

“Henry Klumb: Puerto Rico’s Critical Modernist”

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ABSTRACT

The German-Puerto Rican architect Heinrich "Henry" Klumb (1905-1984) is Puerto Rico's most celebrated modern architect. Over the forty years that he called Puerto Rico home, Klumb enjoyed a highly productive architecture practice. His major successes consisted of his public works, university buildings, churches, and residences. Despite the strong modern lineage evident in his buildings, Klumb's lifelong pursuit of a principled and noble approach to architecture led him to cast a critical eye towards some of the leading figures and dogmas of the Modern Architecture movement. As a consequence of these views, key aspects of Klumb's architecture can be seen as creative adaptations rather than blind adoptions of modern design practices. Through this paper I demonstrate Klumb's three principal creative adaptations that are evident in his Puerto Rican houses. I also trace the genesis of those adaptations to pivotal moments and experiences in Klumb's life. The first creative adaptation was the balancing of natural and built elements in those houses he designed for and built in dense urban spaces. The second adaptation was Klumb's idiosyncratic use of spatial-structural planning grids to merge his houses with their surrounding landscapes and natural landmarks. The third adaptation was his drawing inspiration from local building traditions to formulate a modern stilt house suitable to the highly variable, mountainous topography of Puerto Rico. In the end, Klumb's legacy should be seen not as having brought the Modern Architecture movement to Puerto Rico (an untenable historiographical proposition) but rather in bending and willing Modern Architecture towards a more humane and environmentally sensitive endeavor. This paper draws upon the research that I conducted for my doctoral dissertation. The fieldwork for that research included site visits to Klumb's houses, and extensive archival research at the Architecture and Construction Archives of the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras.