

ReVista

HARVARD REVIEW OF LATIN AMERICA SPRING | SUMMER 2010

ARCHITECTURE



Beyond Buildings

Many a year ago, when I first came to work at DRCLAS, I hosted a summer intern from South Carolina. She was even newer to Cambridge than I was.

On her first day at work, I sent her to mail a FedEx package, instructing her that the drop box was in the lobby of the “really ugly building two blocks down the street.”

She came back defeated. “I looked all around, and I couldn’t find a FedEx box in the ugly building,” she said.

I pressed her for more details. It turns out that her ugly building was the Swedenborg Chapel, a stone gothic revival building that I happen to admire, while mine was across the street: William James Hall, architect Minoru Yamasaki’s 1963 high-rise which Robert Bell Rettig describes in *Guide to Cambridge Architecture* as “fourteen stories of pure white concrete.”

I should have known better than to describe a building in such a subjective way (even though I still think it’s the ugliest building on campus). Buildings may be made of stone, concrete, glass, steel or bamboo. But in the end, they are architectural creations, acts of imagination, that are viewed in very different ways. Buildings are subjective.

Their very presence helps shape society. The way buildings are viewed, how they are built and who builds them can become ideological battlefield. In my life as a foreign correspondent, I’ve witnessed many fierce debates that ultimately are debates about what buildings represent and how they create a concept of community: should a dictator’s house be torn down or turned into a Culture Ministry? (Nicaragua); should a modern palace—replacing another that was seen as a symbol of Prussian imperialism—be torn down to make way for a partial reconstruction of the original baroque one? (Berlin); should public libraries be designed for poor neighborhoods? (Bogotá).

It was in Colombia that I first discovered how buildings shape the lived environment. The buildings of Rogelio Salmona interweave with the fabric of the society, whether in social housing, public buildings or luxury dwellings. In Nicaragua, I discovered what it meant to have a city literally disappear, its buildings tumbled by an earthquake and never rebuilt. I also learned that solutions are not always easy. City dwellers with peasant roots did not like the Sandinistas’ East German-influenced clean but sterile apartment dwellings that had no gardens and no space for chickens.

It’s not just buildings that shape society, but the parks and playgrounds that surround them, that carve out outdoor living space and centers for interaction, as both Flavio Janches and Anita Berrizbeitia so eloquently explain in this issue.

In so many places where I’ve lived as a correspondent, war, revolution, social upheaval and natural disasters have shaped the way cities are lived in and built. I was recently in the lovely colonial city of Antigua in Guatemala, originally the capital city of the country. After a major earthquake in 1776, the capital was moved to Guatemala City. A friend remarked, “I’m glad there was an earthquake then, because as a capital city, Antigua would have lost its charm.” I had never thought of that.

Major disasters like the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile give architects and urban planners an unusual opportunity to think about the meaning of their buildings and green spaces. Oscar Grauer draws on his extensive experience rebuilding Venezuela’s littoral to give us some thoughts on Haiti; Pablo Allard gives us an incisive view on how a small town was rebuilt in Chile after a volcanic eruption.

As I walk to work every day, I pass the Harvard Graduate School of Design. As I peeped into a large glassed-in auditorium this morning, I saw that students were looking at slides of buildings. It’s not just buildings, I wanted to tell them; think about the way that all those buildings have shaped all those lives.



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DAVID ROCKEFELLER CENTER
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Director

Merilee S. Grindle

Associate Director

Kathy Eckroad

ReVista

Editor in-Chief

June Carolyn Erlick

Copy Editor

Anita Safran

Publications Intern

Jai C. Beeman

Design

2communiqué
www.2communique.com

Printer

P & R Publications

Contact Us

1730 Cambridge Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
Telephone: 617-495-5428
Facsimile: 617-496-2802

Subscriptions and Reader Forum

jerlick@fas.harvard.edu

Website

www.drclas.harvard.edu/publications/revistaonline

Facebook

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ARCHITECTURE

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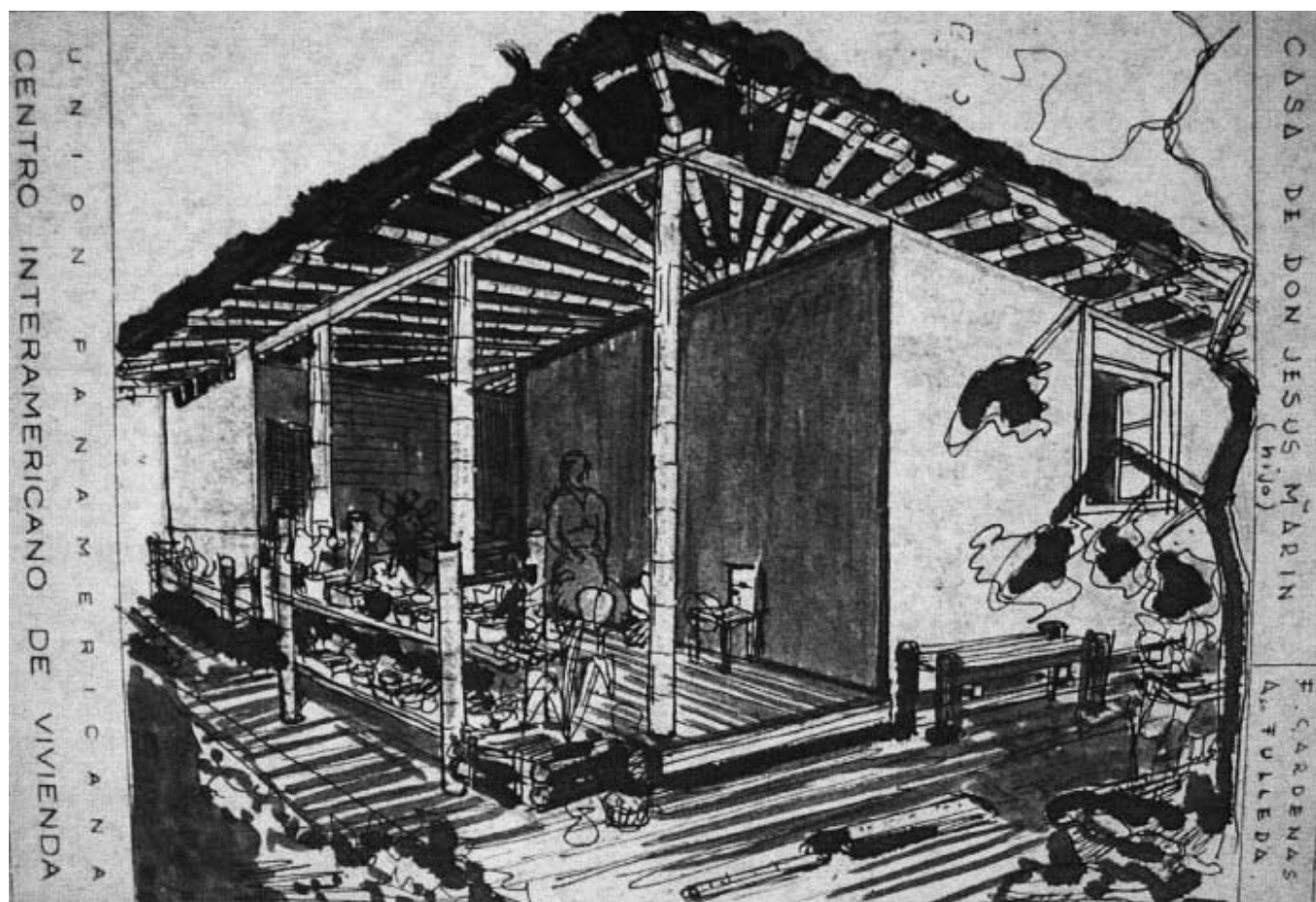
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ON THE COVER

A collage of Brazilian architecture, photos by James Brown and unknown photographer, courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles Archive



Productive Workers for the Nation

Architects, Peasants and Development in 1950s Colombia

BY RICARDO LÓPEZ-PEDREROS

IN 1954, COLOMBIAN ARCHITECT ALBERTO Valencia took a short trip to the small town of Anolaima, two hours away from Bogotá. An architect at the Inter-American Housing Center—a joint project of the Organization of American States and the U.S. Office for International Development—Valencia was excited to arrive in a “remote but attractive place” where he could find the “reality of life.”

After some days in the field, Valencia resolved to leave his books and city be-

hind. Instead, he would return to Anolaima to teach peasants “how to build [new] houses...how to build homes... how to live in community.” He wanted to know the “Colombian peasants *in person*...their families...their lives... their souls, their activities.” Above all he wanted to transform those peasants into “modern citizens of the Colombian nation” (quotations from Housing Center Archive, Alberto Valencia’s personal archive).

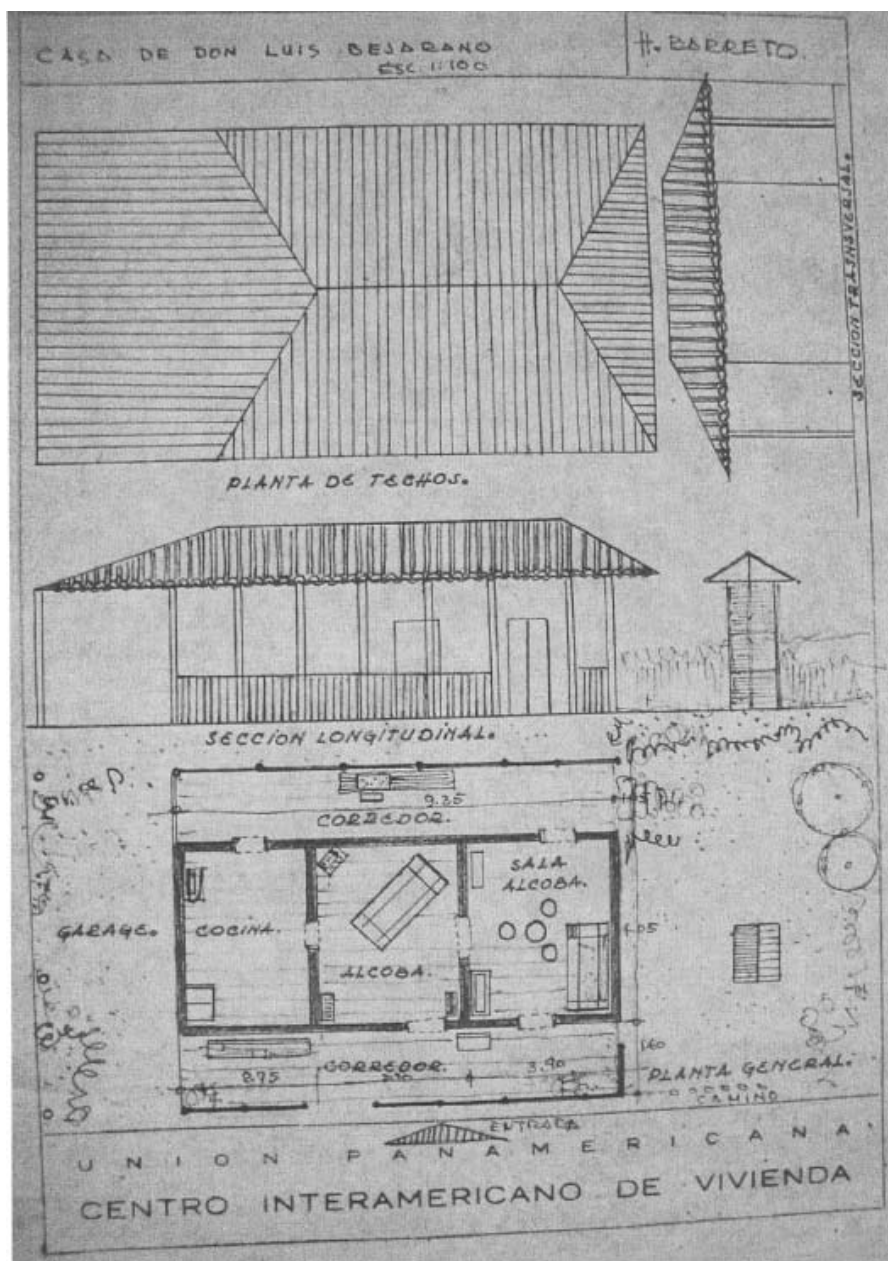
Valencia’s preoccupations and desires speak eloquently of the new roles architects and other middle-class professionals began to play in political discussions about “development” and “modernity” in post-war Colombia. As the world split into the conflicting camps of the Cold War era, state institutions and multilateral development agencies, among them U.S. foreign aid organizations, constantly discussed how the social sciences could be applied in a practical manner to creat-

Floor plans for peasant housing in Colombia reflect the new role assigned to architecture as a social science.

ing critical roles for professions such as architecture in achieving modernization. The goal was to move Latin America away from underdevelopment, political instability and social poverty, lifting it into what was conceived as a modern, developed, stable and democratic society.

In Colombia, policy makers, politicians, diplomats and intellectuals agreed that a new “mission” for professions such as architecture was imperative to bring *La Violencia*, a ten-year bloody conflict between Liberals and Conservatives, to a definitive end. Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958-1962) and Guillermo León Valencia (1962-1966), the two first presidents of the National Front, a 16-year power-sharing agreement between Liberals and Conservatives, wanted these new professionals to educate the working and peasant classes about how to live harmoniously and peacefully. These experiences, according to many politicians and intellectuals of the time, were foreign to the lives of Colombian citizens.

It is in this context that Alberto Valencia's preoccupations and desires make so much sense. He, as an architect, was experiencing a new role assigned to architecture as a social science. He was only one among many professionals who were hired by the Colombian state to carry out what was understood as the crucial task of the 20th century: to bring “social progress,” “modernity,” and “peace” to those who had suffered the consequences of *La Violencia*. But in order to succeed in such a difficult endeavor it was necessary to train new generations of architects. During the late 1950s and 1960s, the Inter-American Housing Center, the *Instituto de Crédito Territorial* (the main state housing agency), the National University and a group of private elite organizations worked together to implement a training program to educate a new generation of architects committed to the national common good, rather than elite mate-



rial interests. Much of this training was sponsored by the Kennedy-inspired U.S. Alliance for Progress, which founded or supported technical centers, vocational schools and universities. This training would allow a new generation of architects to perform what was conceived as a more democratic role: they would be ready to teach Colombia's rural peasantry how to overcome poverty, political passivity, violent tendencies, underdevelopment and backwardness.

Alberto Valencia's story as a modern

architect offers an insightful example on how these new professional roles assigned to architecture worked out in practice. In one of the many reports he filed for the Inter-American Housing Center, Valencia pondered the major causes of peasants' underdevelopment and low productivity. For him, these problems resulted in part from the disorganization of peasants' houses, which had merely two corridors surrounding a large physical space divided into simple and tedious sub-spaces. Peasants, he ar-

gued, had houses, but lacked homes. Usually generalizing from his extensive field work in Anolaima, Valencia presented peasants' houses as having a rudimentary, if underdeveloped, architectural planning. With a certain sense of frustration, he constantly described peasants' houses as monotonous, repetitive, and boring. In peasants' houses, he observed, living rooms were simultaneously bedrooms; kitchens were often used for cultivating food or keeping animals. Even worse, he reported, there was no intimacy—children and parents usually slept in the same rooms. This promiscuity of space,

of the home, the nutrition of the family, the moral rectitude of the children, and, above all, the harmony and coordination of the different spaces of the house. In doing so, it was argued, peasant women would become truly good mothers and wives who could prepare the house for their husbands, thus contributing to the creation of a new productive nation.

Architects, therefore, were seen as those who could “save” the peasants from ignorance, ill-health and low productivity by using their professional knowledge to build homes, rather than merely houses, allowing peasants to become productive

a process through which these new, and “good” husbands, should give more independence, autonomy and opportunities to their wives in matters of how to run the home; some peasant women argued that if there was no material compensation to sustain the family, they could work outside the house to create the necessary conditions for that house to become a productive home. Thus, it was now peasant women, not men, who could bring modernity, progress and productivity to the Colombian society.

These appropriations questioned the role assigned to architects as the modernizers of the nation since, professionals such as Alberto Valencia complained, the productive (male) workers of the nation were nowhere to be seen. Valencia argued that peasant women (not men) were creating an obstacle—a “conflicted environment”—for the peasant house to become a home of a productive nation precisely because they were not following their assigned role as wives and mothers; peasants' houses were only houses where husbands and wives were fighting for economic roles and the specific benefits attached to those roles. This “conflicted environment” did not provide the tranquility and harmony necessary for the male worker to produce for the nation. But if Valencia was not able to transform these male peasants into productive workers, his job as a professional was at stake; above all, he was not complying with his putative democratic role: to move the rural peasantry away from underdevelopment and backwardness and lift them into what he considered modern, developed and productive society. In this tension, the new role assigned to professional architects such as Alberto Valencia was perpetually in the making.

Ricardo López-Pedrerros is Assistant Professor of History at Western Washington University. He is currently working on a book monograph entitled A Beautiful Class. An Irresistible Democracy: The Transnational Formation of the Middle Class in Colombia, 1950-1974.

Peasants would attach new meanings to the experiences of development and modernity—meanings perhaps not foreseen by multilateral development programs nor professionals such as Alberto Valencia.

as Valencia suggestively termed it, did not allow peasants to have homes where they could rest their bodies and cultivate their spirits—which would make them truly productive workers for the nation.

For Valencia, “proper division” of peasant houses corresponded with gender roles. He, along with many other architects and social scientists, wanted to educate male peasants on becoming good fathers, good breadwinners and, above all, good workers, not just good house owners. If a male peasant were to become a productive worker, he would need to have a specific room to sleep in (a space to recharge the necessary energy for the next day's work), an intimate room to “reproduce,” and a living room in which to spend quality time with his children and wife. Only then could peasant men be simultaneously transformed into good fathers, husbands, and productive workers.

Peasant women would prepare and properly arrange the space of the house for the needs of the productive male worker. Wives would ensure the cleanliness

workers for the nation. In particular, new gender-specific collective responsibilities were at the very center of how architects envisioned a new developed and modern society during this period.

Peasant men and women, however, would attach new meanings to the experiences of development and modernity—meanings that perhaps were foreseen neither by multilateral development programs nor professionals such as Alberto Valencia. Particularly, peasant men constantly complained that although they were very enthusiastic about being the head of the household and the workers of the nation, these new roles were not reflecting any economic benefit; indeed, if their material well-being was not met they could neither become good husbands/fathers nor true national productive workers. Peasant men reclaimed this possibility for material improvement by assuming that “their” wives and children should show respect, support and obedience as a condition for national productivity. Peasant women, however, understood these new gender assignments as

READER FORUM

Dear Readers,

Over the past twelve years June Carolyn Erlick and I have been collaborating on the publication now known as *ReVista*. Originally a 24-page newsletter, *DRCLAS News*, that in 2001 evolved into the substantive publication, *ReVista*, the Harvard Review of Latin America, sometime reaching 96 pages in length. Over the years design modifications have been made to address the editorial changes in the publication, bit by bit. We decided it was time to step back and look at the publication as a whole, in print and online.

This issue is the first of the look. The experience of reading the magazine was at the forefront of all our design decisions: from the size, to the page-by-page experience, down to the details in the typography. All of these decisions have been translated to a new website, www.drclas.harvard.edu/revistaonline, where you can comment on the issue and individual articles. We look forward to hearing from you.

KELLY McMURRAY
CREATIVE DIRECTOR
2COMMUNIQUE

Hola June.

Recibí la excelente revista de *Harvard Review of Latin America* que tú editas con tanta maestría y arte. MIL GRACIAS. Realmente formidable edición. Un trabajo portentoso que esta vez se dedica al Cine, uno de mis artes favoritos. La fotografía, el diseño, la calidad de los textos hacen de este número una pieza maestra para coleccionistas. Se suma a algunos tesoros (revistas) que



conservo y que releo frecuentemente con especial cariño. Mil gracias por esta joya que, con diccionario en mano, estoy leyendo sin perder detalle. Genial lo de Nelson Palacios, el realizador underground: qué manera más ingeniosa de hacer cine. Igualmente valiosa la historia de Santiago Álvarez y su experiencia en el cine cubano.

HÉCTOR ROSERO
UNIVERSIDAD MARIANA
FACULTAD DE PERIODISMO
PASTO, COLOMBIA

Dear Mrs. Editor-in-Chief, I'm writing you from Berlin, Germany—from the former eastern part. This fact has some evidence because of the subject I'm writing you about: the *ReVista* "Film in Latin America".

In your editor's letter, you complained about the fact that not too many people were answering your question about some personal impressions on Latin American films.

So I'll try to tell you something about the Latin American films in my life. In former Eastern bloc coun-

tries, the choice of worldwide films was naturally not so complete, and I—as a "film freak"—missed a lot. But in spite of the censored choices, there were possibilities to get an impression of the world outside our little country—by watching movies (without the possibility to prove these impressions in reality).

My first associations in regards to your question were:

Sergei Eisenstein's *Que viva Mexico*, Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados*, Santiago Alvarez' *Now!*, Marcel Camus' *Orfeo negro ...* As you see, some of the movies were not really Latin American, but in my head they built some kind of picture ...

In the 60s, I studied in Leipzig, and every year (till now!!) there is an important documentary film festival. In GDR times it was a possibility for us to see some half-legal things, to talk with filmmakers and culture experts from abroad. I remember my very strong impression of *Now!*, 5 minutes long, as I remember, full of power. And in 1968 or 1969 there was shown another film by Alvarez, concerning the Prague invasion in August '68. This invasion was a shock for us, and to criticize it was impossible, a taboo. As far as I remember in Alvarez' movie there was only a speech by Fidel Castro, criticizing the invasion...

Luis Buñuel's movies—most of them shown in GDR-arthouse cinemas— gave me a basic "feeling" of Spanish and the Spanish-speaking world; that way they got in my head—very unprecisely—

also as "Latin American."

Another part of "Latin America in my head" was *Missing*, the Costa-Gavras film about Chile, and also Werner Herzog's wonderful movies *Aguirre oder der Zorn Gottes* and *Fitzcarraldo*, both made in Latin America.

It's important to mention a very special thing: the East German filmmaker Rainer Simon presented 1988/89, before the wall broke down, a film *Climbing the Chimborazo* about Humboldt's expedition. This was a really important film, a kind of projection of actual problems into the past: the wish to discover the world ...a part of this kind of conversation inside the strong GDR borders, speaking about present problems through a historical story.

To come from the past to the present: in the past years I had very strong impressions by the new—real Latin American—movies such as *Babel*, *La teta asustada* (last years' winner of Berlinale), *El laberinto del fauno*. So I'm really looking forward to new films by Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro González Iñárritu.

A very special thanks for this issue of *ReVista*!

ELFI GRIMM,
BERLIN, GERMANY

FE ERRATA

The Film issue of *ReVista* in September 2009, was erroneously listed in the masthead as Volume 8, number 3. It is actually Volume 9, number 1.