The University City of Caracas constitutes a paradigm of integration between Architectu- re and Territory, a synthesis of the different Plastic Arts, a symbiosis between reason and emotion, utility and beauty; a polyphonic concert of spaces and sensations and a utopia, made reality, of modern urbanism. It is also a faithful expression of the capacity of self-criticism of its author, who commenced the Master Plan and the first buildings with the misconception of compositional rigidity but was able to amend this error and terminate by converting the overall action in one of the greatest Architectural achievements of the Twentieth Century. The assignment being an error, easy to understand if we take into account that Carlos Raul Villanueva, formed himself and studied his career in Paris, this was evidenced by the first drawings of the whole and the first buildings built, (The Clinical hospital, the Anatomical Institute and the Experimental Medicine Institute). But Caracas is not Paris, it is not in Central Europe, it is in the tropics, in the pure Caribbean. And what is the Caribbean like? The Caribbean is a melting pot of races and cultures, a meeting place where Amerindia, Europe and Africa come together. A dream world to see, hear, smell and feel, warm, dense, molten, cosmopolitan, baroque, exotic, surprising, suitable for interchange, free and joyful, always rhythmical and sensual. The Caribbean is lush nature surrounded by a green sea and a blue sky, whose whimsical forms and beautiful reasons for being oppose the madness and the geometries of man. The Caribbean is a permanent exercise of passion, it is the beach, the hill, the glen, the palm, the mango, the racket, the shack, the hut, the cabin, the shed, the courtyard, the column, the street, the continuous listening, the intense light and the colour of centu- ries that bathe everything. The Caribbean is light, colour, emotion and rhythm, which invites to live life, to create, to seek the truth in the beauty and... to enjoy. Its people are pure imagination and permanent improvisation and the spirit that animates them is subject to the laws of nature, but also to the rules of art and may be, to the dictates of science. Be- cause it is also possible, without renouncing the form mentioned, the expression, the systematization and the rigor, complementing the exuberance and the apparent whim of natural forms, with geometry and rational architectu- re, as demonstrated by Carlos Raul Villanueva throughout his work and, especially, the University City. Not in vain he stated that “a man who lives in front of a green space must think differently than one living in front of a high wall”. Consequently with his philosophy, after con- structing the first three buildings, Villanueva changed course looking for another solution, the current, more open and flexible to ensure that, the whole group and each of the build- ings, constitute the best example of modern architecture in the Tropics. When I visited the University City for the first time I would not have been able to believe what I was seeing if I had not previously known the house of Luis Barragan in Mexico City. Someone once said, and with reason, that all the problems posed by the architecture occur in any house. When I visited Luis Barragán’s one, thirty years ago, he was already very ill and unable to speak and move, but he still conveyed the tremendous passion that great architects have within them and he was able to materialize it in all his work and in his house. This house which, despite its small size, is like a synthesis of the country: Mexico. This comes to mind because I had that same feeling while walking around the University City of Caracas, the first time I visited it, accompanied by Silvia La sala, a great scho- lar with a profound knowledge of this work. Something similar happened to me visiting Villanueva’s home, in the urbanization La Florida Caracas, with his widow and his daughter Pauline. Within it, it condensates and synthesized the vast Venezuelan terri- tory and its enormous diversity. From the li- ving room or from the Hut-Study located in the garden, arrived echoes and one felt: The Plains, The Andes, The Great Savannah, the Amazon Jungle and the Orinoco Delta ... Also the enormous urban power of the city of Caracas. But returning to the University City, one would have to say that everything in it is a paradigm of the best architecture of all times: each of the more than sixty buildings that it compri- ses, constitute a work of art, so are all and each of the steps or covered walkways that intertwine and unite them; each and every one of the interfaces that exist between these buildings and between them and the vegetation that surrounds and enriches them, as well as the sculptural pie- ces that we encounter and that move us for their beauty and opportunity. Architecture is also the various constructive elements that help to configure the environment and pro- tect us from the incomeliness of strong light and intense heat, such as canopies, pergolas, eaves, latticework, brise-soleil, ... and each and every one of the plant species that, as well as providing shade, separate, wrap, frame, complement and enrich architectural and sculptural volumes and forms. About all of this one could write without stopping but, having to abbreviate, I would like to focus on these four adjacent spaces, singular and unique, which squeezed my heart in a fist, which impressed me when I discovered them and keep impressing and delighting me every time I revisited them: the Botanical Garden, the Rectorate Square, the Covered Square and the Aula Magna. And I am fascinated and I am astonished at these spaces because it seems impossible that in such a short distan- ce, in such a short four one can enjoy spaces so exceptional and different and at the same time so complementary between themselves, so different and so in need of each other. The Botanical Garden is, as its name sug- gests, a garden packed with species of plants, full of didactic intentions and rational- ity but, well designed and implemented, which makes it impossible the distinction between the cultivated and the wild and recreates and assembles the pure realm of Nature. The Rectorate Square is just the opposite, an empty and open space, extraordinarily pro-
portionate, that serves as a hinge between the City of Caracas and the University City, that receives you and is capable of summoning and of hosting the work of the most important national and foreign artists of the moment, (Arp, Laurens, Vasarely, Léger, Manare, Navarro...) offering a suitable “place” for every piece and giving a lesson in the integration of fine arts and of these with the nature.

It constitutes, at the same time, “the door”, “the courtyard of honour”, the antechamber, the prelude of what comes next. And what follows is nothing more and nothing less than the wonderful game that this endless catalogue of spaces offers for transit and rest, covered by winding concrete structures, of different shapes, positions and sizes, that create this unusual world of lethargic shadows and at the same time slots or voids that play with the light, they mitigate it, decompose it and drain it conveniently, in order to attenuate and spread its brilliance, to rededicate it and enjoy it once it is domesticated and which moves and shifts, according to the hours of the day and the days of the year, these effects which are so well captured by the great Venezuelan photographer Pablo Gasparrini, in his extraordinary images, and that constitute, already, a paradigm of the symbiosis between shape and light, that is to say a paradigm of the Architecture of the Tropic, that is known by the name of La Plaza and los Pasos Cubiertos, a full space, at the same time, of many other spaces, each and every one of them unforgettable.

Finally, the Aula Magna, one of the most emphatic covered spaces and dreamiest we can imagine, in which the collaboration of Villanueva and sculptor Calder have enabled to merge the necessary acoustic elements with decorative sculptural objects until they achieve to shape those “flying saucers”, of extraordinary utility and beauty, which shapes radiate constantly, sounds and colours, enriching and enlivening the unique space that contains them.

Carlos Raúl Villanueva, throughout all his work, sought and succeeded in eliminating the superficial and the anecdotic, to keep only the essential. He also endeavoured to keep the poetic values of architecture, he was not satisfied with the exclusively utilitarian shapes because, as he said himself: “Architecture is for mankind and poetry is in the heart of the person.” Juan Pedro Possani, on the occasion of the inauguration of the exhibition of the works of Villanueva in Barcelona, a couple of years ago, said of him: “Twenty-five years after his death he could still be proud as he continues being avant-garde”. I absolutely agree.

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