The superblocks built by the Banco Obrero in Caracas, the 2 de diciembre housing project –today 23 de enero– with which we started the housing component of the exhibition *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980*, was, along with Cerro Piloto, the most important project of the National Housing Plan implemented in Caracas in the 1950s by the architects of the Taller del Banco Obrero (TABO). Built in lightning speed, these were massive urban planning operations that aimed to transform the physical environment of the city by eradicating Caracas’ shantytowns through large investments in public works. Speed and economy justified their crudeness and modest finishes, their serial production and repetitive imprint. Their rationalized production and construction was addressed with a use of color that aimed to transform these housing blocks into a colossal abstract geometric composition installed in the landscape. Under Carlos Raúl Villanueva’s watchful and masterful eye we encounter a model for the concrete appropriation of the sensible and of the natural; a model to be repeated, amplified and extended. Aesthetic appeal, eloquently and decisively captured by Paolo Gasparini in his black and white photos –staged as large images in the exhibition– lift the superblocks above the plane of the everyday and into the realm of Architecture, with a capital “A”. Yet, albeit Villanueva’s ability to humanize this project through Culture, the 23 de enero –like so many others– cannot escape the forces that brought it into being. Standardization and the economy of production dominated; on the ground, the 23 de enero remained a work in which the specificity of architecture as inhabitable space was reduced to a subordinate condition. This subordinate condition of inhabitation in the 23 de enero was made palpable by the later overflow of the site with the by-product of development policies: slums.

In *Latin America in Construction*, superbloques and unidades vecinales of diverse types and different countries from 1955 to 1980, marched along the housing wall. Here, Architecture met the abstract needs of the masses as set by governments and markets. Here, architecture confronted the real needs of the individual. The decisive critique of this Architecture that aimed to address the housing question remains that it was incapable of adjusting or responding to the changing needs of the individual, for it understood the user as a passive agent in need of Culture. It is fundamental not to forget that although these housing solutions were understood as part of a scientific and technological approach to solving an urgent pragmatic problem, they...
remained within Architecture that is within Culture, and that its users were
to grow and be forged as cultural and social subjects in these spaces. This is
why in these social projects there was no dialogue, only a monologue. The
reality, however, was that Architecture as a cultural language to be learned
by the inhabitants of these spaces was and remained a distant speech. Ar-
chitecture was the hablar lejano of experts who meet the general public
armed with plans.¹ In this distant encounter between Architecture and the
individual—at the intersection of inhabitation and subjectivity—we find
the genesis of incrementalism.

The general public, those non-architects who we architects like to call
"users," tend to encounter architecture that is, they find it outside them-
selves; and they find it most commonly as a social practice circumscribed ei-
ther within academic or professional circles.² These two forms: the discipline
and the profession are the exterior form of architecture, and this exterior
form is the key to its social validity. Simply put: Architecture is found out-
side the individual as an established institution, and this exterior presence
of Architecture in relation to the individual is the source of its authority as a
discipline and its currency as a practice.

The Spanish thinker and philosopher José Ortega y Gasset was very inter-
ested in the expressed exteriority of social practices in Western culture, includ-
ing that of architecture. For Ortega, the currency and potency of architecture,
the validity of any social practice was not equivalent to its authenticity. In
fact, much the contrary; for Ortega it was precisely this outside condition, este
afuera, which was a precondition for all social practices and the source of their
validity and currency within society, what made them, in effect, "inauthentic".³
Put differently, for Ortega, all social practices were by necessity inauthentic.
This meant that the authority of a social practice such as architecture was a
kind of "impersonal preserve," a form of "credit" that could be cashed only by
the collective and was always imposed mechanically upon the individual in
order to complete its social mission. This credit cum authority was imposed
upon the individual velis-nolis that is, like it or not. Following Ortega, we find
architecture in the world "already there," as a social practice and praxis that
acts and is transmissible "mechanically." In this, the practice of architecture is
an invitation to inauthenticity. The social preexistence of human endeavors,
Ortega concludes, is one of the tragic components of modern life.

The inauthentic nature of human occupations solicits a need for a re-
turn, a desire to go back to some form of beginning where the "authentic"
might still be found; in our case, it is a return to the moment when there
was no architecture. Here we are presented with the myth of the origin.
The desire for authenticity is but a wish to close the gap between Architec-
ture and the individual. This in turn, is but the siren's call that threatens the
endeavors of incrementalism. Ortega was weary that any call for a return
would inevitably fall into romanticism or naturalism, as it would be inter-
preted in our case as a stepping outside of Architecture. Can the architect
simply claim to step out of his or her own discipline? As we know, there is
no vacation from being an architect; because there is no escape from the
ontological character of social practices. Ortega, then, makes us re-consider
the moment of the birth of the practice of architecture and the birth of the
architect. Ortega's accusation, that of being involved in an inauthentic
practice, makes us consider the necessity for Architecture; and only this vital
moment of questioning, of instinctive necessity is authentic.

The necessity of architecture is a question posed to those engaged in
a social practice; it is posed to those who accept to mechanically produce
and reproduce the inauthentic forms of social practices. Ortega's call to re-
turn to the necessity of architecture can be understood as a psychological
one, as an auto-gnosis, a self-cognition or "re-cognition" that would gives
us, as architects, a sense and drive for criticality and political engagement. In
addition to this clear reiteration of the classical Greek proverb "know thy-
self," inscribed in the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Ortega offers a much sim-
pler directive to all engaged in social practices: for Ortega, the return to the
moment before the apparition of a social practice and thus of the practitioner
is equivalent to the process of desarmar, the process of disassembling, of disarming; in our case of disarming the machine we know as Architecture. Here we find the core of the “housing question”, and my main point. For if the idea or the practice of incremental growth in architecture takes aim at the superbloques and unidades vecinales launched by developmentalist governments through Planes de Vivienda that attempted to complete the functionalist city as proposed by CIAM, then, incrementalism must be the strategy that disarms and disassembles the established social production of architecture; and it does so, not by falling into the romantic myth of a return to the origin, but rather by dismantling the social apparatus of architecture in a particular moment in time. What is crucial to the contemporary discussions on incremental growth today is not necessarily la casa que crece that is “the house that grows,” but rather, la arquitectura que se desarma; the disarming of architecture.

We endeavored to present this in Latin America in Construction. There, in the housing wall we invited visitors to see the development of architecture, as I have already mentioned, through the continued evolution of the superbloques and unidades vecinales: the 23 de Enero in Caracas, COPAN in Sao Paulo, Unidad No.1 in La Habana del Este; Conjunto Urbano Nonoaica-Tlatelolco in Mexico City; Residencial San Felipe in Lima; Conjunto Rioja in Buenos Aires, Conjunto Bulevar Artigas in Montevideo and Parque Central in Caracas. There, in this expanding timeline of housing experiments, visitors also encountered the Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda (PREVI) in Lima, inserted as a syncopated note in this cadence of planned developments. PREVI is more than solitary note. Staged in the exhibition with intermittent color slides, kindly lent to us by Peter Land, and other original materials of several of the international and Peruvian participants, PREVI was a counterpoint; a contrapunto, that appeared earlier in the housing timeline with allusions to the Centro Interamericano de la Vivienda (CIINVA) in Bogotá, and continued afterwards with later projects that I would like to propose as strategies and tactics of disarming the Arquitectura of development that was the core of Latin America in Construction. The intent was to demonstrate a shift in the nature of housing projects selected in the exhibition; as one walked down the housing wall and engaged the projects on the walls and in the vitrines, one discover the ways in which techniques of the everyday were developed as strategies and tactics for disassembling and disarming the supercuadras and the unidades vecinales. For example, Jorge Castillo’s Casa Mara in Venezuela with its experiments on new materials and prefabrication shared with Cuban’s Hugo D’Acosta and Mercedes Alvarez’s Módulo de asbesto-cemento the ability for easy and fast deployment, as well as research in a new economy of materials with its 6mm thick panel’s bowed for structural rigidity. Both projects designed the module considering the proximity of anatomic systems and everyday usages. Moreover, both projects approached the user as an active agent of the construction process. One of the great innovations of systems of prefabricated individual houses was the integration of internal furnishing and storage systems as in the Sistema Multiflex by Fernando Salinas in Cuba. Experimentations in adaptability carried all the way through to adapt industrial technologies to lightweight prefabricated systems as in Las Terrazas project by Mario Girona and Osmany Cienfuegos in Pinar del Río, Cuba.
Self-help and aided self-help was mobilized by architects in the 1960s and 70s; such experiences approached social housing as a dialogue with local communities. We saw a clear example of this position in the Carlos Nelson’s urbanization of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro such as Bras de Pinas and Morro Uniao that engaged not only the community but individuals and families directly as shown in drawings by javelados that presented the homes they wanted. This type of social anthropological research that inflected architectural design was one of the many contributions of Latin American architects to disarm the establishment professional architect. Mauricio Roberto in the Plano urbanístico de Alagados in Salvador Bahia addressed the informal squatting settlements in the first large-scale official effort to complete the urbanization and renovation of favelas without expelling their residents. The Roberto brothers proposed a basic urban unit made up of a cluster of small brick-walled lots, creating a setting for a house that could develop over time. The architects would provide a basic house nucleus with all the required plumbing for a house that could become larger over time and completed through autoconstrucción (self-building) by the residents as they saw fit and their resources allowed.

The Example of the Uruguayan cooperatives and the work of Saul Irureta, Miguel Cecilio and Mario Spallanzani, within the Centro Cooperativista Uruguayo, following the strong syndicalist movement in Uruguay, was one of the most socially transformative strategies produced in the period examined by the exhibition. Incorporating models of aided self-help developed in the early 1950s by cinva, the Uruguayan housing cooperative experience brought together experiments on the growing house with lightweight prefabrication with losetas armadas –reinforced tiles– because of their easy of production and installation –and a cooperative financing system. Informed by sociology and economics, this experience, born outside the realm of government was inscribed into law years later after its decisive success, just to be negated by the military government after the 1973 coup. Also celebrated for its social engagement was the Unidad Habitacional Flores Magón by Alejandro Zohn, in Mexico; built within the institutional realm of housing policies yet mobilizing auto-construcción through community organizations.

Acacio Gil Borsoi and the team around him in the city of Pernambuco in Brazil developed a project for the slum area of Cajueiro Seco to help integrate the slum or marginal community into the greater Recife urban area. Beyond the attempt to create a neighborhood unit by inserting social infrastructures like schools, a church, etc., Borsoi aimed to industrialize the traditional mocambo or hut, inserting it within the logic of prefabrication. Borsoi engaged the well-known technique of taipa or “reinforced-earth.” But he rationalized it by way of creating wood panels of various sizes, produced and assembled collectively in series; these were to be used by the usuários or dwellers to compose or re-compose the traditional mocambo into a dwelling. Through a simple drawing on graft paper, users would first design their own house according to their needs and budgets; acquire the panels, and start to work on their home. In the process, the architect became promoter and facilitator of a new building practice of building. Borsoi made clear that the appropriation of the activity of building by the usuários was predicated on the integration of building with practices of everyday life. Borsoi’s efforts were cut short by the military coup, and it was not until Lina Bo Bardi’s 1975 project for the Camurupim community for rural workers that one saw a turn towards Borsoi’s ideas; in fact, Bo Bardi had commented positively on Borsoi’s Cajueiro Seco project. Although Lina proposed a greater typological variety for Camurupim, she relied on similar techniques and materials as used by Borsoi; particularly that of taipa. Such similarities point to the practice of architecture as a measured intervention by architects in the social, economic and cultural circumstances of a community.

These projects advanced an invitation for other strategies and tactics that disarmed the architecture of the period as an established social practice. These fuerzas des-estructurantes, these disarming forces of auto-gestión and auto construcción of experimentation and social engagement are inherently of difficult translation; especially those translations of the global kind that we are so keen to peruse these days. The disarming forces that we included in Latin America in Construction are untranslatable because they were born in the region at a specific moment in time. The architectural examples that engaged these forces serve to remind us of the crucial difference between growth and development, between the quantitative and the qualitative and the still pressing relevance to question the necessity of architecture.

Notas
2. I am following here Ortega y Gasset’s ideas on the relationship of professional practices as exemplified by philosophy, which he examined in “La Historia de la Filosofía, de Emile Bréhier.”

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