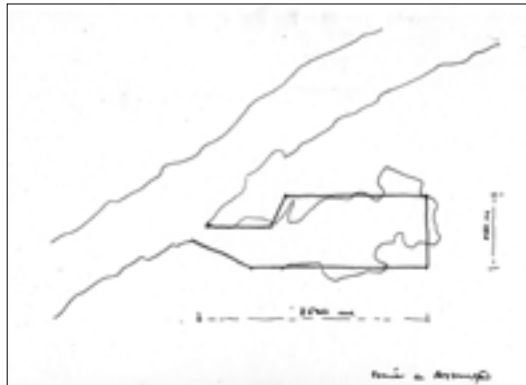
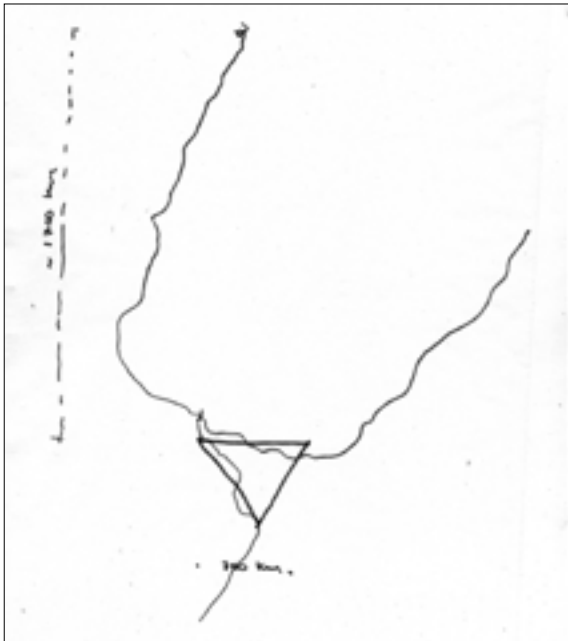


two words, two worlds.

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2011

published in "O'Neil Ford Duograph 5: Paraguay"



Left: Rio de La Plata at Buenos Aires
Above: The Bay of Asunción

The name of the city Asunción evokes the world of the Catholic Spanish once foreign to this country.

The name of the country instead reveals how the native culture of the Guarani, and their symbolic world also remains alive through language. Paraguay, a word that designates both the country and the river, is a Guarani word in which: para means bright, gua is place and y is water. Thus a literal translation could be the bright water's place, an idea indicating that the word was originally used to designate a very specific place.

Which place would that be?

On the 35° parallel South the Atlantic Ocean invades the land in South America, this water entrance has a clear shape, a triangle measuring about 300 km on each side. Two of its vertices are defined by Montevideo (on the sea shore) and Buenos Aires (the inner corner indicating the natural waterway to inland) the capitals of Uruguay and Argentina, respectively. Beyond Buenos Aires, the natural waterway is so wide that it was called Paraná by the indigenous people, possibly meaning inland sea. Economically, it was so important after the first period of colonization that it was named Rio de la Plata (Silver River) by the Spanish. Going upstream the Paraná river for about 1,000 kilometers and then up through the Paraguay river for 300 kilometers, one of its most important tributaries, one finally reaches a remarkable point. About 1,600 kilometers inland, the riverbed is still an impressive 800 meters wide. Here the river bends to the west in a loop deviating from a small hill. Right after the curve, there is a 200 meter wide entrance on the east bank of the river to a unique place, a 2,500 meter long and 800 meter wide bay. This bay is exactly the remarkable site previously named by the Guarani people as Paraguay. The name of that primordial place would be spread all over the river and would end up naming the whole country.

Paraguay is a poetic description of a place whose character and beauty had imprinted a strong impression on the Guarani people. It played an important role for the Spanish colonizers as a safe and strategic port. As a result of history, its poetic meaning was subjected to the economic one; its first name would lay under the Spanish name: bay of Asuncion.

Paraguay is a bilingual country: Guarani and Spanish. This persistent and tolerant coexistence is a clue as to how the country worked, works and will continue to work as a bridge linking these two cultural worlds.

In geographical terms, since the beginning of the colonization process, Paraguay has held a quite strategic location as a hub in the “Atlantic” waterway to Peru and Bolivia. It played an important role in different economic periods, right in the core of the Southern Cone. It is not by accident that Paraguay was once an economic power and held a remarkable position in the South America scenario in the second half of the nineteenth century. But during the War of the Triple Alliance, from 1864 to 1870, the armies of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina unified in devastating Paraguay economically, politically and demographically.

Despite this destruction, Paraguay’s cultural and geographical aspects would remain its foundations , providing the keys for a unique symbolic background and a distinguished architectural approach. More than one century after that war, these aspects would be combined to make powerful architecture as shown in the works of its two most remarkable architects: Solano Benítez and Javier Corvalán.

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Solano Benítez



Angelo Bucci, Solano Benítez 1994

I first met Solano Benítez in Portugal, 1994, when Lisbon was elected as the European Capital of Culture. We were invited for the Iberian American young practices architecture exhibition. While I was part of a group of seven Brazilian architects,¹ Solano was the only participant from Paraguay. It was easy to realize that he was moved by a personal and strong determination and in that event he found an opportunity to expand his dialogue outside of his own country. Soon we all seven Brazilians and one Paraguayan were one single South American group in Portugal.

When I first saw his work there, it was not easy for me to understand the conditions in which it was produced or to clearly comprehend his reasoning. At the time Paraguay was a distant country to me, distant because of everything that I didn't know but also because we all in Latin America had referenced Europe and North

¹ besides myself, Alvaro Puntoni, Luciano Margotto, Luiz Mauro Freire, Vinicius Andrade, Marcelo Morettin and Anna Julia Dietzsch.

America. As if economic hegemony could pre-determine our position in a cultural relationship. As if resources would define the validity of an architectural work. As if our eyes had been trained to see and, at once, to not see.

The work of Solano Benitez seemed to have such a different background not according to any classification I believed to know.

Nowadays it is easy to realize that that much is clear. I missed the words for better understanding his work at that time. Despite the proximity of our countries and their shared contexts and problems, it was as if we could not share a cultural basis for our proposals.

In that occasion I learned that if we wanted to share an identity we would have to build it.

The early works by Solano Benitez shown in Lisbon clearly announced that he could accept conditions and resources available in Paraguay as a point of departure to achieve a result that didn't seem possible given the circumstances. I mean that his acceptance had no meaning of resignation did not at all factor into this departure, and in fact the first possibilities were not expressions of a limitation but the opposite: it was a place to start. Since that time he has been creating a repertoire by building prototypes with bricks, load testing them and analyzing structural schemes by isolating the role of each resistant element. Some years later this process would achieve results of such a high level of resolution that they surpassed all of our expectations.

I believe the outstanding result of his work is due to his performance in two parallel fields.

The first field is in his practice. He spent twenty years researching a very restricted group of products and their combinations that compose the elements for his architectural proposals. In the Paraguayan context, his role in practice must include designer and contractor simultaneously. This dual role has expanded the possibilities of his research and the results of his architecture.

The second field is in his academic activity and his position as a remarkable lecturer in an uncountable number of conferences in several countries around the world. This field concerns itself with the domain of meanings. Here is where Solano elaborates on, and at same time verifies, the reasoning and symbolic approach behind his proposals. Here he also builds and tests key ideas already developed, or to be developed, in his projects.

* * *

Javier Corvalán



Violeta Perez, Adriana Sbetliel, José Luis Ayala, Javier Corvalán
Josetto Cubilla, Angelo Bucci, Solano Benítez, Pablo Ruggiero

In 2001 we were invited to lecture in Rosario, Argentina. I took a flight from São Paulo and flew over 1,000 kilometers to Asunción. From there, with seven² local architects, we drove the 1,000 kilometers to Rosario. I had no idea about the distance, the roads and the fact that we would be a group of eight people in one single car driving for sixteen hours. On the road I realized that the distance between Rosario and São Paulo was also 1,000 kilometers. During the trip we made a stop in Santa Fe, Argentina, to celebrate my birthday in a barbecue place. I had thought that the trip would offer me an opportunity to make me more familiar with Spanish and although this happened in some way, I found the other seven much faster than me as they soon became quite fluent in Portuguese. But the most important thing was we were all like old friends when we arrived in Rosario. Solano Benitez was the responsible for that remarkable event. He was the first to be invited and instead of just accepting the invitation, he took the opportunity to suggest mine and some other lecturers' names. He renounced his flight ticket to save the budget thus making the trip possible and affordable for my flight and all of us to be there at the Rosario University.

They had organized my flight, the road trip, the car, the participants in the group and the program of the congress. I felt that at that time, in our countries, personal relationships were more reliable and effective than the institutions behind them.

Javier Corvalan was the third lecturer in that car.

His talk was my first time seeing his impressive work. Since I knew more about Paraguay than I had known in 1994 when meeting Solano first; I was more familiar with the context in which he is working. I learned that his projects together were a kind of research that sought to merge his thoughts forged during his education in Paraguay and Italy.

The development of his work would bring him to experiment on essential materials, weight and gravity, and their dynamic and static expression. In his latest masterpieces, such as the Hammock House, the walls seem to walk and the stones look as if they were floating in air.

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Although sharing the same context and conditions of economy and construction, the buildings designed by Solano Benitez and Javier Corvalan are quite different. They have sustained an interest in exchanging experiences expanding their dialogue through the decades. At the same time, they preserve their own approach and imprint their unique personalities on each of their works. The kind of exchange they have been cultivating has enriched their process, never aiming to produce a similar architecture but a dialogue, the focus of which has been their work in progress instead of final works. Thus the conclusion of that dialogue is not reduced to one single agreement as a convergent result, but a divergent agreement, as if they were determined to explore all the possibilities that could emerge from shared contexts and conditions.

Their model of exchanging arguments is a remarkable one. It is an inspiration for architects all around the world: persistent and tolerant coexistence. Through their dialogue we all participate in an essential trait of the Paraguayan culture that is a culture of tolerance rather than a culture of hegemony.

Why does their work seem so fresh against the backdrop of production around the globe?

I don't have an exact answer, but I think about two words: balance and limits.

One of the most remarkable features of their work is freedom, mostly from a foreign approach. Although

² Solano Benítez, Javier Corvalan, Luis Ayalla, Pablo, Ale, Violeta e Adriana

correct in several ways this impression is also superficial in a way because it tends to veil the conditions in which these works were produced. There is a freedom which result from their position aiming to overcome a typical South Americans context: lack of resources, budgets, norms, infra-structures, industries, etc. as the most challenging issue in that context. Despite this lack, demands for architecture cannot be postponed and must be faced with the available resources. Thus architects are compelled to transcend limits, their role as designers is not enough. According to each situation they have to act as contractors, as researchers for new materials, as consultants for constructive methods, even as structural engineers, always exceeding in the expectations of the function of a normative architect. Accumulating all this knowledge brings a certain power that yeilds freedom and lots of possibilities, but it doesn't necessarily bring a reward. Although it is not matter of choice, the context demands a mandatory commitment and it shapes a hard and risky day-to-day, forcing one to work in a dangerous field. To know how to balance all those overlapping roles and to know where one surpasses or exceeds limits is absolutely crucial.

The work of Solano Benítez and Javier Corvalán clearly demonstrates this knowledge and more than that their work is an important contribution towards realizing the extent of mitigation required in such a precarious context. The way they act as Paraguayan based architects tends to establish their practice and defines the modes of action in that context.

In the same way I felt in Lisbon about identity or in Rosario about our universities, here again, the institution of architectural activity is still so close to people's lives that we can clearly see its origin and its purpose. Institutions here are still gestating and as such are still closely linked to life.

Both Javier Corvalan and Solano Benitez achieve freedom in their works with bravery, traversing a sometimes dangerous and risky but always challenging path.

That is why I feel it is so close to life.