

True Lies

# Using detailed architectural models, Chilean artist Leonardo Portus constructs alternate realities.

Text  
Katya Tylevich

Photos  
Die Ecke Arte Contemporáneo



Villa Portales.



Will this be my home when I go? (3)

## ‘It’s fascinating to see how people react to architecture, especially in cases of rejection’

### What is the overarching concept that drives your work?

LEONARDO PORTUS: The big idea behind my work is that modern architecture reflects the changes and transformations that take place in society because of state-issued housing policies and power struggles. Specifically, I’m interested in urban modernization efforts across Chile, beginning in the ‘40s – the attempted utopias and political projects, and their varying degrees of social success and failure.

It’s important to note that the legacy of Chilean modernism is currently in a state of limbo: modernism isn’t old enough to be valued in the same way as, say, neoclassical or colonial architecture, which is why so much of it has been demolished or disastrously remodelled in my country. But this phenomenon exists in much of the Western world. It’s another way in which modern architecture is like a mirror of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I’m also very interested in certain artistic elements that were integrated into Chilean modernist buildings between the ‘50s and ‘70s, which were meant to portray international principles in modern Latin America. I’m intrigued by tiles and mosaics with geometric designs, clearly influenced by Neo-Concrete art. Today, these elements, in varying degrees of disrepair, give modernist buildings a retrofuturistic look – the appearance of something avant-garde that’s aged prematurely.

### Do you focus on architecture itself or on how people respond to architecture?

Both aspects are important to me. Architecture has beauty and character in and of itself, of course, but it’s fascinating to see how and why people react to it, especially when you look at cases of rejection.

Take Villa Portales, a social housing complex that was built in Santiago in the ‘50s. The everyday activities of the people who lived there were frequently at odds with certain modern utopian dogmas ascribed to the complex, such as the excessive emphasis on public spaces like gardens and parks. In fact, residents on some of the lower floors of the housing blocks gradually took complete ownership of the ‘community’ gardens, breaking with the logic of collective space.

Ramps connecting the Villa Portales housing blocks were meant to be a way of bridging and elevating the community. In practice, though, they were closed off by mistrustful owners and a general lack of maintenance, ending what could have been an important channel of communication. And the unblemished face of the complex, as planned by the architects, gradually mutated as it was reappropriated by the inhabitants, who added personal items to their façades, painted the fronts of their units, swapped their smooth flat doors for Georgian-style →

Will this be my home when I go? (2)



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Chilean artist Leonardo Portus hits at the truth through detailed, evocative fabrication. Portus creates meticulously comprehensive two- and three-dimensional models of modernist buildings – down to the poorly erased graffiti – that either never came to be or never came to be exactly as designed. He then takes deceptively realistic photographs of these buildings, using the visual language of architectural journalism. Together, these photos document an invented world that remarkably reflects the existing one.

Among other projects, Portus frequently explores the decades leading to the 1973 military coup in Chile, and the state-issued public-housing complexes and ‘utopian’ experiments that were built prior to Pinochet,

with the intention of radically changing the way people lived. Well, things didn’t go exactly as architecturally scripted. Portus examines those housing complexes under the lens of history, as well as the lens of parallel history – cleverly integrating fictional details and outcomes into nonfiction. His works are a commentary on *what if* as much as on *what is*. What if the social experiments driven by modernist architecture had continued to evolve beyond 1973? But what is it that resonates as truth in Portus’s works, despite the fictional, artistic liberties he takes? Why do viewers so often tell him they’ve ‘been there’ or they ‘know this place’, when in fact they’re looking at models of buildings that never came to be?

## ‘My models are a combination of existing modernist features and items of my own design’

← entrances, or repainted and removed original mosaics from the geometric design – all in all, a total modification of the original architectural programme.

This kind of rejection of certain doctrines prescribed by architecture can be seen around the world, as far away from Chile as the Robin Hood Gardens in London [realized in 1972 by Alison and Peter Smithson and currently the site of a major redevelopment].

### What do you try to address in the models you construct – the reality of modernist utopias or their ambitions?

My models are a combination of existing modernist features and items of my own design. They create an ambiguous place between reality and fiction. The physical structures are made mostly of recycled wood. The photographic records I create of these models carefully adhere to the types of photographic framing techniques used by architectural journals. Lighting is important – in daylight I can capture the dexterity and playful mimicry of the façades of the models. I can make viewers wonder whether or not they are looking at existing buildings. In contrast, artificial light shows that the object in the image is a model, in which case the project becomes surreal – like the flashback of a city from a dream, a distant memory, or both.

### Are you creating a new world with each project? Or do

### you constantly add something new to a bigger fictional world?

Each work is a response to the existing world and to cities that have actually been built – and to the dreams and failures reflected in those places. Art is a field of aesthetics in which we search and question. It's about testing and imagining different versions of reality – different utopian fictions.

That said, the model is a seductive device that borders on reality and fiction. On the one hand, the viewer wants to enter a miniaturization of reality through a model. I can't help but think of '60s and '70s Japanese TV series, like *Ultraman* and *Ultraseven*, or any B-rated sci-fi or horror film whose viewers know that everything they're seeing is unreal, a sham, and still can't resist the powerful lure of escaping reality and entering an allegory.

At exhibitions of my work, people might not know much about architecture, art and urbanism in the academic sense, but on an emotional level they wonder why these buildings were never built, what they are, what they represent. It makes me realize that users really do want better living environments, and their wish is a pressing issue for the planners of modernist utopias. Though it's a future that never arrived, we're still very much expecting it to materialize some day.



Will this be my home when I go? (5)

Will this be my home when I go? (1)



### What are you working on now?

I am developing a project that continues a previous work called *¿Esta será mi casa cuando me vaya yo?* (Will this be my home when I go?), which showed at the Sala Gasco Arte Contemporáneo in Santiago last year. The project features an 'uchronia' – an alternate story or parallel reality that diverts from a real point in history. I wondered what would have happened to the strong social stamp of '70s modernism in Chile if the 1973 coup d'état hadn't stopped the evolution of modernism. So I designed five sets of models of social housing, referencing several unfinished projects in Chile as well as some international architecture from socialist Europe, where the modernist model was followed and continued to develop well into the '80s.

My new project, which develops from this idea, will exhibit this year at the MAVI (Visual Arts Museum) in Santiago. The title of the work is *Estación Utopía* (Station Utopia). It will feature three models of subway stations in Santiago, rebuilt in a unique and uchronic way and containing site-integrated art. As I explore the sculptural character of the project, I see the volumes becoming something that the viewer can 'enter' through a camera, as a voyeur setting foot into an imaginary reality.

### In terms of your art, which architects do you find the most interesting?

Among Chilean architects, I'm interested in those who worked in any major or minor way on modernist buildings, such

as Juan Borchers, Schapira Eskenazi Arquitectos, Emilio Duhart, Roberto Goycoolea Infante, Jorge Labarca, and the B.V.C.H. team – consisting of Carlos Bresciani, Héctor Valdés, Fernando Castillo and Carlos Huidobro.

Among international architects, I am interested in Oscar Niemeyer, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Clorindo Testa, Moises Ginzburg, Antonio Sant'Elia, Giuseppe Terragni, Kenzo Tange, most of the Russian constructivists, and Mexican architects such as Mario Pani and Agustin Hernandez.

As an artist, I am interested in a wide range of artists, filmmakers and photographers – particularly those who have incorporated architecture into their work, like Edward Hopper, Giorgio de Chirico, Fritz Lang, Wim Wenders, Thomas Demand, and representatives of the Düsseldorf school of painting.

### Did you study architecture?

I am self-taught. My desire to study architecture was thwarted by economic issues. Chile's dictatorship dismantled several universities and promoted private education, which became more and more expensive and beyond the reach of many families. This is still an issue and the cause of many recent protests.

However, there is a strong relationship between life and art, and artistic learning is also a product of our personal experiences. The empirical process of trial and error is something that never ends. ←