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A. Díaz-Royo
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ANTONIO T. DÍAZ-ROYO

CONSTRUCTING TROPICAL MODERNITY

Antonin Nechodoma, Architect, 1877-1928: The Prairie School in the Caribbean. THOMAS S. MARVEL. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994. xx + 223 pp. (Cloth US$ 44.95)

Puerto Rico 1900: Turn-of-the-Century Architecture in the Hispanic Caribbean, 1890-1930. JORGE RIGAU. New York: Rizzoli, 1992. 232 pp. (Cloth US$ 50.00)

The buildings and ruins we discover for ourselves hold a lasting place in our imagination, not to say in our affections. In a society that has neglected the formal treatment of "space," architecturally as well as in political terms, these personal discoveries can promote a subversion of sorts. Thus, the consecutive appearance of two volumes addressing the architecture produced at the turn of the century in Puerto Rico is a notable event. Each results from an architect's passionate concern with the advent of modernity. Thomas Marvel's book concentrates on the life and work of Antonin Nechodoma, an American of Bohemian origin who spent his most productive years in Puerto Rico. It is the result of his decades-long fascination with a "versatile architect, designer, and craftsman working in unusual circumstances" (p. xviii) who left, both in Puerto Rico and in the Dominican Republic, a string of edifices strangely echoing the continental Prairie School. It is an effort to resolve the author's ambivalent attitude towards this enigmatic creator, and to unravel his production at the moment of Puerto Rico's advent to full-blown capitalism. The Rigau book attempts a wider interpretation of the period, focusing on nineteenth-century influences and the architects who left their mark in the cities of Ponce, San Germán, and Mayagüez. Even though it was published two

years earlier, it is almost a conversation – if not an overt dispute – with Marvel on the vicissitudes of *modernismo* in the new island possession. Although Jorge Rigau does not eulogize the period, his emblematic emphasis on Alfredo B. Wiechers makes the book a very close attempt at lamenting the "long lost happiness" of those days. In addition to the biographical sketch of an architect, he provides a wider portrait of the dominant elite during the same period.

Both authors, like the personalities they deal with, are architects. The lives of Nechodoma and Wiechers never touched, though their projects were erected in Puerto Rico during the same decade (1908-18). Each represented a particular style of innovation: Wiechers stood for the Beaux Arts tradition acquired in his European training, while Nechodoma focused on exploring and adapting new materials more suited to the climate. Nechodoma worked on the island from 1905 to 1927, leaving his work throughout the territory (Ponce, Aibonito, San Juan, Guayama, Coamo, Fajardo, Vieques, Humacao, Mayagüez, and elsewhere), while Wiechers's output was concentrated in Ponce, largely between 1911 and 1918. (Wiechers ventured outside Ponce only to design two structures for prominent families of Catalonian origin in Adjuntas and Aibonito.) Both men engaged in a variety of projects; Wiechers designed hotels, stores, *casas de vecindad,* mausoleums and factories, in addition to houses for prominent citizens, and Nechodoma produced schools, churches, banks and telegraph offices, in addition to bungalows and mansions. In spite of these similarities, sharp differences in background marked these men in distinct ways. A self-made man beginning as a master builder in Chicago, Nechodoma was a secure and able constructor committed to the newer trends, while Wiechers – the son of a Hamburg businessman turned vice consul during the last decades of the nineteenth century and a Puerto Rican of Corsican decent – was brought up in seignorial Ponce and was later a student at L'Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris. Both had traveled and were familiar with the changes taking place at the turn of the century. Nechodoma spent time in Jacksonville, Florida, and in the Dominican Republic. Wiechers lived in Barcelona (ca. 1904-10), where he worked for the renowned architect Enric Sagnier i Villavecchia. Modern men they were, although the ways in which each one solved spatial problems were distinctive. This may say something about the often assumed homogeneity of modernity, particularly in the Caribbean.

Puerto Rico 1900 is an elegant publication, profusely illustrated with drawings, designs, photographs – some in exuberant color – and prints. It contains a preface by Leon Krier. An introduction aptly states its goals, pointing to the long-range project of comparing the architecture of the

Hispanic Caribbean. (Rigau co-authored a 1994 book on Havana.) It also explains the chronological limits of the investigation (1890-1930) and suggests further studies like the rural-urban interchange in architecture, the impact of new building materials, and changes in the views of space and spatial sequence. The first of five chapters deals with the new urban realm; subtitled "Codes as Precedent for Cityscape Transformations," it traces the incorporation of planning and building concepts into prevailing codes and regulations which ultimately shaped the urban profile. The second chapter, "On Being Modern in the Caribbean," attempts to establish a relationship between literary *modernismo* and architecture. The next chapter dwells on architects and builders of the period, with special attention to the Ponce group (Bertoli, Silva Boucher, Porrata Doria, Conesa, Domenech, and particularly A.B. Wiechers). It is this salient chapter that makes one speculate on the author's desire to write a biography of Wiechers. The last two chapters, "Housing, Houses, and Schoolhouses" and "Spanish Revival as Spanish Denial," constitute a reflection on the wider scene from the perspective of architectural productions. The notes are rigorous and abundant, credit is provided for collaborators, and funding sources are dutifully mentioned. A list of surviving modernist houses is most useful for the *aficionado* as well as the scholar. A bibliography is carefully selected for the student of things social and spatial.

It seems unlikely that Rigau's plan was to inform the reader on the plurality of expressions which characterize *modernismo* in literature as well as in architecture, or that he wanted to mark the difference between this expression of *modernismo* and the extremes of international style and the trap of walking the tightrope of historicism and change. The first three chapters let us see only in an oblique fashion the momentous transformations at the economic and social level occurring during that period in the Caribbean. Thus, one begins to be unfavorably disposed toward his estheticist musings. Trying to expound on what this meant for Latin America, Rigau often forgets the far more important and overwhelming determinants of these processes. He does not, for example, present colonialism as an important factor which would help understand the changes and vicissitudes of being modern in the Caribbean. These first chapters seem far too poetic for an overarching interpretation of things fundamentally social. His attempts at establishing parallels between the concerns of the literati and the chores of the designer are unsuccessful. The similarity between modernity and *modernismo* is more than a simple matter of semantics, even from a literary point of view. His last two chapters are far more adequate in dealing with the social and economic conditions that permitted urban and architectural developments. They also widen our view of these develop-

ments by signaling the pleiade of builders and designers working within an emerging social imaginary in a world built for others that simultaneously aspired to please the new masters and the old traditions. Thus, the ambivalent response of built structures themselves; dissimulating and pleasing, deferential and hostile vis-à-vis the profound changes in the social fabric. We are thus able to penetrate the aspirations of the elites and their followers in the notions they held on the city and the house.

Antonin Nechodoma deals with the man and his work, beginning with his Chicago years (1887-1905). This is followed by a chapter entitled "In Transition, 1905-1907," on his years in Jacksonville. "Residence in the Dominican Republic, 1908-1912" explores Nechodoma's sudden move to this country where he engaged mostly in U.S. supported public works. The next three chapters deal with Nechodoma's projects in Puerto Rico, and the final chapter addresses "The Dilemma of Nechodoma." Two appendixes provide lists of the buildings, giving the location and status of each one, and his published projects from 1908 to 1927. The volume has a foreword by H. Allen Brooks, a preface, acknowledgments, meticulous notes, a panoramic bibliography, and an index. It is also profusely illustrated with high quality photographs and drawings.

Marvel is rigorous in documenting Nechodoma's projects. Besides listing them, he is able to place them in context; that is, in the midst of the events that were shaping the societies where he worked. He also provides abundant evidence of Nechodoma's multifaceted personality (his role as contractor, engineer, materials innovator, architect, public official during the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic, preservationist, and even demolition consultant). The evidence of this builder's adaptation of the Prairie School to the tropical climate is impressive, particularly in his use of materials (cement, Compo Stone blocks, wood, glass, tile), the extension of roofs, concerns with providing ventilation, raising heights, placing porches or verandas in prominent places, and (as an amateur botanist) integrating landscaping and gardens. A concern for detail is not Marvel's only virtue; he is equally able to establish links between the creator's individual destiny and pivotal geopolitical events. Nevertheless, he wavers in his treatment of Nechodoma's copying of Frank Lloyd Wright's designs. He is ambivalent, neither reproaching nor condoning, but also not explaining Nechodoma's use of the Wasmuth Folio in several of his Puerto Rican projects. A more direct approach might have saved much pain. It seems that his actions were a common practice at the time. Authorship was not the crucial professional criterion it is at present. Marvel takes a less direct approach, one that neither exonerates nor fully elucidates. Nechodema's use of the Wasmuth Folio, as well as his outright copying of several other

projects (like the All Saints by the Sea Episcopal Church of California, which was recreated in Ponce), was probably sought by Frank Lloyd Wright as is evidenced in Enrique Vivoni's essay (1989). Marvel is also extremely surprised that a man with no formal training as an architect was able to execute such sophisticated solutions as the Masonic Temple he created in Puerta de Tierra. "That he could do this so adroitly while also exploring a new residential style for Puerto Rico was remarkable. Even more impressive was his versatility in the light of scanty preparation for architecture, if he had any at all. This building showed that he could do a serious work with a sense of humor, a sophistication that is seldom seen in designs from a self-made man" (p. 89). Marvel neglects to consider the exposure Nechodoma had prior to the moment in which he was requested to take on these projects. Besides, one must not forget that he was a master-builder and possessed impeccable familiarity with the materials (Compo Stone blocks and cement). Professional credentialing, as currently required by law, may be necessary but not sufficient for exercising the imagination within a canon.

Periodically, both the general public and the professional must raise crucial questions regarding the architecture produced in a given social setting stimulated by the buildings we have discovered on our own. Is it adequate? How does it continue or break with the past productions? How will it affect the future? What social aspirations does it represent? Why have the buildings marked our vision of space as well as our tastes? Both books address these questions and promote much needed comparisons within the region.

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ANTONIO T. DÍAZ-ROYO
P.O. Box 1585
Trujillo Alto
Puerto Rico 00760