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I would first like to outline the context of our work and explain briefly some ideas on architecture that have been fundamental for the projects I will show you later.

The reformulation of architecture that took place in the early twentieth century rose, as we know, from a radical critique to the worn-out academicism of the prior century. This reform, along with the similar revolution of technology, art, and social structures, necessarily meant turning back to the origins. There was a desire for a fresh look at essential issues and for the re-creation of a world that would be forever new. This could not be achieved by following any stylistic canons: it questioned the value of the notion of style; every work should stem from its own peculiar origin, radically new and primordial.

But, as any novel movement, this one was also driven by the energy of conflicts that are bound together in its seminal stages. In 1932 this new architecture was presented to the general public in a famous exhibit entitled “The International Style” at the so-called Modern Art Museum of New York. These names set the tragic mistake, or inevitable misunderstanding, that marked the fate of the newborn creature. The word “Style” in the title of the exhibit did not match at all with the word “Modern” in the name of the museum, since the latter implied the challenge of the new and original, and not the following of the tracks from the past, implied by “Style”. Anyway, “Modern Style” assumed from the beginning the prestige of Reason and Progress, and held the same claim of universal reach as these notions. It spread worldwide, from the center to the periphery of an increasingly global culture. The hegemony did not last long without opposition: critical antibodies sought a local and historical insertion in the midst of a rationalist dream of general application. These counter effects grew stronger until they became dominant in the 1970’s. Those were years of totalizing and exclusive concepts struggling against each other. This was also a time of Neo-Romantic tendencies, and the issues of identity and authenticity took a central importance.

It was in the 1970’s when we started learning the craft. In 1974 I entered the School of Architecture of the Catholic University in Santiago. The latest avant-garde in those days was post-modernism, which, as you know, seemed to surpass critical regionalism; it was a revisionist movement based on the quoting of historical precedents, against the modernist orthodoxy, which was already academically settled, but was conceptually scattered and had no epic drive. In this environment of commotion, social chaos and political violence, our almost instinctive reaction, as a survival strategy, was to base our projects on reasoned arguments consisting of small specific statements pertinent to the particular case. We would try to formulate the concrete and urgent aspects of the problem, and only then look for the architectural form that would most directly and efficiently solve the question. In brief: we sought pertinence in the statement and consequence in the formal solution. This approach enabled us to root our work locally and also avoid the acquiescence with which a cosmopolitan observer appreciates the local flavor of an exotic periphery. We therefore hoped to return to the original creative challenge of the modern ideal, avoiding as much as possible rhetorical flourishes.

Unlike Mexico or Peru, Chile's geography was characterized by the scarce density of historical marks and few vestiges of the past. Settling in a landscape rather than in a country, and in our particular case, building mostly on recent urbanizations, reduced quite a lot the relevance of the post-modernistic claim for historical features: there was not much to relate with. But this lack both increases the margins of freedom and stirs the nostalgia for the prestige of being someone (especially because of distance and isolation), and, consequently, there is a yearning to keep in touch and up-to-date with the metropolis (so provincial). Hence, the acute concern for self-identity as a symptom of a self-esteem complex. This concern is in the same emotional tone as the romantic sensibility akin to subjective intimism that regards authenticity as spontaneity, as well as to the idea of country as nation, which is characterized by folklore.

Yet, however it expresses itself, identity is essentially the continuity of things in time, against which changes and differences are measured. It is an intrinsic need, without which the succession of our perceptions remains unthreaded and senseless. There is no identity without memory, or memory without identity. This demand for constants is satisfied by architecture through its own still permanence. All architecture involves an effort to surpass the mere satisfaction of contingent purposes: its final purpose is testimonial. It should be done with a lasting intention, to render what we are through what we have been capable of doing. That is why we have preferred to build in reinforced concrete, a monolithic plastic material, which endures in the seismic ground of our country with little need of maintenance.

Architecture is construction made with honor, for life and against death, against obsolescence. It should weather with dignity the pass of time so it can attain the glory of ruins. This pride assumes a historic and civic consciousness of belonging to a culture seriously aware of itself. A piece of architecture that aspires to be a reference for the identity of a place should be distinctive and characteristic as well as stable and lasting; not equal to what could be found anywhere. These qualities can only belong to projects that respond accurately to pertinent needs, reflecting a real problem, that are truthfully fulfilled by the building. If the chimera of self-identity is to be achieved, one must pursue it surreptitiously, so as to catch it unawares, as an extra benefit in the search for real, genuine, problems.

A building should serve. We think this statement derives primarily from the Christian concern for the primacy of love. Nevertheless, in the history of architecture, the conception of form as a pure and direct result, mainly useful, can be considered a central inspiration of modern rationalism, from Le Corbusier's "machine-à-habiter" till the theories of Christopher Alexander. It corresponds to the design methods for mechanisms in engineering, that begin with a finite set of requirements, and ends in a performance with measurable results that is valued by its efficiency. But, in architecture, a set of requirements is not stated beforehand, predefined and complete. Rather, the enunciation of those requirements that are pertinent to the case, the statement of the problem that has to be solved in the form, the definition of the set of events to be held in the building, have to be the architects' first invention. Moreover, in architecture, the formal result has a retroactive effect on a mechanism's performance, depending on whether or not (and how) we perceive it. In a work of architecture there is a relationship between what it does or makes possible as a mechanism, and what it appears to be. Beauty may be defined as the mutual seduction between what is and its phenomenon. We have fallen, rather suddenly, into the scholastic definition of beauty as

the shine of truth, so fondly appreciated by Mies van der Rohe, or of art as the setting of truth in operation, by Heidegger. Furthermore, we think that as patent truth keeps always hidden a latent background, beauty is the evidence of mystery. Hence, art works by revealing what is hidden in what is shown.

We shall go back each time to the origins of our subject. Architecture is a craft transmitted by tradition. It involves both the knowledge of well-being and of good building. It gives simultaneously a manifestation of the problem of building and a solution for living well within a space. Because human life is precarious and needs care, well-being is problematic. Our life takes place within a world that is imaginatively projected and never given in a fixed way; not as animals, which are by constitution perfectly adapted to their environment, but always startled. Architecture frees our attention from a continual concern for imminence. It yields serenity possible, and so, intimacy, which is what makes us persons. The limit of the architectural function is to make sleeping (and dreaming) possible, the abandonment of surroundings: it is to disappear as an object and remain as a latent frame.

We have said that the previous, or implicit, thing to be projected before a design is the problem of how to live there, in such a building, in such a place. The question is: what are the possible events that a building should easily allow or prevent from happening? We define space as a set of possible events, movements, or operations. It is a field of possibilities. This set of events is enunciated by a narrative architecturally shaped in the plan: it determines the events that may take place and the movements that standing persons, attracted by gravity to a horizontal plane, may or may not do. The vertical dimension generates the sections of the building, enclosing a volume of air, and refers to imaginary flights, and to the effort of raising a building. The space of rooms is then defined.

Things acquire meaning when they refer to other things that we see or remember. Referring is a mental operation. So we can say that a set of possible references is a space, the significant space of something. It is what we may call its evocative capacity that yields the poetic potential of things. The space of architecture is the set of possible meaningful events, and the meaning of architectural elements flows from the meaning of these events.

We can also think of material itself as a space. In the conception of the opposed pair of form and matter, matter is pure possibility of being that form puts into act. A material is the space determined by the set of possible constructions that can be made with it. In our projects we have been concerned from the very beginning with the possibilities of their making, with the potential of materials, as a significant question.

We have tried to carry out projects that represent true answers to real circumstances and not to stereotyped icons (a contribution to a genuine identity, if possible). Each time we have begun from the prosaic requirements of the program (the what), of the place (the where), and of construction (the how). Nevertheless, we are aware that the buildings so generated should last more than the circumstances which informed them, and that they are to be inhabited and understood in many ways without any consciousness of these requirements, forgetting the particular details that led to them. This fact pushes the goal of architecture further away: it should reach a sense beyond itself, to attain a quality capable of transcending its initial duties, and it should

move from the prosaic to a poetic range, taking advantage of the meaningful opportunities that can unfold from what is primarily useful towards more ample resonance. Our aim has been the ideal so well expressed by Goethe when he said: “from what is useful, through truth, to beauty.”

Luis Izquierdo W.
Arquitecto