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Lina Bo Bardi: The Anthropological Gaze

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Lina Bo Bardi

The Anthropological Gaze

Elisabetta Andreoli

*But linear time is a Western invention,
time is not linear,
it is a marvellous tangle where,
at any moment,
points can be selected and solutions invented,
without beginning or end.*

Lina Bo Bardi¹

This is the architecture of freedom

John Cage,
on Bo Bardi's Museum of Art
São Paulo

¹ This and the following quotes from Lina Bo Bardi are from *Lina Bo Bardi*, Edizioni Charta, Milan and Instituto Lina Bo e P M Bardi, São Paulo, 1993.

² The exhibition 'The Life and Work of Lina Bo Bardi, 1914-1992' originated at the São Paulo Museum of Art, August-September, 1993, and came to the Royal Institute of British Architects, London, October-November, 1994. The exhibition is divided into seven themes: 'Space and Social Interaction', 'Objects and Their Use', 'Methods of Exhibiting' and 'The House'. Together with architectural projects, an ensemble of watercolour paintings, graphic design, personal photographs, papier-mâché sculptures builds up Bo Bardi's kaleidoscopic vision of architecture.

Born, educated and trained as an architect in Italy in the late 1930s, Lina Bo Bardi settled in Brazil in 1946. By marrying the lessons of Modernism to the most salient aspects of Brazilian culture and nature, she gave Brazil some of its most important works of modern architecture. However, her brilliant and compelling approach remained in the shadows to be only recently rescued by a wonderful exhibition — touring Brazil and Europe during 1994-95 — and by an excellent, comprehensive catalogue, both of them put together two years after her death in 1992.²

Thanks to the perseverance and dedication of her small team of architects, Bo Bardi's work is now rapidly gaining the recognition it deserves. There is a growing appreciation of its quality, and of the wide range of her imaginative artistic interventions. Moreover, her complex approach adds interesting elements to the contemporary debate within the field of architecture and culture in general. The cultural relationship between Europe and the 'peripheral' countries, the critique of Modernism and the recognition of different voices all seem to find an echo in Bo Bardi's work, which some describe as the architecture of social interaction.

BRAZIL-BAHIA: POPULAR CULTURE

Crucial to her approach was her appreciation of Brazilian popular culture, which she rescued with extraordinary energy from both elitist contempt and the patronising concept of folklore. Invited to teach Theory of Architecture at the University of Bahia (in northeastern Brazil) for one term in 1958, Bo Bardi ended up staying for several years and completed two important projects: the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia, in which she worked until its closure by the military government in 1964, and the renewal of a colonial complex, the Solar do Unhão, which would host the Museum of Popular Culture.

Amazed by the enormous creative capacities of the ordinary people of the region, Bo Bardi undertook an extensive survey of artefacts of popular culture. The result was a series of exhibitions: the 'Bahia Exhibition' at the 5th Biennale of São Paulo in 1959, 'The Civilisation of the Northeast During Rough Times' for the opening of Bahia's Museum of Popular Art in 1962 and 'Hand-made by the Poor of Brazil' in the recently opened São Paulo Art Museum in 1969. Rejecting any 'folkloric' approach, her understanding of popular culture focused not on 'frozen' forms and materials but on the creative process and solutions invented by people in the effort to improve their material and spiritual life.

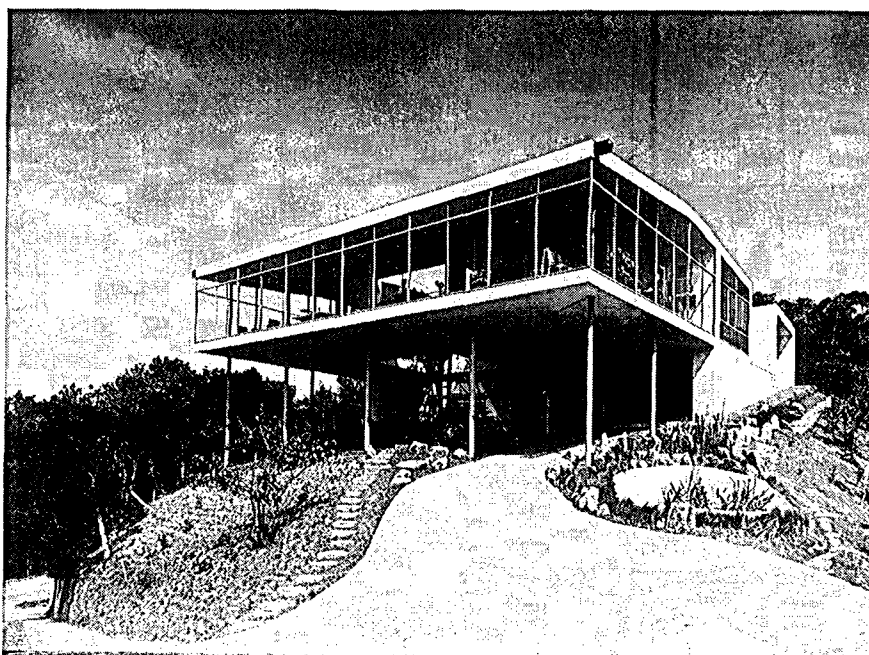
Carefully and accurately to find and promote a country's cultural bases (whatever they might be: poor, wretched, popular and anonymous), to search for the real bases, does not mean conserving forms or materials; it means appraising and valuing their original creative possibilities. Modern material and modern production systems will, eventually, take the place of the primitive; they will not conserve the forms rather the deeper structure of those possibilities.

Bo Bardi's habit of unceremoniously spreading tree leaves on the museum's floor dates from that period. This modest attempt to break with the still-life character of the institution found a fuller expression in the later exhibitions, which were filled with objects in an exuberant juxtaposition of industrial and hand-made artefacts, natural fibres and synthetic materials, sacred images and primitive machines, old and new solutions for the same function. Their display did not follow the usual museographic models, but mimicked that found in fairs and street markets.

Bo Bardi's concept of culture and civilisation did not allow objects to be singled out and displayed as works of art: "Civilisation: it is necessary to remove the elitist and rhetorical meaning of the word. Civilisation is the practical aspect of culture, constitutive of human life in all its moments". This notion explains the subject-matter of later exhibitions organised in the leisure centre SESC-Pompeia in São Paulo (see below): 'Design in Brazil: History and Reality', 'A Thousand Toys for Brazilian Children', 'Beauty and the Right to the Ugly', 'Caipiras, Capias: Stud-and-Mud'³ and 'Intermission for Children'.

By bringing the rich popular culture of the northeast region to the forefront of the Brazilian cultural arena, Bo Bardi and the group of artists with whom she worked in Bahia had a profound and lasting impact in different fields. The cultural movement of those years is at the foundation of the well-known 'Cinema Novo' of Glauber Rocha and of the overt inclusion of popular themes in Brazilian music production. Popular singers such as Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil and other important Brazilian artists still remember with great affection their time spent with 'Dona Lina', the one who "discovered Bahia to the Bahianos".

³ 'Caipira' is the dweller of rural regions, generally illiterate. 'Capias' is a popular expression, of Indian origin, for 'caipira'.



The Glass House, São Paulo, 1951.

BRAZIL-SÃO PAULO: METHODOLOGY

SESC is the Union of São Paulo's traders which sponsors several cultural centres in the São Paulo region. When called upon to build a cultural centre on the site of an abandoned drum factory — a beautiful structure of iron and bricks brought over from England at the beginning of the century — Bo Bardi's attitude was unequivocal. Rejecting the idea of just another "empty cultural centre", she envisaged a place in which people could walk around, meet, have fun, sit down, eat and rest.

With minimal internal alterations of the original structure, Bo Bardi provided the building with facilities including workshops, a restaurant, a theatre and a large area suitable for recreation, sport, games, reading and exhibitions. In the small space outside the factory two massive buildings housing a large number of sports facilities were added. The larger gym tower rising above a ground-floor swimming pool is linked by seven massive bridges to a tower of changing rooms. The austere and almost brutal aspect of their concrete structure — which fits well with the industrial surroundings — is strongly mitigated by the irregular shapes of the huge windows. From the inside of the building these Magritte-like 'holes' provide unexpected poetic views of this chaotic industrial town.

In the narrow strip of land between the old and the new buildings of the leisure centre Bo Bardi's imagination conceived what would become a most popular, deck-like strip of 'urban beach'. To envisage an urban beach in this rather industrial borough, trapped within a city of 18 million inhabitants spread over 900 sq kilometres, requires more than architectural skills.

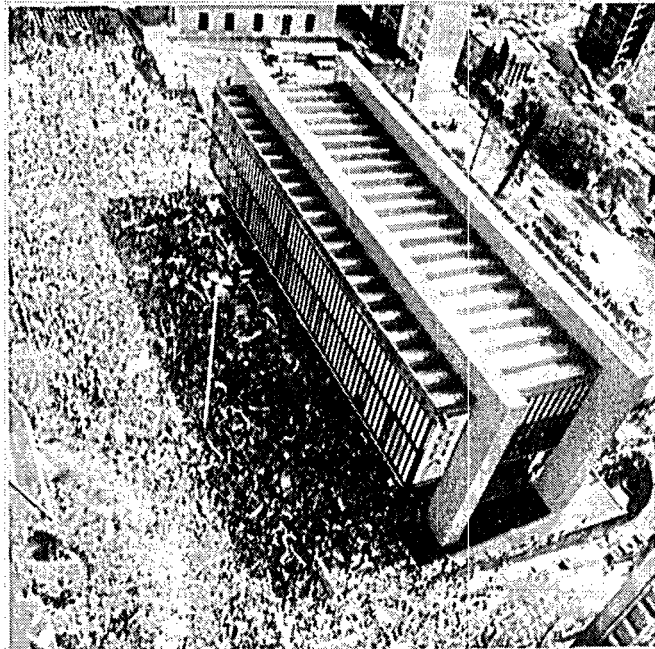
Looking at the way the place actually works — the elderly playing cards or dancing, children involved in a wide range of activities, parents active in

workshops, youngsters exercising in the gymnasias and a mixed crowd making use of everything — is to be reminded mostly of the Russian constructivists' notion of 'social condenser'. Organised through an almost experimental juxtaposition of different architectural languages, the project creates a space of social interaction, culture and artistic activity for a community which is socially, culturally and ethnically mixed. Indeed, some people refer to SESC-Pompeia as an astonishing and most unexpected instance of 'socialism' in Brazil.

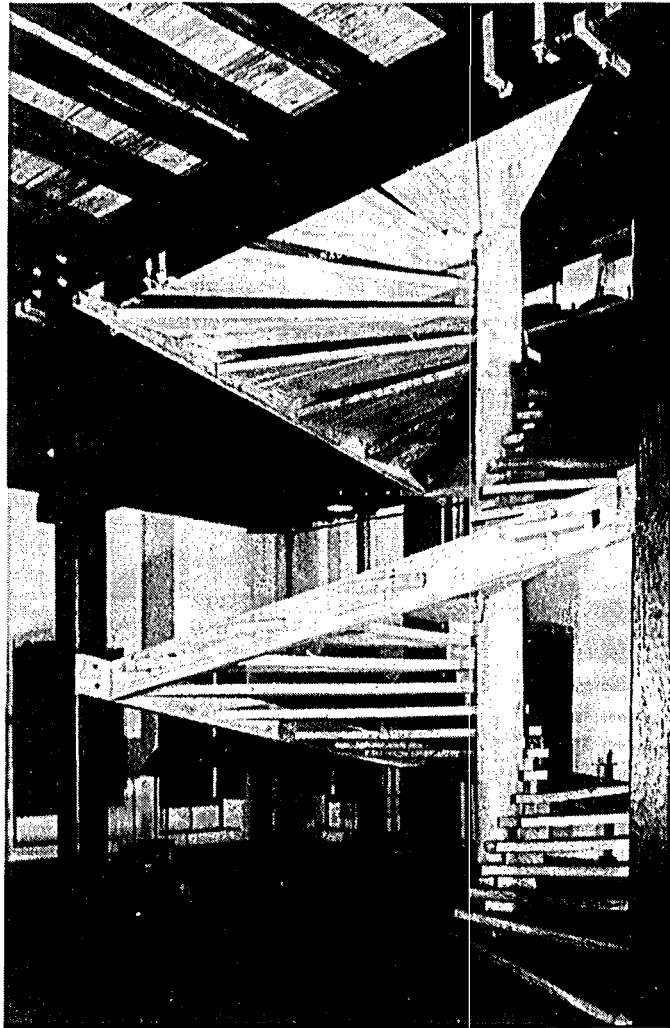
Where does the magic lie? Bo Bardi's assistants argue that the success of her public spaces has to be sought in her way of thinking architecture — best exemplified by her working method. The few 'proper' architectural drawings always came at the end of a long process of discussion aimed at understanding and then defining the very 'spirit' of the place. Sometimes the work started from the very end, that is, by imagining the opening day and the food, the drinks, decoration and happenings which would mark the way the space was to be used by its customers. Once the atmosphere of the place had been visualised, a few sketches — often including water-colour drawings — would begin to give form to the project.

Unlike most architectural drawings, people here are not represented as stylised anonymous human figures, as mere appendages of the architect's masterpiece. Nor are the chaotic elements of the urban environment erased from the ideal space. The sketch of the SESC-Pompeia cafeteria, for example, shows people in colourful swimming costumes lounging around or sitting on the benches while having a snack. Posters and adverts, constant elements of visual urban pollution, are also present. The sign advertising one of the restaurants is another 'constituent' detail of Bo Bardi's approach. Here the architect's touch is successfully traded for that of the artisan. Next to the entrance door is a colourful display shelf containing wooden tropical fruits,

The Belvedere, the free space beneath the São Paulo Art Museum building, as the city's meeting place.







The Solar do Unhão, Salvador, Bahia, 1959.
View of the staircase, a central pillar of 'Pau d'arco'
hardwood and the risers in yellow 'Ipê' hardwood.

a chicken, a fish and a bottle, all made by a local artisan whom Bo Bardi found working on the building site as a master-builder.

Details are considered of critical importance. They are central in establishing the modalities of the relationship between the place and the citizens, the place and the city. Walking on the streets of São Paulo one notices the peculiar irregularities of the pavement. What happens is that a new residential or commercial building often alters the 'public' pavement in front of the entrance. One might regard this illegal appropriation as a manifestation of aggressive and speculative development or as a cultural habit of close contact between the public and the private spheres, but the result is that the 'place' often starts outside the entrance gate. Bo Bardi seems to have picked up this feature of the city. Outside the SESC-Pompeia entrance-gate little round stones are trapped in the cement pavement. Almost like in a fairytale, these marks draw the attention of passers-by, prompting them to look into the alley around

which the leisure centre spreads — and promising them some close, exciting encounter.

Another key part of Bo Bardi's methodology is to work on the actual building site. As she puts it:

I do not have a studio. I work [at home] in the evening, when they are all asleep, when the telephone does not ring and everything is silent. Later, I organise a little on-site studio together with the engineers, technicians and workers. This broadens the building experience and the collaboration between all professionals becomes total. Generally, I do very few drawings, only the essential ones; problems are solved on site, sometimes with hand-made drawings executed on the spot, but with all the necessary measurements.

However, Bo Bardi's attitude should not be mistaken for a populist one, or for a cosy understanding of architecture. On the contrary, she was a committed professional, notorious for her strong personality and her pitiless dismissal of any 'imbecilic' suggestions she might receive. Her decision to set up her studio on the building site shows a sophisticated and demanding concept of architecture. The architect's professional role goes beyond designing a project within the physical (and cultural) limits of the studio. Bo Bardi refused to distinguish between the project and the actual building work. She felt it was part of the architect's role to follow the construction process until the project came into being and to incorporate the skills of other active cultural agents like the engineer, the technician, the artisan and the worker.

Just as her concern for popular culture must not be mistaken for a patronising attitude, so her cooperation with other professionals on the building site has nothing to do with a populist gesture. They both derive from a specific notion regarding the architect's task. Architecture is not seen as the answer to housing needs, but as a profound cultural intervention. Here is the link between her work in Brazil — a country she deliberately chose as her home and to which she passionately felt she belonged — and her European or more specifically Italian origins.

BRAZIL-EUROPE: CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Bo Bardi belongs to a generation of Italian architects and artists deeply marked by the experience of fascism. Like many others, she briefly took part in the Resistance and was a member of the Communist Party. 'Reconstruction' became the pass-word for many people of that generation and it did not refer just to the making-good of physical war damage. It also referred to the reconstruction of the social and cultural fabric of the country after twenty years of fascist rule and ideology. The problem was on what values one was to build the new Italy — a country which, among other things, had changed from a monarchy to a republic with the referendum of 1945. It is then that the question of popular culture — so extensively addressed by Antonio Gramsci in the Twenties — came to the forefront. The 'new-realism' of film directors such as Pasolini and Rossellini shared the same source. The architectural magazine *Domus* — where Bo Bardi worked for a while under the direction of Gio Ponti — illustrates the attempts to link architectural discussions to more complex themes of culture in general. A typical issue of the 1940s featured articles by Lionello Venturi on abstract art, by Dino Risi on cinema, by Malipiero on music and by Elio Vittorini on literature. In this context, to embark on an architectural

project or to design a piece of furniture was regarded as a cultural intervention carrying social and civic values. Dissatisfied with the outcome of Italy's first Republican elections in 1946 — which gave strong support to the populist, clerical and confessional Christian-Democratic Party — and pessimistic about the prospects for social and cultural 'resistance' given the new political climate and the subtle invasion of American consumerism, Bo Bardi left Italy for Brazil. A few years later, in 1951, she officially became a Brazilian citizen.

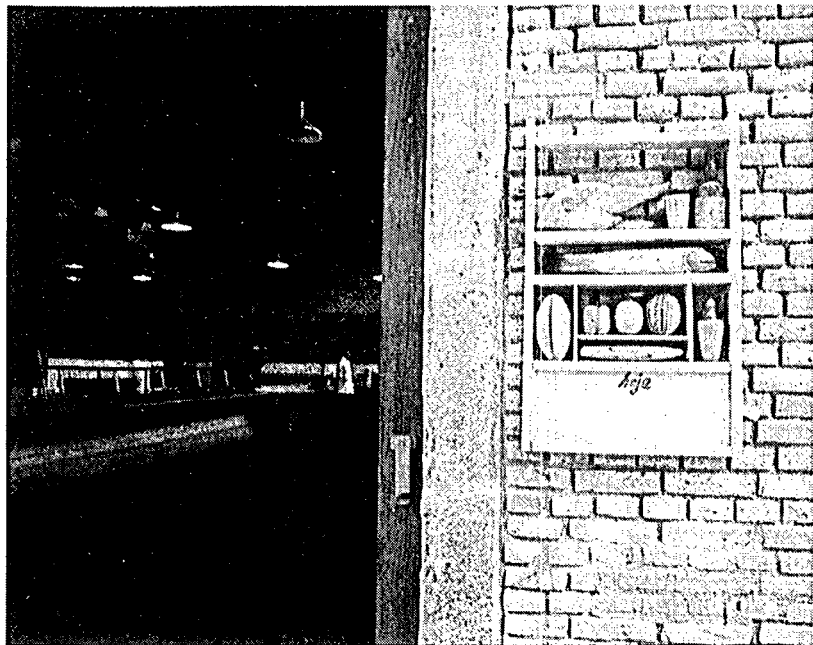
BRAZIL: MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM

Although the ease with which she adopted a variety of forms and solutions brings her close to a postmodernist discourse, her intellectual roots were certainly modernist. The relationship between architecture and nature is significant in this respect.

Bo Bardi paid careful attention to the natural surroundings of her projects. Most of her drawings show a variety of plants and other natural details. Delightful as they are, their function is not to illustrate a kind of landscape architecture, or provide mere 'natural' embellishment. On the contrary, nature seems to provide a striking contrast to the built form. In a way, nature works as the Other against which architecture defines its essential and primarily artificial character: "Architecture as the work of man that most changes nature, the most 'artificial' work and for that reason the most human."

This contrast is vividly apparent in the project for her own home, the Glass House, built in 1951 in the outskirts of São Paulo. At that time the Morumbi hill — on which the house is situated — was a beautiful spot of Mata Atlantica, the luxuriant forest typical of central Brazil. Despite the transformation

SESC-Pompéia Factory. Visual communication for the restaurant, executed by the stonemason 'Paulista'.





SESC-Pompéia Factory. The main hall of the restaurant.

wrought by the city's amazing expansion during the last forty years, the Morumbi still supports large tracts of greenery. Against this rich landscape a fully modernist glass house stands out clearly, its weight supported by thin, elegant pillars on the slope side and resting on the ground on the other side. Two concrete slabs enclose the glass walls around the living area overlooking the distant city-scape. While the living space is floating in the air, the service areas and bedrooms are anchored to the ground in a more secluded manner. The project has a linear, almost mathematical feel to it. It is impossible not to recognise Le Corbusier's architectural language and conception in the project. There is the same dialogue — an aggressive one, it could be said — between the natural space and the conceived one, between the space of Nature and the space of Culture.

This is similarly true of Bo Bardi's most famous project, the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) in the city's main boulevard. Here the two upper floors of the building span the 75 metres of an entire city block; they have been suspended from two large concrete piers and turn the entire site into an open forum overlooking the lower city. Below it, the lower floors are buried, but open to the same view. Turning to the other side, the daring brutalist piece of architecture counteracts with what remains, here, of the Mata Atlan-

tica: the Trianon park, facing the museum from the other side of the Paulista Avenue. The success of the MASP is not due uniquely to the cultural facilities it provides. The daring architecture of the museum confronts São Paulo citizens in a straightforward, direct way without any trace of pompous rhetoric. The MASP is a crucial point of reference for the city. It is a space for political meetings, art and craft fairs, open air leisure activities or simply informal encounters with friends.

The Misericórdia Slope project (Salvador, Bahia, 1987) offers a concise and powerful example of the nature/culture relationship. This was a project aimed at the renewal and restoration of a row of colonial buildings along a sea-facing slope. Modern materials and building techniques were used to restore the buildings to their original plan and shape. Along the slope, two long neglected houses had almost completely collapsed. Refusing to rebuild fake-colonial houses, Bo Bardi filled the gaps around and on top of the original stone walls with specially manufactured corrugated cement panels, but also preserved some of the flora which had spontaneously grown among the ruins. What was to become a bar had as its main focal point a tree now deliberately trapped within a brutalist structure.

View of the exhibition 'Design in Brazil: History and Reality', 1982, at the SESC-Pompéia Factory, São Paulo.



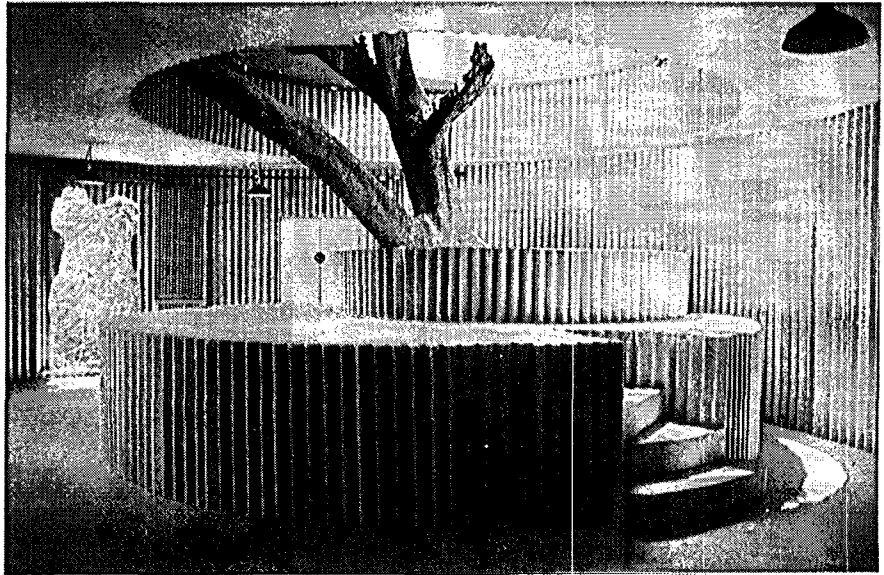


Restoration of Misericórdia Slope, Salvador, Bahia, 1987. Behind the remains of the old wall, buttresses reinforce the neighbouring houses and form the 'Bar of the 3 Arches'.

As we can see, Bo Bardi worked within the language of modernist architecture. Nevertheless her work, when considered as a whole, can hardly be reduced to one style and many of her projects resist a full modernist definition. In the renewal of the Solar do Unhão (Salvador, Bahia, 1959), for example, she limited herself to the restoration of the building and its colonial features — with the sole, but crucial, addition of a wonderful wooden spiral staircase of an artisanal character.

The 'Camurupim' community project (in the Sergipe region, 1975) started with field research which sought information about people's lives: where did they have their meals (in the kitchen, the main room or outside)? Where did they do the washing up, keep their food, their animals or their clothes? And where did they sleep: in a bed or hammock? Did children sleep separately or with the adults? But it also included more unusual questions such as whether people like trees and fruits, or if they could make pans, straw hats or mattresses. It recorded the presence of flowers, vases, birds or any other animals inside the house. The final project, then, offered a variety of imaginative solutions for the houses and objects. Although keeping things simple and functional, it drastically departs from any modernist language and includes the use of traditional building techniques and materials.

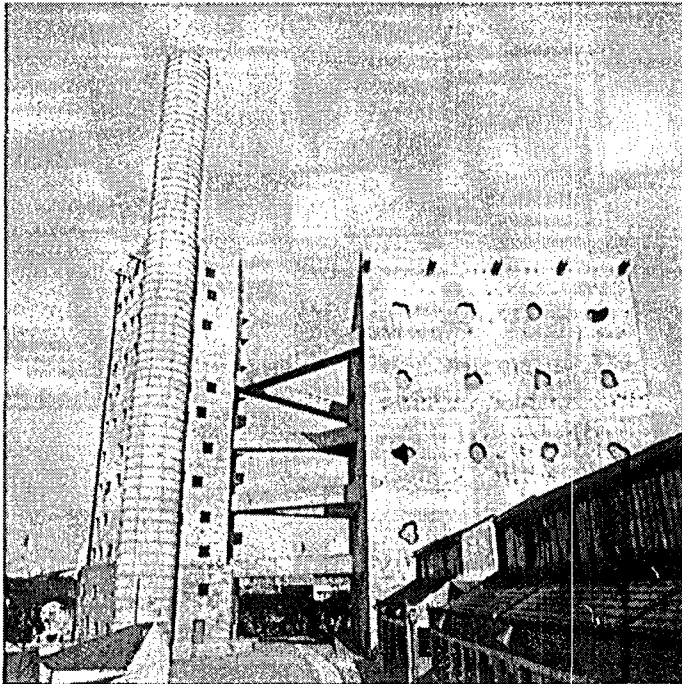
Committed to the idea that architecture is a social activity, Bo Bardi built very few private houses, except for a few close friends. The Cirelli's home (São Paulo, 1958) is one of these. The cubic house — whose exterior walls are entirely covered by pebbles, ceramic fragments and plants — is surrounded at first floor level by a cogongrass roof which provides a verandah running all around the house. On one side, this very textural house meets up with the steely-smooth translucent surface of the swimming-pool. Here there are no traces of brutalist or modernist architecture. If anything, the house is reminiscent of the spiritual atmosphere of a Japanese or Mayan temple.

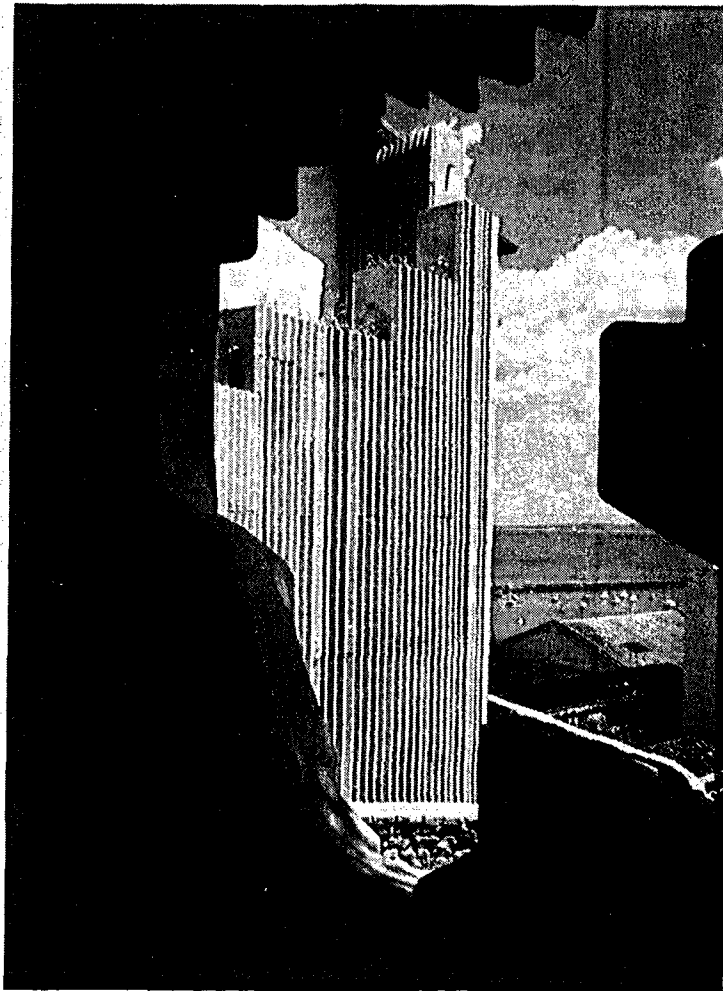


Restoration of Misericórdia Slope. The Coaty Restaurant: restaurant interior with the mango tree and stage for brief spectacles.

SESC-Pompéia Factory, São Paulo, 1977.

Photo: Conjunto Esportivo. Courtesy of the Lina Bo Bardi Archive





Restoration of Misericórdia Slope. The Coaty Restaurant: the hole-form windows with latticed shutters.

Thus, although Bo Bardi's work definitely belongs within modernism, it also defies its boundaries. This is why the usual, and already criticised, practice of mapping our strands of influences between artists — in this case between European and Brazilian architecture — is particularly inappropriate. Although references to Le Corbusier, Italian Rationalists and British Brutalists can be found, this kind of analysis rather misses the point.

Bo Bardi considered her architecture as an act of cultural resistance which spread beyond the limits of architecture. The same cultural project infused her accomplishments in different fields — museum displays and exhibitions, graphics, jewellery, theatre and film production. As architect Marcelo Ferraz — who worked with Bo Bardi for fifteen years — pointed out, her lesson has to be sought not in the definition of a specific architectural language or style but rather in her 'anthropological gaze', her capacity of seeing people within their way of life.



MARCOS Photo: Carlos Cisneros.