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ARGENTINA BETWEEN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES: THE PATH TO MODERNITY IN ARCHITECTURE /
Ciarcia', Federica. - In: EDA. ESEMPI DI ARCHITETTURA. - ISSN 2035-7982. - ELETTRONICO. - 1:(2021).

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2979682 since: 2023-06-29T09:19:50Z

Publisher:

Aracne Editrice

Published

DOI:

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ARGENTINA BETWEEN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES: THE PATH TO MODERNITY IN ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

The affirmation of Argentine modernity is a process that began at the end of the 19th century and culminated during the first decades of the 20th century, leading to the opening of new cultural debates using a heterogeneous language. The important migratory waves created social and economic instability, transforming the cities into places of experimentation and a building site of modernity, where local print had a central role. The spread of the avant-gardes and the beginnings of the first expressions of the Modern Movement were accompanied by the search for a national culture, through the rediscovery of its own historical roots. Argentina transformed itself into a laboratory of modernity and modernization in architectural and cultural field.

Keywords: Argentina; Modernity; Modern Movement; Experimentation.

In Argentina, between 1880 and 1916, a series of political and social changes took place during a period known as *Orden Conservador* (Botana, 1977). The world was experiencing a period of stability known in Europe as the Belle Époque, and the Argentine state benefitted from this. Indeed, it was a period of great growth for the country, foreign investments and European immigration were beginning a phase of economic affirmation on an international level. Policies favored opening the doors to new immigrants who, in the forty years between 1870 and 1910, had a significant impact on population growth, with an increase of almost 6,000,000 inhabitants, of which 44% were Italians, 31% Spanish, along with lesser numbers of French, Polish and Russian. (Scobie, 1977)

The concern over recent social transformations, a consequence of the migratory waves and the modernizing process that had been experienced since 1880, favored the consolidation of ideological positions such as those of the historian and politician Joaquín Víctor González: the first to relate tradition to the new cosmopolitan evolution of Buenos Aires, binding together the landscape, the folklore, the sociology and the history of the new nation.

The year 1880, as defined by the historian Félix Luna, was a ‘foundation’ year (Luna, 1993) for the country, for several reasons: first, it was the year in which the city of Buenos Aires changed its role, after which the National Congress declared it the capital of the Argentine Republic. A second reason can be attributed to the end of the conquest of the desert by General Julio Argentino Roca. Finally, it was the beginning of a mercantilist policy, which established the Argentine *peso* on the world markets, transforming Argentina into the first Latin American power. These reasons allow us

to reflect on the uneven development of the state. In fact, while power was centralized and consolidated, welcoming new labor through the important migratory waves, the Patagonian region, inhabited by indigenous peoples, tried to defend its autonomy.



Fig.1. *Complex Silos, Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires.*

Boletín de Obras Públicas de la República Argentina”, n. 21, Buenos Aires, 1936, p.70

Between 1880 and 1914, about twenty German construction companies and construction materials vendors opened branches in Argentina; a fundamental element in the transformation of local construction systems. The first imports of metal elements for construction through Thyssen-Krupp date back to the 1890s. The development of new technologies was also adopted for agricultural production methods. Grain storage silos, a traditional type of construction, were reimagined for the new scale of production and complex modern transportation systems.

In 1902 the German engineer Ernest Stricker designed and built a new system of mega silos for the Dutch multinational company Bunge & Born, consisting of a mill, silos and an elevation system, in the new port of the city, Puerto Madero, near the 3rd dock, in Dique III.

In the first years of the 20th century, the commemoration of the Centenary of the *Revolución de Mayo* and the independence process from Spain triggered the need for a unified national culture and the search for an Argentine identity. In this context, the two figures considered to be the founders of Argentine nationalism are the writers Ricardo Rojas and Manuel Gálvez. The first assumed a significant position, focusing on recent Argentine transformations and considering the lack of history and traditions demonstrated by some immigrants to be dangerous. He supported the importance of having a state promoter of a ‘historical-national’ culture: ‘The moment urgently requires the impression on our education of a nationalist character through history and the

humanities' (Rojas, 1909). Furthermore, he argued that education should serve as protector of society to form collective memory, national consciousness and language.

Reflecting on the physical transformation of the city, on the one hand he criticized the plurality of languages and styles, which allowed progress and uncontrolled growth, while on the other he reflected on the positive role of the city, understood as an educational space in which the citizen is educated through it, in a passive form. Rojas argued that the city needed transformations which would restore the image lost in previous decades. In his interpretation the urban space would be transformed into an educational stage through the insertion of statues and monuments, a revision of the decorative apparatus and a transformation of the names of streets and squares.

In 1913 Walter Gropius published an article in the notebooks of "Deutscher Werkbund" in which, presenting a series of photographs, he took up the prototype of the silos built in Buenos Aires and in other Argentine cities as well as those in North America and Canada. Gropius identified the silos as an avant-garde symbol and the same view was taken up seven years later by Le Corbusier in the first article on "L 'Esprit Nouveau", which presented an image the same as Bunge & Born had made in the Argentine capital.

1916, which represents the end of the *Orden Conservador*, marked a significant socio-political change; the radicals won the presidential elections with the first government of Hipólito Yrigoyen ending in 1922. Moreover, it was the year of the first democratic elections, which took place thanks to a law sanctioned in 1912, the *Ley Sáenz Peña*, which allowed the introduction of universal suffrage with secret and mandatory voting. It was the beginning of a new era for this geographical region: with the transformation of the role of Buenos Aires, the redefinition of social structures and the establishment of the middle class, the cultural and architectural parameters were renewed. These three decades are emblematic of the birth of modern Argentina.

The opening phase for the importation of new construction materials and technological systems from Europe was suspended with the outbreak of the First World War. In fact, in 1917 Argentina suffered restrictions on steel imports, forcing the metallurgical industry to develop alternative local products. Thus, the contributions from German architectural culture in Argentina were interrupted, in particular those of some technological companies which had settled in the capital previously, such as Philipp Holzmann, Wayss & Freytag and Siemens-Bauunion.

Between 1916 and 1922 there was a change of government, despite the fact that the radicals remained in power, moving from the first presidency of Hipólito Yrigoyen to that of Marcelo Torcuato Alvear and then ending in a new government of Yrigoyen until the coup d'état of 1930.

While the post-war world crisis was ravaging the European continent, Argentina was experiencing a decade of historical positivism with significant economic development resulting from agro-exports and important cultural growth, stimulated by the influence of the European avant-gardes, responsible for the founding of several literary magazines.

The Argentine avant-garde movement played a role opposite to those elsewhere in Latin America, in fact it did not adhere to any revolutionary process, did not claim the mantle of indigenous culture and did not seek regionalism. In contrast, Buenos Aires monopolized the Argentine avant-garde, where artists and writers such as the writer Ricardo Güiraldes and his Don Segundo Sombra, the works of Borges, both in prose and in verse and the work of the poet Oliverio Girondo evoked the Argentine traditions adhering to the *criollista* movement (Marechal, 1948) widespread in several Latin American countries.

Local magazines as a scenario of a moving society

The writer Borges returned to Argentina, after having lived several years in Europe, and in 1921 he published in the literary magazine “Nosotros”, founded in 1907, a manifesto entitled *Ultraismo*; proposing a Spanish version of the avant-garde trends that renewed European art and literature of the first decades of the twentieth century.

In February 1924 the first issue of the latest edition of the most successful two-month Argentine critical periodical, the “Martín Fierro” (Katchadjian, 2007) was published. It inherited its name from a publication dating back to 1919 that dealt with issues of political satire and social problems, also directed by Argentine intellectual Evar Méndez. In the new edition, authors such as the architect Alberto Prebisch (Novick, 1998) and the main Argentine artists and writers named after the 1922 generation participated in the editorial, including Francisco Luis Bernardez, Jorge Luis Borges, Raúl González Tuñón, Xul Solar, and Leopoldo Marechal.

The magazine was among the most revolutionary of the time because it was the promoter of a movement, called *Martínfierrismo* which proposed a break with the institutions and habits that already existed in the cultural field, claimed “the Argentineanity” and denounced the art market.

“Martín Fierro” arose in a moment in which the influences of romanticism and the last traces of academicism were still alive. In its pages there was a constant reference to the poems of Guillaume Apollinaire, to the art of Paul Cezanne and Pablo Picasso, to the architectural proposals of Le Corbusier and the works of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schönberg. In this context, a group of intellectuals nicknamed ‘*criticos martifierristas*’ (González, 1961) were established and amongst those worthy of note was the architect Alberto Prebisch. Among the exponents of European modernity, he was inspired by two figures: on the one hand, Paul Valéry, who, starting with the work *Eupalinos, ou the Architecte*, exalted the new aesthetic research and elevated the intellectual role of the architect, calling him responsible for the great act of building.

The other figure on which Prebisch drew for inspiration was Tony Garnier, one of the most illustrious architects of the late nineteenth century, who sought a synthesis between architecture and urban planning, and in 1904 exhibited his utopian project for Paris, the *Cité Industrielle*. Le Corbusier himself appeared to be an admirer and besides visiting him in Lyon in 1907, he mentioned him in one of his first articles (Le Corbusier, 1920) on “L’Esprit Nouveau”, defining him as the forerunner of the new architecture.

The most significant moments for Prebisch’s training as an architect and critical supporter of the Modern Movement can be analyzed in distinct phases. The first took place during his university career when he was awarded and published in the “Revista de Arquitectura” and participated in the designing taller of René Karman (Gutiérrez, 1984), a French professor who arrived in Argentina in 1913, and who in his course emphasized the study of rationality of the formal composition, regular compositional layouts and consideration of the functional dimension. The second took place between 1922 and 1924 and coincided with his European journey where he and his colleague Ernesto Vautier were confronted with a dynamic cultural world, which influenced their career in a decisive way.

In this context, Le Corbusier presented the Contemporary City project for three million inhabitants and the first model of *Casa Citrohan* at the *Salon d’Automne* in Paris. In those years, the first edition of *Vers une architecture* was published and Valéry published *Eupalinos, ou the Architecte*.

Upon returning from their European journey, the two architects began to collaborate with “Martín Fierro”, contributing to the dissemination, understanding and defense of the aesthetic principles linked to the new European and North American criticism. Prebisch claimed that this new aesthetic must be sought based on its functional value and not on compositional characteristics.

Prebisch and Vautier became the authors of a special section of “Martín Fierro”, dedicated to art and architecture that took various names: *Sección Arte Americano*, *Fantasia y Cálculos*, *Arte decorativo y arte falso*, *Como decíamos ayer ...*, *ARTE DECORATIVO?*.

Prebisch and Vautier criticized all the artists who did not adhere to these new theories and who on the contrary presented decadent proposals, such as the eclectic style used for the luxurious Petit Hotels or Art Nouveau, which became the style used for the decorative facade apparatus and interiors of the houses of the Argentine middle class. “Martín Fierro” recognized the presence of a renewing spirit that did not try to insert a political proposal, which could be found in some Mexican avant-gardes.

The fundamental characteristic of the Argentinian avant-gardes was the urban imagination that was shaped by a fascination for speed in the futurist case, or in its opposite as in pure modern spaces. The demographic explosion of the beginning of the century substantially changed Buenos Aires and consequently the perception of its inhabitants. It also identified two trends with respect to the relationship with the urban landscape: on the one hand those who sought to recover the rocky environment and the suburbs; on the other the city’s supporters, like the perception expressed by the two painters Xul Solar and Emilio Pettoruti.

Between 1928 and 1929 the Argentine artist Alfredo Guttero, after twenty years spent in Italy, produced several works whose key subjects were the industrial landscapes and portals that represented the Buenos Aires of the new century and the influence of futurism evident in the *Novecentista* group.

In 1931 the last of the most significant literary magazines of the decade was published, the magazine “Sur”, founded by an aristocratic Argentine writer, Victoria Ocampo. It lasted for more than fifty-five years, - with the last issue coming out in 1985 - becoming a true cultural institution not only for Argentina, but for the whole of Latin America. It was a historical and cosmopolitan magazine which represented a synthesis of the avant-garde of the River Plate region.

Waldo Frank first traveled to Buenos Aires in September 1929, a few weeks before Le Corbusier. The arrival of two figures with such a different cultural vision was particularly significant in this period of avant-garde affirmation. Jorge Francisco Liernur argued that the overlap of the conferences led by the two authors presented an opposition of paradigms. In fact, while the Swiss architect invited the Argentines to rediscover the classical sense of his European past, the American writer proposed the American ideal, in which progressive American theories were united with Latin American spiritualism, as an alternative to a Europe that was by then old and without ideas: ‘One celebrated rationalism and propagandized nothing less than the house as *machiné à habiter* and the other ended reason, the liquidation of freedom’. (Liernur, 1997)

Furthermore, in a 1967 article, Ocampo claimed that Le Corbusier’s journey was not only dictated by the invitation to present ten lectures organized by the institutions that paid the costs of his stay, but also by the possibility of implementing some projects in Buenos Aires with the help of the founder of the magazine.

A new architectural scenario on magazines

The decade of the twenties, besides being particularly innovative for the liveliness of the Argentine cultural world in various arts, is significant for the debates that developed both in the literary field, with a strong political influence, and in the architectural field, where the magazines of architecture became the forum for the greatest clash of different theories.

The editorial output of Buenos Aires accompanied this cultural process. Suffice it to say that between 1900 and 1950, about twenty magazines dedicated to architecture or related disciplines such as construction, urban planning and fine arts were published in the capital. During these years, the first European theories on the Modern Movement were beginning to spread in Argentina and the specialized magazines did not present themselves as the principal means of dissemination; a role that could be attributed to literary magazines, as previously mentioned, or to newspapers. For example the first references to the controversy that arose around the figure of Le Corbusier can be found in the magazines of “La Nación” around 1925; among the articles of “Martín Fierro” published by architects Prebisch and Vautier you can find the first Spanish translation of the *Estética del Ingeniero - Arquitectura* (Prebisch, 1927) chapter of the book *Vers une architecture*; while in “Revista de Arquitectura” an article was published for the first time in 1936 dedicated to Le Corbusier (1936), in which his eighth conference of 17 October 1929 was reviewed.

The main architectural magazines in the country where this debate was particularly evident were “Revista de Arquitectura”, the official magazine of the Sociedad de los Arquitectos, and “Nuestra Arquitectura” its rival. Both based in Buenos Aires but founded in different decades, the first in 1915, at the beginning of Neocolonialism, while the second in August 1929, during the establishment of the first Argentine Modern Movement. The first came to light in 1916, during the period of the celebrations for the Centenary of the end of the war of independence from Spain; during which the two nations were reconciled. Following this event, Americanist theories began to spread, based on the link to the past with local traditions and the rediscovery of the forms and culture of indigenous peoples. In its first issue, in fact, two articles can be found in which this position is particularly evident. On the one hand that of Alejandro Christophersen, who exalted the break with French classicism, a language proposed by the academies of architecture, on the other an article by Martín Noel on the birth of Hispanic American architecture (Noel, 1915). The latter described and enhanced the quality of the Peruvian masters of the era of the Spanish conquest, who knew how to keep alive the architectural traditions of the country, using the words of John Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

In December 1923 Christophersen published an article (1923) in which he reflected on the loss of values of a society that used the skyscraper as an architectural symbol. He also reimagined the difficulties of those who were young of the Classicist Academy when moving away from those teachings in order to develop a vision with independent characteristics.

Meanwhile, the Belgian magazine “7 Arts”, published in Brussels between 1923 and 1929, in its thirteenth issue, dated 29 January 1925, presented an article dedicated to the international Modern Movement and Argentina. In this, it looked at the Contemporary Aesthetics of the Argentinean magazine “Revista de Arquitectura” and the positions of Prebisch and Vautier. It highlighted the face of the local modernity, presenting the project of the *Azucarera City of Tucumán*, designed by the two architects and congratulating them on the result. This underlined that in the most heated phase of the debate between the different positions, the Argentinean Modern Movement, still in its

early stages and without a single defined language, was beginning to be discussed in a European magazine.

At that time, the debate on the adhesion to the first forms of the Argentinean Modern Movement opened, with the article *Tropiezos y dificultades al progreso de las artes nuevas por el Arq. Alejandro Virasoro*, published in the Argentinean architecture magazine “Revista de Arquitectura. Its author, Alejandro Virasoro, clearly described the state of the architectural world of those years criticizing the conservative position of Argentinean architects who continued to copy past architectural styles, transforming the works into hybrids without fighting for progress. According to Virasoro, the main reason for the lack of progress and renewal in architecture was the public and the need to change their way of thinking. In fact, architects, especially at the beginning of their careers, did not argue with the client’s requests, which led to copies of the academic presentations.

Virasoro’s article unleashed a heated debate among the main exponents of the establishment, which saw on one side supporters of academicist theories and on the other those who proposed a break with the past.

In July of the same year, the architect Alberto Coni Molina, president of the Sociedad Central de los Arquitectos of Buenos Aires and a pupil of Christophersen published in “Revista de Arquitectura” a letter of reply to Virasoro. Coni Molina stated in an open letter that if he had been informed of Virasoro’s intentions the article would never have been published; accusing the latter of the consequences he would have had on the members of the *Sociedad Central de los Arquitectos*. Moreover, he was absolutely in contrary to the new proposals, which he defined as futurist and declared himself offended by the accusations of the former. He concluded the letter by declaring his position and inviting his fellow architects to reflect on his words, while urging them to move away from Virasoro’s theories.

In the same issue a second article was published, written by Christophersen, which was probably an answer, even if indirect, to the accusations of Virasoro, in which the latter expressed his position on the importance of the new expression of architecture which must reflect the changes in construction methods and social change without forgetting the importance of its beauty. Although this article did not present itself with the harsh and contrary tones of the first, Christophersen tried to propose a balance between the two antagonistic positions of Virasoro and Coni Molina. He did not agree with the break with the past and with the art expressed in the forms of the decorative apparatus enhanced by Neoclassicism and Neocolonialism.

In 1927 the debate between tradition and modernity culminated with the publication of two articles in the most active magazines of the time. On one side the “Revista de Arquitectura” with an accusatory letter, even if addressed to an anonymous person who appeared to be Prebisch, on the other a response from the latter, published in “Martín Fierro”. The first article was a letter written by Christophersen published in May 1927 and addressed, although it has never been confirmed, to Prebisch. The letter highlights the common opinion that considered the ‘new’ architecture to be the result of the search for absolute functionality and for this reason devoid of decoration considered not to have any function. In fact, the most widespread image of the proposals of the Modern Movement is that of a building, deprived of all its aesthetic influence, reduced to a skeleton of white concrete with openings, as defined by Christophersen. On the other hand, only four years earlier, the latter was the author of the Argentine pavilion at the Rio de Janeiro International Exposition, in which the search for classical proportions and the symmetry of the building that respects the canons proposed by the Academy was evident. Prebisch’s response to these accusations called into question

the real position of the other and his loss of style and of adapting to his principles in the latest works.

In 1931, the same Prebisch, now a recognized member of the *Sociedad Central de los Arquitectos* and spokesman of the *Comisión de Enseñanza*, published in the “Revista de Arquitectura” the text of a conference presented in the *I Salón Anual de Estudiantes*. In this he defined architecture as a ‘functional order phenomenon whose basic elements are constructive’. Moreover, he enhanced the points that defined it, such as the loss of ornamentation, the search for purity of forms, emphasizing that it was not attributed to an attempt to reduce the costs of the works, but for ‘a rigorous intellectual vocation’.

The “Revista de Arquitectura” with this article began to present for the first time a different position to that of the debate now open to everyone’s knowledge.

Among these was the publication, for the first time, of the house of the architect Alejandro Bustillo, designed for the aristocratic Victoria Ocampo in 1928. This was the only one of the presented works that approached the first expression of the Argentine Modern Movement: the façade with pure lines, despite the development of the planimetry was not free and maintained the traditional canons in its internal organization. The building, devoid of decorations and with a free terrace, presented itself with a weighted structure that was still far from the freedom of space proposed by the European Modern Movement.

Up to now, no reference has been made to the state of architecture on an international level and to the new proposals that invaded the European market in the first Argentine architecture magazine.

In August 1929 Walter Hylton Scott founded and first published “Nuestra Arquitectura”, occupying the role of representative of modernity and becoming the major center for debate between tradition and modernity. This second Argentine architecture magazine was transformed into the main vehicle of diffusion of the Le Corbusierian orthodoxy.

An article in its first issue described its objectives, starting from the title For himself, to serve art and industry and enhancing the principles of modernization, with the value of industry and technology at the service of man (Martínez Nespral, 1998).

In the same issue appeared an article by Arturo Beach Ward, entitled *Arquitectura moderna*, defining as modern architecture all the new proposals that followed one another and evolved after the Napoleonic period, taking all the ideas presented in Paris at the *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs* of 1925 as a premier example.

Despite the obvious search for a style that represented the society of the twentieth century, with its transformations and new needs, it was still a long way from those new principles that defined the Modern Movement in Europe.

The third issue of the magazine, published in October of the same year, saw an article dedicated to Le Corbusier, who in that period stayed in Buenos Aires, in which for the first time his biography, the five points of the Modern Movement were briefly described, along with the works completed up to that point.

In 1932, the first North American rationalist works by Richard Neutra and Wladimiro Acosta were published, writing an article in which it reflected on the situation of the era of modern architecture; defining the construction of Casa Ocampo three years earlier as a point of change. The Russian architect described the building as a petit hotel with traditional internal distribution, but with a façade promoting the new canons. Moreover, it enhanced the importance of the new architecture by affirming that it was first of all a social phenomenon and that the primary goal was

the introduction of the achievements of contemporary science into the daily life of man, no matter to whichever social class he belonged. In the final part of his article he recalled that in order to renew, we need to change the concept of the house; to modify the very concept of architectural thought.

In the rest of Argentina, the cities in which this debate remained alive were Cordoba, where from the end of the nineteenth century they were awarded university degrees as engineer-architects issued by the *Facultad de Ciencias Exactas*, and Rosario, a cosmopolitan city where in 1923 was founded a School of Architecture dependent on the *Universidad Nacional del Litoral* with a teaching staff active in the architectural and urban debate. In this cultural climate in 1926 the magazine “El Constructor Rosarino” was founded and published until 1933. In its first issues, it did not depart from the standard format of the publication of the order of architects with technical articles or updates to the legislation, current events and order information bulletins. After the first two years the architect Francisco Casarrubia took over until 1932, the year in which José Micheletti succeeded him, one of the main exponents of the Modern Movement in Rosario, who at the same time directed the Order of Architects. As far as the spread of international modernity was concerned, it began with the publications of 1930, in which “El Constructor Rosarino” published translations of international journals almost simultaneously with the magazines used as sources.

Between 1929 and 1930 several articles on North American architecture appeared in the “Architectural Form” magazine and between 1931 and 1933 numerous writings on the European avant-gardes were published, especially on the works and articles by Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Eric Mendelsohn, Robert Mallet Stevens and the critic Sigfried Giedion.

In November 1931, “El Constructor Rosarino” published a text by Giedion, which appeared for the first time in 1930 in “Cahiers d’Art”, in which he presented a series of architects of the Modern Movement that he divided into different roles, including precursors, champions and third generation. The critic defended the role of Le Corbusier who was not recognized as deserving by the younger generation and completed the text with a plan and several photos of Villa Savoye which was completed that same year.

The magazine attributed an important role to international competitions, which occupied a significant place in the publications. In fact, in the May 1932 issue, an article was dedicated to Le Corbusier’s project for the Palace of the Soviets competition accompanied by a plan and descriptive review dating back to December 1931, only five months before publication. In the July 1932 issue, on the other hand, one of the first Spanish translations of the manifesto Five Points in the New Architecture was published, whose edition was based on the original version of the German text published in Stuttgart by Alfred Roth in 1927 for his presentation *Weissenhofsiedlung*.

During the same years, a new specialized magazine, “Arquitectura”, was founded by the *Sociedad de los Arquitectos de Rosario*, which lasted for only twelve issues in 1927 and early 1928. The peculiarity of this magazine was that it was directed by the architect and theorist Guido, author of most of the articles that were published. Also, in this case the difference in position of the two magazines was clearly evident with respect to the Modern Movement approach, opening a more theoretical and less theatrical debate compared to that of the Argentine capital. In this magazine, compared to the previous one, the analysis on modern European architecture focused on Guido’s concern about the paradigms of the machine age and standardization, and on criticisms of the figure of Le Corbusier.

Buenos Aires: building site of modernity

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Buenos Aires took on the role of capital city and was crossed by a series of urban transformations that radically changed its image. The rapid urbanization process to which the city was subjected due to migratory waves (between 1921 and 1930 the number of definitively entrenched immigrants reaches 900,000), accentuated the need to revise and reimagine the town planning code and area plans. The city was transformed into an emblematic place that evoked the transformation of the country and during those years the imagery of the urban landscape was redefined. The increase in migratory waves as a result of the demand for new labor led to excessive demographic concentration and densification of the central area. This panorama influenced and changed the growth of the real estate market, which with the high cost of the land in this area led to the search for a new architectural model.

The development of technological systems, and in particular the adoption of reinforced concrete, allowed for the establishment of the skyscraper, as a symbol of economic growth. The inclusion of this style, which until then had only been used in the United States, opened a debate and problems arose in relation to the best location and the regulations of these buildings. These themes found their best expression in specialized magazines such as “El Arquitecto” or “Revista de Arquitectura”. In Buenos Aires the skyscrapers were designed for the central and aristocratic area, which however was not delimited by a specific zoning. Thus, it was proposed, as an “extraordinary” element, outside the building code and was transformed as a private work used for political purposes.

In this context, the search for a national image began and national magazines and photography played a decisive role. Beginning at the end of the XIX century, magazines intended for a mass audience, such as “Caras y Caretas”, “Plus Ultra”, “La vie d’Italia” and “Illustration Italian”, circulated in Buenos Aires giving information about the transformations of the metropolis. These publications, which used photography as a means of mass communication, were characterized by presenting images that represented the city of the future, contrasted with the construction of a national image. In most of these advertisements, high buildings were associated with an idea of quality and prestige, thus spreading the image of strength and solidity of skyscrapers.

In the decade between the twenties and the thirties, the debate that arose around the process of modernization drew various responses from the artists. The urban landscape was transformed and in material and literary representations it became one of the main subjects. During those years, one of the most significant traffic arteries of Buenos Aires, calle Corrientes, became one of the favorite places for the artists of the time. The street became one of the main subjects of writers and magazines beginning with the Argentine writer Roberto Arlt.

The landscape of modern Buenos Aires, characterized by cranes, scaffolding and elevators, increased its heterogeneity in the dialogue with outlying districts where it was still possible to find dirt roads and untidy low houses. In fact, during those years the eclectic landscape of the metropolis was born in which the encounter between the old and the new appeared constantly; the search for autochthonous characters with those of the Modern Movement. In this moment of transformation, the role played by periodicals was fundamental. Particularly in the case of “Caras y Caretas”, which was dedicated to informing and interpreting for the mass public, the rapid metropolitan population growth, building expansion, the complexity of the social, political and cultural life of the city. In its pages, Buenos Aires was converted into a show-city, transformed into a landscape to be consumed.

In 1935 the *Municipalidad de Buenos Aires*, on the occasion of the 4th Centenary of the founding of the city, commissioned Horacio Coppola to carry out a photographic survey of the city.

Together with the photographer Grete Stern, he started this reportage as early as 1930/31, completing his work for inclusion in a book entitled Buenos Aires 1936, *Visión fotográfica*, published in 1936 and reissued in 1937. The aim of the assignment was a photographic documentary on the current state of the city and an analysis of the transformation of the urban landscape.

In urban cartography the encounter with the modern city was highlighted, cut out from buildings that increase in height, in which natural light and neon light over-lapped. A portion of these photographs depicted a vision of the city at night. One in particular was called *Buenos Aires nocturno* and encompassed urban modernity in which the large geometric shapes stand out among the lights and shadows of the great buildings of the new metropolis. Another decisive moment for the transformation of the capital coincided with the month of February 1936, in which a decree was issued which established that ‘To give greater prominence to the celebrations of the fourth centenary of the first foundation of the city of Buenos Aires, a commemorative work will be built, a monumental obelisk, which will contribute to its embellishment and decoration’.

Prebisch, who was considered one of the leading exponents of the local Modern Movement and recognized internationally in magazine as “Moderne Bauformen”, was charged with the project. In the years when the skyscrapers of the modernity of the Argentine capital had already been built, like the Kavanagh and the COMEGA, this new form had established itself as a new architectural typology. In 1998 Gorelik dedicated a chapter of a book to the celebration and representation of the city, taking up the theories of Rojas, and describing the city as ‘the epicenter of a reformist and, therefore, nationalist, exemplifying action’ (Gorelik, 1998), summarizing with these words the new image of the Argentine capital. In the twenties and thirties, this changed face, on the one hand through a search within itself and in its traditions through numerous debates, on the other with the contribution of foreign labor and technological innovations from Europe. The city became the avant-garde expression of transformation and experimentation, with numerous languages and styles, some of which were imported, albeit maintaining its own interpretation.

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