

Dear Friend,

I am writing from the shores of the Pacific Ocean, in the central area of Chile, just over 100 km from Santiago. A few leisurely days at Zapallar with my family give me a chance to continue in writing that unfinished conversation that began in Rome some time ago.

As you know, of all the seas in the world this is the largest. Vastness is the common denominator of this territory. It seems odd that such a seemingly infinite body of water should have been named the Pacific Ocean. If you could see the persistent fury of the breakers on the rocks, added to the greatest concentration of seismic and volcanic activity that lurks in its bowels, you would agree with me that “pacific” is an inexplicable choice of name. Contradiction is of the substance of our being, it is like part of the geography.

My day-to-day experience, however, is not by the sea. I only come here occasionally. The Andes Mountains are my world. Their solemn grandeur borders this long and narrow stretch of the planet defining the eastern boundary of our territory. Its striking --at times even brutal-- geography is so dear to us that we look on it as tame and we long for the mountains when we are away from them.

A few steps away from where I am writing to you, in 1930, Le Corbusier designed the Errázuriz house. You and I have talked about it before. Though Le Corbusier never came here, the description that the owner, Matias Errázuriz, gave him inspired the master to create a notable work that, most unfortunately, was never built. Impressed by the landscape, while keeping in mind the technical restrictions of the time, Le Corbusier designed a house of stone and wood with a “certain air of tradition” without giving up the notion of a “truly architectural solution.”

That project, perhaps for the first time in Chile, brought up the tension between the local and the universal, between modernity and tradition, both notions that today, from this latitude and in the context of globalization, seem to me crucial points in architectural discourse. I have always believed that tradition and modernity are not mutually excluding dilemmas; quite the contrary, as Octavio Paz puts it, “in isolation, traditions become petrified and modernities fade away; in conjunction, one enlivens the other and the other responds giving weight and gravity . . .”

By the way, I am enclosing shots of a relatively recent work, negligible as to architecture but significant for the remarkable art contained in it. It is a small pavilion of Chilean pre-Columbian art. The project is located in an old Neo-Colonial residence of the early 20th century, next to the Santiago Museum of Visual Arts, a building that you saw when it was featured years ago in the journal CASABELLA. An interesting approach is that the archaeological exhibit is reached through the Museum of Visual Arts, which is devoted to contemporary art. The origin of this option for a museum is rooted in a beautiful thought of Paul Klee: “All art is a distant remembrance: dark, immemorial things, fragments of which endure, concealed in the soul of the artist.” Here, in this far-

off land, one very clearly understands primitive art as the foundation of modern art.

Small and simple as this building is, its outer enclosure becomes the bridge that joins past and present. Aware that glass is the most genuine expression of modernity, it seemed interesting to tense that fact by placing thin rods of wicker inside the double glass panel, taking up the available space and neutralizing the transparency of the glass. From outside, the icy superficial glitter of glass was completely superseded by the leading presence of wicker, which takes us back to an ancestral shelter. Whereas inside, a diffuse light weaves its way among the rods and disseminates an unbroken serenity, the indispensable atmosphere for appreciating this marvelous art. In the half-dark, the beautiful items take on a profound density that reveals in passing the remarkable sensitivity of those original cultures that flourished here before the Spaniards came. Each one of these exhibits, whether made of clay, stone, or wood, or centuries-old woven cloth, feels the tension between the primitive and the subtle, the earthly and the mythical, the fantastic and the down-to-earth. It is an incredible world that we, pitifully, have despised.

Chili, the word that originated the name of my country, in the Aymara tongue means “where the earth ends.” Perhaps this will help you to understand some things a little better.

In the course of history, the attempts by different empires to impose their domination and culture are something that we have had to bear with like a continuum since the dawn of our own history. Globalization is a fact that seeps in through the tiniest interstices of our existence. Suddenly, this pervasive phenomenon seems to have homogenized everything. A global undifferentiated esthetics sometimes obscures our certainty of exactly where we are. This globalization is nothing but the creation of a worldwide economy, hence our will – as a country- to lay open our frontiers so as not to be left out of the “benefits” of the system. However, I believe that economic development, unless it is accompanied by cultural and spiritual growth, will only turn us into tradable goods, available to the highest bidder, and our works will be banal, alien to their site, in addition to being both senseless and meaningless.

I do not by any means believe that we should shut ourselves off. In fact, I have always seen the Andes not as a wall isolating us from the world, but to the contrary, as a peak that must be climbed in order to view the world and learn from it. Our poets, Neruda, Mistral, Parra, and so many others, nourished by universal literature, have found their own language, clinging to this geography, to our soil, and no less universal for that.. Hence our challenge is to propose design options consistent with a universal vocation that springs from a sensitivity rooted to the place, to our land, our culture, and our technical possibilities, acknowledging that our destiny is different and possible.

Again I think of that remarkable house of Le Corbusier designed for the rocky outcrops of Zapallar 75 years ago. The handsome residence built of local stone and wood, roofed with clay tiles, was not unaware if the manifesto of universal modernity that the genius drove forward.

Undoubtedly, for the masters of modernity, America was a land of promise, unbound and unprejudiced, so different from your experience in Europe, with those lovely cities brimful of venerable testimonies and your fabulous concentration of culture. Here, even today, history is still in the making, whereas there, where everything is history, the limits of the future are narrower.

Such precise definition of territory as you have in Europe, together with a profound awareness of history and architecture, has defined for Europeans a certain idea of space quite different from ours. Whereas there you build surrounded by history, here we build surrounded by the landscape.

The experience of Le Corbusier of designing among rocks on the seashore, on a vast site devoid of all vestiges of earlier habitation, is still a common experience in this finis terrae. Chile is above all a geographic place. The developed land is negligible and our cultural heritage is not significant either. The earthquakes that wrack the land from time to time make it even more difficult to preserve. In Santiago, the garden city strategy is developing speedily since 1950 as in few other cities in the world. Almost half the population of the country is concentrated there, the total population not exceeding 16,000,000 inhabitants, and all of them, all of them, want to live close to the earth, even if it is a tiny morsel of geography.

To live in Chile is to inhabit the widest range of landscape expressions. Not very long ago I traveled regularly from north to south a distance comparable to traveling between Rome and Madrid, to oversee the construction of a couple of works. In the north, the Atacama desert, a desolate land so dry that there are no fungi or bacteria to destroy the archaeological remains to be found there, while the south offers admirable contrast. There everything is alive. A dark, cold, and humid forest covers the land, opening up from time to time to make room for rivers and lakes of crystal-clear water. To visit these lands is a memorable experience.

You must bear in mind, too, that by 2010 we will be completing just 200 years of life as a republic. This being so, our consciousness of history is shallow indeed. At birth, we receive but little history from this land. In exchange we are given an extensive, limitless, generous land where the future is open and available.

“We seek to be a country and we are just a landscape. . .” the poet Nicanor said underlining the pre-eminence of the landscape above all else. Space, the amplitude of space, is perhaps one of the most abundant assets of this land. That is why my notion of space is so different from yours in Europe. The idea of space at the end of the earth is always associated to the scale of the landscape. That is why my last visit to Rome, where this conversation began, was, as always, such a singular experience.

I am certain that this conversation will proceed beyond this setting. I trust it has helped you to understand a little more about this place “where the earth ends.”

Cristián Undurraga.