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Oscar Niemeyer:

1907–2012

Styliane Philippou

As the pre-eminent figure of one of the most innovative and irreverent national interpretations of architectural Modernism, and a radical critic of orthodox Modernist aesthetic formulae and moralising ideologies, Oscar Niemeyer occupies a unique place in the history of architecture. The prolific designer of more than six hundred buildings and tireless explorer of the structural and formal possibilities of reinforced concrete over more than seven decades died on 5 December 2012, days before his 105th birthday. On his ninetieth birthday in 1997, Eric Hobsbawm observed: 'It is impossible to imagine Brazil in the twentieth century without Oscar Niemeyer.' His bold formal experiments and innovative strategies for articulating space and programme were both forged by and helped forge the modern image of Brazil.

Born Oscar Ribeiro de Almeida de Niemeyer Soares Filho, in the hot tropical summer in Rio de Janeiro, Niemeyer frequently stressed his 'diverse ethnic roots', that is, his Brazilianness, in accordance with the national ideology of ethnic amalgamation [1]. Taking advantage of Brazil's advanced reinforced-concrete technology in the first decades of the twentieth century, and working closely with highly-committed structural engineers, he found in concrete an ideal means to achieve an architecture of 'spectacle [...] plastic freedom and [...] inventiveness' rooted in Brazil's native traditions and tropical landscape. This he imagined as challenging the dominance of clean white walls, straight lines and right angles which, for Niemeyer, 'issued from a European ethical tradition'. Motivated by a post-colonial wish to undo the image of Brazil as backward, he privileged invention and exploited the expressive



1 Oscar Niemeyer in the intimate study of his Copacabana studio, Rio de Janeiro, 2003

potential of structural elements and devices of environmental control, such as the celebrated adjustable brise-soleil – a Brazilian transformation of a Corbusian invention – striving for monumentality and 'splendour', a 'free-flowing style' and 'lightness': all qualities in excess of the functionalist fulfilment of programmatic requirements. Conjugating architectural, structural and topographical events to achieve maximum fluidity, Niemeyer prioritised the sensual

reality of the architectural experience. Concrete was also a material suited to the economic and technological reality of Brazil, allowing for the full exploitation of the potential of the local workforce. It permitted Niemeyer, an admirer of Antoni Gaudí's delicious excess, to launch what he conceived as a 'new' and 'bolder architecture in the dimensions of Brazil', proclaiming the country's unequivocal modernity as well as its emancipation from Western prototypes.

An Afrodisiac repertoire

In 1939, the thirty-two-year-old Niemeyer assumed leadership of the design team that created the first state-sponsored Modernist skyscraper in the world, the Ministry of Education and Public Health (1936–44) in Rio de Janeiro – a symbol of, and manifesto for,

Brazilian modernity [2]. Put together by the patriarch of modern Brazilian architecture, Lúcio Costa, the team united Brazil's 'purist battalion' against conservative forces and enlisted Le Corbusier as a consultant in 1936. Niemeyer's pioneering leisure complex on the lakeshores of

Pampulha (1940–43), a new suburb of Belo Horizonte, led *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* to declare in 1946 that he was moving away from 'the triumph of the straight line' and 'the monumental Cartesianism' of the Ministry and the Corbusian school towards 'the affirmation



2 Lúcio Costa, Carlos Leão, Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Jorge Moreira, Ernani Vasconcellos and Oscar Niemeyer with Le Corbusier as consultant, Ministry of Education and Public Health, Rio de Janeiro, 1936–44: view of south elevation *pans de verre* from roof garden designed by Roberto Burle Marx



3 Oscar Niemeyer, Church of São Francisco de Assis, Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, 1940–42: view of lakeside (east) elevation

of his own originality' in 'the triumph of the curve'. Niemeyer spoke of his 'tropicalisation' of all he learnt from Le Corbusier and of a 'Brazilian Architectural Movement' with a 'dashing creative spirit'. He never tired of repeating: 'My architectural oeuvre began with Pampulha, which I designed in sensual and unexpected curves'.

Giving him the opportunity to experiment freely with a wide range of ideas and forms, the Pampulha project served Niemeyer as a laboratory to call into question received knowledge, destabilise the authority of hegemonic models and explore untrodden ways. Commissioned by mayor Juscelino Kubitschek, the complex included a small church, Brazil's first listed modern monument (1943) [3, 4]; an ingeniously planned casino with a lavish interior; a delightful dancehall-cum-restaurant with a meandering concrete canopy that follows the contours of the lakeshore [5]; a yacht club; a golf club; and a hundred-room hotel (unbuilt). Spectacle and luxury, pleasure, beauty and sensuality were emphatically affirmed as legitimate pursuits in Niemeyer's complex at Pampulha, his personal architectural manifesto. A wilfully rich palette of fine materials and techniques, purposefully-employed detailing and applied ornament were combined with Roberto Burle Marx's intensified images of tropical nature and fully integrated art works to create a unique body of work, motivated by a vision for a modern national architecture with an Afrodisiac repertoire of voluptuous curves and tropical motifs imagined as eminently Brazilian.

If the Loosian figure of the English gentleman embodied 'the truly modern style' of Apollonian Europe, Niemeyer found in the eroticised figure of the Brazilian woman of African descent, the *mulata*, the incarnation of the Dionysian *espírito de brasilidade*, which he employed to challenge the rationalist and functionalist rhetoric of doctrinaire European Modernism, and infect 'civilising' imports with what was perceived as the tropical, irrational primitive, in accordance with Brazilian Modernism's anti-colonialist Antropofagist strategy. 'My work is not about "form follows function", but "form follows beauty"', Niemeyer declared; or, 'even better, "form follows feminine".'



4 Church of São Francisco de Assis: street (west) elevation with azulejos by Cândido Portinari representing scenes from the life of St Francis

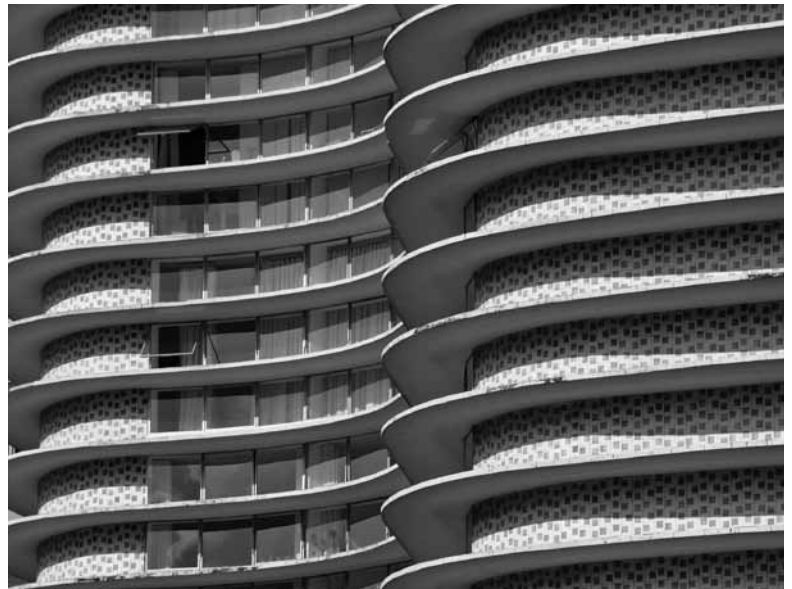


5 Casa do Baile, dance hall and restaurant, Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, 1940–43

The hero of a national modern architecture

Working with structural engineer Joaquim Cardozo at the Pampulha Church of São Francisco de Assis, Niemeyer used structural parabolic vaults as form- and space-defining elements. Shell structures and variously configured vertical supports appear frequently in his mature projects that populated Brazil's rapidly-growing urban centres in the 1950s. The freely undulating volume of his forty-storey Edifício COPAN (1951–66) [6], with 5000 residents, decidedly invaded the urban core of São Paulo, Latin America's premier industrial and financial centre, contesting the dichotomy between the private, feminine world of home and pleasure, and the public, vertical and hard-edged, masculine world of work and power, and challenging the gender polarities of the American city. As at the COPAN, the dynamism of Niemeyer's Edifício Liberdade (1954–60, renamed Edifício Niemeyer) in Belo Horizonte was accentuated by continuous, horizontal, concrete brise-soleil, which function as sunshades on the glazed part of the facade but continue along the tile-clad wall, underscoring aesthetic concerns that transgress the original utilitarian intent of the device [7].

The *Architectural Review* of October 1954 reported that Niemeyer's new house in Rio de Janeiro was at 'the centre of discussion' among foreign visitors at the 1953 São Paulo Art Biennale, who failed to appreciate the simultaneous rhythms of its polymetric architecture. Niemeyer's domestic masterpiece,



7 Edifício Liberdade, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, 1954–60 (renamed Edifício Niemeyer to honour Oscar Niemeyer's brother, Paulo Niemeyer): close-up of external envelope with brise-soleil that continue along the solid wall clad with Athos Bulcão's black-and-white cement tiles



8 Niemeyer House at Canoas (Casa das Canoas), São Conrado, Rio de Janeiro, 1950–53: view of the pavilion from the ramp that descends from the entrance gate towards the house set in what appears like a clearing cut into the mountainside



6 Edifício COPAN, São Paulo, 1953–66: under construction, 1959



9 Niemeyer House at Canoas: view from the entrance towards the dining alcove, panelled in streaked peroba do campo, and the staircase between the green-blue kitchen wall and the granite boulder. The dining table is of Niemeyer's design (1972), and the reclining female figure at the top of the stairwell by Alfredo Ceschiatti

the Casa das Canoas (1952–53) [8, 9], appears to consist of no more than a concrete, free-form canopy with a pool amid a tropical garden that merges seamlessly with a fantastic landscape. Niemeyer's semi-transparent, apparently simple pavilion embodies a rupture with the Brazilian past of the patriarchal mansion, while also proposing a daring adaptation of modern European models to the conditions of the tropical environment, allowing the landscape to penetrate the house and the house to flow freely out into the garden. Its rejection of the traditional, easily identifiable, assertive front door symbolises the conscious denial of the ultimate artificial defence mechanism against a nature that is not perceived as obstacle or threat but is welcomed as the desirable place to dwell in the tropics. Forging the architectural equivalent of polyrhythmic samba, Niemeyer's polymetric, vertical layering of rhythmic lines in open-ended dialogue sets the composition in perpetual motion, proposing rhythm and dance as the ultimate transgressions of utility. At this house in 1956, the ebullient President Juscelino Kubitschek recruited the help of the acknowledged hero of Brazil's modern national architecture for the realisation of his most ambitious scheme: the building of Brasília, a city uncompromisingly modern, which would herald 'the New Age of Brazil'.

Inaugurated on 21 April 1960, Independence Day and anniversary

of Brazil's discovery, the new federal capital was conceived as a symbol of national unity and marked the completion of the second discovery of Brazil, by the Brazilians themselves. The choice of Niemeyer as a father architect represented the choice of the style in which twentieth-century architects and politicians had sought to imagine the nation – Brazilian *and* modern. On the country's central plateau, away from the coastal tropical paradise that embodied the European legacy, Niemeyer's architecture for the 'real Brazil' of the hinterland entered into a dialogue with the landmarks of architectural history in order to affirm the autonomy of Brazilian architecture and 'create

[...] the past of tomorrow'. The desire for monumentality informed Costa's masterplan as well as Niemeyer's civic architecture for 'the acropolis of the new Brazil'. But rather than mass, solidity and weight, Brasília's colonnaded ceremonial buildings proposed lightness, elegance and grace, underscoring the individuality of their constituent parts – the white-marble-clad columns – yet subordinating the individuality of equals to the synthesis of the whole, representing the democratic polis [10, 11].

During the years when Niemeyer was forced into exile by Brazil's military dictatorship, which came to power in 1964, he exploited



10 Congresso Nacional (National Congress) with the shallow dome of the Senate partnered with the inverted larger dome of the Chamber of Deputies and the twenty-seven-storey twin towers of the Secretariat, Praça dos Três Poderes (Square of the Three Powers), Brasília, 1958–60



11 Supremo Tribunal Federal (Supreme Court), Praça dos Três Poderes (Square of the Three Powers), Brasília, 1958–60



12 Palácio do Itamaraty, originally named Palácio dos Arcos (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Brasília, 1962–70: view of the main pavilion set in a pool landscaped by Roberto Burle Marx



13 Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro state, 1991–96

advanced Brazilian engineering and Europe's technology and skilled labour force to produce buildings that were both aesthetically challenging and structurally daring. The precisely-patterned exposed-concrete arcades of the Mondadori headquarters in Segrate, near Milan (1968–75) resemble those of Brasília's Palácio do Itamaraty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1962–70) [12] but, at Segrate, Niemeyer incorporated a random aspect into the design. On each elevation, the twenty-two parabolic arches of variable width and curvature are united by a single parametric equation. Niemeyer's 'modern version of the Greek temple' ranks among his greatest achievements.

Driven by a desire to invent ever new ways to address the relation between the individual building and the city, in France and later in Brazil following the return of democracy in the 1980s, Niemeyer gradually moved beyond the idea of an architecture that is merely beautiful, towards an architecture that is more consciously democratic, prioritising urban public space as fundamental for the enactment of the rights of citizenship. In a classic Niemeyer inversion of conventional hierarchies of space and use, his late civic landmarks such as Niterói's Museum of Contemporary Art (1991–96) [13] and Curitiba's NovoMuseu (2001–02) are dominated by ramps that transgress functional requirements and invite the public to appropriate them as promenades. Underlining the public nature of the buildings, these long, languorously unfolding ramps serve as an architectural metaphor for Brazil's legendary beach, an idealised space of democracy in the Brazilian imaginary and a space onto which Niemeyer projected his ideal of a good life.

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Styliane Philippou is an architect, engineer and architectural historian. Her award-winning book Oscar Niemeyer: Curves of Irreverence (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) was published in 2008.

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