

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Overview Latin American architecture reflects its history and the relationship with its very hierarchical society in a way that encourages the individual to contemplate the true impact of environmental art on its beholder. When the Europeans arrived, they attempted to dominate the culture by erasing it; but in reality what occurred was a fusion. In fact, in some cases, the resulting blended art forms that were created by mestizo artisans were deeply subversive. In any event, the architecture of Latin America changed from being an intricately planned city that closely correlated to the religious cosmogony, to a fusion anchored by massive European constructions designed to communicate complete cultural dominance. The architecture reflects both the success and failure of the attempt to impose a new culture and system, because the original beliefs and customs have been remarkably vibrant, and in fact, a point of enduring pride and sense of identity.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Prehistory

Stilt houses with grass roofs: The earliest dwellings in MesoAmerica and South America consisted of wood frames with grass roofs. They were often on stilts, particularly in coastal or jungle areas.

Cave dwellings: Cave art throughout Mesoamerica and South America indicates that early peoples lived in caves. Perhaps the famous, the “Cave of the Hands” in the Serra da Capivara National Park in northeast Brazil. In the archaeological site, Pedra Furada, more than 15,000 drawings depict animals, humans, birds, representations of the sun, and hunting scenes. So, while the people who lived in the caves did not construct the caves, they did modify them for their purposes.

Classical

The Philosophy of the Latin American Precolumbian City: Latin American religious systems had, at their heart, the need to express their belief in outward manifestations – tangible, concrete forms – that perfectly replicated the structure and relationships of the gods, the solar system, the movement of moon and stars, the history of the world, and how they related to the life of beings on the earth. The cities were microcosms and living models of a cosmogony. The cities were a framework for worship, but even more profoundly, they were a framework – even a machine – that shaped behaviors, inculcated beliefs, and unified mindsets. Whether there was any room for new ideas or the discussion of new paradigms is not clear; but what is very clear is that throughout Latin America, the architecture of the cities was used to harmonize (even control) the thoughts and behaviors of the people, and it may explain why it was possible to attain a high level of productivity and to sustain populations of 100,000 inhabitants and more, who cohabited in evident peace and prosperity.

Pyramids: Perhaps the most characteristic Latin American architectural form is the pyramid. While it is important as the focal point in the city or religious center, it is by no means the only building in the typical Latin American city. The Olmecs, Maya, Aztec, and Inca placed the pyramid at a point of prominence in their cities. There they brought people together for religious ceremonies, sacrifices, and for interment of their leaders. The pyramid became a living symbol of power; at times of the great transcendent and protective power of the belief system; at times an internalized control mechanism to demonstrate how precarious life was and how important blood sacrifice was. The Maya rituals that were enacted in the pyramids were typical: The ruling class mutilated themselves (women piercing their tongues; men drawing blood from the penis), and in the spectacle of extreme pain and bloodshed, established a connection to the gods and even took on attributes of the gods.

Orientation of the City: The cities were very carefully designed so that they aligned with celestial occurrences such as equinoxes, alignments of planets, and more, not only to achieve certain lighting effects, but to instill a relationship between the time of day and conditions of light. What resulted was a mental programming that related

times of days to certain rituals or beliefs, which were carved on the walls and embedded in the design. For example, in the “Castillo” of Chichen Itza, a Mayan pyramid, the lighting is such in the stairway that the serpents carved on the walls appear to move, which reminds the viewer of the fact that the powerful sky god, the Plumed Serpent, Kukulcan, is alive and always present.

Ball courts: The architecture of the ball court resulted in the fact that the individuals playing the sports were also enacting the journey between the underworld and that of the living, and the mysteries of being in two places simultaneously. While much has been said of the fact that the game itself had sacrificial elements, the focus really should not be on the individual feats of strength or athleticism. Instead, the ballcourt represents the dynamic processes of life and community, and the spectators (who actively participated and bet on outcomes) enact the collective energies in the struggles to emerge from darkness, and the need to understand what happens in the underworld. Not all cultures had the same emphasis on ballcourts. The largest ballcourt can be found at Chichen Itza. The Olmecs in Veracruz state had, at El Tajin, more than 18 ballcourts.

Portals to the Sun (Tiwanaku): The pre-Incan culture of the Tiwanaku and the Incans themselves built their cities to connect the human spirit with the energy of the sun. As a result, they constructed portals or gateways that represented that moment in which the human being merges with sun energy. The Gate of the Sun at Tiwanaku, Bolivia, is oriented so that the rays of the sun shine through the portal and illuminate the figure of a man whose head is surrounded by 24 linear rays. The carvings on the gate – human heads and condors – suggest transmogrification, and a merging of human and soaring condor spirits.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (COLONIAL)

Impact of Catholicism: The Catholic Church, with its roots in Roman and medieval Europe iconography, had already developed an ecclesiastical architecture that was designed to instruct and to awe a largely illiterate population. So, it, too, functioned as a kind of machine to construct knowledge by means of a kind of enforced pattern of behavior or ritual. However, as opposed to the Latin American PreHispanic approach to architecture, the Catholic Church focused on the places of worship and the supporting buildings, but was not at all concerned about the city as a whole. Thus, European cities were often chaotic, squalid, and labyrinthine, with a dramatic, ethereal cathedral rising up from the fetid maw of the city. When the conquistadors arrived in Latin America, they tore down what they viewed as the equivalent of their cathedrals, and then replaced them with their own cathedrals. The rest of the city was left to its own devices, which quickly replicated the European counterparts, but many Latin American cities were, thanks to mining riches, newer, cleaner, and more architecturally advanced than European cities. It is useful to keep in mind as well, that the monarchies of Spain and Portugal also needed to establish their power, sway, and legitimacy in the “New World,” and they, too, had a need to construct architectural monuments that communicated their message. They did not necessarily coordinate their efforts with the Church, resulting in a more random city design than in the case of the Olmecs, Maya, Aztecs, and Inca. The attempts of thought control were equally intense; but one can argue that the architecture of the twisting, narrow alleyways (callejones) introduced a mindset of secrecy, duplicity, and espionage, on the one hand, and protected, creative, and divergent thinking on the other.

Baroque Cathedral: The original cathedrals in Latin America were constructed over the most important active religious sites, much in the way that Henry VIII razed the Catholic monasteries and used the stones to construct his own Anglican Church religious buildings. They were constructed in the style of European cathedrals, with gothic and Romanesque elements. The largest were constructed over Aztec and Inca cities, mainly in Quito and Mexico City.

Baroque Governor’s Palace: While the Catholic Church worked to replace what they viewed as satanic rituals with their own religion, the kings and queens of Spain and Portugal were eager to lay claim on the gold, silver, and other riches of the territories they claimed as their own. The architecture was designed to put the stamp of European culture. So, in each main city, the Europeans constructed a center plaza and usually at one end, or at least nearby, a “Palacio del Gobierno” which incorporated Spanish and Portuguese architectural elements, including Romanesque arches, rows of columns, windows to individual offices, and a clear message that these were the offices that housed the power to influence day-to-day life. Important examples are in Quito, Rio de Janeiro, Cartagena (Colombia), Guanajuato (Mexico), Guadalajara (Mexico), Antigua (Guatemala), and more.

Missions: Missions were simple chapels surrounded by workshops and sleeping quarters for the priests and hundreds of converted indigenous peoples who were kept separate from possible bad influences. The missions were often established in outposts, rather than in the large city centers, and were a mechanism for expanding the reach and influence of the Europeans. They were established by different Catholic orders of priests: mainly Jesuit, Benedictine, and Dominican. The Jesuits were very active in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, where they set up “reductions.” Very little remains of the missions, which were built in the 1600s. They typically have a central chapel, a belltower, and numerous outbuildings. The indigenous peoples were taught trades such as masonry and carving, and in doing so, they developed a unique “mestizo” style of decorative work characterized by ornate, “churrigueresque” patterns, gilt overlay, and flowing robes.

Churrigueresco: Extremely ornate, with expressive and intricate styling, the “churrigueresque” style began in Spain in the 17th century, with the Catalan sculptor, Jose Benito de Churriguera (1665-1735). It achieved full flowering in Latin America where the indigenous craftsmen and artisans in the missions developed a Mestizo style that was florid, ornate, and detailed, while it also incorporated the colors and stylings of earlier, Pre-Hispanic art. As such, the Churrigueresque of Latin America is, at some level, deeply subversive, because it does not take much to see the echoes of the writhing plumed serpent, Kukulcan (Maya) or the ornate costumes and masks of Quetzalcoatl. In South America, hints of the decapitator gods and the condors are evident in the altarpieces and also in the colors and movements in the wooden statues carved to mimic the robes and the hair of the Madonna. Important examples of churrigueresque art are in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City, in the main cathedrals of Potosi, Bolivia; Arequipa (Cusco, Peru); Santo Domingo Cathedral, La Paz (Bolivia), Catedral El Carmen (San Luis Potosi, Mexico); San Francisco de Acatepec (Mexico); Cusco, Peru.

Andean Baroque: The Andean Baroque is an artistic movement that appeared in the Viceroyalty of Peru. It was used in both secular and religious buildings in the 17th and 18th centuries, and is characterized by ornate carvings, sculptures and elaborate paintings that narrate history (Biblical or mythological). The purpose is to communicate to the people that the established European church and government was a strictly hierarchical society, and that the power emanated from the top. Excellent examples are in Cusco, Cajamarca, and Lima.

19th CENTURY

French influence (Mexico, Argentina, Chile)

The French philosophes influenced Simon Bolivar and the individuals who urged independence from Spain. The independence was often followed by occupation by French (or at least enhanced commercial interests). As a result, many Latin American cities have a very significant French influence in their architecture and design. In Mexico City, there is the French Rococo; in Brazil, the main cathedral of Rio de Janeiro possesses the characteristically white, gold, and cerulean blue walls, pillars, and ornamentation. The Biblioteca Nacional of Santiago de Chile is another example. Later in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, French influence was expressed in Art Nouveau. Examples exist in Mexico City, Guanajuato (Mexico) and especially in Buenos Aires, which is considered the capital of Art Nouveau in Latin America.

Public Sculpture in Buildings: While there is a great deal of sculpture that stands alone in street corners and plazas, much of the architecture of Latin America includes sculptures of human personages. They may be heroes of the revolution or independence, or may be luminaries of art and music. Of course, the preponderance of such art forms is religious. For example, the indigenous Madonnas such as La Virgen de Guadalupe are important presences that are placed not only in churches and cathedrals, but on the ledges of the roofs of buildings and in windows, where they reinforce national and cultural pride.

20th CENTURY

Art Nouveau: Called Modernismo in Spanish, Art Nouveau represented a break from academic rigidity of design. It is characterized by numerous curves, plant-inspired decorative elements with the goal of harmonizing with nature. Excellent examples in the Palace of Fine Arts (1904-1934) in Mexico City. Other examples are in Guanajuato, Mexico. The most dramatic examples are in Buenos Aires, where buildings as well as interior décor feature art nouveau, with floral and plant-inspired windows. In addition, there is stained glass in the style of Louis Tiffany.

Art Deco: Art Deco is a style of visual arts, architecture and design that emerged in France before World War I, and was adopted in New York City and in Latin America. Its sleek lines, use of chrome and frosted glass, and the polished surfaces made it ideal for communicating optimism about technology, the future, and human invention. In Latin America, Havana was deeply influenced by Miami, which is renowned for its Art Deco buildings on South Beach. In Mexico City, the National Insurance Building utilizes Art Deco. Brazil embraced Art Deco in a dramatic way in Rio de Janeiro and in Sao Paulo. Many of the hotels in Copacabana Beach had Art Deco, and the massive Christ the Redeemer statue is a good example of Art Deco style.

Nationalistic Modernism: Although Le Corbusier only designed one building in Latin America selected to be included in UNESCO World Heritage sites, the Maison Curutchet in La Plata, Argentina, Le Corbusier's clean grid-like lines, generous use of glass and open spaces, were embraced by many countries seeking to demonstrate their entrance into the modern age. Le Corbusier-inspired buildings tended to be massive and part of the public space. They included public housing projects in Rio de Janeiro, the library of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, and numerous airports, government buildings, and private residences. The modernist stylings were perfect for appropriation as they could be used as spaces for massive murals (often socialist realism or abstract), elaborate mosaics, and other spaces that could cheerfully and openly proclaim an ideological position or vision.

Surrealist Modernism: A subset of the Nationalistic Modernism, "Surrealist Modernism" can be found throughout South America where adventurous architects experiment with curves, angles, and unique placements in nature. Examples include the architect Eladio Dieste's church in Atlantida, Uruguay, a rose-brick and wood building that looks like waves in an ocean. Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, was designed to be the first entirely modernist city. In this aspect, surrealist architecture reveals itself to be deeply utopian as in the case of the architect Tadao Ando, whose use of Le Corbusier-inspired openness mesh with natural materials (stone and wood), and a use of windows to bring in the dramatic mountain landscapes, sunsets, and storms, as in the case of the University of Monterrey, Mexico.

Discussion/Questions

1. Early man was attracted to caves. Certainly they could be dark, and potentially filled with danger if they were a part of an extensive karst system with underground rivers and potential cave-ins. However, they represented a unique type of shelter as well as a location for religious rites and ceremonies. The early cave dwellers were hunters and gatherers. Describe the cave drawings and what they illustrated. What do they tell us about their lives and lifestyle?
2. The movement of the sun, moon, and stars were deeply important to Latin American civilization. Not only did they dictate when crops would be planted and ceremonies would be held, they predicted their history, including invasions from other peoples, death, and destruction. Describe the observatories, pyramids, ball courts, gates, and temples in the Pre-Hispanic (Maya, Olmec, Inca, Aztec, Tiwanaku, etc.) world and speculate how daily life might have been in these early cities.
3. When the Europeans arrived in Latin America, some of the first building projects were designed to convey the message that the twin powers of Europe – the Catholic Church and the Spanish monarchy – were too rich and powerful to be resisted, and in fact, they should be regarded in awe. Select five or six examples of buildings in the colonial era that communicated that message and describe the architectural and design elements which reinforced the message.
4. Technological breakthroughs resulted in new materials as well as new ideas about the man's potential in the world. Many countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico celebrated great modernization and breakthroughs while they also took pride and embraced their indigenous roots. Modernist styles and the use of steel, glass, mosaics, murals, and bright colors characterized the architecture. Analyze examples of twentieth century architecture in Latin America and make connections between the architecture, the function of the buildings, and the messages they were intended to convey.

Readings

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