

Power and Modernism: The Making of an Architectural Hybrid in Brazil

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A mythology of politics and modernism has formed in Latin America. The story takes similar forms in many countries. The tale typically begins with the establishment of nationalism and a rejection of imperial imagery followed in-turn by a dictator or strong president in search for symbols of the "New State." Modernism in all its forms provides a mechanism to symbolize these ideas as well as the progressive agenda of a country caught by the insecurities and growing pains of mid-twentieth century urbanization and development. The clearest and most dramatic of these narratives takes place in Brazil. Brazil shows, as in other South American countries, that ironically, European avant-garde is used to supplant European colonial or imperialist imagery. As with all myths there are both truths and lies that have affected the course of events. The myth links modern architecture and modernist ideas with the political agenda of individuals who are in search of progressive iconic symbols rather than the essential goals of modern architecture. One myth is that the power structures that used modern architecture were sympathetic to the whole of its stated agenda (most clearly stated by CIAM) rather than simply searching for a mechanism to facilitate their power. This myth fans the common criticism that modernism in Latin American architecture languishes without content, however, I hope to show in this paper the agenda of Modernism as stated by documents such as the Athens charter is supplanted by a agenda as generated by the conditions in Brazilian culture.

Ultimately the essential goals of modernism in this context are antithetical to the social and political agenda of modern architecture and therefore are vilified accordingly. I would assert that with reasoned examination it becomes clear that the modern agenda still exist although of a different nature. The basic contention of this paper is that the consequences of this narrative ultimately has far less to do with the principals of modernism than the establishment of hybrid or mediate languages of architectural production. The hybrid forms are in themselves inherently linked to the culture in a way that the imported ideas of modernism are never able to achieve.

BACKGROUND

The Brazilian political institutions and cultural institutions have been largely defined by the last 100 years and many cultural institutions and movements are extremely linked to the modern era. Essential changes in Brazilian culture developed simultaneously with the world popularity of avant-garde Modernism. It was the Modern Art Week of 1922 when Brazilian cultural psyche became thoroughly enamoured by the progressive positivism of modernism. This event took place with a relatively small number of participants but in the following years this group controlled nearly all established cultural institutions. Several of its members were part of the government of the dictator Getulio Vargas, most notably his minister of

culture and education, Gustavo Campanema, and President Juscelino T. Kubitschek was the political force behind the construction of the new capital, Brasilia. Parallel to this genealogy of politicians is a generation of architects, planners and artists. Architects such as Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Reidy, and planners such as Lucio Costa, and artists such as the Candido Portinari all become part of a political patronage.

The specific case that emerged in Brazil included a dictator, Getulio Vargas, who controlled the politics of the country for some time, allowing for the extent and scale of these icons to infect the culture enormously. Modernism was understood differently in a detached forum such as was Brazil. It was often was communicated through secondary and tertiary sources and its strongest proponents in Brazil were not initially involved in the formation modernism's founding architectural treatises or the initial conferences of the CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture). The most venerable proponent of these ideas, Le Corbusier, is enthusiastically brought to Brazil several times to communicate the central ideas of Modernism and CIAM, only to find that his message selectively dissected and re-applied with little regard for the authority of his research. In architecture, through the support of the President Getulio Vargas and later President Juscelino Kubitschek, Modernism becomes the definitive the style of the "New State." The argument promoted the idea that new forms of government should be represented by new forms of buildings and the more drastic the change the more convincing is the power of the new state.

In architecture and planning the irony, of course, is that European avant-garde modernism is used to supplant European colonial or imperialist imagery. Brazil searches to define itself on its own terms and specifically pressures its cultural producers to take into account the values inherent within the culture rather than imposed externally. Modernism is therefore often read through suspicious eyes in Brazil and is used to benefit the self-interest of its cultural producers. These ideas are also often co-opted as inherently Brazilian to meet the desire to be culturally nationalistic. Lucio Costa, for example, in some of his early writings attempts to draw a relationship between the formal language of modernism and the traditional colonial Portuguese hacienda. He writes of these forms and how the plain simple geometric forms are influenced by the architecture of the Mediterranean and in-turn how this establishes a cultural predilection to Modernism. In this way Costa accounts for the effectiveness and the ifití of the modern style in Brazil. The notion that the formal language of modernism is indigenous begins to take root.

The formal language of modernism surfaces as indigenous yet the political, social, cultural and economic ideas of modernism are less evenly embraced. The result is that Brazilian cultural producers are as quick to ignore one principal of modernism as they are quick to accept another. This proves to be a common practice. Oscar Niemeyer,

Afonso Reidy, and Lina Bo Bardi are architects that function in a similar fashion with a method of borrowing that places the basic principals of modernism on suspicious territory for the sake of expedient aesthetic production, realistic technical limitation and sympathetic cultural research. Niemeyer is the most celebrated Brazilian architect of his generation and has attributed the plasticity of tropical modernism to specific phenomena in Brazilian culture. The extreme disciplined use of modern formal elements is matched in scale by the tendency to privilege expression over efficiency. In the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, architect Afonso Reidy builds the heroic structural language of modernism in concrete heavily influenced by the labor, technical and skill conditions in Brazil, yet the structure stretches to minimize structural redundancy. Lina Bo Bardi renovates a former slave-auction house into a museum and uses details to signify the cultural history of the structure while creating spaces that are absolutely Modern in spirit. These are examples of a group that form a hybrid of modern architecture.

In magazine publications throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s regular and frequent coverage by the international press occurs concerning design activity in Brazil. The familiar names and ideas surface again as the architectural press covers the most heroic project in this tradition, Brasília, the modernist capital designed for the center of the country. The publications themselves are definers of this hybrid modernism. The publications inadvertently reveal the conflicts of modernity in Brazil by referring to it as a "modern city in the middle of the jungle" or "a single-handed attempt to modernize a whole nation." The photographs of buildings are carefully cropped to exclude the colonial and eclectic urban fabric of São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro with the favelas, or shantytowns, looming silent in the distance. The buildings are photographed from a distance because they are empty or unfinished, often without the interior furniture. A hybrid of modern form begins to develop which depends heavily on the clearest images of modern architecture with an almost parasitic cultural veneer. These publications are riddled with images which present free-standing buildings with a checklist of flat roofs, white walls, floor to ceiling glass, extended columns, etc. in a myriad of contexts which make them seem all the more hybrid of modern and developing technologies.

This hybrid is completely unintended by either the authors of modernism (CIAM) or the dominant modernist of Brazil. The

buildings and cities themselves are far more controlled by the five major factors of: environment, formal spirit, concrete technology, labor skills and rituals of construction, rather than any clear notion of modernism. They have become the basis of a new formal language of blunt modern forms. The works of many of the architects and planners are generally seen as secondary examples of the International Style. Modernism was seen as a way to supplant colonial imperial imagery yet it nonetheless implanted an avant-garde imperial imagery with a vengeance. When the buildings are observed as a sort of hybrid and the architects as isolated thinkers with an internal agenda, the essential model of Modernism in Latin America can emerge out of a hybrid that is at once inseparable from its context as well as ideological roots. The blunt passionate crudeness of the architecture that forms out of this condition are a part of a rich resource and can serve as primary sources of modern architecture.

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