***Superbloques* and the Myth of the Death of Modern Architecture**

**1 BACKGROUND: THE MYTH**

Charles Jencks en su libro “Qué es postmodernismo” define el motivo principal para la aparición de la arquitectura postmoderna: “…is obviously the social failure of Modern architecture, its mythical death announced repeatedly over ten years”. In his book *What is Post-modernism?* Charles Jencks defines the main reason for the emergence of postmodern architecture as "... the social failure of Modern architecture, announced its mythical death repeatedly over ten years”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Uno de los ejemplos que menciona Jenks como evidencia de la muerte de la arquitectura moderna es el colapso de los bloques Pruitt-Igoe en St Louis. One of the examples mentioned by Jencks as evidence of the death of modern architecture is the collapse of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex blocks in St. Louis, Missouri. Sin embargo el estilo postmoderno definido por Jencks fue efímero si tomamos en cuenta  su vertiente neoclásica libre. Hoy en día resulta difícil encontrar algún arquitecto que reviva las formas clásicas en la arquitectura de manera tan literal como se hizo en los 70s u 80s. However, the postmodern style he defined was short-lived if we take into account the free neoclassical side. Today it is difficult to find an architect using neo-classical forms in architecture as literally as in the 70s or 80s(Al menos que sea en el marco de la arquitectura escenográfica o de fachadas de locales comerciales). (except in the framework of scenography architecture or commercial mall façades). Sin embargo gran cantidad de arquitectos siguen produciendo arquitectura en lenguaje moderno, limpios volúmenes blancos o de cristal, acero al mejor estilo de Mies, espaios ocupados por mobiliario moderno; hoy en día los muebles diseñados por Mies Van der Rohe o Le Corbusier a comienzos del S XX son publicados en las revistas de decoración y copiado y vendido en los almacenes de cadena. However, many architects still produce work in the “modern” vernacular: clean volumes painted white or made of glass and steel, applying Mies’ style and materials to interiors occupied by modern furnishings; furniture designed by Mies Van der Rohe and Le Corbusier in the early 20th century appears in decoration magazines and is copied and sold in department stores. Así lo que fue en su momento avant -garde está siendo asumido hoy como el estándar comercial. What was once avant-garde mass production and democratic design is now a status symbol for the upper classes.

Jenks define la arquitectura posmoderna como “the combination of modern techniques with something else (usually traditional building) in order for architecture to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects.” Es interesante como lo que define a la arquitectura posmoderna es something else.Jencks defines postmodern architecture as "the combination of Modern techniques with something else (usually traditional building) in order for architecture to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects." It's interesting that what defines postmodern architecture is *something else*. Something else between lo moderno y la habilidad para comunicar. Así la arquitectura posmoderna responde la inhabilidad de la arquitectura moderna para comunicarse con su público. *Something else* lying somewhere between *modern* and the ability to communicate with people. Hence postmodern architecture responds to modern architecture’s inability to communicate with people. Sin embargo dudo seriamente que ese ingrediente sea todavía hoy el revival neoclásico. However, I seriously doubt that this ingredient, this *something else,* could be any kind of neoclassical revival. El revival neoclásico no tiene una capacidad universal de comunicación con la gente, la ornamentación grecorromana significa diversas cosas en cada lugar y para cada cultura. The neoclassical revival is incapable of universal communication with people; Greco-Roman ornaments mean different things in different places and in different cultures and contexts. Por nombrar un ejemplo, cerca a Bogotá, en la carretera tropical que conecta a la ciudad con las poblaciones vecinas para vacacionar, se encuentran ventas populares de ornamentación greco-romana en concreto. For example, shops along the highway connecting Bogotá with neighboring vacation towns sell concrete Greco-Roman ornamentation used to decorate weekend homes in the area. Sin embargo este tipo de ornamentación popular se refiere no a Grecia ya Roma, sino a la arquitectura popular de las grandes estrellas de televisión o cine como sinónimo de riqueza y lujo. This kind of popular ornamentation, however, refers not to Greece and Rome but to the homes of television and film stars symbolizing wealth and luxury: Una arquitectura que proviene más de Las Vegas y Miami que del Mediterráneo antiguo y que llega a través de los medios masivos de televisión.architecture delivered via television and mass media deriving more from Las Vegas and Miami than the Mediterranean. On the other hand, iUna columna griega en Colombia está más relacionada con el comercio televisivo proveniente de USA que con el mediterráneo antiguo. Por otra parte los edificios institucionales como Bibliotecas y Museos en Bogotá tienen más relación con la arquitectura moderna de Alvaar Aalto o mies Van der Rohe.In the other hand I nstitutional buildings in Bogotá such as libraries and museums draw heavily on the modern architecture of Alvar Aalto or Mies van der Rohe.Jencks menciona un something else.

Jencks mentions a ‘*something else’* that links architecture with people and seemingly not in the style of the building itself. Katharine G. Katharine G. Bristol en su ensayo The Pruitt-Igoe Myth habla de cómo el fracaso del Pruitt-Igoe es atribuido por los arquitectos a la arquitectura misma, desconociendo el contexto socieconómico y la problemática racial y de segregación que rodeó a la construcción del Pruitt-Igoe en el período de la posguerra. “Pruitt-Igoe was shaped by strategies that did not emanate from the architects, but rather from the system in which they practice. Bristol in her essay “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth” [[2]](#footnote-2) speaks of how architects attribute the failure of Pruitt-Igoe to architecture itself by ignoring the socio-economic context and the racial and segregation issues that affected construction of the postwar project. "Pruitt-Igoe was shaped by strategies that did not emanate from the architects, but rather from the system in which they practice. The Pruitt-Igoe implosion and the death of modern architecture therefore not only inflates the power of the architect to effect social change, but it masks the extent to which the profession is implicated, inextricably, in structures and practices that it is powerless to change."[[3]](#footnote-3) It seems then that this *something else* lying between architecture and communication with people is something that binds people to their own space and is strongly linked to tradition. However, this ingredient is not possible without the right political decisions and in an appropriate public context where architects are able to design. Postmodernist architect no longer controls decisions regarding quality of life. Without politicians, economists and investors, architecture has a very limited range of action. Modern Architecture was built on great metanarratives: the belief in progress, science and technology, and the emancipation of the proletariat. Heroic architecture sought to use the tools of design and urbanism (one and the same) to liberate humanity. Lyotard defines the postmodern as incredulity or skepticism toward the totalizing nature of metanarratives. And here we would do well to clarifying a point made in Jencks’ essay when critiquing Lyotard's thought. Postmodernism refers strictly to a style defined primarily by the architecture of Charles Jencks in his own essays devoted to postmodernism. Postmodernity refers to the historical period beginning with postmodernism and includes a break. Postmodern, on the other hand, refers to a way of thinking clearly defined by Lyotard in his essay "The Postmodern Condition"[[4]](#footnote-4). This way of thinking appears within the modern, not after. Charles Jencks’ text mixes the problem of style, which would be *Postmodernism*, with *The Postmodern*. How then is it possible to speak of architecture in the postmodern? Lo postmoderno en arquitectura está relacionado en gran parte con el escepticismo hacia las grandes narrativas. La arquitectura no es más la herramienta universal que va a solucionar a los grandes problemas sociales de la humanidad.

Architecture in the Postmodern refers to a skeptical and ironic view of the *grand narratives*. Architecture is no longer the universal tool that will solve humanity’s major social problems, nor is it the search for something new as in the Avant-garde period. El mito de lo nuevo, lo novedoso característico de las vanguardias no es vigente ya en arquitectura.The myth of the new is no longer valid in architecture. Los prismas blancos de Le Corbusier tan controvertidos en su época, se reproducen hoy en día por todas partes como arquitectura de buen gusto. Le Corbusier’s white prisms, so controversial at the time, are reproduced everywhere today as standards of good architectural taste and a lack of ornamentation is assumed as a minimalist gesture, to use a word absorbed by the commercial design world.

La arquitectura contemporánea no se puede definir como una sola. Contemporary architecture cannot be defined in any single way. Es una multiplicidad de fuerzas  que actúan desde diversos puntos, lugares, culturas, tecnologías y contextos. El concepto formulado por Kenneth Frampton sobre el Regionalismo Crítico en su ensayo "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance." plantea desde la arquitectura moderna una visión crítica de la misma. It is a multiplicity of forces acting from different points, places, cultures, technologies and contexts. The concept of Critical Regionalism developed by Kenneth Frampton in his essay “*Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance*”arises from a critical view of modern architecture. Integrando técnicas y arquitecturas locales y regionales sin adoptar un estilo específico, Frampton habla de lo posmoderno en la arquitectura de una manera más acertada que Jenks. Frampton defines postmodern architecture more assertively than Jencks, pointing out how Critical RegionalismLa arquitectura de Alvar Aalto, Rafael Moneo o Tadao Ando son mencionados por Frampton, arquitectos que ciertamente hacen parte de la tradición moderna de la arquitectura pero que tienen ese “something else” que menciona Jencks, y es la visión crítica de lo moderno a través de lo regional. integrates modern architecture with local and regional techniques and architectures without adopting a specific style. According to Frampton, Critical Regionalism is best exemplified by architects from the modern tradition such as Alvar Aalto, Rafael Moneo and Tadao Ando.

**2 SUPERBLOQUES**

**Descriptive Label**

Sequences of the demolition in 1972 of Minoru Yamasaki’s modernist *Pruit Igoe* housing complex are accompanied by the song *El Superbloque* composed by Venezuelan Simón Díaz to commemorate the construction of the *23 de Enero* housing complex in Caracas, Venezuela. The song, slowed down here to 40%of its original speed, tells the story of a resident whose love for this Superblock goes beyond his love for a woman. The demolition sequences are taken from the 1982 film *Koyaanisquatsi*, Godfrey Reggio’s critical work on progress and civilization. The project has three different versions:

* Performance: The video is projected on the wall. A man sits on a bench watching the video. A slide show is projected on the man’s back. The man drinks rum while getting a virtual tattoo; his back is gradually covered with projected black ink tattoos about his love for the Superblock. Tattoos include the name of the building, a portrait of the architect (Carlos Raúl Villanueva) and iconic American tattoos about love, women, gambling, and alcohol, all of them rededicated to the Superblock. The man’s back at the beginning of the sequence is completely bare and by the end, after 15 slides, is fully tattooed. The sequence then reverses, removing the tattoos until the man’s back is bare once again.
* Installation: The video is projected on a wood construction resembling a Superblock. Blue chalk lies on the floor representing the dust from the implosion. A series of photographs of the performance can also be shown as well as drawings of the Superblock.
* Video: The video is projected directly on the wall.

Year: 2010. The project was shown at the following venues:

At Stony Brook University as part of the performative version of final MFA program presentations.

2015-2016 Infraestructuras, Alianza Francesa, Cali, Colombia

2012 FUSO – Anual de Video Arte Internacional de Lisboa, curaduría de Solange Farkas, Lisboa, Portugal

2011 Videobrasil, Panoramas del Sur, curaduría: Solange Farkas, Sao Paulo, Brasil.

2010 Premio Bienal de Artes 2010, Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño, Bogotá, Colombia

Dimensions: Dimensions vary depending on the venue and the project format.

Technique and elements used in the piece’s different formats include:

* Performance: Video: 5 minutes and 37 seconds with mono audio. Slideshow: Fifteen 35-mm slides. Slide projector and programmer. Can be performed either by the artist himself or by an actor. Performer drinks rum.
* Installation: Wooden construction, blue chalk, video projection, Duratrans color copies with back light of 15 images of the performance, black ink drawings on rice paper.
* Sources: Selected sequences of the Pruitt Igoe housing complex implosion taken from the 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi* by director Godfrey Reggio. The video is edited to fit the music.
* The song *El Superbloque* was included in the album *Caracha Negro* by Simon Diaz and the Hugo Blanco Ensemble.
* The building in the drawing is the *23 de Enero* housing complex located in Caracas, Venezuela. The text in the drawing quotes song lyrics.

**Extended Label: Problems and Questions in *Superbloques***

The *Superbloques* project explores the myth of the death of modern architecture and its possible meanings in Latin America. Modernity was characterized by the formulation of grand narratives: a belief in progress, in science and technology, and in the emancipation of the proletariat. Heroic architecture, along with the tools of design and urbanism (one and the same) sought to liberate humanity. Modern hope and the utopian spirit that existed during those years have now vanished. This epic adventure of the Modern architects is now viewed with nostalgia. The time of the great metanarratives and truths of modernity has passed. I am interested in the lost spirit of that time.

Both Pruitt Igoe and the *23 de enero* housing complex (*El Superbloque*) were conceived in the light of modernity’s grand narratives with the difference that Pruitt Igoe was demolished when it failed whereas the *23 de enero* complex still stands despite all its attendant social problems and poverty. The death of modernity in Latin America never occurred because modernity there always met with resistance and never fully arrived in that part of the continent. To demolish such a large-scale structure in Latin America is a luxury local economies cannot afford. Modernity replaced a past erased by colonialism and conquest and was seen as a new tradition and a chance to start again from scratch. The man in the *Superbloques* installation clings to this new tradition, tattooing himself with its architectural symbol, the object of his love. The portrait of the architect on his back is the portrait of a family member representing this new promise to replace the lost past. But the promise of modernity was never the answer to the lost past. The *Superbloques* installation addresses this contradiction and the duality of rootedness and rootlessness.

1. Jencks, Charles. What is Post–Modernism?,. P. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bristol, Katharine G. “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth.” *Journal of Architectural Education* Vol. 44, No. 3 (May, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eggen, Keith. *American Architectural History: A Contemporary Reader*, Bristol, Katharine G, The Pruitt-Igoe MythBristol, 1992. P. 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Idem [↑](#footnote-ref-4)