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Intertwining brushes and blueprints: The legacy of architect Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño

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Abstract

This research explores the deep interrelationship between the architectural and artistic production of Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño (1914–2009) between 1950 and 1970, an Ecuadorian pioneer whose work exemplifies the synergy between both disciplines. Despite his relevance, the systematic interaction between these facets has been little explored. The study analyzes three emblematic works: the Quito City Hall (1958), the Prometeo Theater (1966), and the Residential House (1972). It is argued that Muñoz Mariño's artistic vision, particularly his mastery of watercolor, not only complemented his architecture but was intrinsic in shaping the aesthetic, functionality, and meaning of his buildings, creating a unique cultural heritage. The methodology includes a descriptive approach to thoroughly characterize each work, drawing on the art criticism of Sueli [1] and the architectural criticism of Casado [2] focusing on the creative process. The results reveal that his watercolors served as aesthetic and conceptual explorations for his architectural projects. The comparison between his artistic and architectural production demonstrates stylistic coherence, shared morphological influences, and a constant pursuit of monumentality and formal purity. His legacy encompasses not only individual projects but also his role as a mentor and integrator of art and architecture. Muñoz Mariño's work stands as a testament to the transformative power of the fusion between art and architecture, transcending time and space.

Keywords: Architecture, Art, Interrelationship, Legacy, Watercolor.

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1. Introduction

Architecture and art have interacted throughout history, mutually enriching the aesthetic experience and the cultural meaning of works. In 20th-century Latin America, this synergy was crucial in forging national identities. Studying figures who bridged both disciplines is essential for understanding the complexity of cultural heritage.

Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño (1914–2009), an Ecuadorian architect and artist, stands out as a pioneer whose work between 1950 and 1970 exemplifies this fusion. His career is key to understanding how art influenced spatial design and architectural conception. His watercolors often served as aesthetic and conceptual explorations for his architectural projects. Despite his relevance, the systematic interaction between his artistic and architectural dimensions has been little explored.

The aim of this research is to analyze the deep interrelationship between Muñoz Mariño's architectural and artistic production (1950–1970). To this end, three emblematic works will be examined: the Quito City Hall (1958), the Prometeo Theater (1966), and the Residential House (1972). The hypothesis proposes that Muñoz Mariño's artistic vision especially his mastery of watercolor not only complemented his architecture but was intrinsic in shaping the aesthetics, functionality, and meaning of his buildings, thereby creating a unique form of cultural heritage.

The methodology includes the analysis of primary sources such as the *Archivo Digital de Arquitectura Moderna* [3] and the work of Valle [4]. The findings aim to recognize Muñoz Mariño's contributions and emphasize the importance of preserving the cultural heritage that emerges from this multidisciplinary interaction.

2. Methods

The investigation of artistic and architectural works requires specific methodologies to ensure the validity of findings. These methodologies not only structure the research process but are also key to effective data collection and the formulation of accurate conclusions prior to comparing the selected works.

A descriptive method was employed to thoroughly characterize each work. This approach documented their formal, stylistic, and contextual elements, going beyond the purely visual or structural. Historical, cultural, and social contexts relevant to each work were also considered. This ensured an accurate representation that supported subsequent comparative and critical analyses.

2.1. Painting Criticism: Sueli's Methodology

The art criticism methodology proposed by Sueli [1] is grounded in the research of Hernández [5] a distinguished professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Barcelona. This methodology emphasizes the interpretation of a work of art over its mere sensory perception.

It is also based on the notion of anthropologist Geertz [6] who argues that “a theory of art is a theory of culture, not an autonomous enterprise,” thus recognizing that art constitutes an integral component of culture.

Building on these foundations, Sueli [1] developed an instrument for artistic evaluation that merges the pedagogical and anthropological principles proposed by Hernández and Geertz. The purpose of this instrument is to foster a critical understanding of art within its cultural dimension (see Figure 1).

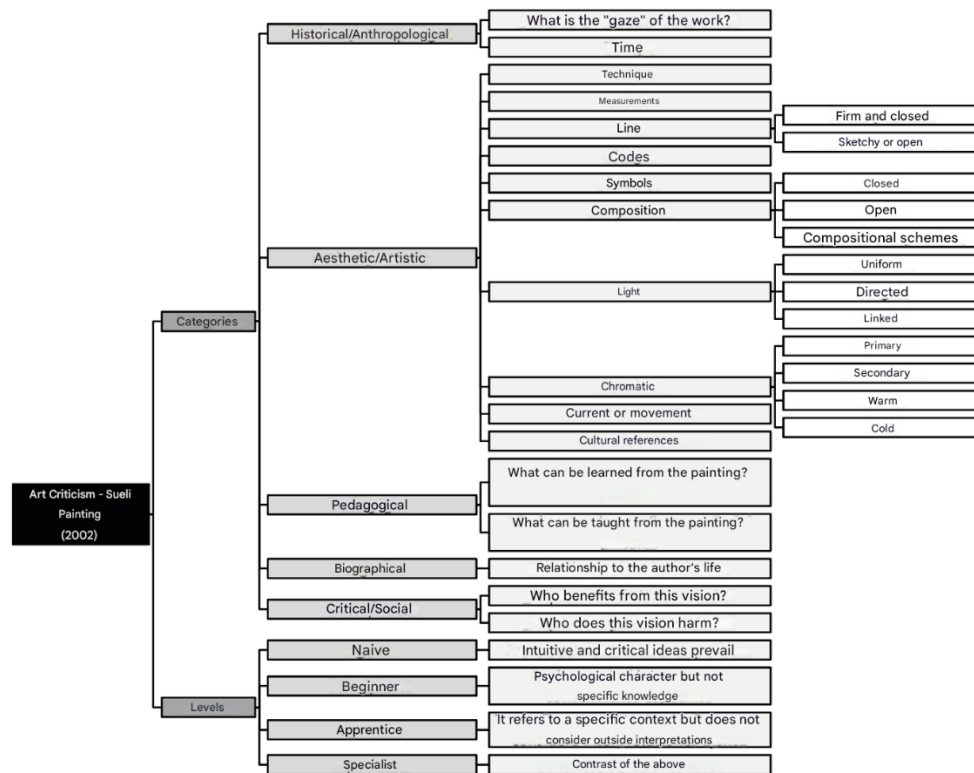


Figure 1.
Painting critique methodology.
Source: Valle [4].

For the level of analysis, the “Expert” level was selected. Unlike the other three levels, this one is defined by its ability to contrast prior approaches and allows for a more objective critique of art.

2.2. Architectural Criticism: Casado’s Methodology

Casado [2] proposes a methodology that combines the conventional criteria of the synthetic-analytical method and the scientific method, with a free interpretation of the inorganic critique developed by Miranda [7] as well as the flexibility to apply the three critical perspectives defined by Chávez [8]. Ethnographic techniques are employed to incorporate subjective and perceptual insights, always within the parameters established by the researcher.

This methodology focuses on analyzing a building through four temporal stages: the creative process, the construction of the building, the life of the building, and its current state. However, for the purposes of this study, only the segment related to the creative process will be used. This will allow a comparison between the author’s architectural production and his artistic output (see Figure 2).

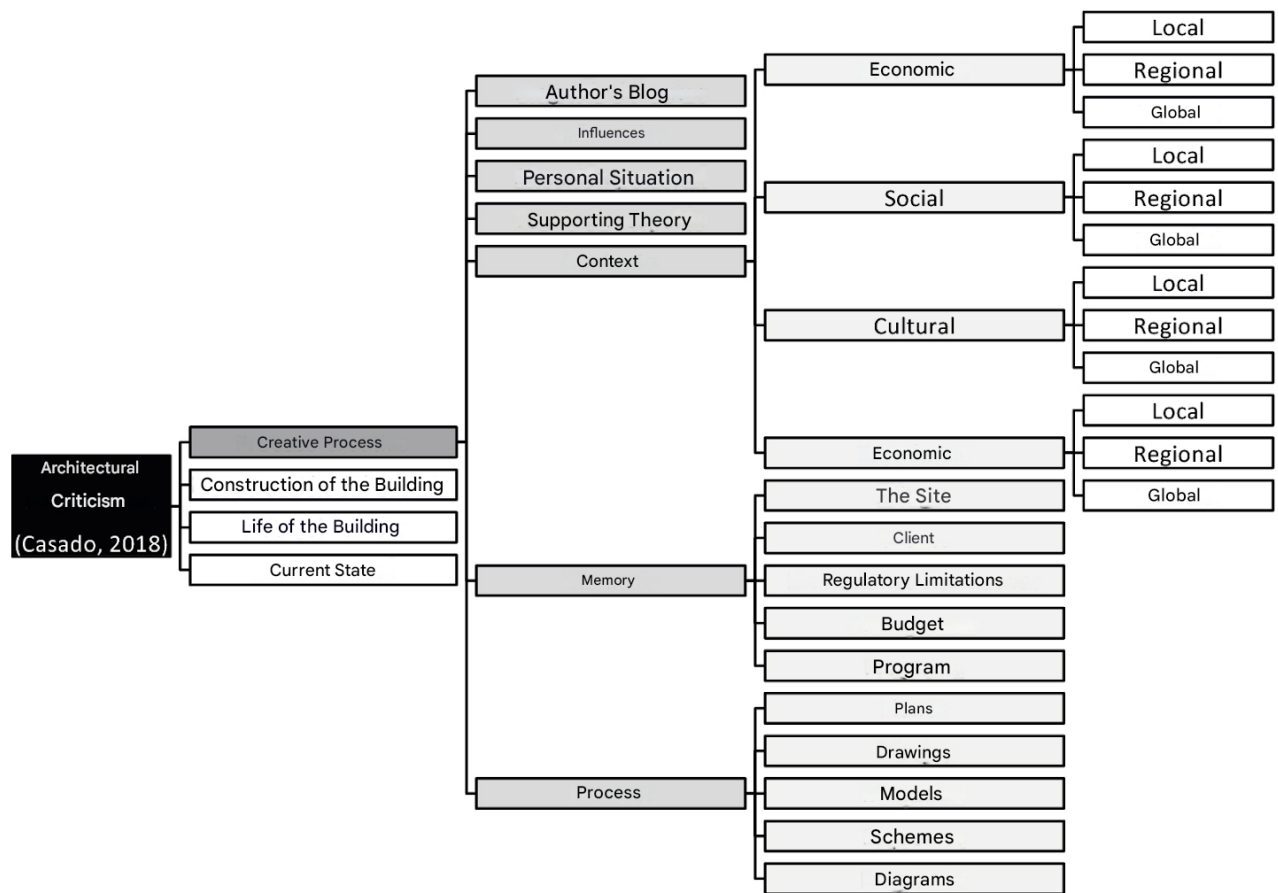


Figure 2.

Architecture critique methodology.

Source: Valle [4].

3. Results

The legacy of Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño spans multiple disciplines, establishing him as a key figure in the architecture and art of Ecuador and Latin America during the 20th century. His versatility was reflected in his artistic production, architectural projects, educational work, and involvement in the preservation of cultural heritage.

From his first exhibitions in the 1950s, he stood out as an exceptional watercolorist, capturing the essence of diverse cities. His work was exhibited in cities such as Paris, Buenos Aires, Tokyo, and Madrid, consolidating his international prestige. His architectural work also left a significant mark, with projects such as the *Quito City Hall*, where he combined tradition and modernity, contributing notably to the urban and cultural landscape.

Throughout his career, he explored various styles and techniques, constantly evolving in his artistic practice. His pictorial work not only documented urban transformation but also served as a visual testimony to architectural development. This facet was complemented by his role as an educator, training new generations of architects and artists across Latin America and participating in UNESCO initiatives for the preservation of cultural heritage.

Moreno [9] a student and friend of the architect, described him as follows:

"I believe that Oswaldo was just that a man for the seasons of spring, summer, autumn, or winter... and I believe the stages he had to live through marked him, and he always faced and transformed his life and circumstances with courage, without surrender, with elegance and integrity of principles and conscience. That, to me, was Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño."

These words reflect his character and the impact of his legacy on those who knew him. His contributions were recognized through prestigious awards, such as the *Premio Nacional de Cultura Eugenio Espejo* and the *Mexican Order of the Aztec Eagle*. In the official act granting the latter, it was emphasized that:

"Mr. Muñoz Mariño is, without a doubt, the most outstanding watercolorist Ecuador has produced in the 20th century, and he is a figure who definitively unites both countries in a significant way through art" [10].

In the posthumous exhibition *El Telégrafo* [11] writer and artist Diego Cornejo Menacho, speaking on behalf of his colleagues, stated that Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño "managed to link the hand with the eye, bypassing the brain. He looked at the world with transparency, which is not the same as innocence. I speak of the watercolorist who worked with transparency, with light, and with patience" (Cornejo Menacho, 2017) cited in Trama [12].

The analysis of his career reveals periods of high productivity that can be divided into distinct phases. Between 1958 and 1966, his architectural and pictorial work experienced significant growth, solidifying his prominence in the field. Later, from 1967 to 1972, his production continued to evolve, adapting to new artistic and architectural trends, which allowed him to further strengthen his legacy and broaden his influence in various spheres. These periods marked key milestones in his

professional and artistic development, establishing him as an essential reference in the history of Ecuadorian and international art and architecture (see Figure 3).

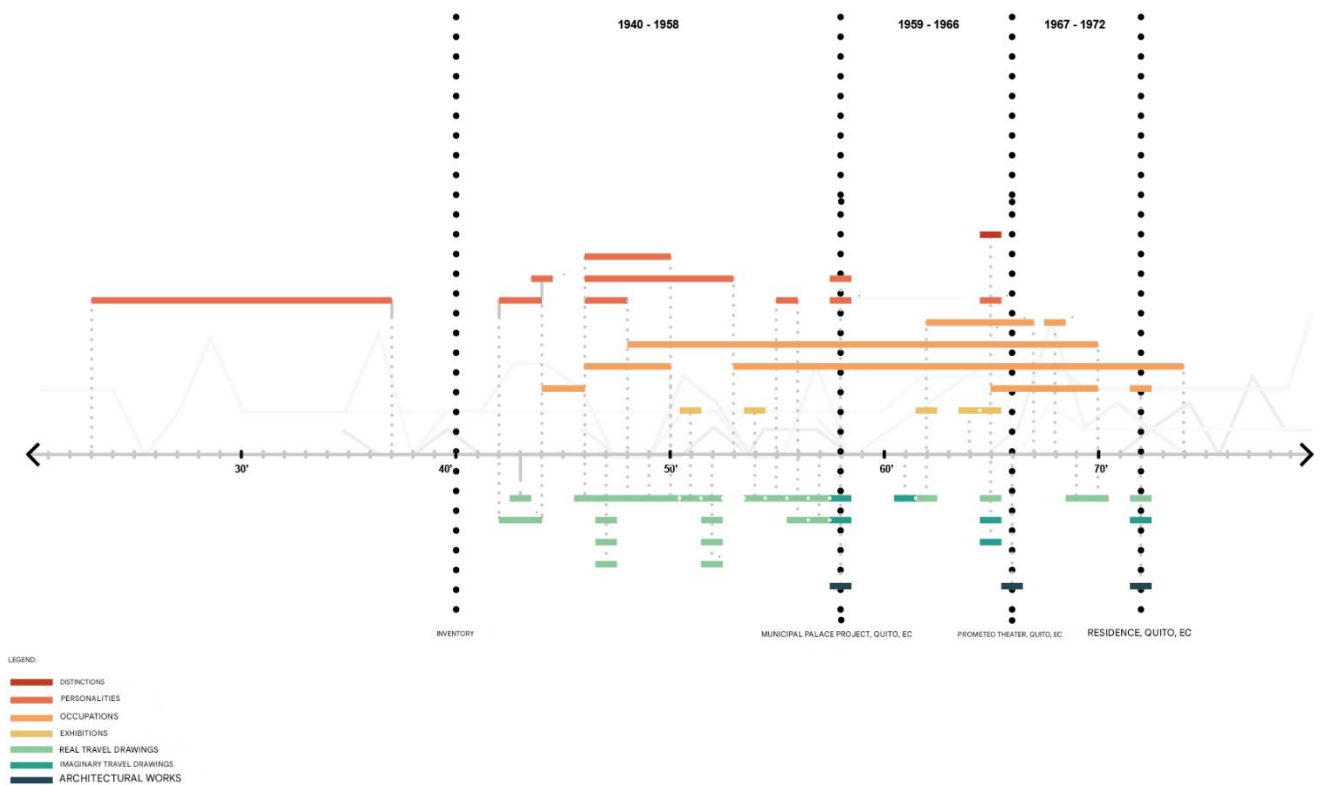


Figure 3.
Time periods to critique and contrast both artistic and architectural production.
Source: Valle [4].

Moreover, his interdisciplinary approach led him to collaborate with artists from various disciplines, enriching both his vision and his work. Through these collaborations, Muñoz Mariño not only left his mark on architecture but also influenced the broader artistic scene in Ecuador and Latin America. This connection between art and architecture is evident in his works, which often challenge conventions and present a profound reflection on the built environment. His legacy extends beyond his individual projects to his role as a mentor, inspiring young artists and architects to explore their own creativity.

Period: 1948 – 1958

(Figure 4)



Figure 4.
Critique of travel sketches 1940–1958.
Source: Valle [4].

3.1. Critique of Travel Sketches 1940 – 1958

During the aforementioned period, Muñoz Mariño focused on depicting urban and architectural landscapes of Mexico, influenced by his studies at UNAM between 1946 and 1953. His travel sketches reflect key observations and experiences crucial to his artistic and technical development.

Primarily using pen drawings on paper, Muñoz Mariño created dynamic compositions with loosely sketched lines that convey spontaneity. His works are compact and centered on prominent elements, employing uniform lighting that generates balanced atmospheres.

His color palette includes shades of gray scale, light green, light brown, dark brown, dark green, and terracotta, evoking a serene and nostalgic atmosphere. Although not directly affiliated with a specific artistic movement, some watercolors reveal influences of Expressionism, experimenting with color and form, showing an emotional expressiveness that connects with Mexican muralists. These elements highlight Muñoz Mariño's distinctive ability to capture the essence of landscapes and architecture, as well as to evoke emotions and memories through his works.

3.2. Crítica de Arquitectura: Palacio Municipal de Quito (1958)

The proposal for the Quito Municipal Palace in 1958, designed by Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño, represents an architectural milestone that was never built. Although it won the competition, this majestic building remained only in plans and models. Located in the center of Quito, it symbolizes the city's ambition and urban vision. It is a promise suspended in time, evoking unrealized possibilities and the architectural aspirations of its era.

In his proposal, the plaza extended into the interior of the complex, passing beneath the horizontal volume toward the courtyard and the other two volumes. Although one volume notably stood out for its height, it is important to highlight the subtlety of design in the elements connecting it to its surroundings. The relationship of heights, the use of transparency and reflection, the large murals, and the interior-exterior extension underscored the intention to emphasize the work and empathize with the surrounding buildings, employing a modern language [12].

The design of the Quito Municipal Palace was influenced by political and artistic figures such as Benjamín Carrión and Gonzalo Abad Grijalva, who merged the public with the aesthetic to grant the project unique artistic depth. The integration of monochromatic painting and narrative poetry added meaning and beauty, reflecting cultural modernism and a balanced dialogue between tradition and avant-garde.

Muñoz Mariño returned to Ecuador in 1958, marking a milestone in his career by participating in the Municipal Palace project under the impetus of Abad Grijalva and Carrión. This return symbolized a reunion with his roots and a renewed commitment to the architectural transformation of Quito.

The Municipal Palace sought not only to be a building but also to serve as a catalyst for the city's urban and cultural landscape. It was designed as a fusion of old and new, featuring a perimeter gallery and a 22-story tower, harmonizing with Independence Square. This combination reflected the architect's ambition to create a dynamic dialogue between the past and the present.

The socio-economic and political context of Ecuador in the 1950s, including the construction of the electric company and popular uprisings, added complexity and meaning to the project, influencing both its execution and reception.

According to Benavides [13] although the project was never built, “this and other works provided the foundation for addressing a recurring theme in Muñoz Mariño's oeuvre: the challenge of integrating the modern architectural object into the city and the forms of dialogue that arose from this situation.”

Period: 1959 – 1966

(Figure 5)

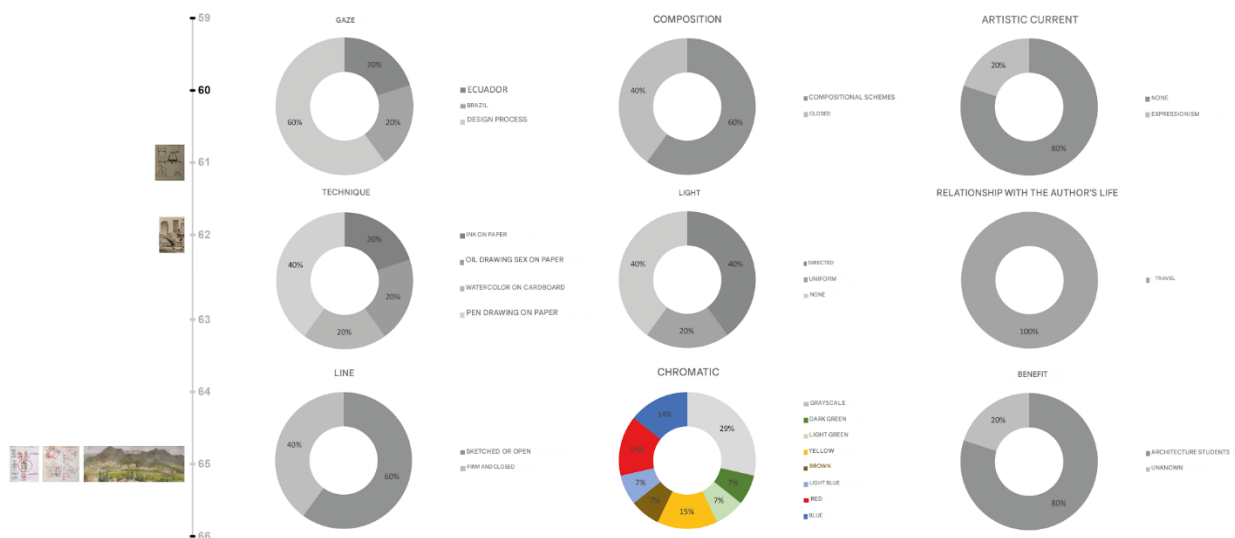


Figure 5.
Critique of travel sketches 1959–1966.
Source: Valle [4].

3.3. Critique of Travel Drawings 1959–1966

The analysis of Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño's artistic production between 1959 and 1966 reveals his profound creative exploration and experimentation. During this period, Muñoz Mariño stood out for a wide range of sketches spanning from preliminary studies to complete architectural projects. These drawings were not merely design exercises but vehicles to consolidate his emerging style and explore new architectural ideas.

Primarily using ink drawings on paper, Muñoz Mariño demonstrated a preference for sketched lines that structured compositions with compositional schemes and a careful play of light and shadow. This technique aimed for simplicity and direct expression, reflecting his focus on capturing architectural ideas concisely and fluidly.

Regarding the color palette, shades of gray predominated, occasionally enriched with touches of yellow, red, and blue, highlighting specific elements within his works to create a distinctive visual depth.

Although he did not show a clear preference for a specific artistic movement, Muñoz Mariño occasionally explored expressionist watercolor, demonstrating his versatility and enriching his creative practice with new dimensions and nuances that expanded his visual and expressive impact.

3.4. Architectural Critique: Prometeo Theater (1966)

Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño's architecture in the Prometeo Theater for the Ecuadorian House of Culture, built in 1966, is both emblematic and complex. Framed within a period of cultural and urban expansion in Quito under Benjamín Carrión, the project sought to reflect national identity and foster artistic expression.

Muñoz Mariño benefited from a political affinity with Carrión, who fully supported his architectural vision and provided institutional backing. Influenced by modernism, he chose monochromatic schemes and detailed geometries for the spaces.

Poetry, fundamental to Ecuadorian culture, inspired the architect to design a space that went beyond mere functionality, becoming a symbol of artistic expression and nationalism.

Architecturally, he employed parabolic forms and double-curved structures to create an innovative structural system that contrasted with traditional architecture, providing a dynamic environment for spectators.

Muñoz Mariño's personal and professional context, including his experience at CONESCAL and success in the 1962 Quito Municipal Palace competition, established him as a prominent architect. His 1967 proposal on the principle of cellular tendency emphasized the spatial integration of the theater.

In summary, the Prometeo Theater stands as an architectural milestone in Quito, reflecting Muñoz Mariño's commitment to vibrant and functional cultural spaces, the result of continued collaboration among architects, engineers, artists, and construction workers.

Period: 1967–1972

(Figure 6)



Figure 6.
Critique of travel sketches 1967–1972.
Source: Valle [4].

3.5. Critique of Travel Drawings 1967 – 1972

During this period, works that explore both natural landscapes and architectural design predominate, revealing the artist's deep connection to his surroundings and his ability to capture the essence and beauty of the places he frequented and explored. The travel drawings, which constitute the majority of his production, are not merely visual representations but rich narratives filled with personal details and experiences, offering a window into the artist's reflections and experiences during his journeys.

Regarding technique, Muñoz Mariño shows a preference for watercolor on cardboard as his artistic medium. This choice grants him expressive versatility, allowing him to explore a wide range of styles and emotions. His firm and defined strokes, combined with meticulous composition, bring his works to life, while the directed and nuanced lighting adds depth and atmosphere to each creation.

It is also insightful to understand what Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño himself said about his artistic production: “I create my artistic chronicle, which is not cold; it is a creation with deep understanding. I learned this from the Germans at the Bauhaus. Painters who have portrayed the city have made mistakes; they did so as painters, as artists, but not in the conjunction of artist and architect. The painter who approaches architecture is mistaken” [14].

The chromatic palette used is varied and rich. Earth tones such as dark brown and light green blend with more vibrant shades like dark green, deep blue, sky blue, and light brown. This chromatic diversity allows Muñoz Mariño to capture the visual and emotional richness of the landscapes and structures he portrays, adding depth and texture to his compositions. The strategic inclusion of colors such as yellow, red, and blue provides visual focal points and emotional depth, enriching the aesthetic experience for the viewer.

Although no specific artistic movement dominates his work during this period, the influence of Expressionism is undeniable in many of his creations. Through emotive strokes and intense visual expression, Muñoz Mariño conveys a wide range of human emotions and experiences, inviting the viewer to immerse themselves in his works and reflect on their own inner universe and perceptions of the surrounding environment. This blend of influences and approaches showcases the versatility and depth of Muñoz Mariño’s artistic language, as well as his ability to explore and transcend conventional boundaries of art and visual expression.

3.6. Architectural Critique: Residential House (1972)

The 1972 Residential House marks a milestone in modern architecture, reflecting a fusion of internal and external influences that shaped its distinctive design. This project embodies the principles of critical regionalism, aiming to preserve cultural identity and the sense of place within contemporary architecture.

The project’s political autonomy, as a private family residence, allows the design to focus on the needs and aspirations of its inhabitants, generating an intimate and personalized space. Stylistically, the influence of Expressionist painting manifests in the chromatic palette, characterized by earthy tones, deep blues, and vibrant greens. This color range creates a visually impactful and emotionally resonant atmosphere, contributing to a warm and harmonious environment.

The poetic narrative in the design grants depth and meaning, turning each space into a medium for storytelling and evoking emotions. Architecture thus transforms into a form of artistic expression where light, form, and space intertwine to generate a multisensory experience.

Furthermore, the integration of elements from Mexican and Ecuadorian vernacular architecture reinforces the cultural roots of the residential house. The incorporation of the “courtyard house” concept and the use of indigenous materials and techniques contribute to the project’s unique identity and strengthen its relationship with the environment.

As Moreno [15] points out, “the Miesian courtyard of his architecture becomes an Andean or local courtyard where he takes advantage of the climate relations to enhance the dissolution between interior and exterior”.

The design itself aims to harmonize with its surroundings by incorporating natural elements and respecting the site’s topography. The interaction between interior and exterior becomes a key element, promoting a fluid connection between the inhabitants and the surrounding landscape. Open spaces, such as patios and terraces, organically integrate with the interior design, visually expanding the rooms and fostering a sense of openness and freedom.

4. Discussion

The comparison between the Quito Municipal Palace and Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño’s artistic production during the period from 1949 to 1958 reveals notable similarities as illustrated in Figure 7.

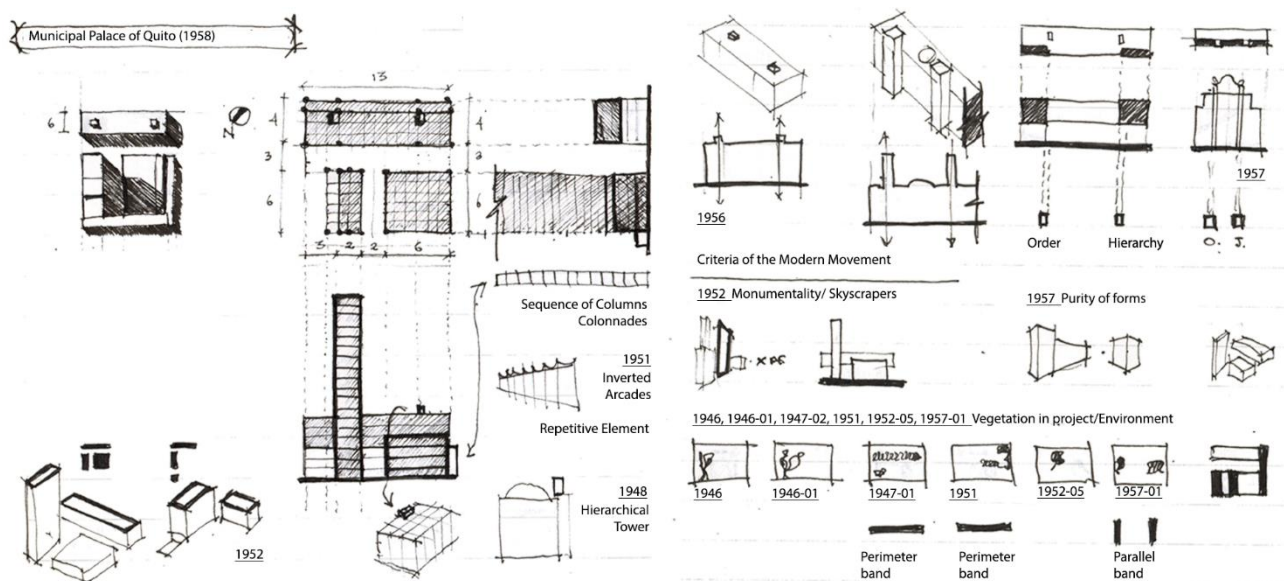


Figure 7.

Comparison of the artistic production between 1948–1958 and the 1958 proposal of the Quito City Hall.

Source: Valle [4].

The plan of the Quito Municipal Palace and the painting *1952_03*, which depicts the last bastion of Santiago, exhibit morphological similarities by arranging volumetric elements in an “L” shape and leaving a square space between them. This architectural disposition reveals a shared structural and spatial approach between architecture and the artistic representations of the period.

The proposal for the Quito Municipal Palace demonstrates a clear influence of rationalist architecture, where functionality and formal clarity are predominant aspects. In particular, the 1951 painting displays inverted arcades, in contrast to the colonnades found in the ground-floor design of Block C of the Municipal Palace. This difference in the arrangement of architectural elements highlights the stylistic and functional preferences of each work, although both belong to the same historical and cultural context.

Analyzing Block A of the Municipal Palace, two tower-like elements emphasize vertical hierarchy and modulation of the building. These architectural resources show similarities with the towers present in the paintings from 1948, 1956, and 1957, suggesting a visual and conceptual influence between the two disciplines. The criterion of monumentality present in the design of the Municipal Palace is also observed in travel drawings made in 1952 in the United States, especially those of New York, which reflect a clear intention of monumentality and architectural prestige.

Likewise, the formal purity of the Municipal Palace project is also evident in the travel drawings from 1957. This emphasis on simplicity and structural clarity demonstrates a coherent modern aesthetic across both creative expressions.

The use of vegetation within the building is a consistent element in Muñoz Mariño's artistic work, especially in drawings *1946*, *1946_01*, *1947_02*, *1951*, *1952_05*, and *1957_01*. The criteria of “vegetation as a perimeter band” are particularly evident in drawings *1947_02* and *1951*, while the use of parallel stripes is emphasized in *1957_01*. This landscape treatment adds layers of meaning and contextualization to the architectural representations, reflecting a harmonious interaction between the built structure and the natural environment.

As Valle [4] points out:

"The comparison between the Quito Municipal Palace and Muñoz Mariño's artistic works of this period reveals an affinity in the pursuit of functional and aesthetically pleasing spaces. Both examples demonstrate an interest in proportion, harmony, and the creation of environments that promote social interaction" (pp. 100–101).

Finally, the analogy between the Prometeo Theater and Muñoz Mariño's artistic production during the period between 1959 and 1966 shows marked correspondences, as illustrated in Figure 8.

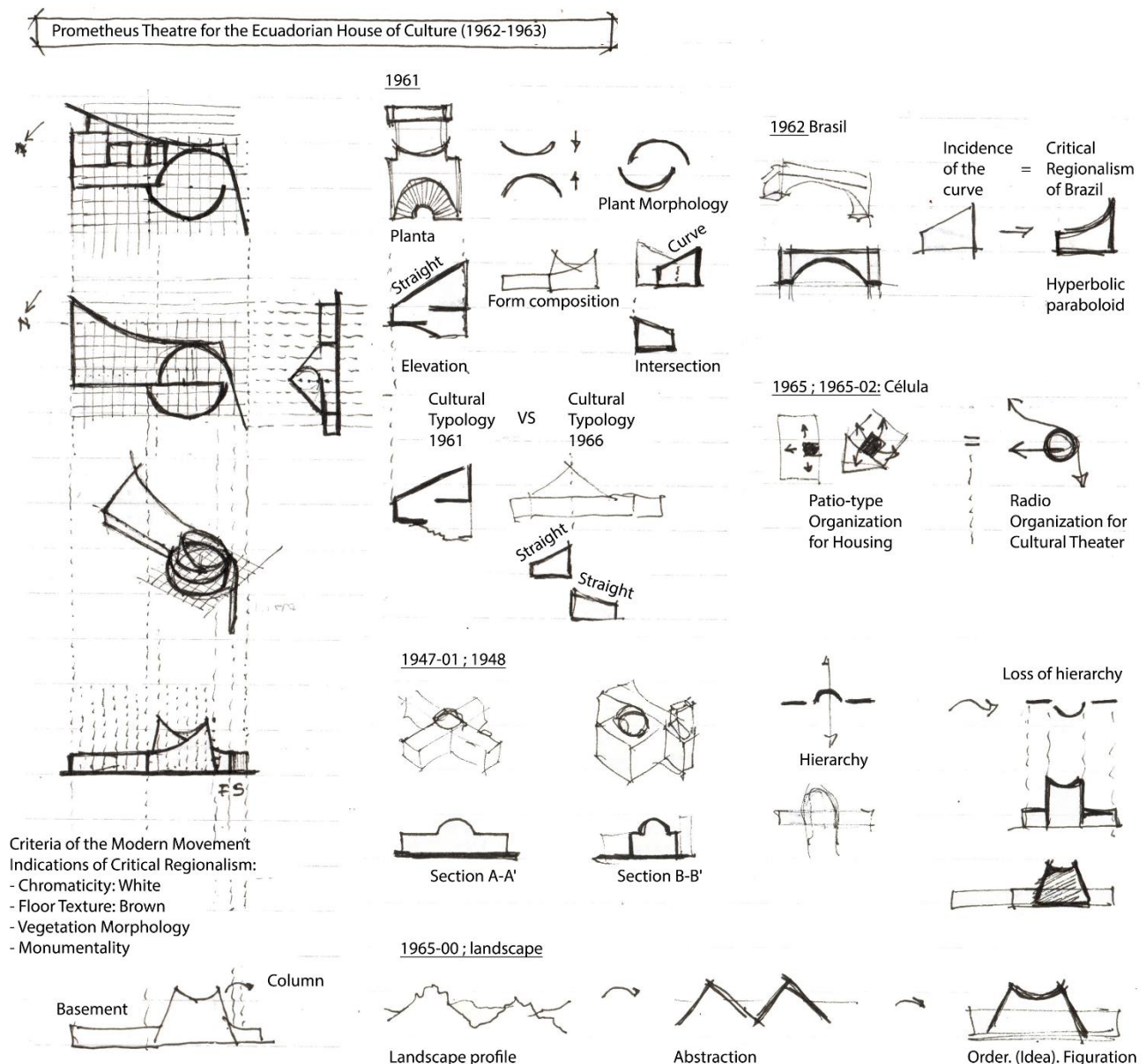


Figure 8.
Comparison of the artistic production between 1959–1966 and the 1966 Prometeo Theater project.
Source: Valle [4].

A detailed analysis of the floor plan of the Teatro Prometeo reveals a complex morphological interaction between the two offset and inverted arches. This architectural arrangement creates a well-defined central core that serves as a focal point and provides visual balance to the structure. The relationship between these arches differs significantly from the 1961 church proposal, where the inverted arches do not maintain a complementary relationship but instead reflect distinct functionality and aesthetics.

When closely comparing the section of the 1961 church proposal and the morphology of the Teatro Prometeo's roof, a continuity in the criterion of the inclined roof is observed. However, a reconfiguration is evident that incorporates elements of symmetry and reflection, contributing to the creation of a visually dynamic and aesthetically coherent composition in the Teatro Prometeo.

Studies on courtyard-based housing organization from 1965 indicate a transition toward a radial organization in the Teatro Prometeo, reflecting a shift in spatial conception and architectural functionality adapted to the specific project. The influence of the hyperbolic paraboloid, explored during his 1962 trip to Brazil, is prominently manifested in the Teatro Prometeo design, demonstrating the architect's ability to manipulate complex forms and create innovative and aesthetically impactful structures.

Finally, the transformation of natural elements into unique architectural expressions on the facade of the Teatro Prometeo underscores Muñoz Mariño's skill in capturing the essence of the environment and translating it into a distinctive and autonomous architecture.

The comparison between the artistic works produced between 1967 and 1972 and the 1972 Casa Habitación reflects a period of maturity both in his artistic output and architectural vision as illustrated in Figure 9.

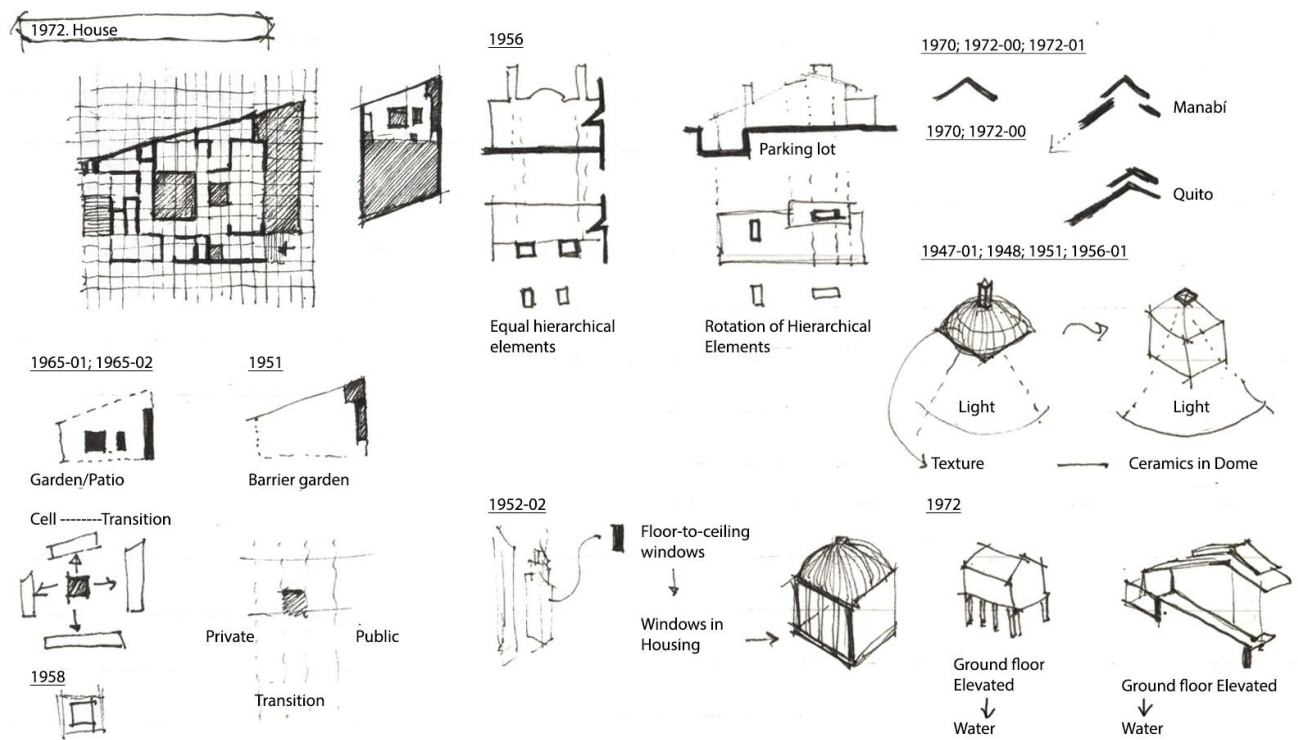


Figure 9.
Comparison of the artistic production between 1967–1972 and the 1972 Casa Habitación project.
Source: Valle [4].

5. Conclusions

This comprehensive analysis of Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño's work from the late 1940s to the early 1970s highlights key aspects of his creativity in both art and architecture. Muñoz Mariño employed the garden as a transitional element between public and private realms in his 1951 painting, symbolizing a barrier against the city. His drawings from 1958, 1965_01, and 1965_02 illustrate the evolution of the central patio as the organizing element of residential space.

Regarding the facade, the 1956 drawings reflect symmetry and hierarchy inspired by churches, contrasting with a more functional approach in the elevation of the Casa Habitación. The paintings from 1970–1972, which depict sloped roofs, influenced the topographic design of the Casa Habitación's roof, demonstrating the interaction between art and architecture.

The study of religious typologies in the drawings from 1947–1956 and the innovative integration of floor-to-ceiling windows, inspired by his 1952 trip to the United States, highlight Muñoz Mariño's ability to merge tradition with avant-garde, enriching the architectural and artistic landscape of his era. Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros expressed a critique about Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño, stating: "I value his ability to put air into his paintings, that is, to endow each landscape with a unique personality" [16].

During the 1950s, Muñoz Mariño stood out for his ability to fuse public architecture with private artistic expression. The comparison between the imposing Palacio Municipal de Quito and his artistic works reveals a surprising harmony between both fields. The meticulous arrangement of spatial elements and the careful selection of architectural details reflect a stylistic coherence that transcends conventional boundaries between art and architecture.

On the other hand, the 1960s marked a stage of experimentation and stylistic search for Muñoz Mariño. The analogy between the innovative design of the Teatro Prometeo and his artistic production illustrates this creative exploration process. Muñoz Mariño incorporated complex geometric elements and innovative forms in his designs while exploring deeper themes related to identity and the human condition in his artistic work. By the 1970s, the comparison between Muñoz Mariño's artistic works and the 1972 Casa Habitación reveals a period of consolidation and creative maturity. His skills in capturing the essence of the natural environment and transforming it into unique architectural expressions reached their peak in this period, marking a milestone in his career and leaving a lasting legacy in the world of art and architecture.

El Comercio [17] calls Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño "the guardian of air and memory," a title reaffirmed in this research, evidencing the masterful synthesis between art and architecture where constant exploration, bold experimentation, and the relentless pursuit of beauty and meaning intertwine to create a body of work that transcends the limitations of time and space.

The legacy of Oswaldo Muñoz Mariño remains a global source of inspiration for artists and architects, who continue exploring new creative frontiers and reconsidering the relationship between form and function in the built environment and beyond. His work reflects a deep commitment to integrating art and architecture within the cultural and social fabric of his era. His creations are not only aesthetic monuments but also testimonies of his vision and ability to interpret and transform his surroundings.

Muñoz Mariño challenged established conventions, exploring new forms of expression and questioning conventional perceptions of art and architecture. His legacy endures as a beacon of creativity and innovation, guiding future generations. In summary, his work represents a living testament to the transformative power of art and architecture, merging aesthetics, functionality, tradition, and innovation to leave an indelible mark on the cultural and architectural landscape of the twentieth century.

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