

# Ordering the Sensual: Paradoxical Utopias of Brazilian Modernism

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“Boys, boys come here will you. Look who’s coming on the street, all dressed up in modernistic style. It ain’t nobody but...” (Aunt Hagar’s Blues, played by Ted Lewis and his band, w/ Jimmy Dorsey on the clarinet).<sup>1</sup>

Brasilia—there is probably no moment in architectural history that has been considered more indicative of failings in the modern movement. From Max Bill to James Holsten’s recent study, Brasilia has been criticized as both indulgently mannerist and urbanistically totalitarian. However, within the context of Brazilian architectural development, Brasilia is significant as the culmination of a unique thirty year partnership of the avant-garde and national political structures—a collaboration would yield work that was both symbolic in its role and Utopian in its scope. And it is within this context that Lispector’s description from her 1964 essay “Five Days in Brasilia” provides an insightful perspective from which to analyze architectural events that presupposed Brasilia’s realization.

Lispector’s evocation of a fashion runway may seem counterintuitive in dealing with an assertive monumentalism. Hegel saw the monument as “form and shape that expresses the sacred, the absolute unifier”<sup>2</sup> or, as while Bataille feared monuments “rising up like levees, imposing the majesty and authority to any confusion”<sup>3</sup>; in both there is an implied association with the eternal. On the other hand, fashion, from Baudelaire, has been seen as something fleeting, it also, in its role to create beauty “is nothing else but a promise of happiness.”<sup>4</sup> This “promise of happiness” is central in exploring the symbolic strategies of an architecture built with political patronage and connected to political goals. The building of Brasilia was the centerpiece of President Juscelino Kubitschek’s administration from 1955-1960. The emergence of a capital from scratch in three years was a “promise” to Brazil and the world of impending national prosperity and economic power. This Utopian gesture was grounded less in ideology or a call for “order,” but in a “hope” for the future—“a promise of happiness.” “Hope” was central to Brasilia’s city architect and ardent Leninist Oscar

Niemeyer, who set aside the goal of reframing society and placed architecture in the realm of art. In a classical manner, architecture became a formal endeavor to make the world more beautiful:

I am in favor of an almost unlimited plastic freedom...things that are new and beautiful capable of arousing surprise and emotion by their very newness and creativeness...designed above all to withdraw the visitor, be it for a few brief instants, from the difficult problems, at times overwhelming, that life poses for all of us.<sup>5</sup>

Niemeyer’s sketch of the National Cathedral in Brasilia features the omnipresent viewer, represented by multitudinous eyes. His drawings rarely depict perspectival experience but indicate the importance of the object framed, viewed, and admired. However, for an overwhelmingly poor working population, this aesthetic escapism can potentially de-politicize the viewer, through appreciation and consequent acceptance of the ideal. The sculptural quality that emphasizes exteriority and denies the cavity, is not unlike the traditional role of the classical statue and the pure somatic ideal it projects—“a closed state that reflects a heroic past and posits the viewer as a latecomer to accept its homogeneous validity.”<sup>6</sup>

The symbolic and Utopian potential of Brasilia’s sculptural modernism was an important tool in Kubitschek’s goal to validate a new international standing for Brazil. However, it was President Getulio Vargas, who, twenty-five years earlier, formed the initial alliance between nationalist politics and architectural culture. Vargas’ “Estado Novo” forcefully argued that immediate modernization was the only way for Brazil to reach economic and social “nirvana.” While Kubitschek operated in a more internationalist economy, Vargas in the 1930’s focused domestically in transforming an agrarian coffee-based economy into an industrial power. His populist-despotism was ideologically flexible; Vargas courted Fascists one moment and Communists the next to gain a nationalist consensus towards rapid industrialization.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Health was the most important new branch of the Vargas government. It was modeled after concepts that dispatched Brazilian government officials observed in Fascist Italy where an all-encompassing strategy of indoctrination solidified nationalism. This ministry meant to overhaul rather than improve existing conditions. Its goal was to create a new framework from whence culture, education, and health would be critically involved in the definition and pursuit of “a new Brazil,” “O Estado Novo.”

The Ministry was the guiding hand in the production and distribution of all nationalist cultural transactions—music, cinema, radio, and physical education. Led by Gustav Capanema and the rallying cry “To Civilize from Above,” the office completely involved itself in “the work of the construction of the Brazilian people as the eugenic formation of the masses.”<sup>7</sup> Behind the implicit belief that without it, man would regress into a lazy, unproductive, irresponsible group, the Ministry positioned itself as the paternalistic guide of the population. Within the ministry a special department was established—the Department of Press and Propaganda—whose stated objective was to “centralize, coordinate, orient, and guide the national image, internal and external.”<sup>8</sup> A specific article of the 1937 declaration which established the “Estado Novo” government called for the creation of an “elite intellectual” to supply “points of view and constructive criticism to counter the journalistic demagoguery of other social sectors.”<sup>9</sup>

This “constructed culture” was vigorously presented in the classroom, as the springboard to a consensus national future. Furthermore, combining health with education in one institution, specifically with intense government involvement in physical education, blurred boundaries between both mind and body, and between individual conditioning and national strength. The concept of the “Estado Novo” was complimented by “O Homen novo Brasileiro”—the new Brazilian Man—emphasizing that the machine is only as strong as its individual parts. The rhetorical concept of “O homen novo Brasileiro” emphasizing a strong productive and reproductive body, aspired to create a national concept of the ideal body. This Taylorist construction of the worker was of a being who not only generated, but regenerated itself.

Michel Foucault points out that, historically, two great systems were conceived for governing sex, “the law of marriage and the order of desire.”<sup>10</sup> The “Estado Novo” promoted the family, and reproduction over pleasure, in order to secure the health of the state. An ex-Ministry member stated—“Home and family were practically the same thing. The preoccupation with the family was therefore a central question for the protection of the Brazilian Man and the moral and material development of the country.”<sup>11</sup>

An interesting example that illustrates some of the concerns of the Ministry of CEH is a government publication introduced by Lucio Costa, the Urban designer of Brasilia and recognized articulator of Brazilian architectural identity. It is a re-publishing of an historical text that describes

the work of the 18th-century architect/sculptor Antonio Francisco Lisboa, better known as “Aleijadinho.” Costa credits Aleijadinho in transforming the Portuguese baroque into an architecture “truly Brazilian.” The most remarkable thing about this short document, written in the 1840’s by a local government official named Rodrigo Bretas, is its emphasis on Aleijadinho’s iconic status, rather than his sinewy architecture.

His mythology begins at birth as an illegitimate child of a slave and a Portuguese architect. The nickname “Aleijadinho” translates into the “little cripple.” His condition, about which volumes have been written was originally speculated to be an advanced form of syphilis. Bretas describes this to be a result of an indulgent immoral life as a young man, which eventually leads to grotesque corporeal manifestations.

Antonio Francisco came to lose all of his toes, with the consequence that he atrophied and curved, and some even fell off leaving him with only the thumbs and forefingers, and even so practically devoid of movement. The excruciating pains he frequently felt in his fingers, and the sourness of his choleric temper, often led him to the paroxysm of cutting them off himself, using the chisel he worked with.<sup>12</sup>

The edification of Aleijadinho that was a result of this publication is seemingly at odds with the heroic “homen novo Brasileiro.” In fact he is defined in what Mikhail Bakhtin would classify as the realm of the grotesque which—“ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths.”<sup>13</sup>

Aleijadino attains his iconic value by transcending his physical state and recreating a classical image of himself in his work. His masterwork is Congonhas do Campo, a symbolic ascent where one encounters small huts within which are sculptural depictions of Christ’s last days. One finally reaches the pilgrimage church after wading through twelve figurative statues of the prophets, that complete the corporeal representations which give meaning to the ascent of the devoted. These bodies truly overwhelm the architecture, as Bretas recounts—“It is said that some women, having gone to Congonhas do Campo, on passing by the Last Supper Station, greeted the figures depicting Christ and his Apostles, which was due solely to the perfection of the work.”<sup>14</sup> These sculpted bodies contrast their creator who Bretas describes as “a priceless treasury laying in a disease-ridden body, that must be carried everywhere and have his tools fastened to him” though having “unquestionable talent, although one cannot fail to acknowledge also that he was better inspired than taught.”<sup>15</sup>

While Aleijadinho was chronologically far removed from the “Estado Novo,” the paradigm of the grotesque recreating itself into the classical ideal for the sake of religion allied itself with the devotional nationalistic rhetoric of the “homen

novo Brasileiro.” He was multiracial and poor, but he had the ability, or rather, the inspiration to transcend his own existence and create for a higher cause. This easily translates into a nationalist modernization project directed at a new working class.

The building to house the ministry assumed a special importance; in addition to providing a work environment for the Ministry, it was to architecturally symbolize its polemic. The collaborative project was executed by a group of talented young architects, including Oscar Niemeyer and Affonso Reidy. The team was headed by Lucio Costa who suggested Vargas invite Le Corbusier to guide the team for a five week period. In a letter to Minister Capanema, Lucio Costa suggested the didactic property of the work could be realized through a strategy of a monumental foregrounding that relied on its object-quality and the exteriorized experience of view.

The need to translate in adequate form the idea of prestige and dignity is logically always associated with the public work. This noble intention manifests itself in the monumental proportions of the work, and in the simplicity and quality of its finished surfaces.<sup>16</sup>

The Ministry building is situated in the middle of a lot. It stands alone framed by surrounding walled streets and perpendicular to the logic of the city. The entrances are somewhat obscured at the flanks of the building and under the main block. The worker enters through a panel that opens within a tile mural, while the visitor must change axis to enter through glass doors. However, he/she immediately encounters a large built-in desk the barrier that facilitates and restricts all movement in the institution. The denial of entry, and its siting in an open field allowing a multiplicity of external views reinforces the architectural experience as an exterior one. From the street one faces the gridded facade of adjustable sun-louvers which provide a patterned identity for the building. Moving towards the facade, one passes beneath the block raised on pilotis. The point where the building meets the ground is clad with azulejos, traditional Portuguese tile-work re-interpreted by the Modern painter Portinari. Above, vegetation overhangs from a Burle Marx roof-garden. Moving past the sculptures left and right reinforces the sculptural independence of the principle block. Finally, one arrives at the South side, and an open glass face in which the structural columns are revealed alongside government servants working within. The modern monument actually supports a variety of art, landscape, and surfaces that give the work a symbolically Brazilian adornment: the Ministry in “nationalist vogue.”

Just as the lines between dress reform and fashion, function and fantasy, have blurred, so too oppositions between surface and substance have lost their meaning.<sup>17</sup>

Mary McLeod has argued that modernism has historically denied the temporality of fashion and frivolity of dress in

deference to the constructed “pure truths” of structure, space, and substance, when, in fact, modern architecture combines these many aspects indistinguishably. The Ministry building, as a case in point, tried to assert its “truth” through its surface. Its sheathing attempted to both fix identity and to close any means of exchange between monument and viewer. This wardrobe presented modernized hybrids of traditionally Brazilian conditions and exemplified the compatibility of the new polemic to the existing environmental and cultural conditions. The elaborately mechanized Brise-soleil adapted the block to the Rio weather, while Burle-Marx’s garden vegetated the block and revealed the inherently modern potential of flora, and Portinari redefined traditional Portuguese tile work into a modern composition.

In addition, the transparency of the South facade which revealed the worker, provided a new element to the ensemble of the new Brazil. As the glass was not reflective the filtered northern light from the building’s other side highlighted the bureaucrat, merging inhabitant with building surface. The bureaucrat was the new twentieth century hero—the elemental cog in the ordering mechanisms of government—“o homem novo Brasileiro.”

The ministry was monumental...the pavilion, now that was meant to seduce...The beauty of the crystal counters the beauty of the flower. The closed form and the open form.<sup>18</sup>

While the Ministry of ECH operated within the nationalist environment, presenting itself to a Brazilian populace, Vargas, at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York got an opportunity to architecturally introduce his “Estado Novo” government internationally. After a competition and some negotiation, Costa and Niemeyer were chosen to jointly design the Brazilian pavilion. The appointment was steeped in politics, and President Vargas made the final selection. The final structure was considered one of the few architectural achievements of the World of Tomorrow exhibition as the world of the day was embroiled in, maybe trying to ignore, a war where futuristic atrocities were to be introduced as a reality in relations.

The 1939 World’s Fair was an environment of national posturing. In such a context, an extension of the monumental strategy undertaken in the development in the Ministry of Education would not have been unexpected. Brazil’s neighbor, the French pavilion, stylistically relied on its imperial history with a neo-classical, monumental structure which displayed its technological prowess and unlimited future potential. An architectural expression of Brazil’s latent power, of a new state built on the shoulders of the new Brazilian Man, could have been realized with a monumental use of modernism. In other words, the pavilion could again present the image of an economic force that it was conveying, at home, through the Ministry.

However, Costa and Niemeyer took another strategy. According to Costa the pavilion was not to hide its temporality by artificially simulating a permanent building. It should

be an “experiential promenade to learn about a country that is still poor.”<sup>19</sup> The promenade would specifically employ the curve and create an open space to emphasize free movement. While the curve was already considered a piece of Aleijadinho’s historical legacy, Costa described how, in designing the ramp, Niemeyer gave it further meaning.

Oscar had the idea to take advantage of the curve of the site—beautiful like the curve of a woman—and the result was an elegant and gracious architecture, with a slightly playful spirit, contrary to the majority of modern architecture that approaches the Doric. (Costa letter to Le Corbusier, April 14, 1939)<sup>20</sup>

Niemeyer and Costa’s direct reference to female form immediately signals an architectural approach that differs from the Ministry of Education. It has already been argued that the monumentality of the ministry referred to the classical statuesque. Can one propose that the use of the curve at the pavilion, a structure that opposed monumentality in its desire to “seduce,” is the feminization of an emerging national modernism? Niemeyer’s formal strategies and his concentration on the beauty of the monument in Brasilia can be seen as being more in line with the material treatment of the body in Western art. The introduction of the curve to the formal vocabulary of modernism can also be viewed in this tradition and not exploring an architecture that extends into uncharted territories of gender. Therefore, to see the curved architecture of the pavilion as “female,” is to deny that this “construction” of what is female is made by men to serve a specific purpose, in this case, as Costa stated, “to seduce.” As Baudelaire fantasized—“Woman is accomplishing a kind of duty when she devotes herself to appearing magical; she has to astonish and charm us.”<sup>21</sup>

Seduction became a central element of the pavilion which began to establish specific relationships between viewer and architecture, and, consequently, the United States and Brazil. The flowing plan is wrapped around an internal garden, an exoticized zone of pleasure. Within the building, movement is essentially unobstructed; the only doors in the building were at the restaurant, offices and bathroom. The indoor/outdoor separation disappeared, in the building to the point where the obvious orifice becomes omnipresent. The architectural experience of openness was underscored the displays, actually done with an American designer. In a fair entitled *World of Tomorrow*, there were conspicuously few examples of industry in the Brazilian pavilion. Exposition spaces were filled with products and resources Brazil had to offer. One such space, the Good Neighbor Hall, was named after the Rockefeller/Roosevelt policy that attempted to secure relations to Latin America during a time when unaligned nations could be possibly swayed by the Axis powers. Through media, cultural and diplomatic events, the US positioned itself as a friendly regional patriarch which served the immediate goal of strategic security, with a possible long term commitment of economic involvement. The displayed resources within the pavilion seemed to be

examples of the fuel needed for industrialized countries to create Tomorrow’s world.

Boundaries between all categories are confused and transgressed...buildings become open orifices which vomit forth and consume people simultaneously, fair-goers of different ages and genders are muddled up together.<sup>22</sup>

As seen in Wordsworth’s 18th century description, the fair was historically a site of interaction between classes and cultures typically separated geographically and socially. It allowed the bourgeois and ruling class which had constructed to indulge in its fascination with those relegated to the realm of the grotesque. While, in one sense this creates a moment where classification is in flux, the proximity of participants with defined social relationships emphasizes the power-differentials in the mixing. The model of the bourgeois positing itself as a moralistic classical body voyeuristically “slumming” can be politically extended in terms of international relations at a fair of industrialized and developing nations. Since the middle ages, the fair was also where exotic products acquired through colonization were displayed and marketed to the public at home. In terms of twentieth century international economics, the 1939 World’s Fair was a sight where traditional powers, such as France, presented themselves alongside developing countries, like Brazil, on the terrain of an emerging superpower. Such a context immediately provided the opportunity to crystallize categories and relationships, and to present a world of both colonizers and the colonized. The architecture and accessibility of the space of the pavilions became a paradigm for an open Brazil.

Again looking at the French Pavilion, one especially interesting display showed “women of the colonies” a collection of photographs of dark, unclothed women that represented specific colonies. The power relationship between colonizer and colonized was emphasized by these sexualized representations. Within the Brazilian pavilion architectural elements and displays were intended to crystallize the myth of the sensual and open South American Neighbor. This included the garden and specified spaces for snakes, orchids, and fish. These spaces were all delineated as circles, as was the dance floor in the restaurant, a space so small in scale it could only have been for performance. These internal spaces of spectacle added an air of eroticized bestiality to the modern space. The anthropologist Roberto da Matta has used a somatic metaphor to describe the world separating rational head from sensual orifice. “The human body as a world unto itself, and the waist as an equatorial line dividing north from south.”<sup>23</sup> Or as the poet Chico Buarque elucidates “*Nao existe Pecado (sin) ao Sul do Equador.*”<sup>24</sup>

“I Yi Yi Yi Yi like you very much!” (Carmen Miranda in *The Gangs All Here*, 1941)

The New York debut of the Brazilian pavilion coincided with the New York premiere of Carmen Miranda. Carmen

had been spotted weeks earlier in Rio by Broadway producer Lee Schubert in a performance in which she donned for the first time, a modified Baiana costume. The traditional wardrobe worn by African-Brazilian women from the Northeast of the country was exaggerated with a headdress that was over-blown and a dress that was under-cut to reveal the midriff. In the United States she would become inextricably identified with this sensualized caricaturization of Black Brazilian women and culture.

Her trip to New York was sanctioned by President Vargas who named her band the official pavilion group and requested her performance in the circular dance space. She faithfully visited the Brazilian pavilion, congenially and constantly posing for propaganda photographs. Carmen's introduction to America at the Brazilian pavilion, and her immediate impact on Broadway in the smash *The Streets of Paris*, strengthened this utopian construction of Brazil as an erotic, plentiful paradise. Accounts of the architecture and the woman representing Vargas' Estado Novo government became almost indistinguishable; as did their respective roles in cementing relations under the good-neighbor policy:

Vast plains, mysterious virgin forests, purple mountains, beautiful modern cities, pungent coffee plantations, all came to me during the day. This building, painted in delicious chartreuse green with ornaments in white, possessing great sheets of glass, from side to side, brings images of palm trees swaying in the breeze, where the aroma of coffee mixes with the fragrance of the hyacinth flowers planted nearby. (American commentator at opening of pavilion)<sup>25</sup>

Undulating the hips, wiggling her delectable sinuous body, making heard her warm laugh, she does more than all the politicians to tie the bonds between the two continents. (Newspaper account of Carmen)<sup>26</sup>

Taking part in this Fair, Brazil offers the world the abundance of its various prime materials and affirms the sincere conviction of the necessity to amplify international commerce. (At inauguration, Armando Vidal, government official)<sup>27</sup>

Finally-

You must see Carmen in action before you can appreciate her universal language of subtle, sinuous symbolism, accented by a tamale-warm voice. (*Vogue* critic, 1939)<sup>28</sup>

While Vargas was presenting one image at home, the pavilion as part of the Good Neighbor Policy presented quite another abroad. The displays of Brazil's resources, disappearance of the facade, of wall, of separation, and the concurrent symbolic presence of Carmen Miranda embodied this political relationship. Investment possibilities resulting from the international exposition were meant to economically strengthen the political situation at home. Vargas had opened Brazil to colonization for the financial benefits that

would help to uphold a nationalism that focused on modernization. In a sense, the pavilion was a political construction of the other, that could be solicited to ensure the integrity of the classical body of the Estado Novo.

Therefore, in its coexistence with the moralistic rhetoric at home, the sexualized construction of this "other" was not a challenge to the existing order, but rather, a compliment. The reading of Brazil as plentiful land of paradise, could arguably operate outside of "O Estado Novo" by directing itself at the temptations of a foreign audience. The success of the coexistence of these two national images is further enhanced by the World's Fair Pavilion's temporality. The absence of an architectural legacy, from this specific moment of solicitation, makes this architectural event an aberration rather than the solidified rule. Aberrations are sometimes considered a necessary reality in the pursuit of an ordered, fruitful existence. In a social environment based on the familial system a "mistress" is often tolerated as such an aberration, existing outside what is "real and valued." The creation of the "necessary mistress," the "aberration" occurs despite the inherent "moral health" of the familial condition. This "other" is a construction of the status quo that is to be used when needed and the discarded, or in the case of the pavilion, dismantled.

The persistence Estado Novo strategies in the consequent conception and development of Brasilia might give credence to this strategy. However, this "other" construction was not so easily discarded. Brazil is more often than not still perceived from abroad as a pleasure paradise, and within, the concepts of "Ordem e Progresso" inscribed on the Brazilian flag coexists, sometimes uneasily, with "Carnivalization of the world." Even Carmen Miranda, later shunned by Brazil as an American sell-out has had her imaged revived at Carnival as a patron saint of the transvestite. The appropriation of the caricature by those that the "homen novo" arguably left behind presents interesting issues when asking "how does architecture make utopia?"

## NOTES

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