

Book Review

– *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space, and Visuality in Venezuela, 1948-1958*, by Lisa Blackmore. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017

All over the world modern architecture had a complex relationship with national identities and developmental policies as they unfolded in the 20th century. In some countries modern architecture and national identity were divergent, as in Italy under Mussolini or the USSR after Stalin. In others modernism was restricted to the corporate sector, as in the United States after World War II. Yet in other countries modernism as a developmental policy and national identity construction through architectural modernism were intrinsically aligned, making them especially interesting from an architectural perspective. Turkey and India, for instance, used modern architecture to legitimize their new power structures. But nowhere was this strategy as profound and, if you allow me, as successful as in Latin America, led by Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela.

The Mexican and the Brazilian cases have been widely debated by the scholarship on the built environment, while Venezuela, unfortunately, not so much. The book *Spectacular Modernity* by Lisa Blackmore is a timely contribution to this understudied topic. In the last few years we have been bombarded by apocalyptic news about Venezuela, often lacking analysis or historical background. As far as I know the classic book on twentieth century Venezuela is still *The Magical State*, written by my late colleague Fernando Coronil, over twenty years ago. Yet Venezuela provides an important example of modernization struggles (for good and for bad) and its architecture and visual arts deserve a place in the scholarship. Moreover, its current political and economic crisis cannot be understood without a good analysis of events going back half a century.

While Blackmore's book does not address the last decades of *Chavismo*, it lays the ground for explaining a lot of it. Right at the introduction the author sets the tone by telling the story of the military takeover of 1948, illustrated by images of modern buildings designed by Carlos Raul Villanueva and Cipriano Domingues. Authoritarianism was present at the core of modern architecture – from Adolf Loos to Le Corbusier to Oscar Niemeyer – and it was no coincidence that this new aesthetic was adopted by strongmen everywhere. As

Blackmore says, the pledge to ‘deliver modernity’ (p. 34) justified dictatorship, censorship and repression. The goal was to get rid of poverty, not by raising wages or educating the population but by demolishing their ‘ranchos’ and forcing them into modern high rises. Contemporary scholarship (Leu, 2004; Rolnik, 1989) demonstrates that wars on shantytowns were very much a continuation of five centuries of wars on black and indigenous populations. Blackmore does not elaborate very much on these racial and ethnic components but they are there for you to read in-between the lines.

To tell the story of mid-twentieth century Venezuela, Blackmore stitches together politics, economics, architecture, infrastructure, and visual culture in general. Her first chapter opens with the military junta crafting a narrative to support their undemocratic actions. Architecture plays a major role here, first on *El Silencio*’s housing complex and later with *2 de diciembre/23 de enero* housing complexes. Both were built where shantytowns once existed. And both aimed to control citizens’ bodies by teaching them how to properly exist in space, as her second chapter explains. While *El Silencio* (built in the early 1940s) seems to have succeeded, *2 de diciembre/23 de enero* is a perfect metaphor for the failure of such cleansing policies. The very same people that were displaced for the construction of the housing complex (then named *2 de diciembre*) came back with a vengeance in January 23, 1958, to reclaim their land and bring down dictator Perez Gimenez. The site, now shared by decaying high rises and shanty towns on the ground level, stands as a testimony of late twentieth century Venezuela, right around the *Cuartel de la Montaña* where the body of Hugo Chavez lies inside his mausoleum. Dictatorship, space and visuality stitched together in one specific hill of Caracas.

In the second part of the book Blackmore discusses less architecture and more how components of an authoritarian modernity came together on a project of nation branding (chapter 3); how it unfolded into a full fledge visual spectacle (chapter 4); and how it was exhibited at home and abroad (chapter 5). Here perhaps lies the most significant contribution of her book. By going beyond traditional architectural history to encompass politics and discourses of national identity construction, the author expands the reach of her argument, making it more contextual and therefore richer. The third part of the book broadens the analysis towards discussions of body, space and nation, as being performed in parades (chapter 6) and the transformation of domesticity (chapter 7). If previous chapters debated the construction of such arguments, the last ones give us a glimpse into how those discourses were absorbed by Venezuelan society.

Yet it is in the epilogue that Blackmore gives us all the clues to understand contemporary Venezuela from the perspective of mid-century culture. Here she discusses how the cult of personality was used to delegitimize regular political processes, and continues to remind us that ‘modernist designs (...) beholden to authoritarian regimes, developmentalist agendas, and capitalist interests, they are apt to deal violent blows to land and body’ (p.211). One cannot understand

the contemporary crisis of Venezuela without addressing the scars left by twentieth century blows, and this is what makes *Spectacular Modernity* such a timely fit for our sad times of authoritarian leaders and weakened democratic institutions, in Venezuela and beyond.

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References

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