

# Gio Ponti's Latin [American] Encounters: A Reading from the Archives

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The design languages and forms of knowledge used by architects and other designers indicate that they not only operate 'within the same domains of knowledge and action', but also share similar historical contexts. Latin American modern architecture and design histories constitute an account of cultural exchanges between architectural and design practitioners working on a trans-national and multidisciplinary basis. Reviewing these practices today may help break the tendency of historical accounts to focus on a 'diffusionist model' and reinforce the critical acknowledgement of the modern legacy in Latin America. The work of architect and designer Gio Ponti is an example of this. During the 1950s Ponti travelled to many countries and built one of his masterpieces, Villa Planchart, in Caracas. Although much has been published about Ponti's Venezuelan project, his letters reveal other lesser known but significant encounters with Latin American culture. Using his *Domus* editorials and readings from his correspondence as guidelines, complemented by articles, seminal books, and projects, this article will explore, from a more plural point of view, how Ponti's experiences and relationships developed in Latin America, especially those lesser known relationships in Brazil, helped shape some of his design processes and conceptualizations.

**Keywords:** Gio Ponti—Latin America—Brazil—architecture—modernism—historicism—design history

## Introduction

The design languages and forms of knowledge used by architects and designers indicate that they not only operate 'within the same domains of knowledge and action', but also share similar historical contexts.<sup>1</sup> A common concern among design and architectural historians, especially from the 1980s onwards, has been the implications of global history approaches, especially those based on a 'centre-periphery' model of knowledge diffusion, mostly Eurocentric and North American towards 'non-Western' contexts.<sup>2</sup> Latin American modern architecture and design histories constitute an account of exchanges between continents as 'many of the modernist designers operated in a trans-European, trans-Atlantic or international context over the course of their careers', some of them developing multidisciplinary practices combining art, architecture, and design.<sup>3</sup> Reviewing these practices today may help break the tendency of historical accounts to focus on a 'diffusionist model,' and reinforce the critical acknowledgement of the modern legacy in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, the disciplines of design and architecture can inform one other where points of view and shared bibliographies overlap. Representing a growing interest over the past twenty years, post-colonial theories applied to architecture [and design] have come to challenge the idea of the Eurocentric canon, acting as a 'new way of understanding "non-Western" contexts'.<sup>5</sup> According to Elisabetta Andreoli and Adrian Forty, 'although post-colonial discourse has not been very favoured in Latin America,' it acts as a reminder that 'cultural exchanges are never simply unidirectional—as much as

the colonizer tries to resist and refute this idea, he is as affected by the cultural shock just as the colonized is'.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, Patricio del Real and Helen Gyger's recent collection of accounts of Latin American modern architecture offered a reading of 'significant figures of modernist architecture in non-canonical contexts, thereby complicating our understanding of their histories'.<sup>7</sup> Amongst them, Gaia Piccarolo's review of the research conducted in the 1950s by the Brazilian modernist architect and theorist Lucio Costa on the colonial heritage in Portugal, questioned 'the assumed unidirectionality of influence between a metropolitan centre and colonial periphery'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, while Andreoli and Forty mentioned that a frequent explanation for the change that occurred between 1920s and 1930s in Le Corbusier's work has been his 'exposition of the Brazilian context', Carlos Eduardo Dias Comas declared that the country's influence on Le Corbusier's work and his reaction to it 'remains unexplored'.<sup>9</sup> These reflections create an opportunity to re-examine certain accounts on modernists masters that were not sufficiently explored before and may benefit from further revision, like that of Gio Ponti's Latin American dialogues. Therefore, this article will explore how Ponti's experiences and relationships developed in Latin America—and especially those lesser-known relationships with Brazil, helped shape some of his design processes and conceptualizations.

## Ponti's prelude

'A designer in the total sense of the word, educated within a global format of experience,' as mentioned by Lucia Miodini, Ponti graduated in architecture in 1921 and started his professional career in 1923, renewing the production of the Richard Ginori ceramics factory.<sup>10</sup> Embracing the various scales in the fields of architecture, design and applied arts, he also taught, worked in journalism and stage design, and was involved in the Triennale di Milano exhibitions. Founder and editor of *Domus* and *Stile* magazines, Ponti contributed to many publications, promoting not only his work but the work of others. By the 1950s, Ponti had already gathered a diverse network of contacts, all registered in his archival correspondence. Considered by Andrea Branzi as 'the first Italian architect of the twentieth century known and operating at an international level',<sup>11</sup> during those years he was at the height of his career and travelled to many countries, including North and South America, as well as Europe and the Middle East. Although he designed what is considered to be one of his masterpieces in Caracas, his trips to Brazil and Mexico marked his polymorphic career.

Ponti's 'architectural dialogues' are traced here using his editorial work in *Domus* complemented by unpublished readings from his correspondence, seminal books, articles, and projects. The reading of *Domus* magazine, besides helping to unveil Ponti's impressions of and interests on the continent, reinforces the current use of specialized magazines in architectural research.<sup>12</sup> Access to the Gio Ponti Archives and correspondence also helped to unravel the architect's interests and relationships in Latin America. As in the *Domus* archives, names of important personalities amongst Latin American expatriates and nationals, locations and projects were used as keywords in the search engines; later, further access was granted to the selected material.

## Letters from across the ocean

Gio Ponti's relations with Latin America can be traced from the late 1930s to his final years; to better understand these exchanges, a brief review of his correspondence will be given here, regarding its implications and influences.

By 1952, Ponti was already in contact with Italian expatriate architects and acquaintances in Latin America, amongst them, Italian architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi—who had worked for Ponti in Milan, and her husband, journalist and art critic Pietro Maria Bardi, a close friend and collaborator. Living in São Paulo since 1946, they were fundamental in Ponti's continued contact with the country. Their work—representative of the integration of arts, design and architecture—would help 'leverage the modernization process' in Brazil.<sup>13</sup> In January 1952, Bardi exchanged letters with Ponti about an (unrealized) Italian crafts exhibition in São Paulo, to be sponsored by *Domus* at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP).<sup>14</sup> It was, though, the offer of a professorial position that brought Ponti to Brazil in the 1950s. In a letter dated May 1952, Bruno Simões Magro, a Brazilian architect and professor at the recently established School of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo (FAU/USP), thanked Ponti for his hospitality in Milan and reiterated the invitation to teach at the School in 1952.<sup>15</sup> This was the beginning of a series of trips to Latin America, starting with Brazil. Ponti, who had already designed an unrealized project in Buenos Aires in the late 1930s—the *Casa D'Italia*—would, while in Brazil, be invited to develop three projects in São Paulo. These were the Taglianetti House, the Institute of Nuclear Physics at the University of São Paulo (INF/SP) new campus, and the Italo-Brazilian Centre Building. Of note was Ponti's reverence for Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, many times referred to by him as 'belonging to the category of geniuses', together with Antoni Gaudí and Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>16</sup> While in São Paulo, Ponti met with a former *Domus* collaborator—Italian immigrant architect and muralist Giulio Rosso. According to Rosso's son, Edoardo, Ponti first met Niemeyer in Rio de Janeiro, on a school trip to the city during his first visit of 1952.<sup>17</sup> Later, in 1955, Ponti sent a letter inviting Niemeyer, who was in Milan, to present his architecture slides at Ponti's office. During the same period, Niemeyer sent a copy of his magazine *Módulo*, together with drawings of his design for the Museum of Modern Art in Caracas. After a gap of years, in 1974, when Niemeyer was living in Paris and designing the Mondadori headquarters in Milan, Ponti sent a letter thanking him for a copy of Niemeyer's special edition of the magazine *Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui*. He also mentioned that it would be an honour to have a building designed by Niemeyer in Milan. In a 1975 manuscript Ponti thanked Niemeyer for a monograph received and mentioned his enthusiasm for the design of Niemeyer's *Clube dos Quinhentos* project in Brazil.<sup>18</sup>

In October 1952, Ponti went to New York and later to Mexico, to participate in the VIII Congress of Pan-American Architecture.<sup>19</sup> Once in Mexico he visited the University of Mexico's new campus, a project later to be published in *Domus*.<sup>20</sup> Although Ponti criticized some of the buildings, he dedicated a special mention to the library; the attention focused on the façade by Mexican architect and artist Juan O'Gormann—a ten-floor rectangular tower, entirely covered with stone mosaics. Within his unitarian understanding of the arts, the pre-Columbian pictorial motifs on the façade were not just ornaments for Ponti but designed as part of the architecture. He also visited the urban development and gardens of *El Pedregal*, and the house of its architect, Mexican Luis Barragán, with whom he would correspond until his final years.<sup>21</sup>

Ponti's relationship with Argentina was reestablished for a brief period during the 1950s. In May 1952, he thanked the Italian ambassador in Buenos Aires for the recommendation of a partnership with Argentinean architect Alejandro Bustillo Madero; he also mentioned the possibility of visiting Argentina.<sup>22</sup> In Brazil Ponti met the Italian architect Maurizio Mazzochi, who was at the time based in Buenos Aires and was responsible for the offices of the *Oficina Técnica Internacional* (OTI).<sup>23</sup> In 1953, while considering the possibility of returning to Brazil, Ponti's Argentinean and Chilean acquaintances proposed a Latin American lecture tour taking in Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Lima.<sup>24</sup>

There was also an offer to supervise the construction of the *Casa D'Italia* Building in Buenos Aires, which Ponti declined.<sup>25</sup>

In June 1953 Ponti met with the Venezuelan couple, Anala and Armando Planchart, in Milan, marking the beginning of a long-lasting friendship.<sup>26</sup>

## Latin America through the lens of *Domus*

### From 1928 to 1952 – a Latin modernism

Thanks to the interventionist policies of the fascist state, Italy's economy had gradually started to recover from the Great Depression of the 1930s by the second half of the decade.<sup>27</sup> During that period, after a beginning dedicated to a neoclassical approach in architecture and decoration, Ponti started transitioning towards rationalism, but without fully committing to any style.<sup>28</sup>

In the first *Domus* editorial in 1928 - *La Casa All'Italiana*, Ponti discussed the reformulation of the idea of 'modern living'.<sup>29</sup> His proposition combined functionalist principles using Italian domestic culture as a reference and, according to Miodini, it was inserted into 'the debate on the Latin origins of the modern house and in the recovery of the Pompeian house model adapted to private construction'.<sup>30</sup> Although his initial attempts led him to research and reinterpret elements such as porticoes, pergolas, loggias, and cortiles, his was not simply a formal solution; related to a sense of morals and ethics, it emphasized the 'Latin spirit' and family life.<sup>31</sup> In an article of 1932 Ponti declared, while arguing about the rationalist 'minimum house' studies, the importance of having a central 'spacious room and a terrace', made possible by 'a careful proportioning' of all the house spaces and guided by 'a good Latin sense'.<sup>32</sup> Miodini pointed out that this vision was also in tune with the Italian interpretation of the rationalist housing studies for the *Existenzminimum* by Venetian architect Enrico Griffini.<sup>33</sup>

As part of Ponti's campaign, *Domus* promoted the 'renovation of style and aesthetic education', and offered a constant repertoire of European examples.<sup>34</sup> Amongst these, three house proposals were depicted in 1928 and 1930 as a result of a trip to Brazil by Ponti's friend and collaborator, architect Tomaso Buzzi.<sup>35</sup> Presented as Mediterranean examples, they were of Palladian inspiration with symmetrical façades and ceramic tiled roofs, similar to Ponti and Buzzi's 1926 *Villa Bouilhet* at Garches.<sup>36</sup> Gardens containing tropical vegetation and striped awnings on the balcony windows provided the local accent. Ponti's domestic agenda was present in the central living areas—in one of the houses the space was of double height and described as a covered inner patio with a fountain.

Around 1934, Ponti started to explore what Miodini called 'visive sequences'.<sup>37</sup> Through a 'complex system of open and closed spaces' irregular plans facilitated the creation of private areas, and through Ponti's perforated walls—his 'display windows'—spaces were connected creating different perspectives.<sup>38</sup> Present in Ponti's late 1930s case *al mare* and in the collaborations with architect Bernard Rudofsky, furnished plans with writing and arrows suggested 'ways of living' and internal perspectives framed landscape through architecture.<sup>39</sup> Thick walls, a walled patio with a tree, coloured floors and ceilings—'the ceiling is a lid, a sky'—completed the expressive intentions of these projects.<sup>40</sup>

In tune with Ponti's ideas, for the first time *Domus* featured the work of Luis Barragán in 1935.<sup>41</sup> Presenting amongst others, Mediterranean accents, Barragán's originality lay in interpreting those influences within traditional Mexican architecture.<sup>42</sup> Therefore,

it was with no surprise that Ponti invited readers to be inspired by Barragán's walled terraces, stair placements, massive volumes, and light and shadow displays, under 'an intense sky', characteristics that matched Ponti's proposals at the time.<sup>43</sup>

In Brazil, according to Luis Henrique Luccas, the search for a national cultural identity marked the 1920s. While in Rio de Janeiro the adoption of neo-colonial architecture as the country's representative style was being discussed, in São Paulo 'a notable cultural effervescence of a modern character' was taking place.<sup>44</sup> Marked by the city's commercial and migratory cosmopolitanism, São Paulo's 'modernist aesthetic experience', was manifested in many ways, amongst them the Modern Arts week of 1922.<sup>45</sup> However, after the economic world crisis of 1929 and the Revolution that dissolved the National Congress in 1930—with a fascist-style programme, President Getúlio Dornelles Vargas' era began; and the attention turned to Rio de Janeiro.<sup>46</sup> According to Lauro Cavalcanti, a desire for modernization characterized Vargas' regime, and the construction of administrative buildings became one of his top priorities.<sup>47</sup> In this scenario, the international recognition of the modern '*carioca*' school left the emergent metropolis of São Paulo—temporally debilitated by an economic crisis—subdued.<sup>48</sup> According to Comas, during the 1930s, 'an appropriation of modern architecture which [emphasized] its classical Mediterranean roots and the analogy of its elements and principles with a rational and national constructive tradition,' was taking place.<sup>49</sup> Allied with a 'previously denied baroque femininity,' it culminated in what Comas called 'a modern architecture of *Corbusian* vein and Brazilian flavour'.<sup>50</sup> Marked by the search for 'total integration of the arts' it also considered furniture and interior design, and the project for the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro (MES) was representative of this.<sup>51</sup> Initially designed in 1936 by a group of architects led by Costa, including Niemeyer, they would later be joined by Le Corbusier, acting as a design consultant.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, Italian-educated architects Gregory Warchavchik (Ukrainian), and Italian-Brazilian Rino Levi started to work in São Paulo. Arriving in the mid 1920s, their integral Italian education was going to be fundamental in enabling them to face the challenges of the deployment of modern architecture in Brazil.<sup>53</sup> By 1933, Warchavchik's own house, with its 'rational forms', had already appeared in *Domus* as the 'first example of Modern architecture in Brazil'.<sup>54</sup> In 1935, the significant number of German and Italian immigrants allied to Vargas' policy of industrialization drew the political and economic interests of the Axis powers towards Brazil.<sup>55</sup> In November 1937 Vargas, inspired by the European totalitarian experience, established the 'Estado Novo' regime through a *coup d'état*.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Vargas' 1938 nationalization policy towards Brazil's southern immigrant centres eventually led to the dwindling away of the international relationship with the Axis powers.<sup>57</sup> By then, a progressive approach towards the United States government gained force culminating in 1942 with the rupture of Brazilian diplomatic relations with Italy and Germany.<sup>58</sup> In 1938, escaping from Italian racist legislations, Rudofsky, followed in 1939 by Italian architect Daniele Calabi, came to Brazil.<sup>59</sup> Accompanied by Levi, these architects designed houses in São Paulo with an inner patio as a structural organizer, some of which were later published in *Domus*.<sup>60</sup> Not usual in Brazilian colonial architecture, the patio, a typical Mediterranean and Muslim solution, was present in some noble houses in Portugal, and in Brazil mainly in cloisters and sugar mill farmhouses in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>61</sup> Although not employing a classical patio disposition, Levi's house of 1944 explored the relationship between a native species garden and the living area. According to Renato Anelli, Levi's (and Calabi's) transformations of an 'Italian' typology, confused critics when considering whether his designs were of tropical or Mediterranean influence.<sup>62</sup> In 1940, a rationalist house design in São Paulo by Italian

architect Luigi Cosenza was published; through open living areas and terraces, it connected the interior to the exterior gardens.<sup>63</sup>

In Italy, because of disagreements with the publishing house of *Domus*, Ponti left his post in November 1940, and in 1941, founded the magazine *Stile*.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, the Brazilian architectural scene flourished. In 1943, as part of the 'goodwill neighbour policy' adopted by the United States, the travelling exhibition 'Brazil Builds' took place at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York.<sup>65</sup> An *Architectural Record* special issue soon followed it and in 1947, the French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* published an edition on Brazilian Modernism.<sup>66</sup> In 1944, after the Italian 1943 armistice, Italo-Brazilian diplomatic relations were fully re-established.<sup>67</sup> Later, in 1945, in face of the defeat of the European totalitarian regimes, President Vargas was forced to resign.<sup>68</sup> New elections were called for, and when the alliance between the United States and Russia fell apart, marking the beginning of the Cold War, Vargas' successor excluded the communist party from the political system.<sup>69</sup> Democratically elected in 1950, Vargas returned to power with a government based on a strong presence of the State and with promises of raising the minimum salary and expanding labour legislation to rural workers.<sup>70</sup>

After the initial enthusiasm created by the MOMA exhibition and foreign publications, criticism started in Europe against a supposed excessive formalism of the Brazilian school.<sup>71</sup> Bo Bardi, already engaged by Brazil, enthusiastically responded by publishing the article 'Beautiful Child' in her magazine *Habitat*:

The new Brazilian architecture has many flaws: it is young, did not have much time to stop and think; it was suddenly born like a beautiful child [...] In order to materialize, Brazilian architecture chose the means of Le Corbusier, [...] that most responded to the aspirations of the people of Latin origin; poetic means, not contained by puritanical presuppositions and prejudices. [...] <sup>72</sup>

At the end of the Second World War, the entire American continent became the migration destination of many European architects and artists. In this context, the city of São Paulo was the chosen place of a second wave of Italian immigrants.<sup>73</sup>

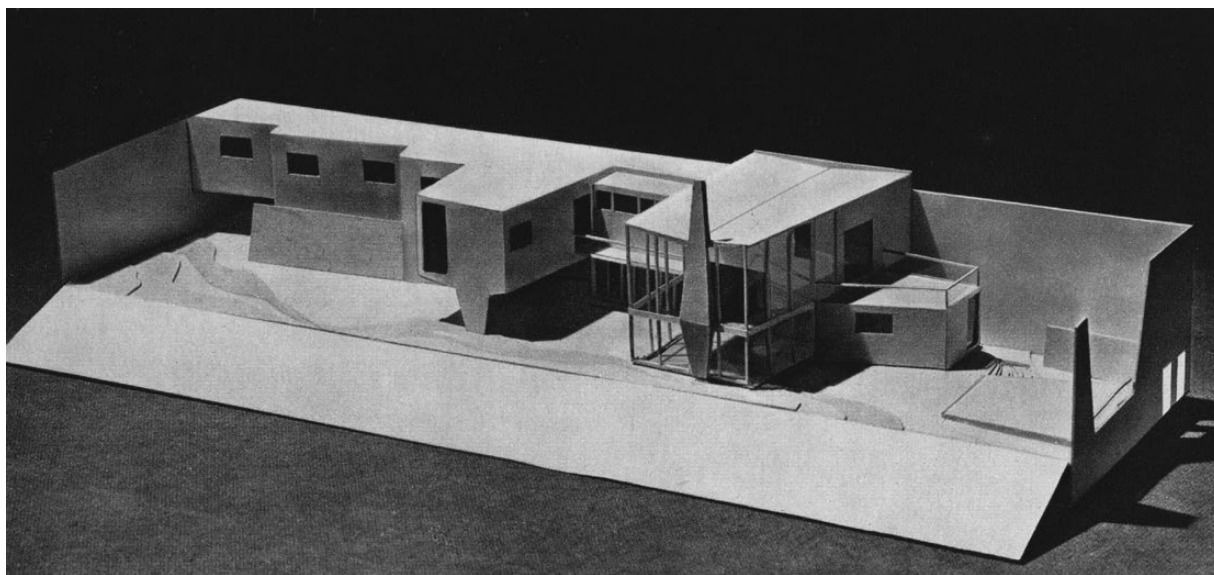
Meanwhile, while in Italy the reconstruction of the country was the priority, Ponti resumed his editorial activities at *Domus* in July 1948. In October 1948, Italian architect Luigi Carlo Olivieri presented in *Domus* an overview of the new Brazilian architecture.<sup>74</sup> In the editorial introduction, probably by Ponti, the 'baptism' of the new Modern architecture was proclaimed; he declared: 'naturally, with triumph [...] born in the studies and polemics, it has become popular and official [...].<sup>75</sup> Olivieri then addressed the focus of design originality in the local interpretation of the *brise-soleil*.<sup>76</sup> After the 1940s the patio house designs in São Paulo by Rudoswky, Levi, Calabi and Oliveri, were followed by the design of Italians Giancarlo Palanti and Bo Bardi (arrived in 1946), and the Brazilians Affonso Eduardo Reidy and João Vilanova Artigas, among others. However, in Rio de Janeiro, architects Costa and Niemeyer had already used a tropical garden composition in the Brazilian pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair.<sup>77</sup> In fact, the patio strategies, together with the verandas, had been a frequent characteristic of Costa's residential projects since his 1930s 'houses without an owner'.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, according to Comas, Costa's explorations of the 'vernacular autochthonous' were 'parallel to similar attempts of Le Corbusier with the Mediterranean vernacular'.<sup>79</sup> For Comas, 'by defending a Mediterranean crib for modern architecture and associating it with Le Corbusier, Lucio [Costa], claimed an inheritance. Although bastard, by genetics, acculturation or transculturation, the Brazilian architect [could not] escape being western'.<sup>80</sup>

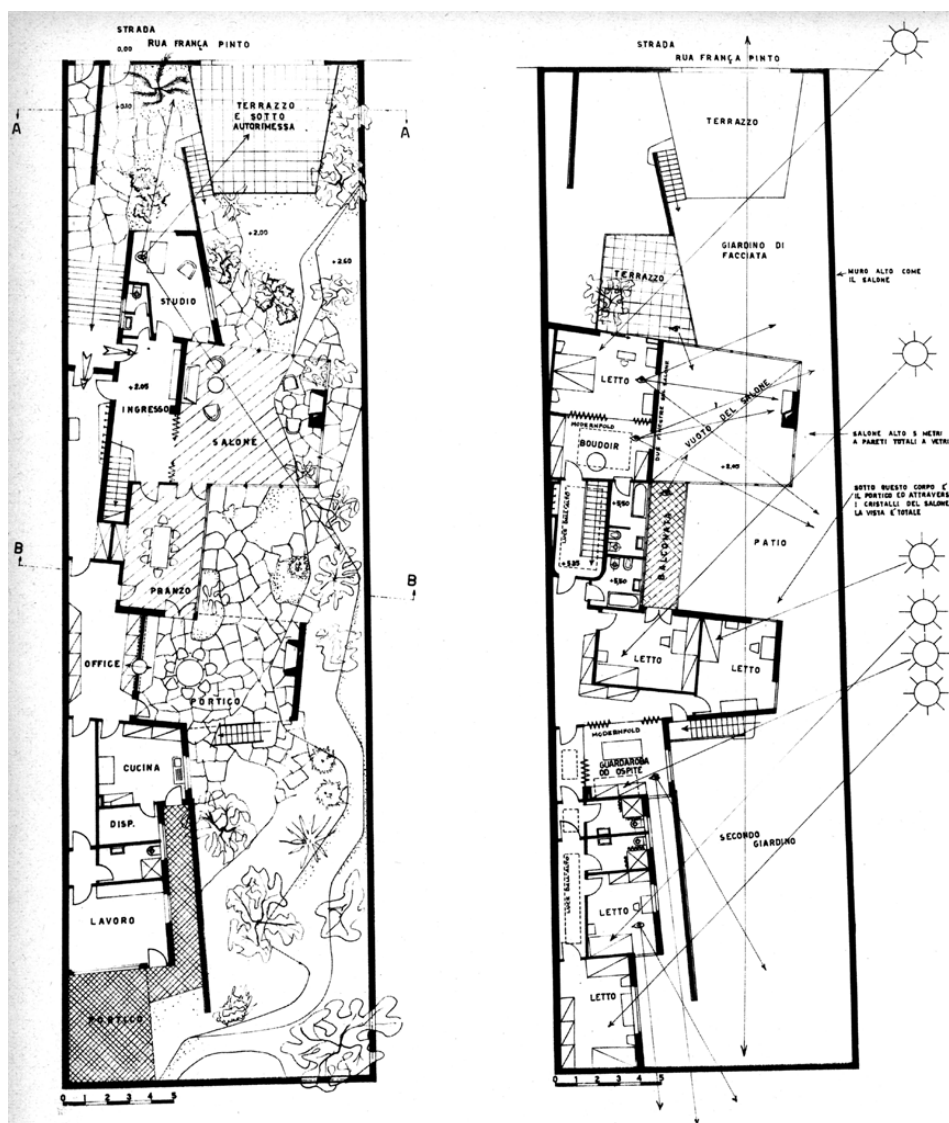
## From 1952 to 1953—the Brazilian journey

Ponti visited Brazil in August and December of 1952. Having received the invitation to teach 'Decorative Composition' for final-year architecture students at FAU/USP at the beginning of 1952, Ponti stayed on his first trip for a month and a half.<sup>81</sup> While in Brazil, three projects in São Paulo were commissioned: Dr. Taglianetti's House, the Institute of Nuclear Physics, and the Italo-Brazilian Centre Building.<sup>82</sup> Satisfied with his trip, in a letter to his Brazilian students he declared that he 'received more than he gave' and that 'the values [...] of Modern Brazilian architecture, [were] of extreme significance throughout the world'.<sup>83</sup> He also appreciated the group visits, and offered to take the students to Bo Bardi's 'Glass House'. In early December, Ponti went back to Brazil for a short visit to present his project for the Institute of Nuclear Physics. During those years, he would stay in contact with some of the students and faculty, amongst them Professor José Maria da Silva Neves. Although the invitation to continue teaching in 1953 was renewed, Ponti did not return to the country, mainly due to the non-execution of his commissions.<sup>84</sup>

Ponti's first Brazilian project to be published, Dr. Taglianetti's house, featured in *Domus* in June 1953.<sup>85</sup> In the article, he recalled visits to houses designed by architects Levi and Henrique Verona Cristofani in São Paulo. Besides mentioning the beautiful inner gardens, particular attention was drawn to the 'broken' architectural composition in Verona's house, caused by the image of the different rooflines of the surrounding buildings. He also observed the same inconvenience at an Artigas' house. According to him, all the effects of the rigorous study of the glass transparencies were also broken by the view of neighbouring constructions. Ponti suggested using the introverted 'Pompeian house' model as a solution. Although square in its original form, according to him it fitted in perfectly in the long and narrow urban lot inherited from the Portuguese tradition. The strategy was to adopt a boundary wall beyond the limits of the neighbouring roofs, forming what he called a *hortus conclusus*. To occupy the lot Ponti inserted a longitudinal volume intercepted by two other transversal volumes. Permeable on the ground level, one with a double height glazed living area and another with an open dining room, these volumes allowed the gardens to integrate with the house, similar to his future Villa Planchart design [1].

**Fig. 1** Model of the Taglianetti House, © Gio Ponti Archives





**Fig. 2** Plans of the Taglianetti House, published in 'Idea per La casa del Dottor T. a San Paolo', *Domus*, no. 283, 1953, p. 8, © Gio Ponti Archives

In order to enjoy the local weather and flora, the fully decorated plan distribution presented Ponti's characteristic observer's points of view and solar orientation markings, including the voyeuristic views from the openings of the master bedroom to the living room downstairs [2]. Ponti also mentioned as a reference the high walled terraces of Barragán's house and studio in Mexico City. Published in 1953 along with the 'El Pedregal' gardens, and described as 'rooms completed by the sky, separated from earth,' this solution was also present in Ponti's 1930s Mediterranean houses and in the inner patio of Villa Planchart.<sup>86</sup> Designed to 'isolate' instead of 'segregate', like a true 'private paradise', this strategy helped Ponti create his Brazilian 'perfect architectural landscape'.<sup>87</sup> Special care was given to the design of the garden plan with its intertwined curves, possibly relating to Niemeyer and Roberto Burle Marx's collaborations. In addition, by examining the Artigas' residence, some similarities could be identified, like the angled entrance volume, the double height living room, the *pilotis* and the permeability of the spaces [3]. As an echo of Niemeyer's entrance gate at the *Clube*



**Fig. 3** Vila Nova Artigas House, São Paulo, © Leonardo Finotti.

*dos Quinhentos*, its slender concrete pillar and tilted roof could be a paradigm for the glazed double height living area and fireplace [4]. In October 1953 Ponti wrote to Dr Taglianetti, announcing that even though the house was not going to be built, it would be presented during a touring exhibition of Ponti's work in the United States.<sup>88</sup>

Published a month later, the project for the Institute of Nuclear Physics was considered by Ponti as responsible for helping him achieve some of his architectural 'turning points'.<sup>89</sup> According to Ponti's understanding, many modern buildings did not usually have 'dimensional limits' in their geometry – with a parallelepiped shape, they gave a 'boundless' impression. He proposed as a solution the principle of the 'finite form'. Applied as a preview for his Milan Pirelli Building, it was obtained by 'folding' the main facades forward in plan, and then by folding the sides of the rear facade, giving 'closure' to the shape. Another principle used was that of 'hanging screens' or 'supported surfaces': the front facade —a slender perforated surface —was detached from the sides and bent on the top and the bottom, giving lightness to the volume [5]. As an example of Ponti's 'interdisciplinary vision,' this strategy resembled his 'organized wall' furniture solution, reproduced in different scales, both inside and on the facades of Villa Planchart. Finally, in an independent volume, an auditorium was proposed with a detached 'dedicatory wall' to the Italian community, combining cladded stones inserted in 'Brazilian style' (stick-on stone cladding), together with an artistic Italian mosaic. This project had the support of Italian descendant, industrialist and patron of the arts Francisco Antônio Paulo Matarazzo Sobrinho (Ciccillo Matarazzo). Representative of a nation, the building was intended to be a gift from the Italian immigrants to the city, honouring the celebrations of its IV centennial anniversary.<sup>90</sup> Ponti, who had experience in the field, came as a natural choice for Matarazzo. Besides being Italian, he was



already engaged at FAU/USP with Professor Silva Neves, a member of the new campus committee and responsible for the rectory building design.<sup>91</sup> Ponti was reportedly inspired here by Niemeyer's slender structures of the *Clube dos Quinhentos*, perceivable in the slenderness of the 'hanging screen' of the bent front façade, and the cantilevered atrium roof slab.<sup>92</sup>

**Fig. 4** Entrance gate at the *Clube dos Quinhentos*, São Paulo, © Prof. Gustavo Neves da Rocha, 1953, © Acervo da Biblioteca da FAU/USP © Niemeyer, Oscar/ Licensed by AUTVIS, Brazil, 2018.

Despite Ponti's enthusiasm for returning to Brazil, all the new campus work was put on hold in 1954 due to budget overspending and government uncertainties (caused by Vargas' suicide).<sup>93</sup> In 1955 a new governor took charge and called for a new campus committee, without Ponti's collaboration.<sup>94</sup>

While in Brazil, Ponti received an invitation to participate in the bid for the new Italo-Brazilian Centre Building, co-authored with Brazilian architect Luiz Contrucci.<sup>95</sup> The programme for a multi-purpose building, housing the Italian centre as well as offices and apartments, offered Ponti the opportunity to develop another one of his principles—the 'representativeness of exteriors'. The different openings and volume heights were designed in a way to demonstrate its programme. Between February and June 1955, Bardi and Ponti's correspondence revealed not only the disappointment of the unsuccessful result in the bid, but also remarks on construction market difficulties occurring in Brazil.<sup>96</sup> Despite the outcome, the project was published in Ponti's book *Amate L'Architettura*, in the monograph edition of *Aria D'Italia*, and twice in *Domus* as an inspiration for the Pirelli Building of 1961 and the Hospital San Carlo Borromeo in Milan.<sup>97</sup> Ponti kept corresponding with Contrucci, with letters dating from 1953 to 1963.<sup>98</sup>



**Fig. 5** Model of the Institute of Nuclear Physics, © Gio Ponti Archives

In December of 1952, Niemeyer's *Clube dos Quinhentos* was described in length in *Domus*. The entrance gate with its cantilevered structure and a slender, sculptural column ('a flower or a leaf') represented a 'lyrical game' for Ponti. He wrote: 'plan seen from one side [...], pure line seen from the front; it is a fantasy or 'illusion' that transforms material reality through form and colour into a lyrical reality, only possible where 'architectural art' exists';' he ended the article quoting Le Corbusier: 'Il faut [...] qu'une architecture chante'.<sup>99</sup> The lightness of the concrete structure of this small construction had a strong and lasting effect on Ponti and deserved a mention in his book *Amate L'Architettura*.<sup>100</sup>

In 1953 references to Brazilian architecture appeared in all the issues of *Domus* and Ponti suggested the beginning of an 'Italian-Brazilian architectural dialogue':

But above all we are happy, too, if we are in the fatal, I will say, the inevitable classicism of our architectural expressions [...] we will know how to get rid of the 'posts and beams' cage and walk towards the arduous resources of reinforced concrete [...] we will greet each other upon watching, in this wonderful field, an 'architectural dialogue', Brazilian on one side, Italian on the other.<sup>101</sup>

In an article about the use of colours in architecture, Ponti once again mentioned Niemeyer's *Clube dos Quinhentos*,<sup>102</sup> and in another, when referring to the *cobogós*—the Brazilian version of the Moorish *maxarabiya*, and the Italian Mediterranean *graticci*—he endorsed its use, having as examples the works of Niemeyer, Levi, Reidy, and Costa.<sup>103</sup> Ponti's work can also be identified with Marx's use of art and ceramic tiles—the Brazilian *azulejos*, inherited from Portuguese colonial times, and applied to his garden designs. For Ponti, the landscaper through art reintroduced the country's native flora, many times supplanted by exotic species: 'he has taught us a new way of thinking about a garden, like that of a painter'.<sup>104</sup> Fulvio Irace, while referring to Ponti's work in Venezuela, interpreted Ponti's relationship with nature as 'less colonizing' and included as a 'constant reference and not a simple scenography'.<sup>105</sup>

### A Brazilian postscript

In July 1952, a note in Bo Bardi's *Habitat* mentioned Ponti's presence in Brazil, and in September 1953, a reproduction of a *Domus* article on the Institute of Nuclear Physics was published.<sup>106</sup> In 1954, Ponti's monograph issue *Espressioni di Gio Ponti* included his Brazilian projects and Villa Planchart. In that year, Bo Bardi wrote to Ponti expressing her interest in his Pirelli Building.<sup>107</sup> During that time Brazil was going through an economic and political crisis which, for various reasons, including military discontentment, led an isolated Vargas to commit suicide.<sup>108</sup> After 1955 and Ponti's unsuccessful commissions, Brazil's presence in *Domus* faded, and besides some publications featuring Brasilia, it focused on Niemeyer and his projects abroad. In 1957, Ponti published *Amate L'architettura*, and Brazil was not forgotten—he quoted São Paulo, Rio de

Janeiro, Levi, Reidy, Mindlin, the Bardis, Marx, and Niemeyer. In that same year, Ponti replied to Bo Bardi about whether he would return to Brazil.

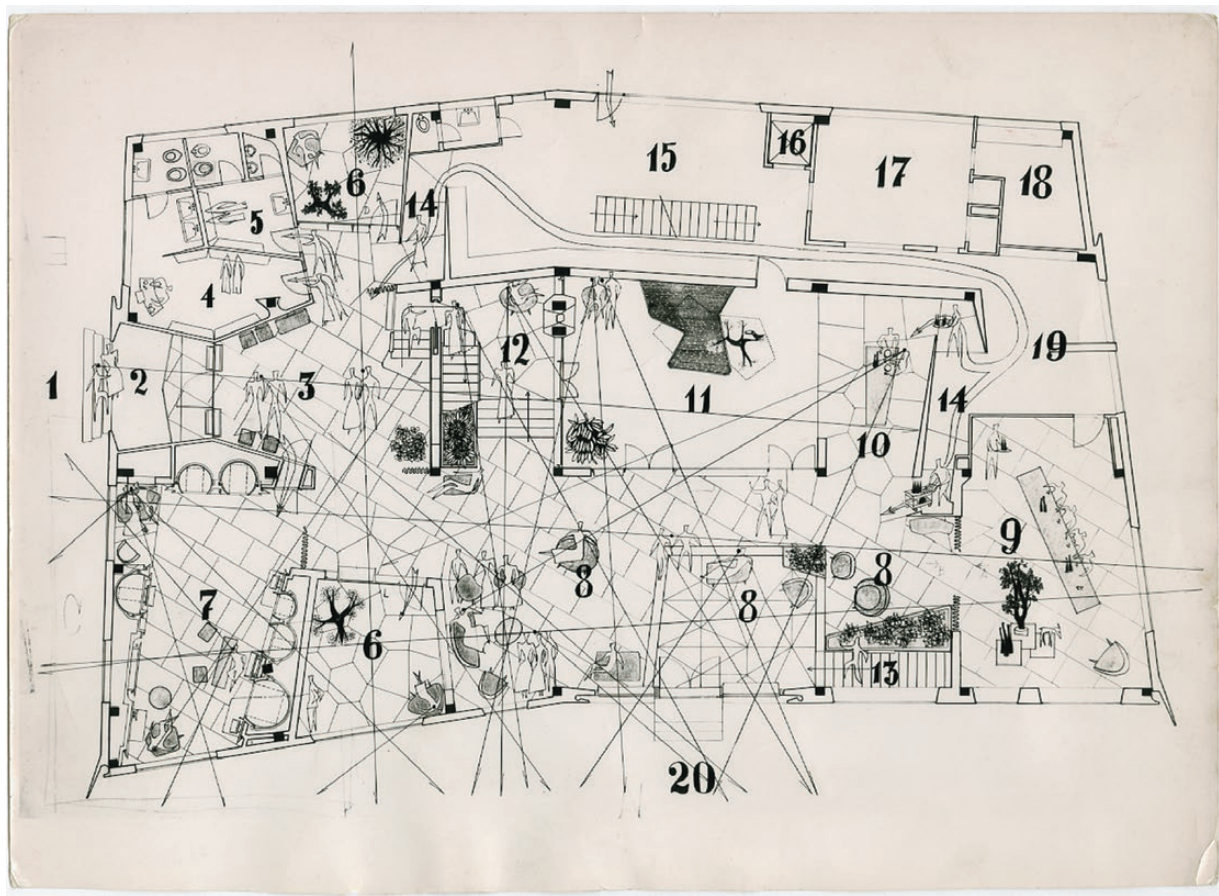
In a September 1967 letter, an emotional Bo Bardi mentioned Ponti's [work] importance and the need to demonstrate it.<sup>109</sup> In the 1970s, Ponti invited Bo Bardi to participate in his 'final legacy' to architects: an apartment tower building with a versatile plan and furniture, to be designed by renowned international architects, including her, Niemeyer and Barragán.<sup>110</sup> During that time Ponti started planning with Bardi a lifetime achievement exhibition at MASP, postponed many times. The final date established was 1979 but, unfortunately, Ponti passed away in December of that year.<sup>111</sup>

### The Venezuelan Agenda—1953–1961

In June 1953, Ponti received the Plancharts in his Milan office, and shifted his attention towards Venezuela in a new Latin American episode. During his first visit to Caracas, in 1954, he met many Venezuelan Modernist architects, such as Carlos Raul Villanueva and Diego Carbonell, and the celebrated Venezuelan artist Armando Reverón.<sup>112</sup> In 1954 Ponti presented Venezuela in *Domus*, placing it side by side with Mexico and Brazil.<sup>113</sup> From 1954 to 1958 Venezuelan architecture filled the pages of the magazine, returning in 1961 with the design for Villa Planchart.<sup>114</sup> During the first of many trips, Ponti paid a visit to Reverón's house. As Hannia Gómez recalled, resembling Gottfried Semper's

**Fig. 6** Villa Planchart, Caracas  
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**Fig. 7** Ground floor plan, Villa Planchart, © Gio Ponti Archives

primitive hut and organized around a central hall, the house made a strong impression on Ponti.<sup>115</sup> Published in *Domus*, its pebble walls would be used similarly in Villa Planchart.<sup>116</sup>

Although Ponti designed other houses in Caracas, it was Villa Planchart that encapsulated most of his fundamental principles, some of which were clearly influenced by his Brazilian and Mexican experiences [6]. Ponti declared his poetic and technical inspirations both from Barragán—by contradiction, and Niemeyer—by resemblance, regarding the lightness of his design: ‘I have dreamed of a house that would rest nicely on the land, like a butterfly (white) without volume or mass [...] that had, in my expressions, the grace of form design, the slimness, that Niemeyer has revealed to us’.<sup>117</sup> Positioned on the top of a hill, the house, today a museum, is organized around a central patio dividing public and private areas and presents two main floors and a basement [7]. Located on the ground floor are the office, services, two dining areas and the main feature—a double height living room. Facing the inner patio, an elevated walkway on the first-floor links the main bedrooms to the family room and to the visitors and services quarters. In the basement, a coloured marble staircase links to the games room and more services. Ponti’s visual sequences were demonstrated through the many arrows drawn in his furnished ‘animated’ plans.<sup>118</sup> According to Irace, these plans represented the ‘domestic space dimension as a cultural identity card of its [...] inhabitants’.<sup>119</sup> These sequences can also relate to what Guilherme Wisnik called the ‘domestic experience’ in Costa and Barragán’s works: a ‘succession of spaces in which the diverse activities of the private sphere correspond to affective places in harmony

with the temperament of those who live in it'.<sup>120</sup> Here Ponti's 'voyeuristic sights' within the house are present upstairs in Mrs Planchart's *boudoir* and in the opposite family room terrace where copper Venetian blind doors discreetly face the main living room, in a manner similar to the Brazilian *cobogós*. The concept of 'inhabiting the landscape',<sup>121</sup> characteristic of certain Brazilian Modern houses, was present in Taglianetti's house and can also be identified here, both in the informal dining area—directly connected to the inner garden, and in the main living room—designed like an open piazza. It might also be related to Ponti's visits to the houses of Artigas, Bo Bardi, and Rino Levi, as well as to Marx's works. In addition, Marx's paintings and landscape drawings influences can be identified in the organic design pattern of the ceramic tiles of the visitors bathroom and Mr Planchart's. Ponti's treatment of the inner patio wall, covered with Fausto Melotti's ceramics, can be related to the 'dedicatory wall' of the Institute of Nuclear Physics and to the Brazilian ceramics panels' tradition. Finally, Ponti's principles of the 'finite form' and the 'hanging screens' are also present here.<sup>122</sup> Ponti 'folded' the plan and the roof slab and detached both the facades in order to achieve the desired lightness. To stress that on the facade setbacks Ponti installed indirect lighting—another one of his principles: the self-illuminating architecture, present in his already mentioned panelled furniture comprising the 'organized wall'. In 1953, Ponti claimed to be happy to hear that locals had called his design a 'Florentine Villa' and concluded: 'It is not necessary to be dogmatic following a modern design or dogmatic following a traditional design; to be modern and traditional, and not even to worry about all that: it is enough to know the spirit of a modern culture, and regarding *'italianità'*, it is enough to be Italian'.<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

Although post-colonial studies favour a non-formalistic approach to architectural history,<sup>124</sup> Maria Beatriz Camargo Cappello reminds us 'that the history of a work of architecture [does] involve its function of formal representation and the effect it produces, generating various aesthetic judgments'.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, she points out, it is architectural history's responsibility to disclose the 'different interpretations given from different aesthetic judgments'. This, in fact, can lead us to hear the voices of the different agents involved, the popular reception of which, according to Sonia Marques, in the Brazilian modernism case, could explain its 'singularity'.<sup>126</sup> According to Claudia Costa Piantá Cabral, from the late 1980's on, a new cycle of architectural academic research has been developing 'through not only general historiographical reviews [...] but thematic studies and monographs on the protagonists in the development of modern Brazilian architecture'.<sup>127</sup> Following this tendency, there has been an increase in the review of immigrant architects' contributions in Latin America.<sup>128</sup> In Brazil, associated with Brazilian and foreign investors, their influence extended through the 1950s and 1960s, working either as teachers in major architecture schools or through their design practices, presenting a web of contacts that included architects, business contractors, photographers, furniture designers and artists.<sup>129</sup> According to Anelli, the Italian conception of an overall architect, encompassing all aspects of design and technique, marked that contribution.<sup>130</sup>

If we are to 'avoid European exceptionalism,' according to Daniel J. Huppatz, we must develop a 'better understanding of the multi-directional nature of flows,' of objects and designers, interactions between institutions and the 'circulation of information related to design production, processes and thinking'.<sup>131</sup> In that light, although Ponti's presence in Brazil was brief, the intent of this article is to demonstrate that he was equally affected and influential not only regarding his Brazilian students but also regarding

all cultural figures and people that he was in touch at the time; and his correspondence, lectures, editorials and designs bear witness to this.<sup>132</sup> A controversial figure, not modern or traditional, Ponti was never a personality who could easily fit into any architectural historiography; until the 1960's he was ostracized from Modern Italian architectural accounts, gradually regaining attention only from the 1980's onward.<sup>133</sup> In fact, for Miodini 'Ponti [wanted] to demonstrate that one can answer equally well to the solutions of functional problems, even if with diverse forms: the modern can reconnect to tradition, without incongruity between the two terms'.<sup>134</sup> In that sense, he paralleled what Roberto Fernandez pointed out in Costa and Barragán's work: 'they choose a register of their thinking/acting distant from the historiographical canon of modernity (as Gideon's or Frampton's), getting closer to a kind of programmed anachronism as an evident and calculated path [...]'.<sup>135</sup> Although their architecture could approach a 'regionalist' interpretation, according to Esra Akcan 'to treat modern architecture in "non-Western" countries as an oscillation between the regional and the modern [...] remains on the surface in coming to terms with the complexities of cross-cultural relations,' as 'there is no pure regional or international style of expression'.<sup>136</sup> Departing from an interest in vernacular, classical and Mediterranean traditions, Ponti, Costa and Barragán (and here we can include Le Corbusier) interpreted vernacular and local expressions within a modern rationale. This included 'elements of the context – climate, geography, materials, and culture'—a phenomenon Jean-Francois Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino defined as 'Mediterranean modernism'.<sup>137</sup> Therefore, when Ponti arrived in Brazil in 1952, he might have identified with a shared Latin (although tropical) language of the Brazilian modern architecture produced by not only expatriates but also by nationals.

Without being dogmatic, in 'episodes', Ponti interpreted, adapted and evolved from solutions that he found interesting and were related to his line of thought.<sup>138</sup> In Mexico, Ponti referred to Barragán's readings of traditional Mexican architecture, and O'Gorman's 'integration of the arts' with architecture; in Venezuela, he interpreted with 'a tropical key the concept of the Mediterranean house;' and by doing that, according to Irace, he was 'exempt of any intention of colonialism, because he [believed] in an affinity that [superseded] time [...]'.<sup>139</sup> In Brazil, Ponti responded to an early understanding before Brasília—that of a Brazilian modern tradition, related to Costa's research (even though this research found no registers of their contact), present in the *brise-soleils*, the ceramic panels (*azulejos*), the *cobogós*, and tropical gardens. In Niemeyer's case, however, it can be said that what attracted Ponti the most was the use of concrete obtaining, according to Wisnik, 'light, stable forms, surprisingly stable, and therefore often regarded as surrealists'.<sup>140</sup> Ponti's affinities can also relate to the works of Bo Bardi, 'one of the few to incorporate vernacular solutions to a Modernist poetic'<sup>141</sup> and to Reveron's house. The fact is that Ponti sought, through tradition, a way to fill in the gaps of a possible sterile modernism. Therefore, while in Latin America, far from any explicit Eurocentric desire, he looked for similarities and inspiration in both Latin American and Italian traditional and modern architecture, being provoked by and producing through all the aspects of his work an exchange of ideas—the study of those aspects may help bring to light a history of counter-influences between continents.

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