

# The Social Importance of Landscaping in Public Spaces in Latin America

Three Cases Studies in Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela

VITO FORTINI<sup>1</sup>

*There are no philosophical answers to philosophical questions that arise over the nature of space - the answers lie in human practice.*

David Harvey

Abstract: More than half a century after they were built, a selection of highly successful public spaces in Latin America may help us understand a correct approach to the design of new public spaces today; the conceptual structures that led their designers to imagine these spaces for the city; the roles of landscaping and social relations that to some degree conditioned their design.

Keywords: organic space, plastic integration, modernism, *landscape design*, roots, place, city

## *The Central Campus of the U.N.A.M in Mexico City*

The history of this university campus begins at the end of the 1930s, when two students – Mauricio de Maria y Campos and Marcial Gutiérrez Camarena – presented their graduate thesis entitled “Ciudad Universitaria” (University City), in which they proposed the unification of the various university buildings present in Mexico City. There was a strong impulse, and as they proposed in their project, technical-administrative steps were taken to concentrate the buildings of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), at the time known as the Escuela Nacional de Arquitectura (ENA). However, it was only in the mid-40s that President Manuel Avila Camacho consigned a series of terrains in *Pedregal de San Angel*, the future home of this ambitious project, to the dean of the University, Salvador Zubirán. A design com-

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*Mexico City, 1952, aerial view of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).*



*Mexico City, 1947, M. Pani, E. del Moral and H. Martínez de Hoyos present their project of the UNAM to then President M. Alemán Valdés.*



*Mexico City, masterplan of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).*

petition was announced in 1946. The Technical Committee, presided over by the dean himself and comprised of members of the university and professors of Architecture, eventually chose the new and original project by three students – the fifth year Enrique Molinar and the fourth years Teodoro González de León and Armando Franco. To coordinate and manage its construction, the Committee appointed the architects Mario Pani, Mauricio M. Campos (who worked on the project until his death in 1949) and Enrique del Moral, at the time director of the Architecture programme. The Ciudad Universitaria was inaugurated on 20 November 1952, only five years later. The complex was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on 28 June 2007.

Construction involved more than one hundred architects and engineers, all Mexican, who had at some point approached the world of Modernist architecture. Important names include Luis Barragán, Félix Candela, Carlos Lazo, Juan O’Gorman, Enrique Yañez, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, Enrique de la Moral and José Villagrán Gracia. They were accompanied by many artists, including Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The works of these important figures permitted what was termed a “plastic integration”, a multi-disciplinary approach that saw architects, painters, sculptors and landscape architects participating in a single synergetic project. At the time, the ideology of the Modern Movement had already begun to exercise a great deal of influence over the production of Mexican architecture; architecture was to have transformed the lives and social habits of people, and the new campus was to reflect the country’s social and economic progress. The design of the complex fully expressed the maturity of the Mexican Modern Movement during the early 1900s, such that it was considered a recognisable paradigm for successive generations of architects. The idea to create a Mexican version of Modernism is summarised in the *Ciudad Universitaria*, which was seen as the realisation of a dream. Individual projects were not intended as separate buildings, but treated as social programmes and planning projects. The value of architecture lay in their ability to resolve social problems. Architecture ceased to be an art or a luxury, and became a mandatory component of public services and

social wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. The innovative project developed by a group of students, preferred to proposals made by architects with considerable experience, was assumed as the basis for the final design; it consisted of a rectangular super-block with a large central garden flanked by scholastic and service buildings. Vehicular traffic was limited to the perimeter, to provide an exclusively pedestrian centre. The university stadium occupied the area to the west, facing the *Avenida de los Insurgentes*, while the playing fields were proposed to the south, outside the rectangular block. The project also included student residences (never built). The team commissioned to develop the project confirmed this general layout. The complex occupies a total area of approximately 5,800 hectares, with roughly 240 ha of built area and some 2,000 buildings<sup>3</sup>.

The design of the campus offered an occasion to apply the principles of the Modern Movement expressed in the Athens Charter: the separation of functions and flows in the city and the arrangement of buildings separated by large open areas. The entire complex, of such an exceptional scale, was divided into three levels: the first, along the *Avenida de los Insurgentes*, featured a main entrance to the university complex at street level. This point provided access down to a lower level: a vast area paved with large squares and lawns that wrapped around the Rectorate on three sides; rectilinear corridors provided covered access to all of the university buildings, emphasising the clear intention to arrange the buildings on an orthogonal grid. Level changes were managed by broad stairs that recall the outdoor platforms of Mesoamerican architecture. The most important space was placed down on the third level: the campus, characterised by a central landscaped area measuring 180 x 360 meters<sup>4</sup>, surrounded by classrooms and research facilities. Paved with the same orthogonal grid and lawns, the area stretches as far as the large central garden; to the north is the Central Library designed by the architect and painter Juan O'Gorman, to the south is the Faculty of Architecture and the *Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte*

2. CANALES GONZÁLEZ 2013.

3. It remains an important meeting point in the city for students, academic staff and thousands of visitors. The daily population on campus, according to statistics available for the 2010-2011 school year is more than 316,000 people (see in Repertory 01).

4 It was later given the name "Las Islas", the Islands.



*UNAM, 1970, view of the Rectorate and Library square, in the foreground the Avenida Insurgentes.*



*UNAM, 1970, to the left the Central Library seen from Rectorate square towards "Las Islas".*



(MUCA). The other university institutions are situated along the edges of the large central garden<sup>5</sup>. The “Islands”, an immense open space, formed of a lawn with trees distributed organically along its perimeter, to this day welcomes students, visitors, events and demonstrations. Its covered routes and paths define a space of transition. It is emblematic for the social relations that develop within it: a collective space, visible and open to everyone all the time, a metropolitan space of encounter, freedom and tolerance. A very important factor, which has permitted the continuous and intensive use of this space over time, is the particular typology of its users: it is a meeting place for students, professors and visitors in general, a constantly changing and continuously renewed group of people. This space can be considered an exception within the fabric of the city; its political and social conditions permit individual actions and behaviour not tolerated in other areas. It is a space that hosts events, demonstrations and social gatherings afforded a greater degree of liberty. «The islands are the heart of student life. They can be considered as one of the most successful open spaces on campus, creating heterogeneous conditions that allow diverse users to carry out different activities at the same time. An authentic space, in the anthropological sense of the term, the product of the actors who use it, it symbolises a constant practice involving memory and imaginary projection»<sup>6</sup>. It is normal to see workshop presentations, performances by theatre students, outdoor concerts and sport here. The heterogeneous condition of this space allows users to vary its uses and transform it over time. Areas without vegetation are generally used for sport, while forested areas are ideal for a rest. Landscaping, an important element that submerges the architecture, is not natural, but designed; the landscaping project was developed by one of the most important international architects: Luis Barragán<sup>7</sup>. Barragán demonstrated a talent for creating extraordinary gardens on abandoned terrains, adding new species to those already

5. ARTIGAS 2006.

6. César Abilio Vergara Figueroa, *Espacio, lugar y ciudad: etnografía de un parque*, in LINDÓN, AGUILAR, HIERNAUX 2006.

7. Together with the painter Jesús Reyes Ferreira, the design of the Jardines del Pedregal demonstrates how to beneficially transform an exotic volcanic landscape to create gardens of immense architectural interest filled with various types of stones, brunt clay, black ash, lichens, ferns, mosses and pepper trees.



*UNAM, 2012, the Central Library, to the right the Rectorate square, to the left "Las Islas".*



*UNAM, 2012, the Library in front of "Las Islas".*



*UNAM, 2012, student demonstration in the Rectorate square.*

present on the site<sup>8</sup>. Volcanic rock was used to create retaining walls, integrated within the landscape, sidewalks, stairs, steps to buildings and as the common main element of some buildings, including pediments<sup>9</sup>. Barragán's design brings a quality of tranquillity that he had hoped for and sought out, firmly convinced that architecture must transmit sensations of serenity, silence, mystery, wonder and enchantment<sup>10</sup>.

As in other similar projects from this period, international critics were not long in launching accusations against an urban concept founded on the principles of the Modern Movement, emphasising its indifference toward local diversity and the loss of their humanity; from this point of view, they attributed a weakness of identity to the resulting spaces, sacrificed in the name of rationalist principles incapable of setting down roots and being appropriated by users, who remained perplexed in the face of such monumental open spaces. Yet time has shown just how unfounded the critics' concerns were; while the university complex was conceived based on the ideal and abstract principles professed by the leading figures of the Modern Movement, and despite the fact that the notable scale of the intervention gave rise to sensations of monumentality among a reduced population of users, some fifty years later these spaces are more than suitable to the preconized and vertiginous growth of the student population.

### *Brasilia*

On 2 October 1956, on its first trip to Brasilia, the airplane carrying President Juscelino Kubitschek, touched down on a temporary landing strip on the site of what would become the railway and bus station. The President, his entourage and local authorities moved quickly toward the large wooden cross, the highest point in the region where Niemeyer would later erect the Church of Don Bosco. It was precisely

8. The area was populated by *Buddleja cordata*, oak, pine, birch and poplar trees. *Erythrina coralloides* is a Mexican species that grows at altitudes of 1,500 meters above sea level, but not at the 2,300 meters of Mexico City. It was noted that it adapted perfectly to the home of the Ciudad Universitaria. Its ability to thrive in areas with little water and thin earth made it one of the most common species used in gardens. *Jacaranda* were also used for their evergreen leaves and spring flowerings, to provide shade throughout the year; trees include Mimosa and scented *liquidambar*; Bougainvillea which are very resistant to drought; Eucalyptus were used in peripheral areas to surround the University with scented forests.

9. MARTÍNEZ 2002.

10. ASCARELLI 1997.



to Niemeyer that Kubitschek turned for assistance in order to understand the direction to be adopted in the design of the new capital of Brazil. The architect, and friend, accepted to design a number of buildings and suggested the methods to be adopted in the development of the master plan for the new capital: a Pilot Plan, not a planning project. This was the first step toward the realisation of the ideals of modernist architects. They were ferociously attacked by regionalist critics who saw the new city as the perfect expression of the «irrationality of reason. Conceived as a monumental symbolic gesture, it would have found its proper justification in the development of theories that sanctioned the city designed for the automobile and not for people. Supported by political will, the work of Lúcio Costa and Niemeyer is conceived as a “city monument” based on the rigorous application of the notions of zoning developed by the CIAM and the super-blocks of Le Corbusier»<sup>11</sup>.

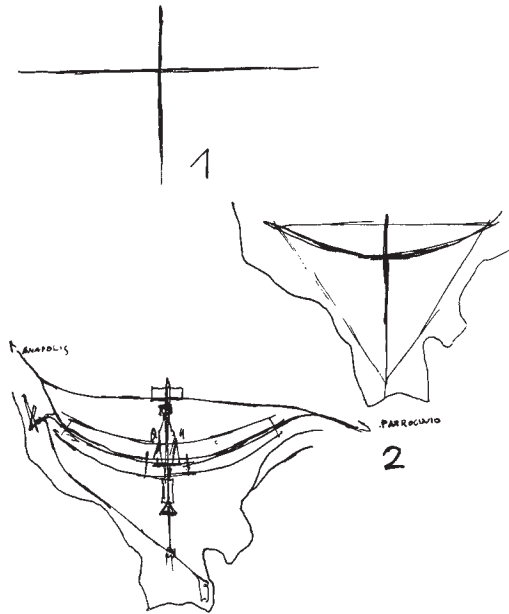
One month earlier, the NOVACAP, the organism responsible for the realisation of the new capital city, announced a competition open to all Brazilian architects, engineers and urban planners<sup>12</sup>. In March of 1957, after evaluating ten projects admitted to the final selection, the jury headed by Niemeyer awarded the competition to Lúcio Costa, who saw his city built only three years later. Brasilia was inaugurated on 21 April 1960, and the short time required to build it was touted as a triumph for the government.

The proposal advanced by Costa, essentially a collection of sketches based on profound considerations, is a cross, an initial gesture: the drawing of two axes crossing at right angles<sup>13</sup>. The underlying idea was that of a cosmic gesture that would characterise a symbolic space within the vast virgin landscape of central Brazil, reiterating the age

11. Ramón Gutiérrez, *Architettura Latinoamericana. Strada Facendo*, in GUTIÉRREZ 1996.

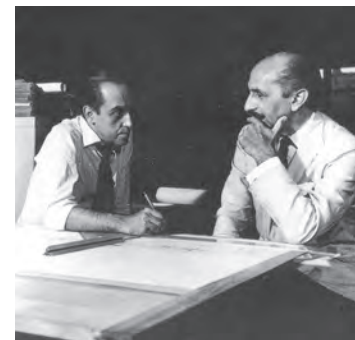
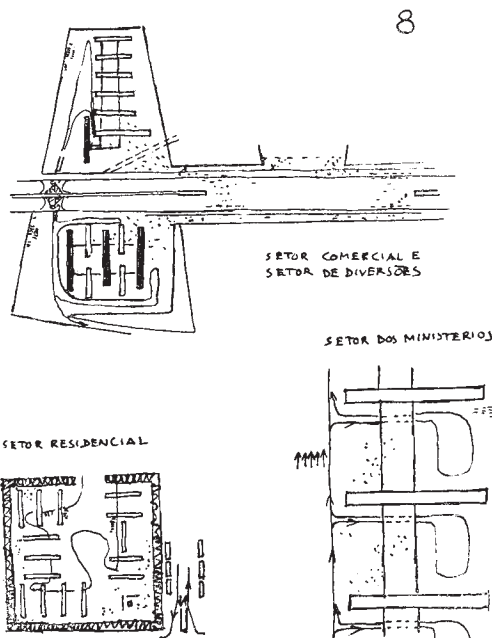
12. Participants were asked to present two documents: the first was to indicate the structure, location and connections between the various sectors, centres and services and the layout of open spaces and infrastructures; the second was to contain a description that included a programme for agricultural areas, economic aspects, water and energy, employment possibilities, financing, etc. Projects would initially be evaluated based on their functional elements, and only successively for their architectural aspects. The “functional elements” included considerations of topographical data and the scale of the city, in relation to population density and other regions. The “architectural aspects” dealt essentially with the general composition.

13. This sign would then be adapted to the topography, the natural drainage of the land, and the best possible orientation: the extremities of one axial line were curved so as to make the sign fit into the equilateral triangle which outlines the area to be urbanized.



Lúcio Costa, competition for the Pilot Plan of Brasília (1956-'57). "The drawing of two axes crossing at right angles" on the first page of sketches attached to the report.

Brasília, aerial view "of two axes crossing at right angles".



Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa discuss the Brasília Pilot Plan, 1958.

Lúcio Costa, competition for the Pilot Plan of Brasília (1956-'57). The sectors of markets, ministries and residences on the fourth page of sketches attached to the report.

old colonial dream of expanding into the heart of the country with intentions of economic emancipation driven by industrial development<sup>14</sup>. Along the monumental axis aimed toward the lake, Costa arranged the administrative buildings, while the transversal axis hosts the “super-blocks” of apartments and spaces for recreational activities and free time. A complex and well-articulated infrastructural system allowed for the elimination of traffic problems by separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic. The city functioned like a true machine. Inside the residential blocks, along the curved axis, Costa allowed other architects free reign, so long as they respected a few general principles: the uniform height of the blocks, set at a maximum of six storeys on *pilotis*, and the separation of vehicular and pedestrian movement.

Each “super-block”, approximately 300 x 300 metres, was surrounded by a 20 meter deep greenbelt, which served to mediate between the private space of the apartments and public space, the latter accounting for 1/4 of the entire surface area. The project featured a prevalence of landscaped areas with respect to built parts that were freely distributed across the internal surface of the greenbelt. Access to each block was open and vehicular traffic was clearly separated from pedestrian movement. The aggregation of the “super-blocks” generated slabs whose interaction made it possible to create a long and continuous residential structure with multiple services and points of access. Each super-block featured intermediate spaces measuring 300 x 80 meters, for schools, churches, clubs and sporting facilities: the *interquadra*.

In the intentions of Lúcio Costa, the city was to have hosted heterogeneous social groups to avoid the clear separation between different social classes seen in many other Brazilian cities. This never occurred as the growing demand for housing in the new capital provoked a notable increase in the value of real estate, which became accessible only to wealthy families. This in turn provoked a process of migration toward the edges of the city, with the consequent creation of satellite cities, inhabited by poorer classes<sup>15</sup>. All of this generated dissention that laid blame at the feet of the Modern Movement and the principles

14. EL-DAHDAH 2005.

15. To resolve this problem, the NOVACAP immediately planned a series of rural centres that, however, were conceived essentially as “dormitory cities” for labourers working in Brasilia.

that inspired it: the separation of functions through “zoning” and the abstraction underlying the application of these principles to such a sociologically complex reality as Brazil. The nation was already suffering from notable imbalances that new urban structures, beyond and contrary to the intentions of those who promoted them, risked aggravating by favouring the creation of ghettos.

The model was questioned, also in relation to conditions of liveability, safety and the creation of spaces that would foster social relations<sup>16</sup>. Also on trial were some of the elements used to structure urban space: the unclear separation between public and private, the failure align buildings with street fronts and the consequent elimination of privileged street views, the scarce use of sidewalks along streets, the need to use a car due to cover the city's distances and the lack of commercial streets for strolling. One of the few authoritative voices in favour of this structure was that of Benevolo: «The super-block was the means that made it possible to keep the mesh of the city's fabric broad and well-spaced, just as the summary divisions of the ‘brise soleil’ or the walls of glass by Niemeyer kept the texture of his buildings rarefied. In this way the organism of Brasilia, despite its half million inhabitants, retained a basic aspect that was immediately legible, which meant that the energy and character of the general plan could be grasped from all points of the enormous area. What is striking is the new relationship between formal invention and the space in which it is applied»<sup>17</sup>.

Just what was the situation in Brasilia soon after it was completed? what was the nature of the social relations that were hoped for, and those that developed in the new city and, zooming in, at the scale of the super-blocks or the slabs? Lúcio Costa stated: «Brasilia is not a completed city, it is not yet ready. To achieve favourable living conditions will require ten to fifteen years. As it is now, it remains, as I have stated, our Siberia. The built parts are not clearly articulated ...»<sup>18</sup>. Costa knew that it would take years before inhabitants could adapt to this new

16. Critics stated that the plan, as it was conceived, created public spaces that were too orderly and quiet, and thus unsuitable to social relations that are generally fostered by safe and animated urban situations, resulting from the simultaneous presence of diverse individuals in the same space.

17. BENEVOLO 1960.

18. Cláudius Ceccon in COSTA 1961.

lifestyle, that vegetation takes time to grow and envelop public spaces to create habitats suitable to social relations that in turn determine the characteristics and identity of place. The spirit was to imagine these minimum urban units as true neighbourhoods in which landscaping was the magma onto which buildings were grafted. At grade *pilotis* and tree trunks were immersed in a perfectly integrated tropical landscape, while an unornamented architecture was provided with only those elements necessary to ensure the sustainability of the environment by regulating light and shade. Vehicular circulation was slow and minimal, with pedestrian paths linking the buildings and services in a neighbourhood, but most importantly a series of spaces and open areas for taking a pause or playing sports, and in which to develop intense social relations. In some of these blocks, the qualities expressed by highly talented designers, masters of landscape architecture, reached lofty poetic heights. One of these is super-block 308, designed by Lúcio Costa and landscaped by Roberto Burle Marx in 1963.

Burle Marx is perhaps the most complete figure among the twentieth century's masters of landscape architecture; his free and experimental work, uninhibited and non-dogmatic, was a lesson to the new world that would be taken up by the successive generation of architects and landscape architects<sup>19</sup>. His first garden project was developed for Lúcio Costa's home in Rio de Janeiro; while Costa did not involve Burle Marx directly in the design of the city<sup>20</sup>, he did commission him with the design of a number (about 30, between large and small) of gardens in Brasilia, among which: the gardens on Brasilia's Monumental Axis (1961), the Zoo-Botanical Park (1961), the gardens of the Hospital Distrital (1962), of Super-Block 308 (1963), of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1965-1986), of Tribunal Federal de Recursos (1967), of Ministry of the Army (1970), of Ministry of Justice (1970), of Tribunal de Contas da União (1972), of Palácio do Desenvolvimento (1972) and the garden of residence of the Vice-President of Brazil (1975)<sup>21</sup>.

19. Burle Marx's principal projects include the Flamengo and the Atlantic Avenue Boardwalk in Rio de Janeiro, the Parque da Pampulha in Belo Horizonte, Dona Sarah Kubitschek Park in Brasilia, the Parque del Este in Caracas, as well as other projects throughout Brazil and abroad.

20. BOIFAVA, D'AMBROS 2014.

21. RIZZO 1992.





*Brasilia, the Monumental Axis.*



*Brasilia, the Super-Block 308.*



Brasília, the garden of Super-Block 308.

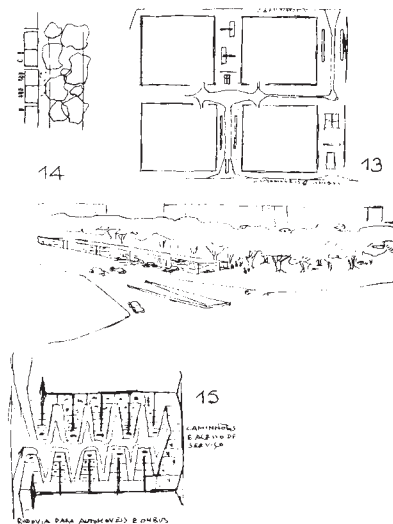
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cada setor, por assim dizer, vale por si como organismo plasticamente autônomo na composição do conjunto. Essa autonomia cria espaços adequados à escala do homem e permite o diálogo monumental localizado sem prejuízo do desempenho arquitetônico de cada setor na harmoniosa integração urbanística do todo.

16 - Quanto ao problema residencial, ocorreu a solução de criar-se uma sequência contínua de grandes quadras dispostas, em ordem dupla ou singela, de ambos os lados da faixa rodoviária, e emolduradas por uma larga cinta densamente arborizada, árvores de porte, prevalecendo em cada quadra determinada espécie vegetal, com chão gramado e uma cortina suplementar intermitente de arbustos e folhagens, a fim de resguardar melhor, qualquer que seja a posição do observador, o conteúdo das quadras, visto sempre num segundo plano e como que amortecido na paisagem.

17 - Disposição que apresenta a dupla vantagem de garantir a ordenação urbanística mesmo quando varie a densidade, categoria, padrão ou qualidade arquitetônica dos edifícios, e de oferecer aos moradores extensas faixas sombreadas para passeio e lazer, independentemente das áreas livres previstas no interior das próprias quadras.

Dentro destas "super-quadras" os blocos residenciais podem dispor-se da maneira mais variada, obedecendo porém a dois princípios gerais: gabarito máximo uniforme, talvez seis pavimentos e pilotis, e separação do tráfego de veículos do trânsito de pedestres, mormente o acesso à escola primária e às comodidades existentes no interior de cada quadra.



Lúcio Costa, competition for the Pilot Plan of Brasília (1956-'57). The original double page of the report which describes the Super-Block.

«Burle Marx would be left out of the general design of Brasilia, where he nevertheless completed a number of specific projects. However, his work is perhaps the greatest Landscape project in the world, an uninterrupted sequence of diverse projects realised at various times throughout his life along the waterfront in Rio. They offer a reading of the evolution of his language. Beginning at the Santos Dumont Airport, along the sea edge, we find a minimal and very young project, where the strongest signs are a simple sand mulch in the form of a halo at the base of the trees. A little further onward, the Museum of Fine Arts, by Alfonso Eduardo Reidy, features a vast parterre defined by an alternation of planted areas and surfaces of large gravel stones. This work was realised at the height of his maturity. Immense, and completed in only a few months during the 1970s, the Aterro do Flamengo is a public park reclaimed from the sea that offers a surprising measure of solutions and effects. The project in Copacabana, from the 1960s, is perhaps his masterpiece. Over a stretch of three kilometres he produced a two-tone macro-graphic wave pattern – a classical expedient of Pop Art – from one of the most classical and popular motifs in traditional Portuguese and mosaic paving»<sup>22</sup>.

Burle Marx trained in Europe and, as he himself stated, as a student of painting he was attracted for the first time toward the landscape «[...] in the greenhouse of Brazilian tropical plants in the Berlin Botanical Gardens. It was there that I realized the strength of the pristine nature of the tropics, that I had there, in my hands»<sup>23</sup>. In 1930 Burle Marx moved with his family to Rio de Janeiro, where he met the future leading figures of Brazilian architecture: Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, Hélio Uchôa and Milton Roberto. His vast oeuvre (estimates speak of more than two thousand gardens) was inspired by abstract art: a purism contaminated by primitive art<sup>24</sup>. This permitted him to develop a unique language that he employed to approach a vast array of themes at a range of scales. At Brasilia he demonstrated how the fate and the

22. Franco Zagari, *In uno stato di perpetua scoperta*, in BOIFAVA, D'AMBROS 2014.

23. Roberto Burle Marx, *Conceitos de Composição em Paisagismo*, in TABACOW 2004.

24 His work was notably influenced by traditional arts. Each day of his life Burle Marx interpreted the contaminations of African and Indian art: colours, patterns, ceramics, tattoos, food, etc. His gardens are lawns, parterres, shrubs, trees and the forest itself. He often used autochthonous plants, many well known, others discovered by Burle Marx himself during lengthy trips across the country.



successful outcome of a project depend solely and exclusively on the qualities of space-architecture and the landscape. Its success as a space of social aggregation helps understand the importance of the quality of public spaces. In “super-block” 308 Costa inserted residential buildings, shops, schools, cinemas and churches; access to the block is open and there are no fences; a single vehicular entrance ensures slow and safe circulation. The spatial qualities of the site promote human contact and social activities. It is a safe, welcoming and comfortable place for anyone, with no private spaces, where everything is for everyone, to be freely used by all. A space for cultural activities and local history. This unique character is amplified by the spatial qualities of its landscape architecture: a large modern Brazilian garden, with its original lexicon, explicitly linked to an autochthonous legacy of Brazilian flora and fauna. Burle Marx had precise convictions about the relationship between Man and the Planet and on the influence of space-landscape on human relations. He held that their relationship «is of such a close interdependence that despite all of the misunderstandings, their remains a sentiment, a desire for its presence. Very often we confuse reality with appearance or worse with a routine we follow almost unconsciously»<sup>25</sup>. Hence man possesses an inherent desire for constant and harmonious contact with the natural environment that surrounds him; to the point that the landscape of a particular era represents the ideals of the society that generated it. «[...] In some periods in history and in particular geographic areas, the equilibrium of the social order is reflected in the configuration of the landscape it has created. One could go as far as to state that the history of the garden (or of the landscape) is the product of the history of the ethical and aesthetic ideals of the era itself»<sup>26</sup>.

#### *The UCV campus in Caracas*

Unlike the other projects described in this text, approached and coordinated by a team of architects and landscape architects, in Caracas the campus of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) was conceived, designed, coordinated and directed by only one person: Carlos

25. BURLE MARX 1969.

26. BOIFAVA, D'AMBROS 2009.

Raúl Villanueva<sup>27</sup>.

Like Pani, del Moral, Costa, Burle Marx and others, Villanueva was educated in Europe in a fervid cultural climate filled with enthusiasm for new architecture. In the 1930s he returned to Venezuela, in part due to important contacts held by his father, a Venezuelan diplomat. He began working for the Ministry of Public Works, where he would remain for the rest of his life. How only one man, over the course of a lifetime, could do all that Villanueva managed can be explained only in the words of his daughter who had this to say during an interview in February 2012 «[...] I always say that my father was like an eclipse. Right now I am reading Lúcio Costa; he speaks of the miracle of architecture. They were miracles. For my father it was never easy, but he managed to overcome all of the difficulties he encountered, even when on one believed in him»<sup>28</sup>. Paulina Villanueva adopts the word “eclipse” as a metaphor to refer to the alignment of three conditions: her father’s talent, the important quantity of funds available to one of the world’s leading oil producers and the opportunity to play such an important role in the construction of the nation<sup>29</sup>.

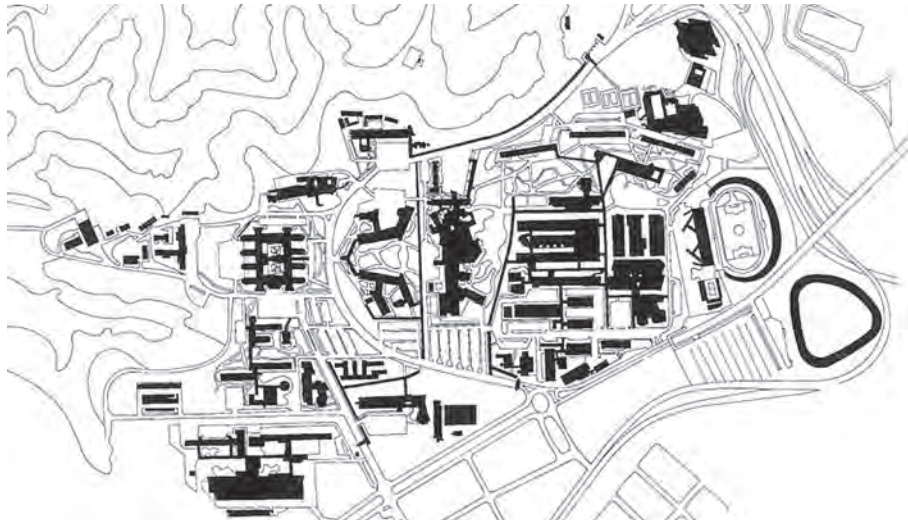
In October of 1943, the government of President Isaías Medina Angarita authorised the creation of the Instituto Ciudad Universitaria (ICU). It was responsible for implementing the idea, in the air for some time, of constructing the buildings of the New University City. The lands of the *Hacienda Ibarra* – a sugar cane farm – were acquired and Villanueva was asked to draw up an initial project. The following year the architect presented the first drawings of the campus, based on a classical urban parti derived from his education at the Beaux-Arts Academy in Paris. In January 1945 work began on the schools, a few

27. Born in England in 1900, he grew up and lived in France until his twenty-eighth year. He would maintain the principles, concepts and ways of life of the European model. His European cultural origins allowed him to rationally understand the characteristics of space, without limiting his ability to penetrate with true sentiment into the traditional qualities of Venezuela and, at the same time, to be the living expression of a traditional idiosyncrasy typical of the Creoles.

28. Extract of the interview by Vito Fortini, recorded on February 6, 2012 in Casa Caoma, Caracas, headquarter of the Villanueva Foundation.

29. Villanueva enjoyed an extraordinary autonomy. He was considered the leading expert in his field. There is an anecdote in relation: when someone questioned Villanueva’s choice to insert a window designed by Léger, the matter was presented to the president of Venezuela at the time, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who answered: “Villanueva is the expert. I haven’t the slightest experience in the matter, nor do you. He knows how to do his job well”.





*Caracas, masterplan of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV).*



*Caracas, aerial view of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV).*

university institutes, service centres and the Olympic stadium and baseball diamond. The Campus measured approximately 200 hectares, 164 of which were occupied by buildings, 40 of which were constructed over the course of twenty years. During this period Villanueva often reworked his own plan, moving away from its original classical structure and developing a more modern vision for the complex. Initially based on the Anglo-Saxon model of the campus, it was never considered a completed project, but instead in constant evolution. This was made possible by the professional skills and talent for adapting possessed by Villanueva «[...] who directs and guides the specialists and artists working in each of the buildings, establishing a very precise inclination, without dogmas, fears or prejudices, with an attention toward changes and new needs, in order to immediately anticipate and test solutions, verifying and modifying the entire project»<sup>30</sup>. He made important changes to the project, and the design of the central areas can be considered emblematic of his full maturity as a modernist. From 1951 to 1963 he designed and constructed buildings and open spaces of great importance for their compositional clarity and the unity of their technical and aesthetic qualities. The Covered Plaza was conceived as a simultaneously open and covered space, surrounded by the three most important structures: the Rectorate, the Library and the Aula Magna<sup>31</sup>.

In this dynamic and complex space, the composition defines a continuous mutation between construction and nature, between building and landscaping; a continuous alternation of solids and voids, ramps, perforated walls, murals without supports and openings in the roof that bring in the natural light of the sun. It is an unconventional, free and informal space that expresses a spontaneity reminiscent of excursions to explore primitive settlements in the jungle; atavistic and linked to the

30. VILLANUEVA, PINTÒ 2000.

31. Inaugurated in 1954, the Main Hall can host up to 2,500 people and constitutes the fulcrum of the complex system of paths that wind through a succession of spaces and buildings from north to south. The plan resembles a broad fan with an internal balcony running from wall to wall that, without actually touching the walls, extends over the stage with an airy and audacious curvature. The bare surface of the ceiling and side walls feature acoustic "mobiles" by Calder, calculated by the engineer Robert Newman. Suspended in the space of the hall, they appear to rise and fall with the varying intensity of light projected by double spotlights – fluorescent and incandescent. They create a blue light above these elements and focus the warmest light toward the stage itself. Fused with one another, these two types of light grow and extend space, similar to the effect archived in Calder's first Constellations.

site, the planted roof resembles a transformation of trees into columns, creating shaded views in which light slips between the cracks, just as it does in a tropical rain forest<sup>32</sup>. The social value of the Covered Plaza means makes it one of the most interesting spaces of the entire university complex: a space of integration, of passage for some and relaxation for others, with plays of light and shadow for all<sup>33</sup>. For Villanueva, it was a point of arrival along a path rooted in important theoretical considerations on the social role of architecture and the architect. In fact, he stated: «Architecture is a social act par excellence, a unified art, as the projection of life itself, linked to economic and social problems and not only to aesthetic standards. [...] For architecture, form is not the most important aspect: its primary mission is to resolve human questions. Its means of expression and foundation: internal space, useful space, fluid, used and enjoyed by mankind: it is a structure that surrounds life. The art of space, inside and outside, Abstract Art and not representative art, but with a function and a nucleus of a Cartesian logic»<sup>34</sup>. He thus considered architecture to be the perfect vehicle for integrating art and society, supporting it as the synthesis of the arts<sup>35</sup>. He proposed that art be open to everyone in an always accessible space. Defined as a “Synthesis of the Arts” or a “Plastic Integration”, he tested this notion by inviting numerous Venezuelan and European artists to create works of art that he arranged along the paths and in the public squares of the UCV: more than 60 pieces, including murals by Alejandro Otero and Victor Valera created to intensify the surfaces to which they were applied; mosaics by Andres Bloc; works by Pascual Navarro, Vigas and the steel elements of the technical school by Mateo Manaure. There are also window pieces by Léger, the sculptures of Arp, Lobo, Laurens, Pevsner and many others. Which each maintains its specific qualities, together they characterise the spaces of movement, projecting shadows and light onto surfaces and people, in the end creating an environmen-

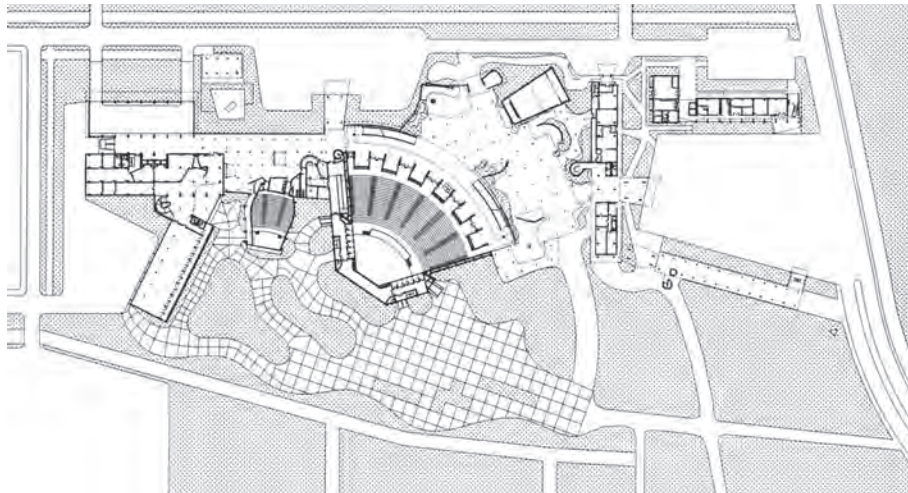
32. HERNÁNDEZ DE LASALA 2006.

33. DEMBO 2005.

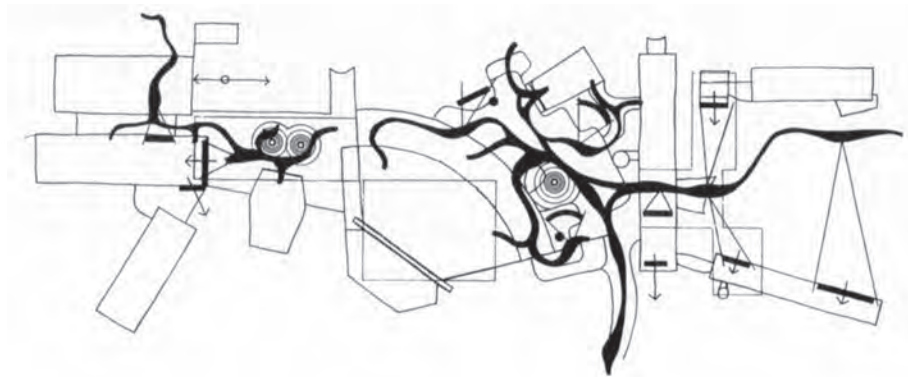
34. VILLANUEVA 1972.

35. From the outset, Villanueva was a convinced proponent of the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the design of architecture. At the end of the 1950s, involved in the debate on the education of new architects, he publicly claimed the necessity to modify the educational structure of the university in order to satisfy the social and cultural role of the architect.

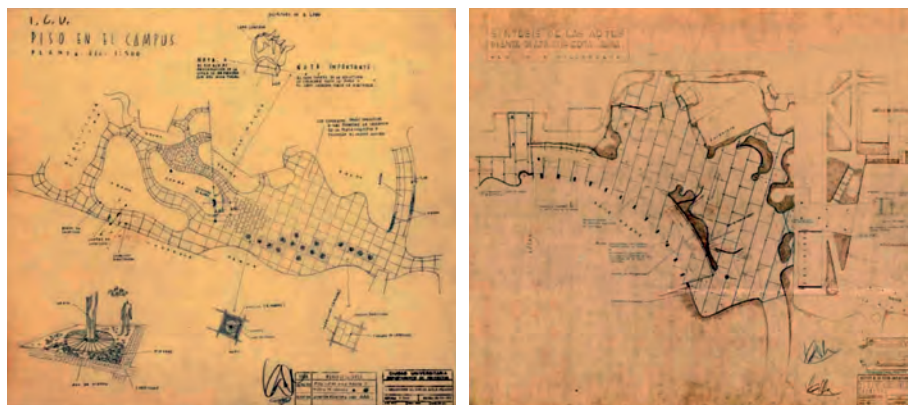




*UCV, ground floor of the central complex with the Covered Plaza, Rectorate, Library and Aula Magna.*



*UCV, flow diagram of the central complex.*



*UCV, original drawings for the landscape furniture and flora of the central complex.*



*UCV, view of the gardens between the facades of the central complex.*



*UCV, internal view of the Covered Plaza.*



*UCV, view of the Covered Plaza which the access ramp of the Aula Magna.*



tal sculpture made of voids and transparencies<sup>36</sup>. Villanueva held that «introducing painting or sculpture into an architectural context meant exhibiting a clear desire to assume social responsibilities». Furthermore, it restores a leading role in society to the figure of the artist, warding off the unconscious self-referentiality of art: «Is it necessary to repeat that the contemporary artist cannot create art only for himself, in a personal manner, whose comprehension is circumscribed to a limited number of people of navigating in the sterile isolation of individual performance»<sup>37</sup>.

In the university city the buildings are immersed in tropical vegetation. The corridors of the buildings themselves, their entrances and the public squares feature courtyards-gardens that blend light with shadow; spaces that function as devices that regulate climate and as spaces of social relations. «It is necessary to recognise and categorically record the social role of landscaping in the conception of the University City in Caracas, comprehending that it can be considered a postulate of modern architecture viewed in its maximum organic expression, the starting point for the author in a given moment in history. Organic space is inspired by the intention to be a faithful expression of the processes of the living organisms that inhabit these spaces and whose value is represented by a social approach»<sup>38</sup>.

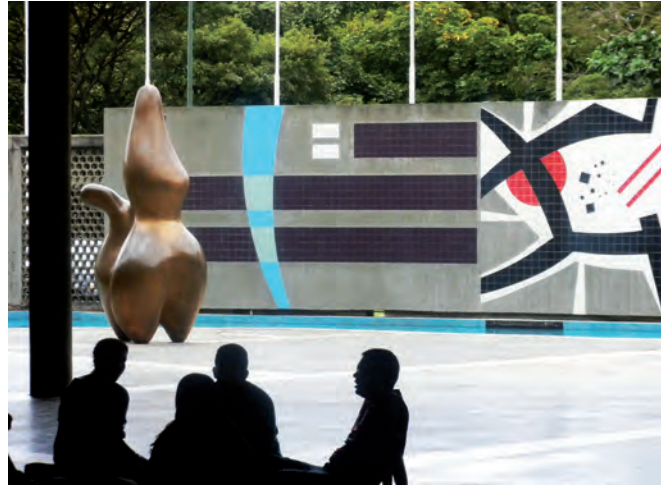
Villanueva considered urbanism, architecture and, in this particular case the theme of the University City, as agents of progress and modernisation for his country. At the same time, he imagined that this project could become the new heart of the city; a centre of social, academic and cultural vitality; a humanistic world whose organisation contrasted the chaos of the rest of the city: an alternative to an ideal order<sup>39</sup>. Here at the UCV, unlike similar interventions in Latin America, the open spaces have unique qualities: firstly, the plastic integration subverts the trend toward the standardisation of modern projects, proposing a large continuous museum that is always open and filled with the work of various artists that define the identity of its spaces; secondly,

36. GRANADOS VALDÉS 1974.

37. VILLANUEVA 1963.

38. COSS 2011.

39. JAUÀ, MARÍN, RODRÍGUEZ 2009.



*UCV, the Cloud Shepherd by Hans Arp (1953) and the Mural by Mateo Manaure.*



*UCV, view of the gardens from the cantilever roof ahead the schools block.*

the proportions of architecture are always suitable to a human presence and activities. The result is that the spaces of the campus have become important meeting points for the community and the city. For this reason the campus of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) is considered, and justly so, one of the most important works of regional modern architecture.

The analysis of the projects presented in this text lead to a number of considerations that help define the shared characteristics of public spaces.

The first question regards the attentive approach adopted by Latin American architects to the design of public spaces and, in particular, the relationship created between cultural identity and modernism. In the Latin American region, this debate was particularly important during the second half of the 1980s, focusing on the concept of “appropriate modernism”, recognised not as a new architectural ‘ism’, but as a particular way of creating architecture that exalts socio-cultural roots. Each of the cases examined offers a dialectic and concrete response to standardisation, using both the elements of local historic traditions and the stimulus offered by the capacity to appropriate a site, though always respecting its original landscape qualities. For those architects, the site constituted the space of cultural experiences and historical sedimentations. It is here that the possibility to recover spiritual, local and universal values becomes a reality, with the material transfer of the emotions and aspirations of a community in its own territory. These ideas are far from the notion of design dominated by an exclusively aesthetic logic. Their intention was instead to improve living conditions for local society by adapting their projects to the socio-economic reality of their country.

A second question involves the way of using public space and the approach to its fruition by its users. The three cases examined, coherent with the diversities tied to the functions of each project, reveal a propensity toward the stable use of space; recreational areas or for open air study, often an extension of educational or domestic activities, are also spaces of passage that occur along precisely structured routes, covered or outdoor paths, in light and shadow, directly uniting points to be

reached. Spaces for everyone prove their ability to subvert the trends of contemporary public spaces; in fact, their quality is often compared to the social component of those who inhabit them. Their continuous use, each day of the year, models a centre of social life toward which power manifests the desire to emancipate society through culture. In the end, they are spaces recognised by the public not through their singular parts or streets, public squares or paths, but for the intimate ties their inhabitants establish with the public realm; a precious resource, used as both a product and a habitual practice to be adopted, functions to be carried out in a space of diverse dimensions: sensual, social, political, symbolic. These are the conditions that transform it into a particular space, whose heritage, while on the one hand renders it distinguishable from the rest of the city, on the other hand consents the population, through collective use, to fully imagine the entire city, which it appropriates in the end to form a living, industrious and civil society.

A final consideration can be made by examining the projects and their conception of the relationship between nature-architecture. Each reveals a total integration between artifice and landscaping, to the point that it is impossible to define the limit between the one and the other; both aspects appear designed to construct an anthropic landscape with scenarios that permit the free development of human practices and intense social relations; with open, semi-closed and closed spaces, characterised by light and shadow, works of art, covered paths and outdoor corridors. Juxtaposed against what is constructed, the presence of landscaping is considered a means for balancing the environmental system.

The projects analysed were desired by national powers with the intention of legitimising their actions of government and their ideologies – totalitarian or democratic as they may have been – through social and cultural emancipation. This demonstrates the possible existence of a strict correlation between political power and the quality of the spaces it generates. «Any ideology is a reference to power, and the relation between space and power has yet to be overcome: power and place. To the degree that architecture manipulates spaces, attributes diverse meanings in relation to social roles and recognises them in diverse commissions. Here, in fact, there is an ideological approach. Not only the classes of power and classes without power, but also the public and



the private, the individual and the collective, masculine and feminine, young and old, can express relations of power that are in turn manifested in space»<sup>40</sup>.

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