
Architecture as Transformation: Puerto Rican Modernism

JOHN HERTZ
University of Texas at San Antonio

INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of Latin America, architecture served as a vehicle of the state as it transformed from an agrarian society towards a utopian ideal. Employing the vocabulary of modernism became the means of realizing radical social change through the construction of significant projects directed at large scale public needs for housing, education and medical care.

To describe modernism and the “international style” as a monolithic force within and without the Americas, is obviously incorrect, in spite of the efforts of Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson to try to connect together architectural production with similar characteristics in their exhibition “International Style” of 1932. They tried to link buildings that emphasized the play of volumes rather than the expression of building massing and an emphasis on asymmetry and regularity rather than axial symmetry. What is more appropriate in the case of Latin America is to examine the application of the language of modernism in design and the utilization of a common vocabulary that was applied to local conditions that were unique.

LATIN AMERICAN MODERNISM

One example that stands out, is that of Puerto Rico, where modern architecture was made manifest in *tropicalismo*, that is, design for the tropics. It became the vehicle for the creation of a new architectural expression that manifested the agenda of the *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD), which came to power when the first free elections for governor

were allowed by the United States in 1948. Unlike its Latin American neighbors, however, what sets Puerto Rico apart was stripping modernism of its original utopian idealism. Rather than being a tool for providing for the “have nots,” as in the case of Mexico with a vast part of the population held in peonage prior to the Revolution of 1910, the iconographic buildings that defined the transition from rural to urban in Puerto Rico were a series of privately operated hotels built with public funds that catered to well-to-do foreigners.

This is also in stark contrast to other countries in Latin America, such as Brazil, where the best cases of the transformative power of modern architecture range from individual projects, such as the Ministry of Education and Health building in Rio de Janeiro (1937–43), by Lúcio Costa with Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier as a consultant, to large urban utopian schemes, like the city of Brasília, planned and developed in 1956 by Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer.

Work from this period was a confirmation of modernist ideals that reflected a balance between the rational and the organic – the basis of Brazilian architecture. This high-modern period, where local architecture utilized the vocabulary of modernism, endured until the construction of Brasília, when regional and material differences began to erode its dominance.

In México, too, projects that employed the vocabulary of the modern movement were more directly related to radical social change. A case in point can be seen in the realm of public education,



Figure 1. Ministry of Education and Health

with the construction of the Ciudad Universitaria of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), designed by Mario Pani, Enrique del Moral, Domingo García Ramos, Armando Franco Roviara and others. Here the underlying concept and spatial development reflected an evolution of traditional ideas about public space that evolved from pre-Columbian models, giving a special meaning to the project. As such, it spoke directly to the role of architecture in creating cultural identity. The way in which the site and its buildings were integrated, as well as the use of local materials and traditional craftsmanship, generated a holistic complex that evoked *Mexicanidad*, or Mexican-ness. This project was so important to Mexican architectural history, that its construction demarked a “before and after.” The campus and its buildings reflected the ideas of modernism in terms of its objectives and rationality, yet at the same time it was the obvious product of 3000 years of local architectural tradition.

In Venezuela, the most important architectural interventions of the modern period again addressed crying social needs, including the realm of public education. Like in Mexico, centers of higher education, such as the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas,



Figure 2. Ciudad Universitaria – UNAM

planned by Carlos Raúl Villanueva, were emblematic of the modern period. Like at the UNAM, heroic works of art were integrated with the urban and architectural spaces. The audacious forms created using modern technology and exposed concrete were conceived of as sculptures. The results were complex, open and integrated spaces, which at the same time were protected from light and heat. Like in Mexico and Brazil, the architecture of this period resulted from the use of the language of modernism applied to spatial elements that had been extracted from Venezuelan colonial architecture, including bright colors, latticed windows for ventilation, and exuberant, interior tropical gardens.



Figure 3. Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas

PUERTO RICAN PRECEDENTS

The first buildings developed by the Spanish after their conquest of the island responded to defensive and military needs. Those same building typologies even today define the character of the historic city center. As such, they are notable for their austerity, and while they can be characterized as neoclassical, their sobriety is notable.¹

For 400 years after the conquest, San Juan continued to be a military fortress that employed a disciplined and severe architectural expression. It was surrounded by high walls and by two massive *morros* or forts that protected the city from both land and sea attacks. It was only just one year before the Spanish-American War that a part of the wall surrounding the city was intentionally torn down.² However, even when the island changed hands and came under American domination, the influence of a central government backed by military force remained, as did an architecture that reflected the specific cultural values of the conqueror.



Figure 4. Viejo San Juan

When Puerto Rico was taken from the Spanish in 1898, there was a notable lack of infrastructure and public services. In response the US funded major projects on the island and brought architects and engineers from the mainland to direct them. Not only did this new conquest bring with it a new architectural expression, it also began to transform the cultural through restructuring the educational system, civil administration, and the imposition of “imperialistic” capitalism.³

The new architectural “style” that the US began to impose on the island through the large scale projects it built reflected a new political reality, where the island became a part of an expanding American sphere of economic influence. While the new buildings reflected designs that involved the “appropriation of the Hispanic element by the culture of the United States itself,”⁴ its source of inspiration was actually the California mission style. As this “frontier” architecture was poorly received, more elaborate, Spanish revival architecture began to be imposed.

The Spanish Revival architecture brought to Puerto Rico became a tool for a reshaping the island’s culture, serving as a mechanism for its colonization and incorporation into the Pan-American vision that the US was cultivating. Iconic buildings created in this style included facilities for US sugar corporations, offices for the electric company, the new University of Puerto Rico, constructed on lands owned by the United Fruit Company, the first public schools, and Protestant and Methodist churches for an island predominantly Catholic. Rather than an architecture derived from the severe, neo-classical style that dominated San Juan, this was an architecture that reflected the golden age of Spain and was seen as more appropriate for Puerto Rico. It certainly was a style more familiar to Americans, who had seen it in international fairs held at the beginning of the 20th century, all with hyphenated Latin American names. It was also the architecture of bourgeois and nouveau riche Anglo-Americans, popular in places like Miami and St. Augustine.

THE MODERN MOVEMENT – PUERTO RICO

When the Americans seized Puerto Rico from the Spanish at the end of the Spanish-American War, it coincided with a period of worldwide changes in the modes of production. However, this time of intense development was derailed by a global economic depression that terribly afflicted the Island and lasted until the post-WWII period. It was only then that the US, which controlled the central government of the island, began to inject capital to develop industry and attract investment to the Island. As tourism was seen as an important tool for development, the government became a major investor in the tourism industry for the next fifty years, including the building of major hotels to promote international tourism.



Figure 5. University of Puerto Rico

One of the key projects of this era was the Hotel “La Concha,” designed during the middle of the 1950s by the firm of Osvaldo Toro and Miguel Ferrer and opened in 1958. This hotel was the third built in the same area, represented a typology repeated during the following forty years, and which now dominates the islet of Condado near the original historic Spanish city center. As a precedent, this hotel was one of the groundbreaking models of tropical architecture. It followed the construction of an adjacent Hilton Hotel, also designed by the office of Toro and Ferrer and completed previously. In both projects, the language of the modern movement accentuated functionality and took advantage of climatological conditions such as cross ventilation and natural illumination through the manipulation of screening, shading devices and *brise-soleils*. It created an expression appropriate to the tropical climate with open lobbies that accentuated the connection between inside and outside, and allowed for visual transparency and interaction with climate and the

verdant landscape. The goal was to define a truly tropical expression within the vocabulary of modern architecture.

Given that both projects were designed by the same firm there are certain similarities. However, La Concha was more sophisticated in its spatial development and its use of construction details as ornament stripped of historic allusions. The project used the vocabulary associated with the modern movement – pilotis, transparency and a roof garden – and a language that expresses the lush tropical context – the vaulted roofs of the *cabaña* area, the curved ceiling of the lobby, and most importantly, “La Concha,” the hotel club with its shell-shaped, undulating structure that floated in a shallow pool of water. The curved features of the hotel contrasted with the orthogonal expression of the Hilton and its more severe linearity and spare details. In these two buildings, the façade treatment was also distinct. For the Hilton, the facades were all similar, while in La Concha, the southern and northern faces of the building are different in response to the climatic dictates of their orientation.⁵ The climatic responsiveness of La Concha also played out in the use of shading devices and other climatically responsive details.



Figure 6. La Concha Hotel

The Hilton was the result of a design competition with five invited firms, two from Florida and three from Puerto Rico. Those three firms constituted the entirety of private offices on the island, and all had been recently formed. Responding to a romantic and idyllic vision of Puerto Rico, the two US firms submitted designs in a Spanish revival style that

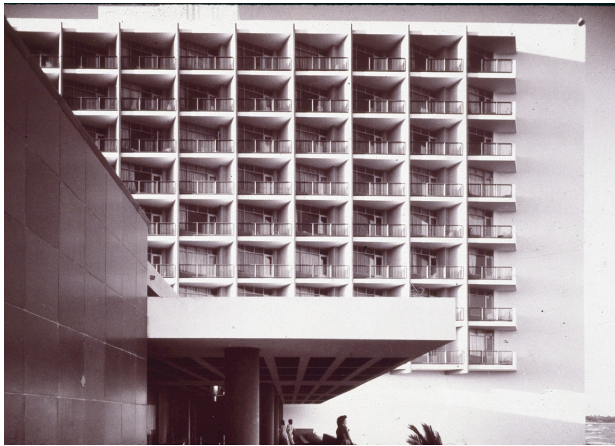


Figure 7. Hilton Hotel

employed a neo-colonial vocabulary associated with St. Augustine and other cities on the Floridian coast. This was in direct contrast with the three local submissions, which all employed the language of modernism.⁶

The proponents of modernism arrived in Puerto Rico in the form of the Austrian Richard Neutra and the German Henry Klumb, who previously worked in Frank Lloyd Wright's office. Even though Neutra only spent two years on the island, he left his mark. More importantly, Klumb adopted Puerto Rico as his new homeland. Klumb represented a "new" architecture for Puerto Rico, based on the particular characteristics of place — topography, orientation, climate, use of local materials, and an economy of means of construction that sprung from need rather than any modernist manifesto — all filtered through a Wrightian lens. However, the first indigenous exponents of a modernism appropriate to building in Puerto Rico were the local architects Osvaldo Toro and Miguel Ferrer. They appropriated and then articulated many of the concepts embraced by Klumb, with the intention of representing an image of progress and industrialization within a tropical context. This was a radical break with the picturesque associated with Puerto Rico that had been implanted by the Americans.⁷

All these key personalities coalesce in the *Comité de Diseño de Obras Públicas* (Committee for the Design of Public Works), which was created by the governor of Puerto Rico, Rexford Tugwell, who had been appointed in 1943 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He collaborated with the most impor-

tant Puerto Rican political leader, Luis Muñoz Marín, to begin the transformation of the island's old colonial political model. The *Comité* included Henry Klumb, Osvaldo Toro, Miguel Ferrer, and the engineer Luis Torregrosa, with Richard Neutra as a consultant between 1943-1945.⁸

Tropicalismo, was the motif for Puerto Rico as it was engaged in the struggle to modernize itself. Like other architects working on the island at that time, Toro and Ferrer were part of a large-scale effort to evolve society itself. With the political transformation of Puerto Rico, brought about by the election of Muñoz Marín as the first Puerto Rican governor in 1948, his political party, the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), wanted to distance itself from the use of historic ornament and typologies associated with the colonial periods. This pro-commonwealth party utilized this new tropical architecture as the new iconography that paralleled their social and political agenda. They adopted the vocabulary of modernism divested of its original utopian idealism to transform the island. In contrast to much of Latin America, Puerto Rico would follow the path to change through reform, not revolution. Perhaps it is more understandable then, that the buildings that defined the transition from historicism to modernism and from rural to urban were privately operated hotels built with public funds that catered to well-to-do foreigners, rather than mass housing, hospitals and other large scale public works.

Puerto Rico burst on to the international architectural scene with the construction of the Hilton and La Concha. Andrés Mignucci, in his seminal work, *Arquitectura Contemporánea de Puerto Rico 1976-1992*, describes Toro and Ferrer, as architects who "evoked the spirit of the Modern Movement, presenting a vocabulary basically consistent in terms of its plasticity and formal posture," and as central figures in "the post-war architectural revolution."⁹ They were catalysts who transformed the architecture on the island and directly influenced the next generation of practitioners, who in the 1960s and 1970s generated a significant body of built work sympathetic to their ideals. These included key figures in the firms of Amaral and Morales, Horacio Díaz, Efraín Pérez Chánis, and Reed, Torres, Beauchamp and Marvel.

In August 1959, La Concha made the cover of *Progressive Architecture*. Even more importantly, in

its January 1961 issue dedicated to Puerto Rico, *Look Magazine* recognized the pivotal role architecture played by featuring La Concha on its cover. The *brise-soleils* of the hotel were prominently displayed with the following text: "The handsome façade of San Juan's La Concha Hotel symbolizes the dramatic revolution that is bringing modernity to Puerto Rico."¹⁰

The structure of the hotel itself is basically a reinforced concrete skeleton. The "concha," or shell, which gives the hotel its name, is a nightclub with an undulating, shell shape, oval roof. It is a thin-shell concrete structure with a minimum thickness of 6 inches and a maximum of 8 inches at connection points that was designed by Mario Salvatore, an internationally recognized structural engineer. It was reported on in depth in the *Engineering News-Record*, in March, 1959.

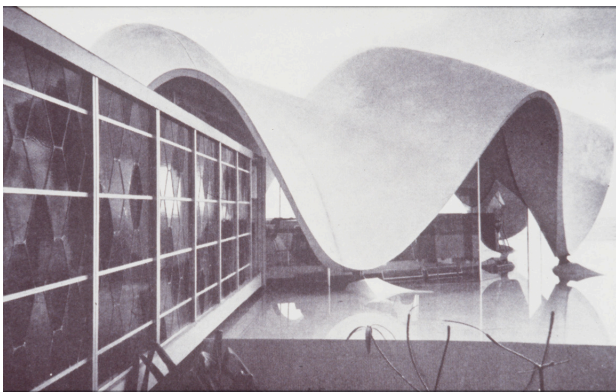


Figure 8. "La Concha"

What is critical is to understand that the hotel was not simply a "modernist" building translated to a tropical setting. In part it evolved from fundamental architectural ideas unique to Puerto Rico. In the same way that the UNAM in Mexico responded to organizational ideas found in pre-Columbian architecture, La Concha was built around a central patio, a "*batey*," the traditional indigenous public space which served as the organizer of the island's pre-Columbian pueblos. But this space was also reminiscent of the traditional urban typology found in old San Juan with its interior patio passed down from Spanish and Moorish roots. Another typical element of traditional housing, the *mirador*, was reflected in the upper level of the hotel which used the rooms and support spaces as a lookout towards

the sea on one side and the city on the other.¹¹ Like the traditional shuttered galleries of the circulation systems in classic Puerto Rican housing, the single-loaded corridors of the hotel boasted articulated *brise-soleils* in much the same fashion. Finally, water was used as a theme for the hotel, which reflected not only its physical site, but the allegory that, as Puerto Rico was an island in the sea, so to the building was surrounded by water.

Conclusion:

In a number of countries throughout Latin America, modern architecture was indelibly linked to political changes which embraced social transformation. The language of modernism was applied to new construction techniques and materials in the creation of a new iconography that was stripped of historic stylistic influences. However, this use of a modern vocabulary was applied to traditional ideas about space, enclosure, and plastic expression. While the architectural production of these countries did share certain similarities, each was uniquely manifested as place, a product of their individual cultural context. While they are the offspring of global changes in architectural production, they are hardly its clones. Rather, each country had its own particular aspirations and filtered these external influences in their own way. In this sense they can be fully seen as local phenomena, much more the product of their own geographic and cultural context.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Vivoni, Enrique, "The Architecture of Puerto Rican Identity," in Vivoni, Enrique, ed., *Hispanophilia: Architecture and Life In Puerto Rico 1900-1950* (Río Piedras: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1998), p. 120.
- 2 García Ramis, Magali, "Memory of the City," in Vivoni, Enrique, ed., *San Juan Siempre Nuevo; Arquitectura y Modernización en el Siglo XX* (Río Piedras: Archivo de Arquitectura y Construcción de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2000), pp. 14-15.
- 3 Colón Zayas, Eliseo, "'Spanishness' and Society in Puerto Rico," in Vivoni, Enrique, ed., *Hispanophilia: Architecture and Life In Puerto Rico 1900-1950* (San Juan: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1998), p. 349.
- 4 Vivoni, "The Architecture of Puerto Rican Identity," p. 124.
- 5 Torres Santiago, Jerry, "The Invention of the Gates of Paradise," in Vivoni, Enrique, ed., *San Juan Siempre Nuevo; Arquitectura y Modernización en el Siglo XX* (Río Piedras: Archivo de Arquitectura y Construcción de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2000), pp. 154-155.
- 6 Vivoni, Enrique, "Palimpsesto Tropical," in Rivera Nieves, Irma and Gil, Carlos, ed., *Polifonía Salvaje* (San Juan: Editorial Postdata, 1995), p. 76.
- 7 Vivoni, "Palimpsesto Tropical," p. 77.

- 8 Mignucci Giannoni, Andres, *Arquitectura Contemporánea En Puerto Rico 1976-1992* (San Juan: American Institute of Architects, 1992), p. 7.
- 9 Mignucci Giannoni, *Arquitectura Contemporánea En Puerto Rico 1976-1992*, p. 7.
- 10 *Look Magazine* (January 1961).
- 11 Torres Santiago, "The Invention of the Gates of Paradise," p. 156.

All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.