

# The Dwellers: The Integration of Art and the Architecture in the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas

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**"I am concerned about the problem of a new synthesis of the different means of expression. It is my aspiration to redirect architecture, painting, sculpture, to an intimate, inextricable, significant cohesion."<sup>1</sup>**

**Carlos Raúl Villanueva**

**W**hen Villanueva worked in the Integration of the Arts project for the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas, he moved from the idea of 'synthesis of the arts' (where arts "preserved their traditional features in order to qualify something whose existence was prior to them and of which architecture was the previous framework") to the idea of 'integration of the arts', which "created a new architectural-sculptural-pictorial organism which did not express hierarchy but the formal combination of the functional and the spatial as equal categories," he took a transcendental step to open his architecture to experimentation in the field of modern art.\*

By Hannia Gómez

**I**t was born and raised to the art of architecture within the realm of the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas, the masterpiece of Venezuelan architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva, and a Unesco World Heritage Cultural Site since 2000. Its spaces – contained by the equilibrium of its masses, tamed and stimulated by its particular combination of light and shadow, color and structure, art and architecture – forged my aesthetical senses, spatial sensibilities and tastes.

### **An Urban Art**

At the beginning of the 1950s, architecture was called to solve more risky and vigorous problems than other forms of art, principally, painting. Villanueva – who had a long relationship with the experience of the Synthesis of the Arts – aimed to experiment anew with various forms of integration (sculptures and murals free of any intentional relationship with the space in which they are located, works with a decorative function à l'ancienne, and proper integrations within the architectural context). The resulting Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas was so successful in doing so that the surrounding city of Caracas, after sixty years of coexistence with this experience, passed from observing it merely as a singular chapter in art history to absorb it as a daily component of its urban and architectural identity. The paradigmatic art/architecture collaboration was highly educational. It soon crossed the doors of the Ciudad Universitaria of the 1950s to be installed in the real city it from the 1960s, wherever conditions permitted it.<sup>2</sup> The rest of Venezuelan cities also began to be influenced by the experience of the Universidad Central, and the aim for integrating art and architecture became part of greater urban territories.<sup>3</sup>

The heart of Caracas beats inside the Aula Magna, the campus' main auditorium. The Aula Magna performs as the core for both cities: the university city and the capital city. Here, Villanueva and Alexander Calder achieved together one of the most important examples in the world of a total work of art. Since its construction, the auditorium's design was naturally felt by the people, together with

Calder's floating "Clouds", as a single, inseparable entity; the most successful work of integration of the whole university project.

Thus, the Aula Magna is a paramount, the strongest key to understand the different scales and nuances of the collection of interactions between Villanueva's strong architectural framework and the numerous artists' interventions that spread and multiply along the campus. Departing from there, it is easier to understand primarily, how the more Villanueva's architecture becomes abstract, the more it approaches modern art; secondly, how art, in one other hand, has many manners of being integrated in the spaces within the academic city; and third, how the different integrations in the other hand offer infinite ways of being sensed, as they were meant to be perceived in the fourth dimension of time. Here is where the issue of the *promenade* takes an important role: as solely by walking over and over again this urban art land can we discover and thoroughly apprehend the quality of the kaleidoscopic conversation of the artistic objects within the architectural space.

### **An inhabited city**

The Ciudad Universitaria – as Paulina Villanueva wrote – "might be considered as a Museum City in which art becomes inseparable from architecture and becomes an inadvertent companion of daily life; but beyond this, it is one of the most exceptional and successful examples of modern urbanism." Moreover, the rich and varying perspectives within this changing modern townscape also advocate for contemplating the university's works of art as the fantastic 'dwellers' of Villanueva's architecture.

As the architect did not originally make the art to go with his architecture, the integration of art and architecture project, instead, "takes shape gradually as the construction of the different buildings in the university campus went ahead, maturing along with Villanueva's architecture."<sup>4</sup> So Villanueva called progressively for the remarkable team of national and international artists that were to collaborate with him in the composition of the different



architectural spaces. These works come from multiple traditions and artistic universes: the sculptures by Laurens, Arp, Pevsner and Lobo; the murals by Léger, Vasarely, Mateo Manaure, Pascual Navarro, Oswaldo Vigas and Armando Barrios; the “Clouds” by Calder and his other mobiles and sculptures; the stained glass window by Léger, the high-relief mural by Wilfredo Lam, the works by Arp and by Sophie Tauber, the art déco ceramic murals and the sculptures made in Cumarebo stone by Francisco Narváez; the facade polychromies by Mateo Manaure; the work by Jesús Soto and the murals and stained glasses by Alejandro Otero, Victor Valera, Alirio Oramas, Miguel Arroyo and Braulio Salazar. The works of arts marked singularly with their idiosyncratic presences Villanueva’s modern scenario.

Some of these works of art would perform in the modern campus traditionally, as sculptures and friezes or wall ornaments did in the traditional city; others would be a part of a classical synthesis with the architecture and are thus inscribed within the architectural frame. The rest, as in Aula Magna’s ceiling, participate in the creation of a genuine and total work of art. But there are also interesting moments when Villanueva’s own designs start mingling and being influenced by the ideas, the shapes or the aesthetics present in some of the art installed in the campus (or elsewhere in his memory). This might happen in a whole building or in an episode of a building. Then his architecture would shift into a more sculpturally or graphically or compositionally-influenced expression... that of an architecture haunted by art.

The resulting university campus can therefore be perceived as a vast architectural canvas, a grey – *béton brut* grey – background on which sparkle the dazzling vegetation and the uniqueness of the multiple art and ar-

chitecture integration cases, which constantly lighten up like fireworks. The austere but bold poetics of Villanueva’s personal architectural language, with its magnificent structural forms in concrete – those winged marquees, sculptural ramps and columns, those monumental planes and roofs, those concrete embroideries, those airy staircases, and – with its almost mute and rational and functional surfaces—the modern grey ceramic tiles of the floor, the classical grey stone pavements, the Venetian glass mosaic-covered walls in bright colors, the rhythmic glass facades, act as a perfect backdrop for art, which repeatedly shows up either to counteract with the architecture... or to become architecture itself.

The fertile ‘contamination’ or cross-pollination spreads throughout the whole university place. This is why the experience of visiting the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas is one for discovering, for guessing and for being surprised with the many unexpected presences of all kinds that ‘dwell’ in the modern campus. The presence of art is thus strong and magical, to say the less. The academic environment is magnetized by its epiphany. The artistic *œuvres* turn into powerful anchors for the architectural space, and, like all magical presences, they easily root and linger in our memory.

### Promenade

Since I was a student I have experienced the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas like a place perennially filled with people of all ages. People who go there to work and study every day, constantly moving from faculty to faculty, from one place to the other. People that walk, sit around on the floors, on the ramps, under the covered passageways and in the open staircases—students’ long-time favorite collective lounges –, attend cultural and academic events or relax on the green grass lawns. The campus has been a lively place since the 1950s, and a most than successful gathering place.

But the feeling for me – and for many – is that it remains always ideally empty, shimmering stunningly under the blue sky, as in the photographs of its opening day. The reason is that beyond the everyday fuzz, Villanueva’s monumental effort of the integration of the arts in his architectural masterpiece is suspended in the air like a charm. The campus is witch crafted. Beyond being populated by its users, it is fiercely inhabited by its works of art, which maintain a dynamic dialogue with the architecture, transmitting to everyone the unequivocal sense of being in an outstanding place, like no other one on earth. A place under the spell of art.

Despite the decay and all the domestic activity, to traverse the campus is to plunge into a long dream, to enter in a sublime voyage gently assaulted by memorable ap-

Figure 1. **Carlos Raúl Villanueva**, *Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, 1944-1970.

Aerial view. Photographer unknown, February 1954. Archives of Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Daily News.

Figure 2. **Carlos Raúl Villanueva**. *Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, 1944-1970.

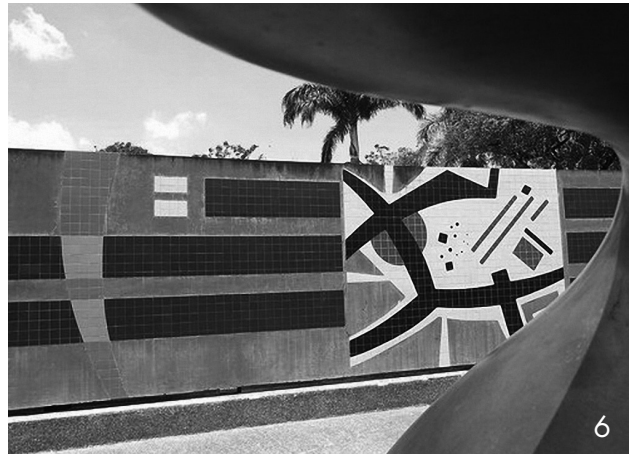
Aerial view. Photographer unknown, c. 1950. Archives of Fundación de la Memoria Urbana, Caracas.

Figure 3. **Carlos Raúl Villanueva**, Plaza del Rectorado, *Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, 1952-1953.

Photographer unknown, c. 1950. Archives of Fundación de la Memoria Urbana, Caracas.

Fig. 6. **Carlos Raúl Villanueva** architect, **Baltasar Lobo** sculptor, **Mateo Manaure** artist, *Biblioteca Central and Campus, Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, 1952-1953.

Photographer unknown, 1950s.



pearances. Departing from the solemn Plaza del Rectorado, the colorful murals by Armando Barrios and Oswaldo Vigas enlighten and encompass the side volumes of the plaza, like writings on the walls. Close by, on a ground floor wall, an abstract André Bloc's mural unexpectedly awaits the visitor with its "lively tones and dynamic composition."<sup>5</sup>

The main doorway to the Universidad Central de Venezuela's unparalleled Plaza Cubierta, practiced on the base of the Rectorado Building under an expressionist concrete marquee, marks the beginning of a journey of listening to the many dialogues posed by Villanueva and the artists. To begin with, right after the entrance, in the first floor of this building a "big mural composition by painter Héctor Poleo, a symbolic, figurative fresco" depicting "the academic character of the university," is placed at the rear of the ample rector's office as a traditional applied art.<sup>6</sup> In this interior space, the fresco, in spite of its air of classicism, is a reminder of the great artistic modern operation conveyed outside in the rest of the university.

Right below, in the Plaza Cubierta, three curved double-faced murals by Fernand Léger and by Victor Vasarely (the "Bimural", the see-through "Homage to Malevitch", and one by Pascual Navarro), and one single-side mural by Mateo Manaure, all done with colored glass mosaics, are sunken in light, catching the eye within the vast shaded 'foyer' displayed between the Aula Magna, the Paraninfo and the Sala de Conciertos, and adding movement to the covered plaza. These murals counteract through space with two remarkable pieces of sculpture: Henri Laurens's "Amphion" and Jean Arp's "Pastor de Nubes". Both sculptures, which in turn are contoured by the edge of the horizontal concrete roof, lyrically stand in the Plaza

Cubierta as its dynamic protagonists, acting as pivots for the whole spatial precinct.

The wide surfaces of the brilliant mosaic walls and the defined silhouettes of the two bronze abstract sculptures add vigor and electrify the plaza's chiaroscuro. But the Plaza Cubierta, with all its power, is but a prelude to the monumental art-architecture-sculpture organism that waits in the Aula Magna. In collaboration with sculptor Alexander Calder and acoustics engineers Boly Beranek and Newman, Villanueva modulated the space, artistically and acoustically, transforming "the usual rectilinear perspective into a spherical form very much in line with the aquatic landscape metaphor he and Calder had in mind."<sup>7</sup> The integration of art and architecture reaches here its greatest peak. The combination of the warm-colored acoustic clouds with the punctual lightning of the ceiling "transforms the auditorium into a universe of strange planets that nuances the whole ambiance with radiant sunrises."<sup>8</sup> Everything in it, the architectural form, the structural solution and the functionality, makes for the creation of a new conception of space. Therefore, a new synthesis of the arts is proclaimed here, where the "shared view is much bigger than architecture or sculpture alone."<sup>9</sup> Needless is to add how unforgettable is the plastic experience derived from attending in this most beautiful of places a symphonic concert, a piano solo or graduation day.

But the artistic entourage of the paradigmatic Aula Magna goes further on. More to the south, having passed-by the many doors of the auditorium, among cylindrical columns, additional layers of murals make their appearance. One, done by Mateo Manaure, covers the external rear facade of the Paraninfo and thus becomes the centerpiece of the great lawn outside the Plaza Cubierta. Another mural by Venezuelan artist Carlos González-Bogen is decoratively displayed with its abstract-geometric composition between the second and the third doors of the auditorium. Plus, after another one-sided abstract composition by Pascual Navarro, located under an opening of the continuous flat concrete roof, is set the 'metallic element' of Vasarely, a kinetic work in aluminum called "Positive-Negative", which with its geometric vibration plays with the long eastern screen-facade that Villanueva made out of concrete hollow bricks. To the west, in a small courtyard, an Antoine Pevsner bronze sculpture on a cylindrical pedestal called "30 Degrees Dynamism" accompanies a ceramic work by Vasarely called "Sophia", placed on the facade of a cooling concrete tower.

As perforations and transparencies and optical operations with light are celebrated along the way to the Biblioteca Central, having left behind yet another colorful mosaic mural by Mateo Manaure, there is a still a grand

Fig. 5. **Carlos Raúl Villanueva** architect, **Alejandro Otero** artist, Faculty of Architecture building, *Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, 1954-1957. Photographer unknown, 1950s. Archives of Fundación de la Memoria Urbana, Caracas.

Fig. 6. **Carlos Raúl Villanueva**, **Jean Arp** sculptor, **Mateo Manaure** artist, Plaza Cubierta, *Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, 1952-1953. Photographer unknown, 1950s. Archives of Fundación de la Memoria Urbana, Caracas.

Fig. 7. **Carlos Raúl Villanueva** architect, **Fernand Léger** artist, **Henri Laurens** sculptor, Plaza Cubierta, *Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, 1952-1953. Photographer unknown, 1950s. Archives of Fundación de la Memoria Urbana, Caracas.

Fig. 8. **Carlos Raúl Villanueva** architect, **Jean Arp** sculptor. Plaza Cubierta, *Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, 1952-1953. Photographer unknown, 1950s. Archives of Fundación de la Memoria Urbana, Caracas.

luminal discovery to be experienced in the library. The library's perennial silence helps to magnify the quality of the encounter with Fernand Léger's two-stories-high stained glass. This magnificent abstract work in blue, red, yellow, green, white and black is duplicated by its reflection on the granite floor, and is the witness and companion in the same room to a Villanueva's free-standing stair, this time performing itself as another sculpture of the campus collection. Having trespassed and unveiled this quiet—yet magna—introduction, lecture and research are easier subjects.

What is known as the central administrative-cultural complex ends at the footsteps of the tower of the Biblioteca Central. From here on, "the different towers and single blocks of each school or faculty, together with the recurrent elements that are repeated with variations, like the free-plan ground floors, the decomposition in bodies and parts, the lattice brickwork enclosures, the brise-soleil and eaves, the transparencies in staircases and ramps" treasure their own chapters of art and architecture integrations.<sup>10</sup>

The list of works – and therefore, of appearances – is very large. There is no Football Stadium without

Narváez's "El Atleta"; the sculpture "Maternity" by Baltazar Lobo rules over the main lawn of the campus and over its composition of architectural masses; without the mural by Alejandro Otero, the Library of the Faculty of Humanities would be dull; the stadium's light pots are echoed in the risen arms of the Monument to María Lionza; Jean Arp's mural in the School of Art is a part of its concrete pergola-covered garden.

I can attest what it meant to be received every day by Alejandro Otero's blue murals placed on the east and west facades of the classrooms tower in the Architecture School, or attend classes in design workshops where it was enough to direct our gaze to the walls to find the compositions of the best artists in the country that filled that school with their works, thanks to Carlos Raúl Villanueva. I can also tell what it is like to study under Calder's white "Ráfaga de nieve" mobile that hangs over the reading room of the Architecture Library, and how his other colorful mobile sculpture—in continuous movement all over the school's ground floor over the years—is almost an old friend who can join hands every time you pass by him in the Exhibition Hall of the Faculty. This experience is repeated every day.

## Notes

1. Carlos Raúl Villanueva, *Escritos 13*, Colección Espacio y Forma (Caracas: Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1965).
2. Roberto Guevara, *Arte para una nueva escala* (Caracas: Maraven, Litografía Tecnocolor, 1978): 30.
3. Hannia Gómez, "Soto, ciudad y arquitectura," in *Soto a gran escala* (Caracas: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, MACCSI, 2003).
4. Paulina Villanueva, Maciá Pintó, Paolo Gasparini et al., *Carlos Raúl Villanueva* (Sevilla: Tanais Ediciones, 2000): 13-15.
5. Antonio Granados Valdés, "Guía de Obras de Arte de la Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas," in *Punto 59, La Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas* (Caracas: Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1977): 80-108.
6. Granados Valdés, "Guía de Obras de Arte de la Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas," in *Punto 59*: 88.
7. Carlos Brillembourg, "Architecture and Sculpture: Villanueva and Calder's Aula Magna," in *Latin American Architecture 1929-1960: Contemporary Reflections* (New York: the Monacelli Press, 2004): 69.
8. Granados Valdés, "Guía de Obras de Arte de la Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas," in *Punto 59*: 89.
9. Brillembourg, "Architecture and Sculpture," in *Latin American Architecture 1929-1960*: 73.
10. Paulina Villanueva, Maciá Pintó, Paolo Gasparini et al., *Carlos Raúl Villanueva* (Sevilla: Tanais Ediciones, 2000): 52.

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