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SES OF PRIMITIVISM. STONE, CLAY
AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

Despite problematic, the notions of “primitive” and “primitivism” were essential categories to modern art and architecture in Latin America, for both producers (architects and artists) and interpreters (historians and critics). These notions have been strongly associated both with the Latin American contribution to modernity, and with the historiographical assessment of this contribution. The main goal of this text is to point out certain “uses of primitivism” in South American architecture, as coincident with the presence of natural materials such as stone and clay, and pre-industrial building techniques. Although this presence could be also discussed in terms of its relationship to the vernacular, the notion of “primitivism” was chosen on purpose, as it exhibits an impasse (in some way indifferent to the vernacular), of an intellectual, and not natural, connection with tradition. The article finishes with some notes on Lucio Costa’s proposal for working class houses at Monlevade in Brazil (1936), and the alternatives presented by Austral group to rural houses in Argentina (1939).

KEYWORDS

Primitivism. Working class houses at Monlevade. Austral group.

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USOS DO PRIMITIVISMO. PEDRA, BARRO E ARQUITETURA MODERNA

RESUMO

Apesar de problemáticas, as noções de “primitivo” e “primitivismo” foram categorias essenciais para a arte e a arquitetura moderna na América Latina, tanto para produtores (arquitetos e artistas), quanto para seus intérpretes (historiadores e críticos). Estiveram fortemente associadas tanto à contribuição latino-americana para uma modernidade universal quanto à apreciação historiográfica dessa contribuição. Este texto tem por objetivo cercar determinados “usos do primitivismo” na arquitetura sul-americana, que coincidem com a presença de materiais naturais, como a pedra e o barro, e de técnicas construtivas pré-industriais. Embora essa presença possa ser discutida apenas nos termos de uma relação com o “vernáculo”, adota-se propositalmente a noção de “primitivismo”, por exibir um impasse (de certa forma indiferente ao vernáculo) de uma ligação intelectual, e não natural, com a tradição. O trabalho finaliza com algumas notas sobre a proposta de Lucio Costa para a casa operária de Monlevade no Brasil (1936) e as alternativas do grupo Austral para a casa rural argentina (1939).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Primitivismo. Casa operária de Monlevade. Grupo Austral.

PROLOGUE: VICISSITUDES OF THE PRIMITIVE

Is primitivism a myth? Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself, to whom we owe the idea of the noble savage, somewhat questioned its existence. It is well-known the preface passage of *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, in which Rousseau ([1754] 2008, p. 27), while justifying the need to think about humanity's "state of nature", advises that it is about "knowing well a state which no longer exists, perhaps never did exist, and probably never will exist". Despite this, convened in its two not always coincident senses, of returning back to the origin or in opposition to the "civilized," the "primitive" has been regarded as a recurrent issue for general culture and the arts, either as a literary reference, formal resource, or as an instrument for criticism.

Since the end of the XX century, the term "primitive" displays a curious position in human sciences. On the one hand, its objective existence is denied by the simple reason that the term does not seem to be applicable to any actually existing culture. Except for some last adepts of the evolutionary paradigm, as explained by Kurasawa in *A Requiem for the Primitive*, no one anymore seems willing to accept the idea that is possible to "equate indigenous societies with a primordial human condition," so the concept of "primitivism" would be converted into a "signifier without a referent" (KURASAWA, 2002, p. 2). On the other hand, this signifier-without-a-referent not only disappeared from the present scene as it became a target for controversies, mainly of political nature. Recently, to simply apply the term "primitive" as a substitute for the geographical coordinates of the culture at issue has been interpreted by some as a Eurocentric ideological construct, the usage of which necessarily shows a pretension of superiority over the "other", despite the fact that, even in the European frame of reference, the primitive is evoked in both positive and pejorative senses (TORGOVNICK, 1990; PERRY, 1993).

In the arts, the issue is not less ambiguous. Gombrich had already anticipated, in *The Primitive and its Value in Art* (1979), that the notion of primitive was becoming problematic in a "century in which we lost the faith in the superiority of our own culture" (GOMBRICH, 2012, p. 295). At the same time, Gombrich had stressed the central role of this problematic notion for the formation of modern art, since Picasso, Epstein, and Moore appealed to the "strange and weathered idols of a lost world" to modify their own ways to proceed in art (GOMBRICH, 2012, p. 295). A few years later, the polemic regarding the primitive would also reach the exhibition *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art*, curated by William Rubin for MoMA (New York, 1984), which, in spite of its artistic interest and documental effort, did not escaped from criticism, eager to report the European engagement with the primitive as the last step of colonial exploration.¹

Gombrich's vision was less reductive and more perspicacious. As Goldwater had done in the seminal *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938), Gombrich was also referring to an intellectual process, through which avant-garde artists had found, in African art, answers for their contemporary questions in the field of artistic procedures. African art, which Picasso had known because of Matisse or his visits to the newly open Ethnographic Museum of Paris (1907), offered, especially, solutions to formal problems that these artists were facing in their own work, in painting and sculpture. The relationship between this interest for

¹ Regarding criticism to the exhibition, see: Susan Hillier (1991); Frances Connely (1995).

the primitive, the transformation of representational concepts, and the progressive distance from the “*verisimilitude and naturalism*” of the Renaissance tradition are well-known (FLAM, 2003, p. 3). Matisse and Picasso found in primitive art certain compositional, figurative, and symmetrical arrangements, which, however, were not attached to an anatomical correspondence, and constituted alternative entries to the naturalistic representation. Such arrangements were the ones that Matisse and Picasso used to modify the compositional structures of their own work.

Gombrich notes that some of Picasso’s compositional and plastic choices meant, at that moment, that he abandoned his acquired “*skills and refinement*.” In other words, Picasso set aside the knowledge of correct proportions, the ability to perfectly represent the human figure, the mastery of perspective in painting, or the expertise of sculpture techniques (as occurs, for example, in the rough aspect of the *Woman’s head* sculpture from 1909, whose faceted form was associated with the invention of Cubism in painting).

Gombrich defines some points that are central to the argument that this text is going to develop: the “*reversibility*” of this position (Picasso went back to making naturalistic and refined portraits whenever he felt like it); the tension between a sophisticated visual operation and the discarding of “*skill and refinement*”; and the conscience of an essentially “*not primitive*” nature of “*primitivism*” (GOMBRICH, 2012, p. 295).

In architecture, the attraction towards the “*primitive*” led to different investigations in terms of objectives and perspectives. Simply think, for example, of two books that are usual references to the matter: Bernard Rudofsky’s *Architecture without Architects* (1864) and Joseph Rykwert’s *Adam’s House in Paradise* (1972). Whereas Rudofsky had used the interest for the primitive to organize a series of anonymous examples, which, somehow, he wished to oppose to the idea of architecture as an educated activity, Rykwert specifically intended to reclaim the primitive’s own historicity within the scope of a disciplinary thinking. As a recent effort to situate the issue in the fields of modern architecture and urbanism, Michelangelo Sabatino pointed out three different manifestations of the primitive: in the dialogue between modernism and archaic building typologies (caves, huts, and tents); in the quest for nature (either restoring its presence within the city or leaving city to regain it); and, finally, “*in the desire to integrate the tectonics and technologies of vernacular architecture with contemporary building practices, opening a dialogue between hand-made and machine-made*” (SABATINO, 2008, p. 355).

The emergence of stone and clay in modern architecture has a direct relationship with this third manifestation and, therefore, with the vernacular. This text intends to encircle certain “*uses of primitivism*” in South American architecture, which coincide with the presence of natural materials, as stone and clay, and pre-industrial building techniques. Such presence could be discussed in terms of the relationship with the vernacular only or, simply, with tradition. However, the notion of primitivism was adopted on purpose, because, as it is intended to suggest, it shows an impasse (somewhat indifferent to the notion of vernacular), of an intellectual, instead of a natural, connection with the tradition.²

²About the idea of “*impasse*” regarding primitivism and the arts, see: Flam (2003, p. 11).

THE ISSUE IN LATIN AMERICA

Latin America's engagement in these notions has a long history. In the arts, "indigenous historicism" was an important subject for XIX century academic painting, combined with the political inclination, usually liberal, of retrieving elements from pre-colonial culture and with the desire to find oneself into worlds untouched by progress (ADES, 1989, p. 35). Similarly, travelling artists (Debret, Rugendas, Humbolt, etc.), who took part in the European expeditions to the New World, motivated not only by political and military interests but also by the Enlightenment's appetite for nature and for knowledge of the tangible world, contributed to build up an American imagery in which, many times, a mythical age is insinuated, the portrait of a natural state of "nudity and innocence" (ADES, 1989, p. 35). Aware of the myth of the jungle and its possible connotations, Latin American avant-garde art from the first half of the XX century reworked the idea of the primitive according to critical projects, from Mexican muralism to Brazilian anthropophagy. This engagement of Latin American avant-garde art with the primitive was extensively described with regard to its political and identity bases and its connections with the establishment of national consciences.³

³ See: Carlos Brillembourg (2004); Carlos Alberto Ferreira Martins (1992/2010); Abilio Guerra (2010).

A prevailing interpretation in the acknowledgment of primitive figures in Latin American architecture coincides in principle with this reading. This is the case of Felipe Hernández and Lea Allen's vision, developed in the essay published in the collection *Primitive: Original Matters in Architecture* (2006), which updated the debate on "the primitive" regarding the territory of architecture within an international scope. Hernández and Allen consider the notion of primitivism inseparable from the idea of colonialism, therefore being inseparable from the opposition between metropolis and periphery. According to these authors, two different attitudes regarding the manifestations of primitivism were explored by the artistic avant-garde, including architecture. One would be what they call the "metropolitan uses of primitivism", is the goal of which being to breakup established codes of representation (Picasso precisely being the example) and to expose a condition of "crisis in the belief of the efficacy and ethics of the empire"; the other, would be the "periphery uses", through which the postcolonial culture appropriates the primitive to "re-imagine their own past, as well as insert alternative experiences and knowledge into the Western European canon" (HERNANDES; ALLEN, 2006, p. 88).

Certainly, Hernández and Allen's explanation is perfectly satisfactory to attribute the manifestations of primitivism to "the periphery" since such manifestations are mainly part of a political project centered in the identification and reevaluation of what is regional. However, as warned by their own scheme, this is not the only use of primitivism observed regarding artistic production. When Hernández and Allen ascribe to the "metropolitan use" of primitivism the role of breaking up established codes of representation, as Picasso had done, they leave an open door so that one can see other nuances of the problem, in which the use of primitivism is less concerned with exterior issues (as political and cultural projects of valuation of national identities) than with topics inherent to artistic practice. But, if this is the case, this interpretation suggests a division of duties, with the "center", identified

with Europe, exploring primitivism as an artistic matter, and the “periphery”, identified with Latin America, examining primitivism as part of a political agenda.

In an analogous way, the presence of natural materials as stone and clay in Latin American modern architecture, as general autochthonous materials that supposedly bear an “authenticity” out of reach for industrial materials, has been recognized as part of a revision program regarding the universalizing premises of the modern movement.⁴ According to this logic, the exploration of the expressive proprieties of stone and clay – rusticity, roughness, alignment with the natural landscape – and the use of traditional building techniques would be associated with a certain idea of honesty and adequacy that could be levelled “against the implementation of values and models culturally foreign” (TOCA, 1990, p. 6). As stated by the forum of debate, it could also be levelled against the malaises of which modern architecture was accused as an international movement, or it could eventually be exhibited as proof of several “modernisms” as one can see.

⁴ Further examples can be found in *Nueva Arquitectura en América Latina: presente y futuro* (1990), collection of essays organized by Antonio Toca (1990), in accordance with the thesis of “critical regionalism” and “appropriate modernity”.

It is not difficult to find primitive images in Latin American modern architecture that seem to fit this reasoning, from the presence of brick and stone masonry in modern compositions to the radicalness of the cave house that Juan O’Gorman (1949-1953) built for himself in Mexico, literally engraved in the landscape, within the stone. Symmetrically, however, should we consider false and arbitrary the famous “large stone wall” of Le Corbusier’s studio on rue Nungesser-et-Coli, Paris, whose real texture and accessories he deemed to be a “sort of opponent?” (BOESIGER, 1980, p. 68). Not yet. The historiographic version of the use of primitivism as a project of cultural resistance suggests a regional specificity, to which, perhaps, the artistic response is not limited.

FROM THE PRIMITIVE TO PRIMITIVISM

The first distinction to be made is between the concept of primitive and that of primitivism. The concept of “primitive” always involves assuming some kind of distance, since any society or creature is not able to recognize itself as primitive. The primitive is related to something faraway in time, as the idea of the primitive hut in architectural theory, or even distant in space, when it qualifies a social group considered at a previous cultural stage, taking into account the idea of technical progress as a cumulative process. The concept of the primitive can also be used pejoratively, as, for example, to indicate cultural delay, not being necessarily accurate. As explained by Jacques Le Goff:

To dominate time and history, as well as to satisfy one’s own aspirations of happiness and justice or fears in the face of illusory or disturbing unfolding events, human societies have imagined the existence, in the past and in the future, of exceptionally happy or catastrophic times, arranging, on occasion, these original or ultimate times in a series of ages according to a certain logic. The study of Mythical Ages constitutes a peculiar but privileged approach to the concepts of time, history, and ideal societies. The majority of religions

conceives a mythical age of happiness, if not of perfectness, for the creation of the universe. Primitive times – whether the world was created or formed by any other way – are imagined as a Golden Age (LE GOFF, 2004, p. 311).

Rousseau's theory, certain aspects of Romanticism and the interest of European Enlightenment on American nature, are echoes of this way to understand the primitive. As Le Goff (2004, p. 355) clarifies, what is at stake is the idea of progress and, simultaneously, the very idea of civilization: Will the progress be related to the development of technology, arts, and habits, or was everything better at the beginning? One of the specific features of the "mythical ages" is to deny the sense of history in favor of a cyclic conception.

Dalibor Vesely (2006, p. 18) reinforces this point: the "discovery of the primitive" by the Enlightenment is inseparable from the awareness of progress, which is shown both in the dispute between the old and the modern, and in the notion of the good savage. At the same time, Vesely stresses a possible duality between "culture" and "civilization", which contributes to form the concept of the primitive in XVII and XIX century thinking. Civilization is mainly defined as a cumulative process, based on technical progress, and likely to be universally disseminated. Culture, however, may identify unique and non-exchangeable events, and may even describe situations of anachronism and stagnation. In this new situation, the chronological and cultural meanings of the primitive tend to be identical, and *"the primitive could be used as an antithesis to civilization"*, either as a confirmation of its superiority or as its own criticism (VESELY, 2006, p. 21).

It was mainly in the art domain, explains Vesely, that the "primitive" became "primitivism". Unlike the interest on the primitive, primitivism is a new phenomenon, which could not have existed before the XIX century. For primitivism be able to appear, the internal development of European art had to reach a certain level of autonomy, without which art could not have been released from imitative processes, towards self-expression and independent creation (VESELY, 2006, p. 23). Paul Klee, as Vesely highlights, was not interested in the external image of the child, but in how such child used to draw or paint; primitivism is, in this sense, a form of emancipation that is identified with a quest for an essence, corresponding to an affirmation of artistic autonomy. As in this passage by Klee in *The Thinking Eye* (1961), which Vesely recalls: *"If my picture sometimes makes a primitive impression, it is because of my discipline in reducing everything to a few steps. It is only economy, or if you like, the highest professional sensitivity; in fact, the precise opposite of the primitive"* (KLEE, 1961, apud VESELY, 2006, p. 25).

Thus, Vesely establishes a fundamental counterpoint to the idea of primitivism as related and reduced to the identity issue. He defines primitivism as an artistic phenomenon, which acquired life due to a highly intellectualized disciplinary process. He also defines it as a phenomenon inscribed in modernity: *"The primitive in the form of primitivism is not a peripheral or secondary phenomenon. It grew out of the depth of modern culture of which it is the main characteristic"* (VESELY, 2006, p. 31). This second position, which

corresponds to primitivism as a position not limited to the problem of identity reconstruction, will be verified, in architectural practice, through the following episodes.

HOUSE OF MONLEVADE (1936)

The reinforced clay of Monlevade is emblematic, because it is not the strict traditional technique that is recommended but its rational refinement. The concern with a representative value of the elements of architecture or composition is not made to the detriment of a concern with its functional or operational value. The simultaneity of focus prevents the representation from being reduced to a veneer or that pragmatism prevails unleashed. The pau a pique wall is neither simply a sign, nor simple instrumentality (COMAS, 2002, p. 83).

The Belgo-Mineira S. A. steel mill company promoted a design competition for a worker's village intended for the mill's employees in João Monlevade, Minas Gerais, held in 1936. The contest's public notice requested the design of independent single-family housing and community buildings, such as church, school, social club and a warehouse, which were to be organized over a sloped terrain, avoiding earthworks and levelling. Buildings were to be low-cost and easy to build, durable and perfectly impermeable.⁵ Lucio Costa was one among the thirteen contestants. The winner, however, was Lincoln Continentino, whose submission was a conventional proposal of free-standing houses, something that Costa had specifically refused (COMAS, 2002, p. 81). From Costa's proposal, it is useful to highlight his typological and building interpretation of the house. Although the number of bedrooms is variable for each house, the general architectural solution is homogeneous. The houses are grouped in pairs,

organizing horizontal and regular blocks, scattered over the natural terrain according to a sensible logic, in which the clear geometry of architectural volumes was defined against and over an almost untouched nature.

As Comas (2002, p. 81) stressed, Lucio Costa begins his proposal's Descriptive Memory quoting Olmsted, affirming that "concerns about beauty must not follow or precede pragmatic concern, but must go along with it, inseparably", which clarifies his position regarding the architectural problem at hand. Costa then explains that he has not visited the project site, although he knew the area, and ensured that he did not "have the elements that would allow him an honest estimate – even if

⁵"Vila (cidade) operária de Monlevade". 1936. (Document III C 03-01342). Available at: <http://www.jobim.org>. Accessed in: 15 Jan. 2013.

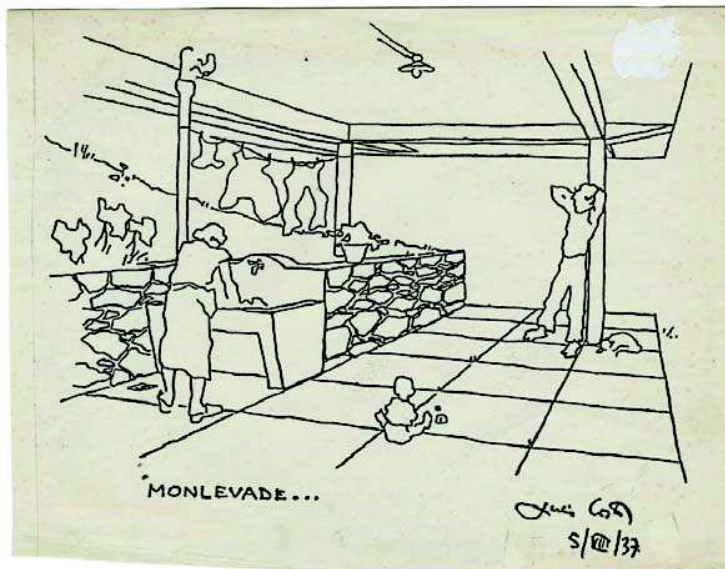


Figure 1. Lucio Costa, houses for the Monlevade design competition, 1936. Source: Casa de Lucio Costa.

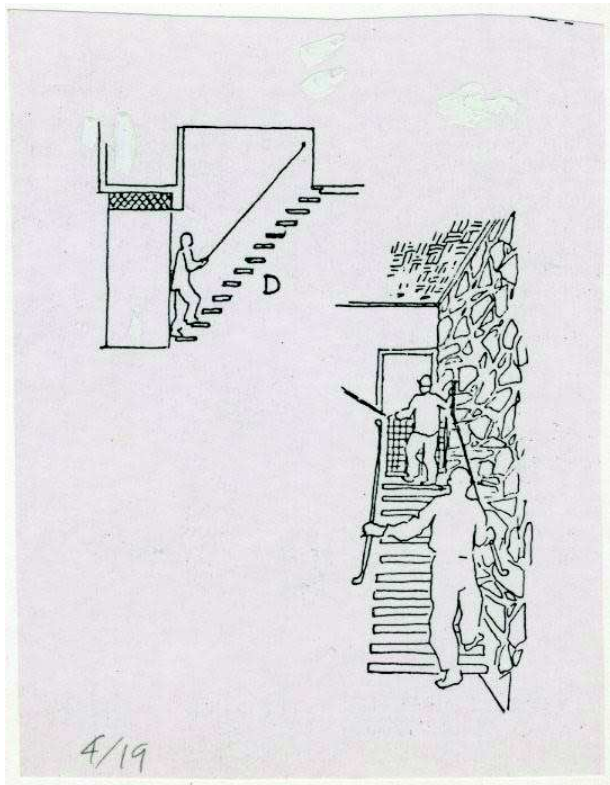


Figure 2. Lucio Costa, houses for the Monlevade design competition, 1936.
Source: Casa de Lucio Costa.

approximate – of the cost for the different works to be performed” (COSTA, 1936, p. 115). Thus, regarding the site’s steep declivity, Costa considered: first, that he ought to avoid “rigid or less malleable lines looking for, the contrary, lines that could be more elastic”, or adjustable to “local topographical particularities”; second, that he ought to reduce land movements to the minimum necessary; and third, that he ought “to damage as little as possible the site’s natural beauty” (COSTA, 1936, p. 115). These three requirements “unequivocally recommend the use of a building system envisioned by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret approximately twenty years ago, which, today, has been already incorporated as one of the fundamental principles of modern architecture – the pilotis” (COSTA, 1936, p. 115).

The pilotis allow to separate the houses from the ground, assuring a series of objective advantages with regard to the site plan: to bypass the inconveniences of a sloped land, whose exact outline Costa did not know; to reduce the number of “digs and foundations”, limiting them to columns and to the stone wall that sets apart one house from another; to solve the contest’s request for impermeable houses; and, also to supply each house owner with a covered area for domestic use, protected from sun and rain.

Over this concrete slab, supported by the shared stone wall and four or eight columns (depending on whether it is a set of houses with two or more bedrooms), the private share of the house is built, fairly autonomous from the pilotis from the program’s point of view – stairs placed on both sides of the stone wall provide access to each housing unit –, but especially from the building system’s point of view. Onto the pilotis system, formulated under the banner of a modern and educated tradition, Costa placed a rustic building system, derived from the conventional pau a pique and taipa houses found on the countryside. As Costa explains:

[The pilotis] allow the use, over the slab – thus free from any moisture –, of building systems that are light, economical, and independent from substructures, for example, – without any of the inconveniences that they have always been blamed for – that one all of rural Brazil knows: the “reinforced clay” (properly enhanced in terms of finish definition, thanks to the use of timber, in addition to the indispensable application of whitewash); one of the most interesting particularities of our preliminary draft is, precisely, to make possible – due to the use of this modern technique – the use of this primitive process of building, perhaps one of the oldest, as it was common in Lower Egypt, still having the advantage of simplifying in an extraordinary way the

roof assembly, relieved by heights of the internal wall structure (COSTA, 1936, p. 115).

“The set of pilotis and the reinforced clay box is the autochthonous equivalent to the prefabricated steel of the Loucher houses, both leaned against a stone wall” – Comas (2002, p. 82) observes. Le Corbusier had designed such semi-detached houses in 1929 with a similar scheme: both proposals coincide in the symmetrical arrangement of houses according to a stone or brick masonry wall, to be built with local materials, and in the distinction between the pilotis from the habitable space, from the building system’s point of view. The difference is that in Le Corbusier’s proposal the box corresponding to the house was an industrial product, which *“should leave the factory aboard a wagon”*, and then be dry-assembled (BOESIGER, 1980, p. 68).

⁶ *“Neither function, technique, nor society, the tripod of the modern movement, acknowledge culture spontaneously. Lucio Costa must feel this drama with the adaptive procedures that he is obliged to make in Monlevade to conciliate his fascination with the new and his respect for the traditional. The Maisons Louchers suffer from all the necessary and painful transgressions to adjust the Domino system to our reality, and the outcome is a possible modernity and a testimony of the confusion between national and architectonic cultures: clay and taquara bamboos over concrete pilotis”* (GIMENEZ, 2010, p. 46).

Nevertheless, others have seen in the Monlevade houses the reflection of a *“compulsory effort”* undertaken by Costa to combine modern architecture and the *“respect for the traditional”*. According to this vision, Le Corbusier’s Loucher houses were adapted to a national reality, resulting in *“a possible modernity and a testimony of the confusion between national and architectural cultures: clay and taquara bamboos over concrete pilotis”* (GIMENEZ, 2010, p. 46).⁶ But, in reality, from the point of view of the architectural profession, the solution is perfectly logic. Monlevade seems less a question of *“respect for the traditional”* motivating a hybrid form than a rational use of tradition (as a *“primitive”* way to build, since it is previous to newer ways, when compared to current knowledge) to better solve a contemporary design problem. If by *“confusion”* a certain tension could be understood, corresponding to the non-concealment of the distance between traditional technique – primitive technique – and its use in a completely modern condition, justified by current knowledge, and not by the *a priori* authority of this tradition, this excerpt is perhaps interesting as it demonstrates primitivism as an intellectual and artistic operation. Lucio Costa makes use of stone and clay in ways that are neither limited by the vernacular tradition, nor legitimated by it.

THE AUSTRAL RANCH (1939)

Vivanco refers to the project in this way:

[...] it was considered a little ranch; but it was not a little ranch, it was a perfectly functional house, which, unfortunately, for the Pampas, is a ranch. A ranch is an example of modern architecture, I do not know if Argentinians have realized it (LIERNUR; PSICHEPIURCA, 2008, p. 226).

The Banco de la Nación Argentina promoted a contest called Viviendas Rurales in 1939, aiming at investigating hygienic and economical prototypes for rural housing, suited for the life in the countryside, and adapted to the various climate zones where the main agricultural activities in the Argentinian territory were developed. Each participant could submit up to three solutions for the minimum rural house to each climate zone defined by the contest: warm weather zone; mild weather zone; and cold weather zone. The rules of the contest established that houses would have two bedrooms (with a possible expansion), with an approximated surface of 45 square meters, with covered

⁷In an interview from 1985, Le Pera argued that Vivanco has never fully belonged to Austral (TESTIMONIO..., 1985, p. 4); we follow Álvarez and Liernur, who coincide in pointing out Vivanco and Peluffo as members of Austral group.

exteriors areas added, suited for the corresponding climate. Prototypes should be adapted to each climate zone, “in terms of the general features of its exteriority and utilized materials” (SCHERE, 2008, p. 206).

Among the 220 submissions received, there were proposals submitted by the newly-formed Austral Group, which Antonio Bonet, Ferrari Hardoy, and Juan Kurchan had just founded in Buenos Aires. Catalan architect Antonio Bonet first met Argentinians Ferrari Hardoy and Kurchan at Le Corbusier’s studio on rue Nungesser-et-Coli, in Paris, where the three architects had met in 1937: Ferrari Hardoy and Kurchan were developing for Le Corbusier the Buenos Aires Master Plan; Bonet, together with Chilean Roberto Matta Echaurren, was working in the Maison Week-end Jaoul project (ÁLVAREZ, 1991, p. 327).

Bonet’s bond to the modern movement and its organizations date back to his student years, having worked since 1932 for Sert and Torres Clavé, the leading members of G.A.T.E.P.A.C., the Catalan branch of CIAM, enrolling afterwards in the IV CIAM abroad the cruise ship *Patris*, in 1933 (ÁLVAREZ, 1991, p. 329). Bonet left Europe to settle in Buenos Aires in 1938 and, with the return of Ferrari Hardoy and Kurchan in 1939, they formed the Austral Group, which was joined by López Chas, Vera Barros, Simón Ungar, Hilario Zalba, Itala F. Villa, Olezza, José Alberto Le Pera y Sanches de Bustamante, and afterwards by Jorge Vivanco and Valerio Peluffo (ÁLVAREZ, 1991, p. 331).⁷⁷

The first achievement was the publication of *Austral 1*, an eight-page brochure distributed by progressive magazine *Nuestra Arquitectura* in June 1939. In the cover, a Picasso sculpture from the Boisgeloup Heads series, which had been exhibited in the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic (Sert and Lacasa, Paris, 1937); on the inside, there was a manifesto, “Voluntad y acción”, signed by Bonet, Ferrari Hardoy, and Kurchan, which described in eleven points the Austral’s position regarding modern architecture. Such position has certain particularities that are interesting to highlight. Even though Austral was clearly placed within the scope of CIAM, as a working organization – “We greet CIAM and CIRPAC, adhering to their spirit and fight” – and deemed, in the manifesto’s second point, functionalism as “the only general conquest that post-academic architecture has ever achieved,” in its third point it states that such functionalism – “slave of the adjective – has not solved the problems raised by the great founders” (AUSTRAL, 1939a, n/p). The eighth point complements this idea:

The architect, anguished by the search for technical solutions, and in need of a real artistic concept, has separated himself more and more from the contact with the other plastic arts, whose freedom and restlessness have been translated into a phased series of movements, from which architecture has separated in almost every aspect (AUSTRAL, 1939a).

Austral’s discourse was endorsed by images of paintings by Picasso, Chagall, Léger, and De Chirico, which belonged to the following pages of the article “1939 Pintura”. Austral’s relationship with the artistic scene does not seem distant from Lucio Costa’s understanding shown in Monlevade if we recall Comas’ observations about Olmsted’s epigraph that Lucio had chosen to open the project’s Descriptive Memory. Regarding Austral’s involvement at the Viviendas Rurales contest, only the project developed by Jorge Vivanco and Valerio Peluffo would be awarded, with a prototype for the warm climate zone. Liernur and

Pschepiurca describe the project as a sort of “*radical manifesto*”, with its “*strictly linear form and concise organization*”, which was related to a “*traditional type*” from the countryside and “*surprised by the unprejudiced use – mythically ‘antimodern’ – of a pitched roof*” (LIERNUR; PSCEPIURCA, 2008, p. 226).

The theme of the competition was, however, reworked, expanded, and even criticized, as the main topic of *Austral 2*, released in September 1939, again as a brochure of *Nuestra Arquitectura*. In “Urbanismo Rural, Plan Regional y Vivienda”, Austral defended the elaboration of a “*regional plan*,” aiming at establishing the basis for the future development of rural urbanism in Argentina, so that it could be possible to speak, in a precise way, about “*rural housing*”, which “*should abandon, in this moment, romantic forms and traditional technique, fully embracing the spirit of the age*” (AUSTRAL, 1939b, n/p). In the same issue, Le

Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret’s “*Le Village Cooperatif*” is shown as an example in France, and, as the Group’s “*own work*”, two approaches for rural housing were presented: on the one side, the study of industrialized rural housing; on the other, the study of houses made with conventional techniques and materials (brick, stone, wood), which Austral had prepared for the Banco de la Nación contest (AUSTRAL, 1939b).

In the first approach, Austral adopted an openly favorable position with respect to the prefabricated, dry-assembled house, as seen in the article’s heading, “*La gran industria debe hacerse cargo. La prefabricación resolvería el problema*”, arguing that



Figure 3. Covers of *Austral 1* (Buenos Aires, June 1939) and *Austral 2* (Buenos Aires, September 1939). Source: Centro de Documentación – Biblioteca. Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo. Universidad de Buenos Aires. Montage made by the authors.



Figure 4. Jorge Vivanco and Valerio Peluffo, *Viviendas Rurales* Contest, hot climate zone, 1939, published in *Nuestra Arquitectura* (Buenos Aires, January 1940, p. 441; 442). Source: Centro de Documentación – Biblioteca. Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo. Universidad de Buenos Aires. Montage made by the authors.

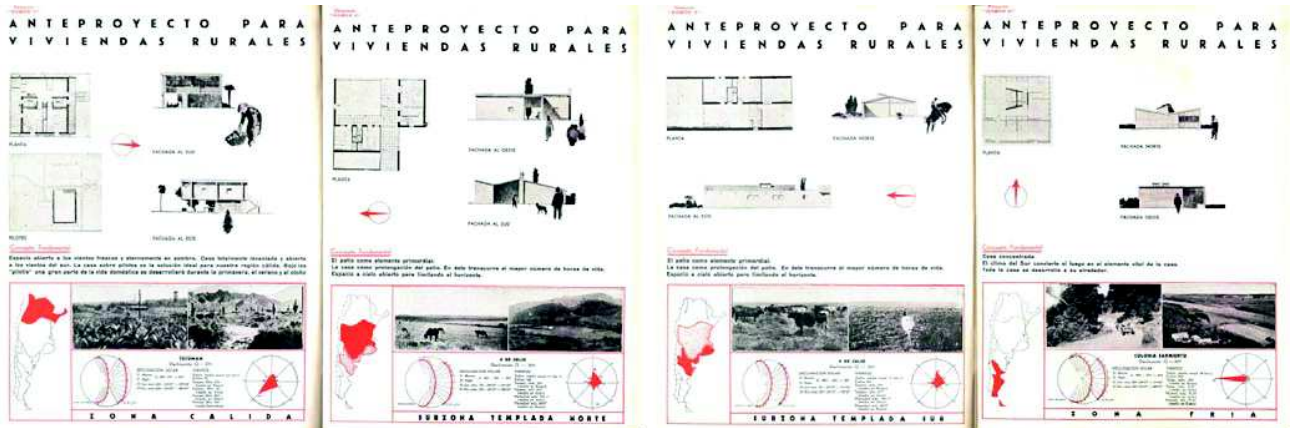


Figure 5. Domus 1, Domus 2, Domus 3 and Domus 4, “Anteproyectos para viviendas rurales”, *Austral 2* (Buenos Aires, September 1939). Source: Centro de Documentación – Biblioteca. Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo. Universidad de Buenos Aires. Montage made by the authors.

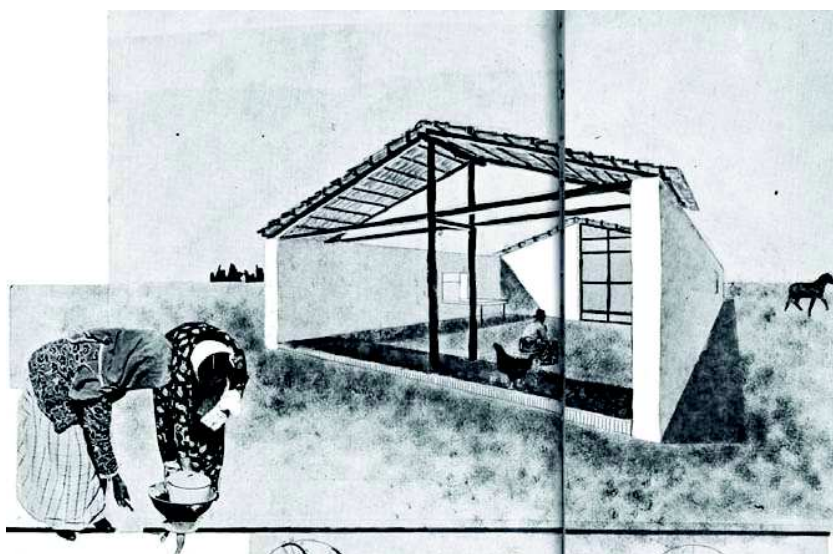
“the same man that requires the most modern machinery to explore the goods of the land, continues to live in the same conditions of primitive settlers, whose housing was nothing but a primary shelter” (AUSTRAL, 1939b, n/p). After that, possible systems of prefabrication are discussed: houses fully assembled at the factory and then transported; houses assembled on site made from serial-produced components; and the manufacture of serial components on the site itself.

Regarding the houses made for the contest, *Austral* publishes four studies: Domus 1, devised to the warm climate zone; Domus 2, to northern temperate sub-zone; Domus 3, to the southern temperate sub-zone; Domus 4, for the cold climate zone. There is no individual authorship attached to these projects; nevertheless, it is known that *Austral* members did not participated in the contest as a single group, but in small teams (LIERNUR; PSCHUPIURCA, 2008, p. 226). Vivanco and Peluffo’s submission, the only one that was awarded, is not among the published studies, appearing only later in *Nuestra Arquitectura*, with other projects awarded by the jury, which include the submission by Horacio Caminos, Fernando Álzaga and Téran Etcheopar (CONCURSO..., 1940).

Anyway, it is interesting to note that *Austral* makes a certain editorial use of these studies. This is perceived both in the way the rural houses were presented in their space in the report, i.e., within the article about the contest, and in the position they occupied in the general context of the brochure. Even though *Austral* has not made the projects as a group, it seems that there was an “*Austral* use” of these ideas, i.e., there was a precise formulation of the subject in the collective scope of the brochure.

Austral’s report on rural housing starts with a perspective drawing of Domus 3, a telluric image of an economical life. Pictures of the countryside, cut and pasted in the foreground, the rooster over the veranda, the work on the patio, the horse on the background near the straight line that may correspond to the unperturbed horizon of the Pampas, are elements that interact with an almost primary, solitary building placed over a homogeneous extension of land. Domus

Figure 6. Domus 3, "Anteproyecto para viviendas rurales", Austral 2 (Buenos Aires, September 1939). Source: Centro de Documentación – Biblioteca. Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo. Universidad de Buenos Aires.



3, the house planned to shelter this idea of life, is a regular and unitary volume, defined by two parallel masonry walls, whitewashed, over which the rustic structures of the veranda and the pitched roof are supported. The domestic environments are ruled by these two planes of masonry, between which the open-covered space of the veranda, the patio area (where the roof is suppressed) and the interior rooms appear. The large glazed surfaces are transversal to these planes; the façade that gives way to the patio is half masonry wall, half frame, coinciding with the interior living room. Only on occasion does one or another window disrupt the continuity of the lateral walls; but, in the patio, a small window seems associated with the table, producing an image that seems like a remembrance of Le Corbusier's little house (Corseax-Vevey, in 1925).

⁸ "Technique to be used momentary", is written close to the picture of a traditional ranch, which is compared to "modern industry" (AUSTRAL, 1939b, n/p).

Austral's formulation for the rural house combines this telluric image and its primitivist resonances to the suggestion that, in all four rural Domus houses, the "primitive" components (as they deemed these components primitive⁸) would be used within the scope of a modern, educated, and informed project reasoning.

In the following pages, the four Domus are presented according to the same visual and systematic discourse: plans, façades, over an explanatory chart of the respective climate zone. Typological and conventional elements – patios, galleries, pitched roofs – may be reworked within a modern scope, provided that their pertinence is proven, something that it is made within the scope of a rigorous and demonstrable knowledge of each climate zone, which Austral intentionally records through charts prepared for each zone studied (including a split between southern temperate and northern temperate zones, areas that the contest deemed as a single one).

The view of the problem of rural housing that Austral offers in the report on prefabrication, which is openly modern, even militant, if we recall the use of the slogan in favor of the "spirit of the age", somehow instruments what the Group

wants to explain with the four rural Domus: the decomposition of the house into predefined and repeatable elements of architecture, associated with a collection, also limited, of local materials. If in industrialized houses, on the one hand, we have an “*element-wall / element-roof / element-floor / element-opening*”, industrially produced, in rural houses, on the other hand, we have “*exterior walls / interior walls / roofs / floors*”, made with brick, stone, grit, and straw. Materials might be industrialized or natural, but, in any case, they may be submitted to a normative and systematic project reasoning, from which, conversely, one may manufacture individual products – the “*variable standard*” that ought to allow houses to be “*the expression of their inhabitants*” (AUSTRAL, 1939b).

CONCLUSIONS

The uses of primitivism in Latin American modern architecture has been understood according to positions that, if not necessarily opposite in its material manifestation, are relatively antagonistic regarding a theoretical point of view. The first position corresponds to primitivism as a project based on identity, in which the valorization of the primitive as stated by ethical and/or political reasons, generally associated with an idea of cultural resistance, prevails. The second one corresponds to primitivism as an artistic project, either as a quest for the essential or as a strategy of characterization, but always as an affirmation of disciplinary autonomy, which is not limited by an ethic of regional. The first position, as a project concerned with identity construction, is closer to an *a priori* acceptance of the structuring center-periphery pair (what it claims is to place periphery at the center); the second position indicates a more complex attitude, in which the center-periphery pair does not necessarily have a very clear geographical correspondence, and may make way to further oppositions (for example, urban-rural instead of regional-universal).

Monlevade (Brazil, 1936) and Viviendas Rurales (Argentina, 1939) were two contests carried more or less during the same time, whose programs converged in the study of small housing – for factory workers in the first example, and rural workers in the second – and whose participants, that is, Lucio Costa in Brazil, and the members of the Austral group in Argentina, who were committed to the development of modern architecture. The outcome of the participation of these authors in both contests, identified, in this case, as a set of drawings and collages, display similar characteristics. Additionally, there is the use, in these projects, of natural materials, such as stone and clay, and the appeal to pre-industrial building techniques, before the emergence of modern architecture that their authors had embraced and promoted. These images could be easily associated, in a preliminary analysis, to the first position. It is evident that both uses of primitivism indicated above address the valuation of local materials, the recovery of ancestral building procedures, and a certain idea of regress. But what this article intends to stress is precisely the relationship between these two examples and the second position. Lucio Costa and Austral members coincide in a certain disciplinary attitude that exemplifies the argument of primitivism as an artistic issue. Both Lucio Costa, in the workers’ houses of Monlevade, and the members of Austral group, in the alternatives for rural houses, proposed the use

of natural and autochthonous materials, as well as the use of conventional building techniques associated with them, departing from an intellectual and artistic choice that could be proved rational in terms of the state of knowledge at the time, and that was neither limited, nor legitimated, by the issue of identity.

Costa's and Austral's proposals did not involve industrially-produced houses, but that was not a reason for them not to be less systematic, sequential, and repeatable, in alignment with the universal ambitions of modern architecture. And neither stone nor clay made these buildings more Latin American. After all, as Clorindo Testa states about the Errázuriz house (1930), when asked about regionalism: "... *superb project, stone wall and wooden beams; Le Corbusier took into account what was in the Chilean site where the house would be built... You can also build it in the French campagne*" (BAYÓN; GASPARIINI, 1977, p. 24).

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