
A Study Of The Caracas University City In The Art History Of Latin America

Latin American Art History - University City of Caracas

The Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas is considered one of the greatest examples of modern architecture in Latin America. Designed by Carlos Raul Villanueva beginning in 1942, the project took almost 20 years to complete and encapsulates over 164,200 hectares, 11 schools, 40 departments, and over 40 buildings. Overall, the campus is known for its distinct buildings that are both aesthetically pleasing and functional, creating one cohesive space. In 2000, the University was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and became the first Latin American campus to receive this honor.

The Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas was founded as the Royal and Pontifical University in 1721 during the Spanish Colonial Period. Due to space constraints and the desire to move away from colonial influences, the University was moved to the San Francisco Convent in 1856. In 1942, the growing student population forced the Venezuelan government to begin planning a new campus. Based on his success with the Ciudad Universitaria de Bogota, Carlos Raul Villanueva was chosen as the architect. Although the campus incorporates work from many artists, the government felt that one principal architect was needed to make the space cohesive. Indeed, Villanueva succeeded in designing nine distinct zones, aligning with the different departments and needs of the university, in one larger campus. The buildings are characterized by bright colors and distinct sculpture-like forms, usually done through exposed concrete in typical modernist style. Of the University buildings, the Aula Magna is the most well known with its cloud-like ceiling. From the ceiling of the performance hall hangs 22 disks of different shapes and angles, creating the illusion of clouds falling from the sky. Additionally, the campus is home to the Olympic Stadium. Although Venezuela has never hosted an Olympic games, this stadium is home to the Caracas FC soccer team and has hosted the Pan-American Games, qualifiers for the World Cup, and the Copa America. Finally, the campus is well known for its covered walkways that connect academic buildings, making the university very efficient in the way it captures and reflects light.

University City of Caracas is very similar to other universities built during this time. The campus was modeled after the University of Bogota, which Villanueava designed prior to this project. More notable, however, is the resemblance to Ciudad Universitaria de Mexico in Mexico City. Despite the geographic separation, both campuses are primarily concrete, sculpture-like buildings adorned with abstract, geometric shapes and bright colors. Specifically, both have covered walkways and an Olympic stadium central to campus. It's important to note that for both cultures, the creation of such a massive university symbolized the importance of education. From a colonial society where education was limited to the upper classes, the erection of a massive, open university was a symbol of bringing education to the masses in this post-colonial, modern culture.

Although Carlos Raul Villanueva was the principal architect, the campus incorporates works from many other artists, both Venezuelan and international. Hans Arp, Henri Laurens, and Balsatar Lobo, for example, created many of the sculptures adorning the campus. The famous

stained-glass was done by Fernand Leger, while the Aula Magna's clouds were designed by Alexander Calder. Many of the murals found on campus were created by Venezuelan-born artists, such as Pascual Navarro, Alejandro Otero, and Victor Valera. The integration of these works into this space contributes to the functionalism of campus; their works, although different, come together to create a cohesive space, much like Villanueva's distinct buildings create a unified campus.

Despite its architectural greatness, the University faces many problems. As in its history, the student population is beginning to outgrow the space provided. The campus, though originally designed to accommodate 6,000 students, now holds over 60,000. As a result, many spaces have been divided to create more rooms. The advent of new technology has also created a problem for these buildings, as many are not properly equipped and introducing these tools damages the structural and aesthetic integrity of the space. Additionally, the exteriors are beginning to decay because the buildings are over 50 years old. The university lacks proper funding to maintain these spaces, although a monitoring program is in place. Finally, social unrest in Venezuela threatens the University's safety as a whole, as protestors consider it a symbol of the state. It'll be interesting to see how this university evolves over the coming decades.

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