
SIMULTANEOUS TERRITORIES

UNVEILING THE GEOGRAPHIES OF LATIN AMERICAN CITIES



The harmonious, utopian image that housing in Latin America exuded across the world in the postwar years is very much at odds with the current view of the region, in which unbridled shantytowns dominate. **Patricio del Real** sets out to understand how such a rupture might have been possible: What was the process of exclusion at play in these Modernist projects? How does Modernism represent simultaneous territories in which emerging challenges to the social and political status quo were merely muffled by the architectural seduction of the 1950s?

In its October 1950 issue, *Architectural Review* claimed that the Pedregulho housing development ‘may be about to make an outstanding contribution to another phase of the modern movement’; *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, in its 1955 issue dedicated to Mexico, exalted the Presidente Juárez neighbourhood unit in Mexico City as the clearest example of how the deep consciousness of tradition could exercise a positive influence in a modern world; and a year earlier, *Domus* had called on Caracas, with its extraordinary superblock housing developments, to become the world capital of modern architecture.¹ By the end of the 1940s, Latin America had become a cynosure of Western modern architecture. Riding the spectacular economic growth as well as the technological and industrial expansion of the war years, and honing the development of modern architecture and design that had started two decades before, the entire region burst with building after building, which created ripples throughout every major architectural magazine.

In their pages, the stylish balance between tradition and innovation – the sensuality of the landscape in ‘glamorous’ Rio de Janeiro or in ‘silent’ Mexico, the pleasures of life in ‘loose’ Havana or ‘elegant’ Buenos Aires, picturesque societies in ‘charming’ Bogotá or ‘serene’ Montevideo, or the dynamic economies in ‘booming’ Caracas and ‘industrious’ São Paulo – presented to European and North American readers an appealing quasi-likeness, exotic, yet familiar. But above all, Latin American architecture of this period was seen as, in one word, harmonious. These were images of a Western world lacking the contradictions and conflicts that had torn Europe apart; in a place still untouched by unbridled US commercialism. These hopeful images were, however, simplistic accounts. Early on, many critics saw through the dreamy pictures reproduced in every article, aware of the incompleteness of the utopia, the unevenness of the societies, the remnants of a dark tradition, and the small enclaves of progressive Modernism that announced the conflicts that, from the 1960s onward, would engulf the entire region into the imaginary of a Third World.

The predominant images today of *favelas-ranchos-villas miseria-barriadas-barbacoas* – the slums that characterise the contemporary Latin American city for outside observers – force us to return to Modernist housing projects to understand the mechanisms of exclusion that these structures enacted and the dual, if not multiple, geographies they constructed. A project such as Mario Pani’s 1948 Presidente Alemán housing complex in Mexico City was created for the ‘modern’ citizen: the burgeoning middle and professional classes associated with governmental corporatism that crafted a singular modern nation through an activist state. Yet, these projects took many built forms, including Wladimiro Acosta’s Hogar Obrero (1941–51), with its elegant insertion into the urban grid of Buenos Aires, and the Unidad Vecinal Portales (1954–66), by Bresciani, Valdés, Castillo and Huidobro in Santiago, which followed International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) planning strategies. These, like many

others, manifested formal and technological experiments that underscored the conflicts between architectural production and the logics of mass housing, and they ultimately revealed a partial industrialisation identified early on by developmental economists such as Raúl Prebisch.

The growth of industrialisation confronted a labour-intensive and craft-oriented architectural production organised in small studios and managing a developing standardisation as the act of building negotiated infrastructural hindrances such as a limited transportation network.² But partial technological industrialisation in architecture was not the only barrier to an inclusive modern world. Housing policies and organisations such as the Fundação da Casa Popular in Brazil, or the Banco Central Hipotecario in Colombia, deployed a bureaucracy of exclusion through screening and selection processes that prevented many of the working poor from gaining access to any citizens’ utopia. In all, these programmes were created by corporatist enclaves tied to a working-class public sector and were based on notions of liberal ownership and bourgeois family values that emerged as early as 1906 in Chile with the Law on Worker’s Housing.³ These values were also discussed within the Pan-American Congress of Architects, such as the 1927 Buenos Aires meeting which engaged the problem of ‘Casas Baratas – Low Cost Houses’.⁴ The early postwar housing projects carry the aura of a progressive state unfolding a landscape of shared social values. These projects also reveal a weak state that could act only through symbolic gestures in the realm of social housing.⁵ The general lack of urban planning across the region exposed the inability of the state to coordinate and control a disarticulated urban landscape dominated by rampant speculation.⁶ The seductive black-and-white photographs promoted locally and circulated across the world completed the exclusion of the urban poor by creating a distinct geographic imaginary and an actual restricted defensible space as the accelerated process of urbanisation accentuated the fragmentation of cities through growing peripheral slums and deteriorating colonial cores.

The geographic imaginary of Modernism created yet another territory as housing policies were reorganised under persuasive national planning programmes, and new state institutions – including the Corporación de la Vivienda in Chile or the Comisión Nacional de Viviendas in Cuba – sought to produce modern citizens through technocratic efficiency. These levelled techno-legal territories, however, had to contend with charged political urban landscapes administered through populist quid pro quo ‘contracts’ that legalised land appropriations and effectively made visible a marginal and now-vocal counter-geography. The active demands of the urban poor, not to mention those of the rural poor, signalled the hinging of Modernist geographies and countered the imagined distance between them. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Peróns’ Argentina, where every possible imaginary was mobilised to build and secure not only a ‘popular’ political base but also the modern activist nation.⁷

Affonso E Reidy, *Conjunto Habitacional Pedregulho, São Cristóvão, Rio de Janeiro, 1948–54*
The unfinished main serpentine residential block can here be seen in the background. To ensure the construction of the social infrastructure, including the swimming pool also seen here, Reidy scheduled them first to avoid the budgetary shortfalls typical in this kind of project that might have prevented their completion.

The geographic multiplicity that Modernism produced allowed for a technological colonisation from the ground up as the Division of Housing and Planning of the Organization of American States (OAS) deployed programmes of assisted self-help – which echoed the Puerto Rican experience – throughout the region.



The geographic multiplicity that Modernism produced allowed for a technological colonisation from the ground up as the Division of Housing and Planning of the Organization of American States (OAS) deployed programmes of assisted self-help – which echoed the Puerto Rican experience – throughout the region.⁸ The OAS colonisation of the everyday became prevalent with the creation in 1952 of the Inter-American Housing Center (CINVA) in Bogotá. Although CINVA emphasised regional coordination of technical and socioeconomic research, it also served to deepen the influence of the US, fastening low-income housing to foreign aid programmes and to a technological development that, under the banner of the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s, showed its true plastic nature by retooling old corporatist modernisation to fit military regimes. A devastated landscape of Modernism, unhinged yet again, was now concealed under the bruised and swelling geography of dependency.

Amid these rich worlds of expanding ideas, needs and desires, and simultaneous geographies, the work of the Banco Obrero in Caracas (1952–6) rises to the foreground since it was able to cohere the centrifugal forces of modernity. Specifically aimed at slum clearance, the massive 85 superblocks of the 2 de Diciembre complex (today 23 de Enero) and its companion projects of Cerro Grande, El Paraiso and Cerro Piloto, all located in Caracas, fused master Modernist aesthetics with mass production and experimentation, clearly locating itself in the dreamy orb of the Western world. This clean geography, however, was performed through exclusionary practices that symptomatically erased the ever-growing and invading slums, which were carefully eliminated in every photo opportunity.⁹

It should also be noted that this Modernist utopia, celebrated by *Domus* as the ‘land of liberty’, was possible only under a dictator enabled by the oil wealth of Venezuela.¹⁰ In this respect, less ambitious programmes under democratic governments aimed at developing a national consensus fared better within a diversifying political urban landscape and a restless countryside demanding land reform, which reached boiling points in Bolivia (1952) and Guatemala (1954).

The advent of the Cuban Revolution, and a decade later Salvador Allende’s democratic socialism, proved that the dreams of development channelled through Modernism and its unfolding territories were not enough, and that the geography of contestation unleashed by modernisation could not be suppressed. One must return to the iconic images of Modernism in the region to rescue the simultaneous territories caught in them to listen to the emerging challenge that is being muffled by the architectural seduction of the 1950s. It is in these images we can witness the dynamics of presence played out in architecture precisely at the moment of the region’s greatest international visibility.

As the current architecture of Latin America regains currency in contemporary architectural magazines, it is worth asking how this visibility will be replayed; to what geography do these images belong? What territories, if any, do these images unleash? We live in a time in which there is an acceleration of images that are sustained by the return of an imagined geography embodied by the mobile elite. But if the Modernist geographic unfolding was once performed through static visual seductions, today these unhings of the built landscape are performed through the rapid consumption of images.

Bresciani, Valdés, Castillo and Huidobro, *Unidad Vecinal Portales, Santiago de Chile, 1954–66*
Built on former university agricultural research lands, the slender five-storey housing blocks were designed to minimise their impact on the site. Open bridges and ramps develop a network of public pedestrian circulation enhanced by a street within the blocks through which cars can circulate. This street allowed the architects to circumvent height restrictions.



The fascination exerted by slums anchors us. In fact, it creates a suture: the slow-moving landscape of anti-modern, romantic dreams and actual human hardship articulates our relationship to Modernist visual seduction and to our contemporary too-fast architecture. The architect's quest remains how to build upon this raw joint.

If, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière has articulated, utopia is not a dreamy and unrealisable future, to paraphrase his words, but an intellectual construction that brings together a space of thought with an actual perceptible space, it is then worth asking whether these latest images of contemporary architecture of Latin America are merely staged visions of a failed Modernist seduction or attempts at a speedy escape into the world of Western privilege? Instead, contemporary Latin American architecture may fulfil a promise to reveal the geography of the city as a site of productive conflict. ▽

Notes

1. *Architectural Review*, Vol 108, No 646, October 1950; *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, Vol 26, No 59, April 1955; *Domus*, No 295, June 1954.
2. On the profession in Brazil see: Henrique Mindlin, *Modern Architecture in Brazil*, Reinhold (New York), 1956. The Argentinian context offers a counter example with larger team-based architectural production. See Jorge Francisco Liernur, *La Arquitectura en la Argentina del siglo XX: La construcción de la modernidad*, Fondo Nacional de las Artes (Buenos Aires), 2001. For Chile, see Fernando Pérez Oyarzún, Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, Horacio Torrent and Malcolm Quantrill, *Chilean Modern Architecture Since 1950*, Texas A & M University Press (College Station), 2010.
3. Law 1838 of 1906 on Worker Housing established the Consejo de Habitaciones Obreras, an organisation that promoted the construction of low-cost units and rationalisation along hygiene principles. See Rodrigo Hidalgo Dattwyler, 'La Reestructuración de la Administración Pública y Las Innovaciones en la Política de Vivienda en Chile en la Década de 1950', *Scripta Nova: Revista Electrónica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales*, No 69–76, 2000.

4. For a general outlook, see Manuel Ruiz Blanco, *Vivienda Colectiva Estatal en Latinoamérica: Periodo 1930–1960*, Instituto de Investigación, Facultad de Arquitectura, Urbanismo y Artes, Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería (Lima), 2003. For Brazil, see Nabil Bonduki, 'Otra mirada sobre la arquitectura brasileña: La producción de vivienda social (1930–1954)', *Block*, No 4, 1999, pp 110–21.

5. For Pani, see Mario Pani, *Mario Pani: Arquitecto*, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana/Noriega Editores (Mexico), 1999. For Acosta, see Juan M Otxotorena, *Wladimiro Acosta: 1900–1967*, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura (Pamplona), 2008.

6. The economic boom years for the region saw their dawn with the lack of capital that sent Chile and Brazil into crisis in the mid-1950s. The need to increase capital investments in Latin America was a primary concern in US economic circles. Washington, however, refused any form of aid and was instead keen on the promotion of private investment in the region.

7. See Anahi Ballent, *Las huellas de la política: vivienda, ciudad, peronismo en Buenos Aires, 1943–1955*, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes/Prometeo (Buenos Aires), 2005. Also Rosa Aboy, 'The Right to a Home: Public Housing in Post-War II Buenos Aires.' *Journal of Urban History* 33, No 3, 2007, pp 493–518.

8. Puerto Rican housing programmes were modelled on New Deal policies that managed federal subsidies through national, regional and city agencies. Highly dependent on technical expertise, these programmes were aimed at slum clearance and the development of a house-owning middle class. Puerto Rico was included within the activities of CINVA from the outset. See *Inter-American Housing and Planning Center. Cursillo de introducción institucional. El intercambio científico y documentación del CINVA, por Luis Florén*, Centro interamericano de vivienda y planeamiento, Servicio de intercambio científico y documentación (Bogotá), 1958.

9. I would like to thank Helen Gyger for bringing this to my attention, and for her comments on an early draft of this essay. See also Viviana d' Auria, 'Caracas' Cultural [Be]longings: The Troubled Trajectories of the TABO Superbloque', in *Latin American Modern Architectures: Ambiguous Territories*, Routledge, forthcoming.

10. See Gio Ponti, 'Venezuela, patria della libertà', *Domus*, No 317, April 1956, p 2.

Text © 2011 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Images: p 16 © Fundación Villanueva; p 18 Marcel Gautherot © Instituto Moreira Salles; p 19 © Archivo de Originales. Centro de Información y Documentación Sergio Larrain García-Moreno. Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Estudios Urbanos. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

A TIMELINE OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN LATIN AMERICA

By Supersudaca

As captured here by Supersudaca, the history of social housing is one of rising and falling densities and a wide range of approaches from formal Modernism to the informal. Commencing in the 1930s with 'New Deal' low-rise neighbourhood units, it was characterised in the postwar period by huge housing ensembles, which preceded even their European counterparts. By the 1970s, large-scale urban development had given way to the unplanned and the ad hoc with the unchecked growth of low-rise squatter settlements as the efficient gave way to the flexible, and big boxes were replaced by small units.

Nezahualcoyotl
Tolerated Barriada
Mexico DF, Mexico
1960 - 1990

300000 units

23 de Enero
Barriada
Caracas, Venezuela
1958 - 68
25000 units



Nonoalco Tlatelolco
Mexico, Mexico
1960 - 64
15000 units



23 DE ENERO
C.R Villanueva
Caracas, Venezuela
1955 - 1957
9176 units



San Martin de Porres
Barriada
Lima, Peru
1950 - 52
16000 units



Plan Cerro
Piloto
Caracas
Venezuela
1952 - 54
6000 units

Ciudad Evita
Bs. Aires, Argentina
1948 - 57
5000 units



El Silencio
Caracas, Venezuela
1941 - 45
7800 units

Villa Presidente Rios
Concepcion, Chile
1949 - 59
5270 units



Bijlmermeer
Amsterdam, Netherlands
1966 - 71
13000 units



Quartier Le Mirail
Toulouse, France
1961 - 75
5656 units



EL Litoral
Caracas, Venezuela
1955 - 57
1974 units



Conjunto Habitacional
San Felipe
Lima, Peru
1962 - 65
1600 units



Timiza
Bogotá, Colombia
1964 - 66
2000 units



Pruitt-igoe
St Louis, US
1950 - 55
2870 units



Unidad Vecinal Diego Portales
Santiago, Chile
1954 - 66
1860 units



UV1 HABANA DEL ESTE
La Habana, Cuba,
1959 - 1961
1300 units



Simon Rodriguez
Caracas, Venezuela
1956
1380 units

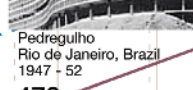


Park Hill Estate
Sheffield, UK
1957 - 61
995 units

Centro Urbano
Antonio Nariño
Bogotá, Colombia
1952 - 56
960 units



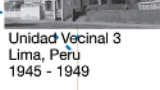
Unidad Habitacional Presidente Aleman
Mexico, Mexico
1947 - 1949
1080 units



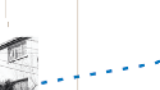
Unite d'Habitacion
Marseille, France
1947 - 52
337 units



Unidad Vecinal 3
Lima, Peru
1945 - 1949
1112 units



Pedregulho
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
1947 - 52
478 units



Poblacion Arauco
Santiago, Chile
1940 - 45
300 units



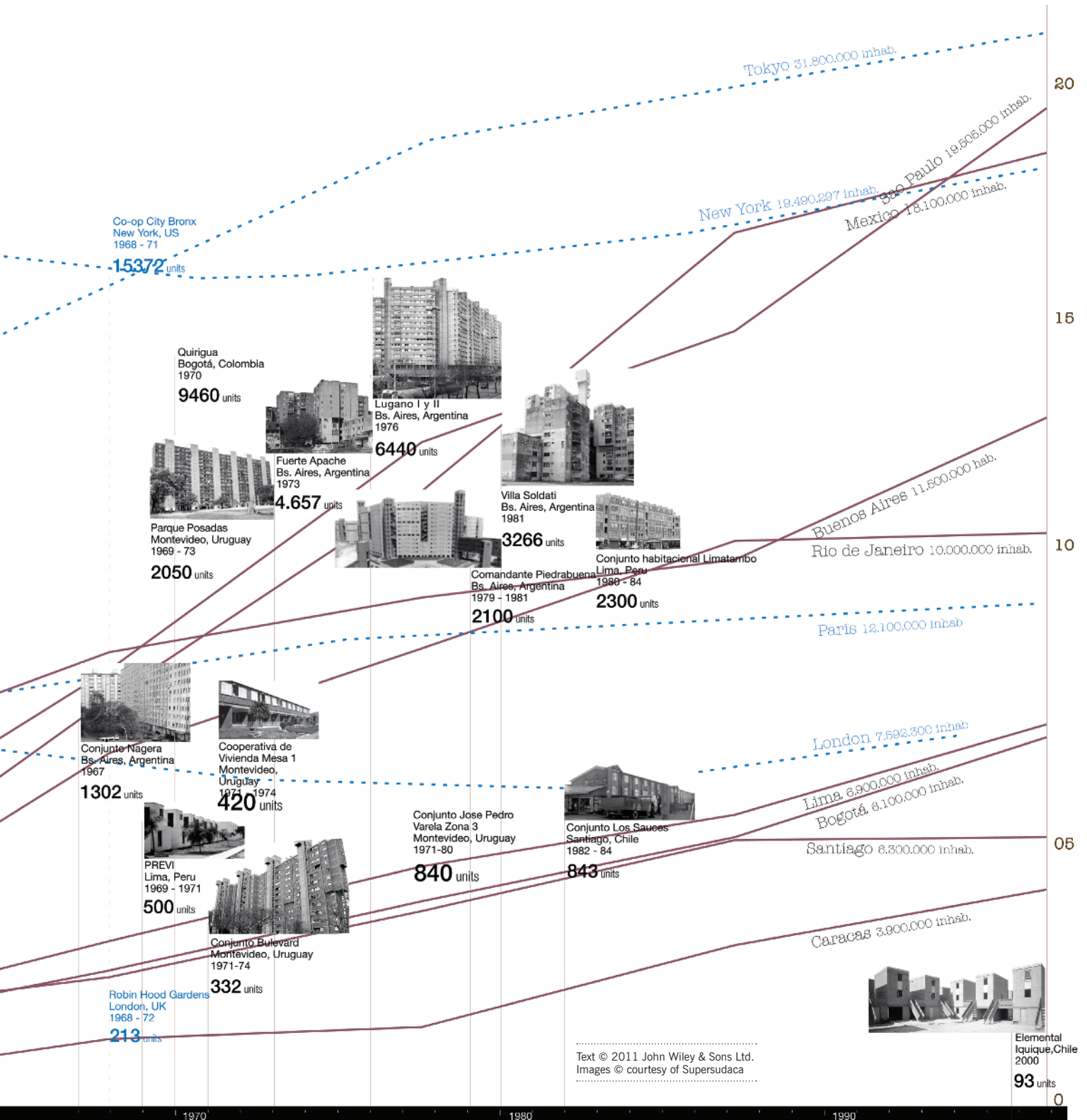
Falansterio
San Juan
Puerto Rico
1937
216 units



1935 1940 1950 1960

Villa el Salvador
Assisted Barriada
Lima, Peru
1971 - 1990
65000 units

hab.
(mil)



Text © 2011 John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
Images © courtesy of Supersudaca