

RISE, FALL, AND RESURRECTION

Architecture as Revolution: Episodes in the History of Modern Mexico
(Luis E. Carranza, University of Texas Press, Austin 2010, 255 pages, \$60, hardback)

by Monica Savino

CONSIDERING THAT TEXAS SHARES A BORDER with Mexico, most of us understand little of its years in armed, cultural, and institutional revolution. As a result, our grasp of Mexico's incredible cultural production during the 1920 to 1940 period can be limited to the Mexican Mural movement and perhaps a few "deco" buildings in the capital.

Luis E. Carranza's well-researched book presents five in-depth episodes and is the result of the author's personal observations growing up as a child in Mexico City, fortified with many years of academic research leading to his dissertation on the topic, and ultimately, this publication.

To be clear, this is not a book about big names and big architecture with big color images, but a book about architectural production in the years immediately following the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Carranza quickly identifies the complex interactions between cultural discussions and the subsequent architectural output after the Revolu-

tion and weaves themes of nationalism, socialism, and capitalism through select architectural projects constructed primarily in Mexico City. His chapters focus on well-known individuals: José Vasconcelos, Manuel Amabilis, Juan O'Gorman, Carlos Obregón Santacilia, and their associated alleged influences. The book contains enough significant information on select topics to satisfy most readers with historic interests and scholarly leanings in early modernism in Mexico during this period.

Carranza's episodes vary in their level of reader satisfaction. For example, "If Walls Could Talk" is the compelling title of the first chapter and might have any reader sitting up straight ready to listen to Carranza's telling of José Vasconcelos' enthusiastic work with the newly formed Secretary of Public Education. Carranza presents the material in full dissertation form to the extent that he risks our interest waning in the topic altogether, since his discussion of the pri-

mary example, a renovated sixteenth-century convent, begins 14 pages into the chapter. Albeit an invaluable insight to the powerfully influential Secretary of Education during this key moment in Mexico's post-revolution transformation, this level of information is readily available from other sources, including Vasconcelos' own writings. Carranza's research on the graphic material, bas relief, and the philosophical origins of the Mexican Mural Renaissance is thoughtfully used to support his thesis. Less convincing, however, is his selection of examples, since important, new discussions could be pursued on lesser known but equally impressive projects of the period such as Carlos Obregón Santacilia's Centro Educativo Benito Juárez.

The episode "La Ciudad Falsificada" highlights vibrant literary and graphic production of the era,

existing primarily as an introduction to Mexico's European influenced avant-garde with the topic of architecture playing a subordinate role. The episode "Colonizing the Colonizer" is a strong chapter with a healthy balance of historical background necessary for the subject. It is straightforward and rich writing on the quandary of national expression of a former Spanish colony, through the example of the Mexican Pavilion by Manuel Amabilis for the 1929 Ibero-American Exposition. Again, this is a popular topic with reprints of common images, but in Carranza's book the topic is covered in English, which is a delight.

A more intense and impassioned episode is "Against a New Architecture: Juan O'Gorman and the Disillusionment of Modernism," depicting the rise, fall, and resurrection of Modernism in one architect's life. Here, too, Carranza constructs a solid context, including several pages of architectural discourse, and presents the undulating socio-political landscape that was Mexico after the Revolution. Included in the background are in-depth discussions on plastic trends between 1920 and 1934 and the emergence of reinforced concrete. For many architects, O'Gorman's education and career represents the transformation of architectural exploration in the late 1920s and early 30s, and serves as the link between the traditional and the modern. What eventually emerges from Carranza's exposition of O'Gorman is a portrait of an incredibly talented architect who worked for Mexico's most important practitioners and was extremely driven to utilize radical functionalism as a means to further the social and economic goals of the Revolution. What we do not get in this chapter, except marginally by way of black and white photos, is O'Gorman's simultaneous conversation with construction technology and the acknowledgement that functionalism can yield a vernacular or regional aesthetic.

Architecture as Revolution embarks into known territory since the author's topics are similar if not identical to those presented over the decades by respected architects and authors such as Rafael Lopez Rangel, C.B. Smith, Edward Burian, Israel Katzman, Louise Noelle, and Enrique de Anda Alanis. The architectural examples have been widely discussed and all but a handful of the images have been commonly available in Mexican publications. Carranza's book achieves similar goals as previous publications by presenting significant trends in post-Revolution architecture, which can generally be identified as socialist/fascist, nationalist, and avant garde. But the value that Carranza adds to the subject is his clarification of important industrial and political connections, reassessing the roles of known personalities and influences, and revealing the roles of new ones. Carranza's heartily researched book confirms what many who pursue the multi-disciplinary topic of early Mexican modernism and the Revolution already know: this is a boundless topic. And Carranza's episodes take great advantage of this wide opportunity.

