

Jorge Luis Borges

One of the 20th century's greatest writers, Borges represented a multidisciplinary sensibility that continues to shape urban discourse in Latin America, showing that it occupies a unique cultural space.

IT MAY BE ONE OF THE LESS welcome facts of the architectural profession that places are not defined only, or even chiefly, by architects, but also by communications media. If poets, novelists, television writers, photographers, painters, advertising agencies, and makers of comic books and movies do not exactly create our landscapes, they co-create them by affecting how we think of them. A formidable example is the role played by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges—arguably his continent's most influential intellectual of the past century—in characterizing Latin America as a domain of urban culture that cannot be understood simply by applying the conventional intellectual tools of North American urban thought.

Born in Buenos Aires in 1899, Borges achieved an immense international mystique that continues to grow. An abstruse figure whose relation to urban culture presents frustrating difficulties for those who see the urban disciplines as highly specialized, business-driven professions, Borges designed no buildings, created no urban plans, and was neither environmental scientist nor policy maker. He wrote philosophical reflections, literary and cultural commentaries, essays, and poetry. Yet, he is a central reference point for anyone interested in Latin America's urban psyche.

For example, *Cruelty and Utopia: Cities and Landscapes of Latin America* (2005), an important book edited by architect and urban scholar Jean-Francois Lejeune, contains multiple Borges citations and discusses how urban theory and practice in Buenos Aires in the seminal 1920s and 1930s are understandable only in terms of the way “the avant-garde” was defined and connected with the concept of the city. Borges is recognized as “the spokesperson, the key

figure par excellence, whose work epitomized the complexities and contradictions” of a pivotal phase of this urban development movement. One of the continent's most prominent public intellectuals, critic Beatriz Sarlo, known for penetrating

inspiration in literature, philosophy, and painting.

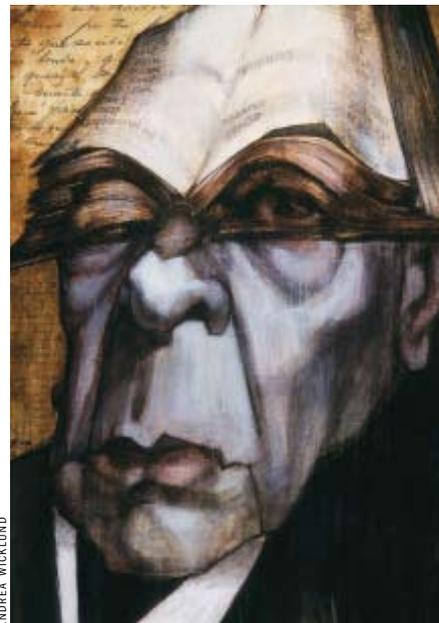
Such examples show that literary culture deals less with concrete artifacts than with states of mind—though intangible, urban mythologies can powerfully define a milieu, like

Paris in the aftermath of World War II, and New York City as it is described in *New York* magazine's aggressive, chic, highly personal journalism, which permeated New York City's collective self-image. Designers do not occupy a vacuum. They respond to community moods, and writers articulate these. This awareness, though abstract, can profoundly color decisions made at drawing tables and in corporate boardrooms.

Borges was an urban mythologist in this sense. In his writing, urban culture becomes not just a form of habitat but a philosophical presence: the primary junction of intellectual activity to which all our artifacts,

past and present, must be related if they are to have meaning. From 1926—when he wrote the poem *La Fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires* (*Mythological Founding of Buenos Aires*)—he was constantly weaving a lore that explored Latin American experience as an essentially urban adventure in which secretive jungles, gauchos from the pampas (plains), and vanished folkways spilled into city and suburbs to fuse with other interests—film, technology, American pop culture and mass consumption, European airs of colonial superiority, and urban infrastructures.

Borges's preoccupation with globalization, in the form of an advanced cosmopolitanism, was



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studies of the intertwined evolution of Latin American urban culture, technological impact, globalization, and postmodernism, has devoted an entire volume to Borges: *Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (1993, English edition, 1995).

The wide range of Borges's influence is not unique. Many writers have contributed to fields in which they did not directly participate. Poet Walt Whitman, a major voice of American democracy, never held public office or wrote a political treatise. William Gibson's *cyberpunk* fictions, linking computerization with abrasive counterculture, have widely influenced perceptions of computer subcultures. Architectural and design movements like the Bauhaus and Futurism found

foreshadowed by his personal background. His mother's family was Uruguayan; his attorney father's was British, Spanish, and Portuguese. He grew up reading classics of English literature in the original. In 1914, his father's eye ailments took the family to Switzerland where Borges and his sister attended school. He graduated four years later, having acquired French and German. During three years in Spain, he absorbed Spanish culture and published his first poem. Returning to Buenos Aires in 1921, he showed his strong interest in the sense of place by publishing magazine articles and poetry written in a regional voice. But his desire to transcend the regional was evident. He associated with writers who were interested in universally relevant issues. In his thirties, he began publishing the pieces for which he eventually became famous. Collected into the book *A Universal History of Infamy* (published in Spanish in 1935, in English in 1972), these writings blurred traditional distinctions between story and essay and truth and fiction by using authentic-looking translations from invented books to convey original speculations and effects.

Livelihood opportunities were few in Buenos Aires, and by his late thirties Borges was supporting himself as a public library assistant. His work from then on confirmed his gift for fusing fictional forms and musings with real and made-up erudition and reflection. He did not limit himself to the perspective of Argentina or even the Spanish-speaking domain but ranged over the heritages of all countries and periods to find themes. This encyclopedic universalism irked some who preferred a more nationalistic approach. When Juan Perón became president in 1946, Borges was stripped of his library job. This came at a particularly bad time, when his sight was deteriorating (as his father's had); within a decade, he was blind.

However, the publicity following his loss of livelihood made

more people aware of him. He was elected president of Argentina's Society of Writers and professor of English and American literature at the Argentine Association of English Culture—the latter an acknowledgment of his internationalism. By 1955, his regained reputation led a new government to make him director of the National Library of Argentina. Cuyo University awarded him its National Prize for Literature; Buenos Aires University named him professor of literature. In 1961, the Prix Formentor, an international literary prize, was conferred jointly on him and Irish poet-dramatist Samuel Beckett.

His works began to be widely distributed in English; he lectured in the United States and Europe; and many recognitions followed, including the Prix Mondial Cino Del Duca, the French Legion of Honor, the Jerusalem Prize, and Spain's Cervantes Prize. When he died of cancer in 1986, he was recognized as one of the world's greatest essayists and short story masters. His books include *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), *Artifices* (1944), *The Aleph* (1949), *The Maker* (1960), *Labyrinths* (1962), *Doctor Brodie's Report* (1970), and *The Book of Sand* (1975).

To understand Borges's urban relevance, it is helpful to consider Latin America's relationship with Europe and the United States and the peculiar continuity of the continent's intellectual life that has flowed from this historical background.

Like the United States and Canada, Latin America was colonized from Europe and later achieved independence. But North America's indigenous cultures did not play dominant roles in shaping the literature, architecture, and other arts of the independencies that emerged. These were, instead, controlled by former colonists of European origin who reflected old world attitudes despite their political autonomy. Latin American cultures, on the other hand, possessed roots in an indigenous history stretching

into antiquity, offering a panorama of origins characterized by awesomely monumental structures, brilliant arts, vibrant learning, and vigorous speculation, all very different from, but no less emotionally and intellectually compelling than, the civilizations of Greece and Rome that had molded Europe. This pervasive fact is masked and complicated by overlays of colonial imposition.

An icon of this past is Machu Picchu, a complex in Peru built by the Inca Empire and thought to date from the 15th century. The publicity given it in the early 20th century by a colorful North American, Hiram Bingham, has merged it in the public mind with the imagery of the *Indiana Jones* film series, but its connotations are far richer than any film can capture. Classified by the United Nations as a World Heritage Site, it is a brooding terrain redolent of architectures, customs, and mysteries that apply to contemporary Latin America a cultural shadow of its own. These cultural nuances similarly encompass the Maya and Aztec heritages, which reach back to the pre-Columbian Americas.

Thus, while the region is linguistically, ethnically, and politically varied to a far greater degree than many foreigners realize, its commonalities have given rise to one of its most intriguing features, which Borges preeminently represents: a general tendency for disciplines in the region to intertwine in ways reminiscent of Europe in previous centuries rather than of the more specialized societies of the United States and Europe today.

In Argentina alone, for example, architect Alejandro Bustillo (1889–1982) was also a painter; contemporary architect Patricio Pouchulu (1965–) is also a painter interested in Expressionism, African art, and utopian philosophy; Prilidiano Pueyrredón (1823–1870) was an engineer as well as a painter and an architect. In Mexico, architect Alberto Arai (1915–1955) was also a writer

and scholar of the Kantian school of German philosophy; Pritzker Prize-winning architect Luis Barragán Morfin (1902–1988) qualified as an engineer, educated himself in architecture, and formulated his architectural philosophy by studying the works of writer and artist Ferdinand Bac; and architect Edgar González Moreno (1972–) is also a writer, an editor, a graphic designer, and a widely read blogger. Nonarchitectural influences on Argentine urban thought during Borges's day included photographer Horacio Coppola (1906–); and Oscar

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Solari (1887–1963). The latter, known as Xul Solar, was a painter, sculptor, writer, and (like Borges) inventor of fictitious languages. Today, Beatriz Sarlo works across an impressive multidisciplinary range. Similar breadth is evident among intellectuals throughout the continent.

It is difficult to explain why this polymathy evolved. Perhaps, pressures of continental identity and the need to distinguish the region from foreign influence have played a role. Whatever the reason, a hothouse of vitality and dynamism has emerged in Latin America, expressed by writers, architects, scholars, and visual artists in overlapping ways, and with mutual and overlapping influence. It is a noteworthy coincidence that this style, symbolized by Borges, is greatly in accord with the multi-

disciplinary approach that some major urban writers, including Lewis Mumford, have advocated (although not with spectacular success in the United States) as a requirement of advanced urban thought.

From these circumstances, a paradox emerges: although it is a region steeped in ancient cultural resonances and economically hampered by colonial constraints and political strife, Latin America has become a force on the cutting edge of the urban imagination. The number and quality of prominent architects it has produced seem disproportionately large. These include the Argentine Cesar Pelli (1926–), whom the American Institute of Architects recognized in 1991 as one of the ten most influential living American architects. Pelli is responsible for some of the world's tallest buildings and is associated with a distinctively futuristic style uniting elements of the international manner with highly individual touches, a desire to link artistry to engineering pyrotechnics, and a visionary responsiveness to modern materials.

Borges has an odd but potent position in this process. He is the nemesis of stereotypes conditioned by generations of Eurocentric cultural products like *Green Mansions*, a popular 1904 novel by W.H. Hudson, filmed in 1959, and B. Traven's 1927 novel *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, filmed in 1948. These and similar narratives have imprinted on the public consciousness of North Americans and Europeans an inescapably rural (whether idyllic or terrifying) Latin American iconography with strong overtones of barbarism. To this rustic legendry has been added the dramatic archetype of perpetual political instability, transformed into lucrative box-office properties like the Broadway and London West End musical *Evita*, filmed in 1996, and the 2006 film *Apocalypto*, a tapestry of chilling violence.

Borges contrasts with these fantasies a montage of urban moods. They

imply, in sum, that the identity and style of Latin America are steeped in the ancient, but are not owned by it in quite the way Europe is governed by its ancestry; that Latin America is a continent of the future and of change, perhaps more so even than North America; that the traditional distinction between conservative and progressive is no longer tenable; that the region possesses local uniqueness but is cosmopolitan to an extent unusual among even foreign globalists, leaving it receptive to all cultures and hungry to integrate them into its own products; that although it is a region of wilderness that the Northern Hemisphere may envy, it is also a strong realm of urban culture, not only multilingual but also multidisciplinary in ways on which 21st-century urban progress may crucially depend.

Borges is an extraordinarily complex figure, and scholars will probably debate the meaning of his writings for generations. Already, however, we can see that the complexity of his work reflects the grand paradox of Latin America itself, which has emerged from a rural past to give the world a leading-edge urban sensibility that spans the full spectrum of cultural creation. **U**

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