

Earthquake 85

Art, Architecture and Disaster

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The Swiss born French architect, Le Corbusier, dreamed of modernizing Paris. For that he had to destroy the city. In his 1925 Voisin Plan, he proposed to substitute the urban plan and romantic architecture of the 'city of lights' with a series of great towers in a cross plan organized on a Cartesian plane. Not even Hitler dared to destroy this idealized city, much less the French. However, after the Second World War, some modern architects would try to implement the utopian ideas of Le Corbusier with disastrous results. The project that has come to symbolize this situation more visibly is certainly Pruitt-Igoe. It consisted in a series of housing buildings constructed in 1954 in Saint Louis, Missouri in the United States. These buildings replaced the nineteenth century settlements with communal baths in terrible conditions in which poor Afro-American residents lived as the white middle class families fled to the city suburbs. Although these buildings improved temporarily the living conditions of their residents and won many design awards, as expected, architecture itself could not solve social, economic, and political factors that produce poverty, crime and segregation. By the end of the seventies this housing project became famous for precisely these problems and started to accumulate waste and graffiti between its broken windows. Thirty-three buildings were demolished at 3 o'clock on March 16, 1972, only sixteen years after they were constructed. The remaining thirty-two buildings were destroyed during the following four years; the demolition was broadcasted on TV. For the conservatives, the project became the symbol of the failure of urban planning and social assistance, and for the postmodern architects, the failure of Modern architecture. Charles Jencks declared its destruction as 'The Day Modern Architecture died'. However, some housing projects with the same architecture and aesthetics such as Penn South continue to operate successfully in lower Manhattan inhabited by people with more resources and political and social power. The architect of Pruitt-Igoe was Minoru Yamasaki, who also designed the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Centre, buildings that also were destroyed as icons of modernity of the United States, of the western world and of

Capitalism, although in this case they were destroyed more for their success than for their failure.

In Mexico the most notable example of this type of Modern architecture is the 1960 housing project of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco designed by Mexican architect Mario Pani. This project also achieved many architecture awards. The original plan included 102 apartment buildings with their own schools, hospitals, convenience stores, mural art and green areas. It worked as a city within the city. Today, the project is smaller and quite deteriorated. If Pruitt-Igoe symbolized Modernism failure, Nonoalco-Tlatelolco symbolizes the coexistence with the past and maybe with the present and the future. The modern buildings surround the pre-Hispanic ruins of what once was the Aztec market of Tlatelolco along with the colonial Catholic church of Santiago Tlatelolco, built by the Spaniards over the Aztec ruins. Altogether, this construction forms what is known as the 'Plaza de las tres culturas' (Tree Cultures Plaza) that by itself suggests a postmodern dialogue with its history. If true that Tlatelolco didn't have the segregation, crime and poverty history of Pruitt-Igoe in Saint Louis, it has a terrible history of repression and failure of the Mexican revolution project. It was the scenario of the student massacre by the Mexican government on October 2nd 1968, just before the Olympic games took place in Mexico. So far, the official death toll is disputed and varies between thirty and three hundred. What is not in dispute is that on October 2nd of 1968, more than 5000 soldiers, 200 tanks, 2 helicopters, snipers, machineguns and paramedics gathered in front of the Chihuahua building in what was planned to be a pacific demonstration of college and high school students. The architecture was then witness of this horrifying shameful event that the anti-democratic government of President Diaz Ordaz tried to hide by blaming the victims and that today is still under investigation. In fact, every year, the architecture is still witness of protest demonstrations.

If for Jencks the end of Modern architecture happened exactly at 3 o'clock the evening of March 16, 1972 with Pruitt-Igoe's demolition by the "Federal Department of Housing", in Mexico we can locate the end of Modernism exactly at 7:19 am on September 19, 1985. It was precisely in this moment when the gods and nature destroyed model buildings of Modern Mexican architecture leaving only the pre-Hispanic ruins and Colonial architecture intact.

Several buildings in Tlatelolco collapsed dramatically as the ones demolished in Pruitt-Igoe and the images were universalized and also broadcast on television. However, this was really a more dramatic event as the inhabitants of these buildings sat within the rubble. The tragedy burdened the limited capacity of a corrupt authority and the citizens bound to survive by themselves demonstrated achievable

direct action and spontaneous self-demarche. Neighbours of all social status organized to rescue victims, and help lift debris. This eventually allowed new forms of political organization that were unthinkable before the tragedy. In a similar way and independently, young artists tried to respond and find meaning and significance to this event generating a critic of modernity that led to the construction of a particular nation-state idea.

The first aesthetic response came from the photographers. Sergio Toledano decided to go and see what was happening in the downtown area and was the first to document the disaster. In his black and white film he made a dramatic essay, which earned him the first prize in the Photography Biennial of 1986. The images are impeccable. Some of them more abstract and some more human but all of them are dramatically expressionists. Many more photographers documented the event. In fact, some members of the workshop led by Pedro Meyer decided to capture the event. We even were allowed access to restricted areas. My memory is a nightmare that I just didn't want to remember for quite a long time. The Regis Hotel was reduced to a pile of rubble and, on the top a person with a mask over his mouth and a black plastic bag was collecting pieces. When I told a police man that this way he would take forever, he answered me that the man was only collecting pieces of bodies. I fainted in the subway when for a moment the light went out, perhaps only for a false contact with the pathways. I soon discovered that photojournalism was not my thing. I then decided to work in a different way making photographic experiments with overexposed images that emulated an earthquake; nerves made me repeatedly expose the same film roles creating fortuitous images that mixed portraits with images of collapsed buildings. In a film I accidentally combined images of 'Las insólitas imágenes de Aurora' with other buildings in ruins. This was a popular rock band that later became Los Caifanes and that with other bands organized rock concerts to raise funds for the victims. I don't have the negatives of these images because I lent them to a magazine...

After the earthquake a cartoon entitled 'Terremoto 85' was published. It contained moralist love stories that happened during the earthquake and where about miracles and tragedies, women crying and Mexican men consoling or fighting with them, all framed by fragmented images of buildings falling creating dramatic compositions. These drawings worked for me as a better inspiration than the photographic images. We were starting to edit and give meaning to the information and those images seemed to have a strong relation with works of art related to other tragedies, for example Picasso's Guernica. With these images I did a series of eclectic paintings with references to the popular culture, the expressionism, postmodernity and even

cubism. One of them, in a relatively large format, consisted in a vertical composition in acid colours where some Tlatelolco's buildings are seen collapsing. I entitled it *El fin del modernismo* (The End of Modernism); along with this painting I did another two compositions with women crying. The first one was very similar to one on the comic strip where a blonde woman appears crying and a dark man with a moustache answers her. Dialogue balloons without text also appeared, it is a very graphic painting. The other painting is a cubist variation of this one. The three of them were sent to the Encuentro Nacional de Arte Joven (Young Art National Encounter), that in those days was the easiest way of making them visible. According to the jury records and Olivier Debroise himself, the works were about to be rejected from the contest for their eclecticism until they reviewed the title and understood that there was a concept within the paintings themselves. *El fin del modernismo* received an award creating attention and polemic inside the local media. Currently, it is part of the Museo de Arte de Aguascalientes collection. Other paintings from this series were acquired by important collectors such as Carlos Ashida from Guadalajara and the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Other artists also changed their plastic proposal, making comments and visual experiments of the earthquake. The architect Mauricio Rocha, Mauricio Maillé and Gabriel Orozco produced a collaboration that was shown at the Modern Art Museum in Mexico City in the Salon de Espacios Alternativos in 1987. They underpinned one of the exhibition halls as if it were to fall. With common scaffolding and wooden beams they reproduced the structures seen all over the city to repair damaged buildings also implying that the museum was in ruins. This work is particularly important if we consider it is one of the first architectonic interventions by Mauricio Rocha and one of Gabriel Orozco's first experiments completely different to the organic paintings he was producing at that time. Let's say this 'institutional critique' is his first recognized conceptual work. Unlike later works it is not a devoid and ambiguous meaning in search of an elaborate interpretation. There is an important and critical commentary on the context that goes beyond the poetic gesture and does not comply only with referring to it with its presence. In this sense, it is a better work than many of his that are actually better known. As *El fin del modernismo*, this work makes reference to the modern building that collapses, in this case the museum and with it, the idea of modernity. The museum becomes the work itself, something that maybe should be in constant reconstruction. The work received an award but regrettably it was overshadowed by the scandal that the church provoked because of a work included in the exhibition that depicted the Virgin of Guadalupe with Marilyn Monroe's face. This incident led to the resignation of the Museum Director, Jorge Alberto Manrique.

The 1985 earthquake is still a subject of inspiration for many artists even outside Mexico. Susie Bielak is a young artist recently graduated from University of California in San Diego who lives in Minneapolis. Her father is a seismic engineer and was in Mexico City at the time of the earthquake. He took a series of pictures where the structural damage of buildings and walls is appreciated. From these images Bielak has made a series of collages and Formica table sizes that in some cases she uses for printmaking. They have fragmented and stylized compositions where nature has broken the regular and perpendicular traces of the Cartesian direction substituting them with dramatic diagonals and asymmetric and irregular balances. There is a huge metal plate at the University of California in San Diego School of Engineering at the University of California in San Diego where some seismic movements can be reproduced from seismic registers. It is used to study the effect of such movements and test different structures and materials. Bielak used this plate in order to test the effects of the Mexican earthquake on her own dining room, which she reproduced at breakfast time (7.19 am). On this still life she replicated the brutal movement of 8.1 degrees on the Richter scale violently pulling down the groomed and colourful breakfast. She documented this action on a video work.

In Mexico there are also artists that keep on working over the same subject, such is the case of Amor Muñoz. Without having knowledge that the same works were done about the earthquake of '85, she designed a diagram to produce seismic alarms. She distributes this diagram in the streets so people can build their own alarms. It is a very simple system that consists in a series of pendulums that activate a speaker when they move. She built her own shopping cart with alarms that activate not only with earthquakes but with simple movements. She pushes it through the streets and public squares such as the Zocalo in downtown Mexico City. Most of all she is interested in the social interaction where the people can participate directly in finding solutions and answers to nature's inevitable disasters.

Recently, Ignacio Padilla, the writer, published *Arte y olvido del terremoto* (Art and Oblivion of the Earthquake). This book parts from the thesis that one of the functions of the artist is to memorialize historical events and affirms that there is a lack of attention of artists towards the '85 earthquake which has generated a ghost who can not find rest. This conclusion is particularly wrong, as there is a great amount of contemporary art produced during this decade in Mexico and it is probably some of the most interesting and critical of modernity. The monuments that usually memorialize historical events are of a scale that Padilla couldn't distinguish, for him they are large public commissions that in any case would make the

State look poorly or offer nothing tangible to the private industry. To blame the artists for this absence is to simply put in evidence his short understanding on the basic mechanisms of value within the artistic practice and art distribution. This book was awarded the Luis Cardoza y Aragón prize for Visual Arts. However, the absurd function of these hundred and thirty eight pages is to demonstrate that in this case Art History does not exist. And it makes a strange effort not to produce it. The only reference he makes to the works of artists is copied directly from the catalogue of the exhibition *La era de la discrepancia* (The Age of Discrepancy). It does not mention the Salón de Arte Joven of 1986 and has some terrible errata and omissions on the Salón de Espacios Alternativos of 1987, which seem to be the only references the author could find. Rants on the sublime and criticism of photography as a nineteenth century art have nothing to do with art from the eighties or contemporary art. Of course the book has no illustrations that might contradict what he says, and it is an exercise of intellectual opportunism. He claims that there was some art made in '68, presented in an independent way and with little documentation. History has more to do with the present than with the past. It exists to the extent that there is an interest in doing it Without this interest there can be no history and the art of disaster would just become one more in a long series of disasters.

Works cited

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