Review: Constructing Latin America: Architecture, Politics, and Race at the Museum of Modern Art


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Constructing Latin America: Architecture, Politics, and Race at the Museum of Modern Art by Patricio del Real is an investigation of the history of the exhibition of Latin American architecture at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) from before the Second World War through the Cold War, with a brief coda dealing with their most recent exhibition on the topic in 2015. This book fits well into current postcolonial discourse and exposes how the museum manipulated images of architecture from Latin America, particularly Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, to make generalizations about Latin America tailored to fit United States foreign policy and large business interests. This is done quite well, beginning with well-trod ground such as Philip Johnson’s known Nazism and how this was manifest as early as 1933 in his treatment of works by Diego Rivera in the architecture gallery.

Where this book moves from the informative and good, to the truly fascinating and important, however, is when it goes into the workings of the museum in researching and putting on the large Latin American shows, Brazil Builds, of 1943, and Latin American Architecture since 1945, of 1955, and when it explores the roles of Nelson Rockefeller and René d’Harnoncourt. Here del Real masterfully uncovers the revolving door between the Museum of Modern Art and the United States Department of State, with Rockefeller serving as Vice President and President of the Museum between stints with the federal government, effecting cultural diplomacy with direct

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benefits to the business interests of large US corporations and Cold War foreign policy. What is a complete revelation to this reviewer is learning that d’Harnoncourt, who would go on to become Director of MoMA, also worked for the US government, even serving as a spy during what were ostensibly research trips to South America for the museum. These are the most profound reveals in a very well researched and written history of how the museum worked alongside the US government and the propaganda machines of various Latin American governments to advance US foreign policy goals, from Pan-Americanism to Neo-Liberalism. This is not a book about Latin American architecture; it is a book about how MoMA shaped a narrative around Latin American architecture to advance changing US interests in the region, at times championing it, while at other times subordinating it to US hegemony.

The book is illustrated with well-chosen archival photography, including installation photography from the exhibitions covered. It has extensive endnotes. The writing is clear, though at times difficult. It presupposes knowledge of modern Latin American architecture and the history and personalities of MoMA, and therefore is for an expert audience. It is recommended for any library supporting graduate studies in architecture, art history, museum studies, or Latin American studies.