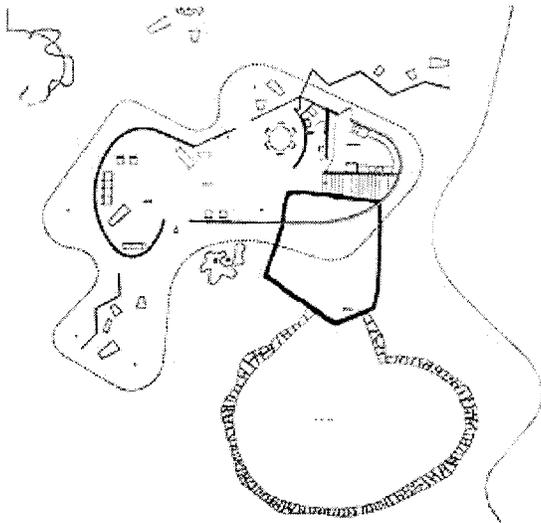


## Modernism Meets Popular Taste: A Tale of a Few Strange Encounters

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Oscar Niemeyer's own house at Canoas, 1954.

### FIRST ENCOUNTER:

*Rio de Janeiro, 1955, Oscar Niemeyer hosts Walter Gropius.*

When Walter Gropius visited Niemeyer's own house at Canoas (completed the previous year) he commented that the house was truly beautiful but could not be mass-produced. Gropius comments echoed for decades among Brazilian architects who saw his remarks as bitter criticism. Two different modernisms had crossed path right there and would surely diverge after this brief encounter.

### SECOND ENCOUNTER:

Any major Brazilian city between 1955 and 1959. Modernist aesthetics meets popular acceptance.

Walking around the residential neighborhoods in the major Brazilian cities, one cannot avoid noticing a repetition of certain architectural elements employed on many facades.



House at Belo Horizonte, 1950s

The rooflines are often sloping inward. Innumerable concrete slabs float above the entrance supported by thin metal columns. Ceramic tiles in pastel colors cover most of the front surfaces of the houses. Shadow and ventilation are very often provided by *brise-soleils* or void blocks cast in ceramic or concrete. In the downtown area, many high-rise buildings use the same tiles, *brise-soleils* and canopies.

The question that follows is: could this be considered the mass-production Gropius was referring to? Or was it mass consumption? In that case, the encounter of modernism and mass-consumption is a unique phenomenon that deserves further investigation. Architectural mainstream didn't address mass consumption until *Venturi's Complexity and*

*Contradiction* 10 years later and as a result this Brazilian encounter was invisible to the large majority of the architectural world. And it still is invisible. Very few perceived it as worth of study then (ARTIGAS, 1956) maybe because they were not designed by architects. Or maybe because they were built in the tropics and away from the architectural media whose eyes were not on Brazil anymore in the late 1950s despite the novelty of Brasilia (LARA, 2000b, TINEM, 2003). But they do exist and their very existence might challenge some of our pre-conceptions about the successes and failures of modernism (VENTURI, 1966; JENCKS, 1977). Instead of asking why modernism failed one might be tempted to ask where it failed or whom it failed since, as this essay aims at demonstrating, it hasn't failed everywhere or everybody.

We can be sure that in most countries Modern Architecture has never been popular. This statement is among the most publicized reasons for the failure of modernism (BROLIN, 1976; NEWMAN, 1980; VENTURI, 1966, JENCKS, 1977). In Brazil in the 1950's, however, modernism was very popular. In fact, it lay at the core of the modern national identity and played a very important role in Brazilian culture of that time (SEGAWA, 1994, 1998; LARA, 1998). The 1950s in Brazil was a unique moment for the development of the nation's self-image. This was due not only to the success of its modern architecture abroad, but also due to its optimism, relative political and economic stability and the acceleration of the model of national-developmentalism (FAUSTO, 1998; SKIDMORE, 1999), especially in the second half of the decade.

#### WHAT ABOUT BRAZIL?

Brazilian architecture entered the 1950s enjoying world-wide recognition for its quality and ingenuity and closed the decade with what should be its climax: the construction of Brasilia. In the 1950s, architecture's eyes were all on Brazil. More than one hundred articles about Brazilian architecture were published abroad between 1947 and 1949, according to the Avery Index (LARA, 2000b). In the early 60s this number was reduced to a fifth (21 articles between 1962-64) despite the novelty of Brasilia striking the news.

In Brazil, during the whole 1950s, architects were very busy designing and building, the country exploding in a huge construction site. The urban-

industrial consolidation after 1950 had created a cultural market for architecture (BAYEUX, 1991). Government offices had been investing in a modern image and architecture was a great tool or conveyor for such image. This was happening since the Vargas government in the 1930s but with the Kubitschek presidency (1955-1960) it achieves an intensity that it never had before, galvanizing the whole society around the idea of "modernization". The optimism of those times was reinforced by the international recognition of the quality of Brazilian modern architecture.

The architecture of those days left a huge impact on how Brazilian cities look even today, 50 years later. Walking around the residential neighborhoods in the major Brazilian cities, one cannot avoid noticing a repetition of certain architectural elements employed on many facades. The rooflines are often sloping inward. Innumerable concrete slabs float above the entrance supported by thin metal columns. Ceramic tiles in pastel colors cover most of the front surfaces of the houses. Shadow and ventilation are very often provided by *brise-soleils* or void blocks cast in ceramic or concrete. In the downtown area, many high-rise buildings use the same tiles, *brise-soleils* and canopies.

The insistent repetition of these elements was what first drew my attention to the wider acceptance of modernism in Brazil. As the historiography states, in Latin America in general and in Brazil in particular, Modern Architecture achieved a distinct level of identity (FRASER, 2000b; SEGRE, 1991, 1994). It is also common knowledge that it had been strongly influenced by Le Corbusier and Bauhaus ideals, but somehow achieved a broader and deeper dissemination. The outstanding examples of the 1940s and 50s, labeled "anti-rationalist pioneers" by Pevsner (1961), by combining the modernist avant-garde and the traditional heritage, can be considered a modernist success in terms of popular acceptance.

The vast majority of these Brazilian houses were not designed by architects, but nevertheless presented modernist elements re-used and re-designed. Built by the owners themselves with help of a contractor and unskilled workers, the houses show an ingenious adaptation and application of a modernist vocabulary. Most of the houses object of our analysis were built in lots of 12 x 30 meters (36 x 90 feet), with a facade usually only 9 or 8 meters wide only

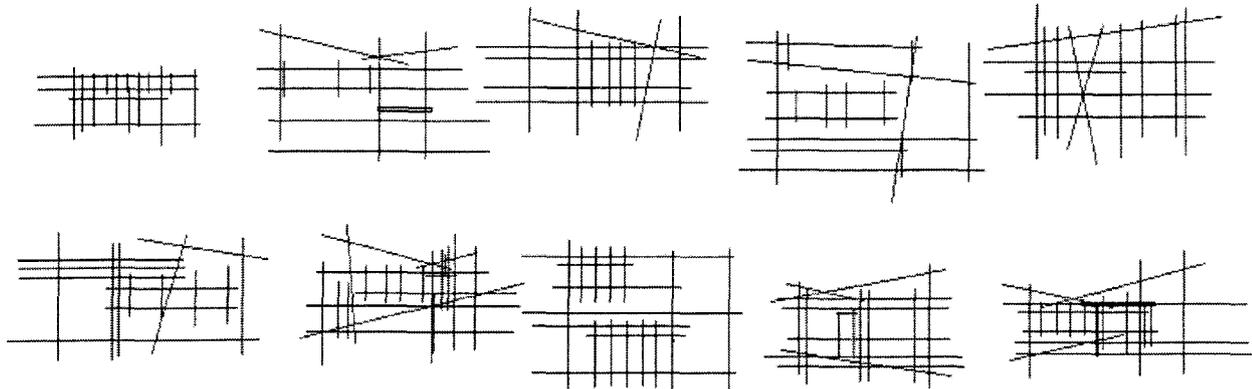


Diagram of some middle-class house facades, Belo Horizonte, 1950s.

(around 30 feet). Despite the narrow lots, these houses present quite complex facade compositions, usually with one or two major volumes defined by different roof slopes and other minor elements that complete the facade.

Formal characteristics such as inverted roofs and concrete canopies were manifested in thousands of middle-class houses. Smaller elements such as thin steel columns, ceramic tiles and *brise-soleils* were even more common. Used to indicate modernity, this Popular Modernism (as I call it) achieved during the 1950's the status of fashionable popularity (LARA, 2001).

### POPULAR ENCOUNTERS ARCHITECTURE

The relationship between architecture and popular culture is one of the main challenges of contemporary architectural theory. Defined by the dichotomy of high versus popular architecture, a gap is perceived between both camps. As stated by Andreas Huyssen "modernity has always had a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture," and he later develops the idea that the avant-garde had tried an alternate relationship (HUYSSSEN, 1986). Another important aspect of the high / popular dichotomy is the exchange of ideas and trends between the two poles. Kenneth Frampton's famous essay on Critical Regionalism, for instance, emphasizes one direction of the movement, that of architects consciously taking elements of vernacular built environment (FRAMP-TON, 1992). However, lay people's appropriation of high architecture has not received much atten-

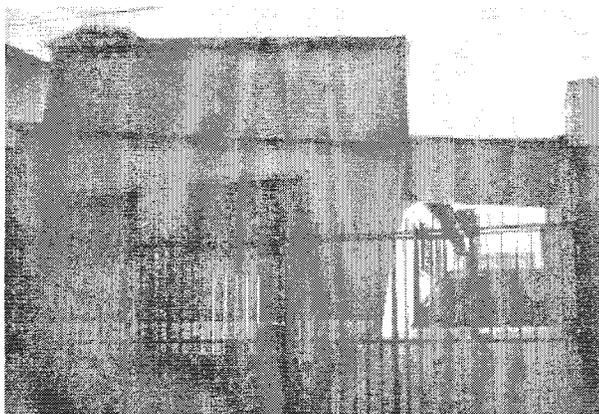
tion, being perceived as unworthy of architectural scholarship. Given that architects design a small minority of the built environment (in Brazil as well as in North-America), it is striking to perceive that we leave the majority of such built environment out of our object of study.

But it is also widely known that modernism, especially in the U.S., has emphasized the "high" manifestations, with little popular appropriation. As the post-modern advocates have stated from the beginning, modernism has never been popular. One of the main ideas behind this paper is that in Brazil the high-popular equation in architecture has been different due to the phenomenon of Popular Modernism.

In order to place Popular Modernism in relation to this high/low paradox in Brazil I need to frame how the issue was being discussed there at that time. Since the *Semana de Arte Moderna*<sup>1</sup> in 1922, Brazilian intellectuals were paying close attention to issues of popular culture and the dialogue between high and low art manifestations. The debates were restricted to an elite, as was the consumption of cultural goods at that time. According to Renato Ortiz, the characterization of the popular in Brazilian culture only happens after the formation of a consumer market for cultural goods, well into the 1950s. Ortiz reminds us that there was no middle class around the 1930s to sustain the development of a "Brazilian culture" (ORTIZ, 1985: 63). That statement is sustained by Nestor Garcia Canclini's thesis that Latin America in general and Brazil in particular had an exuberant modernism with deficient modernization for only a tiny part of the

population was immersed in real modernity (GARCIA CANCLINI, 1995).

Both Garcia Canclini and Ortiz acknowledged that a truly popular art would only exist when reaching a popular audience. The *modernistas* (modernists) of the 1920s and 30s had the common people in mind and it is often present in their work of art, be it literature, painting or music. But the audience of those works of art was still the illustrated elite, and it would only change with the improvements of mass media and the rise of the middle class in the 1950s. In these terms, the cultural production of the early modernists in Brazil was very much one-directional, with artists deriving their inspiration from the popular realm. On the other hand, lay people were not being influenced by high art manifestations. The lower classes were present in the books and in the paintings but they never saw or read such works.



*Modernist façade on a traditional plan. Belo Horizonte, 1950s*

Even in the 1950s, two of the major Brazilian successes, music and cinema, suffered from the same problem of not achieving a larger audience. The world-wide acclaimed bossa-nova, so famous for blending North-American jazz with Brazilian samba, has never been a hit at the slums where the samba was born. A ultimate urban upper class phenomenon, bossa-nova was produced and consumed by an upper middle class in the southern neighborhoods in Rio and spread to other wealthier young audiences in Brazilian major cities. While Antonio Carlos Jobim is known all around the world for having composed "Garota de Ipanema" (Girl from Ipanema) among other hits, in Brazil he never sold as many albums as Roberto Carlos<sup>2</sup> or *Sertanejos* (Brazilian

country music). The movie movement known as *cinema-novo* has enjoyed an even narrower audience. Although the manifesto-thematic of the film directors was based on bringing the "people" to the big screen, a great majority of Brazilians had never watched a *cinema-novo* movie. As reminded by Randall Johnson, the masses were on the screen but not in the audience of *cinema-novo* (JOHNSON & STAM, 1982: 37).

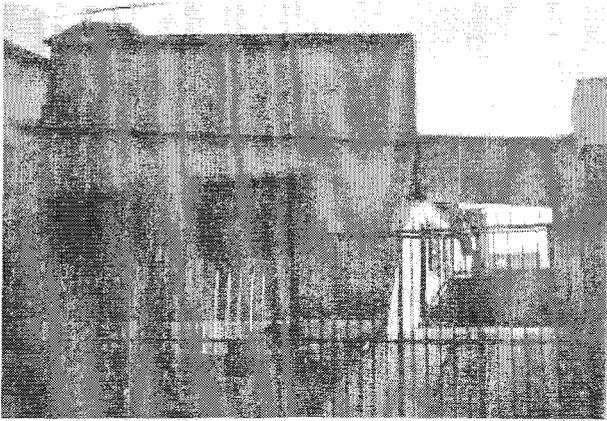
One of the benefits of the analysis of this encounter of modernism and popular taste is that it does not fit the general pattern of high/low dichotomy, adding to this debate. Many differences place the Brazilian Popular Modernism as an exception, but an exception that may prove the rule. When comparing such phenomenon with other art manifestations of 1950s Brazil, I am tempted to claim that it was a unique phenomenon that inverted some of the traditional relationships between high and low.

The medium is derived from high architecture, being it the elements: inverted roofs, *brise-soleils*, thin metallic columns, ceramic tiles, and canopies. The agents are definitely popular or "low" since there are no architects designing those houses, although I was able to find a few other professionals involved with the design and construction of the houses. But unlike in other encounters between high and low, the size and nature of the audience is very different, since thousands of modernist facades can be found in every neighborhood occupied around the 1950s. The fact that everyone can see those facades, being as public as any other urban architectural object, multiplies the audience even more. Not only were the owners involved in the process as producers, but the whole city population, who passed by those houses daily, was forcibly involved as receiver of the message, in a manner close to what Walter Benjamin explained as "distracted perception".

In summary, with a medium derived from high architecture and manipulated by "low" agents, achieving a broad audience, Brazilian Popular Modernism occurs in the exact opposite direction of the traditional high/low relationship. The traditional meeting between high and low in architectural historiography concerns a "high" agent (the architect) deriving his vocabulary from some popular or "low" built environment and rearranging it in a sophisticated building for a small audience.

In these terms, the phenomenon of Popular Mod-

ernism in Brazil is unique in providing us a counter-example that is a successful bridge between high art and the masses, for incorporating elements of a sophisticated and highly acclaimed architecture and spreading it to a significant part of the Brazilian population. At this point I am tempted to ask the question of why can't we do it again. Why can't contemporary architecture learn from the achievements and the mistakes of the past and try (at least try) to engage in a dialogue with the general public?



House in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 1950s.

### MODERN ENCOUNTERS TRADITION

The discussion of to what extent those houses are modern or traditional brings me to question of what is actually tradition and modernity. If a "modern" identity was being formed in Brazil, and architecture was very much part of this construction, what about the "traditional" identity that preceded it? The houses seen here as more traditional ones are, in terms of their facades, a consequence of a French neo-classical movement that swapped Brazil in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Decorated facades with romantic styles, pitched roofs, side *varandas* and arched windows are all elements derived from the Beaux-Art vocabulary, brought to Brazil by the Portuguese court in 1808.

If there is a tradition to rely upon it is certainly manifested in the plan of those houses. Different from the more fashionable cycles of the facades, the plans of those houses have been evolving from the Portuguese colonial to the gold-rush 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings and all the way into the urbanization early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as explained by Nestor Goulart Reis

(1978) and Fernando Novaes (1997).

Therefore, this dichotomy between the novelty of the facades and the conservatism of the interior organization is not something new to domestic architecture in Brazil. Nevertheless, many scholars have already explored this theme of importing foreign trends into Brazilian culture. Roberto Schwarz for instance has investigated the recurrent importation of those "out of place ideas", to the extent that for him it becomes a tradition (SCHWARZ, 1992). For Schwartz, it is the dislocation of foreign ideas in the Brazilian reality that defines most of the national movements. In a similar vein was also the modernist *antropofagia* or "cannibalism" manifesto of the late 1920s, according to which Brazilian culture was defined by the act of eating foreign trends to be digested into something else.

But if there is a "tradition of the new" or better, a "tradition of importing ideas", the Brazilian Modern Movement in architecture also had a different attitude towards tradition since its beginning. Lúcio Costa, the very same man that was responsible for introducing modernist curricular changes at the *Escola Nacional de Belas Artes* in 1930, was also one of the leading forces behind the creation of the SPHAN (office of preservation) in 1937. Working on both fronts, the past and the future of architecture, Costa and others were able to weave together an intellectual discourse that connected the Brazilian modernism with the 18<sup>th</sup> century baroque of Minas Gerais. If on the European modernist avant-garde the past was used as an alterity, as something to be opposed to, the Brazilian case is singular for the use of the past in the construction of identity (LARA, 2004). It should be noted that it is not every past, but a carefully designed and chosen myth of origin. However, the use of memory as an identity rather than an alterity, allowed the modern project to solve many of the complex conflicts of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ancient and modern are integrated and while it proposes a continuation with an older past – baroque – it successfully denies the importance of the Beaux-art ideals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

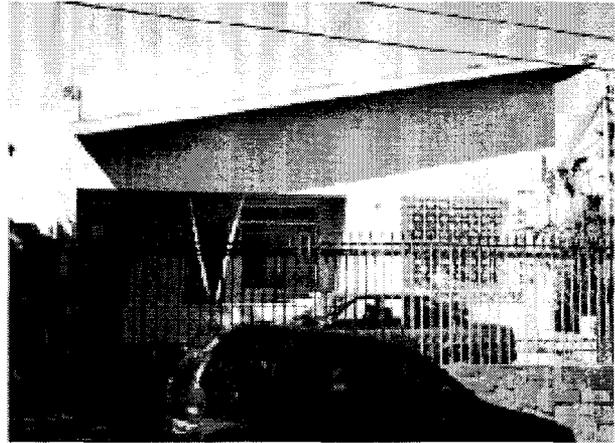
As reminded by Adrian Gorelik, "they could not propose a *tabula rasa* since the problem was the *tabula rasa*, therefore the historic jump went straight to the myths of origin without mediation, to invent the past<sup>3</sup>" (GORELIK, 1999: 67).

If the paradigmatic buildings of Brazilian modern architecture are the result of a combination of modern and baroque influences (FRAMPTON, 1992; SEGAWA, 1998), the houses that configure the Popular Modernism phenomenon are also representative of such paradox. In these terms they are even more modernist than the famous buildings of Niemeyer and others, specially if we look for the roots or the demands of modern architecture: new clients, new programs, new technology, and discomfort with traditional styles. The new clients are present since the idea of the middle class adopting modernist vocabulary is unique. The new technologies play a big role, as demonstrated by the use of ceramics, metallic columns, *brise soleils* and flatter roofs. The discomfort with traditional styles is certainly one of the main reasons behind the modernist facades. Probably the new programs are the only of the four major demands partially absent, since the plans don't change much at first, except in the wealthier houses.

Those houses fluctuate between tradition and modernity and also between high and popular manifestations. Rather than trying to anchor or fix the phenomenon of Brazilian Popular Modernism in one half or another of those dichotomies, I should conclude this section with a discussion of the striking gap between production and re-production. While Niemeyer's house could not be mass-produced as Gropius thought every house should be, its aesthetic was at that very same moment being re-produced in hundreds of thousands of middle class houses. Nevertheless, it is still debatable whether Gropius designs had actually disseminated to the extent he envisioned. I would conclude this article with the statement that escaping the modernist obsession with production, Brazilian modernism was massively re-produced, with processes and techniques adapted to the local reality. With the blending together of such contradictory trends, the Brazilian middle class may have built a unique kind of modernism with a post-modern attitude.

The phenomenon of Popular Modernism is, therefore, a result of many strange encounters that are not very often seen in architecture such as the high/popular and the modern/traditional pairs. Such double roots would be mainly manifested in the overlapping of a modernist façade hiding a conservative plan, but it also unfolds into a discussion of universality versus particularity; or center versus periphery, or any other necessary encounter that

this conference will address.



House in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 1950s.

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**FOOTNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> *Semana de Arte Moderna*, a week of art exhibitions, poetry and manifestoes declamation in São Paulo, 1922, that is considered to be the starting point of Brazilian modernism.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Carlos started in the early 1960s with the *Joven Guarda* (young-guard) movement and became the

"king" of romantic music in the 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> The Portuguese actual quotation follows: não podia se propor uma tabula rasa porque o problema era a tabula rasa, por isso o salto histórico, sem mediações, endereçado aos mitos de origem para inventar um passado (GORELIK, 1999: 67).