

Alexandra Snowden

*Utopia in Latin American Architecture and Art*

Throughout the past fifty years, artists and architects have repurposed the notion of utopia as a way to respond to the historical, political and social environments they find themselves within. The term comes directly from Thomas More's 1516 publication, *Utopia*, which is a play on words, describing both an *ou-topos* (no-place) and *eu-topos* (good-place).<sup>1</sup> This concept has become an extremely powerful ideal in western culture that describes the shining hill on a city, a conceptual non-place capable of achieving the highest degree of idealism for all within a community.<sup>2</sup> That being said, this fantasy comes with its repercussions. As can be seen throughout various utopian projects of political leaders, the goals of a utopian culture for one may be a complete dystopian nightmare for another. While a utopian project looks to create a condition that is transcendent, artists and architects have used this language to create a counter-culture and reclaim agency within a society.

The quest for what has been claimed as a utopian impulse in modern architecture has been closely associated with architects' response to the devastation brought about by World War II, allowing society to move away from its failures of the past in hope to rebuild society.<sup>3</sup> Such idealism was brought forth similarly across Latin America, starting with modernist architectural projects of the 1950s. One astounding development is the construction of Brasília, overseen by Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer in 1956 under the presidency of Juscelino Kubitschek. With hopes to gain public support, Kubitschek led the pathway to create a new modern city which displayed Brazilian development with the hopes to compare Brasil's

---

<sup>1</sup> Alessandra Santos and Kim Beauchesne. *The Utopian Impulse in Latin America*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Nobel. *Utopias, Documents of Contemporary Art*. (London: Whitechapel, 2009), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Coleman, Nathaniel. "The Problematic of Architecture and Utopia." *Utopian Studies* 25, no. 1 (2014): 1-22. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed November 30, 2016), 5-6.

modernity to that seen around the world.<sup>4</sup> During the time of Brasília's conception one of the leading modern architects of the time, Le Corbusier, offered his services to the project and was denied by Kubitschek, who was only interested in opening the competition to Brazilian architects.

The influence of modernist architecture happening around the world was thus reconfigured within the Latin American landscape with an ownership and sense of nationalism enforced by projects such as Brasília. Within this setting, modernist architecture across Latin America was reimagined with elements such as covered outdoor spaces and elements incorporating the exterior environment with the architecture. Buildings such as Instituto Central de Ciências, Universidad de Brasília is an example of one, embracing the elements of the climate with long covered alcoves that invite the exterior elements while also providing some protection. The urban planning throughout was also meant to be responsive to the automotive industries promoted at that time by Kubitschek.<sup>5</sup> The progress during this time was evident in the materialization of Brasília's modern vision towards a new future of Latin America and goes hand in hand with the time's promise.

Working from the Brazilian vision in architecture of the 1950's, artist Hélio Oiticica responded in the following decade that questioned the history of modernism brought about through projects such as Brasília. One of Oiticica's most famous works, *Tropicália* (1967) expresses the contradictions of modernity—poverty and mass communications—and uses architectural elements in his environmental installations.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the pristine structures built from Brazil's modernist architectural boom of the 1950's, Oiticica's aesthetic embraces a rougher and favela-like construction in the work, using makeshift and unmonumental construction. Unearthing the darker side within the utopia vision, Oiticica avoids highlighting an idealism of

---

<sup>4</sup> Luis E. Carranza. *Modern Architecture in Latin America: Art, Technology, and Utopia*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 199.

<sup>5</sup> Barry Bergdoll. *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 132.

<sup>6</sup> Carranza, *Modern Architecture in Latin America*, 246.

the Brazilian situation, inscribing the piece with, “a pureza e um mito” (purity is a myth).<sup>7</sup> Drawing from the purity often times associated with modern art during the time, Oiticica brings light to the absurdity of this idealistic vision modernism of the past looked to carry, while introducing a counter-narrative to the dialogue of modernity, challenging the notion of what a utopia can be.

The failure of utopia in modern architecture has been dismantled numerous times as critics have looked to the past to reconsider its goals. In Nathaniel Coleman’s article, *The Problem of Architecture and Utopia*, the complexity of utopia with architecture is taken apart. He states, “the value of recollecting Utopia—as proposed, or defined, by More—resides in the degree to which doing so helps to untangle Utopia from dystopia, and from visionary as well, and thus charts pathways toward substantive social dreaming.” Perhaps untangling utopian and dystopian ideals is done by artists, who reflect on the ideals of architectural spaces to create spaces for their own social dreaming. How architectural spaces are refigured thus becomes a way for the society and suppressed to take ownership of public spaces. This idea has made itself apparent in the artistic interventions within Brazil and socially engaged artworks made visible in public space.

The group Frente 3 de Fevereiro was founded in 2004 and has used public spaces to make visible the marginalized populations of Brazil. Their urban interventions seek to memorialize, denounce, historicize and question Brazilian racial politics.<sup>8</sup> Such interventions are done within soccer stadiums, with large banners up to 60 ft long with statements such as “*Zumbi somos nos*” (We are Zumbi), “*Onde estao os negros?*” (Where are the blacks?), “*Brasil negro salve*” (Hail/Save black Brazil). The space created by the group and attention drawn through such public displays is both empowering to the group and brings an awareness to the otherwise marginalized populations. It is through such engagements that the Afro-Brazilian population is able to reclaim public space and create a criticality of the circumstances relevant in their lived

---

<sup>7</sup> Caranza, *Modern Architecture in Latin America*, 246.

<sup>8</sup> Santos and Beauchesne. *The Utopian Impulse in Latin America*, 264.

experience. Beyond the statements broadcasted through such performative works is the reframing of public space and use of highly visible locations to envision a visible place for Afro Brazilians within society. As the artist Hélio Oiticica had done with his experiential installations, at once critical of modernity while embracing the aesthetics of favelas and shedding light on marginalized populations, Frente 3 de Fevereiro uses constructed spaces and highly visible arenas to reclaim their voices in the society. It is through such alternative narratives in performance that makes the utopian visions of Latin American artists so distinct.

Performative works coming out of Cuba during the 1980's and 90's are especially strong in responding to the political and social conditions of the time. During these decades the contemporary art narrative was split with ideas of revolution and utopia on one side and dictatorship and communism on the other.<sup>9</sup> Artists used performance and an expression of a lived experience to be critical of the politics they found themselves within. Tania Burgera is one such artist whose earlier performative work is critical of the supposed utopian vision that was once a part of the Cuban revolution. In 2003 she opened a quasi-utopian space for performative practice that focused on the limits of the social body and to "reclaim the pasts," rather than just endlessly recycling it.<sup>10</sup>

Luis Camnitzer discusses the relationship of politics and art in his text, *On Art, Artists, Latin America and Other Utopias*. In this text he states that the choice to become an artist is a political decision and having a political awareness is necessary in the process of art making.<sup>11</sup> Camnitzer is an Uruguayan artist whose political thought in art making is especially important in making the voice of Latin America distinct in the context of international artists. In his essay, *Access to the Mainstream*, he continues to not only discuss artists with political obligations, but

---

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Weiss. *To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Weiss. *To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art*, 236.

<sup>11</sup> Luis Camnitzer. *On Art, Artists, Latin America and Other Utopias*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009, 4.

as individuals who must be keenly aware of the power structure of “mainstream” art.<sup>12</sup> With mainstream art comes an elitist vision that can at times reflect a specific social and economic class. Ultimately this recognition towards art making throughout Latin America means being aware of the specific cultures from which they come from while embracing the ways it may or may not fit in the western canon of art.

The search for autonomy from western influences has been a struggle throughout the history of Latin American politics, dating from Spanish colonialism into today. This has similarly been true in the ways art and the architecture has formed across Latin America. At times the vision for autonomy has felt like an impossibility within its history. Embracing this quest is both visionary, but also hopeful for the region and cultures from country to country. In *The Principle of Hope* (1959) Ernst Bloch discusses the human impulse to explore what is not yet, and argues for the utopian function of hope that has inspired the creation of architectural, social, political and cultural utopias.<sup>13</sup> The notion of hope is what Dinerstein argues for in her book, *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America*, with an emphasis on the ideas that this “reality” is not yet present within the region. This can be argued for and against. While in many ways there are still countries and enclaves within each country still looking for an autonomous voice, the idea that this voice can be present in the space of artistic action is where this hope may lie.

Utopian territories have been a place where artists have been able to find this hope. As Camnitzer has expressed the need for politics to be unearthed through art as Tania Burger did in her early works in Cuba, it has continued to be especially true in the space of new Cuban Art. The relationship of artists working between social praxis and fiction, reality and unreality is inherent in today’s Cuban Art.<sup>14</sup> Through various ways artists have engaged in the reality of public spaces, and the culture of their society. The artists and architects of Brazil have worked to

---

<sup>12</sup> Gerardo Mosquera. *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*. (Cambridge, Mass. : The MIT Press, 1996), 218.

<sup>13</sup> Ana C Dinerstein. *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organising Hope*. (New York, NY: Palsgrave Macmillian, 2015), .

<sup>14</sup> Eugenio Valdes Figueroa. *Utopian Territories: New Art from Cuba*. (University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1997), 21.

challenge not only the influences from the outside world, but to reflect on the situation that is relevant to their circumstances. The various ways utopia has been challenged and sought through art and architecture offers not only a reflection of the international and national politics such creatives have found themselves in, but also a way to engage in a sense of hope for what is to come. Looking forward to Cuba's relationship with the United States, it will be interesting to see how artists look to engage with a new vision and dialogue across borders during this time. As artists work to create communities across borders while also proclaiming the components of their origins, one hopes that Latin American artists are able to continue to hold a space of agency on a global level.

## Bibliography

Bergdoll, Barry. *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015.

Browne, Enrique, and Rodrigo Perez De Arce. "CIUDAD ABIERTA." *AA Files*, no. 17 (1989): 42-47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29543637>.

Camnitzer, Luis. *On Art, Artists, Latin America and Other Utopias*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.

Carranza, Luis E. *Modern Architecture in Latin America: Art, Technology, and Utopia*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014.

Coleman, Nathaniel. "The Problematic of Architecture and Utopia." *Utopian Studies* 25, no. 1 (2014): 1-22. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed November 30, 2016).

Dinerstein, Ana C. *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organising Hope*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Figuerola, Eugenio Valdes, *Utopian Territories: New Art from Cuba*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1997.

Mosquera, Gerardo. *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*. Cambridge, Mass. : The MIT Press, 1996.

Nobel, Richard. *Utopias, Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel, 2009.

Santos, Alessandra and Kim Beauchesne. *The Utopian Impulse in Latin America*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Weiss, Rachel. *To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.



*Instituto Central de Ciências, Universidade de Brasília*



Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália* (1967)



Frete 3 de Fevereiro, *Zumbi Somos Nos* (2007)