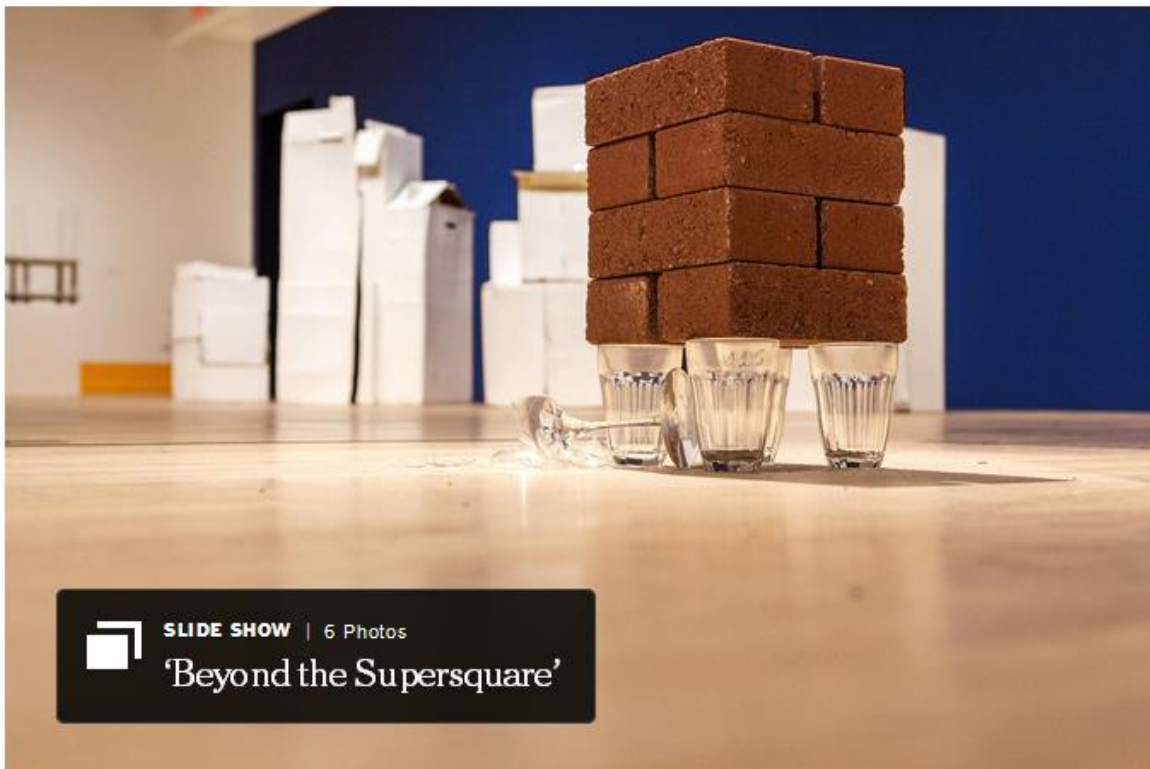


Art & Design

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Even Utopian Citizens Like to Leave the House 'Beyond the Supersquare' Looks at South American Modernism

By *HOLLAND COTTER*



Emon Hassan for The New York Times

In the mid-20th century, certain Latin American cities looked like the most modern on earth. Not only was their architecture imaginative, but so was the thinking behind it: ideas, amounting to faith, that design could positively shape civic life across lines of money and class; that art and architecture were inseparable; that while Europe and the United States were the cultural powers of the day, South America had a shot at tomorrow.

Then the momentum broke. In the 1960s and '70s, a rash of right-wing military coups swept the continent. Left-leaning utopianism was suppressed, and the architecture it had produced either abandoned or repurposed to new political ends. With such changes, modernist monuments to the

future became, to some eyes, relics of a lost past, emblems of dreams betrayed and grim landmarks of a present that had to be survived.

One thing that didn't change was the old link between architecture and art, though the two disciplines now often assumed an adversarial relationship. Art became a way for artists, many of them originally trained as architects, to talk critically about modernist architecture and the failings it represented. This dynamic continues into the postmodern present and is the subject of a subtle and elusive think-piece of an exhibition called "Beyond the Supersquare," at the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#).

The show emerged from an academic conference, convened by the museum in 2011, on the conflicted legacy of modernism in South America and the Caribbean. And more than a few of the 60 pieces seem, on first encounter, to require the logic of a lecture format to make full sense. But the show is blessed with an airy, effortless installation by Benedeta Monteverde, a designer from Mexico City, and has enough instantly recognizable images to get you moving.

The "supersquare" of the title is a reference to Brasilia, the space age city par excellence designed by Oscar Niemeyer (1907-2012) and built between 1956 and 1960 as Brazil's new political capital. Among its innovative features were giant apartment blocks — "superquadras" — conceived as self-sufficient communities. Replete with shops, gyms, libraries and other amenities, they were designed to ensure that residents, mostly civil employees, never had to leave home.

But, of course, people like to leave home, and shop here and there, so the somewhat forced communalism that Niemeyer, a lifelong socialist, had envisioned quickly fell apart. Then, four years after the city's debut, a military dictator came to power, Niemeyer left for Europe, and Brasilia's bright moment was over.

We see its image several times in the exhibition, organized by Holly Block, executive director of the Bronx Museum, and María Inés Rodríguez, an independent curator, through skeptical contemporary eyes. A few years ago, the Colombian artist Alberto Baraya photographed Brasilia's signature buildings and included in each frame the image of his own hand holding up a flower — not in tribute to Brasilia but as a memorial gesture to the landscape that had been destroyed to create it.

In 2012, when the photographer Mauro Restiffe shot the city during Niemeyer's funeral, he made its slablike structures look like tombstones and its government workers like spies.

Felipe Arturo, trained as an architect in Colombia, contributes a cast-concrete model of another modernist paragon, Le Corbusier's "La Maison Domino" (1914-15), a simple structure of stacked planes and uprights designed to be cheaply and easily replicated, erected and attached to similar structures to create mass-produced housing. Although Corbusier never put the project into action, its basic formula is found throughout the so-called Third World. We see a surreal version of the project in an astonishing aerial photograph by Livia Corona Benjamin documenting tens of thousands of attached look-alike houses erected in the last 15 years in a development near Mexico City. A video by Jordi Colomer takes us, at ground level, through the

color-coded streets and gives heartening evidence that the development's residents, however they feel about living in so faceless a place, are at least inventively customizing their homes.

A prototype for Corbusier's ideal of an ad hoc, anyone-can-do-it architecture has long existed in the urban favelas of Latin America, impoverished districts in which habitable spaces organically accumulate and are always simultaneously piling up and falling down. There are few pictures of favelas in this show, which steers studiously clear of the kind of misery-images by which South America, like Africa, is popularly represented. But they are represented obliquely, and we get repeated examples of structures presented in a state of what might be called postmodern contingency.

A plain image in a two-minute video by Alexander Apóstol packs an entire history of exploitation. During the Venezuelan oil boom of the 1950s, rural workers moved to Caracas with the assurance that they'd find housing in newly planned modern-style projects. While waiting for the housing to go up, they took shelter in hovels, which their descendants are still in. In the video, an older man and two young children, probably his grandchildren, sit in a dumpy room watching old films of the Venezuelan economic revolution on television.

And there's work that doesn't just comment on architecture but also does something to it, alters it. Through collage and watercolor, Maria Martinez-Cañas and Rafael Domenech transform found photographs of World War II military bunkers into porous, decorative structures. Ishmael Randall-Weeks lifts architectural images from a range of sources, cuts them up and arranges the pieces into fractured, hybrid structures just wild-enough-looking to be plausible.

Whether we're meant to take the results as hopeful is left in doubt, but that's true in a lot of what's here. How do we respond to the photos of hotels, apartment buildings and storefronts flashing by in a video called "Useless Landscapes," by the Mexican artist Pablo Lón de la Barra, who is also the curator of the current exhibition "Under the Same Sun: Art From Latin America Today" at the Guggenheim Museum? Are we seeing an architecture in a process of deliquescence or one staying alive, despite hard politics and harsh economies, with a certain resilient grace?

There are different ways of questioning modernism. You can attack outright or you can tease it, as Felipe Dulzaides does in the installation "Interrogating Architecture," which consists of a drafting table, a floor-plan drawing of the National School of Dance in Havana and two microphones. The school's building was started in the 1960s but never finished, and Mr. Dulzaides has a problem with that. The two mikes seem to be asking the drawing to explain itself: "Why the delay?"

Another Cuban, Carlos Garaicoa, an architect by training, maps out the history of his home city (also Havana), now decrepit, and fantasizes future changes (a pier that runs from the harbor to Key West) in a charming pop-up book. Fernanda Fragateiro displays the dust jacket of the catalog from the Museum of Modern Art's 1955 exhibition "Latin American Architecture Since 1945," hanging open over a piece of acrylic as if she were airing it out after years of its moldering on the shelf. (An update to that show, "Latin Construction: Architecture 1955-1980," is scheduled at MoMA for 2015.)

So, yes, modernism is a loaded, tainted subject, in different ways in different cultures. How can it be fruitfully revisited? Leonor Antunes's answer was to design a kind of indoor pavilion-shrine dedicated to two of Latin America's great émigré artists: the architect Lina Bo Bardi, who was born in Italy in 1914 and died in São Paulo in 1992, and the sculptor Gego, who was born Gertrud Goldschmidt in Germany in 1912 and died in Caracas in 1994. Both are figures from whom we have everything to learn.

The Canadian artist Terence Gower, who works frequently in Mexico, takes Ms. Antunes's architectural image a step further by giving it a practical use. On commission from the Bronx Museum, he has built an open-air pavilion in the lush garden of the Andrew Freedman Home, a palatial, city-owned former retirement residence across Grand Concourse from the museum. His historical model is Marcel Breuer's "House in the Museum Garden," which was temporarily installed in MoMA's garden in 1949. His contemporary inspiration is the puesto, a type of collapsible, portable market stand found throughout Latin America.

Mr. Gower's version, called "SuperPuesto" and made of plain wood and tarpaulin stained in Mondrian colors (red, yellow and blue), doesn't look like much by itself. But it's clean-lined and flexible, which are modernist formal ideals, and impermanent and popularly available, which move it into some other, maybe postmodern realm. It's there strictly for neighborhood use — for classes, dances, weddings, concerts, picnics, play groups, lectures. It comes to life only when people are added, filling it, changing it, making it their own until it disappears in the fall.

“Beyond the Supersquare” continues through Jan. 11 at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania; 718-681-6000, bronxmuseum.org.

SLIDESHOW:





"Embajada Rusa"
("Russian Embassy"),
foreground, is from the
Cuban art collective Los
Carpinteros.

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Felipe Arturo's "Casa
Domino" is a model of
"La Maison Domino," Le
Corbusier's 1914-15
structure of stacked
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designed to be cheaply
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