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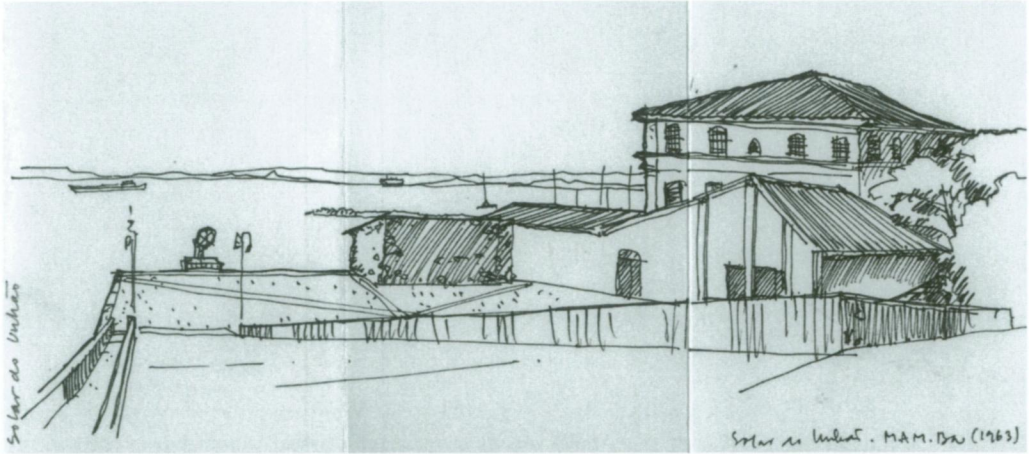
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1. Plaza on the seafront created by Lina Bo Bardi for the Museum of Popular Art at Solar do Unhão, Salvador, BA, Brazil, in 1963. (Drawing by author, 2003)

Preservation as Confrontation: The Work of Lina Bo Bardi

Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992) was suspicious of traditional ideas about preservation. It was not that this Italian-born Brazilian architect despised history or historic sites, or even that her actions were motivated by iconoclasm. She respected heritage more for its social meaning than for its visual and formal appeal. She valued historic sites more for their potential uses in the present than for their value as documents of the past. Lina criticized the idea that restoration usually seeks, as she said, “the restitution to a primitive state of time, of place, of style” that perpetuates the “moldiness of old buildings.”²

Although Lina Bo Bardi was exposed to preservation techniques in Italy, she did not become involved with cultural, architectural, and urban heritage on a professional level until the early 1960s in Brazil (Figure 1).³ She believed that preservation projects should not recreate historic styles but should look for a “modern [contemporary] mark, strictly respecting traditional historic restoration principles.”⁴ This notion of preservation suggested both a modernist sensibility and a non-linear definition of time. Lina repeatedly said that history only made sense as part of the transformation of the present, which resonates with the phenomenological notion that time is not a sequential construct but the simultaneous experience of the past in the present informed by the projection of a future.⁵ More than just the recovery of existing buildings, Lina Bo Bardi believed that preservation should address what she defined as a historic present, as well as the social dimension of the built environment. Preservation, for her, had a strong political purpose.

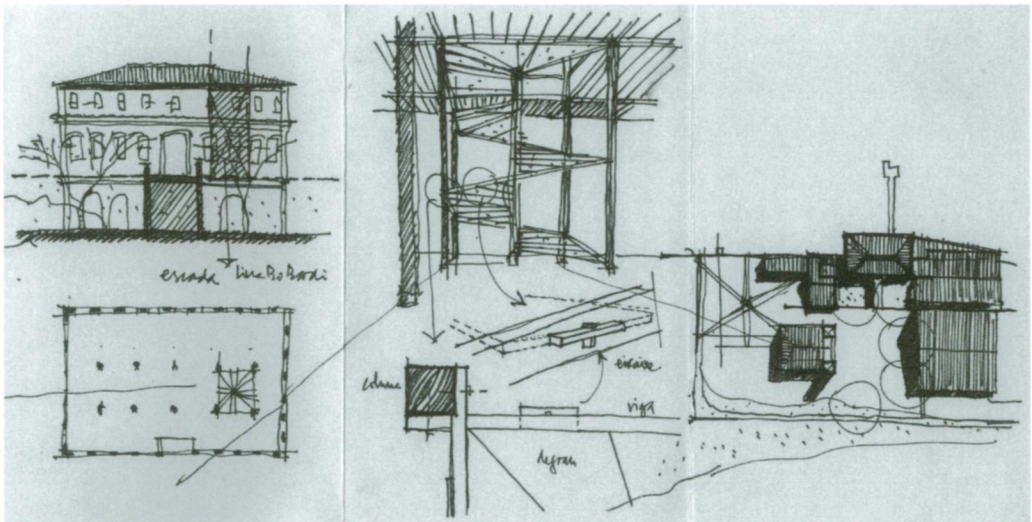
This political awareness did not fully flourish until her mature years in the late 1950s, but the seeds were planted very early. In 1939, she graduated from the school of architecture in Rome, whose director Marcello Piacentini supported traditional views about the profession. She soon moved to Milan, where she encountered a completely different intellectual environment. In the years before immigrating to Brazil in 1946, Lina wrote articles for magazines such as *Domus* and *Lo Stile* and worked with architect Giò Ponti on exhibitions about Italian handcraft for the Milan Triennale. She also collaborated with the magazine *A' Cultura della Vita* (*A' Life Culture*) directed by Bruno Zevi and Carlo Pagano. This magazine was a manifesto against the problems caused by the Second World War and, to a greater extent, by capitalism. This important experience with

Italy's nascent social-realism movement remained the counterpoint to her rationalist education and the influence of her husband, Pietro Maria Bardi.

After spending a decade in São Paulo working mostly with her husband on the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP) and editing *Habitat*, Brazil's first design magazine, Lina was hired by the president of the University of Bahia in 1958 to teach architectural theory in Salvador. There, she joined a group of anthropologists, dancers, filmmakers, musicians, and artists engaged in an active neo-avant-garde movement based on a regionalist project to counter the cosmopolitanism of the south of the country. Some members of this progressive university group were loosely connected to the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), which had strong ideological control over left-wing artistic and intellectual activities in Brazil in the 1960s.

Besides teaching, curating exhibitions, and designing stage sets, Lina authored a Sunday column in the paper *Diário de Notícias* titled "Crônicas de Arte, de história, de costume, de cultura da vida" ("Chronicles of Art, History, Costume and Life Culture"). She wrote articles about art, architecture, culture, music and theater, devoting special attention to a column and photographic essay titled "Olho sobre a Bahia" ("Gaze on Bahia"). In this column, she described daily aspects of urban and collective life in Salvador, stressing how development projects were destroying important historical sites, thereby erasing significant cultural and social aspects of the city and the region.

Lina Bo Bardi was an enthusiastic reader of philosopher Antonio Gramsci's ideas, particularly his theories of the national-popular, which became influential among cultural and political theorists in Brazil during this period.⁶ Gramsci had been a militant critic of Italian culture in the early twentieth century. For him, the definition of culture was political and not anthropological. He believed that class struggles should be resolved through the lived realities of the oppressed, not just through economic solutions. Culture was not an independent system of fixed values and ways of life but the means by which people create their own realities and negotiate with hegemonic values and practices. The act of preservation, which Gramsci considered to be inevitable, should generate a new language with new ideas, new forms, and new meanings. The national-popular will was an important concept for Gramsci. It maintained that leading intellectuals—or, in his words, "organic intellectuals"—should actively embrace the cultural life of oppressed people in order to provide them with the means for social emancipation in the modern world.⁷ Gramsci's work *La Questione Meridionale* (*The Southern Question*), which investigated the problems of inequality between the south and the north of Italy, offered a powerful way of understanding the problems of poverty in the



2. Wooden stairs based on ox carts created by Lina Bo Bardi for the Museum of Popular Art at Solar do Unhão, Salvador, BA, Brazil, in 1963. (Drawing by author, 2003)

northeast of Brazil and the relationship between that region and the industrial areas of the south of the country.⁸ The goal of the cultural movements in Salvador was to modify the structure of social life in an area of the country that faced economic decline, poverty, and underdevelopment. This was the context in which Lina Bo Bardi became involved with historic sites and developed her critical approach to preservation.

Even though Lina had no party affiliation, and quoted Gramsci's ideas only a few times, she personified the organic intellectual.⁹ In collaboration with theater director Martim Gonçalves, she organized an important exhibition about the culture of Bahia that was first shown in the fifth São Paulo Art Biennale in 1959. This provocative exhibition expanded the geography of cultural debate in Brazil and expressed Lina Bo's aspirations for what she believed to be a genuine source for Brazilian design. She turned the focus to popular creative abilities, by "look[ing] for every fact of daily life that express[ed] poetry."¹⁰ The show led to the creation of the Museum of Popular Art of Bahia, her major project in the city of Salvador. Lina believed that this museum should be a means for confronting conventional and conservative definitions of culture. She imagined it to be a "center for the documentation of popular art and a center for technical studies about the Northeast, aiming at the passage from pre-craftsmanship to modern industry."¹¹

Lina Bo Bardi saw the opportunity to use Solar do Unhão, an ensemble of historic buildings on the seafront south of the historic center of Salvador, to house the museum. The original estate and church were built in the sixteenth century and had been renovated periodically through the nineteenth century. These transformations erased several of the building's original architectural features such as ornamentation and dividing walls, which allowed for considerable autonomy in her work of

preservation. Her goal was to make the historic building present in the collective life of the city. To emphasize the structural simplicity of the buildings, Lina removed all extraneous elements, preserving the load-bearing adobe walls and the wood posts, beams, and floors. She also designed a plaza on the seafront to be used for traditional shows and dances, emulating both traditional spaces where collective and popular activities took place. Rejecting the cobalt blue popular during the colonial period, she had the doors and windows painted a vivid red. In the interior of the main building, she created an imposing central staircase that fit into the existing wood frame. The simple joints that attached the steps to the existing wooden columns were based on the construction of ox carts that she saw in the backlands of the country (Figure 2).

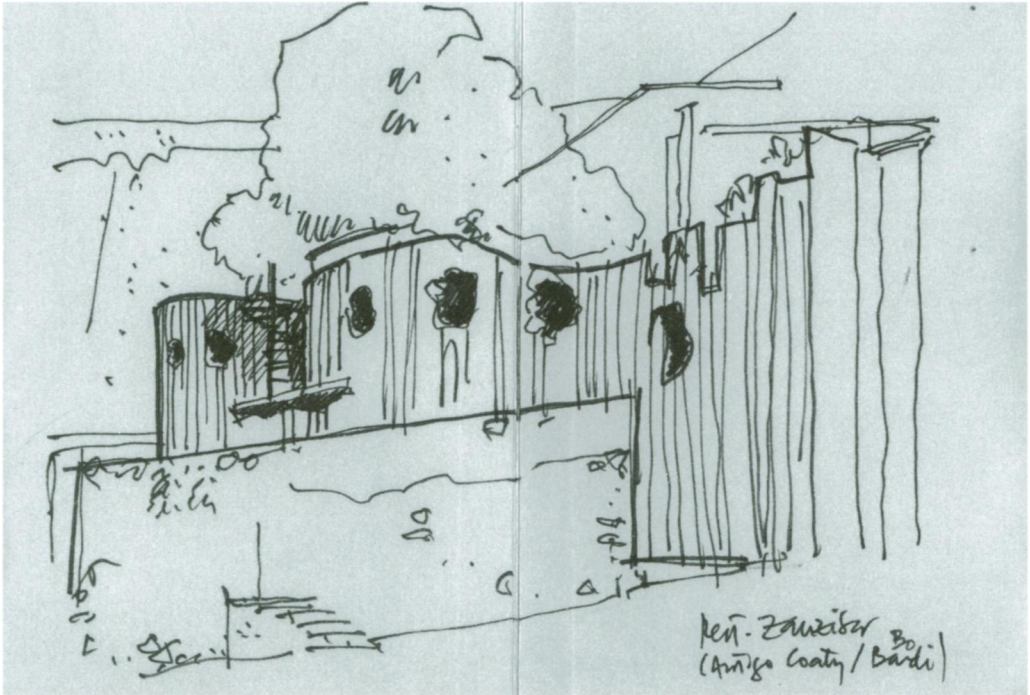
Lina Bo Bardi's ideas for the restoration of the historic Solar do Unhão buildings differed from the ideas about architectural heritage that architect Lúcio Costa had promoted in Brazil since the 1930s. Costa's attitude toward preservation stressed the importance of tectonics, as he was interested in how Portuguese building techniques had shaped Brazilian architecture.¹² His approach emphasized continuity with Brazil's European legacy by merging colonial and Baroque traditions with modernism. In contrast, Lina's approach reflected the Gramscian idea of a national-popular culture while rejecting traditional views of nationalism and folklore. The Museum of Popular Art was a visible manifestation of this aspiration. Its first exhibition, *Northeast*, which opened in 1963, complemented the museum's architecture.¹³ The show contained objects produced in the day-to-day struggles of impoverished people, which were displayed in piles of rustic wooden boxes used for carrying produce and groceries. According to Lina's statement in the exhibition catalogue, the museum was called a "Museum of Popular Art and not Folklore, because folklore is a static and backward legacy under the paternalistic control of cultural representatives, while popular art (defined artistically and also technically) defines the progressive attitude of a culture related to real problems."¹⁴ And she added that "this exhibition is a confrontation. A confrontation that is not shy, and that counters the degrading conditions imposed by man in the desperate effort of [producing] culture."¹⁵

The initial wave of enthusiasm surrounding the museum's opening was short lived. The military coup of 1964 brought progressive activities throughout Brazil to a halt. Army troops took over the museum, whose administrators were charged with subversion. Many of the leading staff members, including Lina Bo Bardi, were replaced by conservative directors. The coup raised a "dark shadow of cultural reaction, stale traditions, anger and fear in the horizon," interrupting Lina's rise to prominence in

Salvador in the 1960s.¹⁶ She then left the country for extended periods to avoid political prison and, as a result, did not produce much work until 1975. Disappointed by the new political situation and by the crises of architecture since the Modern Movement, she gradually returned to design, still believing that architecture should embrace and value human life, especially the lives of the oppressed. The conversion of an old factory into SESC-Pompéia leisure and cultural center in São Paulo and the recovery of part of the historic urban fabric of Salvador in the 1980s stand as two of the most powerful examples of her later work.

Sponsored by SESC, the Social Service Trade Association, SESC-Pompéia occupied the building of a former steel drum factory, which was representative of the history of industrialization of São Paulo in the 1920s. In this project, Lina Bo Bardi combined preservation and experimentation with different architectural forms and techniques. Two major groups of buildings compose the culture and leisure center: the existing horizontally-massed factory that was renovated for cultural facilities and the new towers that were built to house a gymnasium. She embraced the architectural rationality of the prefabricated concrete structure as the framework for different collective activities by “just add[ing] a few things: ... [like] some water [and] a fireplace.”¹⁷ The new vertical, brutalist block contains a swimming pool and stacked sports courts with irregular window-holes carved out from the concrete walls and sliding wooden trellises. Such bold and delicate gestures translate Lina’s interest in the iconography of vernacular architecture and popular culture as a means to represent the harshness of people’s everyday struggle for survival.

During the 1980s, Lina Bo Bardi was invited back to Salvador to coordinate the preservation of urban sites and buildings in the historic district of Pelourinho, which had been the center of the colonial capital of Brazil in the 1700s. She proposed that the preservation of the area should not aim to recreate the original appearance of significant buildings, such as the Baroque architectural ensembles of the state of Minas Gerais, because most of the historic fabric of the city had already been considerably altered. The result was an effort both to restore the remaining fragments of historic structures and to reorganize and unify them through the addition of prefabricated concrete components, which she designed in collaboration with architect João Figueiras Lima (Figure 3). She devised a general plan for connecting several key buildings and sites in the historic center of Pelourinho in order to integrate local commercial and cultural activities, drawing inspiration from the culture of the area, as well as the strong African and popular traits of Salvador and the state of Bahia. The House of Benin, Misericórdia Hill, and



3. Prefabricated concrete panels for buildings designed by Lina Bo Bardi uniting the remains of colonial sites for the recovery of the historic center of Salvador, BA, Brazil. (Drawing by author, 2003)

Barroquinha are among her most important projects.

She argued that her job was to “fight against folklore”¹⁸ and to avoid creating a theme park that would make the city more attractive to tourism or, in her words, to “transform Pelourinho into an ‘ice-cream’ city.”¹⁹ According to Lina Bo Bardi, the preservation of Pelourinho should confront the process of gentrification. She insisted that the plan should, above all, address the socio-economic conditions of the local population by encouraging economic activities that would promote the continued life of historic urban artifacts. She proposed to “pay attention to people and not just to monuments.”²⁰ However, with the Bahian government falling into the hands of conservative oligarchic groups in the late 1980s, most of the work that Lina did in Salvador lost its progressive political and cultural purpose. The Pelourinho district now caters mostly to tourists and does not reflect her desire to promote a more sustainable social and economic vitality.

At the end of her life, a more somber Lina retrospectively summarized her work as the pursuit of “*arquitetura pobre*,” or “simple architecture.”²¹ This description resonates with her early resistance to the established Brazilian modernism and translated her perception of Brazilian culture as being “poor, but rich in fantasy.”²² Preservation had a clear political purpose to her: rather than affirm a historicized notion of authenticity, Lina aimed to denounce the gap between modern design and the reality of a population that was frequently excluded from the benefits of this modernization. She designed forms that

were intended to be as unrefined and poetic as the objects shaped by the resourceful hands of the Brazilian people. Preservation, to her, was a powerful vehicle for inventive social practices whose meaning and forms should derive from everyday culture.

In a contemporary world that resembles more the nightmares than the dreams of Lina Bo Bardi, the relationship between preservation, experimentation, risk, and social values is rarely addressed in architecture. The results of critical practice are often diluted or co-opted by powerful economic interests. Lina and her generation of intellectuals and artists struggled to survive the effects of authoritarian regimes, and they regained some vitality in the 1980s when the world started to confront the geopolitical and economic changes associated with globalization. The sad irony is that, since she passed away in 1992, many of her progressive solutions for cultural and historic sites in São Paulo and Salvador have started to suffer from the problems she tried to fight. Her projects have been transformed to accommodate more conservative, profit-driven conceptions about the relationship between culture and architecture. The privatization and enclosure of the spaces of the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP) and Solar do Unhão, and the intense tourist activities in the Pelorinho area in Salvador are just a few examples of these changes.

Lina Bo Bardi's confrontation with the past was both personal and political. Her approach blurred traditional categories and hierarchies of social relations, time, and space. Today, Lina's work is becoming part of the past and ultimately may become the object of preservation. However, she believed that the preservation of architectural heritage could only be successful if it engaged the present. The work of Lina Bo Bardi challenges us to understand that architecture and preservation are critical activities that should recognize the instability of cultural values and should aim to create spaces that celebrate human life.

Author biography

Zeuler Lima is an architect and assistant professor of design and theory at the School of Architecture at Washington University. He has also taught at the University of São Paulo and at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He received his Ph.D. from the University of São Paulo and has received several research grants, including the 2001–2002 Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Center for Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Lima co-directed a design office in São Paulo and has won several public architecture and landscape architecture competitions and awards in Brazil. Currently, he is developing a book project about modernism and the work of Lina Bo Bardi.

Endnotes

¹ Lina Bo Bardi was born Achillina di Enrico Bò in Rome on December 5, 1914 and married Pietro Maria Bardi in 1946, just before they moved to Brazil. She has been referred to as Signora Bardi and Dona Lina, depending on the context. The author chose the shorter, more familiar form *Lina* because this is the way that she was often referred to in both professional and academic situations in Brazil.

² Lina Bo Bardi, “Ladeira da Misericórdia,” in Marcelo C. Ferraz, ed., *Lina Bo Bardi* (São Paulo: ILBPMB, 1994), 292. Her personal archive at the Instituto Lina Bo e Pietro Maria Bardi in São Paulo has a few hand-written and typed texts that Lina wrote about this topic, which have been published in the posthumous compilation of her work edited by M. C. Ferraz.

³ Lina Bo Bardi studied restoration with Giovanonni in Rome, but she was more interested in the ascendance of rationalism in Italy during the 1930s and in reconstruction after World War II. Her criticism of restoration as a restitution of “a primitive state of time” is related to architectural debates in Italy during that period. She was not involved with or even confronted by preservation until she began work in the colonial city of Salvador in Brazil. Her proposal for the restoration of the historic center of the Brazilian city in the 1980s found support in the 1965 Letter of Venice, which fostered more open views about preservation.

⁴ Lina Bo Bardi, “Ladeira da Misericórdia,” in Ferraz, 293.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

⁶ Lina Bo Bardi read the works of Antonio Gramsci published in the 1940s, which are contained in her archives. Her side notes are often written in Portuguese, a language that she did not write fluently at the time, which suggests that her study of Gramsci intensified in the 1960s. Lina probably encountered the philosopher’s work while still in Italy, as his works were first published there in the early 1940s. According to Carlos Nelson Coutinho, active participant in the 1960s political culture of Brazil, Lina Bo Bardi was one of the first people to introduce Antonio Gramsci’s ideas in Bahia and in Brazil, as cited in Marcelo Ridenti, *Em Busca do povo brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2000), 306.

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from Cultural Writings*, cited in Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 99.

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *La Questione meridionale* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1966). See also the introduction to the Brazilian edition by F. de Felice and V. Parlato, in Antonio Gramsci, *A questão meridional* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1987).

⁹ Lina Bo Bardi, “Discurso sobre a significação da palavra artesanato,” in *Tempos de Grossura: O design no impasse* (São Paulo: Instituto Lina Bo e Pietro Maria Bardi, 1994), 17.

¹⁰ Lina Bo Bardi, *Bahia no Ibirapuera*, exhibition catalogue at the 5th São Paulo Biennial, 1959.

¹¹ Lina Bo Bardi, *Solar do Unhão* (Salvador: Governo da Bahia, 1963). The four-page manuscript describes the recovery, revitalization, and purpose of Unhão estate in Salvador.

¹² Guilherme Wisnick, *Lúcio Costa* (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2001), 35.

¹³ Lina Bo Bardi initially wanted to call the controversial exhibition “The Civilization of the Northeast,” which she eventually agreed to reduce to “Nordeste” (“Northeast”). Lina Bo Bardi, *Nordeste*, exhibition catalogue (Salvador, Brazil: Instituto Lina Bo e Pietro Maria Bardi, November 1963). Also available in manuscript version at the archives of Instituto Lina Bo e Pietro Maria Bardi.

¹⁴ Lina Bo Bardi, *Nordeste*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Lina Bo Bardi, “Cinco anos entre os ‘Branços’” (“Five years among the ‘white men’”), undated manuscript about the architect’s experience in Salvador. Instituto Lina Bo e Pietro Maria Bardi.

¹⁷ Lina Bo Bardi, “SESC, Fábrica da Pompéia” (“SESC, the Pompéia Factory”) in Ferraz, 220.

¹⁸ Lina Bo Bardi, "Ladeira da Misericórdia," in Ferraz, 292-5. These views resonate with Antonio Gramsci's criticism of the economic and political uses of popular culture.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ In the early 1980s, Lina Bo Bardi started to plan a book of articles describing her disappointment with the political and cultural developments in Brazil, as well as with architecture developments around the world. She designed the graphic layout for the spreads of the book but never published the material because she thought it would have no effect. After her death, her collaborators published a posthumous version of the volume in 1994. See Lina Bo Bardi & Marcelo Suzuki, *Em tempos de grossura: O design no impasse [Time of Rudeness: The Impasse of Design]* (São Paulo: Instituto Lina Bo e Pietro Maria Bardi, 1994).

²² Lina Bo Bardi, "Ladeira da Misericórdia," in Ferraz, 292-5.