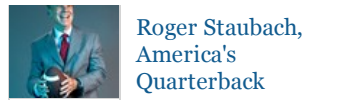


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A God That Failed

Modernism's High Hopes of Better Lives Leave a Troubled Legacy

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By JULIE V. IOVINE

July 29, 2014 6:23 p.m. ET



'La Perla Bowl' (2006-present) by Chemi Rosado-Seijo with Roberto 'Boly' Cortéz Courtesy of the artist Bronx, N.Y.

Early in his term as president of Mexico (2000-06), Vicente Fox Quesada decided to make affordable housing a priority. In Ixtapaluca, some 50,000 identical 300-square-foot homes were promptly extruded row upon identical row along endless street loops distinguished solely by color coding in sorbet shades of pink, yellow and green. The project was repeated across Mexico to the tune of several million units, adding a luridly cheery look to the stifling rigidity of unitary mass housing.

Beyond the Supersquare:

Art and Architecture

In Latin America

After Modernism

The Bronx Museum of Art

Through Jan. 11, 2015

The troubled legacy of Modernism's high hopes to better lives is the fertile subject tackled by 32 artists in "Beyond the Supersquare: Art and Architecture in Latin America After Modernism," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts through Jan. 11, 2015.

Ixtapaluca appears in two entries in this raw and lively exhibition: Livia Corona Benjamin's 2007 aerial photograph "47,547 Homes for Mexico Ixtapaluca," with its Andreas Gursky-style panoramic gloss, and Jordi Colomer's six-minute video "Avenida Ixtapaluca" (2009), where two girls carrying an inflated toy walk through the neighborhood. It is hard to tell if they are going in circles or down different streets. In both, the numbing brutality of this modern housing experiment is slammed home.

The global impact of Modernism is a hot topic and currently one of the themes at this year's architecture biennale in Venice. For Latin America and the Caribbean, the subject is especially fraught with ambivalence. Outsiders, by contrast, associate Modernism in the region with Oscar Niemeyer's swoopy white buildings in Brasilia, the Aztec or Mayan luxe of innumerable 1960s resort hotels, the sensuous minimalism of Luis Barragan and the tropical lush landscapes of Roberto Burle Marx. Hot colors and a walls-optional

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climate in many ways allowed Modernism to become its very best self.

Doctor's Eyes



What remains of the midcentury golden age of Modernism in Latin America is summed up lyrically in Pablo León de la Barra's "Useless Landscape" (2010), inspired by a song of the same name by Brazilians Antonio Carlos Jobim and Aloysio de Oliveira. The catchy tune plays against a slide show of assorted distinctively modern structures, from fountains and pavilions to factories, all now in disrepair. Terence Gower's "Ciudad Moderna" (2004) ingeniously fades movie clips from a popular 1960s caper comedy shot in such glamorous locations as Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology and Acapulco's Hotel Presidente into didactic and lifeless black-and-white architectural photographs of the same spaces. Architecture on its own does not improve lives.

Pitched as both cosmopolitan style for the wealthy and social reform for the needy, Modernism rode in with the oil boom of the 1920s only to be cynically manipulated both by local dictators and outside forces intent on the immediate opportunities and largely oblivious to existing conditions—namely the absence of the most basic infrastructure, such as plumbing, electricity and public transportation. An easy embrace was never in the cards for Modernism in Latin America.

Some of the works in "Beyond the Supersquare" telegraph information cryptically—not in the transformative way of good art, infusing revelatory meaning into familiar scenarios, but as confirmatory code to the initiated. The title is one such lapse, a reference to a large-scale housing complex in Brasilia built in the 1950s and 1960s. Venezuelan artist Alessandro Balteo Yazbek, working with critic and art historian Media Farzin, has pinned up an array of fascinating documents linking U.S. foreign policy to modern art. (In brief, Alexander Calder designed a mobile for a hotel funded by Nelson Rockefeller, who was president of the Museum of Modern Art, president of Standard Oil and director of its Venezuelan subsidiary, Creole Petroleum, as well as a Roosevelt appointee to a commission on Latin America.) If only there were more to the project than guilt by association. Much more effectively devastating is "Documental" (2005), a video within a video by Alexander Apóstol showing a promotional film on the build-up of Caracas described by a sonorous voiceover in glowing terms and watched by a family of the construction workers who did the building, shown living in the cinder block slums that ring the new development.

Along with the political critique (see Los Carpinteros' mocking mock-up of the Constructivist-style Russian Embassy in Havana), the exhibition also demonstrates several instances of homegrown resilience and a spirit of ad hoc experimentation showing how Modernism in Latin America was itself transformed. Felipe Arturo's large scale model of Le Corbusier's never-built Maison Domino, a system of prefabricated concrete slabs preset with window openings and meant to revolutionize housing, eloquently addresses how in Latin America artisans, not architects, appropriated the flexible form, helping it to become the most ubiquitous housing type now in the underdeveloped world.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, on reclaimed land at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, an entire neighborhood joined the artist Chemi Rosado-Seijo (with Roberto "Boly" Cortéz) to build and paint a skateboard ramp inspired by midcentury Modernist beach resorts. If the backbeat of "Beyond the Supersquare" is a little melancholy about days and promises long gone, the inexorable surge of new growth and the unquenchable energies in building anew are also palpable.

Ms. Iovine writes about architecture for the Journal.

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