

# Brazilian Identity On Display- *Cosmopolita or Tropicalista?*

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The capital cities of the Brazilian states of São Paulo and Bahia, respectively São Paulo and Salvador, define polar opposites. At the southwestern and northeastern edges of Brazil, these two coastal cities establish the base of a triangle, the vertex of which is the vast Amazon jungle to the Northwest. Geographically within the same country— but chronologically separated by about 300 years— São Paulo and Bahia could not be economically and culturally farther away from each other. Not until the Vargas presidential period (1930-1945), with its heavy emphasis on nationalism and modernization, did Brazil start to perceive itself as one singular entity. Even with this political cohesion, difficult communication and transportation encouraged regional isolation until the advent of mass communication in the 1950's.

The wealthy South, historically populated through massive waves of European migration, became synonymous with international, urban, educated, industrialized Brazil while the impoverished Northeast was held back by the typical problems of rural Brazil: poverty, feudalism and illiteracy. Descendants of African slaves, and to a lesser degree those of Brazilian natives, constitute the majority of the Northeastern population. Cultural traditions continue to be most strongly felt in the interior isolated regions of the Northeast, like Bahia and Minas Gerais.

The Sao Paulo Museum of Art and the Bahia Museum of Popular Art serve as architectural signifiers of Brazil's regional differences. The nation's search for symbols of 'civility', self-affirmation and identity is expressed not simply in these two structures' form, but in their modes of occupying the site and securing approval. Both projects were designed by Italian born architect Lina Bo Bardi, whose position as a foreigner allowed her to capitalize on her currency as European critic able to legitimize the cultural contributions of Northeastern Brazil. For almost five hundred years, the inhabitants of this forgotten region have enriched the cultural landscape of a country traditionally focused on Europe. Through Bo Bardi's sensibility, which allows the previously invisible to be brought to the forefront of a larger discourse on culture, art, and power; Brazilian national identities are crafted, polemicized and exhibited at these two museums.

The ability of the dispossessed to transform refuse into everyday beauty fueled Bo Bardi's formal investigation. The recycled, improvised aesthetic of appropriated spaces and found objects has been described by anthropologist James Clifford as *cultural imbroglia*. This syncretism resonates with Tomás Ybarra Frausto's concept of *rasquachismo* in Chicano artistic and liter-

ary production. Within the realm of cultural production and operating as well in the arenas of fashion and jewelry design, as well as exhibit and interior design, and art criticism; Bo Bardi's architecture drew in equal portions from the built-in dichotomies and the endless optimism of the Brazilian people, and the cultural traditions of flexibility and adaptivity that emerge from marginal circumstances. First and foremost, Bo Bardi's was a cultural project: a sociological undertaking tempered by a profound poetic sensibility, an innovative way of looking at art, a new found awareness and appreciation of popular culture in high culture circles— all almost 40 years before current 'post modern' practices.

## Historical analysis

The dawn of modernity in Brazil can be traced to three events in the early 1920's that forever transformed the country. The end of the historic alliance between the military and the rural oligarchy. The founding of the Brazilian Communist Party in 1922 opened the doors for other political parties and signaled a brief but hopeful time of change, while disrupting the political and economical hegemony of the Minas Gerais - São Paulo axis. Finally, a key cultural event— the *Semana do 22* - - raised the national artists' consciousness around the need to craft an identity primarily based on native values and new world experimentation. A manifesto was crafted at the event where the writer Oswald de Andrade advanced the term *Antropofagia* (or Cannibalism) to describe the Brazilian cultural process: a system that ingested, digested and expelled foreign influences, especially those European, melding them together with local native traditions to generate what is generally acknowledged as 'Brazilianess'.

The 1943 New York MOMA exhibit *Brazil Builds* ignored the concept of *Antropofagia* and instead focused on the 'brilliant tropical adaptation of the International Style'. The exhibit and accompanying publication sought to establish the new 'American' modernism while legitimizing Brazil, through its architectural production, as a valuable North American cultural ally. Together with the importation of the 'South American way' of Carmen Miranda and Zé Carioca, a seductive image of the 'good neighbor' was promoted which colored dominant notions about the *other America*.

Lured by images seen in the *Brazil Builds* catalog, Lina Bo Bardi arrived in Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay in 1946, a wide eyed member of the Italian avant garde who was as much a

product of revolutionary movements such as Russian Constructivism and the Bauhaus as she was a casualty of WWII. Her arrival in the company of her husband, the art critic Pietro Maria Bardi, coincided with a fertile and liberating climate in Brazil, still savoring the heroic architectural display of the 1935 Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro and a full decade before the start of the largest rational dream: Brasília.

### The Museum as modern phenomenon

As an institution, the museum constructs national identity through cultural production. The art museum in Brazil was a multifold project; part educational billboard, part cultural laboratory and part city monument; which had as its objective the exposure of the masses to art's socially redeeming value. In a country where almost seventy five per cent of the population - the vast majority disenfranchised and illiterate lived outside the cities in 1945, the museum positioned itself as an educational vehicle.

If Modernism might be understood as a reaction to oppressive social conditions coupled with a blind belief in the redeeming power of technology, then nothing is as naturally modern as the new world. How does one define *modern* in a *new* context? - By using old values steeped in European tradition or by defining a new playing field imbued by native conditions?. This dichotomy is investigated in the formulation of Bo Bardi's two museums: The São Paulo Museum of Art, located in a traditional and privileged boulevard of São Paulo, and the Bahia Museum of Popular Art, which occupies a 16th century manufacturing complex in Salvador.

A look at the history of these two museums reveals that by opposing national identities: the *conventional*— that is the modernist europhile identity advanced by recently arrived European intellectuals at the São Paulo Museum of Art ; and the *spontaneous*— by which I mean an Afrocentric and Native identity of resistance that forged the Bahia Museum of Popular Art. In both cases, the museum is the physical and constructed space where notions of local and international reach intersect and where the regional cultural reality confirms itself against an interpreted or imagined cosmopolitan reality.

### São Paulo

Since 1924, São Paulo had been widely recognized as the main economic and industrial engine in Latin America. In an attempt to move beyond this one sided appreciation, São Paulo sought to secure its place as a cultural capital through various initiatives such as the Biennial and the establishment of the first art museum. Art critics, artists and patrons gave birth to this cultural institution in 1947. Early curatorial efforts of the entrepreneur and press magnate Assis Chateaubriand, the poet Blaise Cendrars, and most importantly the Bardis: evidenced europhile leanings and sought to continue a direct lineage to old world artistic traditions.

Largely through the curatorial efforts of Lina Bo Bardi, the São Paulo Museum of Art, originally built with artistic holdings bequeathed by the elite was transformed as a space for popular cultural affirmation. The São Paulo Museum of Art helped define Brazil as a modern country, capable of economic independence and artistic originality. Without relinquishing her rationalistic background - through her schooling and mentoring by Italian modernist architect Gio Ponti - and armed with her enormous wealth of knowledge, Bo Bardi plunged into the Brazilian world to design a museum in the tropics, for a new people of mixed races, 'without the weights and shackles of the past' as she used to say.

The São Paulo Museum of Art was originally located in an office building owned by Assis Chateaubriand. The museum kept this 'temporary' location for over twenty years and adopted an open plan except where enclosed spaces where needed for privacy, like administration and services; or sound and light control, like the auditoriums.

In 1957, a new location was identified for the São Paulo Museum of Art. By that time, Bo Bardi had spent five years in the Northeast and had gained from the popular experience, not as folkloric romanticism but as a valuable experience of direct communication. Bo Bardi was interested in reinterpreting 'monumental' as 'collective' - as determinant of civic dignity for the masses; while she arrived at an essential process of making 'architettura povera', or humble architecture as she would later label it.

De Andrade spoke of overlaying Brazil's intense tropical creativity over the country's major technical accomplishments; like bridges, elevators, airplanes; to formalize a richly heterogeneous and paradoxical creative tradition. Following de Andrade's dictum, the proposed São Paulo Museum of Art emanates conceptual clarity and material rawness. Above ground the heavy transparent box levitates overhead, defying gravity; and underground instead of darkness, one discovers unexpected daylight.

Two rough concrete frames are left exposed in all of their structural exuberance to reveal a clear span of 246 feet. The museum's structure consists of four pilasters and two pairs of beams of pre stressed concrete, one pair below the other. The floor of the painting gallery rests on the lower pair of beams. The upper pair ride over the top of the roof and from them the upper floor, containing the museum offices and the room for temporary exhibitions, is suspended by steel cables.

Construction of the São Paulo Museum of Art began in 1960 and completed nine years later. Its final and actual location in the Park Avenue of São Paulo, can be traced back to a public relations deal masterminded by the astute Bo Bardi. During a heavily contested mayoral election, she offered the endorsement of the Assis Chateaubriand media conglomerate in order to secure political victory for the favorite candidate, in exchange for the rights to build on city property. The legal requirement of preserving the public view of a local plaza, the Trianon Belvedere, without obstructions, provides the conceptual origin to the transparent and suspended art showcase. The Belvedere, sur-

rounded by vegetation and flower beds, is a public sculpture garden and a place to hold outdoor exhibitions, receptions, rallies, and concerts. It is the 'Central Park for the poor' as Bo Bardi once remarked. A place for meeting and celebration.

The open space underneath the museum, itself the roof of a large Civic Hall, presides over an existing viaduct surrounded by the urban chaos of São Paulo. The grounds negotiate a significant slope, away from the Avenida Paulista, anchoring the building to its site while presenting two different faces: a quiet low rise building slipped under a terraced garden on the low side, and a grand podium extending the space of the major boulevard while acting as a reflective pool for a magnanimous urban gesture.

Bo Bardi continued to develop new ways of displaying at the São Paulo Museum of Art that freed the art work not only from the wall but also from the floor by mounting it on independent clear supports that allow it to appear to float. This move ensured a continuity of interior space that recalls the work of Edoardo Persico and Marcello Nizzoli for the 1934 Aeronautical Showroom in Milan. By positioning the paintings within the São Paulo Museum of Art in a simple and revolutionary display that downplayed authorship, style and chronology; Bo Bardi exposed the concept of beauty as an aesthetic construction determined by the governing class.

## Bahia

For two centuries before the Brazilian capital's transfer to Rio in 1763, Sao Salvador da Bahia was the seat of Portuguese presence in the new world. Everything in Salvador speaks to that legacy: its topography, its sinuous cobblestone streets, its many churches, its colonial architecture, and its cultural patrimony. Due to its dubious distinction as the largest slave trading center in the Americas, Salvador is culturally as much a part of Africa as it is a part of Brazil. As the axis around which a colony and later a kingdom revolved, Salvador was at the center of colonial sugar, tobacco and coffee production.

Like Olinda and Recife further to the North, Salvador is the prototypical Portuguese colonial city. It evolved as two distinct districts: the seat of commerce and exchange by the water's edge in the Cidade Baixa, and the seat of church and state up on the hill in the Cidade Alta. Separated vertically but linked through an infrastructure of stairways, elevators and funiculars; the city districts are fully dependent on each other. Even though the Northeast, and Bahia in particular, started to be recognized as the locus of spontaneous artistic production and raw creative energy in the 1920's; it was not until the cultural consciousness shifted in the 1960's that Bahia's AfroBrazilian contribution moved to the foreground of national artistic production.

During the late 1950's; while most of her Brazilian contemporaries (most notably architects Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa) were looking to the newly proposed capital of Brasília as the fulfillment of national aspirations; Bo Bardi chose to look instead to the original capital of Brazil. She spent her energy

helping to reconstruct Bahia, not with the blinding nostalgia that maintains a status quo, but with a desire to extract and define a Brazilian identity from the virtual ruins of the former colonial capital.

Throughout her career, Bo Bardi argued vehemently that *craftsmanship* in Brazil could not be considered a movement. It lacked the tradition of art guilds of renaissance Florence that maintained and combined the production of art with the seed of unionized labor. She advanced the counter-notion of *pre-craftsmanship* as a way to incite Brazilians to adapt the industrial revolution to their own needs and to reinvent consumer culture to fit their desires.

During the time Bo Bardi worked and lived in the Northeast of Brazil, she was profoundly touched by the resourcefulness and creativity of its inhabitants. From 1959 when she was invited to direct the soon to be created Bahia Museum of Art, she and University of Bahia Rector Edgar Santos advanced a poetic vision: that this remote arid region primarily due to its profoundly popular character had the potential to become the national culture capital. As was the case in São Paulo, the Bahia Museum of Modern Art was first installed provisionally, in this case in the foyer of the Castro Alves Theater in 1959. Initially the nomenclature of 'museum' proved to be problematic, in as much as a museum conserves an art collection. In this case the collection was non-existent. More than a museum of art, Bahia's museum operated as a cultural center, an artistic forum and a place of learning. The Museum of Art project met with widespread criticism and suspicion, due to a reactionary media campaign aimed at discrediting the institution. The proposed reconstruction was halted in 1964 when all hopes were abruptly ended by the advent of the right wing dictatorship.

Parallel to these events another project, the Bahia Museum of Popular Art, was allowed to survive— perhaps because it was less of a threat to think about Bahia's cultural production as 'popular art' and not as 'art'. The building chosen to house this museum was the Solar do Unhão, an important architectural complex dating from the 16th century, later modified in the 17th and 19th centuries; located in the Cidade Baixa area of Salvador. The latter intervention transformed the Solar do Unhão into the first industrial complex of Brazil and the structure in 1940 was finally included on the National Registry of Artistic and Historic Patrimony.

Originally a sugar cane and rice processing facility, subsequently military barracks and explosives deposit, the Solar do Unhão was renovated as a cultural facility, by Lina Bo Bardi in 1960, and inaugurated three years later. In its new incarnation as the Bahia Museum of Popular Art, it sponsored the cultural transition of the region that had jump-started Bahia's postwar artistic revolution. This creative catharsis fueled homegrown artistic movements such as Tropicalia and Cinema Novo, in music and film respectively.

Fittingly, Bo Bardi's architectural intervention is more modest than at the São Paulo Museum of Art. Besides cleaning up the original façade of subsequent ornamentation, the only exte-

rior work consists of the addition of an open plaza for traditional cultural manifestations involving music, movement and religion. Through a complete structural reconstruction, all of the non-bearing partitions were eliminated to open up the space of the museum without resorting to separate galleries. An original 16th century chapel, later converted to a residential hotel, is reinterpreted as library and performance space.

The interior work is as subtle as it is, due to its context, irreverent. Bo Bardi designed a central wooden spiraling staircase made exclusively from oversized lumber resting on each other for their sole structural support. Its construction and materiality recall traditional ox carts. The pieces do not negotiate their meeting, as is customarily the case with construction joints, but are secured in a calculated and primitive way by enormous through wooden pegs.

Renamed the Bahia Museum of Modern Art in 1995 after being closed down for more than 20 years, Bo Bardi's building is now the most frequently visited museum in Brazil. Its newly redesigned grounds negotiate the steep slope between the access road and the sea through a sumptuously landscaped sculpture garden facing the ocean. Because the grounds are detached from the museum, they offer an opportunity to ponder the origins of the art displayed inside. The mood created is contemplative and poetic. A sinuous path leads over a wooden bridge and a creek bounded by an unusually steep planted berm, a sculpted retaining wall terminates the visitor's movement with a few concrete steps whose relationship to the water fluctuates according to the tide.

### Curatorial intentions and means

In the two museum projects, by juxtaposing popular art and classic art, Bo Bardi's unique position as architect and curator enables her to define art while evidencing the dichotomies inherent in its production. This in turn informed the collective cultural conscience of postwar Brazil. In the *Civilization of the Northeast* exhibit in the Bahia Museum of Popular Art in 1963, new forms of exhibiting paid homage to street fairs and popular festivals. The recurring aesthetic is that of accumulation, domesticity, process, series, mass production - a production directly linked to the rhythm of the eye and the touch of the hand. Making was crucial to Bo Bardi's work. She believed in a true collaborative process, allowing the craft of the builder and the creativity of the engineer to help create her architecture. The materiality of her buildings are reminiscent of the resilient simplicity of carved wood and woven threads of Junichiro Tanizaki's discussion of the unassuming but considered Japanese aesthetic. No wonder Bo Bardi always spoke of Brazil as the meeting place of East and West, and of Portugal not as integral to Europe as to the Atlantic.

Brazil after all, proves not to be the modern paradigm MOMA's 1943 *Brazil Builds* would have had postwar audiences believe. Instead it is a vital and complex cultural construct caught between globalization and consumerism, and the mystical landscapes of memory. From the outset Lina Bo Bardi operated within a cultural museum institution, which is significantly different than operating within an independent or governmental structure. Her take on modernity was shaped by the museum. Not interested in designing private dwellings for the affluent, she chose to involve herself in cultural production. In turn, her work was shaped by the very culture she helped to forge. Profound regional differences, instituted by forces beyond her control, forced Bo Bardi to choose a distinct direction in her work. The complex reality of Brazil was never incidental to the work. On the contrary, the museum projects reflect and distill the nature of the city where they are located: Salvador as the old defunct capital where ritual and mysticism reign, and São Paulo as the machine city running too fast for its own good. Bo Bardi sought to create a decolonized museum. By fighting off an inferiority complex, Latin America's worst heritage from colonization and slavery, the museum of the new world offers an important museological contribution: the physical and temporal democracy inherent in the art display.

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