Radical Architects: Philanthropy and the Construction of Colombian Modernity

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Historians have often overlooked a central component of the story of the Green Revolution: the construction of laboratories, research stations, universities, and other facilities that made crop research possible. My recent research at the Rockefeller Archive Center started with one pivotal research center—the CIAT (Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical) in southwestern Colombia—to try and understand it as an architectural project. When CIAT was finished in the early 1970s, it had already benefitted from years of Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and Ford Foundation (FF) support to that particular project, as well as decades of philanthropic funding at local universities in the nearby cites of Palmira and Cali. The Universidad del Valle (Uni Valle) in Cali had been a particular focus of U.S. philanthropic funding for university development. Among other disciplines, foundations promoted architecture there as a means for international development. From crop research labs to public health centers, Uni Valle architects were supposed to foment modernization by building the facilities that would make it possible. But architecture was more than a facilitator of development; it also became a central site of contestation. At CIAT, officials debated the proper aesthetic and spatial organization that modernizing facilities should take. At the Universidad del Valle, the very architecture students and faculty meant to serve as the champions of a particular kind of modernity, in fact, confounded an easy United States-led development project. Some faculty were radical leftists, and together with students, they led a movement to gain greater control over the university administration from both local and international administrators.

The dynamic between these different visions for the future offers new insight into how the Green Revolution, and other programs of Cold War development, worked in process. It shows the importance of architecture as a professional discipline that undergirded a vast array of development work, through which people debated and
resisted modernity, advancing alternative plans. It points to universities as pivotal sites of philanthropic funding, which worked not only by building professional capacity and technical knowledge, but also by constructing the physical plant of the university itself along certain lines. Because universities were so imbricated with local life, especially in Latin America, where students were widely politically engaged, they also offer one avenue for meaningful historical inquiry into local perceptions and experiences of U.S.-funded development. The close intertwining of the story of planning and protest is not unique to Colombia. By tracing its detailed contours, especially at the Universidad del Valle, insight is possible into how development interacted with politics in meaningful—and sometimes violent—ways that are easy to miss if we take the historical proponents of philanthropy at their word.

A major finding of my research was that architecture was an important focus for philanthropic funding at Colombia’s Universidad del Valle, especially for the Rockefeller Foundation, even though it often went unacknowledged as such. This university was one of the original group that the Rockefeller Foundation funded as part of its University Development (UD) program beginning in 1961. Figures from the 1960s show the RF funded grants to its architecture school almost as much as to the humanities. Part of the issue with acknowledging architecture’s importance was that it did not fall neatly into any component of the bureaucratic structure of the UD program. One official wrote in his diary in 1961, for example, that “[t]he Faculty of Architecture is in an anomalous position because it doesn’t seem to fit at the moment into anyone’s briefcase.” RF Cali field office records—an important source for many of the administrative documents related to Uni Valle—reveal that by 1969, the Rockefeller Foundation had decided it could not support architecture as an official part of UD. Nevertheless, the RF funded the school of architecture in various ways, including grants to build its facilities and sponsorships for visiting faculty. RF officers worked out their orientation toward the architecture school throughout the 1960s, supporting its shift away from technical issues and towards ‘practical’ ones. The shift signaled the architecture school’s growing conscription
into a larger developmental project in the region. Students and faculty there could help design new housing in Cali, for example, and thus undergird a broader set of development goals facilitated by the built environment. The Ford Foundation was even more interested in broader questions of urbanization and planning, often funding larger studies such as a development scheme for the Cauca Valley, with less focus on the architecture school itself.

Rockefeller and Ford Foundation interests converged in developing the physical plant of the Universidad del Valle. The diary of one RF official, Patrick Owens, an engineer who worked as a professor at the university throughout the 1960s and later directed the Cali field office from 1970 to 1974, tracks the process of creating a new campus, the Ciudad Universitaria, beginning in the mid-1960s. It shows the close involvement of the Rockefeller Foundation and other international funders, including the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), as well as local elites in selecting the site and beginning to build. Owens’ diary also shows conflict. It features architect Jaime Cruz Rincon, who had been the dean of the school of architecture and was involved with the project in its early stages but was angered by the conditions of an IADB loan in 1968. The IADB’s principal architect opposed a student center and cafeteria at the center of the campus, which caused Cruz to leave the planning office over what Owens deemed “professional pride.” The university’s rector, Alfonso Ocampo Londoño, also hampered the project, according to Owens, as he “exhibited a diffidence towards thinking big which is disheartening.” Local architects debated whether or not city planning was part of the project. Likewise, the Ford Foundation was involved in the process, sending a consultant to help plan the new campus and, at one time, hosting Cruz in New York. Eventually, the campus was constructed on the basis of Cruz’s designs and was used first to house athletes during the Pan-American Games in 1971; it won the national architecture prize in 1972.

Rockefeller and Ford Foundation holdings also show the ways in which the nearby CIAT was an architectural undertaking, in which foundation officials were
involved. Again, RF officer diaries were instrumental to my research on this topic. The diary of Ulysses J. Grant, an in-country program head and first director of the center, provides a close look at early site visits and meetings beginning in 1968. The RF photograph collection, though often consisting of staged publicity shots, nonetheless give a rich look into the environmental structuring that CIAT entailed—including through digging into earth to till; pollinating and spraying plants; and branding livestock for animal husbandry, which was an original research area at the center. The Ford Foundation was also heavily involved in the project. The files of foundation Vice President David Bell show interest at the executive level, including in the center’s architecture.\(^1\) FF project files for various grants, beginning in 1967, give detailed insight into early planning and construction; negotiations with the Colombian government; and board of trustees’ meetings. FF grant files capture one particularly illuminating exchange, in which the CIAT board went to the offices of architect Jaime Poncé de León in Bogotá to review the center’s preliminary plans and requested a less “Hilton-like” design.\(^2\) The critique suggests that, contrary to what one might assume, it was international funders who requested a “Colombian orientation,” by which they emphasized the local over the corporate internationalist modernism of which the hotel chain was emblematic. The irony is that Colombian architects were the proponents of such internationalism, while the funders fetishized an indigenous aesthetic that had to be self-consciously produced. In some sense, the advocacy of local elements was no less internationalist, as they followed a particular lineage of tropical architecture long advocated by European architects with colonial ties, such as Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, which itself deployed elements of the international style typified by such figures as Le Corbusier.\(^3\) A Ford Foundation report regarding CIAT from 1969 articulated the objective as “to use architectural designs and concepts typical of the area to identify and use indigenous motifs in the decorations,” and, at the same time, to “express the purpose and concerns of CIAT, i.e. research, training and production in the lowland tropics.”\(^4\) The tension between funders and local architects complicates an overly simplistic narrative of CIAT as just internationalist or just local in its style, and shows the way that
architectural design came freighted with varied politics and positionalities. It also demonstrates that, through the struggle to incorporate both ‘local’ and ‘international’ features, architects and officials negotiated the aesthetics of the international development enterprise, which would both foment and embody modernity whose definition was in flux.

Though they partnered on CIAT, overall funding in the Cauca Valley showed important differences between Rockefeller and Ford Foundation work in architecture. Both organizations saw Cali’s Universidad del Valle as important, but the RF was there earlier and supported the university, including its architecture programs, beginning on a large scale in 1961. The Ford Foundation recognized that Uni Valle was “one of the Rockefeller Foundation’s half dozen favored universities around the world,” and followed suit in 1964 by deeming it “Colombia’s ‘most important educational institution.'” But there was some dissent in the ranks at the FF—officers questioned its central status throughout the mid-1960s, and, though Robert Wickham, a senior program official for Latin America, had built up FF programs there, various issues, including personnel changes in the 1960s, registered within both the RF and FF as hampering the latter’s efforts there. FF program files for Latin America reveal that one officer, Peter Fraenkel, deemed the efforts the “seemingly bottomless problem pit of our Colombian program.”

Both organizations valued the presence of their officers on the ground, but, while the RF had a Cali field office and long-standing officers as faculty at the university, the FF pursued a more decentralized working method, making its regional centers autonomous in 1966 and giving its staff more free reign. Ford was also more explicitly engaged with politics. Its officers analyzed as early as 1960 the way that political tension, riots, and civil disorder might affect FF work there; it concluded that, despite turmoil, Colombia was “highly favorable to reform.” Such political awareness, though, did not help Ford avoid missteps. Its population control programs in Cali were some of the most controversial work it did in the region. Likewise, its tracking of “student turmoil” does not seem to have helped it avoid university student criticism. Thus, while the RF was more focused on the
university and tried to avoid politics, the FF worked in a more diffuse, improvised way engaged with politics; more research is necessary to determine if the former’s funding of architecture and the latter’s funding of planning reflect these political orientations.

Yet though the Rockefeller Foundation did not tend to include political analysis systematically in its assessments, the records of its officers reflect, in narrative terms, the context in which they worked. The diary of RF officer Guy Hayes, Field Director in Cali from 1960 to 1970, is an early example. In 1960, Hayes reported on the political violence seizing the countryside as well as on the favorable reaction he witnessed to the U.S. presidential election of John F. Kennedy, who would remain a popular figure in Latin America throughout his presidency, and even after his death.\(^{20}\) In 1961, Hayes detailed a student strike at Uni Valle for the “first time in its history.”\(^{21}\) For a time, foundation officers saw Uni Valle as safe, while the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá was viewed as more radical; the latter even named the FF in a student petition as early as 1960.\(^{22}\) But by the early 1970s, the RF would have a split sense of its work at Uni Valle: though the organization’s funding underwrote the very existence of the university,\(^ {23}\) an increasingly radical and confrontational student movement was difficult to ignore.\(^ {24}\)

Officer diaries and grant files provide a close account of the burgeoning student movement through the eyes of FF officials and university administrators. In a letter to FF leaders, Alvaro Garcia, a professor of economics, credited students with keeping the Cauca Valley, “generally the tinderbox region,” calm during strikes in 1965, due to their measured and rational behavior, as did the local press.\(^ {25}\) The FF thus relied on the popular conception that Uni Valle appeared to be a place of little political threat. Yet the diary of RF officer Patrick Owens tracks the shift toward greater radicalism throughout the 1960s. It recounts important moments of the student movement—which former students themselves have emphasized in subsequent oral histories\(^ {26}\)—through the eyes of a U.S. program officer. These include protests against a Peace Corps training program at the university in 1968;
an episode in which student leaders questioned visiting African-American RF trustee and UN official Ralph Bunche about the power dynamics of U.S. philanthropy in 1969; and the events of 1971, such as student occupation of RF offices and the university dean’s office, as well as street demonstrations. Overall, Owens reports on the events faithfully, but his disdain is clear, mostly through assessments that trivialize what was surely a serious fight both before and after students were killed by the Colombian army in February 1971. In one episode, Owens notes with smugness that he has secreted working project files away at his house before students occupied the RF office in April 1971; they had to settle for publishing in the local newspaper material from IADB contracts, stolen from the dean’s office.

The increasingly radical stance of the Uni Valle architecture school was a subject of much consternation for RF officers. In project files, they had worried as early as 1961 that the dean of the architecture school had anti-imperialist beliefs that put him at odds with U.S. funding for the university. Patrick Owens’ diary provides an overview of the department’s history, by which he favored the politics of a new dean in the 1960s—his only complaint being that he was a “miserable administrator”—and saw the students as “friendly,” even through 1969, when the student movement was starting. Yet by 1971, architecture faculty had joined the economics professors and students to support the protest movement. Architecture professors refused to collaborate on a document signed by most professors to ‘solve’ the university crisis, for example, and they produced statements that troubled foundation officials. Throughout the early 1970s, Owens reported on the leftist politics of the architecture school, seeking to conflate radicalism and ineptitude: the new dean of architecture, he wrote in his diary, always appeared at meetings late with shaving cream on his face, and he was also a Marxist who supported student activists. In addition to their sociological orientation—or, rather, that they “misuse sociological language”—Owens quipped that “architects are nuts by nature.” His glib tone sought to delegitimize actions that were disruptive to the RF project.
Owens criticized architects particularly for not sticking to technical matters, choosing instead to enter into artistic as well as social endeavors. Though he portrayed the move unfavorably, he captured a real dynamic inherent in the student movement, by which students from many disciplines, including architecture, utilized street theater, graffiti, and other artistic means to disrupt the aesthetic and technical logic of development. They wanted to move from an “architect formalist-aestheticist” and “artisan-empiricist” position in order to “produce an architect planner in physical life.”

They did so for social engagement: the architects had said as much in a statement that they produced. We “are trying,” they wrote, “to overcome the formal barrier between architecture and social structure.”

Thus, it was that architecture faculty and students—the very recipients of philanthropic funding who were meant to serve as the underpinning for a developmental program of construction—pursued politics that became an undeniable impediment to RF work at the university. They refused to be simple conduits for U.S. actors’ ideas of how architecture should function in their communities, and their protests ground the university to a halt. One RF official concluded in a letter that, though Uni Valle had initially developed favorably with the support of U.S. foundations, its “political intensities” by 1971 made it “irrelevant.”

In addition to what RF and FF officers wrote, the things left out of both sets of records also speak volumes. Oral history interviews with student movement organizers demonstrate the extent to which they saw U.S. philanthropic foundations as part of a layered system of power that included local and national elites as well as formal state actors from both Colombia and the United States. RF and FF officers’ records do not reveal a consistent sense of their enmeshment in a complex sociopolitical ecosystem that positioned them in certain ways based on their local partners. They report little of how philanthropy in particular was not just an international, U.S.-led undertaking, but also one sponsored by local power players, who were particularly wealthy in the Cauca Valley from both sugar cane growing and industrial production. Architecture and planning work were also
imbricated with the local construction industry. The new campus that the RF and FF funded, for example, was named after Constructora Meléndez, a powerful construction company based in Cali. Further research is necessary to better understand how competing local visions for the built environment were a fight over political agency as much as who might gain and lose economically.

When students took aim at RF and FF offices, projects, and agents, they were not engaging in frivolous anti-Americanism or falling prey to communist menace; they were, in fact, attempting to seize control of their university from the power structure in which the U.S. philanthropists—whether they knew it or not—were embedded. That RF and FF documents elide this dynamic means that a more circumspect understanding of their work must be recovered from local sources, as well as from the ways that the student movement speaks when we read officer diaries and project files for dissenting voices. That architecture students and professors named both the complexity of local power and its articulation in projects of the built environment indicates features of development that cannot be fully understood when only tracking its workings from the perspective of North American funders. Architecture itself was an important arena in which the tangible edifice of modernity was contested, and protest was an inextricable element of its articulation as a spatial and aesthetic project.37

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1 “RF Grant Support to University of Valle During 1963–67 by Division (Payments in Dollars),” Folder 51, Box 60, Series 1, Will Myers Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC). The table reports $65,000 total to Architecture and $72,000 to Humanities, with $82,000 to Science. By far the most money still went to Health Science and Central Administration, with Social Science and Economics as well as General Studies also earning large grants. Though Architecture was the lowest recipient, it was nonetheless substantial, and greater than Education and Engineering, which were not yet funded in this period.

2 GSH diary, May 5, 1961, Jan-July 1961 Folder, Box R1926, Series 311, RG 1.8, Rockefeller Foundation records (hereafter RF), RAC.

3 William Olson letter to Patrick Owens, January 31, 1969, Folder 63, Box 5, Series 2, RG 6.9, RF, RAC. The Cali field office records are in RG 6.9 of the RF Collection.

4 Rockefeller Foundation Photographs, Series 311, RAC.
See Folder 52, Box 4, Series 1B, David Bell, International Division Latin America and Caribbean (hereafter ID/LAC), Ford Foundation records (hereafter FF), RAC.

Patrick Owens Diary, April–May 1968, Box 359, RG 12, RF, RAC.

Patrick Owens Diary, April 1966, Box 359, RG 12, RF, RAC.

Proa, Folder 631, Box 64, Series 311R, RG 1.2, RF, RAC.

RF officials referred to the FF sending architect Alfredo J. Luz, January 30, 1963, Folder 124, Box 11, Series 4, RG 6.9, RF, RAC; Reel C-1460, General Correspondence, 1963, FF, RAC.


David Bell memo, February 22, 1971, Folder 698, Box 27, Series 4, ID/LAC, FF, RAC; see also reel C-1747, VP-Exec., General Correspondence 1970, FF, RAC.

Memo, February 17, 1969, Grant 689 1968 #0079, Reel 5661, Grants E–G, FF, RAC.


Building and Location Document, CIAT, Grant 69-168, Reel 4610, FF, RAC.

The UD program began in 1961; the RF had long supported Uni Valle—George Harrar noted in 1961 that the RF had already contributed over $4 million in grants. See J. George Harrar, “The Rockefeller Foundation: proposed University Development Program,” November 13, 1961, Folder 349, Box 63, Series 900, RG 3.2, RF, RAC, The Rockefeller Foundation: A Digital History, https://rockfound.rockarch.org/documents/20181/35639/The+Rockefeller+Foundation+with+summary+of+aid+to+selected+institutions+appended.pdf/0ff31767-b7e9-4ca6-8e57-5ff9d0a416b8.

Letter from Peter Fraenkel to Harry E. Wilhelm, October 18, 1965, Folder 62, Box 4, Peter Fraenkel Office Files, ID/LAC, FF, RAC.

Folder 45, Box 3, Series 1B, David Bell, ID/LAC, FF, RAC; Folder 52, Box 4, Series 1B, David Bell, ID/LAC, FF, RAC. See also David Bell Oral History, November 16 and December 15, 1972, p. 101, Folder 151, Box 32, Series 4, Oral History Project, FF, RAC.

Alfred Wolf Meeting, March 1, 1960, Reel C01371, Correspondence, 1960, Colombia, FF, RAC.

Memo on “Andean Universities,” January 22, 1969, Folder 45, Box 3, Series 1B, David Bell, ID/LAC, FF, RAC

Guy Hayes Diary, November 1960, p. 77, Box 211, RG 12, RF, RAC.

Guy Hayes diary, May 1–14, 1961, Box 212, RG 12, RF, RAC.

Letter, October 27, 1960, Reel C01371, Correspondence, 1960, Colombia, FF, RAC.

KWT letter May 10, 1971, Folder Jan–May 1971, Box R1925, Series 311, RG 1.8, RF, RAC.


27 On the Peace Corps protests, see Patrick Owens Diary, April 1971, Box 360, RG 12, RF, RAC; on Bunche’s visit, see Patrick Owens Diary, April 7–20 1969, Box 360, RG 12, RF, RAC; on the events of 1971, see Patrick Owens Diary, especially February–April 1971, Box 360, RG 12, RF, RAC, and correspondence, press, and diary excerpts in Folder Jan–May 1971, Box R1925, Series 311, RG 1.8, RF, RAC.

28 Patrick Owens telegram to Virgil Scott, c. April 2, 1971, Folder Jan–May 1971, Box R1925, Series 311, RG 1.8, RF, RAC; and Patrick Owens Diary, March 31, 1971, Box 360, RG 12, RF, RAC.


30 Patrick Owens Diary, May 12–June 22, 1969, Box 360, RG 12, RF, RAC.

31 On the Peace Corps protests, see Patrick Owens Diary, especially February–April 1971, Box 360, RG 12, RF, RAC; and Folder Jan–May 1971, Box R1925, Series 311, RG 1.8, RF, RAC.

32 Patrick Owens Diary, August 30–September 30, 1971, Box 360, RG 12, RF, RAC.

33 Patrick Owens Diary, August 30–September 30, 1971, Box 360, RG 12, RF, RAC.

34 “Marco General de Referencia, Presentado por La División de Arquitectura,” n.d., probably 1971 or 1972, Folder 63, Box 5, Series 22, RG 6.9, RF, RAC. Original in Spanish.

35 “Marco General de Referencia, Presentado por La División de Arquitectura,” n.d., probably 1971 or 1972, Folder 63, Box 5, Series 22, RG 6.9, RF, RAC.

36 KWT letter, May 10, 1971, Folder Jan–May, 1971, Box R1925, Series 311, RG 1.8, RF, RAC.

37 This piece reports on research from two weeks at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York, in January–February 2019. In the Rockefeller Foundation Collection, I reviewed RG 1 for project files, including university funding, grants to the Uni Valle architecture school and to scholars, and also maps and plans; RG 2 correspondence related to Uni Valle; RG 6.9, Cali Field Offices, including records on CIAT, the Universidad del Valle, and university development, as well as administrative correspondence; RG 12 diaries, especially those of Patrick Owens, Guy Hayes, and Ulysses Grant; RG 13 oral histories, especially Ulysses Grant; and RF Photographs of CIAT, IRRI, and Uni Valle. I also examined the Dorothy Parker Papers on CIAT and Will Myers papers on Uni Valle and its architecture school. In the Ford Foundation Collection, I reviewed records from the Developing Countries Program; the International Division, Latin America and the Caribbean, including David Bell’s field office files; Harry Wilhelm Files; Peter Fraenkel Office Files; David Bell oral history; Correspondence, 1960, University of the Valley (microfilm reel C-1413); Correspondence, 1960, Colombia (reel C01371); General Correspondence, 1962 (reel C-1449); General Correspondence, 1962 (reel C-1460); General Correspondence, 1965 (reel C01496); General Correspondence, 1966 (reel C-1522); Grant
689 (1968) to CIAT (Grants E-G, reel 5661); Grant 689-0079 to CIAT (reel 5466); Grant 640-0037 to Uni Valle (reel 4565); Grant 69-168 (1969–1981) to CIAT (reels 3565, 3566, and 3567).

Special thanks to Lee R. Hiltzik, Michele Hiltzik Beckerman, and Tom Rosenbaum for their help in the archive, and to the Rockefeller Archive Center for its generous support.