

The interior life

ALEJANDRO G. CRISPIANI

Profesor, Escuela de Arquitectura, Pontificia
Universidad Católica de Chile

By reviewing the intellectual and architectural production of Fernando Castillo Velasco, we can trace a parallel with the English architecture theorist and social critic John Ruskin (1819-1900). The Castillo Velasco Communities – designed and built between the early 1970s and the end of the 20th century in La Reina district – will be the frame of reference to outline some of these points of encounter.

Although Castillo Velasco never mentions Ruskin, there are obvious areas of contact between the two: an idea of architecture derived from the same religious faith with which one tries to resist the contemporary world. Both start from a Christian conception that highlights the creative capacity of humankind and brings into play a transcendental and ethical sense; the exercise of this capacity needs to transcend individual ethics and be collectively articulated, which is what the community exercises (or should exercise) when building freely. For both of them, all architecture is communal and from there they elaborate their idea of architecture.

Ruskin understands architecture as the collective art *par excellence*, which cannot be the fruit of any 'genius' in particular but of the joint work of the community, not so much expressed in the city and its homes (the private sphere) but in the great buildings, specifically in the temples which he would see as the materialization of the collective will and destiny. Thus, Ruskin analyzes the great architectural works of Christianity, such as Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice, a product of a centuries-long work that today we would call 'participatory,' also the expression of a high and refined technique.¹ Participation would become the characteristic condition of the great works of an architecture that is understood as public art and, as such, should not be judged according to the fulfillment of any practical function.

This idea differs from the objective of participation in 20th-century architecture, which used it mainly in the field of social housing as a means of achieving greater productivity and efficiency.

This is also valid in the case of Castillo Velasco, especially regarding the 1966 La Reina Housing Neighborhood, where – as mayor of the district – he acted as the main ideologist and protagonist. There he made participation the key for the construction of over 1,600 houses, aimed to benefit its inhabitants, who were previously settled in a camp. Beyond practical results, what Castillo Velasco most highlighted about this enterprise was the possibility of 'building community' in the Ruskinian sense, a free and individual choice articulated collectively, which allows the development of the creative or vocational capacities of each person around a common work. That transcendent sense, which

differentiates it from other ways of understanding participation, brings Castillo Velasco's thought closer to Ruskin's. As he states: "When the architectural work really becomes a platform, is a work that is not done by an architect alone but is done by a community [...] And then it is not an imposed architecture: an imposed architecture has never had transcendence" (Valdés, 1971).

This sense of 'building community' surpasses any practical or economic interest. This is evident in the first community, the Quinta Michita, which he designed and built between 1973 and 1974 together with Cristián and Eduardo Castillo. Although it was intended to house the Universidad Católica "Reformation group" (Gárate, 1995), the 1973 *coup d'état* radically transformed these plans, giving way to a new meaning: it served as a refuge from the repression and violence imposed by the military regime, making it a place of survival and resistance for both people and ideas.

In later communities such as Quinta Jesús (1977), Quinta Hamburgo (1979), Vicente Pérez Rosales (1981), Las Alamedas (1984), Los Castaños (1984) or Las Higueras (1988), created to house exiled groups who were returning to Chile, this sense of resistance was turning towards the new urban conditions produced by the dictatorship's economic policies, which continued after its defeat. Dominated by them, the public space became a threat to community relations, thus, the community space would be the repository of a 'vitality' that the public could no longer accommodate. For Castillo Velasco: "public space used to be an extension of private space. Today, on the other hand, public space is alien to human life, it is the predominance of the automobile, gases, noise and therefore it is necessary to create an intermediate space. It is as simple as that" (Dinamarca, 1996:67).

This community-oriented approach to resisting modern technique was also a central theme in Ruskin, for whom returning to primary human ties was an alternative to the metropolis. In this way, the 'living work' could be recovered, where the creation and decisions of each person appear, as opposed to the 'dead work' of mass production. The clearest material manifestation of this life, as indicated in "The Nature of the Gothic," would be the 'technical imperfection.' A sign of the freedom and originality of each human being, it would result in a constant variation of forms and details. For Ruskin, this is a central quality of true architecture: "It seems a fantastic paradox [...] the fact that no architecture can be truly noble if it is not imperfect" (Ruskin, 2000:236).

The communities of Castillo Velasco reflect something similar. They sought to be an open project where each member could influence its formal definition and meaning, and which could be proposed but not imposed by the architect. The houses would have to overcome one of the main problems of those of his friend and disciple Enrique Browne: being "too neat to be lived" (Castillo Velasco, 1989). The communities' architecture points to something else. Castillo Velasco indicates that "although they did not signify a contribution to 'architecture,'" he was grateful

that “their work and effort together with mine, managed to solve their life problems” (Eliash, 1990:225).

This joint work should translate into materiality. The use of exposed brick is consistent with this by making visible the operation that allows the walls to be raised. The same occurs with the lack of technical rigor. For Enrique Browne, “There is [...] a certain neglect in the constructive details [...] this has economic reasons and [...] the diversity of particular solutions for each family” (Eliash, 1990:199). Community work would not resist the control of technical knowledge. Spontaneity, freedom, and the possibility of error would also be part of the resistance to the world where the cost/benefit logic prevails. This explains why Castillo Velasco recognizes himself as “a supporter of chaos, of the presence of chaos” (Giménez, 2014).

Still, there is a fundamental discrepancy between Castillo Velasco and Ruskin. For Ruskin, all great architecture must be public and give meaning to the public space. It must be a testimony that resists the passage of time. But the Castillo Velasco communities, nestled at the heart of the city blocks, are invisible from the outside. They exist only for its inhabitants. Public space and its violence have silenced them. The repressive “metropolitan chaos,” that does not obey the overabundance of ‘life’ as it does in the communities, has made withdrawal a necessity. This transcendent architecture product of a town – and to which Castillo Velasco was always attached – is hidden from the metropolitan. It resists being part of these dynamics. **ARQ**

Notas / Notes

- 1 These ideas illustrate Ruskin's vast works. More characteristically expressed in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53).

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Alejandro G. Crispiani

<acrispia@uc.cl>

Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina (1984). Doctor of Human and Social Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Argentina, 2009. He has researched in history and criticism of contemporary design and architecture. He is the author of the books *Objetos para transformar el mundo. Trayectorias del Arte Concreto Invención* (Santiago and Buenos Aires, 2011) and *Palabras cruzadas. Ensayos sobre arte, arquitectura y diseño* (Buenos Aires, 2017). He is tenured professor of the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urban Studies of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.