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Review/Reseña

Luis E. Carranza, *Architecture as Revolution. Episodes in the History of Modern Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.

On The Perils of Design-Speak in an Age of Revolution

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In this generously illustrated, large format book Luis E. Carranza sets out to explain critical connections between the Mexican Revolution and new architectural design during the early part of the twentieth century. Published by the University of Texas Press as part of their Roger Fullington Series in Architecture with supporting monies from the National Endowment for the Humanites, *Architecture as Revolution* is, like the design and construction of a new building, truly an ambitious undertaking.

"The Revolution," Carranza observes, "was the catalyst that fomented in Mexico… an unprecedented experimental artistic production" (3). Of course, different interpretations of this "revolution" naturally arose,

all wishing to guide the nation in a momentous transformation. Increasingly open to the larger world well before the violent cataclysm of 1910-1920, the struggle only further defined Mexico as it became a modern society. As many have pointed out then and since, the capital city served as the showcase for this dramatic process.

Carranza writes that "the new architecture in Mexico developed out of existing and newly formed links between architects and the literary, philosophical, and artistic avant-garde… searching for the means to influence the masses" (4). This cultural vanguard had, of course, been influenced by a variety of intellectual precursors; both national and international. After 1920, their great opportunity arose as civil war gave way to peace time reconstruction. Some, like painter Diego Rivera, returned from Europe around this time while others, such as architect Juan O'Gorman, incorporated foreign influences (the Swiss-French Le Corbusier) into their work while remaining in Mexico. Still others, including the loosely affiliated art-provocateurs, the Estridentistas, lobbied for radical new perspectives on urbanism, literature and life. In short, the 1920s and early 1930s proved a profoundly transitional time of experimentation, change and extraordinary challenge as Mexican society realigned itself to navigate the new century.

Architecture as Revolution has five chapters. Chapter one centers on one of the most well-known post-revolutionary trend-setters: Education minister José Vasconcelos. Carranza rightly identifies Vasconcelos and the SEP (Secretaría de Educación Pública) as "a propaganda tool for the dominant elites" (15) and subsequently goes on to discuss Vasconcelos' vision as related particularly to art and architecture. Here, the question of forging a "new national architecture" is center stage. As a key example of the working out of this complicated and perhaps unattainable process, the SEP headquarters is considered as a "modernized version of the colonial style that reflected the synthetic culture of [Vasconcelos' idea of] the cosmic race" (37). As the author details, painters Roberto Montenegro and Diego Rivera help illustrate the "social conditions and autochthonous culture" of the nation with murals inside the SEP building.

Carranza asserts that "[l]ittle, if any, effort has been devoted to the study of mural production in relationship to Vasconcelos' theories and ideals and their relation to the architectural structures that held it in place" (51). He identifies "the headquarters building for the SEP [as the] first and foremost… material representation of… post-Revolution needs, desires, and conditions that determined its production." He further contends that the structure "stands as a testament and manifestation of Vasconcelos' ideology" (50-51). Somehow, these constructions were to communicate his ideas to the public so as to help them "become members of [his] idealized fifth race" (55). If and how this process would come into being Carranza does not explicitly say. Further, we are left with little to no information about the popular reception of these ideas. Neither does the author offers little guidance or seems concerned about the intelligibility, relevance or practicality of his subject's intellectual blueprints.

Carranza's chapter on Vasconcelos' high-minded notions about the interrelatedness of "race," "nation," art and architecture is refreshingly followed by a consideration of the dapper, young assortment of cosmopolitans known as the Estridentistas. The Estridentistas were fun, smart and, unlike many of their countrymen, worried less about national ideology. Instead, they, in a variety of largely individual artistic and literary pursuits, took it upon themselves to be purveyors of modernity. With a touch of European Futurism mixed with a healthy dose of self-effacing Dadaism and a realization—although unobsessive—of their Mexican place in the world, the Estridentists (Manuel Maples Arce, Jean Charlot, Germán List Azubide, Ramón Alva de la Canal, Leopoldo Méndez et al.) sought to put the past behind them in crafting a loosely affiliated, worker-friendly *oeuvre*. Through manifestos, poems, magazines, paintings, soundings and woodcuts among other projects in the late 1920s, they celebrated the modern city *par excellence*. More general recognition largely came late despite their immediate impact on other cultural types. Today, as Carranza points out, they enjoy a well-earned reputation as "Mexico's first internationally oriented [20th century art] movement" (85).

For someone wanting a concise treatment of this fascinating cast of characters, Carranza's chapter, while not particularly original, is nicely

illustrated and worth recommending. Once again, however, we largely get the standard "producer's" perspective and little to nothing on the reception/dissemination of Estridentista thought and work. Fortunately, reevaluation of the Estridentistas has been dynamic of late. Added to a recent show at the Diego Rivera/Frida Kahlo house in San Ángel, one can also now turn to Elissa Rashkin's detailed study of the group.

Chapter three discusses the Mexican exhibit at the 1929 Ibero-American Exposition in Seville, Spain. As Carranza relates, "the invitation for Mexico to participate created a strong reaction against the typically imposed colonial structures of international exposition [while] the location of this exposition furthermore provided Mexico with an outlet to react against three centuries of Spanish domination" (87). Here, Manuel Amábilis' Mexican pavilion design—titled "Itza" and drawing upon architectural and design elements from the Yucatecan Puuc region (just south of Mérida)—promoted a Post-revolutionary reinterpretation of pre-Hispanic culture.

Following a brief description of the exposition's fairgrounds, Carranza briefly profiles anthropologist Manuel Gamio's seminal 1916 work *Forjando Patria* as well as the career of Amábilis who, interestingly, believed that Ancient Americans could be traced back to the mythical "peoples of Atlantis" (96). This notwithstanding, the Yucatecan's written work critically linked notions of pre-Columbian culture with that of the Mexican post-Revolutionary moment. Carranza quotes a long, flowery passage from Amáblis in his *La arquitectura precolumbina de México* (1956) meant to show how the architect was undertaking "nationalistic intentions [in] creating a legible and known architectural language for the indigenous population but also to an opposition to and critique of the elitist academic establishment" (96). While this makes for satisfying reading in one regard, the author's ensuing commentary tells little about the architectural particulars of this objective. Instead, Carranza serves up quotes largely consisting of more abstract, people pleasing "design-speak" by Amábilis along with other, now largely erroneous historical texts speculating about the origins of ancient peoples.

The problem here is not so much that the architect produced such high winded works—which are weirdly interesting and somewhat worth considering—but that Carranza takes Amábilis—and nearly all the architects—too much at his/their word. We regularly get old fashion politico/intellectual terms such as "indigenous masses," "bourgeoisie" "Mexican tradition" among many others left unproblematized.

Thankfully, the author finally gets around to dealing specifically with the pavilion in some refreshing detail accompanied by a handful of (albeit, average quality for a coffee-table size volume) illustrations before circling back to more blanket denunciations of colonial appropriation, imperial tendencies, etc. No doubt Mexican designers, writers and artists (as well as politicians, union leaders and even a handful of common folk at opportune times) talked frequently of the ideals of "socialism" and "revolution" etc. Yet what once may have been welcomed as penetrating architectural/cultural analysis, can no longer go unquestioned today. This is not only because of our own historical present but also because of significant advances in the scholarly literature related to such things.

Chapter four centers on architect and painter Juan O'Gorman. O'Gorman is a hugely interesting figure who deserves serious consideration. Carranza's treatment here is commendable, particularly as he pursues a critique of the Mexican cement industry and its boosters while also factoring in the influence on O'Gorman by Le Corbusier and Frenchman Tony Garnier. This is good architectural history and publishing. Specific structures in and around Mexico City are discussed and illustrated: The 1927-28 Ernesto Martínez de Alba house, the 1929 Cecil O'Gorman house, and, most famously, the 1932 Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Studio. O'Gorman designs for schools also make a welcome appearance. Again, however, what I am calling "design-speak" occasionally gets in the way. Since we're not reading from Marx, I don't exactly know what terms like "dialectically," "the masses" and "contradictions," mean these days.

The final chapter deals with the Monument to the Revolution in central Mexico City as well as Enrique Aragón Echeagara and Ignacio Asúnsolo's homage to Álvaro Obregón. Interesting material here on the design competition included entries not only by winning architect Carlos

Obregón Santacilia but also Germán Cueto (whose offering was decidedly Futurist in appearance) as well as Austrian Adolf Loos. We get nice detail in this concluding section with, again, ample illustration. Yet still, Carranza's discussion of the growing political institutionalization of the "Revolution" is underdetermined given the mountain of recent work on the subject. Further, his decision to use Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Paramo* by way of closing seems a bit of a *non sequitur*. Nevertheless, the basic point of "the revolution" engendering many "contradictions" can be noted.

Carranza's text is strongest when referencing primary sources. He also makes decent use of relevant secondary literature on Mexican architects (Graciela de Garay Arellano and Víctor Jiménez on Carlos Obregón Santacilia for example). The author, however, does not engage much in terms of more recent scholarship whether that be works directly dealing with architecture by, for example, Valerie Fraser, or other publications on urban and cultural history. Ruben Gallo's book on Mexican modernity (like Fraser's text) is listed in Carranza's bibliography, but seldom referenced and never significantly incorporated. Literature on related themes such as Mexico and world fairs as written about by Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo goes seemingly unnoticed.

Reference to big picture, hugely influential critical urban studies by David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Manuel Castells and other international luminaries does not occur. When we do get the occasional nod to heavies such as Walter Benjamin, Benedict Anderson, Roland Barthes, Peter Bürger and Michel Foucault there is not much offered in terms of analysis that seriously integrates their work and relates it to the subject of architecture in Revolutionary Mexico. Néstor García Canclini's 1989 *Hybrid Cultures* commendably does get a mention early and then drops out. I do not want to suggest mere scholarly back slapping here, but still. Nevertheless, the biggest problem is that *Architecture as Revolution* neglects to define terms, translate passages and make sense of vacuous, occasionally pseudo-mystical art/intellectual terminology articulated by his historical subjects. The book would have been a much better one if Carranza had called his subjects out on these superficialities.