

RISE AND FALL

Tezontle at Richard Neutra's
VDL House within Tu casa es
mi casa exhibition

09 2017 - 01 2018

From Aris Janigian

To Tezontle

To answer your question, they came in three waves, 20,000 or so strong. Alarmingly efficient for a government agency, in a period of a week they arrested something like 12,000 undocumented immigrants, mostly from Mexico, but also from China, Korean, India, even Armenia. They first targeted any illegal immigrant who had committed a crime, and then for the crime of simply being here, lifting them from their workplaces, then from right off the streets, until, warrant in hand, they busted into their very homes. Huge vans, predictably, I suppose, ICE white in color, transported them to five different locations across the county, where tent cities were set up for processing. Without legal representation or any way to lodge a viable complaint, it didn't take long; a day or two at most, and they were shoved onto busses and shuttled to LAX or south to the border. Hotels, carwashes, restaurants were suddenly shuttered, and all the human parts that keep the machine humming—nannies, gardeners, housekeepers—vanished, turning countless households into a shambles. Pharmacies were scrambling to keep Ativan (usually obtainable as M&Ms) stocked, and an estimated 1.2 million people rose in fiery protest. Placards in hand, they marched down the 101 Freeway, from the Barham all the way to Central Avenue, and on the 10 Freeway, from La Cienega to the Los Angeles River. Downtown was paralyzed, but by the end week the rest of the city was too, as the protest spilled onto several of the East-West going Boulevards, including Wilshire and Sunset and Pico. Most were satisfied that ICE was frozen in its tracks, but others, as it turned out, were looking for a full on meltdown.

During what evangelical Christians call “the rapture,” the faithful will disappear from our midst in the blink of an eye. Even families, the bible promises, will be torn apart, as God one by one conveys his followers to heaven before the apocalypse can begin.

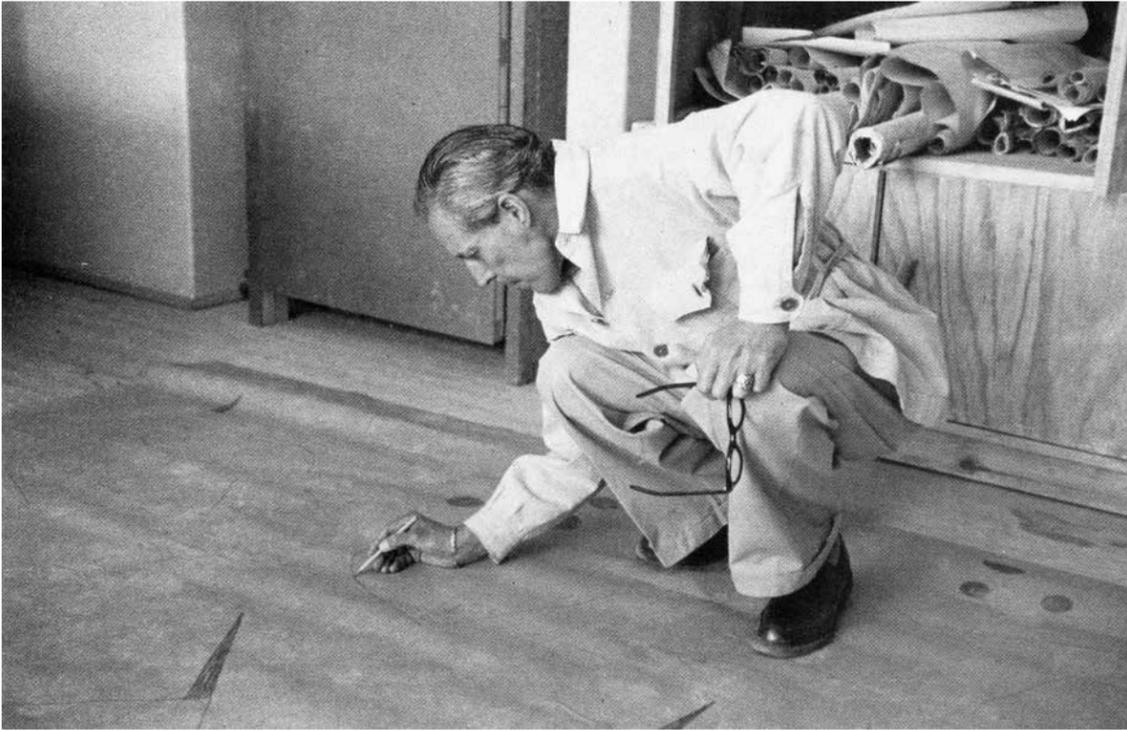
I was dining with my friends Sarah and David the first evening. She teaches at architecture at Cal Poly Pomona and David is a multi-media designer and they live in the garden house of the VDL Neutra House on Silver lake Boulevard, over which they also act as caretakers. The three of us toted a bottle of gin to the roof top solarium and from up there we watched hell unfold. To the West, an uncanny red glow throbbled over the tops of the hills and from our narrow vantage point to the city floor we could see several structures lit up, smoke rising baroquely from the flames. We prayed that a few lone pyromaniacs had taken perverse advantage of the disorder and it would all would come to a swift end, but by midnight we learned that structures had combusted at 12 locations, approximately 3 miles between them, simultaneously. It was obviously organized in advance, some claim by an underground militia, and others claim by Mexican drug cartels that ICE was going after with a paramilitary ferocity. Gun shot and sirens cut through our sleep like shrapnel, and so we slept that night by fits and starts, only to discover, when we woke, that some of our most revered starchitecture projects, mostly downtown, were reduced to clinkers. Saddest and most ironic of all, Our Lady of Angels was now Our Lady of the Ashes. Our eternal faith has turned into our infernal. In defiance of the Feds, we'd raised up a so-called “sanctuary city” only in the end to raze it.

What an irony that I should have been here at the Neutra house watching all this go down, no? He was a refugee, arrived here when the city was hardly small, about 1.2 million people, but still lithe and kind of sleepy. I've read that when you walked Hollywood boulevard you could smell of lemon blossoms from nearby orchards, but since the 1930s we've piled quadruple that numbers into more or less the same space and now we were witnessing what an exodus of that many people looked like.

Waze went haywire, and MapQuest's quest for a way out turned epic as cars filled to the brim with hysteria and whatever valuables were transportable, were bumper to bumper on even the most trivial side streets, while on the main arteries leading out of town, four wheelers plowed out their own lanes from the mediums, sidewalks, and even lawns. Freeways were so slow going people killed their engines and set up these propane canister burners on the trunks of their cars to heat up ramen. Breathing became grim, and ash, like some necrotic snow, twirled in the air and blanketed everything that was exposed. Helicopters—where did they all come from, who knew so many existed?—flitted about like mosquitos in a sky the blood red color of sunrise even at 2 in the afternoon; golf courses, public parks, and, naturally, good enough size backyards were converted into landing strips for the rich and famous to make their escape. Neutra used steel and concrete to fashion a house that felt transparent and light as a soap bubble, but, now, honestly, with all those windows, I felt exposed, wondering how the place would shore up for a bunker, what it presently turned into, because I could find no way to the Westside where I live with any assurance I wouldn't have to spend the night in my car, not an option. In every culture, fire seems to free people of their hang-ups, and so mass looting ensued: first super markets (you couldn't blame people for securing food), but soon stores that stocked anything from clothing to gadgets, large and small, were gutted, and then typically, at nightfall, set ablaze. Every day, for nearly a week, it was Christmas and 4th of July wrapped into one. There was no point in calling the police. They had abandoned the city the way they did during the so-called Los Angeles riots.

That was in 1992; in 1968 Watts erupted, and the Zoot Suit riots strafed the city in 1943. Every quarter of a century or so this city gets to be too much for itself and explodes. Do we see the nightmare coming in our dreams? Is this why Hollywood regularly confects apocalypses that wipe Hollywood out? Or maybe we make use movies as an artificial induction, like a flu shot, but time and again our immune system is too weak for the inoculum to work. Eight hundred and thirty-three dead, and fifty thousand buildings have now been destroyed, from San Pedro to Sylmar, at a financial and human cost that is incalculable.

Neutra's formal language hoped to quiet us down so that we might be more attentive to the world around us; the most economical geometry would be the means; concrete, steel, glass and good old fashioned wood would be the material, but to my thinking, light, so abundant in LA, was the immaterial essence of his work. He let it flood in to flush us of ignorance, prejudice, and hate. When light was freed, our view of the future was clearer, and the lessons of the past more clearly received. It took 200 or so years, but with that achievement, modernism was finally able to embody, if that's the right word, all the ideals of the Enlightenment. But does it any longer make any sense? All the knowledge in the world at our fingertips, all the light we can possibly absorb, and, yet, we humans remain a dark and predictably destructive complexity. The last time this happened, we came together, buried our dead, swept up the mess, and rebuilt as tirelessly as ants do after a school kid steps on their hill. And it's an old trope, I know, but sometimes the slate has to be wiped clean in order for a new story to begin. In 1963, this very house suffered a fire, and only the garden house survived, giving Neutra a chance to re-imagine his plan, which, by many accounts, turned out better than the original. But every now and then wanton destruction turns the clock backwards too. The perennial and hard earned promise of modernism—more as a guiding philosophy than as an architectural movement—has been shaken to the core, but might modernism have taken enough hits to finally call it quits? Have we entered a new American dispensation, where the windows are shuttered, the doors sealed, and paranoia festers in the place of faith and hope? If so, now what, my friends? What then?



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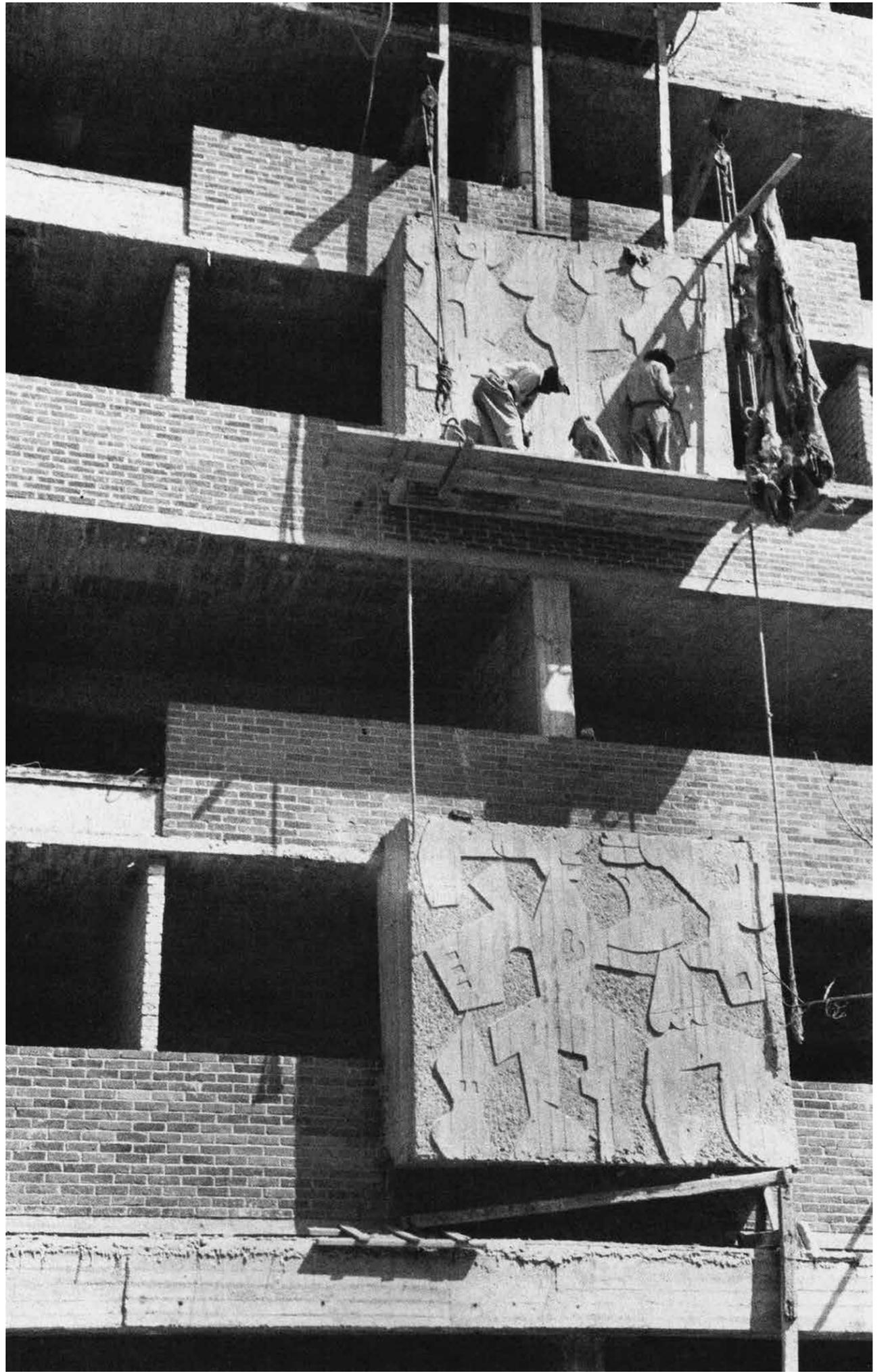
2.

1. Carlos Merida working on real size drawings to be traced on the concrete panels

2. Aerial view of Mario Pani's Multifamiliar Juárez housing complex in Colonia Roma. Completed in 1952 to become one of the prime examples of *integración plástica*

3. Workers finishing off Merida's murals in situ

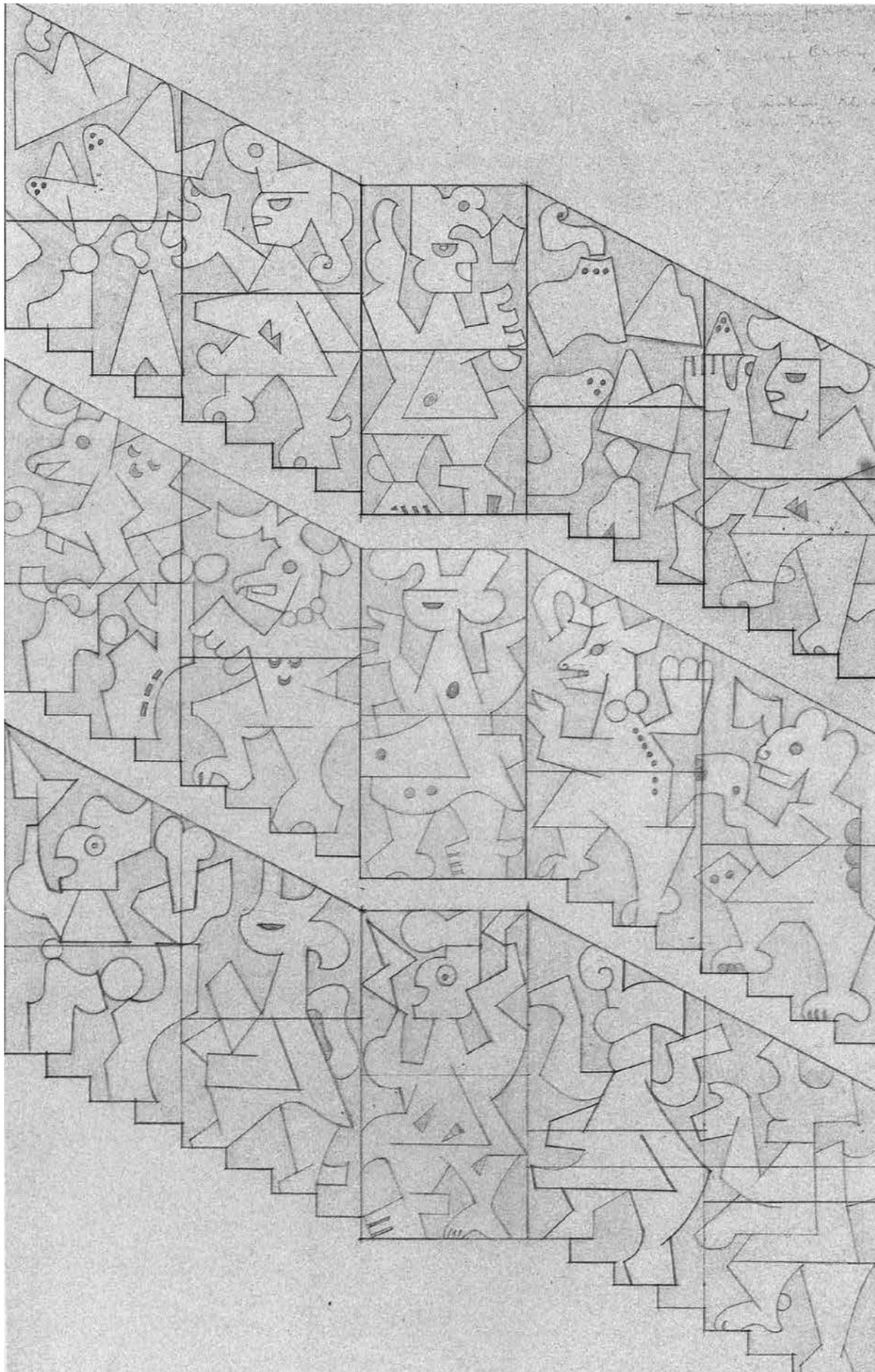
4. Worker grinding the relief and texture into the concrete panels



3.



4.



Carlos Merida's original sketches depicting pre-hispanic tales for the vertical circulations of Mario Pani's Multifamiliar Juarez

OUR CHIMERICAL MODERNISMS

by Nicholas Simcik-Arese

Some say modernism was a convergence towards the generic – a reflexively universalistic project for humanity, with unambiguous origins in Europe. But, like in countless other places, in Mexico City and Los Angeles our graceful, contorted modernist legacies are distinct creatures. These twinned experiments for staging life mirror our temperate climates, expansive skies, and sensations of possibility. The modernist moment was just one stop in the genealogy of this ancient conversation between our cities. It's a meandering chat that began long before either place was named and that cannot help but to continue shaping the minds of our makers today. Like two cousins talking, testing, arguing, and sharing, drifting apart only to reunite at moments, commonalities and differences feed our imaginations, affirming new commonalities and new differences. Our pasts and futures somehow always remain entwined.

For both cousins, how could modernism not confront ancestors and futures? And in finding possibilities through respective pasts, chimerical constructions came to life. They embody the human imagination's recombinant roots. In Mexico, our creatures reassembled how we think of our collective origin. Through modernism we carved cracks in the cultural shackles of colonialism, integrating European lineages with the pre-Hispanic pulse that could never really be suppressed. This force relentlessly bubbles up through the soil and concrete that we build our lives on. Our modernist progenitors channeled this pressure from below – pre-colonial urges, values, and visions – through the vocabulary and sensibility at hand. European modernism became the vines that channeled a groundswell that had to see light. Its clean lines and spaces somehow contain a bursting entanglement, mutant composites to release pressure lest the ground dissolve entirely. This vital compromise and the prerogative for evolution is what Carlos Merida may have had in mind when he developed the notion of *intervencion plastica*.

In the UK or in Germany, you could not have the lightness of LA and Mexico City. It worked beautifully for us, for a time. For this weird yet comforting yellow light, that both our cousin cities emit and refract, came buildings where the light can touch every tiny room within. Light is the lead character, with spaces allowing this distillation of a city's magic to spill and bath the inhabitant. From body to house to city, concentric geographies are all washed in the thread of this light, while also inevitably exposing themselves to a street nearby. But the stories of our chimerical modernism are also ones of collapse. With its rise came an equally momentous fall. For each cousin this happened in its own way, but also always somehow together.

In LA, many of these buildings became shrines, relics of a spirit of experimentation that could not break another tide, distinct from the one emanating from below, that of the political-economy of the time: sprawl and dispersion in the seventies, eighties, and nineties. What remains is so fragile that it must be embalmed in historic value. These structures are still open to the street, but they are also protected from life like precious messages from ancient ancestors. They look outwards, to audiences and devotees shepherded by cultural institutions and foundations, who are left to imagine what it must have been like to live in such a radically open way, comfortably exposed to the elements and to gazes. These pilgrims bathe in views, light, circulation, and wind, deriving inspiration and a sense of origin, but only between 3:30pm and 5pm and by reservation.

Mexico City saw a similar tide, perpendicular to the rising pressures of history: suburbanization, automobilization, and commercialization. But, while many of our creatures succumbed and collapsed under this other pressure, the survivors still exist through a separate strategy. In Mexico City a few people actually inhabit the dream, but contain them within a physical fortresses. When you go see the modernist frames and glass panels in Pedregal, so deft and graceful, they now all sit within high-walled gardens as they lose their original significance. The values of modernism – the lightness and openness – have become wholly introspective.

Inherited visions and values cannot be ignored. The groundswell will not just go back to where it came from, even as it faces each subsequent wave of lateral forces on all sides. Life and the impulse to make things (and ourselves) anew cannot be ignored.

As our interlocutor, Aris Janigian, warns us, these are combative times. Voices from above tell us we must hate each other in order to discover what makes us special. It is as if these ghoulish voices believe they can fill the void left by a desire for a coherent and nurturing tradition, the foundation for varied values, with antagonism itself. But vitriol is no substitute for affirming the richness and confronting the violence of our shared roots. And so, these chimerical constructions remain provocations.

Here, in the glass house, we offer protective barriers against this current lateral tide. But, at the same time, yet again, these constructions can only actually succeed as defences if they also mould new conduits and channels of openness for the ceaseless groundswell of our origins, offering them new light. In this way our barriers manifest a particular kind of opposition, one stemming from solidarity between two cousins and from solidarity between our respective pasts and possibilities. This is an opposition that seeks to bear new fruits by affirming that true rootedness can only exist in conditions of openness. Protection can offer new fruits.

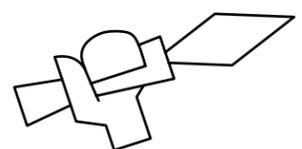
These walls we have planted don't just reproduce a relic of Mexican modernism. We have grabbed the language instinctively and almost impulsively. Merida abstracted his pre-hispanic tales, but positioned them carefully to manifest the values of welfare and affordable housing for all. He knew all too well that the tales and figures depicted were never static. They must have always been moulded for their times, through centuries of civilizational turns on this land. Following the destruction

of Merida's shields in the 1985 earthquake, his student Alfonso Soto Soria followed in a resonant spirit, arranging them anew as towers in and of themselves. These towers, too, expired along a path that echoed their times, falling into decay as their resonance faded while embedding itself somewhere within the public imagination.

Now, again, we resurrect and re-collage these beasts, gods, and warriors, this mythical ecology with all its own internal harmonies and contradictions. They are assembled for our times, but also assembled for this very particular place, an almost sacred niche in this singular house. Scaled, modulated, refined, with patience and care, and humbly directed for this one context as a conduit for channeling our entwined histories. Chimerical creatures and chimerical constructions meet again, embodiments of imagination, carrying the essence of *intervencion plastica* forward to build possibilities out of pasts below us while protecting from lateral forces.

Just as modernism had its own mothers, it would be foolish to deny that these modernisms are ours. The claim that one must either only copy or reject one's past is just a distraction. We do not act 'with' or 'against' modernism but through it. It is a heritage that bares our future. This is the card we've been dealt. We make use of it as needed for our times, and in doing so bring our desires closer to the present: as waves of noxious fumes of resentment and insecurity slowly roll over us, to keep our bearings, we turn to our intuitive foundations - memories, images, faiths, paths - and, now, we make shields, bulwarks that carry light within them. This plastic is crafted for the openness of modernism – its greatest and only universality – layer by layer, with patience and attention, to embrace light and air. At the same time, these layers yield our lasting icons - the firm faces, proud snarls, and open claws of our makers – to shield against this fraudulently divisive tide of today.

Exactly thirty-two years since the earthquake swallowed Merida's murals, the present is just another threshold. And so the form and spirit of this plastic skin is another ruin in the making. It shoots up from ground, absorbs the tide, and petrifies to bury it: a rise and fall. May others shape what remains for themselves, differently but from a common stem, as a filter against pressures and for possibilities in their own times.





1.

1. Crowds gathered around the collapsed buildings of Multifamiliar Juárez in the 1985 earthquake

2. Vertical circulation murals momentarily standing after the earthquake

3. Merida's mural protruding from the rubble of the collapsed buildings

Backcover. Alfonso Soto Soria's reconstruction of Merida's murals in their current state of oblivion (2017)



2.



3.

