. Ortega was weary that any call for a return would inevitably fall into romanticism or naturalism, as it would be interpreted in our case as a stepping outside of Architecture. Can the architect simply claim to step out of his or her own discipline? As we know, there is no vacation from being an architect; because there is no escape from the ontological character of social practices. Ortega, then, makes us re-consider the moment of the birth of the practice of architecture and the birth of the architect. Ortega's accusation, that of being involved in an inauthentic practice, makes us consider the necessity for Architecture; and only this vital moment of questioning, of instinctive necessity is authentic.

The necessity of architecture is a question posed to those engaged in a social practice; it is posed to those who accept to mechanically produce and reproduce the inauthentic forms of social practices. Ortega's call to return to the necessity of architecture can be understood a as a psychological one, as an *auto-gnosis*, a self-cognition or "re-cognition" that would gives us, as architects, a sense and drive for criticality and political engagement. In addition to this clear reiteration of the classical Greek proverb "know thyself," inscribed in the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Ortega offers a much simpler directive to all engaged in social practices: for Ortega, the return to the moment before the apparition of a social practice and thus of the practitioner

remained within Architecture that is within Culture, and that its users were to grow and be forged as cultural and social subjects in these spaces. This is why in these social projects there was no dialogue, only a monologue. The reality, however, was that Architecture as a cultural language to be learned by the inhabitants of these spaces was and remained a distant speech. Architecture was the *hablar lejano* of experts who meet the general public armed with plans.[1] In this distant encounter between Architecture and the individual—at the intersection of inhabitation and subjectivity—we find the genesis of incrementalism.

The general public, those non-architects who we architects like to call "users," tend to encounter architecture that is, they find it outside themselves; and they find it most commonly as a social practice circumscribed either within academic or professional circles.[2] These two forms: the discipline and the profession are the exterior form of architecture, and this exterior form is the key to its social validity. Simply put: Architecture is found outside the individual as an established institution, and this exterior presence of Architecture in relation to the individual is the source of its authority as a discipline and its currency as a practice.

The Spanish thinker and philosopher José Ortega y Gasset was very interested in the expressed exteriority of social practices in Western culture, including that of architecture. For Ortega, the currency and potency of architecture, the validity of any social practice was not equivalent to its authenticity. In fact, much the contrary; for Ortega it was precisely this outside condition, *este afuera*, which was a precondition for all social practices and the source of their

Installation view of "Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980" at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (March 29-July 19, 2015). Photo by Thomas Griesel. © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

is equivalent to the process of *desarmar*, the process of disassembling, of disarming; in our case of disarming the machine we know as Architecture.[5] Here we find the core of the "housing question", and my main point. For if the idea or the practice of incremental growth in architecture takes aim at the *superbloques* and *unidades vecinales* launched by developmentalist governments through Planes de Vivienda that attempted to complete the functionalist city as proposed by CIAM then, incrementalism must be the strategy that disarms and disassembles the established social production of architecture; and it does so, not by falling into the romantic myth of a return to the origin, but rather by dismantling the social apparatus of architecture in a particular moment in time. What is crucial to the contemporary discussions on incremental growth today is not necessarily *la casa que crece* that is "the house that grows," but rather, *la arquitectura que se desarma*; the disarming of architecture.

We endeavored to present this in *Latin America in Construction*. There, in the housing wall we invited visitors to see the development of architecture, as I have already mentioned, through the continued evolution of the *superbloques* and *unidades vecinales*: the *23 de Enero* in Caracas, *COPAN* in Sao Paulo, *Unidad No.1* in La Habana del Este; *Conjuno Urbano Nonoalco-Tlatelolco* in Mexico City; *Residencial San Felipe in Lima*; *Conjunto Rioja* in Buenos Aires, *Conjunto Bulevar Artigas* in Montevideo and *Parque Central* in Caracas. There, in this expanding timeline of housing experiments, visitors also encountered the *Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda* (PREVI) in Lima, inserted as a syncopated note in this cadence of planned developments. PREVI is more than solitary note. Staged in the exhibition with intermittent color slides, kindly lent to us by Peter Land, and other original materials of several of the international and Peruvian participants, PREVI was a counterpoint; a *contrapunto*, that appeared earlier in the housing timeline with allusions to the Centro Interamericano de la Vivienda (CINVA) in Bogotá, and continued afterwards with later projects that I would like to propose as strategies and tactics of disarming the Architecture of development that was the core of *Latin America in Construction*. The intent was to demonstrate a shift in the nature of housing projects selected in the exhibition; as one walked down the housing wall and engaged the projects on the walls and in the vitrines, one discover the ways in which techniques of the everyday were developed as strategies and tactics for disassembling and disarming the *supercuadras* and the *unidades vecinales*. For example, Jorge Castillo's *Casa Mara* in Venezuela with its experiments on new materials and prefabrication shared with Cuban's Hugo D'Acosta and Mercedes Alvarez's *Módulo de asbesto-cemento* the ability for easy and fast deployment, as well as research in a new economy of materials with its 6mm thick panel's bowed for structural rigidity. Both projects designed the module considering the proximity of anatomic systems and everyday usages. Moreover, both projects approached the user as an active agent of the construction process. One of the great innovations of systems of prefabricated individual houses was the integration of internal furnishing and storage systems as in the *Sistema Multiflex* by Fernando Salinas in Cuba. Experimentations in adaptability carried all the way through to adapt industrial technologies to lightweight prefabricated systems as in *Las Terrazas* project by Mario Girona and Osmany Cienfuegos in Pinar del Río, Cuba.

Self-help and aided self-help was mobilized by architects in the 1960s and 70s; such experiences approached social housing as a dialogue with local communities. We saw a clear example of this position in the Carlos Nelson's urbanization of the favelas of Rio de Janerio such as Bras de Pinas and Morro Uniao that engaged not only the community but individuals and families directly as shown in drawings by *favelados* that presented the homes they wanted. This type of social an anthropological research that inflected architectural design was one of the many contributions of Latin American architects to disarm the establish professional architect. Mauricio Roberto in the *Plano urbanistico de Alagados* in Salvador Bahia addressed the informal squatting settlements in the first large-scale official effort to complete the urbanization and renovation of favelas without expelling their residents. The Roberto brothers proposed a basic urban unit made up of a cluster of small brick-walled lots, creating a setting for a house that could develop over time. The architects would provide a basic house nucleus with all the required plumbing for a house that could become larger over time and completed through *autoconstrucción* (self-building) by the residents as they saw fit and their resources allowed.

The Example of the Uruguayan cooperatives and the work of Saul Irureta, Miguel Cecilio and Mario Spallanzani, within the Centro Cooperativista Uruguayo, following the strong syndicalist movement in Uruguay, was one of the most socially transformative strategies produced in the period examined by the exhibition. Incorporating models of aided self-help developed in the early 1950s by CINVA, the Uruguayan housing cooperative experience brought together experiments on the growing house with lightweight prefabrication with *losetas armadas* –reinforced tiles– because of their easy of production and installation –and a cooperative financing system. Informed by sociology and economics, this experience, born outside the realm of government was inscribed into law years later after its decisive

success, just to be negated by the military government after the 1973 coup. Also celebrated for its social engagement was the *Unidad Habitacional Flores Magon* by Alejandro Zohn, in Mexico; built within the institutional realm of housing policies yet mobilizing *auto-construcción* through community organizations.

Acacio Gil Borsoi and the team around him in the city of Pernambuco in Brazil developed a project for the slum area of Cajueiro Seco to help integrate the slum or marginal community into the greater Recife urban area. Beyond the attempt to create a neighborhood unit by inserting social infrastructures like schools, a church, etc., Borsoi aimed to industrialize the traditional *mocambo* or hut, inserting it within the logic of prefabrication. Borsoi engaged the well-known technique of *taipa* or "reinforced-earth." But he rationalized it by way of creating wood panels of various sizes, produced and assembled collectively in series; these were to be used by the *usuarios* or dwellers to compose or re-compose the traditional *mocambo* into a dwelling. Through a simple drawing on graft paper, users would first design their own houses according to their needs and budgets; acquire the panels, and start to work on their home. In the process, the architect became promoter and facilitator of a new building practice of building. Borsoi made clear that the appropriation of the activity of building by the *usuarios* was predicated on the integration of building with practices of everyday life. Borsoi's efforts were cut short by the military coup, and it was not until Lina Bo Bardi's 1975 project for the Camurupim community for rural workers that one saw a turn towards Borsoi's ideas; in fact, Bo Bardi had commented positively on Borsoi's Cajueiro Seco project. Although Lina proposed a greater typological variety for Camurupim, she relied on similar techniques and materials as used by Borsoi, particularly that of *taipa*. Such similarities point to the practice of architecture as a measured intervention by architects in the social, economic and cultural circumstances of a community.

These projects advanced an invitation for other strategies and tactics that disarmed the architecture of the period as an established social practice. These *fuerzas des-estructurantes*, these disarming forces of *auto-gestión* and *auto construcción* of experimentation and social engagement are inherently of difficult translation; especially those translations of the global kind that we are so keen to peruse these days. The disarming forces that we included in *Latin America in Construction* are untranslatable because they were born in the region at a specific moment in time. The architectural examples that engaged these forces serve to remind us of the crucial difference between growth and development, between the quantitative and the qualitative and the still pressing relevance to question the necessity of architecture.

Notas
1. José Ortega y Gasset, "La *Historia de la Filosofía*, de Emile Bréhier," en *Obras Completas* 6, (Madrid: Alianza Editorial/Revista de Occidente, 1983), 399.
2. I am following here Ortega y Gasset's ideas on the relationship of professional practices as exemplified by philosophy, which he examined in "La Historia de la Filosofía, de Emile Bréhier."
3. José Ortega y Gasset, "La Historia de la Filosofía…", 399.
4. José Ortega y Gasset, "La Historia de la Filosofía…", 402.
5. José Ortega y Gasset, "La Historia de la Filosofía…", 403. Ortega uses the term *deshacer*.

Patricio del Real
Arquitecto
Doctor en Historia y Teoría de la Arquitectura
Columbia University, Nueva York
✉ patricio_delreal@moma.org