Beyond the Supersquare, at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, includes André Komatsu’s “Base Hierárquica,” which evokes the fragility of survival.

Even Utopian Citizens Like to Leave the House

In the mid-20th century, certain Latin American cities looked like the most modern on earth. Not only was their architecture imaginative, but so was the thinking behind it: ideas, amounting to faith, that design could positively shape civic life across lines of money and class; that art and architecture were inseparable; that while Europe and the United States were the cultural powers of the day, South America had a shot at tomorrow.

Then the momentum broke. In the 1960s and ’70s, a rash of right-wing military coups swept the continent. Left-leaning utopianism was suppressed, and the architecture it had produced either abandoned or repurposed to new political ends. With such changes, modernist monuments to the future became, to some eyes, relics of a lost past, emblems of dreams betrayed and grim landmarks of a present that had to be survived.

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One thing that didn’t change was the old-fashioned architecture, art, and the two disciplines now often assimilated as an adversarial relationship. Art became a way for architects, many of them originally trained as architects, to talk critically about modernist architecture and the failings it represented. This dynamic continues into the postmodern present and is the subject of a subtle and exhaustive think-piece of an exhibition called “Beyond the Superstructure,” at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

The show emerged from an academic conference, convened by the museum in 2011, on the contested legacy of modernism in South America and the Caribbean. And more than a few of those 8 papers seem, on first encounter, to require the kind of lecture format to make sense. But the show is blessed with an airy, effortless installation by architect Rafael D’Ambrosio, a designer from Mexico City, and has enough instantly recognizable images to get people talking.

The “superstructure” of the title is a reference to Brasilia, the space-age city designed by Oscar Niemeyer (1907-2012) and built between 1956 and 1960 as Brazil’s new political capital. Among its innovative features were gigantic apartment blocks — “superquadras” — conceived as self-sufficient communities. Replete with shops, gyms, libraries and other amenities, they were designed to ensure that residents, mostly civil employees, never had to leave home.

But, of course, people do leave home, and shop here and there, so the somewhat forced communalism that Niemeyer, a lifelong social activist, had envisioned quickly fell apart. Thus, four years after the city’s debut, a military dictator came to power. Niemeyer left for Europe and Brazil’s bright modern moment was over.

We see its image several times in the exhibition, organized by Holly Black, executive director of the Bronx Museum, and Maria Inés Rodríguez, an independent curator, through this lens of contemporary eyes. A few years ago, the Cuban artist Alberto Burri photographed Brasilia’s signature apartment buildings and included in the image of his own hand holding up a flower — not in tribute to Brasilia but as a monumental gesture of protest, an act of inspiration that had been destroyed to create it. In 1960, the photographer Mason Royce took off the city during Niemeyer’s funeral, he made his style structures look like lumps and his government workers like ghosts.

Fernando Antonio, trained as an architect in Colombia, contributes a cast-concrete model of another modernist paradigm, Le Corbusier’s “La Maison Domus” (1914-15), a simple structure of stacked planes and uprights designed to be cheaply and easily replicated, erected and attached to similar structures to create mass-produced housing. As thought, but never put the project into action. Its basic formula is found throughout the so-called Third World. We see a surreal version of the project in an arresting aerial photograph by Livis Corrêa Benjamin documenting tens of thousands of shanty-town adobe houses erected in the last 15 years in a development near Merida City. A video by Ana Mendieta takes us, at ground level, through the color-coded streets and gives haunting evidence that the development’s residents, however they

Felipe Antunes’s “Casa Domus,” above left, is a model of “La Maison Domus,” La Corbusier’s 1914-15 design for mass-produced housing. Above right, “SuperPueblos,” by Terence Gower, a Canadian artist who often works in Mexico, was inspired by the portable market stands throughout Latin America.

There are different ways of questioning modernism. You can attack outright or you can tease it, as Felipe Orellana does in the installation “Interrogating Architecture,” which consists of a drafting table, a floor-plan drawing of the National School of Dance in Havana and two microphones. The school’s building was started in the 1940s but never finished, and Mr. Orellana has a problem with that. The two plans seem to be asking the drawing to explain itself: “Why the delay?”

Another Cuban, Carlos Gasaicea, as architect by training, maps out the history of his home city (also Havana), now decentered, and imagines future changes. (a plan that runs from the harbor to the woods) in a charming pop-up book. Fernandez Fragoso displays the dust jacket of the catalog from the Museum of Modern Art’s 1955 exhibition “Latin American Architecture Since 1945,” hanging open over a piece of acrylic as if she were cutting it out after years of its residing on the shelf. (An update to that show, “Latin American Architecture Since 1955-1985,” is scheduled at MoMA for 2013.)

So yes, modernism is a loaded, taut, subject, in different ways in different cultures. How can it be fruitfully reimagined? Antunes’ answer is to design a kind of indoor pavilion carte-dedicated to two of Latin America’s great emigre artists: the architect Luis Joaquin, who was born in Italy in 1914 and died in Sao Paulo in 1992, and the sculptor Gego, who was born Gerdur Goldschmidt in Germany in 1921 and died in Caracas in 1964. He became figures from whom we have everything to learn.

The Canadian artist Terence Gower, who works frequently in Mexico, takes Mr. Antunes’ architectural image a step further by giving it a practical use. On commission from the Bronx Museum, he built an open-air pavilion in the last garden of the Andrew Freedman Home, a palatial, city-owned former retirement residence across Grand Concourse from the museum. His historical model is Marcel Breuer’s “House in the Museum Gardens,” which was temporarily installed in MoMA’s garden in 1949. His contemporary inspiration is the pueblos, a type of colonial portables, market stands found throughout Latin America.

Mr. Gower’s version, called “SuperPueblos” and made of plain wood and tarps painted in Mexican colors (red, yellow and blue), doesn’t look much by itself. But it’s a clean-lined and flexible, which is modernist formal ideals, and impermanent and popular availability, which move it into some other, maybe postmodern, realm. It’s there strictly for neighborhood usage — for classes, dances, weddings, concerts, picnics, play groups, lectures. It comes in life only when it is added, filling it, changing it, making a chair out of it, until it disappears in the fall.