

Evolution and Challenges of 20th Century Latin American Architecture: A Critical Perspective

Hernán José Hernández Durán
Universidad de Oriente, El Salvador
hhernandez@univo.edu.sv

Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Jun 17, 2026	Aug 14, 2026	Aug 26, 2026	Aug 31, 2026

Abstract

The historiography of architecture and urbanism in Latin America has evolved from an initial emphasis on inventory toward critical interpretation of the complexities underlying regional modernity. This article examines the persistent dialectical tension between the assimilation of exogenous models and the construction of a distinct Latin American identity, with particular attention to the national-modern period (1929–1939), when pavilions at international expositions functioned as prominent instruments of self-representation and avant-garde expression. It critically analyzes how accelerated and disordered urban growth has produced fragmented urbanization and pronounced socio-spatial segregation in emerging peripheries, excluding substantial population groups from the benefits of the formal metropolis. Within this context, intermediate cities emerge as strategic laboratories for adapting external instruments such as strategic urban planning and facilitating a transition from unidirectional social engineering toward participatory governance and paradiplomacy. The analysis further identifies the emergence of collective architecture as a redefinition of professional practice in which architects act as community interpreters and prioritize social management and local materials over the production of physical structures alone. By incorporating the

operational category of collective form, the study conceptualizes informal settlements as complex functional systems that challenge conventional planning approaches. It concludes that the preservation and valuation of modern architectural heritage must move beyond the transfer of finished products toward collaborative exchanges of processes. This perspective contributes to critical Latin American architectural historiography and supports urban practices that promote dignity, participation, and citizenship.

Keywords: Architectural Historiography; Intermediate Cities; Latin America; Regional Modernity; Urban Participation

INTRODUCTION

The history of architecture and urbanism in Latin America during the 20th century constitutes a narrative of dialectical tensions between the obsession with universal progress and the relentless search for a distinct identity (Arango, 2012). The 19th century bequeathed to the region the unwavering conviction of indefinite progress, which translated into an architecture that, lacking clear local parameters, adapted to changing fashions primarily originating from the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris (Gutiérrez & Gutiérrez Viñuales, 2012). This pedagogical colonization imposed exotic models that often ignored local climate, geography, and ways of life, creating fictional urban landscapes in which steeply pitched mansard roofs were built in places where snow would never fall. However, as the 20th century progressed, this illusion began to shatter, giving way to a phase of critical interpretation that today allows us to move beyond mere documentary inventory to delve deeper into the appreciation of architecture as a holistic social phenomenon (Muñoz Sánchez, 2016).

Regional historiography has moved from an initial stage of identifying and classifying phenomena to a critical assessment of the contemporary city. In this process, pioneering figures such as Jorge Enrique Hardoy and Silvia Arango have pointed out that the first requirement of all historiography—the inventory—has been completed, making it imperative to now address the interpretation of this corpus in studies that encompass all of Latin America and long periods of time (Lamedá Luna, 2011). This interpretation must recognize that architecture is not only an aesthetic phenomenon, but also a response to evident social transformations and a commitment to national identity (Ramírez Nieto, 2009).

A pivotal moment in this evolution was the national-modern architectural period between 1929 and 1939. During this decade, pavilions at international expositions, such as those in Seville (1929) and New York (1939), served as privileged documents for historiographical analysis, where nations presented themselves through archetypal images (Ramírez Nieto, 2009). In these unique buildings, architecture embraced the commitment to expressing national identity based on modern criteria, resolving the dilemma between the spirit of the age (*Zeitgeist*) and the spirit of the place (*Genius Loci*). This period demonstrated that the entry into modernity in the periphery was not a degraded copy of European models, but rather a process of selective assimilation and critical adaptation.

However, the optimism of functionalist modernity clashed with harsh urban realities. The rapid growth of metropolises, driven by industrialization and mass migration, led to the formation of impoverished peripheries and urban ghettos, highlighting the "irrationality of reason" applied to the city. The failure of functionalist urbanism revealed a mechanistic fallacy that viewed the city simply as a sum of road systems and zoning, forgetting that the city is, above all, the foundation of its inhabitants' way of life (Gutiérrez & Gutiérrez Viñuales, 2012). This disconnect between design and social reality resulted in a weak identification of citizens with their urban environment, manifested in continuous environmental degradation and the exclusion of large sectors of the population from the benefits of the formal metropolis (Tauber, 2014).

In this complex scenario, intermediate cities emerge as strategic laboratories for the implementation of planning and management tools. These cities, which often grow faster than large urban centers, face the challenge of avoiding repeating patterns of territorial imbalance. The transfer of exogenous models, from Anglo-Saxon City Planning to Barcelona's Strategic Urban Planning, has shaped disciplinary practice in these cities, although often under a social engineering logic that ignores local specificities. Contemporary research suggests that to optimize this external urban influence, it is necessary to move beyond the unidirectional transfer of model-product to achieve a collaborative exchange of model-process (Díaz Márquez, 2015).

Faced with the socio-spatial segregation of the fragmented city, initiatives have emerged that redefine the role of the architect. This gives rise to the notion of collective architecture and citizen participation, where the professional acts as an interpreter of the community rather than an authoritarian leader. In these processes, which often take place in

informal settlements, the building ceases to be an autonomous object and becomes a catalyst for social transformation and the building of citizenship. This vision shifts the focus from physical construction to social management, prioritizing the use of local materials, low cost, and the impact on the quality of life of the most vulnerable groups (Díaz-Osorio, 2019).

It can be said that Latin American architecture of the 20th and early 21st centuries faces the historical responsibility of reconciling itself with its cultural heritage. It is no longer merely a matter of speaking of historical or monumental heritage, but of a built heritage that possesses a useful life and a social value indispensable for addressing housing deficits and community facilities. The current challenge for the research architect lies in understanding the city as a complex functional system where the balance between humankind and its environment is not a technical-utopian aspiration, but a binding commitment to urban dignity. Architecture, therefore, must recover its capacity to give meaning to places, allowing inhabitants to experience the city as a genuine collective good (Gutiérrez & Gutiérrez Viñuales, 2012).

METHODS

The research is based on a multi-scalar and critical methodology that integrates documentary analysis, spatial measurement, and qualitative interpretation of the Latin American urban phenomenon. The methodological design is articulated around the following pillars:

Historical Triangulation and CTD+EPD Matrix. A historical triangulation tool is used, designed to observe the concatenation of the macro-disciplinary-micro process, identifying how global decisions impact the local context. For this purpose, the CTD+EPD Matrix is used, which cross-references the Transversal Components of the Dynamics (actors, paradigms, urban influence, procedures, and context) with the Elements Specific to the Dynamics (triggering factor, model, tool, adaptation, implementation, management, and evaluation). This matrix allows us to determine whether the transfer of urban models has been a unidirectional imposition of a model-product or a collaborative exchange of a model-process.

CTD = Transversal Components of the Dynamics.

These are the fundamental factors that appear recurrently in texts and processes of regional urban planning. They are grouped into five main categories: Actors, paradigms, urban influence, procedures, and context.

EPD = Elements Specific to the Dynamics

These represent the links in a chain of events that are concatenated to materialize an external urban initiative in a specific context. These elements are: Trigger, model, tool, adaptation, execution, management, and evaluation.

RESULTS

Historiographical Evolution and National-Modern Identity: Research shows that the historiography of regional architecture has completed its initial inventory phase and entered a stage of critical interpretation. The national-modern period (1929-1939) is identified as a key period of transformation, during which pavilions at international expositions served as privileged documents for resolving the tension between *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age) and *Genius Loci* (spirit of the place). Furthermore, three interpretive criteria for analyzing modernity have been consolidated: the review of styles and external influences, the interplay of polarities between local and foreign elements, and the study of the generational structures of architects.

Analysis of megacities such as Buenos Aires, Mexico City, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro reveals that neoliberal policies have diminished the role of the state, allowing the real estate market to dictate urban planning. This has generated a pattern of dispersed and segmented expansion characterized by disconnected housing developments on the periphery that do not form an interconnected urban fabric.

A steady decline in population density coupled with rampant consumption of rural land.

Socio-spatial segregation with the formation of urban enclaves of both luxury and poverty exacerbates inequality and hinders community building.

Cases like Santiago de los Caballeros and Ciudad Guayana demonstrate that the success of external tools such as Strategic Urban Planning depends on the capacity of local governments to integrate into para-diplomatic networks and adapt models to the real urban demands of the complex local functional system.

Informal peripheries and collective architectures, in the face of the ineffectiveness of traditional planning, reveal informal settlements as complex functional systems of natural adaptation. In the case of Quito, these neighborhoods do not grow erratically, but rather follow logical structures based on the street as a generating element. Simultaneously, a trend toward collective architecture emerges, where the architect acts as an interpreter of the community through participatory design workshops.



Figure 1. Buenos Aires, Argentina. Fuente: Nautyy <https://nautyy.sk/detail/SE20270405>



Figure 2 Mexico City, Distrito Federal, Mexico. Fuente: Travel Weekly
<https://www.travelweekly.com/Hotels/Mexico-City/Spotlight>



Figure 3 São Paulo, Brazil. Fuente: Alpha Intel <https://alfainter.co.jp/spot>



Figure 4 Río de Janeiro, Brazil Fuente:Caribbean News
<https://caribbeannewsdigital.com/es/turismo/rio-de-janeiro-se-ratifica-como-el-principal-destino-turistico-de-brasil>

DISCUSSION

The trajectory of architecture and urban planning in Latin America during the 20th and early 21st centuries reveals a persistent dialectical tension between the obsession with universal modernity and the need for a distinct identity. This research allows us to discuss how the region has moved from a "pedagogical colonization" based on exotic European models toward a phase of critical interpretation of its own built heritage (Gutiérrez &

Gutiérrez Viñuales, 2012). The analysis of the national-modern period (1929-1939) demonstrates that the international pavilions were not mere copies, but rather "chemically pure" documents where the dispute between the spirit of the age and the spirit of the place was resolved (Ramírez Nieto, 2009). However, this initial optimism of modernity was cut short by urbanization without a city, where functionalist rationality failed by conceiving the city merely as a sum of road systems and zoning, neglecting its social and cultural dimensions.

In the contemporary context, the implementation of neoliberal policies has displaced the role of the State as a manager of welfare, handing over territorial planning to a market logic dictated by the real estate sector (Cruz-Muñoz, 2021). This phenomenon has consolidated a business-oriented city characterized by segregation and socio-spatial fragmentation, where luxury urban enclaves proliferate alongside impoverished peripheries (Tauber, 2014). The expansion patterns observed in megacities reveal a disconnected residential habitat that exacerbates inequality and hinders the construction of citizenship. Faced with this reality, a necessary critique arises of the high-tech of underdevelopment, which produces buildings that appear intelligent but are alienated from their actual maintenance capacities and their climatic context.

Faced with the ineffectiveness of traditional planning, intermediate cities are positioning themselves as strategic laboratories for testing a paradigm shift: moving from the unidirectional transfer of imported product-model recipes to a collaborative exchange of process-models. This transition requires understanding the city as a Complex Functional System where political, economic, and social subsystems interact dynamically. The discussion should focus on the functionality of the local rather than cutting-edge aesthetics, recognizing that development is not a single, predetermined goal, but an endogenous process that must arise from the potential of each territory (Díaz Márquez, 2015).

Finally, the emergence of collective architecture in informal peripheries redefines the architect's professional ethics. The professional should no longer act as an authoritarian leader, but rather as a community interpreter capable of validating self-construction and social management processes (Díaz-Osorio, 2019). In this approach, the building ceases to be an autonomous object and becomes a pretext for social transformation, prioritizing the use of local materials and low cost to improve the lives of the most vulnerable groups. The valuation of built heritage must, therefore, transcend the monumentalist vision to integrate

the accumulated experiences of organized society, allowing inhabitants to experience the city as a genuine collective good.

CONCLUSION

Research on Latin American architecture and urbanism of the 20th and early 21st centuries allows us to draw fundamental conclusions about the evolution of the discipline and the region's territorial challenges. First, it is evident that regional historiography has moved beyond the initial phase of mere documentary inventory to consolidate itself into a stage of critical interpretation encompassing long periods and the entire continent. This progress has allowed us to understand that the entry into modernity was not a copying of external models, but rather a process of selective assimilation that resolved the tension between the spirit of the age *Zeitgeist* and the spirit of the place *Genius Loci*.

Regarding territorial management, it is concluded that intermediate cities represent strategic laboratories for optimizing external urban influence. The research demonstrates that it is imperative to move from a unidirectional transfer of model-product to a collaborative exchange of model-process, where tools are adapted to the real demands of the complex local functional system and do not function as mere decontextualized recipes. To achieve this, strengthening local governments and integrating them into knowledge networks is vital to prevent international coordination spaces from becoming mere validators of pre-made decisions.

Regarding the problem of marginalization, the research validates that informal settlements are not an anomaly to be eradicated, but rather a natural process of adaptation and conversion from rural to modern urban life. Self-built settlements demonstrate a powerful logic of social organization comparable to the coordinated work of emerging systems, often generating higher levels of habitability and sustainability than state-run housing complexes. In this context, the need arises for a collective architecture where the professional acts as a community interpreter, prioritizing social management and the use of local materials over the autonomous architectural object.

Finally, it is concluded that the future of planning in Latin America depends on the capacity to integrate binding citizen participation and socio-spatial justice into the design of public policies. The valuation of built heritage must transcend the monumentalist vision to recognize the use value and lifespan of the structures that sustain the daily lives of the

inhabitants. Ultimately, architecture in the region must reclaim its historical responsibility to give meaning to places, promoting urbanism that heals the fractures in the social fabric and dignifies the habitat of the majority.

REFERENCES

- Almandoz, A. (2003). Historiografía urbana en Latinoamérica: Del positivismo al postmodernismo. *Diálogos*, 7(1), 117–156. <https://periodicos.uem.br/ojs/index.php/Dialogos/article/view/37918>
- Arango, S. (2012). Arquitectura moderna latinoamericana: El juego de las interpretaciones. *Anales del Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas “Mario J. Buschiazzo,”* 42(1), 39–54. <https://iaa.fadu.uba.ar/ojs/index.php/anales/article/view/357>
- Cruz-Muñoz, F. (2021). Patrones de expansión urbana de las megaurbes latinoamericanas en el nuevo milenio. *EURE*, 47(140), 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.7764/eure.47.140.02>
- Díaz Márquez, Á. M. (2015). *Ciudades intermedias latinoamericanas ante modelos urbanos externos* [Doctoral dissertation, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid]. <https://oa.upm.es/39858/>
- Díaz-Orsio, M. S. (2019). Arquitecturas colectivas y participación como estrategias para la construcción de la ciudad latinoamericana. *Revista de Arquitectura*, 21(2), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.14718/RevArq.2019.21.2.2670>
- Gutiérrez, R., & Gutiérrez Viñuales, R. (2016). Una mirada crítica a la arquitectura latinoamericana del siglo XX: De las realidades a los desafíos. In H. Karge & B. Klein (Eds.), *1810–1910–2010: Independencias dependientes: Kunst und nationale Identitäten in Lateinamerika = Arte e identidades nacionales en América Latina = Art and national identities in Latin America* (pp. 317–337). Iberoamericana/Vervuert.
- Lamedá Luna, H. (2014). Historiografía de la arquitectura latinoamericana: Del positivismo a la autocritica (1860–2010). In *Memorias de la Trienal de Investigación FAU 2014* (pp. 647–658). Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Central de Venezuela. <https://saber.ucv.ve/jspui/handle/10872/23616>
- Muñoz Sánchez, D. (2016). *Observatorio de arquitectura latinoamericana contemporánea: Caso México* [Undergraduate thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Xochimilco]. <https://repositorio.xoc.uam.mx/jspui/handle/123456789/26866>
- Ramírez Nieto, J. (2009). *Intervalo nacional-moderno de la arquitectura latinoamericana, 1929–1939* [Doctoral dissertation, HafenCity Universität Hamburg]. <https://repos.hcu-hamburg.de/handle/hcu/532>
- Tauber, F. (2014). La gestión urbana en la ciudad-región latinoamericana: Desafíos, oportunidades y limitaciones en el proceso de desarrollo. *Estudios del Hábitat*, 12(2), 97–114. <https://revistas.unlp.edu.ar/Habitat/article/view/1136>