Catalano, Caminos and the Dissolution of Two Disciplinary Dichotomies. The Case of the Ciudad Universitaria Campus in Buenos Aires

Marcelo Faiden

The building housing the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism (FADU) is one of a select group of architecture schools to be designed by prominent architects. Others include Gropius’s Bauhaus, Mies’s IIT and Artigas’s FAUSP, as well as Siza’s work in Porto, OMA’s work at Cornell and Lacaton & Vassal’s work in Nantes... The University of Buenos Aires joined this list, albeit unwittingly, thanks to the work of Eduardo Catalano and Horacio Caminos. Yet, there is one key difference between the buildings at the Ciudad Universitaria campus and the others mentioned above, which is central to this essay. Whereas all the other architecture schools have made the spatial attributes of their premises part of their academic culture, FADU has remained indifferent to its physical form. There have been no publications or exhibitions on the subject of the Pabellón III building, nor do the faculty’s archives contain any documents concerning its architecture or the architects who produced it.

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It is striking to see that the building has been overlooked in local discourse, despite its highly didactic nature. During my time at university, the building by Catalano and Caminos was only mentioned in the classroom when our lecturers wanted to give us an empirical example of what not to do. Whenever they deemed our proposals to be “too systematic”, “indifferent” or simply “cold”, they evoked the Pabellón III building to represent the evils so vehemently opposed by the “Buenos Aires School”. Some of us would nod despite being unconvinced by their arguments because, in our eyes, we were witnessing an architecture that could withstand almost anything. It was capable of withstanding our professors, the predominant narratives of each era and, most importantly, a lack of visibility and predictability. Embracing these capabilities as architectural attributes will be the main focus of my latest attempt to anchor the Pabellón III building to the present day.

Catalano and Caminos displayed an impressive adaptability when it came to their own careers. From the outset, their education and work were both national and international in scope and they combined their professional practice with extensive academic activity. They both worked as lecturers at the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies in Tucumán before joining the Architectural Association (AA) in London as guest lecturers. Later on, they worked at the School of Design at the University of North Carolina, where Catalano was subsequently appointed dean. Finally, both architects obtained tenure at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where they ended their academic careers as emeritus professors.

Their working style was never stable. During the most productive period of their professional careers, they were able to combine their individual work with the work that they carried out in partnership. Their lives and work were influenced by the political upheaval in Argentina, although this did not dampen the intensity of their activity. Indeed, quite the opposite is true: their sheer consistency obliges us to reconsider their work from a new perspective, accepting events not as diversions from an apparently ideal destination but as a specific variable capable of sparking specific knowledge.

Let us begin by looking at the two versions of the plot plan published in specialist media outlets. The difference in graphic terms between them and the other documents disseminated is immediately apparent. Their lack of definition suggests that they have been produced to tick the boxes prior to a potential publication. It would not be outlandish to assume that the architects took little interest in designing a project from such a position of distance. This might be explained by their first-hand experience of the Tucumán university project collapsing or by the perspective granted by their geographical distance from Argentina at the time when the project began. They may well have been sceptical of long-term projects, especially those whose scale meant that they would span several government mandates before they would be completed.

The Ciudad Universitaria campus was quite literally designed over the River Plate. The expansion of the city along this new edge was decided on the same drawing board used to design the faculty buildings, at the same time. There was no careful attention to context nor empty slate. Architecture and landscape were part of a single design, or better put, a single attitude to design. An attitude based on a determination not to reproduce traditional approaches to design in situations in which they were clearly no longer workable.

If we observe the layout of the blocks, we see an arrangement that appears to be in motion, in the midst of a decision-making process. It is as if the design were in tension, perhaps because it is not entirely symmetrical. The central area seems unstructured due to the imbalance produced by the off-centre position of the dyke. The three buildings located to the north of the plot blur any possible axiality in the layout, leaving some room for...
manoeuvre for future adjustments. The subtle changes made to the scale model confirm the use of this strategy.

By contrast, the second diagram not only features a significant reduction in terms of building and plot size but also takes the possibility of incorporating the “accurately unpredictable” into the final arrangement of the buildings to the extreme. Catalano and Caminos no doubt predicted that further cutbacks would be made as the project progressed, prompting them to opt to organise the buildings in as basic a manner as possible: in rows. It was as if they were trying to force themselves to unlearn the value of the finished product or of the “final state” of things through this act. As if, from this point onwards, from this apparent renunciation, they had found a new area in which their project could be deployed: an area in which “change” is accepted as the only material capable of expressing a far more appropriate, relevant idea of context.

To date, two buildings have been constructed. Their duality makes them oddly stable. The radical use we make of them should rid us of any trace of nostalgia when we look back at the unfulfilled promises of the Ciudad Universitaria campus project.

Now for a change in scale. Let us move a little closer and pause on the standard floor plan, with its axial structure and open-plan spaces. The cohesion between each of the elements is evident: the central void in specific relation to the stands and the two cores in line with the position of the columns, which, in turn, are linked to the modulation of the waffle slab, which is connected to the envelope...

Here, the significance of each element could be said to lie in its ability to establish relationships with other elements rather than in its own uniqueness. This characteristic is reminiscent of Mies van der Rohe's architecture of the buildings conveys an unusual authority, as if such a single facade plane, the intensity of use that Catalano and Caminos sought to encourage is more than apparent.

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On more than one occasion, specialist critics have insisted on interpreting this period in Mies's work as a regression from mature modernity to classism. This observation might be misplaced when it comes to Catalano and Caminos's design. In their faculty buildings, there is something that they appear to have overlooked... Where exactly are the classrooms and workshops? How is this floor used? What is it for? And what programme was it designed for exactly? These questions are usually resolved in the specifications before the design process begins. Although that was not the case here, the architecture of the buildings conveys an unusual authority, as if such basic considerations were almost irrelevant to the project. Catalano and Caminos perfectly understood the scope of the project and its new geography, identifying this contingency as an opportunity to test out new design techniques. They built an architecture that embodied “programmatic instability” and “spatial specificity” in a positive manner. The robustness of the layout only makes sense from this new perspective. Its generic character and symmetrical stability are not presented as a value in themselves, but rather as an organisational strategy capable of encouraging the emergence of unexpected, surprise elements. In this case, the architecture itself seems to fade from the limelight. It appears to lose weight and substance. It is now presented as infrastructure for the events that happen within it.

Let us look closer still and spend a moment considering the load-bearing structure of the faculty buildings. Like the National Gallery in Berlin, the buildings rise up from a foundation with just two structural elements: waffle slabs and cruciform columns.

The consistent attention that Catalano and Caminos paid to the rest of the world allowed them to draw on the same disciplinary breakthroughs as their more acclaimed peers. It is even possible that their peripheral status emboldened them to address. The subtle changes made to the scale model confirm the use of this strategy.

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Marcelo Faiden is a founding partner of the architecture studio Adamo-Faiden and dean of the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella School of Architecture. He completed his undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (FADU-UBA) and his postgraduate studies at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Barcelona at the Universidad Politécnica de Catalunya (ETSAB-UPC). In 2016, he was awarded a PhD in Architecture for his thesis ‘Los bajos de los edificios altos’ ('The low part of the high-rise). He has been invited to deliver courses and presentations at numerous institutions, including the Berlage Institute, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Princeton School of Architecture, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Escola da Cidade de Sao Paulo and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, among others. Adamo-Faiden's work has been published extensively in monographic books in Chile, Spain, Italy and New York.
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a similar process in their own careers. “Professional practice” and “academic research” is another dichotomy that has sadly taken hold around the world. Catalano and Caminos embody an approach to architecture that is capable of resisting this global trend. Analysed with the privilege of hindsight, their practices may be viewed as a latent example of the fertile creativity required to dedicate an entire professional career to alternating positively between intellectual speculation and material reorganisation.
Notes
01. As democracy was restored, professionals with a greater involvement in architectural practice returned to the University of Buenos Aires. This is when this group of professors began to refer to themselves as the “Buenos Aires School” for the first time.

02. In 1948, President Perón expropriated 14,000 hectares of the Cerro San Javier in the province of Tucumán (Argentina) to build a university campus that would serve the whole of South America. In the mid-1950s, the project was suspended before any of the buildings could be inaugurated. Catalano and Caminos participated in the project alongside Jorge Vivanco, Eduardo Sacriste, José Le Pera, Hilaria Zalba and Rafael Onetto.

03. See the chapter on Mies Van Der Rohe in FRAMPTON, Kenneth, Modern Architecture: A Critical History, Thames and Hudson, 1980.


Images
01. Aerial Photograph, Photo by Javier Agustin Rojas.
02. Main Hall, Photo by Javier Agustin Rojas.
03. Plan of the complex.
04. Model of the complex.
05. Main plan, second version.
06. Typical Plan.
07. Detail.
08. Photograph of the works.