Canny modernity, uncanny modernity

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Abstract: Focusing on recent scholarly production on housing, this article explores contemporary architecture in Brazil, claiming that postmodernism is manifested among us in the guise of neo-modernism. Acknowledging that this presence of modernism is marked by the classical/anti-classical duality and the counterpoint between norm and deviation, the text seeks to identify the attitudes that tension this legacy and the possibilities available to architectural practice.

Keywords: Brazilian contemporary architecture, housing, site plan, topography

> yes, I could open the doors leading inside / walk, running down corridors silently / lose the apparent walls of the building / penetrate the labyrinth / the labyrinth of labyrinths inside the apartment
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> yes, I could look for the house inside / crossing one by one the seven doors, seven rooms / in the living room get the icy kiss on my mouth / kiss from a dead goddess / dead god, female, icy tongue, icy tongue as nothing
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> yes, I could check the furniture in every room / and in each piece kill one family member / until fullness and death coincide one day / which would happen anyway
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> but I'd rather open the windows / so that all insects may come in. (Veloso, 1972, song).

Revisiting the theme of housing in light of recent Brazilian scholarly architecture indicates, rather than alleged alternative living modes, potential architectural directions. For some time, there has been a reversal in international interest about local production, restoring a weakened prestige achieved in its heyday. If, on the one hand, the contemporariness of modern design popularized by exhibitions and specialized magazines is aligned, after decades of devotion to the spectacle, with the media compulsion for renewal and the call for sustainable models, more appropriate to global economic crisis, on the other hand, it presents practice-related facts that

transcend editorials and critics' circumstantial support to any redeeming sobriety. From the outset, it should be noted that in contrast to similar moments of national architecture prominence, now small private projects predominate, mainly residential ones. Besides denouncing the alarming contraction of the State's public function in Brazil, which confers a negligible role to architecture in the constitution of urban environment, other lessons can be drawn from this convergence of building art and living ways.

In the retrospective *Ainda modernos?* [*Still modern?*], the clear link between historical and contemporary generations of architects was nuanced by pointing out that "Once illusions about the role played by architecture in the country's social transformation have been discarded, modernism is assumed as language, no longer as ideology" (Cavalcanti and Lago, 2005, p.19). Characteristic of a "modernism on the move", without nostalgia (Cavalcanti and Lago, 2005, p.9), meticulous and experimental in the technical sphere, whose appraisal may be paralleled to a previous argument concerning the inventive impasse experienced by Brazilian architecture from the 1970s onward, which "made of its mannered view of modernism a return to language devoid of discourse, [...] attributed the permanence of modernism to its figurative continuity, and what was primarily considered structural became, without ever assuming it, linguistic" (Spadoni, 2003, p.106). The schism between content and form, the emptying of discourse and reasons, the suspension of original variety and complexity, and the accommodation of different nuances under a single modernist dome are byproducts gestated during the dictatorial regime. Weakened down to banking and manufacturing avatars or to institutional versions connected to the suspension of civil rights, a battered and distorted modernism paved the way for and anticipated the post-modernist reduction of architecture to language. Unable to acknowledge the advancement and potential of this averse questioning, which views architectural objects as consonant with the city, the purpose of local post-modern simulacra from the 1980s onward – taking into account the deconstructivists and the shallow *Minimal Art* re-editions that circulated during the following decade – acts only toward conceal its actual manifestation and reveal itself in the guise of neo-modernism.

Or else, how to understand such radically anti-modernist practices associated with it? Houses suited to lots and habits, compartmented, in harmony with domestic rites, but dressed for Sunday mass, spotlessly tidy and well-behaved; a skillful play of volumes under the light, refined surface effects, rooms-balconies in full integration with intramural areas, technical conciseness and virtuosic expression of materials cannot surpass the poetic comment on mid-twentieth century architectural production. Modernity without rupture, reinforcing tradition and academically inclined, almost canonical, two-way: on the one hand, disentanglement from the modern matrix, from technocratic modernism to post-modernism, allowing the adoption of modernist legacy as tradition; on the other hand, acknowledging the value of paradigms, practice becomes tangent to mannered procedures that reveal how the original content vanished. In this context of domesticated modernism, the painstaking architectural works of

Isay Weinfeld and Marcio Kogan have the merit of expressing this gap with fine irony: the apex of balance, where everything is artificial and perfect to the point of bursting, all vital instincts neutralized – as played by Laura Brown (Julianne Moore) in *The Hours* (2002) by Stephen Daldry, the uncanny revelation of the presence of absence, the confusing precipitation of intimacies and hidden depths as postulated by Sigmund Freud in the essay *Das Unheimliche* ('The Uncanny', 1919)[1].

Inflation of images and resources, deflation of reasons and motivations typical of an age that equates project to design, converting architecture to advertising, both media-oriented, and now according to the most hyped trends. The new autonomy of the architectural object yields to image management for greater impact and immediate consumption, alienated by a timid prospect of intervention underway in the country. Renewed *times of crassness*, in which arguments about image sublimation must surely sound obvious and dated, similarly to those exposed in Lina Bo Bardi's criticism about the impasse of design in consumer society in the mid-1970s. "Art is not that innocent: the great attempt to make industrial design the regenerative force of an entire society has collapsed and become the most startling denunciation of wickedness of a system" (Bardi, 2009 [1976], p.137). Awareness of degeneration of the vanguards' original meaning in the course of technocratic modernization, Bo Bardi insisted on the urgent need for the kind of environmental planning that takes anthropological issues into consideration, where "participant balance" of the popular – never of the craft – would be a sign of realness and a medicine to overcome dependent industrialization. "If the issue is essentially political and economic, the 'agent's' task in the field of 'design' is, despite it all, fundamental. It is what Brecht called the capacity to say 'no'" (Bardi, 2009 [1976], p.138).

Resistance remains relevant in times of global homogenization of lives and forms, but it does not suffice to denounce the obvious mismatch between resurgent modernism and the masters' legacy, alluding to how much, during our modern history since 1922, we have pursued a concatenation between artistic avant-garde and national identity, marking out aesthetic and political ideals; the arduous but productive dialogue with indigenous values; disputes over a national project; the conflicting agreement with the state and developmentalism; the critique of formalist excess and prescription of a synthesis between form and structure; awareness of renewed dependency that pervades historical modernism, differing it from current pragmatism. The current situation of Brazilian architecture includes peculiar issues, which, under this approach, cannot even come up. Disparate standpoints circulate in virtually similar forms. On the one hand, extemporaneous practices are restored, whereas, on the other hand, the primacy of language over discourse is radicalized to the point of subverting the reduction of

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[1] An architectural approach to psychoanalytic concept of 'uncanny' can be found in Vidler, 1992. To follow up the huge term polysemy, see pp.22-27.

architecture to language; in most cases, both positions are present in the same project, which oscillates from norm to digression.

The critical reception of architectural works by new generations of professionals has influenced emerging trajectories and fostered a related production. Many authors have considered it relevant to highlight academic advancement, setting it apart from previous impetuses for novelty, acknowledging the pursuit of innovation within a shared practice. The option for formal concision and association of project decisions to constructive motives demarcate a re-enchantment with the profession, whose scope should not be overlooked. In addition to supplanting an environment filled with vicissitudes and refractory to the presence of architects, expanding fields of practice and mitigating past downplaying of the social relevance of architecture; the connection with the modern tradition is a local parameter for emancipated dialogue of model reproduction. Antonio Candido's premise has been cited by many critics to contextualize different periods of architectural production in Brazil:

> A key step to overcome dependency is the ability to produce works of prime condition, not influenced by immediate foreign models, but by previous national examples. This implies the establishment of an internal causality, making what is borrowed from other cultures even more fruitful. (Cândido, 1973, p.17)[2].

The uneasiness regarding the cultural incipience of a significant part of the world's architecture leads some authors, keen on precepts and rules, to deal with modern architecture as a formal system, in an abrupt post-modern resumption of classical themes. However, as indicated by Giulio Argan when chronicling his professional life and introducing anti-classicism, the interest in Mannerism enhanced:

> the conscious sacrifice of a broadly representative reactivity in favor of urgent cultural uneasiness, in pursuit of perfection unwarranted by major models of nature and history, but for the need of facing problems of expressive means, namely internal difficulties inherent to art. Thus was posited to art a question similar and parallel to that of language: the inescapable relationship and contradiction between linguistic rules and immediate communication, between theory and practice, between ancient norms and present demands. (Argan, 1999, p.14-15).

Then, even if Mannerism was not "less conforming" art, it served the purpose of dissolving classical conceptions: "It is therefore impossible to deny that, in that very period, models lost the substance of authority and were reduced to precepts, subsequently viewed as useless, and then abandoned" (Argan, 1999, p.15-16).

Basis for professional establishment, the small-sized, residential (or analogous) building mirrors general trends in architecture, as discussed above, as well as signals the emergence of

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[2] Excerpts from the argument can be found in Spadoni, 2003, p. 116; Camargo, 2009, p. 20.

contrasting alternatives. By communicating unique passages of the new architecture less in light of the preserved past and more in view of conducted disengagements it is possible to promote the identification of original intents and radicalize their transformation impetuses. To the reduction of architecture to language and persistence of modern procedures there adhere procedures that inflect upon modernist matrixes, apposing norm and deviation, in syntheses that, on the margins of or in the face of reality, give rise to the exceptional, in accordance with the notion of internal causality advocated by Antonio Candido. Buildings that are anti-houses without claiming to be so, e.g., weekend houses, pavilions, clinics, suspended in archetypal longings off conventional living spaces. Far from comprising a hegemonic trend, they hold within the potential of new models and paths for Brazil's architecture, grounded on dialog with tradition and contemporaneousness, with established culture and emerging culture. When analyzing this production, it is more important to revolve it critically than situate it historically, singling out aspects that, however familiar, constitute central alternatives, not yet followed, but dormant, expressly needed, because – since the epoch do not embrace utopias – architecture demands radicalism.

Marks of virtuous resumption of modernism among us, two clinics built by MMBB (Angelo Bucci, Fernando de Mello Franco, Marta Moreira, and Milton Braga)[3] in Orlândia (São Paulo State), in residential scale and context, are exemplars of this variation of purposes. With remarkably higher critical acceptance, thus subject to normative desire, the 'classical' plasticity of Clínica de Odontologia (1998-2000)[4] is lauded for its formal conciseness and structural clearness, by rendering visible its constitutive requirements. The project operation condenses its internal reasons to a shape sensitive to the principle of economy and liable to be incorporated as formal order, but experimentally open to renew the habitual. Aside from the elegance of its architectural execution, a distinct aspect of the project is its remarkable ability to add a temporal patina to a modern object. Typology-and urban-oriented, modernity emerges astonishing, complex, and contradictorily contextual, engaged with the surroundings, the city block, streets, and high-basement houses, observing public building height and alignment patterns, invested with memory and history, imbued with temporal depth. By means of scaling operations, modern design suits the tangible city, retains past landmarks, and provides urban form with prospective concreteness.

This anticlassical drift appears much more pronounced in Clínica de Psicologia (1995-98)[5], owing both to its tectonic roughness and unusual appropriation of the lot where it stands. The impetus for deviation from norm stands out in an illustrated implementation that topographically reconstructs the site as architectural support; the building is inlaid in the lot, land is raised to building status; construction and open spaces are placed on equal grounds; its internal mobile partitioning bends and modulates linearity a la John Hejduk; its spatial conformation makes it unique, emphasizing modern experimental ethics and lot tensioning as

[3] Bucci left the group in 2003.
[4] See: http://www.mmbb.com.br/projects/view/30 and http://www.spbr.arq.br/projetos/157_odonto/157.htm.
[5] Project by Angelo Bucci. See http://www.spbr.arq.br/projetos/00_psicologia/psicologia.htm.

matrixes of new designs for the city. When reviewing the houses in Ribeirão Preto (2000-01) and Aldeia da Serra (Barueri, 2001-02) or even Carapicuíba House[6] (2003-08) by Alvaro Puntoni and Angelo Bucci, one finds a similar duality between norm and deviance, model and license: praised by critics, the architectural body hangs over subtle and more disturbing land revolutions. In Ribeirão Preto, extending the promenade into the lot, topographic remodeling is materialized in a set of blocks; the landscape is constructed with artificial rocks, tectonically valued for their incompleteness; architecture becomes literally "a life-supporting infrastructure," as says Paulo Mendes da Rocha. In Carapicuíba, the purpose of the entire basement operation acts toward to show the suspended volume. As a plaza and monumental landmark, the model character of Clínica de Psicologia in Orlândia unfolds in this architectural work; the moderating presence of architecture seeks the balance between land occupation and landscape construction.

Pedra e Arvoredo is a remarkable text by Bucci concerning the invisibility of cities and things, in which the building of Centro Cultural São Paulo-CCSP (Eurico Prado Lopes and Luiz Castro Telles) and the partial flooding in Fama (MG) by Furnas Hydroelectric Power Plant reservoir sheds light on the reading of the city of São Paulo landscape. Hijacked and submerged in fluid atavistically regulated by violence, its hidden faces would arise when walking by the edge-backwater, the threshold where consciousness and unconsciousness immensities touch. This experience of the double and the hidden in the city associates the revelation of its treasures with incompleteness, the sublime rapture produced by a boundary condition, as implied by the view of the CCSP stone foundation, built to preserve the trees inside it, and the sight of divided Fama reunited by water. "Finishing the architectural work by rendering it incomplete", by bringing architecture closer to urban making as much as the fable. The grove-stone, as he argues, points in the direction of a city more connected to leisure than business, in reference to Flávio Motta.

> Buildings in progress, unfinished architectural works, have this grace: they allow you to see clearly configuration possibilities, possibilities that finished architectural works tend to hide deeper and deeper. [...] In other words, in a modern perspective, architectural works, even when finished, remain more than ever projects; prospects for other feasible configurations (Bucci, 2002, p.4).

In times of image inflation, only few people may have noticed certain antinomies in the international architectural scene, contemporary to the drafting of Clínica de Psicologia in Orlândia, opposing Rem Koolhaas' architectural works to those of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, one bound to topology, the other focused on tectonic aspects. If the former claims that spatial form promotes the uniqueness of architectural works (i.e. built nature), the latter

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[6] Ribeirão Preto House, see http://www.spbr.arq.br/projetos/182_ribeirao/182.htm;
Aldeia da Serra House, see http://www.mmbb.com.br/projects/view/19
and http://www.spbr.arq.br/projetos/184_aldeia/184.htm;
Carapicuíba House, see http://www.spbr.arq.br/projetos/0301_carapicuiba/0301.htm.

relies on a formal and deliberately neutral basis in order to tension it through its material qualification (i.e., superimposed nature). A recent synthesis of this duality can be found in contemporary Spanish production, especially in projects of RCR (Rafael Aranda, Carmen Pigem, and Ramon Vilalta): with buildings inlaid in the site, these antithetical procedures materially and topologically merge, becoming landscaping devices. A similar operation was anticipated at the Clínica de Psicologia, demonstrating the correctness of Antonio Candido's ponderings.

Three contemporary works of a Rio de Janeiro architect allow us to further situate this contrast. Against architecture approach toward scenography, but aware of material subtleness, the plain houses by Carla Juaçaba indicate functional divestment as well as technical conciseness. At Casa-Ateliê (with Mário Fraga, Rio de Janeiro, 2001), Casa Bonito (Nova Friburgo, RJ, 2002), and Casa Varanda (Rio de Janeiro, 2008)[7], craft and industry concur to produce spaces based on minimal cells, in which functional and technical sublimation is rather a principle toward informality. In stone, wood, glass, concrete or metal, planes achieve constructive autonomy, dissociating from one another as do volume and land. Disengagement from land highlights the distinction between the technical object and physical environment, but the contrast between artifice and nature is mitigated by materially qualifying the surfaces, which erases the constructive logic of separation. At Casa Rio Bonito, an architectural finding – the stone stairway – is incorporated to the house volume, in keeping with the desire to build a dual viewpoint, a glass-terraced viewpoint-room open to the river and a garden-ceilinged cosmological observatory to the skies; the timeless character of the doubly- and vertically-oriented basement regulates the Miesian suspension of domestic life; the stone wall receives a topological overlay.

The difference in approaching site, program, and technique becomes more pronounced in Vinicius Andrade and Marcelo Morettin's architectural works, as exemplified by two extremes of their production. At Casa P.A. (Carapicuíba, SP, 1997-1998)[8], transparence and opaqueness modulations shape the cell to living at one with its wrapping vegetal covering, widening the minimal living space outwards between land and canopy. The object in the forest defines three living zones: the stone-core, embedded in soil, containing the infrastructure that supports a flexible living room, both lantern and clearing of the outdoor space. Mandatory accompaniment to project definition, the lot does not appear in drawings, thus leading one to suppose this house is only a pavilion. At Casa B (São Paulo, 2010)[9], serigraphed glass panes incorporate a foliage motif in an interplay of shade and translucence, which are at heart the opposite of Carapicuíba veiling. While the purpose of literal transparence moderation provides its involving closure with light corporeity, grading the outdoors and indoors, the foliage motif on Casa B glass panes enhances the phenomenological transparence of the membrane, mitigating the

[7] Casa-Ateliê, see http://www.carlajuacaba.com/carlajuacaba/1.4_casatelier_1.html;
Casa Rio Bonito, see http://www.carlajuacaba.com/carlajuacaba/1.2_casariobonito_1.html;
Casa Varanda, see http://www.carlajuacaba.com/carlajuacaba/1.1_casavaranda_1.html.
[8] See http://www.andrademorettin.com.br/.
[9] See http://www.arcoweb.com.br/arquitetura/andrade-morettin-arquitetos-residencia-21-07-2010.html.

presence of the technical object at the site and augmenting the internal perception of surrounding trees. In both cases, a supposed technical sensitivity comes forth as a landscaping one.

Andrade and Morettin's architectural works stands out in Brazilian architecture by a refined association between form and building and the careful balance of contemporary architectural references in view of modernist legacy. Their noticeable attention to international circles is mediated by an evident fondness for Brazilian modern architecture in a way that the cultural value of this tradition is reaffirmed at the same time that is inflected and presented under new contours. In an environment permeated by the restoration of modern design as style, their production has succeeded to avoid the classic temptation – the form settling as norm, hostile to any urge for renewal – as well as the baroque and spectacular appeal inherent to the play of images that characterizes current culture.

In line with the technical approach, Casa Grelha (Serra da Mantiqueira, SP, 2008)[10] by FGMF (Fernando Forte, Lourenço Gimenes, and Rodrigo Marcondes Ferraz) has an analogous landscaping proposal. The structure of this bridge-house, in the shape of a uniformly spaced grid, alternating occupied and free modules, lies on the site as coordinate and matrix of autonomous living cells, laid out as a village. Above the ground, ceiling and floor grids touch the land at their extremities, reinforcing connections with natural trails and multiplying internal and external pathways, according to three landscaping planes: the natural level, defined by topography, among rocks, pillars, and water; the living level, among enclosures, empty spaces, and decks; and the artificial level, with garden-ceilings, water mirrors, and footbridges linked with the lot. Landscaped by Fernando Chacel and Sidney Linhares, the landscape-house models a new topography, superposing three layers of circulation, with multiple wandering possibilities, and ambiances that will certainly be further enhanced when surrounding trees grow up.

The last design under analysis, Slice House (Porto Alegre, RS, 2004)[11], by Christopher Procter and Fernando Rihl, increases the notion of deviation and cuts off from the modern matrix, providing the topological approach with material concreteness. Taking complete advantage of a residual lot (just 3.5m x 38.5m) deriving from urban subdivision demands, however, a less tortuous spatial approach, but for this very reason a more topological approach, however just relational. By exploring matches and mismatches of form, texture, and matter, it turns away from the notion of design, retaining the primacy of economy from modern spatiality and assuming itself as infrastructural. Ruggedness, simplicity, and constructive correction substantiate the notions of folds, distortions, layers, and transparencies. The manipulation of containing form follows the qualification of content-space ambiances; the folds generate incisions that model light input; inflections act phenomenologically to produce illusions of amplitude, in a sequence of open and closed continuous, undivided spaces.

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[10] See http://www.fgmf.com.br/casagrelha/.
[11] See http://www.procter-rihl.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/slice-house.html.

The collective of projects presented in this article are joined by many other contemporary architectural works of new generations of professionals in the arduous pursuit of architectural works that are open to the unpredictability of life, receptive to achievable and needed transformations, in an environment characterized by the narrowness of goals and susceptible to global homogenization. In alignment with modernity, without changing what is not their matter (life styles), but without conforming to it, they are known for exerting boldness within imposed boundaries, critically tensioning reality. Saving room for experimentation and guiding design toward concrete actions, this project activity seems promising in that it is confronted with ampler and more complex scales and demands. The question is whether this inventiveness, changing drive, and ability to produce roughness will be transferred from small-sized to larger-scale architectural works. The ability to overcome injunctions inherent to domestic environments and produce uncanny architecture is heartening. In confronting reality, a sensitive interpretation of modernist legacy, instead of showing it to be eroded and pacified by notions of comfort and signs of conventionality, promote the rise of deviations from modernist norms, which, by exploring new topographies, keeps in the germ the appearance of the unexpected.

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On the wall of Slice House, Arnaldo Antunes' poetry expresses the otherness of things: in despite of all they have, "things have no peace," perhaps because they escape domesticity. At the top, in a prosaic cult of the body, but as a mermaid about to entice us with her singing, an instant of life is captured by Marcelo Nunes: the sidelong glance of the girl that bubbles suspended in the living room.

> things have weight, mass, volume, size, time, shape, color, position, texture, duration, density, smell, value
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> consistency, depth, contour, temperature, function, appearance, price, purpose, age, meaning
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> things have no peace. (Antunes and Gil, 1993, song).

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