

## Visions of Modernity

### Architecture, Colonialism, and Indigeneity Across the Americas

Brandon Sward

#### Abstract

In this essay, I use the “The Metropolis in Latin America, 1830–1930” exhibition at the Getty Center to think through how and why *criollos*, Latin Americans who are solely or mostly of Spanish descent, adopted the aesthetics and techniques of Mesoamerican construction methods. I then introduce the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Broad Museum in downtown Los Angeles to explore the resonances between Euro-American postmodernism and colonial urban planning, especially with regard to the clean lines and rational geometry of the Royal Ordinances through which the Spanish king wielded his authority in the faraway New World. In this way, I propose a revisionist history of modernism which suggest that Indigeneity played an important role in these developments as a source which was at once appropriated and disavowed. Far from being a specifically Latin American phenomenon, I argue that colonial architecture was strongly taken up in Anglo America, particularly in the Southwest (which of course only became part of the US as a result of the Mexican Cession). I argue that aspiring modernists turned to these traditions in their search for a uniquely “American” style to distinguish itself from its European inheritances, resulting in a predilection for movements such the Mission and Pueblo Revivals. I conclude with some reflections as to the potential implications of this argument as to what an anti-colonial architecture might entail, with a focus on museum display practices and what these imply about how they envision their purpose and relationships with their publics.

## Building Between Past and Future

Between West Second Street and West General Thaddeus Kosciuszko Way in Downtown Los Angeles, the Broad (2015) rises above South Grand Avenue, as if it were silently competing with the Walt Disney Concert Hall (2003) across the street for the award of “most modern” building. Such a contest would be difficult to judge, as the two landmarks offer such different visions of modernity. The Walt Disney Concert is steel, curves, and constant movement. The Broad, on the other hand, is white, hard lines, and pores. Both buildings seem to proudly proclaim their liberation from the past, the fever dream of all diehard modernists. But we can of course only ascertain what is “new” through comparison to the past. In this way, the past lives on in even the most modern of presents, even if only negatively. Accordingly, the question we might pose to modern architecture is: What is a building's connection to the past, particularly if it doesn't have any readily identifiable markers of that past?

A recent exhibition organized by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles entitled “The Metropolis in Latin America, 1830–1930” is helpful in answering such a question, insofar as explores the relationship between history and architecture within the region where both the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Broad were to be constructed (Remember: the Western US was once all part of the New Spanish province of *Alta California*, “Upper California”). In architecture, the new is not always as new as it seems and is often a more or less overt reassembly of the past. But in order to get a fuller sense of the stylistic fodder for the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Broad, let us start even before 1830. For even from the first moment of colonial encounter, the Spanish had distinct ideas about how their settlements in the New World were to look. Consider the following words written by King Felipe II of Spain, as recorded in the “Royal Ordinances Concerning the Laying Out of New Towns,” written on July 3, 1573 in San Lorenzo, outside of Madrid:

On arriving at the locality where the new settlement is to be founded (which according to our will and ordinance must be one which is vacant and can be occupied without doing harm to the Indians and natives or with their free consent) the plan of the place, with its squares, streets and building lots is to be outlined by means of measuring by cord and ruler, beginning with the main square from which streets are to run to the gates and principal roads and leaving sufficient open space so that even if the town grows it can always spread in a symmetrical manner.<sup>1</sup>

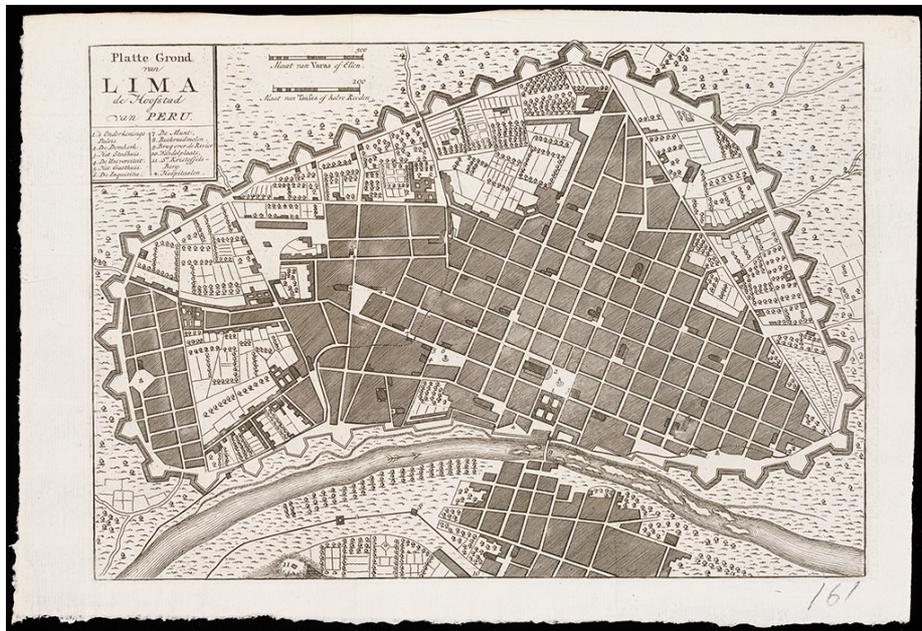


Figure 1. Isaak Tirion, *Platte Grond van Lima, de Hoofdstad van Peru*, ca. 1760  
Getty Research Institute, P840001. Image reproduced under 'Fair Use' condition.

This “main square” was so closely associated with Spain that it became known as a *cuadrícula española*, or Spanish grid (fig. 1). Many of the cities founded during the period of Spanish colonization remain centered on a plaza, streets stretching from each of its four sides. It is as if the plaza were the seed of the city, containing within itself a logic waiting to unfold. This invocation of Cartesian space is the perfect metaphor for imperialism. Although rooted in the square, the settlement could extend *ad infinitum* as long as it didn’t run into unconsenting “Indians and natives.” Later on, the King acquiesces that if the Indigenous peoples resist conversion, “the settlers are to proceed to establish their own but are not to take any of the personal belongings of the Indians or to do them more hurt than what may be necessary in order to protect the settlers and enable them to build without interference.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, this is only the natural consequence of the centralization and hierarchy implied by building around a square. By leaving the center of the town empty, it is as if the King, who decreed these settlements but never saw them, were leaving a space for himself, from which he would rule with perfect, uniform, geometric sovereignty. The Laws of the Indies (*Leyes de Indias*), which encompassed the “Royal Ordinances,” were the embodiment of reason and order. Like all ideas of “civilization,” this model understood itself against the uncivilized, in this case the irrational and disorderly Indigenous peoples. So superior did the King believe Spanish culture was to Indigenous culture that the Indians would be “filled with wonder” by it and “fear the Spaniards so much that they will not dare to offend them and will respect them and desire their friendship.”<sup>3</sup>

When we think of Spaniards in the New World, we indeed tend to think of their influence in terms of culture (language, religion, etc.); “The Metropolis in Latin America,” however, invites us to reconsider that influence in terms of architecture. From the time of King Felipe II to 1830, a constant stylistic source for architecture in New Spain was Europe and many of the metropolises of Latin America bearing a striking resemblance to their European counterparts (fig. 2).

As Europe experimented with its own architecture, bits and pieces of it were effectively flung across the Atlantic Ocean, landing in cities like Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Rio de Janeiro. Colonial holdovers like the plaza were joined by emulations of Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s famous renovation of Paris (1853–70). This architectural blend had the effect of creating internal divisions within Latin America, with more status accruing to those cities and countries that were more able to imitate European ideals. For example, Argentinians, and especially residents of Buenos Aires, have long been stereotyped as snobs, accused of

regarding themselves as the “Europeans of Latin America.” To this day, the main opera house in Buenos Aires, the *Teatro Colón*, is regarded as the premier Latin American opera house and continues to stage performances of what might be considered the most quintessentially European of art forms. Time and again, architecture was operationalized to show how much the New World could resemble the Old.



Figure 2. Auguste Génine, *Las Iluminaciones, Calle del 5 de Mayo*, 1910  
Getty Research Institute, 95.R.104. Image reproduced under ‘Fair Use’ condition.

“The Metropolis in Latin America” also shows us, however, how the 19<sup>th</sup> century was simultaneously an era of revolution, wherein Latin America separated itself from Europe. Shrouded by a mythology comparable to that of George Washington, Simón Bolívar helped to liberate Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Panama from Spanish rule and even envisioned a confederation of Latin American states similar to the US. By the 1910s, most Latin American countries were celebrating the centennials of their independence from Spain, leading to various identity crises intensified by the most terrible war the world had yet seen. As the centennials and their attendant celebrations crept up, Latin Americans were forced come to terms with what it meant to commemorate revolutions against a colonizer they had tried so hard to emulate. During this period architecture shifted away from being a tool with which to quash Indigeneity toward being one to foster it, though we will see that this revived Indigeneity was all too often a twisted, funhouse-mirror version of itself. Although this reclamation could have occurred in any number of ways, architecture was the most natural choice since it was through architecture that the Spanish exercised their

authority in the first place (both generally through the very act of building on Indigenous land and more specifically through less subtle displays of dominance like constructing Catholic churches atop Indigenous temples). Through the efforts of archeologists, a past that had been literally pressed into the earth came again to see the light of day. In sharp contrast to the austere lines of the Spanish grid and the wide boulevards of the European capitals, the twisted forms of the Mesoamerican deities suggested a very different model for design. Rather than rational modernism, these pagan gods evoke a realm of ancient mysticism and communion with nature (fig. 3).

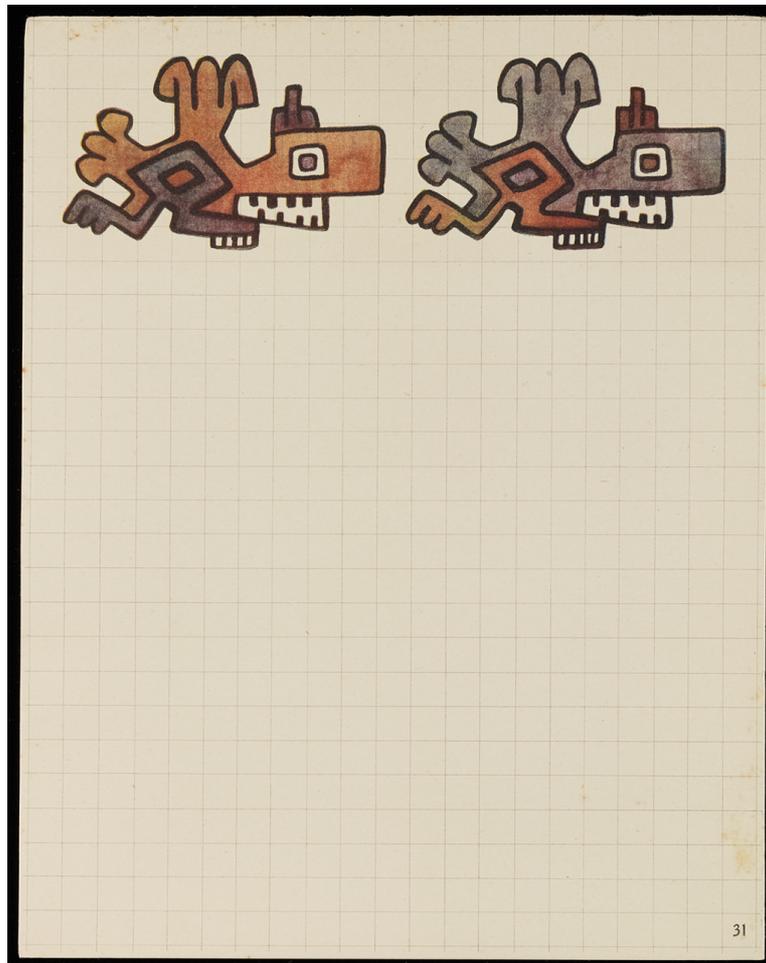


Figure 3. Elena Izcue, "Pre-Hispanic figures," 1926.  
From *El arte peruano en la escuela II* (Paris), pl. 31  
Getty Research Institute, 91-B7095. Image reproduced under 'Fair Use' condition.

Attempts to revive cultures that were once the enemies of Spanish hegemony led to folklorized and sanitized recollections of pre-Colombian history. This selective amnesia was particularly pointed in Southern California, where “Mission Revival” architecture flourished between 1890 and 1915, and a trend to which “The Metropolis in Latin America” also devotes attention. During the colonization of California, Franciscans built 21 missions stretching from present-day San Diego past the San Francisco Bay. El Camino Real, the “Royal Road” or “King’s Highway,” connected these missions, creating a single front of Spanish power in North America. With their tiled roofs, stuccoed walls, and arched windows/doors, the missions were direct responses to the difficulties attending their construction (limited materials, unskilled labor, a desire to imitate Spanish architecture, etc.). The Mission Revival decontextualized the missions, using them for the political purpose of finding a “vernacular architecture” to counter the various forms of “polite architecture” imported from Europe. This new architecture deemphasized the association of the Spanish missionaries with cultural genocide by inserting them into a new context wherein viewers would often not know the histories of these structures but might nevertheless recognize them. The proponents of Mission Revival used the missions as a kind of “authenticity Viagra” intended to prop up Californian uniqueness. But these tactics were geared at more than mere spectacle.

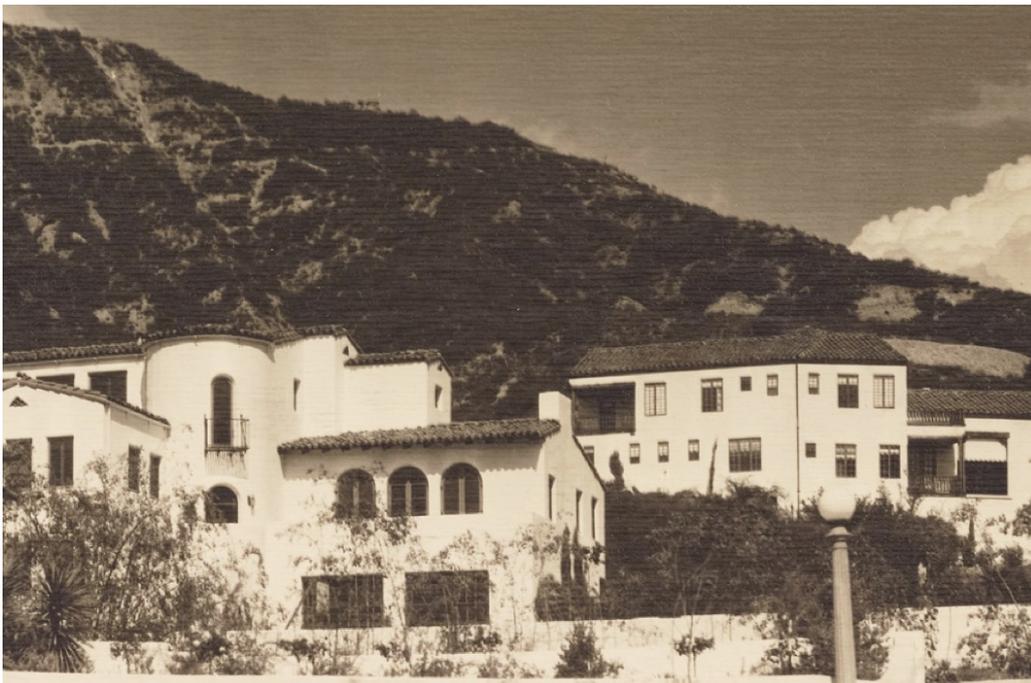


Figure 4. Unknown, Hollywoodland, 1923–29. Image reproduced under ‘Fair Use’ condition.

For example, San Diego held the “Panama–California Exposition” from 1915 to 1917 in order to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal and to advertise the city as the first US port for ships passing westward through the Canal. The Exposition naturally required the construction of many buildings, originally planned in the Mission and Pueblo Revival styles. Under the supervision of New York architects Bertram Goodhue and Carleton Winslow, however, the Exhibition moved toward the Spanish Baroque, distinguished by its use of Churrigueresque, a style of elaborate sculptural ornamentation named after the Spanish architect José Benito de Churriguera and visible on the façade of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Spanish Colonial revivalists like Goodhue and Winslow rerouted architecture that was once intended to inspire awe among the Indians to instead exude a folksy charm that shared several elements with Mission Revival like stucco, tile, and arched windows, but added others such as balconies (fig. 4). Though visually distinct, the revivals of mission and Spanish colonial architecture share a common aim: the dehistoricization of architecture to cultivate a sense of idiosyncrasy.

Moving beyond “The Metropolis in Latin America,” we can appreciate how retrospective paradigms like Mission, Pueblo, and Spanish Colonial Revival architecture uncouple style from oppression, marginalization, and dominance. By purging these architectural forms of their negative associations, the various revivals of these styles were freed up to become badges of newly neutralized uniqueness. But we almost always see the past through rose-colored glasses. When it comes to time, the “Royal Ordinances” have a definite beginning but no foreseeable end; they are the work of a King who thought colonialism might go on forever. Revival architecture, on the other hand, has a definite “end,” or point from which it surveys the past, but does not really have a clear “beginning” it looks back upon. In other words, it is often unclear what exactly is being revived because the Revivalists stripped their historical sources of much of their historicity. We can witness in these Revivals missions divorced from their proselytizing function and colonial architecture from its own violent history—a convenient forgetting allowing us to remember only the parts of the past that do not make us uncomfortable. There is a similar temporal disconnect in the case of the Pueblo Revival. For many of the ancestral Puebloans, architecture was connected to *timelessness*, as construction was often guided by astronomical phenomena, such as solar and lunar cycles. But for Santa Fe, the most notable example of Pueblo Revivalism, the decision to architecturally privilege adobe as a construction material in 1912 was motivated by little other than the desire to transform Santa Fe into “The City Different” and thereby attract tourist dollars. Rather than timeless, Santa Fe’s embrace of Pueblo revival architecture couldn’t have been timelier.

“The Metropolis in Latin America” helps us understand how urban architecture provided a site within which nations reimagined themselves. But does “The Metropolis in Latin America” rise above mere antiquarian interest? How might the history of Latin American architecture help us understand how we build today? For the sake of example, let us return to the city with which we opened: Los Angeles. This choice is not arbitrary. The second largest city in the US has several qualities that make it an ideal case for thinking about the future of construction. Unlike the settlements radiating outwards from a central plaza qua the “Royal Ordinances,” Los Angeles is a city that feels more as if its peripheries determine its center. Much of our sociological knowledge is predicated upon 19<sup>th</sup>-century cities centralized around a certain area, like Chicago’s “Loop.” But the oft-maligned “urban sprawl” of Los Angeles seems to be the more appropriate prototype for the cities of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Without a doubt, Los Angeles has its fair share of Mission, Pueblo, and Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, but what about buildings being built there now like The Broad? The Broad seems to be an archetypical modern, “starchitect”-designed building, as if Steve Jobs were to build a museum. There is simultaneously enough about it to make it look like all too many other buildings and enough about it to make it feel unique. There is nothing about the Broad that feels particularly nostalgic—no references to Californian pasts to shore up its authenticity *pace* Mission, Pueblo, and Spanish Colonial Revival architecture. But does this mean there is no connection between the Broad and the past? If we return to the time before the Revivals, is there perhaps some resonance between the clean geometry of the Broad and the archetypal grid of the New Spanish city?

Answering to this question requires a bit of backtracking. We see that the architectural scheme initially envisioned in the “Royal Ordinances” involved an engagement with Indigeneity that is ironically absent from the various Revivalisms, since these movements were more concerned with pilfering scraps of autochthonous cultures to stylistically distinguish themselves than they were with appreciating the complexity of Indigenous life. This outcome makes sense, however, once we remember the rose-colored glasses that cause whatever is seen through them to appear both attractive and distorted, or attractive precisely *because* it is distorted. By contrast, the initial colonial conquest did not confront Indigeneity as a buried ideal to be resurrected, but as a concrete reality to be resolved. But the Broad has at best only a tangential relationship to Indigeneity. What sense does it make to speak of it in such a context?

The answer lies not in Indigeneity per se, but in a certain relationship to the world. Though the colonial age is sometimes euphemistically referred to as the “Age of Discovery,” it was not merely fueled by European curiosity. The ships crossing the Atlantic were propelled not just by wind but also by capital. Many of these “discoverers” were hoping to get rich, initially by locating shorter transportation routes, but then by finding a whole New World rich with natural resources. The monarchs overseeing these expeditions used this increase in new objects to demonstrate the extent of their empires, creating “cabinets of curiosities” or encyclopedic collections showcasing objects from all over the world (fig. 5). Although they did not make distinctions between areas like natural history, geology, archeology, and art, these rooms were in many ways the precursors of modern museums. We might see an analogy between the cultural globalism implied by these cabinets and the museum. In both cases, objects are linked to certain geographic locations, understood to represent some inherent quality of that place. In the same way that these cabinets functioned as architectural microcosms, museums usually assign different time periods and regions to different wings, thus reproducing a world in miniature.

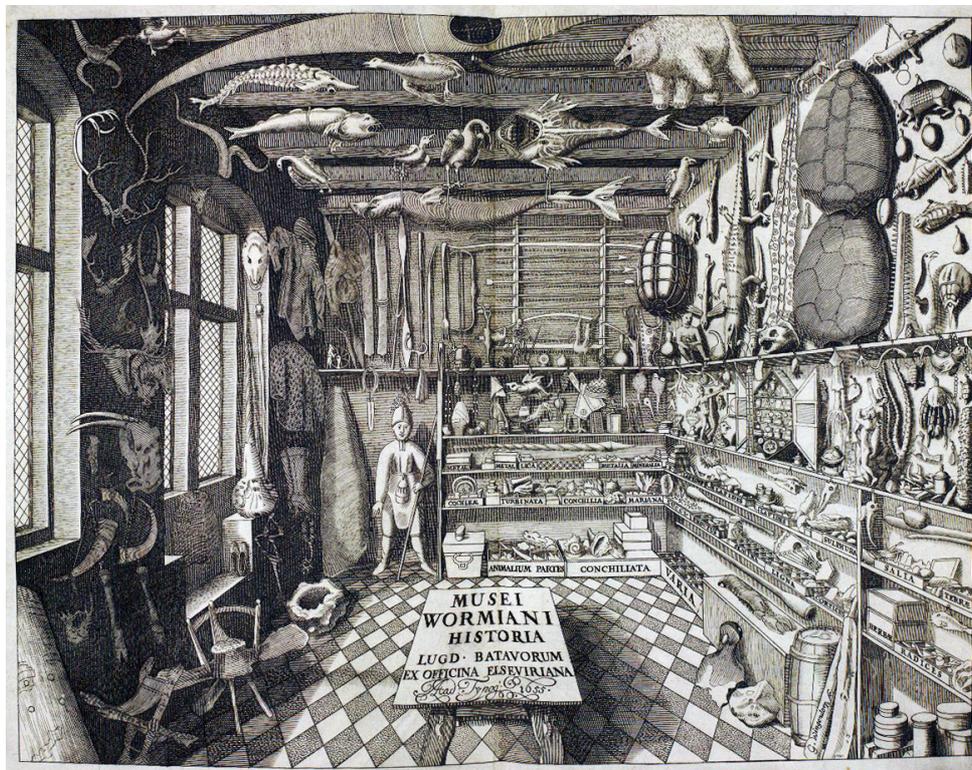


Figure 5. Unknown, *Museum Wormianum; seu, Historia rerum rariorum*, 1655  
 Leiden: ex officina Elseviriorum. 6 p. l., 389, [3] p. illus.  
 Image reproduced under 'Fair Use' condition.

The cabinet of curiosity strangely echoes the linearity of “Royal Ordinances.” Everything within the cabinet is ordered, even when it confronts radical Otherness. In fact, these devices might be interpreted as ways otherness is tamed and translated. The “Royal Ordinances” decreed that the Spanish settlers were to make good faith efforts to convert the Amerindians not only to Christianity but also to Spanish custom; similar to how Indigenous objects were brought into the classificatory schemes of the cabinets. Architecture was a key part of this strategy, inasmuch as the Spaniards thought their buildings would cow the Indians into cooperation, or at least acceptance. In either case, an encounter with the Other is settled through incorporation into a preexisting “neutral” and “natural” order. When European maps began to be drawn upon the gridlines of latitude and longitude, a Cartesian space opened up in which the cartographer might draw sea monsters or other mythological creatures to mark the unknown. Through conquest, the Europeans began to replace myth with reality—or so they thought. The specific objects brought back from the Americas made the distant near and helped anchor a rapidly expanding world, providing possibly the first glimpses of global consciousness. What if we understood the museum as a modern-day cabinet of curiosities? Like the cabinet, the museum brings together objects from different countries made by artists of different races, genders, and sexual orientations. These works are carefully displayed in an orderly fashion, down to the wall texts giving us whatever some curator determined was the necessary information for their appreciation. Both the museum and the cabinets of curiosity architecturally perform the key function of authoritatively organizing the world by recreating this world within a building, or even a room.

From one point of view, art ostensibly represents the height of capitalist excess—within it production becomes entirely divorced from need. From another point of view, art might interrupt consumerist modes of engagement by forcing us to interact with that which cannot immediately benefit us. In short, art could be radically transformative, but is all too often a mere selfie backdrop. This shallow engagement is encouraged by museums like the Broad, which rely upon sensational exhibits like Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirrors* to attract visitors; an Instagram post by Katy Perry within one of these rooms was attributed with increasing public interest in Kusama’s work. Through their orderliness and sterility, museums defang whatever radical potential art might have. This occurs through framing practices geared to make the public feel like they “got” the work, practices that include the architectural spaces within which art is shown.

Is it possible to envision new types of architecture that do not try to render the Other docile and legible? If so, museums are the ideal places to begin this reimagining, since they are in many ways the repositories of the world's cultural wealth. If we cannot have difficult conversations around topics like Indigeneity within a museum, where are we to have them? With every modern architecture comes a vision of modernity because every architecture implies a certain way of arranging space and by extension of ordering the world. And every modernity has heretofore created a premodernity as its dark shadow. Is modernity truly incapable of universality or is there a way of squaring this circle? Could an architecture of the future help us imagine new and less exclusionary ways of being together? Regardless of our answers to these questions, it is clear that any path forward requires knowing how we got where we are and knowing how we got where we are now requires understanding how the production of space simultaneously creates and is created by how we see one other and our world.

## Author Biography

**Brandon Sward** is an artist, writer, and scholar who lives and works in Los Angeles. He was a quarterfinalist for the VanderMey Nonfiction Prize, was shortlisted for Disquiet International's Literary Prize, and was an honorable mention and finalist for the New Millennium Writing Awards. He's won residencies at Alternative Worksite, Byrdcliffe, the Hambidge Center, the Institute for LGBTQ+ Studies, Main Street Arts, NAVE, SloMoCo, the Sundress Academy, the Vermont Studio Center, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Wassaic Project, and Western Montana Creative Initiatives. His first solo show, *How the West was lost*, opens at Stone House Art Gallery in October 2021.

## Notes

1. Nuttall, "Royal Ordinances," 250.
2. Ibid., 254.
3. Ibid.

## Bibliography

Nuttall, Zelia. "Royal Ordinances Concerning the Laying Out of New Towns." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 5, no. 2 (May 1922): 249–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2506027>.