

FUNCTIONALIST HYBRIDIZATION: MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN LATIN AMERICA

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1,130 Words

We live in times when it is necessary to enter and exit modernity; to be more hybrid. This operation is a central idea of Nestor García Canclini's, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. First published in 1989, this study by a leading Latin American cultural anthropologist situates contemporary Latin American culture within the paradox of modernity and modernism. In it, he tries to make sense of the coexistence of traditional or even ancient cultures within modern times and sensibilities. The result of his search is, as he tells us, that Latin America suffers from "an exuberant modernism with a deficient modernization."¹ In other words, the appearance of modernity exists despite the lack of infrastructure, means of production, and urban systems needed to produce it.

To a large extent, this paradox was due to the importation of cultures from Europe and North America by artists and thinkers who traveled there for their education. This is the case, for example, of a number of artists and architects—such as Mexico's Diego Rivera and Mario Pani—who studied in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century. Equally important was the arrival of visitors or émigrés like Le Corbusier or Max Cetto who brought new ideas or forms to be emulated and incorporated into the existing urban realm. This suggests something fundamental: modernism was something largely imported. It was cultural.

The modernization of European societies central to the development of their modernism was, of course, not fully realized within the contexts where these returning Latin American artists and thinkers worked or where those visitors landed. According to García Canclini, a "multitemporal heterogeneity" resulted since the modern did not substitute the traditional; the past and the present worked together in a new hybrid. So, within a generic Latin American way of operating, 'hybrid cultures' developed: aesthetically modern, but where 'high' and 'low', foreign and autochthonous, popular and high-browed, traditional and contemporary cultures coexist through a system of negotiations and transculturations of what is kept, altered, and discarded from each.

One characteristic example of this can be found in the development of functionalist architecture throughout Latin America in the 1920s and 1930s. The type of functionalism used was similar to that developed in Europe by members of a radical socialist avant-garde—including Hannes Meyer, Hans Schmidt and Mart Stam—that considered architecture to be an artistic and bourgeois endeavor that needed to be replaced by pure "building." The latter resulted from the solution of the programmatic requirements, using the most modern materials, and solving the technical problems rationally and scientifically with the goal to creating economic buildings to address the needs of the population. In Latin America, functionalism was, primarily, a response

to the tremendous lack of public infrastructures (such as schools or housing facilities) as well as to what was then considered bourgeois aesthetic practices—practices that were in seeming opposition to social projects and ideals for the advancement of the population and culture in general—this type of architecture—an abstract, utilitarian architecture primarily intended for the masses—and the artistic, social, political, and ideological messages that enabled and defined it were the product of external influences and internal pressures.

While the radicalism of some functionalism was linked to a vision of the power of architecture and its discursive systems to challenge and transform social conditions and social relationships, in other cases, what was radical about it came from a critique of a particular status quo in the specific architectural context, from the introduction of new techniques, materials and understandings of architecture's relation to modernity, and from attempts at reconceptualizing visibility or, in other words, to denaturalize architectural production by challenging the traditional perception of its use, production, and legibility. These were, at the core, based on European polemics that developed in Latin America as a result of a keen awareness of new theories and forms that were disseminated through manifestos and periodical publications, or through the presence of Russians or Germans who had settled and developed new forms there.

There were some that adhered to strict European ideas—most notably that by Swiss architect Hannes Meyer—that architecture was an anachronistic ideal that needed to be replaced with rational building directly derived from the simple formula of function × economics. In other cases, Latin American functionalists sought to define functionalism as something more representational that was expressed through (and made legible by) the ways in which the function was defined through the form. This led, in some cases, towards an aestheticization of function as the buildings imitated other 'known' functionalist buildings—including not only the work of Le Corbusier but also modern factories and grain silos—while also making the buildings look like proverbial machines for living and working.

Architects like Juan O'Gorman, for instance, negotiated these issues in relationship to their particular geographic, regional, historical, and material context, in his case Mexico. This led to provocative works and ideas, as functionalism began, whether partially or fully, embracing the local context and its possibilities. In some projects by Argentinian architect Wladimiro Acosta, we see how the climatic and historic conditions of the place were read as unique prompts that helped to adapt and transform European precedents while simultaneously developing new forms, landscapes, and shapes. In others, we see how traditional crafts and craft-production were used to develop buildings as unique (and uncorrupted)

local expressions that would challenge dominant architectural forms. However, a limited number of architects, such as Argentina's Alberto Prebisch, responded within the particularities of their own specific contexts, as well as political and cultural desires for modernization. Prebisch sought to be more international, rational, and scientific, and closer to European and North American examples, experiments, and developments.

At the core of functionalism in Latin America was the selective embrace or abandonment of modernity or its lineaments. The result was a new solution based on the integration of the contemporary, radical, and modern with the old, 'inefficient', and vernacular. García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures* offers relevant insight, showing how functionalism was explored and carried out throughout the twentieth century in Latin America. And, while it would be easy to essentialize García Canclini's argument by merely translating its provocative title and implications into an architectural milieu, the book provides us with an understanding of Latin

America's ambivalence with modernity and to the development of a 'multitemporal heterogeneity'. In this context, it shows how functionalist architects jumped forward or stepped back from modernity, and how unimaginable strategies and possibilities could be formed by the hybridity required of the context and needs that prompted this architecture. It shows, in short, how they negotiated their present modernity and their desire to leave it.

- 1 Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. Lopez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 41.



GLITCHING AND BUFFERING: INHABITING THE GLITCH

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1,922 Words

The glitch is a problem. It's the acid reflux of the digital world, it's new media's confessional booth where it crackles out its sins to us, its secular priests. As much as we hate the glitch we must also crave it, we secretly enjoy that it is a spanner in the works—a minor rebellion of those vast sandbanks of data which ensnare us all.

A tearaway child, the glitch spoils our favourite songs on an old CD, it signals the loss of a days work, severs the ending from our favourite films, corrupts and ages the face of our favourite actors (before the drugs get to them first), and spoils our titillations on Tinder. Although over time the glitch starts to blend in and we work around it, the glitch is the digital equivalent of running one's hand over a tactile brutalist mass of board marked concrete: it has a very physical presence. Though the digital world is often seamless like the sterile walls of a hospital, the glitch gives it the physicality and friction that all life needs. "It's alive," we think when seeing a glitch on a screen—technology is like us in that it is given presence and personality through its faults.

However, I hadn't, until now, seen a convincing use of the potential of the glitch in a three-dimensional architectural space. I'd seen 'glitched' facades, but these were just ornament, and all other examples I've personally witnessed of the glitch in architecture have been accidental (maybe the glitch should always be

accidental, after all that is its nature) and reappropriated by me in an act of visual bricolage. Surely then, this problem of our time has spatial potential if we translate it from a 2D screen-based phenomena into a space that can be inhabited by people: the glitch can promote new types of spatial experience and different approaches to circulation around a building, and even, as I'll discuss later, renovation.

I would characterize the spatial installation 'Kunst-Werke' (2010) by the Brazilian artist Renata Lucas as a spatial glitch, although not spoken about as one by the artist (Fig. 1). In the piece, Lucas makes a radial cut in a Berlin street and rotates the section of footpath along its arc. This simple act glitches what we see everyday, disturbing the linear rhythm and directionality of the street while sending us off walking into a slightly different direction. This is the crux of the glitch; it is a point of indeterminacy which opens up—quite literally in this case—a multiplicity of different pathways.¹

If we look at Modernist architecture, the most influential architects innovated by changing how spaces relate in both vertical and horizontal axes. We see this in Adolf Loos's Raumpflan, with its discordant modulating spaces scattered around in three dimensions; Le Corbusier's ramps and Dom-ino House; and Rem Koolhaas's lifts that are also floors. I would like to