UC Berkeley
Berkeley Planning Journal

Title

Miami Modern Metropolis: Paradise and Paradox in Mid-century Architecture and Planning Edited by Allan Shulman

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/16j2c4d9

Journal

Berkeley Planning Journal, 23(1)

ISSN

1047-5192

Author

Burga, Hector Fernando

Publication Date

2010

DOI

10.5070/BP323111445

Peer reviewed

BOOK REVIEW

Miami Modern Metropolis: Paradise and Paradox in Mid-century Architecture and Planning
Edited by Allan Shulman
Balcony Press, Glendale, 2009. 414 pages.

Reviewed by Hector Fernando Burga

Miami Modern Metropolis—MMM—takes the reader to the moment in Miami's urban history when the city became modern. To support this claim this handsome volume, edited by University of Miami professor Allan Shulman, offers an unprecedented catalogue of images, cases and archival evidences that will certainly make this publication a platform for the future scholarship of architecture, urban design and planning in that chimeric place known as Miami.

Indeed, when imagining Miami, the glitzy façades of South Beach Art Deco buildings come to mind. Perhaps, vague memories of the 1980's conjure up a blurred collage: *Miami Vice* collides with *Scarface* to render a tele-genic city with splashes of cool pastel visuals set against xenophobic epitaphs. From this decade's portrayal of danger, tumult and excess, Miamians crafted an urban imaginary of sensual glamour and multicultural difference. Today, a distinctive urban brand mixing tourist leisure and carnal abandonment sell city's image as a site of global consumption, investment and paradisiacal living.

MMM doesn't deal with this period specifically, or the 30 years of urban development and demographic change that have made the city what it is today. Instead, it asks us to direct our gaze into the pre-history of this tele-genesis. According to the book's central thesis, the clues to Miami's urbanism can be found in the mid 20th century, a period physical and social change that turned the city into a laboratory of urban modernity.

The study of urban modernity has a lineage of precedents in urban studies, from mid 19th century Paris (Harvey, 2006) to early 20th century Vienna (Shorske, 1980), from 1950's New York (Berman 1982) onward to 1960's Brasilia (Holston 1985). More recently its study has focused on urban life in African and Southeast Asian cities (Horsagrahar 2006, Robinson 2005, Simone 2004 & 2009). In Miami, urban studies have emphasized the past 30 years, offering the portrayal of a city undergoing

rapid social and demographic change. These studies have focused on the empowerment of newly arrived immigrant communities, a process that has defined the city as an experiment of "bicultural and bilingual living" (Portes 1993).

Miami has been exemplified for its singular socio-political characteristics (Croucher 1999, Grenier 1992, Portes et al. 1993, Stepick et al 2003). Nevertheless, a poignant empirical gap has remained in these analyses: Miami has been place-less. The spatial consequences of social, political and economic change have remained unexplored: the shape of the city, its architecture, urban design, planning, uses and mis-uses of everyday spaces and locations of human settlement. This is where MMM starts to offer a compelling contribution. Questions about place begin to be formulated through the introduction of powerful analytical categories: public space, identity, spectacle, modernity, and multiculturalism in the excavation of its mid-century urban history.

This approach is the first of its kind and scope in the study of Miami's urbanism. Other histories have focused on architectural styles and histories of built environment (MDC 1982). Yet their emphasis has been descriptive, veering away from analysis or interpretation. MMM proceeds by exposing Miami's mid-century laboratory of modernity in an extensive catalogue of building types, master plans, architectural styles and engineered infrastructures. The visual material - plans, renderings, pamphlets, photographs and sketches, as well as archival evidences - bibliographic references, brochures, letters, magazines and news paper articles, which adorn all 400 pages is vast and at times overwhelming. Over 40 essays fill the book, ordered in a pageant of architectural and infrastructural vignettes that illustrate and explain Miami's attempt at "Tropical Modernity". These analytical postcards vary in degrees of depth. They range from the purely descriptive to the empirically suggestive. But they also produce a peculiar reading experience: Miami's fragmented and vast metropolitan space is reproduced in the experience of reading the text's sprawlish narrative.

MMM's main characters are architects, real estate developers, tourists and residents who access the city through mass consumption, air travel, and auto-mobility. Driven by post-World War II promises of leisure and prosperity, they colonize the urban and suburban frontiers, translating mainstream *Pax Americana* into a repertoire of innovative building materials, thematic public spaces, whimsical architectural details, adaptive building types and groundbreaking mega-structures. Reigning over this sprawlish narrative and its multi-faceted characters are four "Paradoxes": the *working city vs. the city of leisure*, *civic ideals in the vernacular city*, *modernism and fantasy* and *the construction of authenticity*. Each theme brings intrigue and scope to the text's girth, yet each is

imagined with stable categories that remain mutually exclusive and anchored to specific man-made physical environments.

Perhaps a more trenchant analysis could have explored the ambiguity of urban modernity—the inherent contradictions yet binding relations of development and underdevelopment, progress and tradition, creation and destruction. The paradox that most successfully starts to address this duality is *the construction of authenticity*. This section set up by Shulman's eponymous essay focuses on the production of local landscapes, architectural aesthetics, building materials and techniques. At stake is the dilution of modern architecture's idiom into local vernacular's expressions and practices aimed at capturing Miami's distinctive tropical qualities.

Yet as identity is imagined by professional practitioners, nature is disciplined, raw materials are transformed into commodities, social difference is managed, social tastes, habits and practices are reshaped and authenticity is rendered valid until the next cycle of creative destruction. Given these concrete circumstances should "identity" be a stable category anchoring the built and social environment in time, or can the historian consider it an unstable category constructed in relation to the present as a lens to interpret the past in order to produce history?

In similar analytical fashion, the book's emphasis on built form displays a tension between an urbanism of form and an urbanism of life. Architectural discourse confronts social theory categories head on. This is a welcomed collision, opening an array of provocative questions: What are the limits of deploying a history of architectural and urban typologies to analyze the experience of modernity in Miami? Can this method be applied to different historical periods in the same manner? Or rather different ways of documenting urban histories exist for different periods of urban modernities in this and other cities? Is there something about Miami that makes this method more applicable?

As someone who grew up and currently conducts urban research in Miami, I recognize the timely importance of this publication. The explosive growth of the city's skyline in the past 10 years marks another boom and bust cycle. Yet, beyond the new skyscrapers that adorn an idyllic oceanfront lay still latent urban challenges: environmental degradation, transportation accessibility, public space allocation, gentrification, affordable housing and urban poverty to name a few.

As I read MMM, I wondered if the mid-century could be a reference for Miami's recent tele-genic history, its present and perhaps sustainable future? Can Miami's contemporary urbanism be understood through the lens of mid 20th century urban development? Or rather, should we turn

to the *Spanglish* spoken in its streets for intellectual inspiration? Do we look at vintage postcards or turn on the TV to the latest *Telenovela* (Yudice 2005), an episode of *Dexter*, and reruns of *Miami CSI* and *Burn Notice*?

MMM offers a glimpse into this pivotal discussion by presenting a eulogy to the city's metamorphosis. It makes once familiar places, some that have long been demolished and others that only exist on the screen, new again.

Bibliography

Croucher, S. 1999. *Imagining Miami: Ethnic Politics in a Postmodern World.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Grenier, G. & Stepick A. eds. 1992. *Miami Now! Immigration, Ethnicity, and Social Change.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Harvey, D. 2006. *Paris Capital of Modernity.* London: Routledge.

Holston, James. 1989. *The Modern City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Horsagrahar J. 2006. *Indigenous Modernity: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism.* London & New York: Routledge.

Miami Dade County Office of Preservation. 1982. *From Wilderness to Metropolis: The history of Dade county (1925- 1940)* Miami Dade County.

Robinson, J. 2006. *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development.* New York: Routledge.

Schorske C. 1980. *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* New York: Random House.

Simone, A. 2004. *For a City yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities.* Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Simone, A. 2009. *City life: From Jakarta to Dakar.* London, New York: Routledge.

Stepick, Grenier, Castro & Dunn. 2003. *This Land is Our Land: Immigrants and Power in Miami.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yudice, G. 2005. *Miami: Images of a Latinopolis.* NACLA Reports on the Americas.