A MODERN ENSEMBLE AT THE ARGENTINIAN PAMPA: CLORINDO TESTA’S CIVIC CENTER IN SANTA ROSA

CLÁUDIA PIANTÁ COSTA CABRAL

Address: Faculdade de Arquitetura - UFRGS
Rua Sarmento Leite, 320, Sala 201
Porto Alegre - RS - Brasil
CEP 90050-170
e-mail: cabral fendt@terra.com.br

ABSTRACT

Situated in the middle of Argentinian pampas, Santa Rosa’s Civic Center has been much less discussed than other of Clorindo Testa’s great contemporary works as the London Bank (1959) and the National Library (1962), even in the South American context. The Government Building, the Bus Station and the covered central space were built before 1963. Testa finished the Legislature Building in 1976, and even though in 2006 he was able to conclude the little Legislature Library building, half of the Civic Center area still remains an open space. Nevertheless, as a living piece of the never completed modern project, installed in the far south, La Pampa’s case seems to pose relevant urban questions. This paper explores that case in two complementary directions. One focuses on the results of the first competition, recognizing in them an original contribution to the relationship between modernity and monumentality. The second one discusses the unfinished condition of the Civic Center as constitutive to modern tradition, in the very modern sense of the city as a never completed work.

A CIVIC CENTER FOR SANTA ROSA

Since colonial times, the pampa has been recognized as a vague territory whose mythology incorporates the fear of a vast emptiness, identified with an apparent limitlessness and unchanging landscape (Zago, 1999, p.13). According to Argentinian writer Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, the pampa could be a metaphor for America itself when Europeans first arrived, as the “new world, newly discovered”, which “had not yet been placed over the planet, and had no form” (Martínez Estrada, 1997, p. 5). In his sociological-historical, but also poetic essays on the pampa’s cultural and physical landscape, Martínez Estrada depicted the pampa’s very nature like the incommensurable void that precedes civilization, the land on which “man stands alone as an abstract being, who had to resume the history of the specie - or end it” (Martínez Estrada, 1997, p. 7).

In this context, cities were exception. Santa Rosa, capital of the young province of La Pampa, was founded in 1892, at the end of the military campaigns that annihilated indigenous people and ensured republican control over the Patagonia region. An architect and a painter, Clorindo Testa (1923) claims that only once in his life did he paint a mural for one of his own buildings, and it was in the Civic Center of Santa Rosa, La Pampa (Brea; Dagnino, 1999, p. 124). That mural was intended to cover a wall of the courtroom inside the Government House. It was an abstract, grayscale painting in which he depicted the history of Santa Rosa’s foundation (fig. 1).
Testa’s mural was in fact a sort of black and white cartography of genocide. Ink spots, arrows, dates, names and other marks are arranged to write down the facts necessary to reconstruct the history of the so called Conquest of the Desert, which led to Santa Rosa’s foundation in 1892. The first important gesture is the long horizontal line in the upper part of the mural. That line represents “La zanja de Alsina” - the Alsina’s Trench - which was actually a 374 km long trench, three meters wide and two meters deep, constructed by Minister of War Adolfo Alsina in 1875 to prevent cattle theft. Aboriginals used to make incursions into the Province of Buenos Aires to take cattle from the farms, which would be later carried to Chile across the Andes through the Mapuche routes, with the consent of Chilean authorities expecting to reinforce their influence over Patagonian territories.

Alsina’s trench remained as a frontier line between civilization and the unconquered territories until General Julio Argentino Roca crossed it in his huge campaign against the aboriginal’s settlements. At the right side of the mural, behind an arrow, there is a line of penetration conformed by the words “1879 EXPEDICIÓN DEL GRAL ROCA”. At the center, the line representing Alsina’s trench is crossed by a second line, which corresponds to the Railway connecting Buenos Aires to Santa Rosa in 1897, after Roca’s campaign had been successful in wiping the whole area from the indigenous tribes. The names Pincén, Namungurá, Califucurá, Catriel, Painé, Epumer, belonging to the indigenous commanders, are written over four black spots disposed at the bottom of the mural surface, like four empty holes, standing for the Mapuche population that by the end of the desert campaign in 1884 would be no larger than three thousand.
Not before that date did the National Territory of La Pampa come to exist. It was created in 1884, extending from the south of the Province of Buenos Aires to the areas which today belong to the Province of Rio Negro. La Pampa’s present area was delimited in 1945, when those territories were divided. Although La Pampa can today be regarded as an urbanized province, since most of the population of about 300,000 people lives in cities or small towns as a result of the worldwide phenomenon known as rural exodus, the large urban cores are scarce. Still today, hardly three towns can be considered cities: the capital Santa Rosa, with a population of about 100,000 inhabitants, General Pico with 50,000 inhabitants, and General Acha with 11,000 inhabitants (Zago, 1999, p. 142).

Rodolfo García Palacios has studied the genealogy of Santa Rosa’s urban plan and its transformation. He explained how the foundation of the city in 1892 relied on quite different principles from those valid in the period of the colonial expansion. From the late 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the second foundational period related to the Federal Republic raised new technical and legal devices to regulate the national territory. A regular-shaped, continuous geometrical grid - the “macro-cuadrícula” - would be extended over the whole Argentinian geographic natural territory, indifferently overlapping the most various environmental conditions (fig. 2). Unlike back in the colonial period, “the cities are no longer advanced points against the indigenous”, but rather belong to “a system of political subdivision of the territory that integrates and orders then” (Garcia, 2003, p. 151-152). That virtual and abstract
network would form the cadastral basis for the foundation of new villages. In the case of Santa Rosa, this macro-grid preceded the urban layout, such as a regulatory framework previous to the process of urbanization. Its ineludible presence on the city's urban plan was emphasized by Garcia as a reminiscent feature of the sewing between different urban patterns.

Figure 3. Competition brief, Sociedad Central de Arquitectos, 1955. The proposed site for the Civic Center is hatched.
The proposed site for Santa Rosa’s Civic Center was close to these lines of stitching between the four fractions of the macro-grid on which the city was founded. The site was an expropriated land of nine hectares in the outskirts of the city, a four blocks long rectangular area crossed by the roadway to Buenos Aires, which would have to be deflected to make space for the Civic Center. The design competition for the Civic Center area was held in 1955, organized by the Sociedad Central de Arquitectos in Buenos Aires. The cadastral plan that accompanied the contest rules showed how Santa Rosa’s urban plan was clearly structured according to the lines of the macro-grid, which virtually divided the urban area in four sectors. The core of the city stood in the northwest sector, and the area of the future civic center was in the northeast. The northwest and northeast sectors were both subdivided into typical square-shaped blocks about one hundred meter width. The southwest sector had its blocks rotated 45 degrees with respect to the macro-grid, since that part of the city also responded to the parceling of a pre-existent settlement, called Toay. The southeast sector, which had not been urbanized before the thirties, still showed bigger blocks (fig. 3).

Santa Rosa was not an unfamiliar place to Clorindo Testa when he took part in the Civic Center’s design competition in 1955. He had been there a few times on vacation when he was young, since his mother’s family was from La Pampa (Cabral, 2008, p. 7). Santa Rosa’s urban scene in the fifties was still that of a small town with unpaved streets flanked by one floor houses forming a continuous façade. The Civic Center would not be in the core of the city, but six blocks distant from the main square with the church and the municipality building. Since the beginning, it was clear that it would not be a current infill operation intended to renew the core of the city, in the sense that it was not just a matter of raising a new facade along one of the four sides of the main square. The task implied to design, almost from scratch, a new piece of city. Competitors were supposed to organize new buildings and public spaces within an area of nine hectares standing between the existing city and the surrounding pampas.

Testa won the competition by proposing to build it as a piece of modern city. The winner project was then developed by him with the assistance of architects Augusto Gaido and Francisco Rossi. The Government Building, the Bus Station and the covered central space were built before 1963. About ten years later Testa designed the Legislature Building with Gaido, Rossi and Héctor Lacarra. That building was finished in 1976, but since half of the Civic Center area remained free, another design competition was held in 1980. Testa presented a proposal with Lacarra and Rossi, and for the second time, was declared winner. It never came to be executed, and even though in 2006 Testa would be able to insert another building in there - the little Legislature Library, designed with Miguel Garcia - half of the Civic Center’s area still remains open space.²

---

¹ The Central Society of Architects is a civil institution founded in 1886 to represent Argentinian architect’s professional interests.

Corbusian themes, especially those recently explored in Chandigarh’s Capitol, played an important role in Testa’s plan. There is a remarkable relationship between Secretariat and La Pampa’s Government House. But these are also contrasting situations in scale and purpose. Le Corbusier should refound in modern terms an ancient but very present culture, at an almost untouched territory. Testa’s task was to give a civic core to an existing city, no matter how young it was compared to European or Asian ones, and how lost it could seem in the middle of the endless pampa. Clorindo Testa’s comments on the Civic Center’s site described it as a soft hill surrounded by a horizontal environment, where almost all the urban development extended to north and west directions, while to south and east prevailed the pampean landscape (Testa, 1963, p. 39). Testa’s approach would incorporate that sense of the site as a frontier space between the open field and a city whose most outstanding feature was the ubiquitous presence of the homogeneous square-lined grid of its urban plan.

Testa’s modern design, even though favoring a relaxed treatment of the open areas, is not a casual one. It relies on the conscious inscription of discrete objects within the open space, which does not define a closed system of spaces but clearly structures the civic center designed area. Although not primarily concerned with contextual design sensibilities, in the sense that traditional distinctions between front and back are not conserved, it is related to site specific conditions. The pivotal piece in that plan is the 180 meters long building of the Government House and Ministries, designed as an autonomous...
slab set back from street alignments but geometrically coordinated with the square-lined grid of Santa Rosa's plan. The building is constructed in exposed reinforced concrete, structured over four lines of pillars standing along the longitudinal dimension of the slab, the exterior ones being coincident with facade's surface.

Figure 5. Clorindo Testa, Augusto Gaido and Francisco Rossi, Civic Center of Santa Rosa, La Pampa. Government House, 1955-1963, view from the city's main street (Clorindo Testa’s archives).

Partly inlaid against the sloping site, this is not the pilotis-raised slab. Pedestrian movement is not encouraged at the ground level, but directed to the elevated main floor by means of two access ramps. There, the building massive presence is relieved by a more permeable configuration, which interlocks a continuous peripheral gallery with the public space outside, drawing enclosed rooms back to the structure central stripe. The large facade’s theme is developed as a concrete grid generating a thick, carved surface, whose rich texture is used as a device to control light but also to express programmatic or spatial specific situations, like the visual expansion of the access floor, the ceremonial governor's rooms or double-height spaces.

This large urban piece faces the axis of San Martin Avenue, the city's main street, therefore virtually prolonged into the Civic Center area. But what is placed at the culmination of that urban axis is not a building, but a void: the half-covered civic square, which is somehow anticipated by the curved and perforated wall named "gate of the sun", as in the ancient pre-Columbian cultures. The concrete covering of paraboloid shells, at the center of the whole site, asserts the presence of a public precinct, without rigidly defining it as a
circumscribed area. Those Candela like concrete umbrellas, standing over cross-shaped concrete pillars, are a relaxed limit between the Civic Center's complementary sides: one artificial, constructed and paved, including parking areas and buildings, and the other one natural, preserving the land's green cover, where only the Government House scarcely penetrates. The slab and the central covering, at right angle, settle a corner that both organizes public space and provides a proper conclusion for San Martín Avenue.

Figure 6. Clorindo Testa, Competition drawing showing the Government House (at the bottom), covered square and bus station, 1955. Summa n. 2, Buenos Aires, October 1963.

Figure 7. Clorindo Testa, Augusto Gaido and Francisco Rossi, Civic Center of Santa Rosa, La Pampa. Government House, 1955-1963, view from the south (Clorindo Testa’s archives).

3 See Félix Candela CIBA Laboratories (1953) and Warehouses in Insurgentes (1954) both in Mexico D.F.
The third important peace to close that scheme is the Bus Station, disposed along the north face of the site, parallel to the Government House slab. Today enlarged, it was originally a permeable structure, with six boarding spaces and a variety of service nucleus placed under a unitary concrete covering obtained by the same structural system used at the central space.

About ten years later, Testa conceived another building for the Civic Center. Despite dismissing the Government House’s mono block solution in favor of a more articulated and dynamic volumetric distribution, the Legislature Building makes use of the same architectural repertoire and structural devices, as the rough-concrete grid. Placed closely to the central covered space, the new building restructured Civic Center’s north face, but the east side of the area, almost half of the whole site, remained almost not touched, except for the inclusion of another institutional building not designed by Testa.

**LA PAMPA INTERROTA**

At that point, La Pampa could exemplify one of the modern answers to the issues of monumentality raised by Siegfried Giedion and others at the forties, like former Latin American major achievements as the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro, or the University Cities of Mexico and Caracas (Giedion, 1948, p. 117-128). Instead of the “historist pseudo monumental” schemes that Giedion deployed, it was in fact modern and monumental. Maybe “naked and rough, but true”, as Giedion would say about the big factories and market halls he considered the real monuments of nineteenth century. Current programs, as the Bus Station, were not concealed, and current modern typologies, like the linear block, were used to shelter special and
representative ones, as in the Government House. The modern urban statement implied conversation with existing situation, but not submission to it.

It could be a happy end, but La Pampa's story doesn't actually end here. By 1980 a second competition was launched to study the inclusion of a Cultural Center and a Courthouse in the site, besides the enlargement of both Government House and Bus Station. Testa's proposal was selected in first place, but never executed. The central feature of that scheme, the Cultural Center, opposes to the sober unity of the Government House, first stage's most important piece, a fragmentary design based on an intricate sequence of volumes placed over a diagonal axis growing from the southeast angle of the site. The pedestrian movement is emphasized, since materialized by continuous galleries that connect the new buildings to the existing ones. Those structures delimitate the otherwise expansible public spaces, redefining them as regular voids. Such strategies of a "city of collision", perhaps learned from Colin Rowe, reflected the general interest of the 1980s in urban fabric and Nolli's Roma. Testa's hybrid solution exalts the collage city idea, despite provoked more by design choice than historically constructed circumstances.

La Pampa's Civic Center was never really completed as an urban space, since the occupation of the east side still remains an open design question. Instead of that huge intervention foreseen in the beginning of the eighties, rising 20.000 square meters, in 2006 Testa finally inserted a small new building in the site. The little library for the Legislature, even so cleverly fitted at that building's domain, shows a contrasting appearance respecting to the existing ones, in spite of the same author. But updated or enlarged, the existing buildings are in full use. In some way, it is still work in progress, and due to its unfinished condition, it can be suggested that La Pampa's case has been, historically, an opportunity to prove the many possibilities of change and continuity, as a living piece of the never completed modern project installed in the far south.

THE UNFINISHED CONDITION

Authors like Vidler and Purini have already stressed the uncompleted condition inherent to the modern industrial city, unable to be experienced as a closed unity, and even the very modern city idea as an unfinished task, which could never be realized unless through a number of separated fragments related to a historical and heroic but also deferred project (Vidler, 1992, p. 70-71; Purini,
There is something disturbing about that La Pampa _interrata_ of the eighties. Apparently, it means a retreat from the Modern Movement, maybe so injurious as that Reyner Banham once blamed the Italian Neoliberty for in 1959 (Banham, 1959, p. 230-235). Considering modern architecture in the narrowest sense, the one identified with the urban design strategies and architectural repertory originated in the modern _avantgarde_ of the beginning of the century, Testa gave up building such a modern city in La Pampa in the 1980s.

It also exposes the risky nature of the work in progress, since things will not necessarily change for better. Testa’s first design was a better design, and not just because it was modern and universal. Compared to the 1980s scenography, it was much more effective in structuring a huge and loosely defined area with a restricted number of constructed elements. Although not primarily compromised with contextualist discourses or regional sensibilities, it was perfectly fitted in place, and materialized through proper technology. It proved resilient in time.

Nevertheless, Testa’s attitude before past in 1980 was analogous to the one he professed in the fifties, in the sense that it accepted its own temporality: in spite of its forms, it echoed futurist refrain each generation one house, as any active design attitude in which the past does not prevail over the present.

Conceptually, the unfinished condition of the modern monument sets an aporia, as a logical impasse, or inevitable contradiction that inhabits that narrative form. The acceptance of temporality supposes a dynamic sense of time that refuses the monument basic status of permanence, of something that shall stand against entropy, as Choay so beautifully pointed out (Choay, 2001, p. 18). Within the Modern Movement, the forties debate in search of a new monumentality invoked that time dimension, even though it seems to be that at this moment it was surpassed by the issues of representation. Gropius contribution to that debate plainly considered the old monument as the symbol for a static conception of the world, which was then “overruled by a new one of relativity through changing energies”. He believed that the equivalent for monumental expression in the past was then being developed by “a new pattern characterized by flexibility for continuous growth and change”, not as the “frozen music of static symbols”, but as a quality of the physical environment “in process of continuous transformation” (Giedion, 1948, p. 127).

Acknowledging that unfinished condition as somehow constitutive to modern tradition may provide a key to rework the paradoxes of the modern monument. It holds a critic view over the primarily conservative conception of the historical monument, as formulated in Venice Charter, and requires a more active, architectonic grip of the theme (Solà-Morales, 1987). La Pampa’s case strongly suggests that such an aporia, which cannot be solved at the discursive level, shall be recovered at design level. Whatever could stand between total oblivion and the open air museum, cannot be found at the Charter’s normative view, but must be investigated as a manifold architectural problem.
REFERENCES


García Palacios, R. “Genealogía y transformaciones del trazado de Santa Rosa, La Pampa, entre 1881 e 1931”, Registros, Mar del Plata, n. 1, November 2003, 151-162.

Giedion, S. et al. “In search of a New Monumentality: a symposium by Gregor Paulsson, Henry-Russel Hitchcock, William Holford, Sigfried Giedion,


