



## A classic 20th-century text on Latin American culture offers clues to modernism in the 21st century.

by Luis E. Carranza PhD

**INCREDULOUSLY, I WATCH TWO MEN** — one of them about my age — refilling an aerosol can. Forced to balance the availability of many modern conveniences — such as the aerosol can, invented in the 20th century — with their limited access to modern resources that are widely available elsewhere, these two Cuban men find ways to “make do” in order to survive the hardships of the US economic embargo. In a way, I don’t understand it. I have become used to our disposable culture. On the other hand, I see it as inevitable.

It seems that in our appetite for the new there is something decidedly old-fashioned. Despite our modernity, we often seem to revert to the ways of the past — ways that haven’t been part of our lives since the Great Depression left its mark on an entire generation. While the debate over paper-or-plastic has passed with our increased awareness of dwindling natural and economic resources, our new reliance on reusable bags, so ubiquitous in supermarkets now, harkens to a time when our elders shopped in markets carrying their own wicker baskets and when milk, soda, and water containers were refilled.

We live in times when it is necessary to enter and exit modernity, to be more hybrid.

This idea is, as the subtitle suggests, central to Nestor García Canclini’s classic book, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. First published in 1989, this study by one of the leading Mexican cultural anthropologists casts contemporary Latin American culture within the paradox of modernity and modernism. In it, García Canclini tries to make sense of the coexistence of traditional or even ancient cultures within modern times and sensibilities. His conclusion is that Latin America suffers from “an exuberant modernism with a deficient modernization.” In other words, the appearance of modernity exists without the infrastructure, means of production, and urban systems needed to produce it.

To a large extent, this paradox was due to the importation of cultures from Europe and North America by artists and thinkers who traveled there for their education. This is the case, for example, of Diego Rivera, the Mexican painter who lived in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century. There he became entrenched in the artistic climate that gave rise to Cubism, and was soon recognized as one of its most adept practitioners. Upon his return to Mexico, Rivera’s aesthetic interests

MODERN

were tempered not only by the fevered energy of the social insurrection that had taken place there, but also by the Revolution's goals to improve the living conditions of uneducated and poor Mexicans. His turn to muralism reflected his aspiration to address the largely illiterate population through a legible painterly language derived from vernacular traditions and forms; his European training allowed him to employ Cubist representational and organizational techniques to convey complex information.

As this case attests, modernism was something that was largely imported. It was cultural. European modernism, on the other hand, had been fostered by societies that had experienced a far greater technical and economic modernization than had those in Latin America. Since the modern did not, and could not, entirely displace the traditional in Latin America, according to García Canclini, a "multitemporal heterogeneity" resulted as the past and the present worked together as a hybrid new. Within a generic Latin American way of operating, this resulted in the development of "hybrid cultures" that are aesthetically modern but in which "high" and "low," foreign and vernacular, popular and high-brow, traditional and contemporary cultures coexist through a system of negotiations of what is kept, altered, and discarded from each.

The following three examples attest to the existence of these kinds of hybrid cultures in our world today.

In the *Lagos Charter*, their excellent research contribution to Rem Koolhaas's Harvard Project on the City, Joshua Comaroff and Gullivar Shepard propose examining Lagos, Nigeria for new ways of thinking about cities — as one might extol the virtues of Italian piazzas and Catalan ramblas. In looking at Lagos, they say, we are looking at how the "much-touted values of contemporary capital — and its prophetic organizational models of dispersal and discontinuity, federalism and flexibility — have

Clockwise from left: *Detroit Industry* (detail) 1932–1933; painting by Diego Rivera; © The Detroit Institute of Arts. Lagos, Nigeria; © George Esiri/Reuters/Corbis. Amonte House, exterior; architect: Axi:Ome (courtesy rendering).



been realized and perfected ... This is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos." Central to their proposition is the inevitable corruption of our understanding of the modern as the most advanced and that, in fact, the collision and coexistence of the modern with other systems will dispel the inbred homogeneity of our ways of thinking based on a limited understanding of the world.

The second example concerns the ever-present race for highly rated sustainable buildings. In a conference discussion in Havana, Cuba, organized by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) in 2002, the contradictions of our modernity became apparent. A participant had just finished touting the merits of William McDonough's newly completed Nike Headquarters in the Netherlands, with its multiplicity of systems to regulate the environment and promote good health and work habits. Someone from the audience asked the Cuban respondent for his reactions to this building and its applicability to the Cuban context. His response: "This building wouldn't work in Cuba. We do not have a consistent supply of electricity to power those systems or, in the worst of cases, to run its air-conditioning units when the climate is unbearably hot." In Cuba, in other words, McDonough's work would be obsolete. Replacing it would be a good "old-fashioned" functionalist

building to fulfill well-defined practical requirements (and limitations) and operate most efficiently. Architects in this country are also seeing the paradoxes of the “new sustainability”: from the exorbitant costs of many sustainable and energy-efficient materials, to the limitations of the ratings systems used to judge performance, and the reliance on other types of resources, such as computerized electronic systems, for their operation. The Saint Louis, Missouri-based Axi:Ome, for example, developed the Amonte House as a classically inspired modernist glass box. Yet, through the design of interior courtyards, vertical veranda-like edges based on vernacular traditions, thermal masses for passive heating, and manual operating systems that allow the regulation of ventilation through the double glass walls and the manipulation of thin brise-soleils on the building’s skin, the design addresses the problems associated with the modernist typology and the current limitations with sustainability.

The final example is based upon the division of labor as it currently affects architectural production, design, and management. Many architects complain about the limited amount of time that they spend on design. This is partly a result of increasingly complex projects and limited (and shrinking) fees designated for design itself. Additionally, while the specialization of the profession and its component tasks makes it more economically viable and efficient, the integration of decisions is becoming more difficult. A truly outstanding practice would address all these competing concerns, although, by its very nature, it would most likely be somewhat anachronistic and inefficient. One successful example, however, is that of the Mexican

architect Fernando Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos’ practice consists of three independent offices; he divides his time among them, while privileging the third. The first focuses on construction management for large projects (at present, he is completing the JVC Center in Guadalajara, Jalisco); the second focuses on the design of speculative office and apartment buildings and retail spaces (in collaboration with another Mexican architect and developer); the third is his investigative design practice, which is, self-admittedly, “economically unsuccessful.” It is, however, funded by the other two. In this third practice, Nuevo Espiritu (New Spirit, after Le Corbusier’s *L’Esprit Nouveau*), Vasconcelos and his small team of young architects and interns work primarily on small residences, competitions, schools, and low-budget public works projects. Here, he applies his vast construction experience as well as his knowledge of real estate economics to the requirements of his clients, while developing new design and formal strategies without budgetary constraints. These new architectural solutions are in turn deployed in the other two practices.

At the core of these three cases is a similar procedure: the selective abandonment of modernity. The result is a new direction based on the integration of the contemporary, radical, and modern with the old, inefficient, and vernacular — a process, as García Canclini’s *Hybrid Cultures* demonstrates, that has precedents in 20th-century Latin America.

Although it would be easy for designers to usurp García Canclini’s argument by merely translating his provocative title and implications into an architectural context, his book offers something more: an understanding of our culture’s present ambivalence toward modernity and our “multitemporal heterogeneity.” The hybrid cultures in the Latin American experience were born of expedience, not choice. A deliberate, considered integration of modernity and tradition might yield very different results. In showing us how others have stepped back from modernity, García Canclini offers us heretofore unimagined strategies and possibilities. Perhaps our newly-found hybridity is one that reconciles our embrace of modernity with our desire to leave it. ■

Luis E. Carranza PhD is an associate professor of architecture at Roger Williams University and author of the forthcoming *Architecture as Revolution: Episodes in the History of Modern Architecture in Mexico, 1920–1940*.

Below: IMSS Hospital, Acapulco;  
architect: Nuevo Espiritu with  
Eduardo Canseco; photo by  
Michel Arciga.

