

## Radical Americas

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Book review: Aberrant Architecture, David Chambers and Kevin Haley (eds), *Wherever You Find People: The Radical Schools of Oscar Niemeyer, Darcy Ribeiro and Leonel Brizola*

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## Book Review

### **Aberrant Architecture, David Chambers and Kevin Haley (eds), *Wherever You Find People: The Radical Schools of Oscar Niemeyer, Darcy Ribeiro and Leonel Brizola***

(Zürich: Park Books, 2016), 176pp, £28 / \$39.

*George Kafka*\*

In November 2016, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) awarded the Universidad de Ingeniería y Tecnología (UTEC) in Lima, Peru with the RIBA International Prize, essentially declaring it the best new building in the world. Designed by Irish firm Grafton Architects, in collaboration with Lima-based Shell Arquitectos, the concrete-heavy project continues the continent-wide intersection of radical architecture and education that has long been centred on the university. UTEC joins the mid-twentieth century *ciudades universitarias* (university cities) of Mexico City, Caracas and Buenos Aires as some of the most important instances of architectural modernism across the Americas.

That these monumental projects should centre around the typology of the university should come as no surprise considering the fundamental link between higher education, urban development and civic architecture in Latin America. As Mark D. Szuchman notes, ‘in both England and the United States, the university...was established in the pastoral purity of the countryside. In Latin America, education, particularly higher-level education, was a privilege accorded exclusively to the city.’<sup>1</sup>

The urban school, however, has not featured in Latin America’s architectural history in quite the same way. The one-off, even showcasing

nature of grand university complexes has occupied the historical echelons of pedagogic architecture in a way that dwarfs the less glamorous, iterative architecture of primary and secondary schools. *Wherever You Find People* goes some way to redressing this balance. The book, edited by Aberrant Architecture, sheds light on the Integrated Centres of Public Education (CIEPs), an experimental educational project rolled-out across the state of Rio de Janeiro during the 1980s. This pedagogical project is remarkable not only for its scale and ambition, but also for the relative obscurity it has acquired despite being led by Brazil's – indeed Latin America's – most celebrated practitioner in the built environment, Oscar Niemeyer.

Responding to the influx of rural migrants into the state of Rio de Janeiro, the CIEPs were conceived in 1982 by then-State Governor Leonel Brizola, anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro and Niemeyer to provide holistic education and community infrastructure, with facilities spanning from science to samba to showers. During Brizola's two terms in office (1983–7 and 1991–4) 508 CIEPs were built, before subsequent administrations cut the building project short in attempts to distance themselves from Brizola's socialist politics.

Like the schools themselves, *Wherever You Find People* sees Aberrant Architecture, a young British firm, take a holistic approach to the CIEPs. Aside from archival essays from Brizola, Ribeiro and Niemeyer, the book is predominantly composed of interviews conducted during a research trip in 2012. Architects, teachers, engineers, parents, even a policeman, are drawn into discussions on the varying impact and legacy – both architectural and pedagogical – of the CIEPs in a manner that is in-depth and engaging yet relaxed and at times even jovial.

Unsurprisingly, the discussions tend to agree on the radical nature and social importance of the CIEPs, although their design and management continue to provoke consternation and controversy. The downfall of the programme is particularly provocative and illustrates how the simple provision of basic educational and social services can be conceived as radical. As two former coordinators of the programme explain, the disavowal of the CIEPs programme following the end of Brizola's second term as Governor has been read as 'deliberate discontinuity', owing to the popular association between the former Governor and the school buildings themselves – popularly referred to as *Brizolão*.

Standardization in constructing both buildings and curricula is another contentious thread that runs through *Wherever You Find People*. While the efficiency of building and iconic symbolism evoked through Niemeyer's strong graphic forms are recognized as significant merits of

the pre-fab process, some argue that a more context-specific approach to each CIEP would have avoided the sensation that ‘a spaceship has just landed in the favela’. Either way, the constructed schools represent a vital, and overlooked, part of Niemeyer’s oeuvre in their scale, innovative pre-fabricated construction system and political incentive. Despite being a card-carrying Communist, Niemeyer faced criticism – or ‘nagging’ as architect and anthropologist Lauro Cavalcanti puts it – throughout his career for not producing housing or schools. The CIEPs project provided the opportune moment to address these critiques; as Cavalcanti explains, ‘Niemeyer said he would only do such a project if there was a government in which he believed, and that was the case at that moment’ (p. 87).

Breaking the book’s interview and archival format, an excellent essay by architectural critic, curator and educator Shumi Bose draws Niemeyer’s efforts into a cross-cultural dialogue with contemporary school architecture in the UK. Unlike the ‘entrepreneurial’ spirit of Zaha Hadid’s Evelyn Grace Academy in Brixton, the CIEPs hark more to the Smithsons’ Hunstanton School in Norfolk or John Bancroft’s Pimlico School, constructed in an era when the ambitions for state education aligned with a politics of possibility and public spirit. Like the *ciudades universitarias* of neighbouring countries in Latin America, the CIEPs remain in Rio’s built environment as markers of days gone by. Some are decaying, yet others persist as eruptions of hope poured in concrete, where memories of an emancipatory future may yet be resurrected through the children that learn in them today.

## Notes

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1 Mark D. Szuchman, ‘The City as Vision: The Development of Urban Culture in Latin America’, in Gilbert M. Joseph and

Mark D. Szuchman (eds), *I Saw a City Invisible: Urban Portraits of Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 24.



**Figure 1** The swimming pool at the CIEP Ayrton Senna Da Silva in the São Conrado neighbourhood, named for Brazil's legendary Formula One driver. Image © Aberrant Architecture.



**Figure 2** Internal ramps (bottom) linking the three floors of CIEP Doutor Antoine Magarinos Torres Filho, in Rio's Borel district. Image © Aberrant Architecture.



**Figure 3** CIEP José Pedro Varela in Lapa: the pudding-shaped Cathedral de São Sebastião is reflected in the glazed office block behind the school. Image © Aberrant Architecture.



**Figure 4** An example of a compact CIEP on a difficult site: the CIEP Doutor Bento Rubião in Rocinha, Brazil's largest favela. Image © Aberrant Architecture.



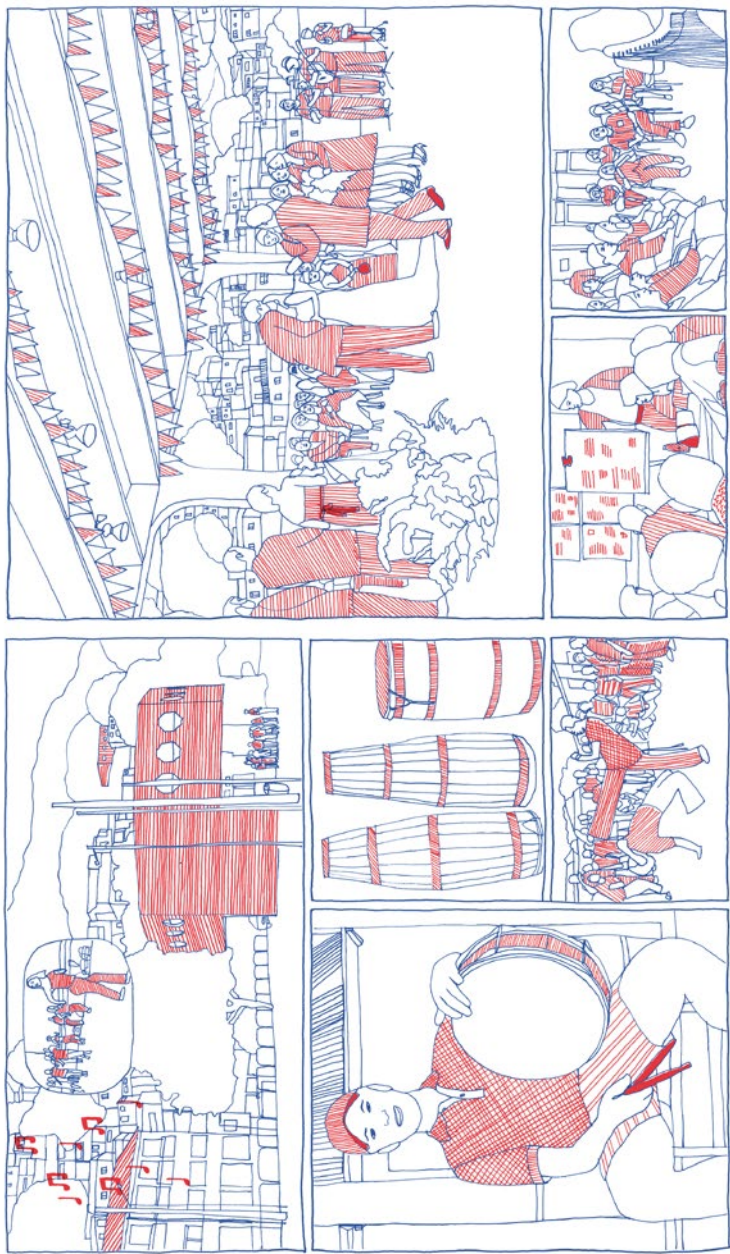


Figure 6 Life in the CIEPs – A Typical Day, Part 2. Illustration © Aberrant Architecture.





**Figure 7** Detail of the main facade at CIEP Douror Antoine Magarinos Torres Filho in Borel, showing Oscar Niemeyer's distinctive lozenge-shaped windows. Image © Aberrant Architecture.



**Figure 8** The multipurpose room on the rooftop at CIEP Douror Antoine Magarinos Torres Filho, a compact-designed CIEP. Image © Aberrant Architecture.