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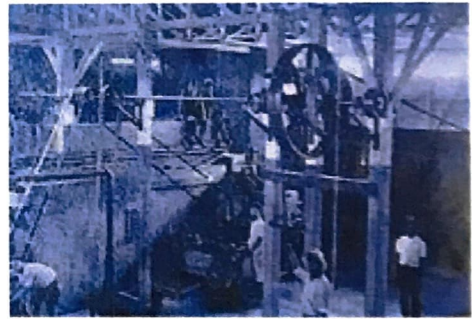
August 13, 2001

Notes from Clifford A. Pearson
Senior Editor

Brewing architecture in the land of coffee

Opening a new architecture school is a leap of faith. It takes a lot of guts on the part of a founder, as well as deep reserves of patience, vision, tact, and obstinance (not to mention a willful disregard for obstacles and an ability to take a few hard knocks). So it was when Álvaro Rojas, AIA, returned to his native Costa Rica after two decades in the United States, and started the Universidad del Diseño in 1993.

Costa Rica would not seem to be the first place one would think of launching a new school of architecture. It's a beautiful country with a long and mostly peaceful history of democracy (its 1949 constitution dismantled the army and in 1987 its president, Oscar Arias, won the Nobel Peace Prize). But it doesn't have much of an architectural or urban tradition. Ever since its Spanish colonizers realized there was little gold hidden in its volcanic mountains, Costa Rica has been a rural backwater run by the wealthy owners of its famed coffee plantations. The capital, San José, was little more than coffee-growing land before the 20th century, and has none of the glorious architecture found in other Latin American cities such as Mexico City or Cuzco. "No Artificial Ingredients" is Costa Rica's current advertising slogan, rightfully plugging the country's beautiful coasts on both the Pacific and the Caribbean, its lush rainforests, and well-maintained national parks. Tourists come to this land to see its flora and fauna, not its buildings.



The coffee processing plant in 1932, sixty-three years before the architecture students would move in.



The building in 1995 when purchased by the Universidad del Diseño (left) and today (above).

Although mindful of the country's shortcomings, Rojas saw an opportunity. In the early 1990s, Costa Rica had only four architecture schools and none were offering much in the way of innovative education. Frustrated by an insular architectural scene, Rojas decided to shake things up. He bought an old coffee-processing plant on the outskirts of San José and converted it into a rambling, open place to learn. He brought in teachers from the United States, Europe, and Latin America, and stocked the staff with psychologists, sociologists, linguists, and philosophers, in addition to design professionals. He attracted students from around Central and Latin America and challenged them to look at architecture as "global" and "holistic" and "sustainable."



The building in 1995 before being converted into the school (left) and today (above).

Some of Costa Rica's architectural power brokers were less than thrilled about such an upstart institution and Rojas has had to fight hard to carve out a niche for his school. But the Universidad del Diseño now has about 100 students and a faculty of 45 mostly part time professors. It offers a 5-and-a-half-year professional degree in architecture and is in the process of establishing a masters of environmental design program. Curiously, things are beginning to change in Costa Rica. For example, since 1993, six other schools of architecture have opened, a remarkable blossoming of educational alternatives in a country with just 4.3 million people.

I got a quick introduction to the Universidad del Diseño by participating in its second Mundaneum, an international show-and-tell fest held at the end of June. Most of the people in the audience were students at the university or from Panamanian schools of architecture. Very few practicing architects from Costa Rica took the time to attend any of the presentations or discussions—a lingering sign of suspicion on the part of the country's architectural establishment.

A last-minute addition to the conference lineup of speakers was the President of Costa Rica, Miguel Angel Rodriguez, who required no secret service agents and came with a sensible entourage of two associates. The story I heard was that Rojas had been quoted recently in the newspaper criticizing the government's lack of a policy on sustainable design. Instead of striking back, the president decided to win over a critic by paying a visit (and presumably getting some good press). President Rodriguez congratulated the school on its second-place showing in a recent international design competition for students and spoke vaguely and briefly of "the possibility of new expressions of the Latin American spirit." Nothing brilliant. But how often does the president of any country show up at

an architectural event?

The conference's regularly scheduled speakers were a solid collection of practitioners and academics, including Stanley Saitowitz from San Francisco, Carmen Pinós and Alberto Estévez from Barcelona, Oliver Lang from Vancouver, Jorge Liernur from Buenos Aires, Vedran Mimica from Amsterdam, Roberto Villalobos and Victor Cañas from San José, Hector Vigliecca from São Paulo, Juvenal Baracco from Lima, Shane Murray from Melbourne, Amanda Reeser and Ashley Schafer from New York, and David Guthrie from Houston.

A few highlights included: Murray from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, who spoke of "the radically local" and "mediated globalism," while showing examples of the sometimes quirky way Australian architects are appropriating ideas from abroad and reinterpreting them in their own, Down Under way. Villalobos from San José, who challenged attendees to examine the role of architects in society. Mimica from the Berlage Institute, who explained how his school likes to "shake and shock" students with new ideas. And Guthrie, who spoke of visual editing and how he tries to express in his work what's behind the surface.

The overall impression I took away from the Mundaneum was of unexpected connections. During one session, for example, I realized I was in a small central American country listening to Lang, who was raised in Germany, has his practice in Vancouver, and teaches in Chile.

I have seen the future and it's borderless.

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A design school in Costa Rica brings green into the picture

Correspondent's File

By Clifford A. Pearson

"No artificial ingredients," announces the Costa Rica Tourism Board on its Web homepage and in promotional material. The slogan is part of the country's campaign to promote itself as a model of ecotourism and move its economy beyond exporting commodities such as coffee and bananas. So a conference on green architecture in the country's capital, San José, seemed logical to Alvaro Rojas, AIA, the founder and director of the Universidad del Diseño, a Costa Rican school of architecture that is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

Costa Rica occupies 0.4 percent of the world's landmass but has 6 percent of its biodiversity, including 850 recorded bird species and 1,400 tree species. The country's 20 national parks cover nearly 12 percent of its area; if you add forest reserves and Indian reservations to the figure, the amount of protected land goes up to 27 percent.

Costa Rica, though, does not always live up to its hype, admits Rojas. It does a good job of protecting the environment in its parks and reserves, but its capital city could serve as a poster child for reckless urban sprawl. With nearly 2.5 million of the country's 4 million residents, the greater San José metropolitan region has gobbled up much of Costa Rica's central valley and keeps growing with seemingly few planning constraints. "San José is the city of my dreams and my nightmares," says Rojas. "It's neither truly urban nor rural. It's what I call 'rurban.'"

Never an important colonial center, San José doesn't have a



With more than half of the country's population, San José now sprawls over Costa Rica's central valley (above). Downtown San José (above right) has lost much of its vitality to the suburbs. The Universidad del Diseño occupies an old coffee plant on the outskirts of town (right).

legacy of great old buildings erected by crown or church. Originally an agricultural backwater, it became powerful only in the 20th century with the rise of coffee as a cash crop. So it has an unusual history as a rural-based metropolis, a city pulled simultaneously by the centrifugal forces of a plantation economy and the modern centripetal attractions of a commercial and political capital.

Opposing forces continue to shape San José in the 21st century. Like many capital cities in the developing world, it has become its country's all-powerful magnet, outstripping all of its urban rivals in terms of political, economic, and cultural activity. But wealthy residents have been fleeing downtown San José in recent decades for the



suburbs. Now the capital's metro area sprawls over 1,600 square miles, says Rojas, not much less than Mexico City's 1,840 square miles. But Mexico City's population of 25 million is more than six times that of San José.

Addressing growing problems of traffic congestion, sewage treatment, and sprawl is critical to the future of San José, says Rojas. "We need to develop a denser city with a smaller footprint." Rojas, who was

born in San José but studied architecture at the City College of New York and worked for many years in the United States, returned to Costa Rica in the late 1980s. Discouraged by the state of architectural education he found there, he established the Universidad del Diseño in 1993 to provide a holistic and global approach to design.

Today the school has about 100 students and a faculty of 40 part-time teachers. It offers a five-

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and-a-half-year professional degree in architecture and a four-year degree in interior architecture. The school is in the process of establishing a masters of environmental design program, which should start in early 2005.

When Rojas established the Universidad del Diseño, Costa Rica had only four architecture schools—one at the national university and three run by a private university. Now the country has 12 schools, representing an explosion of educational opportunities that can be directly attributed to Rojas shaking things up in 1993.

To open his students' eyes to what is happening around the world, Rojas regularly invites practitioners and academics from the U.S., Europe, and Latin America to serve on juries, give lectures, and participate in conferences. For good measure, he has stocked his staff

with psychologists, sociologists, linguists, and philosophers, in addition to design professionals. The result is a heady mix of disciplines and perspectives, which challenges students to develop a holistic approach to design.

The university has established a strong internship program with important architectural practices around the world, offering students the chance to work with such designers as Michael Rotondi, Stanley Saitowitz, Enrique Norton, Carlos Jimenez, and Renzo Piano.

The school occupies a former coffee-processing plant on the outskirts of San José, which offers loftlike spaces for studios and a rakishly unkempt courtyard where students and faculty can relax and exchange ideas. The school's curriculum, which includes degree programs in architecture and interior architecture, focuses on

sustainable and bioclimatic design.

As part of his efforts to change the direction of Costa Rican architecture and planning, Rojas organized the Green Mundaneum 2003, which ran for three days in June. The third in a series of biannual symposia, the event brought together speakers from the United States, Europe, and Latin America and an audience of mostly Costa Rican and Central American students.

The speakers offered a broad range of perspectives on green design, from sculptor-turned-designer James Wines of SITE and architect-cum-critic Charles Jencks to aerospace-researcher-turned-architect Michelle Addington and engineer/politician Rolando Araya. As a result, the conference covered both the art and technics of sustainable architecture. Speakers such as architect Emilio Ambasz challenged designers to aspire to the mythic and the poetic, while others warned of the need to support claims of being green with hard facts and good science.

On the last day of the event, Araya, a chemical engineer-turned-politician who came within a hairbreadth of being elected president of Costa Rica in 2002, spoke about turning ideas into action. A new ecological approach "must start with the people and shouldn't wait for the politicians," advised Araya, who has a son studying at the Universidad del Diseño.

Spending a few days at Alvaro Rojas's remarkable school, a visitor gets a bracing whiff of change in the air. Some people have compared the place to SCI-Arc in its early days, when everything seemed new and possible. Built on a shoestring budget and tied together with smart ideas and lots of energy, the school can serve as a model for architectural education in the developing world. By thinking globally and acting locally, the students who graduate from the Universidad del Diseño may serve as catalysts for sustainable design and planning in their hometown of San José. ■

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