



01 Casa Klumb, aerial fire detail.
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Casa Klumb: an issue of preservation and education

Early on the morning of November 11, 2020, we woke to news of the “fire that destroyed the Klumb House.” The somber story that detailed the complete erasure of the emblematic structure, under the custody of the administration of the University of Puerto Rico, at the express wish of the architect Henry Klumb, went viral and broke the Internet. The newspaper columns proliferated with a wide range of views on the issue. Leaving the essential question: Why did this happen?

The architect Henry Klumb (1905-1984) and his wife Else Schmidt lived in the house, reconstructed to emulate the precepts of Modern architecture, until 1984, the year when both died in a car accident in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The decision to donate the house to the University of Puerto Rico, a campus that houses a great many of the architect’s best works, was natural and understandable in 1984. However, this began a story of decline lasting thirty-five years, ten months, and a few days, counting down through time and space; the “Chronicle of a Death Foretold.”¹

Casa Klumb was the former residence of architect Henry Klumb, considered as one of the masters of the Modern Movement on the Island. Located on a 2.63-hectare site, in a suburban neighborhood of San Juan. The plot was filled by an exuberant landscape, tended for years by Henry Klumb’s loyal gardener.

The importance of the structure lays in its architect’s ability to adapt a 19th century cottage into a true example of regional modernism and sustainability. In a surgical intervention, he opted to keep essential structural elements: foundations, wooden posts, beams, and rafters – but removed all existing partitions, while preserving elements like shutter doors. Although maintaining two bathrooms and the kitchen, he redesigned the whole interior in two distinct zones: a cluster of diverse interconnected spaces that included the master-, secondary- and guest-bedrooms and two studios; and an ample living space, with a living-dining room, balcony and entrance. While keeping the basics, he also added new elements, with a focus on details. The pivoting dining tables that could be adjusted to seat up to twelve guests were just one example of the way he took advantage of the space and used it as his own design laboratory. This approach extended from the interior to the exterior, such as his use of a kidney-shaped pond in front of the house, and the gravel pathways that ran throughout the abundant landscape, which merged with the house in a unique way.

This subtractive design strategy endlessly redefined the space, blending the built and natural context into one; a great example of a tropical contextualization of the modernist philosophy.

With the loss of such a masterpiece so close at hand, which generations could have learnt from, it is imperative to return to the question why? What happened to the house that led to it declining and eventually succumbing to fire? In search of an answer, **docomomo** Puerto Rico, hosted a round table, *Casa Klumb: Past or Future?*. In an open and frank debate, the guests exchanged differing views, not only on what should or should not be done with the property, but also, what should be done in the field of patrimonial preservation in Puerto Rico.

How can we justify concern for the loss of a structure when we had 13,099 days to do something about it, and let them slip away?

Now, much like with Notre Dame, promises are springing up for a reconstruction project and, above all, funding, that were never there before. But something is missing: a plan. Probably, 35 years ago, the euphoria of receiving this piece of our built history was bubbling as the projects emerging today. This grand piece is gone, but the best tribute we can make to Henry Klumb, is to start raising awareness about built heritage, giving courses, leading tours, making alliances between all the groups concerned with preservation. If not, we can only sit and wait for the next “Death Foretold”.

Santiago Gala and Ivonne María Marcial Vega



02 Casa Klumb. © MaxToro, 2015.

Notes

- 1 Taken from the title of the book by Gabriel García Marquez: *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, widely repeated in newspaper columns and social media at the time.

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