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The faces of Janus: modernism and hybridisation in the architecture of Lina Bo Bardi

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From inside the echoing interior of a basketball court, large cut-out holes in the wall frame the convoluted, metropolitan landscape of São Paulo. From the outside, these holes look like hand-carved perforations in a rough and hollow concrete block. Lina Bo Bardi, the Italian-Brazilian architect, designed these unusual windows for the gymnasium of the SESC-Pompêia cultural and leisure centre between 1976 and 1982. These apertures are more than sills that control light and air (Figs 1, 2). They revive the etymological sense of the word *janela*, which means window in Portuguese. Like the two faces of Janus, they represent an ambivalent threshold. They exist between modern rationality and the spontaneity of everyday life and popular culture, merging where one begins and the other ends in Lina Bo Bardi's work.

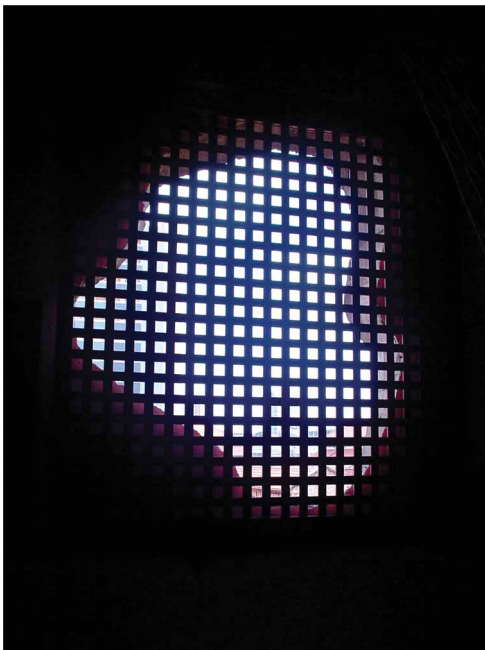
The window apertures exemplify the corollary of a long genealogy in the thinking and design of this unique architect, whose work defies easy classification. One of Lina Bo Bardi's major contributions to design was her focus on the cultural and anthropological character of architecture and her ability to hybridise modern and vernacular repertoires. She conceptualised this procedure as *arquitetura pobre* (simple architecture). Lina Bo Bardi's search for simplification and unpolished materials reflected her political and aesthetic interest in how Brazilian popular culture creatively dealt with the scarcity of material means. By doing so, she confronted privileged and disadvantaged social realities in Brazil.

The development of this hybrid attitude came from her Italian experience, and can be seen in three major examples of her work spanning some twenty years: the Museum of Art of São Paulo, the Museum of Popular Art in Salvador, and the SESC-Pompêia. Her position as a woman and as a foreigner with easy access to the Brazilian architectural and cultural mainstream gave her a unique opportunity to realise her projects. Her dissonant voice cost her isolation for a long time until her work started to be valued in the 1980s. The spaces and buildings that Lina Bo Bardi designed look bare and sometimes even harsh. Yet, they manifest a deeply sensitive and intuitive approach that opened up the threshold between conflicting cultural spheres of modernisation in Brazil in the second part of the twentieth century.

Figure 1. Windows of the basketball court in Lina Bo Bardi's SESC-Pompéia cultural and leisure centre, São Paulo (photograph by the author, 2004).



Figure 2. Detail of window and sliding wooden trellises of the basketball court in Lina Bo Bardi's SESC-Pompéia cultural and leisure centre, São Paulo (photograph by the author, 2004).



The encounter with Brazil

Lina Bo (Bardi) was born into a Roman, bourgeois family in 1914. She was educated during the ascendance of Italian rationalism in the 1930s and worked closely with Carlo Pagani, Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Bruno Zevi on the efforts for Italian reconstruction in the 1940s. While the war in Europe had interrupted the utopian experiences of modernist avant-gardes, Brazil emerged as a new architectural laboratory for many foreigners like her. After hastily marrying the controversial art dealer and journalist Pietro Maria Bardi, both emigrated to Brazil in 1946, where Lina Bo Bardi developed wide-ranging work until her death in 1992. She carried the seeds of her experience with rationalism and the emergence of neo-realism in Italy during the Second World War, and incorporated both the brutalism of São Paulo architecture and the crudeness of everyday design solutions that she observed in her new country.

In her memoirs, Lina Bo Bardi described her great amazement as she saw the iconic building of the Ministry of Health and Education for the first time while her ship approached the bay of Rio de Janeiro.¹ However, she was critical of the development of architecture in Brazil from the start. In articles that she edited and wrote for *Habitat*, the magazine that she created with her husband in 1947, she fostered a critical view of Brazilian modernism as the formalisation of Le Corbusier's ideas. In her essay entitled *Bela Criança* (Beautiful Child) published in 1951, for example, she defended Brazilian modernist architects whose work had been defined by Bruno Zevi as a new canon with technical deficiencies. For Lina Bo Bardi, the



originality and the immature beauty of their work would lead to an authentic Brazilian architecture when it met vernacular and local forms of building and inhabitation. According to her article, 'the new Brazilian architecture [had] many flaws; it [was] young, and [did] not have much time to stop and think, it was born as a beautiful child' that one needed 'to take care of.'² She believed that the development of a Brazilian architecture could only be achieved when 'its spirit became the spirit of men and of their search for life values, or when it drew inspiration from the intimate poetry of the Brazilian land.' In this early article, Lina Bo Bardi stated important premises that came from her Milanese experience and that would guide her design quest throughout her life in Brazil.

Mirrors unveiling concealed images

The Museum of Art, São Paulo (MASP) (Fig. 3), created in 1947, was the reason why Lina Bo Bardi stayed in Brazil and the museum's permanent

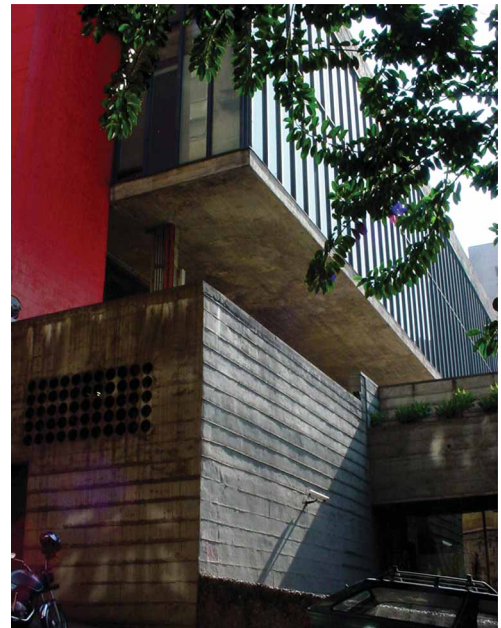
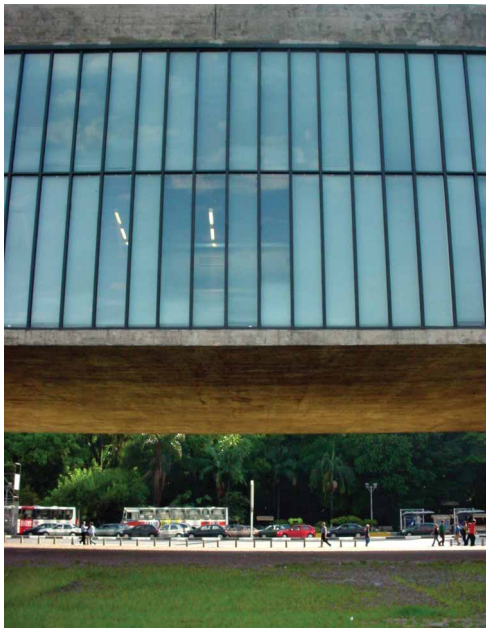
building in Avenida Paulista (designed between 1957 and 1968) is probably her best-known work. This project had a long gestation process and had many collaborators, mainly her husband. Many conceptual and formal changes in the design followed a very important experience in Lina Bo Bardi's life and production between 1958 and 1963 in Salvador of Bahia, the former colonial capital in the impoverished Northeastern region of Brazil. Even though the original project for MASP did not contain the same radical changes in Lina Bo Bardi's work towards her definition of an *arquitetura pobre*, the museum building incorporated many of the efforts at simplification that matured during her contact with the hinterland of Brazil in her sojourn away from cosmopolitan São Paulo.

The conception for the large glass and concrete museum block hanging from two wide piers (Fig. 4) emerged from the need to maintain the view from the site unobstructed, as laid down by a city ordinance dating from the creation of the subdivision along Paulista Avenue in 1891. Her interest in the principles and vocabulary defined by Mies van der Rohe for the Crown Hall provided her with formal choices with which to respond to the site's challenges (Fig. 5), while the increasing currency of brutalism in São Paulo in the 1960s provided her with the aesthetic solution for the construction problem. With the collaboration of the engineer Figueiredo Ferraz, Lina Bo Bardi designed this bold, unembellished structure, which achieved the magnificent and yet rough appearance of the building. She also experimented with industrial and traditional materials such as rubber and rough granite floors and traditional basalt mosaics.

Figure 3. The permanent building of the Museum of Art, São Paulo (MASP), created and directed by Pietro Maria Bardi and Assis Chateaubriand, and designed by Lina Bo Bardi between 1957 and 1968 (photograph by the author, 2003).

Figure 4. The glass and pre-stressed concrete volume of the Museum of Art, São Paulo (MASP) spanning over the Trianon Terrace (photograph by the author, 2003).

Figure 5. Three elements of the Museum of Art, São Paulo (MASP): the ground-level volume, the piers and the glass and concrete volume (photograph by the author, 2003).



These choices resulted in distinctive spatial features inside and outside the building. One of them was the original layout for the permanent collection, which has been inappropriately changed by the new director since 1999. Lina Bo Bardi's design broke down the typological and temporal hierarchies of the art works. Vertical glass panels sitting on small concrete blocks to display the works reduced supports to minimum elements and replaced the traditional museum wall with a boundless exhibition space (which has been replaced, by a controversial new administration, since the deaths of the Bardi couple in the 1990s).

The other spatial feature of the design was the creation of a plaza under the wide concrete span (Fig. 6), which remains a place of strong public and collective reference in the city. Lina Bo Bardi's response to the constraints of the site resulted, as Aldo van Eyck pointed out, in a 'building that is both there and not there, giving back to the city as much space as it took from it' (Fig. 7).³ Lina Bo Bardi had imagined this place to be part of the everyday cultural and social life of the city, including open-air art exhibitions, a sculpture playground, and even a circus, as we can see in many of her sketches and watercolours.



Figure 6. Trianon Terrace, the re-created plaza underneath (photograph by the author, 2003).



Figure 7. The view from the Trianon Terrace framed by the Museum of Art, São Paulo (MASP) (photograph by the author, 2003).

During the construction of MASP, Lina Bo Bardi became intimately involved with new cultural movements taking place in Salvador of Bahia. She started to collaborate with a group of artists and intellectuals who were involved in a regionalist project, resisting both the conservatism of local culture and the cosmopolitan aspirations of the cultural mainstream dictated by São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Her involvement with this new avant-garde movement had the support of the Federal University of Bahia and was closely connected to the efforts for political and cultural socialisation in Brazil. This was a productive time in Lina Bo Bardi's life and career. She saw it as a fertile opportunity to reshape her beliefs in the humanistic and idealistic roots of the modern movement. Living in the Northeast of Brazil between 1958 and 1963, she became a key intellectual leader who helped to set important precedents for movements such as *Tropicália* and *Cinema Novo* (New Cinema). These groups shared practices of cultural hybridisation, as they candidly integrated different aesthetic forms, both from

modern and traditional backgrounds, vernacular and industrial, mass and educated cultures, merging political nationalism with international artistic movements.

Lina Bo Bardi embraced and helped disseminate some of Antonio Gramsci's ideals among the new movements, particularly his focus on the political potential of a national-popular culture. The role of culture in this regionalist project was to modify the structure of social life in an area of the country and in a city that faced historical problems of decline, poverty, and underdevelopment. As part of this framework, Lina Bo Bardi organised, with the collaboration of the theatre director Martim Gonçalves, an important exhibition about the cultural life of Bahia that was first shown in the 5th São Paulo Art Biennial in 1959. This provocative exhibition expanded the geography of cultural debate in Brazil and relayed Lina's aspirations for what she believed to be a genuine source for Brazilian design. It focused upon popular creative abilities as a political sign of people's ability to

Figure 8. Solar do Unhão restored and converted by Lina Bo Bardi into the Museum of Popular Art in Salvador, Bahia (photograph by the author, 2004).

bring aesthetic expressions into their everyday struggle for survival.

The Biennial exhibition was a stepping-stone for the creation of the Museum of Modern Art in Salvador, which later grew into the Museum of Popular Art. According to Lina Bo Bardi's conception, the museum was to be a centre for documentation, education and performance, merging modern and popular art and confronting conventional cultural programmes. The museum was housed in an ensemble of buildings on the seafront called Solar do Unhão (the Unhão Estate) and located south of the historical centre of Salvador. The original estate and church were built in the sixteenth century and had been casually renovated for different purposes up to the nineteenth century. These transformations had erased several of the original colonial architectural features, which allowed for considerable freedom in Lina Bo Bardi's design for the conversion. She emphasised the structural simplicity of the buildings, and proposed a plaza on the seafront to be used for traditional shows and dances (this aim has been nullified more recently by the use of the site for parking: Fig. 8). In the interior of the building, she created an imposing central staircase. The design, of simple joints attaching the steps to the existing wooden columns, was based on the construction of ox carts that she saw in the hinterland of the country (Figs 9, 10, 11).

The Museum of Popular Art opened in November, 1963 with a large exhibition entitled 'Popular Art of the Northeast' that complemented the architectural work as a manifesto. The show contained utilitarian objects produced by impoverished people, displayed in piles of rustic wooden boxes used for carrying



produce and groceries. This everyday material (cooking utensils, clothing, toys, furniture, musical instruments and even weapons) metaphorically represented the concealed side of modern civilisation. According to the exhibition catalogue, the show

Figure 9. The wooden staircase added by Lina Bo Bardi amidst the existing colonial-era columns of the Solar do Unhão, Salvador, Bahia (photograph by the author, 2004).





was an 'accusation, [presenting] people's positive, desperate, and angry search for their right to live.'⁴ It was 'an affirmation of beauty achieved with the accuracy that only the constant conflict with reality could bring.' The museum opening occurred in a period of great enthusiasm. However, it did not last long. The military coup of 1964 ended the progressive activities that artists and intellectuals had been developing in Brazil and interrupted Lina Bo Bardi's luminous and meteoric presence in Salvador in the early 1960s.

Lina Bo Bardi returned to São Paulo and continued the final work for the construction of the challenging building for its Museum of Art (MASP). In 1969, she organised a temporary show for the museum entitled 'The Hand of the Brazilian People', in which she expanded upon the work represented in the exhibitions mounted in the Northeastern state. This was a difficult period for her, given the strong climate of political censorship. She left the country for several periods of exile, and did not produce much design work until 1975. In 1976, at the age of 62, she gradually returned to design, disappointed, but still believing that architecture should embrace and value human life, especially those lives rejected by dominant groups. While working on the small church *Espirito Santo do Cerrado* (1976–82), which marks her idea of simplification in a radical return to architecture, she was commissioned to design a large leisure and cultural centre in São Paulo. Her project for the conversion of an old factory into the *SESC-Pompéia* between 1977 and 1986 is one of the most powerful examples of her later work.

Figure 10. The swirling space of the wooden staircase at the Solar do Unhão (photograph by the author, 2004).

Figure 11. Joint detail of the wooden staircase at the Solar do Unhão (photograph by the author, 2004).

Figure 12. The entrance to the old steel drum factory converted by Lina Bo Bardi into the SESC-Pompéia culture and leisure centre, São Paulo (photograph by the author, 2005).



Figure 13. The converted factory and the new sports towers designed by Lina Bo Bardi for SESC-Pompéia as seen from the sun deck built over a channelised stream (photograph by the author, 2005).



The architectural ideas for SESC-Pompéia are wrapped in the crude forms of brutalism, but every shape and every use in this converted factory was intended to magnify the experiences Lina Bo Bardi had in her first visits to the site. Moreover, the spaces of this leisure centre were intended to integrate culture and everyday life (Fig. 12). This hybridising drive contained insights from her previous experience in Salvador, dealing with adversities and scarcity of means. In her descriptions of the design process, Lina Bo Bardi mentioned how fascinated she was initially by the clarity of the prefabricated concrete structure built in the early twentieth century, and how she suggested that it should just be cleaned and maintained. In subsequent visits, she realised that people in the neighbourhood had been occupying the space spontaneously for different leisure activities. She mentioned children playing soccer, parents improvising picnics, and even a puppet theatre. This perception of an existing lived space under the structure became the most

important aspect of it to be preserved. To Lina Bo Bardi, this was how design and construction began. Her work, as she indicated, was just to add a few things like a reflecting pool, a fireplace, and some furniture.⁵

Two major buildings compose the ensemble of SESC-Pompéia: the existing horizontal factory that was renovated for cultural facilities, and the new towers that were built to house a gymnasium (Fig. 13). Two vertical and solid concrete volumes connected by seven skywalks of pre-stressed concrete contrast with the delicacy of the horizontal,



brick buildings of the old factory, constituting the sublime appearance of the ensemble (Fig. 14). The largest vertical block contains a swimming pool and stacked sports courts over five floors. The holes carved out from the walls create nine-foot-tall irregular openings with sliding wooden panels and trellises that control ventilation and natural lighting. The old concrete structure of sheds was cleaned and opened up to accommodate a few large architectural elements in concrete that established the necessary separation between different parts of the programme, basically an elevated volume for the open library suspended in the space of the lounge, and the foyer and bleachers for the theatre.

Figure 14. The buildings of SESC-Pompéia as seen from the connecting bridges of the sports towers (photograph by the author, 2005).

Details such as small sitting nooks, pebbles in water gutters, simple sculptures, and delicate trellises on windows and partitions reintroduce the intimacy of the human body and hand into the larger spaces (Fig. 15). As a built complex, SESC-Pompéia promotes hybridising experimentation between different architectural forms and techniques. As a collective space, it continues to foster the unfolding of lived experiences into several—sometimes overlapping, sometimes juxtaposed—situations of social and cultural contact. Small and simple gestures that translate daily and corporeal aspects of the project contrast with the sublime roughness and scale of the ensemble (Fig. 16). This combination reflected Lina Bo Bardi's interest in everyday improvisation. It also resonated with the ideals of a cultural and political revolution with romantic overtones that was widespread in Brazil's left-wing politics in the 1960s and 1970s.

Figure 15. The interior spaces of the lounge and exhibition area at SESC-Pompéia (photograph by the author, 2005).

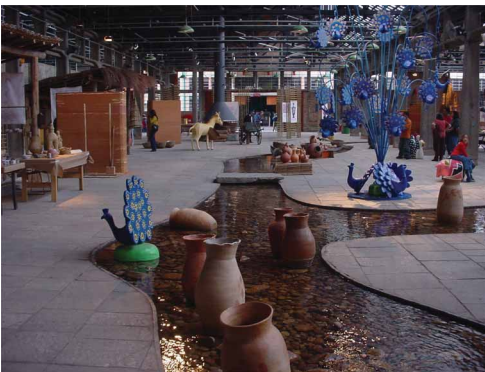
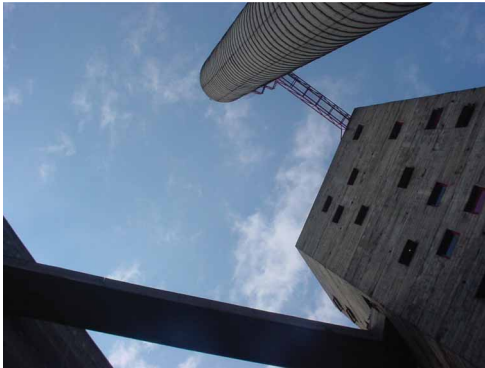


Figure 16. The bridges connecting the two sports towers at SESC-Pompéia (photograph by the author, 2005).



A dissonant modernism

Lina Bo Bardi contradicted many of her Brazilian colleagues with her hybridising experiments. Her approach to design was an exemplary exercise of translation between craft, art, architecture, ethnography, and culture through a way of thinking and practising that was at the same time political and poetic. This process was based on her early experience with post-war Italian neo-realism and her later involvement with leftist politics in Brazil. Lina Bo Bardi's practice can also be seen in the context of García-Canclini's analysis of how hybridising processes allow popular cultures to negotiate with modernity by entering and leaving it. His focus is on art and folklore and mainly on how popular culture resists and negotiates with the presence of the modern. Lina Bo Bardi operated on the flipside of this reciprocal relationship, articulating how modern culture resists and negotiates the presence of the popular.

Through simultaneous cultural engagement and estrangement, Lina Bo Bardi moved between

different cultural, political, and symbolic domains. More than promoting a local variation of European modernist vocabulary like some of her Brazilian contemporaries, her tactics of hybridisation moved between different cultural and geographic references. She was less loyal to modernist aesthetic principles than she was to a modernist conception of modernity. As a designer and cultural producer, Lina Bo Bardi relied on the predicaments of the Modern Movement that sought to reconcile the modern and the traditional in its aesthetic and political programme. She embraced the conflicts between the modern and the non-modern. One of the risks presented by this early avant-garde project lay in whether the belief that everyday life and the traditional could be incorporated into art in order to change art turned into the belief that modern art could actually change everyday life and the traditional.

Despite such risks and ambiguities, her attempt to embrace tradition and popular culture in an *arquitectura pobre* (simple architecture) introduced a very discomfoting memory into the struggles of a modernising country. Modernity in Brazil, as in other places in Latin America, has often presented a gap between significant moments of modernist expression and an unbalanced and discontinuous process of social and political modernisation. Lina Bo Bardi revealed these asymmetrical power relationships by showing that the physical environment can be an important constituent element in the manifestation of culture and how people transform it. Like the ambivalent head of Janus, her outstanding work shows that architecture has no simple and fixed origin, place or form at the same

time that it fosters the modernist aspiration for universality, completeness and singularity.

Notes and references

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5. These statements are to be found in *Lina Bo Bardi*, video tape, Instituto Lina Bo e Pietro Maria Bardi.