



# Maine News

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## Brazil's Modern Architecture

by Carol A. Wilson, FAIA

"I am not attracted to straight angles or to the straight line, hard and inflexible, created by man. I am attracted to free-flowing, sensual curves. The curves that I find in the mountains of my country, in the sinuousness of its rivers, in the waves of the ocean and on the body of the beloved woman. Curves make up the entire Universe, the curved Universe of Einstein."

—*The Curves of Time: the memoirs of Oscar Niemeyer*

When I was in architecture school in the 1970s, little mention was made of Oscar Niemeyer or the three decades of groundbreaking work that took place in Brazil from 1930-1960. Niemeyer was not completely unknown yet writers like Charles Jenks in his 1973 book *Modern Movements in Architecture*, barely mentioned him. Thirty years later, I discovered a whole new world of architecture, not only the work of Oscar Niemeyer Soares Filho who today at 99, lives in Rio, but also the work of Lina Bo Bardi, Lucio Costa, João Vilanova Artigas, Correra Lima, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Bernard Rudofsky and Gregori Warchavchik. Of the buildings these architects left behind, most are still intact and accessible. I was surprised by how many we managed to see in a brief time while visiting São Paulo, Brasília and Rio de Janeiro (I was accompanied by my niece who arrived from Ecuador where she had been installing seismic monitoring on Tungurahua volcano when it erupted).

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1. Congresso Nacional, Oscar Niemeyer 1958  
2. Catedral Metropolitana, Niemeyer 1958-67  
3. Os Candangos by Bruno Giorgi (The Workers, a tribute to the workers who built Brasília) 1960  
4. Casa das Canoas, Niemeyer 1953  
5. Brasília, Master Plan, Lucio Costa 1957  
Photos courtesy of Carol A. Wilson, FAIA.

Tackling the scale of São Paulo was an adventure. Prepared with a long list of buildings to visit, I was afraid that the actual size of the city and difficulty of getting around would hinder the extent of our itinerary. Not so. The city was easy to understand, getting around simply demanded fitness. Subway stops were not blocks, but miles apart, often a 45-minute walk between. I describe São Paulo as Mid-town Manhattan replicated many times; the city center is often referred to as São Paulo's concrete jungle.

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In 1946 the Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi and her husband, the critic and art historian Pietro Maria Bardi, fled fascist Italy to Rio de Janeiro and then to São Paulo. In 1957 she designed the Museu de Arte São Paulo. The building is as modern today as it was upon completion in 1969. For São Paulo, a city of 18 million and the fourth largest city in the world, the two small principal art museums are both in need of attention, restoration and upgrading. We visited the Pinacoteca do Estado, skillfully renovated in 1998 by Pritzker Prize winner, Paulo Mendes da Rocha.

Brasília is a city full of magnificent architecture. The only limitation of the competition for the new city to be built in the internal semi-arid region of Brazil was that it accommodate 500,000 people. The winning competition scheme by Lucio Costa was inaugurated as the capital of Brazil in 1960. The city was designed according to the urban planning principles of the Congrès International d'Architecture Modern (CIAM). The absolute priority in Costa's plan was the automobile. Sidewalks, pedestrians and streets have been abolished in favor of freeways that cross over and under eliminating the need for stopping. As a pedestrian (as are many Brazilian citizens as well as visitors), there is no proper way to cross a freeway safely. The sidewalks are simply packed red earth.

Visiting Brasília was the second test of fitness. The city is spread out, designed in "super squares," zoning where each quadrant contains only one function or type of building. Finding oneself in the Ministries quadrant at 1:00PM in the afternoon with no restaurants was discouraging. Inquiring at the desk of the Ministry of Finance, we were given badges and directed to the neighboring Ministry where there was a cafeteria for the government employees. We had our best meal in Brazil, compliments of the Brazilian government.

Niemeyer's best buildings are in Brasília: Palácio Itamaraty with landscaping by Roberto Burle Marx, Congresso Nacional, Praça dos Três Poderes, the Cathedral Metropolitana and the Memorial to Juscelino Kubitschek.

Our last stop before returning to São Paulo was Rio de Janeiro. We stayed on Copacabana Beach at the Portinari Design Hotel where each floor has been designed by a different well-known Brazilian architect or interior designer. The Pan American games were under way, and the beach was occupied by volleyball teams, tents and nighttime concerts.

Oscar Niemeyer's house, Casa das Canoas, sits on a steep hillside above the beaches south of Rio. Fundação Oscar Niemeyer now owns the house, and it can be visited by appointment. Niemeyer's downstairs office contains models of many of his built and un-built projects. While visiting the house, we met the Italian architects from Genova, Enrico Pinna and Mariri Viardo, specialists in the conservation and preservation of modern buildings.

Along with Pinna and Viardo, we visited the Banco Boavista in downtown Rio (Niemeyer 1946), and then talked our way onto the roof of the famous Ministry of Education and Health Building, designed by the Brazilian architects, Oscar Niemeyer, Lucio Costa, Affonso Reidy, Jorge Moreira, Carlos Leão and Ernani Vasconcelos with LeCorbusier consulting. (LeCorbusier made two trips to Brazil, the first in June 1935 to work on the MEH Building.) The MEH Building was the first application worldwide of the curtain wall. It has two roof top gardens de-

signed by Roberto Burle Marx. In 1943 it was featured in the exhibition "Brazil Builds" at the Museum of Modern Art and celebrated by the *New York Times*.

When the country decided to build its new capital city, LeCorbusier considered that it would be his project, but by then the Brazilians had discovered their own talent for modern architecture, modified to their terrain and climate. Lucio Costa was awarded the commission and Oscar Niemeyer designed many of Brasília's buildings. According to Lucio Costa, "LeCorbusier's greatest legacy was Niemeyer himself."

#### Notes:

Brazilian modern architecture is inseparable from the twentieth century history of the country. Oscar Niemeyer, unable to work under the military dictatorship of 1964, left the country in 1967 for Paris and remained there, working in Europe, until 1979.

In preparation for the trip, I met Kay Stevens-Rosa, AIA, and Augusto Rosa (A4 Architects in Bar Harbor). Augusto is from Porto Alegre, the capital of the southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul. Kay and Augusto have their own little get-away on Gerugem Beach near Florianapolis. They gave me a briefing and a "Boa Viagem a Brazil."

Amanda Hyde Wilson and Gavin Engler in my office helped with pre-travel research, Amanda researching Lina Bo Bardi's work and Gavin studying the Ministry of Education and Health. Both made lunchtime presentations to our office.

São Paulo, renowned for traffic congestion, now operates the world's most complex bus system as a way of tackling megacity megatraffic problems, 26,391 busses.

The favelas of Rio de Janeiro deserve their own story. Brazil as a country has the most people living in poverty just below China and India, yet Rio and São Paulo are two of the 10 wealthiest cities in the world.

The United States limited visas to Brazilians to 20 visas per consulate per day. Brazil, in turn, has limited applications for visas to 20 per day. Giving up one's passport and waiting for a visa was almost as stressful as waiting for an American passport.

#### Further Reading:

- Lauro Cavalcanti, *When Brazil Was Modern*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2003.
- Elizabeth Andreoli and Adrian Forty, *Brazil's Modern Architecture*, Phaidon Press Limited, 2004.
- Valerie Fraser, *Building the New World: Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America 1930-1960*, Verso pub., 2000.
- Oscar Niemeyer, *The Curves of Time: The Memoirs of Oscar Niemeyer*, Phaidon Press Limited, 2000.
- David Underwood, *Oscar Niemeyer and Brazilian Free-Form Modernism*, George Braziller, Inc. pub., 2004. ■