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## Drawing and design for theatre architecture: Lina Bo Bardi's sketches for five venues in Brazil

Evelyn Furquim Werneck Lima

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses spatial design for the performing arts, analysing drawings by the architect and scenographer Lina Bo Bardi from the last two decades of the twentieth century. In doing so, it attempts to understand the visual culture and the professional context in which they were made, and of course the proposed theatrical spaces themselves. Bo Bardi's uniqueness can be seen in the way her drawings and sketches for the theatre place an evaluation of embodied experience, the social exchange between audience, performers and space, at the centre of architectural discourse, and, as such, her ideal theatre spaces constitute a distinctive architectural poetics.

Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992), born Achillina Bo in Rome, Italy, was one of the most significant Brazilian architects of the second half of the twentieth century. After receiving her BA in architecture from the Università di Roma in 1939, she moved to Milan and founded an architectural and design practice with Carlo Pagano. In 1942 she opened her own studio, but it was destroyed by bombs in August 1943. She was a very active member of the Italian Modern Movement, as well as a participant in the creation of the Movimento di Studi per l'Architettura. During this period, she also began work as an illustrator for several newspapers and magazines, including *Stile* with Gio Ponti and *Quaderni di Domus* which she co-edited with Pagano. In these volatile times, she met art dealer and critic Pietro Maria Bardi whom she married in 1946, immigrating to Brazil where she lived and worked until her death. Lina Bo Bardi adopted Brazil as her new country and was greatly influenced by all aspects of Brazilian culture. She was an architect, scenographer, artist, furniture designer (creator of the iconic bowl chair), curator, exhibition organizer, and founder of the Brazilian architecture journal *Habitat – Revista das Artes no Brasil*. When she extended her professional practice towards theatre, she was able to combine these different facets of spatial practice in such a way that she inspired the viewer to see beyond what was materially present and engage their imaginations.

Bo Bardi established her place in twentieth-century modernist architecture with such projects as the Glass House<sup>1</sup> (1951) and the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) (1968). Her theatres, however, differ from her other well-known projects in the skilful way in which they mediate different cultural influences, negotiate modern and vernacular traditions, and serve as places that encourage radical cultural production. Bo Bardi engaged in a dialogue with industrial systems and a sense of tradition, using high-tech

solutions and local materials. Architecture and writing were her primary modes of communication. However, because of her experience as a magazine illustrator in Italy, her drawings are unusual both from an architectural perspective and from a design/scenography point of view. These drawings often used watercolour or coloured pencil as a medium and then filled the page with notes explaining her ideas and the materials to be used. The sketches and drawings analysed in this article display her artistic skills, while also functioning as practical documents to express her unusual ideas for theatrical spaces. Some of her theatrical projects were realized, while others stayed on paper but served to inspire other architects in their designs for places of performance. This article looks at five projects through their initial sketches.

## 1. The Oficina Theatre: a new project for an old theatre

Teatro Novos Comediantes was built in São Paulo in the 1920s at 520 Jaceguay Street. In 1958, a group of law students, including José Celso Martinez Corrêa and Renato Borghi, rented the space and established a theatre company there.<sup>2</sup> To adapt the space and produce an innovative theatrical design, a new project was developed by the Brazilian architect Joaquim Guedes, who created a 'traverse theatre' with the audience placed on either side of the stage. The building was destroyed by fire in 1966. A new space was designed in 1967, by architects Flávio Império and Rodrigo Lefèvre. Its Italianate stage included a large revolve and the theatre had concrete tiered seating. In 1981, the theatre was declared a national heritage site by the Conselho de Defesa do Patrimônio Histórico, Arqueológico, Artístico e Turístico<sup>3</sup> because of its significance in the transformation of Brazilian theatre. As the building had fallen into disrepair, theatre director José Celso Martinez Corrêa (known as Zé Celso), the director of the Theatre Oficina Group, invited Bo Bardi and Marcelo Suzuki to make an initial proposal to refurbish it.<sup>4</sup> The sketches demonstrate a free and unusual conception of a theatrical space, as suggested by the minimalism of the canvas cover and the idea of simplicity and clarity inspired by the Japanese Noh Theatre, as Bo Bardi herself explained in the note in red ink on the sketch (Figures 1 and 2). From Bo Bardi's early drawings, one can sense the force of her imagination as well as her intention to convey an atmosphere unlike the more conventional forms of theatre.

The drawings show that Bo Bardi considered the whole space of the theatre as a scenographic construct encompassing performers and spectators alike. As she states, 'From an architectural point of view, the Oficina will seek the true meaning of the theatre – its *Physical and Tactile* structure, its *Non-Abstraction* – which profoundly differentiates it from cinema and TV, while allowing the full use of these media' (Bo Bardi and Elto 1999, 3).

However, this plan was abandoned. For the final version of the Oficina Group project in 1984, Bo Bardi invited fellow architect Edson Elito to collaborate. The latter reports:

When we started the project and throughout its design, Lina and I sought to implement Zé Celso's scenic and spatial proposals. There was a healthy and sometimes complex process of integrating cultural and aesthetic differences: on the one hand, we architects with our modernist training, the concepts of formal simplicity, the purity of elements, less is more, constructive rationalism, asceticism and, on the other, the theatre of Zé Celso, with his symbolism, iconoclasm, the baroque, cannibalism, emotion, and desire for physical contact between actors and audience, the 'te-ato'.<sup>5</sup> (Bo Bardi and Elito 1999, 6).



Bo Bardi's design was based on the concept of a street, starting in Jaceguay Street, where the original theatre was situated, extending along the wall to the north towards Japurá Street, a 9 × 50 square metre building. A section of the stage slopes to accommodate the 3-metre difference in height from one end to the other. The audience is seated on hard wooden chairs arranged on narrow pipe scaffolding – painted macaw blue – along the entire length of the exterior wall of the original building, facing windows that reveal an outside garden. The stage is covered with 1.5 metres of dirt covered by removable boards of laminated wood. There is a retractable roof 13 metres above the stage. Considering the theatre in ecological terms, the space is a great scenic box where actors, audience and technicians are in direct contact. Bo Bardi's proposal explores how performance and architecture encounter one another within an 'expanded field' of spatial and theatrical practice.

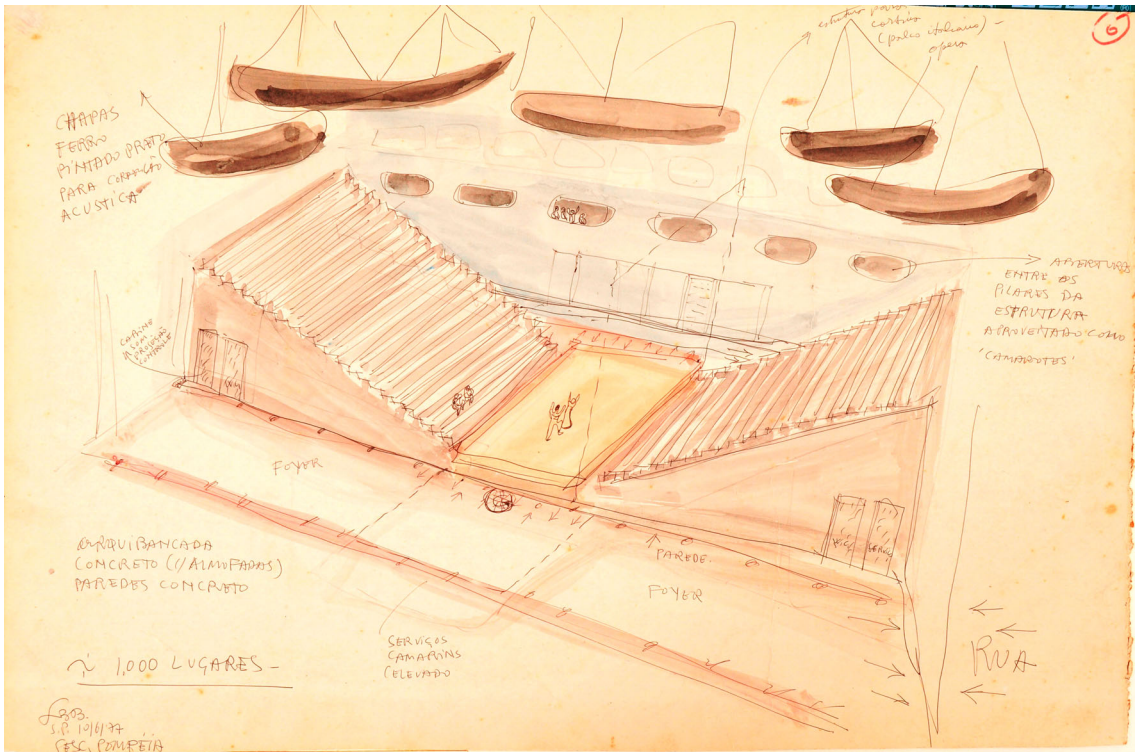
## 2. A warehouse shed transformed into a theatre: the SESC Pompéia Theatre (1982–1986)

When Bo Bardi designed the Leisure Centre for the Social Service of Commerce, SESC Pompéia, in the old Mauser Drum Factory in São Paulo, she tried to preserve the memory of the former working conditions there. In the pre-existing sheds of the 1938 SESC Pompéia complex, she kept everything that signified the remains of the factory, such as visible brick walls, the concrete structure, as well as the cobblestones and ceramic roofing tiles. The theatre occupies one of the long sheds of the former factory. Her concept represented a strong critique of her colleagues at that particular moment, since she challenged the rationalist architectural model. The innovative theatre space she proposed, like the Oficina Theatre, was a traverse stage with seating banks on opposite sides of the rectangular stage and balconies along the two cantilevered wings extending along the length of the building.

The original watercolour for the theatrical space of the SESC Leisure Centre suggests an intense involvement of spectators with the onstage action, due to the open stage space between the opposite seating banks. The sketch also embodies the dual concept of the design that aimed to transform the theatre into a place of entertainment without abandoning the harsh reality that the building had once been a workplace. Bo Bardi is concerned with the realization of an existential space, through the formation of 'lived places' for theatrical performances (Figure 3).

In this theatre, one of many designed by Bo Bardi, architecture is an active form of communication with the public, arousing the audience's capacity to experience the theatrical space. It is also a work of art as expressive as the performances on the stage, as evidenced by the initial draft of the project. When designing the stage, Bo Bardi worked to eliminate everything that could remind one of a theatrical magic box, and she created a naked stage. Faithful to this spirit, scene changes always happen in full view of the audience. For the architect, the project had to maintain the concept of transparency and communication, which she sustained in all her architectural works. She built a stage for cultural citizenship exercised in its fullest form, without the typical balconies or boxes of the proscenium arch theatre that separated the different social classes. Bo Bardi defended the theory that theatre is life and that an 'open' and naked stage can offer the spectator the possibility of 'inventing' and joining the 'existential act' that represents the theatrical spectacle, as she designed in her first sketch.

One of the internal streets of the factory that gave access to other pavilions was covered with a wooden trussed roof frame design and glass tiles, while the space that



**Figure 3.** The SESC Pompéia Theatre. Watercolour by Lina Bo Bardi, 1982 (094ARQd0008@Instituto Lina Bo e P.M.Bardi/Henrique Luz). In this watercolour sketch for the theatre, Bo Bardi includes notes explaining that stands would be concrete, with hard wooden seats without padding, for approximately 1000 people. Walls would be exposed concrete, gaps between the pillars of the structure would be seating boxes for spectators, and iron plates painted black should hang from the ceiling for acoustic correction.

became the theatre foyer differed from the traditional theatre lobby by creating an open venue accessible throughout the day as a design museum. Benches encouraged the use of this space for informal gatherings, creating a true place of encounters. Above this foyer, Bo Bardi designed the dressing rooms, light and sound booths. Appropriate to the demographic of the neighbourhood, all social classes were intermixed in the stands, built for workers and their families, but opened to the public in general, as was the entire project for the SESC complex.

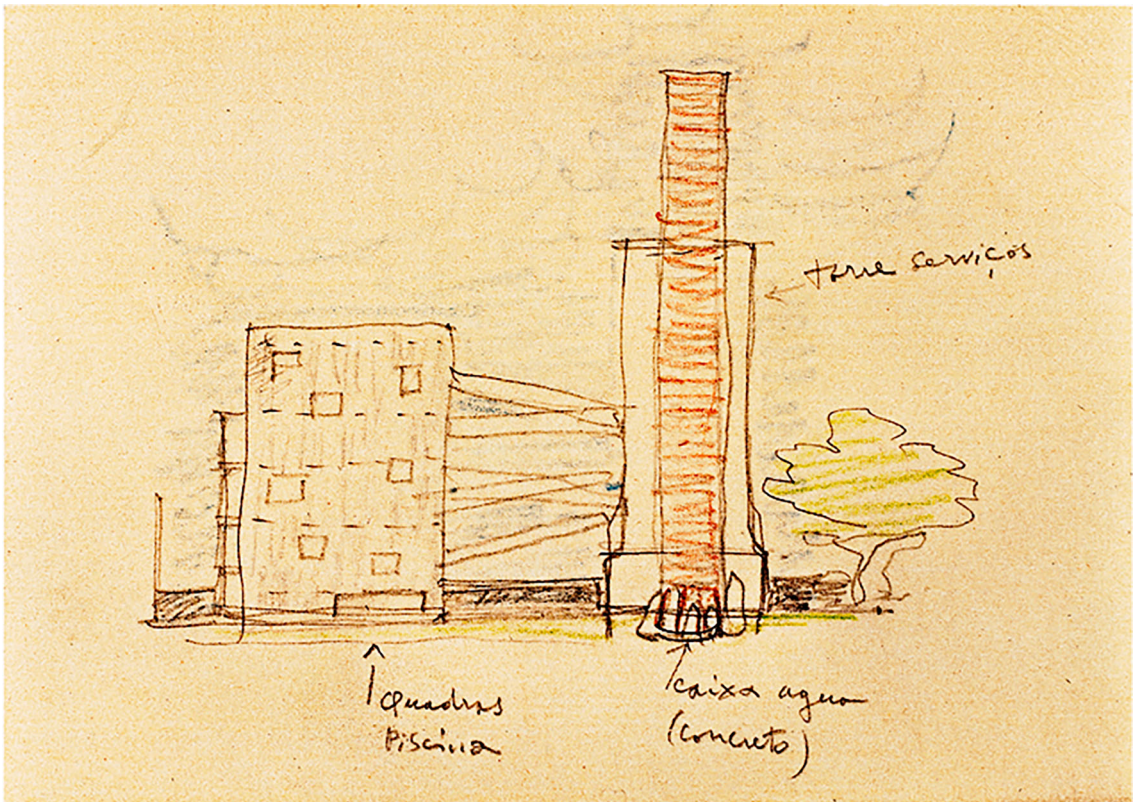
The ability to offer incentives for the reinvention of everyday life is characteristic of Bo Bardi's work, which also proposed strangeness and discomfort to engage users more deeply in the experience of art. According to her, as Brazilian culture did not have the 'cult of beauty' to the same extent as the cultures of European elites, she explored the 'ugly' at the SESC theatre more for its ability to express its message than for its aesthetic (Bo Bardi 1993, 241). In addition to enhancing this lack of formal rationality in the Leisure Centre, she added three huge and unconventional concrete towers connected by aerial walkways to house the sports sector for the workers of all social classes. One is a symbolic but false smoke tower – a reminder of a factory – and the others, two huge concrete buildings, integrate the pavilions of the old factory as the Sports Centre (Figure 4). In this way,

Bo Bardi created performative architecture and the different buildings function as actors on the 'stage' of the complex.

Bo Bardi's drawings show how she transformed a former industrial structure, resulting in one of her most successful built works, encouraging the workers associated with the Social Service of Commerce to reimagine the space by means of shapes and colour. Here individuals can abandon their everyday routine, and be transported into a world of dreams and enjoyment. The tectonic aspects of the building also contribute to this phenomenon, particularly with regard to the details explaining the environment and expressing its industrial character, but also denoting Bo Bardi's political purpose to increase the self-esteem of workers.

### 3. An old *sobrado* readapted as the Gregorio de Mattos Theatre

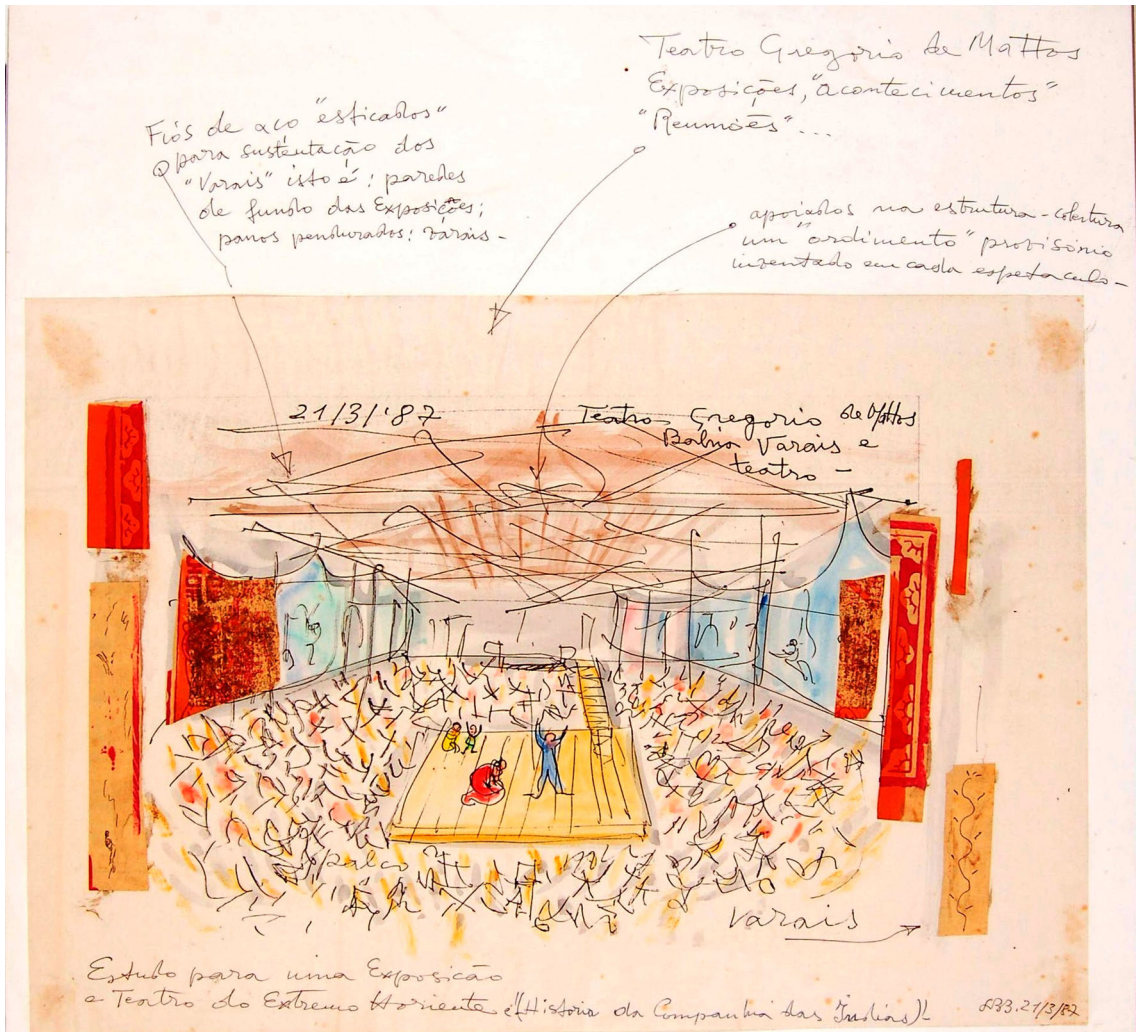
Implemented within a comprehensive urban rehabilitation project called the Barroquinha Cultural Project, the Gregorio de Mattos Theatre was built in Salvador under Bo Bardi's supervision. The watercolour, which she calls *Clotheslines and theater* in one of the



**Figure 4.** The SESC Pompéia Centre for Sports. Detail of a drawing for the Sports Centre by Lina Bo Bardi (094ARQd0323@Instituto Lina Bo e P.M.Bardi/Henrique Luz). The lower block houses the courts and the swimming pool, while the false smoke stack functions as a service tower including staircases, lifts, gymnastic rooms and cloakrooms as well as a concrete water tank at the base.

notes, painted on 21 March 1987 (Figure 5), symbolizes a 'poetics' of informality and human exchange. The auditorium can assume various configurations as the seats are folding wooden chairs that can be arranged according to the needs of the director. This drawing indicates how Bo Bardi's spatial thinking can bring into effect many kinds of performances.

The sketch reintroduces the arena stage, but unlike SESC Pompéia, Bo Bardi proposes a rectangular stage surrounded by flexible wooden chairs. Rods support oriental tapestries that hang from the ceiling. Even the roof of the building – an eighteenth century *sobrado*<sup>6</sup> – was completely replaced by a framework that overlays the space with a sense of the



**Figure 5.** The Gregorio de Mattos Theatre, Salvador, Bahia. 'Study for an Exhibition and Theatre of the Far East History of the Company of the Indies.' Watercolour by Lina Bo Bardi, 21 March 1987 (126ARQ-d0053@Instituto Lina Bo e P.M.Bardi/Henrique Luz). As she explains in the sketch, 'stretched' steel wires shall support the 'poles', since the walls of the auditorium are covered with fabric tissues hanging from those poles. She also proposes 'a temporary grid supported by the covering structure; which could be transformed at every show'.

ephemeral through architectural structures reminiscent of the tents and the nomadic life of the circus. Bo Bardi perfectly understood the relationship of the human body to its environment, advocating that visual, tactile, olfactory and auditory sensations are vital to experiencing architecture. In this sketch, things are loosely outlined, often highly stylized with very little detail, but these few basic shapes, the chairs, the performers on stage, proportions and body language show a confident style of drawing. The sketch also shows that an eloquent watercolour may evoke the sensibility of an intensely 'experienced' space.

The sketches Bo Bardi drew for a loose spiral staircase in the middle of the space, supported by a sturdy pillar, demonstrate the creative process for the most symbolic element of this design for a theatre. In fact, the unusual form of this and of other staircases is a constant feature in her architectural design, not only in theatres but also in homes and museums (Figure 6).<sup>7</sup>

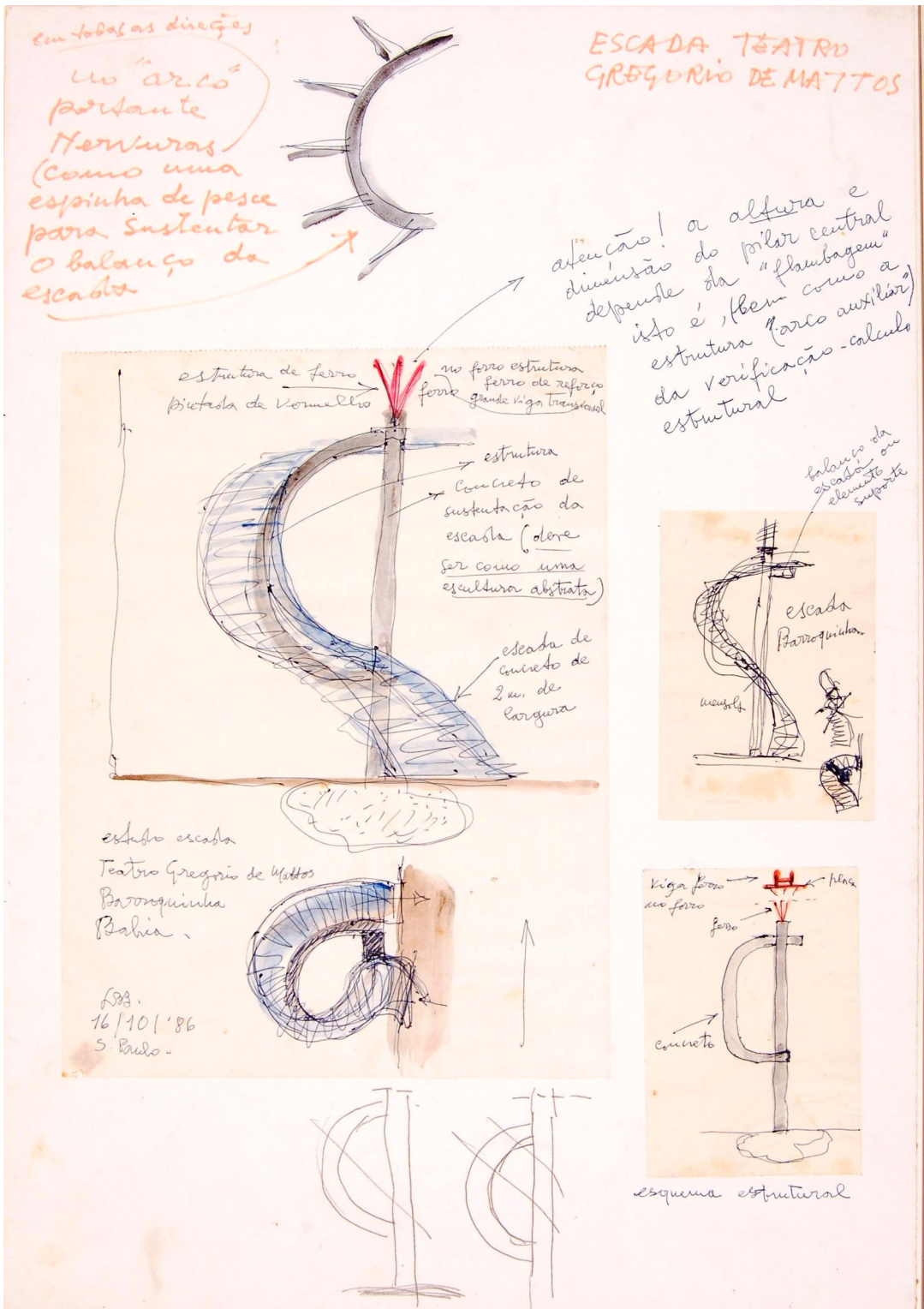
In these watercolour sketches, the steps are designed around a central pillar – a red concrete structure – but conceived as a real sculpture. Bo Bardi's notes indicate the symbolic value that the staircase element has in the design of the Gregorio de Mattos theatre. Even though the sketches were done freehand, they still reveal her structural concerns as she thought that art and 'techne' were inseparable in good architecture. After the structure was finished, this innovative and totemic staircase linking the two storeys of the old *sobrado* became not only a functional element, but also the emblem of this theatre, as it is recognized as the most iconic and sculptural element of the building.

#### 4. Watercolour plans and sections for the Polytheama Theatre

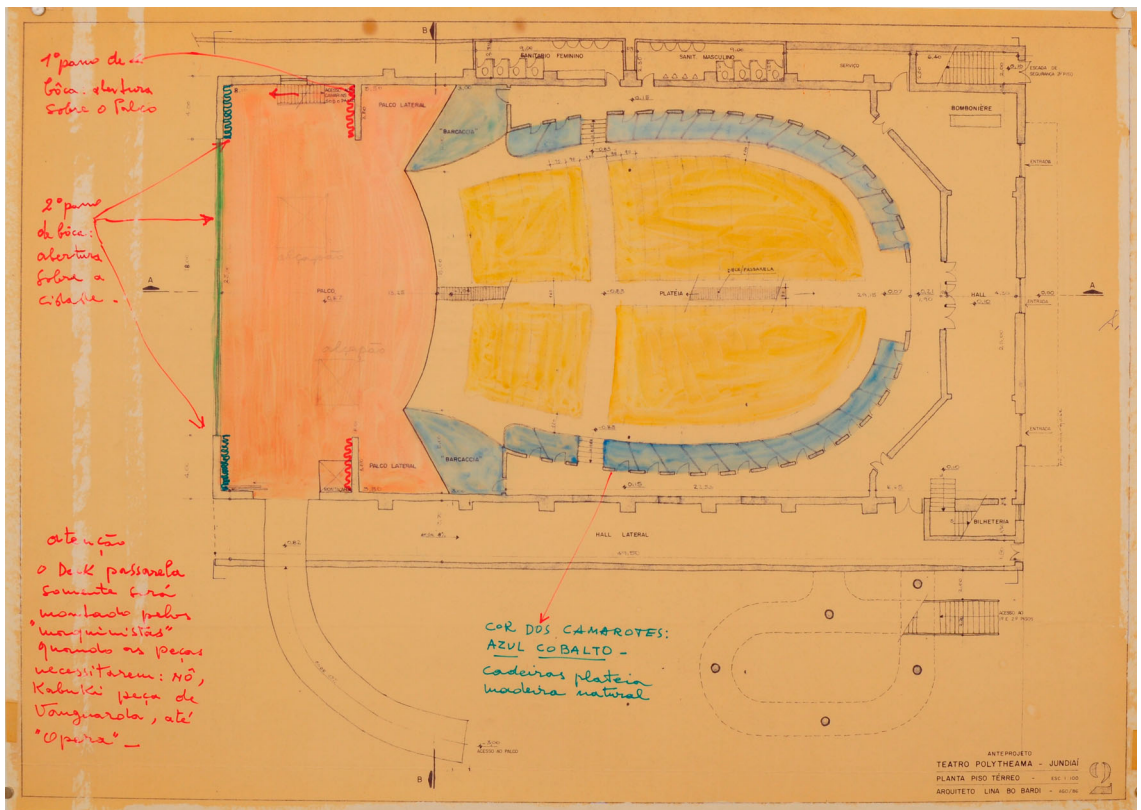
The former Polytheama, a proscenium arch theatre opened in December 1911, used to present theatre, cinema, music, operettas and circus shows. The original theatre contained a circus ring, located in the space of the audience seating, as well as a huge scenic box, which enabled its transformation into a circus hall when necessary. Closed for renovation in 1927, the auditorium received new seats and the modernization of electrical installations, and, on this occasion, new independent entrances to the three floors were created. The audience was distributed among the stalls and boxes on the ground floor, boxes in the mezzanine circle, and balconies on the top floor, which were rebuilt before its reopening in 1928. This also met the demand to show films. Closed again in 1969, the Polytheama Theatre became part of the municipal cultural heritage and, in 1985, the government invited Bo Bardi to oversee the building restoration project. She decided that the refurbished theatre would become Jundiaí's most iconic monument (Figure 7).<sup>8</sup>

While an architectural plan is a two-dimensional view that shows the use and interconnections among the projected spaces, Bo Bardi introduced notations that indicate how she ideally visualized the space in *three dimensions*: the opening of the scenic box to the outside, the colour of the seats, and the dimensions studied for the adaptation of each space.

Consciously or unconsciously, in her studies for the refurbishment of this eclectic proscenium arch theatre, Bo Bardi adopted an old Corbusian proposal presented at the International Conference on Architecture and Dramatic Arts, held in Paris in 1948, and published in 1950 as *Architecture et Dramaturgie*. At this time, architects, set designers



**Figure 6.** The Gregorio de Mattos Theatre, Salvador, Bahia. Sketches for the stairs. Watercolour by Lina Bo Bardi, 16 October 1986 (126ARQd0054@Instituto Lina Bo e P.M.Bardi/Henrique Luz). The architect's main observations in these sketches refer to the concrete structure of the staircase, which had to be like an abstract sculpture, as well as the structural scheme and the mooring of the central pillar on the upper slab. She adds that the height and dimension of the central pillar depend on the 'buckling', which must be checked by structural 'calculation'. She also draws a kind of structural 'rib' to support the cantilevered steps.

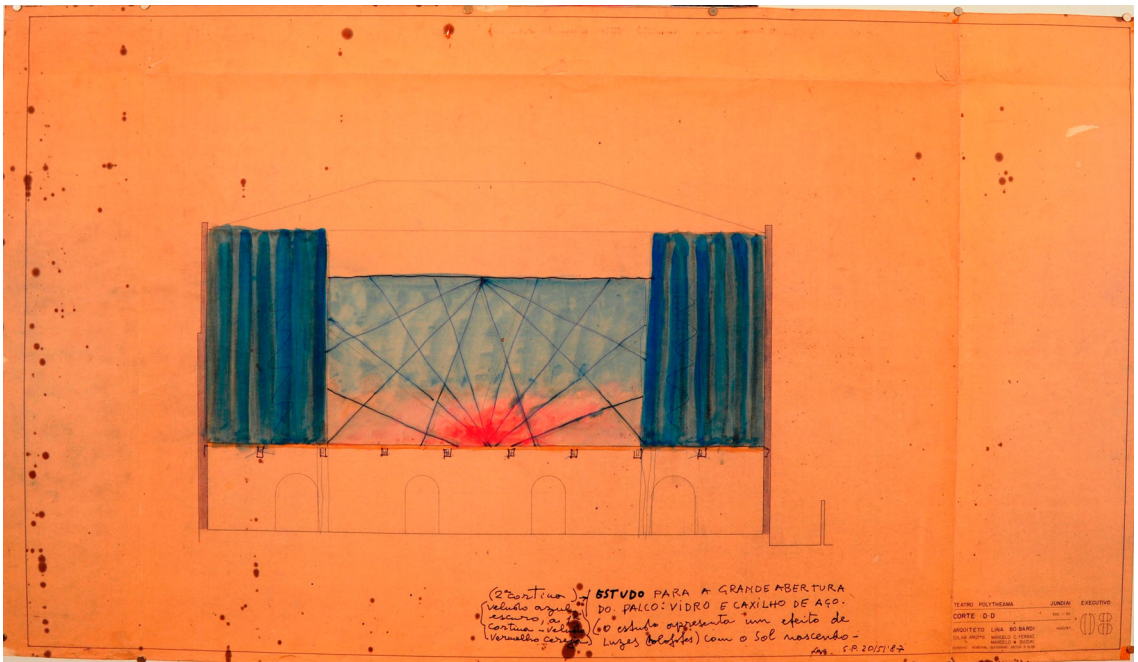


**Figure 7.** The Polytheama Theatre, Jundiáí/SP. Technical plan of the ground floor with posterior gouache painting and notes explaining the project. Lina Bo Bardi, 1987 (120ARQd059@Instituto Lina Bo e P.M.Bardi/Henrique Luz). In this drawing, Bo Bardi explains the following: '1st curtain: opening over the stage', '2nd curtain: opening onto the city', 'audience seats in natural wood', 'boxes seats in cobalt blue', also adding a note, 'attention: the walkway deck will only be assembled by the "machinists" when needed: Noh, Kabuki, avant-garde plays and even opera'.

and theatre theorists were discussing what would be the most effective architectural design for theatre buildings in post-war Europe. At the conference, Le Corbusier argued that the stage – what he referred to as a 'box of miracles' – presented a challenge for architects and suggested new ways of thinking about the space. 'We can open the back of the stage to the outside and have an outdoor amphitheater for sunny days' (Le Corbusier 1950, 182).

At that time, Bo Bardi was already living in Brazil, but she constantly received European publications, as she herself had been a publisher in Italy. As indicated in the plans and sections drawn in 1987, the audacious architectural solution did not materialize in the refurbishment of the Polytheama Theatre (Figure 8). However, the late architect Oscar Niemeyer applied this solution in some theatres he designed, opening the stage to the exterior public space at Raul Cortez Theatre in Duque de Caxias (2006) and at the Oscar Niemeyer Public Theatre in Niterói (2007) (Lima 2017).

The watercolour and the notes explaining the project make clear that Bo Bardi actually proposed the technical solution for opening the stage to the exterior, exactly as suggested



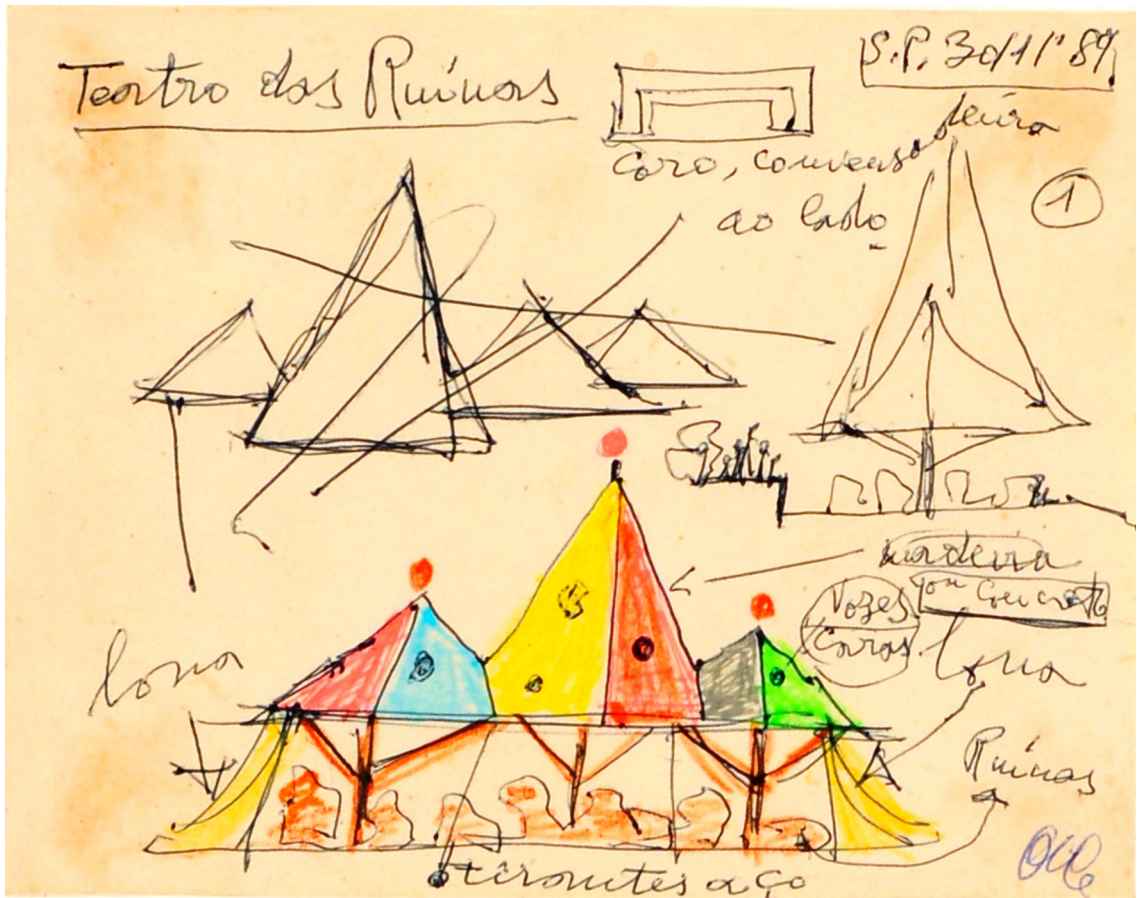
**Figure 8.** The Polytheama Theatre, Jundiaí/SP. Stage section. Lina Bo Bardi, August 1986 (120ARQ-d0067@Instituto Lina Bo e P.M.Bardi/Henrique Luz). As she notes on the drawing, this section is a study for the 'grand opening of the stage with a glass and steel frame (The study features a light/spot-light effect with the sun rising from the bottom of the open stage)'. The architect indicates the material specifications such as the '2nd curtain in dark blue velvet' and the '1st curtain in cherry red velvet'.

by Le Corbusier. However, this inventive and democratic scenic project was not followed through exactly as she intended by her ex-students who carried out the refurbishment years after these drawings were made (Lima 2009). Bo Bardi died before the beginning of the restoration project, but the architects Ferraz, Fanucci and Suzuki, partners in the Brazil Architecture Practice and her former trainees, undertook the refurbishment of the Polytheama Theatre, whose guiding principles had been established by Bo Bardi to reinstate the popular and versatile atmosphere of that particular building.

## 5. The first sketches for the Ruins Theatre

The first sketches for the installation of the Ruins Theatre in Campinas were made on 30 November 1989 and show Bo Bardi's idea to design a theatre featuring a circus façade under three cable-stayed structures and tarpaulins (Figure 9). The proposal was also intended to preserve the ruins of an early nineteenth-century mansion house; unfortunately, this project was not completed.

One of her drawings (in blue ink) for the Ruins Theatre reveals the intention to create an early Greek *skênè*, using canvas and rope. The freehand drawing of this scenic box illustrates a lightweight structure executed in iron tubes and covered with three pyramids forming a wooden roof: one higher in the centre and two lower laterally, on both sides. These structures present circular openings allowing performers' voices to reach the



**Figure 9.** Sketch with notes and proposals for the Ruins Theatre, Campinas/SP. Drawing by Lina Bo Bardi, 30 November 1989 (139ARQd0001@Instituto Lina Bo e P.M.Bardi/Henrique Luz). Collaborators Marcelo Ferraz and Marcelo Suzuki. She specified wood or concrete (on the roofs) and canvas supported by steel straps (on the four sides of the rectangle). She also provided small circular openings in the roofs so that the voices of the chorus could be heard by those seated in the upper levels of the auditorium.

audience in the upper part of the theatre. Along the four sides of the rectangle, there would be no walls, just canvas. The proposed *arquitetura povera* (as she described it in Bo Bardi [1986] 1999, 28) housed the public in simple stands under a thatched roof, a solution that indicates a respect for the remnants of the old house and the existing slave quarters on the site. Although it was never realized, her drawing style and her annotations for the Ruins Theatre also link back to the idea of strangeness and discomfort that she successfully combined in the Oficina and SESC Theatres (Lima 2009).

## Conclusion

Bo Bardi's watercolours and drawings have immediacy as tools of communication in terms of what they can tell us about the spaces she idealized for theatre. They evidence how she

distanced herself from the spatial rationalism and drawing styles of the Architectural School of Rome, from which she graduated in 1939, and reveal how she incorporated local culture into her theatre projects using the experience and knowledge acquired during the years she spent in the Northeast of Brazil (1958–1963), where she came into contact with the rich Afro-Brazilian crafts and natural materials.

Combining aesthetics with social commitment, Bo Bardi always designed dynamic spaces with the aim of fully engaging the audience. Her experiences as a scenographer at the Oficina Theatre (with director José Celso Martinez Corrêa) and her research on Brecht contributed towards the materialization of a 'real imagination'. This is evidenced by the fact that, with the exception of her drawings for the refurbishment of the Polytheama Theatre, a proscenium arch theatre, in all her other architectural sketches for theatre there is no space to create theatrical illusions and the stage is revealed to the audience in all its dimensions. Freed from the spatial constraints of the proscenium, her designs facilitate maximum interaction between actors and spectators.

As a general rule, the interpretative relationship between drawings and the future buildings they describe is heavily dependent on additional technical information and specifications. However, Bo Bardi's sketches visibly demonstrate the integration of one system of representation into another. Her drawings are full of observations, which describe the materials to be used in the designed space, give a sense of volume, indicate the treatment of surfaces, and even communicate her ideas about architecture. By adding value to sketches before the final project design is finished, in addition to plans and sections, her drawings suggest the long series of procedures necessary in the realization of any architectural project. Bo Bardi's uniqueness, however, can be seen in the way her drawings and sketches for the theatre place an evaluation of embodied experience, the social exchange between audience, performers and space, at the centre of architectural discourse, and, as such, her ideal theatre spaces constitute a distinctive architectural poetics.

## Notes

1. The Glass House, where she lived with her husband for more than 40 years, is currently the headquarters of the Lina Bo and Pietro Maria Bardi Institute.
2. For background on the theatre, see Bo Bardi and Elito 1999.
3. Council for the Defence of Historical, Archaeological, Artistic and Tourist Heritage.
4. Bo Bardi had worked with Zé Celso since 1969, when he invited her to make the set design for Brecht's *In the Jungle of the Cities* at the old Oficina Theatre.
5. A concept developed by José Celso that aims to achieve the total integration of the spectator with the theatre.
6. 'Sobrado' is a two-storey construction built as a dwelling in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
7. One of the most amazing stairs projected by Bo Bardi was designed for the refurbishing and restoration of the Solar do Unhão in Salvador, carried out with an ox carts docking system.
8. Jundiaí is a city in the state of São Paulo and is about 60 km from the capital.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Evelyn Furquim Werneck Lima** holds a BA in Architecture and Urbanism, a MA in Visual Arts, and a PhD in Social History (UFRJ/EHESS). She is a Full Professor at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro/PostGraduate Studies Programme in Performing Arts and is a researcher for the National Council of Technological and Scientific Development (CNPq). She has published a variety of articles on Theatre Architecture and History of Architecture, she is the leader of the Theatrical Spaces Studies Research Group and of the Memory and Space Research Group, and is a member of the Theatre Architecture Working Group (IFTR).

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