
Book Review: *The Metropolis in Latin America, 1830–1930*

The Metropolis in Latin America, 1830–1930: Cityscapes, Photographs, Debates, edited by Idurre Alonso and Maristella Casciato. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2021. 298 pages. Hardcover \$70.00.

From September 2017 to January 2018, the Getty-sponsored *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* (PST: LA/LA) initiative flooded Southern California in a triumphant display of Latin American and Latinx art. An inexplicable blemish on the memory of this event was the absence of a catalog for one of the Getty's headlining exhibitions, *The Metropolis in Latin America, 1830–1930*, installed first at the Getty Research Institute and afterward at the Americas Society in New York City. Curators Idurre Alonso and Maristella Casciato organized a vibrant display of visual materials, many from the Getty collections, which were either previously unpublished or at the very least difficult to find. Long considered outside the realm of art-museum-worthy materials, the assemblage of maps, photographs, sketches, engravings, film reels, and design pamphlets offered a revelatory view of Latin American urban visual and material culture at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The show was ground-breaking, so it seemed both nonsensical and tragic that its treasure trove of documents might disappear back into the archives without leaving behind a published catalog.

Now, nearly five years after PST: LA/LA, the wrong has been righted with a lavishly illustrated, three-hundred-page volume edited by Alonso and Casciato. It is not exactly a catalog, although formatted like one. Rather, the editors frame their work as a reflection and expansion on the exhibition's themes. Like the exhibition, the book centers six Latin American capitals as case studies: Buenos Aires, Havana, Lima, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago de Chile. These locations and others are explored over ten essays and six iconographic "albums" that closely echo but do not duplicate the divisions of the original exhibition. The book's introductory materials include an impressive chronology that charts major events of political and economic history, cultural and artistic developments, and urban planning milestones from

1800 to 1930, broken down by country. Another infographic visually represents the population growth in the exhibition's main cities across the same time frame. These are valuable resources for anyone working in nineteenth-century Latin American history.

Among the book's significant achievements is its incorporation of texts by established Latin American scholars who have written prolifically on urban histories, but whose work has received relatively little attention in the United States due to language barriers and general inattention to Latin American urban planning. These authors include Colombian historian Germán Rodrigo Mejía Pavony, Argentine landscape historian Sonia Berjman, Brazilian urbanist Maria Cristina da Silva Leme, and Argentine art historian Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales. Their inclusion here, alongside Venezuelan urbanist Arturo Almandoz (whose studies had been translated into English previously), presages increased visibility for their work in the anglophone world. Furthermore, only one of the included essays was originally written in English, and—apart from the editors—only one of the contributors is US-based, making the book an accomplishment of transnational collaboration. It is also a highly interdisciplinary volume, highlighting the complexities of urban studies.

A few issues from the original exhibition remain unresolved. For example, while the editors begin with a very judicious note on their use of the term *Latin America* that recognizes its shortcomings as "a homogenizing and simplifying construction," some of the essays that follow seem to reduce regional specificities to generalities in the interest of identifying urbanist trends across a vast region that extends from the Caribbean Sea to the edges of the Antarctic. Some of the capitals, most notably Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro, are explored in depth, while others, like Havana and Santiago de Chile, are reduced to asides. The imbalance gives short shrift to the unique geographies and social histories of these places, especially as they

have received increased attention in recent years. While there are issues of space to consider, ensuring at least one essay was dedicated to each of the chosen capitals might have resulted in a more evenly distributed narrative and less overlap between the contributions.

The first four essays share the most information in common. There are considerable parallels between Pavony's explication of the emergence of urban culture in the wake of independence and Almandoz's historical overview of the postimperial period in urbanist terms. Silva Leme's later essay also echoes similar themes of late nineteenth-century bourgeois development and infrastructural expansion introduced by Almandoz, within the context of Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. Similarly, Jorge Rivas Pérez's treatise on the expulsion of nature from urban spaces during the colonial period and its reintroduction into postcolonial landscapes prefigures Berjman's history of the submission of Latin American topographies to Spanish and French urban systems. Both usefully emphasize Spain's desire to discipline unruly American landscapes (and peoples) through the imposition of the grid, but the discussion can become repetitive.

In contrast, Alonso's and David M. J. Wood's contributions accentuate photography and film's role in narrativizing Latin American metropolises in a way that refreshingly centers medium and materiality. Alonso's emphasis on the "visible and invisible" in urban photography comes via the only essay in the book to seriously consider the spatialities of the poor and marginalized. For a region steeped in class struggle with a rich history of resistance, these groups could be afforded more space. Alonso attempts to correct this imbalance, but several of her illustrations come from urban spaces outside those at the book's core. Wood, meanwhile, offers an engaging overview of how cinema spread throughout the region, how it helped to shape conceptions of modern urbanity, and how Latin American filmmakers participated in international conversations about the new medium. His attention to violence and vice as urban tropes underlines the ambivalence many Latin Americans felt about the growth of cities and resulting social changes.

Of particular merit from an art historical perspective is Cristóbal Jácome-Moreno's essay on the marriage of pre-Columbian references and technological advancements in

turn-of-the-century Mexico. Jácome-Moreno adeptly navigates complex relationships between Mexican politicians, archaeologists, ethnographers, artists, and Indigenous communities, dissecting the coexistence of essentializing and celebratory discourses. Likewise, Viñuales offers a sophisticated analysis of the global community's cyclical interest in Hispanic and pre-Columbian architectural styles through their appearance in architectural publications and their use in world's fair pavilions. Casciato's final essay profiles the designs of French planners who worked in Latin America in the 1920s. While providing a succinct overview of historically significant projects, the text ends the volume on a rather Eurocentric note.

Of equal weight with the essays, Alonso and Casciato's image "albums" are visually stunning and intellectually engaging. The first, "Capital Cities," employs early photographs, lithographic panoramas, and maps to introduce the six selected topographies. The second, "Colonial Cities and National Heroes," pairs sixteenth- to nineteenth-century engravings of colonial cityscapes with photographs of monuments to colonial and independence-era political leaders. "Leisure," the third album, showcases the development of Haussmannesque treed avenues, sometimes called *alamedas*, and parks during the regreening of Latin American capitals in the second half of the nineteenth century. The fraught development of railways, ports, aqueducts, trams, and electric lighting is summarized in the fourth album, "Infrastructures." The ambiguously titled fifth album, "Debates," includes photographs of exhibition pavilions and publications that helped to disseminate Hispanic and pre-Columbian styles across the Global North. Finally, the compact sixth album, "Towards Modernism," includes works by domestic and international architects who proposed streamlined interventions into Latin American cities, drawing parallels between pre-Columbian architecture and emergent skyscrapers. Together, these images form challenging constellations that both fascinate and defy expectations. Much like the cities it profiles, *The Metropolis in Latin America, 1830–1930* can feel uneven at times, but in the end, it is a sumptuous and impressive achievement.

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