



**Session 7**  
**Persistent Modernisms (Part II)**

Moderator: Professor Robert Mellin

# Proun Studies

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Lissitzky's Proun...is utmost tension, violent jettisoning. A new world of objects is in the process of being built. Space is filled by all possible variant physical forms of a constant energy...Thrusting sharply into space on all sides, it contains layers and strata, held in a state of tension, and drawn into the tightly-knit complex of components, which cut across, embrace, support and resist each other...[Proun] is a preparation for a new synthesis of real and illusionist methods of creating space...

—Ernst Kállai, "Lissitzky", 1922

## Introduction

One of the most enduring legacies of early Modernism is the remarkable array of avante-garde proposals developed in the first quarter of the twentieth century that aimed at the reconception of architectural space. One notes, for example, the work of Russian Constructivist El-Lissitzky and his *Proun* paintings in the years following the Russian Revolution; an investigation that reached its apogee in the *Proun Space* installation designed for the Grosse Berliner Kunstaussstellung (1923).

The discussion presented here aims, in part, at a description and consideration of El-Lissitzky's *Prouns* as a sustained and unprecedented investigation of form and space, a body of work that offers a reconception of architectural space at least as important to early Modern Architecture as nearly contemporaneous proposals and visionary projects by Wright, Gropius, Van Doesburg, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Moholy-Nagy. The body of scholarly studies on the work of El Lissitzky is small and, not surprisingly, his work has been, until relatively recently, largely ignored by architectural historians, theoreticians, and critics: El Lissitzky is not mentioned in Scully's *Modern Architecture*, receives only brief mention in Banham's *Theory of Architecture and*

*Design in the First Machine Age* and in Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*—though Frampton does include a reproduction of Lissitzky's cover design for the art review *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* (1922). Curtis presents a more detailed discussion of Lissitzky's *Proun* paintings and architectural proposals in the context of a discussion of the work of the Russian Constructivists in *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. *Modern Architecture Since 1900* includes several images of Lissitzky's work, including *Proun 1E*, *City* and the sublime *Der Wolkenbügel* ('Sky hook', 'Cloud hanger' or 'Cloud stirrup') proposal.

Rather than offering a re-examination of topics or questions where others have previously made significant contributions, e.g. El-Lissitzky's politics (Victor Margolin), or common themes in the work and writings of Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, and Van Doesburg (Steven A. Mansbach), this paper seeks a consideration of El Lissitzky's *Proun* studies in explicitly architectural terms as well as an assessment of the importance of Lissitzky's work in contemporary architectural design education. The difficult questions considered by El Lissitzky as he demarked and investigated a realm somewhere between painting and architecture reverberate in contemporary architectural discussions in an abundance of ways, especially in questions regarding the representation of architectural space, the investigation of spatial syntax, and the attributes of architectural space.

## El-Lissitzky (1890-1941)

Lazar (El) Lissitzky was born to Orthodox Jewish parents in Polshinok, Smolensk, in 1890, and grew up in Vitebsk, a small town in Belorussia. An avid artist as a youth, after finishing high school he applied for admission to the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, but was rejected. In 1908 Lissitzky left Russia for Germany in order to study architecture at the technical university in Darmstadt. A

talented and hardworking student with an entrepreneurial streak—not only did he work part-time as a bricklayer, but there are reports that El Lissitzky sometimes earned extra money by completing studio projects for less-talented or less energetic Darmstadt students—Lissitzky was careful with his limited funds and used his summers and school breaks to travel to Paris, Brussels, and other major European cities, and to tour Northern Italy. After completing his studies at Darmstadt (passing with distinction) he returned to Russia just as war broke out in Germany. Later Lissitzky received a diploma in engineering and architecture from the Riga technological university and began working in the office of the architect Felikovsky in Moscow in 1916.

Over the next few years, Lissitzky worked as an illustrator and as a painter and achieved some modest success and notoriety. And, following the overthrow of the Tsars, it was El-Lissitzky who designed the first flag for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Early in 1919, Lissitzky was invited by Marc Chagall, at that time head of the Popular Art Institute in Vitebsk, to return to his hometown to assume the posts of professor of architecture and head of the applied arts department. It was a pivotal moment for the 28-year old El-Lissitzky for a number of reasons: perhaps most importantly, the radical change in his creative work that occurred as a result of events in Vitebsk.

Lissitzky accepted Chagall's invitation and, in September, 1919, the Suprematist painter Kasimir Malevich joined the Institute faculty. Malevich sought

to identify the most essential attributes of painting; he believed that his abstract paintings postulated a pictorial language for a new world. His *Self-Portrait in Two Dimensions* (Figure 1) is emblematic of the work of the Suprematists: the aggressive rejection of icons or references to specific objects; compositions of simple geometric shapes presented in a manner that dramatically compressed and flattened the space of the painting; and a color palette comprised of the primary colors, white, and black.

Malevich's first months at the Popular Art Institute were tumultuous: by the beginning of 1920 he had organized a collective of faculty and students within the school called UNOVIS ('Affirmers of the New Art') who sought to reshape the school curriculum based on the principles of Supremacist art. This led to a split with Chagall and, rather quickly, Malevich's ascension to the directorship of the school.

Malevich's influence on El-Lissitzky was swift, powerful, and profound: within a short time, Lissitzky abandoned the representational approach characteristic of his earlier work (Figure 2) in favor of the geometric and 'non-objective' abstraction of the Suprematist movement (for example, the work shown in Figure 3, *Interpenetrating Planes*, 1919-20, or Figure 5, *Proun 12 E*, c. 1920).

El-Lissitzky executed *Interpenetrating Planes* (Figure 3) shortly after Malevich's arrival in Vitebsk. The painting is noteworthy not only as evidence of Malevich's influence on Lissitzky, but also because a number of

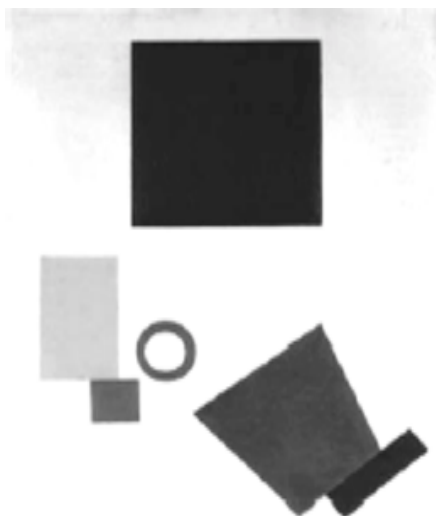


Figure 1: Malevich, *Self-Portrait in Two Dimensions*, 1915



Figure 2: El-Lissitzky, *The Theft of the Crown*,<sup>2</sup>1919

formal themes and strategies are present in the work that establish an agenda, of sorts, for the *Proun* studies of subsequent years. Here one observes the relatively small and uncomplicated palette of colors; the apparent suspension of the laws of gravity; the multiple axes of projection; the precisely ordered presentation of simple geometric objects—rectangles, squares, and circles—both obliquely and frontally; the simultaneous use of the conventions of perspectival and axonometric views; and the condition of ‘phenomenal transparency’ described by Gyorgy Kepes<sup>1</sup> and popularized by Rowe and Slutzky in the essay “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal”. Lissitzky contrasts the apparent *physical* interpenetration of objects, e.g., the yellow and dark gray planes in the upper left quadrant of the painting and the more phenomenal interpenetration of planes near the center of the painting: the white wedge just to the right of center fluctuates between foreground and middle ground.

El-Lissitzky’s abstract *Proun* paintings—*Proun* is an acronym for the Russian title “Proekt utverzheniia novogo” (‘Project for the Affirmation of the New’)<sup>3</sup>—are remarkable if only for El Lissitzky’s attempt to identify and investigate a realm somewhere between painting and architecture<sup>4</sup>. There are, however, at least three other aspects of the *Proun* studies that are significant:

First, the *Prouns* are an attempt to depict formal relationships, *possible* relationships between spaces as well as objects, and are not intended to depict specific objects. One might even consider the possibility that Lissitzky’s *Prouns* constitute a unique typological

investigation of form and space, and the fact that shapes appear to alternately recede and advance within the space of the painting simply increases the number of possible formal relationships. Other examples include *Proun 12 E* (Figure 5), *Proun RVN 2* (Figure 6) and El-Lissitzky’s sketch for *Proun 1E, The Town* (Figure 7).

Second, the paintings contain a multiplicity of views and are not intended to be seen from only one viewpoint. In his 1922 article “PROUN: Not World Visions, But—World Reality”, El-Lissitzky declared:

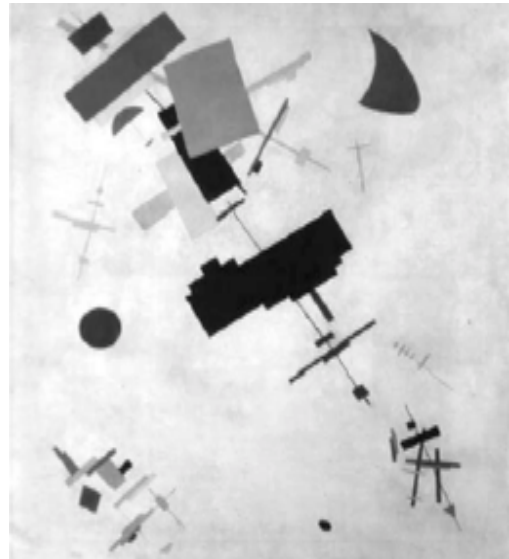


Figure 4: Malevich, *Supremus No. 56*, 1916

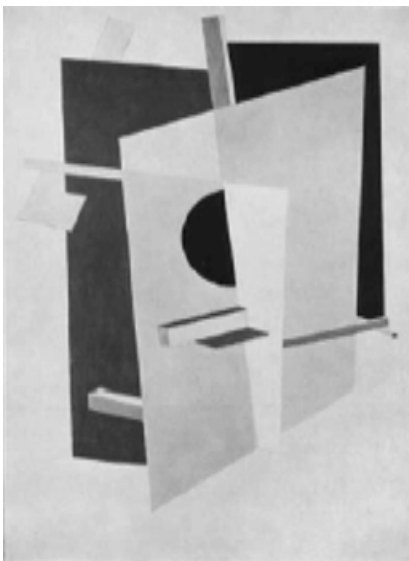


Figure 3: El-Lissitzky, *Proun Interpenetrating Planes*, 1919-20

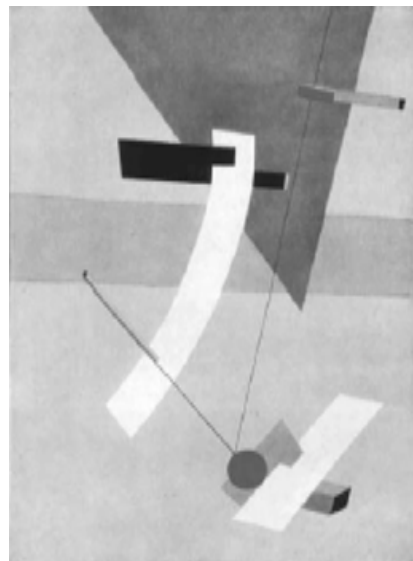


Figure 5: El-Lissitzky, *Proun 12 E*, c. 1920

We have set the Proun in motion and so we obtain a number of axes of projection; we stand between them and push them apart. 5

The identification of multiple viewpoints, presented simultaneously, as well as multiple axes of projection, are essential to understanding and appreciating the work. A comparison of roughly contemporaneous works by El Lissitzky and Malevich brings the issue into sharper focus. Victor Margolin notes:

Lissitzky's handling of space and multiple perspectives gives evidence of his training in architecture, a formation that Malevich lacked. At the same time, Lissitzky had learned a great deal from Malevich about the visual representation of space and time.<sup>6</sup>

Malevich's *Supremus No. 56* of 1916 (Figure 4) is breathtaking in its formal clarity, complexity, subtlety and richness; the establishment of foreground, middleground and background within the space of the painting is straightforward and relatively unambiguous. The presentation is, for the most part, based on the conventions of the orthogonal view. El-Lissitzky's *Proun 12E*, c. 1920 (Figure 5), like *Supremus No. 56*, is strongly ordered, formally complex, uses a similar color palette and a simple and abstract geometry. However, unlike Malevich, El Lissitzky denies the observer a fixed viewing point and adroitly choreographs the simultaneous

presentation of multiple viewpoints as well as projection systems: here elements are presented perspectively, orthogonally, and axonometrically and, even if the viewer does not literally move to view the painting, there is undoubtedly a shift in perception that must occur. As the eye moves across the work, the space of the painting continually compresses, bends, curves, warps, rotates, collapses, deepens, shifts, flattens and expands in accordance with the mode of projection and the attendant visual cues.

Third, a recurring theme is the effect of a variety of forces on spaces as well as objects or shapes: in some instances, an entity may change shape in response to an implied force, may be compressed, attenuated, or sliced. Objects, shapes, and spatial volumes thrust upwards, downwards, and sideways, sometimes rotating or spinning, but a delicate balance is always maintained. Margolin writes that, for Lissitzky, "the *Proun* was an articulation of space, energy and forces rather than aesthetics."<sup>7</sup> A formal discourse, based in part on notions of force, is established between elements and, in many of the works, attributes or conditions usually associated with works of architecture are integral to the *Prouns*: spatial and formal sequences are evident, objects or shapes are placed relative to one another based on an implied grid of slots of space or on a system of regulating lines, and hierarchical relationships are primary, rather than secondary, considerations.

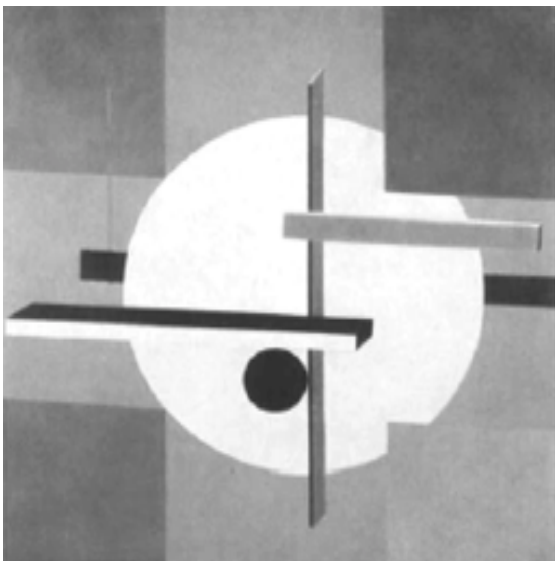


Figure 6: El-Lissitzky, *Proun RVN 2*, 1923

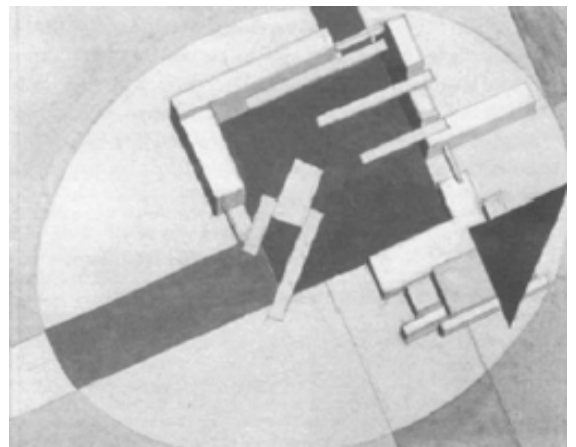


Figure 7: El-Lissitzky, sketch for *Proun 1E, The Town*, 1919-20

Finally, as Matthew Drutt has observed:

With their multiple references to real and abstract space, the *Prouns* became a system through which Lissitzky not only ruminated upon formal properties of transparency, opacity, color, shape, and line but began to dwell upon the deployment of these forms into socialized space...<sup>8</sup>

Early in 1921—and after less than two years at the Popular Art Institute—El-Lissitzky returned to Moscow to teach painting and architecture at the Higher State Artistic-Technical Workshops and, later that year, he traveled to Germany as a kind of unofficial emissary for the vanguard of Russian abstract art. In Germany, Lissitzky met, among others, Theo van Doesburg, Hannes Meyer, Mart Stam, Hans Smidt, Emil Roth, Hans Arp, Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe, and Kurt Schwitters, many of whom would later collaborate with El-Lissitzky on a variety of architectural, graphic design, exhibition design, and writing projects. El-Lissitzky's influence on his contemporaries in Western Europe is significant: in 1922, at least two issues of van Doesburg's magazine *de Stijl* were largely devoted to a description of El-Lissitzky's ideas and to reproductions of the *Proun* studies.

A major breakthrough for occurred in 1923, with El-Lissitzky's *Proun Space* installation (Figure 9) designed for the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung. All surfaces—

floor and ceiling as well as walls—are conceived as continuous rather than differentiated. Furthermore,

The lines of force on each wall, expressed by rods and planar shapes, were seemingly presented with the expectation that the room's inhabitant would experience the walls sequentially, but the reliefs also pulled the walls together as the boundaries of a single volumetric space, with the cube on the left wall connecting to the sphere on the center wall and the bars on the right one.<sup>9</sup>

The significance of the *Proun Space* installation, as well as the *Proun* paintings that preceded it, is best understood and appreciated in the context of Lissitzky's 1925 essay entitled 'A. and Pangeometry'<sup>10</sup>. Lissitzky describes four types of space:

Planimetric Space: space created and suggested by the partial overlap of two or more planes. Lissitzky offers an antique mural or relief as an example of planimetric space.

Perspectival Space: space conceived and represented based on the conventions of one-point perspective and the principles of Euclidean geometry.

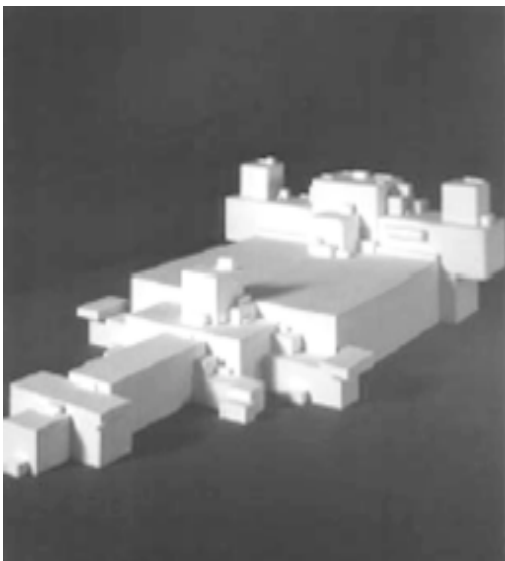


Figure 8: Malevich, *Beta*, before 1926

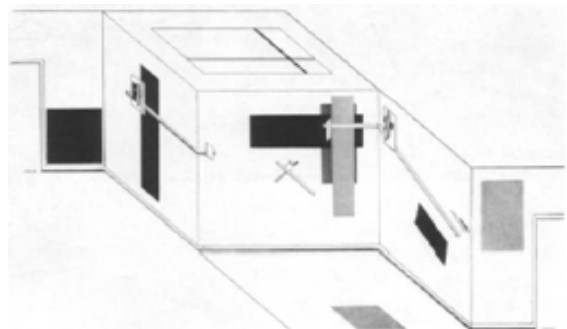


Figure 9: El-Lissitzky, drawing of *Proun Space*, 1923

Irrational Space: conceptually, irrational space is based on two claims: first, “infinite extensibility” of the depth of the space, both forward and backward and, second, since time is “constant” and “sequential”, the passage of time cannot be experienced directly, but only *indirectly* as the viewer changes position.

Imaginary Space: form and space presented as the result of a non-material effect, *motion*. Lissitzky's examples include a moving picture or film where the “impression of continuous movement” is the result of “disconnected movements separated by periods shorter than 1/30 of a second”.

Is *Proun Space* an example of Irrational Space? Lissitzky wrote, in ‘A. and Pangeometry’, that “suprematism has swept away...the illusions of two-dimensional planimetric space, the illusions of three-dimensional perspective space, and has created the ultimate illusion of irrational space with its infinite extensibility into the background and foreground.” Certainly in its *representation*, the modified oblique that simultaneously presents ceiling and floor as well as walls, *Proun Space* is consistent with the notion of *infinite extensibility*: parallel lines do not converge at a vanishing point and there are no depth cues. In addition, the simultaneous presentation of ceiling and floor is consistent with Lissitzky's claim that the passage of time can only be indirectly experienced as the viewer changes position: here a fixed viewpoint is denied and, furthermore, there is the implication of an infinite number of viewpoints.

Perceptually, the physical entity entitled *Proun Space* can only be seen from one viewpoint at a time, however, the highly ordered arrangement of elements and volumes promotes an awareness of an apparently boundless array of “space, energy, and forces” in *n*-dimensions. The placement and alignment of elements on each of the interior surfaces acts as a cartographic system—*another* example of a system with infinite extensibility—that not only establishes a continuous wrapper analogous to the canvas of a Suprematist painting but begins to demarcate other volumes embedded within *Proun Space*: for example, the alignment of the intersecting bars on the ceiling, the rectangle on the floor below, the rectangle on the wall at the far right and the vertically oriented rectangle at center describe at least one volume simultaneously embedded within the neutral wrapper

and extending beyond that wrapper: for a brief moment, one perceives that even Irrational Space can have an ‘axis mundi’, however elusive and transitory.

The *Proun Space* installation of 1923 was followed by other installations, including the celebrated *Room for Constructivist Art* (or *Dresden Room*) of 1926 for the International Art Exhibition. Originally a temporary installation, the design was the basis for a permanent gallery (the *Abstract Cabinet*, 1927) in the Provinzialmuseum of the Hannover Museum.

During this same period, beginning in 1924, Malevich also began to consider the implications of Suprematism in three dimensions rather than two in the series christened ‘planits’ or ‘architectonics’ (for example, Figure 8). His work during the mid-twenties focused almost exclusively on the development of Suprematist principles in three dimensions until his return to painting in the late twenties.

The three-dimensional *Proun Space* studies of El-Lissitzky and the ‘planits’ of Malevich can be seen as a critical component of an ongoing and aggressive investigation of the nature and attributes of architectural space that is an essential characteristic of ‘Modern Architecture’, though it appears that, for Malevich, the move from two-dimensional painting to three-dimensional planit was less than successful: the work *Beta*, for example (Figure 8), executed sometime before 1926, appears to be a Suprematist painting that has been extruded in the third dimension: the result is static and symmetrical, and the dynamic asymmetries and overlapping conditions present in works such as *Supremus No. 56* (Figure 4) are absent. In all fairness, *Beta* may be the least successful of Malevich's ‘architectonic’ studies of the period, but it does support the claim that, for Malevich, the shift from the space of the painting to architectural space was a difficult one.

### **Proun Studies: Introduction**

The notion that that *Prouns* are “an articulation of space, energy and forces” has prompted a series of studio investigations—at both the undergraduate and graduate levels—over a period of six years, that aim at tapping the productive potential of El-Lissitzky's two-dimensional and three-dimensional *Proun* studies. The investigations have pursued various lines of inquiry based on the following premises:

First, if the three-dimensional studies of El-Lissitzky and Malevich, as well as similar studies,

are understood as representations of dynamic relationships between forces and spaces rather than as ends in themselves, then there is a strong possibility of identifying additional (latent) spatial volumes in three-dimensional *Prouns* through a series of simple mapping exercises.

Second, while it is evident that a *Proun* study is correctly understood as the representation of an idea about form and space rather than as a representation of a specific building, any *Proun* can be analyzed using a broad array of techniques and procedures, including those employed when analyzing an architectural precedent. Furthermore, the aim of such an analysis is to reveal new information about the spatial relationships and conditions present in a particular *Proun* and not the simple (and simple-minded) documentation of an abstract model. The members of the class are asked to consider the question, "If architectural space is a 'made-thing', can it also be considered a 'built-thing' that responds to a variety of forces?" and, furthermore, are asked to use the analytical studies to offer an articulate and informed response.

Third, if the *Proun* and *Proun Space* investigations—and, to a lesser extent, the 'planit' studies—are understood as dynamic, rich in potential, highly malleable as well as abstract—in the simplest terms, a kind of loose three-dimensional parti—then the analytical material generated can either be (1) used to initiate new *Proun* studies or (2) when informed by considerations of context, site, program, structure, and construction, serve as a conceptual framework for a more comprehensive architectural investigation.

### ***Proun* Studies: Embedded volumes**

The studio *Proun* studies begin with a modest construction project: each member of the class builds a three dimensional chipboard model comprised of four volumes, designated 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D'. [Figure 10] The largest volume, 'A', measures 2" x 2" x 4". Each volume must be orthogonal to the other three, the three smaller volumes must be separated by a minimum distance of 1/8", and each of the three smaller volumes must interpenetrate Volume 'A'. Finally, the members of the class are encouraged to consider the potential of each three-dimensional study to "establish formal hierarchy, order, or proportional relationships".<sup>11</sup>

After construction of the models is completed—typically, each student builds at least three models—Volume 'A' is painted with acrylic paint as follows: identify a series of zones, at least one for *each* of the three smaller volumes and corresponding to the width or height of the associated volume, and paint the projected volumes onto the faces of Volume 'A'. The painted strips are continuous around the faces of Volume 'A', and, furthermore, at least one of the painted strips must be perpendicular to the others. There is a color change where the strips overlap on the surface of Volume 'A': in some instances, students have added additional emphasis to the overlapped area by darkening or lightening the area of overlap. [Figure 11]

It is proposed that the "overlapped" square or rectangle appearing on two or more faces of the largest volume (Volume A) can be construed as a set of projected elevations and, therefore, offer evidence of the presence of a fifth volume (Volume 'X') embedded in Volume A. Alternately, it can be stated that the position and configuration of Volume 'X' is the result of the projection through space of the faces of Volumes B, C, and D. Volume "X", as shown in the series in Figure 12, is the intersection of the projected faces in space. In some instances, more than a single Volume 'X' is identified in the mapping exercise and, occasionally, Volume 'X' may overlap Volumes B, C, or D.

### ***Proun* Studies: Analysis and Synthesis**

The second phase of the investigation places a premium on a series of drawings, executed in pencil on sheets of white Strathmore, which are speculative as well as analytical (Figure 13). The aim of the studies is to prompt the realization that a *Proun* is not a model of a specific building; a *Proun* is a model of an idea or ideas about architecture, about formal and spatial relationships.

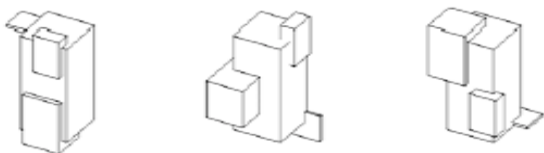


Figure 10: Debelius, *Prouns*, 1998



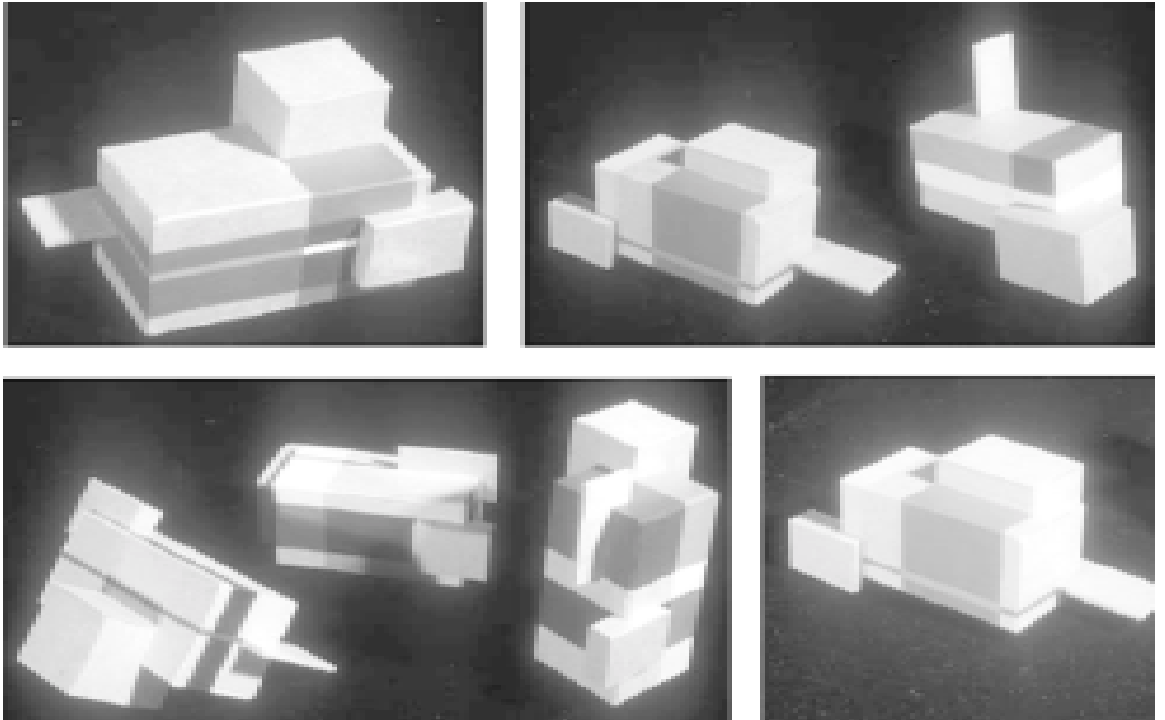


Figure 11, A-D: Painted *Prouns*, 1998-2001

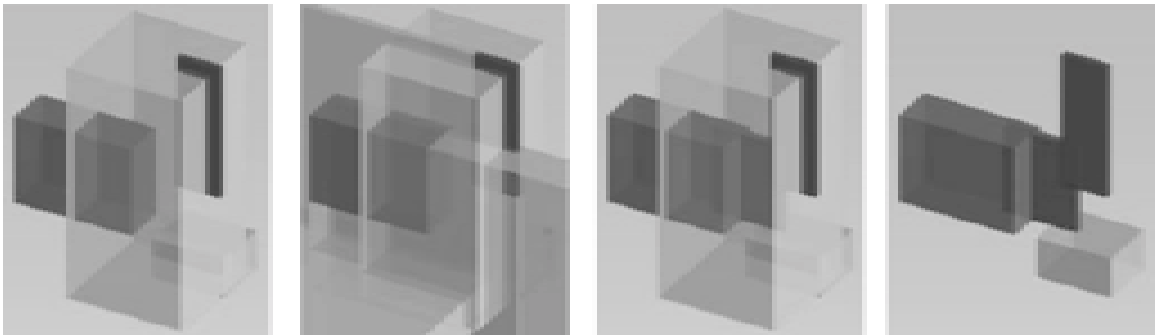


Figure 12: A-D: Volume 'X', the dark green volume, is the result of the intersection of the projections of Volumes B, C, and D



Figure 13: *Prouns*, Analytical drawings, 1999

The drawings include a series of axonometrics of the *Proun* (including at least one wireframe view) and conventional analytical diagrams that examine proportional relationships, axial relationships, and the like. More speculative studies consider the unfolding of the faces of the constituent volumes of the *Proun*, the testing of various structural and spatial grids, the splitting and shearing of the *Proun*, an “X-ray” of the *Proun*, figure-ground relationships—is Volume ‘X’ a solid or a void?—literal and phenomenal transparency, and tectonic studies in which the *Proun* in its entirety (or some volumes) are stretched, compressed, or rotated in response to internal or external forces. The prospect of an understanding of architectural space based on the tectonic attributes of spatial volumes becomes apparent.

This last point is the basis for a series of studies that focus on the properties of Volume ‘X’. If, for example, some other volume is substituted for Volume ‘X’—a volume that, unlike Volume ‘X’, is not trilaterally symmetrical—then how must Volumes B, C, and D change to support the new condition? If Volume A is stretched or rotated, does Volume ‘X’ change? And, if Volume ‘X’ is stretched or compressed along the x, y, or z axes, what is the effect on Volumes A, B, C, or D?

More recently, the drawing portion of the analytical studies has been augmented by reproducing other versions of selected *Prouns* in basswood (Figure 14, A-C). The specific aim is a parallel investigation of spatial relationships, phenomenal transparency, and the mutable characteristics of Volume ‘X’, here based on the manipulation of structural and cladding systems.

### ***Proun* Studies: Design Projects**

In the final phase of the investigation, students are asked to consider on what terms a significant architecture, an

architecture based on some or all of the aspects of El-Lissitzky’s concept of Irrational Space, might result from the *Proun* investigation and, furthermore, are asked to develop a proposal for a specific building on a specific site and in response to a specific program.

In retrospect, the most successful investigations have demonstrated at least some, if not all, of the following characteristics:

In the switch from analytical studies to schematic design proposal, no assumptions were made regarding sectional diagrams versus plan diagrams and, in fact, the designers often went through a stage where the array of analytical diagrams were tested as either plan or section.

Eventually, two or three of the analytical studies are identified as primary: they establish the ground for further study and development. Volume ‘X’ is primary in terms of programmatic, as well as spatial, hierarchy.

During the design process, the designer realized that the volumes that sponsor Volume ‘X’, that is, B, C, and D, can exist outside Volume ‘A’ and, therefore, B, C, or D may be a spatial volume, an object or a space such as a courtyard or garden, adjacent to the site.

During the design process, the designer differentiated between volumes that are perceptually dense and those that are conceptually dense.

The formal and spatial attributes of the original *Proun* model reappear in the final proposal, as a skylight, a garden, a spatial sequence, or a primary space.

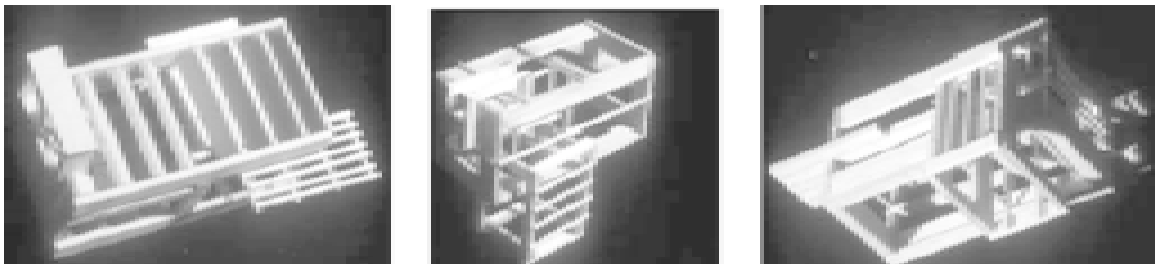


Figure 14, A-C: *Prouns*, Basswood models, 2000-2001

At almost every phase of the investigation, there has been a preoccupation—if not obsession—with Kepes' notion of a fluctuating spatial volume and rigorous and exhaustive study and testing of the means for establishing, maintaining, and exploiting such conditions.

A small sample of project proposals from past years are presented in Figure 15. To reiterate the point offered a moment ago, in each of the most successful projects, there has been a preoccupation with Kepes' notion of a condition of a fluctuating spatial volume and rigorous

and exhaustive study and testing of the means for articulating that fascinating spatial condition in section and in elevation, as well as in plan.

In closing, I offer a heartfelt thanks to the friends and colleagues who, over a period of almost ten years, have offered support, encouragement, and constructive criticism for this endeavor and to my former students at Kansas State University and the University of Tennessee who almost always managed to surprise and impress me with their thoughtful, enthusiastic, and inventive responses to the *Proun* investigation.

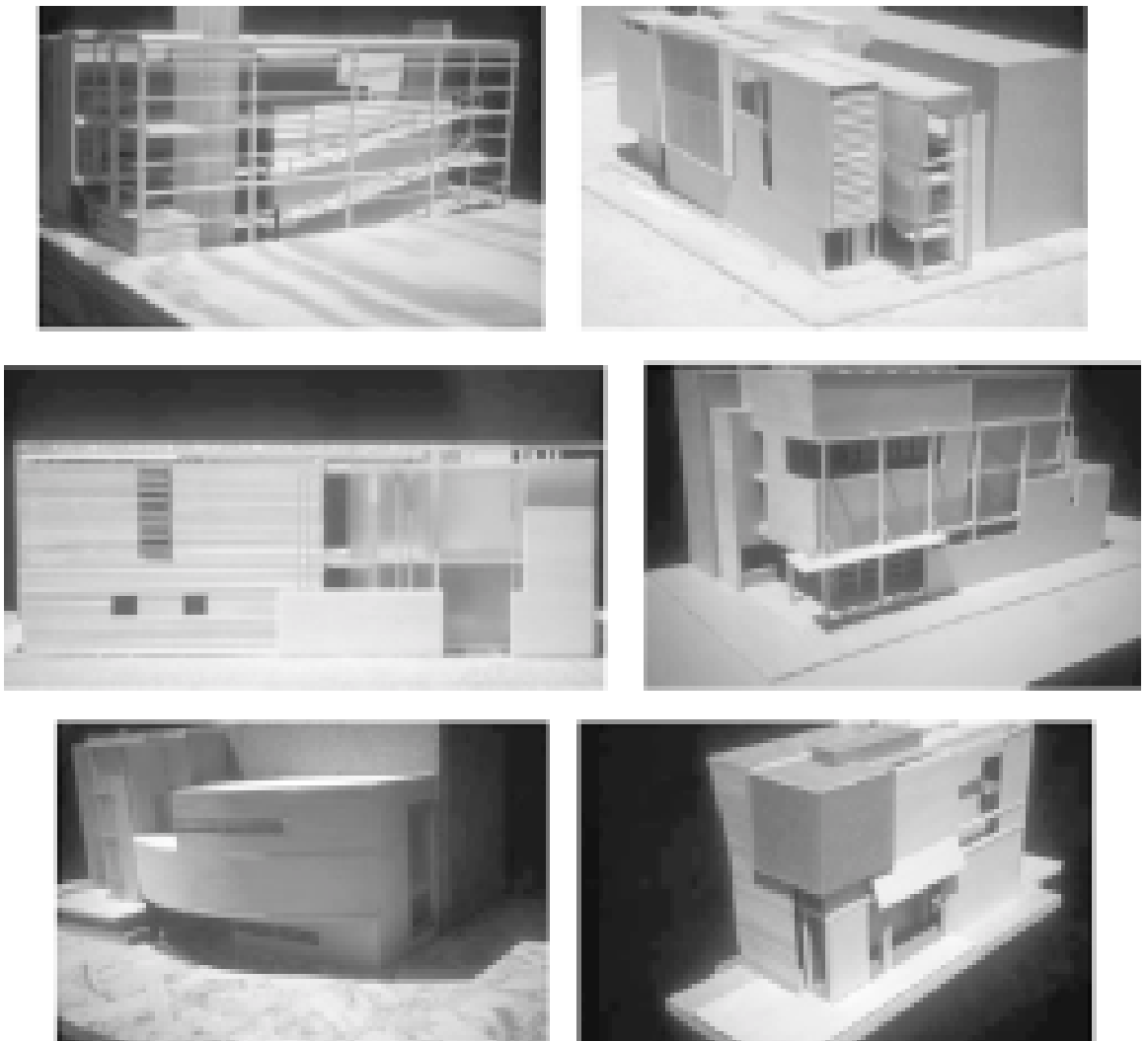


Figure 15: Design proposals based on the *Proun* studies, 1998-2001

## Epilogue

From the magazine *ABC—Beiträge zum Bauen*, 1925, edited by Lissitzky, Emil Roth, Mart Stam, and Emil Schmidt:

...I cannot define absolutely what a 'Proun' is, for this work is not yet finished; but I can try to define a few things which are already clear. At my early exhibitions in Russia, I noticed that the visitors always asked: what does it represent?—for they were used to looking at pictures which had been produced on the basis that they were to represent something. My aim—and this is not only my aim, this is the meaning of the new art—is not to represent, but to form something independent of any conditioning factor. To this thing I give the independent name Proun. When its life is fulfilled and it lies down gently in the grave of the history of art, only then will this idea be defined. It is surely and old truth, dear friend, that had I defined absolutely this idea which I have created, my entire artistic work would have been unnecessary.

But a few facts:

The painter of pictures uses his optical, psychological, historical, etc. abilities, and writes all that into the novel, the short story, the grotesque, etc. of his picture. The Proun creator concentrates in himself all the elements of modern knowledge and all the systems and methods and with these he forms *plastic elements*, which exist like the elements of nature...he amalgamates these elements and obtains acids which bite into everything they touch...they have an effect on all spheres of life. Perhaps all this is a piece of laboratory work: but it produces no scientific preparations which are only interesting and intelligible to a circle of specialists. It produces living bodies, objects of a specific kind, whose effects cannot be measured with an anmeter or a manometer...

Notes:

- 1 Gyorgy Kepes: "If one sees two or more figures overlapping one another, and each of them claims for itself the common overlapped part, then one is confronted with a contradiction of spatial dimensions. To resolve this contradiction one must assume the presence of a new optical quality. The figures are endowed with transparency: that is, they are able to interpenetrate without an optical destruction of each other. Transparency however implies more than an optical characteristic, it implies a broader spatial order. Transparency means a simultaneous perception of different spatial locations. Space not only recedes but fluctuates in a continuous activity. The position of the transparent figures has equivocal meaning as one sees each figure now as the closer, now as the further one."
- 2 Illustration for a Ukranian fairytale
- 3 Kenneth Frampton writes that *Proun* is from "Pro-Unovis", 'for the school of the new art' (*Modern Architecture: A Critical History*), and Reyner Banham asserts that "Proun is merely a Russian word for 'object'." (*Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*).
- 4 Victor Margolin cites El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten* (The Isms of Art), 1925, where they defined the *Proun* as "the transfer point from painting to architecture" [Margolin translation].
- 5 Lissitzky, "PROUN: Not World Visions, But—World Reality", in *De Stijl* 5, no. 6 (June 1922)
- 6 Margolin, p. 31-32. 7 Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 68.
- 8 Matthew Drutt, "El Lissitzky in Germany, 1922-1925", *El Lissitzky, Beyond the Abstract Cabinet: Photography, Design, Collaboration*, by Margarita Tupitsyn, with contributions by Matthew Drutt and Ulrich Pohlmann (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 9.
- 9 Margolin, p. 71
- 10 The abbreviation 'A.' = art
- 11 C. A. Debelius, "Handout No. 1", *Proun Studies*, 1999.




Figure 17: El-Lissitzky, *Self-Portrait (Constructor)*, 1924

# Modernism as Cultural Confrontation

## The Architecture of Lina Bo Bardi

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This paper explores how modernity in architecture can engage in a process of cultural confrontation through three examples of the unique work of Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992): the Museum of Art of São Paulo, the Museum of Popular Art in Salvador, and SESC-Pompeia cultural and leisure center in São Paulo. The main purpose of this analysis is to contribute to the scholarship about how architectural modernization establishes links with non-modern cultural phenomena.

One of her greatest contributions to architectural modernism has been described as the development of an anthropological gaze into the practice of design. This paper proposes to expand the notion of anthropological gaze and look at its ambiguities in light of the notion of hybrid cultures presented by anthropologist Néstor García-Canclini, which defines how popular cultures negotiate with modernity by entering and leaving it. Lina Bo Bardi operated in the flip side of this reciprocal relationship and transformed it into the exercise of political and cultural confrontation. In her case, modern architecture and culture resist and negotiate with the presence of the popular. Her attempt to bring the popular into her conception of the modern simultaneously occurred as a strategy to question modernism. This approach presents an important argument to advance the understanding of issues of otherness and, more recently, the consideration of non-western themes in contemporary architectural discourses, in North America in particular.

Lina Bo Bardi was born in Italy in 1914, was educated in Rome during the ascendance of fascism, worked in Milan during the war and arrived in Brazil in 1946, where she spent the remaining forty-six years of her life. While the war in Europe interrupted the utopian experiences of modernist avant-gardes, Brazil emerged as a new architectural laboratory for Brazilians and many foreigners like her. In 1946, she married Pietro Maria

Bardi, a Roman art critic and dealer who played an important role in advocating modernism in Italy in the 1930s. He planned their honeymoon in Rio after hearing about Assis Chateaubriand, a controversial press magnate interested in opening a large art museum in Brazil, who is well known for having blackmailed the local elites in order to achieve his goals.

This is how Lina Bo Bardi arrived in Brazil. They took a ship to Rio carrying more than 50 Italian paintings from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that he couldn't sell in the bankrupt art market in Europe. The contact with Chateaubriand was successful. Bardi sold his lot of paintings and was immediately invited by the journalist to move to São Paulo and direct the new Museum of Art. As a consequence, Lina was in charge of designing the museum facilities.

Brazil became Lina Bo Bardi's land of choice and she became a national citizen in 1951. From this moment on, until she passed away in March 1992, she developed a variety of activities, designing buildings, furniture, film and stage settings, exhibitions and writing for magazines and newspapers. Culture was the stuffing of her work and thinking. She was loyal to the promise of early-20th-Century avant-gardes to incorporate everyday life as a means to change art, but maybe not fully aware of how much this strategy would challenge her own assumptions.

The Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP) was the practical reason why Lina stayed in Brazil. It was the cultural harbor from where she set sail into her architectural and curatorial experimentations and into her travels around the country. She designed the museum's permanent building located on Paulista Avenue, between 1957 and 1968. This project follows many of Le Corbusier's formal principles, such as abstract geometry, elevation from the ground and independence

between enclosure and structural systems. Lina, however, wanted to go beyond the modernist vocabulary by proposing what she described as simplification or “arquitetura pobre” (poor or simple architecture), based on her perception of how Brazilian popular culture dealt with everyday design solutions.

This terminology has close relationship to “arte povera,” which intended to break down irrelevant divisions between everyday life and modern art, in direct opposition to late modernism and especially minimalism. “Povero” (poor, simple) in Lina’s architecture stands for the gap between modern design and the social reality excluded from consumption society (Bardi, 1994) and for a kind of aesthetic expression that was as unrefined and poetic as the forms she found in objects shaped by the hands of Brazilian craftspeople.

Two of the most significant aspects of her design for MASP are not in the formal features of the building itself but in the spaces that it creates. First, the layout for the permanent collection, according to Lina Bo Bardi, should break down typological and temporal hierarchies<sup>1</sup>. Vertical glass panels sitting on small concrete blocks to hold the artworks reduced supports to minimum elements and replaced the traditional museum wall. Ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary works shared a boundless space as if they constituted a constellation of western art open to debate.

Second, the plaza under the museum 230-foot-wide concrete span. Her response to the constraints of the site resulted in a “building [that] is indeed both there and not there, giving back to the city as much space as it took from it” (Van Eyck, 1997: n/p). She originally imagined this space for different activities, including open-air art exhibitions, a sculpture playground, and even a circus as we can see in many of her sketches and watercolors.

During the construction of MASP, Lina became intimately involved with new cultural movements taking place in Salvador, the colonial capital in the northeastern state of Bahia, and started to collaborate with a group of artists and intellectuals who were involved with a strongly regionalist cultural project. She spent a lot of time there between 1958 and 1963, and set an important precedent for movements such as Tropicália and New Cinema.

She wrote a Sunday column for a newspaper in Salvador with articles about modern art and how modernizing projects were erasing important local cultural features. These texts reveal the ambiguity in Lina

Bo Bardi’s effort to combine both her praise of modernist aesthetic experimentation and her interest – with some nostalgia – for a genuinely popular culture. Her most important collaboration in Salvador was with Martim Gonçalves, director of Castro Alves Theater. Together, they organized an exhibition about the culture of Bahia for the 5th São Paulo Art Biennale in 1959, and opened the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia, conceived to be a cultural “center, a movement, [and] a school” to oppose conservative official art programs and politics in Bahia (Bo Bardi, 1994, 139).

Between 1960 and 1963, Lina Bo Bardi coordinated the creation of the Museum of Popular Art as her project during that period in Salvador, housed in a run-down ensemble of 16th Century colonial buildings called Solar do Unhão. She proposed a plaza on the seafont for popular performances, large open spaces inside the buildings and a new central staircase based on the construction of traditional ox carts.

The museum opened in November 1963 with a large exhibition titled the “Popular Art of the Northeast” (Bardi, 1994, 158). She considered the exhibition to promote a political confrontation. It contained objects produced in the cultural struggle of impoverished people: “from lighting to kitchen spoons, to bedspreads, clothing, toys, furniture, and weapons,” this material “metaphorically represents what modern civilization considers to be trash” (idem, *ibid.*). The goal was to call into question the boundaries between high and popular culture, and promote what she believed to be truly Brazilian design based on popular craft.

In 1964, the establishment of the military dictatorship cut short the environment of cultural experimentation in Brazil and in Salvador for over two decades. The army occupied the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia and organized an exhibition titled “Subversion,” which “raised a dark shadow of cultural reaction, stale traditions, anger and fear in the horizon” (Bo Bardi, 1994, 162) and interrupted the activities Lina Bo Bardi had been developing with artists and intellectuals in the Northeast.

Back in São Paulo, during the first eight years of the military regime, Lina Bo Bardi did not develop any consistent architectural design, but she continued her work as an exhibition curator. In 1969, she expanded the search of the Northeast exhibitions and organized a large show in the new building of the Museum of Art (MASP) titled “The Hands of the Brazilian People.” In 1976, Lina got involved again with architectural projects, and coordinated the design for SESC-Pompéia, a project that

marks the condensation of many of the architectural and cultural ideas she developed throughout her life. SESC, the Social Service Trade Association – a kind of unionized YMCA – commissioned the design for a leisure center in the area previously occupied by a steel drum factory. Her insight about the conversion of the building came from the encounter with the spontaneous occupation of the building by people from the neighborhood.

SESC-Pompéia was a significant step in Lina Bo Bardi's conceptualization of cultural spaces by moving further towards everyday life, simplification and hybridization as design principles. The complex is composed by two major ensembles: the existing factory that was renovated for cultural and educational activities, and new towers built to house a gymnasium. The bottom area of the site where the towers were built is crossed by a channeled creek, which means no construction on top of it. Lina 's response was to create wooden deck over the water channel and to raise two vertical concrete volumes connected by skywalks that complete the sublime appearance of the ensemble. The largest block contains a swimming pool and stacked sports courts and presents the series of irregular cutout holes that I described earlier.

The shed structure of the old factory was cleaned and opened up to accommodate a few large architectural additions in concrete: a volume for the open library suspended in the space of the lounge, the theater foyer, bleachers with seats, and a large lounge, where she promoted several exhibitions, with titles such as "Domestic chapels," "Design in Brazil: History and Reality," "A Thousand Toys for Brazilian People," "Stud and Mud," "Beauty and the Right to Be Ugly." SESC's architecture is the outcome of the combination between these large and harsh gestures with small and picturesque ones such as a water pond in the lounge, sitting nooks, simple sculptures, and delicate textures that reintroduce the intimacy of the hand and the human body into the sublime roughness and scale of the ensemble.

The two-sided character of Lina Bo Bardi's work decentralizes the concepts of modern and modernity and revisits their sense of transience, and the fact that the meaning of architecture and culture is discursive, and not self-evident. The ambiguous and sometimes nostalgic attempt to negotiate between modern and popular cultures provides some clues to consider the sense of modernity in her work.

Lina Bo Bardi was not loyal to modernist aesthetic principles as much as she was loyal to a modernist conception of modernity. As a designer and cultural producer, she relied on the premises of the Modern Movement that intended to reconcile the modern and the traditional in its aesthetic and political programs. This way of defining modernity is probably the most productive and insightful aspect of her work, yet it is also the most vulnerable. One of the risks in this avant-garde project lays in whether the belief that everyday life and tradition could be incorporated into art in order to change art turned into the belief that modern art could actually change everyday life and the traditional. This seems to be the seductive blind spot towards which the ambiguities in Lina Bo Bardi's notion of modernity converge.

She had great affection for the popular culture and craft of the Brazilian people, but it seems that her anthropological quest was simultaneously motivated and complicated by her aesthetic gaze, reinforcing the difficult paradox between looking at the culture of the 'other' as a system of objects rather than a system of social practices and values. Her ethnographic approach to popular culture and design was highly aestheticized, and informed by a picturesque, if not idealized, perspective. This approach does not merely represent, however, a naive perception of the popular, which is probably why she often stated that she was not dealing with folklore.

Her picturesque view constitutes a double-tension with her utopian thinking. Popular elements play a strong ideological role in this relationship, based on her belief that social and political emancipation could be achieved through cultural transformation. What makes this claim even more complicated is the fact that she expected this transformation to achieve a "truly" Brazilian design. This argument implies that the links between culture and nation could be naturalized and identified as the representation a specific territory, contradicting the fleeting condition of the transcultural operations that she proposed.

Her approach to design presented the aesthetic value of popular culture as a constant tension between its representation as fixed objects and products and its changing processes of production. This conflict can be seen in the relationship between her uses of materials, such as mud and concrete – employed as an aesthetic confrontation – and a certain tendency to mimic popular forms, but not always their techniques. According to

García-Canclini, popular culture cannot be frozen in the form of a patrimony of “stable assets,” since it “does not concentrate in objects” but rather in their “social and economic conditions of production and consumption.”<sup>2</sup> For him, tradition is the “mechanism of selection, and even of invention, projected towards the past in order to legitimate the present” and popular culture is the ensemble of “dynamic dramatizations of collective experience.”<sup>3</sup> Even though these positions raise questions about the limitations in Lina Bo Bardi’s anthropological gaze, they do not disqualify her work. They actually reveal more about her own struggle between the modern and the traditional than about the struggle of how the traditional and the popular negotiate with modernity.

Lina Bo Bardi’s definition of popular culture referred to everyday life sociability. She actually avoided the use of the words culture and art in her studio, because she understood that their commodified versions had emptied out their sense of community. According to anthropologist Eduardo Subirats, her “notions of community [and culture] organized around activities of artistic expression, education, and leisure, did not have anything to do with the notion of popular culture” of political nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Culture and art represented instead constituting elements of a community, and were “radically integrated in the production of [its] everyday life and committed to [its] fantasies and struggles to survival.”<sup>5</sup> The political character of Lina Bo Bardi’s cultural project coincides with the specific meaning that popular culture historically developed in Latin America. It stands for the ability for material survival and the struggle against colonizing and modernizing forces from which they are excluded. Lina Bo Bardi overlooked, however, the potential of popular cultures themselves to negotiate their conflicts with modernity – which is a strong argument in García-Canclini’s work about hybrid cultures. Instead, she tended to assume the popular as an unchanging or at least uncontaminated form of expressive practice. The influence of a picturesque perception of the popular shows evidence of the tension between her anthropological quest and her aesthetic gaze by sometimes overlooking social processes over visual appearance.

Despite the fact that this approach to the non-modern presents a blind spot in Lina Bo Bardi’s work, the most important aspect in her attempt to embrace tradition and popular culture was the fact that she introduced a very discomfiting memory into the struggles of a modernizing

country. Modernity in Brazil, like other places in Latin America, presents a gap between significant moments of modernist expression and an unbalanced and discontinuous process of social and political modernization. As García-Canclini suggests, modernity in Latin America was a “simulacrum fabricated by the elites and state apparatuses ... [that] made believe they were creating national cultures while they created elite cultures.”<sup>6</sup>

This was exactly the condition Lina Bo Bardi found in São Paulo during the creation of MASP in the 1950s, and in Bahia in the 1960s, and which was reinforced by the climate of patriotism and censorship established by the military dictatorship until the 1980s. Lina Bo Bardi’s work dealt with the conflict arising from the fact that modern culture in a country such as Brazil has historically represented a social and political process of abstract inclusion and concrete exclusion. This elitist process of cultural modernization was the main target of Lina Bo Bardi’s critical work. She culturally reinforced the presence of what was made invisible by social processes. Despite ambiguities and contradictions, by taking risks she included and valued what the cultural elites of the country had traditionally undermined and rejected.

Lina Bo Bardi’s practice and thinking was strongly engaged with risk, by resisting conservative social, cultural and political positions in her proposals. She revealed the asymmetrical power relations in the reciprocal exchanges between modernity and tradition, by showing that architecture can be an important constituting element in the manifestation of culture. Nevertheless, she revised her experiences and expectations in a negative note at the end of her life. She was disappointed by how capitalist modernization had quickly imposed a heavy burden onto traditional cultures. She remarked that “real estate speculation, the lack of public housing, the proliferation of industrial design in the form of gadgets and superfluous objects weighed heavy over the cultural situation of [Brazil] and created very serious obstacles for the development of a truly autochthonous [sic] culture.”<sup>7</sup>

Her disappointment, however, did not entail the loss of confidence in the ideology of the Modern Movement. She was confident that modernist utopias should be revised and that a method of anthropological search should replace aestheticism in architecture. For her, the proliferation of the capitalist system of production “swept away the basic achievements of the Modern Movement, by transforming its great fundamental idea – planning –



into the utopian mistake of the technocrat intelligentsia.”<sup>8</sup> As contradictory and obsolete as this revision proposal might sound, it had profound political meaning in her work, since she insisted in the demystification of design as the instrument of capitalism and its abstract space.

Despite contradictions and disappointment, her work challenged traditional dichotomies between rationalism and spontaneity, and conceptions of modern and non-modern, and West and non-West. It also provides evidence of the fact that to call modernity into question does not mean to replace the modern world, since her work is a reflection on modernism and modernity more than a reflection on the meanings of tradition and the popular. Lina Bo Bardi's attempt to bring the popular into her conception of the modern, in fact, simultaneously occurred with her attempt to leave modernism. By doing so, it introduced a way to problematize what García-Cañclini described as “the mistaken links [that the modern world] organized with the traditions it wanted to exclude or overcome in order to constitute itself.” This affirmation presents an important argument that gives continuity to the questions being raised about the relationship between contemporary culture and globalizing processes, which in architectural discourses – in the United States in particular – has been introduced through the issues of otherness and, more recently, the consideration of non-western themes.

The introduction of non-western manifestations and forms in the study of architecture and culture today raise the stakes of our considerations about their relationship to modernity. In the 1960s, the critique of the trivialization of high modernism brought back the discussion about the vernacular and the traditional but lost its power as it was co-opted by the same forces it tried to oppose. Since the 1990s, a similar debate has been revived or, more accurately, complicated by the consideration of globalized forms of architectural and cultural production. This is a discussion that one certainly has to engage with caution, because of the threat of reification of the terms it employs to redefine previous understandings of notions such as western, non-western, the ‘other,’ and traditional, popular, literate and mass cultures. One of the cautionary aspects, for example, is that popular culture has become more closely related to cultural industries and mass production than the early avant-gardes expected. The other one is that, unlike Lina Bo Bardi's expectations, popular culture is not always, as García-Cañclini points out, under the control of the popular classes.<sup>9</sup> In a similar

way west and non-west, modern and non-modern are not separate categories that exist independently or under the control of pure identities of cultural and political forms.

Lina Bo Bardi's struggle with modernity shows that the modern has no simple and fixed origin, place or form, despite its modernist claim for universality, completeness and singularity. The process of hybridization and the production of difference in her conception of modernity can be seen in the light of Tim Mitchell's assessment of the complex origin of the modern in his definition of modernity as staging of history. According to him, if the hypothesis that “modernity is not so much a stage of history but rather its staging, then it is a world particularly vulnerable to a certain kind of disruption or displacement.”<sup>10</sup> This vulnerability opens modernity to possibilities of misrepresentation and mainly to the production of difference, which is an important constituting and transient element of the modern. To Mitchell, modernity “always remains an impossible unity, an incomplete universal. Each staging of the modern must be arranged to produce the unified, global history of modernity, yet each requires those forms of difference that introduce the possibility of a discrepancy, that return to undermine its unity and identity. Modernity then becomes the unsuitable yet unavoidable name for all these discrepant histories.”<sup>11</sup>

These disruptions, which produce difference, represent the condition from which Lina Bo Bardi operated. However, the critical challenge to architecture today – if we follow a parallel with Mitchell's argument – is to expand the theorization of modernity into a globalizing context not in a way to invert the narrative of modernization, but instead to enable it to become more complex.<sup>12</sup> This argument could be further explored as we reconsider the role of the margin and the popular and the excluded in the way architecture can articulate spatial situations created under asymmetrical power struggles in “a mobile process of rupture and reinscription.” The margin, the popular and the excluded appear as the elements that provide the gap that makes internal differentiation or, as Mitchell suggests, “displacement, deferral and delay”<sup>13</sup> possible in the indeterminacy of modernity.

As much as these arguments help us make sense of Lina Bo Bardi's negotiation for entering and leaving modernity, they still face the open question posed to the critical role of designers today. The modernist project that informed Lina Bo Bardi's work and concept of

modernity has become too fragile to face the industrialization of a worldwide symbolic economy. The transition from traditional, popular, and modern cultures into market cultures is complicated by the forms of cultural production that are often invested in maintaining the status quo instead of challenging the disjunctions and inequalities within modernity. Yet, if considered in its historic and geographic specificity, and not as a reproducible model, Lina Bo Bardi's work may provide an important analogy for contemporary architectural investigations. Architecture and culture simultaneously raise questions that may indicate gaps and holes – if we consider her windows as a metaphor – that set off movement and displacement in modernity.

On the one hand, the models of practice and thinking in contemporary architecture that inform most designers today tend to retreat into cultures of consumption and excess. In an asymmetrically globalized world, they are concentrated in the traditionally rich areas of the North and in a few scattered centers of economic power in the Southern hemisphere. These designers are mostly concerned with formal experimentation. On the other hand, designers who work in cultures of scarcity and in areas with shortage of means and resources, mostly in the South and in poor areas of the globe, are often in conflict with social and cultural contrasts and increasingly witness situations of trauma. Architects such as Lina Bo Bardi face significant risks. They operate within gaps and disjunctions in order to design an architecture of the possible. Yet they advance important aesthetic, social, cultural and political issues.

Lina Bo Bardi's work as a searcher - an itinerant and exiled woman - shaped an architectural odyssey based on trying to make sense of the ambivalence between modern and popular cultures and the life of those people who tend to be excluded from the reach of modernization and modernity. More than carrying on an odyssey simply in search of her own home, it seems that Lina Bo Bardi longed for a broader sense of home for the anonymous people she met in her travels. The double-sidedness of her design hybridizations and confrontations resembles the fleeting and critical sense of the modern which Tim Mitchell describes as the "an instability always already at work in the production of modernity" (Mitchell, 2000, 17). Lina Bo Bardi was aware of this transient and critical condition. In order to create and realize her project through a spatial and cultural practice, she was loyal to the belief that the role of designers is not to turn away from design but that it is in negotiating and struggling

with it. Or, according to her quotation of Brecht, it is in the ability to say no.

Notes:

- 1 It not say "you should admire this, it's a Rembrandt, but rather leave the spectator to his own pure (sic) and unhampered observations, guided only by captions [on the back], which [provided enough information but] eliminated exaltation in order to have critical rigueur" (Bo Bardi, 1997:7)
- 2 García-Canclini, *op.cit.*, p.203.
- 3 García-Canclini, *op.cit.*, p.203.
- 4 Eduardo Subirats, *op.cit.*, p.118.
- 5 Eduardo Subirats, *op.cit.*, p.118.
- 6 García-Canclini, *op.cit.*, p.20.
- 7 Lina Bo Bardi monograph, *op.cit.*, p.11.
- 8 Lina Bo Bardi monograph, *op.cit.*, pp.13-14.
- 9 García-Canclini, *op.cit.*, p.23.
- 10 Tim Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p.23.
- 11 Tim Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p.24.
- 12 Tim Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p.7.
- 13 Tim Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 24

# Abstraction Versus Representation in Current Architectural Practice

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The issue of modernism as a singularly appropriate architectural language has piqued my curiosity throughout a career as a practicing and teaching architect. I continue to ponder why, more than twenty-five years after the advent of post-modernism, most architects prefer to design in an abstract-modernist mode rather than in an historical-representational one, or something in between.(1) Why do most architects receive more creative satisfaction when working with diagrammatic form and fluid space than if they were producing buildings that reflect traditional typologies and decorative surfaces? Why is there a qualitative difference between a derivation on a late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Beaux-Arts building and a 1920's early modern house? Both models are from the past. Neither represent, accurately nor exactly, "our time and place," a phrase often quoted in either a defense of modernism or in a criticism of historicism. Therefore, I often ask myself why then is it generally considered appropriate to reuse a seventy-five-year-old design vocabulary, but inappropriate to employ

an architectural language only several decades further removed in time?

These are complicated issues, and undoubtedly there are numerous reasons why modernism is still the design philosophy most popular with architects. However, for this paper, I will focus on three causes that I believe most strongly influence the prevailing modernist design approach of contemporary architectural practice. These three conditions are worth defining because, not only do they significantly inform the formal language of most architects, but they also can be clearly isolated and, if need be, restructured without major damage to the profession as a whole. First, I will argue that the initial perception of architecture, held by newly enrolled students, is one of creative activity, and that view, while tempered, continues throughout professional life. The practicing architect wishes not to perpetuate, but to innovate. Another factor is that current architectural education implies that abstraction, rather than representation, in architecture is the more appropriate language. This didactic foundation firmly imprints itself upon the future architect. Lastly, I will show how the reward system of the profession encourages modernism over any other approach to design. In a profession with relatively low financial remuneration, peer recognition is a highly desired reward. Therefore, the dwindling number of, but still significant, journals, with their ability to create celebrity, are highly influential in shaping the direction of architectural design by favoring modernist projects. The concluding question will be, is this condition of a restrictive architectural language harmful or beneficial to the profession?

First, let's look at the initial perceptions held by newly enrolled architectural students of their future profession. A good place to begin might be with my own early presumptions of what function an architect performed in our society. Prior to entering college, I had not thought



Figure 1. Interior of the Villa Savoye by LeCorbusier, 1928-31 - an example of an early modern building that continues to influence current projects.

very much about the field other than being aware that architects designed buildings. My first encounter was while a freshman in engineering and frequently observing architecture students, who lived in the same dormitory, engaged in the act of rendering their projects. I was seduced by their media - graphite, India ink and watercolor. The miniature representations of buildings were, to my eyes, interesting and delightful. Intuitively I could sense these small images being transferred into real buildings that would be occupied by people. It was a fascinating sensation. Looking back to that time, I think that I saw architecture as a process of graphically representing a concept of reality. That reality was a useful three-dimensional object – a building. Upon changing my major and entering the architecture curriculum, a tacit sense of competition rapidly developed in the design studio. It was understood by all of us as students, although never stated by faculty, that our work should display as much originality as possible. If another student indicated an idea or form first, we did all that we could to not emulate or duplicate it. How this urge for exclusiveness developed, I do not know. As I mentioned, I have no recollection of a faculty member ever overtly stressing such an exclusive approach to design. In fact, I remember once when a student blatantly copied a Frank Lloyd Wright design and received a passing grade. Many of my classmates, including myself, were confused and somewhat disturbed. Therefore, for me personally, an ambition for inventiveness and originality developed, without overt faculty persuasion, during the early phase of my architectural education. It was as if there was something inexplicable in the air that said to us that the making of architecture was an artistic act and demanded the originality usually associated with any creative process.

But, let's not leave this argument only to my early perception of the act of making architecture. Well aware of my own, at the time, naiveté and recognizing the fact that today's students are far more sophisticated than most of us were in my undergraduate days, I posed similar questions to a sampling of architecture majors at the University of Arizona where I teach. I asked what their perception of the architectural profession was before enrolling in the school, and why they chose to study architecture? As to be expected, the answers varied but were also far more rational than my own intuitive reasons for entering the same field.

Of course, there was the expected, "I wanted to be an artist, but my parents felt that I would be able to

support myself as an architect." However, this type of ambivalent response did not surface as often as I would have thought. Most of the responses expressed strong pre-enrollment interest in design and the ordering of space. One very interesting student wrote:

"I enjoyed arranging space at a very young age in whatever small contexts I had influence. At age ten the task of designing a dream house for French class opened my eyes to setting out space in the context of architecture....There were no architects in the family, and it was an entirely personal choice. Along the way I have not come across anything else I'd rather pour my efforts into, and that has continued through the years of studying and working in the field."

Another student responded:

"Until recently, I was unaware of the architect's many duties. I had no idea architects were responsible for so many legal liabilities and contractor relationships.....I chose architecture because I had a dreamy idea of designing custom houses and spending days outside building with my hands."

What was learned from my respondents was that none of them selected architecture as a career for the purpose of engaging the less creative activities of the profession such as research, programming, management or technology, as might a science, business or engineering major. Art and design –that is, creative activity – were always cited as the reason for entering the field. Therefore, it is not surprising that a student with a creative penchant would desire to perform acts of innovation rather than reworking some distant tradition during his or her professional life.

A second, and extremely significant influence on the forming of future architects' affinity for modernity and abstraction, is the way we educators teach design studios. Once again returning to my own education, I have absolutely no recollection of a faculty member ever stating that we should not work in an historicist mode. But, somehow we all felt that anything but abstract-modernism was taboo. It was as if there were something in the air, a condition that reminds me of a sentence in D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*. He wrote, "The

thing communicates itself like some drug on the air, wringing the heart and paralyzing the soul. . . .” (2)

Accordingly, and at the present time, within my own school, the University of Arizona, I can state that the student design work I see is exclusively modernist. Other than the history and theory courses, there does not seem to be any strong emphasis placed on historical precedent beyond the heroic period of the modern movement, that is, the 1920's work coming out of the Bauhaus, the proponents of the New Objectivity and De Stijl and, of course, Le Corbusier. Russian Constructivism also seems to have a firm pedagogical position in the catalog of acceptable models to be followed. It is not my intention to disparage my own school but only to illustrate that there does not seem to be a comfortable place for design work that would display any but a modernist language.

I thought that it might prove interesting and informative to survey other schools of architecture in order to learn if they too stress an exclusive modernist pedagogy. The most efficient way to do this was to visit different schools' web sites and view the student work that each architecture department chose to display. Surely, only work that reflected the school's prevailing philosophy would be posted for public consumption.

Across the board, with only two exceptions, all imagery shown was modernist, abstract and even leaning toward the futuristic. The two exceptions were Tulane University and the University of Miami. Both schools incorporated some imagery of traditional or traditionally

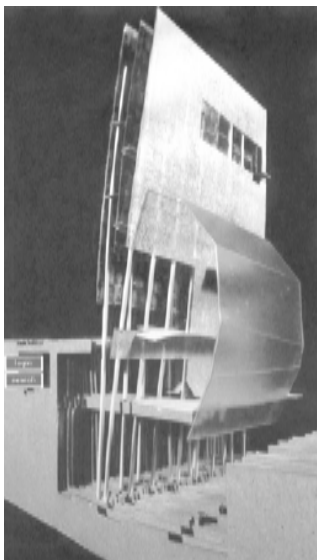


Figure 2. Student project by Elizabeth Emerson, Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture and Planning web site.

derived architecture on either their home page or gallery of student work. I suspect that at least part of the reason behind these aberrations is that Tulane is located in New Orleans, a city extraordinarily wealthy in its inventory of exceptional 19<sup>th</sup> Century Architecture, and the University of Miami enjoys leadership that espouses a more pluralistic and seemingly more accessible architectural language.

In any case, what is clear is that more than a majority of American schools of architectural, whether by implication or overt action, promote a modernist design philosophy. They thus graduate scores of future architects who have been conditioned, for good or for bad, to consider modernism the appropriate path to follow.

I would like to discuss another factor that I know drives the architect, when possible, to choose a modernist language for current work. In a profession still with relatively low financial remuneration in comparison with other professions such as medicine, law or even engineering, peer recognition through publication has become an extremely important reward that often can lead to future commissions.(3) Therefore, the dwindling numbers, but still significant, periodicals and journals, with their ability to create celebrity, are highly influential in shaping the direction of architectural design. Arguably, the two most sought after and influential publications for practitioners to receive acknowledgment by having their projects published are the annual *Progressive Architecture Design Awards* and the annual *Architectural Record* issue on houses. Looking back on some past issues of the *Progressive Architecture* annual awards issue, specifically the years 1991 to 2002, revealed that practically all of the designs selected for awards were in a modernist idiom. Several could be considered vernacular in form, but there were definitely none with overt historical references – a move that would be anathema to modernism.

The other publication that attracts ambitious architects seeking publication is the annual house issue of *Architectural Record*. Looking back from this year's issue to 1997, of 44 houses featured, 42 were firmly modern, and two could be considered traditional or vernacular in appearance. This indicates that the odds favor a modernist design being published over a traditional design by 21 to 1 - another compelling reason why an architect who desires his work to be published in a prestigious medium would shy away from producing projects in traditional modes. Therefore, I firmly believe that editorial prejudice does highly inform a practicing

architect's choice of an architectural language. There seems to be a tacit understanding in the profession, and also in the schools, that if one wishes to succeed critically, one must work as a modern architect.

As stated earlier, the issue of modernism in contemporary practice is complicated. I do not feel that the three causes that I have presented are anywhere near exclusive. Current building technology, a shortage of skilled craftspeople, as well as affordability all certainly weight heavily toward a more industrial language, and thus, modern approach to architecture. Anything but superficial imitation of a traditional building is generally beyond most budgets.

If it seems that I am arguing myself into a modernist corner, it is because I am doing just that. The language of modernism, with its emphasis on current technology, visual lightness and fluid space does seem to me, at times, more appropriate than a traditional idiom with its employment of mass, spatial containment and decorative forms. This could explain why Rietveld's Schroder-Schrader house of 1924 has more relevance for current designers than McKim, Mead and White's Boston Public Library of 1895 even though the two works are less than thirty years apart in age. Modernism, in spite of its own recycling of design language, still is perceived by architects to enjoy appropriateness and to offer the most room for creativity.

So where does this leave us? We have a desire to be an avant-garde profession serving a generally conservative public. As architects we wish to be creative; our educational system stresses experimentation, and that translates, for most of us, into modernism. Yet the general public has never taken to modern architecture in a popular manner.(4) Most people prefer a traditional style for the buildings they occupy, while most architects would rather design in a modernist mode. This dichotomy is a crucial issue in architectural education because schools tend to favor modernism in their pedagogy, thus often placing the future architect in a philosophical conflict with most clients.

Now, I do not advocate dismantling the system, but perhaps some accommodation to a reality can be found. Looking to ourselves, we architectural educators, admit it or not, belong to an academy, and in many ways we are extremely rigid. Other than in our preservation programs, we do not seem to encourage, much less tolerate, an historical approach to design projects. So, is there a way of teaching an appropriate, non-superficial manner of designing with a traditional vocabulary that

might be relevant to contemporary conditions? Consensus seems to indicate that the post-modern approach of the 70's and 80's was a failure. Therefore, the semantic contradiction notwithstanding, I pose the questions, is there a modern way of being traditional or is there a traditional way of being modern? If the answers are no, then perhaps we are doing the correct thing by teaching design based on modernist principles. But, how then should we equip our students who will face the inevitable future challenges of dealing with a public that often desires a traditional solution for their architecture? Do we stress history of styles and how they might be applied using contemporary construction technology? In other words, do we teach the making of architecture through artifice? I hardly think so.

Perhaps there is a way to practice architecture and, by extension, to teach architecture free of the canonical restrictions of hard modernism. Once again, a pluralistic approach to the making of architecture could be allowed, if not advocated, in the educational process. Valuable lessons concerning what not to do should have been learned from the previous post-modern period with its in-jokes, ironic one-liners, cartoon-like elements and outright foolishness. We speak of a "critical regionalism," so why not discuss a critical Post-Modernism? Some practitioners are attempting to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. The California firm of Moule & Polyzoides state on their web site the following:



Figure 3. Detail from Moule & Polyzoides web site. Notice the variety of architectural language utilized in one project in order to reflect the collage of styles in the average city block. Photograph courtesy of Moule & Polyzoides Architects & Urbanists.

“Since the 1970s, architectural culture has become increasingly divided between two factions, each group holding ideals and views exclusive of the other. At one end, proponents who embrace the modernist legacy claim that the architect’s role is to invent ever new and monumental forms. At the other, proponents of historical continuity assert that the cultural rifts of this century can be mended only by replicating traditional architectural forms.

“We believe there is a third way. We are convinced that the visual chaos, formlessness, and place-less-ness of today’s cities and suburbs can be rectified only if architects occupy a middle ground, one that supports both newness and continuity. In our view, knowledge of architectural history need not lead to reproductions of the past, but rather to the subtle transformation of its precedents. By respecting precedent, each project can be the starting point for further design that bestows formal and historical continuity. Only in this sense can newness be synonymous with cultural changes that enrich rather than estrange.”

As far as the influence that the architecture media has on design direction, editorial leadership with catholic taste would encourage broader architectural linguistic exploration. Let us not overlook that certain critics, one being Vincent Scully, have transcended dogma and championed various approaches to the making of architecture throughout long careers. Scully’s writings should be read as an exercise in mind-set liberation by keeping in mind that this is the same historian-critic who had advocated for Kahn in the 1960’s, Venturi in the 70’s and most lately the “School of Miami” with its tropical romanticism. Another architectural critic with an understanding and appreciation of historic continuity and contextualism, along with modernity, is Robert Campbell of the Boston Globe. In a review of last year’s exhibitions of the work of Mies van der Rohe he wrote:

“Mies was all that was best and worst about modern architecture. He embodied its elitism, its arrogance, its love of bloodless abstraction, its ignorance of environmental concerns, and its lack of interest in context or in the conventional language of architecture as understood by ordinary people. But he also upheld its idealism,

rigor, simplicity, honesty, and daring, its belief in the social mission of architecture, and its faith in the power of good design to create a better world.”(5)

I would like to conclude by offering one particular architect who I feel was able to successfully span the chasm of historical continuity and newness of which Moule and Polyzoides speak. The Mexican architect, Luis Barragán, left a body of work during his late phase that was able to transcend the dichotomy between national identity and international progress. Trained as an engineer, with some architectural courses, he first built in the city of Guadalajara in his native state of Jalisco. His early projects were houses in a California Spanish Revival style with tinges of Islamic accents. After a decade of this type of practice, because of economic necessity and, as I believe, in an effort to escape his revivalist past, he relocated to Mexico City where he designed and built a series of multifamily buildings in the International Style. However, by 1940 he was ready to embark on another way of practicing architecture by developing extensive landscapes and building several houses for his own use.

This was the beginning of a seminal body of work that fused tradition and modernism so successfully that the critic, Kenneth Frampton, stated, “Modernity for Barragán was inseparable from the continuity of tradition.”(6) For me, Luis Barragán provides the perfect paradigm for the modern architect who ignites abstract form with humanistic warmth while preserving a subtle but affirmative connection to memory. In his case, it’s the architectonic response to both a real and mythic past by the utilization of primordial elements such as wall,



Figure 4. Folke Egerstrom House by Luis Barragán

water, color and sky. Lacking artifice, his architecture addresses the elusive goal of Moule and Polyzoides's "enrichment over estrangement."

"To be truly modern we must first come to terms with our tradition," wrote Octavio Paz about his fellow countryman, Barragán. (7)

In conclusion, I would not advocate that the education of the architect be deprived of acts of experimentation and innovation, activities intrinsic to modernism and, I might add, to the educational experience. Nor would I propose that pure historicism be taught as a means of making architecture. I would, however, encourage more studio projects to address such subjects as urbanism and contextualism, metaphoric references to the archaeology and history of site, a less "bloodless abstraction," as well as a poetic use of "conventional architectural language" – all areas that pure modernism has abdicated in its quest for newness. While I do not believe that this approach in education will totally bridge the gap between the public's more popular taste and the architect's more arcane ambition, it will, hopefully, begin a reconciliation of goals, thus leading to a less erratic and irrational cultural landscape.

Notes:

- 1 The Museum of Modern Art's 1975 exhibition, "Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts," organized by Arthur Drexler, then Director of the Department of Architecture and Design, could be considered the rebirth of the architecture establishment accepting buildings with historical references as creditable. It was not long after that Philip Johnson unveiled his broken pediment capped AT&T project. One could go back even farther and consider Robert Venturi's, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, published in 1965, also by the Museum of Modern Art, as the true progenitor of a new pluralism in architecture. However, post-modern buildings did not appear until the middle to late 1970s.
- 2 D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), p.118.
- 3 According to the web site, Salary.com, the median salary for an architect in Phoenix, Arizona, is \$51,593, while for an attorney it is \$102,612 – twice as much.
- 4 If one were to judge the quality of architectural practice by the buildings published in the previously mentioned magazines, as well as other similar periodicals from Europe, Japan and Latin America, one would have a very false perception of what the majority of architects produce. The number of buildings published in these journals is only a fraction of the profession's total output and often represent the strongest and most interesting projects. Just drive down any American thoroughfare and notice the lack of quality of most of the buildings that you see. These banal structures came from the office of some architect, I regret to admit.
- 5 Robert Campbell, "Double Dose of Mies Offers NY Diversity," *The Boston Globe*, June 28, 2001, p. 1.
- 6 Kenneth Frampton, "A Propos Barragán: Formation, Critique and Influence," in *The Quiet Revolution*, edited by Federica Zanco (Milan: Skira, 2001) p.22.
- 7 Octavio Paz, "The Uses of Tradition," *Artes de Mexico* 23 (1994):76.



# Light is Like Water

## Barragán and the Question of Magic

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“On Wednesday night, as they did every Wednesday, the parents went to the movies. The boys, lords and masters of the house, closed the doors and windows and broke the glowing bulb in one of the living room lamps. A jet of golden light as cool as water began to pour out of the broken bulb, and they let it run to a depth of almost three feet. Then they turned off the electricity, took out the rowboat, and navigated at will among the islands in the house.”<sup>1</sup>

water from nature within the confines of domestic space to reveal its essential property of fluidity. In Marquez's short story, light *pours* from an electric light bulb and in a similar fashion, at La Casa Gilardi, a slot of light pours from a tiny skylight forming a pool of water below. At mid-day a transient sacred precinct is circumscribed by the angle of the light shaft as it moves across the corner of the pool before vanishing. The boundaries of this sacred precinct are delineated on the wall surfaces with vivid blue pigment that abruptly shifts in saturation as it intersects with the water below and then folds out horizontally to become the ground plane of the pool further blurring the distinction between light and water, between vertical and horizontal. The resulting spatial-temporal experience is *Magically Real*, eluding Western modern and post-modern categories. Gabriel Garcia Marquez explains: “*Magical Realism expands the categories of the real so as to encompass myth, magic*

As with the fantastic imagery suggested by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in “*Light is like Water*,” Luis Barragan transfigures light into water in the indoor pool at La Casa Gilardi in Mexico City. Through this melding of water and light, writer and architect reveal to us the liquidity of light that might be perceived through child-like eyes of wonder. Like Marquez, Barragan uncannily isolates

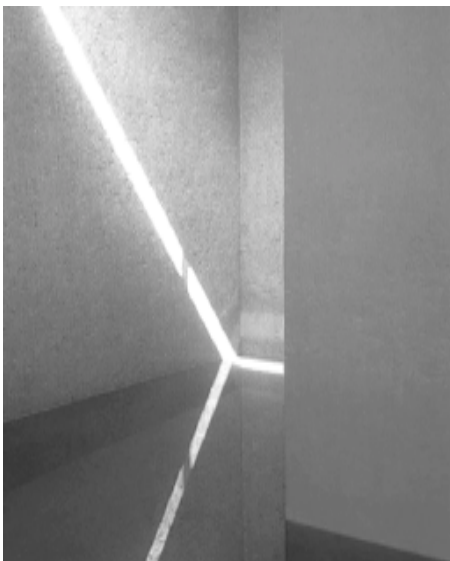


Figure 1: Indoor pool at La Casa Gilardi

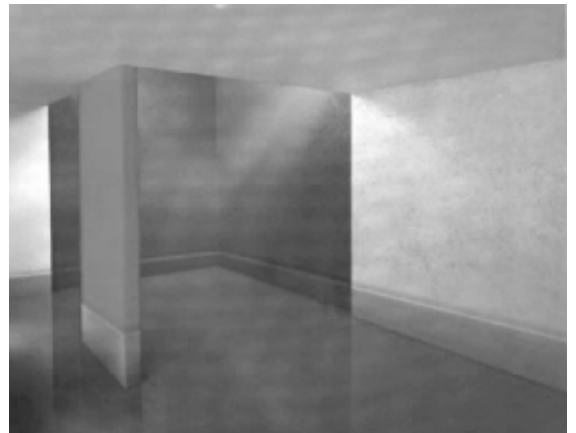


Figure 2: Indoor pool at La Casa Gilardi

*and other extraordinary phenomena in nature or experience which European Realism excluded."*

In his 1975 Pritzker Prize address, Barragan referred to magic as an essential ingredient in his architecture. He wrote, "I think that the ideal space must contain elements of magic, serenity, sorcery and mystery." Because Barragan describes his architecture in terms that elude Western rationalism, he has often been accused of "cloaking himself in mystery" to enhance his legacy. While critics have alluded to the surrealist quality of Barragan's work, its debt to Mexican vernacular traditions, and its relationship to the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and even the expressionist paintings of Mark Rothko, critics have failed to reference the more ontological literary tradition that has come to be known as Magical Realism. This research returns to the original sources of pre-Columbian mythology, the influences of Catholicism, the rather abrupt 20<sup>th</sup> century shifts in social and cultural infrastructure to examine a unique world view expressed in the Magical Realism particular to writers Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes and found in the architecture of Luis Barragan and the paintings of Frida Kahlo.

According to literary historians, the term Magic Realism was coined in the 1920's by German artist and art critic, Franz Roh, to describe post-expressionist paintings that revealed the "uncanny inherent in and behind the object detectable only by objective

*accentuation, isolation and microscopic depiction."* This pictorial expression later came to be largely associated with the de-familiarization of common place elements "that have become invisible because of their familiarity." The expression *Magic Realism* was used at various times to describe the fantastic nature of the work of artists ranging from the German writer Franz Kafka to Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico. Literary critics have traced the introduction of Magic Realism in Latin America to the publication of *Revista de Occidente* in 1927. By 1955, Angel Flores had appropriated the expression "*Magical Realism*" to describe that which, in the 1940's, Luis Borges had deemed the *fantastico* to describe the "outsized reality" of Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Garcia Marquez explains: "*Magical Realism expands the categories of the real so as to encompass myth, magic and other extraordinary phenomena in nature or experience which European Realism excluded.*"<sup>3</sup>

Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo makes a distinction between the rationally derived "irrational art" of the surrealist movement and the "fantastic" nature of her work. In the 1930's Andre Breton, founder of the Surrealist movement, described Mexico as the "*surrealist place par excellence*" and claimed Mexican painter Frida Kahlo as one of the Surrealist's own. But while Breton cited the value of the dream experience in the Surrealist Manifesto,<sup>4</sup> Kahlo, Barragan's contemporary, exerted that the fantastic tendency in her paintings was not the stuff of dreams, but born from her Mexican reality: "*I never painted my dreams, I painted my own reality....I*



Figure 3: Indoor pool at la casa Gilardi



Figure 4: Innocent Erendira; film clip in which paper is transformed into butterflies

*never knew I was a surrealist until Andre Breton told me I was."*

Intertwining her own identity with that of Mexico's while denying a singular narrative of either, Kahlo, in her *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace*, freely mixes images alluding to both Aztec and Catholic beliefs. According to art critic Sarah Lowe, the black monkey perched on Kahlo's left shoulder symbolizes the Aztec belief that gods could transform themselves into their animal altar egos. A backdrop of dense foliage suggests that Kahlo, like the Magical Realist character Eva Luna, came "*into the world with the jungle on [her] breath.*" The necklace of thorns around Kahlo's neck alludes to the death of Christ, and its attached bird amulet is suggestive of flight and transcendence. A black cat staring at the observer reminds us of the ever present reality of death, but butterflies, in various states of metamorphosis, hovering above Kahlo's head suggest the possibility of resurrection. One of the most potent readings to emerge from this painting eludes the traditional western separation of mind and body, self and world. When Breton, founder of the Surrealist movement, claimed Kahlo as one of their own, she countered: "*I never painted my dreams, I painted my own reality. ... I never knew I was a surrealist until Andre Breton told me I was.*" Kahlo's self-portrait tells us that her "own reality" is informed by a complex web of past and present; of the collective and the individual; earthly and the divine; the physical/cultural landscape and the interior landscape of her own psyche.



Figure 5: Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace, Frida Kahlo

Drawing upon the format of the retablo, Kahlo also alludes to the intertwining of self and world in her painting "*The Accident*," which describes her miraculous recovery from a nearly fatal street-car crash when she was thirteen years old. With both European and pre-Columbian roots, the retablo is painted on tin and acts as a cathartic testimony of divine intervention. The retablo (also called an ex-voto) is composed of three basic elements: an image of a holy figure, the circumstances surrounding a miraculous event and explanatory text. One art historian writes of the retablo: "*The imagination of the artist has ample scope to express the supernatural and divine intervention that is superimposed on logical reality and is only acceptable in terms of a blind and irrational faith.*"

From within Mexican culture, Kahlo's blending of the supernatural and natural worlds is not "surrealistic," but rather an expression of a distinct vernacular consciousness that is expressed in the practice of Curanderismo. Based on a unique blending of Aztec plant knowledge, Catholic rituals and Mexican folklore, Curanderismo is the holistic healing with herbs and rituals that acknowledges both natural and supernatural sources of pain. As it is practiced today in both Mexico and South Texas, Curanderismo often integrates everyday objects/foods alongside medicinal plants, prayers and incantations. The Aztecs believed that a delicate balance existed between health, nature and religion. Illness occurred when one of these areas was out of balance. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century Aztec leader Montezuma developed



Figure 6: "Our Lady of Anguish", Traditional Mexican retablo illustrating the super-natural visitation of a patron saint

the Huaxtepec garden, a collection of several thousands of plants which the Aztec priests researched for their medicinal properties. When the Spanish conquistadors came to Mexico in the sixteenth century, they destroyed the garden and documented research because the Catholic Church considered these "sciences" to be blasphemous. Although written knowledge was destroyed, the plant wisdom was remembered and passed down to become the foundation for the practice of Curanderismo as it is practiced today. The Spanish missionaries who came to Mexico introduced Catholic theology and European healing philosophies. Prayers to Catholic saints were soon integrated into healing rituals. Another doctrine that was passed on to the Natives by the Europeans was their belief in witch-craft, sorcery and other superstitions, and the philosophy that illness is often caused by supernatural forces. As it is practiced today, Curanderismo acknowledges both natural and supernatural sources of physical and psychological pain. As with the ex-voto, in the practice of Curanderismo, there is a baroque gathering of natural and super-natural elements woven into a holistic language. These practices articulate a vernacular consciousness that melds together the ordinary and the everyday with the mysterious offering a subtle, but potent resistance to the western technocratic way of life.<sup>5</sup>

Veneration of holy images is an ancient tradition in Mexico and the personal altar is not untypical in the Mexican household. Typical altars include embroidered cloths that claim a sacred space, family photographs, personal souvenirs and religious icons. Critic Tomas Ybarra-Frausto writes "*In their eclectic composition, they fuse traditional items of material folk culture with artifacts from mass culture Typical altars include embroider cloth that claim a sacred space, family photographs, personal souvenirs and religious icons. These altars represent potent places of contact between the human and the divine.*"<sup>6</sup> In Barragan's own residence he constructed three such personal altars. Beyond these private altars, the cross, as an expression of Barragan's Catholic faith, emerges in a variety of forms and is fully integrated with its domestic surroundings. A view of the courtyard is framed by a large glass picture window from which subtlety emerges a cruciform and on the roof terrace the cross takes the form of a relief.<sup>6</sup> Religious shrines and private altars dot the Mexican landscape to articulate a commonplace strongly held belief system.

In the cultural practices of Curanderismo, the retablo and domestic altar there is a baroque gathering of the natural and super-natural, of Pre-Columbian and Spanish referents; of the everyday and the otherworldly woven into a holistic language that reflects the compelling, multi-faceted nature of the Mexican cultural and physical landscape that is evoked in the Magical Realist genre. These practices are not the result of a manifesto or a self-consciousness movement, but are an expression of a distinct world view that creates a potent resistance to total Western encapsulation and has influenced the particular strain of Magical Realism articulated in the writings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes



Figure 7: Curanderismo Practioner



Figure 8: Domestic Altar

as well as the work of Barragan and Kahlo and many other contemporary artists.

A vernacular consciousness that intertwined the dual realities of the earthly and the divine accounts at least in part for the parallels between the work of Kahlo, Barragan and the Italian metaphysical painter de Chirico. De Chirico, like Kahlo and Barragan, sought to reveal the invisible plane of existence behind the visible plane of day to day life. Utilizing the Russian Formalist strategy of de-familiarization to emphasize common elements that have become "invisible" because of their familiarity, de Chirico sought to create a momentary "lapse in conditioned thinking" that allows one to see things ordinarily beyond one's perception. De Chirico explains "*under the shadow of surprise, one loses the thread of human logic – the logic to which we have been geared since childhood. . . .faculties forget, lose their memory.*" Exaggerating the normal conditions of light and shadow, de Chirico placed commonplace fruits and vegetables in vast, otherwise empty, melancholic spaces to create a disturbing and unsettling sensation.<sup>7</sup> Barragan's architecture of stark, empty courtyards with strong contrasting shadows resonate with the empty, melancholic piazzas of de Chirico's paintings. This strange and unsettling quality also appears at Barragan's private garden, Avenida San Jeronimo, where headless torsos, removed from their normal context and arranged in and around a waterfall, appear as alienated from their surroundings as do the eerily mute mannequins in de Chirico's *Disquieted Muses*. But while Barragan's



Figure 9: La Casa Barragan

architecture does resonate with de Chirico's paintings, the magical realist would argue that the "lapse in conditioned thinking" required by viewer of de Chirico's painting is not necessary when viewed within the context of its origins.

The Gilardi house, one of Barragan's last projects, was designed for an art collector, Francisco Gilardi, between 1975 and 1977 soon after Barragan recovered from a serious illness. The house occupies a small lot - 9.6 x 30 meters. The general layout of the house was formed around a central courtyard to maintain an existing tree. Unlike many of Barragan's residential plans, the focal point is not the interior courtyard, but an indoor pool located off of a dining room and connected to the main house by a light-filled corridor.

Barragan, perhaps in the most painterly manner of all his architecture, departs from the muted earth tones he typically used in the interiors of residential spaces and one approaches the pool through a corridor of glowing yellow light that terminates in a vivid blue field that visually extends the depth of the corridor, a strategy that Barragan had used to exaggerate the length of the watering trough at El Arboles.

Like Kahlo's painting "*The Accident*" and Marquez's "*Light is Like Water*," Barragan anchors the miraculous event of light's transfiguration into water to the quick believability of the everyday. Marquez's

*The following Wednesday while their parents were at the movies they filled the apartment to a*



Figure 10: Corridor to indoor pool

depth of two fathoms, dove like tame sharks under the furniture, including the beds, and salvaged from the bottom of light things that had been lost in darkness for years. The sofa and easy chairs covered in leopard skin were floating at different levels in the living room, among the bottles from the bar and the grand piano with its Manila shawl that fluttered half submerged like a golden mantra ray. Household objects, in the fullness of their poetry, flew with their own wings through the kitchen sky.<sup>8</sup>

Barragan's spatial arrangement of la casa Gilardi is not unlike Marquez's fantastic imagery of various household objects suspended mid-air in a light-filled space now estranged from their normal surroundings.

A free-standing wall plane, removed from its familiar utilization as a system of enclosure, is surrounded with a pool of water like the water fountain at San Cristobal ranch where a wall, split into two planes, becomes a sculptural element. This sculptural effect of the red wall plane would have been intensified, if as Barragan had originally intended, the exterior courtyard also contained a large pool of water. Adjacent to the wall and pool is placed a simple wooden dining table from which one has a view out to a stark, exterior courtyard containing a single tree. The alienation of the table from its context is heightened by its reflection in the adjacent pool which creates the momentary impression of its floating like the furnishings in the narrative of *Light is Like Water*. Like

Marquez, Barragan isolates and enlarges the everyday and the ordinary to articulate its mythic or magical potential. Wall, tree and table are isolated in an uncanny, supernatural space of light and water and emerge as do Marquez's furnishings in the "fullness of their poetry." The cyclical transfiguration of light into water transforms the everyday experience of eating a noon meal into a holy sacrament. Like the painter of the retablo, Barragan makes miraculous events ordinary and turns everyday things into miracles. In the words of Marquez - "Why be so surprised? All of this is life."<sup>9</sup>

As with Frida Kahlo's paintings, La Casa Gilardi reflects a complex gathering of both pre-Columbian and Catholic belief systems, of the natural and the supernatural, of the everyday and the ethereal. Based on Barragan's deeply held Catholic faith, some critics have suggested that the pool at the Gilardi house acts as a baptismal. And indeed the melding of light into water may be read as the transubstantiation of the divine presence in the Catholic tradition of the Eucharist. On many levels it does suggest a spatial retablo - perhaps a testament to Barragan's recovery from a serious illness only months before this final commission. But like the retablo, the pool at La Casa Gilardi reflects the complexity of a broader Mexican reality and opens itself up to multiple readings. An alternative reading of the light shaft at La Casa Gilardi is that as with pre-Columbian imagery, it did not serve to represent its subject, as in the western conception of the word as much as to *re-present* it - that is to give it a tangible presence in the physical world.

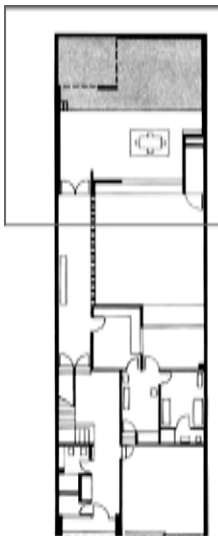


Figure 11: La Casa Barragán, floor plan



Figure 12: La Casa Barragán, Dining Table off of pool

Here the light does not merely symbolize the divine, it actually personifies the divine - that is makes it a moving, physical presence. The divine presence is rendered physical literally in the "body" of water below. This transformation of the mythical into the physical is what cultural critic Dr. Lois Parkinson Zamora defines as *Mythic-Physicality* or Magical Realism's visual counterpart. Zamora writes: "*Mexican images were designed to render certain aspects of the divine world physically present and palpable; they vaulted a barrier that European senses are normally unable to cross. . . . [This] brings us once again to the question of magic.*"

Taking Barragan's own words as a point of departure, this reading of La Casa Gilardi does not discount the well documented influences of Surrealism and other European academic influences on Barragan, but offers a shift in perspective that acknowledges the dynamics of a unique social and cultural infrastructure and provides a more contextual, interdisciplinary discourse.

But the real "magic" of the experience of the Gilardi house lies with the ability of the perceiver to "see." The magical quality in Mexico is not the result of an aesthetic or intellectual movement, but of commonly held belief systems rituals and practices throughout Latin America. The "serendipitous fit" of the modernist language to the Mexican vernacular allowed Barragan to subtly subvert a western vocabulary to articulate a the multi-layered complexities of the Mexican reality as the formal relationship of surrealism to Magical Realism allowed similar parallels to be drawn.

Notes:

- 1 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "Light is like Water" in *Strange Pilgrims* (New York: Pilgrim Books 1992) p.158.
- 2 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "The Solitude of Latin America," *Nobel Prize Lecture* (Oslo, Sweden 1983)
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, pp. 10-11.  
Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear upon the dream. It is in fact, inadmissible that this considerable portion of psychic activity (since, at least from man's birth until his death, thought offers no solution of continuity, the sum of the moments of dreams, from the point of view of time, and taking into consideration only the time of pure dreaming, that is the dreams of sleep, is not inferior to the sum of the moments of reality or, to be more precisely limiting, the moments of waking) has still today been so grossly neglected. I have always been amazed at the way an ordinary observer lends so much more credence and attaches so much more *importance to waking events occurring in dreams.*

- 5 Robert T. Trotter II and Justynion Chavira, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Folk Healing* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press) p. 25-40.
- 6 Tomas Ybarra-Frausto. " The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art " in Gerardo Mosquera, ed., *Beyond the Fantastic, contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press 1996) p. 170 - 174.
- 7 James Thrall Soby, *Giorgio de Chirico* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966) p. 42-48.
- 8 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "Light is like Water" in *Strange Pilgrims* (New York: Pilgrim Books 1992) p. 160.
- 9 Darrow, David, *The spirit of Carnival* (Austin: Austin Texas 1994) 78.