

Civic and Social Infrastructure.

Conservation through Modern Architecture intervention. Embassy of Chile in Argentina 1966–2009

By Elisa Gil Serrano and Hugo Mondragón López

MODERN heritage is not protected in Chile. Most of Chilean modern architectural heritage stands without an official decree protecting it from being modified or even demolished. This is a consequence of having state-controlled organisms in charge of the protection and defense of architectural heritage that use almost exclusively the building's age as main criteria for its appraisalment¹.

From this point of view it seems difficult that constructions that are only between 40 and 90 years old may catch the attention of heritage preservation government officials.

However negative the situation which, in the majority of cases has led to the systematic violation of constructions that constitute valuable records of the status of disciplinary and cultural discussion of Modern Architecture, the following case, paradoxically, couldn't have crystallized the way it did, if the building had been officially protected, and neither could the **docomomo**-Chile group could have played a protagonic role in its management.

A sculpture in a park

For multiple reasons the original building of the Chilean Embassy in Argentina of modern architects Echeñique, Cruz and Burchard² is a singular piece of Modern Architecture in Chile.

Its singularity is due to various factors. For example, it's a building that, at plain sight, was not constructed in Chilean grounds. In fact, the terrain on which the embassy's building was erected lies in the midst of the Parques de Palermo traced by urbanist Carlos Thays, in the beginning of the XX century in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It's a lot donated by the Argentinean State to its Chilean counterpart with the specific claim that the embassy was to be constructed there³.

The fact that the project was erected through a bidding process carried out in 1966, is also very

singular. Only teams of architects of both countries were invited and the jury was also bilateral⁴.

The building stands out from its physical surroundings not only by being isolated in the middle of Parque República de Chile, which lies within the forementioned Parques de Palermo—as if it was a sculpture in the park⁵—but also because it was constructed on the top of a small hill that was, and still is, the only geographic feature of the landscape.

Yet another of the building's singularities lies in the complexity of its program. The bidding's bases stated that four basic functions should articulate in one single compound: 1. Foreign Affairs Office, 2. Protocol Halls, 3. Service facilities, and 4. The Ambassador's residence. From this point of view, the project was considered a multi-program condenser.

As a solution, the winning team proposed three curved storeys superimposed among themselves, all which were assigned different functions. The first storey laid out the chancellery's office. The second superimposes with the previous one and houses the complete set of protocol halls and service facilities. The third storey, which marks the end of the building, is the area of the Ambassador's residence, completely independent of the other areas and activities.

The prolongation of these three strips over the portion of the area of the terrain left unused, gives way to a series of terraced gardens that followed the topography of the small hill on which the Embassy was built. The hill's slope was accentuated by the horizontality of the decks. Protocol halls and the Ambassador's residence open up towards this terraced system of gardens, which merge themselves with the green surrounding park, which configures a visual field of great deep spatial characteristics that stand-out as one of its greatest assets.

In shape terms, this work represents an exception within the dominant rational tendency in Chile between 1930 and 1970. Its organic form lies

closer to some of Wright, Niemeyer or Aalto's experiences than German, Dutch or North-American ones. It's possible that this "freedom of shape" is due to the fact that, as an exception, a team of Chilean architects didn't have to deal with the rigid structural conditions that a seismic country as Chile requires.

A cultural centre within a modern building to commemorate the bicentennial

Within the framework of its 200 years of republican life, the Embassy of Chile in Argentina Cultural Centre is the only piece of architecture built by the State of Chile beyond its borders.

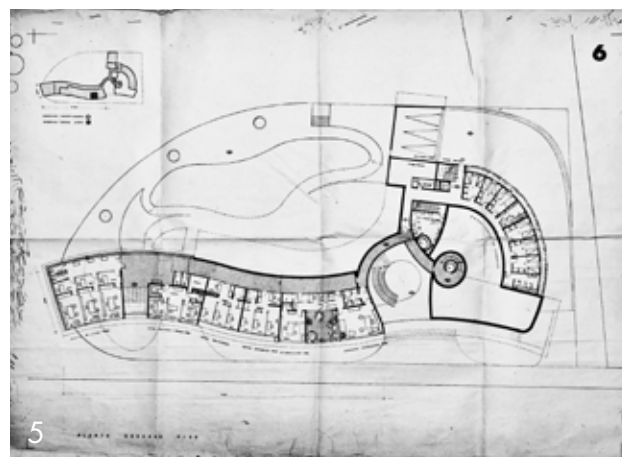
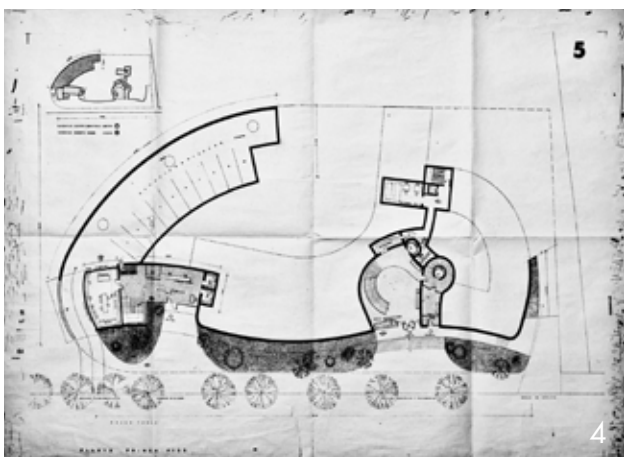
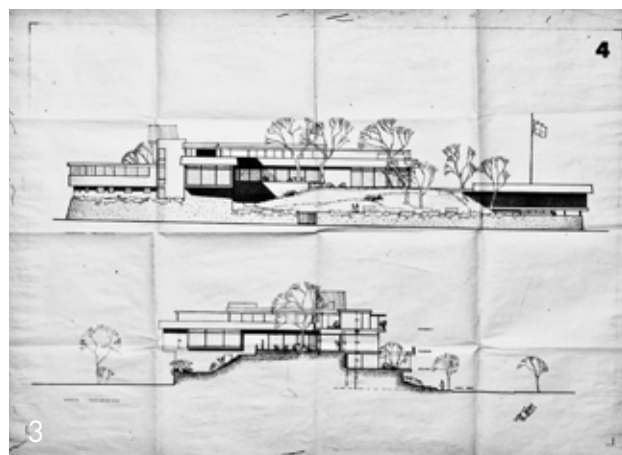
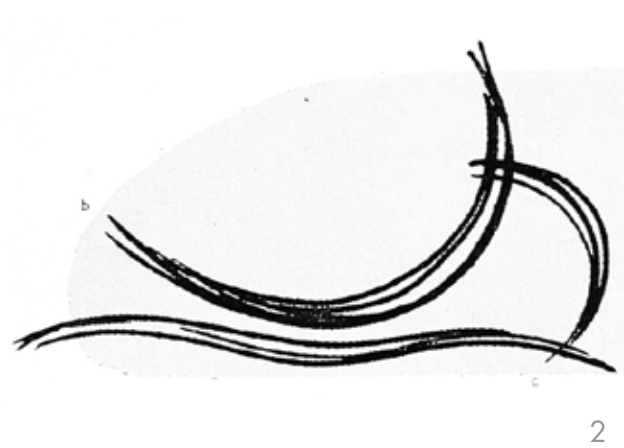
The idea of building this cultural centre of the Embassy of Chile in Argentina, was the brainchild of Chilean Ambassador Mr. Luis Maira. It consisted of a program that would be destined to promote young artists from both countries, and its construction demanded the intervention of the original Embassy building.

Through Elisa Gil Serrano, member of the **docomomo**-Chile group and student of the UC M.A. in Architecture who, in that moment, was developing her master's thesis in the original building of the Embassy, Mr. Maira requested the consultancy of Modern Architecture experts with the purpose of having them design a methodology to guarantee that the modification of the building preserved and intensified its architectural values.

In the context of this solicitation, UC's M.A. in Architecture—headquarters of the **docomomo**-Chile—and its director, Hugo Mondragón, called in November of 2008, professionals, academics and architecture students, to participate in a Seminar-Workshop that took on this case study to propose the "Preliminary design for a Cultural Centre in the Embassy of Chile in Argentina" under the title of "Strategies for the Intervention of Modern Heritage"⁶.

In light of the architectonic singularity of the existing building, the Seminar-Workshop's organizers established in the bases of this bidding call, that all proposals should be thought in the general context of the tension between its patrimonial and functional values, considering the fact that this intervention would be carried out over a patrimonial building that would continue its functions during the execution of its construction.

It was established that the intervention should be an extension of the existing building, so, the proposals should consider the construction of spatial, volumetric, structural, material, functional and visual connections between this new piece and the existing complex, without renouncing to its functional or expressive autonomy. It was also established



that this intervention should maintain the visual depth that the protocol halls and the ambassador's residence have over the República de Chile park.

Finally, in structural and constructive terms, it was recommended that they imagined a light supporting structure that could be easily assembled, and, for usage and security reasons, a controlled connection between the cultural centre and the embassy's stair-shaped gardens was required.

Figure 1. Picture of the building in 2010 (after the intervention). Photo: Elisa Gil Serrano.

Figure 2. *Ideograma* presented by the architects in 1966. Image: Revista AUCA n°3, Santiago 1966.

Figure 3. West and south sides of the building. Image: Archives of the Chilean Embassy in Argentina.

Figure 4. First Level of the original building. Image: Archives of the Chilean Embassy in Argentina.

Figure 5. Second Level of the original building. Image: Archives of the Chilean Embassy in Argentina.

3 proposals

Of the 24 proposals exposed and discussed in the Seminary-Workshop, a commission made up of politicians, technicians and academics selected three. The Embassy of Chile in Argentina and the Ministry of Public Works (MOP) invited the authors to a second bidding to further develop their ideas.

The proposal of the group made up by architects Carolina Del Campo, Nicole Labbé and architecture student Antonia Moreno; was the most balanced one in terms of the care it provided to the project's different dimensions. It preserved the geometric curved design, it maintained the residence's view over the park, it also carefully articulated the proposed volume's rooftop with the terraces of the existing building and achieved a generous project capacity proposing some potent spaces and dynamic corridors.

This proposal suggested a well-configured access and a strategically placed advertisement. Its access, half a storey under the park's level, allowed to go down to a well-dimensioned auditorium and to climb up to the exhibition gallery without exceeding the existing building's height. A mezzanine located on top of the exhibition gallery developed a discreet and well-achieved articulation between the cultural centre and the terrace system of the Embassy.

Facing the park, the building's corridor system was dynamic and didn't functionally interfere with the main spaces' usage. The exhibition gallery and its multiple spaces were generous in size and proposed a potent spatial of high-ceiling.

In general, it was mainly about a proposal that was careful with the existing building, improving the terrace system by incorporating a stair-like garden. It also improved the relationship between the complex and the park by extending the cultural centre's activities through a transparent facade.

The group made up of Teodoro Fernández, Philippe Blanc and Sebastián Hernández, presented a very well achieved plan in composition terms, that operated within the organic logic of the original design. The proposal considered a generous exhibition gallery with a suggesting sunlit system—zenithal sunlight sifted by a water film—controlled, but dramatic.

This proposal remarkably enriched the terrace system of the existing building by incorporating a new element (the water tank), that through reflection, doubled the images of the sky and tree-crowns.

This project proposed an intensification of the masonry wall that acts as a facade against the park. This operation emphasized the petrous character of the already present basement which represented

the logic of a building disposed on a park on top of a "small mountain". The logic of the original location (building on top of a hill, like a fortress), was reinforced by a system of terraced gardens that fortified but at the same time articulated the relation between the building and the park.

The proposal of the group made up of Sebastián Irarrázaval and Francisca Rivera, conceived the cultural centre as a unique, simple and austere piece, that didn't run against the existing building's protagonism, but neither did it have pretensions of a timid mimesis afraid of appearing. It followed the original designs, didn't contradict the geometric logic of the existing building and incorporated a new project dimension that built a strong relation of the building against the park.

The green roof proposed linked itself to the existing terrace system, but it introduced a new scale that would intercede between the domestic scale of the residence's gardens and the park's public scale.

The idea of prefabricated construction, if not completely solved in its details, had acquired a sense of veracity if one observed the rationality of the proposed forms and resulted of great value if one considered that the project had to be developed while the building remained in full function.

In February 2009, the three invited teams shared their strategies in greater depth and detail for a jury composed for politicians, academics and technical experts. The jury selected the proposal led by architect Sebastián Irarrázaval as the winner.

...As if it were part of the original

The winning project complied with various elements of formal neutrality, wasn't aggressive to the existing complex, and didn't interrupt the view over the República de Chile Park from the protocol rooms or the Ambassador's residence. It also worked through the program of assigned functionality with great simplicity, and the proposal of semi-prefabricated construction and absence of detail, allowed it to adjust to the restrictive budget constraints imposed for the construction, whilst reducing the impact of the process over the daily lives in the existing compound.

This exercise has proven fruitful: the city of Buenos Aires gained a new cultural facility that enlarges its already vast network of cultural spaces, and the abandoned República de Chile Park, received for the Embassy a facade that it never had before. In a unique, nationwide, exercise, the modern architectural patrimony in Chile and the **docomomo**—Chile Group, gained in experience and public visibility.

Although there are many aspects that are pos-

sibly perfectible, as much in the process as in the results, the bottom line is positive. A valuable, but little known building saw the limelight, the subject of modern patrimonial architecture was brought to disciplinary and cultural debate and the recently finished work of architect Irarrázaval has found space in recent literature.

Finally, Ambassador Maira, who led the project since the beginning, was satisfied with the result and has thanked the **docomomo**—Chile group in various occasions. In his speech, at the launch of the new cultural centre, and in the presence of the President Michelle Bachelet, he said: "For its harmony and formal continuity with the rest of the compound, this new building looks like it was conceived with the original project, designed by architects Cruz, Echeñique and Burchard in 1966...", words that were meant to illustrate to the audience that the building's architectonic values had been preserved.

Maybe, the laws and decrees of patrimonial conservation are of little use, after all, if organizations like **docomomo** concerned with the preservation of modern heritage, cannot count with the knowledge, willpower, and aesthetic sensitivity of company executives or illustrated politicians, such as Ambassador Maira. Perhaps there lays our mission, to educate and raise awareness to the importance of preserving these buildings.

Notes

1. The value of age appraisal used by Alois Riegl in his book "The Modern Cult of Monuments" refers to the evident manifestation of the harsh pass of time on a building.
2. These three architects are also authors of the IBM building in Santiago, Chile and many others that stand out for their technical innovations and daring shapes.
3. The lot in which the Embassy stands was donated by the Municipality of Buenos Aires as a swap for the terrain and house of the Argentinean Embassy in Chile, located in Vicuña Mackenna during the government of president Eduardo Frei Montalva in the early Sixties.
4. The bidding was granted, in 1966, in Argentina by a jury composed by government entities and architects of both nations.
5. Remark made by the architect Juan Echeñique, information published in an article of the Chilean architecture, construction and urbanism magazine AUCA, n°3, of the year 1966.
6. With this seminary, organized and realized in the Universidad Católica de Chile in 2008, it was sought to start a debate among architecture professionals about possible strategies to face the challenge of modifying a modern building.