Urban historian Patrice Elizabeth Olsen’s recent book is a thoroughly researched examination of political history in relation to architecture in Mexico City during successive post-Revolutionary presidential administrations from 1920 to 1940. The author’s premise “is that significant cultural and political agendas of the Mexican Revolution can be made intelligible through an understanding of works of architecture built in the formative years 1920–1940—the artifacts of the Revolution in Mexico City. This architecture provides us with a means of tracing and understanding the path of the consolidation of the Mexican Revolution, constituting indelible evidence of the process by which that revolution evolved into government” (xi). With this in mind, Olsen explores the intertwining of post-Revolutionary architecture and politics in the capital, using presidential terms, political agendas and upheavals, and significant works of architecture as points of demarcation.

Olsen’s preface contextualizes the book and introduces the reader to the bustling and underlying forces of contemporary Mexico City. Chapters one and two describe the political ideologies and architectural agendas during the regimes of Alvaro Obregón (1920–24) and Plutarco Elias Calles (1924–28). Chapter three examines the pluralistic nature of post-revolutionary architectural culture from 1928–34 (under Presidents Emilio Portes Gil 1928–30, Pascual Ortiz Rubio 1930–32, and Abelardo L. Rodríguez 1932–34), and discusses the pivotal Monument to the Revolution by Carlos Obregón Santacilia (1933–38). Architectural culture during the presidency of Lazaro Cárdenas (1934–40) is examined in the concluding chapters. Chapter four considers the struggle between social welfare projects and capitalist development, while chapter five explores the failures to address the pressing needs for social services and housing for the poor.

Generally, the book builds upon the postmodern examination of the relationships among architecture, society, economics, and political power that emerged after 1968 in the work of authors such as Manfredo Tafuri and Diane Ghirardo. In terms of twentieth-century Mexico, Olsen expands on and complements recent work by scholars such as Antonio Méndez-Vigatá, Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, and Luis E. Carranza. The time period and intertwining of politics and architecture of Olsen’s book is similar to Méndez-Vigatá’s, although Méndez-Vigatá takes a more critical approach, utilizing arguments from Louis Althusser. Carranza’s recent book examines several works of architecture from the era explored by Olsen, but utilizes critical tools from Theodor Adorno, Althusser, and others.

Olsen’s book is less ideologically driven than these works, more of an analytical discussion and documentation of underlying historical causes. She offers a more straightforward, linear, urban historical narrative, drawing on scarce primary sources from newspapers, magazines, commercial and real-estate developer advertising, ideological texts of competing architectural factions, programs from conferences on housing, housing studies by banks, and policies of governmental programs such as the DDF (Department of the Federal District). Evoking Spiro Kostol’s urban histories, the author claims, “The city has always been a negotiated product—of the privileged and less so, particularly in the meeting on the street level of these groups, as the wooden stall touches the upscale shop” (129).

The discussions of these competing forces are the most memorable and compelling portions of the book. Olsen’s topics include: the roots of rational functionalism in Mexico (21–23); concrete as el polvo magico (the magic powder) (26–27), the development of new suburbs, (32–33); power struggles between the old Porfrian elite (referring to Porfirio Díaz, who ruled Mexico dictatorially for most of the period between 1876 and 1911) and emerging real estate interests (56); new bureaucracies and attempts at comprehensive planning (54–57, 63–69); new public monuments (76–77); socialist schools (84–86, 175–82); architecture and hygiene (186–90); professional debates concerning modes of composition (99, 134–35); architecture review boards (102, 136,139); the Palacio Bellas Artes project (103–5); the rising influence of U.S. culture and the decline of French (121–22, 238); social housing and finance (201–7, 214–15, 220); tourism and architectural language (211–12); eminent domain (219, 224); and the Avenida Madero as an experience of multiple architectural languages geared for tourism (239–43).

Olsen also discusses the varied ideals of succeeding post-Revolutionary regimes, the agendas of competing stakeholders, and the constraints and limitations of even the most activist administrations of the time. As she states in the conclusion, “Neither the Constitution of 1917 nor the Ley Orgánico del Distrito Federal of 1928 gave sufficient power to the national government to allow a president to control urban land; there were limits to what a Revolution could do, as well as to the amount of power people were willing to give a president, given their recent experience under [Porfirio] Díaz” (242).

Areas of the text that could be improved include those that deal with more nuanced aspects of modernist architectural theory. Too often, Olsen uncritically presents arguments from other writers, rather than treating them as points of departure to be unraveled and critically examined. Greater attention to a number of the central themes of modernist architectural theory, including composition, abstraction, technology, labor, tectonics, globalization, and early modernist architecture’s utopian social aspirations, would provide greater insights for the reader. And surprisingly, there are no photographs or drawings in this book; such illustrations would have aided the nonspecialist in understanding the arguments and may limit the text’s potential audience. Ironically, the book’s endnotes (281 ff) reveal that the author is an accomplished photographer.

In spite of these shortcomings, Olsen’s book will be valuable to scholars and students in Mexican studies in the areas of urban history, architectural history, art...
history, material culture, and political and economic history. It will also be useful to those generally interested in early modernist architecture and the competition among stakeholders in regard to power, politics, and architecture.

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