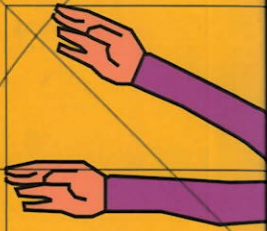


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Supersudaca

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rg@romanoguerra.com.br
romanoguerra.com.br

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From Big Boxes to Little Boxes

Guest writers

Mario Marchant

Massive changes have been taking place in Latin America since the 1990s when the re-democratization process began to replace most of the continent's military dictatorships. Regardless of the ideological orientation of the new democratic governments neo-liberal politics were implemented. That decade marked the end of the development strategies employed by many Latin American governments since the second half of the 20th century within leftist and/or Socialist ideological and political frameworks. It was an era during which it seemed that architecture's ideals went hand in hand with the collective cultural aspirations of many political leaders: housing projects and urban plans proposed by several prominent Latin American architects (which founded in modernist principles the *perfect* recipe to be applied) seemed to easily convince governments of the urgent social need for housing, envisioning what promised to be a bright future. Consequently, during the 1950s and especially during the 1960s those ideals were crystallized in several – collective? – rational projects locally known as Unidades Vecinales (abbreviated as U.V.), such as U.V. de Matute in Lima, Peru, and U.V. Portales in Santiago, Chile. These developments were essentially modernist *big boxes* (blocks and megablocks à la Ginzburg's Narkomfin, Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation or Soviet microrayons) including never-ending corridors and elevated pedestrian bridges that connected standard housing units. Architecture seemed for a moment to perfectly embody collective life.

During the last fifteen years we have witnessed a major modernization of the continent's urban milieu (tolled highways, private industrial parks, international hotel facilities, shopping malls and so on). Along with that typically Western notion of progress, several Latin American countries also modified their housing strategies leading them to institute subsidy policies, which, in association with the private sector, were supposed to

1. *Little Boxes* is a song written and composed by Malvina Reynolds in 1962, which became a hit for her friend Pete Seeger in 1963, when he released his cover version. Reynolds' version was first released on her 1967 Columbia Records album *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*.

satisfy the social demands for that commodity. That scenario drastically transformed Latin America's collective housing dream into Latin America's individual housing dream. Housing production rapidly changed from *big boxes* to *little boxes*. Little boxes have proliferated in Latin America's cities like forest mushrooms after a downpour, defining enormous urban areas (and not just suburban sprawl as many might imagine) with endless rows of *pequeñas cajitas*. The initial urban tissue woven by these small individual houses is initially a dreary landscape of dull conformity, as the North American folksinger Malvina Reynolds described in her 1962 song *Little Boxes* which lampoons the development of United States suburbia:

Little boxes all the same.

There's a green one and a pink one

And a blue one and a yellow one,

And they're all made out of ticky tacky

And they all look just the same.¹

Yet there is a significant difference between the United States sprawl Reynolds describes and Latin America's Little Boxes phenomenon. If we carefully focus on that initial post-card of urban homogeneity, we can clearly see how people in Latin American cities have produced interesting, formal and programmatic transformations in their *pequeñas cajitas*: From room additions to the original unit to a variety of non-residential (educational, religious and commercial) uses. For example, in La Florida, a typical low-middle class neighborhood in South Santiago de Chile, a mother could start her day by dropping her child at a *little-box-nursery* and from there walk down a few steps to stop at the next door *little-box-church* for a religious service. Once the service had ended she could go with a friend (recently met at the *little-box-church*) to visit her new *little-box-house* addition (a second floor for the new baby) and then quickly stop by the *little-box-shop* next door to pick up bread, vegetables and a roasted chicken for the family lunch. Thus the new urban landscape that Latin America's little boxes are constructing do not *all look just the same*. There is a significant variety and singularity within a repetitive basic pattern (initially conceived just for housing). Diversity has been mainly produced by the lack of urban services and infrastructure (generated by unsuccessful or non-existing urban planning) that goes along with the rapid construction of those developments, the product of market forces. As a consequence some people have seen those missing urban necessities as something to

FROM BIG BOXES TO LITTLE BOXES

Essay by Mario Marchant

Massive changes have been taking place in Latin America since the 1990s when the re-democratization process began to replace most of the continent's military dictatorships. Regardless of the ideological orientation of the new democratic governments neo-liberal politics were implemented. That decade marked the end of the development strategies employed by many Latin American governments since the second half of the XX century within leftist and/or Socialist ideological and political frameworks. It was an era during which it seemed that architecture's ideals went hand by hand with the collective cultural aspirations of many political leaders: housing projects and urban plans proposed by several prominent Latin American architects (which founded in modernist principles the 'perfect' recipe to be applied) seemed to easily convince governments of the urgent social need for housing, envisioning what promised to be a bright future. Consequently during the 1950s and especially during the 1960s those ideals were crystallized in several – collective? – rational projects locally known as *Unidades Vecinales* (abbreviated as *U.V.*), such as *U.V. de Matute* in Lima, Peru and *U.V. Portales* in Santiago, Chile. These developments were essentially modernist 'Big Boxes' (blocks and megablocks à la Ginzburg's *Narkomtin*, Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* or Soviet *microrayons*) including never-ending corridors and elevated pedestrian bridges that connected standard housing units. Architecture seemed for a moment to perfectly embody collective life.

During the last 15 years we have witnessed a major modernization of the continent's urban milieu (tollled highways, private industrial parks, international hotel facilities, shopping malls and so on). Along with that typically Western notion of progress, several Latin American countries also modified their housing strategies leading them to institute subsidy policies which – in association with the private sector – were supposed to satisfy the social demands for that commodity. That scenario drastically transformed Latin America's collective housing dream into Latin America's individual housing dream. Housing production rapidly changed from Big Boxes to Little Boxes. Little Boxes have proliferated in L.A.'s cities like forest mushrooms after a downpour, defining enormous urban areas (and not just suburban sprawl as many might imagine) with endless rows of *pequeñas cajitas*. The initial urban tissue woven by these small individual houses is initially a dreary landscape of dull conformity, as the North American folksinger Malvina Reynolds described in her 1962 song 'Little Boxes' which lampoons the development of U.S. suburbia:

*Little boxes all the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.*

Yet there is a significant difference between the U.S. sprawl Reynolds describes and Latin America's Little Boxes phenomenon. If we carefully focus on that initial postcard of urban homogeneity we can clearly see how people in Latin American cities have produced interesting, formal and programmatic transformations in their *pequeñas cajitas*: from room additions to the original unit to a variety of non-residential (educational, religious and commercial) uses. For example, in La Florida, a typical low-middle class neighborhood in south Santiago de Chile, a mother could start her day by dropping her child at a 'Little-Box-Nursery' and from there walk down a few steps to stop at the next door

'Little-Box-Church' for a religious service. Once the service had ended she could go with a friend (recently met at the 'Little-Box-Church') to visit her new 'Little-Box-House' addition (a second floor for the new baby) and then quickly stop by the 'Little-Box-Shop' next door to pick up bread, vegetables and a roasted chicken for the family lunch. Thus the new urban landscape that Latin America's Little Boxes are constructing do not 'all look just the same'. There is a significant variety and singularity within a repetitive basic pattern (initially conceived just for housing). Diversity has been mainly produced by the lack of urban services and infrastructure (generated by unsuccessful or non-existing urban planning) that goes along with the rapid construction of those developments, the product of market forces. As a consequence some people have seen those missing urban necessities as something to criticize and demand from local governments. Other have seen it as an opportunity for personal gain. The capacity of Little Boxes for individualization, flexibility and controlled expansion may explain their demand and popularity. It may also explain why Big Boxes of the past with limited spatial capacity, little flexibility and badly scaled, unsupervised, open public spaces that surround mega blocks have been a failure. In addition, the desire for a *casita con patio* has been strongly embedded in Latin America's social imaginary since colonial times when new cities were constructed based upon the 'mini me' urban version of the countryside's Spanish haciendas (creating the typical urban block, a.k.a. *manzana*, of several side-by-side row houses with inner patios).

The architectural ideas behind Latin America's Big Boxes of the 1950s and 1960s may have confused the notion of 'collective' (a group of individuals with similarities but with particular aspirations) with the notion of 'massive' (a large structure without individual recognition). Massive clearly does not imply collective. Collective architecture must consider space flexibility, the ability to change and grow as well as smaller sized, supervised social space as essential to individual satisfaction and the creation of a sense of community among urban residents that truly represents the social notion of collective. If the architecture of Little Boxes results in the U.S. (and even in parts of Europe) in an ever-expanding monotonous urban sprawl, in Latin America it seems to construct an emerging contemporary collective way of life (with the absence of an architectural vision, plan or discourse), showing that collective aspirations have increasingly become the product of individuals, again, a collective phenomenon. #

Biographical note:

Mario Marchant is an architect, researcher and professor at University of Chile and Talca, with an independent practice based in Santiago.