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# MODERNIZATION AND RATIONALISM IN INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE. THE CASE OF PUBLIC SERVICES AND THE ANTOFAGASTA REGIONAL GOVERNMENT BUILDING, CHILE (1889-1963)

MODERNIZACIÓN Y RACIONALISMO DE LA  
ARQUITECTURA INSTITUCIONAL. EL CASO  
DEL EDIFICIO DE LOS SERVICIOS PÚBLICOS E  
INTENDENCIA DE ANTOFAGASTA, CHILE (1889-1963)

MODERNIZAÇÃO E RACIONALISMO NA  
ARQUITETURA INSTITUCIONAL. O CASO DO EDÍFIO  
DOS SERVIÇOS PÚBLICOS E INTENDÊNCIA DE  
ANTOFAGASTA, CHILE (1889-1963)



**Figure 0.** Public Services and  
Regional Government Building.  
Source: Photographic archive of the  
Directorate of Architecture (1975).

This article presents the results of research developed and funded by the Faculty of  
Architecture, Urban Planning and Design (FAUD) through the FAUD-UNSJ Research  
Competition, won in the 2023 Call.

## RESUMEN

El proceso de modernización arquitectónica en Chile, particularmente en la costa del Desierto de Atacama, ha reflejado la transición desde estilos eclécticos hacia los principios del Movimiento Moderno. La Intendencia de Antofagasta, actualmente sede de la Delegación Presidencial Regional y el Gobierno Regional, constituye un caso emblemático de esta evolución. El artículo examina la transformación arquitectónica desde sus inicios en 1889 hasta la edificación moderna inaugurada en 1963, diseñada por Edwin Weil. A través de una metodología historiográfica y el análisis diacrónico de fuentes primarias, principalmente diarios, se identifican tres ejes fundamentales: primero, la evolución del edificio como manifestación de las políticas urbanas y de modernización estatal en el siglo XX; segundo, la reconstrucción del edificio tras el incendio de julio de 1955 como parte de una estrategia estatal para fortalecer la institucionalidad regional, incorporándose criterios arquitectónicos modernos y funcionales; y tercero, el papel de la nueva edificación en la consolidación del centro cívico de Antofagasta, que proyecta una imagen de modernidad y eficiencia administrativa.

**Palabras clave:** desierto de Atacama, diseño arquitectónico, Edwin Weil, intendencia de Antofagasta, movimiento moderno

## ABSTRACT

The process of architectural modernization in Chile, particularly along the coast of the Atacama Desert, has reflected a transition from eclectic styles to the principles of the Modern Movement. The Antofagasta Council Building, now housing the Regional Presidential Delegation and the Regional Government, serves as an emblematic case of this evolution. This article examines the architectural transformation from its origins in 1889 to the modern building inaugurated in 1963, designed by Edwin Weil. Through a historiographical methodology and a diachronic analysis of primary sources, mainly newspapers, three key aspects are identified: first, the building's evolution as a manifestation of urban policies and state modernization in the 20th century; second, the reconstruction of the building after the July 1955 fire as part of a state strategy to strengthen regional institutions, incorporating modern and functional architectural criteria; and third, the role of the new building in consolidating Antofagasta's civic center, projecting an image of modernity and administrative efficiency.

**Keywords:** Atacama Desert, architectural design, Edwin Weil, Antofagasta council building, modern movement

## RESUMO

O processo de modernização arquitetônica no Chile, particularmente na costa do Deserto do Atacama, refletiu a transição de estilos ecléticos para os princípios do Movimento Moderno. A Intendência de Antofagasta, atualmente sede da Delegação Presidencial Regional e do Governo Regional, constitui um caso emblemático dessa evolução. O artigo examina a transformação arquitetônica desde seus primórdios em 1889 até a construção moderna inaugurada em 1963, projetada por Edwin Weil. Por meio de uma metodologia historiográfica e da análise diacrônica de fontes primárias, principalmente jornais, identificam-se três eixos fundamentais: primeiro, a evolução do edifício como manifestação das políticas urbanas e de modernização estatal no século XX; segundo, a reconstrução do edifício após o incêndio de julho de 1955 como parte de uma estratégia estatal para fortalecer a institucionalidade regional, incorporando critérios arquitetônicos modernos e funcionais; e terceiro, o papel da nova edificação na consolidação do centro cívico de Antofagasta, que projeta uma imagem de modernidade e eficiência administrativa.

**Palavras-chave:** deserto do Atacama, projeto arquitetônico, Edwin Weil, intendência de Antofagasta, movimento moderno

## INTRODUCTION

The construction of institutional buildings in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Chile was not only a response to an administrative need, but also to a profound transformation in how public architecture was conceived. In the case of the Public Services and the Regional Government building, located in the now Region of Antofagasta, Chile, designed after the 1955 fire and inaugurated in 1963, a new structural and conceptual paradigm emerges that marks the transition from eclectic styles to the principles of the Modern Movement, which represents a turning point in the configuration of the city's civic center. Thus, a project that opted for rationality and functionality was reflected. In this context, the Regional Government Building of Antofagasta stands as an emblematic case of how modern architecture not only transformed the urban image but also semiotically consolidated the State's presence in strategic regions of the country.

The project, led by Edwin Weil, National Architecture Prize Winner in 1981, not only sought to provide the city with functional equipment but also embodied a rationalist architectural language characterized by volumetric clarity, formal cleanliness, and the articulation of spaces through a fluid and flexible floor plan. The incorporation of industrial materials, such as reinforced concrete, steel, and glass, along with solutions like the use of pilotis, modular facades, and open spaces, reveals a willingness to design an architecture adapted to desert conditions, while also capable of establishing an active dialogue with its urban and environmental surroundings.

From this perspective, the building under study is not only an outstanding example of the modern legacy on the coast of northern Chile but also a political and cultural artifact that reflects the State's aspirations for modernization. Its analysis allows one to understand how modern institutional architecture was a projectual tool to reorganize the public space, legitimize the state action, and build new ways of inhabiting the urban in tune with modernity.

The article examines the historical and architectural evolution of the building that currently houses the Regional Presidential Delegation (DPR, in Spanish) and the Regional Government (GORE, in Spanish). From its initial version at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the inauguration of its current structure in 1963, this building represents a remarkable example of the architecture of the Modern Movement. The analysis highlights how its design responds to the need to adapt government buildings to the principles of efficiency and functionality typical of architectural rationalism.

Thus, three hypotheses are posed. The first says that the architectural evolution of the institutional building reflects the changes in urban policies and the modernization of the State in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, which manifests a paradigm shift from eclectic architecture to the rationalist principles of the Modern Movement. A second hypothesis states that the reconstruction of the building after the 1955 fire is part

of a state strategy to strengthen regional institutions, which incorporates modern architectural criteria that respond to functional needs and a discourse of renovation and progress. Lastly, it is posed that the location and contemporary design of the building have played a key role in consolidating the civic center of Antofagasta by creating a space for the representation of political and administrative power in the region.

The architecture of the Modern Movement, characterized by the reaction to tradition and decorative and artistic conventions, became the projection of functional, rational, and minimalist approaches in buildings (Norberg-Schulz, 2009; Frampton, 2020). Thus, its development in Chile, from the 1920s to the 1950s, significantly influenced the country's institutional architecture, especially in the north, aligning with the state's modernization policies, which promoted a sober, efficient, and representative public architecture of institutional progress (Galaz-Mandakovic, 2019; Galaz-Mandakovic, 2020; Valenzuela, 2024).

This movement promoted rationalist designs that emphasized functionality and operability as structuring principles that were reflected in the projection of state buildings, inscribed in an era of crucial transformations in the coastal city, where a set of rationalist buildings unveiled a modernization process, such as hospitals, residential buildings, hotels, schools, etc., whose structures and designs represent the integration of modern principles adapted to the local environment. In that context, different architects operated "in forming a laboratory where proposals were developed in various desert environments, aimed at societies receptive to the new architecture and the renovation that accompanied it" (Galeno, 2008, p. 18). In this way, modernity facilitated experimentation to address "those particularities of the desert" (Valenzuela, 2024, p.68).

Institutional buildings play a crucial role in shaping and consolidating urban civic centers. Urban studies, such as those by Jan Gehl (2013), document how these institutional buildings act as milestones that organize a region's administrative and social life. The Regional Government Building of Antofagasta exemplifies this phenomenon by serving as a focal point in the administrative organization and reinforcing the state's presence in northern Chile. Thus, the value of these buildings lies in the fact that "A man does not inhabit only his own house, he also 'inhabits' when he participates in a community, and the institution makes that participation possible" (Norberg-Schulz, 2009, p.127). Namely, when an institution is established in a public building, the inhabitant experiences a sense of belonging, as well as a sense of participation. The purpose of modern architecture is to create spaces that foster contemporary life and also project a rational vision of a city.

The building under study is inscribed significantly in the national and international history of the architecture of the Modern Movement,

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

as it represents a situated translation of the rationalist principles that dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century state architecture, which established a clear link with the international currents of architectural modernism, such as those promoted by Le Corbusier or the CIAM (Corbusier, 2007; Frampton, 2020). However, its value also lies in the local reinterpretation of these postulates, adapted to the environmental conditions of the coastal desert of northern Chile through bioclimatic strategies (Olgyay, 2015; Garzón, 2021) and a functional spatiality that responds to the regional scale. In the Latin American context, the building dialogues with other modernist experiences promoted by the developmental states of the period, such as Niemeyer's Brasília or the state ensembles of Cardenista's Mexico (Liernur, 2001; López-Durán, 2018), but on an intermediate scale that articulates institutional centralization with climatic and urban appropriation. Thus, this work not only testifies to the adoption of a modern architectural language, but also its resignification in a peripheral environment, which consolidates Antofagasta as a node of administrative modernity and projects an image of progress and rationality that transcends the merely stylistic to acquire its own political and cultural density (Norberg-Schulz, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The approach of this study applies a historiographic methodology by collecting and analyzing data from unpublished primary sources. For this purpose, the local historical press, parliamentary acts, plans, and photographic archives are evaluated from a diachronic perspective. In this way, these are combined with architectural analysis, a description, and a comparative examination of the different buildings from 1889 to 1963. This methodology allows a detailed chronological outline that evaluates the design decisions and materials used at each stage of the construction. In this sense, the consolidation of the modern building responds to administrative needs and symbolizes the State agency's efforts to strengthen its legitimacy in the region and project an image of modern innovation.

CASE STUDY

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE INSTITUTIONAL BUILDING

The history of the Regional Government Building of Antofagasta is marked by a series of milestones that reflect not only the administrative and urban evolution, but also the transformation of materiality, from the acquisition and adaptation of a first building in 1889, to the construction of a more imposing building in 1909. However, its fate changed drastically with the 1955 fire, which completely destroyed it, forging an urgent need for a new building. The following is a brief historical diachrony that inscribes and contextualizes the construction landmark inaugurated in 1963.

### ***First Regional Government Building of Antofagasta (1889)***

Once the War of the Pacific ended, Antofagasta ceased to be a Bolivian city and became a Chilean one. On July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1888, the creation of the Province of Antofagasta was formalized, and the demand for a building for its work was included (Ardiles Vega, 2005).

In this context, the State acquired a property belonging to the Company, Minas Descubridoras de Caracoles. However, the building was not fit for purpose, as it had structural, sanitation, and overcrowding problems. Faced with this situation, it was proposed to relocate the institution to an existing building on the corner of Prat and San Martín Streets, where an old wooden structure would be remodeled. The repair works were conducted by Anastasio Fuenzalida's company, with a total cost of \$18,221.16 (Ardiles Vega, 2005, p. 38).

From March 1889, the Province's Regional Government Building was located in the heart of the city, in front of Colón Square, constituting a milestone in regional management and the consolidation of a civic center in the context of the Chileanizing process of a region invaded in 1879 (Galaz-Mandakovic, 2018).

### ***Construction of the second building (1909) and fire (1955)***

Due to the building's anachronism, construction on a new institutional building began in 1909 within the framework of preparing for the Republic's Centenary. The architect Leonello Bottacci, General Director of Public Works, who stood out for conceiving institutional buildings that "coincided with the period of urban consolidation" (Galeno, 2014, p. 63), was responsible for the design. Thus, a French-influenced style stands out in the projection, "[...] large roofs and mansards crowned the new eclectic institutional architecture [...] his designs proposed an architecture that forged a cosmopolitan urban space, of great size, ambitious and attentive to trends" (Galeno, 2014, p. 64). The work was revised by Emile Doyere and built by Jaime Pedrany (Galeno, 2014).

By 1909, it was reported that, "In the previous quarter, all the foundations and half of the partitions of the first floor were completed, half has been completed to date" (El Mercurio de Valparaíso, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1909, p.5). The building occupied a corner and was organized around two courtyards. It had a first floor of 2,824 square meters. The second floor had 1,276 square meters and was used as a residence for the Governor (Recabarren Rojas, 2003, p. 176).

After 45 years as the most important administrative center in the Atacama Desert, the building burned down rapidly in the early morning of July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1955, due to the lack of maintenance in the electrical installations: "it was a fire of immense proportions" (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1955a, p. 1).





**Figure 1.** The Regional Government Building of Antofagasta was built in 1909. With an eclectic profile with French influences, a symmetrical facade with equidistant windows highlights a straight mansard and balcony with balustrades in the center of the building and decorative cornices and moldings. Source: The author's files.

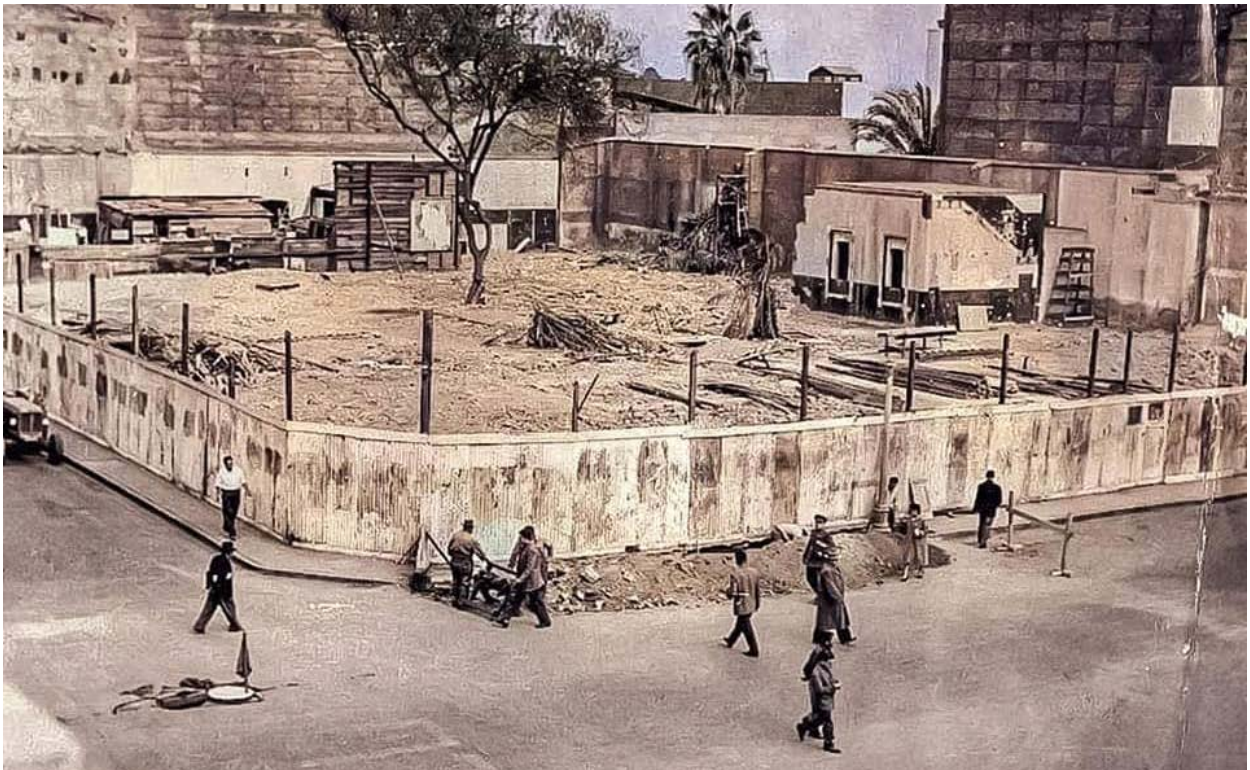
**Figure 2.** Headline of the newspaper El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 16th, 1955a. Source: Author's files.



The newspaper added:

“The interior partitions of cane and clay, and the paint, still fresh from the front, burnt easily, fueling the bonfire it provided to the gathering crowd [...] an impressive spectacle. Gigantic flames and columns of smoke were rising, which could be seen from all points of the city” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1955, p. 1).

Due to the effect of the incident, the Provincial Architect Alejandro Crestá pointed out that it was a complete loss. The approximate estimates



of the losses were close to 100 million pesos (La Nación, July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1955, p.6). The Highways office declared that plans and documents, in addition to transmitters, calculating machines, two adding machines, nine typewriters, etc., were lost. “A new building must be built,” added the architect Crestá (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1955b, p. 1) (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** A vacant lot arose once the damaged property was demolished. Source: Author's files.

### *The Requirement of a new property*

“We must obtain from the government the construction of a new building,” was the headline of the newspaper El Mercurio de Antofagasta, which quoted the statement of Governor Juan Lacassie. It added: “This constitutes a serious loss that must be overcome [...] the State loses, on this occasion, very valuable furniture and real estate” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 16, 1955b, p.2).

Juan Lacassie indicated:

“[...] we will try to make the most for the city of Antofagasta, trying to get the government to consider, on the grounds of the former Regional Government Building, a modern building that brings together all the public offices of the city, something for Antofagasta to be proud of” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 16, 1955b, p.2).

A few days after the fire, “Studies to build a new building” were announced (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1955, p.1). As soon





Figure 4. El Mercurio de Antofagasta, August 3rd, 1955.  
Source: Author's files.

as the Minister of Public Works, Alejandro Schwerter, became aware of the fire, he arranged for the Provincial Architect, Miguel Zuviv, to submit a comprehensive report on the incident, thereby identifying what was urgently needed to restore normal office operations. At the same time, the arrival of another modern architect was promised to collaborate in the study for a new building, and thus, “present a project to build a modern building that brings together all the services that do not have premises” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1955, p. 1). They were talking about Edwin Weil.

Governor Lacassie said: “I will talk to all the parliamentarians in this area and knock on all the doors necessary so that construction on the new public building starts as soon as possible” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1955, p.1). Subsequently, he pointed out that President Carlos Ibáñez had given him direct supervision of project management to avoid consultations at a central level in Santiago, in addition to offering the Provincial Office of Architecture, the technical staff and the elements needed to plan and direct the construction (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1955, p.1).

In this sense, the first hypothesis is demonstrated: the architectural evolution of the institutional building reflects the changes in urban policy projections and the modernization of the State in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, manifesting a paradigm shift from eclectic architecture to the rationalist principles of the Modern Movement. All this occurred in the context of discussion and preparation of the Regulatory Plan, initially approved in



# QUE SE CONSTRUYA NUEVO EDIFICIO PARA INTENDENCIA PEDIRA EL SR. SCHWERTER

EL MINISTRO DE OBRAS  
ASI LO INFORMO  
AYER AL INTENDENTE

Durante tres horas, el Ministro de Obras Públicas, señor Alejandro Schwerter, visitó ayer las diversas obras que tienen relación con su cargo.

A las 8.45 a. m., acompañado del Intendente, señor Juan Lacassie y de los Ayudantes Capitanes Juan Palma y Teniente Orlando Valenzuela visitó el edificio de la Intendencia que el viernes pasado fué destruido por un incendio. En seguida se constituyó en el local que ocupó el Registro Civil. El señor Schwerter expresó que llegando a la capital emitirá un informe al Gobierno sobre los daños causados por el incendio y solicitará la construcción de un nuevo edificio.

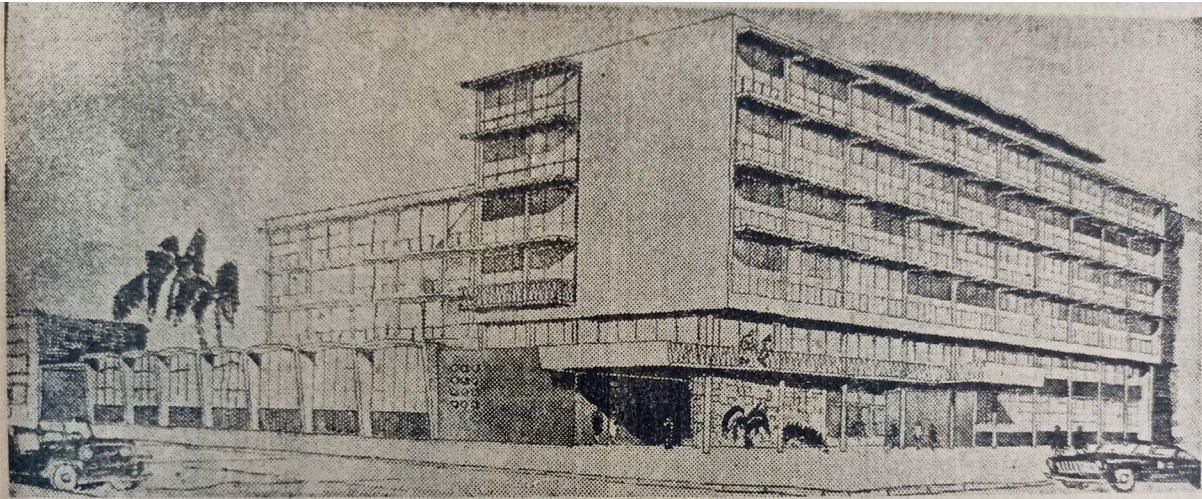
En los terrenos del "Esmeralda" Posteriormente, el Secretario de Estado y sus acompañantes, más el General René Vidal, el Comandante Luis Carvajal y el arquitecto de la Primera División señor Jorge Tarbuskovic y funcionarios de obras públicas se trasladó a los terrenos donde se construirá el nuevo cuartel del Regimiento "Esmeralda". Allí el General Vidal y el arquitecto Tarbuskovic lo



El Ministro de Obras Públicas señor Alejandro Schwerter, acompañado por el Intendente señor Juan Lacassie, por su Secretario señor Manuel Arroyo y por sus ayudantes Capitán Juan Palma y Teniente Orlando Valenzuela, recorre el edificio de la Intendencia que fué destruido.

Figure 5. El Mercurio de Antofagasta, July 22nd, 1955.  
Source: Author's files.

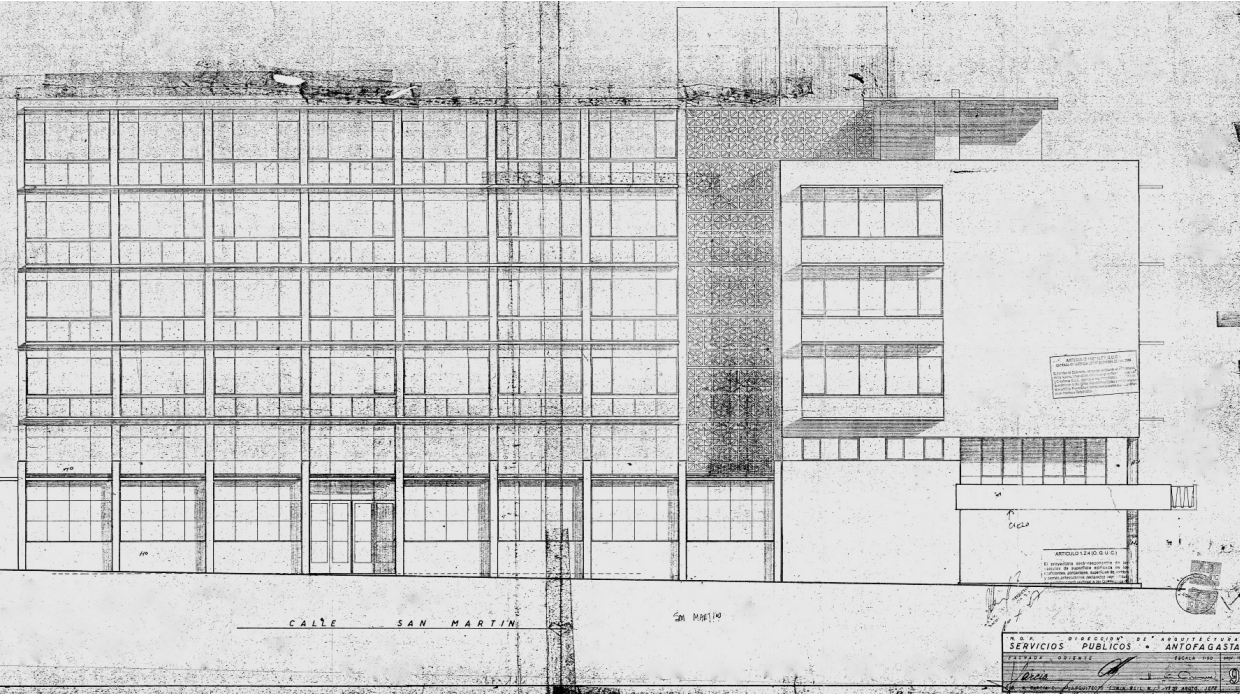
Figure 6. El Mercurio de Antofagasta, June 2nd, 1958.  
Source: The author's files.



El grabado representa el proyecto del edificio de los Servicios Públicos. En el segundo piso destinado a la Intendencia y con vista a calle Prat se puede observar un balcón saliente para los oradores. En el primer piso, siempre por calle Prat, se ubicará a la Notaría Provincial (extremo derecho). La entrada principal se encuentra debajo del balcón saliente. En el extremo izquierdo del grabado (primer piso) estarán ubicadas las oficinas de la Tesorería Provincial, con grandes ventanales con vista a calle San Martín

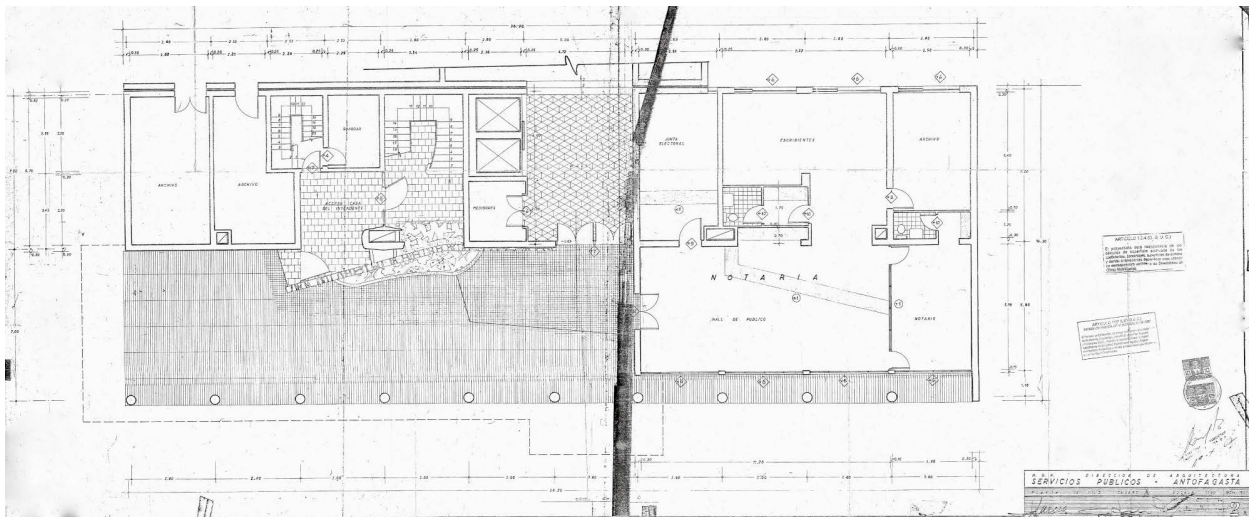
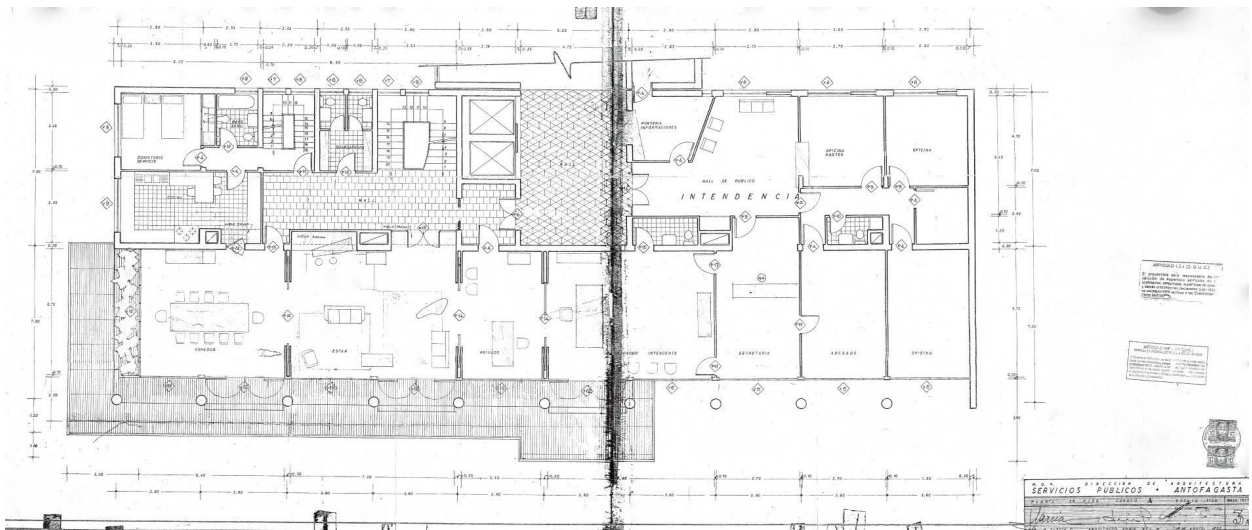
# 18 REPARTICIONES FUNCIONARAN EN EL EDIFICIO DE SERVICIOS PUBLICOS





**Figure 7.** Prat Street facade, designed by Edwin Weil for the Public Services and Regional Government Building of Antofagasta, 1957. Source: Regional Technical Office of the Council of National Monuments of Antofagasta (2020).

**Figure 8.** Facade San Martin Street, 1957. Source: Regional Technical Office of the Council of National Monuments of Antofagasta (2020).



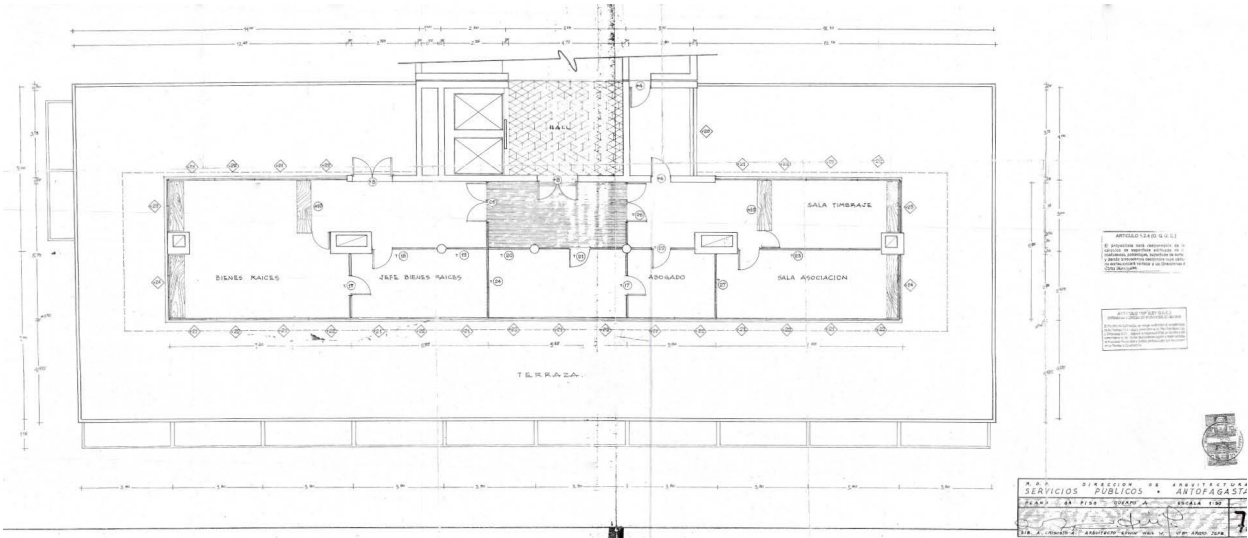
April 1958 (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1), alongside the foundation of other buildings in the city that were also exponents of the Modern Movement (Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11).

Regarding the design published in the newspaper (Figure 6), we can note that it is a watercolor painting that represents the original design ideal, which was not fully materialized due to modifications in the institutional programs during the project's execution, as well as budgetary pressures and technical constraints that necessitated adjustments to the design. When comparing this proposal with the building finally built, it is evident, for example, that the original plan included a projecting balcony on the second floor, designed for protocol acts of the Regional Government. In the final project, this balcony was simplified and replaced by a smaller canopy that protects the main access, which implied the loss of its ceremonial and symbolic character.

**Figure 9.** Second floor of the Public Services and Regional Government Building of Antofagasta, 1957. Source: Regional Technical Office of the Council of National Monuments of Antofagasta (2020).

**Figure 10.** First floor of the Public Services and Regional Government Building of Antofagasta, 1957. Source: Regional Technical Office of the Council of National Monuments of Antofagasta (2020).





**Figure 11.** Terrace of the Public Services and Regional Government Building of Antofagasta, 1957. Source: Regional Technical Office of the Council of National Monuments of Antofagasta (2020).

The watercolor shows a more accentuated modulation of the facade’s compositional rhythm through a structural grid, balconies, and latticework, elements that imprint dynamism and depth. In contrast, the constructed building favored a more regular composition, with windows arranged in a uniform rhythm, dispensing with protruding balconies or shading devices such as latticework.

The original proposal clearly framed the main access under the balcony, which generated a transition space covered with a strong symbolic load. On the other hand, the entrance lacks an obvious architectural hierarchy in the executed building, significantly reducing the institutional gesture proposed in the initial design.

## DEVELOPMENT

### CONSTRUCTION OF THE PUBLIC SERVICES AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT BUILDING (1956-1963)

At the 9<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the Senate of the Republic, held on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1956, the report of the Public Works Commission was read, which recommended the construction of the Municipal building and other public offices (Senate, 1956). The recommendation was based on the resources provided to the Ministry of Public Works through Law No. 11,828. It should be noted that this law established a **new deal** for large-scale copper mining. Article 33 provided for the existence of a special account at the Central Bank of Chile in which 9% of the taxes destined for the Ministry of Public Works were deposited.

According to the minutes: “[...] It is therefore urgent to erect a new building to house the various public offices that are currently in unsuitable premises” (Senate, 1956, p.435). However, there was a delay in the start of the works, which encouraged the written press to urge that the project be expedited. Hence, uneasiness generated a cover page for the

El Mercurio de Antofagasta newspaper (February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1958), exhibiting a noticeable contrast between the two corners in front of Colón Square.

The newspaper noted:

“The fire that created this new problem occurred early on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1955. Since then, two and a half years have passed, and many efforts have been made to allocate the funds. However, nothing has been done, except for the usual promises (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1).

The next day, the same newspaper published the final project, drawn up by the architect Edwin Weil, who had been working in the Architecture Directorate of the Ministry of Public Works since 1947.

It should be noted that Weil was trained at the University of Chile’s School of Architecture, where he began his teaching career in 1949, combining his academic work with an outstanding professional career in the public sphere. Among his most notable works are the La Serena Regional Government Building (1950) and the reconstruction of Valdivia following the devastating 1960 earthquake. In addition, he played a leading role in expanding stadiums for the 1962 World Cup and was the author of important buildings such as the Central Bank of Puerto Montt and the Civic Center of Punta Arenas. His work was recognized in multiple public competitions and awards, which consolidated his prestige within the field of state architecture. He served as Director of Architecture between 1962 and 1971, and again in 1977 (College of Architects of Chile, 2020, pp. 136-147)

Thanks to his proposal, the building planned in Antofagasta would allow 18 public divisions to be combined into a single architectural ensemble. This ensemble would integrate institutional functionality and spatial rationality under a modern approach to urban space management. This vision responded to the logic of administrative centralization typical of public infrastructure policies promoted in Chile during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Table 1).

**Table 1:** List of the divisions considered in the Public Services and Regional Government building projection. Source: Preparation by the author based on El Mercurio de Antofagasta, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p.1.

Public Services	
Department of Livestock and Animal Health	Zonal Direction of Urban Paving
Management of Railway Works	Directorate-General of Internal Revenue
Recruitment Office	Provincial Delegation of Supplies and Prices
Fishing and Hunting Inspection	Provincial Labor Inspectorate
Notary Public of the Treasury	IDs and Passports
Labor Court	Civil Registry
Ropero del Pueblo (The People's Wardrobe)	Delegation of Electric and Gas Services
Provincial Treasury	Judicial Tax Collection Service
National Foreign Trade Council	Provincial Legal Division

According to the Provincial Architect, Miguel Zuvic, the building would have an “A” body facing Prat Street and a “B” body perpendicular to the first and overlooking San Martín Street. Body “A” would consist of 6 floors and terraces, where the Council Office would be located and would occupy the entire second floor. The “B” body would consist of 5 floors and an underground level.

The rough work considered slabs of mezzanines, perimeter walls, pillars, resistant internal walls, elevator shafts, stairs, and ventilation shafts for the different offices’ bathrooms. Each office was projected in isolation, through light and soundproof glass partitions. The foundations would require 351 cubic meters of debris extraction, with a calculated volume of 3,580 m<sup>3</sup>. In brick masonry works, 2,360 m<sup>3</sup> would be used, while in reinforced concrete works, 2,143 m<sup>3</sup> would be used. Additionally, 198,385 kilograms of iron would be used, with an estimated investment of 56 million pesos (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1).

The offices were designed to be joined through sliding doors, “transforming into spacious halls for occasional gatherings. The floor destined for the Governor’s residence will be spacious and have an apartment for guests” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1).

The company awarded the works was the firm Domingo Matte, with an official budget of \$141,639,501 pesos (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1). The same newspaper indicated in May 1958:

“198 tons of iron will be used in the rough work [...] metal molds will be used in the construction of walls, which will avoid stucco and will make the work run more quickly and with the consequent savings” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1).

On the details of the building, where 70 workers worked, it was pointed out that:

“[...] it will have modern architectural lines and will have comfortable offices with all services for all the public offices that are scattered, thereby facilitating a better service to the Antofagastinos, who will be able to carry out their errands more quickly” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1).

In December 1958, the rise of six columns of the so-called “A” body was noted. The local newspaper mentioned:

“During our visit to the works, we verified that the excavations of both bodies are about to be completed. The excavations of the ‘A’ have 70% of their foundations. Practically, the work is not appreciated because it has been carried out underground, but it is of great importance” (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1).

Progress was also being made in constructing reinforced walls on the first floor of the "A" body and the concrete columns of Prat Street, which would give shape to a covered entrance. This would allow the sidewalk to extend into the building, resulting in a 10-meter-wide sidewalk in front of the main entrance (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, December 11th, 1958, p. 1).

In September 1959, it was commented that:

"[...] we were struck in the "B" body by a large-scale underground level, 450 square meters for the parking of state vehicles and a storage area. It is estimated that this level will be the largest in a building in Antofagasta. The great hall for work and public attention of the future Treasury is equally impressive [...]" (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, September 17th, 1959, p.1).

In April 1960, the building had already acquired a definitive form: "A new construction of modern architectural lines with sufficient offices to contain almost all the State services [...] that will contribute to forming a true civic neighborhood in Antofagasta" (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, April 23rd, 1960, p. 1).

On August 6th, 1963, the temporary perimeter fence installed while the Municipal Building was being built was removed. "The new building, with elegant architectural lines, has been admired in all its perspectives by the public, especially on its ground floor, which occupies the closure" (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, August 7th, 1963, p. 1).

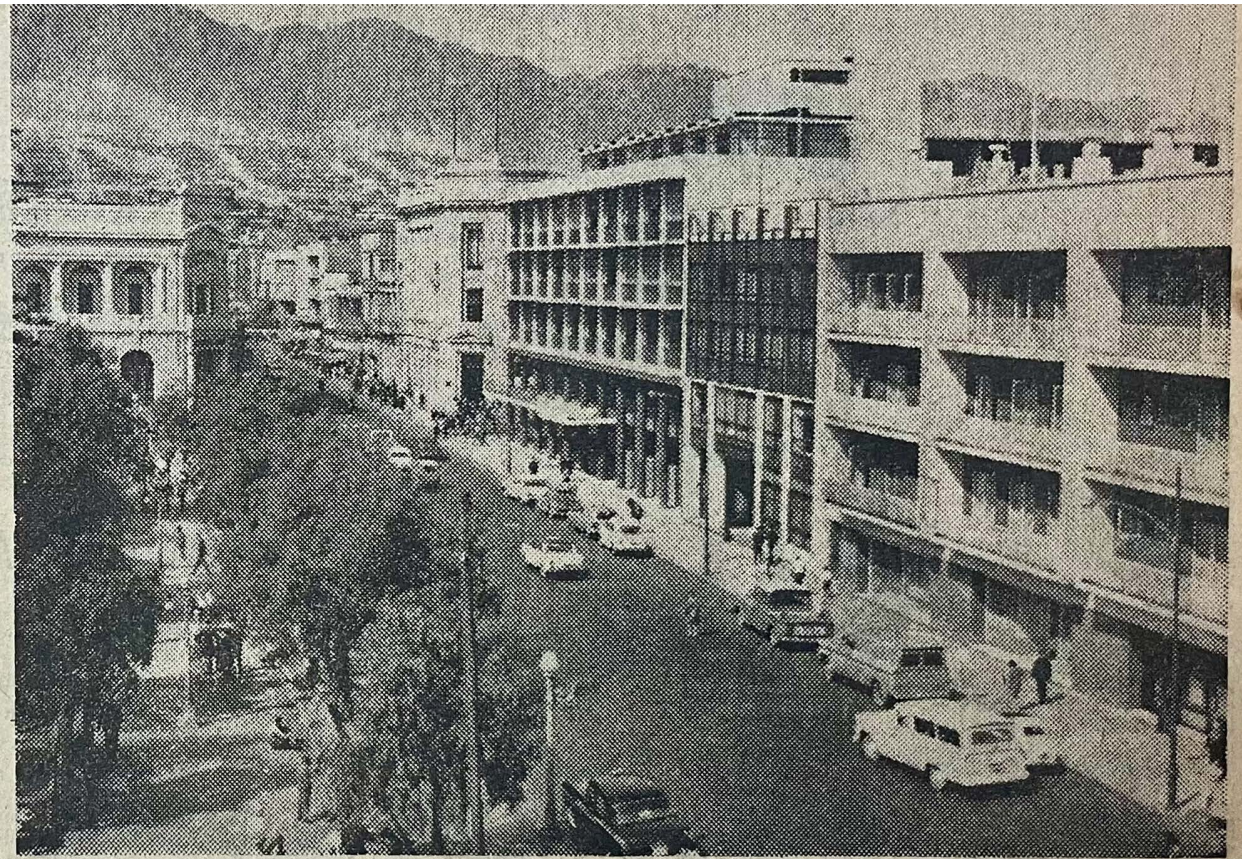
The new Municipal Building was considered an urban development advance for the center of Antofagasta, which improved the surroundings of Colón Square and, above all, was important for Public Services "that had been operating in precarious material conditions, in narrow and unhygienic premises" (El Mercurio de Antofagasta, November 3rd, 1963, p. 1).

The building was inaugurated on Saturday, November 16th, 1963, at 11:00 am. Several authorities attended the event, including three undersecretaries (Interior, Public Works, and Agriculture), the Governor of Coquimbo, and other prominent political figures, such as deputies and a senator. Representatives of the Police, agricultural and municipal advisers, and the director of a publishing house also attended. The presence of the architect Edwin Weil, author of the building project, stood out, as reported by El Mercurio de Antofagasta (November 16th, 1963).

Finally, we can identify the three intendants involved in managing the construction process: Juan Lacassie, Justo Pastor Martín, and Néstor Del Fierro.

The described process demonstrates the second hypothesis, in that the reconstruction of the building after the fire of 1955 is part of a state strategy to strengthen regional institutionality, which incorporates





**BARRIO CIVICO DE ANTOFAGASTA.**— Con la próxima  
habilitación del  
edificio de los servicios públicos quedará completada lo  
que podría llamarse la segunda etapa de la construcción  
del Barrio Cívico de Antofagasta. La cuadra de calle Prat,  
entre Washington y San Martín, tiene ahora tres edificios  
de sobrias líneas que corresponden, como muestra el gra-  
bado, al de la Caja Nacional de EE.PP. y Periodistas, al

del Banco de Chile y al de los servicios públicos. La de  
Sucre, entre las mismas calles y que también circunda la  
Plaza Colón, corresponde al imponente edificio de la Caja  
de Empleados Particulares. Otra de las construcciones que  
contribuirá al progreso es la Casa Consistorial y Teatro  
Municipal, en la esquina nororiente de Sucre y San Martín,  
cristalizando un anhelo del ex Alcalde Osvaldo Mendoza:  
el hacer de ese lugar el Barrio Cívico de Antofagasta

**Figure 12.** News story published  
in El Mercurio de Antofagasta,  
August 13th, 1963. Source:  
Author's files.

**Figure 13.** News story published  
in El Mercurio de Antofagasta,  
November 3rd, 1963. Source:  
Author's files.







modern architectural criteria that responded both to functional needs, expressed through the agglutination of public services, and to a discourse of modernity and progress, a process inscribed in the search for greater social legitimacy “as an insurer of the principles of the welfare State for the population” (Torrent, 2013, p.15), in the most populous town of the Atacama Desert, with 87,860 inhabitants in 1960 (Statistics and Census Directorate, 1964), (Figure 12, Figure 13, and Figure 14).

**Figure 14.** Public Services and Regional Government Building. Source: Photographic archive of the Directorate of Architecture (1975).

## THE VALUE OF MODERN ATTRIBUTES IN THE INSTITUTIONAL BUILDING

Undoubtedly, the Regional Government building can be defined as a clear exponent of the architecture of the Modern Movement. That attribute provides an important patrimonial consideration in the history of the architecture developed on the coast of the Atacama Desert during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The key principles and characteristics are applied in the building such as functionality, simplicity and minimalism, innovative materials at the time, geometric abstraction, horizontality, openness and connection with the environment, fluid spaces and no ornamentation, in a building that opted for a Cubist appearance, with a pure and horizontal volumetry of the design with straight lines. These symmetrical and straightforward geometric volumes reinforce its sober character.

As for the facade, we can indicate that an orderly and functional grid is appreciated through a repetitive design of windows and structures. It has 10 large side windows facing San Martín Street. Of the 50 windows

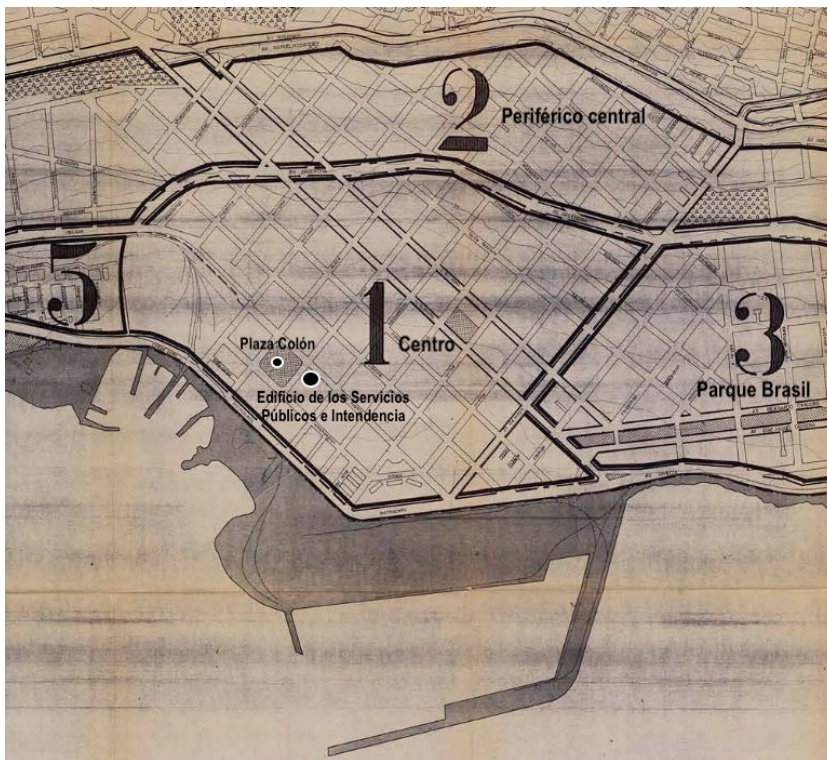
on its facade, 40 project uniformly from the third floor. The frame structure separates the windows and generates a geometric pattern. Large windows reduce the need for artificial lighting, in addition to framing the landscape with width, which facilitates the projection of the interior space. Thus, the window in modern architecture no longer only justifies a type of light, “but it shows that light and landscape simultaneously respond to each other” (Araya De Pablo, 2023, p.104).

Pilotis support the projection of the building. Thus, the ground floor is open and supported by columns, which gives the impression of a floating structure. The purpose of the pilotis is to separate the structure from the natural arrangement of geography. The land was respected in its originality, the building being the materiality that adapts. That section of the building was left free, allowing access and reinforcing the route through the building by maintaining a rational and functional relationship with the environment.

The design of the first open floor not only allows releasing the land and guaranteeing accessibility, but also configures a spatial transition between the urban and the institutional sphere, which operates as an articulating space of the building with its immediate surroundings — the city and Colón Square — through a covered gallery of continuous pedestrian circulation. This layout, in addition to responding to a logic of constructive efficiency, integrates bioclimatic criteria that favor cross-ventilation, passive thermal control and natural lighting, characteristics typical of an architecture that begins to consider the environmental conditions of the coastal desert as part of its design (Olgyay et al., 2015; Araya De Pablo, 2023). In this sense, the building not only symbolizes a modern administrative apparatus, but also an architectural response conscious of its climatic and cultural location.

In the context of the Atacama Desert, incorporating bioclimatic principles into modern architecture not only responded to a logic of thermal efficiency but also meant an intelligent adaptation to the extreme environment and an appreciation of local conditions as design inputs. Although rationalist architecture promoted a universalist formal language, in northern Chile, a situated and contextualized reinterpretation was articulated that integrated passive air conditioning strategies—such as solar orientation, cross ventilation, or the use of pilotis to avoid direct thermal contact with the ground—as constituent elements of modern design (Aravena & Lacobelli, 2016).

In this sense, the case studied is inserted into a narrative of state modernization. It represents an early trial of bioclimatic architecture in the institutional field, where it was sought to reconcile functional rationality with the use of the desert climate to reduce dependence on artificial air conditioning systems. As stated by Olgyay et al. (2015), bioclimatic architecture should not be understood as a marginal



**Figure 15.** Fragment of the Regulatory Plan of Antofagasta of 1980, prepared by I. González, J. Matas & H. Molina. The hierarchy of the main sectors of the city is appreciated. Zone 1 - Downtown: This is the foundational and administrative heart of the city, where urban landmarks of high symbolic and institutional significance are located, such as Colón Square and the Public Services and Regional Government Building, which articulate the regional civic center. This area concentrates roles in religious buildings and commerce, government, services, and urban sociability, operating as a space representing state power and sociological centrality. Source: Author's modification based on the file of the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism, Urban Development Division, Regional Ministerial Secretariat of Antofagasta, 1980.

technique, but as an essential way of reconciling modern design with the ecological conditions of the place.

In summary, it can be indicated that superfluous elements are not appreciated. Using industrial materials, such as steel, concrete, and glass, created a resistant, efficient, and avant-garde structure. However, it also granted an aesthetic of transparency as a metaphor for clarity in State management.

Finally, its aesthetics respond to the premise that beauty lies in the structure and function itself. This rejects traditional ornamentation and consolidates the building as an example of architectural rationalism in the region. Namely, it implied a rejection of historicism by constructing a spatial organizational device for administrative efficiency and institutional control (Frampton, 2020).

Based on this, the third hypothesis is proven, in terms of the fact that the location and the modern design, which include a bioclimatic commitment, have played a key role in the consolidation of the civic center of Antofagasta, by configuring a space of representation of the political and administrative power in the region focused on rationality and functionalism (Figure 15). As Torrent (2013) states, modernity brought with it the conditions of a new state of the social situation, "they promote new ways of life made possible by technical, economic and material development" (p.10).



## CONCLUSIONS

The Regional Government Building of Antofagasta represents an architectural and urban landmark reflecting the evolution of Chile's state and urban policies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout its history, from its first buildings to the definitive construction of the current building in 1963, the building has witnessed changes in architectural and administrative paradigms, from the eclectic Gallic architecture to adopting the rationalist principles of the Modern Movement.

After the 1955 fire, the reconstruction of the Regional Government building was part of a government modernization strategy that sought to improve the state infrastructure and consolidate the institutional presence in the north of the country. Thanks to the resources from the New Deal Law to the large-scale copper mining promoted during the second administration of Carlos Ibáñez del Campo, the materialization of a functional, efficient, and representative building of progress was guaranteed.

The design projected by Edwin Weil Wohlke and the implementation of modernist criteria allowed the creation of a building that integrates multiple public services in a single space, optimizing administration and facilitating citizen access. Its structure, based on functionality, transparency, and connection with the environment, reinforced its identity as a regional key administrative node.

In short, Antofagasta's Regional Government building is a clear example of how architecture and urbanism can act as material expressions of the state's modernization. Its design and construction not only responded to functional and operational needs, but also configured a symbol of development and modernity.

Thus, the building is a tangible testimony of the impact of state policies on the transformation of urban space and the consolidation of the regional architectural heritage.

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