Timothy Hyde

Constitutional Modernism: Architecture and Civil Society in Cuba, 1933–1959.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 384 pp. (Paper US\$ 35.00)

Architectural historian and Harvard Graduate School of Design professor Timothy Hyde has compiled a tour de force in his examination of architectural and urban design practices that were socially construed when Cuban civil society and statesmen aimed to redefine the nation's identity. The book “explores the reciprocations of architecture and political circumstance in order to examine how architecture is incorporated within the developing course of civil society” (p. 2). The period of inquiry—1933 to 1959—was not one of political and social calm. Indeed, it was a turbulent and creative mix of dictatorships, democracy, stolen elections, and a pursuit of cosmopolitanism, particularly in Havana. Hyde argues that “constitutionalism produced a potent and decisive confluence of law and architecture [that is] the crucial theoretical framework to elucidate acts of design undertaken during this period of Cuba's history” (p. 5). A civil and professional revival of the arts and sciences involved key Cuban intellectuals and organizations such as Fernando Ortiz, Wifredo Lam, Nicolás Guillén, Amelia Peláez, Armando Romeu Jr., the Grupo Minorista, the Patronato Pro-Urbanismo, Mario Románach, Pedro Martínez Inclán, Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, and Jorge Mañach, among others, who set the stage for this new, modernist and thoroughly Cuban project.

Constitutionalism is conceptualized and operationalized as a mode of projection that governments use to express their identities—in this case, to help define *cubanidad*. The time frame captures the events on a broader civic project that witnessed an explosion in the arts, music, literature, journalism, poetry, and architecture, in which Cuba tries to emerge as a more sovereign nation and unshackle itself from the 1901 constitution that the Americans had written and used to constrain Cuba as a neo-colonial territory. Constitutions from the Weimar Republic (1919) and Spain (1931) bolster the discussion and final creation of Cuba's 1940 constitution. A new constellation of interdisciplinary, civic, and government efforts unleash a Cubanized version of international modern architectural styles and construction.

The book's eight chapters and epilogue constitute three main parts—Constitution, City, and Monument—which capture the spirit that better cities (through data-driven urban planning and careful urban design and construction) create better citizens. Extraterritorial projects such as the New Deal, CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), and the City Beautiful movement shape this expression of democracy, justice, modernity, and Cuban identity in Havana. Architecture and urban design are intended to lead to a sta-

ble civil society in Cuba during this period only to have this narrative mostly derailed with the onset of the 1959 revolution.

Part I, "Constitution," offers a broad historical and intellectual overview of the period. It unpacks the many narratives that modernity embraced in law, architecture, planning, and the creation of a modern nation state. Part II examines the 'city' through a detailed review of major public works and projects, master plans, and historic districts. Part III details the decades-long design and review of proposals for the José Martí monument and complex (in what is today the Plaza of the Revolution), and General Batista's vision for a new executive-branch complex called the Palacio de las Palmas.

While epilogues often tread on what-if scenarios or incomplete afterthoughts, Hyde avoids this pitfall. He argues that even though modernism carried on as a formal discourse and language for a few years following the revolution, it

was not a constitutional modernism; it did not assist or extend constitutionalism as an object or effect in Cuban society ... [it was] a sheer break, a rupture in the historical continuity that preceded it ... While Castro's famous claim that "history will absolve me" ... contains the grammatical structure of a future retrospection ... [it identifies a] political right with personal choice ... With the Cuban Revolution, the mode of constitutionalism became, like the Laws of the Indies before it, a historic relic.

pp. 299–300

Constitutional Modernism employs the term "modernism" in a catholic fashion. It is "not the sum of projects realized in modern style, nor the calculated actions of certain individuals, but rather a compound of institutional intentions, aesthetic modes, and instrumental techniques produced and proposed in response to the contemporaneous situations of Cuba" (p. 304, note 13). It is for this reason that this sweeping intellectual and architectural history of twentieth-century Cuba will benefit scholars in the fine arts, social sciences, and humanities.

The book will not find a strong readership at the undergraduate level, and will require guidance and context if used at the graduate level. Nor will the novice to Cuban Studies have the necessary background to understand how the historic project laid out by José Martí in the previous century evolved as it did into the middle of the next century. Indeed, parts of the writing are opaque and will obtrude on a general readership. I would also have welcomed an editor who insisted on shorter paragraphs. A few key publications on the notions of *cubanidad* are missing, and a few more pages regarding the way

the socialist government treated certain historic and modern buildings would have been beneficial to what is otherwise an excellent work. Nevertheless, the book epitomizes what the University of Minnesota Press is increasingly known for: theoretically informed books that tackle fascinating conceptual topics. The press should also be commended for such high-quality illustrations in both black and white and color, and all for such a reasonable price.

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