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Magical Modernism: Latin American Urbanisms and the Imaginary of Social Architecture*

Modernismo mágico: Urbanismos latinoamericanos y el imaginario de la arquitectura social

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Artículo de Reflexión

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Abstract

This article critically overviews the evolving portrayal of Latin American architecture and urban design, particularly by United States and European observers, as the realization of a modernist aspiration to align design with social causes. With a focus on the coupling of architectural and nation-building projects in Colombia, the article urges for a closer look at the conditions and entanglements of architectural production in the region's uneven political and spatial landscapes.

Keywords: Latin American Architecture; Colombian Architecture; Latin American Urbanism; Social Urbanism

Resumen

Este artículo analiza críticamente la representación cambiente de la arquitectura y el diseño urbano latinoamericanos, a través de observadores estadounidenses y europeos, como la realización de una aspiración modernista de alinear el diseño con las causas sociales. Con un enfoque en la combinación de proyectos arquitectónicos y de construcción nacional en Colombia, el artículo insta a una mirada más cercana de las condiciones y enredos de la producción arquitectónica en los desiguales paisajes políticos y espaciales de la región.

Palabras clave: Arquitectura Latinoamericana; Arquitectura Colombiana; Urbanismo Latinoamericano; Urbanismo Social

* This article expands an earlier, shorter essay by the authors. See Cardoso Llach and Rehman, "Functional Utopias".

Figure 1. A view of the Parque Biblioteca España, a public library in a comuna in Medellín, Colombia, by the office of Colombian architect Giancarlo Mazzanti. The building has been closed since 2013 because of problems with its structure and cladding. Photo Credit: Ateya Khorakiwala, 2010.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, an image of Latin American architecture and urbanism has developed as the virtuous alignment of progressive politics and modern design. Rooted in a long-standing view of the region from the outside as the place "where modernist dreams came true"[1], this image appears prominently in global architectural and urban discussions, rendering Latin American cities as experiments in radical urbanism and architecture, and enlivening modernist aspirations to cast architecture as both a vehicle and a stage of social change.

The image of Latin American cities as laboratories for democracy and social change is supported by international professional, academic, journalistic, curatorial, and policy networks. The 2015 MoMA exhibition, *Latin America in Construction 1955-1980*, for example, surveyed the region's postwar record of development projects such as housing, universities, hospitals, and other public works, offering, at the same time, an apt window into the region's remarkable architectural production during this period and a document of the evolving portrayal of Latin American architecture through the Anglo-European gaze. The exhibition's lead curator, architectural historian Barry Bergdoll, notes how Latin American architecture in the post war, and Brazil's in particular, seemed to inscribe the promise of a more progressive society, offering war-depleted nations hopeful visions for the future.[2]

1. Moore, "Latin America Was a Place..".
2. Bergdoll, *Latin America in Construction*, 17.

An earlier exhibition at the MoMA, *Latin American Architecture since 1945*, curated by architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock in 1955, reported excitedly on the rapid growth of Latin American cities while celebrating this region's architects' links to European and, increasingly, North-American models of practice.[3] This openly Anglo- and Euro-centric lens contrasts with Bergdoll's, who grants Latin American architects a greater degree of autonomy — updating the rhetoric of one-directional development that transpires in Hitchcock's rendition with a globalist one wherein Latin American architects have found a voice of their own. However, despite the attempt to emancipate Southern practitioners from European and North-American influences, the narrative arc, structure, and key themes remain. Referring to Latin America's urbanization after 1945, Bergdoll notes that "[f]or the first time, architecture and urban planning in Latin America — in particular in Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela — seemed not the belated reflection of examples set in Europe or in the Americas north of the Rio Grande but provisos of a modernization *to come*: lessons from the "underdeveloped" world (as the region was classified after 1945 in the debates over models of development) useful even for the "developed" world to contemplate in the 1950s and 60s".[4] This evolving portrayal of the region shows that Latin American architecture was then, and remains now, the *future*.[5]

But whose future? And, more importantly, how do these images relate to the inevitably richer and more complicated realities of the present? Our main aim in this article is to offer some materials to explore these questions, which we approach through two frames, which are at once local and global. First, we seek to understand Latin American architecture's place in the architectural imaginary not merely as an outsiders' account, but rather as the combined expression of global expectations and local efforts to embrace — rhetorically, at least — architecture's social and political agencies as part of a broader "social turn" in the discipline. Second, we seek to delineate how these images are produced in the context of the architectural profession's long-standing entanglement with political narratives and nation-building projects. Rather than a comprehensive review, we use these frames to ask whose future contemporary Latin American architecture is purported to represent, and what present, and alternative futures, may be obscured by it.

With the phrase "magical modernism", which invokes "magical realism" — a literary movement associated with Latin American authors who combined in their work realistic and fantastic elements — we draw a playful parallel between the mechanisms of literary and urban fiction. We offer it as a critical conceptual handle for representations of Latin American cities that combine elements of reality with those of magic, such as discourses that portray urban transformations as "miraculous".[6] Our use of the term resembles but differs from the phrase "magical urbanism" proposed by historian and urban theorist Mike Davis, who uses it to explore demographic, cultural, urban, and political implications of what he terms the "Latinization" of the United States.[7] Our use emphasizes instead the rhetorical disclosures of specifically Latin American architecture, embraced by Anglo American and European observers, as agents of social and urban change.

Sleek Utopianism in the Discipline's Social Turn

Stories about architecture in the 1990s and early 2000s often celebrated formal explorations enabled by software-based design processes. The rising tides, halting economies, rapid urbanization, and increasing inequality characterizing the first decade of the 21st century, however, triggered discernable shifts in architectural discourse and practice.[8]

3. In fact, Hitchcock's overview of Latin American architecture mostly sees its nineteenth and early 20th century developments as reverberations of European and US movements as, for example, a "belated expression of the team of the Ecole des Beaus Arts" (p. 16).
4. Bergdoll, *Latin America in Construction*, p. 17. Emphasis ours.
5. As architecture critic Michael Kimmelman concisely put it in a review of the MoMA show for the New York Times, "the region is, once again, the future." See Kimmelman, "Review: 'Latin America'.
6. International coverage of the so-called "Medellín Miracle," for example, has been widespread. See for example CMoss, "Medellín, Colombia"; O'Hanlon and Pearce, "Once a Drug Den" . For critical scholarly perspectives examining the more contingent political processes that unpinning these transformations see K. Maclean, *Social Urbanism and the Politics of Violence*. For a detailed assessment of the rhetoric of the "miraculous" in international and local rhetoric media to describe socio-spatial changes associated with the strategy of "Social Urbanism" in Medellín see Taylor Davey, "Medellín's Miracle".
7. Davis' use of the term valuably emphasizes the impact of Latin migrations in United States' cities, emphasizing the unlikely cross-border, transcultural juxtapositions in "national temporalities, settlement forms, ecologies, and levels of development." See Davis, "Magical Urbanism". p. 16. See also Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism*.
8. Contributing to this problematic context is the more recent resurgence of ethno-nationalisms during this century's second decade, along with a reactionary aesthetics that promises to "make architecture beautiful again." McGuigan, "Will the White House,"

Simply put, socio-environmental urgencies made speculation — both geometric and economic — less palatable. Political sensibilities in the discipline started to gain prominence relative to formal ones, underscoring the importance of critically engaging with issues of, for example, labor, environmental responsibility, and sociopolitical agency.[9] With these shifts as a background, Latin American architectural and urban projects have re-appeared as illustrations — particularly in the United States and Europe's popular press, academic circles, and curatorial circuits — of architecture's potential to reconcile formal experimentation with a progressive social agenda.

Northern interest in Latin American architecture and urban design codifies a kind of cross-equatorial tension, or desire. One of its positive effects is to have fostered more diverse professional and academic continental networks, and enriched Anglo-American and European architectural discussions, lecture circuits, and architecture faculties with Southern perspectives. While popular understandings of architectural modernism in the United States tend to gravitate towards images of urban decay, Southern modernities seemed to offer a bargain where iconic designs could coexist, successfully, with a social agenda. The work of architects such as Chile's Pritzker prize winner Alejandro Aravena, Venezuela's Urban Think Tank, Colombia's Giancarlo Mazzanti, and — North of the Rio Grande — California-based architect and activists Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman, among many others, exemplify this particular brand of sleek utopianism. Caracas-based architect Alfredo Brillembourg, from Urban Think Tank, for example, sees architects as top-down social advocates, and calls students to "[invent] a new lexicon to explain to those in power the urban condition, the decay, the informality, in better terms, in terms that they can understand".[10] While working in North-America, Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman have studied closely the US-Mexico border, casting informal processes of urbanization as opportunities for a "collective imagination as these communities re-imagine their own forms of governance… prompting a new democratic politics of the urban".[11] The fact that their projects are regularly featured in the international popular press, and in a profusion of exhibitions, symposia, lectures, as well as traveling architecture studios and planning study-tours, is an important communicative success of these practitioners — and of their ability to form broad networks comprising not just architects but also journalists, civic organizations, curators, academics, and politicians.[12] The imaginary of Latin America as a site of progressive architectural and urban innovation is thus underpinned by rhetorical practices, political projects, and career pathways as diverse as the region itself.

Recognizing how Latin American architecture came to be, *again*, the future, entails recognizing architecture's crucial discursive dimension. While every architectural and urban project performs indexically beyond its programmatic functions — to encode, for example, conceptions of citizenship, of power, and of the relationship between the public and private spheres — long-standing concerns about national identity and statehood uniquely underpin stories about Latin American architecture and urban design as agents of social change. There's much to learn from architecture's representational politics as buildings come to enact the region's nation-building agendas along with the aspirations of new professional and academic groups. Nowhere is the entanglement of architectural and political visions clearer than in Colombia, a South American country with a complicated history of violent internal political conflicts and drug war combined with long-standing compliance with US foreign policy dictates.[13]

Another Boom: Architecting a Different Colombia

Aligning physical and ideological infrastructures

The reinvention of Colombia into a beacon of democracy and urban entrepreneurialism is supported by a powerful alignment of political and architectural visions. Over the last twenty years, a broad spectrum of state and non-state actors including architects and planners, academics, and journalists in Colombia have been invested in transforming narratives of conflict, poverty, and urban informality

9. See, for example, Deamer and Levinson, "Architectural Workers,"; Graham et al., *And Now: Architecture Against*,; Cayer et al., *Asymmetric Labors: The Economy*,; Riano, "Relearning the Social: Architecture,".
10. Design Indaba, "Alfredo Brillembourg: Design Can"
11. See "Teddy Cruz: How Architectural," and Cruz and Forman, "Disruptive Praxis.
12. See, for instance: Palacio, "Colombia Transformed.". Furuto, "'Breaking Borders: New Latin,". "Crown Hall Roundtables: Emerging Voices."
13. See, for example Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia*.

into a brighter image of social engagement, crime-reduction, economic integration, entrepreneurialism, and community empowerment.[14] Borrowing from Lefebvre, anthropologist Ahmed Kanna has used the term *urbanist* to refer to this larger social group involved in the production of space. In this context, *urbanism* refers not only to the physical production of cities, but also to the discursive practices surrounding them: "an ideology and a set of discourses consisting of representations deployed in specific projects of the imagination of the urban".[15] Comprising local and international actors from a range of government, industry, and academic origins, Colombia's "urbanists", including star mayors and entrepreneurial architects, as well as voices from academia and from an expanding middle class eager to escape stereotypes of violence and corruption and to participate in the global economy, converge in projects that work to strengthen a new national, and distinctly urban, identity. Specifically, as Luisa Sotomayor discusses in relation to her research in Medellin, spatial strategies have been deployed by municipal governments within contexts where state legitimacy and agency are otherwise limited by histories of state and non-state violence, criminality, marginalization, and profound social inequality. Spatial planning and, particularly, "social urbanism", in these cases, is seen to "(transform) neighborhoods perceived as unruly". Following Sotomayor, we might also ask how architectural projects and their accompanying discourses operate alongside other forms of urban planning and policy experimentation "to delimit micro-territories of state action" (but which ultimately fail to address the entrenched and renewing forms of violence, inequality, and, dispossession).[16]

A closer look at some projects helps illustrate how architecture is deployed materially and discursively in support of Colombia's renewal. It is not our purpose here to fully detail the scope and limitations of these practical interventions, but rather to use them as a window into the articulation, in the Colombian context, of material architectures with the political visions and economic interests that animate them. A secondary purpose is to delineate how the promises of social inclusion and community empowerment common in representations of Colombia's architecture and urbanism act multivalently as global exports, internal consumption goods, and as important elements in the consolidation of local professional actors and organizations. Ultimately, to show that the construction of the image of Latin America and its architecture as socially progressive means that uncomfortable realities can be glossed over and that, in turn, architectural artifacts and discourses giving support to these narratives of renewal are often shielded from critical scrutiny.[17]

Architectures and images of renewal

The *Bosque de la Esperanza* sports center in Bogota, by the office of Colombian architect Giancarlo Mazzanti, is one example of how rhetorical and formal strategies combine in one of the country's most prominent contemporary firms. The project, a somewhat over-structured polyhedral truss sustained by a "forest" of steel columns, sits atop a hill in Altos de Cazuca, a neighborhood in the city's predominately low-income South-West region. As noted by the first author, the project's coverage in the international press echoed the architects' project descriptions, praising it as an example of how architecture can foster "inclusion", "social change", "hope", and help build a different identity for the neighborhood and its inhabitants. This warm reception contrasted with the harsh critiques the project received from the — overwhelmingly conservative — sphere of local architectural commentators, who variously attacked the project as wasteful, inauthentic, or self-promotional.[18] The international attention Mazzanti's projects have successfully attracted make it somewhat emblematic of the dynamics we trace here.

Another example of the intertwining of space and identity-building is the *Parque Biblioteca Publica España*. Also designed by Mazzanti's office, the building is one of a network of publicly funded iconic projects aimed at redressing urban precarity and strengthening the notion of the public in Medellin. Developed with the involvement of the city's inhabitants, these projects were "conceived as instruments of planning and physical intervention with the aim of creating or reconfiguring new centralities in

14. See, for example, Kimmelman, "Fighting Crime With Architecture.".
15. Kanna, "Dubai, the City as Corporation." See also Lefebvre, "The Production of Space." For a discussion of the idea of assemblages in relation to the politics and processes of planning circulations see McCann, Roy, and Ward, "Assembling/Worlding Cities," 581–89.
16. Sotomayor, "Dealing with Dangerous Spaces." p. 72.
17. Arturo Wallace BBC Mundo and Bogotá, "Medellín, ¿la Mejor? ,".
18. Cardoso Llach, "Lessons on Realarchitektur," 142–56.

Figure 2. A 2009 sports center for a low-income neighborhood in Bogota's South West, designed by the office of Colombian architect Giancarlo Mazzanti, is presented as a "forest of hope". Photo credit: Google 2013.

Figure 3. During repairs due to problems with the cladding, the structure of the Parque Biblioteca Pública España was laid bare. The graffiti on the walls surrounding the construction site indicate that the project was creatively re-appropriated by the neighborhood. The building remains closed to this day. Photo by Claudia Villa, 2017.

six zones of [Medellin] where the State accumulates a high social debt".[19] The architecture of the project — three monumental prisms clad in dark stone overseeing the city from atop one of Medellin's surrounding mountains — is meant to signify a larger cultural transformation. In the words of the architect:

> " What we wanted to do was a building that would be visible, and that would in some way represent the entire transformation of what Medellin meant. [...] This project attacks the visual, this project is an image. Its interior works as it should and relates lifestyles, but the visual is the key, which causes the community to take ownership of it. This building is part of saying how we propitiate a different life, and how we can propitiate it in purely visual terms."[20]

The explicit emphasis on the visual and iconic character of the project is worthy of note. Aside from its functional attributes as a library, the project's key aim is to re-signify the landscape and offer elements to create a new urban identity, through a form that "communicat(es) dignity and recognition amongst residents of the city's periphery".[21] Missing in the architect's statement, however, is the recognition that this iconic enterprise operates not only at a local level, but also (and perhaps primarily) at a global one. The imagery of the project, with its apt use of contemporary architectural form-making strategies, along with its associated ideas about empowering marginalized communities, circulates easily in the usual channels of architectural dissemination. It is tempting to conclude that the imagery of the project is designed with those two audiences in mind — or, in fact, that the project *is* the imagery. However, in 2013, only six years after its inauguration, the black plates that comprised the library's iconic form began to fall and break, at times even causing injuries. The façade plates were entirely removed in 2014 after an assessment revealed the shortcomings of the cladding structure, its diagonally oriented members now laid bare around the more conventional floor plates and concrete cores, exposing also a less than glamorous underside of what once appeared as a powerful symbol of urban and social transformation.[22] The continuing decay of the Parque Biblioteca Pública España in the *Santo Domingo* neighborhood of Medellin's *Comuna 2* casts a shadow on the narratives that place miraculous architectures at the center of processes of urban change.

Observing broader networks

Let us shift focus and consider how architectural projects such as those described above exist in wider social and institutional networks. To do this, we move to Colombia's capital, the Andean city of Bogotá, where, like in Medellin, mayoral politics and architectural visions converge. The administration of two "star-mayors" in the 1990s and 2000s, Antanas Mockus and Enrique Peñalosa, help illustrate this. Along with Medellin's Sergio Fajardo, these two politicians figure prominently in international architectural and urban planning lecture circuits, and their work is frequently discussed in urban planning circles as examples of innovative urban governance. As recently as 2019, to give but one example, they were featured prominently in a lecture by architects Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman at Carnegie Mellon University, hailed as key agents of a spatial and cultural transformation in their cities.

Antanas Mockus is often seen as the catalyst of a cultural, rather than physical, transformation of the city. His policies, the story goes, transformed a city's psyche to embrace co-existence and respect for life as fundamental values. Mockus was mayor first between 1995 and 1997, and later, in a second term, between 2001 and 2003.[23] His administrations are often remembered for his penchant for symbolism and pedagogical tricks, and for a governing philosophy oriented towards rebuilding cultural and civic structures through informal, seemingly insignificant measures aimed at activating people's personal experiences within large-scale planning strategies: a politics of regulation through participation.[24]

19. Echeverri and Orsini 2010, cited in: Barbosa da Silva, "Public Spaces Network:."
20. "Maravillas de Colombia." Translation from Barbosa da Silva, "Public Spaces Network."
21. Davey, "Medellín's Miracle," 246.
22. Urban scholar Taylor Davey, drawing from the Colombian journalist Jaime Dario Zapata Villarreal, suggests that the library reveals the "complicated negotiation the project had with the community from its inception" and the tensions between feelings of pride and distrust that residents expressed about the project.See Davey, 260. See also Jaime Dario Zapata Villarreal, "Así fue 'la película' de la Biblioteca España," *El Mundo*, February 26, 2017, https://www.elmundo.com/noticia/Asi-fuela-peliculade-la-Biblioteca-Espana/47193.
23. Mockus's ascent into Colombian politics started with his defiant (and televised) act of pulling his pants down to quiet an auditorium full of rowdy students while he was president of Colombia's Universidad Nacional, the country's largest public university, in 1993. While Mockus gained national prominence and won a second term as mayor, he later ran unsuccessfully for president of the country representing the liberal Partido Verde. For a documentary overviewing this politician's career and his failed 2010 presidential bid, see Martinez Escallon, "La Ola Verde (Antanas' Way)."

Some of the experimental policies of his administration included traffic safety strategies deploying professional mime artists in place of traffic policemen on the streets to embarrass, rather than fine, traffic offenders; public disciplining tactics such as "citizens cards" that allowed ordinary people to approve (thumbs up) or discourage (thumbs down) civic behavior; and the implementation of "voluntary taxes".[25] Reflecting a common view of Mockus's tenure and achievements in the country, architecture critic Justin McGuirk situates Mockus' legacy in the mind of Bogotá's citizens: "[h]is intervention", he writes, "was in the moral DNA of the city".[26] More than 20 years after his second mandate, this perceived legacy remains an important trope in the city's local elections, with candidates often claiming the mantle of Mockus's signature "citizen culture" administration and promising to make, at least in these limited terms, Bogota great again.

Intertwined with Mockus's two mayoral terms are the two terms served by another "star mayor", Enrique Peñalosa, who succeeded Mockus in 1998 and then gained a second term in 2017. In contrast with Mockus, whose administration is seen through the lens of cultural transformation, Peñalosa's are often seen through the lens of physical and infrastructural change. Key to these transformations was the implementation, during his first term, of a city-wide Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system called "Transmilenio" — whose stations and bridges were also designed by Mazzanti's office. Peñalosa won his second term running on the platform of the perceived successes of his first administration, and on its perceived affinity with Mockus's "citizen culture".

In contrast with Mockus's image as a pedagogue, Peñalosa cultivated an image of a technocratic manager with concrete results. However, it is worth noting that, despite running on an ostensibly progressive rhetoric emphasizing the collective value of public infrastructures, such as parks and transportation networks, Peñalosa's two terms were the subject of harsh criticism from local progressive and environmentalist groups. During his second term, for example, his repeated attempts to challenge the legal protections to one of Bogota's largest natural reserves, in a bid to extend urban development northwards, attracted widespread criticism from the country's scientific and academic communities, as well as from environmentalist groups — whose activism ultimately helped protect the reserve.[27] Peñalosa's image as a "technocrat" was further marred when journalists reported that despite presenting himself as a PhD on multiple occasions and publications throughout his career, he never actually earned a doctorate.[28] Peñalosa, however, remains an international presence as a consulting authority on urban issues, particularly those linked to urban mobility and transportation, in both academic and professional circles.

In March 2015, for example, Peñalosa was invited to Karachi, Pakistan, to talk to planners, policy-makers and citizen groups about the planning and implementation of BRT lines in Bogotá during his tenure. As the four BRT routes planned for Karachi in 2010 by Japanese consultants started to inch towards realization, Peñalosa's involvement was widely celebrated by the Pakistani press — who hailed him as a "BRT Guru".[29] In fact, for those living in a city drastically divided along class, ethnic, and political lines, Peñalosa's central message — that the share of road space in a city is a matter of democracy, urban equity, and social justice, rather than simply technical design — resonated powerfully.[30] Further, a certain parallelism made the comparison between Bogota and Karachi appealing to locals, despite their different sizes.[31] Like Karachi, Colombia's capital has a long history of political instability and violent crime, and so, for Karachiites, Bogota's story seemed to offer a functional and hopeful object lesson.[32]

24. Mockus, "The Art of Changing a City."
25. Silva Nigrinis, "Bogotá: de la construcción."
26. Justin McGuirk, "Radical Cities: Across Latin America," 201.
27. For an overview of the natural reserve, see: González and Felipe, "Cinturones verdes: el papel." For an English summary of Peñalosa's proposal and subsequent controversy see Buckley, "Bogotá's Thomas van Der Hammen." Afanador and Carrillo, "Enrique Peñalosa has been lying."
28. For a detailed account of Peñalosa's academic credential scandal see: Afanador and Carrillo, "Enrique Peñalosa has been lying."
29. Maher, "Public Transport: BRTS Guru.".
30. *Ibid.*
31. While Bogotá is a populous capital with an estimated thirteen million inhabitants in its metropolitan region, Karachi is a 20 million people megalopolis.
32. Notwithstanding the fact that it is usually cities like Dubai and Shanghai that are frequently circulated as models within contemporary urban development practices across South Asia.

Figure 4. Enrique Peñalosa, former Mayor of Bogotá visits Karachi. Photo Credit: Mahim Maher.

Despite Peñalosa's well-crafted message of equity and democracy through public-minded urban infrastructure, the global movement of international urban experts — of which he is a prominent member — deserves attention and should not get a carte blanche. It is important to note that the visit by the former Bogotá mayor to Karachi was not at the request of the city government, but was in fact organized and funded by a company under the aegis of the Asian Development Bank, Bahria Town — a company with a financial interest in procuring the contract for one of the BRT lines.[33] As the largest developer of private housing real-estate in the country, Bahria Town's name is synonymous with some of the most expansive — and expensive — gated communities not just in Pakistan, but in all of Asia. In its short but prolific history, the company's land developments have gained a reputation for building "a state within a state", a rhetoric that appeals to the increasingly paranoid Pakistani middle-upper classes. Erecting tall, guarded walls segregating its gated communities, forcefully evicting and dispossessing indigenous people, and flouting environmental concerns, Bahria Town represents the very antithesis of Peñalosa's discourse of urban sustainability and equity.[34] As the former mayor's clout helped gloss over these uncomfortable details, various actors, both public and private, vied for the BRT contracts.[35] This seemingly contradictory alliance is an example of how, in a neo-liberal context, problematic structures, compromises, citationary practices, and political alliances underlie the urbanist visions comprising today's dominant design and planning discourses. On a more specific note, it is an example of how the image of Latin American cities and infrastructures as realizations of progressive and socially-minded politics can work to hide — while extending — other ideological and political projects.

Some critical considerations

Instead of focusing on charismatic figures, we may usefully focus on wider networks of policy-making, design, academia, and media that position Colombian cities, specifically, and Latin American ones, more broadly, within global discourses about architecture and urbanism, and as exemplars for the challenges of contemporary urbanization. How should stories about Latin American architecture reflect this broader scope? Here, McGuirk provides useful illustration. Proposing Medellín as a "radical city", he places the emphasis not on designers but on a broader network of actors shaping the city's transforma-

33. In its unsolicited efforts to be awarded the contract, Bahria Town in fact hired consultants from Bogota to start designing certain parts of the system. See Maher, "Mass Transit: Global BRTS"; and "Of Bogota and Karachi.".

34. See Khan and Karak, "Urban Development by Dispossession," 307–30, The company has incited controversy over its partnership with the country's powerful military, and serious allegations of land encroachment and corruption. See also Magnier, "Pakistan Gated Community."

35. Peñalosa has also received criticism in Bogotá for designing the BRT systems in a way that forced the city to pay for most of the maintenance to the buses and their infrastructure, while private operators pocket most of the profits.

36. McGuirk, "Radical Cities," 236–7.

Figure 5. A cable car in Medellín connects the downtown area and a "comuna". Photo credit: Ateya Khorakiwala 2010.

tion, in particular the way the city as a community engaged the politics of urban change. Citing Jorge Perez, head of urban planning under Mayor Sergio Fajardo, McGuirk points that "while architecture was the most visible tool in this process, what really mattered was the commitment of a network of politicians and entrepreneurs to building, and paying for, a new future for Medellín".[36] This process, under the broader planning and policy strategy of "social urbanism", de-emphasizes the role of a single politician and instead highlights the collective efforts placed on the city's reconstruction.[37] Similarly, rather than focusing on the iconic designs (or on Fajardo, whose well-practiced rhetoric of urban renewal McGuirk spots) he notes how,

> "the lesson of Medellín lies not in the power of libraries and plazas but in the network of political, civic and entrepreneurial agents that gave rise to them. The architecture was merely an expression of that network, and that was the source of its social capital."[38]

As this example suggests, the production of urbanist visions is not exclusive to star-mayors or even charismatic architects and urban planners, although, as we have discussed, these figures are frequently in the spotlight. It involves a diverse set of practices and social groups, including policy-makers, journalists, activist, critics, lawyers, academics, proselytizers and citizens whose practices constitute what urban scholars refer to as "assemblage work": the relational and dynamic processes of city-making in a global context where these actors engage in formal and informal networks of learning and teaching about different cities, and constantly re-combine and collage policy ideas and imaginations from places near and far.[39]

However, in addition to these circuits of exchange, it is also important to examine the circumstances that situate urban and policy actors and their ideas in particular contexts.[40] The case of Bogota's "citizen culture" ascribed to Mockus is a useful illustration. While politically profitable, the mantle of "citizen culture" is not without its problems, and we may usefully ponder whether the attribution of such a broad idea to the figure of Mockus is accurate, analytically productive, or indeed beneficial to the city itself. While aspects of Mockus's mandate were indeed innovative, and positive urban transformations during the two terms have been

37. For an overview of the term, see Dolan, "Radical Responses".

38. *Ibid.*, 257.

39. Eugene McCann, Ananya Roy, and Kevin Ward use the term *assemblage* to highlight the circulation and confluence of different urban ideas, models, and strategies, as well as their material and spatial outcomes. McCann, Roy, and Ward, "Assembling/Worlding Cities," 581–89. Sergio Montero discusses particular practices of "inter-city policy learning," specifically as framed within the discourse of South-South exchange, in his examination of study tours to Bogotá by policy actors from Guadalajara, Mexico. Montero, "Study Tours and Inter-City," 332–50. See also Montero, "Worlding Bogotá's Ciclovía,," 111–31.

40. This entails attention to "the embeddedness and operation of policies and policy actors in specific places." McCann, Roy, and Ward, "Assembling/Worlding Cities." 584.

Figure 6. *Medellin's Casa de la Música* is a public with rehearsal rooms and other spaces to incentivize the arts in the city. Designed by Felipe Uribe de Bedout and finished in 2004. Here, the building is decorated with traditional Christmas lights and religious motifs.
Photo Credit: Daniel Cardoso Llach 2010.

well documented,[41] *Bogotanos* may harbor a healthy dose of skepticism towards stories portraying him as a messianic figure who taught them how to be citizens and ask whether human traits such as empathy and respect for human life were truly absent in the city prior to his election. More problematically, casting Mockus as an enlightened outsider bestowing wisdom upon people, as these narratives often do, unhelpfully places him outside (and above) the citizenry he represents. This trope is an expression of a historic reliance on a leader's personality to explain social change. The Spanish word *caudillo*, often used in Latin America to describe charismatic leaders with authoritarian inclinations, seems fitting.

The materials assembled so far show how the stories that accompany the notion of Latin America as "the future" of architecture can hide complex urban and political dynamics, and suggest that our understanding of those very architectures might be enriched by paying closer attention to their broader context. How may we eschew overarching myths of magical urbanism and, instead, find nuance, reveal difference, and specificity?

On the one hand, we may first question the narratives assigning certain actors — typically white male politicians, architects or planners — a disproportionate or even epic role in a city's transformation. These personality-focused analyses tend to obscure the complicated, negotiated and messy processes shaping urban policy — and cities themselves. On the other, it is worth remembering that, aside from yielding attractive buildings, and triggering urban dynamics worthy of analysis, regimes of architectural, urban, and discourse production generate exposure and other career benefits to politicians and architectural professionals. As Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells writes, "innovative urban policy does not result from great urbanists (although they are indeed needed), but from courageous urban politics able to mobilize citizens around the meaning of their environment".[42] As we have seen, the notion of Latin America as both "the future" and a place where "modernist dreams came true" is not merely romantic and vaguely condescending, but also inscribes a wishful rationalization. It forces a complex and diverse reality into an ideologically distinct idea of modernity. Just as orientalist discourses essentialize vastly diverse cultural, urban and geographic landscapes into easily transmissible cultural stereotypes,[43] the image of Latin America as an arcadia of radical modernism — as a mythical place where twentieth century utopias are in fact realized and flourish — reduces a region with diverse national identities and political histories to a fiction that sometimes works, consciously or not, in support of free-market urban ideologies.[44] Relentlessly searching for an 'El Dorado' of architecture and urbanism, and mining the region for success stories apt for global consumption, the cross-national professional and academic networks that emphasize the view of Latin America as "the future" of architecture and urbanism might be contributing to the perpetuation of urbanist models that reproduce, or at least gloss over, ongoing urban inequities.

41. Silva Nigrinis, "Bogotá: de la construcción."
42. Castells, "Space of Flows, Space of Places," 582.
43. , "Orientalism."
44. Moore, "'Latin America Was a Place.'"

Conclusion

This article has approached critically the portrayal of Latin American architecture by the international architectural community as "the future" of architecture. Exploring alignments of architectural and political projects in some widely circulated architectural and urban projects in Colombian cities, we have contributed materials to complicate this narrative, and to help make visible links across the architectural, the political, and the ideological that challenge fictive, or magical, representations of urban change. We have urged, instead, to develop a critical sensibility that observes wider networks of architectural and discourse production and which takes distance from explanations that rely on the prowess of individual architects or politicians. We believe this is important for architecture. Through this de-centered perspective, architects may be better equipped to reflect on their own position within larger political and ideological projects, and mobilize with renewed conscience their considerable capacities for critique and speculation. We believe that architectural knowledge, skills, and media can be mobilized for environmental and political change. However, to achieve this, a broader framework is necessary that nurtures more self-conscious speculations whose beneficiaries are made explicit, and whose consequences are more closely scrutinized.

We are aware of the complexities these propositions entail, especially as they can be seen to imperil a profession too dependent on the fluctuations of economy and power. We offer them as aspirations, fully knowing that they run counter to deeply ingrained professional instincts — instincts that make architecture a profoundly conservative profession. We believe that acting on these aspirations is urgent if we are to nurture a more critical architectural culture — one that is able to confront pressing ecological challenges and shape the politics of our shared built environment. Perhaps by embracing that complexity and rejecting simplistic narratives, the contribution of Latin American architecture and architects to building more sustainable and equitable futures can be seen in a new light.

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