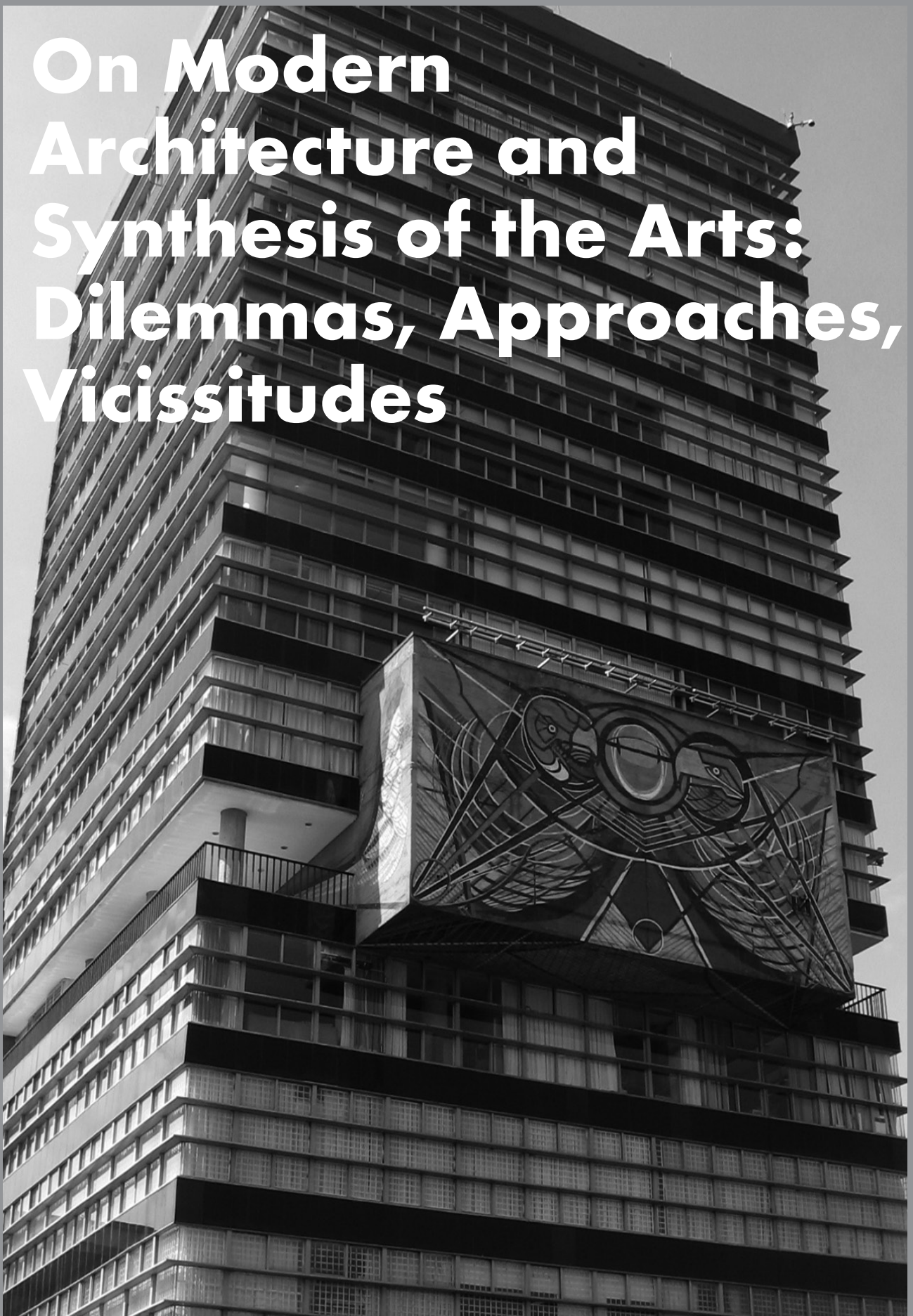


# On Modern Architecture and Synthesis of the Arts: Dilemmas, Approaches, Vicissitudes

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The concept of “synthesis of the arts” became, in the 1940s, a leading principle in the search for renewing and improving modern architecture. Integration with painting and sculpture sought at bringing closer architecture and the people. But many dilemmas stood on the way: from the collaboration processes and the unity of the artistic experience, to “art for art’s sake” predominance or its social content. In the university cities of Mexico and Caracas as well as Burle Marx’s landscapes, the concept of integration reached wider scales. But it found its crisis in the extension to urban planning and the city—which had been, paradoxically, its ultimate target.

By Horacio Torrent, guest editor

THE idea of a synthesis or integration of the arts seems to persist with certain validity in the field of architecture while apparently not in the field of art, which currently falls far from the formal setting to assert itself in the field of experience. The ideas and forms on artistic integration have taken different versions during the twentieth century. The proposals on the total artwork on behalf of the avant-garde are well known, and so is the aspiration of neoplasticism for the unity of artistic creation and the dissolution of the art in the city; indeed there is countless historiography in this regard.

In retrospect, the theoretical concern about the ways in which the main arts could be integrated had for some years an intense and fairly prolific development, but it was in the early 1940s that the ideas that sought a synthesis of the arts stood as clear conceptual guidelines: overcoming constructive objectivity and absence of social representations as a question of surpassing the initial core contents of modern architecture.

This issue of the **docomomo** Journal poses the debate on the synthesis of the arts that historically lies after the initial proposals of the avant-garde, with particular emphasis on some cases, through interpretations by various authors, introducing descriptions and testimonies of the most relevant cases, and presenting resources for specific studies—such as those at the Museum of Sketches in Lund—or documentary texts of its protagonists. It thus seems appropriate to reintroduce this issue in relation to the Eleventh International **docomomo** Conference that takes place in Mexico in 2010.<sup>1</sup>

### Flesh and Skin

The *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*, held in Paris during 1937, was an expression of the most diverse relationships between art

and architecture. Many artworks were included in the exhibition halls, most of them with an educational and decorative sense. The Pavilion of the Spanish Republic by Josep Lluís Sert and Luis Lacasa, built in short time and with limited resources, meant the incorporation of art provided with full political meaning. Sert’s links with the Spanish avant-garde allowed the incorporation of a large number of works of art. Among others, the magnificent work of Alberto Sánchez entitled “The Spanish people have a path that leads to a star”, the “Montserrat” by Juli González, the “Catalan peasant in revolt” by Miró, several photomontages by Josep Renau, the “Fountain of Mercury” by Calder, and most notably the later famous “Guernica” by Pablo Picasso.

The Pavilion showed Sert’s concerns about the ways in which the architecture could relate to art. The architecture was quite simple, but the system of ramps and paths clearly articulated the sequence of the featured artworks, all of which with a strong political content. If art was able to show all the human suffering of the Spanish Civil War, it could also contribute to the improvement of society and civilization. That is, to transcend the political context of the moment and transform it into a new social dimension.

In 1943 Sert, Giedion and Léger wrote the famous “Nine Points on Monumentality”, which proposed to rescue the old social dimension of this idea: “A monument being the integration of the work of the planner, architect, painter, sculptor and landscapist demands close collaboration between all of them.”<sup>2</sup> The proposal would guide the debate from this statement: “Monumental architecture will be something more than strictly functional. It will have regained its lyrical value. In such monumental layouts, architecture and city planning could attain a new freedom and develop new creative possibilities, such as those that have begun to be felt in the last decades in the fields of painting, sculpture, music and poetry.”<sup>3</sup>

Publicly known since 1944, and not without some controversy, ideas therein contained began to gain significant strength. In fact, Giedion himself was responsible for circulating and even expanding its contents consistently for

< Figure 1. **David Alfaro Siqueiros** *New University Symbol* Mural Rectorate Tower, UNAM.

Photo by Horacio Torrent, 2009





over a decade.<sup>4</sup> Incorporated as a theme in the VI CIAM of Bridgwater in 1947, it was introduced by Giedion referring to the state of affairs of architecture. While the prior topics had been industrialization and standardization, the new postwar social time claimed a new approach: "Now we consciously promote another step. A step towards a rather intangible subject: aesthetic problem or, you may prefer to say, emotional expression."<sup>5</sup> He would then again insist on the matter in Bergamo in 1949, although the debate would focus on the CIAM Grid, while achieving a greater response in Hoddersdon in 1951, when attention was placed on the significance of "the heart of the city". Finally, Sert would clearly declare the problem, as proclaimed in his lecture: "we have outlived that period when architecture aimed solely at expressing function. New trends are now apparent towards a greater freedom of plasticity, a more complete architectural vocabulary. No matter how beautiful structure alone may be, should we forget that flesh and skin can be added to the bones? The need for the superfluous is as old as mankind."<sup>6</sup>

### Theoretical Dilemmas

The diagnosis was clear. Industrialization and mass production had populated the world with ugliness and poor aesthetics. The mercantilism and individualism were imposed onto the community. The division of labor and specialization had promoted increasingly distant practices and disciplines, and among them including the higher arts: architecture, painting and sculpture.

Moreover, modern architecture had promoted the expression of the practical and constructive functions and thus the aesthetic ideals had been primarily located in the field of production of art works, neglecting the 'common people', stepping back and away from the expectations of the general public. What was left evident was the crisis that modern architecture had reached, and the efforts to overcome would thus be aligned around the recovery of the symbolic expression for architecture and urbanism, under the name of synthesis of the arts.

Conceptually this resembles an audience formation based on a will for a more organic and fulfilling relationship between production and reception of art. The op-



Figure 2. **Juan O’Gorman** Maquette of the Central Library, UNAM, 1952.

Photo from Mexican Architects’ Archive, Architecture Faculty, UNAM.

Figure 3. **Alberto T. Arai** Sports Area Frontons, UNAM.

Photo from Mexican Architects’ Archive, Architecture Faculty, UNAM.

Figure 4. **David Alfaro Siqueiros** *The People for the University.*

*The University for the People Mural*, 1952-56, UNAM.

Photo by Horacio Torrent, 2009

Figure 5. **O’Gorman** *Historic Representation of Culture Mural*, Central Library, UNAM.

Photo by Horacio Torrent, 2009



tions for this improvement were strategically oriented in two close but different senses: first, from production, the reintegration of architecture, painting and sculpture; and second—oriented for public reception—the restructuring of the unity of the visual experience.

The integration of artistic practices sought to recover the ability to work alongside, or at least the will to try this between architects, painters and sculptors. As such, this focused the role of the protagonists, either in equal terms or whether the architect acted as coordinator or as ‘artist director’. The synthesis also alluded to the artistic conception that takes place simultaneously at various levels of an individual who concentrates in itself more than one artistic practice. The emblematic figure that responded to this was clearly the “artist-architect” Le Corbusier. Stanislaus von Moss expands his relevance in a fascinating collection of notes that prophetically places him in much current cultural dynamics.

Even in a declared spirit of cooperation, the relationships between architecture and visual arts can be outlined in four steps. First, a dynamic of sharing the same

field while every practice preserved its independence, this is often the case of sculpture. Second, art applied to architecture based on the preconditions set forth by its layout, or architecture as canvas and the work of art as decoration frequently applied as murals. Third, the incorporation of art encouraged by the achievement of an effect, particularly in the case of stained glass. And fourth, integration into an interdependent resolution between architecture and artwork, in which the synthesis would be its highest expression, tending to a plastic cohesion between space and work of art, aspiring to a condition of sublime. If the first three were defined from production, the last, in its greatest extent, definitely had its effect based within reception.

Thus, the greatest expectation was based on the restructuring of the unity of the artistic experience. The controversy was raised between abstract and figurative or objective art. Figurative art was closely associated with its communicative function and therefore very close to realism, with a content more easily identifiable in its reception, while abstract art was seen as more impersonal

and meaningless and therefore more collective and democratic in its reception.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, synthesis had to show a tendency towards abstraction, for it allowed a greater capacity to break the limits of existing practices and nurture different fields. That capacity stands, in the words of Barry Bergdoll, in the understanding of the dialectical development of the modern avant-garde.

The positions around one of the options were frequent, the controversies were many<sup>8</sup> and the accusations on the decorative were often, but the most severe strains were established by the opposition between mere artistic expression and the social role of art.

Lúcio Costa made a lucid and analytical intervention at the International Conference of Artists organized by the Unesco in Venice, 1952,<sup>9</sup> by recognizing three reasons for the negative attitude towards modern architec-



Figure 6. **Josep Lluís Sert** and **Luis Lacasa** Pavilion of the Spanish Republic, International Exposition, Paris, 1937.

Photo from Centro Documental del Ministerio de Cultura de España.

Figure 7. **Fernand Léger** *Bimural* partial view, UCV Covered Plaza, Caracas, 1954.

Photo by Horacio Torrent, 1992.

Figure 8. **Jean Arp** *Cloud Shepherd*, 1953 and **Mateo Manauere** *Mural*, 1954. UCV Covered Plaza, Caracas.

Photo by Horacio Torrent, 1992.

ture: it looks very different from previous forms of building, its lack of consideration of tradition, and its utilitarian and deliberately functional nature incapable of producing a dignified impression. Considering the plastic quality as an essential element in the architecture, Costa proposed to overcome the traditional conflict between social art and “art for art’s sake”, recognizing in the latter the capacity of distinction as something significant in the context of culture.

For Max Bill, the problem was not only the exhaustion of the modern impulse, but the loss of authenticity

created by mechanization. The alternative was not the integration of the arts, but the pursuit of “good form” as a state of perfection and efficiency. As explained by Alejandro Crispiani, the reception of his ideas in the realm of Latin American Southern Cone, not without controversy, proposed Bill as an example of the total artist, able to produce in his work this sought synthesis; or, as regarded in the interpretation of Tomás Maldonado, an example of clear correspondence between the work of art and integral design.

### Latin American Approaches

The Americas had a central role in the testing of ideas regarding integration of architecture and urbanism, perhaps because of their particular need to forge a modern tradition in art while building a public sphere through equipment and new meanings for urban space. With particular strength and aggressiveness, and beyond any conceptual dilemmas, various works applied the idea of synthesis, even if sometimes fragmented.

In North America, the search for a link towards art was, as paradigmatic site, the public spaces of corporate architecture. As noted by Theo Prudon referring to Huxtable’s argument, the incorporation was only intended to soften the austerity and blandness of modern buildings, and, except rare cases, the forms were usually three: sculptures in front of buildings or in gardens, indoor sculptural applications, and murals.

In Latin America they took shape on different options and diverse expressions. One was a strong tendency to synthesize sculptural conditions in the architectural form, usually highlighted in relation to the supporting structure, as in the work of Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil, Candela in Mexico or Williams in Argentina. If the canonical-like interpretations such as those of Henry-Russell Hitchcock<sup>10</sup> sought in the architecture of that time the influential presence of modern painting, Carlos Eduardo Comas discusses its prevalence and offers a lucid overview of the exchange between sculpture and modern architecture present in the porosity held in the most important works of the first period of modern Brazilian architecture.

The ideas for integration of art and architecture as proposed by the Mexican muralists for public art were both early and parallel to European expressions; and also generated an intellectual environment clearly leading to a challenging production, such as that highlighted by Louise Noelle. The Mexican scene associated strong theoretical positions with the practice of functionalist architecture, with the intention of overcoming the limitations imposed its universalism in a particularly interesting context as certainly was the new institutional framework forged since the Mexican Revolution. Muralismo was pro-



posed from the 1920s and 1930s as a public art par excellence, with a capacity of social and political content yet unparalleled. Characterized by strong tensions over educational content, often loaded with realism, this attempt for integration almost always carried a message whose destination was the people and that transcended national conditions to be placed universally.

If anything characterized the integration of the arts in Latin America, was its final claim of public influence. They were mostly public works which took on a different scale, associated with the dynamics of the new social and educational programs, linked to movements of large masses of the population – with university campuses as outstanding examples. But it also extended to the more radical urban condition assumed by the use of focal intensities able to transcend the sole artworks, articulating complete

giant mural that covers it. The universalist claim to contain all the “Historic representation of culture” – as the name of the mural indicates – was what established its monumental status and therefore the need for a closed block. By contrast, in the case of Olympic Stadium, Rivera’s mural, even if undeniably powerful, is merely an addition the formal proposal masterly synthesized by Augusto Pérez Palacio. Next to the stadium, the Frontons by Alberto T. Arai overcome mere integration to move onto a different path. It is in the form of a truncated pyramid and the texture of the stone, where the prevalence of artistic integration lies in this experience. Arai himself proved this clear when he declared that “architecture is formed by the union of both distribution and construction, which are subject to the designs of a deliberate and creative artistic intention that translates into a homogeneous unit.”<sup>11</sup>



sequences of urban landscape and large scale places of socialization.

For a consecrated art as the Mexican muralism, the complex of the University City of Mexico, developed between 1946 and 1952, was a wonderful opportunity to assume the condition proposed by the large scale and systematic action upon urban size. With an explicit didactic intention between subject and representation – as diligently presented by Lourdes Cruz –, together with the opportunity to adapt their work to spacial conditions as proposed by architects and planners, artists had a substantial role in the opportunity to articulate content beyond the rationalist conceptions of architecture, and thus set the thematic unity of the territory of the campus.

Juan O’Gorman’s murals in the Library (1952) have been often considered as decorative, but in fact it was fundamentally a work of synthesis: the architectural design of the massive block was conceived with the intention to grant it with a monumental character through the

The University City of Caracas was designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva around 1940 as a rather academic project, but between 1949 and 1955 – the period of its greatest consolidation – it changed radically. The complex was composed as a series of seemingly autonomous buildings – with a center organized around two squares – but assembled by an articulated network of covered walkways strengthened by the presence of art in multiple formats. Some of these works of art fully embody the idea of integration, such as the stained-glass mural by Fernand Léger at the Central Library (1954), while others only stage exemplary works. Most are key interventions in the territorial integration of the campus and all intend to offer, in the words of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, “a recognizable likeness of the spirit, approachable by all men who see and feel.”<sup>12</sup> No doubt the experience of this place as a whole definitely enables a memorable one, as witnessed and testified by Hannia Gómez.

The result is certainly not a product of intuition given

that Villanueva held a quite clear position on this: "Integration of the arts results in a new architectural-sculptural-pictorial organism, where none assumes minor importance, where no fissure exists between all human aspirations."<sup>13</sup> In that sense, two are clear moments of synthesis: the Aula Magna and the Covered Plaza.

Indeed the Aula Magna (1953) is without any doubt the best example of synthesis in terms of a concrete collaboration between professional and artistic practice. It is a clear moment of articulation between architectonic and structural conception, technical resolution of acoustic conditions and artistic definition. Collaboration between Villanueva and the engineers of the Danish construction firm Christiani and Nielsen succeeded in totally isolating the interior shell from the structure; collaboration between Villanueva and Calder made it possible to imagine a space where Robert B. Newman had foreseen an exemplary acoustic resolution, as regarded by Jørgen Petersen.

The Covered Plaza (projected in 1952) is probably one of the places of greatest artistic synthesis and where the integration of different works of art reaches its highest meaning. It is a complex space which brings together the different volumes of the Rectorate, the Aula Magna, and the Hall of Honor, and where there is a change of direction in the pedestrian network of the campus. Its condition as a site of synthesis comes mainly from simple movements of few elements. A higher structure, pillars and roof slabs arranged in the regularity of the square grid, oriented according to its own coordinates, not corresponding to any of the adjacent volumes; and three lower structures that define light wells and a void space in which the lateral path of the lecture hall fugues tangentially. The murals are presented as free surfaces with curves that guide the directions of the promenade: Léger's "Bimural" next to the figure of "Amphion" by Laurens, in the full light of one of the courtyards; the "Homage to Malevich" by Vasarely limits the shadow space around another patio; the work by Mateo Manare closing the passage and setting the space around the bulbous figure of the "Cloud Shepherd" by Jean Arp, which as indicating a full condition of movement, is simply based onto the ground, without a plinth. The square cover is what Villanueva defined as the structure in which aesthetic events take place, being these beyond the coexistence of art works onto the same ground.

The landscape works of Roberto Burle Marx are without doubt the greatest extension of the concept of synthesis of the arts across regional scales and the cultural dimensions of interventions on nature. Burle Marx also paradigmatically represents the synthesis of the arts from the individual point of view, from his studies in architecture, painting and his knowledge of nature and botanical materials; he conceived the garden in a way so genu-

inely new to the epoch. As explained by Lauro Cavalcanti, Burle Marx transplanted logics and forms of artistic avant-garde into the garden. Through the lack of separation between figure and ground, the incorporation of traditional materials – such as Portuguese pavement – and recognizing microclimates, topography, and their corresponding vegetation, he put volume into abstract painting. If the Gardens of the Ministry of Education and Health (1938) formed the initial experience in integrating with the surrounding architecture, the Parque do Flamengo in Rio de Janeiro (1961) was probably the place where the synthesis operation succeeds in expanding art into the urban dimension. Burle Marx dissolved art in nature, and thus expanded the status of total art work onto the experience of landscape.

### Fata Morgana

The dissolution of art in the city, the recovery of the symbolic expression for urbanism, the emphasis on the social role of art as overcoming the limitations of modern architecture and the ability to represent the intangible through the area had always been in the very concept of synthesis of the arts.

Many works were carried out under this slogan, mostly within the scale of buildings. The opportunity to verify the extension of town planning ideas through facts, not under the notion of 'heart', but to the entire city, would take place in Brazil in September 1959 during the International Congress of Art Critics.<sup>14</sup> The theme "New Town: Synthesis of the Arts" seemed appropriate in connection with the optimism of the construction of Brasilia, and the expansion of the synthesis to the field of urbanism and planning.

Many of the ideas that had been central for two decades were still present, but the debates and choices of the participants marked a direction perhaps not foreseen by the organizers. The frustrated experience of integration of the arts in the Unesco building was still latent. Therefore, the main debate was no longer placed on the forms of integration, but onto the very crisis of the idea of synthesis.

From a more orthodox point of view, Alberto Sartoris's position related the integration of art in urban design through the construction of monuments and an unavoidable plastic abstraction. From a different position, André Bloc countered any notion of architecture as part of the major arts and warned of the need for artists to assume the current conditions, "the world today, which is the world of advertising and industrial design" and "we see in our cities the huge advertisements and cars that are like moving sculptures."<sup>15</sup> Bruno Zevi thereby equated the crisis of architecture with the crisis of society.

In a brief speech, apparently out of context of the debate, Frederick Kiesler considered the perspective created in Brasilia as an unparalleled case because it was located both far and near: a Fata Morgana. But, as for architectural units scored this perspective, he would not forget his position against the monumental character and would focus his speech to overcome the artistic vision of the city, yet being modern was still monumental and hence “contrary to the inner life and sense and psyche of human beings today,” proclaiming that “the purest simplicity of life and the most basic needs of men should be the main factors in building the city.”<sup>16</sup>

Kiesler’s intervention seems symptomatic of a moment of crisis within modern architecture. The idea of mirage as an image more fraught with intentions than owning real correlations refers to a need for change and a definite leading role for the ‘common people’.

The synthesis of the arts, a subject that had long played a central role in the debate on architecture, found its crisis in the city, which paradoxically had been its purpose. Faced with the total dimension of the urban phenomenon it would begin to unravel and disappear as an idea and begin to be a part of history.

As Rosalind Krauss subsequently warned regarding sculpture,<sup>17</sup> the universal categories of art were forced to cover a broad spectrum of different manifestations. The expansion of the field of art since the 1960s would be considered as an effective dissolution of art in the city. As seen from a distance the claim of artistic synthesis advocated by architecture stands as a particular historical moment. What stood as a future agenda for more than three decades aiming at the relationship between artistic and social practices was then consolidated as part of the past. Those works encouraged by its momentum are now heritage of modernity.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank the authors, the Fundación Villanueva, the generous collaboration of Anne-Laure Guillet and Ivan Blasi for their support, and Ana Tostões for the trust placed upon me when inviting me to be the guest editor of the first issue of her period as chair of Docomomo International.
2. Josep Lluís Sert, Fernand Léger, Siegfried Giedion, “Nine Points on Monumentality,” in Sigfried Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 49.
3. Sert, Léger, Giedion, “Nine Points,” 51.
4. As for example in: Sigfried Giedion et al., *In Search of a New Monumentality*, *Architectural Review* 104 (September 1948): 117-28.
5. Sigfried Giedion, *A Decade of New Architecture* (New York: Witterborn 1951), 34.
6. Josep Lluís Sert, “Centers for Community life,” in Jacqueline Tyr-

whitt, Josep Lluís Sert, Ernesto N. Rogers (eds.), *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanization of Urban Life* (London: Lund Humphries, 1952), 13.

7. Further reference in Paul Damaz, *Art in European Architecture* (New York: Reinhold, 1956).
8. To quote two examples, while Jean Gorin spoke about the University City of Caracas: “but the different pictorial and sculptural work represented are stuck onto the Architecture and in no way integrated into it; they have no function whatsoever beyond that which is ornamental—and therefore there is no synthesis”, Villanueva himself wondered if the Mexican case was a case of synthesis of the arts or rather a “mere juxtaposition of different artistic expressions?”. Jean Gorin, “‘Is the Synthesis of the Mayor Arts Possible? A Vital Issue of Modern Architecture.’ Open letter to the General Assembly of Groupe Espace (May 9, 1956),” in Germano Celant, *Architecture & Arts* (Milan: Skira, 2004), 200. And Carlos Raúl Villanueva, *Textos Escogidos* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1980), 94.
9. Lúcio Costa, “The Architect and Contemporary Society; Preliminary Address on Architecture,” International Conference of Artists; Unesco, Venice, 1952. [http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/venice\\_52.shtml](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/venice_52.shtml). Unfortunately it was not possible to reproduce in this edition.
10. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Painting Toward Architecture* (New York: Duell, Sloane and Pearce, 1948).
11. Yurik Kifuri Rosas, “Los frontones de la ciudad universitaria,” *Bitácora* 11 (February–April 2004): 49.
12. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Carlos Raúl Villanueva y la arquitectura de Venezuela* (Caracas: Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural, 1999), 94. English version: Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Carlos Raúl Villanueva and the Architecture of Venezuela* (Alec Tiranti: London, 1964).
13. Carlos Raúl Villanueva as quoted by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy in *Carlos Raúl Villanueva*, 94.
14. Maria da Silveira Lobo and Roberto Segre (eds.), *Congresso Internacional Extraordinário de Críticos de Arte - Cidade Nova: Síntese das Artes* (Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ/FAU, 2009).
15. Maria da Silveira Lobo and Segre (eds.), *Congresso Internacional Extraordinário de Críticos de Arte*, 64.
16. Maria da Silveira Lobo and Segre (eds.), *Congresso Internacional Extraordinário de Críticos de Arte*, 43.
17. Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44.

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