





FELIPE HERNÁNDEZ

**BEYOND MODERNIST MASTERS:  
CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE  
IN LATIN AMERICA**

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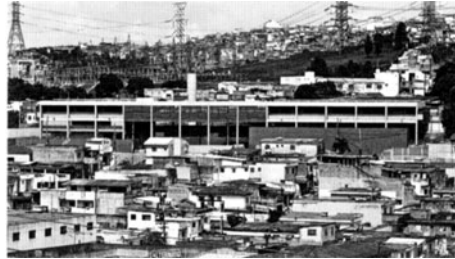
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Latin American cities and buildings continue to figure prominently in the history of architecture. Indeed, attention to architectural production in that part of the world has increased during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It can be argued that contemporary architects from Latin America are receiving more international recognition than ever before. Established European and North American magazines such as *Architectural Review*, *Architectural Record*, *Domus* and, even, non-specialised popular monthly publications such as *Casabella* and *Wallpaper* have dedicated numerous pages and special editions to recently finished buildings in Latin America. Similarly, there has been a proliferation of monographs about the work of contemporary Latin American architects; indeed, this book forms part of such a body of literature. What is more, architects from Latin American countries have won virtually all major architectural awards in the world in the past ten years.<sup>1</sup> The list of achievements could continue if I were to mention conferences, lecture series and visiting professorships at prestigious universities around the world. However, I do not intend to highlight the achievements of architects from Latin America. Instead, I would like to draw attention to the way in which such a degree of renewed international attention disrupts the somewhat homogenous image suggested by the banner 'Latin American architecture'. That is because the focus of such renewed attention has been diverted to new areas of architectural production. Rather than concentrating only on buildings produced during the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by a reduced group of talented and enthusiastic modernist architects, recent publications focus on a younger generation of architects whose work differs greatly from that of their modernist predecessors. Not only is variation found in the form of buildings but, more importantly, in the themes and aspirations of contemporary young architects who work in some of the largest cities in the world, in conditions of poverty – and immense wealth – as well as in situations of social and political instability. The buildings designed by architects in Latin America during the past 20 years continue



COMISIÓN ECONÓMICA PARA AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE (CEPAL), SANTIAGO DE CHILE, CHILE, CRISTIÁN DE GROOTE, EMILIO DUHART AND ROBERTO GOYCOLEA. VIEW OF THE FRONT AND MAIN ENTRANCE TO THE COMPLEX.

to display great formal creativity, but the above-mentioned conditions of practice demand more political awareness. As a result, schemes have become less ambitious in scale and more specific in scope. However, the nature of their work and the conditions of practice in contemporary Latin American countries impede the construction of a homogenous continental identity; even the existence of national identities is challenged by the diversity of architectural practices that participate in the continuous re-shaping of cities in Latin America.

In spite of a resurgent interest, the bulk of literature in existence about architectures in Latin America, especially the material published in the English language, focuses on modern architecture. In fact, many recent books set a chronological limit between 1929 and 1960 as the most representative period of architectural production in the continent. Two of those books are Valerie Fraser's *Building the New World: Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America 1930–1960* and the volume entitled *Latin American Architecture 1929–1960: Contemporary Reflections* edited by Carlos Brillembourg. Other volumes published around the same time are Malcolm



COMISIÓN ECONÓMICA PARA AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE (CEPAL). COVERED CIRCULATION.

Quantrill's *Latin American Architecture: Six Voices*, a book in which six critics examine the work of six modernist architects from six Latin American countries, and Elisabetta Andreoli's and Adrian Forty's *Brazil's Modern Architecture*, a book which expresses, in the first sentence, how reliant Latin American architectures are on the work of only a few modernist architects – those I will refer to, in this book, as the modernist masters.<sup>2</sup> Amongst the most influential modernist masters are Luis Barragán, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Oscar Niemeyer, Rogelio Salmona and Carlos Raúl Villanueva. There are, however, numerous other figures who played an important role in the dissemination of architectural modernism throughout the continent, for example: Eladio Dieste (Uruguay), Cristián de Groote (Chile), Gorka Dorronsoro (Venezuela), Carlos Mijares (Mexico) and Clorindo Testa (Argentina), to mention only a few. Although the work of this latter group of architects has not received the same amount of international exposure, their buildings contributed greatly to the development of architectural ideas in their countries and the construction, by international scholars, of a homogenous continental identity based on modern architecture.

Undoubtedly, the period between 1929 and 1960 was one of great change for most nations in the continent. It was a period of transition when primarily agrarian economies transformed irregularly into a state of industrialisation. By irregular transformation, I refer to the fact that industrialisation did not happen simultaneously in all nations across the continent and that, even at the interior of each country, it was not a smooth process. Industrialisation brought along a new economic system which resulted in greater socio-economic disparity and political instability. There was, for example, great tension between different forms of nationalism: those who promulgated the recuperation of past traditions – pre-Columbian or indigenous and, even, colonial customs – and those which subscribed to modernist principles of progress and universalisation. Socialist ideas thrived. There were also dissident political groups and, at the other end of the spectrum, many right-wing regimes in various countries throughout the continent. Multiple factors influenced the socio-political instability which characterised this historical period. Yet, they all were related, in one way or another, to the enormous transformations caused by the decline of the prevailing feudal-agrarian system and the emergence of a precarious





COMISIÓN ECONÓMICA PARA AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE (CEPAL). COURTYARD.

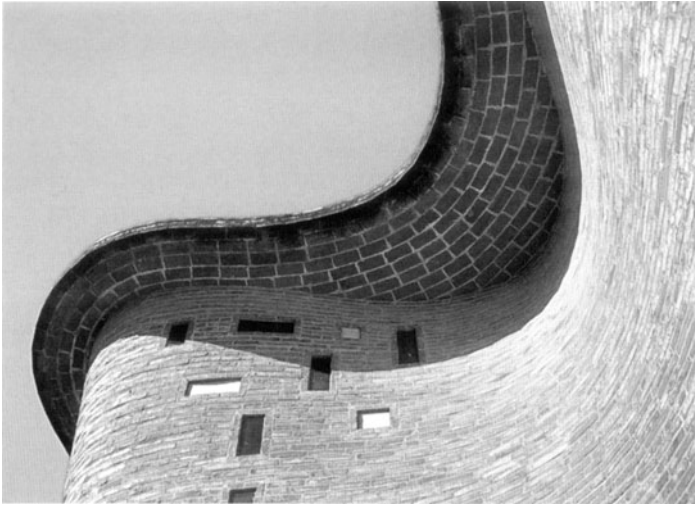
industrialisation, what I refer to with the expression ‘a state of industrialisation’. This is because industrialisation did not result in the consolidation of ‘industrialised societies’, or economies, but in a broad range of ‘versions of industrialisation’ which suited the interests of national elites. In other words, local elites wanted to retain the privileges that the previous system granted them, while taking advantage of the benefits brought about by industrial development.

Comprehensibly, liberal governments in many Latin American nation-states embraced modern architecture during this unstable period because it suited the rhetoric of progress that they promulgated. At a time when cities were growing rapidly due to the increasing migration of people from the countryside to the main cities, modern architecture seemed capable of providing the necessary solutions to guarantee good standards of life for everyone, while also stimulating economic development. Since the technology to produce modern architecture was not entirely available in every country, its very implementation motivated industrial development by instigating the creation of factories to produce cement, steel and glass, materials that are necessary for the construction of modern buildings. It was the

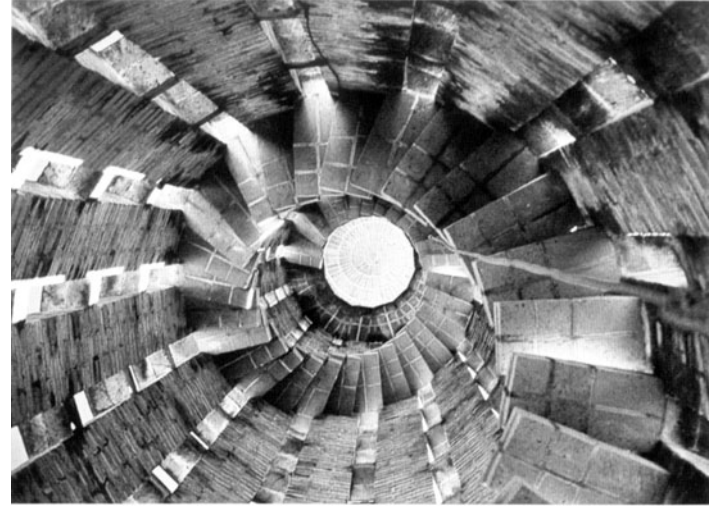
image of modernity – cultural dynamism, industrialisation and economic expansion – which persuaded politicians to endorse modern architecture enthusiastically.

### **NATION-BUILDING AND UNIVERSALISATION: THE ERA OF LARGE-SCALE BUILDING**

The post-war period (1945–1960) was a time when most Latin American economies flourished. Economic buoyancy allowed governments to build on a large scale that was unconceivable in other parts of the world; especially in Europe, where most countries endured a period of austerity. Moreover, architects in Latin America were given *carte blanche* to pursue their aesthetic, technical, functional and urban aspirations in order to materialise their idealistic plans for buildings and cities. Suddenly, Latin America became an attractive destination for European and North American architects who saw an opportunity to materialise their own projects there – the figure of Le Corbusier stands out unrivalled amongst the architects who came to find work in Latin America at the time. Grand and optimistic programmes designed to instigate development gave an opportunity to local



IGLESIA DE CRISTO OBRERO, ATLÁNTIDA, URUGUAY, ELADIO DIESTE. VIEW OF THE UNDULATING CORNICE ALONG THE SIDEWALLS.



IGLESIA DE CRISTO OBRERO. VIEW OF THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE.

and European architects alike to undertake the construction of governmental buildings, university campuses, mass housing, airports, museums, stadia and even entire cities.

One of the most remarkable examples of large-scale modern architecture in this period is the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), built between 1947 and 1952. The master plan corresponds with the principles of CIAM urbanism, although it also incorporates pre-Columbian strategies of land occupation, such as terracing and the construction of pedestals to magnify the image of significant buildings – a strategy that resembles the organisation of Aztec settlements. Similarly, most buildings of the plan subscribe to the five points of architecture formulated by Le Corbusier in 1926, although some incorporate contrasting elements, i. e. decorative motifs taken from the local indigenous tradition. A building which juxtaposes different elements is the Central Library designed by Juan O’Gorman in collaboration with Gustavo Saavedra and Juan Martínez de Velasco. Generally speaking, the library is a conventional concrete slab construction which rests on a plinth. Large expanses of glass around the plinth reveal the floating planes and the free-standing concrete columns in the interior. Above the plinth rests the tower, a large rectangular volume whose exterior is decorated with colourful images of *mestizo* workers and soldiers, Aztec symbols and other pagan motifs. Such a juxtaposition exposes contrasting interpretations of the nation’s cultural identity, an inherent ambivalence in the construction of Mexico by the popular imagination. On the one hand, the planners of the university campus and the architects of the library identified themselves with modern architecture,

as seen in the use of a particular formal repertoire, certain construction techniques and, even, the methods of design used (plans, sections, elevations and perspective views). On the other hand, there is a distinct reluctance to abandon their pre-Columbian past where they continue to find many traits of their identity. In other words, this shows that Mexican architects were split between ideas of progress, industrialisation and technological advancement while, simultaneously, holding a desire for the recuperation of an indigenous past they felt proud of. Far from negative, these inherent contradictions reflect the particularities of Mexican politics and culture at the time. It is precisely these contradictions which assign great architectural merit to the campus and its buildings: instead of offering a deceiving sense of homogeneity, the university campus emerges as a true representation of the Mexican identity – heterogeneous, unequal and ambivalent.

Another example of the large-scale projects built during this period is the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas, designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva between 1944 and 1970. Without doubt, this was Villanueva’s most significant project, not only because of the vast scale and the time he invested in its design and construction but, also, because it shows multiple aspects of his expression as an architect. The master plan, for example, subscribes to the principles of modern urbanism while the buildings show a progression of various styles. From the symmetrical and heavy Hospital Clínico on the east, to the lighter and more fluid forms of the recreational zone on the west (which comprises the Olympic stadium, the swimming pool and the baseball stadium) passing through the cultural and administrative zone at the

heart of campus, which contains the famous covered plaza and the Aula Magna. Since Venezuela did not have as rich a pre-Columbian heritage as Mexico, the implementation of modern architecture did not meet heavy opposition from nationalist groups whose members wanted to evoke an indigenous past.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the oil economy which transformed a poor agrarian country into a prosperous nation-state, brought with it a new sense of historical optimism. Rather than indigenous and revolutionary motifs, as in the Mexican university campus examined above, Villanueva associated himself with North American ideas and the European avant-garde in order further to emphasise the image of national prosperity.

Needless to say, the largest and most significant project realised during this period was Brasilia. Paradoxically, it was inaugurated in 1960, as if closing the era of modern architecture in Latin America. Indeed, as Valerie Fraser points out, Brasilia was 'one ambition too far, and the architectural establishment in the USA and Europe turned against it'.<sup>4</sup> After studying the plans for Brasilia in his 1958 graduate seminar at Harvard, Sigfried Giedion and his students concluded that they were inadequate. In their opinion, the Brazilian government should have appointed international planning experts or, even, commissioned Le Corbusier to assist. Clearly the Euro-American establishment considered Brazilian architects capable of designing good buildings, but an entire city was beyond their capability; the Brazilians were not prepared to design their own capital city – a project which could only be accomplished successfully with the assistance of the experts from Europe or North America. Giedion's damning declaration was supported by other critics and historians – as I will demonstrate below – and, so, interest in modernist Latin American production decreased rapidly.

Despite derogatory statements such as Giedion's, Brasilia remains a remarkable example of modern architecture worthy of examination. Its political backers and the architects conceived Brasilia as a sign of progress and economic expansion, as well as the symbol of a culturally vibrant and confident nation. These ideas were to materialise in three ways: the realisation of the plan itself with its urban and public infrastructure, the construction of emblematic buildings (i.e. the capitol building, the palace of congress, the ministries, the cathedral and so on) and through the provision of mass housing (an aspect included in the later stages of development). Of the three aspects, housing is the only one that has direct impact on the common people – the other two do not affect directly the lives of the majority of the population. However, it is precisely this aspect, housing, which reveals the detachment between the elites – amongst whom architects are included – and the common people. A brief



NATIONAL CONGRESS, BRASILIA, BRAZIL, OSCAR NIEMEYER.

look at the objectives for the provision of housing in Brasilia is enough to reveal this severance. In a periodical called *Brasilia*, published by the corporation in charge of planning, building and administering the city, the expectations set on the provision of mass housing were described thus:

'As for the apartments themselves, some are larger and some are smaller in the number of rooms. [They] are distributed, respectively, to families on the basis of the number of dependants they have. And because of this distribution, the residents of a *superquadra* are forced to live as if in the sphere of one big family, in perfect social coexistence, which results in benefits for the children who live, grow up and study in the same environment of sincere camaraderie, friendship and wholesome upbringing. [...] And thus [are] raised, on the plateau, the children who will construct the Brazil of tomorrow, since Brasilia is the glorious cradle of a new civilization.'<sup>5</sup>

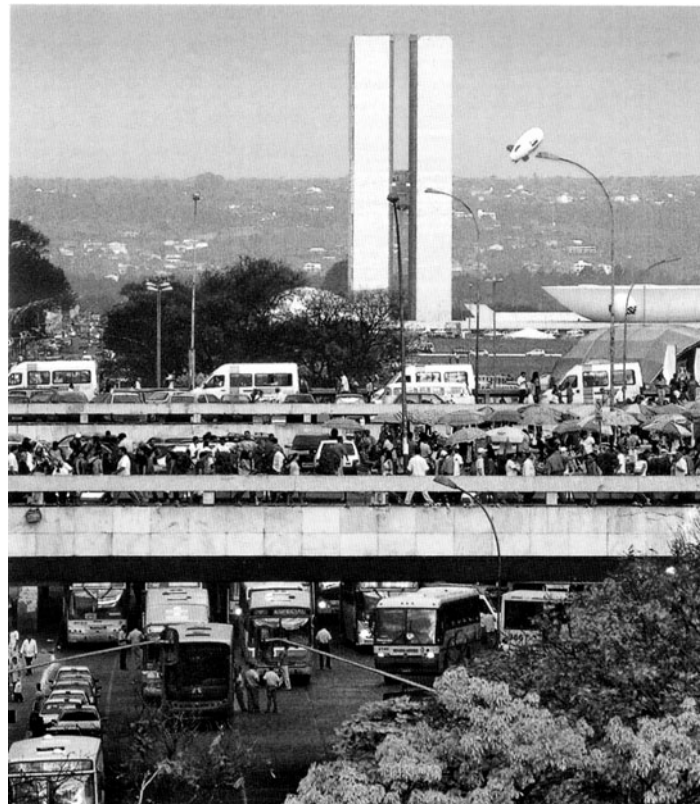
The US-American anthropologist James Holston, who wrote one of the harshest critiques that exists of Brasilia, shows the way in which people were inscribed in the narratives of progress and nationalism as a homogenous community. Indeed, in the process of imagining a homogenous national community, peoples are removed from their historical pasts – the use of plural is not only appropriate but necessary – in order to conceive the idea of 'perfect social coexistence'. The carefully crafted statement cited above discloses the desire of Brazilian politicians to be part of modernity, not simply as an architectural construction but as a western discourse of civilisation. The architects, on the other hand, were understandably busy trying to realise an exemplary city with which to demonstrate that they



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were capable of producing architecture of the same quality as their European and North American counterparts and, even, better than theirs. So, Brasília was thought to be the origin of a renewed thoroughly modern nation, but, in the process, it disowned the heterogeneous realities and convoluted histories of the nation's peoples.

Paradoxically, like Giedion's, most critiques of Brasília – including Holston's – focus largely on the physical dimension of the city: its form, its buildings, the fact that it seems always to be empty and so on. People, the city's inhabitants, only figure negatively as antagonistic elements that prevent the full realisation of the architects' plans. Holston, for example, points out that various parts of the city have been altered by people in the course of its 50 years of existence, alterations which are considered to be detrimental to the original plan. For Holston, the fact that people have transformed physically parts of the city in order to carry out their daily activities, or in order to introduce unplanned uses which subvert the original zoning arrangement, is a testimony of the failure of the city. He refers mainly to the *rodoviária* (Brasília's bus terminal), one of the most populated parts of the city today.<sup>6</sup>



INTERSECTION OVER THE *RODOVIÁRIA*, BRASÍLIA'S BUS TERMINAL, CONGESTED AND OCCUPIED BY PEOPLE.

Consultants to other organisations such as UNESCO seem to share Holston's point of view. The statement for the inclusion of Brasília in the list of World Heritage sites underlines that:

'Brasília currently has a privileged population of 300,000 people, and a large, often transitory, population distributed among the seven satellite cities, as well as in the poorer neighbourhoods that were established to the *detriment* of the 1956–1957 project. In the absence of both a master plan and a code of urbanism, the standards defined by Costa and Niemeyer have been *infringed* upon in the greatest *disarray* [my emphasis].'<sup>7</sup>

By declaring the actions and physical transformations carried out by the city's inhabitants 'detrimental', UNESCO denies political agency to the people in the construction of their own inhabitable space. Paradoxically, the severance of architecture from the realm of the social contradicts the very notion of heritage as a cultural representation of a people's history. UNESCO's assessment implies that there is a need to reconnect the city, in its current status of inhabitation, with its 'original' empty and idealised version which is found in the drawings produced by Lucio Costa, and the buildings designed by Oscar Niemeyer,

more than half a century ago. The question arises, for whom is Brasília a heritage, for its own inhabitants or for an international (and largely anonymous) community of architectural conservationists?

The arguments put forward in this book contest such a derogatory inscription of people in the continued construction of cities, and in the re-signification of buildings. Rather than having a negative effect, the emergence of satellite cities – or spontaneous settlements and shanty towns – and the appropriations carried out by the residents of Brasília are a testimony of the city's success. It is precisely through their acts of appropriation that residents introduce their own and varied socio-cultural traditions into a city that was openly designed to restrain heterogeneity. As a result, the inhabitants of Brasília are considered to be the producers of social, cultural and physical spaces that represent the tense interaction between different groups and the conflictive socio-political realities of Brasília and the rest of the country. If there is a reason why Brasília has been successful, it is not only because of the compliance of its master plan with the principles of modern urbanism expressed in the CIAM manifestos or in the Athens Charter, nor is it because of the elegance of its modernist buildings. The success of Brasília lies also in the fact that it has demonstrated the unrealisability of homogenising nationalist discourses – according to which people can live in 'perfect social coexistence' – and the impossibility to contain the people in the horizontal space of an 'imagined community', to borrow Benedict Anderson's powerful term.<sup>8</sup> Brasília makes visible the heterogeneity and dynamism of Brazilian cultures and societies, their historical discontinuities and the way in which their struggle for survival and identification materialises itself in the transformation of the city and its surroundings. In other words, Brasília is a successful city, and represents a heritage both for its own inhabitants and the world alike, simply because it turned out to be like any other city.

Many of the case studies examined in this book show that contemporary architects have developed alternative strategies to deal with the existence of cultural difference and the effects that such difference has on the fabric of cities and buildings. Contemporary architects decidedly disagree with the narratives of modernity, i. e. (linear) progress and universalisation. Instead, they embrace socio-cultural heterogeneity both enthusiastically and critically, and see the constantly shifting political and economic circumstances in which Latin American people live as sources of inspiration to carry out typological innovations. That is why, in recent years, there has been a noticeable change in the scale of the projects promoted by national and local govern-

ments, as well as in the aspirations of contemporary young architects. Plans for entire cities and punctual mega-projects are rare nowadays. Instead, attention is given to specific issues in precise areas of cities. More importantly, geographical, social and political specificity also allow architects more accurately to attend the needs of particular social groups so that buildings are more closely connected with people.

## THE INSCRIPTION OF LATIN AMERICAN BUILDINGS IN THE HISTORY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

I have brought forward these three examples of architectural modernism in the period between 1929 and 1960 – the campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in the Mexican capital, the campus of the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas and Brasília – not because they are the only examples to be found in Latin America, nor is it my intention to imply that they have greater historical or socio-political significance than others. In fact there are numerous instances of extraordinary modern architecture throughout the continent; so many indeed that a great deal always remains inevitably unmentioned. Drawing attention to the critiques of modern Latin American buildings, or to stress the apparent dissociation between architecture and people, is by no means an attempt to take away architectural merit from any of them. The three cases mentioned above, and the many others which have been omitted for reasons of space, are unquestionably great buildings in their own right and examples of the way in which architects



PEDREGULHO HOUSING COMPLEX, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL, AFFONSO EDUARDO REIDY.





UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL DE VENEZUELA, CARACAS, VENEZUELA, CARLOS RAÚL VILLANUEVA. VIEW OF THE COVERED PLAZA.



UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL DE VENEZUELA. FOYER OF THE AULA MAGNA.

from Latin America appropriated modern architecture in their countries. These buildings caught the attention of international commentators at the time and, so, Latin America was inscribed in the history of architecture. Their inscription, however, was not an innocuous act. Latin American architectures were – in fact, continue to be – inscribed in the history of the field according to European and North American norms. Its inscription had to be sanctioned by European and North American critics or historians. Let me give a few examples before discussing the implications of this mode of historical inscription.

Referring to the Pedregulho Housing Complex (1950–1952) in Rio de Janeiro, a social housing scheme designed by Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Valerie Fraser points out that ‘in the 1954 “Report on Brazil” [published] in the *Architectural Review* it was the one project singled out by Walter Gropius, Max Bill and Ernesto Rogers for unqualified praise. Bill described it “as completely successful from the standpoint of town planning as it is architecturally and socially”:<sup>9</sup> In fact, as Fraser indicates, architects and critics from around the world, mainly from the USA, visited Brazil – and other countries in South and Central America – on a regular basis in order to observe how local practitioners were appropriating modern architecture. Visitors, then, passed judgement about the quality of the work produced by local architects and determined whether their buildings accomplished successfully the standards set by the European and North American architectural establishment. Of course, approval granted inclusion in the history of architecture, while disapproval led to their exclusion and, ultimately, to their historical inexistence.

For another example let us return to Carlos Raúl Villanueva who, unlike Brazilian architects, did not receive international

recognition during the period in question (1929–1960). Only in the past 20 years has his work been fully presented to an international audience, a process in which his daughter Paulina Villanueva, also an architect, has played an important role: she published a monograph about the work of her father in the year 2000.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in the book’s preface, the publisher and editor, Raúl Rispa, feels compelled to establish the credentials of C. R. Villanueva by indicating that his work has been mentioned in books written by renowned figures such as Leonardo Benevolo, William Curtis, Kenneth Frampton and Nikolaus Pevsner. In other words, the architectural value of the work of C. R. Villanueva is not found in its intrinsic characteristics, nor does it lie in the way it responds to specific circumstances or resolves the needs of the people to whom it was addressed, but in the fact that European critics have considered it to be worthy. In the rest of the book, P. Villanueva describes her father’s buildings by way of comparison with European and North American referents, comparisons which establish similarity rather than difference. Thus, it transpires that the architectural achievement of C. R. Villanueva lies in his ability successfully to employ the formal repertoire of modern architecture – which confirms the view of the editor.

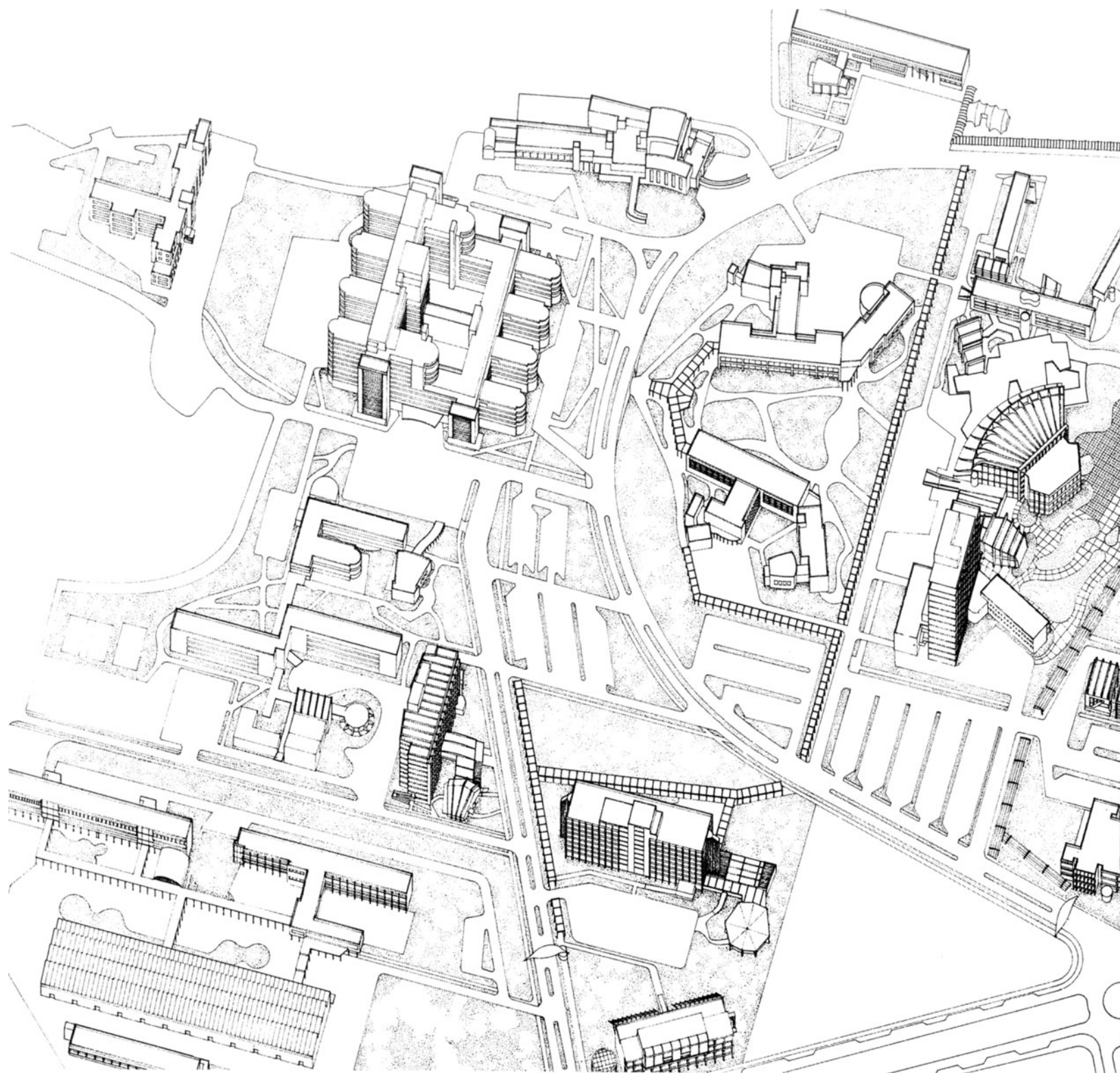
A final example is Alejandro Aravena, principal of ELEMEN-TAL, Chile, who has recently established his own credentials and those of his practice by listing all the prizes that they have been awarded – as most architects do in a fiercely competitive profession – and, also, by highlighting the fact that their work has been included in the latest edition of Kenneth Frampton’s *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. Such an apparently insignificant addition to the promotional material of the practice (available on their website), reveals the persistent significance



UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL DE VENEZUELA. RAMP LEADING TO THE AULA MAGNA.



HOSPITAL CLÍNICO, UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL DE VENEZUELA.



UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL DE VENEZUELA. AXONOMETRIC VIEW OF THE MASTER PLAN.