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Kathryn E. O'Rourke. *Modern Architecture in Mexico City. History, Representation, and the Shaping of a Capital*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.

A Significant Contribution to Knowledge of Mexican Modernism

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For decades, the architecture of Latin America has been neglected from Western architectural histories and, if at all included, it has been discussed as derivative of European movements. Specifically regarding the history of Modern architecture, it was not until 1982 that modernism beyond Europe and North America was first discussed in William Curtis's seminal book, *Modern Architecture since 1900*. In a 12 page-long chapter titled "The Problem of Regional Identity," he reduced Latin America to two countries—Mexico and Brazil—and curiously grouped them with Japan and Australia, their antipodes.[1] Moreover, he dismissed any possible contribution these

[1] See William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, (New York: Phaidon, 1982), 331-343. In this chapter, Curtis analyzes the influence of Le Corbusier in Mexico and Brazil—specifically the UNAM campus and Library (designed by the teams lead by Carlos Lazo, and by Juan O'Gorman, respectively), and the Ministry of Education in Rio (designed by the team lead

regions could have made to the Modern movement prior to 1960; specifically, in reference to Mexican architecture, he concluded that "in a sense, modern architecture was but another cultivated, colonizing influence, which replaced the models of the Belle Époque and the Beaux-Arts."[2]

Things were not much different in Latin America itself. Books on the region's modern architecture would see the light beginning in 1969. In *Arquitectura latinoamericana, 1930-1970* and *Nuevos caminos en la arquitectura latinoamericana,* Francisco Bullrich examined the work produced since Le Corbusier's first visit to the continent in 1929, to a decade after the inauguration of Brasilia (1960). By the 1980s, when ideas on Critical Regionalism began circulating, Latin American academics and professionals became interested in the region's architecture. In this context, Ramón Gutiérrez published *Arquitectura y urbanismo en Iberoamérica* (1983), the first and only comprehensive architectural history from 1492 to the 1980s. Since then, valuable contributions to the scholarship on the region's Modern architecture have been made mostly in the form of articles, monographs, anthologies, and books focused on a single country. As it relates to more comprehensive architectural histories, the few that have emerged limit their attention primarily to Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina, where modernism was particularly notable.

Since the turn of the century, scholarly attention on Modern architecture in Latin America in the northern hemisphere has taken a dramatic turn. From Valerie Fraser's *Building a New World* in 2000 to the catalog that accompanied MoMA's exhibit

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by Lucio Costa of which Le Corbusier was a consultant). He showcases the work of Luis Barragán in Mexico and Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil, who departed from the International Style.

Shortly after the publication of Curtis's book, Latin America began to be included in some world architecture texts. Spiro Kostof was the first to do so in *History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals*, published in 1985. See chapters 10, "The World at Large: Roman Concurrences," and 18 "Spain and the New World," in Spiro Kostof, *History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), 217-244 and 433-454, respectively.

[2] Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900,* 333. While Curtis's Eurocentric position may explain the exclusion of Latin American architecture from his book, Kenneth Frampton, who in 1983 coined the term "architecture of resistance," would apparently have no excuse. Interestingly, in his 1980 book *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Frampton only included a limited number of projects by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. See, Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1980). Over time, both Curtis and Frampton expanded their work to include a few more examples in the revised editions of their books. Additionally, c.1999, Frampton edited a 10-volume series titled *World Architecture: A Critical Mosaic*, a survey of buildings in ten geographical regions that respond to the six points from his 1983 essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," published in the first edition of *Modern Architecture.* The second volume was dedicated to Latin America and co-edited with the Argentinean architect and critic Jorge Glusberg. For more information, see Kenneth Frampton and Jorge Glusberg (Eds.), *World Architecture: A Critical Mosaic*, Vol. 2, (Wien: Springer, c1999).

Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980 in 2016, in the past two decades a total of five books have been published on this topic. Four of them focus on the developments of specific countries (primarily Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico and, in some cases, Argentina), and/or a delimited period (either from 1929 to 1960, or the years following World War II); only one of these studies is a comprehensive look at the events of the entire region.[3] However, while Mexico is one of the countries generally included in these publications, Brazil receives notoriously much more attention. Similarly, more noteworthy than the number of publications is the change in research perspective. Rather than perpetuating Curtis's approach or continuing with a "straight forward comparison between buildings from Europe and the United States to those produced in Latin America," these new histories welcome the transatlantic and regional crossing of ideas that would be re-theorized in the new continent, and the "deliberate and more profound adaptation of or challenge to European models."[4]

Pertaining specifically to Mexico, a limited number of scholarly books have been published both in Mexico as well as in the US, none of which offer a comprehensive account. Edward Burian's *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico* (1997) is a collection of multi-authored essays on the key players and major public projects; Enrique de Anda Alanis's *Una mirada a la arquitectura mexicana del siglo XX: diez ensayos* (2005) compiles ten of de Anda's essays on the topic; Luis E. Carranza's *Architecture as Revolution. Episodes in the History of Modern Mexico* (2010) focuses on the artistic and architectural explorations that took place following the Mexican Revolution; Fernanda Canales's *Arquitectura de Mexico 1900-2010. La construcción de la modernidad* (2013) is a

[3] See the following titles: Valerie Fraser, *Building the New World: Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America, 1930-1960* (London: Verso, 2000), includes an 86-page chapter on Mexico; Carlos Brillembourg (Ed.), *Latin American Architecture, 1929-1960: Contemporary Reflections* (New York, NY: Monacelli Press, 2004) includes a 16-page chapter on Mexico; Jean-François Lejeune (Ed.), *Cruelty & Utopia: cities and landscapes of Latin America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, [2005]) discusses the work of Mexican architects—O'Gorman, Barragán, Mathias Goeritz, and Mario Pani—in three of its chapters; Barry Bergdoll, Carlos Eduardo Comas, Jorge Francisco Liernur, Patricio del Real*, Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), as well as Luis E. Carranza and Fernando L. Lara, *Modern Architecture in Latin America: Art. Technology, and Utopia* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014) are the books that include projects from a broader number of Latin American countries.

[4] Fraser. *Building*, 15. The crossing of ideas was largely facilitated by the arrival of avant-garde publications, such as the journal *L'Esprit Nouveau*—a journal edited by Le Corbusier and Amadeé Ozenfant from 1920-1925—which by 1922 had subscribers in most major Latin American cities, and Le Corbusier's landmark text *Vers une architecture* (1923), which arrived in Mexico within a year of its publication. Later, several European émigrés escaping wars (and post war Europe) settled in Mexico, such as the Germans Goeritz, Max Cetto and Hans Meyer, and the Spaniard Felix Candela.

catalog for the homonymous exhibit; and Miguel Adriá's *La sombra del cuervo. Arquitectos mexicanos tras la senda de Le Corbusier* (2016) traces the impact of Le Corbusier's work and writings in the work of seven Mexican architects.[5] For the most part, these researchers agree, implicitly or explicitly, that Modern architecture in Mexico emerged in the 1920s with significant support from the post-revolutionary government—particularly, the Minister of Education José Vasconcelos—reached its cusp in the early 1950s with the construction of UNAM's Ciudad Universitaria—a large-scale project that attempts to synthesize modernism and National identity—, and ended abruptly in 1968 with the massacre in Plaza de las tres culturas (Tlatelolco), a design by Mario Pani, one of Mexico's foremost modernist architects.[6] By closely associating architecture and politics, the aforementioned texts focus primarily on governmental commissions; consequently, major figures who opposed to the government, as is the case of Luis Barragán, are for the most part excluded from general histories.[7]

In this context, Kathryn O'Rourke's *Modern Architecture in Mexico City. History, Representation, and the Shaping of a Capital* is more than a welcome addition to the existing history of architecture in Mexico. The author studies the topic from what she defines as the "intellectual origins" of modern architecture, to its decline. Unlike the authors of previous publications, O'Rourke's study distances itself from the political and social context to, in her own words, bring forth the "work of architects and historians—people that had by far more influence on Mexican architectural design and history—as shapers of modern architectural culture in the first decades of the century."[8] Thus, she

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[5] Edward Burian, *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas University Press, 1997); Enrique de Anda Alanis, *Una mirada a la arquitectura mexicana del siglo XX: diez ensayos* (México, D.F.: CONACULTA, 2005); Luis E. Carranza, *Architecture as Revolution. Episodes in the History of Modern Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas University Press, 2010); Fernanda Canales, *Arquitectura de Mexico 1900-2010. La construcción de la modernidad*, (México D.F.: Fomento Cultural Banamex, 2013); and, Miguel Adriá, *La sombra del cuervo. arquitectos mexicanos tras la senda de Le Corbusier* ([Mexico D.F.]: Arquine, 2016).

[6] While only Carranza makes an explicit claim on the role architecture played in accomplishing the goals of the post-revolutionary government, all the histories cited here implicitly coincide with this opinion. Carranza, *Architecture,* 3.

[7] Unlike all the main key figures of modernism in Mexico, Barragán worked independently on private, many times on self-commissioned designs; moreover, he was a major opponent to the revolutionary governments. Consequently, his work is not included in previous histories of Mexican modernism. In *Building a New World*, Fraser mentions him only twice in 64 pages dedicated to Mexico, and introduces him as an "alternative to the mainstream government funded architecture". See Fraser, *Building a New World*, 84-85. Carranza only mentions his name in his chapter on O'Gorman. See Carranza, *Architecture as Revolution*, 158. Two of the ten essays in de Anda's *Una mirada a la arquitectura mexicana del siglo XX*, are on Barragán. See de Anda. *Una mirada*, 61-92. In *La sombra del cuervo,* Adriá discusses the work of Barragán and his relationship with Le Corbusier's work. See, Adriá, *La sombra*, 54-81.

[8] O'Rourke, *Modern Architecture in Mexico City*, 6.

focuses on the intellectual as well as built work—that mostly took place in Mexico City—and the influences they had on each other.[9]

O'Rourke traces the "intellectual origins" back to the first illustrated history of Mexican Colonial architecture, *Spanish-Colonial Architecture in Mexico,* a 1901 book by the American historian Sylvester Baxter, and *La patria y la arquitectura nacional*, a 1915 compilation of eleven lectures on the topic of "national" architecture by the Mexican architect, professor, and theorist Federico Mariscal.[10] Baxter argued that in the process of interpreting European models in the New World, the indigenous craftspeople treated painting and sculpture, and architecture, as mutually dependent. The result was a "national" architecture, characterized for its profusely decorated surfaces and, at the same time, distinct from its precursor, the Spanish Churrigaresque style.[11] Building on Baxter's ideas, Mariscal maintained that "buildings that were 'faithful expressions of our life, our customs, and in the sympathy of our landscape [...] our soil and our climate'"[12] suited the category of national architecture. While Baxter referred to Colonial buildings, Mariscal's definition of "national architecture" allowed for a broader range of buildings to qualify as what he called "national architectonic art."

For O'Rourke, Baxter's and Mariscal's claims became the driving force behind Modern Mexican architects' perennial pursuit of a localized architecture characterized by artistic integration, a pursuit that was not limited to constructed work, but rather encompassed research, history and theory, all in support of design.[13] Eventually, many of the key figures themselves were writing history and theory, facilitating the dissemination of these new ideas among other professionals and, more importantly, among the younger generations of architects. Specifically, these two early texts set the ground for Mexican modernists' preference for local precedents to explore the façade as an "expressive surface," rather than experimenting with spatial innovations like their peers in Europe and the US. To prove her argument, O'Rourke analyzes six major projects from the 1920s to the late 1950s, and the histories and theories that influenced,

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[9] Although the topic of her book is Modern architecture in Mexico City, some of O'Gorman's work analyzed in Chapter 4 was built in both urban and rural areas throughout the country.

[10] For more on these publications, see Sylvester Baxter, *Spanish-Colonial Architecture in Mexico* (Boston: J.B. Millet, 1901), and Federico Mariscal, *La patria y la arquitectura nacional: Resúmenes de conferencias dadas en la casa de la Universidad Popular Mexicana del 21 de octubre de 1913 al 29 de julio de 1914 por el arquitecto D. Federico E. Mariscal* (Mexico City: Imprenta Stephan y Torres, 1915).

[11] See, O'Rourke, *Modern Architecture in Mexico City*, 34-36.

[12] Id. ant., 38.

[13] Id. ant., 3-4.

and were influenced by, these projects.[14] Five of these, all government sponsored projects, were designed by architects that, for the most part, were interested in building a national identity. The sixth project, his house, was designed by Barragán, an architect who disapproved of the idea of a national architecture altogether.[15] While some of the readings and projects may be known by scholars on Latin American architecture, the reader is introduced to less known projects, the most notable of all being Juan Segura's Venustiano Carranza Workers' Park (now Centro Cultural Venustiano Carranza) designed in 1929, and is offered an in-depth analysis of projects previously referred to such as Juan O'Gorman's elementary schools designed in the early 1930s. Her chapter on O'Gorman is indisputably the most comprehensive—and best illustrated—study on his designs for over thirty public elementary schools. In addition to studying the architecture, she analyzes the Ministry of Education's publication *Escuelas Primarias*, a text that "outlined the architectural and philosophical program of its patronage of a 'new economical and simple architecture' for one million pesos,"[16] demonstrating its role in encouraging the development of modern and abstract architecture as well as the use of cement and steel, both produced in Mexico. This chapter will be of great interest to scholars on O'Gorman and the influences of Le Corbusier in Mexico.

Whether the reader is knowledgeable of Mexican architecture or not, O'Rourke offers him/her new and fresh insights by analyzing the following: a) formal characteristics (response to the site, spatial organization, and composition of the façades); b) the trajectory of the architect and his relationship to other leading figures; c) the histories, theories, and projects that may have influenced the project; d) the architectural precedents and context relevant to the project or text; e) the critical

[14] Carlos Obregón Santacilia's Ministry of Health; Juan Segura's Venustiano Carranza Recreation and Athletic Center for Workers; O'Gorman's studio-house for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, as well as public schools and mural work; Mario Pani's, Carlos Lazo's and Enrique del Moral's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) Campus, including O'Gorman's Library as well as Alberto Arai's Fronton; and Luis Barragán's studio-house.

[15] Although it may be argued that his designs evoked Mexican vernacular forms, his precedents were Mediterranean and Islamic architecture. For example, in a 1976 interview with Elena Poniatowska, Barragán admitted that his major influences came from the Italian artist Giorgio De Chirico and gardens of El Generalife in Spain. In fact, when asked if a Mexican architecture existed, he responded: "No, definitely not; I don't think there is [such a thing]. The folk architecture that I love so much, links us to the Mediterranean; colonial [architecture] links us to Spain." Furthermore, when asked if architects should find inspiration in pre-Hispanic architecture, he replied: "Absolutely not. There is no more need to build pyramids." See Antonio Riggen (Ed.), *Luis Barragán. Escritos y Conversaciones* (Madrid: El Croquis Editorial, 2000), 105-123.

[16] O'Rourke, *Modern Architecture in Mexico City*, 198-199. For more information on this govern sponsored publication, see Secretaría de Educación Pública, *Escuelas Primarias* (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1933).

reception of the building or its effect; and f) the impact of other factors in the development of the projects, such as urgency for new housing, schools as well as institutional buildings related to social wellbeing in the 1920s, or the commercialization of national cement (and therefore reinforced concrete) in the 1930s.

Through her analysis, the reader can follow the continuous development of ideas and architectural expressions of the country's ever shifting identity, initially equated to Mexico's colonial past, and later to its indigenous and pre-Hispanic history. In the 1920s, architects resorted to the use of sculptural elements to evoke colonial architecture, as is the case of Carlos Obregón Santacilia's design for the Mexican Pavilion in Rio de Janeiro and for the Ministry of Health in Mexico City. By the end of the 1920s, and clearly influenced by Le Corbusier's writings, architects moved away from historicism to adopt abstract forms. An early example is Segura's Venustiano Carranza Workers' Park. In this project, Segura used colonial elements and color in a pictorial mode, and explicitly as an ornament, advancing the "development of the modern façade as a representational site, and revealed a nascent, collective doubt about the project of creating a national modern architecture."[17] In the early 1930s, as ideas of national identity shifted towards its indigenous past, architects furthered Segura's application of color, and later murals, on the façades of rational buildings, as a reference to vernacular and pre-Hispanic architecture. O'Gorman marked the complete break from the use of colonial precedents in his designs for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo's studio-houses—where he used color and a cactus fence as allusions to Mesoamerican and popular architecture respectively—and later in the design of public elementary schools where he first incorporated murals referencing popular architecture. Finally, in the 1950s, architects resorted to the reinterpretation of pre-Hispanic spatial organization, forms and use of sculptural and pictorial murals. UNAM's campus, considered by many the "full-flourishing of modern architecture in Mexico,"[18] best exemplifies this approach. For the campus layout, Mario Pani, Carlos Lazo and Enrique del Moral based their design on the spatial organization of pre-Hispanic religious sites, and for each of the buildings—O'Gorman's Library and Alberto Arai's Fronton (both studied in this book)—architects and artists worked closely in search for the complete integration of the arts Baxter and Mariscal had previously pointed out. O'Rourke's analysis brings forth the profound visual quality of all these projects that, as she

[17] O'Rourke, *Modern Architecture in Mexico City*, 22.
[18] Id. ant., 23.

concludes, "were meant to be seen and 'read.' They addressed local and international audiences and, over time, helped create one of the most complex systems of visual culture in the twentieth century."[19]

O'Rourke also includes Barragán's house (1947) in her study, arguing that this project, and his work, were likewise meant to be seen, in this case, through photographs. However, common throughout Barragán's work, and particularly his house, is its introverted character: behind simple—almost windowless--façades lay an interior, rich in spatial quality. Thus, it is hard to see his work, or the intent behind his work, as equivalent to that of his peers. In my judgement, including Barragán's work in this analysis helps demonstrate the marginalization of those who opposed the need of a national architecture. Contrary to the other architects discussed in this book, Barragán was neither an academic nor was he interested in writing a new history and theory that supported his design. Instead, in his projects, private and self-commissioned, he explored distinct spatial arrangements possibly aligned with European theories. Such is the case of the design of his house, where rooms—including gardens, patios, and roof-terraces—interact with each other, apparently influenced by Adolf Loos's Raumplan theory.[20] How his buildings were seen by others—and who those others were—was without a doubt important to Barragán. As early as 1931, when he had completed his first buildings in Guadalajara, he met editors of American architecture magazines. His work began to be published in the United States shortly thereafter. According to his friend and collaborator Mathias Goeritz, Barragán "lavished great care on the photographic representation of his work, choosing his photographers carefully, working closely with them to achieve certain images and qualities, doing what he could to control the use and interpretation of these images."[21] From 1941 onward he worked almost exclusively with the Mexican photographer Armando Salas Portugal, whose images selectively highlighted the surrealistic and abstract qualities of Barragán's work that have made him one of the best known Mexican architects worldwide.

While there is no doubt on the quality of O'Rourke's research, the title of the book may be misleading. *Modern Architecture in Mexico City. History, Representation, and the*

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[19] Id. ant., 5.

[20] There is still much research to be done on Barragán and his ideas. His archives have been open to the public since the 1990, and historians hope that the annotations in his books and his letters may elucidate some of his ideas.

[21] Keith Eggener. *Luis Barragán's Gardens of El Pedregal* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 64. For more information on Barragán's use of photography, see chapter 2, "Photographic Architecture," in Eggener, *Luis Barragán's Gardens,* 62-93.

Shaping of a Capital suggests that, in addition to tracing the making of modern architecture, the role images played in the dissemination of new histories and theories, as well as the use of architecture to represent national identity, the title also implies that the author will discuss: a) projects located exclusively in the capital, and b) the *shaping of the city*. The latter is neither addressed in the introduction nor in the body of the book. In fact, in the descriptions of the projects she analyzes, there is no information of their location.[22] Moreover, some of these projects were built outside the city limits. That is the case of O'Gorman's studio-house for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, located in what then was the town of San Ángel, and several of his elementary schools located in rural areas throughout the country, such as Tláhuac, Tilhuaca, and Xochimilco. Likewise, the UNAM campus was built in the then undeveloped area of El Pedregal (the stony place, an area of Mexico City covered in petrified lava).[23] Additionally, maps that could illustrate the growth of the city over time, such as those in the book *Guía de Arquitectura Mexicana*—a book consulted by O'Rourke—are lacking.[24]

Despite these shortcomings, however, O'Rourke's book is well written, rigorously researched, and beautifully illustrated, almost exclusively with historical photographs and drawings. *Modern Architecture in Mexico City. History, Representation, and the Shaping of a Capital* is without doubt a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on Mexican modernist architecture. And, while O'Rourke may not have fully accomplished the ambitious task of analyzing the "shaping" of Mexico City, this does not diminish in any way her contributions.

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[22] The location of these projects is as follows: a) Santacilia Obregón's Ministry of Health (Calle Lieja 7, Cuauhtémoc) is located at the southern end of Paseo de la Reforma, across from Chapultepec Park; b) Segura's Venustiano Carranza (Calle Lázaro Pavia S/N, Jardín Balbuena) is the closest of all the projects to the city center and is located to the south east of today's historic center; c) O'Gorman's Rivera and Kahlo studio house (Calle Diego Rivera s/n, San Ángel Inn), are located in the town of San Ángel, across from San Ángel Inn; d) the UNAM campus (Avenida Insurgentes, Coyoacán) occupies part of the area known as Pedregal de San Ángel, near Jardines del Pedregal, the gated community designed by Barragán in the 1940s; and e) Barragán's house (General Francisco Ramírez 12-14, Colonia Ampliación Daniel Garza) is located to the south of Chapultepec Park.

[23] El Pedregal de San Ángel and its surrounding, for many years the "badlands" of the city, became a place for experimentation with projects by Rivera, Barragán, O'Gorman, and the UNAM campus architects. Rivera designed the Anahuacalli, his studio-house-museum; Barragán designed Jardines de El Pedregal, a gated community; and O'Gorman designed his house occupying a cave found in the site. For more information on the development of this area, see, Patricia Morgado, "Diego Rivera and the 'Building' of Mexican Identity," *The Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Working Paper Series (IASTE)*, Volume 247, 1-13.

[24] See Guillermo Rossell and Lorenzo Carrasco (Eds.), *Guía de arquitectura mexicana contemporánea* (Mexico City: Editorial Espacios, 1952).