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## Poetical, Polite, Political Architecture in Latin America

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# Poetical, Polite, Political Architecture in Latin America

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**Abstract.** In 2016 and responding to the Pritzker Price given to socially committed Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, Patrik Schumacher [Partner at Zaha Hadid Architects] complained that the Pritzker Prize had mutated into a humanitarian design award and announced a worrying symptom of a political politeness flowing over architecture practice. With examples in recent humanitarian architecture laureates such as Alejandro Aravena, Shigeru Ban or Balkrishna Doshi we are experiencing a shift in recognition towards a more socially committed practice by comparison with the beginning of this century and that had witnessed celebration of exclamatory poetical building expression in the works of *starchitects* such as Zaha Hadid or Frank Gehry, amongst others. Using this recent debate as starting point I would like to explore the conflictive oscillations of architecture when referring and relating to the poetical, the polite and the political. The use of these three notions is limited to specific understandings associated with material practices that might be summarized as follows: POETICAL having an imaginative or sensitively emotional style of expression. POLITE relating to 'refined' cultural expressions. POLITICAL having some reference to the polis and thus considering the social and political community as a primary instance. It is my intention to trace the understanding, interpretation and implementation of these three notions within some Latin-American architecture practices of the last 50 years. In order to do so I will go over some ideas published by academia and I will present some building examples that help illustrate some points; mostly low-income housing and public infrastructure which are the most pressing architectural subjects in the region.

## 1. Introduction – What is Architecture?

Is it a poetical art? Is it a polite technological expertise? Is it a political and applied social science? According to Boyer and Mitgang as cited by Schneekloth and Shibley [1] “The nobility of architecture has always rested on the idea that it is a social art whose purposes include, yet transcend the building of buildings [1, p.132]. Leon Battista Alberti [2], a renaissance architecture theoretician went further to say architecture is a political act. In the definitions of the three concepts mentioned in the abstract there is an emphasis on the relation between the poetical and art, between the polite and disciplinary expertise and between the political and the social. This is where the understandings of these concepts when speaking about architecture in this text are heading.

## 2. The Expert Culture in the Realm of Politeness

Architecture's lack of an adequate compromise with society and its understanding is partially due to its constant searching for its own unique disciplinary spot. Schneekloth and Shibley [1] say that “The history that places architecture within expert culture goes to the very roots of architecture. Vitruvius sets architecture on “holy ground” and limits the profession to only those who have studied broadly in the arts and technologies. While there has been a restless shifting of the “holy ground” on which we



stand and a gradual narrowing of the studies required, there is little debate about the secularized holy ground as a space apart” [p.131]. It is this expert cultural universe what we understand as the polite in this text. And by doing so the understanding of the polite is reinforced in its meaning of, relating to, or having the characteristics of an advanced or specialized culture. This paper therefore addresses politeness in architecture as its particular quest to polish itself and to establish an expert-like domain. In this development of its domain, architecture as discipline has had to polish away the ordinary. Schneekloth and Shibley [1] say that “even though architectural knowledge includes notions of place and material conditions, such standing has often resided in elitist conceptualization of buildings and places” [1, p. 135]. This might be evident in the type of architectural history taught and precedents used in western culture. As a discipline we have often denied the knowledge of common, everyday places.

It is worth mentioning that architecture as discipline has evolved from what De Carlo [3] calls a coupling of academic art and applied technology. Needless to say that in this pairing equation of a discipline, the greatest considerations left aside are those of social nature. This is to a certain point still true. Most of what we do and study, related with building practices, is framed within paradigms of expert culture, very abstract in its social understanding.



**Figure 1.** In the expert representation of urban futures, citizenship has no saying. A Proposal for Bogotá’s Estación Central



**Figure 2.** 23 de enero Housing in Caracas, Venezuela. Picture taken by Alexis Carmona

In his text, Stickells [4] points out that representations of possible urban futures are mainly developed through the “expert” practices of built environment professionals. Images of Latin-American cities such as the one in Figure 1 seem apart and unaware of social context. They are thought by few promoters and set into form by few architects. This imaginative monopoly of the future of our built planet often resists the attempts of active citizens to engage and develop counter proposals; and thus participation becomes merely an exercise in persuasion and docile acceptance [4, p.217]. Social issues are not a great field of study in our discipline. Much more time and effort is dedicated to the artistic and technological concerns. As DeCarlo [3] points out we care much more about the how than about the why [3, p.15]. Governmental Low-Income Housing Projects are a barely acceptable and polite approach to the housing crisis in Latin America. Polite being in this case, the consequence of setting our expert culture into practice. Technicians, burocrats and architects in our countries are so concerned and overwhelmed with economical and regulatory effectiveness that they hardly ever stop to think about why they are doing what they are doing or for whom they are doing it. The field of large scale housing as DeCarlo [3] points out is restricted to relations between clients and entrepreneurs, land owners, critics, connoisseurs, and architects; a field built on a network of economic interests [3, p.16].

One could argue that the peak of technical reasoning took place during the modern period, which in architecture refers to post first war world architecture. This period, which coincided in Latin America with the dramatic growth of our cities, witnessed a technocratic polite architecture attempting to solve

housing in great numbers. Such reasoning, as the author Mayo [5] points out, was not critical in understanding a specific political reality [p.20]. Let's take project in Figure 2 as an example. In the mid-20th century, when Venezuela's oil economy drove rapid urbanization, the military dictatorship of General Marcos Perez Jimenez commissioned architect Carlos Raul Villanueva to address Venezuela's growing housing challenge. Villanueva's blueprints borrowed from Le Corbusier's communal housing experiments. What resulted was a densely populated ghetto. The name: *23 de Enero* Low-income Housing commemorates the day Venezuela's dictator was overthrown.

In modern and present day low income housing, architects embody contradictions from government and business interests into their design solutions for buildings. Design reasoning is often reduced to technical reasoning for economic efficiency. Architects rarely question concepts and goals behind political initiatives. They just hold on to a commission any way they can and employ their expertise as best they can under often questionable parameters. Results, such as Low-income Housing in Ixtapaluca, in the outskirts of Mexico City (Figure 3), are quantifiable and not qualitative solutions. If the present status quo is to change, then architects must resist the narrow use of technical reasoning so that they may articulate more coherently and forcefully issues of social needs and the public wellbeing. This is a constant claim in academic literature that is starting to be answered. Some timid changes in the realm of political architecture in Latin-American are taking place.



**Figure 3.** Low income Housing in Ixtapaluca, outskirts of Mexico City. Picture taken by: James & Mary Bilancini



**Figure 4.** Trigales Housing Units. Antioquia, Colombia

As has been said before architects can fail to recognize political interests and simultaneously validate their design reasoning through technical means. Avoidance may be controlled subtly by complying with governmental regulations and then being made an accomplice to them [5: p.21]. Projects as the one in Figure 4 are being built one after another to respond to fast city growth and their negative impact will outlast their utility. Architects avoid a critical questioning of why they are doing what they are doing because as Mayo points out they tend to focus on how design techniques can further their firm's status and economic viability [5: p.21] Mayo also underlines education's responsibility in the matter. He says that avoidance of cultural, moral and political content in architecture begins in its educational system. Theory and history according to the author are often treated as a technical study of form without political content [5: p.22]. Some of it has to do with the fact that social architecture lacks rewards and a substantial influence appeal or promotion in visual media. The fact that recent Pritzker prizes have been awarded to Shigeru Ban, Alejandro Aravena or Balkrishna Doshi among other recent measures, changes that.

### 3. From the realm of what is polite towards the political realm.

“By stressing less tangible aspects of projects, social architecture marks an important departure from the modernist ideal of the architect as mastermind who designs everything from teapots to entire

metropolises. Rather than model design solutions addressed at a unified social entity the projects are highly specific, offering localized, collaborative resolution” [4: p.219].

Quality of life in most low-income housing projects is precarious. It is however the consequence of mere technical reasoning under economic efficiency models. Technical reasoning in the polite realm provides a professional criterion for control over design decisions. This reasoning and its resulting definitions are based upon specialized criteria to order and control decisions and to make other forms of reasoning seem inadequate. As a result, technical reasoning can be used to justify decisions in architecture, while simultaneously serving to bury important political questions [5: p.20]. The technical in architecture often undermines the social.



**Figure 5.** URBAN SPA in Chihuahua, México.  
EEESTUDIO. Enrique Espinosa Architecture.  
Picture taken by Taller del Desierto



**Figure 6.** La Ceiba Parliament in Caracas,  
Venezuela. Pico Collective

To place architecture beyond expert culture and into the practice of place-making is an attempt to make the profession and discipline a more relevant, responsible and complex practice. One aspect of this relocation is the requirement of more open and collaborative processes that can create opportunities for democratic action and the celebration of everyday life [1: p.130]. To confront universal massive and permanent solutions we can provide ephemeral small scale particular alternatives as the one on **Figure 5** and which was designed in an academic and community oriented workshop. The design sessions produced a series of sketches for future amenities including the restoration of a fountain and its provisional use as spa.

Architects should move beyond expert models to relocate and embed architecture—implace it—within a broader human endeavor called placemaking [1: p.131]. Placemaking is a most adequate nomination of truly political architecture. One that promotes participation and dignifies everyday life. For architecture to be political it must involve others in all its stages. Planning ‘with’ people, makes architecture resistant to the wear and tear of adverse circumstances and changing times. De Carlo [3] points out that large-scale planning of cities and regions tends to fail because the collectivity has no reason to defend them; since it did not participate in their formulation [p.21]. This is the case of most massive low-income housing projects during the twentieth century and in present days in countries like Colombia, Venezuela or Mexico. But there are also some great examples of healthier practices. This is the case of what is seen in **Figure 6** and which was designed and built in Caracas, Venezuela in 2015. PICO studio teamed up with students, volunteers, and community members to pinpoint five strategic sites and convert them into productive structures that could bring a sense of unity and safety. As with the urban spa, in-site workshops are extremely important for the development of community oriented projects. The workshops in Caracas were about more than erecting structures, they aimed to bring about social change within the communities, as well as pride amongst its citizens and a connection towards one another as they took part in contributing to the improvement of their urban fabric.

Building something together is extremely satisfying to any community. Through participatory building actions such as this one, people take control over events and circumstances that take place in their lives [1: p.130]. This is community empowerment. When we plan ‘for’ people we tend, once

consensus is reached, to freeze it into permanent fact. It remains rigid however liberal the initial intentions. But if we plan ‘with’ people, consensus remains permanently open; the act becomes liberating and democratic, stimulating a multiple and continuous participation; a political action [3: p.21]. Communities must participate and nurture their development for architecture and public space to root.

#### 4. Emotional and expressive architecture in the poetical realm

We’ve spoken about expert culture: architecture that develops within the realm of the polite. Let’s speak about the poetical: architecture which is as all about expressiveness. That which Zaha Hadid or Frank Gehry among others so vividly represent. Even though the budget to commission very expressive projects is not universal; most of them being built in the Emirates, China, Japan, Korea, the US and Europe; the feeling of approval, awe and likeability is universal.



**Figure 7.** Architects in a pursuit of individual and poetical excellence. Soumaya Museum, Mexico City, Mexico. Picture taken by Dan



**Figure 8.** Biomuseum, Panama City, 2014, Gehry Partners. Picture taken by: F Delventhal

We do value and reward architecture as if it were a cultural art usually presented as an isolated and beautiful artifact [1: p.132]. The Museums portrayed in Figure 7 and Figure 8 are pure form. Pure poetical expression, driven by strict aesthetic premises. At this point it’s important to say that this text doesn’t intend to undermine poetical or polite architecture. If this text highlights the political in architecture, it is because it is considered more relevant when addressing pressing matters such as housing or public infrastructure. This doesn’t mean that museums or hospitals, among other uses are expected to be designed or conceived in the same way. Depending on what buildings are needed for and who they address, architects should be either more poetical or political.

The ghost of originality and singularity haunts the realm of the poetical. Who better to exemplify this than Canadian architect Frank Gehry. Figure 8 presents his only work in Latin-America. In words of Schneekloth, Shibley [1]: “Signature architects, scholars, and design culture leaders in the academy seek to hold their leadership edge and independence as the avant-garde in the field with increasingly self-referential artistic operations and moves in the production of theory and buildings. Senior scholars and practitioners in historical, socially responsible, and technical arenas of our fragmented practice consistently seek the next insight that will set them apart” [1: p.131]. Our pursuit of individual [poetical] professional excellence works in opposition to realizing the full potential of architecture as a human and social [political] practice devoted to critical cultural production.

By persevering in a poetical approach, architecture has become less political. So when it addresses the social it does so politely. Social change will not come from a strictly artistic approach. The more architecture can be described in the morally neutral currency of ‘aesthetics,’ devoid of political content, for the people affected, the more elite and the more removed from the political review of ordinary people become the experts [architects] who use this currency [5: p.20].

Architectural education is more poetical and polite than political. Mayo [5] points out: “Not only are young architects kept ignorant of the tastes, values and perception of the client groups they will be

serving, but they are also intentionally trained to develop values which are antagonistic to them. Most of our architectural schools are geared to turning out the occasional genius and the next generation of taste-makers. Their competence in addressing their clients' needs is given secondary importance [5: p.22]. This text shall not go further into this arguable debate of taste. However, it's worth pointing out that the poetical is not the realm where we can find grounded solutions to pressing social problems in Latin America. At most it helps bring about visual interest but if we don't move forward from the poetical and the polite with a much more political agenda we will remain answering beautifully to different questions with same old fashioned answers.

According to Venezuelan *Urban Think Tank* architectural education and practice must shift from "form-oriented to process-driven". Pier Vittorio Aureli has reaffirmed the making of form as the "real and effective necessary program of architecture". The first position reenacts extreme political understandings of architecture and the second reenacts the extremely poetical [4: p.221].

### 5. Political by reference to the Polis

As is well known, the term "political" is derived from the Greek word polis, which designates a human community of a particular type. Polis originally meant the citadel at the heart of the city, but in time it came to mean the city as a whole, including the country dwellers that took part in business and politics. The primary instance of something political, and thus the central focal meaning of the term, is the political community, the polis. Other things are called political by reference to this primary instance" [6: p. 61]. According to Aristotle, the polis is large enough for self-sufficiency, but small enough to combine civilization with freedom [6: p.64]. A Polis in Greek Times was probably of the same scale as a Housing Estate such as the one featured in Figure 9. Architecture of course was quite different back then. This example is very important to what is presented in this text. Mario Pani designed the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing estate in Mexico City in 1964. Justin McGuirk [7] in his recent book *Radical Cities*, sees the decline of Tlatelolco as coinciding with the beginning of a new movement he calls "activist architecture" and that this text refers to as political architecture for it brings together citizens in a same social ground.



**Figure 9.** The Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing estate in Mexico City, designed by Mario Pani, 1964



**Figure 10.** House of the Rain [of Ideas]. Bogota, Colombia. Picture: Arquitectura Expandida

The things called "political" need not have an essence or properties or even fixed structures in common to warrant this designation. What makes them political is either some reference that they have to one thing, the polis, or some proportion that they bear to the things of the polis. This argument implies that it is necessary somehow to know what the polis is in order to understand and speak meaningfully of things as "political" [6: p. 68].

### 6. The political is gaining architectural ground

The social and political in contemporary architectural culture and that made brief appearances in the cities of the 1960s and 1970s is now resurfacing [4: p.213]. A proliferation of practices has

materialized, developing imaginative and practical counter-proposals to existing dynamics of spatial production – defining, fighting for, and claiming a right to the city [4: p.217]. All within the realm of the political and giving up most importance to the social, we find different denominations for architecture tending to the most pressing urban issues: Tactical Urbanism, DIY Urbanism, Urban Acupuncture, Guerrilla Urbanism, User-Generated Urbanism, Emancipatory Practices, participatory architecture, humanitarian architecture or activist architecture. Architecture in the political realm is generally characterized by being ephemeral or temporary, subject to contingency, eager to model alternative ways to communally inhabit the city, oriented towards design processes that privilege working with others and inclined to mobilize and connect inhabitants, activists and professionals [4: p.217].

We've already mentioned participation as key element of political architecture. In De Carlo's words [3]: Architecture is too important to be left to architects and yet as architecture becomes more complex, citizens are further left aside in the development of their own habitat [3: p. 20]. This remains true because positive examples as the ones seen in this text are really scarce. Renewed attention to participation in the production of urban space has consequences for understandings of what architecture is, what it does, and what it can be [4: p.214].

The House of the Rain [of Ideas] in Bogota, Colombia (**Figure 10**) was developed by a collective called *Arquitectura Expandida*. The House of Rain was designed and self-built by the community and a group of volunteers every Sunday for eight consecutive months. The process didn't stop when it was finished. Popular vernacular building in Latin American is progressive; ever changing. It goes on with a cultural agenda, the building of furniture, bathrooms, improvements, etc. As grass-roots, bottom-up claims on the city such as this one are translated at an institutional level, notions of active community appropriation and participation are gaining momentum, visibility and strength [4: p.215]. Thus architecture's role might be reimagined as the empowerment of its collective construction. To discover the real needs of the users means questioning the traditional value systems, which, since they were built on non-participation, must be revised or replaced when participation becomes part of the process, unleashing energies that are just recently explored [3: p.22]. This was DeCarlo's premonition and since then participatory architecture has been set in motion.

## 7. Transforming client-architect relations

Stickells [4] points out that “participatory design, advocacy and self-help architecture are strategies aimed at transforming professional structures and inverting traditional client-architect relationships” [p.216]. In **Figure 11** we can see Niemeyer and Kubitscheck, in front of a model of Brasilia, deciding the organization, form and shape of an entire city. Pure poetical expression set in motion. Let's use Schneekloth and Shibley's words [1] to differentiate what happened then and what placemaking is about now: “There is a difference between engaging the client and placemaking. The common practice takes client experiences and parameters, removes them from their situated place, and brings them into the hierarchical world of expert cultures.



**Figure 11.** Niemeyer and Kubitscheck in front of a model of Brasilia

**Figure 12.** Minga Valpo Housing. Valparaíso, Chile. Pictures taken by: Camilo Moraes, Sergio Levet and Felix Po

Placemaking instead brings the expert culture to the place and makes its knowledges and methods vulnerable to the influence of the specific circumstances of place and place constituents [p.136].

One urgent matter that must be addressed is the role of the citizen in the building of a habitat. It is important in a political architecture to dissolve the passivity of the user of architecture. According to DeCarlo [3] “barriers between builders and users should be abolished, so that building and using become two different parts of the same planning process. Therefore, the intrinsic aggressiveness of architecture and the forced passivity of the user must dissolve in a condition of creative and decisional equivalence” [p.20]. Most of us suffer architecture. It is a given we must adapt to it or move out. Shouldn’t we have more saying than this? Only if we can afford it we can change our built environment. Of course that participation brings out a great deal of uncertainty and skepticism but even that is healthier than rock solid projects. Through participation in the building of polis we exercise citizenship.

### **8. Welcoming uncertainty, the everyday life and the vernacular into participatory architecture**

Minga Valpo Housing in Valparaíso, Chile (Figure 12), bears the name of a participatory tradition within the indigenous peoples of South America. *Minga* means that a community comes together to help a member build their home in the knowing that their turn could come later. No reward for doing it. Just pure communal solidarity.

Architecture should become a social service for most part of the population that can’t afford architecture as product. Most people need architects for less extraordinary tasks than those they have been trained for. People need improvements, help with a better living or for at least reasonable living. Moving beyond expert culture requires architects to care as much about the process by which places are made [the means] as they do about the product that emerges as a result of that collaboration [the ends] [1: p.136]. In this reconsideration of our tasks, architects need to look closer at our every day. Harvey rearticulated Lefebvre’s “the right to the city”, arguing that is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. Architecture is directly connected to the possibility for such change because buildings are key physical elements of the city and the material fabric of our everyday experiences [5: p.214].

Placemaking is the way human beings transform the places in which we find ourselves, into places in which we live. Placemaking consists both of daily acts and of special, celebratory one-time events [1: p.132]. Both acts come together in architecture. Rainbow in the desert in Ventanilla, Peru (Figure 13) first saw the light thanks to famous Peruvian chef Gaston Acurio and to the community in this desertic area of the Andes. The idea was to design and build an orchard and place to communally cook and eat food. It was also a great place to share knowledge around gastronomical traditions.

We have lost our ability to make places because we denigrate the work that maintains our daily lives and over-value extraordinary acts of building, an activity that we delegate to experts [1: p.130]. Experts have become specially overvalued. The production of most of the built world has been [and continues to be] the work of non-architects constructing their everyday lives. In Colombia the vernacular is accountable for more than half our housing. Therefore, the making of the world is a practice to be shared with many people within and outside the expert culture [1: p.133]. Schneekloth and Shibley [1] point out that local knowledges and expert knowledges are always present in each act of construction. Yet there is often a presumed superiority of objective, expert standpoint over subjective, conceptions of knowledge. This privileging of so-called objective knowing over subjective knowing renders the person holding the subjective standpoint ignorant, or worse, useless, in decision-making over the circumstances of their own lives [1: p.135].



**Figure 13.** Rainbow in the desert. Ventanilla, Peru.  
51-1 Architects



**Figure 14.** Social Housing production,  
Tepetzintan, Mexico. Picture Comunal Taller  
Arquitectura

A placemaking practice suggests that all participants in any construction event come together with their respective knowledges, and collaboratively construct a world through confirming and interrogating each other's experiences. It is within this dialogic space that proposals for making and unmaking occur [1: p.136]. Communal Taller de Arquitectura developed a housing project in collaboration with the Nahua community of Tepetzintan, located in the Northeastern Sierra of Puebla, Mexico (Figure 14). The project started with the understanding of the customs and traditions of the families, the understanding of the site, the construction systems used and the way of occupying the territory. Place and local knowledge are not substitutes for professional knowledge gained through education and experience. These knowledges, however, when in-placed and situated, bring meaningful contexts to each building action [1: p.136].

Growth, flexibility and contingency that are so common in the vernacular are not possible in the rigid mass housing that is built today. We have to remain more attentive not to the different forms of order but also to most understudied forms of disorder and that are dismissed as such. [3: p.24] Cañete Productive House in Nuevo Imperial, Peru (Figure 15) is a house project for Lucy, who lost everything during Pisco earthquake on 2007. This project was developed by self-construction and family involvement. Especially interesting in this project is its understanding and potential for growth. That which we can learn from Latin American Informal and Progressive Housing. In traditional planning the user must normally adapt him or herself to the architectural object, and all tensions are resolved in superficial alterations that contradict the pre-established morphological order, without being able, however, to modify it substantially. At this point, we find manifestations of 'disorder' which originate in the creative pressure of the users and are blocked, deplored and even punished by those who create, support and even guarantee 'order' [3: p.24].



**Figure 15.** Cañete Productive House, Nuevo  
Imperial, Peru. Seinfeld Architects



**Figure 16.** Raising moral awareness. House for  
the people at El Salado, Colombia, Simon  
Hosie. Courtesy Simon Hosie

## 9. Conclusions- Healing and reparation through involvement

Schneekloth and Shibley [1] briefly mention that Placemaking as a resituated professional practice makes room for uncertainties by trusting in the possibility of beloved places and processes that include forgiveness and healing [1: p.137]. This is especially important in the present Colombian context. The House of the people in El Salado, Colombia (Figure 16) is a remarkable example of this. It was built in the grounds and after a very tragic massacre. People in this community were horrendously killed in the only paved area of the town: a sports court. And what the community agreed upon was that no memorial could replace or symbolize what happen. But an act did. The cleaning of the court that involved the whole community. Only after the court was cleaned did the community feel capable of further building action. By raising moral and political issues, architects raise the level of moral consciousness in their profession [5: p.23]. Everyday expressions are much stronger. Cleaning something, knitting something, drawing something. It is not monuments to violence what we need but processes where and through action we can heal, we can forgive, not forget, but move on. In order to reconnect people with the polis through real participation, architects and planners should be thinking about developing the role of people as citizens, instead of as users [4: p.221]. Placemaking can be a space for people to learn to engage in community action and to develop communal goals. Placemaking is therefore a way to exercise politics [1: p.138].

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