Felipe Hernández

Beyond Modernist Masters: Contemporary Architecture in Latin America

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Felipe Hernández’s handsomely illustrated survey presents a timely overview of architectural production in Latin America during the past decade. Hernández positions his book as a critique of much of the existing literature on Latin American architecture. This, he argues, continues to focus reduc tively on the period between 1929 and 1960, and on the work of such internationally renowned “masters” as Mexico’s Luis Barragán (1902–1988), Brazil’s Oscar Niemeyer (b. 1907), or Venezuela’s Carlos Raúl Villanueva (1900–1975). The “golden age” these men represent was defined by the combination of economic efflorescence and the embrace of modern architecture by several Latin American states as central to their nation-building efforts.

Hernández demonstrates that the panorama of architectural production in Latin America is now significantly different. While renowned architects based in this vast region build, teach, and receive awards around the world, a privilege reserved for very few in the past, the scarcity of resources and state patronage in many contexts makes localized interventions—rather than the grand-scale schemes for which the “masters” are best known—the most common type of architectural venture today. Hernández’s five chapters explore projects and built works defined by these conditions, challenging the problematic ways in which mid-twentieth-century architecture continues to be perceived as representative of the totality of Latin America’s modern production. Indeed, he argues, the diversity of works in his survey “disrupts the homogenous image suggested by the banner ‘Latin American architecture’” (1).

Many of the projects in Hernández’s book nonetheless establish critical relationships with Latin American modernism’s golden age. For instance, Angelo Bucci’s 2001 glass house in Ribeirão Preto,
Brazil, revisits a legacy of domestic modernism and urban utopianism that can be traced back to Lina Bo Bardi’s pioneering work with this material in nearby São Paulo during the early 1950s (81–84). Similarly, the 2009 Caracas Metro Cable project by the firm Urban Think Tank, addressing the problem of congestion at the urban periphery by suspending infrastructure above ground while leaving pre-existing neighborhoods intact, stands in ironic contrast to Villanueva’s 23 de Enero housing superblocks (1955–58)—iconic modernist works built earlier in the same city, made possible by a vast program of slum clearance (37–40).

Such connections will be clear to readers already familiar with Latin American modern architecture, but Hernández does little to place these works in historical context; in fact, he largely limits his discussion of recent works to function and the use of materials. This approach, highly informative in some ways, does not do justice to the high aspirations the author sketches for the book in his introduction. Indeed, Hernández situates his book ambitiously, challenging the critical paradigms that, he claims, consistently position Latin American architecture in a subordinate position to Euro-American modernism. Among the concepts that he invokes to establish this agenda is the notion of “hybridization.” As formulated by the Argentine-Mexican anthropologist Nestor García Canclini, this term describes a proclivity between Latin America and the Euro-American metropolitan centres (100). In this and other passages, Hernández’s writing sounds suspiciously like that of others who have discussed cultural resistance in “third-world” architecture, most obviously Kenneth Frampton on “critical regionalism.” In his often-repeated and much-criticized argument, Frampton claimed that architects in “marginal” territories combined local materials and building modes with Euro-American ones in order to resist modernism’s imperial thrust. Curiously enough, Hernández does not mention this source at all, nor does he provide concluding remarks that might clarify his position in relation to this and other similar paradigms.

In fact, the book is lamentably short on bibliographic sources throughout, an especially surprising fact if we consider Hernández’s own significant previous work on the history of Latin American modernism. Indeed, the surveys Hernández sets out to criticize initially—Adrian Forty and Elisabetta Andreoli’s edited volume Brazil’s Modern Architecture (London: Phaidon, 2004), Valerie Fraser, Building the New World. Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America 1930–1960 (London: Verso Books, 2000)—are both recent and their scope is limited to canonical midcentury examples. Hernández neglects to discuss the literature that in recent years has challenged the myths of the “golden age.” Keith Eggener’s revisionist account of the career of Luis Barragán, or the more recent study of the popular appropriations of modernism in Brazil by Fernando Lara, are just two examples of publications that have contributed in diverse ways to this task.

Another glaring omission from his discussion is Henry-Russell Hitchcock’s 1955 survey of Latin American modern architecture, the first of significant impact in Euro-American scholarship. Although he treated Latin America as a peripheral territory in the spread of modernism, Hitchcock nonetheless praised the diversity of its architecture and even admitted that it had surpassed Euro-American production in many ways.

Lacking historiographic depth, Hernández’s provocative thesis is thus persuasive only insofar as it critiques a small part of the literature on Latin American modernism. Nevertheless, his book provides a wide range of architectural projects and buildings that should motivate us to rethink the field’s extensions and discursive parameters in ways that its text might not otherwise compel us to do.

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