

Reviewed by Dean Cardasis

Roberto Burle Marx in Caracas: Parque del Este, 1956–1961

by Anita Berrizbeitia

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004

Most landscape designers and scholars identify the work of modern Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx by its extensive use of lush, tropical plants and its crisp biomorphic form. In Burle Marx the love of plants and the relationship between landscape design and modern painting is so apparent that some (including Burle Marx himself¹) have characterized his work as “painting with plants.” Certainly, the fact that his beautifully rendered “plans” look more like Matisse’s paper cut outs than representations of South American landscapes contributes to this perception.

How, then, does such a seemingly shallow, painterly approach to landscape design result in some of the world’s most acclaimed and most beautiful modern parks and gardens? In her monograph on *Parque del Este*, Anita Berrizbeitia attempts to answer this question by probing the relationship between Burle Marx’s artistic approach and the historical and cultural context of this project in Caracas, Venezuela. Her interpretations of the later provide useful context. They are carefully researched and articulately explained. The description of Burle Marx’s artistic approach reaches—sometimes overreaches—to champion his significance, in the process overshadowing important information about his evolution from painter and plantsman to landscape architect.

Berrizbeitia succinctly traces the evolution of Venezuela from its colonization in 1498 as a poor rural nation with an economy based on exports (first of cacao, then coffee) to its more recent, more affluent economy, based on oil. *Parque del Este*, conceived of, designed, and built in the 1950s and early 1960s, is understood, in part, as a function of an economy changing from coffee to oil, the impacts of which included dramatically increased population shifts to Caracas from rural areas. The notion of Venezuelan positivism—a combination of evolutionary positivism and social positivism (6)—is introduced to explain a philosophy by which Venezuela was to acquire its own hybrid modern identity: modern, yet connected to its native roots, distinct from its dismal colonial legacy of poverty and injustice.

With a new source of wealth from oil, Venezuela’s mid-century governments helped accommodate its demographic shift by implementing programs of infrastructure and public works, including the program for *Parque del Este*. Since the production of oil was invisible in the landscape, Berrizbeitia infers, a park that celebrated the native landscape would naturally reflect the source of that wealth. By collecting plants from various regions of the country and reassembling them in the park as representations of their native habitat, Marx “gave Venezuelans a tangible image of their nation” (16).

That he did so with the conceptual design strength of an abstract painter assured that it was a modern, as well as distinctive, image. The resulting 200-acre park was divided into three sections—a series of meandering paths linking collections of plants, a large gathering space, and a series of walled patios. Plants were grouped into separate representations of Venezuelan ecosystems, organized for visual effect based upon abstract relationships conceived on canvas.

In describing Burle Marx's style, Berrizbeitia asserts an "impulse towards form" (60), which she defines as abstract, non-representational, distinct from its context. To this she counterposes an impulse towards "process, contingency, and the solicitation of chance and change." She interprets the results to exhibit "lightness," a quality derived from the literary imaginations of Milan Kundera and Italo Cavino.² In this literature, lightness, achieved by changing one's perspective, is the antidote to the heaviness we carry from living in the world. At *Parque del Este* lightness is "material, phenomenological, and metaphorical" (65), created by Burle Marx's particular repetition, contrast, and juxtaposition of plants, earth, rocks, water and structures.

All real landscape architects, by necessity, address the relationship between form and change. Most seek to alter perspectives, even to remove the weight the world imposes. It is within Berrizbeitia's stimulating description of how Burle Marx worked on the design of the park that more grounded insights about the evolution of his personal style begin to emerge. We see that the plan is, at most, a diagram expressing an abstract concept through the two-dimensional language of a skilled modern painter. We learn it is only partially representational, and contains no information about specific plants, materials, or grading. We can also see that the 1959 plan differs in specifics from the 1961 plan, while fundamental conceptual relations remain. We learn that Burle Marx made significant decisions on the ground, including dramatic changes to the land form.

In her book, *Modern Gardens and the Landscape*,³ Elizabeth Kassler points out that it was about this time that Burle Marx first began to mediate his abstract, two dimensional, free-formal conceptions with the plastic possibilities of earth to serve landscape spatial ends, resulting in less arbitrary, more spatially developed landscapes. By developing form in association with ground contours, Burle Marx is said to have made gardens with "the kind of freedom, inner order, and inevitability that we associate with wildness, yet rarely find so articulately presented in wild nature."⁴

Berrizbeitia would agree; she maintains that at *Parque del Este* the forms of the plan are not perceived in space, that form is revealed through movement and time (63). Here Burle Marx combines a modern painter's love of form and a naturalist's passion for plants with an exploration of the role of landform, achieving a more sophisticated expression of landscape space. Such a significant step in his development begs many questions: What help did Burle Marx, who was well-versed in painting, horticulture and even architecture, have in working with landform? Was he assisted by trained landscape architects? Was he familiar with Sylvia Crowe's articles and books championing landform and landscape space published in the 1950s?

Unfortunately, like the claims of some Modern architects that they had discovered space, some of Berrizbeitia's more generalized and exaggerated claims for Burle Marx overshadow specific and important characteristics of his legacy that would better help us understand the unique and remarkable character of his work. In landscape architecture, the most inclusive of the spatial arts,⁵ a field that many grow into, that character depends both on what one brings to the landscape and how one evolves in the process of directly engaging in landscape interventions. Burle Marx's artistic odyssey shows the merits of this dynamic and how a skilled modern painter who loves plants can create spectacular landscapes.

Dean Cardasis is a professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, director of the James Rose Center, Ridgewood, NJ, and principal of Cave Hill Landscape Architects, Leverett, Massachusetts.

Notes

1. Sima Eliovson, *The Gardens of Roberto Burle Marx* (Portland: Sagapress, 1991), 41.
2. See Milan Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Michael Henry Heim, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1984) and Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Patrick Creagh, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
3. Elizabeth Kassler, *Modern Gardens and the Landscape* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), is a seminal survey of important international modern landscapes.
4. *Ibid.*, 63.
5. See Joseph S. R. Volpe's "The Avant Garde, the Rear Garde, and the Modes of Space: 2-D Flat, 3-D Object, Architectural Enclosure, Open Landscape," in Patrick Condon and Lance Neckar, *The Avant Garde and the Landscape, Can they be Reconciled?* (Minneapolis: Landmarks Press, 1990), 42-55.