City, Culture and Society 7 (2016) 169–185

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

City, Culture and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ccs

An environmental and social approach in the modern architecture of Brazil: The work of Lina Bo Bardi

Steffen Lehmann

The University of Portsmouth, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 6 August 2015
Received in revised form
30 November 2015
Accepted 18 January 2016
Available online 28 January 2016

Keywords:
Brazilian modernism
Identity
Socially-engaged architecture
Urban renewal
Adaptive re-use
Cultural heritage
Critical and dynamic regionalism

ABSTRACT

The architecture of Brazil, which has recently been in the focus with major events (World Cup and Olympics) holds a particular place in Latin America's architecture and is known for its bold modernism. One of the most remarkable Brazilian architects in the 20th Century was Italian émigré Lina Bo Bardi (born Rome 1914-died São Paulo 1992).

This article first looks at the regional diversity in modern Brazilian architecture and then at the ways in which Bo Bardi's sustainable and socially-conscious design is informed by regionalism. Regions are defined through their local materials, tectonics and particular typologies, and the architectural character defining regional spaces, in turn, shapes, retains and enhances social identity. It is timely to reassess the diverse work of Bo Bardi within Latin-America's modernism. Arriving in Brazil in 1946, Bo Bardi was, as well as an architect, a furniture designer, urbanist, political activist, writer and curator.

Previous studies have sought to identify the architects and theorists involved in the making of the modern cultural identity of Brazil, and the mechanisms that created such identity, from Lucio Costa to Oscar Niemeyer. Bo Bardi's work marks the beginning of sustainable design within Brazilian modern architecture; especially the adaptive re-use projects in Salvador, Bahia, identify the beginning of a new approach to heritage and urban renewal.

Therefore, in this article I ask: what exactly is the contribution and role of the work of Bo Bardi in Brazilian modernism? And: discussing regional identity in the Brazilian context, how is such local character expressed?

1. Introduction

The generally high quality of modern architecture in Latin America in the 1940s, in countries like Brazil and Mexico, but also for instance in Venezuela, Uruguay and Chile, is striking. These works of remarkable vitality deserve the same acknowledgement as the works completed during the same period in the US or Europe (Hitchcock, 1955). During the last century, Brazilian cities were built with a generous emphasis on quality public space and lush parks and gardens. Reyner Banham pointed out that Brazil was the first country to create a '*national* style of modern architecture' (1962, p. 36). Brazil is a vast country with a variety of regions (as different as tropical Bahia in the northeast to the dry Matto Grosso in the centre), all with different climatic zones and histories of settlement. In the warm climate, architecture doesn't need much insulation or complicated heating enclosures – one can live with nature for most of the year. Consequently, modern architecture in Brazil has adapted many facets, from its first emergence in the postcolonial – indigenous and Portuguese – context around 1930 with the pivotal, heroic works of Lucio Costa (1902–1998), Gregori Warchavchik (1896–1972) and Rino Levi (1901–1965) – often called "the first generation of modern Brazilian architects" (Lehmann, 1998; 2004), still occupied with the construction of a particular national 'Brazilian style' - and the fascinating, flamboyant buildings by Affonso Eduardo Reidy (1909–1964) and Oscar Niemeyer (1907–2012) in Rio de Janeiro, to the highly individual works of Lina Bo Bardi and João Vilanova Artigas (1915–1985) in São Paulo and Salvador. Warchavchik's own small house in São Paulo (1928) is often described as the beginning of modern architecture in Brazil, while the end of classical modernism is seen with the completion of the new capital Brasilia in 1960.

Two early important surveys of Brazilian architecture were written and published outside the country by the Museum of Modern Art in New York: in 1943, Philip L. Goodwin's *Brazil Builds*

E-mail address: Steffen.Lehmann.Cities@gmail.com.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2016.01.001

(the first exhibition and book that introduced Brazilian architecture to the world, as a regionalist movement) and, twelve years later, Henry–Russell Hitchcock's *Latin American Architecture since 1945*.[1] The publication of *Brazil Builds* was a particularly crucial moment, setting the benchmark for criticism of Brazilian architecture for many years to come (Artigas, 1997; Deckker, 2001). In fact, it took a long time for the first publication written by a Brazilian to come into being: until 1956, when Henrique Mindlin's *Modern Architecture in Brazil* finally appeared. However, to catch up with international trends, it is understandable that, at a certain point, the Brazilian people began to feel the need to reflect on their national traditions and identity, and reassess what they might contribute to an international discourse. Figs. 1–18.

2. The blossoming of Brazilian architecture

The history of architectural modernism in Brazil is one of exchanges, transfers and crossovers with the developed world. After its arrival in the 1930s, modernism quickly flourished in Brazil, and this led to its climax in the construction of Brasilia, the new capital that was – despite being so far away from Europe – built in the hinterland strictly to the urban zoning principles as advocated by the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) and the 1933 Athens Charter. The reasons for such an intensive and rapid blossoming of modern architecture in Brazil were threefold: firstly, the good economic conditions accompanied by a significant building boom (new university campuses, for instance, were a result of this boom); secondly, the extreme growth in population and urban development, causing major social transformations (in the twentieth century Brazil's population grew from 17 to 170 million, fuelled partly by high levels of immigration, requiring the construction of large public buildings); and, finally, the clear wish to overcome colonialism and build in a modern, contemporary style. Combined, these factors fostered a new, optimistic identity for the future of the country – which was also supported by politics, such as Getulio Vargas' politics of the *Estado Novo* (new state) – and created a climate of renewal and optimism that helped vanquish the colonial past, the Portuguese baroque and the previously dominant French style of the nineteenth century (Acayaba & Ficher, 1982; Cavalcanti, 2003; Kamita, 2000).

2.1. The shift from Rio de Janeiro to São Paulo

The city of Rio de Janeiro was the capital of the 'Old Republic' (which lasted from 1889 to 1930), whereas São Paulo was – from the 1950s on – clearly identified as the new financial, industrial and cosmopolitan centre of the country, despite never being its capital city (Evenson, 1973). The Arts Biennial for instance (starting in 1951) put São Paulo at the forefront of cultural activities. Most previous studies have concentrated on the era that can now be called 'the golden years of Brazilian architecture' (which ended around 1955), focusing mainly on the monumental Modernismo Carioca developments in Rio, Belo Horizonte and Brasilia. This much-published 'free-form modernism' of Reidy and Niemeyer is usually identified as a 'uniquely Brazilian' architectural language (Andreoli and Forty, 2004; Costa, 1995; Niemeyer, 2000; Papadaki, 1950;). In addition to that, there were also other significant differences between the systems of two cities: for example, architectural education in São Paulo included major elements of engineering, and *engenheiro-arquitecto* (architect-engineer) was the title given at the Polytechnica in São Paulo, as opposed to the artistic training at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes (ENBA) in Rio. This is the reason why Paulista School (Escola Paulista) modernism

Fig. 1. The Portuguese Baroque architecture of Minas Gerais, such as in Ouro Preto, evolved in the early eighteenth century as a consequence of the gold rush and Brazil's period under Portuguese colonial rule. (Images: S. Lehmann, 2008).

[1] Under Alfred Barr, Philip Johnson and Sigfried Giedion the MOMA defended the International Style and launched anti-regionalist campaigns. Much later, around 1955, MOMA suddenly became a supporter of regionalistic interests, thanks to Lewis Mumford and Bernard Rudofsky.