

## ARCHITECTURE

## International Style

JACOB R. MOORE ON "BEYOND THE SUPERSQUARE"

IT'S BEEN A BANNER YEAR for Latin American art in New York, with the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective of Lygia Clark just one of the many recent highlights. Unfortunately, the complex themes addressed by Latin American artists are often lost in the regional surveys and monographic exhibitions most commonly mounted by large institutions. But the curators of "Beyond the Supersquare" at the Bronx Museum of the Arts—Holly Block, the museum's director, and María Inés Rodríguez, director of the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain in Bordeaux, France—provide a refreshing thematic approach, focusing on what they describe as the "indelible influence" of Latin American and Caribbean modern architecture on contemporary art. Indeed, architecture has long played an outsized role in the region's cultures, manifesting collective responses to colonialism and political unrest in projects whose massive scale and unbridled optimism continue to occupy the public imagination even today—think of Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa's Brasília, a futuristic metropolis that emerged from the Brazilian savanna seemingly overnight; or Mario Pani's Tlatelolco, the sprawling series of apartment blocks in Mexico City that is matched in scale on this continent only by the Bronx's Co-op City.

Although the exhibition presents projects in a range of media by artists of widely varying prominence, these works share a view of architecture as a strategic point of entry into the myriad historical, social, and economic conditions in which the field is inevitably entangled. In Felipe Arturo's *Casa Domino*, 2010, for example, Le Corbusier's iconic prototype for mass-produced housing is given the cheeky addition of rebar poking out of its top level—a sight common in Latin American cities, where tax codes and fluctuating family sizes often encourage a permanent state of construction. Chemi Rosado-Seijo's *La Perla Bowl*, 2006–, is a swimming pool built by the artist in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Its style loosely mimics that of many modernist facilities found elsewhere in the city, but the structure has been designed to foster surprising alternative activities, from skateboarding to graffiti. Such works pit the tropes of incompleteness and reappropriation against the rigidity of modern dogma. Others, including *Avenida Ixtapaluca*, 2009, Jordi Colomer's surreal video set in a sprawling housing development outside Mexico City, and Manuel Piña's *Of Constructions and Utopias II*, 2000, whose subtly varied photographs document resident-built housing projects in 1970s Cuba, strike a more melancholic, if slyly subversive, tone—underscoring the gap between the utopian imaginaries that drove many modernist projects and their current modes of occupation.

But to place architecture at the center of an exhibition of contemporary art also is to invite potential pitfalls. In the show's wall texts and literature—if not always in the works of art themselves—"modern" architecture is deployed primarily as a rhetorical device, and so loses its specificity. In attempting to provide a theoretical framework for the works they have presented, the curators largely hew to well-worn postmodern critique. Ignoring lessons from contemporary architectural discourse—where sociopolitical, cultural, and economic processes are more carefully considered as *constitutive* of rather than *external to* aesthetic production—the exhibition encourages often-facile responses to the most obvious formal and ideological tenets of modernism. If, for example, the modernist housing blocks that proliferated in fast-growing Latin American cities insisted on sameness, here we are simply asked to shout back, "Difference!" To their certainty, we proclaim, "Contingency!" Faced with their gray concrete, we insist on color. Formality? Informality!

Fortunately, several works, including contributions from Felipe Dulzaides, Terence Gower, and Mauro Restiffe, are able to present this reductive disciplinary and temporal separation—between art and architecture, vitality and lifelessness, present and past—in stark and powerful terms while recognizing that one position can't exist without the other. For instance, in Dulzaides's *Interrogating Architecture*, 2012, two microphones are placed inches away from a set of dramatically lit plans of Ricardo Porro's School of Modern Dance in Havana, and the excitement of an anticipated perfor-

mance is smothered by the building's willful silence.

But ultimately the collision of these fields was (and continues to be) much more complex. Architecture is not static any more than modernism is a historically bounded phenomenon, definitively cut off from the present. How might the curators have addressed, for example, the fact that the tiny *habitaciones de servicio* (service rooms) incorporated into many midcentury residences to house servants—featured in a 2012 work by Daniela Ortiz—are still being built well beyond the region's borders, in houses that often look anything but "modern"? Or that large tract-housing developments such as Mexico's Ixtapaluca, featured in Colomer's work

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and in another piece by Livia Corona, *45,547 Homes for Mexico Ixtapaluca*, 2007, are much more than vernacular holdovers from a modernist ideological project and are in fact currently proliferating across the globe?

"Beyond the Supersquare" succeeds in demonstrating that architecture provides a unique analytic lens when questioning the many complex and often contradictory legacies of modernism. But the exhibition misses an opportunity to probe more deeply not only the persistence and durability of the challenges that modern architecture attempted to address—from the housing of growing populations to the articulation of shifting national identities—but also the pivotal (albeit often disappointing) role that architecture continues to play in our collective response. □

*"Beyond the Supersquare" is on view through Jan. 11, 2015.*

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From left: Felipe Arturo, *Casa Domino*, 2010, reinforced concrete, 39 1/2 × 23 1/2 × 19 1/2". Installation view, Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, 2014. Photo: Lauren Click. Livia Corona, *45,547 Homes for Mexico Ixtapaluca*, 2007, C-print, 30 × 40". From the series "Two Million Homes for Mexico," 2003–.

