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RINO LEVI AND THE EVOLUTION OF BRAZILIAN MODERNISM

Jitomir Theodoro da Silva

Rino Levi (1901–1965) was one of the pioneers of the modern movement in Brazil, yet his buildings are virtually unknown abroad, and have not received much attention even in Brazil. His work deserves to be better known, not only for its inherent merit but because it reflects with such clarity the evolution of Brazilian modernism.

After Levi finished his schooling in Brazil, his family decided to send him to Italy to continue his studies, for there were no graduate courses in architecture in Sao Paulo. He went first to Milan, where he attended the Politecnico for two years, then to Rome, where he took a degree in architecture in 1926. Despite the prevailing conservatism of European architectural training, the University of Rome gave Levi the chance to study with some brilliant teachers, in particular Marcello Piacentini (another Brazilian student of his was Gregori Warchavchick).

In October 1925 Levi sent a letter from Italy to the local newspaper, *O Estado de Sao Paulo*. The letter, one of the earliest modernist manifestos in Brazil, begins with the declaration that 'Important changes are now taking place in the arts, especially in architecture. Everything leads us to believe that a new era is about to begin, if it is not already on the way.' It goes on to advocate a 'simple, practical and economical architecture', disparaging the imitation of classicism and suggesting that architects should draw their inspiration from the 'classical spirit' rather than 'classical forms' — although the use of ornament is acceptable if it is 'sincere and boldly expressed' (a contradiction which reveals the relative immaturity of Levi's ideas). The letter also expresses admiration for Piacentini's approach to urban design, particularly his rejection of monotonous planning grids, and his belief that the design of a building should be related to its surroundings.

Levi resolved to put his new ideas into practice on his return to Brazil. In 1927 he established an office in Sao Paulo, at a time when there were very few architectural firms and most buildings were put up by builders. During the first few years of his practice Levi was mainly occupied with building refurbishment and the design of small houses and exhibition pavilions. He was often closely involved in the construction of his designs, and this gave him opportunities to experiment with new building materials and techniques.

Levi's Italian education — in particular his admiration for Piacentini — was a decisive influence on his career, especially during these early years, when his buildings were simple and sober, their forms conceived in terms of rectangular solids. The Medici house of 1935, with its almost pure volumes and its raised external walls concealing a pitched tiled roof, is typical of this period. Characteristically, every detail of the building, down to the window sashes, as well as the furniture, was designed by Levi himself.

Le Corbusier visited Brazil twice, first in 1929 and again in 1936, when he gave a series of lectures and participated in the design of the Ministry of Health and Education headquarters (1936–42). This building was to become a landmark of Brazilian modernism, and it was followed during the early 1940s by a whole series of modernist buildings in Rio de Janeiro. The situation was rather different in Sao Paulo, where Levi was one of very few modernist architects. In 1937, he entered a competition for the Santos Dumont Airport in Rio. Although Marcelo and Milton Roberto won the commission, Levi's proposal was not very different from theirs in terms of its rationalist approach. Certain formal elements of Levi's design are also reminiscent of Michelucci's Florence railway station of 1934, particularly in his use of glass.

In spite of this setback, Levi's office had by the end of the 1930s gained a considerable reputation in the world of Brazilian architecture. Roberto de Cerqueira Cesar, a young architect-engineer graduated from the Escola Politecnica de Sao Paulo, joined the practice in 1941, and in the same year they were commissioned to design a luxury hotel, the Hotel Excelsior, combined with a 2,000-seat cinema, the Cine Ipiranga (Levi had already designed a number of other large film theatres in Sao Paulo). This type of combination was not without precedent: Adler and Sullivan's design of 1887 for an 'Auditorium Building' included not only an opera house and a hotel but an office block as well. In the case of the Hotel Excelsior a daring structure had to be devised in order to avoid the need for columns inside the cinema auditorium. The entrance lobby of the cinema occupies most of the ground floor of the building, with the hotel rising above it. The treatment of the building façades always reflects the function of the interior spaces, so that the fenestration of the taller second and third floors, which contain meeting and dining rooms, is correspondingly taller than that of the storeys above, which contain the bedrooms.

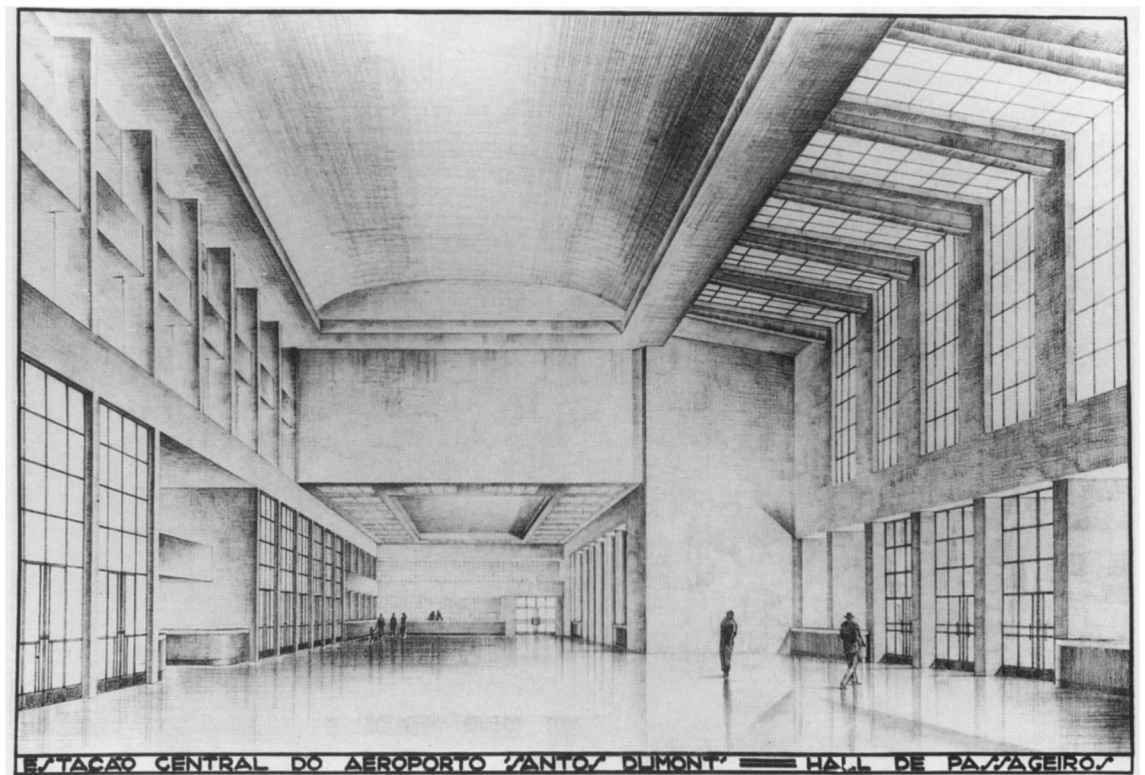
Sao Paulo has changed considerably since the hotel and cinema were built, and the once fashionable city centre is now in a state of decline. The magnificent auditorium of the cinema has been divided into two smaller ones, and on the top floor of the hotel a splendid ballroom with a panoramic view of Sao Paulo now serves as a storeroom.

In 1941 Levi and his partner also designed a school for girls, the Instituto Sedes Sapientiae. The school is housed in three separate blocks, each with a different function (an idea which must have originated with Gropius's Bauhaus design of 1926) — a classroom building, the library and auditorium, and a dormitory. A concrete portico joins the three blocks, and the open spaces between them contain gardens. The tropical climate was an important consideration in the design, and ample provision was made for shaded

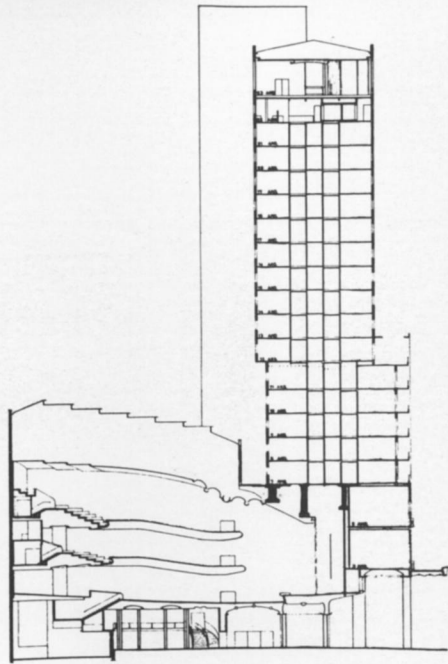
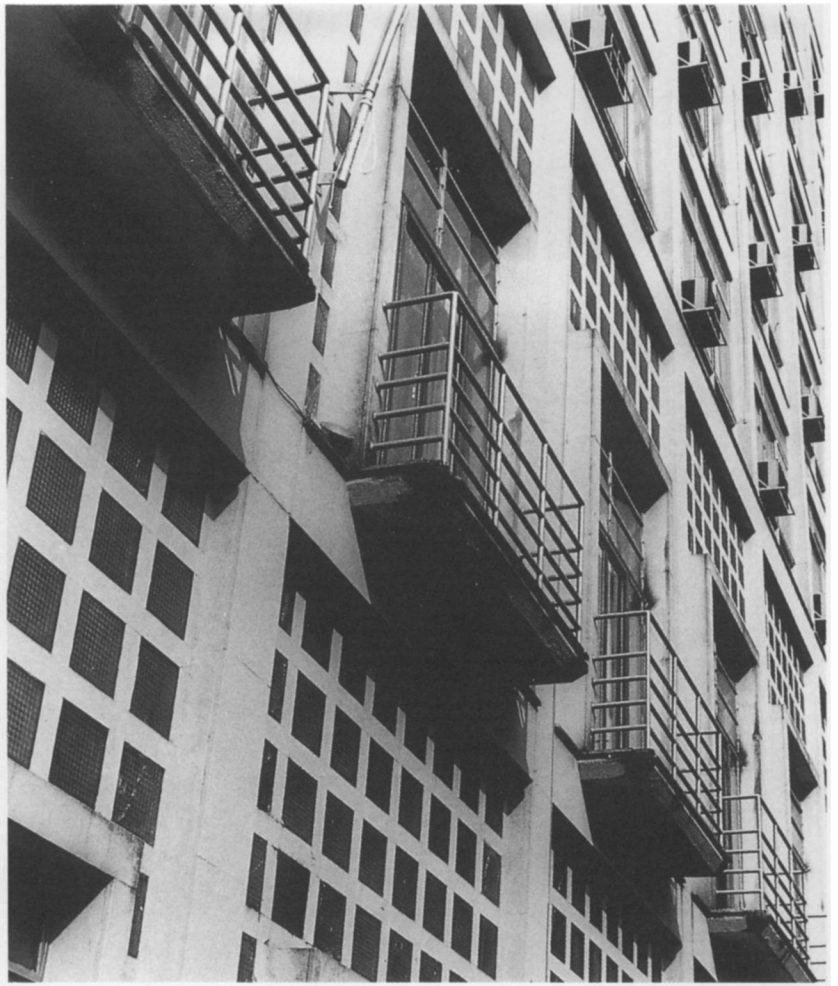
MEDICI HOUSE, 1935



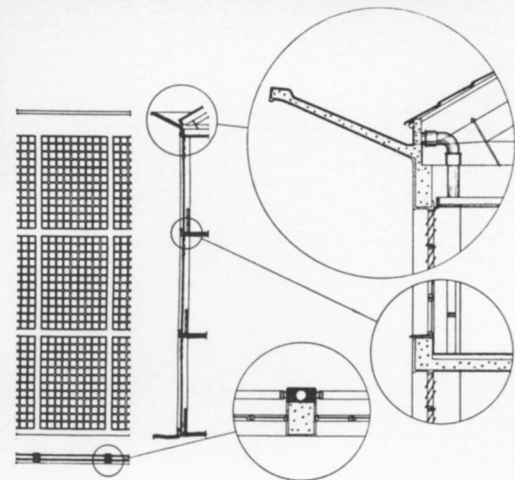
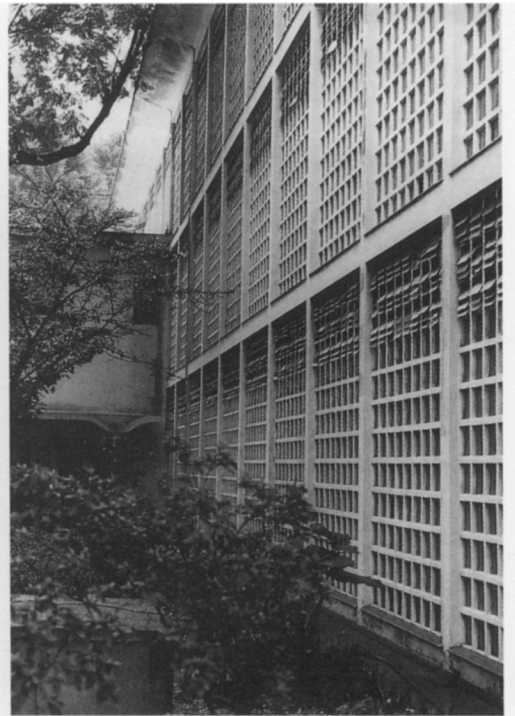
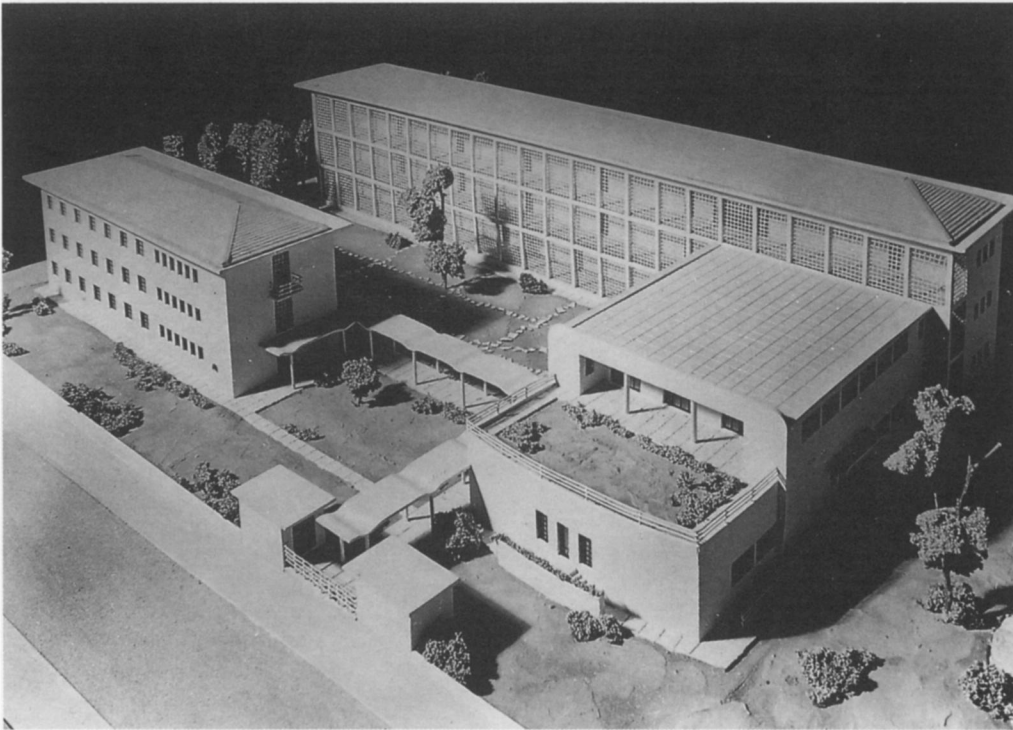
SANTOS DUMONT AIRPORT COMPETITION ENTRY, 1937



CINE IPIRANGA & HOTEL EXCELSIOR, 1941
Exterior view and detail (the original balcony
openings have been filled in with windows);
section; and cinema entrance lobby.



INSTITUTO SEDES SAPIENTIAE, 1941
Model; open portico linking the three buildings;
and exterior view, staircase and construction
details of classroom-building.

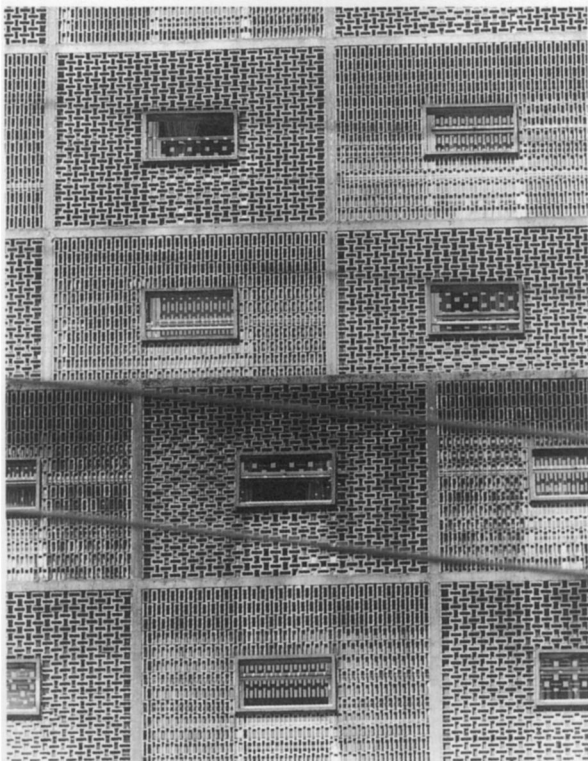
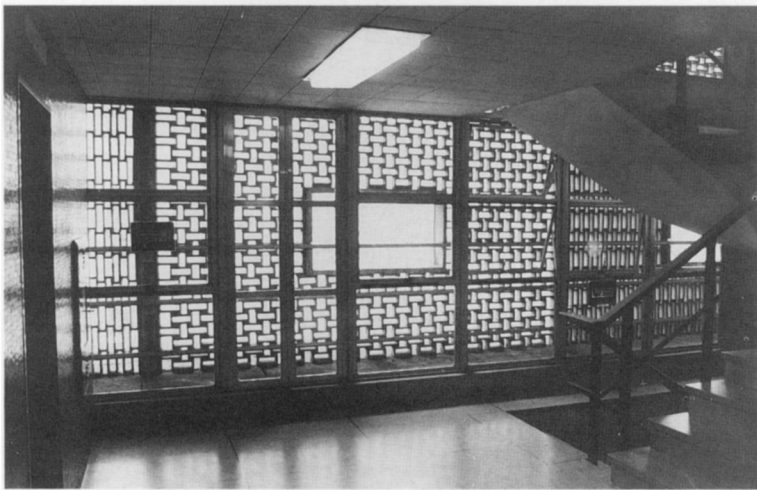
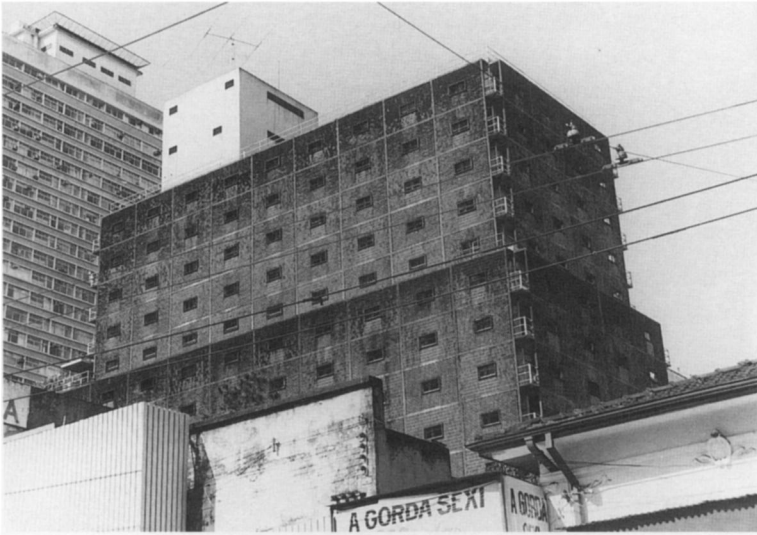


CONCÓRDIA BUILDING, 1955



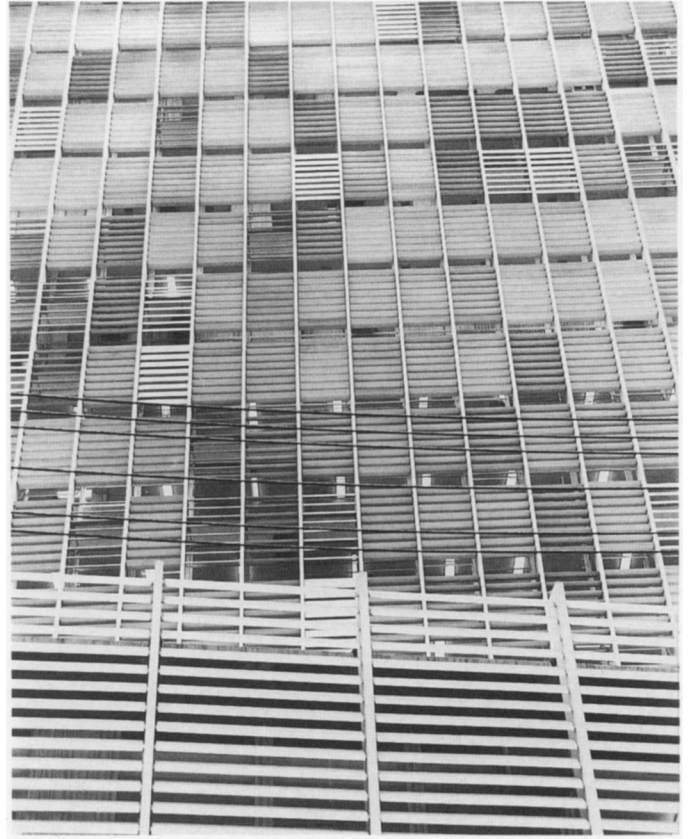
PLAVINIL ELCLOR BUILDING, 1961

Exterior view of the building, and interior view and exterior detail of the cobogós.



SOUTH AMERICAN BANK TOWER, 1962

Detail of the metallic brise-soleil, and general view showing the different types of brise-soleil that were used.



outdoor seating areas. Only one of the blocks has a flat roof, while the other two have traditional tiled roofs and overhanging eaves more suited to the rainy climate.

Because the school was built during the Second World War, there was considerable difficulty in obtaining building materials, particularly metal components for windows and doors, and therefore Levi conceived the idea of using wood and concrete for window sashes and surrounds. The main staircase windows, for example, are composed of small pieces of glass and concrete (a device already used in the breakfast room of the Hotel Excelsior).

By this time the Levi office was one of the most successful in Sao Paulo. Its administrative organization had become large and efficient enough to handle the growing number of commissions during the building boom which accompanied the city's rapid expansion during the 1940s, and less organized colleagues began to seek Levi's advice on the best way to run an office.

In 1942 the American architectural critic Philip Goodwin travelled to Brazil to select buildings for an exhibition of Brazilian modern architecture at the New York Museum of Modern Art in the following year. Architects from Rio dominated the show, and Levi was one of the few Sao Paulo architects to be included. The exhibition was to establish the heroes of the modern movement in Brazil, and it also marked the beginning of an international interest in Brazilian modernism — what might be called the 'Golden Years of Brazilian Architecture in European Journals'. The *Architectural Review*, for example, published a whole series of articles about Brazilian architecture between 1943 and 1956, and Levi's Gomes House appeared in twenty-three foreign journals. After 1960, on the other hand, very little was published abroad.

Levi joined CIAM in 1945, and through it became a close friend and correspondent of Sigfried Giedion, who was instrumental in spreading the fame of Brazilian modernism. Around this time Levi also began to promote the idea of an association of Brazilian architects, which led to the founding in Sao Paulo of the Institute of Brazilian Architects. He led the team of architects who designed the headquarters of the new institute, and for a very long time his own office occupied the seventh floor.

The decade of the 1950s marks the beginning of Levi's architectural maturity, a period when he abandoned Italian rationalism in favour of an approach closer to that of the Rio modernists. The young architect Luis Roberto Carvalho Franco joined the office as

a partner in 1952, collaborating in the design of the Concórdia building of 1955, a commercial building near the centre of Sao Paulo. Here, as in the earlier hotel and cinema, the treatment of the glazed elevations is varied according to internal use, while movable *brise-soleil* are used on façades exposed to direct sunlight. Levi incorporated a volumetric joke on the glazed southern elevation, where part of the wall is detached to reveal the services block.

Levi's office continued to experiment with the *brise-soleil*. The Plavinil Elclor building has a false façade of *cobogós* (fixed *brise-soleil* of hollow ceramic bricks), which protects the totally glazed walls behind (Lucio Costa used this same device in his design for a block of flats at Guinle Park). The superior quality of this building resides not in any architectural innovation, but in the finely balanced system of internal illumination and air circulation, eliminating the need for artificial lighting and air-conditioning.

The *brise-soleil* was also a prominent feature of the South American Bank Tower of 1962. The building consists of two blocks, a horizontal one containing a large banking hall, and a tower which contains offices. Volumetrically it is reminiscent of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's Lever House, New York, of 1952, which influenced a whole series of office blocks in Sao Paulo during the 1960s. However, the Bank building reflects a number of exclusively Brazilian concerns. The lower block, for example, is protected by a *brise-soleil* mesh set forward from the building, with each elevation varied according to the degree of exposure to the sun.

This building was one of the last designs executed by Levi himself, who died suddenly in 1965, not long after completing a competition scheme for the Santo André Town Hall. After Levi's death his office was joined by the architect Paulo J. V. Bruna and, more recently, Antonio C. Sant'Anna jun., and it continues to be active on the Brazilian scene. Although there is now a major commitment to industrial design, the office remains dedicated to the standards established by Levi, in particular his preoccupation with detail.

This article is dedicated to Ivone Levi. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of my friends Beatriz C. M. da Silva, Eurico R. Francisco, Fabio M. Goncalves and Gladys Surani, as well as Rino Levi Associates for their kindness in allowing me to make use of photographs from their files. Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs were taken in February–April 1988. The translation of this article is by Intra-intérpretes e Tradutores.